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Adolescent trolling in online environments: A brief overview

Over the last couple of years there has been increasing media coverage about trolling among teenagers. The term 'troll' appears to have originated from a method of fishing, where an individual would fish by trailing a baited line behind a boat. However, many Internet users often use the description of being a 'troll' as a mythological creature that hides under bridges, waiting for an opportunity to pounce (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler and Barab, 2002). With the latter definition, one can see the comparison with the modern day world with hiding under bridges being the online world waiting for an opportunity that may warrant a troll to take action. With the first definition, it is clear that casting a baited line as a form of provoking individuals into some form of emotional response. This article briefly examines a growing phenomenon – trolling by adolescents.

What exactly is trolling?

Arguably, trolling appears to be a variably defined concept, with multiple definitions existing. It appears to have been first reported by Donath (1999) who argued that "trolling is a game about identity deception" (p.45), and suggests that a troll's personal opinion is often avoided during the act. According to Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler and Barab (2002), trolling comprises "luring others into often pointless and time-consuming discussions" (p.373). Morrissey (2010) expanded this even further by saying "trolling is an utterer producing an intentionally false or incorrect utterance with high order intention [the plan] to elicit from recipient a particular response, generally negative or violent" (p.77). Thus, it appears trolling is an act of intentionally provoking and/or antagonising users in an online environment that creates an often desirable, sometimes predictable, outcome for the troll. Morrissey also states that trolling is a complex

intentional act, that some may consider an art. On the other hand, others have included trolling as a form of cyberbullying.

Research into trolling

To date, there has been relatively little empirical research into online trolling. Published studies have examined trolling in a number of different cyberspaces including online interaction in Wikipedia use (Shachaf and Hara, 2010), online feminist discussion forums (Herring et al., 2002), and online gaming worlds (Thacker and Griffiths, 2012). Despite the dearth of research, some key findings have emerged. For instance, the study by Herring et al., identified three types of messages sent by trolls. These were (i) messages from a sender who appears outwardly sincere, (ii) messages designed to attract predictable responses or flames, and (iii) messages that waste a group's time by provoking futile argument. From these findings, it is apparent that trolling often merges with several other online behaviours. The authors pointed out that a troll is an online user that can be uncooperative, that seeks to confuse and deceive, and can be a 'flamer' by using insults.

Shachaf and Hara's study on trolling within Wikipedia revealed that the main reasons for trolling were boredom, attention seeking, and revenge. Furthermore, it was reported that trolls regarded Wikipedia as an entertainment venue, and found pleasure from causing damage to it and the people who used the site. The research by Herring and colleagues argued that it is non-mainstream environments that are especially vulnerable to trolling (such as forums) as they "provide a new arena for the enactment of power inequities such as those motivated by sexism, racism, and heterosexism" (p.371). Due to this, one could suggest that trolling is a

behaviour that is facilitated and possibly exacerbated by the anonymity of the Internet.

Why do people troll?

Many authors have argued that relative anonymity facilitates disinhibition, resulting in flaming and harassment. This online disinhibition effect is well established in the psychological literature (e.g., Suler, 2004). Furthermore, Widyanto and Griffiths (2011) noted the Internet "might lead to disinhibition, whereby individuals feel more confident as they are protected by their anonymity" (p.15). Therefore, Internet users have an opportunity to present themselves differently online. From this, the opportunity for trolling is undeniably present as Widyanto and Griffiths make clear: "the Internet provides anonymity, which removes the threat of confrontation, rejection and other consequences of behaviour" (p.15). This allows individuals to behave online in ways that they would not normally do in the offline world.

Research suggests that anonymity, which is naturally characterised by the Internet, may affect a person's self-esteem. Self-esteem has been consistently associated as an important determinant of adolescent mental health (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma and de Vries, 2004; Wang and Veugelers, 2008), with lower self-esteem being linked to depression and increased levels of anxiety (Mann et al, 2004; Bosacki, Dane and Marini, 2007). Therefore, it has been claimed that high self-esteem is psychologically healthy. However, online interactions allow an individual to represent a different self, leading to increased feelings of self-worth and therefore being more psychologically healthy (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage and McDowell, 2003).

There is quite a lot of research into self-esteem and more general Internet use. For instance, research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem prefer to communicate with others through the Internet, such as emails, rather than face-to-face (Joinson, 2004). It has also been found that general Internet use increases self-esteem, and some research has indicated that video game use decreases self-esteem (Jackson, Zhao, Witt, Fitzgerald, Von Eye and Harold, 2009). This suggests that the Internet can be used as a form of social interaction that positively affects self-esteem for those with

considerably low self-esteem. However, given the evolution of online gaming in recent years, the effect of self-esteem while playing online video games where social interaction (including trolling) can occur is relatively unknown.

Trolling in online gaming

Until recently, trolling had never been studied in an online video game context and there is still little empirically known about it in the most general sense of the term. Trolling often merges other online behaviours such as flaming. (Adrian, 2010) offers limited, albeit useful, insight into how an individual may troll during online gaming. Adrian names those who enact such behaviour as "griefers", a term used on those who try to ruin a gaming experience, often by team-killing or obstructing objectives. It could be that grieving is one such behaviour used during trolling in the context of an online video game. Furthermore, given the evolution of online gaming, it is possible that the behaviour of trolling has evolved to fit into the context in which the trolling is being used in (e.g., online forums, Wikipedia, video games), and therefore, contains many other online behaviours that are used to disrupt others' gaming enjoyment.

Given the little psychological research that had been conducted beyond the fact that it exists, we carried out a study (Thacker and Griffiths, 2012) to examine the (i) frequency of trolling, (ii) type and reasons for trolling and (iii) the effects trolling may have on self-esteem. Using an online survey, a self-selected sample of 125 gamers participated in our study. Results showed that trolls tended to play longer gaming sessions. Frequent trolls were significantly younger and male. Types of trolling included (i) grieving, (ii) sexism/racism, and (iii) faking and intentionally misleading people. Reasons for trolling included amusement, boredom, and revenge. Witnessing trolling was positively associated with self-esteem, whereas experiencing trolling was negatively associated. Experience of trolling was positively correlated with frequency of trolling. Although the study used a self-selecting sample, the results appear to provide a tentative benchmark into video game trolling and its potential effects on self-esteem.

The study had many limitations that need to be taken into account. Firstly, due to the nature

of questionnaire design and it being self-report, it may have been open to social desirability effects (i.e., participants may have answered differently to represent a different self) and any of the other known problems with self-report methods (e.g., unreliable memory and recall biases, etc.). Another major limitation was that the sample was self-selecting and modest in size. This raises questions into its relative generalizability. Despite these limitations, the study appears to provide several key findings that now provide a preliminary benchmark into video game trolling where there was no previous research. Moreover, it expands the neglected research into online trolling and offers areas and directions for future research.

The need for education and awareness about trolling

Last year I gave my backing to the 'Lolz Not Trolls' campaign following a survey of 2,000 young people aged 14-18 years of age carried out by vInspired (Rice, 2013). The survey found that (i) a third of those questioned had been trolled online in the last six months, (ii) just over a quarter faced regular attacks, and (iii) one in ten admitted to being trolls themselves. Trolling can have a devastating effect on those who are targeted. Around a third of youngsters surveyed lost confidence and were shattered by trolling attacks. More worryingly, almost a half of the surveyed teenagers said they kept the attacks secret because they felt they didn't have anyone they could tell.

The survey also looked at the reasons why people trolled. Nearly a quarter trolled because they found it funny, something that I have also found in my own research on trolling (i.e., Thacker and Griffiths, 2012). Furthermore, around one-third trolled because their friends troll too. Some of the more interesting results indicated that one in six claimed they didn't think their abusive messages would hurt the person they sent the message to, and a half of the teenagers thought it was OK to say things online that they wouldn't say to someone's face.

The survey's findings also revealed that a quarter of the teenagers wanted to learn more about how to use social media correctly. Therefore, to help educate young people to become more aware of the most appropriate

online 'netiquette', I worked together with vInspired, to develop a guide featuring 'dos and don'ts' when using social media. Underpinning the 'Lolz Not Trolls' campaign was a simple and easy to remember three-point checklist with the acronym 'LOL' for teenagers to think about when they are using online and social media: (i) Look at what I write before I post – recognise how it might make someone feel, (ii) Own what I write – take responsibility for what I say, and (iii) Live online the way I live offline – treat others how I would want to be treated. Trolling is an online phenomenon that people may witness without necessarily knowing what it is. Clearly more representative research is needed as adolescents may be a vulnerable group in being both the victims and perpetrators of such behaviour.

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