

# An Exploratory Study of Trolling in Online Video Gaming

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## ABSTRACT

*Despite the increased incidence of trolling within online gaming environments, very little psychological research has been conducted beyond the fact that it exists. The main aims of the study were 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 the study. Results showed that trolls tended to play longer gaming sessions. Frequent trolls were significantly younger and male. Types of trolling included griefing, sexism/racism, and faking/intentional fallacy. 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.*

**Keywords:** Disruptive Behaviour, Flaming, Griefing, Online Gaming, Self-Esteem, Trolling

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## INTRODUCTION

Trolling is an online phenomenon that people may witness without necessarily knowing what it is. The term “troll” appears to have originated from a method of fishing, where one would fish by trailing a baited line behind a boat (“Troll,” 2010). 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, & 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.

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), which suggests that a troll’s personal opinion is often avoided during the act. According to Herring, et al (2002), trolling comprises “*luring others into often pointless and time-consuming discussions*” (p.

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373). More recently, 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 (Willard, 2007).

To date, there has been very little empirical research into online trolling, with only two key studies being documented. The first of these studied trolling in the context of *Wikipedia* (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), whilst the second study focused on trolling on feminist forums (Herring et al., 2002). Despite the lack of research, some key findings have emerged. Firstly, Herring et al. (2002) 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 this, it is apparent that trolling often merges with several other online behaviours. They 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 (Herring et al., 2002).

Shachaf and Hara's (2010) study on trolling within *Wikipedia* revealed that the main reasons for trolling were boredom, attention seeking, and revenge. Furthermore, they regarded *Wikipedia* as an entertainment venue, and found pleasure from causing damage to it and the people who used the site. Herring et al. (2002) argued that it is non-mainstream environments that are especially vulnerable (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.

Ess (1996) illustrated that relative anonymity facilitates disinhibition, resulting in flaming and harassment. This online disinhibition effect is well established in the literature (Suler, 2004). As 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 (Suler, 2002). From this, the opportunity for trolling is undeniably present as *"the internet provides anonymity, which removes the threat of confrontation, rejection and other consequences of behaviour"* (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2011, 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, & de Vries, 2004; Wang & Veugelers, 2008), with lower self-esteem being linked to depression and increased levels of anxiety (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma & de Vries, 2004; Bosacki, Dane, & Marini, 2007). Therefore, it has been claimed that high self-esteem is psychologically healthy (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). However, online interactions allow an individual to represent a different self, leading to increased feelings of self-worth (McKenna & Bargh, 1998) and therefore be more psychologically healthy.

However, research into online trolling has not yet established any association (if one exists) between the effects of trolling and self-esteem, whilst there is much research into self-esteem and more general internet use. For instance, research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem prefer to communicate with others

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