MEN IN CULTURE

NOVEMBER, 2025

"WOMEN... YOU'RE BETTER THAN US!"

PRESIDENT OBAMA GIVES HIS VIEW ON LEADERSHIP

MEN ARE PORTRAYED AS WIMPY OR EXCESSIVELY MASCULINE

57 PER CENT OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC AGREE IN OUR EXCLUSIVE POLL

TOP ROLE MODELS NAMED:

DAVID BECKHAM, KEANU REEVES, PRINCE WILLIAM, DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, AND DWAYNE "THE ROCK" JOHNSON

"Men don't know what they're supposed to be anymore."

CSJ | A LOST BOYS PRODUCTION

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

The CSJ's Lost Boys: state of the nation report launched a nationwide discussion on why so many boys are failing at school and dropping out of the workforce. It asked questions of how we mentor and role model young men, both in our homes and wider communities. It asked why so many men are dying young and filling our prisons.

Over the next few months the CSJ will release a number of reports bringing forward practical and implementable solutions to many of these problems. But one finding was a bit different: 50 per cent of young men aged 18-24 feel that 'the media too often portrays men as being a bit pathetic' and one in three 18-24 women (32 per cent) agree.

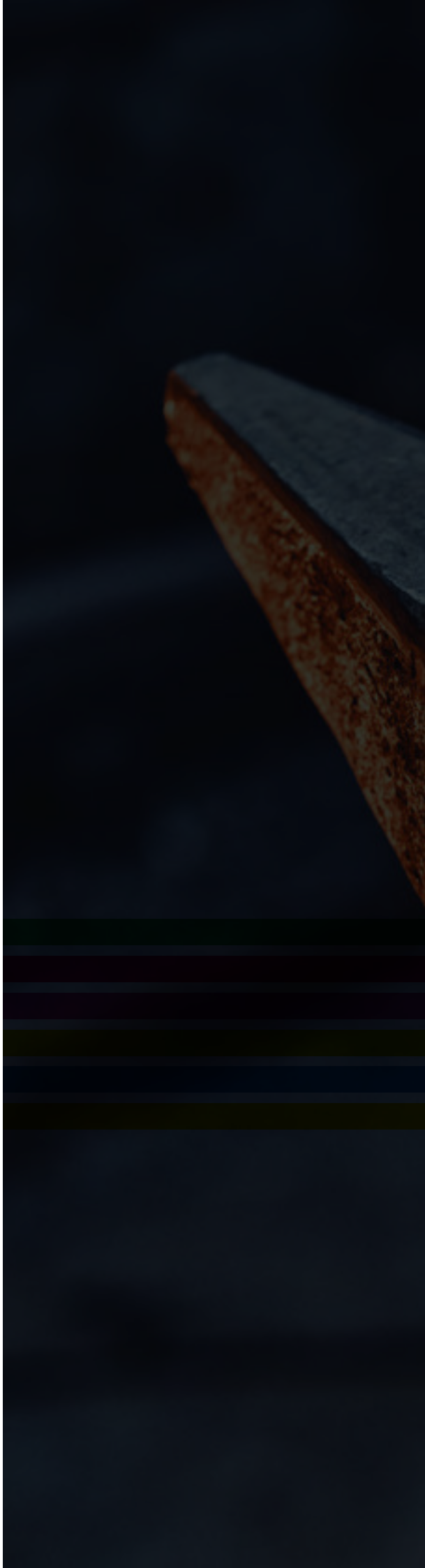
It suggests that some of the problems young men face, particularly of intangible but important issues like identity, belonging, and purpose, are being exacerbated by the cultural water they swim in – a water of pathetic role models. New polling for this paper has found that over three quarters of people think teenage boys lack proper role models across popular culture, and even higher proportions think that if they had them it would lead to better outcomes for men and women too (85 per cent and 77 per cent respectively).

It's hard to measure the truth of this and in the absence of data and objectivity, can quickly slip into grievance and self-pity. And yet the feeling is there and it's widespread. This paper attempts to unpack it, understand it, and kickstart the conversation about whether we can and should do something about it.

But perhaps one of the most interesting things to emerge during this work was how many people we contacted did not want to speak to us. And that many we did speak to asked to remain anonymous. This is difficult stuff, and we don't profess to have all the answers. But we do think this is a good starting point and hope you enjoy reading it.

Ed Davies

Edward Davies
Research Director, Cente for Social Justice



INTRODUCTION:

MEN AND MASCULINITY IN CRISIS?

Statistics will always be reductive, no matter how many people are accounted for. But even so, data presented in the Centre for Social Justice's Lost Boys report earlier this year indicated profound societal challenges to young men and boys, and masculinity. While we looked the other way, young men fell behind on a catalogue of key outcomes including in education, health and economic activity.

But those criteria only tell part of the story. One of the report's most alarming insights was that a high percentage of those surveyed, both male and female, adjudge men today to occupy a character spectrum that reaches from "frightening" at one extreme to "a bit pathetic" at the other.

How did this happen? If the CSJ's portrait of male Britain – and perhaps by extension the male half of the Western hemisphere, at least to the extent that we Britons see ourselves as a key component in Western society – is anywhere near accurate, it leaves men and masculinity in crisis.

This is not just a crisis of character. It's a crisis of identity. Of aspiration. Of confidence. What does it mean to be a man in contemporary society? What value do men add?

It also invites us to take stock. What do boys want to become? What do we want boys to become and men to be? Surely it's not frightening or pathetic?

Given the choice, wouldn't we rather the stable male provider-protector, according to a familiar but increasingly distant traditional masculine stereotype? Men that manifest the healthy characteristics of courage, discipline, reliability and mental, emotional and physical strength, and who are also financially dependable? Men that are positive role models?

LEFT UNADDRESSED PERHAPS WE'RE FACING A CRISIS OF HOPE. SUCH ARE THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS LEFT BY THE CSJ'S FINDINGS.

Left unaddressed perhaps we're facing a crisis of hope. Such are the existential questions left by the CSJ's findings.

Two further questions arise: how did we get here, and how do we get away from where we are to somewhere – to put it simply – better? Perceptions of masculinity have not always been so pejorative, and no doubt if asked the vast majority of men and women would gladly flush these contemporary assessments into the sinkhole of eternity.

Some of the answer to the first of those questions lies beyond the need for deeper analysis. Western society has changed beyond recognition over the past half century, moving away from traditional tropes. Johnny Breadwinner and Susie Homemaker are largely figures of the past, while societal expectations of the roles men and women can play have evolved far beyond what the 20th century feminist movement – both its detractors and its proponents – might ever have imagined. For better or worse, societal norms now cater for stay-at-home dads and female soldiers, mothers, ready to sacrifice themselves on the front line.

Intertwined changing views on age, gender, race, class, sexuality and many forms of hierarchy have all contributed to these changes, as have the technological arms race and our understanding of what constitutes work and proportional remuneration. What citizens of the 20th century would make of a YouTube influencer, an Only Fans model or a crypto-bro we can only fathom, to say nothing of the fact that 8.7 million Britons now rely on anti-depressants to function.[1] The world is different now, and there's no going back.

What will require further consideration is the role played by culture and our media in changes to how men and boys are perceived. Powered up by rapid technological advances, media has been transformed beyond most expectations, too, with far fewer regulatory controls or internationally established parameters than the morally energised generations of the past might have allowed.

We now live in a time when children can consume an unlimited slew of violent pornography in playgrounds, or just as easily the horrific assassination of an American activist. It is surely without question that the cultural forces that surround us and that through media shape our thoughts, our actions, our communities and ultimately the society in which we live are now more diffuse, more powerful and more dangerous than ever.

So what role have culture and the media that communicate it played in getting us to this point? The view that media reflects culture rather than shapes it has fewer adherents these days. Some in the sector might still argue its primary purpose remains to hold a mirror up, and not without some justification. But over time, academics have picked holes in the theory, highlighting its shortcomings.

As long ago as 1985, during a period in which we witnessed an explosion of mass media through the genesis of cable TV, Sheila Davis, an Adjunct Professor of lyric writing at New York University took music as her cultural lens, noting: "That songs speak for their time is a given. But they are more than mere mirrors of society; they are a potent force in the shaping of it."[2]

Four decades along, and by that theory, it seems reasonable to suggest that the time – the culture – we inhabit today has been forged in large part by the influences of film, television, music and advertising to name a handful, and more recently by their greatest amplifiers: streaming and social media.

So if that's the case, how neat a line can we draw between the brittle findings of the CSJ's Lost Boys report and how men and boys have been portrayed through culture over, say, the past 25 years? In the here and now, what kind of men and what vision of masculinity do consumers of contemporary culture, both male and female, actually want to see? And looking ahead, what demands should we make of the media we consume?

These are important questions to ask. Not just because they might help us to understand why we are where we are, but because they might also give us a framework for future decision-making that helps us escape the toxic masculinity vortex, where, as perceptions of masculinity spiral, so too do male behaviours.

That media executives hold great power is undeniable. That this power should be used responsibly might be too, but it's abundantly

clear that the pursuit of the bottom line all too frequently prompts commissioning attitudes that prioritise lowest common denominator content. It might also be true that those attitudes have been crystallised by a prevailing contemporary view of men and masculinity that carries a negative bias.

The goal then of this short paper is to review how men are represented in high-consumption contemporary culture, and to establish if and where the connections between that culture and the Lost Boys' findings exist. It will respond to its brief chiefly through the lenses of film, television and streaming, music and advertising, with frequent references to the technology, devices and social media that accelerate our consumption of those media. As such, it will be limited in its scope. It will not pretend to be exhaustive or indeed particularly academic in its approach.

Instead, it will aim to add necessary nuance to the narrative, using interviews, personal testimonies, anecdote and where possible data-driven insights, referring where relevant to the "Men In Culture Survey" commissioned by the CSJ explicitly in service of this paper.

It will offer some considerations that might – and perhaps ought to – carry influence over how men are portrayed in the culture of the future.

On that note, it feels of some significance to record that a number of the UK's leading cultural institutions declined the opportunity to contribute to this report. Ofcom, UK Screen, the British Film Institute and the on-screen trade union PACT were all contacted, but each indicated a reluctance to engage. If the question of how boys, men and masculinity are portrayed in culture is to be addressed effectively, these institutions will need to engage with it. This report serves as an invitation to do so.

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A TALE OF MODERN MAN:

WHERE ARE WE NOW AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

When was it that men started "mansplaining"? When and where were the seeds of the "manosphere" sewn? And just when did the prefix "man-" become a ready shortcut to ridicule and redress? Travis Kelce, the celebrity American footballer, risked recrimination earlier this year when he admitted to the "man-tantrum" he had thrown in attempting to romance Taylor Swift, even while she admitted it proved the catalyst that sparked their high-profile engagement.

Go back 25 years and these terms were not in the popular lexicon: both are confections of the late 2000s. But there's evidence in the changing view of men they represent and that we observe today were in the water well before the turn of the Millennium.

A survey conducted in the 1990s by Matthew Winter Ph.D. of George Washington University, and Diane Clark Ph.D. and Elisabeth Diamond Ph.D. of Shippensburg University, indicated that between the 1970s and 1990s attitudes to men had shifted.

The survey, Dr Clark confirmed for this paper, was presented at a conference. There were some upsides. In it, men were recognised for the first time for their "friendliness, gentleness and caring", but at the same time a "negative masculinity" had emerged. "Traditional male characteristics" were seen "less positively". Men "were no longer seen as particularly objective, savvy or assertive," as they had been in a similar survey conducted in the 1970s, but "jealous, moody, fussy and temperamental". Men were also seen increasingly to be "deceptive, narrow-minded and heedless of consequences."

In the 1990s, a new, less stable, more hedonistic masculinity was emerging. It began honestly enough. In 1991, the writer Sean O'Hagan wrote a column for Arena magazine introducing the "New Lad", a sophisticated but mischievous – and in theory more interesting – version of the "New Man", a term coined by marketeers looking to sell razors and hair gel that found its purest form in the iconic black and white Athena poster L'Enfant, in which a shirtless male model cradled a baby.

O'Hagan's concern had been to debunk the New Man theory. "I've been wondering if, behind the myth, beyond the advertising concept, there was ever any real possibility of such a creature actually existing," he wrote. "A sensitive, caring, emotionally balanced, non-sexist, non-aggressive male? And what's more, a sensitive, caring, emotionally balanced, non-sexist male who wasn't simply a wimp. The answer, as we all know by now, is a resounding no."

As the strikes and riots of the 1980s receded and 1990s economic prosperity took their place, the New Lad quickly evolved into something less nuanced, and at its mid- to late 1990s apotheosis, in the UK it spawned so-called "Lad Culture", characterised by men who drank, took drugs, raved, gambled, "shagged around" and obsessed over football. Through a diffuse range of influences, from "Cool Britannia" to "Britpop" and "Girl Power", and from Trainspotting to New Labour to the Premier League, cultural and social barriers were being broken down, or at least redrawn, as politics, business, sport, music, TV and film overlapped as never before. The new framework, made more enticing still by the oncoming internet age, offered freedoms of expression for both men and women that no society had experienced before.

TRADITIONAL MALE CHARACTERISTICS WERE SEEN LESS POSITIVELY

The men that shaped so much of this were often quick to present themselves as unreliable and feckless, and sex- and porn-crazed. They were fanatical readers of UK magazines such as FHM and Loaded – the so-called "lad mags" that detailed the wild lives of their writers and their heroes, "for men who should know better", as Loaded's strapline casually admitted.

They were often anti-establishment, too, a sentiment amped up by a changing jobs market that offered diminishing opportunities for manual labour as the technological age advanced and the information superhighway created a new generation of "professionals".

The new establishment meanwhile embraced some of the movement's protagonists as it looked to leverage their commercial and political influence. Tony Blair's invitation to the iconoclastic Noel Gallagher of Oasis, Britpop's most successful expression, to attend a reception at 10 Downing Street shortly after his 1997 landslide normalised, and perhaps lionised, the behaviours and attitudes this new type of man represented. In that moment, some have argued, "Laddism" graduated from sub-culture to the mainstream. But while rockstars made millions from this new masculinity, many men found it led nowhere.

MANY MEN DON'T SEEM TO KNOW WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ANY MORE, NOR HOW TO CONVINCE THEMSELVES OF THEIR VALUE POTENTIAL.

Even so, as Y2K approached, Laddism and its effects felt temporary and of their time. In the 1990s there was little sign of the depressing conclusions the CSJ's recent research would reach that men would be viewed as either "pretty frightening" or "a bit pathetic", nor that younger men would be battling a full-blown masculinity crisis. But perhaps the seeds were sewn then.

Martin Deeson can see it, certainly. In the 1990s, Deeson was editor-at-large of Loaded magazine. He wrote about drugs, booze and partying, largely through the lens of personal experience. "At first, I thought that we were much more of a reflection [of society]," he says. "But towards the end, I realised that we weren't just reflecting the culture, we were influencing it. And was there a line from that to Nuts to Zoo to Russell Brand and on to Andrew Tate? Unfortunately, I suspect there is."

It wasn't only men that were changing. In the summer of 1996, Laddism was joined as one of the defining influences of the era by "Girl Power", channelled through the titanic cultural force of The Spice Girls. Just as Laddism elevated the cultural significance of the feckless male, so Girl Power gave rise to the supremely ambitious, confident female.

If there were a single moment the shift could be pinned to, the epicentre of the cultural earthquake, it might be when Geri Halliwell, aka "Ginger Spice", allegedly pinched the then Prince of Wales' bottom (she would later claim she broke royal protocol with a pat) at the Prince's Trust Gala in 1997. A collective gasp at her impropriety was swiftly followed by laughter and admiration, led by the future King himself, and in that moment hierarchical gender norms passed into the 20th century by the Victorians and everyone before them were gone forever. The 21st century would be different. Lines would be blurred. The relative role of men and women would be different.

With conventions broken and after three decades of a social, economic and political permacrisis – created in the main by male figures – many men don't seem to know what they're supposed to be any more, nor how to convince themselves of their value potential.

In February this year, the London-based market research agency RED C published Modern Masculinity as follow-up to its first report on the subject in 2023. The key finding of its latest survey was that "younger men find it a confusing time to be a man as they struggle with social media, societal pressures and a strong friction between modern and 'traditional' representations of masculinity." Allied to that, RED C reported that only 21 per cent of male respondents feel they are represented on-screen and that "only half of men think being a man is something to be proud of."

Is there a link between how men have been portrayed in culture, how they're perceived and how they feel today?

Clearly, we've not arrived at this position overnight. The origins of man's descent into a figure of fear or fun must lie deeper. Can we pinpoint those beginnings? Scientifically, that appears all but impossible. There's little if any contemporary research that aligns the decline in perceptions of men and masculinity to any particular events, moments in time or cultural genres. But there is a baseline feeling that portrayals of men in culture over the past 25 years have evolved, and that this has played a definitive role in how boys, men and masculinity are viewed today.

That feeling encourages a review of some of the most prominent male figures in modern cultural history. Perhaps we begin the descent into the pathetic in1970s television and Frank Spencer, the effete and ineffectual maladroit who was entirely reliant on his much more competent wife, even if that seems a bit harsh, given Michael Crawford's beret-wearing wimp remains a much-loved character (and one President Donald Trump may be unaware of, having named Crawford as one of this year's Kennedy Center Honors recipients for his performances in Phantom of the Opera).

Or perhaps the genesis is in the predatory lasciviousness of Sid James and his clan in the Carry On franchise? Good, clean, harmless fun, no? Maybe. That the 31-film franchise is still routinely broadcast on UK free-to-air television might suggest that contrary to contemporary mores we're happy to indulge the memory of a time when lewd behaviour and limp innuendo were box office gold; alternatively, it may indicate that broadcasters are intent on reminding us of men's now less acceptable impulses and the dangers of reducing them through comedy. Certainly, dark revelations over the past 25 years detailing the abusive behaviours of male entertainers from that period have heavily tarnished our collective view of masculinity.

IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN HOW MEN HAVE BEEN PORTRAYED IN CULTURE, HOW THEY'RE PERCEIVED AND HOW THEY FEEL TODAY?

For the American late-night talk show host and satirist Bill Maher, a liberal mind as a rule, the catalyst that brought us to where we are now was the release of Three Men and a Baby, the 1987 hit comedy that provided a fumbling male trio with the opportunity to demonstrate their inability to keep a baby alive.[3]

That, as Maher noted in June as part of a monologue calling this year's Father's Day to be the last when dads are treated "as punchbags", was followed by the release of a series of hugely successful and internationally distributed US TV shows such as Married With Children, The Simpsons, Home Improvement and Family Guy, in which the leading men were largely portrayed as gormless, self-interested half-wits.

"Mom is always the smart one, the good one, and Dad's just lucky to be in her orbit," Maher pointed out, looking into the camera, before asking: "I get that this is a correction to centuries of women being deemed the weaker sex, but how long does the correction last?" The empowerment of women is one thing; the disempowerment of men something else entirely.

As Maher continued, the inverted view male celebrity often has of its own gender has helped endorse the new stereotype. Harry Styles' "Women are smarter" t-shirt slogan pushed the idea on Gen Z, while in 2019 Barack Obama addressed a leadership event in Singapore with the words: "Now women, I just want you to know; you are not perfect, but what I can say pretty indisputably is that you're better than us [men]."[4] How many young men would want to follow one of this century's most charismatic leaders into leadership after he's concluded the other half of humanity would do the job better?

As Maher argues: "This cringy pandering is why teenage boys flock to jerks like Andrew Tate… Yes, he's a huge asshole, but your kid thinks he's cool, because that's the choice of role models that an American teenage boy has: either performative pussyhood or the manosphere."

While these themes permeate our culture and create a fil rouge that connects us to the end of the last century, a shift in outcomes for young men has taken place. Writing in The Times earlier this year, Robert Colvile said this: "Young women in the UK are now, for the first time, more likely to be in education, employment or training than young men. They are more likely to go to university. Their salaries are higher. They are increasingly dominant in many of the professions, including teaching, medicine and law. The world that is emerging, in other words, is one of power women – and powerless men. There has, for example, been much fretting over the rise in economic inactivity in the UK. But this has been, overwhelmingly, a rise in male inactivity."[5]

THE POINT THAT CULTURE IS UNDERMINING PERCEPTIONS OF MEN AND MASCULINITY COULD BE TAKEN FURTHER. AT SOME LEVEL, DOES OUR CULTURE ACTUALLY HAVE IT IN FOR MEN?

The point that culture is undermining perceptions of men and masculinity could be taken further. At some level, does our culture actually have it in for men?

Earlier this year, an application called Tea became the most popular download in the US iPhone app store.[6] More than a million women signed up to it in a week, lured in by its promise of a catfishing service that digs up the gossip (hence "Tea") on men they're dating to expose any potential character failings.

Publicly named and shamed, some men immediately took to other social networks to complain of being "doxxed", or cyberbullied, as personal details – including phone numbers – were shared online without their consent or any form of regulation. Fair? Or are men just fair game?

Or take the work of Asa Seresin, an Ivy League "sexuality scholar", whose theory of "heterofatalism" posits that women have been let down by a class of selfish, feckless, feminised men.[7] She is fast gathering acolytes.

The sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning have described what they call a "purity spiral", in which progressive – or woke – views of politics, gender, race, class and more have become a doctrine so acute that any who fail to conform to it are now regarded as impure. While the term might be applied first to considerations of why the working class – and particularly working-class men – are flocking to Reform and its protectionist policies, it could also apply to men in general. The prevailing acceptable ideology has often been that simply to be a man is in some way impure, given it implies either the universal threat of violence and rape, or uselessness. A profound social reaction may be brewing to this mindset, and if so, it will serve to prove not just its existence, but its power.

Meanwhile, this culture of man-shaming (another grim neologism) seems to be making it harder for men to find a mate. Professor Scott Galloway, a leading thinker on the challenges facing men and boys, has suggested a man needs to "swipe right" 200 times on dating apps to get a coffee in the diary and that on four out of the five occasions he does, he'll be "ghosted", or stood up.[8] Given what society thinks of men today, is it any wonder? Who'd want to get a coffee with a man when it's 50/50 he's either a drip or a potential rapist?

But let's zoom out for a moment. Perhaps the driving force behind these perceptions is not that all men are pathetic or dangerous, but the sense that because some are, there's always a chance any one man might be. And further, that because portrayals of men as such are so prevalent through culture – in the news cycle as much as in entertainment – that after a time it becomes impossible to discern the good guys from the wrong'uns.

"It's not all men, but it is always a man," says Rachel Walsh, a former professional hockey player who is now a marketing director for the watch company TAG Heuer. "Every other day, there is a story of a murder of a woman, or some horrific abuse, from somewhere across the world. Because of that, for women, there's constantly a wall up, a head swivel when you're out by yourself, situations that for a male might not seem anything."

MAN-SHAMING

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Walsh says she carries a key between her fingers when alone in public places, a self-defence technique her father taught her as a young woman. "I'm always on my guard, and that's hard to explain to someone who's never had to feel that." And has that changed since she was a young woman? "Yes, I'm more focused on the gender [of those around me in public] than I was when I was younger."

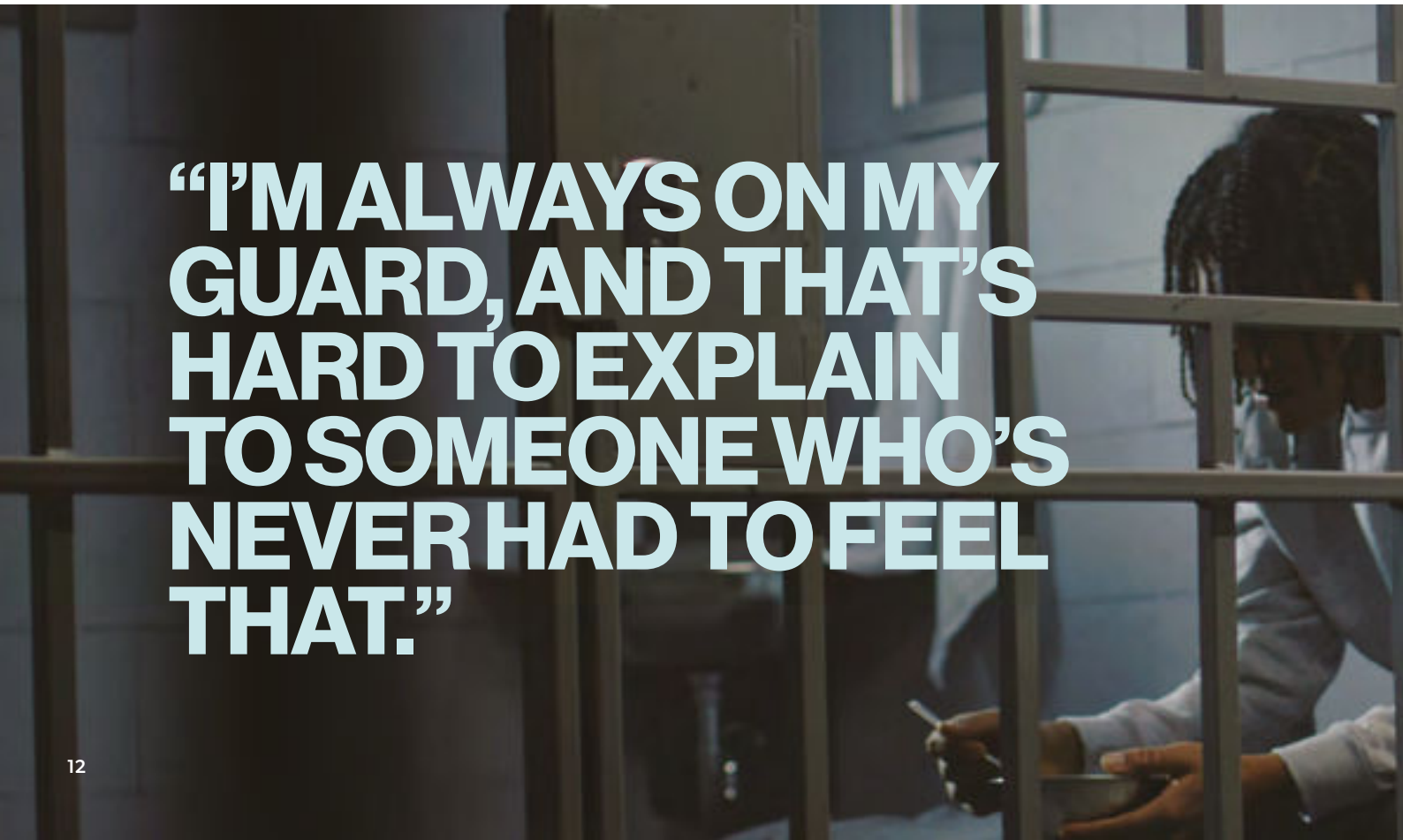
Statistics bear this out. One look at UK prison statistics indicate men are more dangerous than women, or at least that they are more likely to carry a threat than women. According to a UK Government report published in January this year, in 2023 only four per cent of the prison population was female, a figure constant over the past five years.[9] Meanwhile, 84 per cent of the 720,500 arrests made that year were of males, and 78 per cent of prosecutions and convictions were of male offenders. The report also noted that "females are significantly more likely to be victims of headline crime than males."[10]

While the report was clear that "no causative links can be drawn from these summary statistics" or "taken as evidence of unequal treatments or as direct effects of sex", it's hard to conclude anything other than that men are more dangerous than women. And not just to women: in fact, men make up 90 per cent of hospital admissions for knife assaults.[11]

But does that mean men should be so widely defined as dangerous, even while many – most? – are intent on providing and protecting. In our binary age, such data is often presented as black-and-white evidence of gender-wide traits. In such assumptions we find much of the hopelessness prevalent in today's young men. Society expects them to fail, either by virtue of their threat or their uselessness; prominent cultural narratives amplify this; and so begins the slide into male educational mediocrity and economic inactivity.

That may be just a theory, but beyond it one thing appears certain, which is that today, the subject of boys, men and masculinity motivates engagement. As a population, a culture even, we demonstrate a deep interest in men and boys, no matter whether that interest is a proxy for genuine concern, righteous indignation or confirmation bias.

Few better examples will present than that of the multi-award-winning Netflix psychological crime drama Adolescence. Released in the spring of 2025, it told the story of a young boy radicalised



by online content, and explored the potentially tragic implications of fealty to the manosphere.

According to a publicly available Ofcom report, Adolescence became the most-watched show of the first quarter of 2025, pulling in 12.2 million views to the end of March.[12] It was also the first SVoD (streaming video on demand) show to top weekly ratings gathered by Barb Audiences, the British organisation that has been tracking TV viewing habits since 1981. Given the immediacy of the subject, parents breathing the mantra "there but for the grace of God" sat their teenage children down to watch it. Netflix made it available to all secondary schools in the UK.

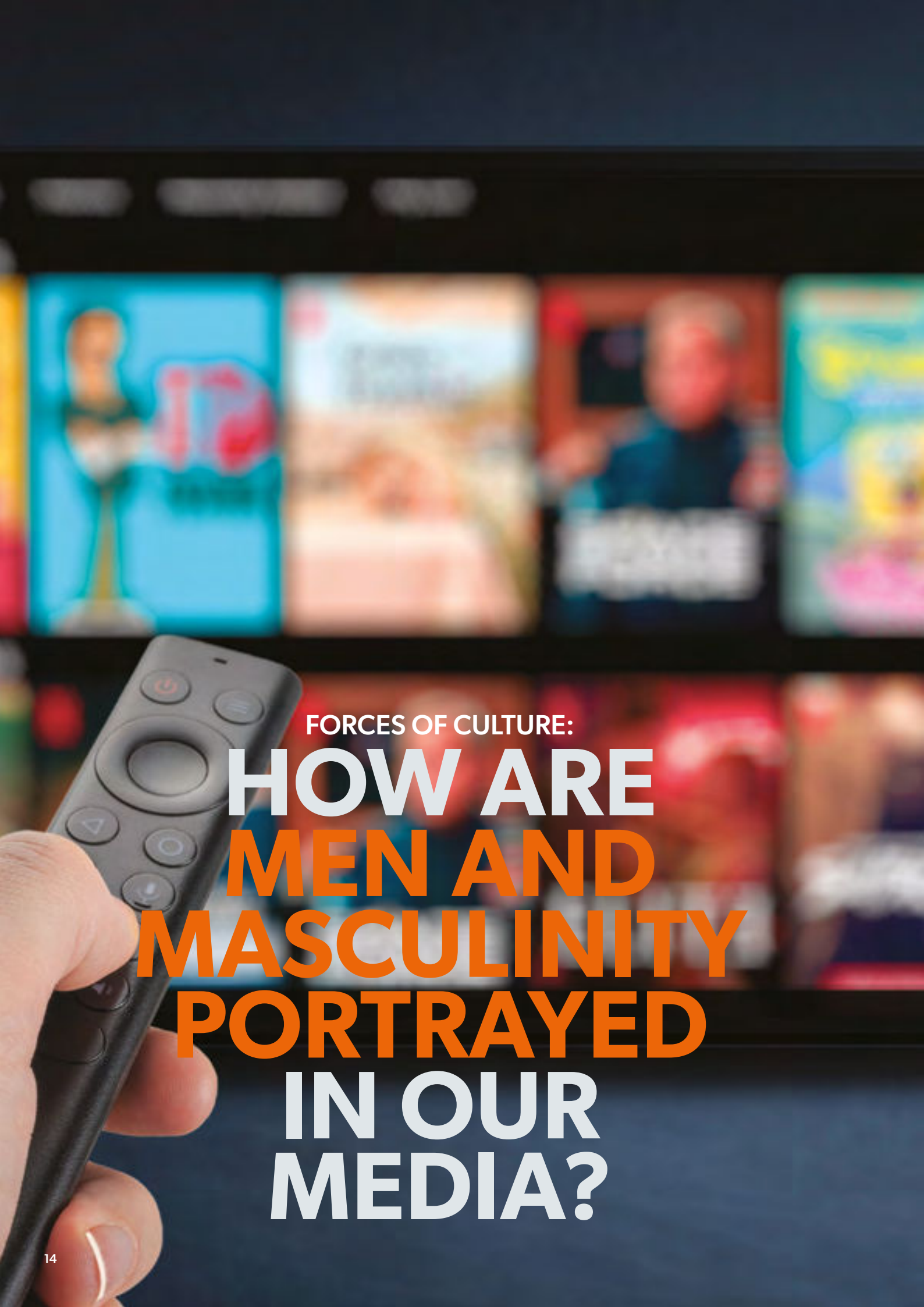
But it's not only the toxic variety of masculinity that sells. The most viewed programme on UK television in 2024 was Gavin & Stacey: The Finale, which drew an audience of 18.6 million[3] as it dominated the Christmas TV schedule.[13]

At the show's heart are the male characters Smithy, Gavin, Mick and Brynn, four very different men ultimately united by the characteristics of loyalty and integrity, and by their shared ambition to provide for and protect their families, relationships and communities.

As the finale reached its crescendo, it was Larry Lamb's patriarch Mick Shipman whose voice – considered, fatherly, authoritative – carried the most weight, leaving a nation of viewers grateful that Smithy didn't tie himself in marriage to a demonstrably unsuitable partner. Lamb has said playing Mick made him "a better man".[14] A positive male role model and a positive father figure, adored and consumed by millions, many of whom must surely be hungry to see the provider-protector male portrayed in culture more often. Right?

So where are we now? On men and masculinity: confused perhaps, unsettled certainly, often angry. But we're curious, too, and showing appetite for answers that recalibrate how men and masculinity are portrayed – and that help us shape a culture of stronger, more dependable men. We're also a long way down a road whose first cobbles were laid at least half a century ago. Can we re-route it? And if so, how?

According to a UK Government report published in January this year, in 2023 only four per cent of the prison population was female, a figure constant over the past five years. Meanwhile, 84 per cent of the 720,500 arrests made that year were of males, and 78 per cent of prosecutions and convictions were of male offenders.



FORCES OF CULTURE:

HOW ARE MEN AND MASCULINITY PORTRAYED IN OUR MEDIA?

There's little value in devoting too much time here to examine how popular culture and the media that convey it have changed over the past 25 years. We know well that the advent of the internet and the box-and-papers migration of film, TV, music, advertising and everything else now branded "content" online has radically altered how we come to media, giving consumers endless choice and creators endless challenges.

Even so, it is still remarkable that fixtures such as Netflix and Spotify were distant concepts as recently as the year 2000. Our Price and Woolworths were still high-street mainstays back then; video rental mega-chain Blockbuster would survive another 14 years. Change has been relentless, exceeding our capacity to keep pace. The neat categorisations of the past are forever lost, and now the battle is to accommodate the online and offline, physical, digital and virtual media morass that has replaced them. This can be exciting, but also terrifying.

But it's not just that the means of consumption have changed; whom we consume media with has changed, too. With 20.6 million UK homes paying for a streaming service in June 2025 (equivalent to almost 70 per cent of all households), and with YouTube and social media platforms now accounting for incrementally higher consumption rates as audiences decrease in age (down to teenagers), the opportunity to watch films, TV and on-demand content alone has never been greater.[15]

A nation no longer communalising around a TV show or film (in the 1970s and 1980s, TV film premiers were often a year's most viewed broadcasts) is one thing; but in households, families are now ever less likely to gather to watch together. That's not new: in 2018, the annual Childwise report showed that for the first time, children aged five to 16 were more likely to watch programmes and videos on devices, rather than on television screens, creating more isolated experiences.[16]

The Covid pandemic accelerated streaming trends, encouraging broadcasters to embrace a non-linear model, whereby consumers actively choose their content, or to hurry films onto paid-for streaming services before they'd had a run at the box office. Cinema admissions increased during the first 20 years of the 21st century, until the pandemic. In 2024, annual UK cinema admissions were down almost 30 per cent on 2019.[17] Where are the punters? More than likely, hunkering down at home. According to the respected industry market research company Nielsen, in 2024 the world consumed 12 trillion minutes of streamed content, up 10 per cent on 2023 alone.[18]

Besides the issues this creates for broadcasters, filmmakers and content creators, it also poses huge challenges around regulation – both the formal legislative frameworks, but also the informal approval of peers. Culture, media and content are now borderless.

The nature and tone of the content we consume has changed, too, clearly in some instances. At the turn of the Millennium, unscripted or reality TV was still largely unexplored terrain – Big Brother 1 premiered in July 2000, Pop Idol a year later.

THE NATURE AND TONE OF THE CONTENT WE CONSUME HAS CHANGED, TOO, CLEARLY IN SOME INSTANCES.

Diversity, a concept with little traction 25 years ago, is now a dominant force in filmmaking and programme commissioning, so that most contemporary content, whether in televised news, sport, comedy or drama, or in film, will at some point have been subject to a diversity audit, whereby attempts will have been made to include as wide as possible a cross-section of society in both on- and off-screen contributions.

The BBC has pledged that it will "hardwire diversity" into all its activities and employs the industry standard Diamond monitoring system to report its record.[19] Since 2020, Channel 5 has been operating a "no diversity, no commission" policy: the influence of the policy illustrated by the creation of the industry acronym "NDNC".[20]

MEN, SOME ARE NOW ARGUING, ARE INCREASINGLY MARGINALISED OR DIMINISHED BOTH ON- AND OFF-SCREEN

The principle behind such measures is good. As inventions of the middle part of the 20th century, baseline forms of the broadcast media that for decades shaped our culture were the product of the UK's population make-up and social structures. They were therefore the preserve of white men, with low opportunity levels for women (many of whom returned to economic inactivity after the war), and even lower levels for minority groups (in the 1950s, there were a few tens of thousands of non-white people in the UK from a population of around 50 million).[21]

UK media were slow to adapt to the country's changing demographics, and it is therefore healthy and logical that increased population diversity (for example, according to 2021 Census data, today, 18 per cent are non-white) should be reflected in on- and off-screen contributions, not least on publicly funded channels.[22]

But after three decades of white papers, periods of internal reflection and in some cases top-down directives, there are deepening concerns that the pendulum has swung too far the other way. Men, some are now arguing, are increasingly marginalised or diminished both on- and off-screen, with a consequent impact on how men and boys and masculinity are portrayed and perceived. Although decreased it is still fair to say that men dominate our screens in terms of volume but it is not only the quantity of men that has reduced but the quality. The feeling that women are portrayed as fierce, independent, moral, while men are often portrayed as useless, evil, or violent.

Putting that case is immediately contentious. The UK media industry has become nervous even to recognise that it might have merit, caught in a trap of its own making: for decades men in media marginalised or stereotyped women, leaving them with no leg to stand on in proposing that the opposite might now be true.

Does it have any merit? This might serve as a useful illustration. At the Edinburgh TV Festival in August, the 50th MacTaggart Lecture was introduced by the festival's chair Jane Tranter.[23] Before an audience of TV industry leaders, the former BBC executive began her speech by describing a "crisis of empathy" and calling for TV to help instruct "a better, kinder, more empathetic world." Good stuff.

But she followed this by recalling the first McTaggart Lecture she had attended in 1995, given by Janet Street-Porter, then of the Mirror Group Newspapers. "At a time when the advisory committees and those in positions of power were mainly men, Janet, wearing a sporty skirt and trainers, tackled the four M's: male, middle-class, middle-aged and mediocre. So – all change there, then…?" she said with no attempt to hide her irony. Then, with barely concealed contempt, she concluded: "Maybe that's why we're in the mess we're in!"

Her insinuations were picked up by audience members. One multi-award-winning senior TV executive in the Edinburgh audience that day, who only agreed to be quoted with the guarantee of anonymity, was appalled – but not surprised. "She could not resist the male-bashing minute," he said. "It's a set piece, now. As a man in TV, it made me feel utterly pathetic. But we just have to take it. It's career-ending if you speak out against this sort of thing."

He continued: "It also felt very dated. Because the balance of representation has shifted hugely over the past 25 years. In fact, I'd say the level of diverse representation, whether in ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender or anything else, is overly compensated for in TV and TV advertising now."

In the present, that view remains anecdotal. UK media bodies approached for this paper in an attempt to establish whether there has been a measurable shift declined to participate. "This needs to be raised," said the executive. "The lack of ability to evidence something that many in this industry recognise and are troubled by is a big problem, and the longer it persists, the greater the disconnect in society will become."

Some of the UK's most-watched TV shows do give an indication of the rapid cultural changes that have taken place and the pressures commissioners and broadcasters have come under to sideline traditional male role models.

Dr Who has been played by 15 actors since its 1963 debut. The first 13 were white male. In 2017, the role was given to Jodie Whittaker, a woman, and in 2023 to Ncuti Gatwa, who is black and a gay man. Both have had to defend publicly their casting following suggestions they had been cast on account of not being a straight, white male. Tensions mount in the court of public opinion.

Female leads in police procedurals are much more common, today: Happy Valley, Line of Duty and Blue Lights have dominated schedules over the past decade. In sport, this autumn Match of the Day's long-time host Gary Lineker was replaced by three hosts, two of whom are female. As Mark Solomon reflected in The Spectator before the announcement was made: "It seems the BBC is going out of its way to give MotD to anyone but the man who I, and many others, consider the best candidate of all: the impressive Mark Chapman."[24] Chapman did secure one of the three spots; Gabby Logan and Kelly Cates are widely recognised as leading broadcasters of their generation. Fair or not, it is another example of the slow erosion of male role models on our screens.

"I'D SAY THE LEVEL OF DIVERSE REPRESENTATION, WHETHER IN ETHNICITY, SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND, GENDER OR ANYTHING ELSE, IS OVERLY COMPENSATED FOR IN TV AND TV ADVERTISING NOW."

The temptation for a project looking to establish whether there is a negative bias towards men and boys and masculinity in culture might be to conclude this swing is somehow erroneous and that it amplifies the role of women unduly. But it's clear even looking at the short list above that this would be myopic and, frankly, sexist. Audiences and critics have had no trouble embracing the shift, either, with ratings sky-high and the awards piling up, particularly for those female-led cop shows.

Instead, perhaps the question should be whether in empowering females in media, men have simultaneously been disempowered. What role for the males who remain? Do they conform to the strong, reliable provider-protector archetype? Or is there an argument that a reduction in the number of men in prominent positions in culture has not simply led to an increase in the number of females in the same positions, but a greater proportional representation of men who are "pretty frightening" or "a bit pathetic"?

Given the absence of meaningful data that speaks to this question, the CSJ commissioned the Men In Culture survey, which was conducted in late September this year. It asked a number of pertinent questions in a bid to address the issue. The CSJ surveyed 2,082 adults, weighted to be representative of all adults. Some of the responses were striking.

The survey asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. For example: "Modern dads are often treated as ineffectual or incompetent in popular culture." 46 per cent agreed and of those who expressed a view, that rose to 62 percent. Another: "In popular culture today, men tend to be portrayed at extremes as either wimpy or excessively masculine." This time, 57 per cent agreed, rising to 70 per cent without the don't knows. Disconcertingly, when asked whether they agreed with the statement that "today's teenage boys lack proper role models across popular culture," 76 per cent agreed rising to 88 per cent of those with an active opinion on it. Asked to name one, the most common responses were "don't know" or "none". It seems even while accurate independent metrics are unavailable, there is widespread public agreement with the hypothesis.

Neil Brand is a playwright, composer of film scores and Radio 4 film critic and has been observing culture over the past four decades.

"There is a sense that men and boys are growing up with a society that is disempowering them," he told this report. "I think cinema has led this charge, even if it's only reflecting what society is doing. Feminism and the #metoo of the past 20 or 30 years has been incredibly important and necessary. What it's meant is that the less able and less socially responsibly writers and filmmakers have gone for the obvious story, if you're talking about women being empowered, which is that the men then have to lose that power and that the balance can't be struck between the two. Somehow or other, it requires shitty men for women to be shown achieving what it is they should be achieving."

This stance is evidenced in programming aimed at toddlers and travels up from there. Hugely successful animated characters such as Daddy Pig, Homer Simpson and Peter Griffin cover multiple viewing age categories and may be loved for their genial haplessness, but they are nonetheless prominent, highly influential examples of men who are largely incapable of running their own lives or making sound decisions that contribute to a stable, secure home. Each needs rescuing by a strong, sensible woman, their children or dumb luck to survive.

Something similar happens in contemporary police procedurals. It took Gillian Anderson's relentless detective Stella Gibson to bring down Jamie Dornan's repulsive serial killer Paul Spector in The Fall. The pursued in Happy Valley is James Norton's monstrous Tommy Lee Royce, eventually overcome by the dogged brilliance and self-sacrifice of Sarah Lancashire's Sergeant Catherine Cawood. Where it exists, even the pathos is reserved for the female characters.

While this has done great things for perceptions of women, the parallel impact on men appears to be far less positive. And yet some argue this formula is self-defeating. For James Ray, fatherhood advocate and author of the book Responsibility: Becoming the Authentic Man, strong male role models are good for building audiences, but also for creating environments in which strong female characters thrive, too.

"Very powerful women characters work when they're alongside very powerful male characters," he told this report. "Look at Beth Dutton in Yellowstone. She is one of the strongest characters on TV and has a very strong sense of femininity, and she hangs around with men who have a very clear sense of what masculinity is for them. And it's super successful. When you have weak male figures and strong female figures, it doesn't work. Men don't buy it."

"IN POPULAR CULTURE TODAY, MEN TEND TO BE PORTRAYED AT EXTREMES AS EITHER WIMPY OR EXCESSIVELY MASCULINE."

57 PER CENT AGREED.

The shrinking number of strong role male models in culture was a feature of a report compiled by the London-based market research agency RED C earlier this year, too. One respondent to its Modern Masculinity monitor said: "The hard-working man trying to make ends meet and still being a good human being is very unrepresented."

David Gandy is one of the world's most successful male models and now a business owner. He has two young daughters. "I noticed when my daughter started watching Peppa Pig how the father is treated as a bungling fool who gets it wrong, while the mum gets everything right," he said. "I like to empower my girls and to teach them about powerful women and what they have achieved, but men are just as important and we have to shout about what's being achieved by them, too."

TV insiders indicate that's not always easy, at least not while NDNC directives remain in place. "The argument for women is: 'Well that's how we've felt for the last 100 years, now you're getting a taste of your own medicine, you white privileged man,'" said the senior TV executive. "Which I get, but how do you argue against that, even while it's so limited in its reasoning?"

IN A MILLION DIFFERENT WAYS, IT CAN FEEL LIKE THE WORLD AROUND US IS FALLING APART, BUT THE PROGRAMMES YOU MAKE CAN CATCH AND UNITE US.

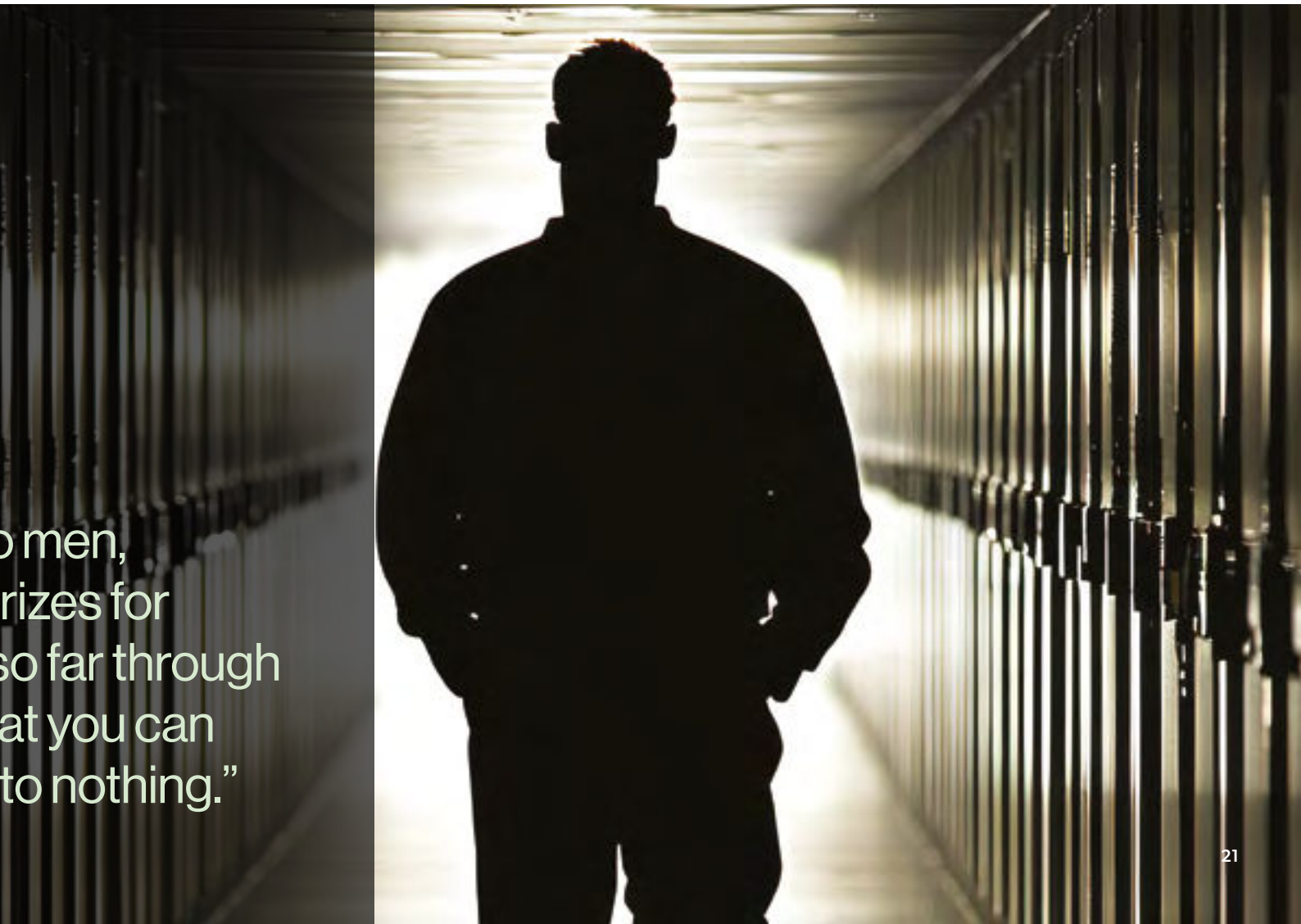
Audience appetite for TV with strong male role models appears to remain high, though. In children's TV, the father figure of Bandit in the Australian animated series Bluey has been widely praised as a positive male role model, and the show has been exported to more than 140 countries and last year ranked as the most watched show on CBeebies and Disney+ in the UK.[25]

So too the patriarchal character of Mick in the BBC's Gavin & Stacey, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Ted Lasso, an Apple Original, presents a vision – however idealistic – of strong male leadership and male friendship (and strong female leadership and friendship, too). With low production values and some question marks over its scripting and acting performances, some have credited its multi-Emmy award-winning run to its portrayal of positive masculinity. Indeed, it won a Peabody Award for being "a counter to the enduring prevalence of toxic masculinity."[26] It can be simplistic and reductive to draw quick conclusions, but the successes of Yellowstone and its prequels 1883 and 1923 have been attributed to its raw portrayals of strong, uncompromising masculinity, too. Where indeed have all the cowboys gone… and why aren't networks quicker to introduce audiences to more of them?

Instead, as respondents to the CSJ's Men In Culture survey noted when asked "which characteristics do you think best describe how men are portrayed in film and culture?", men are portrayed as being at one extreme or another. "Either meat heads or lady boys," one 52-year-old male respondent complained, while another put it more moderately, saying that portrayals "vary between 'alpha male' (whether hero or villain) and 'bumbling fool.'"

In her Edinburgh speech, Tranter made some excellent points. "Television is immediate and boundless," she said. "In a million different ways, it can feel like the world around us is falling apart, but the programmes you make can catch and unite us."[27]

Undoubtedly. But for the senior TV executive, the industry is threatened by a reductive attitude to men, one that is doing little to build unity. "There are no prizes for speaking to this subject," he said. "Unless you are so far through your career or so high up in the power echelons that you can change the conversation, then you are on a hiding to nothing."



OF MASCULINITY AND MEN:

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR HOW MEN ARE PORTRAYED IN POPULAR CULTURE?

British soap operas have been hit hard by the digital age. Shows such as Coronation Street and Eastenders, once the dominant forces of British TV scheduling, have seen viewing figures fall away as audiences have migrated to big-budget shows on streaming services, a trend begun by hits of the late 1990s, such as HBO's The Sopranos.

Despite this, soaps continue to play a significant role in our cultural landscape, often aligning much closer to reality with their linear broadcasts than the wild escapism of glossier on-demand shows. With that comes a weightier duty of care to characters and audiences, but what's it driven by – a responsibility to reflect society or an ambition to shape it? And in either eventuality, what does that mean when it comes to how men and boys and masculinity are portrayed?

Even for those inside the ropes, it's a difficult question to answer. "Because of the statistics we're seeing today, we do men's mental health stories about male anxiety, male depression, male suicide," said one prominent soap scriptwriter of 20 years experience, who asked to remain anonymous and for no reference to be made to the show they work on. "We have to have all these things in mind. I see that as taking responsibility, but whether that's leading or reflecting culture, it becomes hard to say."

Over the past 25 years, how men are portrayed in soaps has changed. For example, there are more storylines around men's mental health, and there are more gay characters in UK soaps than there were. Some might assume this is directed by executives imposing quotas. But perhaps not. "Neither the networks nor the producers give us quotas or tell us what we have to represent in the show," said the same scriptwriter. "The ideas come from the writers' room, and as those become more diverse, these changes get reflected on screen. Of course, there's compliance and there are things we can't show, like taking drugs or profanity, but in the room, we're the guardians of all that stuff, we're in charge of our own moral compass."

The question of which contemporary masculinity issues are written into the show and then how they are presented creates tensions. "Let's say we're thinking about doing an INCEL story [about involuntary celibates, who often display high levels of misogyny]," they continued. "To show that is bad. So do we give this oxygen, or do we try and show that it's bad? What do we do with that character? Do we punish them? Or do we rehabilitate them? Because doesn't the good guy have to win, like in the Westerns? But that's not real life."

As with greater representation of our population's diversity on screen, many of the changes in how male characters are written are positive. But are they effective in developing positive masculinity in the real world? "There would have been a time, say 20 years ago, when I would have written men talking about a girl from last night in a certain way," the scriptwriter continued. "Now, the world has changed, boys are educated in school about how to talk to and about women, and so I would write it differently now. But then when I go to the pub, play football and talk to my mates, they are more retrograde than people think. The constant dilemma we have is how should we show the world: how it is or how it should be?"

HOW MEN ARE PORTRAYED IN SOAPS HAS CHANGED. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE ARE MORE STORYLINES AROUND MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH.

The question of how traditional gender norms and homosexuality are represented on-screen has been at the heart of changing portrayals of men on screen, too.

"A couple of decades ago, we had one gay character in the show," the scriptwriter recalls. "They were outwardly camp, unthreatening. But we've now had lots of gay characters, bisexual characters and they've played romantic leads, bad boys. Again, we have gay writers in the room, and those voices are keen to bring gay characters in who operate just like other characters. And if we need someone to save someone from a burning building, we ask, should it be a woman? That comes from the room though, and not from execs who give us diversity remits. We're asking, 'what are the issues of the day?' and 'how do we dramatise them?' What we do know is that the millions and millions of people who watch television, what they've seen is going to influence them."For Neil

IF IN TV AND FILM THE LEADING QUESTION IS ABOUT HOW MEN ARE PORTRAYED, IN MUSIC IT'S ABOUT HOW MEN ARE BEHAVING – AND THE IMPACT THIS HAS ON HOW MEN ARE PERCEIVED.

Brand, the film composer and critic, the portrayal of homosexual men has had an impact on the kind of male role models we see on-screen, too. "Gay characters and gay couples in film are always treated respectfully and with a kind of understanding and an assumption that they already have a great deal more life experience than heterosexual men," he observed. "They are funnier, wittier. The assumption is the gay character has been through the flames, because of the confidence they must have had to come out as gay in a heterosexual world. If you want answers, gay men will have them. That has developed not just to a normalisation but a celebration of how much empowerment gay men have."

Perhaps the nadir for the representation of men on-screen came in the 2022 horror film Men, starring Jessie Buckley and Rory Kinnear. In the film, Buckley is a widow who retreats in her grief to a rural setting inhabited by a cast of men who are variously weird, sexually aggressive or violent, and universally terrifying. All are played by Kinnear. In The Times, film critic Kevin Maher described Men as "90 minutes of man-hating" and suggested that in the same breath the film managed to be "aggressively misogynistic."[28] The Independent's Clarisse Loughrey said the film highlighted a troubling tendency in the industry: "It suggests that all a male filmmaker needs to do to earn his feminist credentials is to show us men doing bad things.»

The box office alternative it seems, is to portray man in fantastical terms, achieving physical feats inalienably beyond those of any living human being, or saving the world by defying what would otherwise amount to certain death. The top 50 highest grossing films of all time suggest global audiences are in thrall to the superhero, super-spy and supernatural genres: from Avatar to Avengers, Bond to Batman, Spider-Man to Star Wars, the list is dominated by films articulated by wildly aspirational yet impossible portrayals of men.[29]

There's plenty to chew on in the success of these franchises, and indeed in the evolving portrayals of their main protagonists – James Bond, now more conflicted, more sensitive, more vulnerable, and perhaps about to morph into a woman. Briefly, on the one hand, it might imply an innate audience appetite for a supreme, often god-like personification of men and masculinity that in some way recalls man as the protector-provider. On the other, it might fatally betray the everyman, whose life is defined by the mundane rather than the miraculous. How can men and boys measure up to these works of fiction?

Here's Brand again: "This superhero world started with puny 14-year-old boys sitting in their bedrooms reading comics, who then grew up to run Hollywood," he said. "And now hundreds

of millions of dollars are thrown at it to allow audiences to have the same vicarious thrill as the comics gave them back in the 1950s. None of it has any bearing on the real world. If creates ersatz emotion and ersatz involvement from the audience, allowing them to get off on something that doesn't even begin to suggest it's real. Those who take it seriously, for me, are the ones who can't see the difference between the fantasy world and the world we all live in." -

The view among executives and creators in TV and film is that audiences don't show up to see the ordinary lives of men on-screen, and looking at that list of highest grossing films, the theory holds up. Who wants to see a nice, dependable, happily married dad doing routine things without ever tripping up on screen?

"Those kind of qualities are anathema to us," admitted the scriptwriter. "Where's the interest if we put the couple together everybody wants to be happy? So we keep them apart. You don't watch Titanic to see it sail into New York, you watch it to see it hit the iceberg."

And yet the CSJ Men In Culture survey told a different story. When asked an open-ended question about which characteristics they would enjoy seeing in male characters on film and TV, 57 per cent said "honesty, respect and family values". Some 18 per cent said they want to see caring and kindness, 10 per cent a sense of humour. Only 2 per cent cited "good looks".

"THE BOX OFFICE ALTERNATIVE IT SEEMS, IS TO PORTRAY MAN IN FANTASTICAL TERMS, ACHIEVING PHYSICAL FEATS INALIENABLY BEYOND THOSE OF ANY LIVING HUMAN BEING, OR SAVING THE WORLD BY DEFYING WHAT WOULD OTHERWISE AMOUNT TO CERTAIN DEATH. THE TOP 50 HIGHEST GROSSING FILMS OF ALL TIME SUGGEST GLOBAL AUDIENCES ARE IN THRALL TO THE SUPERHERO."

If in TV and film the leading question is about how men are portrayed, in music it's about how men are behaving – and the impact this has on how men are perceived.

While a great deal of music is anodyne and has little to contribute to this conversation, some of the most influential music artists in the world today have a great deal to contribute. Popular music, arguably the most disruptive influence of the 20th century, continues to wield enormous power over how culture is formed and how different cultures are viewed, irrespective of how it is now consumed. What becomes troubling, is that on a number of fronts, the music industry continues to perpetuate negative racial, sexual and gender stereotypes, as well as negative perceptions of men and masculinity. Much of this is in music and music videos created by and featuring male artists, and it seems the volume of such content is on the up.

In their 2023 paper "Large scale analysis of gender bias and sexism in song lyrics", the researchers Lorenzo Betti, Carlo Abrate and Andreas Kaltenbrunner used Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to analyse English language songs.[30] They established "an increase over time of sexist content in popular song lyrics by male solo artists." The worst offenders, according to their research, were "Hip hop and R&B and Soul songs", which they said had "a higher fraction of sexist lyrics when compared to the other analyzed genres."

The research rings true with how many will view the music industry, as continuing to lionise unhealthy characteristics in men, and also in women. Speaking to this paper on the condition of anonymity, one senior communications executive said this: "Look at [British rapper] Central Cee's music videos. It's women jumping up and down on him and on strip poles. He's got bricks of money and cars, and these are the images young men are being confronted with. He's probably one of the most important performing artists in the world today, but he's not a good role model."

Singling out one artist or genre is perilous, but to continue with the example, a quick glance at the British rapper's YouTube channel confirms the analysis of the content.[31] The music video for the song Guilt Tripping, featuring the female rap artist Sexyy Red, ticks all the boxes: male aggression and hyper-dominance, sexualisation and subjugation of females, worship of money and possessions and a rejection of authority. And

MISOGYNISTS ARE ATTRACTED TO MISOGYNISTIC LYRICS

The point behind that statement was to say people are attracted to it because they already have misogynistic attitudes that are therefore reinforced by the music they're listening to, rather than people being inspired as a result of it.

its influence? By mid-October, three months after its release, it had racked up 10 million views and 222,000 likes.

Meanwhile, as recorded earlier in this paper, when asked to name good male role models, 20 per cent of all respondents to the CSJ's Men In Culture survey returned either "don't know" or "none". David Beckham, Prince William, David Attenborough and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson were all mentioned multiple times in the list of responses. Harry Styles featured too. Central Cee was named once by a 25-year-old black male respondent from London. Split out, the two most common groupings of characteristics identified as factoring into a good role model by Gen Z respondents were "caring, kind and compassionate" and "respectful (towards women)."

The communications executive remarked that music had huge power to influence young men, and how they are perceived by contemporary society. "The key messages hitting young men today are music, sports and brands, not religion or government," they said. "Sport is responsible in terms of how it communicates, based on traditional values of participation, support, success. Brands are largely the same. They don't promote associations with someone behaving badly. But music doesn't regulate itself and uses fundamentally negative stereotypes, particularly within hip-hop. Music and music videos are responsible for a lot of the problems young people continue to go through."

Tom Kiehl, chief executive of UK Music, an umbrella body that represents the UK music sector, was more circumspect. "I wouldn't want to single out particular genres," he said. "Rappers are quite unfairly targeted. We're very against policies and procedures that single out particular art forms."

Kiehl did however acknowledge that the music sector had its challenges and suggested audiences played an integral role in shaping its future. "Music fans are great arbiters," he said. "Go back to Robin Thicke's song Blurred Lines which was a huge hit at the time. It had strong misogynistic overtones in the video and the lyrical content, and it's hard to envisage that song being embraced now. The public mood has shifted a lot and we have become a lot more conscious of what is responsible." The music video accompanying the 2013 release has so far racked up 960 million views on YouTube, with 4.2 million likes.[32]

WHAT CORRELATION EXISTS, IF ANY, BETWEEN MISOGYNISTIC LYRICS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS?

Underlying these challenges is an eternal paradox: music, as with any art form, is a consensual form of creative expression and therefore afforded profound freedoms by Western liberal democracies anxious not to censor or oppress, as defined by Article 10 of the Human Rights Act; and yet it can equally be argued this stance has encouraged permissiveness, to the detriment of society.

"Great artists want to communicate about the environment in which they live, but they also want to challenge and provoke," said Kiehl. "As an industry, we're very supportive of artists' ability to communicate and be expressive and to articulate the world as they see it, but also to present a challenge to society. But obviously, there's a balance to be struck and as an industry we're very conscious of the potential impact that might have and we're trying to be responsible for that. You can articulate the world around you, but you should not be inciting violence."

In 2022, UK Music and the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee published the Misogyny in Music Inquiry.[33] It asked the question: "What correlation exists, if any, between misogynistic lyrics and violence against women and girls?" In response, it concluded: "As far as we are aware there is no evidenced causal link between misogynistic lyrics and violence against women and girls."

Instead, the report reasoned that "misogynists are attracted to misogynistic lyrics." Kiehl expanded: "The point behind that statement was to say people are attracted to it because they already have misogynistic attitudes that are therefore reinforced by the music they're listening to, rather than people being inspired as a result of it. I would challenge the notion that the majority of the output of certain genres, whether hip-hop or grime, is misogynistic. That's unfair."

Indeed, some female-generated pop music could be singled out in the same way. On the cover of her most recent album Man's Best Friend, the American singer Sabrina Carpenter is pictured on her knees at the feet of what appears to be a man leading her by her hair.[34] Critics were divided in their interpretation, some arguing it was designed to lure the male gaze and in doing so encouraged unhealthy behaviour; others that is was a satirical pose, designed to highlight society's continuing battles with misogyny.

As it is, the industry's representation of men and women appears to have changed little over the past 25 years. "Sabrina Carpenter isn't doing anything Britney Spears wasn't 25 years ago to sell records, dancing on stage in her underwear – it's so provocative," said the senior communications executive. "Record execs aren't stupid. They know that's what young men want. But then why are young women dressing like that? It's because they want to attract men, not girls."

If the music industry has been slow to self-regulate, the question arises: should law-making bodies intervene? "We're cautious about government interference and regulation," said Kiehl. "But working in partnership is really positive and there are some youth projects backed by the government. We'd be very keen to work with the government more on this."

If there is agreement, it's that music's power to shift society is as real as its ability to reflect it. "Music can make a real difference," said Kiehl. "It can reach areas politicians can't. It's a universal language. So there's definitely a role for the music industry in making sure men and young boys grow up to be socially responsible, to have an awareness of their place in society and also to be valued. Music can be a great enabler."

What of advertising? As with film, TV and music, analysis here must be limited in its scope and allow for some broad strokes. Properly meaningful reflections that assess how, when and to whom a washing powder or a luxury car are marketed would require much deeper analysis than we have time for.

Although again, there appear to be some recurring tropes that quickly come to the surface. And interestingly, in advertising, the negative bias appears not to be as strong. In the CSJ's Men In Culture survey, respondents were invited to offer "which characteristics or stereotypes best describe the way men tend to be portrayed in advertising." This open-ended question yielded a wide range of responses, which were then put through a sentiment analysis. Accordingly, 48 per cent were deemed neutral; 32 per cent positive; and 20 per cent negative.

Looking at the contemporary advertising landscape, we can begin to estimate what contributes to the spread. As a rule, products and services are advertised in a positive light, and people are generally shown to be enjoying whatever is advertised because it will be making their lives better. This is the nature of advertising, after all.

Peel that layer away and two male tropes come into focus. On the one hand, the male incompetent, most likely to be on display in advertising for FMCG products (fast moving consumer goods). A man will sit on the sofa on a games console while his female partner cleans up

THEN AT THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM, THERE'S THE UBER-MALE, TYPICALLY PORTRAYED BY HIGH-END AND LUXURY BRANDS.

STEREOTYPES ARE OFTEN DOWNTRODDEN MEN

"Stereotypes are often downtrodden men who are helped out by whatever product is being advertised"

after him with a miracle, man-bypassing product. Or a dad will leave something important behind before going on a family holiday, meaning he's obliged to fall back on a high-functioning, smiling female service agent to resolve the calamity he's created. The image of the domestically hapless male will be familiar.

This man in control, successful, generous and even fatherly. He's in complete command of his car, he looks fantastic in his new watch and all that time in gym means he can really enjoy his beach holiday. His work, his family and his life are in perfect order.

Of course, both approaches are broadly effective, at least in the sense that they drive sales. But tired Mr Muscle-style portrayals of limp masculinity appear to be effective in another sense: they drive the perception that men are "a bit pathetic."

Here are some of the verbatim female responses to the CSJ survey, describing how they felt men are portrayed in advertising: "Dumb, feminine clowns"; "Either the guy who is a bit of an asshole or a complete joker"; "Stupid idiots"; "Incapable of multi-tasking"; "Hapless or stupid, or depicted as the hero, depending on the product being advertised"; "They either tend to be very good looking, masculine and muscular or a bit dim."

And some of the male respondents to the same question: "Stereotypes are often downtrodden men who are helped out by whatever product is being advertised"; "Many are depicted as wishy-washy, unable to cope with normal life"; "Super-fit, muscular men"; "Greater social agendas to disempower males"; "Often they are portrayed as weak and submissive to women, but the best are shown as caring for their family"; "Confident, strong, dominant and often focused on success, wealth and physical appearance. Sometimes shown as humorous but inept in domestic or family roles."

David Gandy offers a telling take on how audiences might want to see men represented in advertising. Tall and muscular, he struggled at the beginning of his career, but instead of trimming down to conform to a look that was popular in the early 2000s, he bulked up.

"The androgynous Dior boy look didn't appeal to me, and I couldn't imagine it would appeal to other men, either," he said. "I grew up with the Levi's guy and that was the guy I wanted to be. Dolce & Gabbana were looking for this masculine, slightly bigger more muscular build,

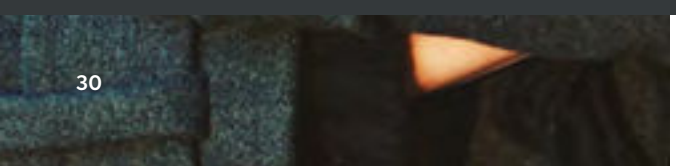
and there was a sparse pool of models because everyone was going the other way. At the time, it was ultra-feminine. I didn't work for the first four years. Tom Ford used to call me 'the big guy'. I'd go to shoots and they'd give me pair of trousers with a 30-inch waist and they wouldn't go over my thighs. But I stuck to my guns and got bigger. It made me feel better as a man."

Some suggest the way men are shown in advertising hasn't changed much over the past 25 years and that it's here where we're more likely to find positive male stereotypes because of their continuing appeal to consumers. Furthermore, when a man is shown in a positive light in advertising, he's a better man today than he was.

"The idea of a male as the hero, the central character – I don't think that's gone," said James Massey, founder of the London luxury PR and communications agency Massey Style. "But the sort of men being used are different. Jude Bellingham is now an ambassador for Louis Vuitton. He's very successful, very handsome, loves his mother, doesn't f*** around and he has good manners. That feels a more relevant, modern interpretation of what men should be and probably want to be, whereas 25 years ago we weren't presented with such rounded characters. Today, the casting of characters its far deeper and more rounded."

Massey said he believed men now aspire to higher standards and that brands are successful when they tap into these aspirations. "The figures luxury brands are employing represent the best of men," he noted. "Lad culture and all that rubbish – it's gone. Those traditional values, if portrayed in a non-aggressive, non-dominating way are hugely aspirational: manners, family values, going out to work but being highly aware of the often

"LAD CULTURE AND ALL THAT RUBBISH– IT'S GONE. THOSE TRADITIONAL VALUES, IF PORTRAYED IN A NON-AGGRESSIVE, NON-DOMINATING WAY ARE HUGELY ASPIRATIONAL: MANNERS, FAMILY VALUES, GOING OUT TO WORK."



negative impact that raising a family can have on the wife, the mother, trying to compensate for that in some way, being dependable, not being domineering. We're rightly criticised for catcalling, molestation, rape. Traditional and positive values are something that men are far prouder of and aspire to achieve far more than they did before."

Rachel Walsh of TAG Heuer said brands such as hers were turning to athletes more and more in advertising campaigns. "Brands are specifically looking to sport and athletes because they become positive role models," she said. "They're inspirational, they often have positive personal brand values, they are powerful storytellers and can be seen as cultural icons, making them engaging and offering a deep level of connection"

And she insisted that in her work, there was no diversity agenda dictating decision-making. "There are no quotas," she said. "We want to create a feeling, evoke emotion and align on values and mindset, whether that's in a male or a female. We don't ask if a colour is masculine. We have brand codes that we follow and they have nothing to do with masculinity or femininity. The strength of the luxury industry is that it helps people dream with beautifully told simple truths, whether it's product or people-led."

POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

Brands are specifically looking to sport and athletes because they become positive role models

THE MASCULINITY RESET:

IT'S TIME TO BUILD BETTER MEN AND A BETTER SOCIETY

Combined, the CSJ's Lost Boys report and Men In Culture survey, aligned to some of the findings of this short paper, begin to illustrate the role our culture and our media have played in shaping how men and boys are viewed today, and how they view themselves.

It's not all bad. But a lot of it is.

We should be deeply concerned at the lack of good male role models in contemporary culture. Their absence has created a void filled by bad actors. Given how they influence society, filmmakers, TV producers, music creators and advertisers have a duty of care to act responsibly in how they portray men and boys, and how they shape our view of masculinity. That responsibility falls even more heavily on social media owners, and on YouTube, now the first-choice platform for Generation Alpha (four to 15-year-olds) and the second most-watched media service behind the BBC in the UK, according to Ofcom.[35]

Audiences and consumers want better role models in media. In the CSJ Men In Culture survey, respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the statements that good role models for men lead to better outcomes for men, women and children. Respectively, 97 per cent, 93 per cent and 97 per cent agreed. Why would creators not look to reflect this?

For now, culture's pose has contributed to a crisis of confidence in men. According to the RED C monitor mentioned several times in this paper, only 51 per cent of men think being a man is something to be proud of. As one 53-year-old male respondent put it to RED C: "There is a feeling that men are responsible for the patriarchy and [you feel] a sense of guilt, although things were this way before I was born and in spite of personal effort for equality and equanimity." How long should men bear responsibility for the past?

Neither a culture of victimhood nor of blame will help, though. As masculinity advocate James Ray put it, some of the disempowerment of men is on men. "We've removed the male role model, and men have abdicated and run away," he said. "It's not all been done to men. 'Poor me, women have stolen have taken my thunder.' My view is take responsibility. We've allowed that to happen. Nobody's addressed it."

AUDIENCES AND CONSUMERS WANT BETTER ROLE MODELS IN MEDIA.

There's a delicate balance to strike. We mustn't lose sight of how the pendulum of contemporary culture and popular opinion lurches more than it swings. While we might advocate for "better men", such ambitions should be filtered through the full political prism.

The argument that men are now subjugated and must rise up and reclaim what is rightfully theirs, illiterate though it might be, is rapidly gathering momentum, as one anonymous contributor to this report noted. "Masculinity is being weaponised by the Far Right," they said. "The white, middle-aged man in this country is frightened that their powers are diminishing. 'It's not like it was in the old days,' they say. They're scared. And they can blame this on the educated classes, or on immigration, or on women. But men have been sold the story of their own victimhood. They want to hark back to the traditional roles that they've seen in a thousand movies or in the pubs they went to when they were little with their dad, when the tap rooms were full of men, and the women were at home cooking."

The purpose of this paper is not to call for a return to old mores. In any case, that horse has bolted. The shifts of the 1990s are permanent. We have a new order now, in which women are socially and economically empowered. As a result we have unprecedented equality of opportunity. The challenge is to ensure that while we continue to empower women, men are not simultaneously disempowered. To build a culture on both strong men and strong women.

The findings of this paper indicate we're failing in this ambition, and that contemporary culture is stifling men's ambitions to be a positive force in their families, workplaces and communities. Men who aspire to be courageous, disciplined, reliable, strong and financially dependable –

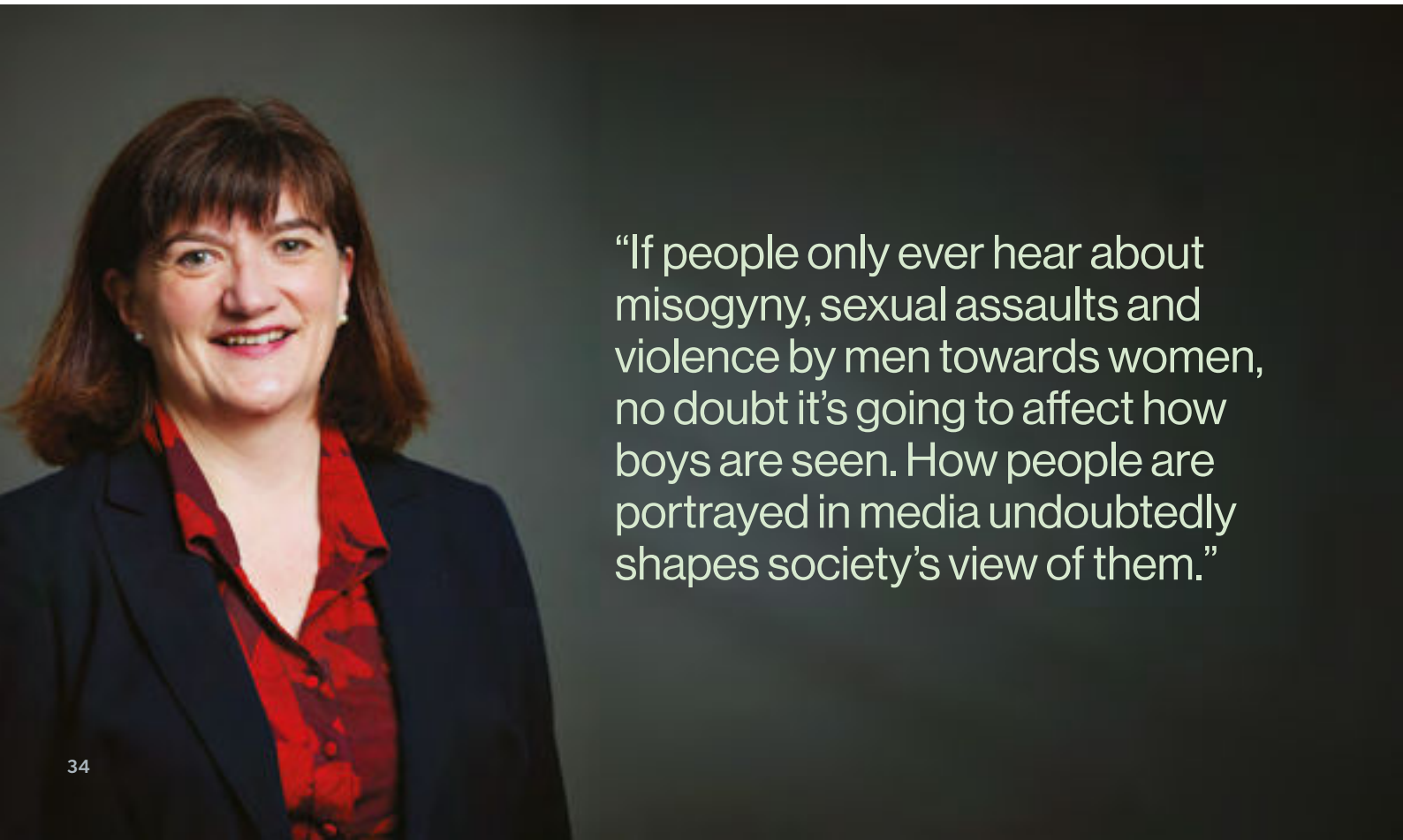
THE FINDINGS OF THIS PAPER POINT TO A PUBLIC HUNGRY TO SEE GOOD MALE ROLE MODELS REPRESENTED MORE IN CULTURE.

provider-protectors – do not see these qualities modelled in popular culture. Nor do women. Positive male role models in film, TV, advertising and particularly music are few and far between. Taken as a whole, men and women have a negative view of how masculinity is portrayed in culture and through our media.

As salient, the findings of this paper point to a public hungry to see good male role models represented more in culture. But at the moment, our cultural institutions appear reluctant to embrace the trope. Collectively, we're not talking about this. Not enough. We're not ready to acknowledge culture has a "men problem". Why not? This is the question this paper must leave to be answered by our media's leadership and by our government.

For its part, government has not yet grasped the nettle. Speaking to this report, Baroness Nicky Morgan, the former secretary of state for the Department of Media Culture and Sport now sitting in the House of Lords, said of issues facing men and boys: "There's definitely an awareness [in the Houses of Parliament], but it becomes very polarised. And so I suspect it doesn't receive the level of conversation and awareness that issues affecting women and girls do."

It might be reaching, but if we can one day look back and define the first 25 years of this century as a masculinity reset, it would be no bad thing. We are now far readier to call out bad behaviour and bad men. The examples of Savile, Weinstein and Epstein will forever be a stain on the male sex, but in exposing them, we have set in stone eternal monuments to the worst of men, and what men must not be. As a culture, a society, we are united in our condemnation of grotesques such as these. But how long must we dwell on



them? In doing so, we continue to cast a dark shadow over men and boys and masculinity and to shackle our aspirations for future generations of men. If our focus over the past quarter century has been to expose men at their worst, isn't it now time to showcase men at their best?

As Baroness Morgan said: "If people only ever hear about misogyny, sexual assaults and violence by men towards women, no doubt it's going to affect how boys are seen. How people are portrayed in media undoubtedly shapes society's view of them."

The question of regulation remains, particularly of online media. While in the UK questions of privacy and freedom of speech continue to stalk the Online Safety Act of 2023, it's clear content platforms with an international footprint have little interest in engaging with regulatory bodies looking to curtail the spread of harmful content, no matter its source, target or intention. Solutions won't come easily. But it should be top of the in tray.

"The most fundamental problem is the debate between free speech, what we define as harmful content, and one person's right to have their say," said Baroness Morgan. "The challenge has been getting online platforms to accept they are publishers with responsibility for content in a way that TV, radio, cinema, newspapers and magazines accepted decades ago. There are a number of platforms that are still very resistant to regulation of their content. But there is a balance to be struck, and it's difficult to find."

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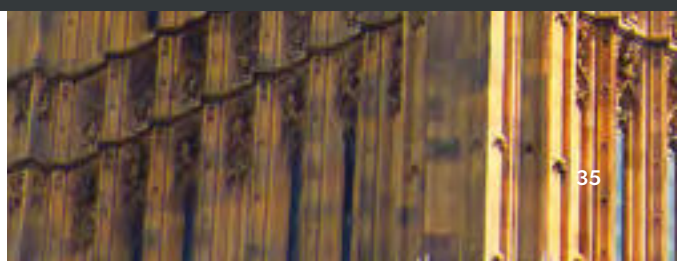

Much is expected of contemporary men. “My dad could burn a salad,” said David Gandy. “In my generation, every man I know still has the job, but now has a much larger role in raising their children, too: being at sports days, taking them to clubs. We also have to be doing the cleaning and sharing the cooking. For many men, it’s a lot of stress, and we forget men need help as well. That’s been lost along the way somewhere.”

Culture in the 21st century has demanded more of men and in many cases, with undeniable justification. It’s also dismantled much of the male psyche. Pretty frightening? A bit pathetic? No one wants that. Now, our culture must begin the process of rebuilding men. And in doing so, build a stronger, better society.

This is an invitation to begin that process.

PRETTY FRIGHTENING? A BIT PATHETIC? NO ONE WANTS THAT.

Now, our culture must begin the process of rebuilding men. And in doing so, build a stronger, better society.

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