Trolling in *World of Warcraft*:

Is it, or is it not cyberbullying?

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Introduction/Background

Cyberculture in *WoW*

The world wide web has marked the beginning of an entirely new set of social interactions between the person and the computer. On the internet, information is passed from person to person through innumerable mediums including email, social networking sites, forums, online games, dating sites, advertisements, and blogs to name a few. Interactions between people has forever changed now that people anywhere in the world can quickly and easily communicate with one another with a simple click of a mouse and tap of the keyboard. These interactions between people create a unique cyberculture, as it is often referred to, which is the "unique set of habits, values, and other elements of culture that [have] evolved from the use of computers and the internet" (Cyberculture). Within this broad term there many variations of this culture depending on the community that is involved. One of the largest communities that continues to gain popularity is within the gaming community. More specifically, within the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) known as *World of Warcraft*.

World of Warcraft, which is often referred to as *WoW,* was first released by Blizzard in 2004. Today, *WoW* ranks as the most popular MMORPG with over 12 million subscribers (Molina). In this MMORPG the player can choose to play as 10 different species of characters which determines the appearance of the character as well as which faction the player will be supporting. During play, the players are immersed within the *WoW* culture as people chat and interact with their fellow players. Activities such as dungeons, raids, battlegrounds, and arenas are often played and communication amongst team members becomes imperative for the team to be successful in their endeavors. Small communities, known as guilds, that exist within each realm have a unique social dynamic where people will join for in-game benefits and gather to discuss upcoming missions, meet new people, and chat.

Definition of a Troll

Within *World of Warcraft*, there is a lot of jargon that is specific to the cyber culture of *WoW*. For example the word "troll" has two very different meanings that exist inside *WoW*. One is the name of a tall, muscular, and savage species that exists within the world of Azeroth (Troll. World). The other, more widely referenced use of the word "troll" is based off the fisherman's definition, "To fish for by trailing a baited line from behind a slowly moving boat" (Troll. Dictionary). The internet troll essentially does the same thing except they use words as the bait, and people instead of fish.

The internet troll that is seen in *WoW* is defined as, "someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking other users into a desired emotional response" (Matuk). Trolls have been known to partake in this behavior for fun, attention, or just because they're bored. This kind of troll can be found anywhere on the internet where the ability to chat among people is enabled. Since the troll aims to get a specific reaction from people (often times this reaction is anger or frustration) comments from the troll may be unpleasant to the receiver, ridiculous in nature, and/or seen as a personal attack on the player. Because of the tendency of people to take offense to the statements a troll may say, the act of trolling some consider to be a form of cyberbullying.

Definition of Cyberbullying

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HRSA), cyberbullying is "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself". This definition also includes, "Sending mean, vulgar, or threatening messages or images; Posting sensitive, private information and/or lies about another person; Pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad; [or] Intentionally excluding someone from an online group" (Smith et al). Though there are differences between trolling and cyberbullying, the victims in both cases are subjected to verbal abuse that may have lasting effects on the individual.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is to identify that the act of trolling is a form of cyberbullying. To do this, the reasons or causalities of trolling in *World of Warcraft* will be identified and related to the reasons why people cyber bully. Based on the intentions of the average troll versus the intentions of a cyberbully this study aims to determine if trolling is indeed cyberbullying.

Methods

In the performed studies, participants familiar with *World of Warcraft* were asked to take part in a survey, and/or a poll in which questions focused on the reasons behind why people troll in *WoW*. The responses in each section were then tallied up and analyzed to find what the main reasons why people troll were.

Study 1: Reason's for trolling

Participants

To collect data on trolling in *World of Warcraft*, surveys were posted in various *WoW* forums inside the General Discussions in the *World of Warcraft* sections of MMO Champion, and Zam. The players in these communities were targeted because they play *World of Warcraft*, come from a variety of backgrounds, ages, gaming experience, etc. and thus, represent the diverse *WoW* community as a whole.

Participants were drawn to the survey by the title of the thread which was, "Take a Quick Survey on Trolling in *World of Warcraft*." From here the viewers found a brief description of the purpose of the survey and a direct link to the survey itself. There were a total of 73 responses after about one week's worth of time. Of the 73 participants, the majority of respondents (n=64) were males between the ages of 22 and 30.

Survey

The survey was created on a free survey hosting site called Survey Monkey and contained a total of 10 questions. The first page of questions was titled, "General Questions" and exhibited four multiple choice questions. All of the questions on the first page were multiple choice and were answered by at least 72 of the 73 people. The questions on this page were:

What is your gender and age?

How long have you been playing *WoW*?

How often do you play *WoW*?

What do you primarily play?

The second, and last page of the survey was titled, "More Specific" and included three multiple choice questions and three essay questions. Of the six questions on this page an average of 47.2 people or approximately 64.7% of participants answered the questions on this page. The questions featured on this page were:

How often would you say you encounter a troll on *WoW*?

Have you purposefully trolled in game or in a forum related to *WoW*? If so where?

Do you troll outside of *WoW*? If so where?

How often do you troll?

Why do you troll?

Why do you think others troll?

Study 2: Trolling in direct relation to Cyberbullying

Participants

Participants for the second study were members of the MMO Champion community. This community was chosen for its diversity of respondents. The poll was submitted only to MMO Champion because of time constraints and overall ease of posting a poll on the MMO Champion website. A total of 209 people voted in the poll during an eight day duration. Discussion about the subject was also encouraged in the thread for people to explain why they chose the answer they did.

Poll

This poll was aimed at getting a general consensus of opinions about trolling as it directly related to cyberbullying. The overall subject of the thread and question of the poll was, "Is trolling a form of cyberbullying?" The participants could respond with one of the following choices:

Absolutely.

Yes, but it's not as bad.

Maybe.

Not at all.

What is 'trolling'?

Forum Posts

After participating in the poll, participants were invited to post their reasons why they choose their answer and their opinions on the subject. In the thread there were a total of 89 posts in about one week. After the initial posting of the thread, the thread was then left completely up to the participants. This allowed for the participants to express their opinions and interact completely with one another without any interference.

Results

Based on the following results the hypothesis was disproven, according to the qualities of a troll vs a cyberbully given by players in the game of *WoW*. However, according to the qualities of a cyberbully defined by HRSA, a troll is in fact considered a cyberbully.

Study 1: Reason's for trolling

General Information about Participants

In the first survey based study, the information gathered in the first page of results participants (*N*=73) are displayed in Figures 1 through 3.

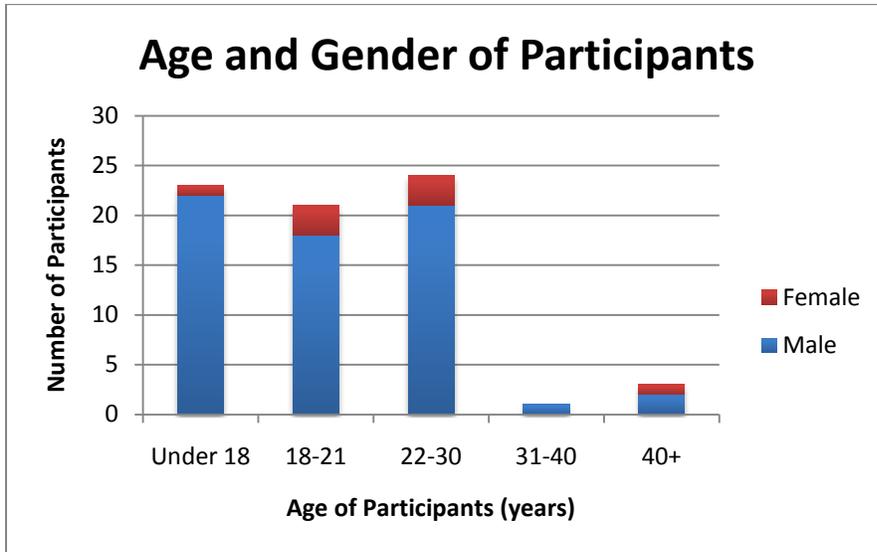**Age and Gender of Participants**

Figure 1: Shows the distribution of the 73 participants as they are classified in groups for their age and gender.

As seen in Figure 1, the vast majority of people who responded to the survey were male (*n*=64) with the mode of the male population under the age of 18. The females (*n*=8) demonstrate an 11% overall say in the results of the survey. There were no females who represented the age range of 31-40.

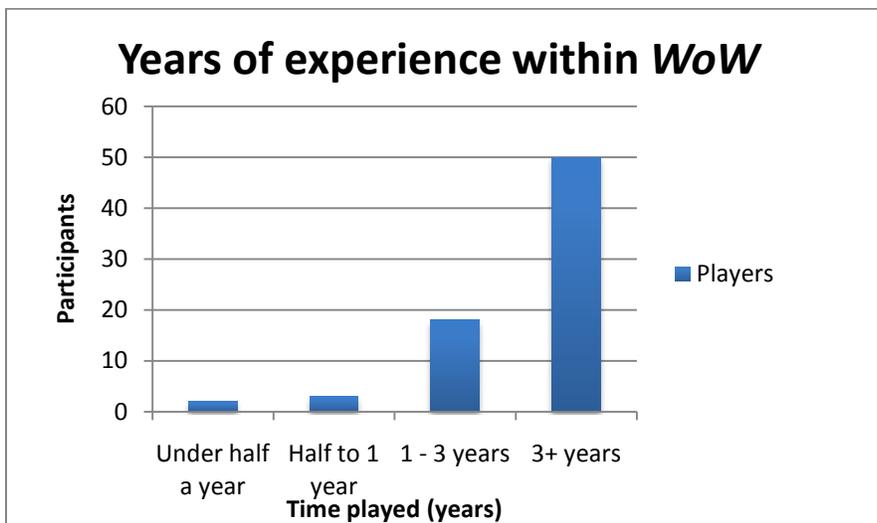**Years of experience within *WoW***

Figure 2: The distribution of total participants and how many years they have been playing *WoW*

In Figure 2, seen above, the vast majority (about 68%) of the 73 participants have been playing for over 3 years. This data indicates that most of the players who answered the survey have a high degree of experience within the game as a whole.

Of the 73 participants, (*n*=56) approximately 77% percent of them indicated that they play the game 3 or more times a week. The mode of the data indicates that the majority of the people (59%) play *WoW* every day (*n*=43). Judging from the duration the participants and frequency in which the participants play *WoW*, it can be inferred that the results for the following data is from a, overall, experienced and knowledgeable set of people within the realms of *WoW* which means more accurate data in general.

Given the limited capabilities of Survey Monkey, the engine used to collect the data, it is impossible to determine the frequency of any of the specific groups of people displayed in Figure 2 play *WoW*. The data displayed in the center of each slice of the pi charts can be read as the *n* number of responses followed by the percentage of the total response. For example, as seen in Figure 3, "57, 55%" would translate to, 57 people responded that they play DPS which is 55% of the total participants who voted.
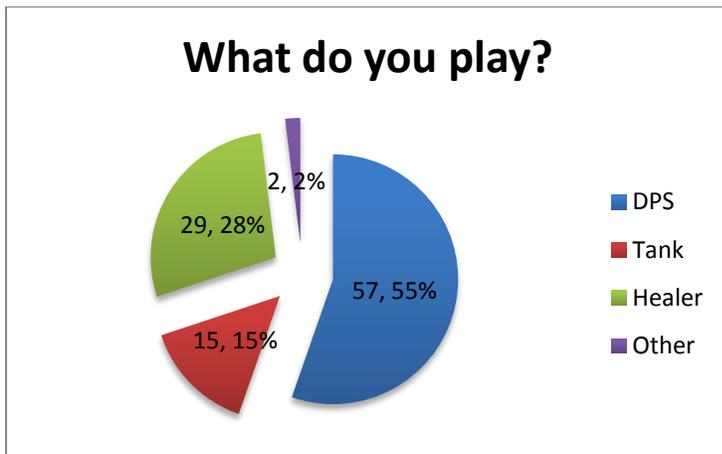

Figure 3: Shows the percentages of the participants who play a certain class of character.

This question seen in Figure 3 was answered by all but one participant. Originally the data in this question was designed to determine if there's a correlation between those who troll and which player class they usually play. Further research would have been done in this area to determine what duties are associated with each class. However, because of the limitations of the survey engine used there were no means of obtaining any particular participants answers to the other questions, therefore, this data has a very minute role in the results of this survey.

More in depth survey questions and answers

Of the questions asked on the second page of the survey the first question was the only one that was multiple choice. The other 5 questions were either just an essay question, or a combination of multiple choice with the option to write more. Questions that incorporated any kind of essay response were calculated using key word's or common phrases found in the results to tally up the data.
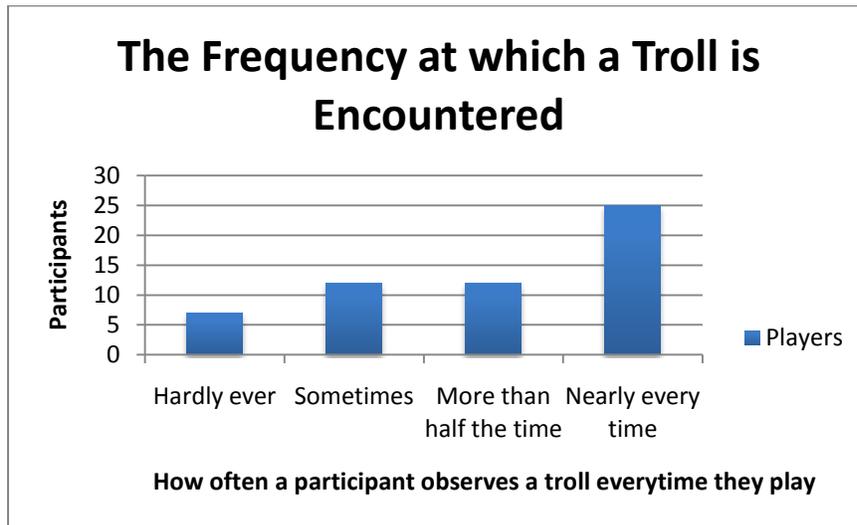

The Frequency at which a Troll is Encountered

Figure 4: Shows how often a troll is witnessed.

The data in Figure 4 was collected from 56 of the 73 survey takers with 45% of the participants (n=25) indicating that they witness a troll in *WoW* almost every time they sign in. There is an equal distribution of (n=12) players who say they witness a troll sometimes, and (n=12) players who say they see a troll more than half of the time.
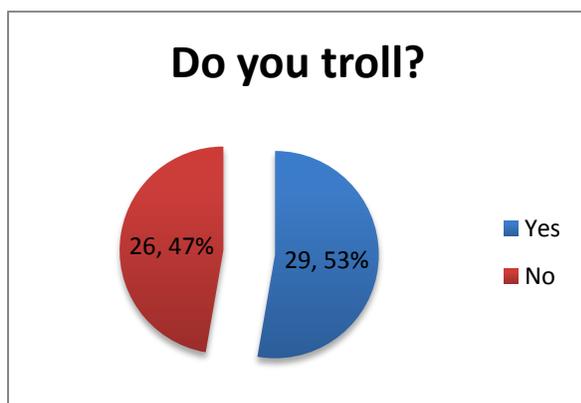

Do you troll?

Figure 5: Shows the percentage of participants who took the survey that admit to trolling in *WoW*.

As seen in Figure 5, of those who took the survey and answered this question (N=55) a slight majority of participants classified themselves as having trolled in *WoW*
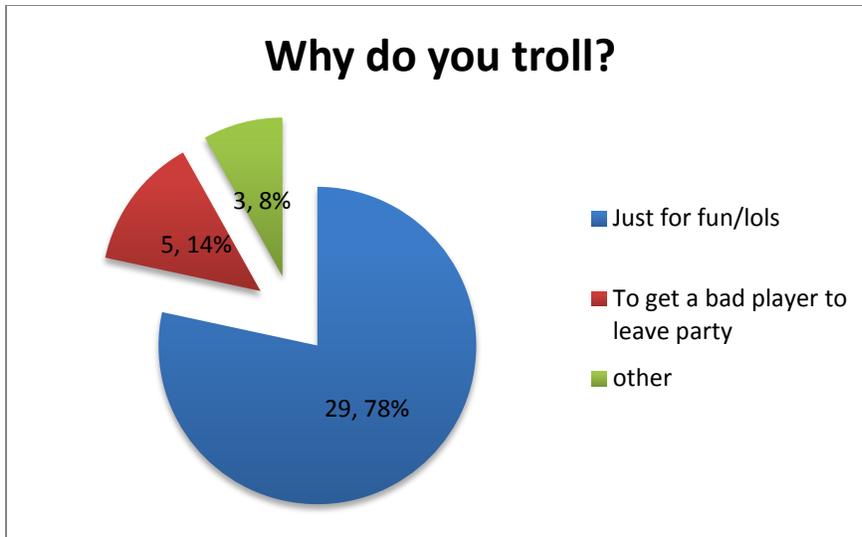
Why do you troll?

Just for fun/lols
To get a bad player to leave party
other

3, 8%
5, 14%
29, 78%

Figure 6: The trolls reasons as to why they troll.

Participants were allowed to check mark that they do not troll (*n*=25), or if they do troll, they were able to answer possible reasons as to why they troll. Only those who said that they troll (*n*=28) are seen in Figure 6. Responses in the "other" category ranged from "born to be trollll!" to "Rape kids". Three responses were omitted from this count because of their complete irrelevance.

Later analysis reveals that the method by which this question was asked should have been altered. But due to time constraints and lack of responses to later surveys, these results were not redone.

Reasons why others troll

Fun/lols
Enjoy bullying
Annonymity
Sad/selfesteem
Attention
Bored
Because others do it

3, 5%
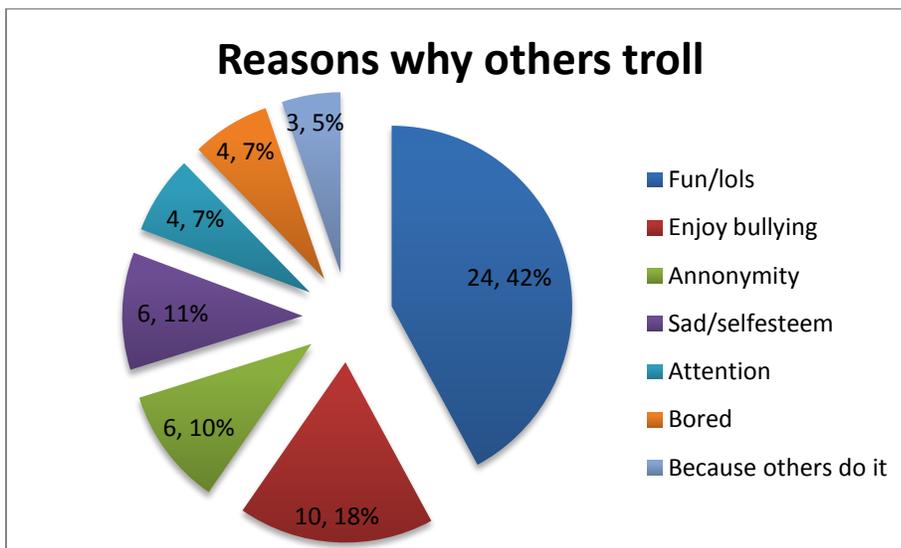4, 7%
4, 7%
6, 11%
6, 10%
24, 42%
10, 18%

Figure 7: Shows the wide distribution of answers as to why other people troll.

The question as seen in Figure 7, was answered by 45 of the participants. This question was answered by both trolls and non-trolls. Additionally, there were no multiple choice questions

accompanied with this response. Every answer was written in essay form and key words were tallied and distributed in the above figure.

The largest number of individuals (*n*=24, 42%) mentioned that they believe other people troll for the fun of it or the lol's (a popular abbreviation meaning laugh out loud) which had multiple of variations in spelling including lulz, and LOLZ.

The second largest percentage of people (*n*=10, 18%) believed that trolls simply enjoy bullying others. The remaining choices that were mentioned 6 or less times included answers such as "because they're anonymous so they can get away with it", "theyre sad and have no self esteem so they want to make other people the same way", "trollz are bored and nothing else to do for fun", and the least amount of people (*n*=3, 5%) had responses that mentioned how players think it's ok to troll because they see others doing it.

Table 1: A Tally of Reasons Why People Troll in *WoW*	
Reasons	**Total:**
Fun/lols	53
Enjoy bullying	10
Anonymity	6
Sad/Self Esteem	6
To get a bad player to leave party	5
Attention	4
Bored	4
Because others do it	3

Figure 8: Shows the combined total of reasons people mentioned in Figures 6 and 7.

Figure 8, seen above, is a representation of all the responses (*N*=91) as to why players choose to troll in *World of Warcraft*. The vast majority of people (*n*=53, 58%) said that the reason people troll is for fun and/or lols.

Study 2:

Poll

Information in this study was aimed at determining whether or not the *WoW* community considers trolling as variation of cyberbullying. 209 total players answered the following poll and there were 98 total posts to the thread that pertained to the poll afterwards.
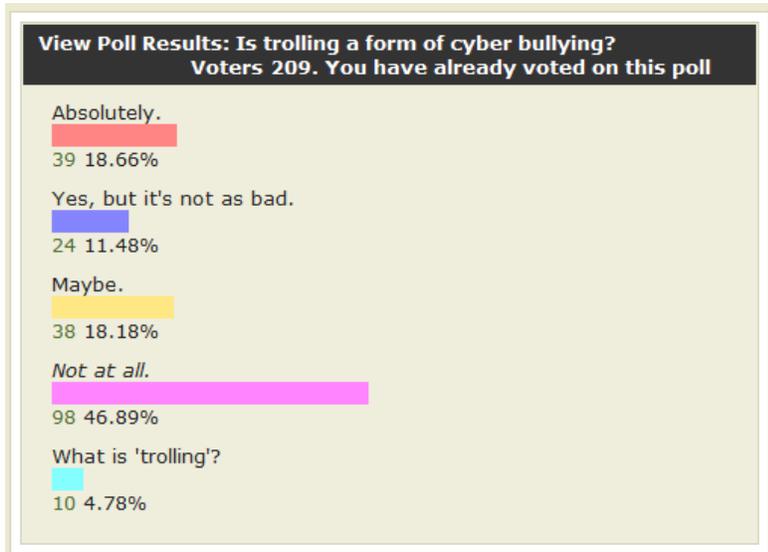
View Poll Results: Is trolling a form of cyber bullying?
Voters 209. You have already voted on this poll

Absolutely.

39 18.66%

Yes, but it's not as bad.

24 11.48%

Maybe.

38 18.18%

Not at all.

98 46.89%

What is 'trolling'?

10 4.78%

Figure 9: Shows the results of the poll taken directly off of MMO Champion.

As seen in Figure 9, nearly half of the participants (n=98, 47%) said that trolling is in no way a form of cyberbullying. The second most popular response, (n=39 , 19%) was to show that trolling is absolutely a form of cyberbullying. A close third (n=38, 18%) in the poll, was for the response "Maybe".

If responses from the "Absolutely" and "Yes, but it's not as bad" categories are combined then the amount of people who consider trolling as a form of cyberbullying is 63 or 30% which is still not enough to outweigh the amount of people (n=98) who do not think trolling is cyberbullying.

Forum Posts

From the posts in the form (N=89) certain key words were picked out and tallied to find out what differences, if any, exist between the act of trolling and the act of cyber bullying. The following data can be seen below.

Table 2: A Tally of Key Words in Forum Posts					
Category	**Characteristics of a Troll**		**Characteristics of a Cyberbully**		**Totals:**
#1	**Innocent Intent**	**20**	**Malicious Intent**	**47**	**67**
	Fun/lols	*5*	*Malicious Intent*	*16*	
	Harmless	*5*	*Harassment/Threat/Blackmail*	*10*	
	Pointless Arguments	*4*	*Defamation/Insult/Demean*	*8*	
	Attention	*4*	*Asshole*	*7*	
	Bored	*2*	*Upset (not just to make mad)*	*6*	
#2	**Not forced**	**17**	**Forced**	**3**	**20**
	Baited	*12*	*Forced*	*2*	
	Kids need thicker skin	*5*	*No fault of their own*	*1*	
#3	**Group**	**8**	**Single person**	**12**	**20**
	Short Lived/General	*8*	*Long Duration/Focused*	*12*	
#4	**Avatar**	**3**	**Real Life**	**8**	**11**
	Have to reveal something	*3*	*Pictures/Facebook*	*8*	

Figure 10: This table shows how many times specific words came up in the forum to describe either trolling or cyber bullying.
*Note: this table does not show how many people voted that trolling is or is not cyberbullying, rather it is a representation of how people *came to their decisions* that were represented in the poll.

As seen in Figure 10, the players categorized certain characteristics as having to do with either trolling or cyberbullying. The sub-headings (in light blue) show the general categories that each keyword a player used counted towards. The number of occurrences the key words came up in the posts were categorized and summed up. The sum of occurrences is represented to the right of the sub-heading title. The numbers in the "Totals:" column is a sum of each of the corresponding sub-headings.

The data in the table can be read like the following example. In Category #1 exhibited the number of people who mentioned that the difference between trolling and cyberbullying lies within the intent of the individual. Players who posted sentences resembling "trolls are typically" then the key words, "bored", "want attention", "looking for amusement", "completely harmless", or "looking to have pointless arguments" were counted as one vote in the corresponding column and row.
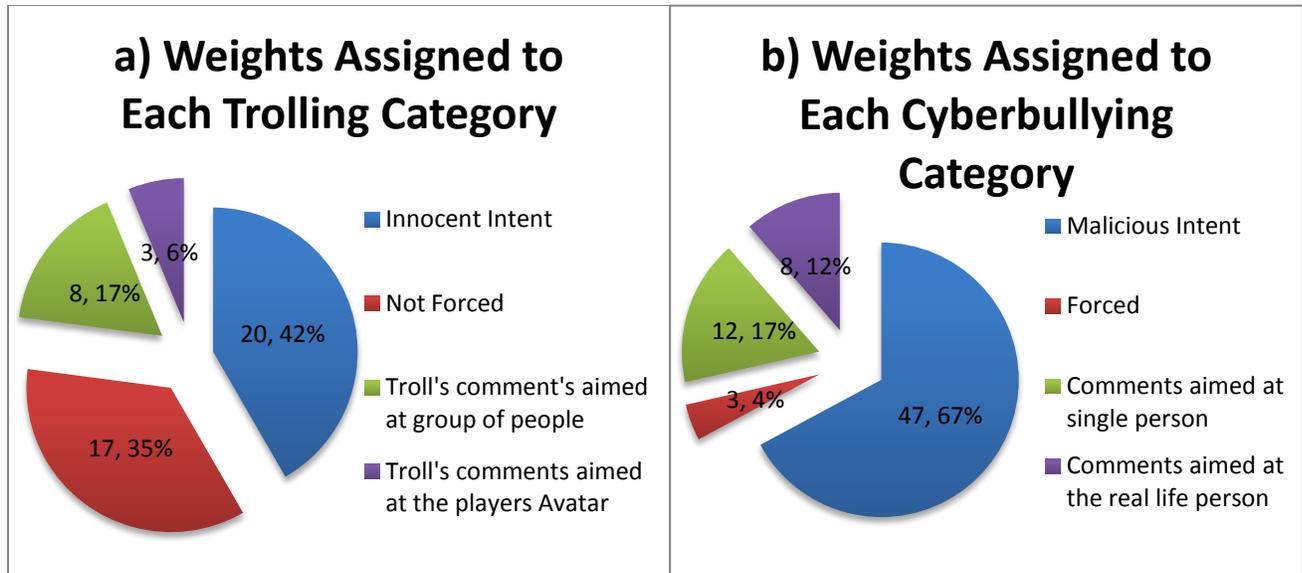
Figure 11 a) and b): both show the Weights (W%) of the categories represented in Figure 10.

The weights in Figure 11 a) and b) were calculated based on the percentage of key words that were said by people in each sub category in Figure 10. In both charts represented in Figure 11, the largest weights were based on the intent of the troll/cyberbully. The reasons tallied in Figure 8 will then be calculated according to the determined weights and the result will yield whether or not the reasons people gave in Study 1 show that trolling is cyberbullying .

Summation of the Data in Studies 1 and 2

The most critical data in terms of this overall study can be seen in the graphs in Figures 8 and 10. To score the reasons why people troll that were given by the participants in Study 1 according to their designated weights. To do so, decision matrixes were used and can be seen below.

	Matrix A: Trolling Score								
		Given Reasons							
Category	Weight, (W%)	Fun/lols		Attention		Bored		Because others do it	
		R	R × W	R	R × W	R	R × W	R	R × W
#1 Innocent Intent	42	53	2226	4	168	4	168	3	126
#2 Not Forced	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#3 Aimed at group	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#4 Aimed at the avatar	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total:	100	2226		168		168		126	

Matrix A Total: 2688

	Matrix B: Cyberbullying Score								
		Given Reasons							
Category	Weight, (W%)	Enjoy bullying		Anonymity		Sad/Self Esteem		To get a bad player to leave	
		R	R × W	R	R × W	R	R × W	R	R × W
#1 Malicious Intent	67	10	670	4	268	6	402	5	335
#2 Forced	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#3 Aimed at one person	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
#4 Aimed at real life person	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total:	100	670		268		402		335	

Matrix B Total: 1675

Figure 12, Matrixes A and B: The decision Matrixes seen above were used to determine whether or not the reasons for why people troll matches the qualities of a troll or cyberbully. The value *R* is the total number of times a key reason for why people cyber came up in the participants answers in Study 1. By multiplying the *R* by the weight (*W*), the Matrix totals were calculated.

Above in Figure 12, the overall score for Matrix A is2688 and for Matrix B score came out to be a lower score of 1675. The 8 major reasons participants gave (as seen in Figures 6 and 7) as to why people troll were categorized as either characteristics of a troll or a cyberbully according to the criteria gathered from participants (seen in Figure 10). Reasons such as "Because others do it" or "Anonymity" that were not previously defined in a particular category were organized according to the intent associated with the reason. "Because others do it", for example can be seen as having innocent intent because causing harm to another individual is not the key reason this particular player trolls.

Also, it can be seen in Figure 12 that there are zeros in place for the *R* number of times a reason was mentioned that fit in the categories 2, 3, and 4. All the reasons mentioned had to do solely on the intent on the troll.

Discussion

According to the results of Studies 1 and 2, the overall consensus proved that to the majority of *WoW* player, trolling is not considered cyberbullying. The results gathered in the poll from Study 2 were confirmed with a different set of individuals who participated in Study 1. Of the criteria used to differentiate between a troll and cyberbully, the intent of the individual was the reigning factor that was taken into consideration by the participants. In fact, not a single individual from Survey 1 pointed out any of the other criteria that had to do with, baiting an individual, focusing on a group of players, or trolling an avatar versus the person behind the avatar. The weighted matrixes (Figure 12) took this into account and a total of 4363 points were calculated in with the majority (62%) of the total showing that the reasons people troll are not aligned with the reasons people cyberbully.

But is this data enough to prove that trolling is not a form of cyberbullying? It came to a surprise that the players of *WoW* had a very different perception of what the definition of cyberbullying is. According to HRSA any "aggressive, intentional act" or "Sending [of] mean, vulgar, or threatening messages" is counted as an act of cyberbullying regardless of the individual's intent (Smith et al). With this taken into account there is no debate, trolling is cyberbullying. The original premise walking into this research was that the term "cyberbullying" is an official term that has a firm set of attributes that the members of any online community had an idea about. What was not expected is that the common troll, though known for "post[ing] inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community... with the primary intent of provoking other users into a

desired [negative] emotional response," is considered cyberbully to a minority of individuals (Matuk).

This research has brought rise to additional work that can be done to analyze whether or not other large online communities consider certain behaviors online as cyberbullying. Additional research could also be done to take into account the various limitations of this study. Though there were enough responses from individuals to create a sturdy platform for these studies to take place, the only people who took part in Study's 1 and 2 were from forums. Analysis would reveal that cybercultures in every corner of the web has a unique set of standards and ideals that the users are subjected to. Even though the surveys were posted in *World of Warcraft* based forums, the ideas about trolls in a forum (the primary habitat of the internet troll) may be different than the ideas of the people who spend most of their time in-game. A future study may focus only at reaching out to the opinions of the players while they're in the actual *WoW* environment.

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