



PERFORMED MASCULINITIES: SURVEY WITH THE SÃO PAULO BEAR COMMUNITY¹

Alexandre Rodolfo Alves de Almeida²

Maria Manuel Baptista³

| 107

ABSTRACT

In this research we present the preliminary results of the quantitative analysis of a survey conducted with users of the app Growlr in São Paulo, Brazil (n = 171). Growlr is a Location Based Social Network aimed at people that self-identify as Bears. The APP allows users to establish contact with other individuals that are geographically close to them. Bears form a subgroup within the gay community that share characteristics that are opposed to what one would consider “expected” in gay men: “masculine” attitude, little to no vanity, big and/or fat body, hairy body, and facial hair. The objective of this study is to identify the level of acceptance of non-conforming identities presented by these subjects and simultaneously verify how the image of the “standard” Bear is crystallized in the self and hetero representations of this group. The results point to the fact that age plays a strong role in the level of acceptance of non-conforming identities among Bear subjects, since younger subjects respond less cis-heteronormatively when compared to older subjects. Age also makes the level of fixation of the standard Bear image differ; older subjects are more likely to limit what they mean by Bear identity.

KEYWORDS:

Cultural Studies; Bear Identity; Homosexuality; Queer Studies.

Introduction

In this paper we present the preliminary results of a survey carried out using the Growlr application with a group of its users in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. The objective is to assess how receptive the São Paulo Bear community was to non-conforming identities. We also wanted to see to what extent the image of the standard Bear was fixed in the minds of the local community.

This survey presents a quantitative aspect of the research currently under development by the first author under the Doctoral Program in Cultural Studies at the University of Aveiro, in Portugal, under the supervision of Professor Maria Manuel Baptista. The research carried out in this doctoral program seeks to understand the processes of subjectification of individuals that self-identify as Bears in the cities of Lisbon, in Portugal, and São Paulo, in Brazil. The research has a methodological design that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

In this paper, we present an excerpt of the referred research. We will start by defining the origins of the Bear community and its most widespread identity, starting a discussion about the experience of being gay and fat, an experience that reflects on many of these subjects’ speeches. In the next section we discuss masculinities and how they arise in the context

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² Member of the Centre for Languages, Literatures and Cultures (CLLC/UA) and PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at the University of Aveiro. E-mail: araalmeida@ua.pt.

³ Member of the Centre for Languages, Literatures and Cultures (CLLC/UA) and Full Professor at the University of Aveiro. E-mail: mbaptista@ua.pt.

of the Bear and gay/bisexual community. We conclude the first part of this paper by presenting Location Based Social Networks and the Growlr application, aimed at the Bear audience.

In the methodology part of this paper, we present the steps we took to build our analysis tool, how we have chosen the questions for our survey, how we prepared the pre-test, and how we sent the survey to the subjects through Growlr.

108 | The presentation and analysis of the data we collect from the survey results is divided in three parts: first the characterization of the subjects, second a brief presentation of the data and finally an analysis that considers only the independent variable “age”.

In the final part of this work, we conclude that age plays a major role in the degree of acceptance of non-conforming identities among the subjects. In fact, among the subjects who answered our survey, cisheteronormativity is more prominent in the 45-54 age group.

Revisiting Pawsteps

The first publication describing what we know as the gay Bear community is from 1979, featured in the text “Who’s Who in the Zoo: A Glossary of Gay Animals”, written by George Mazzei in the American LGBT-interest magazine *The Advocate*, on July 26, 1979 (Wright, 2013). But the pawsteps towards the start of a reflection on this community can be seen even a few years earlier. In 1976, in the USA, a national network of chubbies, fat men, and chasers (men who are attracted to the other two) came up with the name Girth and Mirth, a reference to the size of their waists and the alleged “happiness” of the members (Hennen, 2005).

In the book *Fat Gay Men*, Whitesel (2014) reconstructs the history of the Girth and Mirth groups as a space for the empowerment of fat bodies: “Members congregate to create a cultural comfort zone, surrounded as they are by those with similar physical attributes (both in public and private settings)” (Whitesel, 2014, p. 15). The author also says that the members of these clubs were aware that they did not receive validation from the gay community itself, and because of this absence, they ended up building a community in their likeness as stigmatized people (Whitesel, 2014).

The Bears and Girth and Mirth groups start mixing sometime in the early 1990s, when the latter begin to integrate into events known as Bear Hugs. This is the beginning of a notable change in the way Bears are classified. Until then defining characteristics of Bears such as having facial or body hair, start have an equal, if not less, importance than body weight. (Suresha, 2013).

Simultaneously, the Bears also represent a link of historical continuity with the working-class gay male groups of New York, who identified themselves as “masculine” and adopted the nickname “wolves” (Wright, 2013). Even then, the very concepts of being masculine and homosexual were seen by many as mutually exclusive (Ridinger, 2013).

In addition to the pseudoprotection against “effemination” and the eroticization of the heavy body, another factor contributed to the emergence of the Bear phenomenon in the 1980s: the AIDS epidemic (Hennen, 2008; Suresha, 2013; Wright, 2013).

Suresha (2013) states that in the 1980s the “skinny” look went out of fashion among homosexuals. Any weight loss was a cause for fear and a reason to seek medical care. This kind of “slim-phobia” was eventually translated into the representations of gay men, that is to say “it was actually unhealthy to be of even average weight” (Suresha, 2013, p. 47).



Being gay/Being fat

When we talk about the social movements of minority groups, it is always possible to identify a search for breaking the dominant and hegemonic structures. We can see the questioning of established meanings, a challenge to fixed identities (Lima, 2004). And the Bears challenge these structures in two ways: first because they are men who have relationships with other men, second because they have a body outside of the socially acceptable standard.

The whole gay culture can be seen as a minority. It challenges and questions established notions of normality. For Lima (2004), the Bear experience is even more interesting, as it “problematizes again what was already problematized” by gay culture.

It is through their integration in this community that it becomes possible for what is considered abject bodies (such as fat, old, black or Asian) to change the view they have on themselves, making it possible to overcome difficulties and negative judgments, to allow them the possibility to arouse desire, to be desirable:

Fat people fall outside the parameters for ideal sex objects in two major ways: as desexualized beings or as degradable beings. Therefore, big men engaging in sex at all would qualify as transgressive to outsiders, and coming out as both fat and gay truly represents an act of courage. (Whitesel, 2014, p. 21)

The fat body is made not only by excess body weight, but also by the social weight associated with it. These are individuals who experience stigma and are looked down on a daily basis. This cannot be seen merely as unsolicited negative comments since it affects the psychological health and well-being of the individuals (Cardoso & Costa, 2013). In fact, there are reports of the difficulty that “overweight” people have in getting doctors and medical professionals to pay attention to something other than their fat. No wonder that classifying patients as “fat” versus “normal” is a source of constant shame (Whitesel, 2014).

Researchers Rebecca Puhl and Chelsea Heuer (2009) published a systematic review of studies produced between January 2000 and May 2008 that dealt with adult fat peoples in the United States of America. The data pointed to a 66% increase in discrimination against fat people in the first decade of the 2000s. According to the authors, it is possible to compare these rates to those of racial discrimination, as well as to state that women are the main victims. Corroborating what Whitesel (2014) says, the investigation also showed that there is strong evidence that even health professionals endorse stereotypes and negative attitudes against obese patients.

Culturally, fat people continue to be seen only as funny, but never as objects of desire. While a muscular body is seen as a sign of power and masculinity, fat people are considered ridiculous, asexual and lacking self-discipline and self-love (Brown, 2014).

(Homo)masculinities

Men who are part of the Bear community idealize themselves as “masculine” subjects, pursuing masculinity in a way that limits the possibilities of experience. In most Western societies, the “masculine” attitude, reserved for cisgender men, is associated with physical strength, courage, competitiveness and emotional inability. As for cisgender women, the “fe-



minine” characteristics of delicacy, concern for others, submission and passivity abound. (Huerta, 2019).

In his work with Bear communities in Mexico, researcher Alejandro Ávila Huerta (2019) found a type of masculinity that does not necessarily go through this narrow perception of the masculine. In the Mexican context, there is space for female experiences in the Bear community but even among those subjects it is recognized that the discourse against people who perform femininity is also present.

When analyzing the texts present in Grindr (a dating app focused in homo and bisexual men) profiles in Rio de Janeiro, researchers Renata Rezende and Diego Cotta (2015) perceived misogynistic and homophobic discourses in users:

The hyperbolic male, socially valued, prevails as a potent and powerful hegemonic actor, who runs over other forms that resist domination backed by heteronormativity and machismo. If in the past men were not seen as “real men” because they are gay, today they also display and venerate their “masc-ness” in apps, perpetuating hatred, intolerance and, often, violence, based on eroticized bodies and homophobic speeches (Rezende & Cotta, 2015, p. 363).

These speeches and attitudes are also present in the work of Charlie Sarson (2020), who identifies a kind of “homomascularity” among gay subjects. The author says the subjects end up emulating hegemonic masculinity processes: promoting the performance of stereotypically male gender attitudes, which are given a greater cultural value (Sarson, 2020).

LBSN and *Growlr*

Nowadays the internet crosses all environments and is not exactly a novelty. One of the main means of access to it is through smart phones, devices that are already part of the daily life of a large part of the world population.

Mobile devices have a great ability to process data. Through a GPS (Global Positioning System) receiver, smartphones have the ability to infer the location of the equipment, and, therefore, of its owner. Location Based Social Networks (LBSN) arise precisely from the appropriation of these two capabilities of mobile devices: the high processing power and the possibility to identify the geographic location of users (Farman, 2012). LBSN are social networks with a strong relationship with the user’s physical location. Contacts are made, primarily, with other individuals geographically close.

Growlr is an LBSN aimed at the Bear audience. It can be used by anyone with a smartphone, free of charge or through an optional monthly subscription that gives benefits within the application. The main objective stated by the tool is to incite ‘real’ dates between men who are geographically close.

Like all applications of this kind, over time the way people use Growlr have been expanded (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2014). Now these applications are also used for non-sexual purposes, in part because of some users who find these ‘sex-seeking’ applications unpleasant but also because the user base has been greatly expanded, multiplying and diversifying the forms of interaction between the subjects.



Growlr is not alone in the category of locative social networking focused at men who have sex with other men. Grindr, Scruff and Hornet are other examples of applications of the same type, each with its specificities, but with basically the same functioning: an endless menu of people and possibilities (Gibbs & Rice, 2016).

Methodology

| 111

The investigation presented here is of a quantitative nature and analyzes the data generated from an online survey, disseminated through the Growlr application, with subjects who were in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, during the study. Responses were received between December 3rd and 10th, 2019.

The first step taken was the making of the survey. The document consisted of 37 items divided as follows: (a) Informed Consent Form (ICF); (b) 10 items with independent variables and; (c) 26 statements in which the participants should indicate their degree of agreement with.

The informed consent form contained information about the investigation and those responsible for it; at the end of the document, a filter question: the subject is or is not interested in participating in the research. The following questions would only appear if the answer was positive.

The independent variables were intended to allow the characterization of the subjects. We asked gender; sexual orientation; city where they lived most of their life; city where they currently live; in what Bear category they self-identify with, and what apps and sites they use to find partners. In these questions the participants could choose their answer from a list of options. However, we also added an open 'other' field, that when chosen allowed them to write their answer. Using closed ranged options, we asked how many people from the app they met in person; their age, weight and height. The last three were open questions.

The statements that make up our dependent variables were presented in the last part of the survey. We used a 6 point (Table 1) Likert-type scale (Boone & Boone, 2012; Likert, 1932). We opted for an even number of options to try to minimize the risk of central tendency bias (Douven, 2018; Matell & Jacoby, 1971).

Table 1
Likert-type scale

| Code | Level of Agreement |
|------|--------------------|
| 1 | Strongly disagree |
| 2 | Disagree |
| 3 | Somewhat disagree |
| 4 | Somewhat agree |
| 5 | Agree |
| 6 | Strongly agree |

Source: made by the authors

The statements seek to be clear, simple, unambiguous, avoiding containing more than one information (Carifio & Perla, 2007; Jamieson, 2004; Matell & Jacoby, 1971). For each set of statements, an objective and hypothesis of investigation were listed.



In this paper we will present the results of two sets of items (Table 2). The first intended to identify the users' perception of the acceptance of non-conforming identities (9, 10, 11, 12 and 13), the second to identify how the image of the so-called "standard" Bear is fixed within the community (14, 15 and 16).

Table 2
Analyzed statements

| Code | Statement |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | The Bear community is open to diversity |
| 10 | Transgender men are part of the Bear community |
| 11 | I care more about the conversation than the appearance of potential partners |
| 12 | I avoid romantic relationships with effeminate men |
| 13 | I avoid sex with effeminate men |
| 14 | Only hairy and bearded men can be considered Bears |
| 15 | Fat men are Bears |
| 16 | Bears are men with a masculine attitude |

Source: made by the authors

The survey was made on Google Forms and sent to 5 subjects that self-identify as members of the Bear community as a previous test. The tests showed improvements to be made in some items of the independent variables that did not have broad enough options. We also rewrote statements that seemed ambiguous during the tests.

Google Forms was set so that only the filter question was mandatory, the participants were also informed in the ICF that they could ignore any of the questions. We divided the questions into two blocks: independent variables and dependent variables. Within each of these groups, the platform randomly selected, with each page load, a different ordering for the items. Thus, we intended to minimize the conditioning of responses compared to others in the same set.

With the survey ready, we disseminated it using Growlr's Shout tool, used mainly for advertising. The system allows to define a radius of a region where all users of the app will receive the programmed message. We chose a central point in São Paulo and defined a radius of 16 km from it. The application estimated that 3,151 individuals were in that selected region. Thus, we consider this the total number of the population for the purpose of calculating the sample.

171 responses were received between December 3rd and 10th, 2019. Considering a population of 3,151 people, this survey has a margin of error of 7% and a confidence interval of 95%. The data were later exported to the SPSS statistical analysis software. In this paper we will present rounded up data.

Characterization of Individuals

Our sample consists of a total of 171 subjects. Most are self-declared cisgender men (96%). Other gender identities also appear, but they are residual. There are no women or transgender people. Regarding sexual orientation, the majority are homosexual (92%), there are also some bisexuals (6%) and pansexuals (1%). One subject (<1%) declared himself hete-



rosexual. Regarding age, we distributed the subjects in 5 ranges: 18-24 years old (18%); 25-34 years old (44%); 35-44 years old (21%); 45-54 years old (12%); 55 years or older old (5%). Most of the subjects state that São Paulo is the city where they lived most of the time (51%); second is Rio de Janeiro (8%). The majority lived in São Paulo (64%) at the time of the survey.

As for the self-identified Bear category: “Bear” is the most prevalent (46%), followed by “Chubby” (34%). The most used APP for romantic and/or sexual encounters is Growlr (86%), followed by Scruff (65%). It should be noted that in both questions it was possible to choose more than one option.

In order to help the research, some participants shared the link to the survey through other social networks and texting apps. This explains why 86% of people nominate Growlr as their app of choice, even when the survey was released precisely through it.

The survey also asked subjects to indicate height and weight. The information was used to get the respondents’ Body Mass Index (BMI) (only two participants did not answer the question). BMI is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height squared (kg/m^2). The result is then distributed on a table divided into six ranges: underweight (<18.5); Indicated BMI (18.5 - 24.9); overweight (25 - 29.9); grade 1 obesity (30 - 34.9); grade 2 obesity (35 - 39.9); and grade 3 obesity (≥ 40).

Several studies have already pointed out that BMI is not a direct indication of healthy nor should it be used to measure the degree of obesity. The index ignores characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity, which contributes to a bias in the interpretation of results (Carroll et al., 2008). We chose to calculate the participants’ BMI, and use them as an independent variable, so that it was possible to build analysis groups. Thus, the index will not be used to classify subjects as more or less healthy.

The Results

Our first set of questions was designed to identify users’ perceptions of accepting non-conforming identities. Our working hypothesis was that Bear subjects are not receptive to non-conforming identities, especially those associated with what is commonly understood as feminine. The subjects in our sample seem to agree with this hypothesis, when asked about their degree of agreement with the statement “the Bear community is open to diversity” (9) the median of responses was 3 (partially disagree). 71% of responses were spread through options that disagree at some level with the statement we have made.

But it is important to note that in the following questions (10, 11, 12 and 13), the ones that want to identify to what extent the individuals who answer are themselves open to diversity, the answers point to a greater degree of acceptance. Among these, we highlight the median for the question “transgender men are part of the Bear community” (10), which was 5 (agree). 46% of the individuals chose the option “strongly agree” for that statement.

For the question “I care more about the conversation than the appearance of possible partners” (11) the median recorded was 4 (somewhat agree); in the question “I avoid romantic relationships with effeminate men” (12) the median recorded was 3 (somewhat disagree), with 62% on the side that disagrees at some level with the statement; and in “I avoid sex with effeminate men” (13) the median was also 3 (somewhat disagree), with 58% disagreeing with the statement.



Another block of questions (14, 15 and 16) aimed to identify how the image of the “standard” Bear is fixed within the community: our hypothesis was that there is a fixed ideal image of what the Bear would be, in general associated with a male attitude and body hair. The data point in the opposite direction, even though it is not possible to reach strong conclusions. For example, in view of the statement “only hairy and bearded men can be considered Bears” (14) the median was 3 (somewhat disagree) and the items that indicate some level of disagreement reach 53% of the answers. When considering the margin of error, it is not possible to indicate a strong trend in either direction.

The item “Bears are men with a masculine attitude” (16) registered a median of 3 (somewhat disagree), with 61% of people choosing options that disagree at some level. Among this group, the answer with the greatest degree of certainty was for the statement “fat men are Bears” (15), which presented a median of 5 (agree), with 72% choosing an option that agrees with the statement, 35% strongly agreeing.

Trying to understand this apparent discrepancy between the information brought by the literature and the results of the field, we performed the Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test (George & Mallery, 2020). This test is used to verify whether the distribution between three or more populations is the same or different.

When comparing the age groups, the test showed that there is a statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses between the age groups and items 10, 12, 13, 14 and 16. In the remaining items there is no difference in the distributions. To understand where the differences were, we performed a post-hoc test of the Pairwise type, which compares the ranges two by two. Significance values for several tests were adjusted using the Bonferroni correction (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000).

When analyzing statement 10, the Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there is an effect of the age group on the level of agreement with the item [$X^2(4) = 22.445$; $p = 0.000$]. In general, the older a person is, the less he agrees with the statement that puts transgender people as members of the Bear community. The biggest statistically significant differences are between the age groups 35-44 and 45-54 years ($p = 0.048$); 25-34 and 45-54 years ($p = 0.010$); 18-24 and 45-54 ($p = 0.000$).

Statement 12 also suffers the effect of the age group [$X^2(4) = 15.036$; $p = 0.005$]. The older the individual, the more he claims to avoid romantic relationships with effeminate men. The only statistically significant difference, after the Pairwise test, appears between the 18-24 and 45-54 age groups ($p = 0.038$).

The trend is repeated in statement 13 [$X^2(4) = 24.517$; $p = 0.000$]. In the subjects of this investigation, the older the subject, the more they avoid sexual relations with men perceived as effeminate. The Pairwise test showed that the biggest statistically significant differences are between the age groups 18-24 and 45-54 years ($p = 0.001$) and; 25-34 and 45-54 ($p = 0.001$).

Analyzing specifically the image of what a Bear would be, the Kruskal-Wallis test shows that age has an influence on how individuals answer question 14 [$X^2(4) = 10.335$; $p = 0.035$]. In this specific case, the difference is between the ranges 18-24 and 45-54 ($p = 0.031$). While the former think that body hair is not mandatory to be considered a Bear, the latter group thinks it is mandatory.

The trend is repeated in item 16 [$X^2(4) = 16.108$; $p = 0.003$]. Again the biggest statistically significant difference ($p = 0.009$) was among the youngest, 18-24 years old, who consider



that a “masculine” attitude is not a prerequisite for a person to be identified as Bear, while individuals between 45-54 years old believe that masculinity is an indispensable characteristic for someone to be recognized as a Bear.

Concluding Remarks

| 115

What seemed, at first, to be a contradiction between the data we have and the literature in the area, revealed the need to look at these data taking into consideration the age group the subjects are in. The Kruskal-Wallis test showed that age plays an important role in the level of rejection of non-conforming identities. Younger people have responded in a less cishetero-normative way. Individuals aged from 45 to 54 years old appear to be the most normative.

The test also showed that age plays a relevant role in the image of the so-called standard Bear fixed in the community. The youngest are less conditioned to a hegemonic construction about how a Bear should be and act. It is important to note, however, that the range of individuals aged 55 or more are, in general, less normative than those of the previous group.

This paper is not intended to be a photograph of the entire Bear community of São Paulo. The image captured here is limited to users of the Growlr app, who were in a specific region of the city of São Paulo, Brazil, on the day the survey was made public. The age distribution is not normal and is concentrated in the 25-34 age group.

For future quantitative researches, it would be important to reach users of other similar platforms. This investigation pointed out, for example, that the Scruff app has great adherence from this audience. Networks that are not designated for dating, such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, also deserve attention. As LBSN are associated with the search for quick sex, they end up alienating other individuals, who are also part of the Bear community, and who were not reached by this study.

The data presented here still constitute the exploratory phase of our doctoral research. The next step is to complete the analysis of the remaining items and move on to qualitative research. Our proposal is to conduct in-depth interviews with different subjects, who are part of the Bear community. What we discovered in this first phase will subsidize the choice of individuals and the writing of the interview guide.

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