

Drag as Performance, Therapy, Activism, and Personal Expression: What Older Drag Artists Teach Us

November 14, 2024



SEATTLE, WA • NOVEMBER 13-16

GSA2024.org



Speakers:

University of Connecticut

Alaina Brenick
Emma Chamberlin
Brian Chapman
Laura Donorfio

University of Nebraska

Lyn Holley
Kenneth Hites

University of Hartford (CT)

Nels Highberg

New York University

Camryn Hafner
Jahmar Ortiz



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We have no commercial relationships to disclose.



Overall Symposium Abstract

Drag artists (also described as drag performers, drag queens, and drag kings) have contributed to world cultures for centuries. Drag artistry, as tied to sexual and gender minority (SGM) communities and aging, is the focus of this presentation. The 20th and 21st centuries have been a poignant time for drag artists in the United States, as they have emerged as national and community leaders, been subject to political attack and violence, and contributed to mainstream and sexual and gender minority cultures. Older adult drag artists hold rich lived experiences and collectively share in episodic events that can be seen as traumatic, unifying, and celebrative. However, this population of older adults is grossly underrepresented in the literature. This symposium includes four presentations bridging behavioral science (individual development and wellbeing), social policy, and practice (drama therapy) of older drag artists. The first presentation frames current antidrag policies aimed broadly at SGM communities in the United States. The second presentation provides a feminist, gender, and queer theoretical lens for examining the experiences of older drag artists, particularly the topics of homophobia, and ageism. The third presentation presents findings from a mixed methods study examining the intersection of aging, drag artistry, and individual wellbeing. The final presentation details a study on coping mechanisms of older drag artists through the lens of drama therapy clinical assessment. Collectively these papers highlight theory and qualitative and quantitative analysis illuminating themes of resilience, coping, commitment, and conscientiousness that illustrate fortitude within this population of influential artists.

Learning Objectives

- After attending this session, participants will be able to analyze drag artistry through the lenses of ageism, homophobia, gender, queer, and feminist theories.
- After attending this session, participants will be able to describe various themes that emerge in the lives of older drag artists such as social inequities due to SGM policies, resiliency and fortitude through drag expression, activism, and community engagement and advocacy.
- After attending this session, participants will be able to generate ideas related to therapeutic implications of drama therapy for older drag performers and artists.

Note to All: Organization & Timing



There are 4 presentations, 1 discussant, and Q&A.

This will allow about 13 -14 minutes per presentation to allow for Q&A at the end.

Presentation 1	Lyn Holley
Presentation 2	Emma & Nels
Presentation 3	Alaina, Brian & Laura
Presentation 4	Camryn & Jahmar
Discussant	Brian
Q& A	Brian & Laura Moderate

Lyn Holley Slides

The first presentation frames current anti-drag policies aimed broadly at SGM communities in the United States.



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Lyn's Slides



The Power of Ephemeral Gestures: Theories of Gender and Performance

The second presentation provides a feminist, gender, and queer theoretical lens for examining the experiences of older drag artists, particularly the topics of homophobia, and ageism.



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We argue that drag challenges hegemonic understandings of gender (as binary), sexuality (as heteronormative), and performance (as passive).

“The idea of drag is total performance.”

“Everything is drag - who you choose to be every single day.”

Decorative geometric shapes in the bottom right corner, including a large light blue triangle and several smaller triangles in light green and light blue.

“I don’t want to be a woman, you know.”

“It’s not that I want to be believed to be a female.”

Decorative geometric shapes in the bottom right corner, including a large light blue triangle, a smaller light green triangle, and a light blue triangle, all pointing upwards.

Shields of Chiffon: The Fortitude/Resilience of Aging Drag Artists

The third presentation presents findings from a mixed methods study examining the intersection of aging, drag artistry, and individual wellbeing.



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Meet Our Study Participants

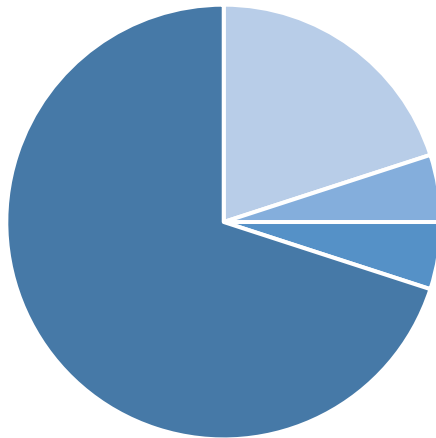
- N=21
- Male – 20 Female – 1
- Sexual orientation – SGM – 21
- Ages – 50-90
- White –14; Black 5; Latino 2
- Education – High school only 4; Some College (no degree) 9; Associates 2; Bachelors 3; Masters 1; Doctorate 1; No response 1



Survey Participants

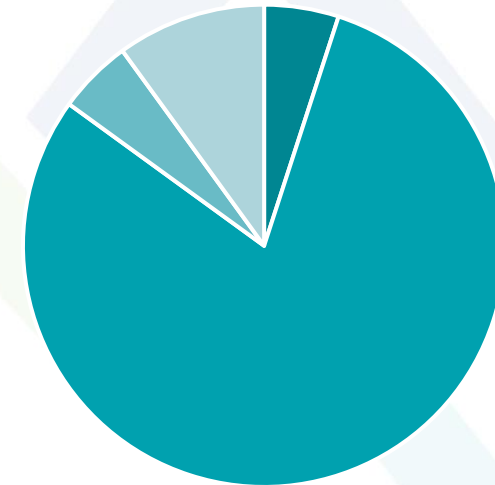
- Purposive sampling was used to recruit
- 20 self-identified Drag Queens in older adulthood

Race



■ Black n = 4 ■ Latino/Mexican-American n = 1
■ Multiracial n = 1 ■ White n = 14

Gender



■ Female n = 1 ■ Male n = 16 ■ Nonbinary n = 1 ■ Transfemale n = 2

Measures: Resilience

- **CD-RISC Scale** (Connor & Davidson, 2003)
- This survey includes 25 items
 - Sample items include:
 - “I am able to adapt when changes occur,”
 - “Having to cope with stress can make me stronger”
- 5-point scale from 0 (not true at all) to 4 (true nearly all of the time)
- Scores are summed and evaluated on a scale from 0-100
- The scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92)

Results: Resilience

Survey:

On average, the sample showed high levels of resiliency with the median and mode at 81 points out of 100.

Interviews:

"I never had that feeling of anxiety again ... [Drag] definitely strengthened me and made [me] a better version of myself, for sure."

"Drag gives me that confidence...
It kind of gave me that extra layer."

Measures: Personality

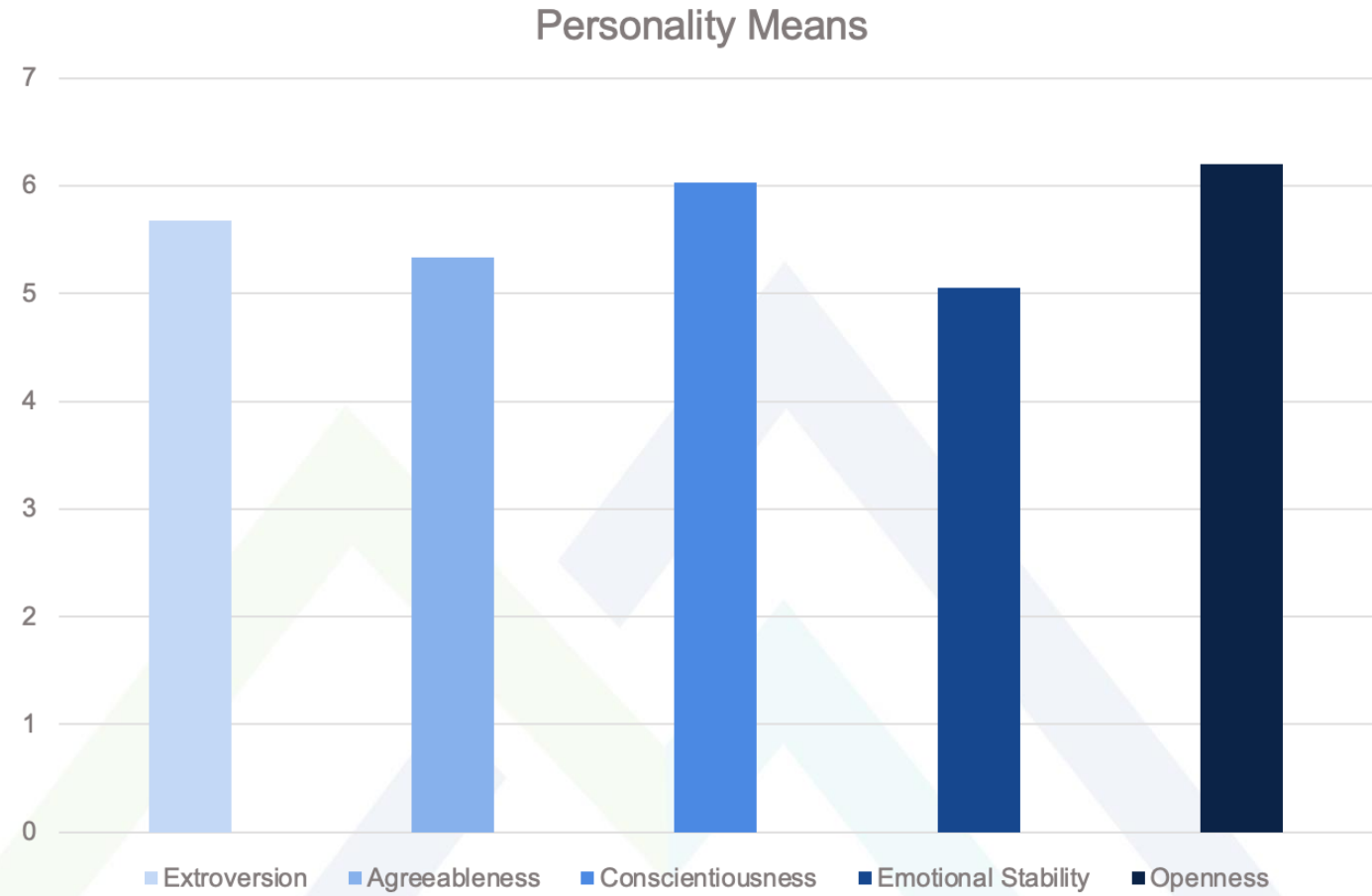
- **TIPI Personality Scale** (Gosling et al., 2003)
- This survey includes 10 items
 - Sample items:
 - I see myself as:
 - Dependable, self-disciplined; Anxious, easily upset; Open to new experiences, complex.
- 7-point scale: 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly)

Interview:

"Everything is drag - who you choose to be every single day, depending on the outfit that you do, how much time you take with your hair. All of that is presenting who you are today. And for me, it can change from day to day."

Results: Personality

- **Extroversion:**
 $M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.23$
- **Agreeableness:**
 $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.02$
- **Conscientiousness:**
 $M = 6.03$, $SD = 0.79$
- **Emotional Stability:**
 $M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.11$
- **Openness:**
 $M = 6.20$, $SD = 0.89$



Results: Personality

Interviews:

“My world was opened-up and expanded immensely. If I never did drag that first time, I don’t know where I’d be now.”

“I never had that feeling of anxiety again ... [Drag] definitely strengthened me and made [me] a better version of myself, for sure.”

The Power to Shape: Impact of Drag on Life

- Armor, resilience
- Community (i.e., chosen families, drag lineage)

"Drag gives me that confidence ... It kind of gave me that extra layer."

"I can say and do anything [in drag]; when I'm out of drag, I have to be a little careful."

"I'm closer to my inner circle than I am my own family. I relied on my chosen family a lot more."

"I look about it now and I think about it ... I think the drag queens saved me ... I think the drag queens saved me. Drag queens let me—to be able to do what I love to do. Perform."

Defining Drag: Specificities in Older Age

- Bodies, physical components
- More integrated sense of identity w/ age
- Aging & reflection

"My issue now
is my
mobility... I lost
a lot of my
mobility."

"So, it's hard getting old.
And I can't—I know I can't
perform the way I did."

"My world was opened up and expanded
immensely. If I never did drag that first
time, I don't know where I'd be now."

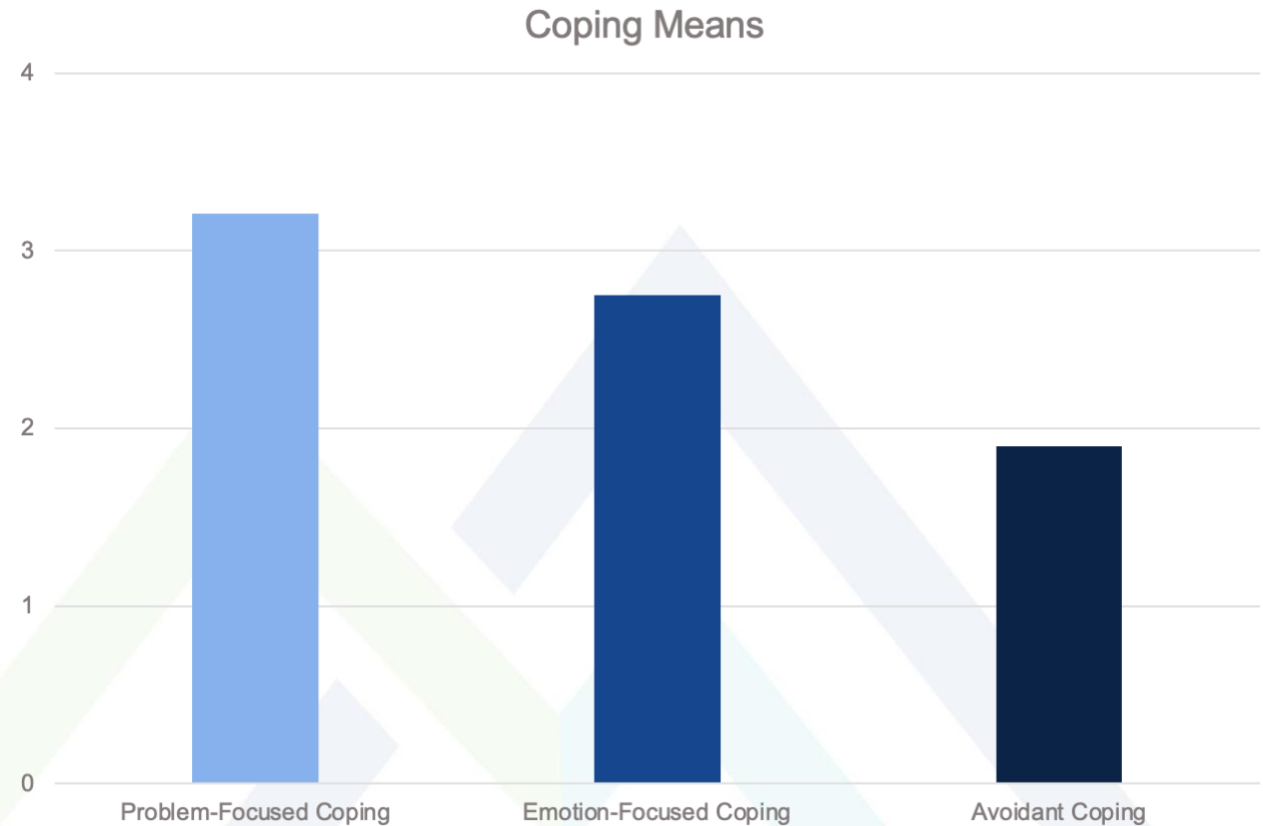
"I think I'm always [drag name]. I don't know if I have to
get dressed to be [drag name] ... I think it's fully now a part
of me that I don't feel... compartmentalized. I don't feel
like I need to do anything to access being [drag name]"

Measures: Coping

- **Brief COPE:** Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Carver, 1997)
- This inventory includes 28 items
 - **Problem-Focused Coping**
"I've been taking action to try to make the situation better." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$)
 - **Emotion-Focused Coping**
"I've been expressing my negative feelings." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$)
 - **Avoidant Coping**
"I've been refusing to believe that it has happened." (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.62$)
- 4-point scale: 1 (I don't do this at all) to 4 (I do this all the time)

Results: Coping

- **Problem-focused Coping:** the sample used a medium amount to all of the time.
- **Emotion-focused Coping:** the sample used just under medium amount.
- **Avoidant Coping:** the sample did not use or only used a little bit.



- Defining Activism
- Parental Influence
- Political Will
- Speaking to Power

"My mom was very vocal...if she saw something wrong...she spoke on it."

On Activist Feminism: "I give my Dad credit for this avenue of my life...My Dad at 87, it's still his life's work every day."

"You're creating a reaction...you are an activist, period....It's a positive moving forward."

"Let's go back 54 years and acknowledge Sylvia [Rivera] and Marcia [P. Johnson] of the Stonewall Rebellion...Drag queens have never been people to sit back and do nothing."

"This is not backlash against drag. There is a Christian-fascist community trying to use queer people as a wedge issue. so White men stay in power...this is about power and White supremacy"

Measures: Depression

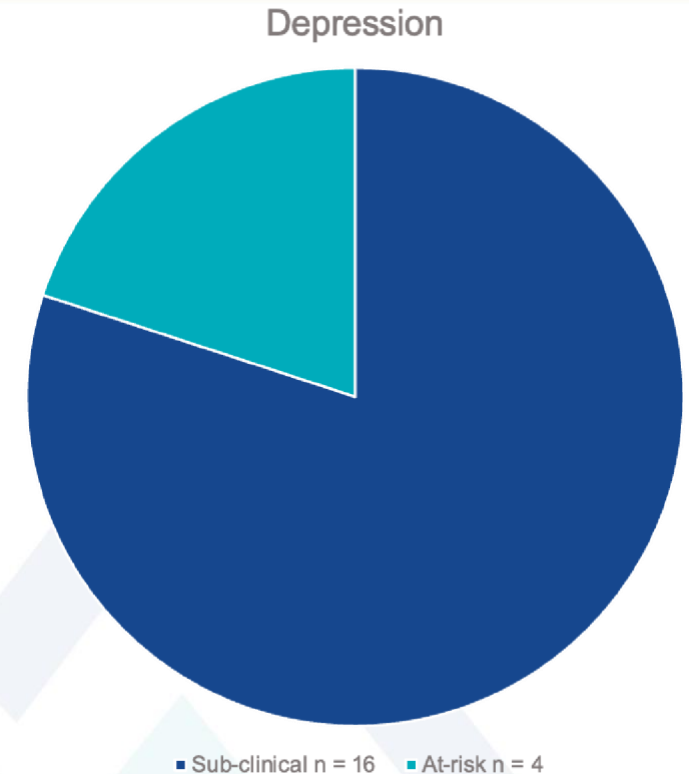
- **Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)**
(Radloff, 1977)
- This inventory includes 20 items
 - Sample items:
 - "I felt that everything I did was an effort."
 - "I felt that people dislike me."
 - 4-point scale: 0 (none of the time or rarely) to 3 (most or all of the time)
 - Cronbach's alpha = 0.91

Results: Depression

- Summed scores:
 - Range: 0-32
 - Mode = 7.00
 - Median = 13.00
- 80% of the sample (n = 16), reported below threshold rates of depressive symptomatology
- 20% of the sample (n = 4), reached the cut-off sum for greater risk for clinical depression

- **Interview:**

“Yeah [I’ve experienced depression]. And that’s more of recent times than, uh, the past. I think it’s because I’m so proud of what I accomplished... I’m thinking about this career of mine and how I want it to keep going...I get depressed sometimes for a partner.”



Camryn & Jahmar Slides

The final presentation details a study on coping mechanisms of older drag artists through the lens of drama therapy clinical assessment.



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Camryn & Jahmar Slides



Discussant: Dr. Brian Chapman University of Connecticut



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