Research examines motives of internet trolling
23 June 2021, by Brenna Seeman

Research from BYU professors Pamela Brubaker and Scott Church found that individuals who exhibit dark triad personality traits and derive enjoyment from others' misfortune were likely to engage in trolling behaviors online. Credit: Jaren Wilkey/BYU Photo

As social media and other online networking sites have grown in usage, so too has trolling—an internet practice in which users intentionally seek to draw others into pointless and, at times, uncivil conversations.

New BYU research recently published in the journal of Social Media and Society sheds light on the motives and personality characteristics of internet trolls.

Through an online survey completed by over 400 Reddit users, the study found that individuals with dark triad personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) combined with schadenfreude—a German word meaning that one derives pleasure from another's misfortune—were more likely to demonstrate trolling behaviors.

"People who exhibit those traits known as the dark triad are more likely to demonstrate trolling behaviors if they derive enjoyment from passively observing others suffer," said Dr. Pamela Brubaker, BYU public relations professor and co-author of the study. "They engage in trolling at the expense of others."

The research, which was co-authored by BYU communications professor Dr. Scott Church and former BYU graduate Daniel Montez, found that individuals who experienced pleasure from the failures or shortcomings of others considered trolling to be acceptable online behavior. Women who participated in the survey viewed trolling as dysfunctional while men were more likely to view it as functional.

"This behavior may happen because it feels appropriate to the medium," said Church. "So, heavy users of the platform may feel like any and all trolling is 'functional' simply because it's what people do when they go on Reddit."

The researchers say it's important to note that those who possess schadenfreude often consider trolling to be a form of communication that enriches rather than impedes online deliberation. Because of this view, they're not concerned with how their words or actions affect those on the other side of the screen. To them, trolling isn't perceived as destructive but merely as a means for dialog to take place.

"They are more concerned with enhancing their own online experience rather than creating a positive online experience for people who do not receive the same type of enjoyment or pleasure from such provocative discussions," said Brubaker.

However, there's still hope for productive online discussions. The study found no correlation between being outspoken online and trolling behavior. The findings noted that users who actively "speak out" and voice their opinions online didn't necessarily engage in trolling behaviors.
Such results are encouraging and suggest that civil online discourse is attainable.

"Remember who you are when you go online," said Church. "It helps when we think of others online as humans, people with families and friends like you and me, people who feel deeply and sometimes suffer. When we forget their identities as actual people, seeing them instead as merely usernames or avatars, it becomes easier to engage in trolling."

Brubaker suggests approaching online discourses with an open mind in order to understand various perspectives.

"Digital media gives us the power to connect with people who have similar and different ideas, interests, and experiences from our own. As we connect with people online, we should strive to be more respectful of others and other points of view, even when another person's perspective may not align with our own," she said. "Each of us has the power to be an influence for good online. We can do this by exercising mutual respect. We can build others up and applaud the good online."


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