

## Fatvertising: Refiguring Fat Gay Men in Cyberspace<sup>1</sup>

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*The internet has become a site for refiguring commercial representations of gay identity. These alternative ads represent a form of gay resistance to advertising that promotes negative perceptions of fat gay men. Fat gay men benefit from cyberspace because it provides a critical organising vehicle for group formation. Users of fat-friendly groups exchange physically inventive pictures and text that reconsider strict body standards. Developing the concept of 'fatvertising', I ask the question: what do people do when multiple forms of media exclude them? Through semiotic analysis, I interpret two types of visual texts: appropriations and morphs. Both alter depictions of the male physique in popular advertisements by using the body to negotiate ideologies. These creative practices, while imperfect, transform the stereotypical, gym-toned body most gay men have come to identify with, which characterises a vital identity-related process for members of fat-affirming groups. It also offers possibilities to gay men for renegotiating the currently restrictive range of gay male body concepts.*

A new gay silhouette is emerging that isn't on the Atkins' diet. The stomach is expanding. It is both out and, shockingly, proud. ... The baby gays who are defining what it means to be young, streetwise, and living for the city actually find a paunch attractive. It's a symbol of being both lived-in and of good living.<sup>2</sup>

This essay explores a new relationship between gay identity and body symbolism in reworked commercial images on the internet, describing what some men do when images, advertising, and other forms of media inadequately represent them. In cyberspace, groups of fat gay men reconfigure imagery and text to signal issues of personal, collective and gender identity.<sup>3</sup> Though the counselling community has discussed how advertisements negatively influence gay consumers' perceptions of their bodies, few have considered advertisements as part of an interactive process that provides an opportunity for groups to evaluate, revise, and reconfigure body images.<sup>4</sup> This interactive process occurs as much in the virtual world (in this case, on the internet) as it does in face-to-face experience. Here I examine how fat gay men subject ads to resistant cultural practices, thereby reshaping both the images and their sense of themselves. This example serves to develop a larger model for understanding visibility politics and virtual body images.<sup>5</sup> Building on studies that unpack the complex semiotics of advertisements and media images,<sup>6</sup> I discuss how reworking the images can provide a site for both critique and the reinstatement of conformity.

I describe, in detail, two visual case studies. These physically inventive images challenge conventional portrayals of fat and contribute to a sense of community (a group with recognised and shared ideals of the body) with the express purpose of enhancing fat's visibility and ameliorating fat as a source of alienation. In my account of semiotic structures, fat gay men emerge as the 'inveterate and promiscuous producers of signs'.<sup>7</sup> Visual semiotics involves the continuous dismantling and reassembly of visual texts, recognising that visual communication represents 'not the mere "embroidery" of "reality", but a way of knowing it, of coping with it, and of changing it'.<sup>8</sup> In other

words, visual communication works in both virtual and actual realities. This work asks: in what way do emerging visual technologies reshape fat politics for gay men? Folding in social history, I also situate the images in the context of developing gay social trends. For the current generation of young gay men, loosening the restrictions on their waistlines signifies a refiguring of gay body concepts. I reference historical moments like the advent of HIV/AIDS that continue to influence gay men's current and everyday understandings of fatness and their bodies.

The title of this paper introduces a paradox, given that advertisers diligently work to trim the fat from commercial images. As such, blending the terms fat and advertisement is unlikely to produce a well-known portmanteau, but I find it useful to try to bundle these two words together. Like 'subvertisements' (ads in opposition to advertising), my discussion of images focuses on work by an artist who recreates commercial images and another who digitally alters them. Both artists try to mimic or maintain the 'look and feel' of the originals while at the same time incorporating fat-affirming themes.<sup>9</sup> These men borrow or 'poach' basic visual elements from widely circulated ad campaigns, convert them into a vehicle for reclaiming a fat gay male identity and then recirculate the new images among members of the online subcultures.<sup>10</sup> Since these artists actively participate in online fat-friendly groups, their works 'speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defence of tastes'.<sup>11</sup> I begin with a discussion about restrictions on the gay body followed by details on the audiences of the images. Figure 1 represents a fatvertisement modelled after a parody of the long-running Absolut vodka campaign. The second image that I analyse plays with a highly visible underwear ad produced by Calvin Klein in the early 1990s.

### *Constructing Boundaries of the Gay Body*

Like heterosexual women, gay men experience greater conflict with their appearance, physique and food when compared to heterosexual men, in part because gay men recognise the images everyone encounters of the idealised male body as being gay. Further, gay men negatively associate fat with effeminacy. Given these dynamics, it is important to identify boundary marking and maintenance, the role of advertising, and the historical context of 'fatness' and body image, including its gendered implications for gay men. Theoretically, I anchor this paper in cyberfeminist ideas, tying them specifically to boundaries of the gay body.<sup>12</sup> This foreshadows the image analysis that focuses on how gay men in online fat-affirming groups visually renegotiate body oppression. As I hinted at the outset, this paper deals with issues surrounding gay identity and body symbolism within a particular historical circumstance (the post-HIV/AIDS era). Historically constituted bodies are socially produced and 'as objects of knowledge and as historical actors ... "homosexuals" are quite junior'.<sup>13</sup> No doubt, 'homosexuals' represent a relatively new social category, but our understanding of gay men's tenuous relationship with fat is also in its infancy. Gay men revisit their relationships to fat subsequent to diseased bodies and recognise that their adherence to the norms and physicality of hegemonic masculinity remains under constant surveillance. Thus, gay men live in historically constituted and highly gendered communities.

Body image influences boundary marking. '[C]onceptions of bodily boundaries and social order' raise 'consciousness about how fundamental body imagery is to world view, and so to political language'.<sup>14</sup> Commercialised images reify body boundaries. Gay personals, for instance, reflect these persistent images and separate bodies with the expression, 'Should be in shape and please, NO fats or femmes!'. Following the personal ad lingo, a failure to be 'height-weight proportionate' goes beyond the bounds of how a gay body 'ought to look'.<sup>15</sup> Gay men marginalise other gay men who fail to conform to strict bodily standards and use these boundaries in the making of inequality.<sup>16</sup> Gender is the most salient dimension of this type of boundary work. Heterosexism perpetuates the myth that gay men are effeminate and that effeminate men must be gay and works in part by assuming that all coupled relationships, even same-sex ones, include a masculine role and feminine complement. Fat visually reinforces the effeminate label when men appear to develop breasts or hips, or it diminishes the visibility of their genitals.<sup>17</sup> Fat produces stereotypical feminised features that threaten masculinity and its archetype of the disciplined, muscular body.<sup>18</sup> To gain heterosexual

acceptance, gay men often adopt rigid gender roles, such as the straight-acting, masculine male, to create a border between themselves and the stigma surrounding the 'fats' and the 'femmes'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, gay men use gendered dimensions of the body to mark territory between groups, creating in- and out-group distinctions.

Advertising also plays a role in the construction of boundaries and often an irresponsible one.<sup>20</sup> Gay men subordinate their bodies to systems of commercial oppression. Being gay has become a commercialised spectacle where men feel compelled to purchase products and procedures that market physical perfection.<sup>21</sup> Thus, advertising as a boundary-ordering device produces conformity and implicates gay men in financing industries that contribute to their body dissatisfaction.<sup>22</sup> The gay male aesthetic rewards those with a lean, taut and muscular upper body and visual elements of gay culture such as clubs and commercial representations reinforce this standard. The oppressive content of gay visual culture centres on the body worship of male models in homoerotic media such as artwork, television, pornography, and physique and fashion magazines. Because many gay men prioritise personal appearance, they spend an inordinate amount of time trying to change the surface of their bodies through gyms, cosmetic surgery, tanning, and hair restoration and removal.<sup>23</sup> Commercial images visualise social difference in ways that exclude imperfect gay bodies, namely fat, old, or disabled, and divide men along these lines.

### *The Audience of the Images*

Web transformation of commercialised images is a proliferating phenomenon defined by its instability. As this goes to press there will be more images, making it difficult to estimate how widespread they are. Over six major websites cater exclusively to big gay men and their admirers; my image analysis comes mostly from two.<sup>24</sup> The first, a relatively new site targeted at young adults, and the second being the pioneer in sites for gay men interested in belonging to an online fat-affirming community. A young and stereotypically handsome network administrator from Florida, who admires big-and-beefy college gays, started the first group I rely on in early 2003. He markets the site as a fraternity that currently has over 5600 members internationally, mostly from North America, Europe and Australia, which continues to grow. Most participants on this site post and update pictures to increase the likelihood that others will view their profile. These personal profile images provide pleasure to members who largely assume them to be authentic. A big man from Ohio and his supportive partner founded the second group I draw on in 1996, during a time when the internet was expanding and becoming more influential.<sup>25</sup> Off the main page there is a clickable link dedicated to galleries featuring members' fat and gay fantasy and 'erotic folk art', and contains everything from sketches and animation to digital artwork.<sup>26</sup> This site went down in 2006 to move to a new server.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the life of these gay-and-fat-affirming images carries on because numerous moderated email groups pick up where the websites leave off. For example, one of the largest storehouses of images was a series of nine *Yahoo!* groups inspired by homoerotic pictures of beer drinking college men proudly showing off their guts.<sup>28</sup> Here, members posted individual photo albums, but the archives mostly contained internet images collected by the moderator for admirers to consume.

Cross-posting provides images with broader coverage. Furthermore, each site sorts and catalogues images differently, so the categorisation of different 'types' varies depending on the group's specialisation.<sup>29</sup> Appropriated images on the email groups connote meaning, that is, they signify it indirectly. Thus, the appeal of appropriated images comes from giving them a new twist under a fat-affirming framework.<sup>30</sup> Members of fat interest groups negotiate and transform the meaning of mainstream images by reading them both with and 'against the grain' taking what the image-maker originally intended and then recasting it in a playful 'key'.<sup>31</sup> Groups organise around similar viewing habits reinforcing alternative visual codes that eroticise the fat gay body.<sup>32</sup> The numbers and types of these groups fluctuate, with popular ones having 4000-5000 members and less trafficked ones having anywhere from 1500-2000.

Online groups of fat gay men construct a sense of community based on asserting the visibility of the body and rely heavily on the stylised repetition of images to build their communities.<sup>33</sup> The artist responsible for the second image I discuss, aside from having artwork on the Ohio-based website, also hosts a small *Yahoo!* group with over 1000 members where he archives most of his pictures.<sup>34</sup> He is into 'tweening' photographs and wreaks havoc on commercialised images of men, porn being the most popular, though male celebrities and sport stars (public figures) come in as a close second for victims of his use of transformative technology. 'Morphing' is a process that warps lifelike images by computer. It plays upon notions of essential identity and confronts viewers with spectacles of unstable identity.<sup>35</sup> This digital imaging technique emphasises the mutability of the body, which corresponds to the 'amodern' body concept put forth by cyberfeminists.<sup>36</sup> In this way, morphs also epitomise queer, a term that marks the instability of identity.<sup>37</sup> Rather than completely overturning dominant images, morphs float between mainstream depictions and marginalised representations.<sup>38</sup> Morphs create new virtual beings with no real human referent and play with relationships between the body and technology.<sup>39</sup> For gay men in online fat communities, morphs superimpose fat onto idealised male bodies in homoerotic media.

Based on conceptual interest, I have chosen two image exemplars from these communities to discuss, interpreting them in close relation to the analytical and theoretical frameworks of semiotics and boundary work.

### *The Images*

During the final season of HBO's *Sex and the City*,<sup>40</sup> Samantha's love interest, Smith Jared (actor/model Jason Lewis), appears in a fictional vodka campaign with the slogan *Absolut Hunk*. Peter Gehrke, the Swede who takes pictures for the real Absolut Spirits Company, produced the fake ad.<sup>41</sup> The Absolut simulation, inspired by 70s pinups, features Lewis nude apart from a vodka bottle carefully positioned in front of his genitals. In this iconic sign, the appearance of the model favourably affects Absolut vodka. Lewis, the object of the advertisement, boasts a smooth, tanned and muscled physique, surfer hair and a sprinkling of facial scruff, all intended to signify sexual desirability. The bottle's placement in the ad associates vodka with sexual opportunity: removing it would fully expose the model. Thus, the ad offers a good in exchange for human sexuality.<sup>42</sup> The fictitious ad represents a highly successful product placement with several viewers, including men, requesting copies of the image.<sup>43</sup>

Two weeks after airing the episode, celebrity fat became a theme in public press and popular imagination surrounding the ad, which appealed to gay men in fat-affirming groups. Was Lewis fat? Absolutely not. As he draws in his abdominal muscles, viewers can see Lewis' ribcage, but ad executives report digitally airbrushing the original photo to remove his 'love handles'.<sup>44</sup> A week into the media hype over the advertisement and its production, a gay artist decided to recreate the ad by visually substituting his fat body for Lewis' and naming it *Absolut Beefy* (Figure 1).<sup>45</sup> From his double vantage point of artist and model, he reflexively inserts himself into a narrow image of beauty, consciously using his own body type and body politics to position himself in an alternative representation. Though both ads use photographic techniques to conceal or display fat, they communicate their messages in different environments and this context of display matters. Overall, the televised image accommodates a general audience and therefore fails to satisfy every viewer's desire. The subcultural image uses an alternative medium to transmit its message and challenges the dominant one that the television producers conveyed. The parody, with the similar slogan *Absolut Beefy*, appeared on a website where male spectators go to view profiles of fat men. In defence of fat identity, *Absolut Beefy* borrows and changes the meaning of *Absolut Hunk* from that intended by its fat-phobic creators.



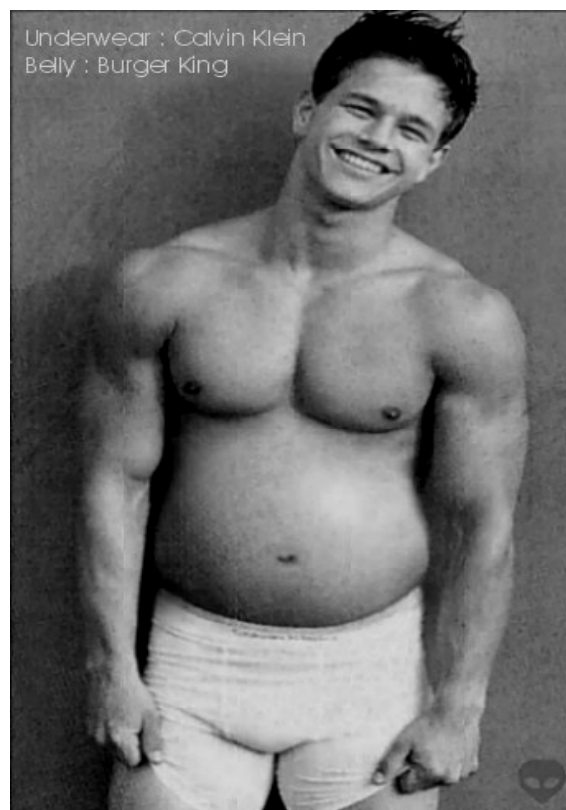
(Figure 1) Appropriation of a commercialised image can be an online form of artistic and fat expression. Author unknown.

*Absolut Beefy* appropriates the homoerotic content of *Absolut Hunk*, but imagines a popular culture inclusive of fat men. The fatvertisement resembles the original ad and visually suggests that the beefy character be equivalent to the hunk. For example, the artist usually reveals a small amount of body hair in his self-portraits, but in the fatvertisement, his smooth upper body mimics the original image. Both images also retain a soft focus produced by the natural light and white bedding that envelops the model. Despite the similar composition of the two ads, there are key differences between the images. For instance, the fat model's posture and gaze differs significantly. The poached ad uses 'self-flaunting' to re-signify Lewis' languid posture and bedroom eyes used to incorporate the spectator.<sup>46</sup> *Absolut Beefy* projects attitude – the model cocks his head and challenges the viewer with his confident, dead on stare, making no effort to 'suck in' his fat stomach.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the poached ad subtly pays 'homage to the phallic power of masculinity' evident in the original.<sup>48</sup> In *Absolut Hunk*, the positioning of the bottle visually substitutes for an erection. In the fatvertisement, the bottleneck intersects the crease under the model's stomach and the cap directs the viewer to a cavernous navel surrounded by handfuls of soft flab. The fat model's swollen (read: phallic) body contrasts with Lewis's trim, muscular frame, visually shifting the sexual focus away from the penis and distributing it across the entire upper body.<sup>49</sup> *Absolut Beefy* advertises a body typically left out of both popular culture and gay men's media and connotes its sexual potential.

Similar to Absolut's campaign, advertisements for Calvin Klein underwear accentuate the homoerotic aspects of the brand. CK underwear and the icons modelling them became enormously popular among gay men in the early 1990s. In the most famous example, Mark Wahlberg began modelling underwear with Kate Moss in one of Klein's most widely distributed campaigns in 1992. Today, male models, who strike classically inspired poses in their contemporary boxer briefs, represent a mainstay of consumer culture. Such advertisements commodify (and sometimes tame) bad boys like Wahlberg in order to persuade consumers to buy CK underwear. One of the ads, taken by gay photographer Herb Ritts, features Wahlberg in his underwear against a vacant background, unaccompanied by models or props. In this mainstream underwear promotion, cross-marketed to gay men, the hairless and ripped male body signifies an object to be visually consumed. The

spatial organisation of this three-quarter length, black-and-white portrait of Wahlberg, standing and facing front reinforces this effect. The arrangement, not far from a police line-up photo, suggests a disparity between the bad boy pictured and the consumer, one that positions the model captive for the viewer. The representation of the model's manner also communicates the same message as the ad's compositional framing. Like a child, the male model clowns around naked, playfully tugs the hem of his underpants, euphorically throws his head back, and appeases the viewer with his irresistible smile. Advertisements like this expose men in a stereotypically feminine way.<sup>50</sup>

Like the Absolut re-creation, the fat morph represents another way that gay men in fat-affirming groups can visually transform homoerotic commercial representations of the male body. A computer artist decided to create a fatvertisement by morphing the Wahlberg image (Figure 2).<sup>51</sup> This morph parodies how advertisers signify a real man's body shape and appears on at least two fat-affirming websites and one moderated email group. It disrupts the dominant visual system by distorting the original image and spoofing the written text of the ad. In the original ad, pleasure comes from imagining the genitals beneath the model's underwear while the morph shifts the visual focus to another part of the body, that is, the bloated stomach now stretched tight across the model's midsection with the help of a computer. The morph recasts the masculine pursuit of bodybuilding, signified in the first ad by the model's six-pack abs, with the manly appetite of *bellybuilding*, a term used by a subtype of men in these groups who embrace a modern equivalent of belly worship. 'Gainers', another overlapping subtype of gay men in fat-affirming interpretive communities, get a charge out of these images because they symbolise an unfolding process of gay men letting loose of their diet and exercise restrictions and putting on weight.<sup>52</sup> Finally, the morph draws the spectator into its signifying effects with the new textual pun, *Underwear: Calvin Klein – Belly: Burger King*. This new slogan anchors the morphed fatvertisement and focuses on male pleasures of eating by relaying a category of male-identified cooking and food preference, namely grilling hamburgers and fast food.<sup>53</sup> If the dominant image displays the male body as a lean piece of meat, then the subcultural image connotes a male body that incorporates it.<sup>54</sup>



(Figure 2) Those proficient in computer generated imaging (CGI) techniques can take advantage of their transformative properties to rearrange the meaning of an existing commercial signifying system. Morph courtesy of the online artist.

The morph also celebrates the boyishness signified by the original 'bad boy'. Gay men continue to revise their body types to correct for the wasting body associated with AIDS.<sup>55</sup> Men with schoolboy looks emphasising youth and health partially replace that of slim, gym-obsessed men thought to spread disease. Gay boys should not be too thin, but instead, just plump enough for their bodies to read as disease-free. 'Ex-jocks going soft' and young, good-looking males with cherubic features, backward-turned baseball caps, and affected boyish stances, symbolise the healthy gay body that thrives on good food and good beer. The morph reinforces this chubby boy body that depicts gay men with youthful innocence, a body that also dissociates gay men from the stigma of AIDS and the deteriorating body.<sup>56</sup> Thus, boyish fat in the morph also signifies good health.

A deconstructionist reading further develops this disconnect between the original ad and the morphed fatadvertisement. In the original, the face and upper body project an air of confidence that remains in the morph, but runs counter to how fat gay men are expected to carry themselves in a fat-phobic community. Thus, the morph artist makes an implicit social commentary on how gay men typically define themselves and their happiness. The morph resonates with the idea that men, who might otherwise feel weight-conscious in their private lives, could come to pose self-confidently in public images, particularly those intended for fat admirers.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the disconnect between the upper body and the abdomen makes the morph look slightly artificial and therefore it does not completely register as a real body. Unlike *Absolut Beefy* with its lifelike softer fat distribution, the distended stomach in the morph invokes 'hard fat' where the exaggerated midsection almost resembles another muscle, gendering it masculine fat.<sup>58</sup> Members of fat-affirming groups often desire men with paunches because to them this physical feature is suggestive of masculinity. The morph signifies their attempt to reclaim beer guts and potbellies in spite of the gay community's aversion to them. This recuperative image should not be surprising considering that many fat gay men feel denied gender prescriptions and relationship roles typically accorded to gay men with idealised physiques. Additionally, gay men retain an uneven purchase on fatness once considered masculine and acceptable for heterosexual males.

## Discussion

These fatvertisements highlight the discrepancy between the acceptability and the rejection of body fat in the context of shifting ideologies. For instance, AIDS is not the cause of this shift, but rather it serves as an occasion for revisiting the ideal body type and opens up the possibility of renegotiating it. Bodies are sites for negotiating ideologies, contradictions that can include the appeal and/or rejection of feminist critiques of heterosexual norms. Prevailing ideas of perfection as a gay male perspective can become destabilised by AIDS as well as shifting sexual preferences where the desire for health and new ideologies of fat coincide. Queer culture and queer bodies are often about destabilisation, possibly in relation to a heterosexual dominant paradigm, but on the internet provide an opportunity for innovation, rejection of dominant paradigms, and in some cases reification of existing paradigms. The tendency to reify restrictive boundaries describes most advertising; certainly, it is a feminist criticism. What is interesting here is that these commercialised images also provide a site for critique and for bodies to exceed culturally bound ideals of beauty.

What do people do when the dominant sign systems do not represent them? Gay men in fat-affirming groups differently interpret dominant images and some members actively rework them. The fat morph refigures what constitutes a pleasing body; in this way, visual technology affects fat politics. For instance, a fat stomach in both fatvertisements no longer represents an undesirable feature, but instead, symbolises the 'intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction'.<sup>59</sup> These artists pattern their work after the social norms, aesthetic conventions and interpretive practices of the larger online fat-affirming community. However, they do not necessarily avoid all the trappings of the men's media or resolve the feminisation of fat gay men without partially appealing to the hegemonic masculinity that works against them. *Absolut Beefy* is arguably the more powerful of the two images because it provides visual pleasure in its presumed authenticity, but also because it engages with softer styles of masculinity. Nevertheless, the beefy

and *Burger King* slogans both serve to recoup masculinity and the morph still relies on idealised male qualities such as broad shoulders, strong arms and an attractive baby face. The fat morph transcends some aspects of extreme body worship while retaining others. For morphing to work, it has to keep some aspects of the sampled image recognisable. This suggests that gay men in fat-affirming communities may still require other dominant drivers of ideal beauty. Furthermore, men in these groups do occasionally marginalise other men for being too old or for that matter too thin, which implies that these men may just exchange one rigid body ideal for another. If one explanation for body image concerns focuses on social approval and acceptance in the gay community, then there appears to be a conundrum. Men in the 'circuit', or gay party scene, do emphasise slender physiques, and leathermen do prefer muscular bodies, but there are gay subcultures that emphasise alternatives. 'Bears' admire big hairy bodies and 'chasers' prefer 'chubbies', yet, a partial inclusion criterion for all of these subcultures is still body type. These men do sort out and reconfigure the sign systems, but the downside of such activity is that at times it results in greater conformity.

Buying into conformity (or not) always represents a mixed mode of resistance. Gay men in online fat-affirming groups do seem to be involved in social protest, though not necessarily the same activities female fat activists engage in, such as scale-tossing/scale-smashing, ice cream socials in front of weight loss centres, or sending advertisements back to magazines with decals that read 'feed this woman'.<sup>60</sup> A *Jenny Craig* protest, for instance, does try to create fat visibility and sensitivity, but it is not about trying to incite eroticism. Unlike mainstream commercial representations of fat women,<sup>61</sup> the images in this paper are by fat men for fat men and their admirers, serve to symbolise fat people left out of the commercial signifying system, and try to remedy existing asexual depictions. Fatvertisements allow these artists the opportunity to display fat positively, and for the artist behind *Absolut Beefy*, a fat gay man gets to be both director and star of his own commercialised spectacle.<sup>62</sup> Commercial images used in this way reformulate boundaries, but they also reify them. The claim I am making here is that fatvertisements provide a site for both conformity and resistance, even when resistance is still conforming. This may sound confusing. Feminists face the same challenge in thinking about fat women who demanded stylish and sexy fashion only to embrace their consumer niche recognition as a feminist victory.<sup>63</sup> Should feminists recuperate fat-affirming beauty shows and pageants as feminism? Like fatvertisements, it is not an either/or proposition. Modes of resistance in commercialised contexts create strange bedfellows; it incorporates that outcast from the cult of beauty back into a questionable system.

Can there be fatvertising? Ads as a form of persuasion require consumers to share some aspect of the advertiser's wishes and desires. As such, advertisers work in the business of creating conformity; an enterprise prone to failure. Under what conditions do people recognise this and do something about it? The perceived larger threat of death represents one cause for a reconfiguring. The categories of fat and thin reinscribe the binary, but together with the erotic, fat takes on new terms such as health and illness. This disrupts the binary and repositions it in a different discourse. Stereotypes of fat people characterise them as unhealthy or unfit.<sup>64</sup> In these fat-affirming communities, however, fat holds partial currency (admittedly alongside muscle) because thin suggests an inability to sustain life where seriously ill or emaciated complicates gay men's preoccupation with thinness. This represents a new binary where some gay men switch signifying systems to accommodate an added signifier of healthiness. 'Fats' and 'femmes' as out-groups persist, but they are gaining some acceptance and the idea that they pick up any piece of the signifying system is important.

What are the larger cultural implications of these digital images, of this hybridisation taking place in semiotic cyberspace? It exemplifies the post-identity 'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries'.<sup>65</sup> Fat gay men's online media challenges current cultural understandings of identity and authorship. It contributes to our understanding of liminal identity by literally showing us two (or more) identities in one body. If cyborg imagery represents partial identities 'of both imagination and material reality,' then it follows that morphs share this uncertainty in their signification of transformational identity.<sup>66</sup> An imitation of an imitation, the Absolut replica vaguely resembles the original and becomes a new cultural product with a circulation all its own. Morphing also creates this kind of simulacra:<sup>67</sup> it turns the typical airbrush for near perfection into a fun house mirror where unreal replicants can support a

sense of connection or a 'we-ness' of identity. These images provide a collective identity that people can sign-on to – they can recognise themselves in the newfound category of proud fat gay man. This category remains on the boundary, or on several boundaries. These liminal people sustain their precarious position by reinstating themselves in more familiar and accepted commercialised images. Morphs are liminal because they float between mainstream and subcultural images creating assemblages of man and computer artifice. The men represented in this paper negotiate their membership betwixt and between two identity groups: fat and gay selves.

Finally, what are some next steps and key questions in looking at gay men's online negotiation of fat bodies? Obesity researchers consider how subcultures influence their members' eating habits and currently their body mass. We can ask, do fat-affirming groups increase the number of fat gay men or just unveil a hidden population? More useful would be not to confuse real bodies with their representations and ask instead, what produces a new subjectivity?<sup>68</sup> The important idea is not assuming a marked difference between realities that doctors measure on real bodies and the kinds of evaluations made in fatvertising. Fat is a spoiled identity and it is important to think about at what point it becomes an object of desire. How do individuals reshuffle a stigma like fatness? The point would be to look at shifts from negative to positive stigma.<sup>69</sup> In the context of a society where bodies are subject to intervention, to literal surgery, there is a tremendous consciousness surrounding fat bodies. Gay bodies are not immune to this. Unlike celebrities obsessed with perpetual youth, fatvertisements (products of cultural poaching and morphing) create visibility markers rather than concealment strategies, where young gay men in fat-affirming groups have a field day with our body conscious culture. If advertisements represent a paradigm that can be destabilised in multiple ways (AIDS destabilising thin; fatness destabilising thin), then what would restabilisation eventually look like? I have identified not only the resistance to thin, but also the need to retain recognisable images such as baby-faced boys with muscled shoulders and smooth torsos. In further work, it will be important to consider the relationship between unstable and stable systems, observing how this recognisability potentially works to create and stabilise new paradigms for understanding gay bodies.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> P. Flynn, 2003, 'Is the Potbelly the New Gay Ideal?', *Guardian*, UK, viewed 13 July 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>

<sup>3</sup> 'Fat' and other euphemisms like 'big', 'beefy' and 'chub', are terms reclaimed and preferred by men in these groups.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, *Do I look Fat? Gay Men, Body Image and Eating Disorders*, (dir. & prod. T. Matthews), USA, 2005; Also see M. Shernoff, 'Body Image, Working Out and Therapy', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, pp.89-94.

<sup>5</sup>Advertisements as virtual images have been central to discussions of gender and the body. See E. Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1979. Also see S. Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*; on visual media's power, also see S. Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.

<sup>7</sup>T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1977, p.134.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, p.143.

<sup>9</sup>K. Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, William Morrow & Co., New York, 2000, p.131.

- <sup>10</sup>H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pp.23-36.
- <sup>11</sup>*ibid.*, p.23.
- <sup>12</sup>D. Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s' (1985), in D. Meyers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1997, pp.502-531.
- <sup>13</sup>*ibid.*, p.511.
- <sup>14</sup>*ibid.*, p.520.
- <sup>15</sup>E. Goode, 'Physical Characteristics as Deviance', in his *Deviant Behavior*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn, Pearson, Upper Saddle River, 2005, p.328. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>16</sup>P. Giles, 'A Matter of Size', in D. Atkins (ed.), *Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Communities*, Haworth Press, Binghamton, 1998, pp.355-357.
- <sup>17</sup>K. Bell & D. McNaughton, 'Feminism and the Invisible Fat Man', *Body & Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, pp.123-124; G. Durgadas, 'Fatness and the Feminized Man', in Atkins (ed.), *Looking Queer*, pp.367-371.
- <sup>18</sup>Bell & McNaughton, p.127.
- <sup>19</sup>Femme signifies a gay man who exhibits stereotypical or exaggerated feminine traits. See T. Bergling, *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior*, Haworth Press, Binghamton, 2001; see also R.W. Connell, 'A Very Straight Gay: Masculinity, Homosexual Experience, and the Dynamics of Gender', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 57, no. 6, 1992, pp.735-751. Fat gay men can also lay claim to masculinity by rejecting slender 'twinks', another effeminate stereotype anchored in body size; see P. Hennen, 'Bear Bodies, Bear Masculinity: Recuperation, Resistance or Retreat?', *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp.33-34.
- <sup>20</sup>Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', p.503.
- <sup>21</sup>M. Signorile, *Life Outside - The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life*, HarperCollins, New York, 1997, pp.33-66.
- <sup>22</sup>Advertisers and corporations are good at manipulating gendered semiotics to produce body insecurity among men so they will buy their wares, see S. Alexander, 'Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men's Health Magazine*', *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2003, pp.535-554.
- <sup>23</sup>J. Blotcher, 'Justify My Love Handles: How the Queer Community Trims the Fat', in Atkins (ed.), *Looking Queer*, pp.359-366; M. Drummond, 'Men's Bodies: Listening to the Voices of Young Gay Men', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2005, pp.270-290; A. Feraios, 'If Only I Were Cute: Looksism and Internalized Homophobia in the Gay Male Community', in Atkins (ed.), *Looking Queer*, pp.415-429; G. Padva, 'Heavenly Monsters: Politics of the Male Body in the Naked Issue of *Attitude Magazine*', *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2002, pp.281-292.
- <sup>24</sup>I control for the plethora of 'bear'-oriented groups, which are relevant, but qualitatively different in some ways. (Bears are big, hairy, rugged gay men who imagine themselves as engaging in blue-collar work and/or conventionally masculine pastimes.) Also, certain sites are more popular as discussion forums and chatrooms while others offer a combination of textual and visual media, ranging from personals to fiction and nonfiction stories and video clips.
- <sup>25</sup>A. Textor, 'Organization, Specialization, and Desires in the Big Men's Movement: Preliminary Research in the Study of Subculture-Formation', *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1999, pp.219-220.
- <sup>26</sup>J. Campbell, *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*, Harrington Park Press, New York, 2004, pp.137-139.
- <sup>27</sup>This occurs quite often due to financial or bandwidth issues. Sometimes a wealthier member of a group will offer space on their server to store images.
- <sup>28</sup>The owner moved all of the material to a central website that eventually went down, leaving only two of the original groups behind. Members of fat-affirming groups continue to diversify, however, using *YouTube*, the popular video sharing site, where they house digital movies and slideshows and create links between individual blogs.
- <sup>29</sup>I. Hacking, 'Making Up People', in T. Heller, M. Sosna & D. Wellbery (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, Stanford University Press, CA, 1986, pp.222-236; Textor, p.220.
- <sup>30</sup>R. Lewis, 'Looking Good: The Lesbian Gaze and Fashion Imagery', in N. Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1998, pp.463-477; M. Sturken & L. Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, pp.59-67.
- <sup>31</sup>W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, H. Zohn (trans.), H. Arendt (ed.), Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p.257; E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Harvard University Press, MA, 1974, pp.43-44; S. Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing "The Popular"', (1981), in J. Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1998, pp.442-453. Gay men may prefer to interpret images this way and share this habit with other marginalised groups. In some cases, appropriated images provide greater visual pleasure than in-group images because of the thrill produced by a sense of transgression. See R. Lewis & K. Rolley, 'Ad(dressing) the Dyke: Lesbian Looks and Lesbian Looking', in P. Horne & R. Lewis (eds), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp.178-190.
- <sup>32</sup>For communities to play with images, members must foster specific 'subcultural competencies' that instruct them on how to decode variable and shifting referents. See Lewis, pp.463-477.
- <sup>33</sup>Several scholars now argue that the invisible features of online community may be overstated and overlook groups organised around visibility politics. See D. Ferreday, 'Unspeakable Bodies: Erasure, Embodiment and the Pro-ana Community', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2001, pp.284-285. Also see, A. Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, University Press of New England, London, 2006.
- <sup>34</sup>Additionally, he maintains an individual website with nearly identical material and the fraternity site also provides a link to this page.

- <sup>35</sup>R. Alcalay, 'Morphing Out of Identity Politics: Black or White and Terminator 2', Bad Subjects Production Team (eds), *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life*, New York University Press, New York, 1998, pp.136-142.
- <sup>36</sup>Following Haraway's diachronic analysis, 'amodern' bodies are not technically modern, postmodern, or socially constructed. Instead, she favours a history of the disorderly conduct of bodies that permanently places them in the middle of scary, risky, and contingent circumstances (some of which are partially divested of human qualities). See D. Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' (1992), in D. Haraway (ed.), *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp.70, 77 & 106.
- <sup>37</sup>On 'queering' fatness, see K. LeBesco, 'Queering Fat Bodies/Politics', in J.E. Braziel & K. LeBesco (eds), *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001, pp.74-87.
- <sup>38</sup>Alcalay, pp.136-137.
- <sup>39</sup>Sturken & Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, pp.304-306.
- <sup>40</sup>*Sex and the City*, Home Box Office, USA, 1998-2004.
- <sup>41</sup>C. Atkinson, 2003, 'Absolut Nabs Sexy HBO Role; "Sex and the City" Features Fake Ad', *Ad Age*, New York, viewed 18 May 2006, <<http://www.oaaa.org/news/release>>.
- <sup>42</sup>J. Schroeder, *Visual Consumption*, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp.144-145.
- <sup>43</sup>Atkinson.
- <sup>44</sup>ibid.
- <sup>45</sup>The Publisher has made all efforts to trace the copyright owner of the image without success. Any information that would help identify and locate the owners would be greatly appreciated.
- <sup>46</sup>L. Monaghan, 'Big Handsome Men, Bears and Others: Virtual Constructions of "Fat Male Embodiment"', *Body and Society*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, p.101.
- <sup>47</sup>For a discussion of 'face-off masculinity', see S. Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1999, pp.186-188. For a description of the sensuous pleasures of abandoning restraint on the abdominal muscles see J. Stoltenberg, 'Learning the F Words', in Atkins (ed.), *Looking Queer*, p.406.
- <sup>48</sup>Hennen, p.35.
- <sup>49</sup>Fat porn also 'displaces erotic pleasure from the genitals and disperses it to other parts of the body, thereby reconfiguring what can count as a pleasurable body'; see D. Kulick, 'Porn', in D. Kulick & A. Meneley (eds), *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, Penguin Group, New York, 2005, p.91.
- <sup>50</sup>Bordo, *The Male Body*, pp.166-178; Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, p.50.
- <sup>51</sup>The irony here being that this image has now been twice retouched; the original left Wahlberg's supernumerary nipple out of the picture.
- <sup>52</sup>Campbell, pp.135-141; Monaghan, pp.94-95, 101-102; Textor, pp.227-230.
- <sup>53</sup>P. McGann, 'Eating Muscle: Material Semiotics and a Manly Appetite', in N. Tuana, G. Johnson, M. Hamington & W. Cowling (eds), *Revealing Male Bodies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2002, pp.85-88.
- <sup>54</sup>b. hooks, 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance', in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Turnaround Press, London, 1992, pp.21-39.
- <sup>55</sup>M. Graham, 'Chaos', in D. Kulick & A. Meneley (eds), *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, Penguin Group, New York, 2005, p.172.
- <sup>56</sup>S. Kruger, "'GET FAT, Don't Die!": Eating and AIDS in Gay Men's Culture', in R. Scapp & B. Seitz (eds), *Eating Culture*, State University of New York Press, New York, pp.37-38.
- <sup>57</sup>Numerous torso shots of young, gay, big-bellied men, posing confidently in underwear (with 'Calvin Klein' conspicuously written all around the outside of the waistband) can also be found on the fat-affirming websites and moderated picture groups.
- <sup>58</sup>D. Hallperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, pp.111-113. Also see, *Hard Fat: An Exploration of Desire, Masculinity and Size*, (dir. & prod. F. Moffet), Canada, 2002.
- <sup>59</sup>Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', p.525.
- <sup>60</sup>K. LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 2004, p.107.
- <sup>61</sup>See J. Feuer, 'Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women', in M.B. Haralovich & L. Rabinovitz (eds), *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1999, pp.181-200.
- <sup>62</sup>This artist has similarly appropriated other commercial images. For instance, he also put himself shirtless on the cover of Madonna's *American Life* album.
- <sup>63</sup>LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, pp.65-73.
- <sup>64</sup>This is despite empirical evidence of the possibility of 'health at every size'. For the tenets of this paradigm, see L. O'Hara & J. Gregg, 'The War on Obesity: A Social Determinant of Health', *Healthy Promotion Journal of Australia*, vol.17, no. 3, 2006, pp.260-263.
- <sup>65</sup>Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', p.503, emphasis in original.
- <sup>66</sup>ibid.; Alcalay, pp.136-142.
- <sup>67</sup>J. Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations' in M. Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings* (1988), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, pp.169-187.
- <sup>68</sup>See J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.
- <sup>69</sup>See M. Shih, 'Positive Stigma: Examining Resilience and Empowerment in Overcoming Stigma', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 591, no. 1, 2004, pp.175-185.