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Social Media and Gender-Based Harassment

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Abstract:

With the emergence of social media, trolls and being trolled become a regular phenomenon. It was started as a new way of entertainment among people. Therefore the trolls are widely welcomed across the world. While the darker side of human nature is exposed through trolls, the merits have been rightly valued and appreciated. Yet the politics of domination and suppression are crucial to this new media. While the dominant classes are privileged in many ways, the resultant victims and weak are attacked or sidelined. When it comes to the matter of gender, patriarchal views are prevalent and dominated. These manmade thoughts, trolls, comments and attacks against the weaker or marginalized groups through social media are widely discussed and biological factors are also crucial in deciding those troll based ideas. Abuses are common in the form of body shaming, rape threats; create rumors about their personal life, the use of sexual comments and even pedophilic comments. Women especially in social media have experienced such harassments personally. At the same time, there exists a tendency to naturalize the attacks and abuses against womankind as if they deserve to be ridiculed. Many social media comments or the so called viral comments against women prove that the problem cannot be confined to a particular place or culture. The number of likes and reactions and even the number of times a troll is being shared show the acceptability of a troll across the world. This paper intends to look at those gender biased trolls and their acceptability across cultures and how woman folk reacts to them. While the majority of internet users are womankind, they are now forced to quit the cyber space or found themselves in blocking many comments, persons and pages.

Keywords: online trolling, cyber bullying, sex and gender.

Introduction

The idea of being trolled and troll are regular phenomenon in the present digital world. Etymologically the word troll means, an imaginary, either very large or very small creature in the traditional Scandinavian stories, that has magical powers and lives in mountains or caves. Depending on the source, their appearance varies greatly; they may be ugly or slow witted. Such figures were different to normal people; funny, frightful or to be laughed at.

A troll is a person in the internet space, who entertains or provokes or even upsets people, an individual or a community by posting something in some type of online community. The goal of a troll is varied; some brings even damage to the reputation of a person or institutions, some intends to harass or disturb and some means to entertain.

In the present context especially in the internet culture, the process in which a person or a group troll is known as trolling and the person who performs a troll is known as a troll. But literally the words troll and trolling have completely different meaning. The common belief among the social media users is that the word trolling is derived from troll. The word trolling denotes, in its literal sense, a method of fishing. In trolling, a fisherman attempts to fish with a hook and line that he pulls through the water. A troll, in this way, casts a line out in the internet world in hopes of hooking someone into an argument. This can be interpreted in this way. Therefore being called a troll, in the internet circle, is usually considered a compliment. Majority of internet users, especially the young users, didn't understand the word meaning. For them troll and trolling are cyber space activities and the literal and the etymological meaning of troll is now lost.

When it comes to cyber world, a troll is a process of intentionally antagonizing other online by posting inflammatory, provocative, irrelevant, offensive or entertaining online dwellers through comments, images or videos. The internet users adopted the term troll in the late 1980s. The intention of each troll is varied; personal entertainment, political argument, harassment or annoying others.

According to a recent estimate, the internet has 3.17 billion users across the world. Most of the users have subjected to some kind of trolling, either being trolled by others or they come across trolls. But certain trolls, with the intention of creating conflicts or tensions, are common by making controversial one. This paper attempts to bring out the politics of gender in trolls: why do

trolls often have a patriarchal stand, why women continue to be haunted and even harassed or attacked and how those attacks turn out to be personal and generalized? This process is common in Malayalam troll groups, therefore this paper focusses more on this area.

Is troll identity a license to insult?

Among the active social media users, the identity of a troll is usually appreciated. Some users even introduce themselves as troll. Many of them are under the assumption that being a troll they are free to harass or provoke anyone, therefore, there develops a tendency to naturalize troll abuses. Some even argues to take things in a troll sense. Hence naturalizing such abuses. This tendency is growing and more evident in the last 10 years.

Trolls are made to believe that they are widely accepted and they come to this conclusion because of the number of likes they receive for their trolls. Some even exceeds the limit and offer their supports by commenting on particular trolls. When we go to check the identity of the users who frequently make offensive comments and those who like those trolls and comments, many of them have mask identity. Some of them have weird names. The number of fake identities are alarming. Therefore their comments violate the propriety.

Whatever the comments, either in support or oppose, the popularity of a troll lies in the number of likes and comments. A common ground can be seen among those comments that is always racial, sexual or personal assassination. In case of reporting or blocking identities, this problem does not end, rather there will be a flow of fake identities.

Cyber abuse against the weaker

A plethora of plain memes are available on the internet space. Those memes can be used for different purposes, depending on the event. Malayalam troll groups are rich with those memes and they encourage anyone to become a troll. The open accessibility to different social media platform is helpful to the troll to form an idea.

Hundreds of troll pages are available on social media and Facebook has vast number of followers. ICU, Troll Republic, Kidilan Trolls, Outspoken are some among them. Each group has admin panels. In the initial days of social media and trolls, these were entertained and appreciated. But they were not free from criticism and chauvinistic, racial slurs gradually crept into it. When

one observes the nature of these trolls, gender and racial abuses are evident. Gender biased troll have more attraction on social media and it seems womankind deserves to be trolled.

Gender biased abuses and ridicules can be read as an organized attempts. Woman, either individual or group, has always been a target for many troll groups. There are certain work areas in Kerala, where womenfolk work together and the most chauvinistic derogate trolls are loaded on them. Both Kudumbashree and Akshaya e-centres are constant source for these trolls. The sole reason is that only women work here and through which they establish their space and identity.

Kudumbashree is a real women empowerment and it is an ideal women's movement. Though it was launched as a poverty eradication programme, women achieved their social and political rights and even civil society leadership. It accommodates all, irrespective of religion, caste or political party affiliation. Though there are criticisms that Kudumbashree is incapable of addressing gender issues, it primarily focusses on poverty eradication and this organization performs under the belief that empowerment is possible through economic independence.

Kudumbashree sets up separate bank accounts to all members and usually holds weekly meetings in which many discussions based on an agenda take place. This meeting is usually targeted; what do they discuss becomes a concern for many intolerant groups and they express their frustration in the form of scornful trolls. Hence it goes viral and the received comments further prove that womenfolk are incapable of discussion of any kind and thereby proclaim their judgment that Kudumbashree meetings are sources of gossips.

The functioning of Akshaya e-centres is not different. More than 2000 e-centres are functioning all over Kerala and around 90 percent of total staff are women. More people depend on these centres for governmental services evidence that the Akshaya e-centre is financially viable strategy for women. These centres provide services within minutes or days further prove that the staffs are technically talented and educated. How such a serviceable centre is targeted by certain troll groups is a wonder. It is argued that a male ego may hurt when he approaches a lady staff for a particular service. If so, a male ego may not be satisfied when a woman offers a service and a counter strategy is formed that the service lags because of the inefficiency of workers. Hence an arrogant Akshaya lady is formed among troll groups. Though every job by nature has a hurry time schedule, here the intention is clear. Thousands of internet cafes perform similar services and they are not targeted on matter of their gender. It is unfortunate from the part of the IT Mission of the

state to form 'Snehapoorvam Akshaya', instead of addressing the gender issues. The project is to make a good understanding about Akshaya,

Facebook opens a big platform for any type of open discussion. All are free to express, hence anything can be shred and posted. In the past there were no such open forums and most harassments remained untold. Cyber bullying must be seen in this context, a kind of harassment through electronic devices and soon it happens over social media. Some of the users started it as a form of entertainment, with no intention to hurt anyone. Soon this process turned vicious and intentional.

Me too Campaign and the wrangle

'Me too' campaign evokes a fresh controversy. Though it energizes many women to disclose their experience and the abuse they faced, a counter movement arises to make the campaign passive. The delayed confession cannot be accepted, they argue. The revelation against judicial members, political leaders, bureaucrats, religious priests and film makers were stirred the public sphere, but the way they were addressed was unfortunate.

Me too victims are abused again on the social media and the verbal harassment at times exceeds the limit. A tendency was formed to discourage the campaign. Those who opens the campaign are dealt with harsh verbal criticisms. The arguments to oppose the campaign are strange; why did the revealing of sexual abusive experience delay, hadn't they known that it was harassment? These comments are expressed not by an ordinary social media user, but even a senior legislative member.

The female celebrities, feminist sympathizers and activists and women writers are also felt the gender biased trolls and cyber-attacks. Here rape threats show the heightened gravity of the matter. Certain film dialogues that glorify chauvinistic male ego further evidenced the poor gender awareness among the most social media users. The worst of it is the Delhi model rape threat. Though these can be legally handled, the tragedy is that those accounts are fake.

Body shaming is another shocking phenomenon that is alarmingly growing up on social media. One's body is one's personal matter, but it is abused and vulgarized in the most substandard way. The cruel feedbacks and comments show these users have their expected beauty standard and if it does not match with theirs, abuses come out. Certain posts and images are forced to delete on

Facebook. The moral policing team teaches the young women and girls the cultural ideals of womanhood; how a woman should be, how should they wear and the need to be looked. While some are able to confront the threat and abuses, majority is afraid of the situation.

It seems there exists an undeclared ultimatum for girls regarding how they need to be looked, behaved, worn and interacted, even the level of makeup and dressing style. Those who violate these 'norms' will be abused. While the worst comments have a masquerading identity, the ordinary so called good looking user strengthened the body shaming program through 'ha-ha' reactions and dislike buttons. The former is a new strategy to deal those who fearlessly confront the attacks. In this way, they believe, the women centered ideas can be diminished. All these can be seen as a way to strengthen patriarchal power. To become popular some believe that this can be done by abusing others. As many of them are not aware of the invisible damage their trolls bring gradually more abuses and insults come out through them.

Conclusion

There has been an increase in the number of women who have been using social media for personal and academic purpose. The knowledge has been widespread and women also contribute much to the dissemination of it through internet. Both men and women should work together for a rapid growth of information by utilizing internet facilities. But the problem of gender politics mars the flow of information and a section is abused. Therefore the internet uses is a responsible one that should make us aware of our duty as responsible users. Contrary to it, women are asked to accept the abuses and patriarchal manners try to naturalize those abuses.

In an age of online trolling, gender based trolls become regular phenomenon and the large scale acceptability make the troll makers believe that they have the license to provoke and insult the weaker sections. Therefore a proper gender awareness must be taught for the internet users as they also follow the chauvinistic masculine based trolls deliberately or not. The virtual world often give the users an unprecedented connection even with strangers and the illusory experience make them go any extend. While majority is afraid of sexist comments and threats, only a few dares to confront and those who do it face the consequences alone. What is needed for the victim is not only strength and support or legal assistance, but the accused need to be brought and counselled. A proper gender awareness to be cultivated in the cyber space among the users at the earliest and the legal steps to be followed in case abuses of any kind reported should also be given.

Instead of challenging and insulting a sect, there should form a common ground for the dissemination of knowledge and information. Let everyone respect and understand each other and the plurality of internet culture should be uplifted. No one is inferior and no one can dominate others. This realization will make the internet space the better world.

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