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Are Johnny and Amber's Stans for Real?

Cruel taunts, slanderous comments, and ugly death threats on social media have some wondering if the former couple's online supporters are human beings at all

By **TATIANA SIEGEL**



A spectator shows support for Johnny Depp outside Fairfax County Circuit Court on April 11, 2022, in Fairfax, Virginia.
Paul Morigi/Getty Images

On April 11, **Johnny Depp** and **Amber Heard** reported to a Fairfax, Virginia, courtroom for a long-awaited defamation trial that would air all the dirty laundry of their tumultuous marriage. The first three weeks of testimony have offered a cascade of eye-popping revelations, with Heard, through her attorneys, accusing Depp of sexual assault, while one of Depp's bodyguards testified that he witnessed the actress throw a Red Bull can at her ex as well as punch him in the face. Also laid bare were Depp's astronomical salaries

(including \$22.5 million for a would-be *Pirates of the Caribbean 6*) and sordid details of his drug-and-booze benders with famous friends like Marilyn Manson and Paul Bettany.

But as wild and unpleasant as the proceedings have been, an even uglier shadow war has been raging in the court of public opinion, as the often-toxic fans of both celebrities take to social media and trash the other side. Heard has borne the brunt of the vitriol, which ranges from a deluge of posts tagged #JusticeForJohnnyDepp and #freejohnny (who is not currently in jail) to out-and-out death threats. According to a screenshot provided by a source close to Heard, one Twitter user named “chloe” wrote on April 13: “who wants to join me in my expedition to brutally murder Amber Heard”; another named Nah’ wrote a week later: “#AmberHeard you big bobble head butch I’m coming for you when you get outta court hoe you lying ass big faced butch it’s up.” *Rolling Stone* has viewed the archived tweets, which were both subsequently deleted (both accounts remain active). Similar sentiments are not hard to find. Also on April 13, a user with the handle @histry_huh tweeted: “Brb on my way to go murder Amber Heard that fucking psycho #JusticeForJohnnyDepp.”

Even fellow celebrities seem to be entering the fray. On April 20, Depp picked up a new Instagram follower (joining a group 14.4 million strong) in **Jason Momoa**... who stars opposite Heard in the *Aquaman* franchise. Team Johnny was quick to read the tea leaves, with a Twitter user named Strawberry Fields opining, “Jason Momoa really just said, ‘justice for Johnny Depp’ by following him on Instagram.” Another chimed in: “HAVE A ROTTEN BIRTHDAY EVIL WITCH” (Heard turned 36 on April 22) and “May your day be filled lies and violence [sic].”

The hate has become so vehement and depraved — one Depp fan painted a picture of Heard defecating on the actor’s bed in a macabre interpretation of Depp’s testimony — that both sides are accusing the other of having fake fan armies. But the reality is far more disturbing.

Depp’s fan base has been one of Hollywood’s most rabid for years, laying the foundation for a David-versus-Goliath battle during the trial. On TikTok, the #justiceforjohnnydepp tag has more than 6.8 *billion* views, while the #IStandWithAmberHeard tag has just 2.4 million views. On Twitter, some pro-Depp posts have received more likes than Heard’s entire 207,900 following. The lopsided discourse has led to speculation that Depp’s team has been using bots and algorithm manipulation to get an edge. Heard first raised the notion in 2020, in her \$100 million countersuit to Depp’s defamation filing, claiming, without evidence, “As part of his ongoing smear campaign,

Mr. Depp and/or his agents acting on his behalf have directed both authentic and inauthentic social media accounts, and/or non-human controlled 'bots,' to target Ms. Heard's Twitter account and attempt to interfere with her [career]."

The suit doubled down on the bot allegation by stating that "many" pro-Depp accounts included Cyrillic signatures, suggesting Russian origin. It then noted that Adam Waldman, who was on Depp's legal team at the time, "is publicly associated with Russian individuals with the capability to organize such attacks." (Waldman once represented Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska.) The allegation prompted Waldman to tweet, "Is this a real Counterclaim or am I getting Punk'd?" and to mock Heard's implication of "some kind of dastardly Cyrillic Russian involvement." (A friend of Heard's named Christina Taft also wrote a book promoting this narrative, titled *Amber Heard vs Johnny Depp & Bots: 21st Century Story: Influence Operations* and billed as "investigative journalism [that] delves into Julian Assange, Jennifer Robinson, progressives and the alt-right, artificial intelligence, Russia voting interference, Elon Musk, United Nations, and *Aquaman 2*.")

Nearly two years later, the idea persists, as Heard supporters have been plastering cars (including those belonging to jurors) and telephone poles outside the Fairfax County courthouse with fliers that claim Depp operatives are manipulating the social media landscape from YouTube to Reddit.

But **Cyabra**, a Tel Aviv-based startup that analyzes online conversations and spots disinformation, believes that Depp's online fan base is overwhelmingly real, at least on Twitter. The company, which is backed by investors like Peter Thiel, and whose clients include the U.S. State Department, studied data on the platform spanning from March 13 — about a month before the trial kicked off — through April 25. Scanning relevant keywords and hashtags associated with the couple, Cyabra then examined profiles that participated in the conversations around those phrases. Using proprietary AI, the company identifies fake accounts, the most influential accounts, and the sentiment and "velocity" of the conversation (how quickly people are tweeting and commenting on a given topic). Synthesizing that data, Cyabra CEO Dan Brahmly tells *Rolling Stone* that "the majority of the profiles that are on Johnny Depp's side and support him are real people, almost 95 percent of them. These are genuine people who love Johnny Depp."

Cyabra also studied the activity surrounding competing hashtags like #JusticeForJohnnyDepp and #IStandWithAmberHeard and reported that Depp's contingent was getting far greater traction than his ex-wife's, which the firm found to be mostly authentic as well (about 90 percent). The top fan page

for Depp received more than 18,000 shares for content containing the hashtag #JusticeForJohnnyDepp and spread to more than 502 million profiles. By contrast, the top fan page praising Heard received only 138 shares and spread to some three million profiles.

“The Johnny Depp fan messages are able to get around better,” Brahmy adds. “The difference between the exposure of the pro-Depp to the pro-Amber [content] is more than 100 times.”

As for Depp’s fake five percent, Brahmy says that number falls within the three-to-five-percent average on any trending topic, while much of Heard’s bot activity, which Cyabra placed at about 10 percent, appeared to be deployed by uninterested third parties looking to promote a product by glomming on to the hot topic.

As the six-week trial enters its second half, the cyber-brawl appears to be escalating. Cyabra found that more than 21,000 Twitter profiles took part in the discourse around the Depp-Heard trial for the week ending April 25, an increase of 588 percent from the week prior. And the anti-Heard rhetoric is only getting nastier. Cyabra identified the most significant increase of negative content surrounding the trial on April 21, a day after Depp testified about an incident in which Heard allegedly severed his finger during a violent argument, resulting in an 819 percent increase in “harmful” content against Heard.

Still, much of the activity is now taking place on TikTok, which has been flooded with pro-Depp videos. One that went viral, purportedly taken at an L.A.-area Starbucks, showed competing tip jars labeled for the exes, Depp’s full of cash and Heard’s empty. In the wake of the trend, Roslyn Talusan, a culture writer for the AV Club and Vice, has stoked speculation that Depp’s lawyers are somehow able to juice the TikTok algorithm, tweeting, “so many people on here have said tiktok keeps forcing videos from the d*pp trial onto their FYP and i can’t help but wonder how much his legal team paid for that.”

A source close to Depp calls that claim absurd and points the finger at Heard’s team. “As much as Amber’s PR representatives would like to believe that there isn’t any organic, unpaid support for Johnny online, it’s simply not the case,” the source tells *Rolling Stone*. “Johnny’s fans and followers — new and old — have rallied around his truth, and not an ounce of that support was paid for.” (Heard, apparently dissatisfied with the job that PR team had been doing, parted ways with them on Sunday.)

In response to specific online threats targeting Heard, her legal team has hired a boutique security firm (*Rolling Stone* is withholding the name of the company at its behest), which assessed her safety risk. In an April 24 report dubbed Operation Fairfax, the security firm noted that Depp's fans, which it referred to as cult followers, could become more brazen and reckless in the coming days and that Heard's in-person security personnel should change up routines and stay alert.

The concern is real enough that two Depp stans — Brooke Walsh (@depplyhallows) and Isabelle Orsini (@Izze1122) — were booted from the courtroom on April 13 and 14, respectively, after Heard's legal team raised their unsettling social media footprints. According to a screenshot provided by a source close to Heard, Walsh tweeted in 2016, "I Can't Wait For The Day I Kill Amber Heard," while Orsini revealed to her Twitter followers the name of the London hotel Heard was staying at in 2021.

Not to be outdone, Depp's team successfully pushed to have Heard supporter and music journalist Eve Barlow barred from the courtroom after they accused the writer of live-tweeting during testimony. "The social media landscape is shockingly brutal for Amber, with TikTok and Twitter especially prone to spreading disinformation and misogynist hate," Barlow tells *Rolling Stone*. "The live broadcast of this trial is highly dehumanizing, and has resulted in obsessional nit-picking by Depp fans over Amber's wardrobe every day, and her facial expressions, while Depp sits in court smiling, doodling, and laughing with his counsel, backed by an army of vocal Twitter fans who are [sometime seated] in the public gallery."

While some close to the case, including former Heard attorney Roberta Kaplan, have maintained their belief that fake accounts amplify support for Depp, there's no denying the virulence of the commentary it's generated. As Kaplan told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2020, "My firm is involved in a lot of controversial cases. Our clients are suing the white supremacists and neo-Nazis responsible for the violence in Charlottesville. I have clients who are suing Donald Trump. But, by far, the one case [of ours] that has generated the greatest amount of hostile social media attacks is Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard. Not even close."

And though the ominous notion of bots and AI-driven treachery have become a powerful motif in a popular culture obsessed with conspiracies, in the case of Johnny v. Amber, the simpler explanation for the mud-slinging may prove to be more accurate: Humans — especially hyper-passionate fandoms operating

from the safe confines of their own phones and computers — are perfectly capable of being bad actors all on their own.

Will the deafening chatter have any effect in the courtroom as the trial continues to unfold? That remains to be seen. “The right answer is no, it shouldn’t,” says attorney Kimberly Lau, who specializes in harassment and assault suits and is a libel and slander suit expert. “But realistically, it may. The lawyers certainly could be influenced by what they’re seeing [on social media] and adjust their trial strategy and how they advise their respective clients to appear in court. So, it shouldn’t influence the trial, theoretically, but I think it’s impossible to eradicate all of that influence, especially in this high profile of a trial.”