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## Online Blaming and Intimate Partner Violence: A Content Analysis of Social Media Comments

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## Online Blaming and Intimate Partner Violence: A Content Analysis of Social Media Comments

### Abstract

Social media has become a ubiquitous form of interacting and sharing information. However, comments on social media sites are often aggressive and contemptuous, especially when topics are controversial or politically charged. For example, discussion of intimate partner violence (IPV) tends to provoke strong reactions from outsiders, who make angry or blaming remarks about those involved. Although IPV is common, it has not been widely discussed in popular media until recent years when high-profile cases of abuse have come to light. In 2016, a celebrity accusation of domestic violence led to thousands of comments on social media, with outsiders weighing in about who was at fault and what should be done. This study involved a content analysis of 400 of these comments, with the intent of better understanding typical types of social media reactions to domestic violence accusations. Key themes included judgment and blame, with around 37% of commenters blaming the supposed victim in this case, while only 9% blamed the alleged perpetrator. The findings show how people comment about domestic violence and illustrate the contentious and often distorted nature of social media interactions. Implications for professionals and researchers are discussed.

### Keywords

Social Media, Trolling, Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Victim Blaming

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## Online Blaming and Intimate Partner Violence: A Content Analysis of Social Media Comments

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*Social media has become a ubiquitous form of interacting and sharing information. However, comments on social media sites are often aggressive and contemptuous, especially when topics are controversial or politically charged. For example, discussion of intimate partner violence (IPV) tends to provoke strong reactions from outsiders, who make angry or blaming remarks about those involved. Although IPV is common, it has not been widely discussed in popular media until recent years when high-profile cases of abuse have come to light. In 2016, a celebrity accusation of domestic violence led to thousands of comments on social media, with outsiders weighing in about who was at fault and what should be done. This study involved a content analysis of 400 of these comments, with the intent of better understanding typical types of social media reactions to domestic violence accusations. Key themes included judgment and blame, with around 37% of commenters blaming the supposed victim in this case, while only 9% blamed the alleged perpetrator. The findings show how people comment about domestic violence and illustrate the contentious and often distorted nature of social media interactions. Implications for professionals and researchers are discussed. Keywords: Social Media, Trolling, Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Victim Blaming*

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### Introduction

In May of 2016, model/actress Amber Heard went public with accusations of intimate partner violence toward her then-husband, actor Johnny Depp. She described a tumultuous partnership, reporting, “During the entirety of our relationship, Johnny has been verbally and physically abusive to me” (Chicago Tribune, 2016). She posted a picture of lesions on her face and filed for divorce. This set off a worldwide avalanche of comments on social media and online news sites as observers gave strong opinions about what happened and who was at fault.

It is not possible, of course, for outsiders to know exactly what occurred in this incident or what the dynamics of this relationship were. Despite this, many were quick to make accusations, asserting blame toward one or the other. This type of reaction is common, where those who hear about intimate partner violence (IPV) become upset and offer strong opinions as to what should happen (Jackson, Witte, & Petretic-Jackson, 2001). Unfortunately, these

opinions can become blaming toward victims of violence, who are often in complicated and difficult circumstances (Cravens, Whiting, & Amar, 2015).

The rise of social media, with its often-provocative content, has amplified emotions and arguments, with some commenters casting aspersions or using inflammatory language in response to morally loaded topics (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Synnott, Coulias, & Ioannou, 2017). Although the impact of cyberbullying and virtual abuse have been studied, we know less about the moderately severe, but very common, forms of uncivil and aggressive online comments (Koban, Stein, Eckhardt, & Ohler, 2018). For example, many posts on social media include insults, accusations, or immature and dramatic language, and these upset readers (Chen & Ng, 2017). Examining this emotional social media discourse can help researchers and professionals better understand these interactive dynamics and how “the technology and logic of [social media] communication forms shape the content” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 3). In this case of an abuse accusation, it is useful to examine how the online format shapes the conversation around the public health issue of domestic violence. This is important because the escalated nature of online comments activates negative emotions and responses, and these reactions do not generate solutions or help victims (Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). For example, fear of outside judgment affects whether victims share their stories with friends or professionals (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008), and the contentious nature of online interactions might intimidate or otherwise silence victim reports.

Social media is here to stay, and it is useful to understand how its dynamics influence relationships, social tone, and perceptions and dialogue about violence and victims. The allegations and reactions in the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case provide an example that can shed light on the prevalence and types of social media comments. The goal of this study was to analyze outsiders’ reactions to this case with the intent to better understand social media discourse around violence accusations. The research questions included the following: (1) How do outsiders respond on social media to a high-profile allegation of domestic violence? (2) How do these types of responses reflect victim or perpetrator-blaming accusations? (3) How common are these various types of responses?

## **Intimate Partner Violence**

IPV is a global challenge. Estimates suggest between 30% and 60% of women worldwide have experienced some form of verbal, sexual, or physical assault (Garcia-Monroe, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006), and these rates are influenced by the social and cultural values in which the abuse occurs (Whiting, Merchant, Bradford, & Smith, in press). Types of violence vary widely, with some patterns including pushing, throwing, and name-calling, and others consisting of ongoing control, degradation, and assault (Johnson, 2008). In some cases, there is a clear perpetrator and victim, and in others the violence is mutual. Although some perpetrators and victims of violence are amenable to treatment and some stop abusing, all violence can be dangerous and should be taken seriously by professionals (Merchant & Whiting, 2017; Smith & Whiting, 2016; Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011).

## **Understanding Victim Blaming in Violence**

The apparent paradox of blaming an individual that is being threatened or hurt is, on the surface, puzzling. However, there are logical, if unfortunate, reasons victims are blamed by perpetrators, friends, family, professionals, and even themselves. Perpetrators of controlling violence often blame their victim, with over 70% of battered women reporting being blamed by their abuser for their own abuse (Anderson et al., 2003). Batterers do this to justify their behavior and reduce cognitive dissonance that comes from hurting another person (Goldner,

1999). For example, in one study a man gave a typical excuse for hitting his wife: “She wasn’t changing, she was still not shutting up when I told her to shut up” (Whiting, Oka, & Fife, 2012, p. 8).

In one study, participants read a story of IPV, and 40% of readers said the victim must have shared some responsibility for the violence, even though the story contained no rationale for that assumption (Ewing & Aubrey, 1987) and more than 60% of readers agreed if an abused woman wanted to, she could leave. This assumption is usually flawed, because for many, leaving involves difficulties such as financial constraints, threats toward children, and fear of the abuser, who often becomes more dangerous during a separation (Johnson, 2008; Meyer, 2016).

The psychological theories on why outsiders blame abuse victims are related to denial or a reluctance to see the world as an unsafe place (Van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009). Janoff-Bulman, Timko, and Carli (1985) did an experiment on the “hindsight effect,” where participants read different versions of a story. In one, a character was raped at the end, and the other had a neutral ending. Those who read the version with the assault were more likely to blame the victim, because they selected out evidence that could retroactively support this conclusion. This, “I knew-it-all-along” bias happens when people claim reasons to make events seem predictable, even if they weren’t.

Some abused women are afforded victim status because they fit the expected profile or are seen as deserving of it. Christie’s (1986) framework for the “ideal victim” suggests that an abused individual warrants support only if they meet five traits, being: (1) weak/vulnerable, (2) involved in a respectable activity at the time of victimization, (3) blameless in the circumstances of their victimization, (4) being victimized by an obvious offender, and (5) the offender is not known by the victim. This may be why professionals or clergy are more likely to blame victims who are of color, on welfare, fighting back, or who are not living according to the standards or recommendations preferred by the person judging them (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008).

Finally, victims often have high levels of self-blame. Some of this is a result of perpetrators’ convincing power and accusing words (Whiting et al., 2012). Victims often feel deep shame and may blame themselves for staying or for allegedly causing the violence. In one study, abused women blamed themselves for starting fights even when the transcripts of the fights showed otherwise (Olson & Lloyd, 2005).

It is important to reiterate that violence does not victimize just women, and for some types of violence the rates of male and female perpetrators are similar (Black et al., 2011). Many women report suffering appalling victimization; it may be that men are often invisible victims (Cook, 2009). Men often report injury and harm, and women report much more physical and emotional trauma (Johnson, 2008). Additionally, victims in same-sex relationships are often ignored by professionals and are researched less often (Fredricksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). In any case of violence, the propensity to blame the victim is fueled by a complex interplay of biases, fears, defenses, and assumptions about the world, regardless of facts.

### **Social Media, Popular Media, and Victim Blaming**

The ubiquity of social media provides instant sharing of information, which generates dialogue in a way print media or scholarly journals cannot. Social media can be helpful for topics like violence because it can give voice to the powerless and hold perpetrators accountable (Crocket, 2017; Rentschler, 2014). Online voices can also add nuance and complexity to issues of violence, which are sometimes oversimplified in the news media as simple perpetrator/victim stories (Cravens et al., 2015).

While the internet has increased discussion of complex issues, it also has given rise to rancorous and coarse voices whose goals are not dialogue, but provocation and shock. The nature of the internet, with its built-in traits of ambiguity and anonymity, influences the way individuals interact (Hertlein, 2012). Online behavior can be ambiguous, where what is seen as inappropriate varies from person to person. It is easier to be angry and crude in an online interaction than in a face-to-face setting (Chen & Ng, 2017).

The anonymous nature of the internet reduces inhibition and accountability, which leads to uncharacteristic behavior (Hertlein, 2012). This is known as deindividuation, where identity is set aside, and interactions can even deteriorate into hooliganism, with commenters giving in to crude and hateful attacks that may fuel heady outrage and power. In this sense, “digital media may exacerbate the expression of moral outrage by inflating its triggering stimuli, reducing some of its costs and amplifying many of its personal benefits” (Crocket, 2017, p. 1). As one example, so-called trolls will post deliberately hateful and outrageous comments, including race-baiting, misogyny, and threats (Runions, Bak, & Shaw, 2017). Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) suggest trolling is partially a status-advancing activity since it provides a sense of power to provoke reactions and requires no skill other than cruelty (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010). Trolls often swarm to posts about gender, power, politics, and religion (Cheng, Bernstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017). In addition to hateful comments, trolls can harass others online by doxxing (publishing someone’s personal information) or griefing (deliberately causing death or trouble for video game characters).

Buckels et al. (2014) examined personality characteristics associated with those who troll, including the “dark tetrad” of narcissism, Machiavellianism, sadism, and psychopathy. The researchers asked participants what their favorite online activities were, and although only a small percentage of responders marked “trolling,” this group had significantly higher scores on all the destructive personality traits. Not only were trolls self-centered and mean, but they also spent significantly more time commenting online than others, showing the outsized, abrasive effect trolls have on online discourse (Buckels et al., 2014). Although trolls say they do it for “lulz,” or laughs, the effect of trolling is significant, with escalations of anger, negativity, and fear in those affected (Cheng et al., 2017). As Stein (2016) summarized, “When victims do not experience lulz, trolls tell them they have no sense of humor. Trolls are turning social media and comment boards into a giant locker room in a teen movie, with towel-snapping racial epithets and misogyny” (p. 47).

Negative discourse online can lead to real-life violence. Political reporters have been threatened with anti-Semitic comments and violence, cyberstalkers intimidate victims, and gangs use social media to threaten and sometimes engage in face-to-face violence (Rainie, Anderson, & Albright, 2017). Even the ability of social media to raise awareness can turn negative, as in situations where online discussion turns to online adjudication. In the case of the rape and murder of Jill Meagher, her story generated widespread interest, and comments on Facebook and Twitter were used to express sympathy, share grief, and eventually identify a suspect through sharing of evidence. This online outrage toward the accused was referred to as “trial by social media” (Milivojevic & McGovern, 2014, p. 22).

Although online abuse and aggression is clearly harmful in extreme cases, it is also important to understand the process of milder forms of arguing and accusing that occur ubiquitously on social media (Coe et al., 2014). This type of incivility may be even more important to understand, because studies have found that it is not necessarily associated with negative personality traits but is very common (Koban et al., 2018). Also, negative online comments spread anger and spawn additional hostile comments like a contagion (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014).

These bitter online interactions have led some sites, such as *Scientific American*, to deactivate the option for comments, and other sites have stepped up monitoring of

inappropriate posts by banning them. This may help avoid ugly accusations and hateful remarks, but it also shuts down conversation and can stoke frustration. This has led Koban et al. (2018) to “plead for stronger efforts in [studying] seemingly mild occurrences of cyberhate to determine factors that might facilitate—or prevent—such activities” (p. 17). Because of the rapid nature of social media change, and the polarizing effects that continue to come from it (e.g., Crocket, 2017), there are as of yet few studies that have examined the types and frequencies of comments about socially-charged topics. This is an important area to learn more about, since social media has changed public discourse about topics that are easily politicized, including gender, power, and violence. This study is an attempt to better understand current social media discourse as it unfolds in online comments about violence accusations. This has the potential to help researchers and professionals better understand discussion about abuse, victimization, blaming of victims, and reporting abuse.

### **Author Context**

A way to help ensure trustworthy findings (Creswell, 2013) is to situate the research in the context of those who have produced it, which in this case includes four authors with interests in various aspects of intimate partnerships, including violence, technology, and victimization. All authors are in academic contexts and have experience teaching, researching, and working clinically with issues related to couples and aggression. The first author specializes in intimate partner violence research, with additional interests in victim blaming and technology. The second author has interests in safety, attachment, and helping victims. The third author studies the intersection of online technology and relationship challenges and discourse, and the fourth author has an interest in victims, trauma, and gender. All are clinicians who feel an obligation to advocate for those whose voices may not be heard in typical settings. In this sense, this research has an action component (Moe, 2007). This prior interest was important to acknowledge during the analysis, where the challenge was letting the data speak for itself rather than be forced into areas derived from our preconceptions. The memos and discussions helped us attend to our role in shaping the categories and interpretations in this study (e.g., Charmaz, 2014).

### **Methods**

To answer the research questions, the researchers gathered online comments that followed news stories after the domestic abuse allegations filed by Heard against Depp. This case was selected in part because of its convenience and the strong and divisive content related to gender and violence that resulted from this story. A selection of 400 comments were gathered from *People Magazine* online, *E! News* online, *Variety* magazine online, and Facebook, where these articles were shared and responded to. These comments were selected from posts within the month after the allegation to attempt to get first reactions rather than subsequent changes in the case and media responses to it. As is typical for stories like this, the number of comments was high and continues to increase over the years as people continue to react to it. Although it is impossible to say what proportion these comments represent of the total that exist, we attempted to seek representativeness by seeking them from a variety of sources, including news sites and social media. The sample was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach (Cho & Lee, 2014), which is a method of classifying oral or written material into categories with similar meanings (Moretti et al., 2011; Schreier, 2012). Most comments were one to five sentences in length.

## **Internet-Based Research and Ethical Issues**

A passive content analysis was used, where interactions and comments were studied without researchers being directly involved in the discussions (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Informed consent was not required because the comments were public, which renders this data exempt from subject review. However, real or screen names were excluded as a measure of privacy protection (Creswell, 2013). An advantage of media data gathered from actual comments was the avoidance of social desirability, which occurs in studies using hypothetical comments or responses (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Koban et al., 2018).

## **Sample and Procedure**

Due to the nature of the analysis, demographic information was not available. Some sources (e.g., Facebook) displayed commenters' names, and from this limited information it appeared that a majority of the comments came from females, as inferred through names, pictures and pronouns, though an exact gender count was impossible. Therefore, conclusions based on sample characteristics are limited. While these sample characteristics could not be inferred, Facebook, the most popular social media site in the United States (U.S.) has 1.8 billion monthly active users in the U.S., ranging in age from 13 to 65 and older. The largest cohort of Facebook users in the U.S. are 25 – 34 years of age and are more frequently used by females than males (Gramlich, 2018).

The online comments were gathered in response to the initial allegations of domestic abuse. The dates of the articles reporting abuse allegations ranged from May 27, 2016, to June 1, 2016, and data were limited to comments in the month following, excluding follow-up information about the ongoing civil dispute and court appearances.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was sought in all phases of research—including preparation, organization, and reporting—using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria along five dimensions: credibility, dependability, conformability, authenticity, and transferability (Elo et al., 2014). Creswell (2013) recommends using at least two procedures to help establish credible and rigorous findings. Although the researchers were not able to examine sample characteristics or revisit participants, they used established content analysis methodology, multiple coders, memos, and used internal audits of the process. Internal audits consisted of regular conversations between the first and second author on the rigor of the analysis process and what results were emerging. All of these helped engender an environment of reflexivity about the researchers' roles in the analysis and rigor in method. This was part of a commitment to representation all commenters' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred in five phases. In phase 1, the first two authors gathered reports of the case and read through the comments to get a sense of their type and nature. A random sample of 400 of these comments was selected and organized in an Excel spreadsheet. As the case was released to the media, the earliest posts were gathered, focusing on the inclusion criteria of posts that responded to the initial allegations. We used several sources and gathered comments with the intent of both getting enough comments to cover an adequate range of responses, per content analysis guidelines (Cho & Lee, 2014), ensuring that we had enough comments to speak to the topics of interest per theoretical sampling guidelines (e.g., Charmaz,

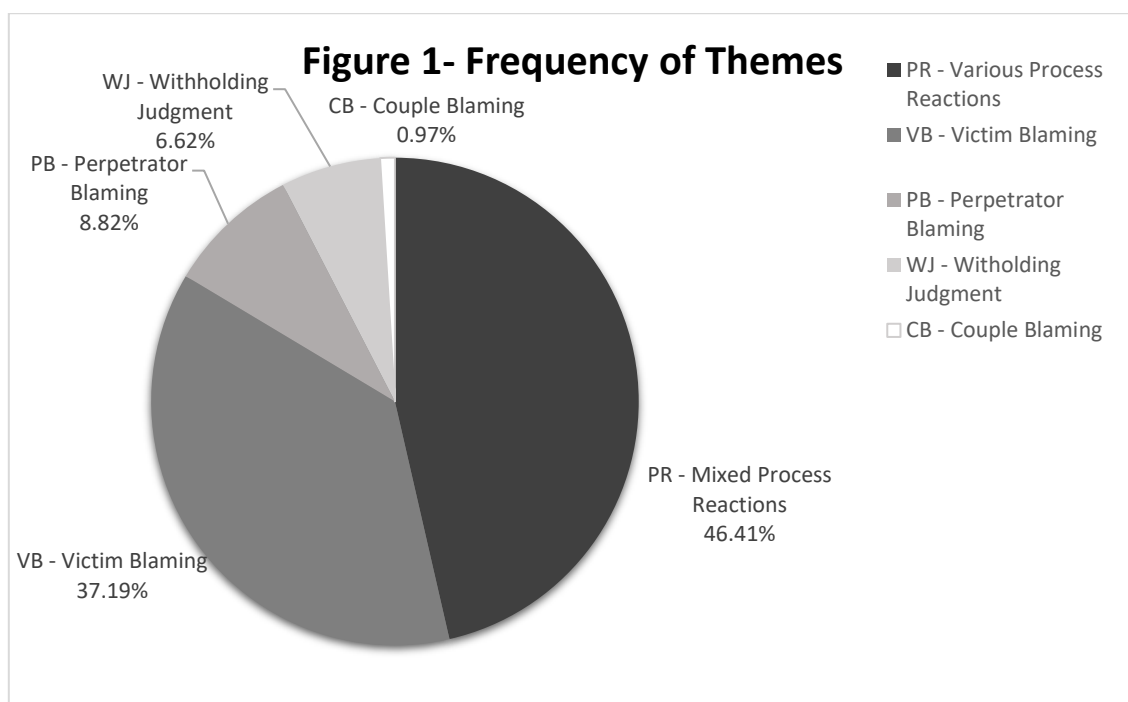


2014). As the comments were read, the first two authors consulted about what thematic content was emerging, and 400 comments were seen as sufficient to cover the range and content sought. In phase 2, researchers conducted open coding on a sample of the comments to identify the most common and analytically rich themes from which to establish a more selective coding scheme (Charmaz, 2014). This was an inductive process that involved writing memos as a way to describe and develop emerging categories, which resulted in an initial codebook of major themes and subthemes, along with definitions of each.

In phase 3, codes were compared, and where discrepancies existed, researchers discussed the process and decided which codes best reflected and explained the data, per grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014). This continued to involve the creation of memos and discussion together of emerging codes. Examples of preliminary codes from phase 3 include *victim blaming*, *debates*, and *withholding judgment*. This continued organically through the next phases, as important themes were refined and expanded and less central themes were dropped. In phase 4, the second author and a graduate assistant engaged in open and focused coding according to the scheme outlined by the research team, making adjustments or additions to the codes as needed. Comments were coded separately and then discussed to ensure congruence among definitions and act as a trustworthiness check on the process (Creswell, 2013), and conceptual and theoretical drafts were made of linkages between emerging codes and categories. In phase 5, researchers reviewed codes together, discussing discrepancies until they reached consensus on how to define each category and categorize each comment. Based on this process, the content of the text was fit into five themes and seventeen subthemes.

The five primary themes included (1) victim blaming, (2) perpetrator blaming, (3) couple blaming, (4) withholding judgment, and (5) mixed reactions to the process (see Figure 1). Themes will be described using text from the comments to illustrate each. Although we again emphasize the uncertain nature of the allegations, for convenience we will refer to comments about Amber Heard herein as referencing “the victim” and those about Johnny Depp as “the perpetrator.”

## Results



## Theme 1: Victim Blaming

There were many ways commenters implied or said the alleged victim was in the wrong. These ranged from skeptical comments to vicious attacks. Victim-blaming themes made up 37.1% of all comments and were sorted into five subthemes: “*this sounds fishy*,” “*flawed motivations*,” “*he [perpetrator] is a good person*,” “*character attacks*,” and “*fact claiming against her*.”

“*This sounds fishy*.” Some (11.4% of participants) expressed skepticism about the IPV claims, with comments such as “this sounds fishy” or “I call b.s.” Others challenged the evidence, suggesting she used camera filters or makeup to create bruises. Others did not like the timing of her accusation, making comments like, “If she was so scared why didn’t she file the restraining order simultaneously with the divorce papers?” and, “Why didn’t she write abuse as the reason for the divorce? Not a week after she got so much crap for asking for spousal support.” Many expressed general suspicion, such as, “I just find the whole thing curious.”

*Flawed motivations*. Some (8.7%) suggested the victim had flawed motivations, such as being a “gold-digger,” seeking attention or a career boost, or being vindictive. Comments included “She’s been known to ‘go for the headlines’ before,” “[People] will play victims to be heard,” and “She has proved time after time she is after the money . . . it’s a shame that she would try to get so much publicity from something so serious.” Others attributed her actions to revenge: “Just trying to get attention and ruin his reputation in the process,” and “Trying to taint his image, or ruin his career with claims of domestic violence is the lowest you can go.”

*He’s a good person*. A third subtheme of victim blaming (4.8%) involved the allegation that because the perpetrator had a good public reputation that he could not have been privately violent. As one said, “15 [years] of marriage and not one record of abuse. Now all of a sudden he beat her . . . you can’t just condemn a man who’s never had an abusive history.” Others similarly commented, “He has no history of domestic violence,” and “Not once was [he] characterized as a bad person. Now all of a sudden she’s making him look like an abuser?”

*Character attacks*. Around 6.1% of the victim-blaming responses included making attacks on the victim’s character. These attacks included her sexuality: “She just wants to be with a female again. [S]he couldn’t handle the D anymore,” and her profession: “[L]et’s not forget she’s an actor too.” Others called her “petty,” “a liar,” “a nut job,” “psychotic,” “controlling,” and “cold-hearted.” Some comments were overtly hateful and wished her harm: “At this point, I really WANT to see someone/anyone beat the crap out of you.”

*Fact claiming against her*. Around 5.8% of the comments included “facts” or other details to undermine her account. “Was he even in town? He has been out promoting his new movie!” Others suggested that it did not fit the pattern of their relationship: “He didn’t leave. She left him and has said numerous times that she wasn’t into marriage.” And others questioned the photo: “I would like to point out the picture it showed of her face had a very straight line on the bruising. The kind you get from walking into a door.”

## Theme 2: Perpetrator Blaming

Although less common than victim blaming, 8.8% of commenters blamed the perpetrator for this alleged incident. This happened in various ways, including standing up for the victim and at other times attacking the perpetrator directly. The analysis resulted in three subthemes of perpetrator blaming: suggesting that *victims should always be believed*; citing ways *the perpetrator was at fault*; and *claiming “facts” that support the victim’s allegations*.

*Should always believe victims*. Of the perpetrator-blaming subthemes, the stance that people should always believe victims occurred most frequently (3.2%). These tended to express

values about how women should never be hit: “And even if she was [in it] for the money, she didn’t deserve to be abuse[d],” or, “Women need to support women.” Others noted how public shaming makes it harder for other victims to come forward. A small number made attacks on the alleged perpetrator in support of the alleged victim: “I’m on her side until proven otherwise. He is a creep and gross . . . Ugh over this creep.” Others commented generally about abuse and supporting victims: “Domestic abuse is serious. No matter how famous Depp is, I always gotta take the side of the victim, because it is wrong to victim shame.”

*He is at fault.* Only 2.6% of the total comments directly said the abuser was at fault. Some cited substance abuse: “He has been suffering alcoholism more so recently than ever he has repeatedly been intoxicated at awards shows and during interviews,” and “His image has been deteriorating the past year. . . . He looks like he’s been doing hard core drugs. . . . Has anybody seen his interviews lately???” Others implied his fault saying he “should have known better,” and “[He] is a fool for not having a prenuptial agreement, to protect his vast fortune.” Others blamed him while also taking a jab at the victim: “Can’t feel sorry for [him]. He brought what he is going through on himself. He should have recognized a snake when he met her.”

*Fact claiming against him.* A few (2.8%) participants focused on details that looked bad for the perpetrator. One suggested that the timing of her accusation supported her claims: “[She] filed for divorce while he was gone, looks to me as the only way out for her,” and another stood up for her claims based on details, saying, “The police didn’t find evidence because they didn’t look for any. They didn’t do a report, at [her] request (typical of abuse victims.) That doesn’t mean there wasn’t any [abuse]. But there are witnesses to the assault.”

### **Theme 3: Couple Blaming**

Only a few (0.97%) held both the perpetrator and the victim responsible for the relationship and alleged violence: “They should split up and get a divorce. She is too young. He made some mistakes and now he has to fix it,” and another said, “would NOT be surprised or shocked AT ALL by what SEEMS, anyway, to be a verry real and awful toxic relationship between [them],” and similarly, another gave their opinion: “Either way their relationship seems toxic, glad they are separating.”

### **Theme 4: Withholding Judgment**

Of all the comments asserting judgment of some kind, only 6.6% suggested no judgment should be given. Of these, the primary point was that outsiders do not have the facts or perspective to offer any opinion at all. Many of these comments used words similar to this one: “You never know what happens behind closed doors.” Another frequent request of commenters was, as one said, “STOP VICTIM BLAMING! Not one of us knows what they are truly like.” Some targeted specific commenters with these requests like, “You’re crucifying him before any actual facts are being brought to the table.” Some commented on the process, while overtly taking a nonjudgmental stance: “Ok there are many people taking sides here. I won’t.”

### **Theme 5: Mixed Reactions to the Process**

Many comments did not take a specifically-blaming stance but had other kinds of reactions that included a variety of content, as well as emotions, ranging from calm to hostile.

Some of these comments contained negative comments that at times was aimed toward some someone, and thus implied blame, but since it was not specifically speaking of who was responsible for the alleged abuse, it was not coded as blaming. But in other cases, these

comments did not address the accusation directly, or even included content unrelated to the original post. These mixed reactions (46.3% of the total) included *irrelevant or mocking comments*; *debates between commenters*; *nonjudgmental questions and comments about the process*; *comments about the topic of abuse*; *focusing on self*; and *making general speculations*.

*Irrelevant/mocking.* Around 8.1% of the comments in the mixed reactions category took a mocking or sarcastic tone that wasn't always related to the case. One stated, "Warning: This story contains graphic imagery that may be disturbing to readers. Dramatic bunch are we, E! News?" Many used mockery and sarcasm about the process to also take jabs at the victim, as in these comments: "Way to go, Amber Heard. Now all of America is going to hate you! I don't believe he hurt her for a second," and "Domestic violence?! That's a load of crap!!!!" Others used sarcasm directed at previous commenters and the online conversation: "[W]hy judge either of them? Oh yeah . . . Because we worry more about other people's lives than our own. Get a grip people."

*Debates/exchanges between commenters.* Exchanges between participants were common (10.4%), with many overlapping with the *irrelevant/mocking* or other subthemes. Debates/exchanges included any comment where someone called another out, called names, or directed a message to the online community. One wrote, "I am just absolutely amazed at how many are automatically calling her a liar. It's unbelievable really." One comment that also was classified as *withholding judgment* said, "People, you don't know how true any of this is. So how can you take sides?" Some comments spoke out against victim blaming or discussed the experience of victims: "So much victim shaming. And you wonder why people who are dealing with abuse don't come forward." Not surprisingly, these types of comments spurred debates such as, "It's not about victim shaming. It's that she's spinning a story because she wants money."

*Questions/comments about the process.* The third subtheme under *Mixed Reactions* included investigative-style comments (4.5%), where participants seemed to play the role of detective. For example, one speculated about the perpetrator's behavior: "We really don't know what goes on behind closed doors," and another wondered about the influence of substances: "I'm not saying she's right but I have know[n] of [people] that don't act the same way under the influence of drugs, or let me be more direct, they can become violent." Another wrote, "Reports are saying the cops were called on Saturday night and [he] left." These comments included questions, digging into the details and looking for explanations.

*Comments about the topic of abuse.* A subtheme in the *Mixed Reactions* category (8.2% of responders) was the topic of abuse and its seriousness. Participants made claims about how this case might affect future reporting with comments like, "This is why women are afraid to take a stand;" described characteristics of the "typical abuser": "Abusive men don't start abusing people this late in life. It's a learned behavior and it starts early;" and speculated about victims' reports "[W]omen hardly EVER get support when something like this happens UNLESS you see evidence. [P]eople are always quick to blame the woman and defend the man."

*Focusing on self.* Around 7.4% of the commenters focused their comments on themselves, offering life histories, personal expertise, or other details that seemed to have the purpose of proving something. Some of these comments were mixed, with part of the comment focusing on the commenter's attributes as a way to then have a platform to make an accusation. For example, some claimed to be the kind of person who would never victim-blame, but still seemed to blame the alleged victim: "I don't condone violence in any shape or form *but* his mom just passed away" and "I don't blame victims *but* it just looks suspicious on her end." Others would claim credibility from experience: "Saying he has no history of domestic violence is a stupid reason to believe this couldn't have happened. My ex had girls before me he didn't hit. I was the first one. And guess what? NO ONE BELIEVED ME!" Some referred to their

own hardship of reading the comments, even while they kept reading and commenting: “It’s so hard for me to read these comments. It’s horrible how women are being so negative.” And others claimed special prognostication powers with hindsight bias: “I knew the moment they got together that this would be a train wreck of a relationship.”

*General speculation.* There was a percentage (7.5%) of commenters who did not take sides per se but instead offered musings as to what happened or why. Sometimes this was about what led to the problem: “It may have happened under booze related circumstances.” Other times their speculation was related to believing one side but not offering definitive conclusions: “[M]aybe this is the last straw for her and she had no choice but to tell her story,” or “Maybe after his mom’s death he snapped?” Some took a conspiratorial tone: “Could be she was willing to keep the abuse on the down low if she was paid spousal support. She’d help him if he helped her kinda thing. Twisted but it’s a possibility?” To which another commenter replied, “Good point. She could’ve ruined him and maybe she used that as blackmail.” Others speculated on conspiracy motives, “For all anyone knows, she and one of her lovers planned this whole thing to get rich/richer quick.” Interestingly, most of the comments coded as speculation stood in support of the victim’s version of the story, which is in contrast to the high percentage of the victim blamers who seemed more certain.

## Discussion

“Moral outrage is an emotion that motivates people to shame and punish” (Crocket, 2017, p. 3), and it is not surprising that the morally loaded topic of violence generates strong responses on social media. This study contributes in several ways to the discussion of online outrage and responses to violence. First, the anger toward the alleged victim in this case was greatly disproportionate to that aimed at the alleged perpetrator. This is likely, in part, due to a function of this specific case in that the alleged perpetrator was better known, but these findings are similar to others who have found that victim blaming is common. Victims who come forward can experience support, but many experience negative responses, including blame and disbelief (Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012). This culture of skepticism and barriers silences and harms those who are already mistreated (Cravens et al., 2015). Only 3% of the comments in this study said that victims should always be believed, while many more were skeptical. This is concerning, since only a small percentage of people tend to lie about being victimized (e.g., Lisak, Gardinier, Nicksa, & Cote, 2010). Another potential explanation for the skepticism expressed by commenters is that while nearly half of all U.S. adults get their news from Facebook, a recent survey indicated that only 37% of online Americans polled say that they have “some trust” in the information they receive from social media sites (Gramlich, 2018). In a case where emotions are high, and topics are politicized, this seems even more likely.

These findings also support the notion that victims are less likely to be believed or receive media attention (Jewkes, 2015) if they do not fit “ideal victim” status (Christie, 1986; Greer, 2017). The example in this case is one where the alleged perpetrator is better known and presumably better loved than the alleged victim who did not fit the “ideal” categories of being weak, respectable, blameless, or hurt by an evil entity. Rather than take her claims at face value, many commenters dismissed or attacked her, which is a common response to those reporting victimization from a known offender (Edwards, Dardis, & Gidycz, 2012; Moe, 2007; Turell & Herrmann, 2008).

Cheng et al. (2017) found situational factors (including loaded topics in online articles) increased hostile and trolling behaviors, and others have found that emotional content in online messages increased their diffusion by a factor of 20% for each emotional word (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017). Because the Heard-Depp case involves power, gender, and violence, it was not surprising that commenters were often reactive and blaming. This has

implications for the usefulness of debating loaded topics online. Social and moral issues that deserve thoughtful and measured dialogue may need additional monitoring and structure. Koban et al. (2018) suggested this could help reduce the spread of online anger: “The link between toxic behavior and more toxic behavior might also underline the incessant necessity of moderation and administration efforts for professional providers of social networking services” (p. 17). Although we expected reactive and blaming comments, it was surprising to us how intense and pervasive the blaming in the comments was. Although we have studied victims and violence, the level of vitriol in the comments about this case caught our interest, and the subsequent analysis also brought out unexpected findings, in that almost four times as many commenters blamed the alleged victim in this case than the perpetrator. An interesting related issue occurred when a discussion of this research project was posted on *Psychology Today* by the first author. The comments posted in response to the blog were harsh and accusing in the exact way as the comments that were being examined (e.g., Whiting, 2017). Although the article was careful to not assume who was at fault for the violence, those new reactions recapitulated the comments being studied, as they were replete with blame toward those allegedly involved in the violence.

### **Implications for Professionals**

Helping professionals who work with those who have experienced intimate partner violence (e.g., counselors, social workers, police officers) have an obligation to not replicate victim-blaming experiences within the relationship, which can happen through skeptical or unsupportive responses such as those expressed online. Helping professionals should seek to understand the complex nature of violence through education, training, and self-awareness (e.g., Fife, Whiting, Bradford, & Davis, 2014). Not all violent relationships are divided into perpetrator and victim distinctions, and often parties are prone to distorted reports (Whiting et al., 2012). When victims receive positive responses to their disclosure, such as validation, they may be more likely to successfully alter or terminate their abusive relationship (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). However, negative responses, such as those in the current study, create barriers for seeking services and contribute to self-blame and low self-esteem (Eckstein, 2011; Merchant & Whiting, 2014).

Professionals can unintentionally convey victim-blaming messages like those in this study to clients because of their own anxiety about keeping them safe. However, when someone pushes another to leave an abusive relationship, they discount and disempower client agency and ignore the complexity of the stay/leave decision. Helpers should avoid prescriptive advice and remain respectful and supportive of a client while still attending to issues of safety.

Professionals should acknowledge the role technology plays in the lives and relationships of individuals. With nearly seven in ten Americans (69%) using social media sites and most social media users going on these sites multiple times a day (Rainie et al., 2017), social media likely impacts many clients’ health and well-being. Researchers have found a negative correlation between online social media use and mental health (Moreno et al., 2011; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014), and Baker, Krieger, and LeRoy (2016) found that individuals with greater fear of missing out, or “FOMO,” experience more depressive symptoms and less mindful attention than others. Outsiders can ask individuals about time spent using technology, including an assessment of activities and their impact.

### **Future Research**

Researchers could explore how outsider reactions affect victims’ well-being, sense of self, and decisions to seek help, disclose, or leave the relationship. Does online blame have a

similar impact on victims as face-to-face blame? Is it possible that online stories and accusations around IPV increase information or help-seeking from support services?

Future scholarship could also explore the ongoing patterns and general impact of social media discourse on those who participate and witness it. It would be useful to understand the motivations of online negativity as well as the characteristics of those who tend to be most aggressive (Coe et al., 2014). Also, what are the effects of online contention on specific topics? Do they further polarize and deepen social divides? Do they desensitize readers to important issues? Are morally laden topics more likely to provoke certainty and blame than less controversial issues? What is the impact of online debating on participants' mental health and relationships? Is there a relationship between incivility and cyberbullying or online stalking? Other content analyses could examine types of reactions to social issues, and sequential analysis methods could analyze the trajectory of stories, comments, inflammatory responses, retaliation, and at what point interactions turn threatening or abusive.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides a unique exploration of online reactions to IPV, several limitations should be noted. The use of secondary data prevented collecting demographic information and also did not allow member checking, which is a process of sharing developing themes with participants to ensure they accurately reflect participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014). This prevents any type of interpretations related to the sample characteristics, and limits can be inferred about demographic traits. Also, the data is inherently interactive, meaning commenters were influenced by previous comments, thus shaping the data in a systemic way, as happens in focus-group data. And as has been noted, this allegation and case is unique, and it may be that a less well-known set of participants would generate different reactions, particularly in regard to the alleged victim. Finally, as is inherent in all research, this study was influenced by the situated context of the researchers, all of whom are in academic settings and have an interest in violence, victimization, and relationship processes. Results of this study should be viewed as one interpretation among many.

### **Conclusion**

In 2016, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of technology experts, scholars, and leaders, asking, "In the next decade, will public discourse online become more or less shaped by bad actors, harassment, trolls, and an overall tone of griping, distrust, and disgust?" Over 80% of responders thought things would remain the same or get worse (Rainie et al., 2017). This is an important public issue to understand as social networks grow in influence. Online forums make it easy to express hostility even when it isn't actually felt, but this can a negative effect. Readers of hostile comments often respond with anger and moralizing, which becomes cyclical and reinforcing as people feel contempt for opposing views, as they seek out like-minded voices that echo their own. This trend is powerful and unlikely to change.

Online negativity and victim blaming are broad societal issues with personal consequences. Not only have social networks been found to influence public movements and elections, they have changed the way in which violence and victimization are discussed. News of sexual harassment and abuse gets amplified and transformed by social media, as in the example of victims using hashtags such as #whyIstayed, or #metoo. These secondary sources of comments become as or more powerful than the original material (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The variety of voices online will likely have many different kinds of effects on those who are harmed. For example, a victim of violence will likely experience online support and

community very differently from online blaming and shame. In such cases, digital interactions have potential to be helpful or harmful in influencing individual lives.

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