



Exploring the adoption and expression of subcultural identities among gay, bisexual, and queer-identifying men in Australia

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Abstract

Gay, bisexual, and queer-identifying (GBQ) communities tend to comprise various subcultural identity groups based around shared practices and intersectional identities, but little research has sought to qualitatively understand how these identities are situated within communities and enacted in everyday life. Further understanding subcultural identities is important as they reflect the diversity of GBQ men and potential health risks/differences between groups of men that may otherwise not be considered. This study aimed to advance understanding of GBQ subcultural identities in Australia by investigating how GBQ men come to adopt and express subcultural identities, such as ‘Bear’, ‘Twink’, or ‘Daddy’. Fifteen gay, bisexual, and queer-identifying men living in Australia who identified with one or more GBQ subcultures participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews between September and November 2019. An inductive thematic analysis with semantic coding and a realist framework was used to assess patterns of meaning within the data. Two higher level themes emerged relating to discovering identity and evolving practices of identification, with sub-themes related to self-guided exploration, identification by others, and contextual changes in expressing identity. These findings highlight that adopting subcultural identities involved elements of exploring language and discourse and embracing or resisting identification. The ways in which subcultural identities were integrated and expressed appeared to evolve over time and shift within different contexts, including emphasising or suppressing aspects of identity. This knowledge expands understanding of GBQ subcultural identities and help inform culturally-sensitive considerations for health promotion, policy, and research that engages GBQ men.

Keywords Identity · Gay Subculture · Subcultural identity · Queer · Culture · Thematic analysis

Introduction

Identity is a concept that underpins much of a person’s self-concept as well as how they relate and interact with others. It should be acknowledged that identity is intersectional, and a person’s self-concept and framings of health may reflect numerous intersecting demographics such as gender identity, ethnic background, religion, etc. Intersectionality is therefore a key consideration of researching identity in minority communities such as the LGBT community (Fish, 2008). Gay, bisexual, and queer-identifying (GBQ) men, in

addition to identifying with a sexual identity (say as gay, bisexual, queer, and other related identities), may also identify with one or more (intersecting) subcultural identities, such as ‘Bear’, ‘Twink’, ‘Daddy’, and many more (Franklin et al., 2020).

In the current study, the authors consider subcultural identities as a set of labels describing a broad range of groups that some (but not all) people within a broader cultural group (e.g., GBQ communities) may self-categorise under and identify with. These identities can represent a collection of characteristics (e.g., hirsuteness in ‘Bears’) or interests (e.g., video-gaming for ‘Gaymers’) that are perceived to be shared by others that categorise themselves under the same identity (*removed for blind review*). Whilst some subcultures exist beyond sexual identity-based cultures (e.g., ‘Geek’ and ‘Jock’), others may be more inherent to GBQ cultural communities (e.g., ‘Twink’ or ‘Queer’). The current study hence uses the term ‘GBQ subcultural identities’ to

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describe subcultures that GBQ-identifying men may self-identify under.

Little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of subcultural identities from the GBQ men who use them, especially regarding how these identities are adopted and expressed in their everyday lives. It is important to better understand how subcultural identities are adopted by GBQ men as these identities have been potentially linked to health and wellbeing-related practices and outcomes (e.g., Lyons & Hosking, 2014; Prestage et al., 2015).

Identity and Health

It is well established from broader research on identity that the ways in which a person chooses to identify and associate with others and expresses their identity may relate to their health and wellbeing (Jetten et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant for those who belong to minority groups (or ‘out-group’) from the perceived majority of society (or ‘in-group’; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Furthermore, the *group circumstance hypothesis* (Jetten et al., 2017) states that those defining themselves around a specific social identity or identities wherein their state of wellbeing may be affected by the status, perceptions, and structural conditions (such as stability and legitimacy) with which the group(s) they associate (Jetten et al., 2017). For example, a person identifying as GBQ (and expresses such) is more likely to experience lower social status and associated stigma, discrimination, and minority stress (Jackson et al., 2016), and thus is at-risk of associated negative outcomes for their mental and physical health (Meyer, 2003). These health and social outcomes are also impacted by both geographical location (Rickard & Yancey, 2018) and significant social developments, such as the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, which impacted the mental health of many LGB people in Australia (Verrelli et al., 2019). As such, a GBQ individual may avoid expressing their identity in certain contexts, such as with family, in school, or in the larger community (Higa et al., 2014).

It should be noted that not all members of GBQ communities equally consider their sexual identity as an influence on their health, wellbeing, or health behaviours (Adams et al., 2012; 2013), or consider it as a ‘secondary influence’ compared to other elements of their identity (Adams et al., 2012; 2014). For some gay men, their sexuality is considered a small or irrelevant part of their identity (or want to avoid being treated differently) and they may prefer not to label or disclose their sexual identity (Adams et al., 2014). Interview findings from Adams et al. (2012) suggest that sexuality and health are generally considered to be linked but to different extents. For example, at least one participant in their study considered their sexuality as having less influence on

their health than their gender identity, and participants were divided on whether their sexuality is a positive or negative influence on their health. Furthermore, Adams et al. (2013) illustrated how gay men perceive their health as an individual responsibility or as a community responsibility, as well as differences in the extent to which perceptions of the broader gay community are considered a positive (e.g., social acceptance) or negative (e.g., exclusion, oversexualisation) social influence on gay men’s health.

Subcultural Identities

Gay, bisexual, and queer communities tend to comprise numerous smaller communities and subcultural identity groups centred around associations with others that share one or more specific characteristics (Clausell & Fiske, 2005). These groups may relate to physical traits, shared activities, sexual preferences, or other characteristics as detailed in another article from the authors (Franklin et al., 2020). Among these groups are more well-known and common subcultures within academic literature such as the physical trait-focused ‘Bear’ (Quidley-Rodriguez & De Santis, 2016; Wright, 2013) and ‘Twink’ (Lyons & Hosking, 2014), and fetish-related ‘Leather’ subcultural identities (Barrett & Barrett, 2017; Moskowitz et al., 2011). Other subcultures include ‘Gaymer’, which is established around communities of GBQ-identified people who enjoy playing tabletop role-playing games and/or video games (Shaw, 2012), and the emerging subculture of ‘Pup’, which is based within kink practices around power dynamics and the adoption of a persona to engage in dog-like behaviours in a sexual or non-sexual manner (Wignall & McCormack, 2017). The terms for these and many other subcultures are often used to connect socially within GBQ communities and within self-description options on personal profiles hosted on mobile geo-social networking applications such as Grindr (Grindr LLC, 2020), Scruff (Perry Street Software, 2020), and Recon (T101 Limited, 2020).

Numerous studies of GBQ subcultures have linked specific subcultures and various health differences, outcomes, and behaviours such as risk-related behaviours. These outcomes include mental health (e.g., self-esteem), physical health differences, and rates of specific behaviours (e.g., alcohol consumption). Willoughby et al. (2008) investigated potential differences in health behaviours between gay men’s peer crowd affiliations in an American/Canadian sample; results indicated that certain peer crowds differed in rates of substance use, alcohol, consumption, and condomless anal sex. Moskowitz et al. (2011) examined the ‘Leathermen’ (men who wear leather and engage in “rougher, passive-aggressive sexual activities”; Moskowitz et al., 2011) subculture’s sexual behaviours and rates of HIV in an American

sample; results showed that those identifying as ‘Leathermen’ were less likely to use a condom and more likely to be HIV-positive, compared to non-‘Leathermen’-identifying participants.

Within an Australian context, Lyons and Hosking (2014) investigated potential physical and health differences between the ‘Twink’ and ‘Cub’ subcultures for young gay men. There were significant differences found for self-rated health, body mass index, tobacco and alcohol consumption, and receptive anal sex between the two subcultures. Furthermore, additional differences were found for mental health outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, community connectedness) and sexual health (e.g., number of sexual partners, rates of testing for sexually transmitted infections) between ‘Twinks’ and ‘Cubs’ compared to participants who did not have a subcultural identity (Lyons & Hosking, 2014). In particular, lower self-reported health was found in ‘Cubs’ compared to ‘Twinks’, whilst ‘Twinks’ reported significantly lower BMI, higher rates of alcohol consumption and tobacco use compared to ‘Cubs’. Furthermore, ‘Twinks’ reported significantly higher psychological distress, were more engaged in sexual health testing, and reported more recent receptive anal sex compared to ‘Cubs’ (Lyons & Hosking, 2014).

Prestage et al. (2015) explored how risk behaviours are associated with gay men’s participation in gay community subcultures in Australia; grouping numerous gay subculture labels into groupings around preferences and engagement in social or sexual activities. Participants who were more engaged with others within the ‘Sexually Adventurous’ or ‘Bear Tribes’ groupings were more likely to be older, to be HIV-positive, and to not be in a relationship. They were less likely to use a condom with casual partners or to have a higher level of education (Prestage et al., 2015).

Notably, the majority of research has examined GBQ subcultures with regard to sexual health or HIV-related behaviours or outcomes such as condom use or testing rates for sexually transmitted infections. Whilst there is a broad literature examining subcultural identities for GBQ men, many of these studies have examined representations of identity, such as in media (e.g., Seif, 2017; Shaw, 2012), or utilised a quantitative approach to draw associations between subcultural identity and health behaviours (e.g., Lyons & Hosking, 2014; Moskowitz et al., 2011; Prestage et al., 2015). Investigating how GBQ men adopt, and express subcultural identities is important to providing overall understanding of how identity shapes lives, particularly given the potential links to health and wellbeing. Such knowledge can potentially inform ways in which GBQ men are engaged around health promotion and support programs, such as ensuring that practices are grounded in cultural understanding, utilise appropriate terminology, and reflect social norms and lived experiences of those who

identify with particular subcultures. Previous research from the authors has explored the ways in which subcultural identities are understood and characterised by GBQ men and the social functions they hold within the community lives of GBQ men (Franklin et al, 2020).

Study Aims

This study aimed to further contribute to the understanding of GBQ subcultural identity in Australia through exploring the experiences of individuals that utilise these identities with regard to adopting and expressing their identity. Specifically, there were three main objectives, which involved investigating: (1) how GBQ men develop their sense of identity and adopt a subcultural identity; (2) whether an individual’s subcultural identity changes over time or within different contexts; and (3) ways in which GBQ men express their identity, including through language and behaviour. The study utilised a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2015), which holds that there is a shared understanding of the world held by people that are developed through numerous social constructs and assumptions, which are influenced by changes in social, political, and historical contexts. This approach extends to identity, in that GBQ men jointly construct an understanding of subcultural identities relevant to themselves.

Method

Participant Recruitment

The study sample consisted of 15 GBQ men living in Australia who attended a semi-structured qualitative interview between September and November 2019. Participants were eligible to attend an interview if they were 18 years of age or older, living in Australia, male-identifying (including transmasculine identities), and openly identifying as gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer. Furthermore, eligible participants had to identify with at least one subcultural identity either selected from a provided list of 19 subcultural identity terms or specified by the participant themselves. The list of 19 terms was developed from a review of profile options on three geo-social networking applications for same-sex attracted men: Grindr (Grindr LLC, 2020), Scruff (Perry Street Software, 2020), and Recon (T101 Limited, 2020).

Potential interview participants were recruited through an online expression of interest survey, advertised through the primary author’s social media (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn), which assessed eligibility for an interview through questions around demographics and self-identified subcultural identities. Participants who met the eligibility

criteria were invited to book themselves in for an interview with the primary author using a weblink. A total of 83 respondents accessed the survey, 56 were deemed eligible and invited to take part in an interview with the primary author; of which 15 attended and formed the final interview sample. The 41 participants remaining either did not book an interview, were unable to attend an interview, or failed to attend and did not reschedule their interview.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face at a university campus ($n=9$) or via an online private voice call (without video; $n=6$). Each attendee was provided an electronic information and consent form upon scheduling an interview and these were provided again at the beginning of their interview in order to obtain consent to be interviewed. Each interview began with a repeat of the expression of interest demographic questions to clarify the responses given. The interviews then focused on participants' experiences of their identity, including how they came to adopt the subcultural identity term(s) they used, how they express their identity to others (including language and behaviour), and in what ways (if any) their identity has changed over time or within different contexts. The interviews also explored characteristics attributed to specific subcultural identities by the participants, their understanding of identity, and their perspectives towards subcultural identity and its importance, which are the subject of discussion in a separate paper (Franklin et al, 2020). At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was given details of peer-counselling and mental health services specific to LGBTIQ+ people if needed; participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time before their interview and could withdraw consent to include their data in analysis for up to four weeks after their interview. Each interview was conducted by the primary author between September and November 2019 and ran for approximately 60 min in duration. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and de-identified for analysis. The study was approved by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

Reflecting the underlying social constructionist approach for the study, participant responses were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A realist framework using semantic coding was adopted for the analysis to explore the patterns of meaning within the explicit content of each response, whilst acknowledging that subcultural identities of GBQ men can be developed from social constructs (Jaspal, 2016). Thematic analysis is

a method of analysis that is both flexible in application and accessible to researchers (Nowell et al., 2017) and therefore fit the exploratory nature of the research well. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a six stage process. In Stage 1 (*Familiarising Yourself With the Data*), each transcript was read numerous times for familiarity; Stage 2 (*Generating Initial Codes*) then involved coding extracts based on content and meaning; Stage 3 (*Searching for Themes*) saw these codes being formed into themes based on patterns of content and meaning; Stage 4 (*Reviewing Potential Themes*) required refining and reviewing each theme multiple times before being defined and organised into structured themes and sub-themes in Stage 5 (*Defining and Naming Themes*); finally, Stage 6 (*Producing the Report*) involved selecting relevant illustrative extracts for each theme and reporting the analysis. Each step of the analysis was conducted by the primary author with regular discussion and review of the analyses with the other authors throughout. Pseudonyms were generated for each participant and are presented alongside their age and self-reported subcultural identity term(s) in illustrative quotes.

Author Positionality

It is helpful to first acknowledge the positionality of the authors (in particular, the primary author who conducted the research interviews and data analysis). All three authors are Caucasian scholars from Australia with professional backgrounds working within broader LGBT communities in health promotion and research contexts. We acknowledge that this may have limited the cultural perspectives through which the authors could understand GBQ culture and subcultural identities. The primary author identifies as a Gay male and has been involved with numerous LGBT community organisations and identifies under a number of GBQ subcultural identities himself. Some of the interpretations of the research data and frameworks for exploring this topic have emerged from his interactions within the community and exposure to different subcultures prior to designing and conducting the current study, though all authors were involved in checking and refining the data and interpretations presented. The research presented in both this article and the authors' previous work (Franklin et al, 2020) formed the basis of a research-based Master's thesis by the primary author, hence the two articles are considered as complementary and help to contextualise one another.

Results

A table presenting the demographics for the final interview sample of the current study can be found in Franklin et al

Table 1 Overview of Higher-Level Themes and Sub-Themes Derived From Participant Responses

Higher-Level Themes	Sub-Themes	Example excerpt
Discovering identity and sub-cultural identity		“Just sort of learning about these labels within the community and then seeing who already falls under those, who are already identified as those types.” (Brandon, 37 - Daddy, Jock, Geek, Gaymer, Queer)
	Self-Guided Exploration: The Role of Language and Discourse	“When I moved to Melbourne I started to branch out and interact with new people, and I’ve had both positive and negative experiences [...] From there, I’ve sort of developed bits and pieces going ‘Okay, yeah, I enjoy this, this title fits me and explains this part of me simply’. (Samuel, 28 - Chaser, Otter, Pup).
	Embracing or Resisting Identification	“I hated identifying [as ‘Bear’]. It wasn’t until [...] I started seeing an ex that I actually started identifying as ‘Bear’, because he just nicknamed me Bear.” (Robert, 38 - Bear, Daddy)
Evolving Practices of Identification		“With time, you go to grow with those [GBQ sub-cultural] communities [which] are always popping up all the time [...]. It’s not until they come along that you can identify with [them], so my identity now might be different from my identity in five years’ time.” (Harry, 32 - Otter, Poz)
	Expressing Identity Differently Across Social Contexts	“I will use similar terms to myself and to other people, so long as those people are people that I know, and people that are safe and accepting. But if the other person is an unknown quantity, then I tend not to say very much at all.” (Alex, 38 - Bear, Geek, Daddy, Chub, Queer)

(2020). Here, we provide a summary of the key demographics. The majority of participants were aged between 18 and 40 years ($n = 14$) and only one participant was aged over 40. Of the sample, 14 participants reported their gender as male or ‘cis male’ and one was transmasculine. The majority of the sample identified as gay ($n = 12$), one participant identified as bisexual, another as pansexual, and one identified as queer for their sexual orientation. In terms of sub-cultural identities, the majority of participants identified as ‘Geek’ ($n = 9$), followed by ‘Queer’ ($n = 7$) and ‘Bear’ ($n = 5$). Four participants each identified as ‘Otter’, ‘Daddy’, and/or ‘Gaymer’; three identified as ‘Cub’ and/or ‘Pup’; and two as

‘Chub’, ‘Jock’, and/or ‘Twink’. Only one participant identified as each of ‘Chaser’, ‘Guy Next Door’, ‘Leather’, ‘Poz’, or as another sub-cultural identity term. Participants could select more than one sub-cultural identity.

Participants were based in Victoria ($n = 13$) or Queensland ($n = 2$). The majority of the sample identified as Anglo-Celtic ($n = 9$) or European ($n = 2$) and one participant identified as South-East Asian; two participants reported a mixed ethnic background with limited elaboration, and one participant did not disclose their ethnic background. In terms of experience in education, one participant reported not finishing high school, but the rest of the sample had completed high school ($n = 2$) or a tertiary qualification of some form ($n = 13$).

Two higher-level themes and three sub-themes arose from the responses of each participant regarding how they explored and developed their understanding of identity as well as how they express their identity. A synthesis of the higher-level themes and sub-themes derived from participant responses can be found in Table 1. Furthermore, a glossary detailing how the interview sample defined each sub-cultural identity discussed in the current study, including participant-derived descriptions and representations of these sub-cultural identities, can be found in Franklin et al (2020).

Discovering Identity and Sub-cultural Identities

Participants were invited to share their experiences of how they came to discover GBQ identities in general and the different sub-cultural identities that they felt an affinity with. Participants outlined several concepts such as exploration, language and discourse, embracing identity, the evolution of identity, and how sub-cultural identities are integrated and expressed. Their responses also reinforced the notion that it is possible to identify with more than one sub-cultural identity (as every interview participant had).

Self-Guided Exploration: The Role of Language and Discourse

Most participants articulated a period of self-guided exploration and a process of gaining knowledge around GBQ communities, subcultures, and language. Brandon briefly summarised how he came to discover his identity (or identities):

Just sort of learning about these labels within the community and then seeing who already falls under those, who are already identified as those types. Then, I’d basically be like comparing [myself] to those individuals whether consciously or subconsciously,

and seeing who's somewhat applicable to yourself as well, your circumstances. (Brandon, 37 - Daddy, Jock, Geek, Gaymer, Queer)

Brandon (among other participants) highlighted the importance of social comparisons, particularly in identifying where he fit within different identity categories, but Brandon also implied that comparing and identifying with others could be both a conscious and deliberate process as well as a natural or automatic process, at least for him. Often, participants mentioned that their sense of identity developed as they explored GBQ communities further, observed and interacted with people of different subcultures, and developed an affinity with subcultures that align with their own personal characteristics such as physical traits, hobbies and interests, and sexual preferences. A common theme that emerged (as perceived by the authors) was that the language used to identify themselves within a subculture had to be learned and developed, and that it took time to realise how best to describe themselves. For some participants, they began learning about the terms they use from other people, whether from encountering terms being used by other people or being labelled directly by others (see *'Embracing or Resisting Identification'* below). For example, Mark recounted his first experience with subcultural identity terms:

I remember sitting around with some friends and we did like an online quiz, that you know puts you into different categories depending on [your answers]. So, I think probably that was one of the first times I'd really thought about myself in fitting into a category like that. (Mark, 35 – Otter, Queer)

For several participants, learning about these terms and/or the communities that use them was often framed as an important process in developing and adopting their subcultural identity (or identities). Additionally, some participants mentioned how discovering and selecting terms from those they have encountered in online spaces or have heard from other people that relate to their own personal characteristics, experiences, and social affiliations prompted them to adopt these into their overall identity, as discussed by Samuel:

When I moved to Melbourne I started to branch out and interact with new people, and I've had both positive and negative experiences [...] From there, I've sort of developed bits and pieces going 'Okay, yeah, I enjoy this, this title fits me and explains this part of me simply'. (Samuel, 28 – Chaser, Otter, Pup).

Furthermore, discourses behind subcultural identities were explored by participants in their responses including apparent symbols, unspoken expectations, and dominant framings that influence how these identities are discussed and understood. These include framings related to gender norms, and expectations around perceived interests or behaviours, and may be influenced by media and social conditions. For example, the interview data suggested that each participant drew upon similar descriptions and characteristics for better-known identities like 'Twinks' and 'Bears', in both appearance and behaviour, to how they are portrayed in media. However, lesser-known identities like 'Otter' and 'Guy Next Door' had less consistent framings and fewer implicit archetypes evident in the participants' responses. This might be due to there being fewer reference points and symbols that enhance the visibility for or shape understanding of these identities.

Embracing or Resisting Identification

A common experience described by participants was the manner in which they were identified or labelled by other people, some of which they may or may not already be familiar with or feel an affinity to. Some terms were welcomed and adopted into their sense of identity, others were rejected or resisted by the participant for numerous reasons, including internal reflection of one's identity and personal characteristics, recognising elements of oneself within specific communities, or purely through visceral responses to being labelled. For example, Alex explained why (although the term may be accurate) he does not identify as a 'Geek': "Yeah, it's an accurate description but I don't feel that - I don't have any kind of visceral response to being labelled a Geek to bother identifying in that way" (Alex, 38 – Bear, Chub, Daddy, Queer).

Alex's response suggests that there is a difference between appearing or behaving in ways that others may feel reflects a particular subcultural identity, and actively feeling and identifying with that identity.

For others, the rejection of identity terms appeared to be based on negative perceptions, such as stigma or discrimination by others. For example, Robert described his perspective on being called a 'Bear', a term that he now uses:

I hated identifying [as 'Bear']. It wasn't until [...] I started seeing an ex that I actually started identifying as 'Bear', because he just nicknamed me Bear. [...] Growing up in [home city] the 'Bear' community was ostracised and segregated. [...] Because (I am) hairy, people tried to put me into that category, and I saw it as a negative term. It was one that I fought off for a very, very long time, until I moved to Melbourne and

started to understand more about the ‘Bear’ community and that it wasn’t actually a bad thing, and it was just, it was more what I identified as. (Robert, 38 – Bear, Daddy)

Although given the term ‘Bear’ by other people, Robert had encountered negative connotations of the term and experiences of the ‘Bear’ community in his home city. He eventually came to learn more about the term through interacting with other ‘Bears’ positively in Melbourne, which helped Robert to understand that it was how he identified, and he adopted the ‘Bear’ label into his own sense of identity. In a similar manner, Brandon briefly expressed how he incorporated the ‘Gaymer’ term referred to by others:

At first, I really rejected that term, the ‘Gaymer’ with a Y, but it’s cool. [...] Just due to my own experience, especially not really having a community of ‘Gaymers’, wasn’t really until I started playing World of Warcraft™ and [realised] there’s dozens of us. (Brandon, 37 – Daddy, Jock, Geek, Gaymer, Queer)

For both Robert and Brandon, they have adopted subcultural identities based on how others have identified them. However, they only adopted these identities after engaging with others who identified in this way and after experiencing a sense of community these terms can facilitate in relevant physical (e.g., Melbourne) or virtual spaces (e.g., World of Warcraft™). Although resisting them at first, both of these men demonstrated acceptance of subcultural identities, a process commonly mentioned by the participants.

Several participants referred to self-acceptance, deciding upon term(s) to identify with and becoming comfortable with them over time was an important part of adopting and articulating a subcultural identity or identities. By accepting themselves first, it became easier to utilise and share how they identify to other people, as summed up by Evan:

When you identify as these subcategories of queerness or fetish whatever, it’s the same as when you identify as gay. You have to accept it, and say it to yourself, and be it yourself internally to be able to share it externally. If you’re saying externally ‘I’m [these identities]’, but internally you’re saying ‘I’m [other identities]’, there’s something going on that you need to address. Because unless you’re comfortable and willing to say to yourself ‘This is who I am’, then saying it to other people isn’t going to mean anything, and it’s going to make you more uncomfortable, because that means you’re just faking it. (Evan, 28 – Bear, Cub, Geek, Chub, Pup, Leather)

Evolving Practices of Identification

Several participants also highlighted the evolving and fluid nature of GBQ communities and how the terms for GBQ subcultural identities themselves change over time, as exemplified by Harry.

With time, you go to grow with those [GBQ subcultural] communities [which] are always popping up all the time, so you can’t always self-identify with these communities. It’s not until they come along that you can identify with [them], so my identity now might be different from my identity in five years’ time. (Harry, 32 – Otter, Poz)

As both he and the communities change, Harry felt that his identity could change entirely over time, including identifying with communities he had not felt aligned to in the past.

To some participants, their responses implied that the way that they expressed themselves with subcultural identity terms had also changed over time, whether through changing which terms they use or the ways in which they describe themselves. Mark, for example, stated that he has become more comfortable in declaring and understanding his subcultural identities over time.

I’m less subtle over time, and I think feeling more comfortable using some of, using those words and definitely more comfortable yeah having a little bit more of a theoretical discussion about it because, just I think that’s an increase in knowledge, it’s an increase in experience, and it’s just feeling more comfortable in myself. (Mark, 35 – Otter, Queer)

For other participants, the subcultural identities they used have changed as their interests (or other factors such as age, weight, or sexual preferences) have changed over time. Maxwell illustrated that his identity has changed to reflect changes in both his personal interests (becoming more focused on popular culture and ‘Geek’ tendencies) and self-concept:

It depends on my most prominent identity trait at the moment. [...] For a while, I was like a gym junkie, [...] that one guy who talks about the gym. Nowadays, it’s a lot more like femme stuff, and about the [‘Gaymer’] stuff. (Maxwell, 23 – Cub, Gaymer, Geek, Twink)

Maxwell’s change in identity came about as a result of shifting identity traits and the management of his multiple subcultural identities, having identified as ‘Geek’, ‘Gaymer’, and ‘Jock’ (among others) at the same time. In the instance

referred to by Maxwell, when ‘Jock’ was no longer relevant to himself personally and the ‘Gaymer’ identity was more prominent, it appeared that Maxwell chose to revise his identities by discarding ‘Jock’.

Expressing identity differently across social contexts

Several responses from participants suggested that social norms have a role in shaping subcultural identities as well as the behaviours associated with them. These social norms may be influenced by stereotypical perceptions of how someone in GBQ communities act, or the notion of meeting these perceptions by ‘acting gay’ as mentioned by Mark:

I think with the things that you identify with it's easier to fall into the behavioural norms of that, because you know that you're not going to be questioned about it, and you sort of blend in I guess with those types of things[...] Like when you go to a gay club, the more gay that you are there the less people are going to say, or less the perception I guess that people are going to look at you as being an outsider you know, if you're acting the role of it you're able to blend in a little bit more I guess. (Mark, 35 – Otter, Queer)

Participants indicated that they emphasised certain identities or aspects of their identity, depending on the context and any potential benefit to doing so (such as communicating with others more easily or successfully, feeling safer in a given situation, or an increased feeling of belonging with an individual or group). Brandon and Zachary gave examples of how they emphasise and express certain identities:

I would perform a little bit sometimes I'd play up an identity when it's, say, beneficial to me or within certain groups for sure. Within the ‘Gaymer’ group for example, I would be talking about how much I love video games, and all these different games. Whereas in the workplace, I'm just ‘Oh yeah, I spent the weekend hanging out, just you know watching TV, and all that sort of stuff’, [and I] don't really mention the video games to someone that's not going to be interested in video games. (Brandon, 37 – Daddy, Jock, Geek, Gaymer, Queer)

However, several participants stated that there were also situations in which they would suppress or downplay subcultural identity or other aspects of themselves, often to reduce the risk of potential social rejection, harm, or discrimination, or to increase their perceived safety in an environment. This suppression can manifest in a number of ways hinted

at by participants, including avoiding the use of subcultural identity terms in general, altering the levels of self-disclosure to others depending on the environment, or even avoiding interaction or disclosure altogether. Alex discussed how he changed the term(s) he describes himself in (both in terms of subcultural identity and his identity as a trans man), depending on whom he is talking to:

I will use similar terms to myself and to other people, so long as those people are people that I know, and people that are safe and accepting. But if the other person is an unknown quantity, then I tend not to say very much at all. (Alex, 38 – Bear, Geek, Daddy, Chub, Queer)

Furthermore, specific situational contexts (such as specific GBQ community spaces) influenced how Stephen emphasised/suppressed his identities:

I'd also say it was very situational as well, like if I was at [a specific ‘Bear’-associated bar] I would be more open with my identity as the cub or within the kink sort of thing than, you know – if I was at a straight bar, I'd be more covered up or a bit more reserved and watching how I danced or whatever. (Stephen, 24 – Bear, Cub, Jock, Queer)

Discussion

The discovery and adoption of subcultural identities by GBQ men were illustrated to incorporate elements of discovering identity as a concept, self-guided exploration of one's own identity, learning the language and discourse around subcultural identities, and embracing/resisting identification by others. Furthermore, identity in general (and subcultural identities) emerged as a construct that was by no means stable but rather was found to evolve in terms of meaning, language used to express it, and in terms of how identity interacted with social context.

Several participants referred to associating with groups of similar people in a way consistent with previous research on gay subgroups and peer groups (Clausell & Fiske, 2005; Willoughby et al., 2008). Additionally, the subcultural identity terms actively self-identified with or referred to by participants were consistent with previous quantitative research on subcultural identities in Australia (e.g., Lyons & Hosking, 2014; Prestage et al., 2015). The elements of resisting identification and labelling as a particular subculture(s) or suppressing aspects of personal identity reflect a similar resistance or downplaying of identity illustrated by GBQ

men in Adams et al. (2014). Reflecting the group circumstance hypothesis from Jetten et al. (2017), the perceptions of certain subcultural groups that participants identified with (or were labelled as) were stated to influence their self-perception and wellbeing, especially in regard to feeling accepted in social circles.

It is important to consider that the responses from participants represent their individual perceptions of identity and reality, and these may be influenced by their intersectional identities (subcultural identities, as well as demographics such as cultural or ethnic background or religion). The current study was designed to account for and acknowledge the potential for participants to adopt more than one subcultural identity by considering these as a form of intersecting identities similar to demographics. From the authors' perspective, this was an appropriate decision to avoid forcing participants to choose only a single term to describe their identity and potentially suppressing other parts of their sexual identity or subcultural identity as a result.

The current study provides new insights on the ways in which GBQ men adopt subcultural identities and how these identities can be expressed and shift within different social contexts in their everyday lives. Furthermore, this study provides insight on subcultural identities that have not received as much attention in previous research, such as 'Chub', 'Gaymer', and 'Otter'; placing attention on these identities alongside more commonly-known ones provides a richer picture of the diversity of GBQ subcultural identities. The findings of the current study provide further cultural understanding of GBQ communities and highlight how GBQ men are not necessarily a single homogeneous group and how subcultural identities can be an important part of their life experiences. Exploring how subcultural identity is integrated, expressed, and emphasised or suppressed in different contexts provides a basis for understanding how the impacts of stigmatised contexts and discrimination may relate to certain subcultural identities (or combinations thereof), particularly those potentially more exposed to stigma.

Having greater culturally situated knowledge is important to informing policies and support programmes aimed at improving wellbeing, such as social support initiatives to foster community connectedness or social inclusion, health promotion efforts that speak to the lived experiences of GBQ men (Fertman & Allensworth, 2017), or support-related initiatives that target particular subcultural groups. For example, health promotion for subcultural groups such as 'Bear', 'Leather', or 'Pup' could consider utilising community spaces, events, and specific terminology tailored around those subcultures wherein those identities are more likely to be expressed openly to others. There are few examples of health promotion campaigns such as these, tailored

at specific GBQ subcultural groups, such as the 'Go Bear Not Bare' ad campaign from 2012, run by ACON with Harbour City Bears in Sydney, Australia (Forgan-Smith, 2012).

There are also numerous GBQ subcultural groups documented in the current study that have very limited visibility or specific consideration in health outreach or research (e.g., 'Chub', 'Otter', 'Pup'). The current study potentially helps to make these subcultural identities more visible and to possibly prompt a level of attention in support programs and research that is similar to better known identities such as the 'Bear' community. At a broader level, the findings of the current study may inform future health promotion campaigns and support programs by considering the wider spectrum and potential multiplicity of subcultural identities for GBQ men, as well as some of the different ways in which these men come to adopt and express these identities.

Policy makers and health promoters should also consider and be aware of how health needs and experiences may vary across different GBQ subcultural groups in order to understand where is best to situate which kinds of interventions. Furthermore, exploring factors such as stigma and the ways in which different subcultural identity groups are perceived in future research may inform how these experiences and perceptions relate to the health and well-being of GBQ men who identify with particular subcultures, which may further inform health promotion initiatives.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This study is among, to the best of our knowledge, the first to explore GBQ subcultural identities through a ground-up empirical approach centred on the perspectives of the individuals and communities who actively identify with and utilise subcultural identity terms in Australia. A strength of the current study is that it avoids placing specific emphasis on certain subcultures or behavioural outcomes when examining subcultural identities, allowing for any information or emphasis to naturally emerge for certain subcultures.

The study focused only on those who identified with one or more subcultures and who were willing to participate in an interview. For these reasons, these participants could be considered more open about their identity and more connected to gay cultures. We did not collect data from individuals who do not identify as GBQ but engage in related practices (such as men who have sex with men but identify as straight) nor from those who do not openly identify with a GBQ subculture. As such, the study findings represent an insider perspective of GBQ identity and subcultures and should be considered within that context. It is important to note that certain subcultural groups may be more private in how they express or discuss their identity and practices and may be less willing to participate in interviews to share

their experiences. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that these groups have been fully accessed and different methods of accessing these groups (such as utilising individuals within these communities to reach other members) may be needed for future research to reach a larger range of participants. Further research should also consider exploring the perspectives of non-GBQ-identifying men who have sex with men as a comparison or for alternate perspectives of subcultural identities.

Additionally, the study involved limited representation of different Australian states and territories (participants were primarily from Victoria with a few Queensland-based participants), thus reducing the potential information that may be gathered around location-based differences or the comparison of each state's social environments that may influence how subcultural identities are discovered or expressed. Furthermore, only one participant was above the age of 40, curtailing meaningful exploration of the perspectives of older GBQ men, in order to better understand potential age-related or generational contexts for identity development and expression.

Finally, data were not collected regarding participants' marital status which may be an additional intersectional identity that informed the participants' perceptions of identity and subcultural identities. This is hinted at as a potential influence in one quote from participant Robert (see '*Embracing or Resisting Identification*' above), highlighting a potential avenue for further exploration. Future research could consider collecting the marital status of participants and/or exploring the extent to which marital status and romantic and/or aromantic relationships might factor into how subcultural identities are adopted or expressed.

Future Research Directions

Further exploration of GBQ subcultural identities may involve tailored quantitative and qualitative application of the current study's findings from both this paper and Franklin et al (2020), such as the perceived benefits of adopting a subcultural identity and the contextual changes in expressing them. Furthermore, future research can assess how combinations of different subcultural identities relate to health and wellbeing outcomes in the lives of GBQ men. One avenue of such research may be to explore subcultural identity-specific health and risk-related factors (e.g., rates of sexual risk behaviours, experiences of minority stress, and stigma-related health impacts). In addition, protective factors of subcultural identities (e.g., community connectedness, perceived visibility and representation) may be explored at both the individual and group-level. Further research around these topics may provide new insight into how subcultural identities relate to particular health outcomes within

GBQ-identifying people. Additional qualitative research would be useful to examine and better understand the ways in which GBQ subcultural identities are expressed and may be informed by other intersectional identities such as cultural background, religion, and marital status.

Conclusions

This study utilised an empirical qualitative approach to examine how GBQ men in Australia discover their sense of identity, and how they adopt and express subcultural identities. The findings demonstrate variations in how GBQ men adopt subcultural identities (such as seeking out subcultural groups, comparisons with others, or being labelled with subcultural identity terms by others), how subcultural identities can be expressed within different social contexts and how they may change over time. Overall, these findings provide further insight into understanding gay cultures and subcultures, particularly around the lived experiences of subcultural identities which may be useful for those seeking greater cultural knowledge of these communities as well as those seeking to engage with GBQ communities in a culturally appropriate manner.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Jake D. Franklin, under the supervision of Dr Adam Bourne and Dr Anthony Lyons who provided advice on analysing and interpreting the data. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Jake D. Franklin, with critical feedback provided by Dr Adam Bourne and Dr Anthony Lyons. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Approval All research procedures reported in this article were approved by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC19350).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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