Online Trolling the Case of Madeleine McCann

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ABSTRACT

Despite the sustained media attention surrounding internet trolling, academic studies investigating its occurrence are rare. This study aimed to provide a case study analysis of the behaviours and strategies of a group of alleged Twitter trolls referred to as the anti-McCanns due to their continual abuse of Kate and Gerry McCann as well as those who support them and thus identify as pro-McCann. The way in which language was used to construct the anti-McCanns group identity, enhance in-group cohesion and facilitate out-group disassociation from the pro-Mccann group was additionally explored, given that previous research has implicated group processes in the propagation of aggressive online conduct. A multi-method approach involving a combination of ethnographic observations and the collection of online commentary was employed. The data was then analysed using quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis, which indicated that language was utilised in a variety of ways by the anti-McCanns to construct a salient group identity and negatively stereotype and disassociate from the pro-McCann group. Findings additionally revealed that several strategies were employed by the anti-McCann trolls to provoke and derogate members of the pro-McCann group, supporting previous findings which have linked trolling to both western media culture and the characteristics of anti-social personality disorder. The implications of these findings both theoretical and practical are discussed, alongside recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011 Sean Duffy became one of the first internet trolls to receive a custodial sentence in the UK after being jailed for 18 weeks for posting offensive messages and videos on tribute pages created to honour the memory of deceased young girls. One of the deceased persons targeted was 15-year-old Natasha MacBryde, who had been killed after being hit by a train. In a barrage of offensive posts on a Facebook tribute page set up by her family, Duffy left messages such as "I fell asleep on the track lolz", as well as posting videos depicting children's character Thomas the tank engine beneath a superimposed image of Miss MacBryde's face.

The Malicious Communications Act, 1988 under which Duffy was prosecuted represents one of three existing legislative acts devised to safeguard people from online victimisation, the other two being the Communications act 2003 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.[1] Despite the firmly established illegality of internet trolling within the UK, cases such as that of Sean Duffy appear to represent the exception, not the rule. Few others have since culminated in charges being brought, and the taking of legal action is generally deemed extreme and unnecessary, despite the often-significant detriment caused to the individual(s) targeted (Bishop, 2013b). This ostensible reluctance to convict internet trolls is attributed in part to the implementation of Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidelines in 2012 imposing a higher threshold for the criminal prosecution of trolling following an eight-fold increase in cases tried between 2003 and 2011 (Fiveash, 2014). These guidelines specifically propose that the bringing of criminal charges be reserved for circumstances in which communication can be proven to be grossly, as opposed to just merely, offensive (Bishop, 2013b).

The exponential increase in reported incidences of trolling has been accredited in part to the significant rise in social media usage over the past decade. As of January 2016, there were approximately 3.4 billion internet users and 2.3 billion active social media accounts, operating

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[1] For an explanation of the legal stance taken with respect to trolling in the U.S, see Phillips, 2012

primarily through social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter (Kemp, 2016). Few could deny the pervasive effect such social networking sites have had in recent years. To put this into perspective, Facebook alone was assimilated to the third largest country in the world based on its population size of 1 billion in 2011 (Mal & Parikh, 2011). Twitter

meanwhile, a micro-blogging service, currently boasts around 288 million monthly active users and is one of the fastest-growing sites in the world (Chae, 2015).

The primary aim of this research is to provide a case study analysis of a group of alleged Twitter trolls commonly referred to as the anti-McCanns. Operating predominately under pseudonyms, the group are responsible for posting abusive and antagonistic messages on Twitter levelled at both Kate and Gerry McCann, the parents of abducted child Madeleine McCann. The anti-McCanns are also known to engage in verbal attacks against anyone who takes to Twitter to support the McCanns, particularly those who identify as pro-McCann and are therefore perceived to represent an opposing group of sorts. Despite nearly 10 years having passed since Madeleine's abduction, there are still estimated to be over 100 tweets posted using the McCann hashtag every hour, making this a significant community to investigate in terms of the sheer volume of activity they generate.

THE CASE OF MADELEINE MCCANN

To put the research aim into context, it is first necessary to consider some of the events surrounding Madeleine's abduction and the subsequent investigation into her disappearance. On May the 3rd 2007 three-year-old Madeleine was taken from a holiday resort in Praia da Luz, Portugal, after being left with her two-year-old twin brother and sister in an unlocked apartment while her parents dined at a nearby Tapas bar (Machado & Santos, 2009). Her disappearance prompted what has come to be regarded as one the most widely reported child abduction cases

in contemporary history, with saturation coverage akin to that which followed the death of Princess Diana (Rehling, 2012).

The investigation into Madeleine's abduction initially yielded few leads, with those that were pursued failing to generate further clues. The case, however, took a turn on the 31st July 2007 following reports of biological traces in the holiday apartment by two UK sniffer dogs (Machado & Santos, 2009). The outcome of this search was one of the main reasons the McCann's came to be regarded as suspects, despite widely held concerns surrounding the reliability of cadaver dogs (Lasseter, Keith, Jacobi, Farley & Hensel, 2003; Warren, 2015). Nevertheless, Portuguese investigators stood by these identifications and despite the lack of corroborating evidence, put forth the theory that the McCanns had sedated Madeleine, causing her to die in a tragic accident, before attempting to conceal this fact by disposing of her body. Despite these allegations, the McCanns were never formally charged, and as such, are considered innocent.

TROLLING RESEARCH THUS-FAR

Despite increased interest as of late, existing academic research on trolling is somewhat scarce. The limited research carried out thus far has traditionally focused on the linguistic analysis of corpora containing iterations of the term troll (Phillips, 2015). Hardaker (2010), for example, conducted a content analysis of Usenet posts containing accusations of trolling, identifying its four primary characteristics to be those of aggression, disruption, success and deception. The latter was also emphasised by Judith Donath, who defined trolling as "a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players" (Donath, 1999, p. 40). Hardaker (2013) later identified 6 primary strategies utilised by internet trolls. These ranged from covert tactics such as digression from the discussion topic at hand and the criticism of spelling or grammatical errors made by others, to overt ones such as the use of insensitive,

inflammatory and threatening language. Such attempts to define trolling are however limited, as existing forms of trolling not only manifest themselves differently across cultures (De Seta, 2013) but are also constantly evolving in order to adapt to the developments of online environments and interactions (De Seta, 2013; Hardaker, 2013; Phillips, 2013).

Recently, the focus has shifted from the analysis of online comments to the ethnographic study of communities of trolls (Bishop, 2013b; Phillips, 2015), particularly those who self-identify as such, and in so doing, form a subculture characterised by a distinct set of linguistic features and behavioural norms. Phillips (2015) after carrying out an ethnographic study of a network of self-identifying trolls on 4chan, an open access image-based bulletin board, concluded that trolling in the subcultural sense is predicated on aspects of media culture, with which it forms a symbiotic relationship (Phillips, 2013).

While such findings serve to frame trolling as an unremarkable phenomenon, representative of an extreme manifestation of pre-existing cultural practices, others have lent their support to the notion that those who engage in it may be driven, at least in part, by their individual pathology. Exploring the role of clinical disorders, Bishop (2013b), carried out an in-depth interview with a self-confessed troll, drawing attention to the many similarities between the characteristics of anti-social personality disorder as outlined in the DSM-V and those exhibited by the troll. These included the marked intimacy deficits made evident by the individual's claim that he enjoyed toying with him, as well as indications of deceitfulness and manipulative and callous behaviour.

Similarly, in two online studies exploring the relationship between the dark triad of personality, sadism and trolling behaviour, throughout which a total of 1215 participants were accumulated, trolling behaviour was found to be positively correlated with sadism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014). Of all three measures, sadism,

commonly defined as the enjoyment of cruelty, was found to show the most robust associations with trolling, both in terms of enjoyment levels and the extent of which the individual identified as an internet troll, as measured using the Global Assessment of Internet Trolling (GAIT) (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014). This finding, coupled with the fact that sadism was unrelated to the enjoyment of other online activities such as chatting and debating, led them to conclude that cyber-trolling appears to be an Internet manifestation of everyday sadism.

The measures employed were however limited, in that they did not allow for elaboration as to the type of trolling activities participants engaged in, nor the environments in which they occurred. Given that trolling behaviour has been shown to differ significantly between websites such as Facebook and Wikipedia (De Seta, 2013), it is arguably necessary to pinpoint the specific form of trolling being investigated before inferences can be made regarding the intentions and motivations which drive this behaviour.

Shachaf & Hara (2010), who avoided this pitfall by focusing on the behaviour of Wikipedia trolls, interviewed 15 moderators with whom they had engaged in frequent interactions with. Content analysis revealed emerging themes to be those of boredom, attention-seeking, and revenge. They concluded that the trolls came to regard Wikipedia as an entertainment venue through which they could find pleasure in causing damage to the community as well as individual users, all while shielding their identity beneath a cloak of anonymity.

The anonymity afforded by the internet, as pointed out by Widyanto and Griffiths (2011) often encourages a sense of impunity, which can cause users to become disinhibited and behave online in ways which violate the social norms they would otherwise adhere to when engaging in face to face encounters.

Exploring the role of anonymity in the context of internet trolling, Cho & Acquisti (2013) found that a users' propensity to carry out trolling behaviour decreased as the level of identifying

information increased, with significantly less offensive language being used within users' real name accounts in comparison to those which used pseudonyms.

GROUP PROCESSES IN INFLAMMATORY ONLINE INTERACTIONS

The role played by anonymity in facilitating inflammatory online interactions is thought to be mediated by group processes such as that of deindividuation, commonly described as a state of reduced self-awareness typically associated with immersion in a group (Goldstein, 2002) and depersonalization, whereby individuals come to be viewed and attended to in terms of the prototypical attributes of a group they are categorized as belonging to, rather than a unique individual (Lea, Spears & Groot, 2001). These processes form the basis of the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995), which contrary to traditional deindividuation theories postulates that anonymity accommodates a shift from the perception of the self and others at a personal level to that of the group, resulting in group polarization and an increased adherence to group, as opposed to idiosyncratic norms. This effect is believed to be exacerbated further when a group's social identity is particularly salient; an occurrence which Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell (1987) argue is only made possible in the face of perceived opposition to an out-group. The categorization of individuals as belonging to "us or them" can, in turn, culminate in the proliferation of hostile and aggressive behaviours (Tajfel & Turner, 2001).

Lorenzo-Dus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch (2011) for example found that online impoliteness was associated with group identity construction. Where group identity was salient, antagonistic groups used language to construct an "us versus them" dichotomy, with in-group members consequently associating members of the out-group with all the characteristics they viewed as undesirable and disassociating from them.

It is generally accepted that computer-mediated communication lends itself well to the exploration of a group driven anti-normative behaviour given the anonymity it affords and the

number of interactions it facilitates, both of which are considered conducive to the process of deindividuation (Lea, Spears & Groot, 2001). Such group processes, however, have yet to receive much systematic study in the context of trolling, the exception being Teppner's (1997) study of Usenet trolls, in which he argued that trolling resulted in the demarcation of in-group and out-group membership. This manifested itself through those who displayed naivety to the trolls intentions being categorized as the out-group and made subject to derogation by members of the in-group, which in turn consisted of those who had been capable of identifying and resisting the trolls attempts to cause disruption.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This case study employs an ethnographic approach, which emphasises the importance of considering online communities as a product of the wider societal culture in which they exist (Hine, 2000), thus aligning with modern conceptualisations of trolling (De Seta, 2013; Phillips, 2015). This also facilitates exploration of the extent to which the characteristics identified in prior ethnographic studies of trolling, such as those conducted by Phillips (2011) and Donath (1999) apply to the McCann "trolls".

The manner in which language is used to construct the group identity of, and enhance in-group cohesion and out-group disassociation within and between anti and pro-McCann groups are additionally explored, given the well-established role of inter-group relations in the initiation and sustainment of inflammatory online interaction.

METHOD

PROCEDURE

As is often necessary when conducting research which relies upon the co-operation of internet trolls, significant effort was placed early on in their identification and recruitment. Hashtag

analytics websites such as hashtracking.com and followthehashtag.com were used to identify the most prolific twitter users who tweeted using the McCann hashtag. A twitter account was then created and used to follow the accounts of the individuals identified. Observation of these users' interactions with other individuals operating under the McCann hashtag allowed for the identification of additional troll accounts to follow. Throughout this process particular attention was paid to the accounts of individuals who were accused of trolling by other users, as well as those named by various pro-McCann users, who essentially acted as informants after being approached by the researcher with a request that they identify the anti-McCann users they perceived to be trolls, the latter approach being endorsed both generally within ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2010) and more specifically with respect to ethnographic trolling research (Phillips, 2015; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). Those who reciprocated in following the researcher's account back were then sent private messages requesting their participation in a study exploring tweeting behaviour. This attempt to engage with the trolls through interview was largely unsuccessful. As a result, efforts were refocused solely on the collection of data from public discussions. This was acquired using ethnographic participant observation, a process throughout which the researcher engages in observational and participatory fieldwork with an online community over a period of time (Marwick, 2013), in this case over the duration of 6 weeks. While ethnographic observations were being carried out, the role of group processes was simultaneously explored through the collection of a corpus of tweets, in addition to data acquired via group and one to one conversations with anti-McCann users. The natural formation of the pro and anti-McCann groups negated the need to employ experimental paradigms such as the minimal groups paradigm, in which participants are allocated to groups on the basis of meaningless and arbitrary criteria, which ultimately serves to strip group interactions of the very social context the SIDE model emphasises the importance of (Hornsey, 2007). Unlike their ad-hoc counterparts, naturally formed groups have a historical context, and

feature bonds between group members facilitated by sustained interactions and formed on the basis of within-group similarities and between-group differences that hold meaning to their members (Weisel & Böhm, 2015).

TWEET SAMPLE

A sample of 400 tweets obtained from 37 user accounts and containing a total of 7600 words was selected for analysis. Two hundred of these consisted of interaction between members of the anti-McCann group toward in-group members, while the remaining 200 consisted of interaction between members of the anti-McCann group and the pro-McCann users. Though the sourcing of data from Twitter is governed by the same principles which cover human research participants, it is necessary to acknowledge the unique challenges encountered when conducting internet research, such as acquiring consent from anonymous and often unreachable users. It has been proposed that the conflict between conforming to ethical guidelines and successfully carrying out useful internet research might be reconciled by the understanding that social media content is placed in a public place, and as such, should be considered to be available for public consumption (John, Chens & Hall, 2004).

CODING SCHEME AND DATA ANALYSIS

Group cohesion between the anti-McCann users and disassociation from the pro-McCann users was assessed using a coding scheme developed by Luzón (2014)[2]. This was composed of a number of indicators some of which indicated positive aspects of social interaction and some of which signified online anti-sociality. The inclusion of both social and anti-social markers, gleaned from previous research on social presence, uninhibited behaviour and online

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[2] See Luzón (2014) for a breakdown of the coding scheme for Social and Anti-social indicators that have been used in the present study.

impoliteness between groups offered an ideal framework for the exploration of intra and inter-group relations within the specific context of CMC, such as the manner in which linguistic cues were utilised by anti-McCann contributors to express allegiance to one group and disassociate from another. The former were divided into the 3 subcategories of affective, cohesive and interactive indicators while the latter were likewise separated into the 3 subcategories of negative socioemotional behaviour, group exclusion and confrontational interaction. For a breakdown of the specific indicators coded for within each of the aforementioned subgroups, see Tables 1 and 2. The prevalence of social and anti-social indicators within the sample was analysed using quantitative content analysis. A discursive approach was additionally employed to identify emerging themes and explore the ways in which language was used by the anti-McCann's to construct both their own social identity and categorise that of the pro-McCann group. The importance of considering the language employed by a community of interest was emphasised by Markham (1998), who argued that when attempting to delineate the characteristics of the individuals who inhabit a particular social space, virtual ethnography must consider also the "Text of people who constitute these social spaces, [as] the process of building relationships and social structures is thoroughly dialogic: online cultures exist because people interact with each other through writing over time" (p. 210).

RESULTS

ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

Initial observations of the McCann trolls took place over a six-week period, commencing at the end of May 2015 and concluding in mid-July 2015. Several observations were noted via field notes throughout this time. These revealed a number of basic patterns with respect to the way in which the trolls interacted with both one another and pro-McCann contributors. First, the insults and abuse levelled at both the McCann's and pro-McCann users were constant,

repetitive, and in clear violation of Twitter policies, though user accounts were rarely suspended. Observations carried out at various intervals throughout the day and corroborated using hashtag analytics indicated that Twitter discussions using the McCann hashtag usually peaked in the early hours of the morning between 6-9am. They would then experience a lull during the day, before increasing dramatically once again in the evening, typically at around 7pm. It was noted that while many of the regular anti-McCann contributors were absent during typical working hours, others were posting continuously and appeared to be able to dedicate an inordinate amount of time to their activity on Twitter. This observation parallels that made by Phillips (2015), who concluded that the trolls she had encountered on 4chan were likely somewhat privileged. Similar inferences were drawn in this case, and were to an extent verified by group members who appeared keen to illustrate this point. A pertinent example of this was the case of a prolific contributor who described herself as "a wealthy housewife" before sending the researcher an image of a summer house she alleged to have sold for a large sum of money. When making such assertions however, it is worth also considering alternative explanations for the behavioural patterns identified. It is possible for example that the anti-McCann users continued to contribute to discussions while at work, or were operating in countries with different time zones, such as Australia where several users purported to be based.

CADAVER DOG DISCUSSION

After several weeks simply observing the anti-McCann users and the way in which they engaged with other hashtag McCann contributors, the researcher attempted to engage the trolls in a discussion pertaining to the validity of the cadaver dogs, which was noted as being one of the most frequently evidenced topics discussed by the McCann trolls. This conversation was initiated on the evening of July 5th, 2015 after the researcher posted a tweet stating that cadaver dogs make false positive errors 10-20% of the time when working in hot temperatures

alongside a link to the journal article from which this finding was obtained. The trolls' responses were plentiful and instantaneous, prompting an in-depth discussion which lasted approximately 3 hours. Throughout this time a total of over 100 messages were accumulated.

The first of these took the form of a dismissive claim made by an anti-McCann user stating that "it wasn't hot" which immediately preceded two responses from pro-McCann users, both of whom expressed interest in reading the article. As more users began to contribute to the discussion thread, some of the anti-McCann members began to become suspicious of the researcher due to their newcomer status, as evidenced by their limited tweeting activity. This led an anti-McCann user to confront the researcher by suggesting that they seemed "to have made this account just to make this point".

This was followed by an accusation that the researcher was "nothing but a cheap shill", shill being a term frequently used by anti-McCann users in reference to an individual whom they believe is being paid to spin the facts in the McCann's favour.

This accusation prompted the involvement of several more anti-McCann as well as pro-McCann users, though any genuine attempts to discuss the case were rebuffed. Where references were made to the journal article, responses became hostile, with one user stating that he did not "care about the stupid article". The discussion soon escalated, resulting in the anti-McCann's posting various insulting statements targeted at anyone who disagreed with them. In an apparent display of confirmation bias, the anti-McCann users continued to ignore any evidence presented which refuted or failed to align with their purported belief that the McCann's were responsible for Madeleine's disappearance, even proceeding to block those who were persistent in attempting to engage them in a cogent discussion of the facts. This included in some instances, the researcher.

TROLLING STRATEGIES

A number of strategies identified in previous research (Hardaker, 2013; Phillips, 2015) as constituting trolling behaviour were observed when participating in this discussion. The main strategy employed was a tangential digression from the topic of conversation, most often expressed through spamming the conversation thread with non-sequiturs. Such statements often incorporated claims that the cadaver dogs Eddie and Keela had never been wrong and were sent in a succession of up to 20 messages irrespective of their relevance to the discussion topic at hand.

Any attempt to initiate a legitimate discussion about the McCann case was usually met with extreme hostility in the face of little provocation, often culminating in the person who had raised the point being personally attacked. Such verbal attacks typically involved insinuations that the individual to have broached the subject was stupid or incapable of comprehending that which they perceived to be glaringly obvious. The researcher, for instance, was told that they must be, "Thick as bricks. It's so easy a child could work it out".

Another interesting observation related to the way in which the word "shill" was used. As aforementioned this was a term used to refer to an individual they believed to be under the employ of the McCann's. It was, however, used by the anti-McCann's to refer to virtually everyone who they perceived to be group outsiders, even those who claimed to be neutral. Phillips (2015) suggested that individuals engaging in covert trolling may use subtle cues she refers to as calling cards, in order to inform other trolls of their success or identify someone who took the bait, so that other trolls might join in and cause further disruption. Whenever this term was used, anti-McCann users presented themselves in abundance and typically proceeded to mock the naivety or intelligence of the individual identified.

Many of the McCann trolls used images of Kate and Gerry McCann as their profile images, typically favouring images of Kate McCann jogging or the couple smiling after Madeleine's

abduction in order to reinforce the expressed group belief that they were in some way culpable. They also frequently distributed memes and offensive images in an apparent attempt to elicit a response from pro-McCann users. These memes typically depicted Kate or Gerry McCann with large sums of money and captions such as "it's not about the money but please keep donating" and "I've been working really hard, says Kate #McCann who gave up her job 8 years ago after her daughter was 'taken'.

EXPOSURE OF RESEARCH AIM

After engaging in this initial discussion, an individual who had been approached prior to the fact via direct message weighed into the conversation, informing the others of the researcher's intentions by referring to them as "the psychology student studying trolls". Though none of the individuals approached were informed of the nature of the research, they were able to gage an understanding of its purpose upon viewing the intended interview questions. At this point many became increasingly hostile and launched a personal attack on the researcher, displaying many of the vengeful behaviours identified by previous researchers (Bishop, 2013b; Hardaker, 2010; 2013), though in this case these primarily focused on the criticism of grammatical errors and suggestions that the researcher lacked the intelligence necessary to conduct academic research, as illustrated by comments such as "Stick to your psychology studies, you need to do something constructive with your time", "you need better English to do a PHD luv!" and "if your bias [sic] your dissertation will be a complete failure you need my help". This continued for several minutes, with anti-McCann users continuing to mock the researcher amongst themselves as highlighted by the discussion below.

"She should at least have the intelligence to read the PJ files before spouting off, eh!"

"Well with that level of perception I'm amazed she got in"

"she sent me a questionare file back in May ,lots of stupid q's"

15

"Oh FFS. X"

"lol xx"

At this point an anti-McCann user who had not taken part in the initial conversation addressed the researcher, saying "One notes one's following one. Am I correct in assuming you must be in the v earliest stage of your psy course? #McCann". Upon being informed that this was not the case, he proceeded to post a series of nonsensical statements, which, can be observed below.

 "ACE I love it when I'm wrong! Coz it's so fkn rare that I am. By the way, I'm also the Pope when I'm not on here!"

"When me and my mates woz iz in the LAST months of our Masters we'd already done our research You've left it v late!"

"I've been researching abuse on the internet since June 2013. The #McCann case lends itself SUPERBLY #Media #Police et al"

When asked what he had studied at university he responded "#FatLorraFknGoodItDidTho I now dig ditches for a living. Rather have muscles than a fat arse from sitting down". Interestingly, such statements were analogous to those made by the troll interviewed by Bishop (2013b), who he argued represented a type of troll he referred to as a "hater" given their propensity to undervalue and mock those whom they perceived to hold specific achievements. In a statement which very much mirrors that quoted above, the individual interviewed suggested that he had been "unconditionally offered a PhD (sic) placement, but instead choose to contribute to society, rather than masturbate (his) life away on deluded mentalist follies".

The frequencies with which anti-social and social indicators featured in the sample are presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Examples of tweets illustrating the use of a subset of both anti-social and social indicators can be found in Tables 3 and 4.

(Table 1 here)

(Table 2 here)

ANTISOCIAL INDICATORS

Group Exclusion

Personal Attacks

Indicators of group exclusion were comprised mainly of the use of personal attacks, which featured heavily in the anti-McCann members' interactions with the pro-McCann users at a rate of 47%. These personal attacks primarily involved the use of curse words and vitriolic language as demonstrated by the examples in Table 3.

Subtler forms of personal attack, such as the use of sarcastic and condescending language which served to mock and undermine pro-McCann members were also observed, and externalized through use of the hashtags such as "stupid is as stupid says" and suggestions that pro-McCann users were lacking in intelligence, both of which can also be observed in Table 3.

Disassociation from group

Another prevalent strategy used to facilitate group exclusion was the use of language to disassociate from the pro-McCann group members which were employed within 25% of the tweets analysed. This was often expressed through the utilisation of "us" v "them" terminology with Kate and Gerry McCann and all those perceived to support them being associated with a

variety of negative traits, such as the inability to protect their children, as depicted by the examples in Table 3.

(Table 3 here)

SOCIAL INDICATORS

Group Cohesion

Appeal to Shared Knowledge

As shown in Table 2, one of the most prevalent cohesive indicators used by the anti-McCann's was the posting of links which served to appeal to shared knowledge, a strategy commonly used in circumstances which feature online conflict as a means to strengthen a particular group's position (Luzón, 2013), or facilitate the achievement of group goals. These links featured in 21% of the overall tweets sampled and were almost always for the Gofundme page of Gonçalo Amaral, the detective who led the investigation into Madeleine's disappearance before accusing the McCann's of covering up her death. They were often accompanied by captions such as fiver Friday, which facilitated a shift in focus from individual to group goals, in this case funding Amaral's legal defence. The fact that "fiver Friday" resulted in anti-McCann users coming together in a specific virtual space at a specific time seemingly increased group cohesiveness, which can in some circumstances be restricted within virtual communities given that they are more dispersed in terms of space and time (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). Other links frequently featured included those for the McCann files, as well as links to videos made by individual users discussing the case which appeared to be posted and retweeted in order to share information, solidify arguments and express solidarity and support as evidenced by the examples outlined in Table 4.

Use of Vocatives

The use of names to refer to one another was quite rare, featuring in just 8% of the tweets sampled. This may however be accounted for in part by the automatic incorporation of usernames when responding to or addressing others on Twitter, as well as the fact that the majority of the McCann's used pseudonyms in lieu of their real names. Where anti-McCann users did refer to in-group members by their names, they almost always referred to two prolific users named Isabelle, and Nikki, who, unlike the majority of the group used their full names and images of their likeness, though establishing the veracity of such details is, of course, difficult. Use of their names was seemingly intended as a term of endearment and a means to express admiration and support. Examples of tweets which featured the use of vocatives are presented in Table 4.

(Table 4 here)

DISCURSIVE THEMES

A number of discursive themes were identified, the most prominent of which were those of motherhood, justice and freedom of speech. Examples of the tweets which embodied each theme are presented in Table 5.

(Table 5 here)

MOTHERHOOD

The anti-McCanns frequently referenced motherhood in order to construct themselves as paragons of good parenting, while Kate McCann and pro-McCann users were constructed as the very embodiment of poor parenting, often being referred to as neglectful, uncaring and generally devoid of all the characteristics they perceived as being synonymous with good parenting. With respect to Kate McCann specific references were made to her "negligent"

parenting style and her behaviour and demeanour shortly after Madeleine's disappearance, with particular emphasis placed on the fact that she had not physically searched for Madeleine. Such attacks on Kate McCann's parenting are reminiscent of the stance taken by mainstream media shortly after Madeleine's disappearance, which, when not formulating hypotheses as to the identity of Madeleine's abductor focused its efforts on employing moral news discourses which framed the McCann's as "bad" parents, who were negligent in leaving their children in the apartment alone and appeared too controlled in the wake of such a tragic event. Kate, in particular was subject to repeated insinuations that she had failed to exhibit the level of emotionality expected from that of a mother concerned for the well-being of her missing child (Goc, 2009). Contempt for her was such in the aftermath of Madeleine's disappearance that journalists went as far as to label her as being too serene for sympathy (Goc, 2009). Underlining this sense of disassociation with the McCann's plight, Enright (2007) suggested that distancing ourselves from the McCanns was a potent form of magic as it keeps our children safe. Examples of the manner in which the theme of motherhood is materialized are presented in Table 5.

This theme also implied a strong female presence within the anti-McCann group, a finding which contrasts with the majority of trolling research in which the individuals being observed are typically perceived as being male due to the misogynistic sentiments they often express, sometimes under the guise of a female alias (Phillips, 2015; Herring et al. 2002). Though accusations were made suggesting that members of the anti-McCann group were, in fact, males purporting to be female, the clandestine nature of internet trolling makes such claims difficult to verify.

JUSTICE

Another prominent theme was that of justice. Mirroring the findings of Kennedy (2010), who analysed YouTube comments relating to the McCann case, anti-McCann users framed their

comments as a plea for justice for Madeleine, though this appeared to be little more than a means to justify the ongoing perpetuation of abuse toward the McCanns. Conversation relating to the notion of justice also typically referenced the belief that the McCanns were being aided by a compliant media, or a government-wide conspiracy devised to protect paedophiles. Such rhetoric often centred on recent controversies surrounding alleged cover-ups, amidst thoroughly unfounded allegations that the McCanns themselves formed part of a paedophile ring. The anti-McCanns, therefore, constructed their social identity as purveyors of justice, while the McCanns and those who supported them were constructed as enablers of sexual abuse, lacking in moral fibre, and representative of an obstacle in their fight for justice and the protection of children, as illustrated by the examples tweets in Table 5.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to provide an ethnographic account of the behaviours exhibited by the anti-McCann trolls, as well as the way in which they used language to construct their social identity, enhance in-group cohesion and facilitate disassociation from a perceived outgroup. In doing so, it aimed to fill a lacuna in the case study of a specific group of internet trolls, as well as the role of group processes in a trolling context.

It must first be noted that the individuals observed over the course of this study do not appear to represent trolls in the sub-cultural sense such as those identified by Phillips, as they did not self-identify as such, but rather constructed their social identity as that of a group of justice seekers, determined to denounce the individuals and institutions they perceived as being complicit in the cover-up of child abuse. Analysis of the language used in discourse relating to justice seeking, however, indicated that this was simply used to mask the trolls underlying intentions to continue directing verbal abuse at Kate and Gerry McCann, as well as those who lent them their support, thus supporting the findings of Kennedy (2010). It might, therefore, be

useful for future research to explore the ways in which disingenuous intentions and manipulative behaviours manifest themselves linguistically and as an extension of this, how they might consequently be identified. This would hold particular utility when investigating online communities such as that of the anti-McCanns, in which the nature of the content being discussed makes it difficult to discern any genuine, albeit controversial statements from those made with the intention of creating conflict for amusements sake, the motivation underlying the latter being what distinguishes trolling from the making of belligerent comments when engaged in a hostile debate (Leaver, 2013; Phillips, 2011).

While attempts were made to gage a first-hand understanding of the anti-McCann users intentions, their proclivity to decline the invitation for an interview meant that all the behaviours identified as constituting trolling were based primarily on the perceptions of individuals who formed part of a community of users who regularly tweeted using the McCann hashtag, or, where little elaboration was given as to why a particular behaviour was perceived to constitute trolling, the interpretation of the researcher.

This led to the identification of a range of behaviours and perceived trolling strategies, which ranged from continuously spamming discussion threads with nonsensical statements to attempting to engage others in a game of transgressive one-upmanship and, in their most extreme form the use of vitriolic language and the distribution of offensive memes. The diverse nature of strategies identified corroborates previous findings (Hardaker, 2013; Phillips, 2015) and consequently, the notion that trolling is characterised by a wealth of behaviours even within a specific group (Phillips, 2012).

In terms of group processes, findings contrasted with those of Shachaf & Hara (2010) who found that trolls typically operated in isolation, revealing instead that the anti-McCann trolls appeared to work within an anti-social network of sorts, thereby aligning with the findings of

both Phillips (2015) and Tepper (1997). The anonymity of anti-McCann group members and the salience of their social identity, as evidenced by the linguistic realization of politeness and impoliteness indicators, formed the conditions conducive to the process of both deindividuation and depersonalisation, resulting in those who were considered to prescribe to group norms being categorized as in-group members and those who did not categorized as belonging to a perceived out-group. Reflecting the findings of Tepper (1997) the anti-McCann trolls were found to define themselves using "us and them" terminology, displaying antagonistic behaviour toward and mocking the pro-McCann users, thus lending support to his assessment that trolling is "A game that all those who know the rules can play against all those who do not" (p.40).

At an idiosyncratic level, a number of parallels were drawn between the comments made by some of the anti-McCann trolls and those made by the "hater troll" interviewed by Bishop (2013b), which were found to reflect the criteria for antisocial personality disorder as specified within the DSM-V. The continued exploration of the role of antisocial personality disorder in trolling behaviour may, therefore, represent a fruitful avenue for future research, particularly as it shares many of its characteristics with psychopathy (Cale & Lilienfield, 2002), which Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus (2014) found to be strongly correlated with trolling. The notion of a relationship between trolling and antisocial personality disorder is further supported by the McCann trolls' unwavering endorsement of the right to unfettered free speech and their profound resistance to authority, particularly where online censorship is concerned. This adversity to the regulation of online spaces has been shown to be one of the only consistent characteristics of internet trolls (Phillips, 2011), as well as a defining feature of antisocial personality disorder (Black & Larson, 2000).

Beyond individual pathology, findings additionally supported Phillips' (2015) assertion that trolls are "cultural scavengers" who essentially feast on existing issues of controversy which

first pass through the media filter. This was particularly evident in the case of the anti-McCanns given that the trolling was preceded by a series of equally provocative and unsubstantiated news reports implicating the McCanns in Madeleine's disappearance, and was thereafter fed by media reports condemning the trolls' actions and consequently showering them with the very attention they appear to covet (Bishop, 2014; Phillips, 2015). It is, therefore, evident that the "don't feed the trolls" credo is somewhat futile when they exist within a cultural system which does precisely that, and in so doing, contributes to both the initiation and sustainment of trolling behaviour.

It is critical to acknowledge, however, that research exploring the role of the media in shaping trolling behaviour is vastly over-represented in western parts of the world, and thus generates findings that can only be generalized to western cultural systems. Enhancing our understanding of the relationship between media and trolling behaviour necessitates that existing research be contrasted with future research exploring this relationship in parts of the world where the media exists under state ownership.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The finding that anonymity contributes to the perpetuation of trolling might prove useful in informing preventive strategies, such as the prohibition of the use of pseudonyms on Twitter. This approach is currently employed by Facebook, and while it still remains subject to occasional exploitation by trolls (Leaver, 2013), the higher degree of transparency with respect to user identities makes this substantially easier to regulate. At the group level however, where a group is rendered identifiable to an out-group, particularly a powerful one capable of repressing the in-group, the consequential visibility between in-group members might simply cause them to rally together and adjust their actions so as to resist the powerful outgroup (Lea, Spears & Groot, 2001). The manner in which a community of trolls might negotiate their

behaviour in response to attempts at repression by a powerful out-group, such as moderators on a forum might therefore serve as a useful avenue for future research.

The first limitation of note is the selection of accounts to follow on the basis of their interaction with prolific users. Given that interactions on social media are underpinned by the principle of homophily, that is the tendency for people to "associate with other people and groups who are mostly like themselves" (Yardi & Boyd, 2010 p. 316) this technique was effective in identifying additional trolls' accounts to follow. However, many such interactions are also ephemeral in nature, meaning that those who engage in them might not necessarily be invested in the topic or regularly contribute to its discussion (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). This was underscored by the fact that some of the accounts followed engaged in very little discussion using the McCann hashtag. In hindsight, it may have been more efficient to search each account identified as potentially belonging to a McCann troll on a website such as Greptweet, through which a large number of archived tweets can be viewed.

Despite ethnography being endorsed as one of the most useful methods for ascertaining the "reality" of a community or situation (Creswell, 2007), it is critical to acknowledge the subjectivity which surrounds a researcher's discernment of this reality (Hine, 2000). An ethnographer's interpretation can be considered to be "one truth of a potential many, with each truth being just as valid as the next. No one truth is exhaustive and definitive, but an attempt at persuasion" (Rosaldo 1986, p. 80). The external validity of this research might, therefore, be somewhat limited by this fact.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasises the fact that trolling is a complicated phenomenon which cannot be reduced to any single definition or explanation, with individual pathology, group processes and cultural context all being implicated as contributory factors. More research is needed,

particularly with respect to the way in which trolling can be inferred when it centres on discourse relating to wider political issues. In light of this, the trolling behaviours perceived to have been exhibited by the anti-McCann's can only be tentatively distinguished from malicious impoliteness and other forms of online abuse. What remains clear, however, is the damaging impact the McCann trolls' behaviour has had on those victimised, both online and offline, necessitating the continuation of research exploring the way in which aggressive forms of trolling materialise, so that we might consequently establish ways in which to effectively deal with them. This research sought to make a small step in this direction.

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Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Indicators of Anti-Social Behaviour

Indicator	Frequencies	Percentages
Negative socio-emotional behaviour		
Paralanguage (e.g. Word capitalisation)	68	34%
Verbal expression of emotion	14	7%
Irony/sarcasm	4	2%
Group exclusion		
Exclusionary language	76	38%
Personal attacks	94	47%
Disassociation from other	51	25.5%
Confrontational interaction		
Argument criticism	68	34%
Quoting and referring to for confrontation	168	84%
Strong disagreement/correction	70	35%
Imperatives/directives	14	7%
Request/invitation to respond	24	12%

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Indicators Of Social Behaviour

Indicator	Frequencies	Percentages
Affective		
Paralanguage (e.g. emoticons)	26	13%
Informal expression of oral discourse	4	2%
Verbal expression of emotion	54	27%
Humour	7	3.5%
Self-disclosure	12	6%
Cohesive		
Vocatives	16	8%
Inclusive pronouns	85	42.5%

Appeal to shared knowledge	42	21%
Interactive		
Acknowledgements	128	64%
Approval	54	27%
Agreement/polite disagreement	100	50%
Collaboratively following the thread	44	22%
Request/invitation to respond	70	10%

Table 3. Examples of Tweets Illustrating the Use of Paralanguage, Personal Attacks, and Discourse Used to Disassociate from the Pro-Mccann Group.

Paralanguage	Personal attacks	Disassociation from group
"I said, SAVING HER OWN ARSE DOESNT COUNT. There is ABSOLUTELY ZERO reason a desperate mum would not cooperate	*"says the big strong shill who runs and blocks like a weak BITCH.*	*"Pammy Pammy Pammy, we're not all like you weirdos, i've no interest in any of u love. Now get a grip.*
"it takes INTENT. Wee M DISGUSTED k8 Why? Was she a wee Slut flirting w all the men? Stealing K8 beauty?	*"UM mebbe it was K8 TELLING US about her torn genitals, deadness on a slab, burial...? #CANT #MCCANN #stupidisasstupidsays"*	*We do, however, have SURVIVING CHILDREN.#sotheresthat #McCann #lifeofFail*
	"Stupid tactics by Stupid people"	*"lol @ madam muck, definitely thinks shes better than she is, mums have ONE JOB = look after their children #mccann FAIL"*

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Table 4. Examples of Tweets Illustrating the Use of Vocatives, Inclusive Pronouns and Discourse Centred Around the Sharing of Knowledge

Vocatives	Inclusive pronouns	Appeal to shared knowledge
"Isabelle, may I commend you on #mccann vids! We need more like you! Ignore jealousy!"	*nearly £53K we gave...I'm sure it would have paid for a few jig saws put together*	*"#mccann #GoncaloAmaral Just paid my troll fine for the week. Have you? http://www.gofundme.com/Legal-DefencePJGA Makes tweeting a pleasure"*
"ask it a question nikki, its like pouring water on the Witch of the West.	*No amount of your wishing we will go away will change the fact that we're here until there is JUSTICE.*	*We can say that poor M #McCann died and the parents hid her body cos that's in the PJ files* *"Isabelle McFaddens video and latest Goncalo Amaral news*

Table 5. Discursive Themes Identified Presented Alongside a Subset of Tweets

Theme	Example tweets
Motherhood	*"Keith Bennets mum spent every spare minute digging the moors with a teaspoon. Not #McCann who jogged"* *"this is what gets me MOST @ #McCann. Some folk wont realize, but most mums WANT to be w kiddies, especially littlies!"*
Justice	*"Paedophile? Kiddie killer? Lonely? Join Team #McCann and find a sympathetic ear. FREE REIGN - They'll excuse anything"* *"It doesn't matter how much you bully, abuse & mock, we will NEVER give up until there is Justice for Maddie"*
Freedom of speech	

Everyone should be allowed freedom of expression without intimidation into personal lives, don't you think?

"Those who live thru suppression become passionate about freedom. #mccann censorship & shills r attempts remove freedom of speech"