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Swimming Upstream: The Aging Experiences of Middle-Aged Gay and Bisexual Men

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a literature review exploring the lived experiences of middle-aged gay and bisexual men in contemporary Western society. Through a Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis (QIMS) analysis of existing qualitative research, the study explores the emergent themes of identity change, relational change, and bodily change and highlights the need for further research that provides a platform for men to share their own narratives and contribute to a deeper understanding of their experiences. Despite the growing body of literature on LGBTQ+ issues, there remains a significant gap in understanding middle-aged gay and bisexual men. By addressing this gap, future research can help to reduce the invisibility of middle-aged gay and bisexual men and inform the development of targeted support services and interventions, particularly in an Australian context where such research is urgently needed.

KEYWORDS

Ageing; middle-age; gay and bisexual men; identity change; relational change; bodily change; qualitative interpretative meta synthesis (QIMS)

Middle age, defined as the period between 39 and 65 years of age, is the time when people start to face the loss of their youth (Simpson, 2013a). It is also a time when people can encounter unexpected challenges, such as an increased awareness of mortality, greater cognitive complexity in the assessment of relationships to the social world, and a gradual disengagement and decreasing identification with the world of the young (Del Pino et al., 2016). While these challenges can be experienced by heterosexual men, this literature review will specifically focus on gay and bisexual men's experiences of middle age as they navigate unique socio-cultural challenges and barriers such as marginalization, discrimination, and gay culture's emphasis on youth (Del Pino et al., 2016; Hajek, 2014; Meyer, 2003). When combined with the challenges associated with HIV/AIDS, these barriers can leave gay and bisexual men feeling a reduced sense of well-being, together with a low or damaged self-esteem (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Hajek, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Indeed, these stressors can be exacerbated for gay and bisexual men who are often caregivers for their elderly parents,

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as they are more likely to be child-free. Hence, this may raise concerns about who their own caregivers will be as they age (Hajek, 2014). Therefore, without sufficient support, gay and bisexual men can find themselves experiencing mental health issues, drug addiction, homelessness, or suicidal ideation (Del Pino et al., 2016; Movement Advancement Project, 2017).

When investigating the lived experiences of middle-aged gay and bisexual men, Hajek (2014) and Simpson (2013a) claim that there is a demonstrable paucity of qualitative research specifically exploring this age cohort. In particular, Hajek (2014) suggests that this is because of the small population size and resultant challenges to analyzing age cohorts; the invisibility of gay and bisexual men in studies of parenting or marriage; the legacy of HIV/AIDS, the association of middle-aged gay and bisexual men with survival; and finally, earlier research focusing on the sexual activity of young men to the exclusion of other age cohorts (see also Del Pino et al., 2016; Kertzner, 2001). Simpson (2014) states that the experiences of middle-aged gay men have been comparatively neglected in the current qualitative literature, as there is only one article published between 1998 and 2012 that directly addresses the aging of gay men. Moreover, Simpson (2013a) found that gay-specific academic literature often conflates the experiences of middle-aged gay and bisexual men with those of older men (see also Herdt & de Vries, 2004). Overall, both studies identify gaps in contemporary qualitative literature and suggest that additional research needs to be conducted to better understand the lived experience of middle-aged gay and bisexual men.

In consideration of the aforementioned findings, this literature review will explore the lived experience of middle-aged gay and bisexual men in contemporary academic literature from 2013 to 2022 using a Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis (QIMS) methodology (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). This review is specific to middle-aged gay and bisexual men, and none of the studies that emerged in our search included a comparison with heterosexual men, nor a comparison across age groups. The results of this QIMS review highlight how the themes of identity change, relational change, and bodily change are key to understanding gay and bisexual men's lived experience of middle age in contemporary Western society. We do not suggest that the extracted themes presented in this QIMS review are necessarily exclusive to gay and bisexual men, nor do we seek to generalize the experiences to all men. Rather, this review shows how gaps in contemporary academic knowledge need to be addressed to help reduce the invisibility of middle-aged gay and bisexual men's socio-political experiences and inform the development of targeted support services and interventions. This is especially true in diverse cultural contexts, such as Australia, where such research is urgently needed to achieve a better understanding of how sexual identity and aging impacts wellbeing, so that middle-aged gay and bisexual men can be supported to realize a better quality of life.

Research methodology

The QIMS methodology was chosen for this literature review as it purports to offer a broader understanding of a given topic, while being an academically rigorous component of evidence-based practice (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). Indeed, the QIMS methodology allows researchers to determine the shared lived experience of the phenomenon versus what aspects are divergent to develop a more holistic and in-depth understanding (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). Thus, the rigorous iterative nature of the QIMS methodology is well suited to the formulation of research questions, sampling frameworks, thematic extraction, thematic synthesis, data triangulation, and the composing and dissemination of research findings (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Dewar et al., 2023).

Researcher positionality

The QIMS methodology requires that researchers clearly position themselves in relation to their research project (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Dewar et al., 2023; Holmes, 2020). This declaration of the researchers' positionality facilitates transparency and serves to promote the trustworthiness of a QIMS research project (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Holmes, 2020). Accordingly, the QIMS methodology uses the terms etic and emic to describe the positionality of researchers in their research projects. Emic refers to an author who is an insider, or a member of the population being studied (Hoare et al., 2012; Holmes, 2020), while etic refers to an author being an outsider, where they are not member of the community being studied (Dewar et al., 2023; Hoare et al., 2012).

Author 1 comes to this research from an emic position. He is a middle-aged gay man who has worked among the LGBTQ community publicly for most of his life. During this time, he has sought to be responsive, helpful, and professionally orientated toward the LGBTQ community. What drives his social work research is his eagerness to promote and foster the wellbeing of gay and bisexual men in middle age, so that they may realize a better quality of life, socially just outcomes, and emancipation from the barriers of the past that have hindered their ability to live life authentically.

Authors 2 and 3 come to this research from an etic position, and both identify as women. While Author 2 does not belong to the gay or bisexual community, she has worked alongside men who identify as gay and bisexual in both the higher education and in welfare sectors. From her perspective, as a researcher interested in exploring embodiment in social work practice (Mensinga & Pyles, 2021), her interest in this literature review is to achieve a better understanding of how sexual identity and aging impacts wellbeing. Author 3 has likewise worked alongside men who identify as gay and bisexual

in a range of contexts. Author 3's research focuses primarily on social movements, social change, and agency, and her commitment in this work is to contribute to positive change for this group and others.

Literature review process

This QIMS review was conducted between May and July 2023, and was guided by the research question "What are the life experiences of middle-aged gay and bisexual men?" To initiate the QIMS process, the following compound search term was used: "lived experience" OR "personal experience") AND ("narrative inquiry" OR "narrative research") AND ("older-adults" OR "older adults" OR "middle age" OR "middle-aged" OR "middle aged" OR "middle-aged" OR "mid-life" OR "mid life") AND ("gay men" OR "gay man" OR "bisexual men" OR "bisexual man"). In addition to the compound search term, the inclusion criteria for this QIMS research were: published between 2013 and 2022; peer reviewed academic journal articles; either mixed-methods or qualitative in nature; written in English; with participants that are between 39 and 65 years of age. Five academic search engines: Cinahl, Emcare, Psychinfo, Scopus, and Webofscience, and six publisher/vendor platforms: Scopus, Informit, ProQuest, Gale Academic, Analysis & Policy Observatory, and Taylor & Francis were comprehensively searched for relevant articles. Google Scholar was also used to hand search for other suitable articles not found by the initial searches.

After a comprehensive search of the databases, a total of 95 articles were identified as being suitable to include in the screening process (see Appendix A). Upon an initial screening of the articles, Author 1 identified three articles as duplicates, leaving a total of 92 articles for further screening. Author 1 then proceeded to screen the titles of the 92 remaining articles and removed a further 71 articles that did not incorporate any of the search terms. Subsequently, the abstracts of the remaining 21 articles were then reviewed to identify if they addressed the lived experiences of middle-aged gay or bisexual men in the specified age range. This process resulted in the removal of 11 articles, leaving a total of nine articles that conformed to the screening criteria. Following the completion of this process in accordance with the QIMS methodology, Author 2 then checked the articles reviewed by first author, reviewed the exclusions, and then confirmed the selected articles. To finalize the screening process, Author 1 then screened the remaining nine articles for "contextual relevance, temporal relevance, and fatal flaws" (Dewar et al., 2023, p. 285).

The nine studies that met the criteria for inclusion in this QIMS review were: Del Pino et al. (2016), Hajek (2014), Ozturk et al. (2020), Simpson (2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). While seven studies were from the United Kingdom (UK) and two from the United States of America (USA),

there were no studies from any other countries, including European, or Western, English-speaking countries such as Australia (see Appendix B). Moreover, as the articles had a Western focus and a level of cultural homogeneity in the populations selected, it became evident that there is a need for further qualitative research that explores the lived experiences of gay and bisexual men in other contexts. In this analysis, though, we note the relative homogeneity of experiences present in contemporary academic literature.

Extraction and synthesis of thematic material

To begin the process of extracting thematic material, a table was created to show key details regarding the research methods, findings, demographics, and key characteristics of the research participants in each article (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; see Appendix B, Table B1). In total, there were 238 male participants across the nine studies, aged between 39 and 65 years. All the studies used a qualitative research method that incorporated semi-structured interviews to explore the following topics: coping with stigma and family relationships, managing midlife identity, negotiating heteronormative organizational settings, using aging capital, friendship families, midlife body practices, the experience of aging in homo-spaces, gay voluntary organizations, and aging in domestic spaces.

When using the QIMS methodology, the goal is to preserve the integrity and essence of the original work of the authors, therefore data from the articles was not "rewritten, reworked, or analysed" (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013, p. 285). Rather, the original themes and subthemes were entered into another table in their original form, to preserve their integrity and strengthen the reliability of this review (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; see Appendix C, Table C1). In addition to preserving the themes from each article, quotes relevant to each theme and subtheme were extracted, so that all requisite data was readied in preparation for the next step in the QIMS process: thematic synthesis (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Dewar et al., 2023).

In the thematic synthesis process, the QIMS reviewer is tasked to translate all the articles into a synergistic whole, while ensuring that the integrity of each individual article is maintained (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). To ensure the integrity of the articles, a mind map was created to visually organize the themes, so that the convergences, complementarities, and dissonances between the themes and subthemes could be established, leading to the emergence of a preliminary set of synthesized themes and subthemes for further review (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Dewar et al., 2023). After this process was completed, the preliminary synthesized themes were then reviewed by Author 2 to verify the resultant data (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). To complete the process, the articles were then reviewed a second time with the intent of augmenting the synthesis, to thereby facilitate a greater understanding of the

thematic material in the articles (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Dewar et al., 2023). The outcome of this iterative process is the emergence of several fully synthesized themes, which are explored in the section below (see Appendix D, Table D1).

Themes from the literature

Once the major themes in the papers were identified, compared, and then synthesized, three main themes emerge from the papers in this QIMs review: identity changes, relational changes, and bodily changes. These themes provide insights about gay and bisexual men's lived experience of middle age and highlight research gaps within the literature. To facilitate this QIMS exploration, synthesized themes from the studies are presented using direct quotes, where italics are used to indicate quotes from participants in the studies, while standard text is used to indicate quotes from the authors of the respective papers.

Identity changes

When synthesizing the articles for this QIMS review, identity changes emerge as the most common theme within the papers. In this subsection, the two subthemes of midlife identity changes that emerge from the articles are explored, including: positive identity formation, and negative identity formation.

Positive identity formation

The six aspects of positive identity formation that emerge from the articles are: creative agency, self-esteem, age group comparisons, group dynamics, aging capital, and authenticity.

Creative agency. To promote a positive midlife identity shift, the men in Simpson's (2013a, p. 294) study indicate "that the doing of midlife … male identity and ways of relating, involve creative agency." For example, in Ozturk et al. (2020, p. 1262) study, creative agency is understood to mean how "participants negotiate ageing as a competitive strength, instead of a liability." Accordingly, through the men's creative agency, their emotional responses change so much that they now have more muted reactions to negative ageist stigma compared to the past (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 10).

Self esteem. In addition to creative agency, some middle-aged men attempt to "recapture a younger identity, or maintain one in the case of denial, and occurred by way … of labelling, ways of talking and acting, and physical appearance" (Hajek, 2014, p. 617). Whereas in Simpson's (2013b, p. 107)

study, the men distance their midlife "self from their younger self—the one that had been involved in non-stop partying" to facilitate a positive identity. They thought that "being 'older' and 'wiser' meant that they gained a degree of credibility, which countered some of the stigma attached to being older and gay" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262). Comparatively, these factors underscore middle-aged men's attempts to increase their age-based esteem (Hajek, 2014).

Age group comparisons. Some men use age group comparisons "to enhance their age-group identity, . . . [which] took the form of personality, accomplishments, life conditions, and linguistic/verbal communication skills" (Hajek, 2014, p. 619). While other men "differentiated themselves from men thought of as old (usually 65+ or 'pension age')" to make favorable age group comparisons (Simpson, 2013c, p. 159). In contrast to the comparisons with older gay men, some middle-aged gay men "found ways to make favourable age group comparisons with younger men to enhance their age group identity" in a positive way (Hajek, 2014, p. 619).

Group dynamics. Group dynamics also contribute toward a positive identity, especially when the men begin their involuntarily shift into middle-age identity. For example, the men in Hajek's (2014, p. 616) study "reported frequent in group bonding and identity formation through talk about where hair was growing or not, their forgetfulness, clumsiness, knee replacements, [or the] work they wanted to get done on their bodies." Overall, the men derive a "positive distinctiveness from other groups by staying sexual, being in the best shape of their lives, . . . being financially stable, . . . and identifying strongly with their midlife age group" (Hajek, 2014, p. 623).

Ageing capital. Positive identity formation also develops in the men because of aging capital, which Simpson (2013c, p. 148) defines as "age-inflected cultural capital . . . that enables or predisposes men to narrate and perform legitimate, 'age-appropriate' midlife, gay male citizenship." For example, the men in Simpson's (2013c, p. 164) study use "ageing capital and 'technologies of the self' to avoid constraints on expression of midlife subjectivity." In Simpson's (2013a, p. 295) study, "midlife gay men . . . use ageing capital to differentiate themselves with more positive effects." "Gains in ageing capital help midlife gay men to resist the pressure to justify their ageing presence and proclaim authenticity" (Simpson, 2013a, p. 294). Furthermore, aging capital, in the form of "emotional resources and forms of support, . . . enables middle aged men to feel included in . . . gay male culture and maintain a sense of self-worth" (Simpson, 2013a, pp. 295–296).

Authenticity. A final element in the men's positive identity formation is "the idea of authenticity, . . . where the exterior should be a true reflection of a more

'real' interior midlife self, consisting of feelings, values, and 'personality' developed over time" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 155). For the men in Simpson's (2013c, p. 155) study, "authenticity frequently registered in upbeat tropes such as 'being happy in my own skin' or 'happy with the real me'."

Negative identity formation

In contrast to the development of a positive identity formation, three aspects of negative identity formation emerge from the articles, including: identity formation challenges, enduring negative identity, and inability to change identity.

Identity formation challenges. While a positive identity develops in some men, others struggle with challenges during their middle-age identity formation. For example, in Del Pino et al. (2016, p. 9) study, some men turned to "alcohol and drugs to avoid their own sexual thoughts and desires, as well as to cope with the resulting emotional pain." Moreover, they made "a clear connection between the negative social messages and . . . [their] use of alcohol to 'battle' the messages [they] . . . internalized" (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 9). Conversely, even when "sober, . . . [some] participants reported still feeling shame and guilt over their sexual orientation" throughout the formation of their middle age identity (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 10).

Enduring negative identity. In addition to substance abuse, transitioning into a middle-age identity was troublesome for some of the men in the studies. For example, in Hajek's (2014, p. 616) study, "awareness of their age identity shift was followed by the formation of a negative age identity that endured for months or years," although "the degree of negativity expressed by gay men . . . varied greatly." While the men in Del Pino et al. (2016, p. 11) study, were "feeling 'self-hatred and self-loathing' and not experiencing 'full acceptance' from themselves" due to their "discomfort with their sexual orientation after many years." Indeed, "some men still felt shame and guilt over their sexual orientation, even though they were older and sober" (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 10).

Inability to change identity. Some men struggle with their changing identity and tend "to disown their younger selves that were associated with sexual excess/experimentation and being dupes of gay and consumer culture" (Simpson, 2014, p. 159). Indeed, the men in Hajek's (2014, p. 623) study were "either unable or unmotivated to achieve a positive midlife age distinctiveness . . . [and] remained in a negative midlife identity." Consequently, "men might grow older, but not always and necessarily bolder and wiser" (Simpson, 2014, p. 166) as they "can undermine their notion of maturity" – i.e., a "linear path towards acceptance/understanding of the self-and other" (Simpson, 2014, p. 159).

Relational changes

After the theme of identity changes, the second most prevalent theme discussed in the papers is relational changes. Relational changes are an important theme in the papers because the men's relationships influence and shape their sense of belonging and selfhood. The seven subthemes of relational changes that emerge from the articles are: family rejection, friendship families, gay homes, intergenerational relationships, sexual relations with peers, work relations, and gay voluntary organizations.

Family rejection

Family rejection is a relational change that some men in the studies encounter "regardless of class or ethnic difference" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 64). For example, in Simpson's (2016b, p. 64) study, "two thirds of the sample . . . described the heterosexually identified family home as a site of risk." Regardless of the risk, the men in Del Pino et al. (2016, pp. 11–12) study "continued to look to . . . [their] family for support and acceptance" (Del Pino et al., 2016, pp. 11–12). The men reported "wanting "to feel loved" by their own family and described "how horrible [it is] to not feel part of," or to be rejected, on account of their families' moral beliefs" (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 12). For some men, "ongoing rejection from their families of origin" (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 11) can "influence decisions to use drugs and alcohol" (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 12), due to them feeling "self-hated and self-loathing" in these circumstances (Del Pino et al., 2016, p. 11).

Friendship families

Family rejection challenged many men in the studies, yet it was often the stimulus for the development of a new family of acceptance—a personal friendship family. In Simpson's (2013b, pp. 102–103) study, friendship families are "conceptualised as integral to the 'interpretive community' necessary to develop counter-narratives to homophobia, . . . like a family of choice." These friendship families "consisted of peer aged gay men, . . . biological relatives, women, and gay men of different ages" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 106). "Closer friends were chosen because: 'they subscribe[d] to a common set of values and beliefs. . . of trust, honesty, integrity, self-expression and mutual support" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 66). Accordingly, a "peer-aged friendship family [helped] . . . middle aged gay men develop the emotional and political resources (ageing capital) to challenge homophobia and to claim validity for their kinship" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 64).

"The shift in midlife away from heteronormative notions of family and the actual family of origin" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 106) is due to "an acceptance of increasing 'detachment' from [them], . . . as if this were a natural, unremarkable development" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 64). However, the

middle-aged men's shift away from their "actual family of origin was paralleled by a move away from the youth coded bar scene towards [a] more domestically staged friendship family" While not all men had made this change (Simpson, 2016b, p. 68), they "understood the shift from the bar scene to domestic spaces as a natural development of the ageing process" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 106).

Gay homes

While the men's transition from the bar scene to a friendship family is important to their wellbeing, so is the transition from the family home to a gay home. Indeed, "the transition from bar/nightclub scene to home then might represent less withdrawal from social engagement with gay others, than aging capital functioning creatively to extend men's gay scene/friendship circles to domestic spaces" (Simpson, 2013b, pp. 106–107). In Simpson's (2016b, p. 65) study, the men felt that "the gay (or gay friendly) home … provide[s] a measure of ontological security—enabling … [them] to 'be themselves' without excessive self-surveillance." Nevertheless, "despite gains in self-worth with age, the ontological security of the home and sense of belonging in the neighborhood, could be seriously destabilised by neighbors' age-inflected homophobia" (Simpson, 2016b, pp. 69–70).

Intergenerational relationships

In addition to homophobia, men moving into middle age also face the challenges of negotiating intergenerational relationships with younger men. In contrast to middle-aged gay men, "heterosexual men's involvement with younger women is more legitimated—naturalized in the media and popular culture" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 109). Moreover, the "dominant discourse sets up a hierarchy of relationality where gay relationships, especially cross-generational ones, are accorded much less legitimacy, either because they breach the natural, or else, represent a 'less eligible' form of sexuality" in society (Simpson, 2013b, pp. 108–109).

The social distance of middle-aged men from younger men "registered in anxieties about being 'old enough to be the parent' of any younger man, … even when there was intergenerational parity" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 108). Indeed, "commonplace in informants claims … were concerns about … the moral consequences for the older man of younger men's presumed naivete and vulnerability" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 108). While men in Simpson's (2013b, p. 111) study recognized their "capacities to work across age differences, … [there was also] a recognition of the emotional and practical support that younger men can give" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 111). Yet, "cross generational relationships might wither because of disagreements over money, household management, or changes in priorities or 'personality'" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 110). Ultimately, "being the age of a boyfriend slightly older than their

parents evinced a discomforting concern with broader social disapproval" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 108).

Sexual relations with peers

For many men in the studies, the transition to middle age is a time where their sexual relations are transforming, particularly in relation to monogamy. Indeed, it was the view of many men in the studies men that "in the absence of health problems, monogamy would be the norm" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 67; see also Simpson, 2013b, p. 105). Nevertheless, "while some men desire a constancy that a partnership can bring, . . . [they were] prepared to forego sex with a partner and tolerate a partner having sex with unknown others" as they transitioned into middle age (Simpson, 2016b, p. 67). In this situation, "the relational arrangements . . . would involve the imposition of constraint on any partner who would be required to avoid emotional entanglements and be required to instrumentalise himself and any sexual partner," thereby preserving the emotional monogamy of the relationship (Simpson, 2016b, p. 67).

"Central to the informants' accounts of ethical non-monogamy was the distinction between sexual and emotional fidelity" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 104). Whereby, some men "had forged a way of 'doing' sexual relations consistent with . . . [their] values, ethical in terms of . . . treatment of self and others, and critical of dominant thinking about sexual relations" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 105). "The men's accounts claimed the right to sexual pleasure with unknown, barely known, others without being superficial, calculating, or promiscuous" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 104). Indeed, the men's "age inflected political and epistemic claims concerning sexual ethics question the notion that non-monogamy 'necessarily' entail[s] an amoral, libertine, separation of sex and emotions" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 67) Nevertheless, the men in Simpson's (2013b, p. 105) study caution that "non-monogamy can be a foil for selfishness, which was associated with a much younger self" identity (Simpson, 2013b, p. 105).

Work relations

Outside of the realm of the personal, work relations is another aspect of relational change that emerges from the articles. Indeed, in the domain of work relations, aging in the workplace is a major focus for the men in these studies, because "ageing continually create[s] anxieties and insecurities about the long-term sustainability of their position in the organisational hierarchy" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1260). While the men in Ozturk et al.'s (2020, p. 1262) study "considered ageing as an asset that facilitated them to engage with organisational leaders more persuasively," "ageing emerged as a problematic social process, where participants shaped their masculinity practices to avoid embodying age-specific, gay negative, stereotypes" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1261). Ultimately, the men's "embodied agency was shaped by the social

implications of ageing and sexuality, which fostered a cautious and defensive approach to change" within organizations (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262).

Power in the workplace is another significant concern for middle-aged gay men in Ozturk et al.'s (2020) study, particularly in relation to how heteronormativity persistently shapes the workplace. For some men, "hegemonic masculinity triggered anxieties about measuring up, which sometimes led . . . [them] to intensify their focus on business development and commercial relevance to demonstrate desirable managerial masculinity" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1260). Indeed, some men "managed work and people in line with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which helped them to exercise managerial power" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1259). In this heteronormative environment, the men's "desire to defend their power and privilege in the workplace undermined their capacity to seek transformative change" within their organizations (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1261). Nevertheless, "despite pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity, . . . men in senior managerial and professional roles . . . exercised organisational power using the levers of influence to push for change" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262).

In addition to power relations, heteronormativity in the workplace is a challenging issue for many men in the studies. Therefore, some of the men "emphasised practicing hegemonic masculinity in order to fit into an aggressive and competitive work environment" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1259). The men suggest that "change is an incremental process that must be pursued prudently . . . [and] relies on a critical mass of LGBT people in senior positions being able to dismantle the heteronormativity of [the] . . . workplace" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262). Indeed, "they preferred to change their organisations from within and slowly, by being measured, strategic and political" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262). Consequently, some men "believed that . . . change involved making hard choices, because a direct challenge against organisational heteronormativity seemed untenable in their work contexts" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1261).

Gay voluntary organisations

The final aspect of relational change that emerges from the articles is gay voluntary organizations. "Gay voluntary organisations (GVOs) were recounted as empowering spaces where men could continue to claim belonging" as they move into middle age (Simpson, 2016a, p. 373). They "were narrated as antidotes to the commercial scene and as an enabling expression of an authentic, midlife, gay self" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 373), where "ageing capital combined with the normativity of the group, promoted mundane acceptance of ageing and greater openness to empathy" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 374). Hence, the men appreciated "the comfort of peer aged others who form a community of understanding, or generational cohort, that promoted a politics of visibility" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 378), while being "a vital source of

support when coming out and [forming] subsequent friendship networks" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 374). Indeed, when some men join a GVO, they "metamorphose from [a] taciturn, awkward, and self-protective [person], into a social butterfly" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 374).

While GVOs were helpful to many men, they "were not immune to the ageism and other divisions inherent in the commercial gay scene" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 379). For example, some mixed-race men found that "some people . . . don't want to be friends with you outside group meetings. So, you wonder what their reason is . . . Is it age? My race? Different Interests?" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 379). Moreover, GVO "staff in positions of authority appeared [to] unconsciously . . . view age difference as a problem, even though . . . [the men's] age would be no bar to the execution of duties" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 379).

In these circumstances, some men noticed that "age was more of an issue, and more noticeable, than anywhere else," in GVOs (Simpson, 2016a, p. 378). This sentiment was echoed by a staff member in Simpson's (2016a, p. 375) study, where he recounted that in the "generic GVO where he worked as an administrator, . . . he 'often' found himself 'isolated' in a staff of mainly younger . . . men, where his standing was influenced by perceptions of age and attractiveness" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 375). Hence, some men concluded that age "was more of an issue than ever [in GVOs], and more noticeable than anywhere else," because "it's about 'gay old,' as opposed to 'just old'" (Simpson, 2016a, p. 378).

Bodily changes

The final theme that emerges from the articles is bodily changes. Bodily changes are a challenging aspect of middle-age for many of the men in the studies, because ageist discourse around these changes could influence their positioning within gay culture, thereby shaping their relationality with other gay and bisexual men. The five aspects of bodily changes that emerge from the articles include: bodily aesthetics, sexual desirability, commercial social spaces, online gay spaces, and commercial sexual homo-spaces.

Bodily aesthetics

The "battle [for] ageing body . . . aesthetics . . . [is] thought to be operating more harshly within gay male culture" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 160). For example, "stories of bodily ageing as involving loss of youthful looks, or physical and sexual capital, and shame concerning the ageing body, were featured in every interview" of Simpson's (2013c, p. 156) study. Indeed, "middle-aged men's positioning within [gay culture is inherently contradictory:] . . . where they are damned if they do try to present a more youthful self, and damned if they don't" (Simpson, 2014, p. 160). This sentiment is echoed in Simpson's (2014,

p. 160) study, where a respondent "stated that by their thirties, middle aged men [have] 'become invisible'" in gay culture.

Despite the men's "rejection of styles considered overly youthful, ageist discourse informed men's micro-level grooming practices, which were designed to disguise or conceal the finer, giveaway signs of aging, such as monitoring and trimming of ear and nose hair" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 160). "Close monitoring of the quality of facial skin for signs of ageing was . . . conducted because this is 'the' barometer of how well or badly men might be . . . managing aging" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 161). Hence, "Botox use [was] . . . justified as a response to the pressures facing middle-aged gay men to look as 'credibly' young for as long as possible" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 162), due to "concerns with the critical gaze of other gay men" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 161). However, "anxiety about bodily ageing was considered a waste of time and energy" for some men in Simpson's (2013c, p. 163) study, as they felt that "negotiation with ageing could be facilitated by a pragmatic acceptance of the signs of ageing."

Sexual desirability

As a result of the outward signs of physical aging, "the routine exclusion of . . . middle-aged men [occurred because they were] marked as less desirable in a sexual economy of surface appearance" (Simpson, 2013a, p. 291). Indeed, "age inflected norms maintain a boundary between permissible shared social experience and the forbidden sexual," for many middle-aged gay and bisexual men (Simpson, 2013a, p. 294). Nevertheless, some men desired "continuing inclusion within socio-sexual citizenship, especially among the middle-aged gay men who frequent a bar for older men, where they might still be considered desirable" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 162). Hence, they used "ageing capital to subjectify themselves as social sexual citizens" in the sexual economy (Simpson, 2014, p. 162).

In Simpson's (2013b, p. 107) study, "four fifths of the [men interviewed] . . . expressed a preference in terms of sexual attractiveness and sociability for men over 30, and ideally within 10 years either way of their own age." For example, "working class . . . and non-white men . . . expressed greater openness to—and had in the recent past been in—a relationship with" an older man, because they were considered "more caring and solicitous as lovers" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 159). Nevertheless, "even where there was intergenerational parity in terms of economic resources, cultural tastes, and sexual interest, social distance registered in anxieties about being 'old enough to be the parent' of a younger man" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 108). Unfortunately, heteronormative "dominant discourse sets up a hierarchy of relationality, where gay relationships, especially cross-generational ones, are accorded much less legitimacy . . . because they breach the natural, or else represent a 'less eligible' form of sexuality" (Simpson, 2013b, pp. 108–109). Consequently, "androgenic

heteronormative discourse, . . . gay ageism, and the greater delegitimization of gay male cross-generational relationships, set limits on [the men's] ability to deploy aging capital" in middle age (Simpson, 2013b, p. 109).

Commercial social spaces

As middle-aged men age, not only do their bodies change, but in commercial social spaces, the ocular-centric gaze of gay and bisexual men alters in response. Some of the men in Simpson's (2013a, p. 293) study realized that a "discomforting self-regulation . . . [can occur due to] the power of an age, looks, racially, and sexually, preoccupied 'gay gaze' in 'white space'." Furthermore, some men were troubled about "the widespread assumption that gay men embody a promiscuous culture and obsess about maintaining [a] youthful appearance and sexual marketability" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 158). Because for some men, "changes in 'taste' and behavior with age . . . eclipsed considerations of self-presentation and whether [they were] considered attractive on the gay scene" (Simpson, 2016a, pp. 376–377). Instead, "emphasis on support, acceptance, and friendliness, were spoken of as important in helping men to feel included in . . . gay culture" (Simpson, 2014, p. 164).

When men contrasted their "younger and middle-aged selves, [they felt freedom] . . . from the grip of the punitive aesthetics that characterised . . . [their] formative years on the gay scene" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 164). Because "opportunities for such self-expression were often denied in the individualised competitive" commercial gay scene and its spaces (Simpson, 2016a, p. 373). For example, "aging capital was central to an authentically presented middle aged self in terms of men's creative appropriation of what the fashion industry makes available, whilst withstanding pressures to conform to what gay men are supposed to wear" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 163).

In consideration of these challenges, some middle-aged men "spoke of giving up the bar/club scene, which they figured as an alienated experience, . . . enabling [them] . . . to be more open to empathizing with others" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 107). While other men "expressed superiority relative to peers who were [still] 'barflies'," and "peers who attempted to assimilate with younger men in terms of physical appearance, especially those who failed" (Hajek, 2014, p. 622). Nevertheless, a "lack of income and single status both prolonged dependence on the . . . [commercial gay] scene" for some men, as they transitioned into middle-age (Simpson, 2016b, p. 68).

Online gay spaces

As the commercial gay scene was not accessible to all middle-aged gay and bisexual men, "the online scene . . . provided a pathway to confidence building opportunities, sexual adventures, and transformation of erotic practice" as their bodies aged (Simpson, 2014, p. 162). For example, a participant in Simpson's (2014, p. 162) study "used his online profile to explore and

distinguish an idealised form … [of] authentic self, consisting of values, feelings, and personal qualities." While another participant "used the internet to develop sexual capital and convert it to social capital (networks) that helped … negotiate the 'rituals and codes' … of a new cultural, social, and sexual scene" (Simpson, 2014, p. 162).

While the internet helped midlife men in many ways, some men felt that "the online gay scene is the antithesis of 'community, … and oblige[s] middle-aged … gay men to negotiate various forms of risk (related to ageism and objectification), where individuals are reduced to their chronological age and/or body parts" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 69). Moreover, "the tyranny of the visual and objectification of body parts … could obscure appreciation of the more real, rounded (middle-aged) person" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 69). This "ageism towards middle-aged … gay men could be combined with racism … and at times [be] internalized by non-white gay men themselves" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 69). In consideration of these factors, the men in Hajek's (2014, p. 620) study "considered digital communications to be inferior to face-to-face interaction," while those in Simpson's study (2014, p. 159) criticized the "virtual gay scene as being discomforting, exclusionary, and dehumanising" (see also Simpson, 2016b, p. 69).

Commercial sexual homo-spaces

While the online scene was very helpful for some men as they explored new forms of their sexual self, many "working class and long-term unemployed [men] had no access to the internet." Therefore, they used other commercial sexual homo-spaces to explore their sexual self, particularly the public sauna (Simpson, 2014, p. 159). In Simpson's (2014, p. 160) study, "four participants reported current use of saunas, and all were single and either graduates and/or familiar with humanistic therapies." Most of the men "spoke of their use of saunas as an expression of youthful experimentation after they had come out" (Simpson, 2014, p. 160). Particularly when they were "unable to share a bed/have sex with a partner in … [their] bedroom" at home, due to the "operation of complex, covert, homophobic discourse, whose consequences restricted … [them] to recreational sexual encounters in saunas" (Simpson, 2013b, p. 104).

Some middle-aged men preferred saunas "to the uncertain rituals of chatting someone up in a bar with little guarantee of reward—social or sexual" (Simpson, 2014, p. 163). Moreover, they sought the right "to sexual play with unknown or barely known others without guilt or fear of being labelled superficial, calculating, or promiscuous" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 67). Indeed, men who attended saunas "told stories of self-education, adventure, and conviviality" (Simpson, 2014, p. 162), where the "rules of the sauna sanctioned more direct forms of communicating than on the bar scene, involving tacit, immediate, rejection/acceptance of an overture" (Simpson, 2014, p. 163). Consequently, the men used "resources of ageing … to make

sexualised space[s] more habitable . . . to bring about an ethical conviviality . . . [that] reclaim[ed] the middle-aged gay body-self as attractive, valuable, and not reducible to the visual, . . . or the sexual" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 163).

Discussion

The overall themes that emerge from this QIMS review contribute toward a greater understanding of the identity, relational, and bodily changes that gay and bisexual men experience as they enter middle age (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013). For example, when the men in the studies were challenged by the involuntary changes that attended their shift to middle age identity, many found positive ways to develop their identity, including viewing "ageing as a competitive strength, instead of a liability" (Ozturk et al., 2020, p. 1262). Nevertheless, many refused "to accept the fact of growing older" and hung on to their last semblance of youth (Simpson, 2013c, p. 159), often struggling with a negative middle-age identity (Del Pino et al., 2016; Hajek, 2014).

In terms of relational changes, the findings from this QIMS study illustrate that familial rejection due to homophobia was a challenging circumstance for some men in the studies, as they "continued to look to their family for support and acceptance" (Del Pino et al., 2016, pp. 11–12). Fortunately, this circumstance stimulated the development of new families of acceptance—friendship families—which the men developed "to challenge homophobia and to claim validity for their kinship" (Simpson, 2016b, p. 64). In time, friendship families could transition into gay homes, where the men "creatively . . . extend[ed] men's gay scene/friendship circles to domestic spaces" (Simpson, 2013b, pp. 106–107). These relational changes also extended into the challenges and opportunities of intergenerational sexual relationships, the workplace, and gay voluntary organizations, which offered opportunities and challenges for gay and bisexual men as they transitioned into middle-age.

In relation to bodily changes, one of the greater concerns for the men were the changes occurring in their physical bodies. As "ageing body . . . aesthetics . . . operate more harshly within gay male culture" (Simpson, 2013c, p. 160), the men were "damned if they d[id] try to present a more youthful self, and damned if they" did not (Simpson, 2014, p. 160). Regardless, while men might be excluded from commercial gay spaces because of punitive, age-based aesthetics, they recognized that the online scene offered "opportunities, sexual adventures, and the transformation of erotic practice," while the physical space of the sauna allowed them to "reclaim the middle-aged gay body-self as attractive, valuable, and not reducible to the visual, . . . or the sexual" (Simpson, 2014, p. 160).

Opportunities for further research and practice

A major finding of this QIMS review is the need for further qualitative research exploring gay and bisexual men's experiences of transitioning into middle-age, especially in relation to bisexual men, who were underrepresented in the studies (Banik et al., 2019; Fernando, 2021; Zivony & Lobel, 2014). While the changes in the men's identities, relationships, and bodies were investigated in the studies, many aspects of their entry into middle-aged were either briefly covered or neglected entirely in the collective studies (Baum, 2016). Particularly, more research is needed in relation to men who are long-term unemployed, disabled, nonwhite, battling HIV/AIDS, or who face even greater ageism, discrimination, and stigma, than the white, middle to upper class, participants involved in the studies (Del Pino et al., 2016; Simpson, 2014, 2016b). Moreover, men experiencing domestic violence, mental health issues, suicidal ideation, homelessness, COVID, or disability, were either briefly covered, or not included in the qualitative studies investigated in this QIMS review (Baldwin, 2013; Del Pino et al., 2016; Simpson, 2016b).

By including a broader diversity of gay and bisexual men in prospective research projects, the themes of identity, relational, and bodily changes can be more fully explored and understood to inform interventions by social workers and other helping professionals (Mehrotra et al., 2024). Indeed, despite greater attention to gay and bisexual men's experiences and issues in the social work profession, there is a need to integrate queer theorizing into the curricula and practice, as practitioners sometimes have minimal knowledge in this area (Mehrotra et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2019). Therefore, through gathering additional information about the men's identity, relationships, and bodies, helping professionals could use these findings to inform interventions, advocacy, or community-based programs, and queer theorizing (Mehrotra et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2019). For example, Mehrotra et al. (2024, p. 2087) suggest that these findings could be used to inform the social work curriculum and pedagogy in universities; promote a positive institutional climate for LGBTQ people in universities; implement change in institutional policies so that they specifically support LGBTQ people; sponsor educational opportunities for faculty and staff to learn how to advocate for LGBTQ issues; foster diversity, equity, and inclusion, and safety for LGBTQ people; and reduce "negative attitudes, bias, and ignorance around LGBTQ issues." Additionally, these findings are particularly applicable to LGBTQ research, where LGBTQ people can be constructed as the "Other," and/or reduced to subjects of investigation (Mehrotra et al., 2024).

When reviewing the literature, it also emerged that there is a gap in the research in relation to giving gay and bisexual men a voice to tell their own stories, in their own words, about their experiences of middle age (Bengtsson, 2022; Bostwick & Dodge, 2019; Fernando, 2021; Wang & Geale, 2015). Giving

gay and bisexual men a voice is important, as the men in most cases did not talk at length about the gay and bisexual men that influenced them and inspired the development of their midlife identity—their story to live by (Bird et al., 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, as there were few articles that extensively explored the men's stories in this QIMS review, there is an opportunity for researchers to present the lived experience of middle aged gay and bisexual men more comprehensively, so that their voices can be heard in the research, rather than having researchers and academics retell stories about them (Wang, 2017).

Finally, as the studies that emerged in the research for this literature review were limited primarily to the UK and USA, there is a need for further research that explores the lived experience of gay and bisexual men from other English-speaking countries that have unique socio-political structures and cultural contexts, such as Australia (Hajek, 2014, Mehrotra et al., 2024; Simpson, 2013a). Indeed, there were no studies where gay and bisexual men from other English-speaking countries told their own stories about how local culture and socio-economic conditions have shaped their experiences of middle age, particularly in relation to their recent experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it has impacted their lives over the intervening years (Baum, 2016). Consequently, these identified gaps in the literature suggest that additional research should be pursued to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of gay and bisexual men's experiences of middle-age in diverse cultural contexts.

Conclusion

In a guest essay in *The New York Times*, Cris Beam related her experiences of growing up as a queer woman; "I didn't know any gay people, didn't have the language for what . . . I would surely become, . . . my future was void of vision" (Beam, 2023, p. 2). "Something similar is at play now, . . . I don't have a cultural context for imagining my own aging" (Beam, 2023, p. 2). Fortunately, "I met an older lesbian professor, . . . she was in her 70s and I was in my 20s, and she offered me one vision of getting older that I hold on to still" (Beam, 2023, p. 2). Cris Beam's story is illustrative of what the research articles have shown: middle-aged gay and bisexual men need to be given a voice to tell their own stories, in their own words, about their experiences of middle age. Moreover, research needs to be conducted to ascertain how gay and bisexual men imagine and inform their middle-age identity—their story to live by—and how this helps them negotiate changes to their relationships and body that occur during their transition to middle age.

These findings could then be used to inform interventions, advocacy, community-based programs, or queer theorizing, that directly benefits the LGBTQ community. Especially in diverse cultural contexts, such as Australia,

where an investigation into middle-aged gay and bisexual men's experiences could help reduce the invisibility of their socio-political experiences and inform strategies to support and advocate for them, so they can realize a better quality of life.

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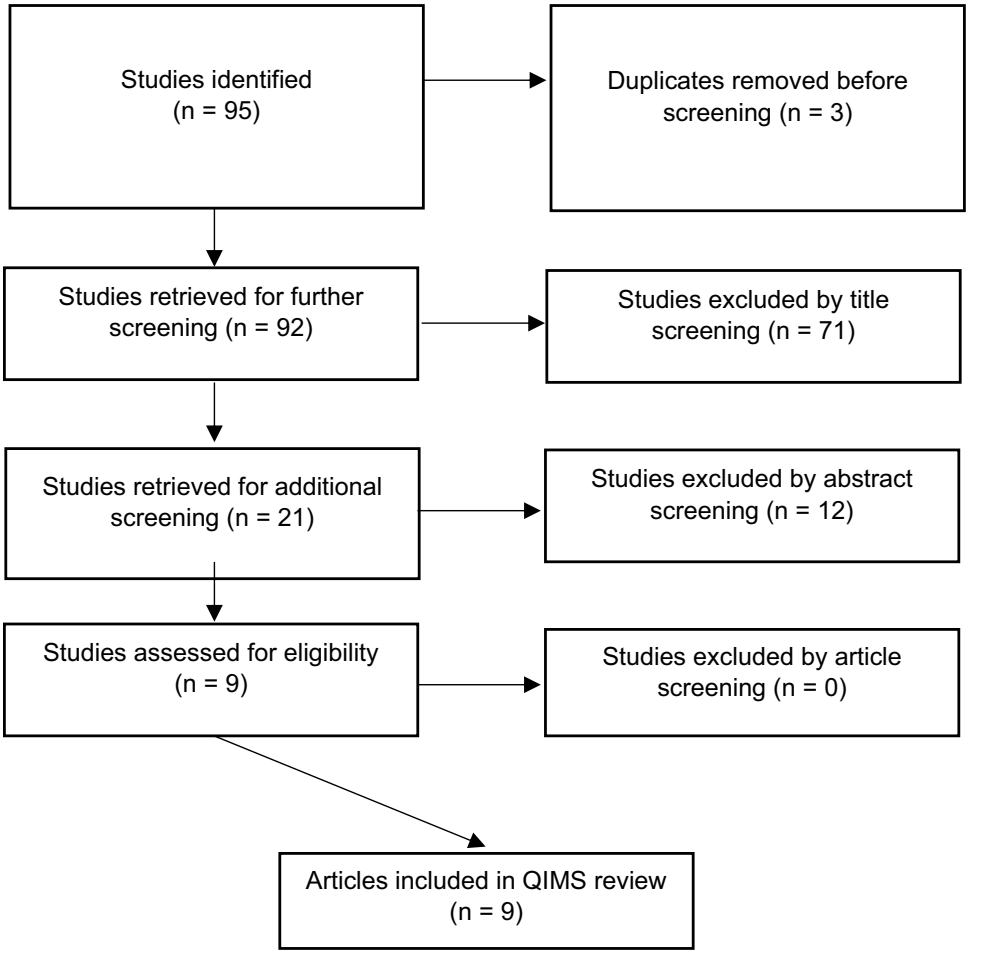
Appendices

Appendix A. QIMS screening process



Appendix B. Characteristics of primary studies

Table B1. Characteristics of the primary studies.

Authors	Date	Tradition and data collection method	Sample size	Age/gender/cultural background	Location	Findings explored
del Pino et al.	2016	• Collectivist grounded theory • Semi structured interviews	30	• Age: 50–64 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 33.3% African American 33.3% Latino/33.3% Caucasian	USA	How middle-aged gay men in recovery cope with stigma and family relationships.
Hayek	2014	• Grounded theory • In-depth semi structured interviews	40	• Age: 40–53 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 52.5% Caucasian/42.5% Hispanic or Latino/5% African American	USA	How early midlife gay men manage their age identities through the use of linguistic labels, intergenerational talk among peers, and inter-generational talk with younger gay men.
Ozturk et al.	2019	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structured interviews	12	• Age: 51–65 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 100% British Caucasian	UK	How older gay men practice masculinity in heteronormative organisational settings.
Simpson	2013a	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structured interviews	27	• Age: 39–61 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 89% British Caucasian 11% mixed ethnicity/Oriental/Irish and European.	UK	How midlife gay men use ageing capital in response to age related norms.
Simpson	2013b	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structuredinterviews	27	• Age: 39–61 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 89% British Caucasian 11% mixed ethnicity/Oriental/Irish and European	UK	How middle-aged gay men in Manchester differentiate themselves through accounts of friendship family' from relating/ kinship associated with heterosexuals and younger gay men.
Simpson	2013c	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structured	27	• Age: 39–61 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 89% British Caucasian 11% mixed ethnicity/Oriental/Irish European.	UK	What midlife gay men's body management practices say about the construction of aging and the discourse of ageism in local gay culture.

(*Continued*)

Table B1. (Continued).

Authors	Date	Tradition and data collection method	Sample size	Age/gender/cultural background	Location	Findings explored
Simpson	2014a	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structured interviews	26	• Age: 39–61 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 88% British Caucasian 12% mixed ethnicity/Oriental/Irish and European	UK	What middle-aged gay men's men's accounts of homo-spaces say about their experience of age/aging & how relations of aging works within them.
Simpson	2016	• Qualitative research • Semi structured interviews	22	• Age: 39–55 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 90% British Caucasian10% mixed ethnicity/Oriental/Irish	UK	How norms in gay voluntary organisations can facilitate or frustrate mobilization of aging capital by middle aged gay men.
Simpson	2016b	• Qualitative research • In-depth semi structured interviews	27	• Age: 40–61 • Gender: gay men • Culture: 88% British Caucasian 12% Irish and European/mixed ethnicity/ Oriental	UK	How middle-aged gay men differentiate themselves from others via domestic spaces.

Appendix C. Themes and subthemes of primary studies

Table C1. Themes and sub-themes of primary studies.

Authors and date	Title	Original themes and sub-themes
del Pino et al. (2016)	Stigma and family relationships of middle-aged gay men in recovery.	Internalization of stigma Changes in coping strategies i: Using alcohol to cope ii: Recovery and coping Ongoing stigma i: Lack of self-acceptance ii: Ongoing family rejection
Hayek (2014)	Gay men at midlife: A grounded theory of social identity management through linguistic labelling and intra and intergenerational talk.	Midlife age identity shift Formation of negative midlife age identity Denial of midlife age Attempt to recapture or maintain younger identity Experience of dissonance and/or inability to recapture younger identity i: Experience of dissonance ii: Inability to recapture or maintain younger identity Alternative social creativity i: Compare the in-group to the out-group on some new dimension a: Personality, accomplishments, and life conditions b: Linguistic/verbal communication skills c: Verbal communication and technology d: Linguistic subtlety ii: Linguistically invert the labels assigned to the attributes of the group iii: Change the out-group with which the in-group is compared a: Intragroup comparisons with other midlife gay men b: Appearance based comparisons c: Comparisons with age assimilators d: Intra-ethnic comparisons e: Intergroup comparisons with older gay men f: Intergroup comparisons with midlife heterosexual men Positive or negative age distinctiveness
Ozturk et al. (2020)	Age, sexuality and hegemonic masculinity: Exploring older gay men's masculinity practices at work.	Maintaining heteronormativity Embodying change

(*Continued*)

Table C1. (Continued).

Authors and date	Title	Original themes and sub-themes
Simpson (2013a)	Alienation, ambivalence, agency: Middle-aged gay men in ageism and Manchester's gay village.	Alienation Ambivalences Agency
Simpson (2013b)	Differentiating the self: The kinship practices of middle-aged gay men in Manchester.	Differentiating biological and friendship family: The difference of (homo) sexuality Relationship rules: non-monogamy Exclusions from friendship family Differentiating the domestic and bar scenes: the difference of age Younger men as sources of anxiety: Ageing capital undone
Simpson (2013c)	Work that body: Distinguishing an authentic middle-aged gay self.	Distinction through authenticity Ageing: alienation, ambivalence, agency Self-governance/alienation: The hidden injuries of multidirectional gay ageism The signs of age: Self-surveillance Getting ready: How do I look? Ambivalences: Negotiating ageing and gay ageism Agency: Reclaiming the middle-aged body-self
Simpson (2014)	Differentiating selves: Middle-aged gay men in Manchester's less visible 'homospaces'.	Capitulation to gay ageism: Risk and constraint Resistance to gay ageism through pleasures Stories of ambivalence: Negotiation
Simpson (2016a)	The resources of ageing? Middle-aged gay men's accounts of Manchester's gay voluntary organisations.	Empowerment: Facilitating ageing capital Ageing capital undone
Simpson (2016b)	At home with significant others or risky domestic space? Middle-aged gay men's stories of kinship and un/belonging.	Gay homes as empowering: Differentiating friendship family from heterosexual family and the commercial gay scene Ambivalences, exclusions, and risk Homes are sites of constraint and risk

Appendix D. Synthesized themes and subthemes from primary studies

Table D1. Synthesized themes and subthemes from primary studies.

Synthesized themes and subthemes	Original themes and subthemes (with author and publication date)
Theme: Identity changes	Stigma
	i: Lack of self-acceptance (del Pino et al., 2016)
Subtheme: Positive identity formation	
i. Creative Agency	Midlife age identity shift
ii: Self-esteem	Formation of negative midlife age identity
iii: Age Group Comparisons	Denial of midlife age
iv: Group Dynamics	Attempt to recapture or maintain younger identity
v: Ageing Capital	Experience of dissonance and/or inability to recapture younger identity
vi: Authenticity	i: Experience of dissonance
	ii: Inability to recapture or maintain younger identity
Subtheme: Negative identity formation	Alternative social creativity
i: Identity formation challenges	i: Change the out-group with which the in-group is compared
ii: Enduring negative identity	ii: Appearance based comparisons
iii: Inability to change Identity	iii: Comparisons with age assimilators
	iv: Intra-ethnic comparisons (Hayek, 2014)
	Embodying change (Ozturk et al., 2020)
	Agency (Simpson, 2013a)
	Self-governance/alienation: The hidden injuries of multidirectional gay ageism
	Ambivalences: Negotiating ageing and gay ageism (Simpson, 2013c)
Theme: Relational Changes	Internalization of stigma
	i: Changes in coping strategies
Subthemes: Family rejection	a: Using alcohol to cope
Friendship families	b: Recovery and coping
Gay Homes	ii: Ongoing family rejection (del Pino et al., 2016)
Intergenerational relationships	
Sexual relations with peers	Change the out-group with which the in-group is compared
Work Relations	i: Intra-ethnic comparisons
Gay voluntary organisations	ii: Intergroup comparisons with older gay men
	iii: Intergroup comparisons with midlife heterosexual men
	Alternative social creativity
	i: Compare the in-group to the out-group on some new dimension
	a: Personality, accomplishments, and life conditions
	b: Linguistic/verbal communication skills
	c: Verbal communication and technology
	d: Linguistic subtlety
	ii: Linguistically invert the labels assigned to the attributes of the group
	iii: Change the out-group with which the in-group is compared
	a: Intragroup comparisons with other midlife gay men (Hayek, 2014)
	Maintaining heteronormativity (Ozturk et al., 2020)
	Differentiating biological and friendship family: The difference of (homo) sexuality
	Relationship rules: Non-monogamy
	Exclusions from friendship family (Simpson, 2013b)
	Gay homes as empowering: Differentiating friendship family from heterosexual family and the commercial gay scene
	Ambivalences, exclusions, and risk
	Homes are sites of constraint and risk (Simpson, 2016b)
Theme: Bodily Changes	Alienation
	Ambivalences (Simpson, 2013a)
Subthemes: Bodily aesthetics	
Sexual Desirability	Differentiating the domestic and bar scenes: The difference of age
Commercial social spaces	Younger men as sources of anxiety: Ageing capital undone (Simpson, 2013b)
Online gay spaces	
Commercial sexual 'homospaces'	Distinction through authenticity
	Ageing: Alienation, ambivalence, agency
	The signs of age: Self-surveillance

(*Continued*)

Table D1. (Continued).

Synthesized themes and subthemes	Original themes and subthemes (with author and publication date)
	Getting ready: How do I look? Agency: Reclaiming the middle-aged body-self (Simpson, 2013c) Capitulation to gay ageism: Risk and constraint Resistance to gay ageism through pleasures Stories of ambivalence: Negotiation (Simpson, 2014) Empowerment: Facilitating ageing capital Ageing capital undone (Simpson, 2016a)