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MANIFEST
MASCULINITIES BEYOND THE MASK

A READING OF THE REPRESENTATION DISCOURSES OF MEN

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Redefining Masculinity through Kathakali: An Artist's Exploration

Imagine a warrior, face aglow with vibrant hues, eyes burning with intensity, and every muscle coiled with power. This is the traditional Kathakali dancer, a symbol of masculine strength and valour, suspended in a moment of dramatic action. But now, envision that same dancer, still resplendent in elaborate attire, yet conveying vulnerability, perhaps even fear. This contrast encapsulates the evolving nature of masculinity, mirrored in the shifting depictions of men by the media.

Kathakali, an ancient dance form from Kerala, offers a fascinating microcosm of this transformation. The 'Kathakali Chutti,' or mask-like makeup, transforms the dancer into a dynamic, expressive, and larger-than-life character, who captivates the audience with his performance. Much like the 'mask of masculinity' that men have worn for centuries, this makeup conceals and reveals, challenging conventional notions of masculinity.

Traditionally, Kathakali has been a male-dominated art form, its stories populated by heroic figures and powerful gods. Dancers embodied an idealised masculinity – strong, fearless, and virile. However, times are changing. Today, women take the Kathakali stage, challenging traditional gender roles. Characters have evolved, exploring a wider range of emotions and experiences.

Through my illustrations for this report, I aim to capture the performative nature of gender, using Katha (story) and Kali (play) to question what it means to be a man in a world where definitions are constantly being rewritten.

By **Radhika Bawa**
Artist and Illustrator

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Foreword

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has been championing the idea of progressive representations within advertising. Our efforts over the last five years have seen us explore this challenge from various lenses and perspectives. Beginning with Gendernext in 2021 that set the tone of imagining more vibrant and progressive narratives for women, we then released a whitepaper with Kantar in 2022 on the business case for progressive representations of women. Thereafter, we investigated the issue of inclusion beyond gender in 2023, and explored multiple axes of representation, such as age, body type, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and more. This study has been conducted in partnership with Kantar and the Unstereotype Alliance.

Our work in DEI is driven by two key objectives:

1. Understand the business case for progressive representations
2. Equip advertisers with insights, tools and best practices to support them on their journeys of inclusive advertising.

As part of this exploration, we now turn our attention to a most interesting aspect and stakeholder—The Man.

'Manifest: Masculinities Beyond the Mask', a collaborative effort between Unstereotype Alliance, Religious Brands and ASCI, explores the fascinating world of masculinities, and what lies beyond and beneath the external manifestations and representations we see in the media. More than 29 literary and scholarly articles, 170 media pieces (such as ad campaigns, podcasts, cinema, and social media handles), 70+ articles and sociological data reports, along with six expert interviews— these form the basis for the observations in this report.

For generations, the narrative of masculinity has been a singular, and often inflexible, one. It has been a narrative etched in stone, passed down through time, and one that has bestowed both privilege and burden upon those who wear its mantle. The traditional patriarchal compact, with its rigid expectations and promises of power and privilege, is fracturing. This shift has created a crisis within masculinity, leaving many men feeling insecure, confused, and alienated. The rise of gender equality, coupled with rapid societal changes and economic uncertainties, has challenged the very foundations of male identity. The once-unquestioned ideal of 'manhood' is now under intense scrutiny, and the patriarchal structures that have long defined our world are being dismantled.

This report explores the complexities of this transformation, examining the global conversation around masculinity, the unique Indian context, media representations, and the evolving aspirations of men. It reveals the limitations of the binary approach to masculinity, and highlights the need for a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the diverse realities of the male experience. We must attempt to understand the legitimate insecurities that men feel in a rapidly changing world, where their roles and identities are being redefined. And we must identify and promote alternative pathways for men to express their masculinity in healthy, constructive ways.

It is our hope that the insights and findings revealed in this report will serve as a catalyst for deeper understanding and positive change, helping advertising and media to respond with greater awareness, empathy, and purpose to men navigating the changing world.

Advertising has the power to contribute to societal change. By recognizing the crises that men are facing today, and the insights revealed by this report, advertising can help to create and build narratives that augur well for men, and for society.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is proud to present this important work. We believe that by fostering open and honest conversations about masculinity, we can help to create advertising that is progressive, relatable and effective.

Ultimately, the goal is to partner with men in their journey from the limited 'Mard' to the fullness of the 'Admi', to encourage a diverse idea of masculinities over a monolithic understanding, and to acknowledge a spectrum of values that are contextually relevant, without negating the core values that provide men purpose and structure.

Manisha Kapoor
CEO and Secretary-General, ASCI

Contents

Introduction

The known history of the world is largely the history of men—their deeds, their valour, their exploits, their mistakes, their conquests and defeats. To be an upper caste, upper class 'man' (not woman, animal or child), was to be bestowed with the ultimate gift and privilege, conferred with power, prestige, status, riches and history.

Manhood was considered the default, while womanhood was something to be learned. Masculinity, as defined by men, was the unquestioned norm, beyond scrutiny or challenge.

Today, masculinity—and the patriarchal structures that organise society—are facing a crisis. There's a growing awareness that the traditional masculine model, designed to conquer the world, is failing to save it. We're seeing a major cultural shift, moving away from 'man' as the norm to recognising 'man' as a specific gender. Simultaneously, women are rising as equals and competitors.

Women are now recognised as a vast, untapped resource. The absence of female perspectives is being linked to various shortcomings, from poor economic growth and business profitability, to ineffective government policies, flawed medical research, and slower technological advancement. Recent crises have even suggested that women are often better leaders. The language around women has also evolved, shifting from 'gender equality' to 'gender equity', and recognising 'female capital' and women as 'value creators'. Traditional masculinity is ill-equipped to navigate this new landscape.

Western liberalism over the past 30 years has fueled this cultural shift, sometimes resulting in chaos, anger, victimhood, and violence within the traditional male sphere, leading to a reactionary backlash. We are currently witnessing a decline in liberal values and a resurgence of conservative values in response.

A century of feminist movements has provided women with the tools, resources, language, and political framework to advocate for a more progressive agenda. Comparable progressive men's movements are virtually nonexistent. Traditional masculinity is increasingly being challenged, and popular media often presents a narrow, heroic portrayal of men. This creates a growing disconnect between how men perceive themselves, and how they are represented.

The current challenge is to move beyond these limited representations of masculinity, and embrace a broader range that reflects the diverse realities of male experience.

The need for a progressive agenda for women is clear and straightforward: emancipation, personal, emotional, and sexual liberation, equality, challenging oppressive roles and power structures, control over their bodies and reproduction, and the freedom to express their voices and make their own choices.

The liberal progressive agenda, while advancing women's rights, also requires a shift away from traditional masculinity, making the conversation more complex. Progress in redefining masculinity requires understanding men's desires, purposes, identities, anxieties, and their core traditional roles as protectors and providers. Language that ignores these core needs will only fuel the reactionary tendencies already observed.

Therefore, this study aims to develop an empathetic understanding of the current state of masculinity, recognising men as both villains and victims, heroes and those in need of support, and apex providers and individuals who also require care.

Methodology: The Cascade

From Theory to Application
Understanding Indian Masculinity
Sites of Research

How men are supposed to be

Existing Literature on Masculinity

Contemporary Conversations

Consumer-speak

Representations in Popular Culture
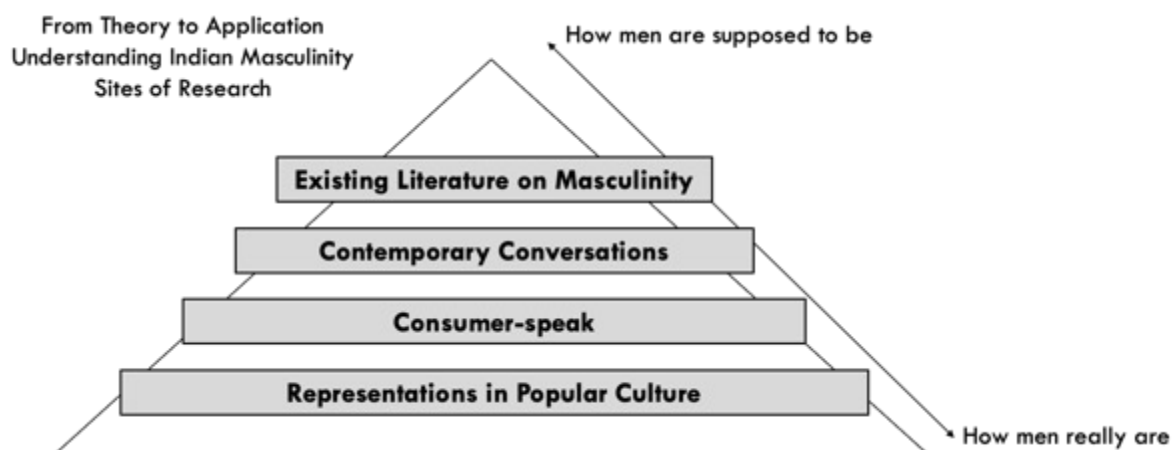
How men really are

Our study has tried to understand both what men are "supposed to be" and how men really are. We have done this through an interrogation of literature, popular conversations, consumer-speak, as well as the depiction of men in media, including cinema and advertising.

More than 29 literary and scholarly articles, 170 media pieces, such as ad campaigns, podcasts, cinema, social media handles, 70+ articles and sociological data reports, along with six expert interviews forms the basis for the observations in this report.

Existing Literature on Masculinity

Review of current academic understanding of masculinity to build a theoretical framework to interrogate masculinity.

Contemporary Conversations

Contemporary cultural conversations include what male icons and influencers are saying, and the opinions of experts, psychologists and stakeholders on how masculinity is shifting.

Consumer-speak

Digital exploration of the voices of everyday men, articulating what their experience of masculinity is. A three-month long deep dive, where we collected a rich trove of testimonies and posts by men articulating their lived experience.

Representations in popular culture.

Mapping contemporary narratives and representation in popular culture; a reading of single-screen and multiplex cinema over the last five years, along with other digital and OTT content. Beyond reading the actual piece of content, we supplemented it through reviews and ratings, and audience and fan conversations and commentaries.

Finally, an analysis of our learnings through each research phase was cascaded to the next phase.

STATE OF MAN

Section 1: State of Man

The global conversation around masculinity

Poly-crisis – The Changing Context

We're experiencing a full-blown poly-crisis, an 'age of acceleration', marked by rapid technological advancements and unprecedented climate shifts. Our world is simultaneously more interconnected and more divided than ever.

> *As Thomas Friedman pointed out in at a 2018 talk at MIT, "Changes involving markets, the earth's climate, and technology, are reshaping social and economic life in powerful ways, and putting a premium on learning faster, and governing and operating smarter. Technology is now accelerating at a pace the average human cannot keep up with"*

These accelerating forces are disrupting core institutions such as work, family, marriage, and government. Technology is leveling the playing field between genders, while economic uncertainty is impacting men's sense of identity and purpose.

This complex situation is further complicated by the emergence of empowered, financially independent women, with heightened gender awareness.

Overall, the landscape is shifting, making it increasingly difficult for men to navigate. Traditional values seem less certain in this fluid and rapidly evolving world, leaving them without clear guidance for the present, or a roadmap for the future.

The natural instinct for many men has been to close ranks, cling to power, control what they have, and often aggressively.

This behaviour is now being recognised as toxic. What once came naturally to men is no longer acceptable. Male hubris is increasingly seen as the root cause of many global problems. Consequently, masculinity today has a serious image problem.

The Concept of Masculinity is facing a branding problem

> *As Mark Zukerberg called it in a recent interview "It's one thing to say we want to be kind of, like, welcoming and make a good environment for everyone—and I think it's another to basically say that 'masculinity is bad,'"*

Just as feminism has become synonymous with empowered, progressive women, discussions about masculinity often focus on negative examples of 'toxic' behaviours. Terms such as 'mansplaining' and 'manspreading' give the prefix 'man' negative connotations. The word 'man' has lost its positive associations, and we view anything related to it with suspicion. This process overlooks the positive aspects of masculinity, discarding the good along with the bad.

This has led to a major push for male accountability and change. Effectively, it is an attempt to challenge and dismantle patriarchal power structures to create space for others, and rebalance the social order.

In dismantling patriarchy, are we taking away the core stability it gave men?

Previously, the focus was on dismantling masculine and patriarchal structures to eliminate their toxicity and achieve gender equality. However, there's a growing understanding that dismantling these structures, without considering their role in shaping men, is counterproductive. As these structures weaken, confusion and uncertainty increase, worsening the very problems we were trying to solve.

And is it paradoxically leading to polarisation and divergence, instead of the gender convergence we had hoped for?

Polarization of genders: The cultural output we studied suggests that there is a growing group of young women who are disinterested in being 'rehabs for toxic men'. Hand in hand, there are groups of young men who believe that feminism has done more harm than good in the world.

> *According to the 2024 Ipsos International Women's Day study on global attitudes towards women leadership, 76% of people surveyed in India agreed that "men are being expected to do too much to support equality", and 67% agreed that "we have gone so far in promoting women's equality, that we are discriminating against men." These views being highest among the GenZ cohort.*

Growing gender divergence: Globally, data suggests that the gap between genders is widening, with common ground becoming less evident.

Young men appear to be showing a renewed interest in traditional values, which some perceive as a step backward. At the same time, there is a large group of progressive women who are reassessing their roles in relationships, and no longer feel obligated to keep doing

the emotional and physical labour as before. They are claiming more autonomy in life choices, and are becoming more discerning about their life partners. Women are setting high standards for who they want as mates. And men are failing to meet the criteria they are setting.

Men appear to be caught between two conflicting messages about masculinity—the liberal perspective and the manosphere

The liberal voices
The liberal perspective often focusses on what men shouldn't be, like being sexist or aggressive–but doesn't often offer a clear picture of what positive masculinity looks like. It usually tells men what's wrong with traditional masculinity and urges them to change.

The Manosphere
The second message comes from the 'manosphere'. While this space usually promotes extreme hypermasculinity and anti-women views, it also serves another purpose. It's a place where men find support and validation, especially when they feel society is making them feel less masculine. Through its extreme hyper-form, it offers a sense of purpose and restores a sense of traditional masculinity.

> *As Jordan Petersen calls it, "It's okay to be a man. It's not okay; it's necessary. You look around cities and see all these buildings go up. These men, they're doing impossible things. They're working on the sewers; they're up on the power lines in the storms and the rain…They work themselves to death (often literally). There's a massive infrastructure of unbelievably hard-working, solidly labouring working-class men breaking themselves in half regularly, making sure that everything that always breaks works."*

Both messages have their pros and cons. The liberal message helps address toxic behavior, but can leave men feeling lost and without purpose. The manosphere amplifies a sense of purpose, but relies on harmful ideas of hypermasculinity.

Men are trying to find their own identity by navigating between these two opposing viewpoints.

It can be argued that if the liberal discourse focusses only on holding men accountable, it may be unintentionally pushing them towards the manosphere, where they find the rules and positive affirmations they crave.

What appears missing from these two conversations are the blueprints of masculinities that allow men to navigate a modern world order in a way that feels aspirational and progressive to them.

When we listen to men on the ground, it's clear that the idea of men not being obligated to be providers and breadwinners fails to resonate deeply. Many men seem to be wired to aspire for traditional ideas of success with a strong drive to win and achieve, shaped over generations. Simply suggesting that they embrace roles like being house-husbands or hands-on fathers can sometimes feel like it takes away a sense of purpose and power, without necessarily offering a clear alternative or a meaningful roadmap to navigate those feelings.

Are we encouraging men to reform while not providing a clear agenda or purpose? If men are naturally designed to be winners, wired for success, and if their sense of identity is tied to achieving great goals and building big things, can we tell them not to win?

THE UNIQUELY INDIAN EXPERIENCE OF BEING A MAN

Section 2: The Uniquely Indian Experience of Being a Man

Moving on a from a general discussion about the present global discourse, this section takes a look at the specific factors influencing and shaping Indian masculinity

More so than any other culture, the birth of a male child is coveted and celebrated in India.

In a country where identity was historically determined by birth, the primary method of transferring skills, legacy, fame, power and wealth generationally was through the male child. The entire hierarchal social structure (patriarchy, in this case) was constructed to protect and preserve this system of transmission.

This was enshrined in the patriarchal compact where men were asked to sacrifice their selves to fit into the moulds that patriarchy demanded of them, in return for enormous power and privilege. This compact had a few key characteristics:

a) Men are expected to be protectors and providers, and the breadwinner norm is high.

One of the conversations that comes up often in podcasts, blogs and posts is the collective anxiety that people feel when they see a man without work, which triggers a constant push to get him back to being a provider.

Our readings suggest that along with other cultural norms like women moving to live with their husband's family and taking her husband's name in marriage, Indians also strongly believe that a man should earn more than his wife. Having a wife as an equal or greater contributor to the family income may make the situation more complex instead of easing pressure, becoming worse if the wife earns more.

b) Men are expected to be rich, successful upwardly mobile, with no space for failure.

Men are socialised to seek 'glory', a need approval and validation from society for being the man of the house, the family and the nation. Our research indicates this as a key factor influencing how men perceive themselves and their place in the world. They are brought up addicted to approval, and feel empty without it. As Abhishek Banerjee puts it "I think it's somehow seeps in your mind that if nobody is clapping for you, then your parents are not going to love you or your friends are not going to see you in a good light, or you will not get a nice girlfriend or wife, and stuff like that."

> *Shubman Gill in an interview spoke about how he had to detach a part of his personality that was only happy with success in cricket. "Ki khush tabhi hounga, jab run ban rahen hain mere (that I will only be happy when I score runs)…Indian culture is so success-driven. From inception, childhood, this happens, right? Simple things like, say a kid likes chocolate, he will get it only when he gets high marks. That you can only be happy if you are successful. Otherwise, you don't have the right to be happy."*

c) No room for personal choice, only socially approved pathways.

> *As Harjant S Gill states in his paper 'India Masculinity, Identity', "India is a society defined by male supremacy and patriarchy in which men relish the privileges that accompany being a man while simultaneously resenting the limitations that patriarchal family structures place upon their individual aspirations and personal lives"*

This performance of masculinity is called 'mardangi'—a hegemonic, hierarchal idea, based on 'aukat' and 'hesiyat'.

It seems that status and superiority play a fundamental role in the production of the Indian man. When we ask them to share power, space and resources with others, this status need may remain unfulfilled.

As a result of this compact, we see a few challenges that men face, but aren't often spoken about.

a. They are critical of themselves, and hold themselves to the quintessential standards of masculinity that are almost impossible to achieve.

The compact promised privileges only when men went through the pains of being a man and lived up to a transcendental ideal. Any deviation from norm is seen as signs of weakness and emasculation.

So, men tend to curb their instincts, their feelings and emotions—and give up their choices to follow the rules in order to fit into the roles and norms of being a man.

Much before society calls men out for not being macho or successful, young Indian men are likely to feel that they were programmed to evaluate themselves negatively when they don't fit the quintessential definition of masculinity. It can be said that the first act of violence against men is the one they do to themselves.

> *As Vicky Kaushal succinctly puts it "I was damaging myself so much I didn't need bullies outside… sometimes you don't need an external person to tell you, or to be fearful of something…it's just your inner monologue"*

b. The challenges with masculinity are perceived not to be a personal, but a structural, problem of family and society

We found that men in India see the toxicity in masculinity as a structural and systemic issue, and not personal one. As a result, Indian men often attribute it to faulty parenting, skewed legal system, and generational influences. What should be interrogated personally is displaced to the structure.

The most intense pressure that all Indian men feel, cutting across all classes and cohorts, is exerted primarily by the family and then, by society.

> *As Ram Bhatt from MARAA explains, while Indian men experience masculinity differently in rural and urban India, "…one undercutting thread was the pressures of the family structure that definitely came out very, very strongly. Many men spoke about the burden of upholding masculinity within traditional family roles, and the lack of space to express emotions with partners, children, or others. The pressures of livelihood also came up frequently, as well as navigating public and workspaces in ways that conform to societal expectations of masculinity."*

c. To be successful, men believe that they need to own some of the traditional masculinity values that may be toxic

Many Indian men are working hard to climb the social ladder. They're not from rich families or elite backgrounds, but they're moving up in the world, jumping class and geography. They're experiencing new and challenging cultures, and trying to find their place within existing power structures. They feel that to succeed they need the qualities masculinity gives them.

> *Indian men seem to need the hunger masculinity conditions them with. They need to be apex breadwinners, to be assertive and aggressive, competitive, have a winning mindset, and to dare and take risks, in order to keep up with the cultural expectations placed on them.*

Aadit Palischa India's youngest billionaire credits the toxic hyper competitive conditioning he grew up with in school for where he is today. He spoke about his need for the "semi toxic aggressive line of sight" to be happy, to keep trying to do what he is doing now.

The real discourse in India is how to expand the role of masculinity beyond the traditional definitions of 'mardangi'.

The compact of Mardangi seems to be failing men

Patriarchy is no longer delivering the way it used to for men. They can no longer access the opportunities and privileges they were promised in return for following socially approved pathways. They are expected to share power with others, both women and other men. Their natural skills and strengths are not designed for jobs in the growing creative and technological economy. The new world is demanding a re-socialisation from men.

A strong feeling is that the system is rigged against them

> *Ram Bhatt from MARAA further observes, among the men he had worked with, there is "a pervasive suspicion of institutions such as family, courts, and government." They "feel burdened by roles such as being the taxpayer and the provider". This feeling, he noticed, went beyond the pressures of provider-ship, and was actually "much like a deeper and wider wound,."*

This is possibly leading to the alienation of Indian men

Young men in social media are expressing concern about the soul-crushing pressure they feel to hit milestones earlier, and how the time to figure things out feels like a luxury. There is a growing feeling shared by men that the compact has failed to live up to its promise. They feel that it's high time men started realising that masculinity is a trap.

Growing loneliness epidemic – Toxic self-sufficiency

Male loneliness is a growing topic in Indian social media and digital space. In the Men's Locker Room podcast, Arpit Bala shares his perspective on how societal conditioning, rather than shame, often makes it challenging for men to seek help, or consider therapy. He explains that the hesitation to ask for support often stems from a deep-seated belief in self-sufficiency—the idea that one should be able to handle things alone, push through difficulties, and never give up. However, when these pressures build up, they can start affecting other aspects of life.

Rise in misogyny, rage and violence

The normalisation of images in public life feature young Indian men in various attitudes of violence, along with reports that show road rage and inter-caste violence are on the rise. According to the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), there was an 84% escalation in communal riots in 2024. The OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) Report reveals that in India, about 220 million women faced domestic violence in 2023, which is statistically slightly higher than the global average. In a study, published in the PLOS One journal, researchers from the UNICEF and University of California - San Diego, US, found a significant rise in absolute

volumes, as well as proportion, of misogynistic tweets in India after the onset of Covid-19, relative to trends prior to the pandemic. All this combine to paint a picture of India as a nation of what could be called 'angry men'.

To move the ideas of masculinities forward, resolutions need to acknowledge some of these new anxieties. Any progressive agenda that does not recognise these anxieties, is unlikely to be accepted, and not be seen as aspirational or progressive by men.

WHAT DO MEN WANT?

Section 3

Section 3: What Do Men Want?

There is a certain idea of positive masculinity that is desirable for the world and women. However, as our research shows, men are not willing actors in this idea. Men have their own ideas of how masculinity should evolve, and to understand this, we need to interrogate them on what they want. What is their definition of progressive representation? Podcasts, social media posts, and public comments give us a glimpse of the various spoken and latent aspirations that men have for their own lives.

Men want the branding problem addressed.

Men speak of being tired of being painted with the same brush, of the assumption that they are all inherently toxic or bad. They want to challenge this stereotype, without getting defensive, or feeling like they constantly have to prove themselves. They seek a more nuanced conversation about masculinity, one that acknowledges both the harmful aspects, and the potential for positive change.

> As this Reddit post explains, "There's a clear distinction between expressing fear and blaming all men. When women share their concerns about safety, they're not accusing every man; rather, they're acknowledging that they can't always tell who is safe and who isn't. The conversation was never about all men—it's about the experiences that make it difficult for women to feel secure around strangers, regardless of their intentions."

Men recognise that they are trapped by patriarchy, and want to create space for the self.

Men are starting to realise that traditional ideas about masculinity can be a trap, preventing them from being their true selves, and having deeper relationships. They feel limited by these expectations and want to break free.

They're becoming aware of how isolating it can be to always act tough and hide their emotions. As Nakul Mehta said in the 'Be a Man Yaar' podcast, it's not enough to just have lots of friends; men want to have close, meaningful relationships where they can truly open up and share their feelings.

> "I don't want to spend the rest of my life just with lots of friends...I should be able to have a meaningful open relationship with them, and I want to do that...I feel like I am failing in life because I can't share..."

Before becoming the man the family, nation, society, patriarchy or women want, they want to be their own man.

Many men feel trapped—stuck in a life that feels like it's not their own. They feel tired of working tirelessly for society, family, or a partner, as if they're on a treadmill with no escape. They don't want to waste their lives in meaningless jobs.

This is different from earlier generations, who were more focused on gaining freedom. Men today appear to be committed to themselves and their own goals. They want to build a life on their own terms, and are afraid of anyone or anything that might get in the way.

Men desire the permission to access and express the full range of emotions and vulnerabilities.

What the conversation on the ground is showing us, is a growing awareness among men about the harm of being emotionally guarded, and the need to break down the walls they unconsciously build around themselves. For example, Nakul Mehta realised he was closed off emotionally, just like his father. He could share his successes with everyone, but not his struggles or failures.

> As he expresses it, "The closest person I am to right now is probably my wife...and I couldn't share my bad day with her"

Men want freedom to make life choices without judgement and cost.

> As Nikhil Kamath puts it, "My only plan once I dropped out was to make money. I come from a typical, middle-class family–my cousins are the MBA kind, so I faced questions like, 'What's he going to do with his life?'... So my only advice is to not sweat about this stuff–five years later, the things you're worrying about now, won't matter, so why not do what you have to today and have the 'stupid faith' that it'll work out...somehow?"

Men want to step beyond the natural gender roles that they are traditionally allowed.

Men are realising they don't have to be defined by their jobs or by old-fashioned ideas about what it means to be a man. They want to be seen as complete people with a full range of emotions, not just a gender stereotype.

As Jimmy Sarbh puts it, modern masculinity is about being a 'whole person'. It's not about fitting into a box or suppressing your emotions.

"Modern masculinity is about being a whole person or a self-actualised person. When someone asserts that guys are less emotional than women, I don't buy it."

Men want to channelise their masculine energy in more positive ways. They want new pathways of masculine production

Men are realizing that the old ways of being masculine aren't working anymore. They're looking for new ways to express their masculinity that don't involve just being in charge, or dominating others. They want to use their energy in positive ways, and they're finding new outlets to do so. Fashion, sports, fitness, adventure, and communities such as biker gangs or cycling clubs, are becoming new ways for men to explore and express their masculinity.

As this Reddit comment explains "It's one's mind that makes one violent. For me, both gym and cycling give me peace". It's about learning to channelise the energy contextually, Neeraj Chopra explains, "Yes, I do get angry. I can't say I get angry on the field. I get aggressive on the field. I think it is necessary sometimes."

Men want to be able to take risks and not fear failure. They want to be allowed to fail without penalty

Men want to be able to take chances and not be afraid to mess up. They want the freedom to try new things, even if they might fail. They don't want to always play it safe, or follow a predictable path. They admire people who are brave and take risks. Bhuvan Bam feels that they want to be able to look back on their lives and laugh at their mistakes, and not regret that they never took any chances. "When you look back in 10 years, you laugh at how ridiculously you failed."

As Arpit Bala puts it "18-30 is the time when you can actually take risks…it's not like it is abroad… you are 22 you have to leave home…you are 18 you have to fend for yourself…here families will support you, even when you are 30….this is a great thing…you need to go out and do your thing…"

Men want to learn to be kinder to themselves

Men who are learning to open up and be vulnerable are starting to feel more compassion for themselves, and for other men who are still struggling with traditional ideas of masculinity. Nakul Mehta says the biggest learning he had after becoming a parent was that, "Vulnerability also means having a lot of compassion for people, who may not be able to express themselves. Just because some men are now able to show their emotions doesn't mean everyone can, and that's okay."

From the limited "Mard" to the fullness of "Admi"

One of the new ideas growing in culture is the realization that Mardangi is a flawed and limited state that needs to become whole again. At one level there is a noticeable desire to bring back the older codes of masculinity, honor, valor, discipline and commitment. At another level many men are starting to embrace the idea that they can incorporate both hard and soft values in different contexts. Rather than dismissing certain values as harmful or toxic and others as effeminate, they seem more open to accepting the full range of traits. There appears to be room for both aggression and romance, softness and strength, with the understanding that one person can embody all of these qualities in different contexts.

from a singular and fixed idea of masculinity to the notion of severality of masculinities. Shifting from heroicness and the idea of the Mard to embrace the wholeness of being Man

Historically men have carried the responsibility for heroicness, the man adored and celebrated for saving his family, community, nation and species. Today we observe that they want to move beyond that stereotype or macho ideal. They want to stop editing parts of themself to fit in. Above all, they may wish to embrace all of who they are and feel whole.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Section 4: Media Representations

The Binary Playbook of Advertising

There appears to be in media a man's idea of a man in categories speaking to men, and a woman's idea of a man in categories speaking to woman—and they represent opposing philosophies.

There are also some brands that seemed to have made the move forward, but these are emergent.

The man in the man's world is still usually the hero and the alpha

In traditionally male-dominated categories such as cars and bikes, menswear, alcohol and beverages, there are some new conversations around softness and vulnerability. There is some effort to acknowledge the new empowered woman, but the patriarchal narrative is largely intact.

Watching these narratives, it seems that some brands struggle to fully commit to progressive representation. What starts off as promising can sometimes end up reinforcing traditional gender discourse.

He needs alternate purpose beyond winning a prize

While some effort is being made to acknowledge his struggle and vulnerability, and he appears more empathetic than he was, his primary purpose is still based on winning the trophy, the girl—and the discourse of success is still central. What may have shifted is the way he pursues these goals.

Could we do more to challenge 'The Man Script'?

In certain categories like e-commerce, tech, and menswear, we observe a more evolved depiction of the man—softer, more caring, and less driven by ego; someone who has your back. However, this seems to be a reworking of the traditional gentleman role, rather than a substantial challenge to the predictable man script. Some of these narratives that on first glance seem progressive, may also create more pressure by asking men to live up to both the protector and the caregiver, instead of un-stereotyping masculinity.

The new man that women want

Mapping the last decade, we also found a new 'house-proud' man in categories speaking to women. He is soft, vulnerable, and wants to share the load. He speaks up to empower women. He is the father who wants his daughter to escape domestic drudgery. He is the groom who wants to be an equal partner in marriage. He is the caregiver who is willing to look after the hearth and children, while his wife toils at the border keeping the country safe.

Are we infantilising men?

Some progressive advertising that aims to show men in new roles tends to depict men as a bumbling incompetent man-child, who needs correction. The father who forgets to buy diapers in advance, or the husband who cannot be left to fend for himself and his children without constant instructions even for a couple of hours, let alone a week. Most projections of these nature do not normalise the possibility of men doing these tasks. Rather by infantilising men in these roles, they reinforce the stereotypical roles and suggest that men cannot do these tasks with any ease or comfort.

Are we self-consciously writing men to evoke audience sympathy?

In many commercials we observed men depicted to evoke our sympathy. As Swati Bhattacharya says "I am so tired of men who forget anniversaries, don't know how to switch on the washing machine, have to wear mismatched shoes, and is this large infant. I'm not interested in it. And I'm like, you know, what about pleasure? What about joy?... Now, these brands want us to fall in love with these infants. They don't want to make us laugh. We're supposed to cuddle them and say, this is the best that a man can get..."

Swati Bhattacharya explains that we are not giving women the permission to be incompetent too. We don't see mothers who don't take to motherhood naturally, and who may happily hand over the child to the father, so that she can have a girls night out. Maybe we need to represent men who remember anniversaries even when their wives forget, who are not intent in replacing their wives, but can embrace their softer side when the context calls for it.

Brands trying to break out of binaries

A few brands have made the attenmpt to move out of stereotypical binary depictions and narratives. For instance, in the Liscious #fasterchef campaign, the home cook is a man, while the guests include a hungry woman who wants her tandoori fast. The narrative broke gender norms and normalised these new depictions. Some other campaigns include:

- The Manyawar 'Adha Adha' campaign with Virat Kohli, where he speaks up for shared wedding expenses, was a great example of the marriage equality conversation.
- Tata Tea, Jaago Re campaign for tackling positive parenting, which says, 'Inequality gets learnt. Equality needs teaching'.
- Tata Tea Jaago Re campaign, calling out toxic success with 'A message for all parents'.,
- The recent Blinkit India's 'Last Minute App' Rakhi campaign, where the brother travels to his sisters office, ensuring that she participates in the ritual

without missing her presentation, was a fresh take on emotional labour done unselfconsciously.

- The Royal Challenge #NayasSher campaign, which showcases Smriti Mardhana's ability to evade the gender box, and triumph along with Virat Kohli and Vidyut Jamwal.

- The Man Company 'gentleman tumhi ho' campaign from three years ago, which turns the female gaze on men to appreciate their beauty at their most natural.

- Mother Dairy #Majaisi campaign last year, which proposes maternal care as a gender-neutral emotion, starting with a sequence highlighting care between two men.

- Axes 'Find your Magic', a global campaign that celebrates individuality and self-expression over traditional masculinity.

- Fastrack Smart's 'Follow Yourself' featuring Ranveer Singh, which asks its audience to resist the cultural timeline that men are expected to adhere to, the collective pressure to get a job then marry, buy a home and have kids to the societal clock

- Fastrack's 'Be Both' featuring Vijay Deverakonda, which asks its audience to resist the binary boxes that the world wants to put them into, and embrace both sides.

The World of Cinema

In cinema too, binaries tend to dominate the narrative.

Men are portrayed to represent what men and boys find attractive in other men. As this review nicely expresses it,

"There is a meme right where a guy goes to gym to bulk up, expecting women to turn up, but instead other guys do….Animal's Ranvijay is a male fantasy of men for men. Being rich, owning and flying a jet, doing everything to protect family, firing machine guns, etc."

In the recent past, with films like Animal, we see a growing focus on channeling angst against the system towards what men see as a women-centric social order. Javed Akhtar pointed out "Who are they angry with? Women?…Don't they have the courage to go against the establishment now? They think women are the soft target?"

But opinions on forums, such as Reddit pages focussing on Indian men, disagree "So what's wrong with it?…Do men always have to always do and like what caters to women?". For others it's "Great to see men creating non-gynocentric identities and goals for themselves….I wish it would be less based on power, and more on competence, bravery, leadership and honour though."

Running counterpoint to that is a new genre of cinema and web series, that are meant for OTT platforms and multiplexes, which can be best described as men being written by women for women.

A dialogue in Bhediya makes this eminently clear. "Bhediya hai tu bhediya, Animal mat ban (You are a wolf, do not be Animal)". This seems like a direct commentary about the perceived misogyny and violence in films such as Animal.

This is the man women tend to admire, the kind who is not necessarily the most courageous or confident on the outside, but is brave inside. For example, someone like Vicky from Stree 1 and 2, who is a small-town tailor. He may not have bulging muscles, but he does have a brave heart that has dealt with the scars of his dubious birth and his unmanly profession.

In some way Vicky, Gotya from Munjya, and even Deepak from Lapatta Ladies, are the cinematic version of the new man in advertising. But, in our effort to represent positive masculinity, the question being asked is whether we have reduced them to being more boys than men.

If the depictions of men written by men are excised of all positive qualities, the roles of men written by women are also deprived of qualities that they may need to feel whole. *Heroic or infantilised – these depictions fall short of acknowledging what men actually want.*
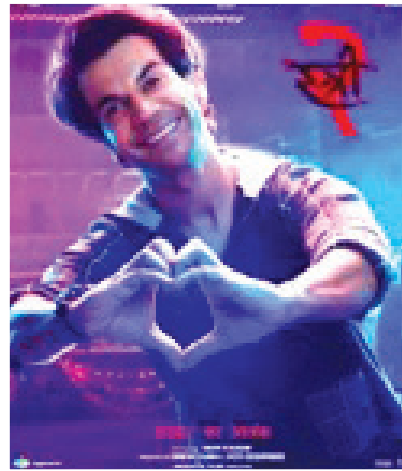
NEW REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA AND CULTURE

Section 5: New Representation in Media and Culture

From Binaries to a Representational Continuum

Not caught between good versus bad, right versus wrong, or hero versus villain, we are seeing a representational continuum emerge from the binary. Often expressed as the protagonist—such as Lucky Bhasker, Tribhuvan Sharma CA Topper, Taaza Khabar—these are all stories illustrating how a man's values can change depending on context. How a scrupulously honest, middle class bank teller can break from his long-held values to change his family's destiny, or how a mild-mannered CA, who cannot be bribed becomes a male sex worker to pay off his financial responsibilities—protagonists are now allowed layers and complexities, expanding the behavioural range that they operate within.

The representational continuum reflects the various shades of masculinity that are now being depicted. These are perhaps the beginning of the emergence of a range of archetypes or role models that respond to various contexts in which men find themselves, as they negotiate the world.

At one end of the continuum there is a primal idea of masculinity that is still prevalent in culture, responding to the broken patriarchal compact. On the other end is a very purposive idea of masculinity that is trying to expand the compact and find new purpose. In between is a negotiated masculinity that is figuring out how to deal with the core anxieties men feel around doubt versus conviction, vulnerability versus strength, and success versus failure. He is trying to work out a more equitable compact between himself, women and the world.

A. Hyper Masculinity

This is an idea of the man who is reaching down to his baser primal instincts because he feels powerless and deprived of resources. He laments the loss of the man universe. He feels anger and fear at the patriarchal compact breaking down. He's lost in a world that he thinks no longer values him. He feels like society is changing in ways that leave him behind, and he's lashing out.

He embraces an aggressive, 'alpha male' persona, using force to get what he wants. He rejects anything that seems weak or sensitive, clinging to an old-fashioned idea of what it means to be a man. He's trying to prove that nothing has really changed, that his way is the only way.

A1) The Anti-social man

When the structure of patriarchy begins to break down, the certainty that once defined it can give way to uncertainty. Without traditional anchors or clear roadmaps, and without the resources to embrace progress, some men may feel increasingly disconnected from modernity. This sense of alienation can contribute to feelings of anger and resentment, which may be expressed through hypermasculine behaviours, or even misogyny, as seen in films like *Animal*.

> *As Javed Akhtar said at the 9th Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival "They are changing, although not at the speed with which women are changing. But there is no choice; they will have to change."*

Example: Rannvijay's regression in a world of absent fathers and disconnected patriarchy is a cautionary tale of what happens when the patriarchal compact breaks down, and there are no alternatives to replace it. It is a cinematic representation of what is unfolding around us and perhaps that is why its resonating with men.

A2) The unyielding hacker

Hi is the Illegitimate outsider, fighting privilege, searching for legitimacy through power. He is anti-system, anti-nepo, and a disruptive force that opens the system up, both economically and socially. His actions seek to

create space for himself while questioning hierarchy, monopoly and cartelisation. The outsider represents the emasculation, alienation and powerlessness that Indian men are feeling in real life.

The gesture of Pushpa slicing his hand under his neck, brushing his beard, and the accompanying catchphrases 'Thaggedhe Le' or 'Jhukega Nahin' have become a clarion call for men wanting to show defiance against an exclusionary system.

A3) The epic man

In films like *Bahubali* and *RRR*, there seems to be a recurring theme of the orphaned child, separated from his parents and birthright by enemies. Alongside this, there's often an unabashed celebration of the warrior spirit, which reflects a primal form of masculinity. These films embody traditional values of valour and chivalry, and uncorrupted primitive innocence that we are seeking in our men in times of corruption. Innocence that doesn't make him weaker. Such qualities do not seem to be available in real life, and therefore men can only access these in epic form.

B. Negotiated Masculinity

In the middle are the men who are figuring it out. They are trying to rework a more equitable compact between themselves, women and the world. These are men who are starting to realise that traditional masculinity is too limiting for the present context. They are self-actualising between the transcendental ideal of masculinity, which is not giving them the solutions, roadmaps they need, and their own humanity and selfhood.

They represent the dilemmas, anxieties and emasculations that men face every day in real life within a competitive job market, growing disconnection, and loneliness. This is a man starting to recognise his own weaknesses, learning to open up and level up. He's beginning to embrace his vulnerability and emotional side. He's becoming aware of how limiting certain toxic ideas have been for him, and is working on overcoming them. He's finding ways to silence his inner bully, and show more kindness to himself and others. He's learning to view failure as a preparation for life, and reclaiming his agency to challenge the predictable paths others might have set for him. Not born perfect, he's giving himself the space to grow and shape his own masculinity.

B1) The successful failures from mofussil India

Indian men, as we saw in our study, are starting to acknowledge their internalised patriarchy and toxic success orientation that makes them hardest on themselves, when they fall short. Culture here is responding with a message to not judge yourself too harshly, to show yourself the same compassion you show others. Narratives such as 12th Fail and Kota Factory seem to resonate because they represent the harsh reality of heartland India, where lakhs of aspirants compete for a few meagre government jobs and seats in engineering colleges, and where failure is the rule and success an exception. Failure is being reframed as prep for life, an impetus to restart better, a great space for learning and levelling up—and not an occasion to accept defeat.

> As Jeetu Bhaiya says in Kota Factory, "IIT isliye karo kyunki tough hain, aur tough battle ladne me confidence aati hain."
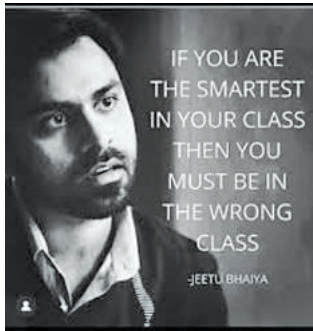
B2) The unmasked man of metro India

For a generation too filtered to connect with each other at a meaningful level, and unable to form emotionally fulfilling relationships, these narratives may resonate, because they mirror the loneliness we observed young men feeling in present times. These narratives highlight the false sense of safety that the mask of masculinity can represent. They suggest that the need to project and perform manhood may serve as a way for men to escape or disconnect from an essential part of themselves. Unmasking could be seen as a way to reconnect both with oneself and with others.

B3) The respectful knights of feminist horror cinema

As the manosphere encourages men to embrace more aggressive aspects of hypermasculinity, these narratives might not appeal to those in the audience, who don't see themselves as the oppressor or the dominator, the men who are trying to figure out their own idiom of bravery and strength. They don't feel strongly invested in being the protector and are comfortable being saved by women.

An Outlook India article on Alternative Masculinities in Feminist Horror Hindi Cinema states thus,

"Vicky is not a courageous and confident conqueror, but one who yells and stutters in fear, when it comes to confronting Stree. At the same time, he is unable to plunge the dagger heartlessly into Stree's heart to finish her. He doesn't conquer through vengeful elimination but through love and respect."

B4) The self-learning rookie from procedural drama

In a system that creates clones to perpetuate itself, these narratives suggest that there are some who are able to resist this pull, and make their own way to being a man. These are men rejecting the perfection of ideal masculinity to explore and embody a different kind of man, someone who grows into himself.

A review by India Today of the web series 'Black Warrant' puts it aptly. "Actor Zahan Kapoor plays the underdog cop, ASP Sunil Kumar Gupta, who neither looks like a jailer nor thinks like one in the conventional sense. He is a frail, soft-spoken man, vying for the validation of his mother, trying to exist and bring reform in the prison, without uttering a single cuss word. Unlike other jailers, he believes in going by the book, without initiating violence, or taking advantage of the conditions in which prisoners are surviving inside."

B5) The unscripted man from romcom web series

In a world where it feels like all certainties are fading, and the established pathways of education, job and marriage

are failing. we've observed that these narratives resonate with an audience who might also be exploring alternatives beyond the expected outcomes. Rishi in 'Mismatched' is looking for a happily-ever-after life with Dimple, but is instead forced out of his comfort zone to explore his own capacity, and to be more than who he thought he was. Anmol is confined to a wheelchair, has a chip on his shoulder, and has accepted his role as the villain in other people's stories. Over the course of the narrative, he realises that he doesn't have to be the bitter man that he is.

B6) The self-loving man from men's beauty advertising

In India, traditionally, men were not expected to focus too much on vanity or personal beauty, as it was seen as diminishing their machismo and virility. They were expected to prioritise the security of their families over personal well-being, sacrificing mental and physical health, and forgoing luxuries to save for the future. During our research, we discovered a different kind of man who is questioning this kind of self-negating, self-harming behaviour. He is not just metrosexual, hipster in appearance but embraces taking care of himself, his skin and hair, as an act of self-maintenance. He sees it as a way not just to look good but also feel good.

B7) The social liberal of multiplex romcoms

This is a man trying to unbox masculinity, and win over the woman. He reflects the changing reality of gender equations today. He has taken responsibility to change masculinity. His changed and different mindset reveals itself primarily in the context of the woman. The social liberal picks up taboo subjects (often because of the woman), opens up secrets, has fewer or no lags between the way one feels and the way one acts. He has the freedom to become whoever he is.

C. Purposive Masculinity

On the other end of the masculinity representation spectrum, are depictions of men who have worked through the broken compact. They are more secure and grounded, having gained clarity about who they are, and the values they hold. They are expanding the compact, finding new purpose, and manifesting a new self-assured Idea of India in the world, and within themselves.

These men are powered by a self that is re-energised because it has made peace with negativity, and reconnected relationally with the world. This shift allows them to step away from the constant fear of losing their masculinity, and instead embrace the idea of sharing space and power with women and other men.

C1) The patriot from global Bollywood blockbusters

This is a man so secure that he doesn't feel the need to dominate the narrative. In *Pathaan*, while Shah Rukh Khan plays the protagonist, it's Dimple Kapadia who arguably has the most heroic storyline. He doesn't appear bitter or defiant, even though he has every reason to be. He loves India despite its problems and shortcomings. He is focused on making the flawed

system work, and to rectify its social injustices. His deep compassion for humanity and his fellow Indians stands in stark contrast to the bitterness, cynicism and anger of those who have succumbed to their resentment.

C2) Diljit Dosanjh - The brave outlier

He resists the privilege that the hegemonic masculinity offers, and lets go of opportunity to state that he is more than that. He is not apologetic or suppressed in the face of hate and manufactured controversy. He is a man who won't edit himself to fit the desired narrative. Instead of reacting with anger, fear, or resentment, Diljit Dosanjh is able to signal his defiance through playful impish lightness. More than his words, he uses his actions to speak for him, whether its draping the tricolour during a concert, visiting major cultural and religious institutions to pay respect, or gifting a Pakistani fan a shoe. He knows that the deeply secure cultural connections he has with every part of India doesn't need the approval of any external entity.

> As Karanjeet Kaur concludes in an article about him in Print, "He has shown us how joy can be more subversive than anger. And his G.O.A.T. act of patriotism is demonstrating that Indian identity is too vast, too complex, and too alive to fit in the Hindu Right's narrow boxes."

C3) The vernacular man

His mother tongue is his muse. He has gotten over his inferiority complex at not fitting in to elite city cultures. He is unschooled but that means he hasn't been dumbed down and homogenised by the English medium system and bookish knowledge. His power comes from being homegrown. He has more empathy and compassion – deep and real relationship with the environment, community. His exploring self is not limited by the rules and structures of modernity, which allows him to be truly original.

C4) The capitalist hipster

He is the irrational optimist, who manifests his reality, however outlandish it seems to others. He wants a new world order, and does not accept the system he inhabits. He has deep belief in the India moment, in finding the next frontier. Capitalism is his philosophy, yet he critiques its invisible companion and veritable trap, consumption. He has a strange detached attachment with regard to wealth and money. He believes in being self-owned, he

does not want to be co-opted into the very system he is building and transforming.

C5) The Renaissance Men – The growing myth of our times

Men who have done the work they need to do let go of their traditional masculine power, and find their energy source within. Words like refresh, reborn, phoenix caption his story. This is an idea of man who is much more experimental, not set in stone but shaped by experiences, questioning his norms, habits and patterns, and trying to make braver choices. From fluid postures to the openness of his body, the way he dresses, his unkempt hair—he is comfortable in his skin, inviting the female gaze. His self-assurance is conveyed in the way he lays bare his neck and chest, his open-legged posture. He is open for conversation, and secure enough to handle tough questions.

These representations and real-life role models show the width and nuance of various shades of masculinities that exist, and can be leveraged to create narratives for men to offer various ways of negotiating the world. It highlights the idea that there isn't a single formula, a single pathway, and a single homogenous idea—which is in stark contrast to the narrowness with which traditional masculine structures of patriarchy were constructed.

LEARNINGS THAT ADVERTISERS AND MEDIA CAN LEVERAGE

Section 6: Learnings that Advertisers and Media can Leverage

The following are some learnings for brands and advertisers to reflect upon, as they cast and write for men.

Acknowledge the crisis inside masculinity.

We may engage men better if we acknowledge that the crisis of toxic men is a symptom of a deeper crisis within masculinity. As its compact with patriarchy breaks down, privileges start shrinking, and the demands being made on them become soul-crushing and harder to keep up with.

Understand the insecurities of masculinity in a new world order.

While the liberal perspective is trying to re-socialise men to share their power and privilege, it appears not to address the insecurities that men feel, which makes it impossible for them to give up the values modern society may find toxic. The incentives of giving up their power and privilege is enjoyed mostly by society and women, and the costs are still too high.

Think of masculinity as a structural issue rather than just an individual issue in India

If we truly hope that men can change and transform, we should consider addressing the conditions (privilege, provider, protector, success orientation, risk, failure, gender expectations) that continue to shape men, which they feel are beyond their individual control.

Any movement forward should explore ways to expand masculinity rather than negate core values that help men build their identities

We may connect better if we work through the core demands of masculine identity production, and not make men feel weak. While there are some progressive archetypes in advertising, we are not speaking to the core anxieties men have about emasculation, being trapped into providership roles, loneliness, of growing complexities and shifting goal posts.

In a country with a large cohort seeking upward mobility, masculinity is seen as a core strength that they feel they need to keep moving forward.

Identify alternative pathways and expand the focus for masculinites.

One way ahead could be to shift focus from calling out patriarchy to finding more positive pathways for men to work out their masculine energy. A good example of that maybe how men are channeling their aggression through sports, competitions or expressing their primal energies in the adventure sport arena.

Over valorizing success is toxic. Engage men better by relaxing the norms.

We should consider the impact success orientation has on men. Advertising speaking to men could move beyond just portraying winning trophies, or getting the girl; it could also focus on themes like self-discovery and exploring hidden depths.

Indian advertising might accentuate the pressures of success, as it is focused on winning big and living large to an audience that is increasingly speaking out against the 'soul-crushing' competition in contemporary life, and how they are struggling to keep up.

Normalise failure.

Can advertising normalise failures and setbacks, and recognise the exceptional nature of success, given that only a small percentage succeed while many others continue striving with little hope of reaching that point? In a country of aspirants, we may connect better if we also celebrate the stories of the men who pivoted after they failed at their primary goal, and found success and fulfilment in other ways.

Acknowledge that while the provider mindset is valuable, it puts inordinate pressure on men—and expectations are only rising every year.

We may connect better with men if we keep the paradox of provider-ship in mind.

It's not that men don't want to be providers. They want to do it on their own terms, and not under pressure from the world and women. If we can have marriage conversations about why men can't cook, we should also be able to have conversations on why society and families still need men to earn significantly higher than women.

The idea of provider-ship can expand beyond the material idea to include other kinds of provider roles, such as spiritual investors, emotional providers, or being a cheerleader.

One of the negative effects of modernity is how the definition of provider has shrunk to only mean financial and material, instead of the expansive role men played in the pre-modern community. In earlier times men used to not just bring in a salary but were also providers of skill, expertise, labor, wisdom, justice and security. A remedy for that maybe to expand the definition of what it means to be a provider in the present context.

Unlock safe spaces for learning and unlearning, and sharing.

It may be valuable to see more representation of care between men. Of the space they can give each other to be vulnerable and express their emotions, to talk through their anxieties and negativity. We may connect with more representations of the caring locker room, a place where men are finding camaraderie and support in an isolating world. We can also explore narratives where men are able to pick up the phone to emotionally check in.

These are spaces that allow men to speak up and come out about their nonconforming selves, the parts that patriarchy forces them to edit out. Spaces, which celebrate men who defy the standards of masculinity, who have unconventional journeys, who resist the normalisation of work and family, and try to figure out life for themselves.

> *Both Raghu Ram and Nikhil Taneja started their podcasts with the desire to create this space for others. As Mr Taneja points out "After a long time I have understood…If I didn't have that space, growing up with my close male friends…then I would also have to create that space…If I don't create that space how do I grow?"*

A more textured and empathetic approach to vulnerability.

Depictions can shift from portrayals of either stoic, unemotional warriors who always have the answers, or overly sensitive individuals who are easily scared. It may be more appealing to represent other ways of being vulnerable that we may not be exploring now.

There is room to showcase the more empathetic man that engages with the others, who can acknowledge perspectives beyond his own. It's about creating something Inviting, not merely inclusive—one that welcomes differences, and fosters curiosity about the unfamiliar.

Showcase iconic men who publicly open up about their own struggles, and legitimise it for others.

As Harish Sadani explains, currently men are speaking on masculinity but often doing it as 'do gooders', talking about it in the third person. We also observed a dearth of men of substance, who walk the talk and are willing to open up about their intimate personal lives.

There are exceptions to this culture, Virat Kohli being the most obvious in the way he has spoken up for mental health, and opened up about his own struggle.

What we may not have enough of are campaigns where men address their own toxic urges, and how they overcame them. For example, Mr Sadani spoke of a campaign for a beer commercial in the UK, where footballers spoke up about their own toxic interactions with women.

Take away the performative pressure and showcase depictions of men as normal, average, good guy, the guy next door, without having to win, impress and succeed.

Normalising the portrayal of progressive men without embedding them in a gender narrative could be a powerful way to create new narratives. Just like for women it's important to liberate them from the inevitability of 'happily ever after', men should be freed from the predictable ending of man saving the day for the world and the planet.

Amplify voices (both men and women) that challenge hegemony.

Can advertising be an ally for men speaking out about their experience within a hierarchal system? For example, icons such as Bhuvan Bam speak about the crazy hierarchy he faces that has driven him to produce and execute his own projects. Zakhir Khan feels that he has to justify himself to organisers despite his reach, audience size and cultural relevance, because he doesn't fit the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Look at identity beyond narrow work and success to open up space for other values such as creativity, fun, service, hands-on-ness, connection, etc.

As of now, most representations of men that we observed were either in the workplace, or in the family setting. We know men are looking for other ways to express their self-hood. There are so many communities and weekend hobby clubs that are growing, and springing up a new generation of men who don't define themselves through just their work. We may resonate more if we represent men as more than professionals and fathers but as foodies, trekkers, travellers, hikers—and explore other builders of identities.

By expanding the box, we could consider advocating for a more contextual idea of man. One that acknowledges that masculinity is not a monolith but has many shades; that it's more than a hard-soft binary, and can be both. One where all values are valuable in certain contexts. Without negating the values men need and making them feel weak, can we make them realise that they need a lot more resources and other qualities to fully embrace their manhood?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Section 7

Section 7: Key Takeaways

We need to recognise the seductive pull of the Manosphere. It gives men structure, stability, a promise of a fixed and unchallengeable identity, and the safety of a tried and tested pathway.

As patriarchy weakens, as technology changes our reality, as social structures go into decline, the world becomes fluid and loose, and manosphere promises a certain structure that the liberal discourse appears to have taken away. It bats for traditional gender roles, for the return of respect for men in acknowledgement of the hard jobs that men do and that women still can't.

What the conversations on the ground point out is that the progressive discourse may be overly preoccupied with holding men accountable, and not invested enough in making men better. It's focused on creating new demands on masculinity, but do not equip them to meet these demands. If we want men to embrace co-operation, agency and selfhood, addressing the structural problems might be a better pathway. What needs further consideration is how to address masculinity without making men feel weak.

Indian masculinity is a material idea. The ideal man is the successful, wealthy householder who keeps money in circulation. We may need to work on these fundamentals to shift men towards a self-oriented idea of masculinity.

Indian men are socialised for glory; to win and succeed. We may have better results if we address toxic success orientation, and normalise economic and other failure.

When we ask men to share privilege and power, we may engage them better if we nuance it with an understanding that the need for status and hierarchy cannot be left unmet.

Indian men seem to be at a sociological juncture where they are heavily invested in upward mobility. Achieving this requires them to either make themselves miserable, or make themselves strong . The dilemma for them is how to be strong in a positive way instead of a toxic manner.

We observed many men grappling with the fact that their socialisation has left them without a self to feel worthy of, and that helicopter parenting has left them without goals of their own. They feel unequipped to answer the progressive call to "Be whoever you want to be, but be a good one".

To move masculinity forward, we have to work through the core demands of masculine identity, and explore ways to expand the box and not replace it.

Finally, our task may be easier if we partnered men in their journey away from the limited 'Mard' to the fullness of 'Admi' and if we encouraged a diverse idea of masculinities over its monolithic understanding—one that acknowledges and valourises a spectrum of values that are contextually relevant, without the negation of core values that provide men purpose and structure.

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Acknowledgements

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Sites of Research

New Conversations: Blogs and Podcasts	Digital Ethnography for Lived Experience	People as Phenomenon
Advertising Review	Visual Iconography	New Representation: Content Mapping
Expert Conversations	Literature Review	Academic Perspectives

New Conversations

Podcasts	Interviews and Vlogs
What's A Man - Masculinity in India', Deepa Narayan	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6z2WDAwaZI
Be A Man Yaar, Nikhil Taneja Season 1 Season 2	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-2n8uLnxRI
The Ranveer Show, Ranveer Allahabadia	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAootoaqwPU
Figuring it Out, Raj Shamani	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLVrvIpPmwo
WTF, Nikhil Kamath	
Mencyclopedia, Raghu & Rajiv	
Men's Locker Room, MensXP	

Advertising

Hyundai Creta, The All-New Creta - Undisputed. Ultimate	V-Marc, #RishtonKeTaar, Celebrating The Light Of Togetherness This Diwali
Kia Seltos, The Badass Test Drive ft Bobby Deol #TechIsNowBadass	Policybazaar, Sapne Aur Suraksha: Policybazaar Ka Promise for Your Future
Royal Enfield, Classic 350	Blinkit, India's "Last Minute App", Raksha Bandhan
Royal Enfield, #BulletMerijaan, The New Royal Enfield Bullet	BlinkIt, Get diapers in 10 minutes
Yamaha Motors, The Call of the Blue Version 4.0	Zepto, Mujhe Kya Milega, Zepto turns 3
Mahindra Thar, Explore the Impossible, The Thar Film Uncut Version	Zepto, Quick Trims. Quicker Deliveries, Zepto x Philips
Maruti Suzuki Swift, Time To Go #Swifting	Zepto, Gentleman's Party Ft. boAt on Zepto
Maruti Suzuki S-PRESSO, Its Made for More	Zomato, Official Diwali Short Film ft Piyush Mishra
HDFCLife, My Child My Pride, #SarUthaKeJiyo	Amazon India, #DeliverTheLove, Raksha Bandhan
Paisabazaar, UNSPOKEN, #StoryOfAFatherAndSon	Canva, Farewell made special, "Dil se, design tak"
Paisabazaar, 'The Wedding Speech' – 2 brothers, 1 advice, countless emotions!	Canva, Bearded Beauties, Customizable Templates
	Uber, Let's Go, Uber India

Advertising (Continued)

Uber, Let's Go, Uber Auto

Royal Challenge, #NayasSher

Royal Challnege, Choose Bold Choose Water

Imperial Blue, The Dream, Because, Men Will Be Men

Imperial Blue, Happy World Laughter Day, Because, Men Will Be Men

Imperial Blue, Heartbeat, Because, Men Will Be Men

Royal Stag, It's Our Life. We Live It Large.

Royal Stag, Don't Give Me Small. I'm Made For Large

Manyavar, Virat Kohli ki ladkiwalo se demand

Manyavar, Aap Kab Ban Rahe Hain Manyavar?

Manyavar, Promises that come from the heart! #NayeRishteNayeVaade

Manyavar, Ranveer Singh nudges Mausaji out - Manyavar Taiyaar Hokar Aaiye

Manyavar, Shaadi hai, koi interview nahi #TaiyaarHokarAaiye

The Man Company, "Gentleman Tumi Ho"

The Man Company, International Dog Day ft Ayushman Khurrana

Axe, "Find your Magic" Campaign

Gillette India, Man Enough #ShavingStereotypes

Phillips India, The only score that matters is the one you give yourself, Philips Power Adapt

Fastrack, "Be Both" ft Vijay Deverakonda

Fastrack Smart, "Follow Yourself" ft. Ranveer Singh

Blackberry Wedding Collections, "Being Real Suits You"

Dove, Men+Care

Ariel India, Share the Load

Ariel India, See The Signs & #ShareTheLoad

Ariel India How Strong is your home team? #ShareTheLoad

Ariel India, This new year let's #CelebrateEqual

Olay, #Stem the Gap

Mohey, Dulhanwaali Feeling

BIBA, Change The Convention, #ChangeIsBeautiful

BIBA, Change The Conversation

Pampers, #ItTakes2: A father's promise

Pampers, #ItTakes2: A message from Dad

Huggies India, DaddyDo: When he changes the diaper, she smiles. Learn how to let the joy remain. #MomsNeedHugsToo

Liscious, #fasterchef ft Kunal Kapoor

Tata Tea, Jaago Re, "Inequality gets Learnt. Equality needs Teaching"

Tata Tea, Jaago Re, "A message for all parents"

Mother Dairy, #Majaisi

Cadbury Dairy Milk, #GoodLuckGirls

HealthOk, Express The Tough Love, Happy Father's Day

Expert Conversations

- Ram Bhatt and Angarika Guha of MARAA Media and Arts Collective
- Harish Sadani from Men Against Violence & Abuse (MAVA)
- Paromita Vohra from Agents of Ishq
- Swati Bhattacharya from Godrej Culture Labs
- Abhishek Banerjee, Actor and Casting Director, Stree and Stree2, among many others
- Ishita Moitra, Scriptwriter for Rocky and Rani Ki Prem Kahani, among many other films and web series

Digital Ethnography for Lived Experience

Reddit Pages

Reddit/india – 2.5M   37

Reddit/indiaspeaks – 1M

Reddit/indianews – 211K

Reddit/unitedstatesofIndia- 465K

Reddit/indiasocial – 1.3M

Reddit/delhi – 1M

Reddit/mumbai – 857K

Reddit/bangalore - 870K

Reddit/kolkata – 329K

Reddit/ahmedabad – 145K

Reddit/Jaipur – 50K

Reddit/onexindia – 19K

Reddit/twoxindia – 328K

Reddit/askindia – 688K

Reddit/indianteenager – 109K

New Visual Iconography

Magazine Covers 2015-2025

GQ India

MW

The Man

Vogue India

Sportstar

Business Today

India Today

Literature Review

Manliness – Professor Mansfield. Harvey C.

India Masculinity, Identity: Gill. Harjant S

Becoming Young Men in a new India: Philip. Shannon

Masculinity Consumerism and the Post National Indian City: Srivastava. Sanjay

Muscular Indian: Baas. Michael

Dear Men: Gangwani. Prachi

 Transforming MENtalities: gender equality and masculinities in India: UNESCO, Coley. Christopher, Gressel. Christie M., Bhavani. Rao R.

Educating Men And Boys About Masculinities In India To Address Violence Against Women And Girls : Vaz. Fiona, ALIGN

Engaging Men in Building Gender Equality: Edited by Michael Flood with Richard Howson

Studying Men And Masculinities: Buchbinder. David

THE MAN BOX: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico: Heilman. Brian, Barker. Gary, Harrison. Alexander

Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era: Kimmel. Michael

Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity Gilmore. David D.

People as Phenomenon

Actors	**Sportsmen**	**Musicians**
Vicky Kaushal	Shubman Gill	Prateek Kuhaad
Jimmy Sarbh	Shikhar Dhawan	Ritviz
Ali Fazal	Virat Kohli	Yo Yo Honey Singh
Nakul Mehta	Neeraj Chorpa	MC Stan
Baabil Khan	Rishabh Pant	Diljit Dosanjh
Boman Irani		
Giriraj Singh		
Rajveer Deol		
Startup Founders	**Influencers**	**Content Creators**
Deepinder Goyal	Ankur Warikoo	Bhuvan Bam
Nikhil Kamath	Raj Shamani	Zakir Khan
Aadit Palicha	Ranveer Allahabadia	Viraj Ghelani
Kaivalya Vohra	Carryminati	Pratyush Chaubey
Riteish Aggarwal	Soam Jena	Arpit Bala
		Ankush Bahuguna
		Samay Raina
		Raghu Ram

New Representation

Single Screen Hindi

War

Animal

Pathan (The YRF Spy universe)

Jawaan

Uri

Sher Shah

Good Newz

Bad Newz

Badhai Do

Multiplex

Munjya,

Rocky aur Rani ki Prem Kahani

Bhediya

Stree and Stree2

Tu Jhooti Main Makaar

12th Fail

Single Screen Vernacular

RRR (Telegu)

Pushpa 1&2 (Telegu)

Kalki 2898 (Telegu)

Sita Raman (Telegu)

Byomkesh Bakshi (Genre) (Bengali)

The Goat Life (Malayalam)

Avesham (Malayalam)

Super Deluxe (Malayalam)

Lucky Bhasker (Telegu)

Meiyazhagan (Tamil)

Bahubali 1 &2 (Telegu)

OTT

Tooth Pari

Mirzapur

Kota Factory

Dahaad

Lapaataa Ladies

Tribhuvan Mishra CA

Guns and Gulab

Taaza Khabar

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan

Black Warrant

Dahaad

Pataallok 1&2

Family Man

Mismatched

Bandish Bandit

Academic Perspectives

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Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power: Wood. Elizabeth A, International Feminist Journal of Politics, (2016).

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Masculinity and the Postmodern in American Psycho and Fight Club, McCray. Sean, Masters Theses & Specialist Projects, (2006).

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Masculinity and Violence Interconnectedness: Defining and Reconciling the Gender Paradox Among Men With Cumulative Lifetime Violence Histories, O'Donnell. Sue, Taylor. Petrea, Malcolm, Jeannie, Sage Open (2024) https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241266998

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About Unsterotype Alliance

The Unstereotype Alliance is a thought and action platform, which seeks to eradicate harmful stereotypes from advertising and media, to create a more equal world. Convened by UN Women, the Alliance collectively acts to empower people in all their diversity—gender, race, class, age, ability, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, language, education, etc.—using advertising as a force for good to drive positive change all over the world.

The Unstereotype Alliance was launched at a global level in 2017, at Cannes International Festival of Creativity, where a group of global brands and creative agencies united with a shared mission to eliminate harmful stereotypes and discrimination in advertising.

Since its inception, the Alliance has expanded multifold and comprises global and national organisations, including many of the world's biggest brands, agency networks, advertising authorities, policy makers, and like-minded advocates from across the world.

Central to the Alliance's infrastructure are the National Chapters. The Unstereotype Alliance launched the India national chapter on 30th March 2021.

About Our Knowledge Partners

About Religious - The cultural engineering company

Religious is a culturally-driven strategy, innovation and futures company, with the ambition to directly impact a business' value, values and valuation.

Basically, we produce cultural intelligence, model the intelligence for brands, and deploy our models to transform how companies think.

We work across the entire value chain - cultural zeitgeist, cultural branding , culture-led innovation, and cultural futures.

Purpose-led company transformation, enhancing the cultural value of brands, unlocking growth through strategic foresight, fighting thought orthodoxy by mapping the emergent—these are some examples of what we do.

Why Religious?

We believe that big ideas are in life, not in things, that branding is asset creation, marketing is monetization, and that big brands are brands with a big agenda.

In an over-communicated world, there are few real conversations. We look at what must grow in the world for your brand to grow. Beause, it's not what you say that matters, it's what people want to talk about that is important.

Businesses need culture producers, and not just consumers. Which means, to be part of the market-place, you need to be worthy in the cultural-scape.

This is the mental model we build for your business.

About ASCI

Established in 1985, The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is the self-regulatory body of the Indian advertising industry. ASCI resolves issues around dishonest or misleading ads, Indecent or offensive ads, harmful ads, and ads that are unfair in competition.

ASCI looks at advertisements across all media types and formats such as TV, print, digital, outdoor, radio, point of sale, claims made on packaging, and others. It works closely with different stakeholders in the matter of consumer protection.

ASCI's code is part of the Advertising Code enshrined within the Cable TV Networks (Regulation) Act, 1994, providing it with a legal backstop.

ASCI's speedy, independent and low-cost complaint management approach ensures that both consumers and industry have the opportunity for a fair resolution. All stakeholders can register their complaints at no cost via www.ascionline.in ASCI's independent jury (the Consumer Complaints Council or CCC) comprises 40 eminent professionals, both from the industry as well as from civil society, who review complaints on a weekly basis, and provide their recommendations. Three retired high court judges hear appeals from complainants or advertisers, who may wish to contest a CCC recommendation. Eminent technical experts from over 20 fields support the CCC and the Review Panel.

About ASCI Academy

The ASCI Academy is ASCI's flagship programme to build the capacity of all stakeholders in creating responsible and progressive advertising. The academy offers an array of services to raise standards of advertising through training, education, outreach, and thought leadership on the preventive aspects of advertising self-regulation. Key programmes include

E-learning Certification: Short and snappy elearning courses to help advertisers stay abreast of the changing regulatory/self-regulatory landscape.

The ASCI Guide to Responsible Advertising: Designed specifically for brand, marketing, regulatory compliance and creative teams

The ASCI Responsible Influencing Playbook: Specifically tailored for influencers, it encompasses a Masterclass, an on-campus or hybrid immersive workshop with in-depth case studies, group working sessions, role plays, quizzes and much more.

Advisory Services: Enables assessments of storyboards/ scripts by an expert panel to get advertisements right, rather than make subsequent expensive changes.

Endorser Due Diligence service to help endorsers meet their obligations, and avoid making misleading claims that potentially violate the law.

Thought Leadership Reports and White Papers on topics impacting advertising and consumer protection to drive meaningful dialogue, and provide actionable insights to industry stakeholders.

To know more about ASCI Academy please visit: www.ascionline.in/academy/

About the Artist

Radhika Bawa

Radhika Bawa is a Mumbai-based visual artist and entrepreneur. A self-taught artist, who has moved between various forms and mediums, including pottery, paintings, and sketches, she has taken on varying muses over the years. She draws her biggest inspiration from the urban environment around her – the colors, sounds, and sights of the large metropolis of Mumbai.

Watercolors and oils are her mediums of choice as she explores her creative side. Over the years, her art has included large-format paintings, wall murals, public art installations, name plates, portraits, and sculptural work. You can explore some of her work at https://www.radhikabawa.com/

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For queries email on **contact@ascionline.in**