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**Disassembling Online Trolling:  
Towards the Better Understanding and Managing of  
Online Mischief-Making Consumer Misbehaviours**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing

by

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*To Luna and David without whom this dissertation would have been completed  
with lighter dark circles under my eyes and in a clean house.  
But needless to say, I wouldn't have it any other way.*

## Abstract

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This thesis draws on actor-network theory to explore the assemblages of human and non-human entities that allow and perpetuate online trolling. Trolling is a form of consumer misbehaviour that includes deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other online users. Despite being a pervasive online consumer misbehaviour, affecting consumers, brands, and online sites that offer a medium for trolling, trolling is poorly understood. In particular, there is a lack of understanding of what trolling actually is, how it differs from other anti-social behaviours, how it comes about, and how it could be influenced. These questions are at the forefront of this study.

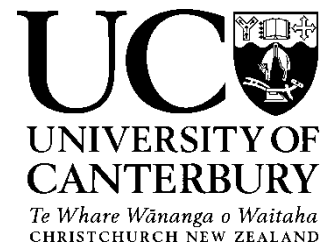
In disassembling trolling behaviours, this study adopts the actor-network theory (ANT) and practice-focused multi-sited ethnographic research approach. Five cases of trolling were investigated: playful trolling, good old-fashioned trolling, shock trolling, online pranking and raiding, and fake customer service trolling. Data collection included nonparticipant observation of trolling behaviours, in-depth interviews with trolls, short-electronic exchanges with trolls and community managers, and review of trolling-related documents. Data analysis started with in-depth exploration of single actor-networks and continued with cross-case analysis, comparing and contrasting the actor-networks and building a general representation of the nature of trolling, the assemblages created in trolling, and the roles these assemblages play in the 'doing' of trolling.

In respect of the nature of trolling, this study has found that trolling behaviours are deliberate, mischievous, deceptive, and designed to provoke a target into a reaction. Trolling behaviours benefit trolls and their followers, and they typically but not necessarily have negative consequences for the people and firms involved. These characteristics of trolling

suggest that trolling should be differentiated from other online misbehaviours, in particular cyberbullying.

Concerning the manifestation of trolling behaviours, this research has revealed that online trolling is performatively constituted by a collection of human and non-human entities interacting more or less in concert with each other. The study has identified nine actors participating in trolling: troll(s), target(s), medium, audience, other trolls, trolling artefacts, regulators, revenue streams, and assistants. Some of these actors (i.e., troll, target, medium) are playing a role in initiating, and other actors in sustaining trolling by celebrating it, boosting it, facilitating it, and normalising it. The findings highlight the role of other actors (apart from misbehaving consumers) in the performance of misbehaving and suggest that effective management of consumer misbehaviours such as trolling will include managing the socio-technical networks that allow and fuel these misbehaviours.

Better understanding of online trolling, as an instance of online and mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviour, contributes to a more rounded understanding of consumer misbehaviours, given that prior research focused on financially motivated or illegal misbehaviours, and on misbehaving in analogue retail settings. Focusing on the act of trolling itself, this ANT-inspired thesis extends previous research on consumer misbehaviours, and trolling, which almost exclusively adopted the dispositional perspective, focusing on studying misbehaving consumers. The original contribution also lies in providing a new definition of trolling behaviours and presenting a theoretical model of how trolling comes about and is nourished. This model has practical value, providing guidance to marketers on how trolling and similar mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviours can be stymied or, if so wished, bolstered.



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  - 8.3.2.2 Boosting trolling behaviours
  - 8.4 Influencing trolling: Managerial implications
- Chapter Nine: Conclusion
  - 9.4 Future Research

*The extracted co-authored work from the sections mentioned above comes from:*

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- Chapter Five: Actors in trolling
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Please detail the nature and extent (%) of contribution by the candidate:

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The undersigned certifies that:

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Name: *Ekant Veer*

Signature:



Date: *22/06/2018*

This thesis also builds on the papers presented at several conferences throughout my PhD journey.

### **Refereed Conference Presentations**

Golf-Papez, M., & Veer, E.\* (2017). *Disassembling Consumer Misbehaviours: the Case of Trolling*. Paper presented at the ANZMAC conference 2017, RMIT University, Melbourne, AUS.

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Golf-Papez, M.,\* & Veer, E. (2015). *Who do We Call Trolls and Why do they Still Find Ways to Troll? A Conceptual Paper*. Paper presented at the ANZMAC Conference 2015, UNSW Business School, Sydney, AUS.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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### 1.1 Introduction

This study seeks to enhance understanding of online trolling behaviours as an instance of consumer misbehaviours. This chapter begins with an overview of the background that frames the research. Following this, a problem statement, research aim and questions, and the research approach are presented. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of the significance of the research. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the structure of the thesis and a summary of the chapter.

### 1.2 Research background

In firms' promotional materials employees are typically "portrayed as smiling, happy workers, cheerfully serving equally smiling, contented customers" (Fisk et al., 2010, p. 417). My dissertation adopts a less utopian perspective in the hope of better reflecting the reality of marketer-consumer interactions. The reality is that the consumer is *not* always right; in fact, it seems that on occasions s/he intentionally engages in activities that seem wrong. In the marketing literature, such activities are known under the name *consumer misbehaviours*—these denote consumers acting "in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers" (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016, p. 524).

There is a growing body of literature that explores the misbehaviours of people in their role as consumers. As insightful as these studies are, they provide only a partial understanding of consumer misbehaviours as they are predominantly preoccupied with studying misbehaviours that are *financially* motivated and often *illegal* (e.g., shoplifting, fraudulent returns). The focus on the financially-incentivised and illegal consumer misbehaviours seems somewhat divorced from the reality, where consumer misbehaviours

come in all shapes and sizes. At the same time, much more is known about consumers misbehaving in *analogue retail settings* than is known about consumers misbehaving in online settings. This once again does not match the reality, where consumers, considering the vast amount of time they report to spent online (e.g., Perrin & Jiang, 2018), have plenty of opportunities to engage in misbehaving and to witness misbehaving. These opportunities extend beyond frequently studied *illegal downloading* (e.g., Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Phau, Teah, & Lwin, 2014) and media favoured *cyber violence* (for a review of studies on cyber violence see Peterson & Densley, 2017). To illustrate, online consumer misbehaving includes also falsifying personal information to get access to services (Punj, 2017), attempts to hack the system in order to identify the system flows (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004), sharing negative opinions about companies or products (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014), and engaging in hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions (Dineva, Breitsohl, & Garrod, 2017). Each of these examples of misbehaviours constitute a misbehaviour that is called *online trolling*.

Trolling involves deliberately deceptive, disruptive, and provocative practices of individuals or groups toward others in online social settings. In practice, trolling may take a variety of forms; examples include: the posting of hilarious but completely irrelevant reviews on Android's WebView app store page (Ghoshal, 2015); posting on YouTube a video tutorial showing how drilling into an iPhone 7 will reveal a hidden headphone port (TechRax, 2016); offensively replying to disappointed customers under fake customer service accounts on retailer Target's corporate Facebook page (Nudd, 2015); broadcasting on YouTube a prank call leading to a McDonald's employee pulling a fire alarm (Tri-City Herald, 2015); and convincing consumers to microwave their computers to get rid of a virus (Japan, 2015).

Such examples indicate that trolling is not just an online misbehaviour but it is a *consumer misbehaviour*. Trolls can be considered as a subset of “jaycustomers”—consumers who are with their misbehaving causing problems for other consumers, the company, and its employees (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016, p. 767). Trolling is also an instance of “problem customer behaviour”, as consumers who engage in trolling (i.e., trolls) are “unwilling to cooperate with the service provider, other customers, industry regulations, and/or laws” (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994, p. 98). Finally, trolling behaviours may be framed as *mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviours*, as they include a playful misconduct that is positioned at the boundaries between acceptable and anti-social behaviour (Kirman, Linehan, & Lawson, 2012). In contrast to consumer misbehaviours that are guided by financial or material gains and clearly not allowed by the law (e.g., online downloading, fraudulent returns), trolling seems to represent activities with less straightforward intent (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014) and activities that may range from what Phillips and Smith (2003, p. 85) call “everyday incivility” (i.e., inconsiderate and rude activities) to illegal activities.

### 1.3 Problem statement

Mischief-making consumer misbehaviours such as trolling behaviours *affect consumers, marketers, brands, and online sites* that offer a medium for trolling. The problems caused by trolls and their misbehaving are varied in nature. Trolling may disrupt discussions within online communities (Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Trolling may result in material damage as trolls may trick people into ruining their phones and computers or into causing property damage (e.g., by convincing them to pull a store’s fire alarm). In addition, in the case of online users, trolling has been associated with more serious psychological effects, including severe distress and disturbance (e.g., NetSafe, 2012). In the case of brands and sites that offer a medium for trolls to seek out and troll, the trolling may result in users leaving sites (McAloon, 2015), the harming of brand images

(Hutchinson, 2015) and reputation, or destabilising marketers' intended brand meanings (Rokka & Canniford, 2016), and in financial loss to the company and mental distress to the online community managers. On the other hand, trolling could also have some positive effect on online communities (Coles & West, 2016b; Cruz, Seo, & Rex, 2018; W. Phillips, 2015) such as reinforcing online community by giving members something to rally around (Coles & West, 2016b). Together, these effects suggest that trolling is far from being an inconsequential behaviour. The pervasiveness of trolling behaviours further attests to this notion.

Trolling behaviours are pervasive, compromising “a substantial fraction of user activity on many web sites” (Cheng, Bernstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017, p. 1217). Trolling is particularly common on chat boards (e.g., Reddit), blogs (e.g., Lifehacker and Jezebel) and social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) (YouGov, 2014a). Studies from YouGov (2014a) found that 38% of Americans and 27% of Britons (YouGov, 2014b) who have ever posted an online comment have engaged in conduct that could be considered as trolling (e.g., joked at the expense of somebody else; deliberately posted controversial, inflammatory, or off-topic statements; or maliciously argued with another online user). Furthermore, according to the available research, almost one-fifth of US (19%) and UK (17%) adults reported they had been a “victim” of trolling (YouGov, 2014b, 2014a). It can be expected that the actual numbers of those conducting and experiencing trolling are much higher, as it is known that many consumer misbehaviours are under-reported (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

Though trolling appears to be a common form of consumer misbehaviour, affecting the experience of other online consumers, involving brands, and demanding the attention of the online platforms where it occurs, it is poorly understood. In spite of the brands and consumers being trolled, marketing scholars remain noticeably silent on this topic. Trolling

has, however, recently started gaining an increased interest from researchers from other disciplines, including psychology (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016; March, Grieve, Marrington, & Jonason, 2017; Sest & March, 2017), linguistics (e.g., Hardaker, 2010, 2013), computer science (e.g., Cheng et al., 2017; Kumar, Cheng, & Leskovec, 2017), and information science (e.g., Sanfilippo, Yang, & Fichman, 2017b; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). As insightful as these studies are, they do not resolve one key question as to what trolling behaviours actually *are* and how *they differ from other anti-social behaviours*. Existing trolling definitions lack consensus on what trolling is (Cook, Schaafsma, & Antheunis, 2017; Cruz et al., 2018; Hardaker, 2013) and do not draw a clear line between trolling and other forms of online misbehaviour, in particular cyberbullying (Cruz et al., 2018). This conceptual ambiguity, resulting in trolling becoming a blanket term for all sorts of negatively marked online conducts (Hardaker, 2010; W. Phillips, 2014; Shachaf & Hara, 2010), hinders the effective management of trolling and other online misbehaviours.

In addition, we still do not know *how trolling behaviours are actually carried out*. In explaining trolling, prior research resorts to attributing trolling to ‘*problematic*’ *characteristics of perpetrators* (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016; March et al., 2017; Sest & March, 2017) and/or to *anonymity*, offered by the Internet (e.g., Binns, 2012; Donath, 1999; Griffiths, 2014; Hardaker, 2010, 2013). Yet, recent findings challenge such explanations by showing that under the right circumstances *anyone* can become a troll (Cheng et al., 2017) and that verbal barrages occur within *more and less anonymous* online places (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013). Research into actors involved in trolling behaviours, in order to examine the making of *trolling* rather than the nature of trolls, could contribute to a more rounded and actionable understanding of these misbehaviours.

## 1.4 Research aim and questions

The overall purpose of this thesis is *to better understand the assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviours such as online trolling*. In seeking to achieve these aims, it examines the following research questions:

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- (1) *What is online trolling and how is it differentiated from other forms of online misbehaviour?*
  - (2) *What and how do human and non-human entities come together and manage to hold together, however temporarily, in the performance of trolling? and*
  - (3) *Can assemblages of actors, joined in the performance of trolling, help in our understanding of how trolling is bolstered, maintained, disrupted, or broken?*
- 

## 1.5 Research approach

In answering these research questions, this study employs *actor-network theory* (henceforth ANT). From the perspective of ANT, consumer misbehaviours should be seen as effects of networks of all kinds of actors (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992). These actors “persuade, coerce, seduce, resist and compromise each other as they come together” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 4). To trace the actors and their associations in the performance of trolling, I adopted a *practice-focused multi-sited ethnographic research approach*. The focus of the observations was on the socio-material practices, rather than on the culture, which would be the major point of interest in the case of ethnography. *Five different cases of trolling* were investigated: (1) playful trolling, (2) good old-fashioned trolling, (3), shock trolling, (4) online pranking and raiding, and (5) fake customer-service trolling.

The data collection started in October 2015 and finished in August 2017. It was guided by the principle of following the actors (Latour, 2005) and included 330 hours of *non-*

*participant covert and overt observation of trolling practices*; seven *in-depth interviews* with trolls; and *exchanging short electronic messages* with trolls and community managers. To contextualise my data, I collected and reviewed various documents, such as social platforms' terms of use and community guidelines, trolling-relevant laws, trolling-related newspaper articles, blog entries and other materials including podcasts on online community management and YouTube clips on trolling.

The data analysis started with an *in-depth exploration of a single actor-network*, treating each network as a distinct representation of trolling. The coding was focused on identifying the actors and registering the associations between them. Then, I conducted a *cross-case analysis*, comparing and contrasting the networks and building a general representation of the nature of trolling, assemblages created in trolling and the roles these assemblages play in the making of trolling.

## **1.6 Significance and implications**

The significance of this thesis stems from several potential academic contributions and practical implications. From the *academic* perspective, this study will advance the field of consumer research and marketing by examining a currently unexplored form of consumer misbehaviour—online trolling. A better understanding of trolling as an instance of online and mischief-making consumer behaviour will contribute to a more rounded understanding of consumer misbehaviours in general. In addition, the use of ANT approach will extend the existing body of literature on consumer misbehaviours, which predominately adopted a dispositional perspective, focusing on consumers' traits and dispositions as an explanation for misbehaving. In contrast, my study shifts the focus from the perpetrators of misbehaviours to the misbehaviour itself. Such a perspective will likely offer new insights into the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours in general, and trolling behaviours, in particular. By using an ANT approach, this study directly answers the calls

of Fisk et al. (2010) for exploration of different methodological approaches in investigating consumer misbehaviours in order to facilitate the progress as a discipline.

This thesis should also make an important contribution to the *practice* of managing trolling and other similar misbehaviours. A better understanding of the nature of trolling behaviours will help marketers to recognise trolling and separate it from the other forms of electronic aggressions such as cyberbullying, online hate speech, and flaming. Knowing what constitutes trolling is essential as the nature of the negative information being disseminated dictates the proper marketers' responses (Noble, Noble, & Adjei, 2012). By revealing the trolling actors and their acting, my study will equip the marketers who wish to deal with trolling with the knowledge as to who to actually manage and how.

## 1.7 Thesis outline

The overall structure of this dissertation takes the form of nine chapters, including this *introductory chapter* which presents the research background, problem statement, research aim and questions, research approach and significance of the research.

*Chapters Two and Three* provide a review of the extant literature and research gaps in relation to consumer misbehaviours and trolling behaviours, respectively. Both chapters are similar in structure, organised around the topics of conceptualisation, explanations, consequences, and management of consumer misbehaviours (Chapter Two) and trolling (Chapter Three). Each chapter concludes with an overview of research gaps.

*Chapter Four* is concerned with research methodology; a detailed research approach used for this study is laid out and justified after a brief overview of actor-network theory. After presenting the cases and the methods, the chapters go on to discuss data collection and data analysis, the issues of trustworthiness and the various challenges that arose prior to or during the study.

The findings of the study are presented in three chapters. *Chapter Five* introduces the assemblages of actors involved in the performances of trolling behaviours. *Chapter Six*, presents the roles these actors play in the making of trolling. In particular, the chapter discusses what roles actors play in the evolution, stabilisation and destabilisation of the trolling. *Chapter Seven* provides a new definition of trolling behaviours.

*Chapter Eight* synthesises, interprets and discusses the findings, directly answering the research questions. Finally, *Chapter Nine* concludes this thesis with a presentation of theoretical contributions, acknowledgement of limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **1.8 Summary**

Online consumer misbehaviours, such as trolling, are widespread and poorly understood. Using actor-network theory and a practice-focused multi-sited ethnographic research approach, this thesis explores the assemblages of actors that allow and/or perpetuate trolling. This study provides a significant opportunity to advance our knowledge of mischief-making and online consumer (mis)behaviours by studying the misbehaviour itself rather than its perpetrators. The thesis is composed of nine chapters. The chapter that follows presents the literature on consumer misbehaviours.

## Chapter Two: Consumer Misbehaviours

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### 2.1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature uncovering how people misbehave “in their role as consumers within exchange situations” (Fullerton & Punj, 2004, p. 1239). The purpose of the present chapter is to investigate the literature informing the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours. To identify the relevant literature, I performed directed searches within the Google Scholar and Web of Science databases, looking for terms such as “consumer misbehaviours”, “dysfunctional consumer behaviours”, and “playful consumer behaviours.” To get a deep understanding of the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours and since the literature on the online misbehaviours is relatively scarce, I have *not* limited my review to studies that focus exclusively on *online* misbehaviours.

The present chapter is organised as follows. The first two sections explore how consumer misbehaviours are conceptualised and classified in prior literature. Then, academic findings on explanations for, impacts of, and management of consumer misbehaviours are synthesised. The chapter concludes with a synopsis of the research gaps and a summary of the chapter.

### 2.2 Conceptualising consumer misbehaviours

Existing research mobilises a variety of terms to refer to the activities of consumers who misbehave (see Table 1). These terms include “dysfunctional customer behaviour” (Daunt & Harris, 2012a; Fisk et al., 2010), “aberrant consumer behaviour” (Fullerton & Punj, 1993), “problem customer behaviour” (Bitner et al., 1994), “jaycustomer behaviour” (Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016), “opportunistic consumer behaviour” (Wirtz &

Kum, 2004), “deviant behaviour” (Denegri-Knott, 2006; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Yagil & Luria, 2014), “unethical consumer behaviour” (Egan & Taylor, 2010), “customer unfairness” (Berry & Seiders, 2008), and “uncivil customer behaviour” (Henkel, Boegershausen, Rafaeli, & Lemmink, 2017).

In general, in defining consumer misbehaviours researchers take one of two approaches: either they define them in terms of the *violation of the social norms* (e.g., Daunt & Harris, 2012a, 2012a; Denegri-Knott, 2006; Fullerton & Punj, 1993) or in terms of the *activities they involve* (e.g., Bitner et al., 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016; Muncy & Vitell, 1992). To illustrate, for Fullerton and Punj (1993) aberrant consumer behaviours refer to behaviours that in an exchange context transgress the generally accepted norms. Harris and Reynolds (2003), on the other hand, use the term dysfunctional consumer behaviour to refer to consumer’s actions that disrupt service encounters. The second, activities-based definition of consumer misbehaviours is adopted also in this thesis, where the term consumer misbehaviours is used in the broadest sense to refer to *consumers causing problems to firms, employees, and other consumers*.

Table 1: Overview of selected<sup>1</sup> scholars definitions and conceptualisations of consumer misbehaviours

<i>Study</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Fullerton & Punj, 1993	Aberrant consumer behaviour	“[B]ehavior in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers” (p. 570).
Denegri-Knott, 2006	Consumer bad behaviour	“[C]onsumer activities on the web that defy conventionally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations in offline environments” (p. 82).
Fullerton & Punj, 2004	Consumer misbehaviour	“[B]ehavioral acts by consumers, which violate the generally accepted norms of conduct in consumption situations, and thus disrupt the consumption order” (p. 1239).
Berry & Seiders, 2008	Customer unfairness	“[W]hen a customer behaves in a manner that is devoid of common decency, reasonableness, and respect for the rights of others, creating inequity and causing harm for a company, and in some cases, its employees and other customers” (p. 30).
Reynolds & Harris, 2006	Deviant customer behaviour	“[D]eliberate acts by customers that violate widely held norms” (p. 95).
Fisk et al., 2010	Dysfunctional customer behaviour	“[D]eliberately deviant behavior by customers” (p. 418).
Harris & Reynolds, 2003	Dysfunctional customer behaviour	“[A]ctions by customers who intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly, act in a manner that, in some way, disrupts otherwise functional service encounters” (p. 145).
Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016	Jaycustomers	“[O]ne who acts in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firms, its employees, and other customers” (p. 524).
Bitner et al., 1994	Problem customer behaviour	Customers that are “unwilling to cooperate with the service provider, other customers, industry regulations, and/or laws” (p. 98).
Henkel et al., 2017	Uncivil customer behaviour	“[A]ll forms of rude, disrespectful, condescending, or degrading customer behaviors toward an employee” (p. 132).
Mitchell, Balabanis, Schlegelmilch, & Cornwell, 2009	Unethical consumer behaviour	“[C]onsumer direct or indirect actions which cause organizations or other consumers to lose money or reputation” (p. 396).

<sup>1</sup> The purpose here is not to be exhaustive but rather to indicate the variety of terms used to refer to the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours.

### 2.3 Types and forms of consumer misbehaviours (studied)

There is a growing body of literature that uncovers how consumers misbehave (see Fisk et al., 2010). A great deal of previous research into consumer misbehaviours has focused on *offline*, ‘real-life’ settings with researchers investigating misbehaviours such as shoplifting (Daunt & Greer, 2015; Egan & Taylor, 2010), cheating on service guarantees (Wirtz & Kum, 2004), fraudulent returning (Harris, 2008a), customer retaliatory behaviour (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), vandalism (Van Vliet, 1984), customer aggression and sexual harassment in service encounters (Yagil, 2008), and relating badly to brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). Since 2000, however, a growing interest for investigating misbehaviour in *online* consumptions situations can be noticed (Fisk et al., 2010).

*Researchers have mentioned several ways in which consumers may cause problems for marketers online.* Examples include illegal downloading (e.g., Giesler, 2008; Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Phau et al., 2014; Sinha & Mandel, 2008), falsifying personal information in order to take advantage of online services (Punj, 2017), participating in online firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014), engaging in negative word-of-mouth (Tuzovic, 2010), trash-talking brands and their users (Hickman & Ward, 2007), and engaging in hostile consumer-to-consumer interactions (Dineva et al., 2017) such as participating in a dialogue with the supporters of rival brands that resembles flaming (Ewing et al., 2013). While some of these forms of misconduct are entirely new, others are “technologically updated versions of long standing ethical debates” (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004, p. 122).

Dividing consumer misbehaviours based on the location where they occur (e.g., online vs. offline) is one way of classifying these misbehaviours. Several other classifications have been offered in the current literature. Focusing on the target of the misbehaviour, Fullerton and Punj (2004), organised consumer misbehaviours into five categories. These categories include misbehaviours that are directed against marketer employees (e.g., verbal

and physical abuse of employees), against marketer merchandise (e.g., theft and fraudulent returns), against other consumers (e.g., jumping queues and annoying behaviour), against marketer's financial assets (e.g., rumour generation and credit card fraud), and against marketer's physical or electronic premises (e.g., database theft and spreading computer viruses). This categorisation is illuminating in the sense that it highlights the possible targets of misbehaviours but is also limited in that the categories are not mutually exclusive. To illustrate, while Fullerton and Punj (2004) classified spreading a computer virus as an example of misbehaviour targeting marketer's premises, this act could also be seen as targeted against other consumers or the marketer's financial assets. Directly acknowledging that a particular type of misbehaviour could fit in more categories, Berry and Seiders (2008) presented an alternative typology of consumer misbehaviours, classifying unfair customers into five categories: verbal abusers, blamers, rule breakers, opportunists, and returnaholics. Both typologies are informative but lack empirical grounding.

In contrast to conceptual typologies, Harris and Reynolds's developed theirs (2004) from the analysis of over 417 critical incidents. Focusing on the hospitality industry, these authors identified eight categories of jaycustomers: compensation letter writers, undesirable customers, property abusers, service workers, vindictive customers, oral abusers, physical abusers, and sexual predators (see Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Introducing the first and to date the only classification of *online* consumer misbehaviours within the business field, Freestone and Mitchell (2004) argued that online aberrant behaviours could be grouped into one of the following categories: illegal activities, questionable activities, hacking related activities, human Internet trade, and downloading material. Another data-derived categorisation of consumer misbehaviours was presented by Daunt and Harris (2012a) who used the severity of the norm violation as a base to cluster consumer misbehaviours into: petty norm infringements (e.g., illegitimate complaining), felonious norm infringements (e.g., shoplifting), and belligerent norm infringements (e.g., vandalism).

Finally, consumer misbehaviours may be classified based on the motives for engaging in such misbehaviours. In this view, consumer misbehaviours may be divided into those conducted: for financial gain (i.e., intended to acquire assets), for ego gains (i.e., intended to improve perception of self-worth) (Daunt & Harris, 2012b; Reynolds & Harris, 2005), for disruptive gains (i.e., intended to cause disruption) (Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2005), for revenge-related gains (i.e., intended to retaliate against firm or firm's employee) (Daunt & Harris, 2012b; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), for thrill-related gains (e.g., to enjoy in a thrilling experience) (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Harris, 2008b), and for fun (e.g., to have fun or to play) (Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Van Vliet, 1984).

Existing academic studies and classifications provide fascinating insights into the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours. Yet, being preoccupied with studying misbehaviour through frontline employees' eyes (Yagil & Luria, 2014) and misbehaving in analogue retail environments, these studies provide a rather limited understanding of consumer misbehaviours. An additional problem is that what we know about consumer misbehaviours is predominantly based on scholars studying one of the two following forms of misbehaving: shoplifting (Daunt & Greer, 2015; Egan & Taylor, 2010) in offline settings and illegal downloading (e.g., Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Phau et al., 2014) in online settings. Both forms represent illegal misbehaviours and misbehaviours driven by financial gains. *In reality, however, consumer misbehaviours seem to be more diverse.* Current classifications of consumer misbehaviours mention also misbehaving acts such as bizarre behaviour, annoying behaviour towards other consumers, mindless horseplay (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), gaining unauthorised access to another consumer's computer for fun (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004), and rule breaking (Berry & Seiders, 2008). *The commonality between these poorly understood misbehaviours is that they are not necessarily illegal and financially motivated, and they include some level of mischief-making.*

### 2.3.1 *Mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviours*

The expression *mischief-making consumer (mis)behaviours* is throughout this dissertation used to refer to *misbehaving acts that include causing problems in a playful way*. Since consumers could derive playful value from nearly every product (Grayson, 1999; Holbrook, 1999), service, or activity and the concept of play relates as much to trouble-making, mischief, and deception as to fun and collaboration (Grayson, 1999), it is reasonable to say that some consumer misbehaviours are valued for their playfulness. In other words, some people may playfully consume (Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva, & Greenleaf, 1984; Holt, 1995) consumer misbehaviours. For a consumer misbehaviour to be considered play, it has to: (1) be pursued for its own sake; typically for the sake of having fun (2) provide a self-oriented reward, and (3) require an active engagement (Grayson, 1999; Holbrook, 1999). It is important to note that the misbehaviour itself plays little role in being labelled as playful or non-playful. It is *misbehaving consumer's attitude toward his/her misdeed* that makes a particular misbehaviour a playful one (Grayson, 1999).

Some types of playful behaviours seem to be particularly relevant for our discussion of consumer misbehaviours. Drawing on a Caillois' (1979) typology of play, Grayson (1999) presented seven types of consumption-oriented playful activities with two of them—subversion and deception—being reminiscent of consumer misbehaviours. Being a subtype of so-called *paidia*<sup>2</sup> behaviours (i.e., play that is unstructured and spontaneous), both subversive and deceptive behaviours relate to consumers performing activities that clash with the marketers' expectations as to how consumers should behave in a particular situation. While in the case of subversive acts (e.g., poaching, revolting) the consumer does not try to hide his/her misbehaviour from the marketer, in the case of deceptive ones, as the

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<sup>2</sup> Caillois (2001) argued that people can play in two different ways: *paidia* or *ludus*. While *paidia* refers to playing that is unstructured and spontaneous, *ludus* refers to institutionalised and structured play.

name suggests, the consumer seeks to conceal his/her misbehaviour (e.g., tricking, hoaxing, cheating) (Grayson, 1999). Such misbehaviours can be characterised as playful as long as the perpetrators perform them for their own sake.

In the light of the potential challenges and opportunities of playful consumer behaviours (see Grayson, 1999), there is a need to better understand them. *Researchers have documented some forms of mischief-making misbehaviours.* Van Vliet (1984) and Harris and Reynolds (2004), for instance, talked about play vandals whose vandalism is motivated by fun-seeking and not by malicious intent. Besides play vandalism, trolling and griefing have been framed as mischievous activities. Kirman et al. (2012, p. 124) argued that “[t]he key to mischief is the apparent attitude of playfulness” and that *trolling* and *griefing* may be positioned as playful misconduct at the boundaries between acceptable and anti-social behaviour. This thesis takes a similar approach, studying online trolling as an example of currently poorly understood forms of mischief-making consumers behaviours in online settings.

## **2.4 Drivers and facilitators of consumer misbehaviours**

Current literature attempts to answer the question of why consumer misbehaviours occur by focusing on either *individuals* or *situations within which misbehaviours happen*. Table 2 (Fisk et al., 2010, p. 419) provides illustrative examples of the individual-related and situational motivators and inhibitors of consumer misbehaviours that have been identified in prior research. Some of these determinants are discussed as follows.

Table 2: Examples of determinants of financial or other benefit-oriented consumer misbehaviours

	Individual-related factors	Situational factors
<b>Motivators</b>	Machiavellianism	Potential material gain, rewards, and benefits
	Introversion and extroversion	Opportunity to cheat
		Perceived injustice
		Dissatisfaction with a relationship
		External pressure
<b>Inhibitors</b>	Moral inhibitions	Sanctions (formal and informal)
	Honesty	Risk of being detected
	Shame (or self-imposed punishment)	Codes of conduct
	Risk aversion	Perceived seriousness or magnitude of dysfunctional behaviour
	Locus of control	Attitudes and norms
	Self-esteem	Visibility of victim; personal contact with victim
	Self-monitoring	Commitment and loyalty; trust in a relationship
	Religion	High satisfaction with a relationship
	Intelligence	
	Gender	
	Age	

Note. Table is reproduced from Fiske et al., 2010, p.419.

#### 2.4.1 Individual-related drivers of consumer misbehaviours

Most of the existing research takes a *dispositional approach* (Daunt & Greer, 2015). *This dispositional view suggests that certain traits and characteristics of perpetrators predispose a consumer to misbehave.* For instance, being young, being a male, having a low income and low education, are some of the characteristics attributed to the likely perpetrators of consumer misbehaviours (Daunt & Greer, 2015). Egan and Taylor (2010) identified additional factors, predicting attitudes to unethical consumer behaviour, in particular shoplifting. These are lower conscientiousness, lower agreeableness, lower intellect, and higher emotional stability. Furthermore, consumer knowledge of firms' return policies and procedures and consumers' public self-consciousness are two of the several identified factors associated with fraudulent returning inclinations (Harris, 2008a). Many other individual-related motivators and inhibitors of consumer misbehaviour have been identified in the current research, as can be seen in the first column of Table 2 (Fisk et al., 2010).

While the knowledge of individual-related antecedents would aid in better understanding of perpetrators of consumer misbehaviours, the existing studies are inconclusive as they offer contradictory findings on the variables influencing consumer misbehaviours (Harris, 2008a). An additional problem with individual-oriented studies is that they do not explain why some of the consumers with the ‘problematic’ characteristics participate in misbehaviours and others do not. Understanding the role of situational factors within which misbehaviours occur may help in answering this question.

#### 2.4.2 *Situational drivers of consumer misbehaviours*

*A situational approach—investigating the environments within which consumer misbehaviours occur*—is an alternative approach to the dispositional explanations of consumer misbehaviours. According to the situational view, all consumers may misbehave in *particular* situations. As can be seen from the second column of Table 2 (Fisk et al., 2010), several situational factors motivating or inhibiting consumer misbehaviours have been identified in the current academic research. For instance, Daunt and Greer (2015) in their seminal paper introduced routine activity theory to the studies of consumer misbehaviours and found that the high target accessibility and the absence of guardianship (i.e., the absence of security guard and security camera) have increased the perceived opportunity for a consumer to thief. The likelihood to engage in the theft was found to be higher also in the presence of unknown others compared to being surrounded by known others (Daunt & Greer, 2015). Several other researchers identified the presence of fellow customers, in particular crowding, as a situational variable that influences consumer misbehaviours. Homel and Clark (1994), for instance, mentioned bar crowding (i.e., movement and concentration of people within the bar) as one of the strong correlates of physical violence in and around bars. Staff intervention, in particular refusal of service, was the factor found

to have the strongest association with the consumers becoming violent (Homel & Clark, 1994).

The finding that employee service influences consumer misbehaviour was echoed by several researchers who showed that some consumers misbehave as a way to retaliate against employees who contributed to the (perceived) service failure (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Consumer misbehaviours may be triggered also by the nature of communication. Reynolds and Harris (2005) reported that the likelihood to engage in illegitimate complaining was higher when communication was impersonal, non-oral and non-face-to-face. Such communication is common in online settings. Focusing specifically on online environments, Denegri-Knott (2006) argued that consumer deviance is positively influenced by online communication that is anonymous, de-centred and anti-hierarchical. Several other situational variables of consumer misbehaviour (e.g., atmospherics, design and layout, exterior environment) have been identified in current research and some of these variables were found to be associated not only with the form of consumer misbehaviours (Daunt & Harris, 2012a) but also with the motive for consumer misbehaviour (Daunt & Harris, 2012b).

The increasing academic interest in understanding the contexts within which consumer misbehaviours occur is commendable *in light of the dominance of studies exploring the factors that distinguish misbehaving consumers from non-misbehaving ones* (Daunt & Greer, 2015; Daunt & Harris, 2012a). Yet, far too little attention has been paid to the situational factors that impact consumer misbehaviours that occur in online settings and do not involve direct contact between the misbehaving consumer and the target. Nevertheless, investigating individual-related and situational factors in isolated fashion leads to partial explanations of consumer misbehaviours (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). Being aware of this problem, some scholars (e.g., Daunt & Greer, 2015; Fullerton & Punj, 1993; Wirtz & Kum,

2004) included in their studies both types of factors, highlighting the potential interactions between situational and individual-related influences. On one hand, such studies provide a more holistic approach to explaining consumer misbehaviours. On the other, even these studies tell us more about *who* misbehaves and within what *situations* these people misbehave, than about *how the particular practice of misbehaving itself comes about*.

## 2.5 Consequences of consumer misbehaviours

In defining jaycustomers as customers who pose problems for firms, employees and other consumers, Lovelock and Wirtz (2016) indicate the groups of stakeholders (i.e., firms, employees, and other consumers) that are impacted by consumer misbehaviours. As regards firms, consumer misbehaviours have been associated with high economic cost (Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton & Punj, 1993). Examples of costs include legal costs, costs caused by illegitimate complaining and costs for covering damaged properties (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Covering such costs may impact a firm's profit, as can be seen in the case of fraudulent returning, which is believed to reduce firms' profits by 10-20% (King, 2004 as cited in Harris, 2008a). Contributing to higher prices of the products and services, these reduced profit margins do not affect only firms, but also other (legitimate) consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 1993, 2004; Harris, 2008a).

Besides driving up prices for all consumers, consumer misbehaviours negatively influence the consumption experiences of observing consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016). This is particularly so in the case of misbehaviours that are overt and public (e.g., violence) (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Misbehaving consumers also negatively influence the experience of co-consumers by affecting their relationship with the frontline employees. For instance, consumers may be treated differently (e.g., more negatively and more suspiciously) by employees who have previously dealt with misbehaving consumers (Berry & Seiders, 2008).

Handling such consumers is associated with various negative impacts. Dealing with misbehaving consumers may come at the cost of time spent on serving non-problematic customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Experiencing consumer misbehaviours also gives rise to moral dilemmas such as whether the employees should comply with, for example, the expectations of their employer to hide negative emotions on all occasions or adhere to their beliefs that consumer misbehaviours should not be accepted with a smile (Yagil & Shultz, 2017). Besides causing moral dilemmas, consumer misbehaviours negatively influence employees' job satisfaction (Berry & Seiders, 2008; Walsh, 2011) and reduce their morale and motivation (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Consumer misbehaviours also give rise to stress disorders, anxiety and feelings of fear (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). In some cases, misbehaving consumers cause tangible damage to employees or their property (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). On the other hand, there is a possibility that constantly witnessing consumer misbehaviours desensitises frontline employees and leads to employees becoming misbehaving consumers themselves (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). That consumer misbehaviours may be contagious has been already suggested in previous studies of Harris and Reynolds (2003) and Kowalski (1996), who reported how some observing consumers replicate the behaviour of misbehaving consumers.

Besides impacting firms, employees, and other consumers, consumer misbehaviours also affect their perpetrators. Feelings of guilt experienced by the perpetrators of consumer misbehaviours have been mentioned as a potential consequence of misbehaving by scholars who focused their research on investigating the ways in which misbehaving consumers justify and rationalise their misbehaving in order to reduce their guilt (e.g., Harris & Daunt, 2011; Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007).

Overall, therefore, consumer misbehaviours may result in "financial, physical, and/or psychological harm to marketing institutions and their employees, and to other

consumers” (Fullerton & Punj, 1993, p. 570). These impacts are all negative in nature. Indeed, to date most of the research on consumer misbehaviours has investigated acts that result in harm (Fisk et al., 2010). One notable exception is Fisk et al.’s (2010) study that uncovered various beneficial manifest and latent outcomes of consumer misbehaviours. These include consumer misbehaviours creating employment opportunities (e.g., need for in-store security personnel), serving for perpetrators as a means for their self-expression (e.g., graffiti can be a form of self-expression), fostering positive self-image for consumers who observe but do not engage in consumer misbehaviours (e.g., not cheating on income taxes may help one to feel better about oneself), and reaffirming to bystanders what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in certain consumption situations (e.g., person who speaks too loudly in the library reaffirms for others what is (in)appropriate behaviour) (Fisk et al., 2010). Consumer misdeeds may also be a source of innovation (Denegri-Knott, 2006; Grayson, 1999). The awareness of the positive and negative impacts of a particular consumer misbehaviour play an essential role in deciding how to deal with it.

## 2.6 Managing consumer misbehaviours

The potential impacts of consumer misbehaviours for firms, employees and other consumers and the commonality of such behaviours (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Harris, 2008a; Harris & Reynolds, 2004) highlight the need to understand how to manage them. Even though some companies see consumer misbehaviours as a cost of doing business (Fullerton & Punj, 2004), ignoring such misbehaviours is not desirable for various reasons. One of them is that *not* reacting to dysfunctional behaviour reduces the loyalty of observing consumers (Habel, Alavi, & Pick, 2017). Another is that “[m]anagement inaction is thought to be a significant factor in the escalation of deviant customer behaviour” (Harris & Reynolds, 2004, p. 357). Managing consumer dysfunctional behaviour is not only desirable but also generally

expected by consumers—consumers expect that marketers and other representatives of a business will protect them from incivilities of other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

Several managing strategies have been identified and suggested in academic research. In a study which set out to investigate how frontline workers cope with deviant consumers, Reynolds and Harris (2006) identified 15 coping strategies used to deal with misbehaving consumers before, during and after the misbehaviour. Mentally preparing for work, consuming drugs, altering their clothing and observing customers were the tactics that frontline workers employed prior to acts of deviant consumer misbehaviours. During the misbehaviours, employees reported tactics such as ignoring the customers, eliciting support from regular customers and manipulating the servicescape. Finally, identified post-incident tactics included gaining revenge and talking to colleagues (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). Reynold and Harris's (2006) study is insightful as it is one of few studies that empirically investigate the issue of management of consumer misbehaviours. Other scholars generally tackled this topic only in the concluding parts of their papers, suggesting managing misbehaviours by addressing particular individual and/or situational factors. For instance, a suggestion of Fiske et al. (2010) is that, since some consumers justify their misbehaviours by saying they were not aware of the rules, marketers should put more effort into promoting and explaining the rules of appropriate behaviour.

Educating misbehavers, other consumers and employees as an approach to managing consumer misbehaviour has been mentioned also by other researchers (e.g., Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2005). Recognising consumer personality traits in order to anticipate consumer misbehaviour and keeping the retail environments hygienic, cared for, and not crowded, are a couple of managerial implications, recommended by Daunt and Harris (2012b). The view that marketers can anticipate, and thus prevent, consumer misbehaviours is supported also in another study by

Daunt and Harris (2012a), where the authors suggested that to reduce consumer misbehaviours marketers should target homogeneous consumers (i.e., consumers with similar needs and wants) and pay close attention to customer satisfaction. When the misbehaving occurs, one of the recommendations is that firms respond fairly and firmly towards misbehaving consumers *specifically* (Berry & Seiders, 2008). The view that marketers' actions against misbehaving consumers should not 'punish' other consumers was supported also by other researchers (e.g., Phau et al., 2014; Reynolds & Harris, 2005). When marketers employ sanctions, these sanctions should be consistent and certain rather than severe (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

Such managerial suggestions are informative, yet they once again highlight the value of adopting alternative approaches to dispositional explanations of consumer misbehaviours. While managers cannot control or adjust the internal, individual-based factors such as perpetrators' personality traits, they are, for instance, able to manipulate the situational factors such as the layout of the retail environment (Daunt & Greer, 2015; Daunt & Harris, 2012b, 2012a). An additional issue with the managing strategies mentioned in the literature is that they do not differentiate between different types of misbehaviours suggesting that, for instance, extreme forms of misbehaviours (e.g., physical violence against frontline employees) and mild forms of misbehaviours (e.g., jumping the queue) may be dealt with in the same way. To illustrate, even though Gregoire and Fisher (2008) explicitly emphasized that, because of the managerial implications, it is important to distinguish between different types of misbehaviours, they themselves did not differentiate in providing suggestions to marketers on how to manage misbehaviours. There are, however, two notable exceptions to studies providing undifferentiated managerial suggestions. Lovelock and Wirtz (2016) and Fullerton and Punj (2004) proposed different coping strategies for different consumer misbehaviours. For instance, when dealing with so-called belligerent consumers, marketers should work on moving the misbehavior(s) away from other

consumers. In case of vandals, on the other hand, the most effective strategy is prevention – marketers should protect themselves, for instance, by requesting security deposits (Lovell & Wirtz, 2016). Prevention or (better said) education will likely be effective in cases of occasional opportunistic misbehavers but not in cases of consumers motivated by thrill-seeking. In case of misbehaviours rooted in thrill-seeking, even deterrence based on sanctions plays a limited, if not even counterproductive, role. Deterrent measures, increasing the risks and reducing the benefits of misbehaving, may however be more effective in controlling consumer misbehaviour that occurs because opportunity allows it (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Such findings highlight the value of misbehaviour-tailored management approaches. Such approaches will likely be more effective than a general approach in managing consumer misbehaviours. Yet, to create tailored-made and effective management programs, a good understanding of the misbehaviour that needs to be curbed is required.

## 2.7 Overview of research gaps

While other disciplines such as social psychology and criminology have been researching people's misbehaviours for decades, consumer misbehaviours only recently started receiving increased attention from marketing and consumer behaviour researchers (Fisk et al., 2010). The existing studies offer a fascinating insight into the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours, yet this insight is not well-rounded. What we know about consumer misbehaviours is based on the research that explores misbehaviours from the frontline employee's point of view (Yagil & Luria, 2014), the studies of misbehaviours in analogue retail settings and the investigations of misbehaviours that are financially motivated and often illegal. Shoplifting and fraudulent returns are two typical examples of such misbehaviours, both well-explored in the current literature. *Much less is known about online consumer misbehaviours* (Harris & Dumas, 2009) *and about misbehaviours that are not*

*straightforwardly illegal but more ambiguous and mischievous*. To explore such behaviours, researchers may take a practice-based perspective as an alternative approach to existing investigations; these predominantly focus on the people who misbehave *rather on the making of this misbehaviour*. Using trolling as a context for this study and actor-network-theory as a theoretical lens, this dissertation aims to address these research gaps.

## 2.8 Summary

In the current literature, consumer misbehaviours are defined in terms either of violations of social norms or of the activities they include. This dissertation takes the second approach, broadly referring to consumer misbehaviours as consumers causing problems to firms, employees and other consumers. Researchers offered several conceptual and empiric typologies of consumer misbehaviours. These typologies highlight the plethora of ways in which consumers may misbehave. At the same time, they illustrate that we know very little about misbehaviours that are *not* illegal and primarily economically motivated but mischievous and conducted for intrinsic reasons. On the question of why some consumers misbehave, current research ‘blames’ the perpetrators, the situations or both. The identified antecedents of consumer misbehaviours are informative yet focused on the perpetrators of misbehaviours. Similarly, the perpetrators are also in the forefront of the marketers coping strategies. In contrast, this dissertation focuses on the consumer misbehaviour itself. In particular, online trolling is explored as an online mischief-making form of misbehaviour. The next chapter, Chapter Three, presents the literature that informs the practice of online trolling.

## Chapter Three: Online Trolling

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### 3.1 Introduction

With its growing public and media awareness (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), trolling has become a topic of interest for an increasing number of scholars. The current chapter examines the scattered and multidisciplinary (Buckels et al., 2014; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; Shachaf & Hara, 2010) literature that discusses trolling. Trolling-related sources were identified with directed searches within the Google Scholar and Web of Science databases, where I searched for the term “online trolling” and its variations (“online troll\*” and “cyber troll\*”) and for the terms that are often conflated with trolling (e.g., “cyber harassment”, “cyberbullying”, “flaming”, “griefing” and their variations). While the literature on other online misbehaviours has been used to better understand the similarities and differences between trolling and other misbehaviours, the complete review of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation. The present chapter focuses on trolling behaviours exclusively, and studies on other online misbehaviours are mobilised only when they add to better understanding of trolling. Besides including academic studies, this literature review incorporates trolling-related industry and government sources. These sources were identified by searches on database Lexis Nexis, on official governments’ pages, and on the web pages of four industry players: Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and 4chan. The platforms Twitter, Facebook and Reddit were selected for two reasons. First, Twitter, Facebook and Reddit were identified as the sites with the most active trolls (YouGov, 2014a). Second, these three sites represent different manifestations of trolling. The platform 4chan was added to the sample to offer an additional variability with respect to the types of trolling.

The discussion that follows is organised around five key themes: conceptualisation of trolling, trolling tactics and strategies, trolling drivers, trolling impacts, and management

of trolling. The chapter concludes with an overview of the research gaps identified through the literature review and summary.

### 3.2 Conceptualising trolling

*The expressions to troll, troll, and trolling have been in use within the online context from the early days of the Internet—namely from the late 1980s—when these terms were first spotted within the Usenet discussion groups (Herring et al., 2002). Usenet community members, presumably borrowing the expression from the fishing realm, used the term trolling to refer to an activity of a user baiting a post: asking stupid and ‘newbie-like’ questions, waiting for the ‘clueless’ community members’ bite on the line, and then enjoying the consequent fight (Donath, 1999). Over time, the meaning of trolling has broadened. In everyday and media discourse it is used nowadays as a blanket term for any type of negatively marked online conduct (Hardaker, 2010)—from “sophomoric pranks to identity-based harassment to online impersonation to political activism to straightforward racism and misogyny” (W. Phillips, 2014).*

*The lack of conceptual clarity is noticeable also in the academic literature, where several definitions and conceptualisations of trolling have appeared. The definitions are listed in Appendix A (p. 231). These definitions generally include the notions of the nature of the behaviour, intentionality, and the location where the behaviour occurs. Yet, as shown in Table 3, they vary considerably and widely in their specifics. As regards the nature of the behaviour, the broad consensus is that trolling includes acting *deceptively* (Buckels et al., 2014; Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; T. C. Turner, Smith, Fisher, & Welser, 2005) and *provokingly* (Baker, 2001; Bishop, 2013; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Gully, 2012; Jane, 2015; Thacker & Griffiths, 2012; Utz, 2005). Current conceptualisations classify as trolling various other types of practices such as behaving in a *manipulative* (Hardaker, 2013), *aggressive* (Hardaker, 2013), *disruptive* (Buckels et*

al., 2014; Hopkinson, 2013; W. Phillips, 2013), *impolite* (Hardaker, 2013), or *derogatory* (Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013) manner. *These practices share some commonalities, but are not semantically interchangeable, denoting that scholars are not in agreement as to what forms of behaviour represent trolling.* It is also unclear whether the acts are required to be repeated, as a repetitiveness criterion is mentioned in one of the existing trolling conceptualisations (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015) but not in others.

Another difference among the definitions of trolling relates to the drives and aims of a troll. Two inherently different types of drives, namely *a troll's wish to entertain oneself* (Baker, 2001; Bishop, 2013; Dahlberg, 2001; Hardaker, 2010, 2013) and *a troll's desire to inflict harm on others* (Bergstrom, 2011), are mentioned as intentions for trolling with the first—‘self-oriented’—purpose receiving more support from scholars than the second—‘others-centred’—one. The dissimilarities among the definitions arise also in terms of what the troll’s aims are, with scholars mentioning everything from *triggering conflict* (Dahlberg, 2001; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013), *eliciting reactions* (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013; Jane, 2015), and *disrupting* (Dahlberg, 2001; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Hardaker, 2010; Utz, 2005) to *promoting political views* (Dahlberg, 2001). Finally, the existing conceptualisations differ in terms of generality versus specificity in determining the venues through which trolling occur (e.g., in any computer-mediated communication [Hardaker 2013] versus a specific online location, such as in a discussion forum (Hopkinson, 2013).

Table 3: Overview of the similarities and dissimilarities among definitions of trolling

		Study																		
Parameters		Baker, 2001	Bergstrom, 2011	Bishop, 2013	Buckels et al., 2014	Coles & West, 2016a	Dahlberg, 2001	Donath, 1999	Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015	Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013	Gully, 2012	Hardaker, 2010	Hardaker, 2013	Herring et al., 2002	Hopkinson, 2013	Jane, 2015	Phillips, 2013	Thacker & Griffiths, 2012	Turner et al., 2005	Utz, 2005
Nature/Form of behaviour	Deceptive				■		■	■		■		■	■						■	
	Baiting or provoking	■		■					■		■						■		■	■
	Tangential (off-topic)									■				■	■	■				
	Disruptive				■										■			■		
	Transgressive/Deviant								■									■		
	Impolite												■							
	Aggressive												■							
	Manipulative												■							
	Antagonising																	■		
	Destructive				■															
	Derogatory									■										
	Depends on the aims of the poster at the time of posting					■														
Frequency	Repeated behaviour								■											
Intentionality	To amuse oneself	■		■			■					■	■							
	To amuse others			■																
	To anger/trigger conflict						■		■			■	■		■					
	To elicit reactions								■	■					■	■				
	To disrupt						■		■			■								■
	To lure others into useless discussions																	■		
	To embarrass						■													
	To harm others		■																	
	To promote/demote political views						■													
	Depends on the ingroup/outgroup status of the poster					■														
	No apparent purpose				■															
	Location	Any (social) online location or computer-mediated communication			■	■		■		■	■	■	■	■			■		■	
Discussion forum		■						■		■					■					■
Blog										■										

Note. The symbol ■ signifies the definition/conceptualization includes/mentions the given parameter.

The differences among current trolling definitions and conceptualisations are problematic, as imprecise definitions lead academic researchers to study highly different phenomena under the label of trolling. For example, at the beginning of his paper, Baker (2001) framed his study as the examination of trolling behaviour, but later used flaming and pernicious spamming as the synonyms for trolling. Imprecise definitions also lead to trolling occasionally being examined under the labels of phenomena such as flaming, cyberbullying, and harassment. To be specific, *flaming* refers to “hostile and aggressive interactions via text-based computer-mediated communication” (O’Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003, p. 69). This type of communication typically includes insults, invective and negative affect (Jane, 2015). *Cyberbullying*, the behaviour receiving high attention on the part of scholars, is “any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). For a behaviour to be called cyberbullying it has to be repetitive and intentional and must include some power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target (Olweus, 2012). Finally, *harassment* is referred to as “threats or other offensive behaviour targeted directly at youth through new technology channels (e.g., Internet, text messaging) or posted online about youth for others to see” (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013, p. 54). According to Jones et al. (2013) to be referred to as harassment behaviour can happen only once and between two people equal in power.

*These definitions illustrate that these online misbehaviours share some commonalities, and unsurprisingly are often used interchangeably.* However, they are *not* the same and researchers have tried to draw the line between trolling and other similar online misbehaviours—in particular, flaming and cyberbullying. For example, Hardaker (2010, 2013) claimed the difference between trolling and flaming is that the former includes deception and is an end in itself, while the latter occurs as a reply to a perceived threat. The deceptive nature, along with the “‘pointless’ disruptive aspects” and less straightforward perpetrator’s intent, has

also been suggested as a dividing line between trolling and cyberbullying (Buckels et al., 2014, p. 97). Herring et al. (2002) and Jane (2015) suggested a different approach to distinguishing between these phenomena. Focusing on who the target group is for a specific behaviour, these scholars propose that trolling is directed at naive or new Internet users, flaming is targeted at any and all users (Herring et al., 2002), and cyberbullying is a term generally used to describe misconducts among the young (Jane, 2015). These attempts to distinguish trolling from other anti-social online behaviours are a much-needed, yet difficult task, as other online misbehaviours themselves (e.g., cyberbullying and flaming) are not without conceptual problems (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014).

The fact that the scholars examining trolling are “far from [being] in agreement with each other” on what trolling is (Hardaker, 2013, p. 61) and on what trolling is not has implications not only for future academic research but also for policy and practice, where the term trolling has been regularly used in the media but *not* in the official documents of legislators, policy-makers and operators of online social networks. To illustrate, while Twitter talks about “winning war on trolls” (Burrell, 2015), trolling is not explicitly mentioned in the Twitter policies, terms of use or resources published in the online Safety Center. Similarly, whereas the media proclaimed the New Zealand *Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015* as an “anti-trolling law” (Síthigh, 2015) or law that “is making trolling illegal” (BBC Newsbeat, 2015), the Act actually focuses more on preventing cyberbullying, online harassment and revenge porn than on typical—no harm-intended—trolling behaviours. *Using the expression trolling imprecisely, as an umbrella term for various online misbehaviours or as a synonym for similar but different behaviours poses a problem for the effective tackling of these behaviours.* By ignoring the conceptual differences, it is assumed that different online misbehaviours, for instance online harassment and trolling, could be tackled successfully in the same manner. On the contrary, it could be argued that the most effective prevention will build on the specific, distinctive nature of each of these

phenomena. In view of all that has been mentioned so far, providing a better definition of trolling is not a pedantic linguistic task but a necessary step to facilitate research progress and address trolling more effectively. Until a more precise and empirically-based definition of trolling is developed, this thesis uses the expression trolling to refer to *deliberately deceptive, disruptive, and provoking practices of individuals or groups in an online social setting*.

### 3.3 Trolling strategies and styles

*“Start a religious war whenever possible using stereotypes like ‘all Jews are selfish’, ‘all Christians are crazy’ or ‘all Muslims are terrorists’. Accuse the author of being a gay, pro-abortion limp-wristed wimp or being a fundamentalist pro-war hick when the discussion has nothing to do with abortion, sexuality, religion, war or region.”*

(Washington’s Blog, 2012)

While the Internet is full of instructions on how to be a (successful) troll, there has been, to the best of my knowledge, only one study that *systematically* investigated *how trolling is carried out*. This is the study of Hardaker (2013), who identified trolling strategies by analysing almost 4,000 Usenet discussions cited by participants in discussions as trolling. According to this study, six overlapping, perceived strategies of trolling exist. These are digression, (hypo)criticism, antipathizing, endangering, shocking and aggressing. These strategies differ in terms of how obvious are the troll’s intentions. Digression (i.e., steering away from the topic of the discussion), for example, is deception-heavy, and can be classified as a covert trolling strategy. On the other hand, aggressing (i.e., the usage of insults, threats or other aggressive tactics where trolls deliberately attack targets) includes less deception, and is more overtly antagonistic (Hardaker, 2013).

The strategies of digression, aggressing and antipathizing (Hardaker, 2013), seem most clearly to exemplify the findings of other researchers. First, trolling by digressing can be comparable to trolling by luring people into useless discussions (Herring et al., 2002; T.

C. Turner et al., 2005). Second, aggression-based trolling is evocative of trolling behaviour identified by Shachaf and Hara (2010) in the context of Wikipedia, where trolls, among other aspects, engaged in personal attacks and threats to other users. Trolling by aggressing has also been found within video games, where some players engage in negative trash-talking to other players (Cook et al., 2017). Last, trolling by antipathizing is reminiscent of trolling by category deception, where the troll attempts to give an initial impression of being a “legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns” (Donath, 1999, p. 43) to shape other participants’ subsequent interpretations of his or her behaviours and motives (Donath, 1999). The similarities among identified trolling behaviours suggest there exists some consensus among researchers regarding how people troll. However, several differences in the identified types and nature of trolling strategies between different media (e.g., Usenet in the case of Donath [1999] and Hardaker [2013] vs. Wikipedia in the case of Shachaf and Hara [2010] vs. video games in the case of Cook et al. [2017]) suggest trolling behaviours may be context- or site-specific. In other words, some types of trolling behaviours seem to occur only at particular places.

Knowing different styles of trolling certainly adds to academic understanding of trolling and may help targets and online community managers to recognise trolls. *However, classifying trolling acts into categories tells us more about what trolling is than how it is actually carried out. To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has investigated the later question.*

### 3.4 Trolling motivations and explanations

Knowing trolls’ motivations is at odds with the basic ingredient of any successful trolling behaviour: deception. If a troll wants to succeed with his or her act, he or she has to mask his or her (genuine) intent (Hardaker, 2010). Not many academic researchers tried to unmask and explore the motivators or forces that drive these trolling intentions. These drivers could be approached from three different angles: by studying *the individuals (i.e., trolls)*, the

*situations (i.e., Internet environment) or socio-cultural contexts in which trolling behaviours are embedded.*

### 3.4.1 *Understanding trolls*

One possible approach to explore trolling motivations is to study factors related to the trolls. In this regard, *current academic research on trolling behaviours describes trolling as a result of either trolls' personal characteristics, or their needs and motives.*

Some researchers reason that trolling behaviours occur because *trolls have 'bad' personality characteristics*. An example of this view is the study carried out by Buckels (2014), which revealed trolls have high levels of the Dark Tetrad traits (i.e., sadism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism). Among these traits, sadism was found to be the best predictor of trolling enjoyment. As Buckels et al. (2014, p. 5) argued: “[b]oth trolls and sadists feel sadistic glee at the distress of others. Sadists just want to have fun . . . and the Internet is their playground.” The popular trolls’ catchphrase—‘I did it for the lulz’<sup>3</sup>—seems to be a manifestation of this view.

Although the findings of Buckels et al. (2014) give important insight into the influence of trolls’ dispositions on trolling, they are also limited. On the one hand, in this research, trolling was not defined to the participants (Study 1 and Study 2), and on the other hand, when it was defined or specified (Study 2), it included elements<sup>4</sup> that may not be the best representation of trolling behaviours. Hence, the research results are biased by the

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<sup>3</sup> Lulz is »a corruption of L O L, which stands for »Laugh Out Loud« and it signifies »laughter at someone else's expense« (Encyclopedia Dramatica, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of their research Buckels et al. (2014) formed a composite score called Global Assessment of Internet Trolling, which included four items: sending people to shock websites for the lulz, trolling people in forums and comments sections, grieving other players in games, and receiving satisfaction from corrupting beautiful things.

possibility of different survey respondents understanding trolling differently, and by the risk of trolling operationalisations influencing the participants' responses. Moreover, it is also possible that identified negative traits are consequences of trolling, and not its predictors. The view of Buckels et al. (2014) has been supported by March et al. (2017, p. 142), who described trolls as "sadistic, psychopathic, and dysfunctionally impulsive." While these findings give an important insight into the influence of trolls' dispositions on trolling, they run counter to the findings of Cheng et al. (2017), which have shown that under the right circumstances all people can act like trolls.

Another, more direct way of approaching trolling motivations is through *exploring trolls' desires or motives*. To the best of my knowledge, only two studies have focused exclusively on examining motives underlying trolling behaviours. The first is Shachaf and Hara's study (2010) which in the context of Wikipedia, identified the following trolls' motivating factors: boredom, attention- and/or revenge-seeking, wishing to have fun, and desiring to cause damage to the community and other people. All of these findings were supported and extended by Cook et al.'s (2017) study, which differentiated between trolling triggers (i.e., social, internal, and circumstantial triggers) and trolling goals (i.e., personal enjoyment, revenge, and thrill-seeking). Three other motivating actors were briefly acknowledged in prior research: ideological factors (Sanfilippo et al., 2017b), and a wish to exercise control and to feel superior (Herring et al., 2002). Although these findings are illuminating, they are limited as, with the notable exception of Cook et al. (2017), the identified motivating factors were not defined by the trolls themselves but by other participants (e.g., Wikipedia sysops) or researchers. In addition, it seems the existing research neglects that trolling behaviours could also be extrinsically motivated, as can be seen in the case of political trolls, who are paid for aggressively promoting particular political ideas (Sindelar, 2014).

### 3.4.2 Understanding trolling situations

Most earlier research on the drivers of online misbehaviours suggests such behaviour occurs because of *specific characteristics of computer-mediated communications* (hereafter CMC). According to this technologically deterministic view, features of online communications such as availability of instantaneous exchange of the messages, lack of physical and social cues, and lack of shared norms governing interactions (Herring, 2002; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984) contribute to the incidence of trolling behaviours. Inherent to this view is the assumption that people adopt conducts online they would not ordinarily exhibit offline (Suler, 2004). This phenomenon is known under the name of online disinhibition effect. Six factors causing this effect are: dissociative anonymity (i.e., possibility of hiding one's own real-life identity); invisibility (i.e., inability to physically see other users); asynchronicity (i.e., not having to deal with other users' immediate reactions); solipsistic introjection (i.e., self-centred assigning traits to other users); dissociative imagination (i.e., the feeling of an online world being completely separated from the offline one); and minimising authority (i.e., reduced effect of real-world status on one's online status) (Suler, 2004). Among these factors, one of the most mentioned by the researchers of trolling behaviours is *anonymity*. While some researchers see it as an antecedent of trolling behaviours, others refer to it as a facilitator of such behaviours. The first view is exemplified in Donath's (1999) statement that anonymity in online space is "an invitation to anarchy" (p. 51). This understanding differs from that of Hardaker (2013), who saw anonymity more in a role of fostering negatively marked behaviours than causing them. The role of anonymity in trolling has been challenged by Coles and West (2016b, p. 52) who found that "online members do not treat each other as being anonymous—even when posters' real names and identities are unknown." Furthermore, the fact that verbal barrages are found on more and on less anonymous sites (Ewing et al., 2013), suggests that trolling may not be the feature of

the users' anonymity alone and that there are other factors in play that make a particular online space more prone to trolling.

### 3.4.3 *Understanding trolling contexts*

To understand motivations holistically behind trolling behaviours, and suggest relevant control mechanisms, we have to consider trolling as a social and cultural phenomenon, as opposed to a purely psychological one (Kayany, 1998). In this context, social and cultural forces are not in themselves seen as the causes of trolling, but more *as the factors that influence the context within which such behaviours occur* (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993). These factors, as Arnould and Thompson (2005) put it, “frame consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others” (p. 869).

Some academic studies, all outside consumer research (Herring et al., 2002; Lange, 2007; W. Phillips, 2011), acknowledge that trolling behaviours are embedded in broader socio-cultural contexts. A seminal study in this area is the work of Phillips (2011), who ethnographically researched RIP trolling<sup>5</sup>. In this study, RIP trolls are conceived as resisters who push back “against a corporate media environment that fetishizes, sensationalizes and commoditizes tragedy” (W. Phillips, 2011). Such framing of trolls as interpretative agents, who critically reinterpret media ideologies, corresponds with consumer culture theory research on *Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers’ Interpretive Strategies* (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 874).

Although Phillips’ (2011) study is enlightening, its findings are not the most helpful or (better said) actionable in addressing trolling. In addition, they are underpinned by the view

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<sup>5</sup> RIP trolling can be defined as posting “abusive comments and images onto [Facebook] pages created for and dedicated to the deceased” (W. Phillips, 2011).

that mainstream media reports of trolling behaviours as “exaggerating, sensationalising, and “beating up” the issue of online hostility” (Jane, 2015, p. 74). While this may apply in some cases, due to the lack of academic research on the perceived consequences of ‘being trolled’ it would be difficult to claim that “all mainstream coverage of hostile cyber-discourse is groundless or exaggerated” (Jane, 2015, p. 74). The research on other social-cultural factors—apart from the mass media ideology—that create contexts conducive to trolling behaviours seems warranted.

### 3.5 Trolling impacts

Before thinking about how to address trolling behaviours, it is necessary to define when trolling becomes a problem that needs management. In other words, the line between (perceived) harmful and harmless trolling behaviours has to be drawn. Understanding the whole range of possible consequences of trolling behaviours may be the first step in this direction.

The *negative* impacts of trolling behaviours on targets are frequently reported by the targets themselves (e.g., BuzzFeedYellow, 2014), or the media (e.g. Finnegan, 2014). *However, to date, no academic research has systematically investigated these effects.* This is somehow surprising, especially considering the amount of attention this topic received in the studies of the similar albeit different phenomenon of cyberbullying, which according to researchers can result in “anxiety, depression, substance abuse, difficulty sleeping, increased physical symptoms, decreased performance in school, absenteeism and truancy, dropping out of school, and murder or suicide” (Kowalski et al., 2014, p. 1). While the effects of trolling have not been researched as thoroughly as cyberbullying impacts, this is not to say they are completely ignored in the existing research. *Disrupted discussions* and *loss of trust* within the online communities are two consequences of trolling mentioned by several researchers (Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Herring et al., 2002). The latter effect is best exemplified by

Dahlberg (2001), who noted “suspicion of a troll can lead to participants’ re-evaluating how they post and how seriously they take other posters.” Furthermore, due to the presence of the trolls, “participants may become cautious about self-revelations and about believing the revelations of the others” (Dahlberg, 2001). While these consequences of trolling are relevant for any online venue, they may be of particular importance in the context of online sites or communities intended to give (vulnerable) participants support and a sense of belonging. Besides disrupting discussions and influencing participation in the online community, trolling can also impact the online users’ attitudes towards a particular issue. In the context of science issues, Anderson et al. (2014) found that uncivil comments on an otherwise neutral blog post about nanotechnology polarised readers’ nanotechnology risk perceptions and changed their interpretations of the story.

In comparing the impacts of trolling behaviours mentioned by researchers with those reported by the people who experienced trolling first-hand, it can be noticed that current academic work does not take into account the whole range of possible trolling effects. In other words, by mentioning only relatively harmless effects of trolling (e.g., disrupted discussions), existing research neglects the possibility that trolling may also lead to more damaging responses and serious consequences. Severe distress and disturbance, for instance, have been reported by New Zealanders who experienced negative online communication (NetSafe, 2012).

On the other hand, prior research (Coles & West, 2016b; Herring et al., 2002; Hopkinson, 2013) showed that trolling could also have *positive impacts* as it may hold online consumption communities together by giving community members something to rally around. Positive impacts of trolling were mentioned also by Cruz et al. (2018), who found that trolling can reinforce community through humour and may enable the communication of less popular opinions. It is necessary for researchers to develop an in-depth understanding of the various

impacts of trolling behaviours on the targets to better understand the nature of trolling and suggest appropriate and effective ways of dealing with trolling.

### **3.6 Combating trolling behaviours**

Apart from Binns (2012), Herring et al. (2002) and Sanfilippo, Yang, and Fichman (2017a), few studies have studied management of trolling in any systematic way. Such research is needed given that, as the review below shows, addressing trolling is riddled with challenges.

Marketers can take several measures to curb trolling. First, monitoring customer-to-customer and customer-to-business online interactions enables marketers to be aware of trolling incidents involving their consumers and their brands. Having identified the trolls, which is by itself not a straightforward task (Coles & West, 2016a, 2016b), marketers can determine if trolling “activities warrant responses and, if so, how to engage” (Gallaughier & Ransbotham, 2010, p. 200). Some marketers may decide to choose a non-engagement conflict management strategy (Dineva et al., 2017) and ignore the trolls. In the case when the targets of trolling are consumers, marketer’s non-engagement approach may be to the liking of those consumers who value the freedom to express their online identities free from interference and therefore find the interventions of online community managers unnecessary and unjust (van Laer, 2013). Yet, ignoring negative consumer-generated brand stories, regardless of whether the consumer or the brand is the target of the trolling, may have adverse consequences for the brands, potentially leading to brand dilution (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). In addition, in practice, ignoring the troll is a difficult task to carry out (Herring et al., 2002) and could be seen as an example of “silencing strategy” that dissuades the targeted consumers from challenging inappropriate messages (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017, p. 927).

In contrast to ignoring the trolls, marketers may respond by rejecting the trolls' claims, insulting or threatening them, and unmasking them by exposing their personal information (e.g., Baker, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Herring, 2002; Herring et al., 2002). Drawing on the Dineva et al.'s (2017) research into corporate management of online consumer-to-consumer conflicts, companies may also respond to trolls and trolling by posting content that corrects the supposedly false claims made by trolls, affirm the comments that brand defenders have sent to the trolls, or ask the trolls to change their behaviours or communication styles. Trolling the trolls (Coles & West, 2016a; Cook et al., 2017) is another response strategy that marketers may adopt; however, the use of this approach could contribute to trolling becoming a norm within the online community (Coles & West, 2016b). While these suggested strategies are used 'post festum', meaning after the business or consumer has experienced trolling, some measures, such as demanding real users' names, pre-moderating comments, or making the terms of participation simple and clearly visible (Binns, 2012), can be taken to avoid trolling in the first place.

When marketers host their branded content on social media platforms, they can employ the various tools that these platforms offer for managing online misbehaviour (e.g., deleting the trolling content, adjusting the privacy settings, blocking the troll). Not being legally obliged to either monitor or address online misbehaviour (Lipton, 2011), these platforms intervene reactively, focusing only on reported trolling (House of Lords, 2014a). Identifying trolling, however, is a high-effort and time-consuming process (Citron, 2014; New Zealand Law Commission, 2012) that does not necessarily resolve the problem for marketers or targeted consumers as trolling typically does not violate the rules or community standards of these platforms. Due to the fact that trolling is not prohibited, and thus prosecuted, the type of behaviour on major social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Reddit) connotes that managing trolling falls entirely into the domain of users of these sites. While targeted consumers are often in the best position to deal with trolls, it seems that they

lack the knowledge about how to resolve ‘problematic’ online situations (Herring et al., 2002; New Zealand Law Commission, 2012; Reed & White, 2014). Moreover, their responses to trolling may even exacerbate trolling behaviour (Cook et al., 2017). Trolls use target’s responses as a base for further attacks (Herring et al., 2002) and after being ‘punished’ (e.g., being down-voted by other community members), some online users not only write worse, but they also write more and more frequently than before being policed (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2014).

When trolling behaviours include illegal activities, marketers and targeted consumers may use legal remedies. One option is a civil law action: individuals, for instance, can sue trolls for intentional infliction of emotional distress, and ‘trolled’ businesses can recover damages under defamation laws. Yet lawsuits are slow and expensive, and defamation cases tend to be difficult to win (Petty, 2012). Moreover, they may bring additional ‘unwanted’ attention to the people being trolled or the sites where trolling has occurred. For instance, such a site may win the defamation case against the troll but at the expense of gaining additional negative publicity (Johnson & Gelb, 2002).

An alternative, relevant for individuals targeted by trolling but not for businesses, is criminal law. As can be seen from Table 4, trolling can be ‘criminalised’ and prosecuted when it contains unlawful behaviour. In the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand, trolling can amount to a criminal offence when it includes communications that are grossly offensive, false, indecent, menacing, provoking or disturbing, inciting suicide or in any way intending or causing emotional distress to the targets. In practice, successful prosecution is difficult and time-consuming due to issues of proof (e.g., problems identifying the sender of the message) and issues with jurisdiction (e.g., the target and the troll being located in different countries) (Lipton, 2011).

In addition, trolling behaviour usually and automatically falls under the right of freedom of expression (House of Lords, 2014b; Marwick & Miller, 2014). Every legislation regarding online speech is required to be interpreted in the way that gives effect to freedom of expression (House of Lords, 2014b; Marwick & Miller, 2014). To illustrate, in the United States, the First Amendment to the *US Constitution* (U.S. Const. amend. I, 1791) maintains that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.” Similarly, the *European Convention on Human Rights* (Council of Europe, 1950) states that “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.” This right is not absolute and can be restricted in some circumstances. For instance, in the United Kingdom, these circumstances include the national security, public safety and protection of the rights of others (House of Lords, 2014b). In practice, however, it seems that trolling in most cases does not qualify as such circumstance, and consequently falls under protected speech. These observations question the role of legal action in addressing trolling.

Table 4: Examples of the criminal laws covering trolling-like behaviours

<i>Class of conduct</i>	<i>Conducts that can be prosecuted</i>	<i>Country/State</i>	<i>Name of the Act</i>	<i>Number and name of the provision</i>	<i>Maximum penalty</i>
<b>Grossly offensive communication</b>	Sending or causing to send grossly offensive messages	UK	<i>Communications Act 2003</i>	Section 127; Improper use of public electronic communications network	6 months or level 5 fine (up to GBP 5,000) or both
	Sending grossly offensive message	UK	<i>Malicious Communications Act 1988</i>	Section 1; Offence of sending letters etc. with the intent to cause distress or anxiety	24 months or fine or both
	Using a carriage service in a way that reasonable person regards as offensive	AUS (Federal)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i>	Section 474.17; Using a carriage service to menace, harass, or cause offence	3 years
<b>False communication (false advice)</b>	Sending or causing to send false messages for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another	UK	<i>Communications Act 2003</i>	Section 127; Improper use of public electronic communications network	6 months or level 5 fine (up to GBP 5,000) or both
	Sending false information	UK	<i>Malicious Communications Act 1988</i>	Section 1; Offence of sending letters etc. with the intent to cause distress or anxiety	24 months or fine or both
	Using a telecommunications device to give fictitious orders, instructions, or message	NZ	<i>Telecommunications Act 2001</i>	Section 112; Misuse of telephone device	3 months or fine up to NZD 2,000
<b>Indecent or obscene communication</b>	Sending or causing to send indecent or obscene messages	UK	<i>Communications Act 2003</i>	Section 127; Improper use of public electronic communications network	6 months or level 5 fine (up to GBP 5,000) or both
	Sending indecent message	UK	<i>Malicious Communications Act 1988</i>	Section 1; Offence of sending letters etc. with the intent to cause distress or anxiety	24 months or fine or both

<i>Class of conduct</i>	<i>Conducts that can be prosecuted</i>	<i>Country/State</i>	<i>Name of the Act</i>	<i>Number and name of the provision</i>	<i>Maximum penalty</i>
<b>Indecent or obscene communication</b>	In using a telephone, using a profane, indecent, or obscene language to offend another person	NZ	<i>Telecommunications Act 2001</i>	Section 112; Misuse of telephone device	3 months or fine up to NZD 2,000
	Sending a message with obscene, lewd or profane language to frighten, intimidate, threaten or abuse another person	USA; Wisconsin	<i>Wisconsin Criminal Code 2017</i>	Section 947.0125; Unlawful use of computerized communication systems	Class B Misdemeanor (up to 90 days, a fine of up to USD 1,000, or both)
<b>Menacing or threatening communication</b>	Sending or causing to send menacing messages	UK	<i>Communications Act 2003</i>	Section 127; Improper use of public electronic communications network	6 months or level 5 fine (up to GBP 5,000) or both
	Sending a threat	UK	<i>Malicious Communications Act 1988</i>	Section 1; Offence of sending letters etc. with the intent to cause distress or anxiety	24 months or fine or both
	Sending or causing to send threat to kill or do grievous bodily harm	NZ	<i>Crimes Act 1961</i>	Section 306; Threatening to kill or do grievous bodily harm	7 years
	Using a carriage service in a way that reasonable person regards as menacing	AUS (Federal)	<i>Criminal Code Act 1995</i>	Section 474.17; Using a carriage service to menace, harass, or cause offence	3 years
<b>Inciting (harmful) Behaviours Inciting (harmful) behaviours</b>	Abetting suicide	NZ	<i>Crimes Act 1961</i>	Section 179; Aiding and abetting suicide	14 years (if the person commits or attempts to commit suicide) 3 years (if the person does not commit or attempt to commit suicide)
<b>Disturbing or annoying behaviours (malicious)</b>	Using or causing to use telephone to disturb, annoy, or irritate any person	NZ	<i>Telecommunications Act 2001</i>	Section 112; Misuse of telephone device	3 months or fine up to NZD 2,000
	Seriously annoying or bothering another person for no purpose	USA; Rhode Island	<i>2012 Rhode Island General Laws</i>	Section 11-52-4.2; Cyberstalking and cyberharassment prohibited	1 year or fine up to USD 500, or both (1 <sup>st</sup> conviction); 2 years or fine up to USD 6,000, or both (2 <sup>nd</sup> conviction)

<i>Class of conduct</i>	<i>Conducts that can be prosecuted</i>	<i>Country/State</i>	<i>Name of the Act</i>	<i>Number and name of the provision</i>	<i>Maximum penalty</i>
<b>Disturbing or annoying behaviours (malicious)</b>	Communicating in a manner to cause annoyance or alarm with intent to harass, annoy or alarm another person	USA; Delaware	<i>2014 Delaware Criminal Code</i>	Section 1311; Harassment; class A misdemeanor	Class A misdemeanor (1 year and fine up to USD 2,300)
<b>Provoking or challenging behaviours</b>	Taunting or challenging another person for no reason and in a manner that provokes a violent or disorderly response	USA; Delaware	<i>2014 Delaware Criminal Code</i>	Section 1311; Harassment; class A misdemeanor	Class A misdemeanor (1 year and fine up to USD 2,300)
<b>Any behaviour that causes emotional distress</b>	Posting a message that intends to and causes emotional distress	USA; Michigan	<i>Michigan Penal Code 2001</i>	Section 750.411s; Posting message through electronic medium; prohibitions; penalty; exceptions; definitions	2 years or a fine up to USD 5,000 or both
	Carrying out an act which intends to and causes emotional distress to another person	USA; Missouri	<i>Missouri Revised Statutes 2016</i>	Section 565.090; Harassment, first degree, penalty	Class E felony
	Behaving in a way that causes substantial emotional distress to the person and serve no legitimate person	USA; Florida	<i>The 2017 Florida Statute</i>	Section 784.048; Stalking; definitions; penalties	First degree misdemeanor (up to 1 year and a fine up to USD 1,000)
	Wilfully and maliciously behaving in a way that alarm the person and would cause a reasonable person a substantial emotional distress	USA; Massachusetts	<i>Massachusetts General Laws 2017</i>	Section 43A; Criminal harassment; punishment	Up to 2 1/2 years in a house of correction or a fine up to USD 1,000 or both (first conviction); Up to 2.5 years in a house of correction or up to 10 years in the state prison (second conviction)
	Posting a digital communication that intends and causes harm to the person and would cause harm to ordinary reasonable person	NZ	<i>Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015</i>	Section 22; Posing harm by posting digital communication	2 years of a fine up to NZD 50,000 (natural person) A fine up to NZD 200,000 (body corporate)

### 3.7 Overview of research gaps

While online trolling has not been studied as extensively as cyberbullying, it has recently started receiving *increased interest among researchers in the fields of linguistics, psychology, and computer science. Marketing and consumer researchers have, however, stayed noticeably silent on this topic.* While the current body of literature on trolling is insightful, it is also riddled with challenges. *First, researchers do not agree on the nature and the definition of trolling. Second, while researcher have identified several types of trolling, it is not yet clear how trolling is actually carried out and who and what is involved in it.* In explaining trolling, the current research provides partial answers, predominantly attributing trolling to the troll's problematic dispositions or to anonymity. Yet, since under the right circumstances all people can act like trolls (Cheng et al., 2017) and online trolling is found on more and on less anonymous sites (Ewing et al., 2013), there seem to be other participating actors and trolling-favourable factors in play. The lack of understanding of the nature and manifestation of trolling has important consequences. First, it hinders research progress, as scholars do not have the opportunity to build their research on a solid conceptual base. Second, it further challenges the effective management of trolling – the issue that current studies fail to resolve. My research is intended to fill these research gaps.

### 3.8 Summary

This chapter reviewed the scattered and multidisciplinary literature that describes online trolling. Several diverse definitions of trolling have appeared in the literature. In the broadest sense, trolling refers to deliberately deceptive, disruptive, and provoking practices of individuals or groups in an online social setting. These practices involve various strategies, including digressing, endangering and aggressing (Hardaker, 2013), and can be explained by perpetrators' personalities, characteristics of the online environment (e.g., anonymous communication) or socio-cultural attributes (e.g., mass media ideology). There

are several ways in which people and firms can respond to trolls and trolling (e.g., ignoring the troll, using civil law, deleting the troll's comment), yet these response strategies are riddled with challenges. Better understanding of the distinctive nature and the manifestation of trolling would help practitioners in managing and scholars in researching trolling. To do so, in contrast to existing studies that focus on investigating the trolls, this study investigates trolling or (better said) the making of trolling. The chapter that follows, Chapter Four, presents the methodology that will be used to satisfy my research aim.

## Chapter Four: Methodological Praxis

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### 4.1 Introduction

To recap, *the purpose of this thesis is to understand the assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate online trolling*. In particular, my research questions are: (1) What is online trolling and how is it differentiated from other forms of online misbehaviour? (2) What and how do human and non-human entities come together and manage to hold together, however temporarily, in the performance of trolling? and (3) Can assemblages of actors, joined in the performance of trolling, help in our understanding of how trolling is bolstered, maintained, disrupted, or broken?

The present chapter discusses how these research questions were tackled. The chapter starts with a brief introduction of theory that served as a methodological “sensibility” (Law, 2009, p. 142) in this thesis—this is actor-network theory. The discussion of the rationale for adopting ANT is followed by the presentation of the research approach, including the presentation of the cases and methods. Next, data collection and data analyses are discussed. Prior to a concluding summary, the chapter provides an overview of issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations and research challenges.

### 4.2 Mobilising actor-network theory

“Truth and falsehood. Large and small. Agency and structure. Human and non-human. Before and after. Knowledge and power. Context and content. Materiality and sociality. Activity and passivity. In one way or another all of these divides have been rubbished in work undertaken in the name of actor-network theory” (Law, 1999, p. 3).

Expressing an unfamiliar view on the numerous familiar issues (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), ANT is difficult to summarise or explain. Since the time of its origin—in the 1980s (e.g., Callon, 1984; Latour, 1987; Law, 1984) in the context of sociology of science and technology

(Law, 1992)—ANT has been called vastly different things such as “a theory, philosophy, approach, method, sensibility, and/or toolkit” (Thompson, 2012, p. 95). The position taken in this thesis is that ANT is a complex resource that allows for asking a particular type of methodological, empirical, and analytic questions about the phenomenon under study (Michael, 2016). While not being a theory per se, saying anything about the examined phenomenon (e.g., Mol, 2010), ANT could be described as *a theory of how to study things* (Latour, 2005) or as “a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world” (Law, 2009, p. 142). The discussion that follows presents key tenets or as Michael (2016, p. 3) calls it “practical orientations and sensibilities” that characterize ANT.

#### 4.2.1 *A brief introduction to ANT*

The ‘basic’ idea of actor-network theory is that everything is treated as effects of networks of all kinds of actors (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992). Several ANT principles are highlighted in this description, including relationality, heterogeneity, and performativity.

First, similar to the semiotic concept of *relationality* (Bajde, 2013), ANT claims that “nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of [the] relations” (Law, 2009, p. 141). An actor therefore does not exist on and by herself/himself/itself, but can be defined only in relation to other actors. This assemblage of associating actors is what is called an actor-network. As an “actor is defined by its network”, so is a network defined by the actors located in the network (Latour, Jensen, Venturini, Grauwin, & Boullier, 2012, p. 593).

Second, the actor-networks are marked by *heterogeneity*, consisting of different types of actors (Law, 2009). Something is considered to be an actor as long as he/she/it acts. To act means to “make a difference” (Latour, 2005, p. 71); it means to influence some other actor’s action. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of ANT is that it assumes that both

human and nonhuman actors have a potential active role to play within the networks. As Callon and Law (1997, p. 168) put it:

Often in practice we bracket off non-human materials, assuming they have a status which differs from that of the human. So materials become resources or constraints; they are said to be passive; to be active only when they are mobilized by flesh and blood actors. But if the social is really materially heterogeneous, then this asymmetry doesn't work very well. Yes, there are differences between conversations, texts, techniques and bodies. Of course. But why should we start out by assuming that some of these have no active role to play in social dynamics?

This ANT's principle of *generalised symmetry* (Callon, 1984) is closely related to the ANT's adoption of *flat ontology* (Bajde, 2013; Harman, 2009). ANT's flat ontology replaces the ideas of purely human agency (Bajde, 2013) and puts all entities on "exactly the same ontological footing" (Harman, 2009, p. 14). Thus, something is considered to be an actor as long as he/she/it influences some other actor's action. ANT's flat ontology advocates that researchers should not in advance assume that people are always the actors and that non-humans are passive and insignificant objects. Furthermore, a researcher should not hold a priori assumptions about who has power in the network. In fact, power is a function of the composition of the network (Law, 2009). To put it differently, power is "made of the wills of all the others"; it is enacted by other actors and therefore should be seen as *a consequence* of the heterogeneous webs of relations and not a cause (Latour, 1984, p. 269). This intentional neglect of *a priori* assumptions and 'causes' and emphasis on the 'in here' reality rather than 'out there' reality are two general characteristics of ANT that illustrate its empiricist and materialist stance (Bajde, 2013).

For ANT, everything is taken as a network effect: things, behaviours, and ideas, for instance, *are enacted and are performed* in, by and through the associations (Law, 1999). In this view, ANT adopts a constructivist position (Latour, 2005). To be specific, ANT is representative of what could be called *socio-material constructivism* and *not* of what is called

‘social constructivism’ (Latour, 2005). In contrast to social constructivists, ANT researchers do not believe that the fact that something is constructed means that is not real. For ANT the question is not whether something is real but how well or badly it is constructed (Latour, 2005).

The concept of translation plays a key role in the understanding of the construction of the network. It is through translation that the actors are induced into co-existing (Latour, 2005). During this translation, the interests and goals of the actors and the actors themselves get displaced and transformed (Callon, 1984). One of the most widely cited explanations of the translation process has been offered by Callon (1984) who suggests that the translation process consists of four, potentially overlapping, moments: problematisation, interessement, enrolment, and mobilisation. During the process of problematisation, the focal actors define the problem, identify potential allies and make themselves indispensable in solving the problem. In other words, they establish themselves as an obligatory point of passage (henceforth OPP)—the assemblage in the network through which all associations must flow at some point in time (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). In the interessement phase focal actors try to recruit other actors to join the network. Successful interessement leads to the moment of enrolment, when the roles of the actors in the network are being negotiated and accepted. Finally, mobilisation includes the negotiations about who speaks on behalf of whom (Callon, 1984).

While the present study has not directly used the translation process put forward by Callon (1984), as it was found to be too linear, it has drawn on its main idea. Namely, for the success of anything (e.g., a behaviour, a practice), the competing interests and goals of the heterogeneous actors have to be tied together (Callon, 1984; Giesler, 2012). To put it differently, actor-network is characterized by “a lot of hard work in which heterogeneous bits and pieces . . . would like to make off on their own” (Law, 1992, p. 381), establishing and

following their own programs of action (i.e., a goal or an intention) (Latour, 1992, 1999), and “are juxtaposed into a patterned network which overcomes their resistance” (Law, 1992, p. 381). While this process of building a network is making a network inherently unstable, and an ongoing effort is needed to keep it together, some networks manage to, or at least appear to, consolidate. The terms ‘black-boxing’ (Latour, 1987) and ‘punctualisation’ (Law, 1992) are used to describe the case when a network seems to act as a single node, concealing from view all other actors and the relations that actually enacted this network into being. To illustrate, a computer is most of the time seen by its user as a single object; however, once it breaks down, the user suddenly becomes aware of the whole network of associating actors making up the computer. Opening the black boxes, therefore, reveals the complexity of the networks, where each actor in fact is an actor-network in itself. This network complexity poses several methodological challenges; in fact, the difficulty of conducting ANT research is a common critique of ANT, as is discussed in the section below.

#### 4.2.2 *A critique of ANT*

Over the last three decades ANT has encountered various criticisms. One of the most common critiques relates to the ANT *granting agency to nonhuman actors*. The flat ontology of ANT is sometimes understood as a statement of hierarchy; a statement that, in the light of the rise of artificial intelligence, suggests that non-human actors are becoming equally powerful, if not dominating and masterful (Bajde, 2016). Such understanding misinterprets the ANT’s view of flat ontology, which does not contend the equality or domination of either humans or non-humans but rather assumes that every network enacts its own ontology and at the start it should be assumed that anyone or anything could act and have power (Bajde, 2016). Some authors (e.g., Bassett, 1999) question whether non-humans can actually act in the network, since they do not have goals and intentions. Yet, non-human actors have goals and interests; as they are equipped with them by their designers. For example, a seat belt in

a car has a goal of protecting a driver; a goal that was inscribed in the belt by its engineers (Latour, 1992). A seat belt, as any other non-human, therefore acts, and to see its acting one just has to imagine “what other humans or other nonhumans would have to do were this character not present” (Latour, 1992, p. 155).

Besides content-related critiques, ANT has received a number that are *methodology-oriented*. One problem is the lack of information as to how one actually does ANT-inspired research (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). For instance, one of the main questions is how to choose which actors to follow and which ones to exclude (McLean & Hassard, 2004). In this view, ANT accounts have been accused of predominately telling the story of the ‘heroes’ and ‘victors’ to the exclusion of other actors (McLean & Hassard, 2004). Another criticism stems from the outcomes of ANT studies. First, ANT studies have been criticized for being descriptive in nature and lacking explanatory power (Bassett, 1999). Second, ANT accounts have been criticized for not really embracing the principle of generalized symmetry as the story about non-humans is written from the perspective of analysts, thus, humans (McLean & Hassard, 2004).

In the light of the potential of ANT for understanding trolling (see next section), this thesis was not deterred by these or other critiques of ANT. The critiques have been studied in detail in order to conduct a better ANT-inspired research.

#### **4.2.3    *How can ANT inform the study of trolling?***

Despite receiving some criticism, as set out above, ANT has attracted significant interest from a multitude of disciplines (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Michael, 2016), including sociology, anthropology, geography, and cultural studies (Michael, 2016). While ANT has recently diffused also into marketing and consumer research (e.g., Bettany & Kerrane, 2011; Canniford & Bajde, 2016b; Giesler, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2014), it has not yet been used

as a lens for studying consumer misbehaviours. Considering that methodology based prior consumer misbehaviour literature is rather one-dimensional and rarely draws on any theoretical framework apart from, for instance, theory of planned behaviour (for an overview of studies see Phau et al., 2014), neutralisation theory (e.g., Dootson, Johnston, Beatson, & Lings, 2016; Harris & Daunt, 2011; Harris & Dumas, 2009; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Phau et al., 2014) and routine activities theory (Daunt & Greer, 2015), using an ‘exotic’ lens such as ANT holds promise *to provide new insights* into the phenomenon of consumer misbehaviours. At the same time, it has a potential for providing a different insight, as it allows the study of misbehaviours as practices that are *in the making*; an approach that is largely absent in the current literature on consumer misbehaviours in general and trolling in particular. A notable exception in this regard is a recent study by Cruz et al. (2018, p. 18) who, similarly to my research, focused on “‘the doing’ of trolling.” Being, to the best of my knowledge, the first in applying ANT to the domain of consumer misbehaviours, the present study answers the calls of Fisk et al. (2010) for exploration of different methodological approaches in studying consumer misbehaviours in order to facilitate progress as a discipline.

Before presenting how this research was carried out, it has to be mentioned that the research process did not set out with ANT philosophy in mind. It was only after doing initial fieldwork and data analysis that the potential of ANT for understanding trolling behaviours was recognised. While trolling behaviours in the making could be studied also by, for example, practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996) and assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006), ANT was chosen for its rich depository of conceptual tools that seemed to relate well to the collected data. In particular, awarding non-human actors agency (Latour, 2005) and being focused on the interplay of the material (non-human) and expressive/semiotic elements (Canniford & Bajde, 2016a), ANT offered a promising approach to study online trolling behaviours that embody the complex interplay between the human (e.g., troll) and

non-human actors (e.g., computer, Internet). The discussion that follows presents the research approach employed to satisfy the research aim of understanding the assemblages<sup>6</sup> of actors that allow or perpetuate trolling.

### 4.3 Research approach and strategy

To study online trolling, this thesis employed a *practice-focused multi-sited ethnographic research approach*. As an ethnographer I spent “an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting” (Hine, 2000, p. 4). Unlike traditional ethnography, which includes studying people, races or cultural groups (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2012), the ethnography used in this thesis focused on studying *online socio-material practices*. In this view, my research could be called virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) *of trolling behaviours* or netnography (Kozinets, 2010, 2015) *of trolling behaviours*. The even better alternative is to describe my research as a *praxiography* (Mol, 2002), an approach where the focus is less on studying the ‘ethno’ (i.e., people, a race or a cultural group) and more on studying the ‘praxis’ (i.e., practice).

A practice-focused ethnographic/praxiographic approach as a “deliberately ‘messy’ methodology” (Nimmo, 2011, p. 113) corresponded well with the messiness characterising ANT studies. It was an inductive method (Nimmo, 2011) that allowed studying trolling behaviours in their natural settings (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994) while they were being enacted. At the same time it allowed and, in fact, required the researcher to pay attention to objects of all kinds when attempting to understand the phenomenon in question (Mol, 2002).

The adopted praxiographic approach was *multi-sited* in nature. This multi-sitedness can be understood in two ways. First, the present research can be considered as a *multi-sited*

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<sup>6</sup> Terms actor-network and assemblage are used interchangeably in this thesis.

*ethnography* (Marcus, 1995), where the focus was on following “people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)” (Falzon, 2016, p. 2). A multi-sited ethnographic approach was well suited to the study’s purpose of investigating a phenomenon (i.e., trolling behaviours) that is mobile and multiply situated (Kjeldgaard, Faurholt Csaba, & Ger, 2006).

The second view of multi-sitedness relates to investigation of different instances of trolling behaviours. In this view, this research drew on *multiple case studies* (Stake, 2006) that provided insight into different manifestations of trolling behaviours. Investigating five different types of trolling relative to investigating only one type of trolling allowed for examination of the similarities and differences between the cases, providing “a tougher test of a theory” (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010, p. 583).

#### **4.3.1 Unit of study and selection of cases**

Fitting to the purpose of the study, online trolling behaviours were selected as units of study. *Five different examples of trolling* were investigated: playful trolling, good old-fashioned trolling, shock trolling, online pranking and raiding, and fake customer service trolling. In choosing the cases, I followed the principles of *purposeful sampling* (Patton, 2015). The potential cases were identified through the review of trolling-related newspaper articles and blog entries, through posting a research invitation on forums and social media channels, and through searching for trolls on YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook.

The cases that were chosen for the study had to satisfy the following requirements. As it is a requirement for a multiple case study, the selected individual cases shared some similarities (Stake, 2006). In this regard, all five cases were representatives of trolling behaviour. They all corresponded to the working definition of trolling representing deliberately deceptive, disruptive, and provoking practices of individuals or groups in an

online social setting. In addition, the trolls from the cases were self-identified trolls, publicly calling themselves trolls or at least not disputing being called trolls. While, in general, all cases represented trolling, the cases differed in purposefully typifying different forms of trolling. The heterogeneity and data-richness of cases played an important role in final selection of the cases.

The selected cases are by way of introduction briefly presented in the following subsection. The Findings section 5.2 provides a deeper analysis of the chosen cases and outlines the individual actors performing within each case. The cases carry the names of troll(s), who served as a point of departure in my process of following the actors (Latour, 2005).

#### *4.3.1.1 Meet Ollie, performer of playful trolling*

Ollie is performing playful trolling. He is trolling within multi-player video games such as Second Life, Rust and DayZ. His trolling is occasionally livestreamed on Twitch and/or edited into the short videos of trolling highlights, posted on YouTube or other social media channels. Ollie himself describes his trolling as an “experiment on people in videogames whilst doing low brow comedy.” Some of his trolling activities include locking people in their own virtual houses and calling the police under the pretension their houses are being robbed, as a virtual taxi driver dropping customers off at deserted places and driving the taxis into the water and annoying other players with driving around in his virtual truck and playing loud and repeating jingles. In the most basic sense, his trolling includes using, misusing or abusing the basic game features, while acting like he is doing nothing wrong. One of his followers described Ollie’s method of trolling as “so direct but indirect at the same time, just blissful ignorance. It takes a genius to be that stupid.”

#### 4.3.1.2 *Meet Alfie, performer of good old-fashioned trolling*

Alfie is performing good old-fashioned trolling. Alfie describes his online troll persona as a “good-hearted, sweet geriatric moron.” His trolling resembles the type of trolling from the early days of the Internet, when trolling included posting intentionally incorrect messages in a non-blatant way in order to lure others into a response (Donath, 1999; Herring et al., 2002). Similarly, Alfie posts ill-informed comments under the news articles on Yahoo News, on Facebook brand pages and Yelp profiles. Alfie, for example, intentionally misunderstands the content, pretends that he does not know how to use a computer or other technology, or simply plays ignorant. The following comments published on the Subway Facebook page epitomize his typical light-hearted style of trolling.

*Alfie:* safe for folks who are on a free gluten diet?

*Subway:* Hi [Alfie], thanks for asking, we are currently testing some gluten free products in select stores. The test is only happening in few cities, but we’ll let all of our fans know how it all turns out. Stay tuned...

*Alfie:* thank you. my doctor, says I can eat gluten as long as it don’t cost nothing, will you have free gluten in your local store?

#### 4.3.1.3 *Meet Jon, performer of shock trolling*

Jon is performing shock trolling. His trolling content is provocative at best and morally offensive at worst. Jon’s trolling is limited to Facebook. In particular, he trolls by creating Facebook events and posting comments within Facebook buy and sell groups. An example of his trolling included inviting member of online animal welfare groups to his newly created Facebook event of Christmas dog-punching party. Another example of this shock trolling is Jon’s classified advertisement that was posted in the public Leeds Buy Sell Swap Facebook group, stating:

Darkies wanted for dog fight training. £10 per day and free chicken. White kids that speak like a coon because they think its cool . . . need not apply.

#### 4.3.1.4 *Meet Flinn and Antonio, performers of online pranking and raiding*

Flinn and Antonio are performing online pranking and raiding (i.e., strategically invading other online users' channels). They both belong to Raid Board, an online community where users discuss and plan raiding activities. Most of these activities are conducted on Twitch—a livestreaming video platform, where raiders such as Flinn and Antonio spam comments sections, hijack the user's livestream, and try to convince users to do something that would damage their computers. These activities are, according to Encyclopedia Dramatica, a satirical wiki site, carried out at a specific time and from a specific location. They are, typically, livestreamed on Twitch and/or recorded for later editing and viewing. The raiders' case, embodying organised/group trolling, provides an additional variety to my dataset that consists of trolling that does not seem to be a coordinated activity.

#### 4.3.1.5 *Meet Otto, performer of fake customer service trolling*

Otto is performing fake customer service trolling. Better understanding of this type of trolling is particularly relevant for marketers, as it occurs on Facebook brand pages. Pretending to be a customer representative, Otto provides a response to an online customer who posted a complaint. This response ranges from being light-hearted to purely offensive. The following excerpt, taken from Arby's (i.e., American fast food sandwich restaurant) illustrates Otto's style of trolling:

*Customer:* Dear Arby's, Your BLT looks NOTHING like on Tv or on your signage. This is fraud!!!

*Otto pretending to be Customer Service:* Hi [customer], The food in our commercials are like a Tinder profile picture. Everything looks great until you see it in person. Hope that explanation helped!

#### 4.3.2 Research methods

Multiple methods were used in my praxiographic research. First, I engaged in *nonparticipant observation of online trolling behaviours*. Observation was chosen as this method is particularly useful in studying practices in natural settings and the influence of non-human objects on these practices (Belk et al., 2012). The observation was overt and covert in nature. The research collaborators (i.e., online users whose practices and interactions were observed and enriched with the interviews/IM) *were made aware of my observations* in the information sheet (see Appendix D). Online communities' members (i.e., online users whose practices and interactions were only observed) were *observed covertly*. The rationale behind choosing a covert observation was the following. First, an unobtrusive way of observation allowed me to protect the "natural operation of the community" (Veer, 2013). Maintaining natural dynamics of online communities is as much in the interest of the researcher as it is in the interest of the community members: posting a research announcement under every observed trolling video or post would likely be disruptive to the online communities' members. Second, covert observation seemed to be the only way to obtain the necessary data (Langer & Beckman, 2005), due to the deceptive and sensitive nature of trolling behaviours. Online users made aware of being observed could change their behaviour and intentionally deceive the researcher. Furthermore, overt observation was not practicable due to the nature of the field sites. For instance, it would be impossible to ensure that the research announcement had been seen by all the observed communities' members due to the sorting algorithms that influence the position of the postings in the online comments systems.

*In-depth interviews* with the trolls were the second method employed, supplementing the observational method. While the observations were focused on what trolls do (i.e., on trolling acts), interviews provided an insight into what trolls say they do. In-depth interviews

were used to deepen understanding of observed trolling practices, in particular in regard to the process of how these practices were carried out. Another method used to deepen the understanding of observations were *short electronic exchanges* with the participants. Finally, to contextualise my data I collected and reviewed various documents and other materials such as social platforms' terms of use and podcasts on online community management. The specifics of the methods are detailed below.

#### 4.4 Data collection and procedures

My data collection started in October 2015 and finished in August 2017. Table 5 and Table 6 provide an overview of the methods that were used to collect the data. Three types of data were observed, read, archived and analysed in this ethnographic/praxiographic study: *archival*, *elicited*, and *reflexive* (Kozinets, 2010). *Archival data* refers to the data that was created by the online users (e.g., postings, videos, recordings, images) or by organisations (e.g., social media's terms of use, trolling legislation, podcasts on trolling) (Fischer & Parmentier, 2010). "Although clearly shaped by selection biases and observer effects" such data "[did] not bear the imprint of the researcher as creator or director" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 165). In contrast, *elicited data* was co-created with the researcher (Kozinets, 2015). Examples include interviews with the trolls and short electronic exchanges with the community managers. The final type is *reflexive data*—these were researcher's thoughts and observations recorded during the fieldwork (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). The reflexive data in the present research took the form of a research log (Latour, 2005) and fieldnotes.

Table 5: The outline of data collection techniques employed in the study

Type of data	Method	Case#1 (Ollie)	Case#2 (Alfie)	Case#3 (Jon)	Case#4 (Flinn & Antonio)	Case#5 (Otto)	External context
Following the actors (Latour 2005). From October 2015 to August 2017.							

Type of data	Method	Case#1 (Ollie)	Case#2 (Alfie)	Case#3 (Jon)	Case#4 (Flinn & Antonio)	Case#5 (Otto)	External context
<i>Archival Reflexive</i>	<b>Observation of trolling</b>	330 hours of non-participant covert and overt observation of trolling behaviours					
<i>Elicited Reflexive</i>	<b>In-depth interviews</b>						2 trolls
		1 troll	1 troll	1 troll	2 trolls		
<i>Elicited Reflexive</i>	<b>Short electronic exchanges</b>						1 troll + 3 community managers
<i>Archival Reflexive</i>	<b>Review of trolling-related documents</b>	Trolling-relevant laws in UK, AUS, NZ, and USA Trolling-related newspaper articles and blog entries Social platform's terms of use and community guidelines Podcasts on online community management YouTube clips on trolling					

In contrast to prior qualitative consumer research that rarely took secondary data as primary data (Fischer & Parmentier, 2010), this research predominantly drew on archival data. The non-participant overt and covert observation presented a large part of the archival dataset. During my 330 hours of observation of trolling, the focus was on staying close to the practices (Mol, 2002) and on following the actors and their associations (Latour, 2005). As can be noted from Table 6, I observed trolling behaviours that occurred on a diverse set of online platforms. Observations were conducted both asynchronously and synchronously. In practice, observation included reading or watching the online posts and the accompanying content (e.g., comments attached to the post), following the shared links, and capturing and saving the content. The observations, as well as other methods, were accompanied by extensive field-noting. I took field notes to describe my observations, to capture my reflection on the observations, to develop interpretation, and to document and reflect on the research process.

Besides observations of trolling behaviours, I conducted in-depth interviews with the trolls. Five interviews were conducted with the main protagonists of the selected cases and two interviews were conducted with the trolls (i.e, Luke and Eli) that do not belong to

the cases, but they exhibit behaviours shown in the cases. While Luke was an expert in raiding, sms bombing, and site editing, Eli described his/her trolling expertise as “posting unpopular opinions . . . and getting people to believe [s/he] actually held those opinions.” Luke and Eli correspond to what is called in this study *an external context*—the data sources that were not a part of my case studies but informed their understanding. Also part of an external context that helped to contextualise the investigation were the various trolling-related materials that I was systematically gathering and examining (see Table 6).

Apart from one interview, all interviews were conducted via instant messaging. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. A general interview protocol was developed after the initial observations of trolling practices and prior to the interviews, and then specialised and tailored to the participants and their practices. Interviews thus took a semistandardised form (Arsel, 2017; Berg & Lune, 2012). An example of a personalised interview guide is provided in Appendix B. The interviews played a supplementary role in this research—they provided the background information on the context behind their trolling practices; information that would be difficult to get with only non-participant observations. The interviews revolved around the questions of “what happened and who did what when” (Langley, 1999, p. 692). They lasted from 75 minutes to 111 minutes. In addition to the interviews, I have exchanged electronic messages with another troll, who was a raider, and with three community managers from religion-related subreddit. These exchanges taking the form of unstructured interview and consisting of a free-flowing chat allowed me to understand trolling practices from yet another perspective. Some electronic messages were exchanged also with the trolls that have been interviewed.

Data collection was informed with ongoing data analysis, which is presented in the following section.

Table 6: Specification of the utilised methods and data sources

Type of data	Method	Data sources	Case connection	Purpose
Archival data	Continuous observation of trolling practices (Time period: October 2015-August 2017)	Alfie's subreddit, Alfie's Facebook page, Alfie's Twitter page, Alfie's Tumblr page, Alfie's media interviews, Alfie's posts on Yahoo News, YouTube, and Facebook brand pages	Alfie	To gain a rich understanding of the trolling in the making
		Ollie's subreddit, Ollie's Facebook page, Ollie's Twitter page, Ollie's YouTube channel, Ollie's Twitch channel, Ollie's Patreon channel, and Ollie's media interview	Ollie	
		Jon's Facebook profiles, Jon's posts on Facebook, Jon's trolling web-page, and Jon's media interviews	Jon	
		Raid Board online community, Raid Board' members postings on YouTube, and Raid Board' members activity on Twitch	Flinn and Antonio	
		Otto's Facebook page, Otto's posts on Facebook, and Otto's media interviews	Otto	
	Sporadic observation of trolling practices (Time period: October 2015-August 2017)	Subreddit intended for posting trolling requests (created by Luke)	External context	To gain a rich understanding of the trolling in the making
		Reddit Armie subreddit and Reddit Armie's members posts on YouTube	External context	
		Daily mail comments sections	External context	
		David Thorne's webpage (www.27bslash6.com), David Thorne's book, and David Thorne's media interviews	External context	
		John Lindsay's webpage (www.dontevenreply.com)	External context	
		Twitch channel of a troll gamer	External context	
		Facebook Safety page	External context	

Type of data	Method	Data sources	Case connection	Purpose	
		Gaming forum (Blizzard)	External context	To help understand the research context. To contextualize the observations.	
		Trolling-relevant laws in UK, AUS, NZ, and USA	External context		
		Media-generated articles and blog posts (Google Alert for keywords troll and/or trolling in the title)	External context		
		Social platform’s terms of use and community guidelines (Facebook, Reddit, Twitch, Twitter, YouTube, 4chan)	External context		
		Podcast on online community management (Community Signal)	External context		
		YouTube videos on trolling (free search)	External context		
		Encyclopedia Dramatica (satirical website of Internet-related issues)	External context		
		Elicited data	In-depth online video interview (Skype)		Alfie
In-depth interview over IM (Facebook Messenger)	Ollie		Ollie		
In-depth interview over IM (Facebook Messenger)	Jon		Jon		
In-depth interview over IM (Skype)	Flinn		Flinn and Antonio		
In-depth interview over IM (Google talk)	Antonio				
In-depth interview over IM (Stinto chat)	Luke		External context		
In-depth interview over IM (Skype)	Eli		External context		
			Alfie, Ollie, Jon, Flinn, Antonio, Luke, Eli		
Short electronic exchanges	Lev (raider)		External context		
	3 online community managers of religion-related subreddit		External context		
Reflexive data	Fieldnotes Research log		Alfie, Ollie, Jon, Flinn, Antonio, Otto, and external context	To describe observations and to capture researcher’s thoughts and reflections about the observations, research process, and theorisation.	

## 4.5 Data analyses

Overall, the data analysis started with an in-depth exploration of a single case/actor-network, treating each case/network as a distinct representation of trolling. Then, I conducted a cross-case analysis, comparing and contrasting the networks and bringing into the analysis the data from the external context in order to build a general representation of assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate trolling.

My coding within the single case was focused on identifying the actors and registering the associations between them. First, I looked for the actors—anyone or anything that acted and so left traces (Latour, 2004). In identifying the actors, I tried to be as specific as possible. In order to de-blackbox the actor-networks, the actors were withdrawn from the data sources on the smallest level as possible (e.g., like button rather than social media button was enlisted as an actor). In doing so, I was cautious to not make assumptions about the actors. Only the actors that were directly observed or mentioned by the participants or sources from external context were coded. For instance, if the troll mentioned that he hid his IP address, it was not assumed that a VPN was used to do this. In this case only an IP address was enlisted as an actor. Avoiding the assumptions of who is involved in the constellations of the actors also helped in cutting the network. The actor-network was cut when the new data did not bring any new actors. In this view, it could be said that the network was cut when data saturation was achieved. Considering all the networks, I identified 330 actors. Table 7 provides an overview of the number of actors coded within each case. While this table is illustrative, it has to be taken with caution. As it is never possible to completely de-blackbox the network and each actor is, in fact, in itself an actor-network, the provided numbers do not reflect the number of actors within a network but rather a number of *coded* actors within a network. A description was provided for each coded actor. Table 8 illustrates some of the coded actors from Alfie's case.

Table 7: Number of coded actors within a particular actor-network

Case	Number of coded actors	Number of coded interactions between the actors
Ollie	54	165
Alfie	60	236
Jon	56	335
Flinn and Antonio	111	418
Otto	49	154
<i>In total</i>	<i>330</i>	<i>1308</i>

Table 8: Some of the actors from the Alfie's case (excerpt from the codebook)

Case	Actor	Description
Alfie	Downvote button	A button that online users use to show that they dislike the content
Alfie	Trolls copycats	People who are trying to impersonate Alfie
Alfie	Online commentators	People who comment online
Alfie	Screenshots of copycats' trolling	Screen capture of trolling done by the trolls copycats
Alfie	Book publisher	A person whose business is publishing books
Alfie	Delete button	A button that is used to delete the content
Alfie	Human moderators	People responsible for maintaining order online

As the data collection was guided by the principle of following the actors (Latour, 2005), so was the data analysis. In practice, this meant that the first enlisted actor was always the troll. I started my process of following the actors by examining who and what is this troll actor associating with (i.e., influencing and/or being influenced by). The answers to these questions led to other actors, which/who suggested yet other actors. For each identified association, I noted the type of association (i.e., writing down the description of what precisely happened between two actors) and the place of association (i.e., noting the platform where the interaction happened).

To aid the analysis I visually mapped out the networks with the help of the network visualization tool Gephi. Gephi is open source software enabling the visualization and exploration of networks (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009). It has to be stressed that Gephi was used as a tool that allowed a different view on the data and *not* as a tool to analyse

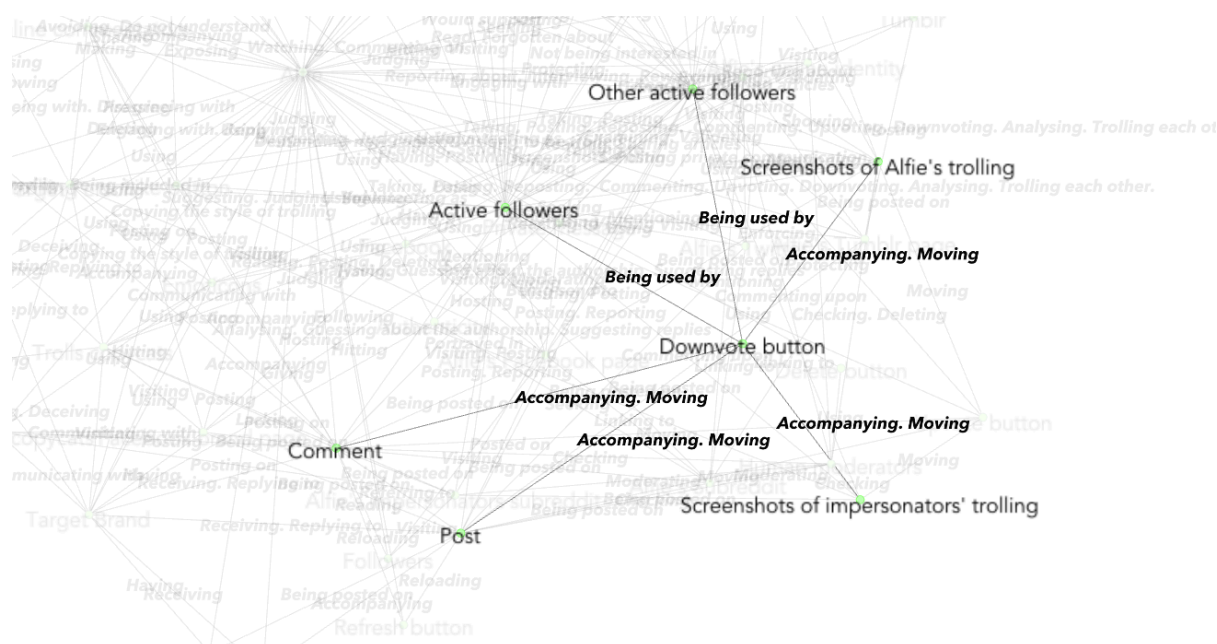
the networks in the manner of social network analysis (SNA)<sup>7</sup> (for an overview of differences between ANT and SNA see Venturini, Munk, & Jacomy, 2016).

While I have found only one other ANT-inspired study that would visually map out the actor-networks with the aid of Gephi (i.e., Latour et al., 2012), I found the visualisations both practical and helpful in developing interpretations and analyses. Gephi enabled me to follow the associations between actors more smoothly and vividly as this could be done in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which I used for coding. Figure 1 provides an example of the Gephi-enabled visualisation of the associating actors. A layout of the maps was defined by the ForceAtlas 2 algorithm. This is a default Gephi's algorithm that follows the principle of linked nodes attracting each other and non-linked nodes being pushed apart (Gephi Consortium, 2011). This algorithm was selected as it is well-suited for qualitative interpretation of small graphs (Jacomy, 2011). *Having said that, no attention was paid to the shape of the network, as in ANT the term 'network' does not denote that the actors are related in the shape of the network.* As Latour (2005, p. 142) states, one "should not confuse the network that is drawn by the description and the network that is used to make the description." Yet, "scientific representations do not have to resemble their referent to be useful" (Venturini et al., 2016, p. 11). One way the maps were useful in my research is that they have made actors and associations more 'observable' (Venturini et al., 2016). The maps of each actor-network were thoroughly studied during the process of the analyses. By thinking about how each actor relates to other actors, I identified new actors and relationships that I had not discerned in the previous close readings of the data.

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<sup>7</sup> SNA is concerned with the use of »quantitative techniques to analyse and represent the connections between social actors« (Venturini, Munk, & Jacomy, 2016, p. 2)

Figure 1: An example of the visualisation of the actors and their associations (Alfie's case; zoom in on actor downvote button)



After identification of the actors and their interactions within a single actor-network, I started comparing and contrasting studied actor-networks. The cross-analysis was shaped by the research questions. First, openly-coded (Kozinets et al., 2014) actors were sorted into categories based on their relationships. The emergent categories, that were related and linked, were being collapsed or black-boxed into higher-level categories or finer codes (Belk et al., 2012). During the analyses I was paying attention to three different types of relationships between the codes. First, *codes were assembled based on being distinct elements of the same construct* (Belk et al., 2012). In this regard, an outcome of the analyses was different types of actors performing in trolling (see Chapter Five) and a set of elements characterising trolling behaviours (see Chapter Seven). Second, *the categorisation of the codes was made based on codes representing phases in a trolling process* (Belk et al., 2012). An evolution, stabilisation and destabilisation of the trolling practice (see Chapter Six) emerged out of such analysis. Third, a final stage of the analysis was concerned with *how the codes can be related based on the premise that some codes can be interpreted as assisting in understanding condition that give rise to a focal phenomenon* (Belk et al., 2012). The theoretical model of the manifestation of trolling

behaviours (see Chapter Eight) emerged out of this type of analysis and interpretation. In general, the analysing process was an iterative one, including the repeated going back and forth between the raw data, codes, and emerging theorising (Belk et al., 2012).

In reporting the findings, the focus was on “richly-textured” description (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p. 499) or *thick description*. That is the description that is characterised by “complex specificness” and “circumstantiality” (Geertz, 1973, p. 23). *The effort to be descriptive, rather than explanatory is well aligned with the ANT view*. According to Latour, for instance, researchers should stick to the description (Latour, 2005), as only “bad descriptions need an explanation” (Latour, 2004, p. 67). My thesis attempts to follow Latour’s (2005) advice. While my discussion chapter, for instance, presents a theoretical model of the manifestation of trolling behaviours, this model provides “descriptions of how rather than create interpretations of why” (Wright, 2016, p. 9) trolling behaviours occur. In writing Discussion chapter (see Chapter Eight:), in general, I strove to reveal “the forces behind what is said” and to not just add a “superfluous” explanation that “dissimulates what has been said” (Latour, 2005, p. 49).

Another thing in regard to how the findings are reported has to be mentioned. The chapters, constantly referring to the data from individual case, are in their essence devoted to cross-case issues. This *multiple-case study only* (Yin, 2018) *composition* is in accordance with the purpose of this thesis. The focus was not on the case itself but on the issue that the case illustrates.

#### **4.6 Issues of trustworthiness**

Several procedures were undertaken to establish the trustworthiness of research. The overall aim was to create *credible* rather than exhaustive interpretations of trolling practices (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). Reporting the findings in a manner of *thick description* (Geertz,

1973) was one way of trying to establish credibility. Another way included seeking *triangulations* across methods and across participants (Creswell, 2013). For instance, whenever possible I compared the insights from one data source (e.g., media interview) with the insights from another (e.g., interview with a troll). In this regard, special attention was paid to comparing and contrasting the data collected by observations and the data collected by personal interaction (i.e., elicited data). The convergences and disjunctures were questioned and provided an opportunity for interpretation building (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). To not misinterpret the phenomenon of trolling behaviours my fieldwork was *long-term in nature*, lasting for one year and ten months. During this time the research process was documented in detail in a research log. This log helped keep the research process transparent and allowed for an “external audit” (Creswell, 2013) of the research. It also helped me to become more aware of influences such as my native biases, and values that I, consciously or unconsciously, may have on the research process (Belk et al., 2012). This was an especially important task given that a researcher as observer and interpreter is actually a part of an actor-network.

Despite mobilising all these quality-assurance procedures, the study is not without *limitations*, which are acknowledged in the concluding chapter of this thesis (see Chapter Nine).

## 4.7 Ethical considerations

Various safeguards were used to protect the research collaborators and community members and their well-being before, during and after ethnographic/praxiographic data collection. Prior to commencing the study, I applied and successfully obtained an ethical approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury (see Appendix C).

During data collection and data analysis, I adopted two-tiered ethical standards, differentiating between the ethical procedures in the case of the online communities' members (i.e., online users whose practices and interactions were only observed) and ethical procedures in the case of research collaborators (i.e., online users whose practices and interactions were observed and enriched with the interviews) (see Table 9). The main difference between these two groups is that online communities' members, in contrast to research collaborators, were not aware that they were being observed. Several arguments, presented above in section 4.3.2 Research methods, justify this covert observation. An additional rationale for the covert observation is that I observed, collected, analysed and published only the data that could be considered "intentionally public" (Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 197). Research collaborators, on the other hand, were informed about being observed. In practice, a community member became a research collaborator as soon as s/he had read the information sheet (see Appendix D) and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix E). Whether observed covertly or overtly, participants were ensured confidentiality. By using fictitious names when publishing or describing their postings, I made sure that the identities of the research informants remained confidential.

In the final stage of my study, I will try to return something to the research collaborators by presenting them with the summary of my main findings.

*Table 9: The comparison of ethical procedures in the case of online communities' members and research participants*

	<b>Online communities' members</b> (whose practices were only observed)	<b>Research collaborators</b> (whose practices were observed and enriched with the interviews/IM)
Were their <u>public</u> practices and interactions observed (read/watched and stored by researcher)?	Yes	Yes
Were they <u>actively interacting</u> with the researcher, participating in interviews and other electronic exchanges?	No	Yes

	<b>Online communities’ members</b> (whose practices were only observed)	<b>Research collaborators</b> (whose practices were observed and enriched with the interviews/IM)
Were they aware of the researcher presence in the online community?	Probably not	Probably yes
Did they receive information sheet?	No	Yes
Did they have to sign an informed consent in order to participate?	No	Yes
Were their public postings published?	Yes (if relevant) The postings are published under pseudonyms	Yes (if relevant) The postings and quotes from the interviews are published under pseudonyms
Were their quotations from the interviews published?	No (no interviews)	Yes (if relevant) Published under pseudonyms

## 4.8 Research challenges

The proposed study contained certain methodological, legal and ethical challenges. The *methodological challenges* were as follows. First, while the Internet offered a plethora of trolling instances for observation, it was rather difficult to convince the performers of misbehaviours—trolls—to participate in my research. This was actually anticipated considering the general lack of studies that include trolls as participants. There are two reasons why getting research collaborators was not a simple task. First, as already observed by Shachaf and Hara (2010), trolls were hard to track down. One of the main reasons for this was that some trolls’ accounts got deleted all the time. Second, trolls were, typically, distrustful of my intentions. Upon contacting one of the trolls, asking him/her for an interview about trolling, s/he replied: “look to yourself if you want to study a troll.” While some contacted online communities’ members thought I was a troll, others were more worried that I was trying to expose them. Trolls from the latter category reacted by threatening me (see Flinn’s message below) or by trying to get more information about me (see Luke’s comment below).

*Flinn:* After thinking about it more i am happy to conduct a interview through messages as i would rather not call for reasons. Just message me back when you are ready to do this and know that if you are a fed i will skin you alive and wear your skin as a suit.

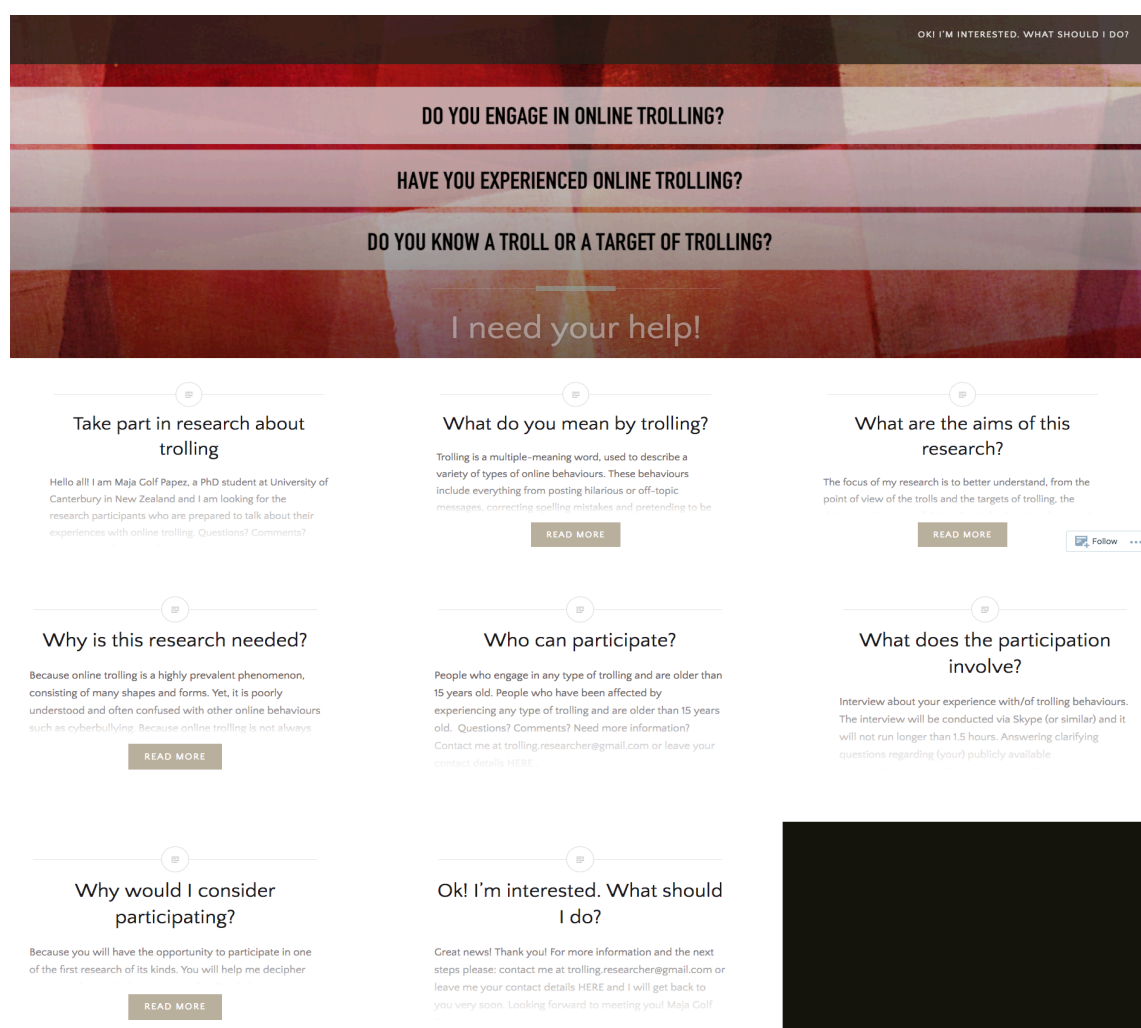
*Researcher:* I would love to chat with you. Messaging will be perfectly fine. . . . P.S. Oh and about skinning me alive. I have to warn you I am rather short – so I am not sure if you can use my skin for the suit – maybe you use it for shorts though ... :P Not a fed-no worries!

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*Luke:* “what reasons have i got to trust you. Do i have permission to trace your IP address to give me a seance of security”

To address the challenge of gaining collaborators’ trust I took the following measure. Following the advice of Allen et al. (2006) and Kozinets (2010), I provided the description of research on a webpage (see Figure 2). The webpage provided information such as what was the aim of the project and why would somebody be interested in participating in such research. I also included the presentation of the researcher, disclosing my name, surname, and university affiliation, in order to remove any motivation for the trolls to attempt to search for and publish my identifying information (i.e., to dox me). The webpage was not only helpful in the case of gaining potential collaborators’ trust, but it was also practical, as the link of the webpage allowed for easy posting and sharing.

Figure 2: Screenshot of research webpage



Gaining participants' trust was not a challenge only prior to the study but also during the interviews. Following the common advice in the literature (Arsel, 2017), I started the interviews with a warm-up question: "Can you tell me about yourself?" While such questions are typically used to build rapport and the responses to this question should be heavily probed (Arsel, 2017), I soon realized that it is not the best warm-up question for interviews on 'sensitive' topics such as trolling. The troll's responses to this question were either defensive or intertwined with trolling, as can be seen in the example below:

*Researcher:* Can you tell me about yourself? Anything that you are prepared to share with me - it can be your age, gender, hobbies, opinions, ...

*Flinn*: I am male I am a Nazi of Mongolian origin I am somewhere between the age of 5 and 30 depending on who I am trying to fuck. Hobbies hmmm i differentiate from the majority of rf [Raid Board] in the fact i have a life and i like to go out. Eh and i have been programming since a very young age. I study computer science at college. And in the middle of this conversation i am pretty sure no joke that my gf killed herself...

After the first set of interviews, I refined my interview protocol guide, moving the demographic question to the end of the interview and starting the interview with less personal questions.

Another challenge that arose from this study was related to following Latour's (2005, p. 133) advice that in tracing an actor-network "everything is data." That this study resulted in overwhelming amounts of data is not surprising considering that the research was conducted on multiple sites (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Yahoo News, Twitch), and included multiple forms of data (e.g., videos, screenshots, images, gifs, text). In addition, the online data is by nature complex and interlinked (e.g., conversations are constantly cross-posted, they occur privately and publicly) (Kozinets et al., 2014). I took several measures to address the difficulties with saving, sorting, categorising and archiving the collected material. A sub-optimal, albeit adequate, solution was to use NVivo 12 (Windows) as a data container. NVivo Capture—a Chrome plugin—enabled the quick capture of different social media postings and bringing them into NVivo. Not all data points could be stored in this software, however. Recordings of trolling on Twitch, for instance, could not be imported into Nvivo because of their size (e.g., some of them amounted to 2GB or more). While the complexity and messiness of the research could not be completely managed, the fieldnotes focusing on the enquiry itself (Latour, 2005) allowed me to regain a sense of control over my data collection.

Besides methodological challenges, *legal* ones arose during the study. One of the concerns was how to collect the data from commercial sites without infringing sites quite

prohibitive<sup>8</sup> content-related ownership rights written in their terms of use agreements (Allen et al., 2006). Against the suggestion of Allen et al. (2006), the platforms were not informed about my research activity. It was believed that data collection on commercial sites can be executed without the permission of these sites as per fair use copyright law; the collected data was used strictly for academic and research purposes, the data was collected manually (i.e, without automated data collection agents), and the focus of the research was not on the platforms but on the practices and behaviours that appear on them.

Finally, the present research was riddled with *ethical challenges*. One of the concerns, mentioned previously by Kozinets (2010), was how to find the appropriate balance between protecting participants from unexpected consequences of being exposed in a study, and simultaneously giving them credit for the content they have created. While some trolls, indeed, would not mind being named in this research with their real online names, I have decided to use the fictitious names for all the participants, mainly in order to protect other participating actors (i.e., targets) that were not asked for permission to be featured in this research. I have also avoided liking, following or subscribing to the content on the participants channels in order not to accidentally reveal my participants. An additional ethical challenge was connected with the research web-page; in particular with the ethicality of web-analytics tracking. Due to a low response to the research invitation I employed Google Analytics in order to see whether potential participants visited the research website and what kind of information they were most interested in. To protect the participants, I have used this information only to design a more effective research invitation and not for any sort of profiling. While, for instance, Google Analytics displayed the location

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<sup>8</sup> For example in Reddit user agreement it is explicitly stated that users are not allowed to “make unauthorized commercial use of, reproduce, prepare derivative works, distribute copies, perform, or publicly display Reddit content, except as permitted by the doctrine of fair use or as authorized in writing by us” (Reddit, n.d.).

of the visitors to the web-page, I have not used this information in my study. Furthermore, there was an ethical challenge related to the participants' requests. While trolls were not paid for collaborating in this research, some trolls, typically at the end of the interview, 'wanted' something in return. This 'something' could include anything from liking or sharing the trolling video to signing a petition. Luke, a member of Anonymous Group, for instance asked me to sign a petition against the US government changing a federal rule about the government's access to computers:

dude if you want to do something for me you could sign this petition it stops the fbi/cia hacking any pc anywhere all over the world they are currently trying to put this threw congress its a complete breach of peoples privacy.  
<https://noglobalwarrants.org/>  
 if you do then thanks ever signature helps  
 ps: hope you have everything you need if you need anything else just ask ;)

I have approached such requests on an individual basis, fulfilling the requests that I would have in any case had I not been asked by the participants.

Finally, my study raises some challenges in regard to ethical approval and informed consent. Getting ethical approval for my research was a challenge in itself. While the Human Ethics Committee, my supervisors and I deliberated how to protect the participants and the researcher, some participants, especially the mischievous ones, could sabotage our efforts. Upon sending the link to online informed consent, Ollie stated:

seems like something that could easily be forged lol  
 name, mail & ok button  
 now that is some top notch fact checking

Ollie's comment raises a question of how to find the balance between getting participants for research into sensitive topics and at the same time preventing participants subverting the informed consent form.

## 4.9 Summary

In summary, this chapter provides a detailed description of the methodological praxis. An actor-network theory approach as a repository of tools for thinking about and engaging with the world (Mol, 2010) was adopted to open the black boxes of online trolling. ANT was chosen for its emphasis on examining the enactment of activities and practices. To explore online trolling, this study used a practice-focused multi-sited ethnographic research approach, studying five different instances of trolling. Data collection included non-participant observation of trolling behaviours, in-depth interviews with the trolls, short electronic exchanges with the trolls and community managers and review of trolling-related documents. Data analysis was focused on the identification of the actors and their relations. Several ethical and research challenges have been encountered and more or less successfully addressed during the research process. Now it is time to present the findings. Chapter Five introduces different types of actors that participate in trolling. Next, Chapter Six presents the evolution, stabilisation and destabilisation of the network enacting trolling. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the nature of trolling.

## Chapter Five: Actors in Trolling Actor-Networks

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### 5.1 Introduction

This thesis aims to open the black boxes of trolling behaviours by examining the assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate these misbehaviours. The present chapter presents the actors involved in trolling. The actors are presented on two different levels of analysis. In the first part of the chapter, a brief overview of actors involved in each case study is provided. Each case study is visually mapped as an actor-network. The chapter then moves away from the presentation of case-specific actors to an examination of the actors on the aggregated level. Drawing on the examples from the single cases and external context data sources, the second part of the chapter presents and describes the categories of actors participating in trolling. *According with the ANT approach, trolling actors are described rather than discussed.*

### 5.2 Trolling actors: individual case view

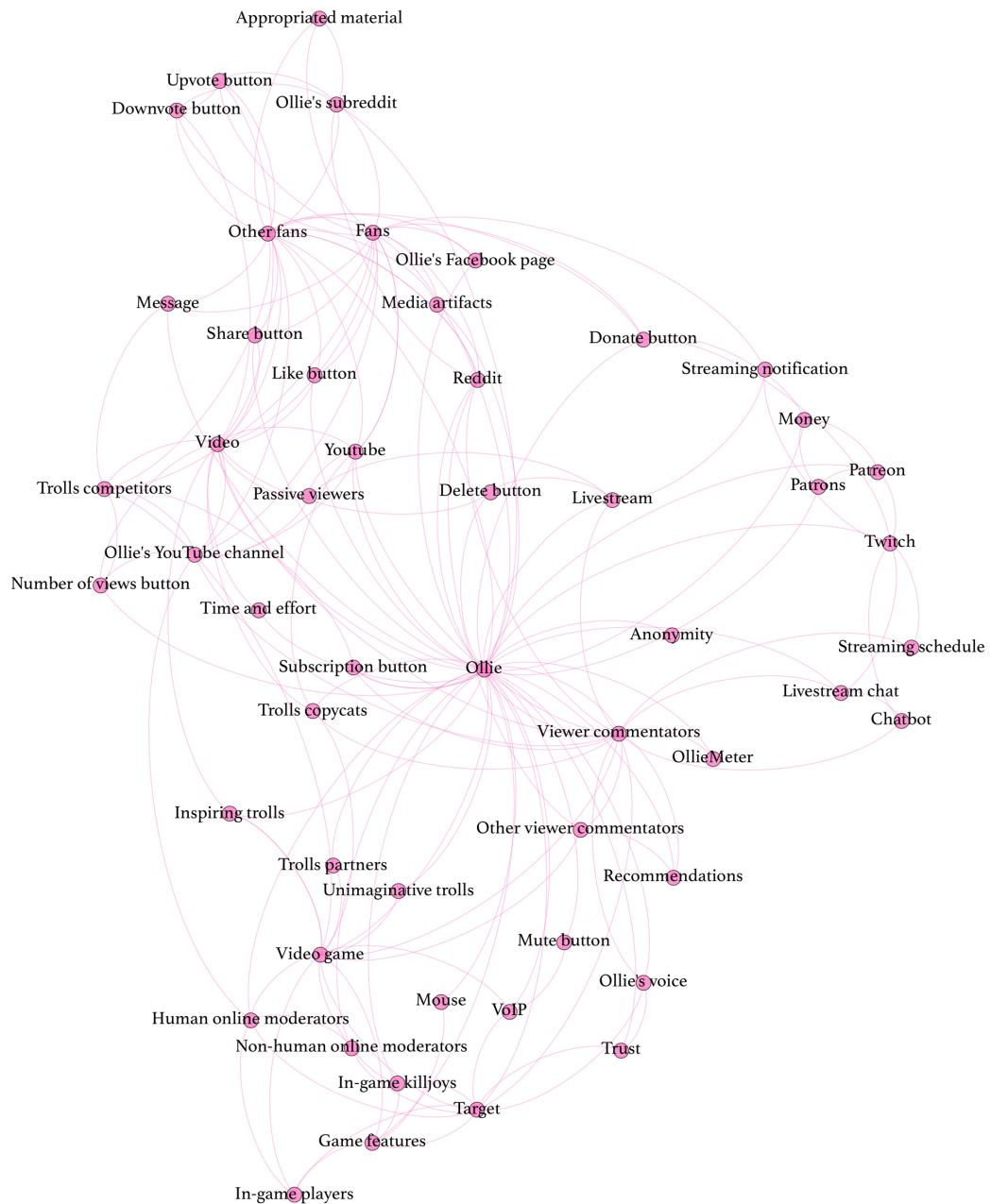
A collection of human and non-human actors is performatively joined in trolling. This section offers an insight into constellations of actors identified in each of the five case studies. The identified actors are depicted in case-specific actor-network maps (Figure 3: Actors performing in Ollie's actor-network, Figure 4: Actors performing in Alfie's actor-network, Figure 5: Actors performing in Jon's actor-network, Figure 6: Actors performing in Flinn and Antonio's actor-network, and Figure 7: Actors performing in Otto's actor-network), which are described below. The actors are written in *italics* and underlined for reasons of clarity.

### 5.2.1 Mapping Ollie's actor-network

Ollie is a troll in multi-player video games. Examples of the games where he was seen trolling include online virtual world Second Life and survival simulators Rust and DayZ. Within these games, he is interacting with other in-game players in a soft and trustworthy voice, looking for targets who would respond favourably to his trolling attempts. Occasionally, Ollie broadcasts his trolling in livestreams on Twitch. These livestreams are attended by Ollie's followers. Receiving a streaming notification, more than 1,000 people typically tune in within the first five minutes of his livestreaming. Some of the viewers are using the livestream chat to comment on Ollie's trolling. One of the most common questions in this chat is whether Ollie has or plans on having a streaming schedule. This schedule would allow the followers to know in advance when Ollie will be live. Viewer commentators are also asking for and demanding a channel subscription button, which would enable them to support Ollie by paying a small subscription fee. Some of the viewers are already financially supporting Ollie, donating him money through Patreon, a platform that allows content creators to get paid for their work by their patrons.

Some of Ollie's trolling get presented in the form of videos, the editing of which takes Ollie a lot of time and effort. These videos include the highlights of the livestreams or the content that Ollie recorded when not broadcasting. They are being posted on Ollie's Facebook page, on his subreddit or on his YouTube channel. These channels are the hub for Ollie's fans who use like, share, upvote, and downvote button to express their attitude towards the content created by Ollie or comments and content created by other Ollie's fans.

Figure 3: Actors performing in Ollie’s actor-network

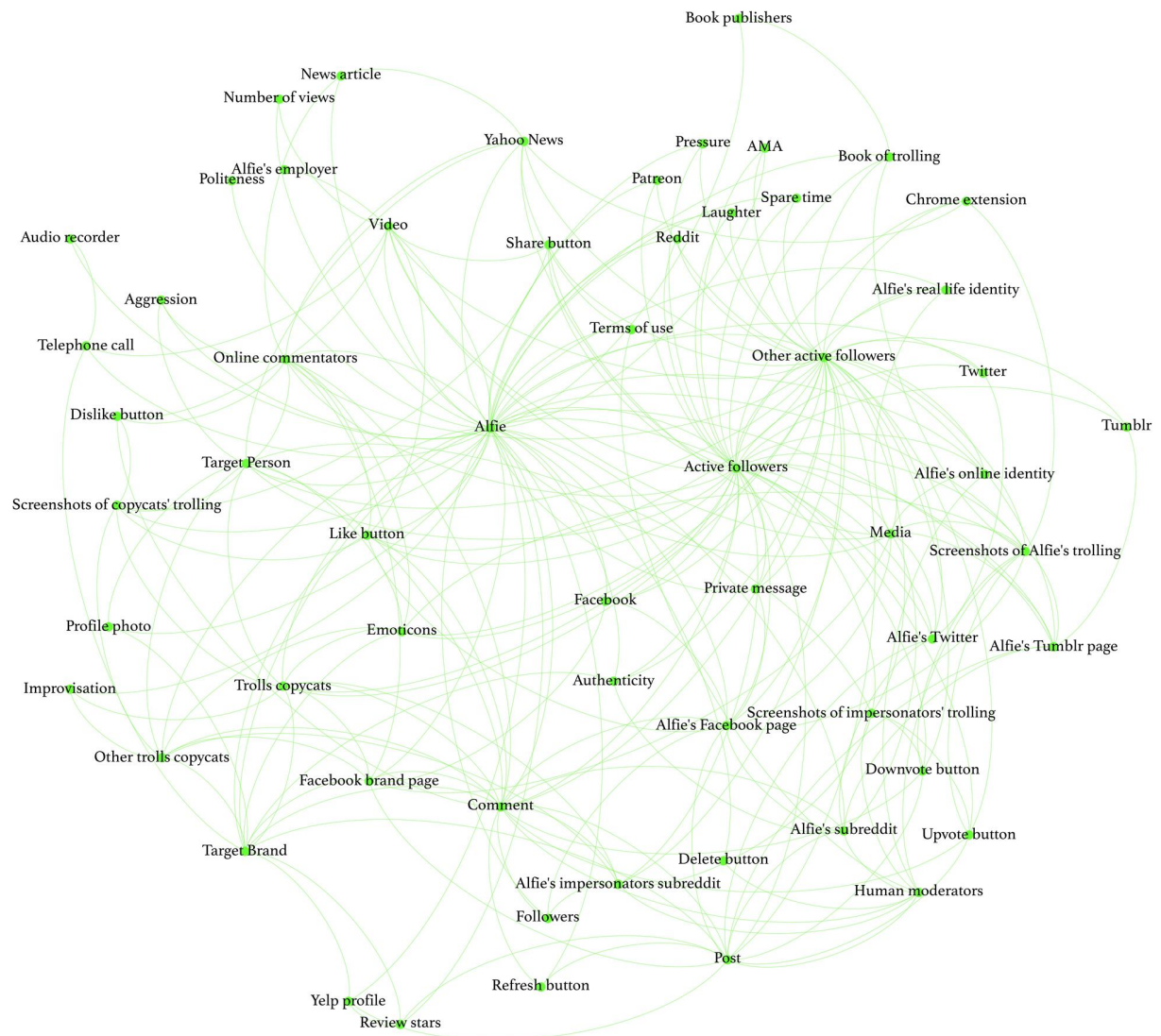


Note. Some of the actors (e.g., target, video game, message) should be multiplied. *For the visibility reasons, they are black-boxed and depicted just once* (e.g., with one node as opposed to several nodes). This is the case for all the visual accounts of actor-networks in this dissertation.

### 5.2.2 Mapping Alfie's actor-network

Alfie is a troll on Yahoo News, branded Facebook pages and Yelp profiles and an occasional prank caller. An important part of his online identity is his profile photo which suggests Alfie is an old man. The comments he posts are “harmless but horribly ill-informed”, as stated by one of Alfie's active followers. His trolling posts are always written in a polite tone. After receiving a favourable response from the target person or the target brand, Alfie takes a screenshot of trolling and posts it on his social media accounts: on Reddit, Tumblr, Facebook and Twitter. These sites are heavily visited by Alfie's followers; for instance, his subreddit has more than 350,000 subscribers and his Twitter more than 68,000 followers as of November 2017. As there are many troll copycats who try to troll in his spirit, and Alfie seeks authenticity, he and his followers regularly use the delete button to move the posts that were made by other trolls to Alfie's impersonators dedicated subreddit. Alfie's followers are using like and upvote button to express their positive attitude toward his trolling. Such positive attitude comes also from the mass media, which features Alfie's screenshots in the news articles.

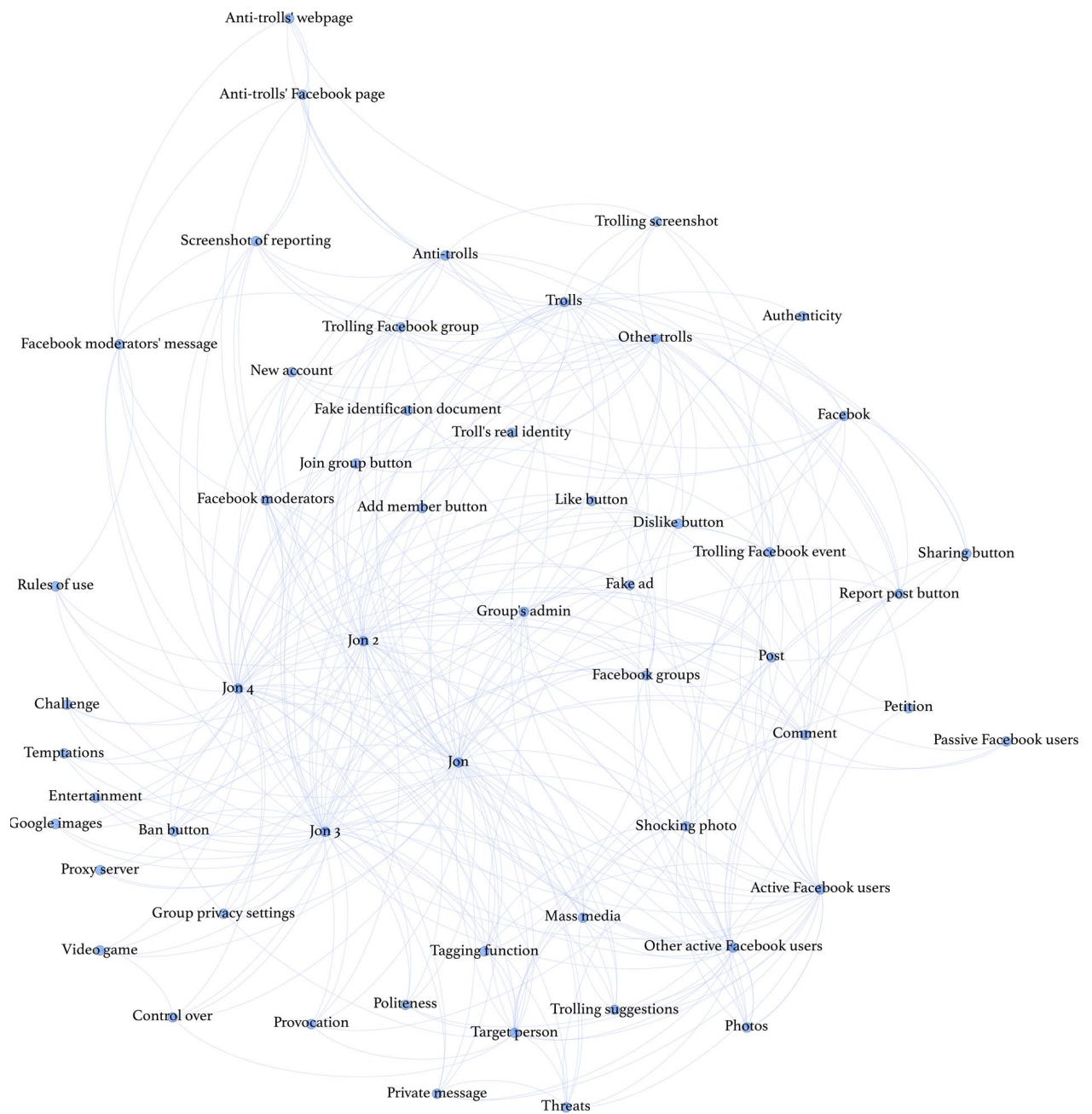
Figure 4: Actors performing in Alfie's network



### 5.2.3 Mapping Jon's actor-network

*Jon* trolls on *Facebook*; in *Facebook groups* and in *Facebook events*. In contrast to Alfie and Ollie who always troll under the same name, *Jon* uses several different *accounts* (i.e., *Jon2*, *Jon3*, *Jon4*), all being a variation of one name and surname. His style of trolling is built on *provocation*. With his *posts*, *comments* and *photos* *Jon* attempts to shock and anger *Facebook users*. To do so he is mobilising *other trolls* that he knows from a special *trolling Facebook group*; a group where *trolls* gather, plan their actions and showcase the *screenshots* of successful trolling. Some examples of Jon's trolling include posting distasteful *fake ads* in *Facebook* buy and sell groups and creating shocking *Facebook events*. Such posts receive the indignation on the part of the people who witness them. One of the typical *target person's* response strategies is to press the *dislike button* or the *report post button*, which informs *Facebook moderators* about the trolling content. While *Facebook moderators* use *ban button* to remove Jon's *account*, he uses *fake identification document* to create a new one. His *accounts* are being followed by the group of *anti-trolls*; audience members that created a special *anti-troll webpage*. On this webpage they are reporting about Jon's trolling and all the measures that they took to address it.

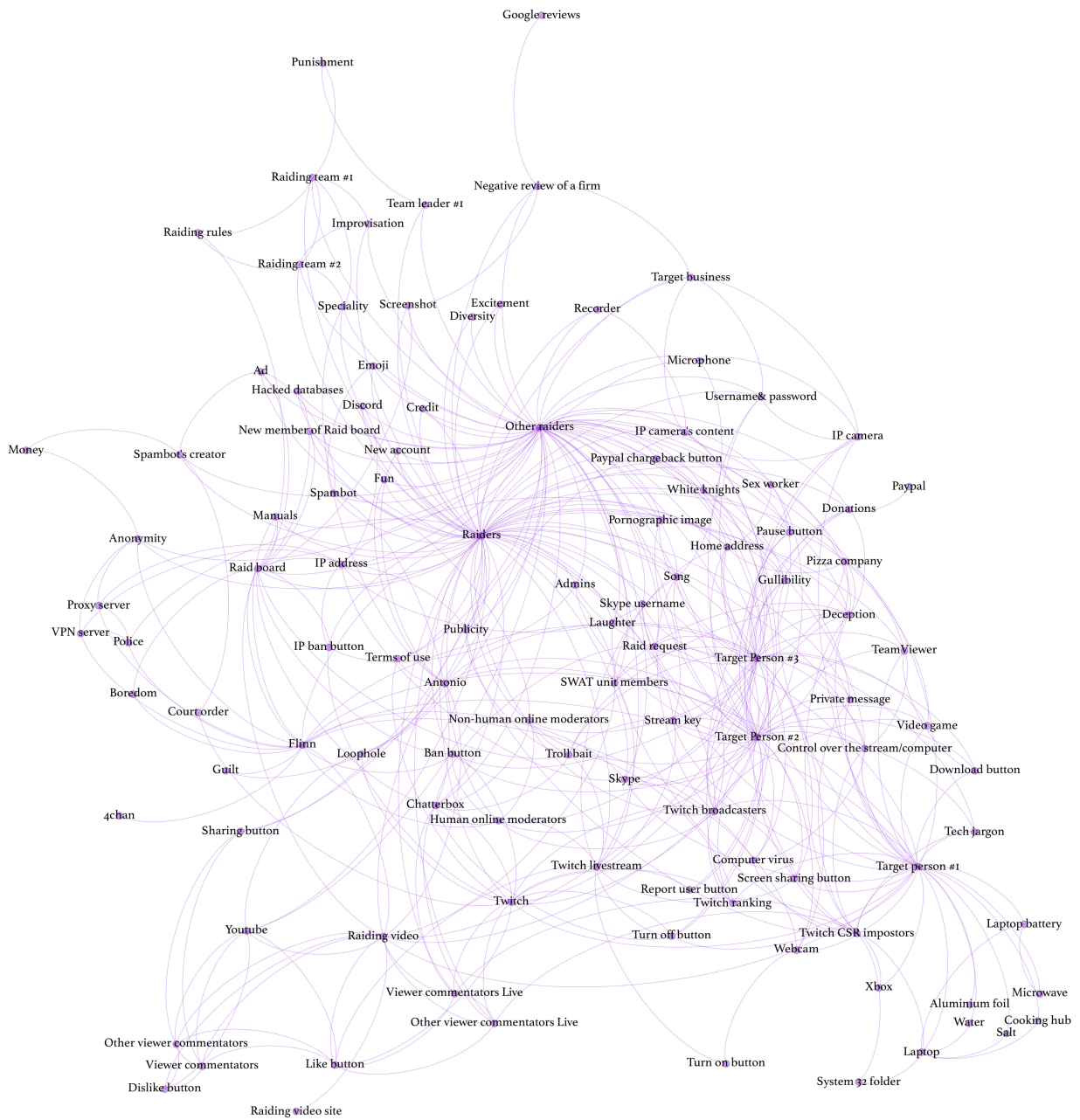
Figure 5: Actors performing in Jon's network



#### 5.2.4 Mapping Flinn and Antonio's actor-network

Flinn and Antonio are raiders. They are members of two different Raiding Teams, which formed on the discussion forum Raid Board. This forum is a place where raiders gather to organise and discuss raids and other trolling-like activities. As of 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, the Board had 77,079 members registered, with more than 7,000 users active in the past 24 hours. As stated in its official description, the forum “is concentrated in database leaks and any type of 4chan raidings such as Twitch raiding and prank calls.” The typical activities of raiders include using target person's Twitch stream key to take control over his or her live stream, social engineering that results in target person's ruining his or her computer equipment, accessing and interfering with unsecured private IP cameras of target businesses, and finding a Twitch streamer's home address and asking pizza company to deliver a high number of pizzas during the time when he or she is known to be streaming live. All these activities are livestreamed on Twitch or recorded and later edited into short videos. Other raiders and viewers use like, dislike, and sharing button to express their approval of the content. When aware, human and non-human moderators on the sites where raiding is organised (e.g., Raid Board), executed (e.g., Twitch) and shared (e.g., YouTube) use the dislike and ban button to react to the raiding. Target persons, on the other hand, use turn off button on Twitch to finish their livestreams prematurely.

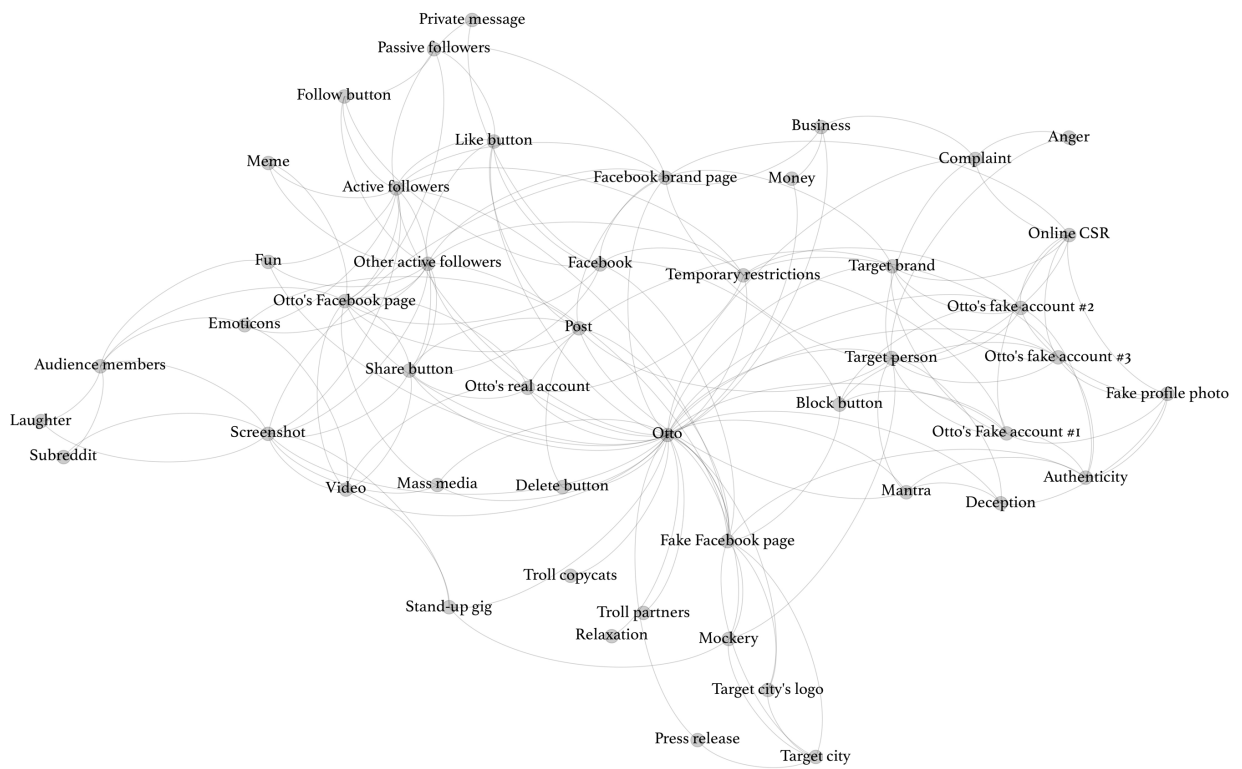
Figure 6: Actors performing in Flinn and Antonio's network



### 5.2.5 Mapping Otto's actor-network

Otto is a comedian who trolls on Facebook. Typically, his trolling includes creating a fake account, pretending to be a customer service representative, and using mockery to reply to the public complaint made by a target person on a Facebook brand page. To deceive his targets and convince them that his account is authentic, Otto uses a profile photo of a lady with a headset and typically finishes his posts with a mantra 'Hope that helps'. Otto posts the interactions of trolling on his trolling-dedicated Facebook page, where his followers gather, using like and share button to engage with the posted screenshots of trolling. The screenshots of his trolling have also been shared by the mass media and showcased in videos of Otto's stand-up gigs. Besides trolling customers, Otto trolls a city. On a special city-dedicated Facebook page he publishes mocking posts and status updates related to the city government issues. Facebook is aware of his trolling efforts, sending him temporary restrictions and hitting block button to prevent him from creating new pages. Businesses, on the other hand, are more receptive of Otto's trolling, approaching him with offers for TV shows and requests for trolling.

Figure 7: Actors performing in Otto's network



### 5.3 Assembled trolling actors: cross-case view

Across all cases and external data sources, 330 *actors* have been identified. In the process of analysis (see subsection 4.5 Data analyses) the actors that played similar role in trolling were sorted into categories.

This study has found that the actors involved in trolling can be classified into nine categories: *troll(s)*, *target(s)*, *medium*, *audience*, *other trolls*, *trolling artefacts*, *regulators*, *revenue streams*, and *assistants*. The description of each of these categories is provided in Table 10. The diagram visually displaying subcategories forming these categories of actors is presented in Appendix F. Examples of data illustrating each category of actors are discussed below and provided in Appendix G.

Prior to presenting the categories, it has to be mentioned that a particular individual actor (e.g., like button), when playing different roles in the performance of trolling, could be sorted into two categories (e.g., like button in some cases served as both a regulator and a revenue stream). Given that some actors were categorised under two or more categories, *the categories should not be seen as mutually exclusive*.

Table 10: Description of the categories of actors involved in trolling

Name of the category	Description of the category
Troll(s)	Performer(s) of trolling
Target(s)	Person(s) and business(es)/brand(s) that are experiencing trolling
Medium	Channel on which trolling occurs
Audience	Spectators of trolling watching asynchronously or synchronously
Other trolls	Other people engaging in trolling
Trolling artefacts	Materialised byproducts of trolling
Regulators	Actors engaged in managing online experience
Revenue streams	Financial and nonfinancial rewards associated with trolling
Assistants	Entities aiding in trolling

### 5.3.1 *Troll(s)*

The category of troll(s) includes information that relates to trolls as performers of trolling<sup>9</sup>. This category consists of characteristics related to (1) *troll's identity*, (2) *troll's psychographics* (i.e., personality, values, beliefs and interests), (3) *troll's skills*, and (4) his or her *belonging to a team* as opposed to trolling alone.

To start with the subcategory of an *identity*, all informants in this study tried to some extent to protect their real-life identities. To do so they all used online pseudonyms and fake profile photos. Staying anonymous was more important to some trolls than to others. Ollie, for instance, stressed that he wants to keep his online persona separate from his offline one. He stated:

I don't like being associated with what I do in real life, since I plan on actually doing things that are a whole lot more interesting than this. And to have people come up to me and say, hey you're that troll on youtube, is close to a nightmare.

Staying anonymous online was particularly important to raiders, whose trolling behaviours occasionally involved illegal activities. Raiders reported that they are using proxy servers or virtual private networks to mask their real IP addresses when trolling. Not all trolls, however, were so concerned with hiding their identities. Two informants, Alfie and Otto, both comedians, seemed to be particularly relaxed about being associated with their real-life identities. In fact, although trolling under pseudonyms, they presented themselves with their full names in the interviews they gave for the media. Alfie provided two explanations as to why he did not mind if others knew who was hiding behind his trolling character. First, he mentioned that his bosses approved his trolling:

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<sup>9</sup> For the sake of clarification, with the expression *troll* I refer to the person who has an inclination to troll. The expression troll does not denote that the person was or will be successful with his trolling.

I used to be very protective because I did not know if my bosses at work... I just did not want people to know who I was because it's just my business and I did not want to upset a boss who maybe just doesn't like my sense of humour. Amm... But yeah I am very comfortable with that now. At my current job they are very happy with what I do on the Internet. Cause it is a comedy job anyway and they think it's great.

Second, revealing his offline identity, helped Alfie to protect his online identity of a troll. In Alfie's words:

And when people started imitating me or there is this rumour that [Alfie's pseudonym] is like anon, just thousands of people, I just wanted to correct the record by saying: no, his name is [Alfie's real name and surname], for better for worse, he is one person, this is what he does. Just to keep it from turning into meme that I have no control over.

Overall, openness to disclosing personally identifiable information seemed to be connected with the type of trolling that one engages with and with the strength of the personal brand. Trolls engaging in a more distasteful forms of trolling and using several troll personas seemed to be more protective of their offline identities compared with trolls who were participating in funny trolling acts, using one troll persona and had a strong base of followers.

*Troll's psychographics* is another thematic subcategory that emerged from the analysis. This subcategory involved hobbies, personality traits and beliefs reported by the informants. Interests commonly mentioned by the troll informants were playing video games and coding. Some of the trolls mentioned their beliefs. Luke, a member of hacktivist group Anonymous, seemed to be guided by the political agenda. He stressed that I "need to understand that the system works for the one percent" and some people troll for political reasons. Other trolls expressed beliefs about what communication on the Internet was supposed to look like. In this regard, several informants expressed their annoyance about how brands communicate online. Otto, for instance, stated that brands should be more honest online, "stop giving [the] customers fake responses" and be more like a person. That

brands should be more authentic was suggested also by Alfie, who disapproved of the way brands communicate online with customers in a cynical and extremely intellectually insulting way. Brands “talk to people like children and also try to sound authentic and human but they are fucking brands,” explained Alfie.

Another troll’s characteristic that emerged from the data is *troll’s skillset*. One of the skills mentioned and observed in the case of individual trolls was the ability to hold back laughter. This skill was of particular relevance in trolling that included a voice component, as suggested by Eli. Recognising the actual target from the troll bait (i.e., person who is pretending to be a target) was another skill mentioned by several informants. Furthermore, trolls required knowledge of improvisation. Several trolls reported that successful trolls have to be able and willing to improvise as one never really knew how a particular trolling act would evolve. Finally, trolls mentioned skills related to online safety. Luke, for example, attributed the knowledge of how to set up anonymous accounts and hide his location to his hacker skills. One’s skillset seemed particularly important in the case of raiding, which was usually conducted in teams. Antonio reported how raiding teams consist of members with different specialities such as social engineering, planning the raid, finding a target, participating in DoS attacks, and code injections. Antonio also emphasised the importance of knowing the technical side to raiding and learning how to gather information quickly on the least amount of clues you get. To join a team, raiders had to sell their skills. To illustrate, in an application to join a team which would revive raiding, one of the raiders wrote:

I can bait streamers with kind words and grabify links. I am moral support, and can make alts and do what no one else wants to do unless those actions make me wanted by police, which in that case I get out.

This excerpt illuminates that both soft skills (e.g., one being a “moral support”) and hard skills (e.g., making alts) came handy in trolling.

Trolls also differentiated themselves in terms of whether they *acted alone or in groups*. As previously discussed, raids are usually done in teams. Typically, these teams consist of five to ten members, who agreed to take on a particular role. While teams were formed *ad hoc*, some had a more permanent nature. A special thread dedicated to forming teams was open on a Raid Board. Teams were being presented and raiders were invited to send applications to join a team. Raiders were not the only ones trolling in teams – some of the individual trolls had trolling partners as well. For instance, although the observations of Ollie’s trolling live suggested that Ollie is trolling alone, his public posts, especially the most recent ones on his channels, indicated the opposite. “I would like to create a team of people that have over 700 hours in Rust to do some serious mental damage, hit me up when interested,” was posted by Ollie, directly acknowledging that he had been planning on trolling with other people.

### 5.3.2 *Target(s)*

Targets are *consumers* and *businesses* that are experiencing trolling. Most of the observed trolling included consumers as a target. Trolling was experienced by the players of video games such as Rust and DayZ, by the users of the platforms Twitch and Facebook, and by the buyers of the brands such as Target, Doritos, Victoria’s secret and Pizza Hut.

Several of the informants had experiences with trolling businesses and brands. Prank calling firms was a typical raiding activity. In one of these prank calls, raiders called the firm McDonalds and convinced the employee to unintentionally pull the fire alarm. Other examples include calling the orthopaedic clinic to donate a limb or plastic surgeon clinic to make an appointment for the pet. Brands were trolled also on social media. Alfie mentioned that brands are “pretty low hanging fruit” since online “they tend to have to respond to everything” and they respond “with this lawyerly, ... condescending fake friendliness.”

Figure 8 illustrates how Alfie took advantage of this knowledge in communicating with Bush's Beans.

Figure 8: An example of Alfie trolling Bush's Beans

 **Bush's Beans** 20 hours ago · 

how come they dont do a refund for your beans

Like · Comment

 **Bush's Beans** Hi  - Thanks for reaching out to us. Please contact us at 1-800-590-3797 so we can get some more details on your refund request. 8 hours ago via mobile · Like

 store clerk made me pay for my own refund even though the beans had no flavor 6 hours ago · Like ·  2

 **Bush's Beans**  - Would you mind giving us a call at (800) 590-3797 or filling out our Contact Us form at [https://www.bushbeans.com/en\\_US/contact\\_us/index.jsp](https://www.bushbeans.com/en_US/contact_us/index.jsp). We would like to get some additional information from you to better understand your situation. 3 hours ago · Like

 Thank You the form asks for my personal info, can you just do the refund in my penpal acct 3 hours ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - We do not use Paypal. Please be assured that while we do ask for some personal information on our "Contact Us" page, we not do share that information with others. We would like to know more about your experience. If you wish to share, please contact us. Our offices are open from 8-5 Eastern time Mon-Fri. 50 minutes ago · Like

 well when i opened the bean can all the flavor popped out and all i could taste was the texture 2 seconds ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - There is specific information we need to have to try to help you. Please call us or fill out the Contact Us form. Otherwise, we cannot help you. 51 minutes ago · Like

 Thank You, grandson hooked up my skype so i will just call you from my computer 11 minutes ago · Like

 hello? 11 minutes ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - We are not on Skype so you will need to call us from a phone (cell phone or land line). Our phone number is (800) 590-3797. about an hour ago · Like

 then can i send a picture of the beans to your phone 2 seconds ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - if you will call us, we can help you share pictures with us. 2 hours ago · Like

 hi Thank You i called and your phone just said beep beep beep a few seconds ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - Our phones seem to be working. Please try again in the morning or try our Contact Us form. 11 hours ago · Like

 please get Call Waiting or a 2nd Telephone cause i keep getting the beeper signal 10 hours ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans**  - Please check the number you are dialing. You should never get a busy signal when calling us. We have multiple phone lines and voicemail for after hours calls. It may be easier if we call you. Can you give us a phone number where we can reach you? about an hour ago · Like

 looks like i forgot to dial the area code about an hour ago · Like

 where is that area code, is it long distance about an hour ago · Like

 **Bush's Beans** Our number is (800) 590-3797. It is a toll-free call. about an hour ago · Like

 is the whole number toll free or just the area code 37 minutes ago · Like

Besides being targets of trolling, businesses played two other roles in trolling: they were hosting trolling (e.g., as a medium) or offer an opportunity for trolling (e.g., as a prompt for trolling).

### 5.3.3 *Medium*

The category medium includes *channels on which trolling occurs*. Informant Eli commented that trolling is “present on every webpage which has an element of communication—private messages, forums, group chats, comment sections—the users of these forms of internet communications have all seen the troll.” The diversity of channels where trolling occurs has been echoed by my observations. I have observed trolling that happened in *video games*, on *online discussion boards*, in *chatterboxes*, on *comments sections* under the published articles, during gamers’ *livestreams*, on *Facebook pages*, in *private messages*, on crowd-sourced *review pages* and in *phone calls*.

Some of these channels predominantly use written communication (e.g., online discussion boards, comments sections), some oral communication (e.g., phone calls) and some use both forms (e.g., gamers’ livestreams). The commonality between all these channels is that they include *an online component*. For instance, video games, where trolling happened, have been played on consoles connected to the Internet. Furthermore, gamers’ trolls have livestreamed their gaming experiences or at least recorded them and uploaded them later in the form of a video. Likewise, trolling phone calls have been conducted over the internet (e.g., via Skype), livestreamed or shared online.

### 5.3.4 *Audience*

Audience relates to the spectators of trolling. These are *viewers*, *fans*, *media*, *friends*, and *upstanders*. Some of these actors attended trolling synchronously. Watching trolls livestream on Twitch would be an example of this. Other actors observed it asynchronously – seeing it

in the form of a recording or screenshot, for instance. The most common type of audience amongst all my informants was *viewers*. Some of these viewers were viewing trolling by choice. For example, more than 1,000 people typically tuned in within the first five minutes of Ollie's livestreaming of trolling people within video games, and his videos based on the livestreams had, on average, more than 500,000 views each while one of his videos received more than 10,000 shares and 1.5 million views. All the observed trolling did not receive this much attention. While the exact number of viewers was not always available, it can be expected that trolling was always done in the presence of viewers. For instance, while it cannot be said for sure how many people have seen the fake ad that Jon posted in the London buy and sell group, the fact that this group had more than 45,000 members suggests that at least some of these members have seen his posts. Such members witnessing trolling would be an example of viewers who did not voluntarily choose to observe trolling. Nevertheless, regardless of trolling being found spontaneously or deliberately, it was always done in the presence of other consumers or users.

Most of the viewers were lurkers. Some, however, adopted a more active role by commenting on the livestreams, videos, screenshots or real trolling posts. A part of this commenting was occurring on troll-dedicated social media sites or on Raid Board. Some trolls managed to build a strong base of *fans* – people who were liking and following their work. As mentioned before, Alfie is one of the trolls who had high numbers of supporters. Another is Otto, whose Facebook page had more than 200,000 likes and 190,000 followers as of November 2017. Besides viewers and fans, journalists were observing trolling, as evidenced in their reporting about trolling. Ollie, Alfie, Jon, Otto and trolls from Raid Board have all been featured in *mass media* articles.

Another type of audience member was *friends*. While some trolls kept their online trolling identity away from their friends, celebrity trolls reported that they shared trolling

content with their friends. Alfie stated that he was showing his new content to his friends, as they all had a very similar sense of humour.

Lastly, trolling was witnessed by *upstanders* – the people who upon observing trolling got somehow involved. Ollie, for instance, reported how he was going after a particular target and then got recognised by another person who told Ollie and the target person that he knew he was a troll. In raiding community, the upstanders were called White Knights. One of the raiders described them as people “who make a deliberate attempt at ruining a raid by telling the target that he/she is being raided and not to listen to the raiders.” While most of the observed upstanders intervened in the trolling acts that they encountered by chance, some upstanders felt they were called to do something about the particular troll or trolling. The informant with the strongest base of such upstanders was Jon. His upstanders created a webpage, where they are listing Jon’s accounts, posting trolling screenshots and reporting about the actions they took to prevent Jon from further trolling. Compared to upstanders in other observed trolling, Jon’s upstanders exhibited higher effort in intervening in trolling acts. This observation may be explained by the finding that Jon’s upstanders were previously targets of his trolling.

### 5.3.5 *Other trolls*

Other trolls are other people engaging in trolling. These are *role models*, *copycats*, *competitors*, *dissociative trolls*, and *troll baits*. All of the informants were aware of other trolls; talking about them in both a positive and a negative light.

A subcategory of other trolls that was perceived positively was *role models*. Each interviewed troll mentioned at least one other troll or trolling group who he or she is following and admiring. During the chat, for instance, Flinn mentioned a couple of times a particular team of trolls. Once prompted if he is a member of this team he responded: “Nah

I wish. I had to stick with second place.” When asked what made that team so special, Flinn stated:

They are responsible for the greatest raids  
 cos they all had a position  
 and they all stuck to it extremely well  
 and everyone in the team is well respected and old members  
 they just had something special about them  
 They were all very good at “social engineering”

Similarly, other trolls mentioned other role models whose trolling style they like and admire. *Troll copycats* are the other side of the coin. These are trolls who copy or imitate a particular troll. Otto stated: “[t]here are a ton of copycat pages in at least four languages from people doing the same thing.” Otto was not the only troll that had been copied. In fact, all the ‘celebrity trolls’ had trolls who adopted their trolling style. They did this in an obvious way either by using the same name as the troll they were trying to echo or by using the similar style in the same media. These troll copycats were found in the ‘wild’ or on troll-dedicated social media. One of the informants, Alfie, even had a special subreddit called non[Alfie], intended for the postings of the screenshots of his copycats.

The role models and troll copycats in some cases overlap with another subcategory of other trolls – these are *troll competitors*, competing with the trolls for the targets and the attention of the audience. Some of these trolls were perceived positively. Alfie, for instance, talked about all other successful trolls in a praising way. Ollie, on the other hand, gave the impression that he was not fond of a particular troll. When I asked if he could recommend me any troll I should talk to he said that there is one troll he would not recommend at all. He explained and warned me:

[XY] is terrible lol. Very low effort . . . He started a lot earlier than I did, I started to overtake him in subs & views. Once he noticed that, he accused me of faking my views & subscribers . . . Now you must wonder, how is any of this interesting for me when Im doing the interview,

when he all over the sudden stops liking you for whatever reason he has, he will publish everything about you. . . . so just after I made my video [“Title”] and someone from kotaku featured me, he started getting pissed off and posting chat logs about her on twitter . . . anyways, up to you if you want to interview him . . . would really advice against it xD

Ollie’s troll competitor could qualify also as an example of so-called *dissociative trolls*. These are trolls that one does not want to have anything with. Ollie, for instance, explained how he did not want to call himself a troll as trolling has been associated with “people on YouTube making videos where they just make people mad over VOIP in games like Call of Duty” and he thought “that’s some of the most uninspired & boring things you can do.”

Another identified subcategory of other trolls is *troll baits*. These were trolls who pretended to be a target in order to attract trolls. “They make themselves easy target for ignorant and inexperienced trolls who, craving for experience, will attempt to grab this low-hanging fruit,” was explained by Eli. Troll baits were a subject of discussion also on Raid Board where raiders warned each other about the people who “feigns naivete or weakness with the intention of becoming a target.”

### 5.3.6 *Trolling artefacts*

The expression trolling artefacts in this study refers to materialised byproducts of trolling. Six categories of trolling artefacts have been identified: *screenshots*, *livestreams*, *videos*, *appropriated materials*, and *mass media articles* reporting about trolling.

*Screenshots of trolling* refer to the photos of trolling. These photos include a conversation between the troll and the target and do not include rich contextual information such as the location or time of posting. The screenshots are taken by trolls or other trolling actors. The difference between the screenshots taken by the trolls and other actors is that the trolls usually screen grab just the posts that epitomise the successful trolling. Alfie, for instance, explained his decision to take a screenshot or not saying that

“[R]eally it comes down to whether or not a successful joke happened.” Alfie stressed that he screengrabs just the trolling conversations that make him laugh. His followers, on the other hand, take a screenshot of any of the trolling that involves Alfie’s name.

*Livestreams* and *videos* convey trolling that is not textual in nature. Livestreams of trolling are live video broadcasts of trolling. From all the trolls in the dataset, Ollie and raiders were the ones making use of the livestreams. These streams varied in length. Raiders’ streams were usually short and covered the trolling of one person. These streams started when raiders found a potential target. Ollie’s streams, on the other hand, were longer, with some of them lasting more than two hours, and included several targets getting trolled. All of the observed livestreams were broadcast on the platform Twitch, and none of them was scheduled in advance. Some of the livestreams were edited and transformed into videos. Videos of trolling included the highlights of the particular trolling. For instance, one short video (usually around five minutes long), encapsulating the best trolling conversation would come out of more than Ollie’s two hours long livestream. Not all videos were based on the livestreams, however. Videos of prank calls would be one such example. Even though these videos could be presented in the audio format only, the informants re-presented them in the form of video in order to increase their shareability.

Another trolling artefact is the so-called *appropriated materials*. This sub-category includes the examples of trolling materials being transformed and reshaped by actors other than the trolls. Appropriated materials were noticed only in the cases of trolls with a strong base of followers. One example of this actor would be the ringtone that a fan made from a siren that Ollie used for trolling.

The last identified sub-category of trolling artefacts was *mass media articles* reporting about trolling. These articles typically took the form of feature articles, where a troll and his or her work were presented along with editorials in which journalists reflected on the

phenomenon of trolling. In the media reports trolling was often conflated with cyberbullying and harassment.

### 5.3.7 *Regulators*

Regulators are actors engaged in managing online experience. Seven categories of regulator emerged from the analysis. These are *interaction buttons*, *moderators and admins*, *police and court*, *rules*, *anonymity and privacy settings*, and *other regulators*.

*Interaction buttons* were the most recurring regulator in the dataset. These are the buttons that one presses to conduct a particular action oriented toward another user's content (i.e., social media buttons) or toward the computer (operating buttons). While social media buttons regulated the experience between the users, operating buttons controlled the experience between the user and the computer. Examples of social media buttons included buttons such as like, dislike, delete, upvote, downvote, share, report post, and ban button. Some of the social media buttons such as IP ban button were available only to pre-selected users, typically the sites' moderators or admins. Operating buttons, on the other hand, were available to everyone. Turn off button, for instance, enabled a targeted Twitch streamer to turn off his computer, hastily finishing the livestream. A similar function was played by close window button. Other examples of operating buttons include the mute button, which disabled one's audio transmission, and the pause button, which put a livestream temporarily on hold. While social media buttons were evident in all my cases, operating buttons were prominent in the trolling that was more than just textual in nature.

*Moderators and admins* are two other types of regulator represented in all the observed sites (i.e., Twitch, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo News, Raid Board). While the responsibility of both the moderators and admins lay in maintaining order online, these two types of trolling actors differed in their capabilities. Moderators were regular users whose

job was to oversee the discussion or other communication activity on a particular online place (e.g., on a particular subreddit, Twitch channel or Facebook Group). As Twitch FAQs states: “Moderators (Mods) ensure that chat is up to the standards of the Broadcaster by removing offensive posts and spam that detracts from conversations.” Beside removing trolling posts, moderators were seen sending a warning to the trolls. In their work, moderators were usually “left alone by the admins as long as they [did] not violate Reddit rules or allow abuses of those rules,” was pointed out by one of Reddit moderators. The role of admins was to enforce the sites’ terms of rules and to execute the most severe punishments such as IP banning the troll’s account. On all the observed sites, with an exception of Facebook brand pages, moderators did their jobs voluntarily in contrast to admins who were paid employees of the company that owns a particular service (e.g., Admins employed by Facebook, Twitch, Reddit). However, the position of moderator was associated with a special honour, as moderators had to be selected for this job. This was exemplified in the public post of Raid Board’s owner, who said that the forum is always on the lookout for new staff members, “but the requirements are high and few are cut out for the job.” That moderating necessitates high commitment on the part of the users was evidenced in the requirement that Raid Board’ moderator should “be willing to spend at least 3 hours online a day actively moderating, if needed.”

Besides “active moderation” on the part of people, trolling content was regulated also by non-human online moderators. These are automated online moderators, scripts, algorithms, bots and other technological tools that detected inappropriate behaviour and acted on it. While non-human moderators were described in the official documents of platforms, their application in practice was difficult to spot. Furthermore, observing trolling content that had been moderated it was hard to say with certainty whether it was moderated by a person or a bot. For instance, on Reddit a deleted trolling comment was replaced by the word [removed] and by no other explanation how this comment got removed. The presence

of auto moderators was most obvious in the case of trolling livestreams, where the speed of moderation suggested that this act was of an automated nature and on Twitch chat where automated moderators and their actions were clearly marked, as can be illustrated in the excerpt from Ollie's Twitch chat:

[XY]: <message deleted>

*Nightbot*: ReflinkTV -> That hurt you more than it hurt me. [stop spamming caps] [warning]

The Nightbot is one of the commonly used third-party provided bots that users of the Twitch and YouTube channels employed to fully or partially fulfil the duty of a moderator. On Reddit, as one of the moderators pointed out this task was done by so-called AutoModerator, that “automatically flagged and/or removed [problematic content].”

While moderators and admins control users' experience online, *police and court* address trolling in the physical world. These two actors were not mentioned by all the informants but mainly by the informants who have engaged in activities that may be considered illegal. For instance, when I asked an entertaining troll Alfie whether he had ever been sanctioned for trolling, he mentioned relatively light sanctions such as being warned by the moderators or being banned from the site. However, when I posed the same question to Luke, who is an Anonymous<sup>10</sup> member, he answered that “[n]o because there are very few ways to be *prosecuted* for trolling [emphasis added].” While not having personal experiences with police or court, the informants reported about other trolls who were prosecuted and even arrested for trolling.

*Rules* are another subcategory of the regulators. These rules define what is allowed and what is prohibited on a particular page or in a particular situation. Location-specific rules were defined in the terms-of-use and community guidelines. For instance, Alfie

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<sup>10</sup> Anonymous is an international group of activists and hacktivists.

mentioned that on Yahoo News one is “not allowed to swear, use the profanity . . . and otherwise you know harass, threaten or intimidate.” Some rules were associated with the activity of trolling itself. For instance, raiders from Raid Board had to follow several rules when raiding. One set of the rules related to raiding in teams. For instance, one of the rules was that each team has to create a banner which they put up at the end of the raid (e.g., once they hijacked somebody’s live stream on Twitch). In addition, the rules prohibited team wars. “This also means no ddosing or doxing other teams. Save that for the livestreamer,” was written in an online thread describing the rules.

Another subcategory of regulators is *anonymity and privacy settings*. While anonymity refers to online users trying to hide their identity, privacy refers to people trying to limit access to some information or place. As previously discussed, trolls typically guarded their anonymity. However, they were not always protective of their privacy, as can be witnessed in their openness to accept new people in their closed Facebook groups or on Raid Board. Anonymity and privacy were mobilised also by the targets. For instance, the target forgetting to secure the IP camera with a non-obvious username and password had made the target open for IP camera trolling – the type of trolling where trolls access the cameras and livestream the content.

Lastly, *other regulators* include all the other responses to trolling that trolls received or targets made. Examples include petitions against trolling and threats to trolls. To illustrate, Jon’s Valentine’s cat punching event was countered by the petition of 20,000 animal-lovers, who urged Facebook to remove the page. Jon also reported that he was receiving direct threats from the Facebook users.

### 5.3.8 *Revenue streams*

The category of actors named Revenue streams includes financial and nonfinancial rewards associated with trolling. Six categories of revenue streams emerged out of data analysis. These are *interaction buttons*, *call-to-action buttons*, *money*, *business proposals*, *publicity*, and *pleasant emotional states and experiences*.

As previously discussed, *interaction buttons* help users regulate their experience with other users' content and with the computer. Besides serving as regulators, some of these buttons played a role of revenue streams. The most obvious examples were like, upvote, and share button, which troll's followers on troll's dedicated social media used to appreciate the troll's content. In addition, the role of revenue streams was played by the buttons that were more negative in nature – for instance, dislike, downvote and ban button. Some informants felt rewarded by targets, upstanders or moderators hitting these buttons to express their negative attitude toward the posted content.

Another type of revenue streams are so-called *call to action buttons* (henceforth CTA buttons). These are buttons that directly invite the viewer to do something. Subscribe, follow, donate, and watch now buttons are typical examples of CTA buttons. Apart from follow button, these buttons are not automatically provided by the platforms. For instance, on Twitch only invited streamers who satisfy certain criteria (e.g., minimum hours of streaming or number of followers) get access to a subscription button. Amongst my informants, Ollie was offered to become a Twitch partner and get a subscription button. This button thus by itself served as a reward for Ollie having an active channel. The other side of the coin is that these buttons communicated to trolls the exact number of people viewing, following, subscribing, or donating money. These buttons were also associated with bringing in the *money*. For instance, once Ollie's videos received more than 10,000 views, they became eligible for ads. Ollie shared with his followers that he got "100 bucks for

1,3 mill views in August”, confirming that his trolling videos were a source of income. Another example of CTA buttons bringing money is the donate button – followers of celebrity trolls have been using this button to donate money to trolls. These donations were channelled through Patreon, an online service which enables various types of content creators to be paid for their content by people supporting their work. Ollie and Alfie were both sharing their content on Patreon. Ollie, having 258 patrons as of November 2017, for \$5 or more per month offered access to the patron-only videos, content that got cut from Twitch channel, and updates on projects. Alfie, on the other hand, having 92 patrons as of November 2017, offered three different packages. The most popular was \$1 or more per month package which offers new and frequent weekly trolling content. Two other packages were “Visual goofs for the well-heeled \$3 spender”, giving “exclusive VIP ACCESS to [his] fresh comics and other original ‘art’”, and \$5 per month worth access to audio goofs such as “audio of [his] narrated stories, stupid songs, prank calls, etc.” In total, Alfie reported he was gaining \$184 per month from his patrons. Trolls such as Alfie and Ollie were able to expect to receive this or higher income every month, as Patreon is a recurring funding.

Some revenue streams were less certain. *Business proposals* – these are offers that businesses make to trolls – were often associated with the promise of income. Ollie, Alfie, and Otto all reported that they had received proposals for collaboration from various businesses. These proposals included requests for trolling or requests to report about trolling. One example of the latter would be Alfie being approached by a book publisher inviting him to write a book about his trolling.

*Publicity* is another subcategory of revenue streams. A request to participate in Ask me Anything Sessions (so-called AMA) on Reddit, given to Alfie, is a manifestation of the publicity given to the trolls. Furthermore, as mentioned before, some of the trolls and their trolling have been featured in the press. In one case the media company even awarded one

of my troll informants with an award for being an influential person on the internet. Another award—mark of recognition for trolling—was the Reddit’s award for the most inciteful comment.

The last type of revenue stream that emerged out of the data analysis was *pleasant emotional states and experiences* such as a feeling of thrill, having fun, relief of boredom and relief of tension. For Jon, for instance, trolling was a way to entertain himself and relax after work:

I’ve never been one for watching tv, done all the video games, was playing call of duty, and injured my arm (not playing xbox) so couldn’t play for months – and wound up doing this. It’s just entertainment, or a way of winding down after work. – for me anyhow.

The ‘fun element’ of trolling was not mentioned only in the interviews with the trolls, but came across also during live observations of trolling, where trolls were laughing out loud and seemed cheerful and in good spirits. The entertainment aspect was often paired with relief of boredom. As Flinn commented: “Raiding gives me something to do/laugh at.” Besides having fun and killing boredom, trolling rewarded trolls by providing an avenue to vent frustrations. This can be observed in the case of Otto who in the media interview talked about how trolling helped him cope with his job of customer representative:

I think it stemmed from the frustration of having to work in customer-facing positions being forced to wear a fake smile and be polite to customers, regardless of how entitled or unreasonable or even abusive they are. It was a good way to lighten up what can be a very stressful job.

Otto was not the only informant, mentioning the ‘therapeutic’ value of trolling. Several other informants reported how they engaged in trolling to blow off some steam.

### 5.3.9 Assistants

The last identified category of actors was assistants; these are entities, actively or passively and knowingly or unknowingly aiding in trolling. Four sub-categories of assistants have been identified: *hardware*, *software*, *resources* and *collaborators*.

*Hardware* refers to the physical items needed for or involved in trolling. One of the most obvious actors in the hardware sub-category is a computer. Other examples include a computer mouse, which Ollie pretended he did not know how to use, and computer camera, which a target used during livestreaming of his or her content. Another representative of hardware is a physical recorder that Alfie used to record his prank calls.

In the most general sense, *software* includes computer programs and software products that help in trolling. This category was well represented in my dataset. Three views of software as an actor emerged out of the analysis. The first referred to functions and features of the software, allowing trolls to do something. Examples include video games having VoIP function, allowing trolls to communicate with the targets and Paypal's chargeback button, which enabled raiders to give donations to the targets and then claim back the money. Another example is TeamViewer – a program that allowed raiders to get remote access to a target's computer. Furthermore, the refresh button on the internet browser enabled trolls such as Alfie to see whether the targets had replied. Lastly, some software solutions helped trolls to protect their privacy. Virtual Private Network or VPN is one such tool that, in the words of one of the raiders, “masks your real IP with a different IP so nobody can know your real location.”

Second, software played the role of communication channel. Communication channels did not serve only as places where trolling happens but also assisted in trolling. Raiders, for instance, organised their trolling attacks on Skype. Recently Skype was being

replaced by Discord, which was perceived as “safer to use” than Skype. Chatterbox on the Raid board or Trolling Facebook group are another two examples of the platform aiding in trolling, as they both served as places where trolls gathered and organised and discussed their trolling activities. Such channels played an important role in the planning phases of trolling.

Thirdly, some software applications could be called malware. This sub-category included actors that were designed to directly and autonomously interfere with the computer or online service’s normal functioning. Raiders were the ones mentioning this type of assistant. Flinn, for instance, reported that he was writing computer viruses that when loaded on a target’s computer ran against the target’s wishes. Another example of malware assistants is a spambot, that raiders used to flood a particular chatterbox on Twitch.

Another sub-category of the assistants was named *resources*. This sub-category included the actors that were designed or employed to catch the targets. Examples include tech jargon that trolls used to confuse the target, IP address that trolls used to identify the location of the target, fake identification document that helped in creating new accounts on Facebook and shocking photo that Jon, for instance, used to cause indignation on the part of the potential targets. A commonly used resource employed by trolls were also trolling guidelines. In these guidelines, trolls advised others on how to troll. Eli, for example, published online a trolling tutorial titled “The Art of Trolling.” The tutorial, “based heavily on Sun Tsu’s Art of War” covered content such as how trolls could deceive the target, set bait, recognize counter-trolls and anti-trolls, and where were the best places to troll. Similar content was covered in guidelines intended for raiders. Under the tab “Tutorials” on the Raid Board, raiders could find a plethora of different guidelines for trolling. One of the most visited threads was the dox tutorial, which in detail described how a troll might find the identifying information such as name, phone number, address, and social security number

of a specific person. Other examples of tutorials, all practical in nature, included “How to make a thruway google account without phone verification”, “how to get bots on social media”, and “[t]ips to staying anonymous online.”

*Collaborators* are the last type of Assistants that emerged out of the data analysis. In contrast to troll partners, who were trolls themselves, collaborators represented entities who were not trolls but by some circumstances got associated with trolling. Collaborators consisted only of businesses. Alfie’s employer, who appreciated what Alfie did in his free time, is one example of a collaborator. Another one is businesses which raiders contacted under false pretences in the process of trolling. Sex workers or pizza delivery personnel dispatched to a target’s address would be two such examples.

## 5.4 Summary

This chapter shed light on the assemblages of actors that participate in trolling. The visual accounts of five actor-networks, corresponding to five case studies, provided the first insight into the actors involved in trolling. Examples of these include trolls, targets, Facebook page, streaming notification, dislike button and authenticity. Some of the actors were appearing in all case studies (e.g., target and troll), while others were case-specific (e.g., computer virus and aluminium foil appeared only in Flinn and Antonio’s case). Taking into consideration all identified actors across all case studies and the roles the actors played in trolling, nine categories of actors that participate in trolling have been identified. These are: troll(s), target(s), medium, audience, other trolls, trolling artefacts, regulators, revenue streams and technical assistants. While this chapter introduced and illustrated these actors, the next chapter, Chapter Six, moves on to discuss what these actors actually do in trolling.

## Chapter Six: Assembling Trolling

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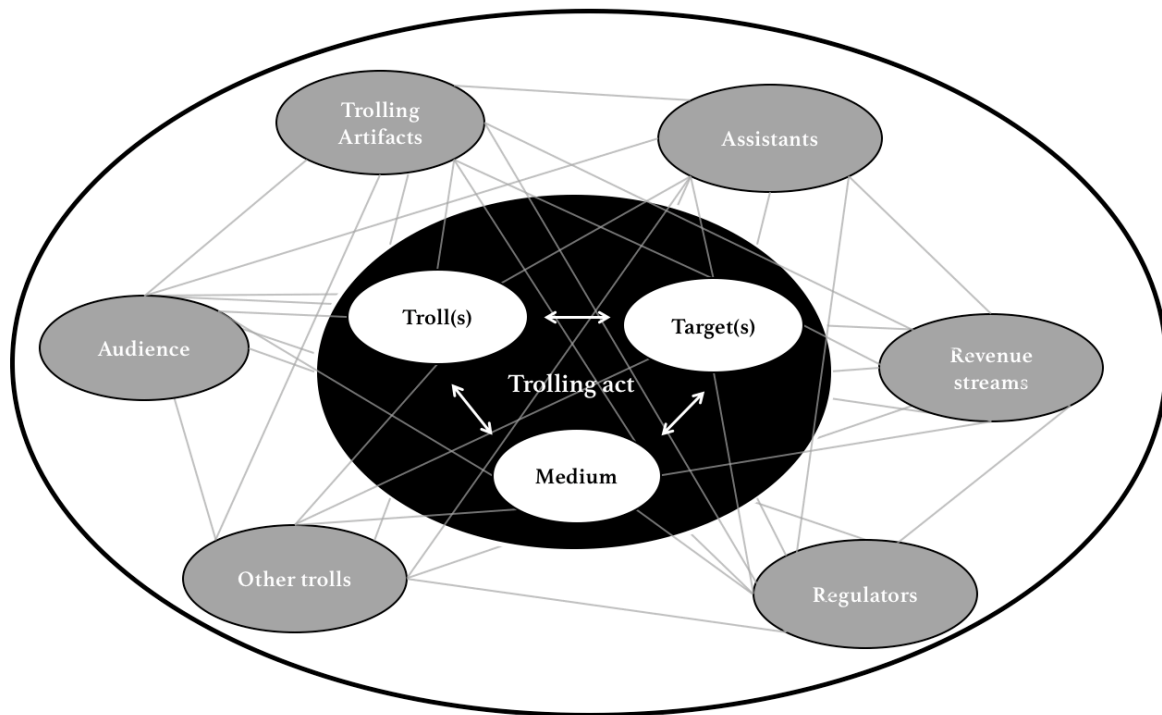
### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter Five introduced the actors involved in trolling. Now it is time to discuss what these actors do and how their ‘acting’ makes the difference within the actor-network and influences the phenomenon of trolling. The present chapter is divided into four parts. It starts with an overview of the trolling actor-network. Then I discuss how the networks performing trolling evolve. Next, I explain how the associations between the actors positively influence trolling behaviours. Finally, I present the ways in which associating actors destabilise networks and spoil trolling acts. The findings are presented from the perspective of trolls, who have served as a point of departure in the data collection and analysis.

### 6.2 Trolling network-network: A bird’s eye view

Trolling actor-network is a network of heterogeneous actors, playing different roles in the manifestation of trolling. Three actors were necessary for any trolling act to manifest; these were *troll*, *target* and *medium*. These three associating actors represented a trolling act and were treated as an individual actor in itself. In other words, these three actors were punctualised (Callon, 1990) representing the network within the network (see Figure 9). Therefore, we can talk about trolling not only as an example of actor-network but also an example of network-network. Other actors – apart from a troll, target, and medium – were associating with the punctualised actor (i.e., trolling act) and the individual actors. Some of these associations influenced trolling in a favourable way, sustaining the network, while others influenced it in a less favourable way, disrupting the network. These arguments are developed and supported in the sections that follow.

Figure 9: The trolling network-network (bird-eye-view)



### 6.3 The evolution of a trolling actor-network: the manifestation of a trolling act

An assemblage of three interacting actors—troll, target, and a medium—has to be enacted for a trolling act to manifest. Each of these actors has its own interests or programs of actions, which get aligned in the process of trolling. Trolls, in the simplest form, want to troll. They wish to have fun and to relieve their boredom. In addition, they want to have control over the situation. Online users (future targets of trolling) want to spend their time online. They wish to share their opinion and to correct people who need to be corrected. Some targets just want to do their job well, as it was witnessed in the case of online brand community managers who were indefatigably responding to trolling comments. Also, targets want to recognise the troll. Medium, such as online social media platform wants to have visitors, as this keeps their communities alive. As Patrick O’Keefe, an experienced online community manager, said in his podcast: “We don’t want to have a long banned list of people that can’t

come to the community because it means that we have less activity in the community itself” (2017). The medium also, generally, wants to create a good experience for their users.

For trolling to occur or in other words for trolls to fulfil their programs of action, trolls form alliances with the medium and the target. The first one to get enrolled into the trolling network is the *medium*. When asked how I should start trolling, Luke replied: “OK so the first thing you would want to do is find your trolling platform where do you think the easiest place to troll for you would be.” In choosing “the easiest place” for trolling the trolls applied several criteria. First, trolls consider the *technical affordances of the medium*—these are the ways the medium can be used, determined by the properties of the medium (i.e., material functionalities) and the capabilities of the trolls (Norman, 2013). For example, Jon mentioned that Facebook is great for trolling because “it only takes a few mins to make a new account and re-group.” When asked what he meant by “re-group[ing]” he replied he was referring to finding the other trolls and adding them as friends to your new account. He found this task easy, as on Facebook “all your ‘friends’ come up as ‘people you may know’.” Easy image posting, availability of VOIP, and streaming are three other characteristics that some of the trolls mentioned when talking about what makes a platform good for trolling. Another thing discussed in this context was the nature of the channel. Some trolls mentioned that some places are more attractive for trolling because they are based on written communication and this form requires less improvisation and it is easier to have control over the conversation. Eli’s comment below illustrates this point.

In the verbal part of communication, there is the constant threat of revealing oneself by laughing and a constant threat of creating contradictions due to improvisation required in the verbal art. If one is communicating textually, one is given complete control of the engagement. The post can be edited and reviewed, the fine details being corrected and added as needed, and then you may post a verified, convincing post that will fool your enemies. It is not as fine an art as that of the verbal troll, but it is the preferred one.

Another factor playing a role in the selection of a medium for trolling is the knowledge of the particular *medium culture* – the attitudes and behaviour that are typical for people gathering at a particular online space. Alfie discussed how online places were like closed communities “with the same type of characters popping out again and again.” His selection of the places to troll was based on the knowledge of these characters. To illustrate, he liked trolling on Yahoo news, as people there are “beautifully gullible.” On the other hand, he avoids Fox News, as people there are “extremely right-wing” and “extremely angry” and “is harder to turn [the conversation] into something light and silly.” That some places are more appropriate for trolling due to a particular medium’s culture was a recurring theme emerging out of my data analysis.

The third identified factor playing the role in the troll choosing the channel for trolling was the *presence of the regulators* who could deter the potential trolling act or delimit the occurring trolling act. Trolls mentioned that some places were particularly good for trolling as they did not employ strict regulators. For instance, one raider posted that a particular forum was “made for trolling” as “[t]he Admins go home on the weekends” and “[a]ll the mods can do is lock threads, they can not ban.” The absence of capable moderators, admins and banning, particularly IP banning, was mentioned by several informants as places attractive for trolling. As one redditer put it: “[n]o IP bans means no limits.”

Once the troll had selected the medium, they started searching for a *target*. In terms of ANT, the medium was not only an actor but may also be seen as an obligatory point of passage – *for trolling to happen the troll and the target had to find themselves at the same place; however not necessarily at the same time*. Within the medium, trolls did not seem to be highly selective in choosing their targets. When observing Ollie trying to find the target within the video game it did not seem he was looking for a particular type of person – more he was looking for the first person who would engage with him. Similarly, when asked how the

targets were selected, raiders did not report complicated selection criteria. To illustrate, talking about how they found the target who microwaved his computer, Flinn said: “We randomly chose him. He was a kid, playing minecraft. That was good enough for us.” The absence of elaborate targeting criteria was commonly observed during fieldwork on Raid Board where trolls, searching for an idea who to troll next, were seen asking for “any streamer” that they could troll. Some Raid Board members replied to such requests with a personal agenda, suggesting as a target an online user that they had a personal issue with. According to Lev and Antonio, such requests were usually ignored, unless they were coming from a reputable member of the raiding community. In fact, the Board prohibited such requests, stating in one of their rules “We are Not YouR Personal Army.”

Trolls searched for the targets in two ways: reactively or proactively. As Luke put it: “You can find a target or you can fish for people” where fishing means that “people come to you.” To illustrate, Otto found his targets by scanning through the customers’ complaints posted on the Facebook brand pages. Jon, on the other hand, by posting a fake ad in Facebook buy-sell group waited for the targets to come to him. In both reactive and proactive targeting, the troll’s opening statement seemed to be of key importance. With the first move, “troll can either immediately lose the engagement for himself, or he can also win it”, has been suggested by Eli. Several ways as to how online users were translated into targets were observed and put forward by the informants. Eli suggested the following:

If you know your victim to be more intelligent than you, exploit this. Purposely use logical fallacies. Entice him with these. He will inevitably point them out. Pretend to be intellectually superior. He will become irritated. Force him to correct you.

The excerpt above alludes to the second obligatory point of passage in the network – this is the *deception*. Online user and a troll coming together in a space did not always result in trolling. The troll had to also convince the online user (i.e., the target in making) that

his/her statement or the actions were genuine. To illustrate with the fake customer service trolling, Otto had to convince the complaining customer that h/she was a customer service representative. Trolling would not occur if the complaining customer knew that Otto was a troll, who was just pretending to work in a customer support. As indicated by Eli: “if there is not a convincing proposition made, there shall not be a victim for the troll, no engagement, and thus, no win.” The convincing proposition, based on the deception, was thus necessary for the online user being translated into the target of trolling.

The engagements between the troll, target and medium led the way to trolling. More precisely, the trolling act emerged out of the troll enrolling the medium and online user swiftly. In this case, the trolling act became a punctualised actor on its own. Other actors (e.g., trolling artifacts, regulators, audience) were engaging with this punctualised actor and also with the individual actors that were punctualised. These engagements positively and negatively influenced trolling. The following two sections present the various ways in which these engagements stabilised the trolling network-network and therefore amplified trolling or destabilised the trolling network-network and thus disrupted trolling.

## 6.4 Stabilising trolling network-network

Artefacts, audience members, other trolls, revenue streams, regulators and assistants all played a role in stabilising the trolling network-network and by this sustained or even fuelled trolling even when trolls, targets, and a medium were not participating fully.

### 6.4.1 *Trolling artefacts*

Trolling artefacts (i.e., visible by-products of trolling) played an important role in sustaining a trolling network-network. By broadcasting trolling live and producing videos and screenshots to encapsulate trolling, *these entities materialised trolling*. Their basic function was to allow the trolling stakeholders to witness trolling. For instance, when Otto trolled on

branded social media Facebook sites, his trolling was observed by online community managers and some of the visitors to these sites. Because Otto or one of the audience member's took a screenshot of his trolling and shared this screenshot on Otto's website or other sites, the trolling reached people who would not otherwise have had an opportunity to see it. Trolling artefacts therefore expanded the trolling audience. The artefacts also extended the 'live expectancy' of trolling. Trolling events, if not captured in screenshots and recordings, would be short-lived. Alfie, for instance, reported that he deleted his comments on Yahoo News once he had taken a screen cap of his trolling effort. Taking a screenshot of trolling and sharing it with others enabled the particular trolling event to circulate through the network for months after an actual trolling event has occurred. Alfie's followers, for instance, were posting in 2017 on subreddit screenshots of Alfie's trolling that dated back to 2013 and 2014. This suggests that a trolling network can be sustained even when the troll, target, and the medium where trolling happened are not participating fully.

Another way of how trolling artefacts sustained trolling was by *serving as an advertisement* for trolling. Several informants mentioned that they started trolling after seeing some of the videos or screenshots. As Antonio put it: "Well, a friend of mine showed me some videos and it just rolled on from there."

#### 6.4.2 *Trolling audience*

Various types of audience members joined in the performance of trolling and participated in the *distribution of the trolling artefacts*, which kept trolling alive. Troll's followers played an important role in finding and sharing these artefacts. Not only were they posting the screenshots of trolling in the troll's dedicated subreddits, they also used the content from the screenshots to troll each other. The communities organised around trolls were an echo-chamber of internal jokes. The serious conversations were often substituted by followers discussing with each other by using the exact or appropriated phrases that the troll or the

target used previously. When an online user asked on Alfie's subreddit what was this subreddit all about, one of Alfie's fans explained that Alfie was "the greatest troll of all time" and they "celebrate[d] this by quoting him and his adversaries." He continued: "This allows us to casually insult each other with no hard feelings."

Another distributor of the artefacts was mass media. During the fieldwork the media (e.g., popular press, podcasts) regularly showcased examples of trolling, thereby expanding the audience for trolling. In its reporting, the media generally took one of two approaches. First, it attributed an entertainment value to the funny trolling acts. For instance, the newspaper articles had titles such as "'[xy]' Strikes Again! 40 Hilarious Comments From The Internet's Biggest (And Funniest) Troll" and "A Troll Posing as 'Customer Service' on Corporate Facebook Pages is Winning the Internet." Another one stated: "45 Times [XY] Was A National Treasure For Amazing Acts of Trolling." On the other hand, the distasteful forms of trolling were featured in tabloids or generally reported in a more sensationalist manner. "Trap the sicko: Facebook troll hijacks mum's profile and 'offers' her children for sale to paedophiles" was used as a title in one of the articles reporting about trolling. By calling a particular troll "funny" or "sicko" the mass media suggested to readers and other trolling stakeholders how a particular type of trolling should be perceived.

As mentioned previously, trolls such as Ollie, Otto and Alfie managed to become microcelebrities. *Celebritising the trolls* was another way the followers sustained trolling. One of Ollie's fans wrote: "First, I'd like to say I've seen a fair share of "troll" youtubers. I've seen the big ones, the little ones. But you, [Ollie]. You fucking mastered it." Trolls seemed to appreciate such positive comments, sporadically replying to followers and receiving in return another shot of adulation. "He himself comments on my post! I am so incredibly happy," wrote one of Alfie's followers. Being hero-worshipped influenced the trolls to feel indebted to followers and pressured them to create new trolling content, as will be discussed

later on. In addition, the received praise and the audience members' support signalled to the trolls that what they were doing was 'okay'.

One way audience members *neutralised the troll's guilt* was through blaming the target. "He totally deserved it you cant be that stupid name", "anyone who is that gullible, and ignorant . . . deserves natural selection" and "I feel bad for the kid but how dumb do you have to be to put your laptop in an oven" were some of the comments posted during the live stream and the video of the raid. While not all the audience members blamed the target, the ones who tried to defend the target typically encountered a negative response from the troll's followers. For instance, when Otto replied to a customer, who left his phone in Uber, saying: "Hey [xy], here at Uber our job is to drive the car, not babysit your fucking phone", one of Otto's followers expressed that Otto "really did harass this guy" and "that was kind of uncalled for." While the follower received 14 likes for his comment, he also received comments from other Otto's followers such as "I don't think this page is for you. Or this world", "[a]nyone who posts a complaint to a company's Facebook page deserves harassment" and "[Otto] wasn't hurtful or mean; it was just a funny troll comment." In case of celebrity trolls, the comments supporting the troll were typically outnumbered in the volume and number of received likes by the comments, attacking or doubting a troll. This once again suggested to the trolls that there is nothing wrong with their trolling. As one troll put it: "The audience obviously likes what I'm doing here." While negative comments did not seriously upset the trolling actor-network in the case of the celebrity trolls, they also did not seem to play a detrimental role in the case of ordinary trolls. Jon was one of my informants, who seemed to receive a lot of negative feedback on his trolling. While he said he stopped reading "hate mail", he also reported how negative feedback on the part of the audience members or the targets did not discourage his trolling as such feedback just revealed their real character. Exposing someone's true nature as an aim of trolling was a recurring theme in the interviews with the trolls.

Another way the audience influences trolling was through *serving ideas to the trolls*. Both ‘celebrity trolls’ and ‘ordinary trolls’ were very successful in transforming the audience members into trolling accomplices. Ollie, for instance, during the trolling act itself asked the viewers which game he should play next and how to respond in a particular situation. Suggestions as to how to troll were given also by the audience members watching raiding. For instance, to convince a person to microwave his computer was in fact suggested by one of the audience members. Further, Otto relied on the audience members’ advice as to how to circumvent the regulators. While some audience members intentionally shared the trolling ideas with the trolls, mass media played this role unintentionally. This was observed in the case of Jon, who reported that he did not have any problems with finding Facebook groups where he could troll as, “if there’s something in the news, like some disaster – some one will make a page about it.” This suggests that newspaper articles help trolls in sourcing potential places for trolling.

Besides serving ideas to the trolls, the audience members encouraged trolling by *demanding (new) content*. These requests came in two, not mutually exclusive, flavours. There was a demand for more trolling in general and there was a demand for a particular type of trolling. Ollie was not active in trolling in the first half of 2017. His inactivity was noticed by his followers who were regularly asking on Ollie’s social media accounts where he was, what he was doing, when was he planning on coming back and whether somebody else saw him trolling. Some followers were closely observing his accounts on social media sites, attributing any activity such as changing his profile picture to his impending return. Some followers directly approached Ollie, asking him when he was planning on continuing trolling, and then posting his answers on the subreddit.

*Follower A:* Where is he?

*Follower B:* Working on a big project . . . He deletes his social media posts a lot, but it’s been in the works for the past six months or so. He hasn’t gone anywhere, just been hard at work.

*Follower C:* Do you know when the last time he streamed was? I know he just does it whenever he feels like but I'd love to catch a stream sometime.

*Follower B:* A couple months back. He's said a few times that he plans to stream and put our shorter videos much more regularly after this project finishes up!

*Follower D:* Cool. I look forward to it.

While demanding new content, Ollie's followers did not suggest how or where he should troll; they just wanted him to start trolling again. In contrast, Alfie reported how his followers were being more prescriptive and trying to influence his trolling style.

*Alfie:* A lot of my followers don't like when I do prank calls, they think it's like . . . like it's sort of out of my brand or something.

*Interviewer:* Really?

*Alfie:* Yeah they told me this. On Reddit it's like: stick to what you're good at [Alfie], that's what somebody said.

These demands, although perceived as a pressure by some of the trolls seem to, in general, bring on more trolling, with trolls attempting to sustain the interest of their followers by promising more, and more regular, 'desired' trolling content. Both Ollie and Alfie were sending regular trolling updates to their followers. Ollie was posting on all his social media channels that his big project was nearing the end and that followers could expect more trolling content in the future. Similarly, Alfie was seen apologising to his followers for his recent trolling inactivity: "Lately I'm not a fan of myself due to the low turnout of new content but I'm really trying to change that." All these examples highlight that, even when there was a lack of trolling activity, the trolls and their followers sustained the actor-network by stressing the temporariness of trolling inactivity and confiding that new trolling content may be coming out any moment and it was worth waiting for.

Followers sustained trolling also by constantly *introducing new trolls* into the actor-network. This process was done in three ways. First, followers were recommending to each other trolls that they may like. One of the followers wrote: "[Alfie] is by far the single best

troll I have seen . . . The only one close to [Alfie] is [XY].” Second, followers were unwittingly enrolling new trolls by asking other followers whether the troll in question was trolling also under other names. For instance, in the time of Ollie’s trolling inactivity, an online user wrote: “Is [Ollie] the same guy as [XY]? I can’t help but feel that the voices are the same. Maybe I’m just going mad from lack of [Ollie].” Such comments led to the online users finding new trolls to watch. At the same time, the trolls’ followers started trolling themselves. The trolling communities organised around the celebrity trolls became an incubator for new trolls. “That’s basically the idea of this sub. Everybody on this sub goes and trolls other sites,” reported one of the Alfie followers, illustrating how the communities of a troll’s followers may breed new trolls.

### 6.4.3 *Revenue streams*

There are several ways by which the actors from the category of revenue streams fuel trolling through associating with other actors. First, they *reward trolls, audience, and trolling places*. Second, they *sell trolling to the audience members and other trolls*.

Trolling *brought trolls entertainment, attention, and/or money*. First, as pointed out by Jon, trolling brings “free entertainment.” Attention, however, seemed to be the main currency in the network, strengthening the associations between the actors from the category of revenue streams and other actors. Troll’s followers were the most obvious actor, rewarding trolls with attention. The positive influence of the received attention on the troll’s program of action could be observed in the case of Otto, who said that he “started working on [trolling] and communicating every day” after he was pleasantly surprised by “how much it got shared and liked.” The trolling content was shared also by the media. My informants were aware of their media portrayals and expressed a positive attitude towards them. This was not the case only for funny trolls but also in the case of less tasteful trolling. For instance, when a fire alarm prank call was featured on NBC news, the raiders celebrated this

‘achievement’: “WE ARE FAMOUS WE ARE FUCKING FAMOUS” stated one. Another one added: “Ladies and Gentlemen THE RISE OF [RAIDBOARD] HAS BEGUN.” The raiders expressed their pride in knowing the pranksters: “I know whos in that call” or in publicly admitting that they were participating in the featured prank call: “I think I was there” or “was in that call (not speaking).” These examples highlight the role of media trolling reports in satisfying the troll’s wish to be seen.

Beside attention, trolls were also rewarded by money. Flinn commented that, “while you cant really make money directly by raiding”, you could “made money from raiding.” The fact that trolls can be paid for trolling surprised the trolls themselves. “I didn’t know I could make money doing this shit,” reported Ollie. The money came from two sources: the troll’s followers and businesses. Trolls’ followers were donating money directly to the troll and the financial return supposedly allowed the trolls to be more consistent in pushing out new content. When launching a Patreon, Alfie explained to his followers that he kicked off a Patreon with the primary goal of freeing him up to create more content every week. He posted:

The main reason for this Patreon is to get enough tiny, dinky monthly donations to give me time to create much more frequent troll posts as opposed to the 1-per-month-or-so dirt pigs I post on FB/Twitter, which then get posted to the [Alfie] subreddit.

While trolls such as Alfie and Ollie were encouraging their followers to financially support them, the followers themselves played an important role in promoting the troll and convincing others to donate money to him or her. Online users regularly expressed disappointment with the relatively low numbers of a troll’s patrons and encouraged other followers to donate with the hope that this would lead to the troll more regularly trolling.

Trolling was also a reward for audience members and the trolling places. Troll followers mentioned in their online comments how observing trolling helped them relax

after long working days. Otto also reported how “people who work in customer service and have to deal with rude people all day” came to his page and “get kind of a release from [their work].” That watching trolling was an enjoying activity was observed also from the comments of the audience members. “Omg I’m having an orgasm here. Holly crap”, “So glad I come to this”, “Hope everyone is recording this cooking show” and “I haven’t laughed this much for ages” are a couple of illustrative examples of comments posted by the online users watching the live stream of the target microwaving the computer. These comments highlight the entertainment value that trolling has for some audience members. Trolling places also benefitted from trolling, which brought visitors to the sites.

Trolling bringing entertainment, attention, and money to the trolls *served as an advertisement for trolling*. To put it differently, positive consequences of trolling signalled to others, in particular audience members and other trolls, that trolling could be a pleasurable and ‘profitable’ activity. This finding can be supported by observing the surprise and awe expressed by audience members at the number of subscribers and video views gathered by a particular troll. Some audience members directly acknowledged that they did not know that trolling could be so successful in getting followers and that they are considering starting to troll themselves.

#### **6.4.4 Other trolls**

Other trolls in associating with the other trolling stakeholders feed the trolling in the following ways: *through inspiring the trolls, competing with the trolls and creating (fake) trolling opportunities*.

First, other trolls amplified trolling by *inspiring (potential) trolls* to become interested in trolling. Several informants reported how seeing other people troll convinced them to start trolling themselves. Ollie, for instance, stated: “I’ve got inspired by charliezzz’s

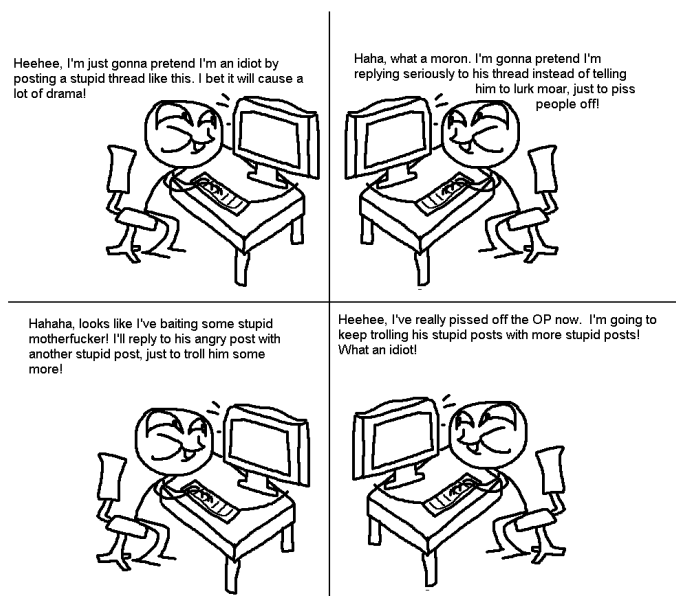
character Esteben Winsmore who makes funny “troll videos” for Second Life. I figured I could give my own take on it, and made one video for it.” Similarly, Eli reported h/she “learned [trolling] through watching other trolls then applying in practise what [s/he] had learned.”

*Competition between the trolls* was another factor driving trolling. The rivalry was discouraged in the case of raiders. One of the rules on the Raid Board stated: “NO TEAM WARS . . . This also means no ddosing or doxing other teams. Save that for the livestreamer.” While, in fact, I have not observed raiders confronting each other, I have noticed the more subtle ways of competition among the teams. Raiders were regularly discussing the success metrics such as the number of views of the raiding videos. The videos that received many views and presented well-executed raids were the ones that, reportedly, motivated the raiders to engage in raiding in hope to achieve similar or better results. The awareness of other trolls did not lead just to more trolling but also to better and different trolling. That creativity in trolling is fuelled by competition was directly acknowledged by Ollie who stated that “everyone is trying to be unconventional now so they can get ahead of their competition.” Some of the other trolls echoed Ollie’s view, reporting how in order to differentiate themselves they have to be “less boring”, “more provocative”, “smarter” and “funnier.”

Third, other trolls influenced trolling by *creating (fake) trolling opportunities* such as when trolls posed as targets. Flinn reported that raiders “get requests from trollbait people who come on rf [Raid Board] and post there [sic] own twitch stream pretending to be a random streamer.” As suggested by one of the raiders, such users aim to gain viewers and followers, to have fun, or to earn money. While Flinn stated that he did not see the point in trolling troll baits, my observations of Raid Board suggested that raiders decided to troll Twitch streamers even in the case when some of the users raised doubts about their

legitimacy. If the trolled person is a troll himself/herself, this trolling may endure for a longer period than if the trolled person is an ‘ordinary’ online user. Encyclopedia Dramatica, the satirical wiki website, described trolls trolling trolls as “one troll deliberately [acting] like a fucktard in order to gain attention” and “second troll, believing that the first troll is being serious, [attacking him or her] using another extreme of fucktardedness.” These two trolls “will banter back and forth, one thinking that he is totally pwning<sup>11</sup> the other.” Figure 10 graphically depicts the engagement of two trolls, connoting the potential never-ending trolling loop.

Figure 10: Trolling loop. Image downloaded from Encyclopedia Dramatica



#### 6.4.5 Regulators

Regulators (e.g., upvote, downvote, block button, and online moderators’ warnings) sustain trolling by *being futile, by giving the trolls the attention they seek, by getting abused and by penalising for not trolling.*

<sup>11</sup> Urban Dictionary defines pwnt as a player severely beating another player or group of players in a game.

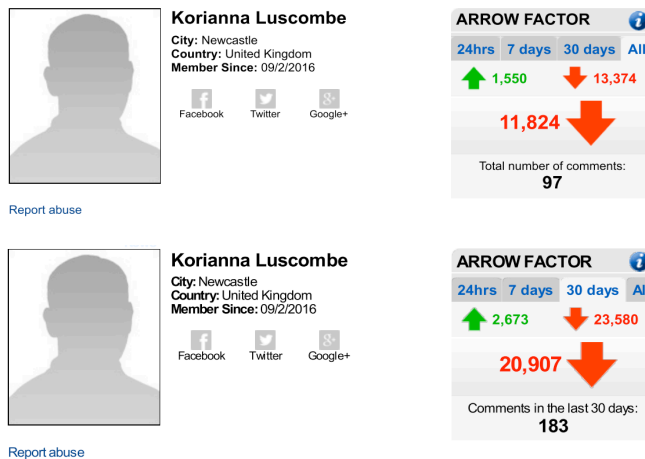
In the simplest form, regulators favourably influenced trolling *by being futile in interrupting trolling acts*. Several informants reported how the regulators that online platforms and game companies offer did not produce the desired effect. The companies are “too soft on [trolling], too forgiving,” was what one gamer said. His/her view was repeatedly expressed on the gaming forum, where various users felt that Blizzard, the company that develops video games, allowed trolls to continue with their trolling as: the “report system is basically there for no reason”, “report options are for lolz”, “EVERYONE KNOWS that there is no penalty for trolling”, people are allowed “to be poison in the community with virtually no consequences”, and “[n]ot a single [troll] has been banned since game launch.” That trolling continues in spite of the targets and bystanders using the regulators was observed also on the *Daily Mail* comments sections, where being downvoted 13,374 times did not seem to discourage a particular troll from trolling, as can be seen from Figure 11. The futility of the downvote button was pointed out also by Alfie who, when asked how it feels to be downvoted stated:

For me it's just more raw material for humour. It's funny when people downvote somebody that's so obviously stupid anyway. But if I was being sincere, which I haven't done in years, I haven't written a sincere comment on any of the news article. But yeah it could be a downer if people downvote you when you are just trying to make your own point. Since what I am doing is not in a good faith, I deserve to be downvoted, and I also think it is funnier.

The (perceived) futility of the regulators led to targets and bystanders doubting into their value. One gamer commented: “I do not feel reporting is doing anything.” In a similar vein, when a bystander suggested another gamer to report the troll, the gamer replied: “[t]hat'd sure do a lot”, highlighting his perception of the uselessness of reporting the trolls to the moderators. That the regulators when applied by the targets or bystanders do not have a detrimental impact on trolling was suggested also by Eli who acknowledged that

his/her comment may be removed due to being reported but, “random users can’t prevent you from making more comments.”

Figure 11: Troll’s statistics on Daily Mail comments sections on 16.2.2016 and 27.2.2016



While users not reporting the trolls supported the troll’s programs of actions, the users reporting the trolls played a similar role. Interactions between the actors from the category of regulators and other actors (e.g., trolls, targets and fans) were particularly charged with the attention. My observations suggest that applied regulators encourage trolling by *giving the trolls attention they seek*. “I hate it when they ignore me because then I have nothing to work with,” reported Alfie, highlighting the importance of attention in the process of trolling. This view was echoed by a gamer who stated that “responding is the worst thing you can do in such a situation”, since “a reaction is that the players are looking for, after all.” Any reaction such as enforced sanctions (e.g., down-voting or deleting trolling comments) indicated to the troll that his or her actions were successful. Antonio reported that raiders know they are successful when the target “starts mass banning everyone.” For Jon a sign of successful trolling was “people saying their brother/uncle/neighbour are in the police, cia, have [his] IP, are coming around to kill [him].” Even the most severe penalties

(e.g., suspending the troll's account) did not seriously discourage a troll's plans, as can be observed in the following passages.

*Interviewer:* How does it feel to be banned?

*Jon:* Part and parcel. I'm used to it, in the first days we all had to make new accounts after midnight- EVERY DAY

*Interviewer:* Wow. That takes some time, no?

*Jon:* 3 mins to make a new account, with practise comes speed . . .

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*Interviewer:* What was your most severe punishment?

*Flinn:* Ip ban. But they only did that after I made like 80 accounts. 16 perma bans . . . I guess I would be considered the most banned user on rf [ Raid Board]

These two passages suggest that being banned or sanctioned in any other way is not only a *modus operandi* for trolls, for some of them it is also a badge of honour. Informants talked with pride about the number of times they were sanctioned online. Their relaxed attitude towards being banned has been observed also in their online posts, that featured regulators and mocked them. For instance, when Facebook prohibited Jon from adding a new troll into one of the groups that he was an admin of, Jon took a screenshot of this notification and published it on his wall with the following comment: "When fakebook wants to stop you erm . . borrowing pages ect. – for a week . . roughly twice as long as I've kept an account." The fact that he could easily create a new account was communicated also in one of his cover photos (Figure 12), where he warned the people reporting him that his plethora of accounts makes him unstoppable.

Figure 12: Jon's Facebook cover photo



The ease with which new accounts could be created enabled trolls to continue trolling. In addition, trolls used the option to open new accounts to purposefully annoy the moderators. To illustrate, Jon reported that opening new accounts was like “waving a red flag to a bull”, implying that this is how trolls troll the social media platforms and online moderators. Support for this observation can be seen also in the case of Flinn. Flinn was banned from the Raid Board for evading the ban. Minutes later he logged back to the forum under a new name, using various measures to communicate who he actually is. As an observer, I found his actions counterintuitive as can be seen from my fieldnotes.

He [Flinn] was yesterday banned for evading the ban. But now I can see him he created a new account, calling himself [xy]. It is obvious it is [Flinn]. In his profile description he wrote he was referred to the forum by [Flinn]. Then, he in the thread about the best jokes, he says that the best joke would be “[Flinn] being unbanned.” It is Flinn – no doubt about it. But I do not understand – he was just being banned – why on this earth he would like to expose himself. Wouldn’t it make more sense to not act in the way that will get him banned again???

Flinn’s case highlights how some trolls use the trolling sanctions as a way of further provocation. The regulator *getting abused* was observed also in case of trolls who organised raids just for fun to downvote particular videos on YouTube. This misuse of regulators favourably influenced trolling by incapacitating the regulators, particularly the human moderators. Engaging with the trolls seemed to be a time-consuming procedure, which kept

the online moderators fully occupied. To illustrate, one of the Reddit moderators suggested I get in touch with other moderators by sending a message to a modmail (i.e., a moderator mail where you can discuss something with all other subreddit's moderators). He warned me, however, to reply to my own message again to bump it to the top of the queue in case I do not get a reply within a few hours, as moderators "get swamped in waves from various attempts at trolling" and "messages can get buried if they can't be addressed quickly." The trolls' distraction of online moderators by (ab)using the regulating features was observed also in video games, where moderators reported being overwhelmed by trolls abusing the reporting functions by reporting other users for "not having a mic" or "talking with an accent." This false reporting focused the regulator's attention on 'false' trolling and this may come at the expense of managing 'genuine' trolling and more serious misbehaviour. As one raider suggested: "confuse the mods . . . it will be harder for them to see legit trolling reported."

Regulators giving sought-after attention to trolls was not the only observed way of how regulators sustained trolling. In some cases, regulators were actually used *to punish trolls for not trolling*. For instance, in Raiding community, which includes members forming teams, raiders could be punished for not attending the raids. "If anybody fails to attend 3 raids in a row without reason, will be punished accordingly," wrote the leader of one of the raiding teams on the discussion board. Raiders may also get punished for violating any of the Rules enforced by the community (e.g., teams) or online discussion board moderators. As Antonio reported: "Us raiders have standards / set rules that if you break them you would get IP banned." One of the rules that would result in the user being permanently banned is the prohibition of so-called white-knighting. White-knight is a term raiders use to refer to people who ruin raids. A person who gives away the intent of the raiders is not only regulated by means of online 'formal control' but also by means of 'informal control'. White-knights are not welcomed in the raiding community; they are gossiped about, ridiculed,

name-called and even threatened. The post on Raid Board titled “How to White Knight” reveals the typical attitude toward the White-Knights.

Welcome To: How To White Knight

Step 1: Contract Aids or Cancer, either will do for become the best white knight out there!

Step 2: Be adopted, a nigger, or add an extra chromosome to your body, this will provide optimal performance whilst you’re stopping those pesky raiders!

Step 3: Dig your own grave, this will be convenient once the raiders find out the slightest bit of your information, this will save you time further down the line!

Step 4: Don’t do any more shit, if you’ve achieved all the steps above, kys then you’ll be a true white knight!

Thank! This is how to be a white knight in 4 easy steps!

The excerpt above suggests that it is not in the best interest of raiders to negatively interfere with raids, as this could bring them a negative reputation within the raiding community.

#### 6.4.6 Assistants

The final actor playing a role in sustaining trolling are assistants which *troll on the behalf of the trolls, disguise trolls and trolling and gather the online community members*.

First, assistants support trolling by adopting the troll’s role and *directly participate in trolling*. A computer virus ruining against the user’s wishes or spam bot flooding users Twitch stream with the same message over and over are two examples of such assistants. Mobilising some of these assistants arguably intensifies trolling as the computerised trolls could do more damage in a given time than individual trolls.

Another way assistants sustained trolling was by *disguising it*. In other words, the assistant prevented the targets or regulators from realising that they are engaging with a troll. To illustrate, before bursting out laughing, Ollie always made sure he pressed the mute button, preventing the target hearing his laugh. This mute button compensated for a troll

lacking skill that has been found important in trolling live – this is to hold back laughter. In addition, pressing the mute button helped the troll to sustain the interest of the audience members, as the mute button suspended the audio transmission only between the target and the troll and not between the troll and the audience. Another type of assistants playing the role of disguising trolls and trolling were the online accounts. While some platforms disguised trolls by not giving the users the option to see the history of the account, trolls found a workaround also for platforms that offered this option. Eli, for instance, reported how in order to prevent potential targets from realising that the troll’s “account is a few hours old . . . [so that] it is a throwaway account, simply made for trolling”, trolls made a “large number of accounts on one day and let them age.” In ANT terms, the trolls mobilised new actors to enact their program of action.

Assistants fuelled trolling also by *gathering the community members*. Trolling Facebook groups, chatterbox on Raid Board and Skype were found to play an important role in trolling. In these groups, trolls and sometimes audience members discussed who should be trolled next or how a particular trolling act should develop. Some of such assistants (e.g., email notification) guaranteed the trolling would be witnessed. To illustrate, since Ollie did not have a streaming schedule, his followers were informed about his streaming through a notification from Twitch. Every time Ollie went live, his followers received an email with the invitation to join the livestream.

## 6.5 Destabilising trolling network-network

Several ways of the trolling actor-networks becoming destabilised have emerged out of my fieldwork and data analysis. This section discusses the associations between the actors that upset the stability of the network and led to trolling act being interrupted, adjusted, or discontinued however temporarily. The disruption meant two things: either the trolling act was not successfully completed or it was completed but then interrupted, preventing further

trolling. The process of trolling was disrupted for the reasons associated with the three main actors: troll, target, and the medium.

As regards trolls, five things spoiling trolling emerged out of analysis: *feelings of guilt*, *lack of creativity*, *lack of planning*, *feeling pressured* and *monotony*. Even though Antonio reported he felt excited during this particular raid, he also admitted to *feeling guilty* about it and that this was one of the main reasons why he stopped participating in raids for a while. The feelings of guilt stopping a troll from trolling were reported also by a redditor:

A few months ago there was a video posted about koorean guys trapped in a sinking boat. It was a pretty hard video to watch and as it was getting many upvotes on r/videos but no comments from the reddit armie, I thought I'd give it a try. I tried my best to troll with some originality but in the end it was offensive and I felt pretty bad after. The dudes in the video died in a really sad way. My comment got removed soon after almost no upvotes. I thought "damn, maybe that was actually going a bit far" I won't ever comment again on videos involving such things (like death, extreme violence, or more recently the Paris terrorist attacks) . . .

This redditor's comment shows how feeling guilty led to troll's decision to not participate in trolling on the content that could be considered sensitive. The guilt, however, was not a sufficient reason for the redditor to completely stop trolling, as h/she pointed out how h/she now moved his/her trolling to different subreddits. In ANT terms, while the old actor-networks dissolved, the new actor-networks were created.

*Lack of creativity* was another reason that contributed to trolling actor-network dissolve. Trolls reported how trolling was based on improvisation and required creative input. When the creative juices are not flowing, the trolls may temporarily stop trolling. "... you know, sometimes you are just not inspired, it is just not coming", stated Alfie, suggesting he had trouble trolling when not inspired. The need for inspiration was related to the next

factor, potentially leading to the failed trolling acts – this is the *lack of planning*. Eli stressed that trolling failed when the trolls did not plan trolling approach in advance.

Another way the trolling actor-network was destabilised, at least temporarily, was through pressure exerted on the trolls by the trolls' followers. As previously discussed, followers were demanding new trolling content or requesting a particular content. "You should get back into the field, man! We need new shit. The random tweet here and there doesn't cut it," posted a redditor on Alfie's subreddit. Alfie reported how it was not fun that his Reddit followers were "very demanding about how [he] should and shouldn't be." He felt that the main problem with the demand was that it turned a hobby into a job. In his words:

[T]hat demand will never go away as long as people still like what I do. That kinda makes it feel a little bit more like work. A little bit more stressful and that's exactly not what I want to feel like when I am doing anything creative. You know I'm a copywriter and I have to turn out writing every night, and I don't mind that because it's my job and pressure is kind of exhilarating my work. But this is supposed to be just a kind of light-hearted, creative hobby, you know. So it would be great if there was a little less expectation of new stuff ...

Similar dissatisfaction with the *followers' pressure* was observed in Ollie's case. Ollie several times shared publicly how he did not understand why some followers felt entitled to new content. Ollie was actively fighting this followers' entitlement by stopping trolling for a while. Interestingly, the burden of this pressure seemed to get smaller, if not expected, once the trolls started earning money with the trolling. The excerpt from my field notes illustrates this finding:

What's going on. When I started observing [Ollie] he was bitching about peeps demanding new content all the time. He even stopped trolling for a long time. But now he doesn't seem to be bothered by people's nagging anymore. Not just not bothered he actually tells people that he is planning on streaming more. What happened? Is it because trolling is now

bringing him money – he just posted in Discord that his aim is to generate 700 bucks a month with his trolling projects.

This field note passage highlights how the enrolment of a new actor – earning – seemed to change what was a previously problematic relationship between the troll and his followers into an ordinary one. In other words, it seems that the destabilisation of the network was only temporary and the enrolment of a new actor re-stabilised the network.

For some trolls, trolling lost its charm when it *got predictable*. Antonio, for example, mentioned that when the raids got repetitive he stopped actively participating and became “more of a lurker, just checking in every once in a while.” In his words:

What happened was that new member came in, inspired by the videos posted on youtube. It was repetitive and unnecessary. Similar targets, same result. And when we did have a decent raid going on, other members would come and spam the typical stuff that gave away our intents.

Antonio’s excerpt above highlights another thing that spoiled trolling – this is the *target recognising h/she is interacting with a troll*. Ollie has reported how he stopped trolling within a particular game as people started to recognize him. In his words: “I was working on a long ruse type video . . . and then one of the [targets] recognised my voice and that was pretty much the end for that footage.” Similarly, Alfie reported how his trolling attempt failed when people called him out. Upon recognising the troll, some target’s responses seemed to be particularly effective in breaking the trolling network. These strategies, reported by Eli, are as follows. The first option included ignoring the troll. While ignoring the troll may negatively influence trolling, Eli stressed that this target’s tactic was particularly difficult to execute, as people “are people.” The second one was directly confronting the troll by labelling him/her as a troll, leading the troll into a situation where he had to explain h/she was not a troll. The third one was responding with positive remarks or a generally unexpected response. This option was mentioned also on the gaming forum,

where one of the users wrote that “what shuts up” the trolls is when targets respond to trolls with “an uncomfortable amount of seemingly genuine compliments . . . demonstrating they have no power over [them].” The fourth option included misinterpreting the troll’s statements. All four options were an example of the target disrupting the trolling process. Not recognising the troll, on the other hand, was associated with the target’s gullibility, and potentially severed the nature of trolling. Observing a raid when a target microwaved his computer, I noticed that the target was aware of the existence of trolls, asking the raider questions such as “you are not a troll, right?” and “you troll me?” Yet, the target did not recognize the troll. Talking about this event Antonio said: “Initially, we just decided to screw with him a little, but we found out that the kid was extremely gullible, so the whole situation got out of hand. In a good way.” This quote suggests that early recognition may lower the severity of the trolling act.

Another target-related way of trolling being disrupted is through the *lack of potential targets*. For instance, Ollie, who had started his trolling in Second Life, stopped trolling there because Second Life “[was] dying.” Furthermore, when streaming trolling live, most of his streams finished at the point when he could not find a target due to the low numbers of players in the game.

Trolling actor-networks also became destabilised for medium-related reasons. *The speed of regulators* was one such reason. While I have observed how banning encouraged troll to troll on several platforms, banning on one of the subreddits seemed to be more effective in discouraging trolling. On this subreddit banning was executed swiftly and permanently. In the words of one of the subreddit moderators: “[r/subreddit] gets trolled very frequently, so the ban hammer is used quickly and often permanently. It is not unusual for someone to attempt to troll and get permanently banned within a minute or so of their first posts.” While banning led to trolls creating a new account, the moderator added that “[e]ven serial trolls

tend to give up after they are banned enough”, as “after a while, they seem to get bored or frustrated” and “there isn’t much of a payoff for [them].” While the quick implementation of the regulators was a high-effort activity, the Reddit moderator reported that “it [did] eventually get rid of trolls.”

Another observed medium-related activity that discouraged trolling was the *manipulation of the visibility of the trolling content*. That trolling can be disrupted by the medium manipulating how the trolling content is positioned was observed in the case of Reddit trolls who were trolling the YouTube videos shared on subreddit /r/video. One of the alias that trolls shared was “Mina” – a hard-core feminist. In her best times she “was everywhere all at once”, having top comments on almost every reddit video that linked to YouTube, as reported by one of the redditors. When I started my observations, I noticed that Mina’s trolling at some point became less visible. A similar observation was made on reddit, where several redditors opened threads, asking questions such as “What Happened to Mina?” The answer to this question came from Mina herself:

Google changed their commenting sorting system sometime in the past few weeks . . . When I’m logged in [Mina] is 2<sup>nd</sup> to the top but if I log out she is somewhere on the second page. The sorting algorithm is no longer upvotes + number of comments. There are some relatively low upvote/low response comments up top . . . the sneaky bastards

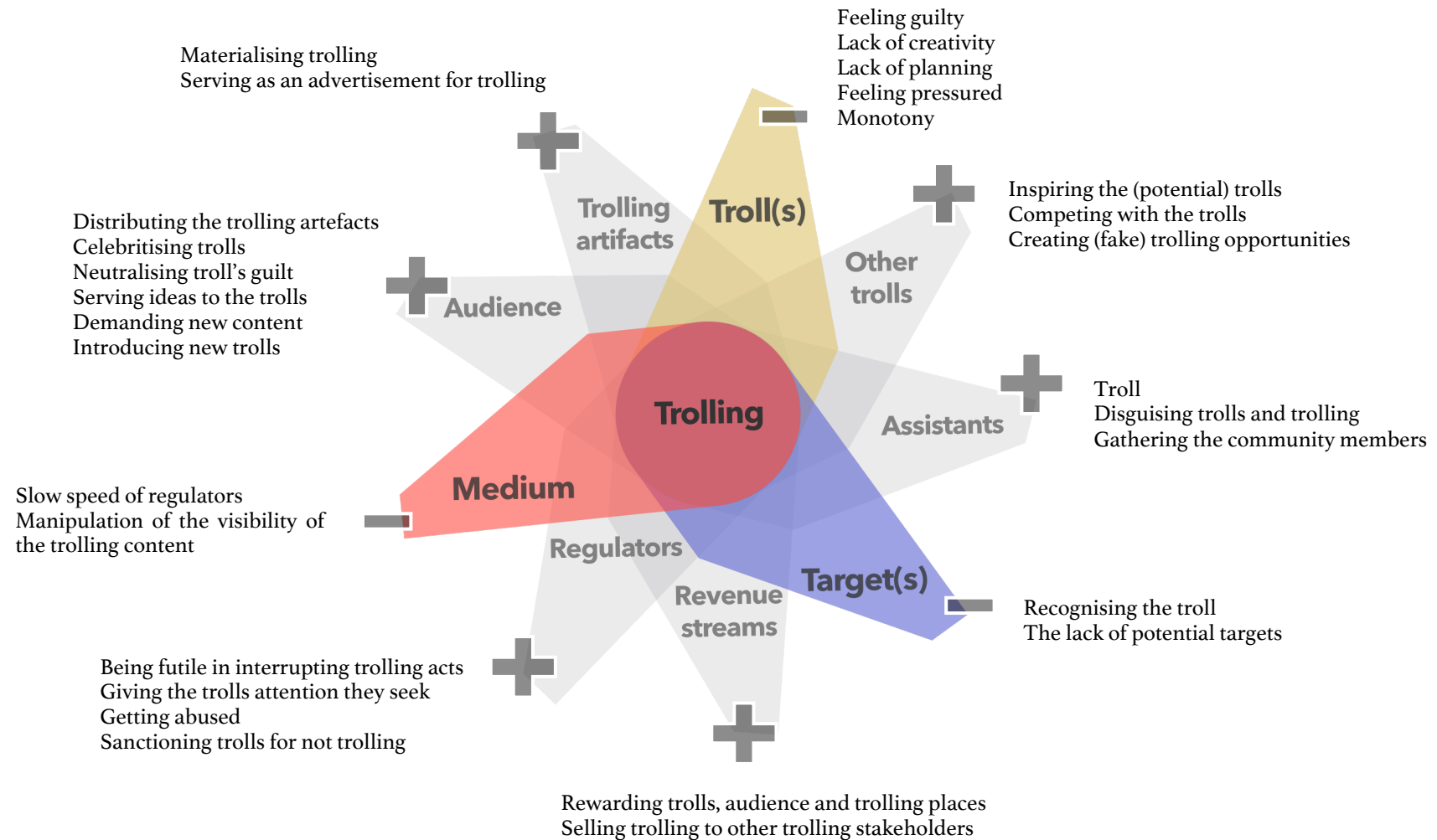
Another redditor, also posting under Mina’s alias echoed this view: “it’s harder to reach the top now . . . Newer, low response comments seem to overtake ours a lot quicker.” Another one added: “this shit ruined me in my legend of league vids as well, fml.” Medium depriving Mina’s creators of the attention seemed to play a role in discouraging trolling on YouTube. However, that does not mean that the redditors completely stop trolling. When talking about the revival of organised trolling, one of the redditors commented that despite the challenges their “spirit prevailed.” “Although our ranks were scattered, our presence was strong. Many old knights still infiltrated reddit threads, 4chan threads, and FaceBook

comment sections. Slowly influencing the normies until one day we will rise back up again,” he reported. This redditor’s comment highlights that trolls are part of many different trolling actor-networks and that their behaviour may persist, despite the resolution of one network.

## 6.6 Summary

The present chapter presented the trolling network-network. A troll enrolling the medium and target swiftly resulted in a trolling act. This trolling act became a punctualised actor on its own. Other identified actors such as audience and regulators did not play a direct role in the manifestation of the trolling act itself, but engaging with the trolling (punctualised actor) or the three base actors stabilised the network and thus reinforced trolling. The trolling act was interrupted by the factors associated with one of the base actors—troll(s), target(s) or medium. Figure 13 summarises the ways in which the trolling network was stabilised and destabilised. Together these findings provide insights into how trolling evolves and is influenced. The next, final chapter of findings, moves on to discuss what trolling actually is.

Figure 13: Summary of the ways in which network enacting trolling was stabilized (marked with +) and destabilised (marked with -).



## Chapter Seven: What is Trolling, Actually?

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### 7.1 Introduction

To date, trolling has been conceptualised inconsistently and imprecisely. As seen in my overview of existing definitions of trolling in section 3.2 *Conceptualising trolling*, the researchers are far from agreeing with each other what trolling is and is not. For the purpose of data collection, I have referred to trolling as the practices of individuals or groups in online social settings perceived by the recipients as deliberately deceptive, disruptive, destructive, manipulative or aggressive. This short chapter presents a revised definition of trolling, based on the observations of trolling, conversations with the trolls and other trolling stakeholders, and review of trolling related documents. The chapter is *descriptive* in flavour and is divided into two parts. The first part introduces the new definition and discusses each element of this definition in detail. In the second part, the differences between trolling and similar online misbehaviours that emerged from the data are presented.

### 7.2 The new definition of trolling

This thesis suggests understanding *trolling behaviours as deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s), are performed for the benefit of the troll(s) and their followers and may have negative consequences for people and firms involved.*

Let us now have a closer look at this definition.

*Trolling behaviours are...*

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The expression trolling behaviours as opposed to simply trolling should be used to account for all the diversity that this activity possesses. The fieldwork has revealed that the term trolling is assigned to a diverse range of activities. Trolling was used to describe activities such as:

- purposefully digressing from the topic of the conversation on the discussion forum,
- correcting somebody's grammar mistakes,
- posting intentionally ignorant comments under media articles,
- accessing a private IP camera and playing a song,
- killing another player in the video game under the pretension that the gamer is new to the game and does not know how to use a weapon,
- pretending to be a customer service representative and offensively replying to customer complaints,
- convincing another user to delete Windows system directory System 32, which is essential to the running of Windows,
- putting up a False Facebook event of punching cats, and
- abusing the reporting features on social media sites and within video games.

These activities, varying in their severity, attest to the term trolling representing a diverse set of behaviours. To be called trolling, these behaviours have to satisfy several criteria. First, they have to be done consciously and intentionally.

... *deliberate*...

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Trolling is not an accidental act. The observations and conversations with informants highlight the intentionality in trolling. To illustrate, all of the informants in this research have been trolling for more than one year: Antonio has been raiding for two years, Otto has been trolling for four years, and Jon has been trolling for about seven years. Trolling was not a one-off event but a repeated activity. Alfie, for instance, reported that he had conducted more than 900 trolling acts in the last five years.

Trolling has not been just a continuous act but also a conscious one. Troll informants were fully aware of the nature of their behaviours. This finding may be supported by the observation that when asked for an interview about their experiences with *trolling*, none of

the informants expressed surprise that s/he was approached. In addition, none of them disputed that their behaviours could be called trolling, as can be seen in the excerpt from my field notes:

I find it really interesting that up to now none of the trolls I contacted to participate in the interview disputed being called trolls. They are not surprised when I ask them to talk about their experiences with trolling. They do not pretend that they do not know what I am talking about. They do not try to convince me that their behaviours happen by chance.

That trolling does not happen by accident was also pointed out by one of the Reddit moderators, who stressed how easy it was to manage “accidental” trolls. He pointed out that “annoying sincere people who share some characteristics of troll” were easily talked out of causing problems on the subreddits, once approached. With real trolls, on the other hand, moderators’ requests fell on deaf ears.

*The continuity of trolling and trolls being conscious of the nature of their behaviours are two findings highlighting the deliberate nature of trolling. Trolling being, to a greater or lesser degree, a planned act, is the third one.* Alfie, trolling on the comments sections of Yahoo News, had to first read the article in order to come up with a ‘relevant’ trolling comment. His trolling blueprint was: “read the story and then come up with uniquely stupid point of view. And then commit to that, throughout, defend your argument in the most polite way possible, in a way that it is getting increasingly absurd.” Raiders, on the other hand, had more specific plans. Upon starting trolling, they decided what type of trolling they would do (e.g., convince a user to delete System 32, spam user, hijack user’s livestream). Eli considered planning to be a critical success factor in trolling: “The troll who fails makes no or little calculations beforehand. Planning will lead to success, and lack of that will lead to your discovery.” Regardless of how developed troll’s plans were, each of the trolls seemed to have its own game plan, supporting the finding that trolling is a deliberate act.

... *deceptive*...

---

In order for a behaviour to be called trolling, it has to include deception. As Eli states: “If you are not deceiving anyone at all then I don’t see how it can be considered trolling ... Deception is the essence of all trolling. It is what makes trolling trolling.”

Deception was present in all of the observed cases of trolling. It was used to “cause a fuss or provoke an argument,” as suggested by Jon. In the most elementary sense, trolls deceived by concealing; they kept the information that they were trolling hidden from their targets. Other observed forms of deception were: providing false information (e.g., lying that one does not know how to use a computer mouse), impersonating (e.g., pretending to be a customer service representative), equivocating (e.g., answering the target’s comments in an ambiguous ways), and providing irrelevant information (e.g., digressing from the topic at hand). The observed deception took both verbal and non-verbal forms. Trolls used both verbal (e.g., having a social media handle called Customer Support) and non-verbal elements such as fake avatars (e.g., a generic photo of a customer service representative) and manipulating tone of voice (e.g., talking in a particularly trustworthy way) to convince the target that their actions are genuine.

... *mischievous attempts*...

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Typically, trolls are mischievous in playful ways. In other words, *trolling included causing trouble in a playful way*. Trolls made trolling seem like a game. Several informants reported how trolling was a source of amusement and relaxation because it was challenging and uncertain. “You never know what the other person will do,” was pointed out by one of the trolls, implying the role of the improvisation needed in trolling and the uncertainty present in every trolling act.

Rather than aiming to hurt a target, *trolls seemed to enjoy trolling for its own sake*. Trolls reported that trolling was fun, exciting and relaxing. Alfie highlighted the intrinsic value of trolling by pointing out that for him trolling “is just a creative exercise.” It is about “trying to find a strange joke, that [he] didn’t expect, that surprises [him] and makes [him] laugh.” While Alfie acknowledged that with trolling he is “not really helping people out there”, he also stressed that he is “not hurting anybody.” That trolling is relatively innocent in nature has been observed also by Antonio, who mentioned that trolling was “just a silly banter . . . just poking fun at someone” which “is not to be taken seriously.” The lack of intent to do harm to the targets was observed also through the rules the trolls imposed on themselves or other trolls. Alfie, for instance, reported that his ethical rules involve “not being mean to people in any way, shape or form.” That trolling should be light-hearted in nature was stressed also on the Raid Board where trolls instructed other trolls to “keep it funny”, “keep it a joke” and “don’t insult people.” While not all trolling was funny and joking in nature – I have observed many instances of trolling that was distasteful and unpleasant even just to watch – the obvious malicious intent seemed to be absent in the behaviours considered to be called trolling. As stated in Encyclopedia Dramatica under the description of raids: it was “never about being a haet [hate] machine for the sake of hate, it was about doing things that [raiders] are capable of doing that are FUNNY, which happened to be mean for the most part.” This quote highlights that while trolls may not start their trolling acts with the intention to harm the target, trolling could cause harm.

*... that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s)...*

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*The main goal of trolling is to get a reaction.* As Otto put it in a media interview: “[t]rolling is commenting with an aim to get an emotional response.” Similarly, Eli commented that the basics of the art of trolling was not to be neglected. Refreshing the browser, to check if there had been any response, was an activity reported by several of the troll informants. Getting a

response from the target was a sign of successful trolling, as can be seen in the following comment that Alfie posted under a screenshot of his trolling, posted by one of his fans: “oh boy, I wasn’t going to post this because there was not followup and it didn’t seem funny enough by itself, but somebody caught this in the wild and posted it.” Due to the target not responding to his comment, Alfie felt he had to explain to his followers that he himself would not post this screenshot on the subreddit.

The desire to provoke the targets to react was not reported only by the informants but also reflected in the trolling acts themselves. To get a reaction, trolls were trying to push the online users’ buttons by deliberately making grammar mistakes, bringing up upsetting and taboo topics, intentionally misunderstanding the content, and performing irritating activities, to name just a few. The actions of the most successful trolls were not only provocative but also believable, and therefore convincing.

*... are performed for the benefit of the troll(s) and their followers, and may have negative consequences for people and firms involved.*

---

Trolling was found to be *beneficial for trolls*. As mentioned before, for trolls trolling was a source of amusement and relaxation. Trolling had an entertainment value also for trolls’ followers who enjoyed observing trolling acts. On the other hand, unsurprisingly, trolling impacted targets in a negative way. Alfie, for instance, stressed that he was aware that his acts were annoying to others. Similarly, Ollie’s followers admitted that Ollie was frustrating the targets. This view was echoed by the targets themselves, as can be seen from the following passages:

I played 4 games , all 4 games in a row I get trolled , 2 times by the same game , 2 other times by 2 diffirent trolls. Fun part here , I can do NOTHING about this and it realy affects how I look at the game , I wasted an hour being stuck with trolls and it makes me just quit the game for today...Can we please have something against trolls? Please?!....

---

Can we get some form of actual punishment for people who leave games, troll games, and purposely lose the game for their team? . . . Seriously that !@#\$ needs to %^-\*ing stop. I am VERY close to just asking straight up for a 100% refund because blizzard does not want to fix it.

The passage above, posted on the gaming forum, illuminates the frustration that targets may feel due to trolling. Moreover, it shows that trolling may lead to targets quitting the games or closing their accounts. Similar actions were reportedly taken by the bystanders, who had reported that trolling decreases their enjoyment of the online services and products. After expressing his disappointment that “the volume of trolling has not subsided even remotely with the new rules”, one gamer commented that trolling “has severely curtailed [his] desire to play the game.” Impacting the targets and other people involved in trolling (apart from trolls and their followers) in a negative way was a typical case in trolling.

Less typical, but commonly observed, was that *trolling could also have positive impacts*, as can be seen from Table II. One of Ollie’s followers, for instance, reported that there were instances when Ollie’s targets took trolling in good spirit, suggesting that trolling may not always negatively impact the targets. Eli, for instance, suggested that the targets can have fun during trolling. He mentioned an example of the person who was “being prank-called, and they follow[ed] along with the prankster’s joke but then end[ed] the call with the admission either in a subtle manner or in an explicit statement that they [had known] the whole time that it [was] indeed a prank. Flinn, on the other hand, mentioned how they “raided this guy the other day who was happy we raided him cos he got pushed up on the twitch “rankings” or whatever,” highlighting how trolling may bring wanted exposure to the targets. To acknowledge these and other possible positive impacts of trolling, the definition of trolling includes that trolling ‘*may*’ but not necessarily does have negative consequences.

This differentiates it from other similar but different online misbehaviours that are overtly harmful.

Table II: Overview of impacts of trolling

		Positive impacts	Negative impacts
<i>Trolls</i>		Being entertained Allowing to relax Getting paid	Feeling guilty
<i>Troll's followers</i>		Being entertained Allowing to relax	Feeling bad Considering starting trolling themselves
<i>Targets</i>	<i>People</i>	Getting views/exposure Having fun	Being distrustful toward other online users Feeling annoyed Feeling offended Feeling belittled Feeling disappointed Quitting the service Decreased enjoyment of the game Experiencing material damage Losing game progress Being mocked by other users (typically troll's followers)
	<i>Brands</i>	Getting views/exposure	Being annoyed Making a job more difficult
<i>Platforms</i>		Being visited Being creatively used (innovative use) Being informed about the security flows	Users leaving the platforms Being creatively used (misused)
<i>Bystanders</i>		Being entertained	Decreased enjoyment of the game Feeling disappointed Feeling offended

### 7.3 What is not trolling?

While some informants struggled to define what trolling exactly is, all the informants had an opinion about what trolling is not. *Cyberbullying* or *bullying* was most often mentioned in this regard. The participants discussed these two behaviours as two separate, but occasionally joined activities. In other words, one can troll with bullying and one can troll without bullying. Antonio added that trolling may also evolve into bullying. Discussing the differences between these two behaviours, Antonio mentioned that cyberbullying “is meant to hurt someone.” Furthermore, he saw it as a “continuous attack against a person” in

contrast to trolling where “you don’t get to communicate with your target more than once.” Another mentioned difference between cyberbullying and trolling was the power relations between the perpetrator and the target. “If the attacker is picking on a weaker opponent, that’s bullying,” was suggested by one of the gamers.

Another behaviour that is different from trolling is *harassment*. When describing the trolls, trolls’ followers stressed how the troll in question is not a harasser. One of Ollie’s followers stated: “The thing with [Ollie] is that he’s not like the run-of-the-mill griever that simply harasses players in-game. At most, [Ollie] gets a little smart mouthed, but that’s it. He adds that “some of the targets take it in good spirits at the end”, suggesting that trolling does not always have a negative impact on the targets. This view was echoed by Eli, who stated that “[t]he ignorant are quick to label all trolling as harassment, but no matter your belief, objectively, this is good fun between two adults.” That trolling is about having fun and not being mean or hurtful was observed also on Raid Board where one of the users stressed that during raiding it is important to “realize when it’s not funny anymore for viewers/listeners” and “realize when it’s not funny, funny funnnny, funnnnnny, anymore for the victim” as “at some point it becomes harassment.” This quote again suggests that trolling may evolve into other harmful behaviours. Trolling being repeatedly done to the same person was one of the most mentioned ways of how trolling becomes harassment. Trolls always target a different person, was stressed by Flinn.

Trolling was also separated from *flaming*. A redditor pointed out that the point of trolling is not to throw out insults to hurt the target but to provoke; to make people react. Another term often conflated with trolling is *raiding*. Observations suggest that in contrast to trolling which is typically an act done by the individual, raiding is a group activity. During the raids, raiders did not act alone; they acted in more or less *ad hoc* formed or permanent teams. Their acts involved both the harmless forms of trolling and activities that would

qualify as cyberbullying. “Raiding fits into both trolling and CB [cyberbullying], commented Antonio. He added: “Some raids are just trolling, such as spamming the chat or song request trolling. Others can go into raiding with the full extent of causing as much damage as possible.” That depending on the context, raiding can be seen as either trolling or cyberbullying was observed during the fieldwork.

Observing raids was very illustrative in helping to understand where the line was between trolling and cyberbullying. While I have observed many seemingly innocent and therefore trolling-like raids (e.g., raiders spamming on Twitch chat and prank calling), some of the raids seemed to represent or evolve into cyberbullying-like behaviour. The raid that resulted in a person microwaving his computer was a typical example. While raiders said they “trolled” the target into damaging his belongings, this raid deviated from other observed trolling acts in several ways. First, the troll leading the raid informed the target he was trolled. In contrast to other observed cases of trolling, where the troll left the target in doubt whether s/he was really a troll, in this case the raider asked a target to look at the camera and told him: “Well, yeah, you just got trolled. I’m not Twitch support. Yeah, good luck buddy. Hahahaha . . . I think you need a new computer now.” This overt gloating over a target’s misfortune was the second thing not typically present in other trolling cases. For the raider in question, it was not enough to witness the misfortune of the target; he wanted to make sure that the target knew what great satisfaction that had brought to the raider. It almost seemed the raider wanted to inflict harm on a target, telling him that the raider was not the only one witnessing this event: “hey you should check out your Twitch stream yeah . . . 120 people just watched you destroy your computer.” Third, this example deviated from other trolling cases by the multiplicity and severity of the actions. Raiders continued their raiding long after succeeding at what they aimed to do when they started the raid. In my fieldnotes I wrote:

The problem is that they just don't stop. First they ruined the computer. Then they asked the guy to microwave the battery. Then they asked if there was any other computer in the house. Then they asked him to locate his Xbox. The guy followed their instructions and the raiders seemed to be carried away. Now the guy has ruined his computer, the battery and Xbox.

This excerpt highlights how the target was 'trolled' several times, which was not common in other observed cases. It also illuminates the severity of the actions (i.e., bigger damage caused) as another of the factors separating trolling from other more harmful behaviours.

Lastly, trolling has been conflated with the *behaviour of people that one disagrees with*. Some of the participants were concerned over how the expression trolling has been used to label any dissenting opinion. This can be observed in the following conversation on the gaming forum:

*User X:* None of your forums users know what a 'troll' is. You call me a troll. All I do is point out hypocrisy in peoples' posts. You call [XY] a troll. All he does is make unpopular points, with the occasional joke post (which is NOT trolling). . . . It's to the point where we've embraced the term and call ourselves trolls, but the truth is we aren't. Please do some research before you call us trolls. Thanks.

*User Z:* Its sad to see that disagreeing against the masses is considered trolling.

...

*User X:* And it gets worse. Many of us have embraced the term "troll" for dissenting opinion when we should rise above it and prove how much importance a belief that isn't mainstream has.

The experience of User X, who has been falsely accused of being a troll, was echoed by other online users, who shared how they were called a troll on occasions when they wanted to have a serious discussion. That some people are falsely called trolls was suggested also by one of Reddit's moderators:

Also, keep in mind that there is a difference between;

People who are sincere ... yet, abusive towards others.

People who are primarily focused on screwing around with other people.

The first group aren't trolls; they think they are making legitimate points on actual issues ... and they just happen to end up being assholes.

The second group are trolls; assholes on purpose for fun.

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, trolling possesses distinctive characteristics that separate it from other online misbehaviours. The lines between the online misbehaviours were not clear-cut; yet 'real trolls', reportedly, cared about who is called a troll. Trolls who were not engaging in harassment or cyberbullying were called "old school trolls" and "legendary trolls." On the other hand, trolls who were engaging in such misbehaviours were called "bullies", "12 year Olds" and "amateurs." Eli, for instance talked about trolls "who just went to a forum and spammed anti-Semitic slurs" as "amateur trolls." It is hoped that the new definition of trolling will contribute to a more precise use of the expressions troll and trolling.

## 7.4 Summary

In view of a relative disagreement as to how trolling should be defined, this thesis provides a new definition of trolling. Based on the analysis it is suggested that for a behaviour to be called trolling it has to be intentional, deceptive and mischievous, and designed to provoke a target into a reaction. To further separate trolling from other different albeit similar behaviours the definition includes that trolling may benefit the troll and their followers, and does not necessarily harm other people or firms involved. While trolling typically had negative consequences for the targets, some targets, audience members and firms benefited from trolling. Cyberbullying and online harassment, on the other hand, describe behaviour that is straightforwardly hostile and harmful. Under the right circumstances (e.g., repeated targeting of a person), however, trolling evolved into more serious and damaging

misbehaviours. The presentation of the nature of trolling behaviours concludes the reporting of findings. The subsequent chapter, Chapter Eight, provides interpretative insight into the findings that were presented in this and the previous two chapters.

## Chapter Eight: Discussion

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### 8.1 Introduction

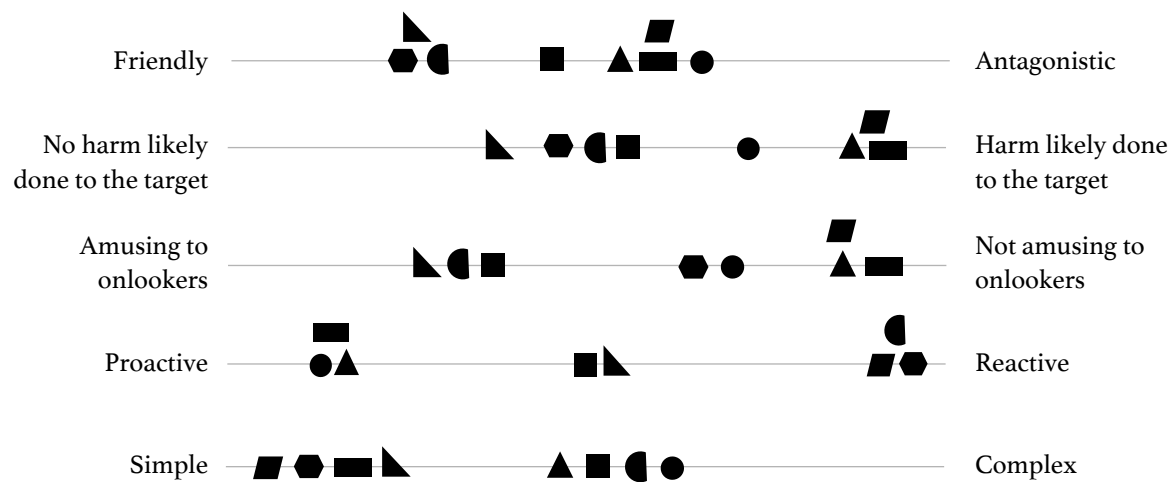
This study set out with the aim of better understanding the assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate mischief-making consumer misbehaviours such as online trolling. The following research questions were examined: (1) *What is online trolling and how is it differentiated from other forms of online misbehaviour?* (2) *What and how do human and non-human entities come together and manage to hold together, however temporarily, in the performance of trolling?* and (3) *Can assemblages of actors, joined in the performance of trolling, help in our understanding of how trolling is bolstered, maintained, disrupted, or broken?* The current chapter discusses the answers to these questions, synthesising the findings and relating them to the existing literature. Excluding the introduction and summary, the chapter has been divided into three parts. The first part deals with the nature of trolling behaviours. The second focuses on trolling in the making. The last section deals with influencing trolling.

### 8.2 The distinctive nature of trolling

In view of the relative disagreement among scholars researching trolling as to what trolling is, the first contribution of my dissertation lies in providing a new definition of trolling. Drawing on the conceptual and data analyses, this study suggests that *trolling behaviours are deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s), are performed for the benefit of the troll(s) and their followers and may have negative consequences for people and firms involved.* This definition, also published in the *Journal of Marketing Management* (i.e., Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017), in several ways matches, opposes, and extends what is currently known about the nature of trolling.

First, this study supports the notion of multiplicity of trolling by advocating the use of the term ‘trolling behaviours’. In keeping with prior studies (e.g., Cook et al., 2017; W. Phillips, 2015; Sanfilippo, Fichman, & Yang, 2018), the present research points out that trolling presents a spectrum of behaviours. These behaviours vary, for instance, in terms of their friendliness, harmfulness, amusement value, proactiveness (i.e., the degree to which acts are initiated by a troll or are a reaction to external events) and simplicity. The heterogeneity of trolling behaviours is illustrated in Figure 14.

Figure 14: The heterogeneity of trolling behaviours



Legend	Strategy	An illustrative example of trolling behaviour
●	Endanger	Troll publishing a video tutorial of how drilling into iPhone 7 will reveal hidden headphone port
▲	Shock	Troll setting up "a dog punching event" on Facebook
■	Digress	Troll as a taxi driver dropping customers off at deserted places (in a video game)
⬡	(Hypo)criticise	Troll correcting other online user's grammar mistakes
■	Antipathize	Troll posting on the Islam subreddit that all Muslims are terrorists
▮	Aggress	Troll insulting an online user, calling him a d**k
◐	Mock	Troll pretending to be a customer service representative and humorously responding to the complaining consumers
◑	Joke	Troll engaging with other video game player and pretending he/she does not know how to use the computer

Trolling behaviours vary also in terms of the strategies that underpin the behaviours, as can be seen from Figure 14. Before discussing trolling strategies, it has to be mentioned that it is impossible to claim without doubt that a particular trolling post reflects a particular strategy. While in some cases trolls directly stated their strategies (e.g., “I wanted to be funny”), in other cases trolls were not aware of or did not want to disclose their strategies. In this case the strategy behind trolling behaviour was assumed on the basis of the elements of the act (e.g., surprising punchlines, entertaining gestures, satirical comments) and/or the reaction of the audience (e.g., reacting to a post with haha, commenting with LOL).

In general, many of the observed trolling behaviours corresponded to six overlapping trolling strategies identified by Hardaker (2013): trolls were found to digress, (hypo)criticise, antipathize, endanger, shock and aggress. In addition, trolls were found *to mock* and *to joke*. The strategy of mocking involves trolls making fun of the target, typically by using the elements of parody. An example of implemented mocking strategy is Otto’s parody Facebook page of a particular city. His trolling page resembles the official city page and it hosts topics that typically appear on the official page (e.g., city news, investments, traffic conditions) but with a humorous twist: comments are exaggerated and written for comic effect. While mocking strategy may involve jocular elements, joking strategy revolves around them. Joking strategy involves acting in a humorous way. The troll that employs joking strategy aims to cause laughter or amusement for himself/herself, onlookers and/or target. Polite ill-informed comments with surprising punch lines in the online comments sections are an example of trolling embodying joking strategy.

Trolling practices that seemed to be driven by the goal *to be funny* were common in the study’s dataset. This is a surprising finding, as current research at large does not consider trolls as humourists or jokesters. While several scholars pointed out that trolls are after amusement (e.g., Baker, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Hardaker, 2010, 2013), it seems that this

‘amusement’ is typically conceptualised as the pursuit of having something to do and not as the pursuit of being funny. On the other hand, the studies that acknowledge that trolling behaviours may be amusing (Bishop, 2013; Sanfilippo et al., 2018, 2017b) are based either on anecdotal evidence or on the perceptions of the research participants. The present research adds empirical support to these studies; engagements with the trolls and other trolling actors have revealed that some trolls are performing a low-brow comedy that is entertaining not just to the trolls but also to the audience<sup>12</sup>. A possible explanation for such a finding arising out of my study and not of others is that my dataset includes light-hearted, well-known trolls who happened to be comedians in real-life. In contrast, other studies on trolling (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; W. Phillips, 2015) typically included a more antagonistic version of trolls and trolling, representing harsher strategies such as shocking, endangering and aggressing against others. Among these strategies and in line with Hardaker’s (2013) findings, aggressing against others has been the least commonly observed. The reason for this may be that aggressing is an overt strategy, leaving no doubt to the target as to what troll wants to achieve (Hardaker, 2013). As it is obvious that s/he wants to cause trouble, the target is less likely to respond (Hardaker, 2013).

*Provoking the target into response* has been found to be the primary goal of the troll. This finding agrees with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013; Jane, 2015). Another finding supporting previous work (Buckels et al., 2014; Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; T. C. Turner et al., 2005) is that *deception* plays an essential role in trolling. For a behaviour to be considered trolling it has to be fabricated (i.e., in order to succeed with his or her act, the troll has to convince the target to “have a false belief about what it is that is going on” (Goffman, 1975, p. 83). This study argues that this fabrication is

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<sup>12</sup> The entertainment value of trolling behaviours is discussed in detail on page 181.

always exploitative (Goffman, 1975): it is designed for the benefit of the troll or the troll's followers (i.e., audience members who find trolling entertaining). While the definition in general acknowledges that trolling may have negative consequences for people and firms involved, it includes the word '*may*' to connote that such consequences may or may not be intended. In contrast to scholars (Bergstrom, 2011; Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016) who claimed that trolls enjoy inflicting distress on others, this study claims that typical trolls are *mischievous*. Following Holbrook's (1999) definition, trolling behaviours can be considered play and while trolls cause trouble in a playful way, they know that there are limits and they do not intend to cause harm. This is a position taken also by Kirman et al. (2012).

The lack of intent to cause harm does not mean, however, that trolling is an inconsequential phenomenon. In the absence of studies that would systematically examine trolling effects, this research adds support to previous studies that mentioned various negative consequences of trolling. The findings further support the idea that consumer misbehaviours negatively influence the experience of other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 2004; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016); trolls disrupt discussions and online communities (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Herring, 2002), among other negative influences. A more surprising and less expected finding is that trolling behaviours may be associated with various positive impacts. While Fisk et al. (2010, p. 417) introduced what they call the "provocative idea" of *positive outcomes of consumers behaving badly*, the present research supports and makes concrete this idea. As observed, trolling brings money and entertainment to trolls, relaxation to followers, exposure to the targets, traffic and innovative ideas to the platforms, and amusement to the bystanders. These trolling impacts are far from exhaustive, yet illustrative enough to show that consumer misbehaviours such as trolling are associated with positive benefits. This idea has been hinted at in earlier studies which suggested that trolling could positively influence online communities (Coles

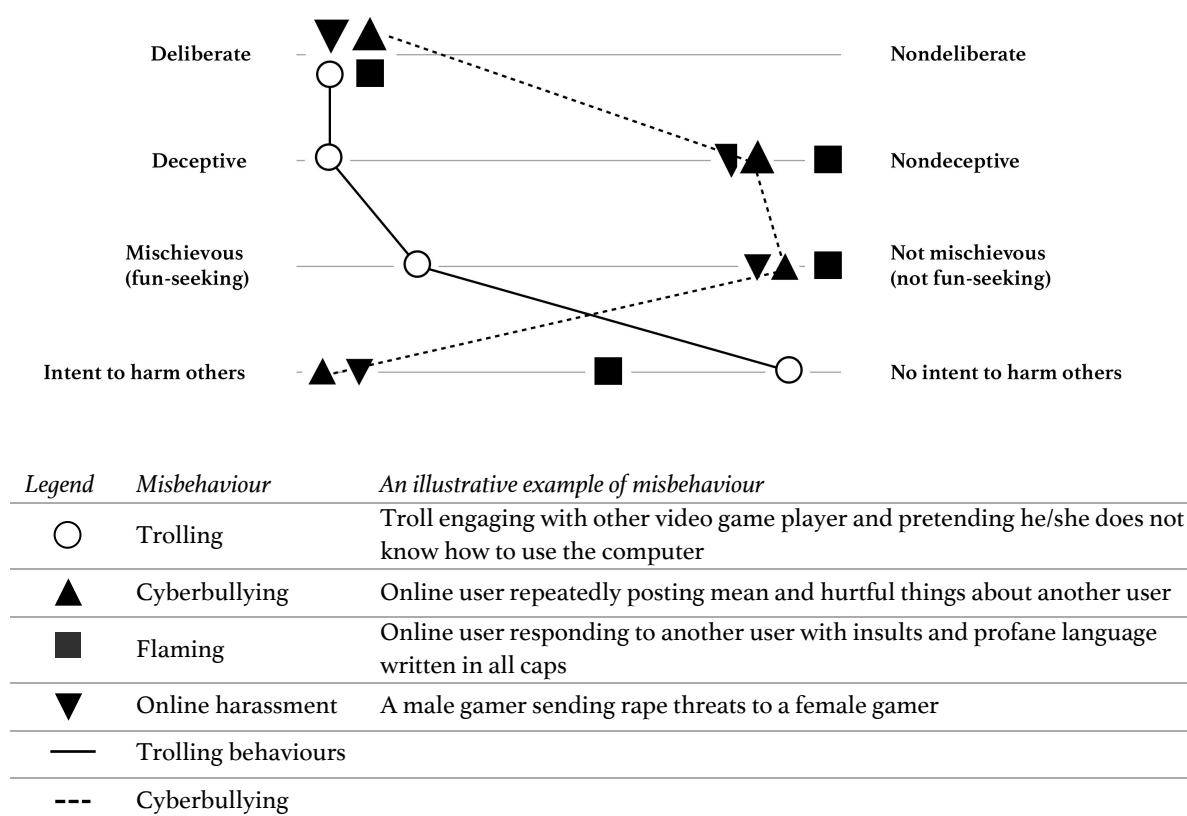
& West, 2016b; Cruz et al., 2018; Herring et al., 2002; Hopkinson, 2013; W. Phillips, 2015); yet this research extends this finding by highlighting that trolling also positively impacts trolls, their followers, platforms, and occasionally even targets.

Besides being deceptive, mischievous, provocative, and for at least some of the trolling stakeholders beneficial, trolling behaviours are also *deliberate*. In keeping with the existing definitions of trolling (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Griffiths, 2014; Gully, 2012; Hardaker, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013), this research shows that trolling behaviour is intentional—troll deliberately decides to troll. Finally, by using the plural form of the troll and the target in the definition, this research acknowledges the findings of previous studies (Cook et al., 2017; W. Phillips, 2015; Synnott, Coulias, & Ioannou, 2017), which show that trolling can be an *organised activity* involving multiple senders and multiple receivers.

The provided definition is *integrative*; it aims to resolve some of the academic discrepancies as to what trolling behaviour includes. It also brings the needed conceptual expansiveness and restrictiveness. It is expansive in indicating the diversity of trolling behaviours. At the same time the definition is restrictive in that it rules out several close cousins of trolling, namely cyberbullying, flaming, and online harassment (see Figure 15). To illustrate, following the definition, *purely aggressive, neither playful nor deceptive, online practices to harm the target do not qualify as trolling*. They would be categorised as *cyberbullying*. Additional identified criteria that separate trolling from cyberbullying are that trolling does not necessarily include a power imbalance between the troll and the target, and that it can be a one-off event. Such conceptualisation of cyberbullying is in line with scholars examining this type of misbehaviour. Olweus (2012), one of the renowned (cyber)bullying scholars, for instance, directly states that bullying does not involve friendly and playful teasing, and arguing by people similar in strength or power.

The provided definition—in particular the emphasis on the trolling’s deceptive and no-harm intended nature—also helps to separate trolling from flaming and online harassment. Trolling usually does not include overly hostile, inflammatory behaviour such as the posting of insulting messages written in profane language. Such behaviour would typically be referred to as *flaming* (cf. Alonzo & Aiken, 2004). Finally, trolling usually does not include targeted hostility – hostility that is targeted towards people of a particular gender, for instance. Such misbehaviour is distinctive of *online harassment* (cf. Tang & Fox, 2016). Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that a behaviour that started as trolling can evolve into cyberbullying or other harmful online behaviours. This study suggests that this happens when a troll repeatedly trolls the same person and when a trolling act gets carried away due to various reasons (e.g., the gullibility of the target, the pressure of the audience, the pressure of the community of trolls).

Figure 15: Highlighting the differences between trolling and other online misbehaviours



Finally, it has to be mentioned that trolling should not be conflated with negative word-of-mouth. *Negative word-of-mouth* “has usually been conceived and studied as negative communication about a brand resulting from a specific unsatisfactory experience with the brand” (Hickman & Ward, 2007, p. 315). In contrast, trolling usually does not result from negative experience with the brand. When trolling includes complaining, trolls can complain “without having prior experienced genuine service failure and feelings of dissatisfaction” (Reynolds & Harris, 2005, p. 325). Trolls use illegitimate or unjustified complaining simply as a tool to deceive in order to evoke reactions from the brands or other consumers. By the same token, trolls spread *fake news*<sup>13</sup>—“news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). The provided definition of trolling does not create a clear-cut division between trolling and spreading fake news, but it can be argued that the main difference between these two types of behaviour lies in their motivation. Providing fake news is, reportedly, linked with pecuniary and ideological motivations (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and trolling, driven by the same motivations could be understood as spreading fake news. While the present research is, to the best of my knowledge, first in unearthing that trolling may be a source of monetary income, and therefore could be equated with spreading fake news, trolls were not found to be ideologically motivated. The troll informants in this study, similarly as Phillips’ (2015) ones, categorically denied that they are trolling to further or fight some sort of ideology. This contrasts with Sanfilippo et al. (2017a) who talk about political and ideological trolls. However, this category of political and ideological trolls has not been established by the trolls themselves, but by researchers and participants in the research (i.e., students), who *believed* trolls to have been motivated by a certain social or political stance. By incorporating

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<sup>13</sup> The discussion of fake news in relation to trolling extends beyond the purpose of this dissertation. Yet in the light of the importance of the issue of fake news in current academic debates, it seems important to at least touch upon this topic.

troll's perspective, the present study addresses the limitations of previous work on trolling and consumer misbehaviours, that predominantly studied trolling through the eyes of the third-parties (i.e., research participants) or front-line employees, respectively.

### 8.3 Theorising trolling in action

Prior studies on consumer misbehaviours in general, and on trolling behaviours in particular, are preoccupied with the perpetrators and the targets of the misbehaviours. This approach neglects the plethora of other invisible actors involved in misbehaviours. The current study revealed that at least nine types of actors that participate in trolling. These are: *troll(s)*, *target(s)*, *medium*, *audience*, *other trolls*, *trolling artefacts*, *regulators*, *revenue streams*, and *assistants*. Representatives from each of these categories have appeared in all five case studies. Each of these categories of actors plays a different role in the making of trolling; some actors are essential for the misbehaviour to manifest and others are acting favourably towards trolling.

#### 8.3.1 *On the making of the trolling act*

An assemblage of three associating actors—*troll(s)*, *target(s)*, and *medium*—must be in place for a *trolling act to emerge*. For the troll to accomplish his/her program of action (i.e., to troll) s/he has to first ally himself/herself with the medium. Troll selects the medium that is amenable to trolling; that means it has *fitting*<sup>14</sup> *technical affordance*, *discernible*<sup>15</sup> *medium culture*, and/or *absent or incapable regulators*. It is one of these or a combination of these three characteristics that make a particular medium trolling friendly. To illustrate, a channel (i.e., medium) conducive to trolling is the channel that offers attractive features that match the troll's capabilities (e.g., a troll that lacks skills in improvisation will be less likely to choose a

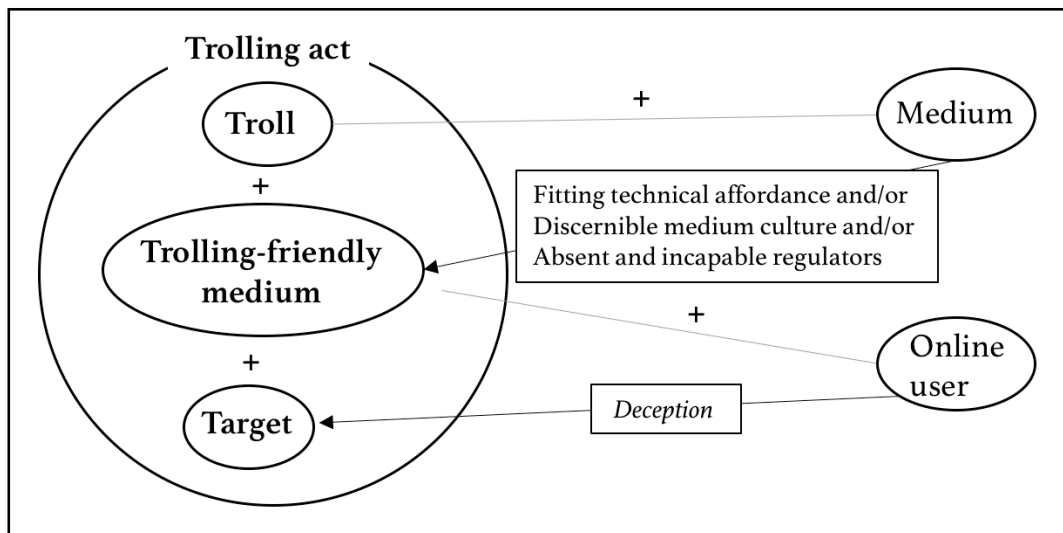
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<sup>14</sup> Fitting in a sense that the capabilities of the trolls match the properties of the medium.

<sup>15</sup> Discernible in a sense that is known to the troll.

platform that requires the use of VOIP). A medium conducive to trolling is also a medium that has a discernible medium culture—a medium that is known to the troll after being visited by people that have particular attitudes and behaviours. Finally, the absence of regulators (e.g., no human moderators) or incapable regulators (e.g., human moderators that are too slow in applying their actions) make a particular medium a good place for trolling. On a medium, trolls proactively or reactively become *searchers for a target*—this is for an online user who would take a bait. *Only an online user who has been deceived is translated into the target*. The assemblage of interacting troll, medium, and target creates a *new punctualised actor*—*trolling act*. Figure 16 illustrates this process of the emergence of the trolling act.

Figure 16: The emergence of the trolling act

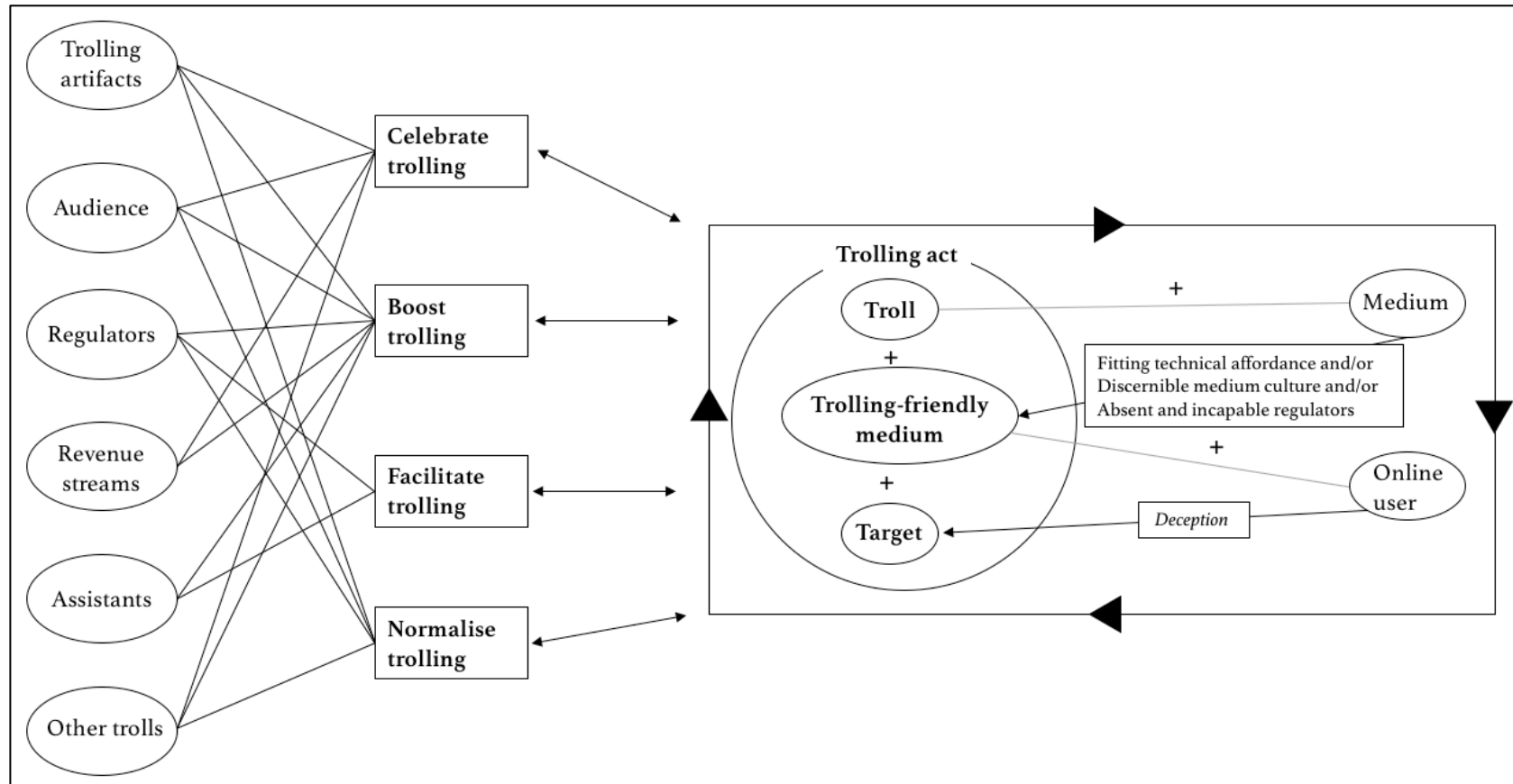


### 8.3.2 On feeding trolling behaviours

While the presence of troll, trolling-friendly medium and target are necessary for the trolling act to manifest, other actors (i.e., audience, other trolls, artefacts, regulators, revenue streams, and assistants) through their associations with the punctualised actor (i.e., trolling act) and with the individual main three actors *act favourably towards trolling*. They feed it and

nourish it. As Figure 17 indicates, there are four ways in which associating actors support trolling: by *celebrating it*, *boosting it*, *facilitating it*, and *normalising it*.

Figure 17: Trolling-nourishing ecosystem



### 8.3.2.1 Celebrating trolling behaviours

Trolling and trolls are being *celebrated*. One of the most surprising findings of this thesis is that trolling behaviours and their perpetrators are *honoured* and *praised*, in particular by the actors that correspond to the categories of the audience, artefacts, revenue streams, and other trolls. By sharing trolling artefacts, audience members express public respect for trolling. Some audience members (i.e., trolls' fans) reported how observing trolling live is a privilege. As it is a privilege to receive a troll's reply to the posted comment. The fans' comments, intended for the trolls, are typically full of flattering and admiring words. Words, likes, and shares are not, however, the only way trolling is being celebrated—trolling is also officially honoured. After all, a respectable news magazine has recently proclaimed a well-known troll to be one of the most influential people on the Internet. The media representations of the trolls and trolling, either praising it or sensationalising it, contribute to some trolls becoming celebrities. This is an argument that is in line with working within the field of celebrity studies, which argued that the phenomenon of celebrity and media are closely linked (Marwick, 2015; Rojek, 2001; G. Turner, 2004).

Unexpectedly, the celebritisation of trolling has been noticed both in the case of funny trolls with a large base of loyal fans (e.g., Alfie, Otto) and in the case of trolls who troll in a more socially contentious way and have few, typically in-group associated, fans (e.g., raiders). While the finding that trolling actors celebrate trolls who troll in an antagonistic manner seems counter-intuitive at first sight, Rojek (2001) demonstrated that considering their public impact even serious criminals may be seen as celebrities—notorious celebrities, to be sure. Rojek's (2001) conceptualisation of *glamorous* (i.e., favourable public recognition) or *notorious* (i.e., unfavourable public recognition) celebrities, relates well to present research.

That misbehaving consumers and misbehaviours, in particular trolls and trolling, may be celebrated is an idea that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been previously discussed in marketing and consumer research literature. The contribution of this thesis lies in showing *the public impact of the trolls*: they have the capacity to generate fans, attract funding, and inspire copycats. This public impact is not something that happens completely by chance but seems to be actively sought after. Both notorious and glamorous trolls from the dataset employed a variety of self-presentation practices to self-brand themselves. This suggests that some of the trolls are “micro-celebrities” (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013)—they are committed to deploy and maintain their online trolling identities as if they were branded goods (Senft, 2013). Or as Senft (2013, p. 347) would say, trolls manage their online selves “with the sort of care and consistency normally exhibited by those who have historically believed themselves to be their own product: artists and entrepreneurs.” Microcelebrities, therefore, is a term applicable not only to the consumer making selfies with the brands (Rokka & Canniford, 2016), political activists (Tufekci, 2013) and fashion bloggers (Marwick, 2013) but also to misbehaving consumers. Such an argument is surprising, so much more in the case of notorious trolls, where one wonders why some people wish to amplify their popularity through misbehaving. Rojek (2001) offers one possible explanation as to why some people desire to acquire celebrity status through notoriety. Mobilising his view, notorious trolling could be seen as the “expression of the quest for one-upmanship, the desire to outsmart others and take people for a ride so as to confirm one’s inner sense of superior gamesmanship” (Rojek, 2001, p. 151). How successful misbehaving consumers are in this quest depends on all the other actors in the assemblage. In general, trolling behaviours are feeding off the trolls being successful with their micro-celebrity practices and the other actors (i.e., audience, revenue streams, artefacts, and other trolls) acknowledging and supporting their celebrity status.

### 8.3.2.2 *Boosting trolling behaviours*

Trolling behaviours are being *boosted*. The findings from this research demonstrate that trolling is being supported by the associating actors *promoting* it. Representatives from all categories of actors have been found to play this role; some of them directly and intentionally, and others indirectly and unknowingly promoting trolling. Examples of the actors from the first category would be audience members; a troll's followers who demand new trolling content and who are asking the troll to be trolled. Some online users went so far as to manipulate their online identity and position themselves as a potential target. Interestingly, these 'wannabe targets' have been noticed in the cases of both glamorous and notorious trolls. A possible explanation for this is that 'wannabe targets' are trolls themselves. Another possible explanation is that such online users, like trolls, engage in micro-celebrity practices (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013) using trolling to appeal to existing followers or to gain new followers. In this view, trolling thrives within the attention economy in which the ability to attract attention is a status symbol and people value whatever helps them get attention (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The quest for attention is supported by the *infrastructure of the social media* which offers comparable and quantifiable metrics of one's success (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Non-humans such as the number of views, likes, shares, and followers act as a currency in this attention economy. A trolling act that is rich in currency—that is being viewed, liked, and shared—not only encourages the trolls to continue trolling but also sells trolling to other online users, suggesting to them a potential way of grabbing public attention. At the same time, the ubiquity of social media metrics seems to inspire other trolls to push themselves harder. In an attempt to outrank others, one has to be funnier, more provocative, or more shocking.

Social media metrics are not the only non-humans boosting trolling. One unanticipated finding is that *some regulators actually promote trolling*, rather than discourage it. Supporting Herring et al.'s (2002) finding, this study shows that responses to trolling are used as a base for further attacks. Trolls do not seem to be dismayed even when their accounts are suspended—for trolls, being banned is a *modus operandi* and a badge of honour. Furthermore, the responses to trolling (e.g., a reply from the manager of an online community) may serve as an invitation to other trolls in the same way as publicly rewarding online complainers may lead to an increase in complainers (Gallaughier & Ransbotham, 2010).

That *marketer's efforts may backlash* is not a completely new idea in marketing and consumer research. Within the social marketing field, Peattie, Peattie, and Newcombe (2016) demonstrate that marketing interventions may have negative unintended consequences. They use the expression 'surprises' to refer to "'backlash' effects where campaign targets respond perversely to messages or incentives" (Peattie et al., 2016, p. 1604). This thesis brings the idea of surprising unintended consequences to the consumer misbehaviour field, where the possibility of counterproductive managing strategies has been briefly mentioned in a conceptual paper written by Fullerton and Punj (2004). The findings of the current study add empirical support to their conceptualisations.

The finding that responding to trolling may exacerbate trolling is also enriching our understanding of actor-network theory. In contrast to the classical ANT studies showing that the lack of compliance among the actors may lead to destabilisation and failure of the networks (Callon, 1984), this study reveals that *the lack of compliance may even stabilise and energise the networks*. In other words, surprisingly, some anti-programs of action (e.g., especially regulators' actions such as banning or downvoting the troll) seem to strengthen the troll's program of action (i.e., to troll), instead of weakening it. A possible explanation for

this '*stimulating punishment*' is that the enforcement of some anti-programs, particularly the ones that are publicly enforced by the regulators, indicate to the looking-for-reaction trolls that their actions are being successful. In this way, the regulator's anti-programs actually become compliant with the programs of the trolls. To put it differently, a troll's program of action—to play with the rules rather than by the rules (Grayson, 1999)—in its essence includes a nonchalant attitude towards the regulator's intentions. Such findings suggest that the struggle between the programs and anti-programs of actions within the network is not influenced only by the "customers' resistance, their carelessness, their savagery", their mood and their cleverness (Latour, 1990, p. 105) but also by their mischievousness and playfulness. In this light, trolls seem to resemble tricksters who are "forever hungry" for the targets and willing to disobey any prohibition that lies between them and a prospective meal (Hynes, 1993 as cited in T. Green, 2007, p. 57).

Lastly, trolling is boosted by *being a potential source of income*. In contrast to Phillips (2015, p. 8) who explicitly stated that "trolling behaviours aren't rewarded with a paycheck", my research shows that some trolls, in particular the glamorous and celebrity ones, are being paid for trolling. These trolls are selling their mischievous ways not only to their fans but also to the companies. The finding that some *firms are hiring trolls* to respond online to their dissatisfied customers may be understood as an attempt at differentiation from rivals; perhaps it is a guerrilla marketing tactic (Levinson, Levinson, & Levinson, 2007). There is, however, another possible explanation. Hiring trolls to communicate with the customers may represent an attempt to attenuate the perceived power imbalance between the customers and the firms. Firms adopting consumer orientation and living by the principles that 'the customer is king' or that 'the customer is always right' are obliged to deal with consumers in a courteous way, regardless of how consumers behave (Yagil & Shultz, 2017). In cases of misbehaving consumers, such requirements may negatively impact the firm's employees, clashing with employee's personal values (Yagil & Shultz, 2017). Employees are

not only not allowed to express anger towards customers but they are typically required to ‘fake it’ and “display organizationally prescribed feelings, such as happiness and enthusiasm” (Geddes & Callister, 2007, p. 725) towards problematic customers. Trolls, on the other hand, have no incentive to act in a politically correct way and can give voice to the frustrations marketers may have when dealing with misbehaving consumers. This explanation may help us understand why some firms are prepared to hire and pay trolls, and in this way promote trolling. On the other hand, it has to be noted that the prescribed and inauthentic type of communication between the firm and the customer is also what makes a particular firm or brand a good target for misbehaviours. For instance, trolling may be facilitated by the troll knowing that it is part of the online community manager’s job to answer in a friendly way.

### 8.3.2.3 *Facilitating trolling behaviours*

Trolling behaviours are being actively and passively *facilitated*. Some of the actors, in particular assistants and regulators, seem to *make trolling easier*. In the process of trolling trolls *use, misuse, and abuse* the features and functionalities offered on online platforms. The public display of performance metrics (e.g., showing number of likes or views), quick and easy creation of new online accounts and online groups, ability to tag other users, the option to set alerts so that you are notified when an online user starts streaming, easy sharing of the content, suggestions of ‘similar others’, and permissible revisions of the posted content are only a couple of features facilitating online mischief-making consumer misbehaviours such as trolling. These examples highlight that the functions trolls use for trolling are in their essence no different from the functions other online users use. While, for instance, an ‘ordinary’ Facebook user employs the feature ‘people you may know’ to add new friends, a troll such as Jon uses it to add his troll friends to a fake Facebook group. With mobilising non-humans that automatically suggests to him the accounts of other misbehaving

consumers, Jon saves his time and simplifies his work. Together this indicates that *online platforms basically have an infrastructure in place* that allows consumers to misbehave with minimal effort. In terms of ANT, since online misbehaving consumers typically do not have problems with enrolling the non-humans offered by the platforms, these non-humans ‘must’ have interests that are in harmony with the interests of the troll. It should be noted that such argument does *not* imply that the infrastructure of online social platforms *enables* trolling behaviours. Rather, this study argues that it passively *facilitates* it. Trolling behaviours such as pranks, practical jokes and horseplay are not exclusively limited to online worlds, yet it seems that the online world makes such behaviour easier to conduct. One potential explanation for this may be that online environments offer a plethora of options to control the performance of trolling—for instance, while a troll trolling in the analogue world could be disclosed by starting to laugh out loud, an online troll hiding behind the screen or using a mute button may hide the revealing laughter from the targets.

The ability to disguise misbehaving seems to be one of the key facilitators of trolling behaviours. One way misbehaving consumers try to disguise themselves is through enrolling into the network actors that help them hide their ‘real-life’ identities. This research to some extent agrees with the scholars who claim that trolling behaviours are facilitated by *anonymity* (e.g., Griffiths, 2014; Hardaker, 2013). This has been typically observed in the case of notorious trolls, who eagerly guarded their offline identities. On the other hand, at the same time, this thesis further supports Coles and West (2016b) in challenging the idea that trolling behaviours can be attributed to anonymity. Some trolls—the glamorous ones and the ones with a strong base of followers—are not particularly worried about being anonymous. In fact, while they are not posting under real names, they make sure that their trolling names are associated with real names via other channels. While such a finding is surprising, it may be explained by the fact that such trolls managed to build strong personal brands that they want to protect and nurture. Their trolling behaviours are typically more

innocent in nature and disclosing their real identities allows the trolls to reap the benefits of trolling beyond the online world and to maintain control over their online trolling identities. That some trolls do not want to hide under the cloak of anonymity is a finding that extends our knowledge of the relationship between trolling and anonymity. That said, it has to be mentioned that even the most carefree trolls are concerned with staying anonymous to one type of actor involved in trolling—the targets.

As mentioned before, the affordances of the online environment make sociotechnical practices such as trolling behaviours easier to conduct. At the same time, they make them more *durable*. If offline trolling may be more ephemeral in nature, *online* trolling has the possibility to be preserved forever in the forms of screenshots and videos. This durability of the materials that embody the relations within the network signals the stability of network-network within which trolling behaviours are performed (Law, 1992). This durability of materials is, however, “a relational effect” (Law, 1992, p. 387), supported by the actors such as assistants who afford to preserve materials, audience members who share the materials, and regulators who by being futile in interrupting trolling acts allow trolling to be materialised and/or shared. The seemingly ‘passive’ attitude towards managing trolling behaviours on the part of regulators, particularly human moderators on social media platforms, is not a surprising finding—prior research has shown that *marketers lean towards ignoring consumer misbehaviours* (Berry & Seiders, 2008; Fullerton & Punj, 2004). The problem is that marketers’ ignoring misbehaviours such as trolling, particularly in the cases when they are not the targets but the medium for trolling, facilitate trolling by giving trolls free access to the targets. While this would be an example of the actor (i.e., marketers) *actively facilitating trolling*, most of the time the facilitation was passive in nature with actors unknowingly or unpurposely supporting trolls and trolling.

#### 8.3.2.4 *Normalising trolling behaviours*

Trolling behaviours are being *normalised*. The associating actors, in particular, the trolling artefacts, other trolls, audience, and regulators play a role in *positioning trolling as an ordinary, taken-for-granted part of the online experience*. The trolling artefacts, representing trolling behaviours that occurred in a variety of online places and in a particular online place on a variety of occasions, insinuate that trolling is a widespread phenomenon. The audience members play an important role in circulating these artefacts and therefore reinforcing this perception of the commonness of trolling. One thing that makes the artefacts such as trolling screenshots shareable is that they are easy to understand. They seem to share a similar destiny with memes, which once were only comprehensible by insiders but have now lost their relative obscurity and gone mainstream (W. Phillips, 2015). That screenshots of trolling are shareable, or as Green and Jenkins (2011) would put it “spreadable,” connotes that people who share them find the content worth watching and worth sharing.

However, the audience members do not normalise trolling only by watching and sharing but also by *not* actively condemning trolling or trolls. In general, thus, trolling seems to be well-received. While no doubt there are audience members who attack the trolls for trolling or try to help out the targets, such attempts are rare, badly executed and therefore prone to further trolls’ manipulation or at least less visible and quickly silenced by the fans of the trolls or other trolls. Audience support, executed through words or through viewing the video, for instance, also helps trolls in neutralising potential guilt. Receiving upvotes, likes and shares may connote to the misbehaving consumers that they are engaging in perhaps problematic but certainly acceptable behaviour. That trolling behaviours should be perceived as what Cavan (1966, p. 18) would call “normal trouble” is also by the marketer’s merit, whose *regulating sanctions for trolling are not readily apparent*.

In saying that the associations between the trolling actors normalise trolling, it has to be noted that this process of normalisation may be better represented by some online settings than others. To put it differently, trolling behaviours seem to be more expected within the particular online places and the same misbehaviour that constitutes “normal trouble” (Cavan, 1966, p. 18) and are thus ignored within one place may be severely sanctioned at another one. This suggests that *consumer misbehaviours are normalised and localised in place* (Cavan, 1966). Such argument further supports the idea that the nature of misbehaviours, in particular trolling, is different from one platform to another (Hardaker, 2013; Kirman et al., 2012; Sanfilippo et al., 2017b).

To sum up, the discussion presented thus far suggests that trolling behaviours are supported by various actors celebrating, boosting, facilitating, and normalising them. While trolling represents a complex interrelated spectrum of relationships that could never be fully explained through a model, theory presented in this study and illustrated in Figure 17 does start to shed light on the key trolling actors and the relationships these actors have. From a conventional perspective, it is possible to explain consumer misbehaviours by referring to the characteristics and predispositions of misbehaving consumers. While misbehaving consumers undoubtedly play a very important role in the manifestation of misbehaviours, this thesis shows that the success of consumer misbehaviours depends on the whole network of associating actors. In other words, “complex, heterogeneous networks need to do their stuff, for consuming actors to be” (Bajde, 2013, p. 229). As seen in the case of trolling, the trolls are not the only ones responsible for trolling but receive recognition for the activities of other actors (Mol, 2010). In this regard, one of the most neglected actors participating in trolling is the audience. The section that follows discusses the characteristics of the audience gathered for trolling performances and the value the audience receives from observing trolling.

### 8.3.3 *On the audience feeding trolling behaviours*

This research identified many examples of how the audience exerts power “in actu” (Latour, 1984, p. 265), strongly influencing the actions of other actors, particularly misbehaving consumers. It is interesting to note that the power *in actu* was held by both active online users (i.e., content producers) and passive online users (i.e., consumers of user-generated content). In fact, drawing on the fieldwork this study challenges the prior studies which talk about online users as actively or passively involved (e.g., Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). In this research even the most passive audience members seemed to be active in some sense—they might not be posting comments under trolling videos or sharing trolling screenshots, but they had to at least click on a particular site to witness the video or the screenshot. Even though the ‘passive’ audience members did not express their opinions out loud, they influenced trolling behaviours, as their presence was noted and made visible by non-humans such as the button communicating number of views. Taking this into consideration, it would make more sense to talk about *more or less visible* audience members rather than about more or less active ones.

Besides participating in trolling behaviours in a more or less visible way, audience members also differ in terms of *belonging to a community or not*. Some audience members such as those gathering at the discussion forum focused on raiding could be understood as a community as their participation is marked with “shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In this case, belonging to a community may help explain why these audience members attend trolling behaviours. However, most of the audience members, even a specific troll’s followers gathering on his Facebook page, could not be categorised as a community. Viewers of trolling behaviours, trolls’ fans, and other audience members are better understood as a *public*, momentarily constituted by strangers united by ‘communion mentale’ (i.e., observed

trolling behaviour) (Arvidsson, 2013; Tarde, 1969). While the members of the public interact with each other, these interactions are not the reason for the existence of the public (Arvidsson, 2013; Tarde, 1969). The public is united by their interest in the performers of the misbehaviours or the misbehaviour itself. In other words, as this thesis argues, the public is united by the interest in entertainment.

In contrast to prior research which suggests that trolling is done for trolls' amusement (e.g., Baker, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Hardaker, 2010, 2013), my findings reveal that trolling behaviours have *entertainment value* also for their spectators. How could such finding be explained? Similarly to observing impolite interactions, observing trolling behaviours may provide "*voyeuristic pleasure*" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 234, emphasis added). Trolling is a form of entertainment where the entertaining content is not forced only from the part of an entertainer but is co-produced with the target. In the process of trolling, targets are being teased, mocked, made fun of, shocked, endangered, and aggressed against. Targets' embarrassing, angry, sad, witty or nonchalant responses to these trolling actions are music to the ears of what Clay Calvert (2004, p. 2) calls a "Voyeur Nation"—these are people obsessed with consuming "information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives." One possible explanation of why some consumers are transformed into trolling voyeurs is that observing trolling provides "the pleasure of being superior" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 235). As Culpeper (2011, p. 235) puts it: "there is self-reflexive pleasure in observing someone in a worse state than one-self." This idea is in line with the findings of Veer (2011) who revealed that some online users engage in voyeuristic behaviours for motives of *schadenfreude* (i.e., pleasure derived from knowing or seeing the misfortune of others).

The voyeuristic appeal of trolling behaviours is in great measure supported by the affordances of online platforms. These platforms not only offer trolling behaviours to audience members on a plate, but also allow the spectators, who "are hunting for an

opportunity to stare and be entertained” (Veer, 2011, p. 194), to spectate without being seen. Interestingly, in contrast to the classical conceptualisation of voyeurism that defines voyeurism as a *covert* observation (Baruh, 2010; Metzl, 2004) and to the studies that suggest that online voyeurs wish to stay anonymous to continue with their voyeuristic endeavours (Veer, 2011), this research suggests that not all spectators of consumer misbehaviours try to hide behind the curtains. In fact, in many instances, they do not need to, as online platforms, for instance by not moderating trolling content, provide free access to content that satisfies voyeuristic pleasures. In addition, the online voyeur may stay visible as the asynchronous nature of the online communication and the fact that target is typically not personally known to the observer may allow the voyeur to neutralise his/her potential feelings of guilt at not helping, as helping in such circumstances seems difficult if not impossible (Veer, 2011). Having said this, help might not even be always needed. While no action is a possible strategy for marketers concerned in managing trolling behaviours, the section that follows presents how mischief-making consumer behaviours such as trolling behaviour could be influenced when necessary.

#### 8.4 Influencing trolling: Managerial implications

The present findings have important implications for dealing with trolling behaviours. A better understanding of the trolling practice—in particular, what defines it and how it comes about—allows for the development of more tailored, and arguably more effective, ways to manage trolling. Taking into consideration the presented theoretical model of the manifestation of trolling behaviours (see Figure 17), the individual trolling act *may be prevented or interrupted by removing from the network at least one of the three main actors: the troll, the trolling-friendly medium or the target*.

Focusing the efforts on *removing the trolls* would be an action in the spirit of the previous studies on consumer misbehaviours and trolling. The present thesis does not

examine the motivations for trolling, so it cannot provide suggestions as to how trolls' motivation could be addressed. However, some recommendations can be made based on observation of what spoils trolling for the trolls. Feeling guilty for trolling is one such thing. Prior research has shown that, to escape from feelings of guilt, misbehaving consumers engage in the process of justifying and rationalising their misbehaving (e.g., Harris & Daunt, 2011; Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007). A troll's rationalisation of misbehaving may be neutralised by alerting his/her conscience (Cornish & Clarke, 2003). This can be done, for example, by posting reminders on the websites such as "You know, you CAN hurt people with trolling." Another way trolls can be influenced is by putting them under unreasonable pressure. The findings of this thesis suggest that trolls do not troll when they are not inspired and that failed trolling acts may be related to too little time invested into planning. Combining these findings with the finding that the demand for new or specific trolling content negatively influences the troll's motivation for trolling, it can be suggested that a troll may be discouraged by receiving unrealistic demands to troll more. Troll as a mischief-maker "plays only if and when one wishes to" (Caillois, 2001).

Besides removing the troll from the network, trolling acts may be stopped or interrupted by making the online place *less or not at all friendly to trolling*. As can be seen from Figure 16, an online place that has fitting technical affordance, discernible medium culture and/or absent and incapable regulators gets translated into a trolling-friendly place. Addressing trolling by changing technical affordance and medium culture is less reasonable, as these elements are difficult to change and present the essential part of the platforms. To illustrate, it is unreasonable to expect that Facebook will remove the feature 'people you may know' just because trolls use this feature to troll. The more practical and sensible way in this regard would be *to employ capable regulators*. Drawing on the findings of how trolling gets disrupted, this study suggests these regulators should be concerned with

reducing the visibility of trolling content (e.g., by adjusting sorting algorithms) and should be applied swiftly (e.g., banning the users after being warned once).

Thirdly, trolling may be disrupted by marketers focusing their efforts on *the targets* of trolling. In this regard, the actor-network within which a trolling act is performed may be disrupted by removing one of its obligatory points of passage through which an ‘ordinary’ online user is translated into the target of trolling—this is *deception*. In this sense, managerial actions that are designed to help to recognize trolling and trolls are of key importance. An example of one such action would be a marketing campaign focused on building awareness of what trolling is and what it is not. Another example would be the use of troll badges that would mark online users as trolls and warn the potential targets. Such tactics would be most likely executed by the marketers of the social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit...) and are appropriate for cases when a target of trolling is a consumer or a brand. In the case of brands being the targets, online community managers should be trained to identify (il)legitimate complainants, in order to make sure that they are fair to consumers that are genuinely complaining (Reynolds & Harris, 2005) but exhibit some troll-like characteristics. Besides recognising the ‘real’ trolls, the online user may prevent being trolled by minimising their possibility to be targeted. The lack of potential targets within a particular medium has been found to be one of the things that trolls find frustrating. Targets that wish to frustrate trolls may hide themselves from trolls by limiting the audience for social media posts, for instance.

The troll, the medium and the target-oriented managerial actions discussed above, are summarised in Table 12. This thesis advises against using these three types of approaches in isolation. In particular, this thesis challenges the effectiveness and feasibility of focusing on managing trolls as one “masterful, separate actor” (Mol, 2010, p. 256). This is for the following reasons. First, among all the actors in the assemblage, trolls may be the most

difficult one to manage. This study has shown that trolls are elusive: difficult to identify and catch. In addition, not taking anything seriously, trolls do not seem to be susceptible to marketers' messages. Such messages would be, arguably, better received by the targets. Second, targeting the perpetrators of misbehaviours in contrast to any other actor from the assemblage is most likely only displacing the misbehaviours to other times and places. The fieldwork has revealed that a troll removed from one network simply enrolls into another one. In practical terms, after being banned for trolling from one platform, the troll simply relocates to another one. This once again questions the value of banning trolls from the online platforms. There is an additional challenge with the removal of the troll from the network in the sense that this does not necessarily lead to the collapse of the network. The trolling assemblages consist of many other actors the trolls did or did not intentionally enlist who, at least temporarily, continue associating in the absence of the troll. Together, this suggests that marketing practitioners who exclusively concentrate their efforts on deterring the thieves, verbal abusers, trolls and vandals are, at best, only temporarily solving the problems of consumer misbehaviours and most likely only displacing the consumer misbehaviours to other times and places.

Table 12: Potential managerial actions and tactics for combating trolling

	<i>Managerial strategy</i>	<i>Managerial action</i>	<i>Examples of tactics</i>
Preventing or interrupting trolling act	Managing the troll	Alerting troll's conscience	Pointing out the potential consequences of trolling by displaying reminders such as: 'Trolling can hurt', 'Would you send such a message to your sister?', and 'How would you like being the butt of a joke?'
		Pressuring the troll	Creating fake unreasonable demand for new content (e.g., asking the troll to troll all the time or to troll only in a specific way)
	Managing the medium	Reducing the visibility of trolling content	Making sure that trolling content does not appear on #trending or on the first pages of platforms
		A quick application of sanctions	Banning trolls from the platforms after the 1 <sup>st</sup> warning
	Managing the target	Minimising the possibility of being targeted	A campaign intended to improve targets' digital literacy such as educating about how to change privacy settings on published posts  Building an awareness about trolling-prone places (e.g., platforms that do not require users to register accounts or do not use any moderation of comments)
		Teaching to recognise the troll	A campaign that builds awareness about what trolling is. Highlighting its deceptive and mischievous nature. Contrasting trolling and cyberbullying and harassment.  Training online brand community managers to identify (il)legitimate complainants (in the case where the brand is a target)
		Helping to recognise the troll	Non-human or human warnings that an online user might be a troll. For instance, marking the online user as a troll but hiding the badge from the troll
	Celebrating trolling behaviours	Reducing the attention paid to trolling	Preparing 'safe' reporting guidelines for media (for cases of notorious trolling)
			Hiding metrics such as the number of views or likes on trolling content
		Preventing copy-cat behaviours	Minimising opportunities for social learning (e.g., deleting the content that provides ideas about how one goes about trolling)
Suppressing trolling behaviours	Boosting trolling behaviours	De-monetising content portraying trolling	Flagging content with trolling as advertiser unfriendly  Hiding metrics such as the number of views or likes on trolling content
		Identifying and managing actions that have	Regularly testing the effectiveness of the managerial actions (e.g., what percentage of people who have

<i>Managerial strategy</i>	<i>Managerial action</i>	<i>Examples of tactics</i>
<b>Suppressing trolling behaviours</b>	counter-productive or unintended consequences	<p>been temporarily sanctioned has repeated the same misbehaviour?)</p> <p>Online community managers avoiding public confrontations with trolls (talking with trolls via direct messages)</p> <p>Hiding troll's comments from other online users but not to the trolls themselves</p> <p>Disabling down-voting/up-voting or expressing reactions on trolling content</p>
		Rewarding bystanding consumers who recognize trolling and warn or help the targeted consumers
	Making trolling behaviours harder	Improving potential targets' digital literacy (e.g., educating about how to block or report a troll)
	<b>Facilitating trolling behaviours</b>	Managers being aware of and taking a stance about their products/services being used for trolling
		Strengthening surveillance (e.g., increasing the perception of the presence of online community managers)
	Making trolling behaviours riskier	<p>Clearly stating sanctions for trolling and consistently enforcing sanctions</p> <p>Reducing anonymity (in case of notorious trolls)</p> <p>Tracking trolls' IP addresses</p>
<b>Normalising trolling behaviours</b>	Decreasing the social acceptance of trolling behaviours (of the more harmful variants)	Setting positive behaviour expectations (e.g., by avoiding anarchistic user interface design)
		<p>Sanctioning people who share or re-post trolling <u>artefacts</u> depicting notorious trolling</p> <p>Disabling down-voting/up-voting or expressing reactions on trolling content</p>

A better option to manage misbehaving consumers would be to manage the socio-technical networks that allow and feed these misbehaviours. The findings of this study suggest that without managing the audience and other, at first glance invisible, actors, it will be difficult to stymie trolling behaviours. To break the assemblages within which mischief-making misbehaviours exist and thrive, marketing practitioners should develop and employ actions that *do not celebrate, boost, facilitate or normalise such misbehaviours*. An example of a trolling-management tactic in the spirit of suppressing the celebration of trolling behaviours would be hiding the viewing metrics on the trolling content. De-monetising trolling content by marking such content as advertising-unfriendly is an example of a marketing tactic that would not boost trolling. Another such tactic would be hiding trolls' comments to other online users but not to the troll himself/herself. To stop facilitating trolling, marketers should try to make trolling behaviours harder (e.g., by improving the digital literacy of online users) and riskier (e.g., start tracking trolls' IP addresses). Lastly, to not normalise harmful and notorious trolling behaviours, online community managers should aim to set positive behaviour expectations within their communities.

Table 12 presents the examples of trolling-management actions corresponding to the four strategies. It is important to note that *the presented managerial implications may be used either by marketers who want to discourage trolling behaviours or by marketers who would like to encourage them*. In the latter case, of course, marketers should do the opposite to the tactics suggested in Table 12. For instance, if they want to boost trolling behaviours, they should engage in public confrontations with the trolls and make sure that the trolling content on their platforms makes it to the forefront. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first academic study that provides managerial implications not only for the marketers who wish to discourage trolls and other mischievous consumers but also for those who see the opportunity to encourage and enable such consumers.

## 8.5 Summary

In this chapter, the findings were analysed, interpreted and synthesised in relation to the research questions. First, concerning what is online trolling, the chapter discussed its distinctive nature. This study argues that trolling behaviours are deliberate, deceptive, mischievous, provocative behaviours that benefit the trolls and their followers and typically, but not necessarily, negatively impact the targets and the firms. The elements of the presented definition match and extend the current academic conceptualisations of trolling; what is more, they help in differentiating trolling from other online misbehaviours. Second, in relation to how trolling behaviours are performed, the chapter presents a theoretical model that helps understand how a trolling act is assembled by the associations of the troll, trolling-friendly medium and the target, and how the associations with other actors support trolling behaviours by celebrating them, boosting them, facilitating them, and normalising them. Besides having theoretical contributions, this model can be used to guide marketers in discouraging or encouraging trolling behaviours. The summary of theoretical contributions opens the following, final, chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

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### 9.1 Introduction

This is the final chapter in a thesis which set out to understand the assemblages of actors that allow or perpetuate online trolling behaviours. The chapter consists of four parts. The first section summarises key theoretical contributions. The second section presents the limitations of my research. The third section provides recommendations for future research. The chapter culminates with several concluding remarks.

### 9.2 Overview of theoretical contributions

The findings of this thesis make several contributions to the current literature on trolling behaviours, consumer misbehaviours, and actor-network theory. To start with, to the best of my knowledge, this is *the first ANT-inspired study of trolling behaviours*. In contrast to prior studies, which overwhelmingly focused on studying the trolls (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016; March et al., 2017; Sest & March, 2017), this study shifted the focus from the trolls to the act of trolling itself. ANT approach, while methodologically challenging, has proved itself useful for providing new insights about trolling behaviours and it can be suggested that this approach has broader applicability in the area of consumer misbehaviours. In addition to demonstrating the usefulness of ANT for understanding consumer misbehaviours, the current study provides ideas as to how to actually conduct ANT-oriented research. This seems to be an important contribution in the light of the lack of practical information about carrying out ANT research (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010).

The next set of contributions stems from empirical findings. First, the study contributes to the literature on trolling by *providing a new definition of trolling behaviours*. As previous definitions are far from being in agreement as to what trolling is (Cook et al., 2017;

Cruz et al., 2018; Hardaker, 2013), thereby impeding research progress and managerial efforts, a new definition was needed. This new definition, communicating the nature of trolling, in several ways confirms the findings of earlier studies. In keeping with prior research, it suggests that trolling behaviour are *deliberate* (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Griffiths, 2014; Gully, 2012; Hardaker, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013; Sanfilippo et al., 2018), *deceptive* (Buckels et al., 2014; Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hardaker, 2010, 2013; T. C. Turner et al., 2005), and engineered *to provoke* the target into responding (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013; Hopkinson, 2013; Jane, 2015).

Besides confirming previous findings, the new definition also sheds a new light on the nature of trolling. Similar to Kirman et al. (2012) and unlike prior research that argued trolls enjoy inflicting distress on others (Bergstrom, 2011; Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016), this thesis suggests that trolling is *mischievous*—marked by an attitude of playfulness and not an intent to do harm. This mischievousness is one of the criteria that could be used to help to distinguish trolling from other similar, albeit different online misbehaviours such as cyberbullying, flaming, online harassment, and negative word-of-mouth. The present research adds support to prior studies that mentioned that trolling differs from other online misbehaviours (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Hardaker, 2013; Sanfilippo et al., 2018) and contributes to trolling literature by *empirically outlining what these differences are* and by demonstrating that under certain circumstances *trolling behaviours may evolve into other types of more harmful online behaviours*.

In regard to the harmfulness of trolling, this study contributes to the extant literature by identifying the consequences of trolling that extend beyond typically negative (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Herring, 2002) and occasionally positive (Coles & West, 2016b; Cruz et al., 2018; Herring et al., 2002; Hopkinson, 2013; W. Phillips, 2015) impacts on online

communities. The original contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that *trolling impacts are diverse*, and that trolling can *negatively and positively* affect not only targets but also trolls and their followers, platforms, and bystanders.

Another important contribution of this thesis lies in *presenting a theoretical model of how trolling comes about and is nourished*. The findings suggest that trolling emerges out of the interactions among the troll, the trolling-friendly medium, and the target. Other actors—these are audience, other trolls, artefacts, regulators, revenue streams, and assistants—through associations with the punctualised trolling act and with the individual three main actors feed and nourish trolling. To be specific other actors celebrate, boost, facilitate and normalise trolling behaviours. This theoretical model provides a new understanding of trolling, suggesting that responsibility for trolling must be shared among the various actors. Such finding enriches the existing body of literature on trolling that was overwhelmingly attributing trolling to the trolls. Having said that, most prior studies on trolling, with the notable exception of Phillips (2015) and Cook et al. (2017), either did *not* include trolls as research participants (e.g., Binns, 2012; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Sanfilippo et al., 2018; Shachaf & Hara, 2010) or included people that researchers considered to be trolls (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Lopes & Yu, 2017; March et al., 2017; Sest & March, 2017). In contrast, this study *directly incorporated the troll's perspective by interviewing the people who self-identified as trolls*.

The inclusion of trolls in the research assisted in revealing *two strategies of trolling, previously poorly understood: to mock and to joke*. The latter one was particularly common in my dataset, contrasting with the common scholar and media interpretations of trolling as malevolent (Sanfilippo et al., 2018) and supporting the recent findings of Sanfilippo et al. (2018) whose participants also claimed that many trolling instances are about entertainment and humour. My research enhances the knowledge *about the relationship between the*

*entertainment and trolling* by empirically revealing that trolling does not have an entertainment value just for the trolls but also for the audience members observing trolling. This research shows, for the first time, that audience members do not only voyeuristically consume trolling but are strongly influencing the actions of trolls and other actors. In this view, this study sheds light on how audience members assist the misbehaving consumers in building their glamorous or notorious celebrity status. To the best of my knowledge, this is, at least in the field of consumer misbehaviours, the first study to demonstrate that consumers can gain some sort of celebrity status through misbehaving.

Audience members were not the only significant but ‘invisible’ actor in trolling that the present study unearthed. This study enhances the understanding of *the role of various material or technical elements in trolling behaviours*. While prior research on trolling neglects this question, current research illuminates the various ways by which material elements support trolling practices. Helping to protect the troll’s or an audience member’s anonymity is the most obvious example. Yet, the findings of this thesis provide additional evidence that anonymity is not necessarily the facilitator of trolling, as it is typically interpreted in the literature (e.g., Griffiths, 2014; Hardaker, 2013, p. 20). Showing that some trolls do not want to stay anonymous and that audience members even if they wish to stay anonymous are in some way still visible to others, this study *sheds new light on the relationship between trolling and anonymity*. It also suggests that making online places less anonymous will not necessarily lead to no or less trolling.

Another contribution of this study lies in highlighting how *marketers’ efforts to manage trolling behaviours may have negative unintended consequences*. This finding provides empirical evidence to support Fullerton and Punj’s (2004) conceptual study that acknowledged the possibility of some strategies for managing consumer misbehaviours having counterproductive effects. This empirical finding also provides *a new understanding of the*

*role of compliance of the actors in the success of the network.* Namely, this study demonstrates that the lack of compliance among the actors (e.g., between regulators and troll) may stabilise and energise the network, rather than destabilise it, as a classical interpretation of ANT would suggest (e.g., Callon, 1984). Taking this into consideration and drawing upon the provided theoretical model of manifestation of trolling, this thesis *suggests how the network enacting mischief-making consumer misbehaviours may be destabilised or broken.* However, this is also *the first study to propose* that, considering the potential public impact of mischief-making misbehaviours, some marketers might be interested in *encouraging* rather than discouraging *these misbehaviours.*

As can be seen, this study makes several contributions to the literature on trolling, consumer misbehaviours, and actor-network theory, and to the practice of managing mischief-making consumer misbehaviours. However, the study is not without limitations.

### 9.3 Limitations

The findings in this thesis are subject to several limitations. Firstly, the findings may be biased in terms of using ANT as a ‘theoretical’ framework. ANT opened up the possibility for the researcher to “attune to the world, to see and hear and feel and taste it” (Mol, 2010, p. 262) in a certain way. At the same time, ANT opened up the possibility for the researcher to *not* “attune to the world, to [not] see and hear and [not] feel and taste it” (Mol, 2010, p. 262) in any other way. To put it differently, selecting ANT as a framework has influenced me to see things in a certain way at the expense of not seeing things in another way. This bias was to a certain extent unavoidable and expected. After all, ANT was chosen for its potential to see the world in a certain way (see section 4.2.3 How can ANT inform the study of trolling?). Despite being deliberately influenced by ANT assumptions, this study did not include any force-fitting of the data, which has been mentioned by Belk et al. (2012) as a potential challenge of using the theoretical framework during analysis. Force-fitting data was actually

impossible as ANT is not theory *per se* and does not offer a ready-made grid or framework to which data could be fitted.

Another potential limitation lies in the selection of the cases. While selected cases epitomised different types of trolling behaviours, they were all the same in the sense that they included more successful or (better said) to some extent renowned trolls. Such cases were chosen as they were data-rich and allowed unobtrusive data collection. However, by interviewing two less renowned trolls (i.e., trolls from a so-called external context), I have attempted to gain an understanding of trolling also from the perspective of trolls whose trolling is arguably less visible.

Another limitation relates to taking a troll as a point of departure in exploring the network. In this sense, the present study can be seen as another ANT-oriented study that is biased toward the point of view of the ‘heroes’ (Law, 1990) or ‘victors’ (Star, 1990). While this approach potentially silenced other actors’ points of view—in particular those of targets—it has to be stressed that the aim of the study was not to celebrate trolls but rather to deconstruct them and their activities. “Heroes are built out of heterogeneous networks” (Law, 1990) and my goal was to better understand the networks within which trolling thrives. In addition, studying trolling from the trolls’ perspectives was needed as prior research rarely included self-identified trolls as participants (for a notable exception see W. Phillips, 2015).

A small number of interviews is another limitation of this study. While a higher number of interviews would potentially unearth new examples of stabilisation and destabilisation of trolling practice, for instance, it has to be stressed that interviews played a supplementary role in this research. The focus of the research was on observing trolls in action rather than exclusively focusing on what trolls say about their actions.

Finally, as much as my thesis seeks to inform trolling management practice, it is also a part of the problem. It is an actor, guilty as charged of the effects that this thesis attributes to other actors. Namely, by reporting about trolling, the study celebrates, potentially boosts, facilitates, and normalises such misbehaviours. At best, my thesis expands our knowledge of the poorly understood phenomenon. At worst, it is a guide on how to troll. While this limitation is unavoidable, some of the other presented limitations may be successfully addressed in future research.

#### **9.4 Future Research**

Considerably more work will need to be conducted to advance understanding of consumer misbehaviours, in particular trolling. Future research should continue to examine the relationships between the troll and their audience and the troll and the regulators, for instance, rather than solely focus on the troll-and-target narrative that predominates media reports of trolling behaviours. One fruitful area for further work would be to examine how actors such as audience, assistants, and revenue streams get enrolled into the network. While this study presents how trolling acts gets assembled, it remains unclear how other identified actors join the network, enacting trolling.

Another possible area for future research would be to continue with deciphering the nature of trolling behaviours. Further studies need to be carried out to validate and operationalise the definition of trolling that has been proposed. In addition, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between trolling and other online misbehaviours. In particular, considering my finding that trolling may evolve into cyberbullying, further work needs to be done to establish whether trolling is, as was once believed for graffiti writing (Plenty & Sundell, 2015), an example of early stage delinquent behaviour.

Another trolling-nature related future research question is whether trolling is a purely online phenomenon or not. While prior research positions trolling as a behaviour occurring online (e.g., Buckels et al., 2014; Coles & West, 2016a; Dahlberg, 2001; Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015; Griffiths, 2014; Hardaker, 2013), my observations suggest that people also use the expression trolling to describe behaviours happening in analogue settings. In fact, when “Trolls of Reddit” were asked “what’s the best troll you’ve accomplished?”, users listed more examples from analogue settings than from online ones. For instance, users mentioned how they convinced the “grandmother that the word dinosaur is pronounced ‘Dy-no-SAR’ instead of ‘Dy-no-SORE” or “a roommate that Microsoft was coming after him for piracy and that he needed to go down to the court house to meet their lawyer for a settlement.” Acts such as these would qualify as trolling under my definition. Further research might explore whether and how consumers troll other consumers or brands offline, and whether trolling in an analogue environment is a ‘practical joke’ by another name.

In addition, future work is required to systematically examine the consequences of trolling. From the perspective of brands, further research should establish whether trolling behaviours, in the same way as user-generated ad parodies, have no effect on consumers’ attitudes towards the brand being trolled (Vanden Bergh, Lee, Quilliam, & Hove, 2011). It would also be interesting to explore whether, and how, a particular type of brand could take advantage of being trolled. On the other hand, there is much to investigate with regards to the impact of trolling on consumers in comparison with the impacts of other online misbehaviours. Understanding the relationship between trolling behaviours and its consequences would be invaluable for deciding when a specific type of trolling becomes a problem or opportunity that needs to be managed and how responsibility for management of these challenges should be divided among businesses, social media platforms, law enforcers, and both onlooking and targeted consumers.

More broadly, further work should investigate how to address the challenges of conducting online (ANT-inspired) research. The present study encountered methodological, ethical, and legal challenges that could not be addressed with the help of the commonly cited works on qualitative consumer and marketing research (e.g., Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Belk, 2006; Belk et al., 2012; McCracken, 1988; Sherry, 2008; Spiggle, 1994). As insightful as these studies are, they do not provide answers to questions such as how to research non-human actors, how to report content that was deleted by the user, whether it is ethical and legal to analyse visitor behaviour on the research webpage, and how to prevent the possibility of research participants forging an online informed consent form. Such questions represent a fruitful area for further work.

## 9.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter concludes the thesis which aimed to better understand the actor-networks that allow or perpetuate trolling as a form of consumer misbehaviour. Some of the key contributions of this thesis are the provision of a new definition of trolling behaviours and a presentation of a theoretical model of the manifestation of trolling. Both contributions facilitate research progress on trolling and other mischief-making consumer misbehaviours, as well as offering a way forward in managing online mischief-making consumer misbehaviours. Another important contribution of the thesis lies in demonstrating the insightfulness of ANT for studying consumer misbehaviours. While not without limitations, ANT has allowed a fresh view on trolling behaviours, shifting attention from the perpetrators of misbehaving to the act of misbehaving itself. It can be expected that future work on other consumer misbehaviours would also strongly benefit from mobilising this approach.

To conclude, trolling represents a complex interrelated spectrum of relationships that could never be fully explained through a model; however, my research does start to

shed light on the key actors and the relationships these actors have. By understanding the associations between the actors, it is shown how some of the actors (i.e., trolls, targets, and a trolling-friendly medium) play a role in initiating and others (e.g., audience, other trolls, regulators, revenue streams, and assistants) play a role in nourishing trolling by celebrating it, boosting it, facilitating, and normalising it. Showing how much influence actors such as a troll's audience and revenue streams have over trolls' practices, this thesis suggests that marketers concerned with encouraging or discouraging trolling should not focus their efforts on the trolls but rather on the crowded theatres watching the trolls. In addition,<sup>16</sup>...

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<sup>16</sup> Ending this doctoral dissertation in the middle of a sentence is perhaps my poor attempt at trolling its readers. More likely, however, it is a sign that the present study is just a beginning and that, technically speaking, ANT-inspired descriptions of trolling practices could never be complete. To cut the descriptions of the ever-changing trolling network-networks, I follow Latour's advice. In answering the question of how to stop describing the network, Latour (2005, p. 148) stated: "you stop when you have written your [8]0,000 words" or, to put it differently, you stop by putting "the last word in the last chapter of your damn thesis."

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## Appendices

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# Appendix A: Overview of scholars' definitions and conceptualizations of trolling

<i>Study</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Baker, 2001	Trolling	"[T]he act of 'baiting' a newsgroup, and then enjoying the resulting conflict."
Bergstrom, 2011	To troll	"[T]o have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort upon one's audience."
Bergstrom, 2011	To be trolled	"[I]s to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else's joke."
Bishop, 2013	Trolling	"[S]ending of 'provocative messages via a communications platform for the entertainment of oneself, others, or both'" (p. 302).
Buckels et al., 2014	Trolling	"[T]he practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose" (p. 1).
Coles & West, 2016a	Trolling	"[A] specific type of malicious online behaviour, intended to aggravate, annoy or otherwise disrupt online interactions and communication" (p. 233).
Dahlberg, 2001	Trolling	"[I]dentity deception in cyberspace [that] aims to embarrass, anger, and disrupt. It is often undertaken merely for amusement, but is sometimes driven by more 'serious' motives including political goals."
Donath, 1999	Trolling	"[A] game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns; the newsgroup members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings and, upon judging a poster to be a troll, make the offending poster leave the group" (p. 43).
Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015	Trolling	"[A] specific example of deviant and antisocial online behavior in which the deviant user acts provocatively and outside of normative expectations within a particular community; trolls seek to elicit responses from the community and act repeatedly and intentionally to cause disruption or trigger conflict among community members" (p. 163).
Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013	Trolling	"[T]he verb used by community members to describe a textual practice, which is designed to inscribe and provoke an emotional response" (p. 297).
Gorton & Garde-Hansen, 2013	Troll	"A troll is online slang for someone who is deceptive, derogatory or tangential in his or her postings to an online community, discussion board or blog" (p. 299).
Gully, 2012	Trolling	"[A]n activity pursued by so-called trolls who deliberately post inflammatory or controversial messages online" (p. 7).

<i>Study</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Griffiths, 2014	Trolling	“[A]n act of intentionally provoking and/or antagonising users in an online environment that creates an often desirable, sometimes predictable, outcome for the troll” (p. 85).
Hardaker, 2010	Troller	“[A] CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intension(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement” (p. 237).
Hardaker, 2013	Trolling	“[T]he deliberate (perceived) use of impoliteness/aggression, deception and/or manipulation in CMC to create a context conducive to triggering or antagonising conflict, typically for amusement’s sake” (p. 79).
Herring et al., 2002	Trolling	“[L]uring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions” (p. 372).
Hopkinson, 2013	Trolling	“[A] form of behaviour through which a participant in a discussion forum deliberately attempts to provoke other participants into angry reactions, thus disrupting communication on the forum and potentially steering it away from its original topic” (p. 5).
Jane, 2015	Trolling	“[O]nline posting of deliberately inflammatory or off-topic material with the aim of provoking textual responses and/or emotional reaction” (p. 66).
W. Phillips, 2013	Troll	“[U]sers who revel in transgression and disruptiveness” (p. 496).
Thacker & Griffiths, 2012	Trolling	“[An] act of intentionally provoking and/or antagonising users in an online environment that creates an often desirable, sometimes predictable, outcome for the troll” (p. 18).
T. C. Turner et al., 2005	Troll	“[I]s someone who mostly initiates threads with seemingly legitimate questions or conversation starters. However, the ultimate goal of a Troll is to draw unwitting others into useless discussion.”
Utz, 2005	Troll	“[I]s a character invented to disturb the conversation in a newsgroup by asking provoking questions or by disseminating poor advice” (p. 50).

## Appendix B: Interview guide

### a.) Beginnings

- (To start with can you tell me anything about yourself? Anything that you would be prepared to share – it can be your profession, gender, hobbies . . . )
- People call you 'Internet prankster', 'online bully', 'troll'. How would you identify yourself?
- How did you get involved in trolling?
- Do you remember when you 'trolled' for the first time?

### b.) The definition of trolling

- What is trolling actually?
  - I define trolling as: *the deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts in online social settings that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s) and that are performed for the benefit of the troll and at the (unintended) expense of the target(s). What do you think about this? Does it make sense?*
- What is cyberbullying?
  - Does it bother you that people confuse trolling and cyberbullying?
- Is calling you 'a troll' an insult or a compliment?

### c.) Execution of trolling

- If I ask you to prepare a manual on how to troll (Let's call it Trolling for Dummies), what would you put in this manual? What was your last trolling example – can you explain me on the example?
  - What do I have to do?
  - When do I have to do it?
  - Where do I have to do it? Where do you do it?
    - Why have you chosen this platform to troll? Why are some places more favourable to trolling?
    - Is it necessary to be anonymous to troll?
    - Do you troll also brands/companies? Which one is funnier – trolling brands or people?
    - How do I choose who to target? Why animal lovers?
  - When you create a specific event, how do you get the likes?
    - 2478 people liked [XY] event. How have you convinced these people to like the page?
    - Do you advertise page? So, are you prepared to invest money into trolling?
  - How regularly do I have to do it? How regularly do you do it?
  - Can everybody do it?
  - Do troll has to believe in what he/she is saying?
  - How do I know I was successful?
    - Do you take print screens of successful postings?
      - If yes – what do you do with them?

### d.) Trolling examples

- Can you tell me more about [XY] event?
- Can I see any of your other trolling examples? How can I follow your trolling?
- Is [post intended to XY] response to [XY's post]?
  - Tell me more about your relationship with [XY]...

### e.) Trolling success metrics

- Is it important for you that your trolling is successful?
- What would you describe as a successful trolling? What ruins your trolling?
- Have you ever been banned or anyhow punished for trolling?

- How did this make you feel?
- Which is your favourite trolling act? By that I mean something that you did.
- Which is your favourite trolling act, in general?
- Does trolling create stars?
  - Do you have twitter/subreddit?
  - Do people write to you? Do you get requests for trolling?
  - Has trolling become your responsibility?
  - Is trolling bringing you any money?
- That article in Mirror – to what extent is it true?

**f.) Trolling drivers**

- What role does trolling play in your life?
- What do you aim to achieve with trolling?
- Why do you think trolls troll?
- What do you think of the argument that trolls troll to get attention?

**g.) Trolling justification**

- Do you see yourself as protecting causes/individuals? What causes? What individuals?

**h.) Trolling consequences**

- Do you think trolling has any impact on the people who are trolled?
  - Have you ever been trolled yourself?
- Do targets profit anyhow from being trolled?
- Do trolls profit anyhow from trolling?
- Are trolls anyhow at disadvantage because of trolling?
- What is with that webpage posting all your accounts? Can you give me more information?

**i.) Trolling prevention**

- Do you ever read terms of use or community standards?
- Do you know what is permitted and what is not on specific media?
- Do you ever think about possibility of getting caught? Have people tried to dox you?
- I noticed you are regularly banned on Facebook. What were the other 'punishments' you received for trolling?
  - How did this make you feel?
- Do you think trolling should be prevented? How? When?

**j.) About the troll**

- Do you see yourself as belonging to a group or community? The Mirror article mentions the gang? Is it really the gang behind your trolling? How are you organised?
- What is this community like?

**k.) The end**

- Is there anything else I should know?
- Is there any troll that I should have a look at? Is there some troll that you really like?
- Do you might know anyone else who would be prepared to participate in this research?
- Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix C: Ethics approval



### HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen  
Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

Ref: HEC 2015/68

31 August 2015

Maja Golf Papez  
Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship  
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Maja

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal “Don't feed the trolls: understanding the drivers and effects of online trolling behaviours, and exploring their prevention policies and practices” has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 27 August 2015.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. MacDonald'.

Lindsey MacDonald  
**Chair**  
*University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee*

## Appendix D: Information sheet

**Department of Management, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship**  
Principal Researcher: **Maja Golf Papez**  
Email: [maja.golfpapez@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:maja.golfpapez@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)  
**16/02/2016**



### Research project: **Exploring Online Trolling Behaviours** **Information Sheet**

I am Maja Golf Papez, a PhD student of marketing at University of Canterbury, New Zealand, who kindly invites you to participate in the research project that **explores online trolling behaviours**. These behaviours could be defined as deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous practices in the online social settings.

The aim of this project is to better understand trolling practices. In particular, I hope to learn more about the **motivations for trolling** and the **consequences of trolling**.

If you decide to be part of this study, your participation will involve:

- 1. An interview to be conducted over Skype or Facebook messenger.** During the interview you will be asked questions about your opinions and attitudes relative to your experience with/of trolling behaviours. The interview will take at most 90 min (1.5 hour). The interview will be undertaken at a time that is mutually suitable. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. After transcription will be completed, you will have the opportunity to review it. At the time of reviewing your transcript, you will have the opportunity to withdraw from the project entirely or partly.
- 2. Answering short clarifying questions over Facebook messenger or through email.** Your online interactions/postings, published on publicly available websites/platforms, will be observed by the researcher. Over the time you will might be occasionally asked to answer short clarifying questions related to these online interactions/postings. Answering these questions will take at most 120 min (2 hours) in total. The answers on the questions will be stored for further reference.

Your participation in this study is **voluntary**. You have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove all information relating to you. Please note that it will be difficult to remove the information relating to you after the information will be analysed and published.

The participation in this study **could involve mental stress or emotional distress**. Because some of the topic matter related to online trolling behaviours may be sensitive, there is a chance that your recollections may become personal and emotional. In case this happens, the researcher will provide you the list of local support services where you can get support or help.

The results of the project may be published and presented, **but your real name and online pseudonym will not appear in any publications**. You will be assigned a fake name that will be used instead of your name to disguise your participation. All the raw data (the recordings and transcripts) will be kept safely in locked and secure facilities and in password protected electronic form. All the raw data will be destroyed after 10 years of completing this research project.

The project is being carried out in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy at University of Canterbury**, Christchurch, by **Maja Golf Papez** (maja.golfpapez@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) under the supervision of **Dr Ekant Veer** (ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz). Maja and Ekant will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

A thesis is a public document and will be available through the University of Canterbury Library. You may receive a copy of the project results by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following consent form.

**Informed Consent Form**

press **ENTER**

## Appendix E: Informed consent form

I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.

I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and her supervisors and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after 10 years.

I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.

I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.

I understand that I can contact the researcher Maja Golf Papez (maja.golfpapez@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or her supervisor Ekant Veer (ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (humanethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

I confirm I am 16 years old or older.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please type your first name/pseudonym and email address below to indicate agreement to participate in this study.

**OK** press ENTER

Your name: \*

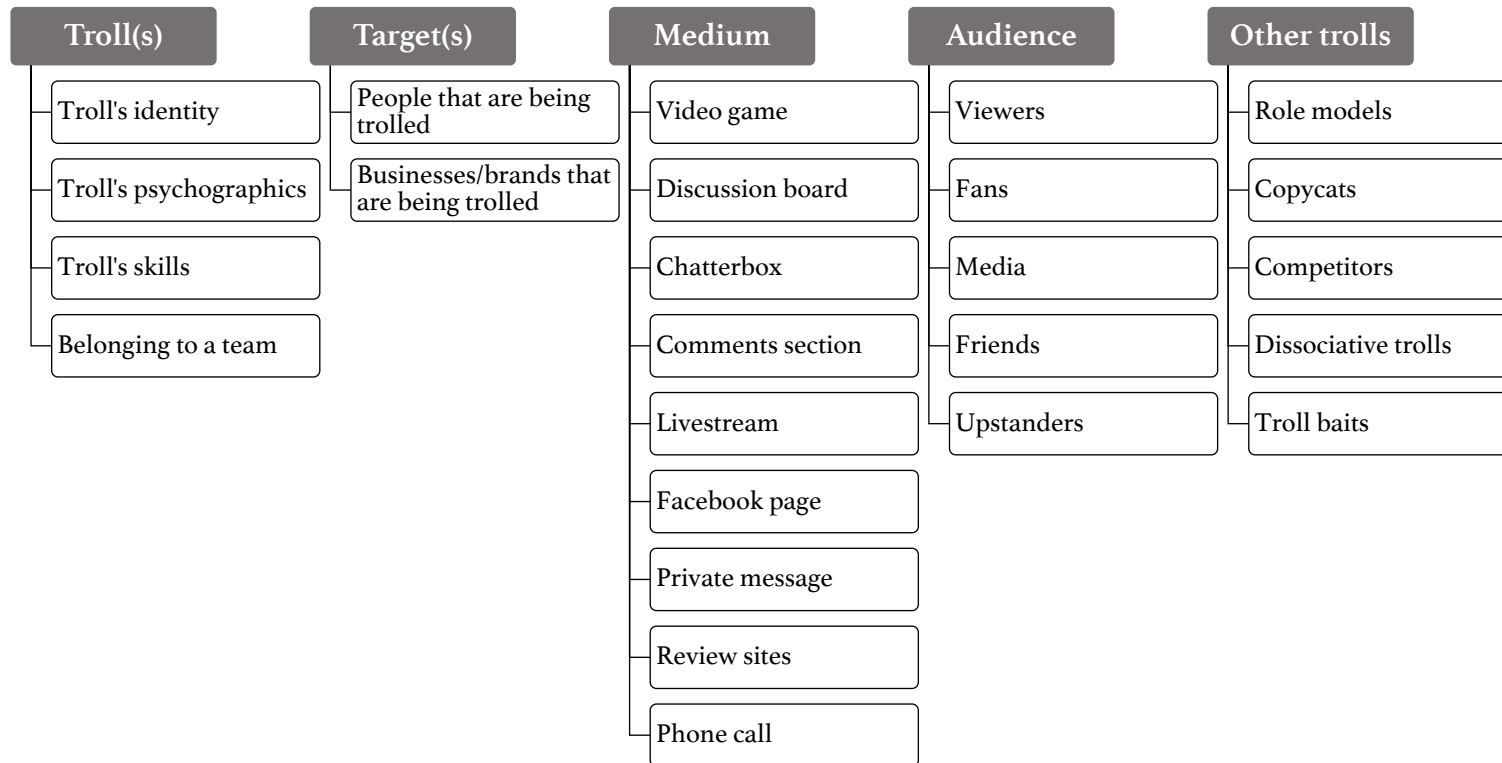
Your email address: \*

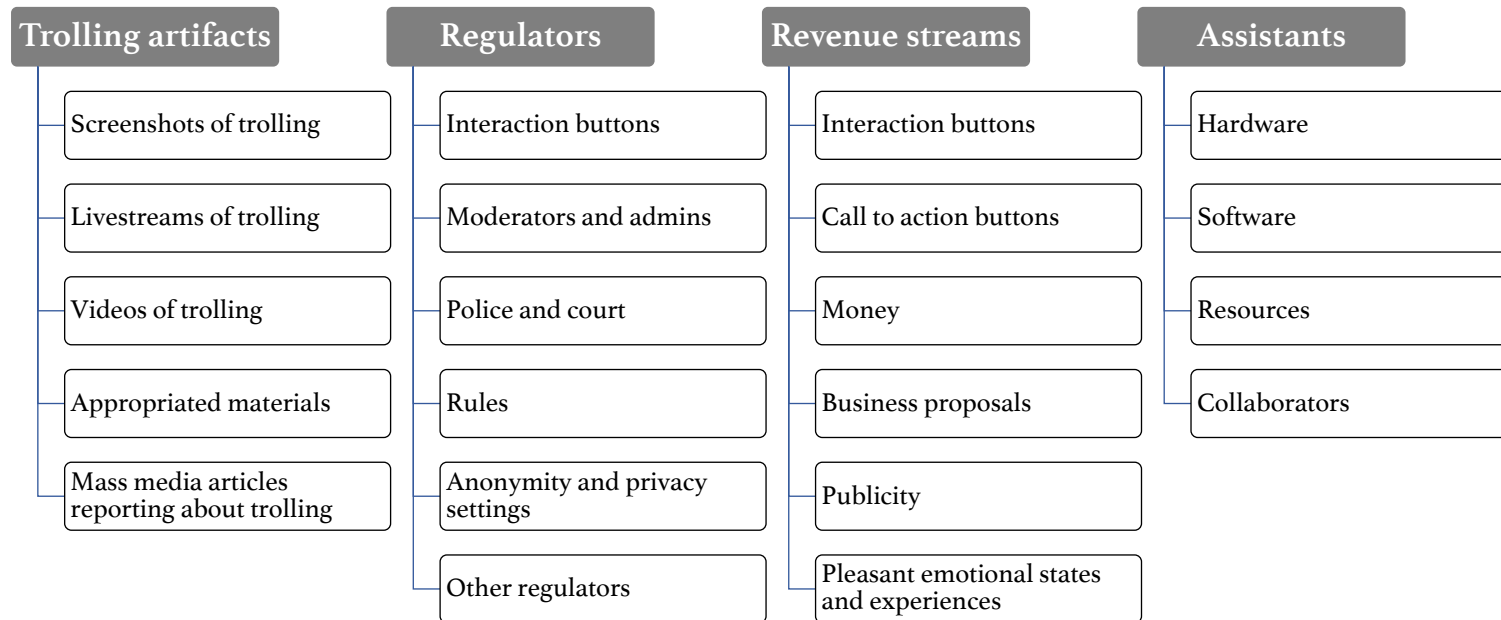
I wish to receive a copy of the summary of results of the project.

☐ Yes

☐ No

## Appendix F: Overview of subcategories of actors participating in trolling





## Appendix G: Illustrative data examples of categories and actors from the categories

<i>Category of actors</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples of actors from the category</i>	<i>Data examples</i>
<b>Troll(s)</b>	Performer(s) of trolling	Troll's hobbies	In spare time some trolls play video games.
		Troll's skillset	The ability to hold back laughter was mentioned as an important strategy in deceiving the target in trolling in prank calling.
<b>Target(s)</b>	Person(s) and businesses/brands that are experiencing trolling	Brands	"You know brands are pretty low hanging fruit because ... I used to work in digital marketing and I know that they tend to have to respond to everything ... (Alfie)
<b>Medium</b>	Channel on which trolling occurs	Video game	Ollie has been seen trolling within video game.
		Facebook page	Otto has been seen trolling on Facebook page.
		Livestream chat	Raiders have been seen trolling in livestream chat.
		Comments section	Alfie have been seen trolling in comments sections.
		Internet	All the channels where trolling occurred required an internet connection.
<b>Other trolls</b>	Other people engaging in trolling	Competitors	Trolls are competing with other trolls for the targets and the attention of the audience (in the form of likes, shares, views, etc.).
		Role models	Each interviewed troll mentioned at least one other troll who he or she is following and admiring. "I've got inspired by charliezzz's character Esteben Winsmore who makes funny "troll videos" for Second Life. I figured I could give my own take on it, and made one video for it" (Ollie)
		Dissociative trolls	The trolls that one does not want to be associated with. "I wouldn't necessarily call it [being called a troll] an insult, it's more like it waters down what I'm actually trying to do. Since there are so many people on YouTube making videos where they just make people mad over VOIP in games like Call of Duty, that's some of the most uninspired & boring things you can do." (Ollie)
		Troll baits	Informants reported that some individuals pretend to be a target in order to attract trolls. "They make themselves easy target for ignorant and inexperienced trolls who, craving for experience, will attempt to grab this low-hanging fruit." (Eli)

<i>Category of actors</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples of actors from the category</i>	<i>Data examples</i>
<b>Audience</b>	Spectators of trolling watching asynchronously or synchronously	Fans	Some followers demand new content. “That demand will never go away as long as people still like what I do... It would be great if there was a little less expectation of new stuff.” (Alfie).
			“THE GOD HAS UPLOADED! MORE FREQUENTLY NOW PLEASE” (commentator on Ollie’s YouTube video).
		Upstanders	Some members of the audience witness trolling and get involved. “There was this one time I made this Rust video, and I was going after this person and then one of his clanmembers got in and said he knew my vids. That shit is always annoying.” (Ollie)
		Media	Media is regularly reporting on the occurrences of trolling. Some of our informants were mentioned in the media and these articles were passed around by the trolls themselves and fans.
<b>Trolling artefacts</b>	Materialised byproducts of trolling	Friends	Some trolls share the trolling content with their friends. “I would just show it to my friends whenever I posted something new. We all have a very similar sense of humor.” (Alfie)
		Videos	In the case of trolling within video games, trolls and fans are making short videos encapsulating the instances of successful trolling. The videos are then shared on social media.
		Screenshots	Trolls and fans are making screenshots of trolling acts and sharing them on social media.
		Livestreams	Audience members watch live streams of trolling. For instance, one of Ollie’s trolling broadcasts has been watched by more than 1,000 people.
<b>Regulators</b>	Actors engaged in managing online experience	Downvote button	Audience’s downvoting does not seem to discourage trolling. “I always get downvotes...It’s funny when people downvote somebody that’s so obviously stupid anyway” (Alfie)
		Non-human online modertator	Twitch users can set up AutoMod which checks for potentially problematic text in chat.
		Ban button	Being banned is a signal of successful trolling. “We know raid is successful when the person either ends stream or starts mass banning everyone.” (Antonio)
<b>Revenue streams</b>	Financial and nonfinancial rewards associated with trolling	Business proposals	Trolls are receiving requests for trolling from businesses. “I had small business owners asking me to troll their page...” (Alfie). Also, one of our informant has landed a deal to publish a book on trolling.
		Donate button	While watching livestreams of trolling, fans use the donate button to donate money to the troll. Viewer commentators encourage other viewers to donate money to the troll.
		Subscription button	Audience members want to be informed about new trolling acts. One of our troll informants has his own dedicated subreddit with 245,626 subscribers, his official Facebook page has more than 70,000 likes, and he has more than 52,000 followers on Twitter.

<i>Category of actors</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples of actors from the category</i>	<i>Data examples</i>
<b>Revenue streams</b>		Number of views button	Trolls, fans, and media are checking how many times a particular live stream or video has been viewed. Trolls use the number of views to compare themselves to other trolls.
		Publicity	One of our informants was included in a magazine's list of the 30 most influential people on the internet. Another troll received an award from a social media platform for posting the most inciteful comment.
<b>Assistants</b>	Entities aiding in trolling	Communication platforms and tools	Raiders use Discord to communicate with each other as it is 'safer to use' than Skype.
		Businesses	Experienced trolls mobilize new actors to enact their agenda. Raiders had ordered 50 pizzas and asked the pizza company to deliver them to the target's home address.
		Features and buttons	Experienced trolls mobilize new actors to enact their agenda. "Say for example, a user sees a post on Reddit of which he is suspicious. All he needs to do is click on your username and see that the account is a few hours old, and he instantly realises that it is a throwaway account, simply made for trolling...The obvious solution is to make a large number of accounts on one day and let them age." (Elis)
		Trolling guidelines	Trolls advise others on how to troll. One of the informants published a trolling tutorial online titled "The Art of Trolling." The tutorial covers Laying Plans, Deceiving the Victim, Variations in Stratagem, Bait, Counter-Trolling and Anti-Trolls, and the Troll on the Move.