I’d better say something! How empathy shapes bystander psychological reactance and intervention to online trolling of service organizations

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Abstract
Purpose – Online trolling is a detrimental behavior for consumers and service businesses. Although online trolling research is steadily increasing, service research has yet to thoroughly explore how this behavior impacts businesses. Further, the role of bystanders, consumers who witness a victim (business) being trolled, remains largely unexplored. The purpose of this paper is thus to introduce online trolling to the service literature and begin to identify when (types of online troll content) and why (empathy and psychological reactance) bystanders are likely to intervene and support a service business being trolled by posting positive eWOM.

Design/methodology/approach – This research uses a two-study (Study 1 n = 313; Study 2 n = 472) experimental design with scenarios of a service business experiencing online trolling (moral versus sadistic). Participants’ responses as bystanders were collected via an online survey.

Findings – Results reveal bystanders are more likely to post positive eWOM to support a service organization experiencing sadistic trolling. Psychological reactance is shown to mediate the relationship between trolling type and positive eWOM. Further, spotlight analysis demonstrates that bystanders with higher levels of empathy are more likely to post positive eWOM, whereas bystanders with low levels of empathy are likely to have a significantly higher level of psychological reactance.

Originality/value – This research is among the first in the service literature to specifically explore the consumer misbehavior of online trolling. Further, it provides new perspectives to online trolling by probing the role of bystanders and when and why they are likely to support service organizations being trolled.

Keywords Online trolling, Bystander, Empathy, Psychological reactance, eWOM

Paper type Research paper

The impact of online trolling, deliberate, “deceptive and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other users” (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017, p. 1136), is significant. In Australia for example, online trolls are estimated to cost the economy (AUS) $3.7 billion annually (Roy and Burnside, 2021). Beyond the economic impact, online trolling can cause mental and physical health concerns for people who have been trolled (March, 2020). For example, research has shown that trolling can disturb the sleep of victims and is associated with depression (March, 2020). While online trolling can cause harm to individuals, it can also have a significant detrimental impact on organizations. In a 2015 United Kingdom study, it was identified that...
20% of organizations were paying £30,000 on average to rectify instances of online trolling, and 30% were paying between £11,000 and £20,000 (Smith, 2015). Thus, not only is online trolling a personal issue for consumers, but it is also an organizational issue, particularly for those in services (Ciuchita et al., 2022; Mahr and Huh, 2022). One solution which may be beneficial to resolving this issue is bystander intervention (Huang and Ha, 2020), which considers how individuals not directly involved (e.g. not a victim or a perpetrator of online trolling) could support victims of trolling. However, there is scant research on bystanders for online trolling, particularly in relation to how or when they may intervene when a service organization is the victim. Thus, to begin to provide new understanding and insight into potential solutions to the online trolling of service organizations, this research investigates the impact of different types of trolls on bystanders’ likelihood to intervene, the mediating role of psychological reactance, and the moderating role of the psychological trait of empathy.

Online trolling is unique and diverse in nature with a range of types of trolls and content posted. In relation to its uniqueness, online trolling is distinctly different to other forms of online misbehaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth or negative reviews, in that usually online trolling does not result from a negative experience, instead trolling can use illegitimate or unjustified complaining simply as a tool to deceive and incite reactions from organizations and consumers (see Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). Online trolling, while distinct, is also diverse. For instance, a troll may post on a service organization’s social media page with an unrelated negative and emotionally charged comment “Your service sucks!” or in a different example, a consumer may be morally driven to post warnings to other consumers with unwarranted complaints, “Watch out, I had terrible service!” to mislead consumers to avoid that service provider.

In response to the variety of troll types and the posts they make, scholars have begun to theorize and investigate different forms of online trolling (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017; Komac and Çağiltay, 2019; Kyriacou, 2016; Sanfilippo et al., 2018). However, as discussed later in this paper, while studies have suggested different forms of online trolling, it is not yet understood how different forms of online trolling of service organizations may impact bystanders, despite calls for such future works by service management scholars (Bacile, 2020). Consider for example, a bystander may feel disgusted or angry at how a service organization has been trolled and potentially intervene by posting positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in support (Dens et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2020). However, it could also be that bystanders are more likely to intervene when certain types of online trolling occur against service organizations than others. To begin to address this gap in knowledge, the first aim of the current research is to conceptualize and examine two types of online trolling of service organizations, to determine how bystanders psychologically respond to troll exposure, and how this impacts their likelihood to intervene by posting positive eWOM to support a victimized service organization. The two types of trolls are (1) moral trolls, defined as occurrences whereby a troller will present rational, factual, or informative content which digresses from the original social media post of the service organization in order to deceive consumers, and (2) sadistic trolls, defined as occurrences where a troller posts content with negative emotionally laden language which aims to humiliate or threaten the service organization.

To understand the psychological response of a bystander exposed to a service organization experiencing online trolling, this research proposes a key mediating mechanism, psychological reactance. In the literature, psychological reactance has shown to provide an understanding of why consumers respond to online advertisements (Ahn and Ham, 2022; Feng et al., 2019; Shoenberger et al., 2021; Yoon and Kim, 2019). Further, research has indicated psychological reactance explains consumer responses to the structures of service relationships (Shin and Casidy, 2021; Shirai, 2022) which take away (or give) a sense of freedom and control. This research theorizes and empirically tests a new role of psychological reactance. As opposed to the traditional perspective, whereby psychological reactance considers the victim experiencing a reduced sense of agency, the current study...
theorizes and empirically tests a new perspective, specifically that psychological reactance can also be experienced by a bystander witnessing the agency of another being reduced, in this case the service organization, and this encourages the bystander to intervene. Thus, the second aim of the current research is to examine the mediating role of psychological reactance for bystanders’ reactions, to the observed online trolling of a service organization.

When considering the impact of trolling on bystander interventions, it is important to consider the characteristics of the individual which may lead them to be more likely to intervene. One characteristic that might explain why bystanders are more inclined to assist service organizations being trolled is empathy (Liu et al., 2021). In the online trolling literature, previous research has largely investigated the role of empathy (or lack thereof) in contributing to perpetrators likelihoods of engaging in online trolling (Bentley and Cowan, 2021; March et al., 2017; Sest and March, 2017) as opposed to the role it plays in bystanders’ intervening and assisting a service organization being trolled. This is somewhat surprising given that at its core, empathy captures an individual’s ability to connect emotionally and share the feelings of another (Herhausen et al., 2022). Indeed, service research has shown empathy to be important in explaining how or why customers or employees support others in need (Wieseke et al., 2012). As such, the third aim of the current research is to examine how empathy may contribute to a bystander’s reaction to the online trolling of a service organization and in turn, their potential intervention.

To begin to provide an understanding of bystander reactions to online trolling of service organizations and address the three identified aims, the current paper, underpinned by psychological reactance theory, empirically tests a model of online trolling, psychological reactance, empathy and eWOM using two online experiments. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual background of the paper is reviewed. This is followed by a presentation of the conceptual model and proposed hypotheses. Next, the method and results of the study are presented. A discussion of the results, implications for theory and practice, and directions for future research then conclude the paper.

Conceptual background

Online trolling

From psychology (March et al., 2017; Masui, 2019) to marketing (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2022) to informatics (Hong and Cheng, 2018) to tourism (Tham and Wang, 2017) to service management (Bacile, 2020; Ciuchita et al., 2022; Mahr and Huh, 2022), online trolling is a growing area of interest. A review of the online trolling literature identifies three predominant streams of research (Sanfilippo et al., 2018). The first stream of online trolling focuses on the perpetrators of online trolling also referred to as the troller, which in the case of the current study is a consumer who trolls a service organization. In relation to understanding perpetrators, research has investigated psychological factors as well as demographic factors (gender and age), which lead to increased likelihood of engaging in online trolling (Hossain et al., 2022; Howard et al., 2019; Lopes and Yu, 2017). The second stream of online trolling research investigates the impact these behaviors have upon victims (Akhtar and Morrison, 2019; Cook et al., 2021; Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2015), also referred to as the “trolled” (Sanfilippo et al., 2018), which in the current study is a service organization. The third key stream of literature in online trolling is only just emerging and focuses on the bystander or observers who have experienced, or are witnessing, online trolling take place (Sanfilippo et al., 2018), which in the current study is the consumer witnessing a service organization being trolled. This stream of research investigating the bystander although nascent, is a fruitful and important area of inquiry when considering online trolling, as the bystander can deescalate a situation and provide support for the service organization being trolled.
As demonstrated in Table 1, while some research has been undertaken on bystander roles, most of this work is situated in related but different areas to online trolling such as cyberbullying (Macaulay et al., 2022; Pabian et al., 2016) and online service recovery (Dens et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2020). For example, in a study closely related to the current research, Macaulay et al. (2022) suggest that bystanders play a key role in cyberbullying and the type of cyberbullying. Online trolling, however, is distinct from cyberbullying in that cyberbullies are not routinely dishonest or meaninglessly disruptive, but instead usually know their victims in real life and the abuse is very targeted (Craker and March, 2016). Further, in comparison to online service recovery, service organizations who experience online trolling may not have done anything wrong to warrant the online abuse (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). Additionally, these related bodies of literature focus on consumers or individuals as opposed to service organizations as the victim. For instance, Dens et al.’s (2015) study of online service recovery identifies bystanders are likely to post positive WOM if they witness a service organization providing an apology, explanation, and compensation for a service failure. Whereas, the research by Sharma et al. (2020) investigates bystander responses to service transgressions, finding that when transgressions are perceived as unethical, bystanders are likely to engage in negative eWOM. Thus, from a review of the literature (Table 1), it is evident that there is yet to be a study which examines bystanders in online trolling of service organizations as a victim, as opposed to a preparator, despite closely related areas such as cyberbullying and online service recovery doing so.

In addition to identifying the lack of research of bystanders in online trolling of service organizations, Table 1 illustrates that there is yet to be thorough consideration of how collectively the concepts of trolling type, psychological reactance, empathy, and eWOM may assist in providing an understanding of the impact of trolling for service organizations. Instead, most of the research has focused upon these concepts in isolation and/or have focused on the troller or individual trolled as opposed to the role of the bystander. Next, the trolling types of focus for the current study are defined and justified.

**Online troll types**

There is a growing discussion of what content and behaviors constitute trolling, as well as the different forms of trolling which can occur (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017; Hardaker, 2013; Komac and Çagultay, 2019; Kyriacou, 2016; Sanfilippo et al., 2018). This discussion has led to multiple different conceptualizations and proposed types of online trolls with some proposing two types (Sanfilippo et al., 2018), while others propose three (Cook et al., 2021; Thacker and Griffiths, 2012), four (Bishop, 2014; Tham and Wang, 2017), and five types (Kyriacou, 2016) (see Table 2). One of the more notable conceptualizations of online troll types summarized in Table 2 is Sanfilippo et al. (2018) who propose “serious,” intentionally provocative, and pseudo-sincere behaviors that reflect serious opinions and values, and “humorous,” repetitive behaviors motivated by personal or social enjoyment, as two trolling types. However, a critique of serious trolling of service organizations considering Sanfilippo et al.’s (2018) “serious” trolling type is that there could be separate instances of provocative and pseudo-sincere trolling. For example, instances whereby a troller verbally abuses the service organization may only be provocative but not pseudo-sincere. Whereas, in the instance of a fake review or social media post criticizing a service organization with falsified information, the troll could be “pseudo-sincere” but not necessarily “provocative.” In addition, the “humorous trolling” type proposed by Sanfilippo et al. (2018) could be critiqued in that it appears to assume the motivation or desired goal of the troller (social enjoyment and entertainment), as opposed to the content in which they post, and how others subsequently respond. It could therefore be suggested that such a dimension does not allow for an understanding of how trolling content is crafted or interpreted from the perspective of bystanders or the service organization.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)/Year</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Type of online trolling</th>
<th>Bystander</th>
<th>Psychological reactance</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dens et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Online Reviews and Service Recovery</td>
<td>Online Reviews and Service Recovery</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Positive WOM</td>
<td>When exposed to mainly negative online reviews from other customers, bystander positive WOM is highest when an apology is provided</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brewer and Kerslake (2015)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>As empathy decreases, likelihood of online trolling increases</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Craker and March (2016)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Trait psychopathy was found to be a significant positive predictor of Facebook trolling behavior suggesting trolls likely lack empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>March et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Affective empathy is negatively correlated with trolling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sest and March (2017)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Affective empathy is negatively correlated with trolling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017)</td>
<td>Online service recovery</td>
<td>Online service recovery</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Negative word-of-mouth</td>
<td>Companies are particularly effective in enhancing bystander-brand relationships by means of credible and accommodative responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>de Campos Ribeiro et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Online consumer revenge</td>
<td>Online consumer revenge</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Revenge approval</td>
<td>Attribution of blame mediates the impact of situational empathy on bystander’s revenge approval</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feng et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Self-service technology adoption</td>
<td>Self-service technology adoption</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td>Intention to use self-service technology</td>
<td>Perceived threat increases psychological reactance, which in turn predicts attitudes to self-service technology; and intentions to use</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Lower levels of empathy in relation to perspective taking and concern are related to high levels of trolling</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Psychological reactance</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masui (2019)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Indicated that higher levels of loneliness were positively associated with Internet trolling in high Machiavellianism individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youn and Kim (2019)</td>
<td>Facebook advertising</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Advertising avoidance</td>
<td>Psychological reactance mediates the impact of perceived intrusiveness and threat of freedom on ad avoidance</td>
</tr>
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<td>Bentley and Cowan (2021)</td>
<td>Online trolling of individuals</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online trolling</td>
<td>Empathy partially mediates the relationship between social dominance orientation and trolling acceptance attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shin and Casidy (2021)</td>
<td>Loyalty program</td>
<td>Y (not measured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Patronage reduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Patronage reduction</td>
<td>Heightened feelings of embarrassment and perceived unfairness of loyalty program alterations predict patronage reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shirai (2022)</td>
<td>Loyalty program</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Loyalty program</td>
<td></td>
<td>Loyalty program</td>
<td>Reactance mediates the impact of loyalty program structure on program evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malhotra et al. (2021)</td>
<td>In-game advertising</td>
<td>Y (not measured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude toward brand</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude toward brand</td>
<td>Psychological reactance theory explained how the perceived persuasion of in-game advertising effected the relationship between attitude towards game and attitude towards the brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoenberger et al. (2021)</td>
<td>COVID-19 advertising</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intentions to engage in responsible behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intentions to engage in responsible behavior</td>
<td>Psychological reactance mediates the impact of advertising message types and intentions to engage in responsible behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharma et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Online service failure/transgressions</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Negative eWOM</td>
<td></td>
<td>Negative eWOM</td>
<td>Bystander is most affected by service transgressions that are unethical and can lead negative eWOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)/Year</td>
<td>Setting</td>
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<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim <em>et al.</em> (2021)</td>
<td>Facebook advertising</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intentions to receive vaccinations</td>
<td>Psychological reactance against comments to a Facebook post mediates the impact of attitude to vaccine and intentions to receive vaccinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutzinger and Weitzl (2021)</td>
<td>Online service recovery</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand attitude</td>
<td>Vouching and comments by a consumer as opposed to the organization has a greater impact on bystander’s brand attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu <em>et al.</em> (2021)</td>
<td>Reactions to tourism companies’ prejudice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bystander eWOM</td>
<td>Empathy indirectly effects bystander responses via perceived severity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahn and Ham (2022)</td>
<td>Online video advertisements</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude to advertising</td>
<td>Psychological reactance mediates the impact of ad choice and attitude to advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herhausen <em>et al.</em> (2022)</td>
<td>Social media responses to service failure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer complaints to service failure</td>
<td>To mitigate negative arousal in text-based social media complaining active listening and empathy should be expressed by organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current paper</td>
<td>Online trolling of service organization</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moral versus Sadistic</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y (measured)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Bystander eWOM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source(s):** Table by authors
Thus, when considering conceptualizations of online trolling types such as Sanfilippo et al. (2018) as well as others summarized in Table 2, one may consider that the varying number of types of online trolling signifies a lack of agreement in the literature as to how they should be conceptualized. However, as Ortiz (2020) points out, a likely contributing factor to this divergence in the number and types of online trolling conceptualized within the literature is likely due to this misbehavior, trolling, being contextually bound and subjectively evaluated. Specifically, what may be considered online trolling in one circumstance may not transfer to another. For instance, what constitutes online trolling in an online gaming context may considerably differ from trolling in a social media community due to the different norms of these communities. Despite the difficulties in identifying a generalizable typology of online trolling, there is agreement across all conceptualizations that online trolling represents behaviors which aim to provoke a negative reaction in another user (Ortiz, 2020) and as shown in Table 2 has multiple types.

Thus, given the contextual nature of online trolling and this study being among the first to investigate the online trolling of service organizations, this study conceptualizes two types of online trolling, sadistic and morally driven, which are defined and justified next. The first type of online troll, sadistic, is defined as an online troll who posts content with the purpose of inflicting pain, harm, or humiliation (Kyriacou, 2016). Studies in online trolling have shown sadism as being a key personality trait which predicts the likelihood of perpetration (Buckels et al., 2014; Sest and March, 2017), which makes it an important concern when considering the types of online trolling. Further, literature on sadism demonstrates that this personality trait and subsequent behavior is often reflected through physical or emotional violence and aggression (Buckels et al., 2013; Kircaburun et al., 2021). Given the setting of online trolling, it is the emotional violence aspect of sadism, which is reflected through the content that perpetrators post to inflict pain and suffering on victims (service organizations), that makes the consideration of sadistic online trolling of service organizations important for the current study. Specifically, online trolls of a sadistic nature in the current study are proposed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number of troll types</th>
<th>Label of troll types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sanfilippo et al. (2018)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Serious trolls, Humors trolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyriacou (2016)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Social, Lonely, Sadistic, Narcistic, Morally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thacker and Griffiths (2012)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grieving, Sexism/racism, Faking/fallacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook et al. (2021)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Flaming, Ostracism, Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herring et al. (2002)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Outward manifestations of sincerity, Flame bait, Attempts to provoke futile arguments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Types of trolls as described in prior literature

Source(s): Table by authors
to integrate emotionally laden language to humiliate, threaten, and or frighten (March, 2019; March and Steele, 2020; Kircaburun et al., 2021).

The second type of online troll, moral, occurs when an online troller will post content presented as rational, factual, or informative but digresses from the service organizations’ social media post topic as an act of vigilantism (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). Research shows that trolling of others who have done wrong is sometimes morally justified as a form of vigilantism, the act of enforcing law and ethics, and punishing others (Coles and West, 2016). For instance, the research by Legocki et al. (2020) shows that digital vigilantism can occur in the case of where service failures occur. Further, as pointed out by Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) trolling can use illegitimate complaints to deceive and incite reactions. It is therefore important to consider how moral trolls may post complaints framed as factual or informative but are instead illegitimate and whether bystanders are likely to recognize and respond. This is because it could be that moral trolling does not lead to as likely of a response from a bystander given that the trolling content may bare similarities to negative WOM. In case of the current study, moral trolling could manifest by a service organization promoting a new offering on a social media post and an online troller commenting with content which is presented as informative or factual and not related to the social media post itself. Next, psychological reactance and empathy of the bystander is defined and reviewed.

**Bystander psychological reactance**

Psychological reactance can be defined as an individual’s negative response which explains how and why individuals react to situations which forcefully reduce their sense of agency (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Redondo, 2012; Youn and Kim, 2019). Specifically, psychological reactance is captured by two aspects. First, psychological reactance captures individual’s negative emotional reactions such as irritation, anger, and annoyance (Youn and Kim, 2019). Second, psychological reactance captures individual’s evaluations of whether actions which impact them are reasonable or fair (Youn and Kim, 2019). Transferring these key tenants of psychological reactance to bystanders in the current research, it is proposed that bystanders will experience anger when seeing a service organization is being unfairly or unreasonably trolled, and it is for this reason that bystanders are more or less likely to intervene and support the service organization via positive eWOM.

When reviewing the literature related to psychological reactance as shown in Tables 1, it becomes apparent that most studies have examined this concept within online advertising (Ahn and Ham, 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Youn and Kim, 2019) or structuring of loyalty programs (Shin and Casidy, 2021; Shirai, 2022) and how it explains attitudinal evaluations and/or avoidance behaviors (Ahn and Ham, 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Youn and Kim, 2019). For instance, Youn and Kim (2019) demonstrate that psychological reactance mediates the relationship between intrusive advertising and advertising avoidance. In line with these findings, Ahn and Ham (2022) show psychological reactance to mediate the impact of advertising choice and attitude to the advertisement. Whereas, Malhotra et al.’s (2021) study of in-game advertising theorized based on psychological reactance examining the relationship between attitude toward game and attitude toward brand. Thus, while psychological reactance has been demonstrated as an important mediating mechanism as well as a theoretical explanation for individuals’ responses to online situations, there is limited to no research which has considered it thus far in online trolling. Further, most of the psychological reactance studies only examine this response from the perspective of individuals (consumers) directly involved in the interaction or situation (e.g. the victim) rather than the bystander. Given such gaps in the current online trolling literature, this research will be among the first to assess how a bystander’s response to online trolling is explained by psychological reactance. Next, how bystanders’ psychological reactance is likely to differ is considered through the levels of empathy, is defined, and discussed.
Bystander empathy
Empathy can be defined as an “other-focused” emotion (Lazarus, 1991) which captures the capacity of an individual to understand and identify with others’ emotions (Yang and Yen, 2018). In the literature, emotional intelligence has been measured as an array of competencies and skills, in the emotional competence inventory (ECI), empathy is a key item of emotional intelligence measurement (Boyatzis et al., 2000). Further, studies have shown empathy is particularly important in explaining why individuals care or support others who have encountered misfortune (Xie et al., 2015), and thus for this reason is considered potentially important for understanding the role of bystanders in the online trolling of service organizations.

In the online trolling literature, empathy has also been shown to be an important concept of consideration. Yet, as opposed to the definition of bystander empathy relating to the capacity of an individual to understand others, the online trolling literature to date has focused on how a deficit of empathy leads individuals to become perpetrators of online trolling. For instance, Howard et al. (2019) demonstrate that a lack of empathy relates to higher levels of trolling. Similarly, Sest and March (2017) and March (2019) find that a lack of empathy is related to higher levels of trolling.

This research however contrasts with most of the online trolling literature by considering the role of empathy of the bystander as opposed to the perpetrator of online trolling. Further, the current research seeks to understand how empathy may explain why a bystander is likely to react to the online trolling of a service organization and may intervene. Second, in line with other bystander studies outside of online trolling (Liang and Park, 2022; Muralidharan and Kim, 2019), the current research suggests that individuals with high levels of empathy (as opposed to low) are more likely to intervene and assist a service organization victim. For instance, research shows empathy can lead to bystanders intervening by reporting and supporting a customer who is sexually harassed (Liang and Park, 2022), whereas empathy has shown to also offset low bystander efficacy in relation to domestic violence prevention (Muralidharan and Kim, 2019). Based on the findings of this literature, it could therefore be plausible to suggest that bystanders witnessing the online trolling of a service organization who have higher levels of empathy are likely to have a heightened reaction and in turn be more likely to intervene. However, empirical evidence is needed to confirm such assumptions.

Bystander intervention via eWOM
The current study focuses on the behavioral outcome of eWOM, consumer’s information sharing about a product or company via online communication channels, as a form of bystander intervention that consumers can undertake supporting service organizations experiencing online trolling. eWOM was chosen for two reasons. First, prior research has established that consumers are influenced by the reviews and content they read online relating to a service organization (Liang, 2016). Therefore, if an individual is trolling the service organization, then it is important to understand how a bystander might engage through eWOM in relation to this comment as a way of combating the troll. Second, eWOM was selected due to it being identified as an important outcome in bystander studies outside of the online trolling literature (Huang and Ha, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). For example, Sharma et al. (2020) examined how bystanders are motivated to engage in negative eWOM by witnessing service transgressions of an organization. In a similar vein, Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017) examined how bystanders were likely to engage in negative eWOM against an organization based upon their responses to online service failure. Huang and Ha (2020), on the other hand, investigated positive WOM of bystanders. The current study aligns with Huang and Ha (2020) by examining positive eWOM, as opposed to negative eWOM (Sharma et al., 2020; Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017). This is due to the
transgression being against the organization as opposed to the customer as investigated in the prior studies by Sharma et al. (2020) and Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017). Thus, in this instance, the victim (trolled) is the service organization (as opposed to the consumer) and it is proposed bystanders who are consumers witnessing such situations will seek to assist a service organization via posting positive eWOM.

Conceptual model and hypothesis development
Psychological reactance theory (Brehm and Brehm, 1981) is utilized as a theoretical lens and as a key mediator which underpins the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Specifically, it is suggested that depending upon the trolling type that a bystander witnesses against an organization, a psychological reactance will occur, which triggers the bystander to post positive eWOM. Further, this relationship is suggested to be dependent on the empathy of the bystander, which will moderate the aforementioned relationships. The following sections detail the hypotheses of the conceptual model supported by previous literature and psychological reactance theory.

H1-H2 Trolling type and psychological reactance
First it is proposed that bystanders will be more likely to engage in positive eWOM for a service organization when they witness sadistic as opposed to moral trolling. From the perspective of psychological reactance theory, obstacles or threats by external sources that obstruct individual’s enjoying their freedom and agency is likely to result in a response (Riedel et al., 2018). The current study seeks to extend psychological reactance theory to suggest that sadistic trolls as opposed to moral trolls will be perceived as having higher levels of threat to a service organization as perceived by the bystander, which increases their likelihood of posting positive eWOM. It is likely that bystanders will post positive eWOM in support of a service organization being sadistically trolled as bystanders will perceive the content as having higher levels of intention to inflict pain, suffering or humiliation towards the service organization (Li and Cao, 2022). Whereas it is suggested there will be significantly lower likelihood of bystanders posting positive eWOM in the case of moral trolling, due to bystanders perceiving somewhat logical reasoning and less of a threat to the freedom and

Figure 1. Conceptual model of bystander response to online trolling of service organizations

Note(s): Dotted line for H4 signals a moderated mediation; H1 and H3 are assessed in Study 1; H2 and H4 are assessed in Study 2 to determine if bystander psychological reactance explains the effect of troll type on bystander response
Source(s): Figure by authors
agency of the service organization due to the trolling being based upon previous violations by the organization or past firm or product service failure (Demsar et al., 2021). Thus, the following is hypothesized:

\[ H1. \] Bystanders are significantly more likely to post positive eWOM for a service organization when sadistic as opposed to moral trolling is present.

Extending upon H1 and consistent with psychological reactance theory, it is suggested that the main explanatory mechanism which explains why a bystander is likely to post positive eWOM in support of a service organization is due to a negative emotional response through feelings of anger, irritation, and annoyance due to trolling deemed unreasonable or unfair (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). There is literature outside of trolling that also provides support of psychological reactance as a key mediating mechanism (Ahn and Ham, 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Shoenberger et al., 2021; Youn and Kim, 2019). For instance, Youn and Kim's (2019) study of Facebook advertising found psychological reactance to mediate the impact of perceived intrusiveness and threat of freedom on advertising avoidance. In another study of Facebook advertising Kim et al. (2021) found psychological reactance to mediate the impact of Facebook comments on attitudes. Thus, extending upon these studies, it is proposed that psychological reactance plays a mediating role in the bystander’s reaction to online trolling. This is formally hypothesized as:

\[ H2. \] Psychological reactance will mediate the relationship between trolling type and bystander positive eWOM for a service organization.

**Moderating role of empathy**

In H3 and H4, it is proposed that empathy will moderate bystanders’ psychological reactance to trolling as well as their likelihood of posting positive eWOM. One may consider that due to a consumer’s ability to associate or understand other’s feelings (high empathy) that this would also translate into higher levels of psychological reactance. However, in the case of the current study, it is suggested instead that bystanders with lower levels of empathy are likely to have higher levels of psychological reactance particularly when sadistic trolling is present. However, bystanders at the same point are less likely to subsequently post positive eWOM for a service organization. Support for these proposed relationships is based upon theorizing using the empathy and emotional intelligence literature, which will now be discussed.

The empathy literature provides support for this proposed relationship, demonstrating that empathy moderates relationships where customers’ and organizations’ outcomes are considered (Bedi and Schat, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wieseke et al., 2012). Wieseke et al. (2012) found customer empathy to moderate the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Specifically, those with high levels of empathy were likely to experience a stronger relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Nguyen et al. (2019) also demonstrate empathy to play a moderating role in service settings, demonstrating it to moderate the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior (employees’ assistance of others) and customer orientated citizenship behavior. Their study specifically demonstrates employees with higher levels of empathy are more likely to support fellow employees and customers. It is therefore evident that empathy often moderates relationships in service situations.

In the case of the current study, while empathy is suggested to moderate relationships consistent with the previously discussed literature (Bedi and Schat, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wieseke et al., 2012), it is proposed that bystanders with low levels (as opposed to high) will have significantly higher levels of psychological reactance to sadistic trolling (as opposed to moral trolling). That is, a stronger relationship between sadistic trolling (as opposed to moral trolling) and psychological reactance for bystanders with lower levels of empathy is proposed. Support
for this can be drawn from emotional intelligence, which suggests that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to manage their emotions in positive ways and mitigate violence (Castillo et al., 2013; Garaigordobil and Peña-Sarrionandia, 2015). Transferring this thinking to the current study, this would suggest that those with low levels of empathy are not able to utilize their emotional intelligence as effectively as those with high levels of empathy to regulate (manage) their emotions and thereby have significantly higher levels of psychological reactance. Indeed, research has shown that lower levels of emotional intelligence often leads to greater levels of negative emotional responses such as anger (Castillo et al., 2013; Szczygiel and Mikolajczak, 2018), thus suggesting that low levels of empathy may lead to significantly higher psychological reactance.

It is also suggested that bystanders are more likely to have heightened levels of psychological reactance when sadistic, as opposed to moral trolling, is present for the following reasons. First, recall that moral trolling is conceptualized as using misleading complaints which are framed in such a way that they come across as factual (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). Whereas sadistic trolling is conceptualized to use strong negative emotive language. It is this difference between moral and sadistic trolling, the use of strong negative emotive language which symbolizes emotional violence and aggression (March, 2019; March and Steele, 2020; Kircaburun et al., 2021), which is likely to lead to a greater psychological reactance. Further, due to this nature of sadistic trolling as well as the previously discussed limited capacity of bystanders with lower levels of empathy to regulate their emotions due to their emotional intelligence (Castillo et al., 2013; Szczygiel and Mikolajczak, 2018), it is suggested that bystanders with low levels of empathy will experience higher levels of psychological reactance in sadistic trolling situation. In sum, bystanders with lower levels of empathy are suggested to be particularly susceptible to psychological reactance, as they may struggle to regulate their emotions in response to the emotive language used in sadistic trolling. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

**H3.** Bystanders with low levels of empathy will have significantly higher levels of psychological reactance to sadistic trolling than bystanders with higher levels of empathy.

Contrary to what one might expect based on H3, higher levels of psychological reactance among bystanders to sadistic trolling is suggested to not necessarily lead to greater likelihood of intervening to support a service organization. Specifically, while those bystanders with low levels of empathy are likely to have a stronger psychological reactance to sadistic trolling, it is due to this reaction and consistent with emotional intelligence theorizing that they may not be able to use their emotions in positive ways to communicate effectively (Rezvani and Khosravi, 2019; Smith et al., 2008). For instance, as noted by Rezvani and Khosravi (2019), negative emotions such as anger and frustration can obstruct communication. In support of this assertion, research has demonstrated that high levels of emotional intelligence which can reduce negative emotions can predict the likelihood of discussions of relationship problems (Smith et al., 2008). In further support, Hendon et al. (2017) identified a strong positive relationship between emotional intelligence and communication levels. Based upon the evidence of higher levels of empathy leading to constructive communication, it can be suggested that bystanders with higher levels of empathy, who are better equipped to regulate their negative emotions, may be more likely to communicate via positive eWOM and intervene to support a service organization when faced with sadistic trolling. This may be due to high level empathy bystanders’ abilities to perceive a higher level of threat in these situations of sadistic trolling and regulate their emotions accordingly. Thus, on the prior discussion the following is proposed:

**H4.** The indirect effect of sadistic trolling (as opposed to moral trolling) on positive eWOM via psychological reactance will be significantly stronger for bystanders with higher levels of empathy as opposed to bystanders with low levels of empathy.
Overview of studies
To achieve the research aims, two experimental studies were undertaken. The main purpose of Study 1 is to assess the impact of troll type on bystander response, as well as the moderating role of bystander empathy. Study 2 replicates and extends this by assessing whether the relationships identified in Study 1 are fully or partially explained by psychological reactance.

Study 1
The aim of Study 1 was to establish the impact of troll type (moral vs sadistic) on positive eWOM, as well as the moderating role of bystander empathy.

*Design, sample, and procedure.* Study 1 was a two-level, single factorial experimental design manipulating troll type (moral versus sadistic). In Study 1, a total of 313, U.S. consumers (65.8% male; \(M_{\text{age}} = 37.99\) years \(SD = 10.64\)) were recruited via Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and randomly assigned to one of the two troll conditions. Further, as recommended in the literature, to ensure data quality MTurk workers with an approval rating equal to or above 97% were used. Participants were required to complete a set of questions related to their age, gender, social media use and empathy. Participants were then required to review the trolling stimuli as shown in Figure 2 for 30 s after which they completed a set of questions measuring positive eWOM.

*Experimental stimuli, pretest, and measurement.* The experimental stimuli used in Study 1 involved the development of a fictitious Café and social media trolling post on Instagram. The image in the social media post and brand remained consistent throughout all conditions with the only alterations being the troll comment. For the sadistic post, the troll comment read as “Your Café is disgusting. It’s embarrassing to go there again,” whereas for the moral troll the comment read as “Your Café is unhygienic. I would never go back there again.”

![Figure 2. Online trolling stimuli](image)

*Note(s):* Photo by Tony Lee on Unsplash, text/comments by authors

*Source(s):* Moral, Sadistic
A pretest was undertaken to confirm the validity of the sadistic/moral manipulation. 40 US participants were recruited from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (57.5% male, Mage = 38.27 years SD = 9.91) and randomly allocated to the sadistic or moral troll condition. It was proposed that in alignment with prior literature, online trolls of a sadistic nature integrate emotionally laden language to humiliate, threaten, and frighten (March, 2019; March and Steele, 2020; Kircaburun et al., 2021). As such, an emotional manipulation check was utilized to assess the level of emotions based on Zhang et al. (2014) “Thinking of Sam’s comment in the social media post above, how much emotion do you believe is in their comment.” Whereas, for the moral troll, manipulation checks regarding the level of rational (moral) information were conducted “Thinking of Sam’s comment in the social media post above, the post contained a lot of rational (factual) information” (Zhang et al., 2014).

The first independent t-test confirmed a significant difference in the ascribed emotions with the sadistic troll having significantly higher levels of emotions (M = 7.09, SD = 1.89) in comparison to the moral troll condition (t = 2.15, p = 0.037). The second independent t-test assessed the level of rational (factual) information in the troll comment. As intended in the manipulation, the moral troll condition was identified to have significantly higher levels of rational (factual) information (M = 4.73, SD = 2.13) in comparison to the sadistic troll condition (M = 2.76, SD = 2.27) (p = 0.008).

In the main experiment, e-WOM was measured via seven items adapted from Duarte, e Silva and Ferreira (2018) (α = 0.86). The empathy scale included 10 items adapted from Carré et al.’s (2013) Basic Empathy Scale in Adults (BES-A) (α = 0.81).

**Study 1 results.** To assess H1 and gain initial insights into H4, the data were analyzed using PROCESS Macro Model 1 for SPSS with 5,000 bootstrapping samples with the independent variable troll type (1 = Sadistic, 2 = Moral), moderator of bystander empathy, and outcome variable eWOM. The results showed a significant direct effect of troll type on eWOM (B = 1.60, SE = 0.78, t = 2.03, p = 0.04). Upon inspection of the main effects, it was evident that consumers were more likely to post eWOM when sadistic trolls were present (M = 4.55, SD = 1.10) as opposed to moral trolls (M = 4.22, SD = 1.13). This supported H1. Further, bystander empathy was found to have a direct effect on eWOM (B = 1.19, SE = 0.31, t = 3.77, p < 0.000). As hypothesized, there was a significant interaction effect between troll type and bystander empathy (B = −0.51, SE = 0.20, t = −2.46, p = 0.01).

To identify where significant differences more precisely were observed in the troll type and bystander empathy interaction, a spotlight analysis was undertaken. A spotlight analysis identified the conditional effects of troll type at different values of the moderator. Specifically, using the Johnson-Neyman technique as recommended in the literature (Krishna, 2016), the analysis assessed levels of empathy at the 50th, 75th and 90th percentile, which identified low empathy at ≤3.10, moderate empathy at 3.2–4.2, and high empathy levels at ≥4.3, respectively.

Specifically, troll type was unlikely to significantly influence eWOM for bystanders with low levels of empathy (B = 0.00, SE = 0.17, t = 0.01, p = 0.99). Whereas bystanders with moderate levels of empathy were significantly more likely to post eWOM when sadistic trolls were present (B = −0.30, SE = 0.12, t = −2.48, p = 0.01). The strength of the relationship between troll type and eWOM was then shown to increase in strength for bystanders with high empathy, again showing they are more likely to act when sadistic trolls are present (B = −0.61, SE = 0.17, t = 3.53, p < 0.001). Thus, this lends partial support to H4 that as empathy of consumers increase so too does their likelihood of posting eWOM as a bystander in response to trolling, specifically in the case of sadistic trolls. However, what mechanism (mediator) explains this relationship is not yet understood. Therefore, Study 2 was conducted to explore the mediating role of psychological reactance and test the conceptual model and its network of relationships in its entirety.
Study 2
The aim of Study 2 was to confirm the impact of troll type (moral versus sadistic) on bystander responses and the moderating role of bystander empathy. In Study 2, there was also a new additional aim of assessing the mediating role of psychological reactance, to provide a potential explanation as to why bystanders may post positive eWOM. In Study 2, the materials and procedures were replicated with the minor exception of measurement of psychological reactance being included. We utilized the same trolling type sadistic/moral manipulations used in the previous studies to again allow greater comparability between the studies. The sample comprised of 472 U.S. consumers 18 years and over. Most of the sample were male (63.6%) with an average age of 37.49 years (SD = 10.17). The same items for eWOM (Duarte et al., 2018; α = 0.919) and empathy (Carré et al., 2013; α = 0.826) were used in Study 2 as per Study 1. For psychological reactance, six items were adapted from Youn and Kim (2019; α = 0.773).

Study 2 results. In Study 2, the data were analyzed using PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% confidence interval, which allow for the assessment of the entirety of the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. In relation to the first aspect of the model, the impact of troll type on the mediator, psychological reactance, and the moderating role of bystander empathy, the following was found. Troll type was found to have a significant impact on psychological reactance (B = 1.43, SE = 0.64, t = 2.21, p = 0.027). Bystander empathy also had a significant impact on psychological reactance (B = 0.58, SE = 0.64, t = 2.20, p = 0.027). Next, the interaction between troll type and bystander empathy was found to be significant (B = −0.35, SE = 0.17, t = −2.05, p = 0.041). A spotlight analysis was then examined to assess the impact of different levels of bystander empathy (low levels ≤ 3.1, moderate levels of 3.2–4.3, and high levels ≥ 4.4). Specifically, the effect of troll type on psychological reactance for bystanders with low levels of empathy (B = 0.31, SE = 0.14, t = 2.20, p = 0.027) were found to be the strongest in support of H3.

Next, the impact of the independent variable, troll type, and the mediator, psychological reactance on bystander eWOM was assessed as well as the potential for a moderated mediation relationship. The independent variable, troll type, was shown to have a non-significant impact on bystander eWOM (B = −0.20, SE = 0.74, t = −0.27, p = 0.784). Psychological reactance was demonstrated to have a significant negative effect on positive eWOM (B = −0.19, SE = 0.05, t = 3.73, p = 0.0002). Next, index for moderated mediation was found to be significant (index = 0.06, SE = 0.03, LCI = 0.006, UCI = 0.15), supporting H2 and H4. The spotlight analysis identified that the indirect effect of troll type on positive eWOM via psychological reactance was negative and non-significant for bystanders with low levels of empathy (levels ≤ 3.1) (B = −0.10, SE = 0.19, t = −0.05, p = 0.95). This suggests that bystanders with low levels of empathy are likely to side with the troller given that the prior results show they are likely to feel higher levels of negative emotions and rationalize the trolling as reasonable. Next, the indirect effect of troll type on positive eWOM via psychological reactance became positive and significant for bystanders with moderate levels of empathy (levels of 3.2–4.3) (B = 0.27, SE = 0.13, t = 2.09, p = 0.03) and this relationship increased in strength with bystanders who had high levels of empathy (levels ≥ 4.4) (B = 0.52, SE = 0.19, t = 2.74, p = 0.006).

Discussion
The purpose of this research was threefold, namely, to investigate the impact of different types of trolls on bystanders’ likelihood to intervene, the mediating role of psychological reactance, and the moderating role of the psychological trait of bystander empathy. A conceptual model underpinned by psychological reactance theory was proposed with three main hypothesized relationships. The results support the conceptual model and all hypothesized relationships. The implications of these findings for theory and practice will now be discussed.
Theoretical implications
This research contributes to the understudied bystander roles in online trolling research. To date, most of the empirical and conceptual work related to online trolling has focused on what factors contribute to individuals being, or becoming, a “troller” (Bentley and Cowan, 2021; Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Craker and March, 2016; March, 2019; Masui, 2019; Howard et al., 2019; Sest and March, 2017) or on those being trolled (Akhtar and Morrison, 2019; Cook et al., 2021; Fichman and Sanfilippo, 2015). This study is among the first to conceptualize and empirically test a model which explains when (type of online trolls), why (psychological reactance and empathy), and how (positive eWOM) bystanders, a rarely investigated actor in online trolling, intervene in online trolling situations. In doing so, it begins to address calls for understanding how different types of online uncivil communications are more impactful than others (Bacile, 2020) and begin to shed insight into service literature relating to trolling, which to date has only been sparingly discussed (Ciuchita et al., 2022; Mahr and Huh, 2022). Further, this research begins to broaden the focus of online trolling research beyond trolling of individuals to other potential victims (targets) within the marketplace, such as service organizations. To date, the majority, or arguably, all research on online trolling, has focused on victims (targets) who are individuals, despite numerous examples and discussions of organizations also being victims or targets of this anti-social behavior (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017, 2022). A key contribution of the current study therefore is the opening of two new perspectives and lines of inquiry into online trolling, the bystander (as opposed to the troller), and the trolling of service organizations (as opposed to individuals), providing investigation for future scholarship and discovery in these areas and subsequently enriching our understanding of online trolling.

A second key contribution of the current study to the online trolling and service literature is demonstrating that psychological reactance is a key mediating mechanism which explains why bystanders are likely to respond to the online trolling of service organization, particularly regarding posting positive eWOM. Specifically, this research begins to elucidate the psychological process which explains bystanders’ reasoning for intervening in the online trolling of service organizations. While prior research has established psychological reactance as a key explanatory mechanism (Ahn and Ham, 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Shoenberger et al., 2021; Youn and Kim, 2019), these studies have predominately been situated in an advertising or loyalty program context (Shin and Casidy, 2021; Shirai, 2022), where the freedom of the individual is diminished. A unique insight of the current study is that psychological reactance can still be a key mediating mechanism felt by others witnessing the agency and freedom of another being diminished, as demonstrated through the online trolling of service organizations witnessed by bystanders in the current study. Thus, the current study contributes not only to the online trolling literature but also to the bystander and psychological reactance literature by demonstrating its key mediating role to extend to why individuals witnessing the reduction of agency of others leads to a behavioral response.

The third contribution of this study to the online trolling and service literature relates to investigating the psychological trait of empathy as a moderator of online trolling and bystander response relationships. Prior literature has predominately focused on demonstrating how a lack of empathy increases the likelihood of individuals engaging in online trolling (Bentley and Cowan, 2021; March, 2019; Sest and March, 2017) but not how a higher level of empathy may encourage bystanders to intervene to support a service organization. Further, prior bystander in service research has yet to consider how the psychological traits such as empathy of bystanders shape their responses (Hutzinger and Weitzl, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2020). The current research therefore takes a novel approach by examining the psychological trait of empathy for bystanders and how this shaped their psychological reactance, and the downstream impact this had on their likelihood of supporting the victim (service organization) via positive eWOM. The empirical results support our theorization that bystanders with lower levels of empathy are likely to experience heightened psychological reactance due to their limited capacity to use emotional
intelligence (Castillo et al., 2013; Garaigordobil and Peña-Sarrionandia, 2015; Szczygiel and Mikolajczak, 2018), and it is due to this amplified reaction that they are unlikely to intervene and post eWOM in support of a service organization. Our results also revealed that bystanders with higher levels of trait-based empathy can regulate their psychological reactance, and due to this and consistent with our theorizing based upon emotional intelligence research (Rezvani and Khosravi, 2019; Smith et al., 2008), are likely to post eWOM supporting the service organization (victim). Thus, from a theoretical point of view, the framework and moderating role of empathy should prompt service scholars to explore other psychological traits which explain why bystanders are likely to emotionally react and behaviorally respond to online trolling or other online misbehaviors.

Practical implications
The first practical implication of the current research relates to service organizations’ social media management of trolling. Based on the results of the current study, we suggest two distinct social media marketing management approaches to online trolling, which should be determined by service organizations, based on the type of trolling they are being targeted by. Service organization should carefully consider in the case of sadistic trolls whether a response is required. As shown through the results of the current study, in the case of sadistic trolls, bystanders are significantly more likely to intervene and post positive eWOM in support of the service organization. Given this, service organizations may consider a non-engagement conflict management strategy as suggested by Golf-Papez and Veer (2017), whereby the service organization does not respond and instead allows bystanders to step in. However, when targeted by moral trolls, whereby trollers are attempting to use facts, information or figures, service organizations should strongly consider a response to troller strategy, whereby they refute facts and correct false claims and information (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017), as it is unlikely bystanders will step in to support the service organization.

A second implication of the current research relates to service organizations’ demonstrating their empathy towards others on their social media pages to cultivate potential reciprocal empathy. As shown in other studies, when empathy is shown by an individual it is likely that it will be received and returned in a reciprocal manner (Fannes and Claeys, 2022). Therefore, service organizations should seek to demonstrate empathy in the following ways through their social media pages. First, service organizations should consider how to demonstrate emotional empathy by sharing or posting about the emotions of employees or customers. For instance, service organizations could consider affective language in their social media responses which celebrate positive events or milestones for customers and employees “we are so happy for you” and “congratulations on your big day!”. Doing so may build a community that may reciprocate this emotional empathy as a bystander witnessing sadistic trolling which uses negative emotions. Second, cognitive empathy could also be expressed by service organizations when inconveniences or service alterations occur, “we understand this is inconvenient for you, and we apologize” and “we are sincerely sorry, but our opening hours are shortened today due to staff shortages.” Again, expressing empathy in a different way could encourage a reciprocation of empathy when, and if, trolling is experienced by the service organization.

Limitations and future research directions
This study is not without limitations which offers opportunities for future research in online trolling and bystanders. While a key strength of the research is the implementation of two experimental studies, the service organization victim, a Café could arguably be perceived as a small-medium enterprise (SME). Future work could consider whether the size of the service organization being targeted by online trolling provides a further explanation as to when (or not) bystanders are likely to intervene. For instance, it could be that bystanders are more likely to intervene only when they consider a service organization to be of a smaller scale and thus requiring greater assistance from the community.
Second, while empathy is included in the measurement of emotional intelligence competencies, it should be noted that other competencies and other measurements and conceptualizations of emotional intelligence exist and could be considered in future research. Future research could examine whether other competencies of emotional intelligence such as conscientiousness and adaptability also moderate (Boyatzis et al., 2000). Further, there is some debate in emotional intelligence literature as to whether it is an ability or trait (Petrides et al., 2007). Probing whether emotional intelligence as an ability or a trait has varying effects on bystander responses to trolling could elicit interesting insights as to how consumers respond to this online misbehavior.

**References**


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Further reading


Appendix

Scale items for constructs

**Empathy (Study 1 and 2):**
To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Strongly disagree/Strongly agree)

1. After being with someone who is sad about something, I usually feel sad.
2. I get frightened when I watch characters in a good scary movie.
3. I get caught up in other people’s feelings easily.
4. When someone is feeling “down” I can usually understand how they feel.
(5) I can usually work out when someone is scared.
(6) I often become sad when watching sad things on TV or in films.
(7) I can often understand how people are feeling even before they tell me.
(8) To what extent do you agree with the following statements? – I can usually work out when people are cheerful.
(9) To what extent do you agree with the following statements? – I can usually realize quickly when someone is angry.
(10) To what extent do you agree with the following statements? – I often get swept up in other people’s feelings.

**Psychological Reactance (Study 2):**
The comments on the social media post made me feel (Strongly disagree/Strongly agree)

- (1) Angry
- (2) Irritated
- (3) Annoyed

The comments on this social media post were (Strongly disagree/Strongly agree):

- (1) Reasonable*
- (2) Fair*
- (3) Pleasant*

**eWOM (Study 1 and 2):**
Thinking about the café in the social media post (Strongly disagree/Strongly agree)

- (1) I always share my knowledge and information about cafés.
- (2) I always read online consumer reviews when I go to cafés.
- (3) I would recommend this café.
- (4) I would speak of this café’s good sides.
- (5) I would be proud to say to others that I am this café’s customer.
- (6) I would strongly recommend people buy products from this café.
- (7) I would speak favorably of this café to others.

*Reversed item.

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