

The Construction of a Common Enemy and the Hate It Allows: The Case of Amber Heard



By Sam Goodwin
Spring 2025

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of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code,
and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

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Joseph Tompkins

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Introduction

In April 2022, a defamation lawsuit levied by Johnny Depp against ex-wife Amber Heard took the internet by storm. Depp accused Heard of inaccurately and maliciously presenting him as a domestic abuser, citing an opinion piece Heard had written for *The Washington Post* in 2018. Heard countersued Depp, citing statements made by Depp's attorney, Adam Waldman, calling Heard's allegations a hoax. The trial was livestreamed across multiple social media platforms, allowing anyone with internet access to witness the personal and expert testimonies, court evidence, and even the facial expressions of the two celebrities throughout the entire trial. The case lasted six weeks, culminating with the jury ruling largely in favor of Depp (Hennessy 2022).

The trial revealed many personal and intense issues of a very complicated relationship, but what was most striking was the public reaction. The trial incited an outpouring of social media content across multiple platforms, which merged with mainstream media coverage (Dellatto 2022). This content was characterized by a shocking level of mobilization, particularly against Heard, resulting in what one report called "one of the worst cases of cyberbullying and cyberstalking by a group of Twitter accounts" (Dellatto 2022).

Scholars have already commented on the forms and causes of mobilization (Jin and Bouvier 2024) and the forms of misogyny that Heard and her supporters faced (Nelson 2024; Robinson and Hiltz 2023), but there is more to be said about how the discourse constructed the purported "villain" of Amber Heard and how it ties into popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018). Regardless of what anyone thinks about the case and the people involved, the way the discourse positioned, curated, and perpetuated the character of Amber Heard speaks to greater issues of popular misogyny, commodified misogyny (Nelson 2024), and the ways in which complicated issues are framed around and funneled through constructed common enemies.

This case study exemplifies these issues. Given the subject matter, the high-profile status of the involved parties, and the specific moment in time and culture that the trial happened, many defined the trial in terms of the #MeToo movement, describing it as "#MeToo backlash," "#MeToo fatigue," and even the "Death of #MeToo" (e.g. Bokan-Lindell 2022). This gendered lens dominated the ideological battlefield of Depp v. Heard discourse. The discussions around the #MeToo movement, domestic violence, and gender violence were funneled through the characters and events of the trial in ways that reduced the topics to a matter of taking one side and attacking the other. Given the disproportionate amount of pro-Depp/anti-Heard content as

well as the gendered nature of the discourse, focusing on how Heard specifically was made out to be a morally bankrupt villain can give us insight into how common enemies are made in public discourses and how the construction of a common enemy enables normally taboo and inappropriate behavior such as misogyny, hate speech, and mobilization.

This trial was about two individuals, but its significance extends to victims of domestic abuse everywhere. By deconstructing how victimhood was approached by social media audiences during this spectacle of a court case, we can get a sense of how people understand and interact with concepts of victimhood, abuse, and gender-based violence. By analyzing the scrutiny and public reception Heard received, we can see the obstacles women face when they raise allegations against powerful men. This trial was a pivotal moment in domestic abuse discourse, and the way that Amber Heard was treated will impact survivors for years to come.

Background

Relationship and Trial Timeline

Johnny Depp and Amber Heard met in 2009 on the set of *The Rum Diary*. Depp plays the lead role of Paul Kemp, who falls for Heard's character, Chenault. In one scene, the two characters kiss in a shower. While both were in relationships at the time, they have gone on to say that the kiss felt more real and passionate than other on-set kisses. In 2011, the movie released and they met again during the press tour (Garvey 2022).

In 2012, Depp parted from his partner of 14 years, Vanessa Paradis, with whom Depp had two children. Shortly after, Depp and Heard began publicly dating. Depp was 49 and Heard was 26 at the time. They got engaged in January 2014 and married in 2015 (Blumm 2014, Garvey 2022).

After 15 months of marriage, Heard filed for divorce in 2016 and obtained a temporary restraining order against Depp, alleging that he had abused her while under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Depp denied these claims and a settlement was reached out of court with Heard awarded \$7 million, which she pledged to donate to the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles and the American Civil Liberties Union, also known as the ACLU (Garvey 2022, Gonzalez 2016). Depp and Heard released a joint statement at the time, which reads: "Our relationship was intensely passionate and at times volatile, but always bound by love. Neither party has made false accusations for financial gain. There was never any intent of physical or emotional harm" (Garvey 2022).

In December 2018, Heard wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* entitled "I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture's wrath. That has to change." The piece does not mention Depp by name. In response to the op-ed, Depp sued Heard for \$50 million for defamation, claiming that the article falsely implied he had abused Heard which negatively impacted his career and public image (Garvey 2022). Heard unsuccessfully tried to have the suit dismissed, and eventually countersued Depp for \$100 million based on comments his attorney Adam Waldman made calling Heard's story a "hoax" (Gardner 2021).

In 2020, Depp brought a UK libel suit against the tabloid *The Sun*. Depp specifically sued News Group Newspapers, the publisher of the tabloid, and Dan Wooten, the executive editor, over a 2018 article entitled: "How can JK Rowling be 'genuinely happy' casting Johnny Depp in the new *Fantastic Beasts* film after assault claim?" The piece referred to Depp as a wife-beater

and domestic abuser in no uncertain terms, calling out J.K. Rowling's decision to cast him. The article is based on allegations that Depp assaulted Heard 14 times, leading her to fear for her life. This trial took place in London, presented in front of a judge who listened to testimony from Heard and Depp to determine if the article was unfounded in its claims. In a massive blow to Depp, the judge found that "the great majority of alleged assaults of Ms. Heard by Mr. Depp have been proved to the civil standard," and ruled that 12 of the 14 alleged assaults had occurred (Pylas 2020).

Two years later, on April 11th, 2022, Depp and Heard's defamation suit and countersuit commenced in Fairfax County, Virginia. The trial went until June 1st, with the jury ultimately ruling that Heard had defamed Depp on three of three counts and that Depp's lawyer had defamed Heard on one of three counts (Hennessy 2022). This trial had some key differences, most notably that it was in the United States, in front of a jury, and livestreamed to the public. The fact that the entire trial was livestreamed resulted in a huge social media spectacle that generated an incredible amount of content and discourse with the vast majority of said content being largely in favor of Depp. In fact, much of the content was actively anti-Heard, with countless degrading memes and video edits being made of her courtroom testimony (Dahir 2022, Do Couto 2022, Spangler 2022).

The #MeToo Movement

To understand the discourse, it is necessary to understand the context. The content of Heard's op-ed and the public reaction to the allegations are inseparable from the #MeToo movement.

The hashtag #MeToo was a social media movement that went viral in 2017, in which victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse shared their stories and called out abusers (Kundu 2024). The movement reflected the fact that women are overwhelmingly victims and men are overwhelmingly perpetrators in these situations, with conversations of gender and gender-based violence being rife. Phrases like "believe all women" and "not all men" are just a few examples of popular stances taken within the discourse, with the latter being primarily in response to and arguing against the movement's messages.

The #MeToo movement worked to "increase awareness, change societal perspectives, [and] hold perpetrators accountable (Kundu 2024). The phrase "me too" emphasizes solidarity and shared experiences, offering survivors a sense of community and support. As more and more

victims spoke up, many powerful men faced allegations of misconduct, harassment, assault, and rape. People began to rally, wanting these men to face consequences for their actions, such as losing their jobs and facing legal consequences when applicable.

Other people, typically men, would outrage at attempts to cancel abusers, claiming that there was often a lack of proof, that the women were making things up for attention/fame, and that these types of allegations ruined the lives of the men being accused. While, unfortunately, there can typically be an amount of he said/she said present in these situations making it difficult to “prove” abuse happened, the other two arguments are less complicated. As the women who make these allegations are almost exclusively met with trolls, threats, and scrutiny, the argument that women lie for fame and attention rarely makes sense. And for powerful men, it often takes a lot more to ruin their lives. Recognizing and understanding these arguments is important for this case study, as these were all arguments people used against Heard’s case since her initial claims in 2016, and thus they shaped part of the discourse around the Depp v. Heard trial.

The #MeToo movement set the stage for the Depp v. Heard discourse, as it formed and solidified people’s positions on topics such as domestic abuse, gender violence, and victimhood in a significant way. Different groups and echo chambers were positioned to take extreme sides on the relationship without needing critical thought or any actual information. Arguments were already formed, and groups were already mobilized to support, argue, and/or troll.

While Heard’s claims initially happened in 2016, and the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2017, Heard’s 2018 op-ed explicitly positioned itself in the context of the #MeToo movement. Heard claimed that she is a public figure representing domestic abuse and that her experiences of backlash are indicative of the larger-scale backlash against the movement as a whole.

In fact, when Depp “won” the trial, there were many who celebrated it as the end of the #MeToo era, particularly in right-wing media. Fox News had multiple anchors use the verdict as ammunition against the #MeToo movement, with Martha MacCallum saying, “This puts a bit of a stake in the heart of the notion that you believe all women,” and Greg Gutfeld claiming that Heard “used the #MeToo movement and now she’s betrayed the #MeToo movement. You can’t believe all women, is basically what this case is saying” (Peltz 2022).

The Lawsuits

As the trial was the catalyst that turned this situation into a spectacle, it is important to break down what happened in the trial itself. When Depp sued Heard for defamation, he sued on three specific claims made in the op-ed (Hennessy 2022):

- (1) that she spoke up against “sexual violence” and “faced our culture’s wrath.”
- (2) that “two years ago, [she] became a public figure representing domestic abuse.”
- (3) that she “had the rare vantage point of seeing, in real time, how institutions protect men accused of abuse.”

Heard countersued based on three comments made by Depp’s lawyer Adam Waldman, which were published in the Daily Mail in 2020 (Hennessy 2022):

- (1) that “Amber Heard and her friends in the media used fake sexual violence allegations as both sword and shield, depending on their needs. They have selected some of her sexual violence hoax ‘facts’ as the sword, inflicting them on the public and Mr. Depp.”
- (2) that “quite simply this was an ambush, a hoax. They set Mr. Depp up by calling the cops but the first attempt didn’t do the trick. The officers came to the penthouses, thoroughly searched and interviewed, and left after seeing no damage to face or property. So, Amber and her friends spilled a little wine and roughed the place up, got their stories straight under the direction of a lawyer and publicist, and then placed a second call to 911.”
- (3) that “we have reached the beginning of the end of Ms. Heard’s abuse hoax against Johnny Depp.”

The bold numbers are the counts that were deemed as defamatory in court. Depp originally sued on four counts, the fourth claim from the op-ed being the statement:

- (4) “I write this as a woman who had to change my phone number weekly because I was getting death threats. For months I rarely left my apartment, and when I did, I was pursued by camera drones and photographers on foot, on motorcycles and in cars. Tabloid outlets that posted pictures of me spun them in a negative light. I felt as though I was on trial in the court of public opinion — and my life and livelihood depended on myriad judgement far beyond my control.”

However, this statement did not meet the initial threshold requirements of defamation, as it in no way implied that Depp abused Heard. It was dismissed prior to the trial (Gorzlancyk 2022).

The Trial

In opening statements, Depp's team outlined an argument that Heard's claims were unfounded and that Depp was actually the victim in the relationship. Heard's team outlined an argument regarding free speech and Heard's First Amendment rights, on top of the argument that if the jury found that Depp had reasonably abused Heard even once then Depp's defamation suit would be nullified.

Depp took the stand on April 19th, 2022. Depp and his team worked to refute Heard's allegations while claiming that Heard was the instigator and amplifier of conflicts within the relationship. Heard's legal team focused on Depp's history of substance abuse, as well as text messages and recordings from Depp that painted him as violent, aggressive, and out of control due to substances. Depp's team worked to present him as a sympathetic figure, who grew up in an abusive household and battled addiction from a young age. At the end of his initial four-day testimony, Depp stated that he lost "nothing less than everything" due to the op-ed (Berg 2023). A recording of Heard saying "Tell the world, Johnny, tell them Johnny Depp, I Johnny Depp, man, I'm, I'm a victim too of domestic violence" was played, which Depp responded to by saying, "Yes, I am" (Kilander 2022).

Heard took the stand on May 4th. Her testimony painted Depp as a troubled man who battled addiction and substance abuse for the length of their relationship, lacking self-control and mental clarity. She described multiple instances of alleged abuse (Berg 2023). She also claimed that there was a "revolving door" of cheating allegations from Depp and that he tried to hold her back professionally (Wang 2022).

Throughout April and May, many witnesses were called to testify. Depp had many people show up to his defense, including his sister who worked with him, his friend who lived in the penthouse at the same time as Heard, security personnel, and his ex-lover Kate Moss. Many spoke to his character, and some gave testimony that did not line up with Heard's version of events. Many also claimed that Heard was often the aggressor, saying that Depp would attempt to de-escalate and step away from arguments while Heard would yell, bait, and obstruct him (Phillipson 2023). Heard's witnesses included her sister, talent agent, and former makeup artist (Wang 2022). They spoke to Heard's physical injuries and emotional anguish, often depicting Depp as aggressive and demeaning (Phillipson 2023). Heard's team also noted that many of

Depp's witnesses were people who depended on, were employed by, or otherwise were biased toward Depp.

Many expert witnesses testified as well, covering topics such as mental health diagnoses and how these events impacted the two celebrities' careers and public images. At various points throughout the trial, both actors were depicted as unstable and unwell individuals with different personality or mood disorders. Heard was made out to be bipolar and narcissistic by Depp's experts, and Heard's experts made Depp out to be unstable and violent. Heard's experts also argued that she had PTSD from the alleged abuse, which Depp's experts argued against (Burton 2022).

Heard spoke on the deluge of death threats she had received since the trial began, stating that she was being "harassed, humiliated, [and] threatened every single day." She ended her testimony before closing arguments by saying, "Johnny has taken enough of my voice and the right to tell my story. I have the right to say what happened... I have the right as an American to talk about what happened to me. To own my story and my truth" (Berg 2023).

Literature Review

Ideological Mobilization

In order to understand the data I collect, I will be applying Teun A. van Dijk's (1995) "ideological square." This concept outlines how a proposed "we" defines itself in relation to a supposed "they." These lines in the sand are important as it is through these imagined groups and subject-positions that common enemies are constructed. As Shangran Jin and Gwen Bouvier (2024) note, these imagined oppositions function with intense double standards, in which any given quality would be a positive for "us" and a negative for "them." I will be looking at how Heard and, in turn, Heard supporters are defined as "them" by the anti-Heard majority. By paying attention to the use of collective pronouns and calls to action in my data samples, I can map how anti-Heard users created a sense of imagined community through shared position-holding against Heard.

These curated subject-positions are exacerbated through the intense competition for attention that takes place on social media platforms (Jin and Bouvier 2024). Users are incentivized to generate as many likes, shares, and comments as possible, and this practice is monetized through advertising and self-promotion. Due to the fast-moving pace of hashtags as well as the need to make content short and digestible in order to capture as much attention as possible, discourse is not only amplified but adulterated, becoming more extreme as time goes on. As users compete for attention in these spaces, they develop a code of recognizable and repeated expressions that allow them to effectively "perform" the sentiments of the hashtag (Jin and Bouvier 2024). This deepens the sense of community and presents a sort of unified mob, regardless of the diversity of perspectives and opinions that make up the hashtag. When these hashtags create an ideological square, mobilization against the "them" is immediate, exaggerated, and intense.

Mobilization in these cases is characterized by a deep sense of moral conviction. Blind side-taking based on oversimplifications is facilitated by digital technologies and spaces. Hashtags are not oriented to broader participation but instead to framing issues within fragmented worldviews. In these contexts, calls for cancellation are not based on laid-out or agreed-upon issues (Jin and Bouvier 2024). People calling for Heard to be cancelled are doing so for various reasons, and many likely disagree with each other, but in these digital spaces they are presented as a cohesive unit mobilized against their constructed common enemy.

This connects to Alice E. Marwick's (2021) theory of "morally motivated" networked harassment, in which large-scale harassment emerges from and is condoned by an ideological position of moral high ground. Marwick argues that networked audiences of individuals with different views and values are presented as a single entity that justifies abuse by claiming their seemingly unified case is "morally right." This moral high ground creates a culture that either deliberately overlooks or explicitly excuses behavior that would otherwise be seen as unacceptable or offensive. I also consider Emma Jane's "digilantism," a term for digital vigilantism, which refers to attempts, ranging from lighthearted and humorous to serious and criminal, to secure DIY justice online (Jane 2017). Digilantism implies a just cause or end the so-called vigilantes are working towards, often correcting something deemed wrong. These moral convictions and righteous causes impassion those engaging in digital harassment, driving them to be more vocal and extreme with their harassment.

Misogyny

Given the complexities of how misogyny manifests, it is important to specify the different forms of misogyny I will be referencing. Sarah Banet-Weiser's term "popular misogyny" is the "systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women" which is produced, networked, and reproduced across all forms of media and everyday practice (Banet-Weiser 2018). "Commodified misogyny," a term coined by Camilla Nelson, is when misogynistic stances are socially accepted to the point where misogyny is commercially lucrative (Nelson 2024). Nelson started this discussion and noted specific YouTube accounts that saw incredible profit through Depp v. Heard content, but the focus of their paper was on the corporate level, not smaller-scale "influencers" and social media advertisers. Thus, while Nelson's scope discussed commodified misogyny in the case of Depp v. Heard primarily in terms of corporate capitalization on popular misogyny, I am interested in connecting commodified misogyny with the aforementioned intense competition for increased views, engagement, and monetization. This will provide insight into the monetary incentives that guided and reinforced the ideological stances that came to define the discourse.

A great deal of work has been done on the general topic of misogyny, and for the purposes of this paper I will be pulling from Kate Manne's (2017) argument that misogyny, while a social and cultural force, often targets one woman who is seen as defying accepted norms

rather than attacking all women as a whole. This is incredibly relevant as we view the case of Amber Heard as representative of an individual being used as a conduit for societal levels of misogyny. Manne's argument mirrors that of Jilly Boyce Kay (2020), who posits that while the #MeToo movement increased the visibility of gender-based violence, the movement highlighted individuals at the expense of collective action. In these cases, the individual is emphasized and the larger societal forces are largely ignored.

I will also be pulling from Michele White's (2023) concepts of "straw feminisms" and "anti-feminism." Straw feminisms happen when disinformation about or commandeering of feminist thought reduces feminism to easily dismissed, disproven, or degraded positions. Anti-feminism is defined as "a structure of hearing, a way feminists are eliminated from the conversation; a way certain forms of critique are dismissed before being made" (White). These concepts apply to the styles of conversation that were taking place about Depp v. Heard, given its positioning as a watershed moment of the #MeToo movement. White further notes the way anti-feminisms create a false distinction between taboo misogyny and supposedly righteous dismissals of feminist thought, feminists, and women in general. This dismissal takes many forms and extends past straightforward misogyny.

Victimhood, Believability, and Truth

When looking at the public's response to certain evidence and Heard's demeanor in court, I will apply Banet-Weiser's (2023) notion of "normative victimhood," which states that there are certain behaviors, characteristics, and qualities that a victim must present as in order to be accepted as a victim. Non-normative or otherwise imperfect victims are denied the sympathy and support that normative or perfect victims would be owed. This discrepancy is heightened even more when considering Nelson's (2024) concept of "himpathy," or the inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy that men, typically powerful men, are given. Narratives such as "the woman scorned" and "the gold digger" position men as the victims of beguiling, vengeful women desperate for their attention, money, or power. All of this results in a culture that deprivileges Heard's status as a victim, even before any evidence is shared. In my data, I will look for examples of anti-Heard rhetoric that are based on her not aligning with normative victimhood.

Similarly, I will explore Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins's (2023) "economy of believability," which refers to the factors that go into constructing believability, including the labor of performance, or the work of becoming believable. This relates to the concepts of "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (IPCD) and "feeling rules." IPCD, as Miranda Fricker describes it, is a systematic devaluation of marginalized individuals' knowledge based on negative stereotypes about their social identities (Fricker 2007). Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of feeling rules is the prescribed emotional behaviors that situate people in different social contexts through affective expectations and norms determined by factors such as gender, age, race, and class (Hochschild 1984). All three of these ideas—economy of believability, IPCD, and feeling rules—showcase obstacles in the discourse for victims presenting their own victimhood. I will scrutinize instances where Heard was presented as unbelievable to determine the contributing factors. I will also pay attention to how Heard's courtroom demeanor was policed and judged by the public, as well as how that then played into how the public treated her.

Furthermore, I will be invoking the terms truthiness and post-truth. Truthiness, coined by Stephen Colbert, is defined as the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true. Post-truth relates to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford). Both of these terms are invoked by Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis (2018) in "The Affective Politics of the 'Post-Truth' Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity" to explore the political landscape following the 2016 election. I will be using these terms to contextualize the discourse around the case, especially when I am considering the previous concepts surrounding believability.

Common Enemy

All of the previous sections coalesce into the creation of a common enemy and the subsequent condoned treatment of said enemy. The literature on misogyny, victimhood, and believability all paint a picture wherein someone who breaks unspoken societal rules makes themselves vulnerable to socially acceptable vitriol. The literature around the ideological square and mobilization demonstrates how accessible and intense digital mobilization is, making us aware of the rhetoric indicative of mobilization as well as the factors, both societal and monetary, that make way for such mobilization. As Nelson (2024) puts it, misogyny acts as the law enforcement arm of patriarchal social order. I will see just how apt that is in my analysis.

Analysis

Just by looking at the hashtags associated with Amber Heard during the time of the trial, one can get a sense of the vitriol present in the discourse. #AmberTurd was by far the most prominent anti-Amber hashtag, but some others were #AmberHeardIsAnAbuser, #AmberHeardDeservesPrison, #WeJustDontLikeYouAmber, and #MePoo.

Even just at face value, #AmberTurd and #MePoo are particularly relevant when applying Manne's understanding of misogyny. The belief that Amber Heard defecated on Johnny Depp's bed posits a transgression against normative femininity, which then provides a supposed "morally just" misogynistic high ground. The act of making this purported transgression center-stage and amplifying an example of Heard defying accepted norms is exactly how we see misogyny function: by targeting one woman on the basis of her being seen as having defied social norms. By successfully normalizing hashtags like #AmberTurd within the discourse, the anti-Heard posters are consistently and insidiously centering Heard's non-normativeness in a way that implicitly justifies any misogyny or harassment in their posts.

Looking through posts made with these hashtags, we see themes of victim blaming, othering, violence, discreditation, mockery, and mobilization. Many of these themes overlap and all are informed and amplified by misogyny. For this analysis, I will showcase and break down a few of the most relevant posts that are representative of larger patterns.

Victim Blaming and Himpathy

The posts in these hashtags seek to discredit Heard through various means. A lot of the discreditation relates to victim-blaming rhetoric and himpathy. Many posters highlight instances of Heard not conforming to normative victimhood and use these arguments as proof that she was not a victim. By putting the responsibility on Heard to have handled the alleged abuse better, the attention and scrutiny are directed towards the alleged victim rather than the alleged abuser. We see examples of victim-blaming rhetoric in many of the posts. For instance, @Rubygirl_Tweets, on May 5, 2022, received 12k likes on a post that reads:

So her sister & best friend are in the same house while she's supposedly getting beaten so badly that she thought she was gonna be killed. And there's no physical evidence. No medical treatment Her own sister didn't so much as call the cops? Bullshit.

[#amberheardisapsychopath](#)

We also see this post from @lindsey_veal on May 18, 2022:

We were scared for Amber, we saw Amber all beat up, he was an addict, he was a monster..... but we still lived in his houses rent free and we were great friends with him.. oh and we never saw him hit her, ever. -all of ambers witnesses.

[#IStandWithJohnyDepp](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#)

This post has 13k likes. Here are some of the replies:

“Thinking that the heard sisters had a drag out fight and that’s why face looked bruised and a chunk of hair out. Because I am believing the make up artist. She doesn’t seem to be lying. She comes across as very believable” [from @Wilderauthor]

“RIGHT?!?!? thats what I'm saying this whole time?!?!? If he was such a bad man and drunk WHY STAY???? why not leave the first time!!! NO THEY CHANGED THE DAMN LOCKS SO HE COULDNT GET IN AND LET HIM PAY THEIR RENT.” [from @JoyAnn96581676]

“Also them: we're so concerned for Amber's condition but let's not take her to the doctor. Let's call a lawyer and take pictures.” [from @A10864551]

The arguments present in these posts show that Heard loses sympathy, believability, and support because she and her friends did not handle alleged victimhood in the “correct” way. These posts construct a narrative in which the victim and/or the victim’s friends should have done something else, and since they did not do those things, they must be lying. These oversimplified, unsympathetic narratives serve to deprivilege victimhood and undermine the victim’s believability. The framing and context of these posts make it clear that domestic abuse victims will not only be denied sympathy if the public does not see their victimhood as earned, but also heavily scrutinized and mocked. These narratives invoke truthiness, as they rely on what the posters feel is true rather than making real arguments. These posts are also examples of straw feminisms, as they mischaracterize facts and victimhood in order to present Heard’s witnesses’ testimonies as easily dismantled and degraded positions.

We see how @Wilderauthor is willing to believe one witness because “she doesn’t seem to be lying” and “comes across as very believable,” which are statements based wholly in feeling rather than fact. This position is a product of the “post-truth” era in that personal beliefs and emotions are more important in shaping opinions than objective facts. By making judgments based on who “seems” believable, already deprivileged perspectives like those of victims and marginalized groups are further deprivileged, as they need to put in more work to appear believable on top of presenting evidence.

On the other side of the spectrum, we see Depp receive the disproportionate sympathy that powerful men are given, also known as himpathy. This comes out in full play in many of the posts, such as this one from @lindsey_veal on May 24, 2022:

The fact that Johnny is suing for almost to the penny as to what he lost, and Amber is suing for 100 million, when she has lost NOTHING, is all I really need to know. She wanted money, and still does. [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#IBelieveJohnnyDepp](#) [#DeppvHeard](#) [#amberturd](#),

this one from @VoteWatchTV on April 21, 2022:

Depp: Accused, without evidence, of domestic abuse = branded a 'wife-beater' and is cancelled. Heard: ADMITS to being a domestic abuser. Accused of severing his finger, emotionally controlling him etc etc = No consequences. Because she's a woman. [#MePoo](#),

and this one from @aaaaaaati1209 on May 22, 2022:

Johnny Depp drank and did drugs! - ooooooh! He ABUSED her then! Amber Heard drank & did drugs! - poor baby! must have been so hard to deal with everything! See the DOUBLE STANDARD yet?!?!? [#AmberTurd](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberIsALiar](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#JusticeForJohnny](#)

These have 19k, 3.4k, and 8.7k likes, respectively. The first post presents the gold digger narrative, reducing Heard to a vindictive, greedy woman trying to take advantage of an honorable Depp. The second and third posts frame the issue of domestic abuse discourse as if being a woman is the privileged class in these instances, directly stating that she is getting away with abuse “because she’s a woman” and because of a “double standard.” Whatever this imagined feminine privilege is does not seem to be reflected in the larger discourse. On the contrary, we see how posts like these paint Heard as a villain who represents greater societal evils. Attacking Heard is not only justified but also righteous; to attack Heard is to attack double standards and greedy women who make victims of powerful, helpless men.

Othering and Non-Normative Femininity

In many instances, Heard was subject to “othering” and made out to be non-normative through comparisons to Camille Vasquez, one of Depp’s lawyers, and Dr. Shannon Curry, an expert witness. On May 17, 2022, @JoleneErswrell writes:

It makes me so happy to see Johnny Depp surrounded by strong , intelligent , professional , classy woman , protecting , and supporting him after [#AmberTurd](#) broke him as a man. These are real woman! [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#JohnnyDeppVsAmberHeardTrial](#) [#CamilleVasquez](#) [#DrCurry](#)

Similarly, in a post from May 5, 2022, @erinlcurtis says:

Watching Amber Heard testifying...we are all seeing how the gorgeous, respected Dr. Curry got her nickname “Queen” She diagnosed her 1000%!! [#DrCurry](#)
[#amberheardisapsychopath](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#)
[#AmberHeardIsALiar](#)

These posts have 2.7k and 4.9k likes, respectively. Both have images of Vasquez and Curry attached. The focus on these two women seems to serve multiple purposes. By highlighting the womanhood and femininity of these two individuals, the posters effectively “other” Heard, implying that she is not a “real woman.” We see in real-time how misogyny isolates and targets one woman seen as defying social norms. By uplifting these two other women, the posters send an implicit message that they are not being misogynistic by diminishing Heard or engaging in these hashtags. It’s Heard’s fault; if Heard was stronger, classier, more professional, and more supportive, then the hashtags and backlash would not be needed. And “we” all see it, according to @erinlcurtis, further cementing that Heard is separate not just from these two “real” women but also from all of “us.”

Injury Discreditation

In what I believe to be the grossest trend within these hashtags, there are multiple posts with images and videos of women applying makeup that looks like facial bruises. A post from @Ballerontheroll on May 3, 2022, reads:

Guys. Remember this "bruise"?I recreated it with my Make-Up Revolution Velvet Rose palette.Took me less than 5 minutes lol 🤪 [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#)
[#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberTurd](#)
[#amberheardisapsychopath](#) [#JohnnyDeppAmberHeardTrial](#) [#DeppHeardTrial](#)
[#DeppVsHeard](#)

Similarly, a post from @angelaesthetic_ on May 20, 2022, says:

[#amberturd](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#WeJustDontLikeYouAmber](#) Ok last one for the night this is funny, I love the internet reenacting her testimonies. [TikTok link]

These have 9.1k and 4.7k likes, respectively, as well as thousands of reposts. The first post has multiple images attached of both Heard and the poster’s recreation of Heard’s bruise on their own face, to which @classicpaws1 wrote, “yours actually looks more convincing.” The second post links to a TikTok from @juliedoesmakeup, of someone lip-syncing Heard’s testimony while applying makeup of bruises on their face, to which @mStar27 wrote, “Lol except this tik-toker

did it better. I could believe those fake bruises. Amber couldn't even get that right." Once again, believability comes into play. Even though the posters' bruises are declared as and shown to be fake, they supposedly look "more convincing" and believable than Heard's bruises.

The way that @Ballerontheroll uses quotation marks around the word bruise, emphasizes that it took less than five minutes, and adds a crying laughing emoji all work to not just discredit, but also make light of Heard's alleged injuries. By drawing attention to how "easy" it is to create fake bruises, this rhetoric undercuts victims everywhere and casts doubt on photographic evidence within domestic violence cases. Regardless of the context, this is a dangerous line of thought that sends the message to domestic abuse victims that even if they have evidence it may not be enough. And given the high-profile and sensationalized characteristics of this trial, this message is being sent very publicly and aggressively.

In a similar vein, @Jess_Errington, on May 5, 2022, shares a rather extreme perspective on Heard's testimony regarding injuries, writing:

I'm not a confrontational person but man, I would love to show Amber Heard what a broken nose really feels like [#JusticeForAmberHeard](#) [#AmberTurd](#) [#DeppHeardTrial](#)

This post has 4.1k likes. The inclusion of #JusticeForAmberHeard may be confusing, but @Jess_Errington clarifies in the replies that they are purposely trying to flood the pro-Amber hashtags to drown out support for Heard. This post is bluntly violent, and the phrasing of "I would love to" shows that the poster is not just wishing harm upon Heard but also saying they would derive joy from being the one to cause it, which elevates the violent sentiment considerably.

These posts go beyond casting doubt on Heard's testimony. They openly disparage Heard in ways that are dangerous for all victims. I do not believe that @Jess_Errington actually wants to punch Heard in the face. I do not believe that @Ballerontheroll means to discredit all domestic abuse victims. But they still posted these things, the latter even including their face in said post, and they received thousands of likes and engagements. This is indicative of the intense competition for attention that social media algorithms create. To perform well, posts need to be shocking, blunt, and digestible. With these examples, we see how digital platforms like X lend themselves to extreme and harmful discourse, which encourages more intense and vulgar harassment as time goes on.

Poor Performance

Perhaps the most prevalent throughline of the anti-Heard sentiment was that she was putting on a fake performance in the courtroom, acting and lying the whole time for the jury and the cameras. Moreover, her “performance” was brutally scrutinized and picked apart by posts such as this one from @andysignore on May 4, 2022:

OMG I'm DYING. Amber Heard is the worst actor EVER. This fake incoherent PERFORMANCE is sickening... All over the place, too many details, fake sighs, forced tears and looks to the jury.. This is an EMBARRASSMENT to survivors everywhere. [#Heardsay](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#DeppvHeard](#),

this one from @CenterviewHQ, also on May 4, 2022:

Ever seen someone cry without tears and then have a completely straight face void of emotion 10 seconds later? This acting is worse than her performance in Aquaman... [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#JusticeForJohnny](#) [#AmberTurd](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberHeard](#),

this one from @colonelkurtz99 on May 8, 2022:

Apparently it's more difficult to produce tears on command than turds. [#AmberTurd](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#),

and this one from @BadbatchtechX on April 21, 2022:

Looky here, [#AmberTurd](#) Looks about as expressive as a blow-up doll She's had the same stupid faces on the whole time, these are the only 2 faces you're going to see. We don't need a body language expert to tell us she's a narcissistic abuser [#Justiceforjohnnydepp](#) [#mepoo](#)

These posts, which have 15k, 7.1k, 2.8k, and 1.2k likes, respectively, all employ ad hominem to discredit the content of Heard's case based on the posters' subjective interpretations of her body language and delivery. The rhetoric in these posts connects back to the trend of victim blaming that we looked at earlier, as both relate to Banet-Weiser and Higgins's economy of believability. To many people participating in the discourse, the content and evidence were secondary to the affective performances from Depp and Heard. In that arena, Heard's labor of performance was not enough. Additionally, we see a clear example of moral conviction as @andysignore calls Heard's performance “an EMBARRASSMENT to survivors everywhere.” This post claims that Heard is not a survivor and that Heard's demeanor is harmful to survivors. This creates a moral high ground for those attacking Heard, as they are supposedly defending real victims from Heard's offenses.

Heard's courtroom behavior was policed and scrutinized in a way that Depp's simply was not. Posts depicting Depp smiling with his legal team or being difficult with Heard's legal team are championed as wholesome and funny, whereas posts showing Heard smiling with her legal team incite attacks of her being called unprofessional, unserious, and evil. The double standards and dominant perceptions showcased here relate to Fricker's identity-prejudicial credibility deficit and Hochschild's feeling rules. As a conventionally attractive woman celebrity, Heard's perspective is devalued as she is made out to be crazy, dramatic, self-absorbed, bitchy, and stupid. The post from @BadbatchtechX uses blatantly misogynistic language, comparing Heard to a blow-up doll. This exchange happens in the comments of that post:

"Shes still fine af" - @getting_learnt_, April 21, 2022

"Thats all the bimbo has to do. flutter her eyelids and the sheep will let/want her to win" - @BadbatchtechX, April 22, 2022

We also see her looks referenced in this post by @Benaskren on April 28, 2022, which has 3k likes:

How hot would your wife have to be so that you didn't divorce her for pooping in your bed? [#amberturd](#)

Heard faced much more of an uphill battle in the court of public opinion, and was punished for behavior that Depp was praised for. Even though many felt like the opposite was true, the discrepancy between how the two celebrities were framed and perceived in the rhetoric proves that misogyny and prejudice played a large part in shaping public opinion, both subliminally and blatantly.

Mobilization and Hashtag Manipulation

As a final note, we see intense mobilization within these hashtags. People are not just calling for Heard's cancellation, but also for her removal from Aquaman 2, removal from Hollywood and the entertainment industry as a whole, removal from her position as the ACLU's Ambassador of Women's Rights, and imprisonment (as seen in the #AmberHeardDeservesPrison hashtag). Multiple petitions circulated online, with a change.org petition titled "Remove Amber Heard as ACLU Ambassador of Women's Rights" having received 120,572 signatures and another titled "Remove Amber Heard from Aquaman 2" having received 4,630,761 signatures, as of April 2025.

Moreover, the deluge of anti-Heard content was grossly inflated via coordinated attacks and spam. Almost a fourth of all accounts posting in anti-Heard hashtags were created in 2022, and nearly a fifth were “dedicated to spamming,” per a report from research firm Bot Sentinel (Kates 2022). Christopher Bouzy, founder of Bot Sentinel, stressed that the accounts engaging in spam and harassment seemed to be real people, not bots. He described a coordinated effort to drown out Heard support, in which Heard supporters were threatened, doxxed, and “attacked relentlessly” (Kates 2022).

On top of the coordinated spam and harassment, the platform and discourse were further manipulated through the strategic use of hashtags. We already noted an example of this with user @Jess_Errington, who used [#JusticeForAmberHeard](#) in their post about wanting to break Heard’s nose to muddy the pro-Heard hashtag. Another strategy, which we have seen multiple times in this paper but you likely did not notice, was to misspell words in the hashtags, such as replacing the “i” in “is” with an “l.” There are three examples of this in the posts we have looked at, with two counts of [#AmberHeardlsALiar](#) and one instance of [#AmberHeardlsAnAbuser](#). Bot Sentinel explained that “the intentional misspelling demonstrates a calculated effort to manipulate hashtag trends” (Kates 2022).

Heard and her supporters were used as a punching bag throughout this trial. There was a clear line in the sand, which was constructed and enforced by relentless, misogynistic attacks. We see how organized efforts positioned Heard as a public enemy, putting a target on the back of anyone who supported her. Many people recognize this level of vulgarity, aggression, and blatant misogyny as wrong, but since the discourse held Heard up as non-normative and transgressive, the majority of people in this digital space turned a blind eye to, stood beside, and even participated in these extreme positions.

Key Takeaways

Due to Heard’s perceived transgressions, she needs to be punished. The discourse has framed the situation in such a way that she deserves all of the hate, harassment, and violence. We see how she was attacked from multiple angles, including misogynistic ad hominem, victim-blaming rhetoric, othering, and various discreditation. She was scrutinized and devalued in a way that goes beyond any potential contextual justification. We see the digilantism and morally-motivated mobilization enabling increased harassment as Heard is decried, discredited, and vilified in ways

that create ideological positions of moral high ground for those attacking Heard. We see a range of perspectives and arguments seemingly unified behind these hashtags, calling for the cancellation and punishment that the public feels they are owed. We see how Heard was othered, depicted as non-normative in terms of both victimhood and femininity, and constructed to be a vindictive, performative, psychotic monster. We see how these subjective and misogynistic perspectives influenced and bled into the overall discourse in a way that was popularized and accepted. I cannot say who abused who in their relationship, but I have to agree with Heard when she says that she faced our culture's wrath.

Conclusion

The case study of the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard trial was a watershed moment for cultural discussions surrounding domestic violence. I would be remiss to say that no good came of it, as this paper has focused solely on the most notable hate and vitriol present in the discourse. That was a large part of the cultural moment and considerably influenced the discussion and understanding as a whole, but a culture's understanding of a spectacle like this cannot be reduced to one movement. Discussions of and exposure to victimhood, domestic violence, and legal recourse are necessary for people to understand and grapple with these complex and significant topics. That makes it all the more disheartening and damaging when a large part of that discourse is centered around hate.

The hashtags and posts discussed in this paper send clear messages to many victims that they will have to fight for sympathy, that they will be personally attacked, and that speaking up is not worth it. The celebrity status and televised nature of this case elevated and sensationalized these nuanced and difficult issues in unproductive ways. For women, it is not enough to be a victim. Men will always garner more sympathy and be subject to less scrutiny.

Depp and Heard became representative of forces larger than themselves throughout the course of this trial. No matter what evidence was shown and what verdict the jury brought, the implications and impacts extend far past Depp and Heard's personal lives. This case showcased our culture's dominant beliefs surrounding victimhood, gender, and truth.

This paper is limited in scope and more analysis should be done surrounding the pro-Depp hashtags. By delving deeper into the pro-Depp hashtags rather than the anti-Heard hashtags, we can learn more about the conversations regarding male victimhood, in terms of how it is understood, communicated, and positioned within the discourse. In the anti-Heard hashtags, male victimhood was brought up exclusively in unproductive ways and used to diminish and distract from female victimhood, but many Depp supporters claimed this trial was a win for normalizing male victimhood and inspiring male victims to speak up. It would be interesting to see what truth there is to that, and to track any impacts this trial had on male and female victims speaking up.

Another area worth analyzing that may go unnoticed is the discourse about the courtroom and legal proceedings. Misinformation and misconceptions dominated many opinions, and legal "experts" and influencers skyrocketed in popularity in order to explain and weigh in on what was

happening. Many people would point to Heard talking to the jury as manipulative when that is what witnesses on the stand are supposed to do. People would throw around legal jargon and get upset about lawyers doing their jobs, often devolving into harassment and trolling. For six weeks, a high-profile, hot-topic, complex defamation case played out in front of millions of viewers, with many participating in content creation and discourse surrounding the trial. The level of engagement with the court system itself, involving how the judge, lawyers, jury, witnesses, and law were characterized, was groundbreaking. The broadcast amassed 83.9 million hours watched over the six weeks and had a peak of 3.5 million viewers when the verdict was announced (Zaveruha 2022).

In tandem with that, the discussion around specifically the expert witnesses would be worth looking into. As the court authorities on mental health, abuse, PTSD, and substance abuse in this trial, they played a significant role in how Depp and Heard were characterized, as well as how those issues were understood by the public. Many of the experts were controversial, and some were simply baffling in their presentation and testimony.

This trial produced a lot of hate, but it also brought attention to these complex topics, inspiring a lot of discussion, content, and media coverage. There is a lot left to analyze, discuss, and learn from this case.

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- @BadbatchtechX. "Thats all the bimbo has to do. flutter her eyelids and the sheep will let/want her to win." X, 22 Apr. 2022, 4:05 a.m., x.com/BadbatchtechX/status/1517414206471086081.
- @Ballerontheroll. "Guys. Remember this "bruise"?I recreated it with my Make-Up Revolution Velvet Rose palette.Took me less than 5 minutes lol 🤪 [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberTurd](#) [#amberheardisapsychopath](#) [#JohnnyDeppAmberHeardTrial](#) [#DeppHeardTrial](#) [#DeppVsHeard](#)." X, 3 May 2022, 3:53 a.m., x.com/Ballerontheroll/status/1521397549261004800.

- @Benaskren. “How hot would your wife have to be so that you didn’t divorce her for pooping in your bed? [#amberturd](#).” X, 28 Apr. 2022, 5:22 p.m., x.com/Benaskren/status/1519789261880406016.
- @CenterviewHQ. “Ever seen someone cry without tears and then have a completely straight face void of emotion 10 seconds later? This acting is worse than her performance in Aquaman... [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#JusticeForJohnny](#) [#AmberTurd](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberHeard](#).” X, 4 May 2022, 4:45 p.m., x.com/CenterviewHQ/status/1521954234933129216.
- @classicpaws1. “yours actually looks more convincing.” X, 3 May 2022, 5:32 a.m., x.com/classicpaws1/status/1521422328005025792.
- @colonelkurtz99. “Apparently it's more difficult to produce tears on command than turds. [#AmberTurd](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#).” X, 8 May 2022, 10:39 p.m., x.com/colonelkurtz99/status/1523492810950815744.
- @erinlcurtis. “Watching Amber Heard testifying...we are all seeing how the gorgeous, respected Dr. Curry got her nickname “Queen” She diagnosed her 1000%!! [#DrCurry](#) [#amberheardisapsychopath](#) [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#AmberHeardIsAnAbuser](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#).” X, 5 May 2022, 12:41 a.m., x.com/erinlcurtis/status/1522074074368946177.
- @getting_learned_. “Shes still fine af.” X, 21 Apr. 2022, 9:17 p.m., x.com/getting_learned_/status/1517311640424923136.
- @Jess_Errington. “I’m not a confrontational person but man, I would love to show Amber Heard what a broken nose really feels like [#JusticeForAmberHeard](#) [#AmberTurd](#) [#DeppHeardTrial](#).” X, 5 May 2022, 5:49 p.m., x.com/Jess_Errington/status/1522332577335590912.
- @JoleneErswrell. “It makes me so happy to see Johnny Depp surrounded by strong , intelligent , professional , classy woman , protecting , and supporting him after [#AmberTurd](#) broke him as a man. These are real woman! [#JusticeForJohnnyDepp](#) [#JohnnyDeppVsAmberHeardTrial](#) [#CamilleVazquez](#) [#DrCurry](#).” X, 17 May 2022, 3:51 a.m., x.com/JoleneErswrell/status/1526470567695613957.
- @JoyAnn96581676. “RIGHT?!?!? thats what I'm saying this whole time?!?!? If he was such a

bad man and drunk WHY STAY???? why not leave the first time!!! NO THEY CHANGED THE DAMN LOCKS SO HE COULDN'T GET IN AND LET HIM PAY THEIR RENT.” X, 18 May 2022, 9:43 p.m.,

x.com/JoyAnn96581676/status/1527102603762360320.

@lindsey_veal. “The fact that Johnny is suing for almost to the penny as to what he lost, and Amber is suing for 100 million, when she has lost NOTHING, is all I really need to know. She wanted money, and still does. [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#) [#IBelieveJohnnyDepp](#) [#DeppvHeard](#) [#amberturd](#).” X, 24 May 2022, 12:38 p.m.,

x.com/lindsey_veal/status/1529139669023301633.

@lindsey_veal. “We were scared for Amber, we saw Amber all beat up, he was an addict, he was a monster..... but we still lived in his houses rent free and we were great friends with him.. oh and we never saw him hit her, ever. -all of ambers witnesses.

[#IStandWithJohnyDepp](#) [#AmberHeardIsALiar](#).” X, 18 May 2022, 1:27 p.m.,

x.com/lindsey_veal/status/1526977908442640385.

@mStar27. “Lol except this tik-toker did it better. I could believe those fake bruises. Amber couldn't even get that right.” X, 20 May 2022, 4:41 p.m.,

x.com/mStar27/status/1527751375014141954.

@Rubygirl_Tweets. “So her sister & best friend are in the same house while she's supposedly getting beaten so badly that she thought she was gonna be killed. And there's no physical evidence. No medical treatment Her own sister didn't so much as call the cops? Bullshit.

[#amberheardisapsychopath](#).” X, 5 May 2022, 5:52 p.m.,

x.com/Rubygirl_Tweets/status/1522333338035441664.

@VoteWatchTV. “Depp: Accused, without evidence, of domestic abuse = branded a 'wife-beater' and is cancelled. Heard: ADMITS to being a domestic abuser. Accused of severing his finger, emotionally controlling him etc etc = No consequences. Because she's a woman.

[#MePoo](#).” X, 21 Apr. 2022, 2:03 a.m.,

x.com/VoteWatchTV/status/1517021168682815488.

@Wilderauthor. “Thinking that the heard sisters had a drag out fight and that's why face looked bruised and a chunk of hair out. Because I am believing the make up artist. She doesn't seem to be lying. She comes across as very believable.” X, 18 May 2022, 3:51 p.m.,

x.com/Wilderauthor/status/1527013930761084928.