

# Unveiling Masculinity: A Critical Analysis of Racial Representation in Men's Health Covers

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From fitness magazines to blockbuster films, American media has long celebrated the ideal of the “strong man”—disciplined, confident, and in control. Yet who gets to embody that ideal has never been equal. *Men's Health* magazine, one of the most widely circulated fitness and lifestyle publications for men, serves as a prime example of this cultural sculpting. Through its covers, workout advice, and celebrity features, the magazine promotes an image of masculinity that merges physical perfection with social success. It showcases a wide range of hypermasculine ideals that intersect markedly with racial identities. This paper aims to dissect these intersections, particularly focusing on how the magazine's portrayal of masculinity differs across racial groups and reinforces specific hierarchies of desirability. The narrative surrounding white men typically upholds and defends traditional masculine norms, presenting white masculinity as both aspirational and attainable. In stark contrast, African American men are often pigeonholed into roles that highlight physicality over intellect, reinforcing outdated and monolithic stereotypes of primal masculinity. Meanwhile, Asian men encounter a different sort of marginalization characterized by underrepresentation and invisibility; when they are featured, they are often subjected to prevailing stereotypes that commodify their identities while positioning them in opposition to hypermasculine norms, feminizing their identities. *Men's Health* magazine not only upholds hypermasculinity within the framework of whiteness by depicting white men as both paragons and relatable exemplars of traditional masculine norms but also systematically commodifies African American and Asian men, reinforcing enduring racial stereotypes and subtly perpetuating white supremacy.

## The Idealized White Male: Portrayals of Mental and Physical Discipline

In *Men's Health*, portrayals of white hypermasculinity often align with traditional masculine norms, presenting white men as paragons of control, endurance, and desirability while subtly reinforcing racial hierarchies. The magazine repeatedly idealizes the white male body as both disciplined and transcendent—a site where physical mastery becomes a marker of moral and social superiority. Sociologist John Preston, whose research explores race, masculinity, and education, defines hypermasculinity as “a conception that the body itself might be transcended and that corporeal categories may be surpassed”. In his essay “Prosthetic White Hyper-Masculinities and ‘Disaster Education’” (2010), Preston argues that whiteness operates as a prosthetic—a flexible form of privilege that can be “attached and detached” from the body, allowing white men to appear as if they exist beyond racial identity.

This idea reframes whiteness not as an inherent trait but as an aspirational state achieved through bodily control and self-discipline. Within this framework, *Men's Health* participates in what Preston calls a “hyper-masculine, white supremacist project” that seeks to transcend the physical limits of the body while simultaneously reaffirming racial dominance. The magazine's visual language of fitness, transformation, and endurance turns whiteness into a performative ideal—an embodiment of perfection that claims universality while depending on its racialized visibility for power (Krasinski; Renner; McElhenney).



Fig. 1 | John Krasinski

Fig. 2 | Jeremy Renner

This transition is exemplified on the January 2016 *Men's Health* cover featuring actor John Krasinski, which advertises “Age erasers: 5 quick fixes she'll notice,” suggesting that maintaining a youthful appearance is crucial for social and romantic success. The imperative to appear young and the tactics provided to achieve this not only cater to societal standards of attractiveness but also echo the broader theme of transcending bodily limitations. Similarly, the magazine's portrayal of sexual intercourse illustrates a distinct framing of sexual activity not just as an aspect of intimate relationships but as a realm of competition and achievement where bodily limits are challenges to be surpassed. The coupling of the phrases “Lean muscle fast! Results in 9 days” with “Sex Tonight—Instant Action” on actor Jeremy Renner's cover intertwines physical fitness with sexual availability and prowess, reinforcing the notion that the male body must be constantly honed to remain sexually desirable and capable. This narrative implies that sexual satisfaction for both the self and the partner is directly correlated with physical appearance and stamina. Collectively, these covers characterize aging as a controllable challenge and sexual

prowess as an arena of competition, casting white hypermasculinity as an ideal that champions perpetual youth and dominant sexuality as benchmarks of a man's value and success.

Following the portrayal of hypermasculinity as a transcendence over bodily limitations, *Men's Health* further constructs the idealized white male body as not only physically superior but mentally virtuous, framing that such virtues are self-achieved through discipline and intellect. As cultural sociologist Stefan Lawrence, whose research examines race, sport, and masculinity in media, phrases it, "They are depicted as possessing the virtues of both mind and body," leading to what he calls a "miraculous-ordinary" and "average-exceptional" paradox. This paradox involves depicting the white male body in a way that simultaneously normalizes and idolizes it, setting up a discourse that both deifies and makes accessible the ideals of physical and mental virtue. The magazine covers often showcase stories like those of John Krasinski, who shared his "How I Lost 50 Lb" alongside mental health and stress management tips such as "Strike Out Stress" in a comprehensive "Get Back in Shape 21-Day Plan." Such covers suggest that the idealized body is not only about physical appearance but also about mental resilience and intelligence, achieved through self-discipline and careful planning. Similarly, actor Rob McElhenney's feature in *Men's Health*'s May 2021 edition, "Ab Blasters, Memory Boosters, and 257 Ways to Power Up Your Life," exemplifies this paradox. The coverage implies that while the tips are accessible and ordinary, their effects are exceptional, thus maintaining an allure of attainability while promoting a model of superiority. These covers collectively work to reinforce the notion that the pinnacle of masculinity, achievable through personal effort and intellectual commitment, is not merely a physical state but a complex, holistic form



Fig. 3 | Rob McElhenney

of personal development. This not only upholds traditional masculine and racial hierarchies by idealizing a narrowly defined body type and intellectual capability associated with white men but also marginalizes those who fall outside its reach. By intertwining physical prowess with mental discipline, *Men's Health* positions the white male as the apex of desirability and achievement, reinforcing a standard that masquerades as universally attainable while remaining racially exclusive.

### The Narrow Portrayal of African American Men: Physicality Over Complexity

A stark contrast emerges between the treatment of white and African American men. While white masculinity is elevated through narratives that emphasize mental and physical discipline, African American masculinity is often confined to depictions that focus almost solely on physicality, reinforcing long-standing racial stereotypes. In contrast to the nuanced portrayal of white men that Preston and Lawrence describe—where hypermasculinity involves transcending both bodily and mental limits to achieve a blend of physical and intellectual supremacy—black hypermasculinity in *Men's Health* is often not afforded such complexity.

African American men like Durang Atembe and Michael B.



Fig. 4 | Durang Atembe

Fig. 5 | Michael B. Jordan

Jordan are predominantly showcased in contexts that emphasize their physical attributes over any intellectual or emotional depth. For instance, fitness trainer Durang Atembe is featured with phrases like "Muscle Made Easy" and "The Best Body Hacks—Plus: The New Rules of Testosterone," which not only trivialize the effort required to achieve such a physique but also suggest that these physical traits are easily attainable for men like him, possibly due to innate physical qualities rather than hard work or intellectual engagement. Similarly, actor Michael B. Jordan's portrayal under headlines like "Beach Muscle Right Now!" and "Protein Up Your Diet" focuses on immediate physical gratification and aesthetic standards rather than any long-term personal growth or discipline. This framing sharply contrasts with the covers featuring white men, such as John Krasinski's or Rob McElhenney's, which emphasize long-term transformation and the fusion of mental discipline with physical fitness. Together, these portrayals reveal a racial divide in how *Men's Health* constructs masculinity: while white men are depicted as thoughtful architects of their strength, black men are presented as naturally powerful but intellectually absent. This disparity simplifies African American masculinity and reinforces the magazine's broader hierarchy of who is permitted to embody a complete, disciplined ideal.

The visual representation of Black men in *Men's Health* also reinforces racialized stereotypes by situating them within narrowly defined images of physicality and strength. Contrasting with the magazine's usual style—which often features white male models against clean, neutral backgrounds and in relaxed stances—African American cover models are frequently shown in more dynamic and visually charged poses. The cover featuring Durang Atembe depicts him with outdoor lighting, his body angled mid-stride and his expression joyful, accentuating motion and vitality. His bare torso and the headline "Muscle Made Easy" link his physique to effortlessness, implying that strength is an innate quality rather than the product of discipline or intellect. This visual framing transforms vitality into stereotype: it celebrates athleticism while reinforcing the idea that Black masculinity exists primarily within the realm of the physical. In contrast, Michael B. Jordan's cover places him before a dark studio backdrop overlaid with faint words like "stamina," "speed," and "strength." His raised fists and direct gaze project focus and control, while headlines such as "Get Black Panther Fit" and "Beach Muscle Right Now" merge the language of cinematic heroism with commodified fitness culture. The stark lighting emphasizes his musculature and intensity, coding Black masculinity as powerful yet contained within bodily performance. Across these covers, men of color are

consistently framed through movement, muscle, and readiness—visual tropes that differ from the balanced, lifestyle-oriented depictions of white men in the same publication. While both Atembe and Jordan are portrayed as strong and successful, their representation remains confined to a physical register, limiting Black masculinity to athleticism and bodily achievement.

### The Commodification of Black Masculinity: Selling Superhero Fitness

Moreover, covers on *Men's Health* not only perpetuate a hypermasculine ideal focused on physicality but also commodify the racial identity of African American men. Sociologists Eric Primm, Summer DuBois, and Robert M. Regoli, whose research examines media representation, race, and criminal justice, argue in their analysis of *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers that this portrayal of African American models is “not the liberation and enhancement of an oppressed minority, but the commodification and expropriation of their difference and resistance”. This observation is parallel to the trends seen in *Men's Health*, where the physicality of African American men is not only highlighted but also part of its marketing strategy. Much like the feats of athleticism in *Sports Illustrated*, *Men's Health* covers featuring black men often market their racial identity as a unique selling point, capitalizing on their roles in culturally significant films to attract attention and sell issues. For instance, Michael B. Jordan (Figure 5) is showcased with the tagline “Get Black Panther Fit—Billion Dollar Man Michael B. Jordan,” leveraging his role in a blockbuster film that holds significant weight in African American culture. The phrase “Billion Dollar Man” not only alludes to the commercial success of “Black Panther” but also implies that Jordan's physique and fitness regime are intrinsically linked to the commodified success of his film character. This reduces his identity and hard work to a product that can be consumed by the reader, suggesting that with the right workout, anyone can “acquire” a body like that of an African American superhero. In contrast, *Men's Health* often frames white male bodies through narratives of discipline and self-determination, presenting their physiques as reflections of inner virtue rather than spectacle. is commodified and aestheticized for its physicality and market appeal.



Fig. 6 | Anthony Mackie



Fig. 7 | Jonathan Majors

This pattern of commodification extends beyond Black Panther to other representations of Black heroism in *Men's Health*. Actor Anthony Mackie's cover with “Who is the New Captain America?” and “Anthony Mackie on The Endgame Shocker + The Future of Marvel” centers on his role in the Marvel Cinematic Uni-

verse, highlighting a transition of symbolic American heroism from a white to a black actor. While seemingly empowering, this rhetoric primarily benefits the magazine's appeal and sales, banking on the fame and intrigue surrounding the Marvel franchise. The “Endgame Shocker” and “Future of Marvel” taglines tantalize the reader with insider knowledge, but the underlying intent is to commodify Mackie's racial identity as part of a broader commercial narrative. His ascension to a traditionally white heroic role is used as a selling point, commodifying the significance of a black man's portrayal of Captain America as a novelty rather than a substantive step towards diversity.

The phrasing, “How Marvel's Baddest Villain Yet Built This Body”, on actor Jonathan Majors' *Men's Health* cover further encapsulates the magazine's approach to commodification. This headline does more than highlight a rigorous training regime; it transforms Majors' physical transformation for his role into a blueprint for physical success that can ostensibly be replicated by the magazine's readership. By doing so, it commodifies not just Majors' image but also the idea of physical fitness as an attainable commodity, packaged and sold through the appeal of a culturally significant film role. In the case of *Sports Illustrated*, the individual narratives of African American models and the broader cultural significance of their roles are overshadowed by the commodification process (Primm et al.). The same pattern can be seen in *Men's Health*: Their presence on the cover is less about celebrating African American success and more about exploiting their current popularity for commercial gain. In contrast, white actors featured in the magazine—such as John Krasinski or Jeremy Renner—are rarely framed as commodities. Instead, their appearances often center on narratives of personal discipline, self-improvement, and authenticity. The titles chosen by *Men's Health* do not just promote a film or a celebrity; they market a lifestyle product that is intertwined with the commercial success of blockbuster cinema, reducing the actors' embodiments of their characters to mere fitness milestones for the consumer. This commodification risks undermining the potential for genuine representation by prioritizing marketability over the celebration of racial diversity and personal achievement.

### The Stereotyped Portrayal of Asian Masculinity: Invisibility and Singularity

In contrast to the extensive and multifaceted portrayal of white and African American masculinities, Asian men encounter a markedly different representation in *Men's Health* magazine. Their visibility is not only rare but also lacks the depth and focus afforded to their counterparts. This pattern of underrepresentation and superficiality is supported by research from Joanna Schug and her colleagues, psychologists whose work examines racialized perceptions of gender in media and social cognition (Schug et al.). Their study highlights the dual invisibility Asian men face due to prevailing gendered race stereotypes. These stereotypes often depict Asian men as less masculine, positioning them opposite to the hypermasculine norms celebrated in Western media (Schug et al.). *Men's Health*'s exclusion of Asian men can be seen as part of a broader issue in which Asian identities are often feminized or de-sexualized in popular media, contradicting the typical hypermasculine archetype. Communication scholar Chiung Hwang Chen, in her analysis of Asian American male representation in U.S. film and television, traces how media narratives have historically portrayed Asian men as submissive, asexual, or effeminate figures. This portrayal has significant implications, as it not only marginalizes but also simplifies the complex identities of Asian men, reduc-

ing their presence to occasional features rather than regular, in-depth explorations of their lives and challenges. An example of this can be seen in the rare cover featuring actor Simu Liu in May 2021, which was the magazine's first cover featuring an Asian man since Jet Li in 2004. Headlining "Every Body is Strong—Skinny! Stocky! Short! Tall!" and "Unlock Your Power No Matter What Your Size," Liu's cover attempts to be inclusive and empowering. However, this singular portrayal does not compensate for years of underrepresentation. The message, while positive, still marks a significant departure from the typical narrative arcs given to white or black cover models, who are often depicted with stories of overcoming personal or physical challenges that highlight their robust masculinity and mental toughness. Moreover, Primm's analysis of the commodification of minority bodies provides a critical lens through which to view this representation. Like African American and other minority models, the inclusion of Simu Liu coincides with commercial imperatives rather than a genuine commitment to diversity. Liu's cover, branded with "Simu Liu is Action's Next Superstar, Hollywood's New Changemaker, The Future of Marvel," leverages his role in a blockbuster franchise to attract readership. This commercial angle can overshadow the potential to explore deeper narratives related to Asian masculinity, reinforcing the notion that minority figures are often valued more for their marketability than for their actual experiences or achievements.

Furthermore, the quality of representation, such as the alleged poor quality of photoshopping noted on some covers, can subtly imply a lack of care or importance given to these models, further enhancing the sense of marginalization. In the *Men's Health* cover featuring Simu Liu, the lighting and editing appear unusually harsh, creating an artificial gloss that flattens his features and washes out the texture of his skin. These aesthetic choices differ from the smoother, more balanced tones typically applied to white male celebrities, where attention to detail conveys polish and prestige. High-quality imagery is often associated with importance and value. By allowing lower standards of production for covers featuring Asian men, the publication may unconsciously convey that these subjects are less important or less appealing to their audience. This reinforces invisibility by obscuring the individuality and complexity of Asian men, reducing them to symbolic figures of diversity rather than multidimensional subjects worthy of the same care and presentation as their white or Black counterparts. It also suggests that the magazine does not view uplifting or accurately portraying Asian masculinity as a priority, thus contributing to the ongoing marginalization of Asian men in media narratives. The quality of presentation in Simu Liu's cover serves as a metaphor for the broader issues of visibility, representation, and respect for Asian men in media. The quality of presentation in Simu Liu's cover encapsulates this contradiction: while intended as an act of inclusion, it ultimately reveals how visibility can coexist with inequality, where representation signifies presence but not parity.

## Conclusion

The exploration of hypermasculinity in *Men's Health* magazine reveals a complex interplay of racial narratives that both uphold and challenge traditional gender norms. White men are often portrayed as paragons of both physical and intellectual achievement, embodying an aspirational and holistic ideal of masculinity that transcends mere physical prowess. In stark contrast, African American men are frequently depicted in ways that emphasize physicality over intellect, reinforcing historical stereotypes of primal masculinity. This reductionist portrayal not only diminishes

their personal achievements but also serves to commodify their identities in the context of popular culture, particularly in roles associated with cinematic heroism. Similarly, the treatment of Asian men in the magazine underscores a pervasive invisibility and marginalization of this racial group, with their singular representation failing to break free from the confines of stereotypes that see them as less inherently masculine. This selective visibility and the qualitative disparity in how these identities are presented not only perpetuate existing racial and gender stereotypes but also underscore the need for a more inclusive and nuanced representation in media. By critically examining these portrayals, this paper highlights the role of popular media in shaping societal perceptions of race and masculinity, calling for a conscientious reevaluation of how these identities are constructed and understood in the public sphere. This reevaluation is essential not only for the sake of fairness and accuracy in representation but also for the broader societal project of dismantling longstanding racial and gender hierarchies. Exposing and critiquing these normative portrayals encourages media producers to adopt more responsible practices that reflect and respect the complexity of all identities, thereby contributing to a more equitable society.



Fig. 8 | Simu Liu

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