Don't feed the trolling: rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated

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Don't feed the trolling: Rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated

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Abstract

Trolling involves deliberate, deceptive and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other online users. Even though trolling causes problems for marketers and consumers, there has been little discussion about what trolling actually is and how marketers should respond to it. The present conceptual study addresses these gaps. First, we present a working, integrative definition of trolling behaviours, arguing that trolling is substantively different from cyberbullying. Next, we present the challenges of current trolling regulations, showing that trolling is sometimes the result of the regulations themselves. The paper concludes with a presentation of the conceptual model of the manifestation of trolling behaviours. The model informs and assists scholars and marketing practitioners concerned with understanding and addressing trolling.

Keywords

consumer misbehaviour; online trolling; trolling regulation; social media; routine activity theory

Introduction

Over the past three decades, researchers have examined the many faces of online misbehaviour. A considerable amount of literature has been published on cyber violence (for a review, see Peterson & Densley, 2017), with researchers exploring behaviours such as cyberbullying (e.g., Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Tokunaga, 2010), online hate speech (e.g., Leets, 2002), and flaming (e.g., Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992). The present paper focuses on a behaviour that in academic research and media discourse is often regarded as being synonymous with these forms of electronic aggression, but as we show it is in fact substantively different—this is online trolling. We define trolling as deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other users.

Compared to other forms of online misbehaviour, trolling has received comparatively scant attention from scholars (Hardaker, 2013). Neither has it been systematically studied within the field of marketing. Yet the variants of trolling behaviour are often seen in marketing-relevant contexts. 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).

These examples indicate that trolling can be considered as a form of consumer misbehaviour. It is an instance of so-called 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). Trolls

can also be considered as a subset of so-called jaycustomers – consumers who act ‘in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers’ (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016, p. 524).

The problems caused by trolls are varied in nature. Trolls may disrupt discussions within online communities (Dahlberg, 2001; Donath, 1999; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Trolling may result in material damage. 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 effects. Trolling can drive traffic to a website, encourage interactions, and in some cases even increase sales through stimulating product awareness (Berger, Sorensen, & Rasmussen, 2010). Trolling may also hold online consumption communities together by giving community members something to rally around (Coles & West, 2016b). Finally, trolling may contribute to a positive self-image for consumers who do not engage in such behaviours. Observing trolling allows bystanders to feel better about themselves by distancing themselves from such people, who break the rules of proper conduct (Fisk et al., 2010).

The pervasiveness of trolling highlights the importance of a better understanding of this phenomenon. Trolling occurs in online social settings and is common on chat boards (e.g., Reddit), blogs (e.g., Lifehacker and Jezebel) and social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter)

(YouGov, 2014a). Recent 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. By examining what trolling is and what the approaches are to handling it effectively, the current paper aims to shine a light on trolling in general and marketplace trolling in particular. Our contributions are as follows. First, we provide an integrative definition of trolling behaviours. This definition helps in distinguishing trolling from other online misbehaviours and takes into account the existence of a variety of forms of trolling. Second, we highlight the challenges that marketers may have when dealing with trolling. As a means of aiding the understanding of trolling and how it can be more effectively countered, we present a conceptual model of the manifestation of trolling. Using routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) as a conceptual framework to understand how opportunity for trolling emerges, we suggest that the effective tackling of trolling will include attacking the unique dynamics that create and fuel trolling, as opposed to attacking only individuals’ (i.e., trolls’) behaviours. Taking a situational rather than a dispositional lens to explain trolling, we contribute to the current literature on consumer misbehaviour, which has, with the notable exception of Daunt and Harris’ (2012) and Daunt

and Greer's (2015) studies, tended to focus on explaining misbehaviours by referring to the characteristics and predispositions of misbehaving consumers as opposed to the situations in which those misbehaviours occur.

The paper is organised as follows. After a short review of online consumer misbehaviours, we begin by presenting an integrative definition of trolling behaviours. Next, we discuss how, and how effectively, these online behaviours are currently being addressed. Thereafter, we present a conceptual model of the manifestation of trolling behaviours. Finally, we propose a way forward in thinking about how to combat trolling.

Online consumer misbehaviours

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). While a great deal of previous research into consumer misbehaviours has focused on offline, 'real-life' settings, the last decade has witnessed an increase of scholars investigating misbehaviour in online consumption situations (Fisk et al., 2010). Researchers have documented several ways in which consumers may cause problems for marketers online. Examples include illegal downloading (e.g., Harris & Dumas, 2009; Hinduja, 2007; Odou & Bonnin, 2014; Phau, Teah, & Lwin, 2014), falsifying personal information in order to take advantage of online services (Punj, 2017), participating in online firestorms (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 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, Breitsohl, & Garrod, 2017) such as participating in a dialogue with the supporters of rival brands that resembles flaming (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 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). One of the currently unexplored forms of consumer misbehaviour, which

includes both cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled forms of misbehaving, is online trolling. The lack of interest of marketing scholars in studying trolling may be attributed to an overall ambiguity as to what this type of conduct actually entails.

Defining 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’ (Phillips, 2014).

The lack of conceptual clarity is noticeable also in the academic literature, where several definitions and conceptualizations of trolling have appeared. 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 1, they vary considerably and widely in their specifics. Using the expression ‘trolling’ imprecisely, as an umbrella term for various different online misbehaviours or as a synonym for similar, but different behaviours, poses a problem for the effective tackling of these behaviours. To contribute to more successful managing of trolling and to facilitate research progress, we propose a new, integrative, definition of trolling behaviours.

Table 1 Overview of the similarities and dissimilarities among definitions of trolling

Parameters		Study																			
		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												■								
	Antagonizing																	■			
	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									■											

■ The definition/conceptualization includes/mentions the given parameter.

Towards a definition of trolling behaviours

We suggest 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.*

Several remarks regarding this descriptive definition should be made. First, we use the term ‘trolling behaviours’ as opposed to ‘trolling’ to emphasise that trolling is a multi-meaning concept, consisting of various types and forms (e.g., Hardaker, 2013; Synnott, Coulias, & Ioannou, 2017), which differ in their (perceived) severity (Suler & Phillips, 1998). While trolling has not yet been the focus of a study within the marketing field, researchers have mentioned consumer (mis)behaviours that are or could be called trolling. Noble, Noble, and Adjei (2012), for instance, use the expression ‘troll’ to describe the dissatisfied consumers who are too aggressively posting bad product reviews, complaining to the firm or moderator, and messaging to other online consumption community members. As observed in actual examples, trolling performed by consumers may also encompass bizarre, annoying or rumour-generating behaviour (Fullerton & Punj, 2004); professionally fabricating complaints (Reynolds & Harris, 2005); falsifying private information (Punj, 2017); rule-breaking and vandalism (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016); and illegal, questionable, or hacking-related activities (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004). Second, in agreement with several scholars (e.g., Hopkinson, 2013; Jane, 2015; Thacker & Griffiths, 2012) we claim that the troll is an ‘attention-seeker’, using these activities to provoke the target into response. In the case of marketplace trolling, the targets may include other consumers, online consumption community managers, and brands. Third, in keeping with existing definitions of trolling, we believe that trolling behaviours are intentional (i.e., the troll deliberately decides to troll) and 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)). Fourth, we argue that this fabrication is always exploitative (Goffman, 1975): it is designed for the benefit of the troll (Thacker & Griffiths, 2012) or their followers (i.e., audience members who find trolling entertaining) (Bishop, 2013; Coles & West, 2016a). Fifth, while we acknowledge that trolling may have negative consequences for people and firms involved, we believe that these consequences may or may not be intended. While some trolls may enjoy inflicting distress on others (Craker & March, 2016), the trolls with the playful attitude know their limits and do not intend to cause harm (Kirman, Linehan, & Lawson, 2012). Sixth, by incorporating in the definition the plural form of the troll and the target, we stress that trolling can be organised activity involving multiple senders and multiple receivers.

The definition offered here is theoretical, calling for enrichment through a growing understanding of ever-changing trolling behaviours and through empirical testing. Yet, it is also practical in a way that can help separate trolling from other similar, albeit different online misbehaviours such as cyberbullying, flaming, and negative word-of mouth.

Cyberbullying is intentional and repeated hostile conduct against a person who cannot easily defend himself or herself, carried out through electronic means (Coles & West, 2016a; Kirman, Linehan, & Lawson, 2012). While both trolling and cyberbullying are intentional acts, trolling does not necessarily include power imbalance between the troll and the target, and it can be a one-off event. Furthermore, while cyberbullying includes mean and hurtful acts (Olweus, 2012), trolling is, especially in a marketing context, done in a playful and mischievous way. Whereas cyberbullies intend 'to inflict harm or discomfort' (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278) typically to people they also know in real life (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), trolls' intents are less straightforward (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014) and un-directed. In addition, in contrast with cyberbullying, trolling includes deception and meaningless disruption (Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016).

Its deliberately deceptive nature also sets trolling apart from flaming (Hardaker, 2010, 2013). While recognizing that trolling in practice may be difficult (Coles & West, 2016a), recognizing flaming seems to be a more straightforward task, since it includes uninhibited expression of easily identifiable elements such as insults, profanity, and offensive language (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004). Another difference is that flaming occurs as a reaction to provocation (Hardaker, 2013), whereas trolling is executed with the intention to provoke.

Another concept from which trolling needs to be separated is 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 the 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.

As the nature of the negative information being distributed dictates effective marketers' responses (Noble et al., 2012), it is likely that trolling necessitates different response techniques than do other consumer misbehaviours. The presented definition, illuminating the unique nature of trolling, will hopefully guide researchers and marketing practitioners in developing more tailored, and hence more effective, controls to manage trolling.

Combating trolling behaviours: An overview of the 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. This 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 may have adverse consequences for the brands, potentially leading to brand dilution (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). In contrast to ignoring the trolls, marketers may respond by refuting 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) 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 (New Zealand Law Commission, 2012; Reed & White, 2014). In addition, consumers expect that marketers will protect them from the incivilities of other consumers (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

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. 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). Moreover, trolling behaviour usually and automatically falls under the right of freedom of expression (House of Lords, 2014b; Marwick & Miller, 2014). These observations question the role of legal action in addressing trolling.

On how tackling trolling may encourage trolling

Some practices used to control trolling seem to generate the type of unintended consequences that Peattie, Peattie, and Newcombe (2016, p. 1604) refer to as surprises—““backlash” effects where campaign targets respond perversely to messages or incentives’. These ‘surprises’ are evident in several ways. First, any marketer’s response to the troll (e.g., disputing his or her claims) and enforced sanction (e.g., down-voting or deleting the trolling comment) may indicate to the troll that his or her actions are being successful. In other words, operating in the digital marketplace, where the main currency is attention (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009), trolls understand any attention that they are given as a ‘mission accomplished’. Marketers’ responses to trolls may be used as a base for further attacks (Herring et al., 2002). Furthermore, they may serve as invitation to other trolls, in the same way as publicly rewarding online complainers may lead to the increase of complainers (Gallaughier & Ransbotham, 2010). Finally, current sanctions for trolling exacerbate trolling behaviours. After being ‘punished’ (e.g., being down-voted by other community members), trolls not only write worse, but they also write more and more frequently than before being policed (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2014). In addition, even the most severe penalties (i.e., suspending a troll’s account) do not seem to dismay trolls. For trolls, perceiving themselves as invulnerable rather than invincible, being banned seems to be a ‘modus operandi’ if not ‘a badge of honor’ (Suler & Phillips, 1998, p. 283).

In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that attacking the ever-evolving trolling behaviours could result in more rather than less trolling. Given that

contextual factors strongly influence the occurrence of consumer misbehaviours (Daunt & Harris, 2012), understanding and attacking the dynamics that create and sustain trolling would present a more fruitful option.

Where to now in combating trolling?

This paper identifies conceptual and practical ambiguity surrounding the nature and management of trolling behaviours. The section that follows proposes a way forward in thinking about understanding and tackling trolling.

Explaining trolling: A new conceptual model

The findings presented thus far suggest not only that existing trolling controls have many limitations but also that trolling sometimes may be the result of the control itself. A possible reason for this is that these controls are being developed without understanding how trolling behaviours come into being and what fuel them.

Current literature approaches this question from two different angles: by studying individuals (i.e., trolls) or by studying situations in which trolling occurs. Regarding the former, researchers explain trolling by referring either to the trolls' needs and motives or to their personal characteristics. Trolls were found to be motivated by boredom, seeking attention and revenge, wishing to have fun, desiring to cause damage to the community and other people (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), or wishing to exercise control and to feel superior (Herring et al., 2002). Although these findings are illuminating, they are limited by the fact that the identified motivating factors were not defined by the trolls themselves but by online community managers or researchers. Another individual-based explanation of trolling is that trolls have 'bad' personality characteristics. According to Buckels et al. (2014), trolls have a high level of the Dark Tetrad traits, with sadism being found as the best predictor of trolling enjoyment. Similarly, March et al. (2017, p. 142) describe 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.

An alternative explanation to individual-based theories of trolling is offered by studies that explore the situations within which trolling emerges. According to this view, trolling occurs because of specific features of computer-mediated communication such as the availability of instantaneous exchange of messages, the lack of physical and social cues, and a lack of shared norms governing interactions (Herring, 2002; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). In this context, trolling has been most often attributed to anonymity (Donath, 1999; Hardaker, 2013; Suler, 2004). 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.

One theory that can help us better understand the environment within which the opportunity for trolling is optimised is routine activity theory (henceforth RAT), originally formulated by Cohen and Felson (1979). This criminology theory posits that the opportunity for crime arises through day-to-day behaviours of individuals—through their routine activities. The likelihood that the crime occurs at any specific time and place where such routine activities occur is ‘a function of the convergence of *likely offenders* and *suitable targets* in the *absence of capable guardians*’ against the offense (Cohen & Felson, 1979, p. 590, emphasis added). In this way the presence of amenable places where offenses occur are a function of the actors within the place and the interaction between those actors.

Consistent with RAT, we maintain online trolling emerges in places amenable to trolling where three main actors involved in trolling—*motivated trolls*, *reactive targets*, and *capable guardians*—coalesce and interact. As illustrated by the conceptual model in Figure 1, we claim that trolling occurs in places that house motivated trolls and reactive targets and where capable guardians are absent. Motivated trolls are performers of trolling practices. Reactive targets are online users responding to trolls. Capable guardians are people and technological tools capable of deterring or delimiting trolling. Examples of guardians include online moderators, bystanders, online privacy settings, block buttons, and IP address-tracking software.

At a micro level, a number of coinciding influences individually shape each of the three actors, impacting their presence and intensity. These influences require far greater depth of analysis and empirical support; however, some pertinent examples of antecedents include the impact that one's personality (Buckels et al., 2014; Craker & March, 2016; March et al., 2017), one's sex (March et al., 2017), one's emotional state (Shachaf & Hara, 2010), one's mood (Cheng et al., 2017), media discourses (Phillips, 2011), membership of in-group vs. out-group (Coles & West, 2016a), or monetary awards (Sindelar, 2014) have on one's likelihood to carry out trolling behaviour. With respect to targets, gender (Jane, 2014) and digital literacy (Herring et al., 2002) could contribute to a person's likelihood to be targeted by trolling. Finally, some influences—such as number of controls utilised, possibility to communicate anonymously types of anonymity control mechanisms (Cho & Kwon, 2015), and user interface design—make guardians more or less capable of preventing or discouraging trolling.

At a macro level, all three factors (i.e., motivated trolls, reactive targets, and absence of capable guardians) coalesce and interact to create an opportunity for trolling. As suggested by Cohen and Felson (1979), the absence of any of these three elements in a given space may

prevent misbehaviour from occurring. To illustrate, a particular platform may host many motivated trolls and reactive targets, but if guardianship is sufficient (e.g., all trolls' comments are examined before the publication), then trolling may not occur. While the presence of trolls and targets in the absence of capable guardians in a given space enables trolling behaviour to occur, the multi-directional interactions between the factors sustain and energise trolling. For example, while trolls actively search for targets, the targets' defensive responses seem to encourage trolls to continue their behaviours. Furthermore, the consumers voluntarily visit websites where there is no real means to combat trolling and sometimes themselves create a trolling-attractive environment by not utilising the available means (e.g., by having loose privacy settings). Finally, the motivated trolls not only search for online settings where the capable guardians are absent, but they also incapacitate the capable guardians. Capable guardians being incapacitated, for example by being overloaded by trolls' false reporting, can allow genuine trolling to go unnoticed.

Incapacitated guardians are only one example of how capable guardians may be absent in online environments. Another example of absent capable guardians are guardians that have the potential to address trolling successfully (e.g., the option to report the troll to online moderators) but are unable to do their jobs well due to the nature of the online communication (e.g., the sheer volume of it). Last, in the simplest form the absence of capable guardianship may be seen on platforms such as 4chan, where targets have almost no means available to protect themselves from trolling.

The presented conceptual model provides a theoretical rationale for how an opportunity for trolling arises or, in other words, what makes a particular environment a trolling-friendly place. What is more, it provides further support for the relevance of an alternative theoretical approach, an opportunity-rooted one, for understanding consumer misbehaviours (see Daunt & Greer, 2015) in general and online misbehaviours in particular. Rather than focusing solely

on the individual characteristics of misbehaving consumers, we advocate focusing on the bigger picture—on the contexts ‘which are likely to lead some consumers to misbehave some of the time’ (Fullerton & Punj, 1993, p. 570). It can be reasoned that the challenges with current ways of dealing with trolling may proceed from regulatory approaches insufficiently addressing each of the three actors or unintentionally sustaining trolling by encouraging the ‘unwanted’ interactions among these actors. Understanding the role that perpetrators, targets, and guardians individually and collectively play will be crucial for effective management of trolling-prone places.

Figure 1 Conceptualisation of the manifestation of trolling

Notes: Trolling strategies presented in ○ were identified by Hardaker (2013).

Managerial implications

The findings of this study have a number of implications for management of trolling behaviours.

Identifying several areas of concern to marketers, we aimed to demonstrate the complexity surrounding how to deal with trolling. Rather than abandoning existing measures, we suggest modifying them in the light of how trolling occurs and is sustained. In other words, the way forward in addressing trolling is understanding the dynamics that create and fuel trolling and in designing control mechanisms that break the effects within this dynamic. Our conceptual model suggests two options to do so. Examples of trolling-management strategies in the spirit of each of these two options and organised in terms of five situational crime-prevention strategies proposed by Cornish and Clarke (2003) are presented in Table 2.

First, actors engaged in trolling prevention can attempt to eliminate or minimise the effects associated with reactive targets, motivated trolls, and the absence of capable guardians. An eliminated or weakened factor contributes to trolling communication losing its impact. In practice, for example, effects related to the targets could be addressed by increasing the perceived effort of trolling by teaching people to recognise trolling and by improving their digital literacy. In relation to minimising effects associated with the trolls, the intervention should focus on reducing provocations and increasing the risks of trolling. Neutralising peer-pressure in the case of organised trolling and de-normalising the harmful forms of trolling, for instance, are two potential strategies worth exploring. Finally, to minimise effects associated with the absence of capable guardians, online places should be supervised by the different human and technological tools that discourage or prevent trolling. Such relevant tools would include making trolling harder (e.g., by rewarding bystanding consumers who recognise trolling and warn the targeted consumers), making it seem riskier

(e.g., by actively moderating the content) or reducing provocations (e.g., by having aesthetically pleasing and functional user interface design).

An alternative trolling-management approach is to minimise the effects associated with the interactions between the three factors. Reducing the rewards of trolling by educating people to respond politely to trolls and removing excuses for trolling by reminding trolls that they are provoking other online users just to make themselves feel better are strategies that would attempt to break the effect associated with the troll–target interactions. In the context of troll–capable guardian’ interconnectedness, we would suggest increasing the effort of trolling (e.g., tracking trolls’ IP addresses and introducing troll badges), reducing the rewards of trolling (e.g., using bots to privately engage with trolls), and reducing provocations (e.g., preparing safe reporting guidelines for media, disabling mimicking trolling tactics). Last, target–capable guardian interactions could be addressed by making trolling harder by warning users they are entering a trolling-prone place, for instance. As Herring et al. (2002, p. 381) stated, ‘[s]imply naming the danger can heighten people’s awareness of it’.

Table 2 Examples of strategies for combating trolling

Eliminating or minimising the effects associated with the three factors	Minimising the effects associated with the two-way interactions between the three factors
<p>TARGETS</p> <p><i>Objective: Increasing the effort of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building awareness about what trolling is. ▪ Building awareness about how to respond to trolling. ▪ Improving targets' digital literacy (e.g., educating about how to change privacy settings). 	<p>TROLL–TARGET INTERACTIONS</p> <p><i>Objective: Reducing the rewards of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Building awareness about how (not) to respond to being trolled. <p><i>Objective: Removing excuses for trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alerting conscience by pointing out the potential (positive and negative) reasons for and consequences of trolling.
<p>TROLLS</p> <p><i>Objective: Reducing provocations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Neutralising peer-pressure in the case of 'organised trolling'. ▪ Addressing attention deficits by channelling trolls' boredom into other forms of behaviours (away from people) or into less harmful forms of trolling. <p><i>Objective: Increasing the risks of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decreasing the social acceptance of trolling (of the more harmful variants). 	<p>TROLL–CAPABLE GUARDIAN INTERACTIONS</p> <p><i>Objective: Increasing the effort of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Online communities establishing internal policies of when and how to deal with trolls/trolling. ▪ Training online community managers to identify legitimate complainants (Reynolds & Harris, 2005) ▪ Tracking trolls' IP addresses. ▪ Introducing troll badges (marking online users as trolls). <p><i>Objective: Reducing the rewards of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Online community managers avoiding public confrontations with trolls. ▪ Using bots to engage/instant message with trolls (as opposed to people). <p><i>Objective: Reducing provocations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hiding trolls' comments to other online users but not to the trolls themselves. ▪ Minimising opportunities for social learning (e.g., deleting the content that provides ideas about how one goes about trolling).
<p>CAPABLE GUARDIANS</p> <p><i>Objective: Increasing the effort of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rewarding online users who recognise trolling and warn or help the targets. <p><i>Objective: Increasing the risks of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reducing anonymity. ▪ Strengthening surveillance (e.g., increasing the perception of the presence of online community managers). ▪ Clearly stating sanctions for trolling. ▪ Consistently enforcing sanctions. <p><i>Objective: Reducing provocations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Setting positive behaviour expectations (e.g., by avoiding anarchistic user interface designs). 	<p>TARGET–CAPABLE GUARDIAN INTERACTIONS</p> <p><i>Objective: Increasing the effort of trolling</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improving targets' digital literacy (e.g., educating about how to block or report a troll). ▪ Building awareness about which online platforms are prone to trolling (e.g., 4chan).

Eliminating or minimising the effects associated with the three factors	Minimising the effects associated with the two-way interactions between the three factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Convincing bystanders to not further encourage trolling by down-voting or up-voting. 	

Future research implications

Considerably more work, in particular empirical studies, will need to be conducted to advance our understanding of trolling behaviours and to address the limitations arising from the conceptual nature of our study. First, further studies need to be carried out to validate the definition of trolling that we have proposed. Furthermore, research is needed to determine additional parameters that may characterise trolling. Borrowing from the official definition of bullying (Olweus, 2012), a further study could examine whether power imbalances between the actors qualify as additional necessary conditions for a particular online activity to be called trolling.

Another fruitful future direction may lie in ‘specifying’ the model of how trolling behaviours occur. For instance, exploring what influences contribute to one being more or less of a troll or a target, and to a situation being more or less trolling-friendly, would be worthwhile. On a macro level, an empirical study needs to be done to explore the role of two-way interactions between the three factors in sustaining trolling. This is of special importance, as Daunt and Greer (2015) have not found evidence that the three elements of RAT (i.e., spatio-temporal environment, target suitability, and a lack of capable guardianship) interact to impact the consumer misbehaviour—in their case, the likelihood of the theft.

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. While ignoring trolls, or in the language of online users ‘not feeding them’, might solve the problem in the short term, for some marketers and consumers, a better solution would be to stop feeding the trolling. Until then, combating trolling will continue to be a game of cat and mouse, with the mouse on a winning streak.

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