GETTING INTO THE WORLD OF TROLLING: A SECONDARY SOURCE-BASED RESEARCH

Sameeksha Suri
Research Scholar
Delhi School of Social Work
University of Delhi
Email: samysuri03@gmail.com

Abstract

The article examines the literature sources to put forward the changing dynamics of digital platforms. It examines the world of trolling through the lenses of the authors and tries to put forward a comprehensive viewpoint on how online trolling impacts the students from higher education. Thus, the objective was to collect secondary source- based data on online trolling and reflect upon the social media's advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords

Online trolling, social media, digital platforms.

Introduction

Understanding the Concept of Trolling

Trolling is the reason behind many problems faced by people especially students on the social media such as hatred, outrageous reactions, polarization of opinions and) distracting positive discussions (Coles & west, 2016). Trolls tend to provoke the other person to satisfy their beliefs (Klempka & Stimson, 2014). Due to the anonymity and wider reach, online social networking sites are becoming the space for trollers to post offensive material on any post to gain followers (Cambria et al.,2010). Kling & Iacono (1988) examined that there is a social shaping of views due to the discovery of ICT (Information and communication technology) and it has shaped social identities online which are different from the real world. Suler and Phillips (1988) have characterized online deviances and thus evaluated that in the social response to online behavior; deviances like clueless and mischievous newbies are proactive. They do not have any idea about what ethics must be followed to maintain the digital world safe and user-friendly. Shachaf &Hara (2010) found that the trolls are mostly motivated by some political or personal ideologies as well. They certainly believe in the pre-existing notions and have the urge to impose their ideas on others. However, Cook et al., (2017) highlighted that there is no certain motive that we can derive from the troll's behaviour or their tactics. Meanwhile in developing the definitions of trolling, there has been a rationalization of themes based on bad comments, controversial, fake narratives and aims to disrupt any conversations (Al Marouf et al.,2019). In many of the agencies like Russian Internet research agency, the troll term has been used by the users to refer them as the state-sponsored trolling to dismantle other countries' situations (Badawy et al., 2018). Recently the works of (Ferrari 2018, Fichman & Dainas, 2019) have highlighted the political trolling within the countries and across the borders to spread online hate against each other and silence the government through online harassment. These types of trolling have generally used satire as a form of activism where fake social media accounts are made to spread online hate (Yang et al.,2017). It is observed that trolls violate community norms and societal harmony (Lu et al., 2019).

To widen the understanding of trolling, Davidson et al., have used the terms cyber aggressions and hate speech. It is mostly based on the behavioral patterns or personality traits of an individual (Don. ath,1999). When it comes to recent times, trolling is taken as a mischievous and deliberate attempt to harm the other person emotionally. The usage of the word trolling with a variety of psychological terms and behavior patterns has blurred its definitions and an attempt to conclude its impact on the society. There is notable limited research on online trolling especially in relation to the opinions and views of the students in India and thus various metaphors have been used to notify what trolling is. Addawood et al., (2019) stated that to get a narrow definition of the term trolling it is important to focus on it as an observable interactive behavior that may be positive or negative.

The conclusion to draw certain definitions of trolling is difficult as it is not defined by any act or policy of the Indian government. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of the researcher to try to bring the perspective of the students under an umbrella to define trolling in their own words and derive to certain conclusions. Hence, in the strategies to combat

335

trolling there is a need to develop a literature based on various motivations, predictors, and perceptions of online trolling especially among the highest users of the internet i.e., youth.

Objectives of the Study

To systematically involve the literature based on the online trolling behavior and patterns of the social media users with reflecting the necessity of students' involvement in the online world.

Research Methodology

The literature was collected and was thematically analyzed based on the secondary research.

Rationale of the Study

The literature was collected to address the present notions about online trolling specifically targeting higher education students. The need to comprehensively analyze the literature thematically was felt as many studies focused on trolling of the individuals but lacked the perspectives of the most internet users i.e., youngsters and especially college-going students.

Thematic Analysis and Findings

Online Behavior Patterns of the Trollers

Sanfilippo, Fichman & Young (2018) in their study constructed trolling as a multidimensional behavioral pattern where humorous trolling, mocking people and degrading patterns were mostly found. The methodology used by the researchers was focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews of 15 participants only to derive the behavioral patterns of the online trolling.

Trolling has been often regarded as an anti-social behavior which is different from cyberbullying and has different factors and motivations linked to it. However it varies by context as individuals have different experiences on online trolling. The trolling behavior is potentially harmful and manipulative (Sest & March, 2017). They focused on the personality profile (exploring sadism, psychopathy, and empathy) of the internet trolls through an online survey of 415 participants.

The different characteristic of online trolling behavior like aggression, harmful, provoking, hateful, humorous etc. makes it different from other online behavior because it is tough to interpret the comments over someone's post on the social media based on other people's interpretation. Marrington, March, Murray et al., (2023) in their latest study explored psychopathy and sadism trolling behaviors in Australian adolescents and evaluated that trolling behaviors can have a negative impact on the adolescent's mental health and termed them as conservative. They explored trolling behaviors of Australian adolescents using an online survey based on Rosenberg's self-esteem scale, youth psychopathy traits inventory, social rewards questionnaire, and short sadistic impulse scale. Behavior patterns like sadism, self-esteem, psychopathy, empathy, and negative social potency were observed.

Trolls often believe themselves as a member of the digital community whereas their actual purpose is to cause disagreements and disruption for their self-enjoyment (Hardaker, 2010). He tried to understand the definition of online trolling using a corpus

derived from online posts hitting the most likes and trolling. The study revealed factors like aggression, disruption, and deception in connection with online trolling behaviors.

Sarcasm was another type of behavior seen as an escaping way to tell the other person about their intentions in a distinctive way without expressing the actual meaning of it. 5 (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989). Fichman (2020) discusses sarcasm as an expression of false message to pass a negative comment on the other person intentionally to make them feel bad. He conducted a Thematic content analysis of the 60 videos comprising of global trolling of Donald Trump.

Aggression can also be seen as one of the factors contributing to increasing online trolling. Physical aggression can harm a person's mental and physical strength but online aggression i.e., spreading fake narratives and gossip to harm friendships or threaten anybody has been increased on the social media. Hardaker (2010) has examined that there is a direct association between trolling and an aggressive behavior. Navarro-Carrillo et al., (2021) analyzed that trolling was majorly instigated by aggressive humor. Dark personality traits of 201 participants were analyzed by (Navarro Carrillo et al., 2021) on factors of psychopathy and sadism by self- semi-structured questionnaire on men and women.

Manuoglu & Ozkan (2022) believed humiliating others and teasing others are common behavioral patterns observed in online trolling. A sarcastic trolling scale was developed and were tested on university students through an online survey based on dark personality traits and online aggression.

Trolls are mostly destructive and tend to repeat their behavior intentionally to harm a person mentally (Shachaf and Hara, 2010). This study highlighted the motivation behind Wikipedia's troll behaviors and compared it with hackers using thematic analysis.

The two personality traits that have been mostly explored are psychopathy and sadism. They are mostly linked with trolling. Lynam et al., (2007) showed psychopathy as a characteristic of impulsivity, manipulation, and thrill-seeking attitude. This study used the Childhood Psychopathy Scale on adolescents and the Psychopathy Checklist on adults to predict the attitude toward psychopathy in these age groups. Blair & Coles (2000) in their article suggested that adolescents engage in online aggression if they have higher psychopathy. There is evidence that more adolescents are involved in online trolling with high psychopathy (March et al.,2017).

March & Steele (2020) examined that social mayhem is created mostly by the psychopaths who seek thrill in posting a comment online. The other factor that has a positive correlation with trolling is sadism. The study explored anti-social behaviors like psychopathy, sadism, and narcissism of 357 participants on real-time dating applications and moderation analysis was applied.

The sadist often enjoys harming other people and seeks pleasure from hurting others (Baumeister & Campbell, 2021). It was found that sadism was one of the predictors especially in adults. Sadist traits are mostly correlated with the anti-social behaviors (Chabrol et al., 2009).

One of the anti-social behaviors that is explored by (Biyun et al., 2023) is online disinhibition. Exploratory and Confirmatory factor analyses on the measures of Internet

Sameeksha Suri

perceptions of young adults in Australia were evaluated in this research on experiences of online disinhibition. Disinhibition is often referred to as the inability to withdraw unwanted behavior. They evaluated that individuals feel less concerned with the fact that their actions may have harmful consequences and thus they mostly hide their identities and become invisible in the online space.

It is also often observed that a lack of empathy towards each other highly contributes to online trolling. There is a potential role of empathy especially in adolescents wherein they tend to be less empathetic towards other person's views to justify their own beliefs (Altikulac et al., 2019).

Few patterns have been observed by the researchers that may contribute positively to conveying a message called humorous and entertainment-based trolling. Sanfilippo et.al, 2017 examined that humorous and non-trolling behavior can also lead to trolling in a manner that an individual tends to pass comments which may or may not be humorous to the other one. Some scholars have also found that trolling behavior may include repetitive commenting, lying or insulting others (Shachaf & Hara, 2010) However, in an online platform people may react to each other in a humorous style while not intentionally provoking or harming each other.

Nature of Online Trolling Behavior and Victimization

The nature of online trolling behavior is hard to predict as it may involve some behavioral patterns or pre-existing beliefs. It may also involve falsification and manipulative claims. (Thacker and Griffiths, 2012). More specifically, online trolls on social media justify their behavior and patterns that they have established. They use the incorrect information, deliberately and tend to repeat their online nature by being genuine about their perceived notions. Bishop (2013) found that the very nature of the troll often designs flame wars and pointless arguments to make others commit themselves to time-consuming and meaningless discussions, often leading to negative and aggressive responses. From posting and disseminating information, the online trolling behavior may include self-victimization of the negativity they initiated as they are mostly involved in blame games (Griffiths, 2014). Adrian (2010) while analyzing online game trolling believed that a person could be considered a victim of the online behavior even if they are the one initiating the incident as in a game, they want to obstruct team goals.

Online Trolling Predictors

Until now, studies pertaining to trolling have predominantly aimed at defining this emerging form of online conduct, and the body of literature concerning the psychosocial elements that could forecast trolling behaviors remains relatively scant. Initially, the five-factor model (FFM) of personality, proposed by McCrae and Costa in 1992, was investigated in lieu of the antisocial tendencies associated with online trolling.

Mitsopoulou and Giovazolias (2015) conducted a meta-analysis that outlined the aggressive nature inherent in general bullying conduct. Their study established a correlation between lower levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness, and higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion with instances of bullying.

Examining personality factors specific to trolls, Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus (2014) discovered that individuals who derived considerable pleasure from trolling exhibited great

levels of extroversion and low levels of agreeableness compared to those who did not find trolling enjoyable.

Another theoretical perspective revolves around the connection between empathy and prosocial behavior. Studies (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010) have highlighted that anti-social behaviors are associated with a person being less empathetic.

Research of (Hogan, 1969) on online bullying has explored both affective and cognitive empathy i.e., the capacity to experience and share others' emotions and the ability to recognize others' emotions. Thus, lower levels of both affective and cognitive empathy are correlated with a higher frequency of cyberbullying patterns (Ang & Goh, 2010) and even Sest and March (2017) found that the more the levels of affective empathy were, the lesser number of trolling behaviors were observed.

Motivation behind Trolling

While trolling is mostly explained as a medium to express serious opinions that an individual puts forward; the real motivation behind trolling is often neglected by various researchers as they may focus on the impact of trolling or creating a typology of trolling while not deeply analyzing what motivates a person to troll the other person (Phillips, 2015). Trolling is often perceived to satisfy personal beliefs and social needs while still not finding the exact motivation to do so. There is a difference in how college students perceive trolling in comparison to older generations. Humorous trolling is motivated by fun or enjoyment, serious trolling may be motivated by provocation. While an individual feels it may be an act of just commenting on the post; the other person may feel it as a provocation to gain a response or hamper someone's mental health (Sanfilippo, 2018). The research by Sanfilippo, 2018 mapped the perception of four behaviors of trolling namely humorous and non-humorous trolling by the college students and applied concept analysis by showing the comments on certain posts.

Various researchers have focused on the behavior that may be linked to the troll's motivation but little have they stressed upon why the trolling is done. There have been motivational factors that might have been discussed in lesser volume like provocation and harm in the study of Hopkinson, C. 2013. This study did a qualitative pragmatic analysis of the discussion which was hindered by the trolls to evaluate how trolls can react to a certain discussion in both positive and negative ways.

However, the present study has directly tried to analyze some motivational factors of online trolling to a great extent. These factors are: to harm an individual, to gain social acceptance, to show their personality traits knowingly or unknowingly, for entertainment or whether a person feels inferior about their beliefs which leads to trolling. The area of motivation behind trolling according to the view of college students has hardly been explored by previous researchers which makes it a prominent factor to be explored further in this research.

Factors behind Trolling

Ortiz (2020) contributes to analyzing the political tactics that create a prevalent notion of paid trolls and self-motivated propaganda with governments increasingly investing in digital structures in recent years. This phenomenon of politically motivated trolling is not

different in India. Chaturvedi (2016), in her book, extensively examined the tactics employed by the digital army, focusing particularly on trolling. It also analyzed how various individuals used trolling techniques to hamper others' image publicly and discourage them from expressing opposite political viewpoints. Herring (2002) delved deeper into the categorization of cyber violence. Sanfilippo, Fichman & Yang (2017) analyzed that the victims of trolling were able to identify the various existing factors and patterns of people who troll. Likewise, they suggested that some troll others to gain pleasure while some do to offer their humor online to let people understand their funny identities. It can take the form of harmful trolling but can also sometimes be entertainment-based only and not to harm or provoke the other person. Scott et al. (2011) evaluated those certain circumstances of mood swings also contribute to the forms in which a person trolls the other one. If a person's mood is sad, he/she tends to troll the other person in order to spoil the other person's mood as well.

Sometimes, as suggested by Buckels, 2014, the troll just wanted to have fun and entertainment in order to gain social acceptance. This study involved Personality inventories and a survey completed online on their commenting styles on the internet to know the relationship between personality traits and trolling.

Demsar et al., (2021) analyzed that online troll behaviors tend to take the forms of aggression and revenge. It can be sarcastic as well but majorly the forms of trolling that have been discussed are mostly provoking in order to generate a response out of anyone to heat up the conversation or sometimes just to pass the time online (Erickson, et al.,2000). Various researchers have discussed certain forms of trolling in accordance with the characteristics like fun and humours based or an act coming out of aggression and manipulation but have not developed the exact forms of trolling for the future researchers.

Gender bias and trolling in India The digital space has ushered in an exhilarating new era for public expression among Indian women. Unfortunately, despite this progress, the norms and practices within the digital sphere have failed to dismantle entrenched gender hierarchies (Gurumurthy, 2019). The prevalence of online gender trolling serves as a stark testament to the enduring influence of male dominance, manifesting as a form of control (Vaidyanathan, 2019). Ghosh (2020) uncovered a concerning trend where victims of gender trolling were often unjustly blamed in India. Norris (2018) disclosed that a substantial 73 percent of survey respondents reported experiencing instances of online gender-based violence.

While hashtag activism gains momentum in India, gender stereotypes persist unchecked, even in the digital world, where men constitute 61% of total users while women comprise only 39% (Statista, 2019).

The groundbreaking research in 2016 by Halder &Jaishankar illuminated the prevalence of cybercrimes against women, highlighting that their presence on social media platforms is often seen as opposing their traditional notions about masculinity. This perception fosters unrealistic expectations of self-denial.

Consequently, Gudipaty (2017) was of the view that online spaces have become breeding grounds for trolling, replete with calling with certain names, using sexual slurs, and public shaming.

Claesson, 2022 in her study evaluated that in a parallel context, it becomes evident that three key dynamics underpin the structural barriers that women face in journalism: less supportive resources, established norms and online abuses and negativity. When applied to broader frameworks of inequality in the modern professional sphere, it becomes apparent that online violence is reinforced by existing notions about gender and inequality. It is imperative to see how organizations often struggle to mark other forms of online trolling as these structural barriers pose challenges for newsrooms in their efforts to tackle online violence.

Ozden (2008) found that gender differences do exist in digital spaces especially when women tend to build their communities through discussions or blogging, many attributes related to pre-existing notions about women in a society come popping up immediately. Further it is seen that individuals possess different perceptions of the same behavior differently between men and women (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). Lester (2011) had shed a light on social norms being enforced on women differently and majorly these norms are asserted through men's patriarchal mindset and women's behavior of non-confrontation sometimes to avoid the arguments. The perceptions of trolling also vary for men and women. There are expectations by the online community for women to behave and act in a certain way. Widen-Wulff et al., (2018) evaluated that in an online community the construction of gendered norms is also prevalent and there is a certain different way of how women react to the trolling in a different way than their counterparts.

Suler and Phillips (2018) further analyzed that masculinity appears to be a factor in forming online discussions about a women. The result of the study conducted among college students on cyber victimization evaluated that the female college students faced more blackmail and threats. They even faced personal attacks on them; mostly about their color and physical appearance (like body shaming, dress shaming and character shaming) and majorly were involved in sexual comments (K. O'Connor et. Al, 2018)

Internet trolling and statistics

Internet trolling is reshaping the dynamics of online interactions. According to a study by the Pew Research Centre, 70% of Internet users aged 18 to 24 have encountered harassment, with 26% of women in that age group reporting instances of online stalking (Stein, 2016). Additionally, a 2014 research article in the psychology journal Personality and Individual Differences highlighted that individuals identifying as Internet trolls exhibited notably elevated levels of dark personality traits, including psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism (Stein, 2016).

The prevalence of trolling is prompting individuals to distance themselves from social media platforms as a means of self-preservation. In a comprehensive report titled "Born digital, Born free? A socio-legal study on young women's experiences of online violence in South India" by IT for Change, it was revealed that over three-fourths of respondents experienced gender-based trolling, leading to a range of impacts like social, functional, and aspirational consequences (Gurumurthy, 2019). Moreover, the report indicated that many victims of gender-based trolling chose to adapt to the prevailing culture of online violence to safeguard their agency rather than seek external support.

Another recent report by Amnesty International India (2020) employed quantitative data to examine the degree of abuse faced by women politicians online in India during the

2019 General Elections. The findings underscored the exceptionally high levels of abuse reinforcing the perception that social media platforms have transformed into a war room for them.

Trolling behavior varies differently for different communities and age groups but for college students the definition and type of trolling is different (Sanfilippo et al, 2017). It has been firmly observed by Gammon (2014) that most teenagers and college students are involved in trolling as their understanding is yet to develop intellectually and they are less educated about the usage of sensitive words. However, how they perceive trolling is lesser known and is often neglected by various researchers. Hence the need to analyse the experiences and perceptions of trolling from this age group becomes important.

Social Media Fatigue and Online Trolling

Forbes Advisor digital report published that the active social media penetration evaluated was 33.4%. Most of the social media platforms in India constitute 398.0 million users who are above 18 years of age. In general, 67.5% of all internet users regardless of their age in India is use at least one social networking platform. The time spent by an average person on social media every day is about 145 minutes. Hence, it is noteworthy that, on a global scale, the average individual dedicates this much portion of their day. What's intriguing is that, on average, Indians spend around 141.6 minutes daily on the social media. The research further evaluated that if the person on an average continued with the usage till 73 years, they will give their 5.7 years just on the social media platforms.

Social media addiction and its fatigue arise from the consumption of a range of negative posts or any certain reaction including feelings of scrolling unnecessarily, anxiety and irritation Ravindran et al., 2014). Considering a mediator namely social media fatigue between safe space and trolling is highly justifiable. Firstly, it represents a psychological state characterized by a decline in cognitive capacity as evaluated by Dhir et al., 2019, and it serves as a contributing component to aggressive behavior (Wolf et al., 2017). Secondly, Social media fatigue may exhibit a positive correlation with online trolling. Barlett et al., (2016) believed that impaired cognitive function, coupled with feelings of depression and anxiety contributes to factors that increase the risks not only for real-life aggression but also for trolling or even for cyberbullying. Additionally, online trolling has been identified as a source of amusement for some individuals (Navarro Carrillo et al., 2021). Mostly tired or social media-fatigued individuals may be involved more in trolling behavior in order to alleviate their emotions negatively (Cheng et al., 2017), capitalizing on the anonymity afforded by the internet to engage in trolling with reduced consequences (Navarro Carrillo et al., 2021). Consequently, there appears to be a positive correlation between fatigue and social media trolling. Social media fatigue can be considered as a psychological state which comprises of individual traits and can contribute to aggression as well. (Allen et al., 2018). As far as the knowledge extends, no previous studies have explored how social media's limitless usage of higher education students results in online trolling. Hence the present study can be useful in analysing the relationship between time spent on social media and online trolling by the students who spend most of their time on these platforms.