

Research Paper

The Role of Trolling in Mental Health and Creativity of Online Content Creators

Tanisha Das¹, Ms. Megha D. Prasad^{2*}, Mr. Vignanth Babu K.G³

ABSTRACT

Trolling, defined as repeated and intentional online harassment, has become a significant issue for online content creators, affecting their mental health and creativity. This study aims to explore the role of trolling on psychological well-being and creative processes of content creators, addressing the gap in existing literature. Utilizing a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with online content creators aged 18-45 who have experienced trolling. Participants were recruited through social media platforms using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to coping strategies, emotional impact, influence on content, long-term effects, and the role of platform support. The findings revealed that trolling contributes to heightened anxiety, self-censorship, and decreased motivation to produce creative content. Creators also reported dissatisfaction with the current support systems on social media platforms, highlighting a need for better moderation policies. This research underscores the importance of developing more effective support systems and mental health resources for content creators, along with stronger platform policies to combat trolling. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dual impact of trolling on mental health and creativity, paving the way for further research on supportive interventions in digital spaces.

Keywords: *Trolling, Mental Health, Online Content Creators, Creativity, Social Media, Cyberbullying*

Trolling refers to repeated, willful harassment on the internet. With the ease of anonymity provided by digital platforms, particularly social media, content creators—from influencers to vloggers—have become highly susceptible to cyberbullying. The adverse consequences of trolling are not limited to pure irritation and have a wide range of serious risks to the user's mental well-being and creativity. Although trolling has been described in the extant literature as having psychological effects and cyberbullying, little research looks at the bi-fold effect of trolling for the mental health and the creative production of online content creators. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the personal experiences of content creators with trolling and analyzing how it has taken a toll on both their mental health and creativity.

¹Student, Department of Psychology Kristu Jayanti College Bangalore

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology Kristu Jayanti College Bangalore

³Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology Kristu Jayanti College Bangalore

*Corresponding Author

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With the advent or proliferation of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, content creation has been disintermediate—a way for people to go public on a global scale and make content creation a viable career (Kemp, 2020). However, this digital empowerment also brings challenges. Trolling—the intentional creation of inflammatory, provocative and false comments in cyberspace—has emerged as a problem that concerns a great extent of people, who especially are visible and having influence in this medium. Although the psychological consequences of trolling are highly reported, callously less focus has been placed on how trolling impacts the creative work flows of its content creators (Cheng, 2017; Gashroo, 2024). Research demonstrates that trolling is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress (Turk, 2022).

Creativity, as the capacity to produce new and practical ideas, is highly desirable for content designers. In addition to being central to their professional advancement, they also play a major role in their self-presentation. It is important to determine the effects of trolling on both mental health and creativity so the right type of support can be offered to content creators who are subject to these issues (Amabile 1996). Creativity is impaired when personal experience includes psychological distress, thus the question of how trolling affects content creator's creative output deserves examination.

Theoretical Framework

This paper builds upon several theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the intricate association among trolling, psychopathology, and creativity.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, created by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), helps us understand how people handle stress, such as when they deal with online trolling. According to this model, people usually cope in two ways: by trying to fix the problem directly (problem- focused coping) or by managing their feelings about the problem (emotion- focused coping).

For content creators facing trolling, this can mean either addressing the trolls directly or taking a step back to manage the emotional toll. How they cope with these challenges can really affect their mental health and their ability to keep making content (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). This understanding can help us support creators better in dealing with online harassment. According to this theory, people get some of their sense of self from the groups he/she belongs to, and even from the user information related to his/her online persona. To content creators, their personal/professional life can be seen in their online identity. Trolling attacks are therefore particularly hurtful as they attack these very important components of an individual's self- concept. The psychological impacts of such trolling can have damaging emotional effects, eroding creators' view of themselves and their capacity to participate in creative processes (Postmes, Haslam, Swaab, 2005).

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory (1990): According to the theory people occupy a state of —flow when they are totally absorbed in it, for example, working on a creative task. Flow enables performance of peak efficiency, because the person is immersed and selective in the process.

Nevertheless, trolling can interrupt this flow state, since the creators can be absorbed with that emotional and psychic burden of online mob. This breakdown can have a considerable depressing effect on their creativity and professional achievement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

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Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): This theory emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation for creativity. It proposes that creativity in people is maximized when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. Defying these needs through trolling can result in a decreased sense of intrinsic motivation, which is then a challenge for creators of content to keep producing original content. The apprehension for adverse feedback can also reduce the feeling of competence which can then further affect the creative process (Ryan Deci, 2000).

These theoretical approaches provide a holistic model to explain the relation between trolling, mental health, and creative production in content creators. Through the integration of these theories, the purpose of this study is to examine the intricate, multidimensional interactive process between psychological distress and creativity, specifically focusing on online harassment.

Statement of the Problem

While there is a growing body of literature on cyberbullying and trolling, surprisingly, there is still an important gap in the literature with respect to the impact of these mechanisms on mental health and creativity for those developing content online. This study tries to address how trolling affects the work of people whose livelihoods and identities are tied very closely to their online presence, both in terms of their psychological well-being and their creative production.

Understanding this double impact is thus the social intervention improvement and support mechanisms for content creators.

Study Objectives

The study aims to understand the role of trolling on content creators, in terms of mental health and creative productivity.

Objectives

- To explore personal experiences of online content creators with regard to trolling.
- To understand the role of trolling on content creators' mental health.
- To understand the role of trolling on content creators' creativity.

Research Question

- How would online content creators describe their experience with trolling?
- How do online content creators perceive the role of trolling on their mental health?
- How do online content creators perceive the role of trolling on their creative output?

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the research is crucial for deepening the understanding of how online harassment—and, most importantly, trolling—affects the mental health and creative capabilities of content creators. By its focus on the dual impact, this research covers some important lacuna in the literature so far and brings a more holistic perspective into the array of challenges that different creators confront.

In this regard, such findings could help inform interventions and support systems destined for content creators and the effects of trolling, such as the availability of psychological support, creative resilience training, and policy recommendations for social media platforms in reducing the prevalence of trolling. This also points to a need for more nurturing online

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environments, which enhance creativity and well-being by indicating the impact of trolling on creativity.

Theoretical and Operational Definition

- **Trolling:** The publishing of online messages or comments that are deliberately provocative or inflammatory in nature for purposes of eliciting strong emotional responses, disrupting a process, or simply causing emotional pain. This includes harassment, purposeful dissemination of false information, and thereby making offensive remarks (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2014; Sest, March, & Buchanan, 2020).
- **Mental Health:** mental health in this context is the state of the mind, or emotional condition, regarding perception and response, of the online content creators (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; World Health Organization, 2018).
- **Creativity:** The production of novel and valuable ideas or content. In the current study, for instance, subjective views related to the opinion about one's creative product were considered subjective measures, while creativity was quantitatively measured by the audience engagement in and feedback related to the creative product (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).
- **Digital content creators:** persons whose main motivation, influence, and intention is to create online contents in the forms of videos, blog posts, and social network updates that will reach and engage an audience. Here fall the influencers, vloggers, bloggers, and all those who make content to publish it on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms (Kaufman, 2015; O'Neil, 2018).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature on the state of the current psychological effects of trolling and cyberbullying on online content creators. Much research has been done regarding the overall impacts of online bullying; however, there is a critical lack of insight into how trolling affects the mental health and creative processes of these creators. This review will outline the present findings, identify key gaps in the research, and set the stage for the proposed qualitative study.

Gashroo (2024) studied the rise of trolling and its negative effects on mental health by analyzing social media interactions over time. The study revealed a significant increase in trolling behavior and its harmful consequences on individuals' well-being. However, while it sheds light on how trolling affects mental health, it doesn't dive into how these interactions impact the creativity of content creators. This is a crucial gap, as the mental health consequences are well-documented, but how they affect creators' ability to produce content is still unclear. Cheng (2017) focused on the mental health effects of cyberbullying, specifically anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. While Cheng's work gives us a thorough understanding of how cyberbullying impacts its victims, it doesn't address the challenges faced by content creators. The study doesn't discuss how being bullied or trolled might disrupt their creative work, which is a significant oversight considering the pressures content creators face. It's clear that cyberbullying harms mental health, but there's little attention to how it impacts the creative process. Herring (2018) examined the socio-emotional effects of cyberbullying, emphasizing how it damages social interactions and causes emotional harm. This research is valuable for understanding the emotional consequences of online harassment, but it misses an important angle—how such emotional distress might affect the work of content creators. Herring's work focuses on the emotional

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toll of cyberbullying but doesn't explore its effect on creativity and content production. Cruz (2017) looked at how cyberbullying influences psychological well-being, specifically pointing to decreased self-esteem and heightened distress. Cruz's research offers useful insights into the mental health impacts of online harassment but falls short of addressing how these issues may disrupt the creative work of content creators. There's little focus on how these emotional struggles hinder the ability to create content or innovate in the face of online harassment. Turk (2022) explored the negative impacts of trolling on mental health, identifying issues like emotional distress and withdrawal from social life. While the study provides strong evidence of the mental health toll of trolling, it doesn't go further to explore how such stress and emotional challenges might impact a creator's ability to engage with their audience or produce creative work. The study is clear on the psychological harm, but it misses how this damage might affect the creative process of online content creators.

Research Gap: While existing studies (Cheng, 2017; Cruz, 2017; Herring, 2018; Turk, 2022) provide valuable insights into how trolling and cyberbullying affect mental health, there's a lack of research on how these emotional impacts disrupt the creativity of content creators. Most studies focus on the mental health outcomes—like increased anxiety, depression, and emotional distress—but few explore how these emotions directly affect creators' ability to produce content. This is a significant gap that calls for further qualitative research to understand both the emotional and creative toll that trolling has on content creators.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter covers the design of the research, selection of participants, methods of data collection, and techniques applied for analysis to ensure comprehensive understanding during the design and conduct of the study. In addition, this chapter provides ethical considerations respected before, during, and after the research processes.

Research Design

This qualitative exploratory design is appropriate to understand the depth and complexity involved in personal trolling experiences among online content creators. The qualitative approach entails the collection of rich and detailed data through semi-structured interviews, which provide an insight into the subjective experience of the participants.

This design is particularly fitting because the investigation has to delve into the subtlety of the effects that trolling will have on mental health and creativity, and those features are best captured by the participants' narratives and personal reflections.

The data were collected from 12 participants who are online content creators, active or aspiring, aged between 18 and 45 years, who have been victims of trolling. The age bracket captures the essence of a variety of different experiences at different stages of both the content creation career and life. Participants for the study come from various online content creation platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and personal blogs, hence giving a wide perspective on how trolling affects different types of digital media.

Sampling Technique

The study has used purposive and snowballing techniques of sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the sampling of participants with specified criteria to suit the research questions on the experience because of trolling and active engagement in content creation. Snowball,

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with the referring of other potential participants by current participants, reaches out to wider networks of creators that are hard to reach directly.

Inclusion Criteria

- Active online content creators or aspiring creators.
- Age from 18 to 45 years.
- Participants should have experienced trolling.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with no trolling experience.
- Creators who are inactive.
- Individuals on social media without the intention of creating content for an audience.

Measurements and Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview guide:

It follows a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool. This guarantees that identical interviews are replicated to provide participants with an opportunity to explain personal experiences in their own words. These interview questions were used to enquire about the participants' personal experiences of trolling, including those that had an effect on their mental health and how this impacted creative output. The guide was developed from the research objectives and was refined through a pilot study.

Procedure

Data Collection Process

Recruitment: Participants will be recruited from social networking sites, communities of content creators, and snowball samples. Initial contact will be made by email or direct message, where the study will be introduced, and they will be invited to participate in it.

Consent: Detailed information is first given to all participants with regard to the purpose of the study and the procedures and their rights as participants. Informed consent is obtained using electronic or written means.

Semi-structured interviews will take place via video conferencing platforms or in person; interviews will be recorded when consent has been provided by participants. Each interview will last 45 minutes to an hour based on the depth of the conversation.

Data Analysis: Transcription is done verbatim as interviews occur. Thematic analysis involves identifying key themes and trends in the data. NVivo software will be used to analyse data, as it is a program that assists with coding and organising themes.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality: Data from participants is well secured, interview recordings and transcripts are anonymised by removing identifiable information, and reports published are no exception.

Voluntary response: Participation is completely voluntary, and the respondents must be aware that they can leave the study anytime without any repercussions whatsoever.

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Debriefing: Participants are briefly debriefed after the interview to report how their information will be used and referral resources that have come up as part of the discussion. Data analysis Thematic analysis Thematic analysis is conducted on the qualitative data collected from semi structured interviews. In this method, data is first coded, and the themes are identified that are recurring in reflecting the experiences of trolling by participants. Thematic analysis becomes particularly useful in qualitative research during analysis if one aims to identify meanings and concealed patterns within the datasets.

Research Ethics

The research is in line with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association, whose activities on data collection must not violate any rights of the participants.

Informed Consent: The participants have been fully informed about the purpose of this study, the procedures involved, and their rights, including their right to withdraw at any time.

Privacy: Participant data privacy is a top priority, with all identifying information anonymised in reports and data stored securely.

Voluntary Participation: The participation is absolutely voluntary, and the participant can withdraw at any time without any ramifications.

Debriefing: After the interview, participants are given an opportunity to undergo a debriefing session whereby the purpose of the research is reiterated and support resources are made available in case of need.

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Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant Quotes	
Coping with Trolling	Ignoring Trolls	—I just ignore them. I don't engage with trolls at all.	
		—I block and report trolls immediately. I don't let them affect me.	
		—I focus on the positive and brush off the negativity.	
		—I ignore trolls and move on.	
		—I don't think about it for more than a few seconds.	
	Seeking Support	—I talk to close friends when trolling gets too overwhelming.	
		—Having support from friends and family helps me cope.	
		—I turn to fellow creators for advice when I'm feeling down.	
		—I talk to my friends about it and laugh it off.	
Emotional Impact	Initial Hurt	—At first, I felt hurt, but I quickly learned to brush it off.	
		—It made me feel bad at first, but I know it's not important.	
		—It can be frustrating, but I've built resilience over time.	
		—Sometimes it stings, but I remind myself that trolls just want attention.	
		—Trolling has made me more resilient. I don't let it affect my confidence anymore.	
		—I've become more confident in handling negative comments.	
	No Effect on Content	— Trolling hasn't changed my content. I continue creating what I love.	
		—Trolling hasn't affected my content at all.	
		—I post what I want, regardless of trolls.	
	Staying Authentic	—I don't let trolling affect my content decisions. I stick to my style.	
		—I continue with the topics I want to cover.	
		—I stick to my own voice and won't change that.	
	Platform Support	Faster Response a and Resolution	—Platforms should provide better tools to report and remove trolls faster.
		Need for better Moderation	—Platforms need better moderation systems to handle trolling effectively.
			—They should improve comment moderation and filtering options for creators.
—I think platforms are doing well, but they can do more.			

DATA ANALYSIS

Here, the themes, subthemes, and accompanying quotations offer insights into how creators process and respond to trolling, the support they find helpful, and the resilience they've built over time. These experiences highlight not only individual strategies but also the larger need for improved platform support in mitigating trolling.

Theme 1: Coping with Trolling

This theme encompasses the various ways in which creators manage or deflect negative comments and trolling. It includes the sub themes of "Ignoring Trolls" and "Seeking Support."

Ignoring Trolls: Many creators prefer not to engage with trolls, adopting a proactive stance of blocking, reporting, or simply ignoring them to minimize emotional harm. For example, one creator notes, "I just ignore them. (p 1) I don't engage with trolls at all," while another shares, (p5) "I block and report trolls immediately. (p7) I don't let them affect me." (p10) Ignoring trolls allows creators to maintain their focus on positive engagement and brush off negativity, as evidenced by quotes like, "I focus on the positive and brush off the negativity" (p8) and "I don't think about it for more than a few seconds."(p2)

Seeking Support: When trolling becomes overwhelming, creators often seek support from friends, family, or fellow creators. This support network helps them cope emotionally, process the trolling experience, and sometimes find humor in it. Statements such as "I talk to close friends when trolling gets too overwhelming"(p3) and "Having support from friends and family helps me cope"(p5) highlight the value of a trusted support system. Additionally, connecting with fellow creators can provide valuable advice and solidarity, as in, "I turn to fellow creators for advice when I'm feeling down."(p9)

In the course of this research, participants highlighted various ways they had coped with the behaviour of trolling over the Internet. Some learned to be resilient with time and not to get involved with trolls, while others took specific actions like blocking or reporting or avoiding other forms of abuse in comments. Some participants reported using humor as a coping mechanism to alleviate tension and to gain emotional protection against the negative influence of trolling. However, most participants looked for support systems-from friends and family members to online communities-in order to express their experiences and comfort themselves; thus, it relieved it of its burden and emotional impact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The themes that arise from the topic of the effects of trolling in mental health of online content creators is that the creators' experiences vary ranging from practical coping mechanisms to the emotional impact of negative online interactions.

In this research, Coping with Trolling emerged as the most prominent theme, highlighting how participants dealt with the negative behavior of trolling. Subthemes in this theme included various coping strategies that participants used to cope with the emotional impact of trolling. A subtheme was resilience through time, i.e., how participants recounted, developing, their ability to become more emotionally resilient facing trolls repeatedly. With time they also made it easier to dismiss the nasty remarks and not respond to the trolls. Another subtopic was active defence mechanisms, in which participants employed tactics such as filtering or reporting the behaviour of those spamming them. Certain participants

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made extra efforts, for instance, deleting or not posting negative content and limiting online communication in order to avoid being targeted.

Humor emerged as a notable subtheme, with participants reporting that they often used humor to deflect the emotional impact of trolling. For some, responding with humor or finding ways to laugh at the trolling comments served as a form of emotional protection and helped them to feel more in control of the situation. The largest subtheme though was looking for assistance, in which the participants relied on contacts (i.e., friends, family) and/or on the online environment in order to be emotionally supported. They disclosed their stories to trusted persons or sought comfort in virtual communities where they could identify with others who had similar stories. This was an important component for participants, in enabling them to handle the emotional toll of trolling and provided some solace and affirmation. Via these different means of regulation, participants were able to reduce the negative emotional weight of trolling and protect their mental health while still engaging in online spaces.

Theme 2: Emotional Impact

The emotional impact of trolling spans initial feelings of hurt to a gradual buildup of resilience. This theme includes the subthemes of "Initial Hurt" and "Building Resilience."

Initial Hurt: Creators often experience an immediate emotional reaction when they encounter trolling. Initially, it may cause hurt or discomfort, but many learn over time to let it go. For instance, one creator reflects, "At first, I felt hurt, but I quickly learned to brush it off," (p5) while another adds, "It made me feel bad at first, but I know it's not important." (p7) This initial hurt is a common experience that many creators work through as they continue engaging with their audience.

Building Resilience: Over time, many creators report developing resilience, seeing trolling as a minor annoyance rather than a significant obstacle. By reframing the behavior of trolls as a bid for attention, creators strengthen their confidence and self-assurance. For example, one states, "Sometimes it stings, but I remind myself that trolls just want attention," (p6) while another notes, "Trolling has made me more resilient. I don't let it affect my confidence anymore."(p4)

These experiences underscore how creators adapt to trolling by cultivating a more robust sense of self.

Most of the participants had thought that sometimes the blow was too much after multiplicity harassments of feeling lonely as they could not fathom the kinds of personal attacks. Even emotional draining was identified when some participants underwent the worst encounters with trolling. Such intense forms of trolling make people frustrated and stressed while having low self-esteem.

This emotional draining often made the person question their worth or the relevance of whatever they were posting online. The Emotional Impact theme encompasses the deep psychological effects that participants reported as a result of trolling. Participants talked about strong feelings of anxiety, anger, and frustration that arose from the trolling. One of the most prominent subthemes was emotional distress in which most participants talked emotionally exhausted following persistent harassment. Some of the participants reported that they experienced great anxiety from the relentless stream of personal assaults, many directed at their own appearance, beliefs, or character. As a result, the emotional burden of

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trolling caused some to feel severely isolated, to doubt self-importance and to question the meaningfulness of the content itself. One participant expressed that after multiple negative comments, they could no longer differentiate between constructive criticism and harmful trolling, which fuelled their feelings of inadequacy. This emotional depletion led to low self-evaluation amongst participants, reducing their willingness to continue participating in online communities. Scores of participants showed it was a multiple-round problem because trolling caused them to doubt the meaning of their contribution. Overall, the emotional consequences of trolling were profound, leading to a significant psychological burden for the participants.

Theme 3: Influence on Content and Creativity

This theme explores how trolling may or may not affect creators' content, with subthemes including "No Effect on Content" and "Staying Authentic."

No Effect on Content: Many creators assert that trolling does not influence the nature or quality of their content. They remain committed to producing what they love, regardless of any negative feedback. Statements like "Trolling hasn't changed my content. I continue creating what I love"(p2) and "It hasn't influenced the quality of my content. I stay consistent" (p7) illustrate this commitment. Creators often view trolling as noise rather than a factor that would alter their creative output.

Staying Authentic: Another facet of this theme is creators' commitment to authenticity. They avoid altering their style, voice, or topics in response to trolling, thereby staying true to their identity and vision. For instance, one creator states, "I don't let trolling affect my content decisions. I stick to my style," (p3) while another adds, "I stick to my own voice and won't change that." (p8) This steadfast adherence to authenticity demonstrates the importance of personal expression in a creator's work.

Trolling had an immediate impact on content and creativity. People often self-edited or altered content based on the fear of such trolling. They mention that they were afraid of retaliation from those who would have criticized them for posting certain opinions or artworks. Respondents said that gradually their desire to be creative in joining online spaces decreased due to constant trolling. They could not make sufficient enthusiasm and motivation to produce content since the trolls hated them in a constant manner, then making them wonder what value their ideas meant to people.

The Influence on Content and Creativity theme explores how trolling directly affected participants' ability and willingness to create and share content. A significant subtopic was self-censorship, in which subjects self-reported in editing/modifying content in order to prevent trolling. Fear of being criticised or retaliate among participants often made them doubt the creative decisions. One participant explained that they had started to filter their posts more cautiously, unsure if their audience would accept their true opinions or ideas. The reduction of creativity motivation became a subtheme, in which respondents voiced a reduction in the desire to create fresh content. With time, the relentless negativity of trolls chipped away at their motivation to create. Loss of confidence was another subtheme in which participants described the way in which relentless trolling led them to doubt the usefulness of their work. Their creative impetus declined and some participants reported that they began to wonder why they should continue to post online in the first place. The underlying fear of being attacked online overshadowed their desire to share their thoughts and creativity, significantly diminishing their engagement with their audiences.

Theme 4: Platform Support

The final theme that emerges here is related to the support mechanism of the platform, which fails to deliver an effective response to the situation of trolling that was posed to it.

The theme of platform support captures creators' perspectives on how social media platforms could better address trolling, including the subthemes "Faster Response and Resolution" and "Need for Better Moderation."

Faster Response and Resolution: Many creators feel that social media platforms should have quicker and more effective mechanisms for reporting and handling trolling. This would enable a faster resolution, allowing creators to focus on their content without lingering negativity. As one creator notes, "Platforms should provide better tools to report and remove trolls faster." (p12)

Need for Better Moderation: Improved moderation features, including comment filtering and more robust tools, are also seen as necessary steps for platforms to help creators manage trolling effectively. One creator suggests, "They should improve comment moderation and filtering options for creators," (p8) while another adds, "I think platforms are doing well, but they can do more." (p5) These requests underline the need for supportive digital environments where creators can focus on their work without harassment. Evidently, a usual observation was that social media portals are not geared well enough to have mechanisms to protect users from harassment. Though these blocking and reporting mechanisms did exist, users complained of how such arrangements did little in curbing obsessive trolls.

Most complained that they had to report offending users to the moderation teams of social media portals, arguing that it hardly ever led to any follow-up action on those complaints. Some even demanded tougher platform policies and more active measures at the social media venues against trolling, thereby making the online space safer and much more inclusive.

The Platform Support theme concerns the ways social media platforms can help in the moderation of online trolling and safeguarding of users. The subtheme, weak protection mechanisms, emerged, with participants stressing and being frustrated about the lack of protection against the reporting and ad blocking of features. A number of participants reported that these technologies were ineffective in the intervention against serial trolling and/or they frequently sensed that their complaints were not considered or acted upon. One participant described how they repeatedly reported abusive comments, only for the situation to persist without any tangible follow-up from the platform. The lack of effective policy enforcement was a subtheme, as users called for more stringent measures by social media companies to stop trolling. A few participants called for better, more stringent policies on harassment, because they thought the current regulations were not sufficient to guarantee their safety. This theme drew attention to a key need for platforms to become more active and more effective at fighting troll thus making online environments safer for users. Participants believed that without further improved support from the platforms, the damage caused by trolling would persist among the creators on the internet and the online populations themselves.

In conclusion, creators face complex emotional and practical challenges due to trolling, yet many find effective ways to cope and remain resilient. They value support from their personal networks and emphasize the importance of staying true to their content and goals. The shared experiences around platform support further underscore a collective call for

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improvements in moderation tools and faster responses, which would create a safer, more productive space for creators online.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed how creators deal with trolls in their own unique ways. Many put on a brave face and develop thick skin, but coping strategies are really diverse. Some people just tune them out, and others have very small circles of friends and other content creators that they rely on.

According to Gashroo's research in 2024, a strong support system is key when dealing with online harassment. Interestingly, most comedy creators turned to their art as a form of defense.

All of which notwithstanding, what really needs to be discussed is the emotional cost of creation. Waves of anxiety, burning anger, and deep frustration described by game developers. In Cheng's 2017 research wherein she said cyberbullying relates with mental health problems such as depression and low self-esteem. As some of the creators told us, it even reached a point at which one felt totally drained and worthless at times. It signified that—trolling goes beyond just giving someone a momentary pain but has some deep scars on the emotions.

The effect trolling can have on creativity might be the most revealing impact. There were many admissions to self-censorship, alongside a fear of what trolls and what they would say: quite worrying as Cruz observed in 2017. Such a backlash can really strangle real expression, so online there is a greater homogeneity of voices and an abhorrence to standing out.

The long-term effects are fascinating, though a little disturbing. The number of creators who dramatically changed the way they view social media was impressive enough, with many deciding mental health had to come first before online visibility. As Herring reflected in 2018, such a shift reflects a change even deeper than the surface.

Feedback on platform support was discouraging. Creators showed real frustration about how social media platforms handle harassment reports – apparently, this is a systemic problem that requires urgent attention. Turk 2022 echoes the same issue, with a prime need for the urgent development of better controls over online governance and protective measures.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Our findings really shed light on what content creators undergo when dealing with trolls, and honestly, it's pretty intense. We got to see firsthand how harassment affects them emotionally and psychologically. The interesting point is that the scales of coping strategies by creators vary- from some coming out with very creative strategies about dealing with trolls to others who have a very hard time with the emotional load. We saw how trolling dumbed-down the creativity process by holding the artists back to not be able to publish real content. But at the end the learning has been such: social media has a long way to go to protect users from harassment more effectively.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data provided a number of key themes concerning the effect of trolling on content creators. One key theme is the emotional and psychological effects of trolling;

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hence, subthemes will include anxiety and depression. Many creators reported back on heightened levels of anxiety and depression being a direct consequence of the online harassment, although other cases suffered from low self-esteem problems due to the negative comments they were subjected to. The second theme is coping mechanisms, which relates to the ways in which creators deal with the emotional cost of trolling. A related subtheme is that of social support, and indeed, many participants stressed the value of supportive networks in learning to cope with the emotional stress caused by trolling. Some creators even used self-censorship—changing what they post or holding back from posting—to avoid further attacks. Another theme that emerged was the impact on creativity and content creation. Trolling had been conducive to creative block in that creators found themselves not able to create more content due to emotional disturbances.

Secondly, many creators changed focus, shifting from content creation to managing their mental health. Finally, there was a theme of frustration regarding support from the platforms; participants felt aggrieved by the mechanisms that social media platforms apply with regard to online moderation. Most respondents also felt that that kind of response from the platforms to trolling was very weak and left them exposed to more harassment. The frustration underlined the big hole in online governance and how creators needed protection.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the profound impact trolling has on content creators, affecting their emotional well-being, creativity, and overall online experience. The array of coping mechanisms that creators use to highlight their flexibility, but it is far from trivial to ignore the emotional burden that comes with coping with online trolling. As also shown by Gashroo (2024) research, an adequate support network is essential, although many creators still suffer from considerable psychological burdens (e.g., anxiety, anger, frustration), which correspond to related findings where a cyberbullying relationship correlates with mental health issues (e.g., depression, low self-esteem) similar to that of Cheng (2017). In addition, trolling's contribution to the creative field is important because a great number of creators self-censor through fear of reprisal and a silencing of voices online. The long-term implications are worrying, as many of the creators modify their focus to mental health rather than online presence, which is illustrated by Herring (2018). Also, the exasperation with platform support mechanisms highlights an important gap in the nature of effective online governance and protection from harassment (as Turk, 2022, has also written). At last, the results demonstrate that although coping styles are different, trolling is a real emotional and creative burden for victims, and online social platforms have to take other steps to protect their users at the cyber community from trolling to create a healthier, more inclusive cyber space.

Limitations of the Study

The participants were mostly obtained from conventional platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Accordingly, the results from this research cannot be generalized to content creators' experiences in general across other media platforms such as TikTok, LinkedIn, or even niche forums because the dynamics of the phenomenon of trolling under study could be different for the specific resource.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, it would be valuable to look at a broader and more diverse group of content creators, ideally from different industries, to see if the findings hold true across different backgrounds. By studying a larger, more varied sample, researchers could help make the insights more relevant and useful for a wider audience. Adding quantitative

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methods—like tracking how often trolling happens and how it links to mental health factors such as anxiety, depression, and creativity—could offer a richer, fuller picture of its impact. It might also be enlightening to explore how creators from different cultures handle trolling, revealing unique coping strategies and resilience patterns that could guide more tailored support. Lastly, it would be helpful to examine if certain types of content, like art, political commentary, or educational videos, attract more trolling, so creators in these spaces can develop targeted approaches to protect themselves and continue their work with confidence.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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