

**MACHO, MACHO, NOT SO
MASCULINE,
MAN?**



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WHAT DOES MASCULINITY MEAN FOR PEOPLE IN THE UK TODAY?

In the wake of Barbie-mania over summer and headlines dominated by the rise and fall of Andrew Tate, have our perceptions of masculinity changed? Could this signal pushback against narratives of ‘toxic masculinity’?

HOW DO WE ‘SEE’ GENDER?

Do men see gender more than women? Do we associate particular qualities with being masculine or feminine?

WHY DO GENERATIONAL PERCEPTIONS DEFY EXPECTATIONS?

What does the younger generation believe in terms of allyship for women? Are the older generations still the traditionalists?

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR BRANDS?

Why celebrating modern masculinity needn’t be toxic, or labelled as ‘woke’.

FOREWORD

It's cliché to start a paper with some etymology on the language of the topic, but this time it's both essential and contrary. What is Masculinity?

“From Latin masculinus “male, of masculine gender,” from masculus “male, masculine; worthy of a man,” diminutive of mas (genitive maris) “male person, male,” a word of unknown origin.”

Easy peasy.

Some ten or fifteen years ago the Cambridge Concise would have ironed out any debate:

“**the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men.**”

Leap back some three thousand years to the Hebrew Bible and you'll get some helpful guidance on how to be masculine. Go another couple of thousand years to find the Ancient Gods bringing some personality to it all. Masculinity, as a simple concept of representing traditionally male qualities, is older than manly Adam and womanly Eve (maybe).



Today, a sprawling Wikipedia entry fails to scratch the surface of hundreds of University courses on the topic. A sure sign of disagreement and complexity.

for UK consumers. This research brought together quantitative surveys (n=1,542) and qualitative immersion (6 x national focus groups).

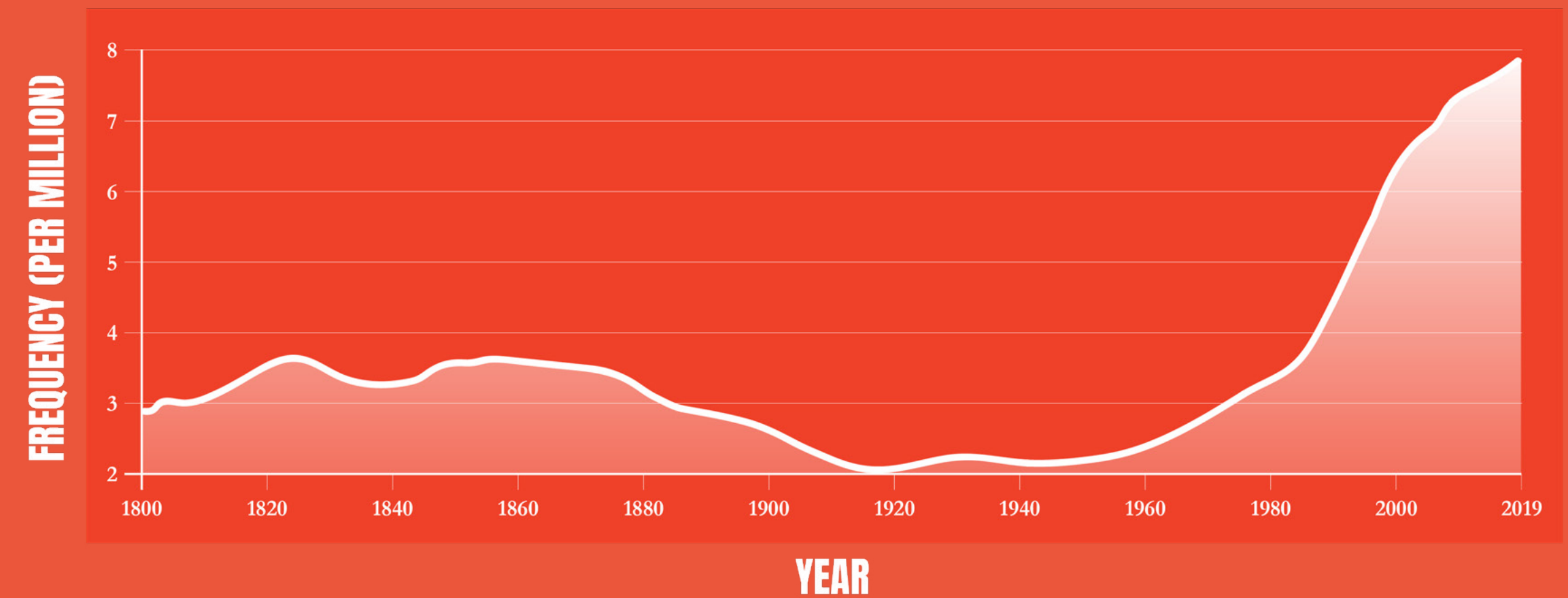
It seems the more we debate what Masculinity means, the more complex its definition becomes. There are competing expressions, some negative, some traditional and some reactionary. And there are fluid expressions, some grey, some militant and some uncertain. And wherever you stand, we're talking about it more than ever.

However, there are three things that past and present agree on:

- 01 Its expression evolves with the culture around it
- 02 Its constituent parts are subjective
- 03 Its existence is entwined with gender debate and, historically, has male edges

With this in mind, BBH and GWI have undertaken proprietary research to step out of the Mojo Dojo Casa House and question what Masculinity means today

FREQUENCY OF THE WORD 'MASCULINE' IN LITERATURE OVER TIME



Estimated Global English Language mentions of 'masculine' in literature (1800-2019), Google Ngram.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

- 01 For 43% of the population, Masculinity is something unimportant
- 02 'Physical Strength', 'Machismo' and 'Arrogance' represent over 50% of the ingredients of modern Masculinity
- 03 That men 'see' gender more than women
- 04 Challenges to gender norms aren't always progressive

'Physical Strength', 'Machismo' and 'Arrogance' represent over

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of the ingredients of modern Masculinity

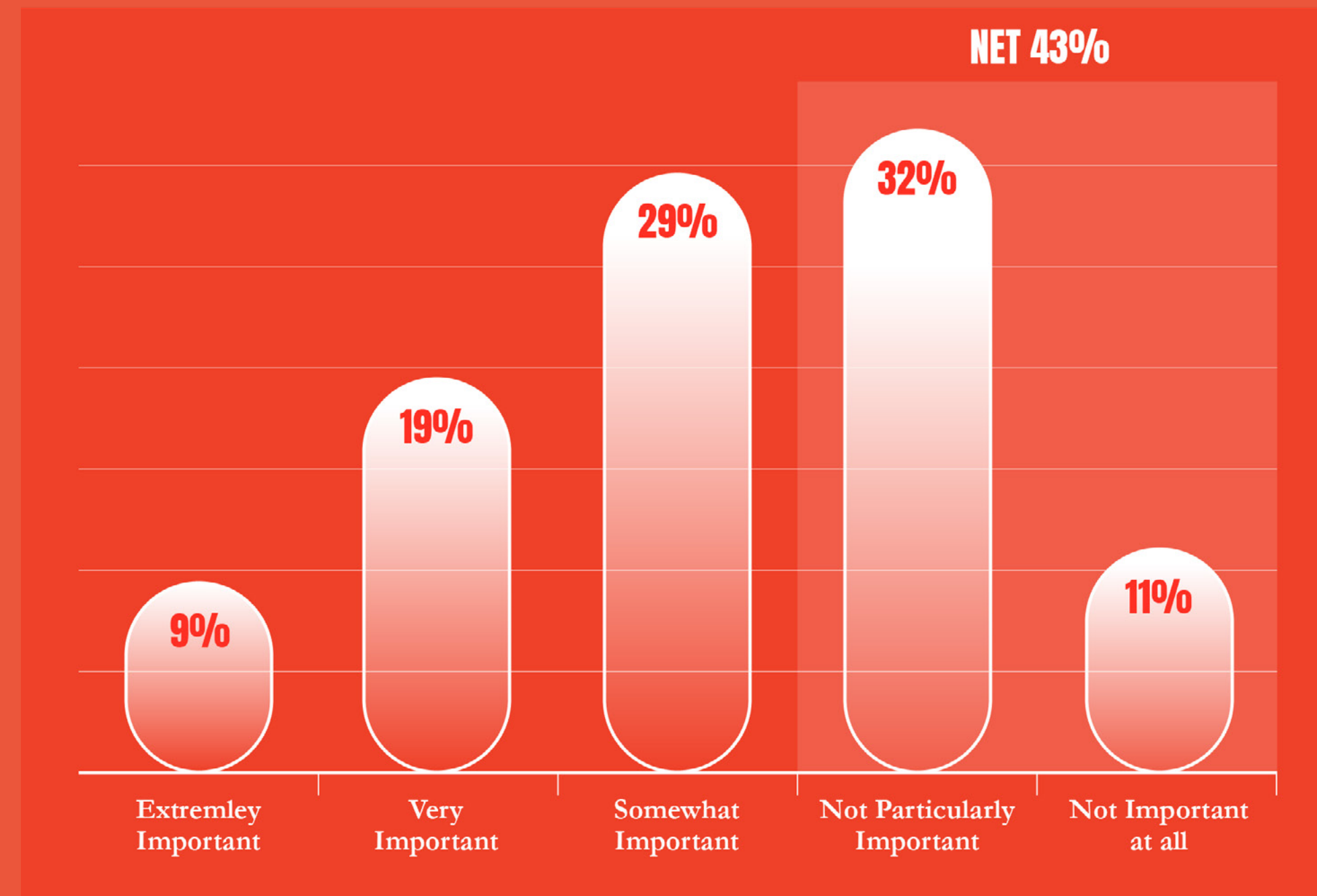
LET'S GO DEEPER...

DEFINING MASCULINITY

43% OF THE POPULATION SEE 'BEING MASCULINE' AS UNIMPORTANT

Whilst there is a lot of content discussing masculinity and its attributes, it's not that important to a vast amount of people (irrespective of gender). 11% of respondents claimed that being masculine was "Not important at all" and 32%, the most popular selection, claimed that it was "Not particularly important."

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO BE 'MASCULINE' IN THE UK IN 2022?



11%
of respondents claimed that being masculine was "Not important at all"

32%
claimed that it was "Not particularly important."

n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

Behind the data we see that men are more likely to claim the importance of masculinity (31%) compared to women (25%) but both genders are more likely to say it isn't important at 41% and 46% respectively.

There may be a paradox here: recent gender debate may have initiated a more flexible view on masculinity, though we mustn't assume that the topic is as important to people as we think.

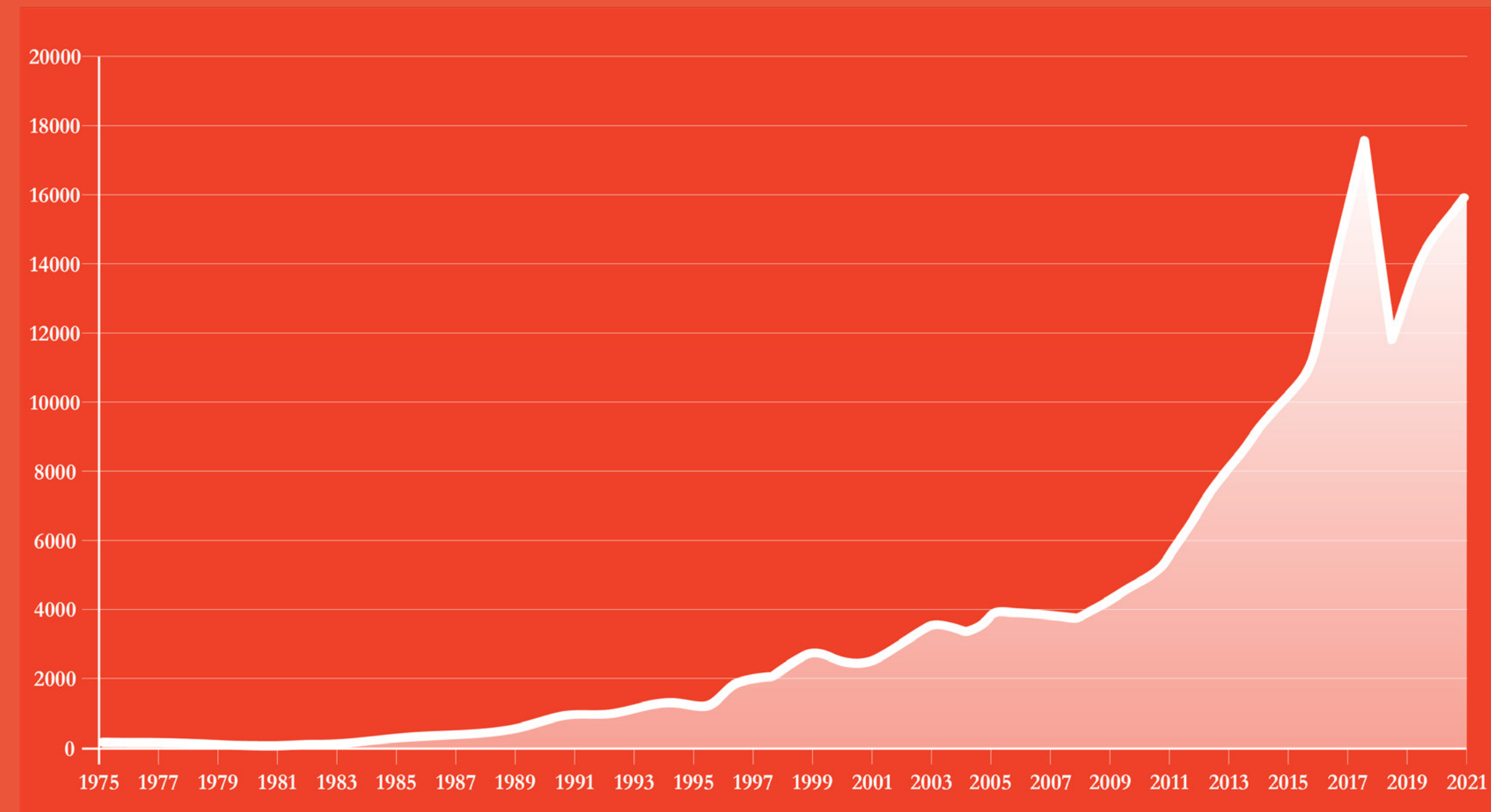
“**In the world that I live in and where I exist... friends, work, family, whatever...it's just a non topic. It means nothing**”

Jon, 52, North West

Another thought here is the role of confidence in discussing the topic. Gender debate has become too much of a minefield for many to risk walking into. Declaring disinterest are going with the tide is both easier and safer.

One thing is for sure, the conversation isn't getting any quieter:

ESTIMATED ENGLISH LANGUAGE MENTIONS OF 'MASCULINITY' IN GLOBAL NEWS MEDIA PUBLICATIONS (1975-2021)



198,367 English Language mentions of 'masculinity' in Global news media publications (1975-2021). Factiva, all sources.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'PHYSICAL STRENGTH', 'MACHISMO' AND 'ARROGANCE'

We asked our respondents to 'gender code' a variety of physical, emotional and behavioural characteristics. From this we can pull out qualities that signify masculinity.

Nearly all characteristics were selected by various people in our base but, more interestingly, the percentage selecting each quality allowed us to create an index of masculinity. From this, we can break down the preferred ingredients of modern masculinity.

Over 50% is made up of **Physical Strength, Machismo and Arrogance.**

It's hard not to read an undertone of negativity here, especially when **Selfish, Stubbornness and Privilege** form a further 14%.

More positive are the inclusion of **Emotional Strength, Confidence, Success and Leadership**, albeit as single figure percentages.

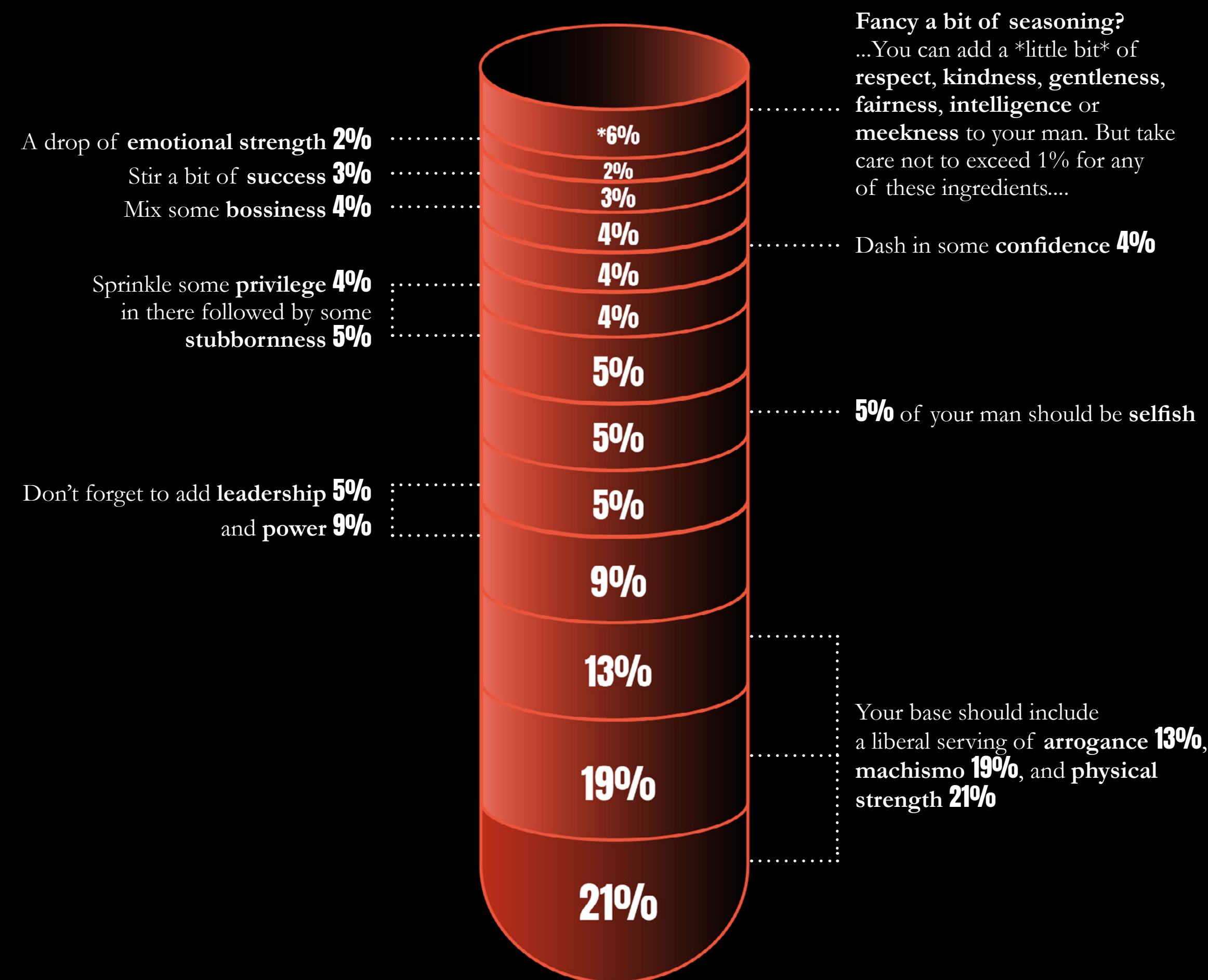
There is, of course, a lot of subjectivity in this, and this is another point: it is hard to identify what masculinity actually is and means. The long list of attributes

is testament to this but the absence of Empathy and Beauty is interesting.

WHATS IN A MAN?

% GENERAL UK POPULATION RESPONDENTS CODING EACH QUALITY AS MASCULINE

(According to UK adults today)



% respondents coding each quality as associated with 'Masculinity', from a total sample of n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

However, being tough isn't always as easy as it sounds:

[w.tiktok.com/@bobbyspinach/video/7253137060620569902](https://www.tiktok.com/@bobbyspinach/video/7253137060620569902)

When it comes to how men should behave with women, chivalrous traditions are relaxing with the most common response for things like pay for a meal on a date, give up your seat on public transport and offering your jacket in the cold being 'it depends'. The exception here is opening doors.

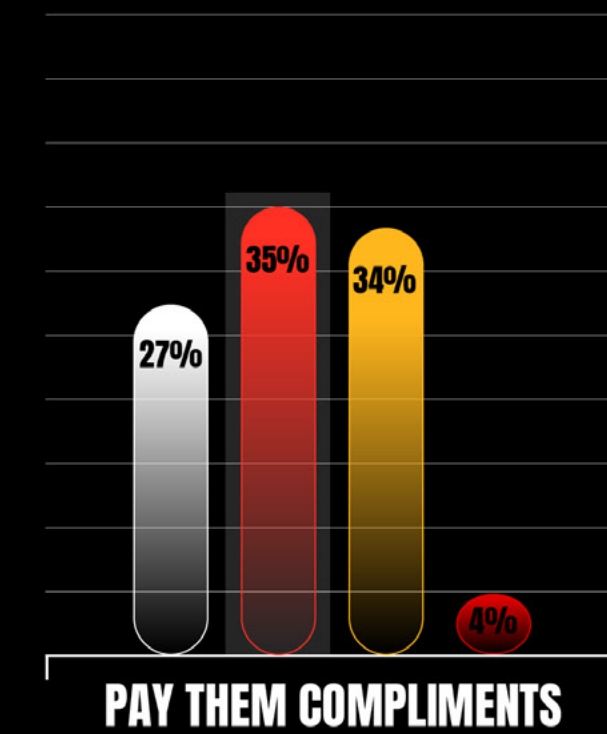
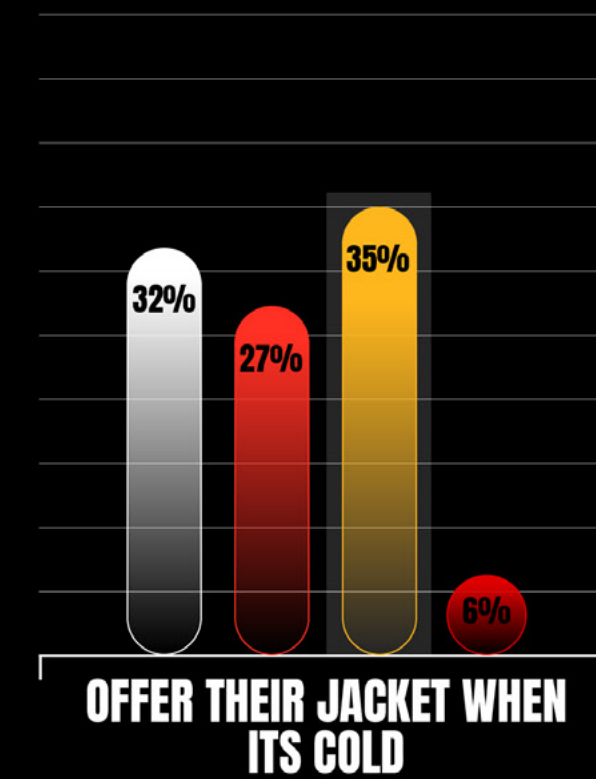
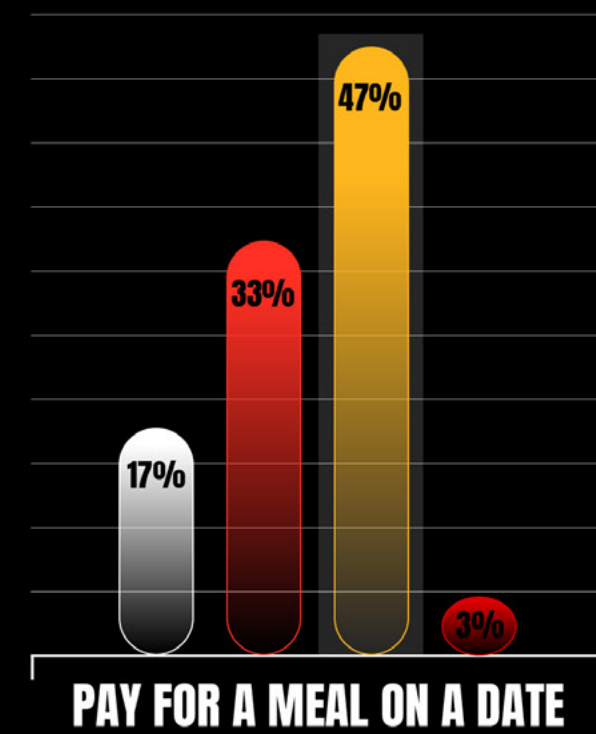
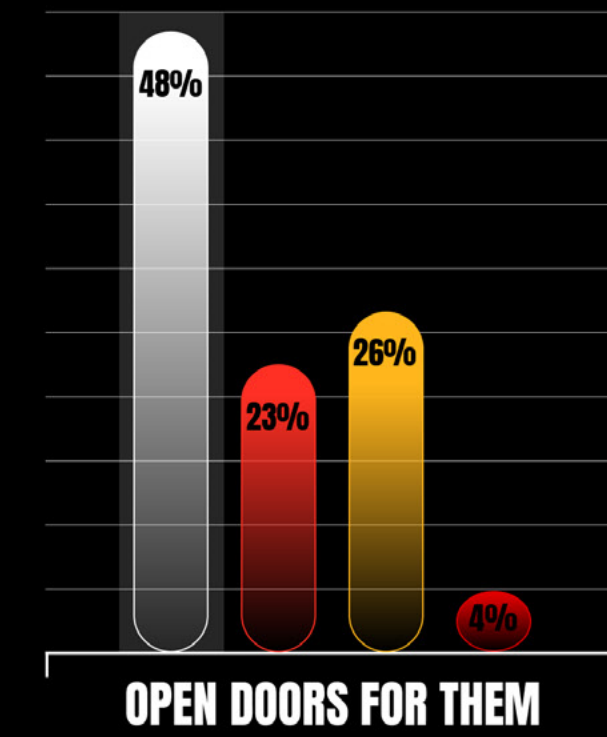
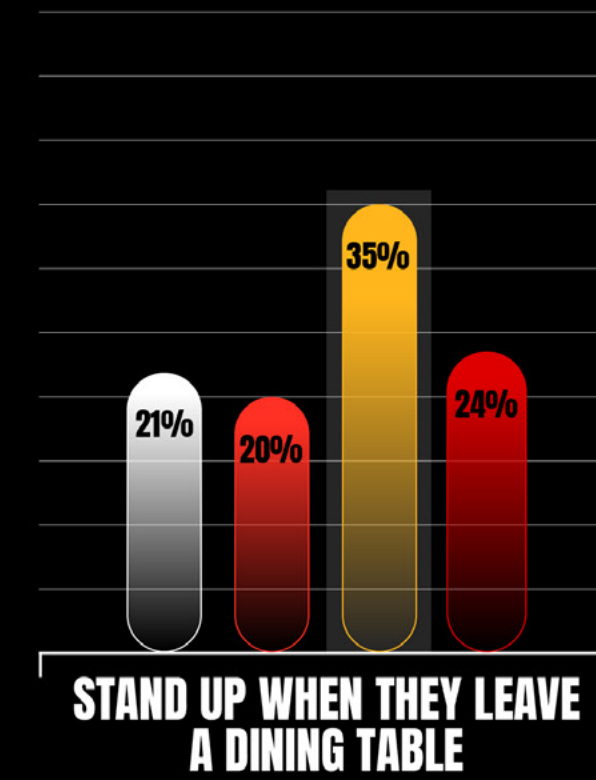
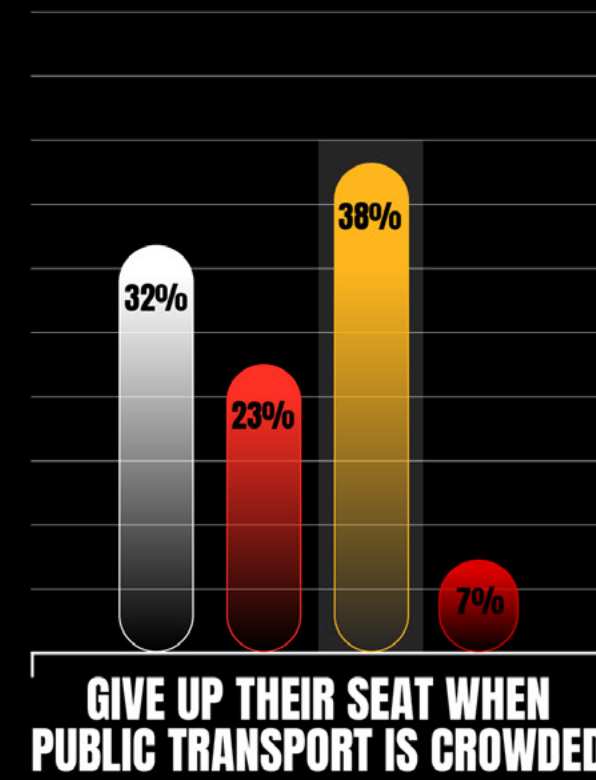
This may be a realignment of modern values or, as one respondent put it:

“Men are so drowned in worry that it reduces their ability to even think about being chivalrous”

Juber, 31, Leeds

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, DO YOU THINK MEN SHOULD DO FOR WOMEN?

(Male respondents)



n=735 UK online adult men aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

HOW WE 'SEE' GENDER

MEN 'SEE' GENDER MORE THAN WOMEN

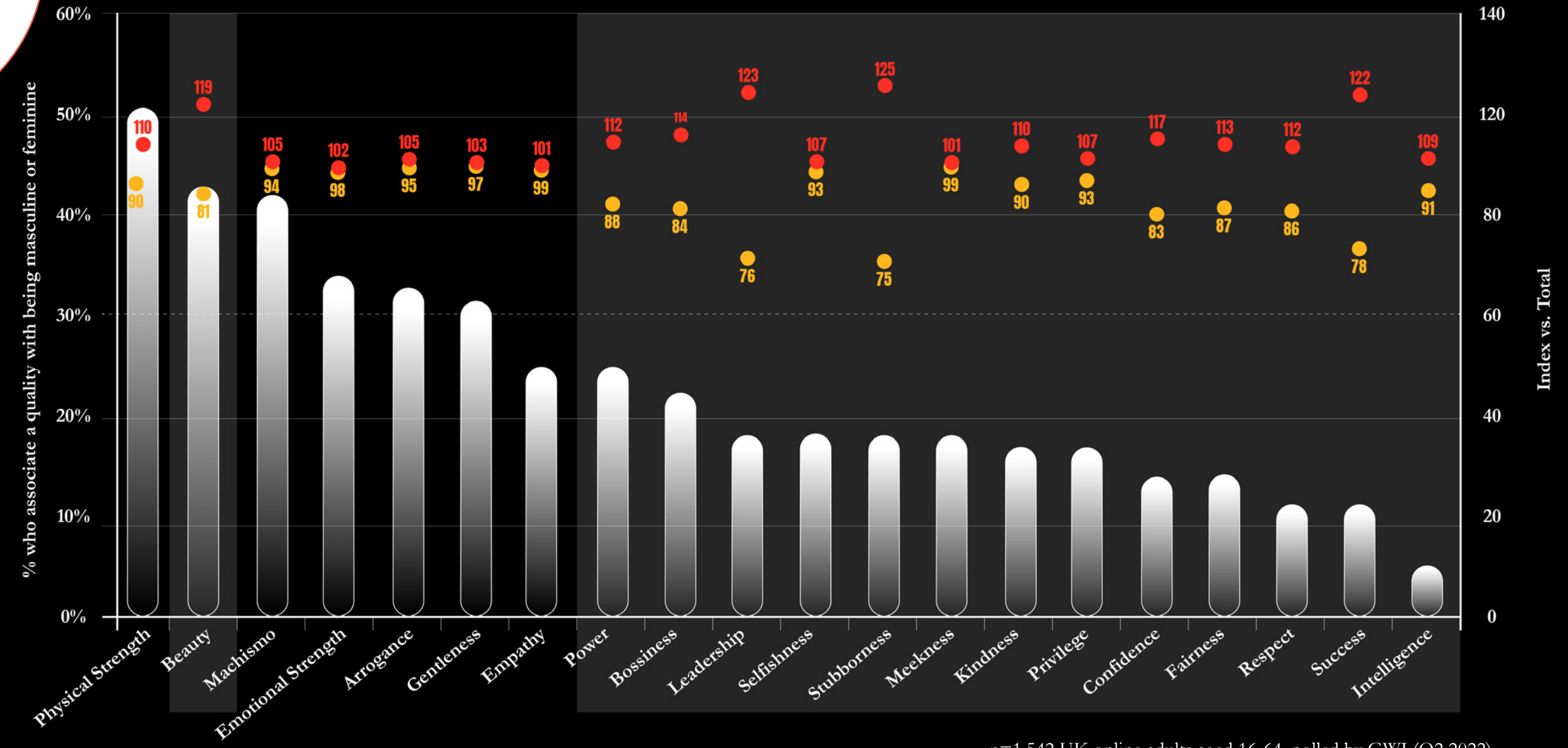
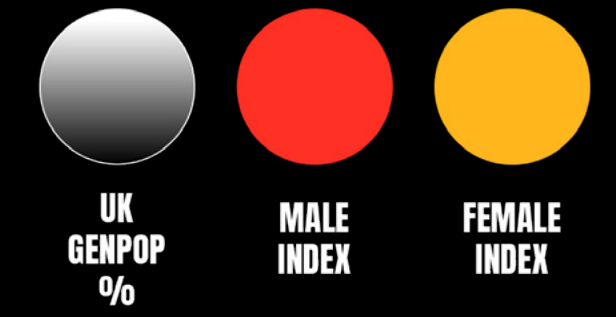
Another interesting theme is how male and females attribute characteristics to a gender (ie to say that Gentleness is more likely to be a male or female trait, versus not being associated with any gender). Here, it appears that men are more likely to 'see' gender than women.

That is, men are 10% more likely - and women 10% less likely - to associate a particular quality with being masculine or feminine. Only **Arrogance** and **Privilege** are the exceptions to this rule.

Men are **100%** more likely to associate a particular quality with being masculine or feminine

Women are **100%** less likely to associate a particular quality with being masculine or feminine


% WHO SAY A PARTICULAR QUALITY IS EITHER 'MASCULINE' OR 'FEMININE'



n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

The index (e.g. 110) tells you how much more or less likely an audience is to exhibit a particular trait compared to the base (in this case, UK Gen Pop).

An index above 100 means an audience is more likely to code a particular quality as Masculine or Feminine, while an index below 100 means they're less likely.

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a woman's eye. The eye is dark and looking slightly to the right. The eyelashes are long and dark. The skin around the eye is fair and has a soft texture. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of the eye and the texture of the eyelashes.

On the right hand side of the map, we show qualities that were less gendered overall, such as ‘Intelligence’, ‘Success’ and ‘Respect’. But when we drilled down into the gender of respondents, these qualities reveal the biggest gulfs in perception between men and women. Men are much more likely to associate these qualities with a gender.

On the left hand side of the map, qualities that were more gendered overall, like ‘Machismo’, generally revealed closer alignment between male and female responses. Less volatility, more agreement.

But there is an interesting outlier: men are far more likely than women to associate a gender with ‘Beauty’.

ADDRESSING TOXIC MASCULINITY

There is a group of c.3.5m people that actively hold contrary but non-progressive views on masculinity.

The data so far represents a more 'normative' view. There is an assumption that masculinity is becoming more modern, inclusive and fluid. However, digging deeper into the data reveals a strong dynamic shaping the definition with contrarian, non-progressive views.

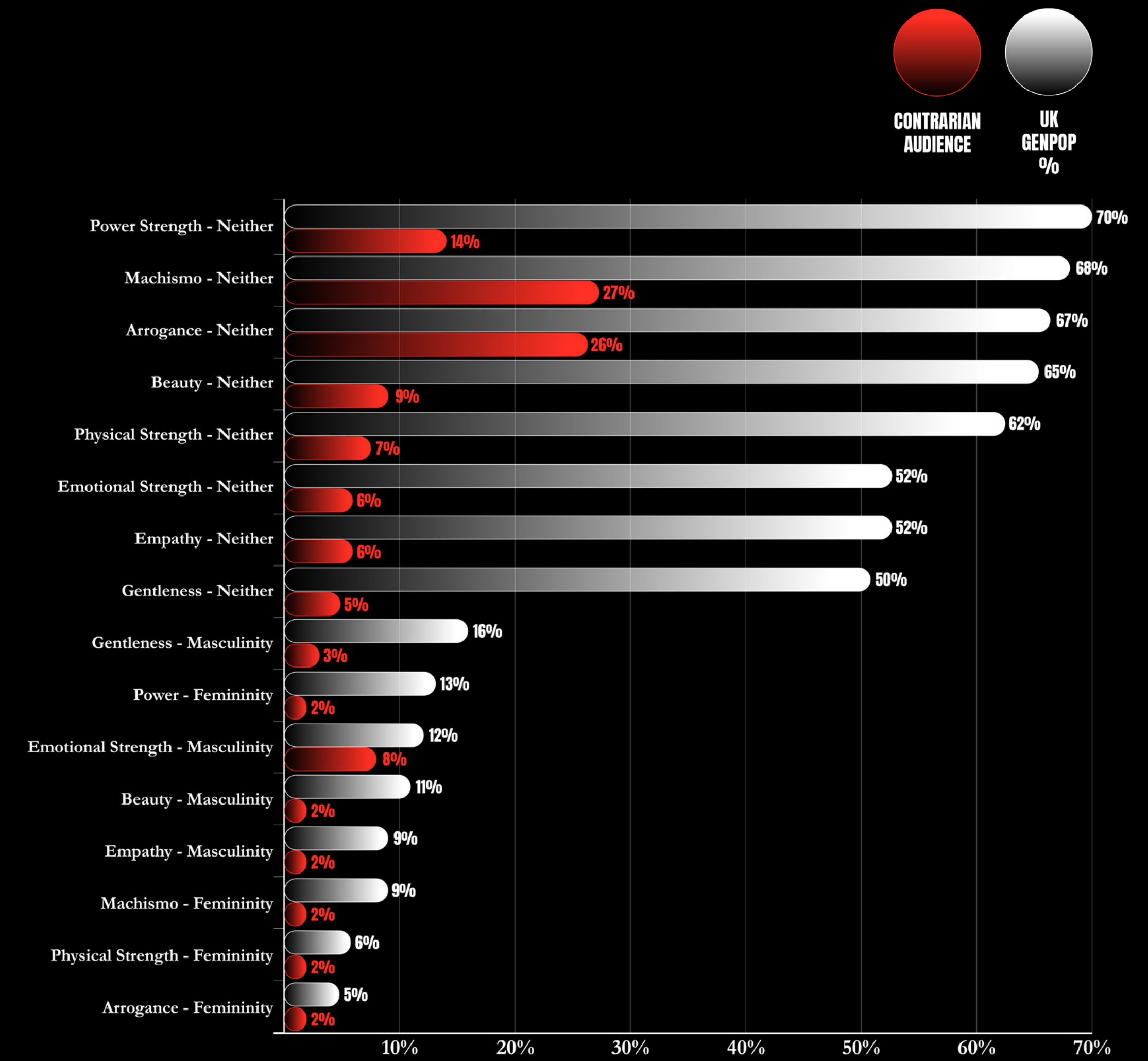
This is a male group who, on the one-hand, are more likely to code more negative or traditionally masculine attributes (eg **Machismo** and **Arrogance**) as neither gender. On the other hand, they over-index for coding qualities traditionally associated with feminine qualities as being masculine (eg **Gentleness** and **Emotional Strength**).

Could this signal pushback against narratives of 'toxic masculinity'? In the qualitative research we heard a weariness of polarising portrayals of

men reigning in popular culture at the moment, like 'Love Island dickheads'. So maybe there's an appetite for more multifaceted portrayals of men?

THINKING ABOUT THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES & CHARACTERISTICS, WHAT WOULD YOU ASSOCIATE THEM WITH?

HOW OUR CONTRARIAN AUDIENCE COMPARED TO THE GENERAL POPULATION (AUDIENCE %)



'Contrarian' audience (n=121), extracted from a total sample of n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

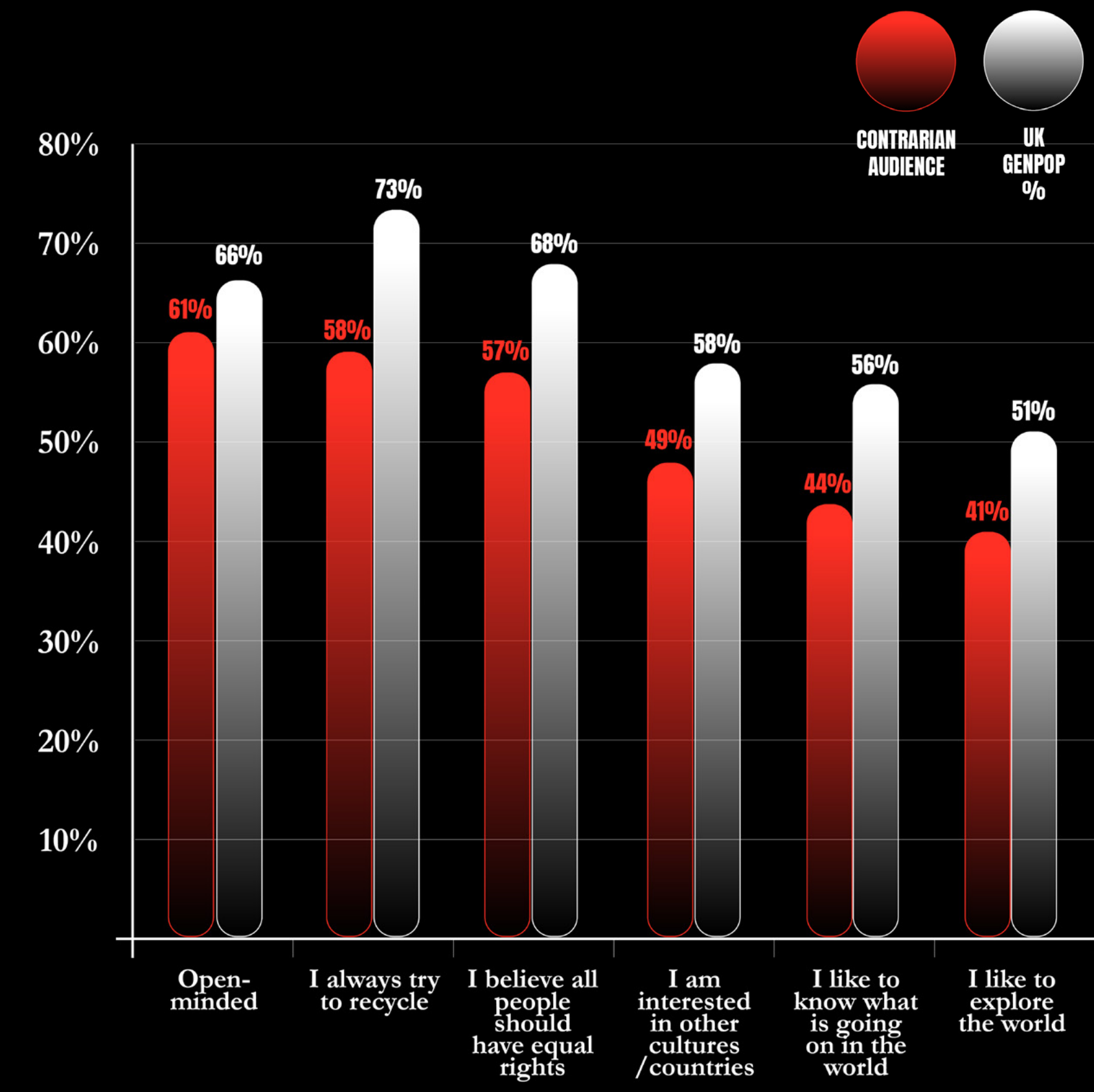
To qualify for our 'Contrarian' audience, respondents had to agree with at least 4 'contrarian' views on individual qualities. For example, associating 'Machismo' with 'Femininity', or 'Power' with neither 'Masculinity' or 'Femininity'.

However, we also found that this contrarian group correlated with less progressive views overall, such as **Interest in other cultures, Recycling** and **Open-mindedness**.

In a world of Andrew Tate and incels, it is tempting to read this as resistance and at worst, chauvinism. This may be true, but other factors may be at play.

Is this apathy to the debate during a time of pandemic and a cost of living crisis? A defensive response driven by fear of change? A [cry for help](#) from a group that finds themselves making up the majority of prison populations, homelessness and suicide (ie men)? It is not our intent to excuse, more an invitation to dig deeper.

'DESCRIBES ME' (% OF CONTRARIAN AUDIENCE)



'Contrarian' audience (n=121), extracted from a total sample of n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

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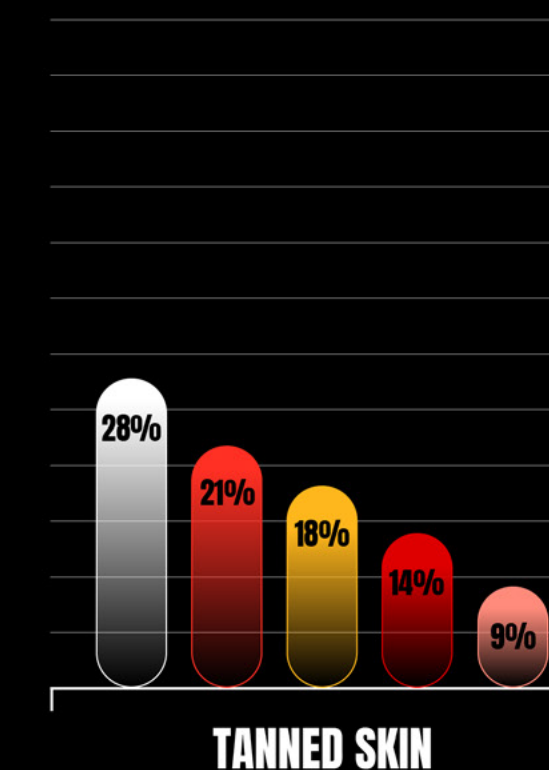
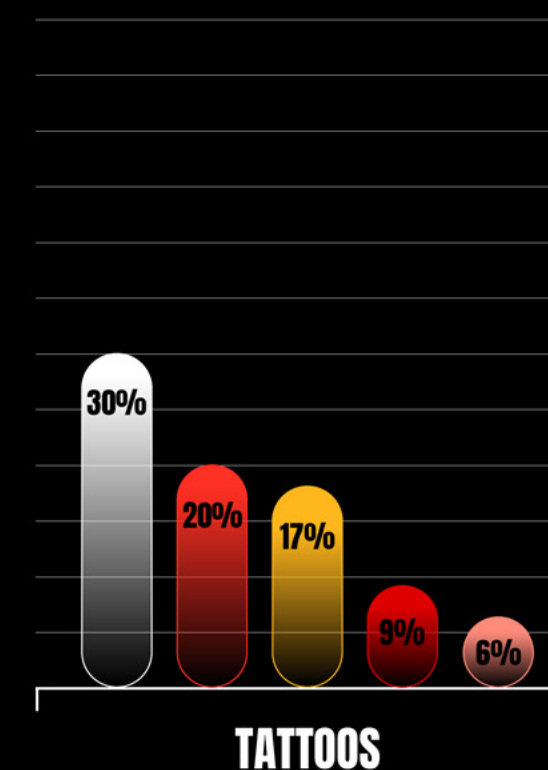
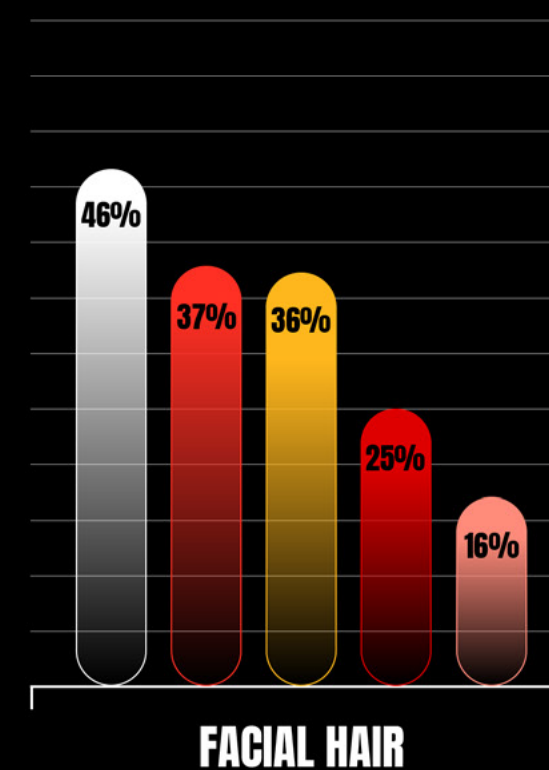
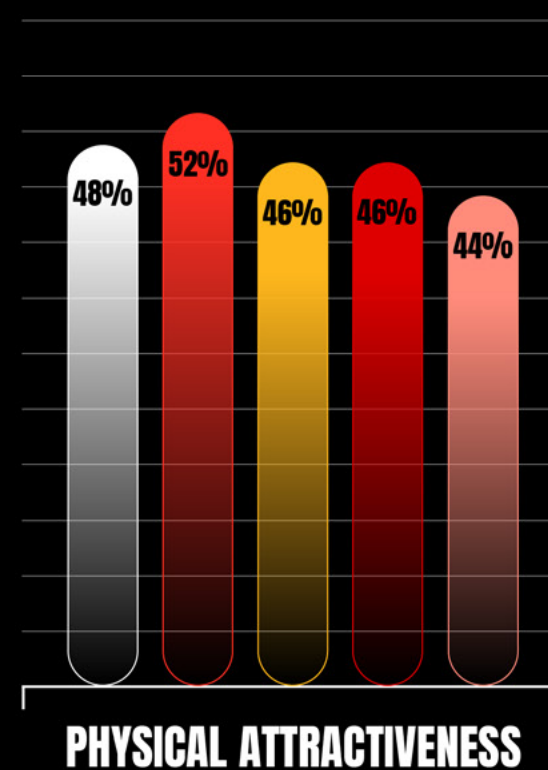
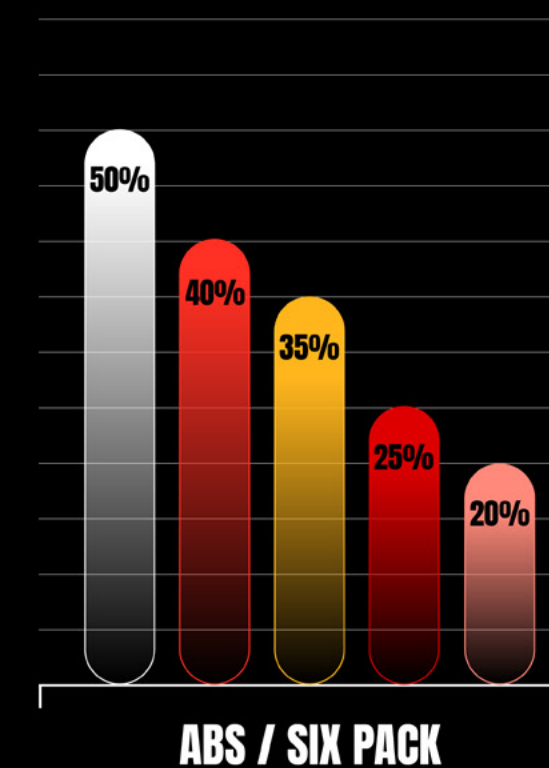
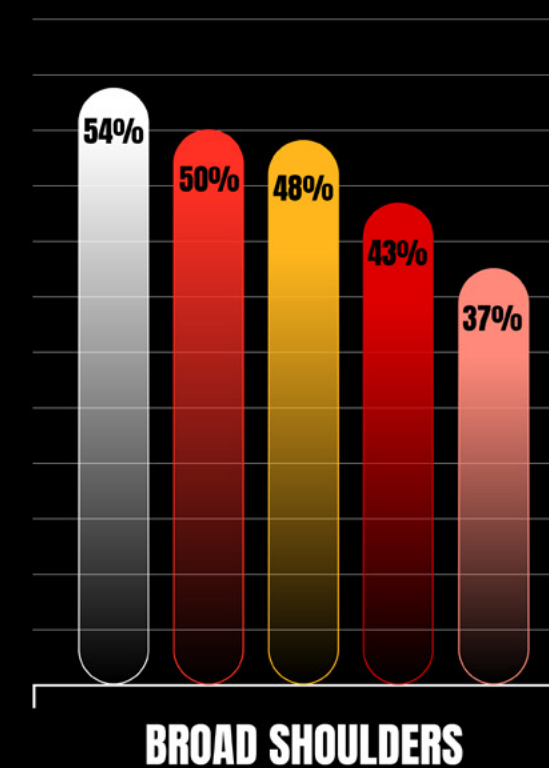
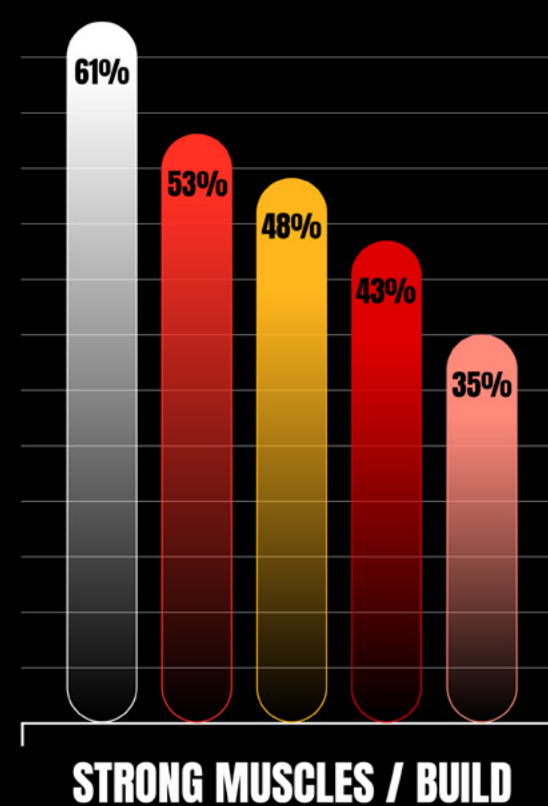


WHAT DIDN'T WE FIND?

The most noteworthy omission was traditionalism amongst older cohorts. We had a presumption that older audiences may have selected or called out a more old-school definition of masculinity - behaving with chivalry, being strong, and so forth.

In fact, we found that younger cohorts are far more likely to label 'big muscles' and 'six packs' as masculine traits than older audiences.

HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK THE FOLLOWING ATTRIBUTES ARE FOR SOMEONE TO BE CONSIDERED 'MASCULINE'?



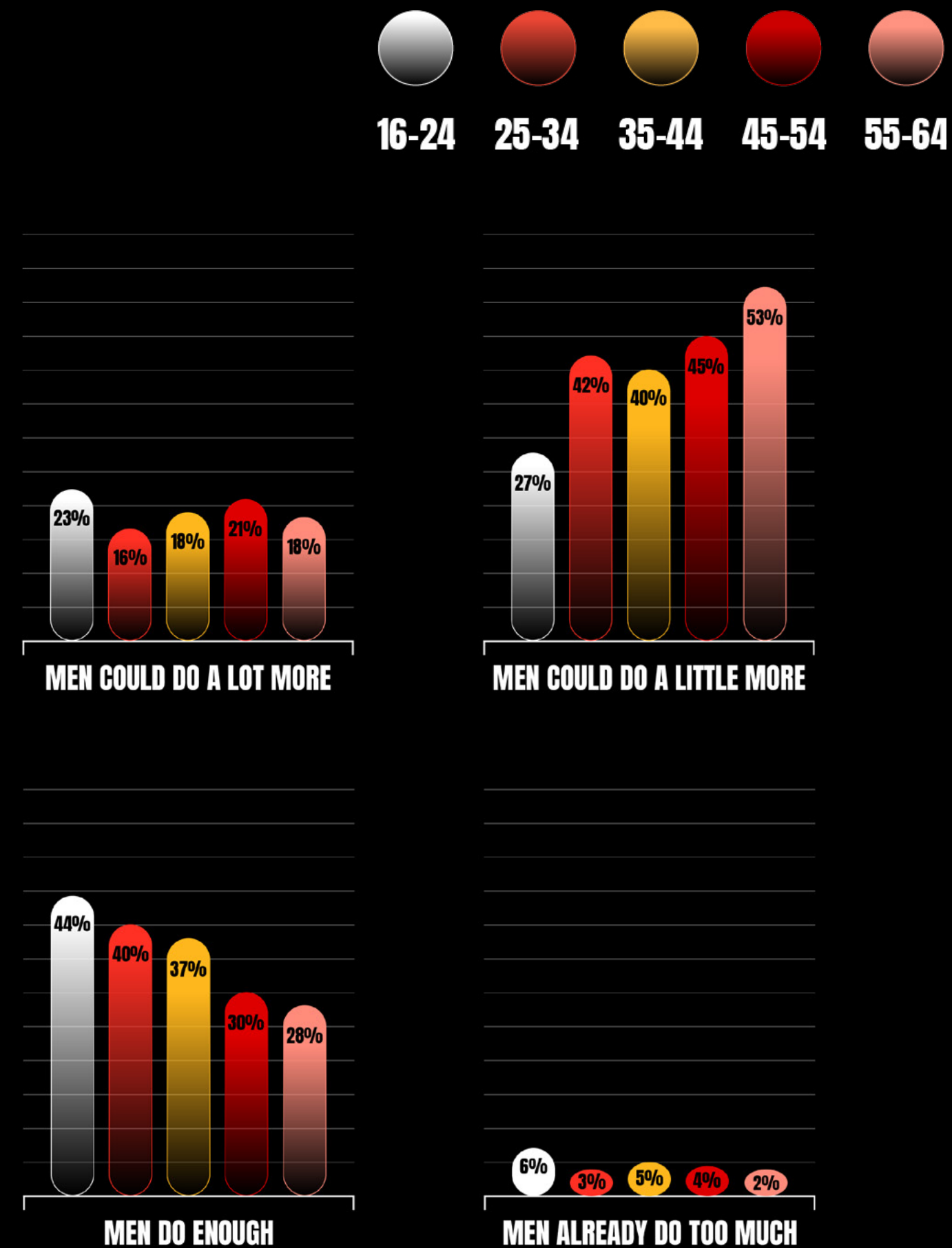
n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).

Equally, we found that younger people are more likely to say men ‘do enough’ and older generations ask for ‘men to do more’ in terms of allyship with women.

This may be generations using men from their own group as a reference point. Or older generations being less focused on broader gender debates (ie gender loses importance in the traditional view of simply men and women). Or something else. We don’t know, but it was unexpected.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, DO YOU THINK MEN IN THE UK DO ENOUGH TO SHOW THEIR “ALLYSHIP” TO WOMEN?

By “allyship”, we mean behaviours and actions that support women



n=1,542 UK online adults aged 16-64, polled by GWI (Q2 2022).



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS

MASCULINITY IS SUBJECTIVE

There are subtleties in both masculinity and male representation. It took us too long to dismantle wives and mothers as sole female characters and daintiness and pretty as feminine representations, let's not make the same mistakes with masculinity. It can feel like there is a certain venom hidden in topics discussing masculinity (eg Dusty Sons and Boy Math) though it needn't be toxic and it needn't be 'woke'. There is so much ground in the middle. The definition is broadening.

In fact, for some, talking about masculinity is a turn-off (42% say being masculine is unimportant) but feel very passionate once you get into the debate. Maybe masculinity is too broad and or too charged and we need to get deeper into the debate.

Think about how your segmentation is matching up to this?

Chat to your audience. Profile them differently. Mix up your research groups (I love pairs - it stops friends lying).

IT'S HARD

Don't stress it. Everything is fluid. You don't need to be part of the debate (cf Gillette), just open and inclusive and representative. We'll all get it wrong for someone, the strategy is to genuinely try hard to get it right. But beware the bubble. As much as the noise increases others are leaning out from or even going against it. It's not a hot topic for most. You need to dig into it to get a response.

There isn't a need to jump in two-footed with a rallying cry for men or a 'thumbs-up' for men. The likes of 'This Girl Can' were much more pointed campaigns aimed to reframe topics and categories from and for a more authentic female perspective. It was a correction of previous approaches and a promotion of unheard voices.

FIND NEW ROLES FOR MEN

There are an increasing number of modes that demonstrate a more modern, less

toxic and inclusive form of masculinity. It's no longer a 90s model of the modern man being a beer buddy for the lads and a charmer for the ladies, more a case of the roles men play in broader society, particularly in the context of families.

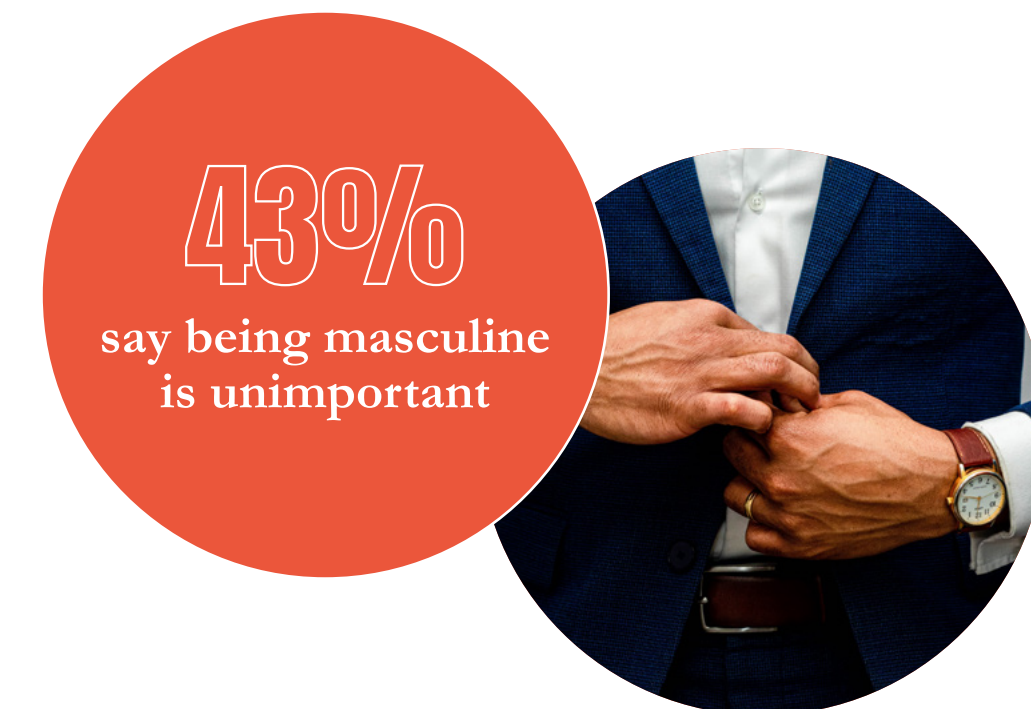
The role of a father is a great example. According to the ONS working dads were on average spending 39 minutes on childcare for every 60 spent by working mothers and 40 minutes for the equivalent on chores. There is obviously work to be done here but this needs support in the same way that we have helped mothers increase their working hours to 45 minutes for 60 spent by men. There is a common goal here of both parents trying to balance a want to provide for the family both financially and emotionally with roles becoming more fluid.

Avoid the temptation to rail against or embrace the Barbie vision; listen to the debate, consider the different roles in society that men can play, and call it out when the dad is becoming little more than the professional silly-billy.

POWER OF YOUR TONE OF VOICE

This could be a final point in most research documents, but an exploration into modern-masculinity provides a new growing language to describe personality and tone of voice. We can't all be 'Simple, Playful and Real'. How about 'Kind, Empathetic and Strong-Willed'?

Similarly, stretching beyond the narrow Alpha vs Beta definitions of masculinity can open new avenues to help bring your brand to life. Sigma males, for instance, are communicative, self-aware, abrasive, comfortable in themselves, flexible and happy in silence. There is a whole raft of attributes and behaviours beyond the surface of masculinity that can be explored. Define the values of masculinity, not simply its presence.



**THE ROLE OF A FATHER IS A GREAT EXAMPLE.
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07 CONCLUSION

Masculinity may be an increasingly used word in society and in marketing, but it's also increasingly complex. From hidden layers of gender-coding to consumers having more prescient things on their mind, it's a new topic for brands to unravel. With this comes an opportunity to better connect with audiences and play a more modern and positive role in society. However, it also comes with a challenge too: avoiding the social media extremes of toxicity and 'wokeness'. Indeed, there is an ever-growing middle ground to explore if brands are willing to go deeper in their understanding of the issue.

This report has only scratched the surface and is by no means complete, final nor exhaustive. Rather, we hope that it serves as an invitation to dig deeper and understand more. We're looking forward to seeing where it gets taken and how it gets used.

MORE FROM BBH & GWI

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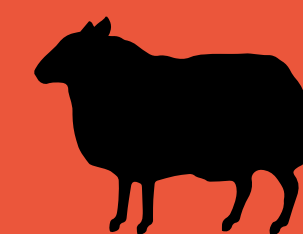
Chief Research Officer,
GWI



METHODOLOGY

For this research, GWI re-interviewed 1,542 UK consumers aged 16-64 who had already completed its ongoing quarterly Core study, covering a wide range of questions on psychographics, lifestyles and digital behaviours. In the follow-up survey, we asked them about their thoughts and opinions on masculinity, using a series of questions co-created by GWI and BBH. Online fieldwork took place between October 7th – October 22nd 2022

In addition to the quantitative element, we conducted a number of focus groups with UK consumers (across a broad range of demographics: age, gender, ethnicity, region and income) to add texture to the data findings. The fieldwork was done in partnership with Northstar Research and took place between February 1st - February 3rd 2023.



GWI.