

# RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN BURLESQUE

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# BURLYCON

## INTRODUCTION

The organization, BurlyCon, created an Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination committee to better serve their entire community. BurlyCon is a community-oriented professional growth and educational organization for burlesque performers, fans, and aficionados. We conduct educational events to preserve, promote, and advance burlesque as a theatrical art form. We offer classes, workshops, panels, and other educational offerings that further professional skill and development. We are committed to supporting personal transformation through creative artistic expression in the burlesque arts. (BurlyCon Organization, 2020) A survey for the Burlesque community at large was crafted from this committee and was open for responses for two months. This survey was created to understand the baseline of what the marginalized communities of Burlesque experience.

## METHODOLOGY

The survey consisted of 100 questions and received 165 responses. Twenty-seven of the responders completed the entire survey. The survey consisted of questions about microaggressions, racism, overt racism and discrimination. This report will go into the findings and discuss the complexity of the questions. Each survey question was chosen to start the conversations and to utilize the findings to create a curriculum based on what the results showed.

### **Definitions:**

**Discrimination** - distinguishing between two or more people or things. Usually, *discrimination* means an unfair system that treats one group of people worse than another.

**Microaggressions**- a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a member of a marginalized group, especially a racial minority, that is often unintentionally offensive or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.

**Overt Racism** - Intentional and/or obvious harmful attitudes or behaviors towards another minority individual or group because of the color of their skin.

**Racism** - the practice of discriminating against people based on their race or ethnic background.

SGSDSA – An acronym to encompass sex, gender, sexuality, disability, size, age. When questions were asked, these categories were always grouped together.

After each question based on whether an individual experienced any of the four categories, open ended questions were asked to receive more information on what harm was done in each instance. These anecdotal stories influenced the data analysis, as some questions were answered for the incorrect category. The data, therefore, is not as clean to decipher. In these specific instances, the data was still utilized for the category the answer was in; but the anecdotal information was shifted to the correct category for reference later in the report. It is believed that if overt racism is described in the microaggressions section, the individual has also been a victim of microaggressions. Identifying characteristics of the individual were requested to shape the report.

Data was analyzed using Pivot Tables in Excel, and additional data analysis tools.

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONDENTS

### Names, Region, Age, Type of Performer, Years of Experience

#### Age

Three basic questions were requested of the respondents, “Name”, “Region” and “Age”. The respondents were given the option of typing “Anonymous” if they felt safer responding in that way. Only 15% decided to fill out their names on the survey. The other 85% either typed a variation of Anonymous or left the field blank.

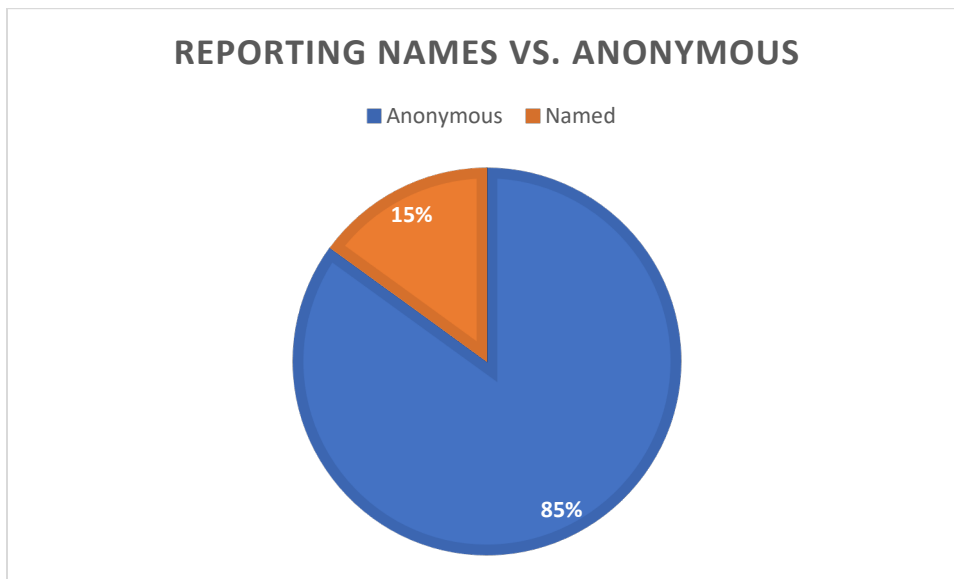


Figure 1: Pie Chart of those choosing to report their names versus remaining anonymous.

## Region

The “Region” question refers to the area in which the individual is located and their main performing location. This was a very diverse response with the highest amount of respondents from California at 16.67% of the total number of respondents. The next highest number of respondents came from New York at 8.33%. Respondents were from all over the world though, including Australia, Germany, and Mexico.

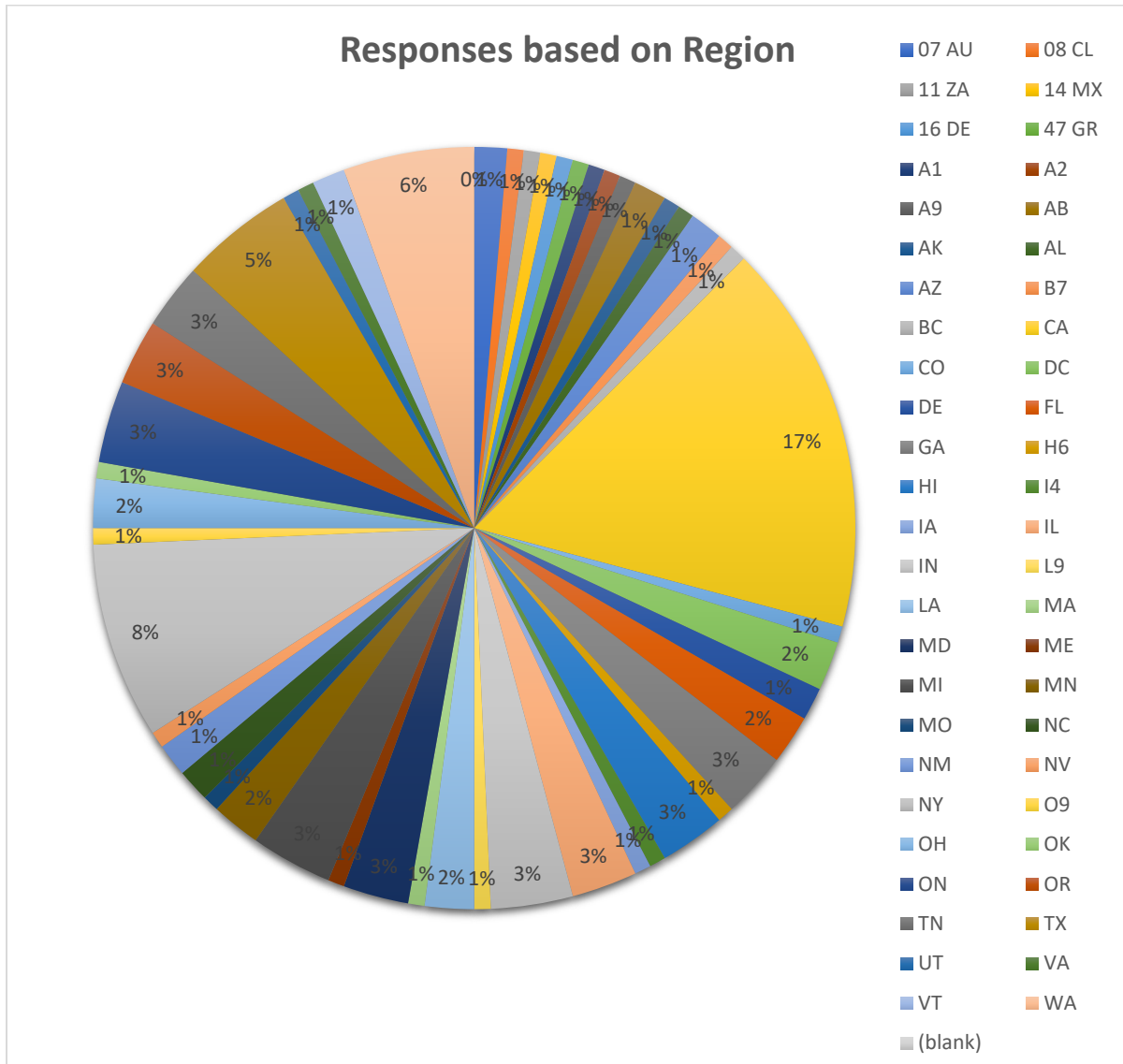


Figure 2: Pie Chart of Respondent Region of Performing.

## Age

Of the respondents that divulged their age, the majority of them were between 30-39 years old. This age bracket consisted of 43% of the respondents. Most notably, there were no respondents between the ages of 60 to 69. Respondents over the age of 40 represent 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the entire population of people that filled out the survey.

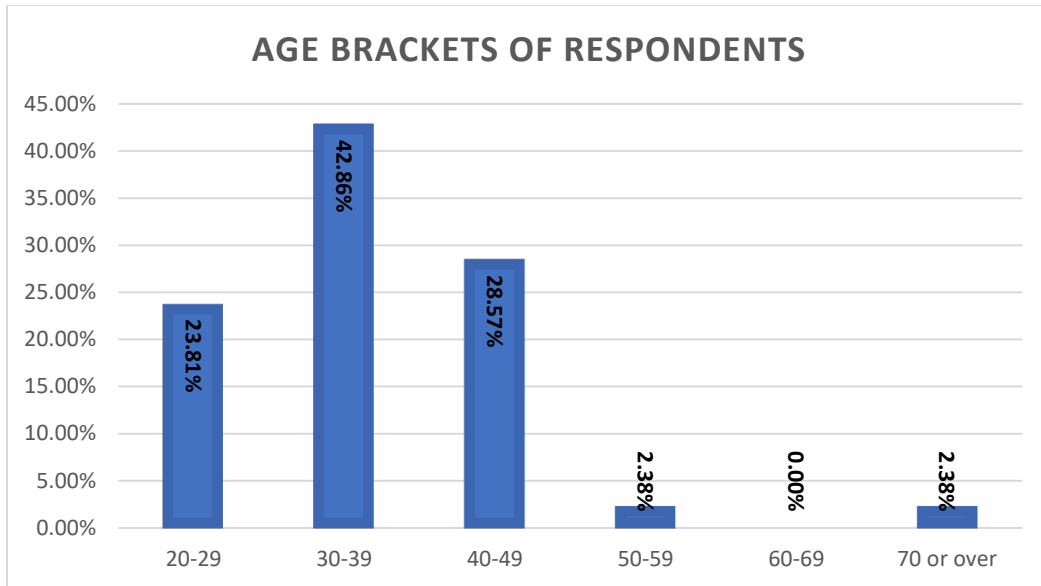


Figure 3: Respondents under 40 make up over 65% of the total respondents for this survey.

### Type of Performer/Producer

Burlesque and Variety performers make up 56% of the total respondents. 25% of the respondents were hosts, aerialists and other. For the “Other” category that made up 10% of the pie chart there were 10 different responses making each 10% of the total 10%.

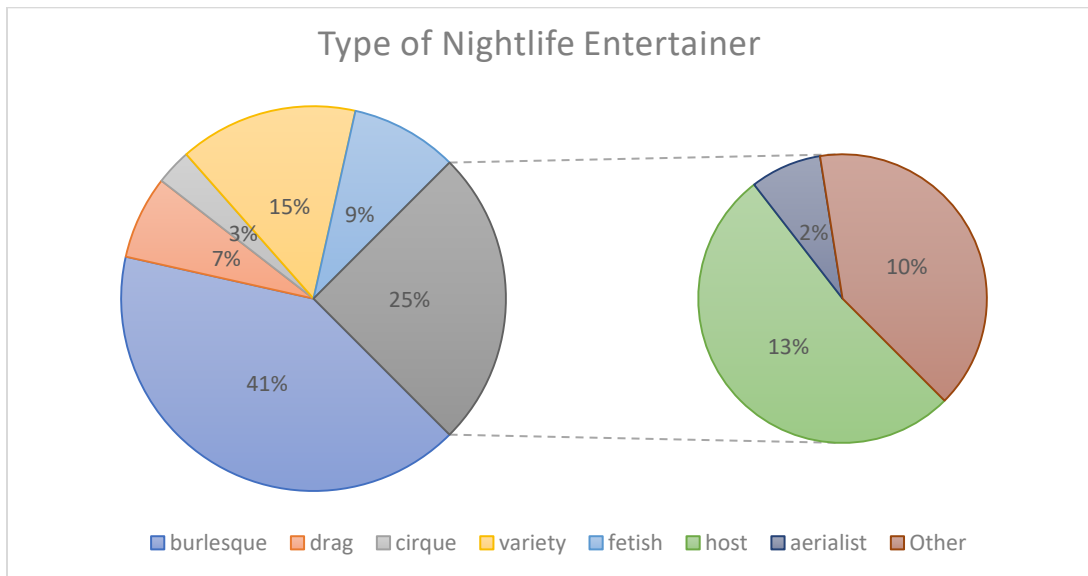


Figure 4: The dark grey piece of the pie is pulled out to show 25% of the pie easier. The primary Nightlife Entertainer that responded to this survey is a burlesque performer.

Of the respondents, 60% of the respondents are producers. Of the producers, 32% have been producing for 2-4 years. Twenty percent of the producers have been producing for over a decade. A high majority, 75%, of the producers put on one to ten shows a year.

## Years of Experience

Of the respondents that answered over 28% have been performing for over a decade. No one has been performing less than a year. Over 35% of the respondents have started to perform in the last 1 to 3 years, and 36% of the respondents have been performing between four and nine years. This information is extremely important as the data will show that the discrimination and racism is not based on time in the industry.

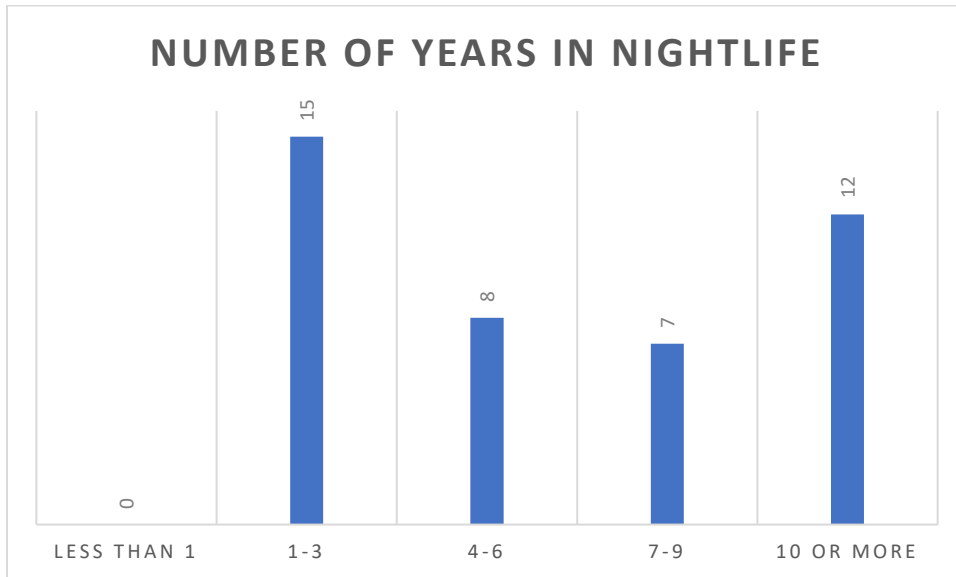


Figure 5: The majority of respondents have either been performing for less than 3 years or have been performing for over a decade.

## Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Disabilities

### Race/Ethnicity

When asked about their race/ethnicity, the respondents were again given an open-ended question. The data was only combined when the responses were the same but spellings or capitalization differed. The rest of the data was left untouched when reviewed. The highest percentage of respondents, at 17%, were self-identified as white. Respondents that self-identified as Black were the next highest group with 14%. Latinx and Mixed-race respondents both represent 5% of the total respondents, respectively. With that being said, 76% of the total respondents identified as a person of color. 71% of the respondents feel comfortable talking about race with producers when discussions come up, which was found to be about 38% of the time when performing. The percentage that feels comfortable talking about race with other entertainers goes up to 78% when the topic of race comes up in conversation.



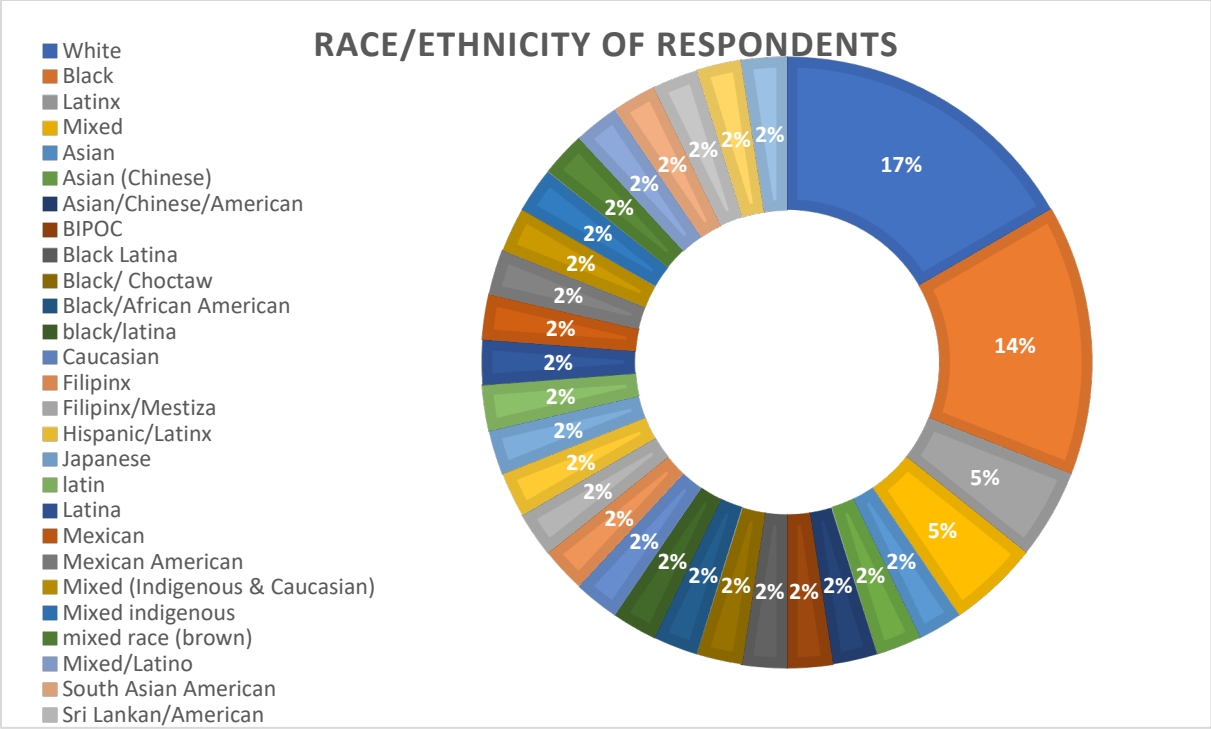


Figure 6: Respondents were able to self-identify their race/ethnicity in the survey. The results show that 76% of the respondents identify as a person of color.

### Gender

The majority of the respondents self-identified as female. The question pertaining to gender was an open-ended question so respondents could respond with their most true answer, because of this the remaining 40% of the answers are extremely varied with the next most significant percentage of respondents gendered as Non-binary at seven percent.

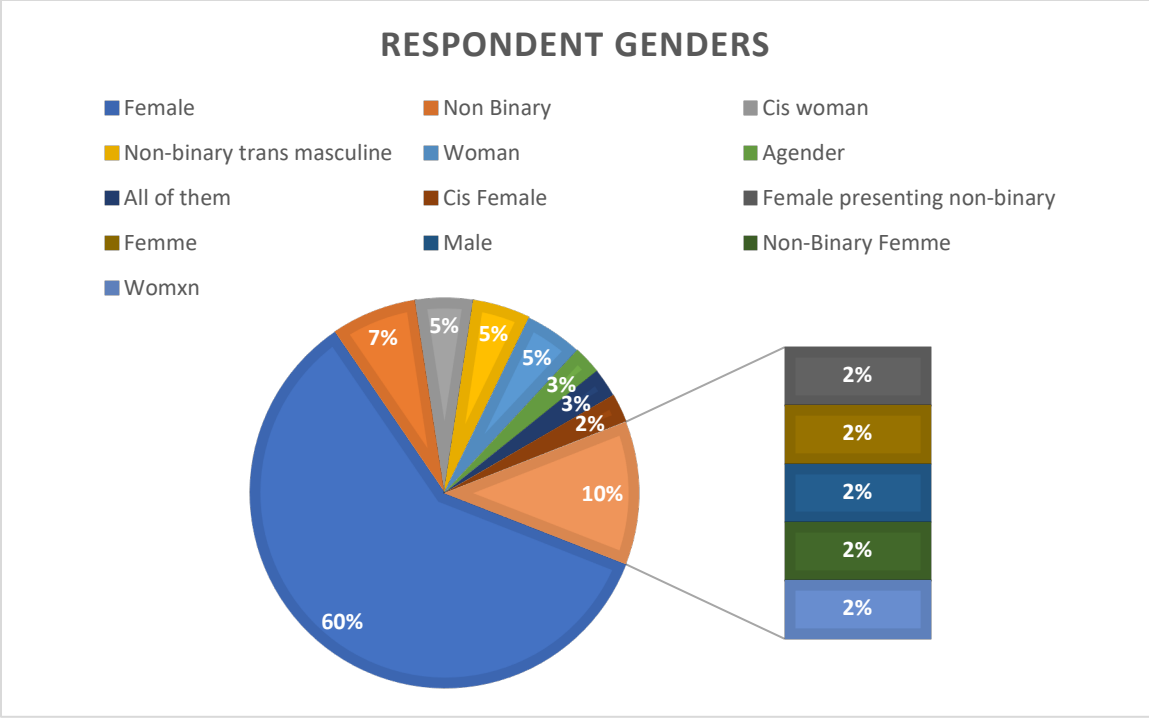


Figure 7: Female respondents make up 60% of the survey takers. The rest of the responses were varied.

**Gender and Ethnicity**

To determine additional contributing factors, race/ethnicity was analyzed against genders. Black females were the highest responders, with white females coming in next. For ease of reading the graph, the columns are stacked. For example, those that identified as white, also identified as female, female-presenting non-binary, Femme, and non-binary transmasculine. It is important to cross reference gender and race/ethnicity since both identifications can be dismissed in society on their own.

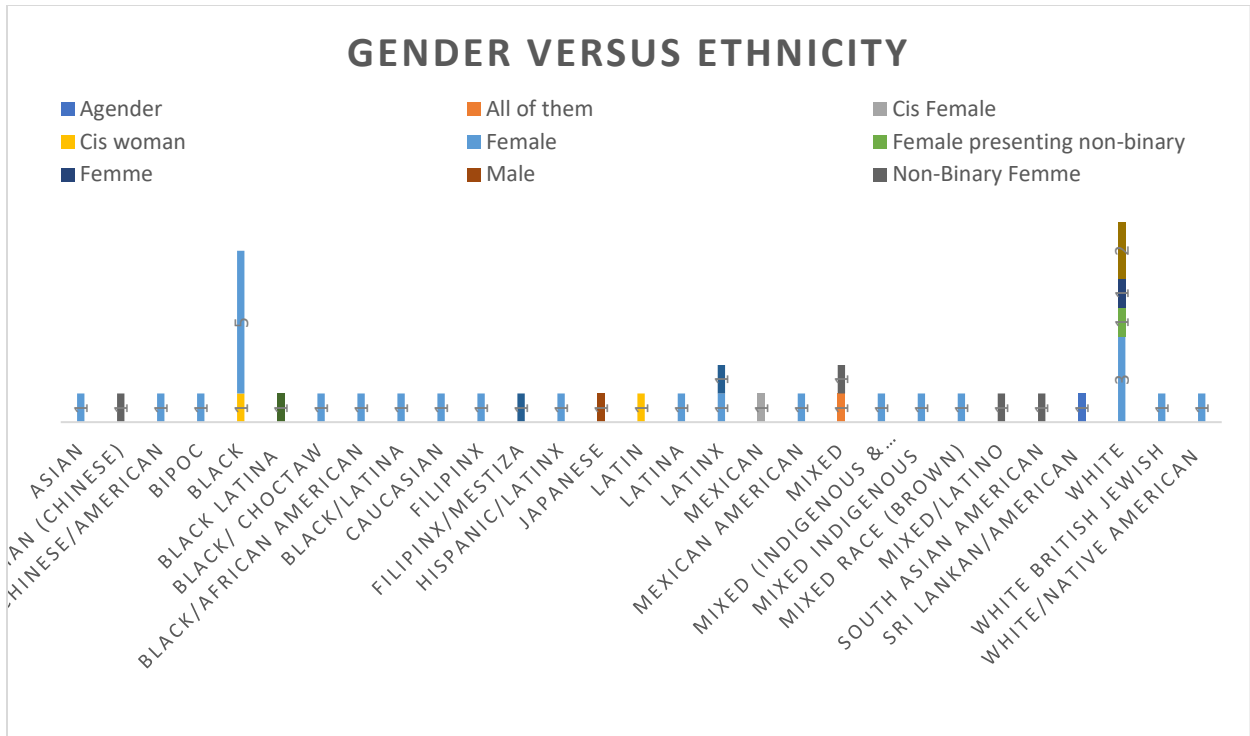


Figure 8: Cross analysis of gender and race/ethnicity show that the majority of the responders identified as Black Female.

### Sexual Orientation

Sexual Orientation was also surveyed. Unsurprisingly, the top three responses were Bisexual, Pansexual and Queer. Those responses alone make up 69% of the survey takers. Only nine percent of respondents identified as straight or heterosexual. Amusingly, one respondent does not have a sexual orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent also only wrote “yes.”

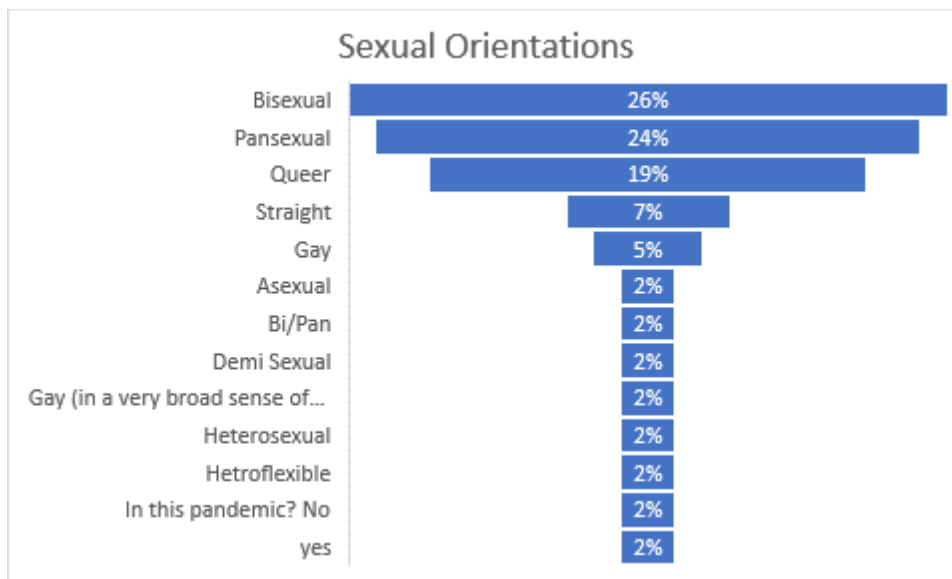


Figure 9: Respondents primarily fall under the LGBTQIA umbrella.

## Disabilities

The survey asked one open-ended question about disabilities. The respondents filled in all disabilities and due to privacy concerns, the responses were gathered into three different buckets of information: No disability, Physical Disability, and Mental Illness. Some respondents mentioned both physical and mental disabilities, so these were counted twice. The total for this specific survey question is 102% instead of the normal 100%. The majority of the responders do not have disabilities.

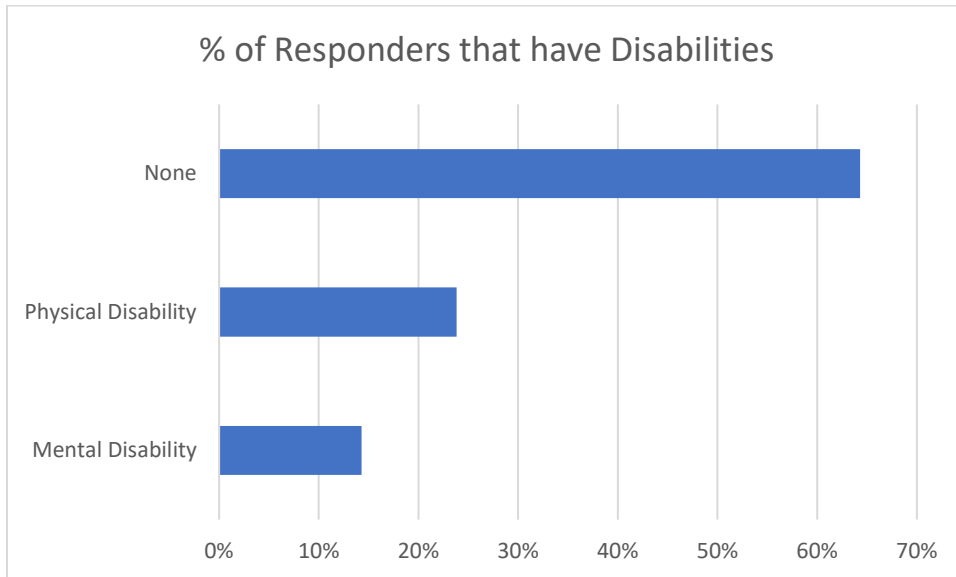


Figure 10: The respondents were given an open-ended question. The responses were collected and analyzed into three different types of information that can be seen in the chart above.

79% of respondents feel comfortable talking to producers when the topics of Gender, Sexual Orientation, Disabilities or Size are discussed. The percentages of respondents increase to 81% when discussing these topics with other performers.

## MICROAGGRESSIONS IN BURLESQUE

Microaggressions are subtle but offensive comments or actions that are directed at a member of a marginalized group that could often be unintentionally offensive and reinforces a stereotype. The survey takers were asked about microaggressions while performing with regards to interactions with producers, other performers, and, also, audience members. One note must be made, some responses of examples of microaggressions, were in fact, not micro in nature. This does muddle the data slightly but, in those cases, the assumption has been made that the respondent has in fact had microaggressions made against them but may not be aware of the actions as of yet.

### Experiences with Microaggressions

Of the responses received, 57% of the have felt microaggressions against them by producers or production staff. Performers who have experienced microaggressions, have been told to change their hair because

it was not the “right look” for the show, covert anti-Semitic comments were made, comments like, “‘You’re so well spoken’, ‘You’re here because you’re Asian’”, were made to individuals. One performer was once out-right asked if they “counted” as a performer of color regarding casting. 52% of the respondents have experienced microaggressions from fellow entertainers. In these cases, jokes were made regarding race, being told individuals are white adjacent, ‘you speak so well’, ‘your hair is gorgeous (while touching individual’s hair), cultural appropriation in acts, and the list goes on. One performer shared this story, “I also perform in plays, and in rehearsals a white performer who was my age kept publicly correcting my mistakes - in front of the director, cast, and crew - as if she were calling out a child or babysitting me. It would have been helpful for the director to speak with her about how inappropriate it is for an actor to coach other actors.” When asked if the respondents experienced microaggressions from audience members, 52% responded yes. Performers have been addressed as “the native one,” “the spicy Latina” and asked culturally stereotypical questions, “the exotic one” and another big one that was mentioned on all three survey responses is that people comment on how big the performers’ butt is compared to what the stereotype is.

In all of three of these questions, the respondents were asked to describe what was done and what should be done when microaggressions occur. Rarely, are they addressed by anyone other than the person feeling the microaggressions. Those around them do not stand up for the performer. Some performers do not feel safe bringing up microaggressions as they live in states that are predominantly white and racism is common. Only sometimes do those impacted, feel like an outcome is favorable and the offender has learned a lesson of any sort. In almost all cases, the impacted party would have liked someone to stand up for them. One respondent suggested that producers have a clause in contracts that the performance space is anti-racist.

When respondents were asked if they have ever experienced microaggressions based on their sex/gender/sexuality/disability/size/age (SGSDSA) from other performers and audience members, 43% responded in the affirmative. Performers have been misgendered, experienced unwanted touching, and unwanted weight/diet/exercise talk. Audience members have made fun of performers on stage because of their size, tipped less. Often performers here, “how amazing it is” that they can do something in spite of their size, or comments about “being so brave” to be on stage.

## Witnessing Microaggressions

When asked if the respondents ever witnessed a performer being victimized by microaggressions based on race by a producer, 74% responded no. Those that did witness an event of this nature, witnessed comments that were “unsavory.” The performers that did witness this, asked the victim if they wanted assistance in dealing with the issue. One performer wrote in, “I can’t speak to what actions were taken, but I doubt it was adequate. Being a marginalized person with precarious status and work in the community, it is hard to speak out without jeopardizing my survival. It’s got to be in producers and on prominent community members to enforce zero tolerance. I try to step in as much as I’m able and support my friends/ colleagues.” 62% of the respondents have not witnessed another performer being victimized by microaggressions based on race by another performer. One witness producer reported, “After trying to have a conversation with someone who made racist comments to another performer at rehearsal, I was told I ‘took it the wrong way’. The person who made the comments had zero remorse or ownership of their behavior, so I fired them.” Based on the responses so far, this producer as an example seems to be an anomaly in the business. The other performers that did witness the microaggression happen to

another performer by another performer did have a higher tendency of speaking up compared to when producers are the perpetrators of microaggressions. Only 31% of respondents have witnessed another entertainer be victimized by microaggressions based on race by audience members. For the respondents that did witness this victimization, the microaggressions were about the performer butt size and the exotic nature of performers.

## OVERT RACISM IN BURLESQUE

Overt racism is intentional and/or obvious harmful attitudes or behaviors towards another minority individual or group because of the color of their skin or ethnicity. Respondents were asked overt racism while performing with regards to interactions with producers, other performers, and, also, audience members. The respondents were also asked to describe the events that took place.

### Experiences with Overt Racism

Out of the 42 respondents to the overt racism questions, 74% have not experienced overt racism by producers or by other performers. 86% of respondents did not experience any overt racism by audience members. Those that did experience overt racism were the victim of actions such as this story, "I was once cast in a musical as a brassy-voiced antagonist (yikes). The director kept telling me to act more 'like Diana Ross,' so I started moving and singing more daintily. It turned out he wanted me to act more like Aretha Franklin. I realized this when he rewarded a white actress sing my character's songs in the style of Aretha Franklin. It would have been helpful to have someone I could talk to about his criticisms, who could tell him 1. the difference between Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin, and 2. how problematic it was that he was basically asking me to act 'blacker,' especially in the role of a villain." One Jewish respondent had someone deny the Holocaust in front of them. Another respondent that was a producer had to fire a performer for making racist comments. In one performer's case, none of the other cast members would sit next to them or talk to them.

### Witnessing Overt Racism

When respondents were asked if they have ever witnessed a performer being victimized overt racism by producers, 88% responded negative. Of the twelve percent that have witnessed overt racism, overt tokenism by producers was named as the biggest problem. Producers that talked about needing to invite a POC to perform since no POC applied and the producer was more concerned about being seen as racist than what was hindering POC from applying to the show. Producers have also said they book based on talent, not race which is why they do not hire POC. 21% of respondents did witness other performers being victimized by overt racism by their peers. One performer stated, "I witnessed a very unfortunate incident where a performer attempted an unapproved joke linking Trump to Hitler and put a Nazi salute into her act. It went down terribly and made some of the cast very upset. I wish that I'd had better communication with her so I could have prevented it. I've added clause to all of my performer contracts about offensive symbolism." One performer retired from performing all together because of the internalized misogyny and latent racism in Burlesque. Seventeen percent of respondents have witnessed overt racism to other performers by audience members. Inappropriate racialized hooting and hollering from the audience, talking over Black MCs and disrupting a show when they were hosting a virtual event were given as examples of overt racism that was witnessed.

# DISCRIMINATION IN BURLESQUE

The act of making unjustifiable distinctions between people based on the groups, classes or categories that they are perceived to belong. Discrimination can be based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation and other categories as well. The survey included questions about size, gender, age, disabilities, and sexual orientation. The respondents were asked to discuss discrimination that they were victims of and if they witnessed others being the victim of discrimination. In this survey, the term blatant discrimination was used but for the sake of this report blatant discrimination will equal the definition of discrimination.

## Experiences with Discrimination

29% of the respondents have experienced discrimination from producers based on their SGSDSA. One performer was told they were hard to work with because of their insistence on speaking up when misgendered and because trans people comes with “its own set of issues that we can’t control.” Another emcee was called a “fag” by a venue owner; in this instance the producer was notified, and the situation was dealt with to the satisfaction of the emcee. One performer saw discrimination based on age in an amateur competition, where a younger performer was doted on by the producer and the other performers were completely ignored. Another performer has reason to believe that they were not hired by producers because of their size. 77% of respondents have not experienced blatant discrimination by other performers. Of the 23% that have experienced discrimination by their peers, they have seen other performers who do not want to perform in the same show as plus size performers, and misgendering while also being disrespectful of pronouns. When asked if the respondents ever experienced blatant discrimination based on SGSDSA by audience members, again 23% have responded yes. One example given was when audience members leave during a plus sized performer’s act and come back as soon as they were complete.

## Witnessing Discrimination

Less people have witnessed discrimination based on SGSDSA compared to those who have experienced. Only 11% of respondents have witnessed discrimination from producers and production staff. Unfortunately, no examples of this discrimination was given to report on. 19% of respondents have witnessed discrimination based on SGSDSA by one performer to another. Of those have witnessed this type of discrimination it has been about body shaming, tucking and binding shame. One performer who performs both in drag shows and burlesque noted that this type of shaming happens more in drag than burlesque from their perspective. When the respondent was involved in the production a conversation was had with the guilty parties and if those individuals continued to shame, they were not invited back to the perform. Nineteen percent of respondents have witnessed discrimination based on SGSDSA by audience members. Audience members have heckled female hosts for not being as funny as a male host and have refused tips based on the host’s gender. Audience members have walked out of the theater when larger performers, trans performers and Black performers were on stage.

# BURLYCON

As a subset of questions, respondents were asked specifically about microaggressions, overt racism and discrimination at BurlyCon, the Burlesque Convention

## Microaggressions

Of the respondents that answered these questions, 20% experienced microaggressions while attending BurlyCon events. Of those that have experienced microaggressions, the situations were widespread. Asian performers have been mistaken for other performers, despite the name tag, white instructors have used AAVE and nothing was corrected, a white performer cried when being called out on a microaggression and then proceeded to make the situation about themselves by disclosing abuse in the past. Some performers have felt uncomfortable being the only Black person in the room. A vendor completely ignored an Asian femme-presenting performer when white performers sauntered over to the table even though the Asian femme-presenting performer was in a conversation with the vendor. 80% of respondents have not witnessed microaggressions based on race at BurlyCon. Having to justify and explain why a POC caucus is necessary was the microaggression that was noted.

11% of respondents experienced microaggressions based on SGSDSA at the convention. Fatphobia was the only microaggression that was given as an example. Interestingly, 93% of attendees have not witnessed a performer being victimized by microaggressions based on sex/gender/sexuality/disability/size/age. Of those that did, the responses were varied. One performer witnessed a non-wheelchair user use the wheelchair accessible stall, when a wheelchair-using performer entered the restroom, another performer witnessed someone being misgendered, and fatphobia.

## Overt Racism

94% of respondents did not experience any sort of overt racism while attending BurlyCon. The 6 percent that did, specifically noted that twerking classes that were taught by non-Black individuals and belly dancing classes that have been taught by non-SWANA individuals. 89% of respondents have not witnessed performers being victimized by overt racism. 11%, however, did.

## Discrimination

There was no overt discrimination observed or felt at any BurlyCon event. 100% of the respondents did not feel they were discriminated against.

# CONCLUSION

Respondents were asked two open ended questions at the end of the survey pertaining to anti-racist and anti-discrimination programming. Ideas that were requested are:

- Orientation or training for instructors/facilitators/panelist to address in a standardized way what microaggressions are and how to deal with them.
- POC Legends
- Workshops on anti-racism production and how to take action



- Classes, Certifications, Codification and Support
- Direct statements regarding anti-racist and anti-discriminatory policies AND consequences for violations.
- Colorism within the Black/Brown community discussions
- How to handle racist audience members
- A compass that points towards accountability and redemption.
- Land Acknowledgements
- Educating white producers on not just casting but also protecting and providing equitable treatment to BIPOC performers.
- Pay gaps and reparations in performing
- Focus on disabilities besides physical disabilities
- Accessible pedagogy
- 101 sessions on marginalized identities for those who don't fall into those categories
- Gender discrimination mindfulness
- Implicit Bias training

One respondent left these words of advice, "Remember that it's called activism WORK for a reason - power and money will need to be redistributed. That will be hard. Where you feel resistance is a highlighter from the universe to you of where you need to focus your work. It will not be easy but it will be worth it, on a micro and a macro level."

### Key Takeaways

- When doing future surveys include the definition of a term and examples in each question when asking about the term. Do not depend on the survey taker to review the definition from a reference page.
- The survey was too long for all respondents to stick around and respond to all questions.
- Microaggressions were highly discussed and training in how to identify and eliminate microaggressions in Burlesque would be an ideal starting point.
- Overt Racism is easier for people to understand and responses were not convoluted in this section.