

Final Paper

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Introduction and Justification

The 2022 defamation court case between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard (Depp V. Heard) has captivated millions of people through extensive online discussions about domestic violence, gender biases, and credibility. The live-streamed court case was centred around celebrity star Johnny Depp (the plaintiff) who was suing his ex-wife Amber Heard (the defendant) for defamation over an opinion article written for the Washington Post that framed Johnny Depp as a domestic abuser. Through online discussion platforms such as Reddit and Quora, the general public's opinions from around the world were shared and discussed amongst each other, offering important insights into how society frames issues of gendered violence, particularly in the context of famous figures. This is critical to discuss as it emphasizes how online platforms can shape public perceptions of gendered violence and reflect societal biases that influence the credibility of victims and perpetrators in domestic abuse situations. This exploration has prompted me to ask the following research-guiding question: How do online discussion platforms such as Reddit and Quora influence the framing of gendered biases concerning Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, particularly in terms of victimhood and credibility during the 2022 defamation trial?

This paper utilizes a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), a framework that analyzes how power and ideology in discourse reproduce gendered social hierarchies, to understand how online discussions on Reddit and Quora frame the public narratives of Amber Heard and Johnny Depp (Lazar, 2007). Through the analysis of both Reddit and Quora, I examined three separate Reddit "subreddits", where users create and vote on posts and discussion threads, and two separate question-and-answer Quora posts. With both platforms offering little real-world consequence to the user, these spaces often engage in debates, share personal experiences, and provide an adequate reflection of broader social issues commonly viewed as sensitive and hard to discuss, such as domestic violence.

Reddit, founded in 2005, and Quora, launched in 2009, have both developed into popular platforms for online public conversations, prompting a wide range of users to engage in diverse

discussions on a large degree of topics. As they can offer a space for collective thinking and can amplify voices who might otherwise be silent or silenced such as marginalized groups, it allows for a significant site of study into social dynamics and public perceptions.

Key Themes in Contemporary Literature

Language as a Tool of Power

Scholars such as Anderson (2020), Shoaf et al. (2024), and Chang (2022) contend that language plays a pivotal role in framing gendered biases, particularly in online spaces such as Reddit and Quora. Language, in this context, is not neutral; rather, it consistently shapes public opinions surrounding justice, truth, and moral legitimacy in high-profile cases. Anderson (2020) points out that the language used in online discussion forums surrounding controversial figures or events, such as Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, commonly reflects deeply ingrained societal power dynamics and gendered stereotypes that paint, ultimately affecting perceptions of truth and justice (Anderson, 2020, p. 5). In a broader sense, Lazar (2007) highlights the gendered power structures in discourse that often position women as passive victims or manipulative individuals, whereas men are depicted as either heroes or victimized by female aggression (p. 150). This gendered framing is relevant to the online discussions of the Depp v. Heard court case, where Amber Heard, as a female-identifying defendant in a high-profile domestic abuse case, risks being framed as a passive victim or manipulator, and Johnny Depp, a male-identifying plaintiff, can be framed as a victim of female aggression.

Contemporary research also supports this framing. For instance, Poorghorban (2023), drawing on Foucauldian theories of power, contends that contemporary discourse regularly mirrors societal power relations, with dominant gender norms, such as those connected to masculinity, influencing how individuals perceive and respond to gendered biases. This is consistent with Schneck (1987), who argues that dominant societal discourses often reinforce power dynamics, with women commonly being forcefully situated in conversations that challenge their victimhood. While Foucaultian theory is widely

used to understand the power dynamics present in public discourse, feminist scholars such as Stevi Jackson (1999) have critiqued the Foucaultian framework for its heavy focus on diffuse power, ultimately neglecting structural and institutional forms of power that disproportionately affect women (1999, p. 5). This critique is valuable as it highlights that the Foucaultian framework tends to focus on diffused and decentralized power, ultimately missing the importance of structural and institutional power.

Social Media as Amplifiers of Gendered Power Structures

Pre-existing literature further explores the role of online spaces in amplifying existing gendered power structures. As argued by scholars such as Donato et al. (2022) and Debbie Ging (2019), online spaces, particularly chat forums such as Reddit, are sites where toxic masculinities are often performed and reinforced. Using terms such as “alpha masculinity” and “beta masculinity” to describe the level of masculinity a man seemingly possesses, the domination and upholding of hegemonic masculinity is proven to be rampant (Ging, 2019). These platforms can also amplify misogynistic attitudes and gendered violence, as perceived anonymity allows users to express extreme views and narratives without the fear of repercussion (Mathew et. al, 2020). This is particularly evident in online incel (involuntarily celibate) communities and the broader “manosphere”, where gendered hierarchies are reinforced and uplifted through the normalization of male entitlement and the dehumanization and violation of women (Ging, 2019).

When discussing the Depp V. Heard trial, I believe online discussions may serve as a battleground where competing gendered biases are played out. The anonymity provided by online forums such as Reddit allows users to openly debate and contest issues of abuse and manipulation, with many users likely positioning themselves as either supporters of Depp or Heard. As Ging (2019) points out, these communities often use language that parallels traditional, patriarchal notions of masculinity, where male figures are often heroized due to their masculinity and female figures are alienated or ignored. Scholar Heather R. Hlvaka further explores this by explaining that this is in part due to the heteronormative

scripts used to make sense of violence directed towards men, with victimhood largely associated with dominant forms of masculinity (2017).

For instance, the incel communities on Reddit that largely feel wronged and victimized by women use derogatory terms such as “femoid” to alienate and dehumanize women. This derogatory term makes them feel more secure in their toxic masculinity while also reinforcing the narrative that women are inherently manipulative (Chang, 2022). I suspect that a similar dynamic will be evident in the framing of the Depp V. Heard trial, where online forums may reinforce narratives that support Depp’s victimhood while undermining Heard’s credibility as a victim of domestic abuse.

Anonymized Public Discussions as Reflections of Societal Norms

Anonymity in online chat spaces such as Reddit provides users with the freedom and safety to express their opinions without the constraints of face-to-face interaction. Mathew et al. (2020) argue that this anonymity can lead to the amplified expressions of deeply held cultural beliefs that might otherwise remain suppressed in face-to-face discourse (p. 37). It is emphasized that when individuals can engage in public conversations without the risk of social repercussions, the boundaries of what is considered respectfully engaging in discourse are often pushed to the extremes.

This dynamic is critical in acknowledging how public figures such as Depp and Heard are framed in online forums. It is important to note that while mainstream media offers a more neutral perspective on the trial, online discussions, especially in anonymous spaces, can provide more extreme and unfiltered views. Donato (2022) emphasizes that anonymized discourse can provide a window into broader biased societal norms and prejudices that influence public thought and opinions about gender, victimhood, perpetrators, and more broadly, violence (pg. 403). On a platform such as Quora, where users can ask and answer questions about sensitive or taboo topics, the framing of the Depp V. Heard trial may provide insight into how the general public perceives gendered violence.

Gaps in the Literature

The existing literature on FCDA in online forums and its relationship to gendered biases is limited, with much of the focus on niche subcultures and echo chambers, such as incel (involuntarily celibate men) communities and the “manosphere”, a term used to refer to strong antifeminist online communities (Ging, 2019). However, these studies habitually overlook the perspectives of the general public and how gendered biases are constructed in easily accessible online spaces. By analyzing neutral-toned discussion forums surrounding the Depp v. Heard trial, my research aims to fill this gap by examining how the broader public understood the trial, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how gendered biases surrounding celebrity culture are shaped outside of isolated online communities.

Through the analysis of online discussion forums, my research aims to fill this gap by examining how the broader public understood the trial, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how gendered biases were framed in relation to victimhood and credibility outside of isolated online communities.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

A framework based on feminist critical discourse analysis has been employed throughout this research project to explore ways online forums such as Reddit and Quora shape the perceptions of both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp. As stated by Lazar (2007), an FCDA lens seeks to evaluate “complex workings of power and ideology in discourse [that sustain] hierarchically gendered social orders” (Lazar, 2007, pg. 141). The aim of FCDA, therefore, is to analyze the complicated and subtle ways in which gendered assumptions and gendered power relations are “produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, pg. 142). This project also utilizes Foucaultian theory of power and discourse, ultimately providing a critical lens for understanding how

discourse operates within broader power structures such as the media and the legal system (Poorghorban, 2023).

I examined two Reddit discussion threads (“Does anyone secretly wonder if Amber Heard is at least partially telling the truth?” and “Why do people still believe Johnny Depp?”), alongside two Quora question-and-answer forums (“Who do you believe, Johnny Depp or Amber Heard? What part of the testimony stood out to you that made you believe them?” and “Should I believe Amber Heard or Johnny Depp?”). As some Reddit threads can be lengthy with posts receiving 70+ answers, I only examined the first three comment threads when sorted by “Top”, ensuring I analyzed the most popularized opinions. Moreover, as the Quora question-and-answer forums tend to be much longer and richer in text, I have only analyzed the five highest upvoted answers for each question to understand the dominant viewpoint. This cutoff allowed for an in-depth analysis of the comments shared regarding Johnny Depp and Amber Heard while remaining manageable within the given time. These specific sources were chosen because of their range of perspectives that did not overtly align with either an anti-Amber Heard or a pro-Johnny Depp stance, and instead primarily sought to understand and explore others’ thoughts regarding the trial. Lastly, as Quora forums use the first and last names of their users, I have anonymized those mentioned below for the safety of those included in this study.

Findings

In several of the sources that I analyzed, the narratives surrounding both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp were shaped by gendered biases, which frequently led to polarized discussions surrounding victimhood and credibility. It is important to note that these online discussions were heavily influenced by deeply ingrained beliefs about power, behaviour, and societal expectations of who is “allowed” to be a victim and what a victim “should” look or act like.

In the Reddit threads I analyzed, many of the discussions surrounding the trial primarily took a neutral stance or leaned toward the support of Amber Heard, especially when analyzing the narratives of

victimhood and gendered biases. For example, in Reddit forums such as “Why do people still believe Johnny Depp?”, some users viewed Heard as a victim of intersectional online violence, showcasing her experiences due to “biphobia and misogyny against Amber Heard” (*Careful_Swan3820*, 2022). This comment suggests that as a woman in the public eye, Heard’s victimhood and credibility were scrutinized in part because of societal biases against women, especially those outside of the heteronormative box. This bias is persistent with what feminist scholars such as Michelle Lazar argue about gendered victimization, where women are commonly socially constructed as victims or manipulative figures in public discourse (2007).

In contrast, the majority of discussions analyzed on Quora were Depp-leaning and often defended Depp’s victimhood and credibility, ultimately positioning him as the only victim in the trial. I hypothesize this is because Quora has an older user base, ultimately leading to more traditional views on relationship dynamics. This may manifest in more conservative-leaning views with undertones of misogyny or masculine righteousness. For example, one Quora user stated plainly, “I am team Depp. I have heard and read about all of their toxicity and it still appears to me that Heard is the main abuser” (*Quora User A*, 2022). This statement in contrast with the quote mentioned in the paragraph above reflects the deeply divided nature of the trial’s public discourse, with Depp supporters maintaining a strong sense of loyalty for Depp, ultimately creating a parasocial narrative that simplifies the situation into one of obvious victimhood, often ignoring the complex nature of Depp’s past and interactions with Heard.

Victimhood

Throughout the online discussions surrounding the Depp v. Heard trial, the narrative of victimhood is heavily contested, with both Heard and Depp being painted as the “true” victims by different users of both Quora and Reddit. This dichotomy highlights the highly complex ways in which gendered assumptions of power and victimization intersect within social discourse. When expanding on

the themes mentioned above, some Reddit users position Heard as a victim of not only Depp's actions and allegations but also of broader societal forces such as ingrained misogyny and female violence. In the Reddit thread "Why do people still believe Johnny Depp?", Reddit user *gymnasticgirl* connects Heard's situation to "✨misogyny✨", with user other users such as *Boulier* later expanding on this, arguing that misogyny is "ubiquitous and deeply ingrained," ultimately suggesting that many people fall short in recognizing and challenging it (2022). This highlights how Heard's gender is used as a weapon to delegitimize her claims of victimhood, aligning with Lazar's argument that institutionalized power is forever linked with other social identities such as gender, creating an intricate web of biases that shape how women's victimhood is understood (2007).

Contrarily, users who support Depp create a narrative where he is viewed as the true victim of abuse. This perspective is often supported by claims that while Depp's actions may have involved verbal abuse, substance use, or jealousy, it is unjust to equate these facts to proof of physical abuse. For instance, *Quora User B* argues that people who have been abused might eventually "snap back" and that "people don't suddenly in the 50s become raging abusers. Depp reportedly tends to be a tad jealous, but jealous doesn't mean abuser. Jealousy is insecurity." ("Who do you believe, Johnny Depp or Amber Heard? What part of the testimony stood out to you that made you believe them?", 2022). This explanation positions Depp's known violent behaviour as a natural human flaw of jealousy, ultimately discrediting him of any responsibility within the relationship. Moreover, *Quora User D* explains that "There was no factual evidence to suggest that Johnny did anything wrong other than the verbal abuse, drinking and smoking" ("Should I believe Amber Heard or Johnny Depp?", 2022). This perspective further highlights a common defence for Depp, where his problematic and allegedly violent behaviour, such as verbal aggression and substance abuse, is seen as less significant than Heard's alleged physical abuse.

Foucault's theory of power and discourse allows for a powerful lens of examination here, as these constructions of victimhood are shaped by the power structures of gender norms, media portrayals, and public image (Poorghorban, 2023). Depp's public persona as a beloved Hollywood figure can heavily contribute to his perceived victimhood compared to Heard's, as many of his supporters view Depp through his longstanding "good guy" or "comedic" image. This means that Depp's cultural status has the power to influence how his actions are interpreted and how his victimhood is construed (Schneck, 1987). For many online users, Depp's victimhood is framed as more legitimate and serious because of his fame and the cultural recognition of his persona as a beloved actor in nostalgic films such as *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Credibility

The portrayal of both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp's credibility in online discussions throughout the trial encompasses a very polarized debate. A recurring theme I noticed is the undermining of Heard's credibility, with many users questioning her honesty and proposing that she is manipulative. For example, Reddit user *silly_rabbit269* states, "As a female myself I too believe Amber is faking/hiding things to an extent. We may never know what exactly went through their marriage, but some of the audio clips clearly show that Amber is violent with Depp" ("Does anyone secretly wonder if Amber Heard is atleast partially telling the truth?", 2022). Although this user is explaining that the trial, and more specifically Heard and Depp's marriage, is complex, it reproduces a broader narrative that positions Heard as less credible, ultimately reinforcing delegitimizing narratives about her accusations. This means that the narrative surrounding Heard's credibility is reliant on skepticism and suspicion of her actions, contributing to a broader societal bias against women who come forward with abuse allegations, especially when the accused male is a well-liked figure.

The skepticism surrounding Heard's credibility in the context of online discussions aligns with Foucaultian theory of power and discourse. As Poorghorban (2023) argues, power structures, such as

gender, knowledge, and discourse, are influential in shaping how individuals and their credibility are perceived. In the case of the trial, Heard's credibility is not only questioned because of the complexities of the trial itself, such as the lawful inconsistencies, but also because of the broader power dynamics in motion, such as societal gender biases that undermine a woman's claims of abuse.

In direct contrast, Depp's credibility is often defended and upheld based on his well-known public persona as a beloved actor, often overshadowing his documented history of substance abuse and allegations of violence. For instance, Reddit user *butinthewhat* emphasizes Depp's complicated history of violent tendencies, stating, "It's well documented that he's had violence rage problems since the 80s. I'm so confused as to why people are pretending that there's no history of him assaulting people ("Why do people still believe Johnny Depp?", 2022). Nonetheless, even with such evidence publicly available, Depp's likeable image is often used to mitigate the impact of past allegations and those brought to light by Heard. Other Reddit users, such as *ShhPaperMoon*, build on this idea, arguing that "Depp has a long history of being violent when drunk. He is an entitled charming abusive person. Did some poop go down in this toxic relationship, absolutely but the common denominator here is Depp when he's high or drunk" ("Why do people still believe Johnny Depp?", 2022). I believe the complex dichotomy of credibility reflects broader societal tendencies to protect male celebrities, especially ones tied to nostalgia, from alleged violence they have caused, especially when their public image aligns with users' personal feelings such as likeability, comfort, and charisma.

It is important to note that this trial, and the subsequent public discussions regarding it, were rooted in extreme polarization. As discussed by *Quora User C*, "most people think dichotomously. When two people are in conflict, one will be regarded as "good" or "right," and the other will be regarded as "evil" or "wrong". ("Who do you believe, Johnny Depp or Amber Heard? What part of the testimony stood out to you that made you believe them?", 2022). This oversimplified narrative is limiting in nature,

with one person being cast as purely the victim and the other as the abuser and the villain, when it is a much more complex situation.

Summary

This research project sought to explore and understand the ways that easily accessible online discussion forums such as Reddit and Quora shape the perceptions of both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp. My research was guided by the following question: How do online discussion platforms such as Reddit and Quora influence the framing of gendered biases concerning Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, particularly in terms of victimhood and credibility during the 2022 defamation trial?

Through this analysis, I argue that online discussion platforms such as Reddit and Quora significantly influence the framing of gendered biases concerning Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, particularly in the contexts of victimhood and credibility. On Reddit, many conversations display support for Heard, or at least affirm a strong dislike for Depp, by emphasizing her victimization of not only Depp's action but also broader social forces such as misogyny and biphobia. This framing reinforces the idea that her victimhood and credibility are often questioned as a result of her gender and sexual identity, ultimately highlighting the gendered dynamics of public discourse surrounding the trial.

In direct contrast, Quora had a large support network for not only the defence of Depp, but also the villainization of Heard. Depp was commonly portrayed as the primary victim, with users often minimizing past behaviours such as substance abuse and violent tendencies. I found that this is largely due to his public persona as a male Hollywood favourite, causing a lot of people to struggle with the separation of Johnny Depp and their favourite film character. Moreover, Heard's accounts of violence from Depp were often delegitimized through narratives based on inherent suspiciousness or deceit. This gendered divide showcases how deeply ingrained gendered biases are in shaping public perceptions of victimhood and credibility. Overall, online platforms such as Reddit and Quora reproduce these complex

gendered narratives, ultimately contributing to the broader societal understanding of victimhood and credibility through the lens of gender and power.

Research Limitations

It is important to note that there were multiple limitations to my research project. Firstly, the time frame given was quite limiting in nature; with only three months to design, plan, complete, and share the research, I believe I was unable to display as much detail and depth in the analysis and overall project as I would have liked. Additionally, as the scope of the study was constrained by time, it led my methodology to focus on just two Reddit discussion threads and two Quora forums. By analyzing a smaller sample size, it is very possible I could not capture the full diversity of opinions shared about the trial or ensure a comprehensive representation of all user voices in the conversation. Moreover, the focus on the Depp v. Heard trial itself also posed critical limitations. While the research project provides valuable insights into the gendered framing of the trial and both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, an intersectional analysis that examined additional factors such as race, class, and disability would have likely provided a more complete understanding of how complex identities influence and are influenced by perceptions of victimhood and credibility. I understand that my findings fail to extend beyond white, able-bodied and rich celebrity perceptions, and I hope that future research could encapsulate broader identities and a more intersectional approach to grasp a fuller understanding of these discussions.

Avenues for Future Research

As mentioned briefly above, I am confident a strong avenue for future research could be taking an intersectional approach to investigate how gendered biases are framed in relation to identity factors such as race, class, disability/ability, religion and other factors. This would promote a deeper understanding of how the intersections of identity shape perceptions of victimhood, such as who can be a “proper” victim versus who can not and credibility.

Another avenue for future research could involve expanding or shifting the dataset to include a wider range of online discussion platforms and threads, such as Twitter, Facebook, or specialized forums such as ones located behind a paywall. These can be used to capture a more specific or diverse spectrum of public opinion. By including a larger or different set of opinions, I believe researchers could identify different themes and narratives on how gendered biases and notions of victimhood and credibility are framed across different online communities. This could provide a more complete picture of how social media platforms differ depending on their user demographics.

Reflection

When reflecting on this research project, I must acknowledge my own positionality that influenced the design, processes, and outcomes of the study. As someone with little experience in conducting qualitative research and using qualitative discourse analysis, I encountered challenges in applying these methods adequately throughout the entirety of my research project, which may have impacted the depth and quality of my analysis. Moreover, my strong pre-conceived alignment with feminist ideologies presented both advantages and challenges to my research; while it provided a critical perspective on gendered biases, it also made it difficult to separate myself from my research and remain non-biased throughout the research process. This struggle was a significant challenge throughout, and future research in this area, specifically when using a feminist critical discourse analysis framework, should carefully consider the impact of the researcher's subject position to confirm a balanced analysis.

Ultimately, this research emphasizes the powerful role online discussion platforms play in shaping the public's perceptions of gendered biases, victimhood, and credibility in high-profile trials. While limitations in the scope and methodology existed throughout, the findings of this research project provide an important starting point for future studies that can continue exploring the complexities of online discourse through a wider and more intersectional lens.

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