

# BEARSPACE:

EXPERIENCES OF FAT GBQ MEN IN SPACES OF THE UK'S BEAR COMMUNITY



## COMMUNITY SUMMARY

In 2018 and 2019, the Bearspace project explored the role of UK Bear spaces in the marginalisation and/or empowerment of fat gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ) men. 32 men across 5 sites took part in focus groups and interviews to share their experiences. This is a short summary of some of the project's findings, detailed via 4 Themes and 7 Sub-themes.

**Theme 1: Being fat outside Bear spaces.** Outside of Bear spaces, fat GBQ men do at times experience direct anti-fat abuse. Even when not abusive, mainstream LGBTQ spaces were often felt to be 'uncomfortable' due to subtle looks/comments from others. But more significant was being surrounded by large numbers of thinner guys and feeling like you stick out and don't fit in.

**Jay:** *Everyone was very skinny and pretty and everyone wore skintight jeans and that was just never on the cards for me. I always felt a bit self-conscious about that, and I always felt like I was the fat friend in the corner.*

**Theme 2 : Feeling safe & comfortable as a fat GBQ man.** In contrast with mainstream LGBTQ spaces, Bear spaces were overwhelmingly said to be 'comfortable' for fat guys. This meant that your body fitted in and you didn't feel self-conscious about being fat. There were three main things that made fat GBQ men feel comfortable in Bear spaces. First, that they were surrounded by bodies like their own (**Sub-theme 2.1**) and didn't stick out as 'the fat one'.

**Oscar:** *When you come into a Bear space or just being around Bear people... I'm not the big fat hairy one, I fit in just like everyone else.*

Second, that they believed that other guys in a Bear space would have an attitude of body acceptance and non-judgement (**Sub-theme 2.2**). And third, that they could take their shirts off (**Sub-theme 2.3**) and be celebrated, not shamed, for having a fat belly.

**Timothy:** *Last night I took off my shirt and I danced. I would never do that in a straight club. I'd never do that in a gay club that wasn't a Bear night.*

**Theme 3: Feeling desirable as a fat GBQ man.** Fat GBQ men also appreciated Bear spaces because they felt attractive and desirable in them, unlike how they felt in mainstream LGBTQ spaces and often in their everyday lives too.

**Theme 4: Hierarchies of Bear bodies.** Bear spaces were not universally positive. Many suggested a hierarchy of bodies in Bear spaces, particularly a top tier of trim, muscular men. Some experienced or even expressed anti-fat attitudes in Bear spaces (**Sub-theme 4.1**), so that a fourth thing that made fat GBQ guys feel comfortable was not being the fattest man there.

**Jonathan:** *By the end of it I was really comfortable 'cause there were people walking round with their shirts off who were bigger than me.*

Fat guys were conscious that there are more Muscle Bears and 'Muscle Marys' (**Sub-theme 4.2**) in Bear spaces that there used to be. Though these muscular guys weren't particularly abusive towards fat guys, they were felt to have a negative 'attitude' and could make fat guys feel uncomfortable just by their presence.

**Jay:** *Going to some club spaces, I'm very conscious of the whole Muscle Bear thing, and again that harks right back to my first coming out and seeing all these sculpted Bears that I can't really identify with... So I don't feel as comfortable around that.*

There were also physical differences between fat guys' bodies (**Sub-theme 4.3**) which could make them feel more or less included and comfortable in Bear spaces. These included race, ethnicity and the general Whiteness of the bodies in Bear spaces; and also having the 'right kind' of beards (full and sculpted) and body fat (firm and round, rather than soft and rippling).

**Daniel:** *I feel like I'm an outsider sometimes 'cause I've got two tummies, I haven't got the round one, I feel like I'm not a Bear.*

Fat GBQ men also pointed out that images used to represent Bear bodies (**Sub-theme 4.4**) on advertising and merchandise rarely matched the actual guys in Bear spaces, and they tended to show 'idealised' less fat and more muscular men. These images often set expectations of what Bear bodies 'should' look like, and could make fat men feel they didn't belong in Bear spaces.

**Ryan:** *Any one-off Bear events it's always two muscular guys... Over the last few years there almost seems to be a push of, "Hey, this is what the ideal Bear looks like." Which really annoys me, 'cause that's not what our community is at all.*

The full Bearspace Findings Report provides more details and analysis about the experiences of fat GBQ men in spaces of the UK's Bear community, including 2 pages of data and discussion on each Theme and Sub-theme.

To download the Findings Report, plus copies of this Community Summary, visit:  
<https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/ctsg/2022/02/02/bearspace-report/>

