

Trial by YouTube: Prejudicial views of mental health labels formed following trial of Johnny Depp and Amber Heard

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Viewing expert testimony during the court case of Amber Heard and Johnny Depp led to highly prejudicial views of the mental health difficulties of both parties being formed, a [new study](#) by students at the University of Surrey reveals. The findings, published in the journal *BJPsych Bulletin*, suggest these views were considerably more negative than their views about mental illness beforehand.

The 2022 trial was live-streamed globally on YouTube and was viewed more than 1 billion times, making it the most-watched trial in history.

Dr. Oliver Mason, Reader in Psychology at the University of Surrey, said, "This court case is perhaps one of the most memorable of the last decade, with two A-list Hollywood celebrities battling it out for victory.

"Their legal teams sought to undermine both their testimonies with terms such as Borderline and Histrionic Personality Disorder (Heard), Paranoia and Substance Use Disorder (Depp), effectively weaponizing each other's mental health difficulties.

"Given the widespread consumption of this online content, we wanted to assess its impact on perceptions of the reported mental health of Heard and Depp, and of mental health issues in general."

The research team surveyed 38 participants about their attitudes to mental illness both before and after viewing video coverage of expert witness testimony concerning either Heard or Depp.

Participants were then asked to complete the Prejudice Towards People with a Mental Illness (PPMI) scale—a well-known measure that assesses people's feelings of fear/avoidance, authoritarianism, malevolence, and unpredictability towards mental illness.

Participants viewed the trial footage, which was focused on the testimony of mental health experts. The Prejudice towards People with a Mental Illness scale was then repeated concerning Heard or Depp. Researchers identified a statistically marked increase in stigmatizing attitudes towards the [mental illness](#) of both Heard and Depp after viewing footage of the trial, which were more negative than participants' previously held views.

Dr. Mason added, "The unmediated availability online of video in which mental health labels were used by experts to discredit testimony, tarnish reputation, and undermine the credibility of both parties is highly concerning.

"Our evidence suggests that this may lead to stigmatizing and prejudicial opinions of the mental health of both parties being formed. It raises the question of whether [expert](#) testimony regarding mental health should be widely available in this way for public consumption. There is the clear danger when this happens that prejudicial views of mental health in general are formed."

More information: Oliver Mason et al, Trial by YouTube: effects of expert psychiatric witness testimony on viewers' opinions of Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, *BJPsych Bulletin* (2024). [DOI: 10.1192/bjb.2024.31](#)

Provided by University of Surrey

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