Discursive constructions of masculinity in campaigns addressing gender violence in London

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Abstract

Public service announcements (PSAs) increasingly position men as key agents in preventing gender-based violence (GBV), yet their ideological foundations remain underexplored. This study critically analyses two London-based PSAs – *Have a Word* and *Maaate* – through a discourse analytic lens to examine how they construct responsibility and masculinity. We introduce the concept of responsibilised masculinity to describe a hybrid formation that blends progressive gender ideals with neo-liberal self-regulation. While the campaigns promote male intervention, they represent a broader trend that risks individualising responsibility and obscuring the structural conditions that sustain GBV. We argue that these PSAs discipline masculinities through moral governance, reinforcing dominant power relations while appearing transformative. The article calls for prevention efforts that move beyond responsibilisation towards systemic, relational and abolitionist approaches to gender justice.

Keywords

responsibilised masculinity, gender violence, neo-liberalism, hegemonic masculinity, abolitionist feminism

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Introduction

Public service announcements (PSAs) have become a key strategy in addressing a range of social issues, including public health crises, environmental sustainability and, increasingly, gender-based violence (GBV). As a media-driven intervention strategy, PSAs aim to shape public attitudes and behaviours through strategic messaging that leverages the emotional, persuasive and symbolic power of communications (Wakefield et al., 2010). Operating within a framework of social marketing, PSAs differ from commercial advertising in that they promote behaviours intended to benefit collective well-being rather than individual consumption (Kotler and Lee, 2008).

PSAs play a growing role in constructing narratives around responsibility, morality and social change within contemporary crime prevention strategies. Although policy responses to GBV have historically prioritised legal reforms, such as increased sentencing for offenders and enhanced protections for victims, these approaches often overlook the cultural norms and structural inequalities that allow such violence to persist (Goodmark, 2018). By contrast, PSAs are increasingly employed as primary prevention tools that seek to reshape attitudes and behaviours before violence occurs and disrupt harmful attitudes and behaviours before they escalate into criminal acts (Flood, 2019).

One of the most common strategies deployed in GBV-focused PSAs is bystander intervention, which encourages individuals, particularly men and boys, to recognise and challenge misogynistic behaviours and shift peer norms (Powell, 2011). This approach draws on research showing that social norms are powerful determinants of behaviour: when harmful attitudes are normalised within peer groups, they are more likely to be perpetuated; conversely, when individuals intervene, these norms can begin to shift (Banyard et al., 2007; Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014). In this way, PSAs seek not only to prevent acts of violence, but to reshape the cultural conditions that legitimise them.

However, the ideological underpinnings of these interventions merit closer scrutiny. Although bystander-focused campaigns ostensibly aim to dismantle harmful norms, they may simultaneously perpetuate neo-liberal narratives that prioritise individual moral responsibility over structural transformation (Pease, 2008). As a governing rationality, neo-liberalism individualises social problems and responsibilises citizens to manage risks and behaviours through introspection and discipline (Garland, 2001; Rose, 1999). Within this framework, individuals are called upon not only to regulate their own conduct, but also to police the conduct of others, often without sufficient institutional support, public education or acknowledgement of systemic failures. Moral self-governance prevails over structural change and state accountability (Wacquant, 2009).

Whereas the emphasis on men's responsibility represents an important shift from earlier GBV prevention efforts that overlooked male roles altogether, this article asks whether such appeals, by centring idealised forms of empathetic, accountable and interventionist masculinity, ultimately reflect and reproduce neo-liberal logics. In emphasising individual conduct as the primary site of change, do these campaigns risk obscuring the deeper institutional, economic and cultural forces that sustain gender inequality? This question becomes particularly salient when examining recent high-profile PSAs in London that explicitly target men as agents of violence prevention.

This article examines two recent campaigns launched by the Mayor of London – *Have a Word With Yourself, Then Your Mates* (London City Hall, 2022) and *Say Maaate to a Mate* (London City Hall, 2023) – that target men as key actors in preventing GBV. Developed in partnership with Ogilvy, a global advertising agency, these PSAs employ digital storytelling and interactive technologies to encourage men to intervene in everyday scenarios involving misogynistic behaviour (Fanner et al., 2023). The *Have a Word* campaign, launched in March 2022, featured a widely circulated video depicting a man witnessing his friend harassing a woman outside a bar. The man hesitates, visibly uncomfortable, before seeing his own reflection urging him to 'have a word' with himself and his mate. This interventionist framing, which highlights men's internal moral struggle when confronted with sexism, became a defining feature of the campaign's broader message: masculinity is reframed as moral vigilance. The campaign's digital reach was extensive, generating more than 3.1 billion social media impressions and winning the prestigious Grand Prix at the Data & Marketing Association Awards (Data & Marketing Association, 2022).

Building on this momentum, London City Hall launched *Maaate* in July 2023 as a follow-up campaign to further encourage men's intervention in everyday situations. Adopting a more interactive approach, it featured a video-based decision-making tool placing viewers in social scenarios in which they chose when to intervene in conversations involving misogynistic remarks (Appendix A). Users practised intervention by pressing a virtual 'Maaate' button at key moments, reinforcing that small, everyday actions can disrupt harmful gender norms. Research commissioned by the Mayor's Office found that although two-thirds of men wanted to intervene when hearing misogynistic language, many were unsure how or when to do so (Fanner et al., 2023).

As such, *Maaate* sought to lower the perceived social stakes by framing bystander action as casual, humorous and non-confrontational. Using the light-hearted expression 'Maaate' to challenge sexist comments, the campaign presented intervention as accessible and unintimidating, and as a strategy consistent with research indicating that humour can lower defensiveness, enhance perceptions of efficacy and shape emotional responses in ways that make prosocial engagement with sexism feel more approachable (Cohen-Chen et al., 2024). Collaborations with public figures, such as comedian Romesh Ranganathan – who co-created a skit modelling everyday call-outs – and his widely publicised conversation with Mayor Sadiq Khan on YouTube on men's responsibilities to intervene, reinforced the campaign's message about everyday accountability (Mayor of London, 2023; Romesh, 2023). Indeed, although both PSAs promote similar responsibilised scripts, their strategies diverge: *Have a Word* employed darker tones and personal confrontation, whereas *Maaate* used humour and interactivity.

Although these campaigns have been widely praised for their innovative digital outreach and engagement strategies, they have also faced substantial criticism. The London campaigns are part of a broader recent trend of targeting men as key audiences in preventing violence against women. In 2019, Gillette, a large global company known for its shaving and grooming products, ran its 'We Believe' campaign, which gained widespread international attention, reached more than 4 million views on YouTube in its first 48 hours, and was received with both praise and backlash (Xu and Xiong, 2020).

Some GBV scholars and activists have questioned whether such efforts reinforce a paternalistic model of masculinity, in which men are positioned as 'protectors' of women rather than as equal participants in dismantling gendered violence (Burrell, 2018; Keddie, 2021). Others have argued that by focusing on interpersonal interventions, these campaigns risk obscuring the structural and institutional factors perpetuating GBV, such as economic inequality, workplace discrimination and failures in the criminal justice system (Pease, 2008).

This article uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how these campaigns construct responsibility, masculinity and the promise of social change. It investigates how the 'responsible man' figure is discursively produced in ways that align with neo-liberal rationalities of self-regulation, moral reform and individualised action (Katz, 2014). The central research question asks: How do public-facing GBV prevention campaigns directed at men articulate responsibility, and what are the implications of these constructions for understandings of gender, power and violence? The analysis aims to uncover the ideological tensions embedded in these interventions, exploring how they may both challenge and reproduce dominant gender hierarchies. Situated within broader debates in criminology, masculinity studies and the governance of gender, this study contributes to critical scholarship on anti-violence work by interrogating how neo-liberal discourses discipline masculinities under the guise of progressive change, and by questioning what becomes obscured when violence prevention is framed primarily through the lens of individual male action.

Theorising masculinity, violence and responsibilisation in criminology

Criminology has long explored the intersection of gender and violence, with particular attention to how masculinities function both as sources of harm and as mechanisms for sustaining gendered power (Jewkes et al., 2015; Messerschmidt, 1993). Early engagements with masculinity in criminology often relied on positivist or pathologising accounts, framing male criminality through lenses of biological deviance or social dysfunction (Ellis, 2005). However, it but did not explicitly theorise masculinity as such, a concept developed more fully in later work (R Connell, 1995). These approaches disproportionately focused on working-class men as inherently dangerous, reinforcing classed and racialised stereotypes while neglecting the social production of gender itself (Collier, 1998; Walklate, 2004). Over time, the field has shifted towards more critical frameworks that understand masculinities as relational, performative and institutionally embedded (R Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1998; Messerschmidt, 2018). These developments align with broader theoretical turns in gender studies that reject essentialist accounts, favouring intersectional, historically contingent and power-conscious analyses (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Wiegman, 2002).

Particularly, Messerschmidt (1993), drawing on Connell's (1987) earlier work on gender and power, reframed male violence not as a pathological or deviant impulse, but as a gendered practice embedded in broader systems of domination. He argued that crime

functions as a means of 'doing' masculinity, particularly in contexts in which access to hegemonic masculine ideals – defined by authority, dominance, and heterosexual virility – is limited or threatened (Messerschmidt, 1993). This work marked a theoretical break from essentialist views of masculinity, positioning it instead as a set of socially situated practices shaped by power relations.

Later, Messerschmidt (2018) deepened this analysis by foregrounding intersectionality, demonstrating how masculinity is always co-constructed through race, class, sexuality and other structures of inequality. He also returned to R Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of complicit masculinity, noting that many men benefit from hegemonic masculinities' institutional privilege even if they do not fully embody that form entirely (RW Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). This framework has since catalysed a wide range of critical inquiries into how hegemonic masculinities legitimate violence across diverse domains, with masculinity no longer seen merely as a behavioural trait or identity but as a regulatory force – continuously reproduced through institutions, cultural scripts and the state. Masculinities are not only implicated in violence, but constituted through violent systems such as colonialism, militarism and the carceral state (Lockwood and Williamson, 2022). These approaches challenge criminology to move beyond interpersonal models of harm and examine masculinity as a technology of power, produced, enforced and resisted within global capitalist and settler colonial regimes.

Concurrently, there has been a growing critical engagement with efforts to 'reform' masculinity, particularly through discourses of hybridity, care and emotional expressiveness. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) identify hybrid masculinities, where privileged men adopt traits from subordinated masculinities, such as emotional vulnerability or feminist language, while maintaining dominance. These performances appear progressive but may function to obscure or reinforce male privilege. In violence prevention and allyship discourse, such patterns are visible in the 'good man' narrative, in which men use feminist identification to claim ethical high ground without engaging in structural change (McCook, 2022). Similarly, the recent emphasis on caring masculinities (Wojnicka and de Boise, 2025), which valorise empathy, vulnerability and relational ethics, can risk de-politicisation when co-opted into therapeutic or self-help frameworks.

More recent scholarship highlights how responsibilised masculinities must be situated within broader institutional and cultural logics rather than reduced to interpersonal performances. Bridges and Pascoe's (2018) concept of 'the elasticity of gender hegemony' underscores how seemingly progressive masculinities can reproduce dominance by adapting to new cultural expectations. Similarly, Bridges' (2010, 2021) work on public performances of profeminist masculinities and Pascoe and Hollander's (2016) analysis of 'good guy' narratives both reveal how symbolic gestures of allyship can recentre men's subjectivity while sidelining survivor agency. Murphy's (2009) visual critique of anti-violence campaigns further demonstrates how PSAs can appear transformative while sustaining existing hierarchies. Ralph (2023) warns that without a structural critique, care becomes another vehicle for self-optimisation, rather than a challenge to patriarchal or racialised systems of domination.

This critique finds resonance in the contested uptake of the term 'toxic masculinity'. Initially emerging from therapeutic contexts to describe patterns of emotional

suppression, aggression and entitlement (Kupers, 2005), the term has since gained traction in the media and public discourse. Although useful in naming specific harmful behaviours, it has been criticised for psychologising GBV and reducing it to individual pathology rather than analysing it as a systemic problem (Heath, 2019; Waling, 2019). Waling (2023) cautions of 'over-responsibilisation', in which men are positioned as individually accountable for detoxifying themselves, often through introspection, wellness practices or emotional labour, without confronting the structural foundations of patriarchal and racialised violence. Such frameworks, grounded in neo-liberal self-improvement, risk displacing political critique by turning gender justice into a matter of personal ethics rather than collective transformation.

This individualising logic is a hallmark of neo-liberal governance. Drawing on Foucauldian theories of responsibilisation, scholars have shown how individuals are increasingly tasked with managing risks that were once the purview of collective institutions (Rose, 1999). In criminology, responsibilisation has been explored concerning offender management, desistance and risk regulation (O'Malley, 2010). Yet, relatively limited attention has been paid to how this logic operates in violence prevention, particularly in the construction of the non-offending man as a responsibilised subject. Within programmes that target male allyship or bystander intervention, men are increasingly called upon to monitor their peers, intervene against sexism and model 'better' masculinities. Burrell (2018) critiques how initiatives aimed at engaging men, although valuable in raising awareness, often position them as 'protectors' or 'role models' rather than as agents of structural change, risking the inadvertent reinforcement of gender hierarchies under the guise of care. This tension is magnified in digital spaces, which have become key battlegrounds for the performance and policing of masculinities. As Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) observe, the internet hosts a dynamic struggle over the meaning of gender, where reactionary and progressive masculinities clash in real time.

Campaigns such as Gillette's 'We Believe' initiative, seek to engage men in gender justice through digital storytelling, yet often rely on relatively simplified affective appeals and viral logics (Trott, 2022). Salter and Blodgett (2017) caution that these forms of digital engagement can produce performative allyship – visible displays of support that lack political substance. Trott (2022) further argues that even these ostensibly progressive spaces are governed by digital hegemony, wherein audience backlash and platform dynamics discipline what forms of masculinity are deemed acceptable. In the 'We Believe' campaign, Gillette attempts to repurpose its long-running advertising slogan ('The best a man can get') into a kind of moral appeal. Within one of the campaign videos, a (male) narrator asks, 'Is this the best a man can get? Is it?' while a montage of videos depicting bullying, sexual harassment and toxic masculinity is shown. At the same time, any efforts to affect broader cultural change also compete for bandwidth and attention amid the rise of influencers such as Andrew Tate – the self-anointed 'king of toxic masculinity' (Bella and Nadhir, 2022) – whose social media content glorifying misogyny and dominance has reached over one billion user views through the mid-2020s, especially younger male viewers via TikTok and YouTube. The policing of male responses to anti-violence campaigns reveals the persistence of hegemonic norms, even in efforts designed to subvert them.

Taken together, these trends illuminate underexamined dimensions of criminological theorising around masculinities. Although responsibilisation has been analysed extensively in relation to offenders, comparatively less attention has been directed towards the responsibilisation of non-offending men within prevention discourses. Similarly, although hybrid and caring masculinities have been subject to critical inquiry, their articulation as technologies of neo-liberal governance remains under-theorised.

This article seeks to extend existing scholarship by conceptualising responsibilised masculinity as a discursive formation within GBV prevention. Drawing on critical masculinity studies, criminological critiques of neo-liberalism and feminist theories, we examine how men are positioned as moral actors who regulate violence through allyship, mentorship and self-governance. Our central question is whether responsibilised masculinity, as a hybrid form merging progressive gender ideals with neo-liberal self-regulation, disrupts hegemonic configurations of power or re-legitimates them under the sign of progressive change. In addressing this, we offer a theoretical lens for understanding how gendered governance is operationalised through contemporary equality discourses.

Methodology and reflexive positioning

This study employs CDA to examine how PSAs construct and regulate masculinities in the context of GBV prevention. CDA is a qualitative methodology particularly suited to this analysis because it is grounded in the understanding that language and visual representation are constitutive rather than merely descriptive – they actively shape social realities, power relations and gendered subjectivities (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2003). The campaigns themselves explicitly foreground the centrality of language, with the 'Have a Word' PSA stating that 'male violence starts with words' – making discourse analysis a well-suited fit for understanding how these interventions position words and language as both the problem and solution.

Our data set includes the official campaign videos, campaign websites, associated press materials and official messaging from the Mayor of London's Office. Practically, our analysis followed a three-stage process: we conducted a close, line-by-line reading of the PSAs' scripts, visual framings and campaign materials; identified key discursive strategies to how masculinities are constructed and recurring rhetorical patterns related to which voices are foregrounded or silenced; and situated these within wider sociopolitical and theoretical contexts. This approach moves beyond description to interrogate the ideological work performed by the campaigns, ensuring the analysis remains grounded in CDA's methodological commitments rather than a purely polemical critique. As Jewkes and colleagues (2015) note, discourse analysis enables researchers to interrogate the ideological work done by seemingly benign public messages, revealing how social order is legitimated through language and visual framing. This approach helped us to examine not only what the PSAs say, but also how they convey their message, analysing how language, visuals, symbols and digital affordances (such as interactivity, algorithmic amplification and platform-specific engagement strategies) construct narratives of ideal masculinity, while potentially obscuring or reinforcing existing power structures. In doing so, our approach aligns with developments in digital and multimodal discourse

analysis, which emphasise that meaning in online campaigns is produced not solely through textual or visual content, but also through the technological, interactive and networked environments in which that content circulates. These methodological perspectives recognise that platform logics, user interaction patterns and the multimodal layering of media all shape the ideological work of discourse (Jones et al., 2015; KhosraviNik and Unger, 2016; Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2017).

Through this focus on discursive construction, we closely and critically examine the campaign's content, visual framing and stylistic choices in constructing narratives of ideal masculinities (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Our analysis attends to the sociopolitical conditions under which these PSAs are produced and consumed, following Fairclough's (2013) conceptualisation of discourse as a form of social practice. We treat these campaigns not as passive reflections of shifting gender norms, but as active sites of ideological struggle where responsibilised masculinities are discursively produced and legitimated.

This analysis is shaped by a reflexive awareness of the authors' positionalities. Our interdisciplinary team spans English, education, gender studies and law, bringing distinct methodological and theoretical commitments to bear. One of the authors draws on personal experience as a survivor of GBV and brings a praxis-oriented feminist perspective grounded in advocacy and trauma-informed pedagogy. This diversity of expertise and lived experience enriches the analytic process while also requiring us to be attentive to power dynamics in how knowledge is produced and whose experiences are centred. We recognise that survivor experiences are not monolithic and have aimed to approach the analysis with care, rigour and a commitment to feminist ethics of accountability and justice. Ultimately, this method enables a nuanced examination of the campaigns as discursive sites where gendered power is not only represented, but actively organised, negotiated and, at times, resisted.

Ideal masculinities as self-reflective

The Mayor's two-tiered campaign emphasises the importance of self-awareness and introspection. In the primary video, 'Have a Word With Yourself', a scene unfolds where a group of men approaches a woman waiting alone for a taxi. The tension escalates as one man persistently harasses her, leading another man to debate whether to intervene internally. This internal struggle is visualised through the man speaking to his reflection in a mirror, as he ponders:

> You're not going to say anything?
> Just leave me alone.
> Bro, look at her. What are you doing? You need to say something.
> This isn't a joke anymore.

The subsequent intervention embodies the campaign's call for personal accountability, highlighting the need for self-reflection and transformation rather than simply shifting blame.

By contrast, the second video, released a year later ('Say Maaate to a Mate'), employed an interactive online experience. Set in an apartment where a group of men play a football video game, one man repeatedly makes increasingly graphic misogynistic remarks while the others respond with visible discomfort and awkward shared glances. Viewers are supposed to press the 'Maaate' button when they feel it is time to intervene. If the button is not pressed correctly, a message appears: 'If you didn't step in, watch this again'.

The most striking moment occurs after one uninterrupted viewing of the video; the primary misogynistic actor looks directly at the camera in a fourth wall-breaking moment: 'Mate. You gonna keep letting me carry on like this? Not gonna say anything?'. This moment invites moral introspection but also subtly suggests that intervention is a matter of individual will, rather than social structure or collective support. Although the video content is comprehensive, with 270 different narrative scenarios in all, depending on when a user clicks the 'Maaate' button, commenters have noted that it may not be entirely clear that the video is interactive owing to the minimalist interface. In addition to the video, this second phase of the campaign was also augmented by more traditional forms of offline advertising, such as physical billboards across London, and a broadcast during a football match.

The London campaign drew direct inspiration from Police Scotland's (2024) 'Don't Be That Guy' campaign, which featured male actors speaking candidly into the camera, asking men if they recognise themselves in various problematic behaviours. The language and discursive approach of the Scottish campaign is strikingly similar: 'Most men don't look in the mirror and see a problem. But it's staring us right in the face'. Both campaigns utilise mirror imagery and self-reflection to position introspection as the primary means for enlisting men as allies against GBV, through appeals to individual moral responsibility.

Both videos underscore the importance of self-examination and challenge complacency towards sexism, urging viewers to reflect on their role in perpetuating harmful norms. By promoting self-awareness and encouraging men to reconsider their behaviour and language, the campaign advocates for what it frames as accountable and inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Stough-Hunter and Hart, 2015). This message was reinforced by the language used on the London City Hall website during the campaign's first phase:

> [W]e are facing an epidemic of violence against women and girls, committed by men. This must unsettle us all and force us to take a long hard look at ourselves. As men, we need to be reflecting on the way we view, treat and talk about women … Male violence against women and girls can start with words. If you see it happening, have a word with yourself, then your mates.

The urgency of the epidemic is underscored on the website through the citing of reports that a woman is killed every three days by a man in the UK.

The campaign's call to introspection aligns with RW Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) view that men must recognise their complicity in patriarchal structures, whether or not they commit violence. The framing of intervention as a moral obligation of

'good men' also draws on the model of hybrid or amalgamated masculinity (Gater, 2023), in which traits such as empathy and responsibility are layered onto traditional masculine identities. Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity concept further underpins this model, arguing that masculinities are no longer bound by rigid hierarchies when homophobia and sexism decrease. However, both theories have been criticised for downplaying the persistence of structural inequality and focusing too heavily on individual change.

Although the campaign's emphasis on personal reflection is valuable, it risks reinforcing a model of neo-liberal responsibilisation. In encouraging men to 'have a word with yourself', the campaign places the burden of cultural transformation on individual introspection rather than structural redress. As Waling (2023) argues, this approach promotes a form of moralised masculinity, in which men are praised for self-regulation without addressing the systems that facilitate GBV.

The campaign focuses primarily on everyday behaviours – sexist jokes, invasive remarks – while sidestepping broader institutional forces. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stresses, masculinities are not shaped in isolation but through social, economic and cultural forces. Similarly, Katz (2014) argues that preventing male violence requires confronting the deeper societal norms that legitimise aggression, entitlement and male dominance – norms often embedded in schools, workplaces and the media. Although the integration of the PSA into secondary school classrooms via the Mayor of London's Violence against Women and Girls Prevention Toolkit marks a notable effort, the campaign still falls short of engaging with how institutional sexism – in vital domains such as policing, healthcare and the workplace – normalises misogynistic behaviours. Ultimately, while powerful in tone and reach, the campaign's message promotes an introspective yet politically quietist version of masculinity. It encourages individual men to do better but offers little insight into how collective action or institutional reform might support this transformation. Without a complementary focus on structural change, these introspective appeals risk becoming symbols of moral performance rather than levers of systemic disruption.

Ideal masculinities stand up to aggressive sexism

The campaign materials depict 'ideal masculinities' as those that are enacted to actively oppose sexist behaviour, particularly language and actions that demean or discomfort women in public settings. In the first video, the central character's intervention to stop his friend from harassing a visibly upset woman illustrates the campaign's message that men are responsible not only for their own conduct, but also for challenging harmful behaviour among their peers. This action not only frames men as active agents in confronting sexism, but also redefines power as the ability to oppose harmful norms and advocate for respect and dignity for all individuals.

The 2023 phase of the campaign continues this theme with messaging that seeks to lower the stakes for male intervention. As conveyed on the London City Hall website, the phrase:

> Say maaate to a mate shows how a simple, familiar word can be all you need to interrupt when a friend is going too far without making things awkward, ruining the moment or putting your friendship at risk.

Such content reflects an attempt to make intervening seem accessible and non-confrontational. This strategy draws on behavioural insights to mitigate men's social and emotional discomfort when confronting peers, positioning intervention as a minimal social risk rather than a moral confrontation. The campaign acknowledges that men often want to step in but feel uncertain about how to do so effectively, citing a behavioural science report indicating that '[t]wo in three men want to intervene when they hear misogynistic language, but did not know what to say', and that '[m]ore than half of men said they would not know how to intervene in a risky situation' (Fanner et al., 2023).

This framing aligns with Messerschmidt's (2018) assertion that men have a critical role in dismantling structures of sexism and violence, not merely by avoiding harmful behaviours but by actively participating in promoting gender equality. The campaign's approach echoes the work of Corboz and colleagues (2015), who argue that men, particularly in social settings such as sports, are crucial bystanders who can interrupt instances of sexism and violence. By positioning men as capable of ethical agency rather than inevitable perpetrators, the campaign advances a discursive shift in norms encouraging relational accountability rather than dominance.

The emphasis on confronting language is particularly significant in the campaign. On X (formerly known as Twitter) on 25 April 2022, Mayor Sadiq Khan emphasises that VAWG often begins with words, listing phrases like 'Boys will be boys', 'She's asking for it', 'My ex-girlfriend is crazy' and 'She's such a drama queen'. These phrases reflect deeply ingrained stereotypes that normalise sexism and perpetuate harmful attitudes towards women and girls. Targeting these expressions as entry points into broader cultural critique positions language as a site where patriarchal values are constructed and maintained. By inviting men to challenge this everyday language, respect, empathy and relational justice rather than control or aggression are prioritised. This shift from passive complicity to active confrontation is a significant reconfiguration of traditional masculinities, particularly in its challenge to hegemonic masculinities. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, hegemonic masculinities often perpetuate male dominance through complicity with sexist norms. The campaign, however, disrupts this model by advocating for amalgamated masculinities (Gater, 2023), blending traditional traits of strength with progressive qualities such as empathy, accountability and the courage to challenge harmful behaviours in peer groups.

However, such empathy is not extended to the victim–survivor in the campaign. Although the importance of men becoming more socially responsible and reflective is prioritised, empowering the abused character fails to materialise as a goal. The woman is left sobbing in a taxi without support, a narrative choice that starkly undercuts the campaign's broader message about respect and empowerment. While making bystander action accessible, intervention appears as a casual gesture rather than a practice of accountability embedded within broader gendered power relations. Moreover, the campaign offers limited guidance on how men might engage more substantively, beyond linguistic interruption, with the attitudes or structural forces underpinning sexist behaviour and with survivors themselves. The videos stop short of modelling more nuanced or context-sensitive approaches, leaving a pedagogical gap in how men can move from reactive disruption to sustained dialogue. Without addressing these dynamics, the

campaign risks reinforcing what Waling (2023) describes as over-responsibilisation, where men are encouraged to intervene without institutional or community support, ultimately reinforcing a neo-liberal model of self-regulation. The campaign articulates a progressive vision of masculinity as ethical and interventionist, but its tools for achieving that vision remain limited. By failing to provide a broader structural or relational context for men's engagement (such as the need to address workplace imbalances around gender and leadership, retaliatory practices, hierarchies that focus on risk, misogyny-amplifying algorithms in online spaces, and inadequate victim services), it risks transforming the project of anti-sexist action into a behavioural prompt rather than a political commitment.

Furthermore, scholars such as hooks (2000) and Lugones (2003) have long critiqued narratives that frame men as primary agents in dismantling patriarchy. hooks (2000) notes that this perpetuates male dominance under the guise of progressive action. Lugones (2003) underscores the importance of recognising women's proactive roles in resisting gender norms, warning against marginalising women's voices and the importance of their active participation in the fight against misogyny. A more equitable and transformative approach would frame anti-sexist action as a collaborative project that honours the voices, strategies and leadership of women and gender-diverse people alongside male allies.

Ideal masculinities as connecting to mateship and collective membership

The campaign encourages men to 'have a word' with their mates, emphasising the crucial role of peer relationships in shaping behaviour and fostering accountability. The invocation of 'mates' signals relational dynamics rooted in shared experience and mutual recognition (Dyson and Flood, 2008). By emphasising informal, conversational interventions – such as calling out sexist jokes or inappropriate comments – it seeks to normalise everyday acts of resistance. It reflects Towns and Terry's (2014) conceptualisation of an accountable form of mateship, wherein there is an evolved form of masculine solidarity that encourages men to hold one another responsible for harmful attitudes and behaviours. It also resonates with Anderson's (2009) conceptualisation of inclusive masculinity, which identifies peer culture as a site for fostering more ethical, emotionally literate masculinities grounded in social responsibility and mutual care.

However, despite the campaign's positive framing, we need to be cautious against the uncritical mobilisation of 'mateship', given its historical entanglements with patriarchal nationalism and heteronormative constructions of male behaviour, as well as its alignment with heroic masculinities in Anglo and Australian culture (Laurie, 2021). Positioning men as the primary agents in confronting sexism risks reproducing a model of maleness observed in other public service campaigns, wherein men are cast as saviours of gender justice, inadvertently displacing women's agency by representing them as passive recipients of male protection (Steele and Shores, 2015). This dynamic is subtly evident in the campaign, as exemplified in its first video, where the female character, visibly

distressed after being harassed, plays no active role in her own defence. Her safety and dignity are instead secured through male intervention, reinforcing a gendered division between action and vulnerability.

Masculinities as diverse and adaptive

The campaigns both depict masculinities as plural and adaptable, showcasing men of various racial, generational and social backgrounds and thereby disrupting the image of a monolithic, white, heterosexual masculinity. This representational diversity is significant, because studies show that audiences are more likely to engage with content they perceive as relevant to their own identities and experiences (Noar et al., 2007). However, in both videos, the aggressors are white, whereas those intervening are men of colour. On the face of it, this narrative configuration appears to invert harmful tropes by casting men of colour not as aggressors – disrupting historical narratives that have unfairly portrayed minority men as predisposed to violence – but instead as agents of change (Roberts and Elliott, 2020).

Yet these representational choices, while progressive on the surface, introduce new complexities. The configuration risks instrumentalising men of colour as symbolic 'correctives' to white male misogyny, positioning them primarily as moral exemplars – figures who exist to model virtuous, anti-sexist behaviour – rather than portraying them as fully realised subjects shaped by intersecting social positions and political realities. In other words, the campaigns present men of colour primarily as pedagogical tools for demonstrating 'better' masculinities, without exploring the broader contexts of their lives, including how they might simultaneously experience racialised marginalisation and participate in patriarchal power structures.

This limited framing becomes even more problematic when considered alongside the near-total absence of racialised and marginalised women. hooks (2000), Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2004) have long argued that interventions into gendered violence that do not centre intersectionality risk reproducing the very exclusions they seek to dismantle. While Black and other minority men are visible, the absence of women of colour (whether as survivors, commentators or agents of change), creates a representational gap that undermines the campaigns' claims to inclusivity. Moreover, without engaging with how violence differentially impacts women of colour, or how men of colour navigate both oppression and complicity, the campaigns offer an overly sanitised account of masculinity and power. This failure to represent the complexity of intersecting racial and gendered dynamics illustrates a broader limitation of the campaigns' approach: by relying on symbolic diversity rather than substantive engagement with intersectional realities, they risk reinforcing simplistic narratives even as they attempt to challenge them.

Discussion

The London campaigns analysed here represent a prominent, timely and high-profile intervention into GBV prevention in the UK, leveraging bystander engagement and

reimagined masculinities to promote cultural change. They position men as responsible, morally accountable actors who can challenge sexism and foster safer communities. In their aesthetic reach and strategic design, these PSAs exemplify a novel form of communication for violence prevention. However, when situated within wider theoretical frameworks of masculinity, neo-liberal governance and criminology, important limitations in their conceptualisation and execution become clear.

The campaigns operate on the premise that hegemonic masculinities are relational, socially reproduced configurations of power, rather than static identities. By promoting empathy, introspection and peer accountability, the PSAs appear to move away from masculinities grounded in aggression and dominance, modelling what Anderson (2009) calls inclusive masculinity. Yet, as the analysis throughout this article shows, these seemingly progressive shifts are deeply entangled with neo-liberal rationalities of self-governance. Waling (2023) warns that contemporary discourses of 'healthy' masculinity often repackage patriarchal authority through the lens of individual moral reform, prioritising emotional labour and self-policing over structural analysis or collective transformation. This responsibilisation narrative casts men as autonomous moral agents tasked with managing the social risk of violence. As Pease (2008), Rose (1999) and Brown (2015) argue, such framings redirect attention from institutional structures to the ethical performance of the individual.

In this light, the PSAs reproduce neo-liberal governance logics, shifting the burden of violence prevention onto men's personal conduct while leaving intact the wider social, political and economic systems that reproduce GBV. They offer no vision of broader systemic change, including no reference to legal reform, redistribution of resources or survivor-led infrastructures of care. As Messerschmidt and Bridges (2024) remind us, gender inequality is both enacted and legitimised by institutions, not only by individuals. The campaigns' emphasis on moral reform rather than political transformation ultimately limits their effectiveness as tools of social change.

The specificity of London as a site of intervention is particularly significant in this context. As one of the most diverse metropolitan cities in the world, London is shaped by profound racial, economic and spatial inequalities that intersect with gendered violence. High levels of austerity-driven public service cuts, widespread housing precarity, intensive policing and surveillance, and entrenched racial disparities in institutional responses all shape the context in which GBV occurs. These create structural conditions that are distinct from many other UK contexts, where state violence, resource deprivation and economic marginalisation intersect directly with gendered harm. Yet the PSAs make little reference to these dynamics. In failing to situate their messaging within the material and institutional landscape of London, where structural inequality profoundly shapes both GBV prevalence and responses, they risk offering a superficial narrative that is disconnected from the lived realities of the communities they aim to reach.

Moreover, the campaigns risk reinforcing 'hero masculinity' tropes, wherein men are cast as saviours restoring moral order, as in the 'Have a Word' video, where the harassed woman remains silent and distressed while the male protagonist intervenes. This dynamic echoes critiques by Steele and Shores (2015) and hooks (2000), who caution against paternalistic masculinities that centralise men in feminist narratives under the guise of

allyship. Such framings displace women's agency and reproduce a gendered division between action and victimhood.

The campaigns' approach to race also requires scrutiny. Both campaigns feature men of colour as ethical agents, while white men are portrayed as aggressors. Although this might seek to challenge racialised stereotypes of violence, it risks instrumentalising men of colour without engaging the structural intersections of race, gender and power. The absence of minority women is also notable. As Crenshaw (1991) and Roberts and Elliott (2020) argue, failing to centre the experiences of marginalised women, particularly women of colour, leads to their erasure within anti-violence narratives. This omission is particularly stark in London, where GBV and state violence are profoundly shaped by racial and economic inequality. As R Connell (2012) and Wacquant (2009) stress, masculinity is shaped through interpersonal norms and institutional landscapes, such as austerity, housing precarity, surveillance and unemployment. PSAs that ignore these structural contexts and their interaction with experiences of marginality remain confined to symbolic intervention; they may raise awareness, but do not redistribute power.

This symbolic limitation is further reinforced by the campaigns' partnership with Ogilvy, a global corporate marketing firm whose involvement shaped not only the professional polish and digital reach of the PSAs, but also their underlying communicative logic. While Ogilvy's expertise contributed to wide circulation, it also reflects a market-oriented approach that prioritises emotional resonance, simplicity and shareability over political critique or structural depth. As Salter and Blodgett (2017) argue, commercial campaigns often prioritise visibility over transformation, resulting in messaging that favours behavioural nudges and moral appeals rather than systemic challenges.

This logic flattens GBV into a matter of interpersonal conduct, sidelining structural drivers, such as state violence, austerity and institutional complicity. Future campaigns must be integrated into multisectoral GBV prevention strategies that encompass education, policy reform and survivor-led services. Public health evidence indicates that media interventions are most effective when supported by broader institutional scaffolding (Farrelly et al., 2002; Noar et al., 2007). Although the campaign website includes educational toolkits and brief references to legal frameworks, it lacks links to specialist services or resources for women and survivors, signalling a troubling absence of survivor-centred infrastructure. While men are cast as agents of cultural change, women appear largely absent from the solution space.

Ultimately, if masculinity is to be engaged as part of the solution to GBV, it must not be framed as a personal project of ethical self-improvement. Instead, it must be reimagined through collective accountability, structural critique and relational praxis. Criminology and GBV prevention initiatives must move beyond symbolic campaigns and behavioural messaging to embrace feminist, abolitionist and structurally informed approaches. This requires addressing the institutional and material conditions that sustain gendered violence and building campaigns in partnership with survivor-led organisations and front-line communities. PSAs may contribute to cultural shifts, but their potential for transformation depends on their integration within broader, justice-oriented strategies that

redistribute power and resources. Only then can interventions move from raising aware-ness to enabling liberation.

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Ethical considerations

None required.

Statement for consent

Not applicable.

Author contributions

SS was responsible for study design. SS and TS collated and analysed data and drafted and revised the manuscript.

Guarantor

SS is the guarantor.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Appendix A

Transcript of First Campaign Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbk3iJqmjNU&t=1s

Scene opens to a group of men in a convenience store chatting and clowning around. [general chatter]
Scene shifts to street to two women
W1: Text me when you get home, ok?
W2: I will
[W2 checks phone and sits on seat]
Scene shifts to group of men paying for items near shop at door.
M1: I'm paying
[general chatter]
[M2 points at W2 on bench]
M2: Sweetheart, you alright? You alright, yeh?
M3: She ain't listening man
[M2 shakes bag of crisps very closely to W2's face]
M2 to W2: want a crisp? go on have a crisp… go on, have a crisp
M2 to other men: she's a moody one isn't she… she a little bit rude to be honest…
[W2 looks uncomfortable]
M2: God, Jez, am I really that bad?
[M1 looks unhappy and concerned]
W2: my taxi's nearly here taxi…
M2: your taxi
[Scene shifts to M1 looking in a mirror with buzzing lights]
M1 to himself in the mirror: Oi, Jacob, you're not going to say anything? Just leave me alone. Bro, look at her!
[Scene shifts back to street with W2 trying to walk away]
M2 to W2: Oh wowwooow! Where are you going in such a hurry? All I've done is be nice nice, that's it, I'm trying to be nice all right and all I'm getting is this.
[Scene shifts back to M1 looking in a mirror with buzzing lights]
M1 to himself in the mirror: What are you doing? You need to say something, this isn't a joke anymore!
[Scene shifts back to street with W2 now looking frightened and upset, with tears in her eyes and looking around]
M2: what is it what is your problem? You've not said one word, no?
[Scene shifts back to M1 looking in a mirror with buzzing lights]
M1 to himself in the mirror: Come on bro!

Voiceover of M2: you're not so pretty with that face on you know?!? I just don't understand…

[Scene cuts from M1's face in mirror to same framing of his face on the street]

M1 to M2: What are you doing? That's enough!

Voiceover: Male violence against women and girls can start with words, but it doesn't stop there!

M2 to M1: I 'm only joking, bruv!

M1 to M2: Let's go!

[W2 gets in taxi]

Voiceover as group walks away and text on screen: If you see it happening, 'have a word with yourself, then your mates'

[Screen goes black. White text on screen: Mayor of London, London.gov.uk/have-a-word]