

# The Troll: from Mythology and Folklore to Internet Trolling

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight how from the trolls of mythology and folklore, we have moved to online trolls and the so-called practice of trolling. Through bibliographic and network research it is realized that the development of the internet marks a new era, where almost all aspects of our lives are affected by it and now the internet is considered one of the biggest cultural phenomena of the time. Nevertheless, cyberspace presents quite often infringing elements and practices. Some of them are the well-known internet trolls and the practice of trolling by trolls on unsuspecting internet users. So, we notice that, with the development of technology, the mythological and folklore troll creature has turned into an internet troll, i.e., a malicious cyberspace user.

## Keywords:

Trolls, trolling, folklore, internet

## INTRODUCTION

The spread of the internet and the subsequent development of social media brought about the phenomenon of online trolling and the appearance of trolls. In the language of the Internet, the word troll is attributed to a person who interferes in the discussion of an online community and publishes comments with the aim of provoking strong emotional reactions. Trolling renders the corresponding social practice. This particular phenomenon is presented in various social media. The origin of the word 'trolling' refers to the mythology and folklore of the Scandinavian countries and is connected to many aspects of folk culture such as legends, fairy tales, satire, tricksters.

## THE TERM "TROLL" IN SCANDINAVIAN FOLKLORE

The term "troll" in the Norwegian and Swedish languages and "trolle" in Danish is a name for various types of supernatural beings in Norse folklore that resemble humans and in the collections of poetic tales - Eddas (1220) they are referred to as monsters with many heads. Later, trolls became characters in fairy tales, legends and ballads. In particular, they are actively involved in many fairy tales and collections of Norwegian stories by the authors Asbjørnsen and Moe (1844). Of course, trolls, like a large number of different mythological creatures of Norse folklore, have become known mainly through contemporary genres of culture and fantasy (TV, cinema and online games) [42].

The word troll can also be used as a general term for any magical or supernatural being in more recent centuries, but mainly as an interpretation of the term the giant of Norwegian legends with its violent, destructive and ferocious character prevailed [7].

## ORIGINS AND MEANINGS OF THE WORD "TROLL"

As for the etymology of the word troll, it comes from the Old Norse nouns "troll" and "tröll" (i.e. satan, demon, werewolf, jötun) and according to the German language of the 1200s to 1500s, the so-called "Middle High German, "troll", 'troll', 'fiend'. According to philologist Vladimir Orel, the word is probably a loan word from the Old Norse language that developed from the Proto-Germanic neuter noun "trullan" (giant, devil, demon, werewolf). Additionally, the Old Norse verb 'trylla' (to charm, to troll) and the German verb 'trüllen' 'flutter' (to stir) developed from the German verb 'trulljanan' (to charm, to troll), a derivative of "trullan" [45]. In the Swedish language, such beings are often called "jätte" (giant), a word related to the Norwegian "jotun". According to another version, the origin of the word "troll" is probably

connected with the Swedish words "trolla" and "trollkonst" which mean magic and its practice [42].

"Troll" as a term is unknown origin and is not related to Indo-European languages or to West or East Germanic. It occurs in northern European countries, such as in Denmark where it is recorded as troldfolk (troll-folk), bjergtrolde or bjergfolk), in Iceland as jotunn, risi or thun (male trolls) and gygur or skessa (female trolls), in Norway as jötnar /jötun, troldfolk (troll-folk and tusser), in Germany as troll and trolle and in Sweden as trollkoner (Sampson, 2015) and jätte (MacCulloch, 1930) [38].

In all Scandinavian languages the troll is considered a supernatural being and a member of a family or group known for its magical powers, so its name several times connotes a wizard or magic both literally and figuratively (such as magic that offers poetry or music). In fact, the word troll may have been used by the pagans of Norway (in the Orkney and Shetland Islands) as a collective term for supernatural beings to be respected and better avoided than worshipped. John Arnott MacCulloch, one of Scotland's leading scholars, has also drawn a connection between the ancient Norse 'vættir' spirits of mythology and trolls, suggesting that both concepts may refer to the spirits of the dead [38].

Names of land or sea animals are also associated with the word troll, to emphasize the magical nature of the beasts to which the word refers. In addition, the term troll can denote terrible diseases, or a dangerous, unwilling, rebellious and terrifying creature, or a person of unusual skill, an ugly woman or a woman of bewitching beauty, a beautiful object, a place from which there is no escape, superhuman strength, etc. [45].

The term "troll" is also found in names of the geophysical environment, as a name of a prehistoric stone tomb, an upright stone or even a cavity in a rock. In particular, nowadays the word troll is used in Scandinavia for names of mountains. According to legend, Sweden's high mountain ranges and its boulder-strewn countryside herald the presence of troll creatures. [45].

In addition, there are many places in Norway that include the term troll in their name, such as Trold-Tindterne (Troll Peaks) (because of the huge rocky cliffs), Trollstigen mountain pass and the famous Trolltunga rock formation (Troll's Tongue) [42]. Finally, a Norwegian research station in Antarctica (which includes a ground station that tracks polar orbiting satellites), is called "Troll" because of the rugged mountains that stand around this place like a troll [38].

Lindow, while stating that the etymology of the word troll remains uncertain, defines the trolls of later Swedish folklore as "beings of nature" and "creatures of questionable intent, otherworldly, equivalent to the fairies of Anglo-Celtic lore," who "appear in various migratory legends" [38].

## **VARIATIONS OF TROLLS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES**

According to Stattin, but this has not stopped scholars from trying to give various definitions. In Finland, especially in the provinces of Nyland (Uusimaa), South western Finland and Ostrobothnia, as well as in the Åland Islands, i.e., the Finnish areas inhabited by Swedish-speaking inhabitants, a troll is considered a supernatural creature associated mainly with hills and rocks in the forest, usually solitary, but which may sometimes live with others of its kind [5].

In Iceland, trolls are generally considered to be giants. Many Icelandic myths refer to the fate of giants who were "captured" by the dawn and turned to stone, so many rocks in Iceland bear names reminiscent of trolls, who are generally considered silly in oral tradition, since their strength compensates for their lack of brains [51].

The German writer Elisabeth Hartmann, who distinguishes between the Eastern (Danish and Swedish) and the Western Scandinavian (Norwegian) perception of trolls, characterizes Norwegian trolls as solitary beings, large in size and very ugly. The trolls of eastern Scandinavia (Denmark and southern Sweden) are considered social beings corresponding to the huldefolk of Norwegian folk tradition. In the case of Denmark, of course, the term

'troid' (equivalent to 'troll') is rarely used, preferring the term 'bjærgfolk' which characterizes a class of beings somewhere between the Norwegian huldrefolk and the Swedish vättar [24].

Hartmann likens the trolls of southern Sweden to those of the Danish tradition and identifies them with the vättar. The trolls of western Sweden combine features of the eastern and western Scandinavian conceptions of these beings, although they also retain several features of the Norwegian trolls. Hartmann describes the trolls of central Sweden as creatures largely corresponding to the Danish bjærgfolk and Norwegian huldrefolk, as well as the beings called vättar in Swedish folklore, mentioned above, who were considered more peaceful and benevolent, as opposed to the Norwegian trolls who appeared more ferocious and aggressive [5].

So, the term "troll" takes on different meanings in Sweden (including Swedish-speaking Finland), Denmark and Norway.

## **THE MYTH OF TROLLS IN THE MYTHOLOGY AND FOLK TALES OF THE SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES**

The evolution of the term "troll" in both mythology and folktales as a recognizable species is confusing. Originally the word 'trolleri' was used to describe all kinds of creatures who drew their magic from nature and used it to harm people. It took hundreds of years for the name to narrow down to the creatures we recognize today as trolls. Indeed, the contrast between the two types of trolls that we still recognize today (one giant and aggressive and the other small, cute and mischievous) is a testament to the diversity of these creatures in the old sources [3].

Although the peoples of Scandinavia are heterogeneous, their oral tradition, as well as their material life and lifestyle, had several common characteristics. In particular, in the Scandinavian folklore traditions there are some similarities that are mainly elements of the mythology of the Norse, which overcame the various Christian concepts in all the peoples of Scandinavia and after the northern peoples were Christianized, as its elements were also preserved in the Christian traditions. In fact, in fairy tales and legends about trolls the plot often features a clever and courageous man facing a troll. Later Norse but still early Christian legends of saints include stories of a virtuous man who tricks a giant troll into building a church [42].

In folktales, the activities of Swedish and Danish trolls range from the merely annoying (such as breaking into people's households on Christmas Eve) to the threatening (cradle-changing babies, a legend known as changeling (baby-changing or kidnapping), where trolls take people's babies and leave their own) and identify with many of the activities attributed to the Swedish jätte (e.g., kidnapping and hatred of Christianity) [54].

Hartmann (1936) believes that some of the Norse legends of changeling and abduction of adults derive from lived emotional experiences and therefore have elements of realism, whereas troll tales are purely fictional stories. However, in both of these cases of legends and popular conception, trolls have some common characteristics, e.g., their enormous size, their preference for living in the mountains, and their hostility to humans [24].

Finally, stories about trolls are also found outside of Scandinavia. In particular, trolls appear in Shetland and Orkney narratives, where they are referred to as "trows" which in Orkney and Shetland folklore are small, ugly and shy nocturnal creatures, like the trolls of Norse legends with which trows have many similarities [54].

## **WHAT WE DEFINE TODAY AS TROLL AND TROLLING**

In the age of the internet, we go from the troll creature of folklore and tradition, so to speak, to the cyber troll user and trolling, i.e., the act of internet trolling. There are various hypothetical theories about the occasion, place and time when the word "troll" was first used in the language of the internet. Specifically, as a word it first appears in many unselected BBS and UseNet accounts from the early 1980s or a little earlier [16, 37]. The modern use of the term, however, first appeared on the internet in the late 1980s [58]. Despite its use, of course, it was officially at least another decade late to be recorded as an official term, with the best-known recorded reference coming from an online discussion in 1991 [50].

Additionally, one of the first recorded attempts to define an internet troll occurs in the mid-1990s, with the release of the book *Netlingo* – available online at “netlingo.com” – where one can see the following definition of an internet troll: “Internet trolls are people who post nasty things to strangers on the internet. They “fish” for the trust of others and, once they have it, they take advantage of it.” [30]. Finally, an interpretation of the term “troll” as an online term also exists in Wikipedia since 1999 [34].

As for the characteristics of the Internet troll, it is worth noting that, like the troll of Norse mythology as a supernatural being that lives in isolated rocks, in mountains or in caves, under bridges, lives in small families and rarely helps people, respectively many users of the internet often describe the troll as a mythical creature (in the sense of anonymity) that hides under (procedural) ‘bridges’, waiting for an opportunity to ‘pounce’ on unsuspecting users. With this definition, it captures the comparison and juxtaposition of the troll of tradition with the troll in the world of the modern era, that is, the world of the internet [25].

According to the Cambridge dictionary, an internet troll is considered a person who does “trolling”, an English word which refers to dragging the bait through the water, according to the technique of tuna fishing and swordfish, similar to trolling (dictionary.cambridge.org). According to Shah (2004), although the term “trolling” has its origin in the fishing sector, it is used in exactly the same way in the Internet sector, as it captures the “unfolding” of contradictions that takes place during of trolling. With this definition it is clear that baiting is a form of provoking any emotional reaction in individuals. In this sense, the troll may be subtly or overtly offensive during a conversation [6,14] or may seek to engage others in a pointless conversation [25].

In internet slang, the word troll or better “internet troll” is used for a person who aims to sow discord in a group or community (e.g., on a forum or blog) by posting caustic, inflammatory or off-topic posts comments [12]. This act is done deliberately by the person/troll, with the intention of evoking strong emotional reactions among the members of a group, as he invades their discussion and conversation, thus disrupting the normal flow of the conversation for no particular reason, simply for his own amusement. There is even a very famous image about trolls, which is widely circulated on the internet, called “trollface” or “Mr. Troll” [48].

Early trolling was relatively harmless, taking place within small Usenet newsgroups. The trolls used a “pseudo-naive” tactic, asking dumb questions and seeing who takes the bait [19]. According to Bishop, trolling was originally thought of as ‘the act of posting a message in a discussion group that apparently exaggerates about some issue’ (1995), [8]: 1) and Tepper (1997) explains how trolling can define group membership, i.e., those who “take the bait” of the troll mark the novice user out of the group, while in-group members will recognize the troll and can even make fun of it [65]. Donath (1999) and Dahlberg (2001) then add another dimension by claiming that trolling is a one-sided game of deception played against unsuspecting users who assume that the troll is sincere when in fact he is not, because the troll tries to pass off as a legitimate participant who shares the common interests and concerns of the community [19]. Donath (1999) and Dahlberg (2001) further argue that trolling is a one-sided game of deception played unwittingly on victims. Specifically, the troll poses as an honest participant and once accepted, sets out to cause as much disruption as possible while trying to hide his true intentions [19].

As Watts (2003) argues, “politeness is a vanishing term today as it was in the past and probably will be in the future” and inevitably, the growing interest in areas dominated by rudeness has caused a dramatic increase in similar terms, such as ‘indecent’, ‘insult’, ‘conflict’ and ‘meanness’, therefore (rudeness) is a characteristic associated and quite related to trolling [26, 49].

Baker (2001) and Cox (2006) describe trolling as posting inflammatory comments with the intention of provoking other internet users into conflict [6, 14]. Naraine (2007) adds to the list of characteristics of trolling “ridiculous rants, stupid threads, personal insults and abusive language” [47] and challenging others to disrupt the group for one’s own amusement. According to Hardaker (2013), trolling involves deliberately attacking other users online and specifically competing with other users, but usually for fun. Her definition [23] that a troll is defined as “a user who, using Computer-Mediated Communications (CMC), constructs his

identity by deceiving that he sincerely wishes to be a member of the group, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption or heighten conflict for their own amusement' [22] includes as characteristics of trolling in addition to the rudeness mentioned by others, the aggression and handling. Also, the definition clarifies that computer-based communication is used to create a context that activates or antagonizes conflict.

In modern times and in the scientific literature, information on the identity of internet trolls is limited and mainly concerns their gender (male, female), while many of them are based on unverified assumptions. Studies also on the identity of online trolls do not have a global scope, but only investigate certain cultural and online spaces, so the results are accurate for only certain geographical areas. It is often stated that trolls are mostly men because men have historically been more involved in negative online behavior. The age of onset of trolling is usually placed in adolescence, a period of a person's life characterized by emotional upheaval, during which individuals often find an outlet online [31].

It seems that the motivations of internet trolls who often appear in public (scientific, social, political, etc.) dialogue are the need for visibility, boredom and entertainment. Attention has often been considered as one of the main reasons for trolling by the media and academic studies. Herring et al. (2002) also cites as a motivation for trolls the exercise of control over others and a sense of superiority from manipulating others [25]. The most common factor for an internet user to start trolling is a natural tendency of people to engage with others, to comment on others and the fascination that this behavior exerts. Most trolls also like to prank in real life, harass online, enjoy chatting and arguing online, finding the websites and humor related to trolling fascinating. The reasons that trigger someone to start trolling are not the same as those that lead them to the specific act afterwards [31].

Studies on motivation can be related to studies on negative personality traits of trolls, especially sadism and psychopathy [10, 61]. Research by Buckels et al., (2014), which thoroughly examined the personality profiles of online trolls, concluded that trolls have high levels of traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and the sadistic personality [10].

Trolling is nowadays quite wide spread worldwide and takes various forms. In the literature there are several forms of trolling, and even subcategories of them. Generally speaking, they have all been given negative characterizations (Bishop, 2012) [8]. Those that appear frequently are: flaming trolling [1, 18, 21, 22, 29, 41, 44, 64], spam trolling [22, 60], social and political trolling [57], gender trolling [39], Facebook trolling [15, 32, 52], organized trolling [27], RIP trolling [52], Wikipedia trolling [63], kudos trolling [9], meme trolling [36], doppelganger trolling [32] etc.

The aforementioned categories of trolling are associated with a specific topic or a specific platform, making them more easily distinguishable from others. Although some categorization has been attempted, there are no general categories on which all researchers agree. Although some categorization has been attempted, there are no general categories followed by all researchers. Trolls can use multiple strategies, and there are examples in the literature of different trolling strategies.

## **TRICKSTERS AND TROLLING**

The act of trolling goes back to the age-old practice of teasing, tricking, trickery, but nowadays it concerns the transformation of the monstrous troll into the internet's troll, but an introduction of a new term into our daily communication.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the term of the perpetrator has a double meaning: on the one hand it denotes the "intelligent hero" on the other it has the meaning of "selfish-buffoon" [13]. Tricksters are complex and contradictory and move between opposing elements, such as "piety and blasphemy, life and death, culture and nature, order and chaos, fertility and impotence" [28]. It could also be said that the trickster represents the ancient, archaic level of consciousness, the 'animal' part of man prone to uncontrollable impulses, libido, gluttony and physical abuse [35]. The basic characteristics of the trickster are imitation, deception, humor, parody, ridicule, violation of social and natural rules and taboos, profanity, entertainment, disguise, and transformation. The trickster is generally considered to be resourceful and his tricks, with the primary goal of deception, are important to the

shaping of the world, as they promote a change in the rules for the benefit of humanity [28, 66].

Therefore, the trolls of folklore and tradition as well as the modern ones are connected to the trickster archetype [66]. Trolls, like detractors, are characterized by humor, satire, teasing, mockery, farce, satire, and mockery. Of course, just like the actions of trolls, so too those of trolls, often cause harmful actions for their victims. Trolls of folklore and tradition mainly caused physical harm to their victims, while modern trolls mainly provoke strong emotional reactions (through the publication of scathing comments) which in many cases do not exclude the subsequent physical harm of their online targets.

## **FOLKLORE AND TROLLING**

Most trolls, as already mentioned, like to play pranks, online harassment, enjoy chatting and arguing online. It has even been reported by Jussinoja that boredom and frustration experienced by a person are considered to be driving factors in trolling, therefore, many users find trolling websites and the humor associated with it exciting [31].

Based on the above, the association of trolling with humor is obvious, which, as the trolls say, stems from the so-called "lulz". Also, trolling includes elements that resemble satire, mockery, pranking, teasing, and parody. In addition, memes are an excellent tool of trolls for creating humor. Finally, there is an association of popular culture and specifically of silly stories or jokes with trolling and memes.

Humor is, in its basic sense, a special form of human communication, which aims to cause laughter. It is difficult to give a definition for humor that perfectly describes the phenomenon including all its aspects. In fact, as mentioned by Samson, Huber and Ruch (2013) [56], it is a general term that includes various phenomena related to laughter and which perform different functions. Therefore, there is a lack of a universal definition that includes every facet of the phenomenon, as well as a lack of a common tool or measuring instrument that can cover all aspects of humor [40, 55].

Accordingly, in the online space and especially as far as trolling is concerned, most trolls like to prank, harass, enjoy discussion and argue online. It has been reported that the driving factors for trolling are many, such as boredom, frustration, escape from everyday life, etc., as well as humor and fun that trolls enjoy from trolling. In fact, several internet users consider trolling to be fun-humorous and for this reason they decided to try it as a practice [31].

Satire attempts to ridicule some concept or person. The one who exercises it considers that the concept or person deserves such treatment, for their improvement. It is done through methods such as parody, exaggeration, comparison, analogy and irony. The satirist with his satirical work has the ability to turn against human behavior, both individually and collectively. It can criticize and embellish both human flaws and society's bad writings, while it often criticizes outdated situations, ideas or perceptions that have the effect of keeping man and his society captive [2].

Similar to satire, trolling attempts to mock some concept or person that the troll is trying to troll. Furthermore, it also involves criticism or commentary in various forms, it is directed against human behavior, both at the individual and collective level (online communities or fora, media), it criticizes and embellishes both human flaws as well as the bad texts of society, while often cauterizing situations, ideas or perceptions. That is, trolling, like satire, is based on the irony of the troll with the main purpose of entertaining him or what is called in the trolling world "lulz" [43].

The term comedy describes any work that aims to entertain through a humorous theme, and parody is the action or result of parodying people, things or situations in a way that causes laughter. Comedy is presented in many forms, such as theater, which began through the ancient theater, television and stand-up comedy [59]. The influence of comedy can be significant on a social level. For example, the democracy of ancient Athens was strengthened through comedy plays that aimed to satirize negative elements of the community [46].

Similarly, to comedy trolling aims to make fun of public or non-state figures, various things or situations of everyday life in a way that causes laughter. Every day on various websites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), one can come across incidents of trolling that adorn everyday life, as well as persons and situations.

Modern teasing, pranks, mockery, and even satire that take place and are disseminated and spread in the online world through cyberspace users often manifest through memes. Trolls use memes and anime references in their trolling by recycling cultural products (such as language, religion, ideologies and beliefs, morals and customs, institutions and laws, arts, technological achievements, media production, scientific knowledge, ceremonies and rituals) for their purposes [53]. The result is that memes created and reinforced by trolls have now become mainstream and are nowadays part of normal online interactions [36].

In the modern era, folk culture and tradition are transmitted and developed through the printed word as well as modern means of communication, such as the Internet. This fact is due both to the improvement of the educational level and to the development of new technologies. Through virtual identities, internet users, using their real data or falsifying them, construct digital personas – avatars, i.e., characters, and chat with friends or even strangers on the world wide web. Virtual identities and anonymity, as mentioned above, are the main characteristics of trolling [33].

As types of folk literature, lighthearted stories or jokes, according to Dimitrios Loukatos, are the so-called anecdotes or laughable jokes or pranks that satirize or mock manners, professions, characters or even intellectual imperfections. Jokes could also include witticisms, especially if they are not long. Trying to describe witticisms, some of their characteristics which are also found in trolling are the following: First, the funny mood, where even a sad topic can be given in a way that even causes a sneer. Second, brevity and compact speech. Thirdly, the verbal and semantic independence, as they can function e.g., as slogans on walls, without needing further explanations and for the receiver to understand their message, as long as he has a common frame of cultural reference with the creator [33].

According to Katsadoros, Fyntrili & Stylianou, 2016, these genres of folk literature continue to spread thanks to the world wide web. A user, usually anonymous or pseudonymous, posts or regurgitates something, which in turn at a given time and condition resonates with a group, whose members have the option of ignoring it, registering it, promoting it or even reform it. At this point we can see the similarities in the creation of memes, which are either ideas or "inside" jokes that spread even in real life via the internet [33].

Of course, the meaning of the term "trolling" often oscillates between good humor, satire, comedy, prank, teasing, and abusive language, posting caustic, inflammatory, or off-topic comments. Modern teasing, pranks, mockery and even satire that manifest and spread in the online world through cyberspace users are created through memes. Trolls use memes and cartoon references in their trolling, reusing cultural objects for their purposes [53]. As Evangelos Avdikos mentions, the fluidity of boundaries is the main feature of popular culture [33], a fact that is in absolute agreement with the so-called trolling.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to the above we find that the troll of Scandinavian stories and folklore is a creature of various characteristics, depending on its country of origin. The development of technology and specifically the internet has resulted in the troll, the ugly creature of Norse stories, turning into a delinquent internet user. Therefore, the ugly appearance of the creature now becomes 'ugly' online behavior. The categories that exist for trolling are several and related to the nature of this action. Finally, modern trolls and trolling have been associated with elements of folk culture such as trolling, humor, satire, comedy, tricksters, funny stories or jokes, and memes.

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