

***“I would choose the bear”*: To What Extent Does this Online Debate Reflect Women’s Perceptions of Men?**

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Abstract

The viral “choose the bear” debate, which asks whether one would rather be alone in the woods with a bear or an unknown man, sparked widespread attention after many women chose the bear, revealing deep-seated concerns about gendered safety. This study explores the extent to which the debate reflects women’s perceptions of men, particularly in relation to fear, violence, and masculinity. Existing literature on women’s fear of men, rape culture, social media, and cyberfeminism informs the analysis, addressing a gap in scholarship that has largely overlooked informal, viral online discourse in favour of structured feminist movements. A qualitative methodology was employed using two women-only focus groups consisting of twelve participants aged 18–25, allowing for open discussion in a safe and supportive environment. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: *women’s fear of male unpredictability and sexual violence*, *contested understandings of masculinity and male responsibility*, and the *polarising expressive nature of the debate*. Participants consistently described men as capable of prolonged physical, sexual, and psychological harm, often perceived as more threatening than death itself, while bears were viewed as predictable dangers. Difficulties distinguishing “good” from “bad” men, frustration with male passivity in addressing gendered violence, and concern over the influence of hyper-masculine online figures further shaped women’s perceptions. While the debate was widely regarded as an accurate reflection of women’s fears and lived experiences, its extreme framing was seen as provoking male defensiveness and limiting constructive dialogue. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the “choose the bear” debate functions as a powerful expression of women’s collective fear, illustrating how male violence continues to shape women’s trust, autonomy, and sense of safety in both online and everyday contexts.

Key Words: *man versus bear debate; cyberfeminism; gendered safety; sexual violence.*

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Introduction

Online discourse is increasingly a space where gender dynamics are debated, challenged, and reshaped. One debate that gained widespread attention was the hypothetical question: Would you rather be in the woods with a bear or an unknown man? Overwhelmingly, many chose the bear, sparking conversations about the perception of men in contemporary society. This dissertation seeks to explore the extent to which the debate reflects women's perceptions of men, particularly in relation to issues of unpredictability, fear, violence, and gendered safety dynamics. Disguised as an internet trend, the debate, referred to throughout this dissertation as the "choose the bear" debate, delves into a deeper issue—the pervasive concern of gendered safety. It reflects the reality of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), a global crisis that is recognised as both a public health emergency and a fundamental human rights violation, thus demonstrating the need for this research. The United Nations (1993) defines VAWG as:

"... any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (United Nations, 1993).

Rooted in gender inequality and harmful norms (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005), public awareness of VAWG has surged due to cases like Sarah Everard's death and #MeToo, leading to policies like the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the Tackling VAWG Strategy (Home Office, 2021). This dissertation sits within the current climate of heightened public discourse and policy action against VAWG, offering timely academic insights for meaningful change (Fray et al., 2022; Lindsay et al., 2023). VAWG encompasses three categories of harmful behaviours. *Physical violence* involves acts like kicking, biting, slapping, beating, or strangling. Injuries, often disguised as accidents, can be severe and sometimes fatal. *Psychological violence* includes controlling behaviours like isolation, humiliation, economic abuse, and threats. Its diverse forms make it difficult to define universally. *Sexual violence* encompasses forced sexual acts and coerced sexual behaviours, as well as reproductive coercion, such as forced pregnancy or denial of access to contraception (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Thornton et al., 2024). Sexual violence is a particularly insidious form of VAWG, as it can have devastating physical and psychological consequences for survivors. Within the "choose the bear" debate, a

crucial distinction emerges: men, unlike bears, present the threat of sexual violence. This fundamental difference underscores the distinct and complex danger that men can pose to women's safety, making it a key point of discussion in the debate and a central focus of this research. While this research acknowledges the experiences of men who have been sexually assaulted, it focuses on the disproportionate impact of sexual violence on women. To explore women's perceptions, this study employed women-only focus groups, providing participants a safe space for discussion. Rooted in a feminist framework, this methodology prioritised women's voices and acknowledged the sociocultural forces that shape their lived realities. The discussions revealed how perceptions of male unpredictability, the fear of sexual violence, and distrust in male passivity are embedded within women's daily experiences. By thematically analysing these narratives, this research investigates how women navigate masculinity, safety, and trust in a digital age. This dissertation has five chapters. The introduction situates the "choose the bear" debate within broader societal concerns about gendered violence. The Literature Review uses a feminist lens to examine sexual violence as gendered, women's fear and safety, social media's dual role in feminist discourse, and cyberfeminism. The Methodology justifies qualitative focus groups, detailing participant selection, ethics, and thematic analysis. The Findings present three themes: women's fear of male unpredictability, contested masculinity, and the debate's polarising effectiveness in challenging norms. The Conclusion argues that while the debate raised awareness of gendered fear, its polarising framing often limits meaningful engagement, especially from men. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the provocative "choose the bear" debate accurately reflects women's perceptions of men as unpredictable and potentially harmful. It demonstrates how online discussions mirror and amplify real-world gender dynamics, exposing deep-seated anxieties and systemic inequalities. Though its power for lasting change is unclear, the debate reveals the enduring impact of male violence on women's trust, safety, and autonomy, both online and offline. The existence of the "choose the bear" debate spotlights the societal anxieties regarding women's safety around men and how these are projected online by cyberfeminist movements. This chapter adopts a feminist theoretical framework, drawing on scholarship which identifies gendered differences in power inequalities, differences in experiences, how these issues are represented in social media and resisted in digital activism. The comparison of men to bears, creatures renowned for their potential danger, reinforces the depths of these concerns and the perceived threat to women posed by male violence. Within the "choose the bear" debate, it's crucial to recognise that,

unlike bears, men are capable of sexual violence. This difference illustrates the unique threat men represent to women's safety, a central point in the discussion. Consequently, this chapter will prioritise sexual violence as a key area of focus, exploring relevant literature through themes of sexual violence as a gendered issue, women's safety and fear, the role of social media, and cyberfeminism. The rise of informal online discourse presents a gap in contemporary literature on how digital notions of female victimisation, masculinity, and activism are shaping real-world perceptions and behaviours. This literature review contextualises the relevance of the "choose the bear" debate and how it reflects women's perceptions of men.

Sexual Violence as a Gendered Issue

Feminist research has continually noted that sexual violence disproportionately affects women and girls (Kuo et al., 2018). While precise prevalence figures are challenging to obtain due to vast underreporting (Scurich, 2020; Willmott et al., 2021), women are significantly more likely to experience it than men (Kelly & Stermac, 2008), with global estimates indicating approximately one in three women and girls experience sexual victimisation, compared to one in six men and boys (Reid & Konrad, 2004; WHO, 2018). Systemic gender inequality and discriminatory attitudes foster harmful stereotypes and victim-blaming, directly contributing to the gender disparity in sexual victimisation and underreporting (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; Kelly & Stermac, 2008). The societal normalisation of sexual violence desensitises individuals, leading to reduced recognition and reporting of abuse (Sinko et al., 2021). Consequently, even reported cases often face dismissal, evidenced by low rape conviction rates (CPS, 2023). This societal failure to adequately address sexual violence against women is compounded by the influence of rape myths on jury decision-making, which undermines fairness and favours perpetrators (Tavara, 2006; Willmott et al., 2021, p. 23). Young women and girls are alarmingly vulnerable to sexual violence. A significant portion of first sexual experiences being coercive or forced, with one in three of first sexual victimisation experiences occurring before the age of 15 (Basile & Smith, 2011; Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013; Tavara, 2006). In addition, women often experience repeated sexual violence throughout their lives (Tavara, 2006). Kelly's (2013) seminal work "Surviving Sexual Violence" depicts women's sexual victimisation as a lifelong continuum. Her study found 100% of participants had experienced some form of sexual

victimisation, often on multiple occasions. Notably, 72% of participants were first victimised before age 16. This pervasive impact solidifies sexual violence as inherently a women's issue. Despite the proven vulnerability of women, there is an increasing tendency for men to deny and trivialise male violence against women, reinforcing harmful myths and stereotypes (Bates et al., 2019; Diemer, 2014; Eastal et al., 2015). The displacement of blame onto victims and the justification of perpetrators' actions contributes to a diminished sense of responsibility for ending such violence (Diemer, 2014; Metson, 2024). This likely contributes to women's fear as even if some men would never personally perpetrate sexual violence, their inaction against it can erode women's trust in men (Buss, 2021; Katz, 2019) Men are not simply either good or bad. They exist on a spectrum, with those who do not challenge other men's harmful actions falling into a problematic middle ground (Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2024). Furthermore, patriarchal structures normalise male aggression, exacerbating sexual violence as a gendered issue. Men are significantly perpetrators of sexual violence, accounting for '98% of those prosecuted for serious sexual offences' in England and Wales (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019 as cited by Willmott et al., 2021, p5; Diemer, 2014). Palmer's influential work (1988) challenges theories of sexual desire as the primary motivation for sexual victimisation, instead presenting arguments that it stems from aggression, hostility, and a need for power. These characteristics align with those ascribed to masculinity, or more precisely, toxic masculinity (De Boise, 2019; Waling, 2019) and thus can be seen as an explanation for the disproportional gender differences in perpetrating sexual violence. In effect, men's socio-historical need for control is reflected through the prevalence of violence against women and girls, particularly sexual violence with "masculinity perpetuat[ing] rape culture" (Ernst, 2022; Lomazzi, 2023; Segraves, 2022; p6). This ultimately reaffirms sexual violence as a gendered issue.

Women's safety and fear

Sexual violence, as a crime, is unique in the fact that "the violent actions of some men... keep *all* women in a state of fear" regardless of personal victimisation (Haskell & Randall, 1998: p1). This fear restricts women's freedom of movement and sense of safety within society and is often exacerbated by cultural norms that prioritise honour and stigmatise victims of sexual assault. Such norms can vary significantly across cultures, but their impact on women's experiences of sexual victimisation remains profound (Krantz & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Riger & Gordon, 1981; Warr, 1985). This constant threat reinforces the collective impact of sexual

violence on all women. Radical feminists argue that women's fear of crime is directly linked to their fear of men, particularly the threat of sexual violence (Haskell & Randall, 1998; Stanko, 1996). This fear serves as a form of social control, restricting women's movements and activities, and reinforcing patriarchal norms to keep women “passive” in society (Haskell & Randall, 1998; Riger & Gordon, 1981: p72; Stanko, 1996). One study found that 32% of women reported that the fear of sexual assault negatively impacts their quality of life, with 66% feeling unable to leave the house alone at night. This fear of rape is “an ongoing terror that women...[must] manage” (Haskell & Randall, 1998: p1 & 34). The findings remain relevant today, with women still fearful for their safety around men (Moreno et al., 2022; Yates & Ceccato, 2020). This continuity suggests a lack of social change, with the knowledge that sexual violence is a frequent and indiscriminate crime against women exacerbating these feelings of fear. In addition, Ferraro's (1996) influential work argues that women's fear of crime is significantly shaped by the ever-present threat of sexual violence. This fear is not simply a generalised anxiety about crime but a specific and heightened fear of sexual victimisation that permeates women's experiences and influences their perceptions of risk in various situations. Ferraro's (1996) research highlights the unique way in which gender shapes the experience of fear, demonstrating that women's fear is different from men's due to the gendered nature of sexual violence. Mellgren & Ivert's (2019) more recent study reaffirms Ferraro's hypothesis, again demonstrating a continuity of women's fear and a lack of social change. Elderly, minority, and economically disadvantaged women, who have the fewest resources for protection, experience the highest fear of sexual violence (Riger & Gordon, 1981). For example, ethnic minority women often face greater risks and barriers to safety due to intersecting racism and sexism (Cantalupo, 2019). This intersectional fear reinforces social inequalities, as those least able to cope with victimisation often limit their lives, increasing marginalisation. Victimology literature emphasises the intensity of women's fear of sexual violence, equating it to the fear of death (Ferraro, 1996: p687). This parallels the bear debate, with 53% of women aged 18-29 opting for the near-certain death of a bear encounter rather than risk sexual victimisation by a man (Smith, 2024). This is an alarming reality, where women's fear of sexual violence overrides the basic human instinct for self-preservation (Dos Reis et al., 2017 p2355; Ferraro, 1996; Gordon & Riger, 1989). This fear is arguably ingrained in what it means to be a woman, with “women's lives rest[ing] upon a continuum of unsafety” (Stanko, 1990: p85). A significant aspect of women's fear is the concept of "stranger danger". Despite statistics

indicating most female victimisation is by men known to them, many women still fear sexual assault by male strangers (Bell, 1998; Haskell & Randall, 1998). Stranger danger intensifies the social control of women, evidenced by the women in Haskell & Randall's study (1998, p2) reporting the use of precautionary actions to prepare for "stranger perpetrated violence" but omitting any mention of safety measures to protect themselves from men they know. This misalignment between women's perceptions and the reality of sexual victimisation is likely a result of media discourse and portrayals, where sexual violence is a highly concentrated, overdramatised and sensationalised topic (Eastel et al., 2015; Guiliani et al., 2020; Haskell & Randall, 1998).

The role of social media

Social media is a double-edged sword in addressing sexual violence against women. While it has potential to raise awareness, the constant exposure can heighten fear, desensitise audiences, and reinforce harmful narratives like victim-blaming (Kapoor, 2019; Walsh, 2020; Guilani et al., 2020). Media narratives often objectify women, distort public perceptions of sexual violence, and negatively influence how female victims are perceived (Ward, 2016; Willmott et al., 2021). This contributes to a culture that prioritises male reputations over women's safety (Wilson et al., 2018). From a feminist lens, this functions as a form of social control that discourages resistance to female victimisation. Furthermore, social media provides a platform for individuals that promote toxic notions of gender, such as "manosphere ideologies" (Haslop et al., 2024; p1; Renström & Bäck, 2024). The rapid, widespread dissemination of content on these platforms, a characteristic that contributes to their appeal, can be abused by individuals to promote the victimisation of women. For instance, Andrew Tate has contributed to 'raising a generation' of boys where misogyny and violence against women is normalised and encouraged (Renström & Bäck, 2024). His videos paint women as men's property, responsible for their own rape and perpetrate other extreme sexist stereotypes. Despite being banned from major platforms in 2022, his content continues to circulate online, making misogyny easily accessible (Haslop et al., 2024). Tate's influence has real-world implications, evidenced by the increasing prevalence of misogyny in schools (Bubola & Kwai, 2023; Roberts & Wescott, 2024). This trend raises serious concerns about the future safety of women, online and offline. Despite this, the positive role that social media plays cannot, and should not, be ignored. Social media has the capacity to act as a means of prevention and empowerment in response to sexual

violence. Through raising awareness and promoting collective action, *cyberfeminism* advocates for women's rights online (Kapoor, 2019; Kumari, 2020; Willem & Tortajada, 2021).

Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism integrates feminist theory and digital technology to critique patriarchal online structures. It challenges gender norms and aims to empower women (Hall, 1996; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). This work defines "cyberfeminist" broadly as anyone engaging in digital feminist discourse/activism, irrespective of self-ascribed labels. Early thinkers like Haraway (1991) and Plant (2013) saw the internet as a utopian space for deconstructing and reimagining gender, offering women freedom from traditional roles and opportunities for new identities and communities (Milford, 2015). However, increased commercialisation and mainstreaming have made the internet a site of gendered violence and discrimination. This has led cyberfeminism to evolve into a more activism-focused movement recognising both the empowering and oppressive potential of the digital realm (Kaya, 2018 as cited by Ersöz et al., 2024). Modern cyberfeminism examines gender representation and construction in online media. By challenging the underlying power dynamics at play, cyberfeminists expose how women are often marginalised, stereotyped, or objectified in digital spaces (Polat & Polat, 2024). This includes social media, gaming, and virtual reality portrayals of women (Baltezarević et al., 2021). Through digital activism, they raise awareness, mobilise communities, and empower women to participate online, building support networks. Recognising the intersectionality of various forms of oppression, they strive to create inclusive spaces that address the diverse experiences of women and challenge systemic inequalities (Isaac, 2023).

The #MeToo movement, which gained traction in 2017 following the Harvey Weinstein allegations, amplified cyberfeminist efforts against sexual violence. By providing a platform for survivors to share their experiences online, #MeToo challenged patriarchal norms and exposed the widespread nature of sexual assault. This globally recognisable hashtag fostered support, contextualised the scale of victimisation, reduced stigma, and pressured authorities to act. Consequently, increased sex crime reporting followed (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Levy & Mattsson, 2023), with Leopold et al. (2021) suggesting this cyberfeminist movement has been more effective in shifting perceptions than "decades of laws and ... policies". Hashtags, such as #metoo, have revolutionised the way (cyber)feminist activism is conducted (Chen et al.,

2018; Mendes et al., 2018). They visually enable individuals to share, and build upon, personal experiences collaboratively (Chen et al., 2018). ‘Hashtag Feminism’ connects women online, creating “intimate publics” – virtual ‘women-only’ spaces (Chen et al., 2018; Dixon, 2014; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). These ‘spaces’ foster a sense of community and bonding through “ambient affiliation” - temporary unity without direct engagement (Jones et al, 2022, p2; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Blending public and private spheres through hashtags allows women to organise, discuss, and critique from a feminist perspective, particularly for those who lack such spaces offline (Carstensen, 2014). Using hashtags to draw attention to feminist topics, such as #MeToo, contributes to the reach and influence of these movements (Chen et al., 2018). However, the increased visibility of sexual violence, created through these movements has led to a backlash from some men. #MeToo, and other sexual violence movements, highlight masculine aggression as a cause for female victimisation (Segraves, 2022; Boduszek et al., 2017). Feeling threatened by perceived challenges to traditional gender roles and power dynamics, men have adopted the #notallmen hashtag (Nicholas et al., 2018; Segraves, 2022). This hashtag, originally created by feminists to ridicule the attempts by men to separate their gender identity from sexual violence, has increasingly been used by men in defence of their gender identity (Nicholas et al., 2018; Segraves, 2022; Zheng, 2020). This ‘countermovement’ has shifted the attention away from female sexual victimisation and instead on to men’s ‘right’ to not be accused, reaffirming their male privilege (Dadas, 2017; Jones et al, 2022; Segraves, 2022).

Cyber-feminist’s have responded with strategies like #YesAllWomen to criticise men who use #notallmen (Jones et al,2022). The feminist perspective is that while not all men are perpetrators, all women face the constant threat of sexual violence (Morikawa, 2019 as cited by Jones et al, 2022). Furthermore, they don’t view masculinity as the sole cause of sexual violence but contend that it contributes to the perpetuation of rape culture (Jones et al, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). This concept of feminist activism can be linked to the "choose the bear" debate. While not as uniformly organised as a hashtag campaign, the movement, which aims to highlight the intensity of women’s fear of men, can be seen as a powerful manifestation of cyberfeminism. By leveraging digital platforms to share personal stories and perspectives, this debate, and the community behind it, challenges traditional gender roles and calls for systemic change regarding women’s safety.

Similar Research

Similar research indicates that online discourse provides a space for women to express experiences of gender-based violence and fear. Jane (2016) examines "digilantism," where women collectively address misogyny online, suggesting digital platforms serve as sites of both resistance and potential re-traumatisation. Similarly, Mendes et al. (2019, 2018) analyse feminist digital activism through movements like #BeenRapedNeverReported, #WhyIStayed, and #MeToo, emphasising how these empower survivors to share narratives and challenge societal indifference, while also acknowledging the risk of backlash hindering systemic change. Banet-Weiser (2018) highlights the broader rise of anti-misogyny digital activism, and the "popular misogyny" contemporary feminism must navigate online. However, existing literature largely focuses on formal movements and direct survivor accounts. The informal, meme-like nature of the "choose the bear" debate, rooted in hypothetical violence and viral discourse, remains largely underexplored, indicating a gap in understanding how unstructured digital trends reflect women's evolving perceptions of masculinity, safety, and collective fear in the digital age. This chapter has explored the literature in relation to the "choose the bear" debate focusing on the core theme of sexual violence as a gendered issue. It has demonstrated the disproportionate impact of sexual violence on women, the pervasive fear this engenders, the complex role of social media in both amplifying awareness and perpetuating harmful narratives, and the counter-narratives of cyberfeminist movements. These themes are interwoven by the underlying thread of gender power imbalances and societal anxieties surrounding women's safety in relation to men. However, significant gaps remain in the literature. While considerable attention has been paid to structured movements like #MeToo and formal online activism, the contemporary, informal, and viral nature of debates like "choose the bear" remains largely underexamined. There is a need for deeper academic engagement with how modern digital culture—shaped by the rise of influencers such as Andrew Tate and the growing influence of incel communities—redefines masculinity in ways that both reflect and reinforce violence against women. These figures contribute to a shifting societal landscape where misogyny is not only visible but often celebrated in online spheres, complicating the efforts of digital feminists and exacerbating women's fear. This review has demonstrated that while feminist digital activism is powerful, it must now contend with an increasingly hostile and dynamic online environment. The "choose the bear" debate, while not a formal movement, embodies this tension, emerging as a raw, viral expression of women's

fear and mistrust. It signals the urgency of interrogating not just institutional responses to violence, but also the cultural undercurrents that sustain it. The next chapter outlines the qualitative methodological approach used to examine how women interpret and engage with the “choose the bear” discourse online. Using focus groups, and then thematic analysis, this dissertation aims to understand to what extent the ‘choose the bear’ debate is an accurate reflection of women’s perceptions of men.

Methodology

This chapter details the qualitative methodology used to explore women's perceptions of men through the "choose the bear" debate. It justifies the use of focus groups based on research purpose, desired output, and practical constraints. The chapter also outlines the feminist methodological approach, sampling strategy, ethical considerations, and the chosen thematic analysis method for exploring complex qualitative data. This research sought to understand how the “choose the bear” debate reflects women’s perceptions of men and whether the comparison of men to bears is an accurate portrayal of how women view men. Therefore, the research question for this dissertation is:

“I would choose the bear”: *To What Extent Does this Online Debate Reflect Women’s Perception of Men?*”

The following aims were used to guide to this research:

- To understand how the ‘choose the bear’ debate is perceived by participants.
- To explore the debate in relation to societal perceptions of gender and safety.
- To evaluate the debate's effectiveness as a platform for discussing gender and safety issues.

These aims are significant as they consider, and engage with, a viral discourse that reflects many women’s lived experiences. The research highlights how social media can amplify fears, perceptions, and gendered power dynamics, offering insight into how digital spaces shape narratives around gender, safety, and trust.

Research Design

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative methodology was used to gain a detailed understanding of participants' perceptions (Neumen, 2007). This approach allowed for a thorough exploration of complex issues like gender and safety, providing context to underlying meanings (Sutton, 1993). Open-ended discussions and probing questions facilitated a deeper exploration, revealing unexpected insights that a quantitative approach might have missed (Bryman, 2016). The evolving nature of online discourse and its impact on gender relations supports the use of a qualitative approach. Underpinning this research is a social constructionist epistemology, which posits that reality and understanding are not objective but are constructed through social interaction and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This aligns with the focus on exploring women's perceptions of men and the "choose the bear" debate, recognising that these perceptions are shaped by social, cultural, and online contexts. The aim is not to uncover an objective truth about men but to understand how women collectively make sense of and interpret this online phenomenon within their own social realities. Ontologically, this research acknowledges gender as a key social organiser shaping experiences and power dynamics (Butler, 1990), justifying a feminist methodology. Recognising the historical marginalisation of women's perspectives on gender and safety, women-only focus groups prioritised their voices (DeVault, 1996). This gender-exclusive environment fostered candid discussion without male influence (Burns & Walker, 2005), aligning with the dissertation's aim to benefit women by highlighting their perceptions and experiences of mistreatment (DeVault, 1996).

Focus Groups

Two 60-minute focus groups were the primary research method for understanding women's perceptions of men. Focus groups are purposeful discussions amongst a group of characterised individuals on a selected topic (Krueger, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Wilkinson, 1998). They are often a "cheap, quick and easy" method of data collection (Wilkinson, 1998: p186), making them suitable for this time- and resource-limited undergraduate dissertation. Wilkinson (1998) outlines three key considerations for using focus groups: research purpose, desired output, and practicalities, which will structure the justification for their use in researching women's perceptions of men within the "choose the bear" context.

Purpose

The purpose of this study, and thus the justification for using focus groups, is to understand women's perceptions towards men. Focus groups effectively uncover perceptions by enabling participants to collaboratively generate and refine ideas through discussion (Breen, 2006; Krueger, 2014; Wilkinson, 1998). They yield unique data through verbalised perceptions and group 'synergy' (Rabiee, 2004: p656; Wilkinson, 1998), making them preferable to interviews for exploring broader perceptions in the "choose the bear" debate (Breen, 2006). While success depends on participant comfort and engagement (Krueger, 2014; Rabiee, 2004), a conducive environment with informed consent, a neutral setting, and skilled facilitation was cultivated to promote equitable participation.

Desired Output

The desired output of this research is to produce an interactive and qualitative understanding of women's perceptions of men that contributes to existing research (Breen, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). This topic does not lend itself to being quantified and so the use of focus groups to produce qualitative data is justified. Although focus groups can produce relatively large amounts of data in a short time span, samples are usually small and unrepresentative in comparison to quantitative methods, meaning that focus groups are unsuitable for drawing comparisons between groups or producing generalisable findings (Rabiee, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998). This was a consideration when choosing focus groups but ultimately the desired output from this research is to produce illustrative data that is suited to qualitative analysis.

Practical Considerations

Discussion Length: My aim was to conduct two 60-minute focus groups. This duration was ideal to collect sufficient data and facilitate in-depth discussions without being too time consuming. The priority is to collect the maximum amount of information in the least amount of time (Masadeh, 2012). I determined a maximum of ninety minutes to avoid encroaching on participants' time and to maintain engagement quality (Masadeh, 2012). Both focus groups fell between 60 and 70 minutes, producing thorough data and justifying the length of time allotted.

Location: I chose in-person focus groups over online platforms for their authentic connection and observable group dynamics (Woodyatt et al., 2016). Prioritising comfort, the first group met at a familiar house, likely enhancing engagement (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The second took place in a reserved campus study room. Despite a two-hour limit, these familiar settings fostered participant comfort and engagement.

Group Dynamic: Focus groups typically consist of four to twelve participants, with the “quality of discussions... greatly affected by group size” (Krueger, 2014: p6; Tang & Davis, 1995). My goal was to balance group size, ensuring each participant can contribute while maintaining a diverse range of perspectives (Krueger, 2014). Focus groups of “six to eight individuals” were deemed optimal for this research (Guest et al., 2017: p11). Smaller groups would have required additional groups to gather sufficient data, while larger groups would have been challenging to coordinate as the participants were university students with other commitments. I weighed differing views on participant relationships within groups. Thomas et al. (1995) proposed unfamiliarity to foster unbiased honesty, while Kitzinger (1994) suggested familiarity to promote comfortable critique. Practical recruitment led to focus groups with both familiar and unfamiliar individuals. Although a homogenous group was preferred, the mixed composition did not noticeably hinder discussion, as contributions were generally equitable. To counteract 'groupthink' (Janis, 2008), open dialogue and critical thinking were actively promoted to ensure a range of perspectives.

Questioning format: The semi-structured discussion used pre-set and follow-up questions to clarify meaning and build rapport (See Appendix B), allowing new themes to emerge (Bryman, 2016). Impromptu questions, based on participant responses, showed active listening and validated contributions, increasing engagement (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The initial phase of questioning focused on eliciting participants' personal perceptions, encouraging discussion and debate. This "warm-up" period is crucial for facilitating productive focus group discussions (Breen, 2006). Key research questions then followed once the discussion flowed. Relevant literature situated in areas of feminism, sexual violence, and social media was used to inform the line of questioning.

Moderator's Role: To facilitate productive discussions, I showed genuine interest, remained neutral, and facilitated inclusive participation. While addressing dominant voices by engaging quieter members, I also strategically guided the discussion and group dynamics for informative outcomes (Cronin, 2008; Tonkiss, 2012). My shared age and gender with participants could have fostered rapport, encouraging open discussion. However, this similarity may have also increased social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010), potentially influencing responses. For example, one participant, with whom I have a pre-existing relationship, seemed to shift her language during the focus group, using overly complex vocabulary. While her core ideas remained the same, this attempt to appear more knowledgeable created ambiguity and required me to frequently ask for clarification. This potential limitation was considered during data interpretation. However, because I was familiar with the participant's genuine perspectives, the impact on the overall findings was judged to be minimal.

Sampling

Twelve women aged 18-25 were recruited for this study. This age group (Perrin, 2015), typically with high rates of social media use, were ideal for this study due to their engagement in online discourse and likelihood to be familiar with the “choose the bear” debate. The choice to have exclusively women is supported by the research’s aim to understand women’s perceptions, making the inclusion of men unnecessary. All twelve participants are students at Loughborough University, this was not purposeful and likely has implications on the diversity of perceptions recorded. The study aimed for purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020). However, practicalities meant this often resembled convenience sampling (Sedgwick, 2013) as my social network largely matched these criteria. This combination proved an efficient and effective recruitment strategy for suitable participants. While this subjective sample selection is not broadly representative (Etikan et al., 2016), nonprobability sampling remained the most feasible method given the specific requirements and time constraints of this research.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting focus groups required careful consideration of ethical guidelines. First, ethical approval from Loughborough University was gained, confirming the research as an ethically sound study (see all ethical documents in Appendix A). This required a comprehensive risk assessment covering threatening behaviour, distressing topics, and participant/researcher

safety. A Participant Information sheet and Informed Consent form were devised to ensure potential participants were fully aware of the study's purpose and risks, as well as confirming participant confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study up to the point of analysis. I ensured confidentiality by anonymising all data and storing the audio recordings and transcripts (See Appendix B) securely within Loughborough University's database. Maintaining confidentiality can be difficult when group members might inadvertently disclose sensitive information (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). I addressed this by clearly communicating the limits of confidentiality and emphasising the importance of respecting each other's privacy. To minimise potential distress, the study focused on participants' perceptions, not personal experiences. While aiming to mitigate harm, the potential for sensitive topics was acknowledged. To address this, the focus on perceptions was reiterated, encouraging participants to disclose any discomfort. Additionally, body language and contributions were closely monitored for signs of distress.

Analysis

Thematic analysis, using Nvivo, was employed to identify patterns in participant perceptions (See Appendix B). This method, suitable for qualitative data and accessible for novice researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2012), allowed for the exploration of complex responses and emerging themes. This highlights the suitability for the research, an undergraduate dissertation, as my experience in complex data analysis is limited. Following Braun and Clarke's six phases (2006, cited in 2012) aimed to enhance analytical accuracy and reliability. Despite the time-consuming coding phase (Joffe, 2011; Wilkinson, 1998), the resulting in-depth familiarity with the data significantly contributed to the quality of the analysis. Through this process three key themes emerged: women's reasoning for choosing the bear and their fear of men, women's perception of masculinity, and the debate's effectiveness in discussing gender and safety, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

This chapter outlined the qualitative, feminist approach used to explore women's views on men through the "choose the bear" debate. Focus groups enabled rich discussion on gender, safety, and online discourse, with thematic analysis via NVivo revealing key themes. While limitations such as sampling and bias exist, the method effectively captured women's lived experiences.

The following chapter presents the main findings, exploring the debate's relevance in broader societal discussions on gender and safety.

Findings

This chapter presents the key findings collated from the two focus groups, exploring gendered perceptions related to the “choose the bear” debate. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: (1) Women’s reasoning for choosing the bear and their fear of men, (2) Women’s perceptions of masculinity, and (3) The Polarisation and Effectiveness of the Debate for discussing gender and safety issues. These themes were selected based on their prominence in participant discussions and their relevance to the research questions. They encapsulate key aspects of the debate, including women’s fear, its relevance to gender and masculinity, and its potential to shape social discourse. By focusing on these areas, the analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how the debate reflects societal concerns regarding gender and safety.

“Why would you want to pick the bear?”

A major theme that emerged was women’s reasoning for choosing the bear and, more broadly, their perception of fear, safety, and threats. Participants repeatedly emphasised that women’s fear of men is shaped by lived experiences, social conditioning, and social narratives.

The Perception of Men as Unpredictable Threats

A common argument for choosing the bear was the perception that men, unlike the bear, are unpredictable and have the capabilities to commit a wider range of harm, across a more extensive timeframe. One participant noted:

“Bears are predictable so they are going to rip you apart and kill you but that's all they can do. Whereas a man could rape you, could torture you, could leave you like really mentally harmed, and it can be for an elongated period of time” (Amelie, Group 1)

This view underscores how women’s fear extends beyond immediate physical danger and to include potential psychological and emotional consequences, particularly the risk of sexual violence. The wording of ‘that’s all they can do’ when describing being killed by a bear

poignantly suggests that women's fear is not simply about survival but about the possibility of prolonged harm. This articulation reveals a deep-seated understanding of the potential for sustained trauma, highlighting the unique nature of male violence compared to the more finite act of the bear. Another participant supported this, emphasising the range of harm that men are capable of:

"I think the damage that can be done by a bear is pretty much life ending. But the damage that can be done by man can be life altering, and like sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, everything, whereas with a bear its straightforward." (Beth, Group 1)

Again, the description of being killed by a bear as "straightforward" suggests that women prioritise psychological integrity over physical survival. It demonstrates that the violation of personhood in sexual violence is a more profound threat than death. While Ferraro (1996) claims that women's fear of rape rivals their fear of death, the preference for the bear further illustrates that the uncertainty of male encounters and the threat of sexual violence provoke greater fear than near-certain death. This aligns with research indicating that uncertainty significantly amplifies fear responses (Grupe & Nitschke, 2011).

Women's Fear of Men as an Ever-Present Reality

Many participants described the fear of men as a constant, inherent aspect of women's daily lives. Lucy notes the role of early socialisation in shaping women's fears:

"[Women] are brought up with that fear and ... we grow, like adapt, to ... prepare ourselves in case that scenario happens, ... if you confront a man" (Lucy, Group 1)

This highlights women's lifelong awareness of men as a threat, suggesting the fear of men is somewhat integral to the female experience. This constant awareness, stemming from early socialisation, lays the groundwork for the fear expressed by participants as, despite acknowledgements from participants that not all men pose a threat to women's safety, the consensus across discussions was:

“Not all men, but all women... not all men will attack but all women are scared of being attacked.” (Vera, Group 2)

The quote highlights the deep-rooted fear that women have of men, as a collective. While the assertion that *all* women fear men may be untrue, it highlights the widespread fear women experience. The fear can be seen as a defining element of the female experience, making such a generalisation feel disturbingly plausible. This fear can be linked to the aforementioned unpredictability of men, as women cannot guarantee which men to feel safe around:

“I’m going to be cautious of all of them. it’s like that analogy where if you told someone they had ten drinks and one of them had been spiked, you’d approach all of them cautiously. It’s the same with men... they’re not all bad, but some of them are, therefore you approach them all with caution, and as a whole, you would choose the bear.” (Molly, Group 1)

This pervasive fear doesn't remain abstract. Rather, it translates into a range of practical behavioural adaptations as women navigate their daily routines. Participants offered numerous examples, illustrating how this fear directly influences their choices and actions:

“If you’re walking home, like pretend to call someone or only have one headphone in.”
(Natalie, Group 2)

“As women ... we obviously choose what we wear, the direction we go in purely on the fact of being able to feel safer” (Rebecca, Group 1)

This shows women frequently adjust their behaviour to mitigate perceived threats, revealing the real-life impact of their fears and perceptions of men. These adjustments illustrate women’s mental calculations, weighing up potential threats against daily routines, highlighting fear’s tangible impact on their lives. More extreme safety precautions include:

“[women] are getting in taxis now and snap a bit of their hair off and chuck it under the driver’s seat so that if something was to happen there’s DNA..., or they will bite their finger

and smear blood on the door, which ... is [women] trying ... to protect themselves." (Ellie, Group 2)

The extremity of these examples reinforces the severity of women's safety concerns, where self-harm becomes a means of control in inherently dangerous situations, highlighting their profound vulnerability.

Discussion

These findings highlight the deeply ingrained fear women have of men, shaped by lifelong socialisation and lived experiences. Choosing the bear reflects broader concerns about unpredictability, prolonged harm, and the psychological toll of gendered violence. As the findings suggest, men, unlike bears, can inflict multiple forms of harm—physical, sexual, and emotional—contributing to an overarching sense of vulnerability. Participants described being killed by a bear as "straightforward" compared to the lasting trauma a man could inflict, reinforcing Ferraro's (1996) argument that women's fear of sexual violence rivals their fear of death itself. The fear felt by participants is not unfounded but reinforced by systemic gender inequalities that normalise male aggression and downplay the severity of sexual violence (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013). Feminist scholars assert that sexual violence is not an isolated crime but a widespread societal issue that disproportionately affects women (Kuo et al., 2018). The perception reflected by participants that men are unpredictable threats mirrors Kelly's (2013) "continuum of sexual violence," where male violence shapes women's behaviours, decisions, and perceptions of safety across their life course. The quotation that "not all men, but all women" live with the fear of male violence aligns with Haskell and Randall's (1998) assertion that the violent actions of some men keep all women in a state of fear. Moreover, the findings show this fear shapes women's daily precautions (e.g., altering routes, faking calls, leaving DNA). Ferraro (1996) and Mellgren & Ivert (2019) argue fear of sexual violence dictates women's risk perception, leading to constant vigilance. This aligns with the participants' perceptions of gendered safety. The extremity of these precautions highlights how deeply embedded this fear is, shaping not only individual behaviour but societal norms around gender and safety.

Consequently, the findings show that the “choose the bear” debate is not just an internet trend but a reflection of systemic gender-based fears, illustrating how women’s perceptions of men are shaped by lived experience, cultural narratives, and institutional failures to protect them.

“Good” Men, “Bad” Men, and The Idea of Masculinity

“There's not only the bad men, there's so many good men, it's like the how can you make that sort of judgment in a split second when you're being followed?” (Natalie, Group 2)

A dominant theme that emerged is women’s perception of masculinity and how it informs women's attitudes towards men. Discussions across both focus groups reveal that participants broadly categorise men as "good" or "bad", revealing the complexity of male identity, the influence of gender roles, and the perceived social threat posed by men. Additionally, the rise of hyper-masculine figures such as Andrew Tate has intensified the discourse around toxic masculinity, aggression, and societal expectations of men.

Participants repeatedly referenced traditional gender roles, noting how historical expectations of men as providers and protectors have shifted in modern society. Several participants in one group highlighted that masculinity, once associated with chivalry and security, is now often linked to power, control, and, at times, violence. This evolution has contributed to growing distrust towards men, particularly in the context of gender-based violence.

“...they were protectors but now they're not protectors, because they harm women.” (Zara, Group 2)

However, the other group associated masculinity with notions of aggression, describing men as “animalistic” and claiming:

“...women have always feared men in recent history, for sure” (Lucy, Group 1)

This difference between the two groups’ perceptions provides an interesting insight into women’s perceptions of men. Both groups recognised that men inflict harm on women.

However, their differing perspectives on how masculinity and this harm have evolved suggest a division: some women feel the situation is deteriorating, while others consider it a constant issue in society. Strikingly, no participant felt the threat men pose to women is lessening. A recurring sentiment throughout both focus groups was the difficulty women face in distinguishing "good" men from "bad" men. This difficulty is poignantly captured in the opening quote, which underscores the immediate, often instinctive, assessments women must make in potentially threatening situations. The quote highlights the inherent vulnerability and the psychological burden women carry, forced to make critical judgments without the luxury of time or certainty. One participant notably claimed:

“The men that we would naturally see as like safe men are also unaware [of women’s experiences]” (Lucy, Group 1)

This indicates the struggle women face when trying to determine which men are truly “good” as opposed to those who might not pose an immediate threat but who allow for the victimisation of women to continue. Multiple participants expressed a frustration that men, who don’t see themselves as harmful towards women, continue to stay silent on gendered issues:

“[It] is more frustrating than anything ... unless they actively put themselves in a position to help the situation rather than passively ignore it and say, well ‘oh, I’m not someone a girl would need to worry about so that’s me sorted’” (Lucy, Group 1)

Despite the absence of explicitly wrong actions, participants viewed this attitude as a threat to women's safety and an impediment to gender equality. This passive indifference, perceived as a form of complicity, amplifies the difficulty women face in discerning genuine allies from those who inadvertently contribute to societal gender divides. Furthermore, multiple participants raised the issue of Andrew Tate when discussing gender norms and the concept of masculinity. Tate, who has gained notoriety for his views on male dominance and female subservience, was identified as a key influence shaping young men’s perceptions of masculinity and driving misogyny. Participants expressed concern over the way figures like Tate promote hyper-masculinity, aggression, and the dehumanisation of women:

“Andrew Tate, he's saying things like all women get back in the kitchen or this woman needs to shut up and do this for me” (Natalie, Group 2)

“I think it's kind of sending people backwards because now that there's like younger men like watching that, that's now then bringing them up” (Natalie, Group 2)

Describing the phenomenon as moving "backwards" suggests Tate reinforces outdated gender norms, aligning with earlier findings of stalled progress on gender-based violence and misogyny. Participants felt Tate's accessible social media content radicalises young men towards misogynistic attitudes and a sense of entitlement over women, framing interactions as power dynamics, not mutual respect. Building on this notion of harmful masculinity, participants perceived aggression and violence as prominent characteristics of modern masculinity:

“That toxic masculinity trait that men are very much aggressive” (Niamh, Group 2)

“[women] think ... of men as violent and we're all bloody scared basically” (Ellie, Group 2)

Ellie's expression of women's fear serves as a valuable insight into women's perception of men, as whilst the participants noted that not all men fall under the label of aggressive or violent, the prevalence of such is clearly enough to impact women's feelings of safety. This pervasive fear, compounded by the inability to reliably distinguish 'good' from 'bad,' instils a constant state of uncertainty, driving anxiety and hypervigilance in women (Grupe & Nitschke, 2011), underscoring the need for societal change.

Discussion

The findings reveal a persistent conflict in women's perceptions of masculinity, with participants struggling to categorise men as purely good or bad and highlighting a problematic "passive" middle ground. This reflects women's difficulty in discerning trustworthy men, reinforcing societal anxiety about male behaviour and women's safety. This uncertainty aligns with feminist literature on the normalisation of male aggression and its role in sustaining gendered fear (Haskell & Randall, 1998; Stanko, 1996).

Additionally, participants expressed frustration with male inaction on gendered violence, viewing silence as complicity in perpetuating toxic masculinity. Literature supports this, noting that men's failure to challenge toxic masculinity contributes to its persistence (Segraves, 2022; Jones et al., 2022). This aligns with bystander apathy research, where passive male attitudes reinforce gender divides, leaving women feeling unsupported (Diemer, 2014; Easteal et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2023). This inaction is seen as actively sustaining gender disparities (Buss, 2021; Katz, 2019; Rios-Gonzalez et al., 2024). A recurring theme is the evolving notion of masculinity, shifting from protector to potential threat. This parallels literature on toxic masculinity, where hyper-masculine figures such as Andrew Tate promote regressive gender norms, exacerbating misogyny and reinforcing power imbalances (Renström & Bäck, 2024; Haslop et al., 2024). Participants' concerns about Tate's influence highlight social media's role in radicalising misogynistic ideals (Kapoor, 2019; Powell & Henry, 2017; Williams et al., 2023), supporting the perception of masculinity regressing and women viewing men as threats.

The Polarisation and Effectiveness of the Debate

A recurring topic of discussion was the perceived disconnect between the debate's aims and its actual outcomes in addressing gender-based issues and reflecting women's perceptions.

This included concerns that the debate did not facilitate productive discussions on gendered safety, instead contributing to the polarisation of perspectives and reinforcing harmful societal divides. The debate created spaces for productive discussions about gender and safety and overall, was seen as an accurate reflection of women's perceptions and feelings of safety toward men. Several participants acknowledged that the stark nature of the debate forced some men to confront the depth of women's fears in a way they previously had not considered. The extreme comparison made the conversation accessible and engaging, even for those who might otherwise avoid discussions on gender-based violence.

“The man versus bear is very straightforward and anyone can answer it, so I think the men have spoke up a bit more” (Beth, Group 1)

Some men were reported to have responded with understanding and a willingness to learn, especially those who had witnessed the reality of male violence through their relationships with women in their lives:

“I think people who ... have a close relationship with women in their life, who ... have seen ... the harm that they've gone through... they don't see [the debate] as an attack on themselves but they see it as an attack on the men that they are trying to protect the women in their lives from.” (Molly, Group 1)

However, the debate's reliance on extremity was also identified as a potential drawback. Participants expressed concern that the simplification of the issue into a binary choice -between a man or bear - failed to account for the nuances of the discussion. Interestingly, Amelie articulated that this reliance on extreme tactics serves as a critique of societal priorities, implying that the perceived devaluation of women's safety necessitates increasingly radical approaches to elevate the discourse on gender-based issues:

“it's worrying that ... we have to put it on two complete opposite ends of the spectrum and give the most extreme examples to make people understand [women's] point of view.” (Amelie, Group 1)

The effectiveness of the debate was often perceived to be compromised by its divisive framing, which led many men to dismiss the discussion outright rather than engage with it meaningfully. Many participants noted that they had seen men often interpreting the discussion as a direct attack on their character rather than as a commentary on gendered safety concerns. This led to minimised male engagement and weakened the perceived effectiveness of the debate:

“They don't see what the actual meaning is, they just see is ‘oh, you're attacking men’ like, it's not all men but that's like their first thought, whereas they don't actually know why women think that.” (Zara, Group 2)

Participants claimed that some male respondents took issue with the generalisation that all men are dangerous, failing to recognise the societal patterns that inform women's fears. This defensiveness often led to an unproductive stalemate, where men focused on refuting the claim rather than engaging with, and listening to, the reasons behind women's fears, minimising the debates effectiveness:

“I feel like the women are all speaking up, but no one's really listening apart from the other women so it's not really doing anything.” (Harriet, Group 2)

It must be stated that the data reflects participant perceptions of male responses, not direct male contributions. However, the consistent and recurrent mention of male defensiveness and disinterest within both focus groups indicates a notable pattern worthy of analysis. The perception of male defensiveness in the context of gender-based issues provides a useful insight into women's broader perceptions of men. This perceived defensiveness may foster a belief that men prioritise self-preservation over women's safety, subsequently intensifying feelings of vulnerability and fear. Furthermore, some participants suggested that the debate, whilst an accurate reflection of women's fears, might intensify the sense of fear among women, exacerbating anxieties rather than leading to constructive solutions for gendered safety concerns:

“I think it's probably made people a little bit more scared” (Harriet, Group 2)

The effectiveness of the debate as a platform for discussing gender and safety was another contested issue. Some participants felt that it successfully brought attention to women's fears and encouraged conversations about male violence:

“It's really opened... a door for [women] to talk about their experiences.” (Beth, Group 1)

Others, however, felt that it lacked a clear resolution or actionable outcome, instead fostering further division between men and women.

“It risks demonising all men for sure” (Lucy, Group 1)

“There's no positive in the right direction towards making that fear go away.” (Zara, Group 2)

Paradoxically, the men who choose to engage with and internalise the debate's messages are frequently not those whose actions are perceived as harmful, thus limiting the debate's capacity to effect meaningful change without “the men that are actually harmful” engaging.

“If the people in the debate aren't even listening to the debate, then it's not really a meaningful approach” (Niamh, Group 2)

Participants appreciated the debate's success in amplifying women's perceptions and fears, offering a raw insight into gendered safety experiences. The extremity of the comparison proved effective in drawing attention to women's lived realities, particularly for men who might otherwise disengage. However, this provocative framing was a double-edged sword, making the issue visible but risking oversimplification of nuanced experiences. As Amelie noted, such extremes reflect a societal failure to prioritise women's safety, where only radical comparisons gain attention. A key challenge is male defensiveness, with participants noting men often see the debate as a personal attack, hindering engagement with systemic issues—a reaction aligning with research on rape culture and minimisation of gender-based violence (Bates et al., 2019; Diemer, 2014; Ioannides, 2023). Participants also perceived that male disengagement reinforces that sexual victimisation disproportionately affects women (Kuo et al., 2018). Although digital activism, including cyberfeminist movements like #MeToo, has successfully raised awareness (Kapoor, 2019; Leopold et al., 2021), the bear debate may lack the same clarity of purpose. While it highlights women's fears, its reliance on extremity risks alienating men, reducing its potential for meaningful change. The findings also highlight how the debate risks heightening women's fear rather than providing solutions. Radical feminist perspectives argue that women's fear of male violence functions as a tool of social control, restricting autonomy (Stanko, 1996). While the debate amplifies awareness, the findings reflect that its effectiveness in fostering actionable change remains uncertain. As some participants noted, men who engage with the discussion are often not those responsible for harmful behaviours, limiting its transformative potential. To maximise its impact, future discourse should shift toward constructive engagement and strategies for improving gendered safety.

General Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that the debate serves as a strikingly accurate reflection of women's perceptions of men, particularly their fear of male violence. The findings reveal that women's preference for the bear is not an irrational exaggeration but a deeply ingrained response to lived experiences, social conditioning, and systemic gender inequalities. By

presenting a choice between man or bear, the debate simplifies whether women weigh the risk of sexual victimisation against the likelihood of fatal harm, acknowledging uncertainty in both. Participants expressed that their fear of men extends beyond physical harm to include emotional and psychological trauma, particularly the risk of sexual violence, making the bear seem like the 'safer' option (Phillips et al., 2024). Building upon Ferraro's (1996) argument, this analysis suggests that women may prioritise the avoidance of sexual victimisation over death. Unlike a bear, perceived as instinctual, men are perceived as capable of prolonged and multifaceted harm. This aligns with broader feminist discourse that highlights how the threat of male violence, and women's fear of men, acts as a form of social control, impacting women's daily lives and behaviours and forcing them to take extensive precautions to mitigate perceived risks (Haskell & Randall, 1998; Stanko, 1996). The correlation between the debates intended discussion, and the findings of this study demonstrates the accuracy of the debate in reflecting women's perception of men. Furthermore, the convergence of women's perceptions of masculinity as 'aggressive' and 'violent' with the debate's comparison of men to bears, exploring masculine aggression and trust dynamics, validates the premise of the debate. The debate reflects participants' difficulty to differentiate "good" from "bad" men. Discussions suggested that men's passivity on gendered violence increases women's insecurity, reinforcing the feminist perception of distrust (Buss, 2021; Katz, 2019). Participants highlighted how hyper-masculine figures like Andrew Tate exacerbate these concerns, as they perpetuate misogynistic rhetoric that influences young men and reinforces gender-based fears, as supported by Haslop et al. (2024). However, the debate's effectiveness is contested. While highlighting women's fears, its extreme framing causes male defensiveness, limiting constructive dialogue. The perception that men prioritise self-preservation over women's safety intensifies feelings of vulnerability, reinforcing the fears the debate seeks to highlight. This defensiveness, shifting focus from women's experiences to men's reactions, reflects male privilege and internalised gender inequalities (Nicholas et al., 2018; Segraves, 2022). Ultimately, the debate serves as a revealing lens into women's perceptions of men, illustrating how fear of male violence is embedded in social realities. Disguised as a mere internet trend, the debate serves as a form of cyberfeminism, addressing systemic gender and safety concerns and highlighting the persistent threat of male violence women face.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the extent to which the “choose the bear” debate reflects women’s perceptions of men. By centering women's voices through a feminist methodological framework, utilising focus groups, the study addressed its three core aims: to understand how the debate is perceived by participants, explore how it connects to wider societal perceptions of gender and safety, and evaluate its effectiveness as a platform for discussing gendered issues. The findings confirmed that the debate powerfully encapsulates widespread and ingrained fears women hold towards men, particularly surrounding sexual violence. Participants articulated that the choice of the bear over a man was not rooted in absurdity but in a rational assessment of threat—emphasising male unpredictability, the potential for sustained psychological harm, and the ever-present fear that accompanies being a woman. This validates the debate as an accurate reflection of women’s perceptions and lived realities, demonstrating its cultural relevance. Moreover, the research also showed masculinity is increasingly seen as a threat, rather than protection. Despite acknowledging the existence of “good men,” the difficulty distinguishing from those who may harm—combined with widespread male inaction—contributes to a climate of mistrust. Hypermasculine influencers like Andrew Tate exacerbate this by promoting misogyny narratives. The Netflix series 'Adolescence' illustrates the real-world harm of online toxic masculinity, highlighting the dissertation's timely relevance to public discourse on male violence. Although the debate succeeded in drawing attention to gendered safety concerns, participants expressed concern about its polarising nature and its tendency to alienate male audiences. This tension diminished its effectiveness as a tool for driving constructive conversation or change - emphasising the necessity of engaging strategies that preserve the gravity of women's experiences whilst considering diverse audiences. Such an approach could enhance the conversation's inclusivity and effectiveness in driving progress. The significance of this research lies in its ability to give voice to women’s perceptions in a digital age increasingly shaped by viral discourse. It adds valuable insight to contemporary feminist scholarship by evidencing how online trends function as both reflections of and responses to real-world gender inequalities. Furthermore, it highlights the enduring relevance of cyberfeminist activism in mobilising awareness and resistance in virtual spaces, particularly in the digital age. However, the study is not without limitations. The sample, consisting solely of similarly aged women from Loughborough University, is relatively narrow, which may limit the scope of the findings. While qualitative research does not aim for generalisability, a more

diverse sample could provide a broader perspective. Nevertheless, the homogeneity of the group is beneficial for understanding the views of a specific population and for facilitating focused group dynamics. Moreover, male perspectives were not directly included, so the analysis of their reactions to the debate is based solely on the participants' perceptions. These limitations open up valuable avenues for future research. Future studies could expand the participant base to include a wider range of demographics, examine male perceptions of the debate, or conduct cross-cultural studies to explore how gendered fears manifest in different contexts. Longitudinal research could also examine the long-term effects of online debates like this one on societal attitudes or policy. In conclusion, while the “choose the bear” debate may initially seem like a social media trend, it is in fact a poignant reflection of the complex fears, frustrations, and realities women face daily. This dissertation not only affirms its legitimacy as a form of feminist commentary but also highlights the urgent need for continued dialogue and action toward a safer, more equitable society.

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