

How body ideals shape the health of gay men

January 7 2019, by Phillip Joy And Matthew Numer



‘I am bombarded with lifestyles, aesthetics and bodies that gay men are pressured and expected to emulate to be attractive, worthy and happy.’ (Ryan), Author provided

Gay men currently [receive little research attention](#) when it comes to

health issues such as eating disorders and other body image concerns. Yet [expectations are high for gay men](#), as the western ideal masculine body is [muscular and fat free](#).

Evidence also indicates that there are [unique concerns for LGBTQ people](#) relating to nutrition and obesity, and that [tailored programs](#) can improve overall health outcomes for gay men.

Our research shows that social demands placed upon gay men to eat healthily and achieve a perfect body are linked to anxiety and depression and have serious mental health consequences. And that health researchers and practitioners need to [challenge beauty standards](#) among diverse groups of men through conversations, connections and support.

In our study, carried out at Dalhousie University, gay men explored how culture influences the way they think about food and their bodies through a process called [Photovoice](#)—an [arts-based research methodology](#) in which participants submit their own photographs.

Nine self-identified gay men photographed various aspects of their lives relating to their experiences with food, [body image](#) and health. Guided by their photos, they talked about their struggles with body image and the strategies that have helped them overcome negative [health issues](#) associated with trying to have the "perfect" body.

Tic Tacs and muscular bodies

The way [food is talked about](#) within Canadian culture influences whether it, and the people consuming it, are labelled as ["healthy" or "unhealthy"](#) and morally good or bad.

In this research, participants viewed food as a way to socialize and connect with other gay men. They also found it to be a source of stress,

as they try to live up to idealized body standards within gay culture.

Participants reflected on how various forms of media reinforced certain body types and influenced their thoughts on food.

One participant talked about the hit reality TV show, RuPaul's *Drag Race*. In this show, the top three contestants have lunch with the host, during which a single Tic Tac is served. For this participant, this scene highlights the need for gay men to be "as thin as humanly possible."

But gay men also need to be strong with highly toned bodies. Participants talked about the immense pressures to showcase muscular bodies on [social media](#), such as Facebook, Instagram and gay dating apps. At the same time, they recognized that the cultural expectations placed upon them are unrealistic.



'I'm always uncomfortable even in disguise, even though I know my body doesn't need validation.' (Oliver), Author provided

'No one is going to love you'

The health consequences for gay men of not living up to body ideals have been previously identified and include [disordered eating](#), [avoidance of sex](#), stigma, [rejection and isolation](#).

The men in this study talked about how constantly thinking about food and body ideals often leads to losing themselves in feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression.

Participants similarly talked about dating and believed they needed an ideal muscular body to attract other men. One man discussed his fears of being fat, saying "no one is going to want to have sex with you...be in a relationship with you... no one is going to love you."

The idea that being fat means being alone is a social discourse reinforced through media.

Others discussed the pressures to maintain a perfect body even within their current relationships. They commented that [being in a relationship does not resolve body image concerns](#).

For every pot there is a lid

Participants still struggled even after losing weight and building muscles. However, they did provide suggestions from their own experiences to help other men.

Their ideas included increasing the portrayal of diverse bodies within media, finding supportive people and engaging in communities that celebrate all [body](#) types. They also encouraged engaging in social conversations that allow men to be open to the possibilities of dating others outside the narrow ideals of fit and muscular bodies.

Sharing their ideas allowed the [participants](#) to see through the "bull" of rigid beauty standards.

Working through their anxiety and concerns was a personal journey. It was about recognizing that for "every little pot there is a little lid" or, in other words, even though their bodies may not be socially "perfect" there can still be [health](#), happiness and love for them.

The participants will be [showcasing their photos and telling their stories](#)

in an art show on Jan. 10, 2019, in Halifax.

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