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Research paper

'Men are Very Scary Out There'[1]: Reflections on Rape Culture, Misogyny, and #MeToo in the Bear vs. Man Social Media Trend

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the viral 2024 Bear vs. Man social media phenomenon that trended across TikTok, Instagram, and X offers significant insights into the post #MeToo landscape, elucidating the continued sociopolitical and technocultural uncertainties around rape culture. As digital technologies change, the means through which marginalised genders resist, retaliate, refuse, and rebuke misogyny and its intersecting oppressions concomitantly change. Methodologically, this article uses digital dwelling to map the media matrices of our social media platforms, focusing on small, curated data sets. Theoretically, we ground our work in digital activist feminist media approaches to critically question both the reliance on big data in scholarly research and the kinds of power relations that big data can reify. Through dwelling, the article suggests that Bear vs. Man memes reveal three themes: tensions of bodily safety, the prevalence of toxic masculinity, and the reliance on colonial ideologies of man vs. nature. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how the misogynistic backlash to Bear vs. Man memes reveal the ways that rape culture continues to thrive, in partnership with white supremacy, ableism, classism, and colonialism.

Keywords: social media, feminism, misogyny, rape culture, #metoo

On April 10, 2024, using the street interview style of conversation, popular TikTok account SCREENSHOT (@screenshothq) posed the question to women: Would you rather be alone in the woods with a man or a bear? Across TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter), the response from women and other marginalized genders was clear: give us the bear. While responses started with giggles and outright laughter, they quickly took a serious turn as women began using the question to highlight the realities of living in femme bodies. Indeed, rather than simply answering 'man' or 'bear,' women began taking time to explain why they would choose the bear, and their responses resonated deeply with many others. 'Bear, men are scary.' 'Umm, with a bear.' 'I've heard about bears, right? They don't always attack you unless you fuck with them. So, maybe the bear.' 'Depends what man, but probably a bear.' 'Oh, 100% a bear, which is terrifying to say, but….' Across all responses, the primary reason for this preference was safety, with seven out of the eight women who responded saying that they would take the bear, feeling that men pose a greater threat to their safety than bears do. To these women, bears are predictable

[1] From https://www.tiktok.com/@screenshothq/video/7356208240008498465 at 23 seconds.

creatures driven by instinct. Men, on the other hand, are feared for their potential to commit violence, including sexual assault, rape, kidnapping, and physical violence. While bears might attack if provoked, they do not act out of malice, unlike some men who might harm women intentionally and who cannot always be differentiated from other men in a group. As one woman in @screenshothq's TikTok responds, without missing a beat: 'Definitely the bear. Some men are very scary out there' (23 seconds). While only a matter of seconds, this discussion succinctly highlights broader issues of women's safety and trust in unknown men, resonating with many who have had negative experiences or are aware of the statistics of gendered violence. Instagram Memes and TikToks quickly began circulating after the original April 2024 TikTok, with users creating short videos humorously and dramatically weighing their options, often preferring the bear. Tweets featured humorous and sarcastic takes on the question, with users sharing reasons for choosing the bear. The inclusion of stats regarding gender-based violence and bear attack logic prompted deeper reflections on gender dynamics. As the trend continued, broader tensions surrounding masculinity emerged, with many reacting negatively to women's preference for the bear.

The viral uptake of this media event are not surprising, especially given that, since 1784, there have been only an estimated 180 fatal bear attacks in North America (Cockroft, 2023), compared with the estimated three women who are murdered by men each day in the United States – the equivalent of 262,800 women since 1784 – with the number of femicides rising annually (Sanctuary for Families, 2023; World Health Organization, 2024). As the North American Bear Center suggests, while bears can be dangerous, especially if they feel threatened or are protecting their young, the odds of being attacked by a bear are low. Proper precautions, such as securing food and being aware of bear behaviour, can further reduce the risk of an encounter (Rogers, n.d.: para. 3-5). And yet, these 'proper precautions' are not ones that can be taken to ward off man attacks. Despite this reality, many men have expressed confusion and frustration, feeling that the trend unfairly portrays men as more dangerous than wild animals. Some have argued that not all men pose a threat and that the fear women express is exaggerated, based on negative stereotypes (this, we would note, is reminiscent of the 2014 #NotAllMen trend, a defensive response to feminist critiques of systemic misogyny following the Isla Vista killings, where discussions about gendered violence were derailed by attempts to separate individual men from collective accountability). Further, some men online have responded to this conversation with anger, condescension, and mockery, verbally attacking women for truthfully sharing their lived experiences. There is clearly a need to continue the work of feminist media studies to examine and locate the ways that, as Sarah Sharma (2022) articulates, 'techno-logics of … power operate in culture' (8) as seen in this trend, women's responses, and the misogynistic backlash. In response, this article argues that the viral Bear vs. Man trend is more than simply a trend; these discourses offer significant insights into the 'post' #MeToo landscape, suggesting that – even as women, femmes, and other marginalised genders wish that the pervasive culture of misogyny and rape was now drastically different – rape culture continues to thrive. Here, when we speak of women, we mean this to, of course, include trans women.

We also intentionally include femme, which extends beyond gender identity or expression, representing a politicised and often marginalised identity grounded in femininity but distinct from mainstream conceptions (Hoskin and Taylor, 2019; Schwartz, 2020). As Schwartz (2020) explains, femme aesthetics, particularly in digital spaces, deliberately challenge dominant notions of power and resistance, using softness, vulnerability, and care as empowering forms of strength. As we discuss the Bear vs. Man trend in this article, we aim to acknowledge the intersectionality of marginalised genders, including transwomen, non-binary people, and gender queer people, that experience gendered violence and who participated in the trend, noting the range of gender identities and sexualities that claim femme as an identity, politic, and aesthetic. Re-mixing other contemporary trends on social media, like the summer 2024 girlhood trend, Barbiecore, zine aesthetics, FitTok, BookTok, mini vlogs, bricolage memes, and more, bear vs man memes speak to the current status of #MeToo. Using contemporary methods of social media communication, these memes illustrate the depths of current iterations of misogyny and ongoing realities of gender-based violence. This trend widens the audience of 'me too.' participants, particularly for those who may have been too young to fully participate in the viral 2017 #MeToo movement. Across the motifs encoded into our dataset of memes, we identify three themes: first, the colonial desire of men to dominate nature, viewing women, femmes, and other marginalised genders, particularly racialized women, as extensions of that nature; second, the role of toxic masculinity in encouraging boys and men to believe that they (i) can conquer the bear and (ii) have a right to be in the woods with women; and third, physical experiences of safety, where safety and survival carry different connotations for women, femmes, and other marginalised genders in the context of rape culture. Reflecting on these themes, Bear vs. Man thus becomes a means of intervening into normative heteropatriarchal ideologies of rape culture. Through digital media trends (hashtags in 2017; TikToks, memes, and Instagram reels in 2024) Bear vs. Man speaks back to online rape culture and misogyny using the logic of survival and the comedy and humour of contemporary digital meme culture.

METHODOLOGY

In this article and across our work as a research collective, we engage with digital activist and feminist media approaches that focus on social justice-oriented content. We digitally dwell (Wiens and MacDonald, 2024; Wiens, 2021) to map the media matrices (Wiens, 2024) of our variously mediated spaces, focusing on small, curated datasets (Gajjala et al*.,* 2024; Wiens, 2021; Wiens, 2022; Wiens et al*.,* 2024) rather than the ambiguity of big data's generalised and abstracted patterns. From within this context, digital dwelling entails spending time in online spaces to understand tools, tactics, and counter-hegemonic uses that amplify marginalised voices. We thus look at the various dynamics within the Bear vs. Man social media scene, including, but not limited to, 'stories, affects, people, and hashtags and the relationships between these participants' (Wiens & MacDonald, 2024) to consider what flourishes and what does not on the research scene, including how this process is both enabled and constrained by 'systems of power, including social media platforms, institutional policies, and ideologies' (20). Through dwelling with curated small data sets of Bear vs. Man memes, we aim to map the media matrices we find in the collection. From this perspective, we suggest that the Bear vs. Man trend encourages us to locate sociopolitical and technocultural uncertainties around rape culture and interrogate the insecurities that are felt, if not always articulated, in big data research.

For data collection, we analyse memes found through searching the hashtags #bearvsman and #manvsbear on Instagram and TikTok or saved from five personal TikTok accounts and eight Instagram 'For You Pages,' including our research Instagram account, @Anonymous, from April 10, 2024, when the first viral TikTok circulated until June 10, 2024 (two months). These accounts belong to (to use the language of the academy) an established scholar, an emerging scholar, one master's student, two undergraduate students, and our longstanding research Instagram account, which is part of a feminist Instagram activist and scholarly community. Each of us identifies as both femme and feminist. From the dataset of posts we gathered, we conducted a close textual analysis involving three interrelated sets of questions around text, context, and paratext (Wiens & MacDonald, 2024). First, we conducted a direct reading of the post as a visual-textual object, examining its form and content to identify themes and representational tactics aligned with the platform's stylistic norms. Second, we reviewed the accounts more broadly to understand the context behind the post and the frameworks and politics that shaped it. Finally, we analysed the hashtags associated with each post and the comments and replies to grasp the paratextual discourse surrounding it. These three layers of analysis offer a comprehensive view of how a given post functions within the platform's script, highlighting where it conforms, upholds, deviates, and resists.

Despite the diverse ages, races, educational backgrounds, and sexualities of our research collective, we found significant overlap in the posts we encountered and analysed. At the same time, we pause here to recognise the ever-present role that algorithmic bias (Anable, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; Noble, 2018) plays, making our data highly personalised to our identities and habits as chronic users of the Internet. Along those lines, as feminist researchers, we consider our positionality and situated knowledges through constant reflexivity (e.g., Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Pillow, 2010). We acknowledge that our perspectives, both online and in our everyday lives, are shaped by already present feminist orientations to digital culture and scholarship. Using our personal accounts was ultimately a decision rooted in our intersectional, intergenerational politics, especially given how, in this article, we aim to highlight how ways of knowing are influenced by our social locations and how dominant perspectives often obscure important knowledge from the mainstream view. We also acknowledge that the collective dwelling and discussion of our collaborative pool of memes intimately shaped (and continues to shape) how we personally viewed and interacted with the Bear vs. Man trend. Many of our insights and commentary here were built in community, and therefore represent our ongoing intergenerational, intersectional relationships as a research collective, as well as our personal responses. Focusing on our own feeds was a necessary methodological and political intervention, looking towards how both misogyny and feminist resistance are reflected in the rape culture we live within, manifest within Bear vs. Man posts on Instagram and TikTok. Our approach reinforces the idea that, as researchers, we are never truly distanced from our research sites; our research sites and data a/affect us and operate through us as we analyse them.

Context: Feminist media and misogyny in action

The intersection of rape culture and misogyny in digital spaces has long been a focal point of feminist media studies, which has explored how online platforms perpetuate and challenge existing power dynamics (Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Conley, 2017; Daniels, 2016; Gajjala, 2019; Rentschler, 2017; Singh, 2018; Williams, 2015). Indeed, the convergence of digital culture and feminist activism has impressed the importance of nuance and criticality in understanding and addressing rape culture. The well-known #MeToo movement, which gained widespread traction across North America in 2017 after its inception in 2006 by Tarana Burke,

highlighted pervasive sexual harassment and assault, prompting a larger, global conversation about gendered violence, sexual harassment, and rape culture.

Rape culture, a term that emerged in the 1970s, is a term coined by feminist activists to explain the cultural context 'in which sexual assault is not only seen as inevitable in some contexts, but desirable and excusable as well' (Mendes, 2015), because 'women are constructed as enjoying being aggressively pursued, and in some cases, overpowered by men' (Keller et al*.,* 2016). In a culture of rape, rape is pervasive and normalised due to social attitudes towards gender and sexuality; practices like rape jokes, sexual harassment, cat-calling, sexualized 'banter'; the routine policing of women's bodies, dress, appearance, and code of conduct; the re-direction of blame from the perpetrator in an assault to the victim; and impunity for perpetrators, despite their conduct or crimes (24) are all indicative of rape culture. Rape culture includes, as Wiens (2021) notes, the ways that women are framed as provoking rape and sexual violence through actions like drinking too much, wearing certain clothes, walking alone at night, speaking with men one-on-one, or otherwise being seen as unsuccessfully acting in pure or chaste ways. (23) These practices contribute to and reinforce legal and social structures that perpetuate the prevalence of sexual violence. Notably, rape culture does not only exist materially and ideologically, but also 'in the spaces between, leaking between technologies, mediations, and domains of power' (23).

On social media, memes and other posts are potent contributors to rape culture, both subtly and overtly perpetuating misogynistic ideas. Memes rely on humour, irony, and relatability as they re-mix politics and pop culture (Karayianni & Christou, 2020; Shifman, 2014; Wilson, 2019), making them an insidious means of normalising harmful stereotypes and behaviours. In the context of rape culture, memes minimise the seriousness of sexual violence or blame victims, contributing to a broader culture of misogyny (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Because rape culture is sustained through language, media, and cultural norms that trivialize, excuse, or even condone sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Armstrong et al*.,* 2018), social media inevitably reinforces rape culture, while also serving as a platform for resistance and activism (Baer, 2016). Platforms have long been criticised for their inadequate responses to online gendered abuse, allowing such behaviours to thrive. As Danielle Citron (2023) argues, writing for *The Yale Law Journal Forum,* there continues to be a refusal to 'recognize cyber gender abuse as wrongful, even though empirical proof shows the damage that it causes' (6). And like Emma A. Jane (2016) outlines, 'violent partners and ex-partners are able to use the Internet as another dimension of their abuse of women, but that violent partners and ex-partners are able to use the Internet to incite others to join their attacks' (287). Indeed, during the lead-up, playing out of, and aftermath of #MeToo, social media platforms were well documented as crucial spaces for both perpetuating and challenging harmful gender norms, particularly around rape culture (Mendes et al*.,* 2018; Rentschler, 2014; Sills et al*.,* 2016; Whitehead, 2023; Wiens & MacDonald 2020). Such misogyny in digital spaces manifests through harassment, doxxing, and the dissemination of misogynistic content.

For instance, the 'manosphere' (Ging, 2019), a loose collection of online communities that promote anti-feminist, misogynistic, and often racist ideologies, have been at the forefront of the brigade against women and other marginalised genders' rights. This manosphere includes, but is not limited to, Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), and involuntary celibates(incels), all of which share a common hatred of feminist gains and women's autonomy. Ging's work elucidates how the manosphere employs digital media to disseminate their views and recruit new members, using 'networked misogyny' (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Networked misogyny describes the ways in which misogynistic discourses and practices are propagated, amplified, and sustained across digital networks; it is characterised by coordinated attacks on women and feminists, often under the guise of humour or 'trolling.' This form of digital harassment not only seeks to silence women but also to reassert traditional gender hierarchies in the face of feminist challenges. Connectivity and anonymity, two buzz words of the internet and two affordances of social media platforms, facilitate the spread of misogynistic content, which can range from overtly abusive comments to more subtle forms of gendered harassment. Importantly, as Kate Manne (2017) reminds us, misogyny is not merely a set of individual attitudes or acts of hatred towards women but a broader social system that enforces and polices gendered norms and expectations. Different from sexism, which is the ideological belief system that rationalises and justifies gender inequality, misogyny is the enforcement arm that punishes and controls women who deviate from societal norms. As Manne (2017) argues, misogyny works to uphold patriarchal social structures by targeting women who challenge or fail to conform to expected roles, thereby maintaining male dominance. By focusing on the systemic nature of misogyny, we importantly shift the conversation from individual actions to the broader social and cultural forces that sustain gender inequality.

Contemporary material and discursive enactments of the bear

The 'Bear vs. Man' social media trend, which began in April 2024 and has, by July 2024, seemingly ended, posed a hypothetical question: would individuals, primarily women, rather be stuck in the woods with a random, unknown man or a bear? Overwhelmingly, women chose the bear. The trend highlighted deep-seated fears and

societal issues regarding safety and trust, especially concerning male violence against women. Notably, the imagery of bears in pop culture has a rich history, evolving and reflecting various cultural trends and societal attitudes, setting the stage for the recent Bear vs. Man trend on social media. In ancient cultures, bears often symbolised strength, bravery, and power, appearing in myths and folklore such as the Greek myth of Callisto (*Britannica*, n.d.) and in some Native American oral histories of the Bear, Mato, as a revered spiritual healer and protector, a gift to Mother Earth (Native Hope, 2020). In medieval Europe, bears were both feared and respected, featuring in heraldry and often associated with nobility and warrior attributes (Pastoureau, 2011). By the 19th to early 20th century, bears became popular characters in children's literature, with notable examples including *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1837) and A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). During this period, bears were also commonly featured in circuses, often performing tricks, which emphasised their strength and trainability, but also their potential danger (Bear Conservation, 2024). Moving into the mid to late 20th century, television and film further entrenched bears in popular culture with characters like Yogi Bear (1958), a mischievous but lovable bear, Baloo from Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967), known for his carefree attitude, and Beast from Disney's *The Beauty and the Beast* (1991, drawing on the 1740 by French fairytale by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and then abridged and rewritten by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1756). The creation of the teddy bear in the early 20th century continued to influence the perception of bears as gentle and friendly (Picard, 2016). In the late 20th century, with clearer impacts of the climate crisis and the rise of environmental awareness, bears, and particularly grizzly bears, became symbols of wilderness conservation within the Canadian context. The bear came to visualise the dire consequences of human activities on natural habitats, exemplified by the fuzzy polar bear turned skeleton in discussions about climate change (Government of Canada, 2022).

Mapping this earlier iteration of the bear becomes important for understanding the iconography of the bear, particularly in its current iterations. Bear vs. Man on social media offers a modern evolution of the age-old fascination with the power and danger of bears – as well as their 'cuteification' via children's toys and movies – put into conversation with the very real power and danger of patriarchy. Social media platforms amplify this fascination by showcasing videos and stories where humans encounter bears, often highlighting the tension between awe and fear. Viral videos of bear encounters, whether in urban settings, national parks, or staged confrontations, capture public imagination by playing on themes of human vulnerability and the unpredictable nature of wildlife. Many social media posts about bear encounters are shared with humorous or satirical commentary, reflecting a blend of respect for and trivialisation of the dangers posed by these animals. The trend and its responses exhibit a combination of historical bear imagery: the respect and fear from ancient and medieval times, the endearing and anthropomorphised depictions from children's literature and cartoons, the environmental symbolism of the late 20th century, and the modern-day fascination with viral and often sensational content on social media. Understood within rape culture's context of the manosphere and the prevalence of networked misogyny, this blend creates a complex portrayal of bears in relationship to men in contemporary popular culture, balancing the line between admiration, humour, and genuine concern for safety and conservation.

ANALYSIS

Across the analysis below, three themes emerge from the motifs encoded into the memes: 1) bodily experiences of safety, where safety and survival connote different rhetorical meanings for women, femmes, and other marginalised genders in their relation to rape culture; 2) toxic masculinity supportive of men believing they (i) could defeat the bear and (ii) deserve to be in the woods with women; and 3) man's colonial desire to conquer nature, with women, femmes, and other marginalised genders, and especially racialised women, as part of nature. In this article, when we say toxic masculinity, we draw on 'hegemonic masculinity' to refer to a set of socially constructed attitudes promotes the idea that men must dominate others to assert their masculinity, leading to harmful behaviours such as violence, sexual harassment, and the suppression of emotions (Connell, 1995). Toxic masculinity may arise from feelings of entitlement and the fear of losing power or status, particularly in the face of changing social and economic conditions, where men who feel displaced or emasculated may resort to aggression, misogyny, and even violence as a way to reassert their masculinity (Gheorghe, 2023). As bell hooks has argued (2004), social pressures to conform to traditional masculinity harm men and prevent them from experiencing love and emotional fulfilment. Importantly, toxic masculinity is not just about individual behaviours, nor is it innate to cis men and/or masculinity but is deeply rooted in societal expectations that define manhood in narrow and rigid terms.

'We Choose the Bear': Feminist Responses to Rape Culture and Bodily Experiences of Safety

In **Figure 1**'s sequence of carousel images, posted on May 25, 2024, to Instagram by Berlin based artist Lisa, we are confronted by images of faceless women, drawn against the night sky across eight different slides, each bearing known tropes of rape culture, explaining why they would choose the bear. The text, superimposed onto the blank face of the woman in each image, reflects the language used to redirect the blame of assault from the perpetrator to the abused. Women are keenly aware of the greater danger posed by bears (after all, bears are known not to be the friendliest of animals, sometimes inflicting injury or death), but the eight women across the carousel demonstrate the reclamation of their agency by making a profound point: choosing to confront a bear's instinct-driven aggression, an aggression that is often predictable and predicated on a series of controllable factors, is a more dignified choice than enduring the often unavoidable and erratic horrors inflicted by men. As outlined in the fourth image of the carousel, 'a bear wouldn't say afterwards that I can be glad that at least he paid attention to me,' or as written in the eighth slide, 'screaming wouldn't make the bear excited.' Neither, as the sixth slide reminds audiences, 'would the police believe a bear over me.' In other words, if a woman were attacked by a bear, no one would trivialise the severity of the violence inflicted by the animal or blame her for provoking such an attack. By contrasting the raw instinctive aggression of a bear with that of a man who is expected to embody rationality and empathy, these eight women illustrate the fact that, under rape culture, they would likely be safer choosing the bear. Notably, the caption for this post reads, 'The bear wouldn't choose man either,' suggesting that, in the imaginary world where women have the agency to choose bears over men, even the bears are wary of men's unwarranted aggression. By extending this critique to a cross-species perspective, the caption draws a parallel to aggression and violence, suggesting that a bear's attack would be uncommon and only occur in response to perceived threats, rather than out of enjoyment or malice.

Figure 1

The bear wouldn't choose man either

Source: @the.art.to.change on Instagram[2]

Across the images, the text used on the faceless figure address's themes of victim blaming, the silencing and normalisation of sexual violence, and the stigmatisation of those who have experienced rape and/or other forms of sexual abuse. Each drawing contributes to a broader narrative about how rape culture operates not just as a series of isolated incidents but as a systemic issue that affects countless women. Each woman shown represents a variety of races, illustrating the shared experience of violence against women across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. Here, the image of the faceless figure gestures towards the erasure of women's personal identity in the face of gendered violence, drawing attention to the shared struggle of violence against women. The facelessness of

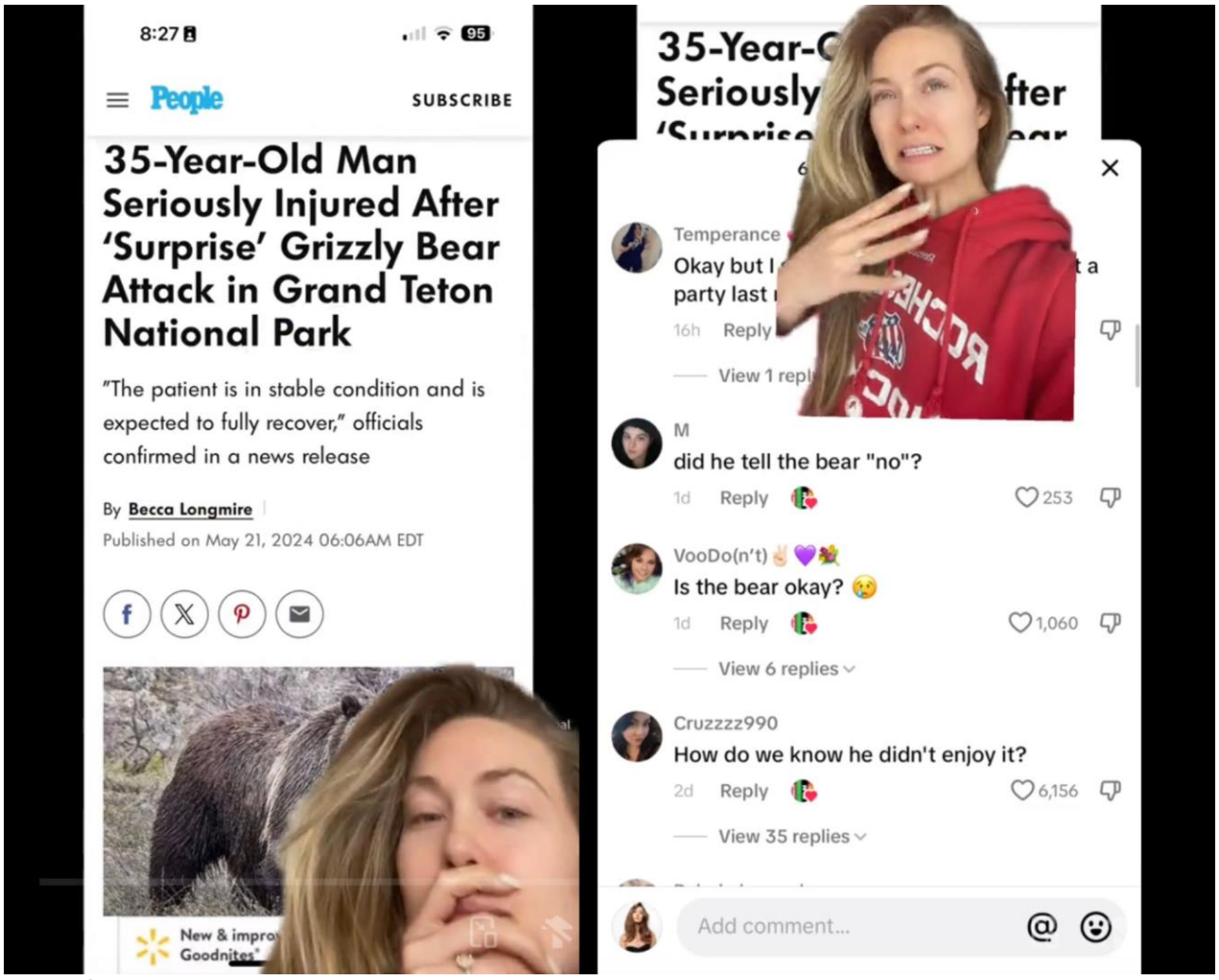
[2] https://www.instagram.com/p/C7ZC-L5ib14/?igsh=bTkycnkydzY2MmJs

each woman, while symbolizing the universal nature of sexual and gendered violence, simultaneously highlights how personal experiences are often silenced or ignored at a systemic level.

Similarly, **Figure 2** flips the script on rhetorics of rape culture, calling attention to the long-standing frameworks that are used to discredit women's experiences of gendered violence. Despite our urge to label the excuses highlighted in this TikTok as tired and overused, these kinds of words continue to be mobilised to frame women's actions (or inaction) as legitimate reasons for their assault. In this TikTok, Lauren Howe, an actor, model, former Miss Universe Canada, and current correspondent for Citytv in Toronto, Canada who also studied industrial engineering, examines the responses to an article titled '35-Year-Old Man Seriously Injured After Surprise Grizzly Bear Attack in Grand Teton National Park.' In the comments section of the online article from *People Magazine* posted on May 24, 2024, commenters sarcastically make statements typically used against women under rape culture, applying them to the situation of a man attacked by a bear. This approach humorously exposes the unjust nature of these rhetorics by putting them into an alternative context. Comments like, 'I feel like there's a lot we're missing, and we shouldn't put it out there to ruin this bear's future,' 'Bears will be bears,' 'Did he tell the bear no?', 'Did he go to the bear's house?', and 'How do we know he didn't enjoy it?' critique harmful narratives that are casually, on both an individual and system level, leveraged against women to excuse gendered violence and abuse, all to great and not at all casual damage. By using the language and arguments typically found in discussions around rape culture, it challenges the audience to recognise and confront these harmful narratives, emphasising just how ingrained and pervasive these harmful beliefs are within our society. Critiquing the oft-used tactic of victim-blaming, this scenario of 'flipping the script' emphasises the double standards of how callously we excuse sexual violence against women.

Figure 2

Did he tell the bear no?



Source: @laurenhoweyoudoing on TikTok[3]

[3] https://www.tiktok.com/@laurenhoweyoudoin/video/7372614356128894214?_r=1&_t=8nTAbZeP9Lp

'He's a Small-Town White Man and Honestly, it's Just as Terrifying': Toxic Masculinity in Bear vs. Man

On May 28, 2024, The Guilty Feminist (@theguiltyfeminist) reposted a tweet from Rohita Kadambi on Instagram that reads, 'I like that most Disney villains are literal monsters with access to dark magic except Gaston. He's a small-town white man, and honestly, it's just as terrifying' ('Disney Villain' @theguiltyfeminist May 28, 2024). Set against a muted pale pink background with a pattern of feminine mouths, open and ready to talk, as seen here in **Figure 3**, the image of this tweet points to the larger current seen across memes and digital discourse from women around the kind of men found to be terrifying in contrast to (or an everyday extension of) the monstrous masculine. The male-coded monsters of Disney, including Gaston from Disney's animated version of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), operate very differently from the image of the bear being upheld as safer than men within the larger trend of Bear vs. Man. These male-coded monsters are suspicious, unpredictable, and lacking in morality, aligned as they are with evil intentions and deeds. Unlike the hyperbole of monsters, Gaston is decidedly banal in his toxicity. He is narcissistic, entitled, and clueless as to Belle's actual interests and desires. He does not deem it necessary to act outside his narrow view of how men and women should relate to one another and, when refused by Belle when she chooses the Beast, turns vengeful, possessive, and violent towards not only Belle but to her non-human, and thus less humanly masculine and less worthy, lover. Kadambi's tweet, memeified by The Guilty Feminist, locates Gaston as a prototype of a form of non-cosmopolitan white masculinity that is not only entitled but comes with the threat of violence if you do not conform to his expectations lurking underneath.

Figure 3

The original man vs. bear

Source: @theguiltyfeminist on Instagram[4]

While this stereotype may appear as hyperbolic as the monstrous masculine of Disney, it also echoes the stream of discourse emerging from men's rights movements, pick-up artist culture, and the manosphere at large. Within this nexus, a playbook of dating, gender relations, and social resentment emerges that advances myths of 'natural' gender roles, what is 'owed' or 'due' to men in heteronormative relationships, and discredits conversations around consent and women's agency. The most extreme manifestations of this discourse are incredibly violent, as they inform a now far too common use of incel ideology to justify mass shootings and other acts of indiscriminate violence against women in public spaces. The sinister, devilish villain aligned with dark powers is terrifying, but so too, the tweet suggests, is the kind of ordinary violence supported by an acceptable vision of masculinity in contemporary culture. The overt anger, egocentrism, and pompous attitude of

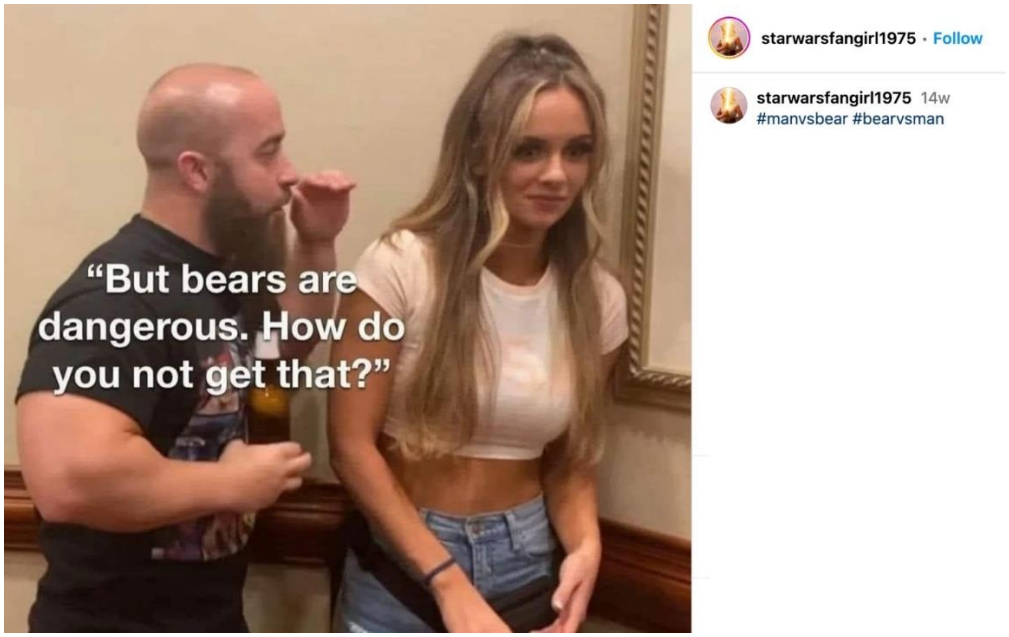
[4] https://www.instagram.com/p/C7gwAaLM8IN/

Gaston are quickly coded as monstrous within Disney's animated film. But, as X user @nikita_gill noted in a now memeified post by Instagram user @birdsandbeesask.me, a sexual-reproductive health and safety account designed to make research relatable, 'I didn't hear a peep from anyone when Belle from Beauty and the Beast very obviously chose the bear over Gaston, by the way.'[5] Indeed, bears and other beasts are not dangerous – that is, dangerous in the sense that they may steal your well-deserved women from you – until women make clear that it is not just the overtly monstrous Gaston that they are running from, but all men who may certainly be dangerous.

Amid rising tensions within the Bear vs. Man trend, a category of seemingly light-hearted memes cropped up, providing an alternate lens through which humour and satire were used to navigate and cope with the daunting realities of contemporary gendered violence. These memes do not explicitly provoke or attack men but rather use absurdity to indirectly enable sustained and perhaps more palatable venues for discussion. In an Instagram post shared on April 30, 2024, user @starwarsfangirl1975 shared an image of a man holding a beer, holding his hand up to his mouth to 'whisper' to a visibly uncomfortable woman, with the text reading, 'But bears are dangerous. How do you not get that?' The woman is pressed against a wall, eyes wide and leaning away, uncomfortable by the man's presence, yet the man is unable to recognise her body language or leave her be. Despite the blatantly obvious visual cues, he continues to push the notion that bears are dangerous, questioning the rationale of the women who choose the bear over the man, all while violating her space and her intelligence. What is laid bare in this post is the incongruity between the words the man is saying and the entitlement and superiority he appears to feel over her space and her body, and the defensiveness in his assumed tone attunes audiences to this dissonance. Notably, there are no comments on this post from any of the account's 11.1k followers and, upon closer inspection, it's noted that comments on the post have been limited – an action that, from our initial observations of the account, has not been taken on any of the other posts from the self-described Star Wars fangirl account

Figure 4

But bears are dangerous. How do you not get that?



Source: @starwarsfangirl1975 on Instagram[6]

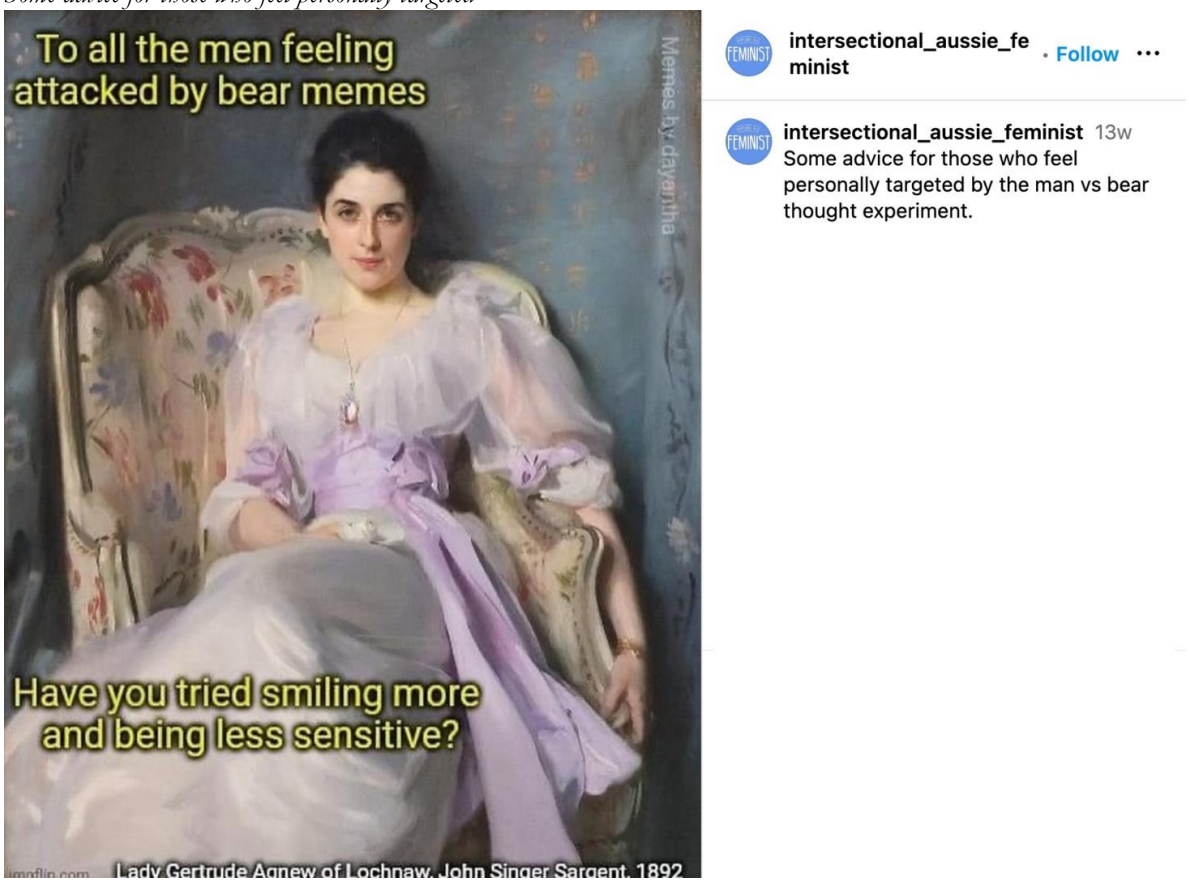
In response to the toxic masculine backlash to the Bear vs. Man trend, meme artists turned to vintage and nostalgic imagery, drawing on an older aesthetic and rejection of the familiar memetic template. The use of vintage references and familiar language re-grounded the Bear vs. Man conversation within rape culture, women's and femmes' rights, and sexism. The memes of this moment sardonically twisted familiar language typically used to devalue women and femme experiences of assault and directly implicated male discomfort with the Bear vs. Man trend into the larger, long-standing conversation surrounding the problem of rape culture and misogyny. On May 13, 2024, Instagram account @intersectional_aussie_feminist posted an image of an Edwardian portrait of a woman in a gauzy white dress with a purple sash staring directly at the viewer. Yellow text on the image reads, in two parts 'To all the men feeling attacked by bear memes' 'Have you tried smiling more and being less sensitive?' The portrait, titled *Gertrude Vernon, Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (1864-1932)* is an oil

[5] https://www.instagram.com/p/C6htM4vMEbk/?igsh=MXhrYmpvN3czZXBpNw%3D%3D&img_index=4
[6] https://www.instagram.com/p/C6Zrkwhu3Rw/

painting of Gertrude Vernon by renowned portraitist John Singer Sargent (National Galleries, n.d.), finished in 1892. Vernon's 'direct, frontal gaze and the informality of her pose' (The Frick Collection, n.d.: para. 1) were unusual for formal European portraits at the time, often attributed to her 'frail health' (National Galleries, n.d.: para. 5) which would have made portrait sittings difficult. In combination with the text, which parodies common and familiar sexist dismissals of women's lived experiences, Vernon's pose and gaze become confrontational. The meme creates new meaning for her direct eye contact and attitude: she becomes conspiratorial, fed-up, and sarcastic. Women and femmes can see ourselves in her. The meme collapses temporal distance between the viewer and Vernon, using overlaid text (and the larger context of the entire Bear vs. Man trend as displayed on the @intersectional_aussie_feminist account) to create historical resonances with Vernon as a fellow femme fed-up with sexism. Intersectional Aussie Feminist posted more than ten feminist memes about Bear vs. Man in May 2024: both original memes and ones reposted from other accounts. @intersectional_aussie_feminist, who has over 11,000 followers and declares herself to be 'unapologetically feminist' (see bio), participated in the Bear vs. Man trend from an overtly intersectional feminist standpoint, using her well-known meme account to defend women's choice of the bear, as well as directly connect Bear. vs. Man discussions to the issues of #MeToo and contemporary rape culture.

Figure 5

Some advice for those who feel personally targeted



Source: @intersectional_aussie_feminist on Instagram[7]

'Bear discourse comes for us all': Colonial Control, Conquest, and Violence

On May 2, 2024, in another example of non-template meme aesthetics, @therealflydog posted a photoshopped book cover to Instagram, as seen here in **Figure 6**. The cover reads, 'It's darkly funny seeing that the worst men are losing their goddamn minds because women feel less safe in their presence than with a bear,' with 'if this makes you angry… you're telling on yourself' written on a price sticker underneath an image of a topless woman being embraced by a bear (@therealflydog 2024). The meme is a remixed image of the paperback cover for *Bear*, a controversial romance novel by Canadian author Marian Engel published in 1976. The image of the woman and the bear remains unchanged, making a direct visual reference to the central romantic pairing of *Bear* (between a female archivist and a bear), while the text of the cover is re-written to critique the moment of misogynistic backlash to the Bear vs. Man trend. The caption of the post reads

[7] https://www.instagram.com/p/C67ffxHP1DK/

Bear Discourse comes for us all. You're either in on the joke, or you are the joke. If you're mad at the Bear Gals. Buddy, then you're probably a huge part of why they feel safer with Yogi and Boo Boo than they do with you. (@therealflydog 2024)

The meme author overtly calls out the toxic masculinity and sexism present in the backlash to Bear vs. Man, implying that the sometimes-violent anger men expressed about the trend was the exact reason women and femmes chose the bear in the first place. Naming the misogynistic backlash as coming from 'the worst men' counters the manosphere rhetoric of the 'nice guy' and implicates sexist backlash in the list of reasons women and femme's chose the bear. The non-template vintage aesthetic of the meme not only makes specific literary references to *Bear* but also allows the meme author to make more sophisticated critique of misogyny, toxic masculinity, and male violence. Additionally, the romanticised image of the bear in the meme bolsters the image of bears as non-threatening prospects and legitimises women and femmes' choice of them over men.

Figure 6

Bear Discourse comes for us all. You're either in on the joke, or you are the joke

Source: @therealflydog on Instagram[8]

@therealflydog references Yogi Bear and Boo-Boo (friendly, anthropomorphised bears popularized in the late 1950s) in their caption, connecting the figure of the bear to a comparable lack of danger in contrast to angry men. This caption contributes to discussions in the Bear vs. Man trend about the different rhetorical meanings of safety and survival for women and femmes within rape culture, while the meme itself responds to men's defensiveness at the trend which calls out toxic masculinity and the colonial desire to conquer nature. In the Bear vs. Man trend, representations and perceptions of bears in Western popular culture become tangled with themes of colonial control, conquest, and violent white masculinity that are upheld in North American histories. Within dominant Western histories that are 'funded, produced, and sanctioned by the state,' the 'myth of conquest' (the idea that white men were the only ones capable of conquering, and therefore owning, the land of North America) is invoked to legitimise 'the theories of [Indigenous] inferiority that rationalize colonialism' (Furniss, 1999, p. 60). These histories entrench the 'frontier myth' in common North American consciousness, perpetuating the perception of nature as something to be 'feared and endured,' and white men as those destined to 'encounter and eventually conquer' nature, including the conquering of animals and Indigenous peoples that have resided in these spaces from time immemorial (Furniss, 1999: 58). Nature is continuously perceived as a domain that white men can (and are destined to) control. Bears and other wild creatures, when viewed within this framework, represent a site for white, male colonial control to be enacted and validated. Situating women and femmes in the context of nature or the wilderness, or furthermore as representations of or an intrinsic part

[8] https://www.instagram.com/p/C6eqLvAPvyC/

of nature, means the framework of white male colonial control overlays with discussions of masculinity, misogyny, and male violence.

The memed *Bear* cover and accompanying caption use remixed references to non-threatening bear figures to bolster the critique of colonialism, male anger at Bear vs. Man, and misogynistic rhetoric. In a moment of backlash, vintage meme aesthetics add more nuance and reference to the viral trend of Bear vs. Man, defending and legitimising the choice of the bear while also furthering the discussion beyond its original context. For meme creators like @therealflydog, who edits wartime propaganda posters to say, 'protect trans kids,' or cowboy posters to say, 'be a gender outlaw,' remixing nostalgic or referential imagery opens new possibilities for cultural critique within viral trends.

CONCLUSION

During a moment when the misogynistic backlash to Bear vs. Man missed the point of the discussion – that rape culture remains alive, prominent, and actively recruiting members less than a decade after the watershed momentum of #MeToo – many responses reflected a lack of care, wilful naivety, or purposeful ignorance. Memes, whether engaging with popular templates like **Figures 1-4** or unconventional aesthetics like **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**, reorient the conversation back to the deeper issues of misogyny and gendered violence. Each meme, and in particular, the memeified portrait of Gertrude Vernon (**Figure 5**), frames the backlash to Bear vs. Man as men being 'too sensitive' (an insult hurled at women who report or complain about misogyny), while simultaneously bringing the focus back to critiques of rape culture and misogyny. These memes re-orient audiences to the original issue, where (toxic) men, the patriarchy, and rape culture are once again the problem, made humorous in this case for not understanding the trend (indeed, for the very reasons that toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and rape culture thrive). These memes respond to 'men feeling attacked' by the trend, while widening the conversation to include criticism of the misogynistic invalidation of women and femme's embodied experiences within rape culture. The use of the word 'attacked' across all the memes here is evocative of the types of attack that both men and bears perpetrate, which purposefully demeans the hurt feelings and egos of men complaining about the social media trend. The varying memetic aesthetics used across the posts sampled here, each of which responds to the backlash, draw us in in different ways, letting us trace the longer conversations and histories that inform the contemporary digital moment and current conversations of rape culture.

Across the memes detailed above, three themes emerged: 1) bodily experiences of safety, where safety and survival connote different rhetorical meanings for women, femmes, and other marginalised genders in their relation to rape culture; 2) toxic masculinity supportive of men believing they (i) could defeat the bear and (ii) deserve to be in the woods with women; and 3) man's colonial desire to conquer nature, with women, femmes, and other marginalised genders, and especially racialised women, as part of nature. While this article's reliance on small, curated data sets has limited the generalisability of its findings, we would note that it has allowed for a nuanced, context-specific analysis that resists the abstraction and dehumanisation often inherent in big data approaches, aligning with feminist commitments to situated knowledges and ethical research practices. Additionally, our limited engagement with broader manosphere media constrains a deeper understanding of how Bear vs. Man memes intersect with more entrenched networks of misogyny, antifeminism, and far-right ideologies that operate beyond mainstream social media platforms.

Despite these limitations, drawing on the popularity of visual-based platforms that did not yet exist in 2017 when #MeToo trended on social media, the above themes suggest the misogynist backlash to Bear vs. Man memes reveals the ways that rape culture continues to revel in its partnerships with white supremacy, ableism, classism, and colonialism, and that the dualities in these conversations (nature and culture; survival and safety; bodily experience and intellectual capacity to understand these experiences), while also indexing the discursive importance of these memes and their larger cultural conversations. In other words, the backlash to these 'post' #MeToo meme conversations creates dual discourses surrounding the terms and scenarios posed by Bear vs. Man, where women, femmes, and other marginalised genders experience these online conversations at the level of the embodied and factual, while many men navigate these discourses on the level of the hypothetical. Now, in 2025, Bear vs. Man thus becomes an altogether different conversation of virility, strength, and fortitude for men who refuse to see themselves as participants in rape culture, employing red herring tactics to divert from the key issue of misogyny and effectively bypass the lived experiences of women, femmes, and other marginalised genders. These memes speak to the current status of #MeToo, using popular social media methods to comment on contemporary misogyny and the ongoing realities of gender-based violence. As we use humour, absurdity, and satire, we poke fun at the lack of recognition from so many others. And so, to conclude, we leave you with

the words of a particularly poignant meme Bear vs. Man: 'the point is we don't want to choose the bear, bro, so you need to look within yourself to figure out why I'm making that choice."[9]

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Ethical Statement

This study did not involve human participants, animals, or the collection of primary data. As such, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required for this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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