"I'm in the center of a vortex": Mapping the affective experiences of trolling victims
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Abstract

This study investigates how the landscape of affect in trolling is constituted from the perspective of victims. It is based on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with people who had experienced trolling on Chinese social media and were willing to talk about it. All participants described trolling incidents as beginning from something seemingly inconsequential. By the end of their descriptions, however, a messy, uncontrolled situation emerged that became the source of stress, frustration, and anxiety. Victims worked, sometimes unsuccessfully, to escape from trolling and regain control, not just of their social media communications but also of their identities. Their posts and, inevitably, themselves became the central point of attraction for content to stick to. Screenshots played a particular role in creating this stickiness. Even though some factors were considered a normal but unfortunate part of using social media, crossing the line into private spaces was considered unacceptable. A mapping of the landscape of affect showed that the emotions expressed have a clear starting point in surprise and a fairly clear sequence, with timing, including rapid escalation and drawn-out continuation of the experience, alongside a lack of logical explanations and reactions, leading to a sense of powerlessness. The potential for damage to a victim's everyday life and for harm to their sense of self, along with the difficulties in reclaiming an identity over which they have control, indicates that a focus on the victims of trolling is a topic worthy of further research.

Contents

Introduction

The voices of victims of trolling have been used to create indicators of the occurrence of trolling and formulate conceptual frameworks. Recently there has been an increasing number of personal accounts of being trolled in the media. Systematic investigations of how trolling has been experienced and perceived by victims are largely absent, limiting the dimensions of how trolling can be understood beyond a pragmatic or procedural dimension. In this study, trolling is not concerned with attempts to manipulate public opinion, for example, through state-sponsored operations intended to influence, nor through campaigns of mis- and dis-information intended to discredit experts as in anti-vaccination debates. Rather, trolling refers to acts of harassment, usually prolonged, carried out online on social media platforms by anonymous individuals; trolling that frequently happens in gaming is excluded from this study.

This study seeks to set out the experiences of victims of trolling, how they talked about what they did and how they felt, in their own terms. Through a focus on the victims of trolling, this study fills a gap in the literature. However, the intention is not to describe the attitudes and actions of individuals but, working from a practice-based theoretical perspective (Cruz, *et al.*, 2018), to focus on the "routinized ways ... in which the world is understood" [1] by victims of trolling. The practice-based approach underpinning this study supports expressions of affect as a practice (Leith, 2019) and builds on individual experiences to create a collective understanding (Schatzki, 1996) of what people do, including how they feel. Using the data gathered, the ways affect is expressed is routinized to present a schema that can be considered a map of the landscape of affect that is part of the experiences of victims of trolling.

Review of related literature

There is extensive literature concerned with defining trolling and identifying its key characteristics (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). It is a complex activity (Sanfilippo, *et al.*, 2018) that can take place in a number of online activities and platforms, with the perception of trolling behaviors varying, depending on the context (Sanfilippo, *et al.*, 2017a). The approach adopted in this study is based on the definition used by Sanfilippo, *et al.* (2017b) taken from the *Urban Dictionary* entry, which defines trolling as "deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off." [2] However, from the perspective of many victims of trolling, the impact goes well beyond being "pissed off." The purpose of this study is to document and map the way that victims of trolling talk about their experiences of trolling as they confront the attention that trolling brings to their online posts and to them as individuals.

Relatively little consideration has been given to how trolling is experienced by its victims and how these experiences can be conceptualized and understood. Targets of trolling frequently include sportsmen and women, politicians, journalists, and participants in reality TV shows; race and disability are often the focus of an attack by trolls. The profiles of victims indicate that they are more likely to be women (Peterson and Densely, 2017; Mantilla, 2013; Braithwaite, 2016, in Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, 2019). However, Kilvington and Price (2017, in Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, 2019) showed that men could be a focus of racial trolling on social media associated with football clubs.

Accounts from victims do exist, but the majority of the literature presents case studies, anecdotal evidence, and self-reporting by victims of how they perceive trolling to have affected them. These accounts indicate a range of negative outcomes can be suffered by victims, including humiliation, low self-esteem, shame, damage to reputation, and withdrawal from social life, as well as impacts on mental health such as paranoia, self-harm, substance abuse, and even suicide, with the outcomes possibly being more severe when threats made the online move into life off-line (Maltby, *et al.*, 2016). Elaine Campbell (2017), who documented her own experience of being trolled while writing autoethnography on Twitter, noted "the toxic nature of the intimidating tweets. The sarcasm, the sneering, the mockery. The public shaming". Some studies (*e.g.*, Herring, *et al.*, 2002; Mantilla, 2013) assessed the damages of trolling to vulnerable online groups; few emphasized how trolling affects people at the individual level and how people identify with their experience of being trolled.

The majority of studies reported in English focus on Western examples of trolling and its victims. An exception is Cook, *et al.'s* (2021) cross-cultural examination of the reactions of victims of trolling in gaming. In the gaming community, as Gray (2012) noted, trolling may be considered normative and take a number of forms, including "trash talking" (Cook, *et al.*, 2021), or exhibiting "bad manners" through ignoring a team mate or refusing to take their turn (Arjoranta and Siitonen, 2018). Cook, *et al.* (2021), in their study of men and women from three distinct cultures (Taiwan — face-saving; Pakistan — honor-valuing; and Netherlands — dignity-valuing) playing Cyberball, found that emotional responses to flaming and ostracism differed depending on value orientation. In their review of studies of cyber-stalking, Kaur, *et al.* [3] identify the need to broaden the national and cultural backgrounds of participants.

To begin to understand the experiences and practices of the victims of trolling, it is necessary to draw out key points from the extensive literature on trolling, reflecting what is known about trolls and trolling behaviors as well as about the roles that technologies can play in supporting these behaviors. Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) identified three major dimensions of trolling: behavioral characteristics, intentionality, and location, and the attention on the behavioral nature and intentionality of trolling has directed a focus onto trolls. Some studies consider trolling, with online activities that deviate from the norm, a part of human behavior (Suler, 2004; Blommaert, 2017) and an extension of impoliteness in face-to-face context (Hardaker, 2010). Others consider trolls violators of explicit or implicit rules of online communication, and some go so far as to link these deviant online behaviors to abnormal mental states (Coles and West, 2016). Trolling can be linked to abuse and cyber-bullying (Kavanagh, *et al.*, 2020). While aggression and impoliteness have been considered the major indicators of trolling and an intention to create violation, disruption, and provocation, trolling can also be done using humor or amusement associated with "LOL" (Bishop, 2014) and is not necessarily serious in its intent (Sanfilippo, *et al.*, 2017a).

Trolling is facilitated by several technological affordances and communicational patterns on platforms, including discussion forums, blogs, and other forms of social media. These include anonymity, invisibility, a sense of being removed from everyday reality, and a rapid response time (Kilvington, 2021). A key affordance is anonymity, which allows people to behave in socially unacceptable ways without apparent consequences, as there is minimal authority exercised in many sites (Suler, 2004). Asynchronous communication (Herring, *et al.*, 2002; Maratea and Kavanaugh, 2012; Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016) is significant, rendering the troll invisible (Suler, 2004). The ease of sharing and copying messages and rapid response times lead to endless possibilities for repetition (Shachaf and Hara, 2010). This repetition of

messages and images not only communicates a show of strength against someone or something but can actually enhance the force of the negative content of existing messages.

Several metaphors have been used to express the complexity of this phenomenon, that is, the repetition of messages and the force that can arise from that, the most relevant of which are resonance, reverbing, swarming, and stickiness. Paasonen (2015) uses the term "resonance," which she notes is concerned with connections that generate importance and feeling and which are not necessarily good or pleasurable. Cho (2015) used the term "reverb" to denote the effect of electronically producing an echo, a kind of repetition, in recorded music, to conceptualize the capacity of the circulation of messages to amplify the force of a message through simple copying and pasting (Cho, 2015). Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2000), in their work on military conflict, used *swarming* to refer to a "deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to strike from all directions" [4], but in the analysis of trolling and other forms of online hostility, it is used when many social media accounts come together around a particular post or account (*cf.*, Jakubowicz, *et al.*, 2017). Ahmed's (2004) metaphor of stickiness, like Paasonen's metaphor of resonance, can have both positive and negative outcomes. She linked stickiness with the attention paid to online communication, leading to an increase in the value of a circulating message, a characteristic which is prized in marketing, where people keep returning to the site and to "the product." This attention is at the heart of trolling. Jakubowicz, *et al.* (2017) refer to "sticky spots" as "points of attraction" in the context of hate speech online and, like Ahmed (2004), are concerned with the value that can accrue at these points.

Being the focus of attention is the point at which affect emerges. Paasonen (2015) argued that at the point where individuals recognize that "we are no longer fully in control," affect comes into play and that understanding and conceptualizing affect can offer ways to shed light on the implications of the use of social media in contemporary society. For Gregg and Seigworth (2010), affect is also found in interactions, emerging "out of muddy unmediated relatedness" [5]. These interactions can involve non-humans, and in the resonances or reverbings that occur around those interactions, sometimes sticking not only to the posts but to the embodied person as well (Ahmed, 2004). This study seeks to understand the victim at this point through exploring experiences of attention and the resulting affect. For victims such as Campbell (2017), the attention is unwanted and disruptive, something potentially beyond the individual's control, its effects enhanced by technology. In Cook, *et al.'s* (2021) cross-cultural study in the context of gaming, the Pakistani participants, categorized as being from an honor-valuing culture, experienced anger and embarrassment when they were ostracized, whereas the Taiwanese participants, categorized as holding face-saving values, experienced anger, and embarrassment, as well as humiliation, when they were flamed. Sun and Fichman's (2018) study of a trolling event in China, which investigated roles in the event, content, and trolling tactics, identified participants as members of four distinct stakeholder groups and showed that there was no clear distinction between trolls, victims and bystanders, with participants from all groups acting as trolls, bystanders being identified as coming from two groups, and victims coming from three groups. Noting that research on the negative consequences of trolling "is still scarce" [6], Ginader, *et al.* (2021) aimed to develop a scale to extend understanding of these negative effects. The five-point sub-scale of the emotional experiences of trolled targets ranges from taking the attack to heart and feeling angry or sad to dismissing it or laughing it off. In this instrument, bystanders can report on action on a two-item scale, but there is no such scale for the targets of trolling, and thus, no apparent acknowledgment of their agency.

The online space mediated by computers and the Internet has paved the ideal terrain for affect. Affect in the online space has been considered as the force that enables ever-changing negotiation of boundaries between self and others, the personal and the public (Ferreday, 2009), and the medium through which power relations can be made apparent (Wise, 2003). In this context, agency and control are important factors, providing opportunities for action not usually available in the physical world.

Exploring how people have experienced being trolled creates the possibility of mapping this landscape. Mapping such a landscape draws on analyses of expressions of affect that can show the workings of intersubjective space (Lloyd, 2010; Leith, 2019), that space between self and others, between public and private, between the individual and institutions.

This study seeks to extend the literature by conceptualizing the descriptions of experiences given by Chinese victims of trolling from a practice-based approach. This will reveal the collective practices of the victims, and from the landscape, the intersubjective space, which comprises the people, technologies and their affordances and communication, and the norms of behavior that link them, can be mapped. Adopting expressions of emotion as the lens through which to investigate trolling shifts the focus away from notions of rationality and intention, as Paasonen (2015) suggested, and enables consideration of how the actors — the victim, the trolls, and the non-human technological affordances — constitute the landscape of affect in trolling from the perspective of the victims.

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Method

This study was based on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with people who had experienced trolling on Chinese social media and were willing to discuss it. All communications were in Chinese and were translated. A snowballing technique, starting from personal connections, was used to recruit participants rather than public advertising in an attempt to ease difficulties that some might feel in sharing experiences, especially given the personal and sensitive nature of the data to be collected and that reactions were likely to be emotional. In the initial recruitment messages sent out from that author's personal social media accounts on multiple platforms, it was emphasized that individuals would be encouraged to share their experiences of trolling, including trolling others, being trolled, or other forms of involvement. Initial respondents were acquainted with "trolling," which, like other Internet buzzwords such as "Facebook" and "follow/friend," is used to some extent on the Chinese Internet. They also showed that they were familiar with particular forms of trolling that exist in China, such as the "five cents" (五毛, Wu Mao) army. This refers to people who are paid for Internet postings (the name coming from the amount they are reputed to be paid per post). These "trolls" are not only used in political propaganda, but also in marketing, like writing fake reviews online to help sell more products. Some also used Chinese terms to refer to an incident of cyber-nationalism, the "Diba Expedition to Facebook" (Yang, *et al.*, 2017). The author approached those who responded to recruitment messages and asked them to explain how they identified their experiences as trolling. This approach was preferred instead of screening and selecting interviewees based on criteria of trolling found in the literature. Its purpose was to ensure that participants were able to articulate what they perceived had happened, describe what they

did, and justify their statements. Through this preliminary communication, common ground was established, and 17 respondents were recruited for interviews.

Participants were informed that they would only be identified by a pseudonym in any reports emerging from the study. This was a requirement of the ethics approval granted for this work. Studies of victims of trolling face a number of ethical issues since participants have probably already been traumatized. Thus, it was important that participants did not feel coerced into participation nor into revealing more than they were willing to discuss about their experiences. The names given to participants are fictitious. Victims of trolling are often seen as dehumanized and giving participants in this study pseudonyms instead of referring to them by a code number was a way of ensuring that, in this study, they are seen as individuals.

The interviewer asked each interviewee to choose the medium that they felt comfortable with for data collection, in accordance with the requirements for ethics approval, with three choosing in-person interviews, one a phone interview, and the remaining 13 choosing instant communication tools, both text and voice messaging, but mostly text. This choice of instant communication tools may result from their wish to remain in the relationship of "Internet acquaintance" instead of extending the relationship by involving face-to-face communication or voice-to-voice conversations. The first round of interviews was conducted in 2018. Interviewees were asked to start with their most memorable experiences of trolling (if they experienced multiple ones) and to move from one story to others. During their narratives, the interviewer used prompts from the three groups of questions. The first group of questions inquired about the details of the trolling events experienced. The interviewees were asked to focus on the most impressive events they had experienced, with as much detail as possible, including but not limited to the time and locale (*i.e.*, Web sites or platforms), what triggered the trolling, and how it progressed and ended. Some interviewees were able to provide links to the events or screenshots. The second group of questions focused on the actions of the interviewees, including how they participated in the trolling events and how they were affected and coped with the impacts. The third group of questions, closely associated with the second group, centered on the interviewees' feelings through the entire duration of trolling events. The interviews using instant communication tools were conducted in a narrative-oriented manner, meaning that the interviewer followed up with questions alongside the interviewee's narrative, arranging questions to reflect on storytelling instead of fixing the interview in a prearranged protocol. Some interviewees were contacted for a follow-up because it became apparent that activities were taking place online in which the interviewee was involved willingly or not. Further, a few interviewees reached out to the author after the data collection was finished because they had new experiences or updates and wanted to share them for the study. Most 'interviews' were already in written form. The others were recorded and transcribed and then translated into English. To support interview data, some interviewees also provided links, images, and chatting history to recreate certain scenes. The transcripts and other auxiliary materials were analyzed using open coding (Miles, *et al.*, 2014) rather than an *a priori* coding scheme, thus allowing patterns and conflicts to emerge from the coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Findings and discussion

The landscape of trolling

Among the 17 participants, 14 of the victims emphasized feeling stressed, depressed, unhappy, and even threatened (even if there were no messages incorporating literal threats); the other three explained their fewer negative feelings as resulting from previous experience, including being trolled, trolling others, or just witnessing trolling as a common phenomenon. Seven of the respondents admitted trolling others, but that data is not included here. The sites of trolling ranged from discussion boards (Tianya, a popular Internet forum that provides BBS, blog, microblog, and photo album services, and Baidu Tieba, probably the most popular Internet forum in China at the time of the study, with spaces where people with common interests can socially interact) and blogs to social media sites (Weibo, Renren, and Zhihu). These three sites respectively resemble Twitter, Facebook, and Quora, with only slight variations. For example, Zhihu also provides a function like Twitter for shorter messages and more rapid circulation in addition to the original Q&A platform.

All participants, regardless of whether they were reporting being trolled or trolling others, described trolling incidents as beginning from something seemingly inconsequential. By the end of their descriptions, however, a messy, uncontrolled situation emerged, which became the source of stress, frustration, and anxiety, especially for those who felt, to some extent, traumatized. Liu's story is typical of that shift and is recounted here at length.

Liu indicated that she suffered severe hostility for years after she posted a joking comment on Li Na, the famous Chinese female tennis player. In 2013, Liu was a member of the fan club of Maria Sharapova, not the most active member but also not inactive. The post in question mocked Li Na when she was in a game with Sharapova. Liu said that she just did what people were always doing, trash-talking the other player during the game, which was the convention between fan clubs. This phenomenon is also common in gaming (Cook, *et al.*, 2021). "*But somehow, my post was f***ed. It was reposted all over Weibo — just overnight*," she reported. A massive number of comments flooded her post, with hundreds of reposts, and she found her homepage, which she regarded as her personal space, was also under scrutiny. In other words, the trolling moved from public space into private space. "*They found the only two pictures of myself. I didn't post my photos that much on Weibo. And they browsed all my posts to years ago and found my real name, possibly my real schools, and the connections in my real life.*" As all these tasks required intensive effort, Liu asserted that it was an organized or at least semi-organized activity, which, again, she acknowledged was not uncommon in fan club settings. The situation escalated further when Liu's fellow fans swarmed in and defended her by attacking back. More effort led to more attention — clicks, comments, reposts. "I was like in the center of a vortex," a situation that lasted for six months, after which the most concentrated attacking stopped. Liu reported that she continued to be harassed regarding this post in the following two years; right after the first interview had taken place in 2018, she received two hostile messages wishing death on her and her family.

Escalation is usually rapid, according to the interviewees (*cf.*, Sun and Fichman, 2018), and asynchronous communication made it even harder to predict when escalation might happen. While the overnight burst caused damage to Liu, those who successfully avoided escalation, such as Xin, experienced their event differently. Xin posted a comment on a nationalist movie, disagreeing with its sentiment, but she spotted the danger when the first few harsh comments popped up. She deleted her post before it attracted attention, even from people who might have agreed with her, and before the situation moved out of her control.

Xin explained that she was able to delete the post before it became a point of attraction for endless "heat." Heat (热度, Re Du) is the word used in the Chinese Internet vernacular to refer to any topic, post, or figure that draws attention, is controversial, and provokes intensive conversations. Heat is also a metaphor that conveys how attention works: like the fuel burning in the cylinder of the engine of the Internet. The only way to get out of disaster before too late, for Xin, Liu, and other victims stuck in the center of a developing trolling event, is to stop the engine. This requires two actions, not adding more fuel and also ensuring that no fuel can be added by someone else, by removing the post itself so that it draws no more attention. Using a different metaphor, scholars have suggested "no feeding the trolls" as the solution to trolling (*e.g.*, Binns, 2012; Dammann, 2019), and this solution was followed by many interviewees, although Liu's case shows that this solution must be implemented in a timely way; otherwise, it becomes too late to withdraw from a chaotic scene.

Working for control

"*Social media silence*" was chosen by some victims as a temporary or even permanent strategy to escape from trolling and regain control. A survey carried out by PEN America found that two-thirds of writers who had been trolled stopped writing. Participants in this study used phrases like "lie low," indicating an attempt to evade discovery and attention. For Liu, this involved deleting all her Weibo posts going back five years and all her other social media posts as well. For most respondents, the experience of maintaining social media silence, or lying low, is negative. In particular, it affected their self-confidence and sense of security in expressing themselves online in the future. Liu's strategy for lying low proceeded with anxiety and fear. Although the majority of trolling messages stopped six months after she initiated social media silence, she had lost trust in the world of social media, including WeChat, the well-known and widely used acquaintance social network app in the Chinese community. And still, the experiences were not over. After the interviews were completed, she contacted the author to say: "*Someone hacked my QQ (an instant communication tool) account, impersonated me, and scammed my mum for a lot of money. I kept wondering if this was related to my trolling experience [...] I don't know if it's relevant, but I stopped posting anything on Weibo and other platforms.*"

Most respondents felt they successfully avoided being trolled. Liu's experience was not shared by the majority of participants, with only one other interviewee having experienced trolling of such drastically escalated intensity. Most respondents strategized their communications and trained themselves to be more vigilant to pick up any signs of incoming trolling. Xin, for example, moved all her movie reviews from Weibo to another platform, deleted anything that may expose her personal life, and most importantly, deleted the very post that had attracted or could potentially attract heat as soon as she spotted the danger. On reflection, participants indicated that they were less concerned about the proportion of hostile comments in the whole discussion than about the potential for escalation caused by 'heated' participation, that is, by participation that attracted attention. Chen, who commented on a bus accident on the Reddit-like discussion forum, Tianya, withdrew from the discussion when she noticed her comment was becoming a target, although she would never have expected it to draw so much attention. After that, her experience of trolling was partially from witnessing how her post was repetitively quoted, criticized, and rephrased. "*I waited in silence and saw those people keep building on my original comment. I had to wait for something new to come out and redirect their attention. Once something spicier was there, mine wouldn't be the center of the heat.*"

For someone as deeply traumatized as Liu, any heat or attention through clicks, comments, and reposts equated to the risk of being trolled, regardless of topics or themes. Years after that traumatizing incident, Liu reported that by chance she found one of her posts was under the spotlight again. That post was a funny one about the lyrics of songs of two singers coincidentally conversing with each other. Although Liu had changed her profile name to avoid being recognized, she deleted that original post immediately to stay safe. Yet even deleting the post did not make it disappear because, she reported, someone had taken a screenshot of it. Taking a screenshot is a way of preserving the original post, and reposting a screenshot is a way of re-activating that original post, although not by the original poster. Liu observed that the screenshot was soon circulating 'crazily' and was being reposted by amused fans. She said: "*In 2015 [this post] had one thousand retweets, but I disabled the comment zone to avoid engagement. There were several comments from my friends. Last year [2017], I activated the comment zone for a short period, then over seventy comments flooded in just a few hours. I panicked and shut it down again, and then I realized not only was [the original post] still being retweeted from time to time, but some commercial accounts had also screenshotted that post and reposted it, meaning it was out there forever.*" She recognized that most people would feel happy to see people enjoying their funny jokes, yet she was left feeling rather scared: "*I don't think they would ever remember [the previous trolling]. Maybe they could recall it. But I'm not sure. I don't know. I was just concerned. I should have deleted EVERYTHING that might relate me to Sharapova or tennis [...] I wouldn't want any spotlight on me.*" In other words, she felt that she had completely lost control of her posts, and parts of her life that had been separate before were now linked.

The power of affordances

Stickiness explains how the endless user-generated content about a Facebook post attached the individual to that post and to Facebook as a platform (Ahmed, 2004). Respondents in this study explained how their posts and, inevitably, themselves became the central point of attraction for the content circulated in posts, comments, and reposts to stick to. They admitted the fear of being trapped in a chaotic situation, the vortex Liu referred to; they were afraid that it would be impossible to regulate the discussion to stay on a track they felt in control of. In other words, the posts were driven by the affordances of the technology, that mechanism that facilitated the circulation of messages, with little engagement with the content (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). In this circulation of messages, there was a point at which the focus would shift to them as a person. That was the point at which they would feel that they were victimized — being attacked, intruded upon, and dragged into the center of attention and thus being placed under scrutiny through this circulation mechanism. Similar to Liu's experience "in the vortex," Song, who was trolled because she fought back against a misogynic post, spent countless efforts to get rid of the affective power sticking to her online activities (Paasonen, 2015). "*Because I felt like I might lose face, I was very reluctant to admit I was extremely upset and a bit depressed. Either he [the troll] would stop just because he lost interest, or you could say I surrendered. [...] It took a while for it to cool down. I deleted many old posts. It took me days to scrutinize my timeline. They found the only selfie, one I took years ago, and I never did that again. I stopped posting anything relevant. Months after this [trolling], I still felt upset and angry thinking about it or discussing it. I suppressed my urge to search for any new updates.*" She felt she had to keep standing her ground, that is, making new posts, at the same time recognizing that new posts from her would give more strength to the stickiness and that, in turn, expanded the space for trolling (Ahmed, 2004). In the end, it was not clear to her whether the troll lost interest or she gave in.

Screenshots played a particular role in creating this stickiness. For users of traditional platforms such as blogs and discussion forums, screenshotting supplements the disadvantage of lack of functions for rapid circulation, such as reposting, but in trolling, it takes on a different character. Thirteen interviewees mentioned that screenshots of the attention-attracting posts took over the role of the original ones after the latter were deleted. Viva saw a screenshot-repost as a sign of escalation because screenshots allow continuous trolling even after trolls have been blocked. "*I blocked them [trolls], but they wouldn't give up. They screenshotted my word and posted. [...] Some of their [trolls'] followers could jump in.*" In this way, she lost control over her own post.

Screenshots are ways to document evidence of being trolled, by creating an archival record of the event, according to study participants. In the context of trolling, archiving is not only to preserve the original post but to enable the recirculation of a deleted post. This "archiving-circulation" serves to do more than restarting an accumulation of heat and interrupting the withdrawal of people eager to escape from it. It can also indicate the competition for the power of discourse. Wen explained: "*They [trolls] didn't repost my post. They took screenshots. Just did it to attack me.*" As Wen described it, reposting screenshots served to rephrase and reinterpret her original words. "*It [reposted screenshot] was different from what I meant. They [trolls] twisted my words.*" Unlike Liu, whose concern about screenshots lay in the efficiency of distributing the contents, Wen was more concerned about the impact of her speech online, especially whether her words would be manipulated against her stance. Wen was a well-known stray animal rights advocate who was active across multiple social media platforms. She was not one of those deleting the posts to avoid the heat. Her strong positive attitude towards her opinions posted online about the changes of policies needed for stray animals in urban China meant that she did not fear confrontation in any form. According to Wen, this scramble for the start of a chain of discourse was common not only in trolling but also in her countermeasure against trolling. This was to start a new chain of circulation, reset the undertone, and modulate the affective forces in the new chain of circulation. "*I screenshot a cat abuser's post, like collecting the evidence of the horrible things he said [...] I posted the screenshot, but I didn't attack him. My friends and followers tracked his original post and left condemning comments.*"

Where the public intrudes into the private

Xing, who was running a self-media account through the WeChat public account to post articles, comments, and reviews of movies and books from a multiculturalist perspective, believed that trolling was an outcome of common communication to be expected on the Internet because of the tension in the power relationship between author and audience. (Self-media is a Chinese phenomenon: An independently operated social media account run by individuals using self-produced content on any one of a range of topics.) Xing considered the trolling he experienced almost every day a challenge from readers in this power imbalance. He said: "*I used to spend time explaining my opinions in the article to my audience. But then I figured out that once the article was published online, it stopped belonging to me, the author. We are equal users. I could only focus on sharing my opinions, nothing more.*" The stress he felt was the burden he must bear in this era of self-media. "*I know people feel depressed when they get trolled. But I tend to think about this problem from another angle: if you want to earn a reputation, then you must bear the pressure in this process. I, as the author and organizer of this platform, hold the power to speak; the trolls, attacking me, practice their power to speak too.*" Xing and eight other interviewees agreed with this "free-to-speak" norm of online communication. Luo, for example, an intensive user of Weibo,

recognized this mass participation as one of the positive characteristics of social media communication. He also admitted that he may have trolled others when he was an active participant in a discussion: "*I think it happens. Just a natural thing people would do [...] I hated someone's opinions, or maybe got disgusted by that person, but it's not really personal.*"

Communication mediated via a social media platform such as Weibo lies between addressing an individual and addressing the masses, from the perspective of victims, as Yu indicated: "*I just found hundreds of notifications of @ and comments on my homepage. Those are responses to my post [...] Yes, that created pressure.*" In this way, the responses, some of which may be addressed to the mass audience, are mediated through the personal homepage and transformed into messages to the individual. This process makes the personal, private side of social media space seem remarkably fragile and also reveals the ambiguous line between the space for self and personal expression and the public space for mass participation. Yu continued: "*I thought I was prepared to deal with dirty words and curses. But people cursing me in my own Weibo space really irritated me [...] It affected me in my real life as well. I would feel those words and actions disrespectful to women extremely intolerable and repulsive.*"

Even though some victimizing forces may result from the techno-communicative process and be considered a normal but unfortunate part of the process, a few activities are still flagged as unacceptable by respondents. Viva, one of the organizers of a fan club, believed that sending aggressive private messages was "crossing the line" in the practices of trolling. She described one of her experiences of trolling as the "dirtiest" because of the private messaging with curses and personal attacks. "*Attacking happens a lot [in reposting and comments]. But private messaging with attacks is the lowest level.*" Viva disclosed herself as a troll, as a fan club member, but claimed she was never the first to cross that line. Five other interviewees considered private messaging trolling unacceptable because of its fully exposed intrusion into personal space. Agreeing with Viva, the animal rights advocate, Wen, did not believe trolling in a general sense was morally wrong or deviant by nature, but trolling via private messaging was an intolerable intrusion at the lowest level of behavior in online communication.

Despite the differences in mechanism and the distinction in the eyes of interviewees, these two types of trolling, one resulting from the linkage of a series of mediated participation and communication and the other characterized by blunt intrusion into private space, usually co-existed in a single incident, such as the ones Liu and Song experienced. Not only does the escalation of a heated situation usually brings more intrusive trolling, but so does the "no-feeding-the-troll" practice. When Song deleted the original controversial post that attracted trolls and changed the system settings to shut down commenting and some reposting, trolls lost their targets (including her other posts), and as a consequence, they turned to her personally. She ended up receiving more curses through private messages. "*I deleted it (the original post), but it was already out there [...] in the forms of screenshot or maybe others. [...] There still were people that wanted to attack me. Then they started to private-message me.*"

The information landscape and its map

The environment within which trolling occurs has been well documented as including three elements: people — the troll and the object of trolling, technologies and their affordances, and communication. From the perspective of the victim of trolling, based on these findings,

the environment is more complex, as the types of people involved are extended to include supporters, friends, and even family. The participants in this study place emphasis on the norms of behavior that bring together these three elements. This is important because it is "crossing the line" of these norms of behavior that opens the intersubjective space where trolling takes place.

The outcome of the mapping of this intersubjective space from the perspective of affect appears to derive from the approach that a 'victim' of trolling takes to the online communication process. For those who placed value on freedom of expression, some level of trolling is to be expected, and their rational approach left little space for affect. However, for most of the participants in this study, trolling was unexpected and met with **surprise**. Liu's defense that she was only doing what is normal in the fan club supports this expression of emotion. Surprise is followed by recognition of the **unpredictable** nature of interactions and communications and the reluctant acknowledgment that **logical** courses of action are **not** always successful in preventing the escalation of an interaction. A **sense of time and timing** seems important at this point; the timing of action in taking down a post that might get caught up in 'circulation' might prevent that circulation, but the **speed** at which a small beginning is escalated can be breathtakingly fast, and the duration of attacks can be agonizingly **drawn out**, over months. The sense of being in an uncontrollable situation, in a 'vortex' or in 'chaos' arises from the **powerlessness** felt through the inability to prevent "heat." To some extent, it is the technology and its affordances that are influential at this point, permitting the copying, reposting, flooding of comments spaces, and screenshotting that amplifies the intensities of communication in a way that takes on a momentum of its own, with circulation leading to further **attention**. Attention itself can be the focus of differing emotions. The participants in this study who are activists seek out supporters for their cause; they are keen to generate "**heat**," aiming for stickiness on their sites, and aware that attacks will follow. There are times in social media communication when attention is craved, but in cases of trolling, this is **unwanted attention**, giving rise to a feeling that the individual is under scrutiny and must **be vigilant**. A course of action to avoid attention may be to '**lie low**,' maintaining silence on social media. This time of 'lying low,' waiting to see what might happen next, is a time when the power balance has shifted to the trolls. Another course of action is to delete posts and comments. For a few, lying low, or disappearing from social media, brought an end to trolling, although the **wariness** that attacks might resume seemed to prevent a sense of relief. Several participants expressed **anger** that trolling had spilled from the public space of their social media site into private space, with personal messages of threat and abuse; this was seen as "**crossing the line**," a completely unacceptable behavior. Some expressed the **damage to their self-confidence**, not only from unwanted attention but also from a **fear** that trolls would **strike at the heart of their identities, use their own words against them**, twisting what they had written to mean something else. Participants in this study spoke of moving to different platforms, deleting online posts, including even all traces of the online self, to 'escape' from a time of **stress** and **anxiety**. A final expression of emotion is the **uncertainty** that the episode of trolling is over; whereas the beginning, with the expression of surprise, may be clear, there is no point at which a victim can be sure that "something spicier" has come along to deflect attention and they can **reclaim their online identity**.

A key factor in mapping this landscape concerns the interactions between the victim's sense of their private self and the self in the eye of the public. Social media sites mentioned in this study, along with their Western counterparts, provide a space, not directly for connection, but for self-presentation: the home page or profile page and timeline. This space is designed to be personalized; with anonymity, it has become the niche of self-expression. For Gershon

(2011), it requires users to "manage themselves as flexible collections of skills, usable traits and tastes that need to be constantly maintained and enhanced" [7]. At the same time, this personal space is placed at a juncture between intimate, personalized, and semi-private self-expression and a highway of circulation of maintained and enhanced user-generated content that are seamlessly connectable. In other words, it becomes a space for an individual, off-limits to others. This space is not intended for high-speed sharing of social media communication, but when this space is intruded upon, victims are most strongly affected by trolling.

Yet even making this assertion denies the complexity of this relationship. Luo's expression is telling here: that trolling is in between being personal and, at the same time, not personal. To some extent, there is something in common with the dialogic relationship in broadcasting, which is "a communicative structure that mediates for-anyone structures and for-someone structures" [8]. Such a conclusion directs focus away from the people, leaving only technologies and communication, but this in itself forms a kind of defense, protecting the victim against the idea that another person is wishing them harm.

The impact of the affordances of technologies should not be overlooked, as they lead to that sense of loss of control. The pursuit of connectivity as strong and fast as possible, which maximizes the profit of high-volume traffic on social media (Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013), also expands channels for accumulated affective forces carried by circulated comments, reposts, likes, and clicks. These channels are filled with desires for personal and private expression, which must be personalized but connectable at the same time. When a post or a person becomes a point of attraction for forces of aggression, surprise, and reaction to accumulate around, the associated personalized space has to bear the weight of those forces, which come from both positive and negative forms of participation. Deleting posts and disabling comments, and reposting so there is less to bear, can be seen as destroying norms of communication in social media, as an individual strives for control. These actions may change communication, and they may have some influence on the use of the affordances of technologies; the findings in this study have shown that they are part of the experiences of victims of trolling.

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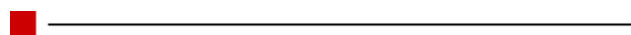
Conclusion

The focus on the victim of trolling in this study has facilitated the mapping of affect, an important contribution to understanding the experience of being trolled. It has shown that emotions expressed by victims in this study have a clear starting point and a fairly obvious sequence; it has also demonstrated that timing, including rapid escalation and drawn-out continuation of the experience, alongside the lack of logical explanations and reactions, leads to a sense of powerlessness.

This study has highlighted the importance of relationships between the personal and the public in giving rise to emotions that may be all-consuming and with far-reaching consequences for some, such as damage to identity and reputation online and off-line, but not for others. It has also shown that an individual may be overwhelmed by the affective forces of stickiness (or "heat"), generated by affordances of technologies; these forces may be seen

as having power beyond the emotional reaction of a victim, or they may be considered part of the context of communication in social media.

This study focused on self-identifying Chinese victims of trolling using a practice-based approach, which facilitates the development of a collective report of practices. It does not claim to be representative of experiences of all victims of trolling; the findings are generalizable. However, it goes some way towards filling gaps in the literature, by taking a systematized approach to descriptions of trolling and by focusing on the experiences of Chinese victims of trolling. The potential for damage to a victim's everyday life and for harm to their sense of self, along with the difficulties in reclaiming an identity over which they have control, indicates that a focus on victims of trolling is a topic worthy for further research.

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Notes

1. Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250.

2. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Troll.

3. Kaur, *et al.*, 2020, p. 9.

4. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2000, p. vii.

5. Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p. 4.

6. Ginader, *et al.*, 2021, p. 164.

7. Gershon, 2011, p. 867.

8. Peters, 2010, p. 128.

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Editorial history