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Gay bear subculture: self-concepts, subjective practices and mental health

Subcultura gay bear: auto-conceitos, práticas subjetivas e saúde mental

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Resumo | Este artigo explora o ponto de vista sugerido de que indivíduos que se identificam com a subcultura "urso" entre homens gays apresentam autoconceitos e práticas subjetivas associadas à masculinidade hegemônica e atitudes negativas em relação à efeminidade, o que pode afetar sua saúde sexual e mental. Para explorar esta sugestão, articulou-se uma análise sócio-histórica sobre os relacionamentos homoafetivos e o fenômeno da subcultura dos gays ursos. Através desta exploração, verificou-se, por um lado, que esses indivíduos envolveram-se em diferentes formas de grupos formados com o intuito de mitigar a marginalização dentro da comunidade LGBT, enfatizando a camaradagem, o carinho interpessoal, a aceitação da maturidade e da estética da classe trabalhadora como elementos de suas identidades. Por outro lado, também foram identificadas referências atributivas heterossexistas implícitas no discurso e nas práticas desses indivíduos. A revisão de uma amostra da literatura revisada e publicada na última década apontou que esses indivíduos apresentaram comportamentos idiossincráticos influenciados por fatores socioculturais e éticos, mas que convergiram em elementos da masculinidade hegemônica. Como parece que essa convergência pode afetar a saúde sexual e mental desses homens, profissionais de saúde mental podem beneficiar-se com a compreensão das especificidades das necessidades dessa população. Outros estudos empíricos são sugeridos para verificar tais associações em contextos socioeconômicos-culturais, étnicos e de orientação sexual mais diversos.

Palavras-Chave: Homossexualidade, Subjetividade, Masculinidade.

Abstract | This paper explores the suggested standpoint that individuals who self-identify as part of the "bear" subculture among gay men present self-concepts and subjective practices associated with hegemonic masculinity and negative attitudes toward effeminacy which might be impacting their sexual and mental health. To explore this suggestion, a socio-historical analysis about the homoaffective relationships and the gay bear phenomenon was articulated. Through this exploration, it was verified, on one hand, that these individuals engaged in different forms of peer crowds that were formed to attempt to mitigate the experience of being outcast within the gay mainstream, emphasizing the camaraderie, the interpersonal affection, the acceptance of maturation, and the working-class aesthetic as elements of their identities. On the other hand, references of implicit heterosexist attitudes in the discourse and practices of these individuals could be also identified. The review of a sample of the last decade peer-reviewed published literature pointed out that these individuals engaged in idiosyncratic behaviours that were socio-cultural and ethically influenced, but converged towards elements of the hegemonic masculinity. It seems that this convergence might be impacting on the sexual and mental health of the self-identified bear gay men. Mental health professionals could benefit in understanding the specificities of these population's needs. Further empirical studies are suggested in order to verify these associations in more diverse socio-economic-cultural, ethnic, and sexual orientation contexts.

Key-Words: Homosexuality, Subjectivity, Masculinity.

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Introduction

This exploratory and bibliographical study articulates the constitution of the bear subculture niche and the subjectivity of its members through a socio-history framework, describing a brief history on how homoerotism-affectivity relations – referring to eroticism and affective bonding between individuals of the same gender – in different socio-cultural contexts influenced the construction and use of the hegemonic sexual ideology to regulate the behaviours of sexual orientation-related minorities.

This psychosocial background was used as the foundation for the comprehension of the gay bear community, its self-concepts and subjectivities. It is believed that this review is relevant because it seeks to understand a new masculine reality present within gay bear interpersonal relationships. Also, because it looks for the amplification of the discourse about affirmative mental health practices within micro-cultures of the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community, which, in this study, is focused on the understanding of subjective practices of the bear masculinity, the singular needs, and the internal and external factors that might impact the psychological well-being of men who self-identify as bear.

Brief historical review of the homoeroticism-affectivity among men

While male homoerotism refers to the non-static quality associated with sexual attraction and its expression among individuals of the same gender, homoaffectivity relates to any kind of bonding between these individuals, independently of their sexual orientation (Costa, 1992). The symbolic representations of homoaffectivity and homoerotism can be retraced in different periods of human history.

For instance, in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, affective bonding and sexual relations between men were practiced, but only socially accepted in mystical and ritualistic events or if related to friendship and loyalty among warriors. Nevertheless, a man being penetrated in the anus by another man was considered a punishable offense (Parkinson, 1995; Montserrat, 1996; George, 1999). These practices certainly even influenced the laws of other peoples in the region, such as the Hittite and Hebrews (Bottero, 2001). There are references to these practices among Canaanites: "Do not carry [referring to practices of sex] as is done in Egypt, where you lived, or as is done in the land of Canaan, where I am leading you. Do not follow their practices." (18, 3). References in the Bible (1 Kings 14: 23-24, 2 Kings 23:4-7) also suggest this assertion. Much of the literature indicates that, for the Hebrews, sex among people of the same sex was condemnable as is stated in Leviticus: "Thou shalt not lie with a man as a woman: it is abomination (18: 22) [...] they shall be killed, his blood shall be upon them" (20:13).

In Ancient Greece and in the Roman Empire, homoerotism and homoaffectivity among an adult and a pupil was intertwined with sexual activities as a mechanism of moral and civic education, and it was aesthetically beautiful (Foucault, 1976, 1984). However, penetrating one's anus, practicing fellatio, or anilingus among citizens was not accepted, while "intimate" friendship among soldiers was conventionally seen as a sign of great virility and honor (Hubbard, 2003).

In the Ancient China, there are records of homoerotic behaviours between men in some teahouses in Beijing dedicated to homoerotic encounters during the Qing dynasty (Hinsch, 2005). Among the Hindus in Ancient India, homoerotic practices were not considered inferior or shameful, but according to Hindu principle of chastity, it was believed that if a man penetrated the anus or the mouth of another man, punishment should be inflicted (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000; Pattanaik, 2002).

Ancient Arab societies also practiced pederasty, and homoaffectivty was moderately exposed (Colligan, 2003). In this context, sexual intercourse among same-sex individuals was related to acts of domination and subjugation of the other (those who were penetrated were the dishonored). Thus, the masculinity of the one who penetrated was not questioned (El-Rouayheb, 2005). With the advent of Christianity, the Romans and their conquered peoples were obliged to follow the doctrines that considered pagan practices, polytheism, exacerbation of sexual practices and ostentation as abominations. Chastity was disseminated through ancient Western peoples,

especially after the rise of Emperor Constantine (323 A.C). Thus, as Christianity propagated, intercourse should not occur for sexual pleasure, as procreation was the ultimate goal. From this perspective, homoeroticism should be also punished by death (Murstein, 1974).

Records of homoeroticism in the Middle Age are rare. Some authors suggest the Greeks continued to engage in the practice of pederasty, and homoerotism also occurred during the Byzantine domination. The term used to designate homoerotic practices in the Middle Ages was "sodomy" and was originally used by the early Christians. Historical documents indicated that this concept appeared among Latin Christians by 1175, in the Iberian Peninsula, and it was related to the Ottoman invasion, in which homosociability habits that were connoted as aberrant behaviours by early Christians – who interpreted their homosocial demonstrations as sins, and used these acts as tools for stereotyping and discrimination. At this time, homoeroticism was considered a peccatum contra naturam (sin against nature), hence a demonic act. Incidentally, historical records indicated that was not uncommon for monks to seek sexual encounters. With Pope Gregory VII, celibacy was introduced and, with it, the persecution of the Islamists, Jews, heretics and sodomites (Ranke-Heinemann, 1991).

While homoerotic activities remained in obscurantism during this period, the notions of romantic love began to blossom under the foundation of prototype of a hegemonic sexual ideology – the hallmark of the Modern Era. This ideology is notably circumscribed by the premise of monogamy, patriarchalism and heterosexualism, where individuals' sexuality should be regulated – all in name of individuals' well-being (Foucault, 1976, 1984). In this context, homoerotic practices were marginalized and practiced at hidden spaces, forming sub-cultures (Giddens, 1993).

During the 19th century, although the hegemonic sexual ideology was not challenged, important social events culminated in a process of change, where the traditional concept of family was questioned. For instance, after the Great Wars, the intensification of industrialization generated massive migration from rural to urban areas, allowing men and women to develop new styles of life, creating new areas for socialization, and experiencing other forms of sexuality (Kinsman, 1996), establishing a vicious cycle: the State repressed individuals who demonstrated non-conforming sexual practices and gender expressions, but also opened marginalized loopholes in the social space that allowed these individuals to congregate, socialize, and express their homoeroticism. In order to provide repressive control, repressors would identify "deviant" individuals through stereotypes associated to homosexuality of that time, such as effeminacy, crossed-gender, and classic Victorian attire.

In fact, these features have composed the social representations of homosexuality and some of its subcultures in different Western societies. For instance, Tamagne (2000) asserted that, during the 1920s, there was a cult of homosexuality in Europe. During this period, in the Netherlands and Germany, there was also an open homosexual political scene. As a matter of fact, the first homophile organization was Dutch. While in Germany the homosexual subculture was more leftist, in England it was more associated to aristocratic and academic circles and punishable by imprisonment. In France, since the French Revolution, the criminal code of 1791 no longer recognized "sodomy" as a crime.

In Spain, although the crime of sodomy had been abolished in 1822, "los violetas" (pejorative term related to homosexual) were strongly repressed. In Portugal, those who were identified as homosexuals were sent to Mithras – rehabilitative institutions that functioned as prisons (Bastos, 1997). In Italy, although laws against homosexual relations were abolished in 1890, similar repression occurred, especially during Mussolini's regime (Dall'Orto, 2015), and, in Latin America, similar repression was exercised (Mott, 2011).

Although the phenomenon of homoeroticism and homoaffectivity had flourished in urban centers, it was, predominantly, an urban aristocratic practice. However, during the 1930s, the scenario changed due to socio-political climate that fostered the World War II. In Germany, the new nationalism ideology strongly repressed those who were identified as homosexuals through forced labor or death. Youths were encouraged to follow rules that sustained the eugenic project of Aryan cleansing and destroy the

"germ of homosexuality" (Pretzel & Rossbach, 2000; Hoffschildt, 1999).

In the United States and Canada, homoerotic practices were considered crime, and sub-cultures were also established: the fairies (effeminate gay men) and wolves (masculine gay men) originated in New York, and later on, in the mid-50s, the Leatherman sub-culture first documented, in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago (Chauncey, 1994; Rubin, 2004).

This climate in North America fostered other social phenomena that deeply affected the tension between the hegemonic sexual ideology, and those who did not conform to it: the African American equal rights movement in the United States, the counterculture movement of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and finally, the homophile and gay movements that hatched an increased intolerance towards police repression and the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (Edsall, 2003). These movements involved activists of the Black Power movement, the feminist movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, and several LGBT organizations (including the members of the Bear movement), reinforced the front advocating for equality and for the end of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Nevertheless, in several states of the United States, especially in California, homosexuality was considered a crime punishable by imprisonment, castration, even treatment with electroshock and lobotomy (Carter, 2004).

In synthesis, the historical references to the regulation and repression of homoerotic practices, the emphasis on an hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism, the post-war effects, such as migration from rural areas to urban centers, the redefinition of spaces of homosocialization and homoeroticism, the extensive state oppression over non-conforming sexual practices, the social movements claiming civil rights, gender equality, the end of discrimination based on sexual orientation and race, the countercultural movements, and influence of socio-political ideologies influenced how societal practices regulated the expression of homoaffectivity and homoerotism. They were operated through persistent and perpetuated mechanisms applied in different social institutions throughout the individual's lifespan – which had deleterious effect on the mental health of those who did not conform to this ideology.

The hegemonic sexual ideology and minority stress

Throughout history, there has been an elaborated construction of a stigmatized representation of individuals whom sexual practices were non-conforming, which justified the regulation of their behaviours. This representation has been founded on a dominant sexual ideology, in which there has been a predominance of the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. The immediate impact of this configuration on the gay community was the internalization of mechanisms of control, such as signals and discourses that were translated into stigmatization and exclusion, which generated excessive exposure to sexual orientation-related stressors (Meyer, 2003). Examples of these mechanisms were cumulative, chronic, repeated and anticipated stressors events, such as daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities (as heterosexism harassment), that communicated either veiled or overt act of humiliation and micro-aggressions, as systemic acts of discrimination.

Studies have shown that these mechanisms produce a compound damaging effect on members of different groups within the LGBTQ community, usually related to family and peer rejection, religious exclusion, workplace and everyday discrimination which, together, engender psychological processes as rejection sensitivity, internalized homophobia, and the need for personal and interpersonal concealment. The consequences of these processes are the constitution of risk factors that impact on the mental health of those individuals (Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Between many risk factors can be highlighted poor affect regulation, passive and repetitive focus on one's distress, emotion dysregulation, lack of social support, unassertiveness, lower general and sexual self-esteem, depression, anxiety, higher propensity to engage in alcohol and substance use, condomless anal sex, partner violence, and suicide (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Tulloch et al., 2015; Eldalhan et al., 2015). As could be expected, many constitutive aspects of LGBTQ subjectivity, identity, self-concept,

as well as their subjective practices, health and social well-being would be influenced by these stressors and their psychological processes, from which the hegemonic masculinity and the heterosexist ideology are perpetrated into the life of these individuals. It is possible to verify how this ideology imposed its premises and influence the surge of the bear subculture.

Historical context for the surge of the bear phenomenon in the gay community

The work organized by Wright (1997) about the beginning and perpetuation of the bear phenomenon indicated that its roots can be traced back to the Leatherman movement in the mid-1950s and the Girth and Mirth culture in the 1970s.

The Leatherman subculture was formed by a group composed, initially, by some of the veterans of the Second World War who were driven by military values, such as discipline and hierarchy, but also camaraderie, having the common interest in motorcycles. The aesthetic of this group was contoured by hypermasculine codes such as muscularity, body hair (including facial), leather attire, and the exaggerated expression of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. domination-submission relation).

These codes and subjective practices were translated through the lens of an opposition to the feminine stereotype among most social actors of the gay community. The Girth and Mirth culture refers to a known club dedicated to gay men who physical appearance was large and heavy (or for "chubby and chubby lovers"). Both cultures were formed as a contrary tendency within the gay mainstream that emphasized youthfulness, thinness, and muscularity as the desirable homoerotic features (Suresha, 2002).

Still according to Wright (1997), the first references to the term "bear" can also be traced back to an informal group of men in Texas who identified themselves as "Papa bear lovers", but it was in San Francisco that this term became more popular, especially during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's. During this time, gay men who self-identified as bears only had access to Leatherman spaces for socialization and, due to the strong impact of AIDS on this group; this access became more difficult for them. This difficulty prompted these men to disperse and form clusters of communities, which eventually agglutinated, thanks to advances in technology (e.g. computer bulletin boards) that allowed these individuals to communicate among each other more effectively and organize larger and larger gatherings.

At this point, the gay bear representation becomes associated to a clear opposition to the hegemonic stereotypes of the mainstream gay culture. The peer pressure seemed to have out broken a new form of socialization that was formed upon a new self-concept of the gay man who refused some of the Leatherman practices. One of its subjective practices was related to the use of handkerchiefs. Instead of using colored handkerchiefs to signal preferences for specific sexual practices, bears displayed teddy bears as totemic representation of a natural aggressiveness, but nurturing nature expressed by cuddling and emotional intimacy.

In synthesis, the bear identity would be associated to an exaggerated allusiveness to masculinity ideals (natural masculinity and non-objectified masculinity), at the same time would engage in homoaffective behaviours. As such, this movement was also open to other different subcultures, equally affected by the mainstream gay culture, such as the "chubbies" (larger fatter men, not necessary hirsute) and "chasers" (thinner men who are attracted to bear/chubby men), seniors, and other non-bear admirers. From this perspective, the essence of bear representation relies, though, on an ideal geometry through which the individuals' body were demarked by their hirsuteness, where thick and toned thighs, legs and calves, arms, and a larger back and pectoral were emphasized. The unfortunate irony of this eruption, however, is that while these features contrasted to the physical wasting with loss of weight and muscle mass portrayed through social representations of AIDS (Hennen, 2005), the current literature indicates that bear gay men tend to engage in high risk sexual behaviours (Willoughby et al., 2008; Moskowitz et al., 2013; Noor, 2017).

In this vein, Sáez (2005) analyzed how the representation of masculinity within the gay community produced a paradoxical effect over how its symbols and narratives constituted the bear

community and its power-dynamics. According to the authors, when leather culture emerged in the North America during the early 1950s gay scenes, its symbolic representations and practices were associated to a denial of the effeminate stereotype of the general self-identified gay population. In this context, the identity signals of the leather gay community seemed to have converged to the identity signals of the bear community: body constitution, integration within social spaces, and the emphasis on the expression of a more "natural" masculinity – that, supposedly, were less exacerbated than the expression of masculinity portrayed by the Leatherman members and, paradoxically, more closed to the Western North American cowboy.

Paradoxically, one can agree that the bear aesthetic seems closer to the urban white working-class and heterosexual representation, performed by behaviours disregarding finesse, any concern about physical appearance, and body expressions that were more rigid in movement, as well as lower tone of voice. Although equally influenced by the civil right movements and by the Gay Liberation activities, the roots of the gay bear representation expressed a response to an internal marginalization of the hegemonic subculture (Manley, Levitt & Mosher, 2007).

The gay bear self-concept and subjectivity

The concept of self stands on the idea that personal and collective meanings about self are built interpersonally. Based on that, several authors suggested that subjectivity is a construct of representations of self and the organization of these representations from everyday experiences (Guattari, 1999). The subjectivity implies the existence of a self-reflective activity from which the person constantly produces knowledge about his or her own self. Therefore, it is not a portrayal of identity, nor is it derived from reaching a sense of interiority through insight: the subjectivity situates the person in relation to socio-cultural relations, such as relations of power, societal convention, laws, economics, religion, and other institutions (Berlinck, 2010).

Within the socio-historical perspective of Vygotsky (1929/2000), it is possible to understand that the subjective makeup of the bear develops, first, within a social context through the interaction with other self-identified gay bears. Later, it seems that this makeup is internalized psychologically to, finally, articulate the other superior psychological functions already established. In this sense, the bear individual operates a dynamic, dialectical, multifaceted, and dialogic system of roles.

These roles can be permuted into endless possibilities of expression, but always being permeated by a socio-cultural bias. This bias recognizes the gay bear individual as a social actor integrating the niche of a social group that is formed by self-identified "gay bears", influencing and being influenced by collective pressure within a social context that is maintained by this pressure. Therefore, although each gay bear individual develops singular social roles, ideas, feelings, and passions – which can only be understood through his narrative about his idiosyncratic self; it is always contoured by the geometrics of the bear body and its representation of masculinity, according to what defines masculinity in his socio-cultural context. An illustration of this thesis is presented in a sample of the last decade peer-reviewed studies about the gay bear community in some different countries.

Hennen (2005), for instance, accomplished an ethnographic study of 23 American self-identified gay bears living in a specific urban environment. He verified that the narrative of his participants sought to minimize the difference between characterizing elements that defined heterosexuality and bear masculinities in two polarities: on one side, the emphasis on the experience of nurturance and affection; and on the other side, the perceiving feminized bodies as having a lower status. Also, he verified that the sexual culture of his participants seemed to be influenced and pressured by hegemonic masculinity.

In the study done by Manley, Levitt and Mosher (2007) with six Americans with an average age of 41 years, the participants' meanings of being a gay bear also converged, as did Hennen's participants, to the representation of self-acceptance related to pursuing a masculine aesthetic. Paradoxically, while their results indicated a minimum amount of agreement over the endorsement associated to the idea that this aesthetic facilitated blending into the

male straight profile, all participants accepted the endorsement that the bear physical appearance symbolized by masculinity, virility, facial hair, and hirsuteness were main identifiers of a member of the bear community. Nevertheless, the bear community would be considered more open to different forms of homoeroticism and romantic relationships (from monogamous to polyamorous), and inclusiveness toward aging individuals.

Such inclusiveness was also identified as a crucial element for the development of higher self-esteem among gay bears who were obese. In a qualitative study with nine white British self-identified gay bear men, Gough and Flanders (2009) verified that these men experienced frequent negative judgements by heterosexual and homosexual counterparts about their weight, and these experiences affected their self-worth, socialization, and mental health. However, being part of the gay bear community improved their self-acceptance and quality of life. This seems to be associated to the social changes towards diversity in Western societies. The same does not seem to be verified in some Eastern societies, as described in the next study.

To date, the only study about gay bear men in China was published in 2014 (Lin, 2014). From a sample of 217 self-identified gay bear men, 12 of them, age average of 27-years-old, were randomly selected to a qualitative study about their identity. According to this study, being a gay bear in China implied being represented by gender binaries (masculinity more valued than femininity), somatotype dualism (an ectomorph body more valued than a thinner body), and influenced by peer pressure to conform to a stereotypical bear aesthetic in order to be part of the bear community – which seems similar to the stereotypes of the Westerns societies. Nevertheless, it was concluded that the Chinese bear community was not diverse and as inclusive as in the Western societies, and that, although avoiding the heterosexual mainstream stereotype, this was the desired subjective and concrete interpersonal practice envisioned by participants. The same could be identified in some other studies presented in this review. For gay bear individuals, their body weight is frequently associated to group identification and self-acceptance, as shown in Lyons and Hosking (2014) study.

In a quantitative cross-sectional online survey, Lyons and Hosking (2014) investigated the physical, mental, and sexual health of 93 self-identified Cub gay men (younger bear men) in Australia, mean age of 26-year-old. The authors verified that the higher body weight, the lower self-esteem. However, contrary to other studies, they found that lower self-esteem did not predict less romantic relationships and less frequent sexual self-care (e.g. getting tested for sexual transmitted diseases). In this case, identification to the group becomes a protective factor for many dimensions of health. Similar results were found in Brazilian studies described as follows.

In a study by Cerqueira and Souza (2015), 19 Brazilian participants from a Southeastern urban environment, age varying between 22 and 38-years-old, were interviewed about their discourses and practices around their bear self-concept and the use of their bear body. According to participants, there was a convergent discourse over an identity model that was transmitted by the media and materialized on the representation of the "muscle bear": a white (but, sometimes, ethnically mixed) hirsute, bearded, muscular, masculine, middle age man. Among the participants, the representation of a bear was only accepted if being diametrically opposed to the untoned, smooth, thin, and feminized stereotype propagated throughout the gay mainstream, and physically bigger enough to not be confused with the toned, smooth, thin, and masculinized stereotype – called, in this Southeastern Brazilian bear community context, "bicha pão-com-ovo" (translates as "bread and egg fed fairy") and "Barbie" (equivalent to the North American "clone"), respectively. This study concluded that the bear subjectivity, for this sample, was permeated by multiple and varied discourses and concepts that, ultimately, derived and were performed according to the hegemonic masculinity perspective.

Another Brazilian-sample study was made by Domingos (2015). The author published his dissertation about the construction of the bear identity, analyzing the discourse of a group of men self-identified as bears from a Northeastern urban environment. Although his analyses were based on profiles posted by men participating in major bear websites, he verified that, similarly to Cerqueira e Souza (2015), the representation of belonging to this

community started off from perceiving themselves as outcast of the gay mainstream, while being polarized between the "bicha" and the "Barbie" stereotypes, permeated through the idea of becoming desirable individuals, despite having bodies that do not fit in the gay mainstream context. As such, the body of a bear must be marked by icons and narratives like those described by the Southeastern Brazilian sample.

Santos and Lago (2016) performed a study about homoeroticism among seniors who frequented a bar dedicated to the bear community in an urban center located in the Southern region of Brazil. According to their observations, the meaning of belonging, fomented by this environment, seemed to have allowed those individuals the subjectivation of their bear-experience through the expression of their homoeroticism and common identification towards multiple combinations of identities (bear, non-bear, young, mature, or none). This was one of a few studies describing how an environment was locus to the subjectivation of participants' practices, where inclusiveness associated to the expression of homoeroticism. Many other studies illustrated a focus on the geometry of the body and dynamic of exclusion.

For instance, Benavides-Meriño (2016) performed a study about how Chilean self-identified bears conceptualized their masculinities as such. The participants of this study lived in a major urban area of Chile and had an average age of 26 years. The author verified that his participants' bear identity was associated to the reference of being, above all, masculine, as a social camouflage, which would allow them to navigate within heterosexual spaces without being marginalized as gay men. In the same vein, while increasing a sense of belonging, this identity also increased chances of finding sexual mates. The study concluded that, among those Chilean self-identified gay bears, the meaning of being part of the bear community was associated to the signals of virility, the competition for sexual capital, and segmented self-discriminant socialization through rejection of feminized signals – the author even suggested that his participants' attributions were influenced by internalized homophobia.

McGrady (2016) analyzed the life-history of 21 men who self-identified as bears, averaging 40 years of age, from the United States South, Midwest, and West. He investigated how these men resisted stigmas related to weight and to be a bear. This analysis was based on topics related to his participants' coming out experiences, their masculinity, their perceptions and their experiences about their (bear) bodies, as well as their participation in the bear community, and their life experiences before and after participating in this community. The author verified that, based on his participants' narratives, the resistance against these stigmas was operated by joining the bears' social groups. Participating in these groups legitimized the eroticism of their bodies and challenged stereotypes of being overweight.

In accordance to other's studies indicated in this review, the author also found that, despite being part of the bear community or self-identified as part of this group, there was not necessarily a weakening of feelings of marginalization regarding their bodies and sexual orientation. Such perspective seemed to reinforce the participants' concerns about managing their masculinity and their bear look to avoid negative peer evaluation. Interestingly, this study highlighted the ambivalent subjectivity that seems to permeate the bear self-perception, identity, and the way bears navigate in their socio-cultural context: for example, in one hand, having a bear body and masculine attitude did not necessarily imply neither a feeling of need to belong to this group, nor having exclusive homoerotic inclination towards bear gay men. One might be attracted to non-bear, non-masculine men too. On the other hand, the avoidance of marginalization might prompt some individuals to model their behaviours on heteronormative attributes (e.g. anti-effeminacy) and gay mainstream (e.g. appearance and youthfulness-focused).

As seen from these studies, part of the constitution of the gay bear subjectivity seems to be reflected by the influence of the hegemonic sexual ideology. Avoiding the burden of this ideology might be one of the pressuring factors for the formation of the bear community, facing societal heteronormativity, while searching for acceptance, belonging, and affirmation of their homoeroticism despite their age, biometrics, and ways of expression of their desire. Although these elements seem positive to the

bear movement, other studies have indicated that individuals of this community seem to be affected by the same psychosocial factors affecting the sexual and mental health of other individuals of the gay community.

For instance, Willoughby et al. (2008) verified in his American and Canadian study sample that bear gay men are more likely to engage in condomless anal intercourse than other men of the gay mainstream. In another study, Moskowitz et al. (2013) performed a large-scale investigation of 469 bear gay men from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States about their physical, behavioral, and psychological traits. They found that their participants conformed to the physical identifiers associated to the members of the bear community, and seemed to be impacted by the gay mainstream to the point they feel less attractive and present lower self-esteem. According to this study, it seemed that this impact influenced their participants' sexual behaviours, in the sense they were more likely to engage in sexual practices as well as to participate in atypical sexual behaviours, such as anilingus, fisting, and voyeurism more often when compared to non-bears.

Quidley-Rodriguez & Santis (2016) produced a review of eleven studies about the health of men who self-identified as bears. They concluded that these men were more inclined to develop weight issues, lower self-esteem, as well as perform risky sexual behaviours more often that other gay men. In a study of a large Toronto sample (Noor, et al. 2017) formed by different niches of the gay community, it was verified that those identified with the Bear/Leather/BDSM (bondage, discipline or domination, sadism, and masochism) group presented higher sexual self-esteem, and were more likely to report condomless anal sex with casual male partners compared to other groups. Although this information revealed important factors of these individuals' psychosocial practices, it was partially congruent to other studies indicated in this review. Yet, it was not clear if these factors were equally accounted among Bears, Leather, and BDSM individuals, since studies about sexual behaviours among Leathermen indicated higher incidence of HIV infection compared to other subcultures (Moskowitz et al., 2011).

Finally, Schnarrs et al. (2017) performed a study with a large sample of gay bear men and verified that when their participants paired with other men who also self-identified as bears, they were less likely to use condoms during sex. It was speculated that this phenomenon happened because condomless sex was perceived as behaviours congruent to the normative values of the bear community, either associated to the peer pressure and search for acceptance, or to the enhancement of homoerotic desirability. Both elements seemed to be connected to the hegemonic masculinity that permeates the subjectivity of self-identified bears, indicating that this subjective element might influence the sexual health of these individuals.

In discussing the modern individual, it is accepted that one is part of a context where the human body is used as a controlling dispositive of the population which is legitimized by scientific practices, aiming for the well-being and safety of its individuals. This means that the individual has a body that needs regulation, because this body presents inherent vulnerabilities that might affect this major societal aim. In this sense, it is not a surprise that the essential element of identification among bears is focused on their bodies. Besides, it is through their bodies that they express their masculinity as expected to all men of their respective culture. As seen in this review of literature, body, masculinity, homoeroticism, and homoaffectivity compose the equation that will produce the phenomenon of the bear identity, accordingly to its historical variation and geography.

Also, this perspective implies that the bear identity is more associated to a dispositive of sexuality and its multiple expression than to a micro-ideology of attitudes that would, in this context, compose their narratives about their Self. The bear sexuality is expressed through a performance of this self, which is never completed, because it is rather a polysemy of multiple and idiosyncratic subjective practices. Yet, their expressions seem to converge to a searching for belongingness.

This is the case, probably, because belonging is based on the distribution of relevant attributes acknowledged among the members of a specific group that informs about one's characteristics and differentiates them from others, forming peer

crowds associated to image and reputation. The objective and subjective experience of belonging to peer crowds also works as platform or as pooling device from which individuals would increase their probability of being chosen by others based on their attributes (Peacock, Eyre, Quinn, & Kegeles, 2001; Bénabou & Tirole, 2006). As such, being a member of the bear community, obviously, would imply some gains, such as possible increased of self-esteem, identity strengthening, eroticization and desirability, and increased possibility of mating and developing romantic relationships, to name a few.

Nevertheless, the price of the recuperation of the "natural masculinity" comes at the expense of the experience of being an outcast among outcasts, the experience of gender role conflict, the pressure to conform to the new signals that justify the belonging to this new group, and the risk of sustain and naturalize a heteronormative narrative and practice. Finally, it seems that even within the bear subculture there is an increasing peer pressure that influences the compartmentalization of types – that presuppose a model of reference from which other variances should be followed, according to the cultural assimilation of this model.

Such pressure for variance is at the core of the formation of the bear community, as discussed in the presented historical review. Yet, it seems to continue to exist. For instance, while gay bears' narrative and practices seek to minimize the differences between "being a gay bear" and "being heterosexually masculine", once its majority perform a specific set of identifying behaviours, such behaviours will be naturalized and expected to be performed (Stets & Burke, 2000). If one conforms to this expectation, the group's esteem incentives will become stronger and, consequently, those who indicated that the group expectations were met, will be "better", "more desirable", and "models" to be followed. Otherwise, this "models" will be prone to discourage the other's performance of behaviours that skew off from those expectations, and prompt these others to seek out other affiliations (Abrams & Hoog, 1998). Could this explain the narratives of some bear individuals about an elusive clash between muscle-bears and chubbier men or between masculine and more feminine men within the community nowadays? Future studies may clarify this new phenomenon.

Nevertheless, it explains the variability of types and practices within the bear community. At this point in history, the bear subjectivity seems to be constituted by initial premises that founded the bear movement, varying not only in relation to socio-cultural contexts, but also within its own groups of individuals, where such premises are fluid and even ambivalent. Notwithstanding, the common denominator of this dynamic of power is the idea that feminized bodies (and its expressions) are perceived as having lower status – implying that there might be a collective effort for having their masculine reputation recognized as part of the normativity.

Final considerations

This article articulated elements which emphasized the importance of being culturally competent when addressing the phenomenon of gay bear identity and its expressions, especially when a relationship of help is the setting of the interlocution. In that sense, the common denominator of this phenomenon – that is masculinity; must be pondered as a problematization that goes beyond the biological and cultural determinism. As discussed, many gay bear men might be at risk of being infected to sexually transmitted diseases and disseminate them due to peer pressure, which seems to be sustained by social representations about what means to be a bear gay man in different socio-cultural contexts, and that is alarming. Therefore, mental health professionals, educators, and influencers could benefit in understanding the specificities of these population's needs.

The last decade peer-reviewed published literature explored that the members of the bear community presented a general self-concept that implied an integration of a hegemonic masculinity based on premises of the heteronormativity that rejects effeminacy in men, and, by the same token, formed a group that emphasized affective-nurturing behaviours. If this is true then, self-identified gay bears would present some evidences of internalized heterosexism and negative attitudes toward effeminacy, and, at the same time, present an absence or low evidence of internalized homonegativity.

Therefore, one could also hypothesize that they would be less affected by the minority stress than non-bears gay counterparts. However, the information collected in the sample of last decade peer-reviewed literature seemed to indicate that self-identified gay bears were subjected to collective peer pressure to conform to a hegemonic masculinity, generating migration to sub-niches within the bear community to enhance desirability, and presented ambivalent subjectivity when negative attributes toward effeminacy are questioned.

In this perspective, further studies are suggested in order to empirically verify the impact of the hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism harassment among self-identified gay bears, evaluating how this impact might be associated to negative attitudes toward effeminacy, as well as among bisexual, and other men who have sex with other men who self-identify as bears, and non-bear gay men, of different socio-economic-cultural as well as ethnic contexts, using representative samples because most studies presented in this review were focused on Anglo-Saxon white individuals, which average of age was 35-years-old. Other elements from such empirical associations could highlight the peculiarities of the experience of being bear gay men, their psychosocial needs, and how affirmative mental health practices could be adequate to respond to these needs.

Competing interests

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