



Don't Feed The Trolls

Thanks to modern technology, our social interactions have moved beyond face-to-face interactions to an almost boundless domain. But is this 24/7 culture of accessibility—and the veil of anonymity the blue screen provides—giving way to a new breed of anxiety in the form of cyber-bullies?

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

“Troll.” I remember when the word used to conjure up images of a large, brutish, one-eyed creature, ready to heckle and torment passers-by in a cruel game before eventually trying to eat them. Now it means something different—though, much like the troll under the bridge in the famous Norwegian fairytale, these trolls also lie in hiding, taking pleasure in making their prey suffer before eventually destroying them. But the modern day troll is better at hiding: Veiled under a cloak of anonymity, they remain hidden behind the glow of a computer screen, getting a kick out of making deliberately offensive, provocative or hurtful posts online with the explicit intent of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry retort.

From the US to the UK, a shocking number of cases of online harassment have been reported in the past decade, with many of them resulting in severe emotional and mental trauma for the victim or in some cases, even suicide. There was Megan Meier, for instance: The 13-year-old girl from Missouri in the US, who hanged herself in a bedroom closet after having her self-esteem utterly destroyed by a cruel cyber-bully named Josh—who turned out to be

a fake profile created by a neighbour and her daughter, along with another teenage girl. Then there was Daniel Perry, the 17-year-old boy from Fife, Scotland, who leapt to his death from a bridge after having been bullied and duped into a blackmail scam online. And there are countless more such tragic cases. Statistics show that one in five children in the UK, and almost 50 percent of teenagers in the US, have been victims of cyber-bullying. The problem isn't

limited to the West—with our penchant for mobile devices and the region's high internet and mobile usage levels, it's not surprising that the phenomenon has found its way to our shores. The results of a 2013 study found that 20 percent of teenagers in the UAE have been subject to some form of cyber-bullying, and new software by XRayData.com designed to alert parents if their children are being attacked, excluded or emotionally abused online (or if their child is doing any bullying of their own)—in both English and Arabic—is currently in the works.

A GROWING PROBLEM

It's not just impressionable teenagers suffering at the hands of faceless digital tormentors, either—adult cyber-bullying is a very real problem, with some incidents so vicious that it could affect not only a victim's mental wellbeing but even potentially cost them their job, their friends, or their overall health. Yes, the bully has moved from the playground to lurking behind a computer screen, and they're not just attacking kids anymore—it's just that by the time we're all grown up, there's another name for it: Harassment. In fact, the concept of bullying is so closely interlinked to youth that many adults don't even realise they're being bullied—or if they do, they're afraid to report it lest they be known as over-sensitive or weak. After all, by the time we're adults, we should know better than to let bullies get to us, right?

"As we develop into adults, our perception of bullying often changes; adults may

feel that they can't report it because it's something that only happens in youth, and we may instead see this type of behaviour as being more normalised for adults. You only have to look on Facebook or Twitter to see the vast amount of negative remarks that people make towards pictures and status updates," says Ross Addison, a Psychotherapist at Camali Clinic and a member of the WHME Advisory Board. This negativity is so commonplace that you might not realise it's happening, even as it slowly chips away at your energy, confidence and self-esteem. "Whilst adults tend to be more resilient in nature due to having more life experience, this does not remove the fact that remarks made by people that intentionally affect an individual's emotional wellbeing in a negative way is a form of bullying," Ross explains. He adds: "Social networking sites can be a great way of communicating, [but] unfortunately some abuse this system and use it as a way of projecting and venting their anger towards people in a way that negatively affects another person's feelings."

Then there's the embarrassment factor. When we're feeling obliged to conform to certain opinions or beliefs, or to act a certain way under peer pressure, it can be tough or even shameful to admit that it's making you feel uncomfortable and that you want it to stop—even if those pressuring you can clearly see that you're sensitive about a certain topic, says Johanna Griffin, a Consultant at LifeWorks Personal Development. A friend constantly or publicly ribbing

you for your more unique clothing choices is one thing, but if you've made it explicitly clear that their comments are distressing or, worse, hurtful, and they carry on, they're being a bully—albeit a casual one. "If you're being made to feel angry or frustrated, put on edge, or as though you're constantly walking on eggshells, surrounded by anxious and negative energy, these are all warning signs that you are, in fact, being bullied to some extent," Johanna says. She adds that an increased desire to withdraw from your friends or spend more time in isolation could be another point to look out for—after all, if you're being made to feel so uncomfortable that you don't want to spend as much time in their company, it's important to wonder why.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

If you're receiving messages that are mean, vulgar or threatening—whether it's via private message or on a public forum, being impersonated, or you're suffering someone posting content including your private or sensitive information or humiliating or degrading photos of you online without your permission, you're being cyber-bullied. If the level of bullying is so extreme that it involves threats of violence, extortion, obscene messages, stalking or hate crimes, this is serious harassment—and it's time to get the authorities involved. After all, it's not just celebrities that have had to take out restraining orders against internet harassers-turned-stalkers that have threatened them or their loved ones, and thankfully most countries now have laws in place to protect us from what is, essentially, a cyber-crime. Even if you've covered the risk of things leaking into your physical life and becoming potentially dangerous, there are also the emotional and mental risks to consider—and these aren't

BAD BEHAVIOUR

According to a survey by YouGov, although only 45% of adults have heard of the term troll, 28% of Americans admitted to trollish behaviour, where they had intentionally directed malicious online activity at someone they didn't know. In fact, 12% admitted that they had crossed the line so far in some instances that their comments had to be removed by a moderator. The survey results also revealed that Internet trolls are more likely to be men, particularly those on the younger side—millennials were found to be the biggest culprits, twice as likely to engage in such behaviour.

factors to be taken lightly.

"[Being bullied] can leave you with increased levels of anxiety, stress, or depression, or a sense that you're losing control of yourself, your life and your emotions—which could lead to you having less control over your mood swings or even anger," Johanna says, adding that it could also result in physical problems such as frequent headaches or trouble sleeping. "It's detrimental because much of the time, the bully will be focusing on aspects of the individual that they believe they may already be self-conscious of, causing them to reflect more on what the bully is saying. This is often exacerbated if the bully has picked up on pre-existing insecurities in the individual, which unfortunately bullies can be very good at," says Ross. "Being bullied affects our psyche in a way that we question the reason why we are being bullied. Such questions someone may ask themselves are, 'Why me?' or 'What did I do to deserve this?'" This can begin a trail of negative thinking about oneself, such as self-blame, self-pity, dwelling on and

The bully has moved from the playground to lurking behind a computer screen, and they're not just attacking kids anymore

overthinking on what has been said, and can cause the individual to wonder why this person doesn't like them—or if other people feel the same, Ross says. “The result of this can be extreme sensitivity and hypervigilance to the aspect or trait the bully has focused on, particularly where there was a pre-existing insecurity, and may lead the individual to avoid in every way possible being subjected to or leaving themselves exposed to this again,” he explains. But is avoiding anything that could make us feel vulnerable to being bullied—whether it's rational or not—the solution? In the short term, this could mean the avoidance of social situations, work, school or social networking, not to mention hypersensitivity, potential loss of weight and

even self-harming behaviour. In the long term, Ross says, it could even lead to a lifetime of difficulties with social interaction, creating issues with making and sustaining future relationships, or to one becoming depressed—which could then lead to self-harm or attempts to take one's own life. “In most cases, the perception that an individual has of themselves dramatically reduces and they may have persistent thoughts like, ‘I'm worthless, I'm rubbish, and nobody likes me,’ which in turn can exacerbate many of the symptoms above,” Ross adds. It's a vicious circle, and one that is hard to break.

TECH-HAPPY TROLLS

So how did people in the 21st century become so *mean*? Technology is, in large part,

to blame—designed to make our lives easier and more openly accessible to others, the reach of the internet and its role in our everyday life means that, unfortunately, any negative interactions can now chase us anywhere from our workplaces to our bedrooms. Pestering and harassment no longer stops at our front door: It's in our homes, creeping up everywhere from our email inboxes to our social media accounts, and it can come from anywhere in the world. “There are far more ways of bullying now than there were 10 or 20 years ago,” Ross says. Aside from the fact that we're now more constantly and easily accessible to others, this new culture of instant gratification means many people are also becoming more impatient, which can lead to traits such as lower tolerance, being more demanding and feeling more entitled to what you want, when you want it, sometimes aggressively so. It's also so easy for information to go viral now that the spread of potentially damaging content has become

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Don't bear the burden of harassment alone: There's no shame in seeking help from friends or even a health professional

a fat, juicy apple dangling from a tree: Gaining notoriety at the click of a button is so tempting that we often act before we think of the consequences, even if the gains come at someone else's expense. “To a certain extent, technology is affecting the way we view our relationships with both friends or strangers,” says Johanna. “We seem to be losing touch with face-to-face connections, and this could be a reason why we are becoming desensitised and finding it easier to be negative or unfriendly.”

TAKING ACTION

“Preventing cyber-bullying completely would be very difficult, since bullying can take on many forms and each individual experiences things in different ways: What one person considers bullying,



another may consider joking or character-building,” says Ross, suggesting that trying to manage bullying may be a more efficient way of coping. Raising awareness that it does exist, in adults as well as kids, would help us to be better at spotting it, enabling us to take measures to nip it in the bud before things get serious. Reading up on cyber-bullying can also help manage your self-esteem, says Ross: “[If] you understand the psyche of the bully, you could reflect on not taking it personally. There’s normally a reason why someone is a bully, and it usually has nothing to do with you. While this doesn’t make it right, you should find some solace in knowing that you’re most likely bearing the brunt of someone else’s insecurities or difficulties, [rather than

your own].” Once we’re aware they’re out there, we also need to wise up, Johanna says: “If you’re going to speak in a public forum, there will be some people who disagree with you. Think before you speak or write, be mature and expect that some [incendiary types] may be out there, and use the internet in a sensible way.” If what it takes to not let it get to you is deleting it so you no longer have to see it, do so. If things are getting really nasty, consider getting the authorities involved. And if it’s cutting at your sense of self-worth, speaking to a healthcare professional could help. Ross recommends writing down easily visible positive affirmations that you know to be true: “If you’re finding this difficult, perhaps you could ask a friend or family

member to [help].” Ross also warns against avoiding social situations that might make you feel nervous or anxious: “This could contribute to keeping your negative self-beliefs alive,” he says, explaining that giving in to these feelings of fear can only perpetuate what a bully is trying to instigate. Throwing yourself into exercise and

hobbies that you know will lift your mood whenever you’re feeling beaten down will not only help keep your mind off it, it could also help stop you from sinking into a spiral of negativity in which a bully’s attacks can break through your wall of confidence and self-worth. And remember: Whatever you do, just don’t feed the trolls. ■

INSTA-TROLL

Clare Wright, a 29-year-old Public Relations Manager in Dubai, was targeted on her Instagram account. “Someone left about 20 offensive comments on different photos, making fun of my pictures or my appearance. There were a couple of things that I was quite sensitive about, but some of the insults didn’t even make sense. I didn’t actually notice them until one of my friends posted a reply to a mean comment saying what an awful thing it was to say. I got that horrible feeling you get when your face goes hot and your ears go prickly and I felt sick. Then I just thought, ‘What the...?’” she says.

Thankfully, Clare’s strong nature and support network helped her deal with the matter quickly and effectively: “I deleted all the comments—after taking screengrabs of them—and reported the person to Instagram, then blocked them. ‘I thought about replying but I knew that was what he or she wanted. A couple of my friends asked if they could reply to them, too, but I said no,’ she says. The troll was hidden behind a private account, and despite wondering who she might have upset, Clare didn’t want to request to follow them to find out who they were. “I checked back for the next few weeks, but the account was still live. When the insults didn’t continue, I decided that it was just some professional troll amusing themselves,” she explains.

While Clare suspects Instagram didn’t do anything to resolve the matter, talking to her friends about it helped: “It made me feel better to vent and have my friends assure me that I didn’t deserve the comments. At first I was embarrassed to tell people, but I hadn’t done anything wrong!” Interestingly, nearly all of her friends assumed the culprit must have been someone Clare knew: “They didn’t know what I meant when I said [I thought it might be] a ‘professional troll.’ I’ve read about them and it just seemed to fit the profile. It’s worrying, though, that if this happened to one of them, they would assume it was someone they knew personally. Once I decided that it was a troll, I just accepted the fact that they were a loser and got on with my life. I knew there was no point in trying to ‘uncover’ them. I’m quite lucky that I have a strong sense of my own personal worth—enough to not let the comments get to me and move on. I can imagine some people would really take the comments to heart, and the result of that could be disastrous,” she says.