



PLAYBOOK EDITION

Hero Complex

The role of the entertainment industry
in tackling America's masculinity crisis

OCTOBER 2024



Masculinity is in crisis— and the entertainment industry needs to step up

THE CONTEXT

Today's boys and young men are being fed contradictory cultural signals about masculinity.

On the one hand, heroic male archetypes are still omnipresent within our culture. Many of our most popular movie and TV genres center around devastatingly attractive men with impossibly chiseled physiques saving the world and, often, getting the girl in the process. Men are socialized from an early age to judge themselves and their peers by their adherence to traditionally masculine features and traits. And young men still feel a strong pressure to “perform masculinity”—especially from other men in their lives.

At the same time, we're also telling young men, directly and indirectly, that masculinity, at its worst, is “toxic”: something to be ashamed of rather than celebrated. Modern cultural values are largely incompatible with the idea of entrenched gender roles; we have broadly moved away, for example, from the idea that the male sex is uniquely dominant, ambitious, or protective. Fairly or unfairly, many young men feel as if society is telling them that they have a moral responsibility to interrogate their own relationship to the patriarchy and systems of oppression.

THE IMPLICATIONS

Caught between these conflicting currents, many young men are struggling to figure out what society expects from them—and, as a result, are uncertain of their own place in the world.

This crisis is having a serious impact on both the physical and mental health of boys and young men.

Compared to previous generations, today's young men are:

- Finding it harder to build meaningful social relationships
- More likely to lack close friends and to suffer from loneliness
- Dying from preventable causes such as suicide and drug overdoses at greater rates
- Less likely to complete higher education and to participate in the workforce
- Not living as long as women, with the gap growing wider

Now more than ever, the entertainment industry needs to critically examine the role it plays in defining cultural expectations of masculinity. Studios and streaming services need to be asking themselves how they can deliver a range of role models that can help young men and boys navigate this increasingly complex gender crisis.

IN THIS REPORT, YOU'LL FIND...

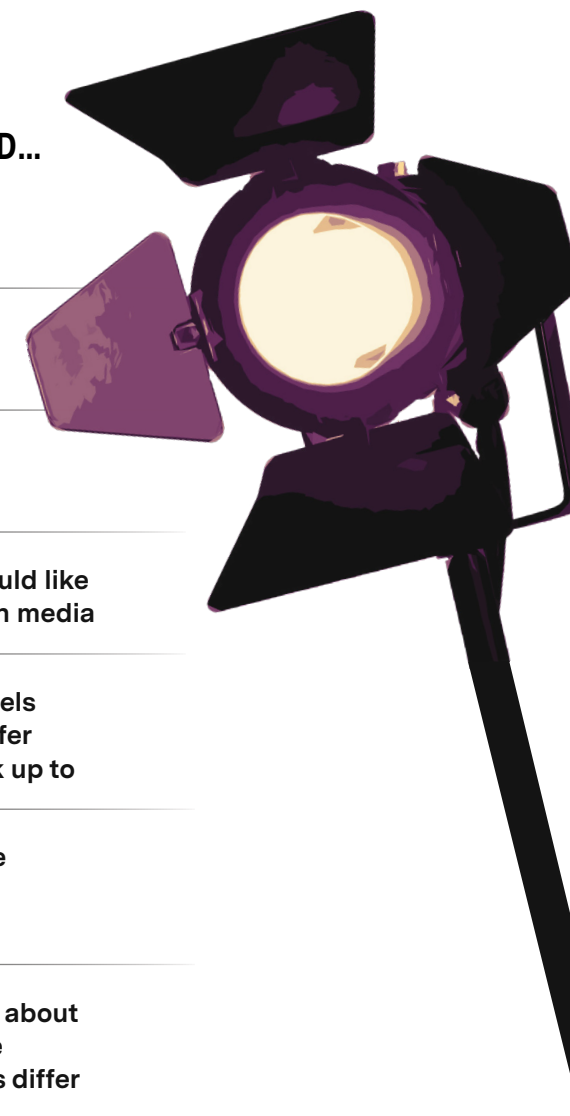
- > How teens and young men think about the concept of masculinity
- > How younger men perceive fictional male characters in movies and TV shows
- > The types of male characters young men would like to see greater and better representation of in media
- > The most popular real and fictional role models among today's young men, and how they differ from the role models that young women look up to
- > How differing conceptions of masculinity are shaped by the broader political divides in today's culture
- > The factors informing how Gen Alpha thinks about masculinity, including the influence of online creators, and how this generation's priorities differ from Millennials and Gen Z
- > What will make for an effective male role model in TV and film moving forward

Methodology

Unless otherwise specified, data featured in this report comes from a study of 1,250 boys and young men in the US, ages 8 to 30, conducted online in June and July 2024. The audience for this study contained 750 respondents aged 13 to 30 and 500 respondents aged 8 to 12. Within both of these sub-audiences, participants were selected and weighted to be demographically representative of the national population in terms of age and ethnicity.

Additional data comes from a study of 250 parents of young boys (aged 8 and below) conducted in tandem. Where other data sources have been used, this has been marked in the footnotes of the report.

Additionally, this report draws on insights collected from in-depth interviews with a wide range of entertainment industry professionals, including screenwriters, producers, casting directors, and academics. Select quotes from these interviews have been included throughout this paper.



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THE FUTURE OF MASCULINITY

How will masculinity continue to evolve as Gen Alpha enter their teenage years, and what implications will this have for the entertainment industry?

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1 **Avoiding overcorrection**

Avoiding the risk of overreacting to recent critiques of masculinity and overcorrecting in the next wave of fictional male characters.

2 **Creating grounded role models**

Ensuring that young people are exposed to grounded and realistic role models, so that their understanding of masculinity isn't solely informed by unattainable ideals.

3 **Pushing emotional boundaries**

Creating emotionally well-rounded characters who embody empathy, vulnerability, positivity, and social confidence.

4 **Transcending divisions**

Bridging the growing political divide on masculinity by crafting characters and traits that represent a balanced middle ground.



PART 1:**UNDERSTANDING OUR CURRENT CRISIS OF MASCULINITY**

Q: What's the first word that comes to mind when you think of "masculinity?"
Teens and young men, 13 to 30



Today's young men are struggling to understand their place in society

In a much-discussed 2023 op-ed, the Washington Post columnist Christine Emba wrote that young men are now facing a “widespread identity crisis.”¹ While the role of women in our society has changed dramatically over the past half-century, according to Emba, **“there hasn’t been a corresponding conversation about what role men should play in a changing world.”** This, she argues, has had significant negative repercussions for the wellbeing and life outcomes of boys and young men.

It’s easy to dismiss concerns about young men’s wellbeing or see them as a reactionary pushback against feminist progress, especially since men still dominate positions of power in society, from Congress to the Fortune 500.

But the reality is that the spoils of the patriarchy are not distributed evenly. **“There are tens of millions of young men who find themselves increasingly rudderless and adrift, uncertain of their own sense of identity and how they fit into society.”**

Young male participation in the workforce, for example, has been steadily declining for decades; a 25 year-old man today is about twice as likely to be out of work as Baby Boomers were at the same age.² Academically, too, men are falling behind. US colleges and universities now admit about six women for every four men;³ in every state, men are less likely than women to graduate from both college and high school, and all signs suggest that the gender gap here is only increasing with time.⁴

There’s also clear evidence that young men are finding it harder than ever to make meaningful connections with others, both socially and romantically. Compared to women, men are more likely to report feelings of loneliness, alienation, and social isolation.⁵ Fifteen percent of men now say they have no close friends at all, a fivefold increase since 1990.⁶

This sense of isolation may be one of the reasons that so-called “deaths of despair”—i.e., deaths by suicide, drug overdose, or alcoholic liver disease—have seen a sharp uptick among men in recent years. Indeed, experts suggest that this is one of the primary drivers behind the growing divergence in life expectancy between men and women in the United States—which had reached almost six years as of 2023.⁷

In the most extreme cases, these feelings of loneliness and alienation may even manifest in the form of violence against others. In the US, men commit around 80% of violent offenses⁸—and a staggering 98% of mass shootings.⁹ Psychologists have suggested that strengthening the social circles of young men could go a long way towards limiting the frequency of these kinds of tragic mass casualty events.¹⁰

- Christine Emba, “Men are lost. Here’s a map out of the wilderness.” The Washington Post, July 10th, 2023
- Leila Bengali and Evgeniya Duzhak, “Men’s Falling Labor Force Participation across Generations.” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, October 10th, 2023
- Derek Thompson, “Colleges Have a Guy Problem.” The Atlantic, September 14th, 2021
- Michael T. Nietzel, “Women Continue To Outpace Men In College Enrollment and Graduation.” Forbes, August 7th, 2024
- Jean Guerrero, “Why are men so lonely?” Los Angeles Times, January 15th, 2024
- Daniel A. Cox, “Men’s Social Circles are Shrinking.” Survey Center on American Life, June 29th, 2021
- “U.S. men die nearly six years before women, as life expectancy gap widens.” Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, November 13th, 2023
- John Gramlich, “What the data says about crime in the U.S.” Pew Research Center, April 24th, 2024
- Michel Martin, Emma Bowman, “Why Nearly All Mass Shooters Are Men,” NPR, March 27th, 2021
- Brian McNeill, “Addressing social isolation may be key in preventing mass shootings, study finds,” VCU News, February 17th, 2023

Central to this crisis of masculinity are the conflicting cultural signals we're sending to boys and young men

Ultimately, these startling statistics reflect the fact that many of today's young men feel uncertain about their own role in society, and unsure of how their gender ought to inform the way they navigate the world.

Young men still feel a strong sense of social pressure to "perform masculinity," particularly from other men. And these expectations of masculinity are endlessly reinforced by the media that they consume.

Our society pressures men to perform masculinity...

74% of teens and young men feel society expects them to act and behave in a certain way because of their gender

53% say that they often feel pressure from other men to behave in a "masculine" way

...but we're making it harder for them to figure out what masculinity even is.

43% of teens and young men say they don't know what it means to be a man in today's society

48% of parents of young boys say they don't know how to speak to their sons about masculinity

Encouragingly, however, 62% of young men feel that masculinity can be a positive force in our society, with fewer than one in ten seeing it as negative. Notably, 69% of Black men view masculinity positively, compared to 59% of white men. But there's growing confusion over what exactly masculinity means to society.

Young men today have grown up amid constant debates about gender roles, both online and in real life. The 2010s saw the popularization of the term "toxic masculinity"—and while many feminist thinkers at the time made it clear that they never intended to characterize all expressions of masculinity as intrinsically negative, many young people still feel that masculinity is at odds with modern cultural values. Notably, women are currently more than twice as likely as men to view masculinity as having a negative impact on society.

As a result, the issue facing us today is that many American men feel their belief in masculinity as a positive force isn't shared by society; 35% of teens and young men think the culture views masculinity negatively. Whether justified or not, many believe traditionally "masculine" traits are now seen as regressive, and men are expected to suppress or moderate these traits.

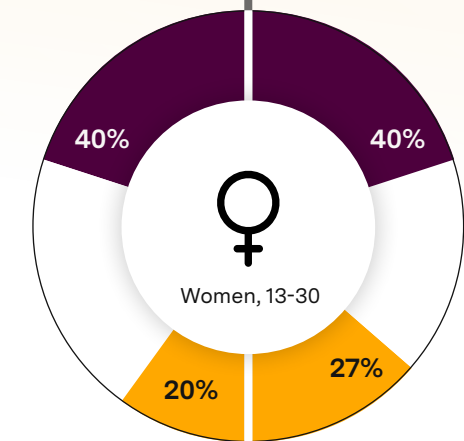
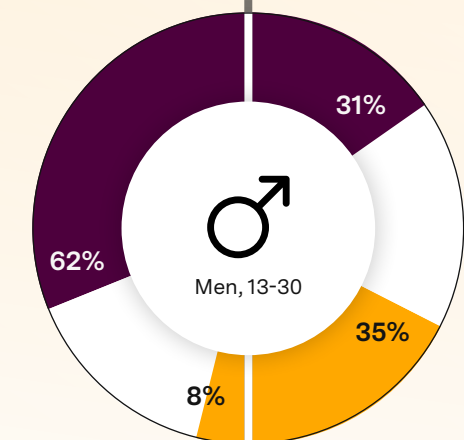
Rightly or wrongly, a plurality of young men now feel they live in a culture in which masculinity is viewed as something to be inherently suspicious of, rather than celebrated.

Q: Do **you** see masculinity as a positive or negative force?

Q: Do you think **our society** sees masculinity as a good thing or a bad thing?

POSITIVE
NEGATIVE

+ GOOD THING
- BAD THING



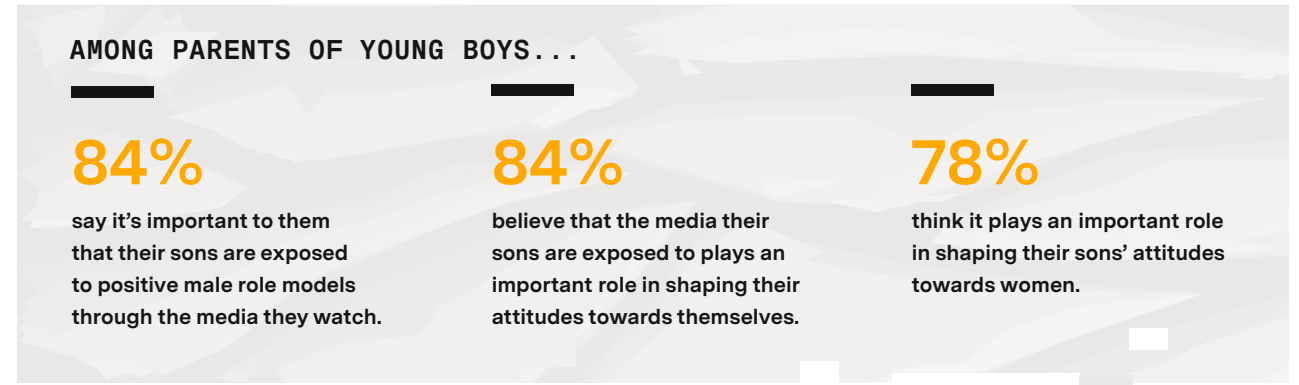
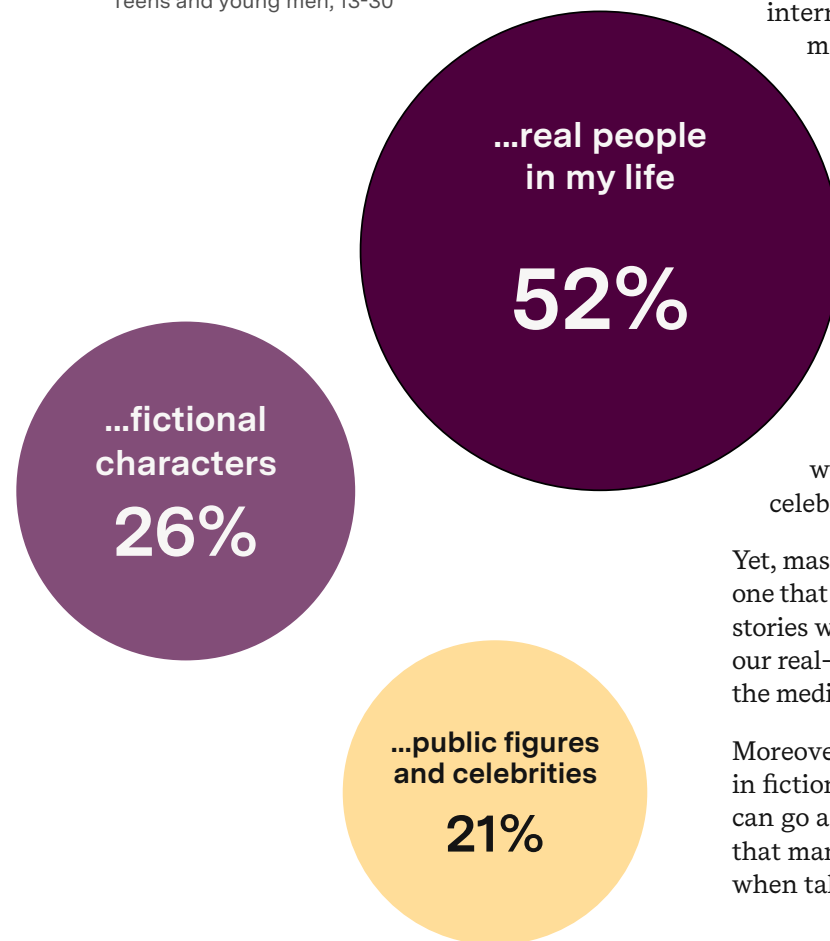
Based on two surveys of 3,000 US streaming viewers, conducted in July 2024

Fiction has a vital role to play in helping boys and young men navigate these conflicting cultural signals



Q: Who did you look up to as male role models growing up?

MOST OF MY ROLE MODELS WERE . . .
Teens and young men, 13-30



With so many young men struggling to make sense of their place in the world, it's more important than ever for the entertainment industry to interrogate its own role in America's ongoing masculinity crisis.

We know that fictional role models can't fully replace real-life ones; around half of young men (52%) say the male role models they admired the most growing up were real people, like brothers, fathers, teachers, and mentors. However, not everyone has access to these sorts of positive real-life influences. For about a quarter of young American men, their most positive role models are from fiction, while another one in five look primarily to celebrities and public figures for guidance.

Yet, masculinity is ultimately a cultural narrative—one that is inextricably bound together with the stories we tell and the media we consume. And even our real-life influences are themselves influenced by the media they consume, to some degree.

Moreover, the presence of strong male role models in fiction—and in children's media in particular—can go a long way towards addressing the issues that many of today's parents are running into when talking to their sons about masculinity.

More than eight in ten parents say that they're actively thinking about the kinds of role models their sons are exposed to through the media they consume, and the vast majority believe that the presence or absence of such role models can play a significant role in determining life outcomes and in shaping how children think about themselves and their relationships with others.

"Research suggests that kids pick up on ideas of gender and race extremely early. Gender socialization starts happening as early as three to six months; even if parents are mindful of it and trying to counter it, kids are inevitably going to pick up certain ideas about gender roles from the media they're exposed to, and it has lifelong consequences for how they think about these things."

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls, Center for Scholars and Storytellers, UCLA

PART 2

It's clear that media plays a critical role in shaping young men's understanding of their place in the world...



...but what are the **key challenges** Hollywood needs to be aware of when it comes to creating aspirational male characters that can guide young men through this current crisis of masculinity?

PART 2:

FOUR KEY
CHALLENGES FOR
THE ENTERTAINMENT
INDUSTRY

CHALLENGE 1 2 3 4

Avoiding
overcorrection

Hollywood needs to resist the urge to act solely in reaction to recent cultural conversations around masculinity, and should instead focus on being a positive force in shaping the concept.

As well as responding to the past and present, Hollywood needs to offer a future-oriented perspective on masculinity

Over the past century, portrayals of male characters in TV and film have been shaped by and helped to shape prevailing cultural norms of masculinity. Indeed, the evolution of popular male archetypes across these forms of media can tell us an enormous amount about the kinds of socio-political questions that preoccupied different eras.

In the 1960s and 70s, for example, fictional portrayals of masculinity were deeply informed by the countercultural movements of the era; movies of this period often feature leading men who reject traditional sources of authority and shrug off stifling social conventions. But in the 80s, as a resurgent conservative movement swept Ronald Reagan into the White House, we saw the pendulum swing towards unapologetically macho—even militaristic—visions of masculinity, defined by rugged action heroes like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Recently, cultural debates about masculinity have manifested themselves on-screen in two distinct ways. On the one hand, we're now seeing more leading male characters—like Jason Sudeikis's Ted Lasso—who feel like conscious rejections of traditional masculine stereotypes. These characters tend to be introspective, humble, and aware of their social privilege; their sense of masculinity is typically rooted in their values and their relationships with others, rather than physical strength.

Simultaneously, however, we've also started to see movies and shows which push their characters to the opposite extreme—emphasizing the most toxic elements of masculinity in an attempt to create “cautionary tale” male characters that show boys and young men how *not* to behave.

Ryan Gosling's Ken in 2023's *Barbie* is perhaps the most prominent example of this trend. It's Ken's (mis)understanding of masculinity that provides the central conflict of the movie—and by the end of it, he's had to learn to cast off social expectations and define a new identity for himself.

For an even more recent example, we can look to the treatment of Joaquin Phoenix's Arthur Fleck in *Joker: Folie à Deux*; many critics have observed that the film feels like a direct rebuke of male fans of the first movie who saw something to admire in Phoenix's character.¹¹

While there's certainly a role for these kinds of stories within our cultural tapestry, there's a danger that we become too focused on these sorts of cautionary tales about what boys and young men *shouldn't* be, at the expense of offering positive role models that demonstrate *what they could aspire to be*.

The challenge for the entertainment industry, therefore, is to develop a perspective on masculinity oriented more towards the future than the past. If too much content feels like a response to recent backlash against toxic masculinity—either shying away from traditional masculine attributes or taking them to their most dangerous extremes—then we risk failing to provide boys and young men with a positive roadmap forward for navigating the challenges of our current moment.

Ultimately, we need to create space for diverse models of aspirational masculinity—including characters who exhibit stereotypically masculine attributes such as ambition and

physical strength, as well as those who don't fit into that mold. If we focus too heavily on critiquing previous notions of masculinity instead of constructing healthier visions of the future, we'll miss the opportunity to provide the positive and empowering male characters that young men, boys, and their parents feel are desperately needed.



Ryan Gosling, *Barbie*
Warner Bros. Pictures, Heyday Films,
LuckyChap Entertainment, NBGG
Pictures, Mattel Films

11. Peter Debruge, “*Joker: Folie à Deux*’s Fatal Flaw Is Turning the Fans Into the Villains of the Sequel,” *Variety*, October 8th, 2024

Post-War patriarchs

In the aftermath of World War II and during the red scare, on-screen depictions of masculinity reflected traditional values which were deeply bound up in a broader sense of patriotism. Westerns, in particular, provided filmmakers with an opportunity to integrate this specific vision of masculinity into a uniquely American mythology—creating the archetype of the “strong and silent” cowboy.

Countercultural icons

The social upheavals of the 60s—from Vietnam to the civil rights movement—brought about a challenge to the stoic male archetypes that had dominated TV and film in the 50s. In the New Hollywood era of the 60s and 70s, filmmakers gravitated towards complex and often morally ambiguous male characters, who were more willing to reject authority and social norms.

Rugged Reaganites

The action and adventure movies of the 1980s often reflected or responded to the cultural values embedded within America’s resurgent conservative movement. Characters in this era were often self-reliant and unapologetically patriotic, taking matters into their own hands to defeat enemies at home and abroad.

Disillusioned everymen

As the millennium approached, filmmakers became increasingly preoccupied with the inherent tensions between traditional masculinity and our commodified, commercialized lifestyles. Movies of this era often depicted modern men struggling to reassert their manhood within the confines and constraints of modern office jobs.

Conflicted anti-heroes

The 2000s and early 2010s saw a resurgence of the “alpha male” antihero, especially on TV. These characters were imposing, violent, but often morally conflicted—reflecting the social complexities of the post-9/11 landscape and the great recession of the late 2000s.

Introspective allies

While (mostly male-led) superhero movies dominated the box office of the 2010s, this period also saw the rise of a new, more introspective vision of masculinity in TV and film. Throughout the decade, media became increasingly willing to explicitly critique toxic masculinity, leading to the emergence of male characters who reject traditional masculine stereotypes—and whose function in the narrative is often defined by their relationships to their wives, daughters, or other female characters.



1950s

Gary Cooper, High Noon 1952



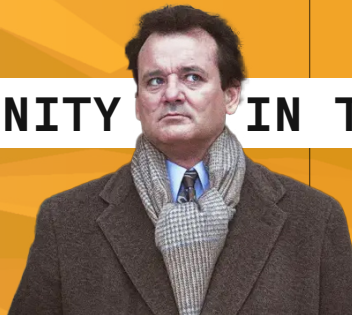
1960-70s

Paul Newman, Cool Hand Luke 1967



1980s

Sylvester Stallone, First Blood 1982



1990s

Bill Murray, Groundhog Day 1993

2000s

Bryan Cranston, Breaking Bad 2008



2010s

Sterling K. Brown, This Is Us 2016



EVOLVING DEPICTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN TV AND FILM

- Clark Gable, The Tall Men 1955
Henry Fonda, Mister Roberts 1955
Hugh Beaumont, Leave It To Beaver 1957
Robert Stack, The Untouchables 1959

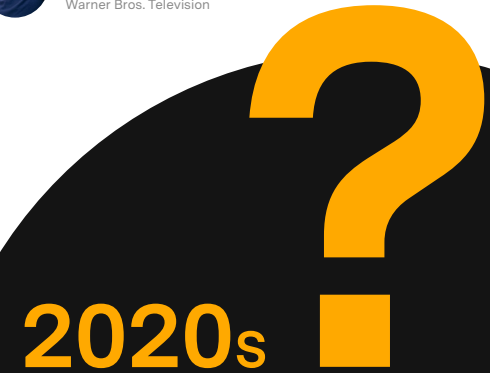
- Dustin Hoffman, The Graduate 1967
Jon Voight, Midnight Cowboy 1969
Jack Nicholson, Easy Rider 1969
Richard Roundtree, Shaft 1971
Alan Alda, M*A*S*H 1972
Al Pacino, Serpico 1973
Robert De Niro, Taxi Driver 1976

- Tom Selleck, Magnum, P.I. 1980
David Hasselhoff, Knight Rider 1982
Arnold Schwarzenegger, The Terminator 1984
Tom Cruise, Top Gun 1986
Danny Glover, Lethal Weapon 1987

- Spike Lee, Do the Right Thing 1989
Michael Douglas, Falling Down 1993
Morgan Freeman, The Shawshank Redemption 1994
Jim Carrey, The Truman Show 1998
Edward Norton, Fight Club 1999
Keanu Reeves, The Matrix 1999
Kevin Spacey, American Beauty 1999
Ron Livingston, Office Space 1999

- James Gandolfini, The Sopranos 1999
Michael Chiklis, The Shield 2002
Timothy Olyphant, Deadwood 2004
Jon Hamm, Mad Men 2007
Christian Bale, The Dark Knight 2008
Danny Trejo, Machete 2010

- Ty Burrell, Modern Family 2009
William Jackson Harper, The Good Place 2016
John Krasinski, A Quiet Place 2018
Jason Sudeikis, Ted Lasso 2020



PART 2:

FOUR KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

CHALLENGE 1 2 3 4

Creating grounded role models

Men currently lack grounded and relatable fictional role models—and are looking for more characters with obtainable, realistic skills.

Today's young men are taking their cues on masculinity from an extremely limited selection of genres

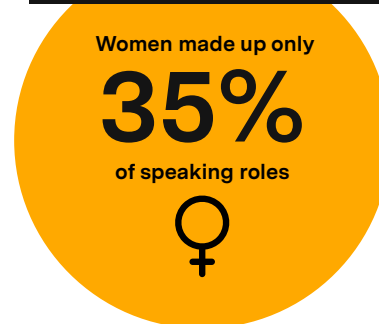
Over the past few decades, Hollywood has made a deliberate effort to create more female role models for girls to look up to, in response to society's push to empower young women. These characters have rightly helped to reinforce the message that girls can achieve anything they set their minds to and be anything they want to be in their careers. The growing number of empowering female figures in media reflects this effort—though of course, **there's still progress to be made in breaking through the remaining glass ceilings for female representation on screen.**

In contrast, there's clearly not a shortage of male roles on screen. The vast majority of fictional roles created are male roles. However, we wanted to understand the individual characters that have most successfully emerged as positive male role models for boys and young men in recent years. To do this, we presented teens and young men with an open-ended question, asking them to name the first three fictional characters that came to mind when thinking about positive male role models.

What's most striking about the list of characters that emerged from this exercise is just how heavily concentrated it is within a few specific content genres. **Just under half of the 20 most popular role models for boys and young men are superheroes**—and all of those, with the exception of Batman and Superman, are Marvel characters.



AMONG TOP GROSSING FILMS OF 2023...



According to analysis conducted by the [Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film](#) at San Diego State University.



Spider-Man, *Spider-Man, No Way Home*, Columbia Pictures, Marvel Studios



Batman, *The Batman*, DC Studios, Warner Bros. Pictures

Superman, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, DC Comics, Warner Bros

Beyond the superheroes, we see a smattering of characters from sci-fi and fantasy franchises—Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, and Percy Jackson—alongside a number of characters from video game franchises and animated TV franchises. Of the animated characters on this list, all of them—with the exception of SpongeBob—are from anime series, reflecting the rapidly growing popularity of anime among young American men.

Glaringly absent from the list are characters from movies or TV series set in the real world. Almost every single character cited here as role models for young men either comes from a fantastical universe or possesses supernatural abilities. Even though many of the young men we surveyed had watched movies like *Rocky* and *Top Gun: Maverick* and recognized that the characters in these titles are highly effective role models, these characters lack the cultural presence of figures like Peter Parker, Bruce Wayne, or Clark Kent and their respective alter-egos.

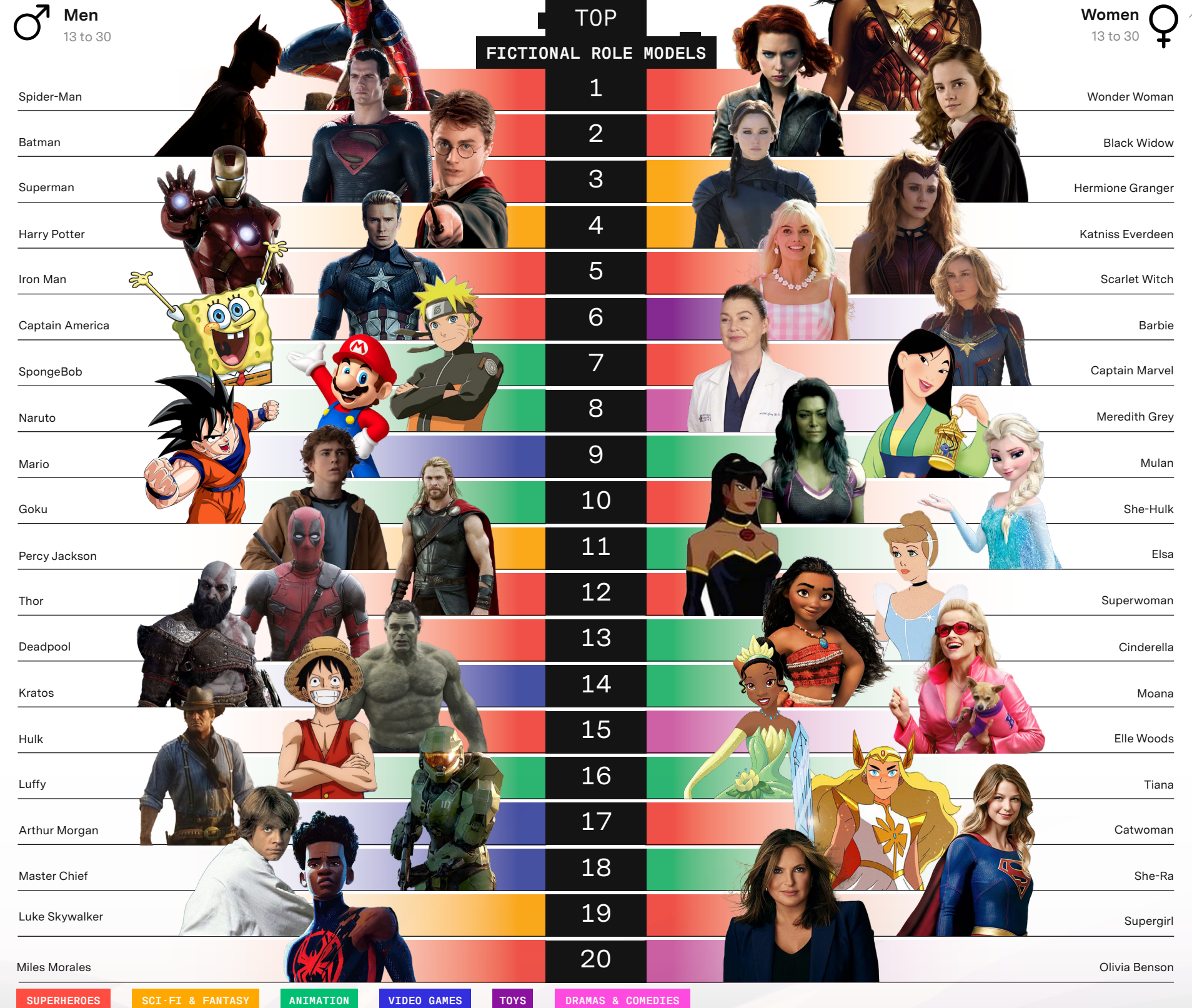
The lack of “grounded” characters for young men is striking when compared to the positive female role models identified by women in the same age range. While their list contains its fair share of supernatural and superhero figures like Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, it also features real-world characters in real-life professions, such as Meredith Grey from *Grey’s Anatomy*, Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*, and Olivia Benson from *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

All of this matters because it means that young men are gravitating towards a vision of masculinity that is, by definition, never going to be fully obtainable.

While boys and young men can certainly learn valuable lessons from characters in comic books, fantasy movies, or anime, in an ideal world, these kinds of portrayals of superhuman masculinity would be balanced against characters in realistic situations facing realistic challenges.

The conspicuous absence of these more grounded and relatable characters may be a contributing factor to the difficulty that many young men are having in finding a model of masculinity that can usefully help them navigate the challenges of everyday life.

Data for female role models comes from a survey of 654 female streaming viewers in the US, ages 13 to 30, conducted in August 2024.



SUPERHEROES | SCI-FI & FANTASY | ANIMATION | VIDEO GAMES | TOYS | DRAMAS & COMEDIES

Pushing emotional boundaries

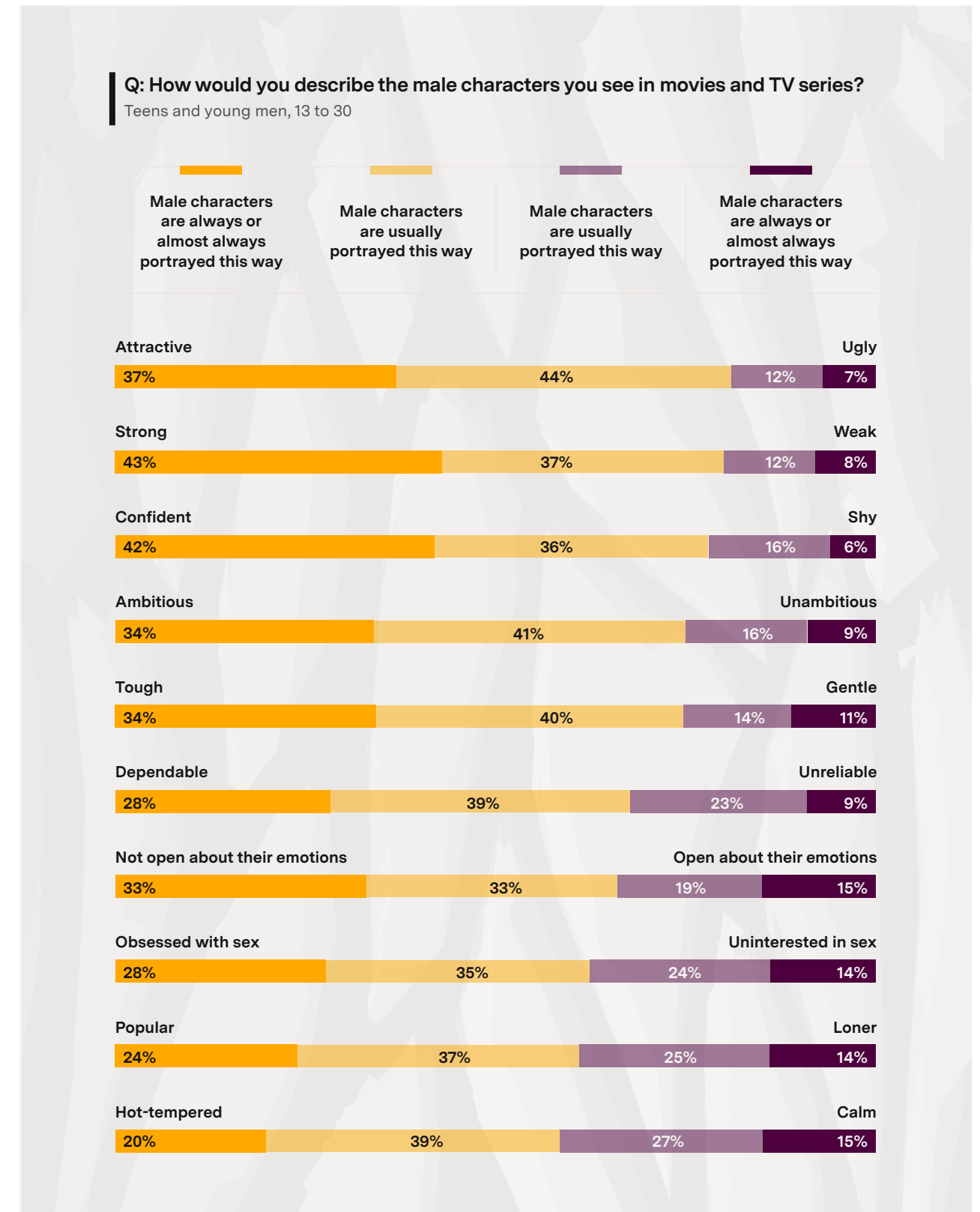
Young men feel that today's male characters largely reflect stereotypically masculine traits. There's a desire, however, for characters that display emotional and not just physical strength—through vulnerability, empathy, and deeper relationships with others.

It's important to show young men that masculinity doesn't have to mean repressing your emotions

Men still report that stereotypically “masculine” personality traits—both positive ones such as ambition and physical strength, as well as negative traits such as hot-headedness—remain the default forms of characterization for male characters in movies and TV shows.

This all helps to explain why many young men want to see greater on-screen representation of:

- ✓ **Characters whose masculinity is rooted in expertise and skill**, rather than superhuman abilities.
- ✓ **Mimicable bromances.** Given the loneliness epidemic and the degree to which many young men are struggling to create meaningful friendships, it's not surprising that there's a craving for male characters who rely on other men for support and know what it means to be a good friend.
- ✓ **Vulnerable men with a sense of humility.** Young men want to see more characters who are able to talk about their emotions with maturity, not letting pride get in the way of asking others for help and not always having to put on a brave face.



Q: What types of male characters would you like to see more of in film & TV?

Teens and young men, 13 to 30

+ more less -

Men who have deep and meaningful friendships with other men



Men who ask for help and rely on others for support



Men who are emotionally vulnerable and open about their feelings



Men who are experts in a specific skill



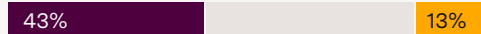
Men who are sensitive and kind



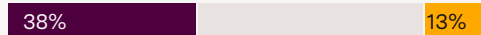
Men who stay home to look after their children



Men who work in stereotypically feminine jobs



Men who act as comic relief characters



Men who are physically strong



Men who dress in ways that aren't traditionally masculine



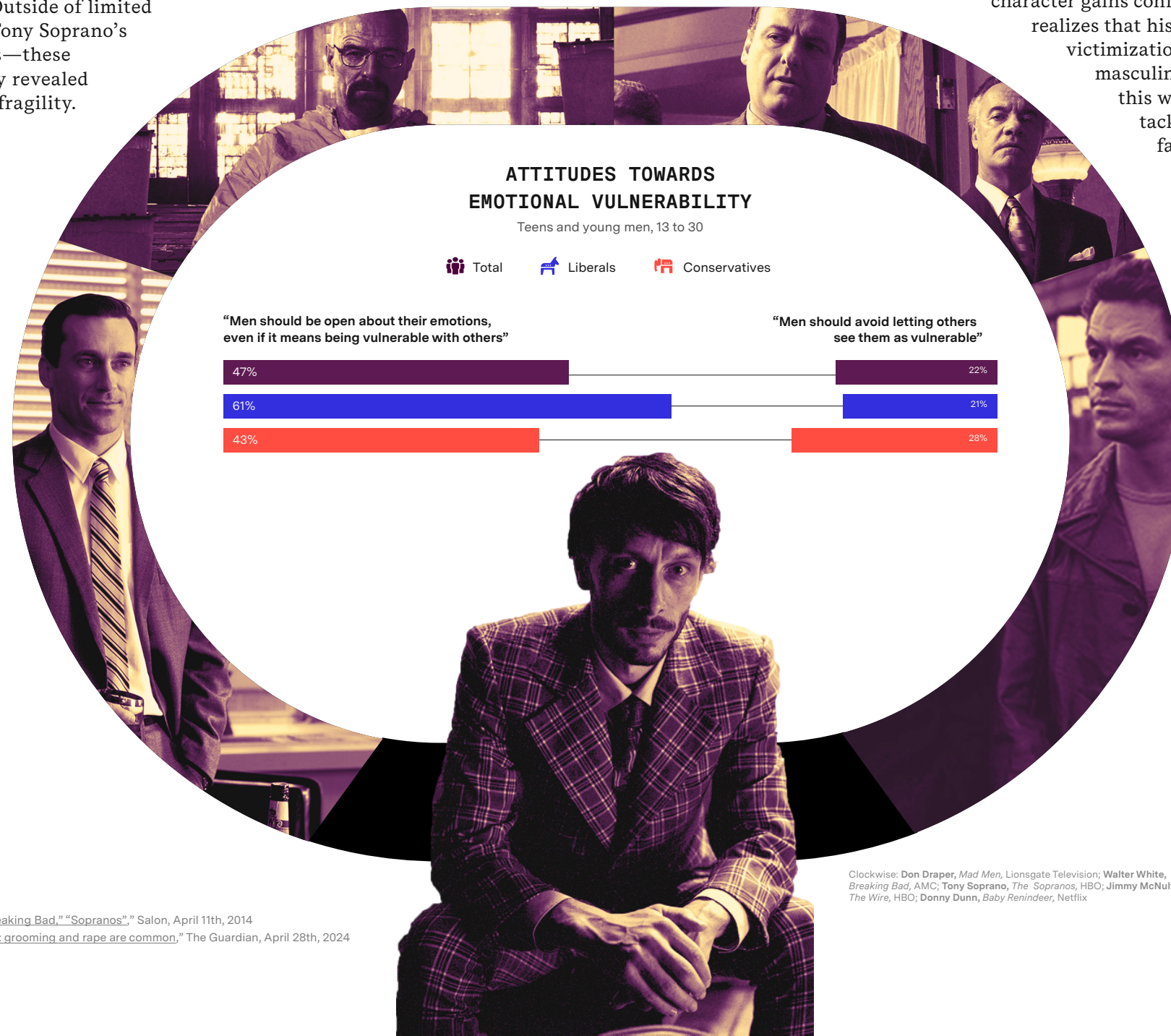
Indeed, showcasing more vulnerability is one of the areas where we've already seen substantial progress in recent years—especially on TV. For decades, many of the most prominent male characters in this medium were anti-heroes defined by their independence and refusal to show vulnerability. Shows like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire* explored masculinity as a performance, with male characters adopting rugged stoicism driven by personal ambition or societal expectations.¹² Outside of limited contexts—like Tony Soprano's therapy sessions—these characters rarely revealed their emotional fragility.

"I'd love to see more media that teaches boys and young men that it's ok to be flexible and change your mind. A lot of male characters are written as very set-in-their-ways, the narrative doesn't give them a lot of opportunities for personal growth."

Comedy writer

Now, however, we're beginning to see something of a correction to this trend. More and more, high profile and critically acclaimed TV shows are exploring the question of how modern men can find a sense of masculinity even in their more vulnerable moments—and how they can reconcile their identities as men against the expectations society forces upon them.

Baby Reindeer, for example, has been praised for addressing these issues, as the main character gains confidence in his identity and realizes that his sexual and emotional victimization doesn't diminish his masculinity.¹³ More shows like this will be vital in helping tackle the masculinity crisis facing young men.



Clockwise: Don Draper, *Mad Men*, Lionsgate Television; Walter White, *Breaking Bad*, AMC; Tony Soprano, *The Sopranos*, HBO; Jimmy McNulty *The Wire*, HBO; Donny Dunn, *Baby Reindeer*, Netflix

12. Amanda D. Lotz, "Don Draper's sad manhood: What makes 'Mad Men' different from 'Breaking Bad,' 'Sopranos,'" *Salon*, April 11th, 2014
 13. Jeffrey Ingold, "Baby Reindeer strikes a painful chord for gay and bi men, and I know why: grooming and rape are common," *The Guardian*, April 28th, 2024



Bandit, *Bluey*, Ludo Studio

“One of the biggest changes I’ve seen in kids’ media over the last 10 years is the way that parents are depicted. Dads, in particular, used to swing between two different extremes: either they were the comic relief character, or they’d be this incredibly draconian figure. Now, they’re being written in a much more nuanced way. Take *Bluey*, for example: the dad in that show is extremely present in his kids’ lives, he’s very much a creative partner for them, but also a shoulder to cry on when they need it.”

Children’s author and screenwriter

“For a long time, masculinity in Hollywood was synonymous with the ‘troubled tough guy’ archetype. But today, masculinity is much more of a spectrum—and films are a lot more willing to mix traditionally masculine and feminine character traits, or play around with traditional expectations of sexuality and gender expression. Josh O’Connor’s character in *Challengers* is a great example; he’s bisexual, but there’s never any implication that that makes him less secure in his masculinity, or negates his athleticism. And a lot of the biggest male stars in Hollywood—people like Ryan Reynolds and Ryan Gosling, for example—have a self-deprecating quality and a softness to them that you never used to see in leading men.”

Fabianne Meyer, casting director

“For a lot of male characters in fiction, their sense of masculinity is wrapped up in their professional work. We need to see more content that shows men how to find a sense of identity through other avenues, such as being creative, building positive character attributes and values, and forming healthy community.”

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls, Founder, Center for Scholars and Storytellers, UCLA

“The best male stars, in my opinion, have always been the ones that tread the line between humor and emotional vulnerability. Ryan Reynolds, for example, is a great joke-teller, but he also wants to find the emotion behind the joke, and create those surprising moments of empathy. Pierce Brosnan, when he was playing Bond, was always clear that he didn’t just want to be this smart-talking action hero; he wanted to find the quieter, more emotional moments that gave the character a depth and a gravitas.”

Jeff Kleeman, producer

“It’s important for media to communicate to boys and young men that it’s ok to get things wrong sometimes as long as you learn and grow from the experience. But I think, increasingly, we’re not giving characters that kind of grace. Look at *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, for example: the character of Sokka has a lot of sexist views, but he changes and evolves as the series progresses. But when they adapted it to live-action, they stripped out that element of the character. I think that points to a general fear we have these days of allowing characters to sit within that gray zone; not everyone has to be either a perfect role model or a cautionary tale.”

Actor, writer, and director



Sokka, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Netflix

Patrick Zweig, *Challengers*, Warner Bros. Pictures, Amazon MGM Studios

PART 2:

FOUR KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

CHALLENGE 1 2 3 4

Transcending divisions

The definition of masculinity is becoming polarized along political lines, meaning it's harder than ever to create fictional role models with universal appeal.

Liberals and conservatives have staked out competing approaches for solving our crisis of masculinity

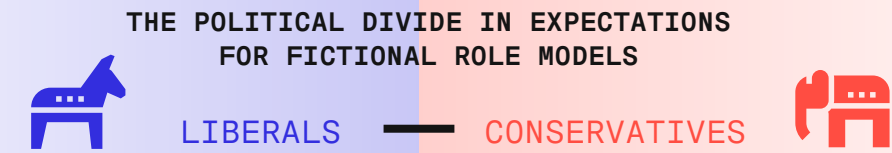
There's currently a stark divide between liberals and conservatives about the role that masculinity ought to play in society—creating further cultural contradictions for young men to navigate.

These political debates around the concept of masculinity have contributed to the now sizable and growing political divide between the opinions of young men and young women, and are informing the rise of some of the more extreme online influencers within the so-called "manosphere," with many young men becoming increasingly radical in their political outlook.

And the end result of these divisions is that there's no clear consensus on what, exactly, fictional role models should look like.

"The thin slicing that we've seen within audiences and genres has made it much harder to create male characters with truly cross-generational and cross-demographic appeal. Consumers, these days, are watching content on streaming platforms that is hyper-personalized to them; there's not as much content that the whole family can watch together. So, because writers are creating characters for a narrower audience, that shaves off a lot of the complexity that they might otherwise have had."

Jeff Kleeman, producer



A good fictional role model for boys and young men is someone...



Our culture and our understanding of masculinity are out of sync. So...

Liberals have attempted to **redefine** masculinity, shifting our understanding of the concept towards something that feels more inclusive and less rooted in traditional gender norms.

A majority of liberals say that a good fictional role model is someone who challenges traditional masculine stereotypes.

Liberals are seeking characters who challenge stereotypes, showing children and young men that they can be confident in their masculinity without adopting toxic traits traditionally linked to it.

They want more on-screen characters who redefine masculinity, promoting a broader and more inclusive understanding of the concept.

They are more likely to prioritize traits like kindness and empathy, and respond positively to male characters that act to support and uplift women within the narrative.

Conservatives have sought to **reclaim** the concept, arguing that our culture has failed young men by abandoning traditional masculine virtues and we're losing sight of their value in society.

Most conservatives, on the other hand, feel that a good fictional role model is someone who embodies and champions traditional masculine values.

Conservatives believe we ought to be using fiction to show children the importance of upholding traditional values—values they believe have sustained civilization for thousands of years.

They aim to offer young men heroic role models that inspire self-reflection, personal growth, and responsible citizenship, rather than deconstructing or redefining masculinity.

They're also more likely to think that a good role model is someone who goes out of their way to be a mentor to others.

LIBERALS VS. CONSERVATIVES ON WHETHER SHOWS/MOVIES PROVIDE GOOD ROLE MODELS

Teens and young men, 13 to 30

% saying the main male character(s) in this title represent positive role models

LIBERALS

In alphabetical order:

- Barbie
- Brokeback Mountain
- Dead Poets' Society
- Dune: Part Two
- Game of Thrones
- Invincible
- Joker
- Modern Family
- School of Rock
- The Iron Claw
- The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring
- Top Gun: Maverick

Distance from the dividing line indicates degree of disagreement between liberals and conservatives on whether titles contain positive role models



CONSERVATIVES

% saying the main male character(s) in this title represent positive role models

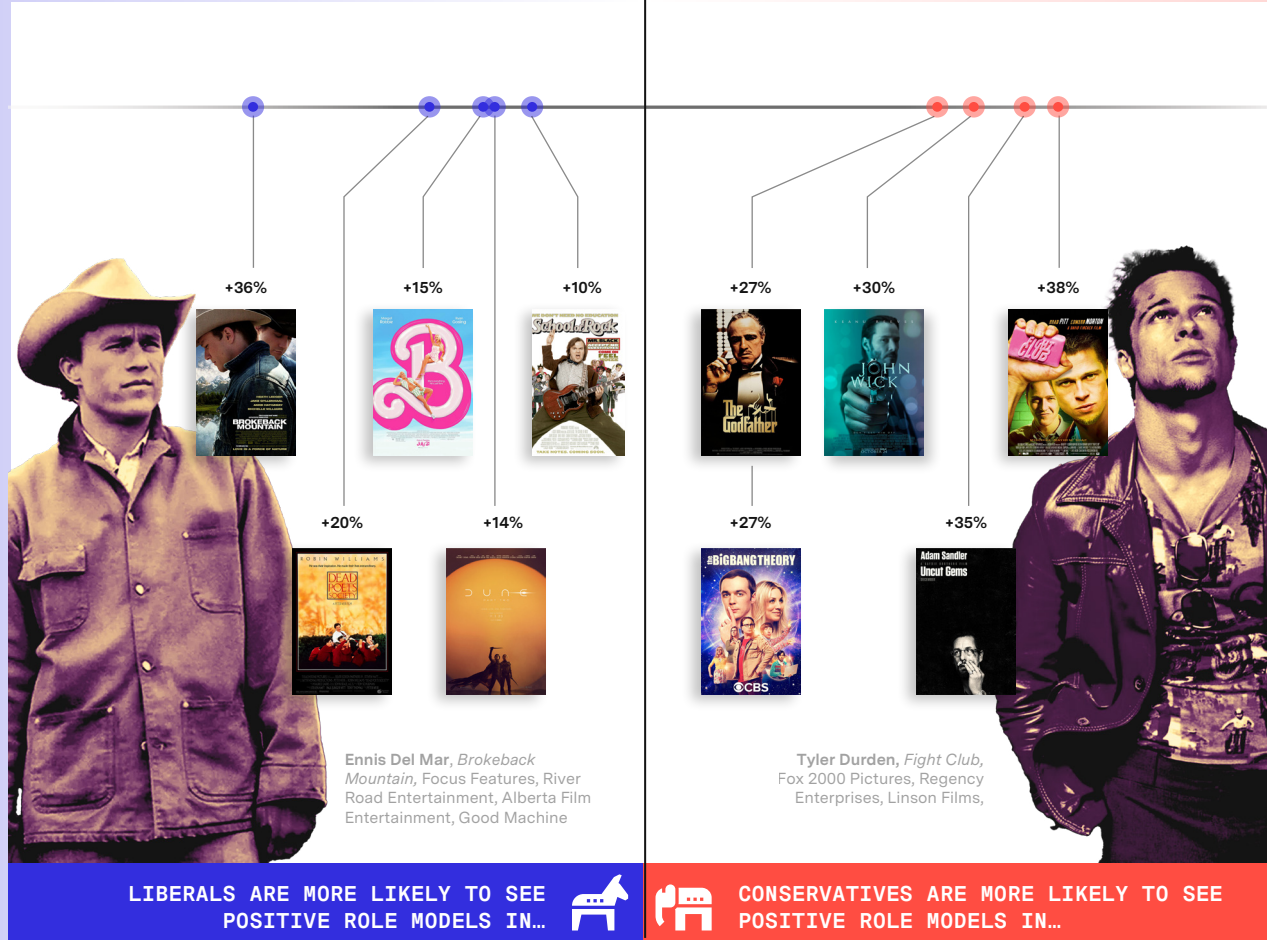
In alphabetical order:

- Avatar: The Way of Water
- Avengers: Endgame
- BoJack Horseman
- Breaking Bad
- Brooklyn Nine-Nine
- Captain America
- Creed
- Die Hard
- Doctor Who
- Fast X
- Fight Club
- Good Will Hunting
- Interstellar
- John Wick
- Mad Max: Fury Road
- Mad Men
- No Time To Die
- Rick and Morty
- Rocky
- Saving Private Ryan
- Spider-Man: No Way Home
- Stranger Things
- Superbad
- Taxi Driver
- The Big Bang Theory
- The Godfather
- The Hangover
- The Sopranos
- This Is Us
- Thor
- Uncut Gems
- Yellowstone



To understand how these political leanings might be informing how people are viewing male role models in fictional content, we examined the specific titles that resonated with different types of men.

We tested around 50 different movies and TV series that deal, in one way or another, with themes of manhood and masculinity—from classics such as *Taxi Driver* and *Rocky* through to recent blockbusters like *Barbie* and *Top Gun: Maverick*. The chart to the left shows the percentage of young men who identified the main male character(s) in each title as positive role models (excluding titles where total viewership was too low to provide a reliable base size).



Net difference between percentage of conservatives and percentage of liberals saying each title contains positive role models for boys and young men

Liberals are much more likely to embrace role models who fall outside of heteronormative expectations of masculinity, either physically or in terms of their sexuality and gender expression.

Brokeback Mountain, for example, was one of the titles where liberals and conservatives diverged the most in their opinions. And while Jack Black may not have the chiseled physique of Brad Pitt or Keanu Reeves, that didn't stop many liberal men from seeing his character in *School of Rock* as a powerful embodiment of positive masculinity.

Conservatives are more likely to value characters who assume a leadership role and are willing to make tough decisions to protect their friends and family—even when that means having to bend or break the law.

Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, Howard Ratner in *Uncut Gems*, Vito and Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*; all of these are characters who exist beyond the margins of polite society, but who have their own strict moral codes they choose to live by. For many conservative men, there's much to admire in this type of strongly individualistic approach to masculinity.

Despite the scale of these political divides, there's an opportunity for fiction to help bridge the gap

While there were certainly plenty of movies and TV shows where opinions differed significantly between liberals and conservatives, there is common ground to be found. There are a number of examples—both recent and historic—of movies and TV shows which have been able to successfully bridge this cultural divide and create characters that both groups can agree on as strong role models who exemplify a positive vision of masculinity.

These titles include a number of Marvel movies—specifically *Thor*, *Captain America*, and *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Two military-themed movies—*Top Gun: Maverick* and *Saving Private Ryan*—also proved to resonate strongly with both liberals and conservatives. Similarly, both of these audiences saw much to admire in the treatment of masculinity in both *Rocky* and its 2015 spin-off, *Creed*.

There are also several qualities that both liberals and conservatives agree are important in fictional role models—such as going on a journey of growth and self-improvement, being kind and respectful to others, and supporting other characters.

Q: What qualities are important in a fictional male role model?

% of respondents saying each quality is "very important"



They learn and grow over the course of the narrative



They are respectful towards women



They are kind



They support other male characters



They support female characters



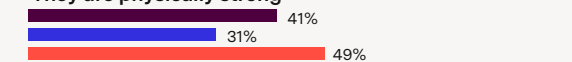
They act as a mentor to others



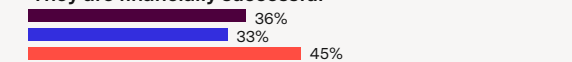
They have a good sense of humor



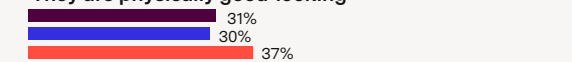
They are physically strong



They are financially successful



They are physically good-looking



1



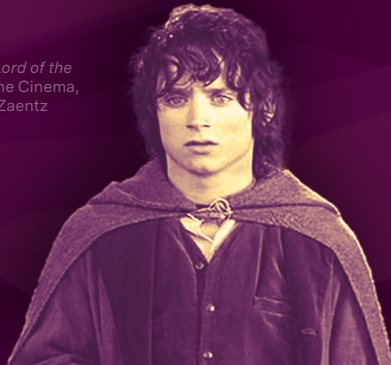
Jack Pearson, *This is Us*, Rhode Island Ave. Productions, Zaftig Films, and 20th Century Fox Television

Obtainable, real-world skills

It's important that there are male role models who demonstrate skills and expertise—partly to provide young men with a more attainable vision of masculinity but also to provide a sense of meaning and fulfillment. A big part of our current masculinity crisis is a sense among many young men that they aren't "useful" anymore; giving male characters important and valuable skills can help challenge these preconceptions.

One—but by no means the only—way to do this is to have the character work in a physically demanding and/or dangerous profession. Military roles, for example, are well-represented among the movies and shows that liberals and conservatives tend to agree on as good sources of role models for young men—across titles such as *Top Gun: Maverick*, *Captain America*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. Jack Pearson, one of the main characters of *This is Us*, is both a soldier and, later, a construction worker. There's a smattering of boxers as well, in the form of Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa and Michael B. Jordan's Adonis "Donnie" Creed, the main characters of the *Rocky* movies and their legacy sequels, respectively.

Frodo Baggins, *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*, New Line Cinema, WingNut Films, Saul Zaentz Film Co.



3

Deep male-to-male connections

Young men are keen to see stories about male characters who develop deep bonds, who learn how to be supportive of others, and who are willing to open up emotionally to the other men in their lives. While supporting female characters remains important, especially for liberals, stories that highlight men helping other men have a high chance of successfully bridging the political divide. The mentor-mentee relationship, in particular, is deeply valued and sought after by male audiences.

Saving Private Ryan and *Top Gun: Maverick*, for example, both revolve around squads of men who develop deep and meaningful relationships while pursuing a specific military objective. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, meanwhile, is perhaps the archetypal example of a story about men from different backgrounds united by a shared quest.

KEY INGREDIENTS

for creating aspirational male characters that transcend political divisions

2



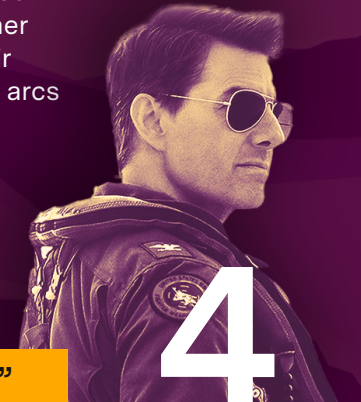
Adonis Creed, *Creed*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Chartoff Winkler, New Line Cinema, Chartoff-Winkler Productions

Personal growth, whether that ends in failure or victory

A good role model doesn't have to start that way; it's often more impactful to see their growth throughout the narrative as they discover their place in the world and find a model of masculinity that suits them. And not all stories have to end in a clear moment of victory. Not being afraid to fail is important—and it's ok if you don't instantly bounce back.

This is, arguably, one of the biggest reasons that *Rocky* and *Creed* have both proved to be such enduring portrayals of positive masculinity. The two films both seek to subvert the traditional narrative structure of the sports movie form. Neither Rocky Balboa nor Adonis Creed get their climactic victory at the end of their respective movies; instead, it's in defeat that they complete their emotional arcs and learn the true meaning of masculinity.

Pete Mitchell, *Top Gun: Maverick*, Paramount Pictures



4

Moving from "hero" to "helper"

There's a strong desire among young men for stories about male characters who uplift others and, in turn, rely on others for support. Ultimately, this may force us to reexamine our cultural understanding of "heroism"—to move away from a focus on the heroic individual battling against all odds, in favor of a more community-oriented model, one that prioritizes collaboration with others, loyalty to higher causes, and a willingness to make meaningful sacrifices.

Many of the titles that resonate among both liberals and conservatives feature men who believe in something greater than themselves, and who are willing to make personal sacrifices for those beliefs. In some cases, that means loyalty to a specific nation or place: Steve Rogers' loyalty to America, for example, or Thor's sense of personal duty to the realm of Asgard. But it can also mean loyalty to a specific concept, group, or individual. *Maverick's* loyalty to his deceased friend Goose, for example, and the way that it informs his relationship with Goose's son Rooster, is absolutely central to the emotional arc of *Top Gun: Maverick*.



Steve Rogers, *Captain America*, Marvel Entertainment, Marvel Studios

PART 3:

THE FUTURE OF MASCULINITY



MrBeast, Getty Collection, Chris Smith/The Wrap

Gen Alpha is looking to online creators, not Hollywood, for their cues on masculinity

So far, this report has focused primarily on the challenges young men in Gen Z and Millennial cohorts face as they navigate the world, the role media plays in shaping their expectations of manhood, and what they seek from future male characters as they define their own personal sense of masculinity.

We are, however, on the cusp of a generational handover. The oldest members of Gen Alpha—the cohort born in the 2010s and 2020s—are now becoming teenagers. So, if entertainment companies want to ensure that their portrayals of masculinity resonate with this youngest generation, they will need to invest time and effort towards understanding the unique experiences that have shaped their priorities and their personal understanding of what it means to be a man in the 21st Century.

Gen Alpha has grown up immersed in the world of online video content, with platforms like YouTube and TikTok often serving as more reliably relevant sources of entertainment than traditional media of TV shows and movies. This shift to social platforms has played a major role in shaping Gen Alpha's understanding of masculinity, or what it ought to mean.

Online content platforms are shaping a new model of masculinity—blending interest in traditional masculine pursuits like combat



TOP 10 REAL WORLD ROLE MODELS
For boys and young men

Boys under 13 were asked to name the celebrity or public figure they most want to be like when they grow up. Teens and young men were asked to name three celebrities or public figures they regarded as a positive role model for men.

sports with a sense of irreverence, embracing male camaraderie, and a bold adoption of one's personal hobbies and passions.

No-one has done as much to shape Gen Alpha's expectations of masculinity as MrBeast. The world's most popular YouTuber—real name Jimmy Donaldson—is also the single most popular real-world role model for boys under the age of 13.

His brand of "philanthro-tainment," featuring videos where he gives away large life-changing sums of money to contest winners or performs charitable

"It's very clear that Gen Z and Gen Alpha have a very different understanding of masculinity than previous generations. But Hollywood always takes a while to catch up, because the industry is still run by the old guard who have their own preconceived notions about what audiences will respond to."

Studio casting director

acts like building 100 wells in Africa, or rescuing 100 abandoned dogs, all while surrounded by a close cadre of almost-exclusively male friends, resonates strongly with young viewers.¹⁴ While Donaldson has been the subject of some controversy in recent months,¹⁵ his flashy yet community-focused vision of masculinity has clearly made a big impact with this demographic.

14. Sarah Manavis, "Want to understand Gen Z? Watch MrBeast," New Statesman, January 11th, 2024
15. Mary Harris, "MrBeast Is in Over His Head," Slate, August 15th, 2024

"Film and TV are no longer the primary forms of entertainment for many young men; instead, they're spending their time gaming, or immersed in online content platforms like YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok. If we really want to create positive and interesting role models for people under the age of 35, we need to be including these newer cultural watering holes in our thinking."

Jeff Kleeman, producer

Image credits in order of appearance: Variety, Stephen Kahn; Business Insider, Gabe Ginsberg/GI; Deadlines, GI; NBC Sports, GI; The Oberlin Overview, Jan Kruger; GQ, Dia Dipasupil; Architectural Digest, David Ramos, FIFA/FIFA GI; Fortune, Oil Scarrif, AFP/GI; NBA.com; People, David Rosenblum, Icon Sportswire/GI; History.com, Stephen F. Somerstein/GI; Northeastern Global News, Evan Vucchi/AP; BostonGlobe, Alex Brandon/AP; The Guardian, Brian Bowen Smith; Entertainment Weekly, Kevin C. Cox/GI; Unsplash, Arturo Rey

If storytellers fail to adapt, they risk losing the next generation of audiences

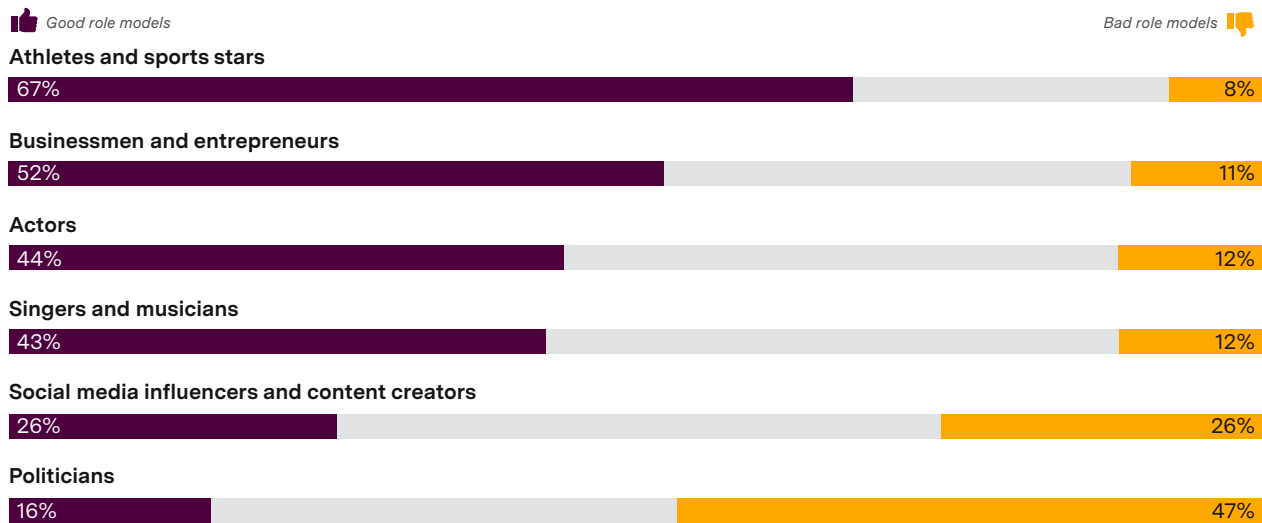
Given the influence of figures like MrBeast, it's no surprise **young boys now aspire to careers in the creator economy over traditional "dream jobs" like astronauts or pro athletes.** More than four in ten young boys say they'd like to be a professional video game streamer when they grow up; almost as many say that they'd like to create video content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

This contrasts with the views of their parents, who would generally prefer their sons look to other categories of celebrities as their primary sources of role models.

For better or for worse, streamers and content creators are rapidly taking their place as the go-to role models for Gen Alpha. To connect with this audience, media companies need to acknowledge and respond to this shift.

This may take the form of collaborating and partnering with celebrities who have emerged out of the online content ecosystem. Alternatively, studios and streaming platforms could consider incorporating more fictional portrayals of influencers and their professions into their content.

Q: Do you think these types of celebrities are generally good or bad role models for your son?
Parents of young boys



Glen Powell's Tyler Owens in *Twisters* is a good example of how this approach can be deployed to create fictional male characters with strong cross-generational appeal. While the character has a rugged "cowboy" persona, likely to appeal to older and more conservative audiences, he's also a content creator who uploads videos of his storm chasing activities to social media. Despite his age, there's something very Gen Alpha about Owens's unashamedly "nerdy" pursuit of his meteorological passions, and the sense of boisterous camaraderie he exhibits with his crew of fellow chasers.

Experimenting with new types of stories and new character archetypes may not always produce effective results, but it will be a necessary piece of the puzzle if we're serious about creating characters that resonate with boys and young men.

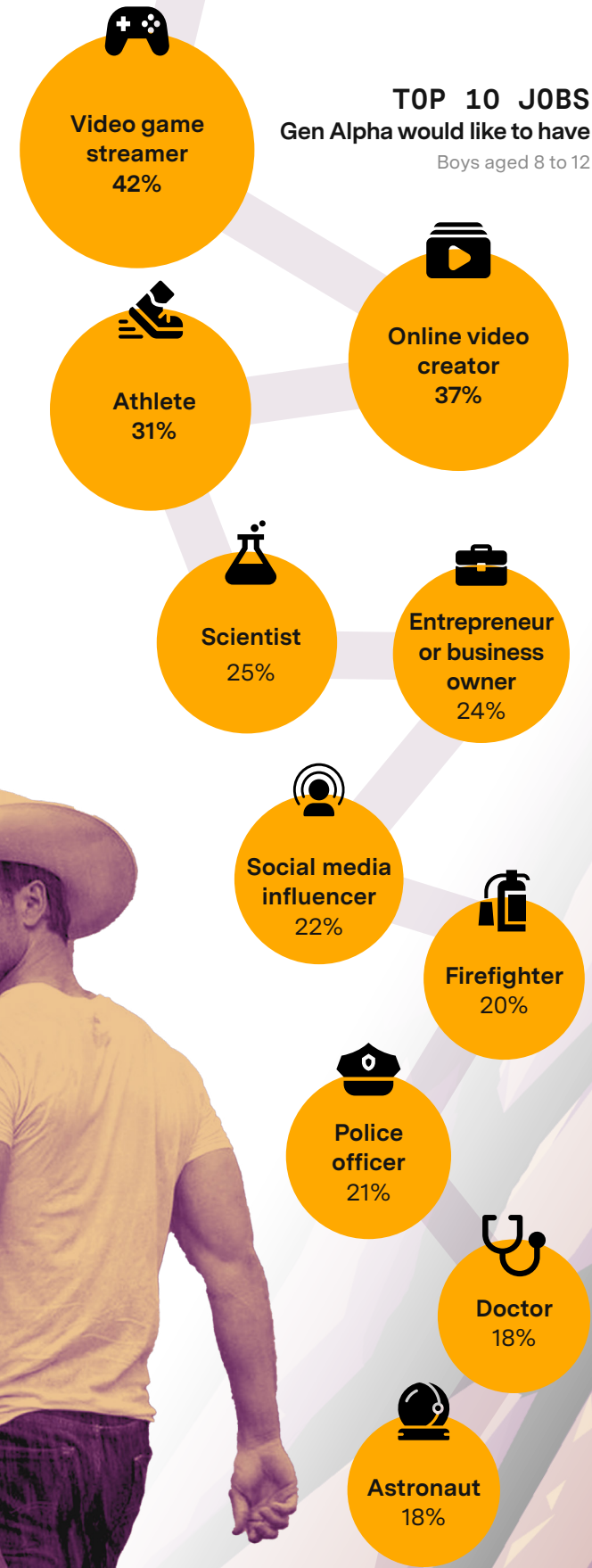
As we've seen throughout this report, our understanding of masculinity has never been set in stone; there's always been an onus on storytellers to respond to shifting societal expectations and to understand what modern audiences are looking for from male characters. But the need to get things right is especially pronounced at a time when so many boys, teens, and young men are struggling to balance the competing social expectations of their gender.

There's a real desire among this audience for aspirational storytelling that can help them navigate the complexities of modern manhood and understand their place in the world. If Hollywood can't step up to the plate and meet that need, we can't be surprised if more of them continue turning away from traditional forms of storytelling and taking their cues on masculinity from new sources.

Tyler Owens, *Twisters*, Universal Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, Amblin Entertainment, The Kennedy/Marshall Company



TOP 10 JOBS Gen Alpha would like to have Boys aged 8 to 12





National Research Group is a leading global insights and strategy firm at the intersection of content, culture, and technology. The world's most innovative brands turn to us for insights into growth and strategy for any content, anywhere, on any device.



NRG would like to offer our sincerest thanks to the Center for Scholars & Storytellers at UCLA for their input into the production of this report.

For additional practical recommendations for storytellers looking to create complex male characters that resonate with today's boys and young men, download their [Boys Tip Sheet](#).

WORDS & ANALYSIS



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Grady Miller



Ashleigh Bohr



Jess Adis



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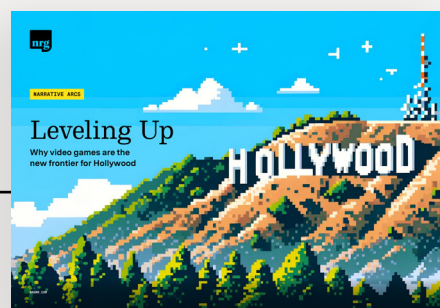
Design by Liv Horn



Art Direction by Grace Stees

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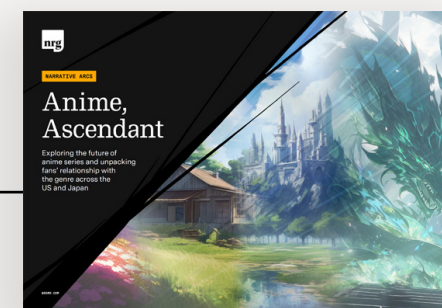
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Why video game adaptations could be the next frontier for Hollywood



How generative AI will reshape the lives of America's creative professionals



Why interest in anime is surging, and the four forces that will shape the future of the genre