Gaps in Bear Research: A Qualitative Study of Plus-Size and GMPD Inclusion in University Education (Theory of Change Analysis)

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Abstract

Plus-size gay men and Bear/GMPD communities remain marginal in educational research, despite growing scholarship on fat stigma and queer experiences in higher education. This pilot study explores how Bear-identified and plus-size gay men working in academia understand their visibility, wellbeing and sense of belonging within university environments. Five cisgender gay men aged 26–40 completed an anonymous online questionnaire distributed via academic and Bear/GMPD networks. All had at least a master's degree and 1–15 years of academic or research experience in Europe, with one participant originating from South America and now working in Czechia. The questionnaire combined demographic items, open-ended questions about identity, representation and wellbeing, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three overarching themes were identified: (1) "Visible bodies, invisible identities" – participants sometimes experienced their size as neutral or even protective, yet saw almost no explicit representation of Bears or plus-size gay men in curricula, policy or senior academic roles; (2) "Belonging at the margins of multiple communities" – participants negotiated partial belonging in both academia and Bear scenes, describing exclusion based on body, sexuality, nationality or neurodivergence; and (3) "Carrying the weight of academic cultures" – high performance demands, reviewer hostility and subtle discrimination undermined wellbeing, with Bear/GMPD spaces sometimes offering counter-narratives of desirability and acceptance. Life satisfaction scores suggested generally mixed to low satisfaction. The study argues for developing body diversity literacy in universities and for closer connections between Bear/GMPD communities and educational institutions.

Keywords: bear culture, LGBTI+, self-perception, plus-size, stigmatization, SWLS test, RTA

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Introduction

Bear and GMPD[1] communities provide important spaces of belonging for large-bodied gay, bi and queer men, yet they have only recently begun to receive sustained academic attention. Previous projects in the field document how fat GBTQI+ men experience both comfort and fat stigma in UK Bear scenes, revealing complex geographies of inclusion and exclusion (McGlynn, 2022). At the same time, scholarship on LGBTQI+ people in higher education has highlighted persistent patterns of invisibility, marginalisation and conditional belonging for students and staff (Nutter et al., 2019). Parallel work in fat and body-diversity studies shows that weight stigma is pervasive across social institutions yet often left unexamined in equity and inclusion policies (Brown et al., 2022). However, research specifically examining plus-size gay men in academic roles remains virtually non-existent (Edmonds & Zieff, 2010). Existing work tends to focus either on fat queer men in community or leisure settings, or on LGBTQI+ scholars (McGlynn, 2022) more broadly without attention to body size as a dimension of inequality (Edmonds & Zieff, 2015).

In East and Southeast Asia, LGBTQI+ rights remain uneven, shaping the social positioning of Bear and GMPD communities. In 2025, Japan's Supreme Court upheld the national ban on same-sex marriage despite growing public support and ongoing legal challenges (BBC News, 2025; Speed, 2025). Although some local governments issue symbolic partnership certificates, these provide no binding legal protections in areas such as taxation, inheritance, or healthcare. Legal uncertainty surrounding same-sex relationships contributes to broader patterns of invisibility and intersects with cultural norms surrounding heteronormativity, thinness, and traditional masculinity. For plus-size gay men, particularly those identifying with Bear or GMPD communities, this combination of legal exclusion, body stigma, and gender expectations may intensify marginalisation within both society and institutional settings such as universities. Similar tensions exist in Europe, where legal recognition of LGBTQ+ relationships remains uneven despite a 2025 Court of Justice of the European Union ruling requiring member states to recognise same-sex marriages performed elsewhere in the EU (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2025). Together, these legal and cultural contexts highlight the importance of cross-cultural research examining how body politics, sexuality, and institutional recognition shape the experiences of Bear/GMPD individuals in academia.

Figure 1

The Japan Times. (Speed, 2025). Photograph of Protests to Tokyo High Court Ruling on Same-Sex Marriage.

Note. From The Japan Times. Photo by Taro Yamada, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

[1] GMPD refers to "Gay Men of Physical Diversity", including the Japanese body-type terms **gachi** (ガチ – solid/muscular), **mochi** (モチ – soft/plush), **pochari** (ぽっちゃり – chubby), and **debu** (デブ – fat).

This pilot study responds to that gap by exploring how Bear-identified and plus-size gay men working in universities make sense of their educational and career trajectories, their visibility, and their wellbeing. It is conceptually aligned with cultural literacies and inclusion in European education and builds on earlier work documenting the psychological wellbeing of plus-size gay men in Japan, the Czech Republic and beyond.

This study is also informed by two complementary impact-oriented frameworks increasingly used in education and social policy: Theory of Change (ToC) and Social Return on Investment (SROI). Theory of Change provides a structured way to articulate how specific activities and institutional practices are expected to lead to short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes, making explicit the assumed causal pathways between interventions and social change (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Weiss, 1995). SROI, in turn, focuses on identifying and evidencing the broader social value generated by such changes, particularly in domains such as wellbeing, inclusion, and participation, which are not easily captured by economic indicators alone (Fujiwara, 2015; Nicholls et al., 2012). Although the present study does not conduct a formal ToC or SROI analysis, these frameworks provide a useful lens for interpreting the findings, as they foreground the importance of linking institutional practices (e.g., diversity policies, curriculum representation, support structures) to outcomes such as wellbeing, sense of belonging, and sustained participation in academic life.

The main research questions for creaing the pilot study were:

1. *How do plus-size / Bear-identified gay men in academia describe their experiences of representation, inclusion and visibility?*
2. *How do academic cultures and Bear/GMPD communities shape their wellbeing and sense of belonging?*
3. *What forms of support or change do they consider necessary in universities?*

Given its small scale, this study aims not to generalise but to generate rich, exploratory insights that can inform larger qualitative and mixed-methods projects.

Methodology

The study employed an online qualitative questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions, supplemented by demographic items and a brief life-satisfaction measure. Data were collected via Google Forms using a convenience sampling strategy, targeting academics who self-identify as members of the LGBTI+ community and are currently active in research or higher education. Participants were recruited through the researcher's existing professional and community networks, including academic conferences, research collaborations, and interest-based groups (e.g., online Bear and GMPD communities). This approach enabled access to a hard-to-reach population and allowed geographically dispersed participants to engage with the questionnaire anonymously and at their own pace, which was particularly important given the sensitivity of topics related to sexuality, body size, and wellbeing. While this sampling strategy limits generalisability, it is appropriate for exploratory qualitative research aiming to generate in-depth insight into under-researched populations rather than statistically representative findings.

Eligibility criteria: (a) identify as plus-size gay men and/or belong to Bear/GMPD communities; (b) currently or recently engaged in academic or research work (including PhD); (c) aged 18+. The questionnaire link was distributed through academic networks, an international Bear research network, and informal Bear/GMPD contacts. Five participants

completed the full survey. While small, the sample is diverse in geography and disciplinary background and appropriate for pilot exploratory purposes.

All five respondents: cis-male, gay, aged 26–40, at least MA, 1–15 years academic/research experience; currently based across EU and one originally from South America and one from Japan.

Data Collection & Ethics

The questionnaire asked about academic background, Bear/plus-size identity and its perceived impact on career, experiences of inclusion/exclusion and visibility in academic settings, connection to Bear/GMPD networks, wellbeing and coping strategies, and suggestions for institutional change. Participation was anonymous and voluntary; no personal identifiers were collected. Data were stored on password-protected institutional drives accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. This study employed a qualitative online questionnaire design supplemented by descriptive quantitative measures. The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms and combined (1) demographic and identity-related items, (2) open-ended qualitative questions targeting experiences of body size, sexuality, and academic life, and (3) a standardized measure of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). The aim was to capture both narrative depth and contextual quantitative indicators of wellbeing to support interpretation of participants' accounts.

The questionnaire included **three integrated sections**:

1. Demographic and Academic Background

Closed-ended questions asked about:

- **Gender identity**
- **Age group**
- **Region of origin and current academic location**
- **Highest level of education completed**
- **Length of academic or research practice**
- **Route into academic work**

These items provided contextual information used to describe the sample and frame individual experiences.

2. Identity, Inclusion, and Academic Experiences (Qualitative Section)

This section contained **25 open-ended questions**, designed to elicit in-depth reflections on:

- personal experiences of being plus-size or Bear/GMPD within academia;
- perceived influence of body size or sexuality on career pathways;
- experiences of inclusion/exclusion, representation, and visibility;
- relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and students;
- access to any gay/LGBTI+ media and sources (manga, novels, idol bands, etc.);
- institutional practices related to diversity, wellbeing, and LGBTI+ support;
- involvement in Bear/GMPD communities (e.g., events, elections, social groups);
- wellbeing, coping strategies, and mental-health challenges;
- perceived connections between Bear identity and academic sense of belonging;

- suggestions for improving body diversity representation in universities.

The open design allowed participants to choose which aspects of identity and experience felt meaningful, aligning with reflexive thematic analysis principles.

3. Standardized Wellbeing Measure: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

The final section the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) measuring global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction.

Participants rated each statement on a **5-point Likert scale** from *strongly disagree (1)* to *strongly agree (5)*:

1. *In most ways my life is close to my ideal.*
2. *The conditions of my life are excellent.*
3. *I am satisfied with my life.*
4. *So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.*
5. *If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.*

Scores were not used for inferential statistics due to the small sample size but served as descriptive indicators to contextualise narratives of wellbeing. Because the questionnaire addressed experiences associated with sexuality, body size, and potential discrimination, participants were reminded that they could skip any question.
Qualitative responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through:

1. familiarisation with the dataset;
2. initial coding across the entire corpus;
3. generating preliminary themes;
4. reviewing and refining themes;
5. theme definition and labelling;
6. writing up with illustrative extracts.

RTA emphasises researcher subjectivity and iterative interpretation rather than coding reliability metrics, making it appropriate for identity-focused qualitative inquiry. Quantitative SWLS data were examined descriptively. Open-ended responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes (e.g. "*being the only Bear*," "*reviewer hostility*," "*comfort in Bear events*") were developed and then structured into themes through iterative interpretation. Given the small sample, analysis prioritised depth and nuance over saturation. Quantitative life-satisfaction responses were summarised descriptively.

Results

This section presents findings from a mixed-methods pilot study combining qualitative questionnaire responses with descriptive quantitative measures. Due to the small sample size (N = 5), quantitative results are interpreted contextually rather than inferentially. Participants, despite differing in nationality, discipline, and institutional context, shared several characteristics: they were early- or mid-career plus-size Bear/GMPD-identifying academics who reported varying experiences of marginalisation related to sexuality, body size, or both. Descriptive findings suggested generally low visibility of body diversity within academic institutions, with participants reporting feeling more invisible than represented, while

connections to LGBTI+ and Bear/GMPD networks were consistently described as important sources of belonging and recognition.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the SWLS Scale Divided by Age Group

Item	*In most ways my life is close to my ideal*		*The conditions of my life are excellent.*		*I am satisfied with my life.*		*So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.*		*If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.*	
Age Group	**26–35**	**36–40**	**26–35**	**36–40**	**26–35**	**36–40**	**26–35**	**36–40**	**26–35**	**36–40**
Valid	4	1	4	1	4	1	4	1	4	1
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.750	2.000	4.500	2.000	5.250	5.000	3.750	2.000	5.500	3.000
Std. Deviation	1.258	NaN	0.577	NaN	0.500	NaN	1.500	NaN	1.291	NaN
Skewness	-1.129	NaN	0.000	NaN	2.000	NaN	-0.370	NaN	0.000	NaN
SE Skewness	1.014	0.000	1.014	0.000	1.014	0.000	1.014	0.000	1.014	0.000
Kurtosis	2.227	NaN	-6.000	NaN	4.000	NaN	-3.901	NaN	-1.200	NaN
SE Kurtosis	2.619	0.000	2.619	0.000	2.619	0.000	2.619	0.000	2.619	0.000
Shapiro-Wilk	0.895	NaN	0.729	NaN	0.630	NaN	0.849	NaN	0.993	NaN
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	0.406	NaN	0.024	NaN	0.001	NaN	0.224	NaN	0.972	NaN
Minimum	3.000	2.000	4.000	2.000	5.000	5.000	2.000	2.000	4.000	3.000
Maximum	6.000	2.000	5.000	2.000	6.000	5.000	5.000	2.000	7.000	3.000

Note. [a] All values are identical

This pattern directly mirrors the qualitative narratives, in which participants described academia as largely indifferent or structurally silent on body diversity, while Bear and GMPD networks were more frequently identified as spaces of affirmation, even if imperfect or exclusionary in other ways. The quantitative results therefore reinforce the qualitative theme of **"visible bodies, invisible identities"**: participants are embodied and present in academic spaces, yet lack meaningful institutional recognition.

Across the full sample (N = 5) in the SWLS scale, mean scores on the Satisfaction With Life Scale items indicate **moderate but uneven well-being**:

- *In most ways my life is close to my ideal*: M = 4.20
- *The conditions of my life are excellent*: M = 4.00
- *I am satisfied with my life*: M = 5.20
- *So far I have gotten the important things I want in life*: M = 3.40

While overall life satisfaction cannot be considered low, the variability across items and participants suggests ambivalence rather than stability. Notably, participants reported relatively high satisfaction with life in general, but lower endorsement of having achieved important life goals, which aligns with qualitative accounts of career precarity, publication pressure, and constrained academic mobility. SWLS Responses Participants completed all five items of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Because the questionnaire used verbal Likert anchors rather than numerical scores, responses were analysed descriptively rather than converted into standard SWLS totals. Across the five participants, responses indicate generally low to moderate life satisfaction, with no respondent reporting uniformly positive evaluations of their life conditions.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the SWLS Scale Overall

	In most ways my life is close to my ideal	*The conditions of my life are excellent.*	*I am satisfied with my life.*	*So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.*	*If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.*
Valid	5	5	5	5	5
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	4.200	4.000	5.200	3.400	5.000
Std. Deviation	1.643	1.225	0.447	1.517	1.581
Skewness	-0.518	-1.361	2.236	0.315	0.000
Std. Error of Skewness	0.913	0.913	0.913	0.913	0.913
Kurtosis	-1.687	2.000	5.000	-3.081	-1.200
Std. Error of Kurtosis	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000
Shapiro-Wilk	0.914	0.833	0.552	0.803	0.987
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	0.490	0.146	< .001	0.086	0.967
Minimum	2.000	2.000	5.000	2.000	3.000
Maximum	6.000	5.000	6.000	5.000	7.000

Note. N = 5 for all items. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Skewness and kurtosis standard errors were 0.91 and 2.00, respectively. Shapiro–Wilk tests assess normality; significant p values indicate departures from normality.

Boxplots derived from the table results further illustrate heterogeneity rather than clustering, reinforcing the interpretation that wellbeing among plus-size/Bear academics is not uniform and likely shaped by intersecting factors such as career stage, national context, institutional climate, and community access.

Table 3
Regression Analysis of the SWLS Scale

							95% CI	
Model		**Unstandardized**	**Standard Error**	**Standardized**	**t**	**p**	**Lower**	**Upper**
1	(Intercept)	6.043	11.632		0.520	0.695	-141.755	153.842
	In most ways my life is close to my ideal	-1.435	0.948	-1.589	-1.514	0.372	-13.475	10.605
	The conditions of my life are excellent.	2.391	1.375	1.975	1.739	0.332	-15.078	19.861
	I am satisfied with my life.	-1.304	2.431	-0.393	-0.537	0.686	-32.187	29.578
2	(Intercept)	-0.040	2.093		-0.019	0.986	-9.044	8.964
	In most ways my life is close to my ideal	-1.320	0.741	-1.462	-1.782	0.217	-4.507	1.867
	The conditions of my life are excellent.	2.120	1.026	1.751	2.066	0.175	-2.295	6.535
3	(Intercept)	0.714	2.692		0.265	0.808	-7.852	9.280
	The conditions of my life are excellent.	0.531	0.666	0.438	0.797	0.484	-1.589	2.650
4	(Intercept)	2.778	0.698		3.978	0.016	0.839	4.717

Several linear regression models were tested to explore whether life satisfaction variables predicted perceived links between Bear community acceptance and academic belonging (p. 5). Although some models showed relatively high R^2 values (e.g., $R^2 = .75$ in Model 1), none of the models reached statistical significance, and degrees of freedom were extremely limited ($df_2 \leq 3$). Given the very small sample size, these regression results should not be interpreted as

evidence of causal or predictive relationships. Instead, they are best understood as exploratory pattern checks. Importantly, the directionality of coefficients is theoretically meaningful even if statistically unreliable: higher perceptions of life satisfaction and positive life conditions tended to align with stronger perceived links between Bear community acceptance and academic belonging. This supports, at a conceptual level, the qualitative finding that community-based acceptance may act as a psychological buffer against institutional invisibility—a relationship that warrants investigation in larger future samples. Shapiro–Wilk tests reported across several variables were significant or indeterminate due to identical values (pp. 1–3), indicating non-normal distributions and limited variance. This further confirms that parametric inference is inappropriate for this dataset and reinforces the methodological choice to treat quantitative findings as descriptive and contextual, not inferential.

Table 4

Model Summary of the Item: Do You See a Link Between the Bear Community's Sense of Acceptance and the Sense of Belonging in Academia?

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE	R^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	p	Durbin-Watson Autocorrelation	Durbin-Watson Statistic
1	0.867	0.752	0.009	2.085	0.752	1.013	3	1	0.606	-0.261	1.630
2	0.825	0.681	0.362	1.673	-0.071	-0.447	1	2	1.000	-0.253	1.968
3	0.418	0.175	-0.100	2.198	-0.506	-1.841	1	3	1.000	-0.287	2.314
4	0.000	0.000	0.000	2.095	-0.175		1	4		-0.457	2.840

Note. p-value for Durbin-Watson test is unavailable for weighted regression.

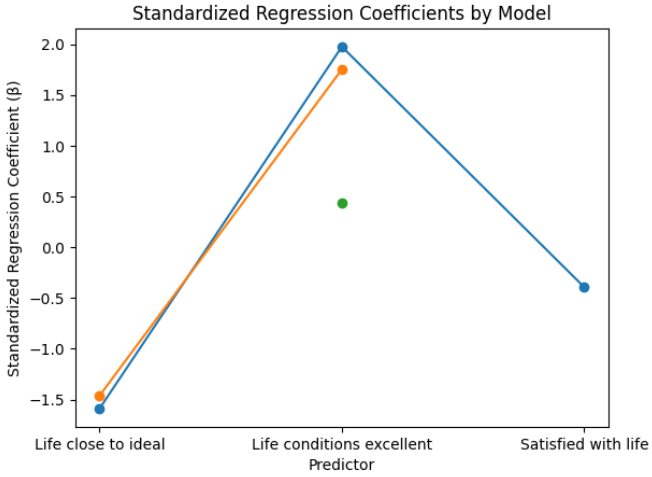
Taken together, the quantitative data **do not contradict** the qualitative findings—rather, they **stabilise and contextualise them**:

1. Participants report **moderate overall life satisfaction**, but not a strong sense of having achieved personal or professional goals.
2. Academic environments appear **structurally neutral or silent** regarding body diversity, producing experiences of invisibility.
3. Bear and GMPD communities function as **alternative sites of belonging**, with measurable psychological relevance.
4. The relationship between community acceptance and academic belonging appears **conceptually strong**, but empirically underpowered in this pilot sample.

This convergence supports the framing of the study as an exploratory mixed-methods pilot, whose primary contribution lies in theoretical articulation and qualitative insight, rather than statistical generalisation.

Figure 2

Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) for Each Predictor Across Models 1–3



As shown in *Figure 1*, the conditions of my life are excellent demonstrated the strongest positive standardized association with the outcome across models, whereas perceiving life as close to ideal showed a negative association.

Reflexive thematic analysis yielded **three overarching themes**:

Participants described a complex relationship between visibility, belonging, and wellbeing within both academia and Bear/GMPD communities. Although their bodies were often physically visible in academic environments, their identities as plus-size or Bear gay men remained largely absent from institutional diversity narratives, curricula, and representation. While explicit fat stigma was uncommon, respondents reported subtle exclusion through overlooked networking opportunities, homophobic remarks (ILGA World, 2023)., reviewer hostility, or feelings of invisibility (Amnesty International Australia. 2025) connected to sexuality and body type. Academic environments were frequently described as stressful and precarious due to publication pressure, funding insecurity, and heavy workloads, negatively affecting wellbeing and body confidence. In contrast, Bear/GMPD communities often functioned as spaces of affirmation, self-acceptance, and emotional support, particularly in opposition to mainstream gay ideals centred on thinness and muscularity. However, participants also noted exclusion within these communities related to class, nationality, neurodivergence, or social capital, suggesting that belonging remained conditional rather than universal. Overall, participants relied on peer networks, selective community engagement, and personal coping strategies to navigate environments where institutional recognition of body diversity remained limited.

A summary of each participant's response pattern is presented below:

Participant 1 (EU Citizen – Origin: Czech Republic)

This profile suggests **moderately low life satisfaction**, with dissatisfaction on three items and only one item indicating agreement. The participant appears ambivalent about past achievements and current circumstances. The participant feels like the bear community in the Czech Republic is somewhat exclusive and it is difficult to get in and feels excluded. He admits that *there are many men in his academic field would classify as plus-size* and *body size is not generally an issue*.

Participant 2 (EU Citizen – Origin: Estonia)

This participant exhibited the **lowest satisfaction profile** in the sample. All five responses fell on the disagreement side, indicating substantial dissatisfaction with life conditions and a *sense of not having achieved important personal goals*. He *feels excluded mainly for gender reasons* as there is a predominantly female presence in his academic field. He does not feel excluded in the original sense as there seems very little exclusion, just a lack of highlighting diversity. As his experience with bear events, he claims they have been both positive and negative. It *is comforting to be around similar body type people and feel free without judgment*, but at the same time, *local events have been quite insular and exclusionary* to outsiders or newcomers based on appearance, income and neurodivergence as well.

Participant 3 (EU Citizen – Origin: Japan)

This profile reflects **mixed or ambivalent satisfaction**, with small positive endorsements on some items but corresponding mild dissatisfaction on others. The participant's overall life satisfaction appears **moderate and unstable** rather than firmly positive. He *does not see any strong connections between body-size, sexuality and academia*.

Participant 4 (EU Citizen – Origin: Germany)

This participant displayed the **highest life satisfaction** in the sample, with consistently positive evaluations across all items, including one "*strongly agree*." This suggests a comparatively strong sense of personal fulfilment or stability. Despite the presence of institutional LGBTQ+ wellbeing programmes, the participant reported only limited connection to LGBTI+ or Bear networks and described feeling "*out of the loop*" within both academic and gay professional contexts. Comparisons to highly muscular "*gym*" masculinities highlighted exclusion within gay subcultures as well as academia. Academic pressures—especially project-based deadlines—negatively affected sleep and wellbeing, though moments of community connection were described as psychologically protective. Notably, this participant reported consistently high life satisfaction, suggesting that strong professional identity and self-acceptance may coexist with, and partially mitigate, experiences of embodied exclusion.

Participant 5 (EU Citizen – Origin: South America)

This profile also reflects **low life satisfaction**, with small positive endorsements on some items but corresponding mild dissatisfaction on others. The participant's overall life satisfaction appears **somewhat low and ambivalent in comparison to others.** This profile reflects the lowest in terms of sense of belonging to a particular group and seems to score lower than others in the sample. n his technical/scientific field, where larger bodies among heterosexual men were common—but sexuality was. Although he identified moments of safety within informal university-adjacent spaces, such as a campus pub where he felt defended by peers, he described limited institutional initiatives addressing either sexuality or body diversity. His reflections emphasised respect over forced acceptance, underscoring *a pragmatic ethic shaped by long-term exposure to exclusion*. Overall, his narrative highlights how migration, generation, and sexuality intersect to produce forms of marginalisation that are not reducible to body size alone.

Discussion

This pilot study suggests that plus-size and Bear-identified gay men in academia experience a complex interplay of visibility, invisibility, belonging, and marginalisation. Although participants' bodies were often visible within academic spaces, their identities as Bear or plus-size LGBTQI+ men remained largely absent from institutional diversity frameworks. Consistent with previous research on fat stigma and LGBTQ+ experiences in higher education, participants described academic institutions as structurally silent regarding body diversity, resulting in limited representation, weak institutional support (Brown et al., 2022)., and experiences of symbolic invisibility (Nutter et al., 2019). Bear and GMPD communities simultaneously functioned as spaces of affirmation and conditional belonging: several participants associated these communities with improved self-acceptance and emotional support (McGlynn, 2022), while others described exclusion related to class, nationality, neurodivergence, or desirability, reflecting findings that Bear spaces may reproduce internal hierarchies rather than fully resist them (Edmonds & Zieff, 2010). The SWLS results further indicated heterogeneous wellbeing, with participants reporting varying levels of life satisfaction connected to institutional climate (Meyer, 2003), career precarity, and access to supportive communities. These patterns align with minority stress theory, which highlights the buffering role of community affiliation against stigma-related stress (Woodford et al., 2015).

The findings also underscore the importance of wider legal and sociocultural contexts shaping LGBTQI+ visibility and belonging. Ongoing legal uncertainty surrounding same-sex marriage in Japan and uneven recognition of LGBTQ+ partnerships across Europe illustrate how institutional inclusion exists within broader systems of legal and cultural precarity (Amnesty International, 2024; Court of Justice of the European Union, 2025). Participants' narratives suggest that formal recognition alone does not automatically translate into inclusive academic environments. Overall, the study highlights the need for greater body diversity literacy within higher education, including explicit recognition of body size within diversity and wellbeing frameworks, inclusive supervision practices, and stronger collaboration between universities and Bear/GMPD communities. Interpreted through a Theory of Change and Social Return on Investment (SROI) lens, the findings suggest that institutional recognition and community support may generate meaningful social value by improving wellbeing, strengthening belonging, and fostering healthier academic climates.

Limitations

This study's sample (N = 5) is very small and based on convenience sampling, so findings are not generalisable. All participants were cisgender gay men; thus, experiences of trans, nonbinary or queer-of-other-genders Bear/GMPD persons remain unexamined. Data were collected via an online questionnaire, which lacks depth compared with in-person interviews, and prevented probing or follow-ups. Life-satisfaction scores were limited to a brief scale and not statistically analysed.

Still, the richness of qualitative responses justifies further, more extensive research.

Conclusion

Plus-size and Bear-identified gay men working in universities navigate a challenging landscape: their bodies may be seen, but their identities and needs are often ignored. Bear/GMPD communities offer partial refuge but are uneven in inclusivity. To foster real

equity, universities should expand diversity frameworks to include body diversity literacy, address weight- and sexuality-based stigma, and collaborate with community groups. Future research should build on this pilot with larger, multi-site qualitative studies and participatory community-based projects. Taken together, the findings suggest that plus-size and Bear/GMPD gay men in academia occupy positions of partial and conditional belonging. Their bodies are present but institutionally unrecognised; their communities are supportive yet stratified; and their wellbeing is uneven rather than uniformly compromised. By integrating qualitative narratives with descriptive wellbeing data, this study advances existing literature on LGBTQI+ academics and fat stigma and underscores the need for institutional approaches that recognise embodiment as central to academic life.

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