

New research shows trolls don't just enjoy hurting others, they also feel good about themselves

September 16 2020, by Evita March



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There is an urgent need to understand why people troll.

Recent Australian estimates show about [one in three internet users](#) have experienced [online harassment](#).

Across several [research studies](#), I have attempted to [construct the psychological profile](#) of those who trolls to harm others.

In my [most recent study](#), I wanted to see if trolling could be linked to [self-esteem](#). Do people troll because they have low self-worth?

What is trolling?

In [scientific literature](#), internet trolling is defined as a malicious online behavior, characterized by aggressive and deliberate provocation of others. "Trolls" seek to provoke, upset and harm others via inflammatory messages and posts.

Trolling can refer to a [variety of online behavior](#). In some circumstances, the intent of the trolling behavior may even be to amuse and entertain. However, in my research, I have explored trolling as a malevolent behavior, where the troll wants to hurt their online victim.

Why is trolling a problem?

Trolling can cause significant harm and distress. It is associated with serious physical and [psychological effects](#), including disrupted sleep, lowered self-esteem, depression, [self-harm, suicidal ideation](#), and in some cases, even [suicide](#).

In 2019, [The Australia Institute estimated](#) trolling and online abuse had cost the Australian economy up to \$3.7 billion in health costs and lost income.

Alarmingly, it is [extremely common](#) to experience trolling. Combined with the psychological and economic costs of trolling, this demonstrates the urgency of understanding why people troll.

If we can understand why people troll, this can inform management and prevention.

Researching trolls

In my latest study, I explored gender, psychopathy, sadism and self-esteem as predictors of engaging in malevolent trolling.

[Psychopathy](#) is characterized by callousness, deceitfulness and a lack of personal responsibility. [Sadism](#) is characterized by enjoyment of physically and/or psychologically harming other people.

The study recruited 400 participants via social media advertisements. Almost 68% of participants were women, 43% were Australian, while the average age was 25. They completed an anonymous, confidential online questionnaire, which assessed personality and self-esteem.

The study also measured the extent to which participants displayed troll-like behaviors. For example:

"I enjoy upsetting people I do not personally know on the internet."

"Although some people think my posts are offensive, I think they are funny."

What the study found

Results showed that gender, psychopathy, and sadism were all significant independent predictors of malevolent trolling. That is, if you are male, have high psychopathy, or high sadism, you are more likely to troll.

The most powerful predictor of trolling was sadism. The more someone

enjoys hurting others, the more likely it is they will troll.

Self-esteem was not an independent predictor of trolling.

However, we found self-esteem interacts with sadism. So, if a person had high levels of sadism and high self-esteem, they were more likely to troll. This result was unexpected because low self-esteem has predicted other antisocial online behavior, such as [cyberbullying](#).

What does this mean?

These results have important implications for how we manage and respond to trolling.

First, based on the results of psychopathy and sadism, we understand the internet troll as someone who is callous, lacks a sense of personal responsibility and enjoys causing others harm.

The significance of psychopathy in the results also indicates trolls have an empathy deficit, particularly when it comes to their ability to experience and internalize other people's emotions.

On top of this, the interaction between high sadism and high self-esteem suggests trolls are not trolling because they have low self-worth. In fact, this is quite the opposite. The more someone enjoys hurting others and the better they feel about themselves, the more likely they are to troll.

So, how can we use this information?

Unfortunately, the psychological profile of an internet troll means you will not get far appealing to their sense of humanity. And don't just brush off the troll as someone who has low self-worth. Their character is

far more complex, which makes managing the behavior all the more challenging.

[Previous research has found](#) showing the troll they have upset you may only reinforce their behavior.

It appears the popular refrain is correct: don't feed the trolls and give them the hurt or angry response they are looking for.

This does not mean we should just ignore this behavior. People who commit this type of cyber abuse should still be held accountable for their actions.

I propose we change the narrative. Trolls are not to be feared—their power lies in the reactions they cause.

One way we can start is to become [active bystanders](#). Bystanders are those who witness the trolling. Active bystanders intervene and say "this is not okay."

Don't fight fire with fire. Respond with outward indifference and strict no tolerance. Let's work together to dismantle the power of the troll and take back the internet from their influence.

It is not only up to the person experiencing the [trolling](#) to respond and manage the behavior. We all need to take responsibility for our online environment.

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