

'The Last Nice Guy in New York':

Unraveling Toxic Masculinity in Netflix's *You*

By

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Abstract

This thesis approaches Season 1 of Netflix's *You* to unravel the interaction between toxic masculinity and the framing of romantic courtship in relationships. Through a feminist and framing theory lens, this research explores how the protagonist, Joe Goldberg, rationalizes forms of controlling coercive violence as a behaviour that stems from love. Through a thematic analysis, this study identifies three stages in Joe's relationship with Beck that demonstrate patterns of obsession, control, and victim blaming. It uncovers the show's implicit endorsement of Joe's actions as romantic gestures. Moreover, it digs into the framing of other characters and the show's ambiguity in depicting Joe as a feminist figure despite his misogynistic behaviour. By engaging with literature on stalking and media influence, this research criticizes the societal implications of blurring the lines between toxic masculinity and romantic pursuit, ultimately advocating for more nuanced portrayals of gendered violence in popular culture.

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Introduction

“What would you do for love?” is the question that the show *You* (2018-) poses within its synopsis. This simple query opens the door to discussions about the blurry lines between love and obsession. Even though *You* seems to be about love, it becomes the central focus of this research project, proposing a closer look at how toxic masculinity is portrayed in movies and shows. The series serves as a starting point to dig into the not-so-obvious aspects hidden beneath the surface of romantic stories.

You's season one (2018) tells its story through the eyes of Joe Goldberg, played by Penn Badgley. Joe is a bookstore manager who quickly develops a crush on Guinevere Beck, played by Elizabeth Lail. This television show is based on a best-selling novel by Caroline Kepnes (2014) of the same name, written and produced by Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble (2018). Joe's seemingly innocent interest in Beck quickly turns into a dangerous obsession as he begins to stalk her through her social media, her house, and social environments. Joe decides to take it upon himself to remove any obstacle- or person - that may stand in the way of their relationship (IMDb, 2018). Joe Goldberg serves as a captivating focus to critique the implications of toxic masculinity. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that Joe's actions are not driven by a simple pursuit of love; rather, they are entangled with toxic traits of control and dominance that mold his perception and criminal actions. This thesis aims to research the complexity of Joe Goldberg's character and the ways in which toxic masculinity influences his perspectives. By examining the portrayal of toxic masculinity in *You*, questions arise of how traditional gender norms contribute to the shaping of characters like Joe and, subsequently, impact the responses from viewers and fans.

The television show that originally aired on Lifetime, an American cable channel, but did not hit streaming records until it was sold to Netflix, the world's largest streaming service (Shewale, 2023). Founded in August of 1997, Netflix counts with over 247 million subscribers as of the end of 2023 (Shewale, 2023), which puts *You* at the centre screen of households globally. *You* was sold to Netflix in 2018, and its first season gained views from 40 out of 58 million subscribers in the United States within its first month of release. As a psychological thriller, mystery and romance in one, *You* gathered most of its popularity through Joe's internal narrative, a different approach to serial killer portrayals that lets viewers take the perspective and feelings of Joe. As a result, Joe became a trope example of America's likeability to serial killers (Lynch, 2020). "The more we get to know about Joe, the more we know to be afraid of him, but we also see where he is coming from," says critic Liz Shannon Miller (2020); as to Joe, he is the *only* one that can see Beck for who she is and can give her what she needs (Miller, 2020).

The fandom of serial killers is not a new idea; rather, it comes as one of the most public forms of fandom, beginning its conceptualizations in Victorian hawkers selling bottled dirt from murder sites as souvenirs, capitalizing on morbid curiosity (Fathallah, 2023). However, the term 'serial killer' did not gain recognition until the 1970s, with FBI agent Robert Ressler playing an essential role in its popularization (Fathallah, 2023, p. 4). It is essential to distinguish between serial killer fandoms and true crime fandoms, as the two exhibit important differences. In true crime, fans may even pity the offender for the offender's backstory, but different from serial killer fans, this empathy does not extend to endorsement of the crimes or offender (Fathallah, 2023).

To understand the role *You* has in this fandom, academics draw upon recurrent themes in social media comments (Rajiva & Patrick, 2021; James, 2023). Social media platforms introduce

a different perspective, which allows fans to switch from viewers to participants (Jiang Xiao, 2019). Some of the most popular themes were romance, comedy and relatability (Lynch, 2020), which draws a clear distinction of fans of this series from true crime fans, identifying them to the narrative of serial killer fandoms. An analysis of the themes present in the show is not only an essential starting point for how perceptions are shaped, but it also becomes a critiquing discourse of its own. Joe's narrative of his thoughts poses an authority of his version of events over Beck's, which not only explicitly re-centers a masculine narrative authority but also induces her to the role of a less important, unlikeable woman (Rajiva & Patrick, 2021). With this discourse, it is argued that potential themes in *You* need to be understood as they hold responsibility for conveying essential messages that center around the gendering of the media.

Research Question

Considering the popularity and perspectives this context brings to contemporary discourses on serial killers, the question posed in this research is, "What role does toxic masculinity play in shaping Joe Goldberg's perspective on his criminal action, and how is the framing of *You* influenced by gender norms?" In the subsequent pages, I dive into definitions of masculinity, the emerging discourse of toxic masculinity, the implications of this behaviour, and how it has been represented in social media. One form of reinforcing toxic masculinity is asserting dominance and control, which can be presented in intimate relationships through stalking. I also detail implications of stalking and other forms of control, as it is frequently present in frames of the series. To approach the research question, I will be conducting a thematic analysis because of its in-depth exploration of continuous themes, unique for presenting any implicit and subtle messages. A thematic analysis is ideal for capturing nuances which I could not find possible through other research methods.

Literature Review

This research intends to incorporate the concept of toxic masculinity not as a replacement for traditional male roles but as a valuable entry point into contemporary discussions on gender politics. Before diving into discussions on toxic masculinity in and how it presents through social media, this research will conceptualize masculinity and define it using criminological and psychological literature on the explanations of this behaviour. Additionally, I will explain the real-life implications of endorsing this behaviour before diving into movie/series framings of toxic masculinity. I organize my literature review into four sections. First, I examine how masculinity and societal expectations of masculinity are understood in existing research. Then, I delve into the contemporary notion of toxic masculinity, discussing its relevance to this analysis. The subsequent section explores stalking behaviour as a manifestation of toxic masculinity. Lastly, I bring the connection made by viewers and violence in movies to understand the portrayal of toxic masculinity in such.

Masculinity: Definitions and Implications

Gender role norms refer to societal standards that shape and limit an individual's behaviour (Levant et al., 2013). Differentiating from social norms, gender roles are divided into feminine and masculine expectations (Cialdini & Trost, 1999; Mahalik, 2003). Some differences include those in professional workplaces, households, and social environments. As this research focuses on masculinity norms, the Male Roles Norm Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF; Levant et al., 2013) is used to provide examples of such roles. The MRNI-SF is a 21-item measure of traditional masculinity ideology norms adapted from the longer Male Role Norms Inventory-Revised, divided into seven sub-scales (Levant et al., 2009). Such divisions are restrictive

emotionality, self-reliance through mechanical skills, negativity toward sexual minorities, avoidance of femininity, the importance of sex, dominance, and toughness.

The MRNI-SF model was used in a sample of 1,017 undergraduate participants (549 men and 468 women). Six measures out of the dominance and restrictive emotionality subscales had the higher endorsement and showed the most considerable gender differences in factors means. The differences included that men were shown to endorse subscale items to a greater extent than women did. This model defines restrictive emotionality as a variable where men should opt for suppressing their emotions, seeing vulnerability as not acceptable. Dominance measures include “the boss should always be a man” or “a man should be the leader in any group.” All of this suggests that men should have control over the environment in which they are placed. There are specific implications that come from endorsing such subscales. As such, elements of dominance over women have been linked to increased sexual aggression towards intimate partners (Smith et al., 2015).

Mahalik et al. (2003) developed a similar model - the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI). This inventory elaborated into distinct factors: winning, emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, playboy, self-reliance, the primacy of work, power over women, disdain for homosexuals, and pursuit of status (Mahalik et al., 2003). The results of several different studies found a positive differential validity between men and women. It also found connections between the factors mentioned above and other masculinity-related measures, such as wanting to be admired, respected, successful, performing competently, being physically adequate, toughness, subordinating women, and emotional disconnection from others (Mahalik et al., 2003, p. 14).

Aspects of the test were linked to psychological distress, fear of intimacy, being dominant in social situations, aggression, a desire to have a more muscular physique, and hostile interpersonal behaviour, such as verbal aggression, insulting, belittling, or yelling at someone. Other aspects were also linked to a reluctance to seek psychological help and trying to appear more socially acceptable (Mahalik et al., 2003; Mahalik, 2006). Men who conform to more traditional masculinity roles are also associated with adverse outcomes of substance abuse, poor mental health and higher suicide rates (O'Neil., 2008).

Toxic Masculinity

In the realm of defining masculinity, the term "toxic masculinity" has emerged within the context of traditional male roles and has gained prominence in both academic and media discussions (Dossier, 2022; Connell, 2005; Harrington, 2021). It refers to a set of cultural norms that prescribe rigid, harmful, and often aggressive behaviours, attitudes, and expectations associated with traditional masculinity. These expectations can include suppressing emotions, exerting dominance, and stigmatizing vulnerability (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2013). Despite its increased usage over the past decade, many scholars have failed to provide a clear definition of this term, as noted by Harrington (2021). The term's origin can be traced back to Shepherd Bliss in the 1980s when he used it to describe his father's militarized and authoritarian expression of masculinity (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). Issues with the term come from defining the words itself, where "toxic" is associated with poison or a disease. As with anything toxic, it is seen as curable. As Bliss described his father, he suggests that such disease arises from inadequate paternal relationships, particularly between fathers and sons, insinuating that a proper father-son relationship can prevent toxic masculinity (Harrington, 2021; Biddulph, 1997). This notion does not account for the broader societal roles and expectations that significantly shape traditional

gender norms. Therefore, there is relevance in critiquing this term's usage within the literature of gender and society.

Stalking

Implications of dominance as an expression of traditional masculinity have been associated with behaviours of controlling coercive violence, or CCV (Carney & Barner, 2012). It is defined as stalking, obsessive behaviour, emotional abuse, sexual coercion, and exerting dominance or control over an intimate partner (Carney & Barner, 2012; Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Coyne & Gambone, 2005). As *You* surrounds its story on the state of New York, we look into rates of stalking within the United States. According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the early 2000s on the nature and consequences of intimate partner violence, stalking is more prevalent than previously assumed. The survey, which was presented in 2000, estimated that 503,485 women and 185,496 men were stalked by an intimate partner annually in the United States (NIJCDC 2000). New York's anti-stalking law defines stalking simply as the unwanted pursuit of another person. It includes repeated harassment or threatening behaviour (OPDV-NY). Unfortunately, it is estimated that only one-fifth of stalking incidents perpetrated against women were reported (NIJCDC 2000).

Carney and Barner's (2012) meta-analysis showed that the largest selection of high variables in CCV was stalking/ obsessive behaviour, where women reported having been stalked up to 8 times more than men in the United States. "As reported in approximately 80% of cases, women were most often victimized by men they knew, most frequently, their current or former intimate partners." (Carney & Barner, 2012). Between measures of CCV, the variable to present the strongest relationship to physical violence in intimate relationships was stalking.

A significant implication related to stalking is that the act of unwanted pursuit is often confused as a form of romantic courtship rather than criminal behaviour (Lippman, 2018; Sinclair, 2010). Sinclair (2010) examines how gender, beliefs and myths about stalking shape individuals' perceptions about a potential stalking scenario. A total of 258 participants (65.9% female and 34.1% male) were introduced to the 21-point Stalking Myth Scale (SMS) developed by Colleen (2006). The scale is gender-neutral and attributes participants to connect scenarios to popular beliefs about victim and perpetrator characteristics. Three different studies have been conducted using the SMS (Sinclair, 2003; 2005; 2010), and this research focuses on the most recent findings as a form of comparison to current belief trends. To this approach, it is understood that personal identification and individual beliefs have an influence on the “extent to which one makes internal or external attributions for behaviour” (Sinclair, 2006).

The scenarios elaborated to participants were not labelled as stalking but rather as an unwanted pursuit, and there were no explicit mentions that the rejecter was in fear or uncomfortable to avoid a directional bias (Sinclair, 2010). It involved two individuals in a romantic relationship of 6 months, followed by a few breakups; the scenario length was 82 lines and 1485 words. Sinclair (2010) describes the elements presented to participants post-breakup:

The scenario went on to depict the pursuer's numerous attempts to reconcile. The pursuer's behaviors were selected based on those indicated by the literature as common to real-life stalking situations. These actions included repeated phone calls, hang-up calls, sending/leaving unwanted gifts/notes, confrontations with third parties, using third parties to find out the rejecter's new phone number, showing up at the rejecter's clubs, stores, and hang-outs, and finally dropping off dead roses on the rejecter's doorstep. These behaviors all occurred during the rejecter's repeated attempts to avoid the pursuer (p. 5)

The study revealed that those who adopted the perspective of the pursuer demonstrated a propensity to attribute the pursuer's actions to external factors, such as situational circumstances, in contrast to those who adopted the rejecter's viewpoint (Sinclair, 2010). Gender was a contributing factor, where men tended to blame the rejecter more than women did, specifically if the rejecter was a female. The strongest factor was attributed to the SMS, where participants' responses relied on their beliefs in myths about stalking to examine the potential pursuit (Sinclair, 2010). The findings are consistent with existing literature that highlights the impact of gender roles on our perceptions and beliefs regarding stalking behaviour. Furthermore, this pattern connects to the prevailing issue of a significant number of stalking incidents going unreported in the United States. I included this discussion on stalking because this critique continues to the paradigm of representation of this behaviour in movies and television shows.

Media Representation of Toxic Masculinity

In American cinema, Katz (2020) delves into the connection made by viewers and the violence in movies as a form of masculinities. Cultural heroes emerged in the film industry during the 1970s and 80s, which were marked by economic instability. Katz explores how economic challenges pushed men to focus on what seemed to be one of the only attainable characteristics of manhood: physical strength, power, and the use of violence to achieve their goals. In a patriarchal, capitalist society, the image of a "real man" is often associated with power and control. However, the dichotomy between manual labour and corporate office jobs means no job satisfies all these conditions. Manual labourers typically work for others at the lower end of the class spectrum, while management occupies desk positions. (Katz, 2020, as cited by Brod, 1987). Consequently, the portrayal of violent men as leaders becomes popularized, driven by these insecurities and the validation of masculine identity.

Masculinity takes the role of a discourse, rather than a behaviour, in social media as “systems of meaning that change over time and are also dependent on context” (Lazar, 2007; Willig, 2014; Nilsson & Lundgren, 2021). Media representation of masculinity is researched by Nilsson & Lundgren (2021) in the context of news media, not as an accuracy-focused analysis but to analyze *how* this representation occurs. The representation works as a mirror, which is shaped by, and shapes, our definitions of masculinity. Although this was analyzed through news and mainstream media, this research draws upon this discourse to reflect and critique masculinity in movies and social media.

How frames and messages are portrayed in media “are part of, and contribute to constructions of reality and the available notions of what it means to be masculine” (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2021, p. 10). Collins (2011) analyzed male versus female representation in media. Recurrent themes included the under-representation of women in multiple media; women are overly sexualized or placed in subordinate positions (indicated by facial expressions or body positions) and in traditional feminine roles (Collins, 2011). This evidence suggests similar themes to the representation of masculinity in media. In both discourses, the man is the focus, is admired, portrayed as dominant, and reinforces traditional gender norms.

A central piece of discussion is the portrayal of stalking or emotionally abusive behaviour in films. Kenasri and Sadasri (2021) conducted a thematic analysis of Korean drama shows in order to identify what they refer to as the *romanticization of intimate partner violence (IPV)*. The central theme the authors looked at was the ‘romantic relationship’. The authors had an intimate partner violence scale that was divided into four subcategories: physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. Identification of controlling behaviours included dominating decision-making process, isolating from peers, stalking, and

distrusting. Out of the twenty episodes they analyzed, 80% contained forms of IPV, where stalking/ controlling behaviour was the most prevalent type (Kenasri & Sadasri, 2021, p. 678).

Questions also arise about exposure to media portrayals of stalking and how these visuals may shape beliefs about the topic. In another study, Lippman (2018) defines stalking as a form of *persistent pursuit*. The repeated portrayal of persistent pursuit as romantic courtship in movies suggests that not only is this behaviour normalized, but it also reflects a cultural ideal where the behaviour is rewarded. This ideal is that romantic movies portray a male pursuit in which persistence often wins, or the stalking pays off, and they gain the desired “object” of their affection (Becker, 1997; Dunn, 2002; Lowney & Best, 1995; as cited by Lippman, 2018). This scenario is then idealized as a form of true love, which becomes a part of recurrent themes in movies and shows and a standard for romantic ideals. Lippman’s experiment revealed that the sample had a lower perceived realism of stalking in romantic films as compared to horror films. “The pursuer in the romantic condition was seen more positively, and his actions were seen as more appropriate than the pursuer in the scary condition.” (Lippman, 2018, p. 406). The masking of stalking as a form of romantic courtship negatively impacted viewers' perceptions of obsessive/ controlling behaviour, and instead, it became an appropriate situation in an intimate relationship. This criticism raises questions of viewers' responses being influenced by gender norms and whether the perpetrator justifies his actions as a form of romantic courtship.

Throughout this literature review, I have explored various aspects of masculinity, including toxic masculinity, stalking behaviour, and its depiction in television media. This will help my research bridge gaps in identifying behaviour and connect its framing in *You* to conceptual definitions. What will further explain my research is detailed in my theoretical framework below, where I’ve adopted a feminist perspective to interpret my data. I am also exploring my research

through framing theory, which discusses how a specific issue or event can influence the way frames are communicated. Feminist Theory will be used to explore the impact of traditional gender norms on the characterization of Joe and his male-dominated narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on two theoretical frameworks, the liberal feminism paradigm and framing theory in order to help understand what role toxic masculinity plays in shaping Joe Goldberg's perspective on his criminal actions. Liberal feminism emerged in the 18th century and is commonly associated with the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equal rights (Mann & Patterson, 2016). Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) is considered a pioneer through her publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of a Woman* (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Brown and Ismail (2019) discuss theoretical feminists' contributions to distinct sex and socially constructed gender roles. Although specific trends in feminist movements have relied upon women's experiences of oppression and exploitation, new discourses branch to problematize and deconstruct the role of masculinity within understanding patriarchy and the dominant role of men (Brown & Ismail, 2019, p. 17).

Scholars have highlighted the importance of discussing masculinity within feminist theories. However, there is also a critique that a vast part of academia has failed to explicitly discuss and detail feminist theories within masculinity discourses (Brown & Ismail, 2019; Robinson, 2003). Most trends presented lack citations, conceptual definitions, and include very few theorists, leading interpretations that feminist scholars do not theorize upon masculinity; yet, understanding masculine roles has been an essential part of critiquing female subordination (Brown & Ismail, 2019; see also McMahon, 1993). For example, liberal feminist approaches,

from their beginnings, critiqued masculinity when arguing for equality with men's power and rights (Brown & Ismail, 2019, p. 19).

Within the liberal feminist paradigm, it is conceptualized that gender roles can be socially learned and transformed (Mann & Patterson, 2016). Choosing this theory lies within discussions of how social norms are intertwined with views on masculinity, which encompasses socially constructed expectations in traditional male gender roles. Traditional male roles are discussed to foster a sense of control and dominance. To advance gender equity, liberal feminists advocate changing laws, rethinking childhood socialization and examining the gendering of the media (Brown & Ismail, 2019). In alignment with liberal feminist theories, this research also conceptualizes gender framing in media, specifically through films.

Framing Theory reveals how words and messages hold influence (Entman, 1993). It discusses how information is framed and how it can shape our thoughts and consciousness when communicated. Chong and Druckman's (2003) four concepts of frame in communication are applied to my research, as it involves the analysis of films. First, it describes that an issue, event, or political actor needs to be identified and focused on a specific time-period. It critiques that the same issue can carry different frames depending on the year or decade, as issues evolve and new themes emerge. For example, frames used in social security reform from before the 2000s are different from those in 2003-2005 – post September 11th (Chong & Druckman, 2003, p. 106).

Besides focusing on a specific event, if the purpose is to understand the effects on the public's perceptions, the researcher must isolate a specific attitude (Chong & Druckman, 2003). Using the example of my research, if the goal is to understand perceptions of shows that frame traditional masculine attitudes, there must be an analysis of the responses to such frames. As a third measure, an initial set of frames must be identified about the overall issue to create a coding

or mapping scheme. To this measure, Chong and Druckman suggest a proper review of existing literature or films regarding the event. The fourth concept asks for choosing a specific source to conduct the thematic analysis, whether this is mass media, social media, -or films. Still, a source of communication must be selected (Chong, Druckman, 2003). To properly apply framing theory, there must be proper knowledge of existing frames and discussions, a structured thematic analysis of the targeted issue through a form of communication, followed by research and understanding of attitudes. (Feldman & Zaller, 1992, as cited by Chong & Druckman, 2003).

Methodology

This next section looks at my methodology for this research. Before I can describe my data collection process and steps for analysis, I offer definitions of key concepts used to design my themes. Considering a critique of studying masculinity within feminist theory is the frequent lack of conceptual definitions, I aim to provide context on this framework. Additionally, I look at Carney & Barner's (2012) meta-analytic review of controlling coercive violence.

Key Concepts

This research intends to incorporate the concept of 'toxic masculinity' not as a replacement for traditional male roles but as a valuable entry point into contemporary discussions on gender politics. As Harrington (2021) suggests, the term toxic masculinity has gained popularity in dialogues among adolescents and young adults, who are also the primary audience for *You*. Consequently, including the term in analyzing themes and codes can enhance understanding of how viewers perceive traditional gender roles.

For my thematic analysis, I draw upon sociological and psychological explanations to define concepts of masculinity. Within the paradigm of feminist theory studies of masculinities, scholars understand that definitions of domination and oppression cannot be captured through

cultural definitions alone, which calls for psychoanalytic studies of the topic as well. This connection helps bridge psychological perspectives with the discussion on toxic masculine behaviour. The aim is to acknowledge some of the negative real-life impacts on forms of masculinities while framing it as a representative role in this thesis.

Masculinity studies challenge concepts of dominance in their various meanings in the sociological context (Messerschmidt, 1993; Dowd, 2010; Brown & Ismail, 2019). This goes beyond a simple dominant-subordinate scale but examines the gendered significance attached to both the present and absent roles in a given scenario. Whether a gender assumes a dominant position with benefits or faces challenges (e.g., men occupying higher paying jobs but also a majority of victims of child abuse), it should lead to questioning its gendered meaning, as inequalities often interlock (Dowd, 2010). However, some imbalances often become invisible as roles deep-rooted in society become patterned, accepted as common, normal, and not worth questioning (Dowd, 2010). These critiques provide a foundation for this research, which examines gender structures as harming both men and women.

Masculinity is discussed as “masculinities” for its multiplicity and hierarchy (Dowd, 2010, p. 418). It recognizes that there is a prevailing idea of what it means to be masculine, and this ideal has an impact on shaping different manifestations of masculinity within a given society. It is also important to note that privilege isn't uniform or a given among all men—it varies based on factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Reuther, 1992, as cited in Brown & Ismail, 2019). In many cases, and for the lenses through which I see this thematic analysis, the privilege of assuming dominant roles and adhering to traditional masculine behaviour becomes more prevalent among white, upper-class cisgender men. This becomes a

discourse of feminist analysis once race and class are directly intertwined with the acting of gender power (Dowd, 2010; Brown & Ismail, 2019).

Additional concepts I take from Masculinity Studies include:

- Men often feel the need to prove and achieve manhood constantly, and this instability relates to the concept of hierarchy among men. These challenges are where the most traditional, conservative ideals may be pushed internally of manhood (Dowd, 2010, p. 58)
- The concept of traditional masculinity becomes a sociological discourse when this behaviour is justified through a role seen as culturally acceptable. This role “is not a biological given, not a thing that one has; rather, it is socially constructed, a set of practices that one constantly engages in or performs” (Dowd, 2010, p. 26)
- Patriarchal Dividend refers to the advantage or benefits that all men receive as a result of the overall dominance of men in the gender hierarchy or societal structure. In a patriarchal system, where men hold more power and authority, this dividend represents the advantages that come with being part of the dominant gender group, irrespective of an individual man's specific actions or beliefs. (Dowd, 2010, p. 61)
- Messerschmidt (1993) suggests that how gender is structured in society can be an important variable for the likelihood of male offending. In this perspective, masculinity is what best explains the commission of crimes once males feel pressure to demonstrate power.
- The focus on gender without looking at sexual differences presumes that men and women are constituted in symmetrical ways. Rather, masculine dominance shows a dissymmetrical structure for both men and women, in which there are opposing consequences for both. (As cited by Gardiner & Cowburn, 2004, p. 65)

Psychological feminist theories take a closer look at concepts of dominance, where men are also impacted by masculinity constructions (Brown & Ismail, 2019). Exploring the internalization in the unconscious mind, it investigates how societal expectations and norms shape men's experiences on a subconscious level when they hold positions of dominance. Through understanding the relationships between a mother and a son, Chodorow (1978) argued that the experience of being cared for can shape a psychological tendency toward masculine dominance and a sense of superiority over women (Brown & Ismail, 2019, p. 21). As a mother becomes the primary source of love, boys begin to develop masculine traits that are defensive and compensatory, as a need to distance themselves from their mothers. This rejection of femininity might be connected to men's violence towards women but also their struggle to express emotions (Connell, 1994; McMahon, 1993, as cited by Brown & Ismail, 2019).

Additionally, I follow Carney & Barner's (2012) meta-analytic review of Controlling Coercive Violence for additional themes:

- Intimate Partner Violence's (IPV) substrata include stalking, obsessive behaviour, emotional abuse and exerting dominance and control over an intimate partner. These categories come from "a dysfunction of the interactional and relational processes of courtship and relationship evolution" (Carney & Barner, 2012, p.288)
- Elements of CCV are defined by a pattern of behaviour that includes emotionally abusive actions, coercion and control. It is a harmful behaviour with the intent to add to physical violence by instilling fear, intimidation, control and emotional abuse (Carney & Barner, 2012).
- Perpetrators use various means to hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate victims. They are cut off from family & friends through the process of

isolation, which is personalized to the victim of controlling coercion and extends through the social space (Carney & Barner, 2012, p. 289).

- Emotional and Psychological abuse has been thoroughly defined in this meta-analytic review, but for the purpose of this analysis, I focus on its examination through “behaviours that are intended to monitor and control or threaten an intimate partner” (Black et al., 2011).
- Stalking and Obsessive behaviour are the highest variables of controlling coercive to have been subject to empirical and legal scrutiny. It can be defined as a knowing, purposeful pattern of harassment used by a perpetrator that is both unwanted and causes fear to the victim (Black et al., 2011)

Designing the thematic analysis

Following Trahan and Stewart’s systematic review of methodologies in criminology, a thematic analysis narrows down to a method for describing patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Trahan & Stewart, 2013). As a thematic analysis can unveil several patterns and their manifestations, criminologists see its advantages in applying such to several theoretical frameworks. Choosing this method allows for a deep exploration of recurring messages and patterns, which leads to understanding the implicit messages it conveys. The advantages of conducting a thematic analysis come from its flexibility in developing a model that best suits the specific research interests (Trahan & Stewart, 2013). Furthermore, concepts of this methodology align specifically with the lenses of framing theory as it looks into the show’s explicit and implicit codes about the issue/attitudes.

To conduct a thematic analysis, the first step should be to define what counts as a *theme*. This could be a recurring aspect in the data set as a form to understand how much “space” is

allocated to any given concept by the subject of the analysis (Trahan & Stewart, 2013). One common issue in this type of research is defining how much is a prevalent theme (Trahan & Stewart, 2013). Braun & Clarke's (2006) recommendations are to steer from set limitations and instead focus on whether specific messages are relevant to the research question(s) or issue. For example, Kenasri and Sadasri's (2021) analysis of Korean shows connected subjects to themes by attributing them to a role that was of significance for the overall message of romanticization of abuse. By using pre-defined concepts of intimate partner violence, the authors could identify patterns of significance and describe their function in the text. Subsequently, I followed my steps for analysis, which are described in the next section, using a similar approach with deductive methodology.

Throughout my discussion of themes, I have detailed masculinities in their various forms and examined the advantages of a thematic analysis to my specific research interests. I found this method to be the best suited for identifying patterns in my qualitative data, ultimately addressing the issues raised by the research question. The thematic analysis of *You* has been structured upon Chong & Druckman's (2003) four framing concepts in communication theory. I will be applying these four concepts to collect my data, as steps for analysis, which are described below:

Steps for Analysis

- I. An issue, event or political actor needs to be identified and focused on a specific time period (Chong & Druckman, 2003). The identified issue here is toxic masculinity as a form of reinforcing traditional gender norms in one of the most recent and popular fictitious shows about serial killers. *You* portrays the event in New York in 2018.

- II. The researcher must isolate a specific attitude if the purpose is to understand the effects on the public's perceptions (Chong & Druckman, 2003). In this research, the isolated attitudes are Joe's perceptions and attitudes toward Beck and their relationship.
- III. An initial set of frames about the overall issue must be identified to create a coding/mapping scheme based on a proper review of the literature regarding the event (Chong & Druckman, 2003). The "Key Concepts" section outlines a detailed description of concepts. It provides a foundation and a starting point for possible themes arising from the show's framing. Examples of these behaviours include dominance, controlling behaviour, psychological abuse, and physical violence.
- IV. Choosing a specific source to conduct the thematic analysis (Chong & Druckman, 2003). The source of this analysis comes from a television show, *You*, which is currently available on Netflix, an American subscription video-on-demand streaming service. Access was gained through my personal Netflix account to avoid the costs of a new subscription. Further description of this step is provided in the data collection.

Data Collection

This research conducts a thematic analysis of four episodes of the first season of Netflix's *You*. Aired in 2018, the series is based on a book of the same name written by Caroline Kepnes. While season 1 consists of 10 episodes, my research is constrained by external time limitations for completion of this research. Furthermore, due to Beck's fatal end, the following seasons include new characters, which offers a fresh perspective for additional research, going beyond the scope of my research hypothesis. Therefore, I focus my analysis on "Pilot" (S1, Ep. 1, is 48 minutes in length), "The Last Nice Guy in New York" (S1, Ep. 2, is 45 minutes in length),

“Living with the Enemy” (S1, Ep. 5, is 45 minutes), and “Everythingship” [sic] (S1, Ep. 7, is 42 minutes), giving me a total of 180 minutes of data.

The episodes were selected based on the three distinct phases of Joe and Beck’s relationship: their initial encounter before dating, dating, and the conflicts that led to their breakup. These are key stages of their relationship that can open the discussion on how toxic masculinity unfolds in its various elements, including Joe's behaviour towards a romantic interest, his conduct throughout their relationship, and his reaction to rejection.

When *You* first aired in 2018, my household was one of the many to have binge-watched the first season. It wasn’t until I pursued my criminology degree that I considered the many intricacies this show may pose within masculinity and crime. After almost six years, I recall the main storyline, but not in great detail. So, before I began my analysis, I defined and coded the key concepts during the pre-data collection process and wrote them on a whiteboard. I placed it next to my TV, making it easier to visualize rather than going between tabs on my laptop.

Since I was familiar with the show but not enough to recall most scenes or characteristics, I approached my analysis in three stages. Initially, I watched the series without pausing or referring to my pre-established themes but wrote relevant notes related to my research hypothesis on my laptop. I sat on the comfy yellow couch in my apartment on a cold, snowy Saturday with my warm coffee and put ‘Pilot’ on. I wanted to take advantage of the weekend to immerse myself as a regular viewer, returning to the eyes of teenage me watching it for the first time.

For this step, I watched the entire first season. Due to my limited recollection of *You*, I needed to understand what occurred between my selected episodes. This would eventually allow me to conduct a more thorough analysis of the following stages. Although there were no pauses in the first watch, I managed to compile roughly two pages of notes per episode in my Word

Document, except for those I had decided not to analyze. I wanted to write not only scenes or frames that I thought would significantly contribute to the theme's consistency but also to detail my interpretation of the show. Specifically, I wanted to capture whether elements such as music, ambiance, and Joe's demeanor towards Beck led to my perception as a viewer as intended by the framing of the series.

I waited about a week, until the following next Sunday, to continue with my second analysis stage. This gave me sufficient time to distance myself from a 'first impression' of the episodes but still had a good memory about how each scene unfolded. Then, I did a second viewing, where this time, I watched the four episodes with frequent pauses, adding more notes and timestamps as necessary. I also organized my observations into the two macro concepts, going back and rewatching some scenes multiple times to write down dialogue or body language accurately. With a clearer understanding of which scenes would be relevant to my research, I conducted a more in-depth critical analysis, focusing on how scenes leading up to pivotal moments contributed to Joe's thinking process. Finally, in the third step, I allocated the following two days to review my notes, transcribing my informal writing style to appropriate phrasing. I used the written text as the primary focus and the show as a secondary reference in case needed to revisit any scenes. In the Word document containing my episode notes, I used bold and highlighted text-markings to classify the dialogue to a specific behaviour.

Themes

There were two distinct divisions of my themes: (a) toxic masculinity and (b) controlling coercive violence. The objective was to integrate previous research findings of 'Key Concepts' into two broader categories. These categories share similar descriptions but diverge in one significant aspect: (a) is based upon feminist and gendered studies, with the purpose of

understanding *why* this behaviour happens, whereas (b) pulls from psychological meta-analytic research and empirical data to define *how* this behaviour can be classified and identified.

- a. Under toxic masculinity, I described: *invisible role, deep-rooted in society. There is a hierarchy of privilege reinforced by a constant need to prove manhood. The justification to demonstrate power (need) = offending. Internalization and rejection of femininity is a combination of men's violence and struggle to express emotions.*
- b. To classify CCV, I wrote: *stalking, obsessive behaviour, emotional abuse, dominance/control over intimate partner. It is a pattern of behaviour which includes instilling fear, intimidation, hurt, humiliation, a process of isolation personalized to that victim, dysfunction of courtship and relationship evolution, intended to monitor and control/threaten an intimate partner, with stalking being purposeful and unwanted.*

As discussed in the theoretical framework section, this thematic analysis adopts a feminist studies lens, with a focus on the relationship between masculinity or 'masculinities' and elements of controlling coercive violence, such as stalking, obsessive behaviour and dominance over an intimate partner. As this research applies to the field of criminology and is my area of study, I view *You* with consideration for the implications portraying behaviour poses for viewers. Following framing theory, I suggest that the messages *You* conveys hold an influence on the way we see and perceive toxic masculinity. Limitations for this analysis consider that this research only includes one series, which means it is specific to the examined fictional story. It also includes my personal bias of knowledge on this behaviour, attributed to the coursework I have taken throughout my degree. However, just as personal bias poses a limitation to any thematic analysis, it can also be viewed as a strength, in which the interpretation of the data is researched and discussed from a unique perspective.

Analysis

As a starting point, this analysis parts from the question, “What role does toxic masculinity play in shaping Joe Goldberg's perspective on his criminal actions, and how is the framing of *You* influenced by gender norms?” This directed my research to examine prevalent themes in *You* to how they relate to toxic masculinity. Moreover, I wanted to integrate what such themes represent in terms of the construction of this series. Referring back to my question, I delve into the meaning of this discourse, in a context where the popularity of this series signifies a culture of toxic romantic courtship and entertainment shows. The current study bases definitions of masculinity within feminist studies and framing theory, in alignment with the data collection section, focusing on the classification of CCV and the exploration of toxic masculinity.

To answer my hypothesis, controlling coercive violence was identified through patterns of behaviour and internal/external dialogue, to understand the dynamics of the romantic courtship, and, subsequently, the relationship. The most pervasive themes in this analysis adhere to Joe but are not exclusive to his character. Forms of toxic masculinity were identifiable in two other male characters, and CCV adhered to one other female character's behaviour.

The prevalence of themes fluctuated as Joe and Beck's relationship progressed. While they are acquaintances, the most frequent theme was obsession through romantic courtship, displayed as stalking/cyberstalking. I counted fifteen different stalking incidents from their initial meet up until a first date. Additionally, Joe's dialogue justifying his actions to viewers demonstrated a connection with feminist theory on masculinities by indicating an assertiveness of his power.

As they begin dating, the highest frequency of themes related to dominance and control, escalating to violent criminal behaviour. These included the kidnapping and murder of Beck's former boyfriend and the murder of her best friend, Peach. Moreover, dialogue that related to toxic masculine views were those regarding the female characters in the show. "God knows I need the help when it comes to your friends. [...] How can self-respecting women tolerate this crap? Sometimes I swear I'm the only real feminist you know." (S1E5, "Living with the Enemy"). Joe's belief that he is a feminist while also belittling other female characters shows a contradiction in his behaviour, in which I question the messages the series attempts to convey regarding gender roles and feminism.

It is worth noting that the 'dating' stage is characterized by indirect violence to Beck, that being, Joe was rather violent towards her friends. This attitude conforms with characteristics of CCV, once he feels the need to isolate the victim from family and friends. Beck only became a direct target to Joe after their breakup, which is the last stage of their relationship analyzed. Here, themes surrounding obsession reemerge but not in the same way as in the first stage. Joe suspects he is being cheated on, and his obsession is now fueled by anger and violence. To this point, Joe has already murdered two of Beck's acquaintances, and he is comfortable and willing to do it again. "They left me no choice. They were dangerous. I think you might be in danger again." (S1E7, "Everythingship").

The majority of themes in this analysis are continuous throughout the season and not separated from one another (i.e. one theme doesn't end before the other begins). For this reason, the discussion is first divided into the three distinct phases of their relationship, those being their initial meeting, relationship and their breakup. '*Hello, You*' is not only a quote from episode one, but refers to the way Joe's internal dialogue often presents, being frequently directed at Beck. I

explore how Joe's narrative as the storytelling of this series can assert his authority over Beck's feelings and actions, while also examining how it reflects that toxic masculinity is embedded within the framework of the show. The exploration of his past and thought processes is an intentional strategy to justify his actions to viewers, especially when he is not depicted as the "big bad monster" archetype. This also refers to my second subheading, '*Last Nice Guy in New York*,' and it is the title of the second episode of the series. The narrative in *You* is presented to not only diminish Beck but also other female characters in the series, characterizing them as unlikeable or 'less.'

Following these stages, I developed a section further exploring Joe's character, including his past and the construction of his 'manhood.' This will also answer my research question by understanding where his toxic masculinity originates. As defined in psychological feminist theories, experiences boys endure can ultimately influence the internalization of conservative thoughts in the unconscious mind. Lastly, I discuss the overall framing of the show and the messages it may convey to the public. This discourse not only adheres to the critique of how malleable this show can be to antifeminist discourses but encourages future research of viewers' perceptions.

Discussion

Hello, You

Although *You* surrounds its story through the eyes of a serial killer, it is no different than most drama series, using lighting and music to paint the nice, cozy feeling of a love story. The first encounter between Joe and Beck would seem just as any television "meet cute." A meet-cute is a term used for a scene in media where the love interests first meet, typically in 'cute'

circumstances (Hellerman, 2024). And it would, in fact, be a cute conversation if it wasn't for Joe's internal comments explicitly objectifying her appearance:

Joe: You like a little attention. Ok, I bite. Oh. Are you not wearing a bra? And you want me to notice. [...] You have enough cash to cover this, but you want me to know your name.

(S1E1, "Pilot")

This quote is the first frame of the episode where I could explicitly see a form of toxic masculinity. Dowd (2010) explores toxic masculinity through the cultural acceptance of its role, confirming it is a set of practices that one constantly engages in. Joe evidentiates this repeated pattern by interpreting her friendliness as a justification to stalk her on multiple occasions. Sexualization is a characteristic I have adhered to as themes of "obsession," such as when Joe engages in self-gratification acts by watching her through her window, without her consent. Additional examples from his narrative that contributed to this theme include "Hell, maybe I'm just a fool in love" (S1E1, "Pilot") and constant affirmations to Beck, such as 'You *want* this,' where there is a justification of his behaviour; conceptualized as a dysfunction of the interactional and relational processes of courtship (Carney & Barner, 2012).

During this phase of their relationship, in which they are considered merely acquaintances, Joe relies on his own assumptions to obsess over her as a potential love interest. Similarly, viewers are left to make assumptions about Beck's feelings, considering we only see her perspective to the same extent as Joe's. As I became more acquainted with Joe, it was evident that his sense of superiority contributed to his cognitive distortions between obsession and genuine love, in which he prioritizes his desires over reality and criticizes her lifestyle and friend choices to make his actions seem reasonable. "And there you were, every account set to public. You want to be seen, heard" (S1 E1, "Pilot") Within Joe's discourse, Beck is now seen as

inexperienced and vulnerable online, and if she did not want to be stalked, she would be private with her social media.

Joe consistently adheres to a second subconcept, the competition among men and the need to prove manhood, pushing the most conservative thoughts (Dowd, 2010). Once Beck leaves and their initial encounter ends, Joe has a brief conversation with Ethan. Played by Zach Cherry, Ethan is a bookstore clerk and Joe's male coworker. Their conversation is as follows:

Ethan: She write her number on there? She was on you hard.

Joe: No, she was just being nice.

Ethan: I'd be googling the hell out of her right now. You knew her full name.

Joe: That's pretty aggressive, Ethan.

Ethan: What do I tell you? Always be closing that shit.

Joe: At the end of the day, people are really just disappointing, aren't they? But are you, Beck? Are you? (S1E1, "Pilot")

There are three perspectives through which I have analyzed this conversation. The first one relates to the cultural acceptance and reinforcement of toxic masculinity. Joe feels validated by Ethan's opinions, and it is following this discussion that he begins stalking Beck. Secondly, Joe's hierarchical status is challenged, and it is the instability in manhood that causes him to feel threatened by Ethan's similar behaviour. Although Joe is certain Beck is flirting, he perceives Ethan's views as aggressive and disappointing. This can be a form of exerting dominance and control, by 'protecting' his love interest from other male competitors. Lastly, I understand that Joe's negative views towards Ethan reflect a sense of superiority, where he believes his thoughts about Beck are justified as an innocent romantic courtship since it stems from love, contrasting with Ethan's perceived negative intentions.

Before their relationship begins, episode one provides the experience of what it is like to become obsessed. To classify this behaviour, I included cyber-stalking (such as searching through her social media and googling her address), as well as physically observing her apartment from outside and following her to various places like school, work, and social settings. Joe also committed break-and-enter in Beck's apartment, and such actions make it for a strong classification of controlling coercive violence, where there is a knowing, purposeful pattern of harassment that is personalized to the victim, with the intent to isolate and control (Carney & Barner, 2012).

The Last Nice Guy in New York

The second stage of the relationship, as I've defined it to be the dating stage, is where I accounted for the highest prevalence of physical violence. I also noted that Joe's violence becomes the most prominent rather indirectly to Beck and focused on the people closest to her. I accounted for lower themes of obsession, such as stalking Beck, but a higher prevalence towards dominance and control, beginning once Joe meets Beck's former boyfriend Benji, played by Lou Taylor Pucci. Indicative of his constant need to assert and validate his masculinity (Dowd, 2010), Joe ridicules and belittles any male character introduced, as a means to establish superiority and validate his own worth:

Joe: The hair, the privilege he tries to hide with retweets of Black Lives Matter. Not to sound judgey, but this guy is everything wrong with America. See, this is why I do my research. You fall for the wrong men. Bad men. You let them in. You let them hurt you.

Such comments also exhibit elements of victim-blaming, as he not only competes with other male characters throughout the series but also rationalizes his criminal actions by suggesting that Beck somehow allowed toxic relationships to occur. As a show, it passes the

message that having similar attitudes as Beck might serve as an invitation for dangerous men into one's life. Furthermore, distancing from the role of “wrong, bad men,” Joe sees himself as the good guy that she should end up with; a television trope that constructs him as Beck’s white saviour, rather than his role of her eventual killer.

Joe begins the victim isolation process once Beck falls short of his expectations of her. As defined by Carney & Barner (2012), the victim is cut off from family and friends as a means to instill control, exploit, isolate, and dominate victims. To isolate Beck from potential competition, Joe kidnaps Benji for days and ultimately murders him. During the time Benji is held hostage, several themes emerge of Joe’s desire to dominate Beck’s social life, and reiterate his toxic understanding of love. Beck wonders why Benji has gone missing, and Joe thinks, in an angry tone, “Thought I took care of that for you, Beck” (S1E2, “The Last Nice Guy in New York”). Additionally, examples of his dialogue related to dominance themes included “I did what I had to do to help you,” “You deserve better,” and “I would beat this guy bloody for the way he talks about you” (S1E2, “The Last Nice Guy in New York”). Such sentences not only indicate that Joe knows what is better for Beck, but that he should decide for her.

During this phase of their relationship, Joe becomes increasingly familiar with Beck’s social circle, providing viewers with insights into her daily life. However, it becomes evident that many individuals in her life have a negative impact on her well-being. For example, Benji, her ex-boyfriend, is revealed to be as toxic through his negative comments about Beck, diminishing her to a “gold digger.”. Additionally, Beck faces harassment from her master's supervisor, who attempts to justify his inappropriate behaviour by her ‘revealing’ choice of clothes. Furthermore, Joe’s perspective, as the narrator, suggests that Beck’s close friends

prioritize superficial aspects of life, such as social media presence or wealth, over genuine connections.

Despite her experience with harassment, none of these characters appear to pose as significant a threat to Joe's control over their relationship as Peach. Portrayed by Shay Mitchell, Peach Salinger is a wealthy New Yorker and considered a best friend to Beck. Peach is also secretly in love with Beck, which adds an interesting dynamic since I was able to identify themes of obsession and control in her behaviour. In my analysis, I observed instances where Peach stalked Beck, attempted to get Beck intoxicated in order to have sex with her and even took unsolicited nude pictures of her.

The framing of Peach as a controlling 'queer danger' (As cited by Rajiva & Patrick, 2019) explicitly shows gendered issues within this storytelling. In my literature research on masculinities, I discussed how men tended to have a greater negativity towards sexual minorities than women (Levant et al., 2013). Placing the function of her character as the dangerous, crazy, obsessed lesbian- as described by Joe- accentuates his justification of isolating the victim from people who are not as worthy of Beck as he is. It also presents the show's intentional strategy to portray other characters as more problematic than Joe, and this construction of Peach is an attempt to justify the lack of remorse once he ultimately murders her.

The Breakup

The murder of Peach is an introduction to the next stage of their relationship. "Everythingship," the last episode in this analysis, gives a breakdown of how Joe and Beck's relationship came to an end. While Beck is mourning the loss of her closest friend, Joe seems to become frustrated and unable to understand why she has shut down from her once friendly personality:

Joe: We were doing great. It was safe to open up about the very hardest things.

Beck: I mean, Peach always said that...Um... [chuckles]

Joe: You can talk about her, you know?

Beck: Yeah, I know. [...] Actually, I think I'd rather save it for therapy, if that's okay.

Joe: [in a frustrated tone] Therapy?

Except, it turns out, we weren't. [...] Don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with going to therapy. It's just...It's a bit troubling when your partner hides something from you. (S1E7, "Everythingship")

Joe fails to grasp that isolating Beck from her friends will not repair their relationship, and his need to control her life becomes heightened and visible to Beck. Rather than hiding his dominant behaviour through his internal narrative, Joe presents his protectiveness directly to Beck, showing a side of him she had not yet met. On her birthday, they have a heated argument once Beck fails to show up at the surprise party Joe planned for her, informing her therapy session ran long. Rather, he believes that she has now been cheating on him with her therapist:

Joe: [sighs] Shit. Beck, just tell me. Just tell me. Tell me the truth. And we can get through anything. If you can't tell me, then show me. Show me your phone.

Beck: [laughs] Are you serious right now?

Joe: You said yourself, you have a hard time with good guys. (S1E7, "Everythingship")

Arguments between Joe and Beck become critical to this analysis as controlling coercive violence also accounts for the perpetrator's actions to be unwanted to the victim, instilling fear or humiliation (Carney & Barner, 2012). Since Beck was unaware of Joe's toxic behaviour so far, there was no certainty of identifying feelings of fear or hurt from her. Although this episode

provides a brief overview of the ‘good times’ they had, it also illustrates how Beck feels once she begins to see Joe’s jealous attitude.

The matter in which the episode unfolds is very clearly from Joe’s perspective. It presents various scenes where Beck’s phone receives constant notifications, and she attempts to hide them from Joe or becomes nervous, with signs of fidgeting. It is a clear gendered issue within the script's construction once the series portrays Beck as unfaithful, with the connotation that she is not suitable for Joe, and he is, in fact, the good one. His tendency to prioritize his desires over reality is a theme that presents itself through his dialogue and mannerisms. The more Beck distances herself, the more he holds on to ‘crutches,’ as he calls the measures of controlling their relationship, such as checking her phone and stalking her wherever she goes. In the end, it is revealed that Beck was texting a college friend, Emma Fox. By the time Beck tells Joe she is not cheating, she discovers he has been stalking her. She is evidently hurt and confronts him, by putting an end to their relationship. If there was any uncertainty that his stalking was undesired, this scene provides a strong confirmation of how much fear and humiliation CCV can cause to the victim.

Concepts of obsession and stalking characterize that the behaviour extends even if there is a rejection. Research shows that about 80% of women as victims are stalked by a current or former partner (Carney & Barner, 2012). “Everythingship” adheres to this analysis since the entire episode is Joe’s narration post-breakup in a therapy session with Beck’s therapist. By hiding his true identity so he won’t get caught, Joe steals her confidential file. Adding to his criminal behaviour, he shows an indication of attempting to murder the therapist by saying Beck might be in “danger” again, just like she was with Benji and Peach. This, once again, is a clear indication of his need to control Beck’s life, as none of these characters (except, of course, Joe

himself) displayed signs of danger. Although my analysis ends with “Everythingship,” there are several intricacies that these four episodes were able to provide throughout the stages of their relationship.

Joe’s Manhood

Considering the series centers its story on Joe over most characters, I wanted to understand the complexity of his behaviour. For instance, I noted quotes from his internal narrative that presented cognitive distortions, where criticisms directed at his romantic partner could actually reflect his own attitudes.

Joe: You trust someone. You give them your heart, and what do they do? Is there even a punishment that fits the crime of lying, of manipulating like this? Of breaking someone’s heart? I guess I’m bad at picking good people. (S1E7, “Everythingship”)

Within feminist theory, Gardiner & Cowburn (2004) discuss that heterosexual males can often become so concerned with maintaining their sense of self and dominance within the relationship, that they cannot tolerate its infringement by a partner. Instead, they seek to assert control and reshape women according to their desires and interests. The woman’s sense of self “is not merely refigured, but systematically dissipated” (Waldby, as cited by Gardiner & Cowburn, 2004, p. 73). Joe consistently claims himself to be the good guy while thinking the worst of his partner, becoming a reflection of his need to control Beck according to his own interests.

You also looks at Joe's troubled past as a young boy, where he experienced physical abuse at the hands of his mentor and bookstore owner, Mr. Mooney. This experience reflects on Joe's insecurity towards his masculinity by analyzing the impact adverse experiences on boys can bring to the relationship with their manhood. As detailed in this concept, there can be an

interconnection between boys, men and toxic masculinity. The lack of emotional, empathetic, and relational growth and dissatisfaction with relationships with male figures on a boy has been connected to the suppression of emotions, challenges in forming and maintaining intimate relationships and increased violence (Dowd, 2010, p. 35). As a boy in adolescence transitions to manhood, those negative experiences can push toward the most traditional and conservative thoughts (Dowd, 2010, p. 58), which can be seen throughout Joe's views on his masculinity and intimate relationships.

Another characteristic about Joe is that he views himself as a feminist: "Sometimes I swear I'm the only real feminist you know" (S1E5, "Living with the Enemy"). Simultaneously, he repeatedly makes comments that not only diminish the female characters in the series but can also be victim-blaming. Referring back to his dialogue, "And there you were, every account set to public. You want to be seen, heard, known" (S1 E1, "Pilot"). The connotation of "want to be seen" adheres his victim-blaming ideology to antifeminist discourses, once there is a gendered negativity of her exposure on social media. The easy way in which Joe is able to google her address, and find out about her family and schedule also extends this ideology to viewers. Not just Beck, but any heteronormative females that have their accounts public become careless and should password-protect their devices if they do not want to be stalked.

Joe's distaste for her female friendships and their social media presence also provoke anti-feminist discourses. "They have nothing better to do than plan their next pointless yet Instagrammable night [...] You have questionable taste in friends" (S1E1, "Pilot"). The suggestion that Beck's friendships are superficial and inauthentic is frequent in Season One. It follows the literature on women's representation in media, where they are often objectified and given a subordinate role (Collins, 2011). Joe's act of diminishing their social media presence, a

common practice in today's digital world, positions him in a superior, more relevant role as he distances himself from this negative norm. If Joe is so explicitly engaging in anti-feminist behaviour, I wanted to understand why he was framed as thinking he is a 'real feminist.' This is a question, and critique, that surrounds the last section of the analysis, which is the overall framing of *You*.

The framing

Although *You* opens the discussion by analyzing toxic masculinity in romantic relationships, it also presents issues within the construction of the story, where this influences the way viewers interpret the show. The first and most influential danger with this framing is Joe's narrative of his internal thoughts. Through examples of his narrative, I've hinted at how his narrative becomes authoritarian over Beck's version of events. As a victim of intimate partner violence, Beck's feelings are overshadowed by Joe's justification of his criminal actions. This narrative shifts the focus to his perspective while disregarding the ongoing abuse she suffers.

Additionally, the show portrays most male characters around Beck, such as Benji, her master's supervisor, and her father, in a negative light. Once viewers see the harm these characters inflict on Beck, the implicit message *You* conveys to viewers is that Joe becomes the most suitable option, since his actions stem from love. Furthermore, this narrative perpetuates traditional misogynistic cliches, where Joe is the saviour, and implies Beck needs one, which is why it wouldn't be unreasonable to hope he doesn't get caught. To answer my question as to why Joe is constructed as a feminist while engaging in controlling coercive violence, it is part of his role to make him an affectionate, romantic, 'last nice guy in New York.'

Penn Badgley, in an interview with The New York Times, suggests that "Joe is this work in progress in dismantling and dissecting the myriad privileges that a young, attractive, white

man carries with him” (Stanford, 2019). By portraying Joe as undergoing a process of examining the various advantages of being a young, attractive, white man, Joe engages in a critical analysis of his own privilege, the patriarchal dividend. Joe takes advantage of the benefits that come from the gender hierarchy, and *You* presents a subtle mockery of typical feminist media representations within the framing of the show. Even when his actions are wrong, his words remain convincing throughout his narrative, which distances him from the role of a villain.

The show's attempt to caution viewers about characters like Joe and gendered violence also exposes it to traditional masculine ideologies. From my perspective, the framing of *You* aims to present itself as a progressive critique of toxic masculinity, as suggested by one of its co-creators comments: "*You* was an opportunity to ask, 'why do rom-coms make this so?' If we change it to thriller music, will we be able to see that what he's doing is terrible?" (Gordon, 2021). However, in reality, the implicit messages of *You* have led to ambiguity, making it malleable to an antifeminist discourse.

As per my thematic analysis, the critique I pose regarding the framing of *You* resumes to lack of positioning on gendered violence, toxic romantic courtship and feminist ideologies. Existing literature on stalking highlights the challenge of differentiating between criminal harassment and romantic courtship, especially when the victim is female (Sinclair, 2010). Additionally, the rise of streaming services among younger generations has transformed viewers into active participants through social media commentary (Jiang Xiao, 2019). This active engagement implies that the messages conveyed by entertainment shows can shape not only their content but also the cultural context in which they are created. Within this framework, *You* may influence the way viewers perceive toxic masculinity and forms of intimate partner violence, fostering a culture for future television shows that may be elaborated.

Limitations

The thematic analysis of Netflix's *You* conducted for this undergraduate honours thesis included limitations. Firstly, the time frame allotted for completing the research within the constraints of an undergraduate honours program, which spans two terms. Since the first term is dedicated to a proposal to be approved by my supervisor, the research itself was conducted during the second term only. While I aimed to conduct a thorough thematic analysis, the limited duration of the program restricted the depth and scope of the research. Additionally, the absence of other perspectives poses a limitation, as the analysis was conducted by a single researcher (myself). Furthermore, the reliance on Netflix's portrayal of themes within the show limits the broader understanding of societal perspectives and reactions. Future studies could benefit from comparing content across different platforms or incorporating diverse sources to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the themes explored in this series.

Conclusion

Considering the themes that *You* presents within its main character, Joe Goldberg, and his distorted views of relationships, I wanted to know if this series related to definitions of toxic masculinity. I pose that the behaviour analyzed forms a relationship to a cultural context that sees stalking as romantic courtship (Sinclair, 2011), rather than criminal harassment. Through the four episodes analyzed, I accounted for variables of CCV; such as dominance, control, and obsession over an intimate partner, forming a relationship to traditional masculine ideologies, as critiqued within feminist theory. These explicitly show gendered issues within this storytelling, and as a series that has been highly popular, refers to a framing that not only condones but also normalizes harmful behaviours. It reinforces stereotypes about victims of abuse, silencing the voice of Beck, or other victims, by not giving them the spotlight in this story.

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Appendix A

i. Concepts Grid.

“TOXIC MASCULINITY”	“CCV”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invisible role, deep-rooted in society ● There is a hierarchy of privilege reinforced by a constant need to prove manhood. ● The justification to demonstrate power (need) = offending. ● Internalization and rejection of femininity is a combination of men’s violence and struggle to express emotions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exerting Dominance/ Control ● Stalking ● Cyberstalking ● Obsessive Behaviour ● Emotional Abuse ● Notes: It is a pattern of behaviour which includes instilling fear, intimidation, hurt, humiliation, a process of isolation personalized to that victim, dysfunction of courtship and relationship evolution, intended to monitor and control/threaten an intimate partner, with stalking being purposeful and unwanted.

ii. Data Collection Viewing Schedule – January/February 2024

The Planned Viewing Schedule:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
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FIRST WATCH- NO PAUSES

JAN 21	JAN 22	JAN 23	JAN 24	JAN 25	JAN 26	JAN 27
EP. 1-2-3	X	EP. 4	EP. 5	EP. 6	EP. 7-8	EP. 9-10

SECOND WATCH- SELECTED EPISODES WITH PAUSES

FEB 4	FEB 5	FEB 6	FEB 7	FEB 8	FEB 9	FEB 10
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EP. 1-2-5-7	X	X	X	X	X	X
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The Actual Viewing Schedule:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
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FIRST WATCH- NO PAUSES

JAN 28	JAN 29	JAN 30	JAN 31	FEB 1	FEB 2	JAN 27
EP.6-7-8-9-10	X	X	X	X	X	EP. 1-2-3-4-5

SECOND WATCH- SELECTED EPISODES WITH PAUSES

FEB 4	FEB 5	FEB 6	FEB 7	FEB 8	FEB 9	FEB 10
EP. 1-2-5-7	X	X	X	X	X	X

iii. Episode Description Grids

You (2018-) - NETFLIX

SEASON #	EPISODE #	TIME	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
1	1	48m	Pilot	A charming first encounter quickly turns into something more nefarious when bookstore manager Joe takes a very strong liking to grad student Beck.

1	2	45m	The Last Nice Guy in New York	As Beck deals with unwanted advances from her advisor, she brings Joe to Peach's high society soiree. Joe tries to navigate matters with Benji.
1	5	45m	Living with the Enemy	A video from Annika's past comes back to haunt her. Joe and Peach's simmering tension boils over when Peach introduces Beck to a major literary agent.
1	7	42m	Everythingship	A grieving Beck turns to therapy, which leads Joe to do the same – for different reasons. Joe's plans for Beck's birthday don't go as expected.