

Social Media's Affect on Teenagers' Perception of a Defendant's Guilt or Innocence

Magali Murray

Introduction

In the age of social media, platforms like TikTok have become powerful tools for shaping how people, especially teenagers, understand real-world events. Unlike traditional news outlets, TikTok relies on short-form, highly engaging videos that prioritize emotional impact, relatability, and shareability. While this format allows information to spread rapidly, it often condenses complex issues into brief clips that lack context. For many teenagers, TikTok now functions as a primary source of information, raising concerns about how opinions are formed when content is driven more by algorithms and user engagement than by accuracy or balance (Pew Research Center, 2023).

One notable example of this phenomenon is the highly publicized defamation trial between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. In March 2019, Johnny Depp sued Amber Heard for defamation following a 2018 Washington Post op-ed in which Heard described herself as a survivor of domestic abuse. After years of legal proceedings, the televised trial began on April 11, 2022, quickly becoming a global media spectacle. Because of the celebrity status of both individuals, the case received extensive coverage not only from traditional news organizations but also across social media platforms. TikTok, in particular, played a significant role in circulating trial-related content, including edited testimony clips, reaction videos, memes, and commentary that often framed the case in highly polarized ways (Blair and Archie, 2022). Many of these TikTok videos accumulated millions of views, exposing teenagers to selective moments of testimony rather than the full legal context of the trial.

These brief portrayals frequently encouraged viewers to form opinions about guilt or innocence before ever seeing the complete evidence or understanding legal standards such as the presumption of innocence. TikTok's algorithm further amplified emotionally charged content, repeatedly exposing users to similar narratives and reinforcing particular interpretations of events (Swamy et al., 2024). As a result, teenagers may have internalized biased conclusions about this legal case without recognizing the limitations or partiality of the information presented.

While existing research has examined how media coverage and social media exposure influence jurors and adult decision-making, significantly less attention has been given to how teenagers perceive legal guilt or innocence through platforms like TikTok. Studies on adult cognition and juror psychology show that emotions, first impressions, and mental shortcuts such as confirmation bias strongly influence legal judgments (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022). These cognitive tendencies may be even more pronounced in teenagers, who are still developing critical thinking skills, impulse control, and media literacy.

This study seeks to examine how exposure to TikTok content related to the Depp v. Heard trial is associated with teenagers' perceptions of guilt and innocence, and specifically whether such exposure is linked to judgments grounded in personality and emotional presentation rather than legal evidence. By focusing on teenagers rather than jurors or adults, this research addresses a critical gap in existing literature. Understanding how early exposure to biased or dramatized legal content shapes teenagers' views of justice is essential, as these perceptions may influence future civic reasoning, trust in the legal system, and

long-term media consumption habits. As social media continues to dominate how younger generations engage with news and public events, examining its role in shaping legal perceptions becomes increasingly important.

Literature Review

Research on social media, misinformation, and legal decision-making provides essential context for understanding how TikTok may influence teenagers' perceptions of guilt or innocence. Existing literature can be organized into four primary areas: teenagers' social media use, misinformation and trust, media influence on legal judgment, and cognitive bias in decision-making. Together, these areas demonstrate that teenagers are particularly vulnerable to emotionally framed and algorithmically amplified content, yet remain an understudied population in research on legal perception.

Teenagers are among the most active users of social media platforms, often relying on them for information, entertainment, and social interaction. According to Pew Research Center, a growing number of adolescents report getting news primarily from social media rather than traditional news outlets (Pew Research Center, 2023). While many teenagers express skepticism toward mainstream media, they are more likely to trust information shared by peers or creators they follow regularly. This trust is often based on familiarity or relatability rather than credibility, making adolescents more susceptible to persuasive but misleading narratives. Popat and Tarrant's qualitative literature review further explores teenagers' perspectives on social media use and well-being. Their findings indicate that while teenagers are aware of misinformation, they often struggle to consistently identify unreliable content (Popat and Tarrant, 2022). Many participants reported trusting posts that appeared popular, emotionally engaging, or widely shared, even when accuracy was uncertain. This pattern is particularly relevant to TikTok, where engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments act as informal indicators of credibility. As a result, teenagers may form opinions based on perceived popularity rather than factual reliability.

Research on misinformation provides additional insight into how teenagers interpret online content. Swamy et al. conducted a qualitative study examining how adolescents interact with misinformation and how they perceive its harms. Their findings identified multiple forms of harm, including emotional distress, confusion about accuracy, and erosion of trust in institutions (Swamy et al., 2024). The study emphasized that visual misinformation, such as misleading images or short video clips, was especially persuasive to adolescents, making platforms like TikTok particularly influential. TikTok's design makes it highly effective at spreading this type of content: short, decontextualized clips can present emotionally charged moments without legal explanation, encouraging viewers to make quick judgments. Because TikTok's algorithm prioritizes content that provokes strong emotional reactions, this creates a feedback loop in which one-sided or sensationalized portrayals dominate users' feeds, reinforcing existing beliefs rather than encouraging critical evaluation. Price's research on social media trust further complicates this issue by highlighting a contradiction in user behavior: while many users acknowledge that social media is not always trustworthy, they continue to rely on it as a primary source of information (Price, 2023). This suggests that teenagers may consume content passively even when they are aware of misinformation risks. Over time, repeated exposure to biased legal narratives may shape perceptions subconsciously, making misinformation difficult to challenge once beliefs are formed.

Studies on media coverage and legal perception demonstrate that public opinion about guilt or innocence is highly influenced by how cases are framed. Polson's research on media portrayals of

high-profile cases found that emotionally charged reporting significantly affects whether audiences perceive a subject as guilty or innocent (Polson, 2016). When the media emphasizes dramatic details or selectively presents evidence, viewers are more likely to form premature judgments that do not align with legal standards. The Depp v. Heard trial provides a clear example of this phenomenon. According to NPR, Amber Heard argued that social media played a major role in shaping public perception during the trial (Blair and Archie, 2022). Clips of testimony were often shared out of context, and TikTok users frequently compared edited footage to suggest credibility or dishonesty. These portrayals often ignored legal principles such as the burden of proof and the presumption of innocence, replacing them with emotionally driven narratives. Enderle's analysis further highlights how TikTok and similar platforms acted as informal judges during the trial. Users interpreted facial expressions, tone of voice, and isolated statements as indicators of truthfulness or deception (Enderle, 2023). While this type of judgment mirrors traditional media bias, it is intensified by TikTok's speed, reach, and popularity among younger audiences, making teenagers especially vulnerable to persuasive visual cues.

Psychological research on decision-making provides a framework for understanding why social media content is so influential. Studies on juror psychology show that individuals rely on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, when evaluating complex information. Confirmation bias, hindsight bias, and emotional reasoning often shape interpretations of evidence more strongly than factual analysis (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022). Although this research primarily focuses on jurors, these cognitive tendencies are not limited to courtroom participants. For teenagers, these biases may be even more pronounced, since adolescents are still developing executive-functioning skills, including impulse control and critical evaluation. When exposed to emotionally charged TikTok content, teenagers may rely heavily on intuitive judgments rather than analytical reasoning. Research on juror decision-making further explains that narratives are often more persuasive than isolated facts, which aligns closely with TikTok's storytelling format (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022).

Despite extensive research on social media, misinformation, and juror bias, a significant gap remains in understanding how teenagers perceive legal guilt or innocence through platforms like TikTok. Most studies focus on adults, jurors, or general public opinion, leaving teenage audiences largely unexplored. This gap is concerning given teenagers' high levels of engagement with TikTok and their limited exposure to formal legal education. Additionally, few studies examine specific real-world cases as lenses for understanding social media influence. The Depp v. Heard trial offers a unique opportunity to analyze how a legal case is transformed into viral content and how that transformation affects teenagers' perceptions of guilt and innocence. By building on existing research across psychology, media studies, and legal scholarship, this study aims to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of how TikTok shapes teenagers' interpretations of justice. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how early media exposure influences civic reasoning, trust in the legal system, and long-term engagement with democratic institutions.

Method

In order to test the hypothesis, a case-study method combining a media exposure survey with a thematic analysis was implemented. Case studies are close examinations and analyses of people, organizations, or phenomena (Zucker, 2009), and this approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth look at how a specific, bounded event — the Depp v. Heard trial — was interpreted within a specific school setting. This research focused on high school students within XYZ County, prioritizing Business Law and

Ethics students because of their direct engagement with media-related legal and ethical concepts. Although the sample emphasized Business Law and Ethics students, the data also include a range of other high school students from XYZ County.

Hypothesis

Research on jurors shows that people often use mental shortcuts, like confirmation bias and emotional reasoning, when they judge legal evidence, especially when they only have limited information (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022). Teenagers are still developing the skills needed to slow down and think past these shortcuts, and TikTok's short video format is built to reward emotional, entertaining content instead of accurate content (Swamy et al., 2024). Because of this, the hypothesis for this study was made more specific than simply predicting that TikTok would “influence” opinions.

This study predicted three things. First, after watching TikTok clips from the Depp v. Heard trial, more participants would say they believed Amber Heard was guilty compared to before they watched the clips. Second, participants would still say on the scaled questions that their opinion did not change much, because the clips would mostly reinforce opinions they already had rather than create brand new ones. Third, when participants explained their reasoning in their own words, most of their explanations would be based on personality and tone, like describing someone as “calm” or “dramatic,” instead of being based on actual legal evidence or testimony. In other words, this study did not expect TikTok to completely flip participants’ opinions, but instead expected it to strengthen opinions they already had based on personality rather than facts.

This study uses a sample size of 92 participants, selected to remain manageable while still producing reliable and valid results. The sample size supports a 95% confidence level with an estimated margin of error of 10% and a population size of 2,111. Although a larger sample could increase statistical precision, this size was chosen to balance feasibility, time constraints, and available resources. Because the margin of error is around 10%, this study treats any change in the data that is smaller than about 10 percentage points carefully, since a change that small could just be normal variation between two groups of respondents rather than a real pattern. A change bigger than that is more likely to actually mean something, and this idea is used later when looking at the guilt-attribution results. Additionally, the sample allows for consistent data collection, reduces participant burden, and supports meaningful comparisons across responses.

This study used a case-study design with both qualitative and quantitative elements, chosen because it allows an examination of how media exposure affects students’ perceptions within a specific school setting. This approach aligns with the research question by emphasizing understanding and interpretation rather than strict cause-and-effect relationships. Experimental methods were considered but ultimately were not chosen because controlling students’ media exposure would be unrealistic in a school environment; allowing participants to report on their natural media habits increased authenticity and strengthened the data collected. A thematic analysis was used to separate the data into subsections, providing a way to better identify patterns and recurring responses across participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Data collection relied heavily on a media exposure survey. The survey included multiple-choice questions measuring the frequency and type of media consumption, along with open-ended questions asking participants to explain how media influences their opinions and decision-making. Surveys are widely used in media research because of how efficiently they gather data from multiple participants while allowing responses to be compared across a group (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010). This combination of question

types allowed for both measurable trends and detailed responses. A thematic analysis was then implemented to identify recurring patterns within the open-ended, textual data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen because it provides a structured yet flexible way to organize student perspectives while preserving each individual's voice, and prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of thematic analysis when examining teenagers' attitudes and perceptions related to media (Popat and Tarrant, 2022).

The research followed a clear and replicable sequence. First, permission was obtained from the teacher, and participants were informed of the purpose of the research. Participation was voluntary, and identities were kept anonymous. Second, the media exposure survey was conducted on participants' phones at the end of class. Third, survey responses were collected and organized, separating quantitative responses from open-ended responses. Finally, the data were evaluated and analyzed thematically in order to identify patterns across both the numeric and written responses.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine whether TikTok influences teenagers' perceptions of guilt or innocence in high-profile legal cases, and specifically whether that influence shows up through personality- and emotion-based judgments rather than actual legal evidence. As explained above, the hypothesis predicted a measurable shift toward believing Amber Heard was guilty after watching the videos, mostly because the clips would reinforce impressions participants already had, and because participants would lean on tone and demeanor instead of courtroom testimony.

A total of 98 high school students participated in the survey used for this study (the number of responses varies slightly by question, since not every participant answered every item). The questionnaire included both scaled questions and open-ended responses, allowing for a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation. Quantitative responses provided insights into patterns in media consumption and levels of trust in TikTok, while the open-ended responses helped explain the reasoning behind those patterns. Although the platform did not drastically change teenagers' opinions on a legal case, it appears to reinforce existing perceptions as well as shape how viewers interpret the information presented to them, which lines up with what the hypothesis predicted.

Teenagers' Use of TikTok as a News Source

One of the first patterns observed in the data concerned how frequently students encounter news or current events through TikTok. Among the 98 participants, approximately 40–45% indicated that TikTok was either their primary source of news or one of the main platforms through which they encounter information about current events. In contrast, other participants reported that while TikTok was not their primary news source, they still encountered news-related content on the platform while scrolling through their feeds. Despite this frequent exposure, many respondents expressed uncertainty about the reliability of information presented on TikTok.

When participants were asked to rate their level of trust in TikTok as a news source on a scale from 1 to 5 — with 1 representing no trust and 5 representing complete trust — responses clustered near the midpoint. Of the 88 respondents to this item, 40 (45.5%) selected a rating of 3, indicating moderate or uncertain trust in the platform. Ratings of 1 and 2 (17.0% and 15.9%, respectively) were somewhat more common than ratings of 4 and 5 (14.8% and 6.8%, respectively), producing an average trust rating of 2.78 out of 5 — a score that sits just below the midpoint of the scale (see Appendix A). Only 6 respondents

(6.8%) selected the highest level of trust, while 29 respondents (32.9%) selected one of the two lowest ratings, suggesting that outright skepticism toward TikTok's credibility was somewhat more common among this sample than strong trust. Taken together, these results indicate that teenagers may regularly consume news content through TikTok even while recognizing that the information presented on the platform may not always be reliable.

This finding reflects patterns identified in the literature review. Price's research similarly found that although users often acknowledge that social media is not fully trustworthy, they continue to rely on it as a primary source of information (Price, 2023); the below-midpoint average trust score observed here, paired with continued heavy platform use, is consistent with that same contradiction. Popat and Tarrant likewise found that teenagers often evaluate credibility based on familiarity, engagement, or emotional impact rather than traditional journalistic standards (Popat and Tarrant, 2022), which may help explain why moderate distrust does not translate into reduced platform reliance. Several participants in this study mentioned that TikTok content can be entertaining or interesting even if it may not be completely trustworthy as a news source, echoing this same pattern of passive, engagement-driven consumption identified by Price (2023).

Prior Knowledge of the Depp v. Heard Trial

A key finding that emerged from the survey involved participants' prior familiarity with the Depp v. Heard trial. A large proportion of respondents indicated that they had already encountered clips, memes, or commentary about the trial before participating in the study. This shows up clearly in the guilt-attribution numbers collected before participants watched any of the study's videos: of the 87 respondents who answered "Before we began, who do you believe is guilty?", 61 (70.1%) said Amber Heard and 26 (29.9%) said Johnny Depp (see Appendix A). Since this question was asked before participants saw any videos in the study itself, this roughly 2-to-1 lean toward believing Heard was guilty must have come from participants' earlier, uncontrolled exposure to trial content on TikTok and other platforms, not from anything shown in the survey.

When participants explained their reasoning for this initial judgment, many referenced impressions related to personality or emotional presentation rather than legal evidence. Several respondents described Heard's testimony as dramatic, confusing, or exaggerated, while others described Depp as calm, humorous, or confident. These explanations suggest that widely circulated clips from the trial contributed to the formation of public perceptions that emphasize personality traits over factual evidence, a pattern consistent with Enderle's (2023) observation that TikTok users interpreted facial expressions, tone of voice, and isolated statements as indicators of truthfulness or deception, and with Polson's (2016) broader finding that emotionally charged media framing shapes guilt perception independent of the underlying evidence.

Influence of TikTok Video Format on Perception

After viewing the TikTok videos included in the survey, participants were asked whether the clips influenced their perspective on the case. Quantitative responses indicate that the majority of participants reported little to no change in their overall opinion after watching the videos. However, the guilt-attribution numbers tell a bit of a different story. Of the 88 respondents who answered the question "After watching these videos, who do you now believe is guilty?", 76 (86.4%) said Amber Heard and 12 (13.6%) said Johnny Depp. Before watching any videos, only 70.1% of respondents said Heard, so this is about a 16-point jump (see Appendix A). Since this is bigger than the study's roughly 10% margin of error, it probably is not

just random variation between the two groups of respondents.

This is an interesting contradiction: participants said their opinion barely changed, but the actual guilt numbers moved a lot. This supports the second part of the hypothesis. Participants may not have felt like the videos changed their mind because, to them, the videos were not introducing a brand-new idea — they were just backing up something participants already leaned toward believing. This matches the idea of confirmation bias discussed earlier, where people interpret new information as support for what they already believe without really noticing that their opinion is being reinforced (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022).

Many respondents described the videos as humorous or entertaining rather than informative. Words such as “funny,” “meme,” “cartoon,” and “joke” appeared frequently in participants’ descriptions of the clips. One participant described a video as resembling a meme about the trial, while another explained that the clip simply showed funny moments from court rather than providing meaningful evidence about the case. These descriptions suggest that participants primarily interpreted the videos through the lens of entertainment rather than serious legal analysis — a framing effect consistent with Swamy et al.’s (2024) finding that visual, short-form content is especially persuasive to adolescents precisely because it does not present itself as a claim to be evaluated critically.

The entertainment-centered presentation style of TikTok content appears to play a significant role in shaping how viewers interpret the material. Unlike traditional news coverage or long-form documentaries, TikTok videos are typically brief, visually engaging, and edited to highlight emotionally compelling or humorous moments. These characteristics can cause viewers to focus more on the personalities and behaviors of individuals involved in the case rather than on the legal arguments or evidence being presented. As a result, the format itself may encourage audiences to evaluate the case in a simplified or emotionally driven way, consistent with Polson’s (2016) finding that emotionally charged framing — independent of its accuracy — shapes audience perceptions of guilt.

Another important feature of TikTok content is its reliance on selective editing. Viral clips frequently isolate specific moments that appear dramatic, humorous, or awkward when viewed independently. In the context of a courtroom trial, these moments may include facial expressions, short responses during testimony, or exchanges between attorneys and witnesses. When these isolated segments are presented without the surrounding context of hours of testimony, viewers may form impressions based on incomplete information. Participants’ responses suggest that many recognized the comedic editing style of the videos, yet still drew conclusions about the credibility of the individuals involved — echoing Enderle’s (2023) description of TikTok users acting as informal judges of testimony they had not seen in full.

Despite recognizing the comedic nature of the videos, participants still formed impressions about the credibility of the individuals involved. A recurring pattern in the responses was that Johnny Depp’s humor and sarcastic tone were interpreted as signs of confidence or authenticity; several respondents suggested that his relaxed demeanor in the clips made him appear more trustworthy or believable. In contrast, Amber Heard’s emotional reactions in certain clips were sometimes interpreted as evidence of dishonesty or exaggeration when presented in short, edited segments. This may help explain why the guilt numbers for Heard climbed to 86.4% after the videos: participants seem to have turned the difference between “calm” and “dramatic” into a judgment about who was telling the truth, without really thinking about the actual testimony.

Participants' reactions also demonstrate how visual cues and body language can strongly influence perception when presented in short-form media. Because TikTok emphasizes visual storytelling, viewers often rely on facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures when forming opinions about individuals in the videos. In a courtroom setting, however, these cues can be misleading when viewed outside of context; a moment of frustration, humor, or confusion may appear exaggerated or suspicious when isolated in a short clip. Consequently, viewers may unintentionally attribute meaning to behaviors that were originally part of a longer and more complex interaction.

Several participants also indicated that the editing style of the videos made it difficult to determine whether the clips represented the full context of the courtroom exchange. Some respondents commented that they were aware the videos likely left out important details, yet they still felt influenced by the tone or presentation of the clips. This tension — between recognizing potential bias and still feeling affected by the content — illustrates the powerful role short-form media can play for teenagers, and it directly supports the third part of this study's hypothesis: that participants' judgments would draw on tone and presentation even when participants themselves were aware that the clips were incomplete.

Additionally, the use of captions, music, and visual effects in TikTok videos may further shape audience perceptions. Many viral clips include text overlays that highlight specific lines of dialogue or emphasize humorous moments. Background music and sound effects can also reinforce a particular interpretation of a scene, guiding viewers toward a comedic, dramatic, or embarrassing viewpoint. Participants in the study occasionally referenced these stylistic elements when explaining why they perceived certain moments as funny or awkward, suggesting that production choices made by TikTok creators — rather than courtroom testimony itself — may have shaped part of the shift observed in the guilt-attribution data.

Another observation that emerged from participants' responses is the role of social engagement features in shaping interpretation. TikTok allows users to view comments, likes, and reactions from other viewers while watching content. These social signals may influence how teenagers interpret a video by suggesting how others perceive the same clip; if a video contains thousands of comments laughing at a particular moment, viewers may be more likely to interpret that moment as humorous or embarrassing. Although the survey focused primarily on the videos themselves, several participants referenced the broader social media environment surrounding the clips when explaining their reactions, indicating that the influence documented here may understate TikTok's full effect, since participants' everyday feeds also include this surrounding layer of comments and reactions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that TikTok's short-form video format encourages viewers to interpret courtroom moments in ways that prioritize entertainment value and personality-based judgments. While participants often recognized that the videos were edited or comedic, the format still influenced how they perceived the credibility and behavior of the individuals involved, and this influence is reflected numerically in the 16.3-point increase in guilt attribution to Heard. This demonstrates how the design of social media platforms can subtly shape the interpretation of serious events, including legal proceedings.

Reinforcement of Preexisting Beliefs

Another important pattern observed in the data was the reinforcement of preexisting beliefs. Although most participants reported that the videos did not significantly change their perspective on the case, many respondents indicated that the clips strengthened opinions they already held. For example, one

participant explained that they had already believed that Amber Heard was responsible for the conflict and that the videos “reassured and affirmed my prior views.” Similar responses appeared throughout the dataset, suggesting that exposure to TikTok content often reinforces existing narratives rather than introducing new interpretations of a legal case. The guilt numbers back this up too. Instead of participants splitting evenly between changing their mind one way or the other, almost everyone who changed moved in the same direction, with the share who believed Heard was guilty going from 70.1% before the videos to 86.4% after.

This pattern reflects the concept of confirmation bias discussed in the literature review. Confirmation bias occurs when individuals interpret new information in ways that support their existing beliefs while dismissing or ignoring evidence that contradicts those beliefs (Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022; see also Appendix A). Social media algorithms may contribute to this process by repeatedly exposing users to similar types of content based on their previous interactions. As a result, teenagers who already hold a particular perspective about a publicized legal case may encounter videos that reinforce that viewpoint, making it more difficult to evaluate the situation from multiple perspectives.

Several participants explicitly acknowledged that their opinions had already been shaped before watching the survey videos. Some mentioned that they had previously seen other TikTok clips about the trial, while others indicated that they had followed the case through news coverage or online discussions. Because of this prior exposure, the videos shown in the survey did not introduce entirely new information. Instead, they functioned as additional examples that aligned with what participants had already seen or believed. This matches the fact that 70.1% of participants already believed Heard was guilty before the study's videos were even shown.

The role of repetition may also be important in reinforcing these beliefs. On platforms like TikTok, users are often exposed to multiple videos discussing the same topic. Even when the content varies slightly, repeated exposure to similar narratives can strengthen viewers’ confidence in those interpretations. Over time, the repetition of certain clips or jokes may create the impression that a particular viewpoint is widely accepted or obvious. Participants’ comments suggesting that the videos confirmed what they “already knew” about the case may reflect this cumulative effect of repeated exposure, a dynamic Swamy et al. (2024) similarly identify as central to how adolescents come to trust widely circulated but decontextualized content.

Another factor contributing to reinforcement is the way social media content simplifies complex events. Legal trials involve extensive testimony, detailed evidence, and nuanced arguments from both sides. However, short-form videos typically highlight only a few moments that appear dramatic or entertaining. When viewers repeatedly encounter clips that portray one individual in a positive or negative light, they may begin to associate those brief moments with the overall narrative of the case. This simplification can make it easier for existing beliefs to persist, because viewers are not regularly exposed to the full range of information presented during the trial.

Peer influence may also play a role in reinforcing beliefs about highly publicized cases. Teenagers frequently share TikTok videos with friends or discuss viral clips within their social networks. These conversations can reinforce shared interpretations of the content, especially if the majority of peers express similar opinions. In such situations, individuals may feel less motivated to question the accuracy or completeness of the videos they are watching. Although the survey did not specifically measure peer discussion, the popularity of TikTok content suggests that social interaction likely contributes to how teenagers interpret these clips, and future research could measure this pathway directly (see Limitations and Future Research below).

Interestingly, only 12 of the 88 respondents (13.6%) still believed Johnny Depp was more likely guilty after watching the videos, even though 29.9% had believed that before the videos. This means that roughly half of the participants who originally thought Depp was more responsible ended up leaning toward Heard after watching the clips, while a smaller group stuck with their original opinion. A small number of participants also reported that the videos made them question their initial assumptions about the case, explaining that certain moments made them reconsider how the two individuals were portrayed in the media. While these responses were less common, they show that social media content does not always reinforce existing beliefs, and that a few participants did think more critically about what they were watching.

Overall, though, the main pattern in the data was reinforcement rather than participants changing their minds in a balanced way. Participants tended to interpret the videos in ways that matched, and even strengthened, their existing opinions about the case. This suggests that TikTok content may help certain narratives stick around, and possibly get stronger, especially when those narratives show up again and again in different viral posts.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations to keep in mind when looking at these findings. First, this study only looked at one case, the Depp v. Heard trial, and only within one county's high schools, so it is hard to know for sure whether the same results would show up with other legal cases, other platforms, or teenagers somewhere else. Second, because participation was voluntary and mostly came from Business Law and Ethics classes, the students in this sample may already be more interested in legal topics than the average teenager, which could affect how familiar they were with the case going in. Third, this study did not have a control group of students who did not watch any TikTok clips at all. So even though the 16.3-point jump in guilt attribution is bigger than the margin of error and lines up with what participants said in their open-ended answers, it is still not possible to say for certain that the videos alone caused the change. It is possible that some of the shift happened just because participants were asked the same question twice.

Fourth, the number of people who answered the before and after guilt questions was slightly different (87 and 88 respondents), so this was not a perfectly matched comparison of the same individuals answering both times. Future research could fix this by tracking each participant's answers individually, by adding a control group that does not watch any videos, and by looking at more than one county or more than one legal case to see if the same pattern of reinforcement, and personality-based reasoning, shows up elsewhere (Swamy et al., 2024). Future studies could also try to measure how much peer conversations and TikTok's algorithm play a role, instead of just relying on what participants say about them.

New Understanding

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a broader understanding of how social media platforms influence teenagers' interpretations of legal events. Rather than significantly changing viewers' opinions in a way participants themselves noticed, TikTok appears to function primarily as a platform that reinforces existing narratives through emotionally engaging, personality-focused content. Short viral clips encourage viewers to interpret courtroom behavior as an indicator of guilt or innocence, even when those clips lack the full context of legal testimony and evidence. In this study, that reinforcement showed up as a 16.3-point increase in the number of participants who believed Amber Heard was guilty, even though most participants said out loud that their opinion barely changed.

One of the most significant insights from this research is the role of media format in shaping perception. Traditional news coverage typically provides longer explanations, interviews with experts, and summaries of legal arguments. In contrast, TikTok prioritizes speed, visual impact, and entertainment value. This difference means that the same legal event can be presented in very different ways depending on the platform. For teenagers who primarily encounter information about a trial through social media, their understanding of the case may be shaped more by viral moments than by comprehensive reporting.

The study also highlights how the personalization features of social media platforms influence information exposure. Algorithms are designed to recommend content that aligns with users' interests and past interactions. While this system can improve user engagement, it may also limit the diversity of perspectives that viewers encounter. When individuals consistently receive videos that support a particular interpretation of an event, they may come to view that interpretation as the most credible or widely accepted explanation. This may be part of why 70.1% of participants already believed Heard was guilty before this study's videos were ever shown to them.

Another implication of these findings involves media literacy. Because short-form videos often omit important context, viewers may benefit from developing stronger skills for evaluating online information. Recognizing that a viral clip represents only a small portion of a larger event can help audiences interpret the content more critically. Educational programs that encourage students to question editing choices, source credibility, and algorithmic influence may help teenagers navigate social media environments more effectively — a recommendation consistent with Popat and Tarrant's (2022) finding that teenagers are aware misinformation exists but often lack consistent tools for identifying it.

Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that public perception of legal cases can be influenced by factors unrelated to the evidence presented in court. Humor, editing style, and personality portrayal all appear to shape how viewers interpret courtroom interactions. This raises important questions about the relationship between social media culture and the legal system: when legal proceedings become viral content, the focus may shift from evaluating evidence to evaluating the behavior and charisma of the individuals involved.

This conclusion addresses the gap identified in the literature review by providing insight into how adolescents interpret high-profile legal cases through social media platforms. While previous research has examined how media framing influences adult audiences and public opinion (Polson, 2016; Curley, Munro, and Dror, 2022), this study highlights how teenagers may form perceptions about legal guilt or innocence through short-form digital media such as TikTok. By examining both quantitative responses and qualitative explanations from participants, the research demonstrates that even brief, entertainment-oriented clips can shape the way young audiences understand complex real-world events.

Ultimately, the findings emphasize the growing importance of considering social media platforms when studying public opinion and legal communication. As digital media continues to evolve, platforms like TikTok are likely to remain significant sources of information and discussion for younger audiences. Understanding how these platforms influence perception, and using study designs like control groups in the future to pin down that influence more clearly, can help educators, researchers, and policymakers better address the challenges associated with interpreting legal events in the digital age.

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Appendix A

Rating	Respondents	Percentage
1	15	17.0%
2	14	15.9%
3	40	45.5%
4	13	14.8%
5	6	6.8%

Timing	Amber Heard	Johnny Depp	n
Before exposure (“Before we began, who do you believe is guilty?”)	61 (70.1%)	26 (29.9%)	87
After exposure (“After watching these videos, who do you now believe is guilty?”)	76 (86.4%)	12 (13.6%)	88