



GENDER AGENDA COLLABORATIVE REPORT

August 2022



x COLLABORATIVE x
Insight . Ideas . Inspiration



INTRODUCING THE GENDER AGENDA

The Gender Agenda was born out of a conversation Charlie Kirkbride and Nicky Vita had with our very capable CSO, Michael Lee. We were talking passionately about our love for female led brands. He, quite rightly, suggested that we pour this pent up energy into producing a thought piece or two in the space of gender that would challenge us and the industry... and so here we are.

Initially we'd planned on releasing a series of papers, over the course of a year (yes, what day job?), but quickly decided to double down and focus in the first instance on what we thought would challenge us most, the topic of Masculinity and its representation today.

This paper is the first in a series of pieces examining what gender and gender representation mean today and what our role as Marketing & Advertising Practitioners is or should be in portraying healthy role models & dynamics, in whatever shape or form. We very much hope you enjoy and reap at least some small benefit from it.



MASCULINITY OUR JUMPING OFF POINT

Much time (quite rightly) has been given to how we portray women in advertising, but less to how we portray men. Perhaps because men have fared better over time? Perhaps because how they're portrayed has been easier to digest? Perhaps because the prevailing feeling is that there is no problem? Perhaps because the topic is just too nuanced and difficult to address?

THE PROBLEM AS WE SEE IT

We see this as a problem. Looking at gender portrayal and identity in isolation is dangerous. In a patriarchal society if we don't look at how men are portrayed and interact with others, then female representations and storytelling will suffer. Gender interplay is key. Yet, so far, this area has been woefully under investigated.

Cue this report.



WE'RE TAKING A STAND AGAINST PUNCHING UP OR DOWN

Too often, the assumption is that we're in a zero sum gain situation. For women to succeed, men must fail and visa versa. We believe gender identities do not need to exist in opposition. What if all genders could rise, better, together? To do this, odd as it may seem, more attention needs to be given to male representation.

As we emerge out of the Covid era, a time of social upheaval, let's take stock. What norms should stay and which should go? What changes in comms tactics and techniques could benefit everyone?

“ Women’s liberation has often been portrayed as a movement intent on encroaching upon or taking power and privilege away from men, as though in some zero sum game, only one gender at a time could be free and powerful. But we are free together or slaves together. ”

Rebecca Solnit



WHAT THIS REPORT IS (AND ISN'T)

When approaching the topic of gender, it's important to be clear. This paper looks in to male identity today, how maleness is portrayed in comms, the impact this has on customer behaviour and the techniques agencies could look to use to better serve society. This report does not look at working practices or gender representation within our agency or any other.

OUR DEFINITIONS DEFINED

In this report, when we use the below terms, this is what we mean:

- **Sex:** Physiological characteristics defined by genitalia and chromosome composition.
- **Gender:** How a human identifies – informed by their intrinsic sense of identity.
- **Gender representation:*** How gender is presented and portrayed in media, advertising, TV, film and culture.
- **Gender stereotype:** A fixed, oversimplified image or idea of gender roles and identity.
- **Gender discrimination:** Unequal treatment of people based on their gender identity.

*This report mainly focuses on gender representation.

A STORY OF FIVE PARTS

Our thinking can be divided in to five parts:

- 1 MALE IDENTITY IN 2022 AND WHERE WE ARE NOW** pg 4-7
- 2 INTEREST IN AND APPETITE FOR IMPROVED MALE REPRESENTATION** pg 8-10
- 3 WHERE RESPONSIBILITY FOR REPRESENTATION LIES** pg 11-12
- 4 10 WAYS BRANDS COULD BETTER REPRESENT MASCULINITY IN COMMS** pg 13-18
- 5 WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE BOTTOM LINE** pg 19-21



OVERALL, THERE'S A FEELING THAT MASCULINITY NEEDS TO PLAY CATCH UP

Traditional ideals of masculinity are problematic

SEXUALLY DRIVEN
GATHERER + PROVIDER
GOAL DRIVEN
EMOTIONALLY UNAVAILABLE
CONTROLLED + IN CHARGE
ACTION ORIENTATED
COMPETITIVE
VIRILE, STRONG BODY



Yet academic frameworks show little has changed over the years regarding how men self define. It seems that as an ideology, maleness has fallen behind in the conversation.

Four fundamental rules of masculinity

According to Brannon (1976), illustrate how misogyny and homophobia are reinforced:

- No Sissy Stuff - males should be strong and avoid behavior that equates with being feminine or gay, such as showing fear, sadness, weakness, or emotion;
- Be the Big Wheel - males should prioritize success, status, power, and wealth;
- Be a Sturdy Oak - males should be reliable and steadfast;
- Give 'em Hell - males should live independently, seek risk and adventure, and disregard others' opinions.

DAVID & BRANNON'S 4 RULES OF MASCULINITY

THE MAN BOX IN SEVEN PILLARS

			
1	2	3	4
Self-Sufficiency	Acting Tough	Physical Attractiveness	Rigid Masculine Gender Roles
A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect. Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help.	A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak. Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside.	It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good. Women don't go for guys who care too much about their clothes, hair, and skin. A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly.	It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of 'princess' children. A husband shouldn't have to do household chores. Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women.

		
5	6	7
Heterosexuality and Homophobia	Hypersexuality	Aggression and Control

A gay guy is not a "real man".
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement).

A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can.
A "real man" would never say no to sex.

Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary.
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage.
If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time.

PROMUNDO'S THE MAN BOX

☞ Society has changed tremendously in a relatively short period of time and women have been the main catalyst of this, meanwhile, masculinity as an ideology got stuck behind. ☞

Robert Cserni,

Programme Director,
Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities

The Forty Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role, Deborah S David and Robert Brannon, Mass, Addison-Wesley, 1976
The Man Box: A Study on Being A Young Man in the US, UK and Mexico, Brian Heilman, Gary Barker, Alexander Harrison, 2017

THE TERM 'MODERN MASCULINITY' IS NOT HELPING MOVE US FORWARD

In recent years the phrase 'modern masculinity' has increasingly been bandied around, yet those we spoke to struggled to define what it means – beyond broad statements around individualism, male self expression and emotion without shame. Or they default to the clunky application of 'feminine traits' to modern male identity. Overall there is a feeling that perhaps not much has changed about the male identity after all.

WE ARE SEEING A RANGE OF MALE FIGURE HEADS EMERGING IN CULTURE



TRAD MEN
i.e. Paddy McGuinness



MACHO FEMINISTS
i.e. A\$AP Rocky



SATIRICAL ACTIVISTS
i.e. Joe Lycett



BROKEN HEROES
i.e. Craig's Bond



MODERN DANDIES
i.e. Harry Styles



COCKY COCKS
i.e. Conor McGregor



VAIN PROVOCATEURS
i.e. Tommy Robinson



SOCIETY WARRIORS
i.e. Stormzy

HOWEVER, CERTAIN ELEMENTS OF MALENESS AREN'T GOING ANYWHERE

On every side and in a range of relationship contexts, we've seen appetite for men to retain certain characteristics – particularly appetite for risk. This is something that should be acknowledged and worked with.

“ There’s space for the light and dark. It’s OK to acknowledge the desire for risk, for adrenalin, the push to self sabotage, tribalism. ”

Tim Samuels,

Who Stole My Spear



IDEAS OF MASCULINITY ARE HARDWIRED INTO RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

“ Why would you try and take the sting out of a bomb. Fighting against nature is unhelpful when it comes to sexual attraction. ”

“ I will always want a tap fixed more than I want a poem. ”

“ Do what you want...but I need to know I can always fall back on you. ”

“ There’s an expectation of protection. I like it when he’s a bit firm with me. ”

VCCP Qualitative Research on the topic of masculinity among members of the agency

IN GENERAL, THERE IS A GROWING ANXIETY ABOUT THE MALE PLACE IN SOCIETY

Men are struggling as their traditional roles are being slowly eroded, while ever-evolving female gender roles throw their male counterparts’ positions into doubt.

“ Most men are struggling because their traditional roles are being slowly eroded. ”

“ My husband feels he’s lost something because I won’t take his name. Something he’d been set up to expect from his life has been eroded. ”

“ Honestly I feel society has played a trick on me. I’m set up to fail at this point. ”

“ Men used to get all the attention and focus – now don’t and that can feel hard. It’s hard for me. ”

VCCP Qualitative Research on the topic of masculinity among members of the agency

PARTICULARLY THANKS TO EVENTS OF THE LAST 5 YEARS

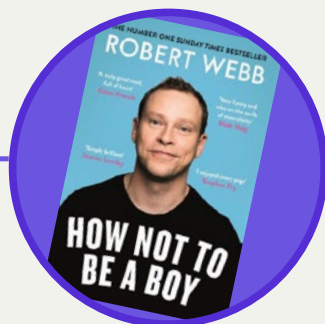
Across the board, there's a feeling that increased attention on male aggression toward and violence against women has led to an unblinking light shone on male behaviour and increased awareness of misogyny and sexism.



THIS HAS LED TO A NEW DEFINITION OF MASCULINITY – ONE DEFINED THROUGH OPPOSITION

As a result, a new way to define masculinity has emerged – a definition built around 'proving what you're not'. We call this definition through opposition. This is problematic as it creates an idea of masculinity that is inherently defensive. It is perhaps best encapsulated by the two ways Robert Webb and Caitlin Moran have titled their recent books.

As creators of cultural output, we need to consider how we're portraying and defining men. Are we falling into definition through opposition? But more importantly, do people care?

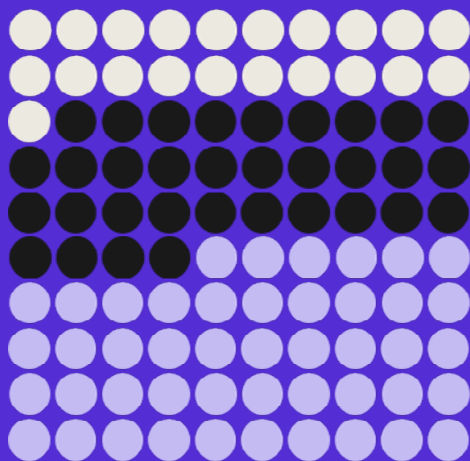


PART 2

WHAT IS THE INTEREST IN AND APPETITE FOR IMPROVED MALE REPRESENTATION?

On to part two. A quick reminder before we jump in – when we talk about gender representation, we mean 'how gender is presented and portrayed in media, advertising, TV, film and culture.'

Interestingly, only 1/3 of the population think gender representation is relevant to them. Although this figure rises to 47% for men aged 18 – 30.



21%
Feel neutral.

33%
Say it is personally relevant.

46%
Don't feel like the topic of gender representation is personally relevant to them.

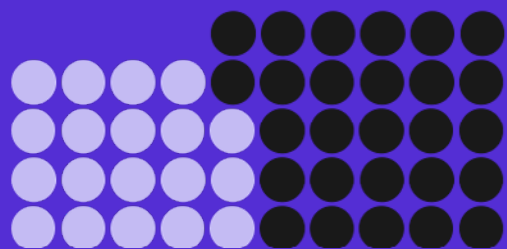
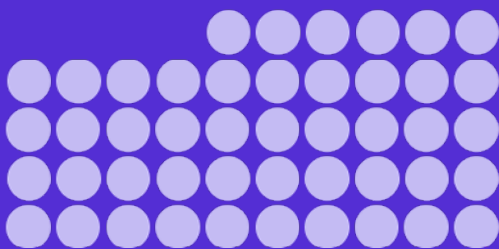
Consumers perceptions of how personally relevant the topic of gender representation is to them. Grey = middle 2 box, Black = top 3 box >4, Purple = Bottom 3 box <4.

THIS IS LIKELY DUE TO A LACK OF DAY TO DAY EXPOSURE

For the 46% of people who don't think gender representation is personally relevant to them, 59% attribute this to it not being something they experience in their day to day lives.

46%
Don't feel like the topic of gender representation is personally relevant to them.

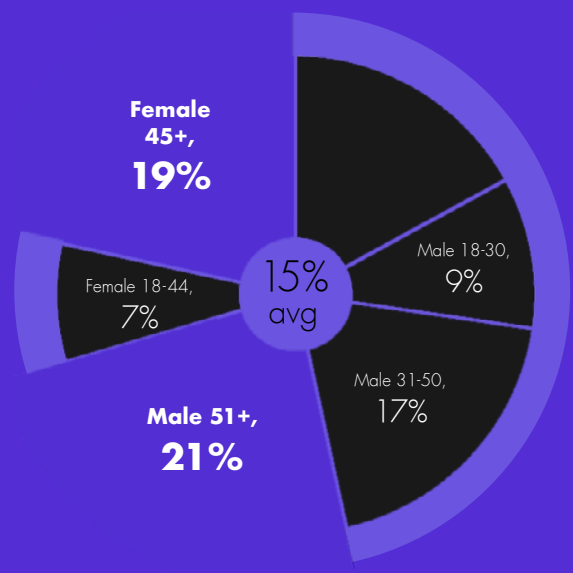
59%
Say this is because they don't experience it on a day to day basis.



This isn't that surprising. In truth, we aren't taught to look at day to day activities through the lens of gender representation. It's also a far more abstract idea compared to 'gender discrimination'.

% of those who feel gender representation isn't relevant to them (bottom 3 ox, <4), and then those who think this is because it doesn't affect their day-to-day experience.

OVERALL, OLDER GENERATIONS THINK THE ISSUE HAS GONE TOO FAR



% of consumers who feel the discussion of gender representation has 'gone too far' (top box, score of 7/7)

HOWEVER, FAIR GENDER REPRESENTATION IS SEEN AS IMPORTANT

61% of people believe it's important to portray men and women equally without stereotype.

Portray men and women equally, without bias or stereotype.	61%
Quietly evolve how men are seen and shown in ads without setting out an agenda	17%
Clearly set out an agenda regarding how men should be portrayed/shown in ads.	11%
Prove that they're addressing gender discrimination within their business	10%

% ranking these actions as #1 most important

PARTICULARLY AMONGST YOUNGER AUDIENCES

63% of young men have heard about the issue and almost 60% of young men think it's important.

Have recently discussed/
heard others discussing
the topic of gender
representation.

63%
MEN (18-30)

Think it's important for
your gender to be
responsibly represented
in media/films/TV.

57%
MEN (18-30)

47%
MEN (31-50)

35%
MEN (51+)

46%
MEN (31-50)

26%
MEN (51+)

% of men who have recently discussed/heard others discuss the topic of gender representation (Left).
% men who think it is important for their gender to be responsibly represented in the media (top 3 box) (Right)

So where does this leave us? For clients with a younger client base and ambitious new audience acquisition targets, gender representation should clearly be on the radar. But perhaps they need to be reminded more frequently? And if that's the case where does responsibility lie?

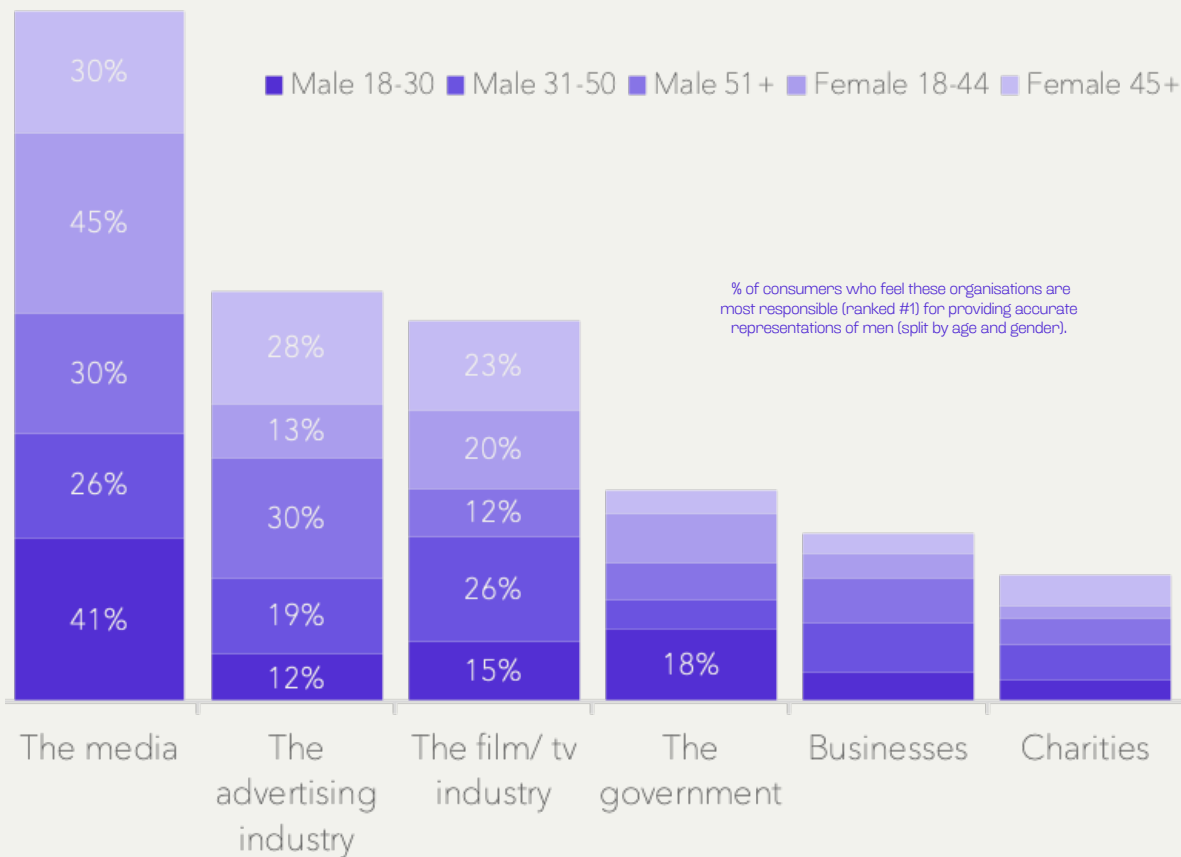


THE LINES BETWEEN MEDIA AND ADVERTISING ARE BLURRED AND BLURRING

In an age where the boundary between editorial, user and brand generated content is blurred, social platforms can take home elections and brands rely on third party creators and influencers – where does media stop and advertising start? It's clear the gap between media and advertising is closing.

ON PAPER, MEDIA HOLDS THE SCEPTRE

Overall, media is seen to bear the most responsibility when it comes to responsible gender representation (a score driven by younger audience perception) but advertising comes in a close second (driven by older audience perception.)



We would hypothesise that this significantly higher media score has been driven by younger audiences who differentiate less between branded and non branded content. Interestingly younger audiences also see culpability lying with the government. Something to keep an eye on for any brand or client with leanings towards having a political or social agenda.

IN LIGHT OF THIS, WE CAN'T VIEW ADVERTISING AS THE 'ROBIN' TO MEDIA'S 'BATMAN'

As storytellers and content creators, we can't default to thinking of this as media's problem. We need to do something. But how? Where to start and where to bite?



PART 4

So here are 10 ways brands can better represent men.

THINK EVOLUTION NOT REVOLUTION

When it comes to what people want to see more of from brands, only 11% say overtly setting out an agenda on the issue is of #1 importance. Instead, people are looking for more subtle methods and approaches.

We call this the James Bond method.

Over the last 16 years, Daniel Craig's Bond character has shifted form.

Spoiler alert – We've seen him experience loss of a life partner, explored his childhood and seen him as a father. Yet on the outside he is still Bond. He is still suave and strong and brave and cavalier. Yet he has emotional context and depth.

So we pose the question – how could your brand subtly shift the dial over time?



YOU DON'T HAVE TO DRAW ATTENTION TO PAST SINS

Whilst brands like Gillette have reflected on their past behaviour to great effect, less than half of Brits are interested in seeing this. As researchers and advertisers, whilst it may seem logical to be as transparent as possible (in an increasingly transparent world) – it would appear we need to fight the instinct. Just because your brand may have sinned in the past, does not mean you can't confidently walk in to a new future.

What does that look like?

Both Always' 'LikeAGirl' and Sport England's 'ThisGirlCan' powerfully challenged female stereotypes, yet Always' work drew attention to the past issue. Perhaps we would all be better served if we simply let go of the past and focused on the now and the solution?



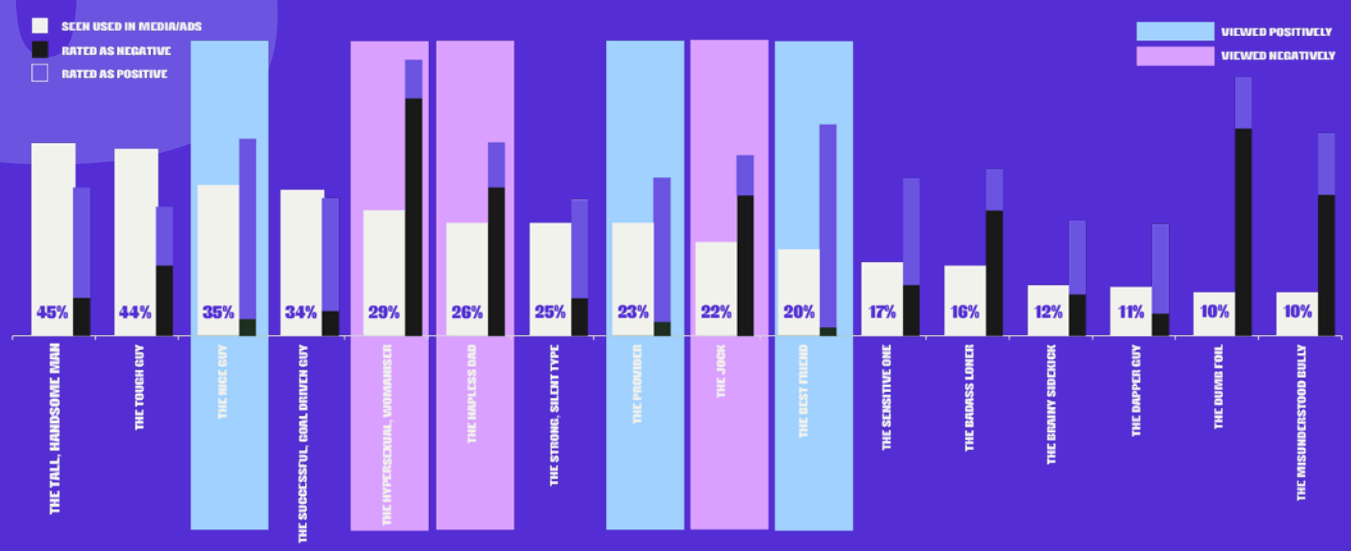
#ThisGirlCan Campaign



#LikeAGirl Campaign

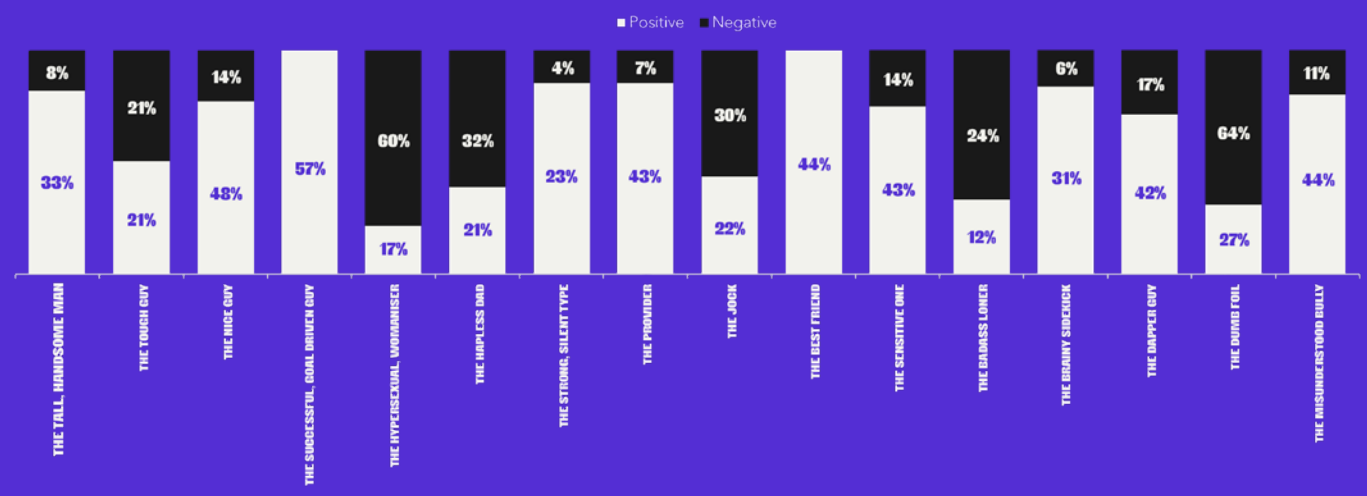
STEREOTYPES ARE OK (JUST NOT ALL OF THEM)

Brits recognise the use of stereotypes in advertising and don't view them all negatively. In a world where content is bite sized, media is fragmented and attention spans are dwindling, stereotypes can be useful. The 'nice guy', 'the best friend' and 'the provider' in particular are recognised positively. However, brands might want to eschew use of 'the womaniser', 'hapless dad' and 'the jock'.



% who have seen a stereotype used in an ad recently (dark purple bars), % who view them positively (light purple bars, top 2 box) or negatively (black bars, bottom 2 box).

It's also worth keeping an eye on what younger audiences want to see. Younger men are overwhelmingly more likely to view the 'successful, goal driven guy', 'the jock', 'the sensitive one', and 'the misunderstood bully' as positive. They're less keen on 'the nice guy', the 'strong silent type' and the 'best friend.'



% who have seen a stereotype used in an ad recently (dark purple bars), % who view them positively (light purple bars, top 2 box) or negatively (black bars, bottom 2 box).

AVOID APPLYING THE TRAITS OF ONE GENDER TO ANOTHER

If we look back at the last 10 years of fempowerment, certain behaviours stick out as potentially problematic, particularly the application of 'male characteristics' to women in an attempt to create parity. Rather than applying the perceived gender traits of one gender to the other (or infantilising with watered down versions of gendered phrases) let's find new and better language.

“ ‘Girlboss’ is a sexist Trojan horse. It appears to raise women up, to carve out space for us in a working world still too crowded with men. But in reality it denies us agency, it diminishes us and denigrates our authority. ”



Strong Is Beautiful' ft. Ellie Goulding Campaign

Refinery29

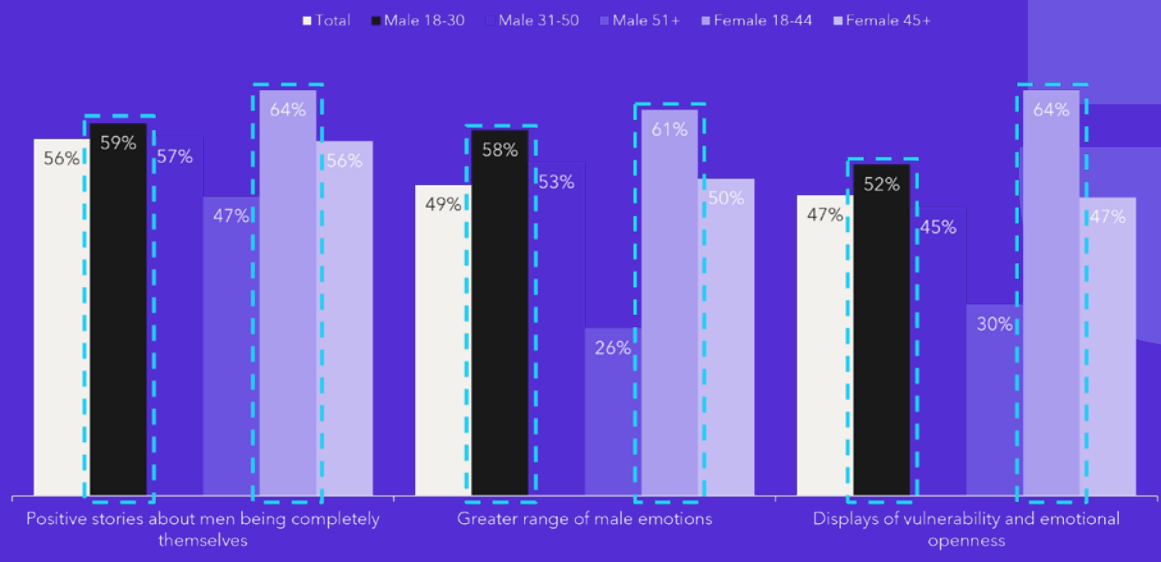


“ We do not need to show women as muscular, strong, powerful and use male tropes to empower women. ”

CHAMPION STORIES OF INDIVIDUALITY AND BEING COMFORTABLE IN YOUR OWN SKIN

Over half of all Brits (56%) want to see more positive stories about men being completely themselves, closely followed by 49% wanting to see a greater range of male emotion within work. This is strongly echoed when we speak to people on the ground.

Younger men and women in particular are drawn to this as an idea and behaviour. So consider how and where you might be able to open up the emotional narrative.



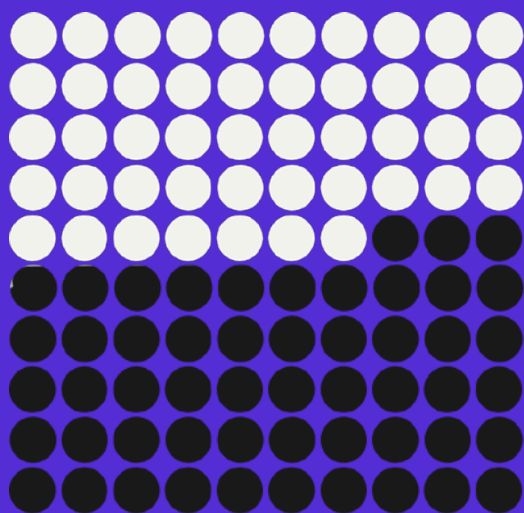
% who have seen a stereotype used in an ad recently (dark purple bars), % who view them positively (light purple bars, top 2 box) or negatively (black bars, bottom 2 box).

“ Takeaway the masculinity bullshit and what you're left with is their personality. ”

“ Self expression doesn't have to be extreme – feathers, glitter. People with incredible personalities and ideas wear jeans and a boring T shirt. ”

USE HUMOUR TO CHALLENGE IDEAS AROUND MALENESS

As advertising increasingly overlaps with entertainment, think about adding a dose of humour to make this potentially tense issue more palatable. Take cues from the work of James Acaster and Joe Lycett and wrap up the contentious with a firm eye roll.



53%

Young men and women would like to see the use of humour to challenge ideas around maleness, compared to 45% at total sample level.

% of young men and women who want to see more (top 2 box) humour being used to challenge ideas around maleness in advertising and media.



Instagram sourced

“ Gallows/Dark humour is imp to men. It's central to the male experience. ”

Tim Samuels

“ Men take the piss out of each other more, don't mind being made fun of. Humour is a GOOD thing. ”

ENABLE EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY, OPENNESS AND QUESTIONING

If you're still with us, another idea we'd suggest is offering up a forum for conversation, questioning, openness and vulnerability around ideas of maleness and what maleness means. This is something that both Lynx and Google have done to great effect in recent years. It allows space for customer interpretation and prevents the brand from coming across as didactic or overtly authoritative about what is the right and wrong way to be.



Is It Okay For Guys...
Campaign

LEVERAGE TRUSTED MALE VOICES

You might also want to consider the use of a trusted, credible male voices, figures who can speak about maleness with integrity, confidence and authenticity. Think Guinness and Gareth Thomas or more recently Nivea's collaboration with Liverpool FC which resonated strongly in our most recent bout of quant research.

“ Showing the Liverpool football team using products makes it feel legit. ”

“ The Liverpool team show men can pamper themselves. ”

“ Using the team shows that mean can be strong, masculine and take care of themselves. ”



Gareth's Story



500 person nat rep survey (2/3rds male/ 1/3rd female) conducted with The Nursery.

DEFINE MASCULINITY THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

Penultimately, think about how shifts in behaviour could be conveyed through how men relate to and engage others. In other words, think about the interplay between male characters.

Just under 40% of people are keen to see greater interplay and conversation between men in comms, and it's especially interesting to younger audiences.



'The Best Men Can Be' Campaign

THE NARRATIVE MATTERS MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

Finally, and at the end of the day remember that first and foremost, we are storytellers, serving commercial client need. Representation is key, but never to the detriment of your objectives.

Good work doesn't feature an inclusive cast irrespective of the product or story it needs to tell. Instead, it connects through brilliant storytelling, reflective of true human experience. No better example of this exists than Maltasers' recent work. Start with the story, then find the right cast. Always.



'New Boyfriend' Campaign

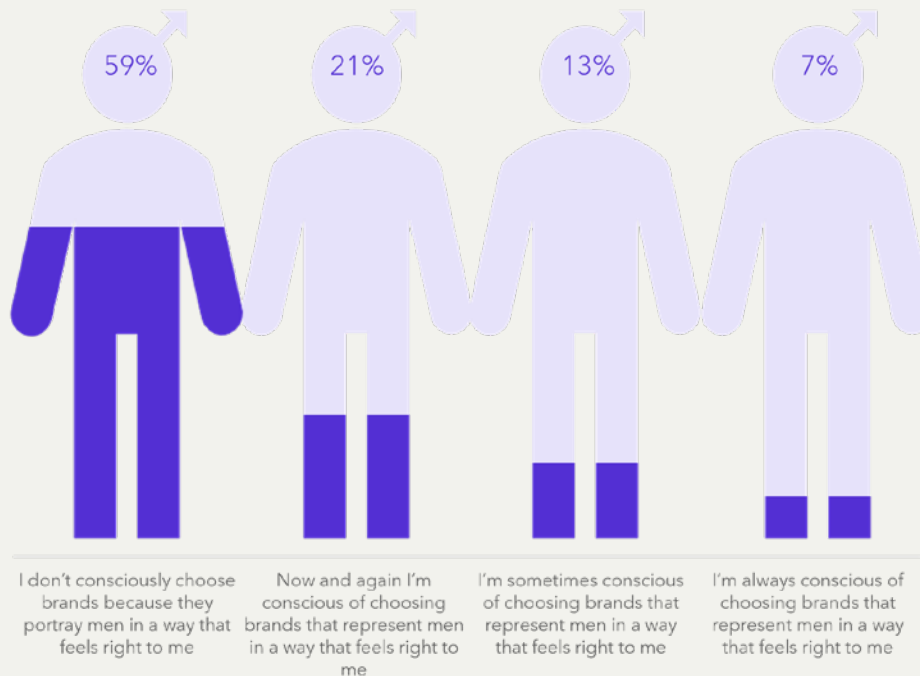
“ We must do the right things, but it should never get in the way of comms – it's a balance of priorities. ”

Claire H,
VCCP Deputy CSO

We're almost there – but here's one final thought. What could this all mean for the bottom line?

IN TRUTH, EVOLVING MALE REPRESENTATION IS UNLIKELY TO BE A GOLDEN BULLET

59% of people aren't currently choosing brands based on gender representation.



Consciousness towards choosing brands based on the way they portray men and masculinity

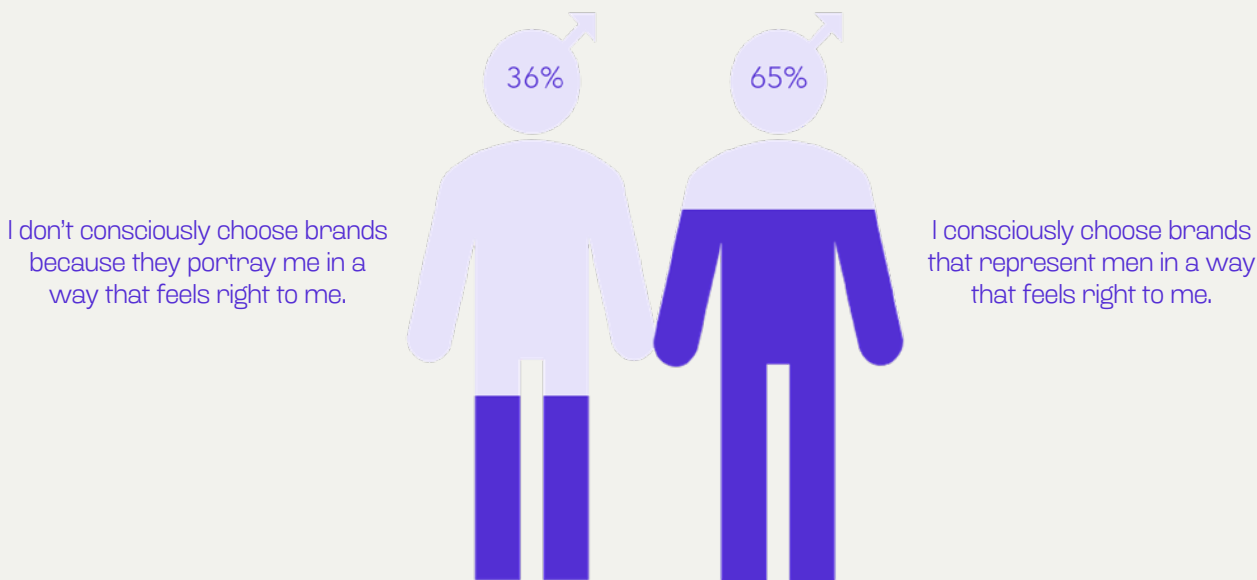
HOWEVER MANY ARE TAKING IT IN TO CONSIDERATION



% all men who say representation has ever impacted their purchase decisions per sector (anything other than 'never', top 4 box).

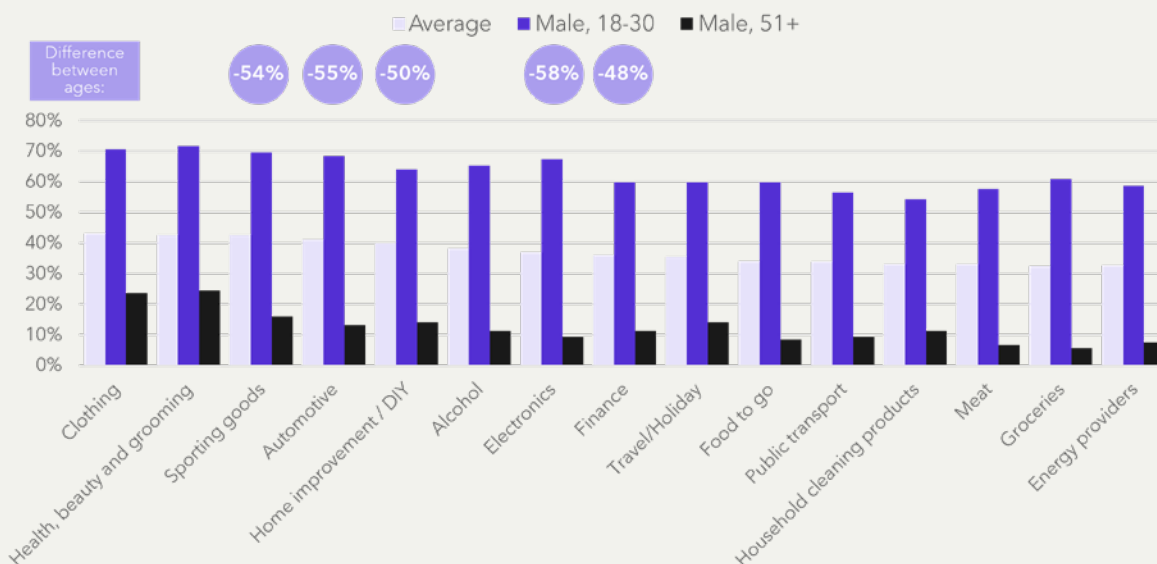
PARTICULARLY YOUNGER MEN

65% of young men say that gender representation in advertising plays some role in purchase decisions.



Consciousness towards choosing brands based on the way they portray men and masculinity (men aged 18-30).

Young men are significantly more likely to feel this way than the general population and particularly older men.



% of younger and older men who say male representation impacts their purchase decisions from sometimes to always (top 3 box) per sector, with the difference between young and old responses in bubbles above key categories

So whilst this may not be something you should be running to your CFO's about right now, if you have an eye on the future and strong audience acquisition targets, take note and start thinking.

THE OUTRO, EXIT, FINAL COUNTDOWN...

And there we have it. By no means a “Masculinity Rep” bible, but hopefully some thinking to encourage us all to consider what modern “Masculine” role models could look like and how to weave these figures, rooted in empathic brand narratives, into our thinking and creative work. As we like to say at VCCP “It only works if it all works” and our collective response to showing positive gender dynamics has a role in making the world at least a little better, at a time when it has never felt more critical.

A NOTE ON OUR METHODOLOGY

QUAL:

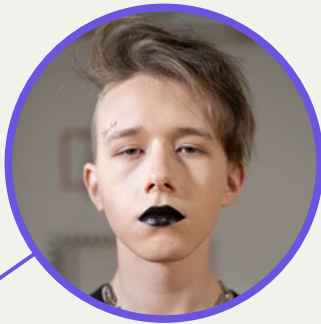
16 qualitative interviews with employees from planning, creative, account management and production departments within VCCP.

Qualitative interviews with experts in the fields of gender studies and/or masculinity

- Fernando Desouches - Managing Director New Macho
- James Scroggs - CALM Chair of Board of Trustees
- Stephen Burrell - Assistant Professor Durham University (Men, Masculinities and Violence)
- Tim Samuels - Author of 'Who Stole My Spear?' and 'Future Man'

QUANT:

500 person nat rep survey (2/3rds male/ 1/3rd female) conducted with The Nursery.



A BIT ABOUT COLLABORATIVE

Collaborative is VCCP's insight platform, showcasing the collaborative thinking of it's strategists from across the VCCP Partnership which include specialists in media, communications and experience design.

The Gender Agenda is a research report undertaken in partnership with The Nursery.

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