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Drag Performance: A Space for Gender Expression and Identity Formation

Ricia Mae M. Corpuz*, Kurt Andrei G. Lozada, Luigi S. Acevedo and John Erwin P. Pedroso

West Visayas State University, Iloilo City, Philippines; kurtandrei.lozada@wvsu.edup.ph (K.A.G.L.), luigi.acevedo@wvsu.edu.ph (L.S.A.); johnerwin.pedroso@wvsu.edu.ph (J.E.P.P.)
* Correspondence: riciamae.corpuz@wvsu.edu.ph (R.M.M.C.)

Abstract: Drag performance is a dynamic form of self-expression. By challenging traditional gender expectations, it can allow individuals to explore their identity without being limited to conventional norms. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how drag can serve as a space for gender expression and identity formation among local drag performers in the Philippines. Guided by Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, it examined how gender identities could be formed through repeated acts of drag performance. It used a semi-structured interview guide, conducted virtually with five (5) local drag performers selected through purposeful sampling. Using Colaizzi's method of thematic analysis, the collected data were analyzed. Five (5) interconnected stages describe how performers navigated their changing sense of gender and self: (1) using drag as a space for self-discovery; (2) exploring gender through fluid expression; (3) gaining confidence through a drag persona; (4) adapting creatively to social and economic challenges; and (5) building solidarity amid marginalization. These findings showed that drag performance can be a transformative process that helps performers define their identities both on and off stage.

Keywords: drag performance; self-expression; gender performativity; identity formation

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1. Introduction

Drag is an exaggerated performance that combines costume and makeup to celebrate individuality. Evolving into a powerful movement, it redefined self-expression and brought discussions on inclusivity (Human Rights Campaign 2023). Numerous investigations, particularly regarding how drag challenges societal gender norms, have surfaced due to this growing attention. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of drag performance in identity and gender expression (Dougherty 2017). Performers challenge societal norms in this new form of self-expression (Bass 2021). With increasing drag popularity, performers reshape their artistry to reflect the fluid and evolving nature of gender identity (Lizama 2024). By recognizing the impacts of drag, the research community can contribute to building inclusivity and appreciation for diverse gender expressions. Consequently, this emphasizes the need to understand how drag performances serve as a space for expressing gender and forming identities for their performers.

Despite being beneficial, drag performance possesses some limitations. An empirical gap exists in understanding relationship between role of drag performances and aid performers to express their gender and identity. Some studies overlooked how performers negotiate these expressions beyond the stage (Egner and Maloney 2015). It recognizes the limited insight into how performers experience their sense of self in both performance and everyday life (Dougherty 2017). There is minimal understanding of effect of broader social structures on fluid gender identity expression (Levitt et al. 2018; Dougherty 2017). One instance is how drag intersects with gender expression, identity formation, and societal expectations (Levitt et al. 2019; Knutson et al. 2019). A population gap is also observed. Performers from different racial backgrounds and local settings remain underrepresented in research compared to those from urban and more established drag communities (Filardo Llamas 2018). Hence, investigating the lived experiences of local drag performers is important to understand drag from the perspective of its performers (Moncrieff and Lienard 2017). A deeper understanding of negotiating gender and identity through drag will be achieved through bridging these research gaps.

This study examined role of drag performance as a space for gender expression and identity formation among local drag performers. Specifically, it explored how performers construct their identities through drag. The research question was how does drag performance serve as a space for gender expression and identity formation? Using gender performativity theory by Judith Butler, it

looked at how performers formed their gender identity as a result of repeated social performances that are shaped by shared ideas and expectations in society (Singh 2022). It was found that performers experimented with gender and identity through the repeated act of performing drag.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This research used a qualitative design, particularly descriptive qualitative research with a touch of phenomenology, to explore how local drag performers navigate gender expression and identity formation. Because gender cannot be limited to strict social categories, this method is crucial to LGBTQ+ studies (Perone 2015). Gender performativity theory by Judith Butler served as the framework for understanding how drag performances help performers construct their gender expressions and identity (Ton 2018). Through this, it showed how drag challenges traditional norms and reveals how gender is expressed through clothing and appearance (Willox 2016).

2.2 Research Instrument

The study used a semi-structured interview (SEI) guide. It is a qualitative approach that obtains rich, detailed data by combining open-ended and structured questions (Ruslin et al. 2022). The guide is divided into three sections. The first section focused on personal information and had six items about the informants' preferred name, stage name, gender identity, sexual orientation (optional), town of residence, and state university/college (SUC). The second section has three items about the informants' definition of drag performance, its purpose, and the challenges they face as performers. It also has six items on identity formation, gender expression, and the relationship between drag performance and Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. The third section has four items on the impact of drag on identity and self-expression, the respondent's sense of belonging within their community, and any messages they wish to share with those unfamiliar with drag culture. The semi-structured interview guide went through validation through expert review to ensure the credibility and reliability of the instrument.

2.3 Informants

Five local drag performers from Iloilo Province were selected using purposeful sampling as the informants. The inclusion criteria were the informant is officially enrolled at a state university; the informant identifies as a drag queen; the informant has performed in at least three drag events, and the informant resides in at least one of the five districts of Iloilo Province.

Table 1 presents the profile of the informants, all male drag performers aged 18 to 25 from Iloilo Province. All were briefed on the research objectives and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Table 1. Profile of Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Number of Drag Events Performed
Princess	18	Pototan, Iloilo	21
Teresa	20	Lambunao, Iloilo	17
Francisca	25	Lambunao, Iloilo	26
Clara	19	Alimodian, Iloilo	34
Veronica	21	Lemery, Iloilo	42

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

A semi-structured written interview questionnaire, consisting open-ended questions, was created using Google Forms. The informants were provided with a consent form outlining the study's purpose and ensuring their voluntary participation. The interview questions were sent after the informants gave their consent individually via Google Forms through Facebook Messenger to allow them to respond at their convenience. Upon completion, the responses were automatically compiled in Google Forms. Both the questions and responses were in English. Lastly, the researchers made sure to contact the informants if there were further clarifications. All collected data were securely stored and used only for research purposes. Ethical considerations were followed as they are important to data gathering in order to guarantee confidentiality and informed consent (Taherdoost 2021).

2.5 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the drag performers was examined using thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify and interpret patterns or themes within data (Nowell et al. 2017). Specifically, Colaizzi's technique was used to analyze phenomenological data using its structured seven-step approach by identifying significant statements and formulating meanings. This makes for a reliable phenomenological technique, as it rigorously grouped the similar statements into themes and subthemes (Wirihana et al. 2018). Pseudonyms were assigned once the informants submitted their completed interview form to ensure confidentiality. After each response was gathered, meanings were formulated from significant statements. The data was organized by grouping these meanings into themes and subthemes. Following this, the results were presented by describing the identified themes and supporting them with direct statements from the participants. This is to provide a detailed understanding of their experiences according to identity formation and gender expression in drag performance (Morrow et al. 2015). Finally, the results were returned to the informants to verify that the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

3. Results

The complex and raw experiences of local drag performers were gathered. The data were categorized into five major themes namely using drag as a space for self-discovery, which includes the subthemes expressing the self through storytelling and empowering the self through performance; exploring gender through fluid expression, which includes the subthemes exploring gender identity and embracing fluidity in gender expression; gaining confidence through a drag persona, which includes the subthemes forming a confident identity, navigating dual identities, and representing the true self; adapting creatively to social and economic challenges, which includes the subthemes expressing socioeconomic identity, practicing financial resourcefulness, and advocating through performance; and building solidarity amid marginalization, which includes the subthemes facing limitations in rural contexts, seeking emotional support through drag, finding solidarity in drag spaces, and recognizing self-worth. These themes and their corresponding subthemes highlight how drag supports the performers' gender expression and identity formation.

Drag as a Space for Self-Discovery is a starting point for performers to understand and express who they are. Specifically, this theme is reflected in two subthemes of expressing the self through storytelling, and empowering the self through performance.

Expressing the self through storytelling is one way this happens. Informants described drag as a form of storytelling where they could openly express their identity and experiences.

Princess described drag as *"a powerful form of self-expression and artistic storytelling."*

Veronica further emphasized this, sharing, *"...it's an art form, a form of self-expression, and a celebration of identity. It's about telling stories…"*

Teresa also stated, *"For me, drag performance is the way to express ourselves as a drag queen performer."*

This form of creative expression also prepared performers to experience greater freedom in asserting themselves through drag.

This sense of expressive freedom extends into empowering the self through performance. Drag provided a platform where informants shared that they could be recognized and establish their presence.

Princess expressed, *"It creates space for queer voices and histories to be celebrated and heard. Drag can also be healing and empowering, both for the performer and the audience."*

Veronica also shared this sense of empowerment, saying, *"Being a Drag Queen is powerful. You have the ability to inspire and influence others through your performances."*

Teresa added, "*I think drag queen performance is to make a representation in which we can promote our advocacy and to show how talented the LGBTQIA [is]."*

This growing sense of empowerment brought opportunities for performers to explore other parts of identity, particularly in relation to gender.

Exploring Gender Through Fluid Expression allowed performers to explore gender beyond binary norms, as reflected in the two subthemes of exploring gender identity and embracing fluidity in gender expression.

This developed through using drag as a tool for gender exploration. Drag helped informants to experiment with gender and how they present themselves.

Princess described, *"I now see gender as something to play with, rather than something to be confined by."*

Clara also expressed, *"Through drag, I was able to explore more about my sexuality by knowing where my boundaries as a queer [person are]. I was able to balance my feminine and masculine sides."*

Veronica added, *"I can portray exaggerated traits of femininity and masculinity in a form of art."*

As performers were more comfortable with gender through drag, their exploration gradually deepened into new understandings of gender.

This becomes clear through how performers embrace gender fluidity as part of their expression. Informants emphasized that it let them to explore gender without following societal expectations.

Princess expressed, *"Drag has taught me that gender is fluid, performative, and not tied to strict binaries."*

Francisca also stated, *"My gender identity feels fluid, playful, and empowered. Drag has helped me realize that gender isn't something fixed; it's something I define for myself."*

Veronica shared a similar insight: *"I can tell that gender isn't fixed—it's fluid."*

Performers continued to present gender more freely, and their understanding of self-expression began to change.

A shift in self-expression is revealed in gaining confidence through drag persona. It shows how adopting a drag persona helps performers develop a more confident identity, both in performance and in everyday life. This theme is reflected in three subthemes of forming a confident identity, navigating dual identities, and representing the true self.

A strong sense of self begins through the formation of a confident identity. Drag personas allowed informants to become bolder with a secure sense of self.

Princess stated, *"My drag persona is a heightened, bolder version of myself that allows me to express parts I might hide in daily life."*

Francisca shared a similar response, *"My drag persona is like a heightened, fearless version of me - it's where I tap into confidence, creativity, and attitude that I might not always show in daily life."*

Veronica also said, *"My drag persona expresses the things that I don't usually do out of drag."*

These describe how adopting drag personas enabled them to gain confidence. Yet with this growing confidence came a new challenge: balancing who they are on stage with who they are off it.

Navigating dual identities was a common experience. Informants reflected on the difference between their drag and everyday personas. Some say there is a clear separation, while others shared certain traits carried over into daily life.

Francisca reflected, *"...that confidence and self-awareness from drag has started to influence and strengthen my everyday self too. It's a balance of honoring both sides and letting them inform each other."*

Similarly, Princess shared, *"Drag gives me confidence that often carries over into my everyday life [self]."*

Meanwhile, Clara noted, *"I always remind myself to separate me from my drag persona."*

While performers had personas in and out of drag, they gave equal attention to both because they are both authentic.

Representing the true self through drag captures how performers express their most authentic selves.

Princess reflected on this idea, saying, *"...both are real and valid parts of who I am."*

Francisca built on this, explaining, *"...both are real parts of who I am-they're not separate, just different expressions of the same person."*

These responses reveal that drag performers view both identities as valid. But this sets the stage to how they respond to limitations concerning their identity development.

In the face of material constraints, Adapting Creatively to Social and Economic Challenges highlights how performers must still navigate the financial limitations that impact their drag practice and daily lives. This is reflected in the three subthemes of expressing socioeconomic identity, practicing financial resourcefulness, and advocating through performance.

Such realities appear in how drag performers express their socioeconomic identity, such as financial challenges that come along with engaging in drag.

Princess shared, *"Coming from a lower-income background meant I had to be resourceful with my drag."*

Veronica admitted, *"Drag is very expensive. Having a low income can really affect my drag as I have to invest so much into it."*

Clara echoed this sentiment, *"Drag is not cheap. In my four years of doing drag, I still don't have enough resources to reach the fullest potential of my drag identity."*

These show how financial constraints affect the way performers approach and develop their drag personas. This taught them to be creative and adapt to support their passion.

Through practicing financial resourcefulness, performers manage limited resources to keep performing drag. Different strategies were used by informants to support their drag amid financial limitations.

Princess explained how she adapted by saying, *"...thrifting, DIY (do-it-yourself) costumes, and borrowing from friends. It influenced my style and made creativity more essential than money."*

Clara shared that she relies on alternative income, stating, *"All my drag equipment is from my makeup gigs."*

This resourceful approach highlights how performers adapt to economic limitations with creativity and inspire their style. It also served as motivation for them to expose the disadvantages they have experienced.

Finally, grounded in these economic realities is advocating through performance. Drag serves as a way to voice performers' opinions and raise awareness about societal issues. Through performance, they are able to express their advocacy while also bringing to light their lived experiences.

Veronica shared that, *"Drag performance can be theatrical, political and emotional."*

Clara affirmed this, stating, *"Drag performances became a safe space for drag entertainers to protest for human rights and gender equality, because drag will always be political."*

Francisca offered a similar view, saying, *"It [drag] also influenced the themes I brought to my performances—sometimes highlighting class struggles, resilience, or realness that comes from lived experience."*

This demonstrates how drag becomes a platform for critical expression. Because of this, they seek a place for them to display their true selves to close peers.

Building Solidarity Amid Marginalization explores how a sense of belonging builds among performers within local contexts. Drag becomes a way of creating bonds and cultivating unity that challenges exclusion. This is reflected in four subthemes of facing limitations in rural contexts, seeking emotional support through drag, finding solidarity in drag spaces, and recognizing self-worth.

A common experience performers face is the limitation brought by rural contexts. Encountering misunderstanding, a lack of acceptance, and limited access to supportive spaces within their local communities are problems that informants described

Princess shared, *"...one thing is for sure that the number one challenge that I have experienced was how other people see the drag. Some people don't understand drag on how it is done and performed, which is crucial for me being a local drag queen."*

Teresa also expressed that, *"Lacking of attention, communication, and time to give chance to show our talent made us feel like we are not giving the chance for our passion."*

Francisca pointed out thoughtfully, *"One of the biggest is lack of acceptance—whether from local culture, family, or even within the broader community. There's often limited access to venues, resources, or supportive networks, which can make it harder to grow as an artist or even find a space to perform."*

These challenges often lead to major personal struggles. Through which drag becomes a meaningful space through which performers cope as a response.

Another role of drag is in the emotional support it gives. It is a place where informants can connect with others who understand their journey.

Clara openly admitted, *"Drag is my coping mechanism when it feels like the world is being a little mean."*

Francisca heartfully expressed, *"Drag has become a tool for healing, empowerment, and authenticity - it doesn't just change how I look; it changes how I see myself and how I move through the world."*

Veronica sincerely affirmed, *"Drag has given me the confidence to express my true self."*

More than emotional support, drag builds belonging by bringing the informants together through meaningful connections rooted in mutual understanding.

This connection deepens through finding solidarity in drag spaces. These spaces support a strong sense of community because performers help one another feel seen and heard.

Princess shared, *"Being a drag performer has connected me with a chosen family of creatives and allies. It's helped me carve out a space where I feel seen, supported, and celebrated. Even in rural or conservative areas, it builds powerful networks of solidarity."*

Teresa also noted, *"I feel that I'm a part of this community."*

Clara then pointed out, *"Drag is a safe space for everyone. I'm so grateful for the people I have met within the community because they somehow shaped not only my drag persona but my out-of-drag character as well. I felt heard and because of that, I felt belong."*

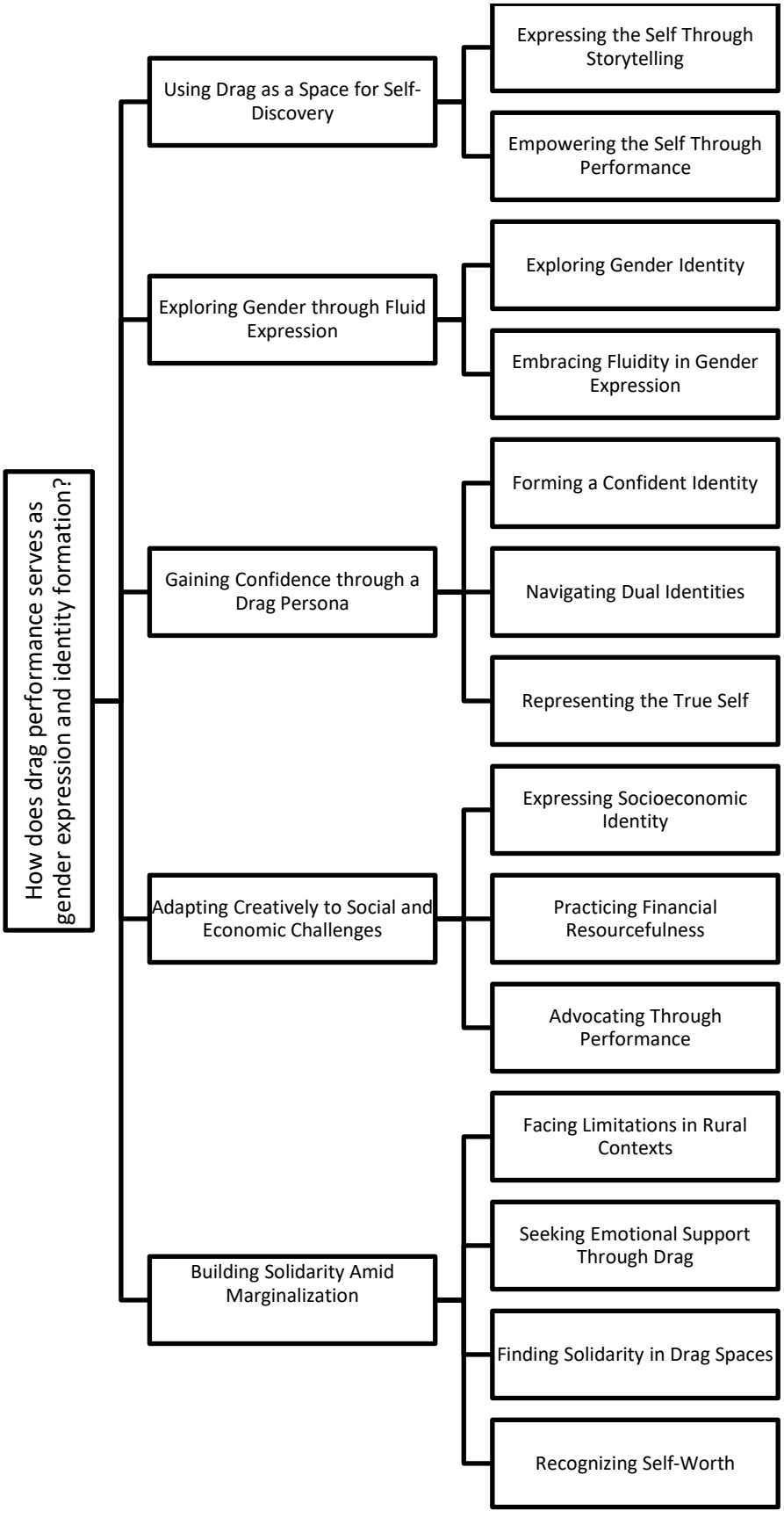


Figure 1. Thematic Map of the Informants' Processual Identity Formation

Building on the sense of connection and belonging found in drag spaces, performers begin to accept this support. This leads to a deeper recognition of their self-worth and confidence in expressing their identities.

This recognition of self-worth appears as an important result of their shared experiences. Drag supports their authentic selves through creative expression.

Princess reflected, *"It's helped me discover parts of myself I didn't know existed and given them a voice. It's a celebration of who I am, both on and off the stage."*

Francisca then shared, *"The most significant impact of drag on my personal identity and self-expression is the confidence and freedom it's given me to embrace every part of who I am. Drag has taught me that I don't have to fit into anyone else's expectations - that I can be bold, creative, loud, soft, fierce, or vulnerable, all on my own terms."*

Veronica also said, *"It helped me discover my strength, embrace my identity, and tell my story with pride."*

Together, these insights show that drag is an important way for performers to connect and feel positive with their identities.

4. Discussion

Drag can become a transformative practice for performers in local settings being a channel for self-exploration. Personal stories were expressed and identities were explored by the performers when they performed on stage. Because of drag's empowering influence, they shared parts of their identities, especially about their gender. These findings are supported by earlier studies, as drag helps performers grow as people by expressing themselves (Balint et al. 2025). Drag performance empowers performers by turning marginalized femininity into a source of strength for self-discovery (Oostrik 2014). Through Butler's gender performativity theory, self-expression and empowerment are seen as performative acts. Performers explore and negotiate their gender, thereby contributing to their broader identity formation.

Drag served as a venue for exploring gender and fluidity and gave performers a meaningful space to express themselves beyond binary norms. Drag performance is a form of self-expression. Several performers described gender as "fluid," "playful," and "self-defined." Blending feminine and masculine traits through drag helped performers build a gender identity that is not fixed. Because of this performance of gender expression, it contributed to performer's experimenting with their gender and overall identity in social contexts where the display of such expressions is limited. Based on performers' experience, they view drag as a space where they could act out those expressions without constraint (Litwiller 2020). Mainstream drag may also influence narrow, stylized ideals of femininity leading to the commodification of drag performance (Hodes and Sandoval 2018). This reflects bigger concerns about how popular media influences expectations in drag culture. Using Butler's gender performativity theory, performers engage in gender expression in drag that is more feminine during performances but shifts to a more masculine presentation offstage. By repeatedly performing fluid blends of masculinity and femininity, performers gradually shaped a gender identity that is true to them, depending on their situations.

A strong sense of self developed when performers stepped into their drag personas. For them, this persona allowed them to embody a more confident and often feminine gender presentation that may be difficult to express in their everyday lives. The confidence they got from drag performance also affected their offstage or more masculine identity as well. Due to the transformative influence of drag, performers experience heightened self-worth and visibility in the world (Balint et al. 2025). Both of the gender identities on and off stage were real and valid, and had to be balanced by the performers. This challenged binary understandings of gender and supported the legitimacy of fluid self-expression. Using gender performativity theory, it showed drag performers can re-enact and reshape gendered behaviors. Therefore, identity is continually produced and negotiated through performance. Drag, in this sense, becomes both a form of self-recognition and an exploration of the multifaceted nature of gender (Greaf 2015).

The social and economic challenges faced by drag performers resulted in heightened creativity and resilience. Limited financial resources and material access shaped both the performers' styles and gender presentation because they had to adapt creatively. For local drag performers, financial constraints are a reality that affects their ability to support their careers in drag. Studies show that fewer performers are able to survive solely on the income from drag, and many struggles with social marginalization and other challenges (Berkowitz and Liska Belgrave 2010). Performers shared that drag is an expensive practice. Simply coming from low-income backgrounds made them find ways in accessible means like thrifting, do-it-yourself methods, and earning supplemental income from other creative work. Despite these constraints, their commitment to drag remained strong, and their socioeconomic status became a meaningful part of their identity and style. Additionally, these challenges motivated performers to advocate for their inherent rights and use drag as a platform for visibility, empowerment, and solidarity (Mallorca 2024). Gender Performativity Theory accounts for this; in this context, performers construct and sustain their feminine identity not through material abundance, but through continuous, creative enactments of gender under constraint. Drag, therefore, becomes both an artistic response to economic limitation.

Local performers experienced solidarity amid marginalization, and it affected their identity development. Limited access to spaces and public social stigma led to misunderstandings of drag and restricted expressions of performers. Despite this, it also strengthened their resolve to be seen. In rural contexts, these performers see drag as a space for collective belonging. As a way to deal with rejection, drag builds emotional and political mobilization that turns social exclusion into connectedness (McCormack and Wignall 2022). Emotional support in drag spaces is developed through shared experiences like using performance as a coping mechanism. These communities became a chosen family for solidarity and to be recognized and supported. In addition, these spaces also allow queer individuals to imagine futures beyond dominant heteronormative norms (Parslow 2019). Butler's gender performativity theory says that this shared concept of identity helps us understand more since it shows that performers can express their gender in different ways in these safe settings without worrying about being judged. This acknowledgment of their gender presentation as genuine and empowering can contribute to their overall sense of self.

This study provides insights into how drag performers from local communities navigate gender and identity. Limitations of study are that the sample size was limited to five informants, all of whom were university students and came from different towns within Iloilo Province. The generalizability of the findings to other regions or contexts may then be limited as a result. Secondly, the focus was only on drag performers. Other perspectives about drag were left out, such as from family members, peers, or

audiences. Future research should include drag kings and transgender individuals to widen understanding. Thirdly, the use of written semi-structured interviews may have limited the depth of responses that could be captured in face-to-face interviews. The study may overlook the intersectionality of drag performance due to its focus on gender and identity. Additional frameworks, such as intersectionality or queer of color critique, could further help understand future analyses. Exploration should also be done on the psychological effects of drag on mental health or social acceptance. Despite these limitations, this research offers key insights that can guide future efforts to better understand and support drag communities.

5. Conclusions

Through the artistry of drag performance, performers showed that becoming oneself is one of the most powerful acts of all. They understand and express who they are becoming as they shape character, appearance, and movement. As two distinct personas converge, performers access parts of themselves that might have remained hidden. What unfolds is a series of intimate performances brought by their imagination and struggle to be seen and hold their place in society. In this way, drag helps performers to deliver meaningful artistry that aligns with their intention to form an identity through deliberate action. These identities are living responses to one's place in the world, which are continuously reimagined. In doing so, drag performance becomes a space to empower performers to express who they are and to reclaim stories with intention and pride. Ultimately, drag is not just art but a transformative platform that helps individuals who are confused and are still in the process of figuring it out.

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