

Comics can improve queer men's body image

July 15 2019, by Phillip Joy, Matthew Numer, Megan Aston And Stephanie Gauvin



Parody Alpha Male magazine cover featuring a wolf man pumping iron. Excerpt from Different Kinds of Forever by Jalex Noel. Credit: Jalex Noel, Author provided

Built, buff and metrosexually styled—such is the dominant stereotype of what queer men should look like. [Magazines](#), [websites](#), [image-based social media and dating apps](#) contribute to creating idealized images of muscular and fat-free men's bodies. Is it any surprise that body dissatisfaction has been reported to negatively influence queer [men's mental](#), [emotional](#) and [sexual health](#)?

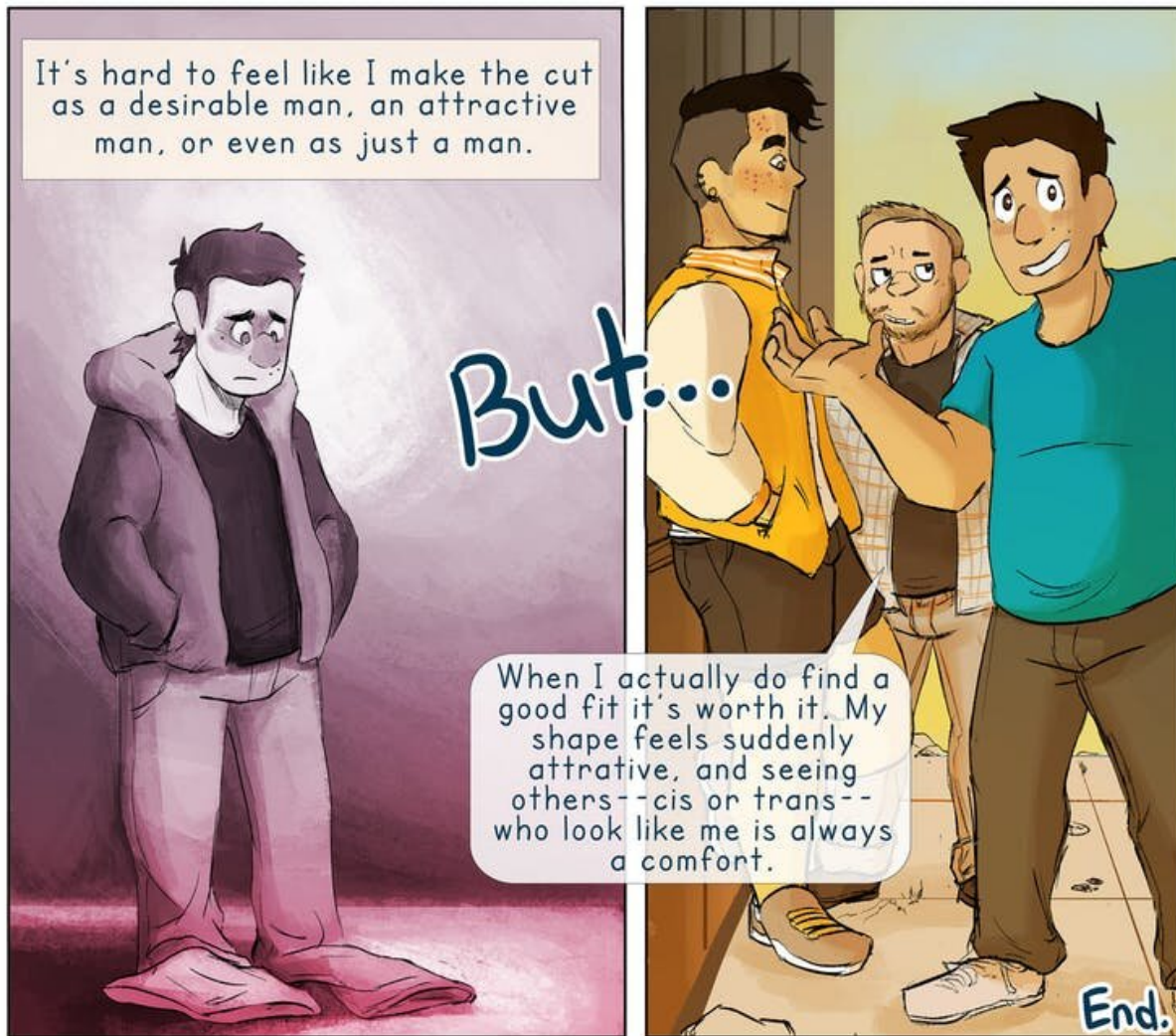
Dominant body ideals for many queer men are unrealistic and can contribute to health issues like [eating disorders](#). Feelings of [loneliness](#) and [isolation](#), sometimes compounded by struggles as a result of heteronormativity and stigma within society, can morph into mental and physical health issues particular to queer men.

But the often invisible concerns of queer men about their bodies are finding a platform. In our recent study, conducted at Dalhousie University and Queens University, 19 self-identifying gay, bi, trans and queer comic book artists completed an anonymous online survey designed to explore how comics intended for queer men could promote discussions on [body image](#) and address body image concerns.

The preliminary results of our study revealed that comics are an innovative way to talk about body image concerns for queer men. The artists said comics have the potential to improve their overall health experiences. We suggest that this happens because comics create a unique language, draw attention to cultural issues and expand queer spaces by connecting men.

Comics for care

Comics have become a pop culture phenomenon, but they also have the potential to change how to [communicate health research](#).



‘It’s hard to feel I make the cut as a desirable man...’ Excerpt from *Fitting In* by Loch Arambula. Credit: Loch Arambula, Author provided

Research shows comics used in health knowledge communication can have [social and emotional benefits](#) for patients, families and communities. Comics for health care!

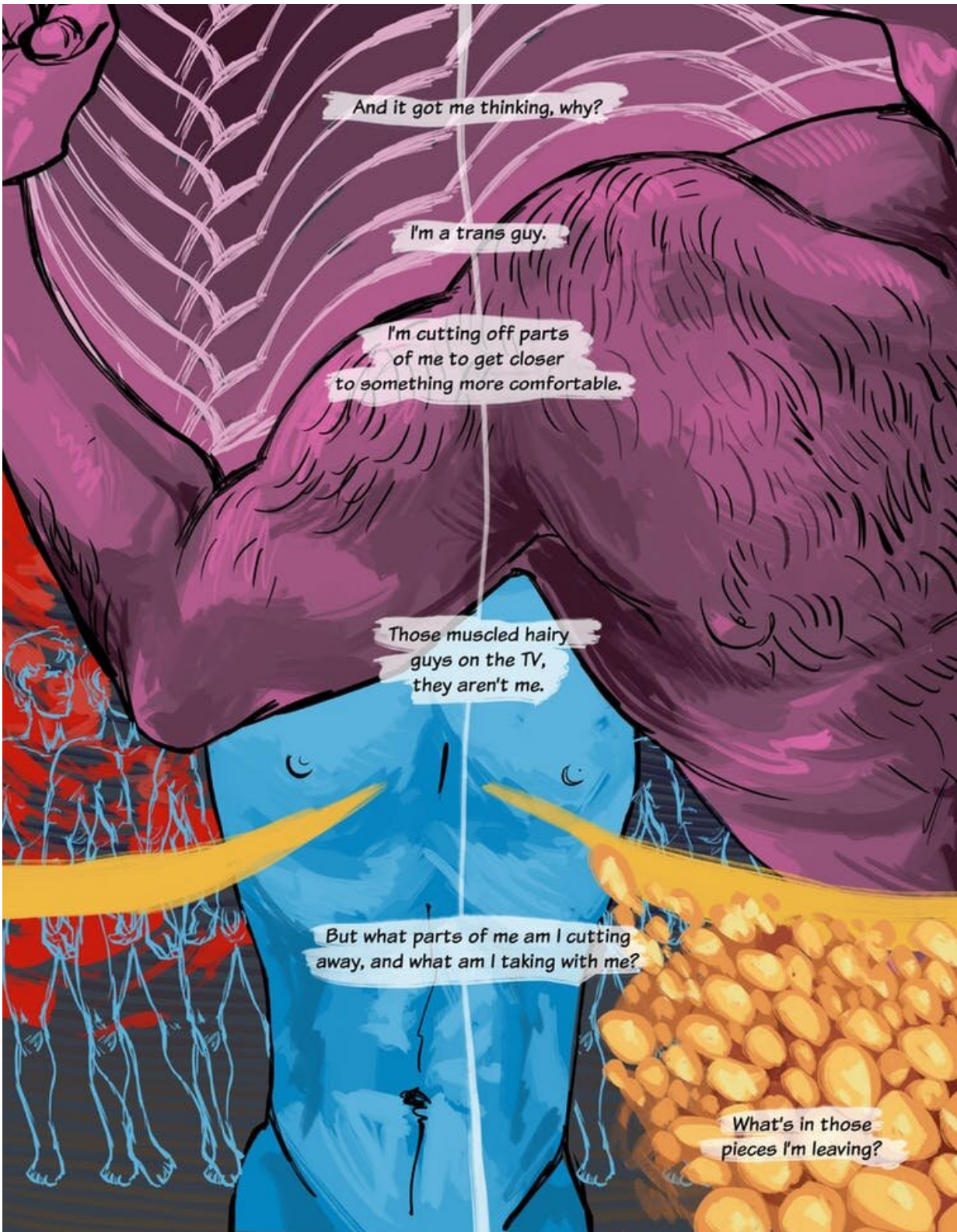
This strategy has been effective in the fields of [nutrition](#), [metabolic syndrome](#) and [HIV](#). Because comics have been shown to help health-care

practitioners talk to people about serious health issues, there have been calls to consider how [comics can be used even more](#) to improve health experiences or better share research [with health professionals and communities](#).

Many studies about [body dissatisfaction](#) focus on measuring how satisfied people are with certain body parts, while ignoring the body as a whole and how people live social and cultural lives. Less common—but critical—are studies that take a more holistic approach.

For example, in a world shaped by heteronormativity, racism and ethical judgment about people's weight or [food choices](#), queer men are frequently talked about and treated as though they are part of what health researchers Mark Stall, Ron Freidman and Joseph A. Catania call "[interacting epidemics](#)." Factors such as [class, marginalization](#), [notions of masculinities](#), [how people are racialized](#) and [weight](#) intersect and shape queer men's overall health.

Addressing all [health issues](#) for queer men, including [nutrition and diet](#), should thus bear in mind bigger social contexts and narratives.



‘Those muscled, hairy guys on the TV, they’re not me.’ Excerpt from Pieces I’m

Keeping by Jay Pahre. Credit: Jay Pahre, Author provided

Unique language

Art to the rescue! The comic book artists in our study saw comics as a way to start complex conversations using uncensored language and imagery, and by the powerful way comics generate meaning and ideas through the juxtaposition of words and pictures.

Comics were seen as a medium of self-expression that can be used to reflect, challenge, destabilize or embrace ideas about body image. The responses of the survey suggest that comics can create spaces by providing representation of many body types. These representations contribute to changing cultural narratives about what queer men's bodies should be.

Survey respondents believed comics allow people to question and explore the social meanings of gender and masculinities that [play a role of body image concerns for queer men](#).

One artist talked about how comics can be used to "help others recognize the lenses that we see ourselves through and how representations of fit bodies can distort our mind's eye with dire impacts for us as holistic beings."



‘You’re getting old and fat!’ Excerpt from *Perfect: The Secret Life of a Naturist* by Fabien Barabé. Credit: Fabien Barabé, Author provided

Expanding spaces for queer men

The participants also viewed body image comics for queer men as a way to create and expand space for them and their bodies. One participant discussed how harmful it can be for queer men to only see and be exposed to idealized muscular bodies in media.

As one participant noted, "to have comics that merely exist that feature

the queer person, let alone a fat one, is revolutionary because it is there. Readers cannot find and empathize with something if it doesn't exist."

The artists also talked about comics as a visual medium that is more effective than prose, reports or research articles at creating space where diverse bodies are allowed and celebrated. Many participants believed finding or claiming more space as queer men can help other men feel better about their bodies.

Connecting men

Comics were also seen as a way to build connections among men and build communities. Most participants saw comics as a means to illustrate the struggles with body image that many queer men share.

Body image comics were seen by several participants as a means to help each other by promoting a capacity to share feelings and vulnerability. As one participant said, comics can "highlight the positive ways we affect each other when we open up about our insecurities."

Such a point of view may echo the understanding that art can provide a broader sense of what [counts as knowledge](#) and a greater use of that knowledge.

Our results suggest comics give people the opportunity to reflect and discover connections between their [health](#), lives and society—something important for every and any kind of body.

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