

# COVERT RESISTANCE TO #METOO: THE UPTAKE OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND PUBLIC ANXIETY IN THE MEN’S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE COVER GENRE

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While the #MeToo social movement begun in 2017 raised awareness around sexual violence and its role in masculinity, its larger impact on masculine ideology is difficult to gauge. Employing an ideologically rich genre—the covers of men’s lifestyle magazines—and concepts from Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), this paper investigates #MeToo’s impact on the (re)production of masculinity in the genre, further considering the extent to which social movements and the resulting public anxiety can impact ideological (re)production in genres. Comparing covers from before and after #MeToo, this paper argues that patterns in the genre represent a sidestepping of the issues raised by #MeToo and a covert resistance to the movement rather than a fundamental shift in American masculinity.

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In October 2017, a simple two-word hashtag spread around the globe in a matter of days: #MeToo. Rejecting taboos around speaking up about sexual abuse, actress Alyssa Milano invited victims of assault and harassment to tell their stories publicly: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Milano). The deluge of responses took the world aback, prompting both a moment of reflection and a movement for accountability and reform. Beginning with accountability for public masculine figures like film producer Harvey Weinstein (“Post-Weinstein”), the #MeToo movement created a context for survivors to acknowledge and identify with one another while also prompting confrontation

with American masculinity writ large and especially how it has sustained what has come to be called “rape culture” (PettyJohn et al. 612). The #MeToo movement, founded by Tarana Burke in 2006 and “fueled by [her] commitment to the interruption of sexual violence and other systemic issues disproportionately impacting marginalized people — particularly Black women and girls” (“Get to Know Us”), was catalyzed by Milano’s tweet, allowing for unprecedented visibility of survivors and the rapid spread of accounts of abuse. But #MeToo prompted more than just the accountability of public figures. Men and boys outside of public cases and scandals were prompted to be accountable and reflect deeply upon themselves and their communities. In an article

on the psychology of men and masculinity, for example, researchers investigated a movement that rose in direct response to #MeToo: #HowIWillChange. #HowIWillChange was “intended to engage men and boys in the ongoing discussion about sexual violence by asking them to evaluate their role in sustaining rape culture” (PettyJohn et al. 612). The relationship between #MeToo and the subsequent #HowIWillChange illuminates how men have responded to the push for social change on behalf of women.

However, #HowIWillChange and #MeToo have produced varied and vocal responses from men underscoring the anxieties and fears connected to shifting social norms around sexual violence, gender inequality, and gendered relationships. While seemingly about clear-cut moral commitments to justice, fairness, and safety, the subject of sexual abuse has wide-ranging implications for masculine identity that can threaten men’s sense of being men or even of being good, ethical people. These identities and the ideological “worldviews” or “common sense” they reflect about how to relate to women and each other and, more generally, how to be in the world are learned and sustained by many means, but quite powerfully through discourse and cultural genres of communication (Paré 193). Genre theorist Anthony Paré argues that when we learn genres, we not only learn that genre but also learn our social locations and identities. Along with those identities, we learn “ways of seeing” that become natural and hard to resist, particularly for the less powerful (192). The way that a genre influences and teaches identity through

ideology extends to embodiment and gender performance. Risa Applegarth, another genre theorist, explains that the ideologies of a genre can become embodied as they are taken up by those who encounter it. This can turn genres into bodily scripts (Applegarth). Bodily scripts assign ideological conventions to how people express themselves with their bodies. This relationship between genre and bodily scripting can play a large role in gender performance because gender “is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). A genre’s ideology, therefore, has the ability to shape how gender is bodily performed in society.

While the public discussions around #MeToo have resulted in recognition of abuse (and sometimes even accountability) committed by many high-profile perpetrators of sexual violence, such as movie producer Harvey Weinstein, musical artist Chris Brown, and United States Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, its influence on the everyday genres that sustain traditional American masculinity is less clear (“Post-Weinstein”). Yet these everyday genres continue to be produced and reproduced, simultaneously (re)producing masculinity. What role do the public anxieties around masculinity and gender that have surfaced along with the #MeToo movement play in the everyday genres that (re)produce masculinity? What, if any, evidence of deeper social change around masculinity, gender inequality, and sexual violence can we see in those genres

since 2017? In this paper, I conduct a genre analysis that investigates a particular genre that is deeply invested in masculinity—men’s lifestyle magazine covers—for evidence of how a social movement like #MeToo can result in ideological shifts in genres and society. Social movements and culture push and pull at one another, making this genre a potent example of visual rhetoric to explore as “magazine covers make use of culturally relevant imagery and symbols to capture the attention of viewers” (Gigante 52). Focusing on a specific public genre affords a view of 1) the broader patterns and ideologies present in its carefully curated design and 2) the way that masculine ideologies are being (re)produced for the genre’s masculine audience. To discern #MeToo’s potential impact on the genre, I analyzed 24 randomly selected samples of the genre from before and after 2017 from six popular American men’s lifestyle magazines: *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Men’s Health*, *Men’s Journal*, *Playboy*, and *Maxim*. Twelve covers were randomly selected across the months since 2017 (2017–2022), and the other twelve covers were collected using the same sampling method from the corresponding period a decade earlier (2007–2012) (see appendix).

After reviewing relevant rhetorical genre theory and describing the men’s lifestyle magazine genre, the genre analysis that follows examines visual representations of men and women in the genre, identifying two shifts in ideological (re)production of masculinity: (1) the replacement of traditional, clean-cut masculine aesthetics with a hypermasculine “cave-man” aesthetic; and (2) a dramatic decrease

in representations of women as relational objects. While these patterns specifically underscore the extent to which #MeToo may have provoked shifts in how masculinity is (re)produced on the covers of men’s lifestyle magazines, they also more broadly exhibit the extent to which social movements and the resulting public anxiety can impact ideological (re)production in genres.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My genre analysis is grounded in rhetorical genre studies (RGS). Genre was originally studied with a focus on form and substance; rhetorical genre theory, however, takes into account other powerful aspects of genre, such as situation and audience. Genres occur across modes and media like text, video, song, visuals, or speech, but regardless of form, RGS theorizes all these as accomplishing specific actions. In her landmark essay, “Genre as Social Action,” leading rhetorical genre scholar Carolyn Miller defines genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (44). Miller advocates for the significance of the social actions genres accomplish, arguing that the study of genres “must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (37). When we recognize and study the actions being accomplished by genres, we are better able to inspect the roles these play for their audiences and larger social contexts.

Anthony Paré refers to Miller’s ideas as having “allowed theorists and researchers to fuse text and context, product and process, cognition and culture in a single dynamic concept”

(185). As Paré states, the dynamic concept of genre includes culture. Building on her definition and concept of a genre's social action, Miller also pointed out that "genre serves as the substance of forms at higher levels... [and] helps constitute the substance of our cultural life" (Miller 49). Culture is thus shaped by the genres that exist within it. However, the way that genre interacts with culture and its larger social context is bidirectional. Genre not only shapes and constitutes culture but culture also shapes and constitutes genre. It is largely accepted that cultures are variable and constantly changing, even if only incrementally. Taking into account the bidirectionality between culture and genre, we can begin to grapple with the changing and morphing nature of a particular genre.

Though important as a whole, culture has many different and observable aspects within it. The aspect that I will be working with in this analysis is that of ideology. Just like culture, ideology (because it is an aspect of culture) has a bidirectional relationship with genre. Ideology plays a tremendous role in shaping nearly every aspect of genre, including form, substance, situation, and audience. Paré also provides an insightful discussion of ideology within genre that, while focused on the study of a textual genre, can apply to all communicative genres. He concludes with an explanation of how genre (re)produces ideology and identity, explaining that "The routines of genre—their regularity, their durability, their status as historical practice—are collective and the conservative forces operating to make sense 'common' and to locate individuals in identities

and relationships that maintain ideologies and allow them to see past 'sense'" (193). Paré stresses the importance of the routine of genre. Genres, so ingrained within cultures and society, occur again and again, persisting and repeating. While changes are always occurring across genres, they continue to be repeated. The repetition of a genre also allows for the repetition of the ideologies that are reflected within them. This repetition, paired with the bidirectionality of ideology and genre, is what allows for the perpetuation of ideologies and the absorption of ideologies by the genre's users and audiences.

The process through which audiences absorb ideologies through genres is important for my analysis. To understand this process, I use the concept of *uptake*. In her work by that name, Anne Freadman explains uptake as "what happens when you accept an invitation to a conference, or agree to rewrite a paper for publication..., or disagree with, or explore, a proposition in theory" (Freadman 135). Freadman argues that genre "is more usefully applied to the interaction of, minimally, a pair of texts than to a single text" and uses "the term 'uptake' to name the bidirectional relation that holds between this pair" (135). Notably, uptake can include taking up the ideologies within a genre. Uptake offers an explanation for the bidirectional nature of culture and ideology. Uptake is the "local event of crossing a boundary. For example, for a death sentence to become a death, the words of the judge must be translated into an extraordinary intimacy between two bodies, the actions of the executioner and the suffering of the victim" (Freadman 138).

Uptake and an audience's interaction with the genre allow genres to accomplish their actions. Therefore, genres—their ideological and cultural representations—can become part of an action being accomplished, meaning that ideologies in genre can have physical and real consequences on producers, audiences, and society.

The complexity of uptake—specifically, the fact that it can include uptakes of multiple elements like genres, texts, and ideologies—has led to more recent attempts to differentiate between types of uptake. Dylan Dryer, for example, offers the concept of “uptake residues” to theorize how genre uptakes “help maintain, modify, and destabilize cultural institutions” (66). Uptake residues are the result of ideas, expectations, cultures, and ideologies within a genre being taken in by those who interact with the genre. Dryer gives the example of academic writing, stating that “if freshmen wonder how they can possibly write within academic genres, the *uptake residue* four years later can be found in seniors who believe they cannot *not* write within those genres” (68-69).

Uptake residues can also take the form of embodied ideologies by a genre's audience. Kimberly Emmons argues that “if we are to account for the power, particularly the intimate, embodied power, of uptake, we must redefine uptake not as the relation between two (or more) genres, but as the disposition of subjects that results from that relation” (140). For example, ideologies regarding gender can become embodied by the individuals who take up and perpetuate certain genres. Building on Emmons's work, Applegarth theorizes that,

Uptakes, like the performances that collectively both stabilize and undermine gendered embodiment, are imperfect, contingent, and shared among bodies and writers, sedimented through the dispersed performances of numerous actors. That is, gendered embodiment and gendered rhetorical activity both rely upon a form of recurrence that is always only partial and is both stabilized through repetition and rendered contingent through the imperfect nature of that repetition. (120)

Applegarth's insight clarifies more precisely how ideologies, such as gendered expectations around masculinity or femininity, can impact the dispositions, behaviors, and identities of the individuals who interact with a genre. And, most importantly, Applegarth underscores that it is through the genre's repetition and repetition of its ideologies that ideas of a culture and society are (re)produced and reinforced. Uptake allows for this process to occur, allows for a genre, like the covers of men's lifestyle magazines, to have real, observable, and tangible social consequences through the action of embodiment by producers and audiences.

## THE GENRE

Maria Gigante explains that magazine covers are the faces of magazines and, in this role, they are what persuades the audience to engage further with the magazine (51). But Gigante also states that “magazine covers are rhetorical—they are the products of editors' and art directors' choices about such elements

as layout, color, types of images, and amount of text” (51). Therefore, “even though, at first glance, the elements on [a] cover seem randomly sprayed across the composition, from a design perspective the arrangement of elements is very deliberate and serves a persuasive purpose” (Gigante 62).

The genre of men’s lifestyle magazine is rhetorically unique as it contains the interaction between visuals and texts. The title and the cover lines have a powerful relationship with the cover image (Gigante). Scholars have studied magazine covers as distinct genres in many ways but often focus on the relevance of the visual rhetoric and communication they execute. Visual rhetoric is “identified with the search for patterns of visual form and content which convey meaning in ways that resemble the meaning construed by known rhetorical figures” (Tseronis 374). A rhetorical figure, in this case, is the genre—men’s lifestyle magazine covers. When studying news magazine covers, Assimakis Tseronis states that to study “rhetorical figures in a concrete genre” is to study a “multimodal argument in the sense that it invites the reader to buy the specific issue on the grounds of the featured story and the stance that it expresses over it” (Tseronis 375). And while the covers of men’s lifestyle magazines might operate differently than those of news magazines, they both (due to their nature as a visual figure) create an argument of sorts from their rhetorical relevance. A cover can contain an argument in its relevance through the way that they attract attention, address emotions, and frame a situation (Tseronis). Janis Teruggi Page has found that magazine covers “have

a legacy of providing social commentary and offering a rhetorical vision of the world” (149). This legacy is what allows these rhetorical figures to represent and communicate ideologies. My genre analysis explores how the rhetorical figures that make up the genre of men’s lifestyle magazines provide rhetorical vision of masculinity. As Tseronis indicates, each cover collected for this analysis from the genre has formed its own argument. However, unlike a news magazine cover, this argument is not directed at a particular issue or event. Rather, these rhetorical figures argue how masculinity does and should appear to be, and they do so using the poignant interaction of visual and textual communication that is unique to the genre of magazine covers.

Because men’s lifestyle magazine covers can be encountered everywhere from grocery store stands to coffee tables at the dentist’s office, its audience is made up of more than just those who buy the magazines. Rather, anyone who encounters the genre, intentionally or not, becomes a member of its audience, though its expected uptake is by men. The genre exists to secure attention with even a fleeting glance, a desired action accomplished by being intriguing and provocative. Generally featuring a celebrity as the visual focal point, the genre advertises the provocative, displaying pretty faces, handsome bodies, and thousands of tips on fashion, workouts, relationships, and living to readers. Each magazine begs to be picked up and flipped through, calling for readers to desperately try to find themselves within the glossy pages and leaving readers who cannot find themselves to try to accommodate

themselves to fit the typified molds set by the models, the cover lines, the advertisements, the articles, all continually (re)producing American masculinity.

This cover of the men's lifestyle magazine first rose to popularity in the mid-20th century. While fashion and lifestyle magazines have been produced for centuries, they had been predominantly targeted toward feminine audiences. This changed in the 1930s when new magazines were created for masculine readers. Men's lifestyle magazines, from the creation of *Esquire* in 1933 to *Men's Journal* in 1992, sprung up with avid support from readers across the century (Gershon). They became symbols in popular culture, advertising dapper men, unclad women, and fancy gadgets (Gershon). All the while, their covers operated as a potent embodiment of the genre as a whole. In the 21st century, printed magazine consumption has declined, and digital platforms have slowly taken over as the leading source of lifestyle and fashion advice (Gershon). But, quite resiliently, the genre of (printed) men's lifestyle magazines and, along with that, men's lifestyle magazine covers, endures.

### **CLEAN-CUT AND IN CONTROL: 2007-2012**

My analysis of men's lifestyle magazine covers focuses on the genre's focal point, the cover star, and its larger implications for masculine ideologies, analyzing (1) men's physical appearance and (2) the representation of women. In the 2007-2012 pre-MeToo corpus, two primary patterns emerge. First, the masculine aesthetic is restricted to men who appear clean-cut and

in control. Second, female cover stars are frequently featured and are generally represented as sexualized relational objects.

### **MASCULINE APPEARANCE**

The genre's role in (re)producing a certain version of masculinity is largely achieved through visual depictions of manliness that can be broken into two categories: men's physical characteristics and the way men are dressed.

### **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: TALL, DARK, AND HANDSOME**

Between 2007 and 2012, masculine cover stars are extremely uniform in appearance, creating a limited ideal for masculine readers to aspire to. This limited representation, however, also offers a clear depiction of the dominant ideologies during this time, particularly around Eurocentrism and physical prowess. While masculine cover stars are only featured on six of the 12 collected samples, every cover star has nearly the exact same physical characteristics: white, between the ages of twenty and fifty, having a clear complexion, lacking facial hair, and sporting short, dark hair. These qualities create a startlingly narrow image of what a man is supposed to look like in American culture, an aesthetic that functions as an homage to the rise of men's lifestyle magazines in the 1960s when the classic, clean-cut appearance grew in popularity (Gershon). This monolithic aesthetic, then, is one that has been upheld for decades. This persistence might indicate a stable masculine ideal or a widespread return to classic, midcentury ideals. Regardless, this

uniformity portrays the genre as one that has not faced social pressures to change or has returned to its foundational ideological moves due to social pressures.

Ideals of the masculine body during this time also champion unrealistic physiques that are athletic and represent physical prowess. While most of the masculine cover stars are clothed, a *Men's Journal* cover from August 2008 displays two famous Olympians, Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte. These athletes, champions of swimming and physical activity, stand wearing only their bathing suits. They are shirtless, showing off their extremely athletic and muscular bodies. While these men are being celebrated for their accomplishments by being featured, they are also defining the ideal masculine body, not only because their bodies are large and muscular but because the audience knows that these bodies have accomplished impressive athletic feats. Most readers, however, are not Olympians or great athletes. Despite this, they will see these bodies as the ideal, possibly tampering with their view of their own bodies and internalizing the unrealistic belief that they need to strive for an Olympian body.

The physical characteristics represented on these covers also (re) produce the culture of racial hierarchy in America. The lack of racially diverse cover stars—they are all white—underscores the lack of representation of people of color in popular media. The nearly total dominance of the white male pushes for an extreme, unachievable conformity that reinforces gendered racial hierarchies. While a lack of representation does not mean that men of color are

not an audience of the genre, it does indicate that they are a secondary audience being asked to adapt to the tastes of a white primary audience and internalize the white gaze. Non-white readers are left with an unachievable ideal figure of masculinity that excludes them.

#### FASHION: T-SHIRTS AND TUXEDOS

The fashion of masculine cover stars during this period also reflects uniformity, presenting only two ways for men to dress: in a classic suit and tie or in a casual T-shirt. These two styles, I argue, express a dependence upon the classic ideals of the twentieth century, a fear of expression, and a value on masculine economic success.

Apart from the Olympians and their bathing suits, the only other fashion featured in this set is either a suit and tie or a t-shirt. Cover stars Paul Rudd and Sean Penn both wear dapper, streamlined suits in muted greys or blacks (see fig. 1). On the March 2012 *GQ* cover that he shares with Jennifer Aniston, Rudd's suit looks pressed and clean, his shirt fully buttoned and his tie tight and clipped. On the September 2007 *Esquire* cover, Penn's tuxedo is slightly wrinkled, and his tie is loosened. They appear as if on their way to or from a powerful job or lavish event. Conversely, cover stars John Krasinski (featured on the December 2007 cover of *Men's Health*) and Cory Monteith (featured on the November 2010 cover of *GQ*) wear relaxed and nondescript t-shirts. Monteith's shirt almost looks like an athletic polo shirt as it is striped and sports a large *G* (see fig. 2). These covers indicate that to dress like a man is to dress in the extremes: formal or business



wear or leisure wear. These expectations create a rigid palette for men to express themselves through fashion, communicating that men do not have the desire or need to express themselves through their clothing. Perhaps as a differentiating move, femininity is positioned as attentive to fashion, while masculinity requires the disregard of it. This attentiveness to fashion, in fact, seems positioned as a way to please the male gaze. This ideological logic (re) produces a heteronormative masculine culture that rejects expressive fashion to avoid being construed as feminine or as desiring masculine attention in a way that could be understood as gay.

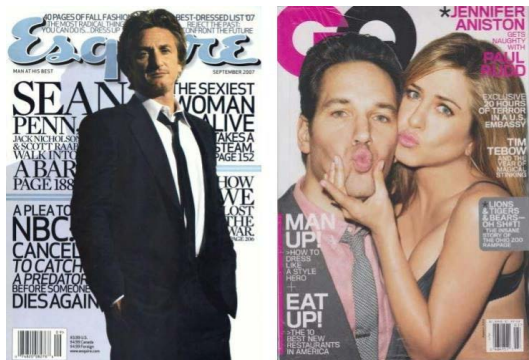


Fig. 1. Covers of *Esquire* (Sept. 2007) featuring Penn and *GQ* (March 2012) featuring Aniston and Rudd

The age differences of the cover models also provide insight into the dominant ideological logic of the time. The cover stars wearing suits are all older than the two cover stars wearing leisure clothing. This difference might communicate that younger men are appropriately more leisurely and boyish, while older

men are appropriately more distinguished and dapper. These perceptions align with expectations for masculine success and advancement, moving from the relatively free college bachelor role to the responsible and affluent father. In this cultural logic, a young man is granted more freedom to relax, explore, and sow his wild oats, whereas an older man is expected to have advanced in his career and acquired stability—expectations and social roles that seem reflected in something as simple as dress.



Fig. 2. Cover of *GQ* (Nov. 2010) featuring Monteith with *Glee* co-stars Michelle and Agron

Further, the emphasis placed on success in masculine fashion may be more than simply

a matter of age. Actually, success can be displayed in not only a tuxedo but a t-shirt as well. While formal affairs, economic advancement, and distinguished societal positions are commonly associated with suits and tuxedos, the t-shirt is a more subtle display of success and freedom that come with economic stability and privilege. Access to leisure and vacations, circumstances associated with relaxed fashion such as T-shirts, is a sign of success as well. Therefore, a truly successful man will be expected to wear both.

### FREQUENT AND OBJECTIFIED: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

In this set of covers from 2007-2012, women operate as sexualized relational objects, both in the sexual focus of coverlines about women and in how their sexualized representations as cover stars. The genre reduces femininity, feminine appearance, and feminine gender performance to a commodified sexuality designed to give men pleasure and a sense of control.

Women are featured on nine of the twelve collected 2007-2012 samples. All of these feminine cover stars are featured in an overtly sexual manner. None are fully clothed. All of the cover stars wear partial clothes, bikinis, underwear, lingerie, or nothing at all. They are all hyper-feminine, wearing makeup and styled hair that exaggerates feminine features as well as jewelry and even high heels. A prime example of a somewhat absurdly sexualized cover star can be seen on *GQ*'s January 2009 cover, on which Jennifer Aniston is wearing nothing but an undone tie (see a 3). She is posed in a manner that conceals her breasts and genitals;

her nakedness, however, is inescapably overpowering. She sits, posed playfully and seductively, smiling at viewers, inarguably a sexual object. The coverline reads, "Is it just us or is Jennifer Aniston getting hotter?" In this example, we can see the way that the coverlines are inextricable from the cover images, both together producing a masculine ideology built on the sexualization of women.



Fig. 3. Cover of *GQ* (January 2009) featuring Aniston

Another illuminating cover elucidates the difference in the sexualization of men and women cover stars. *GQ*'s November 2010 cover features three cover stars: Cory Monteith, Lea Michele, and Diana Agron (see fig. 2).

The two feminine cover stars stand, partially clothed, both with their bras exposed and one wearing only underwear on her bottom half. In comparison, Monteith, who stands between the two women, is fully clothed, wearing a boyish, unbuttoned polo shirt and a cheeky smile. Michele and Agron are displayed glamorously, with sultry, passionate expressions. The three cover stars are posed with the man at the center and the women on either side of him. They have their arms across him, turned in so that their bodies press against him. His arms are around them, his hands resting on (and somewhat gripping) the buttocks of each feminine cover star. This depiction not only shows the stark difference in how men and women are portrayed on these magazines but also the ideologies regarding masculine-feminine interactions and masculine sexual desires for women. Monteith performs the “playboy,” a man who has sexual access to more than one beautiful, objectified woman at a time. Notably, the clean-cut Monteith’s pose reflects a masculine entitlement to access to feminine bodies, reiterating the theme of masculine control through the control of sexualized women.

### **PRIMITIVE AND DOMINATING: 2017- 2022**

My corresponding analysis of men and women in the 2017-2022 post-MeToo set of magazine covers reveals two primary patterns. First, masculine cover stars display greater variability in appearance. Samples here display masculine bodily and clothing expression that ranges from bold fashion choices to a caveman aesthetic. Second, feminine cover stars appear

rarely, but when they do appear, they are sexualized similarly to genre samples from the earlier period.

### **MASCULINE APPEARANCE**

#### *Bodies: The Caveman’s Resurrection*

During this period, masculine cover stars are more diverse in appearance, seemingly no longer restricted to the clean-cut white man. Rather, men of color are featured (though still less frequently than white men), and hairstyles and even body types vary more. This variability, however, features a particular trend: the caveman aesthetic. Big, strong men with rugged features and messy and often longer hair and beards appear in the genre during this period. This primitive survivalist image now dominates the genre, seeming to replace the clean-cut white man as the new ideal man.

This caveman aesthetic is most visible in the portrayal of Jason Momoa on *Men’s Health* in December 2020 (see fig. 4). He has a beard, messy hair, distinguishing and prominent facial features, and, famously, large stature. He is covered in mud and dirt, with a happy smile on his face. He is not just surviving in the dirty, natural environment that he is depicted in, but he even appears happy and comfortable. Momoa’s intense display of the caveman aesthetic is further emphasized by the main cover line: “big arms, broad shoulders, no BS,” indicating the emphasis on having a large and prominent body. Not only does Momoa display the caveman aesthetic, but his presence on the cover combined with the coverline communicates that a man’s physical prowess is a tremendous

part of what makes him a man. It does this while equating size and strength to a simple, natural lifestyle that, it implies, suits a man better than its supposed opposites—the complexities of civilization and femininity.



Fig. 4. Cover of *Men's Health* (Dec. 2020) featuring Jason Momoa

Another example of the importance of the physical body in masculine ideology is Justin Theroux's cover of *Esquire* magazine from April 2021. On this cover, he is shirtless and visibly muscular, having a large and toned upper body. While his physical body is not the central focus of the image—he has a large dog in his lap covering most of his chest and

stomach—the display of his muscular, fit torso asserts his manliness and claims his masculinity. The coverline at the bottom of the page supports this reading, proclaiming that “Justin Theroux is turning 50,” implying that despite aging, his physical strength means he is still a virile (masculine) man. This representation implies that the ideal masculine body is young and capable, communicating that although Theroux is older, he is still a man because he is still physically youthful. The presence of the large dog, however, is just as noteworthy as Theroux's unclad body. While not appearing to be a tough or frightening dog (its demeanor is soft and docile), its presence in conjunction with Theroux's strong body can be read as an ode to “man's best friend,” further asserting Theroux's identity and performance as a man. Notably, dogs in this role often become an extension of the man outdoors or in dangerous situations. The dog's presence on this cover further reinforces a more primitive masculinity by invoking a relationship between a man and his dog in natural environments that has existed for thousands of years.

Fully half of the covers analyzed from this period display men with beards, another trait perceived as very masculine because it is not shared by women and is therefore associated explicitly with manliness. Beards, along with the other choices described above, seem to operate as visual indicators of a man's masculinity. In opposition to the clean-shaven men idealized in the earlier covers, the beards featured in this set act as a natural indicator of manliness, with their “naturalness” significantly reinforcing the caveman aesthetic of this period.

While this set shows greater diversity than the earlier set, six out of nine masculine cover stars are white. Just as white cover stars dominated in the previous period, they continue to do so here. This continuation indicates that, in American culture, to be a “man” still means to be a white man. The dominance of white men shows the influence of Eurocentric beauty standards on masculine representation while also corresponding with other racist ideologies and their consequences, like white privilege. Just as many other types of media feature predominantly white stars as their focal points, men’s lifestyle magazine covers do the same. However, interestingly, of the three non-white cover stars, two were African American and one was Asian American. The two African American cover stars’ representations might provide insight into the intersectionality of ideologies around race and masculinity. LeBron James, featured on the cover of *GQ* (Nov. 2017), and Samuel L. Jackson, featured on the cover of *Esquire* (Apr. 2019), are posed expressively (the emphasis is placed not on their bodies but on their faces) and with a more intense regard for the camera and, therefore, the viewer. This intensity could reflect cultural expectations around Black figures in media. Alternatively, such intensity is a purposeful and distinguishing performance of the individual cover star either as a result of their interpretation of their own masculinity or social location in a racialized world—or even both. Moreover, the emphasis on these cover stars’ faces, as opposed to their bodies, might also be a deliberate attempt to counteract racist ideologies that have long reduced Black men to their bodies.

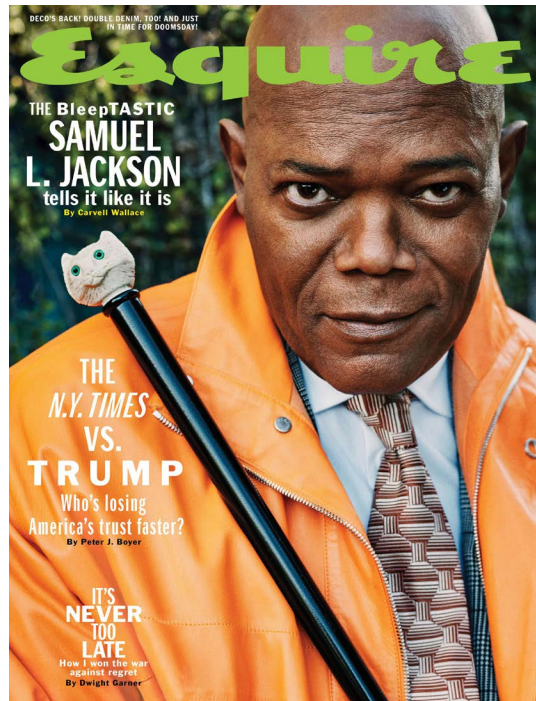


Fig. 5. Cover of *Esquire* (Apr. 2019) featuring Jackson

#### *Fashion: Red Rainboots and Classic Neutrals*

Just as masculine bodies have been represented more expressively, and with subtly increased variability, fashion has become more expressive as well. At least to a degree. Bolder colors and style choices appear on samples from this period. However, they are also accompanied by an array of reserved, neutral, and monotonous stylistic choices. While the variety of fashion displayed in the genre during this period has slightly increased, non-descript clothing dominates. This prevalence of unremarkable fashion also reflects the caveman aesthetic. The

nondescript nature of masculine cover stars' fashion communicates that a man's clothing is not important to him. Just as imagined cave-men would, men only require basic clothing items and do not need to embellish or personalize their appearance through fashion.

All but two of the collected covers depict masculine cover stars wearing shades of black, grey, or brown. These neutral and understated colors are just like those of the T-shirts and tuxedos that reigned during the earlier period. Among these inconspicuously dressed men, only two masculine cover stars don non-neutral fashion: Timothée Chalamet on the cover of the November 2020 issue of *GQ* (see fig. 6) and Samuel L. Jackson on the cover of the April 2019 issue of *Esquire* (see fig. 5). Each wears bold colors and statement pieces, such as Chalamet's red rain boots and Jackson's bejeweled cat cane. The expressiveness of both examples raises questions about why these two cover stars are represented so differently than the rest. Perhaps it is Chalamet's young age and boyish appearance that allows for him to be dressed and represented in an arguably playful manner of dress. And as for Jackson, his dress brings into question again the impact that racial ideologies have on masculine dress. Is there an allowance and expectation that black men can and will dress in bolder, more dramatic ways, or simply that they will dress *differently* than white men? This *difference* could be related to the fact that "self representations of black masculinity in the United States are historically structured by and against dominant (and dominating) discourses of masculinity and race, specifically (whiteness)" (Gray 401). Or is Jackson's fashion

simply a reflection of his own black identity? Jackson's cane and posh suit, in tandem with a bright orange jacket, are arguably reminiscent of the styles of a "black dandy" who "intentionally co-opts and then complicates classical European fashion with an African diasporan aesthetic and sensibilities" (Lewis 55).



Fig. 6. Cover of *GQ* (Nov. 2020) featuring Chalamet

Clearly, the older representations of masculinity have not disappeared from the genre. Another *Esquire* (March 2020) cover features Mack [Macaulay] Culkin wearing a black, luxurious smoking jacket and assuming an intimate-yet-regal pose in which he tucks his

thumb into the end of his robe while placing it upon his lower chest. This presentation of Culkin is reminiscent of hyper-masculine images from the mid-twentieth century when men's lifestyle magazines first rose to prominence. The casual yet powerful pose is an homage to the masculine air that was strived for and assumed consistently by American men throughout the 20th century. The fashion choice for this cover indicates a continuously strong affinity with symbols of masculinity on earlier magazine covers, showing that these covers continue to perpetuate symbols of masculinity that have been around since the rise of men's lifestyle magazines. Not only does this cover form itself to model past magazine covers that depict masculinity, but it also stands as a less obvious ode to, or taking up of, popular styles of masculine poses in 19th-century paintings and portraits, in which men would stand or sit stiffly and place their hands on the center of their torsos, tucking them partially into the overlapping center of their shirts or clothes, almost exactly as Culkin does in 2020. As Freadman points out, uptakes "have memories—long, ramified, intertextual, and inter-generational memories" (136). We see in Culkin a vision of 20th-century masculinity that remembers an even older manliness and power ramified across texts and genres and time.

#### A DISAPPEARANCE: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

A notable pattern in the post-MeToo samples of the genre is women's greatly reduced presence, with women featured on only two of the twelve collected samples. Considering the

purely sexual and relational manner in which women were represented previously, this decrease in prevalence might initially appear positive. The two featured women, however, are still portrayed as strictly sexual objects.

One of the featured women is Megan thee Stallion as "Rapper of the Year" (a position almost always afforded to a man) in *GQ*'s December 2020 cover. While not an erotic magazine, *GQ* represents her with a strong focus on her sexuality. Although not overtly including evidence of nudity, all of her body that is visible—her upper chest, shoulders and arms—is bare. Her hair is very long, shiny, and styled, and her makeup is glamorous and dramatic, paired with extravagant jewelry. Her suggested nudity and carefully styled appearance reflect how women are often perceived through a sexually objectifying masculine gaze.

The second feminine cover star is Lorena Rae on *Maxim*'s cover from May/June 2020 (see fig. 7). Rae is partially turned away, looking demurely over her shoulder at the camera, wearing solely a sheer skirt, large statement jewelry, and cat-eye sunglasses. We see her from the waist up with her back and the profile of her breast exposed and her arm obstructing a full view of her breast. Her hair is long and styled, and her makeup is somewhat natural. Together, these features of her appearance turn Rae into a hyper-feminine figure of pleasure and sex. Her jewelry and clothing (or lack thereof) portray her in an overtly sexual manner, though with an element of dignity. She appears glamorous and sought after, but in a way that maintains her youth and purity.

More than promiscuity, Rae evokes a suggestive invitation to viewers. She beckons.



Fig. 7. Cover of *Maxim* (May/June 2020) featuring Rae

Just like the women featured in the covers from the earlier period, Rae and Megan thee Stallion both exhibit phenomenally smooth and hairless skin. Indeed a 2012 study on the role of texture in consumer magazine cover depictions of women and cars found that in the depictions of women aimed at a masculine market, “smoothness is an important semiotic resource, embedded in stereotypical and heteronormative conceptions of gender” (Iqani 311). The smoothness of these women’s bodies

suggests that their sexuality is routinely commodified in this genre. Just as smoothness appeals to masculine consumers when seeing advertisements of purchasable goods (e.g., cars), the smoothness of a woman’s body is being advertised to be consumed. This genre’s advertisement of a woman’s body uses this smoothness to reaffirm gendered ideologies and perpetuate the continued sexualization of feminine bodies.

### COVERT RESISTANCE TO #METOO

When comparing genre samples from 2007-2012 with those from 2017-2022, two shifts in the ideological (re)production are visible. First, women have nearly been removed from non-erotic men’s lifestyle magazine covers. However, when they are featured in the genre, it is only as sexual objects. Second, masculine expression has diversified. However, this diversification and representation primarily includes the dominating prevalence of rugged, burley cover stars that were not present before. I propose that these shifts in the genre do not portray actual changes to the ideology of the genre or the culture and sentiments of the genre’s audience. Rather, they might display covert resistance to the social change sparked by #MeToo, consequently maintaining masculinity’s dominance.

Further, when analyzed both comparatively and chronologically, the collected sample covers become a visual progression of the genre’s ideological (re)production. This progression highlights the shifts in the genre and goes so far as to construct of timeline in which the #MeToo movement seems to play a significant





Fig. 8. Examples of masculine and feminine representation on covers from 2007-2022.

role. There is a distinct, observable change in this genre over time (particularly before and after #MeToo) in both its design and its ideological reproduction (see fig. 8).

#### SIDESTEPPING SEXUALIZATION

At first glance, the removal of feminine cover stars seems to be a move away from the purely relational role of women in the genre. It seems that if women are not on the covers, they are not being displayed as sexual objects and commodities. It would follow that the genre and its ideologies are shifting away from the limited way that women can be represented. But the genre is not representing women differently. Erotica magazines, logically, continue to display sexualized women. And when *GQ* featured a feminine cover star, Megan Thee Stallion was still presented as a glamorous

sex object. The way that women are presented has not changed. The sexual objects that once dominated the genre have simply been removed from view. The masculine ideologies of the genre seem not to have changed in the way that they position women. Instead, it is the genre's confidence and comfort in displaying this ideology that has changed.

The #MeToo movement called for accountability. It used public forums, like social media, to call attention to abusive and chauvinistic behavior, mobilizing public support to condemn it. This process shed light on the activities of individuals as well as communities and organizations. The threat of public condemnation has likely resulted in a sense of anxiety felt by individual men as well as the communities and organizations that are made up of and cater to men. Just like a celebrity, a men's lifestyle magazine can be the subject of accusations and

public scrutiny regarding the mistreatment and harmful representation of women. In this situation, the producers of men's lifestyle magazines that represent women as purely sexual objects might be incentivized to change how they display feminine cover stars. Alternatively, they could remove them from the genre entirely. Based on my analysis of the collected samples, it appears that producers of this genre have chosen to do the latter. In many ways, this move sidesteps the purpose of #MeToo. Rather than taking accountability for harmful behavior and ideological (re)production, men's lifestyle magazine covers maintain their ideologies by removing women from public view. Instead of committing to dismantling masculine ideologies, rape culture being one of them, the genre seems to "indignantly resist" social change (PettyJohn et al. 612).

Genres, however, do not operate independently of their audiences and the cultures they operate within. If anything, the genre might be resisting this social change because deep-rooted cultural beliefs are held by many of its audience members. The anxiety felt by the genre would be felt by its audience. A man who has witnessed the condemnation of abusive or insensitive behavior of others is made acutely aware of his own actions. This new awareness can lead to confronting a fear of being harmful or just a fear of being publicly criticized. Regardless, this anxiety would likely deter a man from reading and being seen with a magazine in his possession that blatantly displays women as sexual objects. As Morgan PettyJohn and her coauthors demonstrate, men have exhibited a variety of responses to the social change

put into motion by #MeToo. Some commit to change, and some resist it, at times even in a hostile manner. The audience of this genre likely exhibits the same responses to recent social change, guided by the culture they live in and the ideologies they adhere to. The resistance felt by this audience likely has influenced users of the genre to avoid accountability and change in ideological (re)production.

It seems likely, then, that the genre of men's lifestyle magazine covers reflects covert resistance to the #MeToo movement and the public anxiety it has engendered in American men and organizations. When pressured to be accountable and considerate of how they act upon their culture and ideologies, both audience members and the producers of the genre have swiftly removed the issue from view. This sidestepping, this feigned resolution, is resistance to social change. The absence of women from this genre only further confines them within the ideological representation of sex objects. The (re)produced ideologies of this genre deter men from changing their practices and ideological viewpoints. Rather, they are subtly instructed to ignore the issue entirely.

## REASSERTING MANLINESS

The sexualization of women being condemned by #MeToo and #HowIWillChange is an integral part of heteronormative masculine ideology. Being a heterosexual *man* involves (or may even require) asserting control over women by turning them into sexual objects. Therefore, these movements of social change have destabilized ideological masculinity. How can someone be a *man* if he is pressured by social

change not to sexualize women? How can he be a *man* if the public anxiety that this social change has produced makes him uncomfortable sexualizing women openly? This dilemma and its destabilization of masculinity might lead men to feel the need to reassert their manhood. This masculine desire to reassert manliness when fundamental aspects of masculinity are pushed back against would be reflected in a genre like men's lifestyle magazine covers. Indeed, the rise in the cavemen aesthetic, exhibited by the ruggedness of cover stars and the naturalistic elements of the covers themselves, may operate as a reassertion of manliness as #MeToo destabilizes the masculine ideologies being (re)produced by the genre.

More positively, the ideal representation of manliness has expanded. Manliness is no longer restricted to the clean-cut white man in a T-shirt or suit. Bolder fashion is being exhibited, and men of color are being featured. This expansion and increased diversity is a hopeful one. The genre is operating as a slightly more expressive and inclusive space, indicating that the narrow masculine ideals of the past are being slowly broken down. But a dominating trend in this expressiveness is that of caveman aesthetics. The ideal man of the past, the successful gentleman, has been almost entirely replaced by the hairy hunter archetype. Big strong bodies, a disregard for cleanliness, and the prominence of messy, longer head and facial hair appear again and again in recent samples. The cover stars are often featured in outdoor settings, some covered in mud, one emerging from a river. This "primitive" shift in appearance, paired with an emphasis on

nature and the outdoors, appears as a regression in masculine aesthetics. This regression is to an idealized example of hypermasculinity: the primal survivalist.

The genre's original ideal, the clean-cut man in control, has other associations that might deter the audience and genre from idealizing them during public anxiety. The clean-cut man in control has been seen in the genre since the turn of the twentieth century. To maintain an ideal from this period would reflect inflexibility to changing times. The genre and its audience might appear to be clinging to a past in which men had more control, especially over women. Also, the clean-cut man in control is similar to the successful men of power who have been exposed and targeted by #MeToo. The public anxiety that has followed #MeToo might strongly discourage the genre from representing masculinity in such a way.

This genre requires ideological representations of masculinity. As the classic images of masculinity are avoided, the genre has instituted a new one: the caveman. It seems to be an instinctual move to an even more deep-rooted depiction of manliness, one that has not yet been so clearly ostracized by social change. It is also an extreme depiction of masculinity. What is more manly than a survivalist? Instead of moving away from intense depictions of masculinity when pressured by social change, the genre has opted for one that is even more extreme. This, just like the removal of women from the genre, appears as covert resistance to the social change sparked by the #MeToo movement.

## CONCLUSION: TAKING UP #METOO

These shifts in the ideological (re)production in men's lifestyle magazine covers act as uptake residues. #MeToo and the resulting public anxiety have been taken up by both this genre and its audience, made possible by the bidirectionality of uptake. The genre has taken up the discourse and ideas of #MeToo and covertly resisted it. The genre's intended audience, American men, are anxious due to #MeToo. Their masculine identities have been destabilized, provoking anxieties around identity, relationships, sexuality, and more. This anxiety has been taken up by this masculine genre, (re)producing and reinforcing this (even unconscious) resistance to discourse and social change. As Applegarth demonstrates, uptake can include embodiment. The covers of men's lifestyle magazines instill a representation of the ideal man in readers, teaching gender performance. They do so by portraying the ideal appearance and disposition that a (white, heteronormative) *man* requires. Therefore, as the genre resists social change, its audience is instructed to do the same, embodying public anxiety and resistance. That said, individuals

have some agency in whether and how they take up genres and their ideologies (Paré). Whether American men embrace the act of covertly resisting #MeToo, avoiding the uncomfortable discussions necessary to dismantling rape culture and perhaps growing beards to reassert their masculine identities, or whether some men will reject the reassertion of traditional heteronormative masculinity through covert means is not yet clear. But understanding uptake's influence on this genre and its audience allows us to witness the ramifications of #MeToo and aids larger discussions around gender performance, identity, and the possibility for true social change.

Men's lifestyle magazine covers inconspicuously loiter about our lives, imparting their ideologies whether we mean to consume them or not. And while this unavoidable genre currently resists the call for change, a better understanding of its influence and relationship with its audience might allow for this resistance to be transformed by a more conscious audience into active participation in dismantling the rape culture and the traditional masculine ideologies the genre has (re)produced for decades.

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## APPENDIX: MAGAZINE COVER CORPUS

*Esquire*. July. 2007  
*Esquire*. Sep. 2007  
*Playboy*. Dec. 2007  
*Men's Health*. Dec. 2007  
*Esquire*. March. 2008  
*Men's Journal*. Aug. 2008  
*GQ*. Jan. 2009  
*GQ*. Nov. 2009  
*GQ*. Nov. 2010  
*GQ*. March. 2012  
*Esquire*. April. 2012  
*Maxim*. Sep. 2012  
*GQ*. Nov. 2017  
*Esquire*. Sep. 2018  
*Esquire*. April 2019  
*Esquire*. March 2020  
*Maxim*. May/June. 2020  
*GQ*. Oct. 2020  
*GQ*. Nov. 2020  
*Men's Health*. Dec. 2020  
*Esquire*. Apr. 2021  
*Men's Journal*. Sep/Oct 2021  
*Playboy*. Oct. 2021  
*Men's Journal*. Feb/March. 2022