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Scambaiting as a form of online video entertainment: An exploratory study

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Abstract. Popular scambaiting content creators and streamers have turned scambaiting into a form of video entertainment, which has accumulated hundreds of millions of views on YouTube alone. In this explorative study, we followed four popular scambaiters and their viewers to gain insight into the phenomena. Four levels of scambaiting were observed: (1) wasting scammer’s time; (2) annoying scammers; (3) making fun of or ridiculing scammers; and (4) collecting assets from the scammers for authorities. While the first level could be regarded as a harmless activity, the rest require some ethical justification. To this end, scambaiters were found to gain sympathy by highlighting and showing the ruthlessness of the scammers. Scambait video viewers regularly shared experiences of their relatives being scammed. While recent work has suggested scambaiting could enhance racial stereotypes and hatred towards certain groups, such behavior could not be seen in the analyzed YouTube comments.

Keywords: scambaiting, technical support scam, scammer, entertainment, video

1 Introduction

Scambaiting as a form of entertainment, that also serves the purpose of educating the masses about the harmful activity of scamming, started to emerge on online video platforms in the 2000s. It has been profiled as a controversial activity, sparking ethical discussions regarding both the activity itself and its viewership [13, 16, 14, 15]. One of the initial ideas behind scambaiting aimed at wasting online scammers’ time as much as possible, with the aim of making their business less profitable. However, recently it has also received aspects of entertainment at the expense of scammers [13]. YouTube videos where scammers are laughed at have accumulated hundreds of millions of views to date. The rapid increase of scambaiting channels and streamers during the past few years have contributed to scambaiting becoming its own genre of online video entertainment.

Scambaiting as a form of video entertainment can be decomposed in two ways. First, we can consider the characteristics of the scam. Previous work has

discussed several different types of scams from advance fee frauds [6] to technical support scams [10]. Another way to categorize scams is to look at whether they occur in real time synchronously, or asynchronously as a correspondence [8]. Asynchronous scamming such as typical advance fee frauds [3] are more difficult to turn into online entertainment. Still, examples of this also exist. On January 8th, TED uploaded a video on YouTube titled: *"This is what happens when you reply to spam email"* which quickly accumulated millions of views. In the video, comedian James Veitch presents a humorous reconstructed scenario of his conversation with a scammer.

A pioneer of synchronous scambaiting videos, JimBrowning, uploaded his first videos the first half of 2014. Today, thousands of channels dedicated to synchronous scambaiting content exist on Twitch and YouTube. Most typically, scambaiter streamers engage in phone conversations with scammers, wasting their time and trying to do so in a humorous fashion. However, scambaiters have also exposed the real names and faces of scammers, initiating a discussion of the lawfulness and ethics of the activity. This is especially true for sites such as 419eater.com where scammers are publicly shamed [14]. Furthermore, in their pursuit of making the scambaiting as entertaining as possible, scambaiters have relied on ridiculing and purposefully enraging scammers. While stopping people from scamming others can be regarded as a noble activity, questions arise of whether the scambaiters themselves are also wrongdoers [11, 13]. Furthermore, even ethical scambaiters could unintentionally encourage viewers to partake in morally questionable online vigilantism.

Scambaiting literature currently primarily focuses on addressing it from the perspective of online vigilantism [11] or "digilantism" [13]. These studies observe the phenomena from an ethical perspective. In addition, there is a strong research tradition in understanding phenomena specifically related to the so called 419 scams or asynchronous scams initially originating from Nigeria (e.g. [1, 14]). We depart from these veins of research and observe scambaiting as a form of popular video entertainment. We study what the central phenomena related to video entertainment scambaiting are, how popular videos are constructed and how the viewing community responds to them. As the current research is exploratory in nature, we invoke the ethnographic research methodology [7]. The rest of this study is structured as follows. Next, we present our research methodology followed by the findings of our ethnographic observations and thematic clustering analysis. We then summarize our main findings, discuss the implications of our research and present the limitations of our study.

2 Method

2.1 Netnographic observations and analysis

We decided to carry out exploratory content-driven research [4], as the study topic was still fresh with only a few academic studies published beforehand. Consequently, to explore scambaiting as a form of entertainment, we conduct netnographic observations [7] on popular scambaiter channels on the streaming

service Twitch and the video sharing platform YouTube. As a form of participant observation research, we observed both the video content and viewers' reactions to the content as has been done in previous work on Twitch streamers [2]. We chose four popular YouTube channels for this analysis: (1) Jim Browning; (2) Kitboga; (3) ScammerRevolts; and (4) Scammer Hotline. The second channel, Kitboga, was also followed on the streaming platform Twitch.

For analyzing the video and text data, we utilized the applied thematic analysis method [4] by clustering observed phenomena into clusters based on their theme. In doing so, we initially identified several clusters which we started to combine together. The thematic framework was iterated between two authors until a consensus on a framework that describes the data was reached. To report our findings, we dedicate a subsection for each identified thematic cluster, describe main phenomena within the cluster and also include comments from both scambaiter video creators as well as chat participants.

2.2 Information about scambaiter YouTube channels followed in this study

Jim Browning¹ is a YouTube channel created in 2014 with currently 132 million views across 75 videos and 2.13 million subscribers. The channel contains various kinds of scambaiting videos where scammers are lured into revealing information about themselves, or even giving the scambaiter access to their system.

Kitboga² is a channel created in 2017 with 168 million views across 347 videos and 1.28 million subscribers. The channel differs from Jim Browning in that the scambaiting is mostly done live, is uncut and less technical. The channel description includes a justification of scambaiting as follows: *"Everyday there are scammers taking advantage of people. I call them to waste their time, walk people through their "script" and lies, report info when I can, and otherwise make light of a dark situation."*

ScammerRevolts³ currently has 71 million views across 505 videos and 849k subscribers. The channel description reads as follows: *"I troll and expose scammers and do my best to make sure they can't scam any more innocent people!"* However, some of the channel videos go beyond trolling and involve doing harm to the scammers' PC. Similarly to Kitboga, ScammerRevolts also streams his scambaiting activities.

Scammer Hotline⁴ is a channel founded in 2016 that has 10 million views across 31 videos and 144k subscribers. The channel does not aim to get any information out of the scammers like Jim Browning and ScammerRevolts, but instead focuses simply on having fun and entertaining conversations with scammers to waste their time. In this regard the channel is similar to Kitboga. The

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/c/JimBrowning/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/c/KitbogaShow/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/ScammerRevolts/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/c/ScammerHotline/>

channel description describes the content as follows: *"I annoy telephone scammers and upload the recordings here on YouTube for your enjoyment! Check it out!"*

3 Findings

3.1 Scambaiting videos are primarily watched for entertainment

With hundreds of millions of views across several channels on YouTube alone, scambaiting has become a popular form of online video entertainment. This has had several consequences. First of all, the scambaiters have brought public attention to the scam baiting business. The risen awareness and education concerning the issue has likely had beneficial impacts on reducing the number of victims. In addition, scambaiters have motivated others to start scambaiting as a hobby, marketing it as a fun and rewarding activity. Because of these issues and the increased number of scambaiters, scammers have become more paranoid of who they are scamming and are resorting to measures for verifying that they really are scamming clueless people instead of scambaiters. The YouTuber Jim Browning explicitly states in his video that almost all scammers are currently aware of his channel and his voice, and accordingly he has been forced to use voice modulation. The popularity of scambaiter has ignited an arms race between scammers and scambaiters where scammers are coming up with new measures of finding real victims, and ways to detect scambaiters. Scambaiters are responding by coming up with new ways for getting into contact with scammers and remaining undetected.

3.2 Scambaiters have several ways to gain sympathy and justify their activity

An important factor in justifying scambaiting is the demonstration of the unethical, criminal conduct of the scammers. A good example of this comes from Kitboga. He regularly uses a voice modulator and acts as an old clueless grandma, "Edna". He says things like *"My daughter Nina goes there to get my prescriptions"*, *"I told the previous technician that... [implying she has been scammed before]"* and *"I am 81 years old, I can hardly move out of this couch"*. The viewers then can listen to the scammer forcefully continue their scam despite obviously realizing their target is defenseless and clueless. Besides voice modulation and appearing clueless, scambaiters can demonstrate their total lack of technical know-how by having a large number of useless or even malicious software and add-ons in their system. Furthermore, when scammers attempt to invade the user's privacy, further anger is stirred. As an example, YouTuber Monkey Wrench Moment writes: *"This one gives me high anxiety, I feel like KitBoga was truly angry when they tried to access his camera. It made me mad too. It felt intrusive and scary."*

With this type of a setup, the viewers realize that the scammer is prepared to attack clueless victims, and not only go against their money, but also have

complete disregard towards their privacy. In the chat, some commentators shared personal experiences of their own relatives falling victim to these types of scams. YouTuber Brandon Barber writes: *"My grandmother has dementia and has had contact with these scammers before. I want to personally thank you for messing with these scumbags."* Taken together, scambaiters gain sympathy by showing the ruthless nature of the scammers, and people further draw parallels to their own helpless relatives. This serves as a justification for scambaiters' activities, and might also explain why people enjoy watching scambaiting videos.

3.3 Confrontations with the scammers initiates an ethical debate

An important part of scambaiting is the confrontation of the scammers. This typically occurs towards the end of video clips displayed on YouTube. If using voice modulators, the scambaiters switch them off revealing to the scammers that they were in fact not what they pretended to be. The confrontation often involves phrases such as *"You go through a script and take advantage of innocent old ladies"* (Kitboga). This initiates an conversation with the scammer where they either admit to scamming, switch topics or hang up. Here another form to gain sympathy and acceptance for scambaiting might come if the scammers admit to malicious activity, and justify it by calling people stupid, weak, fools or other names.

Arguments by scammers who admitted to being scammers were, for example, the following:

"You people are just fools. People who live in the USA. That's why we are doing this."

"I am earning a lot of money from you people. That's why we are doing this."

Arguments by scammers denying they were scammers were, for example:

"No no sir, we are not scamming you. This is technical support, you called us."

"This is not a scam sir. I can show you our reviews."

However, upon increased pressure by the scambaiters, the initial deniers sometimes later on admitted to scamming. The most popular YouTube clips rarely include examples of scammers hanging up after realizing they are baited, but in the Twitch stream of Kitboga such cases could be regularly seen.

3.4 Scambaiting has parallels to bullying

As noted by several authors, scambaiting features aspects of ridiculing the scammers, which sometimes may turn towards ridiculing an entire nation of people as has arguably happened in the case of the 419 scams [16, 14]. This aspect could be seen in particular on the videos of Kitboga and ScammerRevolts. Highlights of Kitboga's stream started appearing on YouTube with titles such as: *"WHY DID YOU REDEEM IT? Full video. Scamming scammers"*⁵ that showcases a scammer being mad, and which the viewers laugh at. Comments such as nedra

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8r-cEirkuTI>

lemieux’s: *”Lmmfao! I’m crying laughing over here”* and Asha Greig’s *”This is the best entertainment!”* were commonplace on the particular video and others like it. This behavior of laughing at someone being mad, or laughing at an intentional ridicule of someone, draws a parallel to bullying [12]. ScammerRevolts at times even went as calling scammers names and demanding money from them as follows: *”You dumb bitch. You need to give me iTunes gift cards, then I will give you the password.”*

As several of the tech support scammers are poor and have no other income, it needs to be questioned whether they should be ridiculed publicly despite scamming being wrong. On the other hand, before ridiculing a scammer, the scambaiters typically verify that the scammers are aware of the fowl nature of their activity. In some instances, in particular on several videos of Jim Browning, the scambaiting activity involves accessing the scammer’s PC, or in the case of ScammerRevolts even removing some of their files. In these cases we can talk about doing harm to the scammer beyond wasting their time, which further emphasises the bullying aspect of scambaiting. The illegal aspect of scambaiters’ activities is also at times brought up by the scammers. For example, in the Kitboga YouTube video *”Scammer Lost his Mind After Failed SYSKEY”*⁶ the scammer replies: *”Even you were taking advantage [of me]”*.

3.5 While scambaiting might bring forth racial stereotypes, it does not show in the YouTube comments

The racial stereotype problem is acknowledged in the comments. As an example, YouTube user carlotapuig writes: *”This scammer embarrassed his whole country and almost 5 million people watched this. If I were from his country I would be very very mad. He brought a lot of shame to India.”* YouTube user Eshita Goel writes the following: *”I live in Delhi, where we have a lot of scam call centers. such a disgrace, I feel so embarrassed and ashamed. We all aren’t like this, I promise.”*. These comments received hundreds of likes and were commonplace across videos across YouTube channels. This suggests that while prior research has alerted the scientific community to the possibility of scambaiting leading to the exploitation and ridicule of certain groups of people [14], such activity is not representative of the typical Youtube scambaiting audience.

A particularly interesting example related to this theme is the video *”SAD SCAMMER SAYS HE WANTS TO DIE???”*⁷ from the Scammer Hotline. The video features a scammer who seems genuinely depressed. Upon asked about his dreams, the scammer replies *”my dream is to die”*. The YouTube comment section response to the video shows overwhelming support for the particular scammer. For example, YouTuber Nami Zou wrote: *”Poor Adam he sounded like he wanted to cry...I’m so sad for him my heart ached hearing his sad voice. And he sweetly says everybody has dreams...then...”my dream is to die” omg I’ll pray for Adam.”* YouTuber Princess Games echoed these thoughts: *”I feel bad*

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=698Rm2FV6ik>

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMRX_qU37f4

for “Adam”, he is doing this brutal job, he’s forced to scam people, and the fact that he doesn’t have a big dream other than dying, is so sad, and so heartbroken. These scammers need to stop forcing innocent people, money gets you nowhere, only hard work and dedication gets you somewhere, stay strong “Adam”.”.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that YouTube viewers seem to be motivated to gang up and enjoy the ridicule of only those scammers who are arrogant and ruthless. In fact, during our research sample we found no counterexamples to this besides very few comments.

3.6 Scambaiting video creators have multi-layered motivation for their activity

In addition to motivation related to the scambaiting activity itself, such as wasting scammer’s time and gratifications derived from psychologically dominating the scammer, scambaiting video creators have several other reasons to create and post videos online. Here we discuss three of them.

Entertainment value. Scambaiting has entertainment value for both the scam-baiter and their potential audience on video sharing platforms, as they laugh at the expense of obnoxious scammers getting scammed. Not only is the content enjoyable and humorous to many, the community also enjoys the aspect of inflicting vengeance on criminals. In addition to entertaining others, scambaiters seemed entertained by the activity themselves, as evident by, for example, Kitboga laughing several times during his stream.

Educating internet users. Since scambaiting has become something people want to share on social media and video platforms, educating the public about this threat has also become an important justification for the activity. As technical ways to prevent scams based on social engineering are limited, disseminating knowledge about the modus operandi of scams has value for the large scale presentation of scams. Even scambaiting videos made solely for entertainment purposes often provide good lessons for internet users, and teach them to be wary of different kinds of scams rampant on the web. Through watching scambaiting videos, users can also learn general IT skills. Most scambait videos include some educational elements, and not only about how to avoid being scammed, but also on how to scambait. For example, Scammer Hotline videos include the warning “NEVER USE YOUR REAL TELEPHONE NUMBER TO CALL SCAMMERS!!!!!!” as the first thing in their video description.

Scambaiting as a source of income. With over a million cumulative views on YouTube, advertisements running during them and additional income from Patreon and other sources, the observed scambaiting channels are making a lot of money from viewers supporting their activities. The rationale for many viewers to donate to scambaiters is that rather they see scambaiters have the money than actual scammers who could target their relatives unless stopped. Some viewers seemed to also be motivated to support scambaiters simply because their content was entertaining to them. From the scambait video creators’ perspective, video sharing platforms enable them to make a living out of scambaiting and gives them the time and money to come up with ever more complex and elaborate

scambait strategies. On the other hand, the popularity of their channels can backfire as scammers become aware of them and can quickly learn to avoid their counter-schemes.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 The four levels of scambaiting

Based on our findings, we can derive four distinct levels of scambaiting ranging from wasting scammer’s time to collecting assets from the scammer. Hypothetical levels beyond these four could already be considered criminal, and are thus not included here. These levels are described below.

1. *Wasting scammers’ time and money.* Scambait video creators are likely motivated by several factors. Perhaps the most popular, and initial reason for baiting scammers is to waste their time, energy, money and other resources. This way, scammers will have less time to deceive more gullible victims. Scambaiters have different strategies to prolong phone calls, in some cases even taking several hours of a scammer’s time during a single session. Losing time and money this way is also a significant problem for call centers where scammers work. Most commentators on YouTube seemed to be motivated to waste scammer’s time due to personal prior experiences with scammers. From this, we arrive to our next subtheme.

2. *Annoying scammers.* Many scambaiters want to pay back to scammers for annoying innocent users with scam calls and deceptive messages. There are many strategies used to vex scammers, such as intentionally misunderstanding them, forcing them to diverge from the script and making all kinds of excuses for dragging out the call. Continuously prank calling scammers and asking them stupid questions was popular in the observed content creators (e.g. Scammer Hotline’s and KitBoga’s videos). Sometimes calls escalate into shouting and yelling insults, especially from the scammers part. This can be seen as morally questionable, but also adds entertainment value for viewers. Instances where scammers lose their temper also often found their way into the titles of posted YouTube videos.

3. *Ridiculing scammers publicly.* Scammers are laughed at and ridiculed publicly by scambaiters and their audience, although faces or identities usually cannot be shown on the video (because of YouTube’s terms of service). However, more detailed information is often available on scambaiter’s Patreon. Scambaiting sites such as 419eater.com also publish photos of scammers (called trophies by scambaiters).

4. *Collecting information or assets from scammers.* In some cases, scambaiters are able to reverse the remote connection so that they can take a look at the scammer’s machine and gather information on their identities, victims and operations. For example, a call center owner was arrested after Jim Browning hacked into the scammers’ system and collected information on identities of the scammers⁸. Browning also managed to obtain 70,000 recordings in which innocent victims were being ripped off by the scammers.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51740214>

4.2 Main contributions

The identified and above described four levels of scambaiting can be considered one of the main contributions of this work. Scammer Hotline and mostly Kitboga operated on the first level, with the main proportion of their content focusing on having funny harmless and long conversations with scammers. Kitboga also included aspects of the second level by ridiculing and making fun of scammers. ScammerRevolts was the only content creator who was found to aggressively call the scammers with names, ridiculing them. On the fourth level, Jim Browning and ScammerRevolts seemed to take slightly different approaches. While ScammerRevolts "fought fire with fire", Jim Browning tried to take a more legal route in his activity. He informed viewers in his videos that he has reported the scammer's activities to the service providers they use, and in the case of one video, even managed to get some people arrested through contacting the local police force.

Previous work has discussed scambaiting as a form of vigilantism [11, 13], but it can also be seen as a form of citizen activism that assist law enforcement rather than acts as one itself. The English philosopher and political theorist Michael Oakeshott stated that people continuously seek to balance their environment and strive to change the current state of affairs into a more appealing one [9, p. 247–285]. Our study revealed that scambaiters and their viewers strongly feel that authorities are not doing enough to catch scammers from other countries. There are barriers here involving international law and other factors. For these reasons, and judged by the rising popularity of scambaiting, there is definitely a gap to be filled with activism in order to satisfy the basic human need for justice with regards to online scams.

4.3 Limitations and Future work

This study has the following limitations. The netnographic observations were carried out by two authors independently and focused primarily on four YouTube content creators. While we believe this sample to be representative of the currently popular scambaiting channels, we acknowledge that there is a large scambaiting community beyond the observed platforms, as also discussed in other recent work [11, 14]. Furthermore, there is always some subjectivity involved in ethnographic work, which is why several studies supplement observations with interviews [5]. We identify this as an important venue for future work on the topic. Furthermore, our analysis was limited in depth. We went through several videos from each content creator, but not all of them. We read through the most popular and controversial comments in these videos, but not all of them. A more systematic approach to content analysis could improve the robustness of the findings.

This study was one of the first to examine scambaiting as a form of online video entertainment. Its aim is to take the first steps towards understanding why scambaiting has grown to become a popular form of online video entertainment. Future work on this research area should involve both quantitative and

qualitative data from scambaiters and those viewing scambaiting content to verify the findings of our work on why people watch scambaiters and what makes the activity appealing. The educational potential of scambaiting also needs to be studied in further detail. Finally, studies on the implications of the popularity of scambaiting on scammer’s activities should be assessed to establish the impact it has on scamming as a business.

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