

OPINION: Bears of Color, we must allow ourselves to take up space

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5th May 2021



Last year, I wrote an article directed toward white bears in the community. In this article, I urged white bears to step away from the spotlight sometimes and give more opportunities and space to Bears of Color, who are severely underrepresented in the community. The article was very popular on social media, particularly Facebook, where people shared it and praised the message, agreeing that Bears of Color are underrepresented and undervalued in the bear community and a change was much needed.

The problem with diversity in the bear community is clear. Oftentimes, we see flyers for bear events, or even photography projects and photo spreads that attempt to promote body positivity and diversity, but fall into the trap of highlighting what seems to be the same four or five White muscle bear types that we've seen time and time again. It's true that these White muscle bears do not fully represent the myriad of types we see often in the community — bears are chubby, muscular, short, tall, Black, White, Asian, Latinx, Trans, Nonbinary, etc. But, when looking at some of these event flyers and photo spreads, it's hard to see this.

I, like many others, have asked myself why. Why does it seem like the call for diversity is disregarded? Are they doing it deliberately just to make others feel underrepresented and devalued in a community that's supposed to value inclusion and diversity? Are these calls for diversity and inclusion falling on deaf ears? What I've come to realize is that the truth is far more complicated than that.

The truth of the matter is that, many times, diversity is actually being encouraged, particularly in instances where model calls are put out for event flyers. When speaking to certain event organizers, artists, organizations and companies that often put out these calls, I've been told that White muscle bears are oftentimes the only ones that show up.

But why is this? Probably because White muscle bears have obviously been put on a pedestal so often in our community that we've come to accept them as the standard for beauty and attractiveness, and that anything outside of that is undesirable. And that's how the cycle begins; White muscle bears have been historically elevated as the prototype, and are therefore more confident and willing to put themselves and their bodies out front and center to represent the community. Bears of color and bears of more diverse body types notice this and it makes them feel uncomfortable putting themselves and their bodies front and center to represent a community that doesn't appreciate them. And the cycle continues.

Before I move on, I would like to state that this is in no way meant to drag White muscle bears through the mud. Everyone has their own journey with body acceptance, and I'm sure there are many White muscle bears who, despite what others may think, look at themselves in the mirror and are still able to find many flaws and imperfections. Everyone has issues with body image and acceptance. However, not everyone has their body validated in a way that allows them to feel accepted and wanted in particular spaces, and therein lies the problem.

White muscle bears appear to be dripping in confidence in the bear community because the bear community is where they have been made to feel valued, while chubbier bears and Bears of Color have not been given the same message, and are therefore more reluctant to put themselves out front and center to represent a community that has made them feel othered. But therein lies the other problem; in order not to feel othered in a space, you have to allow yourself the freedom to take up space.

Yes, my fellow chubby Black bears and Bears of Color. In order to be properly represented in the community, we have to be willing to actually put ourselves out there and represent. We have to claim space, even when it isn't readily offered to us. And, when it is offered to us, we shouldn't be modest about taking it. We deserve that space. We've earned that space. That space is ours.