



NARRATIVE ARCS

Hero Complex

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

OCTOBER 2024



Now more than ever, the entertainment industry needs to critically examine the role it plays in defining cultural expectations of masculinity

It's been over a year now since Ken left Barbieland and discovered the meaning of "patriarchy." While *Barbie* may not have been the first blockbuster to concern itself with gender roles and the relationship between the sexes, it did spark a vitally important debate about Hollywood's treatment of women and the impact that positive and nuanced depictions of feminine role models can have on women and young girls.¹

America Ferrera's monologue on the expectations heaped upon women in our society, in particular, resonated strongly with critics and audiences alike, and has continued to be the subject of intense discussion within and beyond the industry.²

But what about Ken and the expectations placed on *him*? While men can hardly be said to be underrepresented in today's TV and film landscape, there are still important questions we ought to be asking ourselves about the nature of those male characters—and the role they play in creating and propagating social expectations of masculinity.



As the anthropologist David D. Gilmore has pointed out, almost every culture throughout history has had a concept of masculinity distinct from the mere biological category of male-ness—a kind of social status that young men are expected to earn in some way as they make the difficult progression into adulthood.⁴ The pressure to achieve that status—to live up to the social expectations set by their culture's shared understanding of masculinity—can have an enormous impact on the trajectory of a young man's life.

Right now, it seems that many of our boys and young men are not being well-served by the expectations thrust upon them by our culture. Increasingly, they're finding themselves trapped between competing visions of masculinity, unclear of how to carve out a role for themselves in a fast-changing world—with the result that fewer of them are entering the workforce or completing college degrees, and more are dying from suicide, drug overdoses, and other preventable causes. On both sides of the political spectrum, more and more commentators are making the case that we, as a society, need to have

an urgent conversation about our understanding of masculinity and the role of men in our society.⁵

The entertainment industry will have a vital part to play in that conversation. To better serve the needs of boys and young men, we will have to think critically about the role that TV, film, video games, and other entertainment media have played in shaping their conceptions of masculinity—and work together to provide sources of positive fictional male role models that can help them navigate the ongoing tensions between personal identity and societal expectations.

In this report, we'll draw on quantitative consumer studies and interviews with industry professionals to unpack the relationship between media and masculinity, and the role that film and TV plays in setting expectations for boys and young men. And we'll provide actionable recommendations for storytellers looking to craft aspirational male characters that resonate with these audiences.

1. Valli Herman, "Barbie's influence hasn't slowed down. Pink Crocs and gender equality, anyone?" Los Angeles Times, December 5th, 2023
 2. Larisha Paul, "America Ferrera's 'Barbie' Monologue Resonated with Women and - Sadly - 11-Year-Old Girls," Rolling Stone, January 3rd, 2024
 3. Angelique Jackson, "Speaking Roles for Female Characters and Women Over 60 Declined in 2023's Top-Grossing Films, New Study Shows," Variety, February 27th, 2024
 4. David D. Gilmore, "Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity," Yale University Press, 1990
 5. "Democrats Have a Man Problem. These Experts Have Ideas for Fixing It," Politico, July 16th, 2023

IN THIS REPORT, YOU'LL FIND...

> How teens and young men think about the concept of masculinity

> How differing conceptions of masculinity intersect with broader political divides in today's culture

> The most popular real and fictional role models among today's young men

> What makes for an effective male role model in TV and film

> The types of male characters young men would like to see greater representation of in media

> The factors shaping how Gen Alpha thinks about masculinity, and how their priorities differ from Millennials and Gen Z

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.

AT A GLANCE...

Everything you need to know about the media and entertainment industry's role in creating—and solving—America's masculinity crisis

THE CONTEXT

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

On the one hand, classical 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—as traditionally understood, at least—is something to be ashamed of. Our 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 of our 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 struggling to build meaningful social relationships, and are more likely to suffer from loneliness. More of them are dying from preventable causes such as suicide and drug overdoses, and the gap in life expectancy between men and women is growing wider.

Different political tendencies have offered competing visions for solving this crisis, and resolving these apparent cultural contradictions. 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. Conservatives, on the other hand, have sought to *reclaim* the concept, arguing that our culture has failed young men by abandoning traditional masculine virtues.

These political debates around the concept of masculinity have contributed to the rise of dangerous and extreme online influencers within the so-called “manosphere.” Many young men are becoming increasingly radical in their political outlook—and there's now a sizable and growing political divide between the opinions of young men and young women.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

While the entertainment industry may have contributed to this crisis by shaping our cultural expectations of masculinity, it can also play a key role in helping to address it. By providing strong role models that resonate with the concerns of today's young people, the industry can offer a roadmap for men looking to navigate these cultural contradictions in a healthy and productive way.

In particular, media and entertainment companies should focus on:

1 Building common ground between liberals and conservatives

While these two groups may differ greatly when it comes to the question of what makes for a positive male role model, there is common ground to be found. Stories about male friendship and camaraderie and tales of men overcoming adversity and picking themselves up after defeat, for example, resonate strongly with both of these camps. By telling stories that bridge these political divides, the entertainment industry can help heal this growing social rift.

3 Providing men with more realistic and grounded role models

Part of the issue facing young men is that they're being sold a fundamentally unattainable version of masculinity. Among the characters most often cited by boys and young men as role models, virtually all of them are imbued with some sort of supernatural or magical powers. There's a need, therefore, for more stories about male characters whose strengths come from their knowledge, their skills, or their devotion to a specific craft—rather than from supernatural gifts.

5 Understanding the unique perspective of Gen Alpha

Gen Alpha are about to enter their teenage years, and they're turning out to be a generation with a unique relationship to masculinity. Rather than film and TV, they're taking their cues on masculinity from sports and social media. To meet the needs of this emerging generation, entertainment companies will need to understand the unique culture of masculinity that's now emerging on platforms like YouTube and TikTok—and may even want to consider partnering with the influencers that have become popular among them.

2 Showing men it's OK to be vulnerable

One specific area where there's broad agreement among boys and young men is the need for more stories that center on men who are emotionally vulnerable and honest about their feelings. By spotlighting these kinds of characters, the industry can send a message to young men that masculinity doesn't have to preclude seeking help from others.

4 Broadening the conversation about masculinity to include more diverse perspectives

Historically, the conversation around masculinity has tended to be rooted in the perspective of able-bodied straight white men. Other groups—Black men, Hispanic men, disabled men, LGBTQ+ men, to name a few—have their own unique relationships to the concept, as well as their own struggles and challenges within their communities. By telling stories that feature characters within these communities coming to terms with their own sense of masculinity, the entertainment industry can help expand our cultural conversation.

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

Ultimately, today's young men feel increasingly uncertain about their own role in society, and unsure of how their gender ought to inform the way they navigate the world. And much of this confusion can be attributed to the cultural signals they receive growing up—from their peers, from mentor figures, and, crucially, from the media they're exposed to.

On the one hand, young men still feel a strong sense of social pressure to "perform masculinity," particularly from other men. These expectations of

masculinity are endlessly reinforced by the media that young men consume. There are entire fields of academic study devoted to exploring the ways in which media creates and perpetuates gender roles.

And men themselves 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.

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

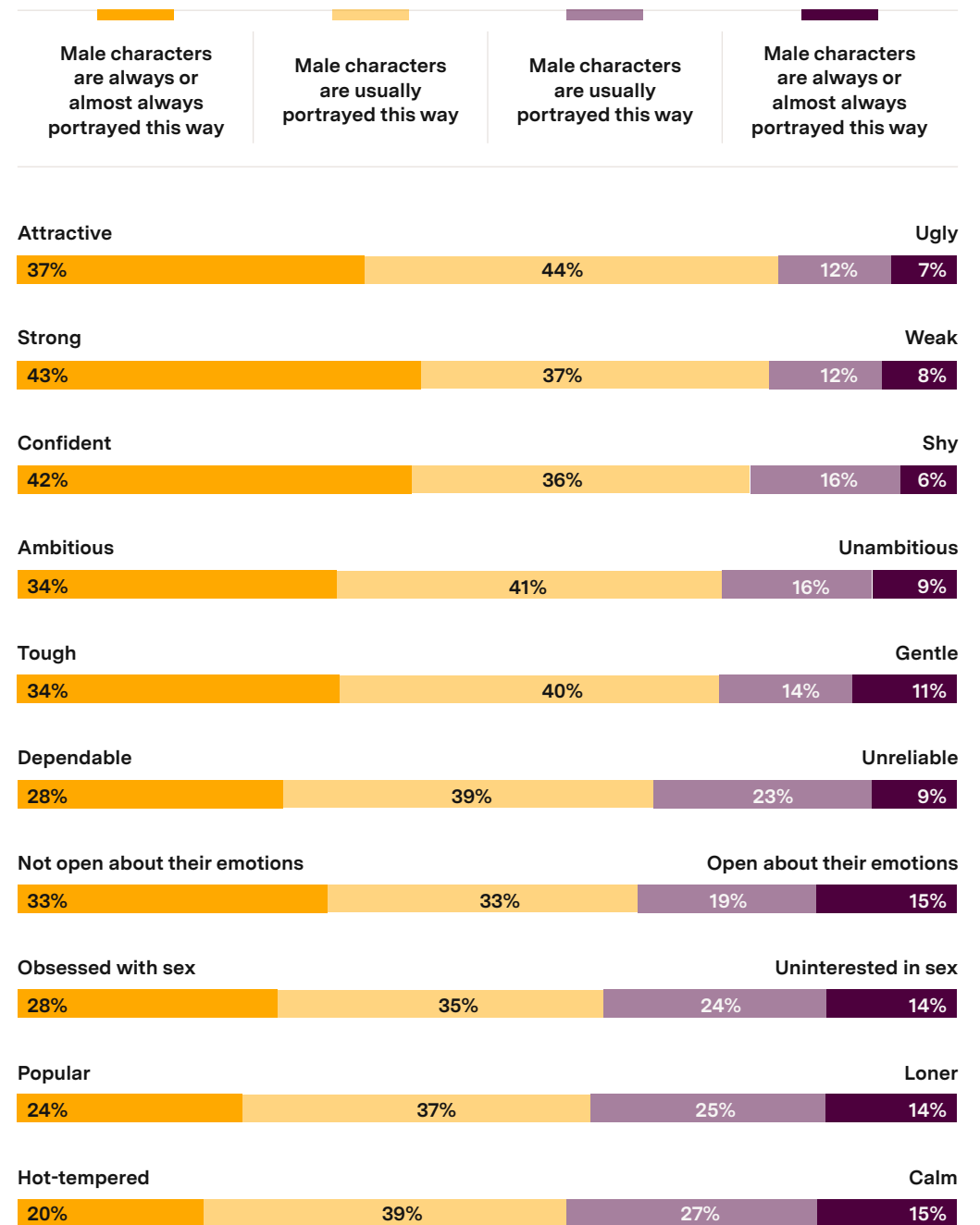
...but we're making it harder for them to figure out what masculinity even is.

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

Q: How would you describe the male characters you see in movies and TV series?

Teens and young men, 13 to 30



Of course, these entrenched social expectations aren't only reinforced by TV and film. A huge amount of advertising content directed towards men, for example, is oriented towards selling a particular vision of hyper-masculinity.¹⁶ Social media algorithms, meanwhile, push men towards violent content, while influencers on these platforms reproduce and propagate their own brand of commodified masculinity.¹⁷

The end result of this cultural signaling is that the majority of men still see masculinity as something worthy of aspiring to.

Sixty-two percent of young men say that masculinity is, on balance, a force for good; fewer than one in ten, meanwhile, see it as primarily a negative influence. Notably, Black men are particularly likely to view masculinity in a positive light: 69% of them see it as a positive force in society, compared to 59% of white men.

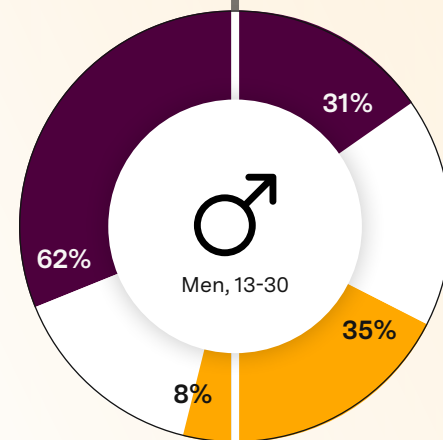
The problem, however, is that many American men don't feel as if the culture in which they live shares their belief that masculinity is, fundamentally, a force for good; 35% of teens and young men believe that our culture generally views masculinity as a negative trait. Whether justified or not, many men feel that we're now living in a world in which traditionally "masculine" traits are seen as inherently regressive—one in which men are expected to subsume or temper their inclination towards masculine character traits.

"Advertising, in general, is somewhat behind other forms of media when it comes to masculinity. In a lot of commercials, the male character is either, like, The Rock, or they're this bumbling buffoon who isn't able to do anything. There's very little middle ground."

Commercial casting director

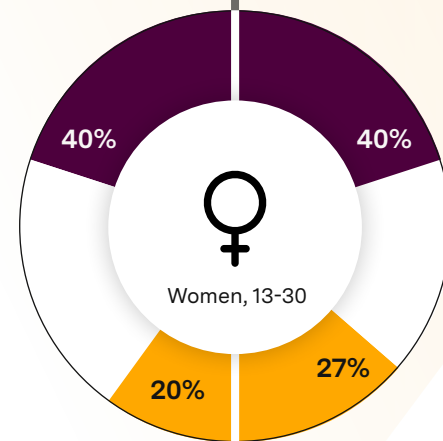
Q: Do you see masculinity as a positive or negative force?

POSITIVE
NEGATIVE

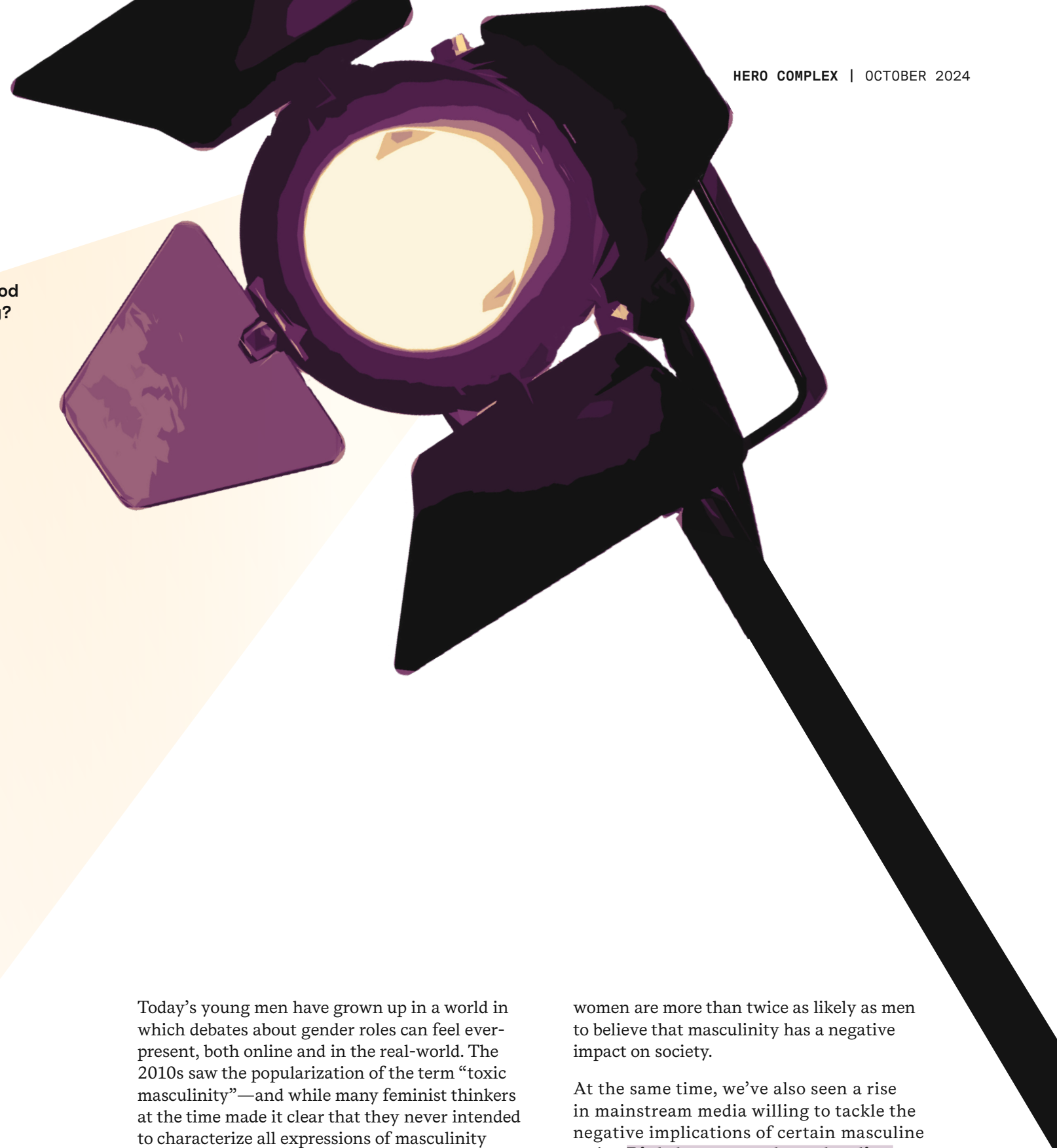


Q: Do you think our society sees masculinity as a good thing or a bad thing?

GOOD THING
BAD THING



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



Today's young men have grown up in a world in which debates about gender roles can feel ever-present, both online and in the real-world. 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, it seems that many young people have nonetheless been left with the impression that masculinity is fundamentally opposed to the dominant cultural values that have come to define society in the 21st century. Notably,

women are more than twice as likely as men to believe that masculinity has a negative impact on society.

At the same time, we've also seen a rise in mainstream media willing to tackle the negative implications of certain masculine 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.**

Masculinity has become a political battleground, as different groups seek out their own solutions to this crisis

So, we have a conflict: men feel a strong pressure to embody masculine traits, and much of the media they're exposed to still treats traditionally masculine traits as the implicit default for male characters. But at the same time, they also feel that they're living in a culture which increasingly views many of those traits as regressive, toxic, or implicitly anti-feminist. **Masculinity and our culture feel out-of-sync with one another, and one of them is going to have to budge.**

Different political tendencies have attempted to offer different resolutions to this conflict. For liberals, the apparent tension between masculinity and the cultural values of our modern era demonstrates that masculinity itself needs to be reconstructed and redefined. From this perspective, traditional notions of masculinity that cast men as inherently dominant, proactive, and

assertive need to be cast away, as we shift towards a new model of masculinity that is better-suited to a more egalitarian society. We may, they posit, even want to question the implicit assumption that there should be a single masculine ideal at all, perhaps instead working towards a world in which all men feel free to define and work towards their own uniquely personal vision of masculinity.

Conservatives, on the other hand, take the exact opposite approach. To them, it's our modern cultural values that need to be reassessed; if anything, we ought to be re-embracing traditional masculine virtues. Indeed, many conservative thinkers and influencers have argued that it's the denigration of these traditional virtues that can be blamed for many of the social ills currently afflicting boys and young men.

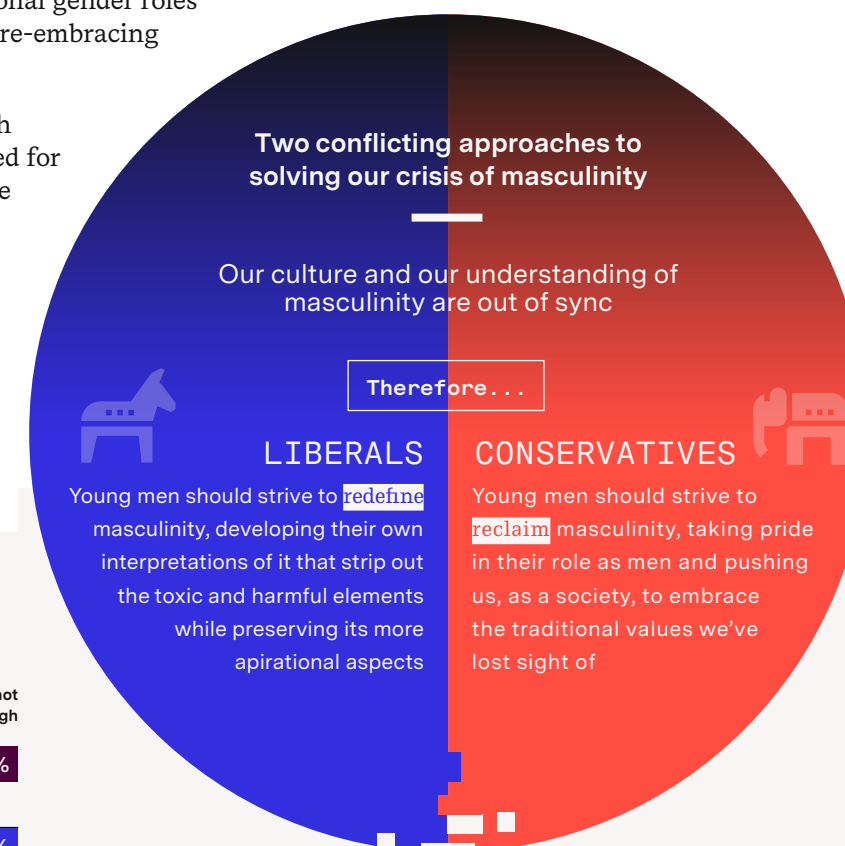
This was the core of the argument that brought Jordan Peterson to international attention in the late 2010s. Men, he argued, were "sick and tired of [being] under the weight of accusations that their ambition and forthrightness is a manifestation of something that's fundamentally tyrannical."¹⁸ More recently, a cruder version of the same line of thinking has helped to propel a new generation of controversial "manosphere" influencers and podcasters—including the self-styled "king of toxic masculinity," Andrew Tate¹⁹—into the spotlight.

Whatever one thinks of these arguments, they have proven highly persuasive to a substantial segment of the male population. Over a third of teens and young men believe that feminism has "gone too far"; four in ten think that society would benefit from people embracing traditional gender roles. And conservative men are about twice as likely as liberals to support traditional gender roles or to believe that men ought to be re-embracing traditional masculine values.

This kind of anti-feminist backlash among young men has been blamed for the rapidly growing political divide that has opened up between the sexes. Over the last six years, men aged 18 to 30 have gone from having broadly similar political views as women in the same age

group, to being almost 30 percentage points more conservative.²⁰ It's no coincidence that young men are one of the key demographics being targeted by the Trump 2024 campaign.²¹ And if the experience of other countries is anything to go by, that gap could get even bigger in the future: in South Korea, for example, there's a 50 point difference in the political views of young men and young women.

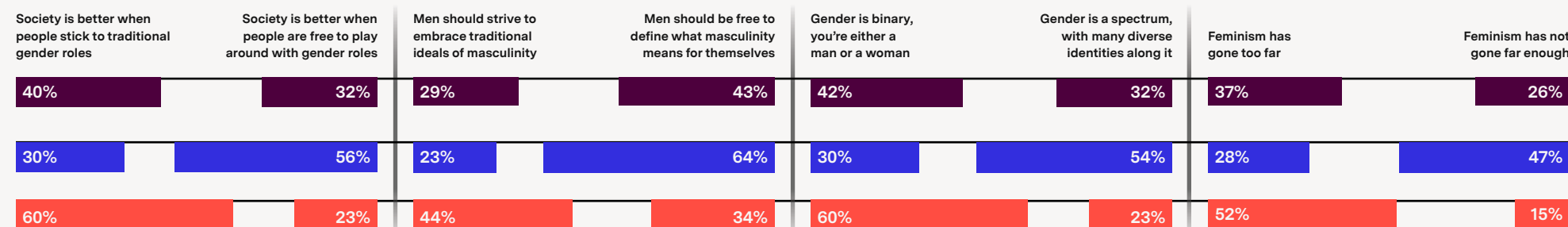
Ultimately, there's a real danger here that we could end up in a self-perpetuating cycle of political polarization. As men and women become increasingly divergent in their political views, it will become harder and harder for the two groups to find common ground—potentially leading to even more men feeling cut adrift from society and seeking radical answers within the "manosphere."



Attitudes towards gender roles

Teens and young men, 13 to 30

Total Liberals Conservatives



18. Helen Lewis, "Jordan Peterson: 'There was plenty of motivation to take me out. It just didn't work,'" GQ, January 15th, 2019; 19. Josephine Franks, "Who is Andrew Tate, the self-styled 'king of toxic masculinity', awaiting trial in Romania?" Sky News, April 4th, 2024; 20. John Burn-Murdoch, "A new global gender divide is emerging," Financial Times, January 26th, 2024; 21. Rebecca Morin, "The Macho convention: Republicans appeal to men with prime speaking slot for UFC's Dana White," USA Today, July 13th, 2024

Fiction has a vital role to play in helping boys and young men navigate these contradictions

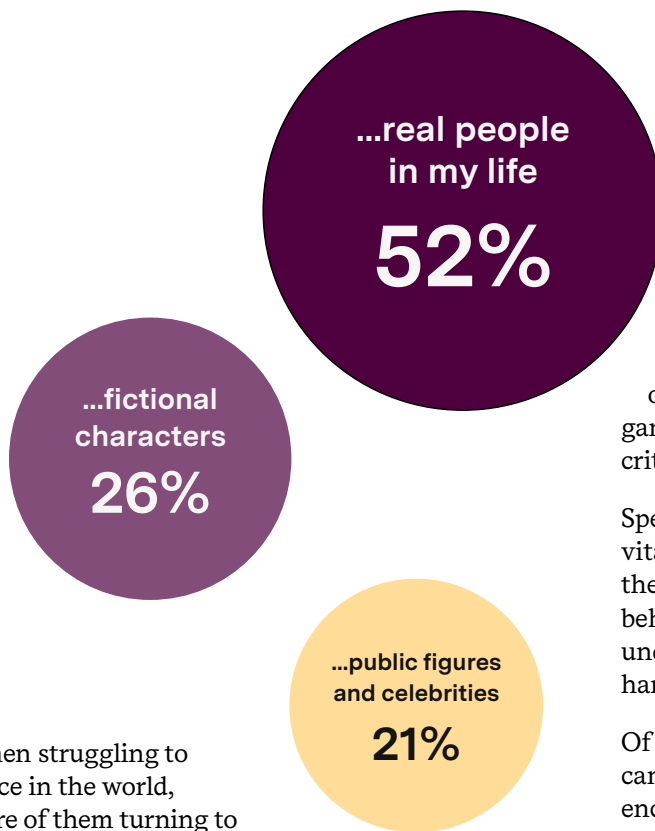
“Research suggests that kids pick up on ideas of gender and race extremely early. Gender socialization starts happening as early as three to six months; even if parents are mindful of it and trying to counter it, kids are inevitably going to pick up certain ideas about gender roles from the media they’re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

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



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, and with more and more of them turning to extreme political ideologies for answers, it’s more important than ever for the entertainment industry to interrogate its own role in America’s ongoing masculinity crisis.

Masculinity, after all, is a cultural narrative—one that is inextricably bound together with the stories we tell and the media we consume. Over the past century, portrayals of male characters in TV and film have both been shaped by and helped to shape prevailing cultural norms of masculinity; indeed, the evolution of

84%

of parents of young boys say it’s important to them that their sons are exposed to positive male role models through the media they watch.

84%

believe that the media that their sons are exposed to play an important role in shaping their attitudes towards themselves.

78%

think it plays an important role in shaping their sons’ attitudes towards women.

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.

Our own era is, of course, no different. If we, as a society, are to find satisfying and equitable resolutions to the apparent contradictions between the pressures of masculinity and the values embedded in our culture, mass media—from TV and film to gaming and social media—will undoubtedly have a critical role to play in that process.

Specifically, entertainment media can act as a vital navigational tool for young men, providing them with positive examples to model their behavior after, and showcasing ways in which our understanding of masculinity can be brought into harmony with wider societal values.

Of course, the role models we find in fiction can never be a complete substitute for those we encounter in the real world. More than half of young men (52%) say that most of the male role models they looked up to while growing up were real people in their lives: older brothers, fathers, teachers, friends, mentors, and so on. But not everyone is lucky enough to have an abundance of positive male influences in their lives. **For around a quarter of young American men, fiction has been the greatest source of positive role models; about one in five, meanwhile, said that they looked primarily to celebrities and other public figures as sources to model their behavior after.**

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 it comes to 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.

“We, as storytellers, have an enormous responsibility—particularly those of us working in children’s media. Kids are always going to take their cues for what masculinity should look like from what they see on TV. So it’s important that we give them positive figures to model their behaviors after. Equally, we also have to show them the consequences of negative traits, and those that promote an unhealthy vision of masculinity—things like not listening to others, being overly proud, or engaging in violence.”

Children’s author and screenwriter

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.

Multifaceted men

As society itself grapples with the question of what masculinity ought to look like, depictions of masculinity have themselves become more complex and inclusive. Toxic masculinity is often explicitly critiqued in storytelling, and male characters are expected to balance strength with vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and an awareness of social issues.



1950s

Gary Cooper, *High Noon* 1952
Stanley Kramer Productions



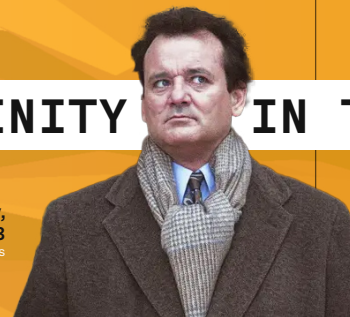
1960-70s

Paul Newman, *Cool Hand Luke* 1967
Jalem Productions



1980s

Sylvester Stallone, *First Blood* 1982
De Laurentiis Entertainment group



1990s

Bill Murray, *Groundhog Day* 1993
Columbia Pictures



2000s

Bryan Cranston, *Breaking Bad* 2008
High Bridge Entertainment; Gran Via Productions; Sony Pictures Television



2010 ONWARD

Mahershala Ali, *Moonlight*, 2016
A24; Plan B Entertainment; PASTEL

EVOLVING DEPICTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN TV AND FILM

- Clark Gable, *The Tall Men* 1955**
20th Century Studios
- Henry Fonda, *Mister Roberts* 1955**
Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc.
- Hugh Beaumont, *Leave It To Beaver* 1957**
Gomalco Productions
- Robert Stack, *The Untouchables* 1959**
Desilu Productions; Langford Productions
- Dustin Hoffman, *The Graduate* 1967**
Lawrence Truman Productions
- Jon Voight, *Midnight Cowboy* 1969**
Jerome Hellman Productions; Mist Entertainment
- Jack Nicholson, *Easy Rider* 1969**
Pando Company Inc.; Raybert Productions
- Richard Roundtree, *Shaft* 1971**
Columbia Pictures
- Alan Alda, *M*A*S*H* 1972**
20th Century Fox Television
- Al Pacino, *Serpico* 1973**
De Laurentiis Entertainment group
- Robert De Niro, *Taxi Driver* 1976**
Columbia Pictures

- Tom Selleck, *Magnum, P.I.* 1980**
Pando Company Inc.; Raybert Productions
- David Hasselhoff, *Knight Rider* 1982**
Glen A. Larson Productions; Universal Television
- Arnold Schwarzenegger, *The Terminator* 1984**
Jalem Productions
- Tom Cruise, *Top Gun* 1986**
Columbia Pictures
- Danny Glover, *Lethal Weapon* 1987**
Jerome Hellman Productions; Mist Entertainment

- Michael Douglas, *Falling Down* 1993**
Warner Bros.
- Kelsey Grammer, *Frasier* 1993**
20th Century Fox Television
- Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show* 1998**
20th Century Fox Television
- Edward Norton, *Fight Club* 1999**
Fox 2000 Pictures; New Regency Productions
- Kevin Spacey, *American Beauty* 1999**
Dreamworks Pictures; Jinks/Cohen Company
- Matthew Broderick, *Election* 1999**
Columbia Pictures
- Ron Livingston, *Office Space* 1999**
Twentieth Century Fox

- James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos* 1999**
HBO; Brillstein Entertainment Partners
- Michael Chiklis, *The Shield* 2002**
Fox Television Studios; Sony Pictures Television; The Barn Productions; 20th Century Fox Television; Columbia TriStar Television
- Timothy Olyphant, *Deadwood* 2004**
CBS Paramount Network Television; HBO; Paramount Network Television; Red Board Productions; Roscoe Productions
- Jon Hamm, *Mad Men* 2007**
Lionsgate Television; Weiner Bros.; AMC; U.R.O.K. Productions
- Christian Bale, *The Dark Knight* 2008**
Warner Bros.; Legendary Entertainment; Syncopy; DC Comics
- Danny Trejo, *Machete* 2010**
Overnight Films; Troublemaker Studios; Dune Entertainment III; Dune Entertainment

- Chris Evans, *Captain America* 2014**
Marvel Entertainment; Marvel Studios; Walt Disney Pictures
- Sterling K. Brown, *This Is Us* 2016**
Rhode Island Ave. Productions; Zaftig Films; 20th Century Fox Television
- William Jackson Harper, *The Good Place* 2016**
Fremulon; 3 Arts Entertainment; Universal Television
- Jason Sudeikis, *Ted Lasso* 2020**
Ruby's Tuna; Universal Television; Doozer; Warner Bros. Television
- Pedro Pascal, *The Last of Us* 2023**
PlayStation Productions; Naughty Dog; Sony Pictures Television Studios; The Mighty Mint; Word Games

With the definition of masculinity becoming polarized along political lines, it's harder than ever to create fictional role models with universal appeal

There is, however, an obvious problem here for storytellers: how do you create male characters that embody positive masculine virtues in a world in which nobody can agree on what those virtues should actually be?

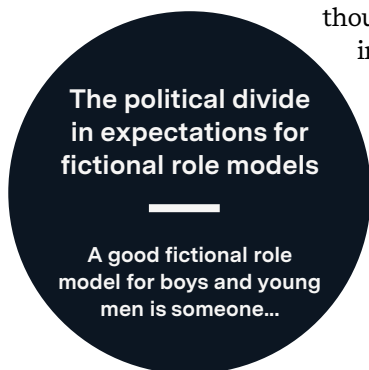
Given the extent to which liberals and conservatives disagree about the role that masculinity ought to play in society, it's only to be expected that they would also disagree about what, exactly, a fictional male role model should look like.

At a conceptual level, these two groups seem to have diametrically opposing interests. A majority of liberals say that a good fictional role model is someone who challenges traditional masculine stereotypes. They're looking, in other words, for characters who subvert expectations, teaching children and young men that you can be confident in your own sense of masculinity without having to embrace some of the more toxic and negative traits that have historically been

associated with the concept. Ultimately, liberals are interested in seeing more characters on-screen who successfully attempt to redefine our understanding of masculinity, pushing us towards a broader and more inclusive understanding of the term.

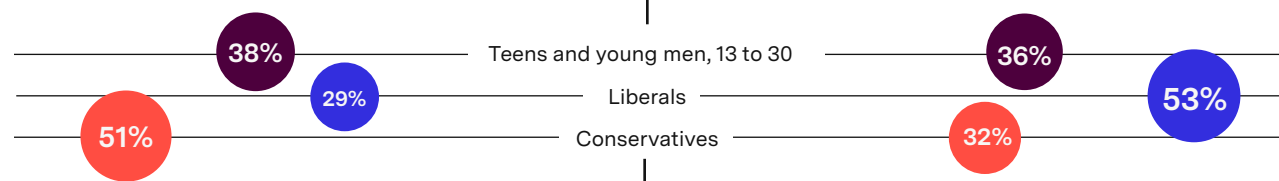
Most conservatives, on the other hand, want the exact opposite. For them, a good fictional role model is someone who embodies and champions traditional masculine values. We ought, they argue, to be using fiction to teach children that, even in a world in which it often feels as if these traditional values are looked down on or denigrated by cultural elites, it's still possible to buck the trend and stand up for the kinds of moral principles which, in their

eyes, have served our civilization so well for thousands of years. They're not interested in deconstructing or redefining masculinity; they want to provide young men with heroic archetypes that challenge them to think critically about their behavior and push themselves to live better lives and be better people.



...who embodies traditional masculine virtues

...who challenges traditional stereotypes about masculinity



As a result of these disagreements, liberals and conservatives also have different priorities when it comes to the specific character traits that fictional role models ought to have.

Conservatives, for example, are more likely to think that a positive role model should be good-looking, physically strong, and financially successful. 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.

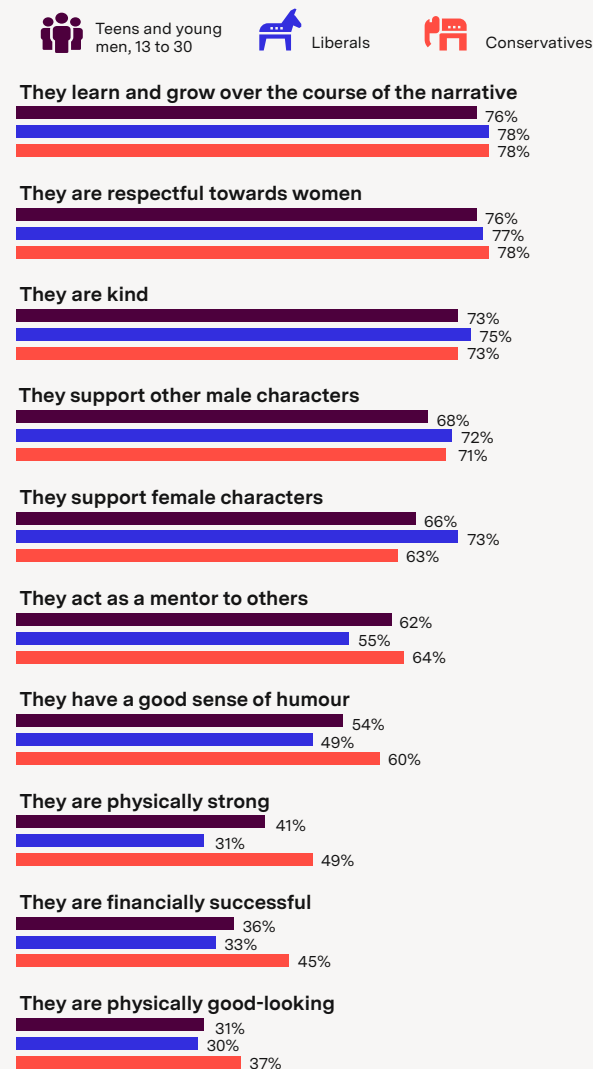
Liberals, on the other hand, are more likely to prioritize traits like kindness and empathy; they're particularly likely to respond positively to male characters that act to support and uplift women within the narrative.

One thing that both groups agree on, however, is the importance of personal growth. A good role model doesn't have to be someone who starts out that way; in fact, it's often more effective if we're able to see them change and develop over the course of the narrative, following along with them as they come to understand their own place in the world and find a model of masculinity that works for them.

And despite the considerable differences in attitudes towards masculinity between liberals and conservatives, 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.

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

% of respondents saying each quality is "very important"



"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

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

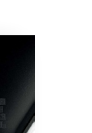
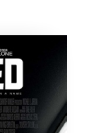
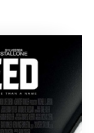
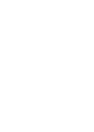
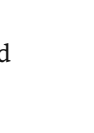
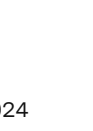
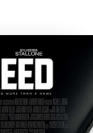
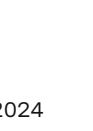
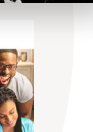
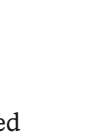
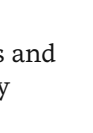
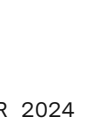
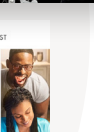
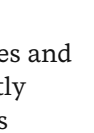
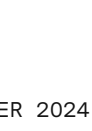
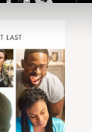
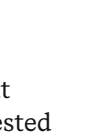
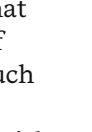
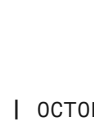
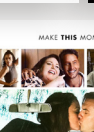
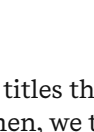
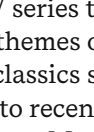
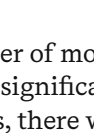
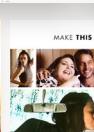
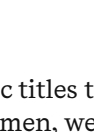
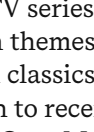
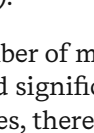
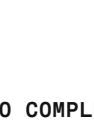
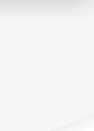
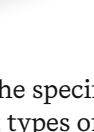
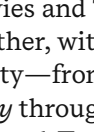
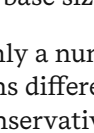
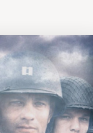
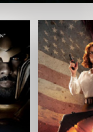
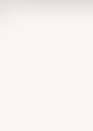
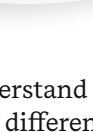
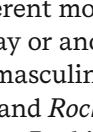
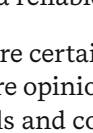
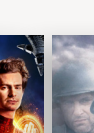
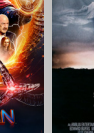
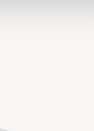
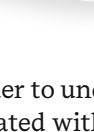
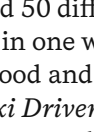
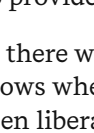
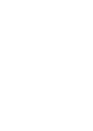
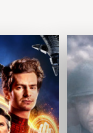
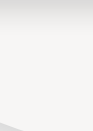
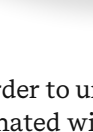
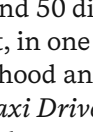
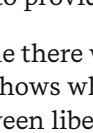
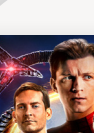
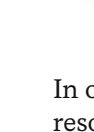
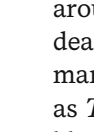
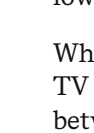
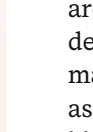
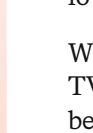
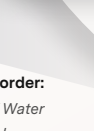
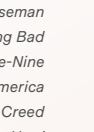
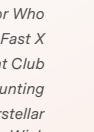
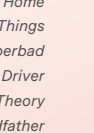
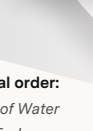
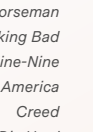
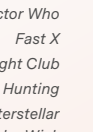
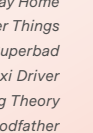
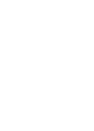
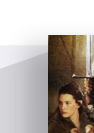
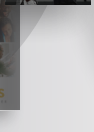
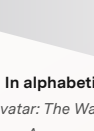
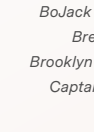
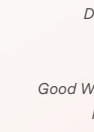
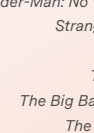
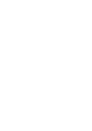
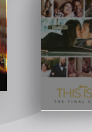
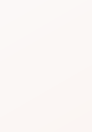
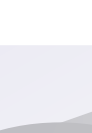
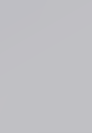
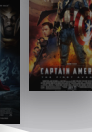
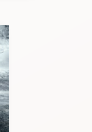
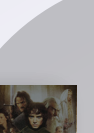
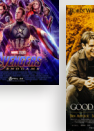
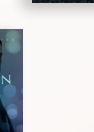
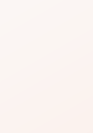
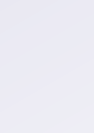
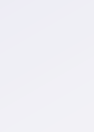
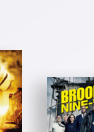
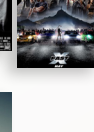
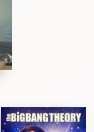
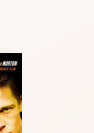
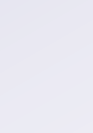
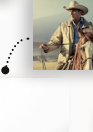
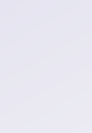
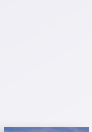
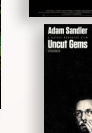
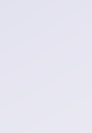
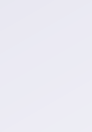
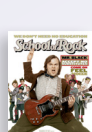
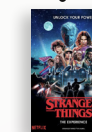
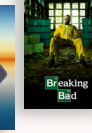
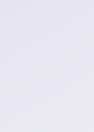
Teens and young men, 13 to 30

% 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



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

In order to understand the specific titles that resonated with different types of men, we tested around 50 different movies and TV series that dealt, 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 a positive role model (excluding titles where total viewership

CREATING FICTIONAL ROLE MODELS THAT TRANSCEND POLITICAL DIVISIONS

FIVE KEY INGREDIENTS

1



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

VALUABLE SKILLS AND EXPERTISE

Central to our current masculinity crisis is a sense among many young men that they aren't "useful" anymore. So, it's not surprising that both liberals and conservatives gravitate towards characters with deep expertise and valuable skills. In many cases, this takes the form of characters who work in physically demanding and/or dangerous professions. Military roles, for example, are well-represented, 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



UPLIFTING THE UNDERDOG

Everyone, it turns out, loves rooting for an underdog. This may be why the vision of masculinity presented by *Captain America* resonates so much with both liberals and conservatives. Steve Rogers doesn't begin the story wealthy and successful like fellow Avenger Tony Stark, or imbued with any supernatural powers; he's a scrawny kid who wants to better himself and serve his country despite his physical limitations. Similarly, the characters of Randall and Kevin Pearson in *This is Us* are largely defined by their struggles to overcome the tragedies of their childhood—including, most notably, the death of their father at a young age. And while *The Lord of the Rings* features plenty of characters with magical abilities or superhuman physiques, Frodo himself doesn't have any of these advantages. Indeed, it's his status as "just" a simple hobbit that makes him ideally suited to the task of carrying the ring to Mordor.



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

2

MALE FRIENDSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Notably, many of these titles feature large teams of primarily male characters working closely together in pursuit of a common goal. *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* is perhaps the archetypal example of a story about men from different backgrounds united by a shared quest.



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

5

LOYALTY AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Themes of loyalty and duty run deeply through many of these titles. Almost all of them feature male characters who believe in something greater than themselves, and are willing to make personal sacrifices for those beliefs: as Peter Parker's Uncle Ben puts it, with great power comes great responsibility. 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*.

Thor, *Thor: Ragnarok*, Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Pictures

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



4

RECOVERING FROM FAILURE

In many of these titles, the main characters are defined not so much by their successes, but by their willingness to put themselves out there despite the risk of failure, and an ability to pick themselves back up afterwards. 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 truly complete their emotional arcs and learn the true meaning of masculinity.



Peter Parker, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, Marvel Studios, Columbia Pictures, Pascal Pictures



“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

“Going forward, I’d like to see more gay male characters who aren’t the super-flamboyant stereotype. Gay men have their own sense of masculinity, and historically Hollywood has often stripped that away from them.”

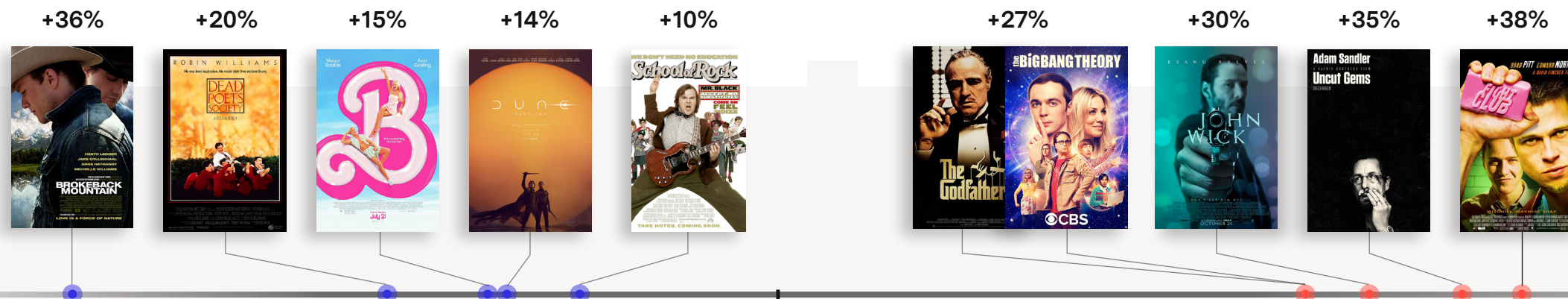
Studio casting director

“Personally, I’d love to see more positive role models specifically for Hispanic men. There’s a real deficit of Hispanic men on-screen—and when they do show up, they tend to be portrayed in very specific ways, with a lot of emphasis on traditional ideas of machismo. I think we could do a much better job of creating diverse role models for Hispanic boys.”

Comedy writer

“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



LIBERALS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEE POSITIVE ROLE MODELS IN...

CONSERVATIVES ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEE POSITIVE ROLE MODELS IN...

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

As much as we can learn valuable lessons from the titles that succeed at bridging the political divide between liberals and conservatives, it can also be instructive to look at the specific movies and TV shows where the attitudes of the two groups diverge the most.

Conservatives, for example, 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.

Predictably, liberals were 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. 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.

We can also see, in the different responses to some of these titles, the suggestion of a political divide emerging between STEM subjects and the humanities. Conservatives were more likely to see the characters in *The Big Bang Theory* as positive role models, whereas liberals responded more positively to *Dead Poets’ Society* and *School of Rock*—titles

about English and Music teachers, respectively. It’s possible that this reflects a broader social trend, as tech leaders such as Elon Musk increasingly align themselves with Republican causes,²² while humanities departments at universities remain heavily skewed towards liberal perspectives, despite the protestations of many conservative politicians and campaigners.²³

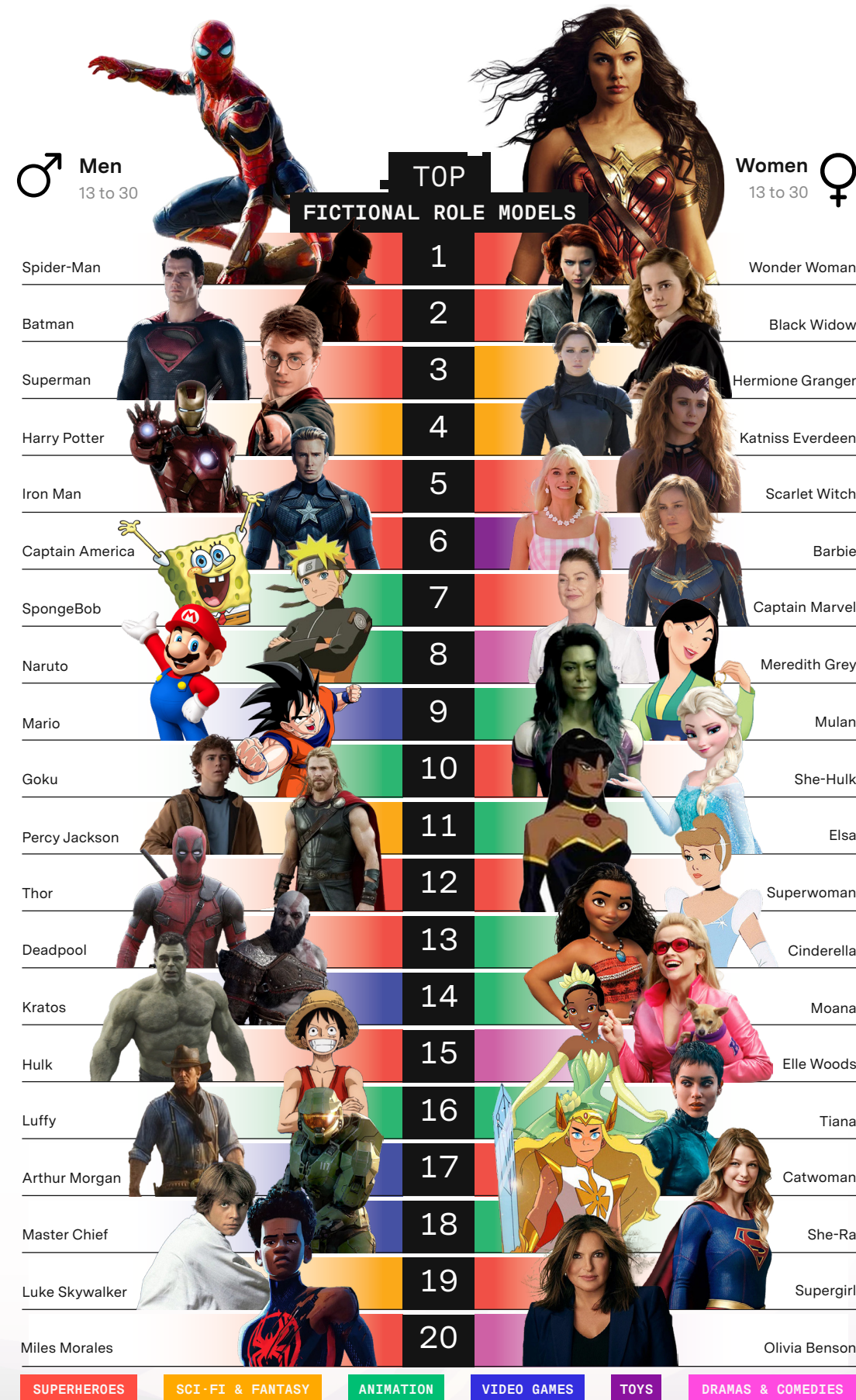
22. Helen Coster and Alexandra Ulmer, “How the world’s richest man is helping Trump’s presidential bid,” Reuters, October 23rd, 2024
 23. “A challenge to leftist bias moves into America’s public universities,” The Economist, April 11th, 2024

In particular, there's a need for fiction to showcase more grounded and more vulnerable male role models

While the preceding analysis focused on the level of specific titles, we also wanted to understand, through our research, the individual characters that have most effectively broken through into the public consciousness as positive role models for boys and young men. To do this, we presented teens and young men participating in our study 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.

The results of this exercise are summarized on the right. What's perhaps most striking about this list of characters 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.

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.



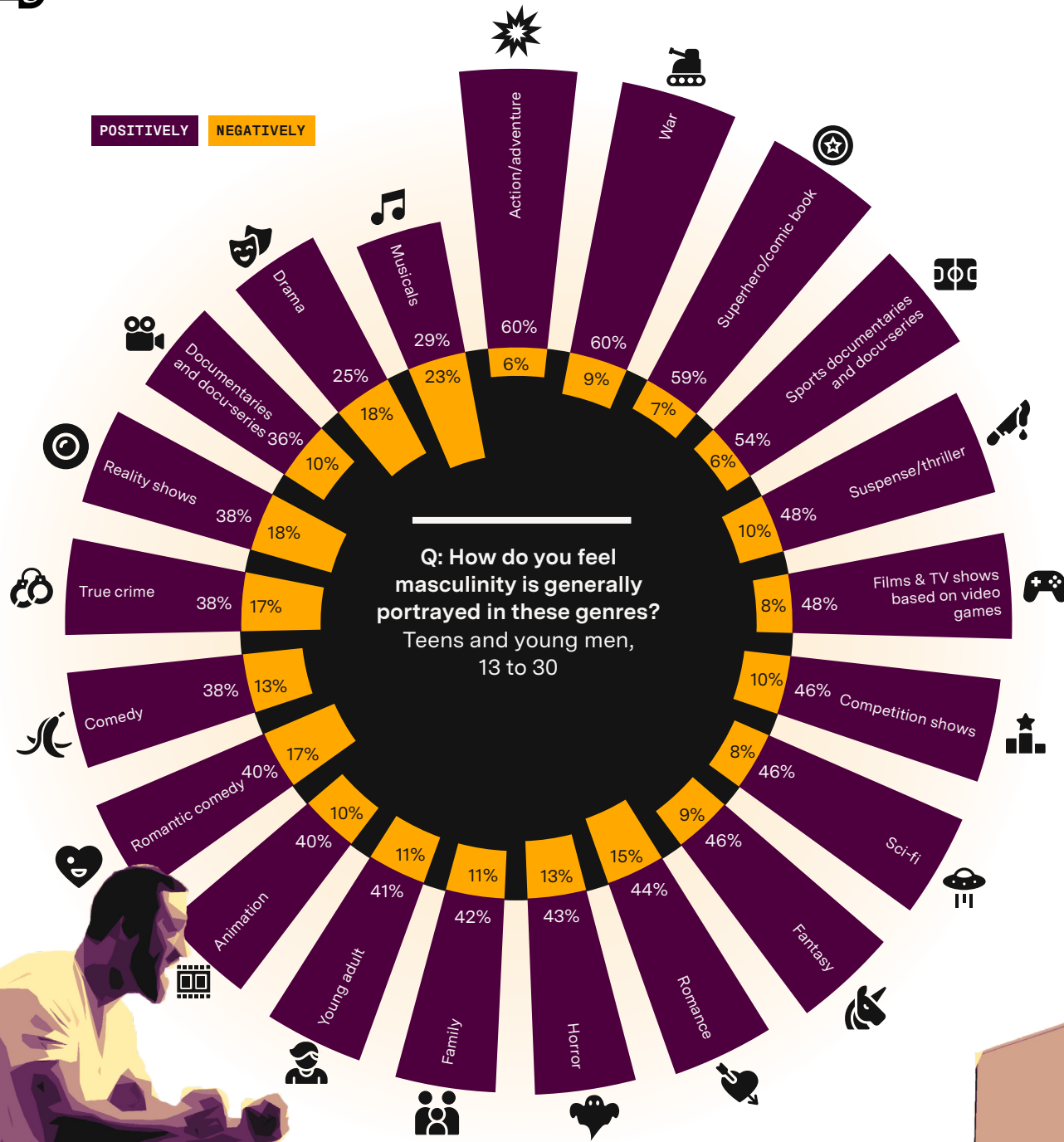
Data for female role models comes from a survey of 654 female streaming viewers in the US, ages 13 to 30, conducted in August 2024.

Glaringly absent from the list, however, are any characters from movies or TV series set in the real world; almost every single character cited here as a role model for young men either exists in a fictional universe substantially different from our own, and/or is imbued with substantial supernatural powers and abilities. Even though young men who've watched movies like *Rocky* and *Top Gun: Maverick* recognize that the characters in these titles are highly effective role models, the characters from these movie franchises simply don't have the kind of cultural omnipresence enjoyed by Peter Parker, Bruce Wayne, or Clark Kent and their respective alter-egos.

The absence of these more "grounded" characters is particularly noticeable when we compare this list to the characters identified as positive female role models by women in the same age range. This list also has its fair share of supernatural and otherworldly characters—including superheroes such as Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, as well as a number of Disney Princesses. But alongside these characters we also see a handful of real-world characters working real-life professions: Meredith Grey from *Grey's Anatomy*, Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*, and Olivia Benson from *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*.

"Within comedy, male characters are a lot more diverse now than they used to be. You can have a character who's nurturing, who's sensitive, who's in touch with his feminine side, without that automatically making him the butt of the joke. Of course, sometimes you still need the stock masculine archetypes, but it's no longer the default."

Comedy writer



Not coincidentally, young men are much more likely to report that they see positive portrayals of masculinity in high-octane, action-packed movie and TV genres—such as comic book movies, adventure movies, and war movies—than in more grounded and subtler genres such as dramas, comedies, or rom-coms.

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

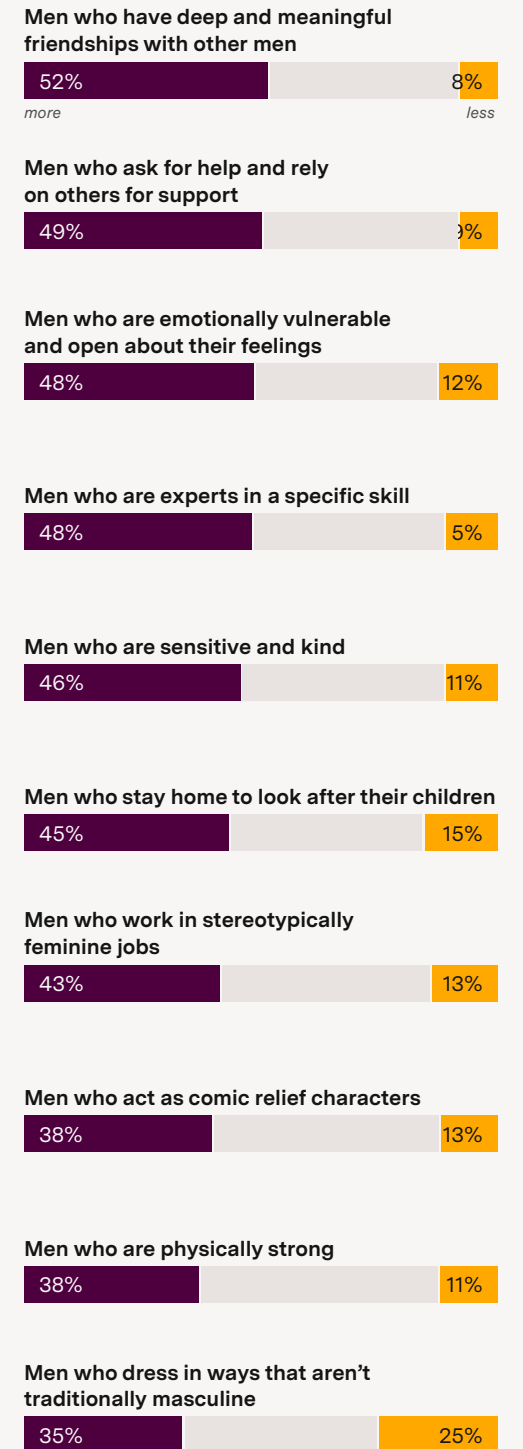
This is not to say that boys and young men can't learn valuable life lessons from characters in comic books, fantasy movies, or anime series; they certainly can. But in an ideal world, these kinds of portrayals of superhuman masculinity would be balanced against characters in realistic situations facing realistic challenges. The conspicuous absence of such characters may be a contributing factor to the difficulty that many young men are having in finding a model of masculinity that feels well-equipped for navigating the challenges of everyday life.

"Men right now are craving more depictions in TV and movies that tell them 'Be yourself; it's ok to be sensitive, to talk about your feelings, to exhibit traits that would traditionally have been seen as more feminine.'"

Fabianne Meyer, casting director

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

Teens and young men, 13 to 30



This may also be a major reason that so many young men are interested in seeing more male characters in film and TV whose sense of masculinity is rooted, not in superhuman talents or abilities, but by their expertise in a specific field or their mastery of particular skills.

We also see a strong desire among many young men for more male characters who are emotionally vulnerable and willing to rely on others for help and support. Again, this makes sense given the current oversaturation of role models drawn from the realms of fantasy, sci-fi, and comic books: it's hard to be truly vulnerable, in a meaningful and relatable way, when you can cast spells, use the force, or control lightning.

Indeed, this 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 on TV were anti-heroes defined by their independence and unwillingness to ever let others see their vulnerabilities. *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*: all of these classic shows were thematically interested in the idea of masculinity as a kind of mask or performance, centering on male characters who felt compelled, whether by their own personal ambitions or by social mores, to adopt a kind of rugged stoicism.²⁴ Outside of certain very narrowly defined contexts—Tony Soprano's therapy sessions with Dr. Melfi, for example—the main characters in these shows very rarely let the mask of masculinity slip in public to reveal their inner emotional fragilities.

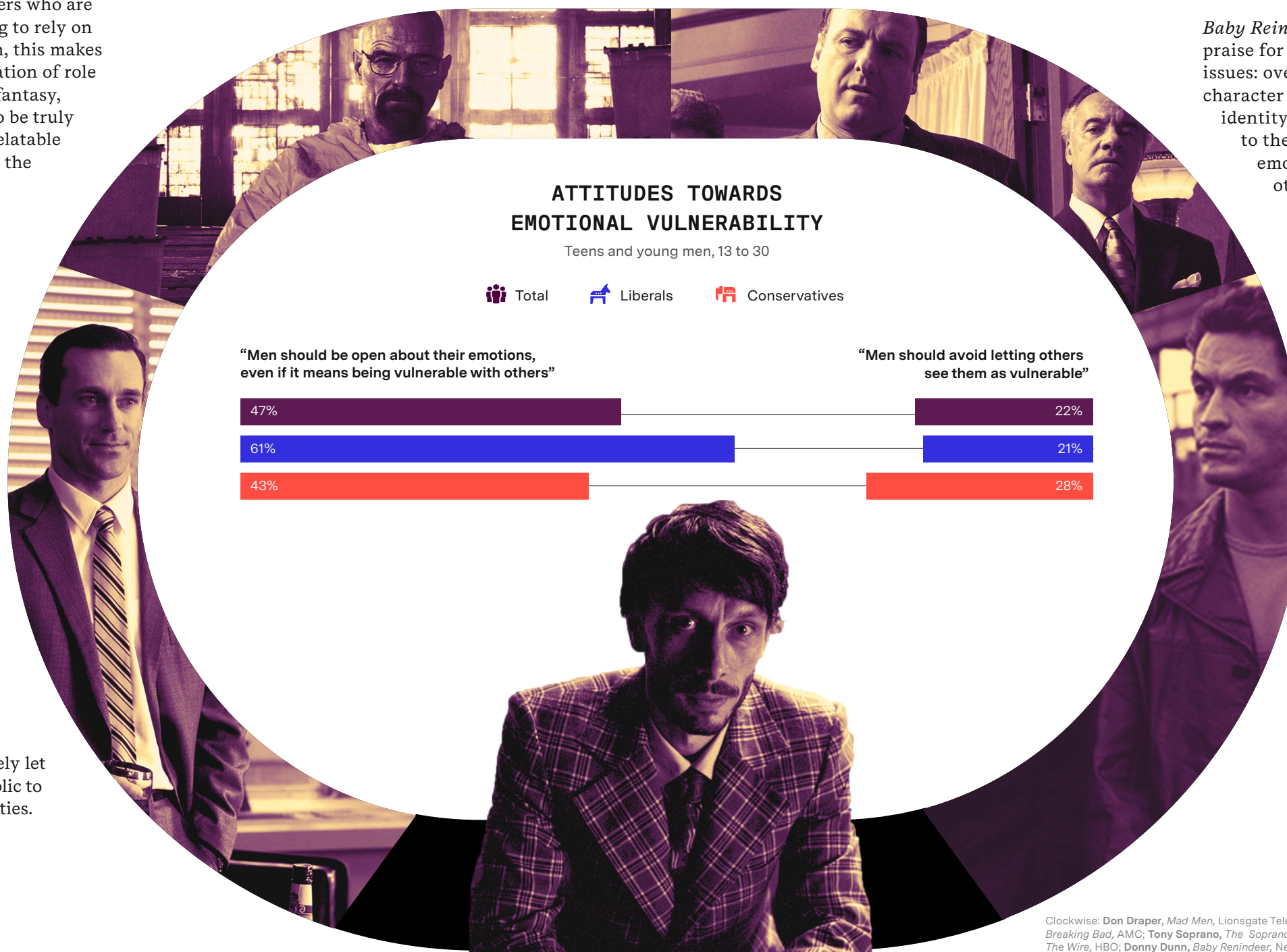
"I'd love to see more media that teaches boys and young men that it's ok to be flexible and change your mind. A lot of male characters are written as very set-in-their-ways, the narrative doesn't give them a lot of opportunities for personal growth."

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, in particular, has received praise for its willingness to tackle these issues: over the course of the series, the main character becomes more assured in his own identity and sense of self, gradually coming to the realization that his sexual and emotional victimization at the hands of others doesn't negate or diminish his masculinity.²⁵ More shows like this will be vital in helping address the masculinity crisis currently facing America's young men; even a plurality of conservatives say that they would like to see a shift towards a model of masculinity that creates greater space for emotional openness and vulnerability.

24. Amanda D. Lotz, "Don Draper's sad manhood: What makes 'Mad Men' different from 'Breaking Bad,' 'Sopranos,'" Salon, April 11th, 2014
 25. 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



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

“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

“I would love to see a movie where someone like The Rock was playing a caregiving role, and it wasn’t treated like some sort of joke. Men often avoid these kinds of roles because of cultural stigma; we need media that shows that men with tattoos and muscles can be nurses and teachers if they want to be.”

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



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

Sokka,
*Avatar: The Last
Airbender*, Netflix

“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

DEEP DIVE

Romantic comedies

Historically, few genres have done as much to shape cultural perceptions of masculinity as the romantic comedy. And while the genre may have faded from the spotlight for a while, we seem to be in the middle of a mini rom-com renaissance.²⁶ We sat down with a screenwriter who specializes in the genre to find out how today’s crop of rom-coms differ from their predecessors when it comes to masculinity.

Q: What does “masculinity” mean to you, in the context of rom-coms?

Masculinity in rom-coms is complicated, because you always have to have a balance between strength and vulnerability. For the love story to work, we have to be willing to root for the male character. And that typically means that there has to be at least one thing that they excel at. Maybe they’re good at sports, maybe they’re very competent at their job, maybe they’re a great single dad. But at the same time, he also needs to have a layer of vulnerability; maybe he’s striving for something just out of reach, or maybe he’s been wounded by some experience in his past that he hasn’t quite recovered from.

Q: How do you think modern rom-coms differ from their predecessors in their treatment of masculinity?

We’re in the middle of a bit of a renaissance right now for romantic comedies. But this time around, the masculine characters tend to be a bit softer—reflecting, I think, some of the

changing cultural trends within our society. And there are a lot of little things that writers will do to communicate those values early on. For example, it’s a lot more common these days to see male characters who work for female bosses, or who work in primarily female environments.

Q: How do you see the genre continuing to evolve in terms of how it handles masculinity?

Gen Z and Gen Alpha don’t have the same kinds of hard boundaries around masculine stereotypes, and I think we’re going to see rom-coms evolve to reflect that. I think the *Tall Girl* movies are a great example of this. You have this very stereotypically jock-ish character, who’s set up as the main love interest early-on, but who has a lot of traits that we don’t traditionally think of as masculine-coded: he’s open about his feelings, he loves musical theatre, etc. And then there’s the neighbor, who she actually ends up with, who’s a nerdier character; but he’s not shy about his feelings for her, he has a kind of confidence to him that’s very attractive. I expect we’ll see more movies—particularly those aimed at younger audiences—start to mix and match elements from different character archetypes like that.

²⁶ Christina Wilkins, “We’re in a golden age of the male romcom,” *The Conversation*, July 17th, 2024



Griffin Gluck & Ava
Michelle, *Tall Girl*, Netflix

As Gen Alpha enters their teenage years, fictional portrayals of masculinity will need to evolve to meet the needs of a new generation

Up to this point, this report has focused primarily on the challenges facing Gen Z and Millennial men as they navigate the world and define their own personal sense of masculinity—and the role that TV, film, and other forms of media have played in shaping their expectations of manhood.

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 about to become teenagers. Members of this generation will soon find themselves, if they haven't already, grappling with some of the same challenges and conflicts. If anything, these issues of masculinity and male identity look set to be even more acute for them than they were for their generational predecessors.

So, if entertainment companies want to ensure that their portrayals of masculinity resonate with this new generation, they will need to invest time and effort towards understanding the unique experiences that have shaped their priorities and their understanding of what it means to be a man in the 21st Century.

This is a generation that has grown up fully immersed in the world of online video content: for many in Gen Alpha, the content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok provides a more reliable and relevant source of entertainment than movies, TV shows, or other more established mediums. And this, more than anything else, has played a major role in shaping their sense of what masculinity means or ought to mean.

While much has been written about the influence of extreme figures like Andrew Tate on the minds of America's youth, Tate and his fellow hardcore "manosphere" influencers are, ultimately, a somewhat marginal force. Popular mainstream streamers, TikTokers and YouTubers such as Kai Cenat, KSI, IShowSpeed, and the Paul brothers have played a far greater role in defining Gen Alpha's understanding of manhood.²⁸

On online content platforms, we're seeing the emergence of a new model of masculinity—one that combines an interest in traditional masculine pursuits such as combat sports with a sly irreverence,

"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. Look at *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



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.

an embrace of male camaraderie, and an unabashed willingness to pursue one's personal hobbies and passions. The fact that so many of these popular content creators have chosen to pursue second careers as boxers and MMA fighters suggests that they themselves are keenly aware of their role embodying a certain brand of masculinity to their Gen Alpha fans.²⁹

But perhaps no-one has done as much to shape Gen Alpha's expectations of masculinity as MrBeast. The world's most popular YouTuber is also, it turns out, the single most popular role model for boys under the age of 13. The online superstar—real name Jimmy Donaldson—has made "philanthro-tainment" a core part of his personal brand, putting out videos where he gives away life-changing amounts of money to contest winners or performs acts of charity such as building 100 wells in Africa or rescuing 100 abandoned dogs, all while surrounded by a close cadre of almost-exclusively male friends. While Donaldson has been the subject of some controversy in recent months, it's clear that his style of flashy yet community-oriented masculinity has had a big impact on younger viewers.

"I think social media has done a lot to shift how Hollywood portrays masculinity. Gen Alpha and Gen Z are a lot more vocal online about topics like patriarchy, feminism, and toxic masculinity—and they're willing to push back when they see leading male characters that feel regressive and one-dimensional."

Fabianne Meyer, casting director

"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

28. Henry Mance, "What does it mean to be a boy online in 2023?", Financial Times, April 6th, 2023; 29. Andrew Webster, "Netflix's next live event is a fight between Jake Paul and Mike Tyson," The Verge, March 7th, 2024; 30. Sarah Manavis, "Want to understand Gen Z? Watch MrBeast," New Statesman, January 11th, 2024; 31. Mary Harris, "MrBeast Is in Over His Head," Slate, August 15th, 2024;

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 Scarff, AFP/GI; NBA.com; People, David Rosenblum, Icon Sportswire/GI; History.com, Stephen F. Somerstein/GI; Northeastern Global News, Evan Vucci/AP; BostonGlobe, Alex Brandon/AP; The Guardian, Brian Bowen Smith; Entertainment Weekly, Kevin C. Cox/GI; wUnsplash, Arturo Rey

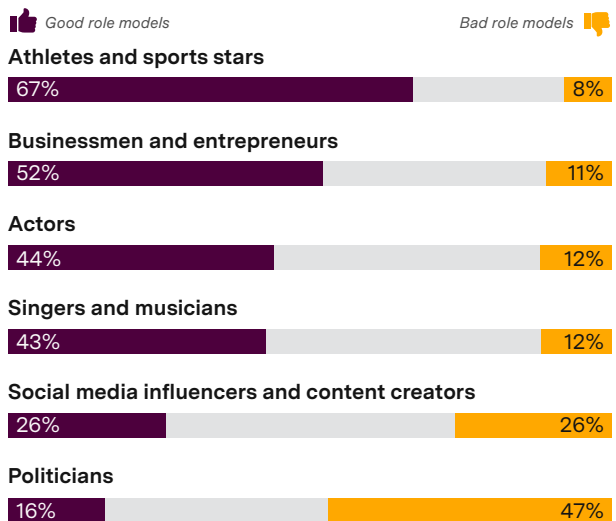
Given the influence of figures like MrBeast, it's not surprising that young boys now say they're more interested in pursuing jobs in the creator economy than more traditional "dream jobs" like astronauts or pro athletes. More than four in ten young boys say that they'd like to be a professional video game streamer when they grow up; almost as many say that they'd like to create video content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. And this is despite the fact that their parents, in general, would prefer they look to other types of celebrities as their primary sources of male 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. Media and entertainment companies looking to reach this audience will need to be cognizant of this fact. They may, for example, want to incorporate fictional portrayals of these figures into more of their content. In certain cases, they may even want to partner with them directly; see, for example, Amazon's announcement earlier this year that they were working with MrBeast to launch *Beast Games*, a reality show with a \$5 million prize, on Amazon Prime Video.³²

32. Emma Roth, "MrBeast's \$5 million game show for Prime Video could one-up Netflix's *Squid Game*," *The Verge*, March 18th, 2024

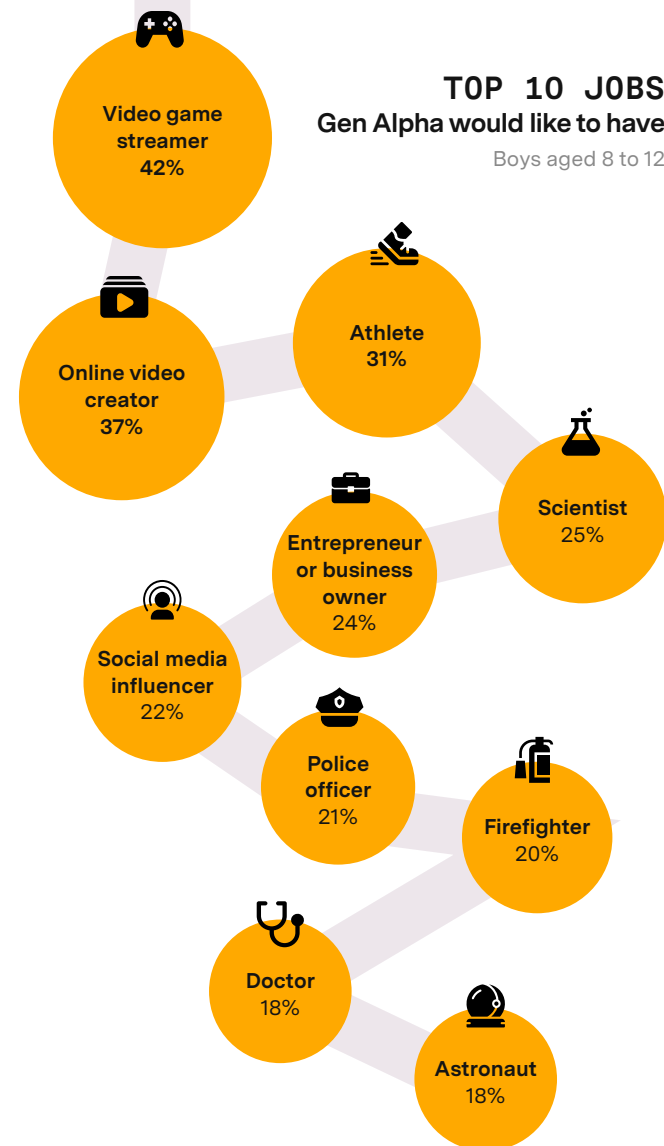
Q: Do you think these types of celebrities are generally good or bad role models for your son?

Parents of young boys



"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



DEEP DIVE

Sports media

Sports has always been deeply intertwined with our cultural understanding of masculinity. Gen Alpha, in particular, are taking many of their queues for what masculinity should look like from the world of pro sports: athletes and professional wrestlers make up eight of the ten most commonly cited real world role models for boys under 13. And two-thirds of their parents believe that athletes are, in general, positive role models for this generation.

We sat down with **Billy Scafuri**, a showrunner and screenwriter specializing in sports media, to understand some of the ways in which conceptions of masculinity have been evolving within this space.

Q: Sports, in general, is often seen as a bastion of a very traditional view of masculinity. Is that still the case, in your view?

Part of the challenge with storytelling in sports is that you're often trying to subvert expectations or inject a level of humor into things, but you have to do it within fairly rigid boundaries; there's a limit to how far you can go while still honoring the intensity of the sport and the expectations fans have towards it.

That's definitely true when it comes to playing around with the concept of masculinity; there are some foundational limits to how far you can deviate from traditional ideas of masculinity. So the concept has been evolving, but it's been a gradual, measured evolution. Look at the NFL, for example. There's still a deeply embedded sense of masculinity within the league, but it's quite different from the almost militaristic energy that existed 20 years ago or so.

Q: How do you, as a storyteller, find a balance between that push-and-pull of traditional masculine ideals versus the need for novelty?

There's a fine line you have to tread in sports storytelling. A big part of my job is finding narratives that go beyond the very self-serious, ultra-macho stuff. And to do that, you often have to start from a very traditional place, something your audience is comfortable and familiar with; and then, once you've earned their trust, you can introduce the unexpected element, the pivot towards something that challenges expectations in an interesting way.

For example, there was an ad I worked on where we had all these retired NFL players calling each other to talk trash ahead of the big game, and then the reveal at the end is that their daughters actually care more about it than they do—playing with that idea of how passion for sports can transcend gender and generations.

Q: How do you see the role of masculinity within sports continuing to evolve over the next 10 years?

I think we're going to see some significant shifts in how masculinity is portrayed in sports media—and a lot of that is going to be driven by the athletes themselves. You have a crop of college kids that are joining the pro ranks right now who are completely flipping what masculinity looks like: guys who paint their nails, who sing in the locker room, who don't take themselves as seriously as previous generations. At the same time, we're also seeing a shift among some of the older players. A lot of these guys are softening their own images, presenting themselves as family men, bringing their kids to post-game pressers, and so on.

I also think that the changing media landscape has played, and will continue to play, a big role in redefining notions of masculinity in sports. Thanks to social media and podcasts, athletes have more options now to talk directly to fans, and take control of their own image. And that means that they can portray themselves as multifaceted humans, rather than being reduced to one-dimensional caricatures by the media. There's just a lot more scope these days for athletes to show off elements of their personality that don't fit into traditionally "masculine" boxes.

There is no “one size fits all” model of masculinity anymore, and the entertainment industry should embrace that

The challenge facing the entertainment industry is a sizable one. With many of today’s young men increasingly uncertain about their role in the world, it’s more important than ever to provide them with positive role models they can model their behavior after. At the same time, media and entertainment brands are also becoming more aware of the need to provide role models that speak to the true diversity of the male experience—moving beyond traditional stereotypes and creating nuanced, compelling, and aspirational characters for traditionally underserved male audiences.

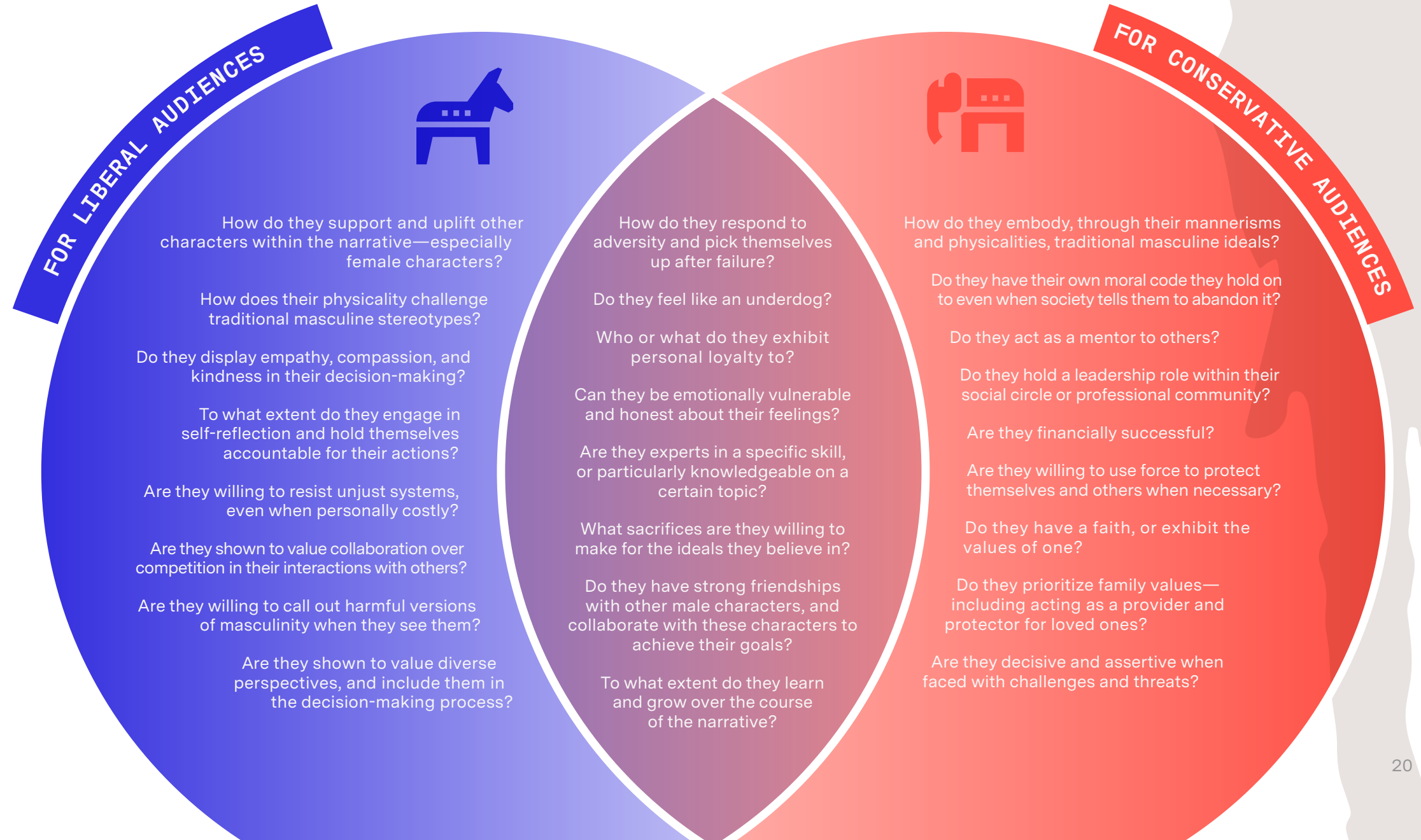
And creating those role models is harder than ever, given the intensely politicized debate about how we ought to understand “masculinity”—whether we should be embracing traditional masculine virtues or seeking to reinvent them—and the differences between liberal and conservative attitudes towards the function that fictional role models ought to play. And many younger consumers are now looking elsewhere for guidance on what it means to be a man in today’s society—reflecting, perhaps, a sense that traditional storytelling formats have failed to keep pace with rapidly-evolving conceptions of masculinity.

While these two approaches may seem, at times, diametrically opposed, there is common ground to be found between them, as demonstrated by the existence of characters that have managed to cut across this socio-political divide. Ultimately, there’s room in our modern entertainment landscape for both of these visions of masculinity to coexist alongside each other—and for characters who shift between the two, take inspiration from both, and/or blur the boundaries between them.

Men are, themselves, responding to our current crisis of masculinity in a myriad of different ways, as they grapple with the question of whether to reject, reclaim or redefine traditional masculine values. **To create characters that resonate with today’s young men, therefore, studios and streaming services need to ensure that all voices within this cultural conversation are represented on-screen.**

Not all characters need to act as role models to all audiences, of course; but by understanding both the unique needs of different groups and those they have in common, media and entertainment companies can rise to the challenge of providing today’s young men—regardless of their background, politics, or worldview—with characters that they can both relate and aspire to, in the process helping them to feel more confident and secure with their own relationship to masculinity, whatever that relationship might look like.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CREATING ASPIRATIONAL MALE CHARACTERS





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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](#).

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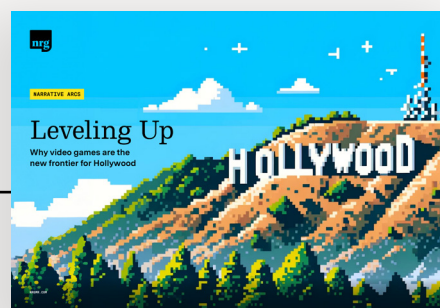


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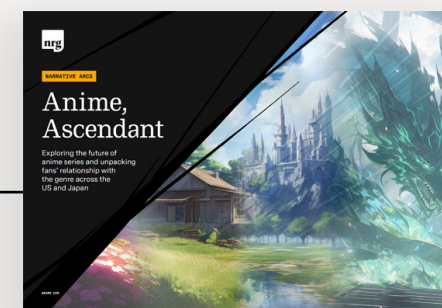
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