

New research finds that many Internet trolls are 'everyday sadists'

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Anyone who's ever encountered Internet trolls, those vile, racist, sexist and often profane people who gorge themselves on others' misery, might have concluded they are psychologically disturbed. That would be correct, new research suggests.

Trolls gleefully spew their "e-bile" using smartphone apps, online comments, texts or social media sites for no other reason than cruelty.

"It happens every night," said Darla Jaye, a radio talk show host in Kansas City whose conservative views often serve as a lightning rod for trolls. "I get stuff on the text line all the time where people swear at me and call me the foulest names. ... It's easy to throw something out there when you're anonymous. That is the thing about the Internet, especially about trolls. Most of these people are cowards."

Perhaps so. But, according to a recent paper by a team of Canadian researchers that has looked into the psychological underpinnings of trolls, they may be something else as well:

Sadists.

Yes, sadists. But not the psychopathic sadists who turn to actual physical torture or serial killing.

"We use the term 'everyday sadist' to emphasize that we are referring to sub-clinical levels of sadism, and not the more extreme forms that are

seen in serial killers and criminals," said psychologist Erin Buckels of the University of Manitoba and the first of three authors of the paper on troll [personality](#) in the February issue of the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

"The essential aspect of sadism," Buckels said in an email, "is enjoyment of cruelty. Persons high in sadism gain some emotional benefit from causing or simply observing others' suffering."

In Kansas City, the issue of using the cybersphere for cruel intent rose again recently. The administrators at numerous schools - including Pembroke Hill, Blue Valley North and Bishop Miege, private, public and parochial - found themselves issuing notices or holding assemblies to urge students not to use a smartphone app called Yik Yak.

Likened to a portable bathroom wall, the free app (which kids say proliferated in recent weeks but has died down just as quickly) allows users to anonymously post anything they want about anybody and share that post with hundreds to thousands of other random users within a few-mile radius.

While many students tend to see Yik Yak as the latest goofy tool to razz friends ("If you're a cheerleader, high school doesn't count," read one) or mock rival schools ("Entrance exam to Shawnee Mission East? Spell your name"), administrators see it as a weapon for cyberbullying.

"As soon as I heard about it, I downloaded the app," said Blue Valley North Principal David Stubblefield, who received complaints from students and parents. " ... Yes, I was shocked. There were just really ugly things on it ... anywhere from sexual humor to racial to religious."

Although researchers delineate between cyberbullies and trolls - cyberbullies torment specific individuals and are often known by their

victims; trolls like to cast their hurt about - they are linked by their penchant for cruelty.

In their troll research, Buckels, Manitoba colleague Paul Trapnell and Delroy Paulhus of the University of British Columbia gathered data from 1,215 individuals - split nearly evenly, half men and half women - based on questions answered on two online surveys.

Both surveys included questions about the subjects' Internet habits, such as "How many hours per day do you spend posting comments?" or "What do you enjoy doing most on these comment sites? Debating issues, chatting, trolling, making new friends, something other?"

They also included statements from well-known diagnostic tests of personality traits meant to detect various levels of sadism: "Hurting people is exciting" or "In video games, I like realistic blood spurts."

Beyond sadism, the questionnaire also looked for signs and varying levels of what are known as the three other legs of the "Dark Tetrad" of personality. Those are narcissism (I have been compared to famous people); sub-clinical psychopathology (payback needs to be quick and nasty) and Machiavellianism (it's not wise to tell your secrets).

Conclusion: Those who rated highest on the scales for narcissism, psychopathology, Machiavellianism and sadism - highest of all for the trait of sadism - were the same people who were trolls. Enjoyment of other online activities, such as chatting and debating, was unrelated to sadism, the researchers concluded.

"It seem like one of their great joys in life," said Paulhus, "is to make fun of other people and to criticize their opinions."

Paulhus said that trolls are often insatiably nasty. There is no reasoning

with them. The more havoc they sow, getting more people to argue with them, the happier they are. It is that well-known trait that has given rise to the Internet advice: "Don't feed the trolls." Like ravenous strays, they just come back.

Over the last two years, Emma A. Jane, a lecturer in media and communications at Australia's University of New South Wales, has been compiling and dissecting the vast range of electronic vitriol - whether by computer or cell phone - as it is directed at women.

In her paper, "Your a Ugly, Whorish, Slut," published in 2012 in the journal *Feminist Media Studies*, Jane pointed out how e-bile directed at women frequently shared the same rhetorical elements: violence and misogyny.

"Gender stereotypes abound," Jane wrote. "E-bile targeting women commonly includes charges of unintelligence, hysteria and ugliness; these are then combined with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts which are often framed as 'correctives.' Constructions along the lines of 'what you need is a good (insert graphic sexual act) to put you right' appear with astounding regularity."

In her view, Jane wrote in an email from Australia, "gendered cyberhate is not rare or occurring only in the fringes of the cybersphere, but has become part of the everyday online experience for many women."

"I agree with the research ... on sadism," she wrote, "but I also think a lot of people are bored and simply running with the pack."

One particularly pernicious form of e-bile known as "revenge porn" - in which one posts or sends sexually explicit photos or videos of another person to degrade or harass them - has become enough of a concern that two states, California and New Jersey, recently passed laws criminalizing

the act. Twelve more states, including Missouri, have offered similar bills.

Compared with such acts, mere trolling seems tame.

Buckels said it's still up for debate how much the veil of anonymity on the Internet actually fuels such behaviors (Without the veil the Internet can provide, would they act this way?) or whether trolling helps vent it (Thank goodness for the Internet, lest they cause physical harm.).

"Some researchers claim that anonymity is primarily to blame," Buckels said. "But, again, our research suggests that the picture is more complicated. Only certain types of people will act antisocially when they have the opportunity to do so. Most of the time, they can only fantasize about cruel behavior or watch from a distance without risking punishment. Direct action is far more risky, unless the situation is relatively anonymous."

Buckels said that the anonymity of the Internet can no doubt provide a dark corner from which to strike. For some users, trolling may also offer the same outlet as do violent video games or movies, providing a dose of vicarious sadism as an alternative to the actual thing.

"Our research suggests that trolls also want to be mean to people in real life," Buckels said. "Perhaps trolling online allows them to satisfy their appetites for cruelty without it creeping into real life.

"As someone recently suggested to me, maybe we should feed the trolls."

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