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Diversity and complexity of online trolling: an extended classification and analysis of social consequences

Abstract

Trolling is a diverse communicative phenomenon involving deliberate actions aimed at provoking, disrupting, and manipulating others in digital environments. This article aims to develop an extended classification of trolling and analyse its key characteristics and social consequences. The study applies qualitative methods: desk research and participant observation based on thousands of interactions across social media platforms. It identifies categories such as destructive, manipulative, ideological, humorous, and thematic trolling. The findings indicate that trolling, distinct from hate, has significant emotional, social, and reputational effects. The proposed typology offers a foundation for further research, education, and reflection on digital aggression.

Keywords: trolling, social media, digital aggression, classification, counteraction strategies, communication.

Różnorodność i złożoność trollingu: rozszerzona klasyfikacja oraz analiza skutków społecznych

Streszczenie

Trolling to zjawisko komunikacyjne o dużej różnorodności, obejmujące działania celowe: prowokowanie, dezorganizowanie i manipulowanie innymi użytkownikami w środowisku cyfrowym. Celem artykułu jest opracowanie rozszerzonej klasyfikacji form trollingu oraz analiza ich charakterystyki i skutków społecznych. Zastosowano metody jakościowe: desk research oraz obserwację uczestniczącą opartą na analizie tysięcy interakcji w mediach społecznościowych. Wyodrębniono kategorie takie jak trolling destrukcyjny, manipulacyjny, ideologiczny, humorystyczny i tematyczny. Wyniki wskazują, że trolling, odmienny od hejtu, ma istotne konsekwencje emocjonalne, społeczne i reputacyjne. Przedstawiona typologia może wspierać dalsze badania, działania edukacyjne i refleksję nad cyfrową agresją.

Słowa kluczowe: trolling, media społecznościowe, agresja cyfrowa, klasyfikacja, strategie przeciwdziałania, komunikacja.

Introduction

Trolling, as disruptive online behaviour, affects relationships, mental health, and public discourse, drawing interest from both researchers and users. This phenomenon manifests in various forms, from harmless jokes to disinformation and symbolic aggression. Trolls aim to provoke confusion and escalate conflicts. The rise of social media has amplified the spread of falsehoods, with trolling playing a central role. Anonymity and weak content oversight enable the dissemination of manipulated content, distorting discussions and eroding trust in facts^{1,2}.

Understanding the mechanisms, forms, and effects of trolling is essential for building effective responses to harmful online behaviours. This article proposes an extended typology of trolling, grouped into thematic categories, to offer a structured and practical tool for analyzing its complexity. The classification is designed to assist researchers and practitioners in recognizing key patterns of trolling. Unlike hate, trolling demands its own interpretative frameworks; therefore, this study focuses exclusively on trolling without merging it with other types of digital aggression. It does not seek to explain all social consequences or provide universal solutions but to serve as a conceptual guide for further research and education. One important dimension is information disorder, which includes three types of content distortion: disinformation (intentional and manipulative), misinformation (unintentional), and malformation (truthful but harmful), each contributing to confusion and distrust in online environments³.

Trolling is often intertwined with cyberbullying, as both involve online harassment and emotional manipulation. While trolling may provoke indirectly, cyberbullying targets individuals more directly and persistently. Both behaviours are associated with dark personality traits, such as psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and sadism, and can lead to serious psychological harm, including stress, depression, and social exclusion⁴. Trolls typically ignore ethical norms, use personal attacks, adopt false identities, and seek attention through manipulation⁵. The youngest users are especially vulnerable due to limited resilience⁶.

¹ E. Brooking, P.W. Singer, *Nowy rodzaj wojny. Media społecznościowe jako broń*, przekł. Baranowski S., Vis-à-Vis/Etiuda, Kraków 2019, p. 211.

² K. Bąkowicz, *Trolle jako kreatorzy dezinformacji. Analiza zjawiska*, „Media Biznes Kultura” 2024, Vol. 1(16), pp. 7–18.

³ C. Wardle, Understanding information disorder, FirstDraftNews.org, 2023, <https://firstdraft-news.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/> (accessed on: 5.02.2025).

⁴ A. Aydin, A. Arda, B. Güneş, B. Erbaş, *Psychopathology of Cyberbullying and Internet Trolling*, „Journal of Experimental and Basic Medical Sciences” 2021, Vol. 2, Issue 3, pp. 380–391.

⁵ *What is a troll?*, Indiana University: University Information Technology Services, Indiana University Knowledge Base, The Trustees of Indiana University 2008.

⁶ J. Włodarczyk, *Zagrożenia związane z używaniem internetu przez młodzież. Wyniki badania EU NET ADB*, „Dziecko krzywdzone. Teorie, badania, praktyka” 2013, Vol. 12(1), pp. 49–68.

Trolling is linked to experiences of cybervictimization, social pressure, and financial strain, suggesting it often serves as a coping mechanism for negative emotions⁷. Their findings align with Agnew's General Strain Theory⁸, indicating that individuals under stress may turn to trolling as an outlet. Studies show that younger users and men exhibit a higher tendency to engage in such behaviours, especially when they have been previously exposed to cyberbullying. The authors emphasise the need for deeper exploration of trolling types and their long-term consequences.

Trolling can be analysed through four dimensions: context (e.g., social media debates), anonymity (which encourages trolling), the nature of activity (such as aggression or disinformation), and motivation, often rooted in psychological or social dynamics aiming to provoke chaos⁹. Although often viewed negatively, trolling may also have constructive or ambivalent aspects. It can entertain, stimulate debate, or foster resilience to provocation. In some cases, it reinforces community solidarity against disruptors or serves as ironic protest highlighting social issues¹⁰.

This article provides an independent conceptual framework for understanding trolling, distinct from related research on hate. Although thematically linked to a broader exploration of digital aggression, the present analysis focuses solely on trolling and introduces an original classification based on a separate analytical foundation.

The aim is to develop a structured typology of trolling forms, examining their communicative features and social consequences. Rather than proposing universal solutions or evaluating specific countermeasures, the article offers a descriptive model to support further research, education, and practical reflection. The analysis rests on three assumptions: first – trolling is a dynamic and heterogeneous communicative practice shaped by cultural, social, and technological contexts; second – it requires a separate framework from hate due to its distinct mechanisms and motivations; and third – systematic classification is essential for understanding its effects and informing preventive efforts.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative desk research, case study analysis, and long-term participant observation in digital environments. The typology was developed through systematic monitoring of thousands of online comments and discussions across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and YouTube. Rather than employing formal content analysis, the author used an interpretative approach

⁷ N.C. Wilson, K.C. Seigfried-Spellar, *Cybervictimization, Social, and Financial Strains Influence Internet Trolling Behaviors: A General Strain Theory Perspective*, "Social Science Computer Review" 2022, Vol. 41, pp. 967–982.

⁸ R. Agnew, *Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency*, „Criminology” 1992, Vol. 30(1), pp. 47–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01093.x>.

⁹ A. Naruszewicz-Duchlińska, *Intencjonalne językowe zakłócenia komunikacji internetowej (trolling, flaming, hejting)*, „Prace Językoznawcze” 2014, Vol. 4, p. 90.

¹⁰ S. Xavier, *Impact of Trolling and Its Effects on the Popularity of Social Media*, „International Journal of Scientific Development and Research” 2022, Vol. 7, Issue 8, p. 760–768, <https://www.ijtsdr.org/papers/IJSDR2208113.pdf> (accessed on: 4.02.2025).

grounded in digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns of trolling behaviour.

A targeted review of 13 academic and expert sources was conducted using purposive sampling, prioritizing conceptual relevance to digital aggression, communicative pathologies, and socio-cultural mechanisms of trolling. Although the sample is selective, it reflects a cross-section of current, thematically coherent scholarship that underpins the proposed classification. The analysis focuses on identifying dominant trends, motivations, and mechanisms, offering an extended typology as a practical tool for researchers, educators, and policymakers to better understand and address online trolling and its broader implications.

Although numerous definitions of trolling exist in the literature, this article adopts a socio-communicative and pragmatic perspective focused on intentional disruption, manipulation, and provocation in digital environments. Rather than relying on a single definition, the study builds on prior research in the field while offering an original classification developed by the author. This conceptual framework combines insights from media studies, psychology, and sociology, and is informed by long-term observation of online interactions. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of trolling as a communicative behaviour shaped by anonymity, power asymmetries, and digital affordances, rather than a uniform or solely pathological act. This theoretical anchoring justifies the extended typology presented in the article and clarifies the analytical lens applied in the interpretation of examples and consequences.

Concept analysis: hate, trolling, and constructive criticism

Distinguishing between hate, trolling, and constructive criticism is vital for understanding their unique roles in online communication. Hate is marked by aggression and hostility, trolling by provocation and manipulation – both lead to exclusion, stress, and misinformation. In contrast, constructive criticism offers supportive, objective feedback aimed at personal or professional growth. Clarifying these distinctions enables better recognition of communicative intent, which is essential for effective moderation, user education, and fostering respectful dialogue. It also supports efforts to counter harmful behaviour while encouraging interactions that build community and individual development.

- Hate refers to aggressive and often offensive statements directed at an individual or group with the intent of provoking negative emotions. It is characterised by a lack of constructiveness and is often motivated by prejudice, jealousy, or hostility.
- Trolling involves the deliberate provocation of other internet users through the publication of controversial or false content. The goal of trolling is to create confusion, elicit an emotional reaction, or disrupt discussions. While trolling may be seen as amusing by the troll, it is often irritating or harmful to others.

- Constructive criticism is a form of evaluation that aims to highlight areas for improvement in a way that is helpful and supportive. It is characterised by objectivity, respect, and the provision of specific suggestions on how something can be improved. Constructive criticism is generally well-received, as it fosters development and refinement.

Kaczmarek-Śliwińska¹¹ extensively discusses another concept related to negative phenomena – destructive communication, which negatively affects relationships, atmosphere, and communication effectiveness. It stands in opposition to constructive communication, which aims to build positive relationships and achieve common goals. Meanwhile, Juza¹² examines the phenomenon of hate speech and its connection to trolling, presenting these terms in the context of online behaviour and their social consequences.

Table 1. Comparison of the characteristics of hate, trolling, and constructive criticism

Hate	Trolling	Constructive criticism
Goal and intent		
The goal is to provoke negative emotions, hurt the victim's feelings, dehumanise, or marginalise.	The goal is to provoke, disrupt, mislead, or entertain at the expense of others. Motivations can vary from amusement to public opinion manipulation.	The goal is to help, improve, develop, or refine a person, project, or situation.
Expression style		
Aggressive, offensive, degrading, containing insults and threats.	Provocative, controversial, often includes false or absurd information.	Polite, objective, helpful, containing specific suggestions and recommendations.
Audience and relationships		
Often directed at a wide audience, including those not directly involved in the conflict; can target both public and private individuals.	Directed at someone or a group but mainly seeks public reaction; anonymity makes relationships irrelevant.	Directed at someone with whom the critic has a relationship or shared goal; typically grounded in respect and intent to help.
Effects on the recipient		
Negative emotions, emotional pain, dehumanisation, lowered self-esteem.	Confusion, frustration, anger, sometimes amusement.	Motivation for improvement, increased awareness, skill development.
Context and circumstances		
Often emerges from conflicts or differences, aimed at individuals or groups without substantive grounds.	Often thrives in online anonymity, where trolls feel unaccountable, disrupting various discussions.	Constructive criticism typically arises in work or education settings, delivered thoughtfully to support improvement.

¹¹ M. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, Lecture at the Scientific Conference during the 24th Congress of Public Relations Professionals “Digital Horizons: Artificial Intelligence and Digitalization in the Service of Public Relations and Marketing” 2024.

¹² M. Juza, *Hejterstwo w komunikacji internetowej: Charakterystyka zjawiska, przyczyny i sposoby przeciwdziałania*, „Profilaktyka Społeczna i Resocjalizacja” 2015, Issue 25, pp. 27–50.

Motivation and knowledge resources		
Often driven by emotions, prejudice, or ignorance; usually impulsive and lacking topic knowledge.	Often motivated by amusement, power, or control; may exploit topic knowledge to provoke or mislead.	Grounded in topic knowledge; the critic offers informed suggestions, aiming to help and improve.
Long-term consequences and outcomes		
May include relationship destruction, victim's lowered self-esteem, and escalation of social conflicts.	May cause ongoing confusion and discourage both victims and observers from online engagement.	May foster personal growth, better skills and relationships, and greater effectiveness.
Examples		
„You are pathetic, and no one likes you. You should disappear from the internet.”	„The Earth is flat, and anyone who thinks otherwise is stupid. Check for yourself, it's obvious!”	„Your presentations are great – adding more visuals might make them even clearer and more engaging.”

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Extended classification of trolling

The classification of trolling allows for a better understanding and management of various forms of undesirable behaviours in the digital space, which enables:

- Identifying and distinguishing the intentions behind specific actions, leading to a more appropriate response.
- Managing online communities, allowing administrators and moderators of forums, social media, and other platforms to better oversee their communities using appropriate moderation and intervention techniques.
- Developing counteraction strategies and implementing effective methods to combat trolling.
- Educating users, who, with increased awareness of various forms of trolling, can minimise its impact on their online experiences.
- Identifying disinformation and strengthening protection against fake news, contributing to the creation of a healthier and safer digital environment.

Additionally, classification provides valuable insights for scientific research, enabling a deeper analysis of this phenomenon, its causes, and consequences, which can lead to new discoveries and a better understanding of online behaviours. Trolling can be divided into four main categories:

- interaction-based and social behaviour trolling;
- disinformation and manipulation-based trolling;
- ideological and cultural trolling;
- thematic trolling.

Interaction-based and social behaviour trolling

Trolling in this category focuses on direct interaction with other users and is often aimed at provoking emotional reactions, disrupting discussions, or drawing attention. It can take the form of destructive comments, provocative statements, humorous jokes, or narcissistic attempts at self-promotion, often balancing on the thin line between entertainment and harm.

Destructive trolling aims to disrupt communication and derail constructive discussion. These trolls often post aggressive, offensive, or irrelevant content to create chaos and frustration, which can drive users away from the conversation or even the platform itself.

Table 2. Destructive trolling

Destructive trolling	
Spamming	The user floods a discussion forum with hundreds of meaningless, repetitive messages, disrupting normal communication and discouraging other users from participating.
Forum flooding	The troll fills the forum with images or text unrelated to the topic, such as ASCII art, leading to disorganisation and blocking the discussion space.
Intentional game destruction	In online games, trolls intentionally destroy other players' progress (griefing), e.g., in sandbox games like <i>Minecraft</i> , leading to frustration and discouragement.
Chat spamming	The troll enters a chat and starts pasting hundreds of random characters or meaningless sentences, preventing normal communication for other users.
Flooding social media groups	A user joins a serious discussion group on Facebook or Discord and floods it with inappropriate memes or GIFs, disrupting conversation and deterring participation.
Malicious Wikipedia editing	The troll edits Wikipedia articles, introducing false information or deleting essential content, which misleads readers and complicates access to reliable sources.
Mass reporting of accounts	A group of trolls organises to mass-report a user's account or posts to platform administrators, leading to unjustified blocking or deletion of the account.
Virtual world destruction	In MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), the troll deliberately leads monsters into areas occupied by beginner players, destroying their progress and discouraging them from playing.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Provocative trolling aims to trigger emotional responses by using offensive language, extreme views, or sensitive topics. These trolls seek to spark arguments and disrupt online communities, drawing attention to themselves and causing division.

Table 3. Provocative trolling

Provocative trolling	
Flaming	The user posts offensive and inflammatory comments under social media posts, such as in political groups, to provoke emotional reactions and escalate conflicts.
Controversial opinions	The troll enters a pet lovers' forum and writes, „Owning pets is outdated and should be banned,” to spark outrage and arguments among users.
Undermining scientific facts	The user posts false information, such as „Vaccines are harmful and ineffective,” in health-related groups to provoke heated debates and confusion.

Provocative trolling	
Challenging authorities	On a health forum, the troll posts messages questioning the qualifications of doctors and scientists, claiming that „conventional medicine is one big scam.”
Questioning values	In a book/literature fan group, the troll writes that „classic literature is a waste of time” and that „reading books is overrated” to stir controversy and outrage.
Attacking religious beliefs	The user enters a religious forum and starts questioning fundamental beliefs of participants, using offensive language or sarcastic remarks.
Political provocations	During a heated political debate, the troll introduces false information or extreme opinions to intensify the discussion and divide participants.
Inciting conflicts in fandoms	In a TV series fan community, the troll spreads false rumours about conflicts between actors to cause arguments among fans.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Humorous trolling uses irony, sarcasm, or absurdity to amuse or confuse others. Trolls of this type post content that may seem serious at first but is ultimately a joke. Although usually less harmful, this form of trolling can still cause confusion if the humour is misunderstood.

Table 4. Humorous trolling

Humorous trolling	
Irony and sarcasm	A user sarcastically comments in a conspiracy theory discussion: „Sure, the Earth is flat, and the moon's made of cheese,” aiming to amuse others.
Meming	The troll shares memes parodying popular topics, such as cats as presidents, to entertain and amuse.
Absurd theories and statements	A user on a culinary forum writes that „the best way to cook pasta is to throw it on the roof and wait for the rain,” which is deliberately absurd and intended to amuse others.
Absurd advice	On a culinary forum, a troll gives absurd advice like „always add sugar to every dish” to amuse participants.
Parodies and satire	A user creates fake news or articles that parody well-known events or figures in a humorous way, e.g., „The president declares a public holiday for all cats.”
Creating fictional characters	A troll creates an account as a fictional character, such as an alien or a cartoon figure, and engages in conversations with users using humorous and absurd statements.
Funny challenges	On social media platforms, a troll initiates humorous challenges involving absurd tasks, e.g., „a challenge to speak only in rhymes for an entire day.”
Creative edits	Creating humorous remixes of popular memes or videos that comment on current events or social phenomena in a satirical way.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Narcissistic trolling centres on self-promotion and attracting attention. These trolls post exaggerated content showcasing their achievements or uniqueness and often steer discussions to focus on themselves. This behaviour can frustrate online communities, especially when seen as egocentric or insincere.

Table 5. Narcissistic trolling

Narcissistic trolling	
Excessive self-promotion	Posting comments that excessively praise one's own achievements.
Attention-seeking trolling	Posting controversial statements to gain attention and provoke reactions from other users.
Creating a false image	Creating a profile that exaggerates real skills or social status.
Posting photos with fake tags	Uploading photos from places one has never been to impress others.
Inflating follower count	Purchasing fake follower accounts to appear more popular.
Provocative posts	Writing controversial statements to provoke emotional reactions and draw attention to oneself.
Exploiting drama	Creating dramatic situations to gain sympathy and attention.
Claiming others' successes	Taking credit for the achievements of other people.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Disinformation and manipulation-based trolling

This form of trolling involves intentionally spreading false or distorted information. Its aim may be to mislead in scientific or political contexts or to promote conspiracy theories that confuse audiences and erode trust in experts and institutions.

Disinformation trolling refers to the deliberate online spread of false or misleading content. Trolls in this category fabricate stories, manipulate facts, or distribute falsified data to mislead others, sow confusion, and erode trust in credible sources. Their aim is to destabilize communities and fuel large-scale misunderstandings or conflict.

Table 6. Disinformation trolling

Disinformation trolling	
False alarms	Spreading false information about threats, such as alleged terrorist attacks, to create panic.
Fake news about celebrities	Publishing false stories about the personal lives of famous individuals to attract attention and generate gossip.
Manipulation of medical content	Spreading false information about miracle cures or therapies that supposedly treat serious diseases.
Fake reviews	Writing false reviews of products or services online to influence public perception.
Impersonating experts	Creating fake profiles of so-called experts who provide misleading advice.
Fake events	Organising non-existent events on social media platforms to deceive people.
Manipulated images and videos	Publishing edited or fabricated images and videos that falsely represent reality.
Rumours about companies	Spreading false information about bankruptcies or other business problems to lower market value.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Manipulative trolling aims to influence others by subtly distorting content and context. Trolls use persuasion, exaggeration, or selective information to steer opinions or actions for personal or group gain – such as skewing polls, shaping consumer behaviour, or affecting political views.

Table 7. Manipulative trolling

Manipulative trolling	
Astroturfing	Creating a false impression of mass support for a cause through fake accounts.
Sockpuppeting	Using multiple fake identities to support one's arguments in a discussion.
Manipulating polls	Generating fake votes in online polls to distort their results.
Fuelling conflicts	Deliberately sowing discord between groups to weaken them.
Impersonation	Pretending to be someone else to defame or influence decisions.
False narratives	Spreading one-sided or fabricated stories to sway public opinion.
Creating false crises	Fabricating the impression of an urgent problem that requires immediate attention.
Distorting facts	Deliberately misinterpreting or taking facts out of context to fit an agenda.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Trolling related to pseudoscience and conspiracy theories involves promoting scientifically unproven claims, often based on speculation, false assumptions, or deliberate distortions. Such trolls create and spread content suggesting hidden forces or conspiracies behind various events. The aim is to confuse audiences, undermine scientific authority, and fuel distrust toward institutions and experts.

Table 8. Trolling related to pseudoscience and conspiracy theories

Trolling related to pseudoscience and conspiracy theories	
Spreading false theories	Publishing untrue scientific claims, such as stating that vaccines contain microchips.
Impersonating scientists	Creating fake identities as scientists to promote pseudoscientific theories.
Fake research	Publishing supposed research findings that do not actually exist.
Manipulating data	Distorting or falsifying scientific data to align with pseudoscientific theories.
Attacking scientific authorities	Criticising and undermining scientific authorities to promote pseudoscience.
Creating support groups for conspiracy theories	Establishing social media groups to support and spread conspiracy theories.
Questioning established facts	Challenging well-documented scientific facts, such as climate change or evolution.
Promoting fear and distrust	Spreading unnecessary fear regarding scientific discoveries and technologies.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Conspiracy trolling focuses on spreading conspiracy theories that interpret events or phenomena as the result of hidden actions by secret groups or organisations. Conspiracy trolls may construct elaborate narratives that link various elements of reality into an apparently logical whole, thereby creating an illusion of credibility. The goal of these actions is to incite fear, uncertainty, and social divisions, as well as to divert attention from real issues and facts.

Table 9. Conspiracy trolling

Conspiracy trolling	
Creating government-related theories	Publishing theories suggesting that governments conceal crucial information from the public.
Fuelling fear of technology	Promoting theories that modern technologies, such as 5G, are tools for mass surveillance and population control.
Rewriting historical events	Developing alternative narratives about well-known historical events, such as the moon landing.
Spreading rumours about organisations	Disseminating claims that well-known organisations, like WHO, secretly work against public interests.
False claims about natural disasters	Asserting that natural disasters are artificially created by secret government programs.
Suggesting the existence of secret societies	Spreading theories about secret societies allegedly controlling the world.
Disinformation about global threats	Claiming that threats such as pandemics are fabricated or exaggerated.
Undermining media credibility	Promoting narratives that mainstream media are controlled and do not report the truth.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Trolling related to specific interests and activities

This type of trolling targets specific interest areas like gaming, streaming, or fandoms. Trolls may disrupt gameplay, provoke conflicts, or manipulate group dynamics, often escalating tensions within these niche communities.

Game-related trolling involves disrupting players and causing chaos in gaming communities. Trolls may sabotage gameplay, cheat, or exploit bugs to gain unfair advantages. Their goal is to provoke frustration, anger, or drive players to quit, leading to conflicts and reduced enjoyment within the community.

Table 10. Game-related trolling

Game-related trolling	
Griefing	Deliberate actions to harm other players, such as destroying their constructions in sandbox games.
Spawn killing	Attacking players immediately upon their respawn in the game before they have a chance to defend themselves.
Cheating	Using illegal programs to cheat and gain an unfair advantage over other players.
Team killing	Intentionally killing teammates in multiplayer team-based games.
Blocking progress	Deliberately obstructing other players from completing missions or objectives.
Distraction tactics	Using voice or text chat to distract other players during gameplay.
Impersonating game administrators	Pretending to be a member of the game's admin team to deceive other players.
False advice	Giving players misleading tips that lead to their failure.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Stream sniping is a specific form of trolling in live game streaming. Trolls watch a streamer's broadcast to gain real-time information – such as their location or strategy – and then use it to sabotage the game. This behaviour disrupts gameplay, frustrates the streamer, and can harm both their relationship with viewers and their online reputation.

Table 11. Stream sniping

Stream sniping	
Watching the streamer	Monitoring a live stream to gain an advantage over the streamer by learning their location in the game.
Deliberately hunting the streamer	Joining the game solely to find and disrupt the streamer's progress.
Disrupting gameplay	Using live stream information to interfere with the streamer's game.
Trolling in chat	Posting offensive or misleading comments in the streamer's chat to distract them.
Playing the antagonist	Intentionally acting against the streamer in-game to provoke frustration and emotional reactions.
Impersonating a friend	Pretending to be a friend of the streamer to gain trust and mislead them.
Intercepting communication	Listening to live strategy discussions between the streamer and their team to counter their plans.
Sabotaging the streamer	Intentionally blocking the streamer's access to resources or key locations in the game.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Fandom trolling targets fan communities devoted to specific cultural works like movies, series, books, or games. Trolls in this category seek to provoke conflict by attacking favorite characters, spreading false rumours, or stirring controversy about creators. Their goal is to disrupt unity, trigger emotional reactions, and fuel rivalries within or between fan groups.

Table 12. Fandom trolling

Fandom trolling	
Fake spoilers	The troll posts false information about the ending of a popular TV series or movie to upset fans eagerly awaiting the premiere.
Mocking beloved characters	A user mocks or devalues favourite characters from a series to provoke emotional reactions from fans.
Fake news about sequels	Spreading false reports about alleged new seasons or films that were never planned.
Dividing the fandom	Stirring conflicts between fans of different characters or romantic pairings, creating „wars” between fan groups.
Using alternate accounts	Creating multiple fake accounts to create the illusion of a mass movement against a particular character or storyline.
Criticising creators	Baseless attacks on the creators of a series, accusing them of poor storytelling choices or disrespecting fans.
Manipulating votes	Organising fake campaigns to manipulate voting results for best characters, episodes, etc.
Sabotaging fan projects	Attacking fan projects such as fan art or fanfiction through negative comments and downvoting. Fanfiction refers to literary works created by fans based on novels, stories, comics, TV series, movies, or video games.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Ideological and cultural trolling

Ideological and cultural trolling targets beliefs, values, and social norms, often focusing on cultural groups, activists, or politicians. It aims to discredit them or provoke conflict, frequently using sensitive political or social issues, which makes it especially divisive.

Culture and subculture-related trolling target the norms, values, and identity of specific groups. Trolls mock or devalue traditions, symbols, or practices, often using stereotypes to provoke controversy. Their aim is to undermine group identity and trigger internal or intercultural conflict.

Table 13. Culture and subculture-related trolling

Culture and subculture-related trolling	
Mocking traditions	Creating posts that ridicule traditional rituals or cultural holidays.
Undermining subcultural values	Criticising and mocking the values upheld by specific subcultures, such as punks or goths.
Spreading stereotypes	Posting content that reinforces negative stereotypes about members of a particular culture or subculture.
Fake cultural narratives	Creating false reports about a culture that mislead and spread misinformation.
Fueling intercultural conflicts	Disseminating content aimed at escalating conflicts between different cultural groups.
Impersonating subculture members	Pretending to belong to a subculture to provoke negative reactions from other members.
Offensive use of cultural elements	Misusing symbols or elements of a culture in a distorted or offensive manner.
Distorting cultural history	Publishing false or distorted information about the history of a particular culture.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Trolling related to social activism targets movements and organisations fighting for political, social, or environmental rights. Trolls seek to discredit activists by spreading false information, provoking conflict, or questioning their integrity. They may also impersonate activists or disrupt campaigns to undermine the movement and deter public engagement.

Table 14. Trolling related to social activism

Trolling related to social activism	
Undermining protest actions	A troll enters activist forums and claims that protests are pointless or harmful, demeaning the efforts of activists.
Spreading false information	Publishing misleading claims aimed at discrediting social movements, e.g., alleging that they are funded by controversial sources.
Personal attacks on activists	Deliberately insulting social movement leaders to undermine their authority and credibility.
Organising online counter-protests	Creating fake social media events intended to weaken real protest initiatives.
Impersonating activists	Creating fake profiles that pose as activists but post content contrary to the movement's values.

Trolling related to social activism	
Manipulating hashtags	Using popular activist hashtags in a way that misleads users or alters their intended meaning.
Disrupting discussions	Intentionally introducing unclear or contradictory information into conversations about human rights or environmental protection.
Sabotaging fundraising campaigns	Organising attacks on fundraising campaigns, such as mass-reporting them as frauds to block donation collection.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Political trolling involves manipulating political discourse to influence public opinion and disrupt democratic processes. Trolls may spread false information, create fake accounts impersonating public figures, or run disinformation campaigns during elections. Their aim is to erode trust in institutions, polarise society, and sway political outcomes.

Table 15. Political trolling

Political trolling	
Fake hashtags	Creating misleading hashtags during political campaigns to manipulate public debate.
Deepfake videos	Producing fake and deepfake videos depicting politicians in compromising situations.
Impersonating journalists	Creating fake journalist accounts to spread disinformation.
Comment flooding	Organising campaigns to flood politicians' posts with comments to discourage discussion.
Manipulating online polls	Fake voting in online polls to skew results in favour of a particular party.
Spreading false rumours	Circulating rumours about politicians' personal lives to undermine their credibility.
Disrupting political debates	Organising troll attacks during live political debates to interfere with the discussion.
Impersonating political organisations	Creating fake websites for political organisations to mislead the public.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Thematic trolling

Thematic trolling targets specific fields like business, education, culture, or health to spread disinformation or cause disruption. It may involve fake reviews, impersonating experts, or sharing false information. The aim is to erode trust in institutions and professionals in these key sectors.

Commercial trolling involves actions designed to disrupt companies, brands, or products to gain financial advantage or harm competitors. This includes posting fake reviews, spreading false product information, creating fake customer service profiles, or launching campaigns to undermine consumer trust. The goal is to manipulate markets, influence buyers, and weaken competitors.

Table 16. Commercial trolling

Commercial trolling	
Fake customer accounts	Creating fake accounts to post negative reviews about competing products.
Impersonating customer service	Setting up fake profiles posing as customer support to mislead consumers.
Attacks on company social media	Organising comment attacks on corporate social media pages to harm their reputation.
Spreading bankruptcy rumours	Disseminating false information about the bankruptcy of competing businesses.
Price manipulation on auction platforms	Placing fake bids on auction sites to artificially inflate product prices.
Creating fake promotions	Posting nonexistent promotions to deceive customers.
Impersonating influencers	Creating fake influencer accounts to promote low-quality products.
Attacks on review systems	Deliberately manipulating product rating systems to lower or inflate scores.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Educational trolling disrupts academic processes by maliciously editing materials, posting false information on student forums, or spamming online classes. Trolls may impersonate teachers or students to spread disinformation, aiming to undermine education's integrity and disrupt learning.

Table 17. Educational trolling

Educational trolling	
Malicious quizzes and tests	Creating fake educational quizzes that mislead students.
Impersonating lecturers	Creating fake email accounts of professors to send false information to students.
Attacks on e-learning platforms	Disrupting educational platforms through mass logins and server overloads.
Fake educational resources	Publishing study materials containing incorrect information.
Manipulating online exam results	Organising attacks to alter online exam scores.
Causing chaos on student forums	Posting conflicting information on student forums during exam periods.
Fake scientist profiles	Creating fake scientist profiles to mislead the public.
Malicious educational software	Distributing educational applications that contain malware.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Cultural trolling targets values, traditions, and norms by mocking cultural events, distorting history, or staging fake events. These acts foster cultural conflicts, social divisions, and weaken community identity, aiming to destabilise cultural cohesion and provoke controversy.

Table 18. Cultural trolling

Cultural trolling	
Parodying traditional holidays	Creating fake events related to traditional holidays that mock their significance.
Fake charity campaigns	Organising fraudulent charity campaigns that mislead donors.
Attacks on cultural festivals	Spreading false information about festival cancellations or venue changes.
Impersonating famous artists	Creating fake social media profiles of well-known artists.
Manipulating history	Publishing falsified historical articles to mislead public opinion.
Attacks on local traditions	Organising campaigns against local traditions to discredit them.
Fake cultural events	Creating social media events for cultural gatherings that never take place.
Malicious comments on museum websites	Posting offensive comments on museum and cultural institution websites.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Health-related trolling spreads misinformation and manipulates topics related to physical and mental health. Trolls may share false treatment claims, discredit medical experts, organise fake campaigns, or disrupt support groups. Their goal is to create fear, uncertainty, and discourage seeking professional care, posing risks to public health.

Table 19. Health-related trolling

Health-related trolling	
Medical disinformation	Spreading false information about disease treatments, e.g., claiming that „drinking lemon juice cures cancer.”
Undermining doctors' authority	Creating campaigns to discredit doctors and medical specialists, suggesting they are motivated solely by financial gain.
Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories	Promoting conspiracy theories about vaccines, e.g., that „vaccines contain microchips to track people.”
False health advice	Giving dangerous health recommendations that could harm individuals, e.g., „stop all medications and drink only water.”
Attacks on health foundations	Organising attacks on charities focused on health to undermine their work and public trust.
Impersonating medical professionals	Creating fake profiles posing as doctors or psychologists to mislead patients.
Disrupting support groups	Joining support groups for people struggling with illnesses and posting offensive or malicious comments.
Fake health campaigns	Organising fraudulent campaigns promoting non-existent drugs or therapies to deceive vulnerable patients.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Technology-related trolling uses technological means to disrupt and deceive. This includes exploiting software bugs in games, spreading fake updates that may contain malware, impersonating developers, attacking forums, creating harmful apps, disrupting live streams, and posting false tech product reviews.

Table 20. Technology-related trolling

Technology-related trolling	
Exploiting game bugs	Using glitches in online games to sabotage other players' experiences.
Fake software updates	Spreading fake updates that harm users' systems.
Impersonating developers	Creating fake developer profiles to publish malicious code.
Attacks on tech forums	Posting false technical advice that leads to hardware damage.
Malicious mobile applications	Developing apps that appear useful but contain malware.
Disrupting online broadcasts	Intentionally interfering with live streams, such as webinars or conferences.
Fake tech reviews	Publishing misleading reviews of technology products.
Manipulating search engine algorithms	Creating fake content to manipulate internet search results.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Effects of trolling

Trolling, as a deliberate act aimed at provoking, disorganising, or misleading other users, can have a wide range of consequences that impact individuals, communities, and society. The emotional effects of trolling are particularly severe, as victims often experience stress and frustration due to constant provocations and disruptions in communication. Provocative and offensive comments can trigger strong emotional reactions, affecting well-being and mental health. Continuous attacks and criticism can lead to a decline in self-esteem and confidence, especially when trolling targets personal traits or beliefs. Additionally, trolling can create a sense of threat and insecurity, leading to anxiety about participating in online discussions.

From a social perspective, trolling often escalates conflicts and divisions within social groups, causing disputes and fragmenting online communities. Users who experience or witness trolling may be discouraged from engaging in discussions and online activities, which limits diversity and the richness of idea exchange. Trolling can also reinforce existing divisions and polarisation in society, making constructive dialogue and collaboration between different groups more difficult.

The health consequences of trolling can be equally severe, as prolonged exposure may lead to serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Individuals affected by trolling may withdraw from social and online life, leading to isolation and reduced access to social support.

On a professional level, trolling can impact the victim's career reputation, especially if attacks are public and widely disseminated. The discouragement from participating in online discussions and professional communities may also limit career development opportunities and networking possibilities.

On a societal scale, trolling can lead to a decline in trust in social media and communication platforms that struggle with moderating harmful content. Trolls frequently

spread false information, contributing to misinformation and confusion in society. Moreover, trolling can degrade the quality of public discourse, discouraging substantive and constructive exchanges of ideas. Understanding these consequences is essential for developing effective counter-trolling strategies, which include user education, enhancing moderation tools, and promoting a culture of respect and understanding in the digital space.

In addition to online trolling, which focuses on manipulating information and destabilising public debate, there is also the phenomenon of copyright trolling. As noted by BG Patent¹³, this involves the aggressive enforcement of copyright laws, often disproportionate to the actual infringement. Copyright trolls frequently exploit legal loopholes, intimidating internet users with excessive claims for damages, even in cases of minor violations. This phenomenon has become increasingly controversial, as instead of genuinely protecting intellectual property rights, it primarily serves financial interests, leading to abuse and undermining the principle of fair intellectual property protection.

Conclusion

Internet trolling is a highly diverse and complex phenomenon that exerts a significant impact on individuals, communities, and broader society. This article set out to systematise the wide spectrum of trolling behaviours, shedding light on their specific characteristics, motivations, and social effects. The typology developed here encompasses a broad range of activities – from destructive and provocative trolling to forms based on manipulation, disinformation, narcissism, and humour. Each category reveals distinct dynamics and consequences, including the escalation of conflicts, social polarisation, erosion of trust, diminished self-esteem among victims, and the reinforcement of misinformation in the digital public sphere.

The social consequences of trolling are multifaceted, ranging from psychological harm – such as stress, anxiety, or depression – to the deterioration of online discourse and increased fragmentation of communities. These effects also extend to reputational damage and professional exclusion. The extended classification proposed in this article fulfils the primary objective of the study by offering a structured and conceptually grounded framework for identifying and analysing trolling behaviours. Rather than proposing prescriptive countermeasures, it is intended as a tool for academic reflection, education, and practical engagement with digital aggression.

The findings confirm the validity of the key assumptions outlined in the introduction. First, the analysis supports the premise that trolling is not a singular or static behaviour, but a dynamic communicative practice shaped by shifting social, cultural,

¹³ *Copyright trolling – czyli kiedy tworca ma rację i jej nie ma jednocześnie*, BG Patent 2022, <https://bgpatent.pl/copyright-trolling-czyli-kiedy-tworca-ma-racje-i-jej-nie-ma-jednoczesnie/> (accessed on: 5.02.2025).

and technological conditions. Second, the typology illustrates that trolling requires distinct theoretical and practical treatment, separate from hate, due to its unique motivations and discursive mechanisms. Third, the classification system developed through the author's longitudinal observation and conceptual synthesis proves essential for understanding both the diversity of trolling forms and their consequences for emotional well-being, public debate, and social cohesion.

These conclusions underscore the need for further empirical research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of educational and moderation strategies that reflect the evolving complexity of trolling in digital environments. The framework presented here offers a foundation for such efforts and invites future contributions that expand and refine our understanding of communicative pathologies online.

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