

Graphicons and Tactics in Satirical Trolling on Tumblr.com

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Internet trolling is inherently multimodal, relying on both textual and graphical means of communication (or “graphicons”). We examined how satire and ideological trolls who use graphicons on the microblogging site Tumblr.com, use knowledge of local culture as part of their trolling tactics. Based on a qualitative thematic analysis of 172 trolling posts (that include 284 graphicons), we identified 7 Tumblr satire troll tactics: the lying tactic, the derailment tactic, the parodic exaggeration tactic, the misappropriation of jargon tactic, the straight man (or “comical seriousness”) tactic, the troll reveal tactic, and the politeness tactic. We also found that ideologically extremizing language was the most commonly used outrage tactic and that trolls used graphicons frequently as flame baiting prompts and for tone modification.

Keywords: trolling, graphicons, trolling tactics, Tumblr, satire

Trolls exist on the margins of online communities and make a game of walking the line of acceptability and legality in any given space. Trolls may or may not be members of the community they are infiltrating, but to pass as sincere members of the group they will adopt at least some of the mannerisms of the community (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Along these lines, they will also often use their knowledge of local cultural norms to manipulate how others perceive them. Much of the study of online trolling has focused on vandalism, harassment, and derailment (e.g., Hardaker, 2010; Shachaf & Hara, 2010; Suler & Phillips, 1998). Satire and ideological trolls are a neglected type of troll in this body of scholarly literature, with a few exceptions from around the globe (e.g., Day, 2008; Ferrari, 2018; Gal, 2018; Sun & Fichman, 2018; Yang et al., 2017; Zelenkauskaitė & Niezgodá, 2017). Unlike malevolent trolls that provoke their target maliciously, satire trolls express extreme views (particularly on issues related to identity such as gender, sexuality, or race) pseudosincerely to expose the ridiculousness in a community. Studying how satire trolls act could better inform our understanding of trolling and can help communities determine how to respond to satire trolling.

In this study, we took a closer look at the tactics that trolls employ, drawing a distinction between behaviors, which are well documented in the literature (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016), and tactics used by trolls. Trolling behaviors manifest as overall patterns of activity, whereas trolling tactics are the means

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by which trolls respond to dynamically changing situations in online interactions. Thus, trolls can exhibit provocative behavior, but they also employ tactics in specific situations to be provocative. For example, a troll can be provocative through various outrage behaviors (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), such as misrepresentative exaggeration and name-calling, or through other tactics such as those found in this study. Knowing the specific tactics that trolls use can make it easier for communities and individuals to identify and respond to trolls.

In addition to tactics, we also considered how the increasing multimodality of computer-mediated communication has affected trolling. Social media websites have increasingly incorporated graphical means of communication such as GIFs, videos, images, stickers, emoji, and emoticons alongside text. These graphical icons, termed "graphicons" have been studied in comment threads and status updates on Facebook (Herring & Dainas, 2017). Although the use of graphicons is prevalent, research into graphicons and their functions is still in its infancy. The little work that has been done on graphicons has focused on general uses on Facebook (Herring & Dainas, 2017), but trolls are known to use multimodal elements such as memes in their activities (e.g., Leaver, 2013; Phillips & Milner, 2018; Sanfilippo, Fichman, & Yang, 2018).

This study focused on satire trolling tactics and graphicon usage in trolling blogs on the microblogging site Tumblr.com. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: What tactics do satire trolls use?

RQ2: How do Tumblr satire trolls use graphicons in trolling posts?

Background

Tumblr.com

Tumblr.com is a microblogging platform that was founded in February 2007. As of April 2018, the site hosts 409.1 million blogs and has a total of 160 billion posts ("About," 2018). Forty-two percent of the site's traffic comes from the U.S.; the majority of it (69%) is from "millennials," who are under 33 years old (Smith, 2016). Thus, Tumblr users are stereotyped as being very young. Tumblr has a vibrant LGBTQIA or queer community (Cho, 2015; Dame, 2016; Goodrich, 2016; Oakley, 2016) that overlaps with Tumblr's outspoken social justice community (Bell, 2013).

Tumblr is composed of characteristics from traditional blogs, social networks, and social media (Chang, Tang, Inagaki, & Liu, 2014). Although Tumblr users can create content in the form of personal expression mainly focusing on their personal interests and hobbies (Xu, Compton, Lu, & Allen, 2014), as in traditional blogging, they can also follow each other without reciprocity, making the platform "a non-reciprocal social network" (Chang et al., 2014, p. 21). In addition to this, a Tumblr post can be reshared or "reblogged," allowing for content to go viral. "Reblogging" is such a central feature to Tumblr that Xu et al. (2014) found that less than 10% of the content posted by users was original. They also found that social ties on Tumblr can be measured by reblogs. There are no word limits on Tumblr, and Tumblr blogs allow for

various ways to post and interact with other users, including multiple multimedia options (e.g., GIFs, images, video, audio).

Trolling

Oxford Dictionaries define Internet trolls as "a person who makes a deliberately offensive or provocative online post" ("Troll," n.d.). Although this definition positions trolls as potentially disruptive to online communities, mass media has sensationalized the term "trolling" into meaning harassment, bullying, and even terrorism (Phillips, 2012). Some governments, such as the UK, have criminalized trolling, jailing those deemed in violation of the law ("Internet Trolls Face," 2014).

The disagreement between the dictionary definition of the term and the media's is further exacerbated by academic definitions. Trolls have been described as deviant "snerts" who are any user that acts out or is annoying or disruptive (Suler & Phillips, 1998). Or they are "a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (Hardaker, 2010, p. 237). They have also been described as just causing trouble "for the lulz" (Phillips, 2011).

One of the biggest sources of confusion is that trolling manifests differently in different contexts (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). A troll on Wikipedia (Shachaf & Hara, 2010) looks very different from one on Facebook (Phillips, 2011), for example. As such, any attempt to define the behavior is constrained by the platform in which the trolling takes place. A good working definition, however, is that trolling is any "repetitive, disruptive online deviant behavior by an individual toward other individuals and groups" (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016, p. 6). We prefer this definition because it potentially encompasses multiple kinds of trolling, from the infamous abusive kinds of trolls favored by news media to the more benign humorous trolls, which are typical on platforms such as Tumblr.

One type of troll that falls under this definition of trolling but has not been studied is the satire troll. These trolls use Juvenalian satire (which typically includes bitter and ironic criticism of contemporary persons and institutions that is filled with personal invective, angry moral indignation, and pessimism) blogs akin to Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." In the essay, Swift proposes that the poor Irish could improve their lot in life by selling their children as food to the rich. The work was intended as satirical hyperbole meant to highlight the cruel treatment of the poor. However, at the time, many people actually believed that he was serious and were thoroughly disgusted to the point that Swift's patronage was even possibly endangered by this proposed savagery (Watley, 2005). Thus, it is with satire troll blogs. The blogs offer satire of extremism that is often mistaken as simple extremism by both proponents and opponents of the view they purport to champion. We believe that this kind of troll is of interest because they are often not doing it simply "for the lulz," though that is a factor. Based on our observation, satire trolls are often attempting to expose the absurdity in the community they are trolling in order to make a point. Furthermore, political satire, in any media, implies the act of mocking conventions (Colletta, 2009), and thus seems to serve trolling actions very well.

We observed that Tumblr satire trolls typically pretend to be extreme leftist social justice bloggers, though there are a few who pretend to be extremist right-wing nationalist bloggers. From our observation, we believe that trolls satirizing Tumblr's social justice movement draw heavily on the ways in which the Tumblr's social justice culture is performed. In this study, we examine how knowledge of an online community's culture and norms can be used to inform trolling tactics and practices. The focus on left-wing irony toward the right wing seems to be a common theme in much of the scholarly literature on political satire (e.g., Day, 2008, 2011; Gal, 2018). Gal (2018) examined left-wing usage of ideological humor toward the right wing in Israeli social media. Day (2008) focused on three case studies of left-wing trolling from the U.S., to illustrate the "identity-nabbing" practice in which participants pretend to be someone they are not, appearing in public as exaggerated caricatures of their opponents. The participants staged elaborate and ironically humorous stunts to attract public attention; the ironic frame allowed for community building within the participants' group alongside the entertainment value it provided. Others, such as Davis, Love, and Killen (2018), illustrated both sides of the spectrum, using Twitter data that showed how humor and politics converged during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Though not focusing on trolling, these studies provide an account of nonmalicious and normative, troll-like behaviors (e.g., Davis et al., 2018; Day, 2008, 2011; Gal, 2018). Research on political satire also recently focused attention on social media platforms and the relationships between everyday politics and online and off-line participation (Highfield, 2016; Reilly, 2011). Social media platforms are convenient and provide users with opportunities to quickly share posts (with text, images, or videos) that can challenge dominant frames. On the one hand, this allows for the expression of dissenting and oppressed voices, while on the other hand it also allows users to easily engage in trolling and harassment (Highfield, 2016). The use of irony and satire on social media can be used to reinforce authority while simultaneously serving oppositional ends (Reilly, 2011).

Political analysis of social media posts must account for the use of visual and graphical means of communication because both can carry complex political connotations (Highfield, 2016). The public use of the rainbow heart on Twitter and the rainbow filter on Facebook profile pictures while the U.S. Supreme Court was voting on marriage equality in June 2015, are examples of using a visual shorthand to convey a political message (i.e., support for marriage equality). The use of the rainbow in this context was so well understood that even the "White House's official Twitter account used an animated GIF to illustrate the recognition of marriage equality" (Highfield, 2016, p. 152). Memes, in particular, serve as a ubiquitous part of the Internet visual culture and have been used to promote ideological and political agendas on social media, sometimes in a satirical manner, but also in a racist and hateful manner (Highfield, 2016).

Though there is a tendency, particularly in the media (Phillips, 2012), to focus on deviant trolling behaviors, some trolls are ideologically driven, seeking to draw attention to social problems or to support socially or politically marginalized groups (Sanfilippo, Yang, & Fichman, 2017a). In recent years, political and ideological trolling have captured media and scholarly attention, with studies of ideological satire trolling cases of Chinese and Russian trolls (e.g., Ferrari, 2018; Sun & Fichman, 2018; Yang et al., 2017; Zelenkauskaite & Niezgodna, 2017). Chinese collective trolling uses humor and sarcasm in political or popular culture trolling events (Sun & Fichman, 2018; Yang et al., 2017). Likewise, humor and sarcasm were prominent in the case of the Russian troll farms in which ideological Kremlin trolls are believed to be paid by the Russian government to cause disruption and encourage conflict in the comments in a Lithuanian news portal (Zelenkauskaite & Niezgodna, 2017). Similarly, fake political accounts, which are humorous social

media accounts, in Italy use satire as a form of activism (Ferrari, 2018); the makers of these fake accounts, like trolls, assume fake identities and take advantage of assumed anonymity online. Those that “challenge social norms through social media are [also] subjected to unsolicited harassment, abuse and threats from strangers using the same channels” (Highfield, 2016, p. 156).

Social justice is a very popular, if controversial, topic of conversation on Tumblr. Though social justice is traditionally defined by the *Oxford Dictionaries* as “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society” (“Social Justice,” n.d.), it is perceived by others to be used much more nebulously and negatively on Tumblr. For example, the online crowd-sourced satiric slang dictionary *Urban Dictionary* defines “Tumblr social justice activists” as

a Tumblr blogger that may blame men, white people, skinny people, attractive people, and almost anything for oppressing them and making the world a worse place. Does not seem to engage in any activity that relates to any actual activism, prefers to judge everyone else loudly and type up possibly fictional stories about how they were “oppressed” that day. Age demographic varies from teens to middle aged adults, mostly females. (“Tumblr Social Justice Activist,” n.d.)

The term has taken on the connotations of being politically correct, and many users who might be considered to work for social justice in the traditional sense are unwilling to call themselves social justice bloggers (Orsini, 2012). Many users have expressed concern over the way social justice is used as an excuse to attack others and creates an unhealthy “Oppression Olympics” atmosphere where it becomes a contest to see who is the most disadvantaged (Tomberry, n.d.; Watley, 2005). Given the centrality of social justice to Tumblr community, and its controversial nature, it has become a popular target for trolls. These satire trolls act in ways that are similar to other political activists, who “are now building their actions around playfully ironic sensibility, creating attention getting stunts, graphics, and slogans” (Day, 2011, p. 145).

Graphicons

Recent research has shown that trolls can be incredibly creative in their endeavors, creating Internet memes (Leaver, 2013; Milner, 2013) and using images to troll their victims (Phillips, 2011). However, these studies have not examined how trolls use the whole range of graphicons, let alone how satire trolls use them. Satire trolls often try to follow the norms of the people they are impersonating, pretending they are members of the community. Not understanding the linguistic or social norms of the community they are infiltrating could negatively impact their ability to troll. This is particularly true on Tumblr, which is famous for its inventive use of graphicons (e.g., #GPOY = gratuitous picture of yourself; Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017) and its proliferation of satire trolls.

The use of graphicons in trolling is also of interest because graphicons, especially GIFs and images, have been found to be more positive and emotional than text-only posts on Tumblr (Bourlai & Herring, 2014). It is unclear if graphicons posted by trolls follow this pattern, and, if the use of graphicons may allow them to appear more sincere. It is likewise possible that the impact of graphicons will be similar to emoticon use in flaming, where emoticons have a significant mitigating effect on perceptions of flaming, but the effect

diminishes as flammers get more obviously hostile (Thompson & Foulger, 1996). Graphicons are also of interest to trolling research because of their social functions in communication such as building rapport (e.g., Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, & Young, 2016) and support phatic communication (e.g., Tang & Hew, 2018) among interlocutors as well as in supporting identity expression (e.g., Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017). To understand what a graphicon means in a given use, a user is expected to perform a complex intertextual reading of the graphicon, any references that graphicon might make or be associated with, as well as the surrounding text, tags, and blog affordances. A simple example of this can be seen when Tumblr users know that tagging a GIF of a yawning kitten with #GPOY means that the poster is using the cat to represent themselves, and that they are tired (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017).

Methodology

Data from Tumblr were collected and analyzed in an effort to address the research questions: (1) What tactics do satire trolls use? and (2) How do Tumblr satire trolls use graphicons in trolling posts?¹ One hundred seventy two trolling posts were collected from 41 Tumblr trolling blogs that were included in the list of "confirmed trolls" on Reddit.com ("Known Poes, Trolls, and Satire Blogs," n.d.). We chose to use this list because it allowed us to circumvent our personal biases in determining what is or is not trolling. It is impossible to know for sure if the list is completely accurate, because "without a clear indication of the author's intent, it is difficult or impossible to tell the difference between an expression of sincere extremism and a parody of extremism" ("Poe's Law," n.d., para. 1). Even so, as a precaution, we coded each post in our sample as clear trolling, unclear trolling, or not trolling in order to get a sense of how much trolling was actually occurring in our data.

Demographic data were collected from the "about" sections of the bloggers. Although this information is based on self-report and is thus inherently questionable because trolls are rarely who they say they are, the descriptions establish the roles being played by the trolls. The trolls often chose to categorize themselves with very specific terminology, such as one troll who identified as "a female presenting genderqueer fat college student and a demigirl," or another that identified their gender as "nonbinary genderfluid fluctuating between gendervoid, boy (without the privileges), gloomgendered and genderless." Some of the blogs also explicitly identified themselves as trolls in an obvious manner, announcing in their blog descriptions that "(Yes, this is a fake blog.)," or stating that their pronoun of choice is "troll" and that "this is a blog about how gullible some people truly are." Even with such labels, these trolls told specific users that they "had been trolled." As the troll writes in Figure 1, "You know in Harry Potter when that one guy yells 'Troll in the dungeon': Yeah this might come as shock because you're a fucking idiot but I am that troll." This is followed by a GIF of Draco Malfoy from the *Harry Potter* movie series screaming upon hearing that there is a troll in the dungeon.

¹ Before data collection took place, the study was reviewed and approved as an exempt study by our institutional review board. We use publicly available data and kept users' privacy by not mentioning any usernames, by reporting our findings in aggregate terms, and using anonymized examples to illustrate our findings. It should be noted that many of the blogs have been deleted since data collection.

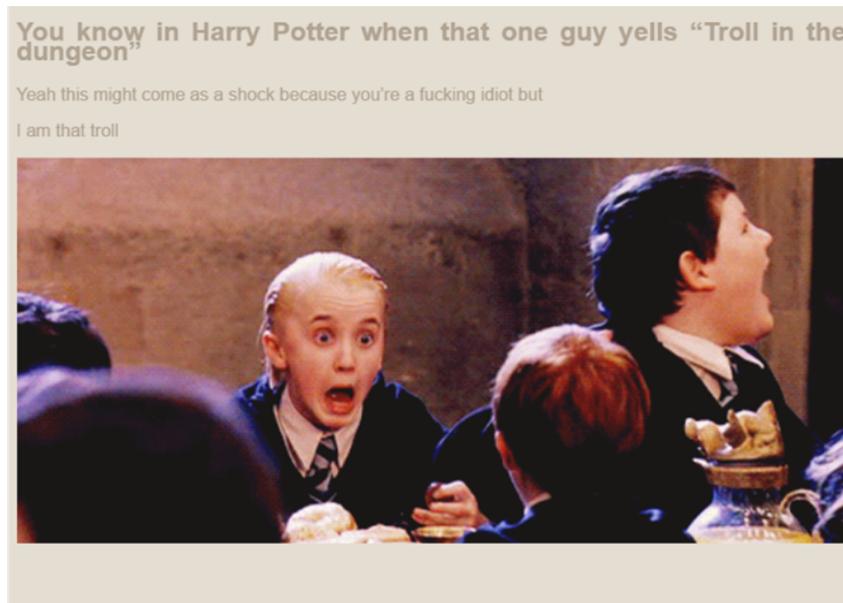


Figure 1. A troll blog announces their status as a troll using a GIF.

The list of Tumblr trolls contains 120 URLs; of those, 41 were accessible, had at least 10 posts, and contained at least three uses of graphicons.² From each of these 41 blogs, three to seven posts that included at least one graphicon were collected using NVivo's³ NCapture. Two kinds of posts were collected: (1) reblogged posts, where the troll had added trolling content to a preexisting post, and (2) "de novo" posts, where the troll blog posted original content. In reblogged posts, the graphicon may or may not have been posted by the troll—sometimes the graphicon was posted by someone else in the series of reblogs (e.g., Figures 2, 3). In de novo posts, the troll typically posted the graphicon (e.g., Figures 4, 6). This resulted in a data set of 172 posts with 284 graphicons. Examining each of these 172 posts, we then assessed whether or not they contained trolling; this assessment was based on the appearance of trolling behaviors and the community reaction to these (Sanfilippo et al., 2018). A total of 134 of the posts were classified as trolling posts (77.9%), whereas 13 (7.65%) were not, and 24 (14.5%) were undetermined (see Table 1). The high occurrence of trolling cases along with the fair number of uncertain cases lends legitimacy to the list of trolls from which our data were collected. It is possible that posts that do not obviously contain trolling are intended to further build up the persona of the troll, and that these trolls are trolling in other ways. But it is also possible that they are genuine posts unrelated to the trolling since a single blog can be used for multiple purposes.

² Since the time of data collection, some of these troll blogs have been deleted either by the user or by Tumblr.com.

³ NVivo is a software that supports qualitative data analysis.

Table 1. Trolling, Not Trolling, or Unclear Trolling Posts.

Trolling	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	134	77.9
No	13	7.65
Uncertain	25	14.5
Total	172	100

To identify trolling tactics, and answer the first research question, we performed a qualitative thematic analysis to group our sample of trolling cases into categories (Bauer 2000); this was done following our efforts to code the data using the outrage tactics taxonomy (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Sobieraj and Berry's (2011) taxonomy of outrage tactics outlines particular behaviors such as insulting language and name-calling, which are not unique to trolling, but which are often exhibited by trolls to get a rise out of their victims. This taxonomy includes 12 outrage tactics including insulting language, verbal fighting/sparring, misrepresentative exaggeration, and ideologically and extremizing language (see Table 2 for descriptions of all the tactics). Then, in our thematic analysis we used an inductive approach, allowing the trolling tactic types to emerge from the data. As a guiding principle, we focused on tactics of "troll-like" behaviors beyond the outrage tactics. If a specific tactic was used by three different trolls, we considered it a tactic and through constant comparative analysis identified its specific features.

Similarly, addressing the second research question, we analyzed the data using a modified version of Herring and Dainas's (2017) graphicons taxonomy of their types (emoticons, emoji, and GIF, images, screenshot, and stickers) and pragmatic functions (action, mention, riff, sequence). We modified and expanded the graphicons types and functions. We found that Tumblr does not employ stickers the way Facebook does, and that the proliferation of images in our data allowed us to subdivide the category of images into three types: images with text, images without text, and screenshots. We also added the "prompting" function, where a graphicon is used at the beginning of a thread to set the topic or focus of the ensuing comments. We provide specific examples of these graphicon functions and explain how they are used in trolling posts.

Methodology

The results of our efforts to identify and characterize Tumblr satire trolls' tactics and the use of graphicons in trolling blogs on Tumblr are presented and discussed in two sections; each address one of our questions and is based on our analysis. First, we focus on the kind of tactics used by Tumblr satire trolls, then we describe how graphicons are used in trolling blogs on Tumblr.

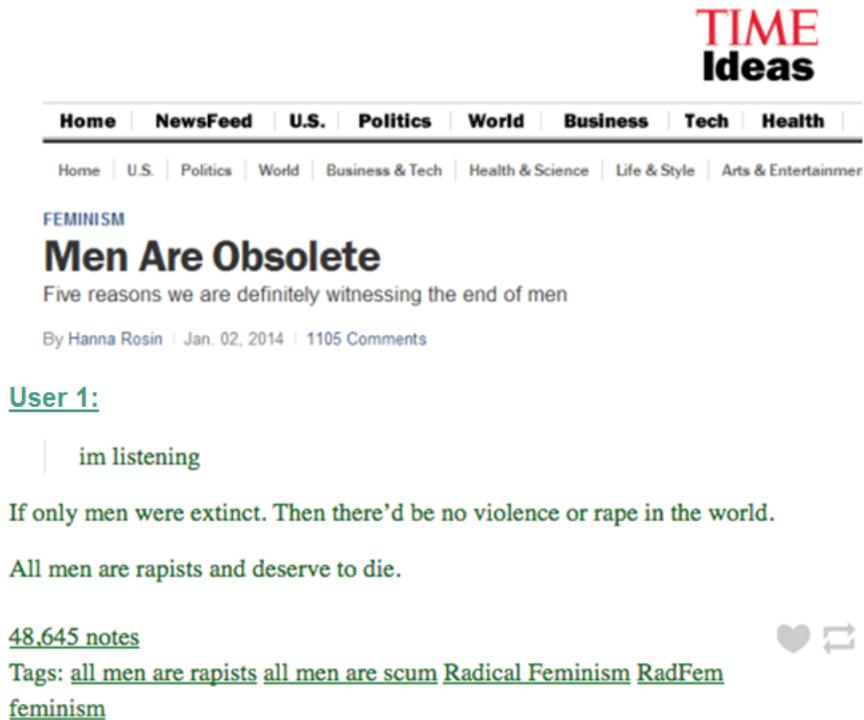
Trolling Tactics

The popular understanding of trolls as being deviant (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015) led us to expect a high use of outrage tactics (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) to inflame the community being trolled. However, outrage was not as common a tactic as we initially expected, with most of the outrage tactics appearing in less than 20% of the posts (see Table 2).

Table 2. Outrage Tactics Used by Trolls.

Tactic	Definition	Frequency	Percentage (of 172 posts)
Character assassination	Attempts to damage someone's reputation by slander or misrepresentation of their views/behaviors.	23	13.4
Conflagration	Attempts to escalate nonscandals into scandals by overstating the importance of minor improprieties.	31	18.0
Emotional display	Emotional displays in reference to a subject/their behaviors (e.g., all caps writing, multiple exclamation points). This deals with the message's form.	20	11.6
Emotional language	Verbal/written expressions of negative emotion in reference to a subject. This deals with a message's literal content.	14	8.1
Ideologically extremizing language	Contains extremist language used to critically describe a subject/their behaviors (e.g., an implicit slur).	59	34.3
Insulting language	Uses insulting language in reference to a subject's behaviors.	20	11.6
Misrepresentative exaggeration	Very dramatic negative exaggeration in reference to the subject's behaviors.	35	20.3
Mockery	Makes fun of the subject's behaviors to make the subject look bad.	13	7.6
Name-calling	Referring to a subject with negative words that make them appear foolish or dangerous.	34	19.8
Obscene language	Use of obscene language in reference to a subject.	15	8.7
Slippery slope	Contains fatalistic arguments suggesting that some behavior is a small step that will inevitably lead to much more extreme behaviors.	4	2.3
Verbal sparring	Aggressive jousting between speakers. Includes dismissive interruptions and rude exchanges.	11	6.4
Total		279	

These outrage tactics were used frequently by different trolls in various combinations. For example, in Figure 2, the troll uses misrepresentative exaggeration when making statements like "If only men were extinct. Then there'd be no violence or rape in the world." The troll uses ideologically extremizing language when claiming that "all men are rapists." Finally, the troll uses name-calling when by declaring that "all men are scum."



The image shows a screenshot of a webpage from TIME Ideas. At the top right is the 'TIME Ideas' logo. Below it is a navigation bar with links for Home, NewsFeed, U.S., Politics, World, Business, Tech, and Health. A secondary navigation bar includes Home, U.S., Politics, World, Business & Tech, Health & Science, Life & Style, and Arts & Entertainment. The main content area features the category 'FEMINISM' and the article title 'Men Are Obsolete' with a subtitle 'Five reasons we are definitely witnessing the end of men'. The author is listed as 'By Hanna Rosin | Jan. 02, 2014 | 1105 Comments'. Below the article is a user comment from 'User 1:' which reads: 'im listening' followed by two lines of text: 'If only men were extinct. Then there'd be no violence or rape in the world.' and 'All men are rapists and deserve to die.' To the right of the comment are icons for a heart and a reply arrow. Below the comment, it says '48,645 notes' and lists tags: 'all men are rapists', 'all men are scum', 'Radical Feminism', 'RadFem', and 'feminism'.

Figure 2. An example of three outrage tactics.

Given the ideological nature of Tumblr satire trolls, as seen in Figure 2, for example, it makes sense that extremizing language, and misrepresentative exaggeration in particular, would be popular ways to frame satirical posts. However, outrage tactics are only used in some of the Tumblr trolling cases. It is possible that Tumblr satire trolls may be employing outrage tactics alongside other, more subtle trolling tactics, such as deception (Shachaf & Hara, 2010) or using local normative behavior to mask their intentions (Sanfilippo et al., 2017a). Thus, we aimed to identify these other, non-outrage-focused, trolling tactics.

To identify trolling tactics, we performed a qualitative comparative analysis across our sample of trolling cases. Through this process we have identified seven unique tactics: the lying tactic, the derailment tactic, the parodic exaggeration tactic, misappropriation of jargon tactic, the straight man (or “comical seriousness”) tactic, the troll reveal tactic, and the politeness tactic. These tactics are described in the following sections with examples.

The Lying Tactic

The lying tactic occurs when the troll makes false claims and presents these claims as being true. These statements may be blatantly incorrect, but the falsehoods may also be more difficult to

uncover. The troll may choose to lie by default or simply for the fun of misdirection and/or may also lie in the service of beliefs about larger sociopolitical issues. To that end, the troll may misattribute quotes to the wrong people to defame that person.

A blatant example of the lying tactic can be seen in Figure 3. In this post, a troll added text claiming that both of the women pictured in the figure are fat activists. The troll names these women and provides some backstory. However, the information provided, including the names, is entirely incorrect. The woman on the left was in fact a fat activist. Her name was Judy Freespirit, not Diana Arendsen. She was the architect of the fat liberation movement, as well as a lesbian feminist. She died in September 2010 at the age of 74. The woman on the right is in fact Ernestine Shepherd, an 82-year-old body builder as of March 2018. She is not of the Navajo tribe, is not transgender, and is not a fat activist.



**These women are the same age.
Guess which one is the fat activist?**

Fun fact: BOTH. The first one is Diana Arendsen, who's had cancer and numerous genetic conditions since her childhood and was unable to get out of bed for years. She was bullied as a teenager for something she couldn't help. Today, she's the most prominent figure of anti-bullying and fat acceptance.

The second lady is Quaysha'un Adebawale, a navajo HAES activist who after realizing her fit privilege and genetical advantage decided to help her sisters through activism. She's also transgender.

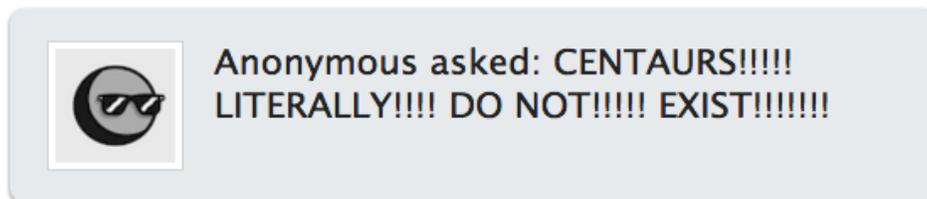
Figure 3. An example of the lying tactic.

It is unclear what exactly the troll was hoping to gain by crafting these alternate identities for the women pictured in the original post. Did the troll want to support the idea of fat activism, or mock it? As is often the case, it is impossible to know for certain what the goals of the troll were, but the tactic itself is clear.

The Derailment Tactic

The derailment tactic involves purposefully leading a conversation off course. This includes latching onto an unimportant detail, going completely off topic or inserting oneself into a conversation uninvited. Trolls using this tactic seek to distract their opponents and readers. The distraction serves to confuse opponents and can often allow the troll to win by default.

Figure 4 contains an example of the derailment tactic.



You literally overuse exclamation marks.

QUICK HISTORY LESSON ABOUT EXCLAMATION MARKS.

Fact: In 1774, an Englishman named John Smithinson realized that there was a sore lack of phallic punctuation in his native language. Dismayed, he realized that the patriarchy would not be in every thought of every English speaker without it, so he created a punctuation that was phallic and expressed strong feelings and emotion. As such, he permanently cemented the patriarchy's foundation in the English language.

You'll notice I do NOT use exclamation marks in this blog for that reason.

-(☆_☆#)☞ ****friendly reminder that using exclamation marks is triggering so don't do it okay**** ლ(ಠ_ಠ)ლ

Figure 4. An example of the derailment tactic.

The gray box contains an anonymous "ask" sent to a troll blog that proclaims "CENTAURS!!!! LITERALLY!!! DO NOT!!!! EXIST!!!!!!" The text below the box contains the troll's response. Rather than addressing the issue of whether or not centaurs exist, the troll chooses to derail the conversation by focusing on the overuse of exclamation marks in Anonymous's message. The troll expands on the derailment by using the lying tactic to fabricate a false history in which exclamations marks were purposefully created to be phallic tools of the patriarchy.

The Parodic Exaggeration Tactic

When using the parodic exaggeration tactic, a troll takes a community's common argument or line of reasoning and uses it as the basis for an exaggerated conclusion that borders on absurd. Community members typically find this tactic upsetting or insulting because they feel it misrepresents what they believe. However, this tactic can be difficult to argue against given that doing so requires being able to articulate why the common argument is correct, but the exaggeration is not. This tactic is also often perceived as humorous both in and out of the parodied community.

An example of parodic exaggeration is shown in Figure 5. The post begins with Anonymous telling the troll that "equating mental illness with gender is really ableist and transphobic." This is a reasonable argument given that both in common understanding and the psychology literature mental illness and gender are typically considered to be different things. However, the troll rejects this point, claiming that mental illness is a gender, citing examples of "autisgender" and "schiztogender" (presumably referring to autism and schizophrenia). Although this argument may seem absurd, it falls under the category of parodic exaggeration because there is a component of the Social Justice Warriors (SJW) community on Tumblr that is pushing for the acceptance of "otherkin" as falling into a similar category as transgender, nonbinary, and genderfluid individuals. "Otherkin" are individuals who identify their gender as animals (e.g., "rabbitkin") or fictional beings (e.g., "unicornkin"). The exaggeration in this troll's post bases itself on the idea that if a person can have an animal as a gender, then it is not unreasonable to claim that they can have a mental illness as a gender.

Anonymous asked: Just so you know, equating mental illness with gender is really ableist and transphobic
 actually its not. nice job #invalidating autisgender & schiztogender ppl :3c
 4 notes · #Anonymous #asks #invalidating #invalidation #trans erasure #truscum #truscum tw ///////////////

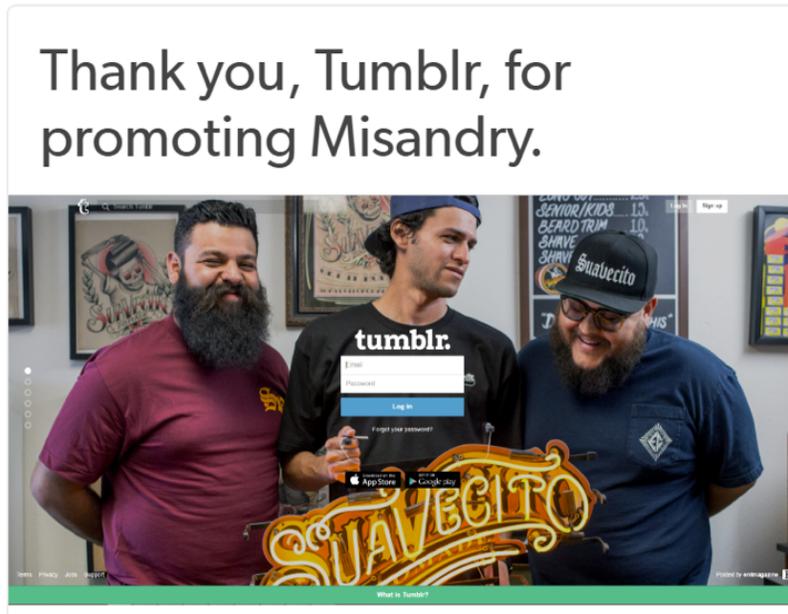
Figure 5. An example of the parodic exaggeration tactic.

The Misappropriation of Jargon Tactic

The misappropriation of jargon tactic occurs when a troll adopts and plays with patterns of speaking that are normative for the community they are engaging with. On Tumblr, this includes using popular phrasings such as "spread this like wildfire" and "friendly reminder," as well as thematic buzzwords like "oppression," "gender," "triggered," and "rape culture." Trolls also mimic community norms about graphicons. Trolls on Tumblr thus use community-favored emoticons such as "uwu," "':3" and "_(ツ)_/_" (although these emoticons are also commonly used on other social media platforms).

One purpose of this tactic is to help trolls better blend in to the community they are infiltrating. However, the use of these words is also central to the trolling. The troll may use local jargon as a building block for their parodic exaggerations, as in Figure 5, where the troll appropriates terms such as "trans erasure" and "truscum." However, the troll may also simply use the jargon incorrectly such as in Figure 6, which is yet another way to draw a reaction from readers. In Figure 6, the troll complains that having to

look at the image of three men on the login page on Tumblr (which is randomly generated from Tumblr content) is an example of "Misandry," "rape culture," and the "patriarchy."



This is the login screen that I was greeted with this morning. Three men standing proud in front of the Tumblr logo, with "beard trim" offer in the back. Once again, trying to shoo away women. This is **rape culture** and the **patriarchy** at work, ladies!

This also shows we have a long way to go when it comes to tumblr. It still isn't a complete safe haven for women & trans people.

Which is why i encourage all of you to send a mail to tumblr support, telling them how you feel about this!

support@tumblr.com

Let them know that we will not be silenced! We will **NOT** have tumblr promoting rape culture!

Figure 6. An example of the misappropriation of jargon tactic.

The Straight Man (or "Comical Seriousness") Tactic

The straight man (or "comical seriousness") tactic occurs when a troll responds to other users in an overly serious manner. For example, the troll may take humorous or sarcastic comments literally. Unlike the "parodic exaggeration," which entails taking community values to ridiculous extremes, the "straight man tactic" is about "not getting it" or comically missing the point. The name of the tactic is a reference to the comedy trope of the "straight man" who maintains a serious demeanor regardless of the events around them.

Figure 7 shows a straightforward version of the straight man tactic. The troll is responding to another user's image showing the words "Happy Fork of July" superimposed over a red fork and knife. The troll replies to this mild pun with extreme seriousness. The troll painstakingly explains that the name of the holiday is the "Fourth of July," rather than "Fork of July." To finish, they gently reprimand the creator of the image for making something that is "very misleading to non-English speakers" and label the image with the popular Tumblr buzzword "problematic." The serious tone of the troll comes across as incredibly overblown in the context of what they are addressing, creating an incredibly humorous post.

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it's actually called the "fourth" of July, because it's the fourth day of the month. it commemorates the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, rather than some sort of month-specific cutlery like you're implying. I think this post is very misleading to non-English speakers and frankly a little problematic

Figure 7. An example of the straight man tactic.

The Troll Reveal Tactic

On Tumblr, trolls have an unusual tactic of revealing themselves as trolls. Many Tumblr satire troll blogs actually use their blog descriptions to disclose their status as a troll, satire, or "fake" blog. This is often in the same place where normative users disclose their gender, sexuality, and mental health status. Of the trolls that follow this practice, some never explicitly bring up their troll status in their interactions, whereas others make a point to tell users that they "have been trolled." The trolls that reveal themselves usually post provocative content, and once another user has gotten angry and engaged them, the trolls reveal themselves. In every case we collected, users who were told they had been trolled either immediately disengaged or apologized for not realizing they were interacting with a troll blog (Figure 8). The troll reveal blogs often have followers who enjoy observing this process and find it humorous.

Sounds fun! Start by reading my blog description

Omg I am so so so sorry I thought you were actually serious lol. I'm pretty hard to fool usually so nice job omg.

Figure 8. An example of the troll reveal tactic.

The Politeness Tactic

The final tactic we observed was the politeness tactic. This tactic subverts the notion that trolls must necessarily be abusive. Trolls employing this tactic use polite language such as “thank you” and “please” as well as behavior that is normative to the community. Trolls use this tactic primarily to disguise their intentions, better allowing them to appear sincere to their victims.

In Figure 9, the troll blog very politely and kindly informs another user that their blog is offensive to colorblind people because it is too colorful. They also encourage the blogger to promote social justice on behalf of the colorblind. The blogger who received this comment apologizes for offending the troll and promises to tag posts that might be colorful. The troll reblogs the user's response and then thanks them with apparent seriousness.

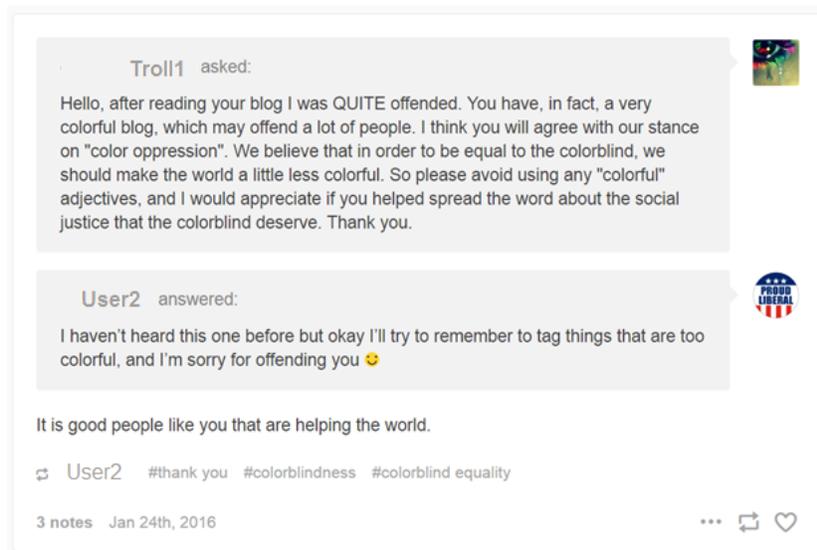


Figure 9. An example of the politeness tactic.

The Use of Graphicons in Tumblr Trolling Blogs

By definition, satire exposes or ridicules behaviors or actors through caricature ("Satire," n.d.), and graphicons are particularly useful vehicles for satire (Phillips & Milner 2018; Sanfilippo, Yang, & Fichman, 2017b). To understand the use of graphicons in satire trolling, we analyzed 284 graphicons that appeared in the 172 blog posts. These included (1) posts by the confirmed troll bloggers, who are blog owners from the list of trolls, and (2) posts by nontrolls that were reblogged by trolls. Our data had 211 obvious trolling posts that contained graphicons compared with 16 nontrolling and 57 unclear trolling posts. Our analysis focuses on the 211 posts that we identified as containing obvious trolling and graphicons posted by trolls. We aimed to identify the graphicon types commonly used by trolls and determine whether these were used as bait (prompt) or for trolling. Other specific functions of graphicons used in trolling posts have been identified, and their roles in trolling are explained.

We found that the most commonly used graphicons in trolling include images ($n = 90$), with or without text (47 and 43, respectively), emoticons ($n = 55$), screenshots ($n = 31$), emojis ($n = 20$), and GIFs ($n = 11$).⁴ Given that the most frequently used graphicons are images, it is no surprise that the question of the relationships between memes and trolling has attracted scholarly attention (e.g., Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016; Phillips & Milner, 2016), and the roles of emoji or emoticons in trolling have not. Furthermore, the memetic logic that by definition involves repetition of ideas (Highfield, 2016) fits the repetitive nature of trolling (Shachaf & Hara, 2010).

Using Herring and Dainas's (2017) taxonomy of graphicons functions, we found that the most frequent functions in our sample included prompt ($n = 73$), tone modification ($n = 43$), mention ($n = 36$), action ($n = 14$), and reaction ($n = 14$).⁵ Before we will discuss these findings, we provide examples to illustrate each of these functions.

The prompt function refers to a graphicon that is used at the beginning of a thread to set the topic or focus of the ensuing comments. In trolling posts these graphicons also serve as flame bait. The role of flame bait in trolling has been documented in the literature from the earliest days of the Internet (e.g., Herring et al., 2002). Traditional flame bait took the form of textual remarks designed to attract predictable comments or flames, which include "insults, name-calling, contentious presuppositions, and blatantly contentious assertions about [a core value] of the community" (Herring et al., 2002, p. 375). Figure 10 provides an example of a graphicon being posted by a troll as a prompt intended to bait other users into responding.

⁴ We only report on graphicons types that appeared more than five times in trolling posts.

⁵ We only report on graphicons functions that appeared more than five times in trolling posts, so riff and sequence are excluded.



Figure 10. An example of the prompt function.

The tone modification function refers to a graphicon that provides information about how a message should be interpreted by serving as a nonverbal, paraverbal, or paralinguistic cue. This includes using graphicons to clarify intent and to hedge. A graphicon being employed in this function always directly modifies the text it appears with. In trolling posts tone modification can add, for example, satirical, humorous, or insulting tones to flame, incite, or trigger emotions. For example, the “(;” emoticon in Figure 11, provides tone modification to the claim that proceeds it, saying, “It’s not a rape if yuh like it.” The winking emoticon, whether backward or forward, does not have any one meaning; its interpretation is heavily dependent on context; however, at minimum it is typically interpreted as changing the tone of the accompanying text to be nonserious. In this case, the new tone could be interpreted as mockery or sarcasm, given that the text of the comment is too inflammatory for the emoticon to simply indicate teasing.

It’s not rape if yuh like it(;

Figure 11. An example of the tone modification function.

The mention (vs. use) function refers to graphicons that are mentioned in a post. To demonstrate the distinction between using a graphicon and mentioning it, we can look at an example of use: “I’m so excited! :-)” and compare it with an example of mention: “That jerk had the nerve to send me a “:-)” after telling me he couldn’t make the team meeting.” The first example is a statement in which the graphicon is being used to add specific meaning to the sentence. The second is a statement about the graphicon itself; it mentions the graphicon without using it to refer to anything other than the actual graphicon. All of the other graphicon functions described here are examples of use, except for this function. In trolling posts, the

mention allows for reappropriation of the graphicons in a different context that changes the graphicon's meaning. Figure 12 illustrates how a troll can employ the mention function for trolling purposes.

I fucking hate Mansanto and their perpetual misogyny and quest to continue male dominance in the world by fucking with the very food we eat. We should all do away with GMOs because they're unhealthy and continue to perpetuate rape culture.

So far, I have seen horrendous deeds done by Mansanto and I just don't know how much more triggered I can get. It's gone too far!

[graphiocon 1]

I snapped this photo last week. Observe as Mansanto is attempting to force rape culture down our throats.

Need more proof?

[graphicon 2]

This is fucking bullshit. Mansanto needs to stop with the GMOs. Why should feminists reject Mansanto's plans to take over the world?

1. Because they are money hungry men out to suppress women's freedom of speech and expression.
2. Because they perpetuate rape culture by making our crops more masculine in an effort to condition women to accept rape more easily.
3. Because their quest is to ultimately create GMOs to overrun this society which benefits men and harms women.
4. G.M.O. is the patriarchal code name for Giant Male Organ.
5. With Giant Male Organs, men will be able to further dominate women into submission and we CAN'T let that happen.

Please wake up and pay attention! Stay woke!!



Figure 12. An example of the mention function.

The first image is a photo of a stand with grape tomatoes, where the "g" in the sign is hidden, making it look like the word "rape" instead of "grape." The trolling occurs here through the text that mentions the image and claim that Monsanto, a major producer of genetically modified crops, enforces rape culture, and continues by mentioning another image depicting a tomato with a phallic shape.

The action function refers to graphicons that are used to portray a specific physical action. These include simple emoticons that reveal facial expressions, such as a smile ":-)" or a string of kisses "xxx," and to more complex physical actions, such as waving "~(^◇^)/." Figure 13 illustrates an example of a trolling post in which a GIF illustrates the action of a White man labeled "white opinions" being repeatedly hit in the face with a plastic bag labeled "no." This GIF could be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, from a social justice perspective, it indicates the frustration minorities feel when members of the majority try to force their opinions on others. On the other hand, it can be read as a metaphor for censorship, which in this case refers to censorship of the dominant White male opinions. In general, the use of this image plays into the leftist social justice bloggers' culture, and can either trigger empathy with the censored by those who advocate in support of free speech or reflect antagonistic approach to the dominant White-male culture; this ironic image can serve well in trolling, through what Day (2008) called "identity-nabbing."



Figure 13. An example of the action function.

The reaction function refers to graphicons that are used to portray a specific emotion in response to something that has been posted. This can range from an emoticon of a sad face ":(" or a crying face "T_T," to an image of a vomiting woman (e.g., Figure 14), posted as a reaction to someone's post. It is important to note that the reaction function, though appearing in our data, was not used for trolling or as bait; all were used in the reaction to trolling posts.



Figure 14. An example of the reaction function.

In summary, unlike in prior work on graphicon functions (Herring & Dainas, 2017), prompting (and not reaction) was the most common function of graphicons. This might be due to sociotechnical factors, including the difference in platform (Tumblr vs. Facebook), or the nature of the samples (trolling vs. everyday interactions). Our findings provide additional empirical support to the use of graphicons as bait in trolling; however, future research should examine whether graphicons are more or less effective than text. Besides the use of graphicons for flame bait, we found that typical pragmatic functions of graphicons can also be deployed as part of trolling. For example, graphicons expressing tone modification can serve as a tool for exaggeration and ridicule, which are the means by which satire works. Interestingly, the high prevalence of tone modification in trolling posts may be because trolls are attempting to be perceived as sincere and casual by exhibiting normative rather than deviant behavior. In particular, they may be attempting to copy the normative uses of graphicons in Tumblr's social justice community. Thus, graphicons can function in multiple ways that allow users to clarify what they mean or express how they feel. Trolls can use these same functions to deceptively portray themselves as members of the community they are attempting to infiltrate. Appropriating graphicons in satirical trolling enforces the in-group, those who get it, and out-group, those who do not, and thus enhances its impact online; memes can empower and exclude at the same time (Milner, 2016). Notably, satire trolls in our sample use graphicons in their trolling regardless of which specific trolling tactics they use.

Conclusions

Trolls exist on the margins of communities and walk the line between acceptability and criminality. They adopt the mannerisms of the communities they troll and play with local cultural norms. Studying trolls highlights these local cultural norms, from social norms to linguistic and multimodal communication norms. Thus, studying them has implications for the study of online culture and identity as well as for linguistics.

This study sought to investigate Tumblr satire trolls, their tactics, and their use of graphicons. We found that satire trolls often use outrage tactics similar to those of news pundits and other deviant trolls. However, unlike deviant and malevolent trolls, satire trolls seem to use additional tactics, beyond outrage tactics. We found seven specific trolling tactics that can help identify satire trolling and inform the public. Tumblr satire trolls lie, derail, make parodic exaggerations, misappropriate local jargon, purposefully comically miss the point of discussion, reveal themselves as trolls, and comport themselves politely. Further research is needed to investigate whether or not these tactics are also used by trolls on platforms beyond Tumblr.com. Further, future work must be done to see if it is possible to assess the effectiveness of these trolling tactics and examine how people react to these tactics.

We found that trolls frequently used graphicons to prompt/bait and for tone modification. Graphicons could act as flame baiting prompts, but they also supported each kind of the seven trolling tactics observed in this article.

Our study has some limitations. The most obvious of which is our sample, which is based on the assumption that the blogs listed on Reddit.com are all, in fact, troll blogs. We also had a fairly small sample of posts to investigate. Further, our results can only be applied to Tumblr trolls and interactions with Tumblr trolls, rather than Tumblr.com as a whole. Finally, generalizing our findings to other platforms and communities should be made with great caution.

Even so, our study offers further proof that not all trolls are alike (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). Although some trolls can be a danger to the communities that they engage with, satire trolls can be an asset to online communities because they push the boundaries of acceptable discourse (Sanfilippo et al., 2017b). Further research should address how this kind of trolling affects diversity and inclusion on different social media platforms. Such findings would allow us to gain better insight into the management of and reactions to satire trolls and would greatly benefit online communities that have to decide how to deal with these trolls.

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