The Court of Public Opinion: Fandom, Celebrity, and Networked Harassment on TikTok

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December 2023

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Abstract

The 2022 defamation trial between actor Johnny Depp and his former wife, Amber Heard, caused a deluge of social media content, the majority of which was strongly in support of Depp. This project explores the reactions to the Depp-Heard trial on the social media platform TikTok, where fans of Depp and fans of Heard argued their points of view via the short-video construct of the site. Through a qualitative analysis using TikTok videos as 'texts,' this project identifies the different narrative categories and technical affordances people use to support their chosen celebrity on the platform. Drawing on research from fandom studies and social media studies, this thesis argues that the reaction to Heard's accusation of domestic abuse by Depp caused her to be the subject of a networked harassment campaign by Depp fans.

Le procès en diffamation entre l'acteur Johnny Depp et son ex-épouse, Amber Heard, qui s'est tenu en 2022, a provoqué un déluge de contenus sur les médias sociaux, dont la majorité était fortement en faveur de Depp. Ce projet explore les réactions au procès Depp-Heard sur la plateforme de médias sociaux TikTok, où les fans de Depp et les fans de Heard ont défendu leurs points de vue par le biais de courtes vidéos sur le site. Grâce à une analyse qualitative utilisant les vidéos TikTok comme des "textes", ce projet identifie les différentes catégories narratives et les moyens techniques utilisés par les gens pour soutenir la célébrité de leur choix sur la plateforme. S'appuyant sur les recherches menées dans le domaine des fandoms et des médias sociaux, cette thèse soutient que la réaction à l'accusation de violence domestique portée par Heard à l'encontre de Depp a fait d'elle l'objet d'une campagne de harcèlement en réseau de la part des fans de Depp.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Carrie Rentschler, for her much-needed guidance and support. Thank you so much for taking me under your wing! This project would not have been possible without you.

Thank you to Heather and Nikoo for cheering me on throughout this program. I'm really glad I got to learn about digital humanities with you.

And a big thank you to my family and friends for their ongoing moral support and cheerleading: Mom, Dad, Katherine, Stephen, Aislyn, and Amila. I love you guys.

Introduction and Literature Review

On April 11, 2022, the Depp v. Heard defamation trial began, dominating social media feeds until its conclusion on June 1st of that year. Movie star Johnny Depp was suing his former wife, actress Amber Heard, for defamation, following a 2018 op-ed Heard published in *The Washington Post*. In the op-ed, Heard identifies as a victim of domestic violence without naming her abuser; Depp and his lawyers argue Heard is implying her abuser is Depp (Grady). This is not the first time Heard has accused Depp of violence: she previously accused Depp of abuse during their divorce proceedings in 2016, and testified against him in a 2020 libel trial in which Depp had sued British tabloid *The Sun* for calling him a "wifebeater" (Grady). Throughout both the 2020 libel trial in England and the 2022 defamation trial in the US, Depp countered with his own accusations of abuse towards him by Heard. While the British court in the 2020 libel trial ruled that Depp was the main aggressor in their relationship, the American jury in 2022's defamation suite ruled in favour of Depp and awarded him $15 million in damages, to be paid by Heard (Grady).

The 2022 defamation trial caused a deluge of social media content, due to the celebrities involved and the fact the trial was publicly broadcast on television. Images and video from the courtroom went viral on a daily basis. Based on the number of social media hashtags indicating a pro-Depp position compared to the number of hashtags indicating a pro-Heard position, the vast majority of social media posts were in support of Depp. For example, as of December 2023, #justiceforjohnnydepp has over 22 billion views on TikTok, while #justiceforamberheard has 330 million. This paper focuses on these hashtags, among other hashtags that focus on the Depp-Heard defamation trial. As Zizi Papacharissi writes, hashtags "serve as framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into publics; networked publics that want to tell their story

collaboratively and on their own terms" (308). Zhao and Abidin also emphasize the collaborative story-telling capacity of hashtags, where individual users making personal posts are connected to a broader narrative of social issues by tagging their stories with the same hashtags (3). This narrative use of hashtags on social media shapes the following chapters.

Despite the credibility of Heard's accusations against Depp, both viewers on TikTok and the jury in the courtroom fell on Depp's side. Posts under #justiceforjohnnydepp portray him as a charismatic movie star patiently handling court proceedings, while mocking Heard's emotional expression, dissecting her words, and spreading misinformation about her legal defense (Dahir). Depp's decades-long career in Hollywood has seemingly afforded him fans that leapt to his defense online.

This opening chapter frames my thesis project and how I will deliver it. It also reviews the key literature on which I draw for my approach, analysis, and methods. This chapter states fan uses of TikTok to shape public debate about this case, and the affordances of the platform. Drawing particularly on social media studies, I highlight key examples of material from my research that point to and reveal the ways in which fan creation on TikTok influenced public discussion about this trial. The affordances of TikTok as a social media platform – the short-video format, how content is moderated, the powerful but opaque algorithms – influence the kind of content that becomes popular on the app. In addition, social media platforms have enabled fandoms to connect and grow around various topics. While fan studies have generally approached fandoms as progressive or largely unpolitical collectives, research on the "darker side" of fandoms demonstrate that not all fans are drawn to fandoms out of love for the fandom's subject. Antifandoms and reactionary fandoms are increasingly visible and vocal on the internet. Fans and antifans take advantage of platform affordances and create their own fan vernaculars to

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defend their chosen fan object, as seen in previous online events like #MeToo and Gamergate. Finally, I discuss how the celebrity of the trial's subjects and the landscape of popular TikTok content caused the virality of the defamation trial on social media.

Why TikTok matters for fandoms

The Depp v. Heard trial was inescapable no matter what social media platform you were using, but it was particularly prominent on TikTok, a highly popular short-form video app. TikTok has many unique features that set it apart from other social media platforms, but it shares something in common with other sites like Twitter and Facebook. On social media, one person's posts may be seen by a wide variety of users from different social contexts. Marwick and boyd describe this phenomenon as context collapse, where multiple audiences appear to be flattened into one (122). Creators on social media do not have a singular audience to whom they address their message. Instead, they employ a variety of techniques to navigate different online contexts, like using multiple accounts curated for different audiences, or only posting content they deem appropriate for the widest audience possible (122). Additionally, while privacy settings can give the creator some control over who can view what they post, they are not a failsafe method for limiting how that content is shared.

Creators contend with multiple audiences while audience members are consuming social media content from many different contexts. On TikTok, what users see is the result of the platform's backend programming and algorithms, which show content to individuals based on their personal user data (Zeng and Kaye 80). This is the "For You" page, and appearing on TikTok users' individual "For You" pages is essential for content to perform well on the app.

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Unlike traditional broadcast media, social media allows networked audiences to provide feedback to the creator, as well as take on the creator role themselves. Marwick and boyd write, "Social media environments become a place where person-to-person conversations take place around user-generated content amidst potentially large audiences" (129-30). The line between audience and content creators becomes blurred, and roles less defined.

The short-video format of TikTok means there is only context for the minute or two the video lasts. In the example of the Depp v. Heard trial, hours of courtroom proceedings are shared in short clips and highlight reels. People viewing trial content on TikTok do not hear all the evidence, arguments, and deliberations that are shared in the courtroom. TikTok creators are more interested in which moments will receive the most attention on the app. In the pursuit of viral content, TikTokers "may seek to push boundaries, producing erratic or freakish content as well as harmful viral trends" (Zeng & Kaye 80). Like in traditional broadcast media, the most shocking or salacious content is often privileged over less exciting, fact-based news. Not only is the audience flattened, but so is the information received. As this process flattens information, it also amplifies certain voices and perspectives over others.

While context collapse is present across many social media platforms, how content gets moderated changes depending on the company. According to TikTok's "Community Guidelines Enforcement Report" from April to June 2022 — the exact timeframe of the defamation trial — the number of videos removed for violating company guidelines made up about 1% of total videos uploaded to the platform. Videos are subject to removal if they violate one or more of the following TikTok policies: Minor safety; Illegal activities and regulated goods; Adult nudity or sexual activities; Violent and graphic content; Harassment and bullying; Suicide, self-harm, and dangerous acts; Hateful behavior; and Integrity and authenticity. Of particular interest to this

analysis is TikTok's policy on harassment and bullying, which covers threats of hacking, doxxing, and blackmail, sexual harassment, and abusive behaviour (*TikTok.com*). This policy also mentions content regarding public figures, with the platform stating, "We allow some critical comments of public figures, understanding that they are in a position of public attention and have ways to counter negative speech, and that the critique may be in the public interest to view. However, we still remove content that violates other policies (such as threats, hate speech, and sexual exploitation), as well as serious forms of harassment (such as doxxing and expressing a desire for someone to experience serious physical harm)" (*TikTok.com*). Content regarding the Depp-Heard defamation trial falls under this caveat.

Content moderation is a constant balancing act for social media companies. All platforms must necessarily moderate their content, but both too much or too little moderation will drive users away (Gillespie 2018, 21). While videos that obviously violate the terms of service are subject to removal, TikTok's main approach to content moderation is visibility moderation. Zeng and Kaye define visibility moderation as "the process through which digital platforms manipulate (i.e., amplify or suppress) the reach of user-generated content through algorithmic or regulatory means" (81). Visibility moderation means that TikTok may not remove certain videos from the platform, but the company controls how many users will view it. Each TikTok user has a "highly personalized" For You Page, where TikTok's algorithms determine what videos to show users depending on the data they have collected from them. For a video to be successful on TikTok, it must be promoted and shared by the algorithms that form individual users' "For You" pages (83). If a video does not perform well with the "For You Page" algorithms, it will not receive the same level of user engagement as videos that do.

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Exactly what kind of content gets promoted by TikTok's algorithms and, in turn, what kind of content gets suppressed, is not publicly known. Zeng and Kaye argue that TikTok emphasizes certain videos and communities that "promote the platform's overall corporate image by serving socially responsible goals" in an attempt to rehabilitate their controversial reputation concerning misinformation and dangerous content for young users (83). TikTok researcher Crystal Abidin also emphasizes the significance of social justice on the platform: in her argument, a young, politically active userbase considers activism a daily part of their social media activity and consumption. Abidin writes, "...posts that engage with some degree of social justice on TikTok tend to be favoured, and many TikTokers engage in viral duets and replies that publicly shame other TikTokers as a route to internet celebrity" (84). This suggests that moral policing by TikTokers of other users performs well on the platform, particularly if it promotes (corporate-friendly) social justice goals. However, exactly what kind of content gets suppressed by TikTok's For You Page algorithm is less clear.

Some TikTok users complain of "shadow banning," where TikTokers with large numbers of followers receive relatively little engagement with their content. Zeng and Kaye acknowledge the "nebulous" nature of shadow banning, which is not an explicit policy of TikTok (85). Whether shadow bans are intentional efforts from the platform to suppress content, or whether they are simply a result of algorithmic interpretation of data, is unclear. Social media platforms have long received criticism for the black box decision-making of their algorithms. Both the machine learning of the algorithm and the reluctance of companies to publish proprietary data mean the variables that factor into algorithmic decision-making remain opaque. This became clear during the 2012 #occupywallstreet protests, when Twitter users felt that the growth of the movement was not reflected on the platform's presentation of trending topics. According to

Gillespie, Twitter explained some of the considerations of what constitutes a trending topic: whether interest in a term is spiking or growing slowly, whether it is spreading to different clusters of users; and whether it has trended before ("Can an Algorithm" 3). As Gillespie further explains, some algorithmic parameters may be more "precise and obscure," but that opacity contributes to users' distrust of the algorithm (4). A similar opacity is at work with TikTok's algorithms, and the exact reasons why posts become viral is hard for creators to pin down.

The platform affordances specific to TikTok go beyond the power of the "For You Page" algorithms. In her evaluation of internet celebrity on TikTok, Abidin identifies further platform structures that influence the type of content shared on the app. Unlike other platforms where influencers gain followers through a consistent public persona, TikTok privileges the virality of a post over the fame of the person who posted it (Abidin 79). The conversation is not led by those with the most followers, but by which videos go the most viral. According to Abidin, "The platform logics of TikTok force internet celebrity aspirants to actively seek out, learn, participate in, and engage in …what is 'going viral' at the moment in order to remain visible to others on the app…" (79). Zeng and Kaye concur, stating that viral content "is the primary means for visibility and sociality" on TikTok (80). A large audience is not enough to guarantee success on TikTok. However, minor figures can gain notoriety when their posts spread, despite a lack of a following.

During the Depp-Heard trial, TikTokers' pursuit of viral posts in support of Depp was evident: not only were TikTok users with small or niche followings talking about the trial, but so were popular internet personalities, mainstream celebrities, and brands. In one example related to the trial, Heard and her legal team used a Milani Cosmetics makeup palette as an example of colour-correcting makeup to show how Heard covered her bruises during her relationship with Depp. The brand responded with a TikTok video saying that the palette was not launched until

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after Depp and Heard had divorced (see figure 1). Heard's team was using the Milani palette as an example, not arguing she used that exact one during her relationship. However, that TikTok video became Milani Cosmetics' most-viewed post on the platform, with many considering it evidence that Heard was lying (Dahir). In short, the brand was able to capitalize not only because the trial was a trending topic, but because they aligned themselves on the popular pro-Depp side by casting doubt over Heard's testimony.
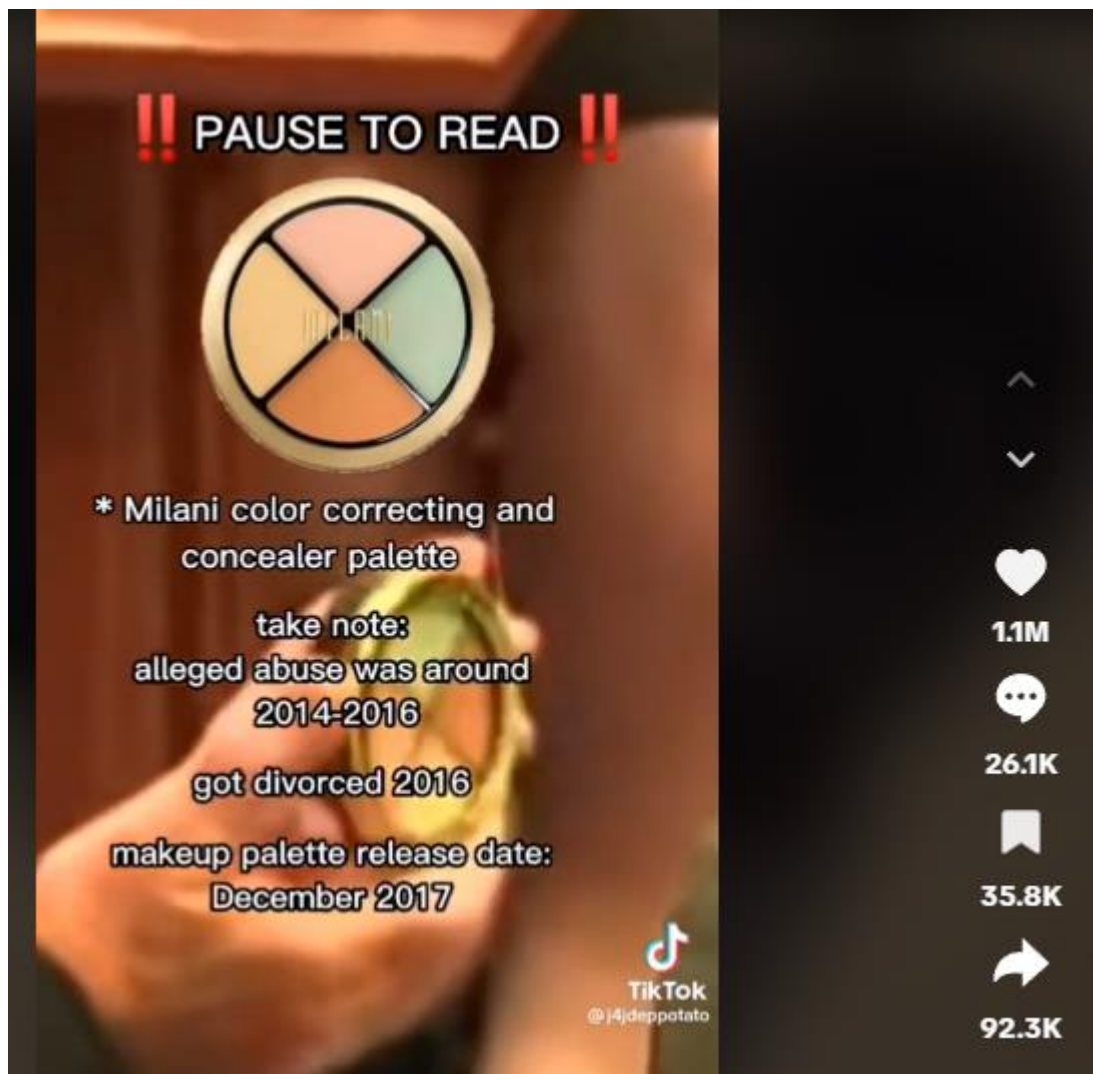
Figure 1: screenshot from @milanicosmetics's video.

Another example of someone with a public platform capitalizing on the virality of the Depp-Heard trial was Lance Bass, former member of boy band *NSYNC. Bass posted a TikTok

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video in which he acted out a scene from Heard's testimony as she described it to the court (see

figure 2). Heard is emotional in her recounting, stumbling over her words as she describes

experiencing physical abuse from Depp. In his video, Bass exaggerates Heard's actions for

comic effect, portraying her narrative as unreliable. Bass later deleted the video after receiving

criticism for making light of domestic abuse, but it remains on TikTok uploaded by other

accounts (@pagesix), demonstrating how difficult it can be to control the distribution of popular

content a person posts on TikTok. Like many TikTok users, both Milani Cosmetics and Lance

Bass were taking advantage of a viral news event to promote themselves on the platform,

especially as the majority of TikTokers discussing the trial were vocally pro-Depp. However,

neither party seemed to consider the implications of mocking testimony about domestic violence.
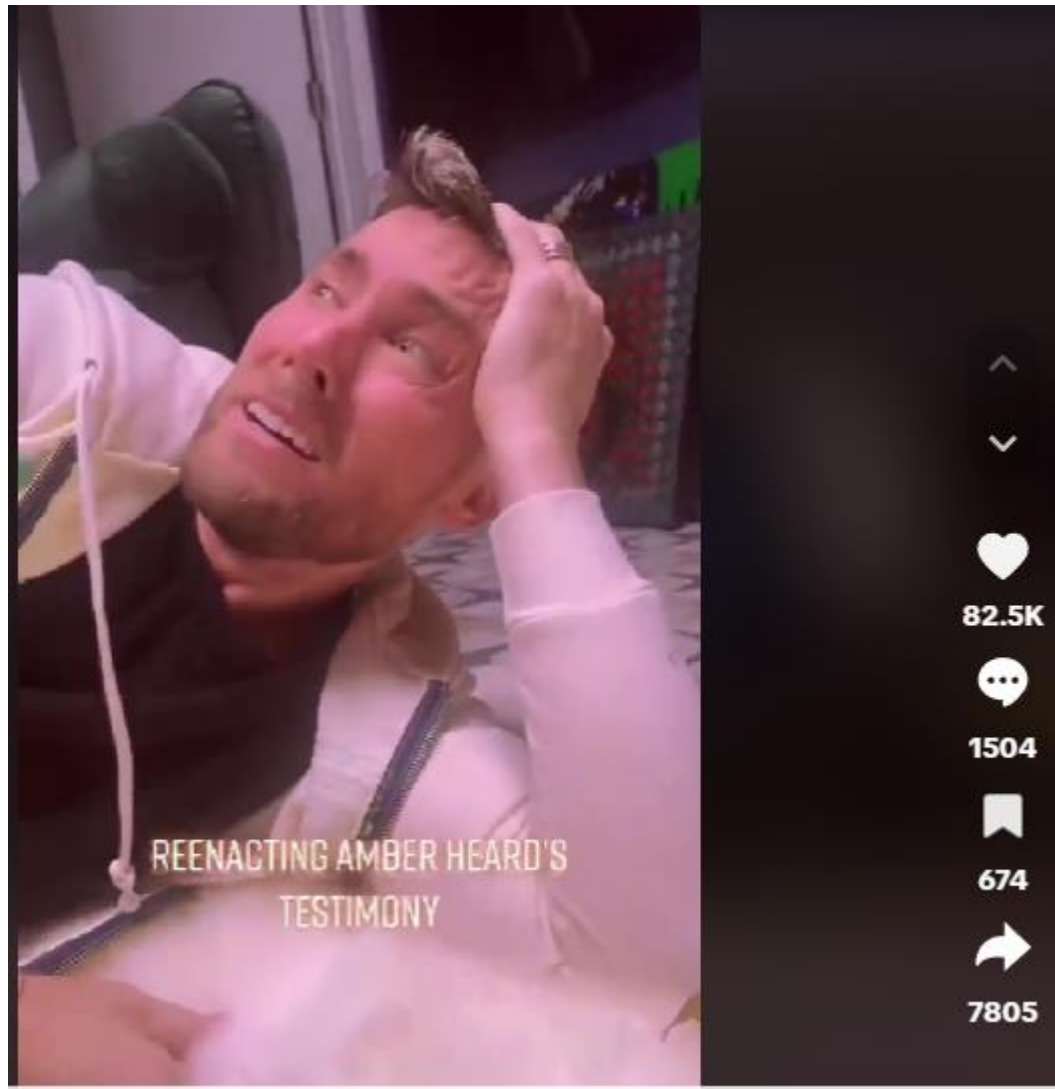
Figure 2: screenshot of Lance Bass's video, re-uploaded by @pagesix.

Approaching Fan Dynamics

The reaction to the Depp-Heard trial was formed in large part by the fandom dynamics shaping social media. *Playing to the Crowd*, Nancy Baym's book about the relationship between musicians and fans, illustrates how online fan communities influenced the development of the internet itself. She writes, "No sooner did the first nodes of what became the internet make their first connection than fans began using it to build stable and persistent group infrastructures for their fandom. They wove fan practices into the internet's core, helping to shape contemporary

media and shifting the balance of power between audiences and professionals" (79). Fans have

always used the Internet to connect over their shared fandom. In contributing to online fan

communities, audiences are not only able to passively consume media, but they can participate in

it themselves. Social media has facilitated the breakdown between audience and creator, where

audienceship is no longer solely a consumptive activity (Jane 177). Social media audiences are

actively engaged in their own meaning-making as they consume media produced by others.

Baym focuses on fans because they are "the most visible and influential of audiences,"

and typically, a vocal minority of media consumers (80). In her study of fans and musicians,

Baym argues that "Most listeners are not "fans," and most fans are pretty low-key in their

fandom, more apt to lurk than perform," meaning only the most ardent fans are the ones likely to

join fan communities (80). While Baym is referring specifically to music fandoms, the practice

of fandom extends to fans of celebrities, movies, tv shows – anything with a fan base. Baym cites

the level of feeling that fans experience toward their fan object as the differentiating factor

between fans and the casual listener or viewer; "Fans feel for feeling's own sake" (81). This

depth of feeling can be expressed through positive means, such as art like fan fiction or cosplay.

It can also justify fans' bad behaviour.

In the social media reaction to the Depp-Heard trial, pro-Depp TikTokers seemed just as

likely to be motivated by their dislike for Heard as they were for their fandom of Depp. While

traditional approaches to fandom studies position fandom as progressive, if not inherently

political, the same participatory practices of fan fiction and cosplay and their emphasis on the

democratic nature of the fandom is also at work in fan communities that seek to harass and

denigrate others in support of the celebrity they love (Stanfill 124). In noting that many of his

research participants had strong opinions on texts they did not like or were not familiar with,

Jonathan Gray put forward the concepts of anti-fans and non-fans ("New Audiences" 65).

According to Gray, the antifan is "…the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom

per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid,

morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (70). The antifan may have varying degrees of

knowledge about the source text of their antifandom, but they know enough to have an opinion

about it. Because their knowledge of the text may vary, Gray argues that antifans create a

textuality that, "…is in large part separate of what might be 'in' the text as produced" (70). What

antifans react to may not actually be in the text at all. These nuances of antifandom offer

researchers opportunities to examine, "…what expectations and what values structure media

consumption" (73). If antifans do not enjoy the media they are consuming, why do they have a

similar emotional investment in their fan object as the fans who love their fan object do?

     In Gray's model, the object of the antifan's attention extends to people as well as texts –

or rather, people with fans become texts. Gray uses the example of reality tv personality

Omarosa, who amassed an antifan following during her 2004 appearance on *The Apprentice*.

Gray writes, "…Omarosa became her own text and an odious moral text to many," due to her

villainous TV persona ("Antifandom" 849). Gray notes how Omarosa's antifans often express

their dislike of her in racist and sexist language, but Gray does little to expand on the "e-lynch

mob mentality" beyond attributing it to the anonymity of internet message boards (852). These

antifans justify their behaviour by attributing it to a moral cause: they believe Omarosa reflects

poorly on women of colour, or women in general. The irony of using racism and sexism to

purportedly defend women of colour seems lost on the antifans in this example.

     In a response to Gray's work on the antifan, Emma Jane criticizes his "…readiness to

classify the human targets of antifan hostility *as* texts" (177). Unlike the inanimate object of a

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text, a person can be harmed by the words and actions of antifans. Antifans often criticize their 'texts' along what Alice Marwick calls "attack vectors" related to structural systems of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia, like Gray noted in the reaction to Omarosa (6). As Jane argues, removed from a media analysis context, disgust or hate towards people or groups of people is called things like 'sexism,' 'racism', 'homophobia,' and 'hate speech,' rather than 'antifan hostility' (177). It is important to acknowledge the biases and prejudices that can make up antifan hostility, instead of equating dislike with discrimination. While negative attention is often considered part of the cost of fame, Jane makes a distinction between 'traditional' celebrities and the "…celebritisation of 'ordinary' people via the internet and media genres such as reality television," arguing that traditional celebrities are more seasoned in dealing with negative attention (184). Though Amber Heard could be considered a traditional celebrity, given her career in acting, she must still deal with the ramifications of the networked harassment she experienced during the defamation trial.

Reacting to fans and antifans

The behaviour of fandoms and antifandoms has become increasingly extreme on social media, with incidents like 2014's Gamergate showing how online communities that begin as fandom become sites of misogyny and right-wing violence. Fan studies scholar Mel Stanfill emphasizes the relationship between fandoms and reactionary politics with their term 'reactionary fandom.' They write, "The 'anti-fandom' first named by Gray indicates only opposition and does not categorize the subject matter at hand; reactionary fandoms may be either anti-fandoms of progressive causes or fandoms of reactionary causes" (125). The lines between antifandoms of progressive causes and fandoms of reactionary causes are blurry. In the example

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of the Depp v. Heard trial, fans of Depp, antifans of Heard, advocates for male victims of domestic violence, and enterprising misogynists were all posting and consuming similar anti-Heard content. Similarly, fans of Heard, antifans of Depp, and radical feminists were creating similar anti-Depp content, promoting Heard's perceived good qualities and dismissing Depp as an abuser. While the motivations of all these audiences differ, TikTok's context collapse allows them to come together in the same digital environment.

The digital environment in which the reaction to the Depp-Heard trial occurred has been shaped by earlier reactionary fandoms, particularly the events surrounding GamerGate and #MeToo. In introducing the interplay between popular feminism and popular misogyny, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that "…popular feminism is *active* in shaping culture," whereas, "popular misogyny is *reactionary*" (3). One significant example of networked popular misogyny is GamerGate. GamerGate began in 2014 as a smear campaign against Zoë Quinn, an independent game designer, by her ex-boyfriend, who accused her of sleeping with a journalist in exchange for a good review of her game. The situation escalated to the point where not only was Quinn was receiving constant misogynistic abuse online, but so was anyone associated with women and diversity in gaming media (Quinn 4). Fans of gaming that represented a "toxic geek masculinity" formed a reactionary anti-fandom towards those they felt threatened the status quo of the gaming world, feminist critics in particular (Massanari "Reddit's Alt-Right" 180). Quinn argues that the movement was not "about video games at all so much as it was a flash point for radicalized online hatred…" (4). Likewise, Adrienne Massanari points to GamerGate as the "mainstreaming of the ideology and tactics of the "alt-right"" ("Reddit's Alt-Right" 180). Popular misogyny as described by Banet-Weiser is a large part of the alt-right's ideology, as seen in the organized misogynist online reactions to GamerGate.

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GamerGate, along with the #MeToo movement, is an example of hashtag activism. Rather than an act of feminist truth-sharing, however, GamerGaters expressed their discontent about "ethics in game journalism" through widespread harassment of women in the game industry ("Reddit's Alt-Right" 182). Quinn and other targets of GamerGate were subject to what she calls dogpiling, where "the cool remix culture that facilitates the spread of fanart and memes suddenly becomes a powerful tool to hurt someone" (52). Like Amber Heard, as my analysis will later show, Quinn's image was photoshopped in unflattering ways or attached to misogynistic memes, and then circulated throughout the internet. While the uproar of GamerGate has died down, Quinn has been unable to return to her pre-harassment online existence.

While GamerGate is a clear example of popular misogyny forming into a reactionary fandom, popular feminism has also established itself in online spaces. Gaining widespread traction in 2017/2018, the #MeToo movement offered solidarity to women sharing stories of sexual violence they had experienced, particularly in the workplace. Some of the most visible and high-profile people involved in the movement were in the film industry, and Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein remains one of the most famous examples of #MeToo's effectiveness. #MeToo is an example of hashtag feminism: the online conversation occurred mainly on Twitter, with hashtags connecting disparate users to the same topic (Mendes et al. 237). While the efficacy or impact of hashtag feminism is often questioned, Mendes et al. are optimistic about its potential to build meaningful "networks of solidarity" (238). The networking afforded by social media platforms is an essential part of today's feminism, according to Sarah Banet-Weiser (1). With feminism being discussed online, showing up in music and film, and creating social movements like #MeToo, feminism has become popular.

#MeToo and other popular feminist activism exists alongside popular misogyny, which "is, at its core, a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 172). What makes the popular misogyny of today unique from its previous iterations, according to Banet-Weiser and Miltner, is how it is networked throughout online spaces in the same way as popular feminism. While #MeToo inspired many people to participate in feminist activism, there was also a significant misogynistic backlash. One study looked at the comment sections of news articles about #MeToo: not only did the comment sections largely criticize the movement, but of the nine news media publications reviewed in the study, seven "had more than twice as many negative than positive articles about #metoo" (Reestorff vi). Not only did the readers privilege the reputations of the accused over the experiences of the accuser, so did the new articles themselves (vi). The fact that the reaction to the Depp v. Heard trial occurred in a post-#MeToo social media environment is significant. The movement sparked discussion of power dynamics in professional and personal relationships, and made calls to 'believe women' when they name perpetrators of abuse. Despite a growing cultural awareness of these topics, the dominant conversations happening through hashtags like #justiceforjohnnydepp fell back on familiar patterns of popular misogyny.

In this literature review, I have set out to demonstrate how the affordances and conventions of platforms affect the conversations that gain traction: the primary platform of the Depp v. Heard trial was TikTok, the primary platform of #MeToo was Twitter, and GamerGate took place across 4chan message boards and Reddit. The platform affordances of Reddit are illustrated in Massanari's study, where she uses the hashtag #GamerGate to analyze how disinformation spreads on the platform. Massanari found the meritocratic logic of the site's voting system to blame: the algorithm puts more weight on early votes than later votes, meaning

those who spend more time looking at new content have a greater say in what becomes popular; the more votes a post receives, the more popular it becomes and thus receives even more votes; and voting can be easily gamed by bots or determined individuals (181). Those algorithmic factors, coupled with a content moderation approach that "bans behaviour, not ideas," leads to a system where information is authenticated by how many votes co-sign it, and not by how factual it is (184). Unlike TikTok's visibility moderation, Reddit's moderation approach is to wait until hate speech turns into harassing behaviour before censoring content ("Reddit's Alt-Right" 184). Reddit's cultural emphasis on free speech allowed Gamergate to gain traction beyond its original 4chan message boards.

GamerGate is an example of what Alice Marwick calls "morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement (MMNH)," an important concept for my own analysis (2). This model describes the pattern of group harassment against individuals online. It occurs when a target has been accused of violating one or more moral norms of an online group, which justifies the harassment of the individual to that group. The accusation gets amplified by "key accounts or network nodes," often in a different social network than the target. Marwick writes, "Members of the amplifiers' networked audience, who share an ideological or moral framework, individually send ad hominem attacks, insults, slurs, and in the worst cases, threats of death, rape, and violence to the accused (brigading, dogpiling, or "calling out")" (5). The goal of the harassment, and the frequent outcome, is to silence that person from speaking on the internet. In GamerGate, Zoë Quinn was accused of sleeping with a games journalist in exchange for a good review of her game. Despite the fact there was no evidence this happened, and the review in question was never found, it became the justification for harassing Quinn to the point where she

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had to give up her career as an independent game designer (Quinn 110). Similar tactics are used by fans of Depp to attack Heard, as my analysis in the next chapters demonstrates.

Morally motivated networked harassment is a frequent tool of many fandoms, reactionary or not. When fans feel a deep emotional connection to their fan object, along with the social dynamics of their fan community, opinions and actions that violate the moral norms of that group are addressed by the methods they have available to them. While events like Gamergate point to mainstreaming of the alt-right, as Massanari stated, MMNH is also used by fans of seemingly progressive, or at least less political causes. Fans of music artists like Nicki Minaj, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé have also organized online to become significant forces in support of their favourites. Reactionary fandom and networked harassment, then, are not exclusively tools of the political right. As my analysis of the Depp-Heard trial will show, TikTokers did not frame their trial content in terms of partisan politics. They did, however, form a reactionary fandom to defend Depp against the perceived threat by Heard.

Depp and Heard in Hollywood

Before the 2022 defamation trial, it appeared that Depp's celebrity was fading. His lack of critical success in the years preceding his trial against Heard contributed to rumours of financial trouble, and he had gained a reputation for poor behaviour on set (Grady). His appearance in the courtroom inspired his fans to gather in his support—some travelled to the Virginia courthouse where the trial was taking place, but most fans gathered in online spaces. They organized and connected through hashtags like #justiceforjohnnydepp and #johnnydeppisinnocent, forming networked publics shaped by the platform affordances of social media, and TikTok in particular (boyd 6). Johnny Depp fan accounts proliferated on the

platform, making fan edits with footage from his Dior fragrance campaigns and his earlier films, or highlighting charming moments from the courthouse (@simpingjohnny, see figure 3). This TikToker's username is a reference to their content: according to the Urban Dictionary, a simp is "someone who does way too much for the person they like." Even those who had joined TikTok without the intention of following Depp joined in: one user titled their video "At this point I'm turing [sic] into a Johnny Depp fan account" (@charbobs4, see figure 4). Depp himself did not have a presence on TikTok until after the trial ended, so what inspired such a response from Depp fans on the platform?
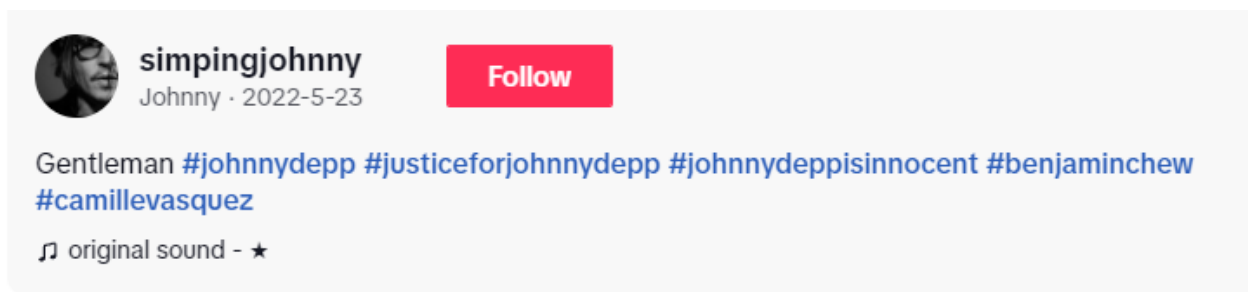

Figure 3*: screenshot of @simpingjohnny's video caption. The other names mentioned are members of Depp's legal team.*
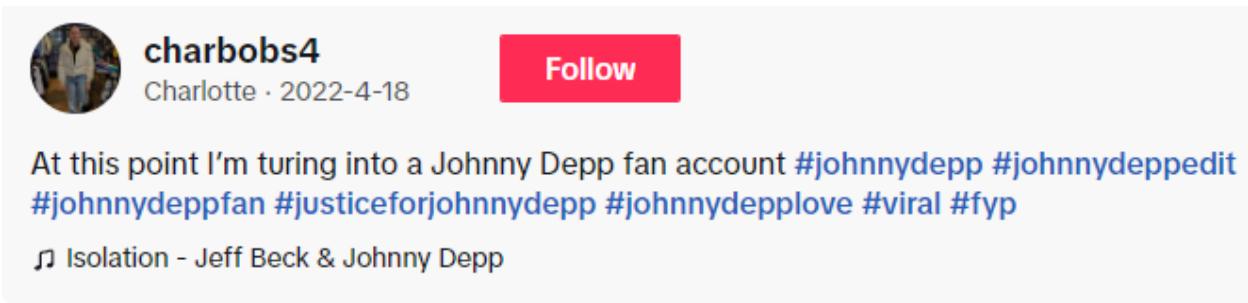

Figure 4*: screenshot of @charbobs4's video caption.*

Nostalgia is a driving force on TikTok, and nostalgic content on the platform can take many forms. The app's obsession with retro fashion has been noted by various magazines as the cause of the current Y2K trend revival (Cavender). Countless point-of-view videos present situations referencing elementary school classrooms or obsolete electronics that are, as described by *Mashable*, "specific enough to elicit a memory, but vague enough that most people on the app can relate" (Cavender). Movies play a large role in nostalgic content, with many TikTok users creating videos about familiar childhood films. Disney, in particular, has long-capitalized on the nostalgia associated with their movies. Since the 2010 remake of *Alice in Wonderland* starring Depp as the Mad Hatter, Disney has made 14 live-action remakes of their animated classics, with an additional 15 remakes planned for 2023 and beyond. The live-action remakes are some of Disney's highest-grossing films of all time, proving their nostalgia-driven approach to marketing is profitable.

Johnny Depp fits neatly into TikTok's nostalgia for childhood memories and Disney movies. His celebrity and reputation as an actor grew throughout the 1990s with popular films like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998). Already a mainstream movie star, Depp found even greater commercial success in the 2000s with Disney films like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) franchise and the previously mentioned *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) remake. Just as Disney relies on nostalgia to market their films, Depp has also capitalized on the trend of remakes and re-imaginings. Aside from playing the Mad Hatter, Depp has also portrayed Willy Wonka in a remake of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), and Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (2013). By the time he was cast in the 2016 Harry Potter spinoff *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, Depp's financial and behavioural issues garnered him the reputation, according to *Vox*, of a "fading and deluded icon" (Grady). However, in the

nostalgic context collapse of TikTok, the characters Depp has played in the past are just as present as his career missteps and messy personal life. While Heard was relatively new to Hollywood in comparison, Depp had decades of familiarity on which to build his support.

Many of those viewing the trial on TikTok were fans of Depp, but many viewers seemed motivated to post trial content on social media for a different reason. While Depp featured heavily in videos under #justiceforjohnnydepp, many of the videos with that hashtag focus on Heard. These TikToks depict Heard in unflattering moments from her testimony, her face contorted with emotion—the implication being that the emotion was faked for the audience. In the below example from user @dxppxhxad, clips of Heard crying on the witness stand are interspersed with clips of Depp laughing (see figures 5 and 6). These viewers seem less inspired to engage with trial content for their love of Depp, and more inspired because of their dislike of Heard, expressed, as we see, through their misogynist attacks on her as a feeling and emotional subject.
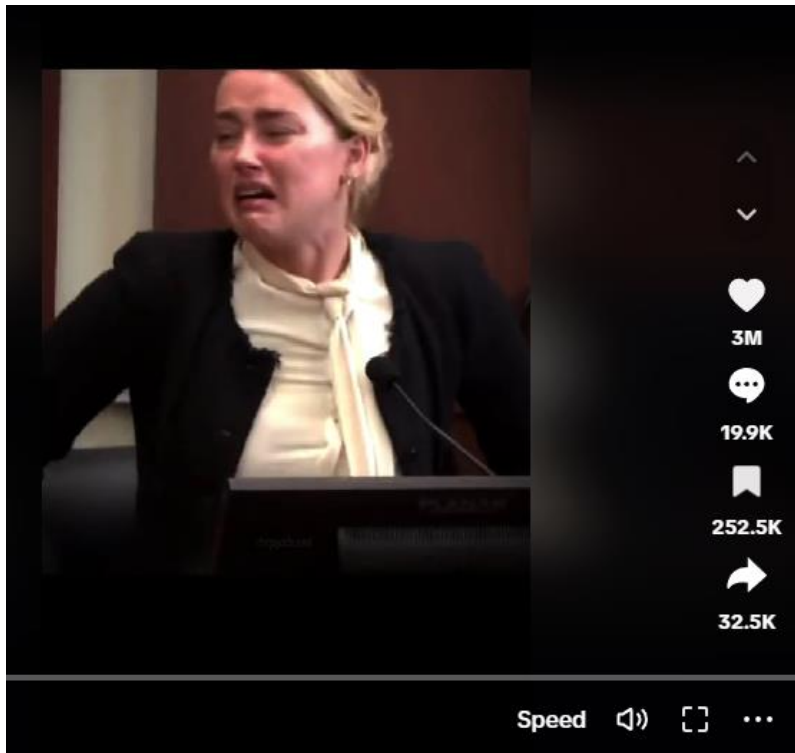
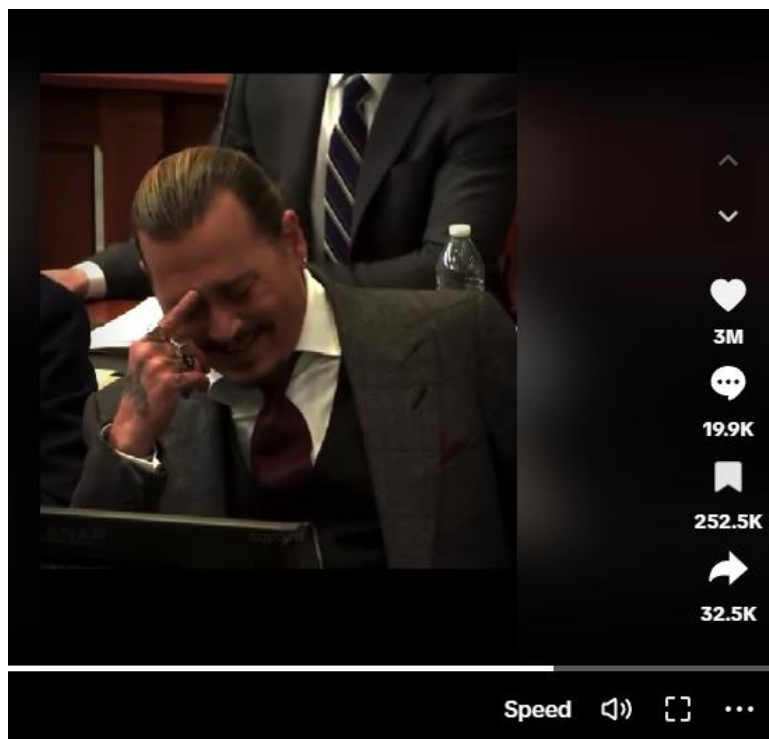*Figure 5: screenshot from @dxppxhxad's video.*

Figure 6: screenshot from @dxppxhxad's video.

Heard had achieved some success in Hollywood, particularly with her casting as a superhero in DC Comics' *Justice League* films. However, her level of fame paled in comparison to Depp's stardom, even as his career was in decline. Before the defamation trial began, Heard was not a household name. Once the trial became publicized over social media, however, it seemed that everyone on TikTok had an opinion about her. Heard became an anti-fan object because most of what the general public knew about her was what Depp's defense presented. In a study exploring the relationship between likeability, parasocial relationship strength, and how believable a celebrity's sexual assault allegations were, Cohen et al. found that study participants were more likely to believe a celebrity's allegations if they already like that celebrity (304). However, the study distinguishes between liking and parasocial relationships—while parasocial relationships are generally considered to be a kind of one-sided friendship between fan and public figure, Cohen et al. argue that fans can form a parasocial relationship with a celebrity without actually liking that celebrity (304). Heard's relative lack of recognition, combined with Depp's significant fanbase, translated to an abundance of anti-fans who judged her believability on how likeable they found her.

Conclusion

TikTok, like other social media, provides a space for people to connect with others over shared interests, media consumption, and breaking news. TikTokers are both observers and creators of content. The affordances of the platform affect how content is made and how it becomes popular. Research has found that TikTok privileges the popularity of trends and videos over specific creators, resulting in a social media setting where participation in trending topics ensures more views than a consistent public persona (Abidin 79). TikTok creators also contend

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with a complex algorithm that is less than transparent about how and why it promotes certain

types of content over others (84). Fans and fandoms were early internet adopters, and their

influence on social media continues today, according to researchers like Nancy Baym.

However, the fan communities facilitated by the internet can also develop a darker

element. Fans develop deep connections with their fan object and with each other, but when the

moral norms of their community are violated, the reaction can be disturbing. Beyond aggressive

fans of pop stars and actors, fandoms and their practices have influenced larger cultural events

like Gamergate and #MeToo, where the bullying and harassment of individuals highlights

structural problems of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia present in our culture.

What occurred during the Depp V. Heard trial is a similar phenomenon: fans picked sides, and

then did their best to silence opinions with which they did not agree.

In the following chapters, I will investigate how exactly TikTokers reacted to the Depp v.

Heard trial. To understand the perspectives of both Depp fans and Heard fans, I gathered data

from both pro-Depp and pro-Heard TikTok videos and analyzed their differences and

similarities. The analysis includes video content, captions, hashtags, and comments. While both

fans of Depp and fans of Heard have a similar motivation for their participation in trial content,

their end goals are different. By exploring popular videos, I hope to understand why those

engaging with the trial over social media had such strong reactions, and why Depp received

much more vocal support than Heard while the trial was taking place.

The following two chapters consist of this analysis. Firstly, the next chapter focuses on a

dataset of pro-Depp TikTok videos. I identify what narrative categories TikTokers use in their

videos supporting Depp: some focus on Depp in the courtroom, while others are more interested

in mocking Heard's demeanour and behaviour. I also identify the platform affordances and

semiotic resources TikTokers use to add layers of meaning to their content. In the following

chapter, I use the same data collection and analysis method, this time for a dataset of pro-Heard

TikTok videos. I identify the narrative categories Heard fans use in their support of her, which

are mainly attempts to mitigate the damage done to her reputation by the defamation trial. Like

the pro-Depp chapter, I also discuss the affordances and semiotic resources used by Heard fans

on TikTok.

Chapter One: Pro-Depp TikTok

Introduction

According to the numbers of pro-Depp hashtags on TikTok compared to the numbers of pro-Heard hashtags, TikTokers overwhelmingly supported Depp during the Depp-Heard defamation trial. While pro-Heard videos received millions of views, views on posts supporting Depp numbered into the billions. In TikTok discussions about the case, the purpose of the trial – to determine whether Heard defamed Depp by identifying as a victim of domestic abuse in *The Washington Post* – was overshadowed by discussion and disagreement over who abused whom in the relationship. On Tik Tok, posters commonly cited that their reason for supporting Depp was to demonstrate support for male victims of domestic abuse, situating Depp as a victim of Heard's supposed abuse. Yet their videos tended not to mention male victims of domestic violence, whether in relation to Depp or anyone else. Instead, most posts focused on the demeanour of both Depp and Heard in the courtroom, mining courtroom footage for opportunities to meme their facial expressions and gestures as part of the folkloric digital misogyny in which many posters engaged.

In this chapter, I conduct a close analysis of popular pro-Depp TikTok videos related to the trial in order to understand why the majority of Tik Toks, and by extension TikTokers, showed support for Depp in the trial instead of Heard. Through an analysis of video content and the specific visual and audio vernaculars that TikTokers used in their pro-Depp videos, as well as examination of the comments posted in response to the videos, we see the kinds of reasons people on Tik Tok offer for often vehemently supporting Depp in the context of the defamation suit. Depp fans employ an ironic meme humour in their defense of Depp and in their condemnation of Heard. Testimony and evidence from the defamation trial are shared and

remixed according to TikTok's vernacular of participatory memes and technical affordances. Pro-Depp TikTokers create memes and motifs that repeat through comment sections and other videos, with the goal of supporting Depp and damaging Heard's credibility.

The fandom of many TikTokers is quite central to the work they do in support of Depp. They celebrate him not only as the wronged man he presents himself to be over the course of the trial, but even moreso as some of the beloved characters he has played when posters were, presumably, children. While some seem to be driven by fan love of Depp as the actor who played some of their favorite movie characters, other people appear more interested in expressing their support for Depp by condemning Heard based on the way she looks, speaks, and behaves in the courtroom, and not, for instance, on the defense she and her lawyer mounted during the civil trial.

This chapter will focus on the most popular pro-Depp videos while the following chapter conducts analysis of a dataset of popular pro-Heard videos. Across these chapters I identify and analyze the different ways in which support is enacted on Tik Tok for Depp and Heard, structures of support shaped by fan cultures, misogyny, feminism, and the capabilities of the platform. This thesis thus aims to understand how TikTok users turned to the platform to express their support by using, making and revising TikTok vernaculars and memes, and, in turn, shaping genre expectations for others who joined Tik Tok-based video making around the case.

Methods and Data

The data collection process used in this chapter and the next is based on Zhao and Abidin's work on anti-racism activism on TikTok. In their paper, Zhao and Abidin collected a total of 30 videos tagged with three TikTok hashtags that promoted the "fox-eye" makeup trend.

They then identified the main narratives and technical affordances used in these videos by the anti-racism activists creating them. Drawing on similar methods to construct a dataset of pro-Depp TikTok videos, I collected the top-viewed videos tagged with three popular pro-Depp hashtags, for a total dataset of 30 videos. A dataset of this size does not allow for broad conclusions about all TikTok videos related to the trial, as a larger dataset may provide more representation of different opinions. However, using a small dataset allows for a close qualitative analysis of the narratives and TikTok conventions popular in Depp-Heard trial videos.

To build this dataset of 30 videos, I chose the three largest hashtags related to the Depp-Heard trial indicating support of Depp: #justiceforjohnnydepp (22.1 billion views), #istandwithjohnnydepp (871.2 million views), and #jonnydeppisinnocent (7.8 billion views). Notably, the number of views on these hashtags far eclipse their corresponding pro-Heard hashtags: #justiceforamberheard (291.2 million views), #istandwithamberheard (263.5 million views), and #amberhearddeservesanapology (86.2 million views).

After collecting the dataset of pro-Depp videos, I followed Zhao and Abidin's two-layered analysis. In their paper, the first layer involves a qualitative narrative analysis using the TikTok videos as the 'text.' The second layer involves the "analysis of semiotic resources deployed in the TikTok videos and their meanings in the context of challenging the "Fox Eye" trend" (Zhao and Abidin 5). In my first layer of analysis, I identify and analyze the video narrative categories of pro-Depp TikTok posts, while in the second I examine the particular semiotic resources TikTokers employ in these videos. In my analysis, semiotic resources are the techniques and materials TikTokers use to communicate meaning in their posts. Examples include TikTok's technical affordances, audio and music choice made by video makers and propagators, captions people create, comments people post, and the "platform vernacular" that

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develops around them in this case. Gibbs et al. coined the term 'platform vernacular' to describe the "unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" that each social media platform develops (257). Attention to the TikTok platform vernaculars people create and re-enact in my analysis helps facilitate an understanding of how people participate on the platform, as well as how TikTok's environment shapes conversation around public events.

Based on my review of the top 30 pro-Depp videos, most videos can be categorized as one of two often-overlapping narratives: videos with Depp as the aggrieved Man on Trial, and videos Mocking Heard. One video was unrelated to either narrative but contained fanart about Depp, and one video was unrelated to Depp or the trial entirely. I identified these categories after thematically identifying key features across the videos that congealed around these portrayals. I identified the themes based on analysis of how the poster conveyed their pro-Depp message in video form and in their captioning. Most videos were either sympathetic to Depp or more directly represented an anti-Heard stance. The videos that were sympathetic to Depp largely focused on footage and images of Depp in the courtroom during the defamation trial, especially at points when he was subjected to questioning from Heard's legal team. The videos mocking Heard tended to focus on her emotional expressions as she delivered her testimony, using those expressions to emphasize how unbelievable Depp fans found her to be. The remaining two videos were harder to categorize but had little to do with the existing categories or with each other.

Categories	Man on Trial	Mocking Heard	Fan Content	Unrelated
#justiceforjohnnydepp	6	3	0	1
#istandwithjohnnydepp	6	4	0	0
#johnnydeppisinnocent	4	5	1	0

Total (out of 30)	**16**	**12**	**1**	**1**

Discussion: Video narrative categories

Man on trial

Over half the videos in the pro-Depp dataset, 16 out of 30, fell into the Man on Trial category, a theme characterized by a sympathetic focus on Depp in the courtroom during the defamation trial. In this category, the combination of TikTok affordances like quick video clips edited together, on-screen captions, and goofy soundtracks come together to depict Depp as not-very-patiently responding to queries from his ex-wife's legal team. The videos tended to suggest her team was incompetent. Heard's lawyers are typically portrayed as bumbling and ineffective, with TikTokers adding clown emojis and the musical punchline of the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song to connote their ineptness. The song's circus-inspired sound and sitcom association cues viewers on TikTok to laugh at the court proceedings. Users also tend to add video captions that flash on the screen to narrate the scenario of being questioned by Heard's lawyers around a shared vernacular, one that tends to make fun of Heard and her lawyers in defense of Depp. Captions often situate the viewer as if they are being let in on an internal monologue, one that is imagined by the person posting. In the example below, the video creator's captioning tells the viewer that "Johnny Depp is done with Ambers [sic] lawyer," accompanied by a laughing emoji at the bottom of the screen. The creator adds another caption, this time overlayed onto the video, with Depp dismissing the lawyer: "im [sic] done with this clown." The captions show a lack of punctuation and capitalization that is common on TikTok and other social media platforms to

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indicate a casual or joking tone. In figure 1 below, the video also highlights how Depp does little

to mask his impatience with Heard's team, as he is shown laughing at being interrupted.

Figure 7: screenshot from @royalbrookzy's video.

TikTok users highlight every awkward moment from Heard's legal team through the way

they edit the courtroom footage together, portraying the trial as a comedy of errors. In one, one

of the lawyers mixes up the order of Heard's first and middle name (@cbatogivename). In

another, one of her lawyers repeatedly confirms with Depp that the evidence was read correctly,

with each repeated question edited together in rapid succession to emphasize the unnatural flow

of the conversation. In the video, Depp becomes more visibly frustrated with each repetition of

"Did I read that right?" (@unknown_username6789). Below, the TikTok poster adds a clown

emoji to their caption of the lawyer's question, indicating how clownish they think he is. The

caption's text alternates between upper- and lower-case letters, indicating their mocking tone.

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The clown emoji appears frequently in relation to Heard's legal team. Another video in the dataset is captioned "Johnny Depp dealing with 🤡 Rottenborn at day 7 trial😭 🤣," one of Heard's lawyers (@thedirens.journalling). By using the clown emoji, the poster can indicate without words how they feel about Heard's legal team: to these pro-Depp TikTok posters, Heard's team is foolish and incompetent.
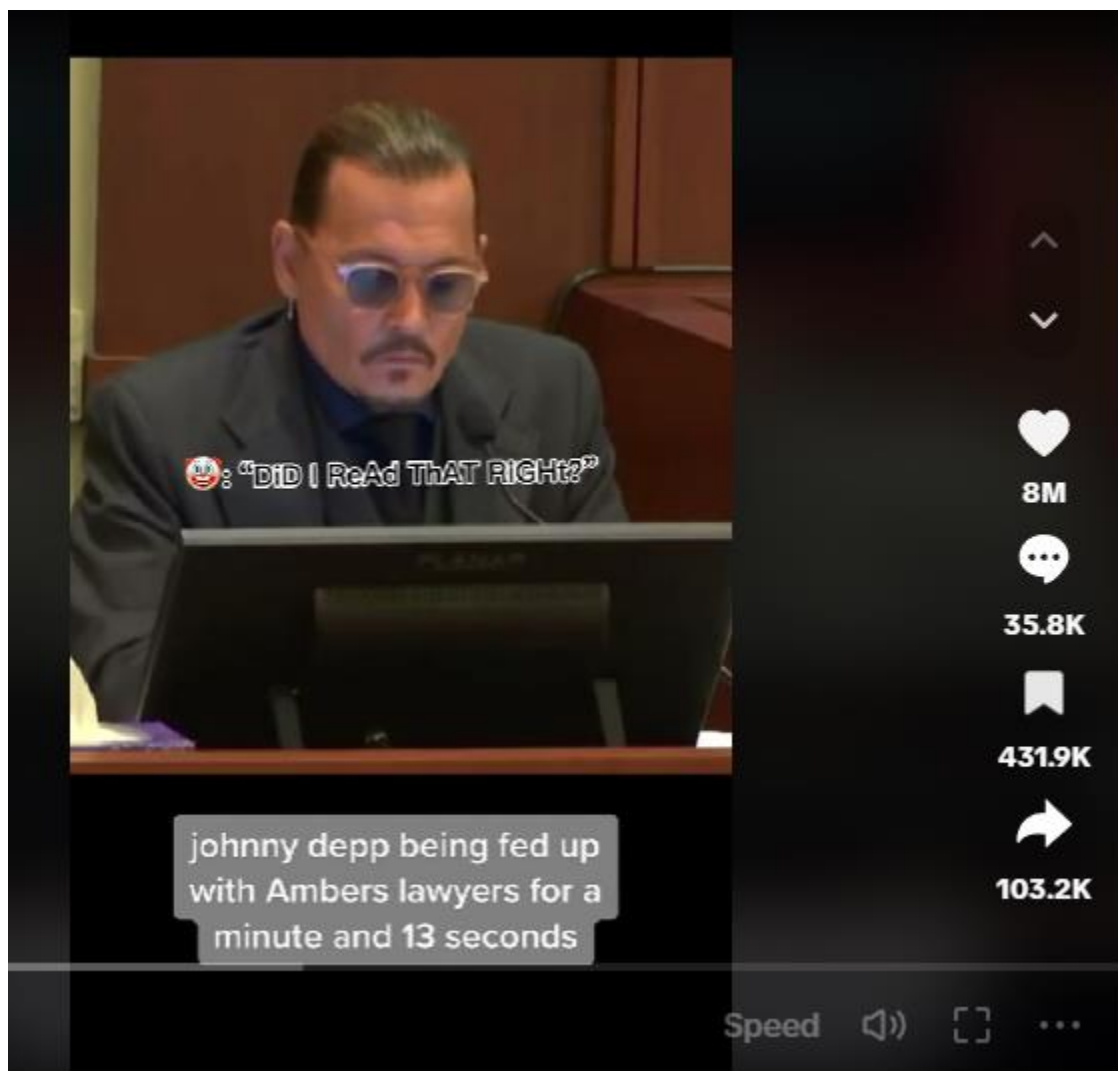

Figure 8: screenshot from @unknown_username6789's video.

Video-recorded moments of Depp's cross-examination were some of the most viewed and liked in the pro-Depp dataset, meaning they were some of the most viewed and liked pro-

Depp videos on TikTok. The video footage in these TikToks is edited to exaggerate the awkward pauses and interruptions by Heard's lawyers in their cross-examination of Depp. Posters in the comment section laugh along with Depp and his seemingly exasperated answers to Heard's lawyers. As we see from the examples below (see figure 3), some posters approach how Depp is portrayed in these TikToks as like that of the character he played in *Pirates of the Caribbean,* Captain Jack Sparrow, as the comment by poster Leander Oonk states directly. The other commenters discuss Heard's legal team, with one calling them "the biggest laughing stock in the room" and another saying, "I hope she gets a refund...", referring to Heard, who the commenter believes deserves a refund because her lawyers are so bad.

Figure 9: Comments on @royalbrookzy's video.

The apparent incompetence of Heard's lawyers became a regular subject of the pro-Depp trial TikToks, so much so that specific memes were born out of the repurposing of trial video

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footage of interactions between Depp and Heard's lawyers. In one video clip, a lawyer pursues a line of questioning about Depp's alleged alcoholism, referring to a text message submitted in court in which Depp said he poured himself a "mega pint of wine." In the footage, Depp smirks at this recounting, and the audience both inside the courtroom and on TikTok laugh along at the term. #megapintofwine soon thereafter became a popular hashtag in and of itself. In another video, Heard's lawyer asks Depp, "You're a lot bigger than Amber, correct?" Depp responds, "I wouldn't say that." The video cuts to Heard's crying face, captioned, *you jerk!* The captions around Depp's giggling face read, *that was a good one,* *proud,* and *time for another mega pint* in reference to the meme (@slytherinitis; see figure 4). The comment section is filled with references to "mega pint!" and laughing emojis. This particular video is the most popular one in the dataset with 17.4 million likes, and these same clips from the trial are reused by other TikTokers throughout the pro-Depp dataset. While I put this video in the "Man on Trial" category because it focuses on Depp's reaction to the lawyer's question, it could also fit into the "mocking Heard" category, as she is the target of the video's punchline.
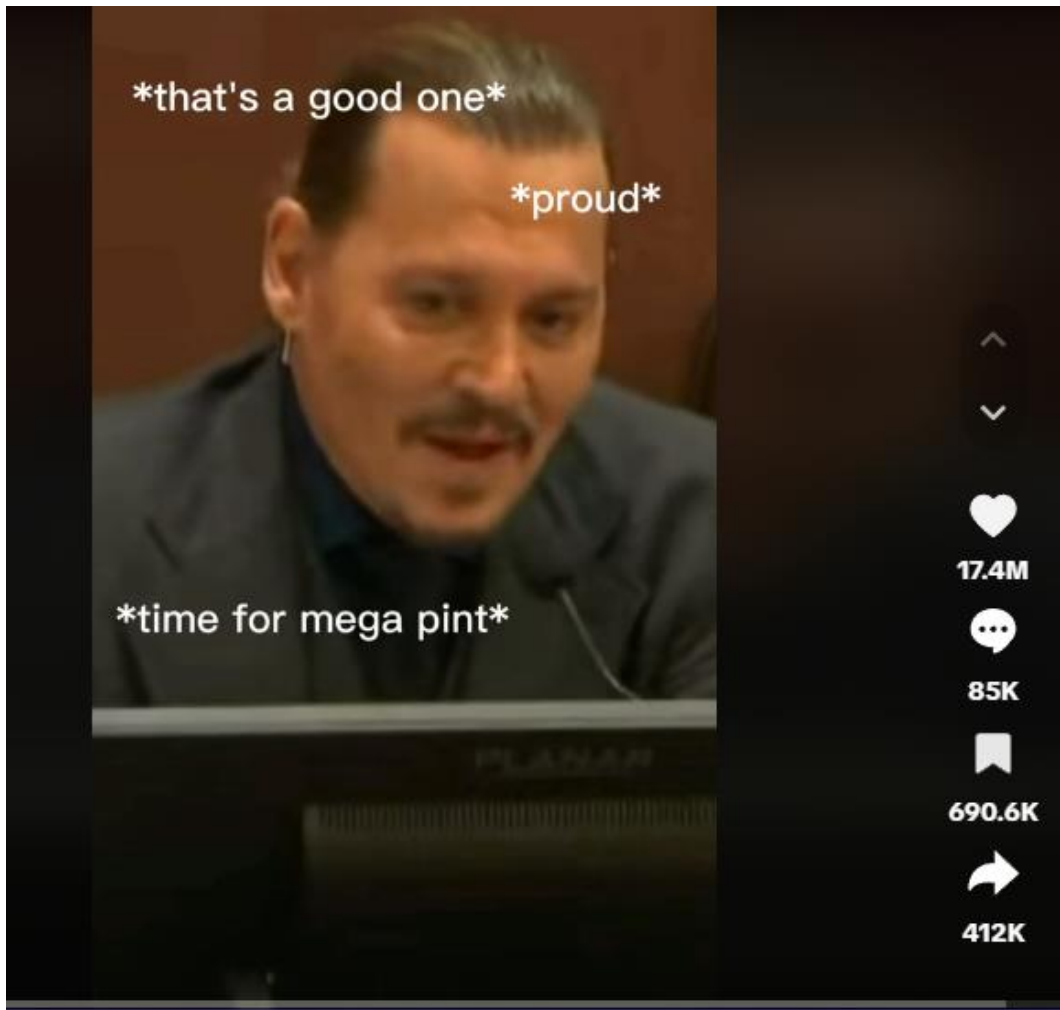
Figure 10: screenshot from @slytherinitis's video.

Beyond turning Depp's alleged alcoholism into a meme, the comments also dismiss the evidence Heard's lawyers bring against Depp. In one video from the dataset, lawyers read out evidence from an argument between Depp and Heard, where she accuses him of attempting to strangle her. In the audio-recorded evidence, Depp tells Heard, "I have other uses for your throat, which does not include injury" (see figure 5). The video caption asks, "and this is evidence because ??" suggesting that implied sexual violence by Depp should not be used in court against him (@unknown_username6789). In the comment section of this video, TikTokers argue that

this is language everyone uses, or that any woman should be flattered to hear, especially from Johnny Depp.

Figure 11: Screenshot of @unknown_username6789's video.

Other videos in the "Man on Trial" category do not necessarily feature Depp in the courtroom, but they still repeat the same narrative that Depp was unfairly persecuted by Heard and her legal team. One TikTok video claims, "every company [is] turning their backs on Johnny Depp due to Amber Heard lawsuit," except Dior, where Depp remains the face of Dior Sauvage fragrance (@bazclipz). The video starts with a shot of Depp looking somber, then continues with a shot of him striding confidently through a Dior Sauvage ad campaign (see figure 6). The video caption claims that Disney has since apologized to Depp for distancing themselves from him

after the last installment of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, a rumour that was never

substantiated. One of the top comments asks, "why doesn't anyone wait for facts before jumping

to conclusions? ruined his career instantly without checking" (@Gemma J's comment on

@bazclipz's video). The video does not mention any other companies that have abandoned Depp

due to the trial, nor does it mention that Disney had already distanced themselves from Depp

before the trial took place.

As seen in the examples below in figures 7 and 8, the comment section indicates that the

loyalty of Depp fans extends to the companies he endorses, with fans pledging to support Dior

because Dior supports Depp. User @venomcakes writes that Dior Sauvage sales "have

skyrocketed by 23%" during the trial, though they do not provide any evidence for this sales

figure. A year following the 2022 defamation trial, however, Depp signed a $20 million deal

with Dior to continue as the face of Dior Sauvage – this is the largest male fragrance deal in

history (Siegal). Despite his public controversies, Depp's partnership with Dior is clearly

lucrative enough for the company to continue investing large amounts of money into him. If the

comments on these TikTok videos are any indication, Depp's fans are a major part of the deal's
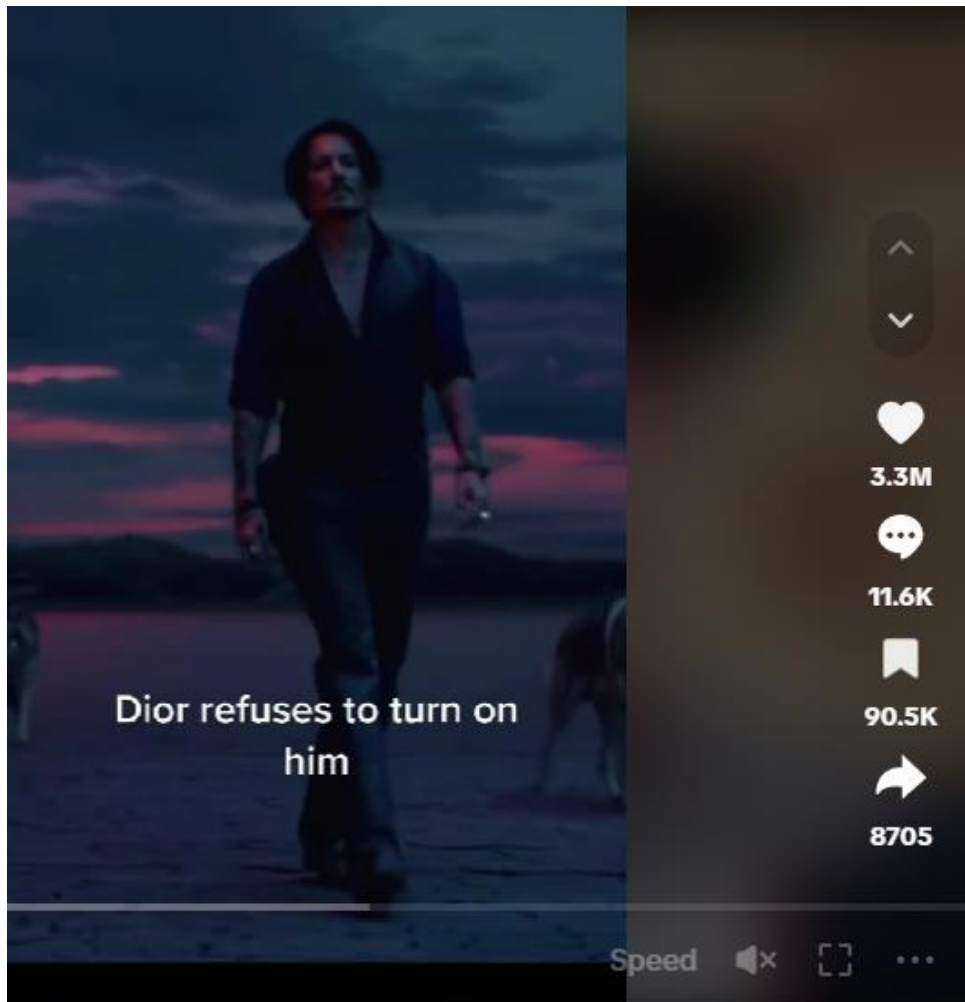
success.

Figure 12: screenshot from @bazclipz's video.

Gemma J
why doesn't anyone wait for facts before jumping to conclusions? ruined his career instantly without checking

2022-4-14   ♡ 46K   **Reply**

View 259 replies ⌄

Nobody
Now they know that it was all along Amber who was the villain.

2022-4-13   ♡ 112.6K   **Reply**

View 75 replies ⌄

Bazclipz · Creator
Can't believe Disney considered making a Pirates of the Caribbean film without him...

2022-4-13   ♡ 313   **Reply**

View 20 replies ⌄

Itsmfuentes
He is the reason I bought the cologne for my husband

2022-4-14   ♡ 16.9K   **Reply**

Figure 13: comments on @bazclipz's video.

45
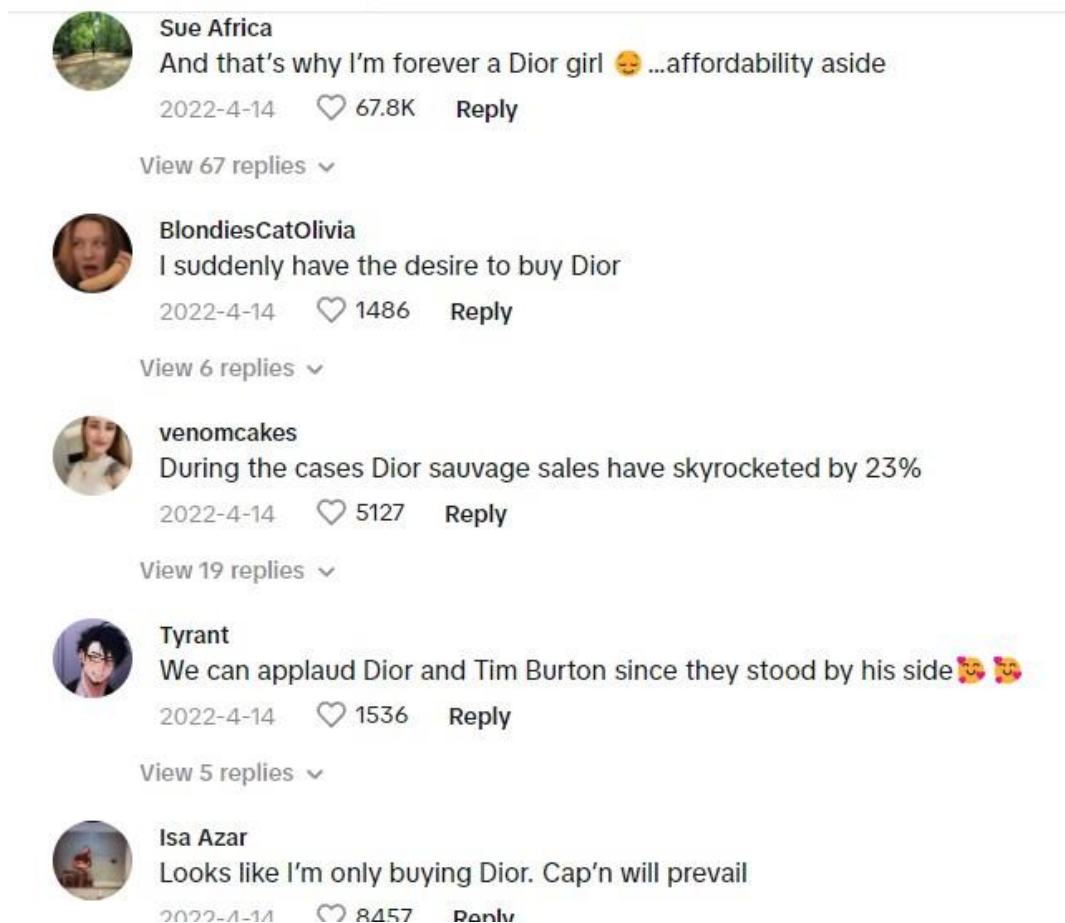
Figure 14: comments on @bazclipz's video.

Mocking Heard

The second large narrative category in the pro-Depp video dataset are the videos

Mocking Heard (12 out of 30 videos). TikTok videos in this category make fun of Heard for her

appearance, the words she uses, her legal team, and her behaviour in court. Every expression she

makes is scrutinized; her crying is criticized as a performance for sympathy, and her calmness is

cited as evidence that she might be a sociopath. TikTok commenters celebrate when she loses

her composure, as shown in the video screenshot below (see figure 9). TikToker @.vdepp took a

video of the trial being broadcast on TV, telling their TikTok audience, "She finally started

crying." In the comment section of that video, people say Heard is acting, faking "crocodile

tears" and listening to body language experts to "play the victim more realistically"

(@Careforyou and @Pumpkin's comments on @.vdepp's video; see figure 10).
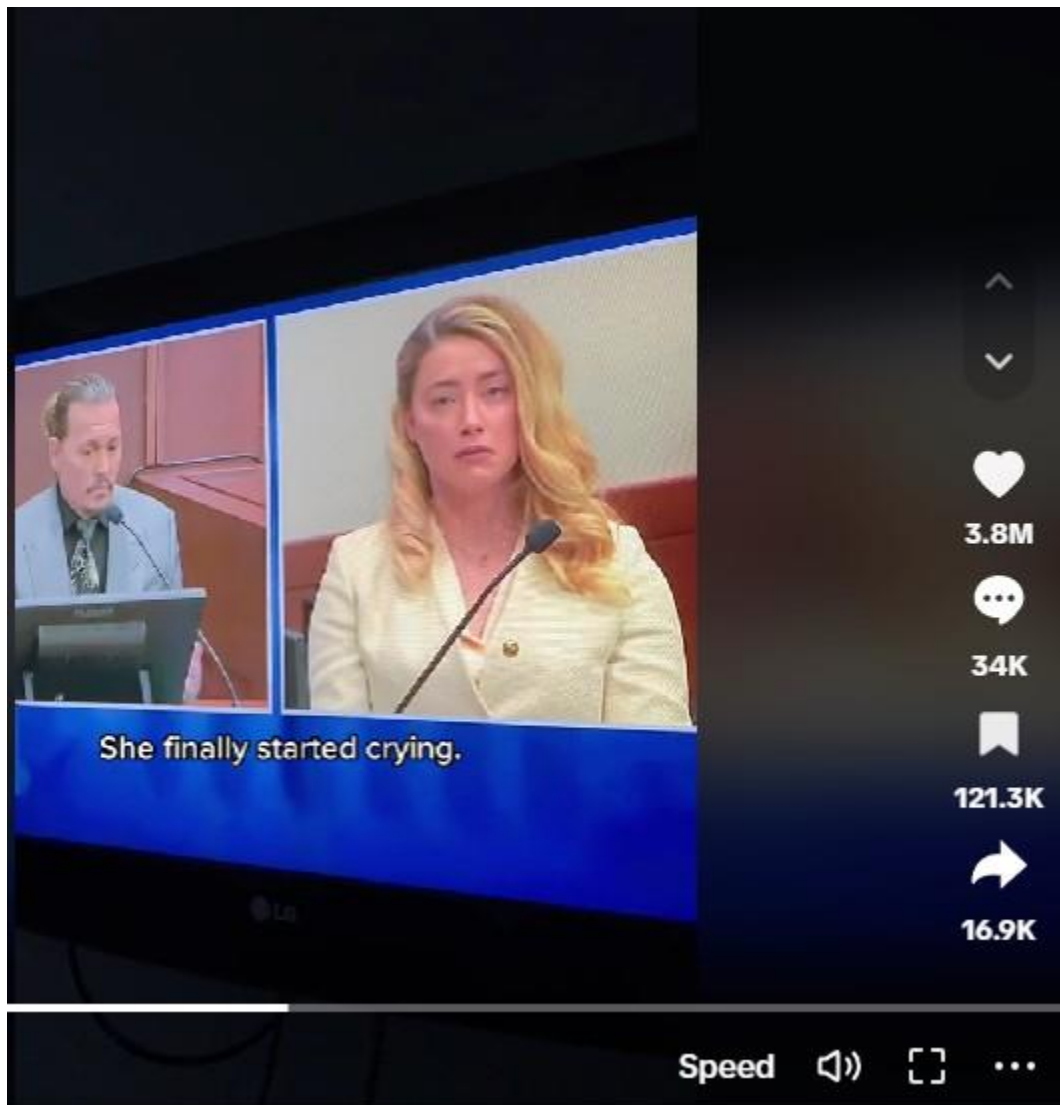

Figure 15: Screenshot of @.vdepp's video.

Figure 16: comments on @.vdepp's video.

In other videos in the Mocking Heard category, Heard is also criticized for doing the same things Depp is praised for. In the example below in figure 11, Heard is described as "panicking and writing essays" while taking notes during the trial. The video has been sped up to make her actions appear frantic. Clips of Heard taking notes are contrasted against clips of Depp doodling and showing his sketches to his lawyers, with his clips playing at normal speed. The clown emoji makes a reappearance in the on-screen caption, indicating the poster believes Heard to be foolish for passing notes to her legal team (see figure 12), while Depp receives a smiley face surrounded by hearts as he shows his lawyer his sketch (see figure 13). The soundtrack adds another comedic layer, as Heard scribbles her notes to a sped-up and frantic sounding song while Depp's video shows him doodling along to cheerful, calm music. The video caption reads "it's

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too obvious who's the guilty one 💩." In this video, the poster portrays Heard as untrustworthy

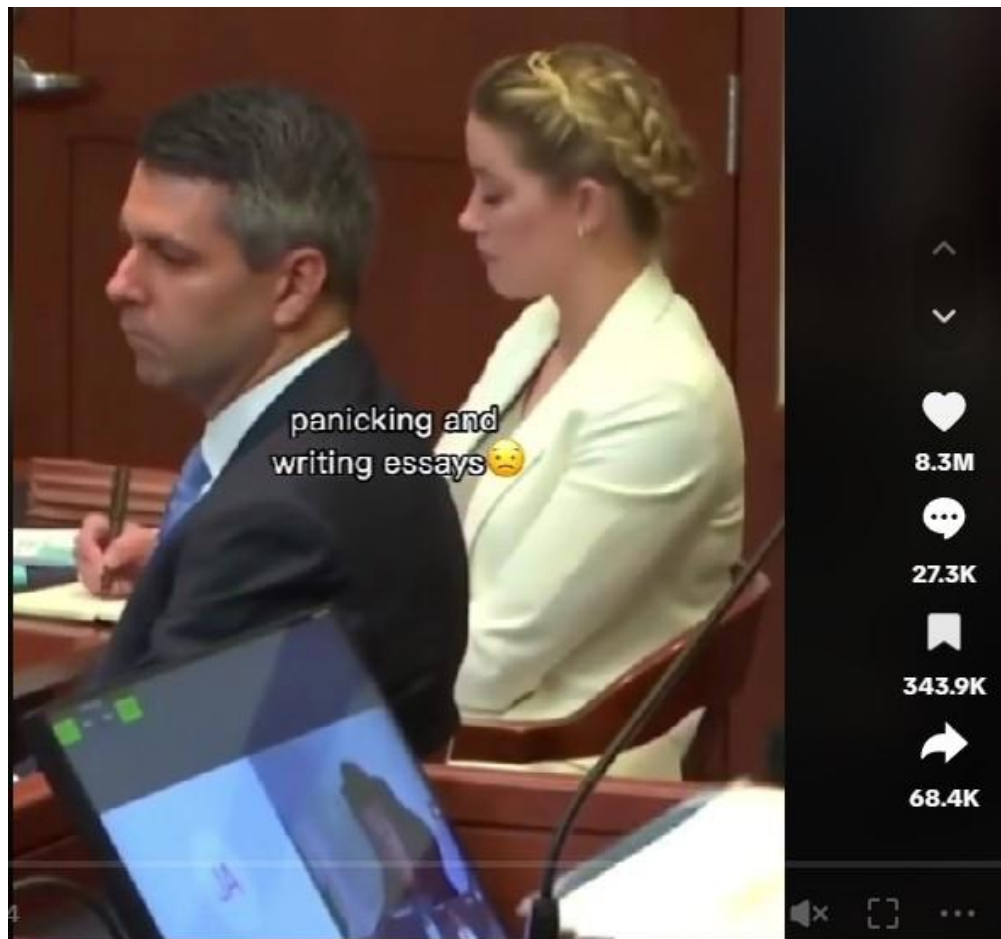and perhaps conniving for taking notes, while praising Depp for the notes and doodles he makes.

Figure 17: screenshot from @jcdeppii's video.
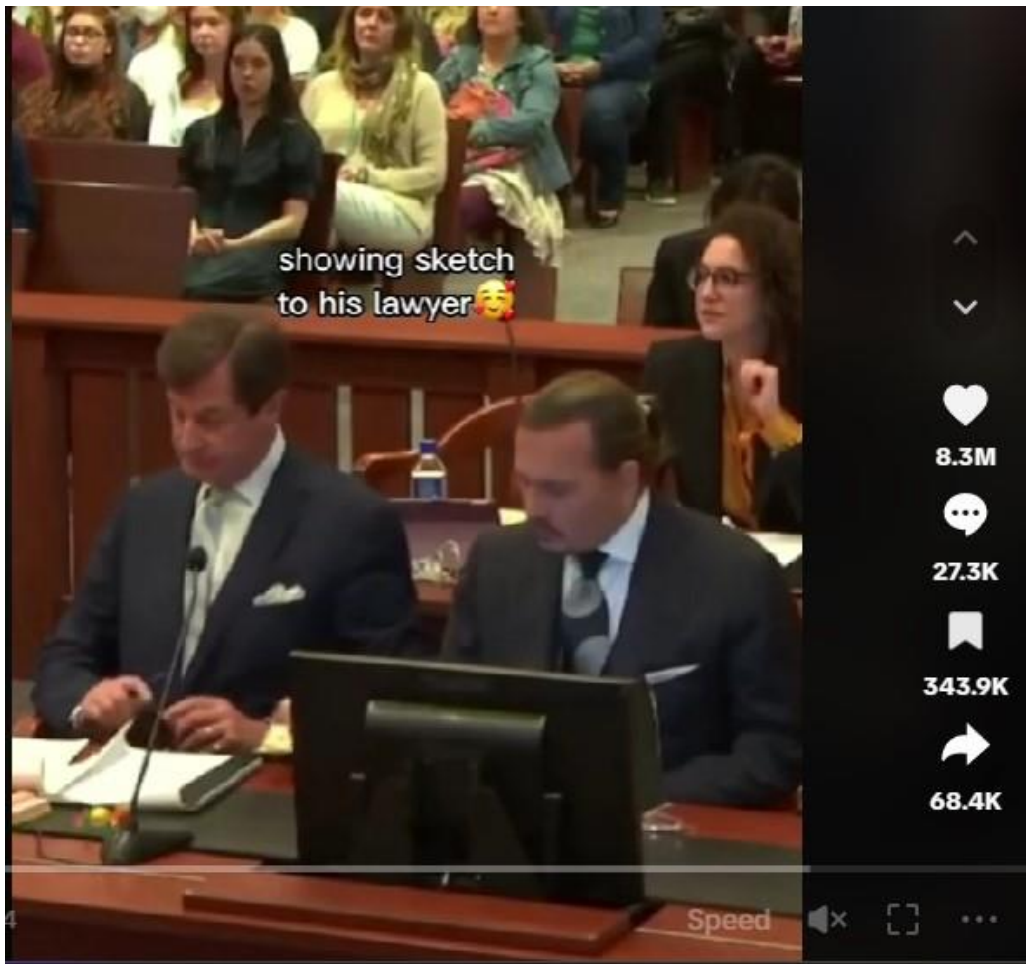
Figure 18: screenshot from @jcdeppii's video.

Figure 19: screenshot from @jcdeppii's video.

Like the "mega pint of wine" meme that came from video of Depp's cross-examination, key moments from Heard's testimony also went viral as memed videos. At one point during the trial, Heard describes an incident in their relationship where Depp accused her of hiding drugs and forcibly cavity-searching her. She finishes her emotional recounting of the story with a story of a trip to the vet they took together the next morning, tearfully explaining how her dog stepped on a bee. Many pro-Depp posters on TikTok found this story funny, especially the way Heard dramatically delivers the final line, "my dog stepped on a bee!" The video comment sections are filled with people quoting this line, often accompanied by bee emojis. The line received its own

hashtag, #mydogsteppedonabee, as well as inspiring the #mydogsteppedonabeechallenge, where TikTokers edit and remix the audio and visuals from the moment to produce new iterations of the meme. In the screenshot below, a popular take on the challenge has the dog stepping on the bee, the bee stepping on the dog, and then both dog and bee stepping on a squished image of Heard (figure 14).
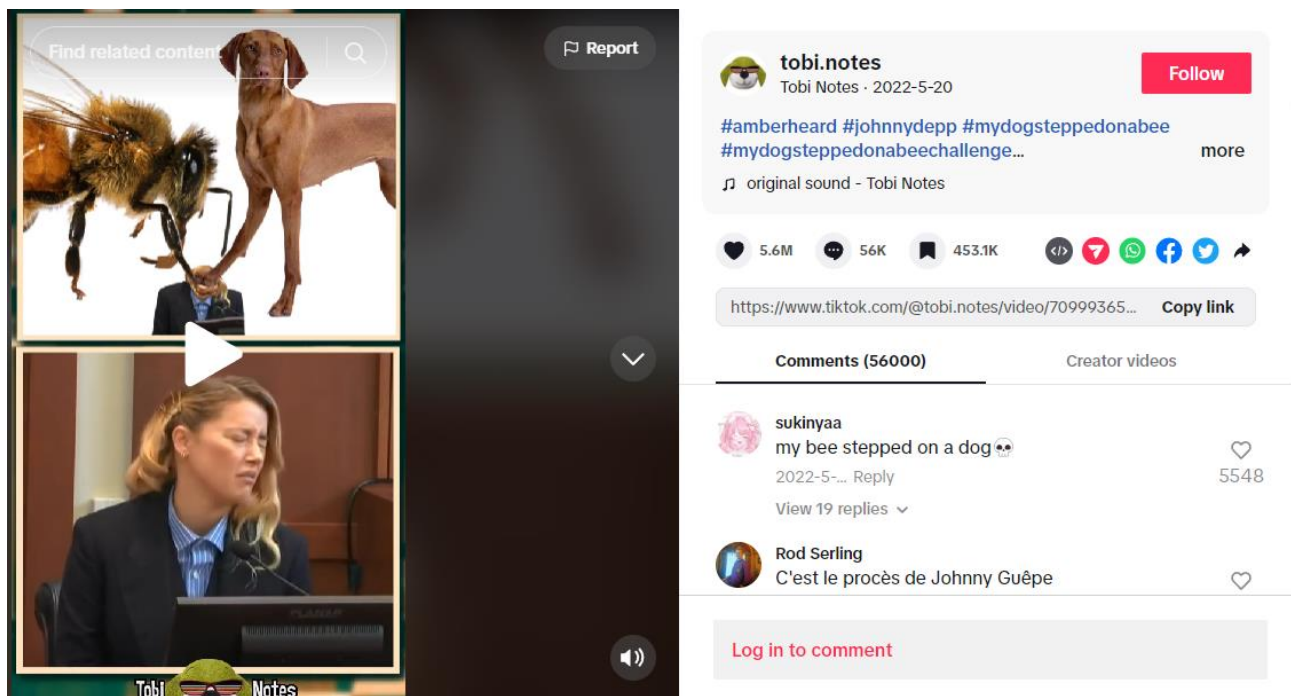

Figure 20: screenshot from @tobi.notes's video.

The purpose of these TikTok videos, beyond the pursuit of TikTok popularity, is to shame and harass Heard into submission. Mocking the way Heard cries or writes notes does nothing to help Johnny Depp or male victims of domestic violence, but it does seek to punish and deride Heard for accusing Depp of violence. While discussing her model of morally motivated networked harassment (MMNH), Alice Marwick writes that shaming is "a form of public moral criticism which serves to uphold social norms through stigma and humiliation" (2). Following Marwick's model of MMNH, Heard has been deemed to have violated the moral norms of Depp

fans by accusing Depp of violence. The accusation was amplified by Depp himself when he sued

Heard for defamation, which "trigger[ed] moral outrage throughout the networked audience" (2).

The audience, in this case networked on TikTok, signals their membership to the network by

their continued harassment of Heard. Like in GamerGate and other cases of MMNH, the

harassment is used as "a regulating force for speech on social media" (2). When audience

members are focused on deriding the way Heard delivers a throwaway line, it is easier not to

acknowledge the story of domestic violence that preceded it.

Unrelated videos

The remaining two videos in the dataset were unrelated to the defamation trial. One video

shows the process of creating a fanart image of Depp, where the artist tears an image of Depp's

Pirates of the Caribbean character in half to reveal Depp's out-of-costume face underneath (see

figure 15). The TikTok video functions as self-promotion for the artist, who includes links to her

other social media pages where she sells her artwork. Drawing an image of Depp and using a

popular Depp-related hashtag while he makes headlines for the defamation trial is a smart

marketing opportunity. Beyond the pro-Depp hashtags, however, the artist does not indicate their

position regarding the defamation trial. The second unrelated video had nothing to do with Depp

or the Depp-Heard trial at all. It showed a group of women performing a sexually suggestive

dance, and like the unrelated videos in the Heard dataset, was tagged with many popular

unrelated hashtags to increase view numbers. Because hashtags referencing the Depp v. Heard

received hundreds of millions of views in Spring 2022, they were popular choices even when

video content did not reference the trial, enabling people to coopt the hashtag for the purposes of garnishing a ready-made audience of people following hashtagged content on the trial.
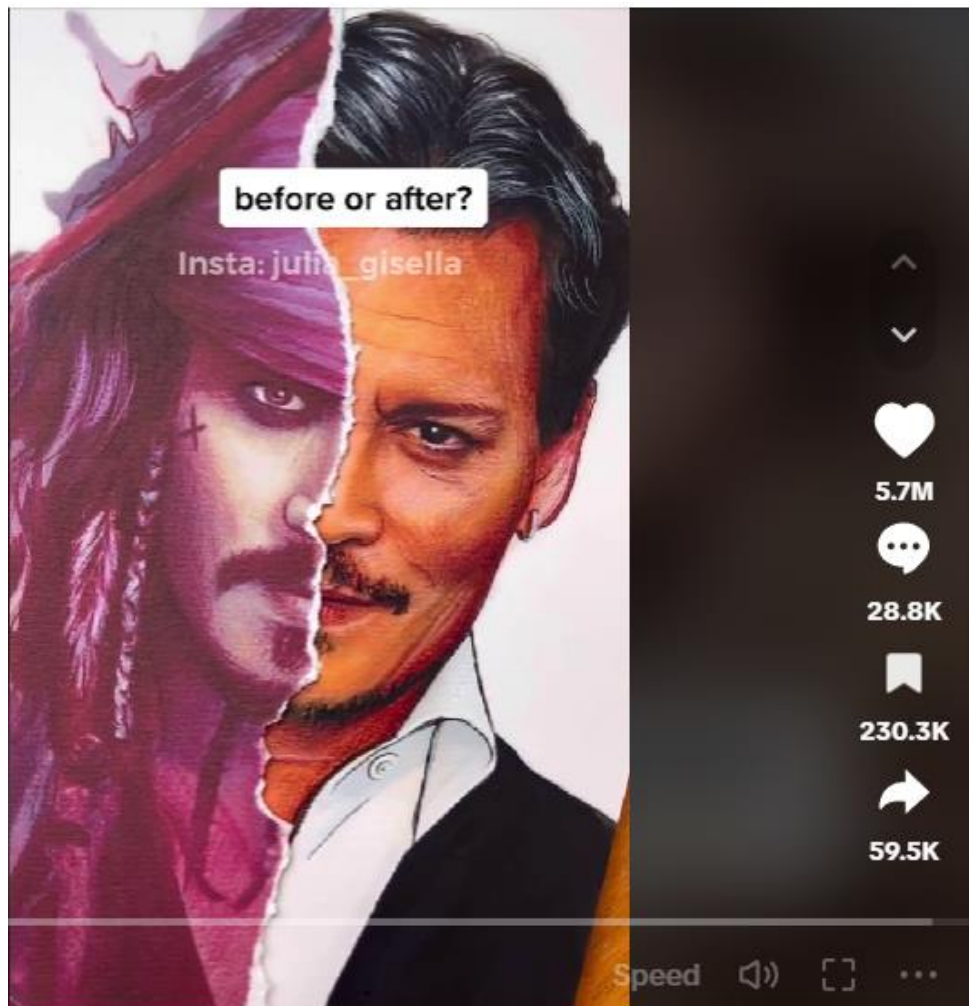
TikTok's affordances

As discussed in the Methods and Data section above, Zhao and Abidin's second layer of analysis concerns the semiotic resources TikTokers use to create meaning in their TikTok videos. The earlier discussion of the pro-Depp video categories touched on some of the methods posters use to add to the meaning of their videos. On-screen captions are used to add context to the short

clips, as well as narrate the thoughts of the people on-screen. Emojis are often used to indicate tone, like the way captions of Heard's lawyers are often accompanied by the clown emoji, whereas Depp and his team are often surrounded by images of smiley faces and hearts. The audio adds another essential layer to the video meaning. In the pro-Depp dataset, posters often include music to contribute to the punchline of the video, like using the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song to emphasize poster's position that Heard's legal team is a joke. Hashtags, like the pro-Depp hashtags that define this dataset, or the meme references to the trial like #megapintofwine and #mydogsteppedonabee, are examples of some of the platform vernaculars people have developed through their participation on TikTok.

Through the affordances of TikTok as a social media platform, TikTokers are not only able to edit and remix the Depp-Heard trial footage in their videos, but they can insert themselves directly into the conversation. In a few of the videos in the Mocking Heard category, TikTokers dressed up as Heard to exaggerate her physical appearance or her demeanour in the courtroom. In the examples below, user @anne.styled shows the process of her makeup transformation into Heard, pouting into the camera to mimic Heard crying on the witness stand (see figure 16). In the next example, user @officialsalicerose acts out a conversation between Heard and a lawyer, using a messy blonde wig to indicate when she is playing Heard (see figure 17). In her enactment, Heard refuses to answer any questions, talking nonsensical circles around the lawyer. Both TikTokers play Heard as the punchline of the joke, particularly her faked emotion and unreliable narration.

Figure 22: screenshot of @anne.styled's video, where the poster is made up to look like Heard.

Figure 23: screenshot of @officialsalicerose's video.

In another example of a TikToker creating their own performance of the Depp-Heard trial, user @zdotss uses TikTok's green screen effect to insert himself directly into the courtroom, sitting beside Depp and acting as his lawyer (see figure 18). @zdotss acts out what would happen if he was Depp's defence. He brings up Heard's past relationship with Elon Musk, calls her a "clout chaser," and shames her for being in fewer movies than Depp. He pretends to flinch when Heard moves, and says, "I thought you were going to punch me!" The audio is edited so the courtroom audience gasps and laughs with each line. He calls Heard's lawyer a feminist for believing her accusations against Depp, clearly intending its use as a pejorative. @zdotss's approach to his Depp-Heard trial commentary is reminiscent of popular misogynist rhetoric, where feminism is blamed for threatening men's social status. As Banet-Weiser writes, "Expressions of popular misogyny often rely upon the idea that men have been *injured* by

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women: men are seen to be denied rights because women have gained them; men are no longer confident because women are more confident...” (35). @zdotss's video shows he feels feminism has gone too far in its accusations against men, and he must, quite literally, become Depp's defense.

Marwick's model of Morally Motivated Networked Harassment is also useful here: @zdotss expresses moral outrage at Heard's accusations against Depp. By disparaging Heard, particularly her romantic/sexual history and her lack of career accomplishment compared to Depp, @zdotss signals his membership to both the network of pro-Depp TikTok, as well as the networks of popular misogyny that believe feminism has overreached (Marwick 4). In her discussion of MMNH, Marwick writes that “Because social norms around gender are both pervasive and persistent, women—especially women in the public eye who violate traditional norms of feminine quietude—experience disproportionate online harassment based on their gender” (4). When Heard wrote in *The Washington Post* that she “became a public figure representing domestic abuse,” TikTokers like @zdotss and many others believe she violated the norms expected of her gender, enabling them to feel justified in their harassment of her. @zdotss' video is the second-most popular video in the pro-Depp dataset, with over 13 million likes, so he is likely not alone in his opinion.
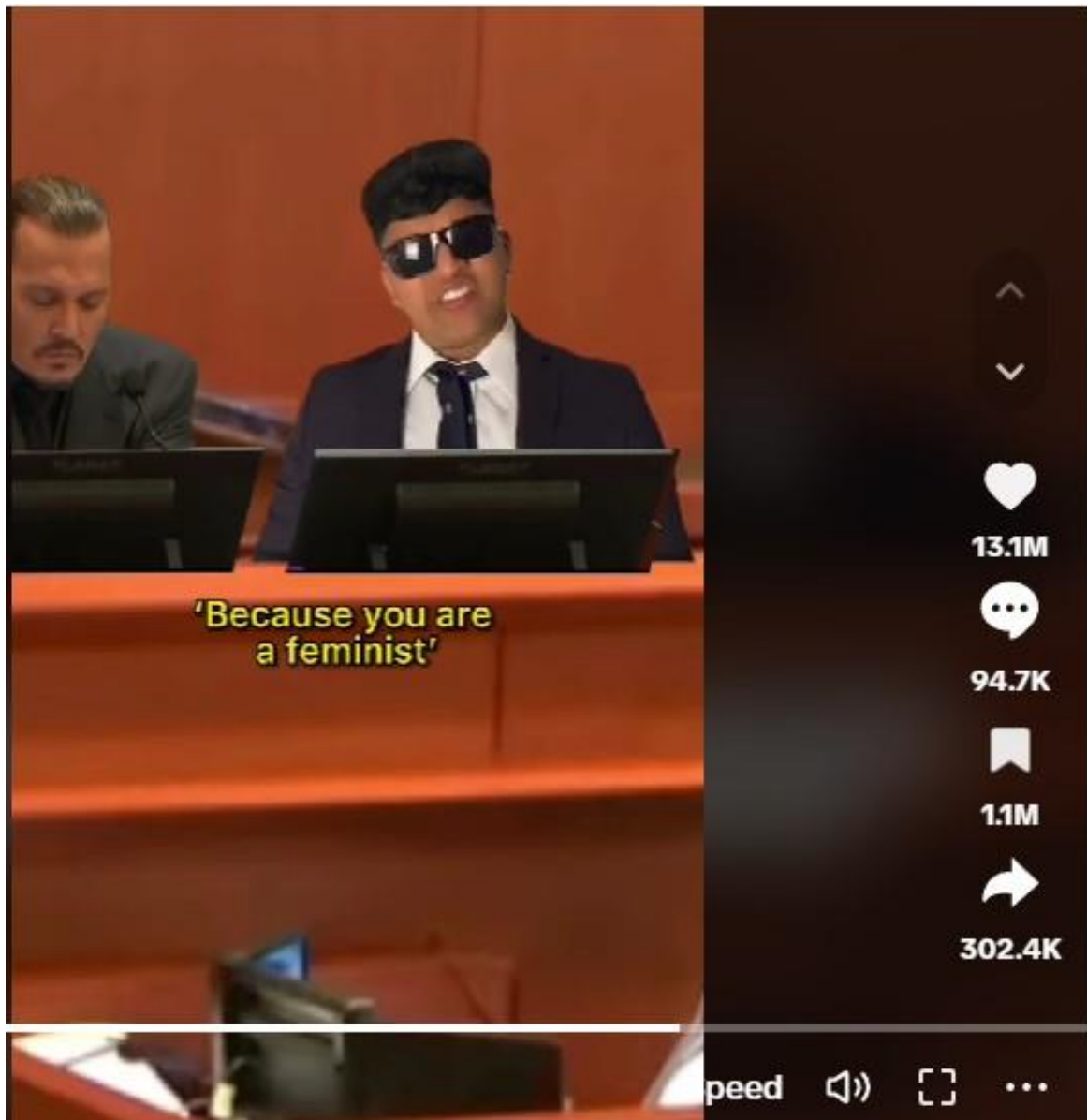
Figure 24: Screenshot of @zdotss's video.

Figure 25: screenshot of @zdotss's video.

Conclusion

TikTok videos that supported Depp were far more visible and popular than those that supported Heard, to which my analysis turns in the next chapter. Depp's supporters demonstrated their allegiance to Depp not only through videos sympathetic to Depp's experiences at the

defamation trial, but also through their mockery and derision of Heard. This formed the two main narrative categories of the pro-Depp dataset: Depp as the "Man on Trial," and the videos "Mocking Heard." In the former, Depp was depicted as clever and relaxed, patiently enduring the incompetence of Heard's legal team. In the latter, the videos mocking Heard focused on making fun of her behaviour, appearance, and emotional expressions, shaming her and ultimately damaging her credibility in the public eye.

Depp fans particularly seemed to enjoy the ironic humour popular on social media, using established TikTok platform vernaculars to add layers of meaning to their videos. In this way, the Depp-Heard trial follows similar patterns of networked harassment that occurred in cases like GamerGate, as Depp fans attempted to bully Heard into submission. In the following chapter, I analyze a dataset of pro-Heard TikTok videos using the same methods to illustrate the main narratives that appear in the most popular videos, as this smaller subset of TikTokers do their best to defend Heard.
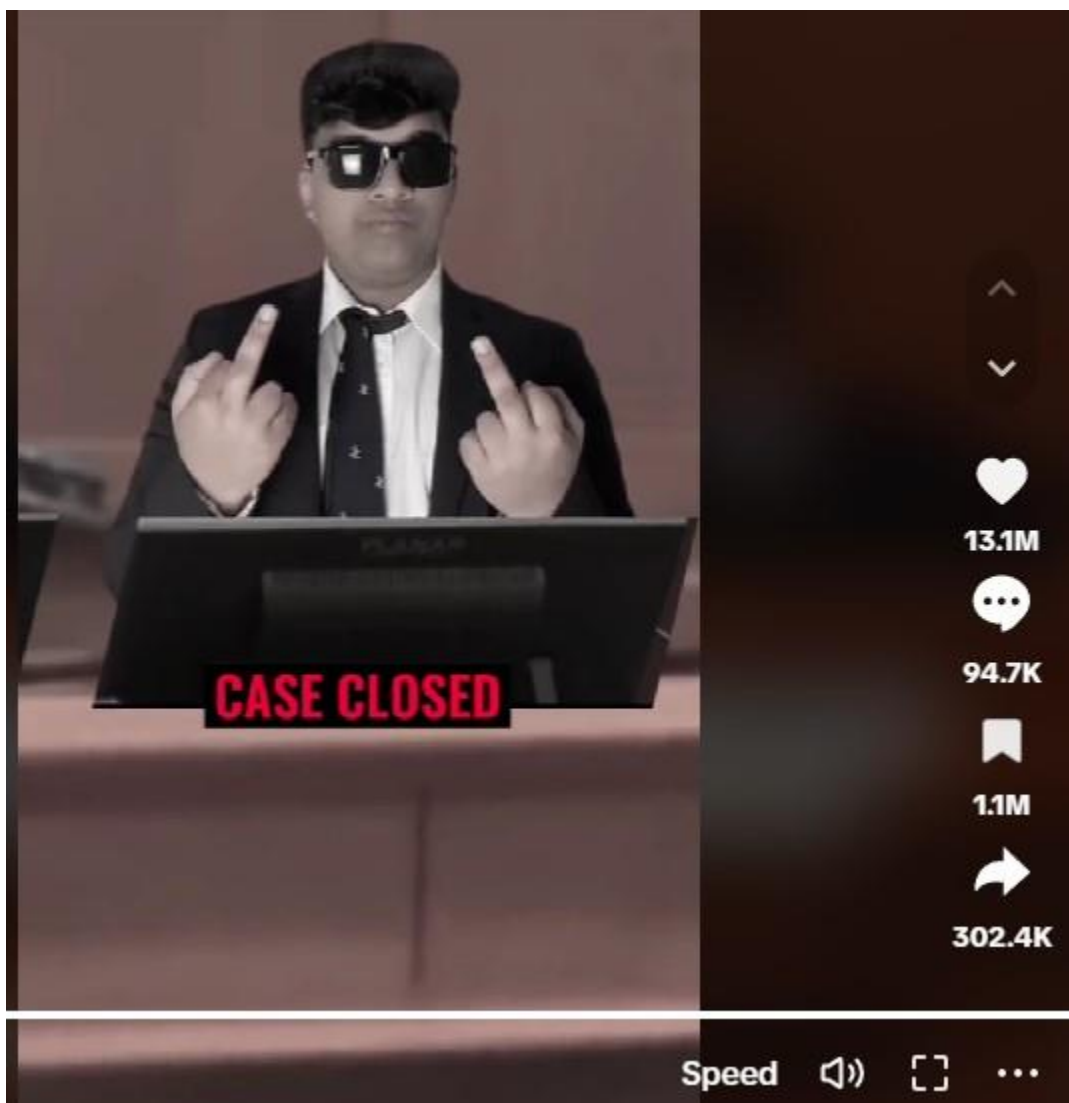
Figure 26: screenshot of zdotss's video.

Chapter Two: Pro-Heard TikTok

Introduction

The 2022 Depp-Heard trial centered around the accusation from Depp that Heard defamed him by implying he was an abuser. Though she did not name him in the *Washington Post* op-ed where she identified as a victim of domestic abuse, Depp's legal team argued that Heard's implied allegations damaged his career and his reputation. In social media posts supporting Heard, the op-ed that launched the defamation trial rarely entered the discussion in online spaces. On TikTok and elsewhere on social media, most people discussed the trial in terms of which person in the couple they believed was guilty of abuse. As the last chapter demonstrated, the overwhelming majority of posts online favoured Depp, celebrating his conduct during the trial, speaking in support of the evidence he presented about Heard's supposed abuse of him, and mocking Heard relentlessly for every word she spoke in the courtroom. Heard's fans faced similar harassment when they posted in support of her, as Depp fans were vocal in their disagreement with pro-Heard content.

While pro-Depp content outnumbered pro-Heard content by a large margin, Heard still had supporters on TikTok and other social media platforms. Both pro-Depp and pro-Heard posters seem to be motivated by their fandom, but the resulting content of pro-Heard videos differs significantly in its themes and appearances than the pro-Depp ones. While Depp fans tended to focus their posts on the defamation trial and the resulting memes, Heard fans were attempting to rehabilitate Heard's image in the light of the harassment she received during the trial. Like the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on the vernaculars and affordances TikTokers use to express their fandom, this time for fans of Heard. By comparing the posts of

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Depp fans to the posts of Heard fans, this chapter aims to understand how TikTok users navigated opposing viewpoints on the platform.

Methods and Data

I followed the same data collection method in this chapter as in the previous chapter. I started by identifying the pro-Heard hashtags that corresponded with the pro-Depp hashtags I used previously: #justiceforamberheard (235.7 million views), #istandwithamberheard (165.5 million views), and #amberhearddeservesanapology (52.7 million views). These three hashtags were the largest pro-Heard hashtags on TikTok. There was significant overlap in the top ten pro-Heard hashtags: over half the videos (16/30) were tagged with all three hashtags, and a further 8/30 videos were tagged with at least two. I collected the most-viewed TikTok videos with each hashtag, avoiding repetition of videos in the dataset by only including each video once, despite the hashtag overlaps. One top video in #justiceforamberheard was eliminated in part for being in Spanish, and in part because a pro-Heard position was not clear.

I then manually annotated each video with their narrative category and the technical elements included. I chose these categories based on how the poster was conveying their pro-Heard message. I found that different pro-Heard TikTokers differ in their motivations to post in Heard's defence, but there are commonalities in how they conveyed their messages throughout the dataset. While the pro-Depp TikTok videos focused largely on the defamation trial, the pro-Heard videos often provide context beyond the courtroom. The pro-Heard categories include depictions of Heard as a humanitarian and activist; Heard as a victim of abuse and Depp as a perpetrator of abuse; and fan edits of Heard footage that primarily focus on her looks. Two videos in the dataset self-identified as radical feminist content, mainly including memes with

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anti-pornography and anti-sex work rhetoric, without referencing the trial specifically. These videos seem to be capitalizing on popular hashtags with a feminist perspective in order to share content the posters identify as radical feminism.

Categories	Heard as charitable/activist	Heard as a victim/Depp as an abuser	Fan content	Radical feminism
#justiceforamberheard	5	4	0	1
#istandwithamberheard	1	5	3	1
#amberhearddeserves anapology	1	4	5	0
Total (out of 30)	7	13	8	2

This dataset was made up of the top-viewed video under each hashtag. The number of likes and comments were also collected, but their numbers do not necessarily correlate with the number of views. The most-viewed video in the dataset by a large margin has 2.8 million views, compared to the next most-viewed video with 431.2 thousand views. The comments on the most-watched video discuss how Heard did not deserve the negative attention she received during the trial. However, at a total of 17 comments, it is one of the least-commented upon videos in the dataset despite having the most views. When one commentor pointed out the discrepancy, the video poster responded, "my comments were filtered (only mutuals could comment), now my comments are unfiltered again" (@heardisbrave). TikTok posters are able to limit the ability to comment on their videos to only people who follow them or remove the option to comment altogether. Posters are also able to delete comments left on their video. This allows TikTokers some ability to moderate their video comment sections, but this ability is limited when the number of comments becomes too large for one person to moderate themselves.

Discussion: Video narrative categories

Heard as the charitable activist

Seven of the thirty TikTok videos in the dataset (7/30) focused on Heard's humanitarian and activist work, with many of the videos within this category featuring footage and images of Heard's 2018 visit to a Syrian refugee camp with the Syrian American Medical Society (sams-usa.net). The images of Heard helping others posted by her fans serves to distance her from her courtroom footage, while the TikTok videos by Depp fans emphasize the most awkward and unflattering moments of Heard at trial. In the videos in this category, Heard visits soccer games, classrooms, and medical clinics at the refugee camp. She smiles broadly as she interacts with refugees, the majority of whom pictured are children. The videos share few details about Heard's work there, and instead rely on the visuals of Heard being charitable as a counter to the damage her reputation received during the defamation trial. In these videos and images, Heard is depicted as joyful and unassuming, in great contrast to the way she was depicted in pro-Depp TikTok videos (see figures 1 and 2).

Figure 27: Screenshot from @ivasversion's video.

Figure 28: Screenshot from @emmacoffeebean's video.

Other videos in this category use footage of Heard at different humanitarian speaking engagements, discussing topics like domestic violence and human rights with organizations like Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union. The context collapse of social media as described by Marwick and boyd is evident here: the age and origins of videos are not often included when they are reposted on TikTok (122). Without this context, it appears every video on the platform involving Heard is in relation to the 2022 defamation trial. In one video, Heard appears onstage saying, "I'm scared now, to be quite honest. I am a white woman, I live in the 21st century, I live in the United States; so I already won the lottery in so many ways, but I'm

still scared" (@tpwkindness04). The narrative framing of the TikTok implies Heard is speaking

about her experience of the defamation trial as a public victim of domestic violence, but the

footage is from a 2018 HagueTalks speech titled "Why Be a Human Rights Activist?", where

Heard talks more generally about political polarization and human rights abuses (Nolan). This

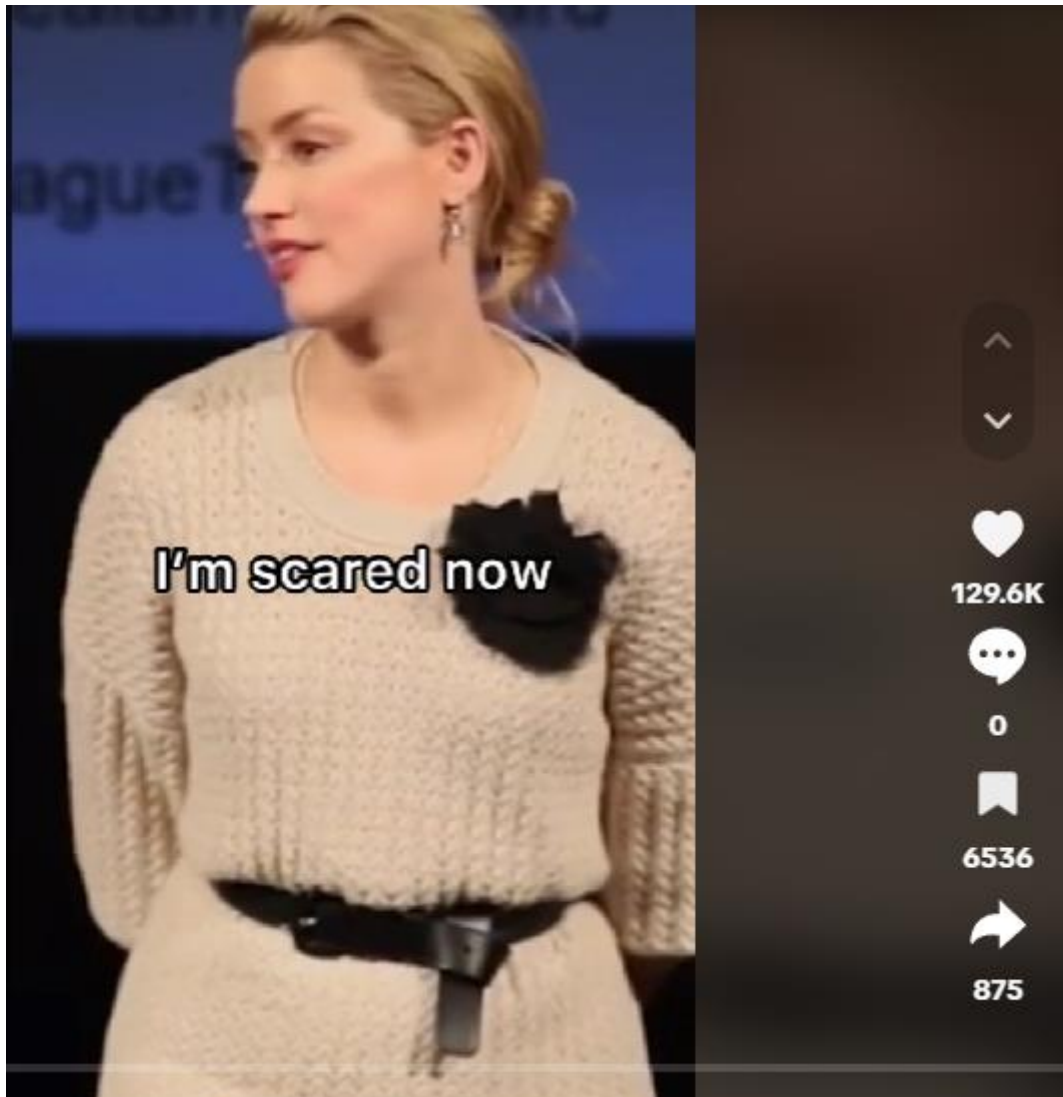particular TikTok had the comments turned off (see figure 3).

Figure 29: screenshot from @tpwkindness04's video.

Promoting Heard's charity work is an attempt to rehabilitate Heard's public image in the

face of the accusations of abuse from Depp and his legal team. The TikTok videos in this

category depict Heard as altruistic and kind, aware of social injustices and her own privilege. The implication is that her social altruism makes her abuse less likely or makes the alleged abuse she received more tragic than if she was not charitable or kind. Additionally, by presenting Heard as morally upstanding, her fans on TikTok attempt to mitigate the moral outrage Depp fans used to justify their harassment of Heard, as in Marwick's model of morally motivated networked harassment (5). Like Marwick's description of MMNH, Heard has violated the moral norms of Depp fans by accusing Depp of violence; Heard fans, in turn, try to prove the subsequent online bullying of the pro-Depp videos unjust. These videos of Heard performing charity in refugee camps and homeless shelters also support Abidin's assertion that social justice videos perform well on the platform: while pro-Heard videos were far less popular than pro-Depp videos, the videos in this narrative category received the most views and likes within the dataset of pro-Heard videos.

Heard as a victim / Depp as an abuser

Related to the charitable depictions of Heard are the depictions of Heard as a victim, which make up nearly half of the dataset (13 of 30 videos). Like the videos depicting Heard's altruism, these TikToks provide a counter-narrative to the dominant view on TikTok of Heard herself as an abuser, or as a participant in "mutual abuse." Some of these videos show Heard with injuries - one includes an awkward conversation with a paparazzo where she jokingly blames a foot injury on sharks in Hawaii (@heardisbrave). Another video shows Heard on the red carpet of a movie premier in 2015, where large bruises are visible on her arms and shoulders (@pringadez; see figure 4). Again, the context of the videos is not clear, but the narrative of the TikTok attributes these injuries to Depp.
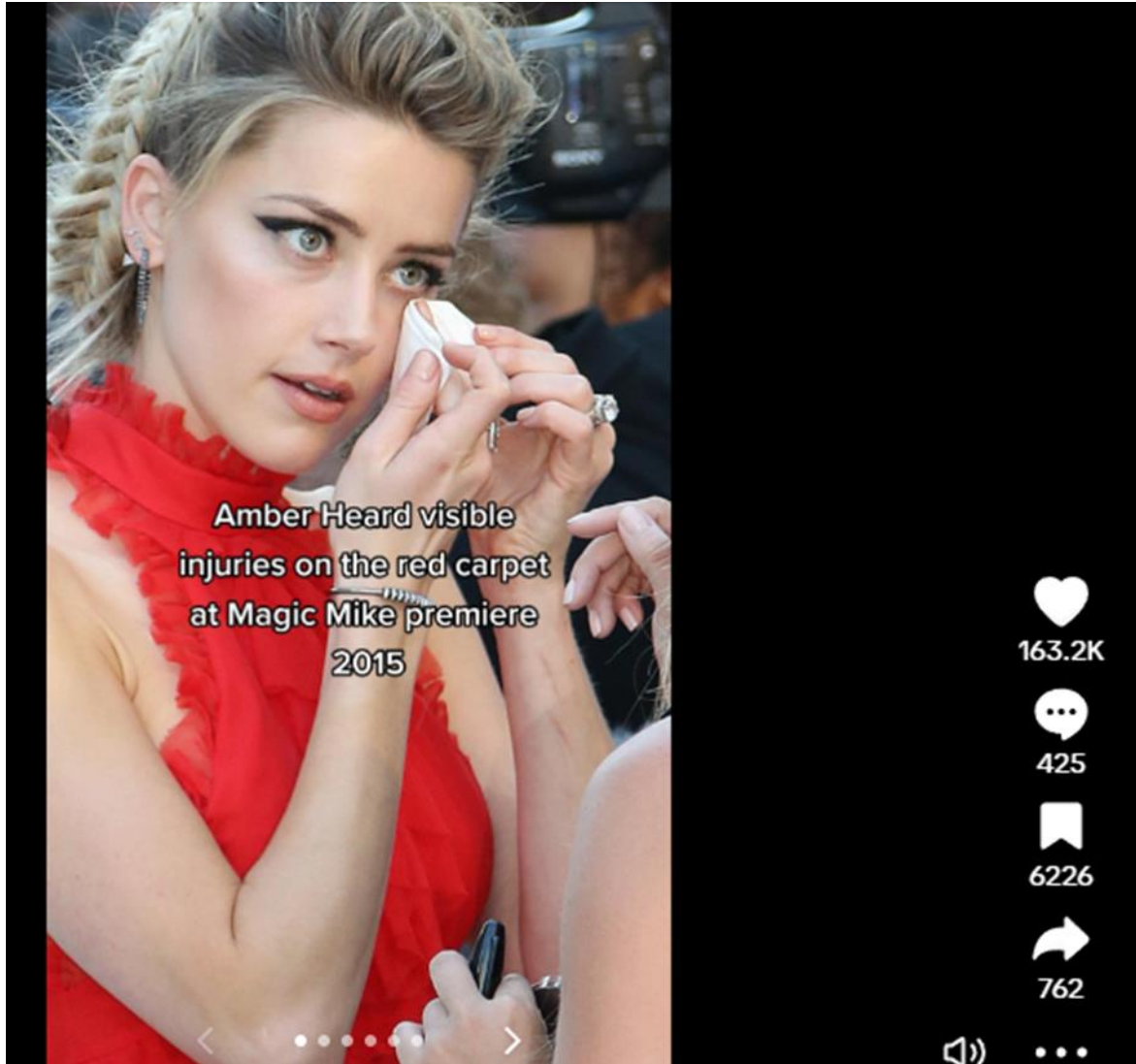
70

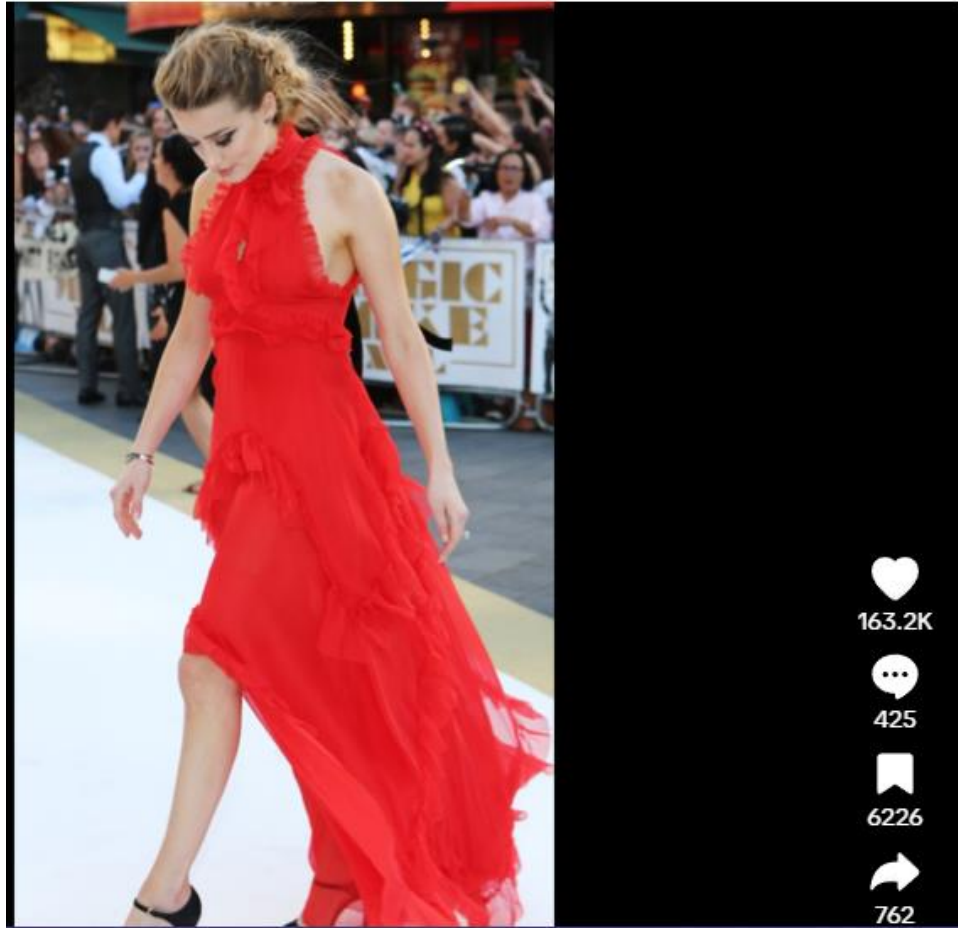*Figure 30: screenshot from @pringadez's video.*

Figure 31: screenshot from @pringadez's video.

The comment section on @pringadez's video is filled with people arguing whether Heard's injuries are visible or not. Some say the bruises are visible, regardless of how you feel about Depp or Heard. Some say they will side with Depp either way. The original poster makes their position clear: "There is no such thing as mutual abuse. Maybe two toxic people in a relationship. Abuse is about POWER and CONTROL. Only him [sic] held the power over her." Their comment echoes other criticism of this trial, particularly the frequent assertion that Depp and Heard were mutually abusive towards each other. According to advocates for intimate partner violence survivors, including the National Domestic Violence Hotline, mutual abuse does not exist. One partner may act violently in self-defence, or be manipulated into reactionary violence, but they are reacting to the abuse they are receiving from their controlling partner

(Jessica R.). @pringadez (Kelly), who posted the video, received eight thousand likes on their comment saying mutual abuse is false. However, user @sparrow received twice as many likes on their comment saying Heard had no injuries (see figure 7).
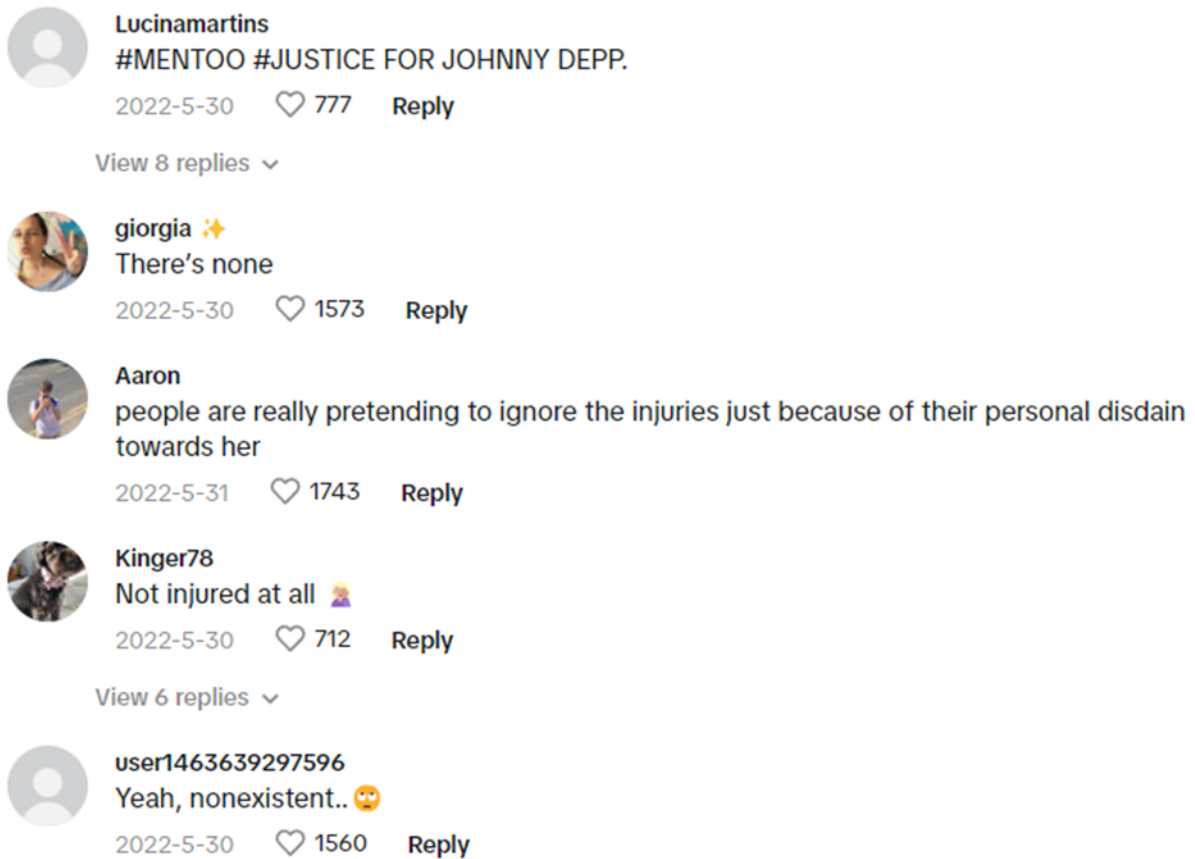
Lucinamartins
#MENTOO #JUSTICE FOR JOHNNY DEPP.
2022-5-30 ♡ 777 **Reply**
View 8 replies ⌄

giorgia ✨
There's none
2022-5-30 ♡ 1573 **Reply**

Aaron
people are really pretending to ignore the injuries just because of their personal disdain towards her
2022-5-31 ♡ 1743 **Reply**

Kinger78
Not injured at all 💁
2022-5-30 ♡ 712 **Reply**
View 6 replies ⌄

user1463639297596
Yeah, nonexistent.. 🙄
2022-5-30 ♡ 1560 **Reply**

Figure 32: Comments on @pringadez's video.
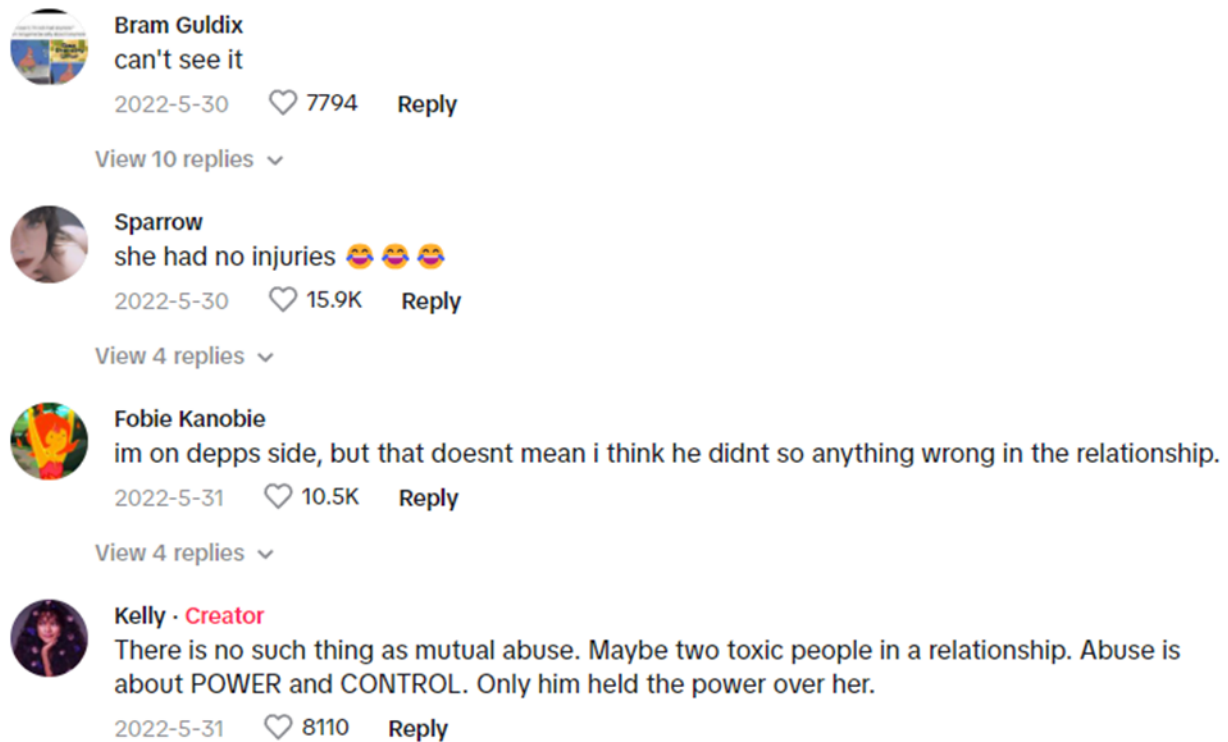
Figure 33: comments on @pringadez's video.

Like the conflict in that comment section between Depp supporters and Heard supporters, other videos in the Heard-as-victim category call out those who sided with Depp. One user captions a video of herself with "I didn't fall for a misogynistic hate campaign against an abuse victim. You supported a man because you liked him as a pirate when you were a kid" (@2percentcowboy, see figure 8). This pro-Heard TikToker associates Depp's support on social media not only with the fandom surrounding his acting career, but with an organized hate campaign designed to discredit Heard. They also imply Heard's supporters are smarter than Depp supporters for not being taken by Depp's performance in the court room. In the caption to that video, the creator acknowledges that the trial is more nuanced than that statement, but they attribute the power dynamic to Depp's fans.
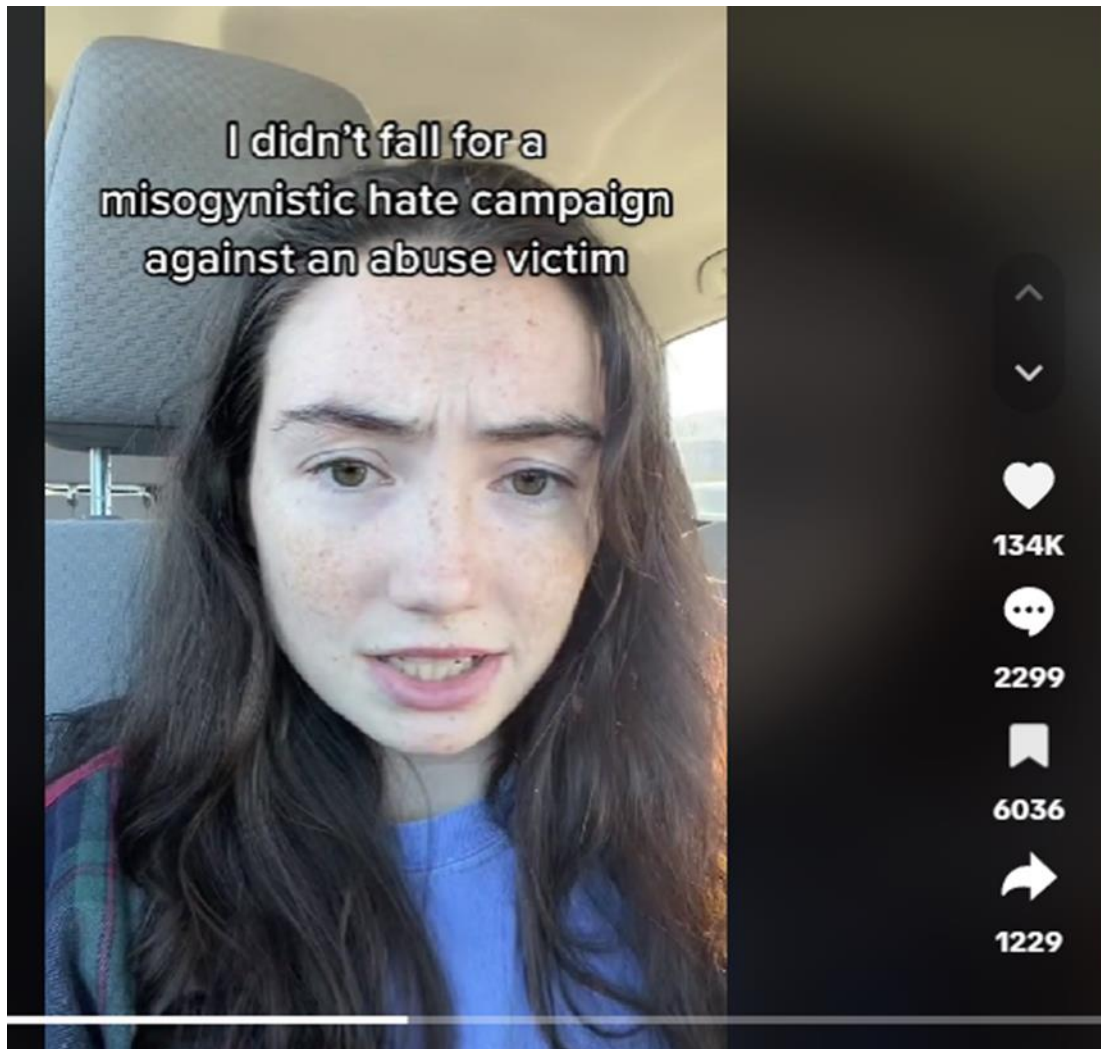
Along with Heard as a victim, some of the videos in this narrative category focus on

Depp as an abuser (5 out of 30 videos). These TikToks largely focus on the evidence brought to

trial, as well as the pretrial documents that were deemed inadmissible in court but were unsealed

by the judge when the trial was over. Depp fans used crowdfunding to publicize the unsealed

documents (Bryant). In both the trial evidence and the later documents, pro-Heard TikTok users

focus on the language Depp used to talk about Heard in personal communications. Some of the

text messages from Depp presented to the court included Depp saying, "Let's drown her before

we burn her" and "I will fuck her burnt corpse afterward to make sure she is dead," among other

name-calling and threats against Heard's life (Richwine). These moments from the defamation trial, where Heard's lawyer is reading Depp's messages out to the court and confirming he read them correctly, became some of the most popular pro-Depp TikTok videos. As discussed in the previous chapter, Depp fans memed the way Heard's lawyer confirmed the accuracy of the evidence and laughed along with Depp's reactions to his own words.

Heard's fans rallied around her, like in the video screenshot below, where they sympathize with Heard's reaction to Depp's messages being read aloud (see figure 9). Like the TikTok users who pride themselves for seeing through "a misogynistic hate campaign," these creators see themselves on a different team than Depp fans. One video caption reads, "Fav part of 2022: Johnny Depp stans buying unsealed documents for thousands of $$, thinking it would look bad for Amber, but turns out Johnny was hiding some pretty nasty stuff" (@peaches_86_ "Fav part of 2022"). According to *Vanity Fair*, Depp's legal team attempted to introduce "what would amount to revenge porn," including nude photos of Heard and accusations about past romantic relationships (Bryant). However, this evidence was not included in the trial, and seemed to have little effect on the opinion of Depp fans.
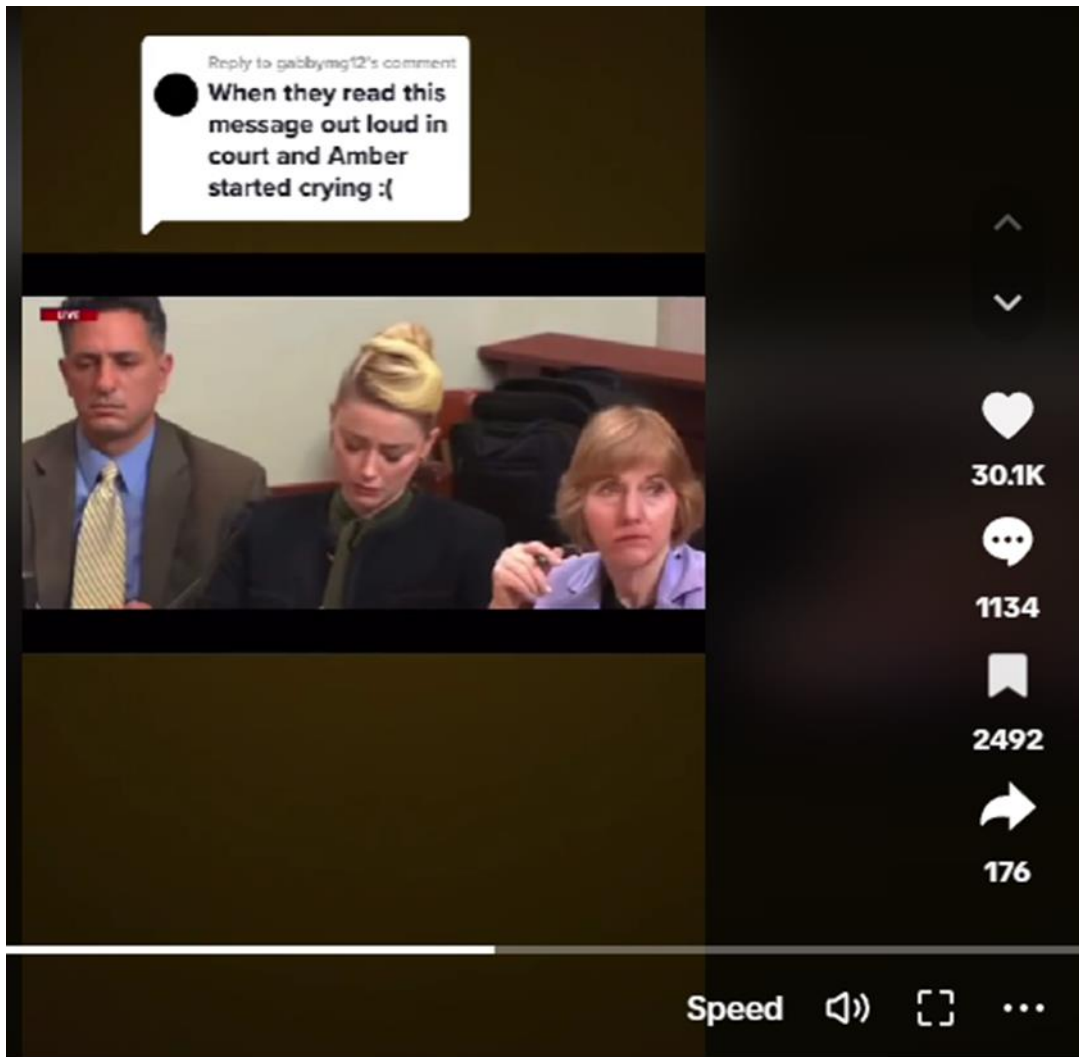
Figure 35: Screenshot from @peaches_86_'s video.

While they do not entirely fit the Heard as abused / Depp as abuser category, some of the videos in the dataset criticize the 23-year age difference between Depp and Heard. This video from user @peaches_86_ frames their age gap as it was in 2001, when Depp was 38 and Heard was 15. The creator sits in front of a green-screened image, lip-syncing to audio that says "Uh oh, sounds like pedophilia" to the tune of the Boy George song *Karma Chameleon*. The comment section argues that Depp and Heard did not meet until much later, when Heard was well into her twenties. The age gap is large, and most likely contributed to some of the uneven power dynamics in their relationship. However, framing their relationship as pedophilic obscures

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the nuances of that conversation. Because relationships with large age gaps are a regular topic of debate online, the comment section was active in its discussion. The most-liked comment pointed out, "Well, it's a good thing they didn't date until she was in her 20s" (@JayBees's comment on @peaches_86_'s video), dismissing the original poster's concerns. The original poster maintained their position that Depp was predatory for seeking out a younger partner.
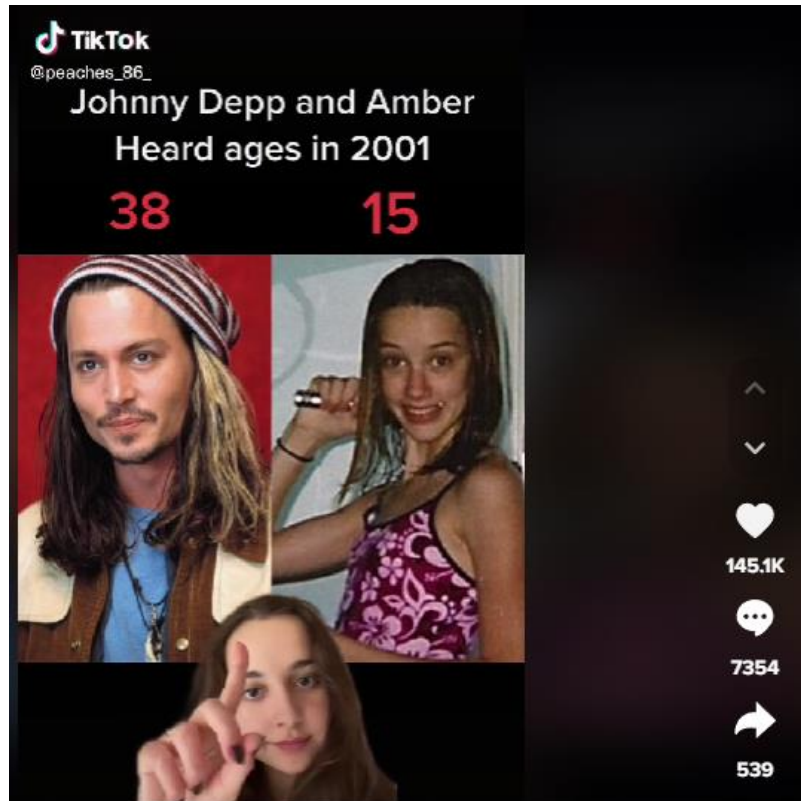

Figure 36: screenshot from @peaches_86_'s video.

Fan edits

A few of the videos (8 out of 30) were fan edits of Heard, featuring images that are often heavily edited or filtered to present the most flattering clips of her. They are made up of footage from movies, ad campaigns, and public engagements, and often involve slow-motion focus on Heard smiling or tossing her hair. Fan edits are common in many (if not all) fan communities.

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Edits of Depp proliferate on TikTok, and footage from his Dior Sauvage advertising campaigns are particularly popular. Comments on the fan edit videos of Heard sing her praises, where fans write things like, "it's insane how someone can just be that beautiful," "goddess," and "isn't she the prettiest" (comments on @emmacoffeebean's Nov. 6, 2022 video). However, many comments demonstrate more ambivalent feelings about her: commenters on a different fan edit TikTok wrote things like, "she so pretty but she messed up fr 💀" and "I don't like her but she's so pretty 🫣" (comments on @yexlie's video).
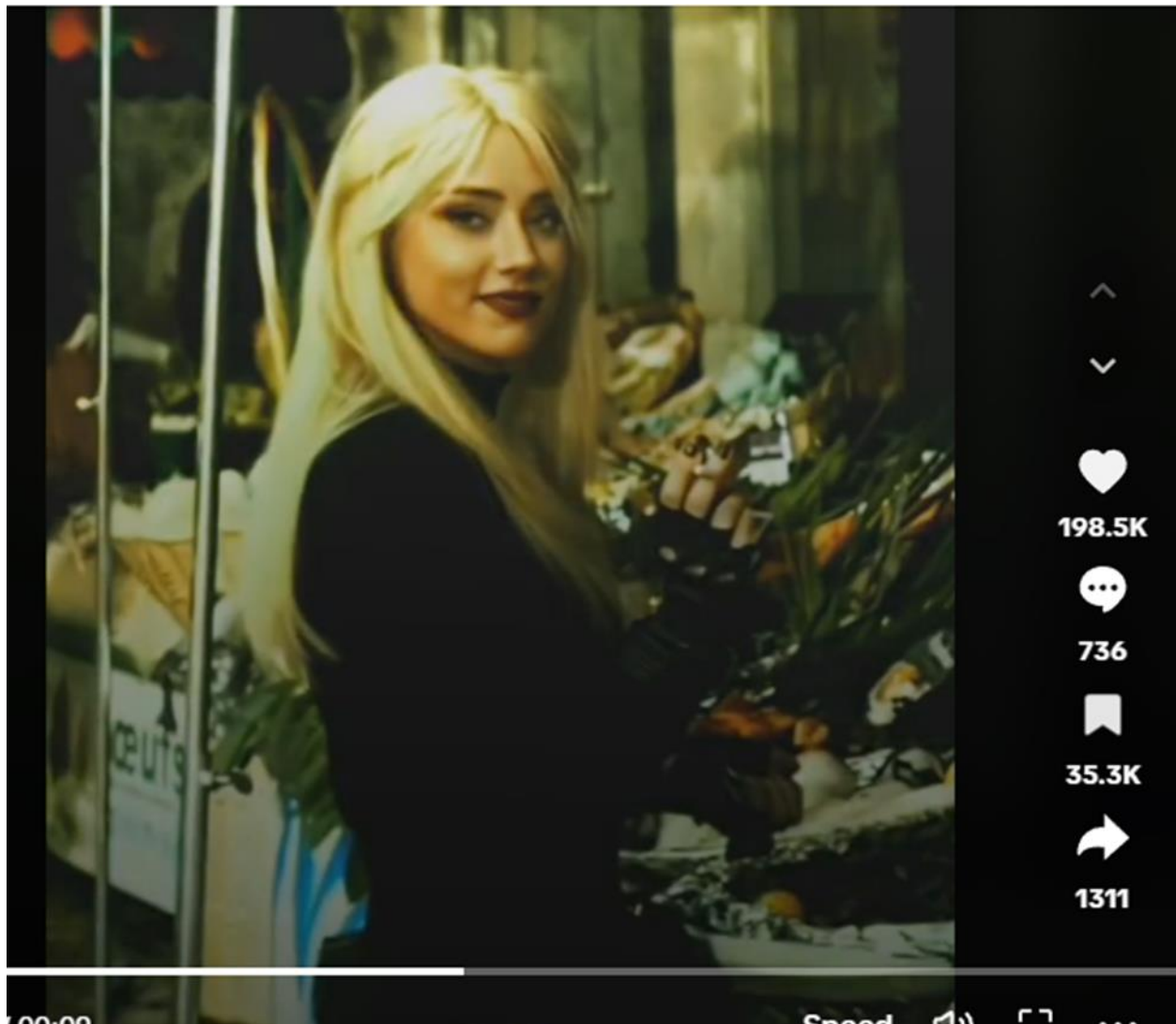
Figure 37: screenshot of @yexlie's video.
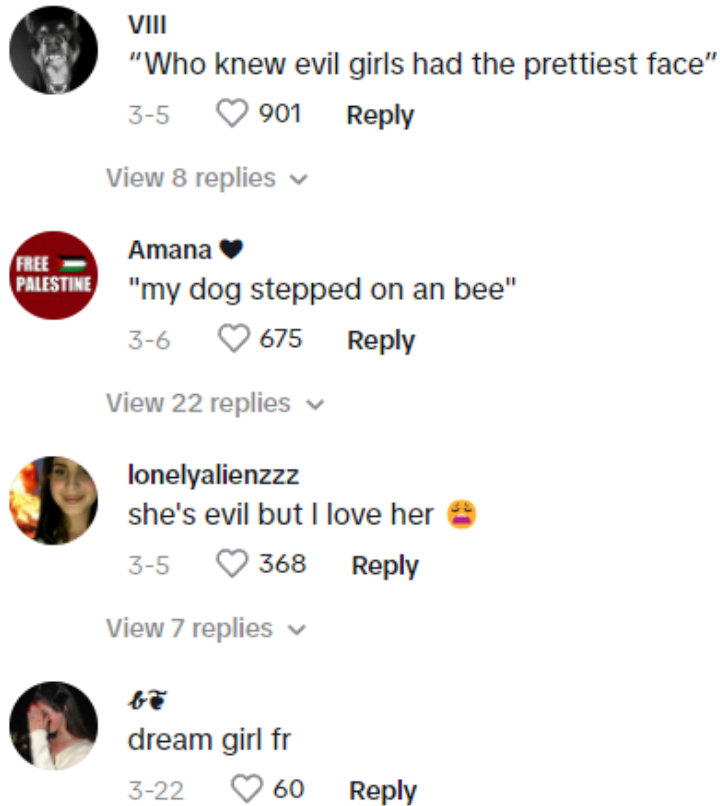
Figure 38: comments on @yexlie's video.

In this example of the comment section on @yexlie's video, these commentors believe Heard to be "evil," but they remain her fans (see figure 12). While one commentor brings back the "my dog stepped on a bee" meme, the others agree that Heard is worthy of their fandom. For these fans, Heard's culpability in the defamation trial is beside the point. She is pretty enough to be the object of their fandom, regardless of whether she abused Depp or not. This is a similar position as Depp fans, who use their fandom of Depp as evidence of his innocence regarding the alleged abuse in their relationship.

RadFem memes on Pro-Heard TikTok

Finally, two TikTok videos in the pro-Heard dataset (2 out of 30) did not reference the

trial or Heard specifically, but capitalized on the virality of the trial to promote radical feminist

rhetoric. Radical feminism on today's internet is largely aligned with second-wave feminist

activism against pornography and sex work and is often associated with Trans-Exclusive Radical

Feminism (TERF). According to Katelyn Burns for *Vox*, "Online roots of the term TERF

originated in the late 2000s but grew out of 1970s radical feminist circles after it became

apparent that there needed to be a term to separate radical feminists who support trans women

and those who don't" (5). Many TERFs use the euphemistic term 'gender critical' to describe

their position on transgender people. Burns highlights how trans-exclusionary feminism has

gained prominence on social media, which led to 'gender-critical' scholars, journalists, and

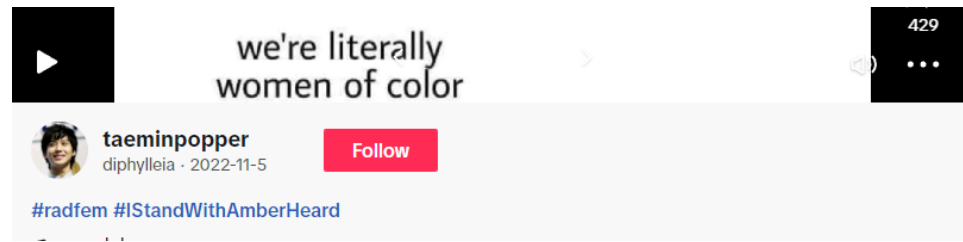policymakers making a career of their gender criticism.

Figure 39: screenshot from @taeminpopper's video.

In the example above in figure 13, a group of women of colour say "feminism should focus exclusively on women's issues," implying trans people are excluded from women's issues. The angry response comes from a cartoon figure in a feminine wig with masculine facial hair, saying that is white feminism. The meme is stating that trans women are dismissing 'gender critical' feminism from women of colour, with the meme's antagonist calling it white feminism to say it is racist and non-inclusive. This meme is part of a slideshow of other radical feminist memes, focusing on anti-porn and anti-sexwork rhetoric. Despite being some of the most-viewed videos in the pro-Heard TikTok dataset, neither radfem video mentions the trial, even as it pertains to feminist concerns like domestic violence and how women are treated in the court of public opinion. Instead, the virality of the trial is used as a way to promote engagement with their content. This is further illustrated by the hashtags on @fierceandglorious's TikTok video: along with the rad fem and pro-Heard hashtags are #MadeWithKeurigContest, #HausLabsFoundation, #fyp, and #foryoupage, none of which have anything to do with the TikTok's content but are general hashtags with wide audiences.

TikTok affordances

Sound and audio memes

TikTok posters use sound and audio memes to provide context and layers of additional meaning that the video alone lacks. As Abidin has previously argued, despite the visual nature of TikTok videos, audio memes are the primary driver of content popularity on the app (80). The audio memes in the pro-Heard TikTok dataset make use of a few different techniques. Many of the videos use music. The most frequently used song was Taylor Swift's *Karma*, present in 4/30 of the dataset videos, and used in 101.8k TikTok videos overall. *Karma* tended to be employed by pro-Heard TikTokers after Depp's pretrial documents were unsealed, with the video posters often displaying a smugness that the attempt to further exonerate Depp did not work as Depp fans intended. The videos focus particularly on the line, "I keep my side of the street clean/you wouldn't know what that means." In the example below in figure 14, the poster shows images of Heard's activism and humanitarian work captioned with "I keep my side of the street clean," while images of the evidence brought against Depp, including his violent text messages, are captioned with "you wouldn't know what that means." Pro-Heard posters are again emphasizing Heard's moral qualities, while drawing attention to Depp's transgressions.

Figure 40: screenshot from @ivasversion's video.

As Zhao and Abidin have noted, "lip-sync becomes a common way for young people to crystallize their central message in the lyrical lines" (10). In the pro-Heard dataset, lip-syncing is a common way to marry the audio and the visual, and the technique is used in 7/30 of the videos. Users perform lip-syncing to emphasize certain lyrics or lines, like the lyrics of *Karma*. The other popular song in this dataset is Eminem's *Mockingbird*, which appears in 3/30 videos and in 540.6k videos on the platform overall. The focus in use of this song also seems to be on the lyrics, especially the line, "It might seem a little crazy, pretty baby/but I promise mama's gonna be alright." Both song choices demonstrate the TikTok users' sympathies towards Heard, while making use of songs that are already popular on the platform.

TikTok users do not just lip-sync song lyrics. Audio memes, created from many different contexts, are a popular way to create engagement on the app. By using the 'sound' feature, TikTok users can recycle audio clips from other videos to perform themselves. There was no

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repetition of audio memes within the pro-Heard dataset, but many of the videos used lip-synced audio memes from elsewhere. In this example from user @peaches_86_, the user acts as Depp, lip-syncing, "Okay? Why'd you have to *beep* bring that up?" ("Fav part of 2022"), portraying Depp as irritated that further evidence from the trial was disseminated (see figure 15).
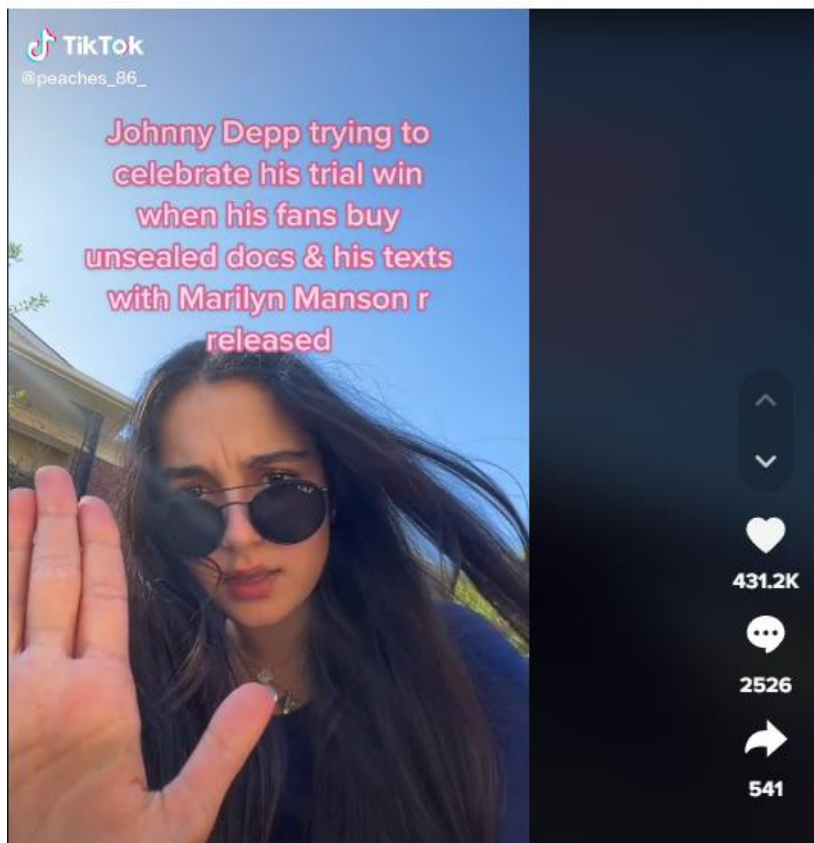
Visual filters and effects

While audio memes may be the driving force of TikTok content popularity, the visuals in this dataset do most of the heavy lifting in terms of video meaning. Like much of the pro-Depp content on TikTok, many of the videos depicting Depp as an abuser are based on footage from

the televised trial. Most of the pro-Heard content focuses on earlier footage of her humanitarian and activist work, interactions with her fans, and de-contextualized edits focused on her looks.

Video footage and still images are layered to great effect in many of these videos, with the audio adding another element to the video's overall meaning. Zhao and Abidin point to what they call "curatorial labor" in the creation of TikToks. In gaining popularity on the platform, "...what becomes crucial is the skill set to piece together fragments of visual materials to make the videos meaningful" (9). Moments from the trial are overlaid with screenshots of the evidence; quotes are attributed to the person on-screen; and in the example below, images of Heard during her refugee camp visit are compared to unflattering YouTube thumbnails about her at trial (@emmacoffeebean "The campain against Amber"). This video directly juxtaposes the unflattering clips of Heard at the defamation trial with the images of her smiling while doing humanitarian work. In the video caption, the poster writes, "The campain [sic] against Amber is scary. I realised how crazy it is when i [sic] was trying to find some Clips [sic] of amber [sic] on YouTube. Those videos should not exist. Mocking her DV/SA testimony AND making money out of this….shame shame shame." This caption points out the financial motivations pro-Depp/anti-Heard posters have for going viral. By depicting Heard as violent or unhinged, posters bank on the popularity of their content.

Figure 42: screenshot from @emmacoffeebean's video.

Conclusion

Fans of Amber Heard had the disadvantage of being far fewer in number than fans of

Depp, but they were numerous enough to make their opinions known on TikTok. Suspicious of

the one-dimensional version of the story presented by Depp and his supporters, Heard fans made

use of various video narratives and techniques to argue their point. By portraying Heard as an

altruistic person, pro-Heard videos challenge the mocking images of Heard that went viral on

during the defamation trial. Likewise, portraying Heard as a victim of abuse, especially as a

victim of Depp's abuse, supports the assertions Heard made against Depp in her op-ed and in

earlier legal proceedings involving the couple. TikTok's ability to popularize trending videos and

topics over individual influencers contributed to the virality of the trial, and TikTok users were

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able to use more of the platform's affordances to support their arguments. By layering video, images, audio, and captions, complex meaning is created within a TikTok post lasting a few seconds.

People posting in support of Heard often faced significant pushback from Depp fans, who took issue at any videos depicting Heard as anything other than what Depp presented during the trial. Even casual viewers who took a more nuanced perspective argued that the couple were mutually abusive, or that Heard's past altruism does not negate her abusive behaviour in her relationship with Depp. However, just like Depp fans, many Heard fans also treated the trial like a football game, taking sides and cheering for their team. This speaks to the fandom dynamics that have shaped social media, where people connect over shared interests and obsessions. In the case of the Depp-Heard trial, fandom dynamics influenced a public discussion about intimate partner violence and showed that despite the advances of popular feminism with events like #MeToo, popular misogyny remains just as prevalent.

Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to explore the reasons why the 2022 defamation trial between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard went viral on social media, and particularly why Depp fans were so vocal in their support of Depp and their condemnation of Heard. Posts in support of Depp outnumbered posts in support of Heard by a large margin. Many of the posts by Depp fans focused on Depp's demeanour in the courtroom, comparing it to his performance in his popular film roles. However, many of the pro-Depp posts seemed more interested in their denunciation of Heard. Heard's testimony and appearance were subject to derision and ridicule, despite the credibility of her claims.

Much of this debate between Depp fans and Heard fans occurred on TikTok, and thus that platform became the focus of this thesis. The affordances of TikTok shaped the platform vernacular that developed and was employed in the discussion of the Depp-Heard trial. Like all social media, TikTok collapses the context of what is posted, and the provenance of content is not always clear to the audience. In the case of the Depp-Heard trial, some moments from the broadcasted courtroom footage went viral, while many others did not become popular. This resulted in an online discussion that emphasized the moments that the pro-Depp audience found funny, while not including the serious elements that reflect poorly on their fandom's chosen subject.

Another platform affordance of TikTok is what Crystal Abidin describes as the privileging of post virality over the fame of the person that posted it. Unlike other platforms, where people with large followings can be confident an audience will be viewing their content, posters on TikTok participate in trending topics, memes, and hashtags in order to maintain and grow their viewership; having many followers is not a guarantee that one's content will be

viewed. As seen in the preceding chapters, this results in celebrities and brands participating in

trending memes and topics along with ordinary TikTok users. For example, in the introductory

chapter, I discussed Milani Cosmetics and Lance Bass producing TikTok videos critical of Heard

as a way to capitalize on the virality of the defamation trial. However, the same applies to

TikTok users without large followings, who may have their content picked up by the platform's

For You page algorithms and subsequently find themselves in front of an unanticipated audience

of millions.

In addition to the affordances of the platform, TikTok users are operating within an

internet landscape that has been shaped by a long interplay between popular feminism and

popular misogyny. The effects of the #MeToo movement are still being felt: since the hashtag

went viral on social media in 2017, more people have been empowered to share their own stories

of sexual abuse and imbalanced relationship power dynamics. The entertainment industry was

particularly prominent in #MeToo discussions. Heard's 2018 Washington Post op-ed is a

contribution to that ongoing conversation about interpersonal violence, and particularly the way

institutions protect men accused of abuse. The tone of Heard's editorial is hopeful. Along with

mentioning her own experiences as "a public figure representing domestic abuse," she outlines

potential next steps to take for legal and social institutions to become more equipped to protect

victims rather than perpetrators of abuse. However, this editorial provided Depp the material

with which he accused Heard of defamation.

While the reaction to the trial occurred in a post-#MeToo internet, it also occurred in an

internet shaped by reactionary misogyny. Events like GamerGate illustrate that when different

elements of feminism enter popular culture, they are met with misogynistic reaction. Sarah

Banet-Weiser writes that "…the intensification of misogyny in the contemporary moment is in

part a reaction to the culture-wide circulation and embrace of feminism," as men react to a perceived loss of social power (3). In the example of GamerGate, Zoë Quinn became the target of a large and dedicated harassment campaign, which was nearly successful in bullying her off the internet. The networked harassment Heard experienced as a result of the defamation trial took form in a similar way, with Heard becoming the subject of unflattering memes, internet jokes, and misogynistic commentary. Marwick's model of morally-motivated networked harassment is useful to explain the pattern of group behaviour that characterizes these large-scale harassment campaigns. Depp fans who felt their moral norms were violated by Heard accusing Depp of abuse were highly motivated to signify their support for Depp by condemning Heard.

Also key to the social media landscape that informs incidents like GamerGate are the fandom dynamics that shape how people use the internet. The internet has allowed fans to connect and gather around their shared interests. Social media has blurred the lines between consumers and producers of media, and by contributing to online fan communities, fans straddle that line between consuming and producing content. However, the creativity of fandoms is not always a positive endeavour. Not everyone is drawn to a fandom out of love for that fandom's subject: Jonathan Gray's concept of the antifan describes those who engage with a particular text because they do not like it. However, in his analysis of the antifan, Gray includes both antifans' reactions to texts, and their reactions to people. Disgust or hate towards an inanimate media object cannot be equated to disgust or hate towards a real person or group of people, which, as Jane argues, makes light of the hostility antifans can direct towards a person.

To understand these dynamics between fans and antifans in regards to the Depp-Heard defamation trial, I created two small datasets of thirty TikTok videos each: one set tagged with pro-Depp hashtags, and one set tagged with pro-Heard hashtags. The videos were chosen based

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on their popularity on TikTok, meaning they were some of the most-viewed videos tagged with those hashtags. Following Zhao and Abidin's two-layer method of analyzing TikTok videos, I first conducted a qualitative narrative analysis by annotating each video with the narrative category that presented. The second layer of analysis focused on the semiotic resources and platform affordances that the TikTok creators used to add meaning to their posts. This includes the audio choices, the video names and on-screen captions, comment sections, and the resulting platform vernacular that TikTokers used in their discussions of the defamation trial.

For the pro-Depp videos, I found that the dataset mostly fell under two narrative categories: videos commiserating with Depp as the Man on Trial, and videos concerned with Mocking Heard. Both categories serve the same goal of supporting Depp in the defamation trial, by portraying Depp as a sympathetic figure wrongfully accused of abuse, and by portraying Heard as an unreliable narrator with an inept legal team. Depp's impatience with the court proceedings is portrayed as clever and funny, with the TikTok audience laughing along with him as he demonstrates disdain for Heard and her lawyers. Heard, on the other hand, is accused of performing her emotions for sympathy while recounting what occurred during her relationship with Depp. The platform affordances of TikTok allowed the creators of these pro-Depp videos to insert themselves into the trial proceedings, acting out what they would do if they were Depp's lawyer, or acting as Heard to make fun of her mannerisms and demeanour. Though some video captions and comment sections spoke about support for male victims of domestic violence, none of the video content actually addressed that reason for supporting Depp and condemning Heard.

The pro-Heard videos received far less attention than the videos supporting Depp, but they were still a significant part of the ongoing conversation about the trial. Like the Pro-Depp videos, the pro-Heard dataset largely fell into two narrative categories: videos where Heard is

depicted as the Charitable Activist, and videos where Heard is a Victim of abuse. Both these narratives serve as image rehabilitation for Heard, to counter how she is depicted by Depp, his legal team, and his fans. The videos of Heard's charity and activism work particularly focus on her visits to refugee camps, as well as speaking engagements she has done for organizations like Amnesty International. Like her op-ed in the Washington Post indicates, the videos in this category depict Heard as aware of her privilege, while still being affected by her experiences of violence and abuse. The other pro-Heard videos, depicting her as victim of Depp's abuse, focused on the evidence that she and her legal team brought to the trial. Pro-Heard TikTok users saw themselves on a different team than Depp fans, who they argued were blinded by affection for Depp's previous movie roles. Heard fans felt they had seen through the harassment campaign conducted by Depp fans.

In both the pro-Depp video dataset and the pro-Heard dataset, a handful of videos did not fit well into the main categories. These videos were largely composed of fandom-related activity: fan edits of flattering video clips depicting Depp and Heard, fan art, and conversations between fans. This activity is a part of the fandom dynamics that shape how people use social media. That Depp received so much more support than Heard, on TikTok and elsewhere, speaks to how fandoms informed the reaction to the Depp-Heard defamation trial.

In the months since the trial concluded, the tide of public opinion has turned somewhat in its criticism of Heard. The evidence not brought to trial but unsealed by the judge afterward soured Depp's reputation, despite his fans' hopes it would exonerate him. In November 2022, an open letter of support for Heard was signed by a number of feminist organizations, who were concerned about the trial's reception on social media and the implications of using defamation trials to silence victims of domestic abuse. However, since the Depp-Heard trial's conclusion,

Depp continues to book movie roles and product endorsements, while Heard has largely remained away from the public eye.

In 2018, long before the defamation trial took place, Heard wrote in her op-ed, "I felt as though I was on trial in the court of public opinion — and my life and livelihood depended on myriad judgments far beyond my control." Unfortunately, the court of public opinion continued to judge Heard for her accusations against Depp, on a much larger scale than she had previously experienced. As this project has demonstrated, social media and fandoms are intertwined in such a way that harassment of those who anger a particular group is accepted and encouraged. Despite the efforts of Heard's supporters, they were not as effective in their support as Depp fans were in their condemnation of her.

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