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# 'So they hit each other': gendered constructions of domestic abuse in the YouTube commentary of the Depp v Heard trial

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## ABSTRACT

This study presents a critical discourse analysis of YouTube comments below five videos of the Johnny Depp v Amber Heard trial, which was live streamed by the platform in April and May 2022. The analysis examines the discursive resources used by commenters to construct domestic abuse. Commenters draw on three interpretive repertoires: 'Perfect Victim', 'Mutual Abuse' and 'Dangerous Women'. The analysis explores the way these repertoires are used to rebut Heard's allegations of abuse by mobilising the perfect victim repertoire to refute any claim she has to this experience, and the mutual abuse repertoire to implicate Heard in the abuse and minimise blame for Depp. Through establishing gender-symmetry in domestic abuse and drawing on traditional gender norms for each party, commenters construct the dangerous women repertoire to depict Heard as crazy, pathological and violent. The key implication of this study is that public constructions of domestic abuse can directly impact the attitudes and treatment of both victims and perpetrators. In this instance, they serve to maintain the oppression and control of women within anti-feminist narratives of female dominance, currently led by men's rights activists and conservative outlets.

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s, when feminists and academics began to emphasise the scale of the problem, conceptualisations of domestic abuse – who does what to whom; the causes and the most effective interventions – have evolved significantly and are often contested (McPhee et al., 2021; Stark, 2010). Initial terms such as 'battered wives' shifted to acknowledge violence in relationships of unmarried couples and 'domestic violence' later became 'domestic abuse' to capture the psychological, coercive and financial aspects of abuse. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) estimates that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. However, it is still a largely hidden crime and estimates suggest only 18% of abuse is

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reported to the police due to individual and structural barriers that prevent women seeking help (Women's Aid, 2022).

Academic debate around the conceptualisations and definitions of domestic abuse has generated opposing frameworks. On one side, researchers have asserted that domestic abuse is a gender-neutral or symmetrical phenomenon, arguing that women are equally, or more, violent in their relationships than men (Steinmetz, 1977–1978; Straus, 1993). Gender-symmetry arguments have impacted women's access to support services as this discourse periodically attracts the attention of the media and legislators and has led to funding for women's services being diverted to underutilised men's refuges (Currie, 1998; Hearn & McKie, 2008). Much of the gender-neutral research has also been adopted by men's rights activists to argue that men are victims of women's violence and psychiatric instability, and that feminists have dominated family and criminal law; social policy and cultural life (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Flood, 2006; Girard, 2009). Indeed, recent research by Venäläinen (2023) highlights the impact of men's rights rhetoric on public perceptions of domestic abuse as social and crisis workers in Finland were found to use gender-symmetry language when discussing men who had experienced violence by their female intimate partner. This is concerning as it raises questions about how women will be treated when reporting abuse.

Despite the prominence of the gender-symmetry debate, opposing research provides a more contextualised account of domestic violence, and has found that men and women are both more likely to exaggerate women's abuse and minimise men's abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 2004), that women's violence is predominantly in self-defence, that women are more frequent victims, and that they suffer more severe injuries (Braaf & Meyering, 2013; Flood, 2006; Stark, 2010). These findings have been consistently reinforced by official crime statistics that find men are the majority of perpetrators and women the majority of victims of domestic abuse (Office for National Statistics, 2022), supporting feminist assertions that domestic abuse is a gendered crime, constructed to perpetuate and maintain the social inequality and oppression of women (Women's Aid et al., 2021).

In examining the way individuals and groups conceptualise domestic abuse, research that acknowledges the sociocultural context within which violence is perpetrated highlights how gender norms shape meanings of abuse. For example, male perpetrators' accounts of domestic violence can employ discourses of innate masculine aggression and feminine weakness, while constructing their own violence as a rational response to provocation, and women's violence as hysterical and inconsequential (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Bettman, 2009). Indeed, when women are perpetrators of violence, their male partners are still found to refer to their own dominant power and control within the relationship, even while discussing the violence they experienced (Durfee, 2011; Venäläinen, 2023). Similar conclusions have been drawn by those studying the media, finding that extreme acts of violence dominate when reporting domestic abuse, and that male perpetrators are often depicted as jealous and unable to control their innate anger, while women are portrayed as provoking abuse (Smith, 2012). This is not without consequence, as Flood and Pease (2009) highlight a consistent relationship between media reporting and sexist social attitudes towards victims.

Studies have also found that, because male violence is normalised by the police and female violence is not, when women retaliate and are aggressive towards their abusers,

it is their 'abnormal' violence that is disproportionately policed while the precipitating abuse is erased (Mottram & Salter, 2016). Furthermore, women who resist are perceived socially, and in the criminal justice system, as unfeminine, crazy and dangerous (Venäläinen, 2016).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the media became fascinated with violent women, fuelled by the gender-symmetry debate and by anti-feminist backlash that suggested women had achieved equality that had masculinised them, making them violent and mentally unstable (Chesney-Lind, 1999). García-Favaro and Gill (2016) contend that this dual cultural rhetoric of anti-feminist backlash and 'post-feminism' created a space for the (re)assertion and (re)security of male power and privilege in everyday public discourse. Men's rights activists capitalised on this to mobilise around issues such as domestic violence against men and father's rights, aimed at rolling back the political and legal sex-based rights won by the feminist movement (Girard, 2009).

The development of the internet allowed men's rights groups to reach a broader audience and social media has facilitated a significant shift in their tone, reach and influence, marking a clear evolution from the anti-feminist and post-feminist culture of the 1990s to men's rights activism, trolling and violent hate speech online today (Ging, 2019; Litosseliti et al., 2019). The legitimisation of violent sexism online led to an outpouring of resistance from women who took to social media to share personal experiences of discrimination, prejudice and violence, collectively redefining sexual violence and driving a rise in public consciousness of male violence against women, through movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp (Barratt, 2018; Langone, 2018; Pellegrini, 2018). Social media platforms have, therefore, become influential new spaces of public discourse, where researchers can study domestic abuse and gendered prejudice as a discursive phenomenon, exploring its legitimisation, operationalisation, reproduction and consequences.

To date, there are limited qualitative studies exploring public constructions of domestic abuse and limited research exploring constructions of gender and violence on social media (Döring & Mohseni, 2019). Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018) studied the social construction of rape culture on Twitter and found narratives of victim-blaming and public shaming, linked to what are seen as morally fair consequences for women not adhering to socially sanctioned gendered behaviour. Similarly, examining the comments beneath news articles about revenge porn and leaked nude photographs in Trinidad and Tobago, Barratt (2018) found disciplining and violent commentary with attacks on the individual women's physical appearance and character, based on critiques of the women's femininity and respectability.

With 213 million subscribers, YouTube is the world's second most visited website (Hootsuite, 2022) and is replacing television and mainstream news sites with 26% of Americans reporting that they use it as their primary source of news (Pew Research Center, 2020). Tucker-McLaughlin (2013) reports that 25% of the most viewed videos on YouTube contain misogyny, violence or both and research has found that this behaviour is not contained to the online world or cut off from other forms of violence against women (Ging & Siapera, 2019).

In April 2022, YouTube and other media outlets live-streamed a civil trial between the formerly married actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Depp was suing Heard for loss of income due to defamation, citing an article she had written for the Washington Post

(Heard, 2018) where she referred to herself as ‘a public figure representing domestic abuse’. During the six-week trial, both actors and their witnesses testified that the other was abusive during the relationship. Video and audio recordings of incidents were played and witnesses included bodyguards, friends and family members, psychologists and a counsellor who characterised the relationship as one of ‘mutual abuse’. In addition to the live streaming of the trial, news outlets and talk show panels analysed every day of testimony with more social media interactions per article recorded during that time than any other news topic (McCool & Narayanan, 2022). The celebrity of the case and the insight into the intimate lives of the two became a spectacle, leading to considerable social media commentary. Large-scale coordinated attacks directed towards Heard included dubbed tik tok videos mocking her testimony, largely driven by conservative media outlets, Depp fans, and men’s rights activists repudiating the #MeToo movement (Denkinson, 2022). The jury decided in Depp’s favour, agreeing that Heard had defamed him in her piece. The vast public response to this trial can contribute to an understanding of current cultural constructions of domestic abuse and the ramifications of those narratives. The case has set parameters for how a victim should behave, how she should look, evidence required in order to be credible, and even what constitutes domestic abuse. It will influence how victims perceive of their own experiences, their decisions to seek support and pursue criminal justice. It will embolden perpetrator behaviour and influence what cases get taken forward by law enforcement and prosecutors in the future (Gerson, 2022). Comments below videos of the Depp v Heard trial on YouTube provide rich data for the study, which aims to examine how domestic abuse is constructed within discussions of the Depp v Heard trial on YouTube.

## Method

### Design

By facilitating extensive textual interactions between users, YouTube comments are rich, naturally occurring data, providing insight into ‘spontaneous’ public opinion that is not influenced by any research agenda but contain and convey historic and culturally located meaning (Favaro et al., 2017; Giles, 2017). In the context of the current research, the Depp v Heard trial was selected because it generated an extraordinary volume of social media discussions about domestic abuse.

This study employed the suggestions of Favaro et al. (2017) and Braun and Clarke (2013) in identifying one media source; a particular event and a section of timeline of that event. Data were collected from four dates and five videos, spread across the timeline of the trial, chosen where subsequent commentary was expected to provide the most relevant data for the research question.

1. 14 April 2022; Testimony of Laurel Anderson, who classified the relationship as one of ‘mutual abuse’
2. 20 April 2022; Day 2 of Depp’s testimony, chosen at point in testimony that referenced alleged abuse
3. 5 May 2022; Day 2 of Heard’s Testimony, chosen at point in testimony that referenced alleged abuse

4. 27 May 2022; Closing arguments: Heard's team
5. 27 May 2022; Closing arguments: Depp's team

The same media stream, The Law & Crime Network, was used for all five videos to provide consistency and avoid any user editorialising. The first 1500 comments on each of the five videos in scope were chosen as they were expected to be most relevant to the content of the video and the most responsive to the trial as it happened. Data were extracted between 8 and 11 October 2022 and included original posts plus any responses to those posts. They were manually copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document before being anonymised, with any identifiers such as names and geographic location removed. Many comments were just emoticons, references to physical appearance of witnesses or otherwise unrelated to the content of the trial. The initial 1500 per video, therefore, allowed for exclusion of data items unrelated to the research topic and yielded a final data set of 2148 comments. Those cited are presented with original grammatical and spelling errors.

This research was approved by the Psychology Department Research Ethics committee at the authors' institution and the British Psychological Society (BPS) code of human ethics (2021) and guidelines for internet mediated research (IMR) (2021) were followed, throughout. Special consideration was given to issues such as confidentiality and security of online data; participant anonymity, and procedures for obtaining valid consent. Given YouTube is an open-access space, comments were treated as 'data in the public domain' and collected without the need for informed consent (see Favaro et al., 2017). While the researchers acknowledge that there is a (low) level of risk that (de-identified) data could be re-identified to reveal more information about users, this risk was managed through careful data management and anonymisation. Specifically, all usernames and pseudonyms were renamed and any hashtags, links to personal web pages or other identifiers within the comments, were removed.

### **Analysis**

Data were analysed using the principles of Discursive Psychology (DP) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and, due to the critical focus of the research, more specifically using Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) (Wetherell, 1998). The process of analysis therefore drew on discursive insights in order to explore how individuals utilise shared discourses and 'do' language to maintain or challenge the dominant social power structures within which comments are located (Wetherell, 1998). This form of analysis is particularly useful for identifying rhetorical strategies that participants use to reinforce and justify arguments (e.g. Terry & Braun, 2016). Data familiarisation was combined with refinement of the data corpus and consisted of repeated read-throughs by the first author, whilst removing emoticons, hyperlinks and YouTube handles. Multiple further sweeps involved removal of comments that asked questions about the live stream or the trial process or were in other ways unrelated to the research question. The final data set was then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for manual coding, which was approached inductively by the first and second authors. In line with the principles of DP and CDP we identified a number of interpretative repertoires used by commenters on the YouTube posts which were discussed and agreed by all three authors. Interpretative repertoires are 'a collection of

words or ways of talking about objects or events in the world which provide a relatively coherent and culturally recognisable characterisation of that object or event' (Wiggins, 2017, p. 244), hence through our coding process we focussed on the ways in which domestic abuse was spoken about by commenters. As part of this process all authors focussed on identifying and agreeing the discursive devices used by commenters when constructing their accounts of domestic abuse.

## **Results & discussion**

In this section we report three interpretive repertoires that were deployed by commenters to construct domestic abuse: (1) 'Perfect Victim' (2) 'Mutual Abuse' (3) 'Dangerous Women'.

### **Perfect victim**

We identified this interpretative repertoire where commenters scrutinise Heard's appearance, behaviour and testimony in order to discredit her as a victim of domestic abuse, often with such contradiction that one commenter identifies Heard as 'damned if she did and damned if she didn't'. Together, commenters construct the category of perfect victim (Potter, 1998), positioning themselves as experts in domestic abuse and refuting any claims that Heard has to that experience. The perfect victim quietly leaves the relationship and 'let[s] bygones be bygones'; If she does pursue criminal justice, she must have witnesses, as her word is not enough; she must produce medical evidence of injuries that must be horrific; and she must only present as quiet and fearful if she is to be deserving of belief and empathy.

Socially sanctioned victim behaviour is explored in the commentary through emotion categories (Wiggins, 2017), which were mobilised to discredit Heard. While many commenters are disturbed by what they describe as a 'cold' and 'emotionless' woman, others mock her crying and claim she is too emotional to be believable. For example,

[...] AMBER HEARD lacks empathy. sitting there in the court room so stone face cold.

I dunno, but I just have to laugh at Amber's tears, LOL! It just seems like a blatant acting job.

Comment one here suggests Heard's lack of expression means that she lacks empathy and is therefore undeserving of any. However, a prominent contradiction within the data is that she is also deserving of mockery- and accused of 'faking'- because she is *too* emotional, as with comment two. This policing of Heard's demeanour and the appropriateness of her emotions uses gender norms around emotions to construct Heard as manipulative and deceitful but also as unfeminine and dangerous. This device serves to discredit her and divert attention from the content of her testimony. When attention is paid to Heard's recounting of events, commenters call for significant physical evidence and multiple witnesses to validate her account. The below comment captures common responses.

[...] She has no evidence of the injuries she claimed to sustain, which if she received those injuries should be pictures (more brutal than the ones she showed) or medical records for being treated for said injuries, but there are none. Nothing but her say so basically. We still

have to see what witnesses they will bring after her testimony, if anyone can corroborate her stories but at this point I would think they'd be lying for her, but we'll see.

This comment constructs domestic abuse as violent – and violent enough to produce ‘brutal’ injuries that the woman must have documented if she is to be believed. However, the images that Heard’s team do submit are dismissed as not ‘brutal’ enough. Constructing domestic abuse as extreme violence ignores the continuum of coercive control, emotional and psychological abuse that exist in many abusive relationships. This can affect women’s interpretations of their own experience and risks women waiting for the abuse to escalate to near fatal levels before they perceive themselves worthy of being believed (Flood & Pease, 2009; Women’s Aid et al., 2021; Storer et al., 2021). In the above comment Heard is also tasked with producing credible witnesses but the commenter pre-emptively discredits any testimony they might provide. The standards for evidencing abuse, therefore, become impossible to achieve. Note here that the commentor accounts for their views on rational grounds by raising queries regarding the type of evidence one would expect to see of Heard’s injuries. As Billig (1991) notes, presenting claims as ‘factual’ based on logical deduction, is an effective way of doing prejudice without appearing as such. Used here, this ‘common-sense’ reasoning is used as a discursive tool to build facticity and rationalise discriminatory views, functioning to undermine Heard’s allegations.

Any photographic evidence that Heard does provide is labelled fake with commenters suggesting she painted the bruises on herself; edited the photographs; inflicted the injuries upon herself; or took photos of bruises from Botox injections and claimed them as abuse injuries. References to cosmetic surgery and makeup are constantly evoked as code for Heard’s/women’s duplicity with commenters suggesting:

Therapists should have a no makeup policy at sessions so that any bruising can be seen and documented with certainty. Makeup seems to be the star of this event [...]

From watching the people in this court room footage, it appears that Amber is pronouncing the makeup on her cheek bones. Perhaps this is to garner sympathy from the jury.

The first comment here creates a picture of large numbers of women falsifying domestic abuse claims by wearing makeup, therefore suggesting men presenting with injuries would be immediately validated. Women are constructed as dishonest by default, with cosmetic surgery and makeup positioned as tools of female deception, as reflected in the second comment. This formulation functions to discredit any photographic evidence of injuries submitted by Heard, or witnesses who testify they saw injuries, while the use of hedging in ‘it appears’ and ‘perhaps’ suggests an awareness that the comment might provoke criticism of insensitivity and serves to distance them from any challenge (Wiggins, 2017).

In contrast to the ‘Perfect Victim’, Heard’s lack of overt fear is positioned by commenters as evidence of her deception, both in her demeanour in the court room and during the relationship. For example,

[...] If Johnny was so violent that he would beat her for the smallest of annoyances, HOW could she still have all these aggressive & bold tendencies?



The rhetorical question here, with emphasis on the 'HOW' indicates incredulity at a woman who might be angry while recounting violence she experienced and there is a disciplining tone evoked in 'bold tendencies' as something a woman expecting empathy should not exhibit. These comments are illustrative of patterns across the data that suggest women who are assertive or angry are incapable of being victims and complicit in their own abuse. Heard is perceived as transgressing feminine norms in her boldness and commenters assess that she is not scared enough, not submissive enough and not injured enough. Storer et al. (2021) report that women who experience domestic abuse have difficulty identifying as victims who are weak or submissive, meaning this construction of domestic abuse and the 'perfect victim' is not something they recognise and is driving women to stay in abusive relationships. This cultural sanctioning of violence against women perhaps contributes to the continued lack of reporting, criminal charges and convictions (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

On the stand, Heard's voice, language, facial expressions and body language are consistently scrutinised, and commenters use the categorisation of *victim* to contrast everything she did with what a 'real victim' would do. For example:

[...] A real victim off, DV,SA and suffering real post traumatic stress, wouldn't be able to hold eye contact or switch emotions on and off like that! Most would be speaker Ng of their horror in monotone!

The comment here concludes Heard's ability to make eye contact in the court room, along with an ability to compose herself when she becomes emotional, is proof of her deception, with exclamation marks functioning to emphasise the opinion. This suggests the perfect victim needs to display vulnerability, with persistently downcast eyes – a constructed feminine norm – to be credible. Heard is framed in contradiction to the 'ideal victim' and positioned in violation of the specific attributes of Christie's (1986) framework of the legitimate victim; such as, vulnerability and weakness. Indeed, displaying agency (through retaliation) and anger, further negates any right Heard might claim to an identity of 'ideal and blameless victim'. In this collective framing, Heard is denied victim status through stereotyping that constructs her as unworthy and closer to Christie's assessment of the 'ideal offender'.

During the case, it was documented that Heard did report to the police, seek a restraining order and did leave, but this is not acknowledged by commenters. For other women the suggestion is that if they do not leave, they are to blame – 'why didn't she just leave then!?' – and if they do, they will be disbelieved and denigrated. This interpretive repertoire constructs a perfect victim and condemns a woman whose appearance and behaviour does not fit this 'ideal' image by discrediting and mistreating her for attempting to seek justice, supporting research that concludes women do not leave abusive relationships because they will not be believed (Mottram & Salter, 2016; Storer et al., 2021).

### **Mutual abuse**

This interpretive repertoire characterises the Depp/Heard relationship as one of 'mutual abuse'. Discursively, Depp's behaviour is then minimised or justified by drawing on traditional gender norms and innate male (rights to) violence, while Heard's is exaggerated through the construction of the monstrous female. This serves to absolve one and

condemn the other. Commenters utilise this repertoire to depict female aggression as extraordinary, shocking and inhuman while male violence is unremarkable, relatable and justifiable.

Across the data, while many refer to the relationship between Depp and Heard as 'toxic' and both 'as bad as each other', an ideological dilemma (Billig, 1988) is created where Depp was not abusive but Heard simultaneously 'gave as good as she got'. For example:

[...] he's not a Saint and no one expects him to be either though. Amber is crazy and most likely instigated the majority of the fights, also assaulted him, during those times he also lost his cool and destroyed things. they both have dirt on their hands but Amber's are dirtiest.

This comment is reflective of a common phrase throughout the data where Depp's behaviour is minimised through the disclaimer 'I'm not saying Depp is innocent but' evoking a *boys will be boys* argument where certain behaviours are socially permissible as they are considered innate masculine traits that cannot be controlled. This use of disclaimer also allows commenters to manage their direct prejudice against Heard by implicating her in the abuse, thereby making their own assertions appear more reasonable, a device commonly used in the discursive reproduction of prejudice (e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Depp is depicted as having 'lost his cool', absolving him of responsibility for his actions, while direct references to Heard's 'assault' betray an inequality in comments that otherwise attempts to position themselves as balanced. Other comments argue that Depp was only acting in self-defence, again acknowledging his violence before justifying it. For example,

[...] I'm still not convinced JD did anything more than defend himself when Amber was a tyrant. Defending yourself against a violent partner doesn't make him an abuser. I think a lot of people forget that little fact. He has every right to defend himself.

The repetition of 'defend' here functions to emphasise the commenter's point, while 'I'm still not convinced' suggests a reasoned observer basing their opinion on evidence, adding weight to their conclusion. Heard is positioned as a 'tyrant' to further emphasise the 'right' that Depp has to defend himself, while any suggestion that Heard might have the same right is omitted from the commentary. The data here echo conclusions of previous research as commenters work to maintain Depp's masculinity, by acknowledging his *rational* or *justifiable* violence, while positioning Heard as provoking and initiating the aggression (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Durfee, 2011).

Commenters use this repertoire frequently where they reference audio evidence of Heard saying 'I didn't punch you, I hit you', which is consistently used as proof of Heard's guilt and Depp's innocence.

the recording clearly has her saying 'yes johnny i hit you, i dont know what postion my hand was in but you're fine' like cmon why is this still going on? this case should be closed already obviously shes the abuser its not that hard to determine.

By presenting a direct quote from the recording, a rhetorical question and the 'obviousness' of the conclusion, this commenter presents their opinion as evidence that speaks for itself. The use of the words 'clearly' and 'obviously' are consistently deployed by commenters to ratify Depp's innocence and Heard's guilt in relation to physical acts of violence.

Heard's admission to hitting Depp supports the findings of Dobash and Dobash (2004) and Flood (2006) who concluded that women are more likely to acknowledge and exaggerate their own acts of violence while minimising men's. This was reflected in the commentary in the unbalanced responses to the 'mutual abuse'. To ensure blame is only directed toward Heard, male violence is minimised and female violence exaggerated, also supporting the conclusions of Mottram and Salter (2016) and Venäläinen (2016) who found that women who fight back are discredited as 'crazy' and 'dangerous'.

Comments referencing the violence Depp and Heard each testified to experiencing also generated patterns through omission. For example, the violence that Heard testifies to experiencing is barely referenced within the dataset and, where there is reference to a specific incident, the comment distracts from the act itself by focusing on Heard's lack of credibility. For example

It's so weird to say that you were 'embarrassed' by being kicked in front of other people in that situation, instead of emphasizing the brutality of the alleged 'attack'.

This comment refers to a violent encounter in which Heard testified she was kicked in the back by Depp in front of witnesses. Focus here, though, is diverted from the violence itself and inoculates Depp against any potential scrutiny (Potter, 1998) by dismissing the recounting of it as 'weird'. Similarly, when Heard testified that she had been sexually assaulted by Depp, the comments barely address the violence of the act but instead use its extremity as reason to discredit her further:

she said her privates were bleeding but no pics no doctor

Amber Heards A Liar. If anyone had put a bottle in a woman's private you would definitely call an ambulance [...]

These matter of fact and passive references suggest no shock or disgust and thereby minimise the violent act. Notably, Depp is absent from these comments and instead 'if anyone had put a bottle' and 'she said' is used to create ambiguity around the incident, and the attribution of responsibility, to undermine her claims. In contrast, comments relating to Depp's testimony of Heard's violence are repeatedly discussed with shock and directly attribute blame to Heard. For example:

She put ... a ... cigarette ... out ... on HIS FACE. Omg put this women in jail!

The use of ellipses to denote a pause due to shock, the capitalisation to emphasise the victim as Depp, the use of active voicing starting with 'Omg' (Oh my God) and of an exclamation mark all function to maximise the abhorrent violence of the act and contrast significantly with responses to Heard's testimony. The passive references to Depp's violence, where he is omitted from the act, are what Lamb (1991) refers to as 'linguistic avoidance' of men's violence against women and of their responsibility for such violence. Although both may have been physically aggressive, the differences in those acts, what led to them and the public responses to them is gendered. The abuse, therefore, is not mutual. Discursively, *mutual abuse* legitimises male violence and punishes women for resisting, supporting Magnusson and Marecek's (2012) assertion that society treats men and women differently when they do the same thing and Chesney-Lind's (1999) conclusion that the

occasional public demonisation of a violent woman acts to warn other women of the consequences of accessing male strategies of resistance.

In this interpretive repertoire, commenters employ discursive strategies to rebut allegations by Heard and minimise any blame for Depp by (re)asserting a gender-symmetry in domestic abuse, where the woman is capable of '[giving] as good as she got'. Heard's behaviour is then exaggerated and Depp's is barely mentioned or framed as self-defence. This is achieved through drawing on established gender norms of male violence as innate, normal and unremarkable and female violence as grotesque, appalling and deserving of punishment, socially sanctioning the violence of one and condemning the aggression of the other.

### ***Dangerous women***

This discursive repertoire is used as commenters draw on the concept of a matriarchal system within which men are victimised through female perpetrated domestic abuse and false allegations. The trial is defined by some as a breakthrough for men's rights with Depp the hero fighting for justice for all fathers and men. This fight manifests in the direct disciplining of Heard, who is positioned as representative of the matriarchal order. She is demonised and pathologised, while commenters position themselves as on the side of 'real victims', legitimising their moral argument and treatment of Heard.

Notably, this repertoire constructs a significant proportion of men as silent and hidden victims of domestic abuse who commenters hope will emerge after seeing Depp represent and fight for them. For example,

Most women treat their husbands this way to some degree. (yes I know men are horrible also, but women (wives) need to be exposed)

This case will be a landmark for male domestic violence victims and gender equality in domestic violence. If Johnny wins, more men will come forward and tell their stories.

The extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) of 'most women' in comment one constructs a hidden world of female violence that needs to be exposed. This categorical generalisation about women is followed by a concession explicitly acknowledging the counter claim ('yes I know men are horrible also'.) which functions to do some level of 'interest management' (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 7), specifically around managing the credibility of this claim. The fight against a dominant female oppressor is picked up in the second comment as a call for gender equality frames men as the oppressed sex and suggests the trial will mark a victory in the fight for 'equality'. This supports research that concludes the dominant discourses around gender and gendered violence online are currently those led by men's rights activists, utilising the same rhetoric and discredited research of the 1990s (Barratt, 2018; Litosseliti et al., 2019). Male victimhood at the hands of women is reinforced elsewhere in comments that suggest there are also large numbers of men falsely accused of domestic abuse.

[...] I know woman like Heard. I have friends that never hit there woman but they would use the kids and would say I will say you hit me so you can't see your kids. I wish there were better laws to protect fathers and men in general. There are a lot of great men who were framed just like this. It's so sad.

I love Women in General but this excrement toxic females are the femenz\*s that make us Men being falsely accused and have our lives DESTROYED, TALK ABOUT THE 'PATRIARCHY' AND TOXIC MASCULINITY, HOW ABOUT MATRIARCHY AND TOXIC FEMS.

The first comment here further evokes a hidden female assault on family men, maximising their victimhood by evoking their children, and the commenter presents personal experience and the image of multiple men victimised as proof of this large-scale issue, while the reference to better laws to protect fathers and men adopts the arguments of men's rights activists and, in doing so, evokes a political and legal system that favours women. In the second comment, the use of 'femenaz\*s', constructs a fascist matriarchal regime that is destroying men and parallels the results of research conducted by García-Favaro and Gill (2016) who found a similar narrative of pervasive male victimisation under a new gender order. The use of capitalisation generates a sense of urgency and panic, and this commenter inverts feminist language to offer a simple and emotive counter-narrative.

Marwick (2021) coined the term Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as an explanation for the coordinated hatred and abuse individuals (predominantly women) receive online, which functions to enforce the social order. This is present in the Dangerous Women repertoire as commenters construct a fight for 'real victims' against Heard's perceived deception, infusing them with a moral crusade and legitimising their treatment of her. The following comment captures this narrative.

As a woman who wholeheartedly believes in the metoo movement, I am disgusted by AH for making it a mockery. It diminishes its name, its strength and most importantly what it stands for. This has been hard to watch. A woman jumping on the bandwagon to seek nothing but profit. Don't even get me started on the mental health issues ... She is a total disgrace to all those that truly suffer.

Many commenters use the membership categorisation (Sacks & Jefferson, 1992) 'as a woman' to validate their dismissal of Heard's testimony and ratify her villainy by claiming she has hurt women; 'real victims'; and the #MeToo movement. Voicing these concerns from this footing provides more weight (and legitimacy) and presents the comment as the reasonable concerns of a woman and activist, rather than a scathing attack and judgement of Heard. Changes in footing and concessions such as these, are common features of talk used to mitigate against negative inferences for the speaker which effectively deny that discrimination and prejudice is taking place (Billig, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This then positions anybody who supports Heard as anti-feminist, which may function to generate a conflict within progressive groups. Although the data did support the observations of Pellegrini (2018) and Langone (2018) that there is a fight on social media to define the dominant narratives around gender and violence, this study could not support observations of feminist resistance or support, such as that found by Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018).

The lack of feminist mobilisation around Heard might be explained by Ging (2019), who questions the sustained effectiveness of social media activism, given its position within a capitalist communication platform, and García-Favaro and Gill (2016) who identify a renewed and reinforced Postfeminism online that divides feminists and maintains a discourse of individual achievement and female dominance. Furthermore, these comments construct domestic abuse as individualised and pathologised within Depp and

Heard's relationship, rather than as a sociocultural issue, and by referencing the perceived harm that Heard has done to the MeToo movement, commenters were able to justify their moral outrage and subsequent treatment of Heard.

The most notable tool mobilised to discipline Heard was that of pathological diagnoses. Through this, commenters invoked and reproduced the historic control of women who deviate from the social order by labelling them psychologically unstable. The most notable lay-diagnoses of Heard were Narcissism and Borderline Personality Disorder, which Jimenez (1997) argues has replaced Hysteria as a pathology that women are disproportionately diagnosed with and medicated for, often due to presenting as *difficult* or *angry* (Becker, 2000; Ussher, 2013).

I think with the histrionic borderline personality disorder she could potentially trick the lie detector because her sense of reality is so warped probably thinks what she is saying is real but it be interesting if they did an investigation into it later.

All narcissists are emotionally underdeveloped. They're emotionally children in adult bodies. It's very hard to grasp but true

Commenter one here refers to the diagnosis as though it is established fact, as opposed to an opinion, and goes on to discuss how it might manifest rather than suggest the diagnosis is in any way debatable. Commenter two inoculates themselves against any challenge by suggesting that people who disagree are less intelligent and positioning themselves as expert delivering fact, a discursive device used by many commenters to establish credibility as they diagnosed Heard's mental health. The misogynistic lay-diagnosing of women in public discourse serves to dismiss their experiences and testimony. It also perpetuates and reinforces the social and state control of women through psychiatry, medication and incarceration, further amplified in the data through suggestions that Heard should be 'locked up'. To justify this assertion, the language used to refer to Heard was also often dehumanising, describing her as a demon, a monster or an animal, such as in the following comment.

Johnny fully intends to see to it this beast is locked in a cage where she belongs. In her narcissistic hubris, the Defendent has grossly underestimated ... her former husband's will to fight for himself and his family. She just does not understand how actual human beings think and feel. Time will tell if I've nailed this, but so far, every single one of my impressions has proven to be spot on. We aren't done with Amber Heard. In fact, we are just getting started.

This last comment captures a number of semantic patterns across the data. The imagery of Heard as an animal who should be locked up in cage pathologises her and situates her outside of humanity. This is juxtaposed against Depp's righteous fight and his status as family man which adds to the commenters self-proclaimed expertise and legitimacy in condemning her. The comment is also representative of a feature of the discourse throughout, which was the violent disciplining of Heard. The language is active and ominously suggests future punishment for Heard, using 'we' to evoke consensus, such as an army called to the fight against, not just Heard, but the patriarchal order that she has been constructed to represent.

## Conclusion

The sensationalism of the Depp v Heard trial and the proliferation of public responses to it have the potential to influence attitudes and beliefs about the nature of domestic abuse. Flood (2006) argues that when a woman is violent toward a male partner, it is usually in the context of his violence toward her. However, women's self-defence becomes obscured through narratives of 'Mutual Abuse', which negate any precipitating male violence as soon as a woman retaliates, however different those acts might be. This risks women being further harmed as they avoid retaliation through fear of being implicated in their own abuse and charged as an abuser themselves (Mottram & Salter, 2016). Any aggression on the woman's part also means she is not a 'Perfect Victim' and will, therefore, not be believed when seeking help. Constructions of 'mutual abuse' are, therefore, discursively dangerous because they ignore the structural male dominance and power within which intimate aggression is situated (Currie, 1998) and they support more extreme narratives of violent female dominance and 'Dangerous Women'.

The lack of notable support for Heard throughout the commentary may be attributed to the coordinated harassment and abuse of women who attempted to speak up during the trial (Bot Sentinel, 2022). This suggests the anger and counter-narratives found in #MeToo and #TimesUp activism are being silenced and that there is a necessity for scholars and activists to maintain their collective resistance to the dominant discourses, currently driven by men's rights activists, in order to preserve women's safety on and offline (Barratt, 2018).

Few qualitative studies of public discourses of domestic abuse have been conducted and this study's design was unique. The use of a Critical Discursive Psychological approach to analysis of the data provided for rich exploration, not only of patterns within the data but of what the language was 'doing' and the potential consequences. Despite this, the research should be considered within some limitations. Firstly, because the research was conducted using YouTube comments, the individual demographics and agenda of commenters is unknown. However, as the purpose of the research was to understand the social consequences of public discourse, rather than the individual opinions of the people commenting, as with Colliver and Coyle (2020), not knowing the identities of specific commenters does not impact the research. It has been noted that the trial was taken up as a cause by the alt-right and conservative media outlets who invested significant funding to drive anti-Heard sentiment online and direct new audiences to their websites (Denkinson, 2022). This was then amplified by the men's rights movement through the coordinated propagation of fake social media accounts with bots and trolls persistently attacking Heard and any woman who posted in support of her (Bot Sentinel, 2022). Some comments analysed may, therefore, have been from fake accounts. However, given the outcome of the trial and the very real consequences for women's ability to speak out and seek support, this is still relevant to the study, which was historically and culturally situated on social media at a time when, it has been argued, the alt-right, men's rights activists and capitalist platforms are coordinating to legitimise violence against women, mobilise around a conservative agenda and violently reinforce the social order (Ging, 2019; Marwick, 2021).

Exploring the construction of gender in narratives around domestic abuse is important to understand the power structures that support them, how they normalise and

legitimise misogyny and the very real consequences that they can have on women's lives; the spaces (on and offline) that they can occupy in safety; their ability to speak out; to seek safety and justice. Future research might explore *below the line* comments on mainstream media articles regarding the trial and analysis of the media reporting itself would provide insight into the mainstreaming of men's rights discourses. Analysis of the testimonies of Heard and Depp and the language used by their legal teams might also provide insight into current state and legal discourses around domestic abuse.

This study analysed YouTube comments below videos of the Depp v Heard trial to explore public constructions of domestic abuse. Analysis of the data concludes that gendered prejudice is normalised and legitimised in order to justify domestic, social and state violence against women and that domestic abuse is discursively constructed to maintain the oppression and control of women within contradictory narratives that are belittling and pathologising towards women, while constructing a story of dangerous female dominance. This exposes a real threat to women's ability to define their own experiences of domestic abuse and seek justice, and to hard-won feminist fights to acknowledge the coercive control and structural power systems that lead to male violence against women.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the public domain on YouTube (Law&Crime Network) [[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoW1SleAWaWb1IDY\\_WuLKvZygiJudUBSdJ](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLoW1SleAWaWb1IDY_WuLKvZygiJudUBSdJ)]



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