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Recreational nastiness or playful mischief? Contrasting perspectives on internet trolling between news media and avid internet users

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Abstract

The term “internet trolling” has come to encompass a wide range of disparate behaviours: ranging from abusive speech and computer hacking to sarcastic humour and friendly teasing. While some of these behaviours are clearly antisocial and, in extreme cases, criminal, others are harmless and can even be prosocial. Previous studies have shown that self-identified internet trollers tend to credit internet trolling’s poor reputation to misunderstanding and overreaction from people unfamiliar with internet culture and humour, whereas critics of trolling have argued that the term has been used to downplay and gloss over problematic transgressive behaviour. As the internet has come to dominate much of our everyday lives as a place of work, play, learn, and connection with other people, it is imperative that harmful trolling behaviours can be identified and managed in nuanced ways that do not unnecessarily suppress harmless activities.

This thesis disambiguates some of the competing and contrary ideas about internet trolling by comparing perceptions of trolling drawn from two sources in two studies. Study 1 was a content analysis of 240 articles sampled from 11 years of English language news articles mentioning internet trolling to establish a ”mainstream” perspective. Study 2 was a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants who self-identified as avid internet users familiar with internet trolling as part of their everyday internet use. Study 1 found that 97% of the news articles portrayed internet trolling in a negative light, with reporting about harassment and online hostility being the most common. By contrast, Study 2 found that 30% of the 20 participants held mostly positive views of trolling, 25% mostly negative, and 45% were ambivalent.

Analysis of these two studies reveal four characteristics of internet trolling interactions which can serve as a framework for evaluating potential risk of harm: 1) targetedness, 2) embodiedness, 3) ability to disengage, and 4) troller intent. This thesis argues that debate over the definition of “trolling” is not useful for the purposes of addressing online harm. Instead, the proposed framework can be used to identify harmful online behaviours, regardless of what they are called.

Keywords

Internet trolling, Social media, Cyber-bullying, Hacking, Flaming, Griefing, Fake news, Disinformation.

Summary for Lay Audience

"Internet trolling" is a term that has been used to describe a wide variety of online activities: ranging from abusive speech and computer hacking to sarcastic jokes and friendly teasing. Some of these activities are simply amusing and harmless, while others are clearly harmful or even criminal. Internet users and online communities should be protected from the harmful consequences of trolling, but ambiguity over the definition of "trolling" makes effective regulation difficult. This thesis argues that debates over what does or does not count as trolling are not useful for the purposes of addressing online harm. Instead, efforts should focus on ways to distinguish harmful online interactions from harmless under the trolling umbrella.

This thesis looks at the ways in which internet trolling has been described in mainstream news reporting from 2004-2014 in comparison with the ways in which trolling is understood by people who are familiar with trolling as part of their everyday internet use. These data were used to determine the different types of online interactions that have been called "trolling," the different situations and people involved in trolling, and whether or not trolling was considered to be a problem. Distinct differences of opinion were found between the "outsider" perspectives from the news and the "insider" perspectives of the internet users, but most importantly, common elements of problematic trolling behaviours could be identified in both perspectives. Through an analysis of these data, a framework for evaluating the potential risk of harm in online interactions was proposed based on four characteristics: 1) whether the interaction is targeted, 2) whether there is a tangible or physical component, 3) whether a potential victim can easily disengage from the interaction, and 4) whether the interaction was intended to be harmful. Using this framework, policy makers and regulators of internet spaces may be able to more accurately target problematic online behaviours while avoiding over-policing of innocuous ones.

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Chapter 1

1 « Introduction »

This chapter introduces the phenomenon of "internet trolling," its history, and the controversy surrounding its meaning, which has come to encompass a wide range of disparate behaviours: ranging from clearly antisocial to arguably pro-social. Two vignettes are presented as examples of harmless and harmful trolling. The chapter concludes with a statement of the purpose and significance of this thesis, its research questions, and an overview of the following chapters.

1.1 « Introduction to trolling »

The internet has become an indispensable informational and social resource in our daily lives. In 2020, 92% of Canadian households had broadband internet access (Statistics Canada, 2021) and 85% of American adults used the internet at least daily (Perrin & Atske, 2021). It is the most common source of information that American adults consult when making important life decisions (Turner & Rainie, 2020) and 86% say that they get at least some of their news from online sources (Shearer, 2021). Yet, while technical competencies, such as the ability to operate computer hardware and software have grown with the advancements in technology, there are longstanding concerns about information literacy: "the ability to recognize when information can solve a problem or fill a need and to effectively employ information resources" (Mossberger et al., 2003, p. 41). Moreover, although older adults (Quan-Haase et al., 2018) and other disadvantaged groups (Seo et al., 2020) have been singled out (sometimes unfairly) as being particularly vulnerable to issues related to low information literacy, even so-called "digital natives" who were born into an internet-connected world do not necessarily exhibit higher information literacy than other generations (Kirschner & Bruyckere, 2017; Massanet, et al., 2019). More broadly, one Pew survey has found that those who rely on social media for their political news tend to not only be both less aware and less knowledgeable about current events, but are also more likely to have been exposed to false or unproven claims (Mitchell et al., 2020), in other words, "fake news". Even more worryingly, the people who make up this

group are among the least concerned about the impact of such fake news (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Indeed, the subject of fake news, as well as mis- and disinformation, has taken up substantial space in the public discourse in recent years – especially since the contentious 2016 presidential election in the United States (and again in 2020). While there are a variety of factors contributing to the fake news phenomenon, one specific type of internet user, in particular, has been consistently blamed: the internet troll. Within the last decade, we have seen allegations of election interference from Russian "troll farms" (Park et al., 2021; Ruck et al., 2019), the rise to prominence of online "Alt-Right trolls" (reactionary right-wing white supremacists) in support of Donald Trump and other populist political leaders (Daniels, 2018), and the astroturfing of news and opinions through social media (Broniatowski et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2018). Internet trolls have been implicated in spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, manipulating polls and public discourse, eroding trust in the media and public institutions, and in the targeted harassment of public figures online – in short, with everything bad on the internet. It is no wonder that trolls tend to now be strongly associated with "uncivil and manipulative behaviours" (Rainie et al., 2017).

Early techno-utopians like Fred Turner (2006, p. 257) had hoped that the internet would "level social hierarchies, distribute and personalize work, and dematerialize communication … [and] embody new, egalitarian forms of political organization". While internet technologies have facilitated some of these noble ideals, those same technologies have also allowed the expression of some of humanity's darkest inclinations. "The relative anonymity of the Internet can make people feel safe talking about issues that might be considered sensitive, inappropriate or dangerous in face-to-face public conversation" (Herring et al., 2002), but this anonymity can also feed a sense of toxic disinhibition, where people feel more free to engage with "rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats" (Suler, 2004). Internet trolls are often considered to be the personification of the latter tendency.

1.2 « Characterizing the internet troll »

In conventional terms, a "troll" is a supernatural creature that has its origins in Scandinavian folklore. Some modern depictions of these creatures have characterized them as being cute and benign, or even benevolent, such as in the case of the popular line of Troll dolls[1] or the children's film *A Troll in Central Park*.[2] These depictions, however, are the minority; from traditional folk tales like The Three Billy Goats Gruff[3] to modern fantasy fiction like *The Hobbit* [4] and *Harry Potter*,[5] trolls have predominantly been cast in antagonistic roles as brutish, dim-witted monsters.

On the internet, a "troll" is "a person who sows discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people … with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion".[6] Like the monsters of folklore, trolls on the internet are often characterized as brutish, dim-witted, and antagonistic.[7] Journalists have described internet trolls as "anti-social and malicious" (Devereux, 2007), filling online spaces with hate speech, death threats, and abuse. From this perspective, the troll is an internet bully – lashing out and harassing innocent victims for their own satisfaction. However, there are other perspectives that take a less damning view of internet trolls and trolling.

Internet trolling has not always been viewed with such negativity – there have been, and still are, parts of the internet that condone or even celebrate the practice. In one of the

---

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troll_doll

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Troll_in_Central_Park

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Billy_Goats_Gruff

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troll_(Middle-earth)

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magical_creatures_in_Harry_Potter#Beasts

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troll_(Internet)

[7] For example: http://www.gucomics.com/20100326

earliest published accounts of trolling behaviour on Usenet, Michelle Tepper (1997) described it as a game of information that serves as an “anti-newbie sport” played by those who were more knowledgeable and proficient in online spaces against those who were not. “Trolling,” she says, refers to a fishing technique using a baited hook – but on the internet, the hook is baited with misinformation of a deliberately comical sort (Tepper, 1997). Anyone foolish enough to take this bait and attempt to engage earnestly became a target for mockery and teasing by those who were in the know. Similarly, Judith Donath (1999) called trolling “a game of identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players” (p. 45). Although this type of trolling had the potential to turn malicious, it was often seen by those partaking in it as a mischievous way of enforcing community norms and netiquette rather than as particularly malevolent and more akin to pranking than to harassment.

1.3 « A brief history of trolling »

The story of trolling is tied up in the history of cyberculture – a term coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and which has come to describe “the set of practices, attitudes, modes of thought and values that grow along with the Cyberspace” (Gómez-Diago 2012). Fred Turner (2006) traces the roots of cyberculture to the broader counterculture of the 1960s. Many early virtual communities, such as the WELL, were founded upon the visions of the anti-establishmentarians of the Free Speech movement, as well as the techno-libertarian ethos of computer hackers (Levy, 1984). “Cyberspace,” for them, was transformational: a place where “the old information elites [were] crumbling,” and in their place, “the kids [were] at the controls” (Turner, 2010). These influences, along with the “audacious politics of pranking, transgression, and mockery” (Coleman, 2012) of the Yippies and phone phreaks laid the foundations of what would become internet culture in the years to come.

However, this countercultural hacker paradise was not to last. Eventually, the spread of affordable computer technology and internet access led to what would be known as the “September that never ended” (Raymond, 2003), that is, the period of time since September 1993. The reference comes from the seasonal rhythms of Usenet in the 1980s

and early 1990s, where the start of the fall college semester would bring an annual influx of clueless newbies unfamiliar with the accepted norms of netiquette. Although initially disruptive, in time, these newbies would either learn how to behave and integrate into the community or eventually get bored and leave. But in September of 1993, America Online opened up Usenet access to tens of thousands of customers, unleashing what seemed like an endless wave of digital immigrants that proved impossible to acculturate – thus triggering "an inexorable decline in the quality of discussions on newsgroups" (Raymond, 2003). This, of course, did not sit well with many of Usenet's original denizens who sowed the seeds of cultural conflict.

While the majority of trolls these days likely have no first-hand experience with the events of the internet's countercultural past, they have adopted many of its attitudes, rituals, and aesthetics into their own subculture. According to Gabriella Coleman (2012):

> *Trolls have transformed what were more occasional and sporadic acts, often focused on virtual arguments called flaming or flame wars, into a full-blown set of cultural norms and set of linguistic practices … Trolls work to remind the 'masses' that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief.*
>
> (pp. 109-10)

In this respect, trolling can be seen as a reaction to the "September that never ended". Internet trolls mark themselves and their online spaces through distinctive language and practices that transgress and sometimes offend mainstream sensibilities and expectations. In their minds, internet trolls may see their actions more as a form of protest than an act of random hostility; it is a show of resistance against the gentrification of the online spaces that had once been safe haven to technologically-sophisticated subcultures who felt disenfranchised by the greater society. From this perspective, trolling represents the "tensions between dominant and subordinate groups" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 2) played out all across cyberspace.

1.4 « Disambiguating trolling »

One of the perennial issues in the discourse on trolling has been the ambiguity of the term itself. “Trolling” has been used to describe a wide range of online behaviours and activities from “the vaguely distasteful to the borderline illegal” (Phillips, 2011, p. 68). “Swatting,” along with “flaming,” “griefing,” and “cyberbullying,” are just a few of the behaviours that been directly or indirectly connected with internet trolling in popular and academic literature. Victims and critics of these acts of “online hate” (Shepard et al., 2015) decry them as damaging and toxic, while more sympathetic researchers and commentators tend to skirt these issues to focus on the creative value of benign transgression and “playful mischief” (Kirman et al., 2012). It is often the case that different people are talking about very different things when it comes to trolling, both in terms of kind and degree. According to Massinari (2019, p. 21), “trolling is both an identity and a practice” – that is, the term describes both a range of actions and behaviours that are associated with internet trolls as well as the subcultural sensibilities that motivate and give context to those behaviours. From this perspective, it could be that, while the *spirit* of trolling may be rooted in transgression and mischief, the *effects* of trolling can be quite harmful, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

The following sections give two examples that have both been labeled “trolling,” but with starkly different outcomes. The first is representative of what might be considered benign transgression, while the second demonstrates both malicious intent and tragic consequences.

1.5 « Vignette #1: Please remove me from this list »

One fall Tuesday morning in 2018, an email message advertising upcoming events and guest speakers at the department of Women’s Studies was sent to hundreds of students,

staff, and professors at a university in Ontario, Canada.[8] These sorts of mass emails were a common occurrence at this institution and many others like it, and this case would not have otherwise been notable but for one quirk: instead of using the "blind carbon copy" (BCC) function for the list of recipients, the sender of this email (presumably) accidentally used the regular "carbon copy" (CC) function. This meant that, when the people who were upset that they had received an email not directly and personally relevant to them inevitably wrote back to complain, many of these curmudgeons mistakenly hit the reply-all button on their email client and sent off their irate response to the entire list of hundreds of institutional recipients. These first reply-all missteps prompted others to hit reply-all; some commented on the futility of requests to be removed from institutional mailing lists and others sought to chastise their colleagues' use of the reply-all function (while themselves using reply-all to do so). These, in turn, inspired yet more people to chime in, causing the email thread to rapidly snowball.

Over the next day, this mass email thread spiraled out of control into a "reply-allpocalypse" with hundreds of messages flying back and forth filled with jokes, memes, insults, pleas for decorum, and all manner of tomfoolery. Some people sent pictures of their pets (Figure 1), others composed poetry dedicated to the absurdity of the situation, and one participant decided to use the opportunity to advertise their recently-published novel. Many email recipients took to Twitter to share excerpts from their favourite messages and a Facebook group of nearly 200 members sprang up, brimming with email-derived memes and amused commentary (Figure 2). The silliness even crossed over into the real world, as "please remove me from this list" posters were soon discovered at several locations across campus (Figure 3).

---

[8] Adapted from "Remove me from this list: A case study of trolling in an academic mass email thread" (Chen, 2019)

Figure 1 Photo of pet dog from mass email thread

Figure 2 Facebook group "about" description

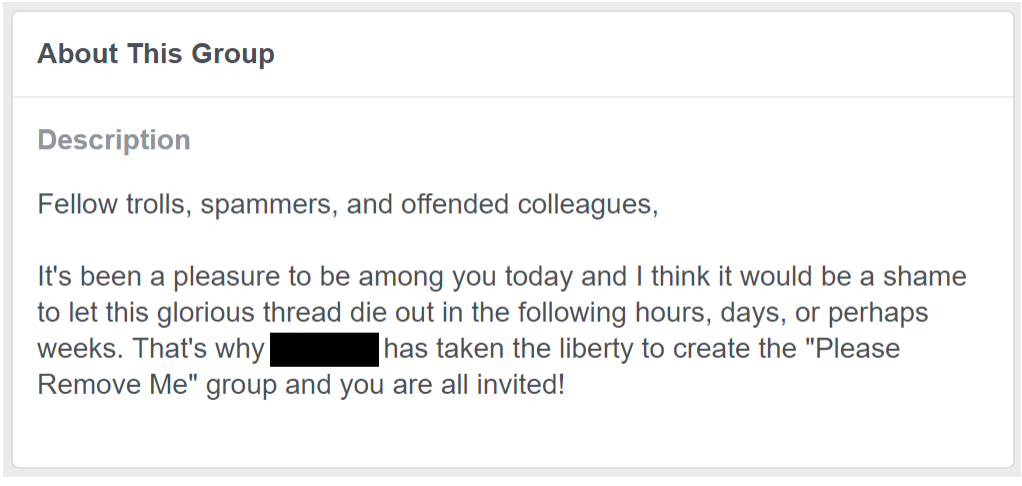

Figure 3 “Please remove me from this list” poster discovered on campus

For the administrative staff at Women’s Studies and other affected departments, this incident was an embarrassing mistake that took almost two days to get under control. But for those gleefully participating in the spectacle or gawking from the sidelines (mostly graduate students, because who else would have the spare time?), the chaos of the “reply-allpocalypse” was a welcome and thoroughly entertaining distraction from classes, research, and thesis writing. These are people who we might call trolls: “a CMC [computer mediated communication] user whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). In this case, the trolling behaviour, while understandably aggravating to some of the people inadvertently caught up in the email storm, was nonetheless a great delight to others.

1.6 « Vignette #2: When pranks turn deadly »

In November of 2017, Activision, one of the largest videogame publishers in the world, released *Call of Duty: WWII*, the newest instalment in their popular online first-person shooter franchise. By the end of the year, *Call of Duty* had already become a bestseller, but this achievement was overshadowed by more dramatic news: the game had been linked to the shocking death of 28 year old Andrew Finch. Just days before the new year, two young men, Casey Viner and Shane Gaskill, were playing Call of Duty together when they started to argue over a wager of $1.50 on an online match.[9] The argument turned nasty and Viner threatened to "swat" Gaskill – a dangerous prank whereby a disgruntled gamer makes a fraudulent emergency call in order to send police to the home of another player as retribution for perceived offences. Viner recruited Tyler Barriss, another gamer known for engaging in swatting in the past, to carry out his revenge. Gaskill reportedly taunted the two on Twitter and gave a false home address and dared them to make the call.

On the evening of December 28th, 2017, Barriss placed a call to the police department in Wichita, Kansas, claiming that he had just shot his father and was holding the rest of his family hostage at the false address provided by Gaskill.[10] Police soon arrived at the home of Andrew Finch, who answered the door and was then shot and killed by an officer. Finch was entirely uninvolved in the gaming feud between Viner and Gaskill and, according to a cousin, Finch wasn't even a gamer[11] – he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not long after news of the shooting spread, Barriss took to Twitter to deny any culpability for Finch's death (Figure 4). While it is true that Barriss did not fire the gun that ultimately took Andrew Finch's life, it was his fraudulent phone call that set

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[9] https://www.polygon.com/2019/3/29/18287168/call-of-duty-swatting-death-prison-sentence

[10] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/06/14/two-rival-gamers-allegedly-involved-in-kansas-swatting-death-plead-not-guilty-in-federal-court/?utm_term=.51bfb4f5c9de

[11] https://www.kansas.com/news/local/crime/article192111974.html

these events in motion. Barriss would eventually be charged with, and plead guilty to, 51 federal charges involving cyberstalking, conspiracy, and making false reports in 2019.[12] Judge Eric Melgren, who sentenced Barriss to 20 years in prison, commented that "the case went into 'uncharted territory,' that the law has not caught up with technology and the charges didn't address the severity of what happened" (Hegeman, 2019).

Figure 4 Tweet by Tyler Barriss following the Wichita police shooting

Swatting, the act at the centre of this case, is a particularly malicious and dangerous expression of trolling behaviour originating in online live-streaming and gaming communities. In most cases, swatting is intended as an empty threat or as a tasteless joke – few calls to police departments are actually made in this way. Unfortunately, in this case, the call was both made and taken seriously.

1.7 « Purpose of this research »

As the above examples demonstrate, there is an immense gulf between the types of behaviours that fall under the "trolling" umbrella. In one case, playful, if annoying, spamming of a university email list. In the other, a fatally disproportionate retaliation

[12] https://www.polygon.com/2019/3/29/18287168/call-of-duty-swatting-death-prison-sentence

over a senseless dispute. The latter is an example of behaviour that certainly cannot be tolerated, but does it make sense to treat the first case in the same way? Both, after all, are considered "trolling". It seems impossible to have a productive conversation about problematic internet behaviour if the same term is used to describe both playful mischief and harmful abuse. Those who see trolling as simply jokes, memes, and weird internet humour would understandably consider calls to regulate it as an overreaction or, at worst, an attack on their freedom of expression – a view that may well be validated if efforts to curtail trolling are not sufficiently nuanced in terms of which specific behaviours are targeted.

Broadly, there are two linked, but contradictory, narratives conceptualizing online trolling. The first is an "outsider" view, often held by people who are not part of internet culture, which casts trolls as villainous, antagonistic users whose actions are harmful to online individuals and communities. Notably, this is the perspective that most frequently informs mainstream news reporting on trolling. The second is an "insider" view that casts trolls as edgy, but (mostly) harmless pranksters who push the boundaries of taste and sensibility – acting upon the ethos that online interactions should not be taken seriously. Representations of this perspective arise mostly from the accounts of self-described trolls and from research based on these accounts.

The outsider perspective has been criticized for unfairly misrepresenting and misinterpreting trolling (Beckett, 2017; Dynel, 2016). Journalists who write articles about technology and the internet may also have little expertise in or understanding of trolling (Marantz, 2016; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). There is also a common perception that the mainstream media is prone to sensationalism and an "if it bleeds, it leads" reporting philosophy that privileges stories about violence, death, and injury (Kilgo et al., 2018). This may lead the media narrative on internet trolling to lack context and nuance, and lean towards fear-mongering and moral outrage. Conversely, the insider perspective has also received criticism for downplaying legitimate concerns about racism, homophobia, misogyny, and other abuses as "just trolling" (Phillips, 2015). Furthermore, given that trolls describe themselves as tricksters and pranksters, there is some question as to the

trustworthiness of their own statements. Could it be that trolling insiders have not been completely sincere in their interactions with researchers and the media?

It is this definitional ambiguity at the heart of trolling that has paralyzed attempts at regulating the worst of what the internet brings out in people and has allowed the normalization of toxic online behaviour. In a sense, "trolling" seems to have become another of Orwell's "meaningless words … [which] have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another" (1946). That is, a word which can mean anything means nothing at all. Orwell also asserts that such words "are often used in a consciously dishonest way" (1946) – those opposed can exaggerate the threat and prevalence of trolling by lumping the innocuous types together with the damaging and trolling apologists can try to downplay problematic behaviours by calling it "merely" trolling.

To examine the ongoing controversy over internet trolling, this thesis explores the issue by bringing in a third perspective: avid, regular internet users who do not necessarily self-identify as trolls. In the Venn diagram of trolling insiders and outsiders, they would be the group of people that fall within the overlapping area (Figure 5). Unlike the outsiders, this third group would be knowledgeable about internet cultures and trolling, and unlike the committed insiders, they may also be more likely to be candid about their opinions on the problematic aspects of trolling. To revive a somewhat archaic term, the word "internaut"[13] seems appropriate to describe these experienced and web-savvy users.

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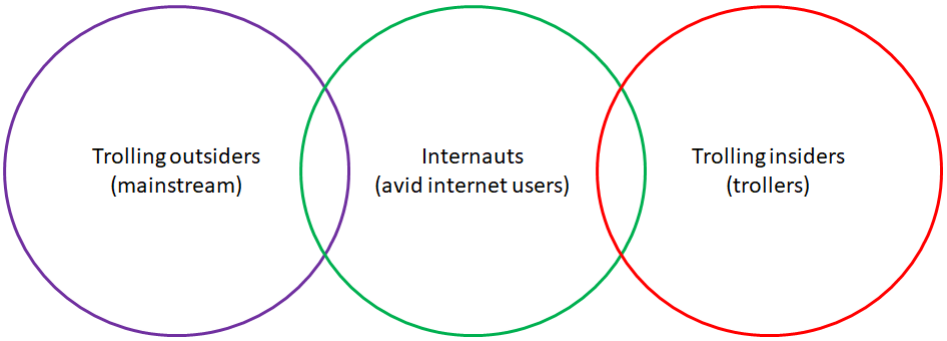
[13] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/internaut

Figure 5 Three perspectives on trolling



This thesis explores the differences between competing narratives about internet trolling from the mainstream "outsider" perspective and the "internaut" perspective. As much of the extant academic literature on trolling is based on data from explicitly "insider" trolls, internauts represent an understudied group. Furthermore, as mentioned above, data collected from self-identified trolls may be unreliable, as the researchers themselves might be trolled. Data from these two sources were analyzed to determine whether the controversy over trolling arises from different readings and interpretations of the same set of actions or behaviours, or if it can be attributed to different groups applying the same label, "trolling," to categorically different actions and behaviours. This work is guided by the three research questions in the following section. For the sake of clarity, I will be using the word "troll" as a verb only from this point (except in quotations). People who engage in trolling acts will be referred to as "trollers" and those who are subjected to trolling acts will be referred to as "trollees".

1.8 « Research Questions»

This thesis investigates both the mainstream and internaut perspectives on trolling interactions based on three questions:

RQ1. How are internet trollers and trolling discussed and characterized in mainstream media reporting?

RQ2. How are internet trollers and trolling discussed and characterized among avid internet users?

RQ3. How closely does the mainstream media reporting on trolls and trolling match the avid internet user discourse in terms of:

a. People who engage in trolling acts (trollers)
b. People who are targeted by trolling acts (trollees)
c. Types of behaviours and actions
d. Attitudes towards those behaviours and actions

1.9 « Signficiance of the Thesis»

This work seeks to tease apart the nebulous concept of "internet trolling" by documenting the different ways in which the term is understood among different groups of people and by describing meaningful distinctions between these conceptualizations. Although this is an active area of academic study (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016), there is still scant literature comparing different perspectives on trolling. Furthermore, while there are numerous studies investigating the harms of trolling behaviour, these have mostly been limited in scope to specific events and/or online communities like #Gamergate (Braithwaite, 2016) or 4chan (Phillips, 2013). Recommendations for addressing problematic trolling based on these studies have been similarly limited in scope and may only be effective in those situations and contexts. My goal in this thesis is to offer a more expansive conceptualization of internet trolling that defines the features which may make trolling behaviours more or less harmful. Rather than concentrate on any one type of behaviour, I propose a framework for identifying harmful trolling based on characteristics shared across all trolling interactions. The recommendations laid out in my framework may be used by regulators, moderators, and policymakers in their efforts to make online environments a safer and more fulfilling place for all people.

1.10 « Thesis overview »

This thesis is broken down into six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the academic literature on internet trolling, concentrating on the various types of behaviours which have been frequently used as synonyms for, or otherwise associated with, trolling. I will examine

concepts including cyberbullying, flaming, and hacking to identify where these concepts overlap with internet trolling and where they differ. This chapter will also summarize both pro- and anti-trolling perspectives and discuss the consequences of trolling behaviours.

Chapter 3 details the methodology and data sources of this mixed methods study. First, the collection and analysis procedure for the newspaper data will be discussed (Study 1), and then the procedure for the semi-structured interviews (Study 2).

Chapter 4 reports the results from the two parts of this study. Content and sentiment categories were identified from the newspaper data, indicating that the majority of news articles focused on malicious or criminal acts of trolling and showed an overwhelmingly negative slant. By contrast, the interview data showed that participants held diverse views on trolling: ranging from approval to disapproval, with the majority somewhere in between.

Chapter 5 interprets the findings of this study and offers a framework with which to identify and classify salient features of trolling behaviours (such as time, place, and intent) in order to distinguish between different types of trolling. This framework may be applied to determine whether a specific trolling act or type of trolling act is likely to be harmful or whether it poses a negligible threat. Through a more nuanced assessment of trolling behaviours, individuals, online platforms, and policy makers can take more appropriate and targeted measures to mitigate the impact of harmful trolling.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings, recommendations, and limitations of this thesis and discusses developments in society and culture, as they pertain to internet trolling, that have occurred since the collection of this study's data in 2014-2016. In particular, this chapter considers how the rise of the Alt-Right and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency have impacted perceptions and understandings of trolling. I argue that the events since the 2016 US presidential election have make it all the more imperative to closely example trolling behaviour and its relation to conspiracy theories, radicalization, and hate both on- and off-line.

Chapter 2

2 « Literature review »

This chapter reviews the literature on internet trolling, concentrating on the various types of behaviours which have been frequently used as synonyms for or otherwise associated with trolling. I will examine concepts including cyberbullying, flaming, and hacking to identify where these concepts overlap with internet trolling and where they differ. This chapter will also summaries both pro- and anti-trolling perspectives and briefly discuss the consequences of trolling behaviour.

2.1 « Introduction »

One of the most persistent points of contention in the field of internet trolling research is the question of what, precisely, trolling means. Different researchers have variously associated trolling with terms such as: "vitriol" (Tkacz, 2013), "vandalism" (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), "rude language" (Binns, 2012), "Sadism" (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014), "cyber-bullying" (Slonje, Smith & Frisén, 2013; Bauman & Taylor, 2015) "flaming" (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003; Hardaker, 2010; Hmielowski, Hutchens & Cicchirillo, 2014; Seigfried-Spellar & Chowdhury, 2017) "hacking" (Coleman, 2014; Matthews & Goerzen, 2019), "griefing" (Ditrich & Sassenberg, 2017) "sexualized threats of violence" (Jane, 2014), and "weaponized misogyny" (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). This lack of clarity in definition has led to a confusing conflation of terms describing concepts that seem to be related, yet distinct. Much of the literature on "flaming," for example, has been criticized for using definitions that were "imprecise within, and inconsistent across, research projects" (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003, p. 70) – definitions such as "antisocial interaction," "emotional outbursts," and "blunt disclosure" (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). This fragmentation of the academic literature makes it difficult to compare findings across different studies and to arrive at any conclusive understanding of what trolling actually is.

This frustration over the definition of "trolling" is also echoed in the popular literature, with journalist Daniel D'Addario lamenting that "everything is 'trolling' now" (July 19,

2013) and Emma Grey Ellis noting that, within newsrooms, the term "has become a point of agita, visited and revisited with each turn of the news cycle" (Apr 26, 2019). George Orwell famously wrote that "the word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something, not desirable'" (1946) and perhaps the same is now true of "trolling". A word that can mean anything effectively means nothing at all. Nonetheless, the difference between "emotional outbursts" and "blunt disclosure" is potentially consequential, and "antisocial interaction" certainly warrants particular consideration – especially when it causes harm. So, does trolling equal cyberbullying equal hacking equal flaming? This chapter reviews relevant academic literature on internet trolling and discusses the relationship between trolling and other types of negative online behaviours. The first section details some of these behaviours that are sometimes considered to be synonymous with trolling (cyberbullying, hacking, flaming, and griefing) and examines how each might overlap with trolling. The second section reviews anti- and pro-trolling perspectives, highlighting the harms of behaviours associated with trolling, as well as the potential positives.

2.2 « Cyberbullying »

"Cyberbullying" is one of the negative online behaviours most frequently treated as effectively synonymous with "trolling". But before we can understand what cyberbullying is, we must first understand what bullying is. Most of the modern research on "traditional" bullying is based on the work of Dan Olweus, who states that "a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (in Law et al., 2012, p. 227). This definition emphasizes three criteria: that there is a power differential between bully and victim, that the actions are repeated over time, and that the bully intends to inflict harm (in Law et al., 2012).

Cyberbullying, then, is most often defined as bullying that takes place through the use of the internet, mobile phones, and other information and communications technologies (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013, p. 9). However, this definition is not without its problems, as many of the characteristics of traditional bullying do not map well onto the online world.

Whereas in the physical world of the schoolyard, power imbalance can be exerted by a physically larger bully over a smaller victim, the power dynamic between individuals in an online environment can be far more complicated. Individuals one the receiving end of aggressive of offensive messages can more easily and are more likely to engage their tormentors, blurring the line between bully and victim (Law et al., 2012). Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by ICTs (information and communications technologies) can make it difficult to establish a pattern of repeated abuse, and intentionality, which depends heavily on context, is notoriously hard to interpret in online communications. These challenges, coupled with inconsistencies over what constitutes cyberbullying, have resulted in studies of the prevalence of cyberbullying around the world reporting a widely disparate range of rates from less than 5% to 67% (Chun et al., 2020).

The central tension in the field of cyberbullying studies is that researchers seem to be applying the term to two different things: (1) cyberbullying as an extension of traditional bullying and (2) cyberbullying as a group of aggressive behaviours unique to the online environment. On the one hand, large-scale studies have suggested that cyberbullying "has not created many 'new' victims and bullies" (Olweus, 2012, p. 520) and that it is largely the same individuals who are involved in bullying acts both on and offline (Festl & Quandt, 2013, p. 104). In these cases, the phenomenon of cyberbullying fits well into the Olweus-based definition as actions aimed at strengthening one's own social position or marginalizing opponents (Sijtsema et al., 2009). On the other hand, there is also a clearly documented record of antagonistic actions that defy classification under the traditional bullying rubric, with its own cadre of researchers arguing that cyberbullying and cybervictimization represent a unique form of interpersonal aggression (Law et al., 2012, p. 231; Cosma et al., 2020).

2.2.1 « Drama »

It may very well be that these two interpretations of cyberbullying are, in fact, two separate things. Marwick and boyd have suggested that at least some of what researchers have been calling "cyberbullying" is more accurately referred to by teenagers as "drama" (2011, p. 1). They make the case that "while drama can resemble bullying, relational

aggression, or gossip, it is distinct from these three practices" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 7). Five key components define drama:

1) *Drama is social and interpersonal*
2) *Drama involves relational conflict*
3) *Drama is reciprocal*
4) *Drama is gendered*
5) *Drama is often performed for, in, and magnified by networked publics*

Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 5

Most notably, drama "allows teens to blur the boundaries between real conflict and jokes, and hurt and entertainment" (Marwick & boyd, 2014) and may be used by teens as a way to talk about situations where there is no clear perpetrator and no obvious victim. In these contexts, the very "slipperiness" of the term is part of its appeal. From both the perspectives of the person instigating drama and the one on the receiving end, the ambiguity of drama "lets teens frame the social dynamics and emotional impact of conflict as unimportant, letting them save face as an alternative to feeling like a victim – or a bully themselves" (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Drama, then, may be a way for young people to explore different kinds of social interactions, even ones that may resemble behaviours that have traditionally been considered anti-social. Adolescence, after all, is time for experimentation and personality formation (Klimstra, 2012) and can involve pushing against the boundaries of accepted norms (Smetana, 2010). Goldsmith & Wall (2019) have suggested that the affordances of internet technologies have not only enabled teens to engage in transgressive acts more easily, but that these technologies may entice them into committing acts that they would not otherwise have contemplated.

With respect to internet trolling, the concept of drama, with its focus on relational dynamics and social transgression, most closely matches subcultural definitions of trolling. The "anti-newbie sport" described by Tepper (1997), for example, fits nicely into Marwick & boyd's framework for relational conflict. Subcultural trolls also tend to minimize the social and emotional impacts of their actions, often exhorting anyone offended by their actions to "not take things so seriously". Similarly, trolling behaviours intended to inflict harm match many of the characteristics of traditional bullying, and by extension, cyberbullying. Although, it is important to note that definitions of

cyberbullying stipulate that there must be a clear power differential between bully and victim and that the behaviour is repeated over time – both of which may not apply in many cases of harmful trolling.

2.3 « Hacking »

In *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, Steven Levy defines the guiding principles of the "hacker ethic" (1984). These principles include the commitment to free and unlimited access to information, the mistrust of authority, and the belief that computers could change human life for the better. While there may be "significant problems in positing any simple connection between all hackers and an unchanging ethic" (Coleman, 2012, p.99), most definitions have, and continue to, characterize hackers as people who "have a profound interest in computers and technology and use their knowledge to access computer systems with or without authorization" (Holt, 2010, p. 467). Even within hacker culture, there is often a preoccupation with authenticity – of differentiating "real" hackers with legitimate computing skills from "script kiddies" (Barber, 2001; Hald & Pedersen, 2012) who simply make use of premade programs and exploits to cause trouble.

One of the most critical distinctions found in the hacker argot is the difference between a hack and a crack. "Hacks" tend to be held in high regard and refer to "any legitimate and useful alteration or adjustment to computer hardware or software, which enables technology to be used in an innovative or unusual way" (Holt, 2010, p. 471), whereas "cracks" referred to alterations for "a negative or potentially criminal application" (Holt, 2010, p. 471) and are often seen as less legitimate. There is also a strong hierarchical bias within the community, where "noobs" (those who are new or inexperienced) and "script-kiddies" (those who hack using premade applications without understanding the technology) are shown little respect and often actively denigrated (Holt, 2010, p. 474). Conversely, to be "elite" or "1337" is considered to be the pinnacle of hackerdom and "held as an ideal to strive for" (Holt, 2010 p. 476). Finally, "true" hackers often self-identify as "black, white, or gray hats" according to their personal ethical perspective. Black for those who were willing to break laws or act maliciously, white for those who

used their knowledge constructively, and gray for those whose actions did not follow any specific moral philosophy (Holt, 2010 p. 476).

2.4 « Flaming »

As a term referring to "the expression of strong and inflammatory opinions to others electronically" (Siegel et al., 1986, p. 161), "flaming" has been in use since at least the 1980s. Early definitions frequently characterized flaming in relatively mild terms, such as "uninhibited behaviour" (Lea et al., 1992), "venting" (Kayany, 1998), and "expressing oneself more strongly on the computer than one would in other communication settings" (Kiesler et al., 1984). Some scholars have even praised the role that flaming plays in internet culture: "as a punitive measure it educates the ignorant, polices cyberspace, brings order to the group, and scares away unwanted commercial advertising" (Wang & Hong, 1995). More recent work, however, has tended towards a more negative view of flaming as specifically aggressive and hostile interactions (Kou & Nardi, 2013; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Andersen, 2021), with numerous authors focusing on the harm that excessively rude or hateful comments can have on individuals and communities (Shukla et al.., 2012; Cicchirillo et al., 2015), along with the potential dangers when this behaviour is normalized (Hwang et al., 2016).

In one of the most influential papers on flaming, O'Sullivan and Flanagin argued for the importance of context and intention in understanding these interactions:

> *"What an outside observer might perceive as hostile language could be perceived by one or both interactants as a routine reminder, an attempt at humor, a deserved reprimand, a poorly-worded but well-intended suggestion, or an intentional use of non-normative language for specific interactional goals"*
>
> (2003, p. 73)

To account for these varying possible interpretations, O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) proposed a framework incorporating sender, receiver, and third-party perspectives in order to distinguish between communicative acts that do not violate interactional norms

and “true” flames, which are interpreted as violations from all three perspectives. Notably, O’Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) point out that some norm violations can have positive outcomes citing situations where “threats and putdowns may be an adolescent sign of affection and trust among some male, undergraduate, computer users” (McCormick & McCormick, 1992). However, this framework has been criticized for relying too much on being able to accurately identify the intent of flame senders. Given that flamers are people who behave in aggressive or hostile ways, Jane (2015) questions “how much credence should be given to their accounts of their motivations” (p. 70).

2.4.1 « Misogyny »

The work of O’Sullivan and Flanagin, along with the literature on flaming in general, has also been challenged for “downplaying, defending, and/or celebrating the discourse circulated by flame producers” (Jane, 2014, p.537) – that, “despite its commendable attempt at even-handedness … its unintended effect is to privilege the rights, experiences, and claims-making of flame producers at the expense of flame targets” (Jane, 2015). On the contrary, Jane (2015) argues that, because the harmful effects of flaming are overwhelmingly felt by flaming targets, their perspective “*should* [emphasis in original] be privileged over the experience of flame authors” (p. 69).

Furthermore, Eve and Brabazon (2008) contend that, although early work by Herring et al. (2002) found that women in feminist communities experience high levels harassment, researchers like O’Sullivan and Flanagin have nonetheless ignored “the masculine inflections of flaming” – that there exists an undeniably gendered aspect to online aggression. While “both men and women dislike flaming, it is more tolerable for men due to a valuing of freedom from censorship and adversarial debate” (Eve & Brabazon, 2008). Gaden (2007) observed that, in particular, “women bloggers have been the targets of sustained and frightening hate attacks”. Shaw (2013) corroborates this claim in her study of Australian feminist bloggers, finding that her participants “found themselves often the target of harassment”. In her analysis of online hostility, Jane (2014) has also noted that “hyperbolic vitriol—often involving rape and death threats—has become a lingua franca in many sectors of cyberspace” and that these threats are “often markedly misogynist” (p. 542). While Jane (2015) and other critics of the “majoritarian view in

academia" recognize that there are possible "upsides" to some transgressive actions and situations, they call on researchers to recognize that there has been a bias towards "*repudiations* [emphasis in original] of dystopic imaginings of the internet as a bad place where bad people are always already doing bad things" and to "acknowledge that flaming is not always an innocuous, victim-free affair" (p. 84).

2.5 « Griefing »

"Griefing," is a term predominantly used in the context of online multiplayer videogames, specifically within the realm of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) and multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA), and refers to "a situation in which a gamer, rather than completing the tasks outlined by the game, intends to cause grief to the opponents and disrupt their enjoyment of the game" (Rubin & Camm, 2013). Griefing-style behaviour has been evident from accounts dating back to the 1990s. Bartle (1996) in his taxomony of MUD (multi-user dimension) users, for example, describes "killers" as a class of users who "get their kicks from imposing themselves on others". Perhaps the most well-known of griefing from this period is Julien Dibbel's (1998) "a rape in cyberspace," originally published in 1993, which tells the story of a singular event within the LambdaMOO community – a virtual community where users participated in collaborative text adventures, role-playing, and conversations. The "Bungle Affair," as it came to be known, involved a user named "Mr. Bungle" who used a "voodoo doll" subprogram to take control of other user characters and forced them to engage in violent and sexual behaviours against their will. Although these violations were entirely text-based and "confined to the realm of the symbolic and at no point threatening any player's life, limb, or material well-being" (Dibbel, 1998), the hurt and outrage of those who had to see their virtual personas hijacked and abused was very real.

In the years since LambdaMOO, griefing has become a prevalent and seemingly-inescapable feature of online gaming environments. While surveys suggest that only a minority of players engage in griefing regularly, ranging from 3% to 10% (Pizer, 2003; Achterbosch et al., 2013; Achterbosch et al., 2017), they tend to have an outsized effect. One survey of Second Life, the online virtual world, found that 95% of sampled users

had experienced griefing (Coyne et al., 2009) and two surveys of MMORPG players revealed that over 97% of respondents had been victims of griefing at some point while gaming (Achterbosch et al., 2013; Achterbosch et al., 2017). Ballard and Welch (2017) have also found that griefing tends to have a gendered component, as heterosexual men are more likely to be perpetrators than any other demographic.

Foo and Koivisto identified three key characteristics for recognizing griefing, which has informed many of the studies into this phenomenon:

> *1. The griefer's act is intentional;*
>
> *2. It causes other players to enjoy the game less;*
>
> *3. The griefer enjoys the act.*
>
> (2004)

Furthermore, Foo and Koivisto (2004) distinguished four categories of griefing: harassment, where the intent is to cause emotional distress; power imposition, where griefers use their gameplay superiority or skill to kill or otherwise prevent weaker players from enjoying the game; scamming, where griefers trick unsuspecting players into fraudulent or unfair deals in order to acquire real or in-game currency or resources; and greed play, where a griefer violates the cooperative spirit of certain games by acting in their own self-interest at the expense of others. The stated motivations of self-identified griefers tend to also fall into four categories: pleasure, power, challenge, and control (Achterbosch et al., 2017). Griefers also generally view their own actions in a largely positive, or at least neutral, light, whereas the attitudes of victims are predominantly negative (Rubin & Camm, 2013).

While some researchers have linked griefing with cyberbullying (Coyne et al., 2009) and other toxic behaviours (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014), others argue that griefing, in some cases, can be interpreted as a subversive challenge to established political or cultural order. Holmes (2013) argues that some griefing incidents represent a kind of anti-

corporate resistance through a “politics of nonsense”. Bakioglu ascribes even broader significance to certain types of griefing:

> *Claiming that they are causing turmoil for lulz (or laughs), griefers treat their activities as mere game play. However, underneath the rhetoric of game play based on targeting those who take the ‘Internet as serious business,’ there exists a cultural phenomenon with serious effects. They not only jam the world’s signification system and subvert the bourgeois taste by spamming the environment with offensive objects, but also attack capitalistic ideology. By crashing sims and significant media events, and regularly launching raids in-world that result in causing businesses to lose money, thereby hurting the virtual economy at large.*
>
> (2009, p. 5)

On a smaller scale, Kirman et al. (2012) discuss the place of mischievous play within multiplayer games as a means to test the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable social behaviours. They argue that positive forms of mischief have value as a creative performance or as a source of serendipitous encounters “as users wrest control of tools from the designer and use them to create new, exciting and usually unexpected social experiences for the greater community” (Kirman et al., 2012). While Kirman et al. (2012) maintain that the intent not to cause distress is an important distinction between positive mischief and “genuinely” antisocial griefing, but this distinction remains highly contextual and subjective.

Despite the negative impact of griefing in online games and virtual worlds, there has been little academic research into ways to prevent or control griefing. Analyzing design and policy decisions in six major esports (competitive) games, Adinolf and Türkay (2018) identify five primary methods that game companies use to deal with toxic behaviours: reporting and punishment, positive reinforcement, priming, restrictions, and muting and avoiding. However, despite the tools available for users to report griefers, few actually take the time to do so, preferring instead to simply mute or ignore the offending player (Adinolf & Türkay, 2018). Second Life studies also suggest that companies may be unwilling or unable to prevent griefing (Coyne et al., 2009). Without significant

pushback either from the player community or the gaming companies, there is a concern that griefing may become normalized to the extent that the average player will see it as simply part of the game and engage in it themselves (Tang & Fox, 2016).

2.6 « Perspectives on trolling »

2.6.1 « Recreational nastiness »

Emma Jane (2014) uses the term "recreational nastiness" to refer to the types of toxic, violent online behaviours that are associated with the most negative aspects of trolling. Motivation for these behaviours can be attributed to the expression of "everyday sadism" (Buckels et al., 2014) in order "to garner what many trolls refer to as 'lulz', a particular kind of aggressive, morally ambiguous laughter" (Phillips, 2011). In short, trolls are motivated to attack other people and disrupt communities on social media because they think it is fun. From the perspective of recreational nastiness, the harm that trolling causes can be categorized at three levels: harm against individuals, harm against communities, and harm against society. Each of these three levels will be discussed in turn.

2.6.1.1 « Harm against individuals »

The case against trolling is most often made based on the personal suffering it causes to those people targeted for harassment and abuse. It is here that the link to bullying (or cyberbullying) is strongest. During #Gamergate, a controversy which arose in 2014 over allegations of ethical breaches in video games journalism, internet trolls, organized through forum sites like Reddit and 4chan, launched a misogynistic campaign of harassment against female video game developers, journalists, scholars, and cultural critics (Braithwaite, 2016). Zoe Quinn, the indie game developer whose ex-boyfriend's accusation that she traded sexual favours in exchange for positive press coverage kicked off #Gamergate, was among the first to be targeted with rape and death threats over social media (Dewey, 2014). "Doxing," the publication of a person's private and personal information (including phone numbers, addresses, and employment information), was one tactic used against many of the women who were publicly critical of #Gamergate,

including feminist media scholar Anita Sarkeesian and game developer Brianna Wu (Mortensen, 2016). This allowed the harassment to follow women off the internet and into their private, offline lives, leading to threats that were so specific that many of these women were advised by police to leave their homes (Dewey, 2014).

Broadly, these types of trolling tactics against individuals have the effect of driving people away from social media platforms, and therefore, preventing them from participating in public discourse and other online activities. Instances of abusive trolling directed at celebrities, journalists, politicians, and other public figures are well-documented in the news and popular media (Time, 2016; Yagoda & Dodd, 2021), but anyone could become the target of personal trolling attacks online. In research, studies have focused predominantly on the effect of trolling towards women (Adams, 2018; Veletsianos et al., 2018), racial minorities (Ortiz, 2019), and other vulnerable populations such as LGBTQ+ people and people with disabilities (Olson & LaPoe, 2017). Victims of this type of abuse reported "emotional responses ranging from feelings of irritation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, vulnerability, and unsafeness; to feelings of distress, pain, shock, fear, terror, devastation, and violation" (Jane, 2014, p. 536). Studies also confirm that the most common reactions by people targeted by trolls were to self-censor, disengage, or otherwise attempt to minimize their online exposure. Furthermore, some victims of trolling withdrew "not only from on-line engagement but from off-line public spheres as well" (Jane, 2014, p. 536). In this way, trolling on and off social media can ostracize and exclude the people who might most benefit from participating in the public sphere.

2.6.1.2 « Harm against communities »

Within the player base of many online multiplayer video games, trolling and other types of "cyberaggression" have become normalized as part of the culture (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020). Indeed, within some highly competitive team-based games, such as League of Legends, "toxicity has become an organic component" (Kou, 2020) that is seemingly inexorably intertwined with the affordances and gameplay dynamics of the game itself. In the gaming context, trolling behaviour can range from abusive communications over text

or voice chat, to attacking one's own team members, to acting in other ways that deliberately ruin the enjoyment of other players in the game (often called griefing). Perceptions of trolling within gaming communities have been documented as ranging from "annoying," to "necessary evil," to "guilty pleasure," and sometimes "even celebrated by some of its members, trolls and everyday gamers alike" (Cook et al., 2018). As noted in Cook et al. (2019), the level of normalization of online aggression in these gaming communities could create a cyclical pattern similar to more traditional bullying behaviours. "Victims and bystanders who are exposed most directly to the troll's antics start reciprocating within the interaction itself" (Cook et al., 2019), thus creating a positive feedback loop that perpetuates and further normalizes the abuse and hostility within these communities.

2.6.1.3 « Harm against society and institutions »

While claims of the downfall of civility brought upon by "the toxic and lawless climate developing on the web" (Waters, 2013) tend to be more sensationalist than accurate, the harm caused by online trolling certainly can extend beyond individuals and their networks. The clearest example of the influence of trolling on societies at large is the breakdown of trust in traditional news organizations and the proliferation of conspiracy theories. The 2016 United States presidential election campaign has been described as among the most negative on record, in no small part due to political trolling carried out by Alt-Right groups in support of then-Republican candidate Donald Trump (Flores-Saviaga et al., 2018; Greene, 2019; Merrin, 2019). In addition to the types of harassment, cyberaggression, and hate speech discussed above, trolls during this time also created and circulated fake news articles and other disinformation to pollute the public discourse. Fabricated stories such as ones about Donald Trump receiving an endorsement from the Pope and Hillary Clinton selling weapons to ISIS received more user engagement on social media than content from major news networks in the lead up to the election (Silverman, 2016). Perhaps even more damaging was "Pizzagate," a conspiracy dreamed up by trolls on the 4chan message board speculating that Hillary Clinton and other Democrats were operating a child sex ring in the basement of a Washington, DC pizzeria (Fisher et al, 2016). Not only did these specious accusations inspire an armed attempt to

liberate the children supposedly held at this restaurant, but the Pizzagate conspiracy also became the progenitor of later "QAnon" conspiracies, which place Donald Trump at the head of a resistance working to counter a shadowy, global cabal of "Deep State" evildoers, including the mainstream news media (LaFrance, 2020).

In addition to spreading via messages and memes on social media, these conspiracies and hoaxes were also amplified through reporting by major news networks. The effect, according to a report by Phillips (2018), was to "make the messages, and their messengers, much more visible than they would have been otherwise, even when the reporting took an explicitly critical stance". One of the primary motivators of internet trolls is attention-seeking, and this sort of media coverage provided that in spades. Not only did this signal to trolls that their tactics were working, Phillips (2018) also argues that giving attention to trolling in this way may have helped to normalize and lend credence to false narratives. News organizations are thus placed in the awkward position of having to fend off outrageous attacks on their credibility by conspiracy theorists while at the same time trying not to legitimize those same baseless accusations by taking them seriously. Regardless, the effect has been an erosion of public trust in traditional news institutions as audiences increasingly turn towards partisan (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) and social media sources (Shearer & Grieco, 2019).

The level of mis- and disinformation circulating through the public sphere has led many in the media to claim that we now live in a post-truth era and, indeed, the term was named the Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year for 2016.[14] While deceptive or misleading information is nothing new, the speed and scale of its dissemination over the internet, propelled by trolls and other malicious actors and given credence by a news ecosystem driven by the monetization of clicks (Chen et al., 2015), has reached a level that threatens "the overall intellectual well-being of a society" (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Studies have shown that merely being exposed to conspiratorial claims can negatively affect people's trust in and acceptance of official information (Einstein and

[14] https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

Glick, 2015; Raab et al., 2013) – an effect that has been weaponized by right-wing populist politicians like Donald Trump to attack their critics as “fake news”.

Trump and his supporters have proven to be adept at using what Merrin (2018) calls “troll-politics” to wage “memetic warfare” against their opponents. Appropriating the tactics and the sarcastic irreverence of trolling culture, Merrin argues that “this troll-politics is now central to our political life, constituting, for many people, their most common mode of political expression, participation and activism” (2018). Instead of bringing about the democratization of the public sphere, as early techno-utopian visions of the internet had dreamed of, the environments created by social media platforms like Twitter are more akin to “schoolyard[s] run by bullies” (Hannan, 2018).

2.6.1.4 « The harmful effects of trolling »

In study after study, the hurtful and damaging effects of internet trolling have been documented again and again. These accounts problematize techno-utopian ideas about how the internet would “level social hierarchies, distribute and personalize work, and dematerialize communication … [and] embody new, egalitarian forms of political organization” (Turner, 2006). While it may be true that “the relative anonymity of the Internet can make people feel safe talking about issues that might be considered sensitive, inappropriate or dangerous in face-to-face public conversation” (Herring et al., 2002), the level of anonymity and mediated interactivity afforded by this technology has also led to a rise in toxic disinhibition, where online interactions can devolve into “rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats” (Suler, 2004) with shocking regularity. The internet certainly does provide people with new freedoms and new avenues of expression, but it has also allowed trolls unprecedented access and opportunity to spread chaos and suffering – often for nothing more than their own amusement.

At each of the three levels, the internet trolling can have serious and long-lasting consequences. Attacks on individuals often silence and oppress the very people who might benefit most from an open forum for connection and support. Unchecked toxic behaviour and cyberaggression can sabotage prosocial interactions and push online communities into a spiral of ever-increasing negativity. Finally, the malicious spread of

mis- and disinformation over social media platforms by bots and trolls erodes public trust in government and institutions and drives conflict and polarization. And yet, it would be foolishly myopic to blame trolling for all the ills of the internet. “Trolls may be destructive and callous,” Phillips (2015) argues, “but the uncomfortable fact is that trolls replicate behaviours and attitudes that in other contexts are actively celebrated … [they] amplify the ugly side of mainstream behaviour”. No doubt there is more that can be done to mitigate the harm that trolls can cause – a serious reconsideration of how social media platforms moderate content and enforce terms of service agreements would be a start (Gillespie, 2018) – but trolling is simply an expression of broader issues of how we treat ourselves and others. Addressing the root causes of harmful trolling, rather than just the symptoms, will require grappling with much more fundamental societal problems than online misbehaviour.

2.6.2 « Playful Mischief »

After detailing so many of the adverse effects of internet trolling, can it be possible for trolling to be anything but harmful? Wouldn’t any argument for a positive side of trolling essentially constitute a defense of the indefensible? The primary issue lies in the way that the term “trolling” has become a sort of catch-all for any “online behaviours with even the slightest whiff of mischief, oddity, or antagonism” (Phillips & Milner, 2018). Almost every type of behaviour online has been called “trolling” at some point – not just the ones that are abusive or anti-social. As a result, behaviours that are relatively benign or even arguably pro-social have been indiscriminately lumped in with the more problematic ones (Cruz et al., 2018). Nevertheless, more light-hearted and productive types of internet trolling have been documented (Cruzet al., 2018; Mylonas & Kompatsiaris, 2019; Phillips, 2015; Sanfilippo et al., 2018) and, sidestepping the prescriptivist debate over what “trolling” means, this section will discuss some of the positive effects of trolling on social media.

2.6.2.1 « Creative transgression »

One of the most consistent features of internet trolling identified across the literature is transgression (Cruz et al., 2018). That is, trolls act in ways that violate common norms and sensibilities. Since the present subculture of internet trolls evolved from the counterculture sensibilities of the early internet, this is not surprising. Despite its negative connotations, though, transgression is not necessarily a bad thing. Sociologist Chris Jenks (2013) places transgression "in liminal zones within culture, such as the avant-garde, radical political movements and counter-cultural traditions in creative practice". Rather than as a subject of abhorration, Jenks (2003) describes transgression as "a dynamic force in cultural reproduction" that "prevents stagnation". Trolling, as a type of playful mischief, exists within that same transgressive grey area at "the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour" (Kirman et al., 2012) and "is fundamentally about the negotiation of culture, norms, and expectations" (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). So long as this play does not cross the line into bullying, these minor transgressions help lend a lively vitality to social media interactions. For example, in one study of the "r/TrollXChromosomes" subreddit, a community dedicated to provocative and humorous women-centered content, Massanari (2019) found that the "trolls harness the unbridled, chaotic energy of the trickster to play or upend some aspects of hegemonic femininity". Through a pro-feminist "reclamation" of the troll identity, members of the subreddit "collectively share and bond around everyday experiences" (Massanari, 2019).

Another feature of trolling that is consistent across studies is humor (Coleman, 2014; March & Marrington, 2019; Phillips, 2015). Of course, whether the targets of trolling behaviour and uninvolved onlookers actually interpret such interactions as humorous is highly subjective and context-dependant, but trolls generally are at least attempting to be funny, even some of those who engage in the abusive behaviours discussed previously. In its more benign expressions, this impulse for performative humor often manifests in playful mischief. The infamous Leeroy Jenkins incident in the World of Warcraft online video game is one example of innocuous troll humor. This incident, captured on video and uploaded to YouTube in 2005, features a group of players discussing their strategy in preparation for a difficult encounter. In the midst of this, one member of the group,

Leeroy Jenkins, who had stepped away to prepare dinner, returns and interrupts the planning by prematurely charging into battle while screaming his own name.[15] As the rest of the party rushes in to help, they are all promptly killed. In the video, the other party members can be heard chastising Leeroy for his incompetence, who simply replies "at least I have chicken". Normally, intentionally sabotaging cooperative events like this would be considered griefing, as discussed above, but the Leeroy Jenkins incident was so over-the-top ridiculous (and presumably contrived) that it was taken as a joke instead. Leeroy Jenkins became a meme among players of World of Warcraft, inspiring numerous copycats, and was eventually made into an official in-game character.[16] Rather than have an anti-social effect on the World of Warcraft community, Leeroy Jenkins became a pro-social in-joke that gave players something to laugh about and bond over (Lowood, 2006).

2.6.2.2 « The internet meme machine »

The Leeroy Jenkins example introduces yet another way in which internet trolling can have a positive effect on social media: memes. Originally coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to describe units of cultural inheritance, memes on the internet have come to be defined colloquially as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison, 2012). Most communication on social media platforms lack many of the verbal and non-verbal social cues that are possible in face-to-face interactions (Derks et al., 2007). Without contextual cues like facial expressions and intonation, it can be difficult online to tell the difference between an earnest comment and a sarcastic one, and interactions may feel more impersonal. Internet memes have been suggested as one a way in which people can form bonds and find affinity with friends and strangers online: "people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity" (Shifman, 2014). Just as with World of Warcraft players and Leeroy Jenkins, the use of memes as in-jokes and references can

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[15] https://youtu.be/mLyOj_QD4a4

[16] https://www.wowhead.com/achievement=9058/leeeeeeeeeeeeeroy

serve as “cultural touch-points” (Massanari, 2013) to build a sense of community over shared experiences or interests.

A significant creative force in the production of internet memes “emerg[ed] out of esoteric forums in the early 2000s” (Milner, 2018). While the irreverent trolling culture that forum communities like 4chan and Reddit cultivated has been a factor in allowing them to become breeding grounds for online hate, as shown by their involvement in harassment campaigns like #Gamergate (Shepard et al., 2015), that same flippant sensibility, when turned to less malignant purposes, simply results in “people acting silly” (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). The transgressive, humorous spirit of trolling has been a powerful driver in the production and proliferation of internet memes, which “shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour, actions of social groups” (Shifman, 2014). While racist and bigoted memes have indeed been an anti-social and divisive influence on social media (ADL, n.d.), humorous memes can act as a form of collective folklore that make the internet “feel more like a ‘place’” (Milner, 2018).

Massanari (2013) has documented how popular memes on Reddit enter into the platform’s collective folklore. One example is the “2am chili” meme, a photo recipe for chili featuring a snarky stick figure, which inspired numerous follow-ups and imitators (Massanari, 2013). Another types of Reddit meme is the novelty account: a user that posts drawings, stories, or comments that reflect the user’s account name or follows a theme. The user “Poem_for_your_sprog,”[17] for example, writes poetry inspired by other users’ posts and comments, while the user “Shitty_Watercolour,”[18] true to his name, creates watercolour paintings. Another user named “shittymorph”[19] was infamous for engaging in a type of bait-and-switch trolling where he would reply to posts with comments that initially appeared to be relevant, but which always ended with a statement

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[17] https://www.reddit.com/user/Poem_for_your_sprog

[18] https://www.reddit.com/user/shitty_watercolour

[19] https://www.reddit.com/user/shittymorph

of “the fact that in 1998, The Undertaker threw Mankind off Hell In A Cell, and plummeted 16 ft through an announcer's table” (Know Your Meme, 2022). Rather than being viewed as malicious attempts to disrupt conversation, shittymorph’s non sequiturs about professional wrestling tend to be highly upvoted (an indication of popular agreement or approval) and even celebrated. Like with the classic “Rickroll” meme (where unsuspecting users are redirected to Rick Astley’s 1987 hit song “Never Gonna Give You Up”), Reddit users who fall for shittymorph’s bait-and-switch often express amusement at the deception rather than annoyance because the other users in the community will explicitly point out that it is a joke.

2.6.2.3 « Wholesome transgression »

Perhaps the clearest example of trolling with pro-social intent is within the genre of so-called “wholesome memes”. These memes are characterized as being “pure of heart, devoid of corruption or malice, modest, stable, virtuous, and all-around sweet and compassionate” (r/wholesomemes, n.d.). In contrast to more typical internet memes, which are frequently sarcastic or ironic, wholesome memes often feature exaggerated messages of love and caring and come abundantly peppered with heart emojis. Gaining popularity starting in 2016, wholesome memes have been interpreted as representing a rejection of the cynical nihilism and antagonism that had risen to prominence in internet culture via #Gamergate and the 2016 US presidential campaign (Chabot & Chen, 2020). Whereas traditional trolling transgresses the norms of mainstream society and netiquette, wholesome memes can be seen as transgressing against the conventions of traditional trolling. Instead of mocking things like social taboos and political correctness, this wholesome flavor of trolling mocks meme culture’s fetishization of aggressive, edgy humor. Wholesome memes playfully subvert the tropes and iconography of satirical and ironic memes in order to deliver a winking reversal of the negativity permeating online social spaces (Chabot & Chen, 2020). While there have been few studies of the wholesome meme phenomenon so far, mainstream commentators have described this move towards a kinder, gentler internet culture as stemming from a desire to mitigate the tension and anxiety of the times (Nagesh, 2018; Romano, 2018).

2.6.3 « The positive effects of trolling »

As discussed in the preceding sections, there are particular ways in which trolling behaviours can make a positive impact on social media platforms. This argument centers primarily on the vitalizing creative force of benign transgression: the playful mischief wrought by internet trolls has produced much of the content that makes the internet such an interesting participatory space. Trolling subcultures have been one of the main drivers in the creation of popular and enduring internet memes. Within many online communities, memes and in-jokes act as points of common reference that give those communities a sense of identity and become a part of the collective folklore – of the stories that they tell about themselves. This has allowed places like r/TrollXChromosomes, for example, to flourish on Reddit, whose culture is otherwise dominated by a "geek masculinity," that is, reflecting the values of "young, White, heterosexual, middle class, cis-males, who are technologically savvy/STEM-oriented [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths], and libertarian-minded" (Massanari, 2019). The recent trend towards wholesome memes as a pro-social expression of trolling practices is another example of the creative energies of playful transgression turned to positive ends. Whereas negative trolling has been a polarizing and antagonistic influence on social media, positive trolling can be a counter-acting force that promotes kindness and empathy.

2.7 « Comparing trolling perspectives from the literature »

As this literature review has demonstrated, significant overlap exists between cyberbullying, hacking, flaming, griefing, and trolling. Each is generally treated as a predominantly online phenomenon. Each is rooted in a desire by actors to push, test, or otherwise transgress expected norms. And, although each is primarily characterized as undesirable or antisocial, there is a body of work challenging the idea that these behaviours are entirely negative.

In some cases, trolling may be indistinguishable from cyberbullying, hacking, flaming, or griefing. A sustained campaign of abuse and harassment against a feminist blogger could be one form of trolling, as could a coordinated distributed denial of service (DDOS)

attack to bring a website offline. In other cases, such as when humourist David Thorne attempted to pay an overdue bill with a drawing of a spider,[20] trolling is categorically not any of these things. While cyberbullying, hacking, flaming, and griefing may appropriately describe its most negative manifestations, trolling is not tied down inexorably to the misanthropic and antisocial. What sets trolling apart from the others is its undeniably positive aspect: as mischievous play and creative re-appropriation.

Over the past several years, researchers have increasingly recognized the complexities of trolling perspectives. In particular, work by Sanfilippo and colleagues has found that similar trolling behaviours can have quite different responses and consequences depending on community and context (Sanfilippo et al., 2017). Sanfilippo et al. (2018) have also suggested that these differences in perception of trolling can be conceptualized based on whether the trolling act is intended to be humorous to a wide audience or only to the troller themselves. This present thesis is motivated in part by the call from Sanfilippo and colleagues to further investigate perceptions of trolling from different social groups and insider/outsider perceptions, in particular.

2.8 « Summary »

This chapter reviewed relevant literature on internet trolling up to 2021. The relationship between trolling and several related concepts were examined, including cyberbullying, flaming, and hacking. Both critical and supportive perspectives on internet trolling were discussed. Anti-trolling perspectives concentrated on highlighting the harmful consequences of internet trolling on individual, community, and societal levels. Pro-trolling perspectives concentrated on framing internet trolling as “creative transgression” and argued that the in-jokes and memes produced as a result of trolling serve as important identity markers in virtual spaces.

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[20] http://www.27bslash6.com/overdue.html

Chapter 3

3 « Methodology »

This chapter details the methodology and data sources of this thesis. For Study 1, a sample of 240 news articles that mentioned internet trolling from between 2004-2014 was collected. Content analysis was performed on these articles in order to identify content categories and their sentiment towards trolling. Study 2 consists of 20 semi-structured in-person interviews with participants who self-identified as avid internet users who were familiar with internet trolling. Transcripts of these interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to categorize each participant's thoughts and opinions on trolling.

The methodology for the collection and analysis of data from news sources is described in Chapter (CH) 3.2 and data from interview participants in CH 3.3. These data were gathered in order to identify how trolling is discussed and characterized in mainstream media reporting (RQ1) and among avid internet users (RQ2). The results of analysis of these two data sets then facilitate the examination of RQ3 (CH 3.4).

3.1 « Introduction to methodology »

This mixed-methods study consists of two parts. The first (Study 1) is a content analysis of English-language news articles that mention internet trolling. While it seems that there is a broad, general consensus that trolling is represented negatively in the media (among commentators both for and against trolling), there has been little work done to investigate and substantiate this. This first study will establish the news media's position when it comes to matters of internet trolling (CH 1.8 - RQ1). This part of the study is largely quantitative, establishing the most frequent terms and contexts in which trolling is reported.

For the second study (Study 2), semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who self-identified as avid internet users who were familiar with trolling practices and behaviours. Using examples of trolling instances drawn from the news analysis, as well as the participants' own experiences, these interviews were designed to probe for responses and commentary from individuals familiar with the norms and

practices of cyberculture (CH 1.8 - RQ2). This part of the study employs a thematic analysis approach in order to delve deeply into the rich and highly personal perspectives provided by the interview participants.

The data from these two studies will identify how each group defines internet trolling and what features and characteristics are considered the most salient. Similarities and differences in how trolling is understood by each of the two groups are then compared and analyzed (CH 1.8 - RQ3).

This thesis does not take a positivist approach and does not seek to test any particular hypothesis with regards to trolling. Rather, this work takes an inductive grounded theory approach in the sense that theory development is grounded in the data collected from the two studies. Grounded theory methods are "particularly well suited for studying uncharted, contingent, or dynamic phenomena" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 155), and are thus appropriate for this exploratory investigation into insider/outsider perceptions of internet trolling. What this thesis does set out to do is to build a model that can distinguish between trolling interactions that may cause more or less harmful outcomes based on the data from these two studies.

The data collected and analyzed for this thesis also represent opinions and perspectives of trolling at a particular time: that being from 2004 up to early 2016. As it turned out, the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency proved to have major impacts on news coverage on and public perception of internet trolling around the globe – impacts that researchers are still working to understand (Fichman, 2022). Although the post-Trump era represents the next phase in trolling research, it is not within the scope of this thesis. This present work is positioned as a snapshot of views on internet trolling leading up to the watershed event that is the Trump presidency.

3.2 « Study 1: the mainstream media perspective – news articles »

It is well established that mass media can have a strong influence over public opinion and discourse. According to agenda-setting theory, "[r]eaders learn not only about a given

issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). Previous work has shown that negative or positive media coverage of different countries is strongly correlated with public opinion of those countries (Besova & Cooley, 2009). Similarly, news framing theory (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2008) posits that the way in which subjects are portrayed in reporting can also affect how news consumers interpret and react to those subjects. For example, one experiment found that participants were more accepting of a potential local Ku Klux Klan rally when it was framed as a free speech issue than if it was presented as a public order issue (Nelson et al., 1997). Another study by Parrott et al. (2020), criticized reporting on video game addiction for a "lack [of] source diversity" when elite sources (medical professionals) were allowed to dictate the conversation to the exclusion of ordinary people (gamers themselves) – this situation may also be present in the journalistic discourse on internet trolling. Parrott et al. (2020), further suggest that "sensational coverage" from tabloid-style newspapers "nurtures moral panic while also trivializing the experience of people who actually encounter problems." With these media effects in mind, Study 1 treats mainstream media reporting on internet trolling as an indicator of an "outsider" perspective (see CH 1.7) which may influence popular understanding of trolling. This first study examines a sample of English language news reporting on internet trolling over 11 years in order to answer RQ 1 (CH 1.8).

3.2.1 « News article collection »

The news articles for this study were collected in two stages. The bulk of the articles was collected in the summer of 2014 and comprised a sample ranging from January 1st, 2004 to December 31st, 2013. This date range was initially selected because it encompasses much of the time period where the internet was gaining widespread adoption. 2004 saw the popularization of the idea of "Web 2.0," which conceptualized the internet as a participatory space for user generated content (O'Reilly, 2005), as well as the founding of Facebook, Google's initial public offering, and the creation of 4chan, just months earlier near the end of 2003. This portion of the study was initially conceived as a ten year sample of news reporting on internet trolling; however, through 2014, the Gamergate controversy developed into one of the biggest news stories of the year involving internet

trolling. In light of these events, the decision was made to extend the news data sample collection in order to capture some of the reporting on this topic. In the second stage of data collection, articles from January 1st, 2014 to December 31st, 2014 were collected in the summer of 2015, expanding the total coverage of news articles in this sample to eleven years (2004-2014).

The articles used in this study were obtained from the Factiva database through a keyword search. As an aggregator of media content from around the world, Factiva was chosen for its comprehensiveness and breadth. The search terms used to retrieve articles were "troll*" with the truncation in order to capture the various grammatical forms (trolls, trolling, trollers, etc.), combined with "internet" OR "online," in order to capture the appropriate context. Filters were also applied iteratively in order to remove articles about trolling in unrelated contexts, such as patent trolling, fishing, and boating. No geographical limits were applied, but only articles in English were collected. In all, the Factiva database search yielded 31,892 articles, of which 7,576 were automatically filtered out by Factiva as duplicates, for a net total of 24,316 articles. One out of every 100 (roughly 1%) of these articles were chosen for in-depth analysis through systematic sampling with a random start for each calendar year, yielding a final sample size of 240 (see Appendix A).

3.2.2 « News article analysis »

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) was chosen as the means by which to investigate the themes and sentiment linked to trolling in the news articles. Specifically, this method was chosen to answer RQ1 (CH 1.8). Content analysis is "the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication" (Riff et al., 2013) and, as a technique developed for the study of media and messages, content analysis is a useful method through which to examine "the content of messages embedded within texts" (Frey et al., 2000). Content analysis methods have long been associated with newspaper research and, more broadly, have been used extensively to study mass-mediated or other public communications in general (Herring et al., 2004; Quandt, 2008; Synnott et al., 2017; Wanta et al., 2004).

Study 1 takes a quantitative approach to content analysis and is primarily concerned with discovering the frequency in which different terms and concepts are associated with internet trolling in the news. As texts, news articles are often necessarily brief, and so, may not offer particularly in-depth coverage of issues or events. Indeed, the news articles sampled for this study show a great deal of variance in terms of how much of the article text is about trolling. In some cases, articles may mention internet trolling only in passing, while others may dedicate several paragraphs discussing a trolling event. To ensure better comparability between news articles in this sample, the unit of analysis for this study was at the individual article level. The coding procedure marked only whether or not any particular code was applied to an article; the number of times that code appeared within any single article was not recorded.

As little work has been done to investigate the news perspective on internet trolling during this time period (2004-2014), this part of the analysis is intended to be mainly descriptive: the purpose was to identify terms and concepts that are associated with trolling in mainstream news reporting. Content codes were developed to mark the occurrence of words and phrases related to the four content categories of interest (CH 1.8 – RQ3): trolling behaviours, trollers, trollees, and attitudes towards trolling. All articles were read carefully by the researcher, with special attention paid to portions of the text where variations of the word “troll” appear. Terms and descriptions in sentences where variations of the word “troll” did not appear were also coded when it could be inferred that the statements were referencing or commenting on the subject of trolling. All articles were coded iteratively by the researcher using HypeRESEARCH qualitative research software.

The basic framework of the coding scheme was determined based on a review of the scholarly literature on trolling and further refined through iterative coding passes. Specifically, this analysis was focused on three fundamental aspects of internet trolling: 1) what types of actions and behaviours are associated with trolling, 2) who are the people or entities cited as perpetrators of trolling (trollers), and 3) who are the people or entities cited as targets or victims of trolling (trollees)? Individual articles were read carefully for occurrences of words and phrases related to trolling, as well as the context in

which they appear. Codes were developed to according to the precepts of Content Analysis to mark and aggregate concepts and themes as they occurred in the data. These codes were applied nonexclusively – that is, articles that associated trolling with "baiting" and "disruption" were counted in both categories. Not all articles reported on trolling in a substantive way; some included the term as little more than a mention. As a result, not all articles could be coded for all three of the trolling, trollers, and trollees categories, but all articles could be labeled with at least one.

Additionally, each article was also coded for its sentiment towards trolling. Sentiment categories were positive, neutral/ambivalent, or negative and were mutually exclusive. For example, an article that mentioned both positive and negative aspects of internet trolling would be coded as neutral/ambivalent (CH 3.2.2.4).

3.2.2.1 « News coding – trolling behaviour »

The "trolling behaviour" category was applied to sentences and portions of sentences where actions were attributed to trollers or given as examples of trolling (see Table 1). Actions that were not explicitly linked to trolling in the same sentence were also included in the "trolling behaviour" category, so long as it was clear that the context was about internet trolling. For instance, a passage about "a woman who made disparaging comments about her landlord on her Internet blog" (article 2006-11) was coded as an example of trolling behaviour because "disparaging comments" falls within the "flaming" category of trolling (CH 2.4).

Table 1 Coding scheme for trolling behaviours

Trolling Behaviour Categories	**Trolling Actions**	**Code Definitions & Example Text**
Abusive Trolling	Harassment/threats	Online abuse directed at a person or persons. May be repetitive. May involve threats of violence or other actions.

		2012-15 "…anonymous attackers who send threatening or destructive comments over the internet."
	Hate/bigotry	Racism, sexism, or other bigotry. Includes hate speech or other references to "hate" 2008-10 "Do they really need to fill every crack and crevice of the internet with sexist, racist or bigoted comments?"
	Hacking	Unauthorized access or use of computer systems, accounts, or data. 2011-20 "Hacking is not a competitive sport, and security breaches are not a game"
	Bullying	Specific reference to either "bullying" or "cyberbullying". 2004-03 "Herring says trolling is the cyber version of schoolyard or workplace bullying."
Disrespectful Trolling	Insults/hostility	Rude, denigrating, or offensive comments or behaviour where a specific threat is not explicit. 2014-56 "You can't stop people saying hurtful things on the internet."
	Obscenity/sexuality	References to obscene or sexual content or behaviour. 2007-12 "…remember that under its bridges lurk trolls with award-winning halitosis and bad feet, and I am not just talking about the porn and other evil stuff polluting internet drains."
	Mockery/snarkiness	Comments or behaviour making fun of a person or persons. Humorous intent may be implicit or explicit.

		2013-19 “He used his personal Twitter account to apparently mock Hannah’s death and the ongoing scandal surrounding his website.”
Sub-cultural Trolling	Disruption/rule breaking	Comments or behaviour intended to disturb the peace of a community or organization, or which violate netiquette or other codes or conduct. 2007-14 “They police Wikipedia, bust WikiTrolls who try to disrupt the site, and lock down oft-molested areas, such as that of the commander in chief.”
	Provocation/baiting	Comments or behaviour intended to incite arguments or conflict. 2013-28 “…trolling is about saying things purely to derive a reaction.”
	Disinformation	References to false or misleading information, including conspiracies and astroturfing. 2007-10 “But efforts to manipulate reputation on the Web are often found out by a site’s regular users, who openly criticize corporate trolls as ‘floggers,’ short for fake bloggers.”
	Jokes/humour	References to jokes or humour. 2014-23 “After protesting in court that his outburst was meant as a joke, Stevenson had his sentence deferred for a year for good behaviour.”
	Gatekeeping	References to in-group/out-group discrimination, including trolling as a test of internet literacy.

		2008-05 “These trolls are an awful, alienated bunch who justify their predations by claiming to provide a public service: They cull the weak from our ranks.”

3.2.2.2 « News coding – trollers »

The “trollers” category was applied to entities identified in news articles as actors in instances of trolling (see Table 2). This identification can be direct, such as in the case of “idle pranksters love to ‘troll’ Digg-like sites” (article 2006-7), or indirect, such as in the case of “online vandals” (article 2010-12) responsible for defacing Facebook memorial sites. Terms known to have been used synonymously with “troller” in the literature (see CH 2) were also coded into this category, for example “flamers,” as in “cyberspace flamers spewed venom in the early ’90s” (article 2007-2), as well as “bullies” and “cyberbullies,” as in “spineless bullies who abuse others on Twitter” (article 2014-56).

Table 2 Coding scheme for trollers

Troller Characteristics	Troller Categories	Code Definitions & Example Text
Gender	Male	The person or persons responsible for trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as male. 2006-11 “…a Saskatchewan math professor who anonymously skewered his colleagues…”
	Female	The person or persons responsible for trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as female. 2007-10 “A 26-year-old who works at a publishing house considers this part of her job.”
Age	Youth	The person or persons responsible for trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as under the age of majority.

		2014-30 “Staffordshire Police has spoken to four teenagers who sent racist and threatening tweets…”
Troller Types	Jerk	Any reference to trollers using a derogatory label that does not fall under a separate code. 2009-03 “I’m not going to link to the post, because this killjoy does not deserve my link-love.”
	Bully	Instances were trollers were either specifically referred to as “bullies or cyberbullies” or associated with “bullying” or “cyberbullying”. 2012-29 “Meanwhile, there are regular stories of school bullying via social networking sites by so called trolls.”
	Anonymous	References to anonymity in relation to trollers, including to the group Anonymous. 2012-23 “Nicola Brookes was tormented for month by anonymous bullies…”
	Political	References to trollers either acting on behalf of politicians or political parties or otherwise engaging in political activities. 2012-11 “…various political supporters engage in defamatory and offensive comments on issues of politics, nationality, language, etc. on media websites.”
	Troublemaker	References to trollers as disruptive, unwanted, or a nuisance. 2006-03 “Sanger says every online community has its trouble makers but he hopes that good intentions will rule the contributions.”
	Pervert	References to trollers as sexually deviant, especially relating to pedophilia.

		2014-33 “Ohio kids might be playing online games with sexual predators – and their parents have no clue.”
	Phony	References to trollers assuming false identities or otherwise acting under false pretenses. 2008-06 “It is a virtual world where ‘trolls’ contribute to discussion boards with invented identities and irritating points of view that they don’t even believe.”
	Stalker	Specific references to trollers as stalkers or engaging in stalking. 2012-31 “Katherine Jenkins, the Welsh classical singer, has also disclosed that she has an online stalker.”
	Prankster	References to trollers as pranksters, tricksters, or comedians. 2006-7 “Idle pranksters love to ‘troll’ Digg-like sites.”

3.2.2.3 « News coding – trollees »

The “trollees” category was made up of entities that were either attacked by trollers or that had otherwise fallen prey to trolling behaviour (see Table 3). Coding for “trollees” included victims of trolling who were identified directly in the article, such as in the case of “former model, Carla Franklin” (article 2010-2), as well as indirectly, such as in cases of “newbies on early internet newsgroups were often the victims of subtle inside jokes” (article 2013-18). Victims of actions and behaviours associated with trolling, such as an article describing cyberbullying as “a growing threat that affects millions of U.S. teens” (article 2008-7), were also included in this category.

Table 3 Coding Scheme for trollees

Trollee Characteristics	Trollee Categories	Code Definitions & Example Text
Gender	Female	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as female. 2014-50 "…a headline declared she had been 'trolled to death'."
	Male	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as male. 2014-30 "It comes after Mr Collymore reported receiving racially abusive and threatening tweets between January and May."
Age	Youth	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is implicitly or explicitly identified as under the age of majority. 2008-01 "Megan wasn't the only teenager to be hurt by unkind words delivered via a computer…"
Trollee Types	Celebrity	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is a famous public figure other than a journalist or politician. 2014-20 "ROBERT Pattinson's new girlfriend FKA Twigs has hit back after being targeted by online trolls."
	Journalist	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is a journalist, reporter, or broadcaster. May be the author of the news article themselves. 2014-03 "The reporters and their families were forced to vacate their homes after facing threats of robbery and rape."

	Politician	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is a politician or other government representative. 2014-13 “An internet troll from Liverpool accused of sending an anti-semitic message to MP Luciana Berger has been jailed.”
	R.I.P. trollees	The target(s) are friends and loved ones of a deceased person or the deceased person themselves. Usually occurring via a memorial website. 2011-08 “Sean Duffy’s online abuse included creating a ‘joke’ video about a bullied 15-year-old girl who committed suicide…”
	Organization	The person or persons targeted by trolling actions is an institution or organization. 2005-01 “…it seems to me that Wikipedia could take steps against vandals and trolls without sacrificing anonymity.”

3.2.2.4 « News coding – trolling attitudes »

News articles were also analyzed to determine the polarity of their opinions with respect to trolling, whether explicit or implicit. This was done by examining adjectives, verbs, nouns, and phrases used to describe attributes of trollers and trolling (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 199). The focus of this study was on the evaluative dimension of statements involving trolling, that is, judgements expressing whether a thing is “good” or “bad” (Osgood, 1952). News samples were classified into three categories:

1. An article was coded as “negative” if the story mostly portrayed trollers and trolling unfavourably. In the following excerpt, the adjectives “abusive” and “puerile” are used to describe trollers and the verb “sabotaging” is given as an example of a trolling action. Each of these words carries a negative valence, which places this article into the “negative” category.

"They're abusive and puerile – and that's the way they like it. Trolls delight in sabotaging internet discussions." (2004-3)

2. An article was coded as "positive" if the story used sympathetic language in reference to trollers and trolling. In the following excerpt, the adjectives "decent" and "hardworking" and used to describe trollers. The noun "good name" is also given as an attribute of trollers. Each of these words carries a positive valence, which places this article into the "positive" category.

"It would be a shame if the users of nasty sites such as Ask.fm were allowed to sully the good name of decent, hardworking trolls like the bauld Ken M." (2013-18)

3. An article was coded as "neutral" if the story offered either no opinion or expressed a mixture of positive and negative opinions about trollers and trolling. In the following excerpt, trollers are associated with negative-valence verbs like "incite" and "insult," but trolling is also credited with the ability to "steer debate in a desired direction," which carries a positive valence. Due to the presence of both positive and negative opinions, this article was placed in the "neutral/ambivalent" category.

"From political blogs to Twitter accounts with no known author, the Internet era has spawned a culture of unnamed people who aim to incite and insult and know that there will be little price to pay for dragging public debates into the mud.

This is a problem that afflicts people and groups across the political spectrum. In fact, smart people on both sides understand that 'trolling' can steer debate in a desired direction." (2013-32)

3.3 « The internaut perspective – avid internet users »

To address RQ2 (CH 1.8), twenty (20) in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the perspectives and attitudes of self-identified "avid" internet users – that is, people "showing a keen interest or enthusiasm" (OED Online, n.d.) for internet media. Beyond self-identification, this study considered a participant to be an avid internet user if they had been active online for at least 5 years and spend 2 or more

hours online recreationally each day. The inclusion criteria were confirmed in the interviews through questions relating to each interviewee's internet use habits and history. The majority of the interviews lasted approximately one hour, with the shortest at 32 minutes and the longest at 110 minutes. In all, these interviews produced over twenty hours of recordings and over three hundred pages of transcription. This second portion of the study was conducted because much of the previous research on internet trolling has been based on interviews with people who self-identify as trollers (Phillips, 2011) or on analysis of trolling behaviours (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017); few studies have explored the perspectives of avid internet users who frequent the same online spaces as trolls, but who are not directly involved in trolling groups or activities (Sanfilippo et al., 2017). This interview procedure was designed for a twofold purpose: to discuss participants' views about internet trolling and to elicit reactions and responses to examples of trolling reported in the news.

Overall, the development and design of these interviews was informed by the principles recommended by Luo and Wildemuth (2014). Demographic and throw-away questions were used at the start of the interview process to establish rapport with the interviewee before moving on the essential questions about the interviewee's definition and perceptions of internet trolling. Standard probing questions such as "can you tell me more about why you think that?" and "can you give an example?" were also prepared in case it was necessary to elicit further responses from interviewees. I also sought feedback from colleagues about question wording and order and pre-tested the interview procedure with a test participant meeting the study's inclusion criteria (my brother).

The positionality of the researcher is also an important factor to consider in qualitative research and especially so when data collection involves close personal interaction with participants (Roulston, 2010). Of particular relevance with respect to this study is the fact that I once identified myself as an internet troller and subscribed to many of the beliefs and values of the trolling subculture, including a blind assumption that transgressive, ironic humour was harmless fun and that people who took offense to such humour were simply being overly sensitive. Although my views on such matters had changed by the time these interviews were conducted (among other things, to give far more credence to

the perspectives of trollees), I was keenly aware that my personal beliefs about trolling could influence how I interacted with the interview participants and thereby bias any data gathered from their responses. To address this issue, I was careful to approach these interviews reflexively and was vigilant in maintaining as neutral a position as possible so that interviewees would feel as comfortable as possible to express their true perspectives. Audio recordings, along with detailed research notes from each interview also aided in maintaining the fidelity of each interviewee's points of view.

3.3.1 « Interview participant recruitment »

Participant recruitment for this study occurred from January through March, 2016. The study was advertised using recruitment posters asking for "avid internet users to take part in a study of attitudes and perceptions of internet trolling" (see Appendix B). Posters were displayed across the University of Western Ontario campus of the duration of the recruitment period. Twenty participants were recruited in total: sixteen undergraduate students, two graduate students, and two staff members. Interview sessions were coordinated over email with the participants and all took place on the University of Western Ontario campus. While opinions differ over research sample sizes where theoretical saturation can be expected, including 12 (Guest et al., 2006), 25 (Charmaz, 2006), and 20-60 (Creswell, 2013), many sources converge on a number around 20 (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Data collection for this study was stopped after 22 interviews, as it became apparent that no further substantive new themes were emerging.

3.3.2 « Interview methodology »

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent, which was later used for transcription. The researcher also took field notes over the course of each session, which were consulted during data analysis. Each interview followed a four-part structure (see Appendix C for full script):

1. Interviewees were asked for demographic information and about their internet use history and habits.

2. Interviewees were asked to discuss what the term “internet trolling” meant to them and for examples of behaviours or interactions that they would consider to be trolling.

3. Interviewees were asked to discuss their attitude towards internet trolling and whether or not they felt that trolling was a problematic behaviour.

4. Interviewees were shown five (5) news articles selected from the previous part of this study and asked to discuss whether or not they agreed that the events described were examples of trolling.

3.3.2.1 « Interview part 1 – Demographic questions »

This first set of questions served to establish rapport with the participants and to obtain information about their online habits and activities. The questions asked participants about their internet use history, what online communities (if any) they are members of, and what online activities they engage in (e.g. video gaming, blogging, Twitter, meme creation). In addition to verifying inclusion criteria (whether or not the participant was indeed an avid internet user), these questions also served to frame the discussion around online activities in order to segue into the next group of questions.

3.3.2.2 « Interview part 2 – Trolling definition questions »

This section of the interview was built around three main sets of questions aimed at drawing out the participant’s understanding of what trolling is. The first set of questions asks the participant to define trolling in terms of actions and behaviours. The second set asks the participant to describe the types of people who engage in trolling and to speculate on what motivates them to be trollers. Finally, the third set of questions seeks responses about what types of actions and behaviours do not fall under the umbrella of “trolling” and why. In this way, the participant’s personal definition of trolling was constructed from two different angles: the positive definition of “what is trolling?” and the negative definition of “what is not trolling?”

In the initial version of the interview script, no specific questions were included about trollees, except to ask whether the participant had ever been targeted by trolling

themselves. However, it was clear from the first session that this was an oversight, as participants would naturally begin speaking about trollees as part of their response to questions about their thoughts on trolling. For this reason, a question prompting participants to describe the types of people who they believe are likely to be trollees was added to this section of the interview procedure.

3.3.2.3 « Interview part 3 – Trolling attitude questions »

This third part of the interview was designed to solicit the participants' opinions about trolling behaviour. Participants were asked if their attitude towards trolling was generally positive, negative, or neutral, and to provide context for their answers. Participants were also asked whether they had ever personally been involved in a trolling incident, either as a troller or trollee. In addition, this part of the interview also included questions about participant perceptions of the severity of trolling as a problem and about what they saw as potential solutions to address trolling behaviour.

3.3.2.4 « Interview part 4 – Trolling news article responses »

The fourth part of the interview was designed to collect data on differences between how trolling is characterized by the participants and in the news in order to address RQ 3. Participants were first asked if they had seen or heard any reporting on internet trolling in the news media and to discuss their thoughts on the relationship between trolling and the news. Following this, participants were shown five news articles detailing instances of trolling and asked to comment on whether or not the portrayal of trolling in each article matched their personal definition.

This procedure derives from elicitation interviewing methods, which aim to uncover knowledge that may be tacit or difficult for interviewees to explain in simple discourse (Johnson & Weller, 2002, p. 491). These techniques use "visual, verbal, or written stimuli to encourage participants to talk about their ideas" (Barton, 2015). Image-based elicitation tasks, in particular, have been used as a supplementary tool in qualitative studies in a variety of fields, including education (Tupper et al., 2008), information behaviour and practices (Greyson, 2013; Hartel, 2014), and journalism (Smith &

Woodward, 1998; Pogliano, 2015). For this study, a text-based approach was deemed more suitable, given the nature of the data.

The five articles used in the elicitation process were selected from those collected in Study 1 (See CH 3.2.1) and were chosen to represent both a variety of reporting periods and a range of different behaviours. These articles are summarized below (see Appendix F for full text):

1. **Armed With Anonymity, Gamers Attack Women** (2014-11)

   Discusses GamerGate, a controversy centred on sexism in video gaming culture and online harassment. This article focuses on internet trolling rooted in misogyny.

2. **'Sometimes I feel like the most hated woman in Britain': But Tulisa says she won't let haters get her down** (2012-10)

   A tabloid-style piece on British television celebrity Tulisa Contostavlos, who received abusive Twitter messages in connection to her appearances on the X-Factor television show.

3. **Cyber bullies spread hatred despite lesson of Drew trial** (2008-1)

   An opinion article commenting on the trial of a 49 year old woman who had created a fake MySpace account in order to bully her teenaged daughter's classmate, which drove the trollee to suicide.

4. **His servers can offer you the world** (2007-14)

   This article features comments from Jimmy Wales, one of the creators of Wikipedia, about the online encyclopedia's ongoing problems with vandals who insert false or obscene content into articles.

5. **Sick internet game aims to torment grieving parents** (2011-18)

> Another tabloid-style piece decrying the practice of RIP Trolling on Facebook. Includes pseudonymous comments from one of the perpetrators of these acts.

Although each of these five articles deals with different levels of seriousness in terms of trolling, they were all classified in the "negative" sentiment category in the news content analysis portion of this study. These five articles were selected because each was substantively about internet trolling. All of the articles classified as "neutral" made only insubstantial references to trolling, as did one of the "positive" articles. These articles essentially only mentioned trolling in passing and would have not provided enough material for the interview participants to comment on. Conversely, the other "positive" article was too substantive, being entirely devoted to a discussion on the definition of trolling. This article was deemed to be too "on the nose," as it were – going through the very arguments and rationales that this study intended to elicit from its participants.

The interviewees were presented with edited versions of the articles that had source, date, and authorship information stripped out so that only the headline and body text remained. Articles were numbered (1) to (5) for organizational purposes, but were not presented to interviewees in any specific order. The interviewees were shown one article at a time and asked for comment before moving on to the next article. As a result of time limitations, three participants (P8, P13, P17) were not able to complete this exercise for all five articles.

3.3.2.5 « Interview part 5 – Interviewee concluding remarks »

At the end of the session, participants were asked if they had any additional thoughts or comments about trolling that were not covered over the course of the interview. Participants were also asked if their view of trolling had changed at all as a result of what was discussed in the interview and/or in response to the content of the news articles. At the end of the session, participants were presented with a five dollar Starbucks gift card as compensation for their time.

3.3.3 « Interviewee information »

Interviewees in Study 2 were mostly undergraduate students (18) ranging from eighteen to twenty-three years in age (median age of all interviewees was 21). Two staff members (ages 43 & 54) and two graduate students (ages 22 & 27) were also interviewed. Seventeen interviewees identified as female and five as male (see Table 4). In total, twenty-two interviewees participated. All interviewees in this study are referred to using their participant number (e.g., P1, P2, etc.)

Table 4 Interviewee demographics

Interviewee	Age	Gender		Occupation		Years online	Daily hours online
P1	43	M		Staff	Computing	12	2-8
P2	19		F	Undergrad	Media, Information & Technoculture	7	4-6
P3	20		F	Undergrad	Political Science	8	3-4
P4*	21		F	Undergrad	Psychology	10	5-6
P5	19		F	Undergrad	Medical Science	6	3
P6	21		F	Undergrad	Health Studies	8	2-7
P7	18		F	Undergrad	Sociology	11	4-5
P8	22		F	Undergrad	Biology	13	2-5
P9	18		F	Undergrad	Anthropology	8	6-8
P10	19	M		Undergrad	Management & Business Studies	9	12
P11	22		F	Grad	Journalism	12	3-5
P12	19		F	Undergrad	Computer/Neuroscience	10	3
P13	54		F	Staff	Administration	7	1-3
P14	22		F	Undergrad	Engineering	10	3-8

P15	20	M		Undergrad	Medical Science	10	4-8
P16	21		F	Undergrad	Criminology	10	3-4
P17	21	M		Undergrad	Engineering	9	2-6
P18*	21		F	Undergrad	Health Sciences	7	6-8
P19	23		F	Undergrad	Psychology	10	4-10
P20	27	M		Grad	Linguistics	15	4-5
P21	22		F	Undergrad	Media, Information & Technoculture/Business	9	6
P22	22		F	Undergrad	Sociology	6	4-5
	21 (Median)	**5**	**17**			**9.5 (Median)**	**4.5 (Median)**

*P4 and P18 completed interviews, but were excluded from analysis. See CH 6.3

All interviewees reported that they had been internet users for at least six years, and half of them had been using the internet for at least ten years (median 9.5). For some of the interviewees, this meant that they had been using the internet for over half their life – one reported her first internet use when she was just 7 years old (P7). All interviewees reported regular internet use, with all but one reporting at least 2 hours daily, and often much more (median 4.5 hours).

All twenty interviewees reported social media use to varying degrees. Each interviewee maintained an active Facebook account, at least. Nine people described themselves as regular "contributors" – either as content creators (bloggers), commenters (on sites like Reddit and YouTube), or gamers (as players of multiplayer games like EVE Online and League of Legends). However, more than half (13) of the interviewees said that they did not generally engage publicly in online communities or conversations and intentionally limited any online impact they had beyond their personal social media accounts. Several of these interviewees described themselves as "lurkers" (i.e. people who read or follow online conversations, but do not participate themselves). Others only seldom contributed and said that they would not comment on internet forums or blogs unless they "have a

valid point" or "find it substantial" (P16). As familiarity with internet culture and trolling is not contingent on public online participation and may be gained simply through observation and "lurking," this was not considered to be disqualifying. Indeed, these less-participatory interviewees expressed a desire to minimize their online footprint and were generally concerned with personal data privacy issues, as stated by P8: "the internet is not – I don't think it's, like, a 100% safe environment, so I have to be careful."

Of the nine interviewees who were more publicly online, three maintained personal blogs, five played online multiplayer video games, and others were commenters or contributors on sites like Reddit and YouTube. All three of the bloggers were female (P6, P13, P21) and three of the five gamers were male (P1, P10, P15). Other sites and apps mentioned by interviewees include Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, Weibo (Chinese social media app), and forums such as 4chan.

While all interviewees were able to recall instances of trolling that they had seen online, exactly half (11) claimed to have personally engaged in activities that they would consider trolling, although P1 claimed that his trolling was unintentional. In addition, three of these interviewees (P2, P10, & P17) further self-identified as trolls: i.e., they referred to themselves as trolls at some point in the interview. One interviewee (P12) described herself engaging in a class of online behaviours she called "shitposting," defined as "posting of worthless or irrelevant online content intended to derail a conversation or to provoke others" (American Dialect Society, 2017). According to this interviewee, "it's kind of trolling in a sense, where you know you're not engaging with the content in the way it's supposed to be … it's more to be funny and not to be annoying" (P12). This interviewee was counted amongst the troller group. Interestingly, the group of interviewees who had personally engaged in trolling (intentionally or not) were also the ones who claimed to have been subjected to trolling at some point in their online lives. Additionally, as further described in the limitations section (CH 6.3), two interviewees (P4 and P18) were found not to meet inclusion criteria and were excluded from further analysis. P4 because she had never heard of the term "trolling" and was not able to describe or recognize any examples of online behaviours that would broadly be

considered trolling. P18 because she did not consent to audio recording during the interview and so no transcript was available for coding and analysis.

3.3.4 « Interview analysis »

To facilitate analysis, all interview transcripts were uploaded into HypeRESEARCH qualitative analysis software for coding. Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was chosen as the investigative approach for Study 2. Braun & Clarke (2006) argue that Thematic Analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis and offers a flexible and accessible means to generate insights from, and facilitate comparisons within, a body of data. Within the field of Library and Information Science, Thematic Analysis has been used to study such topics as the information behaviour of undergraduate students (Berg et al., 2010), promotion of library services on social media (Phillips, 2015), and librarians' perceptions on information literacy (Aharony & Bronstein, 2014). As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), Thematic Analysis involves six steps: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing the report.

Familiarization with the data involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts several times, during and following transcription. Initial codes were generated through looking for key words, phrases, and concepts related to the interviewees' thoughts about trolling. Passages from the transcripts were first coded into broad categories corresponding to the interview questions: "trolling definitions," "trollers," "trollees," and "trolling attitudes". These categories then formed the basis for subsequent identification and refinement of themes through several passes of iterative coding.

Memo writing was done all through the coding process in order to reflect on and evaluate emerging themes as they arose from the data. These memos helped to inform the iterative process of theme refinement and definition. For example, it was noticed early on that the interviewees mostly talked about trolling actions using general terms, but emphasized the intent of those actions as a defining feature of trolling:

> *P17: "It's almost a bit of subversive behavior. Although sometimes it can be very well meaning or even light hearted, but it's essentially presenting false or misleading information with the intended effect of someone's amusement."*

Based on this observation, subsequent analyses of the "trolling definitions" category were refocused to pay special attention to the intention of trolling actions in addition to the actions themselves.

While the top-level categories were decided a priori ("trolling," "trollers," "trollees," and "attitudes"), identification of themes within these categories was driven by the data. Beyond simply documenting the explicit statements the interviewees made regarding internet trolling, this analysis also sought to explore latent ideas and assumptions held by the interviewees as part of the theme-development process. Specific attention was paid to interviewee statements about conditions, circumstances, and consequences related to trolling as indicators of how their understanding of trolling may have been constructed. This approach served to incorporate each interviewee's personal and nuanced perspective into the construction and definition of the themes.

3.4 « Comparative analysis »

Once the data from the news articles and interview transcripts were analyzed and the themes within each data set identified, these formed the foundation for answering the questions posed in RQ3 (CH 1.8). This thesis was designed so that the both the news (Study 1) and interview (Study 2) analyses would be comparable in four pre-defined areas: "trolling actions," "trollers," "trollees," and "trolling attitudes". Within each of these categories, themes and concepts were compared and contrasted and areas of overlap examined. This analysis sought to identify key similarities and differences between the mainstream "outsider" narrative and the "internaut" narrative when it comes to internet trolling.

Although the news articles were sampled at an international scale (Study 1) and the interview participants at a local scale (Study 2), the perspectives from each study should be comparable for the following three reasons. First, the internet, and internet trolling by

extension, has global reach. Major sites where trolling occurs like Twitter and Reddit have users from around the world who interact with (and troll) each other. Second, these studies focus on trolling interactions in the context of the English language internet. As English has historically been, and continues to be, the most dominant language on the internet (Charlton, 2018), we can expect that users engaging with and through the internet in English will share commonalities in how they understand and perceive online interactions. Third, nearly 90% of the articles in the news sample (see CH 4.1) came from "Core Anglosphere" countries: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom, whose shared history has resulted in significant social and cultural similarities (Mycock & Wellings, 2017). All participants in Study 2 were recruited from Canada, and so, should be comparable to those from the other Anglosphere countries.

3.5 « Chapter summary »

This chapter details the methodology for the collection and analysis of data from both the news media sources (CH 3.2) and from the internaut interview participants (CH 3.3). These data were gathered in order to identify how trolling is discussed and characterized in mainstream media reporting (CH 1.8 – RQ1) and among avid internet users (CH 1.8 – RQ2). The results of analysis of these two data sets then facilitate the examination of RQ3 (CH 3.4).

Chapter 4

4 « Results »

This chapter reports the results from the two studies conducted for this thesis. Content and sentiment categories were identified from the newspaper data (Study 1), finding that 97% of the news articles portrayed internet trolling in a negative light, with reporting about harassment and online hostility being the most common. By contrast, the interview data (Study 2) showed that 30% of participants held mostly positive views of trolling, 25% mostly negative, and 45% were ambivalent.

4.1 « Study 1: News analysis results introduction »

This section reports findings drawn from an analysis of samples taken from eleven years of news articles published in English which mention internet trolling. News articles were collected from the Factiva database, which aggregates news sources globally in two stages: a first batch of articles dating from January 1st, 2004 to January 1st, 2014 was collected in the summer of 2014 and then in the summer of 2015, a second batch of news articles dating from January 1st, 2014 to January 1st, 2015 was collected. Only articles that were about trolling in the context of online interaction and communication were selected for inclusion. Out of 24,316 articles collected, 240 unique articles were selected for analysis, representing approximately 1% of the total. Over these eleven years, the number of articles on internet trolling in this sample showed an increasing trend from a low of six articles in 2004 to fifty-eight in 2014 (see Appendix A).

Data collection for this study was focused on all English language articles indexed by the Factiva database, and so, captured news reports from around the world (see Table 5). Within the sample of 240 articles, the largest proportion came from the United Kingdom, which accounted for over 40% (103 articles) of all news articles in the eleven years sampled. The United States and Canada, taken together, made up 34% (82 articles) of the sample, although the United States is responsible for the bulk of this number, with 67 articles. All other regions of the world collectively made up 23% (55 articles), although both South America and Africa were not represented at all.

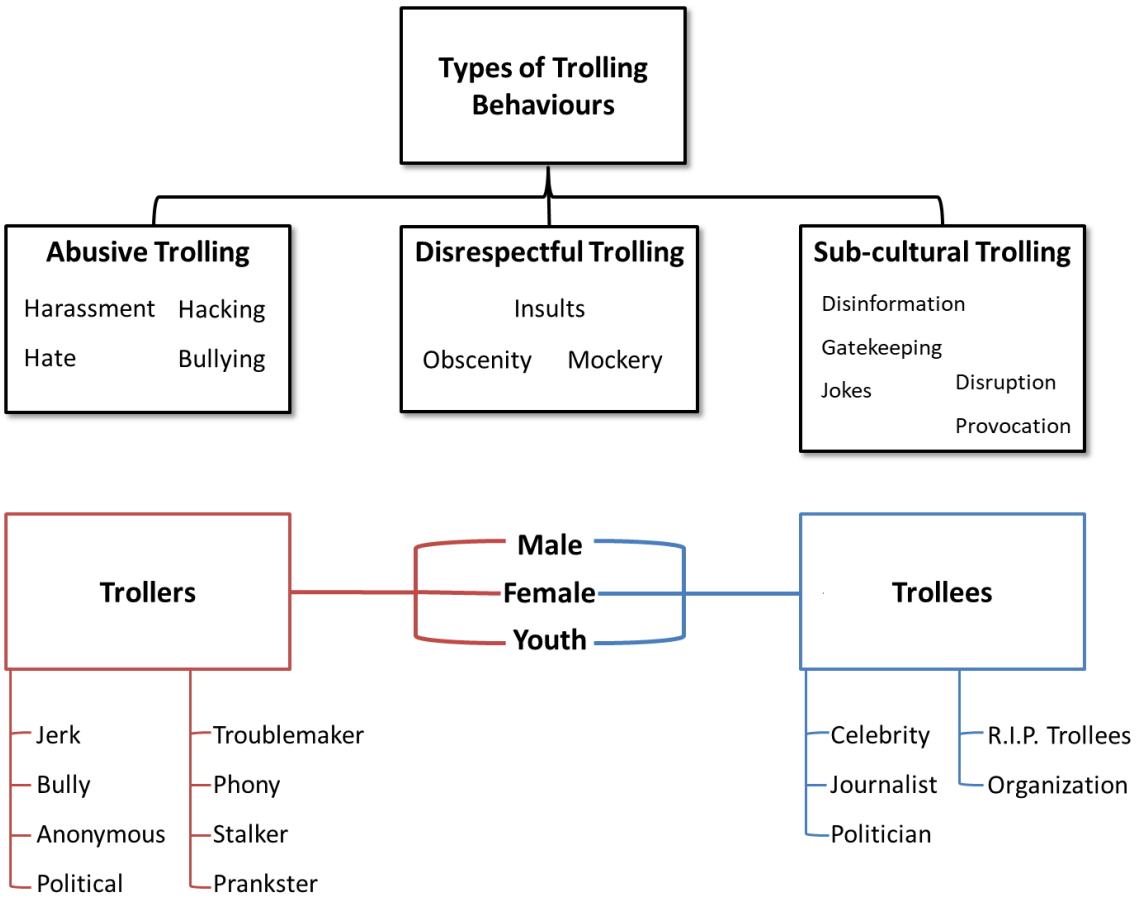
Table 5 Number of articles collected by region

Region	Number of Articles	Percent of Sample
Asia	21	9%
Australia/New Zealand	28	12%
Canada	15	6%
European Union	3	1%
Russia/Ukraine	3	1%
United Kingdom	103	43%
United States	67	28%

4.1.1 « Content analysis results »

Analysis for Study 1 was focused on three basic aspects of internet trolling: 1) what types of actions and behaviours are associated with trolling, 2) who are the people or entities cited as perpetrators of trolling (trollers), and 3) who are the people or entities cited as targets or victims of trolling (trollees)? The following sections report the results of this analysis (see Figure 6 for an overview of the categories). Additionally, each article was also coded for its sentiment towards trolling: either positive, neutral/ambivalent, or negative (CH 3.2.2.4).

Figure 6 Overview of news content analysis categories



4.1.1.1 « Trolling behaviours »

Twelve types of trolling actions were identified and then grouped into three behavioural categories (see Table 6). In all, 218 (91%) of the 240 articles included a reference to a type of trolling action. The "Abusive Trolling" category encompasses trolling activities which either inflicted suffering upon their targets or involved breaking laws. Out of the 240 total articles sampled, 119 (50%) mentioned at least one trolling action in this category. Trolling activities that were merely rude, rather than seriously harmful were classified under the "Disrespectful Trolling" category. These actions were found in 135 (56%) of the articles. The final category captured behaviours associated with traditional sub-cultural definitions of trolling and were coded as "Sub-cultural Trolling." These types of trolling actions were mentioned in 99 (41%) of the articles.

Table 6 Trolling behaviour categories mentioned in the news

Trolling Types	Trolling Actions	Number of Mentioning Articles	Proportion of Total Articles
Abusive Trolling (119 articles)	Harassment/Threats	94	39%
	Bullying	35	15%
	Hate/Bigotry	23	10%
	Hacking	7	3%
Disrespectful Trolling (135 articles)	Insults/hostility	106	43%
	Obscenity/Sexuality	33	14%
	Mockery/Snarkiness	22	9%
Sub-cultural Trolling (99 articles)	Disruption	47	18%
	Provocation/Baiting	30	13%
	Disinformation	26	11%
	Jokes/Humour	24	10%
	Gatekeeping	10	3%

Within the “Abusive Trolling” category, the most frequently occurring type of trolling actions were “Harassment/Threats,” which were mentioned in 94 (39%) out of the 240 articles in the sample. This code was used for any type of malicious trolling action where a specific person or persons was singled out by trollers for targeted abuse, including threats of violence. Specific references to “Bullying” were found in 35 (15%) of the articles and instances of hate speech, racism, sexism, and bigotry (coded as

"Hate/Bigotry") appeared in 23 (10%) articles. Only 7 (3%) cases of "criminal hacking" were reported in this sample.

Within the "Disrespectful Trolling" category, examples of "Insults/Hostility" were most numerous, by far. This type of trolling was mentioned in 106 (44%) of the 240 articles. References to "Obscenity/Sexuality" appeared in 33 (14%) of articles, while 22 (9%) of articles mentioned "Mockery/Snarkiness."

The most common type of "Sub-cultural Trolling" behaviour in this sample was "Disruption," which was found in 47 (18%) of the 240 articles. "Provocation/Baiting" and similar actions intended to incite conflict were mentioned in 30 (13%) articles. References to "Disinformation," which include conspiracy theories, were found in 26 (11%) of the articles and 24 (10%) articles mentioned "Jokes/Humour." Instances of "Gatekeeping," or in-group/out-group discrimination, were found in just 10 (4%) articles.

4.1.1.2 « Trollers »

For this part of Study 1, trollers were defined as any person, group, or entity explicitly or implicitly identified in the news articles as perpetrators of trolling acts. In all, 189 (79%) of the 240 articles made reference to trollers. The characteristics of these trollers were grouped into "Demographic" and "Troller Types" categories, with three and nine sub-categories, respectively (see Table 7).

Table 7 Troller categories in the news

Troller Characteristics	Troller Descriptions	Number of Mentioning Articles	Proportion of Total Articles
Demographic **(66 articles)**	Male	48	20%
	Female	11	5%
	Youth	16	7%

Troller Types (132 articles)	Jerk	68	28%
	Bully	33	13%
	Anonymous	25	10%
	Political troll	18	8%
	Troublemaker	13	5%
	Pervert	10	5%
	Phony	10	5%
	Stalker	8	3%
	Prankster	8	3%

The “Demographic” characteristics include two gender sub-categories: male (found in 48 articles) and female (found in 16 articles), and one age: youth, for trollers identified as children, teenagers, or under 18 years old (found in 11 articles). Trollers counted in the “Demographic” category were assumed to be adults unless the article specifically mentioned that they were children or youth. Gender was counted when explicitly mentioned and when could be inferred via pronouns or established independently (in the case of public figures and celebrities). Of the nine “Troller Types,” the most frequently-occurring was “Jerk” (including terms like idiot, weirdo, and bastard), which appeared in 68 (28%) of the 240 articles. Trollers were described as “Bullies” in 33 (13%) of the articles and connected with “Anonymity” in 25 (10%). In 18 (8%) articles, trollers were identified as “Political” actors – whether as politicians themselves or as agents pursuing political goals – and as general “troublemakers” in 13 (5%). Other descriptors include “Pervert,” covering references to trollers involved in sexual deviance and pornography

(10 articles, 5%); “Phony” for trollers performing identity deception, including catfishing[21] (10 articles, 5%); “Stalker” (8 articles, 3%) and “Prankster” (8 articles, 3%).

4.1.1.3 « Trollees »

Trollees were defined as any person, group, organization or other entity explicitly or implicitly identified in the news articles as being affected by trolling actions. Trollees were referenced in 139 (58%) of the 240 articles. Like the troller category, trollees were split between “Demographic” characteristics and “Trollee Types” with six and four sub-categories, respectively (see Table 8).

Table 8 Trollee categories in the news

Trollee Characteristics	Trollee Descriptions	Number of Mentioning Articles	Proportion of Total Articles
Demographic (108 articles)	Female	75	31%
	Male	39	16%
	Youth	21	9%
Trollee Types (58 articles)	Celebrity	36	15%
	Journalist	18	8%
	Politician	17	7%
	R.I.P. Trollees	15	6%

[21] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfishing

	Organization	10	4%

Among the Demographic characteristics, the most frequently identified trolling targets in the news sample were “Female,” found in 75 (31%) of the 240 articles. “Male” trollees were discussed in 39 (16%) articles and “Youth” in 21 (9%) articles. These demographic categories were established in the same way as with trollers, described above (CH 4.1.1.2).

Within the “Trollee Types,” the “Celebrity” category, encompassing performers, entertainers, and other famous people, was the most prominent. Out of the 240 articles, 36 (15%) identified a “Celebrity” as the target of internet trolling. “Journalists” and other news workers were mentioned in 18 (8%) of articles and “Politicians” in 17 (7%). Friends and family of deceased persons (or the deceased person themselves) were specified as trolling targets in 15 (6%) articles – these were coded as “R.I.P. Trollees.” Finally, an “Organization” (company, website, institution, etc.) was mentioned as a trollee in 10 (4%) articles.

4.1.1.4 « News attitudes »

Coding for sentiment revealed that the vast majority of news articles portrayed internet trolling in a strictly negative light. Out of the 240 articles sampled, 232 (97%) expressed entirely negative sentiment in relation to trolling. As was expected based on the literature (see CH 2.6.1), “harm” was a major theme in articles expressing negative sentiment. Each of the three areas of harm previously identified were represented within these articles:

> Harm against individuals: *“The death of Charlotte Dawson has Australia reflecting on depression and the increasing incidence of cyberbullying via social media websites … The former model was hospitalised after an attempted suicide in 2012 when she received a torrent of online abuse on Twitter, including from one troll who urged Dawson to hang herself.” (2014-52)*

> Harm against communities: *"If a conservative blog allows comments, it is immediately overrun by juvenile, illiterate, liberal hecklers who ruin the comments section. We here at polipundit.com have been fighting this ever since I turned on comments, and only ceaseless vigilance has allowed us to keep the comments section open. If a larger conservative/libertarian blog, like Instapundit, were to start a Comments section, then the blogger would have to spend every waking moment policing liberal trolls." (2005-6)*

> Harm against society and institutions: *"Twitter seems to be morphing into a bully pulpit for trolls. It is a technology that favours the flash mob. In England, the racist takeover of some Twitter feeds has resulted in people going to jail. The digital mob is no different from a street mob. It can be excitable, good-natured or vicious, but don't ever mistake the mob for a democracy" (2012-28)*

Although these articles all portrayed trolling negatively, there was wide disparity in the severity of tone. Some articles described caustic, though fairly innocuous behaviours, while others dealt with abuse, harassment, and death threats. This broad range is apparent in the terms associated with trolling behaviours listed above, where "joking/humour" appears alongside "bullying," "harassment," and "threats" (see Table 9).

Scattered across the years were six articles that expressed a neutral or ambivalent sentiment towards trolling, making up nearly 3% of the sample. For the most part, these were simply articles that indicated that trolling was not entirely negative. A 2013 article on English columnist and media personality Katie Hopkins, for example, compared her negatively to internet trolls:

> *"If you don't agree with Hopkins's views, there's a simple solution. Unfollow her, and let her online presence descend into the parody of herself she's well on the way to creating. But please, don't call her a troll. It's an insult to trolls." (2013-28)*

Another article on American politics on the internet, also from 2013, commented on how trolls could be both annoying and useful:

> *"From political blogs to Twitter accounts with no known author, the Internet era has spawned a culture of unnamed people who aim to incite and insult and know that there will be little price to pay for dragging public debates into the mud. This is a problem that afflicts people and groups across the political spectrum. In fact, smart people on both sides understand that "trolling" can steer debate in a desired direction." (2013-32)*

Only two articles out of the sample characterized trolling in somewhat positive terms. The first was a reference to Scottish comedian Limmy: "Let me tell you about my kind of trolling, a fun and empowering way to annoy the f*ck out of people" (2012-5). The second was a piece in the Irish Independent in which the author discusses the subcultural "trickster" aspect of trolling:

> *"'Trolling' is a word whose definition is rapidly evolving. In the media at least, it now refers exclusively to vicious online bullying. But while trolls and bullies have much in common, trolling, in the classic sense, is a phenomenon that is more mischievous than malicious. In fact, during the early days of the internet, trolling originally meant little more than playing pranks online. In the same way that, in the real world, a work experience kid might get asked to fetch his boss a bucket of steam or a tin of tartan paint, so newbies on early internet newsgroups were often the victims of subtle inside jokes … But, expertly handled, this type of trolling can almost achieve the status of an art form." (2013-18)*

Table 9 News sample sentiment towards trolling

Sentiment Towards Trolling	Number of Articles	Proportion of Articles*
Positive	2	>1%
Neutral	6	3%
Negative	232	97%

*Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

4.1.2 « Summary: The news perspective on trolling »

Putting together the most frequent terms associated with trolling in news reporting paints a fairly clear picture:

1) The most common trolling actions reported are instances of "harassment," "insults," and "disruption."
2) Trollers tend to be "male" and are seen as "jerks" and "bullies."
3) Trollees tend to be "female" and are often "celebrities."

This is further reinforced by the prominence of other terms like "threats" and "hate," relative to other, more innocuous terms like "jokes." As such, nearly all (97%) of the articles in this sample portray trolling negatively. Based on this analysis of news articles, the evidence shows that the news media exhibits a clear tendency towards publishing stories that associate trolling with serious, often criminal, activities and consequences. However, this does not seem to translate to an emphasis on specific victims of trolling. Trollees were only mentioned in 58% of articles, while trollers and trolling actions were mentioned in 79% and 91% of articles, respectively.

4.2 « Study 2: Interview results introduction »

The analysis of mainstream news reporting on internet trolling in Study 1 revealed that the overwhelming majority of articles showed negative sentiment towards trolls and trolling. This section reports the results of Study 2, consisting of twenty (20) in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted to investigate the perspectives and attitudes of self-identified avid internet users. These face to face interviews were structured in four parts:

1. Interviewees were asked for demographic information and about their internet use history and habits.

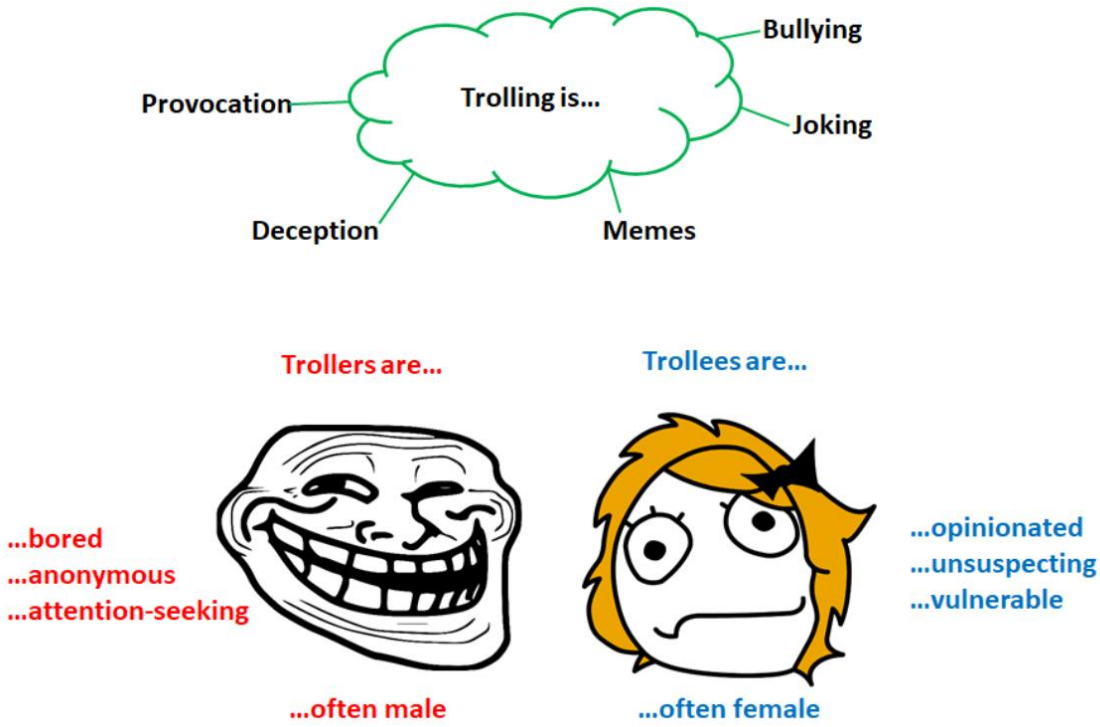
2. Interviewees were asked to discuss what the term "internet trolling" meant to them and for examples of behaviours or interactions that they would consider to be trolling.

3. Interviewees were asked to discuss their opinion of trollers and trolling behaviour, including their assessment of the severity of trolling impacts.

4. Interviewees were shown five (5) news articles selected from the previous part of this study and asked to discuss whether or not they agreed that the events described were examples of trolling.

Whereas the news primarily reported on trolling in relation to serious transgressions, such as online harassment and abuse, none of the twenty interviewees in this study focused on these types of behaviours when they were initially asked about their definition of trolling (see Figure 7 for overview). Instead, interviewees described internet trolling as "annoying," "immature," or "a nuisance". Five general themes were identified from the interviewees' definitions of internet trolling: provocation, deception, bullying, joking, and memes (CH 4.2.1). The primary motivation of internet trollers was described as attention-seeking due to boredom or social isolation, and which was exacerbated by the disinhibition effect of the internet (CH 4.2.2.1). Interviewees identified two types of trolling: as either an untargeted action akin to laying a trap for unsuspecting trollees, or as a targeted action where trolling is directed at particular individuals (CH 4.2.3). Some interviewees further subdivided targeted trolling into personal and impersonal categories based on whether the troller was personally acquainted with the trollee or not. Attitudes towards trolling were mixed, with the largest proportion of interviewees expressing ambivalence (CH 4.2.5). Most did not consider internet trolling to be a serious problem, but all agreed that online platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) should provide better tools for users to protect themselves online and to do more to regulate undesirable behaviour.

Figure 7 Overview of interview analysis categories



Regarding the five news articles, numerous interviewees communicated surprise at the severity of the subject matter of some of the stories (e.g.: suicide, harassment), which was at odds with the mostly-harmless impression that they had of trolling (CH 4.2.7). Some interviewees expanded their definition of trolling to encompass these more severe forms, while others rejected them as incompatible with their understanding of trolling. A few interviewees also criticized the journalistic quality of the more sensationalist articles, and of news reporting on trolling in general, as being out of touch with online culture and norms (CH 4.2.7.3). These results support the observation that there is a substantive difference in the way that trolling is understood and discussed by the news and by the internet users in this study.

4.2.1 « Trolling definitions »

Based on responses from the interviewees, it is apparent that trolling is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. When asked about what trolling meant to them, interviewees

described a variety of different behaviours and actions. Themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified from these interviews will be described below (see Table 10).

Table 9 Trolling definitions given by interviewees

Trolling Behaviours	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Provocation	20	100%
Bullying	16	80%
Deception	15	75%
Joking	13	65%
Memes	13	65%

4.2.1.1 « Provocation »

The point on which every interviewee agreed was that trolling was a behaviour intended to elicit a reaction or response from others. All 20 interviewees (after excluding P4 and P18) touched upon this aspect of trolling in some way. Some interviewees described this provocation using aggressive terms: “trying to start shit” (P3), “out to get you” (P6), and “goes out of their way to leave comments and just leave hate” (P14). More frequently, interviewees offered some variant of “saying things that are intentionally meant to generate a reaction” (P16).

Both implicitly and explicitly, each interviewee indicated that they were confident that they could recognize trolling when it occurs, and so, would not be susceptible to the provocation. One interviewee even complained that she feels “a little bit of a frustration that people are falling for this stuff” (P3). None of the interviewees reported feeling seriously hurt by any trolling that they had personally encountered. P5 had this to say on the matter:

> *P5: "I know to some people, it's a big deal. Personally, it's not to me – I rather compare it to having little sisters, which I do, it's annoying, but you ignore it – don't feed the trolls and they go away."*

P10 believed that provocative trolling could have an element of social commentary or activism, and could be used as a tool to support, protest, or call attention to causes or events. As an example, he cited a case in early 2016 when a group of armed militiamen occupied a wildlife sanctuary in Oregon as an anti-government protest over land-use rights. In response to the militiamen's call for support and donations, internet pranksters instead sent shipments of sex toys and lubricant.[22]

> *P10: "The internet completely trolled these guys. They sent them box upon box of dildos. That was a troll as clear-cut as I've ever seen. Put that in the paper, because that was the internet, total strangers from wherever, banding together and just absolutely trolling these guys. Didn't threaten them personally, but made them a laughing-stock … That is the exemplary textbook troll. You haven't hurt anyone, you've made someone mad, but you haven't done anything wrong. You just sent them a box of dildos. And he released an angry video! So of course these trolls got their gratification, as well!*

4.2.1.2 « Deception »

Another defining feature that most of the interviewees (15) mentioned was that trolling involves some level of misdirection or deception. According to P14, "[trolls'] comments don't necessarily reflect how they feel, it's just that they know it's going to upset people". The aim is not to engage in authentic conversations, but rather to sow confusion by feigning ignorance or making intentionally outrageous claims. Interviewees gave examples of trolls disrupting online conversations by posting intentionally inflammatory or ridiculous messages:

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[22] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/13/oregon-standoff-milita-bundy-malheur-wildlife-refuge-social-media-videos

> *P9: "On Facebook, I have a really strong vegan activist friend, and my other friend commented on one of her statuses saying, "I love bacon" or something. Or he'll post pictures just to get a reaction out of her."*
>
> *Interviewer: "And does this typically get a reaction from your vegan friend?"*
>
> *P9: "Yeah, like a 200 comments kind of thing."*

These sorts of disruptions were typically seen as undesirable:

> *P12: "You know you're saying something completely irrelevant, or off-topic, or straight-up wrong … you're inundating some means of communication online with that content, and you're like 'bam'—nobody really gives a shit, but I'm gonna make everybody mad and I'm just gonna keep posting it."*

However, some interviewees did speak about more positive examples of deception – especially in the context of playful trickery. P17 talked about trolling as "almost a bit of subversive behaviour … presenting false or misleading information with the intended effect of someone's amusement". In this vein, he described an instance where he and his classmates in an engineering program worked together on social media to play a prank on rival students:

> *P17: "We've posted in our main group and coordinated to make something that sounds legitimate from an engineering standpoint that is ridiculous, so we're leading along students from other engineering disciplines. It's a relatively harmless way of trolling, it's not like we're giving them wrong answers, it's more like trying to confuse them for fun."*

4.2.1.3 « Bullying »

Every one of the twenty interviewees described trolling behaviours as variable in terms of seriousness. On one end were the more benign, humorous forms of trolling; on the other, serious, harmful behaviours. Of these negative behaviours, bullying (or cyberbullying) was mentioned at some point by all of the interviewees. Sixteen of the interviewees saw trolling and bullying as related behaviours (2 of these 16 claimed that they were

essentially synonymous). One interviewee, P11, thought that trolling may have even worse connotations that bullying:

> *P11: "I think essentially, pretty much all the examples, trolling and bullying, they are the same thing, I almost wonder if the term bullying has just been so over used that you don't really think twice about it it's like oh well that happens to everyone, but trolling seems to have more serious consequences, like the intent is worse, almost."*

Conversely, five interviewees saw trolling and bullying as clearly different. P22, for example, connects trolling with much more lighthearted behaviours:

> *P22: "To me trolling is, funny, there is a difference between trolling someone and bullying someone online, and I think trolling is more of a joke, kind of thing … I think bullying is when you are deliberately attacking someone's opinion or choice, or calling them out on things they have no control over."*

Expanding further, P10, who has a positive view of trolling, suggested the phrase "act of stupidity" to describe online abuse that skirts the line between criminal and bullying behaviour:

> *P10: "the moment they start to attack you personally, by saying, like, not just stuff like, "you're bad at this game," but stuff like, "it's time for you to get skull-stomped" … the moment you start going down that road, it doesn't really just become bullying, it just becomes escalated to the point where it's just, I don't wanna say crime, and I don't wanna say bullying … where they've actually threatened you, but like a threat that they'll never actually take up."*

The subject of bullying proved to be the most divisive among the interviewees and how they each saw the connection between trolling and bullying seemed to be an important factor in their overall evaluation of the acceptability of trolling behaviours (see CH 4.2.5.1).

4.2.1.4 « Joking »

While all of the interviewees agreed that trolling could be funny at least some of the time, thirteen mentioned humour, specifically, as a defining feature. According to these interviewees, a comment or interaction only counts as trolling if it is motivated by a sense of fun on the part of the troller. For P2, this is a necessary condition for an interaction to be considered trolling: "trolling has to be done with the intent of both parties thinking that it's funny". P10, who self-identifies as a troller, echoes this sentiment: "[trolls] are funny, or they don't make any lasting bad impressions on people". In the context of online gaming, he associates trolling with good-natured joking and playing around:

> *P10: "If we're playing League of Legends and we're playing a custom match, everyone knows each other, people are gonna troll, and there's gonna be a lot of good times. Especially with this group I mentioned earlier, we play Diablo III. There will be shenanigans, there always will be, but no one has ever come out of it feeling like the game was made worse, only that it was made better."*

However, trolling jokes are not always good natured, and the humour may be one-sided. In these cases, trolling can be more like "a modern schadenfreude" (P1) where one party derives pleasure at the expense of another by "causing grief for fun" (P20).

P12 described this type of joking behaviour as "shitposting," which she sees as distinct from, but related to trolling:

> *P12: "you know how everybody has these profiles from like, Grade 7, and, like, you did really profoundly dumb shit when you were in Grade 7, and you posted a picture with, like, 50 filters—and then you were just like, 'here's a deep inspirational quote that has nothing to do with this picture with like 50 filters #nofilter' and, like, it's wild. And then your friends in 2016, they're just having a good time, and they go back to your profile, and they start engaging with this picture absolutely seriously, like, 'Oh, Alyssa* [not a real person]*, looking so good with no filter!' You know, like, something like that, where you make a lot of posts—like, it's kind of trolling in a sense, where you know you're not engaging*

with the content in the way it's supposed to be, and it's completely out of date or irrelevant, but it's more to be funny and not to be annoying. I feel like posting memes on the Facebook page, that's not trolling, that's just shitposting."

4.2.1.5 « Memes »

The joking aspect of trolling is also strongly associated with internet memes (see CH 2.7.2), which can act as markers or signals that a particular joke or interaction is intended to be humorous: "if I hear 'trolling,' I assume a meme is made, a general meme and people are passing it around, posting it on your wall" (P19). Thirteen of the interviewees brought up memes in relation to trolling, either using the term directly or by describing a specific meme. P9 gave the example of a meme based on an unflattering photograph of American singer/actress Demi Lovato known as "Poot":[23]

P9: "It's just a picture and she doesn't look very flattering in it, and they said that this was her twin sister, from the basement, I don't know. It was kind of like trolling because they just wanted to be funny to see a reaction from her."

P9 described mixed feelings with respect to this example. While she was mindful that circulating the meme could be construed as a form of bullying, saying that "it was kind of sad because [the meme] is targeting her [Lovato]," she also felt that the meme had positive consequences by making Lovato "more famous to people who don't really listen to music" (P9).

For some interviewees, the link between internet memes and trolling is quite a strong one. P22 cites a popular meme from late 2015 as a defining example of trolling:

P22: "Have you seen that thread between those two friends on Facebook? One is always making jokes about the other's status, because he'll usually be saying something… he'll usually be doing something contradictory, so then this person

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[23] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/poot-lovato

will always point out the contradictions and what not, so to me that's what trolling is, it's joking and there's no harm intended."

Interviewer: "Five out of seven perfect guy? Is that what you're talking about?"

In this (presumably staged) series of conversations between two Facebook friends, one friend consistently makes questionable, typo-ridden assertions, while the other friend replies with sarcastic, teasing remarks.[24] In this case, the spirit of trolling is found both in the nature of the banter between these two friends and then again in the proliferation of the meme as people began using the absurd "5/7" rating in their own conversations with others who may or may not recognize the reference.

4.2.2 « Who are trollers? »

In accordance to popular stereotypes (see CH 1.2), the majority of interviewees (12) answered that they thought of trollers as most probably male. By contrast, the other eight interviewees did not believe that trolling was limited to any particular gender, although three of these interviewees did comment on the perception that trolls were men: "stereotypically, you think of old, fat guys in their mom's basement, but, I mean, realistically, it could be anyone" (P5). Not a single interviewee thought that trolling perpetrators were more likely to be women than men. In terms of age groups, the majority of interviewees (13) did not see a strong connection to any particular age group. Six interviewees stated that they thought trollers were more likely to be "young," though this was a relative term used by some to refer to teenagers and others to anyone under 30. Outside of commenting on the troll stereotype, only one interviewee described trolls as generally "older" (P11), which she defined as over 30 years of age (see Table 10). Despite this, some interviewees, such as P12, suggested that trolling demographics depend heavily on place and context: "in the Facebook group [for a university class], I know I'm expecting someone who's 19, but on a reddit forum where they're talking about [Donald Trump] … then I'd picture an old guy, like, an old, bald guy". Regardless

[24] See: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/57

of what the actual age of trollers might be, half the interviewees (10) considered these types of behaviours to be immature – that they were "just a childish thing, just an immature thing to do" (P2).

Table 10 Troller demographic characteristics given by interviewees

Troller Characteristics	Troller Descriptions	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Gender	Male	12	60%
	Any gender	8	40%
Age	No particular age	13	65%
	Young (under 30)	6	30%
	Old (over 30)	1	5%

In terms of personality, interviewees frequently described trollers as people who "[don't] have a big social life outside of online" (P11). Descriptors for trollers include "racist" (P13), "less educated" (P3), and "poor social skills" (P7). P6 went so far as to describe some trollers as "like an old-ish pedophile type." Generally, the interviewees who had a more negative opinion of trollers visualized a maladjusted social outcast who spends too much time online. Many of these interviewees either drew parallels to or directly equated trollers to traditional bullies. For P20, trollers were sometimes just bullies "in a traditional school yard sense, even though it is online." P11, a journalism student who had previously reported on internet trolling, considered it "a category of bullying" and that, from her experience, "a lot of it had to do with self-esteem … and the underlying issues that they [the trollers] have themselves". P13 sums up this perspective on trollers, stating "there's just people out there who want to rain on everybody's parade".

As may be expected, those interviewees who had a more positive view of trolling chose to characterize trollers differently. In particular, the three interviewees (P2, P10, P17)

who self-identified as trollers focused strongly on the comedic aspects of the behaviour. P2 described a typical troller as: “playful, [has] a sense of humour, and like[s] to be goofy. So, like me.” P10 called trollers “cheeky” and described some internet celebrities known for comical behaviour as “internet heroes”. P17 used compulsive, addictive terms, suggesting that the pursuit of humour may go too far, saying that a troller is “someone who enjoys humor but perhaps hungers on humor … always looking for humor as a fix that needs to be had”. Other interviewees also made similar comments – that a troller was sometimes more like an “attempted comedian” (P15) than an actual comedian. P12, who had strong opinions on this point, complained that “they think that being funny to like, two of their friends, is worth pissing off six hundred people in a Facebook group!”

4.2.2.1 « Trolling motivations »

4.2.2.1.1 « Attention-seeking »

On the subject of trolling motivations, there was broad agreement that trollers were driven by a desire for attention. However, this attention could be either positive or negative: “some of them are there to make you laugh, some of them are there to like have people reply and get attention and bother people” (P14). For P2, this attention takes the form of friendly interactions between acquaintances and is simply intended “to maybe make them laugh for a couple of seconds.” Coming from a different angle, P16 suggests that celebrities and online content creators sometimes use trolling for promotional purposes: “if you’re attracting a lot of attention from trolling it’s almost like you can use your social media brand to get sponsorships or other opportunities to make money”. This point was also made by P1:

> *P1: “I guess I think it kinda goes back to the saying that there’s no such thing as bad press, that when there’s an online scandal in a game or a forum … y’know unfortunately that just contributes to the notoriety of the game or the forum or the event that they’re participating in.”*

Meanwhile, P10 supports what could be considered a more sub-cultural, mischievous intent for trolling:

> *P10: "a lot of people will troll not because they're actually out there to ruin people's day, but just to have a little bit of fun. Because sometimes there's a little bit of humour in seeing a really, really over-the-top reaction from someone who doesn't get that it's a joke."*

From the more negative perspective, P12 expressed frustration with trollers, saying that they "just have to have a profound desire to be an annoying shit". Again, invoking the bullying comparison, P1's opinion is that "they want the negative attention … it's very similar to high school sort of playground bullying behaviour. They are giving the person a shove, because they want them to try and shove them back". P3 reinforces the idea that trollers often act under false pretenses:

> *P3: "I've seen people when they post something about feminism and equality and somebody post on it saying some insulting thing about feminists or something, and I feel like you can sometimes tell when they don't necessarily mean it but they're just doing it for the attention."*

4.2.2.1.2 « Boredom »

Ultimately, whether the result was positive or negative, there was a prevailing sense among the interviewees that "the driving motivation behind trolling is boredom" (P10). For P10, this is "because on the internet, everything tends to turn into the same after a while," so trolling becomes a way to inject something different into a game or conversation – "to kind of break the boredom." Although, as a self-identified troller, P10 considers these boredom-driven behaviours as a creative cure for the tedium that sets in from "spending 12 hours a day [online]," most other interviewees did not appreciate these types of antics. P5 expressed exasperation towards trollers, saying "I think most people are just bored, they have nothing else better to do, they just – why not pick fights on the internet?" This sentiment was echoed by P9: "They're just bored on the Internet, and might as well start something". P13 further speculated that there might be an element of gamification to trolling: "you have nothing to do with your afternoon and you're saying 'how many people can I piss off,' basically". Based on her experiences during high school, P7 was of the opinion that trollers sought ways to alleviate their boredom online

because they “invest themselves in the internet because that was more rewarding than face to face social interactions”.

4.2.2.1.3 « Anonymity »

All twenty interviewees made statements indicating that they believed that the online environment helped to facilitate and amplify trolling behaviours to some extent. Many interviewees contrasted online with offline behaviour:

> *P3: “people are more likely to be a troll online, because they don’t feel as bad for what they are doing … when you’re behind a screen there’s not that physical connection with a human being as much as when you’re in person and I think people are more aware when they are talking and saying bad things in person and on the internet and like that is just a proven fact and that people are less connected emotionally and they are harsher behind a screen.”*

For some interviewees, this disconnect between on- and offline offers a positive sense of freedom: “it makes it much easier to be humorous, and be creative because you’re projecting out into a void” (P17). These interviewees saw the internet as a stage, in some respects, but one whose reach and relative anonymity made it a more attractive venue for performances than real life: “it really allows you to prank on a larger scale, like, affect more people, and do it in a more anonymous way that makes sure you don’t get any backlash” (P2). However, anonymity was also cited as a reason why people might feel emboldened to act in more hostile ways online. P7 stated that, on the internet, “I think it’s a bit easier to dehumanize someone else” (P7). This was a point that P13 felt strongly about:

> *P13: “they have a computer, that is their connection to the world, that is the way they can make their views known; so, whether or not they feel confident enough to actually engage with people on a face-to-face basis, but this is a very anonymous, in some cases, safe way to put your opinion out there, because there’s no real fear of repercussion, so you can be as negative or as mean and nasty—hurtful, racist, whatever—as you want.”*

One interviewee (P20) had especially complicated feelings about the pros and cons of anonymity on the internet:

> *P20: "to have that anonymity I don't think is a good thing, unless you're being like a whistle blower, there are times when being anonymous is helpful, but I think having it and using it to start – I'm worried that if I started doing, it I couldn't stop because it would, I think, I would be someone who would enjoy it … I spend a lot of my time trying to be as good as I can and there are times when I really wish I didn't have to hold my tongue and I feel, morally, it's the right thing to do – there is something about the two way anonymity, the fact that the person you're targeting isn't – I think it's easy that way to make it seem like it's not a real person in the end … It's a lot easier to be evil yeah, if neither one of you really exist."*

4.2.3 « Who are trollees? »

The responses in this portion of the interview were highly variable and, in large part, depended on how each interviewee initially defined trolling and whether or not they thought it was harmful. Much like how trollers could be "anyone," most of the interviewees (15) said that trollees could also be "anyone." That is, trollers are not particularly discriminating in their choice of targets. True to trolling as a fishing analogy, these interviewees agreed that most trollers will engage with anyone foolish enough to take the bait – that is, there was a perception that trolling was not usually targeted at any specific person. Six of these interviewees commented that those most likely to respond to trolling behaviours were people who tend to be outspoken or hold strong opinions, as well as those who were oblivious or naïve to trolling practices. Three interviewees believed that older adults were more likely than younger internet users to fall for trolling attempts.

4.2.3.1 « Targeted trolling »

Despite the emphasis on indiscriminate trolling in their responses, many of the interviewees also believed that personally targeted interactions could still be a form of trolling. P20 identifies two different types of trolling: targeted, where "you're personally

attacking someone for personal reasons" and untargeted, which is "just chaos, it is just undirected aggression for no reason". P20, along with a few other interviewees, further made a distinction between whether targeted trolling was personal or impersonal. Trolling was seen as personal when the troller had some sort of relationship with the trollee, who was chosen specifically as the target of abuse: "it is a target you know and it something you're doing on purpose to hurt that person" (P20). On the other hand, impersonal trolling could still be directed at a specific target, but one with whom the troller did not have a personal relation, such as famous celebrities: "if you looked at any pop star's twitter feed I imagine there's just bile the whole way down just because they are famous" (P20).

Probing further about instances of targeted trolling, nearly half (9) of the interviewees were of the opinion that women and girls seemed to be targeted more frequently and more ferociously than men. These nine included some interviewees who stated that trollees could be "anyone" above. Although seemingly a contradiction, the logic is presumably similar to that of George Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm*, where "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Some interviewees did comment that this perception of misogyny may simply be based on stereotype rather than actual fact: P10, for one, suggested that the vast majority of trolling actions in gaming contexts were perpetrated by males on other males, simply based on the demographics of competitive online gaming spaces. For the most part, these gaming contexts are environments where "the audience is predominantly male" (P10). However, despite his belief that the majority of trolling interactions are between men, P10 does agree that certain online communities, particularly in gaming, tend to be particularly hostile to the few women who do participate:

> *P10: "it's the hardest single field to get into if you're a woman – is to be a professional gamer or a professional video game content creator … getting down to it, girls get trolled a lot and the acts of stupidity happen a lot more to girls."*

P19 also saw evidence of misogyny in gaming spaces:

> *P19: "I know my dad he plays Call of Duty online and when I play, I play under his tag, I play really badly, and I've gotten kicked out of rooms because I'm not good, but I feel like if I had a girly tag, I'd feel like it would be so much more than that."*

On the subject of internet misogyny, in general, P12 had very strong opinions and went on what she called "a personal tirade" about the treatment of women online:

> *P12: "Because we don't live in a post-sexist society … I think there's a gendered aspect to the internet period – not even just trolling. If you say you're a girl on the internet, or in a game, especially on reddit or any gaming thing, it's just like, 'pics or it didn't happen.'*[25] *There's just immediately this tone shift that you come across."*

Several of the female interviewees also shared stories of situations where they had personally experienced trolling based on their gender. P11, the journalism student, described instances where she had received "very sexist" comments in response to articles she had written. P5 spoke about getting unwanted attention in internet chatrooms: "on the Geek and Sundry channel we've had issues where it's mainly men on there and once someone finds out I'm not a guy, it can turn a little – they get a little, yeah." Although she was not targeted personally, P2 talked about a time when her friend was attacked online: "it was this guy that was making fun of her weight on Facebook."

4.2.3.2 « Untargeted trolling »

While all interviewees expressed concern about the plight of victims of targeted trolling, some were less sympathetic to people who chose to respond to untargeted trolling. As mentioned previously, P3 complained that "there are so many people who are falling for it and that angers me". Each of the interviewees claimed to be able to recognize this sort of untargeted troll-bait and generally felt that those who took the bait were "people who

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[25] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pics-or-it-didnt-happen

don't pay close attention to detail" (P17) or who didn't have a "critical eye … for these ridiculous things" (P3). P19 also speculated that some people who respond to trolls are just as guilty of attention-seeking: "they want to sit there and fight … because they want to be heard – they know others are seeing this, so they want to put up a fight kind of deal." Others found it funny to see people fall into a troll's trap:

> *P14: "some people get genuinely, you can see from their comments they are very emotionally involved with what is going on in the comment, sometimes they'll type up long replies, or an angry sentence, or just cursing off the person, so it's pretty amusing."*

Because they were able to recognize the bait, each of the interviewees explained that they usually chose not to engage with this type of trolling. P10 thinks of it as a no-win scenario:

> *P10: "I never respond to things that I sort of think are troll-baits, because you might think that you're getting the upper-hand but honestly sometimes you'll lose. When you're in a situation like that on forums or on Facebook, everyone loses, because everyone comes out looking like a dork."*

P13 commented on how tempting it might be to respond to trolling: "I understand how difficult it is not to engage. But yes, I think that if people just didn't engage with them they would probably grow very tired and move on". This point was universally accepted by all interviewees: "just pick your battles and don't pick it with them" (P22).

4.2.4 « Vulnerability »

One commonality among many interviewees (8) who saw a closer connection between trolling and bullying was the belief that trolls were "preying on vulnerable people" (P6). Young people were seen as being particularly at risk from trolling, specifically from the personally targeted type. According to P20, "[the playground] kind of bullying is not new; now, it's moved online," but his concern was that the internet allowed bullies greater reach and power to victimize their targets. P13, the oldest of the interviewees

(aged 54), was afraid that cyberbullying would have a more damaging effect on teens than adults:

> *P13: "because a lot of them haven't developed their own self-confidence or self-esteem yet, so they're very vulnerable to what their peers think … I think they take them in more readily, than, say, somebody who would be my age."*

P8 also worried that "because they're like adolescents, they're still young, they don't have much experience … they may easily go extreme." These interviewees expressed a fear that children and adolescents were more likely to react more drastically and tragically to trolling. Indeed, several of these interviewees made reference to youth suicide cases connected to cyberbullying that they had heard about through the news.

4.2.5 « Trolling attitudes »

4.2.5.1 « Acceptability »

Attitudes towards trolling were remarkably divided (see Table 11). Nine of the interviewees expressed ambivalent feelings towards trolling, seeing both positive and negative sides: "I guess in more serious situations it can be negative but I think at times it can be used as a way of humor" (P21). Six interviewees saw trolling as mostly positive, including all three who self-identified as trollers: "it tends to be fairly harmless, generally well meaning" (P17). Only five saw trolling as mostly negative. P1 had this to say: "I don't think there's any positives to trolling. I think it's completely juvenile and unnecessary." Furthermore, all twenty interviewees agreed that trolling can be funny, at least some the time, with seven stating that trolling, by definition, must always be humorous. According to P2: "I wouldn't consider it trolling if both parties aren't seeing humour in it and having fun." For these interviewees, humour is a defining characteristic of trolling: if it's not funny, it's not trolling (see CH 4.2.1.4).

Table 11 Interviewee perceptions of trolling acceptability

	Trolling is…	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Sentiment	…both positive and negative	9	45%
	…mostly positive	6	30%
	…mostly negative	5	25%
Seriousness	…not a serious problem	16	80%
	…a serious problem	4	20%

Most interviewees (16) do not see trolling as a very serious problem, in the grand scheme of things. To these interviewees, trolling was "not a serious thing … it's more of a joke" (P14). Many also didn't feel that trolling was a high priority problem and believing that "there are a lot more harmful things to society than trolling … there's obviously a lot more things on the internet that would be worse" (P3). As previously described (CH 4.2.2.1.3), the relative anonymity and freedom of the internet was seen as helping to encourage trolling behaviour. Taking this idea one step further, several interviewees suggested that trolling was an inevitable, emergent part of the internet – "a natural part of having this environment where people are anonymous" (P21). They argue that trolling is simply an online manifestation of humanity's natural desire to engage in mischievous or attention-seeking behaviours. These interviewees saw trolling as "a reflection of the world" (P16) or "just people being people" (P12). While the disinhibition effect of the internet (Suler, 2004) may make it easier for people to indulge these transgressive urges, some interviewees also saw a silver lining: "the internet brings out the worst, but I think a lot of people do write really nice and interesting things, too" (P16). In fact, some interviewees in this group said that trolling was one of the things they enjoyed about the internet:

> *P14: "it makes the internet what it is, it is a very interesting place to be, especially when you go on reddit for example, I mean like that's just so much fun! I feel like if there weren't trolls – like the thing is it doesn't bother me too much if it was there or if it wasn't there, but it does make some content more enjoyable."*

For a small subset of the interviewees, trolling behaviours were seen positively as a means to build a sense of community online:

> *P21: "I can see communities where it's more acceptable, and even possibly part of the community, I mean if it doesn't hurt anyone … it's actually what keeps the community together – that environment of joking around."*

P2 spoke about university students using the anonymous location-based smartphone app Yik Yak[26] to create and share in-jokes:

> *P2: "Yik Yak because it's locally-based, it's a very interesting niche of user-generated content that can be really funny most of the times … like something I've never realized before: who locks all the doors at night in the buildings, like, is it automatic? No, it's a guy named Hank, he retired last year, but now it's automatic. And like, 'Hank's the real MVP,' and like, that's trolling in the essence that I describe it."*

P16 also spoke to this point, citing her experience as a member of a fan forum for the MTV show 16 and Pregnant.[27] On these forums, it is the irreverent interplay between users joking about the television show characters that helps create a sense of community and keeps the discussion lively:

> *P16: "There's, like, people who are really inspired by the actions of the characters, and people who – not hate them, but who make fun of them in a way.*

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[26] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yik_Yak

[27] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/16_and_Pregnant

> *There are like these forums that are written in a humorous and I think witty way. Like, 'oh, she went to jail for the 16th time'. Like, personally I'm not that witty but the people who write these blogs are really witty. And in the comments, people will respond to them and say things that they picked up."*

4.2.6 « Solutions »

Despite most interviewees stating that they did not think of internet trolling as a serious issue, all twenty believed that there should be better tools on social media sites for users to protect themselves from unwanted trolling. While options for blocking problematic users or reporting abuse already exist on popular platforms like Facebook and Twitter, these solutions were seen as imperfect, at best: "even to block someone on Facebook they can find other ways to get to you … it would definitely be in everyone's best interest to create something beyond just blocking someone" (P20). Some interviewees suggested that increased moderation would be at least somewhat effective. P17 thought that "moderated communities like Reddit" tended to suffer from less problematic trolling, at least compared to unmoderated forums like 4chan, because "they will ban a post or might delete a comment that's inappropriate." P1 agreed, saying that "there's still a lot of trolling, but I think there's community movement to stopping it [on Reddit]." However, P3 was skeptical of such efforts to curtail trolling, saying "I don't think you can really control the internet." Based on his experience, P10 believed that the problem was not so much a lack of rules, but a lack of enforcement: "trolling isn't generally cracked down [in games], or in the forums either … you have a system where you are not punished for doing frowned-upon behaviours." P10 saw most anti-trolling efforts as inconsistent and haphazard, which, conversely, had the effect of encouraging trolling behaviour.

In the absence of effective structural protections, all interviewees agreed that the most pragmatic course of action would be for trollees to actively protect their own online safety. Invariably, the top suggestion was the old internet adage: "don't feed the trolls." Especially in cases where trolling is not personally targeted, there was unanimous agreement that non-engagement was generally the best course of action. That said, several interviewees did recognize that ignoring trolls may not be a lasting solution: "it would be effective not to let it get to you or affect you, but it wouldn't stop people from

doing it" (P9). In cases where trolling is personally targeted, especially, trying to ignore the abuse may have little to no impact on a troller's behaviour. Here, some interviewees emphasized the benefits of having the support of an online community:

> *P5: "like I was saying on the [Geek and Sundry] channel, there's always people there who are looking out – we're all looking out for each other, we're a community. If someone's doing something rude that we don't like, we're gonna deal with it together."*

Speaking about her own internet blog community, P13 believed that cohesion within their group had a preventative effect: "I think that maybe the support that's evident there tends to deter people from trolling on there." Beyond these measures, P1 also suggested that victims of targeted trolling might seek recourse through the legal system, but had reservations about how effective that option might be: "there are new laws in Canada about cyber-bullying, but I don't know how much people know about them, how much they're observed, or how well they're enforced."

4.2.7 « Trolling in the news »

Transitioning to part four of the interview procedure (see CH 3.3.2.4), interviewees were asked if they had ever seen or heard of internet trolling reported on in mainstream news or media sources. Thirteen said that they had seen reports on trolling, but the examples given were quite varied. Five interviewees talked about articles they had seen related to humorous trolling and internet memes. P19 recalled reading about Ken M,[28] an internet personality known for good-natured trolling in website comment sections:

> *P19: "I think Buzzfeed did this one article about this one guy his name was Ken or something and he was going around do a bunch of different companies asking related questions but they are also outrageous questions just to see how the company would respond."*

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[28] http://time.com/4258291/30-most-influential-people-on-the-internet-2016

The other eight interviewees remembered seeing reporting on more serious behaviours, particularly cyberbullying. P20 cited a notable teen suicide case in the Canadian news: "one I saw about three months ago was a mom on the CBC about her son or daughter, I forget, had committed suicide because of trolls who had been at her school." Some interviewees felt that there was a bias in the news towards reporting on more serious examples of trolling:

> *P17: "a lot of stuff that tends to make it to the news more often is not funny or is serious stuff … the stuff that tends to reach the mainstream news tends to be more serious instances of trolling, or often mis-portrayed as hacking or it is only sensational enough if it has a negative connotation, and if it has a negative connotation – tell the world! If it has a positive connotation, it doesn't get spread as widely."*

Other interviewees also felt that mainstream reporting on trolling was lacking because journalists did not understand trolling. P10 was highly critical of what he saw as a generational ignorance on the part of newscasters on the subject of trolling:

> *P10: "I think that it's the fact that you've got grey-haired and white-haired dudes sitting on the TV or sitting at their desks on the nightly news trying to report on an issue that a) they don't personally relate to, or b) we can't relate to them. If I watched Bill O'Reilly or even Anderson Cooper, they're just old enough that I sit there and go, and maybe this is just me, and I go 'they're not 'with it'."*

Seven interviewees were unable to recall seeing any mention of internet trolling in the news.

4.2.7.1 « News article responses »

As part of the interview procedure, each of the interviewees was asked to read and respond to five pre-selected news articles about internet trolling (see Appendix F for full text):

1. Gamergate (2014-11)

2. Twitter abuse (2012-10)

3. Catfishing (2008-1)

4. Wikipedia vandalism (2007-14)

5. Facebook RIP trolling (2011-18)

These articles were selected from the sample collected from the Factiva database and were chosen to represent a variety of publication dates (from 2007-2014) and a range of different trolling activities.

When asked whether each of the articles matched their definition of trolling, most interviewees gave mixed responses: that some articles described trolling activities, while others did not. Interviewee judgments were coded as "definitely trolling," "definitely not trolling," and "uncertain." Three interviewees (P6, P11, P21) saw all five articles as "definitely trolling." Conversely, three interviewees (P2, P14, P22) declared that only Article #4 was "definitely trolling." Five interviewees were not able to respond to all five articles due to time constraints during their interview sessions.

4.2.7.1.1 « Article #1: Gamergate »

Responses to Article #1 were mostly split between "definitely trolling" (8) and "definitely not trolling" (10), with one "uncertain" and one interviewee (P8) who did not answer. All of the interviewees described the story presented in this article as having a strong gendered component. For some interviewees, the sexualized nature of Gamergate was a factor in their decision to classify the events described in this article as trolling:

> *P1: "I think, yes, there is a gender-related thing here that usually a lot of these men are attacking women because they think that they have the natural power to do so and that's just it, and they get a charge out of it."*

> *P6: "I see it as very male, and male trolls, preying on vulnerable people – and in this case the women – from behind the computer screen and kind of getting out of control and not being able to stop."*

> *P13: "It sounds like most of these trolls were men, so unfortunately it's like, if you're a woman on the internet engaging in a particular area that is predominantly dominated by men, I think it opens you up to all kinds of, unfortunately, internet trolling."*

For these interviewees, Gamergate fit precisely into the popular stereotype of internet trolls as anti-social, misogynist, male gamers who victimize women online. Most of these interviewees (6) were the ones who characterized trolls as predominantly male in the earlier part of the interview.

Another common theme among interviewees who saw this article as an example of trolling was the aggressiveness and seriousness of the actions described. References in the article to threats of "graphic sexual and physical violence" (Article #1) elicited strong negative responses from several interviewees. Many interviewees described this article as an "extreme form of trolling" (P6), likening the actions to bullying and sexual assault.

> *P9: "This is like extreme bullying, telling someone you're going to rape them and stuff."*

> *P11: "I wonder if it can be considered sexual assault, sharing videos and photos like that, because I know there have been cases where that has been considered sexual assault and there have been criminal consequences."*

> *P20: "These threats were not 'you suck,' they were very intense and terrifying … they're phrases I never thought one could say, I never thought to put those words together"*

Curiously, the serious nature of the actions described in this article was also one of the key factors cited by interviewees who disagreed that this was an example of trolling. These interviewees were generally those who maintained that trolling was a term that only applied to actions that were not intended to cause harm:

> *P7: "There's a difference between going on the internet and making jokes and like making threats and harassing people."*

> *P12: "That's not trolling – that's straight-up, someone call the police because these people should not be in normal society, they should not be interacting with women. That's not trolling, that's misogyny and sexism!"*
>
> *P15: "I don't think they are trying to provoke anything from these women developers, I think they are just trying to insult them or threaten them … I feel like the consequences are just too grave for this to be considered trolling."*
>
> *P19: "I wouldn't really consider trolling because there was nothing funny, like I said, nothing sarcastic, nothing poking the bear, these guys, are harassing and threatening women for being female gamers."*

For these interviewees, the behaviours reported on in this article ceased to be trolling when they became threatening and overtly targeted. Many of these interviewees saw an element of humour as integral to determining whether or not something is trolling; these people saw nothing funny in this article.

The one interviewee (P5) who expressed uncertainty about whether or not this article counted as trolling drew a distinction between two different actions that she saw in the story: the "long and nasty blog posts" (Article #1) by Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend that incited the Gamergate controversy and the ensuing pile-on by the internet hordes. The key difference for this interviewee was that the initial nasty blog posts intentionally targeted a specific person: "it's definitely bullying there and it got way too severe to be just having a little fun" (P5). The trollers who followed, on the other hand, "were just hopping on the bandwagon" (P5). Though hurtful to the targets, P5 considered the impersonal nature of trolling to be the line that separates it from bullying.

4.2.7.1.2 « Article #2: Twitter Abuse »

Half of the interviewees (10) agreed that Article #2 was "definitely trolling". Seven interviewees answered "definitely not trolling," and three were "uncertain". Similar to Article #1, some interviewees commented on the gender dynamics of this story: a female celebrity being the target of "vile abuse on Twitter" (Article #2). These interviewees

noted that women in online spaces often received sexual comments and are frequently scrutinized in different ways and to a greater extent than men.

> *P1: "Because there's a women who is visibly online and participating on this show and stuff, which has a strong online presence, I assume, that these trolls naturally gravitate towards attacking her, instead of the men that I assume are also on these panels, the judges."*

> *P2: "Women are targeted because of their sexuality … because obviously, historically women have been portrayed as passive, sexual objects first before being humans or being women."*

> *P20: "It's a lot worse for female stars. If she's 24 and voted the sexiest woman in the world she's going to be getting a lot of really awful vile things."*

Another common talking point inspired by this article was the connection between celebrity and negative online comments. Several interviewees brought up the idea that, as public figures, celebrities should expect more exposure, and thus more criticism, than the average internet user.

> *P8: "They have to share their life with other people, society, yeah everybody. So people would have more expectations of them."*

> *P14: "It's almost inevitable – if you're a celebrity, there's going to be people tweeting you mean things."*

> *P21: "It does happen a lot because people see these people on screens … so they feel like they can say hurtful things or make these kinds of comments just because they know so much about these people's lives."*

Again, two of the crucial factors distinguishing trolling from non-trolling, according to interviewees, were intent to harm and intent for humour.

> *P16: "It doesn't say what they're doing, but I mean, she doesn't seem that phased by it, so I'm sure it's not that threatening to her. I think it's a form of trolling."*

P17: "I don't think this trolling, they are throwing the information right at her, and unfortunately this woman feels like she's the most hated woman in Britain … I would draw the line as this is not funny."

4.2.7.1.3 « Article #3: Catfishing »

Responses to Article #3 were the most divided out of all five articles. Six interviewees answered "definitely trolling," while "definitely not trolling" and "uncertain" each had seven proponents. Although four out of the five news articles elicited mentions of bullying at some point, this article was the one that prompted the most interviewees (17) to comment on the relationship between bullying and trolling. Of these seventeen, twelve interviewees suggested that the actions in the article should more appropriately be called bullying or cyberbullying, as distinct from trolling:

P14: "I feel like this is in a category of itself. I don't know if it's fine to call them trolling, that is more like cyber-bullying, like they mentioned here."

P19: "I wouldn't consider cyber bullying a type of trolling."

P22: "Catfishing and cyber-bulling and what not are different from trolling, because I do think that trolling should be a light hearted kind of humourous thing."

This was also the article that prompted many of the interviewees to talk through their understanding of bullying versus trolling. The interviewees identified bullying as a targeted behaviour intended to hurt and belittle a specific person. Several interviewees commented on the fact that the target in this article, a teenaged girl, had been "friends on and off" (Article #3) with one of her bullies. P16 saw this as a continuation of a personal conflict: "this didn't start online. I think they just used the internet as a tool to do this to her." For some interviewees, the personal, targeted nature of this story was incompatible with their concept of trolling, while for others, it was the severity of the consequences that differentiated the two behaviours:

> *P5: "I think the difference between trolling and cyberbullying within intention is, if you're trolling, your intention isn't on the other person, it's on you – you want to feel better, you want to do this for fun. Whereas, if you're bullying, the intention is to hurt someone else – it's no longer about making you feel better, it's 'I want this person to suffer'."*

> *P12: "Oh god, a suicide one? That's not gonna be trolling, that's cyberbullying. If she committed suicide as a result of—it's not trolling, it went too far."*

Catfishing was another term several interviewees (5) spoke of in relation to trolling. P12 describes it as "mak[ing] a profile for somebody that is not real … you're just making it and pretending to be whoever, and then you're engaging with people who have no reason to believe that you're not who you say you are." Again, there was disagreement: some interviewees considered this type of identity deception to be a form of trolling, while others did not.

> *P2: "I don't think catfishing can be considered trolling, it's just another form of cyberbullying."*

> *P9: "I'd consider them making a fake account just to comment on stuff, I think that would be trolling."*

4.2.7.1.4 « Article #4: Wikipedia Vandalism »

Article #4 was the only one that all twenty interviewees responded to and the only one where all interviewees were certain in their answer. Eighteen considered this article to be "definitely trolling" and only two "definitely not trolling". In many ways, this was the least controversial of all the articles. Everyone agreed that Wikipedia vandalism was not a particularly dangerous or serious behaviour. Everyone agreed that at least some of the actions described in the article (such as changing Chopin's birthday) were humorous. Everyone agreed that this behaviour was essentially harmless. However, despite this remarkable level of agreement, two interviewees disagreed in the final judgement as to whether or not this was an example of trolling.

P1 initially declared that Article #4 actually was "a good example of trolling" (P1). However, P1 quickly talked himself out of that first assessment because the behaviour in this example was too benign:

> *P1: "I don't think that there is intended ridicule or mockery here. I think that this doesn't qualify for me, for my definition of trolling. I think these people could be just classified as 'pests' [laugh] as 'text pests'."*

For this interviewee, even the recognition that these Wikipedia vandals were pests was not enough to qualify this story as an example of trolling.

P20 was the only other person to deny that this article was an example of trolling. Similar to P1, this interviewee explicitly defined trolling as a necessarily harmful behaviour: "to me trolling has to have a target that you try to hurt in some ways." For both these interviewees, trolling required a target and a specific intent to cause distress and harm. While both of these interviewees agreed that the events of Article #4 should not be considered trolling, they each differed over what this behaviour should be labelled – with P1 suggesting "text pests" and P20 favouring "vandalism."

One unexpected commonality that this article shared with Article #2 was the idea that, like online celebrities, Wikipedia should expect some degree of tampering due to its open editorial policies and its visibility:

> *P11: "It's almost like a given when you're reading a Wikipedia article like you know there are going to be stuff that isn't accurate."*

> *P13: "Considering that anybody can edit it, you really need to take it with a grain of salt."*

Echoing the admonitions of teachers and librarians everywhere, these interviewees espoused a caveat emptor attitude towards Wikipedia articles. While interviewees were frequently sympathetic to Wikipedia's mission, they also advocated a healthy skepticism when it came to information on the internet:

P12: "If you fell for that, then you should've checked more than just Wikipedia, shouldn't you? Should've listened to your teachers!"

4.2.7.1.5 « Article #5: Facebook RIP Trolling »

Three interviewees were unable to respond to Article #5. Of the seventeen interviewees who did, ten answered "definitely trolling," five "definitely not trolling," and two "uncertain." This article was notable for prompting strong negative responses from many interviewees, due to the distasteful nature of the actions described:

P6: "That's awful. I don't know why somebody would do such a thing … like these trolls – I don't know. They're not even human."

P7: "I thought this was pretty inappropriate and extremely offensive."

While a few interviewees cited the serious harmful intent of the perpetrators as evidence that Article #5 was an example of trolling, several others believed that this did qualify as trolling, in spite of the seriousness of the actions.

P15: "It is clear that the commenters are trying to provoke the parents, provoke the parents through attempted humor, and I guess that's why I consider it trolling, despite the serious nature of what the context is."

P19: "There's definitely trolling in here. Sadly, there are jokes being made, but it's really inappropriate. People have died, these are the memorial pages, and people just having no sense and no sympathy to just go in there and just make fun. They know that they're trolling, but it's almost to be mean … it's meant to hurt people, it's almost to the escalation of bullying."

Humour was another recurring theme that quite a few interviewees chose to speak about regarding this article. As shown in the quotes from P15 and P19 above, humorous intent was a defining characteristic in their trolling judgements. For other interviewees, the question of humour was what caused them to be unsure as to whether or not Article #5 was an example of trolling:

> *P5: "I think the people who are doing the bullying believe that they're just trolling – they're just having a bit of fun because they don't realise or maybe they don't care about the consequences of their actions. Whereas everyone else who's viewing it from a y'know, an objective viewing, is saying 'no, you've definitely crossed the line there, this isn't any sort of funny thing'."*

> *P12: "In trolling … you have to think that this has some kind of entertainment value, like usually it's funny that somebody's gonna react to this. But like, oh my god, I really just don't relate to this as – well maybe they do think it's funny. Oh Jesus. I guess, yeah, if they think it's funny then I guess it is trolling. Oh my god."*

For these interviewees, trolling is in the eye of the beholder and depends heavily on an individual's boundaries of acceptability. Some people may not consider the practice of RIP trolling to be truly harmful, like P16, who stated that, "if I look at it objectively, I don't think it actually harms anyone. It's just distasteful." And, since no harm is intended, this would be consistent with her idea of trolling. Alternatively, for people like P22, this crosses an important line: "I just don't know how these people can feel okay doing these things … I wouldn't consider these trolls, these are bullies."

4.2.7.2 « Post-news comments »

After reading the articles, eight interviewees remarked that they had revised or expanded their understanding of trolling. P22 remarked that: "I thought we were just going to talk about those two guys on Facebook … like funny stuff, because this is cyberbullying which is a whole other side of the internet to me." Some interviewees expanded their initial definitions of trolling to include cyberbullying and social media abuse:

> *P6: "When it's talked about within my friends circle, it's always humorous and as a joke, like 'you're such a troll!' But you'd never associate that person with a stalker who was doing harm or forcing someone to commit suicide."*

> *Interviewer: "So the way that the subjects of things that are talked about in these articles is…"*

P6: "I still think it's a form of trolling!"

Other interviewees reaffirmed their conviction that cyberbullying and abuse were categorically different from trolling:

P14: "I think they are blending the line between trolling and cyber attacks. They are kind of, like, blurring that line and they are making it hard to define what's trolling and what is a cyber attack and I think a lot of people I know would consider trolling very different from cyber attacks."

Several interviewees also questioned the quality of the articles. Speaking about Article #3, P11 (the journalism student) commented that:

P11: "The author seemed a bit naive, in some of the things they said, like 'oh, I believe people are all good deep down' and some of the things they said about the internet it's like they had never seen something horrible happen on the internet before … she even said 'I was naive enough to think…' a lot of the things that she says are kind of obvious points, that you're like 'okay yeah,' we have seen this before, I don't think she was introducing any new ideas, I guess, in the article."

P20 critiqued Article #3 for oversimplifying the narrative into one of "a perfectly innocent" victim and a "perfectly evil" perpetrator:

P20: "Yeah it's oversimplifying, the people doing this, maybe they did want her to kill herself, but maybe they just wanted to cause her some grief and maybe they were 13 like she was and maybe they had no idea what the gravity of this could be."

Interviewer: "So basically, people aren't perfect?"

P20: "Yeah, and if you have sort of this idea that it is a perfect evil, you are going to be blinded to the fact that you're sitting across from people who do that – I mean it's like when they have any crime committed, no one is just an outwardly Satan walking down the street."

Similarly, P10 complained that Article #1 was not a fair account of the complexities surrounding the Gamergate controversy. He claimed that the journalist showed a heavy bias towards only one side of the dispute: “they’re not reporting his [Eron Gjoni’s] side of the story, which, if you read it, really does shed – she [Zoë Quinn] was kind of abusive to him … This is a one-sided report” (P10). Given that only three out of twenty interviewees classified all five of the news articles as describing instances of internet trolling, these results indicate that there is disagreement between what is reported in the news as trolling and what avid internet users might recognize as trolling.

4.2.8 « Interview analysis summary »

This chapter reported the results of twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the University of Western Ontario community who self-identified as avid internet users. These interviewees described provocation, deception, bullying, joking, and memes as five major characteristics of trolling behaviours (CH 4.2.1). Although more than half of the interviewees stated that trollers tended to be male (12 interviewees) and nearly half stated that trollees tended to be female (9 interviewees), all agreed that these roles were not necessarily limited to any single gender. Trolling was perceived to be motivated by a combination of boredom and social isolation on the part of the troller and exacerbated by the impersonal nature of online communications (CH 4.2.2.1). Trolling was not usually considered by interviewees to be a serious problem, except in cases when attacks were personally targeted, such as in instances on cyberbullying (CH 4.2.5).

Interviewees recognized trolling in news articles with certainty only 55% of the time and expressed doubt or disagreement as to whether the actions described in the news articles in 45% of cases (CH 4.2.7). In many of these disagreement cases (30%), interviewees claimed that the serious instances of cyberbullying and abuse described in some of the articles were incompatible with their personal definition of trolling as a more inconsequential type of behaviour. Three of the 20 interviewees criticized the objectivity and credibility of some of the news articles, as well as the expertise of the media, more broadly, when reporting on issues relating to the internet. These results demonstrate that there are notable differences between how internet trolling is presented in news media

sample articles (Study 1) and how it is understood by the avid internet users interviewed (Study 2).

4.3 « Comparing trolling perceptions in Studies 1 & 2 »

In comparing the results of the news analysis (Study 1) and the participant interviews (Study 2), quite a few common themes emerge. Themes like provocation, bullying, and humour emerge from both studies as defining characteristics of trolling behaviour. Both identified internet trolls as most likely to be male and their targets mostly female. Indeed, in terms of the broad categories, there is substantial agreement between the two data sources over what sorts of activities and people are associated with trolling. However, closer examination of the data suggests that much of this agreement is superficial. While it is true that similar themes were identified from both groups, there were clear differences in what each considered to be trolling. Notably, the news articles included instances of online harassment and abuse within their conception of trolling (CH 4.1.1.1) to a far greater extent than the interviewees (CH 4.2.1). On the other hand, the interviewees spoke about aspects of humour and social connection that were all but absent in the news reporting. From the perspective of many of the interviewees, much of what the news reported on was abhorrent online behaviour, but it was not trolling, as they understood it.

Even within the overlapping conceptual space that both groups agreed upon, there were striking differences in how internet trolling was perceived. Whereas almost all of the news articles framed trolling in negative terms (CH 4.1.1.4), the interview participants were far more likely to have a neutral or even positive opinion (CH 4.2.5.1). That is, even when both groups agreed upon what might be called the “objective facts” about a type of trolling interaction, the interviewees often interpreted that interaction in a very different way than how a news story would be written. Of course, neither group condoned clear examples of harassment and other overtly malicious activity, but whereas the news articles were likely to portray even minor acts of transgression negatively, the interviewees were more willing to ascribe humorous or even pro-social intent to such acts. What might be condemned as rudeness or vulgarity in the news articles could

instead be seen by at least some of the interviewees as comic exaggeration or a sort of public performance.

The picture that emerges from these two sets of data is that, while there are some general similarities between how the news media sample (Study 1) and the internaut sample (Study 2) describe internet trolling, the two are, to a large extent talking about different things. The news presents trolling as a harmful menace which ought to be stamped out, while many of the internauts spoke about playful interactions between friends and relatively innocuous online weirdness. Essentially, the news perspective on internet trolling is narrow, negative, and tends to include any sort of transgressive or harmful online activity under the umbrella of "trolling". Meanwhile, the internauts showed far greater diversity in both definitions and opinions on trolling, with some matching the news perspective and others vociferously denying it.

Chapter 5

5 « Discussion »

This chapter interprets the findings of the two studies described in CH 4 and offers a framework with which to identify salient characteristics of trolling behaviours in order to distinguish between different types of trolling. These characteristics are: 1) targetedness, 2) embodiedness, 3) ease of disengagement, and 4) troller intent. This framework may be applied to determine whether a specific trolling act or type of trolling act is likely to be harmful or whether it poses a negligible threat. Through a more nuanced assessment of trolling behaviours, individuals, online platforms, and policy makers may be able to take more appropriate and targeted measures to mitigate the impact of harmful trolling without unduly impacting harmless trolling.

5.1 « Introduction to discussion »

The results of this thesis research have reinforced the notion that internet trolling is a controversial and contested phenomenon, grounded in the fact that there is little agreement over what actually constitutes trolling. Does trolling include such acts as online harassment, cyberbullying, and sending death threats, in line with the types of stories reported on in the news? Is trolling instead a type of sometimes annoying, but generally innocuous style of internet humour, as some of the internauts have suggested? Who, if anyone, gets to decide what "trolling" means? The disparity between the results of the news article findings (Study 1) and the interview findings (Study 2) suggest that there may be little chance that these very different perspectives can be completely reconciled. Therefore, it does not seem particularly useful to continuously debate what "trolling" *should* mean. Even if a specific definition could be agreed upon academically, it would be impossible to enforce its usage among users of the global internet. What is important, rather than trying to pin down any single definition of "trolling," is to be able to more clearly identify when it is harmful and when it is harmless.

In this chapter, I propose a descriptive classification scheme for the purposes of distinguishing between different types of behaviours that could be considered trolling.

Drawing on the results from Study 1 (CH 4.1) and Study 2 (CH 4.2), this classification framework is designed to take into consideration relevant features of the diverse behaviours that have all been called trolling. Based on their context, their intent, and most importantly, their consequences, this framework provides a way to separate those behaviours that may pose a serious risk of harm from those that do not. In the end, what is important is not whether these behaviours are or are not truly "trolling," but the effect these actions have on people, platforms, and institutions.

5.2 « Trolling as action/interaction »

In both the news analysis (Study 1) and the interviews (Study 2), "trolling" was consistently described as an action (it is grammatically a verb, after all) but more importantly, trolling was recognized as an *interaction* – necessarily involving two or more people. The first task, then, is to understand what types of interactions constitute trolling. Broadly, these interactions can be divided into two major categories: verbal actions and embodied actions. Of the two, the verbal actions – that is, trolling that occurs via internet comments, messages, or chats – were by far the most common. Embodied actions, the second category, encompass three types of non-verbal trolling: hacking actions, game actions, and tangible actions. Each of these interactions may be synchronous or asynchronous and either targeted or untargeted. Furthermore, these interactions may have motivations and consequences that are positive, negative, or neutral.

5.3 « Trolling as verbal action »

Examples of verbal trolling were found within every one of the interview transcripts (CH 4.2.1) and a majority of the news articles (CH 4.1.1.1). These included comments posted to online platforms like Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter; conversations over chat programs like IRC (Internet Relay Chat); and videos hosted on YouTube. These trolling interactions included uttering threats and insults, sharing memes and images, and arguing under false pretenses. In general, the presumed intent is to provoke a reaction from the recipient of the message. Whereas people engaged in conversation are normally

interested in conveying meaning through their utterances, trollers are instead more concerned with the effect of their words. The etymological root of trolling as a fishing metaphor is particularly apt from this perspective: just as (outside of Hemingway novels) a fisherman is not particularly interested in a mutually satisfying interaction with the fish, neither is the internet troller focused on engaging in honest conversation with their target. For the fisherman, the ultimate goal is to catch a fish; bait selection generally only matters insomuch as it aids in achieving that goal. Internet trollers treat their communicative actions similarly: the actual content of their utterances may be irrelevant or meaningless on the face of it – what matters is whether or not someone can be drawn into responding.

From a linguistic perspective, trolling can be thought of as a communicative act that violates the cooperative principle of communication. Based on the work of Paul Grice (1975), this principle posits that human beings tend to approach conversations under the assumption that each of the participants is attempting to communicate effectively and to be clearly understood. This principle is composed of what are called the four "Gricean" maxims:

> *1. Maxim of quantity*
> *Make your contribution as informative as is required. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.*
>
> *2. Maxim of quality*
> *Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.*
>
> *3. Maxim of relation*
> *Be relevant.*
>
> *4. Maxim of manner*
> *Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. Be orderly.*
>
> Grice, 1975, pp 45-46

To reiterate: the premise behind these maxims is an assumption that the speakers are each, in their best judgement, attempting to make themselves understood as clearly and completely as possible. In the case of trolling, this is, of course, not true for at least one of the people in the conversation (the troller). In comments and conversations, trolls may violate any or all of the four Gricean maxims. Trollers might violate the maxim of quantity by leaving overly-elaborate, long-winded replies. They might violate the maxim of quality by posting lies or fabricated images. They might violate the maxim of relation with off-topic responses and spam. Finally, they might violate the maxim of manner by taking things out of context and behaving in a purposefully obtuse way. An example of all four violations is the Navy Seal Copypasta, a text meme used as a hyperbolic, facetious response to a perceived slight:

> *What the fuck did you just fucking say about me, you little bitch? I'll have you know I graduated top of my class in the Navy Seals, and I've been involved in numerous secret raids on Al-Quaeda, and I have over 300 confirmed kills. I am trained in gorilla warfare and I'm the top sniper in the entire US armed forces. You are nothing to me but just another target. I will wipe you the fuck out with precision the likes of which has never been seen before on this Earth, mark my fucking words. You think you can get away with saying that shit to me over the Internet? Think again, fucker. As we speak I am contacting my secret network of spies across the USA and your IP is being traced right now so you better prepare for the storm, maggot. The storm that wipes out the pathetic little thing you call your life. You're fucking dead, kid. I can be anywhere, anytime, and I can kill you in over seven hundred ways, and that's just with my bare hands. Not only am I extensively trained in unarmed combat, but I have access to the entire arsenal of the United States Marine Corps and I will use it to its full extent to wipe your miserable ass off the face of the continent, you little shit. If only you could have known what unholy retribution your little "clever" comment was about to bring down upon you, maybe you would have held your fucking tongue. But you couldn't, you didn't, and now you're paying the price, you goddamn idiot. I will shit fury all over you and you will drown in it. You're fucking dead, kiddo.*

https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/navy-seal-copypasta

A naïve reader encountering this block of rambling, typo-ridden, aggressive nonsense might find it bewildering or even threatening. They may be cowed into disengaging from the conversation or respond back in a similarly aggressive manner. In any case, the effect would be that the conversation becomes derailed as the non-trolling participants struggle to understand what is going on. Conversely, if the participants in the conversation recognize the copypasta as facetious, this comment may simply be ignored or might even be appreciated as a joke.

The work of communications scholar James Carey can be applied to understand why internet trolls might engage in these forms of non-constructive conversations. Through his concept of the "ritual view of communication," Carey (2009) suggests that communication can sometimes be understood "less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed." In many cases, "the exact meaning of memes is not as important as the social relations generated by their intertextuality" (Katz & Shifman, 2017). That is, meme usage is often a signal of cultural capital and group identity (Fang, 2020) more so than a means to convey thoughts and ideas. The "Lord Marquaad E" meme (see Figure 8), for example, could be considered entirely nonsensical in the informative sense. The meme is a mash-up of references familiar to many people in the Millennial and Generation Z demographics, with a caption consisting of only the letter "E". Although this meme can be interpreted as poking fun at the absurd degree of self-reference within meme culture (Hathaway, 2018), it is often used simply as a way to confuse anyone who doesn't "get it" and attempts to derive meaning from the image. Similarly, trollers may use memes like the Navy Seal Copypasta, not because they wish to convey anything informative, but rather to signal the fact that they are trolling.

Figure 8 Lord Marquaad E meme

https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lord-marquaad-e

This ritual usage of memes as a means of "forming and signifying communal belonging" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015) is one indicator of trolling activity. In particular, these meme rituals are an important feature of the subcultural varieties of trolling (CH 4.1.1.1), as they are the most playful of trolling behaviours. Some of the earliest scholarly descriptions of trolling alluded to its cultural gatekeeping function as a type of game, "albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players" (Donath, 1999). That is, if you recognize the game being played, you can successfully avoid being lured into an annoying and unproductive conversation; if not, then you have failed a sort of internet literacy test and signaled that you are not part of the in-group. Indeed, Milner (2012) has argued that memes could be considered a sort of Lingua Franca of the internet and underpins much of the subcultural interactions online. Since trolling so often straddles a "narrow spectrum between play and hate" (Milner, 2018), correctly identifying the context in which the trolling game is played is key to understanding whether or not any particular instance may be a cause for concern. P12's description of "shitposting (CH 4.2.1.4) as good-natured teasing between friends is a good example of this concept. While the content of the shitposting messages may seem aggressive or

mean-spirited out of context, they are not interpreted as such by the person on the receiving end. Conversely, in the example of RIP trolling from Study 2 (CH 4.2.7.1.5), similar types of behaviours (jokes and teasing directed at a specific individual) are interpreted as aggressive and meanspirited.

While the identification of internet memes is an important factor in understanding subcultural trolling, there are other context features that can be used to interpret different types of verbal trolling interactions. These features are further discussed below.

5.4 « Trolling time/place »

Trolling interactions take different forms under different temporal and spatial circumstances. Most notably, the internet enables both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, which each facilitate different types of trolling. This section discusses how different dimensions of time and space can influence trolling behaviours.

5.4.1 « Synchronous places »

Through the internet, both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication are possible and trolling may occur via either mode. While every interviewee in this study spoke about and provided examples of asynchronous trolling interactions, relatively few discussed experiences with trolling interactions in real-time, synchronous communication channels. P5 described trolling in comments in IRC chatrooms, P2 and P19 both spoke of trolling interactions with their romantic partners over messenger applications, and both P10 and P15 recounted instances of trolling via in-game chat while playing online videogames. Similarly, the news articles rarely discussed synchronous trolling explicitly, except for a few cases of trolling over chat or video programs (e.g. 2004-5, 2006-13, 2013-43).

There are two potential factors that may contribute to this disparity. First, most real-time communicative interactions do not occur in plain, public sight. A conversation carried out over instant messaging, for example, is not openly visible in the same way that a post on a message forum is, unless one of the participants in the interaction chooses to share the messages publicly. Trolling that occurs via synchronous means, then, is more ephemeral

and invisible, as compared to asynchronous trolling, where posts and messages may persist and be accessible for years. Second, this form of interaction may be less likely to be recognized as trolling. The limited audience of synchronous communications makes for a more private and personal experience and are targeted in the sense that the message is intended for a specific person, often one known to the sender – precisely the type of interaction that many of the interviewees considered different from trolling. Perhaps for these reasons, much of the trolling literature also focuses broadly on asynchronous trolling rather than synchronous (Cruz et al., 2018; Hardaker, 2013; Herring et al., 2002).

Direct messages

The examples of synchronous trolling described by the interviewees in Study 2 can be further considered through the place in which the interactions occurred. Moreover, while all of these anecdotes represent an instance of targeted trolling, each highlights a different relational aspect of the troller/trollee interaction. The accounts of P2 and P19 chatting with their partners are perhaps the most intimate of all trolling acts. While most common trolling interactions tend to be one to many or many to one, applications like the Facebook Messenger system allow for a one to one and (presumably) real-name[29] communicative space. Within the privacy of these environments, trolling may actually be a show of affection in the form of "poking fun" (P19) or being "goofy" (P2). Examples of trolling through direct messages were difficult to pin down in the news articles from Study 1, as the reports rarely made an explicit distinction between public social media posts and private direct messages. Still, these articles provide a counterpoint to the interviewee stories, as all articles mentioning messages directed at specific individuals documented abusive behaviour.

Chatrooms

P5's example of trolling in IRC chatrooms can be considered a synchronous equivalent of asynchronous trolling in message forums. Persistent chatrooms are environments where

[29] https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576

frequent contributors can develop into a community of "regulars" who are acquainted with each other, at least pseudonymously. Within this community dynamic, it is normally outsiders who are regarded as trollers (Herring et al., 2002). For P5, this trolling took the form of unwelcome sexual comments from men arriving into the chatroom: "once someone finds out I'm not a guy, it can turn a little, they get a little, yeah…" (P5). However, as part of the insider group, P5 had many "good friends who run the channel" (P5) who would intercede on her behalf and dole out warnings, kicks, or bans to the offending trolls. In this environment, regulation of trolling activities occurs at a community level and can serve to strengthen group cohesion as the "regulars" band together to fend off disruptive elements. Article 2004-5 from Study 1, which decries sex pests and their annoying "sexual banter" in chatrooms, is another example of the trolling that occurs in this environment.

Video games

The interviewees who experienced trolling via in-game chat represent, in many ways, a middle-ground between the closed and open spaces of the previous two types. Competitive multiplayer online games like League of Legends bring together players who are often strangers, place them in two or more teams, and then task them with accomplishing some type of objective in order to achieve victory. Coordination is key in these games and team members are encouraged to communicate with each other through text or voice chat. Within these circumscribed game spaces, conversations between individual players or between players and teams take on an immediacy and intimacy reminiscent of instant messaging conversations. However, these circumstances do present difficulties when a team is forced to deal with trollers from within:

> *P10: "If you're playing a game like League where you're stuck in an environment with these players, there's no way you can get around the troll. So I think the option of getting up and walking away is definitely prevalent in a forum, where it's not in a game because in a game if you leave, you'll get punished for leaving, and the troller won't get punished for their activities. Or so it can feel like, a lot of the time."*

In a competitive game environment, players may feel trapped in the same space as trollers with limited means to fight back or to extricate themselves from the situation. P15 emphasized that trollers on your own team can be very frustrating when they disrupt the cooperative dynamic because in “a team based game, it yields consequences for the whole team” (P15).

Conversely, when trolling is directed at opponents, such actions can instead serve the interests of the troller’s own team. According to P10, “you could use the all-chat to troll the other team, say, badmouth them, trash-talk, or gloat and try and knock them off their mental game”. While the line between acceptable trash-talk and abuse may be rather thin, verbally mocking or intimidating opponents is nonetheless common practice in many competitive sports and has been used effectively by numerous athletes, famously by people such as Muhammad Ali (Kniffin & Palacio, 2018).

5.4.2 « Asynchronous places »

Harkening back to trolling as a fishing metaphor, the interactive nature of trolling was clearly and repeatedly asserted by the interviewees: a communicative action that did not elicit a response of some sort could not be considered a successful act of trolling. However, this interaction does not necessarily have to be in real-time. With the ability of the internet to facilitate asynchronous communication, a trolling event could be an instance where an unwitting victim responds to an inflammatory comment posted by a troller days, months, or even years before. Even if the creator of the original trolling comment never returns to engage with the respondent, the fact that the victim responded qualifies the interaction as trolling. Furthermore, the victim’s response does not even need to be visible to the troller (in the form of a comment or reply, for example); if the trolling action elicited an emotional response from the victim, then that is enough to be considered a “success.”

In synchronous interactions, such as those over IRC, the people involved in a trolling event are present for the duration of it. Feedback and response are usually quick and occur while the instigating troller is still present in the communicative space. By contrast, asynchronous trolling events may play out over multiple sessions. P17’s story about

conspiring with his engineering program to post fake, absurd projects to their shared Facebook group in order to confuse students in other engineering disciplines is one example where the trolling action is temporally separated from the response. In essence, a trap is laid and set for unsuspecting victims to wander into at a later time. Furthermore, trollers like P17 will have to check back to see if their trap has been sprung or they may hear about it second-hand through other means (such as in-person).

The Rickrolling[30] meme, for example, is a well-known "trap" of this sort that regularly shows up in message forums and other types of open discussion spaces. A bait-and-switch prank popularized in the mid-late 2000s, the practice of Rickrolling uses a disguised hyperlink as a lure to entice potential victims into clicking. Instead of whatever content the hyperlink purports to be, however, the victim is instead directed to a YouTube video of singer Rick Astley's 1987 hit single "Never Gonna Give You Up." P17's fake engineering projects and Rickroll hyperlinks both do not depend on a troller actively engaging with a target. In fact, this type of asynchronous trolling usually does not have a specific, individual target at all and may fool multiple people over time. Once set up, the trap operates independently of the troller and can potentially troll anyone who falls for the deception; it is indiscriminate.

Other types of asynchronous trolling can have features in common with the synchronous trolling examples discussed earlier. P1 described a trolling instance that he inadvertently instigated on a gaming message forum which inspired a back-and-forth reminiscent of exchanges that happen in chatrooms:

> *P1: "I was involved in an in-game PvP [Player vs player] fight, so spaceship vs spaceship sort of thing and I was like totally outclassed by these elite PvPers and then I went to the forums to say that they didn't honor this challenge that I made, which was a 1v1, which I did make and because I didn't know this at the time, these guys had this reputation of being elite, honorable PvPers and then that*

[30] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rickrolling

> *created this firestorm of comments and stuff that a lot of people were agreeing … it was just a little spark that set off probably a 20 page post"*

While message board postings do not update automatically in the same way that chat programs do, it is not unusual for people who become embroiled in heated arguments to stay within the conversation thread and manually refresh the messages so that they can respond as soon as possible. While these types of trolling events may have messages flying back and forth with only a short delay, they nonetheless still occur within the constraints of an asynchronous space. Furthermore, whereas the synchronicity of chat programs lend an ephemeral, speech-like quality to those interactions (whether or not they're actually logged and archived), message board posts tend to have longer and more enduring lifespans. This relative permanence of these posts may imbue them with an unwarranted air of seriousness. As Connery (1997) notes, "we tend to perceive writing as the consequence of long consideration … yet only a relatively small percentage of posts to lists and groups are the product of such reflection." That is, although asynchronous comments give the writer the opportunity to carefully plan out their thoughts, their posts may be just as impulsive or thoughtless as synchronous messages. Asynchronous posts may also be more likely to incite arguments than synchronous, since misunderstandings can be exacerbated during breaks in the conversation. Moreover, conversations that ended weeks or even months before can later be "resurrected" and given new life so long as there are still people willing to add new comments to the thread, leading to potentially never-ending arguments.

5.5 « Embodied trolling actions »

While trolling is usually thought of in the context of textual or verbal interactions, it can take non-verbal forms as well. I will refer to these types of trolling as embodied actions. These interactions may be digitally mediated, but there is a certain physicality to them – in that their perpetrators act upon people or objects, even if virtually. Three main types of embodied trolling are identified in this category: 1) game actions, 2) hacking actions, and 3) tangible actions.

5.5.1 « Game actions »

Three interview participants in Study 2 spoke of trolling as actions performed in online multiplayer videogames. Just like the examples of verbal interactions discussed above (CH 5.3), trolling game actions were seen as ones that violate the cooperative expectations of other players. P15 describes them as "a certain player [who] chooses to, rather than participate in team goals, just to do other completely irrelevant things." For example, a player deliberately and repeatedly acting against their team's objectives is sending a clear signal that they are not acting in good faith, but other types of game actions can be more ambiguous. P10 discussed the concept of *the meta*, or metagame[31] in team-base games like League of Legends (LoL). In LoL, the meta is defined by those playstyles and strategies accepted by a majority of players as effective or likely to lead to a win. Players who use strategies which don't conform to the meta often face backlash from their teammates because "it's going to be unlikely to succeed, [so] people may perceive you as a troll" (P10). However, P10 also expressed admiration for "people that are celebrities on the internet, [who] are sometimes called trolls because they do things that are way way out of the meta, but they work." Interestingly, in both verbal and non-verbal gaming, trolling actions can be seen as either harmful or beneficial, depending on whether it is the troller's team or the opposing team that is targeted.

Asynchronous trolling has also been documented in open-world sandbox games, such as Minecraft.[32] Unlike competitive or quest-based games, sandbox games generally do not provide any specific objectives for players to achieve, nor do they frame the gaming experience within any sort of overarching narrative storyline. Instead, gameplay is open-ended, with a focus on exploration and experimentation within the game world. In Minecraft, players are presented with a game world where everything is constructed out

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[31] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metagaming

[32] https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/09/tech/social-media/apparently-this-matters-america-invades-denmark-minecraft

of blocks. Players have the ability to interact with almost everything in this virtual world and can build or destroy different objects, as they see fit.

While Minecraft can be played as a single-player experience, the game also has multiplayer game modes. Players have the ability to set up local or online game servers with persistent game worlds that others can connect to. In these multiplayer worlds, groups of players can tackle building projects that would be unfeasible for players acting alone, sometimes achieving stunning results.[33] Not only do these persistent game worlds provide the necessary environment for asynchronous trolling to occur, they are also attractive targets for trollers by virtue of the time and effort their builders have invested in them (Hill, 2015).

5.5.2 « Hacking actions »

Hacking actions were a minor category of trolling in both the news and interview sources. Some of these mentions were instances where the actual hacking acts were simply a means to facilitate trolling, such as gaining access to a Twitter account in order to send abusive messages (2014-23), others considered the act of hacking itself to be a type of trolling, such as in two news articles reporting on "internet troll" Andrew Auernheimer, who was charged with stealing data from over 100,000 AT&T iPad customers (2011-20, 2014-45). P17 also spoke about hacking into computer systems in relation to trolling: "I knew someone who took down a webpage in London [Ontario] and they were kind of trolling the city being like, 'hey look, your security is terrible'." Despite this, P17 saw hacking more as a tool for trolling than a type of trolling in itself:

> *P17: "People that hack can have more tools at their disposal for trolling that could be putting up a fake website, that could be taking down a website, or covering a website in a picture"*

[33] https://www.pcgamer.com/10-incredible-minecraft-creations

P11 echoed this sentiment, recalling that "I know at western a few years ago, someone got into the system and added 'Justin Bieber's hair' as an option [in the student council election]".

Speaking in context of the news, P17 suggested that trolling might be "often mis-portrayed as hacking." The difference, according to P17, is the intent for humour. There is nothing particularly funny about stealing user data or shutting down a website through hacking – these actions only rise to the level of trolling when some kind of joke is involved. For example, in a cyber attack on Iranian nuclear plants reportedly conducted by the American and Israeli governments, hackers not only shut down computer networks, but also made workstations play AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" as an extra flourish.[34]

5.5.3 « Tangible actions and non-actions »

The third class of non-verbal actions, tangible actions, is a somewhat loose category that includes both actions and, perhaps paradoxically, non-actions. Most of these actions occur in the context of harassment. One example is the practice of "swatting" (see CH 1.6) which P1 considered a type of extreme trolling. Swatting is a practice whereby a troller makes a false report of a serious emergency (such as a bomb threat or hostage situation) with the intent to provoke an armed police response to the victim's location. Indeed, the term derives from the police SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams in the United States, which were created to respond to violent criminal confrontations. As a form of trolling, swatting is generally associated with videogaming in order to disrupt an ongoing game or as retribution for previous games.[35] While the initial false crime report made by the troller may be a verbal action, the armed police response, which is the most consequential part of the interaction, is a physical one.

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[34] https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/iranian-nuclear-facilities-are-hit-by-acdc-virus/2012/07/25/gJQAqfRz8W_blog.html

[35] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/21/technology/online-swatting-becomes-a-hazard-for-popular-video-gamers-and-police-responders.html

Other tangible ways to harass people include functionality built into online platforms, such as pokes on Facebook and nudges in MSN Messenger. Designed as non-verbal ways to get attention, these functions can be coopted by trolls as a means to send repeated, annoying notifications. Nudge spamming[36] in MSN Messenger was a particular egregious example of this type of trolling, as there was no limit to the number of consecutive nudges a user could send. Community control functions are another means through which a troller might antagonize other users. Used appropriately, like in the case of P5's IRC chatroom friends, the ability to temporarily kick a user can protect communities from those seeking to disrupt conversations. However, this function can also be abused to repeatedly kick individuals for amusement or as a means to exclude them from the community. Similarly, moderators on Reddit, users who are endowed with crowd and content control powers, have often been accused of "power tripping" when they selectively delete some messages or ban some users, but not others. P1's experience in the MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) World of Warcraft can be viewed as an example of abuse of power by privileged users:

> *"Once when I was playing World of Warcraft there was a band they posted this mp3 of a band that sung a song about World of Warcraft and it was the worst sort of poppy rock that you could imagine and I went on the forum and I said y'know 'this music stinks'. Turns out that one of the Blizzard executives was like the bassist for the band and I got banned from the forum for 48 hours for saying that." (P1)*

Aside from performing actions to provoke or abuse individuals, trollers can also agitate others through conspicuous non-action, such as shunning. In games like League of Legends, this could be a situation where the troller finds a teammate under attack and simply stands nearby, watching, rather than helping.[37] In these sorts of cases, it is the

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[36] https://tenor.com/view/nudge-poke-socialmedia-msn-msnmessenger-gif-4669250

[37] Such a situation calls to mind the Voight-Kampff empathy test from the film Blade Runner where, in one scene a suspected android is asked to respond to a troubling scenario: "You're in a desert walking along in the sand when all of the sudden you look down and you see a tortoise crawling toward you. You

mere presence of the troller that produces the trolling effect, rather than any particular action. Such non-actions may be used as gatekeeping tools to exclude or ostracize certain individuals from a group either as a punishment (e.g. shunning) or simply as a means to deny membership. These methods can also be employed in more abusive ways in cases of online stalking. For example, a stalker may not need to take any overt actions once they've made their victim aware that they are both in the same online space. The fact that their victim recognizes the stalker's presence can be enough to cause distress.

5.6 « Targeted and untargeted actions »

Whether or not an act of trolling is specifically targeted against an individual or other entity can serve as a key indicator of its potential harm, but one that is nonetheless complicated. As reported earlier in CH 4.2.3, the majority of the interviewees in Study 2 considered trolling to be an essentially non-targeted behaviour. Even though a specific trollee may be affected by trolling actions, the trollers themselves were generally believed to be acting indiscriminately. The point was that someone needs to fill the role of the trollee; who that someone is was not considered particularly important. These interviewees mostly thought of trolling actions in the "baited trap" sense described above in CH 5.4.2.

Untargeted trolling of this variety is usually seen as unlikely to be a cause of significant harm. These 'troll-bait" types of interactions tend to be asynchronous and one-off: a troller posts a provocative message and then an unsuspecting trollee attempts to engage with it. This may lead to a frustrating exchange (from the trollee's perspective, anyway), but the encounter is ultimately fleeting. However, even relatively innocuous interactions of this sort have the potential to spiral out of control if one or more of the participants becomes personally targeted over the course of the trolling instance. For example, a person who consistently falls for troll-bait may become a "lolcow" – a person who can be

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reach down; you flip the tortoise over on its back. The tortoise lays on its back, its belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs trying to turn itself over, but it can't, not without your help. But you're not helping. Why is that?"

"milked" for more drama and laughs (Konzack, 2017). Often, these situations can escalate when the trollee either attempts to retaliate against their aggressors or to troll them back (Sanfilippo et al., 2018). In this way, trolling can beget more, and more vicious, trolling.

Trolling actions that are explicitly targeted represent the clearest indicators of harmful potential. These include actions identified in both Study 1 (CH 4.1.1.1) and Study 2 (4.2.1) such as harassment, bullying, and other attacks in which malicious intent is ascribed to the troller. Unlike the untargeted, baited trap variety of trolling, which is often asynchronous, targeted trolling attacks may occur either synchronously or asynchronously. Several of the news articles analyzed in Study 1 detailed stories of abuse towards celebrities on Twitter (see CH 4.2.7.1.2), an asynchronous interaction, while P5's account of receiving unwelcome sexual comments in chatrooms (CH 4.2.3.1) would be an example of a synchronous interaction.

Although these targeted trolling actions are often linked to harmful outcomes, it is important to note that targeted trolling is not always harmful. The joking and meme trolling categories identified in Study 2 (CH 4.2.1.4 & 4.2.1.5) may both encompass friendly or pro-social targeted actions. These will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

5.7 « Troller intent »

Just as there is a range of different trolling behaviours, there are also many different types of trollers. Study participants have used terms like "hater," "cyberbully," "shitposter" and "devil's advocate" to describe the people who perpetrate trolling acts (CH 4.2.2). Other terms, such as "flamer," "griefer," "heckler," and "shill" can be added from the popular and academic literature (CH 2). Whitney Phillips (2015) has eloquently described the internet troller thusly:

> *"He is amoral, driven by appetite, and shameless; he's captive by desire and is wildly self-indulgent. He is drawn to dirt, both figurative and literal. He fears nothing and no one. He is creative, playful, and mischievous."* (p. 9)

While some of these characterizations are relatively benign, others suggest much more malevolence. Based on participant responses, there is a common perception that trollers do not generally intend to inflict serious suffering upon their victims and motivated instead by a sense of play, often stemming from a desire to be funny or as means to alleviate boredom. However, it is undeniable that some subset of trollers are bullies and do explicitly intend to cause harm and distress, but even in these darker cases, there is a sort of perverse enjoyment to be had (Buckels et al., 2014). This section breaks down troller motivations into three categories based on the intended effect of their actions upon other people. These intentions can be positive, negative, or neutral, and are each linked to different types of trolling behaviours.

5.7.1 « Positive troller intent »

The positive category encompasses trolling actions motivated by pro-social intent. These trollers generally use humour in an inclusive way in order to establish and strengthen social ties. P19 places friendly jokes and memes in this category:

> *P19: "I mean it's positive when it's like joking … like you scrolling and you find funny pages and you're clicking through and you're like hahah that's me [and you share with] someone that you know is on that same level as you and would get the joke"*

P19 recalls a friend sharing a meme saying "I like long walks to the fridge" (playing off the dating cliché "I like long walks on the beach") to her Facebook wall. As P19 explains, they both enjoyed self-deprecating humour, so the joke was meant as a friendly tease: "like haha that's me because I don't like to go outside and I like to eat and it's funny". P12 similarly describes "shitposting" as a good-natured silliness, saying: "it's just funny, there's no, like, harm from it" and that, at worst, "shitposting is just annoying." Most importantly, according to P11, is the fact that, "with friends, they know that you're not serious." P10 agreed, stating that "it's a lot easier to do that [positive trolling] when you're with your friends than it is with random strangers." In their comments about this type of trolling, the interviewees gave the sense that it is a repeated, back-and-forth kind of interaction with their friends. While one person may take the role of the troller to tease

their friend on one occasion, the roles may reverse on another occasion. The mutual, reciprocal nature of these positive trolling interactions helps to maintain the spirit of playfulness and to ensure that feelings are not hurt.

While the examples given by the interviewees were mostly interactions between friends and acquaintances, positive trolling can be untargeted as well. The practice of creating and sharing "wholesome memes" is a type of subcultural trolling that fits into this pro-social category. In contrast to the often sarcastic, denigrating, or nihilistic content of many popular internet memes, wholesome memes often borrow the same images and format, alter them so that they covey a more supportive message (Figure 9). By referencing familiar iconography, wholesome memes establish an expectation of sarcastic humour, which is then subverted with a good-natured message.

Figure 9 Standard and wholesome memes

It should be noted that much of the conversation around positive trolling revolves around the sharing and re-sharing of memes. According to Shifman, interacting with and through memes is one way in which "individuals participate enthusiastically in the shaping of social networks" (2014, p 33). The affective quality of content like wholesome memes

and reaction GIFs,[38] which exhibit a "self-deprecating relatability" (Ask & Abidin, 2018) are particularly well-suited for this type of engagement. These memes are predicated on presenting everyday situations and circumstances with a humorous twist, often in the form of deliberately incongruous images (Kanai, 2016). Besides simply being funny, these memes evoke a sense of shared experience – that others are facing and have faced similar struggles in life. In using humour to take the edge off of otherwise painful conditions (anxiety, depression, and loneliness are popular topics), these memes "allow new public discussions to take place by addressing conversations and topics not normally granted public attention" (Ask & Abidin, 2018).

None of the news articles analyzed in this study mentioned anything like these types of positive trolling – even the two articles (2012-5 and 2013-8) expressing positive sentiment towards trolling did so only in reference to actions that more appropriately fit the neutral classification. There may be three potential explanations for this: 1) positive trolling among friends is frequently done personally and privately in spaces that the news is not privy to 2) Cases where positive trolling is publicly visible, such as with wholesome memes, may simply not be considered newsworthy and disregarded as merely "fluff" 3) The news media may not consider these types of interactions "trolling" and were therefore called something else – even if such instances were reported, they would not have been captured by the search terms used in Study 1. P17 attributes this to what he sees as a tendency for news to gravitate towards sensationalism:

> *P17: "It is only sensational enough if it has a negative connotation, and if it has a negative connotation, tell the world; if it has a positive connotation, it doesn't get spread as widely"*

[38] "A reaction gif is a physical or emotional response that is captured in an animated gif which you can link in response to someone or something on the Internet" (r/reactiongifs)

5.7.2 « Neutral troller intent »

Based on comments from the interview participants, the majority of trollers are not explicitly pro- or anti-social in their motivations, but neutral. Whereas the positive and negative motivations are centered on the effects of the troller's actions on other people, the neutral motivation is impersonal and likely to be driven primarily by a desire to alleviate boredom. As a consequence, these behaviours tend to be untargeted because it does not matter who the trollee is – so long as they fill can that role, anyone will do. P16 associates this type of trolling with innocuous pranking: "it's somewhat of a joke or it's almost confusing – like, 'why would they do that, what is the point of that' kind of thing – so it's just like, confusing antics." This type of behaviour is often seen as simply weird if it is not recognized as trolling, as exemplified by Ken M, the infamous online commenter (referenced by P19 and article 2013-18) whose absurdist postings frequently leave respondents bewildered and dumbfounded (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Example of Ken M post

http://www.collegehumor.com/post/6912246/the-troll-undiscovered-sea-creatures-and-juice-cleanses

Neutral trolling behaviour is not particularly pro-social, at least on an individual basis, because the troller/trollee interaction is usually impersonal and insubstantial. Some of these interactions are essentially "hit and run": the troller makes a single comment or reply in a message thread and then never engages again. Or, as in the Ken M example, the troller and trollee may exchange a few brief messages within a single conversation, but no further relationship develops. However, on a broader scale, neutral trolling interactions can potentially foster a degree of community cohesion through the establishment of a shared set of memes and references. Miltner (2014) describes these types of memes as "part of a complex, interconnected, and esoterically self-referential body of texts" and asserts that, within communities like 4chan, Reddit, and Youtube, memes "are often the means through which users/members interact with each other." P16 spoke about participating on message forums dedicated to the television show 16 and Pregnant with "people who are really inspired by the actions of the characters, and people who not hate them, but who make fun of them in a way" – citing the witty jokes about the show as what drew her to these online communities. This shared vocabulary of references also serves as "a method of subcultural boundary demarcation" (Tepper, 1997, p 40) in online spaces. Trolling behaviour, then, can help cultivate a sense of online community by defining an in-group of people who "get it" set against an out-group of people who don't. P21 touched upon this aspect of trolling, saying that "it's actually what keeps the community together – that environment of joking around."

Although there may be certain pro-social benefits resulting from in-group inclusion, defining an out-group of people who are not familiar with subcultural trolling references or, "normies,"[39] can produce a level of social insensitivity among trollers, which can be compounded by the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). The online disinhibition effect describes the tendency for people to do or say things online that they wouldn't normally offline and is influenced by six factors:

1. *Dissociative anonymity: "you don't know me"*
2. *Invisibility: "you can't see me"*

[39] "An ordinary or conventional person, as distinguished from someone who is a member of a particular group or subculture" (OED Online, n.d.)

3. *Asynchronicity: "see you later"*
4. *Solipsistic introjection: "it's all in my head"*
5. *Dissociative imagination: "it's just a game"*
6. *Minimizing authority: "we're equals"*

(Suler, 2004)

Earlier internet scholars worried "the connectivity that CMC virtual communities confer upon us blinds the observer to the real character of the technology – all of its users exist as individuals extending their selves through the computer network" (Foster, 1997, pp. 26-27). Staring at pseudonyms and avatars on a screen, it can be all too easy to lose sight of the real people behind each profile and trollers may take the "game" of trolling too far in pursuit of their own amusement.

To extend the "game" analogy even further, the online disinhibition effect may lead trollers to behave as if they are a PC (Player Character) in an online world populated by NPCs (Non-Player Characters). In video games, NPCs may offer quests, buy and sell items, or interact with the player character in a number of different ways. As video games have gotten more sophisticated, the ways in which players can interact with NPCs has also become less scripted and more open-ended. Of course, this means that some players have made a pastime of finding different ways to mess with these characters.[40] However, while trolling NPCs in a video game may just be inconsequential fun, this mentality can become problematic when interacting with actual people online. In this way, trollers might potentially act with callous disregard to a trollee's feelings even if their intent is not explicitly malicious.

5.7.3 « Negative troller intent »

The negative aspect of trolling most closely aligns with the image of trollers featured in news stories as "hostile jerks" (2007-9) or people "sick in the head" (2013-44) who send "racist and threatening messages" (2014-30) or "homophobic abuse" (2014-1). These are,

[40] In the game Skyrim, for example, players can place a pot over a shopkeeper's head and then proceed to steal all of his belongings without consequence. https://youtu.be/rWYYWyFiGrQ

perhaps, the personalities most representative of the link between trolling and the dark tetrad (Buckels et al., 2014). In particular, some trollers seem to display everyday sadism, "an intrinsic appetitive motivation to inflict suffering on innocent others" (Buckels et al., 2013). These are the bullies of the trolling world, bent on inflicting emotional and psychological harm on their victims, or worse. Labelled as haters, cyberbullies, and "misogynistic assholes" (P12), these trollers are seen as "causing grief to people without reason" (P20). However, even in these cases of harmful trolling, there persists an element of play, characterized by "lulz – a spirited but often malevolent brand of humor" (Coleman, 2014, p 4). So, while there is a sort of enjoyment to be had, it is a sadistic pleasure on the part of the troller at the expense of the trollee.

A common refrain from the interviewees was the idea that (neutral) trolling can easily slide into cyberbullying (negative trolling) territory. According to P5:

> *P5: "I think that a lot of cyberbullying starts off as trolling, you're just like 'oh hey, I'm gonna say something that's sort of funny, but it's rude too at the same time' and then it just keeps going, it escalates from there"*

This escalation of interactions is one mechanism through which neutral trolling can cross over into negative. P10 described how this process might play out:

> *P10: "If you're trolling online and someone says, 'I don't like what you're doing, stop,' you're not gonna stop. You might even kick it up a notch, just cause you're eliciting that reaction you crave. You're wanting that attention; you're getting it."*

These descriptions of harmful trolling as targeted, personal attacks are very much in line with definitions of bullying, whether on- or off-line. The definitional criteria of traditional bullying include: 1) intention, 2) repetition, and 3) power imbalance (Langos, 2012; Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2014). Based on interviewee comments from Study 2, it is clear that their perception is that most serious cases of harmful trolling are situations in which trollers specifically intend to inflict suffering and continue the behaviour beyond a single comment or action. In addition, just as victims of traditional bullying find it difficult "to respond or to resolve the problem on their own" (Pepler and Craig, 2009),

trollees who are the target in these instances often have few avenues for recourse – trollers may pursue them offline even if the trollees flee from the online spaces where the original abuse occurred.

Despite its harmful intent, even negative trolling can serve a sort of twisted pro-social purpose. Just as more benign forms of trolling can have community-building effects, a group of individuals focused on attacking other people can be brought closer together through their shared experiences. The practice of "raiding," a coordinated mass trolling campaign on a person, website, or organization, is one such example. The image forum 4chan has historically been infamous for raiding activities, having invaded sites like Tumblr[41] and Habbo Hotel[42] in the past. While causing mayhem within the targeted communities, activities like raiding also help to define and propagate the trolling culture of communities like 4chan, which may be one reason why negative trolling persists. Nevertheless, according to the results of both Study 1 and Study 2, negative trolling is widely considered to be harmful and unacceptable.

5.8 « Trolling outcomes »

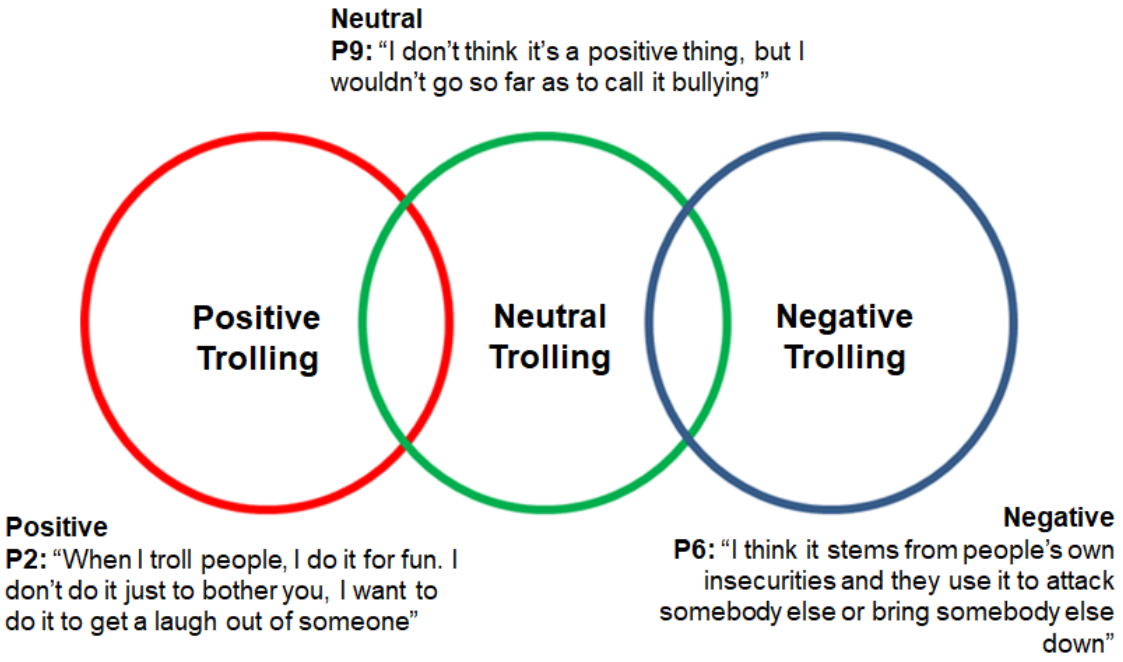
Although trolling outcomes are discussed here as three distinct categories, the reality of the matter is rather more complicated. While the distinction between a positively intentioned act of trolling and a negative one can be fairly clear, intent and outcome may not always align. Consider the example of a joke that misses its mark: while the intentions of the joker may have been friendly, a recipient could misinterpret the joke as hurtful or offensive. As illustrated in Figure 11, positivity can cross into neutrality into negativity. A joke may be funny if told once, but repeated a dozen times, it can quickly become annoying. Repeated a hundred times, the once-funny joke can transform into a type of harassment. Where an act of trolling falls on this spectrum is necessarily negotiated and is highly contextual, but we must consider that it is ultimately the

[41] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2014-tumblr-4chan-raids

[42] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pools-closed

perspective of the trollee that holds the most weight in this determination. After all, it is the trollee who experiences the direct consequences of an act of trolling.

Figure 11 Positive, neutral, and negative trolling intent



5.8.1 « Positive trolling outcomes »

While acknowledging that mistakes sometimes occur, the interviewees in Study 2 who expressed positive opinions of trolling held a firm belief that truly negative reactions were rare. These interviewees placed great emphasis on the idea that positive trollers would be cognizant of and sensitive to the mind and mood of their audience and therefore exercise restraint when joking around. P22 described it as "the kind of thing where we all know it's a joke and then it gets stopped if it goes too far, because it's not supposed to". When trolling occurs among friends, both trollers and trollees have personal history to draw upon to help determine what passes as acceptable humour between them and it is precisely this consideration for the feelings of others that prevents attempts at positive trolling from becoming seriously harmful, accidentally. As P17 states, "there is sensitivity before it. It takes a loss of sensitivity to go from humorous to bullying."

As discussed previously in CH 2.6.2, trolling in the form of jokes and memes can positively connect individuals and communities. Generally, it seems to be the untargeted varieties of trolling that contribute these pro-social effects. P19, for example, describes finding trolling posts with self-deprecating jokes and then reposting them on her social media: “like you’re scrolling and you find funny pages and you’re clicking through and you’re like ‘hahah that’s me,’ that’s funny – share.” Similarly, P14 said “I kind of appreciate it because it makes the internet what it is, it is a very interesting place to be, especially when you go on Reddit for example,” suggesting that the humorous trolling is what draws people to certain communities.

However, the community-building capacity of trolling does not necessarily always lead to positive outcomes for everyone. As mentioned in CH 5.6.3, trolling actions like raiding can increase cohesion within one community at the cost of another. That is, trolling with negative intent (raiding) may actually have positive outcomes within the community that instigates it (4chan), but more wide-ranging negative outcomes outside of that community. In such cases, it would seem prudent to value the safety of the broader internet over whatever localized social benefits such trolling may provide to more transgressive communities.

5.8.2 « Neutral trolling outcomes »

Neutral trolling, being the middle ground between the positive and negative sides, is the category of trolling most susceptible to misinterpretation. In fact, this may be by design, as neutral trolling is the most closely aligned with the deceptive aspect of trolling behaviour. Actions from the sub-cultural trolling category such as baiting, disinformation, and disruption rely to some extent on the troller’s ability to hide their true intention. Similarly, if we consider sub-cultural trolling in the sense of “a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not” (Tepper, 1997, p. 40), then it is reasonable to expect that those who do not know the “rules” of trolling might feel incensed at being the butt of a joke. Even relatively mild trollers like Ken M (Figure 11 above) employ such trickery for extra comedic effect. While the initial comment about there being “only 6 species in the ocean that we havent [sic] discovered yet” is amusing

on its own, the real joke comes at the expense of the other commenters who were duped into taking him seriously.

Another cause of mismatch between intent and interpretation is context collapse, when "people, information, and norms from one context seep into the bounds of another" (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). This can be particularly problematic on the internet, where social norms can vary wildly between communities, from something like EVE Online, "a game that is notorious for being emotionally dangerous or wild" (P1) to the "*Humans of New York* community [which] is just overall a fairly positive one" (P13). P13, in particular, drew attention to how different online community norms can clash:

> *P13: "Once a post goes outside of the community that's surrounding it, you kind of get more trolling happening … after a while you notice there's starting to be these people coming in to the discussion that have very definite racist or extremist views that are very negative."*

In these cases, context collapse occurs when individuals or groups of individuals (often trollers) carry the edgy, irreverent norms of communities like 4chan, where extreme forms of trolling are commonplace and condoned, into spaces where such things are inappropriate and unappreciated. What may be intended to be neutral or even positive trolling on 4chan could be shockingly offensive to anyone outside of that context (for example, the usage of words like "fag" and "tard" as terms of endearment[43]). However, this type of context collapse was not seen as a major issue by interviewees in Study 2Study 2 because there was a perception that such clashes were uncommon. P16, for example, stated that "they [trollers] have their own websites and their own subreddits … whenever they do stuff that might be considered offensive, they stay in their own space."

P16's observation does provide some insight into how we might consider problematic communities such as 4chan. Clearly, malicious attacks directed outward from trolling sites like 4chan should not be tolerated on the basis that such actions are harmful to the

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[43] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/fag-suffix

targeted communities, but if negative behaviours are confined within communities that explicitly condone trolling, that could be a different matter. P16 suggests that "if I'm going onto their website and reading it, then I can't say anything that I'm offended, because I'm in their space, and I sought it out myself." Implicit in this view is that the problematic aspects of trolling may be tied to a type of consent to be trolled – that knowingly entering into trolling spaces entails an acceptance of the subcultural norms of those spaces. This does also highlight the importance of being able to recognize trolling as a pseudo-deceptive practice – as "not just any type of joke; they are jokes made about, and with, information" (Tepper, 1997), which necessitates a level of subcultural knowledge and internet literacy. Pragmatically, this means that, at least in some circumstances, trollees must take some responsibility for self-preservation.

5.8.3 « Negative trolling outcomes »

A mismatch can also occur between intent and effect when it comes to negative trolling: the barbs of a mean-spirited remark can be entirely blunted if the target does not take the insult seriously. In fact, negatively intentioned trolling, when done ineptly, can become a source of delight for a savvy audience and the troller may find the target turned back upon themselves. Trollers seeking to incite arguments rely on a feigned pseudo-sincerity in order to pass as legitimate participants in online communities; however, once a troller is recognized as being disingenuous, much of their power to cause trouble evaporates, as they are no longer taken seriously by the community. Coles and West (2016) describe what they call the repertoire of vigilantism as "an appropriate response to trolls, and … a means to defend online spaces," especially when dealing with a persistent troller. In these cases, certain individuals will take it upon themselves to essentially out-troll the troller. Effectively inverting the trolling dynamic, the original would-be troller is baited into aggravating arguments and is essentially laughed at by the community until they leave.

Negative trolling can also inspire a community to band together more tightly as a response to the attack. This is something P13 has seen in the communities she's a part of:

> *P13: "With Humans of New York you've got people that are very quick to rise to the defense of the subject of the posts because I think of the community that*

> *Brandon creates there, it's a very supportive, open community for the most part. And so I think as soon as someone is obviously trying to attack that, I think people will rise up, and go 'hey'"*

Once again, trolling behaviour is a determinant of "subcultural boundary demarcation" (Tepper, 1997, p. 40), but it is the troller who is the outsider in this case. Not only is the attempt to disrupt the *Humans of New York* community not successful, the troller's attack actually has the opposite effect. Instead of breaking apart the community, the transgression instead serves to strengthen the established norms of the group being trolled.

Of course, these "turnabout" situations where negative trolling attempts are subverted into producing positive effects tend to be the exception more than the rule. As has been documented repeatedly throughout this thesis (CH 1.6, Ch 2.6.1, CH 4.1.2, CH 4.2.1.3), trolling behaviours can have seriously harmful consequences on individual trollees, as well as online communities and platforms. In both Study 1 (CH 4.1) and Study 2 (Ch 4.2), it was found that, regardless of whether or not the specific actions were called "trolling," there was broad disapproval of abusive and antisocial online behaviour. So, while there may be important differences in perspective between the news media "outsiders" and the internaut "insiders" (CH 4.3) one point on which both agree is their mutual condemnation of the serious harms perpetrated in the name of internet trolling.

5.9 « Seriousness of internet trolling actions »

As discussed in this chapter, there are numerous contextual factors which can be used to describe different types of internet trolling. There are several relevant factors to consider when interpreting an instance of trolling, but targetedness arises as the most important for judging whether or not trolling is likely to have a harmful outcome. First, all but one of the abusive trolling behaviours identified in Study 1 (CH 4.1.1.1) are explicitly targeted attacks. The one that is not, hate speech and bigotry, is dangerous because it often provokes or instigates targeted attacks by focusing animosity onto particular groups of people. This is further supported by interviewee comments in Study 2 (CH 4.2.3)

equating targeted trolling with bullying. Second, both Study 1 and Study 2 raised the idea that vulnerable populations, including children and sexual and racial minorities, were at higher risk of being targeted for abusive trolling (CH 4.2.4). Third, targeted trolling opens up the possibility of repeated harassment over time (CH 5.7.3) and/or a pile-on effect where numerous trollers all concentrate on a single trollee (CH 5.6). For these three reasons, targetedness should be considered the most reliable predictor for serious, harmful trolling behaviour.

The next category most closely associated with serious trolling behaviour is embodied actions. Once again, we see that the most harmful of these actions are targeted ones. Hacking actions (CH 5.5.2) must necessarily be directed at an individual or corporate entity via their networks, systems, or profiles. Gaming actions (CH 5.5.1) maybe be either targeted or untargeted, but it is the targeted varieties that are most likely to be of serious concern. Crucially, these targeted gaming actions generally occur during simultaneous sessions within multiplayer video games, the immediacy of which may exacerbate the harm felt by trollees. Finally, tangible actions (CH 5.5.3) may lead to some of the most damaging trolling outcomes because they may progress beyond online interactions and into the "real world." Swatting, in particular, is one such targeted trolling action that can result in serious physical, offline consequences. This is not to say that verbal actions cannot lead to negative outcomes – the routine abuse that many people face on social media refutes such claims, but that embodied actions have greater potential for dire consequences.

These targeted and embodied trolling actions may be considered the most serious because they directly cause the harms against individuals, communities, and institutions identified previously in CH 2.7.1. The prevalence of these actions in news stories (Study 1) is further evidence of their seriousness. By contrast, the disrespectful and sub-cultural categories of trolling actions (CH 4.1.1.1) seem to be less seriously harmful by virtue of being generally untargeted and verbal. Harm in these cases is less direct and may be more impersonal. These actions may be attempts at jokes, subcultural gatekeeping, or argumentativeness for the sake of argumentativeness. In the news discourse, these types

of trolling elicited complaints that they were distasteful or annoying, rather than injurious.

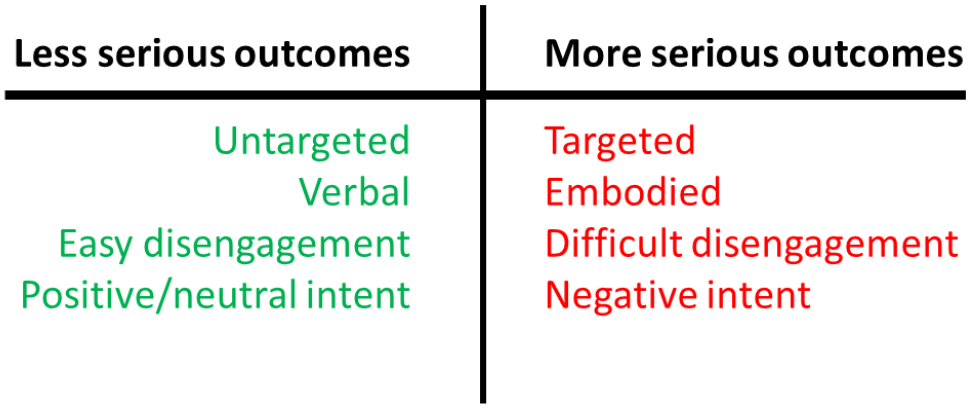
Synchronicity, by itself, is not necessarily an indicator of harmful trolling interactions, but may serve to exacerbate the seriousness of harmful interactions. In terms of time and place, the most important factor may be how easily a trollee is able to disengage or otherwise escape from a trolling interaction. In a multiplayer game context, as mentioned above, players often face penalties or other consequences for leaving a match, which could trap a trollee in an unpleasant situation with their troller. Swatting provides an even more extreme example, as extricating oneself from an aggressive police action is rarely easy or safe. Conversely, disengaging from an annoying comment thread on an internet forum usually poses few, if any, consequences for the trollee. However, this assumes only a single trolling interaction; again, repeated or pile-on interactions can create an imprisoning effect and, therefore, increase the severity of trolling outcomes.

While intent can be a useful contextual factor for interpreting trolling actions, it does come with two main caveats. First is the uncertainty inherent in trying to infer the intent of another person's actions or communications. Sarcasm, innuendo, and cultural differences are just a few of many possible causes of misunderstanding. Second, even if a troller explicitly states their intent, such statements themselves may be disingenuous or misleading – after all, "just trolling" (Phillips, 2015) is a common way for trollers to attempt to minimize their abusive behaviour. Still, it stands to reason that someone trying to achieve a harmful outcome is more likely to succeed than someone who is not. Repetitive abusive behaviours such as bullying imply a knowing intent to harm, while disrespectful and sub-cultural trolling may not necessarily be driven by negative intent, so much as an insensitivity to others. Even if these actions all yield negative outcomes, those that were unintentional would tend to be less damaging than those specifically aiming to wound.

Based on this analysis, the factors associated with serious negative outcomes in a trolling interaction are: whether the action is targeted, whether it is embodied, whether the action occurs in a confined situation, and whether it is done with negative intent. Although none

of these factors, in isolation, conclusively identify harmful trolling actions, actions exhibiting all four ought to be cause for concern. Conversely, untargeted, verbal trolling actions without negative intent are of least concern for harmful outcomes, especially if the trollee has options for mitigation and/or escape (see Figure 12). To return to the two vignettes presented in chapter 1, we can see that the email trolling case (CH 1.5) presented little risk of serious harm because the interactions were largely untargeted, verbal, and troller intent was largely mischievous, rather than malicious. Furthermore, those people who were unwilling to continue participating in the email trolling could block the message thread, turn off email notifications, or otherwise disengage from the situation without significant consequences. By contrast, the swatting case (CH 1.6) was personally targeted, physically embodied, difficult for the trollee to avoid, and intended by the troller to cause harm – all factors which contributed to the tragic outcome.

Figure 12 Factors influencing the seriousness of trolling outcomes



5.10 « Responding to internet trolling actions »

Analyzing internet trolling using the framework outlined above, four main recommendations can be made for how trolling should be addressed in online spaces. First is that many behaviours which are called “trolling” do not pose a serious threat of harm and therefore generally do not require a strong regulatory response. Benign, playful transgressions against expected norms, such as employing unconventional strategies in an online game (CH 5.5.1), or attempts at absurdist or ironic comedy (CH 5.7.1), are both examples of trolling behaviours that generally result in harmless or even positive

outcomes. These types of trolling are usually untargeted or, if they are targeted, occur within a context where the act is understood to be non-malicious by all parties (such as teasing between friends). As P22 stated, “we all know it’s a joke and then it gets stopped if it goes too far.” Notably, such behaviours tend to be self-correcting in that a benign troller who receives a strongly negative response will alter their behaviour based on that response because their intent is not to cause undue offence. Social interactions within a community will also help to negotiate what types and to what extent transgressions are tolerated. As such, overt regulation is likely unnecessary beyond basic conduct guidelines like terms of use agreements and general netiquette.

Second, this framework can be used to identify problematic or harmful behaviours. Direct, personal interactions pose the greatest potential risk – especially if there is a tangible or embodied element. Although these types of interactions may not always be negative in intent, they do have the most potential for abuse. In particular, patterns of behaviour where a specific person is repeatedly targeted by one or more trollers should be taken the most seriously. To stress the point once again, whether any of the people involved consider an act to be trolling or not is immaterial; any targeted behaviour that leads to a negative outcome is a cause for concern. As shown in Study 2, even though the interviewees disputed the semantics of trolling, they were nonetheless in unanimous agreement that online abuse and harassment must not be tolerated.

Third, the trolling features outlined in this framework can be used to target mitigation strategies for addressing problematic trolling. For instance, one aggravating factor in harmful trolling interactions is the sense of entrapment that trollees may experience, based on how and where the interaction takes place. The fact that there is no easy “out” from a trolling situation can encourage the troller and discourage the trollee. One implication of this would be that the design of online platforms should consider ways to give users more control over how and when they engage with other people. For example, social media sites could enable strong privacy settings for their users, by default, such as limiting the ability of users to send messages to strangers. Many platforms, like Facebook, have moved to adopt some of these measures over the years, but concerns about personal information are growing (Auxier et al., 2019). Another important way of

giving users more control over their online experience is the ability to report abusive users and behaviour. Again, this is a feature included in all online platforms, but as interviewees in Study 2 reported (CH 4.2.6), enforcement of anti-trolling policies was seen as inconsistent and haphazard. Additionally, consequences for trolling, such as bans and suspensions, were considered inadequate and easy to circumvent.

Finally, this framework highlights potential mismatches between the intent and outcome of trolling actions, which has implications for online literacy education and policy development. As discussed above in CH 5.7.2, trolling acts that are intended to mark subcultural boundaries may be interpreted as more hostile than intended – leading to context collapse and potential conflict. These types of anti-newbie trolling behaviours generally lead to brief, relatively innocuous encounters that are likely to result in nothing more serious than confusion and, as discussed in CH 2.7.2, play an important role in identity formation and group cohesion online. Since this type of subcultural trolling usually involves memes (such as the Navy Seal Copypasta described in CH 5.3), education initiatives grounded in memetic logics, grammar, and vernacular, such as described by Ryan Milner (2016), could help internet users better understand how memes work in these contexts. For example, education about memetic logics could be included as part of existing public school curricula on ICTs. Similarly, public libraries around the world have launched initiatives to counter fake news and online disinformation in recent years (Reves & Corujo, 2021), which could be expanded to explain subcultural trolling. However, there are other subcultural practices that merit more scrutiny, even if they don't explicitly target any individual person. This is because the subcultural norms of some online communities serve to normalize problematic precursors to malicious trolling, such as hate speech, bigotry, and extremism.

Returning to the example of 4chan, the acceptance (and even celebration) of "insider" terms like "/b/tard,"[44] "oldfag,"[45] and "/pol/ack"[46] perpetuates racist, ableist, and homophobic ideas, creating a culture that pushes towards ever more radical reactionary views. In particular, 4chan's "Politically Incorrect" board (called "/pol/") was created to provide a space where users would be free from the constrains of political correctness and so, could voice unpopular opinions and use offensive language that would be regulated in other spaces. As a result, even by broader 4chan standards, much of the content on /pol/ is "racist, racialized, or otherwise unnecessarily vitriolic and violent, yet is viewed by many in this context as everyday discussion" (Ludemann, 2018). Over time, this /pol/ culture has grown and spread beyond 4chan, seeding a constellation of similar websites (Baele et al., 2021). Some users participating in these subcultures may simply be acting performatively as a sort of transgressive play (Hagen, 2020) – that is, their *intent* may not be overtly malicious, but the normalization of hateful and offensive content within these spaces can produce very serious *consequences*. As discussed in CH 2.6.1, 4chan was one of the driving forces behind both #Gamergate and Pizzagate, as well as the online Alt-Right movement, more broadly. Worse, these subcultures have contributed to the radicalization of individuals who have gone on to commit terrorist attacks in several countries, including in New Zealand in 2019 (Baele et al., 2020). This stands in opposition to P16's assertion in CH 5.8.2 that offensive trolling behaviours are not a problem, so long as they stay within their own spaces. Unfortunately, we have seen in recent years that the toxic ideologies fostered within the darker recesses of the internet can and will spill over into other on- and off-line places, with potentially tragic consequences.

Karl Popper's (1945) observation on the "paradox of tolerance" seems relevant here – in that "unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance." While issues

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[44] https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki//b/tard

[45] https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/oldfag

[46] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=%2Fpol%2Fack

arising from positive or neutral trolling can usually be addressed through rational argument and public opinion, the bigotry and intolerance spread via some varieties of negative trolling cannot be tolerated because they do not negotiate in good faith and will resort to violent means to achieve their ends. Intolerant subcultures, such as /pol/, function by exploiting civil liberties, like free speech, to demand the denial of those liberties to others. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1948) description of the anti-Semite is eerily evocative of how this type of trolling operates (not least of all because many of these trollers are also anti-Semites):

> *"They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play … They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert."*
>
> (1948, p. 20)

In short, not all trolling behaviours necessitate systematic regulation or sanction. Benign trollers will be sensitive to the kind of response they get and are generally self-regulating, while other minor trolling infractions can often be effectively dealt with by community members through informal social means, such as rebukes or counter-trolling (CH 5.8.3). Conversely, harmful trolling does require official, systematic regulation and response because, in many cases, it is beyond the targeted individual's ability to halt or mitigate malicious trolling. In more severe instances, a concerted regulatory response may be appropriate in order to counter the spread of hateful and extremist ideologies.

5.11 « Summary »

This chapter broadly categorized trolling interactions as either verbal or embodied and described four contextual characteristics that can be used to evaluate the potential risk of harmful trolling. These characteristics were: 1) targetedness, 2) embodiedness, 3) ease of disengagement, and 4) troller intent. Based on evidence from Studies 1 and 2, embodied trolling actions that were targeted with negative intent were determined to be most likely

to produce serious negative outcomes, especially when they take place within a situation where the trollee cannot easily disengage. Interactions that were not embodied, not negatively intentioned, untargeted, and did not occur in confining situations are more likely to lead to neutral or even positive outcomes. The implication of these findings, consistent with the views of a majority of interviewees from Study 2, is that many of the interactions identified with internet trolling do not require formal regulation beyond what typically already exists because they pose a relatively low risk of harm. Terms of use agreements, content moderators, and social enforcement of community norms are usually believed to be sufficient to curb minor trolling infractions, while allowing for the positive effects of benign transgressive behaviour. In these cases, the old adage "don't feed the trolls" remains reasonable advice. Also, enhanced default privacy settings and more options on social media and gaming platforms would allow for individuals to take more personalized control over their online experiences and help to mitigate situations where a person may feel trapped in trolling situations.

Many of the harmful effects of malicious trolling come as a result of the inability for a trollee to halt or escape the interaction. As such, these situations necessitate outside intervention. While all social media and gaming platforms have some sort of abuse reporting and terms of use policy, their implementation and enforcement is seen as inconsistent and/or ineffectual. Trollee concerns may not be taken seriously and punitive measures against trollers, such as suspensions and bans, may be easy to circumvent and have little power to deter unacceptable behaviour. Moreover, there needs to be greater appreciation of the fact that trolling subcultures can cause harm even if they rarely interact directly with mainstream online spaces. Subcultural spaces which normalize hate speech and toxic ideologies will foster radicalization and extremism, which will inevitably seep out from the original source, often with tragic consequences.

In the end, internet trolling is a complex issue with manifold forms and expressions that require understanding and nuance to handle. A hands-off approach might be appropriate for some varieties, but others demand to be taken seriously. This chapter offers a framework for how different types of trolling might be categorized so that regulatory and response efforts can be better targeted to those behaviours which are most harmful.

Chapter 6

6 « Conclusion »

This chapter presents a summary of the thesis findings, recommendations, and limitations. Then, I discuss developments in society and culture, as they pertain to internet trolling, that have occurred since the end of data collection in 2016. In particular, this chapter considers how the rise of the Alt-Right and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency have impacted perceptions and understandings of trolling. I argue that the events of the past few years have made it all the more imperative to closely examine trolling behaviour and its relation to conspiracy theories, radicalization, and hate both on- and off-line.

6.1 « Summary of thesis findings »

To summarize, this thesis presented five major findings:

1. Between 2004 and 2014, English-language news reporting on internet trolling was framed almost entirely in negative terms. Trollers were considered a nuisance, at best, and criminal, at worst. Less than 3% of articles presented trolling in a neutral or balanced way and less than 1% expressed positive sentiment towards trolling.
2. By contrast, interview data collected from avid internet users (internauts) familiar with trolling revealed much more diverse perspectives. Roughly one half (9) of interview participants viewed trolling ambivalently, while about a quarter each had positive (6) or negative (5) views.
3. There is ambiguity over whether the events reported in the news constitute trolling or categorically different types of toxic behaviours, despite using the term "trolling" to describe all of the various instances. Many of the interviewees were reluctant to classify instances of targeted harassment or abuse as examples of trolling, although some considered them to all to be part of a spectrum of trolling behaviours.
4. Within the Study 2 sample, interviewees tended to think of internet trolling in less severe and harmful terms compared to the characterizations found in the news

articles. Interviewees consistently described trolling as behaviour that may be unwelcome or annoying, but is ultimately motivated by an attempt at humour on the part of the troller. Furthermore, interviewees mostly considered trolling behaviour to be low-impact and unlikely to have serious consequences.

5. Innocuous trolling behaviours, according to the majority of the Study 2 interviewees, do not need to be specifically sanctioned or regulated. Current tools provided by platforms (such as blocking) and informal peer/community action were believed to be adequate in concept, if not necessarily so in practice. Problematic trolling behaviours, on the other hand, should be taken more seriously by platforms, policy makers, and law enforcement. Interviewees did not think that current tools were sufficient to deter and punish online harassment and abuse. Furthermore, there was a pervasive feeling that trolling was a deep-rooted expression of human nature and unlikely to even be completely controlled.

The results suggest that the subjects of the two studies comprising this thesis, news articles and internauts, are indeed often talking about different things when they talk about internet trolling. Whereas all of the internauts commented on humorous aspects of trolling (CH 4.2.1.4), like memes and jokes (whether or not they personally found it amusing), articles from the news sample almost entirely ignored these aspects in favour of stories about harassment and abuse. One possible explanation for this is that news organizations report on stories that they deem newsworthy, which tend to involve conflict and controversy (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Furthermore, communications scholars have suggested that journalists focus disproportionately on negative stories as an expression of the belief that the news should serve a “watchdog” function by putting a spotlight on crimes and misdeeds (McIntyre, 2016). A story about trollers posting distasteful images and messages to online memorials to deceased loved ones (RIP trolling), in this respect, is newsworthy; a story about a silly internet in-joke is not. So, one reason for the apparent disconnect between the perspectives of the news media and of the study interviewees in regards to trolling may be because the news only reports on newsworthy and therefore negative stories, whereas the interviewees were more personally familiar with positive and neutral types of humorous trolling.

In selecting the types of articles to publish and the way in which they are presented, journalists, editors, and other news media professionals perform a gatekeeping function in shaping the flow of information delivered to newsreaders – that is, to the public at large. However, these pieces are often written by journalists and columnists with little to no understanding of trolling culture; much of the reporting on internet trolling is not only intensely negative, but also incredulous and naïve (for example, article 2008-1). Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the articles sampled in Study 1 appeared in tabloid publications, which are notorious for trading on scandal and outrage. Ironically, this approach has given trollers what they most crave: attention. The effect of this, as described by Phillips (2015) is a "cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle." Trollers engage in shenanigans, the news breathlessly sensationalizes the event, trollers revel in the attention and engage in more shenanigans – rinse and repeat. For news readers who are not particularly savvy to the weird ways of internet culture, this blanket negative reporting could create an exaggerated impression that trolling is an ubiquitous and terrifying menace – a moral panic.

6.2 « Summary of thesis recommendations »

While I have argued in this thesis that some of the concern over internet trolling may be overblown as a result of persistent negative coverage in the press, this does not discount the fact that there are varieties of trolling that can be seriously damaging. Unfortunately, the broad application of "trolling" as a term has served to flatten the discourse by lumping together very different types of behaviours with wildly divergent consequences. The purpose of this thesis, as laid out in CH 1.7, is to provide a means by which to differentiate harmful trolling behaviours from harmless. Based on analysis of the data collected from studies 1 and 2, four characteristics of trolling interactions have been identified which can be used to flag the types of trolling that pose the greatest risk of harm. These are:

1) Targetedness – trolling actions which are focused upon an identifiable individual or a group of individuals.
2) Embodiedness – trolling actions which have a tangible or physical component.

3) Ease of disengagement – trolling situations where trollees cannot readily extricated themselves from the interaction.
4) Troller intent – the motivation of the troller, whether positive, neutral, or negative.

As described in CH 5.9, the most harmful trolling interactions are those where one or more trollees are personally targeted by one or more trollers with negative intent and which occur in real-time in physically or virtually constrained circumstances. Notably, these are the types of trolling interactions where the adage "don't feed the trolls" – that is, non-engagement – does not help to mitigate the harm done. Direct, tangible attacks, such as swatting and hacking are impossible for a target to ignore, while threats of violence, stalking, or cyberbullying present serious dangers that should not be ignored. These and other targeted attacks are often beyond the abilities of any single person to manage and necessitate the involvement of higher authorities. When these trolling actions are clearly criminal, the assistance of police or other civil authorities may be required. When these trolling acts are not so clearly criminal, trollees generally depend on the online platforms to intercede on their behalf. In both these situations, it is imperative that relevant authorities, whether law enforcement or moderators and administrators empowered by the online platforms, take trollee complaints seriously.

Trolling interactions in which trollees are not personally targeted, which do not occur in confined situations, and in which the troller is acting with positive or neutral intent pose less of a risk of harm. Examples include friendly teasing and shitposting (CH 5.7.1), as well as subcultural practices like weird memes and misdirection pranks (CH 5.7.2). If these types of trolling interactions do end up producing negative outcomes, the problematic trollers can usually be dealt with through "soft" measures like community disapproval, warnings, or suspensions. These are also the types of interactions where non-engagement can actually be an effective means of discouraging trolling behaviour. In some cases, adverse reactions to this type of trolling may be a result of a lack of subcultural awareness on the part of the trollee, such as confusion over an in-joke or misunderstanding an ironic comment. This aspect could be addressed with public

initiatives to cultivate greater internet literacy among internet users, especially with regards to memes and internet subcultures. Campaigns that emphasize the potential harmful consequences of trolling actions could also be useful in combating these less serious conflicts – sensitivity training for trollers, essentially.

6.3 « Limitations »

The interpretations and recommendations of this thesis come with a number of limitations. As the data sets for this study were collected in 2014-2015 (news articles) and 2016 (interviews), the findings of this study represent a snapshot of opinions and perspectives of trolling as they existed at the time; opinions and perspectives which have inevitably shifted as culture and circumstances change. Coding in both the news and interview portions of this study was done by a single coder and, despite efforts to be systematic in application and interpretation of codes, subjective human errors may have infiltrated the analysis. Codes were developed iteratively over numerous passes through the data and then applied and reapplied several times over the course of the analysis in order to ensure intra-coder consistency. The researcher also followed the analytic reflexivity practices suggested by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) in order to remain mindful of the meaning-making process. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the interview portion, coupled with the small sample size (20 interviews), does not support generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, these interviews document and describe a wide range of beliefs and attitudes towards internet trolling. The depth and richness of the data gathered in these interviews lend valuable insight into the ongoing efforts to make sense of this controversial online behaviour. Furthermore, as the framework developed in this thesis for evaluating potentially harmful online interactions was based on features of those interactions rather than on any particular viewpoints on trolling, its applicability remains valid for such interactions.

With respect to the interviews, there are three additional limitations regarding inclusion and exclusion of interviewees:

1. One interviewee (P4) was not familiar with the term “internet trolling” and so, could not offer a definition. Moreover, she was not familiar with the phenomenon when provided with a brief description. For these reasons, this interviewee did not meet inclusion criteria for Study 2 and was excluded from analysis.

2. One interviewee (P8), as a non-native English speaker, was also unfamiliar with “internet trolling” as a term, but was familiar with the phenomenon of trolling. Because she was able to describe and discuss instances of trolling that she had either witnessed or heard about, data from this interviewee was deemed sufficiently informative to be included in the study.

3. One interviewee (P18) did not consent to be recorded during the interview. As such, no transcript was available for coding and the researcher’s notes and recollection of the session were not deemed sufficient to facilitate a detailed analysis. Therefore, this interviewee was excluded from analysis.

6.4 « Future research »

As noted in the limitations, this work was based on data collected from 2014-2016 and represents characterizations of and perspectives on internet trolling from 2004 to early 2016. As it turned out, 2016 was something of a watershed year in the history of trolling. Whereas trolling has always been framed negatively in the press, the popular discourse around trolling seems to have become even more negative than ever before. In the first half of the 2010s, trolling was still a relatively unknown, niche topic in the mainstream public consciousness – I am reminded of a meeting with one of my PhD committee members early on in my studies in which she confessed to me that she had no idea what “trolling” was – but by 2016, trolling was big news.

2016 was the year that internet trolling became overtly political as large segments of the subculture coalesced into what would come to be known as the “Alt-Right.” To be clear, the seeds of this reactionary turn had been germinating for years. In 2012, the web journal Néojaponisme had warn of links between online Japanese internet *otaku* (overenthusiastic fans of anime, manga, and video games) on the 2channel online bulletin

board (the spiritual and cultural antecedent of the English 4chan) and right-wing political content.[47] Online troll communities have also long been male-dominated and, if not outright misogynistic, then at least anti-feminist – to the extent that the so-called "Rules of the Internet,"[48] formulated on 4chan sometime in the late 2000s, include as rule #30: "There are no girls on the internet," followed by rule #31: "TITS or GTFO [Get The Fuck Out] – the choice is yours." In other words, women do not belong in online spaces, except as sexual objects. This was the fertile ground from which the 2014 GamerGate controversy sprung and which later coalesced in 2016 around Donald Trump's presidential bid via his campaign manager, Steve Bannon. By the end of 2016, "internet trolling" had become a term that was widely recognized by the news-reading public.

Since the Trump presidency (2016-2020), it seems as if conversations about trolling have become even more complicated. Trolling has played a part in exacerbating cultural and political divisions and has itself become politicized. Data regarding perspectives on internet trolling collected after 2020 would likely reveal a much stronger focus on political trolling, conspiracy theories, and "culture war" ideas that have become increasingly embedded in on- and off-line discourse. These newly-dominant dimensions of trolling may present unique challenges to maintaining the safety and order of online spaces, as they tend to operate in less overt ways – through distrust, disinformation, and radicalization. This is not to say that direct, abusive actions by trollers is no longer salient, but that poisoning public discourse is an insidious and increasingly worrisome issue. Ongoing research into both the toxic and innocuous types of internet trolling is necessary in order to understand effects of these types of online interactions and to mitigate their dangers.

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[47] https://neojaponisme.com/2012/05/30/are-japanese-moe-otaku-right-wing/

[48] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rules-of-the-internet

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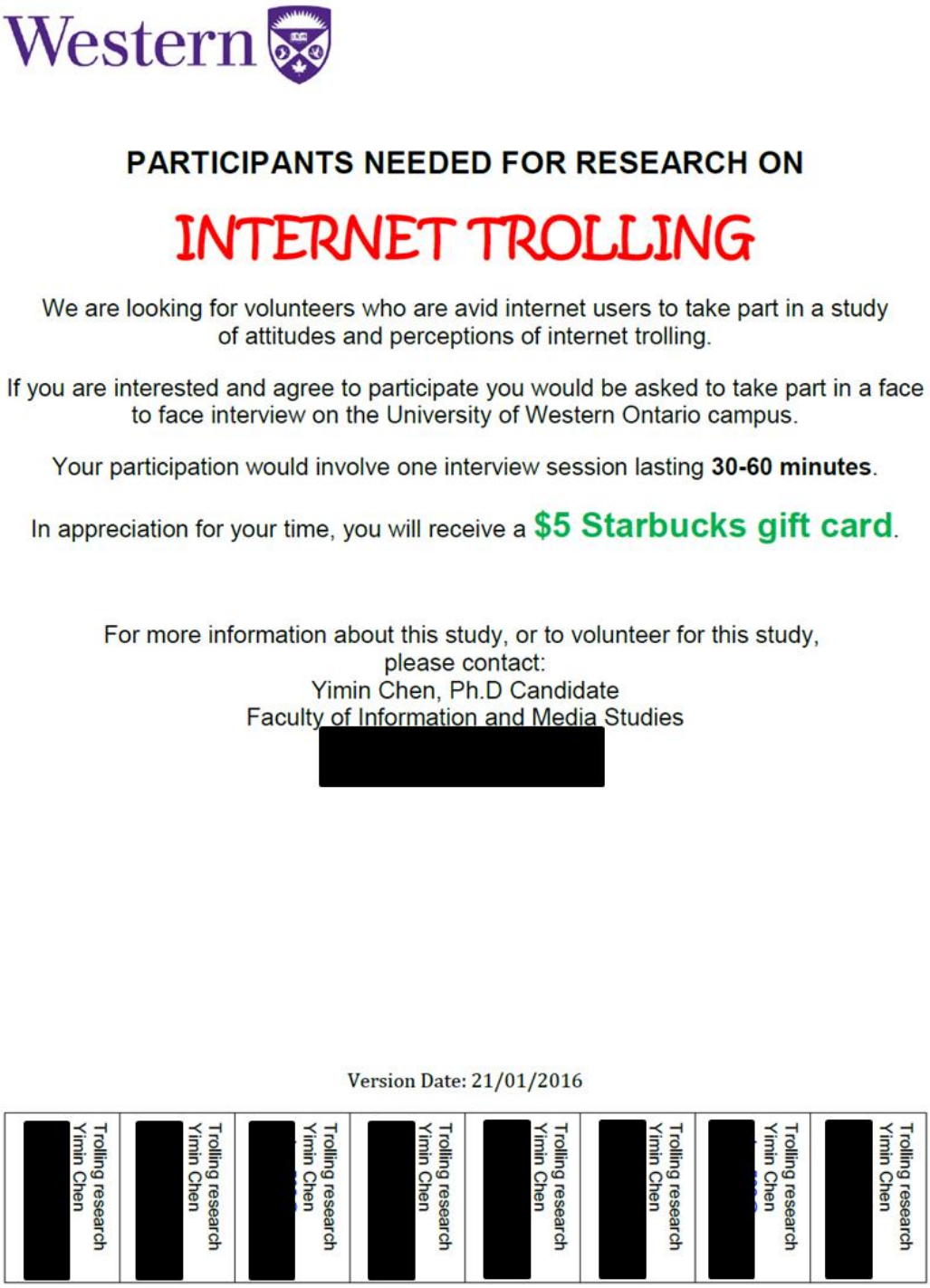
Appendices

Appendix A: Study 1 news articles sampled per year

Year	Number of Articles
2004	6
2005	9
2006	13
2007	14
2008	13
2009	11
2010	14
2011	20
2012	36
2013	46
2014	58

Appendix B: Study 2 interview participant recruitment poster



Appendix C: **Study 2 interview question schedule**

Interview Questions

1. **Participant background information**

    1.1. Can you tell me about your history as an internet user?

        1.1.1. How long have you been online?

    1.2. What sorts of things do you do online? What are your major activities?

    1.3. Are there specific websites where you spend the majority of your online time?

        1.3.1. Are you involved in any online communities?

2. **Defining trolling**

    2.1. What does trolling mean to you?

        2.1.1. What sorts of actions and behaviours are characteristic of trolling?

            2.1.1.1. What does trolling look like? Can you provide an example?

        2.1.2. What sorts of people do you consider trolls?

            2.1.2.1. Why do you think trolls troll? What motivates their actions?

        2.1.3. What sorts of actions and behaviours do you not consider trolling (e.g. cyberbullying, hacking, griefing)?

            2.1.3.1. How would you describe the differences between these actions and behaviours and trolling?

3. **Attitudes toward trolling**

    3.1. Would you consider trolling to be an overall positive, negative, or neutral behaviour?

        3.1.1. If positive: what aspects of trolling do you think are positive?

            3.1.1.1. Why do you think many people view trolling negatively?

            3.1.1.2. Have you ever felt threatened or offended by trolls?

3.1.1.3. How do you deal with trolling when it happens to you?

3.1.2. If negative: would you consider trolling to be a serious problem?

3.1.2.1. Have you ever felt threatened or offended by trolls?

3.1.2.2. How do you deal with trolling when it happens to you?

3.1.2.3. What measures do you think should be taken to address negative trolling?

3.1.3. If neutral: please explain your position.

3.1.3.1. Have you ever felt threatened or offended by trolls?

3.1.3.2. How do you deal with trolling when it happens to you?

3.1.3.3. Why do you think trolling might be viewed as positive or negative by other people?

4. Trolling in the media

4.1. What is your impression of how trolling is characterized in mainstream media?

4.1.1. Please read through these five news articles on trolling (see document "News Article Samples") and tell me your thoughts on each one.

4.1.1.1. Would you consider the actions and behaviours reported in these articles to be trolling? Why/why not?

5. Concluding remarks

5.1. Any final questions or comments?

Appendix D: Study 2 letter of information and consent

Letter of Information and Consent

DISAMBIGUATING ONLINE NEGATIVITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNET TROLLING
Letter of Information and Consent
Yimin Chen, Ph.D Candidate, Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario, [phone number redacted]

1. **Invitation to Participate**
   You are being invited to participate in a research study to examine opinions and attitudes concerning internet trolling. You have been selected based on your self-identification as an avid internet user.

2. **Why is this study being done?**
   Internet trolling is a controversial topic that has been the subject of much attention in the news media over the past few years. The purpose of this study is to find out how avid internet users define internet trolling and what they think about it. The objective of this study is to determine if there are differences in the way trolling is understood in the news and how trolling is understood by avid internet users.

3. **How long will you be in this study?**
   It is expected that you will be in the study for 30-60 minutes.

4. **What are the study procedures?**
   If you agree to participate you will be asked to answer a series of interview questions about your internet use and your perspective on internet trolling. An audio recording of this interview will be made, with your consent. You will still be eligible to participate in this study even if you do not agree to be recorded. This interview will take place on the University of Western Ontario campus.

5. **What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**
   There is a chance that the topics discussed in the interview may cause you to be upset or distressed. If you feel uncomfortable after the interview, you can talk to a counselor and access other mental health and wellness resources at

the University of Western Ontario through Student Development Services or through Student Health Services. Other resources can be found at: http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html

6. **What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
   You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole which include a better understanding of how people interact with each other on the internet and how these actions and communications are interpreted by internet users. This information aims to inform the creation of internet use policies and educational programs.

7. **Can participants choose to leave the study?**
   If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know.

8. **How will participants information be kept confidential?**
   Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law, we have a duty to report. The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 5 years. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file.
   If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used, but quotations from your interview may be included.

9. **Are participants compensated to be in this study?**
   You will be compensated with a $5 Starbucks gift card for your participation in this study. Only participants who complete the entire study will receive this gift card.

10. **What are the rights of participants?**
    Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on

your academic standing.

We will give you new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form**.**

11. Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have questions about this research study please contact Yimin Chen at [email redacted] or at [phone number redacted]; Victoria Rubin at [email redacted]

12. Consent

DISAMBIGUATING ONLINE NEGATIVITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNET TROLLING
Letter of Information and Consent
Yimin Chen, Ph.D Candidate, Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University, [phone number redacted]

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

I agree to be audio / video-recorded in this research

☐ **YES** ☐ **NO**

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

☐ **YES** ☐ **NO**

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Appendix E: Study 2 research ethics approval

Western Research

Research Ethics

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Victoria Rubin
Department & Institution: Information and Media Studies\Faculty of Information & Media Studies,Western University

NMREB File Number: 107240
Study Title: DISAMBIGUATING ONLINE NEGATIVITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNET TROLLING
Sponsor:

NMREB Initial Approval Date: December 07, 2015
NMREB Expiry Date: December 07, 2016

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	Interview Questions	2015/09/19
Instruments	News Articles for Interview	2015/09/19
Western University Protocol		2015/11/06
Letter of Information & Consent		2015/11/06
Recruitment Items	Recruitment Poster	2015/11/06

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

[redacted]

Ethics Officer, [redacted] ir or delegated board member

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information: Erika Basile ___ Nicole Kaniki ___ Grace Kelly ✓ Mina Mekhail ___ Vikki Tran ___

This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files

Appendix F: Study 2 interview news article samples

Article #1

Armed With Anonymity, Gamers Attack Women

GamerGate, like many other Internet controversies of late, has become so bogged down with online trolling and anonymous hate as to be nearly impossible to delineate. As the threats escalate, any credible debate has become thoroughly buried beneath misogyny and sexual violence.

The issue started when game designer Zoe Quinn released her “Depression Quest” interactive journey. Initially, the game received the usual mix of critiques and appreciation. Soon after though, one of Quinn’s ex-boyfriends penned long and nasty blog posts implying that her success in video game circles stemmed from her willingness to provide sexual favors.

Other Internet trolls immediately hopped on board, threatening her with appallingly graphic sexual and physical violence. This became the catalyst for a series of other prominent women in the gaming field to be violently targeted and digitally attacked, to the point that some of them had to leave their homes.

This conflict highlights the inequities of the video game field. Women have always been a minority in a highly masculine and often antifeminist field. Now, the dangers of being such a minority are clear. They’re vulnerable and often left unprotected by their male coworkers.

In addition, it’s an example of the success with which Internet bullies utilize the shield of Internet anonymity. In a forum where no one has to take responsibility or own up to their actions, threats of mutilation and rape are thrown around with a cavalier casualty.

The most disturbing part of this scandal is its endurance. Despite the single instance implications of the suffix “-gate,” the scandal shows no signs of slowing down. As long as the misogynists operate in an environment of such heightened hostility to women and the shield of Internet anonymity, female gamers will likely continue to be targeted.

Article #2

'Sometimes I feel like the most hated woman in Britain': But Tulisa says she won't let haters get her down

SHE is officially the sexiest woman in the world according to a lads' mag poll - but now Tulisa fears she's top of a new list... as the most targeted star of cyber hate mobs.

The X Factor judge says she is beginning to feel like "the most hated woman in Britain" following a non-stop barrage of vile abuse on Twitter.

The 24-year-old beauty, who launches her bid for a second consecutive win on the ITV talent contest this Saturday, reveals she is bombarded with vicious messages all the time.

But she has learned to roll with the online punches and has warned her acts to ignore taunts from internet trolls.

She says: "People just do it for the sake of it - they will sit down and write the most horrific, abusive messages and they couldn't care less.

"Sometimes they are 12-year-old kids sending these things. I've seen grown women read the messages and it brings tears to their eyes. I've had people tell me this has happened to them but it's something you have got to let go over your head.

"If I was to base my opinion on Twitter I'd be like, 'Oh my god, I must be the most hated woman in Britain'.

"But I go around the street and despite all the abusive messages not one person comes up to me and says anything other than nice things and ask for a picture."

But the former N-Dubz star, whose debut solo album The Female Boss is released on November 26, insists she has no plans to suppress her outspoken views on the show. She is even willing to risk a bust-up with her fellow judges.

"Anything can happen at the live shows between me and the others," she admitted. "There are going to be spats and if I have to defend my acts, I will do."

Tulisa caused a storm last year after sparking a public row with former judge Kelly Rowland, calling one of her acts a bully. The comments left the pair at loggerheads for weeks and played apart in the Destiny's Child singer being axed from the panel.

And Tulisa can't guarantee the experience won't be repeated with new judge Nicole Scherzinger, 34. Tulisa says: "Me and Kelly were fine at this stage in the competition last year. It was only when we got through some of the live shows that there was friction between us.

But she has no regrets about discussing her past so frankly and says she doesn't care what the public think of her behaviour.

Article #3

Cyber bullies spread hatred despite lesson of Drew trial

One of the saddest things about Megan Meier's suicide and the landmark cyber-bullying trial that followed is that it hasn't seemed to slow people from spewing hate on the Internet.

Megan wasn't the first teenager to be hurt by unkind words delivered via a computer, and she won't be the last to take her life after getting such a message.

I was naive enough to think that her death would make people think twice before they sent cruel messages.

In my youth, mean words exchanged on the playground hurt, but now put-downs are written in blogs or posted on a teen's social networking profile. Once they're out in cyberspace, they can offend over and over again. Online attacks also allow other users to join in the virtual taunting.

Megan's story got national attention in part because the cruel trick played on her happened with the knowledge of an adult. Prosecutors said Lori Drew, 49, of O'Fallon, Mo., her daughter Sarah and a then-18-year-old employee, Ashley Grills, all were involved in creating a fake MySpace account.

They did it to find out what Megan, 13, had been saying about Sarah, with whom she had been friends on and off.

The fictional Josh Evans pretended to be romantically interested in Megan, who was overweight and had battled depression.

When "Josh" broke off the relationship in October 2006, Megan got a message saying, "The world would be a better place without you," and she hanged herself.

We'll never know for sure what pushed Megan to take her life that day. Her fragile emotional state certainly could have been as much a factor as that final message.

Public opinion in the case, though, was heavily in Megan's corner. And it often was nasty.

Blogs sprang up demanding justice for Megan, some threatening the Drews. Then a blog supposedly penned by Drew claimed Megan had it coming.

It turned out that the blog, like Josh, was a fake. It was started by a troll, someone who posts controversial messages to provoke other users.

I'll admit that I had never heard of a troll before all of this happened, and I don't understand someone who has fun doing this.

As great of a resource as the Internet is, it has also been a great disappointment to me. Before the Internet, I always believed that deep down, people were good.

But the Internet and the anonymity it provides have proved me wrong. The Internet brings out the dark side in many people. Thoughts people say out loud in cyberspace are not thoughts they'd say out loud anywhere else.

When Megan's story hit the news, the shock and sympathy for the Meier family quickly deteriorated into a bashing of Drew.

Last week, Drew was convicted on three misdemeanor charges of accessing computers without authorization.

I think the jury's decision was more of a reflection of the public's disgust with Drew's behavior than anything.

She certainly wasn't the first person to create a fake online identity, but now that she's been charged with violating the rules, those in the public have been put on notice that they could face charges, too.

New ordinances have been passed across Missouri making harassment via computer, text messages or other electronic devices a crime.

Unfortunately, even the new laws and Drew's conviction aren't enough to prevent adults from picking on a teenager in cyberspace.

I didn't have to look any further than the paper's website, STLtoday.com, to find another offender. A reader posting a comment on a story about the court case on Monday made a callous remark about Drew and her daughter's appearance.

Didn't we learn anything from Megan's tragic death? Her pretty, smiling face, which has been featured so often in this newspaper, should remind all of us that words do hurt and that hurtful words, when sent to a person on the edge, have the potential to kill.

Let's try to keep the discussions moving forward without the personal attacks. Some comments are better left unsaid.

Article #4

His servers can offer you the world

Wikipedia's website, run by hundreds of servers in the Tampa area and overseas, gets more than 2,000 page requests per second and is usually ranked among the top 15 most-viewed websites, according to Wikipedia, which is not always accurate, Wales admits.

Expertise is not a requirement for the encyclopedia's unpaid authors. Nearly anyone with access to the Internet can contribute entries or edit existing selections thanks to "wiki" (Hawaiian for "quickly") collaborative software.

Instead of authoritative experts, this free online encyclopedia run by a nonprofit foundation relies on the collective smarts and good intentions of doting Wikipedians. Still, mistakes, falsehoods and errors show up. Vandals known as "WikiTrolls" slip in lies, jokes, porn and obscenities, stirring controversy and criticism.

"The George W. Bush entry is the most heavily edited site, and it may be the most vandalized, but sometimes the trolls are just quirky," Wales said. "Often it's one strange person on a tangent. We had a guy who was very agitated about Chopin's birthday and kept changing it."

The price is right even if the information is wrong now and then. Since Wales bans ads on Wikipedia, the foundation relies on financial aid from nearly 13,000 benefactors for its budget of $1.5 million U.S.

Wales created his constantly updated encyclopedia in the benevolent belief that truth emerges from pooled wisdom. Since bad stuff does float to the surface, he has deputized more than a thousand volunteers as "admins." They police Wikipedia, bust WikiTrolls who try to disrupt the site, and lock down oft-molested areas, such as that of the commander in chief.

"Our approach is to tell people to knock it off because we are trying to do something useful here," Wales said.

Supporters have described Wikipedia as democracy in action, a Utopian project and the World's Brain. Critics, including its former top editor, have assailed it as "anarchy with gang rule," and likened it to a public restroom, or the world's most-ambitious vanity press.

Software guru Eric Raymond, whose work reportedly inspired Wales, recently told New Yorker writer Stacy Schiff that Wikipedia is a disaster "infested with moonbats." Schiff concluded that the online encyclopedia is "a lumpy work in progress."

Wales, who retains final say over all Wikipedia entries (thousands are rejected each month), takes in stride the tossed moonbats and brickbats, noting Wikipedia should be regarded as a starting point for information, not as the authoritative source.

Article #5

SICK INTERNET GAME AIMS TO TORMENT GRIEVING PARENTS

Tribute websites for tragic teenagers defaced in craze known as 'trolling'

SICK internet users are tormenting the grieving parents of a teenage Birmingham schoolboy who hanged himself - so they can score points in the league table of a vile game.

The more they upset the family of 15-year-old Tom Mullaney, the higher score they can notch up in a twisted tournament in which the dead are vilified and ridiculed with cruel words and gruesome pictures.

Tom, from Bournville, killed himself in May after being tormented by online thugs, prompting his father Robert to turn detective in a bid to unmask the so-called cyberbullies responsible.

What the 48-year-old Jaguar worker discovered was sickening beyond belief - a points-based awards system which is part of a bizarre new internet trend known as 'trolling'.

"These people are treating our grief like a game," Robert told the Sunday Mercury. "And there is noone who can stop them.

"I used to react to the messages online but the abuse just got more and more horrible.

"Then I discovered that the reason behind this is that the bigger reaction these people get from family members and loved ones, the more points they give to each other.

It's some kind of twisted league table. It is sickening."

Robert and his wife Tracy, 43, were horrified to discover that the online memorial to their son on the social networking site Facebook had been targeted by 'trolls' just days after his death in May.

Tom went to Kings Norton Boys' School, and was found hanged after allegedly being abused online. Within 48 hours, abusive messages had already begun to appear on Facebook.

Digitally altered pictures were posted showing Tom's neck in a noose, with a caption which read: "Hang in there Tom!" Another picture showed Tom's head diced in the middle of a sausage.

In another perverted twist, obscene sexual images were posted on the site, and set up so that they appeared every time anyone clicked on an otherwise innocuous picture of the dead schoolboy.

One web posting asked: "Why would you make an RIP page about someone that's clearly a wimp? That's just embarrassing."

As troubled Robert kept vigil on the site, reporting abusive content in an effort to have it removed by Facebook, one name appeared repeatedly: a poster who called himself Pro Fessor.

In his most vile comment about Tom, he wrote: "Good news everybody.

I got a shovel from the store now us Facebook bullies can get to Tom Mullaney."

Alarmingly, Pro Fessor also turned up on the Facebook memorial to Bromsgrove teenager Natasha Macbryde, the 15-year-old Worcestershire schoolgirl who died in a rail accident on Valentine's Day.

Within days of a remembrance page being set up for her, sick images appeared on the site, surrounded by phrases including: "I caught the train to heaven LOL."

A macabre video was also posted on YouTube entitled 'Tasha The Tank Engine' causing further heartache for her family.

Last night Tom's dad Robert gave the Sunday Mercury permission to re-print some of the worst messages and pictures in the hope that it will spur action to stop the trolling campaign.

"If people are shocked by these pictures and messages then I would ask them how they would feel if that was their loved one who had died," he said. "The internet is a dangerous weapon, as it proved with Tom.

"In the hands of children it can kill.

"The aftermath can be just as painful for those of us left behind, and that is the stark message we want to get across.

"Some of these sick people, such as the Pro Fessor, clearly get a thrill from inflicting such misery on people like us. The fact that he also turned up on the page of that poor girl Natasha Macbryde tells you all you need to know about their mentality.

"It is a terrible thing for family and friends to have to witness this kind of abuse. It is truly horrendous.

I cannot understand the kind of mind that would see this as some kind of game."

His feelings are echoed by Natasha's father, Andrew, who said last week: "I am disgusted at these comments made by some seriously sick individuals.

"I cannot understand how, or why, these people get any enjoyment or satisfaction from making such disgraceful comments."

'It's funny to mock the dead' THE twisted geek who calls himself the Pro Fessor has been tracked down online - and claims a sickening justifi-cation for why he causes so much agony to grieving families.

"My basic motivation for making these images, as well as many, many others, is that I despise people who feel the need to make RIP pages," he has written. "They hunt for people to tell them they feel sorry for them.

"In my opinion a grief tourist (someone who doesn't know the deceased but leaves a comment) is a terrible person. They feel the need to find random memorial pages and tell people how bad they feel for them.

"Also, it's very funny to mock the dead. I find humour in seeing other people being hurt. If I can make my friends and myself laugh at the expense of a dead person, who won't be bothered one bit, I'm guessin' hen why not do it?' 'I'm not going to lie. I should feel bad about what I did, but I don't. Facebook can shut down my account up to ten times a day, but I can have another one up and running within three minutes."

Robert Mullaney is demanding stricter controls on internet sites to combat the likes of the Pro Fessor.

"I found my son hanged in my garden as a result of internet bullies," he said. "It is one of the worst things a parent could have to go through.

"But to have to put up with these trolls in the aftermath has driven me crazy, and I won't stop until they are brought under control.

"I cannot understand how the internet can continue to exist in such an unregulated way. I think that people should be forced to register their identities on these sites in future, much like a driving licence. That would stop these cowards from hiding behind a cloak of anonymity.

"I notice that when Mark Zuckerberg, the Facebook founder, had his account hacked it was fixed quickly enough. The technology is out there, but just not the will to do it.

"I am not against sites like Facebook. I think they are very good tools but while they exist like they do, they will continue to be a playground for sick people like the Pro Fessor."

Curriculum Vitae

Yimin Chen

EDUCATION

PhD in Library and Information Science **09/2011—06/2022**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
Supervisor: Dr. Victoria Rubin

Master of Library and Information Science **02/2010**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

Bachelor of Science **05/2006**
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC
Double major in General Biology and English Literature

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor—Research Methods and Statistics (MLIS) **2018—2022**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

Instructor—Communication Through Meme (Undergraduate) **Fall 2019, 2020, 2021**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

Instructor—Organization of Information (MLIS) **Summer 2017**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON

Teaching Assistant **2011—2016**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
Courses: Organization of Information (MLIS); Research Methods and Statistics (MLIS); Introduction to Media, Information, and Technoculture; Media and its Contexts

Lead Teaching Assistant **Fall 2014**
Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
Course: Information and its Contexts

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POSTERS AND PRESENTATIONS

Rubin, V.L., Burkell, J., Cornwell, S.E., Asubiaro, T., **Chen, Y**., Potts, D., and Brogly, C. (2020) AI Opaqueness: What Makes AI Systems More Transparent? (Panel). In *Proceedings of the 48th Annual Conference of The Canadian Association for Information Science/L'Association canadienne des sciences de l'information (CAIS/ACSI2020)*, September 14-October 26.

Hara, N., Fichman, P., Meyer, E. T., **Chen, Y**., & Rieh, S. Y. (2019). A social informatics perspective on misinformation, disinformation, deception and conflict. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *56*(1), 538-540.

Chen, Y. (2018, April). *On the Shores of the Internet: Online Gatekeeping & Trolling Privilege*. Presentation at FIMULAW 2018, London, Canada.

Rubin, V. L., **Chen, Y.**, Cornwell, S., Asubiaro, T., & Brogly, C. (2018, March). *Strategies That Sell: Revealing Deceptive and Misleading Practices in Digital Media*. Presentation for the FIMS Seminar Series, London, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2018, February). *I'm Not Evil, I'm Chaotic Neutral: On the Classification of Internet Trolls*. Paper presented at the Mediations Speaker Series, London, Canada.

Rubin, V. L., Conroy, N. J., **Chen, Y.**, Cornwell, S. (2017, September). *Fake News or Truth? Using Satirical Cues to Detect Potentially Misleading News*. Paper presented at the Mediations Speaker Series, London, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2017, March). *The Politics of Internet Memes: Fake News, Trolling, and the Populist Power of Pepes*. Young researcher keynote presented at the Western Research Forum 2017, London, Canada.

Chen, Y. & Nevin, A. (2016, July). *When Does the Narwhal Bacon? Internet Memes as Markers of Online Group Identity.* Paper presented at the International Conference on Social Media and Society, London, UK.

Chen, Y. (2015, July). *When Trolls Become Newsworthy: An Analysis of News Reporting on Internet Trolling*. Poster presented at the International Conference on Social Media and Society, Toronto, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2015, May). *Internet Trolls in the News: Vicious Bullies or Merry Pranksters?* Paper presented at the Canadian Sociological Association@Congress. Ottawa, Canada.

Chen, Y., Conroy, N. J., Rubin, V. L. (2014, September). *Fact of Fiction? Detecting Digital Deception or Deliberate Misinformation in News Stories*. Poster presented at the International Conference on Social Media and Society, Toronto, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2014, May). *News Authentication: Detecting Digital Deception and Deliberate Misinformation in News Stories*. Poster presented at GRAND 2014, Ottawa, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2013, May). *All the News That's Fit to Tweet: Comparing Twitter and Print News Reports*. Poster presented at GRAND 2013, Toronto, Canada.

Chen, Y. (2012, September). *They Came From… The Internet! Attitudes Towards Online Trolling in the News Media*. Poster presented at #Influence12 – Symposium & Workshop on Measuring Influence on Social Media, Halifax, Canada.

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

FIMS Dean's Award—$2000	2011
Highly Commended Paper Award—Emerald Literati Network "Artificially Intelligent Conversational Agents in Libraries"	2011