Looking @ the Trolls behind the Screen: An Analysis of the Factors Affecting Everyday Sadism through Trolling on the Internet

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Abstract

Cyber trolling is a manifestation of everyday sadism. A study of over 500 internet users was conducted to determine why the internet allows for easier expression of sadistic behaviors. Through a 9 question survey, it was suggested that deindividuation and immediacy may be factors for why online trolling allows for display of sadistic behavior. This study contributes to existing theories for trolling and sadism enablers.

# INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the first image this generation would have thought of with the word “troll” would have been of a shriveled old man living under a bridge, or perhaps even a crazy-haired plastic doll. However, the subject of this research has a stronger link to Christian from the 50 Shades of Grey novel than to a folkloric creature. Stereotypically, this troll is living at his mom’s house, sits at his computer desk littered with energy drinks and garbage, and does the best he can to drive everyone online absolutely insane.

## CYBER TROLLS

There is much debate both online and in academia on what cyber trolls really are. There are those who argue for a more deception-based definition (Hardaker, 2010; Buckels, 2014), those who propose a more baited-response definition, and there are those who offer more vague, non-cohesive definitions (Shachaf, 2010; Shin, 2008) However, for the uses of this paper, a lay definition is more in order: cyber trolls are those who aim to deliberately upset people online through use of purposefully destructive behavior. They have grown increasingly more prominent in forums and on social media sites and are rapidly spreading to infect every corner of the internet, attempting to make their targets as irritated as possible. However, trolls do more than just upset people: they have caused mass self-harming events such as “#cutforbieber,” where trolls from the mostly-anonymous imageboard website 4chan encouraged teenage girls to cut themselves in order to encourage the teen heartthrob Justin Bieber to stop smoking recreational marijuana (Arnowitz, 2013; Wood, 2013). There are even countless reports of suicides as a result of people trying to cope with persistent trolls, where they take over the online presence of a targeted internet user until their daily offline life becomes consumed (Bishop, 2014). Trolls can often act in groups, due to their typical personal traits; Trolls are characteristically very prideful, so they form communities in which they share their “trolls” and brag about them to each other. They often even team up on a single party, to enhance their effectiveness in pursuit of a “bite.” A “bite” is essentially a display by the troll’s target that shows they have fallen for the “troll” (Hardaker, 2010).

“Bites” were a phenomenon studied extensively by a university professor in 9 years’ worth of unmoderated comments on a horse forum, where trolls had formed a social community in order to maximize harassment of members. In these communities, she discovered that they are considered to have “failed” if they did not obtain their “bite.” Popular communities such as 4chan, r/trolling, and 9gag can be found to be laced with pornography, “memes,” jokes, contact information for targets, and evidence of past successes (Strickland, 2008). These trolling communities provide social incentives for successes, which as a result pushes the behavior to become more cruel and malicious in pursuit of a more significant “bite” (Gaus, 2012).

It is important to differentiate between cyber bullying and cyber trolling for the sake of this research. While the information found in this study may or may not be connected with the two, the study focuses and bases around cyber trolling as a separate entity.

## EVERYDAY SADISM

Sadists are those who find pleasure in causing harm to others (Baumeister, 1999). In modern research since the start of the internet era, there has been little study of sadism past the typical image of sexual deviance and intense criminal activity (Chabrol, 2009, Fedoroff, 2008; Knight, 1999; Nitschke, Osterheider, & Mokros, 2009). However, the reality is that sadism can reach deeper than just this: many may recall enjoying using a magnifying glass to burn ants, or perhaps laughing when someone fell and hurt themselves after a chair was pulled out from under them. While these are simple examples, they serve to show that not all sadists are abusive partners, sexual kinksters, or serial killers, but can be people leading otherwise normal lives which happen to have incidences of sadistic tendencies. These can be can simply categorized as “everyday sadists” (Buckels 2013).

Cyber trolling in itself was recently established as a manifestation of this “everyday sadism” by a research study conducted by the original proponent of the concept (Buckels, 2014). It explained that people who display trolling behavior were singularly shown to have a strong correlation with the sadistic personality trait. In correlation, it suggests that people practicing cyber trolling have high relative sadistic tendencies as opposed to other internet users. Similar results have also been found in relation to violent video game use (Greitemeyer, 2015). A study established that killing game characters may satisfy everyday sadists’ need for cruelty, resulting in a pattern where everyday sadism was seen to predict the amount of violent video game play in study participants.

Often, those acting upon inherently sadistic impulses may not be purposefully intending to cause harm. Sadistic behaviors are seen as creating a thrilling sensation to serve as an escape from boredom according to a host of psychology researchers, such as Roy Baumeister from Case Western Reserve University (1999). What is commonly seen is that in exploring and acting upon sadistic impulses, sadists appear to have a form of reward system for successes in showing the suffering of others. This can be seen similarly in trolling, where this reward system is present socially when trolls are obtaining their “bites” from their targets and share it with their relevant communities (Hardaker, 2010).

My research is intended to provide a response and supplement to this argument, with a further analysis of existing research on the topic in combination with evidence from an online survey I have created and conducted. This research aims to offer possible reasons the internet allows for a direct, open avenue for expression of sadistic behavior over IRL (“in real life”) or offline interactions.

# METHODS

I conducted a survey of approximately 512 total internet users, which omits incomplete survey responses. The respondents were largely American college students, but included other scattered, unidentifiable populations. Using the Survey Monkey and Responster online survey platforms, I created a 9 question survey which I then posted on Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and Yahoo! Answers to recruit respondents. Several sites were chosen in order to be more representative of overall internet users. I determined that these five sites, taken from a list of leading social media sites based on share of visits, were the best for sharing this type of content (“Leading social,” 2016). Video sites like YouTube, photo sites like Instagram and Pinterest, and professional sites like LinkedIn and Yelp were avoided. Given the nature of this research, I made the decision to refrain from posting on certain questionable sites; this survey was not posted on densely populated trolling sites like 4chan, where it is obvious the trolls themselves would purposefully destroy the data. That being said, it should be acknowledged that this survey is not troll-proof, as nothing on the internet is, and there is always the possibility that trolls may have responded to this survey with false information.

# RESULTS

Of the responses received, they were largely evenly divided between men and women, also with an inclusion of about 10% non-binary identifiers. All major ethnicities were represented, although White/Caucasian identifiers made up about half of respondents. Ages varied from 18 to above 75, with most participants falling within the ranges of 18-24 as well as 25-34, which mirrors the age distribution of internet users overall (“Distribution of,” 2014).

After these three demographic questions, respondents were asked if they participated in any of a list of trolling-identified activities. These trolling behaviors were enumerated based on a community-generated list of types of trolling (Nuccitelli, 2014. This included several hundred types, and these were processed into larger categories for the purposes of this survey. In this question, the word “troll” and its derivatives are avoided, to avoid bias—this is justified because typically, sadists will not claim that causing harm was a main source of pleasure for them (Baumeister, 1999). Therefore, in this instance, where we operate on a premise of trolls as sadists, they would then be averse to claiming they take pleasure from causing pain. This question served as a filter to separate the respondents who were “trolls” from the “non-trolls,” so that the further questions would not be skewed by non-troll identifiers. About 18% of respondents did not in any way identify with these trolling behaviors. In support of existing research, men were more likely to identify themselves as taking part in these sadistic trolling behaviors (Moffitt, 2001).

It was found that, past trolling, debate-based interaction was most popular, which confirms results from Erin Buckels (2014). However, it was also found that “memeing” and picture-based trolling are also becoming more common.

These identifiers were then asked why they choose to participate in those activities. While this is a very simplistic question for a very complicated circumstance, as evidenced by about a quarter of surveyors replying with simply “I don’t know,” this question was asked more as a casual introspection to prompt further research at a later time. Due to the previously explained pattern of sadistic perpetrators not typically claiming the derivation of pleasure from pain as a principle motivator, even the few results from this question may be questionable. That having been acknowledged, respondents most commonly identified their reasoning for trolling at all as it being “entertaining” and “funny.”

|Reason|Percent of Results|

|---|:-:|

| IT’S ENTERTAINING. | 30% |

| IT’S FUNNY. | 28% |

| IT FEELS GOOD. | 13% |

| IT MAKES OTHER PEOPLE FEEL BAD. | 4% |

| I DON’T KNOW. | 22% |

| PREFER NOT TO ANSWER. | 2% |

| OTHER. | 1% |

Respondents were then asked whether they would also say or do these trolling identified activities in person. 70% responded that they would not, although it should be acknowledged that 14% said that they would act this way in person. If respondents answered “no” to this question, they were then prompted by the survey system to respond why they felt they would not troll in person. The most highly represented categories were “I would feel guilty,” “people would be mad at me,” “it wouldn’t be as funny,” “I would feel uncomfortable in a social situation like that,” and “it would be too complicated/difficult.” Analysis of survey results are heavily dependent on these responses.

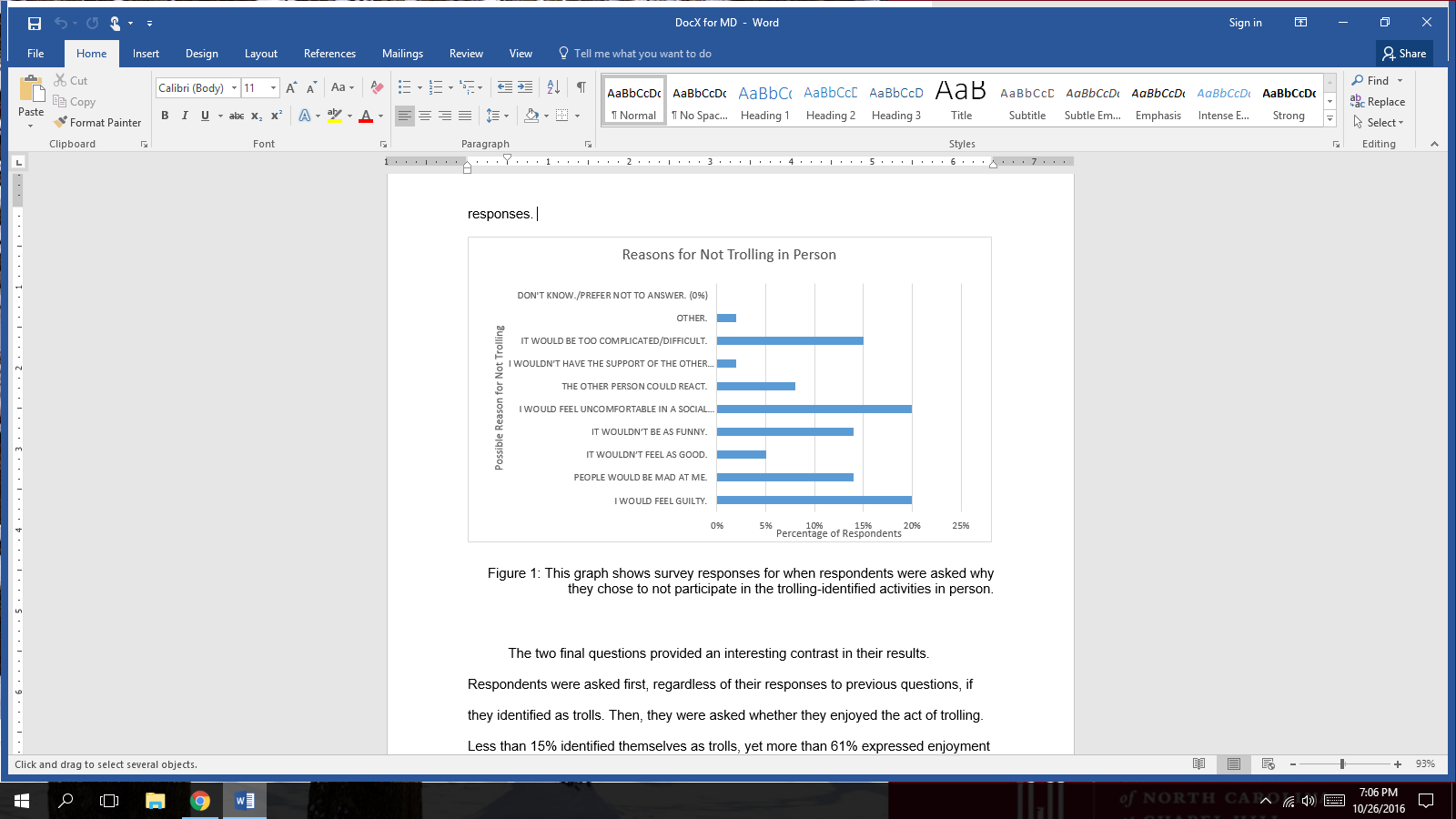


Figure 1: This graph shows survey responses for when respondents were asked why they chose to not participate in the trolling-identified activities in person.

The two final questions provided an interesting contrast in their results. Respondents were asked first, regardless of their responses to previous questions, if they identified as trolls. Then, they were asked whether they enjoyed the act of trolling. Less than 15% identified themselves as trolls, yet more than 61% expressed enjoyment of the act of trolling. This paradox within responses comes to support proposed explanations for this phenomenon of sadistic behaviors online.

# DISCUSSION

Once survey results were finalized, they could have been analyzed one of two ways: either with each participant’s response individually, or each question within itself and context of other questions. While some obvious patterns within individual participant analysis arose, such as men being more likely to participate in trolling behaviors, most analysis was taken directly from question responses. When breaking down the question information, the results of this survey seemed to fall into two broader, base categorizations for explanation: deindividuation and immediacy.

## DEINDIVIDUATION

Society’s demand for control of sadistic pleasures serves as a deterrent against engaging in these behaviors (Baumeister, 1999). When society mandates a certain activity as aversive, it results in causing a feeling of guilt when it is done which will eventually serve to moderate this behavior. Due to the fact guilt is a socialized emotion, the factor of society must be present. My survey results have confirmed incidence of this logic in people engaging in cyber trolling: trolls reported guilt, possibility of others being angry, and social discomfort as reasons that they do not act similarly “IRL.” All three of these options are purely social factors—this proposes that, when online, pressures imposed by society either dissipate or are lessened enough to allow the person to feel comfortable engaging in the behavior.

For these phenomena, I offer the argument that a form of deindividuation occurs when trolling online. In deindividuation, the troll would experience a loss of individual identity, which typically causes people to be less likely to conform to social norms (Reicher, 1994). Deindividuation would allow for the reported social discomfort of acting sadistically “IRL” to be minimized through computer mediated communication, with the sense of anonymity provided by the internet. Trolls can disappear into the masses, and to the troll, the fault for their actions can begin to shift away from themselves. Without direct exposure to the social consequences of their actions, trolls are able to act without feeling guilt or fear of other people’s anger.

Deindividuation is supported by my results in that people were more likely to identify as enjoying the act of trolling than identifying themselves as trolls. This contradiction would suggest that the people are acknowledging their enjoyment of trolling, yet do not view themselves as the perpetrators—a claim which would be consistent with that of someone experiencing deindividuation.

In one of the classic studies on deindividuation, a naturalistic approach was taken on the night of Halloween in the 1970s (Diener et al., 1976). The researcher gave the opportunity for “trick-or-treaters” to steal candy and money, both of which were left on the porch, where the researcher could monitor what occurred. What was found was that those masked and/or in groups tended to steal more—over tenfold more—than those who arrived singly or undisguised. This study showed foremost that deindividuation caused by both anonymity and group identity, which are experienced online by trolls, can result in decreased adherence to social norms and inhibitions.

With deindividuation as a basis, the societal pressures would be removed or lessened, which would then minimize the impacts of guilt as a socialized emotion. Therefore, acting sadistically online would become preferable to doing so “IRL,” where societal demands would maintain the feeling of guilt surrounding sadistic behaviors.

Additionally, one must account for the fact guilt requires empathy as a precursor (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Hoffman, 1982; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney, 1991). However, online, it seems that empathy has declined with technology-oriented communications (Carrier, Spradlin, Bunce, et al., 2015, Small & Vorgan, 2011). Seeing as guilt in itself has been minimized by the internet, a result may concede that its effects are now curtailed enough to where it would allow for easy expression of unacceptable sadistic behavior online.

## IMMEDIACY

The second category of reasoning which was offered by my research was immediacy. The options that showed popular response in my survey, of those not falling into the category of deindividuation, were that “IRL,” these activities were no longer as funny, entertaining, or easy. I propose that this is linked to the increasing need for instant gratification being experienced by our technologically dependent generation (McDowell et al., 2003). Instant gratification demands that pleasure or fulfillment be granted immediately after actions (Patel, 2014). Because the internet is a near-constant availability for the developed world, it becomes corollary that there is an unlimited pool of targets continuously available for sadistic trolls to derive pleasure from with the hit of a button. This may give trolls a perceived belief that they are being entertained and amused more easily when they are online trolling than when acting sadistically offline.

A researcher from Ohio proposes an opponent process approach to sadism. He argues that this opponent process allows for negative side effects (i.e. guilt) of evil events (i.e. sadism) to decrease each time they are experienced (Baumeister, 1999). Explained simply, this opponent process allows that a person be more capable of handling the body’s response to evil events over time and over repeated experiences.

Upon the first event’s occurrence, the person is taken from their normal state, which the person’s body must then return them to. This return to normalcy begins as an inefficient process, but, each time, the process gains power and efficiency. Meanwhile, the effects of the original event that removed the body from its state of stability becomes significantly weaker. Over time, the body remains at normalcy, even with the events continuing to occur—and eventually this can create the pleasurable results we observe in sadistic individuals after they inflict suffering on a chosen target victim. I argue that the internet gives trolls a tool which they can use in order to act and obtain pleasure immediately—then this in turn speeds up the opponent process to allow trolls to feel more comfortable acting sadistically, faster. This would create a situation where these activities would become an easier, more enjoyable option for expression of sadistic behaviors.

I also find that the pleasure principle, which dictates that people will follow urges for pleasure in order to satisfy desires, also supports this theory of immediacy as a factor of why sadistic behavior is easier in online trolling (Freud, 2003).This force described by Freud seeks immediate gratification for primitive urges directly after a relevant action, emphasizing a maximization of pleasure. Thus, the open availability of the internet for an instant thrill would logically placate this principle in that they would be able to almost always have a pool of targets from which to derive pleasure from, almost immediately after acting. This could simplify the expression of sadism, possibly creating a greater feeling of entertainment and simplicity because the gratification comes at a more directly appeasing timescale.

Skinner’s rat box experiment showed that when rats were given a lever to touch in order to gain stimulation, they would do it repeatedly, and forget about all other worldly matters (Slater, 2005). This instant pleasure experienced online might be the closest a sadist could get to that of Skinner’s rats in terms of instant gratification for their actions—which may account for the epidemic spread of trolling online.

However, this study did not focus on the pleasure principle—therefore, in order to sufficiently validate this proposition, further research would be necessary to determine whether trolls experience a higher drive from the pleasure principle.

# CONCLUSIONS

The research and survey conducted for this paper have suggested that deindividuation and immediacy may be two main factors which justify why everyday sadism is expressed so pervasively online. The survey results showed contradictions across distributions in those who identified as trolls and those who identified as enjoying the act of trolling, in combination with direct question results relating to social factors, as enablers for sadistic behavior online. The results also showed entertainment- and simplicity-oriented reasoning as moderators, which can be accounted for by the accessibility of computer mediated communications.

Overall, the study seems to confirm existing theories on internet trolls, as previous research has suggested possible links between trolling, deindividuation, anonymity. It provides survey results to be used in affirming these theories, as well as providing possible new justifications for online sadistic activity.

As in any research experiment, limitations must be acknowledged. This survey was conducted online, which, given the nature of the topic, may have resulted in some amount of troll- driven responses. Additionally, there is always the possibility of respondents not fully understanding the question wording, and responding in a way inconsistent with their actual beliefs or identifications. This also must account for hidden personal biases of respondents.

This paper proposes two directions for further research: firstly, survey question results suggest entertainment and comedy as primary motivators for sadistic trolling behavior. Further studies may be conducted to better comprehend the links between these two components and sadistic trolling behaviors. Furthermore, results suggest a possibility that sadistic trolls may experience a higher level of impulse from the pleasure principle, which drives them to act online to obtain more instantaneous gratification.

By uncovering the possible reasoning for the expression sadistic behaviors online through trolling as opposed to offline, the contributing factors may be able to be curtailed. As offline life becomes increasingly more intertwined with online life, consequences for actions may also become much more tangible for trolls. As such, decreasing these behaviors may become reliant on maximizing societal pressures online. However, blocking the aspect of the immediacy provided by the internet may be a bit more complex. As such, the only real advice to be given for stopping the incidence of this behaviors remains in a cliché: keep calm, and don’t feed the trolls.

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