

How brands can tackle trolling by taking away the enabling audience

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Social media platforms should hide the viewing metrics on malicious content posted by trolls as part of a more proactive approach to curbing

their behavior, recommends new University of Sussex Business School-led research.

Online trolls revel in the number of upvotes, likes, and shares their misbehavior attracts which validates their actions, details the new research from academics at the University of Sussex Business School and the University of Canterbury Business School, New Zealand.

The researchers also recommend demonetizing [trolling](#) content by marking trolling content as advertising-unfriendly as another method of limiting the notoriety that trolls crave from their actions.

The study, published today in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, suggests [social media platforms](#) can curb anti-social online behavior by tackling trolls' behavior head-on.

Suggestions include platforms introducing troll badges that flag anti-social online users to potential targets and for brands on social media firms to not only increase the number of regulators they employ but also give clear indication to would-be trolls that a particular channel is actively monitored and that sanctions for trolling are applied swiftly.

But the research indicates that as trolling behavior is difficult to manage, exclusively focusing on shutting down trolls is likely to be just a temporary solution. Instead, the researchers argue that managing the socio-technical networks that allow and feed trolling misbehaviours, and in particular managing the audience and their reactions to trolling which trolls seek out and feed off, is a more effective option of limiting its impact.

Dr. Maja Golf-Papez, lecturer in marketing at the University of Sussex Business School, said: "To break the networks within which trolling exists and thrive, online community managers and platforms should

develop and employ actions that do not unintentionally support trolling by celebrating it, boosting it, facilitating it, or normalizing it.

"While eliminating trolling entirely might not be possible, our research is the first of its kind to suggest that some brands and online communities might strive to encourage trolling in anticipation of positive side effects such as increased traffic to their communities. The study is also unique in highlighting how mischief-making consumer behavior such as trolling may be exacerbated by the efforts to manage them.

"Managers of online brand communities should not ignore trolling and other similar misbehaviours completely, as this inaction violates the expectations of rule-abiding consumers that marketers will address these misbehaviours and could impact brands adversely. However, the way that some brands engage with trolls only encourages more trolls to target them.

"To develop effective managing strategies in how a company responds to trolling we need understand what drives this type of misbehavior."

The study employed actor-network theory to investigate five different cases of trolling; playful trolling; old-fashioned trolling; shock trolling; online pranking and raiding; and fake customer-service trolling.

The research, involving 330 hours of observation of trolling and interviews with perpetrators of trolling behavior, specifically looked at trolling in consumption-related settings. Such trolling includes impolitely replying to disappointed customers under fake customer service accounts; posting irrelevant product reviews, giving false and endangering information about products/services to other consumers and prank-calling businesses.

The study reveals how some trolls attract significant audiences to their

behavior. One study participant, who targeted other players in live streamed multiplayer online games, gained up to 1.5m views for his trolling videos.

The research also uncovered that some trolls were making money off their actions with fans donating money after they shared their trolling content on membership platforms such as Patreon. Income was also derived from adverts YouTube placed within a troll's video and from collaborations with businesses who were actually asking to be trolled.

The researchers differentiate trolls from cyberbullies, who intend to inflict harm or discomfort intentionally and repeatedly to a predefined target, and consumer brand saboteurs, hostile aggressors who choose activities that will supposedly cause harm to a predefined brand. They defined trolls' intentions as less straightforward, undirected, and fun-seeking but disruptive nonetheless to consumers, employees and brands.

Ekant Veer, Professor of Marketing at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, said: "By revealing that misbehaviours such as trolling may be exacerbated by marketers' efforts to manage these misbehaviours, our study adds empirical support to the idea that managing strategies for consumer misbehaviours could be counterproductive. The more we do to control trolling, the worse the problem gets.

"Our conceptual model has practical value, providing guidance to marketers on how trolling and similar mischief-making consumer misbehaviours can be stymied, or, if so wished, bolstered by managing the network of associating actors rather than trying to deter individual trolls within these networks."

Provided by University of Sussex

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