

**REACTIONS TO PRINT IMAGES OF BLACK MASCULINITY CAGED IN  
WHITENESS**

by

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## I. Introduction

Studies (e.g., Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Coston & Kimmel, 2012) have reported on the suppression of Black people due to insincere depictions in mass media (i.e., television, advertisements, radio, and film), which also tend to over-generalize the whole group. Indeed, stereotypical depictions of Black people are more a norm than an anomaly in that they typically cross **stereotypical** borders. Scholars (e.g., Luyt, 2012; Viljoen, 2012) have found that imagery in print advertisements over-exaggerate negative associations of Black men, while positive associations are limited. Negative depictions linked to criminality, negative domestic partnerships, gang relations, and other forms of violence are typically publicized. These distorted portrayals have caused media consumers, particularly whites, to develop general resentment towards Black men. Not only do these negative portrayals affect the way media consumers view Black men, but some Black men also begin to subconsciously emulate the type of characteristics in which they are often portrayed. In turn, as a maladaptive response, Black some men convert into their social construct, and thereby embrace a hyper-masculinity- a behavior defined as “the exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability” (Fegley, Harpalani, Seaton, & Spencer, 2004, p. 234).

### *Purpose*

Given the widespread stereotyping and standardization of hyper-masculinity in Western advertisements, this study describes how print advertisements perpetuate images of Black masculinity and how hyper-masculinity, as a negative representation, has prompted young adult,

inner-city Black men to display exaggerated versions of their physical strength, aggression, and sexuality. Overall, it will show how print advertisements of Black masculinity, from the 2000s to the present day, are framed and why some Black men are viewed as perpetrators of hypermasculinity.

### ***Rationale***

Hypermasculinity is a social construction deeply rooted in slavery when Black men were ridiculed by white slave owners who prioritized the strong over the weak. (Davis & Hunter, 1994). From social reform movements, during the civil rights era, to social standards that are upheld today, Black men are consistently depicted under hyper-masculine caricatures. Scholars (e.g., Davis, & Hunter, 1994; Fegley et al., 2004) have mentioned that Black men are incapable of displaying their true masculinities. Black men who display their masculinities are often misinterpreted as hypermasculine and are targeted for exhibiting the same traits as hypermasculine white men. Therefore, Black men are forced to suppress their own masculinity to refrain from possibly being associated or interpreted as hypermasculine simply because they are exhibiting their emotions.

Hypermasculine portrayals of Black men in print advertisements contribute to the perception that Black men are hypermasculine, reaffirming the notion that it is due to their genetic makeup. This simplistic and stereotypical conceptualization ignores other important factors, such as their socioeconomic upbringing. Davis & Hunter (1994) explain how “hypermasculinity (i.e., hyper-aggressiveness, hypersexuality, excessive emphasis on the appearance of wealth, and the absence

of personal accountability) as a dominant conception of manhood in poor inner-city communities, particularly among youth, is seen as a by-product of the pathology and despair of the ‘Black underclass’” (p.23).<sup>7</sup> Fegley et al. (2004) note that young adult, inner-city Black men use hypermasculinity as a coping response due to life stressors they often endure based on their socioeconomic status. Life stressors may include fear of sustained racialization in America and a perceived threat of violence in inner-city neighborhoods. “Socioeconomic status impact[s] the formation of hypermasculine attitudes among urban, low-resource, adolescent males in conjunction with available social supports across family and school settings... Whether it is actual physical spaces (neighborhoods or schools) or social structures (i.e., unemployment, racism, or culture), ecology matters in the lives of developing youth, and the impact of masculine norms, which as noted may be problematic in and of themselves, is exacerbated by ecological risks (Fegley et al., p. 230).” In turn, Black men are incapable of coping with their masculinities - which is often intrinsically confused for hypermasculinity.

By explaining how Black masculinity is caged in whiteness, and thus misinterpreted as hypermasculinity, I hope to challenge the negative depictions of Black masculinity and provide an alternative interpretation that includes positive imagery of Black men. It should be noted that not all young, adult Black men have accepted the stereotyped depictions that print media has popularized. In fact, some Black men have resisted the hypermasculine stereotype by following social media movements like “#BlackBoyJoy, (Young, 2018)” pioneered by Chance the Rapper, and “#BlackMenSmiling. (Williams, 2016)” Resistance is defined as the ways “some men have to position themselves outside the hegemonic (hyper)masculinity in highly unequal, violent settings. (McMillian & Paul, 2011)” McMillian and Paul (2011) elaborate on the dissemination

of hegemonic resistance between a Black family. Francisco, a father of two, lives in a lower middle-class neighborhood. While describing his diverging relationship to his father, Francisco's father was a perpetrator of hypermasculinity, as he allowed "manhood [to] define their relationship" (McMillian & Paul p. 374). In contrast to his father, Francisco described that he would not discipline his children by engaging in violent tactics, rather, he adopted a "non-violent, masculine, and progressive identity. (McMillian et al., p. 375)" Following such movement, similar to Francisco, and thereby challenging the imagery of Black masculinity, will provide an alternative representation of Blackness to the one that is propagated in print advertisements.

### ***Research Questions***

Given the issue of hyper-masculinity as a negative media portrayal of young-adult, Black-men, this paper will address the following research questions:

1. How have print advertisements perpetuated images of Black masculinity since 2000?
2. Why are Black men viewed as perpetrators of hypermasculinity?

The next sections of this paper will outline the approach that I took in gathering and collecting scholarly articles on Black masculinity. Section two of this paper will detail the methods that I used to gather articles and become more informed about how Black masculinity is framed in print media and what factors contribute to the perpetuation of Black hypermasculinity. A review of relevant literature about black masculinity will follow. The last section of this paper

will recap the discussions and issues highlighted in this paper as well as propose suggestions for future research incorporating the perspectives of young, Black American men.

## II. Methodology

The literature review is structured around the initial research questions: How have print advertisements perpetuated images of Black masculinity since 1990 and why are Black men viewed as perpetrators of hypermasculinity? It examines how the caricature of hypermasculinity comes from reincarnated images that depicted Black masculinity from post-colonial eras. The literature review then assess the dynamic between Black (hyper)masculinity and white hegemony. Assuming that white masculinity coincides with hegemony, it finds that socioeconomic factors and hyper-vulnerability contribute to Black hypermasculinity. Lastly, the literature review considers those who challenge hegemonic standards, deviating away from hypermasculinity. While constructing the literature review, scholarly sources that elaborated on hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity were examined. By examining these sources, I gained further insight of the topic and the dialogue that hypermasculinity has generated within (and outside) the walls of academia. This deeper understanding helped to dispel any rather than biased views I may have had prior to engaging in my own research.

Within my research, I pulled redefined imagery of Black masculinity from an online archive, which is included in Appendix A. Camila Falquez' photography poses an opposition to typical depictions of Black masculinity, by posing Black men as "radically soft. (Wheeler, 2017)" According to Wheeler (2017), radical softness is an internet-born sensation that's fixated on Black vulnerability. It possesses an "aesthetic filled with pastel colors, bare skin, and emotional

honesty,” (p.#), which are typically portrayed as feminine characteristics. In the imagery (see Appendix A), a Black man is posed with a soft pink color, sheer curtains, bubbles, and a natural afro hairstyle. As Black men are moving progressively towards accepting vulnerability in themselves in the imagery used to represent them, imagery like this is trending on social media. This poses an example of the type of imagery that is presented across the #BlackBoyJoy movement, which thrives off of social media. Similar to the #BlackGirlMagic movement, which “refers to the general awesomeness and beauty of Black women (Santana, 2018),” #BlackBoyJoy was created to “strip Black men of the stereotype that Black men can only be angry or tough. (Santana, 2018)” Artists like Chance the Rapper, Lil Yachty, and Young Thug have “revolutionized the way we see Black men in the media, (Santana, 2018),” expressing a carefree character, being that they’re not afraid to blur gender normalities (Félix, 2016). As Black-male celebrities have begun to accept and normalize soft masculinity, this movement has spread on social media, where Black men post photos displaying their personal versions of joyful masculinity and tag #Blackboyjoy. Following this work, I actively repost positive representations of Black masculinity on my social media. The more that this imagery circulates, the more Black men can internalize that they are able to express their full range of emotions without being victimized. It is important to present positive imagery of Black masculinity, to which Black men can refer to as a role model, and emulate. Falquez’ imagery presents an illustration of what researchers could use to identify Black masculinity in the future.

### III. Literature Review

#### *(White) Hegemonic Masculinity vs. (Black) Hypermasculinity*

Scholars (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2010) found that some adolescent, inner-city Black men conform to hypermasculinity as a maladaptive response to stereotypical media portrayals, socioeconomic stressors, violence in urban neighborhoods, and hegemonic masculinity- that is, the standard that constitutes male dominance and the proper way to be a “real man. (Bengtsson, 2015)” White men are often considered the beholder of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the gatekeepers for the suppression of Black masculinity. In contrast to Black men, white men are able to emphasize distorted levels of power and are referred to as hegemonic, rather than hypermasculine.

Therefore, print advertisers “perpetuate stereotypes about Black males by stigmatizing their aggressive behavior as problematic while allowing aggressive behavior among white males to go virtually unacknowledged and unexamined (Fegley et al., 2004, p. 235).”

Cassidy et al. (2005) have also reviewed how the interpretation of masculinity changes based on the intersection of class and socioeconomic status. Advertisements consistently depict adolescent Black men, from lower-class, inner-city neighborhoods as a perpetrators of violence in comparison to white men. Bengtsson (2015) notes that “hypermasculinity is not alone to be understood as the expression of the individual young person’s performances, but rather as the dominating institutional frame guiding all gendered performances. (Bengtsson)” Being that print advertisements consistently demonize Black masculinity, while bypassing white hypermasculine behaviors, Black men are interpreted as beholders of hypermasculinity. Therefore, Black men share an adverse relationship with hegemonic masculinity because they are viewed as hypermasculine for exhibiting the same traits as white men (Oware, 2011). According to Coston and Kimmel (2015), “male privilege is compromised by marginalization” (p.97) in that Black

men are incapable of displaying emotions without being victimized as hypermasculine. Luyt (2012) adds further support to this argument as they maintain that white men “are represented as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity whilst black men are marginalized” (p. 35).

Other studies (e.g. Cassidy et al., 2005) have noted that Black men emphasize their masculinity as a coping mechanism to inner vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities arrive from socioeconomic status, lack of social support, continued racialization, hegemonic norms (Fegley et al., 2004). “In this way, their hypermasculinity may actually serve as a mask, a ‘hyper-mask-ularity,’ that disguises the vulnerability and powerlessness that may emerge from living in dangerous, unpredictable contexts (Cassidy et al., p.57).” Adolescent Black males, in urban neighborhoods, associate aggressive behavior with hyper-vulnerability. Socioeconomic limitations are also factors to consider because it furthers white suppressions of Black masculinity. Scholars (Fegley et al., 2004) noted that cultural stereotypes related to hypermasculinity are factors that contribute to the victimization and high incarceration rates of inner-city, adolescent Black men. In inner-city, low-poverty neighborhoods, policing is higher than those presented in affluent neighborhoods. “The impact of neighborhood on delinquency is potentially overestimated because the roles of officer and policing bias are not included... Minority youth were more likely than white youth to face charges for the same offense. (Fegley et al., 2004; p. 236)” Therefore, socioeconomic factors contribute to the interpretation of Black masculinity because inner-city, adolescent Black men are targeted by the law enforcement due to stereotypes about their race. Stereotyping Black hyper-masculinity, while ignoring white hyper-masculinity, confirms reincarnated caricatures of Black men from colonial phases of American history (Viljoen, 2012).

The complex of power and privilege forces adolescent Black men to either adhere to or challenge hypermasculine norms. “Marginalization...frames power and privilege from an interesting vantage point; it offers a seemingly existential choice: to overconform to the dominant view of masculinity as a way to stake a claim to it or to resist the hegemonic and develop a masculinity of resistance (Coston et al., 2012; p.99).” McMillan & Paul (2011) mention that it is difficult for younger men to resist hegemony because they are “caught between social demands of manhood and the ability to fulfill them. (McMillan et al., p. 368)” Unfortunately, “Black youth have no control over the vast media expressions and stereotypes of Black hypermasculinity, which they interpret in relation to self. (Fegley et al., 2004, p. 239)” However, “some [adolescent men] in one highly violent deprived context-...have come to diverge from an extreme expression of (hyper)masculinity. (McMillan et al., 2011, pg. 368)” Therefore, adolescent Black men are forced to either embrace their masculine vulnerabilities- which aren’t commonplace in urban communities, resisting hegemonic masculinity, or suppress the entirety of their emotions to resist stereotypical perpetuations in print advertisements.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Fegley et al. (2004) remind us that “Black boys deal with prejudice and the negative, stereotypic connotations associated with Black masculinity, which is often inherently viewed as hypermasculinity (p. 236),” and therefore conform to the caricatures that they’re placed in. Additionally, while white men are able to exhibit distorted levels of hegemonic masculinity without being considered hyper-masculine, Black men are victimized for displaying forms of their masculinities. Therefore, Black men from inner-city neighborhoods, who are from lower

socioeconomic classes, are victimized for responding to the vulnerabilities that they're often subjected to in their neighborhoods. It is important to note that similar to print media, it is difficult to find literature that characterizes white men as hyper-masculine when they are exhibiting distorted levels of their masculinity. Rather, Black men are usually the only people to be given the hyper-masculine label, whilst white men are characterized as hegemonic. However, hegemony and hyper-masculinity are synonymous, in that they both address the dominance of a figure. While white men are able to express their masculinity freely, and be referred to as a real man under hegemony, Black men show their masculinities and are referred to as hyper-masculine. This framing shows the sheer difference between hyper-masculinity and hegemony—as they are identical in structure, but are labeled by race.

While some are able to reject hypermasculinity, pushing resistance and accepting radical softness (Wheeler, 2017), other inner-city Black men are at risk of being viewed as hypermasculine, so they suppress their emotions. Those who choose to deviate from hegemony follow similar types of movements on social media, and therefore, inspire other Black men to show themselves in the form that they deem appropriate. Being that resistance is generated from Black men, their voices need to be heard. So, now it is up to the media to catch up with these Black men and release black masculinity from stereotypical borders masked by whiteness.

### ***Future Research***

For future research regarding this subject, I propose conducting a study that could

collect the reactions of imagery portraying Black hypermasculinity. This study can consist of interviewing inner-city Black men about their experiences with their own masculinities. In addition, the study may also assess if their view of their own masculinity is represented in print media. Conducting this study would allow researchers to further evaluate each inner-city, Black males' personal sentiments of their own masculinities in contrast and comparison to mainstream imagery. Finding that this study will help further research about Black-male sentiments, I suggest that an interview can ask:

1. What is your name, age, academic year, and major area of study? Where are you from (state/hometown)?
2. How do you define masculinity?
3. Do you consider yourself to be masculine? Why or why not?
4. "Hypermasculinity is a psychological term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality" (Collazo, 2016). Have you ever been characterized as hyper-masculine?
5. What do you think about advertisements depicting Black men?

These questions are split up into sections: Introduction, personal sentiments, and recollection, and opinion. It is framed to allow the participant review themselves, and in return, review what print advertisements say about them. The first question (1), will recollect on how socioeconomic upbringing may contribute to their experiences and opinions on their own masculinities- which are assessed in questions two to four. In the last proposed interview question (5), the interviewer may have the option of showing the participant series of print advertisements depicting black

masculinity after having the participant recollect on personal sentiments without the presented imagery. Overall, this study will help deconstruct Black masculinity, as it will take sentiments away from print media and from the perspective of a Black man. Possible limitations of conducting this particular study may be a shift in data collection when you change the target demographics. An older Black man may have a different perception of his own masculinity due to the era of their upbringing, in comparison to the target audience in my proposed study- young adult, inner-city Black men. Additionally, Black men from outside of inner-city neighborhoods may also share different sentiments of Black masculinity, being that their socioeconomic upbringing would not contribute to their propagation of hypermasculinity. Therefore, the findings of this study are not conclusive to all Black men, rather, it elaborates on the possibility of black masculinity for a marginalized group of Black men with specific demographics: adolescent; inner-city.

In addition to this study, as the #BlackBoyJoy movement continues to leave its mark on social media, redefining imagery of Black masculinity, I suggest continuing to share positive imagery. Continuing to share positive imagery may also push Black men to resist hegemony and accept the versatility of their own masculinity. Photos portraying Black masculinity in a positive light would also shift negative perceptions of Black men, and generally, remove Black masculinity from whiteness.

**Appendix A:** Radically Soft Photos of Black Masculinity [Wheeler, 2017]















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