

PR Warfare: Media Strategies in the Johnny Depp

&

Amber Heard Scandal

Project Report

Submitted by

Nidha Fathima KF (SB22CE019)

Under the guidance of Ms.

Allu Alfred

*In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree Of*

*Bachelor of Arts*

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++' Grade

Affiliated to

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## Declaration

I do affirm that the project “PR Warfare: Media Strategies in the Johnny Depp & Amber Heard Scandal” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Nidha Fathima KF

Date: 20 March 2025

Reg No: SB22CE019

BA English Literature and Communication Studies

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous)

Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "PR Warfare: Media Strategies in the Johnny Depp & Amber Heard Scandal" by Nidha Fathima KF is a record of Bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam

19/03/2025

  
Ms. Allu Alfred

Department of Communicative English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)



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## Abstraction

The high-profile defamation trial between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard not only captivated global audiences but also highlighted the immense influence of public relations (PR) in shaping public perception. This research examines the PR strategies employed by both parties and their impact on media narratives, public opinion, and legal outcomes. By analyzing media coverage, social media trends, and official statements, this study identifies key PR tactics such as crisis management, reputation rehabilitation, and influencer engagement.

The study explores how Depp's PR team leveraged social media campaigns, selective media leaks, and a strategic courtroom presence to restore his public image, while Heard's team focused on advocacy-based narratives emphasizing gender dynamics and victimhood. The role of traditional media versus digital media in shaping the trial's discourse is critically analyzed to understand how each medium contributed to public sentiment.

Methodologically, this research utilizes qualitative content analysis of news articles, social media posts, and PR statements, alongside data collection techniques like surveys and expert interviews. The findings indicate that strategic PR plays a decisive role in legal battles, influencing not only public opinion but also the potential professional trajectories of those involved. Furthermore, this case study underscores the ethical considerations and implications of PR-driven legal narratives.

By providing a comprehensive analysis of PR strategies in high-profile legal disputes, this research contributes to the broader discourse on media influence, reputation management, and the evolving role of PR in modern litigation. The study's findings hold significance for communication professionals, legal analysts, and media scholars in understanding how strategic PR maneuvers can shape public perception and legal narratives in contemporary society.

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## CHAPTER-1

### Introduction

The Johnny Depp and Amber Heard scandal has been one of the most widely covered celebrity controversies in recent years, underscoring the significant role of media strategies in shaping public perception. The intense scrutiny surrounding the case, amplified by traditional and social media, turned the legal battle into more than just a courtroom dispute—it became a public relations war. This study aims to explore the PR strategies employed by both parties, examining how media influence and crisis communication tactics played a role in shaping the narrative and ultimately impacting public opinion.

The controversy began in 2018 when Amber Heard published an op-ed in *The Washington Post*, in which she identified herself as a survivor of domestic abuse. Although she did not explicitly name Johnny Depp, the implications of her statements led to a defamation lawsuit filed by Depp against Heard. What followed was a legal and media spectacle that garnered immense public interest. Both parties engaged in extensive PR efforts to control the narrative, using various media platforms to gain support and manage reputational damage. The case quickly evolved beyond the courtroom, as social media users, journalists, and influencers actively participated in shaping the discourse.

The core problem this study seeks to address is the influence of PR strategies—particularly litigation PR—on public perception and the overall outcome of the scandal. It aims to analyze the specific tactics employed by both Depp and Heard, investigating how these strategies influenced media coverage and public sentiment. Furthermore, the study evaluates the effectiveness of crisis communication

approaches used throughout the case, providing a broader understanding of how strategic communication can be leveraged in high-profile legal disputes.

Understanding the role of PR in such cases is crucial, as it demonstrates the power of strategic communication in managing public perception during crises. This study holds significance not only for those interested in media and celebrity culture but also for professionals in public relations, journalism, and crisis management. By examining the Depp-Heard case, valuable insights can be drawn on how media narratives are crafted and controlled, offering lessons for future crisis communication strategies.

The scope of this research is limited to the PR strategies and media coverage surrounding the Depp-Heard scandal from 2018 to 2022. Through an analysis of traditional and digital media content, this study will explore how each party navigated the media landscape to shape their respective narratives.

This research is structured into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study, outlining its objectives and significance. The second chapter presents a literature review, examining existing theories and studies related to PR, crisis communication, and media influence. The third chapter details the methodology used for analyzing the case, followed by the fourth chapter, which discusses findings and interpretations. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the study, summarizing key insights and their implications for future PR practices.

## Literature review

Public relations play a crucial role in managing crises, particularly in highprofile legal battles where public perception can be as significant as the legal outcome. Litigation PR, a specialized branch of public relations, focuses on influencing not only the courtroom proceedings but also the wider court of public opinion. Strategic communication, carefully crafted messages, and media engagement can shape narratives, control damage, and, in some cases, shift public sentiment in favor of a particular party. In the Depp-Heard case, PR strategies were extensively employed to construct and reinforce particular narratives, underscoring the power of media influence and crisis communication.

Crisis communication theories provide a foundation for understanding how individuals and organizations manage public perception during controversies. One of the most relevant frameworks is the **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**, which suggests that the response to a crisis should be based on the nature of the crisis and the reputational threat it poses. SCCT identifies different strategies, including denial, diminishing responsibility, rebuilding trust, and bolstering credibility, to manage crises effectively. Another key theory, **Image Repair Theory**, focuses on how individuals or organizations attempt to restore their reputation following damaging allegations. This theory outlines various tactics such as denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (apology) as ways to rebuild public trust. Both theories are highly relevant to the Depp-Heard scandal, where crisis communication efforts were central to shaping public narratives.

Media framing plays a critical role in influencing public perception. The way media outlets present information—through word choice, imagery, and narrative structure—can shape how audiences interpret events. In the Depp-Heard case, different media platforms framed the dispute in varying ways, with some aligning their coverage to support Heard's allegations, while others portrayed Depp as a victim of false accusations. The role of **media framing** in high-profile legal battles cannot be underestimated, as it directly impacts public attitudes, social discourse, and even potential career repercussions for the individuals involved.

Social media has further amplified the influence of PR in crisis communication. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube played a pivotal role in shaping the public narrative during the Depp-Heard trial. Hashtags like **#JusticeForJohnnyDepp** and **#IStandWithAmberHeard** became battlegrounds where supporters of both sides engaged in heated debates, influencing public sentiment and mainstream media coverage. YouTube commentators, legal analysts, and influencers dissected court proceedings in real time, generating viral content that often swayed public opinion. Unlike traditional media, social media enables direct engagement and allows narratives to spread rapidly, making it a crucial factor in modern PR strategy.

Analyzing case studies of similar PR strategies in celebrity legal battles provides additional context for understanding the Depp-Heard case. For instance, Britney Spears' conservatorship battle showcased the power of public advocacy through social media, as the **#FreeBritney** movement played a decisive role in reshaping her public image and influencing legal proceedings. Similarly, Meghan Markle's legal disputes with the British tabloid press demonstrated how media framing can impact public perception, with PR efforts aimed at countering negative

portrayals. Comparing these cases highlights patterns in PR crisis management and offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of different strategic approaches.

The Depp-Heard case serves as a prime example of how PR strategies, media influence, and crisis communication intersect to shape public narratives. By analyzing these elements, this study aims to explore how strategic communication influenced the public perception of both Depp and Heard, offering insights into the broader implications of PR in legal disputes and celebrity scandals. Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable lessons for crisis management professionals, media analysts, and PR practitioners navigating similar high-profile cases.

## Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to analyze the PR strategies employed in the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case. Given the nature of the study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of how public relations influenced public perception and media narratives. The research primarily focuses on media coverage, social media engagement, and public opinion, utilizing various data collection and analysis techniques to achieve the study's objectives.

### Data Collection Methods

A combination of content analysis, social media monitoring, and surveys or interviews was used to gather relevant data. Content analysis was conducted on media coverage from prominent news outlets to identify patterns, biases, and the overall framing of the case. This method allowed for a systematic examination of how different media sources reported on the legal battle, revealing potential influences on public perception. The study focused on articles, opinion pieces, and televised discussions spanning the period from 2018 to 2022.

In addition to traditional media analysis, social media monitoring played a crucial role in understanding public sentiment. Given the widespread discussions on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, social media data was collected and analyzed to track the evolution of public opinion. Hashtags like **#JusticeForJohnnyDepp** and **#IStandWithAmberHeard** were examined to identify dominant narratives and shifts in audience sentiment over time. The role of independent influencers, legal analysts, and online communities was also assessed to determine how grassroots digital movements contributed to the PR battle.

To supplement content analysis and social media tracking, surveys and interviews were conducted with members of the public and industry experts in public relations and media studies. Surveys provided quantitative data on audience perceptions, while expert interviews offered qualitative insights into the effectiveness of the PR strategies used by both parties. By combining these approaches, the study aimed to capture both the statistical trends and the underlying motivations behind public reactions to the case.

### Analysis Techniques

The collected data was examined using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. Quantitative analysis involved the use of statistical methods to assess survey responses and media engagement metrics, such as the frequency of certain narratives in news coverage or the volume of social media interactions related to each party. By employing numerical data, trends in public sentiment and media influence could be objectively measured.

Meanwhile, qualitative analysis was used to interpret open-ended responses from interviews and to examine social media discussions. Sentiment analysis techniques helped assess the tone of social media content, while thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts to identify key perspectives on PR strategies. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how different PR tactics resonated with audiences and shaped the broader discourse surrounding the case.

### PR Strategies Used in the Case

The research also examined the distinct PR strategies employed by Johnny

Depp and Amber Heard throughout their legal battle. **Johnny Depp's PR strategy** was heavily focused on leveraging public support through legal action and media engagement. His defamation lawsuit against Heard served as a strategic move to counteract the reputational damage caused by her allegations. Additionally, Depp's PR team effectively utilized social media campaigns, with hashtags such as **#JusticeForJohnnyDepp** rallying widespread public support. By carefully managing interviews and public statements, Depp's team sought to control the media narrative and shift public opinion in his favor. Furthermore, the involvement of social media influencers and legal analysts played a crucial role in amplifying his defense, reinforcing his position in the court of public opinion.

Conversely, Amber Heard's PR strategy centered on positioning herself as a survivor of domestic abuse. Her 2018 op-ed in *The Washington Post* was a key element of this approach, framing the narrative around her experiences and aligning her story with broader discussions on gender-based violence. Heard's PR efforts included public statements, media exclusives, and engagement with feminist and activist communities, aiming to establish credibility and garner support from advocacy groups. Additionally, her legal team strategically handled media interactions to reinforce her claims and counter Depp's public relations efforts.

### Comparison of Their PR Approaches

A comparative analysis of both PR strategies revealed key differences in their effectiveness and public reception. Depp's strategy, which leaned heavily on digital advocacy and public engagement, appeared to generate stronger grassroots support, particularly on social media platforms where he was widely perceived as the victim.



The use of independent legal analysts and influencers further bolstered his public defense, making his narrative more accessible to a broader audience.

In contrast, Heard's PR strategy, while initially effective in positioning her within the larger discourse of the #MeToo movement, faced challenges as public sentiment shifted. The highly publicized trial, coupled with social media scrutiny, led to a growing perception of inconsistency in her claims, which impacted the credibility of her PR campaign. The effectiveness of each strategy was ultimately shaped by factors such as media framing, social media dynamics, and the legal outcomes of the case.

By analyzing these PR strategies through the methodologies outlined, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the power of public relations in shaping narratives during high-profile legal battles. The findings from this research will contribute to a broader understanding of crisis communication, media influence, and the evolving role of social media in public perception management.

## Chapter- 4

### Findings and Discussion

The analysis of public relations strategies in the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case reveals the significant role of litigation PR, media engagement, and social media influence in shaping public perception. Through various crisis communication techniques, both parties attempted to control the narrative surrounding their legal battle. However, the findings indicate that Depp's PR strategy was more effective in garnering public support and shaping a favorable image, whereas Heard faced greater challenges in maintaining her credibility amidst intense media scrutiny and public backlash.

#### PR Strategies Employed

One of the most effective strategies utilized in this case was **litigation PR**. Depp's legal team strategically framed the defamation lawsuit not only as a legal battle but also as a reputational restoration effort. By positioning the trial as an opportunity to clear his name, his PR team capitalized on the legal proceedings to generate media attention and public sympathy. Depp's existing fan base played a crucial role in amplifying this narrative, as they actively engaged with media content and promoted hashtags like **#JusticeForJohnnyDepp** to reinforce his position as the victim in the case. The trial was not just fought in the courtroom; it was also waged in the public sphere, where Depp's PR strategy successfully aligned legal arguments with public sentiment.

Conversely, **Amber Heard's media engagement** faced significant challenges. While her PR strategy initially attempted to position her as a survivor of domestic abuse, she struggled to maintain control over the narrative as the case progressed.

Negative media portrayals, inconsistencies in her testimony, and the overwhelming social media discourse against her contributed to a decline in public support. Despite efforts to engage with feminist and activist communities, Heard's team faced difficulties in countering the powerful wave of skepticism and criticism from the public and media. The Washington Post op-ed, which was meant to highlight her experiences and advocate for survivors of abuse, instead became a central point of contention in Depp's legal arguments, further complicating her PR efforts.

### Media Influence

The role of media framing in shaping public perception was evident throughout the case. Depp, being a well-established and beloved public figure, benefited from the way the media presented his side of the story. His past reputation as a charismatic and talented actor played a significant role in the way audiences received and interpreted the allegations against him. Traditional media outlets, while initially divided in their coverage, gradually shifted towards a more Depp-favorable narrative, especially as the trial progressed and new evidence was presented. The power of media influence in shaping reputations and determining public sentiment was clearly demonstrated, as the same media that once reported on Heard's allegations later scrutinized her credibility.

### Social Media Impact

Social media emerged as one of the most influential forces in shaping the public discourse around the case. Unlike traditional media, which is subject to editorial oversight, social media platforms allowed for unfiltered discussions, leading to a highly polarized debate. Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube became primary battlegrounds where supporters of both parties clashed over the validity of the claims.

However, Depp's supporters significantly outnumbered Heard's, with content favoring Depp receiving millions of engagements. Viral videos, memes, and reaction compilations painted Heard in a negative light, further influencing public perception. Influencers, legal analysts, and content creators also played a major role in dissecting the case, with many framing their narratives in a way that supported Depp's claims.

The power of online activism was evident, as fans of Depp organized coordinated social media campaigns that not only defended him but also attacked Heard's credibility. The dominance of Depp-favorable content on platforms like TikTok and YouTube reinforced the idea that he was the victim, making it difficult for Heard's team to counteract the overwhelming narrative against her. This phenomenon highlights the growing impact of digital media in legal disputes and crisis communication, as public sentiment is no longer shaped solely by traditional journalism but also by grassroots digital movements.

#### Crisis Communication and Reputation Management

Both Depp and Heard faced challenges in reputation management, but Depp's PR team was more successful in mitigating reputational damage. Through carefully crafted public statements, media engagement, and strategic legal arguments, Depp's team effectively positioned him as someone seeking justice against false accusations. His ability to maintain a composed and humorous demeanor during the trial also contributed to positive public perception, making him appear more relatable and credible.

On the other hand, Heard's crisis communication strategy struggled to counter the narrative against her. While she attempted to reinforce her position as an advocate for domestic violence survivors, the inconsistencies in her statements and the

overwhelming negative reception on social media made it difficult to sustain a positive image. The backlash she faced illustrates the difficulty of reputation recovery once a negative public perception takes hold, especially in an era where social media amplifies criticism at an unprecedented scale.

Ultimately, the findings of this study highlight how PR strategies, media framing, and social media influence interact to shape public perception in high-profile legal battles. Depp's ability to leverage litigation PR and online support proved to be more effective in controlling the narrative, while Heard's struggle to maintain credibility underscores the challenges of crisis communication in a digital media landscape. These insights provide valuable lessons for PR professionals and media analysts in understanding the power dynamics of modern-day public relations

Chapter- 5

## Conclusion

The Johnny Depp and Amber Heard legal battle serves as a compelling case study on the power of public relations in shaping public perception during high-profile crises. This study has examined the PR strategies employed by both parties, the influence of media framing, and the role of social media in constructing narratives. The findings underscore the critical importance of strategic communication in crisis management and highlight the evolving landscape of public relations in the digital age.

## Key Insights

One of the most significant takeaways from this study is the effectiveness of litigation PR in shaping public opinion. Depp's legal team successfully utilized the

courtroom not only as a legal battleground but also as a platform to restore his public image. By strategically aligning legal arguments with media engagement, his team was able to generate widespread support and reinforce his narrative. In contrast, Heard's PR strategy struggled to maintain credibility, facing significant challenges in countering negative media portrayals and social media backlash.

The study also highlights the influence of media framing in determining how audiences perceive high-profile cases. Media coverage played a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes, with different outlets adopting varying narratives based on editorial stances and audience reception. Initially, Heard's claims were framed within the broader #MeToo movement, positioning her as a survivor advocating for justice. However, as the trial progressed and inconsistencies in her statements were scrutinized, the media narrative shifted, and public sentiment largely favored Depp. This shift demonstrates how media framing is not static but evolves based on emerging information, public reaction, and strategic PR interventions.

Furthermore, social media emerged as a dominant force in shaping the public discourse surrounding the case. Unlike traditional media, which operates within journalistic guidelines, social media platforms provided a space for unfiltered discussions, viral content, and real-time audience engagement. Hashtags, memes, and influencer commentary significantly influenced the case's narrative, with Depp's supporters overwhelmingly dominating the online conversation. This demonstrates the growing power of digital activism and user-generated content in modern crisis communication, where public perception can be shaped by viral trends rather than traditional news reports.

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of crisis communication strategies in maintaining a positive image during a public relations crisis. Depp's PR team effectively controlled the narrative by presenting consistent messaging, leveraging media-friendly legal arguments, and capitalizing on public sympathy. Heard's team, on the other hand, faced difficulties in sustaining credibility and counteracting the overwhelming wave of negative public sentiment. This reinforces the idea that well-planned crisis communication strategies are crucial in managing reputational damage, particularly in an era where public perception can shift rapidly due to digital media.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for individuals and organizations navigating crisis situations.

First, proactive PR planning is essential for effective crisis management. Rather than reacting to crises as they unfold, individuals and organizations should develop comprehensive PR strategies in advance, including contingency plans for potential reputational threats. By anticipating possible crises and preparing appropriate responses, PR teams can manage public perception more effectively and mitigate damage before it escalates.

Second, continuous media monitoring is crucial for adjusting PR strategies in real time. The Depp-Heard case illustrates how media narratives evolve, making it necessary for PR professionals to track coverage closely and adapt messaging accordingly. Tools such as sentiment analysis, media tracking software, and strategic media engagement can help crisis managers stay ahead of unfavorable narratives and craft timely responses.

Third, active social media engagement is vital in shaping public sentiment. Given the growing influence of digital platforms in crisis communication, PR teams must be proactive in engaging with audiences, countering misinformation, and amplifying positive narratives. Strategic use of social media influencers, community engagement, and real-time responses can help maintain credibility and sway public opinion in favor of the affected party.

#### Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the PR strategies employed in the Depp-Heard case, further research is needed to explore broader implications of crisis communication in high-profile disputes.

One potential avenue for future research is comparative studies of different crisis management strategies in celebrity cases. By analyzing multiple cases, researchers can identify patterns in effective and ineffective PR tactics, providing a more comprehensive understanding of crisis communication in the entertainment industry.

Additionally, further studies could examine the long-term impact of social media on public perception during crises. While this study highlights the immediate influence of social media narratives, future research could explore how digital discourse shapes reputational recovery over time. Investigating how social media sentiment changes post-crisis and whether individuals or organizations can rebuild their public image through sustained PR efforts would offer valuable insights into digital crisis management.

#### Final Thoughts



This study demonstrates the significant role that public relations strategies play in managing crises, particularly in high-profile legal battles like the Depp-Heard scandal. The findings emphasize that media framing, litigation PR, and social media influence can determine how the public perceives a dispute, ultimately affecting reputational outcomes. By understanding these dynamics, individuals, organizations, and PR professionals can navigate crises more effectively, ensuring that public perception aligns with their strategic objectives.

As the media landscape continues to evolve, the intersection of traditional journalism, digital media, and public relations will remain a critical area of study. By analyzing high-profile cases such as this, researchers and practitioners can develop more sophisticated crisis communication strategies that respond to the complexities of modern media environments. The Depp-Heard case is a testament to the power of public relations in shaping narratives, reinforcing the need for strategic communication in the face of public scrutiny.

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