# Gender, reputation and believability in mediated representations about sexual harassment and assault

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This thesis is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
June 2025

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## Disclaimer

This thesis should not be taken as stating the truth or as claiming to know the truth about any of the reports of sexual harassment and assault discussed within it. The author has endeavoured to ensure that all information presented was correct at the time of submission and has based all accounts on third-party reporting that are cited herein. (Adapted from J. Robinson and Yoshida (2023) and McDonnell (2024)).

**Abstract**

Name and reputation have become key battlegrounds in debates about sexual harassment and assault, and the discussions that revolve around these cases have serious implications for how believability and sexual violence are discursively constructed online. By drawing on feminist scholarship on media, sexual violence, #MeToo, and believability, this thesis contributes to the field of feminist digital and cultural studies by highlighting a new key actor in these debates: The online commentators.

By drawing on a methodological approach of 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1993) together with a discourse and semiotic analysis, I explore a particular historical conjuncture in which debates about reputation and believability are prominent in online discourses about sexual harassment and assault. By taking on a reflexive approach to my research, I selected two case studies that were popularly discussed across my social media feeds: The criminal trial of former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, and the Johnny Depp/ Amber Heard defamation trial in the United States.

With a dataset of 2516 social media posts (including over 70 hours of video content) collected across four platforms (Twitter/X, Reddit, TikTok, and YouTube), I outline how gendered discourses on name and reputation can be used in the construction of believability online to excuse and/or justify male violence against women. By utilising a mixed methods approach to data collection that allowed me to mimic user-experiences on social media, I demonstrate that these debates have shifted to focus on who has the most supporters and who is the most popular, which translates to, *who has the most power*. In other words, I argue that it is no longer just 'she said, he said' as has been the focus of feminist research thus far. It has instead become, 's/he said, *they said*'.

**Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to have been funded by Strathclyde's Dean's Global Research Award, without which I would not have been able to undertake this PhD project.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisors: Professor Karen Boyle and Dr Michael Higgins. Your care and insight have been invaluable and without it, this process would never have been such an enriching experience. I hope this project, and the work I go on to do, does you both justice! I also want to add a second thank you to Karen for your mentorship outwith this PhD project. Thank you for teaching me what the work of feminism looks like, and for making me the researcher I am today.

I want to thank Dr Chamil Rathnayake for being a caring and considerate annual reviewer, and Dr Fiona McKay for being the best colleague and reader. Both of your comments and advice have helped shape this thesis.

To my PhD sisters: Clare, Elisa, Emma, and Maike, you have all helped me in so many ways. I never would have got through this process if it weren't for your friendship. Thank you for understanding why I am so useless at responding to messages and arranging catchups – I promise I will be better now! Similarly, my Media SIG sisters Amy, Ankita, Tokoni and Zoë, I can't wait to finally have the time to complete all our unfinished projects. Our calls and conference meetups have meant to the world to me, and I hope we never stop collaborating and working together. I am so lucky to have made the best of friends through this journey.

Lastly, to my wonderful family. Mom, Dad, Shane and Miyuki thank you for all our calls, messages and amazing holidays, they have kept me going through the hard times. A special thank you has to go to Mom and Dad who have supported me in all my dreams my entire life. This PhD is dedicated to both of you.

Finally, my Trav. I couldn't have asked for a better partner in life. Your love and support is (and has always been) my reason to keep going. I can't wait to see what we get up to next. I love you.

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# CHAPTER ONE
# Introduction

My interest in how reputation functions in mediated representations about sexual harassment and assault, is long standing. At the close of the South African municipal elections in 2016, President Jacob Zuma was giving his customary speech when four women stood in front of him in silent protest, holding makeshift cards that read, in part, '10 years later…Remember Khwezi' (Maughan, 2024, p. 13). 'Khwezi' was the pseudonym given to Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo who, ten years previously, faced Zuma in court with charges of rape. Zuma, thirty-two years her senior, claimed that they had had consensual sex, and accused Kuzwayo of being a 'honeytrap' sent to 'seduce' him by one of his political rivals (Maughan, 2024; Tlhabi, 2017). Zuma was ultimately acquitted of all charges. Although, as the silent protest above attests, there was always small-scale public acknowledgement and belief in 'Khwezi', the backlash against her was fanatical, as she later reflected to journalist Redi Tlhabi, 'That kinda took me by surprise, the hatred, it was thick, all over, even in the air I breathed' (Kuzwayo in Tlhabi, 2017, p. 53). At the time of the trial, I remember being moved by Kuzwayo's story, and shocked at the level of support for Zuma. His supporters stood outside the courthouse calling for Kuzwayo to be stoned and lynched (Maughan, 2024). The threats to her life were material. Kuzwayo's home was looted and later burned to the ground. At the end of the trial Kuzwayo and her mother were forced to flee the country (Maughan, 2024; Tlhabi, 2017). Three years later Zuma was elected President. At the time, I was shocked that a man who was credibly accused of rape could become the President. Writing this in 2025, however, recent events have meant that shock has turned into a profound disillusionment.

Watching that protest in 2016 was the start of my interest in how men accused of sexual violence seemed to rely on their 'good' reputations as a defence against accusations of bad behaviour. Zuma was a prime example of this. As a Black man living under Apartheid, Zuma was a freedom fighter for the African National Congress (ANC). He was convicted for trying to overthrow the Apartheid government and spent a decade in prison on Robben Island – the infamous South African prison in which Nelson Mandela was also held. During the tumultuous and violent final years of the Apartheid regime, it was Zuma who insisted on peace, playing a

key role in the National Peace Accord that was signed in 1991 (Maughan, 2024). Journalists who have interviewed him over the years have spoken about his consideration and care towards them (Maughan, 2024; Tlhabi, 2017). Indeed, before he allegedly raped her, Kuzwayo considered Zuma to be a father figure, referring to him respectfully, and lovingly, as 'Malume' ('Uncle') (Tlhabi, 2017). As Tlhabi argues in her book tracing Kuzwayo's life story, 'those who benefit the most after conflict, and become heroes who correct the wrongs of society, can live their lives believing that they are victims and that they are beyond reproach because of their previous good deeds' (ibid, p. 133).

When I moved overseas, I noticed a similar yet refracted version of this defence being utilised by predominantly privileged and powerful *white* men who saw themselves as victims, not of a violent and discriminatory institution, but of women's accusations. The harm was centred on the perceived damage these accusations had on their 'hard won' reputations. One case that caught my eye emerged during the 2018 confirmation hearing of, then, Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. During the proceedings, a report that Kavanaugh, along with a male friend, had attempted to rape a fellow student while they were all in high school became public (for more on this see Blasey Ford, 2024). That student, now a professor of psychology at Palo Alto University, Christine Blasey Ford, gave a cogent and powerful account of her experience that was broadcast around the world (Serhan, 2018). Although many commentators agreed that Blasey Ford seemed credible (Werner, 2018), Kavanaugh was still confirmed as a Supreme Court Judge.

What intrigued me most about that particular case was the focus on Kavanaugh's name, his distress in his 'good' name being ruined, and how the defence of him was wrapped up in what his name *represented*: Himself, his family, and his nation. It was this case that inspired my masters dissertation, which I later published (House, 2023), arguing that Kavanaugh's reputational sanctity ended up mattering more than the material sanctity of Blasey Ford's body. This thesis is inspired by these ideas and observations, and as such, it builds on the existing feminist literature on contemporary backlashes against feminism which present men as literally as well as metaphorically endangered (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Boyle, 2024; Manne, 2017, 2020; Tuerkheimer, 2021). By drawing specifically on online discussions centred on allegations of sexual harassment and assault, I am interested in how these debates are negotiated online in what Karen Boyle (2024) has termed 'the long #MeToo moment'.

## Research Context

In October 2017, the actor Alyssa Milano tweeted the first 'Me Too', and encouraged all women who had experienced sexual harassment or assault to do the same, in order to 'give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem' (Milano in Boyle, 2024, p. 4).[1] The impact and success of Milano's tweet has been widely researched and discussed in both popular and academic texts, however, scholars have also criticised mediated narratives that imbued it with uniqueness, ignoring the decades of feminist activism that came before (Boyle 2019, p.5). In fact, even the moniker, '#MeToo', was not original. 'Me Too' was first used by the activist Tarana Burke, who started the Me Too Movement in 2006, specifically for Black women and girls who had been abused.[2] The virality of the tweet overshadowed these origins and refocused the media narrative around (mostly) white, cisgender women celebrities, thus losing sight of Burke's *intersectional* demands for recognition and solidarity.

It is for this reason that feminist scholar, Karen Boyle (2019, p. 5), argued for the need to recognise #MeToo as a *moment* of popular feminist digital activism that is *part of* (rather than constitutive of) the wider Me Too Movement, led by Burke. Hence the distinction between #MeToo and Me Too. As Boyle (2019) explained in her book tracing this moment, it is important to make this distinction because while #MeToo brought unprecedented visibility to the issue of sexual violence, its focus was predominantly *discursive*: circulating stories and testimony about people's experiences of sexual violence, but not necessarily doing *the work* that is required to *end* that violence. Furthermore, #MeToo became an object of mainstream media commentary that centred the 'extraordinary' and controversial stories, obscuring the everydayness of sexual violence (De Benedictis, Orgad, & Rottenberg, 2019). As such, the visibility #MeToo amassed was ambivalent, reproducing patterns of marginalisation and exclusion which have long characterised media interested in sexual violence (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 45). As Boyle (2024) points out in the revised version of her first book on #MeToo, academic writing has at times reproduced these same exclusionary patterns by focusing on the popular #MeToo stories, and as such, there is a danger of #MeToo 'becoming

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[1] At the time of Milano's post, the social media platform 'X' was still known as 'Twitter', which is why I am using the old terminology. I discuss this change further in **Chapter Three**.

[2] See https://metoomvmt.org/.

an origin story for contemporary feminist activism against sexual harassment and assault' (ibid, p. 7). To combat this, Boyle (2024) conceptualises 'the *long* #MeToo moment'.

Centring the *long* moment works not only to highlight the history of feminist activism and discussion about sexual harassment and assault prior to Milano's tweet, it also takes into consideration the *ongoing* uses and conversations about #MeToo (ibid). As such, Boyle argues the long #MeToo moment works to keep the relationship between representation and activism in focus. This long moment is what makes up the context of my thesis. Where Boyle was interested in tracing this long moment as a means of understanding the conditions that lead to the virality of #MeToo, I am using it to understand the backlash that centres a concern for specifically men's reputations. Again, #MeToo was not the origin point of this backlash but, like Boyle (2024) argues, it was the 'cultural flashpoint' for concerns about the implication of women's speech on men's reputations *that were already taking place* (see J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023). I opened this chapter with one such example that stretches back to 2006: The maniacal backlash against Kuzwayo for supposedly being 'sent' to Zuma in an effort to blight his political ambitions (Maughan, 2024; Tlhabi, 2017), but similar narratives were playing out around the world.

*The long #MeToo moment*

In 2011, then head of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was arrested for sexually assaulting a hotel housekeeper, Nafissatou Diallo, on a trip to New York (Tranchese, 2023, pp. 230-233). In her work tracing media reports on rape in British press, Tranchese (2023) identifies this moment as the start of news reporting around sexual violence that centred the perspective of the (reported) perpetrator and used linguistic hedging techniques that fostered a distrust in the victim/survivor(s) story (ibid, p. 230). Indeed, Tranchese argues that as the news media became more 'celebrity' focused, 'mistrust towards women became more accentuated' (ibid, p. 254). In the case of Strauss-Kahn, this was bolstered by the court's initial decision to drop the charges against him due to Diallo's supposed 'lack of truthfulness' (ibid, p. 231). As Tranchese, and others (Gilmore, 2017; Tuerkheimer, 2021) have argued, Diallo's race and social status (in comparison to Strauss-Kahn) undoubtably played a role in this. As a Black woman from Guinea who had been granted asylum in America, Diallo fit the myth of the 'gold digging woman' who would make a 'false accusation' for money (Tranchese, 2023; Tuerkheimer, 2021). This is despite the fact that another woman, a white journalist from

France, also came forward accusing Strauss-Kahn of attempted rape (Tuerkheimer, 2021). Regardless, Diallo was accused of being a 'pawn' sent to derail Strauss-Kahn's political ambitions (ibid, p. 231), a popular fallacy as an opinion poll at the time found that 57% of respondents believed Strauss-Kahn was a victim of a smear campaign (Harris, 2011).

In the end, Diallo successfully sued Strauss-Kahn for physical, psychological, and reputational harm, and settled with him for an undisclosed sum (Tuerkheimer, 2021, p. 234). But the damage was done. As Tranchese notes that initial ruling 'effectively turned the omnipresent spectre of false accusations into reality, contributing to strengthening the sense of disbelief towards women' (Tranchese, 2023, p. 231). This is a somewhat ironic outcome, as the Strauss-Khan case is also credited with reigniting a French feminist movement (Davies, 2011; Flynn, 2024). Regardless, the Strauss-Kahn case influenced subsequent reporting on high profile cases involving sexual violence allegations. Tranchese links this to other international studies, such as Deb Waterhouse-Watson's (2020) work on media centred on reporting sexual assault allegations against pro-footballers in Australia, and the reporting that emerged on Jimmy Savile one year later in the United Kingdom.

In 2012, stories about the beloved television personality Jimmy Savile started to penetrate mainstream media news cycles. Savile died in late 2011. Although rumours had always existed about his proclivity for 'underaged girls' – particularly on early internet forums and gossip sites – in the mainstream media these were often excused as part of his 'eccentric' lifestyle (Boyle, 2018, p. 1566). Although Savile is now recognised as a prolific sexual abuser of both women and children, Boyle (2018) demonstrates that this recasting of Savile as 'monstrous' was by no means immediate. In her article exploring the reporting on Savile after his death, Boyle points to examples in the media where the allegations against Savile were both downplayed – with the same linguistic hedging Tranchese (2023) identified in the Strauss-Kahn case – as well as dismissed as false, with news reports still maintaining and defending his 'national treasure' status (Boyle, 2018, pp. 1566-1568). The sheer scale of Savile's abuses – and the fact that he was found to have sexually abused *children* as well as adult women – meant that his reputation was truly ruined in the end, but the resistance to that ruination that Boyle (2018) highlights is telling.

The revelations about Savile resulted in a police investigation dubbed 'Operation Yewtree' that implicated many more high-profile abusers, including TV presenter Stuart Hall, publicist Max

Clifford, and children's entertainer Rolf Harris (J. Smith, 2014). Although many of these men were convicted for their past crimes (including all three mentioned here), as with Savile, there still existed a fear that they were being 'unreasonably' pursued. Indeed, not long after it was announced, Operation Yewtree was accused of being a 'witch-hunt of elderly celebrities' (ibid). Although their older age and diminished star power was likely the reason they were (finally) acknowledged as abusive (Tranchese, 2023, pp. 224-225), their declining health and elderly status was also used as a means to garner sympathy for them when they were finally brought to justice (e.g. BBC, 2019; Freedland, 2013). A similar pattern of reporting surrounded the allegations against Bill Cosby in America.

Bill Cosby was a beloved television personality, affectionately dubbed 'America's Dad' thanks to his sitcom character Cliff Huxtable (Dunne, 2019). Like Savile, rumours about Cosby's 'sexual indiscretions' had circulated for years before the mainstream media reported on them (ibid). It was only in 2014 when comedian Hannibal Buress made a comment about the rape allegations against Cosby during a standup routine that any 'mainstream' interest in the case emerged (ibid, p. 112). A year later, *New York Magazine* ran a cover story on the case, interviewing 35 women who reported being abused by Cosby (Malone, 2015). Like Savile, it was the sheer volume of women speaking out against Cosby, combined with his age and declining 'star status' that meant he was eventually accepted as another 'fallen star' (Tranchese, 2023, pp. 224-225). However, like Savile, there was still resistance to that idea, especially with Cosby's fans.

As Dunne's (2019) work on the case demonstrates, fans online based their defence of Cosby on rape myths about the highly-promiscuous Black woman, as well as the real racial history in America of white women weaponizing assault allegations against Black men. The latter made up part of Cosby's legal defence (Lindsey, 2018). The case that went to trial did involve a white woman, Andrea Constand, but Cosby was accused by women of many different races. Not to mention, it was the work of Black feminist activism in particular that finally brought Cosby to justice (ibid). Regardless, the backlash was enough that the initial trial resulted in a hung jury (Benshoff & Ballard Brown, 2018). Cosby was convicted in the second trial, but this was overturned after the court found that Cosby was unfairly prosecuted because his conviction was partly based on testimony Cosby gave on the condition that he would not be charged (Dale & Durkin Richer, 2021).

Of course, that there might be a resistance to publicly condemning famous men accused of wrongdoing is perhaps not entirely surprising. However, it was not only well-known men who were being defended. For example, in America there was a growing media interest on campus rape cultures, initiated by an online campaign focused on the rape of a high school student by two student athletes in Steubenville, Ohio (Kushner, 2013). The two athletes, Trent Mays and Ma'lik Richmond, raped a girl, known publicly as 'Jane Doe', while she was 'substantially impaired' at a party they were all attending (Valenti & Friedman, 2013). The rape was witnessed and filmed by other students in attendance who posted photos, videos, and dehumanising comments about Jane Doe online during and after the rape (Rentschler, 2014; Valenti & Friedman, 2013). Originally, the school and authorities did not act on the information or social media posts and were accused of trying to protect the accused. This led a local crime blogger Alexandria Goddard, along with her activist friend Michelle McKee, to post about the incident in the hopes of getting mainstream media interest in the case (Kushner, 2013). When Goddard was eventually sued for defamation by one of the footballers involved in posting photos of the victim online, McKee passed on their evidence to an Anonymous vigilante, whose campaign against the school went viral (ibid). Mays and Richmond were both eventually prosecuted and convicted for their crimes although their sentences, one year for Richmond and two for Mays, were considered lenient by some (ibid). None of the students involved in witnessing and sharing the rape on social media were charged, however the Anonymous vigilante, Deric Lostutter, was eventually convicted for his involvement in exposing the case and sentenced to two years (Kocher, 2017).

A similar campus rape story captured media attention in 2015 when a student at Stanford raped an unconscious woman at a party being held at the university (C. Miller, 2019). The student, Brock Turner, received unduly favourable treatment both in the courts and mainstream media (Manne, 2017). Turner, who was a student athlete at the prestigious university, was dubbed the 'Stanford Swimmer' in media reports on the case – conveniently obscuring the reason for him being in the news – and articles were interspersed with descriptions of his crimes and his record swim times (C. Miller, 2019, p. 51). Turner was eventually sentenced to just six months in jail (of which he served three). The maximum sentence for a crime like Turner's is fourteen years. Turner's lenient sentence was further problematised when his father's letter to the judge was made public, in which he described the rape as '20 minutes of action' (Dan Turner in Xu, 2016). The case received wide public backlash, particularly after the victim – Chanel Miller – had her victim impact statement published by *Buzzfeed* (see K. J. M. Baker, 2016). As in the

cases above, feminist activism led to some justice: the Judge, Aaron Persky, was later recused and the law was subsequentially changed to expand the definition of rape, and introduce a mandatory minimum sentence for crimes like Turner's (C. Miller, 2019; L. Turner, 2019). Furthermore, Turner was still legally recognised as a rapist, which has impacted both his name and reputation. This was emphasised when a law professor creating a textbook on criminal justice inserted Turner's picture and description next to the definition of 'rape' making his name '"the textbook definition" of a rapist' (Rennison, 2017).[3]

Just over a year after Turner was found guilty and sentenced to six months in jail, a story broke about another high-profile Hollywood abuser, although this time he was not an actor. Journalists Jodi Kantor and Megahn Twohey (2017) published their seismic story detailing some of the abuses Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was reported committing against women who worked for him. This was followed by fellow reporter Ronan Farrow's (2017), story which included the first allegations of rape against Weinstein. Inspired by these events, Milano posted her #MeToo tweet. As scholars have demonstrated, the reception to #MeToo was phenomenal (Boyle, 2019), yet the backlash I have been describing was unperturbed. Part of the success of Milano's tweet was that it did not name any alleged perpetrators, nor did it encourage others to do so. Indeed, many of the initial responses to #MeToo did not name anyone (Boyle, 2024, p. 16). However, those that did, faced almost immediate consequences.

Moira Donegan, a journalist working at *The New Republic*, was inspired by #MeToo to create a Google spreadsheet for women working in media to 'track' men they had had 'bad' experiences with as a type of digital whisper network (Haire, Newman, Loney-Howes, & Fileborn, 2019). She titled the spreadsheet, 'Shitty Media Men' and asked contributors in a comment to 'Please never name an accuser, and please never share this document with a man' (Shapiro, 2022). Within twelve hours of its release it was shared publicly by a *Buzzfeed* journalist, Doree Shafrir, prompting Donegan to remove the list, but the damage was done (Haire *et al.*, 2019; Shapiro, 2022). The backlash was immediate, and Donegan, along with 30 contributors known as 'Jane Does', were eventually sued for defamation by one of the men named, Stephen Elliot (ibid). Among other offenses, Elliot was accused of rape on the list (Shapiro, 2022). As Bridget Haire, Christy E. Newman, Rachel Loney-Howes and Bianca

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[3] I return to this case study in **Chapter Two**.

Fileborn (2019, p. 269) argue in their writing on this case, the backlash and lawsuit mischaracterised the list as a public document intended to shame and punish men, when Donegan's stated intentions were instead to create a *private* document, meant to *warn and protect* women from potentially abusive men. Indeed, as they point out, it was other journalists, including right-wing blogger Mike Cernovich, that ended up publishing the names of the men involved, not Donegan (ibid, p. 266). Nevertheless, Elliot was successful in his suit, settling out of court for a reported six figure sum (Italie & Noveck, 2023).

In France, a similar scenario was playing out. Two days before Milano's tweet, French journalist Sandra Muller encouraged women to #BalanceTonPorc ('#OutYourPig') on Twitter, which she followed with a tweet about her own sexual harassment experience in which she named television executive Eric Brion (Flynn, 2024, p. 8). Three months later Brion sued Muller for defamation. The lawsuit was posted just days after a controversial letter, signed by 100 French women, went viral for condemning the #MeToo moment as 'puritanical', with the signatories defending a man's right to 'pester' (Flynn, 2024; Poirier, 2018). Muller initially lost the defamation case, and was ordered to pay Brion €15,000, however she managed to overturn the conviction in 2021 (AFP, 2021). Similarly, in Japan, as #MeToo was taking off online, journalist Shiori Ito published a book detailing her rape by prominent Japanese journalist Noriyuki Yamaguchi, and her subsequent failed attempt to have him prosecuted for his actions (the book was later published in English, see Ito, 2021). Yamaguchi sued Ito for defamation. Although Ito won, and Yamaguchi's appeal was denied, the Supreme Court conceded that Ito had defamed him in her book when she suggested he had drugged her, awarding him ¥550,000 in damages (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, pp. 94-96). As Haire *et al* note on the 'Shitty Media Men' case, 'there is still no protected space for women to tell their stories if that includes naming of perpetrators' (2019, p. 279). Even if they do not face legal challenge, the *social* backlash against these women can be immense.

Blasey Ford, whose 2018 testimony against Kavanagh I mentioned earlier, has recently commented on the profound ramifications she has, and is *still*, experiencing since speaking out (Blasey Ford, 2024). Most recently, Amber Heard faced a co-ordinated and far-reaching online harassment campaign against her after her ex-husband, Johnny Depp, sued her for an op-ed in which she described herself as 'a public figure representing domestic abuse' (Heard, 2018). Importantly, Heard did not name Depp or detail any of her experiences of abuse, but Depp was still able to convince a US jury that Heard had defamed him, and with malice (J. Robinson &

Yoshida, 2023, p. 332). However, this is not to say that the reactions to Blasey Ford and Heard have been straightforwardly negative. Both Blasey Ford and Amber Heard have also received widespread support. Indeed, Heard's allegations of abuse were found to be 'substantially true' by a Judge in the UK during a separate defamation trial Depp brought against *The Sun* newspaper (ibid, pp. 315-326), a point feminist activists have repeatedly made in her defence. Similarly, in her recent memoir, Blasey Ford describes receiving over a hundred thousand letters after testifying in 2018, the vast majority of which she describes as letters of thanks and support (Blasey Ford, 2024, p. xiv).

As I was concluding this thesis, another case in France was likewise receiving international attention. Dominique Pelicot, along with fifty other men, were charged with raping and abusing Pelicot's (now ex) wife, Gisèle Pelicot (see Darian, 2025). The abuse took place over almost a decade, with Dominique Pelicot drugging his wife into unconsciousness, and then inviting men into their bedroom to rape her (Darian, 2025). The case received widespread coverage, not just because of the horrifying details, but because of Gisèle Pelicot's decision to waive her anonymity, making the trial public (Chrisafis, 2024). When addressing her decision to be publicly named, Gisèle Pelicot cited two reasons: What she described as 'will and determination to change society' by serving as an encouragement for other victim/survivors of rape to come forward (Gisèle Pelicot in Walt, 2025); and for her grandchildren, so they could be proud of their name as it relates to her, and not just their grandfather, Dominique (Gozzi, 2024). Her bravery has been internationally recognised and commended (A. Harding, 2024) and she has been dubbed a 'feminist icon' (see Turnbull, 2024).

Of course, waiving anonymity does not guarantee a positive reception. Indeed, Amber Heard was publicly known, but the backlash against her was so vitriolic that some mainstream commentators have dubbed it 'the end of #MeToo' (Boyle, 2024, p. 121). Although, as Boyle points out, commentators have been quick to declare #MeToo's 'end', and have done so for many other cases, including Blasey Ford's (ibid, pp. 121-125). What should be clear from the above, is that the backlash against #MeToo has been present from its start, and that it was based on a long-standing backlash against women who accused (specifically) men of abuse. As Boyle notes, this history 'disrupts a more linear backlash narrative which situates misogyny as the *cost* of such a high profile reckoning with sexual harassment and assault' (ibid, p. 112 - emphasis author's own). Indeed, the online campaign against Heard mimicked past harassment campaigns against women online, the most prominent of which has been dubbed 'Gamergate'.

Although an in-depth discussion on online harassment campaigns is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is relevant to touch on Gamergate as it makes up part of the long #MeToo moment and has wider themes which relate to this project. As Emma Jane (2017) explains, Gamergate started in August 2014 when the software developer, Eron Gjoni, penned an almost 10,000 word blog in which he excoriated his ex-partner and games developer, Zoë Quinn. Amongst a litany of scurrilous attacks on Quinn's integrity, Gjoni also implied that Quinn had slept with a journalist in order to secure positive reviews for her game (ibid, p. 30). At the time there was a growing conspiracy amongst some in the online gaming community that mostly left-wing gaming journalists were colluding with games developers 'to promote a social justice agenda and focusing on cultural/social aspects of games as opposed to assessing their technical and play features' (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 553). As such, Gjoni's accusation acted as an incendiary device, that culminated in a co-ordinated and misogynistic online harassment campaign against Quinn and other women (typically feminists) in the gaming community (Massanari, 2017). The conspiracy was quickly debunked, with even Gjoni acknowledging that the suggestion was untrue (Jane, 2017), but the effects of Gamergate and the promotion of conservative influencers it fostered, are still visible and active online today. As the journalist Taylor Lorenz notes, even Steve Bannon – an integral figure in Trump's first election to office – credited Gamergate for creating 'the "army" that got "turned on to politics and Trump"' (Lorenz, 2023, p. 165).

The 'army' behind Gamergate is a faction of the internet known as the 'manosphere' which feminist scholar Debbie Ging (2019, p. 639) describes as a 'loose confederacy' of men's rights interest groups that exist online. These groups are virulently anti-feminist and misogynist spaces that have given way to a slew of online influencers who have captured both scholarly and journalistic interest in recent years (Bates, 2020; Bell, 2025; Finlayson, 2021; Haslop, Ringrose, Cambazoglu, & Milne, 2024; Johanssen, 2021). The most 'infamous' of these is Andrew Tate, a British-American former kickboxer turned social media entrepreneur who openly identifies as a misogynist and is currently under investigation for human trafficking, rape, and organised crime (BBC, 2025; Haslop *et al.*, 2024). The outsized focus on Tate has centred his popularity with young, adolescent boys (Haslop *et al.*, 2024), however it is Tate's – and other manosphere influencers like him – use of the technological affordances of social media that have also captured the attention of scholars researching anti-feminist backlashes online (e.g. Ging, Baker, & Brandt Andreasen, 2024). As Ging (2019, pp. 642-643) explains,

these influencers capitalise on the anonymity, speed, and social disembodiment that social media enables, therefore facilitating 'hostile and often illegal performances of masculinity' which 'are effectively impossible to regulate online'. This thesis is not focused on the manosphere. In fact, as I go on to explain in **Chapter Three**, my methodology was selected because it did not actively seek out manosphere content (i.e. I did not exclude manosphere content from the analysis, but also did not explicitly search for it). This allowed me to determine its intrinsic influences in wider social media contexts. However, it makes up an important part of the anti-feminist online backlash in the long #MeToo moment and thus forms part of the context for this project.

As the above case studies demonstrate, concerns over name and reputation have been central to the debate about sexual harassment and assault in the long #MeToo moment and have made up part of the backlash against it. What is clear, is that this is a *mediated* backlash spanning both mainstream and social media. Of course, the mainstream media has been at the heart of some of these perpetrators coming to 'justice' (e.g. Savile, Weinstein, Cosby), even as media industries and texts have protected some of these same men for decades. Furthermore, #MeToo – itself a hyper-mediated event – has demonstrated the resistive potential of social media in highlighting the power of women's collective voice (Kay, 2020). However, as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins (2023) note, this resistance is highly ambivalent, based on a mainstream media that benefits from keeping these stories contentious, and a social media that has no politics, and as such the affordances of its platforms work both ways and can easily be mobilised for the powerful.

*Critical reflections spanning the long #MeToo moment*

What is clear from the above, is that the long #MeToo moment is characterised by contradiction. It is a moment where sexual harassment and assault are more visible *as a problem* than ever before, and at the same time there exists a backlash. This contradictory moment is best illustrated by Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) writing on popular feminism and popular misogyny. As she explains, feminism is more 'popular' than ever before, but the types of feminisms that become popular only do so because they centre accessibility, palatability, and importantly, *visibility* (ibid, p. 6). As Banet-Weiser argues, popular feminism operates in an economy of visibility and as such, it is a mediated type of feminism that is able to achieve its unprecedented visibility because it does not offer any meaningful challenge to deeply

imbedded structural inequalities (ibid, pp. 6-17). As Banet-Weiser puts it, it is the *visibility* that then becomes the end goal, 'rather than a means to an end' (ibid, p. 23).

It is clear, then, that popular feminism is entangled in the long #MeToo moment with its emphasis on individual self-empowerment that centres the most visible public figures and thus, as I noted earlier, ends up obscuring the 'everydayness' of sexual violence (De Benedictis *et al.*, 2019). This is not to discredit the resistive potential of online moments like #MeToo. Indeed, 'speaking out', as Tanya Serisier (2018) explains, has long been recognised as playing a foundational role in feminist responses to sexual violence, exemplified in the tenet 'the personal is political' (ibid, pp. 3-7). In fact, listening to victim/survivors' speech has profoundly impacted the way feminists understand and conceptualise sexual violence. For example, through the work of the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s that are recognised as establishing rape as a social and political problem (Horeck, 2004; Serisier, 2018), and Liz Kelly's (1988) theory of the continuum of sexual violence that demonstrated the common traits between 'everyday' experiences of sexism or sexual harassment, and what are considered more serious forms of sexual violence, like rape. However, as Serisier points out, while speaking out has had a significant cultural impact, it:

> 'has not ended sexual violence, nor does it seem to have significantly reduced it, or to have eradicated the stigma associated with being a rape victim.' (Serisier, 2018, p. 12)

This issue with speaking out is emblematic of the contradictory long #MeToo moment in which women are increasingly impelled to speak out, but as the above summary established, by speaking out they are not guaranteed justice, and are also exposed to a fiercely misogynistic backlash that circulates on the same platforms promoting their speech (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Jane, 2017; Kay, 2020). Feminist scholar, Jilly Boyce Kay calls this 'communicative injustice', which she explains:

> 'relates to the multiple ways in which women…and other "others" are denied a voice that is sufficiently expansive, complex and meaningful so as to allow them a position of full citizenship and personhood in contemporary culture' (Kay, 2020, p. 17).

This punishment of women's voices is not new. In fact, the demonisation of women's speech can be traced back to the days of the witch trials (ibid, pp. 10-13). As Kay argues, this history of punishing women's voices demonstrates its subversive power, but it is at its most subversive when it is centred on the *collective* rather than individual voice (ibid, p. 12). This is the pitfall

of the current neoliberal, popular feminist culture, that focuses on *individual* self-empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As such, the popular #MeToo stories become stories about highly visible public figures and their individual believability.

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins define 'believability' as 'the *capability of being believed*, and…the *quality of being convincing*' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 13 - empahsis author's own). As they explain, a person's 'believability' centres on who they are (subjectivity) and what they do (performance). The 'struggle' for believability in cases like the ones outlined above, take place in what they call the 'economy of believability' which 'represents an affective and epistemic continuum within which subjects are unevenly positioned to access and harness believability' (ibid, p. 29). As such, in this new economy, the more subjective resources a person has, the less they need to '*do'* to be believed. As they explain, this is a mediated economy, because these struggles take place through media culture (like #MeToo). The result is an increased visibility of *certain* women (mostly white, middle class, cisgendered, heterosexual), their voices, and their stories. However, that increased visibility is not really leading to any meaningful social change, recognition, or power (ibid, pp. 27-28). Women are speaking, but they are not being *listened to* (Kay, 2020, p. 16). Instead, that visibility is opening them up to backlashes that can be described as popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 31-36).

Unlike popular feminism, popular misogyny, as Banet-Weiser argues, is not as visible – or at least, it is not as visible *as misogyny* – because it instead manifests as the 'norm' or 'common sense' (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 32-33). Indeed, as feminist philosopher Kate Manne (2017) argues, it can even come across as 'well meaning'. For example, one expression of popular misogyny is what Manne calls 'himpathy' which she describes as the disproportionate sympathy given to (predominantly) privileged men when they are accused of sexual harassment and assault (ibid, pp. 196-205). Himpathy was driving the Judge in his sentence of Brock Turner discussed above, and in the choice not to hold all the students involved in the Steubenville rape case accountable. This demonstrates the ways in which popular misogyny inserts itself into structural power, influencing policy and legal discourses (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 33). In doing so, popular misogyny at times mirrors popular feminism, but it is what Banet-Weiser describes as a 'funhouse mirror' in that it reflects feminist messages but in a distorting way that ends up serving misogynistic purposes (ibid, pp. 31-37). As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, this is exemplified in the reactions to #MeToo that decried its

‘unfairness’, arguing that women’s believability has gone ‘too far’ (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 29). This was the reaction to the ‘Shitty Media Men’ list above, or the belief that Operation Yewtree was becoming a ‘witch-hunt of elderly celebrities’ (J. Smith, 2014). In this version of popular misogyny, it is the men who are the true victims of vindictive women’s speech.

The notion that men are the ‘true’ victims in these scenarios is supported by the historical construction of men as victims (Chouliaraki, 2024). Media scholar, Lilie Chouliaraki (2024, p.6) explains that the current discourse on victimhood has been centred around a privileging of pain, which she argues favours the powerful. This is because ‘competing claims to pain’ obscure the connection between systemic suffering (‘suffering as a condition…that ties the self to broader circumstances that perpetuate physical or symbolic violence’) and tactical suffering (‘suffering as a claim selectively adopted by individuals or groups for their gain’) resulting in a type of ‘emotional capitalism’ in which different claims to pain compete for dominance in a marketplace of victims (ibid, p. 17). These competing discourses are exacerbated by the affordances of social media which capitalise on engagement and the attention economy, resulting in what Chouliaraki (2024; p.31) describes as a ‘platformisation of pain’. Like Banet-Weiser and Higgins’s (2023) economy of believability, the platformisation of pain works in a ‘historically hierarchical landscape of communication’ (p.34) that favours certain voices over others. As Chouliaraki argues men, and in particular *white* men, have been historically constructed as victims through discourses of war and crime, and so through the platformisation of pain, it is *white men* who are seen as ‘the quintessential victims of modern times’ (p.70).

Although this is not a PhD about #MeToo, this summary provides the historical and critical context needed to understand the key focus underpinning my thesis: How the meaning of sexual harassment and assault are continually being contested and explored online through conversations about reputation and believability. Indeed, as I complete this thesis, two high-profile cases (Russel Brand and Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs) are making their way through the courts and serve as another example of how these issues remain hotly contested and debated online (see Peplow, 2025; Quinn, 2025). Where previous writing on these themes has focused on the believability of (reported) perpetrators and victim/survivors, what I will argue in this thesis is that these conversations have expanded to include the believability of the *commentators* as well. Therefore, my thesis is concerned with who gets to talk with authority and who gets to be believed. By drawing on the construction of men, and in particular white men, as victims of

women's speech (above), I outline how gendered discourses on name and reputation can be used in the construction of believability online (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023) to excuse and/or justify male violence against women (**Chapter Four**, **Chapter Five**). Through an analysis of my two case studies, which highlight the interconnected nature of both celebrity and political cultures, I will demonstrate that the struggle for believability online has moved on from the typical 'she said, he said' arguments (**Chapter Six**). Thus, this thesis argues that believability is not only about who one is and what one does, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) write, it is also about *how many supporters* one has, and *who those supporters are*.

As such, this project is part of, and expands, the field of feminist media studies that has until now centred their analysis on the victim/survivors and the perpetrators alone. In constructing this argument, my work draws on feminist theory that has made key academic interventions on the topics of #MeToo (Boyle, 2024), sexual violence (Gavey, 2019; Kelly, 1988), believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023), and online popular feminism and popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017; Kay, 2020; Manne, 2017, 2020). By turning the attention to the online commentators, I demonstrate that believability is no longer solely about 'she said, he said' debates. It has instead become 's/he said, *they said*'.

*Case studies*

Given this context, I wanted to choose case studies that spanned this long #MeToo moment, but were still contemporary to my PhD, and that allowed me to discuss different spheres of interest which intersected with questions about reputation and believability. As such, I settled on the 2020 criminal trial against Former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, and the 2022 defamation trial involving both Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. I will expand on the details of these cases in later chapters, but the key point is that these two case studies allow me to trace how gender, reputation and believability are negotiated in both the political and celebrity spheres. I was also interested in what these cases allowed me to say about name. While both Johnny Depp and Amber Heard are publicly known, the victim/survivors in the Alex Salmond Trial were, and are still, all anonymous. As such, these two case studies offer a chance to investigate how reputation and believability are negotiated online in both the absence and inclusion of a name. As both case studies take place in the Global North, I will focus on an Anglo-American context for this project.

**Research Questions**

At its core, this thesis is about sexual harassment and assault, and feminist responses to that. My aim is to investigate the types of debates that are taking place online that centre issues of reputation and name to understand their effectiveness, so that feminists may be better prepared to combat them. In examining these issues, I answer the following two questions:

1. What is the function of reputation and a 'good/bad' name in online discussions about sexual harassment and assault?
2. In cases involving sexual harassment and assault, how, and in relation to whom, is believability negotiated online?

These two questions get to the heart of what I am most interested in exploring with this thesis: Who gets to talk with authority, and who gets to be believed on questions about sexual harassment and assault? Next, I consider terminology before moving on to an outline of my thesis.

**A Note on Terminology**

Before turning to an overview of the thesis, I want to define some terms. This project deals with a number of reports about sexual harassment and assault, many of which are still contested. As will have become clear from the summary above, scholars have tended to use the term 'sexual violence' to encompass all experiences of sexual abuse in line with what Liz Kelly (1988) termed the 'continuum of sexual violence'. As I discussed above, Kelly's (1988) continuum is a foundational analysis of sexual harms that has informed feminist scholarly work on the subject because it acknowledges the common traits between experiences of the 'everyday-ness' of sexism (like sexual harassment) and incidents that are considered more serious forms of sexual violence (such as rape). Furthermore, by centring the continuum, Kelly focuses on the perspective of the victim/survivor, rather than the perpetrator, which helps highlight the *harm* of these incidents, and how they might create the conducive context for further violence. As such, scholars have followed Kelly's language, referring to all instances of sexual abuse and harassment as 'sexual violence'. While there is an argument that instances of sexual harassment *are* a type of symbolic violence, I think focusing on the word 'violence' sometimes disguises these 'everyday' experiences. For this reason, in this thesis I have chosen

to use the language in Milano's tweet, 'sexual harassment and assault', because I think this is more expansive. I will be more specific in my descriptions when discussing specific cases and incidents, but as a collective term, 'sexual harassment and assault' comes closest to bringing these issues together, as Kelly's (1988) continuum intends. Similarly, I use the categories 'victim' and 'survivor' interchangeably in this thesis. I will use the term 'victim/survivor' when referring collectively to people who have experienced sexual harassment and assault, in order to take into account the varied identities and preferences of people who have experienced sexual harassment and assault (Serisier, 2018). However, in my case studies I will defer to the preferred term of the people involved, where this is known.

**Overview of Thesis**

This thesis is made up of five substantive chapters and a conclusion. Chapter Two: **'Know My Name': The construction of identity through naming and name calling**, lays the conceptual groundwork for the thesis, exploring how name, reputation and believability have been theorised in existing scholarly work. Using Roland Barthes (1993) writing on mythologies, and my previous writing on this topic (House, 2023), I argue that a name functions as a myth that works in conjunction with other myths to privilege certain forms of subjectivity over others. A reputation acts as the dominant myth behind a person's name, and both name and reputation work as resources individuals can draw on to exercise symbolic power (Thompson, 1999). I explain how this works within Banet-Weiser and Higgins's (2023) economy of believability to demonstrate how name and reputation can work to reinforce and uphold not only the gendered hierarchy, but the believability of men over women.

Chapter Three: **Methodological Reflections & Methods** is where I outline the methodological framework for my thesis. I draw on Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledges' to justify my choices in methods as well as my data collection process. I argue that this PhD project, and the knowledge I am able to produce with it, make up one part of a wider system of knowledges (ibid) that create a framework for understanding how name and reputation function in the economy of believability, so that other researchers may expand on this in their own work. As such, I demonstrate how my thesis fits into a wider and collaborative conversation on believability and its mediated representations in cases that involve sexual harassment and assault. Additionally, I outline my mixed methods approach to both data collection and analysis, as I draw on both a semiotic and discourse analysis. Furthermore, I introduce my case

studies in more detail in this chapter, giving an overview of my key interests with each case along with my ethical considerations for this project.

Chapter Four: **The Alex Salmond Trial** is my first analysis chapter. Here, I analyse how name and reputation are negotiated in online political discourses. The Salmond Trial centred one prominent politician, Former First Minister Alex Salmond, and his anonymous accusers. As such, this case study allows me to analyse what happens to reputation in the absence of a name, and how this is operationalised in the economy of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). In it, I demonstrate how Salmond actually had a 'bad' reputation, but because he admitted to this, and because his bad reputation was based on hyper-masculinist tropes of 'good' leadership, his (alleged) abuse of others could be excused as part and parcel of a difficult and challenging job. As such, Salmond still maintained a 'good' name. Moreover, I demonstrate how issues around the anxiety of the trustworthiness of mainstream news sources exacerbated this reading of Salmond, as people in my dataset turned to online commentators and bloggers for the 'truth' on the Trial. This sets the context for the remaining two chapters, where these debates over the trustworthiness of mainstream and social media fulminate in the Depp/Heard US trial.

Chapter Five: **Sparrow and Scum: The Depp v Heard Trial** explores how reputation and name work in the entertainment sector. Where the previous chapter looked at how a name and reputation function in the political realm, this chapter turns to Hollywood and as such demonstrates how the star/celebrity hierarchy intersects with the power of name and reputation online. Furthermore, where the previous chapter demonstrated the issue of anonymity in the economy of believability, this chapter focuses on its gendered elements, arguing that women's names, and thus their credit history, are anchored to their bodies and are unable to overcome the negative emotions and connotations that are attached to them. Men's names, on the other hand, can 'transcend' their negative connotations, leaving them with a 'good' name, regardless of their reputation.

Chapter Six: **Constructing Believability Online** continues with issues raised in the Salmond chapter and returns to looking at the different commenters that discuss high profile cases involving sexual harassment and assault online. This chapter is concerned not with the believability of victim/survivors or of people accused of abuse, but with the believability of their supporters and of those who publicly comment on these cases online. Turning to these

posters and drawing on my data from the Depp v Heard trial, I demonstrate how believability online is centred around the affordances of social media platforms that privilege certain kinds of 'social' knowledge production over others. As such, whomever has the most followers, likes, and/or views is seen as the most believable and trustworthy source. Therefore, I argue this has transformed traditional 'she said, he said' debates into 's/he said, *they said*'.

Chapter Seven is the **Conclusion** of this thesis. In it I summarise my findings and provide areas of further research before ending on a note of hope that I have for this project. Overall, this thesis provides an analysis of the ways in which sexual harassment and assault are discursively constructed online. By analysing these cases, I hope to shed some light on the effectiveness of popular backlashes against feminism, so that we might be better prepared to combat them in the future.

# CHAPTER TWO
# 'Know My Name': The construction of identity through naming and name calling

"My name is Chanel. I am a victim, I have no qualms with this word, only with
the idea that it is all that I am."
Chanel Miller (2019, p. viii)

In her memoir recounting her rape and the ensuing trial, Chanel Miller chooses not to give the names of the legal professionals involved in her story. Instead, she names them by the roles they played, 'the judge' and 'the defence' (C. Miller, 2019), noting that although she names her rapist, 'Brock', his name could be any other, 'The point', she states, 'is not their individual significance, but their commonality, all the people enabling a broken system' (ibid, p. viii). Miller's comment on naming is furthered by the function of her memoir: to name *herself*. Prior to 2019, Miller was only known by the legal placeholder 'Emily Doe', given to her at the time of her rape trial as a means of protecting her identity. Instead, Miller felt that both her personal and ethnic identity were lost, replaced by a version she did not recognise, made up by the defence in an effort to secure a lenient sentence for his client.[4] Her memoir, *Know My Name* (2019), is a gripping exploration of identity through naming, not just of herself, but of the rapist Brock Turner dubbed the 'Stanford Swimmer' in the media – a name that conveniently obscures the reasons for him being in the news. Of course, as I outlined in **Chapter One**, this was not the only name Turner was given. 'Rapist' now sticks to Turner and follows him around. As such, Miller's story offers interesting and contrasting answers to one of the questions at the heart of my research which is to understand the function of reputation and a 'good/bad' name in online discussions about sexual harassment and assault.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to unpack the multiple meanings behind a (person's) name, and in doing so, explore the relationship between a name and a reputation. Although a *name* and the meaning behind one seems quite personal, when combined with a *reputation* it

[4] He was successful. As I noted in **Chapter One**, Turner was sentenced to six months in jail (of which he served three). The maximum sentence for a crime like Turner's is fourteen years (C. Miller, 2019).

becomes public and therefore differently associated from the private individual it is attached to. As such, I want to explore how these two concepts operate in the public and private sphere and in doing so, how they intersect with gender, identity, and emotion particularly when it comes to discussions of sexual harassment and assault. I want to unpack the multiple and at times contradictory meanings behind our names that challenges the idea of a person being understood as one thing, either 'good' or 'bad'. As such, I will argue – as I have argued elsewhere (House, 2023) – that names work as a type of myth that can work in conjunction with other myths (such as rape myths) to privilege specific forms of subjectivity over others.

To do this, I will explore three themes that are central to my thesis: First, **Gender, Identity & Name**, where I will focus on answering the questions, 'what is a name?', 'how is it gendered?', and exploring the idea of name as myth. Second, **Name(ing), Emotion & Shame**, where I will unpack the 'emotional' meaning behind our names through the act of name calling and attaching affective words to people's names (metonymy). Third, **Shame, Reputation & Gender**, which explores the relationship between a name and reputation and how this is negotiated in discussions about the believability of sexual harassment and assault. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the history and scholarship behind the concept of a name and a reputation and how this intersects with believability, to highlight the gendered nature and treatment of our names. As naming practices and traditions differ from country to country, and culture to culture, I will be focusing on an Anglo-American context to establish a contextual framework for how naming practices work and operate in a wider cultural space which will then be narrowed down in my case studies.

## Gender, Identity & Name

Names are a deceptively complicated sign system. At their most basic, they can be described as a combination of letters that serve as a linguistic representation of *the self* (Thwaites, 2017). However, names and naming practices end up revealing so much more about an individual than just how you may address them. Although originally intended as a means of social organisation (Hassall, 1967), names have come to represent an important part of a shared *culture* and an individual's place within it (Thwaites, 2017). Names are political. At their most obvious, they indicate where we are from, who we 'belong' to and our chosen/assigned gender. However, names may also say something about our social class, race, and religious beliefs – though these kinds of meanings can change over time, so names may also tell us about generation. Names

also extend past a personal, middle, and surname becoming emblematic of a group or category of people: as in Miller's 'judge' and 'defence' above, and in the labelling of 'Chads', 'Staceys' or 'Karens' in particular online cultures (Maragh-Lloyd, 2021). However, names are not static. Like most other words, their meanings, and the connotations behind them, can change over time. A name that was once considered 'upper class', will lose its prestige the more working- and middle-class people adopt it. This is also true for the gendering of names.

In their article tracking the popularity and usage of 'androgynous' names, Stanley Lieberson, Susan Dumais and Shyon Baumann (2000) showed how as an 'androgynous' name increases in popularity with girls, parents with boys stop using the name. Furthermore, parents with daughters were more likely to choose an androgynous name than parents with sons (ibid). Lieberson, Dumais and Baumann argue that this is because of the issue of 'gender contamination' where the 'advantaged' group (men and boys) 'have a greater incentive to avoid having their status confused with the disadvantaged' (women and girls) (ibid, p. 1285). There are strong social implications for name choice that may contribute to this trend. As Jane Pilcher explains, the gendering of forenames leads to a privileging of 'masculine' sounding names in school and in the workplace, as girls with typically 'masculine' names are more likely to study in a STEM field, whereas boys with typically 'feminine' names are found to suffer more in school and experience behavioural issues (Pilcher, 2017, p. 814). This is why, as Deborah Cameron points out, there are many examples of androgynous names becoming 'feminine' but no examples of the opposite, reflecting 'the basic feminist insight that gender (is not) just a difference, (it is) a hierarchy' (Cameron, 2015) and names are a medium for this to be enacted.

Names are also racialised. Investigations into workplace discrimination have demonstrated longstanding racial bias against African and Asian names in the hiring process (Adamovic, 2022; Syal, 2009), and academics have outlined the various ways Western naming practices disadvantage researchers with names from different cultures (Qiu, 2008). Therefore, names are inextricably linked to our *identities*. Although gender identity is not necessarily a focus of this discussion, it is worth noting that a big part of transitioning genders is to change names to one that 'fits' the gender one is transitioning to (Pilcher, 2017). It is clear, then, that names are an incredibly important part of explaining *who we are*.

This highlights a different type of connotational meaning behind our names. In his writing on signs, Roland Barthes (1993) explains that a sign sends a message about the essential meaning

of the person or thing it stands for, thus becoming a signifier for the *myth* of what that person or thing represents (ibid). A name functions in the same way, sending a message about the essential meaning of the person *it* signifies (the essential self). Thus, as I will go on to demonstrate, names work as a signifier for the myth of what that person represents. However, as mentioned above, there are multiple different types of names and naming practices that all play a role in shaping one's identity and gender. The remainder of this section will explore three of these, but before I begin, I want to clarify some terminology.

As I mentioned above, names and naming practices differ depending on the cultural context. As my focus is on an Anglo-American context, I will be exploring names and naming practices that are typical to this setting. However, in the interest of clarity and as a means of acknowledging the differing naming practices that exist even within this context – such as Miller who also speaks about the significance of her Chinese name, Zhang Xiao Xia and the racialised assumptions associated with the generic name 'Emily Doe' – I will use 'personal name' to refer to the given or typically 'first' name in a Western context, and 'surname' will be used for a shared family or 'last' name.

*Titles*

As with names and naming practices in general, titles have a complicated and varied use and history. There are the general titles of Ms/Mrs/Miss and Mr that denote not only gender but, in the case of Mrs/Miss also marital status. There are professional titles, such as Rev, Dr or Professor, that denote a profession or level of learning. There are honorary titles such as Dame/Sir, Lady/Lord; and then there are hereditary titles: Duchess/Duke, Princess/Prince, Queen/King etc, that indicate a prestigious social class. As above, the meanings and connotations behind these titles have changed over time. Mrs and Mr are some of the oldest recorded titles (Erickson, 2014). In the current Western context, we understand 'Mrs' to denote a married woman, however, originally 'Mrs' was used to denote a woman of social standing – nothing to do with whether she was married – and it was directly comparable to the title 'Mr' (ibid). 'Miss' was later introduced for younger, specifically single women. As Erickson (2014) notes, this change occurred at a time where London was experiencing a significant rise in the population and possibly reaching a 'critical mass' of women called 'Mrs'. As such, 'Miss' allowed younger single women a distinct term to signify their gentility (ibid, p. 53). As such, 'Miss' was the first title that specified marital status. Mrs continued to be used by everyone

else, including non-married businesswomen (ibid). This usage continued until 1800, when the 'Mrs Man' address was introduced, where married women became known by their husband's surname *and* personal name (ibid, p. 53). For example, 'Mrs Jane Doe' became 'Mrs John Doe', a complete erasure of her name and identity, highlighting how gender operates as a hierarchy and how titles are used as a medium for asserting this.

Eventually, 'Ms' was proposed as a new 'Mrs', with the assumption that it would become the feminine equivalent of 'Mr', however speakers do not use it this way and Mrs/Miss remain the most common female titles (Cameron, 2024; Erickson, 2014). This change in meaning behind feminine titles is one example of how women's subordinate role is maintained through language (Cameron, 2024, pp. 107-112). Muriel Schulz (1975) calls this 'the semantic derogation of women' whereby the meaning behind feminine terms of address are downgraded from their original understanding. She gives the example of 'Lady/Lord', 'Governess/Governor', 'Mistress/Master', noting that the downgrade often becomes just another word for 'prostitute'(ibid). However, this is not the only way that gender hierarchy is asserted through titled naming. In a UK context, royal titles are given to those who are born or married into the royal family (Lyon, 2006). Interest in this tradition was recently brought to life in the discussion around Camilla Parker Bowles's title (Coughland, 2022). As the wife of King Charles, the traditional title for Parker Bowles is 'Queen Consort', controversial as only a hereditary and crowned royal can receive the title 'King', which is why the late Queen's husband, Philip, only received the title 'Prince' (Gajanan, 2021).[5] This highlights the gender hierarchy and biases in royal titles and indicates how titles are used as a means of marking difference in social relationships. As Cameron (2024) notes, this is also the case with professional titles, where women's professional titles are less likely to be respected and acknowledged.

In the context of media, there are numerous examples of a woman and a man with equal credentials being interviewed where only the man's professional titles are used. Cameron calls this the 'gender respect gap' (Cameron, 2024, p. 48). As she explains, studies conducted during 'Grand Rounds' – medical style conferences where doctors present recent cases to their

[5] Of course, there is more to Parker Bowles's story that complicates the conversation on her title. However, before her death, the Queen announced that she wanted Parker Bowles to receive the traditional 'Queen Consort' title (Coughland, 2022).

colleagues and students – found that the women were much less likely to be introduced with their titles than the men, and this same pattern has been found in several other contexts. Furthermore, when women push back and insist on having their titles recognised, they are ridiculed. Dr Jill Biden – whose husband is the former President of America, Joe Biden – was openly mocked for using her professional title upon her status change to First Lady (see Epstein, 2020). Similarly, Dr Fern Riddell was chastised for insisting on her title on Twitter when she was commenting on a newspaper's updated style decision to only use 'Dr' for medical practitioners (Cameron, 2024, pp. 113-115). These last two examples are particularly interesting as the detractors were taking issue with the fact that their titles denoted *academic* qualifications. This aversion to academic titles follows a tradition of anti-intellectualism in America (Hofstadter, 1963) which has been exacerbated by changes in communication technology that has led to what Michael Higgins describes as a 'depreciation in the value accorded to knowledge' (Higgins, 2019, p. 134). The criticism of academics and academic expertise is often both gendered (Cameron, 2024) and racialised (Ro, 2021), and at times even comes from feminist voices – as Cameron (2024) notes some feminists are critical of academic titles for being 'elitist'. I return to this issue in my final analysis chapter, for now the key point to make is that titles are used to maintain the gender hierarchy through name, but they are by no means the only way to do so.

*Personal names*

Jane Pilcher argues that our personal names are 'doing words' that work to manage and 'do' gender as a means of upholding the gendered hierarchies and inequalities that come from social norms based on the idea of binary sex categories and difference (Pilcher, 2017, p. 812). She notes that naming practices are rooted in the body, meaning that our identities 'inextricably involve not only our bodies but also our names' (ibid, p. 813). One example of this is the naming of children based on the sex assigned at birth, making sure their personal name 'matches' their body. I have already outlined some of the social consequences of gendering personal names, such as that of 'gender contamination' above, however, the rooting of personal names to the body highlights yet another example of the gendered hierarchy in naming.

Descartes's Cartesian Theory has long been a point of contention in feminist scholarship because of its influence on Western theories of knowledge that argue reality is built on sets of 'either/or' pairings, the most significant of which are mind/body, reason/emotion, man/woman

(Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Prokhovnik, 1999). As Prokhovnik (1999) explains, these dichotomies are typically interdependent 'in that "reason" has helped to define "man", "man" has helped to define "reason"', and due to the dichotomous relationship 'woman' and 'emotion' are subordinated and excluded (p. 3). However, Descartes was not the only philosopher to conceptualise either/or pairings. As Elizabeth Spelman (1982) demonstrates, Plato wrote about a 'soul/body' divide where the body is seen as consumed by material things, incapable of true knowledge, rationality, and 'soulfulness'. Like Descartes, Plato connects his negative understanding of the body to women (ibid, p. 118). This illustrates how enduring this thinking is, and how many esteemed philosophers have continuously theorised the body, and therefore women, as the weaker, lesser element.[6] As Spelman summarises, according to these philosophers, the soul (or mind) is eternal, but the body will eventually decay (ibid). Therefore, men are transcendent but women, who are too consumed by earthly nonsense, are mere mortals. Men's and women's surnames follow this logic, as the man's surname is meant to be adopted by the woman and used from generation to generation. Women's surnames, on the other hand, 'die off' upon their marriage to a man, which I discuss in more detail below. Personal names work similarly.

Naming a child after a parent or a member of the family is not uncommon in Western cultures, for children of all genders. As with the titled naming above, there is a gendered pattern to this naming tradition as boys are more likely to receive an honorific name than girls, and their name is more likely to come from their patrilineal lineage than from their mother's side (Abel, 2013). When children do receive honorific personal names, it is typically accompanied by a '*Jr*' or a Roman numeral to indicate this (Abel, 2013; Brown, Carvallo, & Imura, 2014). In a study looking at the use of patronymic honorific personal names in the US, it was found that in honour cultures, giving a son this type of name has 'special importance…insofar as they connect new generations of males within a family to older patriarchs within the family system, thus identifying new-born sons with powerful male figures' (Brown *et al.*, 2014, p. 252). As the authors note, the use of intergenerational personal names *predates* the use of surnames, meaning the use of patronymic honorifics is a traditional way of establishing kinship and a family unit.

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[6] In fact, Spelman demonstrates how this somatophobia has even manifested itself in some feminist writing (1982, pp. 119 - 129).

As they explain, ‘the [personal] *family name* becomes part of one’s reputational armour, denoting a kinship-based source of strength’ (ibid, p. 251 - emphasis authors' own). As such, sons being named after fathers or grandfathers, allows them to step into their proverbial shoes, take over the family business, and continue the family line. Their names transcend their bodies. Interestingly, the study found no connection between these cultures and the practice of giving honorific matronyms to children (ibid). Similarly, Abel (2013) notes that some etiquette manuals explicitly stated that girls should *not* be juniourised – although this does not mean it never happened. Regardless, this demonstrates that women and girls’ personal names operate very differently, and even when they are handed down, they do not carry with them the same kind of history or ‘honour’. They are inextricably linked and confined to the body, whereas men’s and boys’ names can transcend the body and become the mind, or the ‘soul’ of the family.

*Surnames*

Rachel Thwaites writes that names, and in particular surnames, were created as a means of social organisation (Thwaites, 2017, pp. 15-18). As societies developed, there was a need to be able to distinguish between its occupants. Christian names were incredibly popular, which meant that people often had the same personal name, and as such, there needed to be a way to *further* differentiate between people. Thus, the surname was introduced (Hassall, 1967). Traditionally, in heterosexual families, the surname is passed down patrilineally with the woman adopting the surname of the patriarch as well as any offspring. The significance of this is highlighted in the use of family trees – used to document familial histories and information. As Thwaites (2017) points out, the language used to describe the workings of each tree sets up an understanding of the importance of a *name* in a family, rather than the actual genealogy. As mentioned above, the women’s family line ‘dies’ with her marriage and adoption of a new name, even though she is contributing genetic material to this family. This is furthered by the traditional patrilineal naming practices which are not only *hetero*sexist (Clarke, Burns, & Burgoyne, 2008); they are sexist: harking back to antiquated laws of coverture that were designed to make women subordinate to men through the legal system (Erickson, 2014; Thwaites, 2017). A woman given her father’s name at birth and her husband’s with marriage acted as a sign of their *ownership* over her (ibid), further emphasising the gender hierarchy that is enforced through naming.

Although some have started to subvert these traditions, women who marry men are still much more likely to take their husband's surnames than keep their own (Lin, 2023) and parents who are not the same sex as each other are still more likely to give their children their father's surname – even when the mother has kept her own (Dempsey & Lindsay, 2018; Eshleman & Halley, 2016; D. R. Johnson & Scheuble, 2002). Of course, this is not meant as a critique of anyone who has stuck to these traditions. Researchers cite issues around family and community pressure as well as personal decisions around the symbolic construction of a family as reasons for abiding by traditional naming practices (ibid). My point in focusing on this is how these traditions work to uphold the gender hierarchy.

I first became interested in names and naming practices when I was getting married to a man and was met with a steely resistance to the idea of keeping my surname. Not only from my partner's parents, but from the registrar, who asked me multiple times if I wanted to reconsider. Part of my in-laws' resistance to my surname choice was based on an anxiety over what our potential future children's surname might be. This type of backlash is commonplace, as the studies above, and several others have demonstrated (see Mills, 2003; Pilcher, 2017; Robnett, Wertheimer, & Tenenbaum, 2017; Thwaites, 2013, 2017). The strong opposition to women who subvert these traditions is particularly surprising given how recent some of these patrilineal naming practices are. For most of the early modern period, only England stipulated that women should take their husband's name in marriage (Erickson, 2014). For the rest of Europe, including the rest of what became the United Kingdom, naming practices followed Roman Law which stated that women remained the 'property' of their fathers, regardless of if they were married or not, and thus kept their father's name (Thwaites, 2017). Therefore, the backlash women experience for subverting these traditions is another example of how the gender hierarchy is maintained through naming and demonstrates how men's names, not women's, are imbued with power and importance.

*The importance of a man's name*

In my previous work, I argued that the semantic privileging of men's names (as described above) imbues them with such significance that even in instances where their integrity is called into question, the discursive sanctity of their names is upheld (House, 2023). I made this argument in a paper based on the 2018 news coverage centred on Brett Kavanaugh's

confirmation hearing to the Supreme Court (ibid - mentioned earlier). In it, I argued that Kavanaugh's name came to represent not only him, but his family and his country, and thus his discursive sanctity and right to a 'good' name were deemed more important than the material harm Professor Christine Blasey Ford testified to experiencing (for more on her experience, see Blasey Ford, 2024). The case of Brock Turner complicates this argument slightly.

As I discussed earlier, Chanel Miller was raped by Turner while she was unconscious during a party at Stanford University. The media's treatment of Turner has been strongly criticised for being overly sympathetic, in part because of their choice to name him the 'Stanford Swimmer'. As Miller put it:

> 'The media was no help. They counted my drinks and counted the seconds Brock could swim two hundred yards, topped the article with a picture of Brock wearing a tie; it could've doubled as his LinkedIn profile' (C. Miller, 2019, p. 51).

This effort to preserve Turner's name – and reputation – over Miller's is furthered by the statement Turner's father made on the case, asking the judge for leniency as:

> 'These verdicts have broken and shattered him *and our family* in so many ways. His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action' (Dan Turner in Xu, 2016 - emphasis my own).

It is clear from the above that Turner received what the philosopher Kate Manne (2017) calls 'himpathetic' treatment, which she describes as disproportionate sympathy afforded to men accused of sexual harassment and assault. In fact, she uses Turner's case in her conceptualisation of the term (ibid, pp. 196-204). His race is also significant, especially in comparison to Miller who (as mentioned earlier) is mixed race. Turner is a young, white man and as Lilie Chouliaraki (2024, p. 73) has argued white men have been historically constructed as the 'quintessential victims of twentieth century modernity' through discourses of war and violence that privilege certain claims to pain over others (discussed in **Chapter One**). However, these were not the only comments made about Turner, nor the only reactions he received.

As I noted in **Chapter One**, there was a strong feminist backlash to this framing of him, resulting in the Judge who sentenced Turner being recused, and a change in the law to combat

lenient sentences, like the one in this case (C. Miller, 2019; L. Turner, 2019). Furthermore, Turner was legally recognised as a rapist – something that clearly has had a negative impact on both his name *and* reputation. Indeed, even a law professor creating a textbook on criminal justice inserted Turner's picture and description next to the definition of 'rape' making his name '"the textbook definition" of a rapist' (Rennison, 2017).

Popular misogyny works to protect men, in particular white, privileged men, from ignominy, guilt, and moral castigation, but it is clear from the above that this does not always work, or at least not unconditionally. As I noted earlier, a name acts as a signifier for the myth of the person it represents, making it important to have a 'good' name. I have previously argued how the importance of having a 'good name' is ingrained into the very foundations of American society with one of the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Rush, describing ignominy as a punishment worse than death (House, 2023). As men's names are more 'permanent', and because they come to represent more than the individual, it becomes more important to protect their names, because if their names are ruined, their entire family, and everything else they represent, will be shamed along with them (ibid). It is clear that there is a gendered asymmetry in the way names are treated, but as Miller has demonstrated, this can be overcome in certain contexts, however, it takes exceptional *work*. As I mentioned in **Chapter One**, part of the reason for this reframing of Turner is down to the publishing of Miller's powerful victim impact statement (see K. J. M. Baker, 2016), and the feminist activism that was organised around this case. Therefore, although names do form part of the gendered hierarchy, there are ways of overcoming this, demonstrating the influence of power.

### Name(ing), Emotion & Shame

In her exploration of the cultural politics of emotion, Sara Ahmed (2014) explains that emotions have 'movement' attached to them, allowing them to 'stick' to some bodies, and move away from others (ibid). This 'movement' of emotion can mean 'fixing' some bodies with certain words, names, and therefore certain characteristics which feeds back into the myth of the 'good' or 'bad' name. Ahmed calls this the 'slide of metonymy' (ibid, p. 76). 'Metonymy' is the act of substituting a name of an attribute for the thing it is meant to represent. Ahmed draws on the example of racism and islamophobia to demonstrate this, highlighting how the words 'Muslim' and 'Arab' have been stuck together through the slide of metonymy with words such as 'fundamentalist' and 'terrorist'. The more this connection has been made, the more their

‘identity’ can be linked together (ibid, p. 76). Of course, this does not mean those connections are *true*, instead, they act as myths. As with the connotative meaning behind names discussed earlier, these emotions that are attached to bodies are meant to represent the essential meaning of the body or group they are being attached to, creating the myth behind their names. As the opening quote to this chapter indicates, ‘victim’ is a name you can call Miller, and it is a part of her identity, but that is not all she is. Turner may have been a ‘Stanford Swimmer’ but that does not preclude him from also being a rapist. The meaning behind our names, and the myth that becomes the public understanding of who we are, are all based in power.

In her writing on power and language, Cameron (2012) explains this with her example of Humpty Dumpty’s philosophy of names in *Alice in Wonderland*. By declaring that, to him, glory means ‘a nice knock-down argument’ (ibid, p. 122), Humpty Dumpty highlights the *unfixed* nature of meaning and language, proclaiming it all depends on whomever the master is (ibid). This is typically interpreted as a battle for power between people and language, but Cameron suggests, instead, asking ‘Who’s to be master, *me or you*?’ (Cameron, 2012, p. 122 - emphasis my own). By emphasising this relational use of power, Cameron is highlighting what Sara Mills refers to as ‘interactional power’ whereby a subject can negotiate a position of power for themself – using the different linguistic resources at their disposal – that may well be in conflict with their social status (2004, p. 84).Thus, the meaning we attach to our identities through naming is not fixed. That is the myth of the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ name, people are always going to be more than one thing. Cameron (2012) and Mills (2004) argue, the important question lies with who has the power to define their reality.

*Calling Names*

Judith Butler (1997) notes that subjects *become* subjects only once someone has called them by a name (ibid). By ‘calling people names’, we attach an identity to them, as a means of being able to *know* them, or at least to know the myth of what that person represents to us. As they explain, by calling someone a name, they may *appear* ‘fixed’ to that definition, however the act of calling someone a name also brings them into linguistic existence, which may then ‘(inaugurate) the subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call’ (ibid, p. 2). That is how some people can name Turner a ‘rapist’, while he is still able to name himself a ‘Stanford student’ a ‘successful swimmer’, or how his father may name him a ‘victim’. Butler’s remarks on name calling, or ‘interpellation’, feed into Mills’s discussion of

'interactional power' above, and the idea of a name being a myth that sends a message about the essential meaning of the person it represents, and as such, it is not a 'fixed' identity, but rather one that is assigned through language and can therefore be contested through language as well (J. Butler, 1997; Mills, 2004).

Certain types of media, like tabloid media, have always been interested in name calling as it serves their desire for stereotyped characters and punchy headlines (Gill, 1987). As such, politicians are often given disparaging nicknames, such as 'Tricky Dicky' or 'Slick Willie' for former US presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, respectively. The former First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has also had her share of nicknames, such as 'Gnasher' and 'nippy sweetie' (Higgins & McKay, 2016). For the most part, these nicknames have been used and created by the media to construct particular myths for each persona. More recently, this tactic has been adopted by certain political figures, such as US President Donald Trump. Since the start of his political career Trump has popularised many nicknames for his various opponents. This tactic of bestowing emotive nicknames to his rivals follows Trump's performative, populist style of politics as a means of displaying hypermasculinity while discrediting and belittling his competition (A. Smith & Higgins, 2020). His use of nicknames also demonstrates that, as media scholar Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) argues, emotions are *mediated* and that their public display is both strategic and performative (p. 8), a point I return to in **Chapter Five**. However, not all of Trump's nicknames have 'stuck' as easily to their targets as others.

In a research paper tracking survey respondents' thoughts and memories of Trump's use of nicknames in the 2020 presidential race, Tyler Johnson (2021) found that the 'Sleepy Joe' moniker, used for Joe Biden in his first bid for presidency, was not as successful as the 'Crooked Hillary' nickname used four years earlier during Trump's campaign against Hillary Clinton in 2016. One possible reason for this is that the word 'sleepy' does not have as many negative connotations as 'crooked' and therefore is easier to dismiss. However, Johnson also suggests it could partially be accorded to the media and how they chose to comment on each of the nicknames (ibid). Johnson notes that media was particularly interested in the 'Crooked Hillary' story, and tying Clinton to past transgressions and scandals – whether they were hers or her husband's (Bordo, 2017). 'Sleepy Joe', on the other hand, was received with far less fanfare (T. Johnson, 2021). When Johnson analysed data from Google Trends, he found that searches for the term 'Sleepy Joe' only returned 1/7$^{th}$ of the searches for 'Crooked Hillary',

suggesting that public interest in Trump's nicknames peaked with Clinton (ibid, p. 305). In fact, Johnson found that his survey respondents were less likely to even recall the 'Sleepy Joe' nickname unless they were already taking a vested interest in political discourses (ibid, p. 307). At the time of writing, there has been no update to the study since the latest election, when Biden's competency was a much bigger story than in the election cycle Johnson tracked (e.g. Collinson, 2024), although it is interesting to note that while Biden was running, Trump tried to pivot his 'Sleepy Joe' nickname to 'Crooked Joe' (e.g. Kapur, 2023; David Smith, 2024). Perhaps indicating an awareness that 'Sleepy Joe' was nowhere near as emotive or 'sticky' as 'Crooked Hillary'.

Similarly, there was no comparative study of the 'Crooked Hillary' nickname for Johnson to compare to, however, he did ask his respondents if they remembered any other nicknames for Trump's rivals. Interestingly, the most remembered nickname was the one given to Elizabeth Warren ('Pocahontas'), which is perhaps unsurprising as this was a recent nickname bestowed during the election period being monitored, however the next best remembered one was Clinton's, even though it was a nickname given four years previously (T. Johnson, 2021, p. 311). The power of the 'Crooked Hillary' discourse, and the repeated focus on it in the press (Bordo, 2017), and in other media (T. Johnson, 2021), meant that through the slide of metonymy, the name 'Hillary Clinton' could become synonymous with 'Crooked'. There is also an interesting gendered component here, in that the 'stickiest' nicknames seem to be those bestowed upon women. It is notable, however, that in his most recent presidential campaign Trump failed to decisively confer a nickname to Kamala Harris, his final presidential opponent. Trump did try out a number of options, the most used being 'Crazy Kamala', but even he was inconsistent with his choice (Piper, 2024). Harris entered the race for presidency much later than is standard, taking over from Biden who stepped down four months before the election. In comparison, Trump announced his most recent run in November 2022 – two years before the actual vote (Orr, Holmes, & Stracqualursi, 2022). The tighter time constraints might have impaired Trump's ability to effectively rename Harris, especially as Johnson (2021) suggests what made Clinton's nickname so successful was the added media attention it incurred. I return to the gendered 'stickiness' of nicknames in **Chapter Five,** however the important point here is how nicknames can be used to attach negative emotions to a person through the slide of metonymy. This also works to establish a hierarchy.

Cameron explains that there are two different meanings behind the use of terms of address: a 'power' meaning that is there to establish a hierarchy, and a 'solidarity' meaning that implies a kind of familiarity between the two interlocutors (Cameron, 2024, pp. 116-120). I have discussed the emotive 'power' terms above, however, as she points out, it is typically very difficult to tell the intended form of address in most circumstances, and it is easy for a person who was using a term in a demeaning way to counter that that was not their intent (ibid). Trump's nicknames are clearly power terms of address, and there is really no debate about whether they were meant to be cordial or not, but his are not the only example of political nicknames worth examining. Politicians are often referred to by their personal names as a type of 'nickname' in the media. Boris Johnson, one of the many former British Prime Ministers in recent years, is often referred to as 'Boris' – or even more informally, as 'BoJo' – in the press. In America, Bernie Sanders supporters are known to refer to him, affectionately, as 'Bernie'. However, when women politicians are referred to by their personal names, the affect is rarely friendly, and this shift is more characteristic of a 'power' form of address that is setting up a hierarchy by deliberately denying them a formal (and respectful) acknowledgment (ibid, p. 115).

Another way of using these types of address is by using what Cameron calls 'endearment terms' (ibid, p. 119). As with the semantic derogation of women through titles (Schulz, 1975), endearment terms can follow a similar pattern, although it is more difficult to be certain of their use. As Cameron notes, if you consider common endearment terms for women – honey, darling, love – they do not *only* show 'endearment', but they can also at times be used in a contemptuous or demeaning way as a means to establish a dominant and a submissive interlocutor as in the 'power' term of address (Cameron, 2024, pp. 116-120). As Cameron notes, focusing on these types of address are difficult, because it is near impossible to prove the intention behind their use. Furthermore, these endearment terms, although typically gendered feminine, are not exclusively used for women and it is not uncommon for men to be referred to as 'love', 'honey', or 'darling' in certain settings. However, it does say something that names typically ascribed to women are more commonly used to establish hierarchy, whereas endearments terms typically ascribed to men – mate, pal, buddy – are more likely to be expressions of solidarity. Again, this emphasises how names are used to reassert the gender hierarchy, and how they can ascribe feelings of someone as being either 'good' or 'bad'.

*Anonymising and categorising name*

If calling people names can impact how they are known, then it is also important to investigate the impact of *removing* names. This is particularly resonant with my thesis, given its focus on sexual harassment and assault, and on people speaking out about their experiences of that. It is important that people have the ability to obscure their names from the public as a means of protection (although this is not always a legal right or requirement). It is equally important to interrogate the effects of this anonymisation. There is a definite tension between fully anonymising victim/survivors of abuse and allowing some information into the public domain so that they do not turn into caricatures. This tension has been explored by Karen Boyle, Brenna Jessie, and Megan Strickland (2022), in their focus group interviews with victim/survivors that spoke directly to this problem and its effects. The women they spoke to highlight the tensions of wanting to be fully fleshed out figures, especially when perpetrators are usually given this opportunity, but equally struggling with having to 'come out' and be known as a 'victim' (ibid, p. 121). This did not mean they *necessarily* wanted their identities to be known and there was certainly no argument against the *right* of victim/survivors to be anonymous. However, they recognised that this also came at a cost. By being *known*, especially outside of the court, you can draw on your identity, your friends and family, your history and achievements as a *defence*. You can cash in the 'good will' accumulated throughout your life. Whereas if you are anonymous, your identity is constructed through the court proceedings and subsequent media reporting – both of which are notoriously biased against victim/survivors (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Tuerkheimer, 2021).

Miller (2019) speaks about these same struggles in her book, as the opening quote to this chapter alludes to. She notes how the defence painted her as an irresponsible carouser, and the media juxtaposed her drinks with Turner's swim times, resulting in a description of herself she did not recognise (ibid). In fact, Miller cites this issue with identity as the reason for writing her memoir, so she could reclaim her identity and present a fully fleshed out version of who she really was/is. This example highlights the importance of a name, as Miller notes a name allows you to *know* someone. This emphasises the need for feminist scholars to think critically about the way they choose to name people. In fact, this has long been an interest in feminist academic work.

Feminists have been writing about the issue with the category of 'woman/women' for decades, as real life 'women' are so different, varied, and diverse that capturing them all with one name leads to contradictions and exclusions (J. Butler, 1999; Riley, 1988). These tensions are highlighted in the viral video 'Be A Lady, They Said' where Cynthia Nixon lists the enumerate and conflicting meanings attached to the category 'lady'. [7] These contradictions are further problematised when put into a British context where being a 'Lady' has even more complicated and specifically racialised and classed connotations, as was briefly touched on in the *Titles* section above. The same can be said for categories 'victim' or 'survivor'. Tanya Serisier (2018) speaks about these tensions in her book, *Speaking Out*. In her chapter discussing rape memoirs, Serisier recounts the struggle women who have experienced a violent sexual crime feel with identity after the fact. She notes that these rape memoirs frame rape as a life altering event, and as such, women who experience rape feel as though their identity is forced to change as well (ibid, pp. 60-61). In fact, feminist scholars have long struggled with choosing a name to best describe women who have experienced sexual harassment and assault, as the term 'victim' can be limiting and stigmatising (Jordan, 2004; Lees, 2002). As a corrective, some feminist scholars have suggested using the category 'victim/survivor' (as I have) as a means of incorporating the multifaceted identities and experiences associated with that group (e.g. Boyle & Berridge, 2024, p. 10; McDonnell, 2024, p. 19). However, this does not always work in practice.

Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan (1996) found in their focus groups with women who have experienced sexual violence that using the words together sets up an unintended dichotomy of valued and de-valued meanings that in fact *reinforces* the stigmatising connotations attached to the name 'victim'. Instead, they argue for the need to move away from using these words as identity categories because they end up being more limiting than helpful. Furthermore, people belonging to this group do not always agree on the best terms to use, nor do their opinions on it remain constant. For example, Susan Brison (2008), a feminist scholar and philosopher who was raped in her thirties notes that, where she used to describe herself as a victim, she is unlikely to describe herself in this way anymore, choosing instead to identify as a singer or writer. As she explains in her article – written years after her rape – she feels more like the woman she was before her rape than the woman she became after, something she did not even know was possible partly because of how these experiences are categorised.

[7] See https://vimeo.com/393253445.

Although it has its issues (Kelly *et al.*, 1996), scholars still use 'victim/survivor' because it allows for this multifaceted framing of this experience. Serisier (2018, p. 68) calls this type of framing 'heteroglossic', in that it allows for multiple interpretations and meanings of an experience to exist at once *and together*. Someone can be a 'victim' *and* a 'survivor'. The tension exists because there exists a tendency to try and simplify this into one. A similar argument has been made in the debate about naming perpetrators.

As Boyle (2024) notes, there is some satisfaction with labelling people who commit sexual harassment and assault 'perpetrators', 'rapists', and so on, especially when the person in question has sought to distance themselves from their actions. This was part of Rennison's reasoning when she inserted an image of Turner next to the definition of 'rape' in her criminology textbook, mentioned above (Rennison, 2017). As Boyle argues, 'naming is a means of insisting that individual men *are* responsible for their actions' (2024, p. 17). It allows us to place the shame attached to their actions back on *them* (the perpetrator) instead of on the victim/survivor. As such, naming (or, indeed, *re*naming as with Turner becoming 'rapist') can be a form of justice as it acts as a consequence for the perpetrator, a recognition of the victim/survivor's experience, and it can work to prevent future harm, warning people about potential abusers (ibid, p. 18). This is what Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland (2019) call 'kaleidoscopic justice' in that it offers victim/survivors a form of justice outside the criminal justice system. However, labels can also be limiting. As Boyle (2024) points out, the labelling of certain prolific abusers by their most violent crimes, disguises their other offences that are considered 'not that bad' (Gay, 2018), even though they are still unacceptable and harmful. Boyle (2024, p. 14) gives the example of Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer and the inspiration behind Milano's #MeToo tweet, who was accused of rape *but also* of sexual harassment. By labelling Weinstein a 'rapist', these other harms are rendered invisible.

The Weinstein example highlights further issues with categorising as his name *itself* became a category for 'men accused of sexual assault in the #MeToo era' (Boyle, 2024, p. 16). However, as Boyle points out, as the extent of Weinstein's actions became clear, his name 'became the standard against which other men accused of abuse are judged (and, hence, absolved in the court of public opinion)' (ibid, p. 17). As such, by using Weinstein's name as a category for abusers, men who were not accused by multiple women were considered 'not that bad' ('he's no Harvey Weinstein!'), and men who *were* prolific abusers were recast as 'monsters', creating such unnuanced portrayals that even Weinstein's defence argued *he* was 'no Harvey Weinstein'

(ibid, p. 17). The ‘othering’ of these perpetrators also means that some victim/survivors do not recognise their abusers in these categories. Most victim/survivors know their abusers. Therefore, to them, their abusers are not simply ‘rapists’, but ‘partners’, ‘family’, or ‘friends’. As such, categorising perpetrators and victim/survivors works against feminist theorising on gender and violence which seeks to see the *connections* between these harms instead of establishing a hierarchy (Kelly, 1988). The shaming quality of these names unearths further considerations, which I will explore next.

*Naming and shaming*

In her book *Stigma*, Imogen Tyler (2020) explains her notion of stigma as a physical marking on a person’s body, or, a branding. Names work in this same fashion, branding a person with a particular name which can work to shame them. As Tyler explains, ‘Shame is a feeling of being exposed to a gaze which produces a view of yourself which you cannot control’ (ibid, p. 235). Shame is about some quality of *the self*, and when a person is prescribed a name that is imbued with negative emotions, or just connotations that obscure their understanding of themselves, they become shamed and stigmatised. As Tyler puts it, ‘Stigma functions through subjection; it makes people abject’ (ibid, p. 239). Thus, you can be named and shamed. Tyler has discussed how this works with the name ‘chav’ in varying ways, such as through online forums like *Urban Dictionary*.

As Tyler explains, *Urban Dictionary* is an online colloquial dictionary that allows users to create definitions for words and names that ‘functions as an unofficial online authority on English language slang’ (2008, p. 24). Tyler traces how disgust and shame are written into the name ‘chav’ through this forum, which includes definitions such as, ‘the cancer of the United Kingdom’; ‘drug dealer, McDonald’s worker, prostitute, page 3 “model”’; and ‘disgusting scum’ (Urban Dictionary in ibid, p. 24). These are then reproduced in other types of media that helps solidify the term. *Urban Dictionary* is therefore a useful tool in understanding how affective meanings and emotions, such as disgust and shame, get stuck to certain names. For example, definitions for ‘Brock Turner’ on *Urban Dictionary* include: ‘A white male prep/college kid that generally uses drugs, or other unconsent [sic] tactics to have sex with women’; ‘someone who commits rape and gets away with it’; and another that describes the name as a verb that means:

> ‘to rape someone. Named after Brock “the rapists” turner [sic]. The Stanford rapist-turned-swimmer-but-still-a-rapist who raped an innocent unconscious young woman and dumped her behind the dumpster’ (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-a).

These definitions are interesting as they mostly deny the mainstream media’s overall himpathetic portrayal of Turner, and instead explicitly label him a rapist which hints toward a ‘community’ power in naming which is a theme I will pick up on in my final analysis chapter (**Chapter Six**). Furthermore, this definition is another example of the complex and contradictory meanings behind names I discussed earlier.

*Urban Dictionary* is also useful in tracing the changing meanings and emotions behind names. For example, the name ‘Karen’ was described by one definition in 2008 as ‘A girl who is smart, caring, gorgeous, funny, and cute when she sneezes’, but ten years later in 2018, ‘Karen’ is defined as ‘A blonde woman with ombre cascade hairstyle who wants to speak to the manager’; and:

> ‘a pejorative name associated with uptight, middl-class [sic], do-gooder types of white women…believing to be the victim of any given situation due to an overly inflated sense of entitlement’ (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-b).

As Tyler notes, the dictionary format ‘grants a strange authority’ to the definitions in the posts, which are at times full of ‘dehumanising bigotry’ (Tyler, 2008, p. 25). As such, they act as a good example of how shame and disgust are actively generated through these sites, creating social scripts for how people can come to know these names, and possibly, the people – and bodies – behind them.

Emotions are linked to the body, as emotion is seen as a quality of the body not the mind (S. Ahmed, 2014). As I discussed in the previous section, women’s names, and women themselves, are also linked to bodies, and so they are further confined and branded by the emotional meanings attached to them. Some men, however, are able to overcome these conditions as they may transcend the body, and therefore, the shame and the branding that the body might bear. For example, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump have been described as ‘shame*less*’ (J. Butler, 2025; Fletcher, 2022). Both men have experienced their fair share of scandal, and yet this has little impact on their overall public standing and certainly did not prevent either of them reaching the political heights they have achieved. As Judith Butler (2025) points out in regards to Trump, this is because most of the ‘scandals’ associated with him reinforce his image of

manhood and his hypermasculine performance of leadership. Similarly, Johnson also plays into his scandals as they highlight his ‘bullish’ and ‘macho’ persona, with his ‘take it on the chin’ approach to the global pandemic, his sexist insults for his political opponents, and his coy allusions to his multiple children by different women (Cameron, 2020; Stewart, 2021). There is a link here to what Boyle calls the ‘cultural value of abuse’, in that the behaviour of men like Trump and Johnson is not recognised (or labelled) *as abusive*, because their ‘macho’ displays of hypermasculinity are seen as *a good thing* (see Boyle, 2024, pp. 165-200). Therefore, they can avoid feeling shame because their behaviour is endorsed.

As Ahmed writes, shame is ‘about some quality of the self’ (S. Ahmed, 2014, p. 105). As a society, we have ideas about the ‘ideal self’, or the ‘moral citizen’, that we model ourselves on. This idea is central to the reproduction of social norms, and in particular, with norms about sexual conduct, therefore, ‘shame can also be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence’ (ibid, p. 106). The ‘ideal moral citizen’ is based on a specific type of person that is typically white, straight, middle class, and male, as such, ‘the national ideal is shaped by taking some bodies as its form, and not others’ (ibid, p. 109). As Ahmed writes, ‘The pride of some subjects is in a way tautological: they feel pride at approximating an ideal that has already taken their shape’ (ibid, p. 109). As such, men like Trump and Johnson can enjoy moral impunity, as the ‘ideal moral citizen’ is created in their image. Their indiscretions are therefore inconsequential. They are forgivable. Women, on the other hand, have no such luck.

One way of illustrating this difference, is by looking at women who have tried to ‘reclaim’ shaming names. For example, Tyler (2008) notes that some people have reclaimed ‘chav’ as a positive part of their identity. Similar instances have happened with nicknames Trump has bestowed on women rivals such as ‘nasty woman’ for Hillary Clinton, as well as derogatory comments Boris Johnson made while in parliament referring to people as ‘girly swots’ and ‘big girl’s blouse’. Girls and women have also chosen to reclaim the names ‘slut’ and ‘slag’ in certain contexts (Lees, 1997; Mendes, 2015). However, *fully* reclaiming pejorative names is not really possible when detractors still make use of them. For example, when the politician Jo Swinson attempted to ‘reclaim’ Johnson’s slur by wearing a t-shirt branded with the name ‘girly swot’ during her election campaign in 2019, she was ridiculed (McKay, 2019). Similarly, in her writing about media coverage of the SlutWalk protests, Kaitlynn Mendes (2015) notes the intersectional issues with attempts to ‘reclaim’ slurs that have a complex racial history. In

the same way that not all victim/survivors of sexual violence were comfortable with that category, many women – in particular women of colour – had difficultly 'reclaiming' the word 'slut' (ibid).

The ability to control the meaning behind our names – and therefore 'transcend' the shaming meanings attached to them – depends on hierarchies of power centred on gender, race, and other marginalities. However, as Mills (2004, p. 79) argues, 'power is enacted within relationships' which means it is *contestable*. The interactional quality of power that Mills identifies means that socially marginalised people *can* have some control over the myth behind their names, but that control is complicated by the hierarchical organisation of gender, race, and other marginalities. This is why, rather than reclaiming names, the focus should be centred on embracing a heteroglossic understanding of our names. This would afford women more control over their 'brandings', while also forcing men – whose names are the brand – to have to acknowledge the full history behind their names, as opposed to just the dominant myth. However, naming and shaming has further implications than just 'sticking' some people with negative emotions, it informs understandings of *reputation*, which is what I will explore next.

**Shame, Reputation & Gender**

When thinking about reputation, and how it is negotiated across different milieu, most turn to Pierre Bourdieu and his writing on 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984). Simply put, Bourdieu describes cultural capital as the accumulated knowledge, relationships, skills, and experiences a person can draw on to gain social advantages. It can be passed down generationally, and as such, it describes how class differences can impact social standing (ibid). John B. Thompson (1999) expands Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to explain how reputation fits into this system which he describes as 'symbolic power'.

Thompson (1999) describes symbolic power as being 'the capacity to intervene in the course of events' and 'to influence the actions and beliefs of others' (ibid, p. 6). As Thompson argues, Bourdieu's *cultural* capital is one type of resource individuals draw on in this system as a means of accumulating symbolic power, additionally, Thompson argues there is a second resource that he calls '*symbolic* capital' (ibid, p. 6). Where cultural capital is the technical skills, knowledge and competences employed in this system, symbolic capital, is the 'accumulated prestige, recognition and respect' that produces or institutions that have symbolic power are

able to use to create environments and cultures that fit their purpose (ibid, p. 6). Reputation is an aspect of this social capital that acts as a resource for exercising symbolic power (ibid). Thompson sees reputation as a fragile kind of resource, that takes a long time to 'build up' and is especially vulnerable to being undermined, to the point where it can, at times, be seen as a non-renewable resource (ibid). Thompson sees scandals as struggles over symbolic power, and as such, they can act as 'reputation depleters' that are capable of very quickly and effectively ruining a reputation, to the point where the scandal might leave an indelible mark against a name (ibid). Hence, Thompson describes public scandals as '"struggles" for "name"' (ibid, p. 5). He gives the example of Richard Nixon who could not shake the effects the Watergate scandal had on his reputation, to the point where, even over 50 years later, his name still conjures memories of the scandal (ibid). This demonstrates the relationship between a name and a reputation.

Competing discourses around a name create myths about the person that name represents, whomever has the most power then controls the 'definition' of that name, thus creating a reputation for that name and that person. Therefore, a *reputation* can be seen as the dominant 'myth' of a person's name. However, as Thompson (1999) demonstrates, reputation is unstable because it is based on a myth that is based on limited and subjective information from the dominant discourse – as such it denies the heteroglossic nature of names which hold more than one definition. Therefore, a reputation is like the definition of the name that is subject to change based on the *users* – linking to the discussion on Butler (1997), Cameron (2012) and Mills (2004) above. This further demonstrates the influence of power in naming and the importance of *who gets to be master* (Cameron, 2012, p. 122) – a point I will return to in the next chapter. This is emblematic of the Turner example discussed throughout this chapter as depending on the context, he is either known as a 'star swimmer' or 'rapist'. Negotiations over name(ing) and reputation have been central to the debate about sexual harassment and assault in the long #MeToo moment, therefore, it is useful to look at examples where scandals have had an impact on reputation and the impact this has had on name.

*Shame, name and reputation*

Kobe Bryant was a beloved and accomplished American professional basketball player (Gay, 2020). In 2003, during the height of his career, Bryant was publicly accused of rape by a 19-year-old woman working in a hotel Bryant was staying in at the time of the assault (Walters,

2023). Although the charges were dropped due to the woman not wanting to testify, they reached a civil settlement which resulted in Bryant releasing a public apology in which he came surprisingly close to admitting wrongdoing (ibid). Byrant's reputation certainly was not ruined by this scandal, but it was badly impacted (Gay, 2020; Walters, 2023). In an effort to counter this reputation 'depletion', Bryant adopt a new professional persona by renaming himself the 'Black Mamba' – after the highly venomous snake (Walters, 2023). In interviews, Bryant described this rebranding as his effort to cope with the legal issues of being charged with rape, so that, '"Kobe" could deal with the personal challenges, while the "Black Mamba" dealt with basketball' (ibid, p. 2007). This clearly demonstrates Thompson's description of the depleting effect scandals can have on reputation, but also the connection between a name and a reputation as a definition of that name. By changing his name, Bryant felt he could begin to separate and rewrite his reputation. He was correct. Bryant died tragically in a helicopter accident in 2020 (ibid). When feminists tried to comment on his death while reflecting on his complicated legacy, they were met with online threats to their safety (Gay, 2020). In the years since his death, Bryant's legacy is still reflected on in the media with many of these articles neglecting to mention the report of rape at all (e.g. Browne, 2021; National Basketball Association, 2025).

The Bryant/'Black Mamba' example is linked to what the scholar Andrea McDonnell (2024) calls 'discursive self-cleaving'. McDonnell describes discursive self-cleaving as 'an image management strategy' in which well-known men rely on 'a rhetorical distinction between one's "real" self and one's celebrity image' as a means of excusing their abusive behaviour (ibid, p. 1). Any public 'evidence' of their abusive tendencies can be explained away as 'part of their act', allowing them to defend, and distinguish, their 'authentic self' (ibid). One of the examples McDonnell draws on is Donald Trump. Using the coverage around his 2016 bid for presidency when a backstage video of Trump bragging about grabbing women's genitals went viral, McDonnell demonstrates how Trump managed to argue that those comments were part of his television character, whereas the presidential candidate version of Trump was much more dignified (ibid). As such, Trump discursively self-cleaved himself as 'Donald J. Trump' the entertainer, and the more presidential 'Mr Tump' (ibid, pp. 45-65). McDonnell's theory further emphasises the importance of name and reputation, but it also indicates the contradictions *famous* names are allowed to hold. As McDonnell explains, this is 'a strategy only available to those already widely known because it rests upon a generally accepted belief that the star image is a construction, a chimera, a fiction disguised as autobiography' (ibid, p. 3). As such, stars are allowed more than one myth behind their name – a point I return to in **Chapter Five**.

Of course, this does not mean famous people are never shamed. In **Chapter One**, I mentioned stars like Bill Cosby and Jimmy Savile who were both eventually accepted as prolific sexual abusers. Savile has since died, but both he and Cosby would struggle to recover their reputations after the scandals they were involved in. Not least because the institutions they were strongly tethered to (and that had worked to protect them for years) have now completely abandoned them. As Thompson notes, institutions also deal in reputational social capital, and as such, they have an incentive to retain a good reputation to be recognised as *trustworthy*. Trust is also a resource to these institutions and scandal acts as a trust depleter just as much as a reputation depleter (Thompson, 1999). Thus, when it no longer becomes viable (or, indeed, *profitable*) to support people the public have come to distrust, the institutions behind them will withdraw and join the 'scandalised' reactions of the public. This demonstrates the role commentators and community members play in shaping a person's reputation, or their 'myth'. As Thompson notes, 'scandal is shaped as much by the response of others as it is by the act of transgression itself' (ibid p. 4). This is a point I will return to in **Chapter Six**.

However, as I mentioned in the previous section, once the public has become 'scandalised' by a person's actions, and their reputation has been ruined, they become a type of limit point for measuring indecent behaviour off of (Boyle, 2024). Like Weinstein above, both Savile and Cosby's names have become a common refrain as a means of defending other men whose reputations have come under question. This sets up a direct comparison between their alleged misdeeds and the actions of Savile and/or Cosby which is supposed to then render their actions inconsequential while underlining the horror of being accused (ibid, p. 154). As such, these 'scandalised' reactions to extreme cases of abuse, can be used to dismiss and downplay abuse that is enacted on a smaller scale.

It is worth noting here that reputational damage is not *always* total. For example, in 2017 the comedian Louis C.K. lost work and was dropped by major distributors when it emerged that he had masturbated in front of young women comedians without their consent (Gilbert, 2024). At first, C.K. seemed to grasp the seriousness of the allegations, issuing an apology and taking account of the unequal power dynamics (ibid). However, he later reneged on that apology, releasing a comedy show that openly mocked the allegations and mischaracterised them as his 'sexual fetish' (ibid). That show went on to win a grammy for Best Comedy Album in 2022 (ibid). C.K.'s case is interesting as it is emblematic of another key concern of the long #MeToo

moment: What the limits of reputational damage should be, especially when it comes to abuses/behaviours that are not violently criminal. It is worth mentioning the 'comebacks' here as, in some ways, the idea that reputational damage is immediate and total has served accused men well as it has been the means of arguing against taking reports seriously. Indeed, this was characteristic of the debates in both my case studies which I analyse in this thesis. Taking account of the 'comebacks' is thus important, as it complicates this understanding of accusations being 'career ending' and highlights the contradictory nature of debates that proliferate the long #MeToo moment.

*Gender and believability*

In her work interviewing teenage girls about sex and reputation, Sue Lees (1997) describes how girls' morality and reputation are judged by their sexual behaviour, which is not the case for their male peers. As Lees goes on to outline, the way girls' sexual morality is monitored is through the threat of being named a 'slut' or a 'slag'. This was the worst imagined outcome for the girls Lees interviewed, as being known as a 'slut' results in the total ruination of a girl's or woman's reputation and morality (ibid). The same standard does not exist for boys and men who, as Lees notes, do not have an equivalent *derogatory* name for active male sexuality (ibid). Therefore, due to these social scripts that describe men as sexual pursuers and women as submissive objects, if a woman rejects an advance from a man, we can accept that he misread the situation but forgive him for trying. Where the woman, in that instance, is likely to feel shame for breaking her part of the social script, the man is likely to go on unscathed.

There is a racialised element to this gendered morality. Media scholar Richard Dyer (1997) explains, the category of 'white' as a race is often ignored, as a focus on race is a focus on the body and whiteness is often seen as transcending the body. Dyer connects this concept of race with Christianity and the body of Christ, who of course was able to transcend his physical form. As I noted above, women are unable to transcend the body (Spelman, 1982). Dyer (1997) argues, the symbolic function of race is captured in the understanding of 'dark vs light'. The darkness that exists in whiteness is often characterised as sexual, and thus it is the connection to sex that sullies whiteness. For white women, their 'model for white womanhood is the Virgin Mary, a pure vessel for reproduction who is sullied by the dark drives that reproduction entails' (Dyer, 1997, p. 29). Therefore, when white women are connected to sex, they are unable to transcend the sullying implications this has on their morality. Women of colour are uniquely

harmed by this conceptualisation of sexual morality. They are not only unable to transcend bodily shame because of their race and gender, but because of their perceived hyper-sexuality that frames women of colour as always sexually willing and available (hooks, 2015, pp. 61-77). In contrast, white men, like Christ, can transcend this darkness: ‘in the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it’ (Dyer, 1997, p. 28).[8]

This issue of sexual reputation exposes an imbalanced power dynamic, a himpathetic quality (Manne, 2017), in shaming that works to protect (predominantly white) men from experiencing shame, while instilling it in women, even if they have not engaged in any real sexual interaction. As Lees (1997) explains, a girl or woman’s sexual reputation is not necessarily dependent on her sexual experience, just her *perceived* sexual experience. Therefore, it does not even have to be *true* for a woman or girl’s name and reputation to be ruined, it just has to be *believable.*

As I mentioned in **Chapter One**, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins (2023) explain that the ‘truth’ of sexual harassment and assault is traded in what they call the ‘economy of believability’. As they explain:

> ‘the economy of believability designates a terrain of political struggle where one’s capacity to “speak truthfully”…is publicly negotiated through a combination of subjective resources (i.e., who one *is*) and performative labours (i.e., what one *does*)’ (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, pp. 4-5).

This framework highlights the importance of a name and a reputation. If subjectivity is the resource of the economy of believability, a reputation can be seen as the credit, a name is then the credit history. This highlights the gendered imbalance in debates over sexual harassment and assault, as the women are entering these debates with a ‘bad’ name because their reputation is sullied just by their association with the event. Men, on the other hand, are not defiled by an association with sex. They are sanctified by one. As such, they will enter this economy with ‘good’ names, ‘good’ credit histories, and as a consequence, more believability.

[8] I expand on these arguments throughout this thesis, but in particular in **0**.

The impact of this gendered believability is highlighted by an example I raised in **Chapter One**: The 'Shitty Media Men' list. The backlash aimed at the list was centred on a belief that it was inherently *unfair* that a group of anonymous women were able to name and shame men for their unsubstantiated 'bad' behaviour (Haire *et al.*, 2019; Shapiro, 2022). As Moira Donegan noted when she outed herself as the creator of the list:

> 'I was naïve because I thought that the document would not be made public, and when it became clear that it would be, I was naïve because I thought that the focus would be on the behavior described in the document, rather than on the document itself.' (Donegan, 2018)

In her reporting on the list, journalist Lila Shapiro (2022) noted a similar backlash against Brown University students in 1990 who, in response to the fact that the university did not have any policy for investigating rape accusations, wrote the names of their (reported) rapists on bathroom walls. As she notes, the university's vice-president for university relations named these women 'Magic Marker terrorists' (Shapiro, 2022). The scandal was in the naming, not that the named men might be rapists. Again, this highlights the importance of a man's name. As I noted in the first section, because men's names transcend their individual bodies and become representative of their entire family and communities, their names *mean more*. Therefore, the women who accuse them become the pariahs, the '*terrorists'*, because they are breaking with a social script that upholds the importance of a man's name.

The importance of a name is furthered when considering defamation laws. Women can be seen to be 'ruining' a man's social standing by coming forward with allegations, which breaks another social norm. By coming forward and publicly accusing a man of sexual harassment and/or assault, a woman could be seen as committing a crime of defamation (especially if she is believed to be a liar). That, combined with the legal precedent of being innocent until proven guilty, sets up a scenario where *both* the accuser *and* the accused can be seen as being on trial for a crime. In fact, as the human rights lawyers Jennifer Robinson and Keina Yoshida write in their book tracing the increasing use of defamation lawsuits against women who accuse men of abuse:

> 'The law is being wielded to reinforce the culture of silence and protect the status quo. The courts have become the battlefield where judges grapple with competing rights: her right to speak about gender-based abuse and his right to reputation.' (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 4).

This is an issue that has links to what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls the twin discourses of injury vs capacity. As women now have the capacity to publicly accuse (especially powerful) men of crimes in the media, that is an injury to men and their role as 'sexual pursuer' (ibid). Therefore, by unsticking shame from men and instead sticking it onto women, the masculine capacity of men can be restored.

There has been a wealth of research on how men's reputations are often used to protect or defend them against accusations of sexual violence: From 'auteur apologism' (Marghitu, 2018) that argues the importance of the abuser's art outweighs the abuse, or debates around the cultural capital of the perpetrator that allows their abuse to go unacknowledged as abuse (Boyle, 2018, 2019). These debates have also taken place in the public sphere, such as Donald Trump defending men accused of violence against women, focusing solely on the effects these accusations had on the men's lives (S. Jones, 2019), and media reports centred on typically young, middle to upper class perpetrators that focus on them being otherwise 'good' boys that therefore deserve our forgiveness and himpathy (Boyle, 2019; Manne, 2017; Sela-Shayovitz, 2015). This is also highlighted through the theme of 'imperfection and redemption' where men who have abused women are painted as 'only human' and as such they are bound to 'make mistakes' but they are capable of 'bouncing back' (Walters, 2023, pp. 2006-2007). Or as Butler's (2025) writing on Trump demonstrates above, if a public figure embodies particular masculine, domineering characteristics, their sexual transgressions become less important. As such, the sexual abuse of women by men is seen as almost an inevitability of an imperfect human being who must make mistakes in order to grow, but this is not the same for women.

It is worth returning to, and expanding on, the case study I opened this chapter with: Chanel Miller. Miller, unlike Turner, was not a student at Stanford. In fact, she was no longer a university student, she had graduated a year earlier from the University of California and was attending the party with her younger sister while her boyfriend was out of town (C. Miller, 2019). The fact that she was attending a university party, an environment that is seen as sexually charged, without her boyfriend, was seen as shameful. Her motives were questioned because she was older than most of the students in attendance. As such, Miller was painted as a sexual predator *herself* and was further pathologized by the fact that she was drinking to excess. Her connections to sex, worked to ruin her reputation and were used by the defence as a means of painting his client, the rapist, as the true victim of the assault. This was furthered by the fact that Miller was unnamed in the case, as a means of protecting her identity. As such, her

reputation was solely bound to her assault, and to sex. There was no other definition for her, because we did not know her name.

**Conclusion**

I opened this chapter with a quote from Miller, explaining that although she is a victim, it is not all that she is (C. Miller, 2019). This heteroglossic (Serisier, 2018) nature of names, as holding more than one meaning, is often ignored in favour of a single meaning that fits a particular narrative. This denial of the multiplicity of meanings and identities that can be attached to our names can be incredibly harmful, as this chapter has demonstrated. Names, and the definitional reputations that are attached to them, act as myths (Barthes, 1993), that work in conjunction with other myths (like rape myths) to privilege specific forms of subjectivity over others (House, 2023). Names and reputations work as a type of resource individuals can draw on to exercise symbolic power (Thompson, 1999). This is a highly gendered process, so when men are accused by women of sexual harassment and assault, these issues are negotiated through an economy of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023) in which men's names (credit history) and reputations (credit) are given semantic privileges (Cameron, 2024; Thwaites, 2017) that result in the protection of their reputations, even when they have done something wrong (Boyle, 2019; Manne, 2017). Kate Manne (2017) has labelled this reaction 'himpathy' and it works together with the gendered privileging of men's names (the family name), aided through the lens of gendered contamination (Lieberson *et al.*, 2000) and dualistic thinking of the mind/body (Spelman, 1982) to emphasise the gendered hierarchy. However, men's names and reputations are not immune to damage (Boyle, 2019; Walters, 2023), and they can see their reputations ruined if the scandal they are attached to is deemed bad enough (Thompson, 1999). Therefore, when it comes to the construction of identity through names and naming practices, it all comes down to power, and who is master of the myth of their name (Cameron, 2012).

It is clear from the above, that name and reputation are a key battleground in debates about sexual harassment and assault online. In what follows, I use the construction of identity through a name and reputation to outline the function of 'good'/'bad' name in mediated representation of sexual harassment and assault. I demonstrate how men's names are able to transcend the negative meanings and emotions attached to their names so that even if they have a 'bad' reputation, they can still have a 'good' name. I will argue that names do not function in the

same way for women, however, and will demonstrate how their names cannot overcome a 'bad' reputation. In doing this, I demonstrate the importance of *commentators* in the economy of believability, because the names people are called, and the way their names are used, impacts their meaning and the myth people are known by. Before I do this, I will outline my methodological reflections and chosen methods for this analysis, which is what I discuss next.

# CHAPTER THREE
# Methodological Reflections & Methods

> ‘We see the presence of the researcher’s self as central in all research. One’s self can’t be left behind, it can only be omitted from discussion…But it is an omission, a failure to discuss something which has been present within the research itself.’
>
> Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993, p. 161)

Where the previous chapter focused on the construction of identity through naming and name calling, this chapter will instead focus on construct*ing* an identity (my own) and explaining how this is enacted in my research practice. As a feminist, bringing the personal into political, ideological, and therefore, epistemological and methodological discussions is an important part of my research process. As Liz Stanley and Sue Wise write, ‘there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher’ (1993, p. 158). This statement becomes ever more pertinent when studying and researching social media content. As I go on to explain, in order to collect data from social media sites, a social media ‘profile’ is required. As such, there is no way to ‘detach’ the researcher from the data they collect online: even constructing a ‘new’ online profile for the purposes of research is to take a position. Furthermore, this is a thesis exploring mediated representations about sexual harassment and assault, a topic that is inherently both personal and political. As such, my position as a feminist researching this topic makes up a key part of my analysis. My role is not neutral. It is a fundamental part of both my data collection and analysis.

The purpose of this chapter is to set out my feminist methodological reflections and decisions that have framed the way I have decided to select, collect, and analyse my data. To do this, I will begin by introducing my approach to ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1993). Next, I explain my case studies: the 2020 sexual assault trial against former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond; and the 2022 defamation trial involving both Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. I then discuss my decision to focus on social media and the platforms I have chosen to collect data from as well as my methods for collecting, coding and analysing

that data. I end this chapter with a discussion of my ethical considerations for this project, followed by an account of how these decisions fit into the broader aims of this project.

**'Situating' My Algorithm: Feminist methodology**

Having come of age in the early 2000s, just as platforms like Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube were being publicly released, I fall under the generation (somewhat) affectionally known as the 'terminally online'. Much of my adolescence was spent on these various social media platforms, some of which I still use. As such, when I decided my thesis was going to be focused on analysing social media posts, I knew I would need to incorporate a reflexive approach to my research. Feminist scholars have long challenged the idea of 'objectivity' in research (Haraway, 1988; S. Harding, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993). As Sarah Harding (1992) argued in her writing about 'strong objectivity', the idea that researchers can be truly 'objective' and 'neutral' in their research is easily disputed when reflecting on past work that normalised whiteness, male supremacy, exploitation, and imperialism and presented these viewpoints as 'natural', 'value-neutral' and even 'normal'. Instead, Harding, along with many others, have argued for a need for reflexivity in research as a means of combatting harmful stereotypes that may emerge from work that ignores the biases of its researcher. As the quote opening this chapter states 'One's self can't be left behind' (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 161). Rejecting the notion of objectivity in social media research seems even more pertinent as it is near impossible to separate a user from an internet search.

Websites and social media platforms are notoriously tight lipped about the type of data they collect on users, and on how that data shapes their algorithms (Ging *et al.*, 2024). What has become clear is that no matter the protections taken, our actions are being extensively tracked online and used to shape the content we see there (Crist, 2022; Grothaus, 2019; Srinivasan, 2025; Towey, 2021). For example, tech journalist Ry Crist found that internet routers are collecting and sharing user data with third parties (Crist, 2022). Similarly, noticing personalised content on her anonymous 'sockpuppet' Instagram account created for research purposes, journalist Prianka Srinivasan (2025) discovered social media companies use 'associative logics' to tailor content to users. This means, as she explains:

> 'social media systems see your phone as one node in a vast network of devices. When you spend time in the same place as certain other people – say at work, home or out with friends

> – these connections are reinforced…This information shapes the content you see online' (Srinivasan, 2025).

Moreover, as Debbie Ging, Catherine Baker and Maja Brandt Andreasen (2024) have demonstrated with their research on algorithmic recommender functions, creating 'sockpuppet' accounts for research purposes is not a value neutral position, and depending on the type of profile created, can have an impact on the content these accounts are served. Therefore, the content someone sees on social media is influenced not only by the profile they are using to access that content, but by the device they are on, the router they are connected to, and by the other accounts detected in their vicinity (Crist, 2022; Ging *et al.*, 2024; Pfeffer, Mayer, & Morstatter, 2018; Srinivasan, 2025). Of course, this does not mean 'sockpuppet' accounts should never be used in research – indeed, Ging, Baker and Brandt Andreasen (2024) use them in their work. Rather, it is about recognising that creating a sockpuppet account for research is not a neutral or 'objective' decision, and the data researchers are able to collect from them are subject to a number of criteria that is difficult to control. Therefore, seeing as the node is going to be situated *somewhere* irrespective of whether a reflexive or non-reflexive approach is used, I argue it is better to use a reflexive approach – especially in feminist research – as it at least allows the researcher to understand *where* the node is situated.

There are many different approaches to achieving reflexivity in feminist research. Harding argued for a new and 'strong' type of objectivity, that builds on feminist standpoint theories and calls on researchers to own their bias as a means of seeing from the perspective of the marginalised. Another way of achieving this is through what Haraway (1988), Stanley and Wise (1993) call 'situated knowledge'. Instead of claiming to be able to 'see' from another's perspective, Haraway (1988), Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that researchers should rather see their knowledge and contributions as 'situated', like one node within an entire system of knowledges. This is not to say that research is then limited or 'one sided', because the focus is not on an individual, but the *community* or network of nodes in a system. As Haraway explains, situated knowledge is about 'the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position' (1988, p. 590). It is easy to see how this would work for social media research as this is almost exactly how algorithms work: drawing on personalised information it has on a user such as their gender, age, race, location, and activity online, it fits individuals into a category or community of people that it then tailors content and adverts toward (as outlined above). As such, for this project I will use my own social media and internet profile to conduct

my research. Therefore, I will 'situate' my algorithm, before moving on to discuss how I am going to use this thinking as part of my analysis.

When situating my algorithm, I want to focus on information that makes me one of a 'network' of people. I am a cis woman, white, and in my early thirties. I live in Glasgow, but I regularly spend time overseas in South Africa where I am originally from. I have included this information in all my social media profiles, as well as information on my studies over the years. As I mentioned earlier, I spend a lot of time online, including on some of the social media sites in this study. However, I am also a researcher, and I often research topics which challenge my personal perspective. Although I do engage with some conservative and misogynistic content for work, most of the accounts I follow and interact with (with likes, shares, comments) can be described as progressive-leaning and feminist. I follow several organisations that explicitly state their feminist politics. Furthermore, most of the people I follow (and interact with offline) also identify as feminist. As such, my algorithm tends to push feminist content on my feeds, even if I do not follow all the accounts, organisations, and brands it recommends.

A benefit of using my own social media, therefore, is that I am not seeking out 'manosphere' content (discussed in **Chapter One**) in order to understand its possible influences in wider social media contexts. Thus, this methodology adds to the existing body of feminist research that directly engages with the manosphere (Bell, 2025; Ging *et al.*, 2024; Ging & Siapera, 2019). By situating my 'feminist' algorithm, I am demonstrating how my knowledge and the knowledge I can create from this work, is situated within a *system* of knowledges that can be built upon by other researchers and by referring to others work. In that way, I am rooting my research in feminist principles not only by making the personal political by implementing a reflexive research process, but by highlighting the *social* aspect of my research as well.

**Case Studies**

What I hope is becoming clear, is that my approach to research has always been centred around a curiosity of what is considered 'the norm', 'natural', or 'tradition'. Upon reflection, a big part of this must come from my roots of growing up in South Africa, a country with its own rich cultural traditions and histories that were often overshadowed by the dominance of Westernised media and cultural practices. Just as the last chapter exposed the way in which traditions around names are a medium for upholding gendered hierarchies and power systems, so too does a lack

of curiosity about 'the norm'. As Cynthia Enloe (2004) argues, when something is simply taken to be 'tradition' with no questions as to *why* it then serves 'as a cultural pillar to prop up familial, community, national, and international power structures, imbuing them with legitimacy, with timelessness, with inevitability' (ibid, p. 3). My aim for this project is to utilise this curiosity, not only when it comes to the research process, but with the case studies I have chosen to analyse, and in the way I choose to analyse them.

As I mentioned in **Chapter One**, I have decided to focus on two case studies, and indeed two research questions. I selected my two cases studies because of their popularity on social media sites I frequented, but also because of their contemporaneous relationship to my PhD. Both case studies span the long #MeToo moment (Boyle, 2024) in different ways, but they were by no means the *only* cases to choose from. As the summary in **Chapter One** illustrates, there have been many high-profile cases involving sexual harassment and assault, and the meaning of names and reputation have been central to the debates that follow them online. However, the Depp v Heard and Salmond cases piqued my interest because of their different relationships with name and reputation that I found particularly interesting when following the stories online. These two case studies thus allow me to expand on the work that has already been done on reputation and believability and offer some new ways of seeing how these issues are negotiated online.

I did consider adding a third case study, but upon reviewing the data I had collected on Salmond and Depp/Heard, I realised this needed to be condensed. I had planned on spanning different sectors, but the links between politics and celebrity were so strong that the analysis works with a comparison of the two case studies alone. Furthermore, this follows a growing relationship between politics and popular culture that other theorists have started to acknowledge (Finlayson, 2021, 2023; Higgins, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). I recognise this PhD project, and the knowledge I am able to produce with it, as one part of a wider system of knowledges (Haraway, 1988). As such, my intention with this project is to offer a framework for other researchers to build on, acting as one part of a wider and collaborative conversation.

*The Alex Salmond Trial*

Alex Salmond was the former First Minister of Scotland from 2007 – 2014 and the first Scottish National Party (SNP) politician to reach First Minister status. He was a divisive, yet well

respected and much beloved leader (Ritchie, 2016), who lead the SNP during the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014. He stepped down following the 'No' vote and his Deputy – Nicola Sturgeon – became First Minister, staying in office until 2023. In 2018, a confidential government inquiry into two complaints against Salmond found that he had sexually harassed two women while he was First Minister, and criminal complaints were referred to Police Scotland. Just over a year and a half later, as Harvey Weinstein was being sentenced in New York, Salmond stood trial on 12 offenses ranging from indecent assault to attempted rape. The chargers were brought forward by 9 women who worked in government, but were, and are still, all anonymous due to a court order (Clegg & Andrews, 2021). On the 23rd of March 2020, just as the first COVID lockdown was announced in the UK, Salmond was acquitted of all the charges against him. Like Jacob Zuma, Salmond had a number of staunch supporters that argued he was unfairly prosecuted for political reasons. After his acquittal, Salmond vowed to release evidence that he claimed had not been admissible in court at a future date, but this never transpired. On the 12th of October 2024, Salmond died suddenly while attending a conference in North Macedonia (Learmonth & McKay, 2024).

In line with my reflexive approach to this research, it would be remiss of me to not mention that I did not know who Alex Salmond was before this Trial began. I moved to Scotland in September 2018, long after the former First Minister had stepped down, and after the first initial charges were made. As such, I was not emotionally moved by the announcement of the Trial, and I was mostly drawn to the case because of the discussion around the women who accused Salmond. I had just finished writing my masters thesis which focused on the function of a name in the Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford hearing, and as such I was intrigued by the focus on the anonymity of the Salmond complainers, particularly by those who support Salmond. As such, I selected this case because it allows me to investigate what happens to a reputation in the absence of a name, as well as discussions around 'naming and shaming' which I outlined in the previous chapter. I centred my analysis around the end of the Trial, focusing on the day before the verdict was announced, the day of the verdict, and the day after (i.e. 22-24 March 2020). I chose these days because of the nature of the Salmond Trial: There was a court order in place prohibiting the identification of any of the women involved. This included 'jigsaw identification' and applied to everyone commenting publicly on the case – including social media users. As such, there was very little data to capture prior to the verdict being announced, as is demonstrated by my data collection tables below. This picked up from the 23rd, which is why I included a day after the verdict to get a more representative sample.

*Johnny Depp v Amber Heard*

Johnny Depp and Amber Heard are both American actors, although Heard, at 23 years Depp's junior, has nowhere near Depp's renown in the industry. Depp has three Academy Award nominations, and a career that spans over 40 years in Hollywood. By contrast, Heard had only just started her acting career when she met Depp in 2009, to audition for his film, *The Rum Diary* (B. Robinson, 2011). Depp and Heard later married in 2015. In 2016 Heard filed for a domestic violence restraining order against Depp, detailing a physical assault that had taken place a few days earlier (Woolf, 2016). The couple later divorced in January 2017, releasing a statement that read:

> 'Our relationship was intensely passionate and at times volatile but always bound by love. Neither party has made false accusations for financial gain. There was never any intent of physical or emotional harm.' (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p.306).

Over a year later in December 2018, Heard released an op-ed for *The Washington Post* on the cultural backlash women face for speaking out about domestic and sexual violence (Heard, 2018). She never named Depp and was writing in her role as Women's Rights Ambassador for the ACLU. Depp responded by suing Heard for defamation. Heard later countersued Depp for statements made about her by Depp's lawyer. After a lengthy court trial (that was delayed by a second defamation suit brought by Depp in the UK against *The Sun* for calling him a 'wife beater'), the Jury found in favour of Depp concluding that Heard had defamed him on all three of his claims, and that she had done so with malice. They awarded him over $10 million in damages (Wallis, 2023, p. 275). Confusingly, one of Heard's claims for defamation was also upheld. This seemingly contradictory finding was compounded by the fact that Depp lost the UK libel case, with the Judge finding that he had abused Heard on 12 separate occasions (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 304).

Ultimately, it was the unprecedented amount of social media coverage this trial got that solidified my decision to analyse this case study (see Tsioulcas & Rascoe, 2022). There are many avenues to explore with this case. Firstly, *both* parties were accused of domestic violence and abuse, which complicates my discussions on perpetrators and victim/survivors in interesting ways for the gendered focus of this project. Secondly, this was a defamation trial, and as such, the discussions surrounding it online were centred on conversations about name

and reputation – a key theme for this thesis. Therefore, the Depp/Heard case study provides a wealth of data to discuss my conceptualisations of both name and reputation – especially as both parties are well known (although one decidedly more than the other). When it came to selecting a coding period, I had the opposite problem to the Salmond Trial. Given the plethora of information to code, I selected the day before and the day of the verdict announcement (i.e. 31 May – 1 June 2022) as a means of narrowing the scope.

**Social Media & How I Built My Dataset**

As discussed above, this thesis is centrally concerned with debates over believability that take place online through social media. As Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) notes, the internet is so fast changing that it supersedes any research done on it the second it is published. Although the increasingly fickle nature of social media can make it challenging, from a research perspective, to rely on data from these platforms, it is also what interests me most about studying them.

Social media feels so elusive and conducting any kind of social media content analysis feels like the equivalent of dipping your hands into the ocean and drawing out a fistful of water. The sheer volume and variety of content is almost impossible to comprehend. Yet, social media is fast becoming a main source of information and news (Ofcom, 2024), and as such it is an important tool for researchers who want to understand public discourse around specific topics. The two case studies I have chosen each have distinct social media coverage, which I will explain below. However, before I do that, I will discuss what I mean by 'social media'.

*What is social media*

All different types of media are social (Bruns, 2015), but what distinguishes 'social media' from other types is its focus on connectivity. Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan (2022) argue that 'social media' can be defined by the following three characteristics:

1. It can support user/group/institution/bot-generated content through images, text, videos and other forms of updates and statuses, like location sharing.
2. It allows users to connect through likes, follows, messages and so on; and
3. It provides users with the means to engage with one another in a collaborative and community building way.

(Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022, p. 5)

With this in mind, I selected Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok as my main platforms of interest for this project. All three platforms support user-generated content of various kinds (tweets, posts, videos) and allow (and encourage) users to engage with each other's content through 'following' (Twitter, TikTok), and 'joining' (Reddit) specific accounts and communities. Furthermore, they encourage *active* participation by liking, sharing, and commenting on each other's content. It was through this active participation that I noticed users were cross-posting content from different social media platforms in their discussions. Redditors posted tweets, Twitter users linked to tiktoks, and TikTokers shared posts from both Twitter and Reddit in their videos. However, there were other popular platforms that were linked to as well. When collecting data, I noticed two other types of content that were regularly being shared: YouTube videos and blog posts, including several references to prominent YouTubers and bloggers. As such, I added this content to my dataset, although I collected it in a slightly different way which I will explain below. This last point emphasises the community building focus of all the platforms I ended up monitoring.

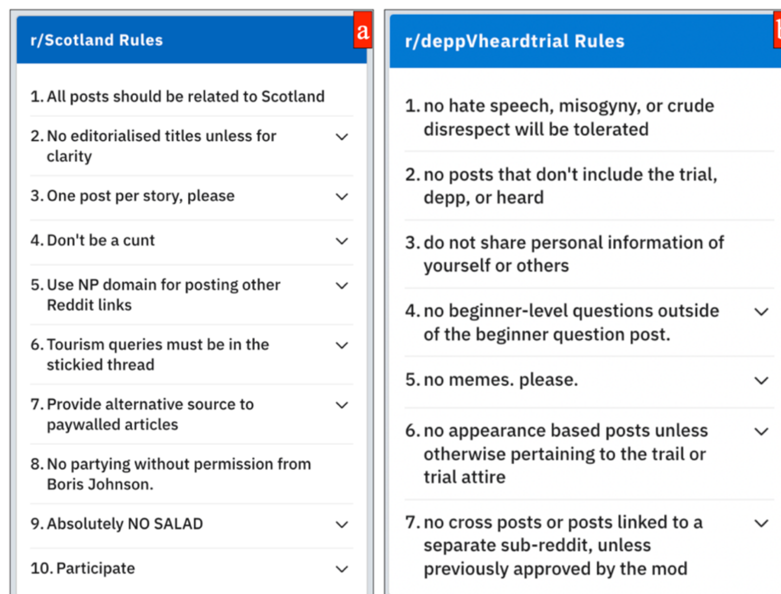


Figure 3.1 Screenshots of subreddit rules for the r/deppVheardtrial and r/Scotland subreddits

Reddit is probably the most obvious example as it is entirely centred around different 'communities of interest' or 'subreddits'. Each of these subreddits has its own set of rules, humour, and vernacular (see Figure 3.1) as well as incorporating the use of 'flairs' that allow

users to add context and personality to their community posts and profiles. The Reddit flairs work in a similar way to Twitter hashtags (discussed more below), as each subreddit has its own set of flairs users can use to tag their posts which not only adds context but links their post with others that have the same tag. However, users can also add flairs to their usernames which allows them to easily declare their allegiances and thus further their community building. Twitter worked in a very similar way. Although it was not organised around formal communities like subreddits, Twitter users could build their communities through follows, lists, and like Reddit flairs, by adding emojis to their usernames (Figure 3.2). As such, users could clearly state their allegiances and build a community of like-minded accounts.

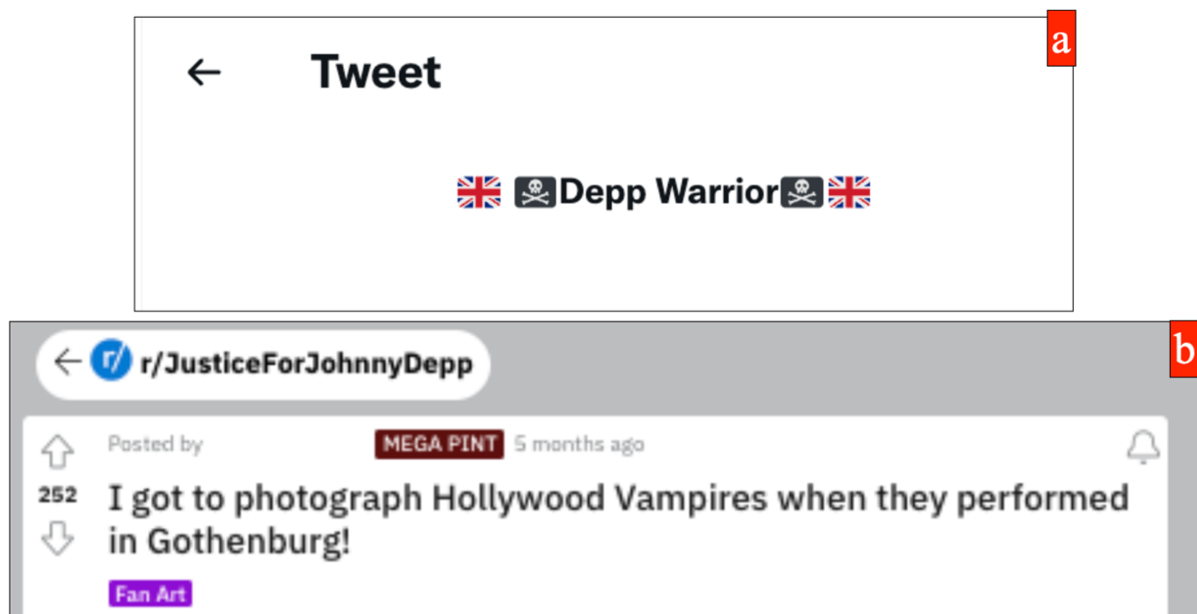


Figure 3.2 Screenshots from Twitter (a) and Reddit (b) demonstrating the use of emojis and flairs to facilitate community building

Instead of using ‘tags’ as a means of community building, TikTok and YouTube use genre. Creators who post on a specific type of content create platformed communities based on that content. For example, in my dataset there were several former or current lawyers who created content on the trial forming the ‘LawTube’ and ‘LawTok’ communities as a result. The similar nomenclature here also indicates the cross-platform community building that takes place on social media applications. This type of community building matches that of bloggers, who generally create content under a specific theme they adhere to, although this of course happens on various different platforms. However, these sites also support a platform-wide sense of community as regular users and produces of content will often refer to themselves as ‘Redditors’, ‘TikTokers’, ‘YouTubers’, and ‘bloggers’.

Although I am not particularly active on these sites, I have engaged with and have used Twitter, Reddit and YouTube throughout my adolescence. I also followed most of the discourse around my chosen case studies on these sites and platforms. In fact, it was through my use of Twitter that I found out about the Depp/Heard case. As I explained earlier and will elaborate below, I used my knowledge and position on these sites as a starting point for my data collection on these platforms, starting by deciding on a method for capturing my data. However, before I do that, it is important make a note about terms.

Since collecting the data for this project, some of the platforms I monitored have undergone significant changes in ownership, content moderation, user access, and more. For example, when I started collecting my data in early 2022, 'Twitter' was run by the CEO Parag Agrawal (Vanian, 2022). By October 2022, Elon Musk had taken over ownership and since then the platform has undergone major changes, including a name change to 'X' (see Spring, 2024). The ever-hubristic Elon Musk had yet to make any changes to the platform by the time my data collection was complete. However, the changes he has since implemented have had a profound impact on the content on the platform. For example, the tweets I collected from 'verified' users indicated that that user had applied for the badge and undergone Twitter's approval system (Graham, 2022). Musk discontinued this scheme when he took over, opting instead to ascribe the blue badge to any X user that paid a monthly subscription fee (ibid). Furthermore, the previous Twitter CEOs had banned some public figure's' accounts for violating their terms of service, the most (in)famous being President Donald Trump (Vanian, 2022). More relevant to this thesis, was a Scottish political commentator and blogger Stuart Campbell who, according to *The National*, was banned from the platform for over two years for 'supposed hateful content' (The National, 2022). Although his account was active during the Salmond Trial, it had been suspended during my data collection, and as such, my dataset had references to tweets and posts that were no longer available. Once Musk took over, he reinstated Campbell's account (The National, 2022).[9]

[9] In fact, Musk has had several strange connections to my PhD project and case studies. He also dated Amber Heard and appears in several posts I collected about her during the trial.

For this reason, I have decided to use the name 'Twitter' throughout my thesis in order to illustrate the time period I collected my data, but also because all the points I raise about my data from that site specifically, pertain to the now defunct 'Twitter' platform.

*Platforms & selecting and capturing my data*

One of the difficulties I faced with collecting data for my research was finding a (mostly) consistent method that worked across all the platforms that host vastly different kinds of content. For example, it has become quite common to see social media researchers using the collection tool 'NCapture' (Bogen, Mulla, Haikalis, & Orchowski, 2022) for text based platforms like Twitter and blogs. However, on testing this tool out on my other platforms, I found that 'NCapture' does not work on either TikTok or Reddit. Furthermore, 'NCapture' like most internet-based research tools, falls victim to the ever-changing landscape of social media. For example, when I was collecting my data, 'NCapture' was still programmed to capture 140 character tweets, which meant researchers had to manually update their datasets (ibid). Furthermore, 'NCapture' does not capture screenshots, or links to the tweets it saves, nor to any images that might be included in the tweet. It was clear that 'NCapture' did not offer me the functionality necessary for the kind of data I was interested in collecting and as such I decided not to use it.

Another popular method of collection is to use an API (mentioned above). Application Programming Interfaces, or APIs, are a type of software interface provided by the owners of a specific application (such as Twitter, Reddit, TikTok and YouTube) that allow programmers (or third-party applications such as NodeXL) to search their data (W. Ahmed, Meier, & Smith, 2022; Janetzko, 2022). This is a particularly useful way of collecting data from social media because APIs allow you to 'design' searches for the exact kind of data relevant to your project that might not be possible through the generic search tools already provided in the application. It also allows you to collect a large sample size, although this is typically limited by the API providers (Janetzko, 2022). There are two different ways of using APIs for data collection. The first and easiest way is to use third-party programs such as NodeXL that are designed to use APIs to collect large amounts of data based on your preferences (W. Ahmed *et al.*, 2022). However, NodeXL only allows you to collect data from the past 8 days. Furthermore, it is not compatible with TikTok or Reddit, and so that was also ruled out of my options. The other way to use an API is to create your own program to read your chosen social media apps (Janetzko,

2022), however, social media companies are not forthcoming with information on the type of data their APIs give researchers access to (Driscoll & Walker, 2014; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2018). Social media researchers have also demonstrated that data collected using APIs is easily manipulated and as such cannot be considered 'random' (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2018). I preferred a more practical application that is easier to repeat across sites. As such, I decided against using an API with one exception, discussed in the Reddit section below.

Ultimately, in the interest of the replicability of my dataset and ensuring that my data could not be deleted or manipulated after the point of collection, I decided to manually capture my data. To do this, I created an excel spreadsheet to store all the information, images, and links to my dataset. The same spreadsheet design was used for all platforms, which meant I was collecting and storing the same information across platforms. For every post I noted the platform I was collecting from; the date of each search I conducted; the specific date I had chosen to search for each case study; if a specific account or search engine was used; the account or username of the poster; the link to the post, a screenshot or screen recording of each post; and the number it appeared in my search. How I organised my searches depended on each platform, which I will discuss in detail in the platform specific sections below. As well as saving the images and videos in excel, I also created separate folders for images and video files labelled with the corresponding numbers in excel so they are easily searchable. All these documents were backed up on OneDrive (my university's online storage system) and an external hard drive.

Furthermore, in line with my feminist methodology of 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1993), I used my own social media accounts to collect my data from these platforms (outlined above). One of the benefits of this method is that it allowed me to replicate a *real* user's experience on these platforms, so my dataset reflects what a user with a similar algorithm to mine might have seen or engaged with if they were following either of these case studies online (discussed earlier). A benefit that other social media research that relies on fake 'sockpuppet' accounts does not have (Ging *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, this approach expands on Karin Wahl-Jorgensen's observation that media research needs to take into consideration the 'multiplicity of media genres and platforms' and the *interactions* between these different platforms and technologies (2019, p. 173). By mimicking a real user's experience online, I can take these cross-platform interactions into consideration. I expand on how this worked across the different platforms below.

**TWITTER**

Twitter was one of the largest social media platforms in the world. It was of particular interest to me for this research project as it was organised around 280 character length 'tweets' that allowed 'users to maintain a public web-based asynchronous "conversation"' through their mobile device or computer (Murthy, 2018, p. 20). Upon opening the app and drafting a tweet, Twitter users were prompted to answer, 'What's happening?' highlighting the platform's focus on conversation, which was furthered by its public nature, as the default setting for tweets was that they were publicly accessible unless the user had specifically hidden or restricted their profile (ibid). Tweets could include text, images, animated images played on a loop called GIFs (Graphic Interchange Formats), and/or video (ibid). Like most of the other platforms I have selected for my study, Twitter used hashtags (any word, name, or phrase preceded by the hash sign '#'), which worked as hyperlinks that connect tweets that used the same hashtag, making them easily searchable (ibid). Twitter also had a 'trending topics' page that collected and listed the most popular hashtags at any given period (Rathnayake, Winter, & Buente, 2018). This further emphasises Twitter's focus on conversation and their goal of engagement. Other than hashtags, tweets could be searched and organised by their contained text, although these conversations were not as easy to link together as the hashtag search was. This is why the latter was the preferred way of connecting conversations when I collected my data.

Of all the platforms, I was the most familiar with Twitter. I already had a profile with a long history of use – having started it when I was still in High School in May 2009. As such, this was where I started my data collection. Although I did have the app, I used the website for my searches, so I could save the screenshots to my OneDrive, and my external hard drive. The focus of my research was to get a sense of the overarching narrative of each case study across the various platforms. As such, I did not limit my scope to specific accounts or people known to have been active during my chosen period of focus. Instead, I started by looking at my For You page and exploring the topics and hashtags for each case study. The 'For You' page on Twitter used to display trending hashtags and topics specifically tailored for each user (Rathnayake *et al.*, 2018). This was where I first found out about the Depp/Heard US trial. When I was not able to find anything there, and in the case of the Salmond trial which was a retrospective search, I searched generic terms like the names of the people involved or broad hashtags like #DeppvHeardTrial / #SalmondTrial. I then noted down any terms or hashtags that were coming up frequently in the posts I was searching. I ended up with a list of search terms

and hashtags for each case study (Table 3.1). I then started my data collection by using Twitter's Advanced Search feature.

Using Twitter's own search function is a method other researchers have employed (Mittelmeier & Cockayne, 2022) because the feature allowed for a variety of search options such as by date, language, popularity of post, key terms and hashtags. This method also fits into what Janet Salmons calls the 'Qualitative E-Research Framework' in the collection of extant social media data (Salmons, 2022). For each case study, I limited my searches by language (English), to fit within my focus of the Anglo-American context, by date (outlined above), and by what Twitter called 'Top Tweets'. Twitter described their 'Top Tweets' as being 'the most relevant tweets for your search', explaining that they were selected by an algorithm that 'determine(s) relevance based on the popularity of a Tweet (e.g., when a lot of people are interacting with or sharing via Retweets and replies), the keywords it contains, and many other factors'.[10] Although this language is quite nebulous, I decided limiting my search by Top Tweets would be the best option for getting an overall understanding of the dominant conversations and discussions that were taking place during my search dates about my case studies. This aligns with my decision to capture data in a way that mimics a user's experience on the platform. As such, the tweets in my dataset are the ones most likely to have been viewed by a user with a similar algorithm to mine. This is interesting because, as outlined above, my algorithm skewed towards more feminist friendly content, a point I will return to in the analysis chapters. Finally, I only collected the first 100 Tweets associated with each search of a hashtag (see Table 3.1 for clarity). Although they did not all have exactly 100 tweets, this allowed me to manage the volume of tweets I was collecting.

[10] These quotes were taken from the Twitter FAQ page prior to the Musk takeover. These pages are now defunct, and no longer available, but I wanted to keep the quotes here as the information is key to how I decided to capture my data.

| TWITTER CASE STUDIES | HASHTAG / SEARCH TERM SEARCHED | NUMBER OF TWEETS COLLECTED | | | TOTAL TWEETS COLLECTED |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | SEARCH 1 | SEARCH 2 | SEARCH 3 | |
| ALEX SALMOND TRIAL | #AlexSalmondTrial | 2 | 95 | 22 | 458 |
| | #NippyKnew | 10 | 15 | 6 | |
| | #AlexSalmond | 4 | 97 | 66 | |
| | #MeToo AND Salmond | 1 | 26 | 8 | |
| | #SalmondTrial | 1 | 85 | 20 | |
| JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL | #DeppvHeardTrial | 87 | 93 | | 1370 |
| | #JusticeForJohnnyDepp | 87 | 95 | | |
| | #MegaPint | 69 | 94 | | |
| | #JohnnyDeppIsAnAbuser | 46 | 74 | | |
| | #AmberTurd | 92 | 97 | | |
| | #IStandWithAmberHeard | 92 | 96 | | |
| | #JohnnyDeppIsAWifeBeater | 24 | 62 | | |
| | #DeppfordWives | 9 | 22 | | |
| | #AmberHeardDeservesPrison | 99 | 95 | | |
| | #DARVO | 16 | 21 | | |

Table 3.1 Lists of hashtags and search terms used for each case study (Twitter)

In the end, I had 1828 tweets across my two case studies before cleaning my data. When a particular hashtag starts trending, people tend to use it to promote their own business, product, or personal message, as such, I needed to remove any of these tweets from my dataset. Once that was done, I was left with 1769 tweets for analysis (see Table 3.2). These tweets included text, image, and video content which I discuss in more detail in the analysis chapters.

| TWITTER | JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL | ALEX SALMOND TRIAL |
|---|---|---|
| ALL TWEETS | 1370 | 458 |
| REMAINING TWEETS | 1333 | 436 |

Table 3.2 Total tweets collected for each case study

**REDDIT**

Reddit often seems like a slightly more 'fringe' social media platform, as its userbase tends to fit what Adrienne Massanari (2017) calls a 'geek sensibility'. However, it is still incredibly popular: It is the sixth most visited site in the world, accumulating 3.4 billion monthly visits (Similarweb.com, 2025). Like Twitter, Reddit is an open-source platform, but where it diverges is that Reddit is centred around 'communities of interest' known as 'subreddits' (Massanari, 2017). Where Twitter was centred around individual users who connected their conversations using hashtags, Reddit collects conversations in these subreddits, which are focused on various topics, forming a community based on these different spheres of interest. As such, subreddits work in the same way as Twitter hashtags.

Although I had used Reddit before, I did not have a profile, nor do I have the app installed. Instead, I have used Reddit on my laptop browser, not logged in, just using the website (although I am logged in to my Gmail account in my browser, which is the same email I used for all my social media profiles). This was in line with my other social media use, as noted above, so I had searched and engaged with misogynistic content, but I had predominantly used the site for content that could be classed as feminist. As such I had saved cookies for the site on my laptop and so I still received some tailored content when searching the site. As with Twitter, I used the website for my data collection for the ease of saving screenshots to OneDrive and my external hard drive. To choose the specific subreddits I would use for each case study, I searched the site using the same hashtags and search terms I did on Twitter to get an idea of where most of these conversations were taking place. I was then able to see which subreddits were coming up most of the time in these searches, which is how I landed on the subreddits I chose to monitor (see Table 3.3). Although choosing my subreddits was simple, capturing the Reddit posts was a challenge.

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">REDDIT CASE STUDIES</th><th rowspan="2">SUBREDDIT</th><th rowspan="2">MEMBERSHIP AT TIME OF COLLECTION</th><th colspan="3">NUMBER OF POSTS COLLECTED</th><th rowspan="2">TOTAL POSTS COLLECTED</th></tr>
<tr><th>SEARCH 1</th><th>SEARCH 2</th><th>SEARCH 3</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">ALEX SALMOND TRIAL</td><td>r/Scotland</td><td>259K</td><td>0</td><td>9</td><td>2</td><td rowspan="3">22</td></tr>
<tr><td>r/unitedkingdom</td><td>971K</td><td>1</td><td>5</td><td>4</td></tr>
<tr><td>r/ukpolitics</td><td>456K</td><td>0</td><td>1</td><td>0</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL</td><td>r/deppVheardtrial</td><td>13.8K</td><td>122</td><td>139</td><td rowspan="3"></td><td rowspan="3">807</td></tr>
<tr><td>r/JusticeForJohnnyDepp</td><td>56.4K</td><td>157</td><td>169</td></tr>
<tr><td>r/DeppDelusion</td><td>14.6K</td><td>57</td><td>163</td></tr>
</table>

Table 3.3 Lists of subreddits for each case study

Not long before I started collecting my data, Reddit changed their search options for their platform, removing the ability to search by date limiting searches to ‘Hot’, ‘Top’, ‘New’ and ‘Rising’. As such, I turned to the user generated platform PushShift to collect my data. PushShift is a website that reads Reddit’s API to return custom searches. It was created by Reddit user Jason Baumgartner in order for researchers to be able to analyse large quantities of Reddit data (r/pushshift, 2019). Although, as noted above, I chose not to use APIs for my social media collection, I made the exception here as PushShift allows users to search subreddits in a way that closely matches the search functions for both Twitter and TikTok. Furthermore, unlike other API methods, PushShift does not automatically download searches, nor does it return thousands of results. I still had to manually collect each post, in line with how I collected across the other platforms, and I was able to limit my scope to 100 posts as with the others. As such, PushShift enabled me to mimic the ‘Advanced Search’ tools in Twitter and TikTok and therefore allowed me to keep a consistent approach to my data collection across these multiple platforms.

For each subreddit searched, I limited my results by date and time (in line with my coding period discussed earlier). As Table 3.3 demonstrates, subreddits for my Salmond dataset were not limited to a specific topic like the Depp/Heard ones, as such, I limited my search on PushShift to posts that included a specific search term. I decided to use the same language as the Twitter hashtags for this (i.e. instead of #AlexSalmondTrial I searched ‘Alex Salmond Trial’), for consistency. As with Twitter, this way of searching Reddit is in line with extant data collection methods discussed above (Salmons, 2022), and once again I limited my search

to the first 100 posts. However, this was slightly complicated by Reddit's handling of deleted posts. Unlike Twitter, Reddit keeps a history of posts that are deleted from its site. I did not want to code deleted posts (a decision I discuss further in the ethics section below), however when looking through the deleted posts on the Pro Amber Heard subreddit, I was interested in how many of the deleted posts were mocking and denigrating Amber Heard. As such, I collected all these tweets and stopped once I reached 100 non-deleted posts (or until there were no more posts from that day to code).[11] In the end, I collected 829 posts across both case studies before cleaning my data, leaving 428 for analysis (Table 3.4). As with Twitter, these posts included text, images, and videos which I discuss more in the analysis chapters.

| REDDIT | **JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL** | **ALEX SALMOND TRIAL** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ALL POSTS | 807 | 22 |
| REMAINING POSTS | 418 | 10 |

Table 3.4 Total posts collected for each case study

**TIKTOK**

TikTok stands out from the other platforms as it is a comparatively new social media platform founded in 2016 and based off of the Chinese app 'Douyin' (Abidin, 2021). In 2018, the Chinese company that owned Douyin, ByteDance, purchased a different social media app that was popular with young users in America called 'Musical.Ly' (Lorenz, 2023). Musical.Ly was mostly an app for lip-syncing and dancing videos, which was TikTok's primary content in its first years (ibid). As such, when the Salmond Trial was taking place in early 2020 (before the COVID lockdown, which was when TikTok really took off in a broader way in the UK), TikTok was not yet widely used for political or other sorts of commentary content. Therefore, there was no data for me to collect on the Salmond Trial on TikTok. However, given its prominent role in the Depp/Heard trial, with some describing it as a 'trial by TikTok' (Tait, 2022), it would have been remiss to exclude TikTok from this project.

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[11] I discuss the issue of these deleted posts in more detail in **Chapter Five**.

In its short life, TikTok has grown at an exceptionally fast pace, quickly becoming one of the world's most downloaded apps (Abidin, 2021), despite its murky future in America (Hamilton, 2025). It is centred around short-form video content, but what makes it unique is its focus on encouraging conversation through videos, as users can respond to comments with videos, create 'duets' by reacting to or adding on to other users' videos, and link their videos to other users by using the same 'sound'. As such, TikTok was a perfect fit for my projects focus on online discussions, however, because TikTok was still so new to the market, at the time I was designing my study, there was little research on the platform. This made deciding how to go about collecting data more challenging than it had been with the other platforms discussed here.

Unlike the other sites I am using in this project, I was not familiar with TikTok. I had heard of it and used it from time to time on my laptop without creating an account, but I had spent less time on this platform than any other in this project. As such, I started my TikTok search by first having to familiarise myself with the app and by starting a profile. When I collected my data, TikTok did not allow for tailored searches without an account or without using the phone app. As such, I conducted my TikTok collection on my phone, using the mobile TikTok app and the new profile I had set up for it. Out of interest of comparability, I used the same email address and information as my other social media profiles. As with Reddit, I began by searching the same hashtags I did on Twitter to see what the best option would be for finding content on this app. Although there are a variety of ways to search the app (through profiles, sounds, filters, hashtags and more), in order to comply with Salmons's Qualitative E-Research framework (2022), as well as with my method for collecting data across the other platforms, I decided to focus my TikTok data collection by searching popular hashtags associated with my case study (see Table 3.5). After running an initial search to collect the most popular hashtags for each case study, I then collected my data.

| TIKTOK CASE STUDIES | HASHTAG SEARCHED | NUMBER OF TIKTOKS COLLECTED | | TOTAL TIKTOKS COLLECTED |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | SEARCH 1 | SEARCH 2 | |
| JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL | #johnnydeppvsamberheardtrial | 4 | 71 | 265 |
| | #johnnydeppamberheardverdict | 6 | 31 | |
| | #deppfordwives | 2 | 4 | |
| | #megapint | 2 | 13 | |
| | #megapint🍷 | 3 | 43 | |
| | #amberturd | 5 | 5 | |
| | #istandwithamberheard | 3 | 6 | |
| | #justiceforjohnnydepp | 12 | 52 | |
| | #johnnydeppamberheardtrial22 | 2 | 1 | |

Table 3.5 List of hashtags used for each search (TikTok)

In the end, I had collected 265 TikTok videos before data cleaning. As with previous platforms, I removed any spam content and was left with 259 videos for analysis (see Table 3.6). The videos ranged from a few seconds to a few minutes in length. In the end, my dataset consisted of just over three hours of TikTok content.

| TIKTOK | JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL |
|---|---|
| ALL VIDEOS | 265 |
| REMAINING VIDEOS | 259 |

Table 3.6 Total videos collected (TikTok)

**YOUTUBE & BLOGS**

As I mentioned earlier, I decided to include YouTube and blog content in my data because of the cross-posting in my wider dataset. This also allowed me to replicate the user experience on these social media platforms, as I could follow the content the users in my dataset were sharing, commenting on, and reposting. I have decided to link YouTube videos and blogs together because, although they differ in form, YouTube videos (sometimes referred to as 'Vlogs' a portmanteau for video blog) and blog content are very similar when it comes to how they are constructed and consumed. Both types of content have a specific 'creator' behind them, that

becomes a type of 'celebrity thinker' and influencer in that both YouTube videos and blogs are often created as a means of imparting knowledge to their audiences. I discuss this further in my analysis chapters, but for now I want to focus on how I chose to collect my data.

Unlike the other social media platforms that are designed for direct conversation as described above, YouTube videos and blogs do not necessarily link to other similar videos and blogs and are therefore harder to create a dataset out of. Indeed, most blogs are not hosted on a single platform, as other social media content. As such, I decided to only capture videos and blogs that were linked to from my other captured data. This meant that if a tweet, TikTok video, or Reddit post linked to a YouTube video or blog, I saved and captured that specific video or blog as part of my dataset (see Table 3.7). Again, this is in line with my situated approach to research, and mimics the user experience of social media, which was my goal with this data collection. As with the other platforms, some of the content collected was not related to the case studies or had been deleted before I could capture the information. This accounts for the difference in 'collected' vs 'coded' below.

| **YOUTUBE / BLOG CASE STUIDES** | **YOUTUBE VIDEOS** | | **BLOGS** | | **TOTALS** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | COLLECTED | CODED | COLLECTED | CODED | COLLECTED | CODED |
| JOHNNY DEPP V AMBER HEARD TRIAL | 73 | 49* | 1 | 0 | 74 | 49 *Hours: 54:52:12 |
| ALEX SALMOND TRIAL | 3 | 3* | 9 | 8* | 12 | 11 *Minutes: 13:37 *Words: 17,393 |

Table 3.7 Total YouTube videos and blogs collected for each case study

*How I coded my data*

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, my project is predominantly qualitative, but I did gather some quantitative data on the social media posts in my dataset in order to get a sense of

who was participating in these conversations, what their allegiances were, and what topics they were most interested in. This information is not intended as an 'objective' study, nor is this data meant to be interpreted as somehow representative of the discussions that centred these case studies online. As I mentioned earlier, I have taken a reflexive approach to my research and so I am not making any claims of 'objectivity'. Instead, I see my research and the knowledge I am able to produce with it as *situated* (Haraway, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This does not mean my data is limited or 'one sided' because, as Haraway (1993) explains, it is one part of a *community* of knowledges. Thus, I drew on methods from media monitoring projects to give a map, or description, of what my dataset looked like. I used this information to inform my qualitative analysis, and I go into more detail on my quantitative findings in each analysis chapter.

Across all platforms, I coded my data using bespoke guides based off of established media monitoring coding schedules from activist and academic projects (see Boyle, House, & Yaqoob, 2020; GMMP, 2025).[12] The purpose of this was to understand what my dataset looked like, so across Twitter, Reddit and TikTok I coded general information about the social media posts (i.e. the media form, topic, and scope); whether or not the post could be considered in support of someone in my case studies; as well as information about the poster, such as their sex and race. To do this, I followed methods from the above-mentioned media monitoring projects, and I only coded this information where this could be determined. For example, if there were pronouns in the poster's username, a profile picture, or if their username denoted a specific gender (e.g. a female coded name) If it was not obvious from the poster's profile, I coded this as 'don't know'. I also coded whether posters were 'verified',[13] if they identified as a survivor, and if their username included any emojis / flairs / phrases that related to the case studies.

Besides general information about the posters, I was also interested in wider questions about the content of the post (i.e. if they were talking about a specific person / group of people) and any specific thematic questions about the content as it related to each case study. This method

[12] I have both personal and professional connections with these projects which makes me best placed for incorporating this method into my PhD project.

[13] As I noted above, my data was collected when the blue badge on Twitter still indicated a user had been through a verification process designed for public figures (Graham, 2022).

of data coding draws inspiration from qualitative content analysis which is described as a ‘systematic method for searching out and describing meanings within texts’ (Drisko, 2015, p. 88). The focus of this type of content analysis is in summarising and highlighting the content of the data (ibid), and as such, worked for my desire to describe my dataset.

In order to determine what these questions should be, I applied an iterative sampling approach which is a common feature in qualitative content analysis (Drisko, 2015, pp. 100-101). An iterative approach to data sampling allows for more flexibility as it requires that the data analysis and coding happen simultaneously in what is referred to as a ‘cycle of sampling’ (ibid, pp. 100). For the purposes of my project, this started with me reading through and watching all the content I had collected before starting the coding process – what qualitative content analysis researchers refer to as data ‘immersion’ (ibid, p. 102). While doing this, I noted down all the key themes and topics that were regularly coming up. I then put together a draft coding schedule incorporating any new variables that matched themes from the dataset and discussed this with my supervisors. In our discussions, my supervisors would suggest other potential themes or interest areas that they noticed, and we would adapt the coding schedule where appropriate. During this stage of immersion, I also tested my coding schedule, discussing these tests with my supervisors and revising the schedule as necessary. I continued this process, until reaching data ‘saturation’ where no new themes were coming up, and I was satisfied with the coding schedule. From this process, I identified unique questions specific to each case study that I added to my general questions I had adapted from previous media monitoring projects (for a full list of all the questions I coded, see Appendix 1 and 2).

For each platform, I created a separate coding sheet per hashtag (Twitter, TikTok) and subreddit. I then collated that information into a single summary document, so I could understand the overarching discourses for each case study, as well as how individual hashtags and subreddits were organised. I had a slightly different method for YouTube and blog posts. Some of the YouTube videos shared were over 11 hours long. Additionally, some blog posts in the Salmond Trial were subject to a criminal investigation that resulted in the blogger, Craig Murray, being sentenced to eight months in jail for contempt of court because his blogs identified the victims involved in the trial (Mistlin, 2021).[14] For these reasons, I decided not to

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[14] I discuss my handling of these blogs in the ethics section below.

code any information about the content of the blogs and videos in my dataset. Instead, I only collected information on the YouTuber/blogger, and whether the video/blog was in support of a particular person, which I adapted from the media monitoring coding schedules mentioned above. See Appendix 3.

In my final analysis, some of the questions I coded were omitted. This was partly due to the scope of the project, and I have gone on to use this data elsewhere (House, forthcoming). However, some of the data collected ended up not being useful for the analysis (e.g. data on the occupation of the people discussed in posts, and their family role). I did not omit this data in the event that it may become useful for a later project, but it does not feature in the description of my dataset that I detail in each chapter. Beyond this, there were instances where I came across some issues coding particular posts. For example, when it was not clear whether a post was in support of a particular person, or when a post matched multiple different variables and was difficult to narrow down into a single category. This was only a problem in a minority of the posts coded, however when this occurred, I discussed the post in question with my supervisors who advised on how best to code the information. This 'cyclical' approach to sampling, together with checking in with my supervisors at each stage has helped to ensure the reliability of my data coded. Again, it was never my intent to conduct a traditional content analysis, and I am not making any claims of 'objectivity' or representativeness with my data. Instead, I have taken a reflexive approach – a well-established tradition in feminist research (Westmarland & Bows, 2019, pp. 16-17) – and have utilised my own social media accounts as well as a more qualitative approach to data analysis in order to generate a situated knowledge of my dataset. The benefit of such an approach, is that I am able to understand what a 'real' user with a similar algorithm to me, might have seen if searching these topics online. The importance of this becomes clearer in my analysis chapters, where I demonstrate that even though my algorithm can be considered progressive leaning and feminist (as discussed above), the posts I encountered predominantly favoured the perspective of the accused men in my case studies. This has wider implications for feminist media studies, that I go on to discuss in the coming chapters.

*How I analysed my data*

The cyclical data immersion method (Drisko, 2015) allowed me to familiarise myself with my dataset, and identify key posts for analysis that were both representative of the dataset as a

whole (i.e. related to the key themes and questions I ended up coding for), as well as those that were important to my research questions. This is a common feature of qualitative content analysis that looks at both representativeness of the dataset as well as a 'non-frequency' approach that recognises 'pivotal information might be present only once in a number of texts' (Drisko, 2015, p. 84). This more qualitative approach to data analysis complimented my choice of methods for analysing this data which I will now outline.

**SEMIOTICS AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

As would have become clear from the discussion on name in the previous chapter, I use a semiotic analysis to understand the media texts in my dataset. Names are signs. As are the names we call others. Put more specifically, names are part of a connotative semiological system that are thus imbued with ideological and cultural messages that make it part of a metalanguage Roland Barthes calls 'myth' (Barthes, 1993, pp. 133-140). As I discussed in **Chapter Two**, the function of the myth of a 'good' name is a key point of analysis for this project. I used Deborah Cameron's (2012) writing on language and power to argue that the metalanguage of myth highlights the 'unfixed' nature of meaning behind language and names, which means that 'good' and 'bad' names can be contested. It therefore depends on the interpreter (Eco 1973). Moreover, my dataset spans text, image, audio, and video content. I thus needed a method of analysis that allowed me to investigate signs, myth and images. Semiotics served the purpose well, as it encompasses all these elements. Therefore, I used Umberto Eco's (1984) writing on interpretation through semiology, as well as Barthes (1973) levels of signification (i.e. denotation, connotation, and myth), with a particular focus on his writing on myth (1993), within my methods for analysis. A key way this method was applied was in my analysis of name, how it acts as a myth (Barthes) and how, by focusing on contrasting points of reference, the myth behind a name can be (re)interpreted (Eco). However, as semiotics is mostly concerned with single instances of communication, I supplemented this with discourse analysis.

Sara Mills defines discourse as:

> 'groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence' (Mills, 2004, p. 10)

Discourse analysis therefore allowed me to move beyond single instances of communication, to see how groupings of utterances / statements operate within a specific social context.

Discourse analysis is the tool many theorists use for an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. For this, most turn to Michel Foucault, as his writing on the *oppositional* quality of dialogues is a foundational tool for understanding how power operates across discourses, arguing that 'all of the knowledge we have is the result or the effect of power struggles' (Mills, 2004, p. 19). I do not draw on Foucault, however. My thesis is concerned with understanding why men's reputational sanctity sometimes means more than the material sanctity of the people they harm. Foucault could be one of my case studies. He was accused of raping and grooming prepubescent boys in Tunisia while he was working there in the 1960s (Guesmi, 2021). These allegations were confirmed by the French essayist Guy Sormon who witnessed Foucault's treatment of the young boys (ibid). Foucault's reputation remains firmly intact in academia. This is despite the fact that much of his later work can be read as an excusal of his crimes (see Taylor, 2009). However, this does not mean that my analysis ignores Foucault's work. As Sara Mills notes, feminist theory has drawn extensive inspiration from Foucault's discourse theory (2004, pp. 69-92). Rather than applying a 'Foucauldian' discourse analysis, my approach is instead informed by feminist readings of Foucault's work.

As I noted in the previous chapter, I am inspired by Judith Butler's argument that people are constituted through language and discourse (J. Butler, 1997). Butler's use of Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation (or name calling) thus demonstrates the power of discourse in our understanding of people and subjecthood. As such, I will be focusing on discourse as language *in use* that is not tied to a specific medium or sign system as a semiotic analysis is (Cameron, 2001; Mills, 2004), and importantly, is not *disembodied*, as Foucault stipulates (Mills, 2004, pp. 76-77). In my analysis, I am drawing on the feminist contribution to discourse theory that sees discourse:

> 'less as something to which one is subjected than as a vehicle which is used by subjects to work out interpersonal relationships, complying with certain elements and actively opposing others' (Mills (2004, p. 76) drawing on the work of Dorothy Smith (1990)).

This emphasises the 'social, context bound view of discourse' that recognises individual agency within discursive structures (Mills, 2004, p. 77). As Mills explains, there will always be conflicting versions of 'social understanding' around specific events or issues. For example, Brock Turner sees himself as a victim, while Chanel Miller sees him as her rapist (**Chapter Two**). This demonstrates how discourse, like language and name, are *unfixed*. Going back to the discussion on myth above, it becomes clear how a name can never truly be 'good' or 'bad'

as it is built up through a discourse of exclusion (Mills, 2004). Mills's argument that discourses operate through processes of exclusion in order to limit what can and cannot be counted as knowledge (2004, pp. 57-60) illuminates the relationship between knowledge and power that I will be drawing on for this thesis.

As Mills (2004, p. 79) notes, 'power [is] enacted within relationships' which therefore makes it *contestable*. I discussed how this works in relation to naming with Butler's argument on interpellation in the previous chapter, where, by calling someone a name, one also brings that subject into linguistic existence and therefore '(inaugurates) the subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call' (J. Butler, 1997, p. 2). This hypothetical interaction demonstrates Mills's argument on the importance of distinguishing between 'one's status and one's *interactional power*' (2004, p.84 – emphasis author's own), whereby a subject can negotiate a position of power for themself – using the different linguistic resources at their disposal – that may well be in conflict with their social status (ibid). An important focus for feminist discourse analysis, then, is on these conflicting *discourses* – in the plural – rather than simply looking at a single discourse, and understanding *which* discourse is given credence (ibid). Mills's writing on interactional power fits in with how I am using power in this thesis.

In the previous chapter, I outlined John B Thompson's definition for 'symbolic power' which he defines as 'the capacity to intervene in the course of events' and 'to influence the actions and beliefs of others' (1999, p.6). In this thesis, I will be using this definition, together with Mills's understanding of interactional power for my analysis. I will be supplementing this with an understanding of gender as a heirarchy (discussed in **Chapter Two**), together with the historical construction of marginalised people as less credible (Banet-Wesier and Higgins 2023). In this way, I am able to recognise the discursive credence typically afforded to white, priviledged men while also acknowledging that individuals can, as Mills explains, 'actively engage with discourses in order to forge particular positions of identity for themselves' (2004, p. 91). In this way, power is not just something that you have, but something that you *use*. Therefore, I am able to investigate who gets to talk with authority online by focusing on the conflicting discourses of believability in my dataset.

Therefore, Mills's (2004) understanding of discourse ties in with a situated knowledge as it emphasises the *different ways of knowing* and understanding issues and events (discussed above). As such, I am not drawing on a specific tool, but a *feminist way of seeing* which allows

me to interpret the media texts I analyse in this thesis. I am best placed to do this, as I will be drawing on my situated knowledge of my own algorithm (discussed earlier), by embracing a reflexive approach to my research. Thus, by adopting these two methods together with the qualitative content analysis, I can understand the function of reputation and name in specific media texts, as well as how that discussion is then negotiated through wider discourses of believability online. By utilising this mixed methods approach, I can therefore investigate how the meaning of sexual harassment and assault are continually being contested and explored online.

**Ethical Considerations**

Social media content is all in the public domain, and as such there are technically no restrictions on replicating or drawing on the content that is shared on these sites. Social media users do not have intellectual property rights, and they do not have any control over what happens to the content they share online. Indeed, social media content is frequently reused in different media content both online and offline (e.g. in news articles, documentaries, advertising, and so on). Social media research does not typically require an ethics review, and my project was not subject to one by my university. However, as scholars have demonstrated (Boyle & Rathnayake, 2020; Jacobson & Gorea, 2022), this does not mean using this content for research purposes is always *ethical*. The Cambridge Analytica scandal illustrated this issue, when 87 million Facebook users' data was covertly gathered and sold to political campaign groups (Jacobson & Gorea, 2022). Furthermore, as Karen Boyle and Chamil Rathnayake (2020) pointed out in their Twitter study, social media research that centres controversial topics may also result in personalised backlash against specific users. The scope of my research content can certainly be described as 'controversial', and given the feminist focus of this project, I am keen to avoid any backlash toward the users in my dataset. However, as feminist scholar Emma Jane has argued in her writing on misogyny, it is equally pertinent for research to give an accurate portrayal of this type of content in order to 'adequately convey the nature and force of contemporary misogyny online' (2017, p. 14).

My thesis is centrally interested in mediated representations about sexual harassment and assault. The language and images used in the posts I draw on are at times shocking, but that is what makes them important to replicate and analyse in detail. As Jane (2017, p. 14) argues, the 'metaphorical unspeakability' of the gendered and hateful language in these posts might even

be the reason online misogyny has become so widespread. As I noted in **Chapter One**, part of my aim with this research is to outline the *effectiveness* of these debates online so that feminist scholars are better placed to combat them. As such, I have chosen to quote from and include screenshots of the posts in my dataset in order to, as Jane (2017) describes, give an unexpurgated account of the type of misogyny and violence involved in these posts. It is worth noting that all the data I have collected comes from subreddits and online discussions that are *intended* to be publicly accessible. By tagging posts with hashtags, users are choosing to link their thoughts and feelings on a topic to other users in a *shared* and *public* conversation. Likewise, by participating in a public forum (like a subreddit) users are choosing to be part of a shared and openly accessible discussion. I have furthered this by only collecting 'Top' posts under each platform, so that the posts I draw on are from users and content that were interacted with the most. As such, I have employed the 'critical-realist' approach to my data in that, as the users were knowingly posting and participating in publicly accessible and sharable sites, I consider their contributions public and therefore safe to use in my study without having to seek further consent (Jacobson & Gorea, 2022). However, I have still made some concessions in an effort to avoid potential backlash toward these users.

In the posts I analyse in this thesis, I do not include any *individual* users' demographic information including their profile images and usernames.[15] I have removed this information from screenshots, and I do not refer to it in my discussion. However, I have made the exception for public figures as they should have an expectation of public accountability and permanence to comments they make in the public sphere. I have followed other scholars researching social media here by defining a public figure as anyone who has either been 'verified' by Twitter's old verification system, or anyone who has over 10,000 followers (Boyle, Flynn, House, & Rathnayake, 2024; Sicilia & López, 2023). As such, my project follows other scholars researching similar topics who too include screenshots and quotations from online sources with some redactions (e.g. Copland, 2025; Jane, 2017; H. Wood, 2018).

There is also the issue of deleted posts. As I mentioned above, Reddit keeps a record of deleted posts, and they still appear in searches. This is because Reddit is set up slightly differently than other social media sites as it is centred around different subreddits (Massanari, 2017). Each

[15] This also protects users who identified as victim/survivors in my dataset, and who may not always want to *be known* as such (see Boyle, 2024, p. 21).

subreddit has designated moderators that moderate content and make sure none of it violates the rules of that specific subreddit (for an example of subreddit rules see Figure 3.1 above). As such, the moderators frequently delete posts, but these posts still appear in searches with the content still visible. However, when a *user* deletes their post, the post shows up in a search but none of the content is available (Figure 3.3). I collected all these deleted posts (as described above), but I chose not to include these in my coding.[16] This allowed me to gather more of a representative sample of pro Amber Heard posts, which otherwise would have been lost to the numerous mocking posts by Johnny Depp supporters as Figure 3.3a demonstrates. As such, I also do not qualitatively analyse these posts.

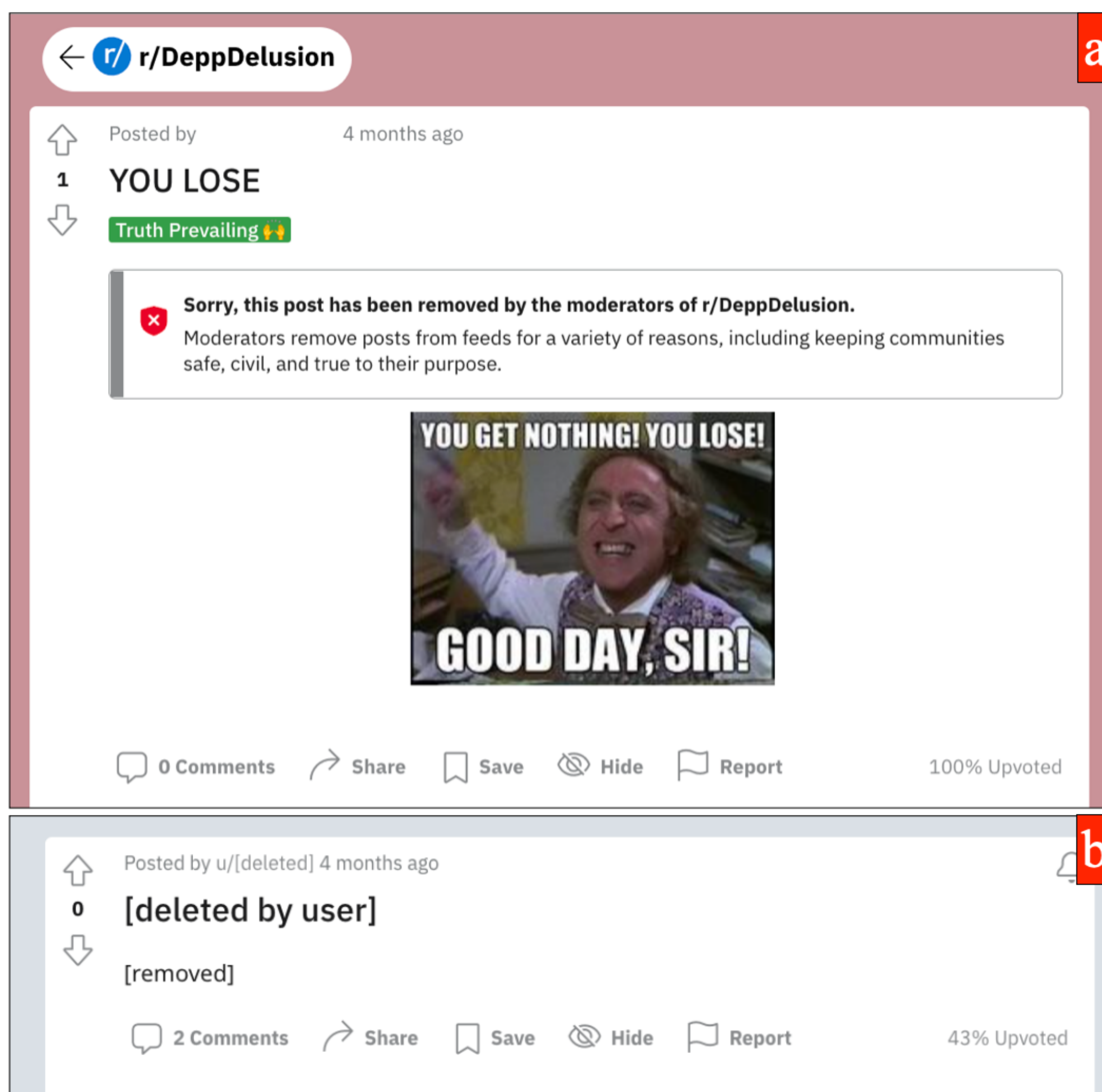



Figure 3.3 Screenshots of Reddit posts that have been deleted by moderators (a) vs users (b)

[16] I discuss how I used these deleted posts, and their significance, in **Chapter Five**.

There is also an issue of posts that have been deleted since completing my coding and analysis. It is not uncommon for users to delete past social media posts, however, I have the added complication that many Twitter users have chosen to delete their accounts in response to Musk's controversial leadership over the app (Tenbarge & Collier, 2024). In fact, even Alyssa Milano has deleted her account, and the viral #MeToo tweet along with it (Tapp, 2024). As such, I cannot feasibly say I do not draw on deleted content – I draw on Milano's tweet in **Chapter One** – however I will not include screenshots of posts that had – at the time of writing – been deleted, and if I quote from them, I will slightly alter the wording, whilst retaining meaning, so that they cannot be searchable. Similarly, as I mentioned earlier, some of the blog posts in my dataset were deleted because they violated a court order not to identify any of the victims involved in the Salmond Trial. I have drawn on these posts in my analysis, but as with deleted social media posts, I do not quote directly from these blogs or include any links to them. As such, when referencing these blogs, I do not include their title, publication date, or any other identifying information. In my bibliography these will appear as 'Murray, Craig. (n.d.) Deleted Blog' followed by a number to distinguish between the different blogs.

## Conclusion

In the above, I have outlined my feminist methodological approach to both my data collection and my chosen methods of analysis. By centring my curiosity of what is considered 'the norm', 'natural', or 'tradition' (Enloe, 2004), I am drawing on feminist principles for research that span my entire thesis, from its construction to its arguments. As I argued above, I see this project and the knowledge I can produce with it, as one part of a wider system of knowledges (Haraway, 1988). As such, my PhD acts as a framework for understanding how name and reputation function in the economy of believability, so that other researchers may expand on this in their own work. My thesis thus fits into a wider and collaborative conversation on believability and its mediated representations in cases that involve sexual harassment and assault. In what follows, I outline my contribution to this system of knowledges.

# CHAPTER FOUR
# The Alex Salmond Trial

"Everyone working in government knows that if a Harvey Weinstein scandal is going to emerge in Scotland, it will be about Alex Salmond."

Government source in David Clegg and Kieran Andrews (2021, p. xxi)

On the 22nd of August 2018, a confidential government inquiry into two complaints against the former SNP First Minister of Scotland found that Alex Salmond had sexually harassed two women (Ms A and Ms B) during his time in office. Criminal complaints were referred to Police Scotland, and the findings of the report were leaked to the press. A few months later, on the 8th of January 2019, a judicial review found that Leslie Evans, the civil servant responsible for the inquiry, had prior knowledge of the complaints and therefore found the inquiry 'unlawful', 'unfair', and 'tainted with apparent bias' (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 329). Regardless, Salmond was formally charged with 14 offenses (later dropped to 13) which included one charge of attempted rape, one charge of intent to rape, ten charges of sexual assault (dropped to nine), and two charges of indecent assault. Over a year later, on the 23rd of March 2020, just as the UK was heading into the first Coronavirus lockdown, Salmond was acquitted of all the charges against him with 12 not guilty verdicts and one 'not proven'.[17]

When looking at the wider context at the time, it becomes clear the story of the Salmond Trial is, intrinsically, a story about media, Scottish politics, and a mediated and politicised discourse on #MeToo. As the opening quote to this chapter suggests, the Harvey Weinstein story – and the wider revelations that followed under #MeToo from October 2017 – was, for many commentators, a valuable context for understanding the Salmond case. This comparison was bolstered by the relative proximity of the two trials, with Weinstein's sentencing in New York taking place just two days after the commencement of the Salmond Trial. Equally, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) point out, another key historical 'moment' that developed alongside

[17] A contentious Scottish ruling of which there is no specific legal definition, however it acts as an acquittal, it is expected to be scrapped (Reporter, 2023).

#MeToo was the contentious 'post-truth' debate. As Jayson Harsin explains, post-truth is emblematic of the current 'breakdown of social trust…(in) the major institutional truth-teller or publicist – the news media' (Harsin, 2018, p. 1) as well as a longstanding distrust in politics and government. This has been exacerbated by popular mediated subjects like #MeToo, which has impacted public knowledge on issues like sexual harassment and assault. However, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, this is mostly an issue of believability where debates around 'post-truth' are used to continue to cast suspicion on women speaking out about abuse – a point I will return to later. Still, post-truth works as a useful framework for understanding the debates and social commentary around the Trial.

At the time of the Salmond Trial in March 2020, the United Kingdom was just two months into Brexit, a political decision Scotland voted *against* and has been described as being 'built on lies' (Hutton, 2021). The coronavirus was quickly spreading across the world, leading to a national lockdown announcement the day the Salmond Trial concluded. However, early media and government responses to the pandemic were often confusing and at times contradictory which dented the public's trust in their messaging (Kyruakidou, Morani, Soo, & Cushion, 2020). This was exacerbated by public distrust in Scottish mainstream media after the majority of Scotland's papers (many of which are owned by companies outwith Scotland) chose not to support independence during the 2014 referendum (Dekavalla, 2019). A further, more specific point of contention was with the BBC, which was (and still is) seen as being London-centric (Hassan, 2014). Unlike UK newspapers who are openly partisan, public service broadcast media is meant to offer an unbiased perspective. However, from the very moment the BBC began broadcasting in Scotland there was concern over its 'Scottish distinctiveness' (Hassan, 2014, p. 69). As the journalist Douglas Fraser put it, 'Scotland wants to see not only itself, but the rest of Britain and the world, through its own eyes rather than those of editors in London' (Fraser in Hassan, 2014, p. 81). This culminated in a protest during the 2014 referendum against 'BBC bias' that was held outside BBC Scotland's headquarters (BBC Reporter 2014).

At the same time, there has been an emerging social media that seemed to talk to these issues. As Harsin (2018) notes, the emergence and proliferation of social media platforms has exacerbated these tensions with mainstream news and governments, because it favours highly emotive forms of communication, which appear as more 'authentic' and therefore more truthful. As Karin Wahl-Jorgensen has demonstrated, this type of 'user-generated content' is often valued *more* than 'objective' news reporting resulting in 'an epistemological vocabulary

which equates truth with authenticity, emotional integrity and immediacy' (2019, p. 75). So, in March 2020 Scotland found itself in an environment where tensions around independence and a distrust of Westminster; a historical suspicion of the news media in Scotland and its ties to London (Dekavalla, 2019); along with public revelations about decades of sexual harassment and assault that had been hidden in 'plain sight' (mostly within political and media institutions, e.g. Jimmy Savile, Dominique Strauss-Kahn), had coalesced into one news story: The Salmond Trial.

Understanding this context is key to unpacking and explaining the reactions and discussion that surrounded the Trial and verdict. Much of the commentary on social media, like the news agenda discussed above, drew on these debates about #MeToo, independence, mainstream media bias, and fears of government conspiracy. Where some might have believed the women who accused Salmond, they were still unwilling to denounce him because of his importance to Scotland and the fight for independence. As stated in **Chapter Two**, a key concern for this research is to understand the gendered function of name and reputation and whether/in what contexts men's names and reputations are upheld as more important. When it comes to Salmond, the reasons for wanting to protect his name and reputation are clear, so the purpose of this chapter is to understand and analyse how those arguments were made in the context of the Trial. To do this, it is necessary to start with a review of Salmond, and his status and relationships in the SNP in the lead up to the Trial, followed by an overview of my data sample. I will then move on to a qualitative analysis of some of the chosen texts.

However, before I begin, I want to make a note on terms and people. Several restrictions have been put in place for writing on the Salmond Trial. It will have become apparent that I have not yet mentioned all the women who accused Salmond. At the start of the Trial, a court ruling granted them anonymity and prohibited the publication of their names and/or any information likely to identify them (Clegg & Andrews, 2021).[18] However, this ruling was not always respected, and as I mentioned earlier, some of the data gathered for this chapter has since been involved in a legal case of contempt of court for jigsaw identification (Mistlin, 2021). Furthermore, in the final stages of this PhD (and after the analysis for this chapter was complete), Alex Salmond died (Learmonth & McKay, 2024). Before his death, Salmond was

[18] This is not a standard protection for victim/survivors in Scotland but was stipulated by the judge in this case.

notoriously litigious. Since his death, his supporters have been vocal about the supposed ‘smearing’ of his legacy (e.g. Drake & Blackley, 2024), especially as new allegations were reported to Police Scotland (Brooks, 2024). As such, I am focusing my chapter around ‘the Trial’ – hence the capitalisation. The Trial is my main ‘subject’, not the people involved. I will discuss the necessary political background of Salmond, but only as so far as it relates to the Trial and the discussions that centred it. Furthermore, as mentioned in **Chapter Three**, I will not quote or link to any information that might identify the women involved.

### Alex Salmond: The Marmite Politician

The allegations against Salmond were shocking but, as the opening quote suggests, not entirely unexpected (at least in some quarters). By many accounts, Salmond was known as an abrasive and difficult man, even before the allegations of sexual assault and misconduct had come to light and would incorporate an element of irascibility into his political persona. In a biography of the Scottish National Party (SNP) published in 2016, a year and four months before the first official complaints against Salmond were filed, Salmond is described as ‘cocky’, ‘arrogant’, and ‘infuriating’, earning him a reputation for being a ‘marmite politician’ (Ritchie, 2016). This nickname would later be picked up in his defence during the Trial. Salmond’s style had always divided voters (McAnulla & Crines, 2017). As commentators have argued, there is no mistaking his achievements in elevating the SNP from a fringe political party, to a strong contender against the previously dominant Scottish Labour (Ritchie, 2016). However, on his own, Salmond was too divisive. As others have demonstrated (Clegg & Andrews, 2021; Mitchell, 2016), it was only when he joined ranks with Nicola Sturgeon in his second stint as convener of the SNP, that he managed to win a leadership election. Commentators such as Garavelli (2020) have argued that Salmond had never been popular with women voters, and the support for the SNP under his leadership was mostly from middle-aged men. Sturgeon was not only a great way to engage female voters, but at 16 years Salmond’s junior, she also brought a much-needed younger voter base to the party. As such, the pairing of Salmond with Sturgeon was instrumental in elevating the SNP to the number one party in Scotland.

#### *Salmond & Sturgeon*

Salmond and Sturgeon’s relationship is key to understanding the context around the Trial. Sturgeon was Salmond’s protégé, his Deputy during the Independence Referendum and the

First Minister at the time of the Trial. Her eventual decision to allow retrospective complaints against ministers, and to not step in and stop the inquiry into Salmond, was seen as a massive betrayal by Salmond and his supporters. Likewise, Sturgeon felt a betrayal by her mentor, and has spoken publicly about the pain of losing that relationship (Garavelli, 2020). But, as commentators have pointed out (Clegg & Andrews, 2021; Garavelli, 2020), tensions between Sturgeon and Salmond existed long before the Trial – or even the investigation – started.

Back in 2004 during the SNP leadership elections, Salmond had assured Sturgeon he would not run, so she put forward an election campaign (Garavelli, 2020). He quickly changed his mind, but to appease Sturgeon and knowing he needed her to appeal to a wider voter base in a general election, he asked her to be his Deputy. Sturgeon accepted and the two went on to win the SNP race and the next Scottish parliamentary election together (Clegg & Andrews, 2021; Garavelli, 2020). It was during the 2014 independence referendum that tensions started to rise. Salmond chose Sturgeon as the public face of the campaign, knowing that he was too divisive a character to run it himself (Mitchell, 2016). In fact, one of the opposition's strategies in the run up to the referendum was to tie the independence vote directly to Salmond *because* of his divisiveness (McAnulla & Crines, 2017). Sturgeon's and Salmond's approaches to independence were very different. Where Sturgeon took a very detailed approach focused on the economics of independence, Salmond was less bothered by the detail and divides between the two and their supporters started to present themselves (Garavelli, 2020). In the end, they lost the vote for independence and Salmond resigned as First Minister, with Nicola Sturgeon taking over from him.

Unexpectedly, the lost vote ignited a surge of support for the party, and for Sturgeon as leader, while Salmond's political life began its decline (ibid). This bolstered the divides in the party, as Salmond and his base saw Sturgeon's success as belonging to him. Salmond returned to Westminster, where he was elected as MP in 2015, but in the 2017 snap elections Salmond lost his seat. As he did not stand in the Scottish election the previous year, he found himself out of parliamentary politics.

*Salmond & #MeToo*

With his political career seemingly come to an end, Salmond reignited the irascible image that was both his unique selling proposition, and his limit as a leader. This was emblematic in his

speech after his 2017 election defeat, where he quoted the famous Walter Scott poem *Bonnie Dundee*, written in honour of the Jacobite rising, stating, ‘You have naw seen the last of my bonnets and me’ (Salmond in Howitt, 2020) – a phrase repeated by his supporters online after the verdict of the Trial was announced. Ousted from politics, Salmond turned to a different type of public stage and started appearing in Edinburgh Fringe shows (Howitt, 2020), until, on the 9th of November 2017, he launched his own chat show on the Russian backed broadcaster *Russia Today* (RT), just as the #MeToo moment was taking off.

In the aftermath of Alyssa Milano’s seismic #MeToo tweet, workplaces and organisations were contending with the revelations that were coming out about their toxic and hostile working environments. The Scottish government was no exception. Female MSPs from all parties, started speaking out about the harassment and abuse they had endured from senior politicians (Clegg & Andrews, 2021; Howitt, 2020). Many of them turned to the prominent Scottish lawyer and human rights campaigner, Aamer Anwar, who then complied a dossier detailing their experiences. The dossier was published by *Herald on Sunday* on the 29th of October 2017 (see Hutcheon, 2017). By the beginning of November, two weeks after Milano’s tweet, Mark McDonald (of the SNP) became the first Scottish MSP to resign due to allegations of inappropriate behaviour (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 132).

At the same time, according to reporting by David Clegg and Kieran Andrews (2021), journalists started to hear stories about Alex Salmond’s past treatment of women. On the 4th of November, the Scottish government received its first query from a journalist who had a story about Alex Salmond’s inappropriate behaviour (ibid, p. 127). The story ended up not being published, but it had come at a time when the government was receiving more and more pressure to address the issue of systemic sexual harassment and abuse in Holyrood. Consequentially, Sturgeon, who was First Minister at this time, introduced a new sexual harassment policy to help deal with complaints of inappropriate behaviour which, crucially, included complaints against former ministers. Just two months after their decision, and three months after the initial #MeToo tweet, two women made formal complaints against former First Minister Alex Salmond.

*Salmond, the SNP & his political persona*

As is clear from the above, Salmond was always a complicated political figurehead. Regardless, he still enjoyed a large amount of support. Salmond's bullishness played into the masculinist personality type that does well in nationalist parties, and in the wider political context, that has taken a turn toward personalisation (Higgins & McKay, 2016; Higgins & Smith, 2022). Furthermore, as James Mitchell notes, 'portraying Salmond as an arrogant bully helped his image as a strong leader' (2016, p. 340). As such, Salmond's 'bad' reputation was actually a *good* thing. This feeds into what Karen Boyle (2019, pp. 83-88) has termed the 'cultural value' of abuse. As the opening quote to this chapter suggests, Salmond's treatment of women was well known. David Clegg and Kieran Andrews (2021) detail many instances where inappropriate behaviour was reported and acted on, including introducing a 'toughen(ed) up…"operational response"' that no women were allowed to work alone with Salmond and that a second male had to 'work alongside women colleagues at night' (pp. 60-61). As Boyle (2019, p. 77) explains, where this type of abuse is known and excused (as in, tolerated by making adjustments rather than clamped down on or reported to police) is often because of the myth of 'the tortured genius' where their mistreatment of others is seen as a by-product of their successful careers. Boyle's writing centres the creative arts, producers, and media personas, however this is arguably even more applicable to politicians, as ignoring their bad behaviour is seen to be for the greater good. *Some* women may have suffered, but the *whole nation* benefits.

The cultural value of Salmond's alleged abuse is made clear when looking at the support he has enjoyed since the accusations were made public. In August 2018, after the *Daily Record* broke the story that the Scottish government upheld its review of the two complaints against Salmond, the former First Minister launched a crowdfunding campaign to help pay his legal costs for a judicial review into the government's handling of these complaints. The fund received widespread support, amassing £63,000 and surpassing the original target of £50,000 in just a few hours (Garavelli, 2020; Howitt, 2020). The cultural value of Salmond and his 'bad' reputation also fits into the 'anti-establishment' history of the Scottish National Party (SNP) (Mitchell & Hassan, 2016b), where a 'David & Goliath' narrative is routinely invoked to describe their various political challenges (ibid). Like David, Salmond might have to turn to extreme, unorthodox measures to win his battles against the 'establishment', but he did so as the agent of a deeper national interest. This 'David & Goliath' narrative was bolstered still

when, in 2019 in the lead up to the Trial, the inquiry was found to be unlawful and ‘tainted by apparent bias.’ (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 329), further establishing Salmond as the proverbial David taking on the SNP Goliath, a narrative that continued into the Trial.

I arrived in Scotland at the end of 2018, so, having only known Salmond as a man who was accused of sexual harassment, it was hard to understand as an outsider just how revered Salmond was. But he is routinely described as ‘the most successful leader’(Mitchell & Hassan, 2016a, p. 6). This is not just in the SNP, but the most successful leader in the *United Kingdom* (Ritchie, 2016, p. 281) for his role in getting a small, nationalist party into power. Salmond is widely credited as the reason for the success of the SNP, and for getting it so close to independence in 2014 (Mitchell & Hassan, 2016b), and as such, he is an incredibly important political figure in Scotland and to many Scottish people. As such, Salmond’s ‘bad’ reputation is seen as more of an asset than a detriment to his supporters, and it was this narrative that formed his defence: He might have behaved inappropriately but not criminally. As Salmond himself said in the lead up to the Trial ‘I’ve never said, incidentally, that I’m an angel’ (Salmond in Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 200).

**Data Breakdown**

As I noted in **Chapter Three**, the majority of my analysis is made up of a qualitative assessment of the media texts in my dataset. However, I am starting with a brief overview of my dataset for this case study to establish the landscape for understanding what my sample looks like, before moving on to my analysis.

| PLATFORM | MEN | WOMEN | DON’T KNOW | OTHER |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Twitter | 44% | 23.9% | 25.9% | 6.2% |
| Reddit | - | - | 100% | - |
| Blogs | 100% | - | - | - |
| Videos | 66.6% (2 of 3) | - | - | 33.3% (1 of 3) |

Table 4.1 Gender of social media posters across platforms (Salmond)

I collected my data at the end of Salmond's Trial starting the day before the verdict was announced and including the day of and the day after the verdict (22-24 March 2020). As outlined in **Chapter Three**, for my Salmond case study I collected 458 tweets, 27 Reddit posts, four videos, and nine blogs. After removing posts that had used the hashtags but were unrelated to the Trial, I was left with 436 tweets, 10 Reddit posts, three videos and eight blogs for analysis. As part of my data analysis, I decided to note some identifying information about the creators/posters collected, but I only did this where the information was available from the social media post collected (i.e., if their name was coded male/female, if there was a picture of them, pronouns in their username, or if they were public figures). I did not go on to seek out this information, and if it was not obvious from their post I coded this as 'don't know'. I used 'other' to describe organisations, and Reddit was the only platform where I could not determine any identifying information of the poster. Table 4.1 outlines these findings.

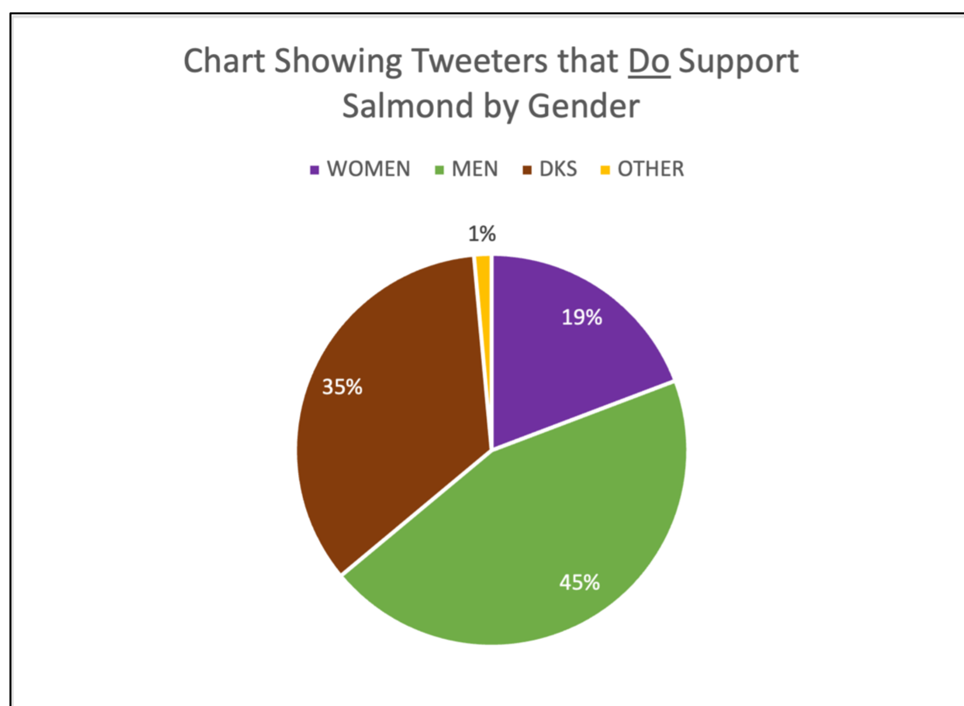



Figure 4.1 Chart showing gender breakdown of Tweeters that did support Salmond

The high percentage of posters who could not be identified on Reddit and Twitter is notable but not surprising, as it is common for anonymous social media users to 'troll' comments and discussions that involve violence against women (Jane, 2017; Turton-Turner, 2013). This can also be seen when looking at the gender breakdown of posters that support Salmond compared to those that do not, as a larger percentage of posters that supported Salmond on Twitter were from anonymous accounts (34.6%) compared to those that did not support him (21.3%). Men

were also more likely to support Salmond than women. 44.7% of posters that supported Salmond were men, while only 19.2% were women. However, the gender split in posters who did *not* support Salmond was much more evenly spread with women making up 43.6% and men not too far behind at 33% (see Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2). Most posts from Reddit were neutral in terms of support for Salmond, but of those that could be identified as expressing a view on Salmond, 30% (n=3) were in support of him. No Reddit posts were identified as explicitly *not* supporting Salmond. All but one blog was in support of Salmond (n=7), and all the videos were neutral.

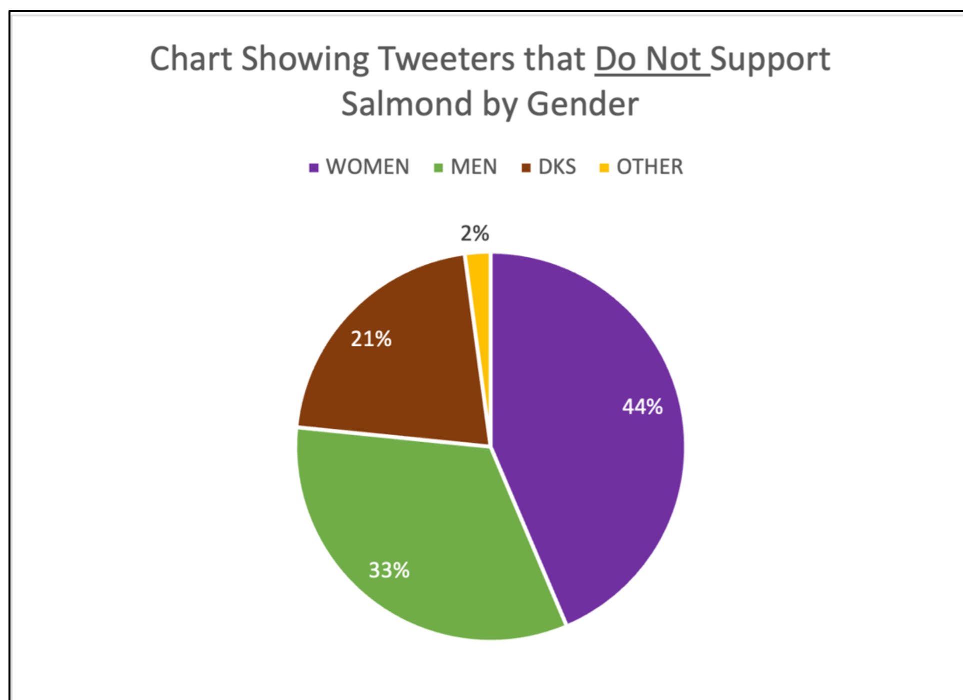



Figure 4.2 Chart showing gender breakdown of Tweeters that did not support Salmond

Five of the blogs were written by the same man: Craig Murray. Murray has become a contentious figure in Scotland. As the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Murray describes himself as an 'author, broadcaster and human rights activist' on his eponymous blog *Craig Murray* (2025) where he mostly discusses politics. He was a staunch supporter of Salmond during the Trial, and one of the voices putting credence behind the idea of political conspiracy. In fact, as I mentioned in **Chapter Three**, three of the blogs that were shared from Murray have since been deleted as they included identifying information about the women that accused Salmond. This led to a criminal conviction for Murray, for which he was sentenced to 8 months in jail (Mistlin, 2021). Regardless, Murray enjoys a lot of support in Scotland for his 'citizen' style journalism and is seen as a trusted source against the 'corrupt' and 'biased'

mainstream media. This is evidenced by *The National* readers' response to Murray's sentencing in 2021, in which all but one reader expressed suspicion and anger at Murray's sentence (Readers of The National, 2021). This highlights the tensions between social and mainstream media I discussed above. As one man wrote:

> 'It would seem that the only two things distinguish Craig Murray from any or all of the other pieces in this jigsaw identification. One is that he works in the new online media rather than the traditional media. The other is that his reporting of the trial of Alex Salmond sought to compensate for the woeful under-reporting of the defence case in the traditional media.' (Peter A Bell in The Readers of The National, 2021).

The other two blogs written in support of Salmond came from Stuart Campbell (of the blog *Wings Over Scotland*) and The Wee Ginger Dug respectively. Campbell, a former video game journalist, is another contentious pro-independence Scottish blogger. Established in 2011 as part of the wider distrust in mainstream media, *Wings Over Scotland* is described as 'one of the most influential blogs in Scotland' (Marlborough, 2021). However, Campbell has been widely criticised for his 'hateful' rhetoric which culminated in the suspension of the blog's Twitter account in 2019 (Marlborough, 2021; Small, 2021). Like Murray, Campbell was a vocal supporter of Salmond during the Trial, although none of his blogs have come under legal scrutiny. Likewise, The Wee Ginger Dug, pseudonym for Paul Kavanaugh who is a blogger and also works as a columnist for *The National* – a Scottish newspaper established as a response to the lack of support for independence. The final blog post was written by the journalist and blogger Gerry Hassan. Unlike the other bloggers in my dataset, Hassan is also an academic and the current Professor of Social Change at Glasgow Caledonian University. He was the only blogger who did not support Salmond.

The topics of the videos and Reddit posts were quite similar. They mostly consisted of reposting mainstream media articles or commentary pieces about the case and Trial (one of three videos, and eight of ten Reddit posts). The next category was 'parody' or 'meme' content, which included one Reddit post and the last two videos. The final Reddit post was a longer discussion post on naming defendants in court cases, which I will analyse later. In terms of the blogs, the one blog that was not explicitly in support of Salmond centred discussions on masculinity post-#MeToo. Two of the blogs written by Murray were his summaries of what happened in court on day seven and eight respectively. Three of the blogs were reactions to the

verdict, and the final two were posted before the Trial started and were focused around picking apart evidence that was known about the case.

Twitter was by far the largest dataset of my sample. As such, there is a lot more that can be said about the data collected there. #MeToo (11.2%), independence (or other references to Scottish nationalism) (25%), references to conspiracy (8.3%), and witch hunts (7.6%) were all themes that came up in tweets. There was also a small focus on media, with 9.2% of the sample discussing and admonishing the 'MSM' (mainstream media). The majority of tweets were in support of Salmond (47.7%). 21.6% did not support Salmond, 18.8% were 'neutral' (in that the post was factual, a repost of a news story, or just relaying information about the Trial), and I could not determine the support in 11.9% of tweets.

Given the large amount of support, it is unsurprising that only 22% of all tweets identified Salmond as a perpetrator of abuse, however, of the tweeters that supported Salmond, 9.4% still identified him as a perpetrator. There were references to known perpetrators in 17 tweets (3.9%) of which people mentioned Weinstein, Jimmy Savile, and OJ Simpson the most. Salmond was identified as a victim in 16 tweets. Six tweets identified him as a victim of accusations, one of defamation, four of feminism, and five of the government or the establishment.

With that in mind, it is interesting to compare how these numbers changed when looking at tweets in support of Salmond, and tweets that did not support him, as a means of understanding the discourses that are most important to these groups. In tweets that supported Salmond, references to independence or any nationalist themes increased to 31.3%. References to the 'MSM' (17.8%), conspiracies (13.5%), and witch hunts (14.9%) all increased as well, however, references to #MeToo decreased to 9.6%. On the contrary, references to #MeToo increased to 22.3% in tweets that were *not* in support of Salmond, whereas there was a decrease in tweets about independence/nationalism (18.1%) and conspiracy (1.1%), and no reference to witch hunts or the MSM. A final point to note is that *all* references to name came from tweets that were in support of Salmond, and all but 2 references to reputation (see Chart 3.2 below).

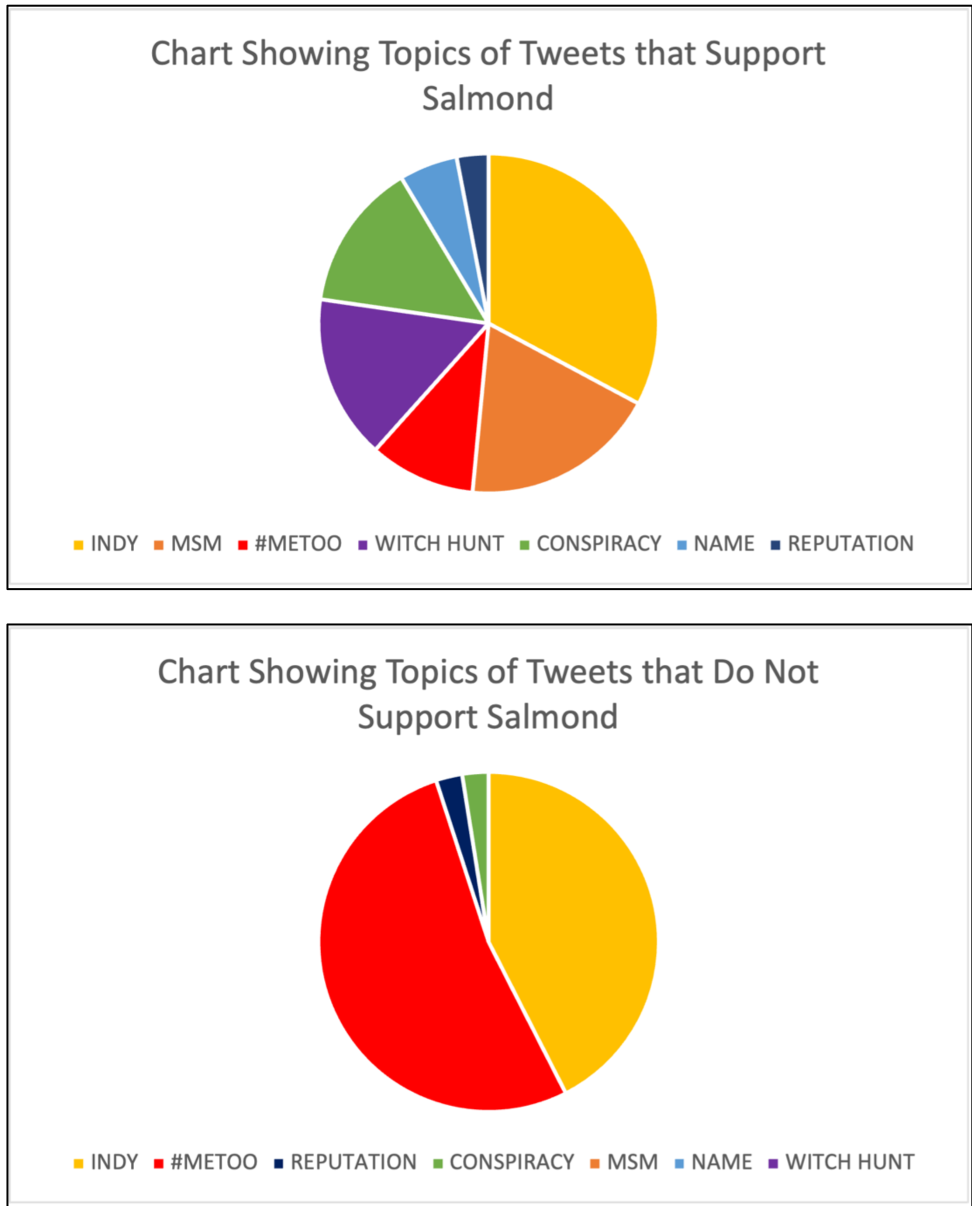


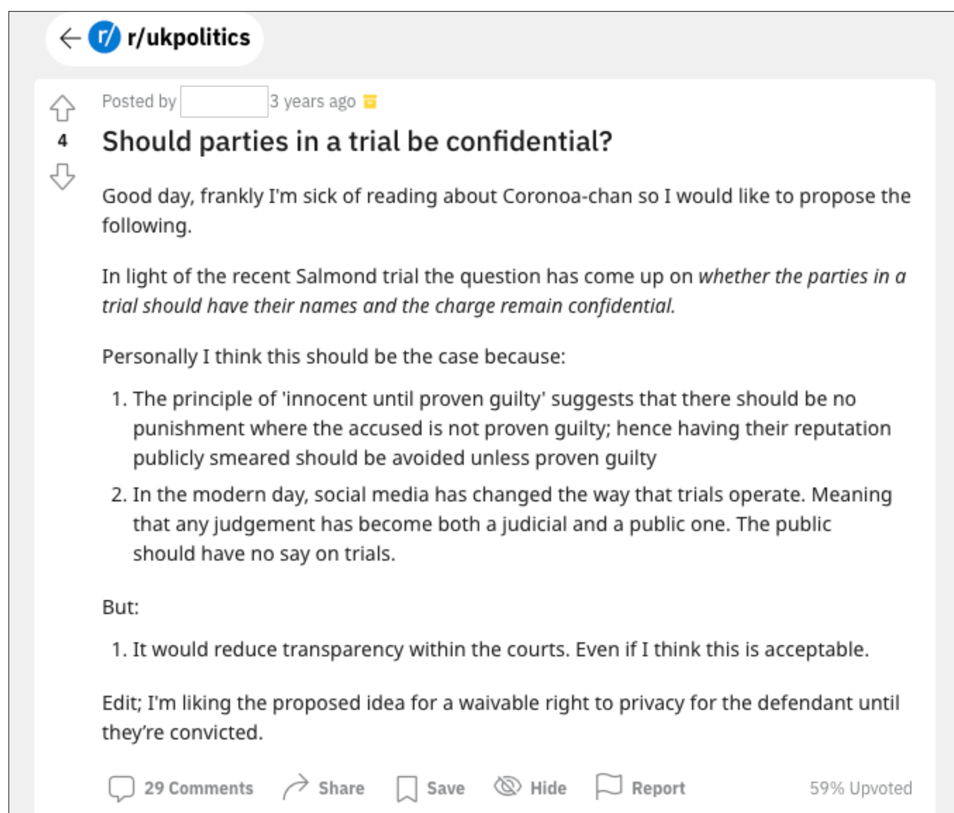

Figure 4.3 Chart showing breakdown of topics discussed in tweets that were in support of Salmond vs tweets not in support of Salmond

**The Salmond Trial & #MeToo**

As I mentioned in **Chapter One**, part of the success of Milano's #MeToo tweet, was that it did not call for women to *name* their abusers and harassers. Indeed, as Bridget Haire, Christy E. Newman, Rachel Loney-Howes and Bianca Fileborn (2019) assert in their analysis of the backlash Moira Donegan faced for creating the Shitty Media Men list, 'there is still no protected space for women to tell their stories if that includes naming of perpetrators' (2019, p. 279). This concern for the name and reputation of accused men is consistent with the rise in himpathy and discourses centring the victimisation of the men who have been called out (Boyle, 2019;

Manne, 2017, 2020). As such, it is not surprising that, in my dataset, name and reputation – but specifically name – are not topics of interest to people who are more likely to sympathise with #MeToo but rather they are topics that only take place with *supporters* of Salmond. It is therefore worth spending some time expounding what this looked like in the context of the Salmond Trial.

In Figure 4.4 below, the poster is expressing a concern for the 'unfairness' of alleged perpetrators suffering reputational damage for charges they are found not guilty of – a sentiment shared across multiple posters in my dataset. This poster captures the general understanding of this being a 'punishment' for men, and together with the racist reference to COVID, says something about the community building that takes place on these sites. Their comments on the issue of social media are also indicative of many of the arguments made against naming high profile defendants in court cases, whose damaged name and reputation (supposedly) carries more weight. As Boyle notes in her writing about men and #MeToo, these highly privileged individuals are often recast as 'the most vulnerable, the most prone to malicious victimisation, *precisely because they have the most to lose*' (Boyle, 2019, p. 109 - emphasis author's own).


r/ukpolitics

Posted by 3 years ago

4

**Should parties in a trial be confidential?**

Good day, frankly I'm sick of reading about Coronoa-chan so I would like to propose the following.

In light of the recent Salmond trial the question has come up on *whether the parties in a trial should have their names and the charge remain confidential.*

Personally I think this should be the case because:

1. The principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' suggests that there should be no punishment where the accused is not proven guilty; hence having their reputation publicly smeared should be avoided unless proven guilty
2. In the modern day, social media has changed the way that trials operate. Meaning that any judgement has become both a judicial and a public one. The public should have no say on trials.

But:

1. It would reduce transparency within the courts. Even if I think this is acceptable.

Edit; I'm liking the proposed idea for a waivable right to privacy for the defendant until they're convicted.

29 Comments Share Save Hide Report 59% Upvoted

Figure 4.4 Post on r/ukpolitics 'Should parties in a trial be confidential/'

Debates about anonymising defendants in rape and sexual assault trials have been around long before #MeToo. In fact, defendants were granted anonymity in England and Wales in the 1970s, but this was later repealed, in part because defendants of other crimes are not anonymised (UK Parliament, n.d.). Regardless, concern for defendants was echoed in the comments. As one redditor noted, 'Publicity has ruined innocent lives', another:

> 'Once you've served your sentence there should be no further punishment, a criminal record that is available to all who want it is essentially preventing an effective rehabilitation of ex-prisoners.'

That public discourses are so concerned with defendants' anonymity in cases that involve some kind of sexual offense, *regardless of if they are found innocent or guilty*, is very interesting. If guilty, as the last redditor's comments note, their name being publicly known prevents them for being able to 'reintegrate' and as such is seen as a punishment that is *disproportionate* to the crime (the prison sentence is thus set up as the only reasonable repercussion). However, if innocent, it is still considered a punishment as their reputation and name have been 'publicly smeared'. Therefore, no matter the outcome, these men can be framed as victims of a loss of standing, name, and reputation, which, even in the event of a guilty verdict, were compromised before the judicial process had run its course.

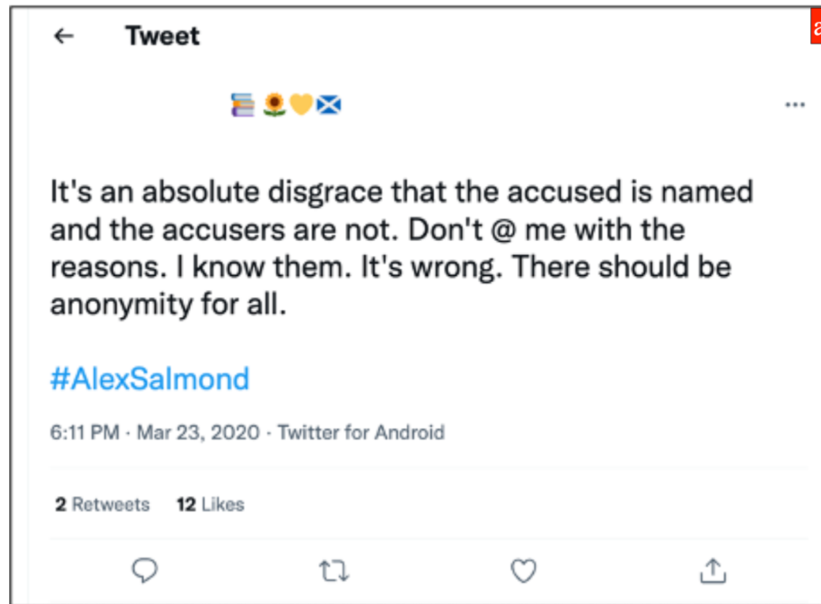
It is also interesting to note the poster's second point, that these cases have become matters for both the public and the courts to comment on. As they argue, 'The public should have no say on trials'. This is a common point of contention in the wider #MeToo discourse, which is that the only appropriate setting for conversations about 'truth' when it comes to cases that involve sexual violence, are the court and legal system. This was the backlash toward the Shitty Media Men list, for example, which suggested if the women wanted to complain about the men named, they should have sought out the appropriate *procedural* measures to do so. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins point out (2023), one thing both supporters and opponents of #MeToo argue is that social media has 'democratised' public speech in that women are more likely to be heard when they speak out on violence. However, where this has gone 'too far' as the backlash narrative argues is that:

> 'the digital media landscape…engenders a politics of doubt that is radically different to that of the criminal justice system; and…that this is a politics that disadvantages (powerful, white) men in the struggle over the "truth" of sexual violence'(ibid, p. 122).

As such, it is common to see what Boyle (2019, pp. 59-60) refers to as a ‘discourse of crime’ that works to complicate public narratives around sexual violation with undertones of crime and justice as a means of setting up these men as victims of a type of moral righteousness. This is mostly in cases that *have not* gone to a trial, as I found in my analysis of the Kavanaugh – Blasey Ford hearing where there was an emphasis on ‘due process’ (House, 2023). However, it is drawing on the same narrative that positions the court system as *the only appropriate venue for these discussions to take place*. This was furthered by posters on Twitter (Figure 4.5):

Figure 4.5 Reply on Twitter stating #MeToo is enabling ‘high burdens of proof to slip’ (Salmond)

The poster’s comment on #MeToo enabling ‘high burdens of proof to slip’ is emblematic of this type of anxiety over ‘truth’ and believability in a post #MeToo landscape. As noted above, this type of thinking is fuelled by the ‘crisis’ of post-truth and the breakdown of social trust in mainstream media institutions (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Harsin, 2018). It is worth reemphasising that many of the initial responses to #MeToo did not name anyone (Boyle, 2024, p. 16). Indeed, this was never the intent behind the Me Too movement, or Milano’s viral #MeToo tweet that asked women to simply post ‘me too’ if they had an experience of sexual harassment or assault. Regardless, public discourse has become increasingly preoccupied with anxieties over the authenticity of public testimonies. This has only been exacerbated by mediated representations of #MeToo. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins put it, ‘Public attention has shifted…from the politics of sexual violence to the politics of public accusation’ (2023, p. 195). Normally, the way to fix this would be to appeal to the ‘trusted’ institution of the courts, however, this comment also seems to be suggesting #MeToo has ‘infiltrated’ the sanctity of the legal system that would ‘normally’ require a high burden of proof.



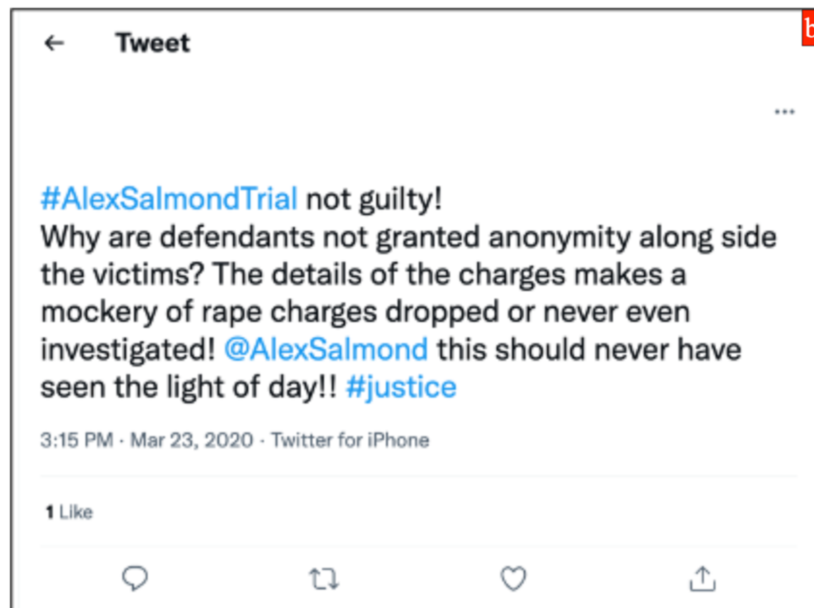




Figure 4.6 Tweets expressing need for anonymity for defendants (Salmond)

There were other, similar criticisms of the legal system and its mistreatment of men accused of sexual harassment and assault on Twitter (Figure 4.6). These tweets, like the Reddit post above, position Salmond as the *real* victim of the Trial because he was named, and the women involved were not. As one additional user put it, 'Acquitted of all charges but reputation in tatters. Isn't anonymity until conviction as a basic premise long overdue?'. Again, a legal failure of the justice system is emphasised, evoking the same discourse of crime as the other two posts. In Figure 4.6b above, the poster sets up a kind of hierarchy where anonymous complainers (the legal term given to a person who is making a complaint in Scotland's court

system) seem to get the upper hand in trials. This legal framing is emphasised by their hashtag '#justice' at the end, which is furthered by Figure 4.6a's assertion that 'it's an absolute disgrace that the accused is named and the accusers are not'. Defendants in cases involving sexual harassment and assault are painted as the true victims that the justice system is failing to protect.

To return to the Reddit post in Figure 4.4 then, it is interesting that the poster seems to think that a reduction in 'transparency within the courts' is an acceptable consequence of anonymity for defendants. In fact, this was part of the reasoning behind it being repealed in the English and Welsh courts (UK Parliament, n.d.). If a defendant is named, other victim/survivors might be encouraged to come forward. Furthermore, if the accused is a public figure, especially one who works in a position of power, naming them might protect more people from being further victimised. However, the posters discussed above, see these protections as a 'punishment' for the accused. A defendant's name and reputation being ruined and 'smeared' through their association with a crime they are found not guilty of, is worse than maintaining transparency in the court systems that could protect more victims. This evokes the legal principle that 'it is better a guilty person is let off than an innocent one convicted'. In other words, protecting a man's reputation, name, or 'public standing', means more than protecting potential victims.

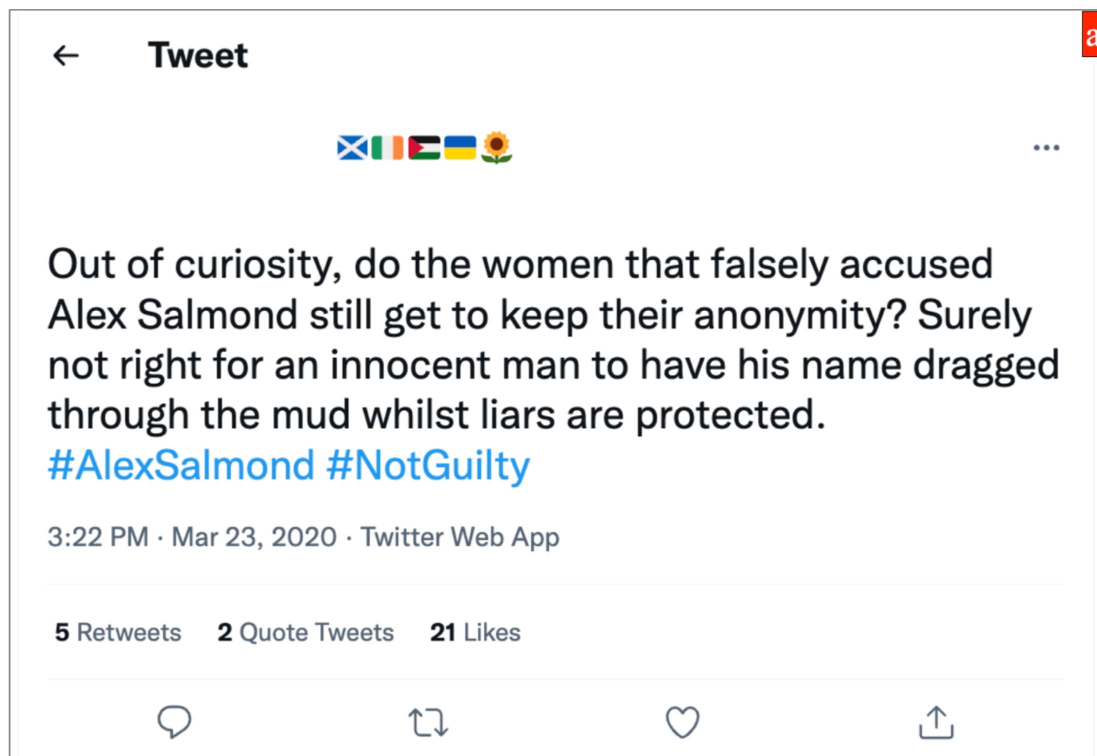
The poster in Figure 4.6b's comments are particularly interesting, as although they identify the complainers as 'victims', they go on to describe the charges brought by the complainers in the Salmond Trial as making a 'mockery' of *other* rape cases. These comments hint toward another issue popularised in the post-truth crisis, which is the focus on authenticity. As Harsin argues, public communication practices have become centred around a type of 'promotional culture' which means it has become difficult to 'determine, or read, genuinely expressive intent or determine what is truth as opposed to a lie, what is authentic as opposed to "spun"' (2018, p. 14). This has been bolstered by the rise in public relations communication which is solely based on image and public 'good will' (ibid). The women in the Salmond Trial have no image. Their anonymity means that the only information the public are privy to is that (1) They are women; and (2) They have worked for the Scottish government. Arguably, this has a detrimental effect on their reputations as the government is an institution that has an issue with public trust. An issue of particular salience in this case, where the Scottish government was already found to have shown bias by pursuing an investigation into Salmond (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 329). Conversely, Salmond's publicness and 'well-knownness', meant he was able to draw on his accumulated 'good will' built up over years in public office. Of course, as I discussed above,

this is complicated for Salmond who was known for his 'bad' reputation. Although, interestingly, this formed part of his *defence*.

One of the things that drew me to this case was that Salmond himself embraced his 'bad' reputation. In fact, Salmond did not even explicitly deny all the claims against him, or that some of his behaviour toward women had been inappropriate. Instead, he argued that what he did, did not justify sending him to prison. During the Trial, it was established that Salmond had apologised to Woman F for his actions after she laid a complaint against him with her line manager. Woman F reported one of the more serious incidents Salmond was accused of, testifying that Salmond attempted to rape her. Salmond alleged his actions were consensual, his lawyer even labelling the incident a 'sleepy cuddle'. This narrative was repeated in the social media commentary centred on the Trial, with Craig Murray writing in one of his removed blog posts that he did not believe most of the allegations would 'meet the definition' of sexual assault by the average person (Murray, n.d.). Stuart Campbell of *Wings Over Scotland* reiterated this in his blog, 'many observers found themselves unable to believe such things could be considered crimes' (Campbell, 2020). Feminist scholars and campaigners who work on violence against women have always had to contend with the narrative and cultural attitudes that diminish the seriousness of sexual harassment and assault (Gavey, 2019; Mendes, 2015). It stems from what feminists have coined a 'rape culture' that is 'the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of violence' (Rentschler, 2014, p. 67). Going back to the quote that I opened this chapter with, it is clear that Salmond's behaviour toward women was well known. As Boyle (2019) argues in her writing on infamous TV personality Jimmy Savile, it was 'hidden in plain sight'.

A lot of the charges involved in the Trial took place in public spaces. Many of them were reported to senior members of the party, some of whom then introduced time limits on when women could work alone with Salmond (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 61). Where Boyle (2018) argues that Savile's abuse was visible but just not visible *as abuse,* a similar argument can be made for Salmond. His abuse was visible, and at times was even considered abusive (Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 50), but it was not recognised as *criminal*. So, dishearteningly, Murray and Campbell's statements above are generally accurate, only it was certainly recognised as abuse to the women involved.

As I argued earlier in this chapter, part of the reason Salmond's behaviour was hidden in plain sight, was because his bad behaviour was excused as a by-product of his successful and important work, what Stefanie Marghitu – in the context of the film industry – calls 'auteur apologism' (Marghitu, 2018). His abuse of women and other people who worked for him was simply 'collateral damage' that was regrettable but sadly unavoidable, and in fact an expected part of having such a stressful and important job. Therefore, the real villains in the story become the *women* who tried to bring down an important man and so damage the causes with which he was associated. Consequently, Salmond supporters in my dataset were also concerned with the anonymity of the women. These comments differed to the ones above as, they both acknowledged the 'damage' of defamation, while calling for the women to be 'named and shamed' (Figure 4.7).



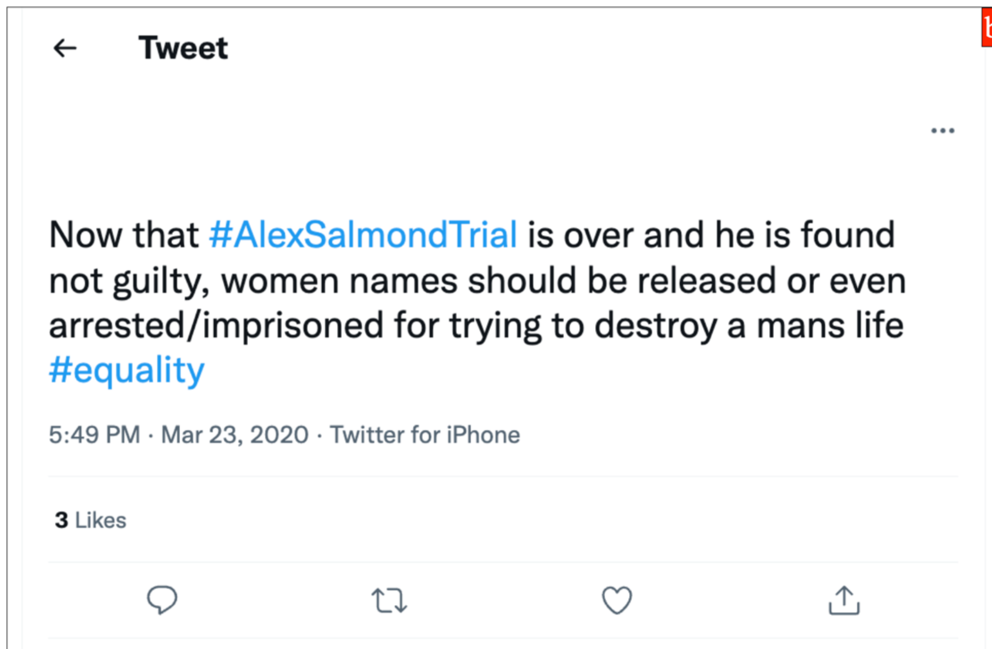



Figure 4.7 Tweets calling for victim/survivors to be named and shamed (Salmond)

Once again, posters are drawing on legalese giving their posts a feeling of legitimacy for their claims that the women have committed some kind of crime. Of course, just because the accused is found not guilty does not automatically mean the accusers gave an inaccurate account of their experience and therefore could be said to be lying. Again, Salmond himself did not deny some of these claims. Yet both posters are suggesting that the women lied. Their sentiment that complainers are protected by anonymity once again sets up a hierarchy where accusers are seen as having the upper hand in a court process. Indeed, Figure 4.7b seems to suggest that it was actually the women who have committed a crime suggesting that they should be 'arrested/imprisoned for trying to destroy a mans [sic] life'.

The fact the women were anonymous was an issue for many Salmond supporters. Campbell (2020) described the women as 'former friends and colleagues hidden behind cloaks of public anonymity'. This conjures up images of shadowy figures conspiring to bring Salmond down, again setting up a hierarchy that places the women in positions of power over Salmond. The emphasis on '*former* friends' furthers Salmond's victimisation as it positions the women as disloyal and treacherous, which again calls their authenticity as victims into question. They are shadowy traitors, 'hidden behind cloaks of public anonymity', where Salmond is made to suffer publicly. This is highlighted in Figure 4.7b's inclusion of '#equality' which, again, turns the narrative around from being one about men's abuse of power, to one about women's greater advantage, underscoring the issue as being men's perceived lack of equality with women.

As I discussed in **Chapter Two***,* it is important that people who have experienced sexual violence may have the ability to obscure their names from the public as a means of protection. This was not a legal requirement in Scotland at the time of the Trial. However, a special order was made in this case. It is clear, however, that the anonymisation of these women worked *against* them in the end. As I argued in Chapter Two, when a person is *known,* especially outside of the court, they can draw on their identity, their friends, family, and history of achievements as a *defence*. Being anonymous means victim/survivors can be recast as the shadowy figure 'cloaked' in anonymity, casting aspersions while supposedly remaining safe from the same scrutiny. This was Chanel Miller's experience, as the defence was able to paint her as an irresponsible carouser who was the 'true' predator, preying on her younger rapist (2019). Similarly in this case, the women who are supposedly 'protected' (Figure 4.7a) are recast as shadowy liars deliberately and falsely accusing an innocent man. This example illustrates the importance of a name in Banet-Weiser and Higgins's economy of believability. As they note, this economy is centred on 'a combination of subjective resources…and performative labours' (2023, pp. 4-5). But when a person is anonymised, they lose their subjectivity and their only 'resource' to trade in. Furthermore, as was the case in the Salmond Trial, when a victim is anonymised, we are unable to witness their 'performance'. We cannot see their testimony, and any interview they give (e.g. Howitt, 2020), is done through actors. This means they are unable to do the *work* of believability. Therefore, being anonymous means you are unable to participate in the economy of believability, highlighting the importance of a name and a reputation. As I argue, if subjectivity is the resource of the economy of believability, a reputation is the credit, a name is your credit history. The more well-known you are, the more credit you have, the less 'work' is required of you, and the more believability you can 'afford'. This is especially true for people like Salmond, who also have cultural value (Boyle, 2019). The more cultural value a person has, the more that culture almost depends on that person's reputation staying intact. Suddenly, believing too many survivors becomes too costly.

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, ignoring the bad behaviour of men who are culturally valuable is seen to be for the greater good. This is especially true when their abuse is 'hidden in plain sight' (Boyle, 2018). As Banet-Weiser and Higgins put it, 'you cannot "reveal" what is already widely known' (2023, p. 177). Therefore, Salmond's bad reputation works together with his 'good' political name and his cultural value to Scotland, to afford him

more believability than the anonymous women who have accused him. Salmond is seen as authentic, he does not deny all the charges, just that they do not amount to criminality. This is believable because he is known to have a bad reputation (The 'Marmite man', the 'Scottish Harvey Weinstein') and he is seen as a 'good' man for admitting his sins ('I've never said, incidentally, that I'm an angel' (Salmond in Clegg & Andrews, 2021, p. 200)). When adding in his cultural value as the man who almost brought Scotland independence, his actions no longer seem so harmful (some women suffered, but the whole nation benefits). The women, on the other hand, have lost their trading powers. They are nameless ('cloaked in anonymity'), the harm of their abuse can be explained away (a 'sleepy cuddle', not 'commonly understood' as sexual assault), and their reputations are called into question ('former friends') especially as they all worked in government and the timing of the complaints with the #MeToo moment, their testimony now looks like a power grab.

The focus on the falsity of the women's accusations was another common theme. One post on Twitter read:

> '#falseallegations are NOT rare!! If #AlexSalmond did not have the £££s to afford the best possible legal team. Many ppl [sic] wo [sic] £££s have been #wronglyconvicted & are in #prison now likely to contract #coronavirus'

The overstating of the prevalence of false allegations was a common theme in my dataset. However, what is particularly interesting about this tweet is the inclusion of the coronavirus. To this poster, false allegations are causing real *bodily* harm. They are imprisoning men and opening them up to the likelihood of catching a dangerous virus. This was reiterated in a later tweet that read:

> 'I disagree with #AlexSalmond…#Covid19 is not more serious than the #FalseAllegationIndustry which is FAR more lethal and has killed – is killing – thousands.'

Here, the false allegations are likened to a global pandemic (or '*industry*') only to suggest that it is these allegations – and not the pandemic – which pose the greatest material risk to men. The focus on a purely discursive victimisation that the other tweets were centred on has moved to a real and material threat to men. The sentiments of this tweet call back to the quote from Murray's blog earlier, that many of the allegations would not commonly be understood as assault. Most charges against Salmond are more easily recognised as abuse when understood *in context*, in that he was in a position of incredible power over these women. As such, they

are easily dismissed as 'false allegations' of harm, and instead the focus can be put on the *real* harm (imprisonment, threat to life) *they* are causing by accusing these men.

The strategic construction of a 'false allegation industry' is also key to understanding the backlash against #MeToo in the Salmond Trial. One of the women in the Trial was repeatedly accused of colluding and encouraging others to come forward with accusations against Salmond (Howitt, 2020). Murray was particularly fixated on this point, mentioning it in several blog posts about the Trial, for example:

> 'A limited amount of evidence was also heard of some of the accusers conspiring together with others, including through a Whatsapp [sic] group created for the specific purpose, to fabricate and forward those lies. The vast bulk of evidence on this specific issue of conspiracy was excluded by the court both in pre-trial hearings and by dismissal of witnesses or evidence in the trial itself but, as Alex Salmond indicated from the court steps, will be out in due time.' (Murray, 2020).[19]

This evidence, at the time of writing, has yet to materialise. Like the tweets above, Murray uses evidentiary language – while offering no evidence – to legitimise his claims. Where Murray is at least alluding to evidence and adding that it 'will be out in due time', the tweets above do not even feel the need to offer evidence. Instead, they treat it as a well-known fact. This, again, fits into a post-truth issue about contested information needing to be constantly restated for them to become 'true'. 'The truth can remain silent but lies need to be stated'.[20] Salmond supporters regularly repeated the line about 'evidence' of collusion, even though no such evidence has materialised, because simply expressing that there is, brings the 'evidence' into being.

Murray's focus in this excerpt is on the women's WhatsApp group that he says was 'created for the specific purpose to fabricate and forward those lies' (Murray, 2020). This works as a direct attack on the workings of #MeToo which was meant to be a means of encouraging and supporting women to finally speak out about the abuse they have experienced and to do so in relation to one another – the 'too' of 'me too'. Instead, this is framed as collusion that causes real and bodily harm to the men accused. Earlier in that same blog Murray alludes to the #MeToo moment as an 'indoctrination' stating that 'everybody' has been:

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[19] This blog post has not been deleted and does not reveal information about the women involved in the case.

[20] Thanks to Michael Higgins for this observation.

> ‘indoctrinated with the rubric that it is a terrible moral wrong to doubt the word of an accuser making any sexual allegation #Ibelieveher’(Murray, 2020).

The use of the hashtag here is telling. It calls into question a popular feminist phrase that is routinely problematised in anti-feminist discourses. By framing women speaking out and speaking together about their shared experiences of abuse as ‘collusion’ and an ‘industry’ working to bring down prominent men, these posters are problematising the very basis of #MeToo and the need for women to feel empowered to speak up about abuse and harassment. Feminist scholar Jilly Boyce Kay calls this ‘communicative injustice’ (2020). As she explains:

> ‘communicative injustice refers to the double-bind that women are in when it comes to public speech: they are pulled in opposite directions by contradictions of a culture that impels them to speak out, but which also punishes them for doing so’ (ibid, p. 18)

#MeToo, at least for a moment (Boyle, 2019), profoundly disturbed cultural histories that positioned women as liars and men as believable (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). The affordances of social media meant that women’s testimony online could be joined together as one *collective* voice, connecting individual experiences of sexual harassment and assault to well-established historical patterns of violence against women. Thus, their testimonies could be read as a public truth situated in a shared social reality (ibid). By framing this collective voice as *collusion*, Salmond supporters are working to re-tip the scale toward the believability of the accused and thus deny the women any chance of collective solidarity. As one tweeter put it, ‘Women just aren’t credible. This doesn’t do #metoo much good’. This works to undo any of the gains of #MeToo by casting it as suspicious and errant. As another noted, ‘In the #MeToo age…Alex Salmond must have been so innocent…I know what it’s like to be falsely accused’, adding to the narrative of an ‘industry’ of false allegations that is actively harming men less fortunate than Salmond.

This framing once again highlights the *injury* #MeToo and feminism has supposedly done to men. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) explains that this logic is based on a discourse of ‘injury’ that works in conjunction with a discourse on ‘capacity’. Both popular feminism and popular misogyny, rely on a neoliberal understanding of ‘capacity’ for success, and both see ‘injury’ as a reason for why they cannot succeed. For feminism, the injury is sexism. For misogyny, the injury is feminism (ibid, p. 4). I found the same theme in my writing on Kavanaugh, where the phrase ‘believe all women’ was picked up as an injury to men, preventing them from feeling

safe around women (House, 2023). The same issue is picked up in the tweet and replies in Figure 4.8 below, which works to produce a kind of social knowledge on the vulnerability of men in this long #MeToo moment.

Figure 4.8 is drawing on this exact logic, and the idea that the legal system is the only appropriate place for these conversations to take place and be decided. Here the poster is using the '#BelieveWomen' hashtag as a direct call out to the #MeToo moment and online activism that has democratised public speech and (supposedly) given women a voice and platform to call men out. That they argue 'Don't #BelieveWomen rather #BelieveEvidence and #DueProcessScotland' highlights this framing which is again emphasised by their use of legalese, 'due process'. This is furthered in the comments to the tweet. One commenter (erroneously) states that '#falseaccusers still get their substantial compensation payouts'.[21] This harkens back to the posters in Figure 4.6 and Figure 4.7 that situate victim/survivors as having the upper hand in the court system, which is further problematised by the comment that this is 'buying a false sexual assault/rape culture'. Again, these posters are adding to the incorrect claim that there are systemic issues with 'false accusations' and insisting that we shift from 'believing women' to 'believing evidence'. Here, a woman's testimony is not considered evidence, but a man's denial *is*. The original poster is further emphasising the unbelievability of women by quote tweeting a separate post that calls out Clementine Ford – a controversial Australian public figure, and self-proclaimed feminist, who acts as a deliberate provocateur online (Hunt, 2021). Among other things, Ford has gone viral for claiming COVID 'wasn't killing men fast enough' (Ford in ibid). The tweet about Ford has nothing to do with Salmond, or the Trial, and is instead calling Ford out for her supposed misandry. Therefore, in including this post in their tweet and linking it to the Trial, the original poster is further problematising the 'believe women' refrain, and feminism more specifically, as an injury to men.

[21] There is no evidence for this claim. Victims can claim from CICA (Criminal Injury Claims Authority) even if their abuser was found not guilty, but CICA does their own investigation into their claim before awarding any compensation. Not everyone who claims gets a compensation. As such, a 'false' account would not be compensated as this poster suggests.

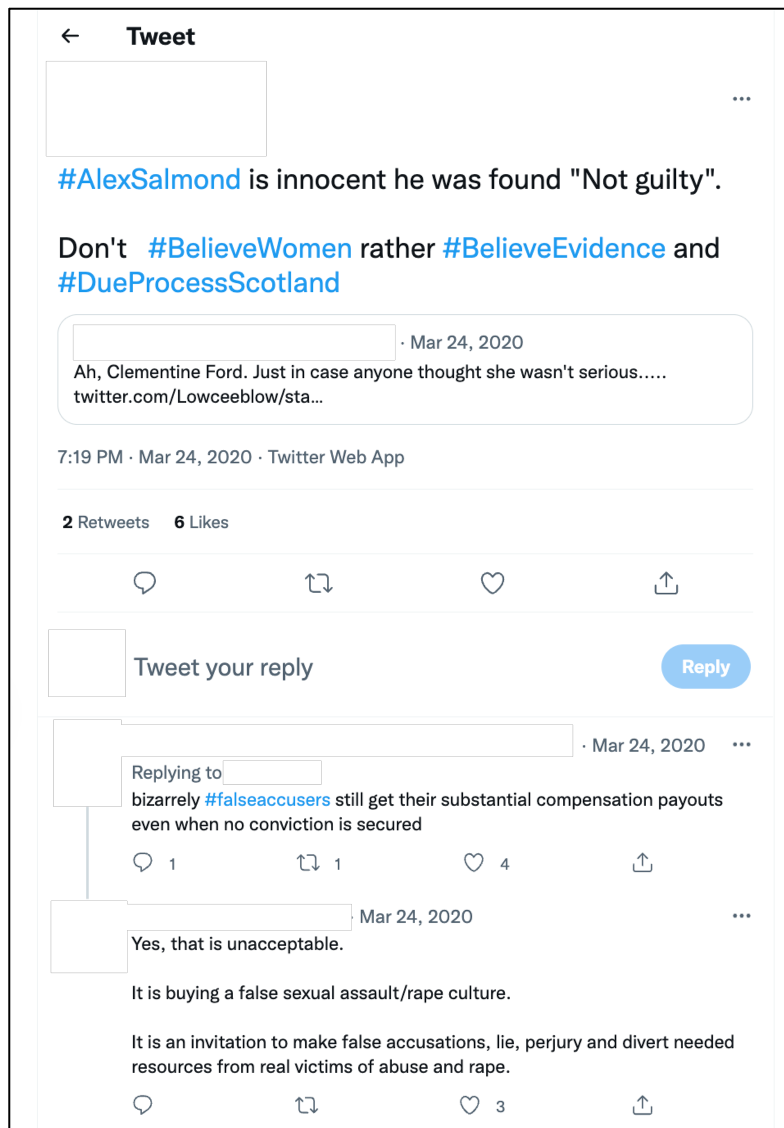


Figure 4.8 Tweet and replies problematising #BelieveWomen (Salmond)

Another way 'believe women' was discussed during the Trial was in relation to the jurors and judge. Nine of the original fifteen jurors were women (it was later reduced to eight as one of them was dismissed), and the judge presiding over the case was a woman. Unlike the posters above who suggested that no women are trustworthy, or at least not the militant feminist kind, some commentators argued that you could trust women, just not *those* women. As such much of the commentary in support of Salmond focused on needing to believe the women jurors, judge, and the women witnesses whose testimony was supportive of Salmond. For example, Campbell (2020) wrote in his blog:

> 'Today a mostly-female jury drawn from the most Unionist city in Scotland and directed by a female judge delivered the only verdict it was credibly possible to reach on the (total absence of) evidence before it: that Alex Salmond was not guilty of any crime.'

Similarly, Murray (2020) noted of the jury:

> 'It is tonight worth reflecting that people seeking to still cast aspersions are attacking the jury, who were diligent and contained nine women whom they are disparaging. Nine women on a jury drawn from No voting Edinburgh.'

The fact the women jurors found Salmond innocent is not surprising. As Nicole Bedera (2022) notes it is actually consistent with evidence that shows women jurors and even other survivors are known to support men accused of sexual violence as a coping mechanism to deal with the 'ubiquity and unpredictability' of sexual harassment and assault.[22] Bedera explains it is known as the 'just-world hypothesis' that believes bad things only happen to bad people and so 'women look for reasons to believe they are different from the survivor as a way to calm their fears and convince themselves that they are safe as long as they make "better choices."' (Bedera, 2022). They are the 'good' women, so they are safe from harm, and they can be trusted to tell the 'bad' women (who are making up their claims or deserving of them) from the 'good'.

The #MeToo moment worked to highlight how common sexual violence is in a time where cases involving sexual harassment and assault are routinely dropped or lost in court, and where women's testimonies are not taken seriously. The sheer volume of the replies meant that it became more and more difficult to deny there was a problem. The hashtag #BelieveWomen came out of this as a reminder to take women seriously when they report experiences of harassment and assault. As Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argues, these hashtags build on the affordances of social media that support community building, and work as a 'cultivation of compassion' amongst typically marginalised groups as a means of addressing social inequality (2019, p. 86). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) calls the communities that form around these hashtags 'hybrid counterpublics' as they orient themselves, not just around their oppositional communities online, but 'aim for broader forms of social and political change beyond these communities' (p. 87). However, as Wahl-Jorgensen argues, the compassion these hybrid counterpublics cultivate is both 'contingent and fraught, as hashtags are often hijacked by opponents who seek to subvert, undermine or ridicule their political projects' (2019, p. 87). This is clear from the tweet in Figure 4.9b below.

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[22] A point I return to in **0**.

In a response to a tweet by Karen Ingala Smith, the CEO of a domestic and sexual violence charity in the UK, the poster in 4.9b (like Cambell and Murray above) is subverting the believe women refrain to focus on the female jurors and judge who found in Salmond's favour. The fact that *women* found Salmond not guilty is used as proof of the 'ridiculousness' of believing women when they make a claim against a man. By deliberately misinterpreting the #BelieveWomen phrase, they cultivate compassion for men who have been 'falsely' accused and thus cast suspicion on the veracity of women's testimony of harassment and assault. The image of Salmond in the linked BBC article almost works in this favour. Salmond appears dejected, like the hapless victim of a 'public onslaught'. This works to silence women and discourage them from speaking out. As Kay observes, 'our culture still, in many ways, operationalises silence as an idealised mode of communication for women' (2020, p. 18).

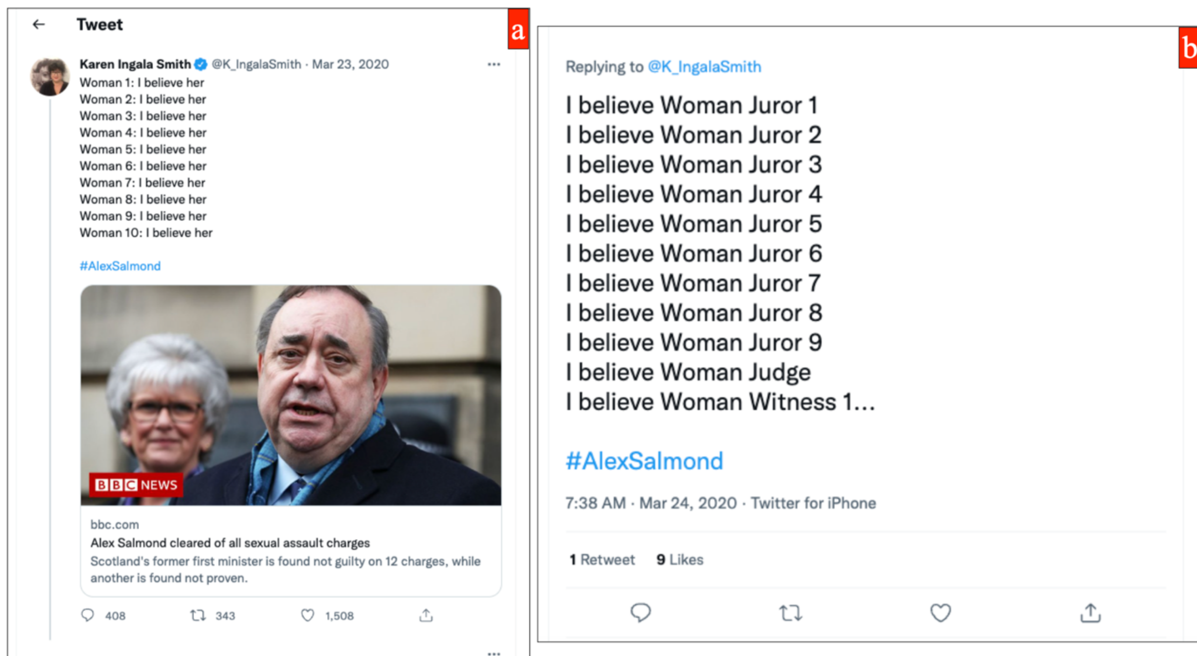


Figure 4.9 Tweet and replies commenting on 'Believe Women' (Salmond)

### The Salmond Trial & Politics

As was already alluded to in some of the posts mentioned in the last section, another important theme that came up in social media commentary on the case was centred on politics. Tweets about politics and the government(s) made up 22% of all tweets coded. References to independence and other nationalistic phrases made up 25% of all the tweets in my dataset, this increased to 31.3% in the tweets in support of Salmond. Furthermore, of the tweets that supported Salmond, 13.5% referenced political conspiracy and 14.9% referenced or mentioned

a witch hunt. One of the main points of reference for the discourse around there being a 'conspiracy' against Salmond, was that all the women involved were government workers (ergo, part of the establishment), and this was used to cast suspicion on them as being 'careerists' using the Trial to get back at Salmond for not helping them advance through the ranks. Here, Salmond's position as a *former* First Minister works in his favour, as he is seen as being *outside and up against* the establishment. He is the underdog. He is David vs Goliath. This was already introduced in some of the Murray posts above, and many commentators on Twitter picked up on these ideas from his writing. As one poster noted:

> 'What dirty, dirty business this #AlexSalmondTrial?! An attempt to stich-up Salmond with lies and distorting innocent interaction in a tough work environment. All built on a lie as Salmond [would not help] Ms H. How 90% of "incidents" ever got to court is a mystery.'[23]

Another commented:

> 'Reading Craig Murray's detailed writing on defence testimonies. Each one completely undermines the prosecution's case. Ms H wasn't even at Bute House on the day she alleges #AlexSalmond tried to rape her?! She wanted [a specific role in government] but was not chosen. Failed revenge?'[24]

Both above posters link to one of Murray's now deleted blogs which speaks to the trustworthiness of bloggers over mainstream news sources I will tackle in the next section. For now, it is interesting to note how Ms H's career aspirations are positioned as the reason for suspicion, which seemed to be a major point of contention in Murray's writing. In a post that was published the day after the verdict, and (at the time of writing) is still available online, Murray explicitly labels the women liars and 'careerists'. Writing:

> 'This was a case where there was very real evidence, from third party after third party, of certain accusers telling definite and deliberate lies. A case where eye witnesses stated categorically that claimed events did not happen. A case where eye witnesses testified people were not physically present when claimed. A case where witnesses testified that reports had not been made, and policies not instituted, as claimed by the prosecution…. What we learned in the trial about careerism and self-promotion among those earning a very fat living out of

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[23] Where posts refer to any information about the women involved, I have redacted this to prevent jigsaw identification. I have slightly altered the language in this tweet, while still maintaining its original meaning, so that it is not searchable.

[24] As above.

> the party's current domination of Scottish politics was really very unedifying indeed' (Murray, 2020).

Murray chooses to only focus on evidence and arguments put forward by the defence to explicitly paint the women as liars concerned with 'careerism and self-promotion'. Murray accuses the women of being 'involved in the non-independence related agenda that has taken over the party' (ibid) further emphasising the importance of politics in the social media commentary. The fact that the women are ambitious is framed as them using this trial either as 'revenge' (in the tweets quoted above) for Salmond not helping them out in their careers, or as a means of 'self-promotion' (even though they are anonymous) to further their political standing (Murray, 2020). So, where a woman's ambition renders her unbelievable, a man's ambition (as established through his reputation and cultural value) is what makes *him* believable to those same people.

This is particularly interesting when contrasted with Murray's description of the jury quoted in the previous section. Murray emphasises the positioning of the female jury members as coming from 'No voting Edinburgh' yet still acquitting Salmond, as evidence of their moral virtue and believability. The women jurors suspected political allegiances are evidence of the authenticity and trustworthiness of their decision, but the opposite is argued about the women complainers. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, if women want to be believed, they cannot be perceived to have anything to gain for coming forward with their stories. Even though the women were anonymised (and remain so to this day), Murray's writing helped cast their actions as suspicious, morally questionable, and opportunistic. This is also illustrated in the tweets in Figure 4.10 below.

Once again, these users problematise #MeToo as political collusion by referring to a 'seemingly coordinated attack' and 'a small group of closely linked women' – calling back to Murray's assertion that the women were colluding on a WhatsApp group (discussed above). The second tweeter also emphasises the women's political bankruptcy in noting their willingness to send Salmond to prison (Peterhead) 'to save their own jobs'. Something these commenters all have in common so far, is their emphasis on women changing their minds and affiliations. This was also evident in Campbell's writing and focus on the women being 'former

friends and colleagues' of Salmond's (Campbell, 2020) which all seems to highlight their unreliable and capricious nature.

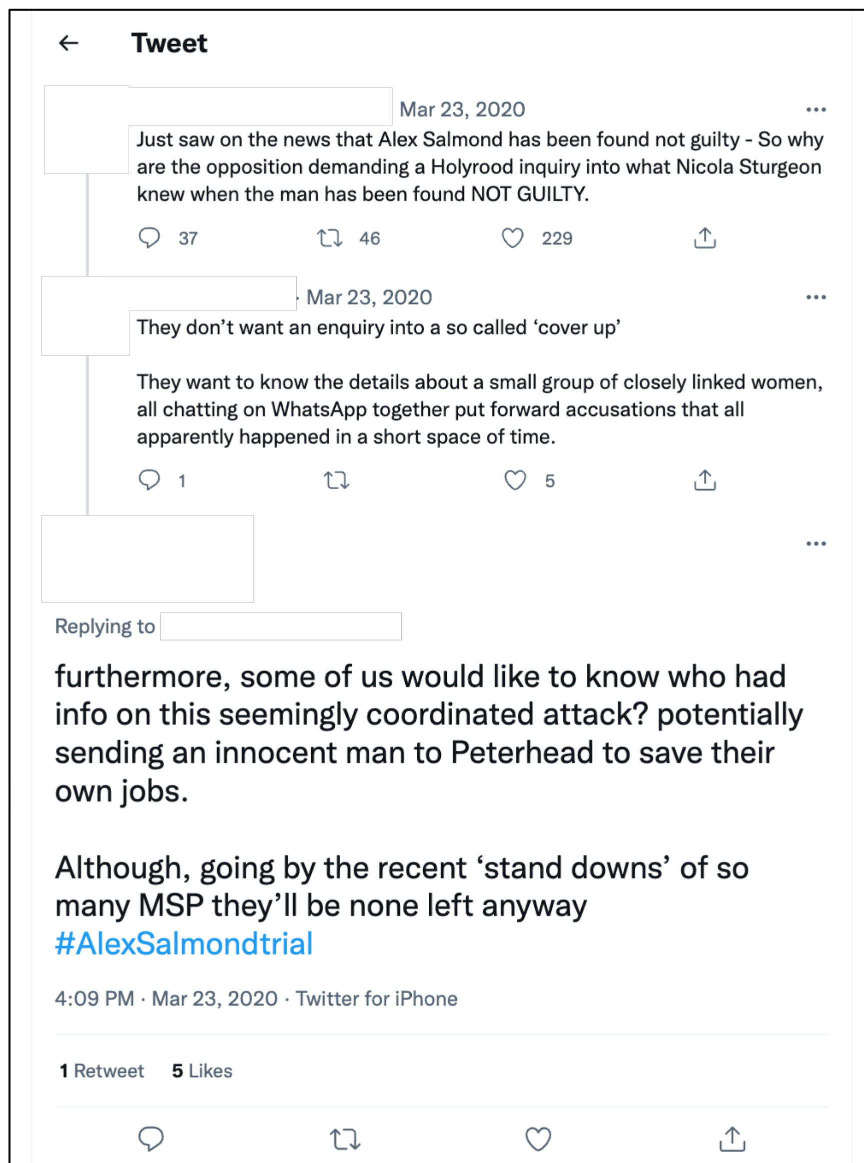


Figure 4.10 Tweets questioning the complainer's motivations (Salmond)

Conversely, Salmond is seen as a steady force who has not changed with the times (hence his 'old fashioned' behaviour toward women in the workplace). Thus, Salmond is painted as steadfast, someone that can be relied and depended on. The final point about MSPs standing down speaks to the other part of this discourse, which centred on Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP 'civil war'. As one commenter noted:

> ‘An #SNP civil war will ensue in months, years ahead as with #Labourparty & #momentum. Like them or loath them reality is two of Scotland’s greatest ever politicians are ready to destroy each other #AlexSalmondTrial’

This poster is drawing on the tensions between Sturgeon and Salmond that started developing during the run up to the independence referendum. As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, after the loss of the vote, the SNP supporters started to split into a ‘Salmond camp’ and a ‘Sturgeon camp’, where Salmond’s supporters expressed some resentment over Sturgeon’s success, seeing it as belonging to him (Garavelli, 2020). Furthermore, Salmond’s camp saw Sturgeon’s decision to allow retrospective complaints against ministers as a direct attack on him (Clegg & Andrews, 2021). This poster is drawing on these narratives of ‘civil war’ and their willingness to ‘destroy’ each other, which once again hints at the idea that Sturgeon was involved in a political ploy against Salmond in an effort to prevent him from returning to politics. The bloggers in my dataset shared this poster’s sentiment, particularly Campbell:

> ‘Every single accuser came from a very small circle within the SNP, or civil servants very closely connected to that circle – a circle at whose centre sit Nicola Sturgeon and Leslie Evans. We must note that no evidence directly links the First Minister to the events of the case, just as no German government document from 1939 to 1945 exists which explicitly connects Adolf Hitler to the Holocaust’. (Campbell, 2020)

The comparison between the Salmond Trial and the Holocaust (and, indeed Sturgeon and Adolf Hitler) is emblematic of the inflammatory and offensive language and analogies often employed by Campbell in his writing. Indeed, this was cited as the reason for him being removed from Twitter (Marlborough, 2021). However, Campbell does capture what is at the heart of the discourse of conspiracy, which is that the women (and other female government officials, ‘Leslie Evans’) colluded with Sturgeon to put an end to the possibility of Salmond returning to politics. Campbell’s incredulous framing of events leading up to the Trial deliberately set up this narrative, with passages like:

> ‘Jurors were also asked to believe that a string of women who’d had a powerful man sexually assault or attempt to rape them elected not to report this extremely serious matter to the police, but to get together with some senior SNP officials and store up the allegations for use in case Salmond ever attempted to return to politics. And by a remarkable coincidence the allegations duly came to light in August 2018 – shortly after he’d signalled that intent, in May of the same year.’ (Campbell, 2020)

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the first two women came forward with their stories after the government introduced a new sexual harassment policy to deal with complaints against current or former ministers as a response to the #MeToo moment that had erupted in October 2017. The first two complaints against Salmond were filed in January 2018, five months *before* the announcement Campbell refers to. Furthermore, as I noted earlier, at this time, Salmond was very much *out* of politics. He had lost his seat in the 2017 snap election and had instead made the move to presenting a controversial talk show on the Russian backed broadcaster RT. Campbell offers a screenshot of a title of an article as his evidence that Salmond was intending to return to politics. However, in that article, Salmond was actually quoted as saying:

> 'I have got no immediate political plans. I'm very happy doing what I'm doing at the present moment. I'm happy writing articles, doing video blogs. I'm happy making television programmes and the rest of it. I'm happy doing the Fringe shows. But the day and the hour that Nicola fires that starting gun I will be on my marks and ready to go for the Yes campaign.' (Salmond in Peterkin, 2018).

Even in the final line, Salmond frames Sturgeon as the leader of the Yes campaign and himself as an eager supporter. Exactly why Sturgeon would not have wanted Salmond's support in the event of a second Yes campaign is also not clear. Yet the claim that Sturgeon conspired with the women involved out of 'fear of a Salmond return' was repeatedly claimed by these commenters (even though their 'evidence' was at best spurious and at worst non-existent). Posters in my Twitter dataset agreed (see Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11 Tweet suggesting Sturgeon conspired against Salmond

The name 'nippy' refers to Sturgeon. As I noted in **Chapter Two**, it was one of several nicknames bestowed on Sturgeon during her time in office. It is short for 'nippy sweetie' which, as Higgins and Fiona McKay explain, 'is a term for an item of confectionary with a sour or tart taste, and has come to mean a normally-female individual renowned for being sharp-tongued and abrupt' (2016, p. 9). As they show, the nickname for Sturgeon is highly gendered, but in a way that subverts conventionally feminine discourses of gentle and reserved communication styles for a more assertive and engaged style, one that Sturgeon herself took as a compliment (ibid). However, in the context of these two tweets, it takes on a slightly tainted meaning. The assertiveness, here, is almost highlighting Sturgeon's 'careerism and self-promotion' that Murray was speaking to earlier. She is described as 'cuddling up close and personal' with Salmond which, read through the knowledge that Sturgeon publicly came out *against* Salmond, is now seen as her 'using' him for political gain (just as Murray accuses the complainers of doing). They go on to note that *Sturgeon* (not Salmond) has 'tainted our legal system' and both posters argue she has used her power to protect 'herself and her tribe' with 'gagging orders left right and centre'. While condemning Sturgeon for her actions, highly gendered language is used. Sturgeon, together with the women complainers, are framed as using their standing *as women* to further their political careers while destroying the fight for independence.

Michael Higgins and Angela Smith have argued that the aftermath of the failed independence referendum in 2014 and the success of the Brexit vote in 2016 has culminated in a Scottish political culture that has 'limited space for compromise and nuance' (2022, p. 47). That, together with a rise in a crisis around 'truth' and anti-mainstream media news coverage (discussed in the introduction to this chapter) has resulted in a social media landscape rife with 'political spite and bickering' (ibid, p. 47). As such, it is no surprise, really, that the verdict on a sexual assault trial involving a former leader of the country, turned into a discussion about political conspiracy and 'civil war'. However, as Higgins and Smith point out, these conversations have been complicated by a 'gendered component to the judgement of how politicians themselves may be diminishing political culture' (ibid, p. 47). Although they go on to discuss how this contends with political masculinities, from the above it is clear that this type of framing is also present in the backlash to feminist interventions in politics, where Sturgeon is framed as the bad actor, as in Figure 4.11.

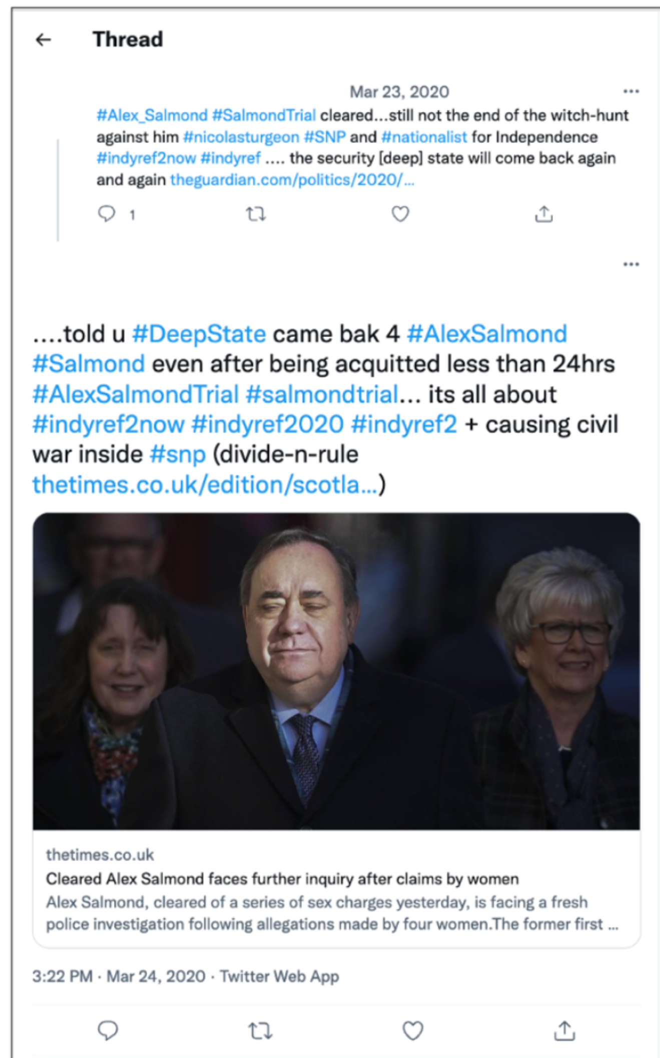


Figure 4.12 Tweet citing 'deep state' involvement

The suspicion of feminism, and women, was also linked to wider conspiracy theories about a 'deep state' (Figure 4.12). The poster in Figure 4.12 identifies new inquiries into Salmond's behaviour toward women as evidence of a deliberate 'witch-hunt' to scupper the chances of a second independence referendum. Other posters agreed. For example, one commented the day before the verdict was announced:

> 'the British state has achieved its goal in using false sexual allegations to frame #AlexSalmond so as to divide the #SNP – centuries old British trick.'

These posters' concerns harken back to the anxiety about a 'false allegation industry' that is targeting important men, discussed in the previous section. Here, the idea that these women are part of the establishment (the 'deep state', 'the British state') is furthered by linking them to Westminster. They are no longer only trying to destroy Salmond, but Scottish politics (specifically the SNP) and independence. The image in Figure 4.12 is therefore connotative.

Salmond is bathed in light. He is given an innocent, almost angelic quality, with his eyes closed and a look of peace on his face. The women behind him, who were actually there in support of Salmond, are cast in shadows, signifying the narrative that Salmond was betrayed by his closest *female* allies. The message is that Salmond is safe for now, but not for long. This harkens back to the understanding of whiteness discussed in **Chapter Two**. Here, like Christ, Salmond is pictured as transcendent. He is able to overcome his association with sexual impropriety both because of his whiteness and his maleness (Dyer, 1997). This is compounded by the historical construction of white men as victims, resulting in a privileging of the pain Salmond experiences by being publicly accused, over the pain of his (alleged) victims (Chouliaraki, 2024). This demonstrates how whiteness plays into the myth of Salmond's 'good' name.

Interestingly, Sturgeon is also seen as a victim in this plot as the poster in Figure 4.12 notes, 'still not the end of the witch-hunt against him #nicolasturgeon #SNP and #nationalist for Independence'. However, this was not a view shared by many posters, as others still saw Sturgeon as an active player involved in the plot against Salmond. For example, in a short video posted to Twitter, one commenter talks to the camera and notes:

> 'this was quite clearly a co-ordinated witch hunt to try and ruin the name of Alex Salmond because of the result of Indy ref one. Who does it benefit? The SNP currently, Nicola Sturgeon and a few others.'

Sturgeon is again set up as a traitor, working *with* the 'English establishment' to ruin Salmond's name which would, in turn, ruin the chances of a second independence referendum.

Figure 4.13 Tweet on Salmond's charitable donations

This 'conspiracy' discourse is used as a means of defending Salmond's reputation and standing, while building an understanding of the complainers and Sturgeon as shadowy figures involved in the 'deep state' who are politically and morally bankrupt and willing to sacrifice a 'good' man to further their careers. This is emphasised in their descriptions of Salmond's character (see Figure 4.13). Salmond is routinely described as a 'statesman' in my dataset. This was repeated in blogs, the Wee Ginger Dug described him as 'dignified and statesman like' (2020) stating, 'Alex Salmond is and will always be a giant amongst us. He's the foundation upon which we build our path' (ibid). A lot of these descriptions came as a reaction to Salmond's press address after the announcement of the verdict in which he, too, alludes to evidence that was not shown that would soon 'see the light but it won't be this day' as, he said, now was the time to concentrate on the emerging coronavirus pandemic (Salmond in Croal, 2020). Commenters responded well to this, noting Salmond's 'decorum and statesmanship' and his 'concern for others'. These tweets are chorused by several others that focus on his reputation and character. For example, 'Today is a good day he's a good man, never doubted @AlexSalmond', and 'Alex Salmond acquitted and says everyone should stay safe At [sic] home! Top man!'. Figure 4.13 above calls Salmond, 'A Scottish beacon and true statesman'.

Again, this is drawing on a post-truth discourse of needing to state contested facts as a means of making them 'true'. It is only in asserting Salmond's 'statesmanship' that he has statesmanship.

The image in Figure 4.13 is also interesting. Salmond's benevolent nature is emphasised with the 'Did you know' fact informing the reader Salmond donated almost half of his salary to charity. This is highlighted by the image used of Salmond, a close up on his face where he is looking just off camera smiling in an endearing and almost boyish way, his eyes big and round giving him a look of innocence. Commenters also used words to highlight these qualities in Salmond, 'i [sic] might just raise a glass to the gaffer tonight' one wrote, emphasising Salmond's age and stature. Another takes a similar angle with, 'it's like all my birthdays & Christmas at once oor Eck aka @AlexSalmond acquitted'. 'Oor Eck' refers to 'Wee Eck' or 'Little Alex', a character from a popular Scottish comic strip *Oor Wullie* and a common term of endearment for Salmond as a political nickname. These descriptions, images and nicknames are all used to emphasise Salmond's character as a well-loved, benevolent, charming man. Like 'BoJo' or 'Bernie' discussed in **Chapter Two**, 'Oor Eck' works to confer a 'solidarity meaning' behind Salmond's name. It also, importantly, references his *Scottishness* and Scottish *media* as *Oor Wullie* is printed in the *Sunday Post*, a Scottish weekly newspaper. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Salmond often emphasised his Scottishness, even invoking King James (another historical underdog of sorts) in his concession speech in 2017 with his line 'You have naw seen the last of my bonnets and me' (Salmond in Howitt, 2020). Posters also invoked Salmond's Scottishness by calling him 'Alec', the Scottish pronunciation for 'Alex'. As one noted, 'Well done, Alec, well done. #ScottishJustice has run it's [sic] course under #ScotsLaw and you are innocent and free.' The use of 'Alec' is also gendered. Where 'Alex' is a unisex name, 'Alec' is predominantly used for men. Thus, this poster is highlighting Salmond's Scottish masculinity.

Where the commentators above shied away from Salmond's own admissions to certain behaviours, others did acknowledge them (Figure 4.14). One poster, like the one pictured in Figure 4.14 who notes Salmond's 'sleazy' behaviour, stated 'Could he have been a bit of a letch? Possibly. Was he a rapist? No'. As discussed in the previous section, blog posts also drew on this narrative, stating that the allegations would not meet a common understanding of sexual assault (Campbell, 2020; Murray, n.d.). Similarly, the now Scottish Tory leader, Russel Findlay, shared WhatsApp screenshots of a conversation between him and 'a legal contact' in

which Salmond's behaviour is dismissed as 'drunken uncle type crap'. These tweets and blog posts work to refocus the narrative on Salmond's reputation – which they frame as acceptably 'bad' – and, as argued in the previous section, emphasise his authenticity and therefore his *believability*. As Harsin (2018) notes, this emphasis on authenticity has come out of post-truth communication practices that rely on promotionalism and public 'good will'. As I have argued above, Salmond drew on these communication practices as a means of 'cashing in' on his good will (reputation, name, and cultural value) for public believability.

Figure 4.14 Tweet describing Salmond as 'sleazy' but not a rapist

The language and images in the tweets also do this work for him, painting him as an older statesman, who perhaps could be 'a bit sleazy' but nevertheless, he is still 'a Scottish beacon'. The political setting is also key for Salmond's reputation, as Higgins and Smith (2022) have argued, the divisive social media narrative around independence has left little room for nuanced debate online, which means Salmond's reputation and character are directly tied to the independence movement, and as such, his reputation is saved by his cultural value. As one Twitter user wrote, 'We will remember his [sic] as the man who took us so close, Scotland opened its eyes, we will never go back in our box. Thankyou [sic] Alex'. Therefore, even though Salmond may have a 'bad' reputation, he has a 'good' name because his cultural value as 'the man who took us so close' is worth more than his 'bad behaviour'. He is simply too important to fail. As the Wee Ginger Dug (2020) writes:

> 'Today is a day for breathing a collective sigh of relief. One of the giants of the Scottish independence movement will now be able to focus his efforts on helping us toward that goal

> we all share…He will not be able to be used by our opponents as a stick with which to beat us, he will be one of the biggest sticks beating the drum for independence.' (ibid)

### The Salmond Trial & the Media

As I discussed in my introduction to this chapter, there has been a growing distrust in mainstream media in Scotland due to the reporting around the independence referendum (Dekavalla, 2019) combined with a historical suspicion of the news media in Scotland and its ties to London (Hassan, 2014). This was exacerbated by the overall breakdown in trust in mainstream news institutions (Harsin, 2018). As Harsin explains, many news organisations have downsized their writing staff while increasing their publication rate, which has made their reporting vulnerable to inaccuracies and hoaxes (ibid). Furthermore, the spread of 'tabloidization' and a proliferation of pseudo-events across a fuller range of news outlets has also degraded public trust in news media (ibid). Harsin (2018) argues that this distrust in mainstream news has rubbed off on traditional sources of information. As I mentioned earlier, and in the context of the Salmond Trial, this was indicative of the early media and government responses to COVID, which were often confusing and at times contradictory, thus denting the public's trust in their messaging (Kyruakidou *et al.*, 2020). The breakdown in social trust has paved the way for 'citizen journalists' and bloggers who were able to capitalise on the advancement in technology to create followings for their own style of journalism and reporting that is highly dependent on feelings of authenticity, rather than on factual information sharing.

Figure 4.15 Tweets thanking bloggers for their reporting on the Trial (Salmond)

Posts in my dataset spoke directly of the trust they had in ‘independent reporters’ rather than ‘mainstream’ journalists. This is demonstrated by the poster and commenter in Figure 4.15 who note of the bloggers, ‘Because of their determined work the verdict can be taken with confidence’. This highlights the symbolic power citizen journalists and bloggers have garnered with Salmond supporters. Other posters agreed, with one noting, ‘Watching the BBC I was affected by Weinstein & #believeher & thought Salmond MUST be guilty’. This poster calls back to the debates discussed in the section on *Salmond & #MeToo* that problematises the #BelieveWomen refrain, likening it to some kind of brainwashing exercise. They cite Murray as the reason they were able to see ‘the full story’.

As I noted in **Chapter Two**, Thomson argues that reputation fits into a system of what he terms 'symbolic power' which is the ability to intervene and influence events, and the actions and beliefs of others (Thompson, 1999). Overtime, people, or institutions can accumulate more power (or 'symbolic capital') based on their reputation for being trustworthy and dependable. Thomson's writing on symbolic power can help explain how reputation and name work in Banet-Weiser and Higgin's (2023) economy of believability. As outlined earlier, 'believability' is publicly negotiated based on who one *is* and what one *does* (ibid). As I argue, reputation (Thomson's 'symbolic capital') works as credit in the economy of believability, and name works as a type of 'credit history'. As in a normal economy, credit is not shared equitably. Some people have more credit because of their 'credit history' or name, and as such, can 'work' less for more believability. This is what Thomson refers to as 'symbolic power', as they can use that believability 'to influence the actions and beliefs of others' (Thompson, 1999, p. 6). Where mainstream news organisations have lost their symbolic power through 'scandals' such as the independence referendum, Brexit, and COVID, independent bloggers have *increased* theirs by framing their reporting of events around discourses of 'conspiracy' and language that makes frequent use of affective and emotional descriptions that are read as more authentic and *believable* (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 75). However, there is something else that is working for these bloggers besides the breakdown of trust in media institutions, and that is their (relatively) 'bad' reputations.

The first two bloggers referenced in Figure 4.15 (Murray and Llewellyn) have subsequently been arrested for different offenses (Murray for contempt of court, discussed earlier and Llewellyn for inciting violence against other MSPs). Similarly, @Grouse_Beater, another independent Scottish blogger, was expelled from the SNP after posting antisemitic comments about a Jewish official (BBC, 2018b). Despite this, the bloggers' reporting is described as 'honest and accurate'. The emphasis on accuracy is notable as Murray's writing frequently referred to 'evidence' without offering any (discussed above). Stuart Campbell, another popular blogger in my dataset, also has a reputation marred by a frequent use of 'hateful' content on his site that eventually had him removed form Twitter (Marlborough, 2021; Small, 2021). Yet posters in my dataset were so trusting of Campbell that many of them suggested he should start a political party with Salmond following his acquittal. As one stated, 'I hope @AlexSalmond & @RevStu [Campbell's handle] create a new political party & lead Scotland to the safety of independence'. Despite their 'bad' reputations, in my dataset these men were

seen as the 'trusted' source of news on the Trial, and this is mostly *because* of their murky histories as hinted by one user that notes:

> 'we need men like Craig Murray to report the full story. Even though a high price can be paid for doing just that #Assange'.

Murray is thus an interesting example to explore here. Before starting his blog, Murray worked in the civil service, eventually becoming the UK ambassador to Uzbekistan. His tenure was not without its scandals. According to reporting by the journalist Nick Paton Walsh (2004), Murray was a vocal proponent against the human rights abuses taking place in the country, that he alleges neither the UK or US governments approved of as Uzbekistan was an ally in their war against Iraq. In what Murry claims was a backlash to his whistleblowing, he was accused of a number of offenses in office, including having sexual relations with young women in exchange for UK visas (ibid). The chargers were eventually dropped, however, Murray did not shy away from his reputation for being an 'unashamed socialiser' admitting to an affair with a 23 year old English teacher, and his frequent trips to bars 'where workers…come to unwind in the company of local girls' (ibid). Through this, Murray became known as an 'anti-establishment' personality, which was bolstered by his later reporting on the Julian Assange story – hence the '#Assange' hashtag at the end of the comment quoted above. Assange ran a website called WikiLeaks that published restricted government reports related to wars, government corruption, and spying (BBC, 2024). After publishing a number of confidential documents that indicated the US army had killed civilians during the war in Afghanistan, Assange was accused of espionage and thus began 14 years of litigation to bring him to the US for prosecution (ibid). Similarly to Murray, Assange was also accused of sex crimes (this time sexual assault and rape) which he denied and claimed was a political ploy to extradite him to the US (ibid).[25] The similarities in their cases have led to comparisons between Murray and Assange, and both men have been held up as important 'anti-establishment' figures (Russell, 2021). Indeed, Murray has been a vocal supporter of Assange, and as I mentioned, his blogging on the case was popular with commenters in my dataset. Therefore, although these men have 'bad' reputations, to their supporters they still have 'good' names in that they are seen as authentic and open about their 'shortcomings', and they are willing to risk their reputations to report on 'controversial'

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[25] The chargers were eventually dropped due to too much time elapsing since the alleged offenses occurred (BBC, 2024)

topics. As such, they have accumulated more symbolic power, and thus more 'believability' than their mainstream counterparts.

In her research on the believability of news sources, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) found that audiences valued user-generated content more than 'objective' news stories. This was in the context of news reports on the 2006 floods in the UK where interviewees noted that the first-person accounts and videos felt more authentic than the usual 'professional' reporting. Wahl-Jorgensen argues, this draws on 'an epistemological vocabulary which equates truth with authenticity, emotional integrity and immediacy' (2019, p. 75). In the Salmond dataset, it is clear how the bloggers fit with this type of 'user-generated' first-person content. As a reminder, some of Murray's most popular shared blogs were his daily summaries of what happened in court. This links back to the post-truth discourse, where the proliferation of social media content has meant that more and more people favour highly emotional communication, which appears as more 'authentic' and therefore more truthful (Enli, 2024; Harsin, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). This is a point I pick up again in my final analysis chapter, but for now it is important to note how this worked in the favour of bloggers whose 'bad' reputations helped boost their authenticity, and therefore, their believability.

Besides bloggers, the other part of the discourse around media in my dataset centred around mainstream news organisations. As I mentioned in the Data Breakdown, references to the 'MSM' (mainstream media) made up 9.2% of my overall Twitter dataset, and 17.8% in tweets that supported Salmond. However, when including tweets that also linked to mainstream news stories, this jumped to 30%. This indicates that although commenters were distrustful of mainstream news media, their discussions were still very much *in conversation with it*. One example of this can be seen in the posts in Figure 4.16 below.

The *Daily Record* is a Labour supporting newspaper and the Scottish equivalent of the English *Daily Mirror*. Importantly, it was anti-independence during the 2014 referendum. It was the *Record* that first published the allegations against Salmond in August 2018. The tweets below are commenting on their front page from the 25$^{th}$ of January 2019 where they ran with the original 14 charges of Salmond all printed out in a list form. In bold and capitalised letters at the bottom of the page is the word: 'CHARGED'. The first tweet in the thread demonstrates the hostile reaction Salmond supporters had toward this headline noting they are 'looking forward' to seeing an updated front page. The replies offer up some options, replacing

‘CHARGED’ with ‘CLEARED’ and another ‘FRAMED’, once again alluding to the idea of a conspiracy discussed in the previous section, ‘NOT GUILTY’ is added at the end. The image of Salmond that sits alongside the charges can be re/interpreted through the updated headlines as looking victimised, emphasised by his furrowed brows and the concern in his eyes. Again, he is set up as casualty of the establishment.

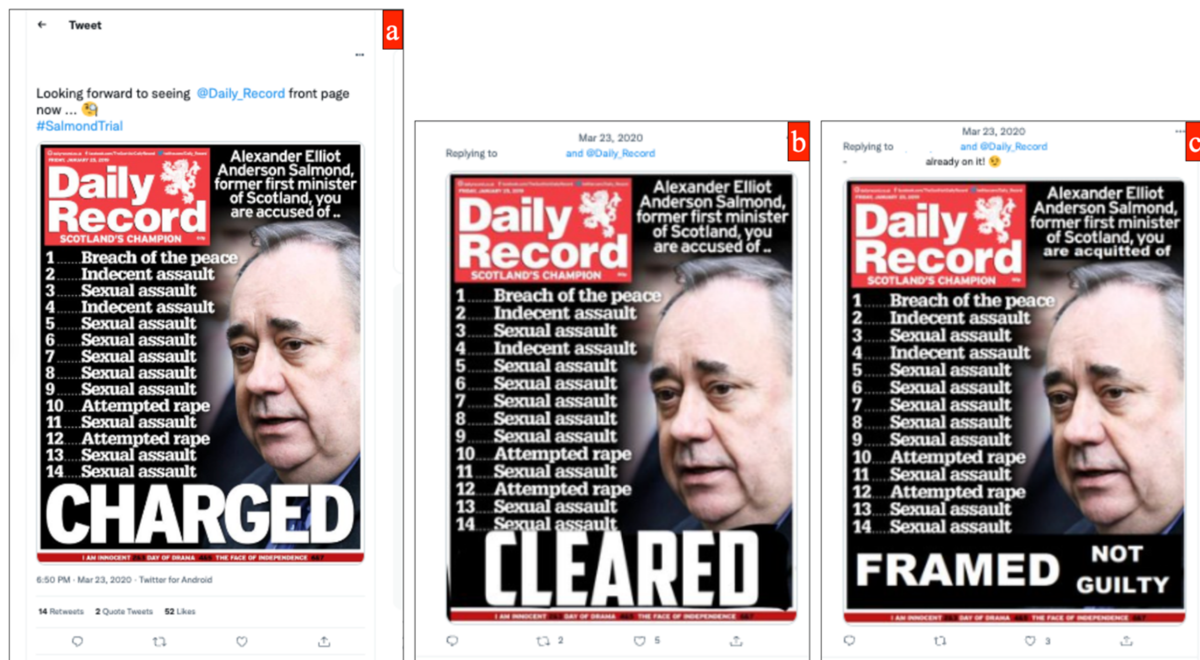


Figure 4.16 Tweets playing on the *Daily Record* cover story (Salmond)

However, by far the most referenced news organisation was the BBC. Unlike newspapers, broadcast media in the UK is meant to be impartial. However, since starting their Scottish focused broadcasting, the BBC has been accused of bias, culminating in a protest outside BBC Scotland’s headquarters in the run up to the independence referendum (BBC Reporter 2014). The tweets below (see Figure 4.17, Figure 4.18 and Figure 4.19), illustrate how this distrust has persisted. Figure 4.17 depicts an image of a badge where the poster has specifically called out BBC *Scotland* as being ‘unionist’ emblematic of the union jack flag at the top of the badge. The slogan ‘where truth goes to die’ speaks to a continuation of the belief that the BBC is biased and cannot be trusted when it comes to reporting stories about Scotland or Scottish politics. This is reiterated by one poster that requested, ‘If you want to share news articles about the #AlexSalmondTrial please don’t share any articles by the BBC #BBCBias #StateBroadcaster’. Again, this invokes the ‘deep state’ discourse discussed above, which is emphasised by the BBC’s position as a public-sector broadcaster.

Figure 4.17 Tweet commenting on BBC bias (Salmond)

Other than their perceived failings on coverage during the run up to the independence referendum, the other major scandal to hit the BBC and its reputation for trustworthy news was the Jimmy Savile story and Operation Yewtree, discussed in **Chapter One**. As I mentioned before, Savile was an incredibly popular TV personality in the UK, whose children's show *Jim'll Fix It* ran for years on the BBC. It later transpired that he was a serial sexual abuser of women and children, with abuse allegations that spanned decades. Staff at the BBC were found to have known about some of the allegations, but they chose not to report him. Savile's crimes were only revealed after his death, however, the investigation into his crimes lead to two other BBC media personalities being found to have abused young girls: Stuart Hall and Rolf Harris. As one poster commented:

> 'In regards to #AlexSalmond, Sarah Smith says "He will always be remembered for this trial in spite of all he has done." When I think of the BBC, I think of Jimmy Saville, Stuart Hall and Rolf Harris.'

This works to discredit the BBC and their reporting on cases that involve sexual assault allegations as they have historically failed to hold their own presenters to account.

Posters commentating on the mainstream media also took issue with specific reporters. Figure 4.17 tags several mainstream news organisations and reporters in their tweet, asking 'Ye Ragin?' in reference to the announcement of the verdict. Other tweets of this nature included, '@davidclegg looks like he was in the process of trying to squeeze out a hedgehog. Prick was devastated'; 'BBC's Glen Campbell spinning the #AlexSalmond story so much he might end up in Australia!'; '"Now is not the time" says @BBCandrewkerr as he winds up his hatchet-job on #AlexSalmond'. But the reporter that got the most mentions was Sarah Smith (see Figure 4.18 and Figure 4.19).

Figure 4.18 Tweet mocking Sarah Smith using *Rick and Morty* meme (Salmond)

Sarah Smith is a Scottish radio and television journalist with the BBC. She is also the daughter of the former British Labour leader and politician John Smith. Again, the connection to the Labour party is problematised, as well as her connection to the BBC. Smith is therefore seen as a unionist and a hypocrite, working for the BBC who protected Savile and others, while condemning Salmond for his association with the Trial. In the tweets above and below, the disdain for Smith is made clear. Figure 4.18 includes a GIF of a cartoon white, blonde woman (Smith is both white and blonde). She is distressed and in a kitchen that is in disrepair. Splatters

of a pink substance cover the counters and cupboards. While crying, the woman reaches for a glass and a bottle of wine that she shakily pours and gulps down. The GIF comes from a scene in the cartoon series *Rick and Morty*. The woman, Beth Smith, is the mother character who is sitting down to dinner with her family after they successfully eliminate an invasive alien species that tricks humans into thinking they are long-time friends, or family, by implanting false memories into their heads. It is revealed the only way to detect the species is if you have no negative memories with them. At the dinner, Beth becomes suspicious of a family friend who she cannot remember any negative experience with, so she shoots him, only to discover he was real. As her family, horrified at Beth's actions, rush to get him help, Beth runs to the kitchen to start drinking. In a post-credit scene, the family friend is seen getting physical therapy while trying to recover from his injury, he asks that a nurse tell Beth he is sorry she had no negative memories with him (Meza-León, 2015). The implication that *Sarah* Smith has wrongly attempted to 'assassinate' an innocent man are stark. Likewise, Beth's decision to run to the kitchen to drink comes across as incredibly selfish, rather than help her friend she has run away to drown her sorrows at being wrong. The fact that she comes across as having 'lost control' is also interesting when looking at the second tweet (Figure 4.19).

This tweet includes a video clip from the BBC drama *Eastenders* in which Vanessa Gold, a put together successful businesswoman, loses control when she discovers her partner is having an affair with his ex-partner. Losing all sense of herself, she starts screaming and violently thrashes about, destroying their home. The image of the refined, put-together businesswoman who is again blonde, white, and dressed in an expensive looking tailored white suit is emblematic of BBC news presenters. When we see her lose control, we are given the sense of the veneer dropping, giving us a look at her 'real' and 'authentic' self – similarly to the revelations about Savile, Hall, and Harris. This further highlights the loss of trust in mainstream news presenters, instead they are seen as 'posers' and selfish 'traitors', too interested in their own self-preservation to show us their true, authentic selves. As the believability and trust in mainstream media is contested, credence is given to the people they are seen as being 'up against' (such as Salmond). Therefore, by being 'unbelievable', alleged perpetrators, bloggers, and social media commentators are *more* believable.

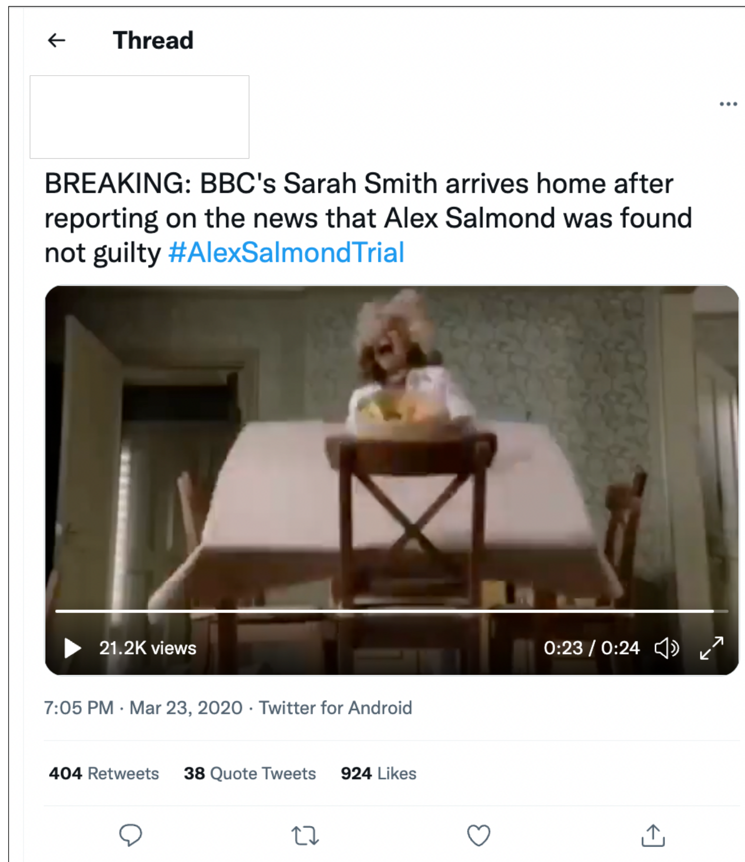


Figure 4.19 Tweet mocking Sarah Smith using scene from *East Enders*

## Conclusion

The Alex Salmond Trial sits at an interesting intersection of many of the popular debates and discourses taking place around discussions of sexual violence, media and politics. It is through this coalescence of different agendas that one can make sense of the discourse around the Trial. The issues around social trust and authenticity have created a landscape where it has become difficult to determine 'the truth'. Instead, there has developed an 'economy of believability' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023) where one is 'believed' and seen as 'truthful' based on who they are and what they can do to convince us. This has created an unequal system as some people (mostly white, wealthy, men) have both the ability to draw on past 'good will' as well as their own cultural value to garner more support. Therefore, even if they have been found to have a 'bad reputation' this can be excused because they still have a 'good name'. Survivors of abuse are put at a further disadvantage when they are anonymised as this removes their ability to participate in the economy of believability, as it requires this understanding of reputation, name, and cultural value. This is bolstered by the breakdown of trust in mainstream

media as people have instead turned to 'alternative' sources. Public understandings of events are instead built on what is being expressed online, and so by stating and restating a claim it becomes true. In the meantime, women's speech and moments like #MeToo are problematised as collusion, corruption, and witch hunts, their testimony cannot be evidence, but the statement that there is evidence can be.

The Salmond Trial can be seen as a starting point of the confluence of debates about #MeToo and anxieties about the trustworthiness of mainstream news media that have started to take place online. It also indicates the multitude of ways famous men are excused for their 'bad' behaviours. In the next two chapters, I explore how both these issues take place in a different context: Hollywood.

# CHAPTER FIVE
# Sparrow and Scum: The Depp v Heard Trial

"These online attacks and in-person protests weren't spontaneous: they were often reflecting and repeating the misogynistic language from Depp's own words."

Account of abuse levelled at Amber Heard from Jennifer Robinson and Keina Yoshida (2023, p. 300)

It was near impossible to avoid the coverage of the six-week defamation trial Johnny Depp brought against his ex-wife Amber Heard in the US. It has been described as a 'global phenomenon' and the biggest trial since OJ Simpson (Mostrous, 2024). At Depp's lawyers request, the trial was live streamed by Court TV, amassing 3.5 million views during the verdict on the Law & Crime Network YouTube channel (Penney & Penney & Associates, 2022). This was a highly contentious decision by the Judge. Amber Heard was expected to testify to sexual assault and rape, both before and during her marriage (Wallis, 2023, pp. 219-220). Typically, cameras are banned in criminal cases involving sexual assault, however in civil cases this decision rests with the judge. Judge Penney Azcarate cited the multiple requests she had had from media organisations, noting her fear that if she did not allow cameras, reporters would come to the courthouse and create a 'hazardous situation' (Maddaus, 2022).[26] Despite Heard's lawyers' arguments that 'anti-Amber networks' would use any footage they could to harass her online (Maddaus, 2022), the Judge put no restrictions on the livestreaming, allowing Court TV to broadcast live on two cameras and ordering that they make that footage available to other broadcasters (Wallis, 2023, p. 220). As a result, the trial, including Heard's testimony to multiple acts of sexual and domestic violence, were reproduced, mocked, and memeified online (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 338) just as her lawyers had predicted. Even more controversially, the Judge decided not to sequester the Jury, who were allowed to use their phones and the internet on the condition they did not engage with any information on the case.

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[26] In the end, the courthouse was filled with mostly Johnny Depp supporters (Wallis, 2023), some queuing for hours to get a seat (Ballasy, 2022; Yahr, 2022), others waiting outside to show their support with placards and alpacas (VanHoose, 2022; Yahr, 2022). They frequently disrupted proceedings by laughing (D. Jones, 2022; Ntim, 2022; Sharp, 2022).

This was a huge feat considering the scale of reportage. On the 1st of June 2022, the Jury found in favour of Depp concluding that Heard had defamed him on all three of his claims, and that she had done so with malice. They awarded him over $10 million in damages (Wallis, 2023, p. 275).

Although support for the two actors was unevenly divided – for example, NPR reported that during the trial #IStandWithAmberHeard had around 8.2million views on TikTok, while #JusticeForJohnnyDepp had 15 *billion* (Tsioulcas & Rascoe, 2022) – the public discourse surrounding the case has always been contested and complex (the dynamic of which fueled the social media content). Part of this is due to the confusing finding by the Jury, concluding not only that Heard had defamed Depp, but that Depp, through a statement from one of his lawyers, had defamed Heard (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023; Wallis, 2023). This was furthered by a later media interview with one of the Jurors who stated that they believed Depp and Heard 'were both abusive to each other', which, of course, would mean there were no grounds for defamation (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 332). Although the verdict was surprising – that Depp proved his reputation had been ruined while crowds of people gathered in support of him is quite an achievement – it follows a growing trend in powerful men responding to high profile allegations of violence with defamation suits, and as such, is of interest to me and my focus on name and reputation for this thesis. Furthermore, I was interested in the unprecedented social media commentary that surrounded the trial, and particularly how it centred on *name calling*.

In order to elucidate the complex background to this case study, I will start with a brief timeline of key events in the lead up to the US trial, followed by an overview of the data relevant to this discussion. The analysis for this chapter will take place over two distinct parts: the first part (**The Celebrity vs The Star**) explicates the difference between Johnny Depp's 'star power' and Amber Heard's 'celebrity' and how this played out in the long #MeToo moment. The second part (**The Captain and the Turd**) will then discuss the names and name calling used by online commentators during the trial that worked to re/construct Depp and Heard's identities and reputations.

## A Timeline of Events

On the 27th of May 2016, Amber Heard was granted a domestic violence restraining order against her then husband Johnny Depp, five days later she filed for a divorce (Woolf, 2016).

The backlash against Heard was immediate. TMZ published multiple stories alleging Heard was lying about the abuse (TMZ Reporter 2016a, 2016b; 2016c, 2016d, 2016g), prompting a friend of the couple – who had called the police in the incident that lead to the restraining order – to pen an op-ed defending Heard and his decision to call 911 (Tillet Wright, 2016). A month after the news broke, Depp revealed he had changed his tattoo for Heard from 'Slim' – his nickname for her – to 'Scum'. As before, this was widely reported (Cherrington, 2016; Fecteau, 2016; TMZ, 2016e), and the name would later be used against Heard in online commentary about the US trial. Although popularly discussed, Depp was largely unscathed by the allegations. He went on tour with his band, continued to work on films, and as the face of the luxury French brand Dior's *Sauvage* fragrance range, described as the most lucrative deal in men's fragrance (Siegel, 2023).

As the year progressed, Heard continued to speak out on her experience. She released a public service announcement on domestic violence in partnership with the Girlgaze Project (Haynes, 2016), and later published an op-ed for *Porter Magazine* on the same topic (Heard, 2016 - the original article has since been deleted). Tabloid magazines continued to speculate on their relationship, with TMZ releasing a now infamous video of a belligerent Depp kicking and smashing up a kitchen before emptying a bottle of wine into a large pint glass (TMZ Reporter 2016f). This later inspired the 'mega pint' refrain of Depp's fans during the trial. Their divorce was finally settled in January 2017. The now ex-couple agreed to a non-disclosure agreement and released a joint statement that read:

> 'Our relationship was intensely passionate and at times volatile but always bound by love. Neither party has made false accusations for financial gain. There was never any intent of physical or emotional harm.' (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p.306).

Almost two years later, while Depp was embroiled in multiple lawsuits alleging assault of a crew member (Minelle, 2018), mistreatment of former bodyguards (Patten, 2018), mismanagement of finances (BBC Reporter, 2018a), and reports of drunken unprofessionalism on film sets (Galloway & Cullins, 2017; Rodrick, 2018) *The Sun* – a UK tabloid newspaper – published an article calling Depp a 'wife beater', prompting Depp to sue them for libel (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023). After this, Depp seemed to go on the offensive, partly for his own reputational repair. He approached *Rolling Stone,* and later *GQ* to write profiles on him to hear the 'truth' (as both articles emphasise). He changed his Heard tattoo, again, from 'Scum' to

‘Scam’ (Russian, 2018) and publicly accused Heard of defecating in their bed through another UK tabloid, *The Mirror* (Rainbird, 2018). This last allegation resulted in another nickname for Heard: ‘Amber Turd’. Heard denied the accusations, adding through her representative that she ‘is moving on and [does] not want to engage in this nonsense’ (Heard's Representative in Rainbird, 2018). Four months later, Heard, along with lawyers from the ACLU, penned an op-ed for *The Washington Post* on the cultural backlash women face for speaking out about domestic and sexual violence (Heard, 2018). She never named Depp and was writing in her role as Women’s Rights Ambassador for the ACLU. Along with her op-ed, she had been promoting the UN campaign for the Elimination of Violence Against Women during her *Aquaman* press tour (K. Butler, 2018).[27] Depp responded by suing Heard for defamation.[28] Moreover, the following two years during the lead up to the two trials, Depp, through his controversial lawyer,[29] continued to release information about Heard and their volatile relationship. This often included recordings that were edited to favour Depp (Mostrous, 2024, episode 6) that were leaked to both mainstream and social media commentators – which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Although Depp ultimately won his lawsuit against Heard, *The Sun* trial had the opposite outcome. After a three week hearing and just over three months of deliberation, in November 2020 the Judge found that Heard’s allegations of abuse were ‘substantially true’, allowing the tabloid to legally name Depp a ‘wife beater’ (Wallis, 2023, p.171) a point that was repeatedly made by Heard’s supporters during the US trial. The Judge found that Depp had been violent toward Heard on 12 separate occasions, noting ‘that she was the victim of sustained and multiple assaults by Mr Depp’, adding that ‘[t]hey must have been terrifying’ ("John Christopher Depp II v (1) News Group Newspapers Ltd. (2) Dan Wooton," 2020, p. 79). The judgement was damning, but surprising. *The Sun* trial was brought against News Group Newspapers Ltd (NGN) who publish *The Sun* in London, where libel law is notoriously easier for claimants to win, and thus described as ‘the libel capital of the world’ (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 308). The US trial, on the other hand, should have been comparatively easier for Heard to win as the burden of proof was on Depp, and the US has stricter free speech laws. Not to mention, the US trial was based on much of the same evidence a Judge had found to be

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[27] See also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6wlAQ7wrvs, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie77EvN54HM

[28] She later counter sued Depp in 2020.

[29] See Wallis (2023) p.147-157, and Mostrous (2024) episode 6 ‘Public Enemy’.

‘substantially true’ (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 304). However, as has been shown, Depp beat the odds, winning on all three of his claims of defamation, where Heard only succeeded proving one.

This chapter does not constitute an attempt to relitigate the case or accuse either Depp or Heard of abuse. It should go without saying that being a victim of domestic violence profoundly affects anyone who experiences it, no matter their gender. This case is incredibly complex. In the country I am writing in, Amber Heard is legally recognised as a victim of domestic violence. In another one, she is not. Although the US trial does not legally name Depp a victim, rather asserting that he is not a perpetrator, he has also levelled accusations of abuse against Heard. Indeed, some of the language Heard uses against Depp in their many recordings is distressing and upsetting to listen to. But so is the language Depp uses against Heard, and other women. I am not interested in the *credibility* – as a priori assumptions about ‘fact’ – of either Depp or Heard’s accusations. Rather, like Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, I am interested in their *believability*. As such, I am moving away from legal discourses to cultural ones instead. Rather than asking who is telling the truth, I am interested in what is read as truthful online, and why; and most importantly, how this is connected to name and reputation.

**Data Breakdown**

As there were over 2000 posts in my dataset I will start with a brief overview of the data as a means of establishing the landscape for understanding what my sample looked like, before moving on to my analysis. It is worth noting that this dataset was very different to the Salmond one. There was much more *visual* (and in particular, *audiovisual*) content in this dataset. This is partly due to the inclusion of TikTok, but even the tweets and Reddit posts collected had more visual content, as I will demonstrate in the analysis below.

As noted in the methodology chapter, I collected my data at the end of the Depp v Heard trial starting the day before and ending the day of the verdict (31 May – 1 June 2022). I had a total of 2516 posts spanning Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube, and was left with 2059 after removing posts that had used the hashtags but were unrelated to the trial, or in the case of Reddit, posts that were deleted from subreddits for rule violations. On the deleted posts, it is interesting to note that the majority of posts collected on the pro Amber Heard subreddit were deleted posts by Depp supporters mocking the members of the page on the day the verdict was

announced (I mentioned these in **Chapter Three**). Although all subreddits had posts that were deleted, this was mostly due to general rule breaches, or users deleting their own posts, as opposed to malicious posts needing to be removed en masse. In the end, only 19.1% of the posts collected on the pro Heard subreddit were coded, compared to 68.6% of the 'neutral' trial centred subreddit, and 60.4% of the pro Johnny Depp subreddit. This is an indication of the influence of fandom present in this case study.

Significantly, 94.9% of the posts in my sample alluded to some kind of anti/fandom (see Figure 5.1 below). Fandom, here, is linked primarily to the actors themselves rather than to characters or franchises they are associated with. For example, only 7.3% of posts referenced a character that either actor plays (with Depp's characters receiving 92.5% of all such references). However, expressions of love and support for each actor was generally centred on their 'real life' persona.

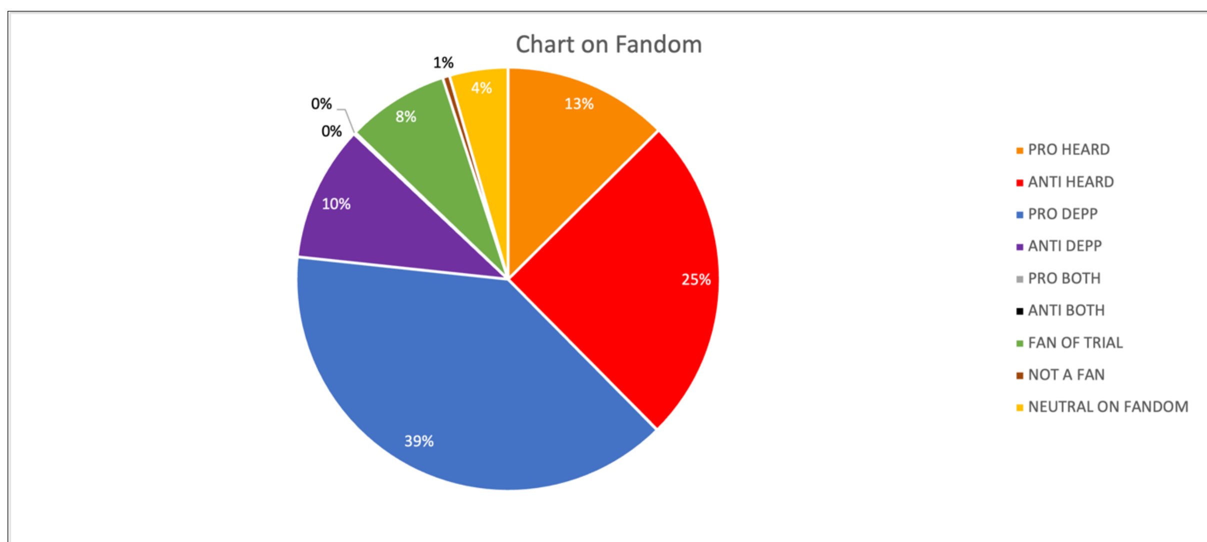


Figure 5.1 Chart on Fandom (Depp v Heard)

On that note, it is also interesting that 15.9% of posters in my dataset included some kind of emoji (Twitter / TikTok), flair (Reddit), image, or phrasing that referenced a fandom they were participating in. For example, a 'pirate flag' emoji typically indicated support for Depp. However, the most interesting point about these accounts is the difference in orientation. On Twitter for example, the Heard fan accounts were often not exclusively focused *on* Heard. Some of the fan accounts were instead dedicated to other female celebrities (such as the Spice Girls), and solidarity with Heard seemed to come second to this. Similarly, there were several accounts dedicated to survivors or women's rights more broadly. Where private individuals

had edited their account in support of Heard, this was often in the form of a purple heart – a symbol for survivors of domestic abuse – or profile frames that read 'We Heard You' or 'Purple for Amber', again, sayings that are redolent of the wider violence against women movement, not fans of Heard specifically. This was the opposite for Depp. Although there were some accounts that made use of the phrase 'Men Too', most accounts in support of Depp were focused on *him* specifically, either through images of him, pirate flag emojis or popular phrases from the trial in their handles (such as 'mega pint'). Profile frames read 'Justice For Johnny' or 'Victory For Johnny Depp', and certain usernames incorporated iconic characters of Depp's into them (with Edward Scissorhands and Captain Jack Sparrow being the most common).

This is in line with what Karen Boyle, Emma Flynn, Chamil Rathnayake and I found in our article tracking social media commentary during the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, presented as Depp's return to filmmaking after the US trial (Boyle *et al.*, 2024). It follows what Rathnayake and Suthers (2019) identified as the influences of pre-existing affiliations and fandom that can create the conditions for issue publics to emerge. As we argue in our Cannes paper, the affordances of social media that favour numbers over content, make it quite challenging to counteract these issue publics, because the same kind of pre-existing network does not exist for Heard. I analyse this point further elsewhere (House, forthcoming), but for the purposes of this chapter it is interesting to understand the difference between Depp and Heard supporters.

I decided to code whether a post was in support of either actor as separate from 'fandom' above because certain posts were clearly on a specific 'side' but not necessarily clear on whether they supported a specific person. This was particularly true for the 'anti fandom' posts, where users would express such contempt for a particular person, but not mention who they were in support of. As such, I treated them as separate variables. In the end, 58.8% of posters were in support of Depp, compared to only 20.3% for Heard with the remaining either supporting neither (1.3%), appearing neutral (3.9%), or where support could not be determined (15.6%). However, interestingly, support was different across platforms (see table below). Twitter was by far the platform with the most support for Heard (although it was only 27.5%) while TikTok had the biggest difference in support with 89.2% of users supporting Depp and only 3.1% supporting Heard. Considering the feminist influence of my algorithm, discussed in **Chapter Three**, it is interesting that so many Pro Depp posts came up in my searches. This is revealing of the wider online discourse that centred this trial (Nelson, 2024), and is a significant finding in outlining

the proliferation of the manosphere in wider cultural contexts online (discussed in **Chapter One**), which other academics have theorised (e.g. Finlayson, 2023)

| PLATFORM | TWITTER | REDDIT | TIKTOK | YOUTUBE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUPPORTS DEPP | 56.3% | 48.8% | 89.2% | 51% |
| SUPPORTS HEARD | 27.5% | 9.8% | 3.1% | 8.2% |

Table 5.1 Table showing support for Depp and Heard across platforms

This difference in support is the focus of this chapter, and how that contributed to the construction of identity and reputation. As I argue in **Chapter Two**, naming and name calling are dependent on power. I argued that a name is a sign, made up of many different elements, that work together to create an understanding of *the self*. The convergence of all these is the 'essential self' or the 'myth' of the person we come to know and identify as being either 'good' or 'bad' (House, 2023). Due to the heteroglossic nature of names, there will always be competing understandings of who a person is. The deciding factor lies with whomever has the most power to control the myth behind a person's name. The 'dominant myth' becomes the reputation, which is subject to change, depending on who has the power to control it. Name calling was a significant part of the online discourse that centred the US defamation trial, and as the opening quotes to this chapter indicate, much of this language came *from Depp*, and was picked up and repeated by his supporters. In what follows, I will demonstrate how Depp, and the online commentators that supported him, held the power to construct both his and Heard's reputations.

### The Celebrity vs The Star

In order to understand the power difference between Depp and Heard, it is necessary to dissect the difference between a 'celebrity' and a 'star', although this is not as straightforward as it seems. Celebrities and stars are full of contradictions, which is not helped by the unclear boundaries within the taxonomy of celebrity, for instance the distinction between the 'television personality' and the 'film star' or, indeed, the rise of the 'internet celebrity' (G. Turner, 2016). A simplified and oft quoted definition of a 'celebrity' comes from Daniel J. Boorstin (1962) who argues that a celebrity is a person who is well known for their 'well-knownness'. Boorstin's conceptualisation of celebrity is rooted in an understanding of its inauthentic nature, a symptom of an inauthentic American culture that is dominated by what

he calls ‘pseudo-events’ which are events staged specifically for media attention. The significance of the event is then judged by the scale of the media attention it incurs. A celebrity is the human version of this phenomena, created for media consumption and judged by the scale of the attention they receive (ibid). Boorstin’s conceptualisation is contested. Partly because it is seen to be overly simplistic, and partly because of the superciliousness of his description of the human pseudo-event, in that he sees it as a sign of cultural regression (Ponce de Leon, 2002). However, it is precisely this negative framing of celebrity that is useful for this discussion, in that it centres a focus on the ‘inauthentic’ and how this contrasts with the authenticity of a ‘star’.

Richard Dyer (2019) is the academic most turn to for his writing on stars (American films stars specifically). Unlike Boorstin’s idea of celebrity, Dyer argues that a star is a symbol of success that embodies ‘several contradictory elements’ (ibid, p. 79). Drawing on Francesco Alberoni’s influential writing on ‘the powerless elite’ (Alberoni, 1972), Dyer notes that stars are conceptualised as being ‘ordinary’ but equally extremely talented and ‘special’; that they had a ‘lucky break’; and that they are hardworking and professional (Dyer, 2019, p. 79). Therefore, they can be ‘ordinary’ despite their extreme wealth because they are not ‘transformed’ by their wealth and success, they are deserving of it. In other words, ‘stardom’ is a version of the American Dream ‘organised around the themes of consumption, success and ordinariness’ (ibid, p. 70). As such, the celebrity’s inauthenticity is contrasted with the authenticity of the star. The celebrity is a commodity, whereas the star is a ‘dream’. Both are made to be ‘sold’ but one is more aspirational.

This difference is illustrated by what Dyer refers to as a ‘soured’ dream of the unsuccessful star (ibid, p. 80). Where the star is ‘lucky’ but untransformed by their success, a ‘wannabe’ star *wants* to be transformed by their success. They want to be rich. They want their ‘fifteen minutes of fame’. They are prepared to do whatever it takes to achieve that. This is illustrated by Dyer’s example of ‘Carla’ a character in a pulp novel called *Naked in Hollywood*:

> ‘Carla could not recall the precise moment she decided she would become a star. As she grew older it seemed that the dream was born in her. She had no illusions about developing into a great actress. It was the glamour, the make-believe, the beauty, the adulation that were increments of stardom that bedazzled her…Hollywood – it can break your heart, rip out your guts, Herb warned. Carla was not impressed. To become a star, she was prepared to trade her immortal soul.’ (ibid, p. 82)

Carla's story illuminates this difference between a 'true' star and a celebrity. It is not the artistry or work of being a star that Carla wants, but the 'adulation'. She wants to *be known*. Her pursuit of fame is inauthentic. Thus, Carla can only ever be a celebrity as Boorstin describes. She might incur some success, but this success will always be tainted.

I argue that Johnny Depp is a star, where Amber Heard is only a celebrity. In what follows, I will explain how Depp's stardom gave him power and control over the narrative that predominated the trial. In contrast to this, Heard's celebrity worked to devalue her narrative – what feminist scholar Jilly Boyce Kay calls 'communicative injustice' (Kay, 2020), which I have introduced in **Chapter One** and will return to later. Therefore, Depp, along with his many supporters and fans, were able to construct both his and Heard's identities and reputations, which influenced the online commentary. For the purposes of my analysis, I have focused on the social media posts I collected, but I have supplemented this with mainstream media texts that were mentioned or discussed by commentators in my dataset.

*Johnny Depp's star power*

Johnny Depp has had a long and decorated career,[30] as both a film 'star' and a rock 'star' with his band Hollywood Vampires. Despite his huge success, Depp is still perceived as being incredibly 'down-to-earth' and 'ordinary' by online commentators in my dataset. One reason for this, is his ongoing struggle with drugs and alcohol.

During the trial, and throughout his career, Depp has sought to manage the frames around his issues with drugs. In interviews he joked about having had 'every kind of drug there was by 14' (Depp in Schneller, 1988), yet he continually refused to admit he had a problem with substance abuse during the trial (Wallis, 2023, pp. 52-54). In fact, Depp's own 'sobriety coach' wrote in 2014 that Depp 'romanticises the entire drug culture, and has no accountability for his behaviours' (Dr David Kipper in ibid, p. 52). In the *Rolling Stone* interview mentioned earlier, the journalist Stephen Rodrick made a similar observation, noting that Depp seemed 'oblivious to any personal complicity in his current predicament'. Adding, 'there were whispers that Depp's recreational drug and alcohol use were crippling him' (Rodrick, 2018). Heard reported

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[30] Depp has received three Academy Award nominations for his performance in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Verbinski, 2003); *Finding Neverland* (Forster, 2004); and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Burton, 2007).

that Depp's physical and sexual abuse of her stemmed from his issues with drugs and alcohol, with both Depp and Heard referring to his intoxicated alter-ego as 'The Monster' (Wallis, 2023, p. 21). As such, Heard supporters in my dataset reposted and shared videos of Depp appearing drunk while at work, as evidence of his alcoholism.[31] Yet, to Depp supporters, his struggles with substance abuse were just further proof of his relatability and ordinariness (Figure 5.2).

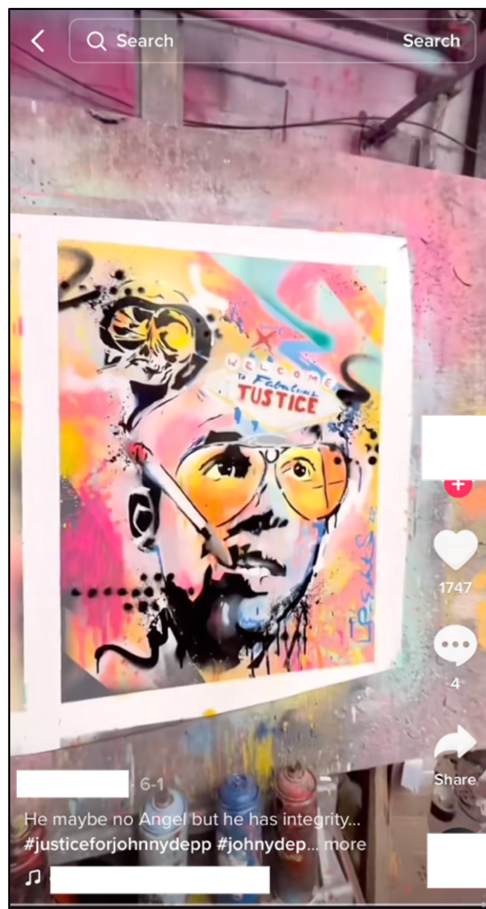


Figure 5.2 TikTok video discusses Depp's addiction

In the TikTok video above, the poster paints a portrait of Depp while we hear clipped sections of his testimony in court about his drug and alcohol use. A slow instrumental guitar provides the emotional undertone of the video, which is a minute long. The TikTok ends with Depp noting:

> 'Sir, if anyone had a problem with my drinking, at any time in my life, it was me. The only person that I have ever abused, *in my life*, is myself.'

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[31] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uivoJBviREI.

At that, the video pans out to reveal the final painting: A fan recreation of the artwork for Depp's film *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Gilliam, 1998), a film that rhapsodises recreational drug use. The painting adapts the famous Las Vegas sign to read 'Welcome to Fabulous Justice', as a commentary on the outcome of the US trial. The poster notes in their caption, 'He may be no angel, but he has integrity'. This is emblematic of the contradictory persona Depp embodies, like Alex Salmond who also argued he was 'no angel' (discussed in **Chapter Four**). Depp is both an addict and not an addict. His substance abuse is both harmful and recreational. He is 'no angel', but by not shying away from these issues, like Salmond, he is demonstrating his 'integrity'. Therefore, he is seen as being honest and truthful about his substance abuse; while also denying he has an issue with substance abuse. A similar argument is made for his other less than savoury characteristics.

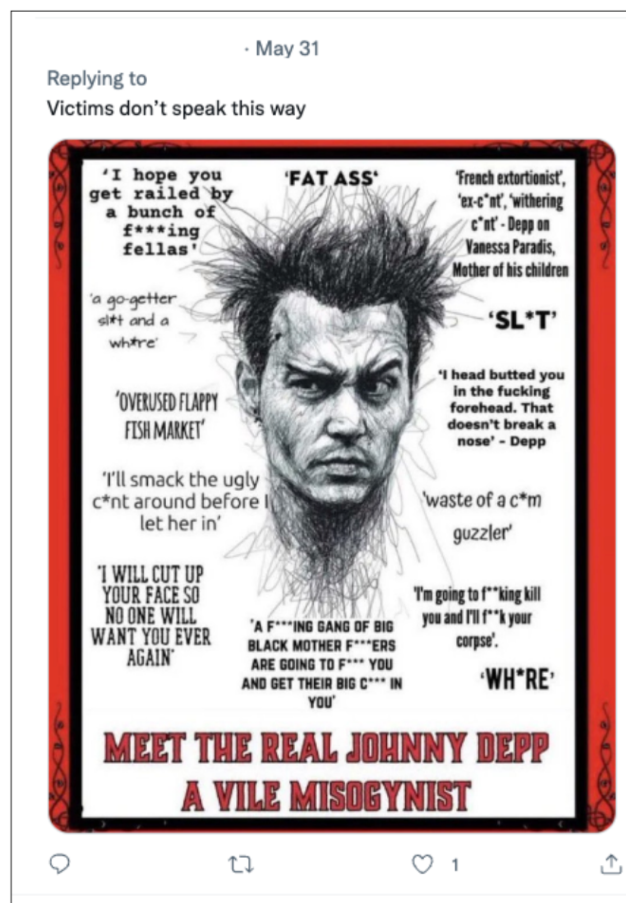


Figure 5.3 Tweet 'Meet the real Johnny Depp'

As discussed in the introduction, Depp had a reputation for drunken, abusive behaviour, but this started long before Heard's allegations surfaced in 2016. In fact, Depp was known for drinking to excess, even while at work (Pengelly, 2014); he had been arrested for assaulting security guards (Snow & MacMinn, 1989), and paparazzi (Hoffmann, 1999); and he was

known to have ‘volatile’ relationships, resulting in an arrest for criminal mischief when he ‘trashed’ a hotel room during a fight with his then partner Kate Moss (Spitz, 2007). Of course, Depp does not shy away from his more ‘problematic’ side either. In fact, his public persona draws on tropes of the ‘outcast’ ‘bad-boy’, the tagline for the *GQ* interview mentioned above reads ‘An outlaw talks’ (Heaf, 2018). In my dataset, Heard supporters created compilation videos tracing Depp’s history with violence,[32] as well as collages of the abusive language he used against Heard and other women (Figure 5.3 above and Figure 5.4). As the two screenshots demonstrate, these posts were meant to highlight the ‘*real*’ Depp who they identify as a ‘psychopath’, an ‘abuser’, a ‘rapist’, a ‘wife beater’, and a ‘vile misogynist’. The images work to further this reading. Figure 5.3 highlights ‘the real’ Depp as crazed and scary. His appearance in the sketch is redolent of Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Figure 5.4 instead uses the image as a juxtaposition. His ‘put together’ court appearance is rendered a farse when surrounded by his words spoken in private.

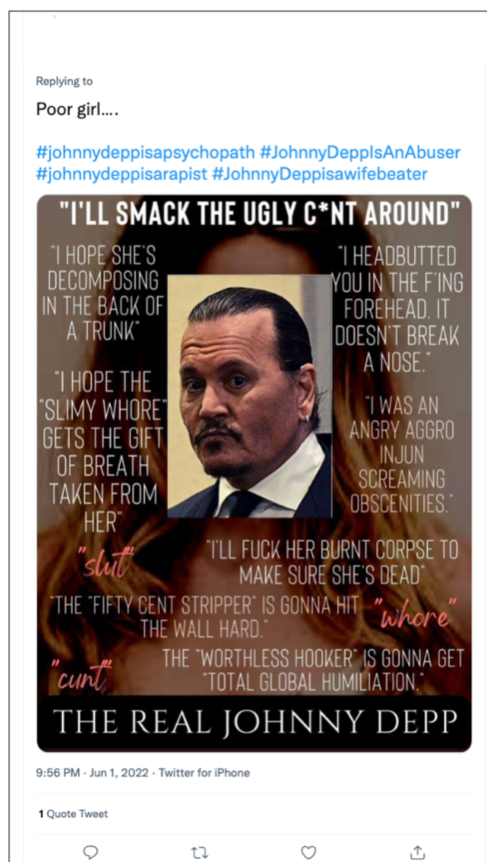


Figure 5.4 Tweet 'The real Johnny Depp'

[32] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcmuuAfliaI.

However, Depp's language in interviews is no less truculent. In the *GQ* article, Depp waxes poetic about one of his arrests for threatening paparazzi with a wooden plank:

> 'there was that time when the paparazzi were trying to take a photograph of Vanessa and she's pregnant with Lily-Rose and I was not going to let them make a circus out of it. So I did what I had to do... I said, 'Take a fucking picture because then I'll stove your fucking head in…' And that's just the truth. I would've. I've even said before, if a paparazzo gets a shot, they're far away… But if I catch you, I will eat your nose. I will eat your nose, chew it up and swallow it in front of you and then you'll fucking think about it next time. I fucking mean it.' (Depp in Heaf, 2018).

Depp frames his violence here as paternal protection, a hyper masculine duty to protect his partner and unborn child. This imbues his description with a kind of familiarity and relatability: what man hasn't considered violence when his family was under threat? That, together with his casual use of expletives, is another indicator of his ordinariness, he may be famous, but he is 'just like us'. This is demonstrated by his supporters' reactions to his language (Figure 5.5 below).

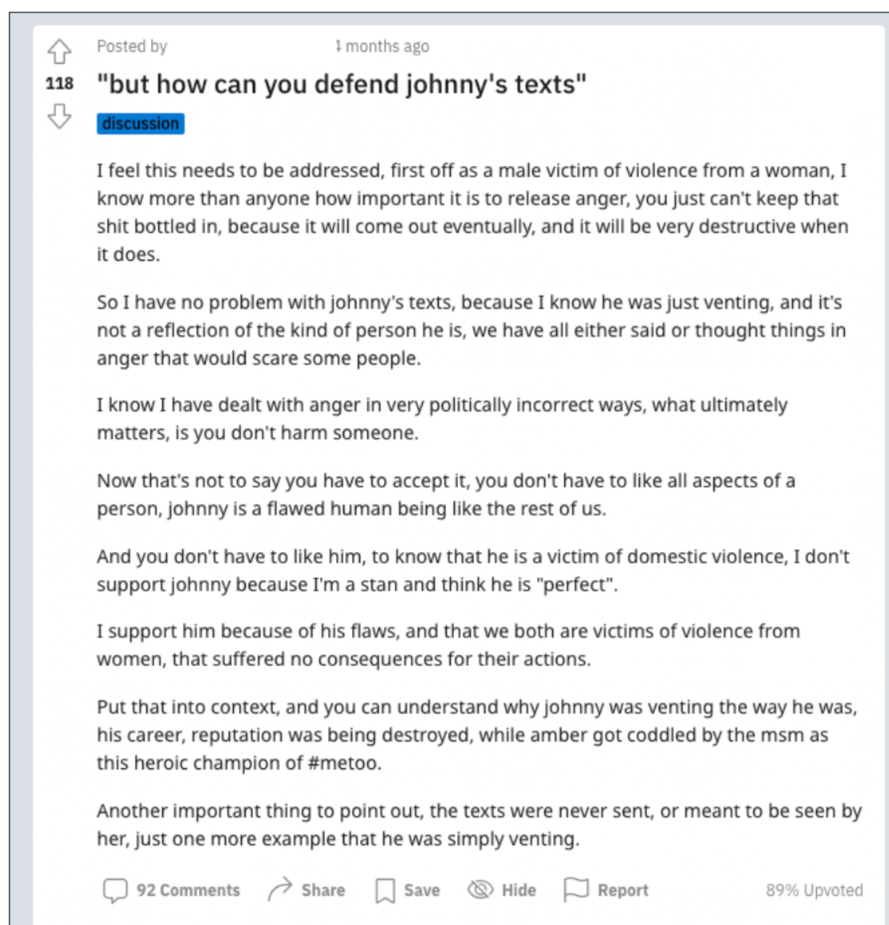


Figure 5.5 Post from r/deppVheardtrial '"but how can you defend johnny's texts"'

As the above post indicates, Depp's abusive language is not understood as a sign of underlying misogyny or violent impulses, but rather a normal expression of hurt and anger at an abusive ex-partner.[33] According to his supporters, his language is not harmful because he is merely 'texting' and Heard was not the intended recipient, which supposedly removes any harm. Furthermore, as Figure 5.5 notes, this is apparently a healthy method for Depp to vent his anger and frustration at his abusive partner to avoid *actual* destructive behaviour. As such, Depp's language is only indicative of the fact that Depp is not perfect, but 'a flawed human being like the rest of us'. This once again emphasises his relatability. Therefore, even though Depp frequently threatens violence – and extreme violence at that – we are not to misinterpret that as him being a 'violent person'. Rather, he is only capable of violence when pushed to it. So, Depp's threats of violence are understood as reasonable and relatable.

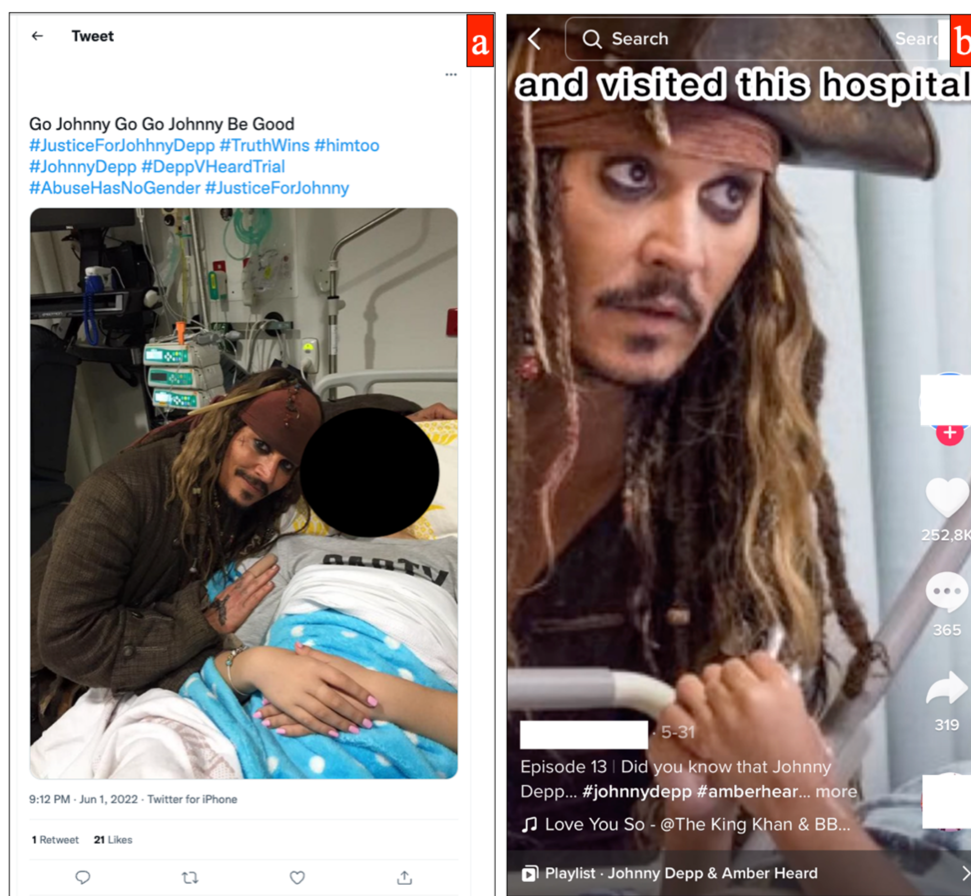

Figure 5.6 Tweet (a) and TikTok (b) comparing Depp to Sparrow

[33] That some of Depp's comments were made about Heard before his allegations of abuse, and about his ex-partner Vanessa Paradis, is ignored.

Part of the reason why Depp's contradictory characteristics are not visible *as* contradictions is because of his 'specialness' and talent, and nothing highlights this more than his role as Captain Jack Sparrow from Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise[34]. Sparrow is arguably Depp's most famous character. He is a criminal, a womanizer, and a drunkard, but is also the comic relief and much beloved anti-hero of the films. Depp based the character on Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, as well as the lustful French skunk Pepé Le Pew from Loony Toons (Petersen, 2007), playing into the sordid rockstar / children's entertainer characterisation. The 'family friendly' framing of Disney gives Sparrow (and Depp) an alibi for his bad behaviour, which fans often draw on. For example, Depp has donned Sparrow to visit children's hospitals, a point made repeatedly by his supporters (Figure 5.6). The posts above emphasise Depp's softer side and his sensitive nature. In the TikTok video (Figure 5.6b), the poster claims that Depp started performing as Sparrow in children's hospitals after his daughter contracted E. Coli, necessitating a prolonged hospital stay, sad piano music plays softly in the background. This highlights, not only his dedication to his family and his young fans, but his loyalty – the TikTok video notes that Depp continues to perform as Sparrow in the same hospital his daughter was treated in. So, Depp may express himself in distasteful (yet understandable) ways, but he is a 'good' man at heart, sharing his talents to make sick children happy. The poster in Figure 5.6a touches on this last point. Their comment is a reference to Chuck Berry's 1958 hit *Johnny B. Goode* – a song about the American Dream: It tells the story of a poor, young man from the South 'Who never ever learned to read or write so well' (ordinary), 'But he could play a guitar just like a-ringin' a bell' (special). The song acts as a celebration of 'Johnny's' success (Cartwright, 2022). Just like Johnny B. Goode, Johnny *Depp* is both ordinary (violence, language) and special (Sparrow). As Dyer (2019) notes, his stardom makes him *extra*ordinary. He is at once 'heroic and villainous' (Heaf, 2018), which of course is what audiences love about Jack Sparrow.

The similarities between Depp and Sparrow are clear, and he often plays into these characteristics to boost this comparison. As he has aged, Depp's personal style has emulated Sparrow's, with his long hair, eclectic clothing choices, assortment of jewellery and tattoos, and predilection for bandanas – feeding into his Keith Richards/rockstar persona. However,

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[34] The *Pirates* franchise is based on a Disney theme park ride.

Depp is not alone in playing on the similarities between himself and Sparrow. In my dataset, commentators frequently drew comparisons between Depp's trial narrative and Sparrow's misadventures (Figure 5.7 below). In the example below, Depp/Sparrow is pictured in a desolate beach, standing beside his ship. This scene is taken from the third *Pirates* film, *At World's End* (Verbinski, 2007). The third film picks up soon after the second one ends, after their failed battle with the Kraken – a sea monster. During the battle, the character Elizabeth Swann realises the Kraken is only interested in Sparrow. So, seducing him, she traps him on the ship. This allows the rest of the crew (including herself) to escape. The film ends with Sparrow being swallowed by the monster. The third film opens with Sparrow trapped in a type of limbo – Davy Jones's Locker – which is the scene we find him in in this TikTok video.

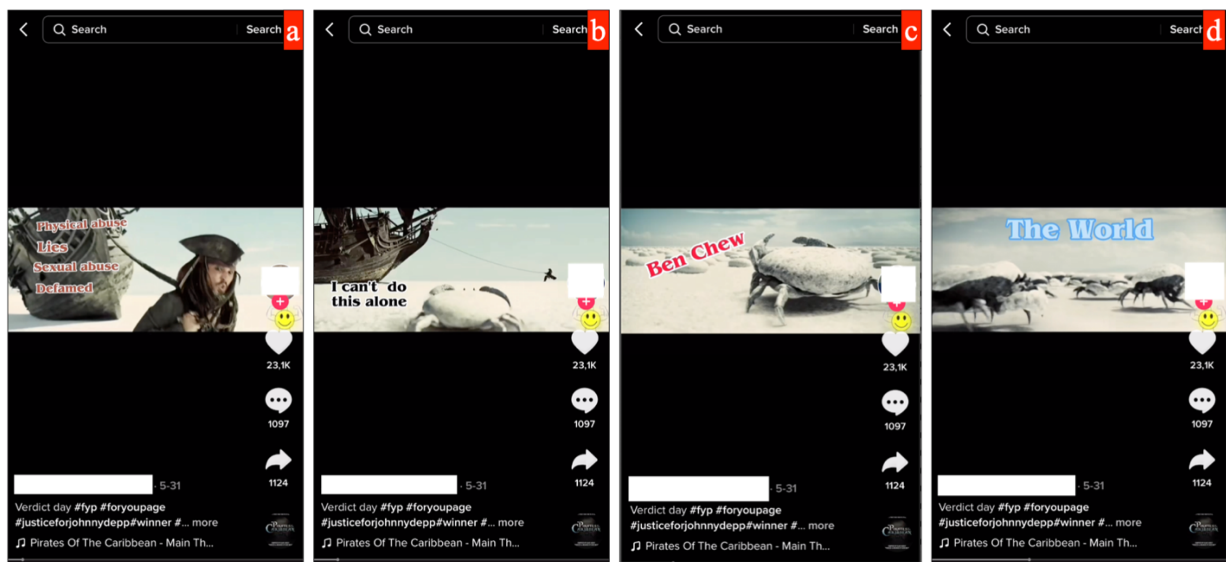


Figure 5.7 TikTok video stills comparing Depp's trial experience to Sparrow's purgatory

Here, the poster has put the film and the trial in conversation with one another and re-interpreted the events of the trial through the scene of Sparrow in this kind of purgatory. Depp/Sparrow is burdened with the weight of Heard's accusations of physical and sexual abuse, and 'lies' that have 'defamed' him, represented as the ship from the scene (as seen in Figure 5.7a). Sparrow/Depp is instructed to 'carry the accusations' in the fan edited captions. We see him struggling with this, until the fan caption reads 'I can't do this alone' (Figure 5.7b). The video then cuts to a crab labelled Ben Chew (who was one of Depp's lawyers during the US trial – depicted in Figure 5.7c), who we see rallying an army of crabs ('The World', Figure 5.7d) to come to his aid. We then see the crabs carrying Sparrow/Depp's burdens away as he runs to catch up with them, the fan caption reads 'We got your back'.

This post is representative of how Depp's star power worked to re-construct his reputation and re-interpret the trial and evidence around Depp's narrative. As such, the labelling of Depp supporters as 'The World' is not insignificant. In fact, Depp supporters frequently referred to the size difference of both actors' supporters. As I have noted, even within my own dataset, the difference in support for Depp compared to Heard was stark. Posters drew attention to trending topics on Twitter (mostly in support of Depp or against Heard); the number of 'likes' either actor got on their statements after the verdict; or by pointing out the number of followers each actor had on their respective social media platforms. The difference in support was taken as further evidence of who the 'true' victim was. Thus, it worked to re-interpret Depp's star power and cultural value as evidence of his authenticity, and therefore, his *believability* and his reputation as a beloved household name.

On that note, it is no coincidence that most Sparrow references come from the original trilogy of films. Depp's swashbuckling character Jack Sparrow had garnered him much support and an Oscar nomination in the past (Petersen, 2007), but in 2018 Depp *and Sparrow* were nominated for a Golden Raspberry Award for the latest *Pirates* film (Fane Saunders, 2018). The post referenced here seems to be reworking this, not as the fault of Depp, but as the fault of Heard, her supporters and legal team, as a means of reasserting Depp's importance. 'The world' was perhaps just lying dormant, not realising the stress and torment Depp was going through, until Ben Chew informed them, reigniting them to come to Depp's rescue. As such, this post seems to be drawing on a kind of 'narrative intertextuality' that uses one media text (the *Pirates* franchise) to re-interpret the US trial as being a clear-cut victory and redemption for Depp. This is highlighted by the remainder of the video, where we meet Elaine Bredehoft (Heard's lawyer reimagined as Barbossa's monkey), Camille Vasquez (Depp's other lawyer, Tia Dalma/Calypso), Ben Rottenborn (Heard's other lawyer, Gibbs), and Heard (Elizabeth Swann). Everyone is happy to see Depp/Sparrow arrive over the horizon (coming to 'tell his truth', as the caption informs us). Even Heard as Swann is excited, until she remembers that she is the reason Depp/Sparrow is stuck in purgatory. We see her face drop as she grapples with the realisation, before the video cuts to a clip of 'trial' Depp leaving the Virginia courthouse, waving to his fans as they cheer.

It is clear how this post works to re-interpret not only Depp's reputation as a beloved actor, but the trial as a clear 'win' for Depp – when, in reality, he had lost on much of the same evidence in a previous trial. It works to discursively tie Depp to his most beloved character, Jack

Sparrow, so that Depp's more controversial characteristics and actions can be softened and/or legitimated by the nuanced anti-hero Sparrow. Thus, Sparrow's narrative arc in the films can be reinterpreted as a fair portrayal of the US trial. It also emphasises Depp's *specialness* and star quality. This is further demonstrated in the TikTok video below (Figure 5.8). In the video, a voice asks the poster who their favourite actor, singer, and musician is giving 'Johnny Depp' as the answer to all of these. This highlights Depp's star power as it is commenting on his artistry. The idea that he is somebody's 'favourite' lets the audience know he is talented. The voice then asks, 'who is your crush', which is again answered 'Johnny Depp' with the smiling picture depicted below. The talents are highlighted as the reason for the poster's 'crush'. The obsession with Depp is made clear when the voice asks, 'Someone who isn't Johnny Depp' to which the poster responds, 'Captain Jack Sparrow'. 'Who is it?' The voice demands, 'Johnny Depp' the poster responds. As in the previous video, Sparrow is mentioned here as *being* Depp, signifying how the two can be read as the same person, which works to highlight Depp's specialness and talent. This is interesting, as by highlighting the connections with Sparrow, Depp is doing the opposite of some other public figures who purposely 'self-cleave' their celebrity personas (e.g. McDonnell (2024) discussed in **Chapter Two**). Instead, by embracing Sparrow, Depp's 'bad' reputation is excused.

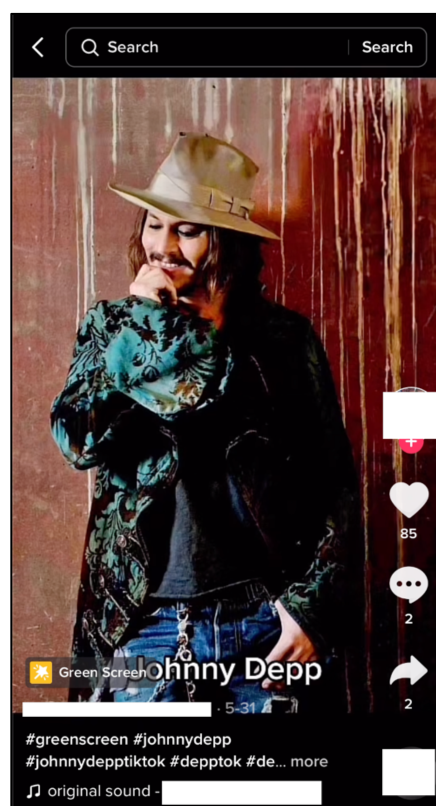


Figure 5.8 TikTok describing crush on Depp

Depp's connection to a huge franchise and brand, could work against his star power and contribute more toward a desire to 'be known'. However, Depp often refers to his acrimonious relationship with Disney. In the *GQ* article, Heaf (2018) describes Depp's issues with Disney as a type of moral conundrum for the actor, noting 'at Depp's moral core' is 'the tussle of being true to his artistic sensibilities while also being a willing participant in and figurehead of a billion-dollar franchise'. This is another example of Depp's status as a 'star', he is both hugely successful, and morally uncomfortable with this success. He is the true artist, in it for the work, not the money or fame. All of this furthers the connection between Depp and his characters, highlighting their authenticity and ordinariness, their 'truth'.

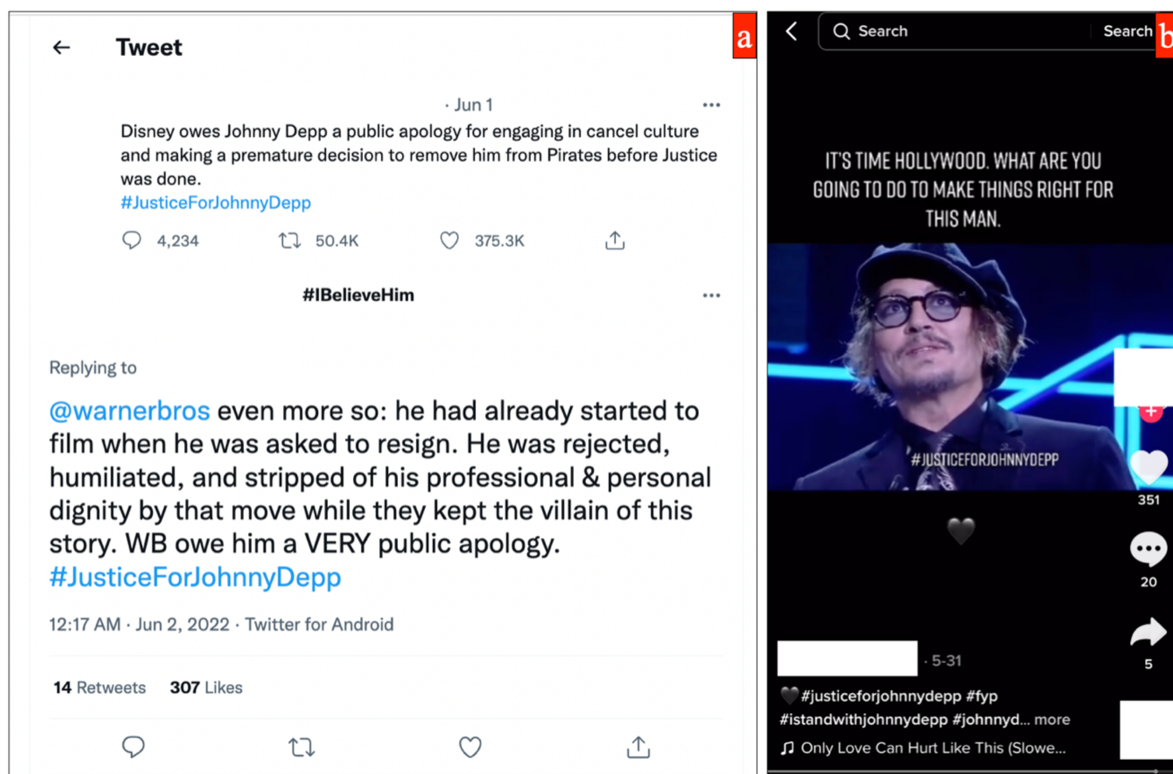


Figure 5.9 Tweet (a) and TikTok (b) calling out Hollywood's treatment of Depp

Depp's issues with Disney and Hollywood go further than his moral misgivings. He also blames them for turning their back on him – a sentiment his supporters share (Figure 5.9 above and Figure 5.10 below). Part of Depp's case for defamation in the US trial argues that he lost work because of Heard's op-ed. Of course, Depp *was* dropped from the *Pirates* franchise (Shoard, 2018) although, this was reported two months before Heard published her op-ed. Depp was also fired from his role in the second instalment of the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise (Vary, 2020). However, this only came after he lost his libel claim against *The Sun*, and followed years

of support from Warner Brothers, the director David Yates, and J. K. Rowling – who *The Sun* was criticising for supporting Depp in the article Depp sued them for (Vary, 2020). Regardless, Depp and his supporters blame Disney, Warner Brothers, and Hollywood for abandoning him in his time of need. Both the posters in Figure 5.9a emphasise that they 'owe' Depp an apology for 'engaging in cancel culture' and supporting 'the villain of this story' (Heard) over him. The TikTok video in Figure 5.9b demands to know what 'Hollywood' is going to do to make it up to him. The video is a portion of Depp's acceptance speech for a lifetime achievement award from the San Sebastian Film Festival in Spain 2021 (a year after his UK trial loss).[35] In the video he thanks his supporters, prompting an audience member to call out 'Johnny, we love you!'. Depp laughs and replies 'I love you' after which the same audience member calls out 'We believe you!'. Depp looks up and replies with a smile, 'That's weird, I believe me too' while the audience laughs and claps. A slower version of Paloma Faith's *Only Love Can Hurt Like This* plays softly in the background, demonstrating the poster's tragic framing of this moment.

Figure 5.10 Tweet expressing devotion to Depp

[35] The Film Festival was criticised by domestic abuse charities for supporting the actor, but they defended their decision, noting their belief in 'the "presumption of innocence" and "right to reintegration"' (BBC Reporter, 2021).

This is a perfect example of the contradictory star power Depp possesses: He is seen as the victim of 'cancel culture' while accepting a lifetime achievement award. In one example, Depp's cultural value as a star *and* his status as a victim of defamation are emphasised – although it is important to note that this award was from a *Spanish* film festival, which speaks to a type of European cultural exceptionalism that Depp also plays into with his connection to France (see Boyle *et al.*, 2024), and of course, the poster is calling out '*Hollywood'* specifically. Regardless, these posts still work to highlight both Depp's success and stardom and the supposed damage to his reputation. In fact, the image in Figure 5.10 above seems to be equating this reputational damage with the domestic abuse Depp is described as experiencing. Heard, along with 'Hollywood', '*The Sun*' and 'WB' (Warner Brothers) are depicted as scratching, bruising, and gagging him. These posts highlight how Depp's star power operates to not only control the narrative of the trial, but to garner support for him 'No matter what happens'.

The last point to make about Depp's star power is linked to his 'humble beginnings'. Depp describes his family as being poor. He downplays any hint at privilege – for example his full name is 'John Christopher Depp II', in the *GQ* interview he laughs this off, noting 'I have a number after my name which makes me sound... I don't know, grander than I should be' (Depp in Heaf, 2018). Depp was named after his father, which is redolent of the patronymic honorific naming culture in the US, discussed in **Chapter Two**. As Brown, Carvallo and Imura (2014) explain, this is most common in US 'honour states' in the southern regions – like Kentucky, where Depp grew up. This 'honourable' focus is key as Depp describes himself as a 'southern gentleman' at heart. Again, this highlights the overall contradictory framing of Depp: He is a violent, volatile 'outlaw', while also being a 'gentleman'. He sends violently misogynistic text messages about his future wife and former partner, while still being 'honourable'.

Depp left home at 17 to pursue a music career, but he failed. His music never took off, so when he met Nicholas Cage, who introduced him to his acting agent, Depp changed career paths (his 'lucky break'). Acting was never his dream, but he took it seriously. He hired an acting coach to train him, he sought out complex, nuanced characters to play in indie productions, all of which emphasised his professionalism and authenticity. He was in it for the art, not the glamour. When rumours about his lack of professionalism started spreading after he was sued by his management, Depp was quick to counter these claims. He was accused of hiring a sound engineer to feed him his lines on set, not being bothered to learn them beforehand – a point

Heard supporters in my dataset picked up on, one noting 'I'm only shocked he managed to get through his testimonies without his sound engineer'. In the *Rolling Stone* interview mentioned above Depp refutes this, stating instead that he gets sounds played to him to help him 'act with just his eyes', explaining, 'my feeling is…if there's no truth behind the eyes, doesn't matter what the fucking words are' (Depp in Rodrick, 2018).

Depp found huge success in acting, but he continues to pursue music, and so, he is both a huge success and a failure. Of course, Depp's version of failure is itself contradictory as Depp is the frontman of the rock band Hollywood Vampires, whose members include Joe Perry (of Aerosmith fame), and Alice Cooper. The band's name is connotative: Depp is a Hollywood vampire, an undying star subsisting on the love and adoration of his fans.

Going back to Dyer's (2019) conceptualisation of what makes a star, we can see that Depp hits all of the 'contradictory elements' involved. He is ordinary, but special. He got his 'lucky break', and he takes it seriously. He is unchanged by his fame because he is also a 'struggling musician' and embroiled in a battle with a predatory and discriminatory industry. All of this works to boost Depp's authenticity and stardom. Through this analysis, it is clear how stardom acts as a type of 'symbolic power'. As I outline in **Chapter Two**, Thompson (1999) argues that symbolic power is the ability to influence the beliefs of others, and that reputation (which is an aspect of symbolic capital) is the resource used to exercise this power. Depp's public persona is full of contradictions, but his reputation as a complicated bad-boy-cum-children's-performer, together with his star/symbolic power works to override his less charming characteristics.

*Amber Heard's celebrity*

At 23 years Depp's junior, Amber Heard has nothing like his renown in the industry, or in the public's perception. Before the US trial, I did not know who Amber Heard was. I knew Depp had been found to have abused his ex-wife in a UK court, but as I had not closely followed the trial, I did not know the details or what her name was. It was only through the unprecedented coverage of the US trial, and in researching for this thesis, that I came to know Amber Heard. Or, rather, I came to know the version of her in my dataset. Given the difference in the size of 'anti' Heard posts in my dataset (25%) compared to 'pro' (12.6%), it became very challenging to write this section. It felt like I was talking about a caricature. And of course, I was. One woman in my TikTok data noted at the end of her video:

> 'She literally got with Johnny to become famous…'cause I'm sorry, I'd seen her in movies before, but I didn't know who the fuck she was. I didn't know her name. And now I wish I never did.'

That is the route to understanding the difference between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Where Depp is a complex, nuanced, beloved star; Heard is an unknown who wants to *be known*. As such, Heard falls into Boorstin's (1962) conceptualisation of a celebrity: an inauthentic 'human-pseudo-event'.

Posters in my dataset regularly commented on Heard's perceived inauthenticity. For example, a user on Reddit shared a YouTube video titled 'Your Instincts Were Right About Amber Heard' (Docherty, 2022). Part of their caption read, 'I just found it fascinating…'. Their post was well received, getting 32 upvotes and comments thanking the poster for sharing. The video is about fifteen minutes long and acts as a type of video essay exploring the question 'What is it about Amber Heard that makes so many people feel like she is FAKE?' (ibid, video description). It is split into 14 sections, indicated with large block letters that fill the screen during each transition, the popular *Law & Order* chime plays over each one. One section covers Heard's 'attention seeking behaviour' (01:05) in which the YouTuber, Kiana Docherty, notes 'Amber Heard absolutely loves the spotlight. She milks the red carpet harder than any celebrity I've ever seen' (01:12). Another section looks at 'Amber's inconsistency of personality' (03:34) where Docherty claims she has likely watched 'every single Amber Heard interview' and can confirm that Heard 'is a completely different person in almost every single one' (03:50).[36] She notes that Heard always seems to be managing her impression on people which she explains is a 'strategic' move that she likens to 'putting on a façade or mask' in order to get people to like you, which she notes 'is the essence of fakeness [sic]' (05:54). She goes on to compare Depp's authenticity, consistency, and 'realness', to Heard's 'lack of realness'. Her video draws on sections of Heard's old interviews, red carpet appearances, and key moments from the trial to 'evidence' her claims, thus making her statements about Heard seem believable.[37] That, together with the *Law & Order* sound, work to emphasise that Heard is on trial, and that the public is here to judge her. She ends her video by noting that when people perceive someone as inauthentic it 'provokes moral outrage' (14:41) which she says explains the negative public reception to Heard (ibid).

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[36] There is something to say here about the 'expert' framing of Docherty's video, which I will return to in the next chapter.

[37] Again, I expand on this in **0**.

Docherty's video captures the consensus about Heard in my dataset (Figure 5.11). Users frequently posted videos or images of Heard in court that framed her as inauthentic and, ultimately, *unlikable*. They called out her note taking as fake (Figure 5.11a), even her clothing choices (Figure 5.11c) as being evidence of her inauthentic nature. Docherty's (2022) video also commented on Heard's clothing during the trial, noting 'even Amber's outfits, clearly meant to suggest honesty and respectability, screamed fake' (07:46). She notes that 'it feels like a costume' which she adds is 'perceived as an attempt to deceive' (07:59). She contrasts this with Depp who she describes as authentic in his clothing choices because he still includes elements of himself, like the rings and sunglasses he wears, 'even though these things could be interpreted in a negative light, he chooses to remain true to himself even under pressure' (Docherty, 2022, 08:17). Docherty's negative framing of Heard is emphasised by her choice of music. Over images and videos of Heard in court, Docherty has inserted a quizzical sounding melody that acts as a musical ridiculing of her outfit choices. Over images and videos of Depp, a smooth stylish phrase redolent of Depp's 'rockstar' persona is used. Figure 5.11c builds on this idea that Heard's clothes are a 'costume' suggesting she has copied Depp in an attempt to 'take her power back', or 'desperation' as another commenter offers. The post contrasts images of Depp and Heard from the trial wearing similar colour blazers as evidence of this claim.

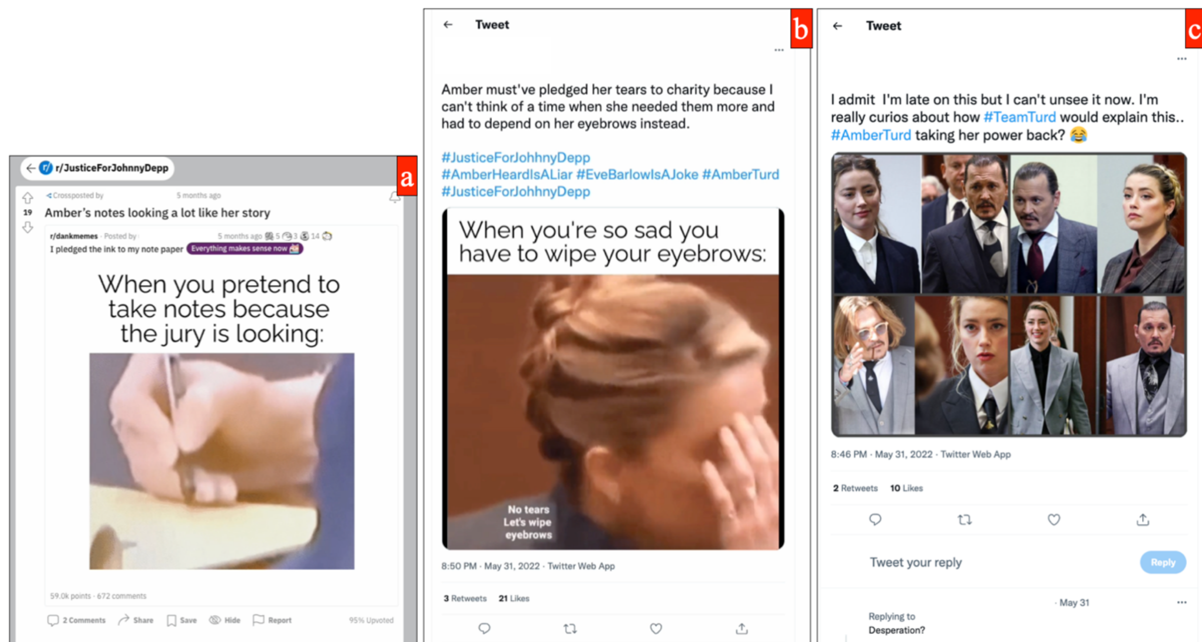


Figure 5.11 Reddit (a) and Twitter (b, c) posts mocking Heard

Another point of contention, was Heard's 'inauthentic' displays of emotion (Figure 5.11b). In fact, many posters in my dataset did not believe Heard's emotional trial moments, a sentiment that was shared by some of the Jury with one member referring to her emotional testimony as 'crocodile tears' (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 334). One user reposted a clip of Heard in court testifying to the physical and sexual abuse she reported enduring in Australia, adding, 'And I thought Skyler's "Happy Birthday" scene in Breaking Bad was super cringey…. Poor Johnny, having to sit through all of this'. This comparison to Skyler White, a character from the popular TV show, *Breaking Bad*, is particularly telling, as she is known to be one of the most hated characters, a hatred that is rooted in misogyny (Willson Holladay & Click, 2019). The idea that Heard's crying was 'fake' was particularly upsetting to her supporters who reposted extreme close-ups of Heard's face during her testimony to visually represent her tears as a means to assert her authenticity. It is clear how the emphasis on Heard's inauthenticity worked as a 'reputation depleter' (Thompson, 1999), discussed in **Chapter Two**, which was furthered by other scurrilous attacks on her integrity and talent.

The issue with Heard's presentation in court was also taken as a sign of her poor acting skills (Figure 5.12). Users frequently called out Heard's lack of talent (Figure 5.12a and b), and on TikTok made videos mocking parts of her testimony that were found to be the most inauthentic. For example, in Figure 5.12c, the poster uses TikTok's 'stitching' feature (which allows users to respond to or add commentary to another user's video) to mock Heard's testimony. The original video first plays a part of Heard's testimony in which she notes, 'My dog stepped on a bee', turning her face and wincing as depicted in the screenshot. The video then cuts to another woman who says, 'My child spilt my tea' then mockingly cringing to the side in an over dramatized re-enactment of Heard's face. It then cuts to the poster of the video, who too mocks Heard, noting 'Without my glasses I cannot see' before squinting and cringing in an unflattering re-enactment of Heard's face. This was a popular meme during the trial which was again taken from a part of Heard's testimony in which she describes being sexually assaulted by Depp.[38] It is worth noting that so much of the ridicule aimed at Heard's testimony was centred around her descriptions of the abuse (and in particular the *sexual* abuse) she alleged. This acted as a type of policing of her experiences that were often deemed unbelievable and inauthentic – thus impacting the discursive construction of sexual assault during the trial.

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[38] See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-dog-stepped-on-a-bee.

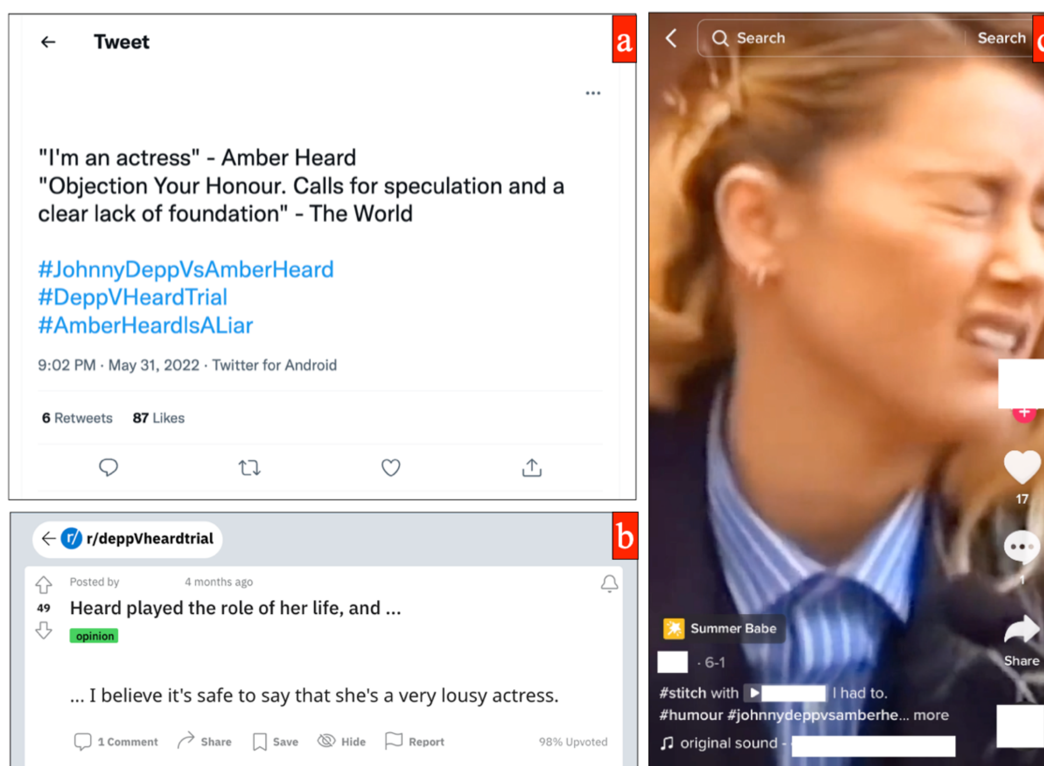


Figure 5.12 Twitter (a) Reddit (b) and TikTok (c) posts mocking Heard's acting skills

These posts and videos do not only work to highlight Heard's perceived inauthenticity but her lower status as 'celebrity' (rather than 'star'). This was emphasised by users who commented on her net worth compared to Depp's, especially after the result of the trial which meant she owed Depp more money than what she was '*worth*'. Commenting on the counterclaim Heard won, one user noted, '#amberturd gets more money now than for any movie she ever played in'. Another asked, 'Does #AmberTurd even have $10 million+ to pay Johnny? McDonald's is always hiring if she needs a job. Or, there's always porn'[39]. Heard's status as an inauthentic celebrity, compared to Depp's stardom is emphasised through these posts. She may be an 'actress', but she is not a talented one like Depp. She may be 'famous' but not for any discernible reason like Depp. Instead, Heard is just 'well-known for being well-known' like Boorstin argues (Boorstin, 1962). One of the best examples of this is how infrequently Heard's actual roles or films were mentioned in my dataset. As a reminder, 92.5% of all references to a film character were to Depp's.

[39] This comment about porn is emblematic of the devalued and gendered nature of celebrity, which I will come on to.

Heard's career as an actor was really only starting when she met Depp at 23 years old to audition for *The Rum Diary* (B. Robinson, 2011), one of her first major roles. Since then, unlike Depp who has fronted multiple blockbuster films, Heard has only been involved in one, for her role as Mera in *Aquaman* (Wan, 2018). Mera is a superhero in the DC Comic universe, but she is still very much a supporting character. In interviews, Heard noted that what drew her to Mera was her independence from the male protagonist, in that Mera was not 'Aquawoman' but her own character (Reilly, 2018). However, Mera does not escape the familiar trappings of the 'female romantic lead': she is hyper-sexualised, appearing in a skin-tight and lowcut outfit to emphasise her sex appeal; she is the main love interest, whose purpose is to act as the moral guide and support to Aquaman; and her main conflict is that she is involved in a love triangle between Aquaman and his half-brother Orm Marius. As such, Mera does not give Heard 'star quality' like Sparrow has done for Depp. Instead, Mera only furthers Heard's 'knownness', her sexuality, and therefore her status as celebrity.

There was similarly very little that was known about Heard's past, prior to her relationship with Depp. As such, what is known about her, comes from issues that were raised in the trial, which commenters used against her. For example, her history with violence. Heard was once arrested for misdemeanour assault (Puente, 2016). She was accused by Airport Security of grabbing and striking her then girlfriend Tasya van Ree's arm. van Ree later released a statement accusing the security team of being 'misogynistic' and 'homophobic', noting that Heard was wrongfully accused and that the security team had 'misinterpreted and sensationalised' Heard's actions (Puente, 2016). Regardless, commenters in my dataset took this as another sign of Heard's inauthenticity and deviousness (Figure 5.13). In the video reposted in Figure 5.13a, Camille Vasquez is seen questioning Heard about the alleged abuse of van Ree, while Heard denies it. The video then cuts to a TMZ article Headline that reads 'Amber Heard Arrested For Domestic Violence Against Girlfriend' while the theme song for the TV show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* plays. This is another popular meme used to express a 'failure' or an embarrassing moment for the video subject.[40] The video does not include van Ree's denial of the violence. Heard's history of violence again works as a reputation depleter (Thompson, 1999). Unlike Depp, whose star power allows him to hold contradictory positions

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[40] See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/curb-your-enthusiasm-theme-remixes.

(so he can have a 'bad' reputation, but a 'good' name overall), Heard's reputation and name are ruined with her association with violence.

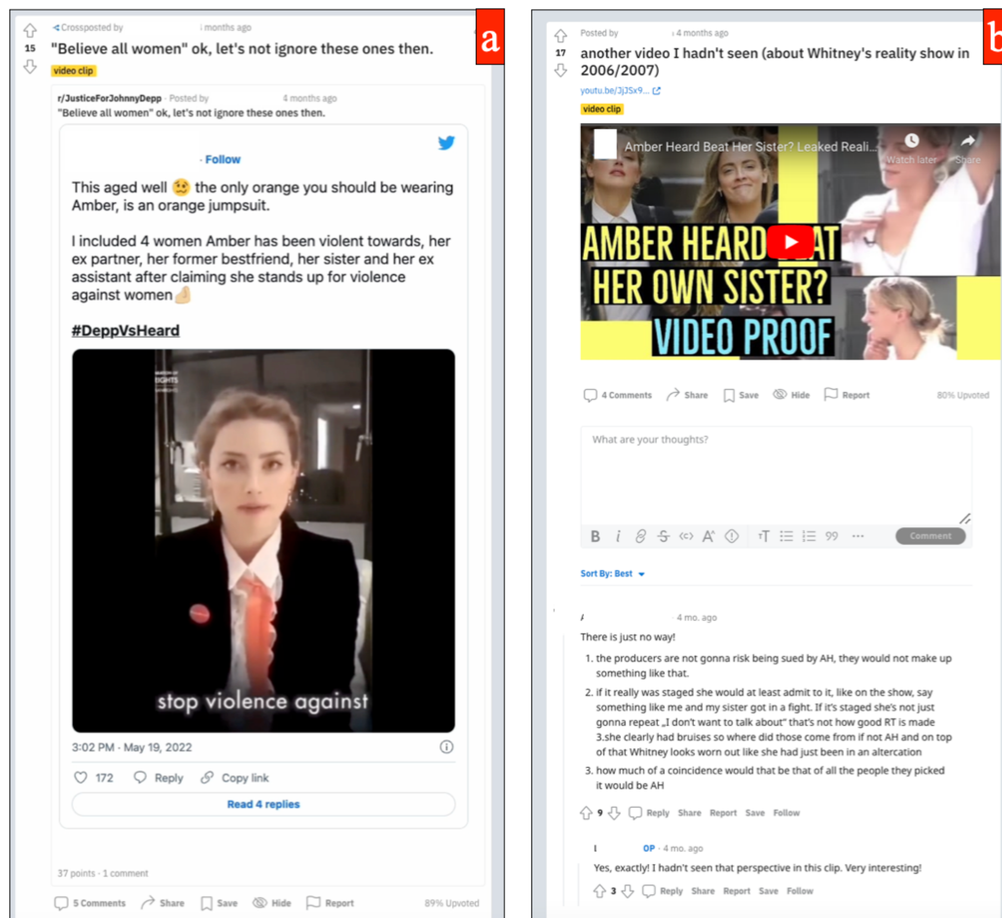


Figure 5.13 Two posts on r/deppVheardtrial commenting on Heard's violent past

The video then moves on to another example of Heard's violence that was frequently referenced in my dataset and can also be seen in Figure 5.13b. As part of their evidence, Depp's legal team submitted a video of an unreleased pilot episode of a reality TV show that Whitney Henriquez (Amber Heard's sister) appears in. A few unedited clips are shown where a woman questions Henriquez about what seems to have been a physical fight between her and her sister. Henriquez ignores all attempts to engage, stating, 'We're not talking about that'. At one point the woman questioning her seems to point out injuries, although no injuries are visible on camera. During the UK trial, Henriquez testified that this was just a 'bad storyline' producers were trying to create to make for an interesting conversation, and that there was no such physical fight between her and her sister, only a verbal one. She also notes that there were no injuries and points out that none are visible in the video. However, this did not stop commenters in my dataset accusing Heard of abusing her sister. The video shared in Figure 5.13b (which

has since been deleted so I will not analyse it in detail) contains the same clips as Figure 5.13a and refutes Henriquez's testimony in which she denies the claims.

The video in Figure 5.13a ends with two final allegations, one from a woman who the creator identifies as Amber Heard's 'former best friend' (Raquel Pennington), and the other from Heard's former assistant (Kate James). Pennington claims Heard hit her on her cheek and James claims Heard was 'spitting in her face' while yelling at her. The same *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme tune plays throughout. The video opens with an old PSA of Heard stating that she wears orange to stand up for women's rights – a reference to her promotion for the campaign to end violence against women mentioned earlier. The framing of this, followed by the videos of her alleged assault of four women, together with the aforementioned theme tune highlights the perceived hypocrisy of Heard. Again, this touches on her inauthenticity, her bad reputation but also her *unbelievability*. As such, these videos work to frame Heard as a hypocrite, and a liar. Where Depp's hospital performances soften his history of violence, Heard's activism is instead seen as evidence of her unscrupulousness – she campaigns to end violence against women, while committing violence against women.

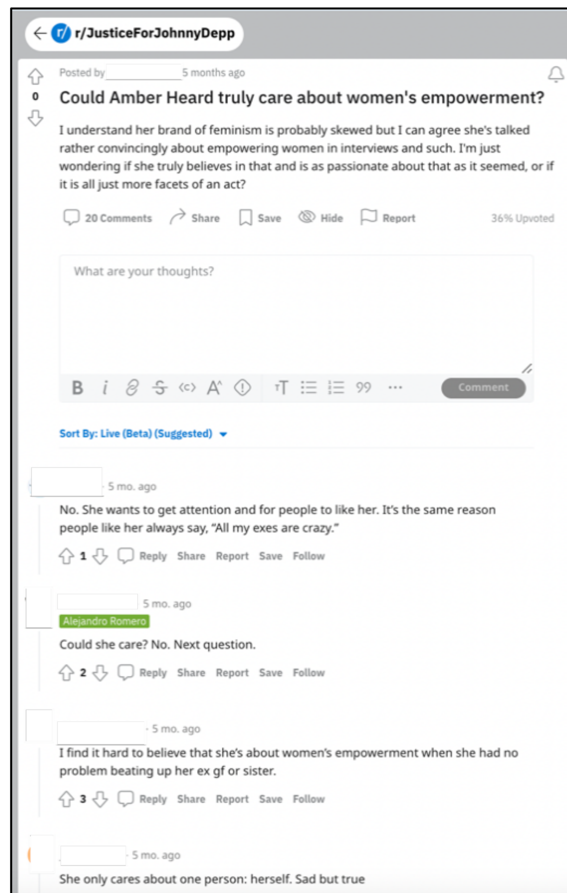


Figure 5.14 Post on r/JusticeForJohnnyDepp 'Could Amber Heard truly care about women's empowerment?'

The poster in Figure 5.14 above touches on this problematic understanding of Heard's activism, asking if others think Heard 'truly' believes in women's empowerment or 'if it is all just more facets of an act?'. This last point emphasises the issue with celebrity – any action that is publicly known is perceived as an 'act' – an attempt to 'be known' and commented on. This is also emblematic in their framing of Heard's feminism as a 'brand' (which I will return to in the next section). The comments support this, as one Redditor put it, 'No. She wants to get attention and for people to like her'. Docherty's (2022) video also problematised Heard's charity work, framing it as an 'ulterior motive'. One of the examples she gives was centred on a perceived lie about Heard donating her divorce settlement to charity.

Heard pledged the entirety of her divorce settlement to two charities, which she agreed to pay over a period of ten years from 2016. By 2019, when Depp first sued Heard, she had met all her agreed payments, however, she had to pause them after the fact to pay her legal fees. Regardless, she has stated that she is still working toward donating the full amount (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, pp. 333-334). Both Depp's legal team and his supporters exploited this issue as another example of her inauthenticity, hypocrisy, and greed. To return to the posts in Figure 5.11 the jokes about Heard 'pledging' her ink to her page (Figure 5.11a), or that she must have 'pledged her tears to charity' as a reason for why she could not cry (Figure 5.11b), are emblematic of the damage this issue did to Heard's overall reputation during the trial. Again, her charity work and activism are seen as an ill-gotten attempt to boost her well-knownness and reputation.

As well as her perceived inauthentic charity work, posters also problematised Heard's sexuality and sexual history. As I mentioned at the start of this section, Heard has not had as long a career in film as Depp, and as such, the characters she has played are over-reliant on tropes and stereotypes, often revolving around her attractiveness (something Heard is aware of (G. Wood, 2015)). Attractive women are popularly conceived as being deceitful and beguiling, and it is clear how this characterisation impacts Heard from Figure 5.15 below. The poster describes Heard as 'a classic example of the femme fatale trope'. The examples they give are all characters who lure men into dangerous situations, usually for financial benefit. Once again, Heard's celebrity status is emphasised here. There is no nuance to her public persona – she can be summed up as a trope. Furthermore, she is characterised as empowering herself by whatever means. This calls back to Dyer's example of Carla, who in exchange for the 'glamour' and 'adulation' that stardom brings, was prepared to 'trade her immortal soul' (Dyer, 2019, p. 82).

The gendered element of celebrity is highlighted here. Female celebrities who are perceived as 'benefitting' from their attractiveness are cast as inherently suspicious. For Heard, this was compounded by her bisexuality and her race.

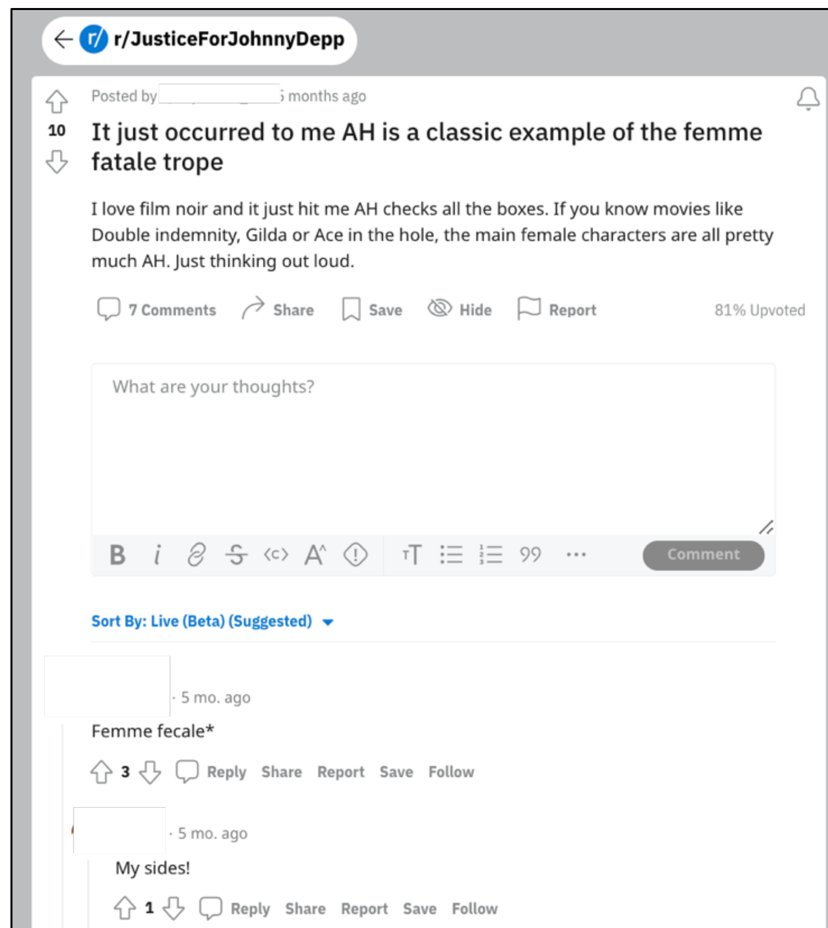


Figure 5.15 Post on r/JusticeForJohnnyDepp 'It just occurred to me AH is a classic example of the femme fatale trope'

Bisexuality is popularly conceived of as inauthentic, and that people who proclaim to be bisexual are either 'gay or lying' (for e.g. Carey, 2005). This is an historical and contested discourse but is still popularly expressed. Furthermore, bisexual women are often perceived as being promiscuous and duplicitous (Richter, 2011), a misconception that is magnified when viewed through the lens of celebrity. In fact, even academic studies have criticised female bisexual celebrities for 'furthering the old impression of bisexuals as manipulative and sex crazed' (Capulet, 2010, p. 299). Writing about women celebrities who have come out as bisexual, Ian Capulet (2010) notes how the majority of them are often also portrayed as sex symbols for a heterosexual male audience, giving the example of Megan Fox, Lindsey Lohan,

and Tila Tequila. Instead of turning a critical eye to the media representation of these women, Capulet states:

> 'What one learns from reading all the stories on TMZ or People.com tagged "bisexual" and "celebrity" is how a young woman calling herself bisexual may be one strategy, when coupled with other ladder-climbing ones, to getting your face on the cover of *GQ* or *Maxim.*' (Capulet, 2010, p. 305).

Even in scholarly discourses, women who are perceived as profiting from their sex appeal are cast as inherently suspicious and inauthentic. Heard's bisexuality becomes *strategic*, another 'ladder-climbing' scheme to get ahead. Her coming out is nothing more than a pseudo-event, designed to garner more attention. Thus, Heard's reputation is further ruined by her association with sex – as discussed in **Chapter Two**.

Heard's 'strategic' and 'promiscuous' framing is further demonstrated in the posts below (Figure 5.16). The poster in Figure 5.16a references a scene from *The Rum Diary* (B. Robinson, 2011) where Paul Kemp (played by Depp) meets Chenault (played by Heard) for the first time while swimming in the ocean late at night. As I mentioned above, Heard and Depp met during her audition for this film. At the time, both Depp and Heard were in different relationships (Heard with van Ree and Depp with his longtime partner Vanesa Paradis), but a few months after the film premiered Depp and Paradis announced their separation, and it is reported that Heard and Depp started dating soon after (Briese, 2023).[41] The scene that the poster shared in Figure 5.16a depicts Kemp/Depp watching Chenault/Heard swim away in the dark while he thinks 'Why did she have to happen? Just when I was doing so good without her.' The poster highlights the significance of that line. In the film, Chenault is the young, beautiful girlfriend of a rich businessman that Kemp becomes involved with. Her sole purpose is to act as a temptress, and with this post, Heard is framed in the same way. As such, it is not insignificant that this film was made while Depp was still in his long-term relationship with Paradis. Heard is seen as the temptress who 'happened' to him 'just when he was doing so good', splitting up his 14-year relationship. This reading of the film by Depp fans is highlighted by another scene shared by a poster on Reddit of Paul Kemp's friend warning him about Chenault, 'Do not confuse love for lust', to which the poster notes 'Johnny should have listened to his friend'.

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[41] Of course, Heard and van Ree also separated, but the fact that they did not have to 'announce' their split again highlights the difference between a celebrity and a star.

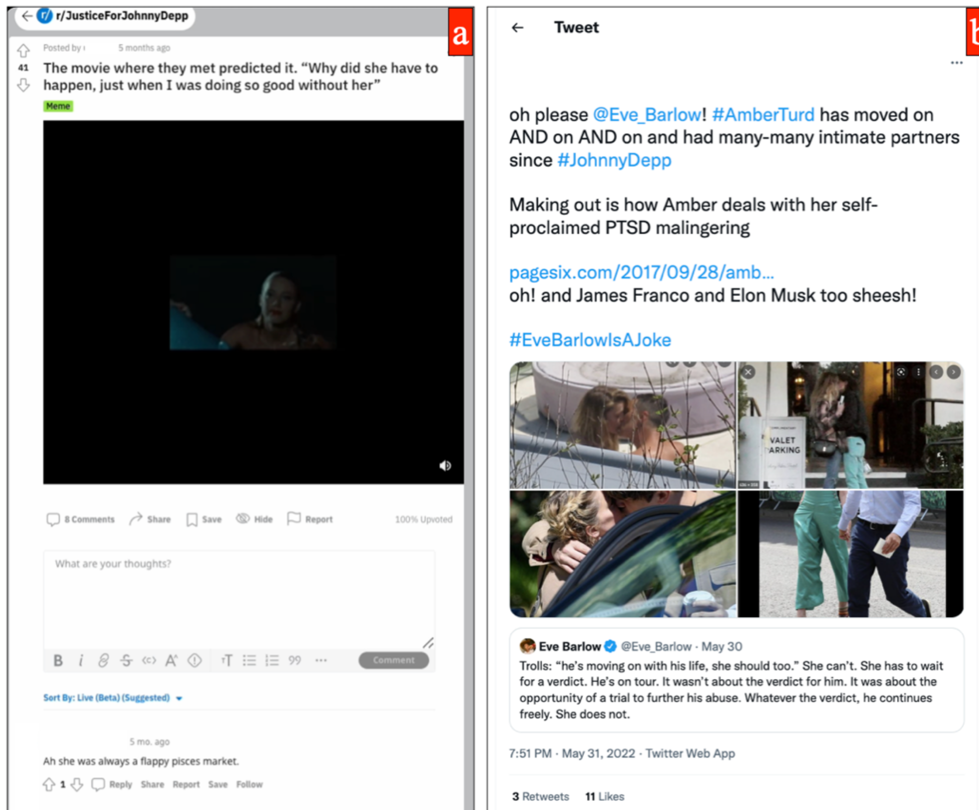


Figure 5.16 Posts on Reddit (a) and Twitter (b) commenting on Heard's promiscuity

Heard is not only a ‘temptress’, but she is also overly promiscuous (Figure 5.16b). The poster notes how Heard has moved on ‘AND on AND on’, since her relationship with Depp, highlighting this licentious framing with blurry paparazzi shots that depict Heard and four different partners kissing, embracing, and walking hand-in-hand. Again, the implication that because she is sexually active, she must also be unscrupulous is redolent of the discussion in **Chapter Two**, that demonstrated being associated with sex ruins women’s reputations (Lees, 1997). The ruination of Heard’s sexual reputation is compounded by her transgression of *white* femininity. As Dyer (1997, p. 29) explains white women are meant to remain ‘virginal’ and ‘pure’, thus any association with the ‘darkness’ of sexual desire sullies their *morality* (**Chapter Two**).[42] The comment that ‘Making out is how Amber deals with her self-proclaimed PTSD malingering’ emphasises this reading. Going back to the example of Chanel Miller, in **Chapter Two**, who was attending a college party (a sexually charged environment) without her boyfriend and as a college graduate, rendered her victimhood *unbelievable* in certain contexts.

[42] I discuss this issue of Heard’s failed whiteness further in **0**.

Similarly, the fact that Heard has had sexual relationships after her relationship with Depp, renders her reported experience of rape and domestic violence by Depp unbelievable. Thus, Heard being able to 'move on' from Depp is read as evidence that she cannot be a 'true' survivor.

These posts all demonstrate the power difference between stardom and celebrity. Stardom allows for nuance and growth. It is expected that a star might have some unsavoury characteristics as they are 'only human', whereas celebrity is treated as inherently suspicious and deceptive. Any hint at inconsistency is read as proof of their inauthenticity and therefore their unlikability. A star is seen as benefitting and profiting off their talents, feeding into the American Dream. A celebrity (especially when she is a woman) is seen as *unfairly* benefitting from her looks, especially in a conniving way. Therefore, a star is *deserving* of the love, praise, and financial and social success they accumulate, whereas a celebrity is seen as undeserving, creating a sense of inequality that does not exist with a star, who is seen as aspirational. This sense of inequality results in a feeling of resentment or hatred for a celebrity figure, so that when that figure is experiencing a public downfall, as Steve Cross and Jo Littler (2010) explain, audiences experience a feeling of schadenfreude. It is clear how this feeling of schadenfreude is present in the posts about Amber Heard. On this, it is also pertinent to point out the name calling in Figure 5.15 and Figure 5.16. Heard is referred to as 'femme fecale [sic]' (Figure 5.15), a 'flappy pisces [sic] market' (Figure 5.16a), and as '#AmberTurd' (Figure 5.16b) demonstrating a delight in her public ridiculing which I will return to later.

Before concluding this section, I want to turn to some of the posts made in support of Heard. As I noted earlier, and have argued elsewhere (House, forthcoming), the majority of Heard supporting tweets were not typically focused on her, like the ones in support of Depp. Instead, they centred on women's rights or the issue of domestic violence more broadly. But for the ones that were focused on Heard, it is interesting to note their similarities to the ones focused on Depp, as well as where they differ (Figure 5.17 below). It is interesting that Heard supporters mostly draw on her role as Mera, again demonstrating the difference between her and Depp where his supporters were able to draw on several different characters. This is indicative of Heard's minor role in films, and that Mera was the first character that was actually aspirational for fans. As Figure 5.17b indicates, it represents Heard as a 'badass Hero' rather than a 'femme fatale' as the earlier poster suggested. The comment from Figure 5.17a also indicates that Heard has yet to be in a film that really captures an audience, the poster does not seem interested in

the *Aquaman* films at all, only in supporting Heard. This is also suggestive of Heard's minor role in the film. The final post is also noteworthy as it points to the wider narrative of Heard as a survivor / women's activist, fighting against an unfair system. The fact the poster notes that Heard has 'a multitude of flaws and contradictions' is particularly interesting. As I demonstrated above, Depp's public persona is full of contradictions, but they are not recognised as such. The fact that Heard's contradictory characteristics are highlighted and visible *as contradictions* (therefore making her inauthentic to her detractors) is again emblematic of her status as celebrity, not star.

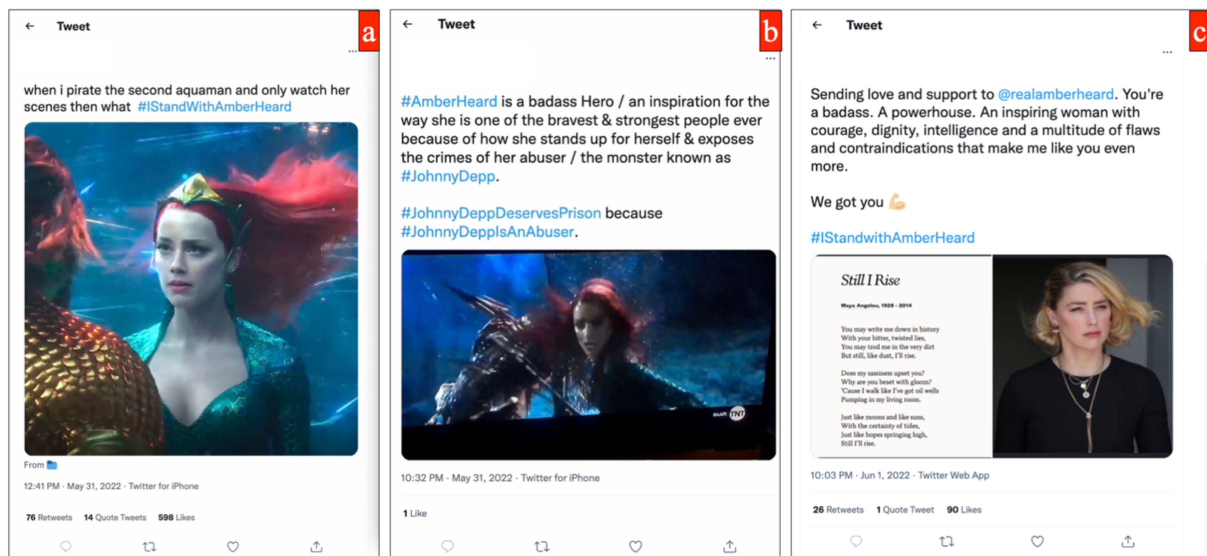


Figure 5.17 Tweets in support of Heard

This highlights the final point to be made about the difference between stardom and celebrity: the issue of legitimacy. The work and history of a star is read as legitimate on its own grounds. Stars can be viewed as individuals who are 'special' but ultimately, human and to err is human. Therefore, they have complicated and questionable pasts, while still being 'good' people. But celebrities can only be understood in the system they exist in. They are not legitimate on their own grounds, and certainly not by the work they perform. They are only legitimated by their relationship to the media, as Boorstin calls them 'human pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1962, pp. 45-76). As such, they are easily cast as suspicious, inauthentic, and power hungry. Furthermore, as their fame is dependent on the media, they are less in control of their narrative as a star might be. Thus, Heard's reputation is dependent on how she is perceived, whereas Depp's reputation can be decided *by him*.

*When fame and #MeToo collide*

The final point to make about the difference in treatment between Depp and Heard is to look at the wider cultural landscape during their trials, together with their celebrity/star status, to understand the impact this had on both of their reputations. In 2018, Depp found himself in a personal crisis, but he was also at the centre of a cultural one. Depp is associated with a star system that is, in someways, in decline. By 2018, in the aftermath of Alyssa Milano's seismic tweet, this decline was exacerbated, but the cultural value associated with this period and its gender roles also persists. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) explain, #MeToo was successful in disturbing historical constructions of men as default 'truth-tellers' and women as liars, and at least in certain contexts, meant that women were more likely to be considered believable. Therefore, although Heard's reports against Depp received relatively little attention, and certainly could not be described as the only reason his career was suffering, there was still media commentary about his status as a potential abuser – as *The Sun* article indicates.[43] This is emblematic of the deeply contradictory long #MeToo moment which is characterised both by himpathy (indexed to the perceived loss of reputation) and by heightened awareness of gendered violence. Therefore, some media commentators did reassess Heard's claims (even for the wrong reasons), and this combined with Depp's wider issues with drugs, alcohol, money, and violence had an impact on his public image (Figure 5.18 below).

Figure 5.18 Tweets blaming Depp for his career losses

[43] Although, it is worth pointing out that *The Sun*'s article was actually about J.K Rowling and her supposed hypocrisy in allowing Depp to star in a film based on her work, rather than about Heard's abuse allegations per se, see Boyle (2024, p. 122).

The fact that Depp was responsible for his sullied reputation is what Heard's legal team argued in both trials and was echoed by her supporters online. However, as many scholars have demonstrated (see Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Boyle, 2019; Kay, 2020), the media and cultural logics that enveloped the #MeToo discourse were often dependent on neoliberal understandings of testimony that centred the individual and 'uniqueness' of the moment – overshadowing the decades of feminist activism and scholarship that came before. As such, #MeToo was refocused around mostly white, cisgendered women celebrities – and as I argued above, any connection to celebrity is construed as inauthentic and therefore, suspicious.

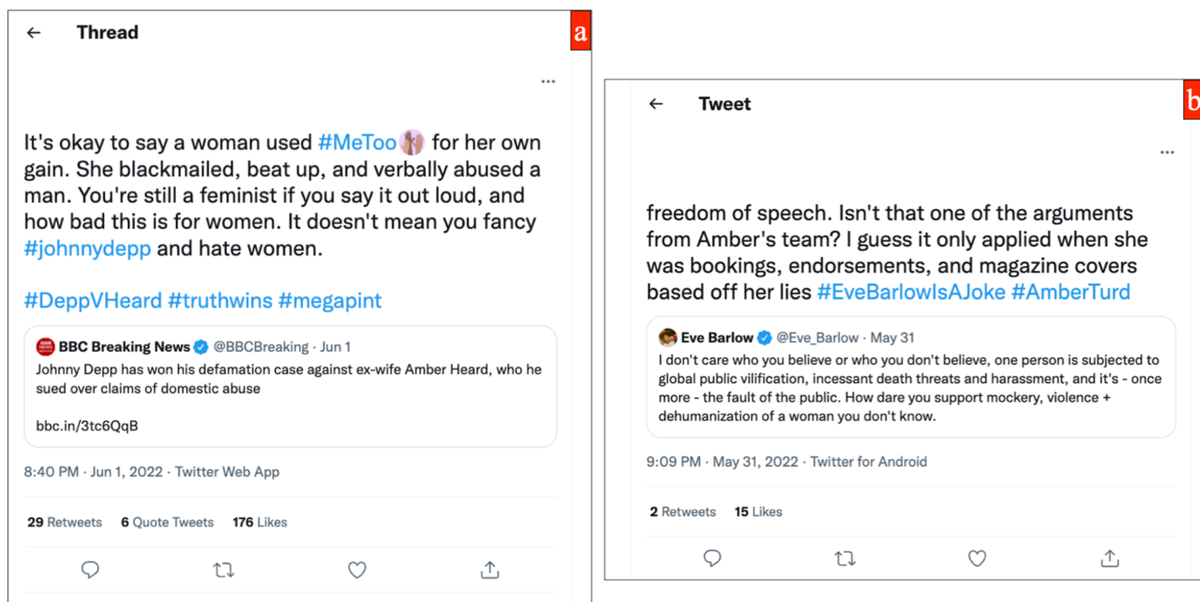


Figure 5.19 Tweets focusing on Heard's inauthenticity and celebrity

After Milano's tweet, the interviews Heard took part in were framed around her status as a survivor[44] and advocate for women's rights (Barlow, 2019; Pergament, 2017; Reilly, 2018). The articles she appeared in all linked her activism to her experiences with Depp, and they centred Heard's *individual* work and actions (rather than linking her story to the history of feminist activism). They focused on her individual charity work and her desire to 'use her powers for good' (Pergament, 2017); and framed her actions and motivations as 'unique' and unprecedented (Reilly, 2018). Like some of her online supporters, articles played on her role as Mera to highlight her 'super-heroism' (Barlow, 2019; Reilly, 2018). This focus on Heard's individuality and her role as 'celebrity activist', refocused the narrative around neoliberal understandings of testimony and activism and therefore only worked to reinforce Heard's

[44] Heard explicitly does not identify as a victim.

celebrity status. As the posts I analysed in the previous section show, this was interpreted as an attempt at *self*-empowerment. Therefore, when contradictory stories about her alleged abuse of women, and seemingly questionable charitable donations came to light, her activism was tainted and recast as inauthentic and nothing more than an attempt to empower herself (Figure 5.19 above and Figure 5.20 below).

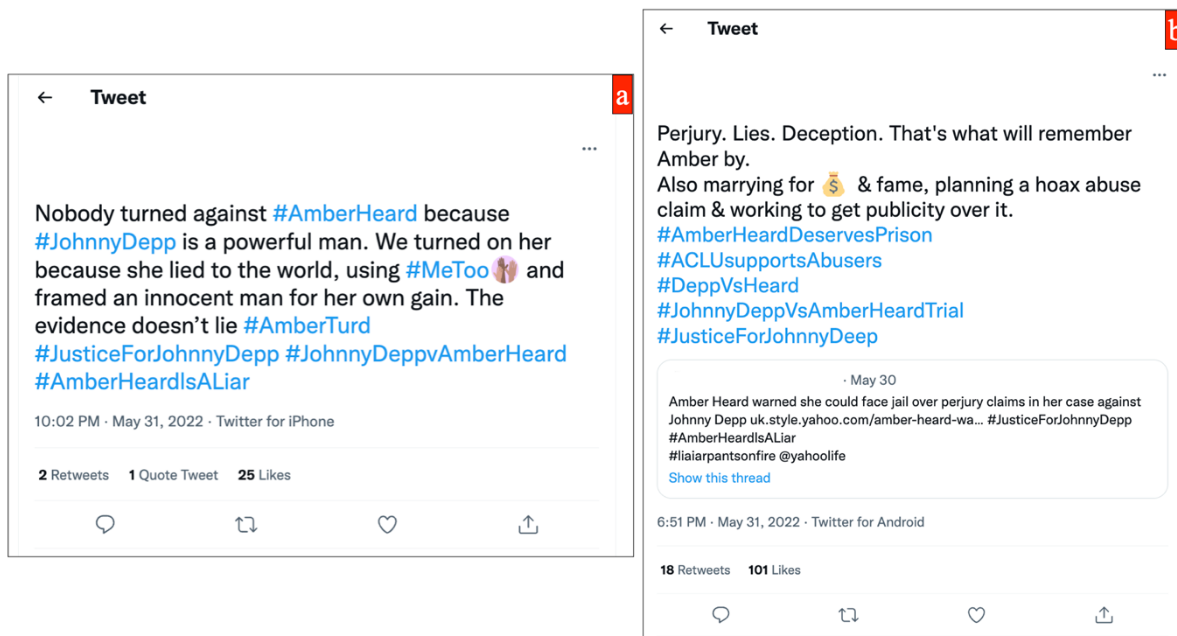


Figure 5.20 Tweets framing Heard as a liar and gold-digger

As the posts above indicate, Heard is seen as *using* #MeToo 'for her gain'. She is labelled a 'liar' and a 'blackmailer', who 'married for money and fame' and used #MeToo to brand herself as a survivor in order to secure 'publicity' and 'endorsements and magazine covers'. As Boyle (2024, p. 113) argues, #MeToo is popularly conceived as a *product* rather than a process. When combined with an understanding of celebrity, it is clear how feminism becomes interpreted as a type of *brand* that celebrities become 'the face' of, promoting its #MeToo product. Like a product, they are then seen as *using* it 'for their own gain'. In fact, the idea that Heard *used* #MeToo to empower herself was exactly what Depp's legal team argued in the US trial.

One of Depp's lawyers' key arguments was that Heard had deliberately staged her court appearance in 2016 where she was pictured with a bruise on her face after being granted a domestic violence restraining order. As part of the trial, they introduced a former TMZ employee who testified to receiving a tip-off from a producer that Heard was at the courthouse

and implied she would pose for photographs with a bruised face (Wallis, 2023, pp. 202-207).[45] Heard's past 'coming out' as a survivor of domestic violence in 2016 is retroactively classed a pseudo-event. Depp's lawyers are drawing on this understanding of #MeToo as a product and feminism as a brand to re-interpret Heard's court appearance as an attempt to cast herself in the role of a victim, so that almost two years later she could use #MeToo to boost her 'well-knownness'. Even posters who supported Heard, problematised this 'celebrity feminism' framing as one noted, 'Attention female celebrities who use feminism to boost their status and gain fans – Now would be the perfect time to come out in support of Amber'. Again, this ties in with the neoliberal framing of #MeToo in the popular press, and as such, the idea that women celebrities use #MeToo and feminism as a kind of *media strategy* to further empower themselves and their 'brand'. Thus, even posts that seem to support Heard do so through undermining other women. The possibility of solidarity is therefore undermined.

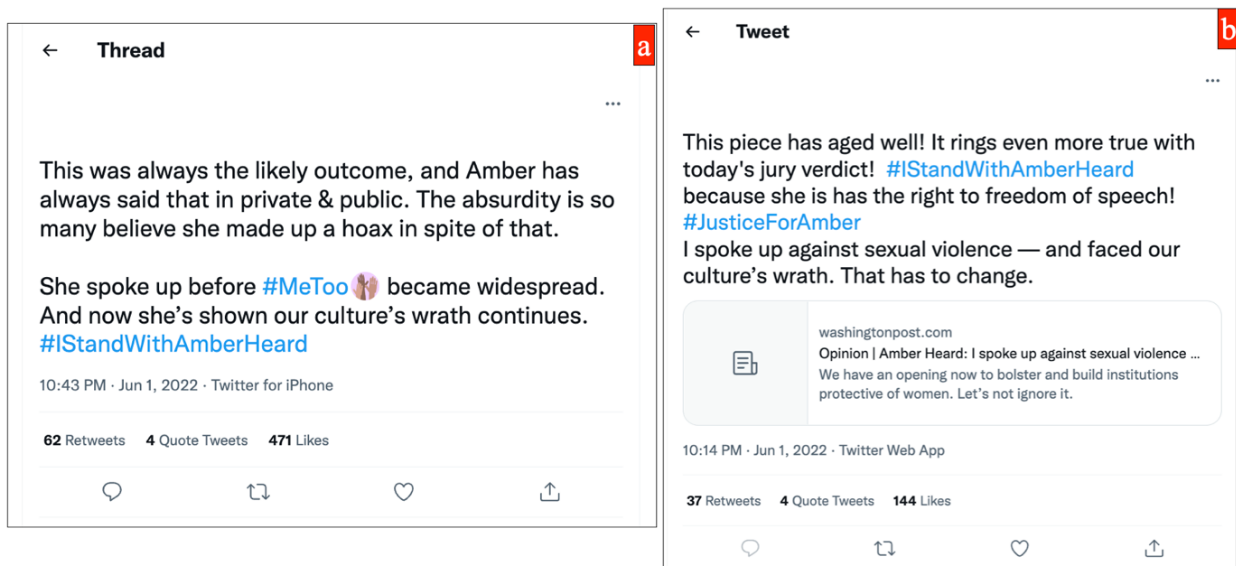


Figure 5.21 Tweets supporting Heard and her op-ed

However, this is not how Heard frames herself or her own activism. In fact, Heard often tries to position her narrative as part of a wider, cultural and *historical* issue of violence against women. This is no clearer than in the op-ed she was sued for. As her opening paragraph notes:

[45] The witness implied, but did not outwardly state, that the tip-off must have come from Heard or her publicist as that would be the only way they would have known she was in the courthouse. However, TMZ also states that they station producers and reporters outside courthouses to wait for celebrities (Wallis, 2023, p. 204).

> ‘I was exposed to abuse at a very young age. I knew certain things early on, without ever having to be told. I knew that men have power – physically, socially and financially – and that a lot of institutions support that arrangement. I knew this long before I had the words to articulate it, *and I bet you learned it young, too*.’ (Heard, 2018 - emphasis added)

In the very first line of her op-ed, Heard makes a point of separating her experiences from Depp. Her address to the ‘you’ in her final sentence also makes it clear she is talking about women’s experiences *in general*, not just her own. Her focus throughout is on the wider issue of violence against women and, as Boyle (2024) points out, ‘the continuum of men’s abuse of women and the structures which enable it’ (pp.124). This is what feminist scholar Jilly Boyce Kay calls ‘communicative injustice’ in that Heard’s own context for her activism is ignored by the logics of media culture that centre neoliberal and individualised trauma narratives over collectivist voices (Kay, 2020). Supporters of Heard also pointed this out (Figure 5.21 above). As the users note, the commentary around the trial has only further proved the title of her op-ed.

Kay’s work here is particularly helpful as she explains the historical framing of this issue, drawing on Silvia Federici’s (2004) foundational writing on capitalism to do so. Federici (2004) demonstrates how the move toward capitalism in the 16th century inspired the witch trials, because women, who had strong inter-relationships and a sense of communal power at the time, had to be destroyed in order for capitalism to thrive (as Federici notes, witches were considered a type of communist). Kay (2020) points out that part of this vilification was centred on the collectivist *voice* of women through the demonisation of their speech as ‘gossip’[46] – which she argues is exactly the same threat that #MeToo posed. As she notes ‘this history reveals precisely what is seen as threatening about women’s speech: its potential for nurturing women’s solidarities, and for seeding communal and anti-patriarchal power’ (ibid, p. 191). Although Kay agrees that the wider media handling of #MeToo has not always realised this potential, the *threat* of this collective voice is still there and as such, just as we have seen with the stigmatising of women’s ‘gossip’ as ‘vapid individualism’ (ibid, p. 213), the same has been done to celebrities like Heard, whose stories are tied to #MeToo.

[46] As Kay (2020, p. 12) notes, this is even demonstrative in the etymology of the word ‘gossip’.

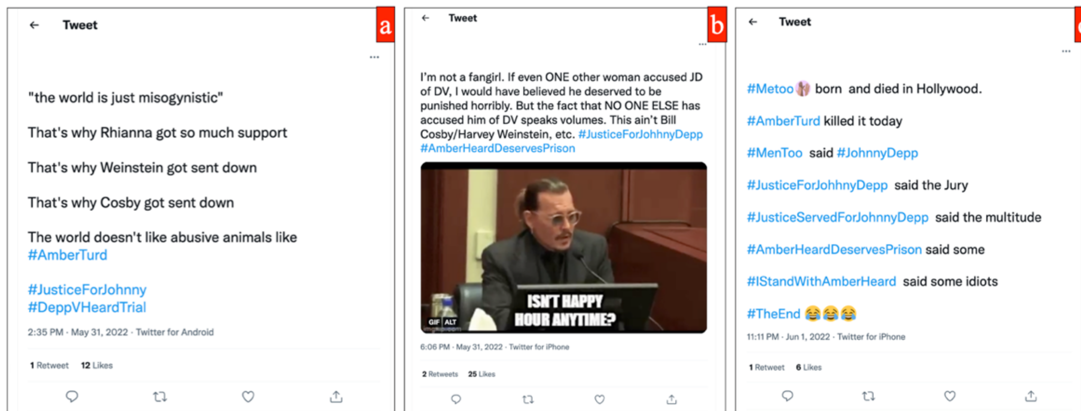


Figure 5.22 Tweets mischaracterising #MeToo and the collective voice it represented

This framing then works to recast feminism and #MeToo as an *injury* to men (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In **Chapter Four**, I demonstrated how this was framed as #MeToo having ‘gone too far’ in that it was unfairly targeting high profile men for behaviour that might have been inappropriate but not deserving of punishment. This discourse was present in Depp’s conceptualisation of the allegations – with his emphasising and hinting at the ‘truth’ in the interviews discussed above. Depp’s lawyers also drew on this problematised version of #MeToo, arguing that no other woman had accused Depp of ‘raising a hand’ against them,[47] therefore making Heard’s statements ‘“me too” without any “me too”’.[48] Once again, Heard’s *individualism* is emphasised. This mischaracterisation of #MeToo was then repeated by online commentators as the posts in Figure 5.22 (above) demonstrate.

Since only Heard’s reports of abuse against Depp are recognised, Depp is exonerated and Heard is recast as a liar. It is both ironic and deeply depressing that both Figure 5.22a and b draw on Weinstein and Cosby’s convictions as evidence of the unbiased support of Depp, when both their convictions have been overturned (Dale & Durkin Richer, 2021; Twafik & Matza, 2024). The emphasis on the fact that ‘NO ONE ELSE’ has supposedly accused Depp highlights his star power. Depp’s history with violence is ignored (as I showed above), however Heard’s history is emphasised (‘The world doesn’t like abusive animals like #AmberTurd’). Again,

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[47] Careful phrasing as, of course, Depp has been accused of assaulting multiple *men* (Hoffmann, 1999; Minelle, 2018; Snow & MacMinn, 1989) and Ellen Barkin (one of his ex-girlfriends) accused Depp of throwing a bottle at her (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 322).

[48] See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yqs347CdrRA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yqs347CdrRA)

#MeToo is framed as a celebrity invention ('born in Hollywood'), and the individualism is emphasised in that one person (#AmberTurd) is capable of 'killing' it. Therefore one 'false' allegation is given more credence than multiple true ones. Depp's stardom works to both frame him as a victim of #MeToo and as an affirmation of his innocence ('#JusticeServedForJohnnyDepp said the multitude').

As Dyer (2019) notes, stars often 'embody social values that are to some degree in crisis' (2019, p. 28). #MeToo had problematised Hollywood stars like Depp. The patriarchy was very much 'in crisis', particularly in Hollywood. But, as I have demonstrated from the above, by levelling his own abuse allegations and trusted reputation with his fans and in the media, Depp was able to draw on his star power to help reinstate these social values that #MeToo had unsettled. By playing on the framing of #MeToo as a product and feminism as a brand, and the demonisation of women's voice and activism as 'vapid individualism', Depp, his US legal team, and his supporters were able to dismiss Heard's allegations as nothing more than an attempt to empower *herself*, and to further her celebrity and 'well-knownness'. Furthermore, Heard's status as a celebrity cheapened her public image and reputation, and as such, devalued her narrative and testimony as inauthentic and ultimately *unbelievable.* As such, Depp and his supporters were able to control the narrative around the trial, and the public perception of each actor.

**The Captain and the Turd**

As discussed in **Chapter Two**, Judith Butler (1997) explains we are all linguistic beings who are constituted through language. Subjects become subjects only once they have been called a name, and thus given a means of being knowable (ibid, p. 2). As such, name calling can be tactical, and used to assign negative connotations and affects to a person through the slide of metonymy (S. Ahmed, 2014, p. 76). Donald Trump regularly uses name calling as a means of belittling and discrediting his competition (A. Smith & Higgins, 2020), to varying degrees of success (T. Johnson, 2021), and during the trial, Depp and his supporters used the same tactic against Amber Heard.

Although it is difficult to know if the name calling used against Heard was deliberate on Depp's part, as the opening quotes to this chapter indicate, the language and names Depp coined for Heard were picked up and repeated online by his supporters. In what follows, I will show how

these names worked to solidify Heard's 'bad' reputation as the myth behind her name. Through the slide of metonymy, 'Heard' was defined as 'Turd', 'Scum', 'Scam', and so on. I will contrast this with the way Depp's name was used by his supporters online, and how this worked to re/construct his 'good' reputation.

*Amber Heard/Turd/Scam/Scum*

One of the most difficult parts of working with the data for this chapter, was reading through the antagonistic comments directed at Amber Heard. The rancour was palpable, and the names were (*are*) highly emotive and affecting. Commentators in my data set called Heard a 'Sadistic Bitch', a 'Flappy Fish Market', a 'blatant scam', a 'worthless piece of scum'. As I noted earlier, Depp had a nickname tattoo dedicated to Heard across his knuckles on his right hand (originally reading 'Slim'). He made this information publicly available, and so when he changed the nickname from 'Slim' to 'Scum' and later to 'Scam' this was widely reported and understood as Depp *calling Heard scum and a scam* (For e.g. Russian, 2018; TMZ, 2016e).[49] It is pertinent to point out the deliberate choice by Depp to publicly name call in this way. Although tattoos are seen as 'personal', the fact that they are visible publicly means that they are sending a message to anyone who views them – especially if you also make the meaning behind them publicly available, as Depp has done. Therefore, through his tattoos, Depp is deliberately and openly calling Heard 'scum' and a 'scam', and the success of this is then understood through the repetition of these names for Heard in social media posts.

[49] This is redolent of another tattoo Depp had for his ex-girlfriend Winona Ryder. The tattoo read 'Winona Forever' which he changed after their break up to 'Wino Forever' (Wallis, 2023, p. 19). Although this was apparently a reference to himself.

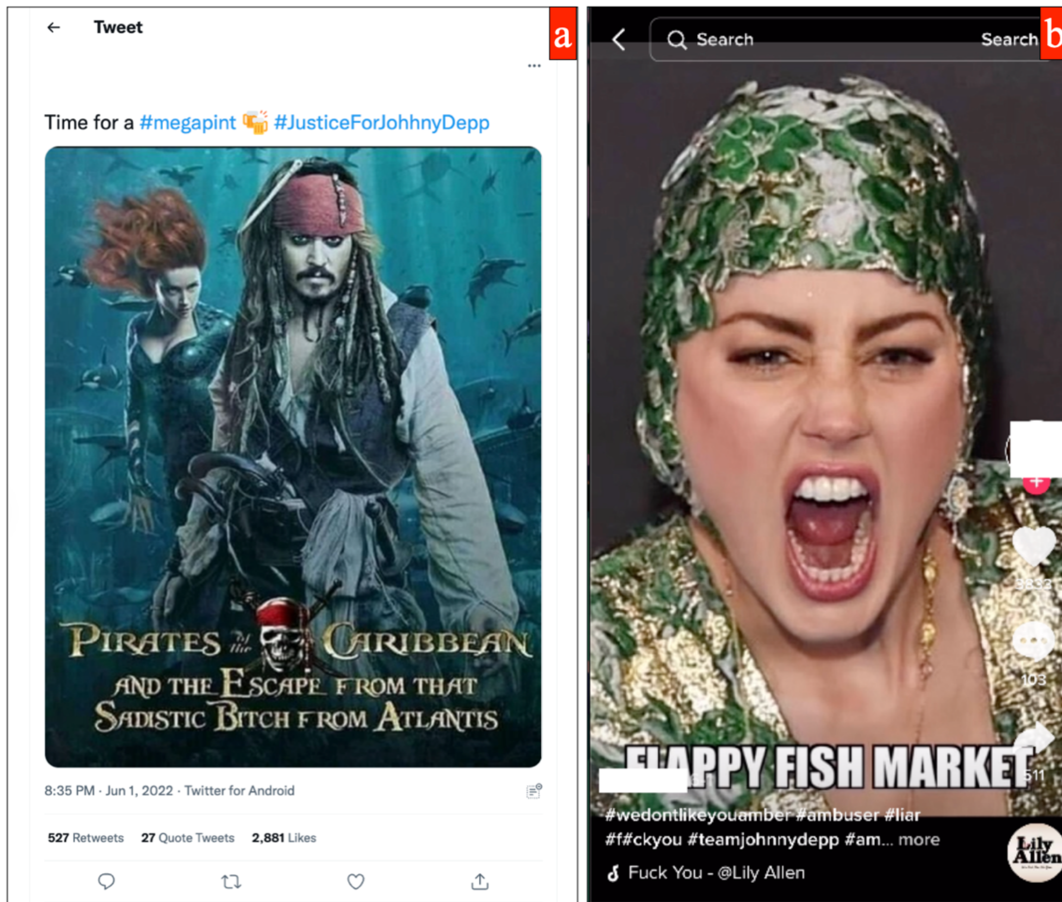


Figure 5.23 Posts on Twitter (a) and TikTok (b) calling Heard names

The influence of Depp's own language is clear. In a text message sent to his agent, Depp called Heard a 'gold digging, low level, dime a dozen, mushy, pointless dangling overused flappy fish market' (J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023, p. 318). His language is deeply misogynistic, and as Figure 5.23b demonstrates, highly influential. The video, just under 30 seconds long, is a slideshow of degrading and unflattering images of Heard, including the one pictured above. The image is taken from Heard's *Aquaman* premiere, but in this context, works to paint her as crazed and aggressive. The added text calling her a 'flappy fish market' is both a play on her role as Mera and a repurposing of Depp's hypersexualised insult as a means of humiliating her. The animosity behind Depp's name calling is shared with the poster who captioned their video '#wedontlikeyouamber', Lily Allen's song, *Fuck You,* reverberates in the background.

Although Depp never referred to Heard as a 'sadistic bitch' as the poster in Figure 5.23a has, it is clear how this framing is inspired by the language Depp has used about Heard. The poster is technically referring to Heard's *Aquaman* character, however Mera is the strong moral centre of the film. Her character stops at nothing to prevent a war from taking place between Atlantis

and the human world. As such, the idea of 'That Sadistic Bitch from Atlantis' is purely coming from the poster's interpretation of *Heard*, not her character. The reference to Mera instead acts as a bridge to bring in Sparrow which, like the other Sparrow references discussed above, works to reinterpret the trial as a clear win for Depp, and to frame Depp as the complicated but lovable hero. Unlike Depp, where his characters are used to humanise him, Heard's public persona and celebrity overpowers any sense of nuance or complexity her characters might have afforded her. Again, it comes back to the idea that Heard is 'inauthentic' and therefore any move to represent a 'different' side of her personality is read as inconsistent and therefore unbelievable and unlikeable. As I argued above, part of this negative framing of Heard comes from her celebrity status, but the name calling also plays a role.

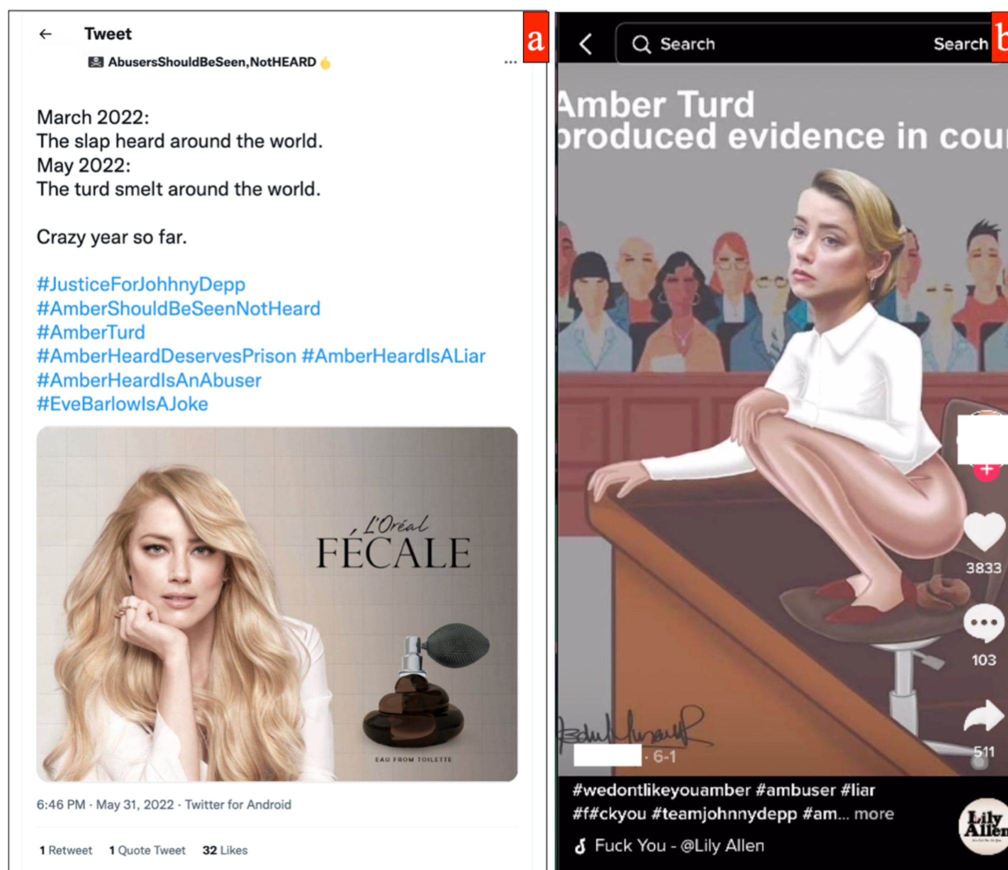


Figure 5.24 #AmberTurd posts on Twitter (a) and TikTok (b)

As I noted in **Chapter Two**, what makes a name 'stick' to a particular person or group comes down to who has the power (Cameron, 2012, p. 122). From the analysis above, it is clear that Depp has more power than Heard. Heard has nowhere near Depp's renown, and many people did not even know who she was before the US trial. As such, Depp was able to control the narrative around Heard's name and reputation – whether intentionally or not. Of all the

nicknames Heard received, none were as prevalent as 'Turd' (Figure 5.24 above). As I noted earlier, once Depp sued NGN, he started to release information about his and Heard's relationship to the press, including that Heard had supposedly defecated in their bed as part of an argument. Heard continues to deny these claims. The actual evidence and testimony about this incident is contradictory and inconsistent at best (Wallis, 2023, pp. 158-165). It also has little to do with any of the accusations of domestic violence, and yet, it became a major talking point of the trial. Even *Saturday Night Live* aired a sketch based on the accusation as part of the show's cold opening.[50] In my dataset, posters continuously drew on scatological humour in their discussion of the trial.

Heard was often depicted *as* a 'turd' or in the act of defecation (Figure 5.24b). That last example, which is part of the slideshow described in Figure 5.23b above, is emblematic of how the association with Heard's name and 'Turd' became read as evidence of the quality of her testimony. This was further highlighted by other posters. Commenting on Heard's post-trial statement in which she notes her disappointment that her 'mountain of evidence' was not enough, one user posted an image of a man standing next to a comically large pile of excrement 'The mountain of Amber's evidence' titled their post. Another poster also commenting on her statement said, 'You should not speak for other women. You lied. That's what set us back, not the jury who saw right through your shit. Literally'. Although never proven, the idea that Heard defecated in a bed became further evidence of her inauthenticity and unbelievability and was used to mobilise disgust for Heard. One user called her an 'unhinged, abusive, bed shitting liar', another noted:

> 'I keep seeing people on the internet saying, "Why does it feel like everyone's on Johnny Depp's side in this?" Because she shit in the bed Janet! She shit in the bed!'

The association of Heard's name with 'Turd' worked to further cheapen and degrade her public image. This is demonstrative in the image from Figure 5.24a. Heard's association with L'Oréal often worked to further her inauthenticity with posters. Although L'Oréal has partnered with some stars such as Jane Fonda and Jennifer Anniston, it is a drugstore brand, so in the case of Heard, this contrasts with Depp's designer Dior pairing. The cheapened image is furthered by

[50] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8R3EXXlKxg.

the advertisement Heard appears in, which is for blond hair dye[51] – again, signifying her inauthenticity. In Figure 5.24a, the poster is drawing on this 'faux chic' framing of the brand by creating a mock perfume advertisement for 'Fécale' again playing into the scatological humour of Heard's nickname. The perfume bottle takes the shape of a cartoon excrement, the play on words in 'eau from toilette' (as opposed to 'eau de toilette') furthers the 'disgusting' reading of Heard. The faux French in the post emphasises this idea of Heard's lower status to Depp. The image of Heard, her blond hair cascading around her, paired with the comment 'The turd smelt around the world' works to highlight this inauthentic imagining of her. She may look beautiful, but it is all a lie.[52] The comment about the 'turd being smelt around the world' constructs the trial as the event that exposed Heard for who she really is: a turd. As one user noted, 'I hereby will no longer say "bullshit" when I hear lies. I will say "Ambershit" that is all'.

By naming Heard, 'Turd', she is dehumanised. She *becomes* a turd, as one commenter said, a 'worthless piece of scum'. 'The Turd, has been flushed…' another commented on the result of the verdict. A further stated, 'DIOR NEW FRAGRANCE IS THE SMELL OF JUSTICE Loreal [sic] is the smell of Amber Turd'. That same poster attached a YouTube video to their comment. The video, one minute in length, depicts the poster, a man, walking outside at night. He comes across as jubilant and animated. He beams at the camera while saying:

> 'Everyone's cheering, everyone's happy, yes! She was caught out for being a liar! I've been at work so I've not actually been able to actually *visually* see it yet, I can't wait to get home and have a look. But I was *so* glad, finally justice has been served. But she still *angered* me, Amber Turd, because there was no reaction! She just stood there! Did she forget her cry courtroom kit, you know? Where was the Vicks VapoRub in the tissue, or whatever else was in the tissue to help her cry. And there were still no tears. Argh! But *yes*, justice…Such good news. Leaving work and hearing that she's *lost!* So good…I hope he gets his career back. And I hope she never gets an acting job again.'

The hatred for Heard is palpable. The expressed need to *see* her reaction to the verdict, and the anger at her not having a stronger reaction is emblematic of this dehumanisation of Heard

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[51] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=AdniwV_2hLQ, the fact that she is white and blond is also key, see McMillan Cottom (2023) for more on this.

[52] The inclusion of the reference to 'the slap' – when actor Will Smith made headlines after rushing the stage during that year's Oscars ceremony and assaulting the host, comedian Chris Rock (BBC Reporter, 2022) – is hinting at the star v celebrity framing but a longer analysis of this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

which highlights what Karin Wahl-Jorgensen identifies as the *mediated* component to emotions. As Wahl-Jorgensen explains, ‘mediated emotions gain their significance from their performative construction’ (2019, p. 173). Thus, Wahl-Jorgensen argues emotional displays through the media are *strategic* and work to reinforce existing hierarchies (ibid, p. 10). By performing disgust and hatred toward Heard in this way, these posters are working to uphold existing gendered hierarchies on the unbelievability of women that work to dehumanise Heard and thus discredit her testimony.

The note about work from the poster above is also interesting. In fact, this line further emphasises the difference between celebrity and star. The difference between ‘*his career*’ and her ‘*acting job*’ alienates her from her identity as an actor. Depp has a career, it is a part of who he is and what he symbolises to his fans, he is an icon, a human myth. Heard merely gets jobs. Furthermore, the sexualised characteristics of the jobs that she has had (discussed above), is emblematic of a kind of prostitution. Her work is reduced to her body, whereas Depp’s work becomes a career which transcends his body. It is clear here that ‘Turd’ became intrinsically linked to Heard, and with it, her reputation.

There was resistance to this framing of Heard from her supporters who tried to ‘redefine’ Heard’s name in positive terms. For example, one user defined ‘Amber’, as someone who is ‘strong, brave and resilient’, but their post was met with ridicule. However, when a different user suggested replacing the term ‘Karen’ with ‘Amber’, the comments were overwhelmingly positive. This is demonstrative of the myth of Heard’s name. Her supporters are unable to reclaim her name because the myth was too enduring. This is demonstrated in the post in Figure 5.25 noting that the Reality TV celebrity Kailyn Lowry, who was accused of domestic violence by her ex-partner (JoVonn, 2020), ‘pulled an #AmberTurd’. Heard’s name has not only become synonymous with the word ‘turd’, it has also become a term for a female domestic abuser.

Figure 5.25 Tweet using #AmberTurd as a name for a female domestic abuser

All the issues surrounding Heard's reputation outlined above: her inauthenticity ('Scum'), her unlikability ('Turd'), her greed ('Scam'), and promiscuity ('Flappy Fish Market') are emblematic in the names given to her by Depp and his supporters. This demonstrates the power of naming and name calling. That, together with the difference in size between Depp and Heard supporters meant that Depp had the power to control the meaning behind Heard's name, and thus, her reputation. Gender had a role to play as well. As I argued earlier, women's names are attached to their bodies, and they cannot transcend their bodies. As such, the names attached to Heard's body through the slide of metonymy meant that she could not unstick herself from them. She remains a 'Turd'. This framing of her made it easier not to see the violence she testified to experiencing. Since Heard is 'worthless', we do not need to concern ourselves with what happened to her.

*Johnny Depp: Captain, Rockstar, Wife Beater*

Unlike with Heard, Depp was not often referred to by nicknames. His name, and the meaning and history behind it, was impactful enough. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) explain subjectivity is the resource of the economy of believability, and as I argue, that means reputation is the credit and a name is the credit history. As such, the more well-known you are, the more credit you have, the less 'work' you must do and the more believability you can

‘afford’. The power and history behind Depp’s name as a star with a decades long, successful career, means that his name alone can be used to ignite support and belief in him and his side of the story. In his closing statement during the trial, Ben Chew described the ‘challenges’ of fame for Depp, noting:

> ‘It was a strange experience for a shy young man from Kentucky to be thrust into the limelight, pursued by paparazzi, and to have even his very name become a brand.’[53]

Although Chew frames Depp’s name becoming a ‘brand’ as a drawback of fame, it is clear here how this has benefitted Depp. As I noted in **Chapter Two**, brands also deal in reputational social capital (Thompson, 1999) and are subject to the same ‘struggles for name’ as individuals (ibid, p. 5). It is clear how ‘brand names’ can become compromised, as demonstrated with the BBC in **Chapter Four**, and with L’Oréal and feminism discussed above. However, Depp’s brand name is bolstered by his association with stardom. Depp’s star status gives his name, and therefore his brand, symbolic capital (ibid, p. 6) which he has accumulated over the many years of being in the public sphere. Thus, Depp’s brand, bolstered by his star power, has accumulated enough ‘good will’ to grant him the benefit of the doubt.[54] He is a *trusted* brand name, which is demonstrated in the below example (Figure 5.26).

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[53] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yqs347CdrRA

[54] Indeed, that brands can have power is illustrated in the anger at Heard ‘using’ feminism as a brand in an attempt to empower herself, as discussed above.

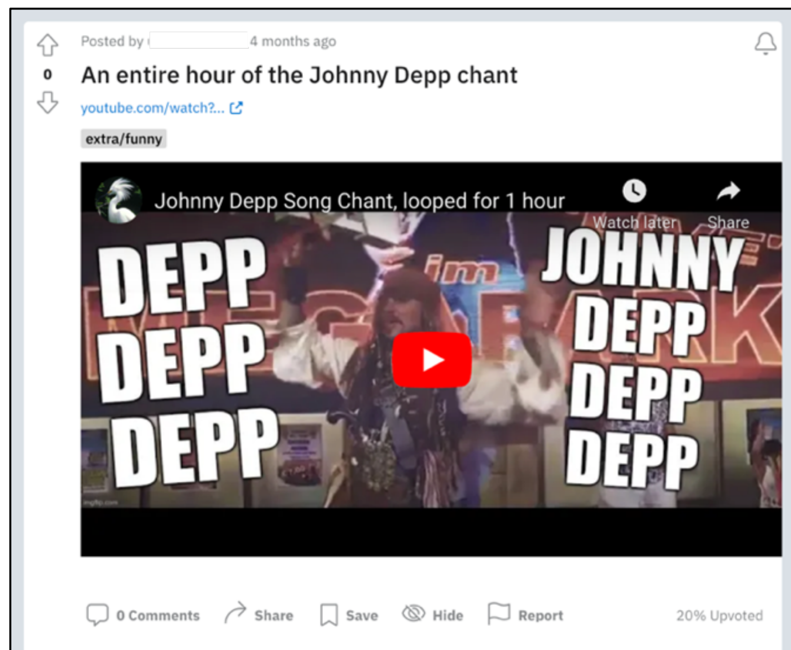


Figure 5.26 Post on r/deppVheardtrial 'An entire hour of the Johnny Depp chant'

Something unique about the Depp dataset was the number of songs that appeared in it. Besides the *Pirates* theme song, two songs were regularly repeated by Depp supporters and fans in their posts: A sea shanty, which I will analyse later, and what became known as the 'Johnny Depp chant'. The chant is the chorus from a 2016 party song by the Austrian DJ Lorenz Büffel. Besides the chorus, which is just Johnny Depp's personal name and surname repeated on the beat, the song is about a desire to return to the party atmosphere in Mallorca. Depp supporters and fans ignore this part of the song and instead clipped the chant creating hour long loops on YouTube (as the above poster has done),[55] or just using this sound in their TikTok videos. The repeated chanting of Depp's personal name and surname ('Depp, Depp, Depp, Johnny Depp, Depp, Johnny, Johnny Depp, Depp Depp' etc) indicates the power it possesses. No other words or much musical accompaniment is needed to make an impact, just the repetition of his surname and personal name on a continuous loop. The use of this song is suggestive of football chants used to honour or in support of specific players. In his analysis of the football chant that evolved from The White Stripes *Seven Nation Army*, Robert Dean (2021, pp. 9-10) describes football chants as a type of 'musical meme' that rely on a simple rhythm and structure that make it easy to remember and repeat, as well as catchy and singable, instilling a desire to repeat the song which is difficult to repress. The Johnny Depp chant fits all these criteria. It is short, a single

[55] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74999fhsoQ8&t=34s

sequence lasting only 30 seconds, and therefore easy to remember. The rhythm is unvarying, the vocal range is not challenging for the average person, and the composition is symmetrical, leading the singer back to the beginning of the chant by the end, making it easy to repeat (as in Figure 5.26).

While coding this data, the chant would be stuck in my head for hours after I had finished working for the day. It was pervasive. Posters in my dataset danced, cheered and celebrated the verdict to this chant. Others asked those present at the court to 'blast' it in the courthouse in celebration. The reading of this chant as a celebration is furthered by the images that play alongside it. Again, taken from the original song's music video, crowds of people are seen dancing and celebrating while chanting Depp's name. A Captain Sparrow lookalike is also depicted, singing and dancing along (as seen in the screenshot in Figure 5.26). The power of Depp's name, and thus his brand, is clear, and it is further emphasised by the nicknames that are given to Depp (Figure 5.27 below).

When Depp was referred to by a nickname, these were equally as positive and aspiring. Depp was called a 'Captain', a 'ROCKSTAR', or simply, a 'Cool Dude' (Figure 5.27). The last example is interesting to analyse in some detail. In this figure, the trial is re/interpreted through the lens of *Star Wars*, Depp is Luke Skywalker – the protagonist of the original trilogy. Heard is constructed as an abuser with the play on the title 'The Empire Strikes Back' as 'Amber Strikes Depp', as well as a liar (she is named 'The Grand Accuser', a play on the antagonist 'The Grand Inquisitor'). There is also a reference to her nickname 'Turd', with a small cartoon excrement pictured on the top of the Death Star, which is wallpapered in mainstream media organisation titles including *The Sun*. The most shocking inclusion is the vodka bottle, as R2-D2, which is a reference to the violent rape Heard testified to experiencing in Australia while Depp was inebriated. The labelling of the bottle 'Absolut Pisstake' is emblematic of Depp supporters framing of the trial, and of this particular incident. Through all of this, Depp remains 'The Cool Dude'.

Figure 5.27 Post on Reddit calling Depp ‘The Cool Dude’

The final point I want to make about the posts in support of Depp was the extent to which they framed him as a victim, which came as part of this perceived damage done to his name, reputation, and ‘honour’ (Figure 5.28 below). Unlike Depp’s status as a domestic violence victim (which I will come on to), the defamation trial was centred on the damage done to Depp’s reputation which, at least in the US, was found to be substantial. Here the posters are commenting on this aspect of Depp’s victimhood. Figure 5.28b positions Amber Heard as the antagonist attempting to ruin Depp’s ‘career and honour’ while ‘The Whole Internet’ protects him. Again, this is another example of the contradictory framing of the trial as being both evidence of Depp’s defamation and evidence of ‘the whole internet/world’ being on his side. Depp is a constant source of contradiction. Figure 5.28a removes the humorous framing of this and focuses instead on the damage and ‘humiliation’ Depp has had to endure to rescue his reputation. The poster quote tweets a post from Laura Bockov, one of Depp’s most ardent supporters, who quotes Depp professing his ‘innocence’ and willingness to risk it all in order

to 'reclaim' his 'honour and identity'.[56] The poster emphasises his *willingness* while drawing attention to the cost this has had on Depp. Depp's bad behaviour that was on display in the trial is described as 'humiliating' for him, but not because he should be ashamed for it, Depp is framed as the victim who had to expose 'his personal life for everyone to gawk at' in order to demonstrate his innocence. The poster refers to the fact that Depp chose to have cameras in the courthouse, which I noted in the introduction was something Heard's lawyers fought against to protect her from online hatred. Where Heard's team saw allowing cameras into the courtroom as a risk of opening Heard up to online abuse, Depp supporters see this as a reason for her guilt, as this poster notes of Depp, 'he wanted the cameras there. [Y]ou don't do that if you are guilty of what you are being accused of'.

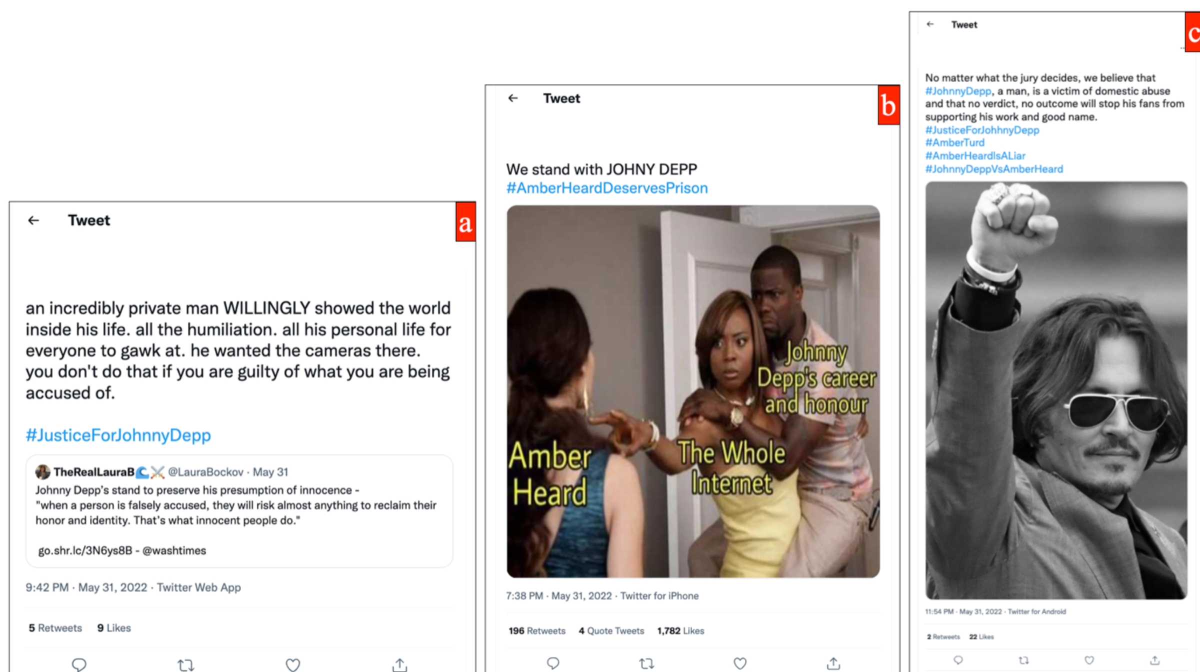


Figure 5.28 Tweets defending Depp's reputation

The last tweet (Figure 5.28c) highlights this point, noting 'no outcome will stop his fans from supporting his work and good name' together with a triumphant looking black and white image of Depp, fist raised in the air signifying a kind of fight for freedom or justice. Again, Depp's 'good name' is emphasised – regardless of the outcome of the trial – together with his *work*, which highlights his cultural value (Boyle, 2019). Therefore, Depp is *too important* to be lost to accusations, his credit history has too high a score. This post also identifies Depp as a victim

[56] For more on Bockov, see Boyle *et al.* (2024, p. 546)

of domestic violence (emphasising that he is a male victim) which was another focus of the commentary surrounding Depp, and present in another song that was shared (Figure 5.29 below).

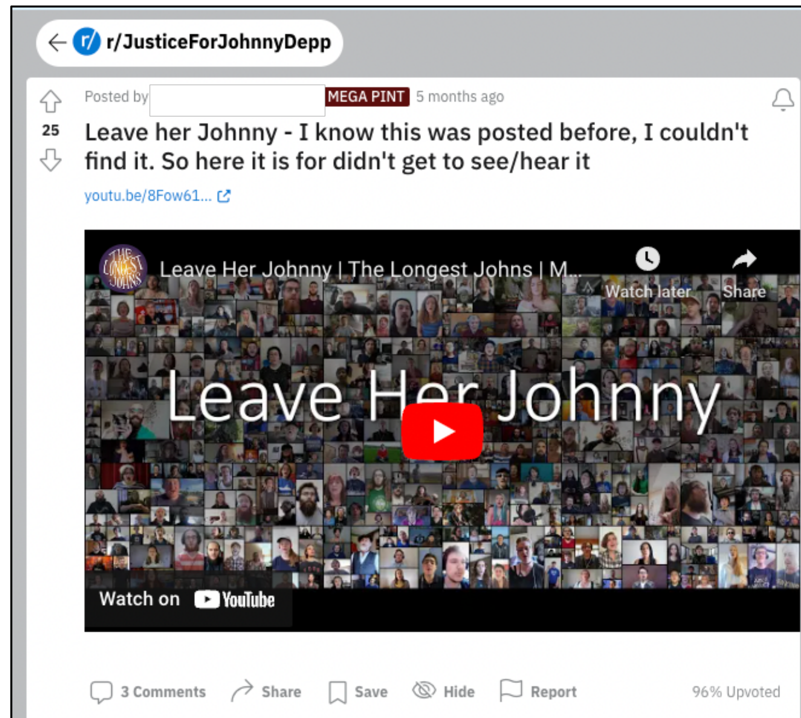


Figure 5.29 Post on r/JusticeForJohnnyDepp 'Leave her Johnny'

This song was not created as part of the trial, or in support of Depp. It was posted in 2020 by The Longest Johns – a musical group who sing shanties and folk songs on YouTube.[57] The video made up a 'mass choir community project' where the group, along with their fans, sang a sea shanty together over video (this was created during the first year of the COVID-19 lockdowns). The song is about finally leaving a ship after completion of a voyage. Like the Johnny Depp chant above, Depp supporters solely focus on the chorus of this shanty song, which repeats 'leave her Johnny, leave her' in choral form, giving the song an emotional and affective resonance. By singling out the chorus, Depp supporters are reinterpreting the song and performance by The Longest Johns and their viewers as an anthem *for Depp*. The meaning of the song is thus transposed from a song about crewmen leaving their ship after a long voyage, to friends encouraging 'Johnny' to leave his abusive partner. As such, Depp's status as an abuse victim is emphasised. Of course, it was Heard who chose to divorce and leave Depp after he

[57] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Fow61Zsn2s

reportedly threw a phone at her face, leaving a bruise. Furthermore, it was Depp who chose to sue both NGN and Heard – choosing not to leave *her* alone. But this is again re-interpreted in the fan posts. By drawing on the original YouTube video and focusing on the crowd of people singing the chorus, Depp supporters and fans are re-interpreting Depp as the abused husband whose loved ones are encouraging him to leave his abuser. The motif of the sea shanty again calls back to Sparrow, and the 'older', 'classic' times Depp is seen as coming from. This is furthered by the pirate iconography referred to throughout in The Longest Johns fan submitted videos – a coincidence, but one that works for this reinterpretation as the song being *about* Depp. Thus, it is easy to imagine this song was performed *for* Depp and therefore works to evidence his victim status.[58]

The final point to make about the framing of Depp is the focus by Heard supporters on him being a 'wife beater' (Figure 5.30 below). One of the main ways Heard supporters and fans asserted Depp's status as 'wife beater' was by referring to the verdict from the UK trial (the idea that it is 'court certified' as in Figure 5.30). Part of this is wrapped up in the issue of 'post-truth' and which source is considered more reliable (which I will return to in the next chapter), but in asserting that Google results call Depp a wife beater, Heard supporters are trying to make this name 'stick' to Depp (S. Ahmed, 2014). The myth of Depp's 'good name' is clear from the above posts, his star power and the history attached to his name mean that his reputation can survive contradictory information and knowledge about his private actions because his cultural value as a star means that his *essential self* is good, even if not all of him is good. Depp's supporters and fans did not need to assign nicknames or monikers to Depp to assert this, they only needed to chant *his* name.

To try and counter these narratives, anti-Depp posters worked to tie Depp's name to the title 'wife beater'. One such way was to Google the search term 'wife beater actor' which returned 'Johnny Depp' as the result (as seen in Figure 5.30).[59] The fact that this was/is an official Google search result was used as evidence of Depp's *true self*. A similar point was made by posters who shared old newspaper headlines commenting on the outcome of the UK trial. These posts worked to highlight the permanence of the UK judgement with comments like 'Never

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[58] It is important to note that Depp's *whiteness* also played a role in his interpretation as a victim. This is a point I pick up in **0.**

[59] Writing this in May 2025, the search term still yields the same result.

forget', 'Forever in our hearts', as well as emphasising the 'superior' ruling of a judge (which I will come back to in the next chapter). However, the name 'wife beater' has never fully stuck to Depp, as the previous posts demonstrate. This could partially be due to the problematic and sensationalist phrasing of 'wife beater', which makes it difficult for feminists to rally behind, but also because Depp's name and star power means that evidence and information that runs counter to the public image of Depp can be dismissed as hearsay. No matter what his detractors insist, he will always be: *Johnny Depp*.

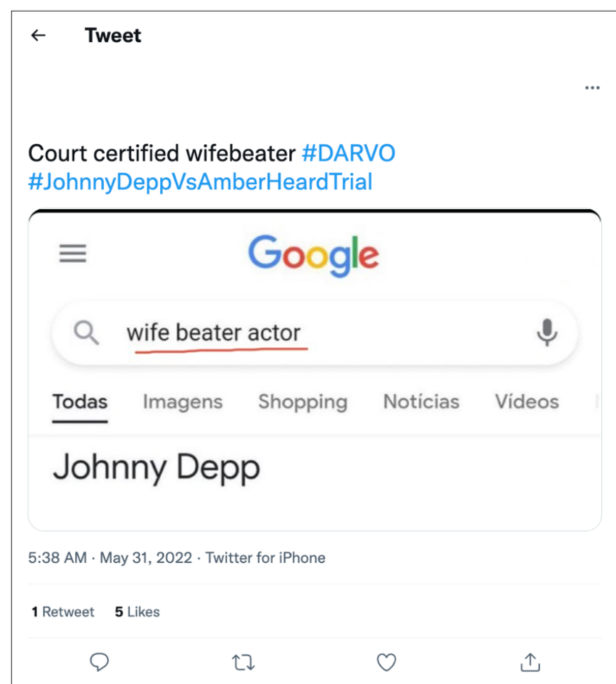


Figure 5.30 Tweet demonstrating the 'wife beater actor' Google search

## Conclusion

As I argued earlier in **Chapter Two**, women's names are rooted to their bodies. Their surnames are subject to change and/or 'die' with their marriage to a man. Men's names, however, can transcend the body. Their names are passed down, becoming the 'soul' of the family. From the above, it is clear how a body might become steeped in shame and humiliation. Women are trapped in this understanding, their names becoming synonymous with the characteristics associated with their body. However, men can overcome this. As I discussed with regards to Depp's 'career' compared to Heard's 'jobs', men's names are not tied to their bodies. They are given to other people and come to represent more than the individual. This is compounded by

celebrity and/or star status. When looking at this through the lens of the economy of believability, it is clear how men's names can accumulate credit history, allowing them to transcend negative or problematic personas and maintain their 'good names'. Women's names, on the other hand, are impermanent and subject to change. As such, they are easier to replace with disparaging nicknames as was demonstrated with Amber Heard. Furthermore, the power of stardom, and the support that goes along with it, means that in a battle between a celebrity and a star, the star will always win, as it always comes down to who has the most power.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how a name and reputation function in the political realm, where Salmond's 'bad' reputation was seen as a symbol of his powerful leadership. As such, his bad behaviour could be excused as acceptable: maybe some women suffered, but the whole nation benefitted. Here, I have demonstrated how that same logic works for *stars*, and in doing so, emphasises the power stars possess in mediated spaces. In the previous chapter, I also discussed how anonymity means a victim/survivor is incapable of participating in the economy of believability, and thus how easy their reputations can be ruined. However, in this chapter I have outlined how having a name and being known does not mean a victim/survivor has any control over *how* they are known. Again, it is clear that struggles over name and reputation have been a key battleground in the long #MeToo moment, and this has impacted the discursive construction of sexual harassment and assault. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how commentators have become key actors in this debate. This is what I will turn to next in the context of the Depp v Heard trial.

# CHAPTER SIX
## Constructing Believability Online

> "it is, ironically, the public spectacle of such trials that affords men like Depp and Manson the greatest opportunity to restabilise the economy of believability in their favour. Trial by jury, in other words, is often simply the pretence for a (re)trial by media."
>
> Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins (2023, p. 127)

Since the culmination of the Depp v Heard US trial, much attention has been paid to the online commentators that proliferated during the proceedings. The US trial was livestreamed on the internet, making it one of the first wide-reaching celebrity trials of this new social media age (Nelson, 2024). It therefore, unsurprisingly, garnered considerable social media attention. Depp v Heard has been labelled a 'trial by TikTok' (Tait, 2022) due to the largescale reaction content shared by both unknown and established social media commentators. Although journalist Alexi Mostrous demonstrated the likely presence of bots driving at least some of this online activity (Mostrous, 2024), there was still a huge swell of content being created by 'real' and verified online commentators. For example, the Law & Crime Network's YouTube channel that covers live court trials received nearly a *billion* views on their content related to the trial (Penney & Penney & Associates, 2022). Tech and culture reporter for NBC News, Kat Tenbarge, tracked how YouTubers who were previously making content on video games, makeup, movies, or music pivoted to covering the US trial because it increased their viewership over three-thousand fold (Tenbarge, 2022b). Furthermore, analysis of YouTube earnings found that 'LawTubers' – former or current lawyers who have become YouTube content creators that provide legal commentary and/or insight on popular cases – were the top-earning creators on the platform during the trial (Chen & Weiss, 2022). One LawTuber, Emily D Baker, is estimated to have increased her monthly revenue by over 350% during her coverage (Sakoui, 2022), indicating the huge economic incentive to create content centred on the trial.

So far, this thesis has dealt with the issue of 'believability' in online debates on 'she said / he said' issues, demonstrating how 'he' is typically favoured due to the gendered emphasis on name and reputation. The previous chapter looked at how believability was negotiated through

the various forms of authenticity associated with 'celebrity' and 'stardom', this chapter will turn to an analysis of the online users and personalities. As I have demonstrated, online commentary played a significant role in the trial and was overwhelmingly in support of Depp. This content was highly influential to public perception about the trial (NBC Mostrous, 2024; NBC News, 2022), and resulted in numerous unfounded allegations against Heard and her legal team (Nelson, 2024; J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023). Some of this content was manipulated in order to favour Depp (Mostrous, 2024), and because pro-Depp content was the most popular amongst social media users, online commentators were incentivised to follow this trend, helping to shape public opinion (Nelson, 2024). As I discussed in **Chapter Four**, there has been a growing distrust in mainstream news media and 'traditional' sources of information in both America and Europe in the context of the 'post-truth' debate (Harsin, 2018) as the predominance of rhetoric around 'fake news' demonstrates. The emergence and proliferation of social media platforms has profoundly exploited the issue, as more and more people favour highly emotional communication, which appears as more 'authentic' and therefore more truthful (Enli, 2024; Harsin, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Moreover, and as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins (2023) argue, this debate about 'post-truth' has often been used to cast suspicion on women speaking out about sexual violence.

In this chapter, I will build on arguments introduced in **Chapter Four** to demonstrate how these growing tensions around media trustworthiness, authenticity and 'post-truth' have resulted in a shift in focus on believability online. As I will argue, it is no longer solely the believability of victim/survivors or perpetrators alone that matters, as has been the focus of feminist media studies thus far. Instead, I will show how the affordances of social media that centre audience attention has created a 'marketplace' for truth online (Finlayson, 2021, 2023). This new marketplace is based on engagement, so that the person who has the most followers, likes, or comments, is the person who becomes the most believable. This is complicated by the growing number of social media commentators, who have constructed an 'expert' framing for themselves online through their commentary on social events. I will argue that these online commentators, like the LawTubers mentioned above, or the political bloggers discussed in **Chapter Four**, are considered more trustworthy and *believable* in their commentary around these cases than mainstream media sources and so I will demonstrate that believability is not only about who one is and what one does, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) write, it is also about *how many supporters* someone has, and *who those supporters are*.

In order to contextualise this tension, I will start by expanding on the key issues concerning the 'post-truth' debate I first introduced in **Chapter Four**, focusing on how this has impacted journalism and online commentary, and where this intersects with a growing online misogynistic backlash culture. I will then introduce some key figures from my data, before moving on to the main analysis for this chapter which is split into three sections: **The Personalities**, which looks at the online 'influencers' who created content centred around the 'evidence' and court proceedings as a means of constructing a type of 'community knowledge' on the case that was amplified by their status as 'believable personalities'; **The Professionals**, which looks at the people who amplified their professional experience as a means of claiming a type of 'expert knowledge' on the trial; and **The Personal** which looks at the users who drew on their own personal experience of violence as a means of asserting their opinions on the trial. Across all three sections is a running theme on *platforms* and how they work to amplify and legitimate certain voices, while silencing and/or rendering others unbelievable.

**Post-Truth, Influencers, and #MeToo**

Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) explain that a key component of the current #MeToo moment is the burgeoning anxiety over the status of truth. Although the discourse on post-truth is not new, the co-emergence of the 'crisis' of post-truth with the current #MeToo moment is, they point out, greatly significant. As Jayson Harsin (2018) argues, post-truth is symptomatic of the current 'breakdown of social trust…(in) the major institutional truth-teller or publicist – the news media' (ibid, p. 1), and, as I have demonstrated, #MeToo was a hyper-mediated event that worked to disturb the historical construction of men as unfailingly honest, and women as liars (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). Therefore, anxieties about post-truth have been mobilised to counter the #MeToo narrative. At the same time, these anxieties are not necessarily expressed *only* through a masculinist lens, and the involvement of women – and, indeed, women who claim some relationship to feminism (and not always an antagonistic one) (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025; Kay, 2024) – in challenging other women's speech about sexual harassment and assault is a key concern in this chapter. This involvement of women is another example of the inherent contradictions of the long #MeToo moment discussed in **Chapter One**. Although undertaking an in-depth analysis of the history and emergence of post-truth is beyond the scope of this thesis, I am interested in online debates and negotiations over believability,

and as such, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the key issues that underline the post-truth debate.

*Post-Truth*

Harsin identifies four key 'agents' that have 'synergistically structure[d] [post-truth] communication forms and practices' (Harsin, 2018, p. 11), starting with advancements in technology that have allowed anyone with a cell phone and access to the internet the ability to create content or comment on the news in increasingly streamlined and professional-seeming ways. This has allowed the circulation of a profusion of ideas and opinions that are broadcast with little to no moderation. Instead of centring nuanced discussions, debates and the sharing of trustworthy information, social media communication is centred on 'the attention economy' (ibid, p. 12). As a result, algorithms have become increasingly important in both capturing and amplifying trends in public discussion, because the more something is repeated, the more it is likely to be judged 'true' (ibid, see also Finlayson, 2021, 2023). This has led to what Michael Higgins describes as a 'depreciation in the value accorded to knowledge' (Higgins, 2019, p. 134).

In his analysis of the success of Donald Trump's media message, Higgins (2019) notes that the increase of knowledge circulation, together with a history of anti-intellectualism and anti-establishment thinking in America, has resulted in a diminishing appreciation for specialised and expert knowledge. As Higgins puts it, 'the democratisation of knowledge…also democratises the means to impart knowledge and engage in informed discussion' (ibid, p. 135; see also Finlayson, 2023). As I outlined in **Chapter Two**, there is a gendered component to this issue, in that women who mark their expert knowledge, namely through professional titles, are met with critical opprobrium, a point I return to later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that this depreciation of expert knowledge has been allied by the growing distrust in mainstream news media that Harsin (2018) outlines as the second key component to post-truth communication.

As I discussed in **Chapter Four**, the increased vulnerability to inaccurate reporting due to downsized news organisations, together with the spread of tabloidization has degraded public trust in news media (ibid). Here, Donald Trump is a particularly good example, as his defence against any negative media coverage is to revile the 'corrupt fake news media'. The success of

this message is made clear by its very ubiquity – the phrase 'fake news' is now part of our lexicon having been added to the dictionary during Trump's first presidency (Steinmetz, 2017) and being named the 2017 'word of the year' by Collins Dictionary (Flood, 2017). The added time pressures, together with the increased need for content in a 24-hour news cycle, and a perceived appetite for subjective, sensational material has only furthered this decline in trust.

As outlined in **Chapter Four** with my discussion on Craig Murray and Stuart Campbell, this distrust in mainstream news has paved the way for an emergence of 'citizen journalism' and bloggers who are able to capitalise on the advancement in technology to create followings for their own style of journalism and reporting that is highly dependent on feelings of authenticity, rather than on factual information sharing (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 75). Higgins (2019) points out that sincerity and authenticity also make up an important part of Trump's media performance, which allows him the 'freedom to disavow reason and verifiable truth' because if he *believes* what he is saying (or at least appears to do so), then he cannot be seen as *lying* (ibid, pp. 136-137). This projection of authenticity has also become a component of promotional culture, that Harsin (2018) identifies as a third key factor in post-truth communication.

Harsin (2018) draws on Alison Hearn's work on promotionalism to demonstrate how people are increasingly understanding themselves, their relationships, their leaders and current social issues in terms of a logic of promotion due to an extension of market values into everyday life. This means that it has become more difficult to determine genuine information from 'spin' (ibid). The Trump example above is one example of this, but similarly, this links back to the negative reactions to Heard's feminist activism that were recast as media strategy, discussed in **Chapter Five**. Greg Elmer, Ganaele Langlois, and Fenwick McKelvey (2012) argue that this increased emphasis on promotionalism has been spurred on, again, by the advancement in communication technology, resulting in a 'permanent campaign' for politicians. As Higgins offers, it is 'government navigated by communicative style and audience response' (Higgins, 2019, p. 138). Again, Trump is a good example of this. As Higgins (2019) argues, Trump himself occupies a performative political blogger role, governing through his social media presence and obsession with campaign-style rallies. Indeed, Alex Salmond could be seen as embracing a similar position. He was never a blogger, but with his show on *Russia Today*, his turn to 'video blogs', and Fringe Festival shows (Peterkin, 2018), Salmond also sought to occupy a position outside the British mainstream. As Harsin (2018) notes, this emphasis on

promotionalism is complicated further by the increase in public relations/professional styles of communication which makes up his final 'agent' of post-truth.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's writing, Harsin (2018) notes that this type of communication is dependent on 'good will' and is therefore incredibly vulnerable to manipulation and lying. It has also come with an emphasis on 'image making' resulting in a proliferation of pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1962) which has further degraded trust in 'traditional' forms of communication, with an emphasis instead being put on emotional styles of communication that convey feelings of authenticity (Enli, 2015, 2024; Finlayson, 2021, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Karin Wahl-Jorgensen describes this communication style as drawing from 'an epistemological vocabulary which equates truth with authenticity, emotional integrity and immediacy' (2019, p. 75). The main issue with this, as she points out, is that audiences no longer see conventional 'objective' news reporting as 'capable of encapsulating the "truth"' in the same way that emotive, user-generated storytelling *is* (ibid, p. 75). I demonstrated the effectiveness of this in **Chapter Four**, where political bloggers' accounts, like Murray and Campbell above, were deemed *more believable* and authentic than mainstream reporting on the Salmond Trial. However, this does not just exist in the political realm.

Harsin's four agents are centred on political commentary and communication practices, but as Higgins (2019), and others (Finlayson, 2021, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) argue, the world of the celebrity and the politician are merging in our current age of 'mediated publicness' as politicians have started to 'engage tactically with media, in pursuit of such performative goals as trustworthiness and authenticity' (Higgins, 2019, p. 130), and indeed celebrities have encroached in the world of politics (Finlayson, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Moreover, as Gunn Enli (2015) demonstrates in her exploration of mediated authenticity, this breakdown in trust in different types of mediated communication has spanned all types of media, not just those centred on politics. As I will go on to discuss, Depp's media strategy borrowed from this political 'post-truth' style of communication through his controversial lawyer Adam Waldman who, according to the journalist Nick Wallis (2023), had worked as a political lobbyist and attorney before representing Depp.

Enli (2015) explains that this emphasis on authenticity has risen out of an understanding that 'although we base most of our knowledge about our society and the world in which we live on meditated representations of reality, we remain well aware that the media are constructed,

manipulated and even faked' (ibid, p. 1), and as such, our relationship and trust in the media is negotiated on feelings of authenticity that Enli dubs 'the authenticity contract' (ibid). Drawing on Stuart Hall, Enli (2015, p. 16) explains that part of this symbolic contract is based on the relationship between media 'producers' (or encoders) and media 'audiences' (or decoders). Social media, intrinsically, has a more straightforward relationship between producers and audiences, as the affordances of social media platforms allow for (at least perceived) direct communication with influencers while engaging with their content. This has flourished with the growth of livestreams as audiences can now interact with influencers directly and in real time. This type of relationship has yet to manifest for more 'mainstream' producers to the same degree, and as such, influencers are typically perceived as more authentic than mainstream media producers. Media scholar Alan Finlayson argues that this is exacerbated by the affordances of digital communications technologies which '"flattens" the appearance of forms of knowledge' resulting in a post from an expert appearing no different to one from a layman (2023, p. 41). The result is a 'disembedded' authority that favours 'those able to master the forms and styles of the platform', thus giving an appearance of authenticity (ibid, p. 41). In fact, as journalist Taylor Lorenz notes, this authentic perception of online influencers has been present since the very start of online 'influencing' (Lorenz, 2023).

*Influencers*

In her book tracing the history on online influence, Lorenz (2023, p. 90) looks at the rise of YouTubers, noting that industry leaders in Hollywood repeatedly passed on opportunities to collaborate with young creators because their work was seen as of a lower quality to Hollywood productions. When producers did eventually decide to work with some influencers, they maintained control of production decisions resulting in products that felt inauthentic to the YouTubers they featured, and were therefore poorly received (ibid, pp. 85-97). Furthermore, as Lorenz notes, when Hollywood eventually started representing YouTubers through Multi Channel Networks they focused on profit over management, signing with thousands of creators in the hopes that a few would take off, meaning control over content was greatly reduced. As a result, there was a feeling amongst influencers of mismanagement and mistreatment by the mainstream 'establishment' which they shared with their fans (ibid, pp. 162-164). YouTube influencers started to be seen as anti-establishment – or at least establishment being 'anti-YouTubers' (ibid). This gave YouTube and its influencers a more authentic and relatable feel, compared to the highly stylised and business-minded Hollywood. This distrust in the

mainstream 'establishment' was furthered still with what became known as the 2017 'Adpocalypse' (ibid, pp. 229-243).

After a string of mainstream news articles documenting and calling out the abusive and extremist content on YouTube in 2017, businesses began pulling advertisements on the platform, resulting in huge economic losses for influencers (ibid, p. 234). Some YouTubers who had been implicated in the various scandals saw their content demonetised completely and were often dropped by their mainstream management networks. This worked to further the divides between influencers and the mainstream industry. YouTubers openly criticised their treatment in their content, and instead began appealing to their fans to directly help fund and support them (ibid, p. 237). Influencers turned to platforms like Patreon which allowed followers to pay a monthly subscription to influencers for exclusive content,[60] and began selling customised merchandise to their fans as a means of stabilising their revenues (ibid, p. 240). As Lorenz (2023) notes, this shift to personalised monetisation worked well for influencers whose entire business is centred on a logic of self-promotion. Again, the blurring of lines between the political and entertainment world are highlighted here, as content creators felt required to go on a 'permanent campaign' in order to continue to grow their online influence in an increasingly hostile economic environment. However, just as with Higgins' (2019) observation with Trump above, this meant that their content was increasingly dependent on a recognisable media logic that centred on communicative style and, most importantly, audience response. As Finlayson argues, this new 'market place of ideas' created by the influencer economy gave way to a particular kind of online influencer that he calls the 'ideological entrepreneur' (Finlayson, 2021, 2023).

Finlayson defines the ideological entrepreneur as online influencers who 'manufacture and sell tendentious political ideas, analyses, images and slogans' who may not have any 'official' training or education but instead rely on the celebrity logics of social media to construct their online brand (2023, p. 36). Due to the breakdown in trust in mainstream organisations, discussed above, these ideological entrepreneurs are able to take the place of 'traditional' public intellectuals, academics, and journalists in the public sphere because of their effective

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[60] YouTube has since introduced a similar feature through the channel membership program, see https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7636690?hl=en-GB

use of digital platforms which gives their content an illusory sense of authenticity and authority (Finlayson, 2021, 2023). Thus, these influencers position themselves as 'brave, honest, subversive thinkers unafraid to challenge established power' (Finlayson, 2021, p. 174). Consequentially, these ideological entrepreneurs operate in what Finlayson terms a 'reactionary digital politics' which he describes as a performative and combative style of communication that works as a means of 'waging polemical warfare on socially liberal ideals of communicative deliberation'(2023, p. 28). Although some ideological entrepreneurs are very much part of the manosphere (discussed in **Chapter One**), this is not true of all of them, as Finlayson explains they encompass a large variety of conservative ideologies from the extreme fringes to the moderate centres (Finlayson, 2021, 2023).

It is not always clear what political or ideological affiliations the posters in my dataset fall under. Although some of them fit Finlayson's definition of an ideological entrepreneur, others seem to embrace more progressive politics and frame Heard as an aberrant outlier. Of course, the presence of some ideological entrepreneurs in my dataset is significant. As I noted in **Chapter Three**, I deliberately avoided conservative online spaces by utilising my own social media accounts which are typically feminist and progressive leaning. Therefore, the fact that some conservative voices appeared in my data demonstrates the proliferation of the manosphere into wider cultural online spaces (discussed in **Chapter Five**). The political affiliations of the posters in my dataset are not the focus of this thesis, however. Instead, I am interested in the media and celebrity logics that Finlayson (Finlayson, 2021, 2023), Higgins (2019) and others (Harsin, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) have identified in online communication that have constructed a new type of believability online. A believability that is highly dependent on feelings of authenticity.

When returning to the online commentary around both of Depp's court cases, it is clear how these media and celebrity logics guided Waldman's approach to Depp's defence online. As I mentioned above, Waldman's background was in politics, and as journalist Nick Wallis explains, his 'techniques came straight from the populist playbook – don't play the game, attack the agenda' (Wallis, 2023, p. 149). His strategy was twofold. Firstly, Waldman developed and cultivated relationships with influencers who he used to disseminate information on both of Depp's trials. Waldman sent portions of evidence submitted as part of the trial to these

influencers to share with their followers (Mostrous, 2024; Wallis, 2023).[61] This evidence (made up of recordings and documents submitted to the court) were often edited to favour Depp, however none of the influencers notified their audience of this (Mostrous, 2024).[62] Waldman described them as 'internet journalists', promoting them on his social media feeds, and at times even connecting them with Depp (Mostrous, 2024; Wallis, 2023). When Depp eventually got his own Instagram account, some of these 'internet journalists' were among the first accounts he followed (Mostrous, 2024). Thus, it is clear how the success of Depp's defence rested in an embrace of mediatisation. This worked as a type of 'authenticity illusion' (Enli, 2015), that imbued these influencers with a sense of legitimacy and, more specifically, of access and proximity. This highlights the *performative* aspect of mediated authenticity that can be mistaken for truthfulness and honesty (Enli, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Waldman's next strategy was to attack the negative mainstream news coverage of Depp (Wallis, 2023). As Wallis (2023) explains, Waldman attacked the motives of mainstream news organisations in any coverage of Depp that was deemed unfavourable. Since Depp had sued *The Sun*, any of Rupert Murdoch's titles were immediately cast as suspicious with hashtags such as '#murdochclowns' (ibid, p. 149) – which was only amplified when Depp lost, and *The Sun* triumphantly named him a 'wife beater'. As Wallis notes, Waldman dismissed other organisations such as *Variety*, *Deadline*, and *Rolling Stone* (discussed in the previous chapter) as 'Saudi Arabia-owned', and also ridiculed journalists attached to the BBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Sunday Times* on his personal Twitter profile (ibid, pp. 149-150). Waldman frequently drew comparisons between this 'corrupt' mainstream and the authenticity of his 'internet journalists':

> 'they [mainstream media] refuse to report the highly newsworthy facts…although YouTube videos are replacing traditional investigative reporting and getting millions of views. Ask yourself why.' (Waldman in ibid, p. 149)

The emphasis on 'views' as being evidence of a factual or *trusted* style of reporting is clearly linked to post-truth styles of communication which centre the attention economy and reactionary digital politics (Finlayson, 2023). By the time the US trial began in 2022, there was an established community of influencers posting in support of Depp and framing the

[61] This sharing of information later led to Waldman's dismissal from the US proceedings (Mostrous, 2024).

[62] Although it is possible they were unaware of this manipulation.

mainstream coverage of him as a 'wife beater' as biased and untrue. It also helps that both the UK and US trials were based on statements made in mainstream news articles (*The Sun* in the UK, and *The Washington Post* in the US). In fact, the location of both trials was partially determined by where each publication operated. Consequently, the idea that the mainstream news was biased against Depp was baked into the actual legal proceedings.

It is clear, then, how the post-truth debate is at the core of Depp's media strategy. Depp, through Waldman, was able to draw on this to shore up support and to call into question any support for Heard. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) explain, this backlash against Heard is compounded by the #MeToo backlash narrative that is bolstered by anxieties over public 'truths'. In *Believability* (2023), Banet-Weiser and Higgins explain that anxieties over the 'crisis' of post-truth, the historical construction of marginalised people as liars, and their mediated economy of believability are all critical elements of the contemporary conjuncture in which 'the problem of "believability" is taking on new complexities and…political implications' (ibid, p. 13). I argue that the changes in the 'influencer' economy described above can be added to this conjuncture, as it offers an alternative informational space that is positioned as 'unbiased' because of its anti-establishment and anti-mainstream focus. After all, it is noteworthy that all three of these issues reached the height of their visibility in 2017, with the 'Adpocalypse' (Lorenz, 2023), #MeToo's virality, and 'fake news' declared word of the year (Steinmetz, 2017). Furthermore, just as with the post-truth debate and the reactionary digital politics Finlayson (2021, 2023) describes, this growing influencer economy has a history of anti-feminist campaigning.

As I outlined in **Chapter One** with regards to the long #MeToo moment, anti-feminist narratives have been developing online since the early 2010s, reaching a pinnacle in what is known as the 2014 Gamergate scandal (Jane, 2017; Massanari, 2017) – part of the online 'manosphere'. There are important similarities between Gamergate and the treatment of Amber Heard as at the centre of both was a wide-reaching and misogynistic backlash against a woman who had publicly aligned herself with feminism. In Gamergate, the backlash centred an issue with journalistic ethics based on a conspiracy that mostly left-wing gaming journalists were colluding with game developers 'to promote a social justice agenda and focusing on cultural/social aspects of games as opposed to assessing their technical and play features' (Perreault & Vos, 2018, p. 553). For Heard, the backlash was based on anxieties of a perceived bias against men accused of violence against women due to the heightened visibility of popular

feminism expressed through viral media moments like #MeToo. This backlash can be seen as part of the reactionary digital politics that Finlayson identifies where ideological entrepreneurs work to disseminate '"populist" ideologies hostile to…the cultural and economic integration of minorities, feminism and gender politics' (2021, p. 168). However, as I noted above, these anxieties were not only expressed through an anti-feminist lens, as commenters that aligned themselves with feminism and progressive ideologies *also* problematised Heard's speech as reductive and harmful, a point I explore later. As I explained in **Chapter Five**, mainstream coverage of #MeToo exacerbated these anxieties by capitalising on the stories of mostly white, cis-gendered women celebrities speaking out about experiences of abuse (De Benedictis *et al.*, 2019). As I argued in the previous chapter, this worked to discredit #MeToo stories by refocusing the narrative around neoliberal understandings of testimony and activism. Heard's own context for her speaking out on her experiences of violence were ignored for a mainstream narrative that centred her celebrity, which imbued her testimony with a feeling of performativity and artificiality resulting in a type of communicative injustice (Kay, 2020). However, as this chapter will argue, this also resulted in a deeper divide between mainstream and social media in relation to the construction and discussion of believability online.

**Data Breakdown**

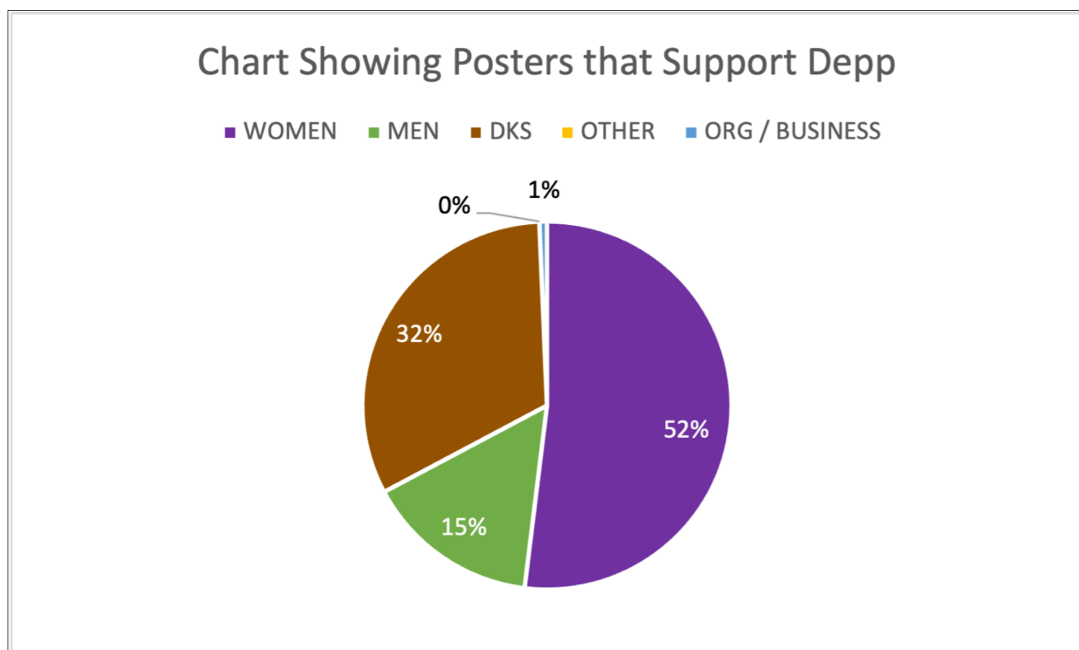
The dataset for this chapter is the same as the previous one, as such I will only highlight the information that is relevant to this analysis, rather than focus on the dataset as a whole.

As this chapter is focused on commentators specifically, I decided to note some identifying information about the posters collected, but I only did this where the information was available from the social media post collected (i.e. if their name was coded male/female, if there was a picture of them, pronouns in their username, or if they were public figures). I did not go on to seek out this information, and if it was not obvious from their post, I coded this as 'don't know'. Reddit was the outlier here, where the nature of the website encourages the use of avatars / personas, and as such the majority of posters were coded as 'don't know'. In terms of race, the majority of posters where race was known were coded as white (83.2%), the remaining 16.8% were people of colour. Table 6.1 below outlines the findings on gender:

| PLATFORM | MEN | WOMEN | DON'T KNOW | OTHER | ORGANISATION |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TWITTER | 13.8% | 56.6% | 27.2% | 0.1% | 2.3% |
| REDDIT | 5.5% | 12.2% | 82.3% | - | - |
| TIKTOK | 14.3% | 67.2% | 18.1% | - | 0.4% |
| YOUTUBE | 40.8% | 20.4% | 12.2% | - | 26.5% |

Table 6.1 Gender of social media posters across platforms (Depp v Heard)

There is an immediate difference here between my previous dataset on the Salmond Trial. For most of these platforms, women made up the majority of posters where gender was identified, the only exception was YouTube, which is interesting considering that Waldman mostly fostered relationships and shared information and evidence with online content creators that predominantly posted to YouTube. The dominance of women continues when looking at posters that expressed support for either Depp or Heard (see Figure 6.1 below).



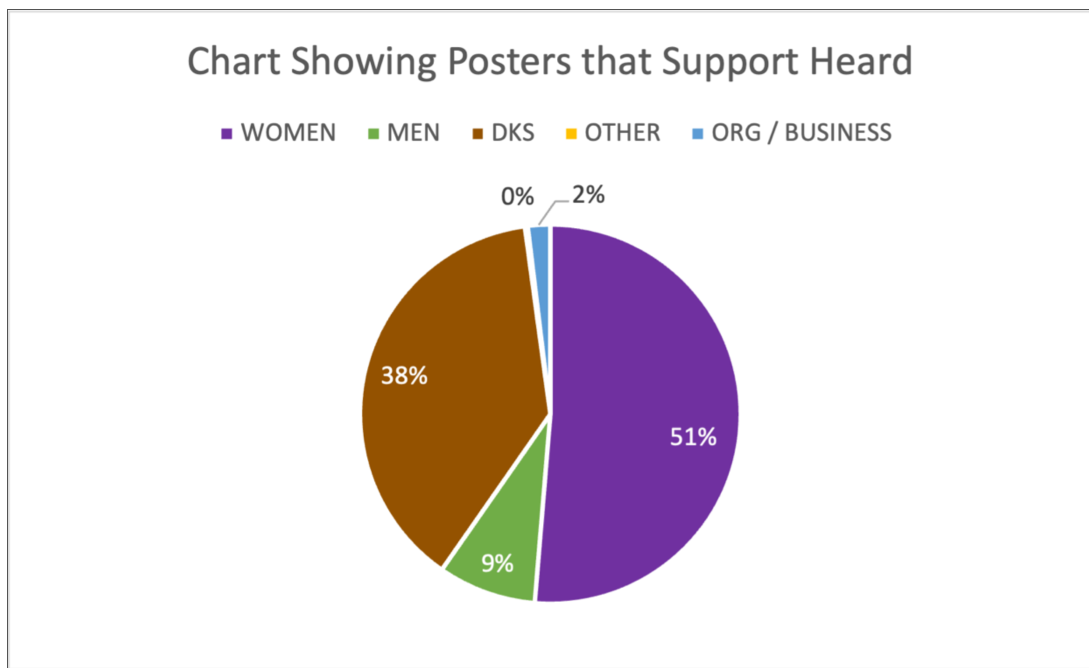



Figure 6.1 Charts showing gender breakdown of posters that showed support for Depp and Heard

I discussed overall support for Depp and Heard in the last chapter, but I want to focus on the gender of supporters here. As noted above and evident in these charts, the majority of posters expressing support for either Depp or Heard were women, although there were more women overall who supported Depp ($n$ = 628) compared to Heard ($n$ = 215). This demonstrates that the conversation on this trial is very much a woman-dominated space – which is the opposite to the Salmond Trial. However, the overrepresentation of women is in line with the focus on personal experience for this chapter, as many Depp supporters used their identity *as women* as further evidence of his innocence which I will evidence in the coming analysis. This was very similar with posters who identified as survivors of domestic and sexual violence who, again, predominantly identified as women. Although making up a small part of my dataset overall (2.3%), the majority of posters who identified as survivors explicitly supported Depp (60.4% of all survivors). Only 22.9% of survivors explicitly supported Heard (I could not determine support in the remaining 16.7%).

The final point to note is the focus on claims to 'truth' present in my dataset. Only a small number of posts (5.2%) referenced what they described as 'evidence' for their claims. This demonstrates that despite the majority of posters taking a clear side (79.2%), the online discourse was less concerned with 'proving' their claims than they were sharing their thoughts and feelings about the trial, which hints toward more of an emphasis on *affective* evidence which will come out in the qualitative analysis below. However, it is worth noting that 19 out

of the 49 YouTube videos collected (38.8%) were influencer videos made in an 'investigative' style that worked to provide some kind of analysis of the trial to an audience. This type of content often relied on a type of 'evidence' collected and analysed by the influencer, at times framing their analysis as 'expertise', as we will see. This is also significant because most posters on YouTube (40.8%) were men, which is important when considering how YouTube is constructed as an 'expert' space.

Before moving on to the qualitative analysis, it is important to make some distinctions between terms. This chapter will be dealing with several different 'kinds' of online commentator or social media user. Firstly, there are the general users who do not necessarily have or want a 'following' but comment, post, and engage with content related to the trial. These posters make up the bulk of my dataset and I have drawn on their posts for most of this thesis and so will continue to refer to them as 'posters' (if it is their post) or 'commenters' (if they are commenting on someone else's post) as I have in previous chapters. Secondly, the 'personality' (like the 'influencer' that Lorenz (2023) discusses) is the user who has or is actively trying to grow a following by posting on a specific theme or topic in an authoritative or charismatic way.

## The Personalities

In his chapter discussing the 'synthetic personality' in television talk shows of the 80s, Andrew Tolson (1991) described a growing instability of the popular public sphere. Where there used to be a focus on 'a populist form of public accountability' in which the general public would attempt to construct a common understanding or opinion, Tolson observed a shift, in which:

> 'the popular public sphere now appears increasingly ironic about itself, reflexive about the forms in which it presents itself, and at times totally ambiguous in its ability to differentiate between sincere and insincere talk' (ibid, p. 198)

Tolson was talking about specific communicative circumstances, where truth seemed to be taking second place to the rhetorical needs of the moment. He demonstrated this through his analysis of the television talk show 'personality' who he argued had become recognised as a *construction* or *performance* made up of interactions that might be sincere or a complete fabrication. In his conclusion, Tolson notes how the playful performances of these 'synthetic personalities' would help draw attention to the discursive construction of media, and of other public personalities, resulting in a fragmented audience 'characterised by different kinds of

“knowingness”’ (ibid, p. 198). With the above discussion on post-truth in mind, it can be argued that the understanding of media as being *constructed* together with different fragmentations of audience knowingness, has resulted in a distrust in mainstream media and its believability (see Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3 below).

Figure 6.2 Tweets expressing distrust in mainstream media (Depp v Heard)

All the posters hint toward a deliberate choice by the media to ‘frame’ the story in a specific way as a means to ‘gaslight’ or to ‘feed lies’ to an audience. Furthermore, it is clear that this distrust in mainstream media was felt by *both* Depp and Heard supporters: Figure 6.2b, (posting in support of Depp), and Figure 6.3 (posting in support of Heard) describe the mainstream media as being willing to ‘flip the narrative’ on the trial, hinting toward a perceived capricious attitude toward factual reporting that fits in with the conspiracy lexicon I identified in **Chapter Four**. However, that both Depp and Heard supporters find issues with the reporting on the trial is perhaps unsurprising, given that feminist media scholars have long problematised the mainstream media’s handling of stories involving violence against women (for e.g. see Boyle & Berridge, 2024), and the popular belief that #MeToo has unjustly reallocated the benefit of the doubt to women, leaving (white, powerful) men uniquely vulnerable to disbelief (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). As Banet-Weiser and Higgins demonstrate, although mainstream media did offer new *visibility* to the issue of men’s violence against women in the wake of #MeToo, that visibility was ultimately selective and unevenly distributed amongst mostly white, wealthy, celebrities. Thus, ‘the political work of that visibility is…always ambivalent’ and works, instead, to keep these narratives contentious (ibid, p. 46). Furthermore, by lumping *all* mainstream reporting together, the inconsistencies between (and within) different media organisations are taken as reason not to trust *any* mainstream reporting. This was also part of

the backlash against mainstream reporting on the Salmond Trial which I discussed earlier (**Chapter Four**). There, the main focus was on the hypocrisy of mainstream news supposedly condemning Salmond when they had ignored and silenced stories about Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris – who were strongly associated with the BBC.[63] It is clear how this history has tainted the BBC's reputation when it comes to reporting on sexual violence as the tweets above explicitly take issue with reporting from the BBC (Figure 6.2b).

Figure 6.3 post on r/DeppDelusion 'Why did the mainstream media flip'

The growing distrust in the mainstream news media, together with the ambivalent mainstream media narrative around sexual violence, has resulted in confusion when interpreting reporting from an audience perspective. As such, if the mainstream media does not explicitly take a stance on an issue, it is seen as untrustworthy, inauthentic and, ironically, biased. It is no coincidence, then, that posters fall back to the trial as the *only credible source* for information on the case (Figure 6.2b).[64] As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Judge Azcarate ordered that the court proceedings be livestreamed and made available to all broadcasters, with no restrictions (Wallis, 2023). By juxtaposing this courtroom footage with the mainstream media's coverage above, the posters seem to be setting up a hierarchy of information on the trial, in which there is a preference for the livestreamed footage because it is seen as somehow *unmediated*.

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[63] Of course, for the Salmond Trial, this was compounded by the unique media context in Scotland that considers the BBC and other mainstream organisations as being 'London-centric' and biased against Scottish values and independence (Dekavalla, 2019; Hassan, 2014) (discussed in **Chapter Four**).

[64] This hints toward a belief in the legal system as the only credible space for debates about sexual violence to take place, which I will come on to in the next section.

The courtroom footage was filmed on two cameras and broadcast live by Court TV. However, the footage was not just two static frames, instead, the two cameras captured a wide frame shot as well as closeup shots of the courtroom; the judge; the lawyers; the witnesses; members in the public gallery; the evidence presented; and of course, Heard and Depp. At times, the livestream displayed witness testimony or evidence side-by-side with closeup shots of either Depp or Heard, setting up a 'reactionary' shot that encouraged viewers to look out for even the smallest gesture as an indication of what either party must be thinking or feeling (as was demonstrated in some of the figures from the previous chapter). When streamed on YouTube, a live chat function allowed viewers to post their opinions and reactions in real time, almost all of which were critical of Heard and supportive of Depp.

In her book exploring mediated representations of rape, Tanya Horeck (2004) explored this emphasis put on 'raw footage' in her analysis of an alleged rape that took place in a fraternity house in 1999. Lisa Gier King, an exotic dancer, was hired by the fraternity to perform for them at a party. After her performance, Gier King returned to carouse with the men in their fraternity house. The next morning, she reported that she had been raped by one of them. The fraternity brothers had recorded the entire night on camera, including the disputed incident between Gier King and the man she accused of rape, Mike Yarhaus. After reviewing the footage, the police dropped the charges against Yarhaus, claiming the video depicted consensual sex, but they did not stop there. They charged Gier King with filing a false police report, and after receiving criticism for their decision, released the recordings publicly as evidence 'so that people could "see for themselves" what happened between Yarhaus and [Gier] King' (ibid, p. 139). As Horeck notes, the assumption by the police here is that this 'raw footage' revealed 'the truth' and that anyone who watched it would come to this same conclusion. Of course, that was not the case, especially to Gier King and her supporters, who argued that the footage clearly depicted her rape.

As Horeck (2004) argues, photographic evidence can only ever represent the *visible* event and not the motivation or subjective reality of the event. It is a *representation* of reality, not reality itself. The same can be said for courtroom footage.[65] As I outlined above, the visual

[65] Or, indeed, the entire court proceedings.

representation of the Depp v Heard trial through the courtroom footage, was 'directed' by the different camera operators who chose what to show, who to zoom in on, or pan over. It also focused on, and was interrupted by, the public gallery. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the public gallery was mostly made up of Johnny Depp fans (Wallis, 2023) who frequently laughed and disrupted proceedings with their reactions which were broadcast live (D. Jones, 2022; Ntim, 2022; Sharp, 2022). Furthermore, this footage was livestreamed on YouTube, where viewers could comment in real time on the proceedings, but the live courtroom footage was not the only way people watched the trial, and this is where the new kind of media 'personality' emerges.

*The LawTuber Personality*

In Figure 6.4 below, the poster attributes their quote to the popular LawTube personality, Emily D Baker, who rose to prominence during the trial. Like the posters above, Baker is calling out mainstream ('legacy') media for being out of touch with 'what we're seeing in court'. Again, the courtroom footage is seen as an *unmediated* depiction of events, but Baker's comments seem to take this further. Baker, along with many other YouTubers, livestreamed the court footage on their own channels, watching the trial with their fans while providing commentary over the proceedings. Almost all these livestreams included a live chat function, which allowed viewers to ask questions or make comments that the LawTube personality would feature and respond to while watching the trial. The live chats were overwhelmingly in support of Depp and critical of Heard, even from the beginning of the trial.

Figure 6.4 Tweet quoting LawTuber Emily D Baker

For example, in Baker's livestream of the opening statements (day one of the US trial), she and her viewers frame Heard's testimony that she donated her divorce settlement to charity as a 'lie'; are immediately hyper critical of Heard's lawyer Elaine Bredehoft, describing her as less intelligent than the other lawyers, irritating and 'combative'; and, they frequently discredit the arguments put forward by Heard's lawyers, favouring Depp's version of events and his defence (E. D. Baker, 2022). Again, this is from the very first day of proceedings, however Baker and her audience already seem to have an idea of who they believe, indicating the influence of the wider online discourse centred on the trial and managed by Waldman and his 'internet journalists'. However, to Baker and the posters above, this is seen as an *unmediated* way to consume the trial because it is centred around 'courtroom footage'. As with Horeck's (2004) analysis of the footage at the heart of Gier King's rape, having access to 'the raw footage' is seen as having access to *the event itself,* rather than just a representation of the event.[66] However, these viewers – and even Baker herself – are not merely watching the court proceedings, they are watching them *together*.

As I mentioned in the introduction, LawTubers are current or former lawyers who post content on YouTube utilising their knowledge of the law. These personalities position themselves as experts, who can help their audience understand court cases by breaking down the legal language and arguments being presented. They position their analysis as focused on 'the facts' – in fact, one of Baker's taglines is 'facts not fuckery' (E. D. Baker, 2024) – and so when they, together with their audience, come to a conclusion on the cases covered, their interpretation is seen as evidenced and irrefutable. Like the livestream of the court proceedings, the LawTuber's content is seen as *unmediated* and therefore, like Waldman's 'internet journalists', is seen as more trustworthy than 'mainstream' commentators. They are the *believable* personality, as opposed to the *synthetic* personality Tolson (1991) describes. This is bolstered by the affordances of social media platforms that are centred around engagement and audience feedback (the attention economy), creating a type of 'community knowledge' on topics of interest. This 'community knowledge' is based more on what is repeated and shared amongst

[66] And again, what happens in the courtroom is considered an accurate depiction of reality, rather than a *representation* of two separate and conflicting realities.

active/reactive users online – as Harsin (2018) noted above – because the more something is repeated, the more 'trustworthy' or 'believable' it seems.

This sets up a stark contrast between 'mainstream' knowledge that is seen as *relaying* expert information from a position of authority and privilege, compared to 'social' knowledge that is discussed, shared and agreed on by a community of people. In a post-truth frame, this 'mainstream' knowledge is seen as highly suspicious due to the breakdown in trust in 'traditional' sources of information (Harsin, 2018). Instead, faith has been shifted to bloggers, online personalities, and 'internet journalists' who are seen as anti-establishment and therefore free from bias: hence they are the new *believable* personality (similar to Finlayson's (2021) 'ideological entrepreneurs' above). As such, it is telling that Figure 6.4 frames the mainstream media as '*controlling* a narrative' (emphasis my own). The mainstream news is positioned as a kind of epistemological dictator that the masses are rising up against. Baker and her audience's interpretation of this footage is considered more trustworthy than the interpretation of the footage by mainstream ('legacy') journalists. In fact, it is interesting that Baker uses the term 'legacy' specifically, implying that *mainstream* media is a dying form of news consumption that has been superseded by *social* media.

During the trial, LawTuber content was typically all livestreamed, allowing for 'real time' engagement with audiences who were then able to ask questions and propose theories the LawTubers could respond to directly. This was helped by YouTube's livestreaming tools which includes a live chat and the ability for users to pay personalities directly through one-off 'superchats', or by becoming a member – both of which give a user's questions and comments prominence in the live chat. As such, the affordances of the YouTube platform allow for high levels of user engagement, making long form content easily consumable and tailored to the interests of the audience as their questions and comments control the flow of the conversation. Indeed, some of the livestreams that were shared in my dataset were over 11 hours long, yet they had over 750 thousand views (e.g. LegalBytes, 2022). Since the trial was also livestreamed, and no restrictions were placed on the use of that footage, most LawTubers hosted the livestream on their own channels, allowing them to watch the trial in real time with their audiences while providing their commentary overtop, thus providing conditions for the creation of 'collaborative' knowledge on the trial.

The emphasis on collaboration was also important to LawTubers, who would often join each other's livestreams to provide multiple perspectives. There was also an economic incentive here. By collaborating, LawTubers were able to share their audiences with each other, helping their channels grow. Despite the plethora of LawTube content, the vast majority of these channels explicitly supported Depp. This worked to foreground a particular form of legitimised knowledge within a restricted space, akin to an echo chamber. For example, in the video mentioned above LegalBytes, a LawTuber whose real name is Alina Mazeika, hosted a livestream with several different LawTubers while waiting for the verdict. Part of the discussion was centred on the UK trial, with Mazeika introducing a UK based LawTuber (BlackBeltBarrister) as a kind of 'expert correspondent' to offer his analysis of the trial that took place there. Within the first five minutes, the UK trial is set up as aberrant with a question posed by one of the lawyer panel members:

> 'What the hell happened in the UK trial? Because I don't know what the hell is going on! Looking at this trial and looking at the UK, it's like how did we get to such different results?' (Nate The Lawyer in LegalBytes, 2022, 5:50).

This was livestreamed on the 31st of May, a day before the verdict was announced, but this framing is an example of how the US trial was perceived as a clear victory for Depp, even before any decision by the jury. Since the setup of this livestream is a panel of legal experts helping their audience understand the trial, this question immediately frames the discussion around the UK trial being deviant. This framing of the UK trial continues throughout the conversation, for example three hours later in response to a super chat calling the UK trial 'shady' and 'BS', the BlackBeltBarrister notes that that is the popular opinion (3:45:00).[67]

The involvement of the audience is an important factor to look at. Due to the unstable and perceived hostile economic environment for personalities (discussed earlier), YouTubers are increasingly reliant on their audiences for money and are therefore increasingly 'captured' by their audience's views and perspectives. To paraphrase Higgins from earlier, this demonstrates a mediatisation that is 'navigated by communicative style and audience response' (Higgins, 2019, p. 138). Thus, the emphasis on these livestreams was on a *collaborative* construction of knowledge, with audience questions and theories at the centre of the content. This incentive to

[67] This might also be a reaction to the fact that the UK trial was not broadcast live, instead the transcripts have been made available online.

agree with the audience is furthered by the fact that audience members can pay for their comments to feature in the livestream through ‘superchats’. For example, in the same livestream discussed above (LegalBytes, 2022), audience members proposed the conspiracy theory that the Judge in the UK trial was biased because of his supposed connection to *The Sun* and to Heard’s council. Mazeika shared these superchats live (seen in Figure 6.5 below), reading some of them out to the group. The panel then referred to a fan-made flowchart visualising this conspiracy for their discussion (Figure 6.6 below). Although the LawTubers note that this connection is ‘tangential’ and that they do not have any proof of the claims, they do not refute them either. In fact, some of the panel members take a sympathetic stance, arguing it paints the judge in a poor light (LegalBytes, 2022). As Mazeika notes, ‘it is a very interesting concept, and a very interesting theory’ (ibid, 1:56:58). The concluding remark is that the trial should have been a jury trial, which would have alleviated any concern of bias. This equivocal frame gives credence to the conspiracy and allows the LawTubers to maintain their trusted relationship with their audience by passively agreeing with them and therefore creating a shared understanding of the UK trial. As such, audience members feel included, and continue to pay to have their opinions heard, shared, and validated.

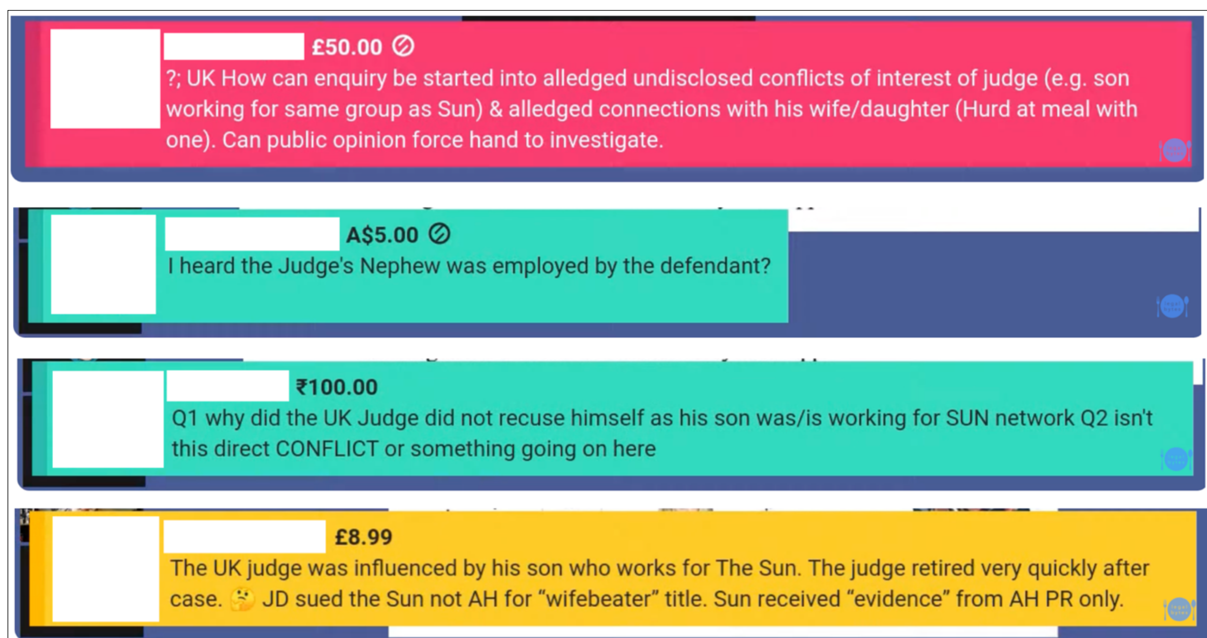


Figure 6.5 Examples of 'superchats' from YouTube livestream LegalBytes (2022)

This collaborative relationship between the LawTubers and their audience is made ever more salient by the livestreaming capabilities. As Enli (2015) explains, one of the key characteristics of mediated authenticity is a sense of ‘immediacy’, as it:

'imparts a sense of togetherness whereby the producers and the audiences are interconnected in a shared "now" in which they construct meaning and authenticity together' (Enli, 2015, p. 137).

In an environment experiencing a crisis of public epistemology with the post-truth debate, this emphasis on community knowledge arrived at together with the help of trusted personalities comes across as authentic and trustworthy – as opposed to the 'controlling' mainstream. It is part of the new epistemological vocabulary which equates authenticity with truth (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 75) The LawTubers were instead set up as *part of the community*. Going back to the quote attributed to Baker in Figure 6.4, LawTubers are part of the 'we', using their platforms to call out a mainstream narrative that does not match theirs.

Figure 6.6 Screenshot from LegalBytes (2022) livestream discussing UK Judge conspiracy

*The 'Internet Journalist' Personality*

With that in mind, the other believable personality found on YouTube during the trial was the general 'commentator' who typically identified as a fan and created 'investigative' style videos or content that centred on collecting and distributing evidence and 'facts'. This type of YouTube personality is redolent of the shift to subjective knowledge discussed earlier, as their 'research' takes on a performative quality that is based mostly on conjecture and/or incomplete and 'privileged' information that is not readily available for assiduous fact checking. It is what

the writer Naomi Klein (2023) calls ‘doppelganger’ investigative journalism, that ‘imitates many of its stylistic conventions while hopping over its accuracy guardrails’ (ibid, p. 224). This is also redolent of the ‘armchair detective’ made popular by the proliferation of ‘true crime’ content across both mainstream and social media (Horeck, 2019). In my Salmond data, this type of ‘investigative’ commentator personality were the political bloggers like Murray and Campbell discussed in the final section of **Chapter Four**. In the Depp v Heard data, these were the YouTubers (or ‘internet journalists’) connected to Depp’s former lawyer, Adam Waldman. The most prominent of which was Brian McPherson, or Incredibly Average on YouTube.

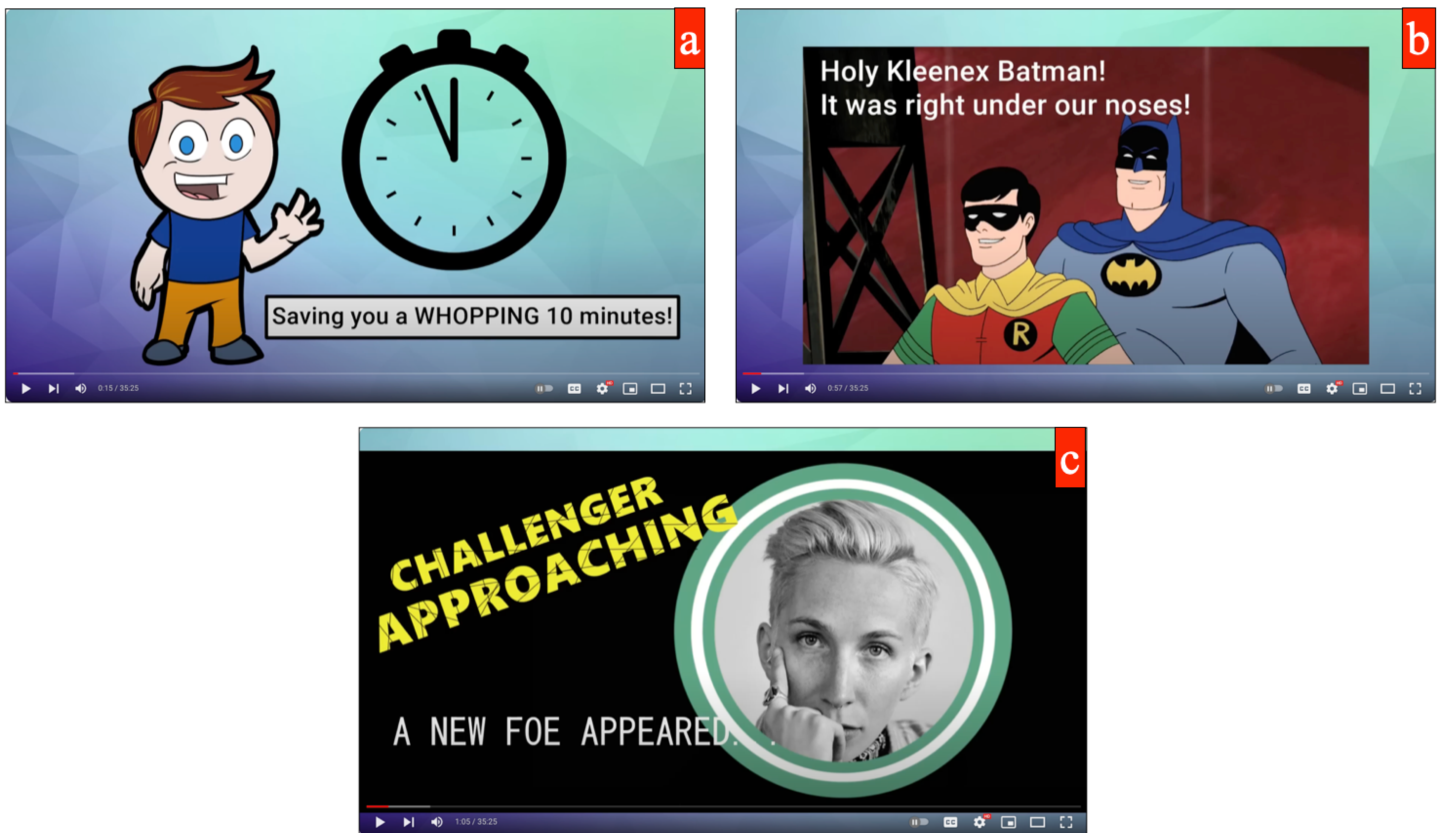


Figure 6.7 Screenshots from the Incredibly Average (2018) video

McPherson posted his first video in support of Depp in November 2018 (Incredibly Average, 2018) – five months after Depp sued *The Sun* for defamation and one month after the *GQ* article (Heaf, 2018), discussed in the previous chapter, was published. Even though this video was posted years before the US trial, it was shared by posters in my dataset as evidence of Depp’s innocence. This says something about its longevity and salience. Lasting just over 35 minutes, the video focused on analysing ‘evidence’ from a variety of sources centred on the allegations of abuse against Depp that were in the public domain. One topic of interest was the testimony

of Heard's friend and witness, iO Tillet Wright, who had submitted evidence to court in Heard's Domestic Violence Restraining Order (discussed in the last chapter), and written an op-ed for *Refinery29* (see Tillet Wright, 2016) on his decision to call the police on Depp.[68] McPherson discusses this evidence on the premise that he believes Tillet Wright is being dishonest. Unlike other pro Depp content that comes across as brash and impudent, McPherson is soft spoken and often apologetic for his unprofessional equipment and set up. He does not appear on camera – rather his video looks like a PowerPoint presentation, interspersed with memes, a few self-deprecating jokes, and a friendly looking avatar made to represent himself (see Figure 6.7 above).

McPherson does not ground his analysis on expertise, like the LawTubers, instead he states his videos are simply 'his opinion'. However, he makes a point of noting that his arguments 'are rooted in a lot of factual information' (Incredibly Average, 2018). Adding at the start:

> 'My intent here is to stick to facts not rumours. I will make note if at *any* point I drift into even the slightest speculation. But I'll try to refrain.' (01:21)

This kind of statement was also common in LawTube content (as noted above), and as such it worked to imbue McPherson's videos with a feeling of authenticity, even though he does not have an expert background. Despite his claim to objectivity, McPherson makes clear that he is in support of Depp and believes Heard, along with her witnesses, are lying in their evidence – even playfully introducing Tillet Wright as a 'Foe' in the screenshots above (Figure 6.7c). Before I move on, I want to make it clear that although I do analyse some of the claims McPherson makes in his videos here, I am not doing so to comment on their validity. Instead, I am interested in how McPherson constructs his arguments as believable.

McPherson's video presents itself as meticulous. He focuses on three instances where Heard accused Depp of domestic violence, analysing the 'facts' surrounding each one and explaining why he believes she was lying. Taken at face value, his arguments are convincing. If watched as intended, his video comes across as reasoned, researched, and forensic in its attention to detail. Yet, when parsed over with more precision, it becomes clear that the seemingly endless volume of 'evidence' is mostly based on spurious assumptions; incomplete testimonies and court documents; and obscure social media posts. For example, McPherson spends a portion

[68] Tillet Wright does not name Heard or Depp in this article.

of the video 'analysing' an incident included in Heard's original statement submitted to the court as part of her evidence for receiving a DVRO. In her statement, Heard states that Depp headbutted her, punched her repeatedly in the head and face, and dragged her by the hair resulting in some of it being pulled out (see Wallis, 2023, pp. 129-138 for full details). Depp admits to headbutting Heard in a text message to Heard's father, and in a voice-recording made by the couple at a later date (ibid, p. 129). Heard submitted photographic evidence of the injuries she sustained which included facial bruising and a cut and bleeding lip, as well as photos of clumps of her hair that were taken by Raquel Pennington – Heard's friend and neighbour – and Kevin Murphy, Depp's house manager (ibid, p. 131). The next day, Heard appeared on James Corden's *The Late Late Show* for which she had her injuries covered up by her make-up artist, who later testified to this in court (ibid, p. 134).

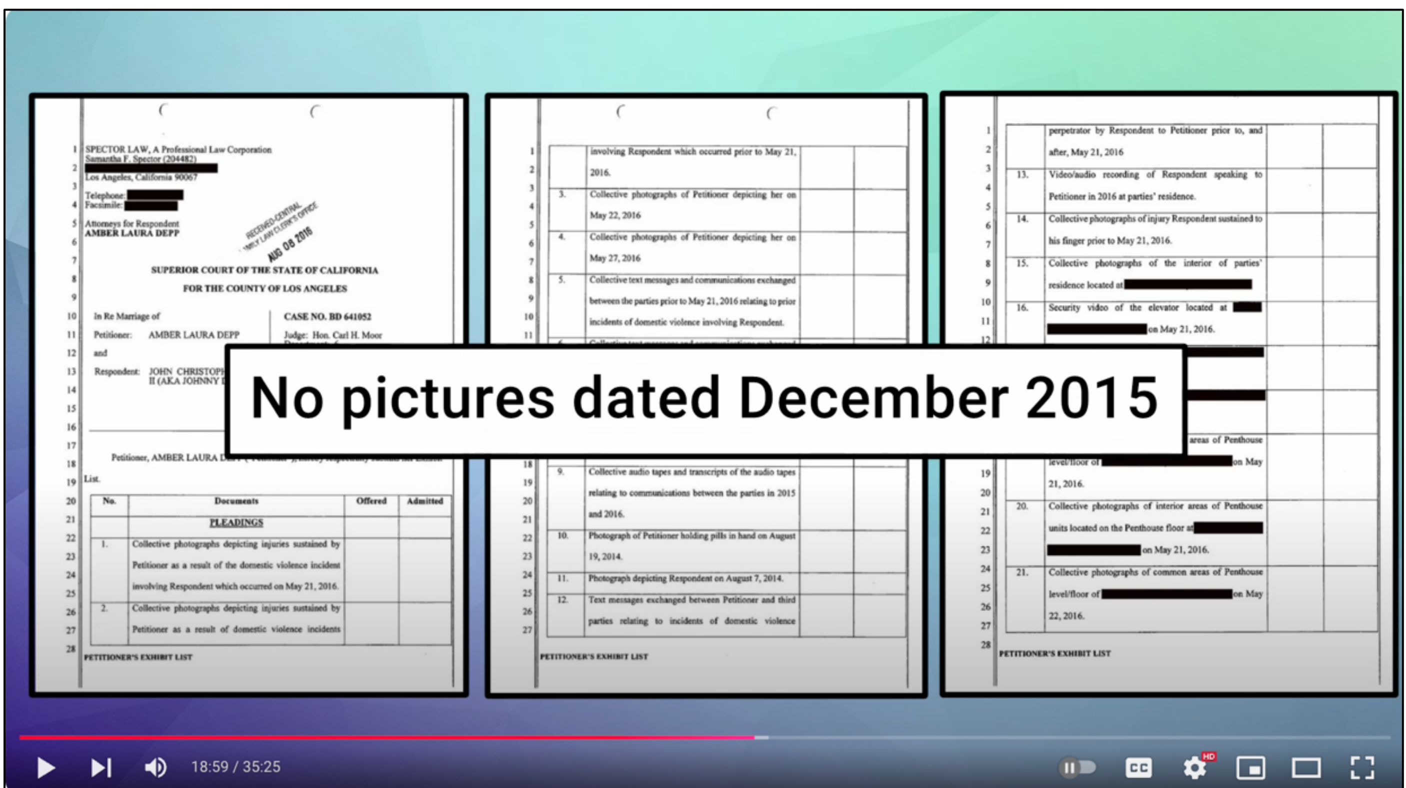


Figure 6.8 Screenshot from Incredibly Average (2018) video exampling the 'evidence' drawn on

McPherson's video makes no mention of Depp's confessions or to the photographic evidence presented by Heard. In fact he states that Depp denies the attack, and draws attention to Heard's exhibit list for her DVRO filing in which there does not appear to be any photos listed for the date of the assault which McPherson's voice over notes he finds 'odd' (Figure 6.8 above) (Incredibly Average, 2018). The court documents make up McPherson's most convincing evidence claims, but he does not explain where to access these documents and only includes

partial and edited screenshots, meaning the viewer must take his word for their veracity. Besides Heard's exhibition list, McPherson also takes issue with her appearance, and it is on this note that he spends a significant amount of time (Figure 6.9 below).

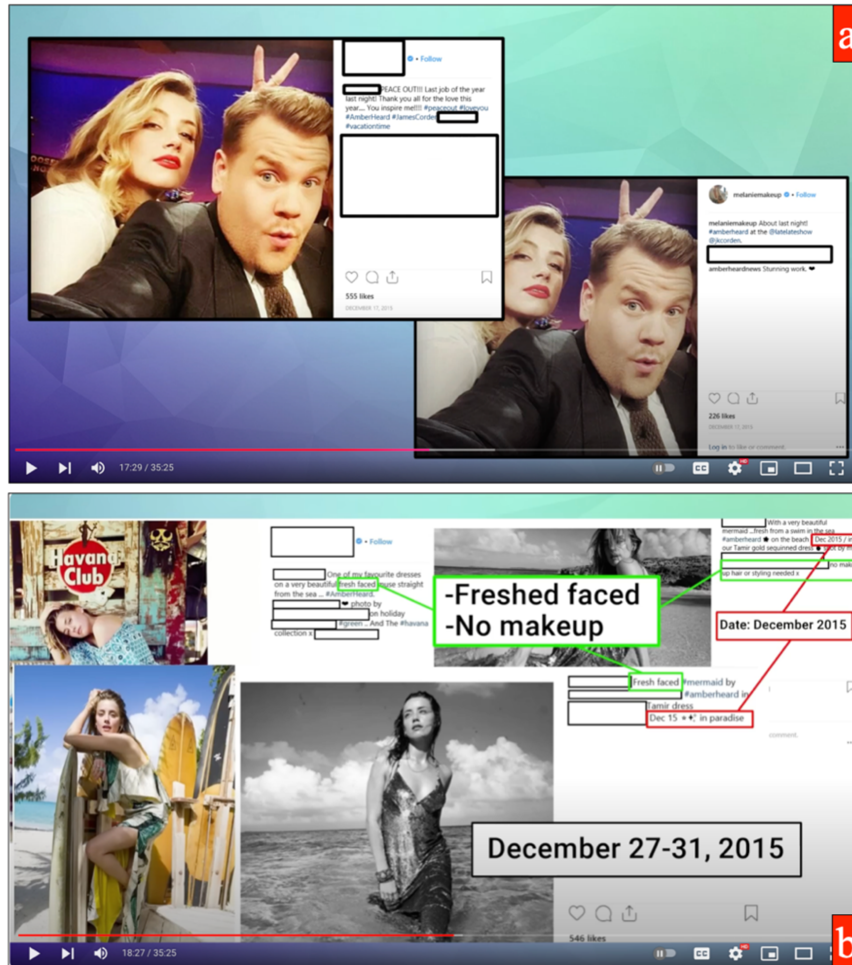


Figure 6.9 Screenshot from Incredibly Average (2018) demonstrating the focus on Heard's appearance

The bulk of McPherson's arguments are based on Instagram posts from Heard and her associates. Again, on the face of it, this comes across as forensic in his search for information, yet in reality it functions as a type of fun house mirror version of research that Klein (2023) observed in her alt-right double. McPherson uses an Instagram post from Heard's makeup artist (Figure 6.9a) the day after the alleged incident firstly as a means to visualise the lack of injury to Heard's face but also to call Heard's evidence into question. As he notes:

> 'neither of these individuals were ever mentioned by Amber, nor placed on her witness list. I find that interesting because they would each be able to vouch for the clumps of hair missing, and also the busted lip, near broken nose and other horrifying facial injuries.' (Incredibly Average, 2018, 17:24).

As I noted above, Heard's makeup artist *did* go on to testify to seeing and covering up these injuries in court – highlighting that McPherson's research is only based on partial information. Of course, he did film this in 2018, before all the evidence was made public, but this was shared by users in my dataset in 2022 as evidence of Heard's lies and manipulation.

McPherson then goes on to analyse a number of images of Heard from various social media posts in the days following the incident to further emphasise the lack of injury to Heard's face, including the ones in Figure 6.9b above. McPherson notes that these images were taken on Depp's private island 'by mutual friends' (Incredibly Average, 2018, 18:05). He highlights the words from the captions that describe Heard as 'fresh faced' and being supposedly make-up free and adds his own note that the photos were taken between 27th-31st of December 2015 but notes he would not go into the details of how he figured that out. This gives the impression of time and research, but again this is all based on partial and spurious information. In his voice over, McPherson notes that the photos were taken, 'A short two weeks after having her hair ripped out and face smashed with a full bodyweight headbutt' (ibid, 18:20). Again, he uses his voiceover to problematise Heard's testimony as he notes, 'I only keep repeating that to emphasise the lack of visible injury' (ibid, p. 18:25). In that way, McPherson's videos work as a type of body surveillance of Heard, redolent of celebrity tabloid magazines that similarly pick apart images of female celebrities as a means of pointing out the flaws that viewers would otherwise never have noticed.[69]

This is an indication of how McPherson's video presents his findings and evidence for his claims, however this is a common genre of YouTube video. The format follows a 'video essay' style – popularised on YouTube by mostly left-leaning influencers (MacDowell, 2024) – with a 'true crime' focus, another popular genre of YouTube video (Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022). As both these types of content follow a 'researcher presenting information' set up, this imbues McPherson's video with the same kind of reading and gives it a feeling of authority. However, as I have demonstrated, this is a fun house version of research, that has all the same markers of an investigation, without the addition of fact checking. Still, by following this style of YouTube content, McPherson's video essay falls into what Enli (2015) refers to as a 'predictable'

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[69] Similarly, this emphasis on *visual* injury is redolent of how 'real' rape has historically been constructed in news media, which I will return to in the final section of this chapter.

framing, and adopting these generic features thus gives the video a feeling of authenticity. In fact, Enli's seven characteristics for mediated authenticity (namely: predictability; spontaneity; immediacy; confessions; ordinariness; ambivalence; and imperfection) are particularly helpful for explaining how McPherson is constructed as a believable personality.

This was McPherson's first YouTube video. As he notes in the description, he chose to make it 'to share information that isn't really being talked about. Yet, it seems like important information' (Incredibly Average, 2018, video description). Enli explains that a media producer's aim is 'to come across as personal, engaged, and emotionally driven rather than calculated and strategic' (Enli, 2015, p. 137), and it is clear how McPherson's description of his decision can be framed in this way. The decision to upload this video comes across as a spontaneous and sincere decision to start a YouTube channel specifically to share information he thought was being missed. The pretence is that he is a mere functionary, compelled to act in order to preserve justice and truth.

As I mentioned earlier, McPherson's video was published soon after Depp had sued *The Sun* and several mainstream news organisations had started commenting on the trial but was shared by users in my dataset during the 2022 US trial. This indicates something of its longevity and sense of immediacy – not in the same way that the LawTubers' livestreams worked, but still allowing these YouTubers and their audiences to construct meaning together in a 'shared now' (Enli, 2015). Again, this emphasises the *collaborative* production of knowledge online which is highlighted, still, by McPherson's role as a member of a community of Depp fans. This community member status was further emphasised by McPherson positioning himself as 'ordinary': indeed, his channel name is Incredibly Average. In the video, he regularly draws attention to his unprofessionalism (he apologises for the poor quality of his audio) and notes at the beginning 'I've put a lot of work into this, even if it doesn't show' (00:05) demonstrating a kind of self-deprecating quality which comes across as sincerity feeding into that believable personality compared to the synthetic personality of the mainstream presenter (Tolson, 1991). Furthermore, his video comes across as 'homemade' and 'low budget' (as the screenshots demonstrate). He makes a few mistakes he later corrects in his comments section, all of which give his video a feeling of 'imperfection' and firmly establishes McPherson as an ordinary community member, simply trying to uncover 'the truth'. It is worth noting here that his mistakes make him more believable, whereas *Heard's* mistakes are seen as evidence of her

deceptive nature, a trend we also noticed in our analysis of social media commentary centred around Depp's return to filming during the Cannes Film Festival (Boyle *et al.*, 2024).

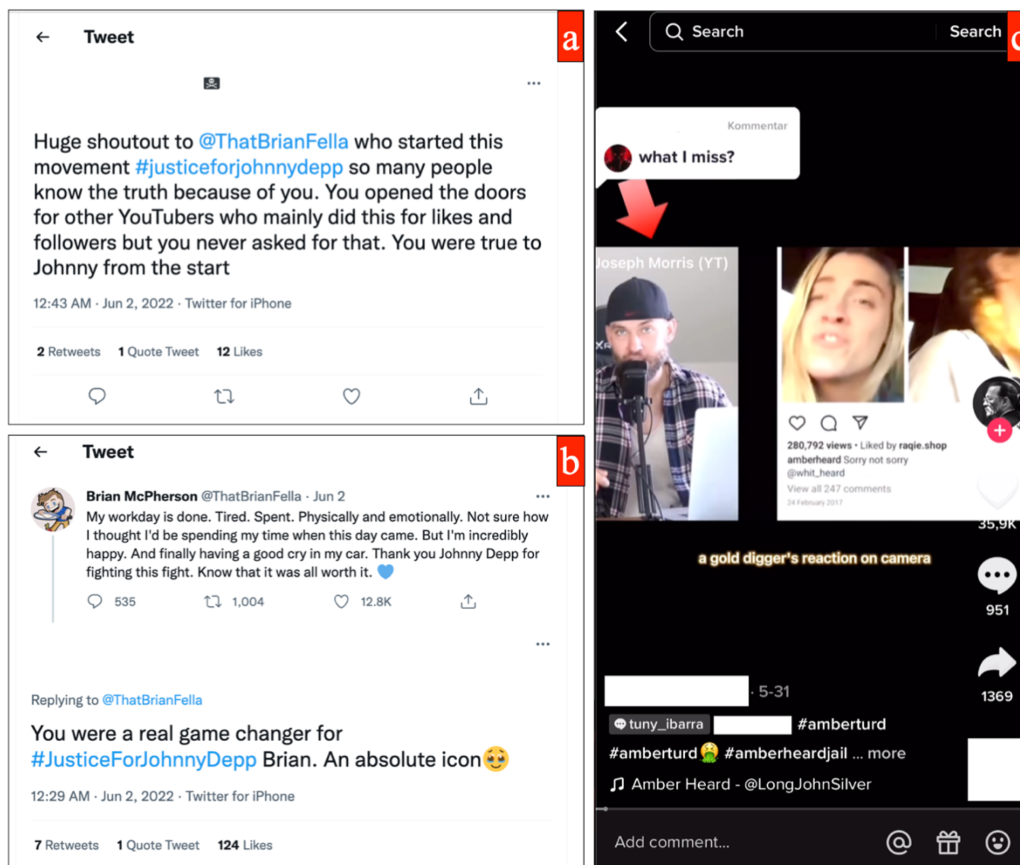


Figure 6.10 Posts highlighting the influence of YouTubers

Like the LawTubers mentioned above, McPherson positions himself as separate to 'mainstream' media and thought. In his description he notes 'I'm not trying to sway anyone's opinion. I know minds are mostly made up at this point' and at the end of his video he stresses, 'I know none of this is popular opinion but I'm not trying to win anyone over, just sharing my views on things' (Incredibly Average, 2018, 34:56). Like the quote attributed to Baker, McPherson is implying a difference in the 'mainstream' narrative compared to what is happening online. Furthermore, like the LawTubers in the video discussed above, he opens the door for popular conspiracies shared during the US trial. He analyses them in detail with reference to court documents – giving them a feeling of legitimacy. As such, McPherson – together with the LawTubers – imbue their content with a sense of ambivalence, however this is a different kind of ambivalence to the mainstream media discussed above. Rather than being ambivalent on their 'stance' on who is 'the true' victim, they are ambivalent on their *role* as 'truthtellers'. Unlike mainstream news media, whose role is to relay information from a

position of authority – which is negatively received in an environment centred on collaboration – the Law/Youtubers construct a more indifferent role for themselves as 'information sharers' which works as a type of strategic ambivalence as it downplays their influence on their audiences. Enli (2024) describes this best in her analysis of Donald Trump who refuses to be labelled a 'politician' instead calling himself a 'businessman' which works to downplay his position in the establishment.

Finally, McPherson also includes elements of personal and emotional confession in his content – particularly in the content posted during the US trial (Figure 6.10 above). In Figure 6.10b McPherson confesses his emotional reaction to the verdict and how the process had left him 'Tired. Spent. Physically and emotionally'. Posters in my dataset responded fawningly, one thanking him for being 'a real game changer' and 'an absolute icon' (Figure 6.10b). Another noting 'You opened the doors for other YouTubers who mainly did this for likes and followers but you never asked for that' demonstrating his perceived authenticity, as the poster ends 'You were true to Johnny from the start' (Figure 6.10a). It is clear, then, how McPherson was constructed as a reliable source of knowledge during the trial – emphasised by his connection to Depp through Waldman. However, he was not the only trusted YouTube personality, as the poster in Figure 6.10c, and the ones in Figure 6.11 below indicate.

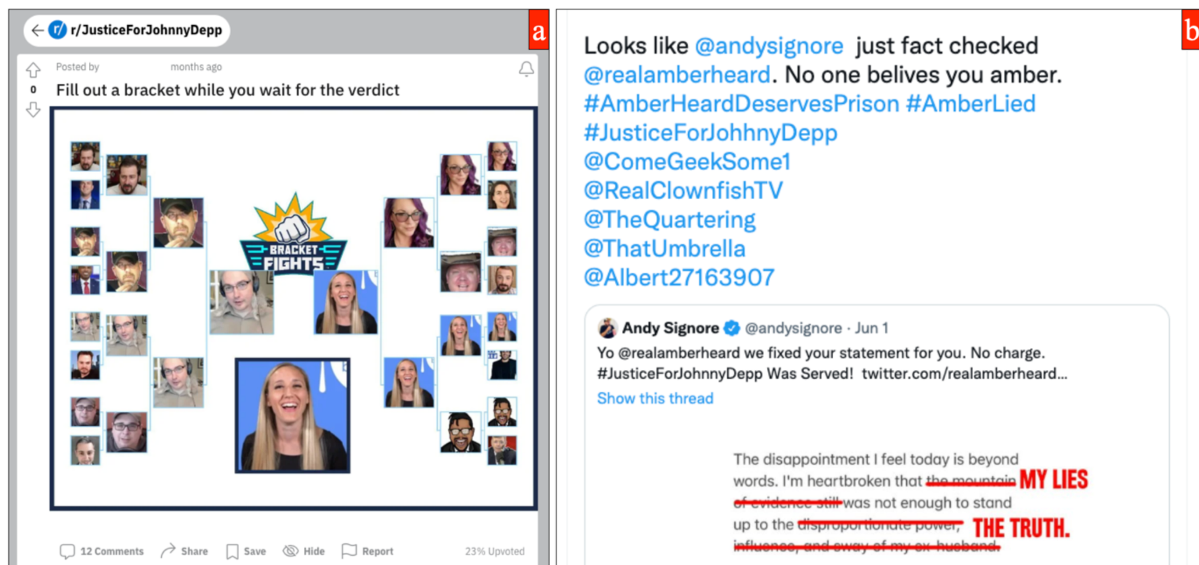


Figure 6.11 Posts highlighting the influence of YouTubers (2)

These posts demonstrate the power YouTubers had over the online discourse centring this trial. Across all other social media platforms monitored, users referenced YouTubers when discussing their opinions on the trial. All but one of the accounts mentioned in the posts above

are YouTubers who made content analysing evidence presented during the trial.[70] The two LawTubers mentioned earlier are also featured here (Figure 6.11a) along with 14 others. It is clear, then, that YouTube is constructed as a type of *uncompromised* expert/believable space in my dataset. YouTube influencers are able to construct a type of expert knowledge in their videos by either appealing to their professional credentials (LawTubers) or their personal research and insight (McPherson and similar commentators). This is redolent of Wahl-Jorgensen's note on epistemological vocabularies which reads these authentic seeming and immediate responses to stories as *truthful* (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 75). Even though they regularly note certain points are just their 'opinion', by emphasising they are basing their opinion on 'facts' and expertise, their videos work to sway an audience in their direction. The affordances of YouTube are key here as this expert framing is dependent on the long form, interactive content that gives the impression of detailed and thorough analysis, and speaks directly to an audience, answering their questions and addressing their theories allowing the personalities and their audiences to 'construct meaning and authenticity together' in a 'shared "now"' (Enli, 2015, p. 137).

Although the Salmond Trial did not attract the same kind of YouTube attention, Craig Murray's daily blogs outlining the events of each day at the trial fulfilled a similar function. Murray would attend the court each day – or at least attempt to – and report on the evidence presented, giving his own commentary along with it (discussed in **Chapter Four**). As the analysis in the Salmond Chapter outlined, this allowed Murray and his readers to construct their own community knowledge around the trial and the supposed conspiracy to undermine Salmond. The daily nature of the blogs, together with the familiar structure, haphazard format, use of personal opinion and analysis, together with his motivation for reporting on the Trial as an independent blogger to reveal the 'truth', all fit these same characteristics of mediated authenticity that allowed Murray to set himself up as the uncompromised expert reporting on the Salmond Trial. To further demonstrate how this works, it is helpful to look at an example of an online personality who failed to convincingly sway their audience: Dr Charlotte Proudman.

[70] Andy Signore (seen in Figure 6.11b) was himself accused of sexual misconduct by female employees, resulting in him being removed from his previous channel's employment (Tenbarge, 2022a). Like other YouTubers connected to Waldman, he later posted videos of himself meeting Depp backstage at one of the actor's shows (ibid).

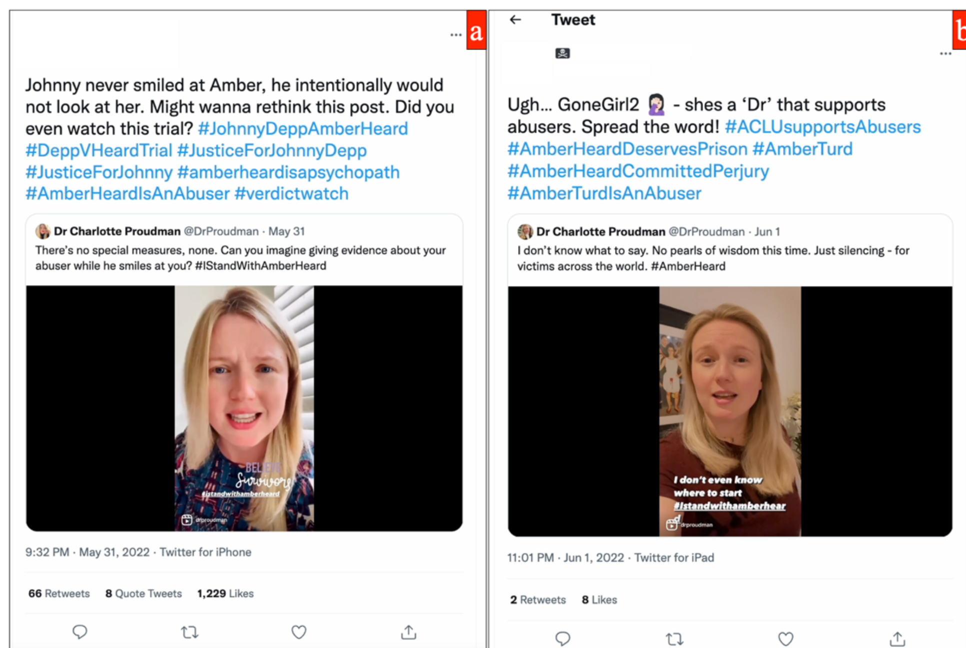


Figure 6.12 Tweets criticising Dr Charlotte Proudman

Proudman, like the BlackBeltBarrister mentioned earlier, is a UK-based lawyer however Proudman is also an academic and, at the time of the trial, did not have a YouTube channel and posted on Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. Proudman aligned herself with the pro-Heard social media users and was one of the most prominent dissenting voices in my dataset posting both TikTok videos and Tweets with her comments on the trial (Figure 6.12 above and Figure 6.13 below). The first major difference between Proudman and the Law/YouTubers discussed above is her choice of platforms. TikTok and Instagram reels, although also video based, have very different formats to YouTube. Firstly, they centre short form content, meaning that personalities have less time to convince an audience of their authenticity and/or expertise.[71] Indeed, Proudman does not mention her credentials in any of the videos in my dataset. By focusing on short-form content, Proudman limits herself to only discussing one point at a time, and because she does not ground it in her expertise (like the LawTubers discussed above) or her own research (like McPherson), it is easy to dismiss. Indeed, none of the posters in either Figure 6.12 or Figure 6.13 mention Proudman's legal background, focusing instead on her being a '"Dr"' (Figure 6.12b) and a 'feminist' (Figure 6.13a).

[71] TikTok has started to allow longer form content more recently, but this was the case during the Depp v Heard trial.

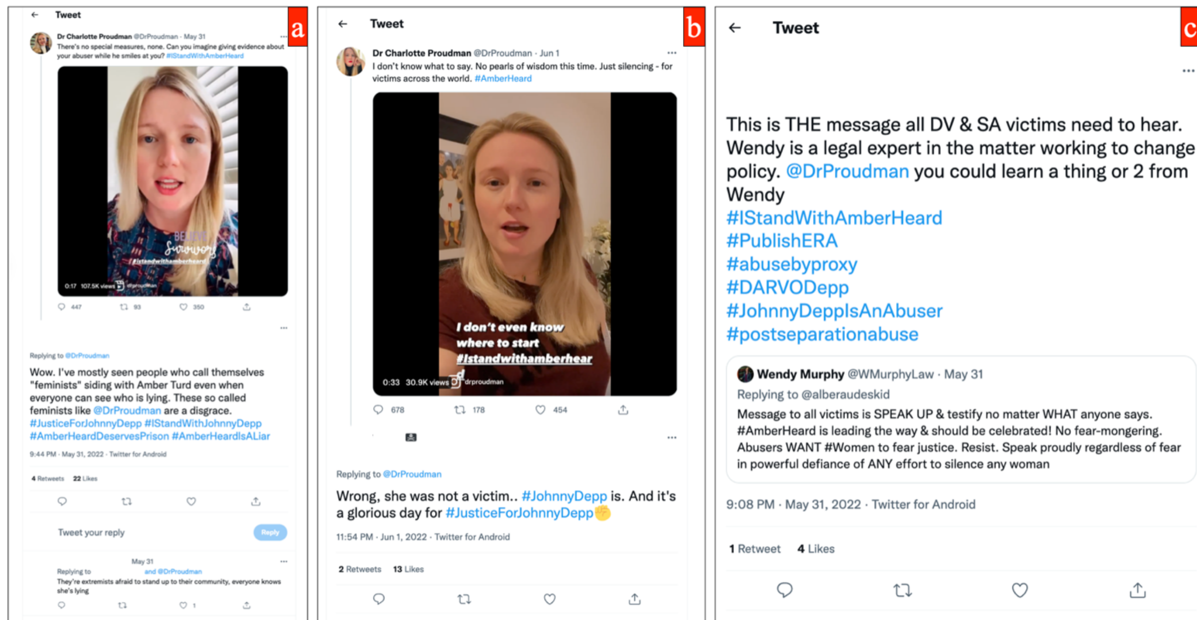


Figure 6.13 Tweets criticising Dr Charlotte Proudman (2)

As with the mainstream media, the post-truth debate has resulted in a distrust of all 'traditional' sources of news and knowledge (Harsin, 2018), especially when they are seen as part of the 'establishment'. This is particularly true for academics, as the post in Figure 6.12b indicates. There is a long history of anti-intellectualism in America (Hofstadter, 1963). In the UK, this is aligned with a particularly gendered suspicion as female academics are often met with ridicule and opprobrium for asserting their professional credentials (Cameron, 2024). I discussed this issue in **Chapter Two**, where female academic doctors like Jill Biden were ridiculed for using their professional titles (ibid, pp. 113-115). As I argued, titles are used as a means of marking difference in social relationships, and professional titles like 'Dr' establish a kind of hierarchy. As such, women are typically denied their professional titles as a means of maintaining the gender hierarchy through name. Like the mainstream news media, academics can be seen as a type of epistemological dictator, who 'tell' people what to think rather than collaborating with an audience and coming to a shared understanding. Indeed, in the video the commenter is responding to, Proudman is reacting to the verdict noting that she normally 'has some pearls of wisdom' to share – positioning herself as an authoritative voice. She goes on to emphasise the silencing effect this verdict will have on victims of men's violence, noting 'women, girls, survivors of domestic abuse…will watch this and will scare *uttering* the name of the person that abused them. Fearing the consequences.'

Proudman is not saying anything untoward, yet her delivery is lacking any of the features discussed earlier that would work to imbue her words with authenticity. Firstly, she *claims* her expertise and bases it in her academic achievements (‘Dr’). This works to further her *in*authenticity as an agent speaking from within the paradigm, or the ‘establishment’ – hence even a Heard supporter critiquing her delivery of support (Figure 6.13c), suggesting she should be more like a different legal expert who notably does not have ‘Dr’ in their username. The reference to ‘Gone Girl’ in Figure 6.12b is particularly telling. Although Gillian Flynn’s novel is *critically* acclaimed for challenging the gendered roles often found in white, middle-class America (Christensen, 2020), Flynn’s subversive take on the Domestic-Noir genre is popularly read and understood as another story about a ‘psycho bitch’ (Saner, 2014) – again, pointing to the issue with the ambivalent framing of mainstream portrayals of violence against women.

As such, Proudman is reduced to the crazy ‘feminist’ and ‘extremist’ (Figure 6.13a). Her comments about the proceedings – in which she problematises the lack of special measures and the effects this might have on the presentation of the evidence – are read as a personal failure in not having paid attention to Depp’s performance in the trial (Figure 6.12a), which of course is not seen as a performance. Proudman is aware of the online backlash (see Gentleman, 2025). It extends beyond this trial, and caused her to leave social media for a time (ibid), demonstrating how widespread these feelings are. The resistance to Proudman also seems to be leaning into a neoliberal understanding of expertise that resists any association with community (feminists) or establishment (academia). Instead, individual exceptionalism that is based more on *experience* than on learned expertise is praised (Figure 6.13e) – which I will come on to in the next sections. Before that, however, I want to look at the only LawTuber in my dataset that posted in support of Heard (Figure 6.14 below).

The posters in Figure 6.14 are commenting on a clipped section of the LawTuber Leeja Miller’s video titled *In Defense of Amber Heard* (L. Miller, 2022). Like the LawTubers discussed earlier, Miller also creates content centred on her expertise as a lawyer, however, unlike the other LawTubers Miller did not livestream or recentre her content around the Depp v Heard trial. This was a deliberate decision made in an effort to protect herself as she notes she, too, is a victim of domestic violence (L. Miller, 2022). Besides the decision not to create more content on the trial, Miller also turned the comment function off on this video – cutting off the ability to collaborate with her audience. On Twitter, people reposted segments of her video – as in Figure 6.14 – however this was not linked back to her original video, which hinders the

solidarity-building efforts. Unlike with Proudman, Miller's video is praised by the posters in Figure 6.14, but without the added community building tools that the other LawTubers utilise, the positive impact is limited with only one retweet and eight likes. This points to the final issue with social media, and the reliance on online personalities for solidarity building: inequality in the attention economy.

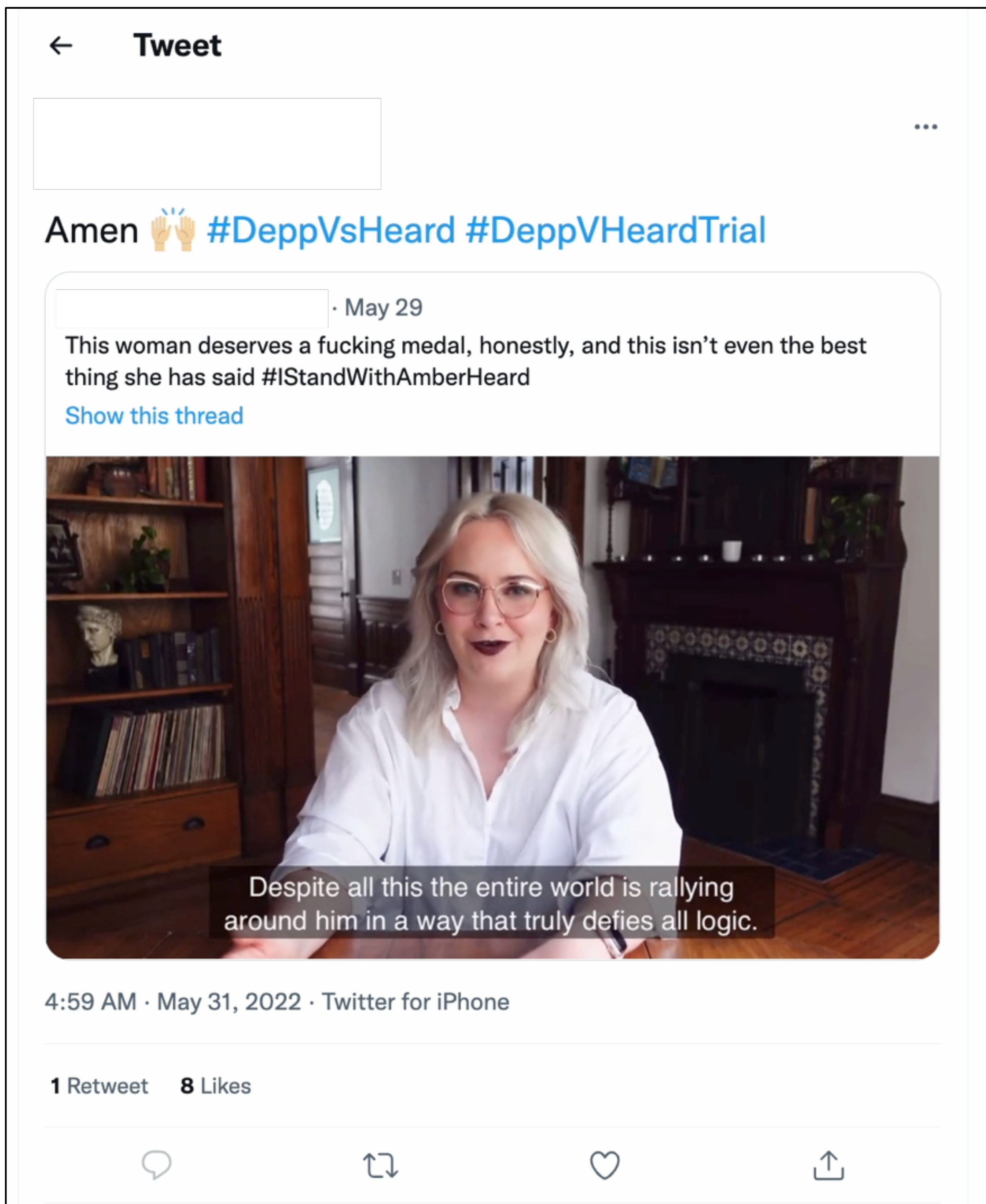


Figure 6.14 Pro Heard YouTuber

The pro Depp community greatly outnumbered those in support of Heard. We encountered the same issue when analysing tweets focused on Depp's involvement in the 2023 Cannes Film Festival (Boyle *et al.*, 2024). In that dataset, and in this one, there was no equivalent community of users posting in support of Heard. This highlights the issue with social media as a site of resistance. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins put it 'The "solidarity-building" capacities of social media…are an affordance without an inherent politics, and so can work just as easily *for* power as against it' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 134). Social media platforms are centred around numbers, engagement, and different personalities and therefore the bigger the number, the higher the follower count, the more the engagement, the more power, and the more believable the personality. This is further emphasised when considering the monetisation of social media products. For an online personality's work to be economically viable, they need a following, and as a result their content is created in collaboration with their audience as they need to be attentive to what their audience wants from them. There is therefore an economic incentive to agree with the audience, rather than challenge them and risk alienating them. Similarly, social media platforms rely on an engagement-based revenue system and therefore have an economic incentive in keeping discussions like this contentious, in an effort to keep people online. As a result, 'truth' online is culturally constructed in line with the majority.

This is in line with findings from the previous chapter, which argued that posters emphasised Depp's believability by drawing attention to the size difference in support for him compared to Heard. They evidenced this by highlighting the number of 'likes' or 'follows' each actor accumulated during the trial (**Chapter Five**). In this section, I have expanded this analysis by focusing on the believability of supporters in relation to the different online 'personalities' that create communities of knowledge around these cases online. These communities of knowledge centre numbers and engagement, demonstrating a shift in the traditional focus on 'she said, he said' discourses that feminist scholars writing and researching these issues have thus far been concerned with. By shifting focus to the *commentators* it is clear that believability online is not only about one's subjectivity and performance, as Banet-Wieser and Higgins (2023) have argued, it is instead about *who has the most supporters and how believable those supporters are*. I have demonstrated how this worked with different online 'personalities' who are constructed as more authentic and trustworthy above. In the next section, I will turn to how this works with commentators that emphasise their professional experience.

## The Professionals

Besides the online personalities, users in my dataset were also quick to highlight specific types of professionals as believable sources of information on the trial. These professionals are different to the LawTubers above because they are not social media 'personalities' in the sense that their main source of revenue is not their social media profile, although some of them do have a social media, and mainstream media, presence. Instead, their 'personality' is centred on their claim to experience and their professional reputations. For example, Judge Jeanine Pirro is a former District Attorney and a current right-wing commentator and co-host of the Fox News program *The Five*. One of the most shared clips in my dataset was a segment of Pirro's discussion about the verdict on *The Five* (Figure 6.15).

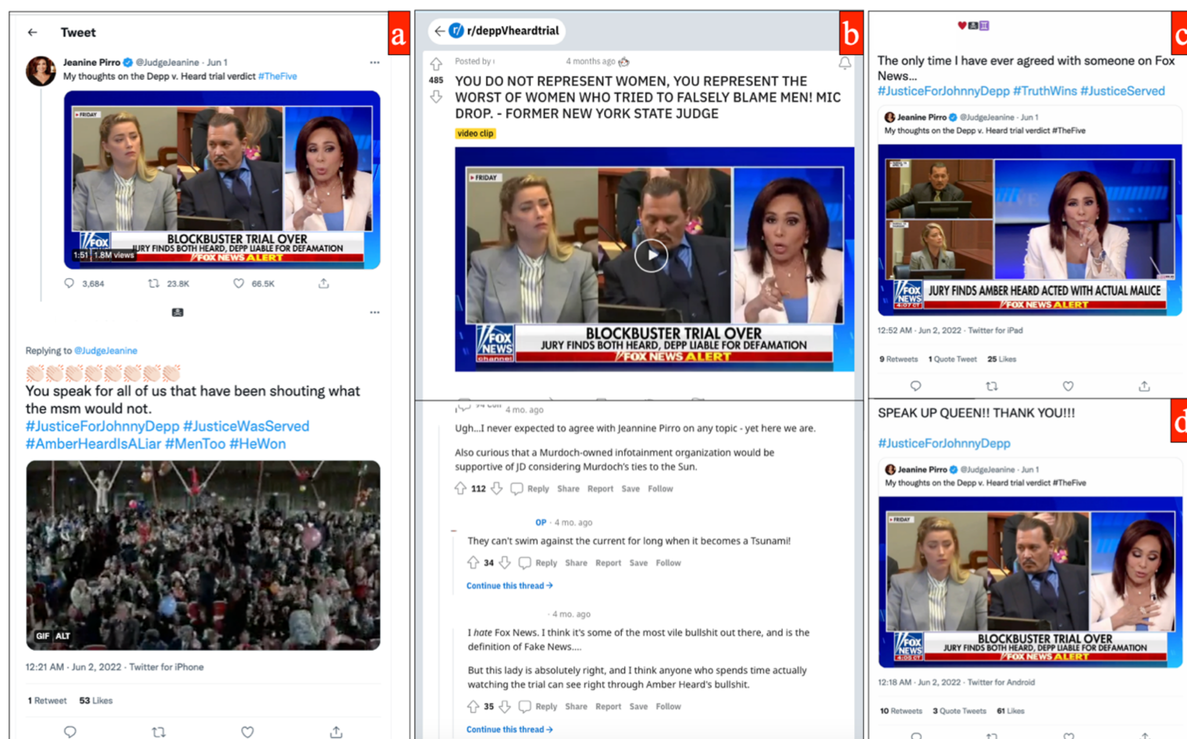


Figure 6.15 Posts venerating Judge Jeanine Pirro

Pirro posted the clip herself on her Twitter page which was shared across social media platforms.[72] As the screenshots indicate, Pirro's comments were widely praised *despite* the fact that they came from a mainstream, right-wing, news presenter. Both the poster in Figure 6.15c and the commenters under Figure 6.15b note their surprise at agreeing with something being shared on Fox News. Again, the issue with mainstream media (and Fox News in particular) is

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[72] See https://x.com/JudgeJeanine/status/1532118296396546050.

made clear as it is derided in the comments as ‘Murdoch-owned infotainment’, ‘the most vile bullshit out there’ and ‘the definition of Fake News’ (Figure 6.15b), yet they still note their agreement with Pirro. Of course, this is partly because she is expressing their opinion, but I argue the reason Pirro’s video was so widely praised is because of the emphasis on her *professional experience*.

In the video, Pirro made several references to her past professional experience and credentials:

> ‘I’m sorry for saying it again, I started the first domestic violence unit in the nation, I’ve dealt with battered women for thirty years’ and, ‘I would tell a jury, as a Judge, if you find that one witness has testified falsely with respect to one fact, you are free to disregard their entire testimony’.

The emphasis on her years of experience and ‘pioneering’ efforts works as an assertion of her expertise and therefore her trustworthiness and authenticity. Posters in my dataset, too, emphasised Pirro’s *legal* background, as Figure 6.15b attributes their quote from Pirro to ‘FORMER NEW YORK STATE JUDGE’. Pirro’s Twitter handle (@JudgeJeanine) also frames her as a legal expert, which is ‘certified’ by Twitter’s verified badge, notifying users that she is a trusted and verified source.[73] This is different to Dr Proudman above, because Pirro is asserting her *legal* background, not her academic one, and focuses her claims of expertise on her years of professional experience in the courtroom rather than on her academic knowledge and qualifications. Pirro’s emphasis on her professional experience also helps posters see her as separate to mainstream news media (Figure 6.15a), *even though she is talking on a mainstream news media platform*. It is easy for posters to see Pirro as a mainstream news ‘outsider’ because she posted this video on Twitter, so not everyone would know she was a host on Fox News, because it is not uncommon to have expert guests on news shows. As such, Pirro’s references to her role as a former Judge work as a type of ambivalent framing (Enli, 2015), positioning herself as ‘outside’ the mainstream news industry while obscuring her role on that platform. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, the fact that Pirro has a background in law further legitimises her statements as believable.

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[73] As discussed in Chapter Two, my data was collected before Elon Musk took over Twitter, when the verified badge was still only accessible to public figures who had applied for it and had gone through Twitter’s approval system.

As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) explain, part of the post-truth 'crisis' is centred on a belief that advances in digital technology have radically democratised public speech which, in turn, has resulted 'in a kind of epistemic anarchy that debases rational deliberation' (p. 120). This belief is central to anti-feminist narratives that position #MeToo as a kind of 'mob justice' that unfairly disadvantages accused men. To counter this new mediated environment where women are supposedly at some kind of structural advantage, there has been a renewed emphasis on the court system as the only legitimate space for these debates to take place (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023). However, the legal system is *profoundly* flawed in its approach to sexual and domestic violence, as many academics and legal scholars have demonstrated (e.g. J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023; Tuerkheimer, 2021) Furthermore, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) state:

> 'the standards of believability set by a court of law are procedural, not rational, it is not the case in any other sphere of public deliberation that we only believe what is wholly above doubt, or that we disbelieve everything that is, by definition, doubtable.' (p. 125).

The appeal to the courts as opposed to public and mediated debates is what Banet-Weiser and Higgins call 'strategic symbolic collapse' that position public accusations as morally impudent which in turn positions the legal system as the only credible space for these discussions to be had (ibid). Consequently, posters in my dataset stressed the importance of a *legal* victory for Depp:

> 'Johnny NEEDS to win in the courts…or else Amber and the mainstream media will continue to spin this. They spun fact we watched with our own eyes. It would be worse if she wins on technicalities of the law.'

Figure 6.16 Tweet commenting on Kathleen Zellner's believability

Posters in my dataset, therefore, frequently cited the court as the only legitimate space for information on the trial, and certain legal professionals – who emphasised their *professional experience* – as the true experts whose judgements could be trusted. For example, the poster in Figure 6.16 describes Kathleen Zellner as an example of someone who 'knows the truth. Always'. Zellner is an attorney who works in wrongful convictions, most famously on the Steven Avery case popularised in a Netflix documentary *Making a Murderer 2* (Demos & Ricciardi, 2018). As such, Zellner, like Pirro, is *also* a member of the mainstream media, however she also disguises this with her use of social media. As Horeck (2019) details in her analysis of the internet following around *Making a Murderer*, 'Twitter is…central to Zellner's public relations strategy' and played a significant role in solidifying her as the new 'star' of the show's second season through her frequent use of the #makingamurderer2 hashtag, hosting #askzellner Q and A sessions, and sharing updates from Avery (2019, p. 164).

In her tweet, Zellner positions herself as a kind of human lie detector, able to 'detect innocence'. Of course, that is not the role of a lawyer, their job being to simply put an argument together for their client, and certainly they cannot profess to being able to detect the truth. Yet, Zellner and the poster who is quote tweeting her, frame it this way (Figure 6.16). Again, like Pirro, Zellner emphasises her *professional experience* in law with her handle (@ZellnerLaw), and the reference to the number of cases she has had overturned. At the time I captured my data, Zellner's account was verified, again like Pirro's, imbuing her posts with a sense of

authenticity and as such, believability as a 'verified professional'. As such, Zellner and Pirro both construct a corporatised professional appeal which works to disguise their own role in mainstream media spaces. The significance of professional experience here follows the anti-intellectualist and anti-establishment framing of the online space discussed above. This can be compared, again, to Trump who, as Higgins (2019) notes, stresses that his 'instinct' is superior to expertise resulting in a presidency 'of whimsical inconstancy…in which all specialist input can be dismissed as fake' (Higgins, 2019, p. 135).

The partiality for professional experience over specialist knowledge is furthered in a post from my Reddit sample, where a user shared a Twitter thread compiled by a UK-based academic researching coercive control and domestic violence. This scholar was one of very few professionals that openly supported Heard in my dataset. I am not sharing the post as the academic has since deleted her account, and her account does not meet my 10,000-follower marker so I will not share her name either. However, the content of the post is not as important as the reception of it on this subreddit. The post was shared to the r/deppVheardtrial subreddit and was captioned:

> 'Here are some claims and facts that have come out that [academic's name] found particularly important as a coercive control & domestic abuse researcher. A thread.'

In the replies to this post, users mock and dismiss the academic's arguments as 'biased', 'bad faith', and 'hearsay'. One commenter notes that her arguments are 'either based on hearsay, lack of foundation or has no context' – calling on the legal framework to dispute the thread. It is worth noting here that the academic, like Proudman, used 'Dr' in her username, which suggests that this title is deemed inauthentic and unbelievable, potentially because of the common understanding of what 'Dr' means. When the person who posted the thread to Reddit asks 'Are you saying an expert on domestic violence doesn't matter? Whose opinions matter then?' another replies:

> 'The jury. I watched the trial like them, every second of it. From the experts we have seen on the stand "expert" means sweet fuck all. Either [sic] does your opinion. Facts over feelings.'

Again, the courtroom is constructed as the only legitimate space for deciding 'truth'. In fact, as the poster suggests, the Jury and the people who watched the trial are seen as having the only legitimate opinion on the outcome. Expert analysis and knowledge are dismissed as 'sweet fuck all'. This is perhaps an unsurprising conclusion, as the very premise of a Jury is to be

judged by one's *peers* rather than an expert. This also explains the online backlash toward the Judge in the UK trial, discussed earlier, as being corrupt (Figure 6.17 below).

The supposed bias of the Judge in the UK, came down to spurious links he had to *The Sun* and Heard's UK council, which harkens back to the neoliberal framing of expertise mentioned in the previous section. The UK Judge's position in the *establishment* just like the academic and Dr Proudman's position in academia (and *feminist* academia in particular)[74] is what makes their expertise *un*believable and biased. Therefore, in order to be seen as unbiased, experts had to base their claims on professional experience and had to be seen as *individuals* who were not part of an established organisation, institution, or community. By being seen as an individual reliant on professional experience (or 'judgement'), Zellner, Pirro, and the LawTubers before them, were able to speak the 'truth' which touches on the final point made by the commenter above on 'facts over feelings'.

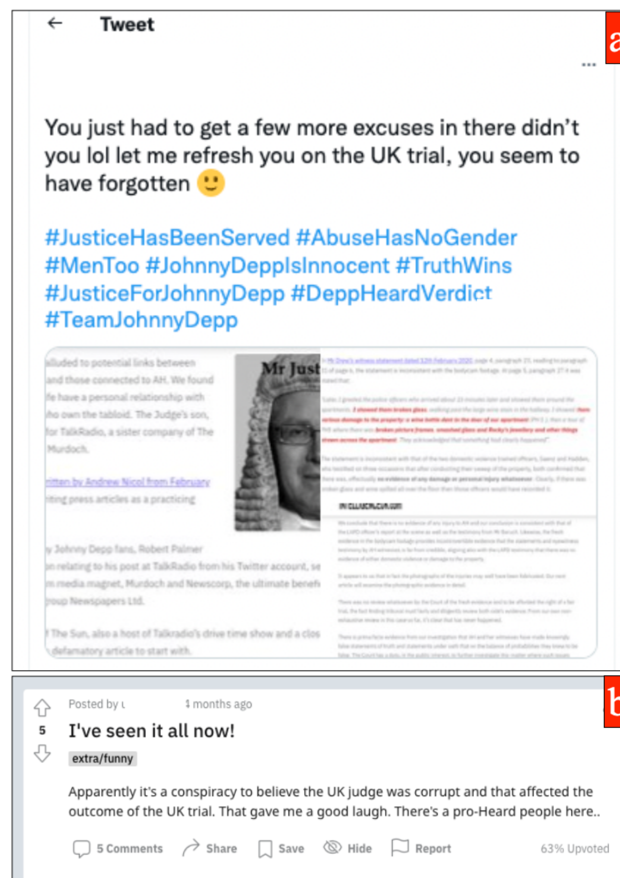


Figure 6.17 Posts sharing the UK Judge conspiracy

[74] For more on the suspicion of feminism specifically see Boyle (2024, p. 49).

The claims for 'facts' and 'truth' in my dataset were prevalent, yet any counter argument that attempted the same focus (such as the academic's thread described as looking at 'claims and facts') was ineffective. As I argued in the previous section, 'truth' online is constructed through collaborations between social media personalities and their audiences and is therefore based on engagement. As a result, whomever has the most followers, likes, and/or views is seen as the most believable and trustworthy source, creating a 'marketplace' for the truth. In other words, the repetition itself becomes the evidence. This is partly because, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue, the believability of a person's experience of violence cannot 'be "fact-checked" as it is not (primarily) about the facts but, rather, about who those facts pertain to' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023, p. 150). Backlash narratives that centre concerns over 'evidence' and 'facts' only work to restore the believability of men by emphasising the importance of the state, and of legal procedure. Therefore, the only professionals who were seen as believable in my dataset were a few 'exceptional' individuals (who notably had both a social and mainstream media presence) who based their expertise on their professional experience. Building on the analysis in the previous section that demonstrated believability is not only about one's subjectivity and performance (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023) but about how many supporters one has, this section has argued it is also about *who those supporters are*. Thus, I have demonstrated, having the 'right' kind of professionals speak out in support of Depp added to his overall believability online. As with the 'personalities' from the previous section, the most believable professionals were those who drew on the celebrity and media logics that make up social media to construct themselves as experts on this case (redolent of Finlayson's (2021, 2023) 'ideological entrepreneurs' above). Importantly, it is an expertise that is derived from *experience* rather than education. It is a neoliberal understanding of expertise that resists any association with 'the establishment' and instead emphasises individual exceptionalism. However, *personal* experience was also an important factor in my dataset which I will discuss now in the final section of this chapter.

## The Personal

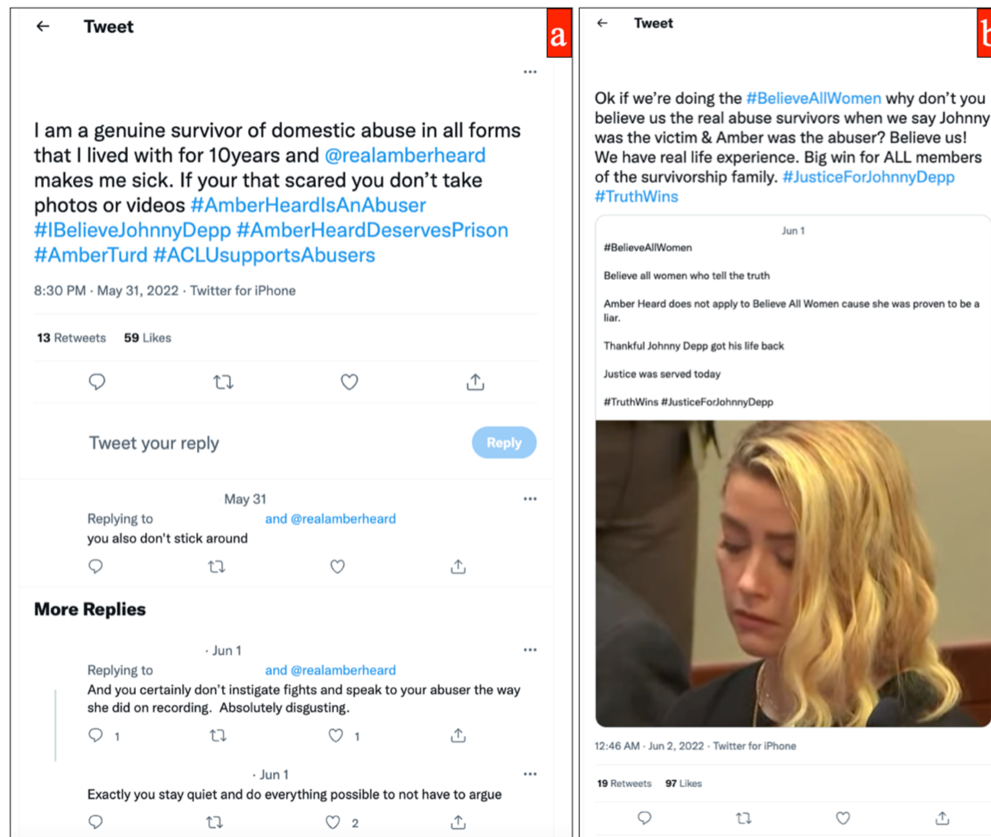


Figure 6.18 Survivors using personal experiences to condemn Heard

The personal experience users in my dataset drew on was mostly centred on their own experiences with domestic and sexual violence (above). As the posters below argue, because of this 'life experience' they are able to discern the 'genuine survivor' from the abuser. Like the law professionals above who were seen as being able to 'detect innocence', survivors of domestic violence are framed in a similar way. Recognising the personal experience of survivors as expertise is important, however, survivors are not a monolith. As Nicole Bedera explains, survivors are experts in their *own* experience of abuse, but they 'are not necessarily experts in *all* experiences of gender-based violence' (Bedera, 2022 - emphasis author's own). Through her research Bedera has found that survivors tend to see their experience as universal, and therefore 'rank the credibility of other victims' stories based on how similar they are to their own' (Bedera, 2022). The result of this is clear from the posts above and below.

The poster and commenters in Figure 6.18a argue that Heard cannot be a 'genuine' victim/survivor because her actions are not the actions of a 'real abuse survivor'. Likewise, the posters in Figure 6.19 below argue that because Heard no longer seems afraid of Depp, she

cannot be a victim. Heard's actions jar with their own, and as such they cannot believe her. Disbelieving survivors that fight back, or indeed start fights, evidence their injuries and stand up to their perpetrators is common and based on a number of myths and misconceptions about violence against women and how it operates in a relationship. As Bedera (2022) explains violence often works to reinforce traditional gender norms, as a means of maintaining patriarchy, and as such, when survivors do not abide by these gendered expectations they are easily cast as suspicious. In her research on survivors' experiences, Bedera notes that conservative survivors are quick to disbelieve women who 'fail to meet white feminine ideals like chastity or subservience to men's authority' (Bedera, 2022). Heard's admitted violence in the relationship, which she maintains was out of self-defence, is therefore read as *her* being the aggressor because it goes against traditional feminine norms (See Andersen, Silcox, & Isom, 2023 for more on female violence). Furthermore, as Bedera (2022) notes, these survivors are likely to feel righteous in their anger towards women like Heard because they feel that these women's stories threaten *their* credibility, like the commenters in Figure 6.19a and the poster in Figure 6.19b who focus on the issue of Heard being seen as a *representative*. As one notes, 'Her lies have deeply hurt me, makes me feel like us who have been through the trauma are irrelevant'.

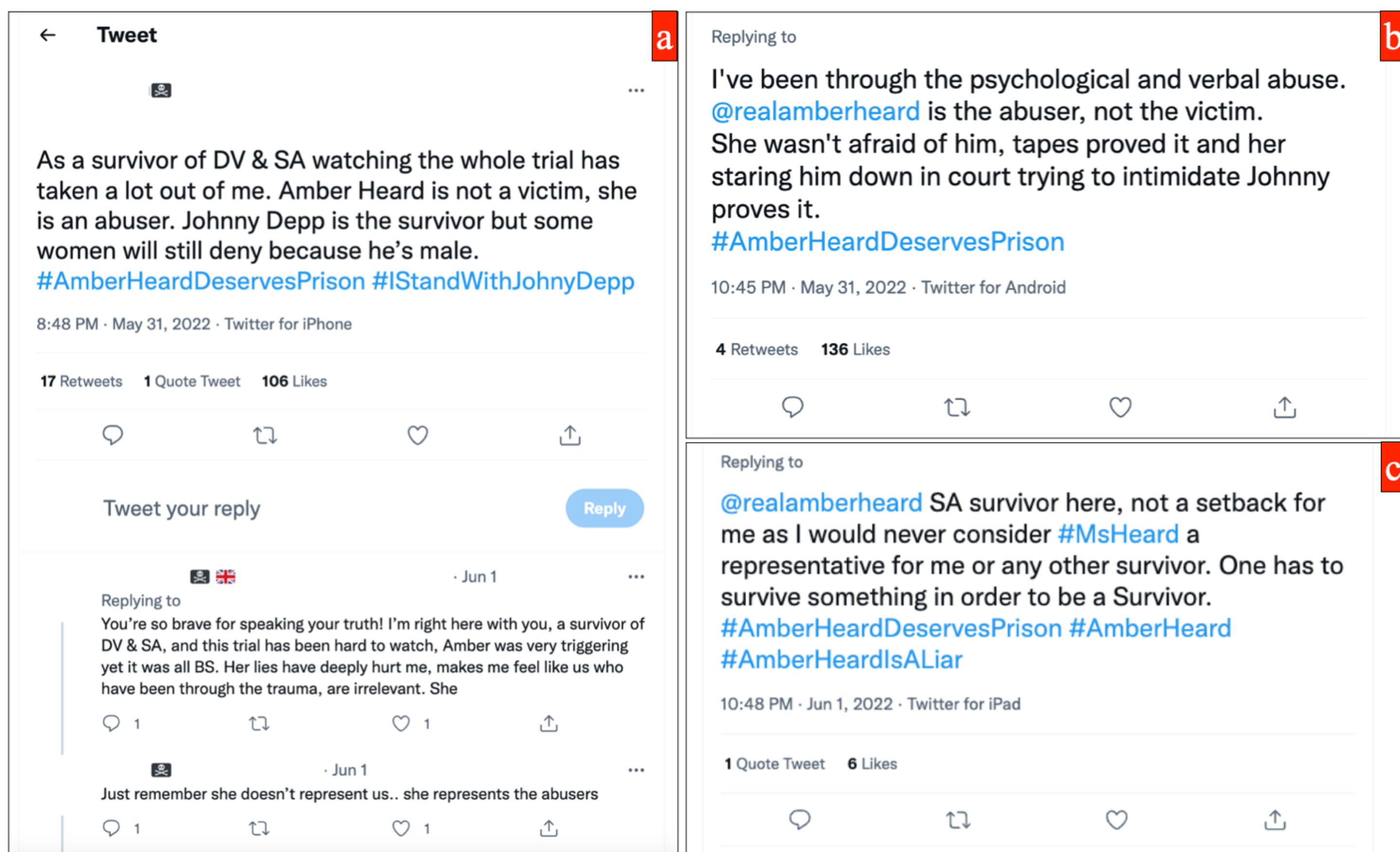


Figure 6.19 Survivors siding with Depp

The point on representativeness touches on wider feminist debates about experience vs expertise. As Sandra Harding (2012) argues a person's 'experience' does not constitute authenticated knowledge, because that requires critical reflection and a degree of collective legitimation. Again, it is important to recognise the value of personal experience but, as Boyle points out, 'the emphasis on experience as expertise sets the stage for highly personalised contests *between* women over the meaning and consequences of men's violence' (Boyle, 2024, p. 220 - emphasis author's own). Instead of understanding Heard's testimony as being part of a *culture* of violence, posters focus on specific moments and instances and refute her claims based on the fact that 'that didn't happen to me', or 'that's not how I did it'. Instead, as Boyle (2024) argues, by de-centring experience, feminist researchers can critique representational claims *without* invalidating personal experience, allowing space for the work of critical listening and analysis. With that in mind, it is interesting to note the pronouns 'us' and 'we' that appear in the posts and comments in Figure 6.18b and Figure 6.19a. This is redolent of the community building in the YouTube videos discussed above. Here, victim/survivors are

constructing their own type of community knowledge on what it means to be a victim/survivor of domestic abuse and creating clear boundaries on what passes as the 'real' thing.

The note about 'white feminine ideals' in the quote from Bedera (2022) above is also key here. As Richard Dyer (1988, 1997) explains in his exploration of whiteness in film, whiteness is constructed as 'ordinary' and 'normal' as he notes 'white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything' (Dyer, 1988, p. 45). Whiteness and white people therefore become 'the norm', setting up an illusion for being representative of 'everything' while at the same time drawing distinct differences between being 'normal' and being 'other'. However, there is a gendered dimension to whiteness. As outlined earlier in **Chapter Two**, Dyer (1997) explains, the category of 'white' as a race is often ignored, as a focus on race is a focus on the body and whiteness is often seen as transcending the body. Dyer connects this concept of race with Christianity and the body of Christ, who of course was able to transcend his physical form. Women, however, are unable to transcend the body. As Dyer explains, 'the model for white womanhood is the Virgin Mary, a pure vessel for reproduction who is sullied by the dark drives that reproduction entails' (ibid, p. 29). Heard is not just transgressing on gendered norms, but on gendered norms for *white* womanhood specifically.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Heard's feminist activism, alleged history of violence, together with her sexualised public image and her bisexuality all work against the image of a white woman as innocent, chaste, and subservient. Heard's victimhood is tainted by her transgression of white conservativism, and as such, leads some survivors who are entrenched in that ideology, to reject Heard's claims to the same victim status as themselves. Furthermore, as Bedera (2022) notes, since survivors universalise their experiences, Heard's failed whiteness, together with her relative wealth and power compared to non-celebrity victim/survivors, works to further alienate her from other survivors. Given this, it is interesting then, that many of these survivors chose to identify with Depp. The posters in Figure 6.18b and Figure 6.19a identify Depp as the 'true' survivor, relating their own experiences of abuse to his. As I noted in the data breakdown above, the majority of survivors in my dataset that identified as women were in support of Depp (60.4%) and took the verdict as a win for *themselves* as well as Depp. As one TikToker who identified as a woman survivor of domestic and sexual violence noted:

> ‘This is opening up people’s eyes to what abuse looks like, to what an abuser can look like and what a victim can look like. It is what advocates like me in the DV and SA community fight so highly for. So today was a win for us.’

Going back to the gendered component to whiteness, Dyer (1997) argues that the symbolic function of race is captured in the understanding of ‘dark vs light’. The darkness that exists in whiteness is often characterised as sexual, and it is this darkness that sullies white women who are meant to remain virginal and ‘pure’, hence the ruination of their reputations when they are linked to sex (**Chapter Two**). However, white men are able to transcend this darkness through the story of Christ. As Dyer explains:

> ‘in the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it. The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence in such pain.’ (ibid, p. 28)

Thus, Dyer argues, because white men are seen as possessing both lightness and darkness, they become the ‘universal signifier for humanity’ (ibid, p. 28). As such, Depp’s identity as a *white* man, means that his experience is seen as universal and relatable. This is compounded by the nature of his alleged victimhood.

Domestic violence, and sexual violence in particular, are discursively feminised. As Stephen Burrell and Alishya Dhir (2023) demonstrate, the ways in which masculinity is constructed socially (i.e. men are associated with ‘strength, power, unemotionality and never showing weakness’ (p. 35)) has resulted in a number of myths about male victimhood when it comes to experiences of domestic and/or sexual violence. For example, the false belief that men cannot be victims of domestic violence, or that domestic violence is somehow less harmful to men are oft repeated falsehoods (Burrell & Dhir, 2023). As Boyle (2019) explains, these myths are often bolstered by media representations that both feminise victimisation, and masculinise violence – resulting in a kind of dissonance for male victim/survivors. It is important to acknowledge this reality, and Boyle (2019) points out where feminist interventions into these conversations have failed at times. However, this is not to say men are not discursively linked to victimisation *at all*.

The emphasis on pain and suffering in the story about Christ and white masculinity is key here. As Lilie Chouliaraki (2024) argues in her book on the weaponisation of victimhood (discussed

in **Chapter One** and **Chapter Two**), white men have been historically constructed as the 'true victims' of modern times through discourses of war and violence. As she explains:

> 'vulnerability is not defined as a "universal" property of humanity but as a particular entitlement of white men as the quintessential victims of twentieth-century modernity. White men suffer as they fight, suffer as they kill, kill as they protect, and suffer from protecting.' (ibid, p. 73)

Chouliaraki (2024) explains that the current discourse on victimhood has been centred around a privileging of pain, which she argues favours the powerful. This is because 'competing claims to pain' obscure the connection between systemic suffering ('suffering as a condition…that ties the self to broader circumstances that perpetuate physical or symbolic violence') and tactical suffering ('suffering as a claim selectively adopted by individuals or groups for their gain') (ibid, p. 6). This has resulted in what she calls a type of 'emotional capitalism' in which different claims to pain compete for dominance. White men, being the most dominant, are discursively constructed as having the most to lose and as such, are more likely to be believed when they claim to be suffering (House, 2023). Arguably, Depp positioned himself as especially vulnerable in claiming pain that is discursively constructed as feminised (domestic abuse) as this calls into question his *masculinity*. This is what made Depp so *brave* to his supporters. As one TikToker who identifies as a woman and a survivor of both domestic violence and sexual assault commented:

> 'It saddens me how many women I'm hearing that think this is a defeat for domestic violence when in actuality it is a huge win. It is a huge win for men who have been silenced, who were too embarrassed, who were too ashamed, who were too fearful, who were thought they were going to be labelled as the perpetrator, who had false allegations against them. They finally feel vindicated. And maybe now more of our young boys, young men, will feel that it is okay to report violence that is done against them. And how can we not support that?... Because if you're against domestic violence and sexual assault, you don't see gender in this… It makes my heart happy to see that somewhere, somebody took domestic violence seriously, and that's a win for us all. And if you don't see it that way, then you're not against abuse. You're against a gender. And if I'm being blunt, then you aren't welcome in the domestic violence and SA community because that's not what we do here.'

Depp's perceived pain and suffering here is seen as representative of all survivors, not just of domestic abuse but of sexual assault – something Depp has never claimed to have experienced. Here, Depp's whiteness (which positions him as a 'universal signifier for humanity' (Dyer,

1997, p. 28)), together with his maleness (which sets him up as 'the quintessential [victim] of twentieth-century modernity (Chouliaraki, 2024, p. 73)), allows him to be seen as the 'true' victim who is representative of *all other victims/survivors.* This may seem contradictory, but as I argued in the previous chapter, Depp's status as a star allows him to occupy contradictory spaces and positions. It does not taint his star image, as it only adds to his embattled image of a struggling musician, embroiled in a battle with a predatory and discriminatory industry, as well as his own personal experience of violence and abuse. He is now *even more* deserving of his stardom, because he has overcome so much adversity to have it. Like Christ, Depp 'conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence' in his pain (Dyer, 1997, p. 28), making him *extra* extra-ordinary. As such, this is not a victimhood *all* white men could claim, but certainly one that white male *stars* can.

Although it is important and necessary to acknowledge the existence of male victims of domestic and sexual violence, it is equally important to acknowledge that the majority of domestic violence and sexual assault victims are women, and the majority of perpetrators – regardless of victim/survivor gender – are men (Burrell & Dhir, 2023). It should not be seen as an attack on male victim/survivors to acknowledge this fact. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the legal system is unfairly stacked against women when it comes to trying cases involving violence against them (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; J. Robinson & Yoshida, 2023; Tuerkheimer, 2021; Waterhouse-Watson, 2020) Indeed, this is why feminist scholars have outlined the importance of clearer language that highlights the perpetrator (i.e. *men's* violence) instead of the victim (Boyle, 2019). Regardless, mediated reactions to these high-profile cases that accuse women of violence, obscure this fact. Instead, spurious claims that domestic and sexual violence are somehow equally experienced by men and women, or indeed that men's and women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence are the same, persist (Burrell & Dhir, 2023) resulting in a homogenisation of the issue that does not take into account structural inequalities. This is, again, exacerbated by the affordances of social media in what Chouliaraki (2024) calls 'the platformisation of pain', which allow competing claims of pain to circulate online as a means of monetising user attention. As such, what matters most is not who is making these claims and why, but how many likes and comments a particular claim to pain is getting. In other words, how many people are in support of a particular claim to pain, and who are those people?

The TikToker above appears to be well meaning in her analysis of the verdict being a 'huge win' for *all* victim/survivors. However, by refusing to acknowledge the gendered differences she is unable to acknowledge the power dynamics at play. As she says, the fact that people believed Depp was a survivor is taken as a victory for all victims, even though it does nothing to address the structural inequalities that render most women victim/survivors, like herself, as wholly *un*believable. In fact, in her video she discloses her own experience of the courts (which is eerily similar to Heard's), in which she notes that she lost her case against her former husband and that she was not believed. Furthermore, as in the section above, it sets up feminist analysis and argument as biased and being 'against' men, setting up feminism as an adversary to 'true' equality (Figure 6.20 and Figure 6.21 below).

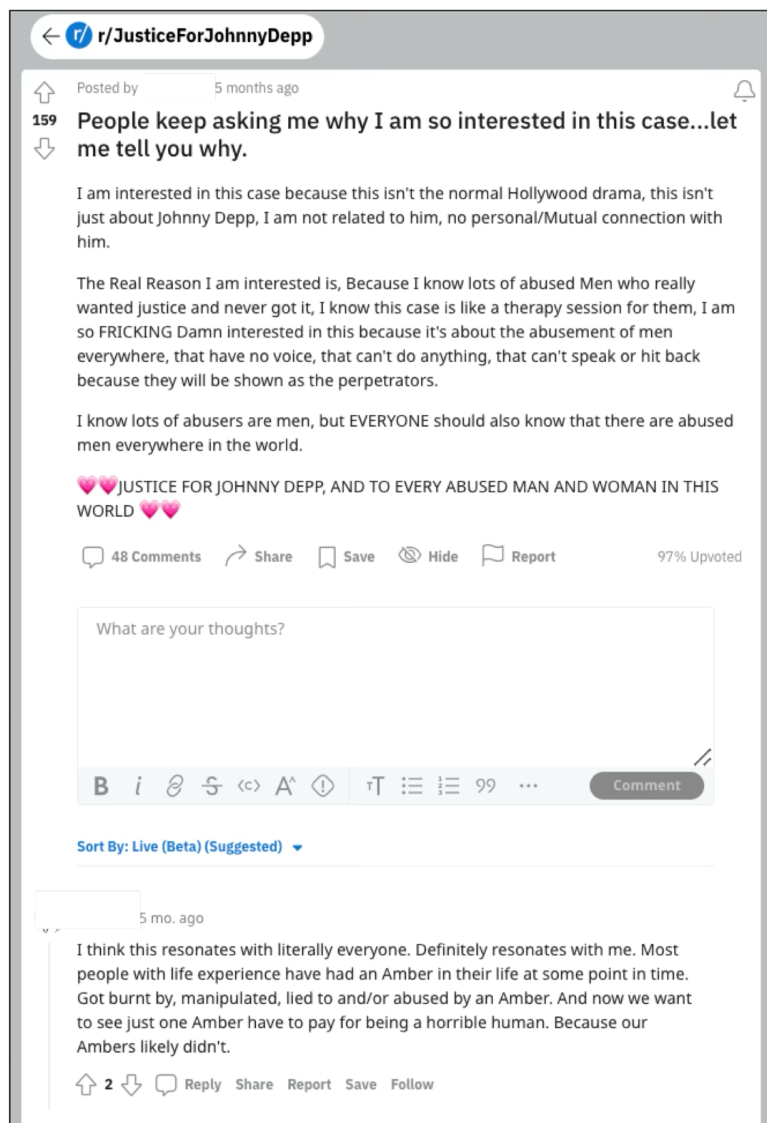


Figure 6.20 Post on r/JusticeForJonnyDepp 'People keep asking me why I am so interested in this case'

As the posts above and below indicate, feminist interventions are framed as discriminatory – as Figure 6.21a calls out the feminist refrain to ‘believe women’, a common point of attack that was also discussed in **Chapter Four**. Similarly, Figure 6.21b refers to this as a ‘gender war’ noting ‘Real survivors seek true justice which isn’t dependent on gender’. On that note, it is interesting that so many of these posts frame their responses in adversarial language when discussing the gendered elements. This poster, as well as the TikToker above, are linking violence to discussions of *gender* and feminism, as if pointing out the gendered component to violence is the problem, rather than the issue of gender-based violence itself. Instead, embracing a homogenising position of ‘all kinds of people experience and perpetrate violence’ becomes the accepted position, which shuts down all feminist insights into the problem of violence against women perpetrated by men specifically. Both of these users fail to acknowledge that feminist interventions have always included men – indeed male victims of sexual assault were immediately embraced by #MeToo, with Terry Crews appearing as one of the ‘silence breakers’ in the *Time* Person of the Year story (Boyle, 2019, p. 102). However, to these posters, the problem seems to be with a focus on *women* victim/survivors as the poster and commenter in Figure 6.20 embrace the centring of *male* victims, and the acknowledgement of *female* perpetrators (‘Most people with life experience have had an Amber in their life’). Therefore, the problem is again about a supposed feminist bias that centres women’s experiences of violence, ignoring the fact that women are more likely to experience domestic and sexual violence, and that men are most likely to perpetrate that violence (Burrell & Dhir, 2023).

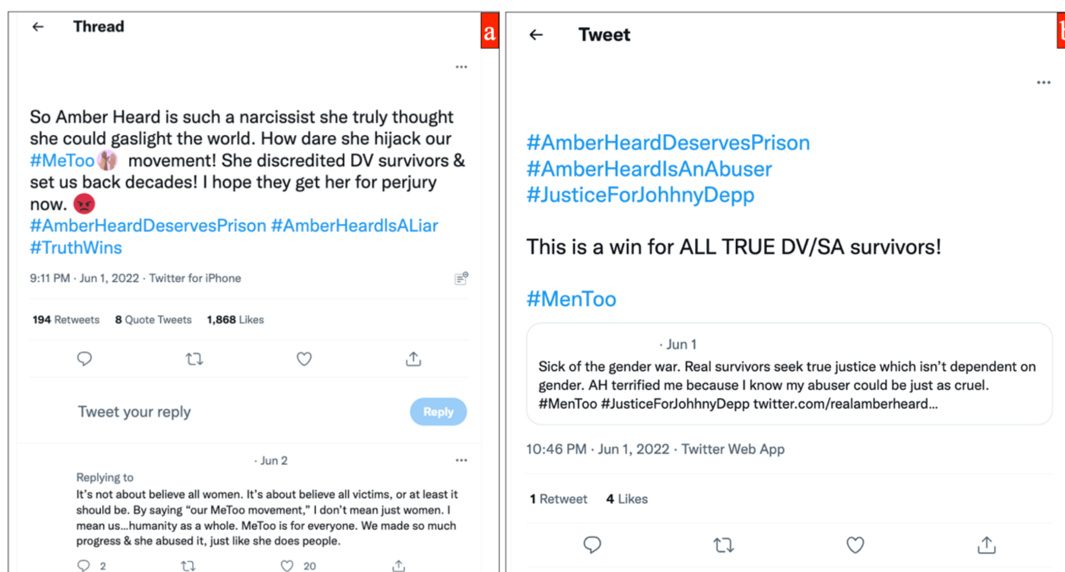


Figure 6.21 Tweets problematising ‘believe women’ and gendered analysis of violence

This problem with feminism in particular is highlighted by another Depp-supporting TikToker. Commenting on feminists who support Heard, she notes:

> 'But just a message to those people who are claiming to be a feminist and supporting Amber Heard: I just want you to know that you are part of the reason why so many people look at feminism as a fucking joke. Feminism is for equality, and when you're siding with a woman just because she's a woman, that is not equality. And that is sure as fuck not feminism. So, if you're one of those people who sided with Amber Turd do not come out and say that you are a feminist, because true feminists, like myself, do not claim you.'

Again, this TikToker uses adversarial language. Her delivery matches this, she is visibly angry and impassioned in her video. Like the 'genuine' survivors above, this poster claims to be a 'true feminist' while calling Heard 'Turd'. Yet, she argues, it is the Heard supporters who are 'the reason' people think feminism is 'a fucking joke'. Again, feminism is highlighted as being simply about equality, and as such, any centring women's experiences of domestic and sexual violence is seen as biased and 'sure as fuck not feminism'. This type of framing, like the above posts centred on survivors, works to homogenise narratives about domestic and sexual violence as being a 'human' problem rather than a systemic and pervasive issue of *male* violence *against women* (See Burrell & Dhir, 2023, p. 38). Instead, by centring a homogenous perspective, posters in my dataset constructed an image of domestic and sexual violence as being experienced equally by men and women (below).

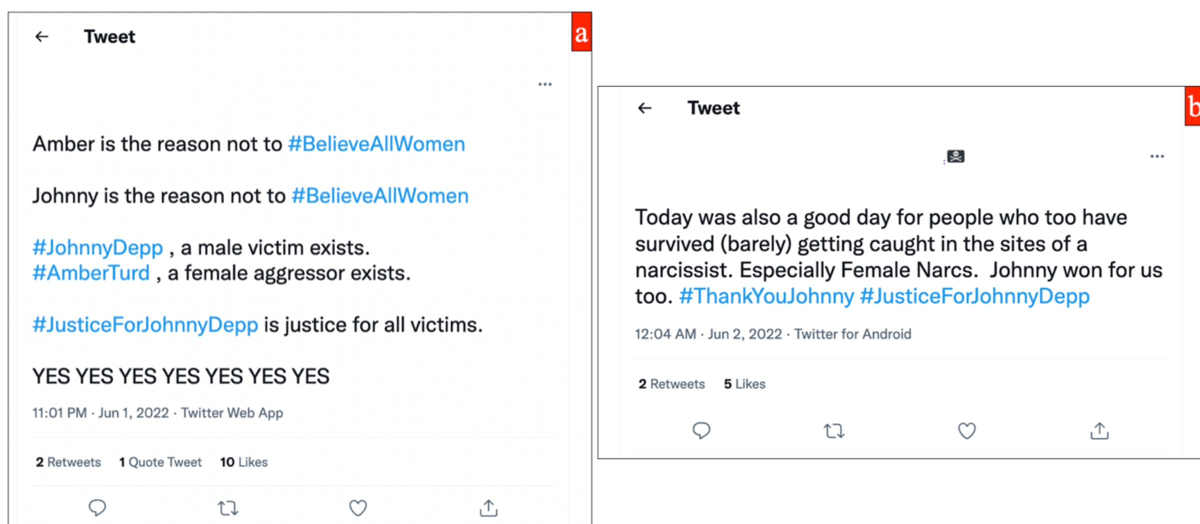


Figure 6.22 Tweets labelling Heard the abuser

The poster in Figure 6.22a, like the ones above, centres 'all victims', and in doing so conflates the issue of acknowledging 'male victims' with highlighting 'female aggressors'. This framing ignores the issue of power – as one poster noted on Reddit '[Depp] was abused and I don't think it is fair that because he is "a powerful male" that people can turn around and say he must be the abuser' – which indicates a misunderstanding of domestic violence and how it operates in heterosexual relationships where there is a clear difference in status, like with Depp and Heard. Furthermore, female perpetrators are painted as particularly deviant (Figure 6.22b), which again frames female violence as more egregious.

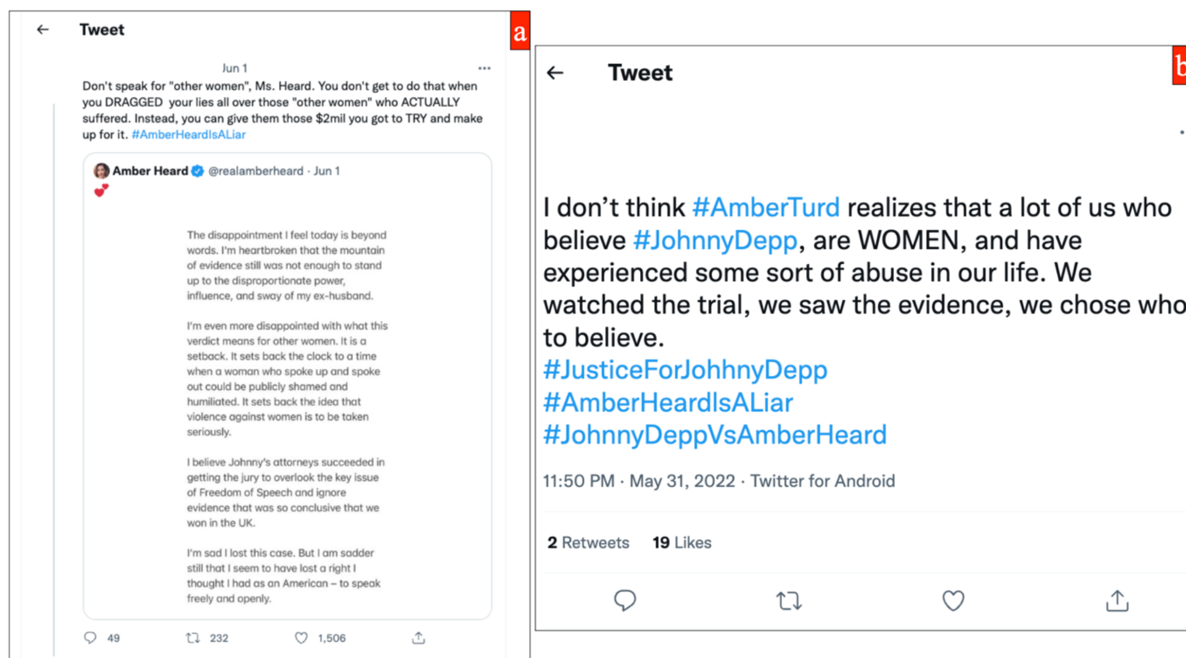


Figure 6.23 Posters drawing on their identity as women

The final point to make is on the emphasis on *women* supporters (Figure 6.23 above). Like in the Salmond case study where posters emphasised the women Judge and Jury members as evidence of Salmond's believability, the fact that not only survivors but *women* survivors supported these men was taken as 'proof' of their innocence – suggesting that no woman would support a 'true' perpetrator: being a woman is seen as somehow being able to tell if another woman is lying. However, as I outlined in **Chapter Four**, Bedera (2022) notes, it is actually common for women to disbelieve victim/survivors because of the 'just-world hypothesis' that believes bad things only happen to bad people and so 'women look for reasons to believe they are different from the survivor as a way to calm their fears and convince themselves that they are safe as long as they make "better choices."' (Bedera, 2022). Regardless, being a woman

was also given a type of 'expert' status online, although like the professionals above, this had to be a woman who was seen as 'unbiased' or in other words, not feminist, or at least not the Amber Heard supporting kind. Therefore, believability online is not solely dependent on who one is, or how one 'performs' in the economy of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023), it is also about *how many supporters* one has and *who these supporters are*. In other words, it is not just 'she said, he said' as has been the focus of feminist research thus far. It has instead become, 's/he said, *they said*'.

## Conclusion

Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) set out that believability is both "the *capability of being believed*, and…the *quality of being convincing*" (p.13 – emphasis authors' own), and as such it centres on subjectivity (who one *is*) and performance (what one *does*) (pp.4-5). Although they predominantly focus on the believability of victim/survivors and accused men, it is clear from the above that in the economy of believability, there is also an emphasis on the believability of one's *supporters*. As Thompson (1999, p. 4) notes, discussed in **Chapter Two**, scandals are 'shaped as much by the response of others as…by the act of transgression itself'. In my dataset, certain individuals (LawTubers, judges, victim/survivors) were constructed as the only 'believable' commentators on the trial, but their expertise was based solely on their *experiences* and their *personality* which was boosted by how they used and engaged with the platforms they were communicating on. As I outlined in **Chapter Four**, the same arguments were being made about the political bloggers posting in support of Salmond, who were seen as the 'uncompromised' experts commenting on the trial. Therefore 'truth' online has become about audience collaboration with social media personalities which means that whoever has the most followers, likes, and/or views is seen as the most believable and trustworthy source. This is concerning, because the argument has become 'lots of people have said that what she said was untrue, and therefore, it is untrue because lots of people have said so'. The repetition becomes the evidence.

The emphasis on supporters is concerning, especially because it centres numbers and popularity and, therefore, power. As Jilly Boyce Kay (2020) argues, #MeToo was a taste of the type of collective power women's voices can achieve, however, the same affordances that allowed #MeToo to take off, also allow for backlashes to grow (Boyle *et al.*, 2024; Boyle & Rathnayake, 2020). Building on the analysis from **Chapter Four**, together with the arguments presented

above on the importance of how many supporters one has, who those supporters are, and how believe *they* are, it is clear that with these hyper mediated events, the debate is no long 'she said, he said', but has instead morphed into 's/he said, *they said*'.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# Conclusion

I opened this thesis with the story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo. Despite years of persecution and exile for speaking out against Jacob Zuma, Kuzwayo refused to remain silent. She decided to work with the journalist Redi Tlhabi to tell her story as a means of challenging Zuma's power in South Africa, and the patriarchal culture that (still) exists there. A few months before publication, Kuzwayo sadly passed away. Reflecting on her choice to publish Kuzwayo's story in her absence, Tlhabi noted:

> 'I felt we needed to document and historicise those kinds of power relations and the fuel that toxic masculinity gives men to just thrive and mark their moment in history. I wanted to be part of documenting that history and saying, we remember, you didn't get away with it.' (Tlhabi in Maughan, 2024, p. 17).

It can be hard writing about cases involving sexual harassment and assault. The data in this thesis is highly emotive and upsetting. But writing something, or indeed speaking it, brings it into existence. It offers a counter narrative to cases that seem set in stone. This was the overarching aim I had for this thesis: To investigate the types of debates that are taking place online that centre issues of reputation, name and believability in order to understand their effectiveness, so that feminists may be better prepared to combat them. In this concluding chapter, I set out what I discovered through this investigation, and how this research contributes to the field of feminist media studies and the existing scholarship on contemporary backlashes against feminism. I then move on to a discussion on the possibilities for further research in this area, before ending on a note for hope.

**Outcomes and Contributions**

The questions at the heart of my research were: Who gets to talk with authority, and who gets to be believed on questions about sexual harassment and assault? The answers to those questions turned out to be less straightforward than I originally imaged. I was interested in understanding the function of reputation and a 'good/bad' name in online conversations about sexual harassment and assault. As I demonstrated across both my case studies, there clearly is

a gendered asymmetry to how name and reputation function online. However, this is not absolute, and in fact, often quite complicated. As I argued throughout this thesis but particularly in **Chapter Two**, name and reputation function as secondary resources in the economy of believability. Due to both the semantic, cultural and historical privileging of men's names and reputations (as they come to represent themselves, their families, communities, and businesses), this often means that their discursive sanctity is privileged over the material sanctity of the people they harm. This has been identified by feminist scholars before (e.g. Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Boyle, 2024; House, 2023; Tranchese, 2023), but it persists in this contemporary moment, despite supposed advances with popular feminism and #MeToo.

As I demonstrated, name – and nam*ing* – are a key battleground in debates about sexual harassment and assault, but as above, the outcome of those battles is not always clear cut. In my case studies, I demonstrated that women's names, and thus their credit history, were anchored to their bodies and were unable to overcome the negative emotions and connotations that were attached to them. Men's names, on the other hand, were able to 'transcend' their negative connotations, leaving them with a 'good' name, regardless of their reputation. However, that does not mean *everyone* agreed with that interpretation. As I demonstrated in **Chapter Two**, some men's appellations *have* been tarnished. Negative nicknames – like 'rapist' for Brock Turner – have 'stuck' to men, and indeed, regardless of the dominant myth behind Heard's name, she has many supporters who spurn those interpretations (**Chapter Five**). As such, I argue for a heteroglossic (Serisier, 2018) understanding of name, that takes into account the multiple meanings and interpretations of an appellation. By embracing heteroglossia, people of all genders will be recognised as complex and at times contradictory, thus equalising the discursive power of name. However, it is important to note that these debates are not just semantic. As Karen Boyle (2024, p. 18) notes, naming is linked to forms of justice seeking victim/survivors draw on that are not dependent on the criminal justice system – what Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland (2019) call 'kaleidoscopic justice' – because naming is linked to consequences for the perpetrator and allows for recognition of the victim/survivor's story. Therefore, the consequences for men are equally both discursive and material. So, name and reputation *are* being used as a way of representing gender, and the ways in which they are used often advantages the representation of a particular type of masculinity, but there are other factors at play.

Across both my case studies, there was a curious interlocution between mainstream and social media. Amongst social media commentators in my dataset, there was an expressed dissatisfaction with mainstream news coverage for supposedly being *too* believing of the women at the heart of each case study. As such, they presented their content as a means of 're-balancing' these narratives. Of course, to suggest that the mainstream media uncritically supports victim/survivors, or that it is somehow biased against men who are accused of sexual harassment and assault, is to ignore all of the feminist research on media that proves otherwise (e.g. Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Boyle, 2024; Horeck, 2004; Kay, 2020; Manne, 2017; Morrison, 1992; Tranchese, 2023; Young, 2022). However, that this was the consensus amongst online commentators is demonstrative of the complex and at times contradictory narratives that circle high profile cases that involve sexual harassment and assault. As a result, commentators like Craig Murray (**Chapter Four**), Brain McPherson (**Chapter Six**), and others, constructed themselves as 'voices on the margins'. This, again, highlights a contradiction, as by constructing the margins purely in terms of media space, privileged, white, male commentators like Murray and McPherson became '*marginalised*'.

However, even though online commentators set themselves up as 'adversaries' of the mainstream, much of their content was really *in conversation with* the mainstream media. Therefore, despite claims to the contrary, one of my key findings from this research is that mainstream media and social media 'news' are closely interlinked. My chosen method to collect data in a way that mimics user-experience was key to this finding. By capturing social media posts in their entirety, and 'following' the links to videos, blogs, and articles they shared or mentioned allowed me to observe this contradictory and complicated relationship between the different media contexts, which would not be possible by just looking at one type of media, or indeed medium of social media platform, which follows what other researchers have noted about the importance of taking into account cross-platform content (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 173). As such, I found that when it comes to discussions on sexual harassment and assault online, it is not just the names and reputations of the men and women involved that matter, *but the names and reputations of the mainstream media and online commentators as well*. Therefore, the function of name and reputation is complicated in relation to gender, *and* to online media spaces.

Besides name and reputation, I was also interested in how believability is negotiated online, and who was treated as believable. As I argued in **Chapter Six**, I found that believability is

negotiated through different online communities that create their own ‘community knowledge’ on a topic through discussions that take place across the multiple different social media platforms. This community knowledge comes across as more authentic and trustworthy, because the more something is repeated, the more it is believed to be true (Harsin, 2018). This is concerning, because the argument has become ‘lots of people have said that what she said was untrue, and therefore, it is untrue because lots of people have said so’. The repetition thus becomes the evidence. As such, it is not only about what women do, or how they ‘perform’ in the economy of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023), it is also about the performance of the commentators and supporters that discuss these cases online, and *who those commentators and supporters are*. In other words, it is not just ‘she said, he said’ as has been the focus of feminist research thus far. It has instead become, ‘s/he said, *they said*’. This is significant because it demonstrates that in order to be believed, one needs supporters – but not just any supporters. I found that online influencers or ‘personalities’ were the most believable actors in these online spaces. This is a concerning finding for feminists as researchers have demonstrated the conservative influences on these personalities (e.g. Finlayson, 2021; Finlayson, 2023). Indeed, that I found so many supporters of both Depp and Salmond in my dataset – even while using my own ‘feminist’ social media profiles – is evidence of this. Believability thus becomes a popularity contest, not just one between the victim/survivor(s) and perpetrator, but their *supporters* as well.

As such, I have demonstrated that the key actors in these online discussions have expanded from the victim/survivor(s) and alleged perpetrator(s) involved in each case, to wider communities of victim/survivors, online personalities (bloggers, YouTubers), recognised professionals, and public figures that comment publicly on these cases. Therefore, it is not only about whether the victim/survivor or perpetrator is more believable, but what kind of *media spaces and online commentators* are most believable, thus dictating who gets to speak with authority on these issues.

As I noted at the start of this chapter, my aim with this research was to understand the effectiveness of online debates centring issues of reputation, name, and believability so that feminists would be better prepared to combat them. As such, my key contribution to this research is in identifying the expanded list of central actors in these discussions, and in showing that their commentary matters just as much, if not more, than the testimony of the women and men at the centre of these issues. Again, there is a gendered asymmetry here, as these online

discussions are characterised by popular misogyny and thus reproduce rape myths, himpathy (Manne, 2017) and doubt, which privileges the perspective of the powerful. Furthermore, I have built on previous observation about the importance of cross-platform content (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) and demonstrated the importance of a mixed methods approach to this kind of research, as the ways in which social media is in conversation with the mainstream media would not be clear using a different method that only takes account of one of these mediums. As such, another contribution my research has made is in the importance of medium to these debates, acknowledging that it is also the reputation of mainstream and social media that matters.

**Further Research**

As I discussed in **Chapter Three**, I see my research and the contributions I have offered through it, to be 'situated' (Haraway, 1988), and as such, it only makes up one part of a wider network of stories and case studies on this topic. Therefore, there are several avenues for further research and exploration. For example, I have only discussed how name, reputation, and believability intersect with gender and *whiteness* specifically. Although I do think it is important to focus on how whiteness operates in these discussions, particularly as it is often ignored or made invisible and just taken as 'the norm', it is equally important to understand how these issues intersect with other races. Although there has been important work done on the treatment and responses to Black men accused of sexual harassment and abuse (e.g. Gay, 2018; Lindsey, 2023; Morrison, 1992; Young, 2022), given the ever changing nature of social media and with my findings on the importance of media and media commentators in mind, it would be pertinent to analyse how these issues play out in different racial and cultural contexts, particularly non-Western contexts. How is believability constructed in these contexts? How/does the role of the commentator change? What is the function of mainstream and social media in these contexts? This work would add valuable insights to understanding the construction of believability online.

Additionally, it would be interesting to further understand how gender intersects with the power of stardom. A question that has come up at conferences is would a female star be constructed as more believable than a male celebrity? Equally, investigating how stardom and celebrity intersect with different races would be important here. In my discussion on Heard (**Chapter**

**Five**), I looked at how her celebrity intersected with her bisexuality to further her discursive ridiculing, but this too could be expanded in further research.

With that in mind, it would also be interesting to trace how these issues play out across different social media platforms. As I mentioned in **Chapter Three**, since finishing this project, 'Twitter' no longer exists. It has been replaced by 'X' and users have reported a change in the content as a result (Spring, 2024). As such, it would be pertinent to see how these issues play out on this new version of the platform. Similarly, the popularity of TikTok has continued to grow. Indeed, in their podcast tracking the current criminal trial against Sean 'Diddy' Combs, the BBC has enlisted a TikTok lawyer to explain elements of the case to their listeners (Mutanda-Dougherty, 2025). In **Chapter Six**, I demonstrated how YouTube was constructed as an expert space, so it would be interesting to see how this might have changed as these platforms have grown and developed. Furthermore, I would suggest investigating how these issues play out on other social media platforms not covered in this thesis. I found that these issues are often debated across platforms and in conversation with mainstream media, so understanding how this tracks in other online spaces would be valuable. Similarly, given the emerging research on 'reactionary' feminisms (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025; Kay, 2024), it might be interesting to see how these debates are negotiated in online spaces that are discursively constructed along different political lines. This focus would allow answers to questions like, what type of feminism is more believable in these debates, and which type of commentator and what type of content is considered more believable? Furthermore, it would help expand my finding on the importance of bloggers and 'citizen' journalists having 'bad' reputations (**Chapter Four**), and possibly provide interesting insights into how these spaces are both gendered and racialised. Ultimately, further work on how believability is constructed across – and by – multiple media actors and platforms would greatly benefit feminist literature on contemporary backlashes against feminism.

### A Note of Hope

As I noted at the start of this chapter, doing research on mediated representations about sexual harassment and assault can be agonizing. The sheer volume of invective and scurrilous attacks that were made against Heard and the anonymous victim/survivors in my dataset were truly upsetting to read and sit with. The alacrity with which some of the insults were hurled was dismaying. Reading these posts was made all the more difficult given the context I was writing

in. There has been no end to high profile cases involving sexual harassment and assault. Even when cases seem to have 'gone well' for the victim/survivors, their justice can be short-lived. Since starting this PhD project, Harvey Weinstein's conviction was overturned (G. Baker, 2024), and Donald Trump was found liable for sexual abuse only to be re-elected for his second term in office (Harvey, 2024). In those moments, it is hard not to feel a sense of despair. However, as Jilly Boyce Kay argues in the conclusion of her book on communicative injustice, 'confronting the true scale and depth of crisis or injustice is both despair inducing and ultimately mobilising' (Kay, 2020, p. 262).

Kay along with Sarah Banet-Weiser argue that hope and despair are interconnected as, in order to have hope, there has to be 'a recognition of just how bad things are' (2019, p. 607). For that reason, they propose reviving the word 'respair' – originally from the 15th century – as a kind of feminist hope (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Respair, as they explain, 'means fresh hope; a recovery from despair' (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 607). Key to their conceptualisation of respair, is the importance of the *collective*. As they explain:

> 'Respair recognises the intrinsic vulnerability and interdependency of humans; it recognises that we need to carry each other, in order not to shoulder the harms of affective injustice alone' (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019, p. 608).

Indeed, we are not alone. In this thesis I have drawn on a multitude of feminist and academic writing that has confronted the issue of misogyny and sexual harassment and assault. I have benefitted greatly from their work, and despite recent setbacks, we have seen progress. I ended my discussion on the long #MeToo moment with Gisèle Pelicot's story. The horrors of her experience are hard to fathom. It is made even worse with the knowledge that her experience is not unique to her (Darian, 2025). Equally, seeing the support for her, and the work it has inspired (Kevin, 2025), gives a feeling of respair. We must not rely solely on victim/survivors to speak out here. As Serisier (2018) notes, we have decades of stories from them, and their similarity is chilling. Furthermore, as I demonstrated in **Chapter Six**, and other academics have highlighted (Boyle, 2024; S. Harding, 2012), there are downsides to relying solely on victim/survivor testimony. Rather, we must focus on the collective voice of victim/survivors, activists, and academics working to end this issue. As Tlhabi says in the quote I opened this chapter with, by telling these stories we historicize them, it is a way of saying 'we remember' (Tlhabi in Maughan, 2024, p. 17). With this project, I have added my voice to the chorus.

# Appendix 1: Alex Salmond Trial Coding Schedule

Coding Schedule adapted from the Pass the Mic 2020 media monitoring project (Boyle *et al.*, 2020)

BASIC INFORMATION:

- Search term / hashtag
- Date searched
- Account used

POST NUMBER:

- Number in sample

POST INFORMATION:

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>TWITTER</th><th>REDDIT</th></tr>
<tr><td>a. What type of post is it?</td><td>1. Tweet<br>2. Quote-Tweet<br>3. Reply</td><td>1. Text Post<br>2. Image / Video Post<br>3. Link to Mainstream Media<br>4. Link to Social Media</td></tr>
<tr><td>b. Topic of post?</td><td colspan="2">1. The Trial & Verdict<br>2. The Women<br>3. Salmond<br>4. Politics & Government<br>5. Crime & Justice<br>6. Gender & Related<br>7. Media<br>8. Humour<br>9. Other (use as a last resort)</td></tr>
<tr><td>c. Scope of post?</td><td colspan="2">1. Local (e.g. Glasgow, Forth Valley)<br>2. National Scotland<br>3. Scotland in UK<br>4. Scotland in Europe</td></tr>
</table>

| | 5. Scotland in Foreign / International<br>6. N/A |
|---|---|

ANALYSIS:

| | TWITTER | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|
| d. Mentions the mainstream media / 'MSM'? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| e. Mentions #MeToo? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| f. Mentions name? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| g. Mentions reputation? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| h. Mentions witch hunt/ stitch up? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Don't know | |
| i. Mentions conspiracy? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Don't know | |

INFORMATION ON POSTER:

| | TWITTER | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|
| j. Gender of poster? | 1. Female<br>2. Male<br>3. Other (Organisation / business)<br>4. Don't know | 1. Female<br>2. Male<br>3. Other (Organisation / business)<br>4. Don't know |
| k. Race of poster? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don't know | N/A* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| l. Is this a public figure or verified account? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don’t know | N/A* |
| j/m. Relevant emojis/ images / flairs in handle? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | 1. Yes<br>2. No |

INFORMATION / PEOPLE APPEARING IN POST:

| | TWITTER | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|
| k/n. Gender of person? | 1. Female<br>2. Male<br>3. Other<br>4. Don’t know | |
| l/o. Is this a person of colour? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don’t know | |
| m/p. Occupation or position? | 0. Not Stated. Story does not describe the person's occupation or position<br>1. Royalty, ruling monarch, deposed monarch, any member of royal family<br>2. Politician / member of parliament, president, government minister, political leader, political party staff<br>3. Government employee, public servant, bureaucrat, diplomat, intelligence officer, government spokesperson, etc<br>4. Police, military, para-military group, militia, prison officer, security officer, fire officer<br>5. Academic expert, lecturer, teacher<br>6. Doctor, dentist, health specialist<br>7. Health worker, social worker, childcare worker<br>8. Science or technology professional, engineer, technician, computer specialist<br>9. Media professional, journalist<br>10. Blogger, YouTuber, Podcaster, non MSM media professional<br>11. YouTube / Social Media Expert / Professional | |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 12. Lawyer, judge, magistrate, legal advocate, legal expert, legal clerk<br>13. Businessperson, executive, manager, entrepreneur, economist, financial expert, stockbroker<br>14. Office or service worker, non-management worker in office, store, restaurant, catering<br>15. Tradesperson, bodyguard, artisan, labourer, truck driver, construction, factory, domestic worker<br>16. Agriculture, mining, fishing, forestry worker<br>17. Religious figure, priest, monk, rabbi, mullah, nun<br>18. Activist or worker in civil society organisation, non-governmental organisation, trade union, human rights, consumer issues, environment, aid agency, peasant leader, United Nations<br>19. Sex worker<br>20. Celebrity, artist, actor, writer, singer, radio or television personality<br>21. Sportsperson, athlete, player, coach, referee<br>22. Student, pupil, schoolchild<br>23. Homemaker, parent, either female or male. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>24. Child, young person (up to 18 years). Code this only if no other occupation/position given<br>25. Villager or resident engaged in unspecified occupation. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>26. Retired person, pensioner. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>27. Criminal, suspect. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>28. Unemployed. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>29. Other. Use only at a last resort (specify in comments) |

| | |
|---|---|
| n/q. In what function or capacity is this person included in the story? | 0. Do not know<br>1. Subject<br>2. Spokesperson<br>3. Expert or commentator<br>4. Personal experience<br>5. Eye witness<br>6. Popular opinion<br>7. Other (Use only as a last resort and specify in comments) |
| o/r. Is this person directly quoted? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| p/s. Is there a photograph of them? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| q/t. Family role given? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| r/u. Is this person identified as a victim or survivor, or both? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| s/v. The story identifies the person as a victim of… | 0. Not applicable (person is identified solely as a survivor)<br>1. Victim of sexual violence / abuse<br>2. Victim of accusations<br>3. Victim of defamation<br>4. Victim of media reporting / bias<br>5. Victim of feminism<br>6. Victim of government / establishment etc |
| t/w. The story identifies the person as a survivor of… | 0. Not applicable (person is identified solely as a victim)<br>1. Survivor of sexual violence / abuse<br>2. Survivor of accusations<br>3. Survivor of defamation<br>4. Survivor of media reporting / bias<br>5. Survivor of feminism<br>6. Survivor of government / establishment etc |

| u/x. Does this post identify Salmond as a perpetrator of abuse? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Don't know |
|---|---|
| v/y. Is this in support of Salmond? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Neutral<br>5. Don't know |
| w/z. Are known perpetrators of sexual violence / abuse mentioned? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| x/aa. Does this mention Scottish indy / nationalism? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly |
| y/ab. Is feminism mentioned / referenced? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly |
| z/ac. Does this post link to an external source? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| aa/ad. Was this a WOS blog? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| ab/ae. Was this a Murray blog? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |

*Reddit as a platform encourages the use of avatars / personas and at the time of my data collection did not 'verify' accounts like other social media platforms, and so questions marked with * did not apply to any of the posts I collected.

# Appendix 2: Depp v Heard Trial Coding Schedule

Coding Schedule adapted from the Pass the Mic 2020 media monitoring project (Boyle *et al.*, 2020)

BASIC INFORMATION:

- Search term / hashtag
- Date searched
- Account used

POST NUMBER:

- Number in sample

POST INFORMATION:

| | TWITTER | TIKTOK | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. What type of post is it? | 1. Tweet<br>2. Quote-Tweet<br>3. Reply | 1. Text Post<br>2. Video Repost<br>3. Video Reaction<br>4. Slide Show<br>5. Other | 1. Text Post<br>2. Image / Video Post<br>3. Link to Mainstream Media<br>4. Link to Social Media |
| b. Topic of post? | 1. The Trial & Verdict<br>2. Amber Heard and/or supporters/team<br>3. Johnny Depp and/or supporters/team<br>4. Domestic Violence<br>5. Crime & Justice<br>6. Gender & Related<br>7. Media<br>8. Humour<br>9. Other (use as a last resort) | | |

| c. Scope of post? | 1. US<br>2. UK<br>3. Both<br>4. N/A |
|---|---|

ANALYSIS:

| | TWITTER | TIKTOK | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|---|
| d. Mentions the mainstream media / 'MSM'? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| e. Mentions organisations either Depp or Heard is associated with? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| f. Mentions #MeToo? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| g. Mentions #MenToo / #HimToo? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| h. Mentions name? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| i. Mentions reputation (or similar)? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| j. Mentions the UK trial? | 1. Yes positively<br>2. Yes negatively<br>3. Yes neutrally<br>4. No | | |
| k. Alludes to a fandom? | 1. Pro Heard<br>2. Anti Heard | | |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 3. Pro Depp<br>4. Anti Depp<br>5. Pro Both<br>6. Anti Both<br>7. Fan of Trial<br>8. Not a Fan<br>9. Neutral |

INFORMATION ON POSTER:

| | TWITTER | TIKTOK | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|---|
| l. Gender of poster? | 1. Female<br>2. Male<br>3. Other (Trans / non-binary etc)<br>4. Organisation / business<br>5. Don't know | | |
| m. Race of poster? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don't know | | N/A* |
| n. Is this a public figure or verified account? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don't know | | N/A* |
| m/o. Does this person identify as a survivor? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |
| n/p. Relevant emojis / images / flairs in handle? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | | |

INFORMATION / PEOPLE APPEARING IN POST:

| | TWITTER | TIKTOK | REDDIT |
|---|---|---|---|
| o/q. Gender of person? | 5. Female<br>6. Male | | |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 7. Other (Trans / non-binary etc)<br>8. Don’t know |
| p/r. Is this a person of colour? | 4. Yes<br>5. No<br>6. Don’t know |
| q/s. Occupation or position? | 0. Not Stated. Story does not describe the person's occupation or position<br>1. Royalty, ruling monarch, deposed monarch, any member of royal family<br>2. Politician / member of parliament, president, government minister, political leader, political party staff<br>3. Government employee, public servant, bureaucrat, diplomat, intelligence officer, government spokesperson, etc<br>4. Police, military, para-military group, militia, prison officer, security officer, fire officer<br>5. Academic expert, lecturer, teacher<br>6. Doctor, dentist, health specialist<br>7. Health worker, social worker, childcare worker<br>8. Science or technology professional, engineer, technician, computer specialist<br>9. Media professional, journalist<br>10. Blogger, YouTuber, Podcaster, non MSM media professional<br>11. YouTube / Social Media Expert / Professional<br>12. Lawyer, judge, magistrate, legal advocate, legal expert, legal clerk<br>13. Businessperson, executive, manager, entrepreneur, economist, financial expert, stockbroker<br>14. Office or service worker, non-management worker in office, store, restaurant, catering<br>15. Tradesperson, bodyguard, artisan, labourer, truck driver, construction, factory, domestic worker<br>16. Agriculture, mining, fishing, forestry worker<br>17. Religious figure, priest, monk, rabbi, mullah, nun |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 18. Activist or worker in civil society organisation, non-governmental organisation, trade union, human rights, consumer issues, environment, aid agency, peasant leader, United Nations<br>19. Sex worker<br>20. Celebrity, artist, actor, writer, singer, radio or television personality<br>21. Sportsperson, athlete, player, coach, referee<br>22. Student, pupil, schoolchild<br>23. Homemaker, parent, either female or male. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>24. Child, young person (up to 18 years). Code this only if no other occupation/position given<br>25. Villager or resident engaged in unspecified occupation. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>26. Retired person, pensioner. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>27. Criminal, suspect. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>28. Unemployed. Code this only if no other occupation is given<br>29. Other. Use only at a last resort (specify in comments) |
| r/t. In what function or capacity is this person included in the story? | 8. Do not know<br>9. Subject<br>10. Spokesperson<br>11. Expert or commentator<br>12. Personal experience<br>13. Eye witness<br>14. Popular opinion<br>15. Other (Use only as a last resort and specify in comments) |
| s/u. Is this person directly quoted? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| t/v. Is there a photograph of them? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| u/w. Family role given? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |

| v/x. Is this person identified as a victim or survivor, or both? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
|---|---|
| w/y. The story identifies the person as a victim of… | 0. Not applicable (person is identified solely as a survivor)<br>1. Victim of sexual violence / abuse<br>2. Victim of domestic violence / abuse<br>3. Victim of defamation<br>4. Victim of media reporting / bias<br>5. Victim of feminism<br>6. Victim of misogyny<br>7. Victim of organisations / establishment etc |
| x/z. The story identifies the person as a survivor of… | 0. Not applicable (person is identified solely as a victim)<br>1. Survivor of sexual violence / abuse<br>2. Survivor of domestic violence / abuse<br>3. Survivor of defamation<br>4. Survivor of media reporting / bias<br>5. Survivor of feminism<br>6. Survivor of misogyny<br>7. Survivor of organisations / establishment etc |
| y/aa. Does this post identify someone as a perpetrator of abuse? | 1. Amber Heard<br>2. Johnny Depp<br>3. Both<br>4. Neither<br>5. Don't know |
| z/ab. Is this in support of someone? | 1. Amber Heard<br>2. Johnny Depp<br>3. Both<br>4. Neither<br>5. Neutral<br>6. Don't know |
| aa/ac. Are known perpetrators of sexual | 1. Yes<br>2. No |

| violence / abuse mentioned? | |
|---|---|
| ab/ad. Is feminism mentioned or referenced? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly |
| ac/ae. Are men's rights referenced or mentioned? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly |
| ad/af. Does this link to an external source? | 1. Mainstream media source<br>2. Social media source<br>3. Other<br>4. No |
| ae/ag. Does this link to 'evidence'? | 1. Yes<br>2. No |
| af/ah. Are either Depp or Heard's characters mentioned/referenced? | 1. Amber Heard<br>2. Johnny Depp<br>3. Both<br>4. Neither<br>5. Don't know |
| af/ai. Does the post reference / mention survivors? (Other than Depp / Heard) | 1. Yes<br>2. No |

*Reddit as a platform encourages the use of avatars / personas and at the time of my data collection did not 'verify' accounts like other social media platforms, and so questions marked with * did not apply to any of the posts I collected.

# Appendix 3: YouTube / Blog Coding Schedule

Coding Schedule adapted from the Pass the Mic 2020 media monitoring project (Boyle *et al.*, 2020)

BASIC INFORMATION:

- Information on collection
- Number

VIDEO/BLOG INFORMATION:

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>SALMOND TRIAL</th><th>DEPP V HEARD</th></tr>
<tr><td>a. Type of video/blog?</td><td colspan="2">1. Commentary / Livestream<br>2. Reaction<br>3. Meme<br>4. Repost of trial footage / trial breakdown<br>5. Fan video<br>6. Evidence<br>7. Other</td></tr>
<tr><td>b. Topic of video/blog?</td><td>1. The Trial & Verdict<br>2. The Women<br>3. Salmond<br>4. Politics & Government<br>5. Crime & Justice<br>6. Gender & Related<br>7. Media<br>8. Humour<br>9. Other (use as a last resort)</td><td>1. The Trial & Verdict<br>2. Amber Heard and/or supporters/team<br>3. Johnny Depp and/or supporters/team<br>4. Domestic Violence<br>5. Crime & Justice<br>6. Gender & Related<br>7. Media<br>8. Humour<br>9. Other (use as a last resort)</td></tr>
</table>

| c. Scope of video/blog? | 1. Local (e.g. Glasgow, Forth Valley)<br>2. National Scotland<br>3. Scotland in UK<br>4. Scotland in Europe<br>5. Scotland in Foreign / International<br>6. N/A | 5. US<br>6. UK<br>7. Both<br>8. N/A |
|---|---|---|

ANALYSIS:

| | SALMOND TRIAL | DEPP V HEARD |
|---|---|---|
| d. Is this in support of Salmond? / Is this in support of someone? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Neutral<br>5. Don't know | 1. Amber Heard<br>2. Johnny Depp<br>3. Both<br>4. Neither<br>5. Neutral<br>6. Don't know |
| e. Does this identify Salmond as an abuser? / Does this identify someone as an abuser? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Implicitly<br>4. Don't know | 1. Amber Heard<br>2. Johnny Depp<br>3. Both<br>4. Neither<br>5. Don't know |
| f. Alludes to a fandom? | N/A | 10. Pro Heard<br>11. Anti Heard<br>12. Pro Depp<br>13. Anti Depp<br>14. Pro Both<br>15. Anti Both<br>16. Fan of Trial<br>17. Not a Fan<br>18. Neutral |

INFORMATION ON YOUTUBER / BLOGGER:

| | SALMOND TRIAL | DEPP V HEARD |
|---|---|---|
| g. Gender of YouTuber / Blogger? | 1. Female<br>2. Male<br>3. Other (Trans / non-binary etc)<br>4. Organisation / business<br>5. Don't know | |
| h. Is this a person of colour? | 1. Yes<br>2. No<br>3. Don't know | |
| i. Is this a public figure or verified account? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| j. Does this person identify as a survivor? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |
| k. Relevant emojis / images in handle? | 1. Yes<br>2. No | |

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