

# READING MASCULINITY ON 9GAG

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## ABSTRACT

This study is conducted to reveal the masculine qualities stereotyped on 9GAG by 9GAG users. There are two main theories used in analyzing this study, gender stereotype and denotation & connotation. (). First, the gender stereotype concepts used are from Brannon (2004) and Wood (2008). The first part of the study discusses 9GAG popular posts which content subtly contains of Alpha Male qualities. The result is the users show preferences on conventional masculine qualities. The second part of the study discusses 9GAG popular posts which content subtly contains of Beta Male qualities. The result is there are some specific feminine or Beta Male sides 9GAG users accept in men. In conclusion, 9GAG users still focus more on masculine qualities, especially masculine physical features, in men. Feminine qualities in men can be accepted by the community if men possess the conventional masculine physical features first.

**Keywords:** *Gender Stereotypes, Masculinity, Denotation and Connotation, Social Media, 9GAG.*

## INTRODUCTION

Besides Social Networking, Media Sharing becomes one of popular social media's branches in modern society. Not only media sharing websites like Youtube, Instagram, or Soundcloud, media sharing with humor content like 9GAG seems to be popular among today's society, especially young people. The number of 9GAG mobile application users and social networking accounts' followers prove its popularity.

Since 2008, 9GAG provides the users to speak and share their ideas through visual images as the focus. As users post still or motion images, other users can give *upvotes* as agreement to the ideas or *downvotes* as the contrary. Users can also voice their ideas through comment section provided in every post. Similar to book or movie genres, there are some classifications or sections on 9GAG, so the users can pick certain contents they prefer. However, there are three main sections which provide the users to see posts according to the popularity or number of *upvotes*. Hot section is for the most *upvoted* or commented posts, Trending section is for posts in the process of gaining big number of *upvotes* or comments, and Fresh is for new posts.

9GAG can be seen as a discourse because there is particular knowledge to be discussed on 9GAG. 9GAG has its authenticity that sets 9GAG aside from other discourses. Moreover, the users come from various cultures, age, and beliefs and they use different languages. People need particular knowledge upon cultural issues, current issues, or popular cultural knowledge in order to be able to understand the posts. Moreover, the varied kinds of posts or contexts create varied discourses inside 9GAG itself and not all users have the knowledge for perceiving the topics of certain posts.

From the surface, the jokes on 9GAG fit its' tagline 'Just for Fun', yet the real meanings of the contents are much deeper that they can lead to stereotyping and even discrimination. Some of the topics brought by the users are sensitive topics in real life. Topics that are related to gender, sexuality, race, nationality, belief, et cetera. Either in form of jokes or serious opinions, the stereotyping materials can be literally stated or subtly shown through the posts or comments.

Among the sensitive topics, gender becomes one of the most common to be posted, laughed, stereotyped, commented, and debated on 9GAG. Some users can be intentionally or unintentionally post something related to gender stereotype. The number of posts related to women and their femininity, as well as posts related to feminism and men's reaction toward feminism, are relatively bigger than posts focusing on men and their masculinity. However, popular social media like 9GAG provides the users, who are relatively young adults from around the world, to show their point of views toward masculinity and their preferences of masculine qualities. Since 9GAG can be a media to distribute certain ideologies, especially masculine stereotypes, those stereotypes are related to today's society's ideas of masculinity.

This phenomenon leads the writer the idea to find out the stereotypes of masculine qualities through the visual and textual signs on 9GAG popular posts. In order to reveal the masculine stereotypes from visual and textual signs, the writer uses two main theories, gender stereotyping and denotation & connotation in Semiotics. The former is used as the guideline in understanding masculinity and its qualities, whereas the latter is used as the tool to analyze the visual and textual signs.

Gender talks about being masculine and feminine and it is classified and characterized by society. Gender stereotype generalizes the characteristics of masculinity and femininity which come from similar behavior or characterization some of individuals have and those which are seen by others. According to Deaux & Lewis (1984), gender stereotypes can be analyzed by four components in order to differentiate male from female, they are traits, behaviors, occupations, and physical characteristics (Brannon, 2004, p. 169). Physical characteristic becomes the central judgments in stereotyping others before judging the other components.

Masculine stereotype keeps changing, so the writer uses several references for masculine qualities. First, four themes of *Male Sex (Gender) Role* by Robert Brannon (1976) provide the conventional qualities, such as *No Sissy Stuff*, *The Big Wheel*, *The Sturdy Oak*, and *Give 'Em Hell*. Then, five themes of *Male Experience* by James A. Doyle (1997) provide more contemporary qualities, such as *Don't Be Female*, *Be Successful*, *Be Aggressive*, *Be Sexual*, and *Be Self-Reliant* (Wood, 2008, p. 173-177). Last, Alpha-Beta Male provides contemporary qualities created by today's society, especially internet users. Alpha Male characteristics are physically strong, charismatic, rational, and sexual (Madsen, 2012). Also, men with Alpha Male characteristics are confident (strong eye contact and body language), dominant, and competitive (Alpha Male Characteristics, n.d.). Beta Male characteristics are sensitive, sympathetic, creative, and not seductive (Madsen, 2012). Beta Male also tends to avoid eye contact and make closed posture (Alpha Male Body Language, n.d.).

Denotation and connotation is the first and second order signification by Roland Barthes in his level of representation. The first order of signification (signifier and signified) result is denotative sign, which in the second order becomes a signifier. In the second order, the signification (relation between the previous denotative sign as signifier and additional signified attached to it) result is connotative sign. Denotative and connotative sign forms a chain, if the signifier changes, the signified changes too. According to Chandler (1994), denotation refers to something definitional, literal, or obvious whereas connotation refers to socio-cultural and personal association of the sign. Moreover, the changes of styles or tones can affect or change the connotation.

## MASCULINE QUALITIES STEREOTYPED ON 9GAG

Gender stereotyping works within any section depends on Original Posters (OP) preferences. Therefore, there is no specific section about masculinity or stereotyping. The samples used for this thesis are taken from Hot and Trending sections, which contain of many varied classification of posts. From August 31, 2015 to September 6, 2015 there are only four samples with men as the main subjects and they are taken by screenshot from September 5, 2015 and September 6, 2015.

### The Stereotypes of Masculine Men with Alpha Male Qualities



Picture 1. Screenshot of the First Post

There are three elements to be analyzed on the first post, such as title, pictures, and subtitles. These elements imply that OP speaks for the “truth” by preferring such qualities of masculinity in men. From the title, Original Poster does not address who consider the content of this post as truth, but s/he writes the title and posts it. It means at least s/he believes s/he represents the voice of “truth” by sharing the post.

The left picture and subtitle shows how OP constructs a message that menswear on the left picture, which fashion companies want men to wear, can be considered as something men should refuse to wear. The focus is the short pants with approximate 5½-inch length. Short pants have been worn since long ago in various length and style, but the acceptance of short pants keep changing depend on society’s agreement. As for now, society still sticks to long trousers for men and society sees short pants as inappropriate for men. Grown men are expected to be masculine and short shorts seem to highlight their femininity.

Meanwhile, the right picture and subtitle shows how OP seems to speak as men representative to show their fashion preference which implies more masculine qualities. Full plate armor can also be considered childish and inappropriate for men to wear this in today’s society, but the image of plate armors shows more masculine qualities than current fashion menswear, especially the shorts. Armors represent men of being tough, aggressive, and powerful because they are known to be worn by knights in medieval era. The weight of the plate materials, the function of armors, and the status of knights who usually wears armors imply those characteristics.

For comparison, menswear like modern short shorts is considered childish and unmanly, whereas medieval era’s plate armor is considered tough, aggressive, and powerful. Since childhood men are told “don’t be female” which means they have to be tough and “be aggressive” which means they have to fight, defeat others, and win to show the power (Wood, 2008, p. 174-175). Relating the characteristics gathered and OP’s title and subtitle, OP prefers these qualities in men. It shows his point of view of seeing the “truth” in being a man is being more like the knight in armor which shows masculine qualities, such as toughness, aggressiveness, and power.



Picture 2. Screenshot of the Second Post

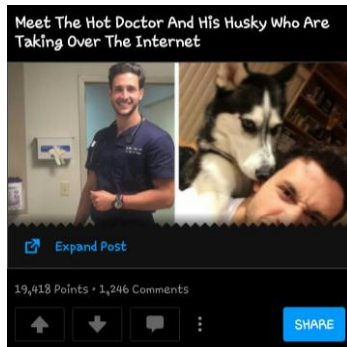
There are two elements to be analyzed on the second post. The title implies that through the picture of the post people can finally realize that Supernatural TV series characters’ muscular abdominals are not real. It means this picture is related to Supernatural TV series context and addressed specifically to the people who know the reference and consider the characters’ abdominal muscles are real.

The second element is the picture along with the context with Supernatural TV series which indicates the subject as alpha man with strength and confidence. Connecting the picture to Supernatural context, the topless man is Jared Padalecki who plays Sam Winchester character in Supernatural TV series. He is most probably wears the blood-effect bodysuit for particular Supernatural scene. Being muscular shows men’s masculine sides and it is often related to being strong or physically fit. Physical fitness can be gained through physical activity. Meanwhile, physical activity needs and builds more strength and endurance. The strength from the self can improve self-confidence. People who have strong masculine side tend to look at people directly in the eye and Jared Padalecki does that to the camera. Therefore, his physical features and behavior resembles to his strength and confidence.

From this analysis, there are two Alpha qualities seen from the subject, the athletic and masculine physical features, which lead him to be seen as strong. From being strong, he can be seen

as confident. These qualities seen from Jared Padelecki can also be found in his role as Sam Winchester. Sam Winchester hunts demons and other creatures with his brother. They deal with a lot of physical abilities, even Sam has died and being revived for several times. However, he keeps daring himself to hunt and kill the demons. The users probably blend his image in Supernatural TV series to his image in the picture.

### The Stereotypes of Masculine Men with Beta Male Qualities



Meet Dr. Mike, a second year medical resident from New York. He is taking the internet by storm with his husky, Roxy. He describes himself as "just a man with his dog against the world." But to others, he is clearly more than that.

Picture 3. Screenshot of the Third Post and the subtitle

Differs from the first sub-chapter, this first post, with number of pictures from the subject, implies not only his stereotyped masculine or Alpha Male qualities, but also some stereotyped qualities of him being Beta Male. The elements to be analyzed are title, subtitle, pictures, and comments. The pictures can be divided into three sections according to the qualities depicted.

From the title, it can be seen that Original Poster thinks that the subject is attractive and OP directly states that the subject and his pet gain popularity in cyber world. This can be confirmed through his Instagram account (@doctor.mike) which has more than 900.000 followers and Twitter account (@realdoctormike) with more than 16.000 followers. Also, the *upvotes* seem to imply that the voters agree to OP's opinion by considering Dr. Mike as an attractive man. The subtitle gives further information about Dr. Mike.

Picture 4. Screenshots of Dr. Mike's Self Portraits



The pictures can be divided into three, Dr. Mike himself, Dr. Mike with his surroundings, and Dr. Mike with dogs. These classifications lead to different qualities. From the pictures of Dr. Mike by himself, they show that he has Alpha Male qualities, such as strong, confident, successful, and rational. Strength is seen from his stereotypical masculine physical features, like strong jawline and muscular body. Confidence is seen from the way he looks directly to the camera. Being successful and rational are seen from his status as doctor which usually related to being secured job with great income and rational thinking skill.



Picture 5. Screenshots of Dr. Mike and His Surroundings

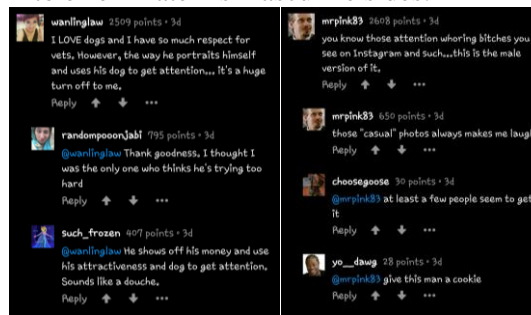
The next pictures include Dr. Mike and his surroundings (object, subject, or activity) which represent his masculine or alpha qualities as emotionally controlled, successful, sexual, dominant, strong, and confident. The first picture shows him being emotionally controlled and successful.

Covering eyes and wearing white shirt makes a person is looked more mysterious and the wearers feel more inscrutable which imply signs of being emotionally controlled. The second picture shows him being sexual and dominant. Dr. Mike can be looked as being sexual because of the good looking girl in a sexy costume and their intimate interaction. Whereas, the way the girl wants and feels alright with his hand holding her and the way the dog is calm next to his owner represent that they are more submissive and Dr. Mike is the one more dominant or can be in control. The third picture shows him being strong and confident. His strength is seen from the sport activity and his muscular body. His confidence is shown through the comparison between him and the man next to him.



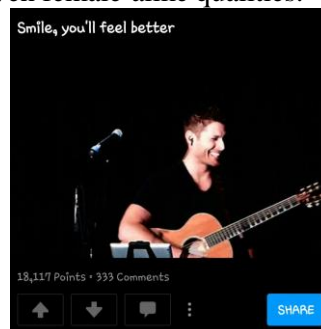
Picture 6. Some of screenshots of Dr. Mike and His Dog, Roxy

However, Dr. Mike seems to be a Beta Male though his physical appearance and lifestyle show that he is a solid Alpha Male. This is shown through his relationship with Roxy, his dog. From the pictures above, Dr. Mike looks soft-hearted and affectionate to his dog. To be Pack Leaders (people in charge of dogs) is to keep boundaries, give limitation, and give assertive not weak energy. These are the qualities of being Alphas for dogs. However, Dr. Mike seems to do all the contrast of the suggestions. Being soft-hearted and affectionate can be interpreted as sensitive and not emotionally controlled seem to effeminate his masculine sides.



Picture 7. Screenshots of Comments of the Third Post

Apparently, some of 9GAG users think that Dr. Mike is an attention seeker. Judging from the characteristics of him being attention seeker, those can be seen as feminine qualities too. Moreover, attention seeking can be seen something too resemblance to female, not Beta Male. From the comment section, a lot of users do not like him because he unnaturally captures his life and uses his body, wealth, and dog to seek people's attention. Still, Dr. Mike has more masculine or Alpha Male qualities than Beta Male or even female-alike qualities.



Picture 8. Screenshots of the Fourth Post (GIF. format)

This second post of this second sub-chapter also shows alternative or unconventional preferences of masculinity compared to the first sub-chapter which shows solid qualities of masculinity. There are some Beta characteristics depicted from the subject along with his Alpha characteristics. There are three elements of this post to be analyzed, the title, the GIF or motion picture, and the comment.

The title has dualistic meanings and it does not imply a demand for users to agree on Original Poster's opinion. If the title is addressed for the users, it means OP believes that the content or the subject in the GIF can make others smile and OP shares it to make them happy. On the other hand, if the title is addressed to the subject in the GIF, it has a connection to the action on the GIF or the context related to the subject.

From the GIF or motion picture, there are three major elements leading to masculinity stereotypes, they are the subject, the expression, and the objects around him. The subject, Jensen Ackles, is often connected to his role in Supernatural TV series as Dean Winchester. Without mentioning to Supernatural, the users may be automatically relate him to his character and this can unintentionally affect their reactions (*upvotes* and comments). From the physical features and the characteristics people see in him as Dean Winchester, Jensen Ackles is considered masculine. He is strong and sexual. As Dean Winchester, he can be mischievous, funny, and aggressive. He is well-trained to hunt supernatural creatures. He also does not like emotional intimacy and prefer sexual relationship only.

However, his smiling expression and guitar he holds resemble Beta Male stereotypes. The *upvotes* and comments show that the users like his smile. This is contrary to a research found that it is more appropriate for women to smile more and men to smile less because women tend to see men's pride as the first level of being sexually attractive. Also, smiling shows more emotion someone has, whereas Alphas are expected to hide their emotion. Playing guitar shows that someone is artistic or creative. Being artistic or creative shows stereotypical beta male characteristics. However, a study shows that today's society considers men playing guitars as attractive. The comments from the users strengthen the preference of man who smiles and plays guitar.

Table 2.1. Comparison of Subjects of the Samples based on Deaux & Lewis' Models of Stereotyping

Physical Features	Behaviors	Traits	Occupations/Status
Physically fit (Well trained for battle, military service, or tournament)	Aggressive	Tough/stro ng, powerful	Knights
Muscular/athletic body and masculine facial features (strong jawline, tall. Small sharp eyes)	Confident	Strong	Actor
Muscular/athletic body and masculine facial features (strong jawline and tall)	Confident, sexual, emotionally controlled, successful, <b>attention-</b>	Strong, dominant, <b>sensitive (soft-hearted and</b>	Doctor
Muscular/athletic body and masculine facial features (strong jawline and tall)	Sexual, <b>emotionally expressive</b>	Strong, <b>artistic</b>	Actor

<b>Subjects/Deaux &amp; Lewis' Models of Stereotyping</b>	<b>Knight in Plate Armor (1<sup>st</sup> sample)</b>	<b>Jared Padalecki (2<sup>nd</sup> sample)</b>	<b>Dr. Mike (3<sup>rd</sup> sample)</b>	<b>Jensen Ackles (4<sup>th</sup> sample)</b>
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From the table above, there are two similarities between the four subjects, such as physically fit or athletic and strong. Physical fitness and strength relates to each other, if men train themselves to gain physical fitness, they will be strong, and so on. The other findings, four of the subjects fulfill four components for analyzing gender stereotyping and the number of Alpha qualities found is bigger than the Beta qualities. Moreover, one of the subjects is considered by the users to have much more feminine side which does not belong to Beta qualities.

Table 2.2. Comparison of Masculine Qualities according to Brannon, Doyle, and the Findings

<b>Brannon</b>	<b>Doyle</b>	<b>Findings</b>
No Sissy Stuff (Not attached to femininity)	Don't Be Female	No Beta or other feminine qualities (Knight and Jared Padalecki)
The Big Wheel (Success and status)	Be Successful	Successful (Dr. Mike) and Status (Knight)
The Sturdy Oak (tough, confident, self-reliant)	Be Self-Reliant	Tough (all subjects), confident (Jared Padalecki and Dr. Mike), self-reliant (none)
Give 'Em Hell (aggressive, daring, violent)	Be Aggressive	Aggressive (Knight), daring and violent (none)
	Be Sexual	Sexual (Dr. Mike and Jensen Ackles)

From the comparison, relatively all of the Alpha Male qualities belong to both the conventional and contemporary masculinity written in 1976 and 1997. It means what society prefers as Alpha Male still resembles the masculine men described in the former time or years. However, the change is the addition for one more classification, the Beta Male, who does not have either Alpha's masculinity or whole female's femininity. Beta Male is in between.

## CONCLUSION

The four samples with the four subjects support Deaux & Lewis' four components of gender stereotypes. Deaux & Lewis believe that physical appearances become the center among the four components. The four subjects' similarities are masculine physical features and being strong. Physical features become the first aspects for 9GAG cyber-community to judge the masculine qualities and later linked them to the other aspects.

The reactions from 9GAG users toward the four subjects and their qualities can be perceived that if men have Alpha appearances, having other Beta qualities are tolerable. From the number of Alpha and Beta qualities perceived from the subjects, it seems that the Alpha qualities are more preferable than the Beta ones. Moreover, the more men show Beta qualities, the more they resemble women. Having few feminine or Beta side is considered attractive, but too much femininity is not. Some of them are acceptable, and one (intensive self-exposition) is considered too much. It can be that the community has specific Beta qualities they can accept. Although there are some alternative qualities in perceiving masculinity, this analysis shows that conventional masculinity still becomes the focus in 9GAG cyber-community.

The findings taken from the gender-related posts on 9GAG and the reactions from the community can become references for people to see how real-life society, especially, young

generation, perceives masculinity nowadays. 9GAG users come from varied countries, races, ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs. However, despite these differences, the users seem to have similar masculine preferences. Also, this shows that the internet, especially social media, has become another agency in distributing particular ideology to society, especially young generation. Their perspectives can be constructed by the information the community offers. In this case, 9GAG users' perceptions toward masculinity have been constructed by their real-life society and media they intensively followed, specifically 9GAG.

In conclusion, no matter how advanced the society is, there will always be stereotyping towards gender. Conventional masculine qualities are still highly exposed, but today's society seems to be in a process of tolerating even accepting feminine qualities in men. In this case, 9GAG becomes one of the media which effectively distribute people's preferences of masculinity.

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