

2-1-2014

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### Recommended Citation

Klempka, Allison and Stimson, Arielle (2014) "Anonymous Communication on the Internet and Trolling," *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 1, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54416/OHQP4384>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/comjournal/vol1/iss1/2>

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## Anonymous Communication on the Internet and Trolling

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**ABSTRACT**

*Internet Trolls are an online subculture who participate in posting upsetting or shocking content, harassing users, and spreading false information for their own enjoyment. As of the time of this study, research is limited on the trolling culture, the perception of trolls, and trolling behavior. The researchers have investigated trolling culture, as well as conducted a study in which subjects were asked to relay their emotional reactions to a selection of online comments, and mark the comments they considered to be trolling behavior. The results were meant to discover whether subjects of different age generations differed in their perception and definition of trolls. The results clarified that trolling was frequently associated with poor behavior, although the degree of disapproval and definitions for trolling varied between age groups.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

“Trolling” is defined by *Converging Media: A New Introduction to Mass Communication* (2011) as, “The practice of posting deliberately obnoxious or disruptive messages to discussion groups or other online forums simply to get a reaction from the participants” (p. 215). In addition, a “troll” is, “A person who purposely vandalizes Wikipedia entries by inserting false or nonsensical information” (p. 266). Recently these definitions have melded together to define a troll or act of trolling to mean both; someone who is acting obnoxiously or posting false information in an effort to antagonize other people. Amongst the more internet savvy, the phrase “don’t feed the troll” (meaning, “Do not respond to anything this person is posting, they are just trying to antagonize everyone”) is well known. Most people follow this advice. But in many cases trolling behavior has excelled to outright harassment and bullying, calling into question whether or not any sort of ramification beyond blocking the offending user from the site should be employed. The term has become synonymous with the harsher phrase “cyber-bullying” in mainstream media, which is usually more associated with people targeting someone (such as a classmate or co-worker) online specifically in order to harm the person.

Trolling has resulted from the anonymity the Internet allows, and the question has been raised as to whether or not stricter laws regarding the Internet and anonymity should be put in place. But would creating such laws help, or force an unwanted limit on how people are permitted to communicate online? Internet trolls are a fledgling subculture, with limited research done on trolling behavior and its impact on culture. Trolls are usually primarily independent of each other, with no guidelines on “proper ways to troll.” While some of the behavior can be harmful, other acts can be playful or relatively inoffensive. Can trolling be truly equivalent to cyber-bullying? Is the trolling subculture as much of a problem as the media makes it out to be?

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The researchers decided to study what the perception of trolling behavior is for average Internet users in the form of the following questions: 1) What are the perceptions of Internet trolls (based on participants age/generation)? 2) What behaviors are commonly identified by users as trolling?

The researchers then hypostasized that the opinions on trolling would vary for each subject, and different age groups' perceptions of trolling would differ based on their knowledge of trolling and prior experience with it.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Because trolling is a new phenomenon, much of the discussion around it has been on identifying trolls, and why people engage in trolling behavior. Therefore, most writings on the subculture only go as far as to cover those two questions. However, limited resources are available on how it affects society and what lasting impressions it may leave, or what should be done about it if the behavior is truly harmful.

Trolling results from the anonymity provided on the Internet. “*Anonymity*—whether online or not—is the condition in which a message source is absent or largely unknown to a message recipient” (Scott, 2004, p. 128). People online have the choice to remain completely anonymous, or use a pseudonym to build an identity online surrounding an online name (e.g., a “user name”). When relating to others online, this pseudonym identity can end up building a rapport with other identities by sharing information about oneself or general subjects. Enough message sharing between the two people results in “source knowledge.” As defined by Scott (2004), “*Source knowledge* concerns the degree of familiarity between the source and the receiver, and may range from the two being complete strangers to being close friends. In more communicative terms, knowledge level varies between instances where a receiver has had no prior interactions with or information about the source, to situations where the receiver has had

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numerous prior interactions and may possess a fair amount of information about the source (e.g., knowing one by name)” (p. 129). Both identities are only what the user wants other people to perceive however. Someone can create an identity online that is either entirely in keeping with their real-life personality—even to the point of sharing their off-line name or personal information should they decide the other user is trust worthy enough—or is a completely new manufactured identity created specifically for the individual forum. A user can pretend to be a different age, gender, nationality, profession, etc. than they really are. They can also alter their behavior so the comments that they make are completely counter to what they would say were the discussion taking place face-to-face. People have created “troll personas” in such instances.

That is not to suggest that all anonymous commenters will be trolls or engage in trolling activities. Because of the anonymity the internet presents, some posters relish in the fact that they can state their opinions without personal backlash. As Scott states, “The Internet is highly accessible and relatively cheap (Crump 2003), it provides a wide range of the population with a channel for voicing dissent. Chiger (2002) adds that ‘speaking in an Internet forum is tantamount to making a conference call with half the planet’ (52); thus, with ability to copy, repost, and mass mail, anonymous communicators can reach far greater number or recipients. O’Brian (2002) adds that Internet statements may be longer lasting, lacking in editorial oversight, and more capable of finding a receptive audience” (2004, p.129). These are the type of people who create pseudonym identities online through blogging or frequenting forums. They feel they can give honest opinions without receiving personal attacks or judgments upon themselves. There is also an appeal in the idea that they will be listened to. Forums for companies requesting consumer feedback are popular because commenters feel that their comments or concerns are actually reaching those in charge, or they might be connected to other users who are in agreement with

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them. This is a form of customer review that commenters prefer over past methods of focus groups and letter writing. “The vitality that anonymous speech brings to online forums can increase readership and revenue for the company” (Kissinger & Larsen, 2009, p. 5).

Another factor in the desire for anonymity online is the heightened security that the United States has been placed under after the events of September 11, 2001. “Marx (2001) confirms that identification technologies have greatly expanded in recent years (e.g., facial/retinal/vocal recognition systems)...judicial and organizational officials are increasingly likely to take actions limiting one’s privacy and to provide identifying information in the name of national security—all of which erodes anonymity” (Scott, 2004, p. 127). In this setting, anonymity becomes a desirable form of communication, when communication offline is being closely monitored and more and more personal information is being taken and archived. With the constant improvement in technology, where anything anyone says could be instantly uploaded or filmed and put online within seconds, people may feel overwhelmed and constricted, forced to monitor what is said both in public and in private, and who it is said to. Desiring anonymity and implementing it online becomes a form of “rebellion” (Scott, 2004). It is freeing to have a space where a person is able to vent, ask questions, or share ideas without being personally held accountable.

There is an idea concerning cyberspace that anyone can be anything they want to present themselves as. Much of the communication online is based on the honor system; there is no way of knowing the identity of a user unless they have been completely honest about themselves. People believe that because the internet is vast and the user’s identities unknown, they are safe to post anything they want, even deeply personal information, without repercussions.

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Online diaries represent a quite different—and more complicated—trusting situation. On the one hand, blogging would seem to be a *less frightening* affair. An author entrusts his/her intimacies to the world at large. Moreover, these spectators are invisible and anonymous. In that sense, blogging amounts to a generalized act of trust (addressing not a specific stranger but a non-specific, invisible, multitude of strangers)...On the other hand, blogging online also has *more frightening* aspects in terms of trust. Blogging is not a one-time display of trust but a continuing one: a diary is an effort to produce entries in a continuous fashion. Entries, moreover, are recorded and archived: intimacies remain visible. So logging amounts to trusting the world out there day after day, on a fully retrievable basis. (de Laat, 2008, p.61)

Any of this information—if made public—can be retrieved at any time, and can be used by forces who want to defame the person who made it available.

To properly understand what a troll is in this setting, it is necessary to look at the form of “impoliteness” in communication that they often use and have come to embody. Trolls use an impoliteness known as, genuine, malicious, strategic impoliteness, or instrumental rudeness. This type of impoliteness is defined as,

To the kind of act that S[speaker] carries out not only with the intention of causing H[listener] offence, but also of conveying that intent to H. Bousfield (in press) offers a fuller definition of the impoliteness as constituting: [T]he issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are purposely performed: 1) Unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation (where mitigation equates with politeness) is required and/or, 2) With deliberate aggression, that is, with the face threat exacerbated, ‘boosted’, or maximized in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted. Furthermore,



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for impoliteness to be considered successful impoliteness, the intention of the speaker (or ‘author’) to ‘offend’ (threaten/damage face) must be understood by those in a receiver role. (Hardaker, 2010, p. 219)

Trolls behave with the intent to offend the readers and other commentators, and may do whatever possible to cause the commentators on the communication platform to become outraged and respond as such.

Present trolling behavior would not exist if not for the massive influx in mass communication that resulted from the invention and wide availability of the Internet. Before its online station, trolling (or trolling’s equivalent) could be found in traditional mediums, such as graffiti used to deface public spaces with hateful messages, slurs, or simple jokes or messages. Like trolling, this type of vandalism is public and anonymous, with little chance of the perpetrators being brought to justice unless discovered through careful, time consuming police work.

Trolling occurs in every corner of the World Wide Web; anywhere from a forum, chat, or comments section is susceptible to trolling in one form or another. These forums and comment sections exist with the best of intentions—to allow people (usually consumers) to provide feedback or comments on content in an effort to share opinions and offer criticism. The opinions are,

An essential element of domestic norms articulated through concepts like the marketplace of ideas that suggest the public needs access to a wide variety of views on a topic in making an informed, rational decision about their future. News outlets traditionally have served a critical role in disseminating these opinions, including avenues for the public to communicate with each other through forums like letters to the editor. This role of

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facilitating communication among citizens embodies the ideas of the public sphere (Habermas, 1999[1962]), which describes a democratic utopia in which all citizens have an opportunity to participate in discussing social and political matters important toward making decisions for the common good. (McClusky & Hemilowski, 2011, p. 304)

This is the ideal. However, just looking at any web forum can illustrate that this is not the reality of online communication. There is the dueling idea that, while people are no longer forced to receive information or opinions from “talking heads” and are allowed to bring issues and information to the public’s attention that might not otherwise be covered by the main stream media, there is also no way of verifying whether these faceless identities are qualified to be talking about the subject, and information can be false or misinformed, spreading quickly before anyone would be able to check the validity of the claims.

Many forums have moderators—referred to as “mods”—whose specific purpose is to keep the forum running, keep conversations on the topic of the forum, and prevent users who intend to behave as a troll from doing so. But some forms of feedback sections lack these gatekeepers who keep the order and have the power to ban disruptive commenters. Social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Livejournal, and Tumblr can be relatively lax about inflammatory comments made about the content of the site. “Comments are allowed – even invited – on individual posts, or on the blog as a whole only. ‘Trackbacks’ alert blogger A on blog B, (s)he is being commented”(de Laat, 2008, p. 59). Because these sites are open, without a set topic of discussion, people who own the accounts are left to police them themselves. There are some degrees of power given to the account owner; they can delete comments, report abusers to the site runners, adjust privacy settings to their account so it can only be viewed by those entered onto an approved (or “white”) list, or simply disable the options

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that allows people to comment. But this will only keep offenders from their personal account.

There is nothing stopping trolls from creating new accounts to continue harassment, or making accounts, websites, or webpages specifically devoted to slandering the victim they've selected.

But not all trolls are operating with the intention of bullying helpless individuals.

According to an interview conducted by New York University lecturer Whitney Philips with a self-identified troll, trolls are not a monolithic or homogenous group, but many share traits in being intelligent, playful, mischievous, and antagonistic. Most remain anonymous, and consider privacy and freedom online to be synonymous, whether on the local or federal level, and all information and persona to be acceptable targets for mockery (2011, p. 68). As previously stated, trolling can range in extremes of how harmful it is considered to be. "Trolling ranges from the vaguely distasteful to the borderline illegal: trolls taunt unsuspecting targets with seemingly racist, seemingly sexist and/or seemingly homophobic language; post shocking imagery, including pornography and gore, in order to derail conversation; and flood discussion threads with non sequiturs or grotesque distortions of other users' positions"(2011, p. 69).

Trolls purposefully use controversial and transgressive humor, all in the pursuit of "lulz": "a particular kind of aggressive, morally ambiguous laughter indicating the infliction of emotional distress. To the troll, the precise nature of this distress is secondary, if not downright inconsequential, to their enjoyment of its effects" (p. 69). In plainer terms, they find enjoyment in the target's reaction of anger, distress, or attempts to reason with those trolling them.

To this effect, trolls may consider themselves the "merry pranksters" of the Internet. It should be noted that many of the people and/or groups that trolls choose as targets are those who have themselves expressed hateful, racist, and prejudiced behavior, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Westboro Baptist Church, and even other trolls. In addition, some trolls may simply post

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harmless false information that tricks their audience, but does not hurt them or attack them personally. Trolls are “equal opportunity offenders” (p. 69). Everything they do is in keeping with the ideal of their actions being “for the ‘lulz’.” It is difficult to predict who a troll might choose to hassle, or how. Trolling is not intended to be anything other than a one-sided relationship with the target; the minute the troll starts to become emotionally involved with the target and the communication stops being the troll speaking nonsense and instead has them engaging the target on an equal footing, the aggressor ceases to be a troll.

Whether or not trolling could be considered a legal issue is still uncertain; “The legal question is another matter entirely. In the US, trolling is, for the time being, protected by the First Amendment. More and more frequently, however – in both America and in Britain – trolling is equated with ‘cyber bullying’ (a problematic term in itself) and therefore risks being legally categorized as fighting words (an offence in the US) and/or outright harassment” (p. 69). These cases are primarily tied to some of the more vicious attacks against victims, such as the multiple instances in the United Kingdom and the United States where memorial webpages for dead teenagers are defaced by trolls. “Trolls bombarded tribute pages on the Web with hateful messages to a dead youth’s grieving family and friends, pot pornographic pictures and upload graphic crime-scene photos of bloody corpse” (O’Hare, 2010, p. 1).

The question is not why users troll, as it has been made clear that the temptation created by anonymity is great, and the restrictions placed on individual’s privacy in the U. S. leave people preferring the anonymous online platform to communicate. Trolls are an exaggerated result of these restrictions, “trolling may not be explicitly or traditionally political, but it is predicated on resistance to all forms of authority” (Phillips, 2011, p. 70). But even with the idea of freedom of speech and the need to usurp restrictions on how people are meant to behave when

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communicating, where is the line drawn between acceptable targets and non-acceptable targets? How is trolling truly affecting its victims, and how is and /or should society react(ing)? Outside of extreme cases of harassment, there has not been official research on what an average person thinks of trolling, no proper measurement of how widespread it is, and even fewer suggested solutions to the problem. The researchers wanted to find out how well known the trolling phenomena was to average people, what they defined as trolling behavior, and how much of a problem they believed it to be.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS/HYPOTHESIS & JUSTIFICATION**

Subcultures, fads, and behaviors out of the norm can be overblown or misrepresented in main stream media, sometimes to the point that they are presented as more harmful than they actually are. For example, speaking as average American citizens, the researchers have witnessed trolling behavior online, but rarely to the extreme degree that is presented in some articles. “Cyber bullying,” a term used to describe vicious harassment of an individual over the Internet, has become synonymous with trolling. But from what has been witnessed, and according to Whitney Phillips’s accounts on speaking with trolls, trolling is not always vindictive and out to harm. With the lack of consistent information on trolls and their numbers, it is difficult to categorize their behavior or measure how wide spread the problem is. The researcher’s wanted to find out if other people’s perceptions, reactions, and definitions of trolls and acts of trolling matched their own, and from there decide if there was a way to categorize trolling behavior.

R1: What are the perceptions/definitions of Internet trolls (based on age/generation)?

R2: What behaviors are commonly identified as trolling?

The researchers hypothesized that definitions of trolling would vary from subject to subject, and that each age group would collectively respond differently to trolling behavior: the

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younger age groups would be familiar with trolling behavior and feel less emotionally affected by comments presented, while the older age groups would be unfamiliar with trolling, and feel more emotionally affected by comments presented.

## METHODOLOGY

For the study, the researchers conducted a descriptive content analysis of the participant's emotional responses to trolling. Descriptive content analysis's main purpose is to "describe communication messages or their characteristics in particular cultural contexts" (Content Analytic Claims, p. 249). The subjects would be exposed to a number of comments taken from an Internet site and record their emotional reactions. To gather information on subjects' emotional reactions to different comments, the decision was made to conduct an interview using a scanned copy of comments from one of the most popular, high traffic comment forums found on the internet. The interview and analysis were based off of a popular website with content that allowed the researchers a sample of a large variety of comments that ranged from quantity and quality posted from users from around the world. YouTube is a well-known video sharing website on the World Wide Web, meaning it reaches a universal audience.

The interview was conducted with four different groups, with four different subjects within each group. This concluded in a total of 16 different subjects responding to the popular music video "Gangnam Style," which was featured on YouTube.

### **Participants:**

A convenience sample of participants varied in ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and frequency of computer use. There were four groups, each containing four subjects, of which there were two females and two males each. The first age group (Group 1) was subjects ranging from 13-18 years of age. The second age group (Group 2) was 19-25 years of age. The third age

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group (Group 3) was 26-39 years of age. The fourth and final age group (Group 4) was ages 40 and older.

### **Procedures:**

The database from which the comments used in this study were collected from the video sharing site YouTube. After YouTube was selected, the researchers then studied the top viewed video of the month as of October 29, 2012. The video that was chosen was “Gangnam Style,” a humorous video and song by Korean Pop singer Psy, with 34,368,416 views. The video was posted to YouTube three months prior—July 15, 2012—and had obtained 703,946 “likes” and 10,903 “dislikes.” The researchers then took a screen shot of the top 70 comments (out of 1,510,518 comments) listed under “Gangnam Style” and printed off 16 copies of the comments to distribute to the 16 subjects during their interviews. Comments were left intact, although swear words were censored with asterisks (\*). Listed above the screen shot was the video’s title and view count, as well as a description of the video for those who were not familiar with it, which read, “South Korean singer Psy performing a silly song and dance” (see appendix).

Subjects were interviewed separately in one-on-one sessions with the researchers. Those in Group 1 who were under the age of 17 were given a consent form for their parent or guardian to sign prior to the interview. All participants were asked their age and gender, and were then briefly informed of the video’s origin. The subjects were then asked to read through the comments and mark any comments they felt strong emotional reactions to, and write the emotion. They were told that the reactions did not need be limited to any specific emotions, but rather open to all varying emotions, from positive to negative. The subjects were also open to express their emotions and reactions verbally with the researchers. Once the subjects finished reading through the comments and recording their reactions, they were asked to define an

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“Internet troll” or “trolling.” If subjects were not familiar with the term, they were asked to give their best definition. All participants were read the same definition of trolling (see appendix b).

The question posed afterward was, “Define ‘Trolling,’ and examples of usernames that display acts of ‘Trolling’.” The subjects then read back over the comments and indicated the users that they defined as trolls. After all interviews had been conducted, the data was assembled and broken down to divide the different emotions subjects experienced, and how they correlated with which usernames the subjects had chosen to be defined as trolls. The emotional responses were grouped into coding categories based on written reactions per group. These emotional categories ranged from positive emotions/reactions to negative emotions/reactions and were defined as, humor, agreement/approval, surprise, confusion, none (no reaction), disapproval, and anger.

## **RESULTS**

The resulting data suggested a discrepancy of the definition of trolling amongst the age groups. Group 4 (ages 40 and older), when asked if they were familiar with them or to define them, had the least knowledge and/or recognition on what the terms “trolling” or “Internet troll” meant. Nearly all definitions of trolling given by Group 4 were furthest from the definition provided by the researchers, presented by Whitney Phillips (appendix). “A person who skims through contents to find a ‘gem.’ Or finding someone to beat up.”-Subject M (Group 4).

“Someone who reads everything on a site and doesn’t participate in the comments.”-Subject O (Group 4). “I don’t know.”-Subject N (Group 4). Only one member had a close answer: “People anonymously spying/bashing people. I’m not sure.”-Subject P (Group 4). The subject cited that their familiarity was due to having a young daughter.



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In contrast, Groups 1(13-18), 2(19-25), and 3(26-39) seemed to have a preexisting understanding and recognition of trolling. Their definitions were closest to the Phillips definition used for the study. “People who comment on websites with rude or degrading comments.”- Subject L (Group 3). “A person who is trying to get a negative reaction from someone by ‘pushing their buttons,’ no matter the subject; being inappropriate and saying rude things.”- Subject E (Group 2). “People who sit online and taunt people.”-Subject D (Group 1).

Despite differing definitions, there were common characteristics each group as a whole recognized as trolling. These characteristics included comments that:

- 1) Used sexist or homophobic language.
- 2) Mentioned physical violence.
- 3) Contained poor grammar or profanity.
- 4) Were nonsensical.
- 5) Were altogether rude to other commenters/anyone reading.

Nearly all characteristics were associated with negativity, and received negative emotional responses from the subjects. However, there were some comments cited as trolling that, while containing some of the same characteristics, were viewed as humorous with some of the younger subjects from Group 1, such as, “he took Morrissey’s style of dress and LMFAO’s style of music. its weird but it makes me laugh”-hmedas82(user). This comment contained poor grammar, but received a positive emotional response from a subject. Some comments were considered “silly” by the younger groups, while they were still cited as examples of trolling, “BROKEN CONDOM STYLE! Heeeey that’s your baby, nope nope, nope!”- TheDoubleDeed(user). Because of this, sarcastic and silly comments intended to make the reader

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laugh were also added to the list of characteristics. Such comments, however, could contain slang, juvenile humor, or references that were unfamiliar to older age groups like Group 4, and where therefore responded to with negative emotions from them. If the older age group did not understand the comment or the intent behind it, they tended to respond to it negatively.

The reactions of each group are tallied in the following graphs; the emotions experienced listed on the side column, and the type of comment characteristic across the top, with numbers indicating how many subjects experienced the emotion pertaining to the characteristic. The emotions were compiled by the researchers joining the comments made by the subjects into emotional codes that best described their reactions. These codes are; Humor, comments subjects found amusing or funny; Approval, comments subjects agreed with or liked; Surprise, comments subjects were not expecting; Confusion, comments subjects did not understand; None, comments that received neither a positive nor negative reaction, but subjects recognized the commenter as a troll; Disapproval, comments subjects did not like or made them slightly upset/disappointed them; and Anger, comments that subjects had a strong distaste for.

		<b>Group 1 Characteristics of Comments</b>						
		Sexist/ Homophobic Slurs	Physical Violence	Poor Grammar	Profanity	Rude to Other Commenters/Readers	Sarcastic or Silly	Nonsensical/ Off Topic
<b>Emotional Responses</b>	Humor					1	4	
	Approval			2		3		4
	Surprise							
	Confusion				1	1	1	7
	None	2		2	1	2		
	Disapproval	3	2	10	13	11		3
	Anger	2	2	2	2	2		1

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		<b>Group 2 Characteristics of Comments</b>						
<b>Emotional Responses</b>		Sexist/ Homophobic Slurs	Physical Violence	Poor Grammar	Profanity	Rude to Other Commenters/Readers	Sarcastic or Silly	Nonsensical/ Off Topic
	Humor			1	1	1	1	1
	Approval							2
	Surprise			1	1	1		
	Confusion					1		
	None	3	1	3	6	7		
	Disapproval	3	1	4	5	6		1
	Anger		2					

		<b>Group 3 Characteristics of Comments</b>						
<b>Emotional Responses</b>		Sexist/ Homophobic Slurs	Physical Violence	Poor Grammar	Profanity	Rude to Other Commenters/Readers	Sarcastic or Silly	Nonsensical/ Off Topic
	Humor							2
	Approval						1	
	Surprise							
	Confusion							1
	None	1		1	1	1		1
	Disapproval	2	2	6	8	10	1	3
	Anger	3	2	4	4	4		

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		<b>Group 4 Characteristics of Comments</b>						
		Sexist/ Homophobic Slurs	Physical Violence	Poor Grammar	Profanity	Rude to Other Commenters/Readers	Sarcastic or Silly	Nonsensical/ Off Topic
Emotional Responses	Humor							
	Approval				1	1	1	
	Surprise							
	Confusion					1	3	
	None	1		7	6	11	1	4
	Disapproval	2		5	12	11		5
	Anger	4	3	7	8	8		2

**DISCUSSION**

To understand the range and variations in the subjects' emotional reactions to the comments, one could employ Social Judgment Theory. The traditional definition of Social Judgment Theory as stated by Brehmer (1988) is that it "defines judgment as a process which involves the integration of information from a set of cues into a judgment about some distal state of affairs" (p. 1). Depending on (what could be referred to as) the "generational culture" that an individual experienced growing up, even within the larger culture, they would experience different learned cues concerning how they were meant to react or to feel about a situation or message. This could be applied to learning a task, problem solving, and building a belief system. The cues could indicate what would be considered "appropriate" or "right," in either a logical or moral sense. The person could be taught that certain actions, behaviors, or thoughts are acceptable, while others are unacceptable. Each generation experiences a different culture, built on the changing ideals and significant events of the time. Even though one generation is teaching

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their cues to the proceeding generation, perceptions and beliefs can change after these events occur. Within the new generation, a “counterculture” could form, with radically new ideas that are meant to subvert what the old generation put into place.

A counterculture is defined as, “a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which the group is part” (Yinger, 1982, p. 3). This counter culture could either seep into the general culture, from the inside out, or be formed by the culture itself, expanding on the new cues that are surfacing and creating something of their own. In this most recent generation, trolling was formed as a small grade counterculture—in opposition to the communication culture existing offline. People had freedom, and had had to mold their own rules of communication from existing cues.

From there, one may look at the two ways in how the age groups are interacting with online comments and trolling could be measured. “The model of the environment comes to function as the normative model, with attendant concern for methods of improving the relations between man and the environment. Of these, two kinds are particularly interesting to social judgment theorists: achievement, i.e., the extent to which judgments agree with the actual state of affairs, and agreement, i.e., the extent to which judgments made by two or more personas are similar” (pgs. 1-2).

The second definition of agreement applies to the age groupings, and how their reactions to the different comments on the Internet and their thoughts on trolling behavior were similar; younger age groups ignored or tolerated the behavior to a point, even finding it funny, while older age groups felt it was harmful and needed to be put a stop to. As shown in the Group 1 and Group 2 graphs, many subjects cited “None” as their reactions to trolling comments as opposed

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to other emotions; they recognized the trolls but were not emotionally affected by what was said. Although some comments may have held profanity, poor grammar, or were rude to other commenters, they could still find humor in them. Group 4 provided the most written feedback during the interview, and cited many comments both troll and non-troll that they disapproved of and found to be negative.

Based on shared “generational culture,” the group members responded with similar cues; younger generations have spent a majority of their lives using the Internet, and have learned through trial and error to identify trolling and the meaning behind the behavior. Furthermore, they have learned by example how to “deal” with trolls; to understand that a troll is baiting its audience and, according to their peers, the only way to deal with a troll is to ignore them—to not engage in the behavior. The troll is looking for attention that should not be given to them, and they will lose power if they are ignored.

Older generations are less familiar with trolling, and subjects from the older age groups had a hard time making distinctions between a commenter purposefully trying to upset people and a commenter expressing their genuine opinion. This could be tied in with the first definition, achievement, in that the group’s judgments and perceptions are not in agreement with what people are really saying when they communicate online. As with any subculture, Internet users have their own culture, their own language, and their own definition of humor; a culture where one need not concern themselves with other people’s feelings and anything is susceptible to mockery. The older age groups come from a generational culture where communication generally includes the participants having a face attached to the name, and people needing to be held accountable for the things they say. They were thereby more personally “hurt” by the behavior as opposed to their younger, more experienced, and apathetic counterparts. The vast

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majority of emotional responses Group 4 cited were towards the negative end of the emotional spectrum, and subjects wrote detailed comments about how the comments made them feel:

“(After a particular negative comment) I would stop reading at this point. I am unimpressed with this juvenile bickering.”-Subject M (Group 4). “Even more use of inappropriate and foul language. [User] shows no sign of intelligent communication skills. (Noted emotional response: Anger).”-Subject N (Group 4).

This is not to suggest that the younger groups’ (Groups 1, 13-18, and 2, 19-25) members wholly approved of trolling. Many made comments about how trolling as a whole was rude, pointless, or irritating. However, they did find more humor in some comments that the older groups found offensive, whether it was due to outrageousness of the comment, or the way that the commenter presented themselves, with horrible grammar or a clear sarcastic and joking tone. For example, user “yomamamiscoo” posted the comment “HOLY SHIT THE VIEWS!!” “Holy shit the views” is a phrase written in Internet slang, translating to, “My goodness, this video has a high view count! I am shocked/surprised/impressed.” Subject F from Group 2 understood the slang, found the comment humorous, and agreed with it, while Subject O of Group 4 perceived it as confusing and did not approve of the use of profanity. Once more the younger groups had been taught cues by their peers—online as well as offline—and understanding the intent behind the message, as to whether or not something was considered funny, even if it was typically unacceptable.

All messages a person receives are judged on a personal scale of “attitude,” which considers the individual’s beliefs, and places the message on a range of zones of what the person is willing to believe, what they will not believe, and what they have no opinion about; these zones are referred to as the “latitude of acceptance,” the “latitude of rejection,” and the “latitude

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of non-commitment” (Griffin, 2011, p. 195). Everything on this scale is judged against a person’s “anchoring belief”—their primary, unwavering, deep set belief, where all other beliefs can either be measured to the left or right of.

If a message is categorized in the latitudes of acceptance or rejection, this suggests that the individual feels personally involved in the message, and is “hard lined” on whether they’re willing to accept it or not; they have “high ego-involvement.” Messages that fall within the latitude of non-commitment indicate that the individual has no strong opinion about the message one way or the other; they have “low ego-involvement.” The range of these zones and their closeness to the anchoring belief can be dependent on the importance of the belief to the individual.

Based on this scale, the younger groups (1 and 2) were going into the study with prior knowledge of trolling’s existence and the types of negative or offensive comments that could be found online. As a result, they were conditioned not to care or feel personally offended by the comments; their ego-involvement was low. Their anchoring beliefs on the subject were that whether or not a user was a troll, they should be ignored—that their behavior was harmful and should not be encouraged; they should not “feed the troll.” For them the majority of the comments were placed on the attitude scale as a part of their latitude of non-commitment.

The older age groups (3 and 4), meanwhile, were judging the comments based on their own knowledge and experiences of what was considered acceptable when communicating. Some noted to the researchers that they were not only personally upset by the comments, they were angry that the practice of trolling—purposefully trying to upset and offend people—existed at all, “No matter what, I find it mean spirited. It’s all bullying. It’s not an appropriate method of



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getting a laugh.”-Subject N (Group 4); their ego-involvement was much higher. Their anchoring belief, which differed from the younger age groups’, was that just because someone may say something hateful on purpose does not mean they should be ignored. They should still be held accountable for what they say and/or do. The behavior could spread, and people could fail to see the distinction between trolling and genuine vitriol. Ignoring the behavior could be perceived as encouraging it. Additionally all people have a responsibility to remain genuine in the perception of themselves that they were displaying to others.

Also, they were experiencing phenomenon known as assimilation, “a perception error whereby people judge messages that fall within the latitude of rejection as farther from their anchor than they really are” (p. 198). They did not understand the intended message behind the comments that were being posted, and as a result judged the comments harshly, based on their own perceptions and standards. Some even cited some of the comments as irritating or examples of trolling simply because they literally could not understand the message, which was not harmful, but written in another language, such as Korean or German. In one such cited comment, the user was not trying to be purposefully nonsensical or obnoxious, but was quoting the lyrics of the song in the video, “eyyyyyyyyyy sexyyyyyyyyyy ladyyyyyyyyyy”-TheCodSan(user).

All groups were able to find comments that they considered to be within their latitudes of acceptance and rejection. The older age groups approved of comments that were positive or conveyed genuine thought, and the younger groups found some comments to be amusing or, like the older groups, appreciated when a comment was positive. Notably, one thing all groups had in common was where they “drew the line” when it came to the negative comments; despite the vast amounts of comments using swearwords, insults, and slurs, all had the strongest negative reaction to ones that told another commenter to “kill yourself”-RedberetVC(user). All felt that

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this comment went too far and exceeded typical cruelty, and it received the strongest negative emotional responses.

This could indicate a range of what comments are considered acceptable or ignorable within the younger age groups. Perhaps they were willing to tolerate certain comments up to a point, such as those that only contained minor swearwords and slurs or poor grammar. Clearly the deciding factor was not quantity of a message, but quality; no matter how long or short the message was in length, what it actually said could make all the difference. Some individual's tolerance for more vicious messages can outlast others', but there can be a breaking point for average users.

This could also suggest that although generational cultures differ from one another, overarching themes concerning hardline topics could still hold true; deep down, there were still some behaviors that they younger age groups considered unacceptable, even within what they knew about trolling and online culture, which was retained from what they learned from the older age groups' cues. Perhaps this could further suggest why there exist "trolls who troll trolls"; despite the anonymity, users still act on cues carried over from the wider offline culture, and seek to punish/shame those who do not adhere to them, or step over perceived boundaries.

## **LIMITATIONS**

There were several limitations regarding the study. Without a distinct definition of trolling, even among the researchers, it was difficult to keep the recovered definitions consistent. While many of the subjects had witnessed acts that could be classified as trolling, they were still unfamiliar with the actual terminology, and had trouble explaining what a troll was. Some subjects' responses were also less detailed than others, which could have indicated a lack of

## TROLLING

consistency in survey directions. The study did not take occupations into account, and answers could have been imbalanced if one participant had had excessive knowledge in the topic due to working in the field of technology or social networking (although that is relatively similar to someone knowing or not knowing what trolling was). It was also a preliminary study, and the sample size was too small to make generalizations for a wider, international audience. If the study was done again, a larger, more diverse sample size would be preferable.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

There is still much to explore about the Internet trolling phenomena. It would be interesting for future researchers to look into whether or not there are certain areas of the Internet that produce more trolling activity than others, and why; uncover what traits the forums possess to attract trolling, whether it is the topics being discussed, lax security from moderators, or a haven created by trolls, for trolls. One wonders what trolls do when there is no one left to troll.

Researchers could also look into categorizing subsets of trolls, seeing if there are further patterns in their methods of communication, and whether or not the more extreme (or as the case may be, mild) instances of trolling behavior could be categorized as trolling at all. They could investigate whether harmless pranks or instances of misinformation are really trolling, or if one is still a troll if they are not or do not remain anonymous. Or, more controversially, whether trolling could be considered acceptable depending on the victim.

In addition, they could study what in a culture, beyond the right to freedom of speech, encourages trolling behavior, or whether trolling occurs in other cultures, and if the behavior is consistent to each culture. From there, they could investigate if trolling specifically is a behavior that needs to be changed and/or stopped, or if the problem lies in the culture and how it chooses

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to communicate. If trolling self-contained, or something that evolved from already changing communication methods? As pointed out by Whitney Phillips (2012),

For example, when trolls court emotional distress in the wake of a tragedy by posting upsetting messages to Facebook memorial pages and generally being antagonistic towards so-called “grief tourists,” they are swiftly condemned—and understandable so. But when corporate media outlets splash the most sensationalist, upsetting headlines or images across their front page, press the friends and families of suicide victims to relive the trauma of having their loved one’s RIP page attacked by trolls (and in the case of this MSNBC segment, by forcing them to read the hateful messages on camera), or pour over every possible detail about bullied teenage suicides, despite the risks of “copycat suicide,” the only objectively measurable media effect, and in so doing slap a dollar sign on personal tragedy, it’s just business as usual. (para. 13)

Could trolling be solved not from the inside out, but from the outside in?

## CONCLUSION

As the research suggests, there is much variation on how trolling is perceived, particularly within generational groups. While younger generations have grown accustomed to it, and found a way to adapt and fit trolling into their online reality, older generations continue to disapprove and fight against it, whether that is through restricting communication or encouraging positivity. Trolling is, undoubtedly, a subculture that will continue to morph and evolve with the changes the future brings to online communication. It could completely change form, become more prevalent in its current state, or simply die out as years pass and people learn how to restrict themselves and cut off the troll’s “food supply.” Keeping an eye on this movement and

## TROLLING

tracking its transformation can open up a discussion about current and future online culture, and reveal a bit about how the “outside” culture interacts with itself and affects how people communicate and relate to each other. Whether or not trolling will lead to stricter laws concerning communication remains to be seen. Knowing what kind of people generally engage in trolling, they could choose to rise up and shut down the Internet should such laws be put in place. Either way, there is still much that can be learned from this bizarre little movement.

## TROLLING

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## TROLLING

APPENDIX A

Gangnam Style: 34,368,416 views on YouTube

Summary of what the video is: South Korean singer Psy performing a silly song and dance.

Well that's 5 minutes of my life I'll never get back. Why in the f\*\*\* is this so popular?

[Umar Waraich](#)

Then why did you waste time in your life to find this video and say this? Dumbass.

[justaman15](#) in reply to [Umar Waraich](#)

well.. the song SUCKS...his moves are somehow good but it certainly doent worth this WASTED 5 minutes of my life

[pyromanis10](#)

Why i have to like this f\*\*\*\*\* shit :))

[Tornike Dunduain](#)

ამ ყლებობის დედას შევეცო

EVERYONE FOR FREE MONEY LISTEN:

- 1.Go To The AppStore On. Your Apple Device
- 2.Download The App Called "App Trailers"
- 3.Make A Free Account
- 4.In The Invitation Box Type "hamzz8"
- 5.Then Use It To Get A Free iTunes Card

[hamzzizzle](#)

Am I the only person who HATES this SONG!!

[SmilingHappyFaces21](#)

All people who dont like it go f\*\*k yourself



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- Oh sorry i didn't realise that because I'm not bumming K-pop and that I don't think an autotuned song with a poor instrumental backing track is the best shit since prostitution that it somehow invalidates my right to live you f\*\*\*\*\* weeabo maggot.

[TheDocGoblinin](#)

Whoever likes this noob, you are an official IDIOT

[Umar Waraich](#)

kill yourself.

[RedberetVC](#)in reply to [TheDocGoblin](#)

This isnt much better than beiber.

[TheDocGoblinin](#) reply to [RedberetVC](#)

Die Japsen haben Ott gefunden

[Umesh Bx](#)

I don't remember having having heavy hallucinogens forced into my system....but the evidence suggests otherwise.

[rossw75](#)

Ganam Style yeeeeea

[monica08104](#)

- Ganam Style yeeeeea

[monica08104](#)

do you like justin beiber?

[RedberetVC](#)in reply to [Olivia Lees](#)

Cool

[janiklukascais](#)

Yeah I Love this Song

[janiklukascais](#)

Ahahahahhaah opopppopppop oppa gangam style

## TROLLING

[klejodra](#) 1 hour ago

Hey Everyone! If you're interested in earning money or gift cards you should definitely have an app called "app trailers". It allows you to collect points that can go towards money in paypal or gift cards. To get started...

1. Download "App Trailers" from app store.
2. Use bonus code "livelovedance21" in videos tab.
3. Collect points & Enjoy the redeem section.

[SmilingHappyFaces21](#)

Ahahahaha op op op opa gangnam style :) atilla tasinkinden sonra mukemmel geldi, sakın o videonun turklere ait oldugunu belirtmeyin. :)

[Deniz Şuözer](#)

GANGNAM STYLE B\*TCHES!

[ww2commanderseargent](#)

- Out of how many weird music videos other countrys make this is a hit?

[Peppermon22](#)

condom style for perves gangnam style for awesome people?

[Christopher Diaz](#)

- i swear he is saying Gundam style

[SilveradoHD0](#) 13 hours ago

I never said it was chinese.

[smokohantis](#) in reply to [0Mangostreusel0](#)

well u did say chinease song x

[Grace Vane](#) in reply to [smokohantis](#)

its not funny its hillarious

[si81wy](#) in reply to [Olivia Lees](#)

## TROLLING

right

[si81wyin](#) in reply to [1112lolol](#)

if it was the same then i wouldn't of said anything Korean girls come from Korea Chinese girls come from China

so u no who is the dumb ass here

[vamptramp783](#) in reply to [gameadict321](#)

- how dare you asshole. the only people that ever truly deserve to die, are child molesters, rapist's, murderers, and all those discusting people.

[webkinzgirls4life](#) in reply to [B3astOfThe3ast1](#)

does anyone else hear him saying- sana air and yojer all the time??

[Zoe30884](#)

eyyyyyyyyy sexyyyyyyyyy ladyyyyyyyyy

[TheCoDSan](#)

Imao love that bit :P

[Zoe3088](#)

You are gay but The Song is amazing

[reiterphilip](#)

Nvm :L

- I hate people who r retarded f\*\*\* u hahaha people can say wat the f\*\*\* they want plus gangnam style can be from where ever he wants u old sick c\*\*\* now f\*\*\* off

[1903hollywood](#)

Cool it, bro. the world is full of idiots that think Asia is a country.

[Jake Adashirin](#) in reply to [merqurycitymeltdown](#)

- its an amazing korean man who loves to dress classy and dance cheesy<  
, i love this song to come join us not hate us;)

[poshshanxx](#)

## TROLLING

- They not even allowed to do this in China...

[DarPesoh's korean](#)

[manunited111able](#) in reply to [Kittehgirlxxxx](#)

I SAW A GUY AT SCHOOL DOING THE DANCE!

[Gary904cp](#)

it is cool

[ellis howen](#)

Wtf stupidd ppl ahahahaha wtf wrong with the ppl,with ppl these days

[keshaladygagabritney](#)

This music video honestly reminds me of some of the videos you would have seen in the 1980's.

[Erik Terock](#)

not even close.....

[fuckrareware](#) in reply to [Erik Terock\(Show the comment\)](#)

wtf people have to be crazy about this music

[sesay9](#)

No, an AWESOME and KOREAN dude dancing. I love this song. It's upbeat and funny and it brings people together. :) Don't be a hater! Join the crowd and do the Gangnam Style!

[GermiraSheperdin](#) in reply to [Itachi Anime](#)

boring id rather listen to humpty dumty and what is he saying

[krishiravi36](#)

- he took Morrissey's style of dress and LMFAO's style of music. its weird but it makes me laugh

[hmedas82](#)

I love this song so much even though I only understand a few words its the beat

[xxninja3](#)

## TROLLING

This is like if AMerican culture took a shit on koreans, and there is a language barrier so this is what they thought it meant.

[thongsong1448](#)

- antik kunti hareketler ne bu yaaa

[sinan ugur](#)

I think ima learn to dance dis shit

[michael hernandez](#)

Its the macarana of 2012

[P1Kage](#)

much more better then bieber

[alesandrohinoin](#) in reply to

he is gay

[chrisjover2](#)

shut up fat boiiiiuuuu

god sing when saying ehh sexy mab

[chrisjover2](#)

Mmm....Korean cat....yum....

[michaeld5](#)

A fat dude dancing?

[Itachi Anime](#)

Hasn't stopped Chris Farley.

[Yrrej8611](#)

But, for real though, I would kill (kill!) to be able to dance like that guy.

[MrJSwitzer](#)

- Wtf has this world come to!! That's absolutely retarded I'm sorry

## TROLLING

[Ryan Guitar](#)

If you don't like it get the hell out, this is one of the most popular songs of 2012.

[DivinusGlacius](#) in reply to [Ryan Guitar](#)

- HOW DARE U SIR U SHOULD BE DEAD THIS IS THE BEST THING TO HAPEN TO THE WORLD U PRICK

[firefistace101](#) in reply to [falloutman96](#)

Well, that's just, like, your opinion, man

- i guess william hung got the last laugh lmao

[20guidochris](#)

wow wut happened in da elevator that stupid korean poop •\_•

[gage paris](#)

It's basically a Japanese party rock anthem.

[Bob Bobby](#)

- BROKEN CONDOM STYLE! Heeeeee that's your baby, nope, nope, nope!

[TheDoubleDeed](#)

- Today on the bus we were all dancing to this latterly dancing :)

[MaddiesRebornHobby](#)

i mean litterly

[MaddiesRebornHobby](#) in reply to [MaddiesRebornHobby](#)

I like this Song

[SuperCynthhia](#)

HOLY SHIT THE VEWS!!

[yomamamiscoo](#)

TROLLING

**APPENDIX B**

From article “What an Academic Who Wrote Her Dissertation on Trolls Thinks of Violentacrez” by Whitney Phillips (2010):

In the '90s, "to troll" was to disrupt a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board. Regardless of why the poster was being disruptive -- for his or her own amusement, or because he or she was a genuinely quarrelsome, abrasive personality -- the poster would be branded a troller (later shortened to "troll") and denounced accordingly. In these cases, "trolling" was used as a general, condemnatory, post-hoc descriptor of an online encounter. It was -- and in many circles remains -- something you accused someone else of being.

Within the ranks of self-identifying trolls, a class of troublemaker whose [roots can be traced](#) back to 4chan's infamous /b/ board, the term has taken on very specific subcultural meaning. Trolling as described by self-identifying trolls is a game, one only the trolls can initiate and only the troll can win. Pulling from a seemingly endless nest of self-referential memes, and steeped in a distinctive shared language, subcultural trolling is predicated on the amassment of lulz, an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s). In order to amass the greatest number of lulz possible, trolls engage in the most outrageous and offensive behaviors possible -- all the better to troll you with.

It is important to note that trolling is not a one-size-fits-all behavioral category. I've worked with certain trolls who take great pleasure in taunting the friends and family of murdered teenagers. I've worked with other trolls who are disgusted by this sort of behavior and instead restrict their focus to trolling other trolls. Some trolls are very intelligent, and have [extremely](#)

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[interesting things to say about trolling](#), while others have no real opinion about anything they do, other than the fact that it makes them laugh. Just as there are many different kinds of trolls, there are many different ways to troll. Some trolling is relatively innocuous, for example trolling that redirects targets to absurd images or videos. Some trolling meets the legal criteria for harassment, and can persist for weeks or even months. (paras. 3-5)



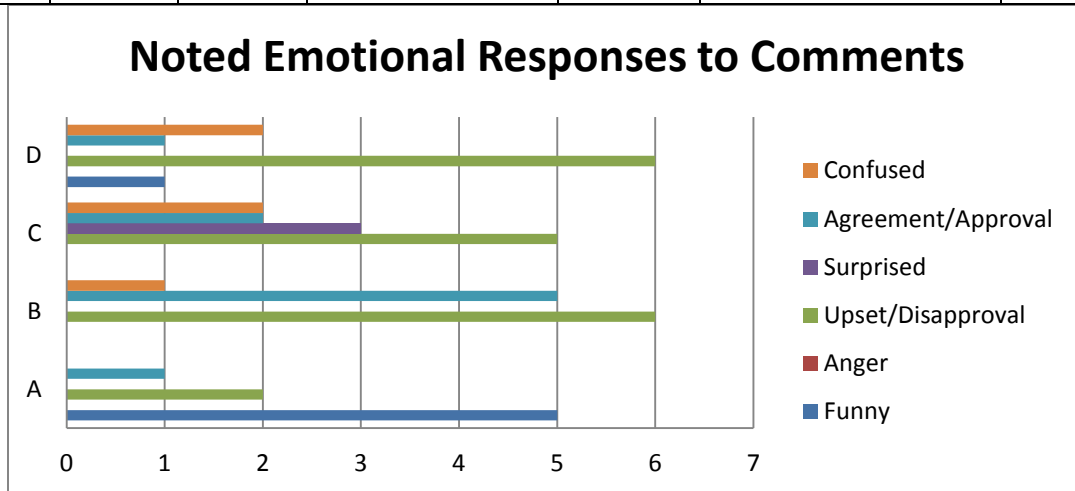
TROLLING

**APPENDIX C**

**Group 1:**

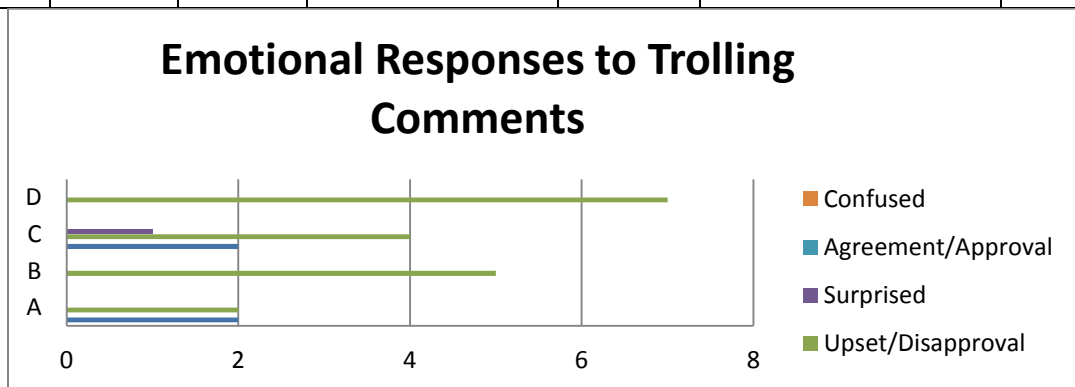
**Recognized Comments**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
A	5		2		1	
B			6		5	1
C			5	3	2	2
D	1		6		1	2



**Recognized Trolls**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
A	2		2			
B			5			
C	2		4	1		
D			7			



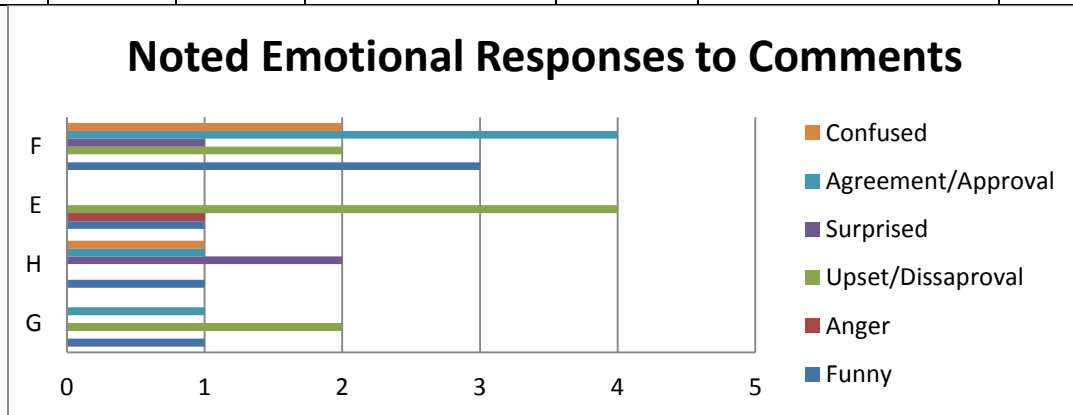
TROLLING

**APPENDIX D**

**Group 2:**

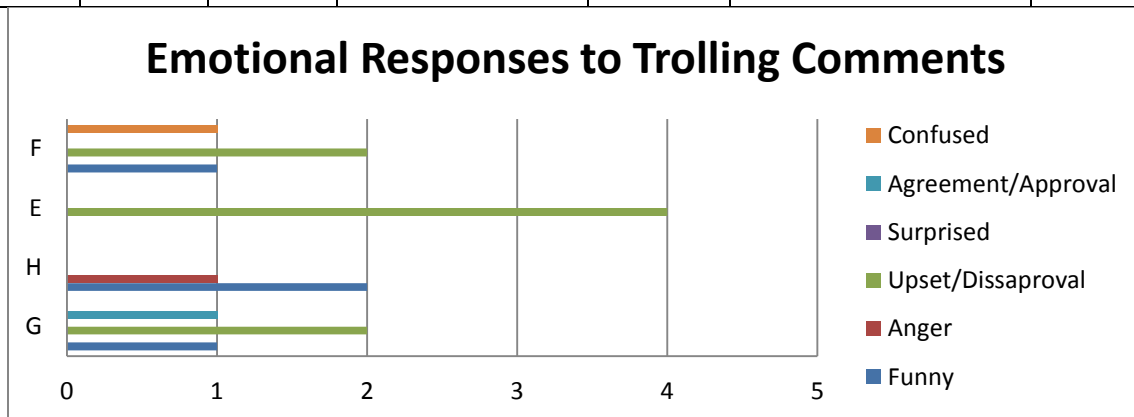
**Recognized Comments**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
G	1		2		1	
H	1			2	1	1
E	1	1	4			
F	3		2	1	4	2



**Recognized Trolls**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
G	1		2		1	
H	2	1				
E			4			
F	1		2			1



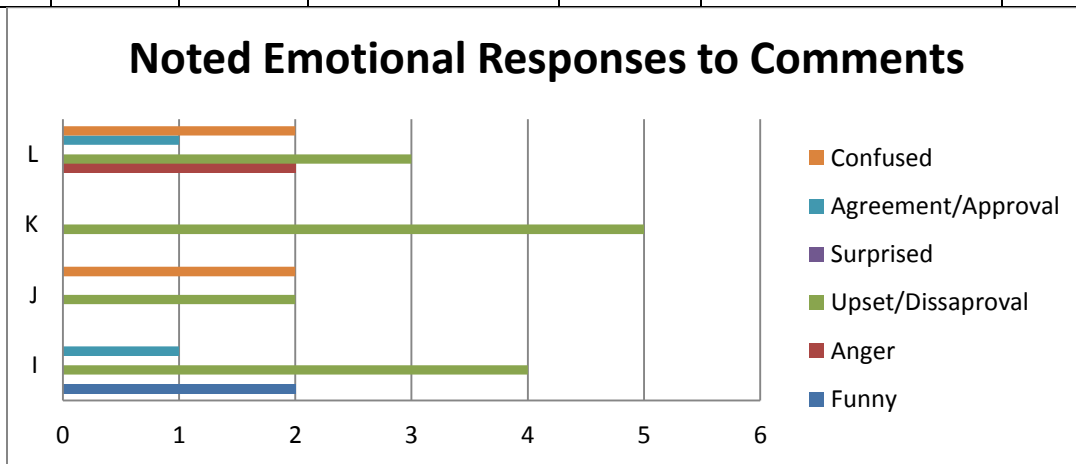
TROLLING

**APPENDIX E**

**Group 3:**

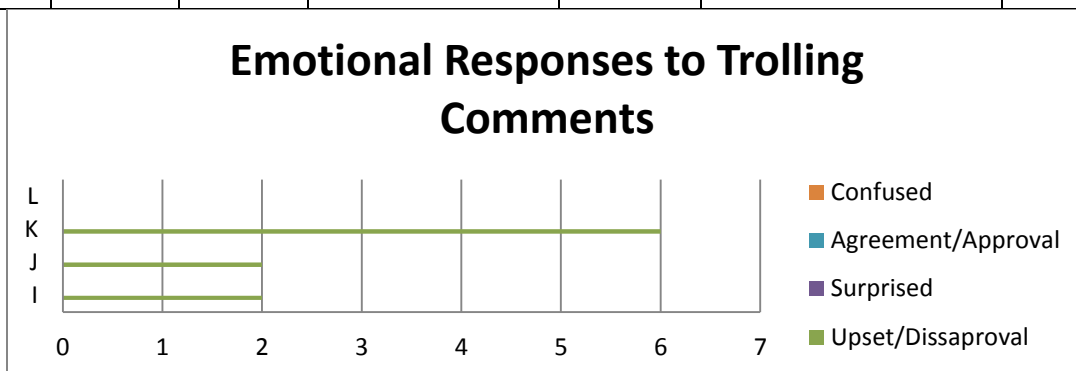
**Recognized Comments**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
I	2		4		1	
J			2			2
K			5			
L		2	3		1	2



**Recognized Trolls**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
I			2			
J			2			
K			6			
L						



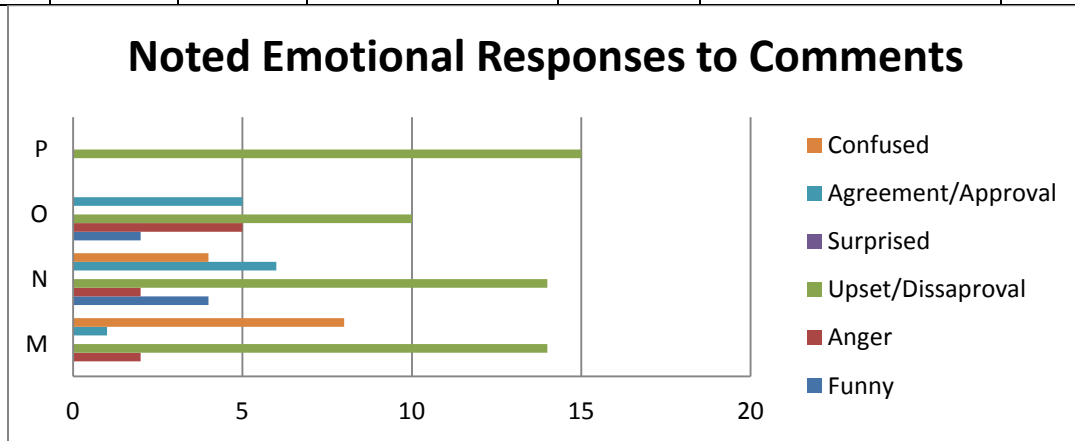
TROLLING

**APPENDIX F**

**Group 4:**

**Recognized Comments**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
M		2	14		1	8
N	4	2	14		6	4
O	2	5	10		5	
P			15			



**Recognized Trolls**

Subjects	Funny	Anger	Upset/Disapproval	Surprised	Agreement/Approval	Confused
M			5			5
N			7		1	2
O			8			
P			15			

