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Physical, Behavioral, and Psychological Traits of Gay Men Identifying as Bears

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Abstract

The Bear community exists as a subculture in reaction to the larger gay community. It rejects the normative idealized male beauty revered by mainstream gay men. While qualitative data document such self-identifiers as masculine-acting gay men who weigh more and have more body hair, there has to date been no quantitative analysis of this group's characteristics. In response, we conducted two large-scale studies of gay men identifying as Bears (n = 469) to survey their self-reported physical, behavioral, and psychological traits. Our studies indicated that Bears were more likely to be hairier, heavier, and shorter than mainstream gay men. They reported wanting partners who were hairier and heavier. They were less likely to reject sexual partners and the partners they did reject were more likely to be young or weigh too little (i.e., were not bearish). Bears were more likely than mainstream gay men to enact diverse sexual behaviors (e.g., fisting, voyeurism) and were comparatively more masculine. Bears had lower self-esteem but were no less (or more) hypermasculine than non-Bears. We concluded that Bears are intensely sexual. We speculate that Bears are viewed as less attractive than what is traditionally considered to be attractive. The partners they can attract may be limited and, in response to this limitation, they may be particularly attuned to seek out partners who will not reject them. This condition may produce the low self-esteem exhibited and may explain how the Bear culture developed to ensure that even the heaviest, hairiest, and/or shortest individual can partner. Future analyses of the community's health are warranted.

Keywords

Bears; Gay Culture; Gay and Bisexual Men; Self-esteem; Masculinity; Obesity

INTRODUCTION

The gay community is ultimately a heterogeneous one with many subgroups and subcultures —one of the commonalities among them being the desire to have same-sex encounters. One such subculture is comprised of gay and bisexual men who identify as Bears. Bears self-present as having the "correct attitude" towards their "naturally developing/aging" male

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bodies (Monaghan, 2005). They consider “real” masculinity to include having comfort with other men’s bodies and eschew the more normative gay male body-model (i.e., one in which thinness, youth, hairlessness, and muscularity are revered) (Drummond, 2005; Duncan, 2007). They favor instead a body-model that may be predetermined by genetics, age, or heteronormative masculine beliefs (i.e., men *should* weigh more and be hairier) (Wright, 1997). There are many different subdivisions within the Bear community. Men are categorized primarily by their hairiness, but also by their weight, age, and ethnicity. Divisions within the community may consist of: *Grizzly Bears* (White, hairy, heavier men), *Cubs* (younger hairy men), *Polar Bears* (older men with greying or white hair), *Big Teddy Bears* (men who are hairy, yet heavier than *Grizzly Bears*), *Otters* (men who are hairy but thin), and other classifications encompassing ethnic variations such as *Black Bears* (hairy men of color) or *Panda Bears* (hairy Asian or Pacific Islander men) (Monaghan, 2005). Despite physical differences within the Bear community, most of the men subscribe to a shared identity: masculinity is praised and therefore celebrated within the community. Because there is a dearth of general research regarding this community, and no studies to date that use quantitative methods, we decided to explore this community quantitatively—using an Internet-convenience sample, followed by a purposive sample.

As suggested, the Bear culture exhibits and values a greater sense of dominant (but not necessarily domineering) “authentic masculinity” in comparison to other subcultures within the gay community (e.g., twinks or drag queens) (Hennen, 2005). Bear culture is complex and inextricably tied to heteronormative and hegemonic masculine ideologies. This suggests that the Bear identity not only is “conventionally gendered” but includes a specific presentation of self (Hennen, 2005). Though ostensible similarities and overlapping traits exist between Bears and other gay male subcultures (e.g., the Leathermen), research indicates that their expressions of masculinity, tolerance of behaviors, and values may be unique (Wright, 1997). For example, where Leathermen revere hypermasculinity as a trait that encompasses embracing danger, fearlessness, power, and sexual callousness. Bears do not. Unconditional acceptance and empathy exist in lieu of hypermasculinity (Manley, Levitt, & Mosher, 2007). Sexual partners matter and are egalitarian. It can be psychologically damaging to live with immutable and devalued physical traits, particularly within mainstream cultures that sexually condemn such traits (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). In response and in contrast with Leathermen, Bears maintain their masculine identity without adopting negative hypermasculine tendencies to accommodate all partners, despite their size or body hairiness.

There is some theoretical support for why the Bear identity splintered from the gay male mainstream culture. Social identity theory suggests that groups adopt social creativity strategies. Tajfel and Turner (1986) have found that subordinate group members will, at times, try to convert their identity from being a negative one to a positive one by “changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group, so that comparisons which were previously negative are now perceived as positive” (p. 20). The classic example of this is African Americans adopting “Black is beautiful.” Bears may do something similar by altering the meaning of their heavier, shorter, and hairier physiques, relative to mainstream gays. That is, to contradict “superordinate” gay male subcultures (e.g., twinks, partyboys, A-listers) that are antithetical to, and even antagonistic towards Bears, men who are hairier and heavier

exist and adopt an identity to affront the stereotypical “alpha” gay male. Thus, being “rugged,” “natural,” and “masculine” are reinvented by this community through increased weight, hairiness, and indifference to fashion (Hennen, 2005).

Popular culture, the media, and Western hetero- and homosexual expectations have normalized the ideal male body as one that is lean, muscular, and v-shaped (with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and a flat but well-defined stomach) (Olivardia, Pope, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2000). This version of the male body and its parts are increasingly portrayed in objectifying ways, such as imagery that includes bare chests or emphasizes genital bulges (Leit Pope, & Gary, 2001). It even has been noted that, as a result of the extreme importance placed on body image, physiological (e.g., anorexia/bulimia) and psychological pathologies (e.g., poor self-image/self-esteem) develop in both heterosexual and homosexual men exhibiting less desirable physical traits (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley, & Grilo, 1996; Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Peplau et al., 2009; Weiner, 2009; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003). Because the ideal male body seems to be unattainable to most, 14% to 45% of men state dissatisfaction with their body or some aspect of it (Garner et al., 1997; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005). Thus, it is of little surprise that, given a cultural atmosphere in which thinness, youth (highly associated with hairlessness), height, muscularity, and above-average penis size are all admired and revered (Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008), a spinoff subculture that devalues, and even eschews, such traits developed. As a corollary, interview data suggest that the adoption of the Bear identity by men who cannot or do not want to achieve this “idealized perfection” results in increased self-esteem, self-acceptance, and a better body image (Manley et al., 2007).

The Bear culture also exists to facilitate same-sex sexual encounters. However, where mainstream gay men report wanting partners with those previously stated, admired or revered characteristics (Moskowitz, Rieger, & Seal, 2009), Bears may not (Manley et al., 2007). Ethnographic research indicates that Bears may be more accepting and caring of partners with traits that mirror their own (Monaghan, 2005). That is, partners who are heavier, hairier, and eschew normative instances of idealized male beauty may be preferred. Alternatively, partner selectivity may simply be more relaxed. For example, it has been noted in previous research that men who were heavier or even obese tended not to reject partners (Moskowitz & Seal, 2010). A similar, and arguably traditionally masculine, proclivity may be present for Bears where, as long as a male partner meets minimum trait criteria, sex can ensue.

Finally, men who possess a Bear identity may be more likely to enact desired sexual behaviors than do men who are not part of that culture. Whereas mainstream gay men often do not engage in desired or preferred sexual behaviors because of fears of rejection or judgment (Kaminski, Chapman, Haynes, & Own, 2004), those in the more accepting Bear community reject these fears due to their being ultimately “feminine” in nature (Hennen, 2005). Part of the eschewal of normative idealized male beauty (for the more “natural” masculine beauty) may also encompass shrugging off sexual constraints. Accordingly, men identifying as Bears may be intrinsically more interested in enacting diverse sexual behaviors, some of which are equated with masculinity, and push the limits of what may be

considered socially acceptable or normative sexual behaviors (e.g., urination, fisting, voyeurism, exhibitionism) (Grov, Parsons, & Bimbi, 2010).

Due to the active existence of the Bear community and recognition of this subculture by the larger gay/bisexual male culture, more research is needed to explore the degree to which the previously mentioned physical, behavioral, and psychological differences actually exist. In exploring these smaller subcultures of the larger gay/bisexual male culture, sociology, psychology, and even public health can better explain and address the needs of men with same-sex attractions. Health disparities may exist for some of these subcultures. Additionally, subcultural differences may unknowingly confound future studies on sexuality and health. Researchers may be ignorant of such differences, fail to account for them, and find results that are mere artifacts of the flawed or underdeveloped initial social identity measures. It is with this concern and considering the dearth of extant Bear research that we explored the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses

Given the literature, we proposed the following hypotheses:

- **H1** Bears will report being shorter, hairier, less muscular, weighing more, and having smaller erect penises than non-Bears.
- **H2** Bears will report wanting partners who are shorter, hairier, less muscular, who weigh more, and have smaller erect penises than non-Bears.
- **H3** Bears will report fewer rejections of partners on criteria (e.g., “weighing too much,” “being too old”) than non-Bears and will report a higher prevalence of “never rejecting” any partners than non-Bears.
- **H4** Bears will report engaging in a higher prevalence of (diverse) sexual behavior than non-Bears.
- **H5** Bears will report having higher self-esteem than non-Bears.
- **H6** Bears will report being more masculine than non-Bears.
- **H7** Bears will report being less hypermasculine than non-Bears.

METHOD

Data for our two distinct studies were derived from two separate samples (a total of 2,067 men). Our two-study structure emerged from the preliminary analyses of the first, encouraging us to ask a second independent sample psychological questions. Specifically, our first study was more exploratory and focused on the physical traits, partner selection, and rejection criteria of gay men (within which we collected enough Bears for analyses). The second was more purposive, where we actively recruited Bears to test the psychological variables (never asked by the first study) that might be associated with the identity.

Participants

There were gender and sexual behavioral inclusion criteria associated with both studies. Specifically, men who have or have had sex with other men were solicited to participate. Bear identification was not an inclusion requirement, but rather a grouping variable to distinguish individuals. In the Craigslist study, 22.6% (n = 120) identified as part of the Bear community. In the IML/PrideFest study, 22.7% identified as part of the Bear community (n = 349). This subsample of 349 could be further dissected by location (i.e., IML vs. PrideFest). At IML, 253 of the 349 were recruited leaving 96 to be recruited from Pridefest. In terms of a percent of subsample: of those sampled at IML, 29.5% identified as part of the Bear community; of those sampled at PrideFest, 14.2% identified as part of the Bear community. Therefore, the most conservative estimate of the Bear prevalence among gay and bisexual men would be the 14% collected at PrideFest.

Procedure

Sample 1: Craigslist Study Procedures—Men with varying sexualities who had placed sexual advertisements in the “men seeking men” personals section of Craigslist.com were asked to complete a brief online survey from January to March 2008. This was an international sample recruited from all of the Craigslist.com mirror sites for which English was the predominant language (i.e., all cities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Specifically, a block message was sent to each man’s publicly listed advertisement informing him of a research study on the sexual health behaviors of men engaging in same-sex sexual behavior. No compensation was provided for participants. A total of 531 men answered the questions.

Sample 2: IML/PrideFest Study Procedures—For the second study, data were collected using an anonymous survey administered at two independent gay events in May and June 2008: the International Mr. Leatherman Competition (IML) in Chicago, Illinois, and PrideFest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We knew Bears to frequent IML because the event encompassed a sub-event, *BEAR PRIDE*. We also selected PrideFest due to the relatively large number of Bear commercial and cultural booths. Thus, we considered the sampling at these locations to be more purposive than convenient. Booths were set up and men attending the events were solicited to take the 15-minute survey. Upon completion, participants received $5 as compensation. A total of 1536 men (859 from IML; 677 from PrideFest) answered the questions necessary to complete the analyses for our hypotheses.

Measures

Bear Affiliation—Across both studies, participants could indicate if, in the past month (for the IML/PrideFest study) and year (for the Craigslist study), they considered themselves part of the Bear community. In the Craigslist study, we only asked about community affiliation. However, because we wanted to expand on what we found in the Craigslist study, in the IML/PrideFest study, we added more measures surrounding the Bear identity. To gauge strength of affiliation, we asked how many Bear activities or events participants had attended *outside of IML/PrideFest* in the past month. Participants also indicated the degree to which the Bear community was important to them (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important).

Craigslist Study Measures: Physical Trait, Partner Preferences and Rejections, and Sexual Behavior Variables

Self and partner body attributes: We asked the men to rate themselves, compared to most men, on a 7-point scale on the following body attributes: height, weight, body hairiness, muscularity, and erect penis size (1 = lowest, 7 = highest). For example, individuals who rated themselves as "1" on body muscularity had virtually no muscle mass, while individuals who rated themselves as "7" were extremely muscular. Similarly, we asked the participants to rate the body attributes of their partners using the same 7-point scale on the same attributes: height, weight, body hairiness, muscularity, and erect penis. These measures have been previously published (Moskowitz et al., 2009; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011).

Partner rejection: We used a checklist to assess "the possible reasons for rejecting partners." Participants could indicate with "yes" or "no" if each of the following criteria applied to why they had rejected same-sex partners: appeared too old, appeared too young, weighed more, weighed less, were taller, were shorter, were less muscular, were more attractive, and were less attractive. Participants could also select, "I have never rejected individuals no matter what they looked like or seemed."

Sexual Behaviors: We asked individuals to indicate which of the following 20 potential receptive and insertive sexual behaviors (as separate choices) they performed over the past year: oral intercourse (fellatio), anilingus, anal intercourse, fisting, urination, defecation, asphyxiation, general domination/general submission, voyeurism/exhibitionism, and sexual assault/non-consensual sex. All of these behaviors were defined on the survey. Differences between receptive and insertive behaviors were also clarified on the survey. Receptive meant that the individual took either the literal or figurative receptive role (i.e., receptive urination: being urinated on or in another man; receptive asphyxiation: being asphyxiated by another man). Insertive meant that the individual took either the literal or figurative insertive role (i.e., insertive urination: urinated on or in another man; insertive asphyxiation: asphyxiating another man).

IML/PrideFest Study Measures: Psychological Variables

Self-esteem: We used the self-liking dimension of the Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale-Revisited version (SLCS-R) (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001) to assess participants' degrees of self-esteem (α = .91). This 8-item measure asked participants to rate their agreement with statements such as, "I never doubt my personal worth" or "I feel great about who I am" (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). Higher scores indicated higher self-esteem.

Masculinity: Masculinity and femininity were first measured as two separate items. The men rated themselves against other men (i.e., "compared to most men") using a Femininity scale and Masculinity scale (e.g., 1 = not at all feminine, 5 = extremely feminine; 1 = not at all masculine, 5 = extremely masculine) from Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, and Bailey (2008) (see also Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Femininity was reverse-coded and then averaged with masculinity with good reliability (α = .76).

Hypermasculinity: The Hypermasculinity Inventory (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984) was used to assess the tendency towards a hypermasculine orientation. This inventory was comprised of forced choices between a non-hypermasculine response and a hypermasculine response. For example, individuals had to choose between the non-hypermasculine statement, “It’s gross and unfair to use alcohol and drugs to convince a partner to have sex” or the hypermasculine statement, “Get a partner drunk, high, or excited and he’ll let you do whatever you want.” Hypermasculinity is most notably associated with sensation seeking traits, callousness towards sexual partners, and dangerous behaviors or precarious situations. Scores were averaged and higher scores indicated a tendency towards hypermasculinity. The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .79$).

Statistical Analysis

The sample sizes varied across tests by the few instances of missing data. For the Craigslist study, we used logistic multiple regression and cross tabulation with chi-square to test for differences between Bears and non-Bears on self- and partner-physical attributes, rejection criteria, and differences in sexual behavior prevalence. For the IML/PrideFest study, we used a single logistic multiple regression model to establish the odds ratios for the psychological measures and Bear identity (i.e., self-esteem, masculinity, and hypermasculinity). Age was controlled for across all tests in both studies. It was positively associated with being heavier (i.e., weighing more, $t(531) = .09$, $p = .05$, and more masculine, $t(1510) = .34$, $p < .001$, and negatively associated with hypermasculinity, $t(1543) = -.23$, $p < .001$. In the IML/PrideFest study, we additionally controlled for survey location and HIV-status—both of which were related to, and could have been possible confounds with, masculinity and hypermasculinity.

RESULTS

Samples

As Table 1 shows, the majority of both samples was White and fairly educated. Most men reported being homosexual. About one in five men identified as part of the Bear community across both samples. There was a difference in the distributions of sexual orientation between the studies; however, this was not significantly related to any independent or dependent variables included in any of the analyses. There were no other significant demographic differences between the Bears collected in the Craigslist sample and those collected in the IML/PrideFest sample. In fact, both samples virtually had the same mean ages and *SD* (Craigslist sample: 41.23 years, ±11.29; IML/PrideFest sample: 41.69 years, ±10.41).

Specific to the Craigslist sample (see Tables 2 and 3), the 531 men reported being above average on height, weight, and erect penis size and below average on hairiness and muscularity. These men also reported wanting partners who were above average on height, muscularity, and erect penis size and below average on hairiness and weight. The most popular rejection criterion for partners for the Craigslist sample was “weighed too much” (50.7%) followed closely by “was less attractive” (50.3%) and “was too old” (49.7%). A majority of men reported engaging in receptive and insertive oral and anal intercourse and anilingus. Other noteworthy sexual behaviors enacted by the sample were exhibitionism

(33.5%), voyeurism (35.8%), domination (19.0%), submission (16.6%), receptive urination (9.6%), and insertive urination (11.1%). A small minority of the men reported experiencing sexual assault (6.8%) or engaging in insertive sexual assault (3.0%).

Due to initial analyses to be presented in the next section, we decided to ask psychological traits questions in the follow-up, Summer 2008 IML/PrideFest study. These were scales that assessed masculinity, hypermasculinity, and self-esteem. This larger sample of men (about 1,000 more men than in the Craigslist study) reported moderate levels of masculinity (M = 3.8, SD = .76, range, 1–5), low levels of hypermasculinity (M = .25, SD = .17, range, 0-.93), and moderate levels of self-esteem (M = 4.99, SD = 1.25, range, 1–7). Hypermasculinity was not correlated with self-esteem or masculinity. However, masculinity was positively related to self-esteem in the greater sample (r(1487) = .15, p <.001).

Craigslist Study Hypotheses

Physical Trait Differences of Bears and Their Partners—To test the first two hypotheses, we conducted a logistic regression and included all five physical traits and all five partners' physical traits. The overall model was significant, $\chi^2(11) = 174.61$, $R^2 = .43$, $p < .001$. Confirming parts of the first hypothesis, Bears were more likely to be shorter (p =. 03, OR = 0.74, *95% CI* = 0.56–0.97), weigh more ($p < .001$, OR = 3.50, *95% CI* = 2.55–4.81), and be hairier ($p < .001$, OR = 1.74, *95% CI* = 1.41–2.14). Confirming parts of the second hypothesis, they were more likely to want partners who were hairier ($p < .001$, OR = 1.47, *95% CI* = 1.19–1.81). Although there was no direct effect regarding partners' weight, we found that the relationship between Bear identification and partners' weight was mediated by the men's weight (Sobel test statistic = 2.26, p = .02). Statistically significant fluctuations in the partners' weight variable (from $p < .001$, without the presence of the men's weight variable, to p = .08, with it included in the model) prompted the mediation test. Thus, Bears were more likely to weigh more and men who weighed more wanted partners' who weighed more.

Partner Rejection Criteria—The third hypothesis was tested through a series of chi-square tests, the results of which are shown in Table 3. Though we predicted that Bears would be less likely to reject partners across all criteria and be more likely to report "never rejecting" partners, this hypothesis only was confirmed for a few of the criteria. Specifically, Bears were more likely to reject partners due to their being too young. They were less likely to reject individuals who were less attractive than they appeared or who weighed more. Finally, they were more likely to report having never rejected partners.

Sexual Behaviors—For our fourth hypothesis, we predicted that Bears would report engaging in more (of the 20) sexual behaviors than non-Bears. This hypothesis was confirmed, with significant results found for 75% of behaviors (see bottom of Table 3). The less normative sexual behaviors produced some of the largest differences. For example, Bears were 3.02 times more likely to have engaged in receptive fisting (p = .01, *95% CI* = 1.27–7.18) and 2.03 times more likely to have engaged in insertive fisting (p = .04, *95% CI* = 1.04–3.96). Bears were 1.81 times more likely to have engaged in voyeurism ($p < .01$,

95% CI = 1.20–2.74) and 2.07 times more likely to have engaged in exhibitionism ($p < .01$, *95% CI* = 1.37–3.14).

IML/PrideFest Study Hypotheses

Psychological Variable Differences—Due to the differences found between Bears and non-Bears within the Craigslist study, we explored three psychological constructs (i.e., self-esteem, masculinity, and hypermasculinity) that were conceptually associated with those results. Also, and as suggested by previous qualitative research, these constructs were likely to vary by the maintenance of a Bear identity. Therefore, one final logistic regression model was conducted in which the relationship between these three variables and the Bear identity were tested. The overall model was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 87.65$, $R^2 = .06$, $p < .001$. Contrary to the fifth but confirming the sixth, non-Bears reported *higher* self-esteem than Bears ($p < .001$, *OR* = 3.11, *95% CI* = 1.68–5.76). Additionally, Bears reported higher degrees of masculinity than non-Bears ($p < .001$, *OR* = 5.26, *95% CI* = 2.37–11.63). The null hypothesis could not be rejected for the seventh hypothesis (regarding hypermasculinity). As a follow-up to Bears reporting lower self-esteem than non-Bears, we conducted an additional analysis to explore whether rating the culture as more important and/or attending more Bear events moderated self-esteem. No significant results were found. That is, being a more active Bear and/or finding the community more important did not affect this low self-esteem in community members.

DISCUSSION

Supporting previous qualitative research, our quantitative results indicated that Bears were more likely to be hairier, heavier, and shorter. They reported wanting partners who were hairier and, due to their own increased weight, heavier. They reported rejecting partners less and the partners they did reject were more likely to be young. Bears reported the enactment of (diverse) sexual behaviors and reported being more masculine. However, in contrast to previous qualitative research, Bears actually had lower self-esteem and were no less (or more) hypermasculine than non-Bears. Our results describe a subculture of men who were different than mainstream gay men in their personal looks, partner preferences, behaviors, and psychologies. Considering the likely prevalence of a Bear identity may be held (with varying tenacities) by about 14–22% of gay men, these results provide additional evidence for the manifest and latent heterogeneity of gay and bisexual men.

The results regarding body traits and partner selection confirm, for the first time in a systematic manner, findings documented in previous interview and ethnographic studies. However, the sexual behavioral and psychological differences between Bears and those not identifying as such were novel and, to some degree, confound what members of the culture have verbally expressed in the literature. Bears reported enacting more sexual behaviors, many of which are relatively esoteric and physiologically extreme (Grov et al., 2010; Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999). These behaviors may be associated with, or an expression of, both the higher degrees of masculinity and lower degrees of self-esteem reported by such men in our studies. For example, behaviors such as insertive/receptive fisting, insertive urination, general domination, insertive asphyxiation, and insertive sexual

assault may be behavioral representations of increased masculinity (Nordling, Sandnabba, Santtila, & Alison, 2006). To be able to take a fist or urinate on another man may be how the men exemplify their form of masculinity—particularly in a sexual climate where *most* gay men do not want to, cannot, or will not enact these behaviors. That is, not only do Bears look like "natural" males, seek partners who look like "natural" males, but also engage in behaviors that only "natural" males could tolerate or perform. Alternatively, these behaviors may stem from the lower self-esteem reported by Bears. To be urinated on or to submit to another man (i.e., engage in general submission) may be a response to perceived lower self-liking (Santtila, Sandnabba, Alison, & Nordling, 2002). Regardless of the potential explanation, Bears appear to be more sexually diverse and explorative than mainstream gay and bisexual men.

The results documented lower self-esteem, which contradicted both our hypothesis and others' interview research (e.g., Manley et al., 2007). It may be that even if the culture has developed as an affront or reaction to normative idealized male beauty (as suggested by the social creativity strategies within social identity theory), cultural indoctrination does not rectify or improve internalized negative self-perceptions. Bear identity adoption may be more of a maintenance therapy for coping with those indelible physical trait deficiencies rather than a panacea. This conclusion even may be true for hardcore Bears, as neither community importance nor event attendance moderated self-esteem. The fact remains that Bears still exist in a mainstream gay male world. Though they may escape this by engaging in diverse sexual acts with partners that reflect their own body traits and by adopting a masculine identity, self-disliking is still present. The higher ostensible self-esteem described by the interview and ethnographic research may have been a front used to remain cognitively consonant with adhering to a minority subcultural identity. Simply, to the Bear culture and in reaction to mainstream gay men, Bears may self-present as feeling good; however, internally, they may wish that they had those normative idealized beauty traits. Such tendencies and psychologies have been found in other cultures and among heterosexuals of diverse backgrounds (Johnson, 2001).

Finally, our results also documented null differences in hypermasculinity, which contrasted the research that prompted our last hypothesis (see Hennen, 2005; Wright, 1997). Contrary to that Bear research, they were no more or less likely to be callous towards partners, engage in dangerous behaviors, or place themselves in precarious situations. Sexual partners were not valued (or devalued) any more consistently than by mainstream gay men. In this respect, Bears may overestimate and overstate care towards partners to self-present as being distinct from men adhering to the mainstream gay culture (which are often stereotyped as treating partners as disposable) (Isay, 2009).

A portrait emerges from these Bear results that supports a theory for why the gay community ultimately is so heterogeneous (and thus produces the high degree of spinoff subcultures): Cultures facilitate successful same-sex encounters. Bears have sexual desires that need fulfilling. Yet, from a body traits perspective, they may be below average on what is traditionally attractive to other gay and bisexual men. The partners they can attract may be limited; and in response to this limitation, they may want partners who will not reject them. This is a point supported by the men's weight mediating their want of heavier partners, and

is a condition that may produce the low self-esteem exhibited. As Bears are not vastly different towards their sexual partners than mainstream gay men, the culture developed to ensure that even the heaviest, hairiest, and/or shortest individual could partner.

Limitations

Our studies were not without their limitations. First, the measures of identity, physical traits, and rejection criteria were single items, which are simplistic, despite their wide use in previous research and/or their having been validated using variable convergence. We missed measuring some other key variables that would have further elucidated the culture and should have expanded the time metric for these variables (i.e., longer than "the previous 30 days"). For example, non-sexual Bear behaviors would have been interesting to assess and apply to the finding. Interest in the Bear culture by non-Bear identifying gay men might have shown the degree of crossover and integration of communities. Conversely, the degree to which Bears exclusively partner with other Bears would have further supported our partners' attributes findings. As for the psychological measures, the utility of the hypermasculine inventory (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984) at measuring hypermasculinity in men who tend towards same-sex attractions may be questionable. After all, its reliability and validity initially were assessed only for heterosexual men. Whether the items are applicable to gay men, bisexuals, or men questioning their sexuality remains unknown.

With respect to methods, the comparability of samples may be somewhat uncertain, as one was collected through internet surveying and the other, through paper survey. They did share demographic similarities and the prevalence of the Bear identity was nearly identical between the two; however, there may be other unmeasured factors that limit the generalizability (e.g., relationship status distributions, general and sexual health, or BMI/hairiness). Also, the surveys were conducted relatively close in time to one another (within a few months). Though the likelihood of participants being surveyed by both studies remains *extremely* low, repeat data may be a limitation that should be considered.

Statistical limitations existed as well. We achieved only small effect sizes for some of the results. This was allowed due to the large sample sizes (531 and 1536). One minor issue involved the logistic multiple regressions producing less than optimal confidence intervals; and, regarding the chi-square tests, statistical differences in distributions were found but the actual number of people engaging in a few of these behaviors or rejecting partners on specific criteria was small (e.g., insertive sexual assault; "was too young"). We are confident that these limitations did not overshadow our solid overall findings.

Future Directions

The current dearth of Bear community research leaves myriad directions for future researchers to explore. Where ours were studies that explored the physical, sexual behavioral, and psychological traits of men adhering to this community identity, future studies should research both the cardiovascular and sexual health of such men. These men statistically weigh more than mainstream gay men (while being no more or less muscular). Being clinically overweight or obese is associated with diabetes, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, and stroke (Peeters et al., 2003). It is unclear how the acceptance and even reverence

of weighing more may impact the prevalence of such medical conditions in this cultural cohort. Because of the adherence to a culture where all a man's friends also may be Bears, there may be no cultural awareness or emphasis to routinely check on one's cardiovascular health.

Bears tended to engage in more (diverse) sexual behaviors. These behaviors are associated with sexual compulsivity and sensation seeking (Grov et al., 2010) and this sort of heightened sexual sensation seeking has been associated with alcohol and drug use, inconsistent or nonexistent condom use and HIV/STD testing schedules, and HIV/STD infection itself (Bancroft et al., 2003; Kalichman, Weinhardt, DiFonzo, Austin, & Luke, 2002). Future researchers might assess the degree to which these associations hold true for Bears. That is, to what degree do they routinely use condoms and test for HIV/STDs? Does this particular community have a disproportionately higher HIV prevalence than the mainstream gay community (or other subcultures within the community)? A study that answers these research questions would provide further evidence to support the heterogeneity hypothesis: Not only is the mainstream gay community culturally heterogeneous, but so are the sexual health behaviors and problems within it.

One last suggestion for future research would be to test some of the theories generated by these current data. Ours was not a longitudinal study or even an ethnographic one where the entrance and exit of new and old members was documented. The speculations made from the data were highly reversible. Is it the bear identity that contributes to the body trait maintenance or is it the trait that influences the adoption of identity? Do Bears use their identity to cope with the larger gay culture; do they construct it as a form of rebellion; or is their identity merely a tool used to accrue sex partners? While we speculated on all of these questions, no clear answers emerged. Future studies are needed to contribute more concrete support.

To conclude, research such as ours consistently finds increased evidence that the gay community should not be treated as one indivisible block. These myriad subcultures (of which the Bear community constitutes but one) operate according to their own psychologies, enact unique behaviors, and may even have distinct physical traits. Sex researchers endeavor to understand the biology of sexual orientation; however, it may be equally useful to understand how individuals with minority sexual orientations develop and change around social and political obstacles. Bears may very well prove to be reactionary figures to the normative idealized male beauty that is pervasive in both the straight and gay mainstream cultures. Future researchers should wonder in what other ways conforming or not conforming to gay norms, stereotypes, and the larger heterosexual culture impacts individuals and their self-identities.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Craigslist Sample		
Group		
Non-Bear	***n* = 411**	**77.4%**
Bear	***n* =120**	**22.6%**
	Non-Bear *n* (% of *group*)	Bear *n* (% of *group*)
Race/ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	9 (2.2)	0 (0.0)
Black	17 (4.1)	3 (2.5)
Hispanic/Latino	24 (5.8)	7 (5.8)
White	351 (85.5)	107 (89.2)
Other/Mixed	10 (2.4)	3 (2.5)
Education		
Some high school/finished high school	45 (10.9)	18 (15.0)
Some undergraduate	140 (34.1)	37 (30.8)
Finished undergraduate	118 (28.7)	30 (25.0)
Some graduate/finished graduate	108 (26.3)	35 (29.2)
Sexual Orientation		
Homosexual	243 (59.1)	88 (73.3)
Bisexual	123 (29.9)	25 (20.8)
Heterosexual/No label	45 (10.9)	7 (5.8)
	Non-Bear *M* (*SD*)	Bear *M* (*SD*)
Age (in years) [a]	40.64 (12.6)	41.23 (11.3)
IML/PrideFest Sample		
Group		
Non-Bear	*n* =1187	77.3%
Bear	*n* =349	22.7%
	Non-Bear *n* (% of *group*)	Bear *n* (% of *group*)
Location		
International Mr. Leatherman Competition	606 (51.1)	253 (72.5)
PrideFestst	581 (48.9)	96 (27.5)
Race/ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	23 (1.9)	3 (0.9)
Black	123 (10.4)	19 (5.4)
Hispanic/Latino	77 (6.5)	28 (8.0)
White	890 (75.1)	274 (78.5)

Craigslist Sample		
Group		
Non-Bear	***n* = 411**	**77.4%**
Bear	***n* =120**	**22.6%**
Other/Mixed/No label	72 (6.1)	27 (7.7)
Education		
Some high school/finished high school	189 (15.9)	33 (9.4)
Some Undergraduate	286 (24.1)	91 (26.1)
Finished Undergraduate	372 (31.4)	92 (26.4)
Some graduate/finished graduate	340 (28.6)	133 (38.1)
Sexual Orientation		
Homosexual	1034 (87.4)	332 (95.7)
Bisexual	75 (6.3)	11 (3.2)
Heterosexual	75 (6.3)	4 (1.1)
	Non-Bear *M* (*SD*)	Bear *M* (*SD*)
Age [b]	37.45 (12.5)	41.69 (10.4)

Note. Ranges:

[a] 18–79 years

[b] 18–73 years

Table 2

Other Traits of the Sample

	M	*SD*
Men's height [a]	4.50	1.04
Men's weight [a]	4.26	1.04
Men's hairiness [a]	3.83	1.42
Men's muscularity [a]	3.73	1.10
Men's erect penis size [a]	4.48	0.98
Partners' height [a]	4.46	0.93
Partners' weight [b]	3.79	0.68
Partners' hairiness [a]	3.70	1.48
Partners' muscularity [a]	4.32	0.92
Partners' erect penis size [a]	4.85	0.96
Importance of Bear Community [c]	3.41	1.02
Number of Bear Events Attended (1 month) [d]	1.35	1.52

Note.

[a] 1–7

[b] 1–6.

[c] 1–5,

[d] 0–5.

For number of bear events attended, participants were told not to include IML or PrideFest as an event. For more information regarding the relationship between these variables, see Moskowitz et al., 2009)

Table 3

Rejection Criteria and Sexual Behavior Prevalence (Hypotheses 3 & 4)

Rejection Criteria	**% of Non-Bears (*n*)**	**% of Bears (*n*)**	**X^2 value**
Never Rejected Anyone *	21.4 (88)	30.0 (36)	3.83
Too old	50.9 (209)	45.8 (55)	0.94
Too young *	7.3 (30)	14.2 (17)	5.43
Weighed too little	2.7 (11)	4.2 (5)	.71
Weighed too much *	52.8 (217)	43.3 (52)	3.94
Was too tall	1.7 (7)	0.0 (0)	2.07
Was too short	4.6 (19)	4.2 (5)	.05
Was not muscular enough	10.5 (43)	5.8 (7)	2.33
Was too attractive	1.5 (6)	3.3 (4)	1.76
Was not attractive enough *	52.8 (217)	41.7 (50)	4.60
Sexual behaviors	% of Non-Bears (*n*)	% of Bears (*n*)	X^2 value
Receptive oral intercourse *	90.3 (371)	95.8 (115)	3.71
Insertive oral intercourse *	88.3 (363)	95.0 (114)	4.54
Receptive anilingus **	64.2 (264)	77.5 (93)	7.42
Insertive anilingus **	54.3 (223)	78.3 (94)	22.38
Insertive anal intercourse **	54.3 (223)	68.3 (82)	7.53
Receptive anal intercourse	56.9 (234)	60.0 (72)	0.36
Receptive fisting **	2.9 (12)	8.3 (10)	6.85
Insertive fisting *	6.6 (27)	12.5 (15)	4.49
Receptive urination *	8.0 (33)	15.0 (18)	5.20
Insertive urination *	9.7 (40)	15.8 (19)	3.61
Receptive defecation	1.0 (4)	1.7 (2)	0.40
Insertive defecation	1.0 (4)	1.7 (2)	0.40
Receptive asphyxiation	2.9 (12)	3.3 (4)	0.05
Insertive asphyxiation *	1.7 (7)	5.0 (6)	4.22
General domination **	14.8 (61)	33.3 (40)	20.62
General submission *	14.4 (59)	24.2 (20)	6.47
Voyeurism **	32.6 (134)	46.7 (56)	7.99
Exhibitionism **	29.7 (122)	46.7 (56)	12.02
Receptive sexual assault	5.8 (24)	10.0 (12)	2.54
Insertive sexual assault **	1.9 (8)	6.7 (8)	7.08

Note. $N = 531$. Pearson X^2:

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.