

Reclaiming Gay Male Bodies: Fat Positivity, Sex, and Masculinity in the Bear Community

As a relatively new subculture within the larger more historically situated gay community, Bears are only now starting to catch the attention of academics in gender studies, psychology, and sociology. In the literature that is currently accessible on the topic, scholars such as Peter Hennen and Eric Manley primarily analyze the differences between Bears and other gay men from a broad and holistic perspective. These writers fail to acknowledge and provide an in-depth exploration of the significance of fat positivity within Bears' social and sexual subcultures. The authors evaluate Bear body size in relation to community formation but do not account for it as a revolutionary reclamation of bodies and sexuality. In a culture steeped in the glorification and idealization of the gay male body as toned, lean, and thin, Bears symbolize a profound shift in the discourse on homosexual attraction and body norms as overweight men are explicitly eroticized. In the context of this interpretation, I will argue that the weight-inclusive nature of the Bear community has reconstructed gay male bodies, allowed overweight men a greater degree of sexual expressivity, and redefined masculinity in the process. In order to develop this argument I will first begin by defining the Bear subculture and its inherent differences from the mainstream gay community. This will be followed by a socio-historical examination of the construction of the gay male body. Subsequently, I will relate the fat acceptance movement and its political ideology to the Bear community in order to effectively demonstrate its importance to developing a fat positive sexual culture and non-heteronormative expressions of masculinity.

Though Bear subculture is characterized by its "hedge against effeminacy and its eroticization of the heavier body," Hennen claims that its origins can be traced to the 1980s when heavier gay men symbolized "health, vigor, strength, and virility," providing a stark contrast to

the physically deteriorating bodies of the AIDS pandemic (29). This emphasis on vitality served to coalesce a loose network of bulkier men into a community that eventually developed numerous social norms and visual traits. The quintessential representation of a Bear is an overweight, hirsute gay man who stereotypically wears flannel or denim and embraces a distinct form of masculinity (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 91). According to Manley, Levitt, and Mosher, Bear socializing primarily takes place in “Bear-themed bars, social clubs, and ‘Bear-runs’ or Bear conferences,” in which Bears can participate in specialized activities and events outside the general gay community (90). However, Bear subculture is most importantly understood as a conscious attempt to adopt “a counter identity” to the idealized popular conception of gay male bodies as slender, smooth, and youthful (91). Hennen provides the insightful observation that the Bear community is also a means to which more masculine, stockier gay men can negotiate their disassociations from stereotypical gay femininity and chauvinistic embodiments of heterosexual masculinity (34).

Further, there are inherent differences between the Bear and mainstream gay communities, which highlight the accepting nature of the Bear community. This polarized relationship is symbolized by the twink: a young gay man who is thin, toned, and has little to no body hair (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 96). As these two subcategories of the gay community embrace contrasting aesthetic norms, it has been argued that overweight men are excluded and ridiculed as they “fall outside the slender, fashion-conscious stereotype of the gay man” (Gough and Flanders 236). Due to this marginalization, “the Bear community becomes heralded as a place for salvation” as they congregate with the collective understanding that all men of varying age, race, height, body weight, and penis size are wholeheartedly appreciated (Gough and Flanders 242). This inclusivity ultimately allows gay men who were typically degraded for their

‘socially constructed unattractiveness’ to establish a space that encourages the development of a subjective consciousness—the psychic awareness that one is an active agent outside the constraints of marginality and subservience—that correlates features such as fatness and hairiness with self-identity. As a result, Manley, Levitt, and Mosher argue that the Bear community functions as a self-accepting and esteem-boosting social group in order to combat the “expressions of superficiality and the criticism of self and others” in the larger gay community (100). Therefore, the Bear subculture’s romanticization of fat bodies reveals the divisive ramifications of Western society’s contemporary understanding of the gay male body as athletic, artificial, and, ultimately, unattainable.

With that being said, the construction of the gay male body has been linked to hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities prompting some gay men to reject effeminacy and endorse unrealistic manifestations of chiseled muscularity. As aesthetic femininity has been used to signify gayness, homophobic cultural scripts dehumanize those who display effeminate qualities by exaggerating and condemning their sexual orientation (Wood 54). This results in non-masculine gay men being seen as inferior in relation to straight men and other more muscular and emotionally rigid gay men who embody the traditional essence of heteropatriarchal masculinity (Wood 54)—one defined in the context of male supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality. Consequently, the social pressure for gay men to embrace the physical and emotional characteristics of their heterosexual counterparts led Nicholas Lanzieri and Tom Hildebrandt to suggest that an emphasis on and attraction to lean and athletic physiques was inevitable in the gay community (275-76). As a result of this longing for normative and aesthetically pleasing bodies, “the hunky, buff boy came to represent the only gender style openly marketed as a desirable object choice for gay men” (Wood 54). Clearly, this pressure to

develop or obtain a partner with an athletic and toned body drastically limits the social acceptability of any body types deviating from this often-unreachable expectation for body perfection. This desire is especially problematic as the gay male gaze—which operates in tandem with the glorification of the aforementioned gay male aesthetic—becomes especially dominant within gay culture (Lanzieri and Hildebrandt 283).

This gay male gaze inadvertently allows “gendered body aesthetics not only [to] constitute a pivotal dimension in the construction of gay subcultural identities, but also determine power relations both within and between gay subcommunities” (Wood 57). This clearly points to one of the incentives behind the persistence of the Bear subculture as a reaction to the fixation on chiseled and thin bodies in the gay community. However, it also reveals the potential for the subordination of Bears by the mainstream gay culture as it devotedly promotes body perfection. I want to stress Lanzieri and Hildebrandt’s argument that “masculine gay men—comporting their muscular and athletic bodies—manipulate the verbal and visual discourses within gay environments, and hone their power to influence what is deemed aesthetically attractive” (279). This not only creates a normative desire among gay men to fulfill this restrictive body norm but also sustains a cycle of shame that plagues this demographic, ultimately constructing the Bear community as a marginalized minority. Thus, the explicit preference among gay men for muscular, slender bodies not only perpetuates hegemonic masculinity but also berates any individuals who do not or choose not to conform, emphasizing the significance of fat positivity among Bears as a social group.

As mentioned, the Bear community has been heralded as a place for overweight men to abandon their body insecurities and engage in meaningful platonic and sexual relationships. Here, I will situate the Bear subculture within the context of fat politics and acceptance. In

Samantha Murray's exploration of fatness, women, and social perceptions, she argues that society envisions "the fat person [a]s slothful, lazy, weak-willed, unreliable, unclean, unhealthy, deviant, and defiant" (266). This trope then pathologizes obesity, allowing the public to believe they understand the fat body from a flawed medical perspective (Murray 266). As a result, fat activists want to alter this misconception and prove there is a complex politics surrounding fatness that attempts to reveal the "biomedical and cultural constructions of weight" that perpetuate a system that unilaterally oppresses fat people (Bell and McNaughton 126). This can be seen in the rejection of Bear aesthetics by normative gay culture. Coincidentally, the mainstream gay community proliferates this anti-fat mentality as they eroticize and idealize muscular and athletic bodies while shaming other body types, providing the precedence for the emergence of both the Bear subculture and fat acceptance movements. Similarly, Murray argues that because our society generally holds "negative knowledge of fatness... most people do not want to have to see fatness out on display [and] our initial urge wants it to be hidden" (273). This is especially prominent in the gay community as the desired body is everything but fat revealing a privileging of thinness that leaves overweight men disenfranchised and secluded. The growing popularity of the Bear community reveals the increasing resistance to a culture that recklessly places thinness and toned bodies on a hierarchical pedestal.

The anti-fat culture within the gay community gives precedence for the Bear community to flourish because their fat positive stance encourages the reconstruction of the gay male body in order to create a new social understanding of queerness and fatness. Firstly, Mitchell Wood states that the empirical literature has shown there is a "greater occurrence of body image disturbances among gay men" as they "desire to be sexually attractive to men" (46). This in turn establishes a standard of attractiveness among gay men, which becomes central to their sexual

relationships and individual identities (Wood 46). This evidence also led Gough and Flanders to claim that body image problems among young gay men have resulted in a higher instance of eating disorders as these men attempt to sustain a slender body (236). By rejecting this superficial and dangerous body norm, the Bear community's appreciation of all body types—especially fat bodies—can fundamentally change how gay men and western society view gay male bodies.

Furthermore, the acceptance of non-conventional male bodies changes the discourse from thinness, regimentation, and muscularity to one that focuses on a sexual, psychological, and emotional happiness that is not dependent on body modifications. By moving away from “the body conscious consumerist ethic” of mainstream gay culture, Bears “promote an ethic of tolerance and celebration of larger, masculinized—but not necessarily muscular—male bodies” (Gough and Flanders 236). This inclusive and fat positive ideology allows stockier men to experience liberation that is not inextricably linked to or determined by their bodies. In order to dismantle the “pressure to be slim and youthful in appearance” and the experience of double marginalization “as outcasts from both the gay community and mainstream society,” Bear subculture has ultimately given more opportunities for gay men to explore their identity and embrace their bodies (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 91-92). Additionally, the fact that a “tolerance of difference [is] an integral part of a Bear identity” contrasts “the competitive or acquisitional values of a mainstream [gay] culture that could foster an uncaring or superficial style of interpersonal engagement” (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 98). By being more accepting of physical difference, the Bear subculture encourages gay men to move away from this hypercritical mentality that allows toxic constructions of the gay male body to prosper, which instigates competition, resentment, and jealousy. Thus, the fat positive politics inherent to the

Bear community are gradually redefining how gay men view themselves and their bodies, allowing them to challenge other issues such as traditionally restricted sex roles.

As Bear communities allow overweight men the sexual freedom and experimentation they are often denied in mainstream gay culture, their fat positive mantra fosters a healthy and non-heteronormative sexual culture. Prior to embracing a Bear identity, many overweight gay men reported feeling physically and sexually unattractive. However following initiation into the Bear community, they felt “valued as their larger bodies were openly sexualized” (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 100). The social acceptance “fostered by this community gave many men the confidence to initiate and pursue romantic and sexual relationships,” allowing Bears to dismantle the normalization of penetrative, phallic sexual intercourse (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 101). In Manley, Levitt, and Mosher’s study, they discovered that self-identified Bears felt the gay community was “sexually restrictive” and discouraged the incorporation of a variety of sexual practices (103). I would suggest that this sexually restrictive mentality is linked to the obsession with the specific body image discussed earlier. When visual appearance dominates sexual pleasure not only are the opportunities to engage in sexual intercourse limited, but also the act of sex itself becomes foregrounded in an expectation to be “perfect” based on idealized imagery and sex scripts. As slimmer gay men adopt heteronormative constructions of masculine bodies, within the context of hegemonic masculinity, they are drawn to a form of traditional, heteronormative intercourse that focuses on the genitals as the primary objects of sexual pleasure. Moskowitz et al. produce quantitative evidence that proves Bears engage in a wider array of sexual behaviors in contrast to gay men who do not identify as Bears, which includes fisting, urination, voyeurism, and exhibitionism (779). According to Moskowitz et al., “Bears may be intrinsically more interested in enacting diverse sexual behaviors” that “push the limits of

what may be considered socially acceptable or normative sexual behaviors” (777). Above all, Moskowitz et al. emphasize that the sexual nature of Bears allows the community “to ensure that even the heaviest, hairiest, and/ or shortest individuals [can] partner” (782). Therefore, generating a strong sense of sexual awareness that promotes different forms of sexual expression, these overweight gay men demonstrate that fat positivity and inclusivity can alter and dismantle traditionally limited heteronormative sex practices, and subsequently encourage a reconfiguration of male masculinity.

As a fat and sex positive culture, Bears embody a distinct form of masculinity that generates an intermediate position between traditional notions of femininity and hegemonic masculinity. Though not explicitly tied to their fat positive mantra, the Bear community’s inclusiveness towards weight allows them to exist in this intermediary position because of their physical connection to heterosexuality as straight men are often perceived as ignorant to their body image and weight (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 90). As well, their added opposition to women and twinks, who are stereotypically viewed as highly body conscious and always striving for thinness in order to fulfill male desires, also allows them to embody this distinct position (Hennen 34). Hennen suggests, “Bears define their masculinity not only against the feminine but more specifically against the feminized, hairless, and gym-toned body of the dominant ideal of gay masculinity—the twink” (33). However, in order to differentiate Bears from hegemonic masculinity it is crucial to note that Bears subtly reject femininity as the core of their identity, not as an attempt to subordinate the feminine, but in order to generate ways to differentiate their identity from both heterosexual and homosexual men (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 105). That being said, Bear masculinity is inherently different from traditional masculinity because it incorporates aspects of “traits typically coded as feminine in Western culture, such as nurturance,

expression of emotion, and affection with other men” (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 105). Hennen provides an example of this emphasis on affection while detailing Bear behavior at a Bear Camp: he explains that there were various Bear hugs in which a large group of men would huddle and kiss, fondle, and message each other (38). This intimacy allows Bears “to forge a new way of being a man that br[ings] together traits that they [feel are] positive in both gay and heterosexual masculinity” (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 105). By emphatically embracing this form of masculinity Bears dismantle the masculine and feminine binary that has dominated social understandings of gender and sexual orientation. Thus advancing their fat and sex positive agendas as the rejection of oppressive hegemonic masculinity established a space for new conceptualizations of male bodies. Above all, because Bears “define their bodies [and masculinity] based upon values of self-acceptance, personal freedom, and increased intimacy with other men” (Manley, Levitt, and Mosher 111), they allow previously disenfranchised and marginalized gay men to engage in behavior that endorses the rejection of heteronormativity and traditional masculinity. Therefore, this distinct form of masculinity allows Bears to challenge gender binaries, gay stereotypes, and body norms in order to create a more inclusive and fluid community that redefines experiences of masculinity and queerness.

Throughout this paper I have attempted to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Bear subculture in relation to the gay male body, fat positivity, sexuality, and masculinity in order to expand on the limited scholarly exploration of this distinct gay community. By first describing Bears and contrasting them to the normative and restricting aesthetic construction of the gay male body, I have used fat positivity to argue that Bears provide an intriguing case study to explore the reclamation of the gay male body through redefining what it means to be a gay man outside the context of thinness and hegemonic masculinity. The inclusive and tolerant nature of

the Bear community provides a space for a diverse array of fat men to experiment with their sexuality in order to escape the heteronormative practice of penetrative intercourse. The Bear's intermediate position between masculinity and femininity symbolizes the rejection of oppressive gender binaries that organizes male and female into two essentialist categories with specific behavioral and sexual expectations. Most importantly, Bears embody a profound departure from the restrictions placed on all men—straight or gay—that serve to constrict the perception of the male body and the experience of maleness. Thus, Bears are reclaiming, redefining, and reconstructing the gay male body as an autonomous entity by altering and dismissing sexual and social norms that are constantly perpetuated within a heteropatriarchal system.

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