**Literature Review | COM 415 | Dr. Carroll**

Tentative Title: Unmasking Anonymity: The Rhetorical Choices of Social Media Trolls

Style used: MLA

This study applies Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to the behavior of so-called online “trolls” on social media. According to Tammy Swenson-Lepper and April Kerby, “Trolls are those people who behave in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose. Trolls find enjoyment in harassing and tormenting others because there is no consequence for the troll, who gets enjoyment from the anger and discomfort of others” (104). This source lays a foundation for understanding the inherent characteristics of trolling behavior – from the deceptive maneuvers to the pleasure-seeking motives. By closely examining these dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute to a comprehension of the underlying factors driving internet trolls, shedding light on the complex interplay of motives and methods within the realm of online communication.

Theodora Adjin-Tettey's insightful categorization of media usem goals and gratifications provides an essential framework, as she asserts, "The goals and gratifications for general media use can be categorized into five categories: escaping from stress; getting informed or educated; identifying with characters in a situation in the media environment (upward comparison); enhancing social interaction, and entertainment" (38). This foundational framework serves as a compass for deciphering users' motivations on Instagram, illuminating the diverse array of needs and desires that propel engagement with digital media. Within the context of UGT, it becomes evident that internet trolls, despite their disruptive behavior, harbor some desire to fulfill a purpose with their toxic discourse. Adapting the framework proposed by Adjin-Tettey, it is conceivable that trolls are likely driven by a motivation to enhance social interaction, albeit in a manner that deviates significantly from conventional expectations. The disruptive and toxic nature of their discourse may, in fact, be a manifestation of a desire to carve a space within the social fabric of online platforms.

Drawing support from a study on Chilean students, it is emphasized that "The uses and gratifications of media by individuals are determined by how people see their needs or desires, by their social determinants, and by the attributes of media" (Tirado-Morueta, Ramón, et al. 372). This supports the idea that internet trolls are not aimlessly engaging in toxic discourse; rather, their actions are intricately tied to the social context in which they operate. The desire to wreak havoc, as observed in their disruptive online behavior, can be contextualized within the broader framework of social determinants and the attributes of the digital media landscape.

By building upon Adjin-Tettey's categorization and incorporating insights from Tirado-Morueta et al.'s study, this paper aims to explore how trolls, driven by a desire to impact social interaction, navigate the digital landscape with disruptive and toxic discourse. The proposed analysis seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world manifestations, offering a comprehensive understanding of internet trolls' motivations and actions within the context of Instagram.

Instagram serves as a breeding ground for toxic comments, particularly targeting underrepresented individuals. Swenson-Lepper and Kerby highlight this alarming trend in their research, revealing that "60% of internet users said they had witnessed someone being called offensive names" (102). This unsettling statistic displays the prevalence of online hate, emphasizing the urgent need for a closer examination of the factors contributing to such harmful discourse.

The issue is worsened when a user's identity is hidden, creating a potential breeding ground for even more hateful expressions. Catherine Phipps supports this point, stating, "The widespread nature of online hate may be partly due to the perceived anonymity of commentary, whereby individuals hide their identities to express discriminatory attitudes" (4221). The cloak of anonymity, as suggested by Phipps, seemingly emboldens individuals to unleash discriminatory sentiments without fear of personal accountability.

Nora Draper further reinforces this perspective by noting that antisocial behaviors are most closely associated with anonymous digital spaces. Despite ongoing debates about whether anonymity itself encourages hostility, Draper highlights the stark reality that several prominent anonymous and pseudonymous platforms are marked by misogynistic cultures and gender-based harassment (667). This insight contributes to a growing body of evidence indicating that the veil of anonymity provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of toxic behaviors and discriminatory attitudes.

Arkaitz Lareki et al. shed light on the deceptive personas adopted by trolls. This aligns with CAT's accommodation concept, emphasizing how individuals adapt their behavior within specific online communities. They say, "Creating a fake profile is a type of identity theft that makes it easier for an individual to engage in online extortion through activities such as phishing, grooming, and cyberbullying" (Lareki 338). When others engage in toxic discourse, shielded by anonymity, others anonymous users are likely to adjust their discourse to match what others are saying.

According to Thomas Nakayama, he observed resurgence of racism in online environments (70). This showcases the impact of digital spaces in providing a platform for expressing socially unacceptable views. This is in line with the gratifications sought by trolls, emphasizing the complex nature of online behavior. Nakayama poses another point to say that “People may refer to President Obama or others with the N-word on Twitter but they are not likely to say that in face-to-face communication” (Nakayama 70) likely because internet trolls who seek gratifications to hurt others know they would be met with opposition had they made a comment in-person. Phipps explores the widespread nature of online hate, further attributing it to the perceived anonymity of commentary. This aligns with CAT's accommodation concept, where individuals adjust behavior based on perceived consequences, emphasizing the impact of anonymity on online behavior. She says, "The widespread nature of online hate may be partly due to the perceived anonymity of commentary, whereby individuals hide their identities to express discriminatory attitudes" (Phipps 4221). Muheng Yu and Karyn Riddle's findings further highlight that individuals are more likely to behave aggressively online if they believe they can remain anonymous (1). A unique perspective on anonymity emerges, building on the idea that perceived consequences, or the lack thereof, influence how internet trolls shape their speech.

Narine Tamburrini et al.’s insightful exploration of social identity and language adaptation online provides valuable perspectives into the intricate communication dynamics within digital communities. Their findings suggest that the heightened social identity within online environments contributes significantly to phenomena such as polarization and stereotyping, illuminating the multifaceted nature of interactions in the digital realm (85). This observation aligns with the principles of CAT, which posits that individuals adapt their communication styles to either converge with or diverge from the social norms within a specific group or community.

Tamburrini et al. emphasize the role of social identity in shaping group phenomena, stating, "Social identity can be heightened which explains why some group phenomena, such as polarization of attitudes, and stereotyping, can seem enhanced in some online environments" (85). In the context of CAT, this heightened social identity signifies the adaptation of individuals' communication behaviors to align with the perceived norms and values prevalent within their online communities. It indicates the dynamic nature of social identity and its influence on communication dynamics.

Furthermore, Tamburrini et al.’s continuation of their exploration analyzes the relationship between language characteristics and group isolation within online networks. They note, "We have also found that the extent to which members change their language characteristics depend on how isolated their group is from the rest of the network. This shows that social convergence between several individuals is strongly related to the proportion of their total interaction that they spend within the group" (87). This aspect aligns with CAT's emphasis on adaptation within specific online communities, demonstrating that language adaptation is not uniform but varies based on the level of isolation or integration a group experiences within the broader network.

Ramon Tirado-Morueta et al.'s investigation into smartphone features and their influence on online behaviors resonates with the central factors of UGT, which discusses the significance of media attributes in shaping individual needs and desires. They say, "The mobility, accessibility, usability, and interactivity features of smartphones act as attractive factors that can facilitate both the obtaining of social and cognitive benefits, as well as problematic internet behavior" (372-373). This statement delineates the dual nature of smartphones, serving as conduits for both positive and negative online experiences, aligning with the versatile nature of media highlighted by UGT.

The emphasis on mobility, accessibility, usability, and interactivity features signifies the pivotal role that smartphones play in facilitating a spectrum of online interactions. The mobility aspect ensures that individuals carry a powerful communication device wherever they go, contributing to the continuous integration of digital media into daily life. The accessibility and usability features further enhance the seamless engagement with online content, providing users with a user-friendly interface to navigate the digital landscape. The interactivity component allows for dynamic engagement with online spaces, enabling users to actively participate in various online activities. The instant and widespread nature of these interactions highlights the potential dark side of the technological advancements that enable connectivity and communication.

This research aims to analyze the observed versatile nature of Instagram, including the evident polarization and stereotyping present in the digital discourse on this platform. Qualitative observations on Instagram posts, along with interviews and surveys among Berry College students, will be conducted to capture the complexities of language adaptation and social convergence within the specific context of this digital platform. By incorporating CAT and UGT principles, this paper aims to uncover the intricate interplay between social identity, communication behaviors, and the formation of group phenomena, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse of digital communication.

This comprehensive literature review integrates diverse perspectives on internet trolls. Drawing insights from CAT and UGT, it synthesizes knowledge to illuminate the motivations, behaviors, and consequences within the context of Instagram. The analysis of each source contributes to the understanding of online behavior, emphasizing the adaptability and complex nature of motivations driving internet trolls. The proposed project aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by providing a detailed examination of these dynamics within the specific context of Instagram, offering a unique perspective that extends beyond the existing body of knowledge.

**Works Cited**

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