



# Talking trolls into existence: On the floor management of trolling in online forums

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 5 June 2018

Received in revised form 21 December 2018

Accepted 14 February 2019

## ABSTRACT

Much has been said about the problems of internet trolls in recent mainstream media reporting of online communication, yet surprisingly little empirical work has been conducted on the pragmatics of trolling. Existing studies of trolling come from different disciplines and provide different interpretations and definitions of trolls, leaving many questions about the phenomenon unanswered. The present study aims to narrow this empirical gap by providing a discourse-analytic account of online trolling. Specifically, the study utilizes the notion of floor spaces to uncover how online users discursively orient themselves to trolling behavior and why such responses vary from one message thread to another. The findings show that the extent to which an alleged troll is accepted into a discussion is partly related to how contributors discursively orient themselves to floor spaces, or in other words, co-establish appropriate forms and ways of communication. The finding that any given message can potentially be treated as an attempt to troll is helpful in understanding the extent to which trolling should be viewed as deviant behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

An expectation exists in the physical world to convey just to right amount of information, be as truthful as possible, communicate in a meaningful way, and not deviate from established rules of behavior (e.g. Grice, 1975). These expectations help interlocutors carry out social actions and co-construct meaning according to context-specific norms, and partly exist because of the spatial configurations of face-to-face communication. For example, the extent to which an individual is believed to be truthful is partly shaped by how gestures and facial expressions are communicated. While text-based online communication is not organized according to, and around, the same spatial configurations of face-to-face communication, individuals generally conduct themselves in online settings as they would in the physical world. Despite some similarities between online and face-to-face communication, the former setting possesses a number of contextual variables that allow individuals to deviate from the above stated pragmatic norms. For example, Arendholz (2013) reports that inappropriate online behavior is the result of the anonymity afforded to participants of online communication. One interpretation is that individuals communicating in online spaces may feel compelled to verbally insult a stranger because of the ability to hide behind avatars and pseudonyms. In other words, the consequences of engaging in deviant or inappropriate behavior, such as trolling, may be less severe than in face-to-face encounters because there is less personal accountability in online spaces. Indeed, much has been said in both academic and mainstream circles about the contribution online communication has on so-called deviant behaviors (e.g., Daykin, 2016).

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Inappropriate behavior is often referenced in larger discussions of technology and society because such practices occur with some regularity during online encounters (Arendholz, 2013; Hardaker, 2015). The ability to participate in online communities without the need to disclose personally identifying information creates social distance (Suler, 2004), which often manifests in behaviors that are characterized by “a loss of self-awareness, a sense of impunity, an increased likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses, increased polarisation, and decreased consideration and empathy for others online” (Hardaker, 2013, p. 60). Fake news, impostors, and pseudo-identities are indeed not uncommon on platforms that are ostensibly based on “real” information and users, such as Facebook and Instagram. Although the frequency with which inappropriate behavior occurs during online encounters is the source of much discussion, it may come as a surprise to the casual reader of computer-mediated communication scholarship that despite recent and ongoing efforts to understand the pragmatics of deviant actions in online spaces, relatively little empirical research examining the discourse of trolling has been conducted (Petykó, 2018). In other words, trolling studies focus on the larger social and cultural aspects and implications of such behavior (cf. Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2016).

The present study adds to this small but growing body of research by providing an account of online trolling as a co-constructed phenomenon. It will be demonstrated below that such an approach can help move computer-mediated communication scholarship forward, as findings pertaining to how forum users themselves construct, and respond to, trolling messages can be used to address larger theoretical and empirical questions, such as the extent to which such practices are indeed deviant, inappropriate, or undesirable. To this end, the aim of this study is to offer detailed analytic descriptions of how online trolling unfolds and the ways in which individuals discursively orient to such practices.

### 1.1. The literature on discourse of trolling

Trolling is often defined in the literature as the act of baiting unwitting online users into ostensibly needless exchanges. A troll often engages in such practices for the sole purpose of self-entertainment (though deception or the wish to provoke anger may also be reasons for, and tools to engage in, this behavior).

(Hardaker, 2013, pp. 71–72)

- B [...] The next two days, I drug myself out of bed, went to teach the classes I absolutely had to do (my brain was so fried I couldn't even contemplate what I had to do to set things up for a sub, it was just easier to go to work and be there), then went home early, took meds, went to bed. Drug myself through the weekend. Monday, I drug myself to the barn after work. [...]
- A **Uh.....not to be nitpicky,,,,,but...the past tense of drag is dragged, not drug. Otherwise it was an interesting post.**
- C She's a teacher. I think she knows. Not to be nitpicky, but more than three dots is considered improper for ellipsis, and five commas in a row is a no-no. The rest of your post was... Sorry, I can't resist wiseassdom after 4 on Fridays : ).
- D Nor is “uh” a word in standard English.  
[EXCHANGE CONTINUES FOR SEVERAL LINES]
- A **[To C] At least I can handle it when someone corrects me. Also, I am neither a troll, nor your friend.**

The example here provides a sense of how trolling is discursively constructed and situated within a larger exchange. User A, rather than respond to the thrust of the previous message (i.e., feeling tired and sick), corrects the verb tense of the word drag. The ostensible sarcasm of the message (“Otherwise it was an interesting post”), which may be a form of self-entertainment or an attempt to provoke an angry response, is oriented to by User C in the following post (“I can't resist wiseassdom”). Although User A's first message could be interpreted as an attempt to troll (see below), the issue of trolling is not made explicit until the end of the exchange. Despite what appears to be a relatively straightforward example of trolling, such behavior is complex and varied.

One of the earliest and seminal investigations of the discourse of trolling is conducted by Herring et al. (2002): the researchers provide a single case analysis of a troll's attempt to provoke responses from a group of forum users. The trolling criteria identified by the authors are based on the practices of one troller successfully disrupting an online forum of feminists during a single exchange of 111 messages. Using grounded theory methods, the researchers (Herring et al., 2002, p. 375) show that trolls often engage in the following discursive actions

- (1) ostensibly align messages with the communicative goals of an online forum by demonstrating sincerity;
- (2) attract predictable responses like insults or name-calling; and
- (3) provoke hostile responses that may lead to heated arguments.

In addition to these actions, Herring et al. (2002) note that trolls are often successful when they can question or attack the ideological positions of existing online users (p. 375). The observation that ideological positions are integral to the extent to which a troll is successful is important, as it is entirely possible that trolling exchanges may deviate from these three characteristics depending on the belief systems and communicative goals of online users.

Hardaker's (2010) work identifies the characteristics of trolling messages by investigating an equestrian forum spanning approximately nine years and consisting of nearly 190,000 posts. The analysis uncovered four key characteristics of trolling: deception, aggression, disruption, and success. The last three characteristics (aggression, disruption, and success) refer to annoying others or provoking retaliation, causing aggravation, and possessing the ability to bait unwitting respondents into exchanges, respectively; these three characteristics are thus similar to the observations made by Herring et al. (2002). The issue of deception, however, is noteworthy, as it demonstrates how complex trolling is. For example, a message that provokes an argument or aggravation does not necessarily mean that a forum user is a troll, as what unfolds during a communicative exchange may reveal that the original poster may have been misunderstood.

(Hardaker, 2010, p. 227, p. 227)

- Example 15    B:    **If you think I'm a troll. I am not. I am a newbie. Learning how to use Usenet.** (not a discussion board as I have been corrected)
- Example 16    A:    Since everyone thinks I am a troll, I wont post here any- more. **I didn't mean to come across the way I did,** and this group doesn't mean anything to me anyway

The misunderstanding revealed in both examples demonstrates that any given message has the potential to be treated as an attempt to troll if forum users feel aggravated. Despite the intentions of Users B and A, what gets treated as an attempt to troll is determined collectively by forum members. The issue of misunderstanding highlights an important issue in conducting trolling research. Analysts concerned with the discourse and pragmatics of trolling must attend to how online users respond to – that is, treat – alleged trolls. The issue of misunderstanding in trolling exchanges is observed by other scholars. The case study work of Dynel (2016), for instance, demonstrates that the ability to create a humorous trolling exchange is tied to the extent to which other users are lured into believing something fictitious.

Herring et al. (2002, p. 372) refer to the practice of trolling as needless, disruptive, or off-topic, “luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions.” While many online users may indeed view such practices as needless, disruptive, or off-topic, the extent to which trolling is viewed as pointless or time-consuming is determined *in situ*, by the recipients of such practices. It can be said that trolling is co-constructed, locally-determined, and thus definitions of trolling should be sensitive to the context in which trolls operate. Again, particular attention must therefore be paid to how online users respond to trolling. For instance, although trolling is commonly defined as “online antagonism” (Hardaker, 2015, p. 202), some individuals relish in the (often long and convoluted) exchanges that follow a troll's attempt to “hijack” a discussion, as demonstrated in the findings reported below.

Hardaker's (2013) study is relevant to the issue of investigating responses to trolling message. Her study is concerned with the characteristics of trolling, and the analysis is based on the responses of users when treating a previous message as an attempt to troll. That is, what are the strategies used to troll as oriented to (or perceived by) the recipients of such behavior? The study examines two corpora of approximately eighty-six million words of discussion related to sports (namely, English football and equestrian). Drawing from politeness theory, Hardaker (2013) identifies six overlapping strategies used by participants to treat a previous message as an attempt to troll: digress, (hypo)criticize, antipathize, endanger, shock, and aggress. Digression is luring users into pointless discussions; hypo-criticism is when a message excessively and sometimes ironically blames users for bad behavior; antipathy relies on deception, such as mock sensitivity, to stimulate emotional responses; endangerment often combines antipathy with shock and is closely related to what other researchers have called “pseudo-naïve” trolling (e.g. Utz, 2005, p. 50); shock entails being offensive, which is closely related to the final strategy identified: aggress or to attack (cf. Hardaker, 2013, p. 77).

What is clear from this small collection of discourse papers is that trolling is often disruptive and antagonistic. Yet despite the contributions made by these scholars, looking primarily at the strategies used during trolling attempts (cf. Nekmat and Lee, 2018) is only one of many approaches that can be used to examine the dynamic and co-constructed nature of this phenomenon. For example, in a later study that builds on her previous work, Hardaker (2015) discusses the limitations of viewing trolling through the lens of the troll. She notes that while previous research provides much to current understandings of *what* trolls do, scholars must also focus on *how* online users respond to trolling messages. To this end, Hardaker (2015, p. 208) identifies seven response types that are based on what online users do when dealing with trolls:

- |                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| (1) Engaging:      | Sincerely responding to a trolling message                |
| (2) Ignoring:      | Notifying other online users to ignore a trolling message |
| (3) Exposing:      | Exposing a trolling message that appears to be sincere    |
| (4) Challenging:   | Providing an offensive or threatening response            |
| (5) Critiquing:    | Evaluating the quality of a trolling message              |
| (6) Mocking:       | Making fun of the troller                                 |
| (7) Reciprocating: | Trolling the troller                                      |

What this list demonstrates is that like trolling messages, response types are varied and often mutually dependent. For example, a respondent can expose a trolling message by trying to be sincere (3) while making fun of the troller (6). The varied and overlapping nature of response types is likely the result of the different ways in which trolls operate, which suggests that the empirical task of identifying strategies or devising categories, while informative and needed in an emergent area of study, may

not offer an account of the co-constructed nature of trolling. This observation is indeed mentioned at the end of Hardaker's (2015, p. 224) paper, where she questions "the value of quantitatively processing these strategies when faced with combinations of multiple response types," which contributes perhaps unwittingly to "the (ever-increasing) semantic scope of 'trolling' as a term."

The issue of compiling lists of trolling strategies and response types opens up a discussion of the research gaps that exist in the literature. In an effort to make sense of what trolls do, researchers have not fully attended to the rich interactional context in which this behavior occurs. The recent discursive psychological work of Coles and West (2016) attempts to narrow this research gap by examining how individuals make use of the term troll. The researchers begin their analysis with the assumption that pragmatic meaning is contextually bound and co-constructed through interaction (see also McCosker, 2014), identifying a list of four "repertoires" that capture how users make sense of trolling behavior.

- (1) Online users easily identify trolling behavior.
- (2) Online users differentiate between old and new forms of trolling.
- (3) Online users identify trolling behavior to admonish trolls.
- (4) Online users treat trolling as inappropriate.

Coles and West (2016, p. 237).

These interpretive repertoires provide a different lens through which to understand how online users make sense of trolling behavior. Notwithstanding this contribution, the identification of repertoires, like previous strategy-focused research, does not attend to the discursive space in which trolling unfolds and is co-constructed by multiple online users. For example, Coles and West (2016, p. 243) note that a single message by a forum member can be interpreted by respondents in a number of ways (e.g., as an act of trolling or a sincere contribution), but the researchers do not show how multiple online users discursively accomplish such interpretations as a discussion unfolds.

The review in this section demonstrates that discourse-based investigations of trolling privilege how trolls operate within turns or individual messages. This privileging of discursive features is a natural outcome of an emergent area of study, seeking to better understand a new phenomenon. Such work helps establish what strategies online participants use when engaging in trolling exchanges. What is missing in the literature, however, is a better understanding of how forum users themselves construct, and respond to, trolling messages. To this end, rather than examine the strategies/repertoires used in constructing trolling messages and responding to trolls (cf. Synnott et al., 2017), the present study looks at how trolling messages are situated within a larger discussion and how trolls are collectively talked into existence.

## 1.2. Theoretical framework

Text-based online communication is inherently vague, prone to misunderstanding, and open to multiple interpretations (e.g., Herring, 1999; Petykó, 2018). This complex communicative environment presents challenges for researchers attempting to understand online behaviors, including most notably analyzing the extent to which individuals see each other's contributions to a discussion as problematic. The present study addresses this analytic challenge by viewing trolling as a co-constructed process that is situated within a floor space. The notion of co-construction is underpinned by the principle that trolling is talked into existence by at least two individuals: one user responsible for a message that is interpreted as an attempt to troll and another user that makes such an interpretation. The contribution of the latter user can occur immediately after a trolling message or many contributions later. Co-construction is a principle that differs from previous approaches to trolling in that the composition of individual messages is not examined in isolation (e.g., what the alleged troll says); rather, the focus is on the interactional work that forum users are involved with in making sense of what trolling is and how to deal with it. Accordingly, trolling is a phenomenon that unfolds from one contribution to another, which requires attending to the discursive resources used to participate in message threads (cf. Baym, 1996).

A concern for how trolling unfolds over several contributions suggests adopting conversation analysis. Although the present study is not concerned with traditional conversation analytic issues, such as turn constructional units (cf. Schegloff, 2007), the analysis below adopts as a theoretical starting point the notion of "next-turn proof procedure" (cf. Sacks et al., 1974). This entails basing analytic observations on not what the researcher believes to be interesting, but rather on how online users respond to each other's contributions (cf. Frobenius and Harper, 2015). This, of course, requires analyzing potentially long stretches of exchanges within a single message thread, thus surrendering any possibility of generalizing beyond the online space from which the findings are based. Despite this ostensible shortcoming, examining the co-constructed nature of trolling builds on the work that has been done using conversation analytic principles to study online behavior, such as humor (Baym, 1995) and opening sequences in video blogs (Frobenius, 2011).

Next-turn proof procedure is operationalized in the following way. Even if a message is deemed to possess trolling characteristics as established by previous research, the analysis must be based on whether and how forum users demonstrably treat this message as such. Next-turn proof procedure allows the researcher to uncover how online users make sense of trolling exchanges, which is helpful in discussing a range of pragmatic issues, including the extent to which such behavior should be viewed as deviant or problematic.

The notion of a conversational floor is one of several analytic lenses through which to understand trolling as a co-constructed phenomenon. A floor, according to Edelsky (1981, p. 383) is "a collaborative venture where several people"

operate “on the same wavelength.” The idea of operating on the same frequency suggests that a floor is a discursive space where appropriate forms and ways of communication are negotiated *in situ*, as online users deal with the context in which they find themselves participating. Accordingly, the act of dealing with, or responding to, an alleged troll reflects how online users co-construct an understanding of their floor space. Put differently, the ways in which online users participate in trolling exchanges is not necessarily based on their (or a researcher's) preconceived notions of what a troll is, though this may certainly be a factor. Rather, how online users deal with an alleged troll—whether they respond positively or negatively, for example—is based on what is determined at that moment to be an appropriate form or way of communication in a particular message thread.

Making sense of a floor space requires online users to negotiate a number of different communicative demands, including determining what direction a topic should take (Simpson, 2005), co-constructing participatory roles (Jenks, 2007), and relating talk to the larger social activity at hand (Jones and Thornborrow, 2004). Although the term floor is often used colloquially, as in the expression “holding the floor,” the construct is not limited to who is talking and on what topic. As the communicative demands identified in the beginning of this paragraph demonstrate, a floor is also a discursive “psychological space” (Edelsky, 1981) where interactants make sense of themselves vis-à-vis the unfolding communicative exchange. In this sense, as Herring (2010) shows in her study of gender differences in conversations, a floor can possess characteristics (e.g., informal, longer turns, or overlapping talk) that reflect its participants (e.g., family members). Trolling exchanges thus possess discursive psychological characteristics that reflect how participants orient themselves to trolls.

### 1.3. The study and methods

The data collected for this study come from a corpus of over 2 million words extracted from an active (and moderated) discussion board dedicated to the lives of professionals working abroad. Anonymized discussion topics include banking issues, finding accommodation, and locating schools for children, to name a few. Many active contributors are no longer in school, have families, and discuss topics important to their wellbeing, as demonstrated in the topics discussed in this forum. Although discussions are moderated, the examples presented below do not include exchanges where a moderator topicalizes the issue of trolling. All of the exchanges presented are made up of frequent contributors to this forum. The posting history of every contributor is public to forum members, and the number of contributions made is also visible. Therefore, it is not uncommon for forum members to question the sincerity of a contributor by using posting history and frequency.

In order to create a more manageable data set that is compatible with the analytic principle of next-turn proof procedure, CasualConc was used to search the corpus for message threads with “troll,” “trolled,” “trolling,” and other similar derivations (for the limitations of using keywords to search for trolling, see Hardaker, 2015), which resulted in 2,081 instances of explicit orientation to trolling behavior. Next-turn proof procedure, as outlined above, was then used to understand how multiple forum users talk trolls and trolling into existence; five data extracts were selected on the basis of where the trolling exchange occurred sequentially in the message thread (e.g., in the beginning or at the end) and who were responsible for constructing and responding to such messages (e.g., the original poster). It should be noted, however, that the sequential location of when trolls were identified did not appear to have an influence on whether forum users treated this behavior as disruptive or problematic. The excerpts analyzed below, nonetheless, are representative of the sequential range in which trolling occurred in the data set. No deviant cases were identified during this selection process. These procedures align with conversation analytic principles for selecting representative data sets for presentation (cf. Sacks et al., 1974).

Although online forums are ideal sites for understanding trolling exchanges, as messages can be constructed anonymously and with minimal spatial limitations, such spaces present a number of representational challenges. First, long message threads with multiple contributors and parallel discussions are common in online forums. Presenting trolling exchanges as data excerpts thus requires being mindful of a number of transcription issues, as it is exceptionally challenging to present a phenomenon in publication form as it is visually experienced by the user. For example, it is not uncommon for message threads to require anywhere from 10 to 50 pages of transcription work. Thus, omitting detail in an effort to enhance readability is a characteristic of all transcript-based research (Jenks, 2011). In the analysis below, for instance, contributions that perform the same action have been omitted (e.g., several contributors providing the same advice), as such messages can potentially confuse the reader by providing unnecessary analytic observations. Furthermore, time stamps were omitted from the transcripts below, as forum users did not appear to demonstrably orient to this public information in their contributions to message threads. In an effort to further aid readability, contributions included in the data excerpts are numbered sequentially.

### 1.4. Talking trolling into existence

The analysis below is organized according to where the trolling exchange occurred sequentially in the message thread and the contributors responsible for constructing and responding to such messages. To this end, the first example begins with a contributor asking several questions about houseboat living. The first contribution marks the beginning of this message thread. The names of contributors in all data extracts are pseudonyms.



- (1) Houseboat living
- 1 rebecca4832 We are in the midst of moving to HKG this coming August. Anyone out there that lives on a houseboat? Any feedback would be great. What about storms? How do they affect the boat? *[several contributions providing advice are omitted]*
- 5 MovingIn07 Typhoons are not a problem just add ropes and ride it out. DB marina is more crowded than Gold Coast and I rejected it on this basis. But otherwise I LOVE living on a boat and consider it our best decision coming here.
- 6 HKNumberOne But seriously if you are living on a boat its really not too secure especially given the location, dearth of people around, etc.
- 7 HowardCoombs Are you speaking based on your experience of living on a boat (or knowing someone who lives on a boat) in Hong Kong or are you speaking based on zero knowledge (ie: talking out of your ass)?
- 8 HKNumberOne Common sense. Does that ring any bells?
- 9 HowardCoombs Common sense dictates that you go, look, try, research, interview those who have done it before assuming that one of the safest places in the world is full of pirates and bandits that are waiting to kill you. Just as I thought, you've come up with your answers and fears based on nothing at all.
- 10 jgl If you look at HK1's posting history, he's either a deliberate troll or just plain thick. Not really worth spending time arguing with.

The floor established in the beginning of this example is important to understanding how trolling is talked into existence. The original poster (OP), rebecca4832, asks a series of questions about houseboat living, and several contributors offer their observations, such as the response provided in contribution 5 (by MovingIn07). All of the contributions (2–5), including those that have been omitted, present houseboat living in a favorable way; these positive assessments create a floor space where each contribution feeds into a consensus that the OP should consider houseboat living.

In contribution 6, however, although the contributor provides an answer that is—on the surface—potentially useful (i.e., not many people around the marina and thus not too secure), the following participant (HowardCoombs) treats HKNumberOne's negative assessment as an indication of “talking out of your ass.” HowardCoombs's response, and the ensuing disagreement in the next three contributions, disrupts the floor space by causing an argument about the extent to which the alleged troll is worthy of providing a negative assessment of houseboat living. The argument eventually leads to the suggestion in contribution 10 that HKNumberOne may be a troll.

The first example reveals several important facets of trolling behavior. First, turn-taking mechanics alone may not adequately explain why trolling is talked into existence in this message thread. For example, HKNumberOne does not violate any turn-taking rules (cf. Schegloff, 2007), but rather provides an appropriately-situated answer to a question. Furthermore, topic management does not offer a useful way of determining why trolling is made relevant: like all other advice providers in this message thread, HKNumberOne offers a topically relevant contribution. The alleged troll, however, deviates from the consensus established in the prior turns by providing an allegedly inaccurate and negative assessment of houseboat living. Therefore, positions taken in message threads, or the extent to which individuals align themselves to established floor spaces, are potentially vulnerable to trolling allegations, as being disagreeable can be viewed as a characteristic of a troll.

Although trolling exchanges may involve heated disagreements, an argument, conflict, or some other form of discord should not always be viewed as a problem to a message thread because even an alleged troll can be considered a legitimate contributor. This paradoxical situation exists in online encounters because trolls can establish floor spaces that welcome ostensibly “futile” exchanges.

For example, the next message thread shows how an alleged troll can establish a floor space by talking badly about Hong Kong women. In this second example, which is divided into two excerpts, the alleged troll (ravenstar) is also the OP.

(2a) Wendi Deng and Hong Kong women

- 1 ravenstar Returning to Hong Kong after 10 years, I see that HK women have not become more attractive. In fact, quite the opposite! Their faces are harder, their clothes worse and their shoes... I have never seen such travesties of footwear. Come on girls! Being a fashion victim rather than someone who chooses for herself, based on what looks good, is not the way to go. Have a look at Weni Deng (soon to be divorced from Rupert Murdoch). Have you seen a harder face? Yes, on the MTR. Daily.
- 2 jimbo are you any better? ☹
- 3 ravenstar Oh yes, infinitely.
- 4 Claire ex-ax You'd better hurry up and leave, lest you start to look like a Hong Kong woman! BTW, I don't think we can count Wendi Deng as a Hong Kong woman, considering she's probably only been here for short visits. Although I guess she is the real topic you wanted to bring up.
- 5 jimbo Proof is in the pudding as they say ☹ ((in response to contribution 3))

- 6    ravenstar      Highly unlikely, unless I go for a sex change. You are right- Deng met Murdoch in HK but is from mainland China. Actually, I only put the topic up in order to stir up some strong feelings; I do, though, feel there is some truth in my original statement.  
*[the message thread at this point breaks into two exchanges:  
 (1) a discussion of Wendi Deng, and (2) a critique of what the OP has said]*

The message thread begins with ravenstar using Wendi Deng, the third wife of Rupert Murdoch, to establish his belief that Hong Kong women are unattractive and have no fashion sense. Unlike some trolling exchanges, what follows is not a heated argument regarding the content of the original message (cf. McCosker, 2014), but rather the first respondent playfully (as demonstrated by the smiley emoticon) attempts to establish the attractiveness of the OP. Furthermore, the second respondent in contribution 4, who both suggests that the OP should leave Hong Kong before looking like the very women described and clarifies the ethnicity of Wendi Deng, does not treat the original message as a problematic assessment of Hong Kong women. Although the OP in contribution 6 reveals that his objective is to “stir up some strong feelings,” there is no indication in the prior turns that he is being treated as a troll (cf. Herring et al., 2002). Indeed, the floor space established by ravenstar and jimbo (and possibly Claire ex-ax) is playful, non-serious, and devoid of irritable responses (cf. Hardaker, 2010).

For the next 15 messages, the contributors either humorously discuss Wendi's life circumstances or deal with the outlandish comments made about Hong Kong women. In other words, the contributors establish two floor spaces: floor one is a playful discussion and floor two is a critique of the OP and his comments. It should be noted that although the contributors of floor two criticize and make fun of the OP (e.g., contribution 18: “I feel sorry for his wife, obviously an arranged marriage. ☺”), none of them call him a troll. That is to say, floor two is concerned with what the OP has said, as opposed to what he is trying to do (again, to “stir up some strong feelings”); of course, it is entirely possible in other message threads for contributors to simultaneously address what is said and what is being accomplished.

The second excerpt begins with one contributor orienting to what the OP is doing, thus marking a shift in both floor spaces.

(2b) Wendi Deng and Hong Kong women

- 21    jgl              You are a sad individual to get kicks out of such pathetic attempts to rile people up on an internet forum.  
 22    shri             BUT ... when it mattered, she threw her weight around ((in reference to Wendi Deng fighting off a man attacking Rupert Murdoch))  
 23    gunsnroses      That actually made me go LOL...  
                          Seriously jgl, what else is there to do on internet forums....

Contribution 21 is the first instance where a contributor explicitly orients to the social action of the OP: “to get kicks out of such pathetic attempts to rile people up.” This subtle change in focus is important to an understanding of trolling because although several contributors have demonstrated their disdain for the OP and his generalizations, they have nonetheless established a floor space where the original message is worthy of discussion. Conversely, in calling out what the OP is *trying* to do (again, as opposed to what he is saying), jgl momentarily disrupts both floor spaces by providing a meta-commentary on the message thread. The next contributor in contribution 23 orients to this shift by suggesting that riled up responses are indeed part and parcel of online communication (“what else is there to do on internet forums”). This attempt to realign the floor space back to the discussion at hand is taken up later by jgl in contribution 26 who for the first time in this message thread uses the term trolling: “I can appreciate skilled trolling (even though it's annoying at the same time). It's this lame-arsed clumsy stuff that has absolutely nothing going for it.”

The message thread continues over several days with the topic of discussion largely remaining on Wendi Deng. Shortly after the second excerpt in contribution 32, however, one contributor calls on jgl to stop engaging the OP: “jgl-stop harassing our trainee troll. Let him practice his art and develop into a well rounded troll to add great depth to online debates.” Despite this explicit orientation to the OP as a troll, the message thread remains, and in the end can be characterized as, playful and non-serious. Put differently, out of many individual exchanges within this thread, with numerous forum users chiming in on the original message, only two contributors in two separate contributions explicitly orient to the OP as a troll.

Understanding the significance of this example requires going back to the beginning of the message thread. While the OP in contribution 6 states that his goal is to do precisely what most researchers define as trolling (“stir up some strong feelings”), the contributors for unknown reasons demonstrably relish in the opportunity to discuss the content of the original message despite two attempts (26 and 32) to highlight the futile nature of the discussion. This situation demonstrates that what is deemed a worthy topic of discussion is not always or necessarily tied to whether an individual is attempting to troll other contributors. Rather, what is deemed a worthy topic of discussion is an expression of the floor space established in a message thread. Put differently, a floor space—that is, a reflection of what is co-constructed as acceptable modes and forms of communication—constantly leaves open the possibility that any proposed topic is worth discussing.

If the act of ignoring (or responding to) trolling messages is not based entirely on the extent to which a contributor is co-constructed as a troll, then it can also be said that trolling behavior should not always be viewed as unacceptable or unwanted. This observation suggests that the pragmatics of dealing with alleged trolls is determined not outside of the floor space in which trolling operates, but rather *in situ* as communication unfolds. The following message thread concerning Hong Kong as

a place of residence demonstrates this point. As with the previous example, the alleged troll is also the OP. The following message thread begins with the original message.

(3) Hong Kong lacks sophistication

- 1 dotgoner Hong Kong reminds me of New York without the elegance, intelligence, sophistication, class, diversity of people and food, culture, modernization, elegance, and empathy...I saw this crippled/disabled guy in Central today who had some obvious birth deformities. I gave him a few bucks and the girl (local) I was with chided me for giving money away. That pissed me off, its my money and if I wanna toss a few bucks to those in need, its none of her business. Mind you this is a girl who works in Finance, makes a really decent salary, and does not hesitate to drop a few G's on a night of drinking, or buys a Prada bag only to not use it and collect dust. What's up with the people on this y speck island?
- 2 Mat Why don't you go to NYC then?  
Elegance -> The Chinese have always been praised for their elegance (just look at the level of sophistication in the art sector...ever seen a Cantonese Opera?)  
Intelligence -> Latest Nobel Prize in physics is from HK  
  
Sophistication -> Re Elegance  
  
Food -> Debatable...I much prefer a Dim Sum over a Pizza but that is affair of personal taste  
  
Culture -> Plenty of culture BUT your ignorance of the local lingo prevent you to fully appreciate it.  
  
Modernization -> Ehrhhh IFC, ICC, MTR, Octopus, HK Airport....
- 3 Claire ex-ax Hong Kong reminds me of the tv programme Survivor, except you can't vote the unworthy off the island. ☺
- 4 Mat Who does Dotgoner remind you of???
1. Safran
  2. Rastaman
  3. Another of those Troll but can't recall their names...just too many

The message thread begins with dotgoner using New York as a point of reference to criticize Hong Kong. In contribution 2, Mat identifies several counterpoints to the original message, and in so doing, treats the OP as a legitimate contributor. In other words, Mat enables the message thread to unfold according to the content of the original message. This is noteworthy, as Mat later in contribution 4 also explicitly orients to the OP as a troll by listing several other established forum trolls – this contribution may be in response to Claire ex-ax implicitly highlighting the problematic nature of the original message, though there is no definitive way of knowing if this observation is true. Nonetheless, Mat's two contributions demonstrate how trolling exchanges are shaped by the highly fluid and robust nature of floor spaces. The extent to which an alleged troll can generate a discussion is dependent on how other contributors orient themselves to a message thread. In the case of Mat, even an individual contributor within a single message thread can post multiple contributions that accomplish different floor management actions. In example 3, a trolling message can be viewed both as problematic and worthy of a response, as demonstrated in Mat's contributions.

These observations highlight an important contextual facet of online forums. Floor spaces embody the intrinsic need among contributors to communicate, or otherwise pursue small talk, share ideas, debate issues, and possibly engage in heated arguments, to name a few. Yet, attempts to troll, while the source of many ostensibly productive online discussions, can be viewed as a barrier to communication.

The next example demonstrates this point by showing how the establishment of a floor space is dependent on first identifying a possible troll. The message thread begins with the alleged troll.

(4) Hong Kong Chinese or British

- 1 exit strategy Not sure if this belongs here or in politics forum, and it probably has been discussed, but periodic updates of the topic have a value. Do the Chinese in HK feel that HK was better under the British? Or just the same. Or is it better now under the Communists, with SAR, and all that. The decade now passed allows us to see what the difference really is. A lot of HK Chinese might not have been old enough to know, but those 20 and over in 1997 might have an opinion.
- 2 jimbo Before we start, what are your actual thoughts on this? Or are you just trolling? ☺



Thus far in the analysis, floor spaces have been shown to tolerate, and sometimes welcome, trolling exchanges. Conversely, this example suggests that interactional work must take place in order to prevent floor spaces from incorporating contributions from alleged trolls. For example, the OP attempts to establish a discussion by asking a series of questions about Hong Kong, but rather than provide sequentially-appropriate answers (cf. Schegloff, 2007), jimbo postpones the topic by attempting to determine the rhetorical thrust of the original message (see “side sequences” as analyzed by Jefferson, 1972). This attempt to act as a gatekeeper to the message thread is evident in the construction “Before we start,” which allows jimbo to temporarily put the floor on hold in order to determine whether the OP is a troll. The distinction between “actual thoughts” and “just trolling” suggests that some floor spaces must be calibrated according to the intentions of a contributor.

Floor calibration—that is, the ways in which individuals shape message threads according to what has been said—is important to an understanding of trolling exchanges. An explicit attempt to identify a troll, such as in contribution 2, possesses a number of communicative functions. That is to say, the social action performed in a contribution that labels someone a troll is not only an accusation, nor does the message necessarily indicate that a contributor is expressing the problematic nature of trolling behavior. Such accusations may also fulfill a more generic communicative demand in message threads to manage what has been said and what should be said moving forward.

This need to manage communication can be addressed implicitly, as was the case in the second example where rather than explicitly declaring a desire to engage in a humorous discussion regarding Wendi Deng (e.g., “Hey, let’s all make fun of this person now!”), each jocular response to a previous contribution co-constructed a space where joking is the *modus operandi*. Unfortunately, the discussions that are created as a result of trolls can unfold into a series of flames (cf. Gully, 2012), and thus it is often necessary to explicitly address what has been said and what should be said moving forward (cf. jimbo’s contribution in example 4). In this sense, identifying a troll is as much a move to address the behavior of a contributor as it is an attempt to recalibrate the floor so that a message thread unfolds knowing that a troll is present. For example, contributors in example 4 may, but need not, ignore the contributions of the OP on the grounds that the original message is potentially an attempt to troll.

The larger discursive point is again that trolling accusations are often situated within a larger communicative demand to manage floor spaces. The following exchange, where a contributor attempts to recalibrate the floor space by encouraging fellow participants to stop responding to a provocative message, demonstrates this observation. In this example, the OP posts a link to an article detailing how a Black South African politician wishes to eradicate “Whiteness” in the country. The original message includes a quote from the politician, which is followed by the OP’s exclamation. The alleged troll appears later in contribution 6.

(5) Reverse Apartheid

- |    |                |   |
|----|----------------|---|
| 1  | bunko8         | “we are starting with this whiteness. We are cutting the throat of Whiteness”<br>Damn son!  |
| 6  | rickyross      | <i>[several contributions commenting on the linked article are omitted]</i><br>How can South Africa be racist? Black South Africans were colonized and subject to apartheid in their own country by a group of white European colonialists. Black South Africans are standing up for themselves now. I don’t see how treating the offspring of the colonizers in such a way to be racism in any way whatsoever. Take note, this is what a successful self-decolonization looks like. I wonder if Hong Kong could learn from SA? |
| 7  | SpeakCantonese | Incredible. I actually can’t believe, I don’t believe you believe what you’ve written. If you do believe what you’ve written, you are wicked. Not just misguided, wicked. You are a black supremacist. You are no different to a white supremacist. You are an old fashioned racist.  |
| 8  | UK/HKboy       | I understand your anger but revenge is not always the solution. It often just leads to further conflict and spiraling retaliations.   |
| 9  | kimwy66        | And you illustrate this approach with a video entitled ‘Kill the Boer’. Because killing people based on their ancestry has worked out so well in the past... Congrats, just about the dumbest post I have seen in 8 years on Geoexpat.  |
| 10 | TheBrit        | If you don’t feed the troll, he will go away. It’s probably a quicker solution than waiting for shri to ban him again.  |

The original message leads to five different contributors discussing the racial context of South Africa or commenting on race relations in general (e.g., contribution 3: “Wow... South Africa is the last place I would think of as racist.”). In contribution 6, the alleged troll indirectly defends the aforementioned politician by pointing to the history of racial segregation in South Africa and offering a link to a video about “killing whites.” This provocative message leads to three different contributors accusing rickyross of being “wicked” or criticizing the logic behind his comments. In responding to rickyross, contributions 7–9 implicitly establish a floor space that legitimizes the provocative message. Simply put, the contributors allow the message thread to unfold into an exchange of accusations and criticisms.

Conversely, in contribution 10, TheBrit explicitly orients to how the floor space has been managed thus far. He does this first through an accusation (“the troll”), which is immediately followed with a directive (“don’t feed”). The accusation-

directive construction here is noteworthy, as it demonstrates how trolling exchanges are tied to the expectation contributors have of message threads. For example, the directive “don't feed the troll” demonstrates that TheBrit neither values responses to trolling messages nor views the message thread as a space that should afford opportunities to post provocative messages. In this sense, TheBrit's contribution should be viewed as an attempt to manage the floor space, rather than (or in addition to) the widely-circulated observation within the literature that his message is a strategy to respond to a troll. In other words, TheBrit's contribution is indeed a response to an alleged trolling message, but it is also an indication of how he wants the floor space to unfold.

## 2. Discussion and conclusion

Trolling can be talked into existence in many ways because the contextual reasons for responding to, accepting the contributions of, or admonishing the actions carried out by, an alleged troll vary from person to person. This observation is alluded to in the literature reviewed in the beginning of this paper, which showed that many discursive resources are used to create, and respond to, trolling messages. Although these strategies are helpful in establishing that trolling is a highly fluid phenomenon, the contextual reasons for such variation require further attention.

The analysis conducted in this paper addresses this empirical gap by demonstrating that floor spaces help explain why alleged trolls are responded to in different ways. Specifically, the extent to which an alleged troll is accepted into a discussion is partly related to how contributors discursively orient themselves to floor spaces, or in other words, co-establish what is appropriate forms and ways of communication. In the second data excerpt above, for instance, the contributors established a floor space that did not attend to the problematic nature of the alleged troll's original message, but rather welcomed a playful discussion of Wendi Deng. The floor space, interestingly, unfolded this way despite the alleged troll wanting to generate emotional responses vis-à-vis Hong Kong women. In other situations, conversely, floor spaces are less flexible in terms of accepting controversial messages, as in the fourth data excerpt when a contributor puts the discussion on hold in order to establish whether the OP is a troll.

By using floor spaces as a lens through which to understand trolling exchanges, the analysis builds on existing research by showing that message threads are discursively elastic. That is, the strength of this research is that it has been able to show that contributors are capable of dealing with trolling attempts while addressing more serious contributions to a message thread. This discursive elasticity exists because message threads are capable of hosting multiple floor spaces (cf. data excerpt 2), and the asynchronous nature of such communication allows contributors to accomplish several actions within a single contribution (cf. CMC research; e.g., Simpson, 2005). For example, a forum contributor can within one message admonish an individual for trolling while creating a new floor that moves away from the discussion generated by the troll.

Furthermore, a number of general observations can be made that establish the benefits of using floor spaces to understand trolling behavior. First, any given contribution can be treated as an attempt to troll. For instance, providing a suggestion that does not align with the consensus established in a message thread is not simply a disagreement, as being disagreeable is sometimes also viewed as a trolling characteristic (cf. the first data excerpt). In other words, perceptions of intentionality are not always a factor when determining whether a contributor is attempting to troll. Second, and relatedly, the act of trolling can be oriented to in a number of ways (e.g., as fun, disruptive, annoying, or important), which feeds into the next observation. Third, it may be problematic to construct fixed understandings of trolls and trolling, as such terms are sometimes negotiated *in situ*, according to how the floor space unfolds. Finally, the co-constructed nature of trolling exchanges means that such behavior should not always be viewed as problematic. This observation was demonstrated most vividly when a contributor in the second data excerpt responds to an attempt to call out a troll with the following positive assessment of trolling exchanges: “what else is there to do on internet forums.” Indeed, troll and trolling are terms used amongst friends in a playful manner, and needless or pointless exchanges are expected and accepted behavior in some contexts. Accordingly, while popular culture and mainstream media overwhelmingly view trolling as a form of deviant behavior, scholars have a responsibility to provide a more nuanced understanding of online trolls. This study moves the literature forward by using floor spaces to establish a context-sensitive and co-constructed account of trolling exchanges.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.02.006>.

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