



GSA 2023

Building Bridges > Catalyzing Research > Empowering All Ages

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Nobody Can Drag Me Down: Aging as a Drag Performer

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GERONTOLOGICAL
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DISCLOSURE(S)

We have no commercial relationships to disclose.



ABSTRACT

This presentation will detail the findings of an exploratory, qualitative research study examining the intersection of aging and drag performance. Even though drag queens have achieved significant levels of visibility in mainstream entertainment and have become increasingly present topics of discussion in news outlets, modern media, and even political landscapes, they are an understudied and underrepresented population (Knutson et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018). Older drag queens have yet to be studied in the social science literature (Henneberry et al., 2022). "Drag Queens possess unique characteristics as a subpopulation of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community that warrant exploration" (Knutson, Koch, Sneed, & Lee, 2018). This research aims to understand and represent the relatively understudied population of drag queens in academic literature while drawing attention to the specific sub-population of older adults in the profession. A semi-structured interview protocol and thematic analysis was utilized to understand the unique perspectives of self identified drag performers over the age of 50 (n=15; ages 54-90). Examining drag artistry and expression through the lens of aging has revealed themes of drag as a form of armor, ageism within the community, and shifts in social perceptions of drag performers. This presentation will introduce the term "dragism" in an attempt to explain the discrimination against drag queens within the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the interplay of both dragism and ageism for the participants of this study (Donorfio et al., 2022).



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

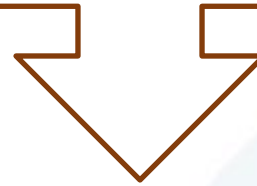
After attending this session, participants will be able to:

1. Summarize the relationship between artistic drag expression and the challenges associated with aging.
2. Describe the relatively recent shifts leading to modern perceptions of drag queens.
3. Define the term “dragism”, and its relation to ageism within the community.

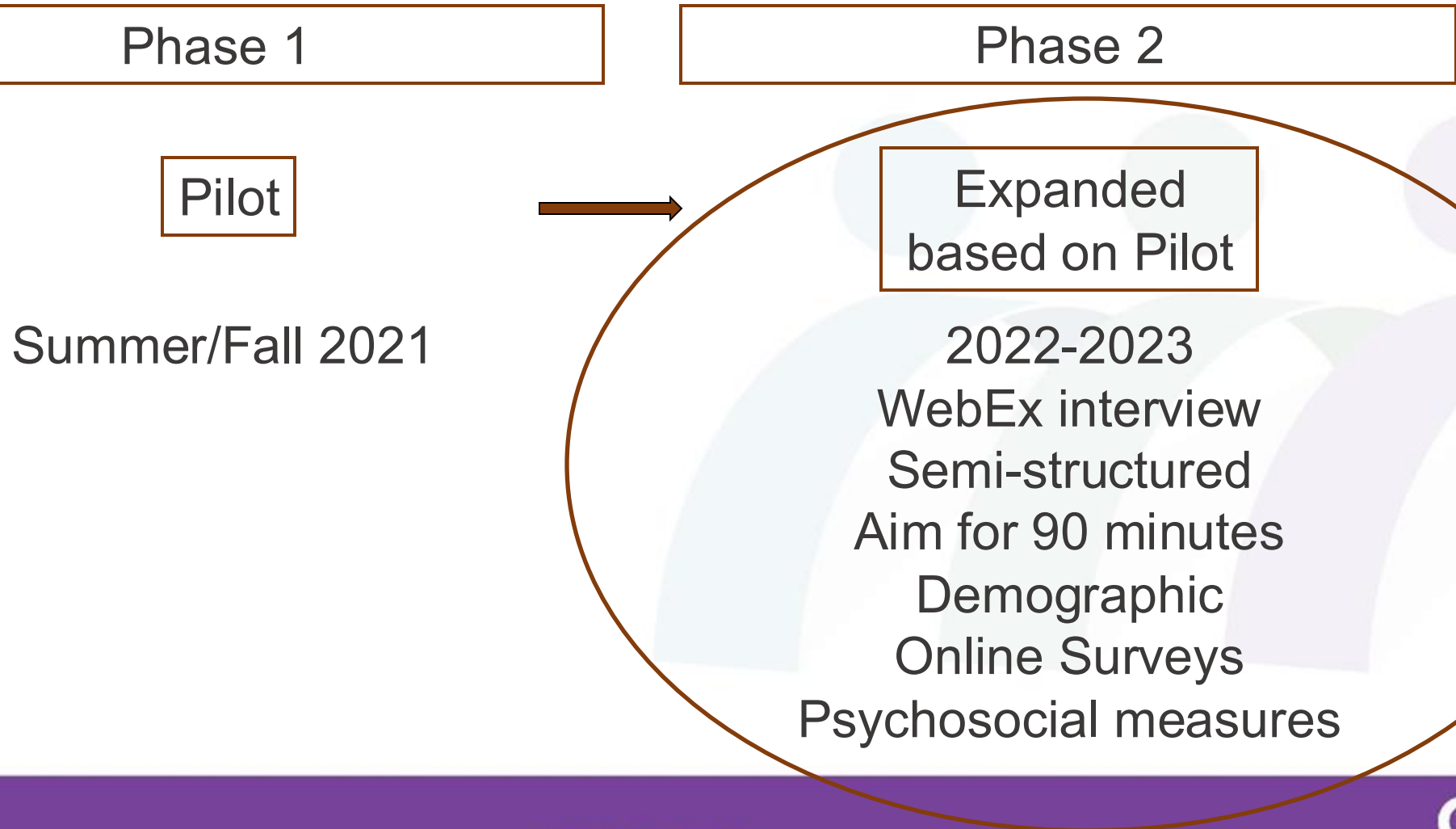


RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODS

1. What is the Meaning of Drag Expression for Older Drag Queens.
2. Is DE a mechanism to a healthier state of self.
3. How DE is integrated with one's persona and how it interfaces with discrimination, coping, resilience, and generativity.



Paucity of Research	Drag Queens (DQ) 50+
Exploratory	Qualitative





ELIGIBILITY

1. Self-identified as a DQ
2. Experience in any capacity as a DQ
3. Self-identified as a gender or sexual minority (SGM)
4. Age 50+
5. English primary language
6. Resident of U.S.



DEMOGRAPHICS

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



DEMOGRAPHICS

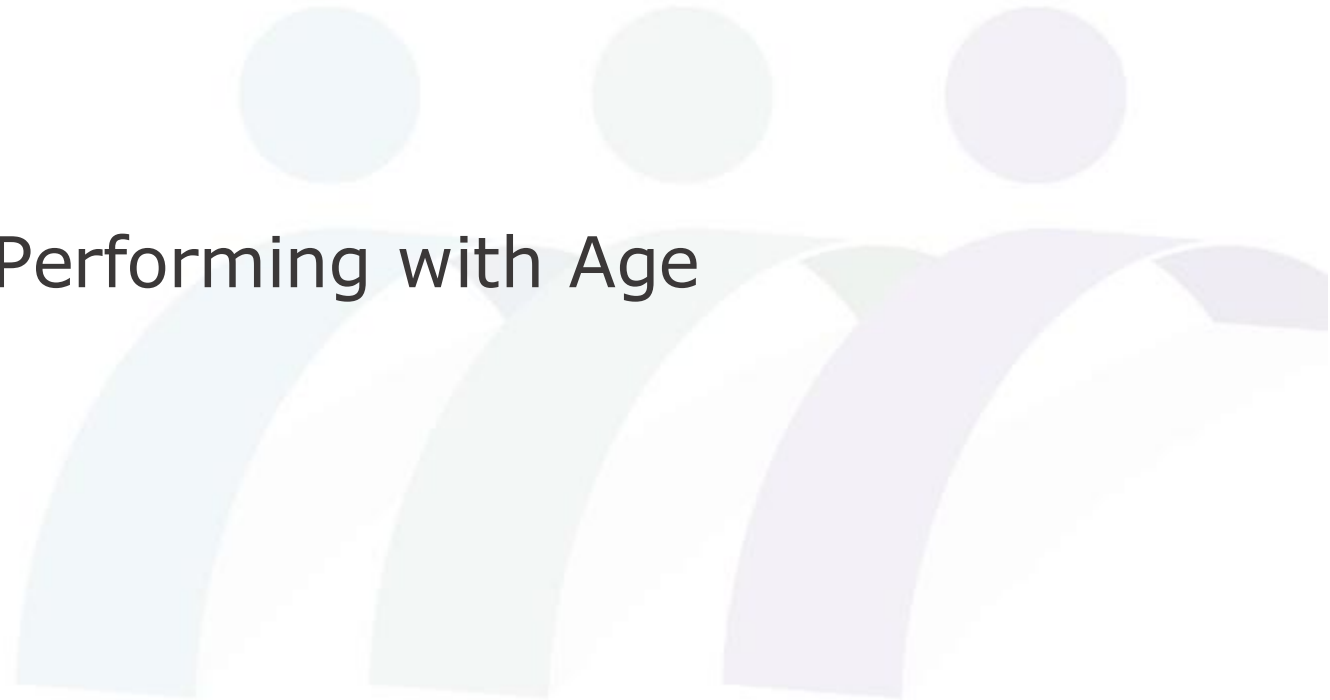
- ✓ Genre of Drag (12 options)
- ✓ Multiplicity of Responses
 - 17 Genre Selections
 - Top 3
 - Art
 - Glamour
 - Historical Drag



GROUND THEORY

Six Themes

1. Defining Drag
2. Armor & Resilience
3. Physical Difficulties Performing with Age
4. Loneliness
5. Ageism & Dragism
6. Old vs. New Drag





FINDINGS: THEME 1

Defining Drag

- ✓ Performance
- ✓ Artistic Expression
- ✓ Exaggeration of Me
- ✓ Gender vs. Character
- ✓ Lifestyle vs. Hobby
- ✓ A majority of participants saw their drag persona as a character - not wanting to BE a woman, but impersonate as such



T1 QUOTES

“But for me, drag queen means performer. To me it equals performer. If you’re not on the stage, if you're doing this not for the stage, then I don't think you're a drag queen. You're a trans person or a cross dresser If you are just dressing up and you're not performing” 04



T1 QUOTES

“It's always just been another way, I always felt it as, like, a sort of an artistic expression, something that I was able to do that I couldn't do all the time, so, give me a little bit of extra freedom...”¹²



T1 QUOTES

“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]” 06



FINDINGS: THEME 2

Armor & Resilience

- ✓ Fierce
- ✓ Empowerment
- ✓ Confidence
- ✓ Strength
- ✓ Better Version of Self





T2 QUOTES

“I never had that feeling of anxiety again ... [Drag] definitely strengthened me and made [me] a better version of myself, for sure.”01



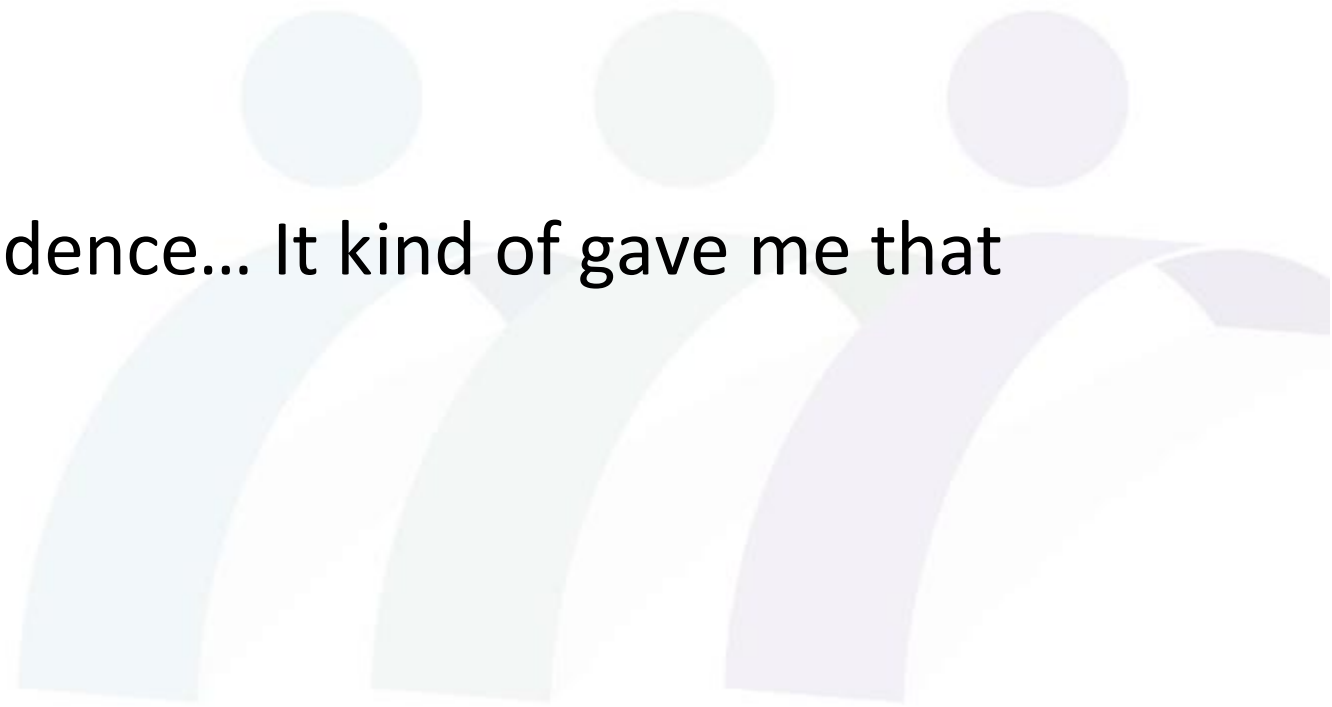
T2 QUOTES

“When I put on the face and the, that [drag name] look, it’s easier to do that [perform], for me. It would not be easy for me to be on stage as [drag name]. Even now.”
...I can say and do anything; when I’m out of drag, I have to be a little careful.”04



T2 QUOTES

“Drag gives me that confidence... It kind of gave me that extra layer.” 08





T2 QUOTES

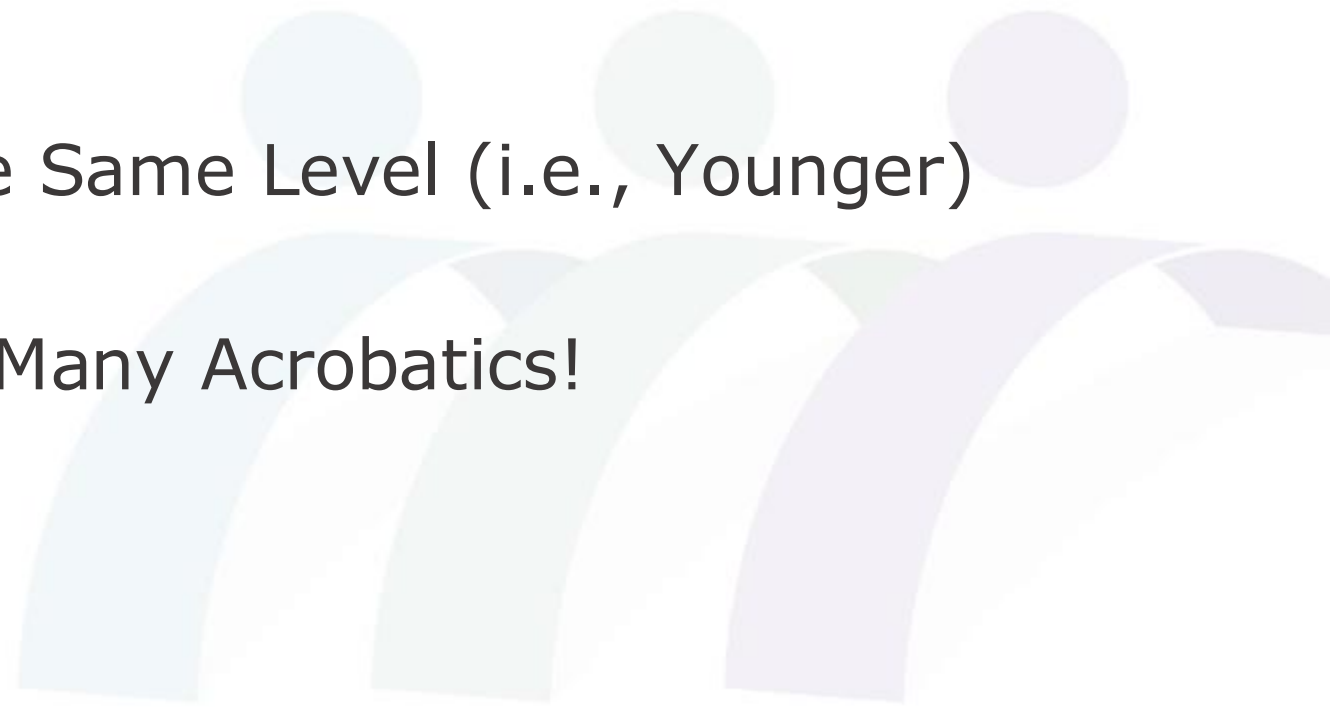
“I look at it now and I think about it... I think the drag queens saved me...Drag queens let me be able to do what I love to do. Perform.” 07



FINDINGS: THEME 3

Physical Difficulties Performing With Age

- ✓ Mobility
- ✓ Can't Perform at the Same Level (i.e., Younger)
- ✓ Heels
- ✓ Today's Drag: Too Many Acrobatics!





T3 QUOTES

“Drag has changed with RuPaul and all that. I mean, there's a lot more acrobatics and physical performances that would be tougher on an older person, so that changes things.” 13



T3 QUOTES

“I had necrosis, and my hips were like coral reefs, basically. There were, like, holes in them and just worn out because with dancer and guessing heels. The male body is not supposed to be in this... The pain I had for 3 years over my hips and stuff was so bad... I can’t give them drag.” 03



T3 QUOTES

03: Notes having knee surgery. Later says: “I ripped my Achilles tendon. And had to have that surgery, so that took me out for almost 2 years.” 03



FINDINGS: THEME 4

Loneliness

- ✓ Impact of HIV/AIDS
- ✓ Getting Old is Lonely
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Audience vs. Friends





T4 QUOTES

“There was no one in the audience who was my friend. I have nobody here in [named city] anymore. In order for me to win, I have to win over people that didn’t know me...It wasn’t like I had friends that I wasn’t seeing anymore. They weren’t friends. It was just, you know, the audience and they like me and that was that.” 03



T4 QUOTES

“Did you see ‘Mommy Dearest?’ Remember when Joan, Joan Crawford was getting ready to die, and she was in her bed looking at TV, and she was old? I picture myself like that. I really do because everything she accomplished and all the money and men she had, she’s still all alone.”

05



T4 QUOTES

“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.” 05



FINDINGS: THEME 5

Ageism & Dragism

- ✓ Importance of Being Young – Become “Invisible”
- ✓ Some Clubs Don’t Like Older Queens
- ✓ Discriminated More in Gay Community
- ✓ Fear for Safety



T5 QUOTES

“And I would say to my dad, ‘I don’t want to live to be an old... I don’t want to live to be an old f*g.’ And yet I fought to live, and now I’m an old f*g.” 07



T5 QUOTES-AGEISM

“Me being a gay man in a gay world, besides the drag, age is a very important thing. Very important to be young. Then there comes a time when you have to say, I’m 90...They don't look at you anymore when you're 45 and on” 05



T5 QUOTES-AGEISM

“One of the owners, the managers of the club, was having people more of his age group perform or people that he liked. And that was hurtful because I was here before they were here, and I just wanted to express myself.” 08



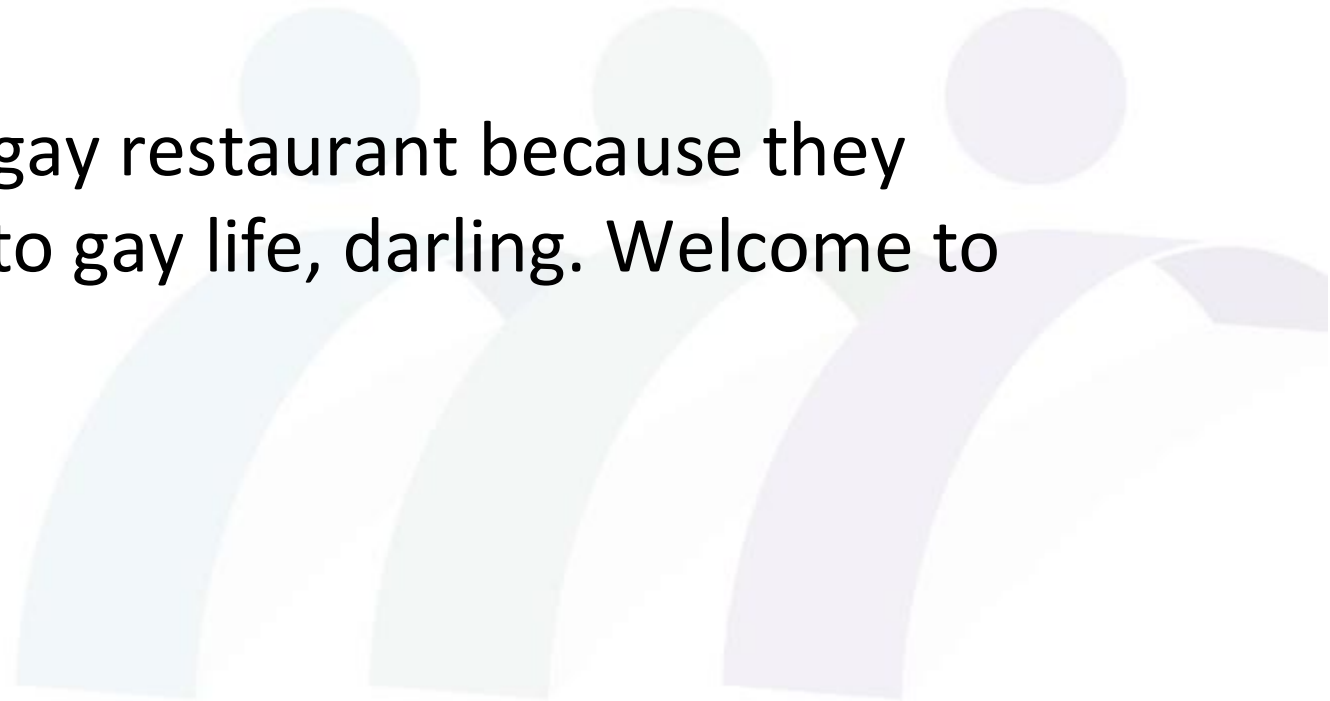
T5 QUOTES-DRAGISM

“There are people in the LGBTQ community that absolutely love and adore drag and embrace it and all of that. And then there are these other ones that wave you away, want nothing to do with you.” 01



T5 QUOTES-DRAGISM

“I as refused service at a gay restaurant because they were in drag. “Welcome to gay life, darling. Welcome to reality.” 07





T5 QUOTES-DRAGISM

“Gay people, especially gay white men, are incredibly discriminating....they focus on us because we were ‘the bad side.’ We were the face of the gays. They made us—the straight people made us [drag queens] the face of the gays. And the gay men hated that, and that’s why they discriminated against the drag queens.” 07



FINDINGS: THEME 6

Old vs. New Drag

- ✓ Closeted During 60's vs. Less Stigma
- ✓ Could go to Jail vs. More Mainstream
- ✓ More Interest in Drag Kings Than Ever Before
- ✓ Drag has Changed Immensely



T6 QUOTES

“We never went outside of our club dressed as women in drag. We never walked down the street then. Because it was the sixties, and the sixties were not too nice to us. And so, we were rather closeted, as far as staying in the club and doing what we do. What happened was, about 1970- something, it started changing because there were television shows. There was, the drag was kind of getting there.” 04



T6 QUOTES

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T6 QUOTES

“In my era, it wasn’t legal... We had to get entertainment licenses in order to be, to to do drag shows. Because it was on the law book that if you see a man with a dress on, they can go to jail.” 05



T6 QUOTES

“That community was, I mean, it was different. The 80’s and 90’s were different, because everyone felt like family... After the 90’s, and especially at the beginning of the internet, it kind of changed because I think people didn’t really need to club to go out and meet someone. They could do the social sites.” 08



WHAT WOULD YOU WANT THE WORLD TO KNOW?

“I would love the world to know that we're not clowns.”

01

“Remember that behind all this glitz and glamor there's a pretty nice person. And maybe you should find out about who this person is first, and then worry about whether she's in drag or not. No, I, uh, I hope they know that I, I'm a nice guy and things are okay in my life, and I can deal with it. Now you deal with it.” 04



WHAT DO YOU WANT THE WORLD TO KNOW?

Q&A





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THANK YOU

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