Size Matters: Performing (Il)Logical Male Bodies on FatClub.com

Tony E. Adams & Keith Berry

Situated against a pervasive and normative logic suggesting that bodies, and especially thin-and-fit bodies, matter most and ought to be attained, FatClub.com provokes a counterintuitive cultural scene. This virtual ethnography examines how members of the site jointly constitute community through an elaborate system of linguistic and embodied proweight cultural performances. In turn, these performances ecstatically cite, disidentify, and play with normative (gay male) health and beauty ideals. Moreover, they provide an exquisite instantiation of how culture and community are constraining, situated, and relative phenomena.

Keywords: Virtual ethnography; Weight; Sexuality; Relational communication; Disidentification

“Someone gonna come feed me?” reads a profile on FatClub.com, an online community of mostly gay men who collectively pursue bigger bodies and weight gain. The man—screen name STUFFMEHUGE—likes to be fed and likes to gain weight. A member since 2007, he has grown from 174 to 304 pounds. He has a “growth fund” on his profile that allows others to donate money for food and new clothes. He also likes to help others gain weight. “I know what needs to be done in order to put weight on,” he boasts. “I am sure that I can help someone pack on those pounds that they have been trying to put on. It has always been a fantasy of mine to help a guy...
grow nice and plump.” STUFFMEHUGE’s discourse illustrates an impassioned desire to consume, expand, and embrace a beefier body.

The communal discourse on FatClub.com (hereafter “FatClub”) rubs against normative cultural beliefs about weight gain and the body—beliefs that encourage the body to be properly maintained in relation to size. Such conventional understanding typically mandates that well-managed bodies are healthy bodies—bodies should be smaller rather than larger, and, should they expand, this growth ought not be the result of a person’s enthusiastic and unapologetic choices. STUFFMEHUGE and the FatClub men like him trouble this understanding of weight and, consequently, illustrate a counterintuitive and dynamic bodily performance that is uncommon to everyday cultural awareness.

This virtual ethnography examines the discursive practices of the FatClub community. We draw on ethnography of communication, performativity, extant research on bodies, and more than four years of fieldwork to examine the linguistic and somatic performances of the men who comprise this cultural scene. We ask: what does it mean to have, build, and interact with cultural bodies that radically disconnect from normative and compulsory expectations of what counts as “fit,” “competent,” and “ideal”? How might these “unfit,” “dysfunctional,” and/or counterintuitive performances of purposefully large and expanding bodies reveal nuanced, liberating, and risky understandings of gender, desire, and weight?

In what follows, we convey the ways in which FatClub functions as a compelling instantiation of community—a nutritive community that persists and thrives because of a pervasive and limiting, thin-and-fit understanding of bodies. Men perform within this space of sex, desire, and attraction through distinct naming practices and by prioritizing larger and non/conforming bodies. In turn, within these ways of relating, members provide an illustration of performativity (Butler “Performative”), as well as show how play (Schechner) and disidentification (Muñoz) can inform performances of weight. Holistically, the somatically rich community’s “(il)logical” troubling of normative bodies inspires an uncovering of limiting ideals on “competence” and “fitness.” Through their risk we can (re)imagine novel possibilities for knowing and doing weighted cultural bodies and beings.

Communication, Culture, and Bodies

Gerry Philipsen defines culture as “a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (7 original emphasis), and Raymonde Carroll stresses the learned and taken-for-granted aspects of culture, which form the “logic by which I give order to the world” (3). In these ways, culture is an instrumental discursive accomplishment created and displayed in/through communication. Culture manifests as logic that people often and instinctively understand as natural, correct, and unquestionable, thus making other logics seem unnatural, illogical, and incorrect (Butler Gender; Garfinkel). Indeed, cultural performances are often contested and complicated processes.
**Ethnography of Communication**

The ethnography of communication (EC) theoretical tradition provides a helpful entry into understanding *FatClub*. At the heart of EC is the investigation of the communicative practices that comprise a speech community, which Dell H. Hymes conceptualizes as a group of individuals who jointly display and draw on common rules, interpretations, and understandings of communication. “The speech of a group constitutes a system,” Hymes argues, adding that the “speech activity of a community” and the meanings of those practices should be the prevailing focus of ethnographers’ attention (132). EC inquiry studies interaction as a communal endeavor, and foregrounds the practices and meanings used by community members.

Philipsen also contends that communal interaction, especially language, is structured, distinctive, and social: structured in that it is both informed by a locally prescribed sequence for interacting but open to variation; distinctive because different speech communities will display diverse ways of and meanings for interacting; and social in that ways of interacting within a community influence and sometimes govern whether or not one identifies with or understands oneself and others as members of that community. Language organizes, distinguishes, and names, sometimes ecstatically, and typically consequentially.

As cultural performers who enact community, we are guided by an understanding of communicative competence, which “usually refers to the communicative knowledge and skills shared by a speech community” (Saville-Troike 21). The enactment of community is intertwined with the task of understanding what it means to relate appropriately—that is, being able to discern the implicit and explicit norms that make possible, encourage, and constrain interaction. Relating competently means performing in accordance to communal norms.

For instance, when I (Tony) moved from Danville, IL, to Carbondale, IL, to Tampa, FL, and then to my current home in Chicago, IL, I observed people interacting through particular linguistic practices; terms that were readily enacted in one location, were not at all in others: people in Danville frequently used “mango” to refer to a green pepper whereas people in Tampa, who used “mango” to refer only to the fruit, evaluated me as ignorant for thinking that “mango” could ever be synonymous with “green pepper.” People in these different contexts also conversed in distinct ways; what constituted a fitting structure for conversation in one context (extended conversations in Danville, Carbondale, and Tampa) would contrast with conversation structures in another (brisk conversations in Chicago, with little time for “small talk”). Who I, and others, understood myself to be was informed by expectations about language and interaction, all of which seemed to be influenced by particular locations.

**Performativity**

Judith Butler conceptualizes identity, specifically gender, through the concepts of embodiment and performativity. “[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed,” she writes, but “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”
(“Performative,” 270 original emphasis). Gender is not an innate or natural identity that gets “expressed,” but rather comes to be known via the ways it is enacted through time, space, and context. The performance of gender is also forever “compelled by social sanction and taboo” (271), situated against normative expectations guiding and limiting social interaction and perceptions of appropriateness.

Butler further characterizes gendered performances as “citations”: performances that effectively “cite”—that is, recall, reify, and relay—assumptions about what it means to be gendered beings (Gender). In this manner, gendered performances invoke, respond to, and possibly remake normative conventions for doing—embodying—gender. Moreover, gender norms, those “cited by bodily practices,” can be altered through the “course of their citation” (Undoing 52)—a change that occurs through embodiment.

Butler’s position underscores how the body is simultaneously the cultural site through which we relate to others, ourselves, and to culture, and the medium through which identities take form and are negotiated. Performance is the coconstitutive process that motivates the creative (re)making of how performers understand interaction, relationships, and identities. This process is always accomplished in ways informed by (implicit and explicit) social constraints and cultural logics that shape what it means to (in)competently perform an identity, such as gender, at a variety of times and in a variety of settings.

For instance, I (Keith) remember dining with a friend (Morgan) when she was eight months pregnant. Morgan ordered a glass of wine that day. I vividly recall how she insisted that I keep the glass of wine on my side of the table, as if it were mine. Experience had taught her that should this glass-maneuvering not take place, others in the restaurant would stare at her. Normatively speaking, a pregnant person drinking wine publicly was a reckless and unfit mother-to-be. Each grasping and lifting of the wine glass to her lips and then re-placing the glass on the table entailed a contested performance—of woman, of pregnant woman, and of negligent mother—thus invoking a commonly and historically sanctioned prescription concerning alcohol and pregnant women.

EC and performativity are distinct theoretical traditions, but we merge them together instructively to stress the importance of communication to culture, and to frame communication as a “symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey 17). Both traditions call us to examine lived experience as performed in particular contexts as well as offer ways to investigate how community is manifest in discourse and in the everyday practices of bodies.

Body Experience(s)

Historically the body has served as a rich and contested site of inquiry, often leading bodies to be “absent” (i.e., unthematized), except during times of dysfunction (Butler Bodies; Leder). Bodies matter in myriad ways—in pleasure and pain, in health and sickness, and as a source of pride and disgust—and are primary access points through which persons come to know society (Spry) and relate to others (Pelias Leaning), but some bodies are more readily understood, valorized, and viewed as (il)logical.
Performance studies and autoethnographic scholarship beautifully carves out a space for ongoing, complex examinations and displays of (il)logical bodies. For instance, Orlan is a performance artist who undergoes plastic surgeries for live audiences in order to foreground destructive cultural norms of beauty, and to highlight the everyday struggles many women go through to achieve normalcy with regards to feeling and looking attractive (Faber). Ronald J. Pelias draws the flawed body out of the shadows of shame for greater appreciation and interrogation, specifically lamenting and appreciating “the smashed finger,” “the itchy anus,” and the “cancerous throat” (Methodology 23–27). Kurt Lindemann explores the intersections of masculinity, sexuality, and disabled bodies, and Nicole L. Defenbaugh writes about (not) taming her Inflammatory Bowel Diseased-body.

These are not the only works about embodiment and competency. Most relevant to our project is the perception that healthy bodies are thin-and-fit bodies (Howell; Lockford; Tillmann). Bodily excess (e.g., fat) remains a common social fear to be rectified through exercise and diet (that is, less or better eating); with weight, “bigger” is not necessarily better, healthier, or more beautiful (Arroyo and Harwood). As numbers decrease on the scale and on body mass index charts, the significance of our lighter “accomplishment” and worth of our nonfat character is amplified, at least within contexts wherein fat is feared.

With some exception (Berry; Fox; Gough and Flanders; Kruger; Monaghan), a similar standard is valorized in performances of the gay male body. In my (Keith’s) research, I describe a pervasive cultural ideal of the gay male body as performed in a bathhouse. Typically the fitting gay male body is thin, “smooth” (hairless), and “cut” (ripped abs). Men who personify this standard display their bodies more openly and usually receive the most attention; men whose bodies do not measure up tend to conceal their bodies with towels and by spending more time in rooms with dim lighting. Like the everyday, nonfat performance described above, this performance often seeks to valorize thin-and-fit bodies, thus downplaying or putting into question the worth of not-so-ideal, heavier bodies.

Further, other popular contexts—bars and coffeehouses, and virtual communities such as Grindr, Scruff, and Adam4Adam—still often privilege thin, fit, and youthful bodies. Although both of us research gay male identity, rarely have we ever heard, from our gay male friends and/or research participants, that growing/bigger bodies are desirable; only a few of them could ever believe that people, especially gay men, would deliberately want to gain, or encourage other gay men to gain, weight. Granted, there are studies of virtual communities of gay men who are interested in having or finding men with beefier bodies. Some researchers foreground characteristics of and desires for large, hairy, and often muscular performers (Campbell; Pyle and Loewy; Santoro). However, these researchers only tangentially mention gay men who want to gain or encourage others to gain weight; the men they describe are not necessarily bound by eating or have any interest in making themselves and/or others bigger.

To our knowledge, there are no studies that emphasize the communicative, embodied performative characteristics of body size on FatClub or how community happens among bigger and attracted-to-bigger gay men. It is this lack of insight into...
this community, the opportunity to learn from and through members' performances, and the desire to discern imaginative possibilities for understanding proweight performances that excite us in doing this research.

Method

This project results from more than four years of virtual ethnographic fieldwork—cultural immersion best characterized as multifaceted, exhilarating, and personal. Tony has maintained almost daily “insider” activity on the site, whereas Keith's activity has been purposefully periodic as a way of maintaining a more detached, “outsider” positionality. Such contrast has enabled us to use different perspectives to understand and analyze the community.

Each of us approached FatClub with particular prejudices. As someone who was dedicated to the “smaller is better” mentality for much of my (Keith's) childhood and young adult life, I remember sometimes going to weight management extremes, once putting myself on a “bubble gum” diet during my teens. My lived experience identifying so dearly with normative thin-and-fit practices has contributed to how this site, especially at first, felt unsettling. I (Tony) have always tended to like bigger gay men, and I often do not find many thin-and-fit men sexually attractive. When I learned about FatClub, I was living in Tampa, FL, a warm climate that encourages much exercise and physical activity, and a climate that, I felt, exacerbates thin-and-fit norms. I came to appreciate the celebration of bigger men, and I found, and still find, FatClub performances of weight invigorating and welcoming.

Ethnographies of digital communities pose unique methodological characteristics. These include defining the field, determining the quality and extent of a researcher’s participation, deciding what counts as data, and finding ethical ways to represent online participants (Attwood; Brotsky and Giles; Garcia, et al.; Gatson; Markham; Whitesel). We address these characteristics in particular ways.

Our observation has consisted of more than a thousand hours of fieldwork in the community as well as detailed field notes of FatClub activity.2 Discourse about identity, weight, gender, sexuality, and desire, as well as the possible meanings attributed to and suggested by this discourse, were of heightened interest. We limited the field to any public activity on the site—that is, to information that any/all members of the community can see once they log in to the community. For instance, a member can participate in the chat room (public), comment on the site’s common virtual wall (public), and comment on other members’ profile pictures or statuses (public). The only private interactions on the site consist of sending a “belly rub” (similar to a “poke” on Facebook.com or a “wink” on Match.com) or a “club note” (similar to a private message on Facebook.com or an email) to a member. We treated any public expressions as relevant data. Our participation also included visits to member pages—visits that other members could see—and we sifted through thousands of public comments and photos.

We have not identified ourselves as “researchers.” We have witnessed members berate and shun people who come out as researchers, and we do not want to be
harm by or excluded from the community. However, Sarah N. Gatson argues that the text- and image-driven characteristics of online communities often make “researcher elicitation from subjects” unnecessary (515). Hence, although engaging members through interviews might provide additional layers of insight, the abundance of public discourse did not make interviews necessary for this project.

We have worked to represent the community mindfully, which entails using rigorous measures to care for and protect the community and its members. For instance, we adhere to a “double-pseudonym” policy (Markham 814) by masking the website as “FatClub” and altering the screen names of members, so that even the virtual identities cannot be found easily (Attwood; Garcia, et al.). Further, though we have participated on FatClub for more than four years, neither of us knows any member’s non-FatClub name. Thus, we assume that it would be even more difficult for readers to figure out such information.

Each of us examined the evidence collected from the site independently, to identify what recurring patterns are present in the communal discourse. We accomplished this by reading the most current status messages and photos as well as comments on these messages and photos. We then came together, shared individual observations, and during multiple telephone and in-person analysis sessions, talked about findings and discerned the forthcoming themes. Our desire was to consider all members’ comments and experiences, no matter how atypical or counterintuitive, and, like good ethnographers, offer a “thick description” (Geertz) of FatClub life.

Cultural Corpus: The Expansive FatClub Community

FatClub started in 2003. Currently the site has about 8,000 members. All members identify as men over 18 years of age, and the majority live in the United States (about 1,500 members claim residency in forty countries, primarily Europe). Based on appearance, many members appear to be white, and most identify as gay or bisexual. Members must create a screen name to access the site and are only required to include a limited amount of information, all of which can be fabricated (e.g., location, age). Members can also post photos of themselves in addition to their profile pictures as long as the photos do not include genitalia. The majority of the site is free; a member can pay for premium services, such as the ability to message other members privately and/or view other members’ photos. The site also features numerous photos of men eating, of pillaging the refrigerator, and of gaining progress—photos depicting the juxtaposition of a former, smaller self with a larger, ever-growing frame. Members respond to standard profile questions about their first interests in “beefyness,” the types of people they find attractive, whether or not they “show off” their bellies “in public,” and their “hottest gaining moment.” And, as mentioned, a member can give another member a “belly rub”—a virtual, complimentary “touch” suggesting fondness of the other.

The expressed purpose of FatClub is to help men meet men who have similar desires for size and weight. Yet, members’ discourse suggests a larger purpose: to provide a much needed and safe virtual community for negotiating weight and
desire. For instance, IAMTHICK states that the community “proves” that a person can be “happy, sexy, and healthy without imitating all the billboards and magazine covers.” BEARBELLY refers to the community as a “safe haven for those who enjoy being fat.” And BIGHEART emphatically describes his gratitude for the community:

[I] used to be 190, lean, muscular, and attractive by general opinion. What people didn’t see on the outside was a man who hated his body, developed bulimia and eventually hospitalized himself by exercising obsessively. Since gaining weight, not only do I like what I see in the mirror, but I also finally feel at home in my body! Where I used to hate touching my stomach (or having it touched), I now find that there is not a place on my body that doesn’t enjoy human contact . . . I just wanted to share my story so other closeted gainers out there can know: IT GETS BETTER!

FORMERATHLETE asks, “who else is going to compliment you outside of here? Most of the world thinks your [sic] all lazy fatloads,” and TWINKY encourages members to “stick together and give support, we need it, we already get enough negativity.” “I would be remiss if I did not say that I am indebted to everyone in this community who has battled strong social norms and turned their thin, fit bodies into what they’ve always dreamed of,” AVERAGE remarks. “Seeing others go large has been more inspirational to me than I can possibly express.”

From our fieldwork, we have identified four, interrelated patterns of FatClub discourse that constitute communal performances: (1) unique naming practices; (2) the privileging of (bigger) bodies and bellies; (3) non/conforming social practices; and (4) discussions of sex, desire, and attraction. As we convey these patterns below, we foreground members’ discourse and background overt analysis, believing that the breadth and depth of the discourse alone readily illustrates relevant cultural logics. We then describe why we find members’ performances to be meaningful.

Unique Naming Practices

A dynamic and coordinated system of naming practices is central to FatClub. Members utilize naming practices in two ways: (1) through the use of predetermined categories related to the given type of person or role a person wants to perform, and (2) through user-created screen names. A member learns about these naming practices and their significance when joining the website (a screen name is necessary for access/participation), completing the member profile (the person is asked about the type of man he is or wants to become), and witnessing other members’ frequent discussions of the predetermined categories and screen names.

Members can identify in seven predetermined ways: “Gainer,” “Encourager,” “Gainer & Encourager,” “Bloater,” “Chub,” “Chaser,” and “No Response.” A glossary of these terms does not exist on the site, thus suggesting that a member, in order to identify accurately and efficiently, must have some idea of what each name entails, a way of understanding inevitably constituted through participation in the community.

The names also make particular kinds of relating possible by helping men meet other men who have similar size and weight desires. For example, any sized man can identify as a “Gainer,” but the purpose of identifying as a Gainer is to signal one’s desire to gain
weight and get bigger. Some Gainers only want to add a few pounds, whereas others
want to add as much weight as they can. Any size man can identify as an “Encourager,”
though Encouragers are often thin. The purpose of an Encourager is to help Gainers
with their gaining journeys, to motivate them to gain weight either through excessive
complimenting, paying for the other’s food, and/or actually feeding these men.
Encouragers typically want to maintain their weight, not necessarily gain. As identities,
Encouragers only make sense in relation to Gainers; they cannot identify as
Encouragers without the Gainers. However, Gainers do not need Encouragers in order
to make sense (e.g., a Gainer can feed himself without others’ help). Furthermore,
Gainers couple well with Encouragers, but also with other Gainers—incidentally, only
since 2010 could a man identify as a Gainer and an Encourager in the community.

Related to Gainers and Encouragers are “Bloaters”—usually skinny men who like to
drink (and sometimes eat) large amounts of liquid (usually water or diet soda) in
order to acquire bigger bellies, albeit temporarily. Bloaters typically do not want to
gain weight, nor do they necessarily want to encourage others to gain. Instead, Bloaters
seek to expand their stomachs to please themselves or someone else (e.g., an
Encourager). Given the expansion of the belly, a Bloater identity is constituted by
process—one can identify as a Bloater only if he likes to make—not keep—himself big.

A man can identify as a “Chub” only if he is fairly large or if he has some (visible)
fat on his body (we have yet to observe a thin man who identifies as a Chub). Chubs
do not necessarily intend to gain or lose weight. Consequently, a Chub identity is not
tied to eating large amounts of food or getting fed by others, but rather to being a
(self-identified) large person. Chubs work well with (Chub) “Chasers.” Typically,
Chasers are people of any size who are attracted to bigger men. In practice, Chasers
do not seem to be as big as Chubs. Furthermore, we have not observed a Chub
identify as both a Chub and a Chaser. Chasers do not necessarily want to make other
men big—they are just attracted to bigger men. Intentional fluctuations in weight do
not matter much for Chasers, either. Consequently, a Chaser identity is not tied to
wanting or motivating others to gain weight, but rather to being a man who is
attracted to bigger men. Furthermore, as with Encouragers and Gainers, Chasers only
make sense in relation to Chubs; they cannot identify as Chasers without the Chubs.
However, Chubs do not need Chasers in order to make sense.

Some members’ performances are met with confusion and criticism regarding
these predetermined categories. For instance, in some recent photos, JOCKGAINS looks
as though he has gained weight, evidenced by a larger belly and tighter clothes.
However, he explicitly reminds members, “For whom it may concern: I am NOT a
gainer.” MUSCLEGUT replies by calling him a “chaser with tendencies.” Seeming to
disregard JOCKGAIN’s qualifier, another member asks if he is “now a gainer,” to which
JOCKGAINS replies crisply, “Um no.” GROWINGBRIAN also narrates what he calls an
“existential crisis,” made possible by the predetermined categories:

I’m hairy and have a belly, so I guess I could be a bear [a large, hairy gay man]?
When I’m with bigger guys, I guess I’m a chaser. Does that make me a chub when
I’m with guys who are smaller than me? A gainer when I’m with an encourager?
As these comments illustrate, naming practices do not proceed without contestation, as evidenced by the supporting and challenging of members and the clarification work as to who members are and how others should make sense of them. The predetermined identifications might be deployed differently by members, and, as GROWINGBRIAN observes, a man can be something/someone different depending on his relationships with other men.

Access to and participation in the FatClub community also requires members to create screen names, most of which illustrate and perpetuate community beliefs, practices, and desires for size. There are screen names about bellies (TUMMYLOVE, GROWBELLY, GUTADIMIRER), about the kind of body a person is or likes (SLAVETOGAIN, YOUNGCHASER, FATADDICT), tied to food (TWINKIE, DEEPFRIED, FASTFOODMAN), that hint at past forms of bodies (CHUBBYEXJOCK, EXJOCKNOWWIDEASS), and that indicate a desire to gain or encourage (BUSTYOURBELT, NICEFEEDER, GROWTOGETHER). These naming practices further stress a community ethos of size and weight gain and, in turn, members’ relationships to these commitments. The practices also explicitly illustrate a member’s loyalty to common, pro-weight goals and implicitly suggest, to other members, what community participation entails. Incidentally, in our fieldwork, we have only noticed one screen name (IWANTABS) that emphasizes a thin-and-fit ideal, indicating an absence of contradiction that underscores members’ commitment to bigger bodies.

Privileging (Bigger) Bodies and Bellies

The FatClub body is a thick body. Active members typically post photos of their gaining progress, and discussion and images of weight loss are discouraged among members. For instance, BEARCUB tells someone to keep “moving to a large size.” THUNDERMAN asks “What should I be for Halloween?” and other members respond with “Chubbier,” and “+5lbs would be a good costume.” BELLYFAN tells DAVEGUT that he is looking great after having gained 15 pounds in July (2010), but then says, “perhaps you can make that 25[lbs] by September.” PLUMPDANCER tells a member to “get back to a restaurant and bring that sexy pudge back,” and DAVEINTEXAS admits he was “afraid” that he “lost weight.” TODDGAIN confesses, “Not to upset anyone, but I bought a pair of 36-inch pants,” to which CHUMMUSCLE replies, “Are weightlosers even allowed on this site?” And EXTRACHUNKY refers to GIRTH’s 10-pound weight loss as “bad news”; GIRTH responds by admitting the loss is a “little setback.” Further, some members consider stretchmarks—weight gain/loss marks on the body—a sign of progress. COOLFATGUY says his “hottest gaining moment” was “getting 2 stretch marks above my right bicep.” FATBOT says, “I WANT STRETCHMARKS.” And FATHAPPY claims his “hottest gaining moment” was “getting stretchmarks!”

Holistically, this way of privileging some bodies over others engenders a specific and heightened focus on the (bigger) belly. In fact, members hold a particularly meaningful relationship with their bellies—an open, explicit relationship of objectification. In the “Personal Information” section of each member profile, two questions refer directly to the belly. The first asks for a “Description of belly.”
second asks, “What do you dislike about your belly,” to which HECKLE says, “It can’t decide what it wants.” Further, the community’s prohibition of images of genitalia positions the belly as the object or area to be admired. The (bigger) belly is framed as the center of attention—the object to expose, to grow, and of which to be prideful.

Non/Conforming Social Practices

Members engage in practices that simultaneously reinforce and subvert normative ideals of gender, sexuality, and health. Although relevant to and suggested by the previous two sections, we unpack this reinforcement and subversion by describing three non/conforming practices of the community: the desire to look and feel like a “real” man; the attempt to work against the stereotype of the youthful, thin-and-fit gay male (sometimes called “Twinks”); and a disregard of personal health and the complications of obesity.

Some members suggest that being bigger means being, and feeling, masculine. The position is marked explicitly by FATLOVER, who says that a “reasonably big man” is his “ideal figure of masculinity.” STOCKY remarks that gaining allows him to “feel big and manly” and to “feel more like a man instead of the little boy I once was.” MAKEMEHUSKY takes pride in a friend telling him that his bigger body makes him look “more like a man,” and SUPERSIZE notes that his “hottest gaining moment” happened when a friend told him that he had a “mans [sic] body.” This emphasis on manliness and size is also exemplified by screen names like REALMAN, ALPHAMALE, and REALMANINUSA.6

Some members suggest that being bigger and liking bigger men goes against a thin, fit, and youthful gay male, or Twink, aesthetic. This sentiment is illustrated by screen names such as ADOREGAYBELLIES, TWINKGAINER, and FATANDGAY. It is also demonstrated through members’ comments. For instance, the caption for a photo of DIGEST’s gaining progress—a picture that shows him barely fitting in his once-favorite clothes—reads as accomplishment and elation: “the twink days are over.” In response to the profile question “What type of person are you attracted to?” BULK responds with “all types, though bigger guys tend to go to the front of the line, while twinks get slapped with a cheeseburger [to fatten them up].” GRIDDLE complains that he is noticing more “‘normals’ bringing in their [Twink] ‘gay.com’ standards and denigrating the locals”; he references the trend as a “Twink invasion.” MYBELLY says, “If I wanted to be ridiculed by a twink about my gut I’d post a profile on Gay.com,” and EXPANDER says, “I’d rather eat a Twinkie than be a twink.” Contrasting this discourse is insight by BELLYPLAYER, who expresses a concern that members use Twink in negative ways.

An additional characteristic of non/conforming social practices is illustrated by members’ comments that explicitly disregard the health consequences of being bigger and in striving for obesity. For instance, FATLIKEAHIPPO says his partner wants him to “get to 700lbs.” MOVIEMAN wants to get as big as possible while still being “able to walk,” and FIRMGUT says he seeks “dominant guys to wreck his body.” In these contrasting ways, FatClub is a curious mix of conforming/nonconforming, reinforcing/subverting performances. As we flesh out next, members infuse these performances with play and disidentification.
Sex, Desire, and Attraction

Sex, desire, and attraction pervade many facets of FatClub. We focus next on two prominent themes that characterize the community in this regard: eating as erotic self-pleasure, and eating as erotic relational pleasure.

Some members describe eating and growing in size in erotic, self-fulfilling ways. For instance, CHILIMAC calls “barely squeezing my fat ass into the seat on the airplane” the “highlight” of a recent trip, and BIGBOY says,

I love the feeling of getting fatter. It turns me on sooooo much. When I touch my hairy, soft belly I just think how much better it will be when I’m a hundred pounds bigger. All that soft, jiggly fat surrounding my body.

Similarly, WHYIGAIN says he is “excited about how one year ago today [he] was 35lbs less! Now [he is] at 155lbs and . . . feel[s] the sexiest [he] has ever been in [his] life!” Members may post these comments to encourage others to gain weight, but they are also self-directed; getting bigger is personally pleasurable.

Eating together—either as roommates, friends, boyfriends, or partners, or as one-night encounters—is also discussed pervasively as erotic and attractive. Take, for instance, CHRISJAKE, who shares that his “hottest gaining moments” happen when he watches his boyfriend “slip things in [his] food and drink . . . extra butter or cookies.” GROWMORE and DIGEST comment that their “hottest gaining moments” happen when clothes no longer fit. GLUTTON says “there is something pretty hot about seeing a guy get bigger,” and FRYCOOK confirms, “There is something ridiculously hot . . . about a man filling out and then busting out of a suit.” MUSCLEMAN says, “I love making guys happy—and FAT,” MANFEEDER says he has a “desire to help a guy stuff his greedy gut,” and FIRMBELLY wants someone to make him a “gainer pig slave.” COOLGUY performs with even greater detail, posting a photo of tubes, funnels, and straps—his “equipment” for helping people gain and equipment that epitomizes his (mutual) feeding capabilities and desires. COOLGUY also has a photo of him pouring chocolate syrup and whipped cream into FIRMBELLY’s mouth; FIRMBELLY has “I was stuffed by COOLGUY” written on his bare, bloated stomach. CREAMFORBELLY comments on the picture, asking how to sign up to be fed. ADAMFEEDER describes vividly the relational characteristics of gaining as well:

My boyfriend has been trying to get me to gain weight for months—in large part, I think, because he’s embarrassed he’s gotten fat (despite my telling him I like his new body). I swore in August that by winter I would gain 15–20lbs—partly to make him happy, partly because maybe he’s right and I am too skinny, and I’ve always been fascinated by the thought of being bigger.

For some members, interacting with bigger men or gaining with others is erotic and pleasurable. Being able to help these others with eating and growing can be erotic and pleasurable, too. FatClub is pervasively relational; members’ performances are always and already coconstituted by communal interactions. Yet, considerations of sex, desire, and attraction make their interconnectedness even more salient. Further, this relationality is not driven by dis-ease or disgust of the counterintuitive, proweight
goals, but rather by an appreciation of and hunger for these goals and the pleasure they bring to so many members.

A Weighted Discussion

*FatClub* instantiates a multilayered community discursively created and maintained by/for performers who enact and celebrate the thrill of size and weight gain. Members’ innovative performances demonstrate a highly distinctive and structured way of communicating, which, in turn, constitutes particular weight-infused identities and realities. In this section, we discuss the intersections and implications of these phenomena, particularly what they suggest about body size, gender, and sexuality, and what it means to negotiate these issues within larger cultural logics that tend to disregard—and possibly even pathologize—these desires.

Some *FatClub* men make growth, and the encouragement of growth, an issue of gender: they assume that being masculine means being big and strong (Chesebro; Gilman; Pelias *Leaning*). Some members thus perpetuate pervasive performances of masculinity by encouraging and/or striving for beefier bodies, a bigger sensibility reinforced in performative—linguistic and somatic—ways. A competent or ideal man is therefore big and strong, not small and weak, an attitude that cites—that is, recalls, reifies, and relays—normative ideals about masculinity.

Some *FatClub* members work against the thin-and-fit beauty ideals for gay male bodies; they make growth and size an issue of attractiveness, gender, and sexuality. In contexts that value thin-and-fit gay male bodies, beefier gay male bodies that do not meet these standards become objects of taboo and shame that might necessitate downsizing or covering—the toning down of their undesirable, stigmatized characteristics (Yoshino). However, as illustrated, thin-and-fit gay men—Twinks—are undesirable and stigmatized in this community, unless they want to gain weight, help others gain weight, be encouraged by others to gain weight, or express their desire for bigger men.

Members’ discourse also helps to establish and advocate for novel, more inclusive ideals about larger body sizes and gains in weight. Competent community members explicitly craft, support, and attend to beefier bodies and bellies, not bodies and bellies that have lost or are in the process of losing weight. Some members discuss the excitement of stretchmarks, and others unequivocally offer measurements of their increasing weight. Dissatisfied with and suffocated by normative thin-and-fit ideals for appearance and attraction, members inscribe, on growing bodies and bellies, new ideals for body size, gender, and sexuality. In performative ways, members cite strict and cruel beauty norms in an attempt to make bigger gay male bodies attractive.

*FatClub* performances of growing bodies thus illustrate members’ commitment to “play.” Richard Schechner notes that “play” can serve as an “escape from or alternative to stress” (100), “introduce flexibility into rigid social structures” (102), and can be a “ritualization and elaboration of ‘patterns of fight, flight, sexual and eating behavior’” (Loizos qtd. in Schechner 101). As a virtual community, *FatClub* allows men to play privately, and safely, “out of the sight of repressive
authorities” (102). Men openly play in a number of ways, such as posting photos of growing bellies, creating fun screen names, feeding each other, and eating in counternormative ways (e.g., using funnels to eat large amounts of food). Men dwell, move, eat, feed, and pleasure each other. Play fuels performances and provides an alternative forum in which to reimagine rigid beauty norms and to experiment comfortably with bigger sizes—performances that are not always valued or welcomed in contexts outside of the community.

Jose Esteban Muñoz’s work with “disidentification” provides insight into members’ practices as well. Often enacted by a “minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy,” disidentification creates “different strategies of viewing, reading, and locating ‘self’” within this hierarchy (25–26). To disidentify means to identify normative and exclusionary messages and then “recircuit” these messages to “account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications”; disidentifying means not only “cracking open the code of the majority,” but also using the code to represent a “disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Munoz 31).

The men of FatClub perform disidentifying interactions and identities in at least two ways. First, members explicitly reframe weight gains and bigger bodies as desirable and erotic; through communal interaction, they work against pervasive and exclusionary anti-fat assumptions. The men unapologetically embrace eating and growing, bring pride to acts (e.g., overeating) and objects (e.g., stretchmarks) that otherwise might conjure up shame, and attempt to cultivate positionalities (e.g., Gainer, Encourager) that have been “rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz 31). Second, as previously mentioned, many of these gay men use bigger bodies to work against the thin-and-fit, Twink norms of beauty associated with some gay male contexts. Using related screen names (ADOREGAYBELLIES, TWINKGAINER), aggressive talk (references to Twinks who ought to be “slapped with a cheeseburger”), and proclamations about who they are or are not (“I’d rather eat a Twinkie than be a twink”), members routinely, and playfully, discuss and self-identify in disidentifying ways; indeed, they explicitly disavow the thin-and-fit, Twink ideal.

Members’ affirming performances and relationships do not proceed without the possibility for criticism. Competent weight-gain performances require access to an abundance of food, clothing, space, and healthcare. Those outside the FatClub community may thus perceive members to be excessive and gluttonous strains on social resources. Similarly, FatClub members, especially Gainers, must often be economically privileged; those who are not may find it difficult to be welcomed into and to participate competently in the community. Related to this, we do not want to suggest that members possess “false consciousness” (Gerber) in that they do not realize the consequences of their feeding and eating actions, or that the personal choice to be beefier and to connect with beefy bodies should be pathologized (Dean) or made illegal (Nussbaum). To us, FatClub life resembles other fetish communities—e.g., persons interested in bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (BDSM), feet, or dressing up and relating as animals (“Furries”). Members’ engagements with weight-related health risks are also not too different from risks
associated with other activities such as skydiving, smoking, paintball, or riding a motorcycle (Halperin). As some members’ discourse suggests, the disregard of physical health is not without an understanding of consequences; indeed, most members seem to enact weighted risks *knowingly* and *deliberately*.

Further, as with many communities, a dialectical tension of marginalization—acceptance informs *FatClub* life and relations. Members are best accepted by each other if they function competently, as illustrated by understanding, engaging, and embracing particular practices and identities (e.g., Gainer, Encourager), using bodies and bellies in prioritized ways, talking about gaining as being more masculine, or as working against a gay male Twink aesthetic, and expressing a desire to meet or support members with their weight and sexual fantasies. If a member engages in these acts, he is typically accepted in/to the community; if he does not, he risks marginalization.

Yet *FatClub* performances may also marginalize members from people outside, and/or who are ignorant about, the community. For instance, one question on members’ profiles asks if members are “out” to others—that is, if they tell others—about their weight (gain) fantasies. Most of the members indicate that they are *not* out to others outside of the community, suggesting a level of secrecy about participating in, or helping others with, liking or adding size. By being out, normative thin-and-fit ideals for the competently embodied being could prompt others to exclude a member for his interest in this community. And so, in the spirit of protection and safety stemming from an awareness of pro—thin-and-fit cultural logics, a member might not disclose his weight attractions to non-*FatClub* others.

**Conclusion**

The *FatClub* body is far from an “absent” and peripheral phenomenon (Leder). Instead, the body occupies an extraordinarily prioritized space at the foreground of members’ lives. The body’s performative expansion becomes the primary focus of attention and, for many, a near obsession. Embedded in this prioritizing is a greater comfort with the atypical, bigger body—a body that cites and conforms to normative ideas of masculinity and/or a body that plays and disidentifies with thin-and-fit (gay male) beauty norms. The *FatClub* body also complicates ideas about competent eaters—that is, people who want to manage weight and who encourage others to do the same. Members’ performances present an exquisite and, for some, an abhorrent, instantiation of how culture and community are constraining, situated phenomena, and how the ways we evaluate size are strikingly different depending on perspective. Further, competent *FatClub* members collaboratively cultivate a proweight environment, and explicitly support each other with growth and beefiness. Their orientations toward and uses of bigger bodies are creative, and the community offers a pedagogical space in which to imagine distinct and often-devalued ways of relating. Indeed, bigger is beautiful in *FatClub*; it is a requisite for everyday, communal interaction.
We conclude this essay by returning to where we began, to STUFFMEHUGE. As of this writing, he has stabilized at 312 pounds. At 230, he commented that doctors had concerns about his increased size; no longer does he mention or acknowledge these concerns. He continues to post photos of feeding himself and being fed by others. His stomach is covered in stretchmarks, and he garners much affection from FatClub members. STUFFMEHUGE appears to be proud of his growing achievement; he seems happy and fully filled.

Notes

[1] Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy suggest that gay men and straight women share/internalize similar, heterosexist weight concerns. For instance, some heterosexual women feel a need to look thin-and-fit and want to be seen/desired by heterosexual men as thin-and-fit. Similarly, gay men might feel a need to be thin-and-fit not because women are looking at them, but because other (gay, bisexual) men may desire these characteristics.

[2] This project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wisconsin-Superior (#686).

[3] There are no definitive rules about the ethics of covert, online research. Gatson calls all online ethnography “disguised observation” (516). Sarah R. Brotsky and David Giles advocate for covert research of virtual communities because the material in these communities is often easily accessible (and therefore public), and because there is a strong history of virtual communities rejecting researchers, particularly communities constituted by possibly controversial topics. Further, covert research is not necessarily deceptive research (Lugosi; Spicker); covert and deception are not synonymous, and most, if not all, research has covert and deceptive characteristics (Fine).

[4] Noticeably absent from FatClub discourse are explicit discussions of race. Members also cannot easily mark race on their personal profiles (they can identify race in the “about me” section, but this information would appear outside of the primary information that other members can easily see). Lacking the ability to mark race effectively implies that race is not, or should not be, as important as other characteristics. Theorizing how race might influence FatClub life must therefore begin with marking the silence of race in members’ discourse.

[5] The practices of and attraction to bigger bodies and gaining weight exist in numerous contexts, many of which are not limited to sexuality (e.g., on YouTube.com there are many videos of women being stuffed with food and who have gained a significant amount of weight). Thus, we engage FatClub in its particularity and as a tentative model for purposefully larger, proweight cultural performances.

[6] Some members consider beefy-and-muscular bodies to be manly bodies, whereas fat-and-flabby bodies are not (Campbell; Pyle and Loewy; Whitesel). For instance, GAMERJOCK says he likes any kind of body, as long as it is not “flabby” or “skinny,” and DARKY wants a “beefy,” well-shaped chest, “not any of that man boob stuff.”

Works Cited


