

REACTIONS TO AND RETALIATION AGAINST UNSOLICITED E-MAIL (SPAM): A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines consumers' reactance and retaliation to unsolicited e-mail, or spam and to a "spam-like" non-commercial incident that provoked a similar consumer response to spam. Using ethnographic methodologies, we examine responses to spam and draw conclusions about the antecedents and consequences of spam. The extensive use of the Internet for all types of communication, regardless of commercial value, appears to generate many of the typical retaliatory responses that have been identified in the consumer complaining literature. Researchers will need to focus on the probable ratio of costs and benefits of such communications and on communication models that meet Internet-based objectives with minimum consumer disruption.

INTRODUCTION

Unsolicited commercial e-mail (UCE), commonly referred to as "spam," is a growing problem on the Internet. Suggesting that it shifts the costs of advertising from the advertiser to the consumer, some have argued that spam involves a theft of Internet resources (Everett-Church and Smith 1997). Others have said that it is at best an example of bad marketing because it is usually untargeted and is, therefore, likely to elicit strongly negative responses from its recipients (Wright and Bolting 1997). However defined, the UCE problem is growing, with some analysts suggesting that 30% or more of all e-mail may be spam (Safdar, Smith, and Brower 1997).

How do consumers react to spam? Most recipients of spam do not want to deal with unsolicited e-mail. But anecdotal evidence suggests that while some complain, many do not because there is little they can do to stop the problem. Spammers often use false addresses, rendering complaints useless. This situation has created a large number of frustrated consumers with very negative attitudes toward spam and, increasingly, toward the Internet as a

communications vehicle (Wright 1998). This article examines the effects of spam on those who receive it. It also looks at the pattern of responses spam tends to elicit.

The specific focus of this study is an event that occurred in September 1998--the unintentional spamming of the 600 plus members of Cougar-Net, an e-mail discussion group devoted to Brigham Young University (BYU) sports. Responses to this spamming episode preserved in the Cougar-Net archives provide a glimpse into the way consumers react to spam. In this case, the response was swift and devastating for the spammer who, perforce, came to appreciate the dangers of spamming.

While spam refers to unsolicited commercial e-mail and Cougar-Net and its subscribers have no commercial intentions, the authors use the term "spam" for this incident as well. This incident is wholly personal and not in any way commercial. And yet, the messages are offered as a free service to subscribers. The similarity to true spam lies in the responses generated to this spam-like problem. We believe the underlying response theories are the same and the costs associated with this unsolicited electronic communication are just as real as those generated from spam. As Internet use continues to grow, we will see more examples of reactions that cover both commercial and non-commercial contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Data

Several hundred fans of BYU sports participate in these discussions and hundreds of other fans read the messages but do not post comments to the site. Members of the list post messages at their own discretion and on their own timetable. Cougar-Net automatically echoes a copy of each post to all subscribed members and deposits a copy in the Cougar-Net archive which is open to public inspection by anyone with access to the World Wide Web <<http://www.cougar-net.com/>

archives.htm>. The data for this study were several hundred messages submitted to Cougar-Net between September 22 and September 26, 1998. In addition, using the following message, the first author solicited private messages describing how Cougar-Net members responded to the incident:

[I] have been away from the computer for a few days... I just got back and noticed that Cougar-Net as been spammed by John Doe [anonymous names, hereafter referred to as "the spammer"]. I also research the Internet's reactions to such phenomena and I am curious: did any of you spam this address back? Or retaliate in anyway? If you did, please respond to me PRIVATELY (not to Cougar-Net) ... and tell me what you did.

In response to this request, Cougar-Net participants sent twenty-nine e-mail messages describing how they had reacted to the spam. These messages ranged in length from a few lines to several pages and also constitute part of the data for this study.

Studies that rely on textual data generated by an online community have several methodological and epistemological strengths. As Alicke et al. (1992) have pointed out, most empirical work on complaining relies on retrospective accounts of what people felt and did (see Wright and Larsen 1997 for an exception). Such accounts are inevitably distorted by memory lapses and efforts to present the self in a more favorable light. These distortions do not occur when data are collected online, for online data provide a first-hand, contemporaneous, and exhaustive account of the social interactions in question. Indeed, the social interaction may be nothing more than the set of words captured in the online archive, the Internet being the medium in which the interaction occurred. Such informant-generated texts are an important part of the data used in this study though retrospective data were also collected: the twenty-nine messages mentioned above that were sent to the first author to recount actions taken outside the confines of Cougar-Net. Finally, the data used in this study are open to public inspection, which means that readers do not have to rely entirely on an account of what was said that is filtered by. Thus, readers can assess, verify, and/or challenge

assertions made in this article with authority comparable to that of the researchers who have assembled the data researchers (Larsen and Wright, 1997). To facilitate access to these messages, all cited messages are hyperlinked on a World Wide Web page located at the following address: <<http://cob.jmu.edu/wrightnd/retaliation.htm>>. And all messages, cited and uncited, are preserved in their original Cougar-Net context in the Cougar-Net archives, located at <<http://www.cougar-net.com/archives.htm>>.

Data Analysis

Interpretive data analysis methods (Hudson and Ozanne 1988) were used to evaluate the data collected for this study. In this case, society literally takes a textual form. Consequently, it is all the more appropriate that, as Ricoeur (1981), Scholes (1982), and others have urged, society be read as a text, hermeneutically, in an iterative process that produces a matrix of structurally corroborated interpretations (Pepper 1981).

REACTIONS TO SPAM

In this section, we provide extensive examples taken directly from the data for this study. We lay out the reactions to the spam in the list subscribers' own words. Then in the next section, we will analyze these statements.

Cougar-Net is an e-mail discussion list distributed to over 600 enthusiasts of Brigham Young University sports. The list is fairly active, often averaging over 100 messages per day. In late September, 1998, while surfing the web, one Internet user stumbled upon the Cougar-Net web site (<http://www.cougar-net.com>) and signed up for the e-mail discussion list. Shortly after signing up, he realized he couldn't handle the volume of e-mail he received. Not finding the introductory instructions for unsubscribing from the list, he set up an automated responding routine that automatically replied to each message sent by Cougar-Net. One example of this automated message is contained in Exhibit 1.

Unbeknownst to the new subscriber, this automated response was redistributed to the 600+ members of Cougar-Net each time a message was sent from the list. Before the list owners could

unsubscribe him, each of the over 600 Cougar-Net list members received 33 messages. The subscriber thus generated over 20,000 e-mail messages to members of the Cougar-Net online community. The result was that the Cougar-Net community felt "spammed," even though they were not hit with unsolicited commercial e-mails, the prototypical example of spam.

Exhibit 1

Example of Automated spam Message

PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

take me off your address / mailing list

PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

take me off your address / mailing list

PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

take me off your address / mailing list

PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

take me off your address / mailing list

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PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

take me off your address / mailing list

PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE - PLEASE

<rest of message deleted >

Cougar-Net Home Page: <http://www.cougar-net.com>
 Other questions? Write to info@cougar-net.com

As it later turned out, the spammer was somewhat new to the Internet and unaware of the likely effect of his autoresponder and of "netiquette," the set of social conventions that generally guide the behavior of most experienced users of the Internet. Though his *faux pas* was unwitting, the response to his perceived spam attack was swift and severe. Many of the 600+ subscribers immediately retaliated against him.

Personal Responses

Not all responses of list members were punitive. Some simply sent the spammer a polite message explaining how to unsubscribe. Here is an example.

Apparently your request to be unsubscribed to Cougar-net hasn't been processed by hand yet. Our list managers are trying to stay ahead of about a thousand messages a day, and they do this in their spare time. So, to spare your further annoyance, I thought you might like to know that there is a way to get yourselves off the list automatically... [Instructions for getting off list followed.]

The tameness of these responses may be explained in part by the fact that most list participants are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the "Mormon" church, which sponsors Brigham Young University. Based on their common membership in a relatively close-knit community, list members tend to feel an affinity for others who have an interest in the list. And, like other Christians, Mormons are taught to "turn the other cheek." Following this counsel, many of the 600+ subscribers to Cougar-Net did not respond in any way. So annoying e-mail messages don't necessarily lead to retaliation.

Not all private messages were worded politely, however. Several were quite hostile in tone. Here are three verbatim responses.

Sending crap like this over 30 times to a list serve is BS. Go to the web address at the bottom of any post and FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS to get off the list. All the hate mail you get you absolutely deserve. UNREAL.

* * * * *

Enough already! Why can't you just ask to have your name removed and let it go? Why do you have to ruin the day for 600 other people? MY GOSH, GET A LIFE!

* * * * *

If you want to unsubscribe, read the damn instructions appended at the bottom of each post! People like you shouldn't be allowed to contribute to the gene pool!

Others offered the following retrospective descriptions of their messages to the spammer.

I asked if they were born stupid or developed that trait with practice.

* * * * *

My articulately worded response pegged him as a spam-spewing moron.

* * * * *

I wrote them a pretty mean email telling them they were idiots and people like them shouldn't have a computer. Something to that effect, at least.

It is possible that other, more coarse responses were sent to the new C-Net subscriber but not passed on to the researchers. Commenting on the messages he received, the spammer wrote:

I HAVE RECEIVED THE MOST VILE, CRUDE, OFFENSIVE, AND DEPRIVED (sic) MESSAGES . . . certainly not the type I would expect coming from someone at BYU.

Clearly, he was stung by the responses that he received, just as the authors intended. And for some list participants, a hostile verbal response was a sufficient vent for their feelings toward the spammer.

Complaining to Internet Service Provider (ISP)

However, other list participants chose to complain not to the subscriber himself but to his Internet service provider. These indirect complaints were reasonable. As mentioned above, it is oftentimes useless or impossible to complain directly to spammers because they ignore the complaints or have falsified their e-mail headers (CAUCE 1999; Wright 1998). These more aggressive list members reported the following actions.

I did what I always do with spammers, I contacted his ISP directly, told them of the situation and asked that action be taken. I received a reply from them saying they would take care of it. I have no idea if they actually will do something, but at least it puts them on notice.

* * * * *

[I contacted] their service provider... they'll be looking for a new one in short order (if the provider is of any quality).

The following are verbatim messages sent to ISPs. The second was sent by a lawyer who was a member of the list.

One of the subscribers to our mailing list apparently decided he needed to leave the list, and apparently set up an "auto-reply" that flooded the list with the message shown below. Unfortunately, we did not know what was happening until scores of these messages were distributed. This is a terrible and completely inappropriate way to deal with a request. I don't know how long the user had been on our list, but there had been no attempts that we could see to get unsubscribed in conventional ways. Many ISPs would cancel the account of a subscriber who behaved so poorly.

* * * * *

I am writing because one of your clients is a spammer and I am going to take the necessary

legal actions if you don't. He just sent our sports list about 50 messages multiplying that by 3000 subscribers ... you get the idea. I have attached one of the offending messages. The homepage for the email list clearly states how to unsubscribe—he chose another course of actions.

It is against the law to spam anyone in California. If you would like to have a lawsuit, then do nothing. If you would like to avoid a lawsuit—tell this guy he just lost his account otherwise I will assume you support these actions and we will assert our rights.

Any further attempts by a person or persons associated with your company or any client who tries to spam will NOT BE TOLERATED.

Retaliation

While many list members offered no response and some offered verbal chastisement to the spammer himself or to his ISP, others chose to retaliate in kind with spam of their own directed at the spammer's account. Several simply redirected each message they received from the spammer back to him.

I started redirecting the messages that they sent to cougar-net. I did this about 20 [times] and then stopped, as reason took over.... I also figured that if 20 other people did at least what I did then, they will get 400 messages.

Others created spam customized to send a message to the spammer.

I don't know if you saw the note I sent to C-Net, but I encouraged everybody to send at least a few notes to them, and a few responded to me that they had (one sent over 50 notes back to them). I sent about 5 or 6, which basically said if they were able to follow directions to get on the list, they should be able to follow directions to get off the list.

* * * * *

Yes, I was very ticked off and I spammed the spammer back with a message saying, "Please, please, please don't be a jerk!"

* * * * *

I composed a reply explaining to him that every one of his messages went out to over 600 subscribers, and then I sent it to him about 20 times.

* * * * *

I did reply to "many" (20 or so) of their posts but not all. Interesting to... I received an angry reply back from them.

One subscriber set up an automated reply similar to that originally created by the spammers. Had this retaliator continued to receive messages from the spammer, he would have flooded his mailbox with a looped retaliatory message, but to his regret, the spammer did not provoke this response with any new messages. The retaliator's actions are reported in the following passage.

[H]ere is what I did. I sent them ONE message that chastised them for spamming us and wasting our time and not following directions... yada, yada, yada... I also set up a Rule in my email system to respond back with a similar nasty message each and every time a message from them appeared in my inbox... no more came in, not even a response to my first message to them. Had it continued, I'd have gotten even meaner, and completely stuffed their box full of mail ... continually ... by setting up a Rule that "looped," so to speak. You don't SPAM a messaging professional! <big grin> But ... alas ... none of this came to pass ... except the first message I sent to them.

Another relatively sophisticated list member also retaliated massively, using a dummy account to prevent counter retaliation.

I have to admit, I did spam them back... usually I ignore people like this, but this time, due to the inconsideration (sic) of the person

involved, the number of people affected, the emotions of the moment, the way the planets aligned (who knows, they pushed my buttons)... I decided to be a passive bystander no more. I created an Email account on Yahoo (to prevent them from re-spamming me as counter-retaliation), then wrote a note telling them that their actions were thoughtless, inconsiderate, and caused a lot of people to be very upset with them. I then sent them over 200 copies... Christ-like? No, it wasn't. *grin* Just got fed up with being hit by one spammer too many.

In this case, the spamming subscribers were the victims of resentment built up in previous encounters with spam.

One subscriber was prepared to escalate from e-mail to the telephone and US mail. He looked up the spammer's home address and phone number and was planning to post them to the list with a suggestion that list members call or send letters to voice their displeasure. In the end, however, he did not post this information to the list, though he did send it to one of the list owners, the first author.

The Spammer's Response

As the passages cited above indicate, the spammer received an overwhelming and overwhelmingly negative response from list members. He, in turn, sent the following message to one of the list co-owners. His response was at different points both angry and plaintive.

Last Sunday I was "surfing the net" to get the score on the BYU/Washington game. I came across the site which asked if I would want to be on the cougar-net. Not an alumni, but as a fan I said "yes." When I next turned on my computer, I had 483 e-mail messages!!! ...all from on the cougar-net. I didn't know what I had turned on when I said "yes" but I wanted out and made the mistake of replying to all to take me off the thing.

Little did I know that EACH MESSAGE went to EVERYONE, and that is reasonable because I did not take the time to look through

400+ messages to find one that gave directions to get off cougar-net.

None of you have had the problems that I have had. Granted, I unknowingly caused problems for you all, but I am getting HUNDREDS AND HUNDREDS OF MESSAGES A DAY!!!! most which are multiple copies of the same message, each seemingly sent once a minute for an hour or so... over and over, and over compounded into thousands and thousands each day.

I HAVE RECEIVED THE MOST VILE, CRUDE, OFFENSIVE, AND DEPRIVED MESSAGES.... certainly not the type I would expect coming from someone at BYU. One of them had an attachment that was 70-MEGABYTES and took 1 1/2 hours of my net-time to load--which my server said not to open, thinking it had viruses.

IS THAT THE CHARACTER OF BYU??????
Are these people the type of people BYU produces???

I'm sorry, but while I caused problems I did not know of... they were nothing compared with what BYU students/alumni/supporters have INTENTIONALLY CAUSED for me. My address is not only on the letterhead of my business---it is also the NAME of my business (RAW ENTERPRISES), and now I may be forced to have to have to change my address... because of the intentional actions of these people. I sent messages one (1) time, and did manage to "unsubscribe" within 3 hours. It has now been 4 days and I still get thousands of messages each day!!!

As I apologize for my ignorant act, I feel that the hundreds of people sending these tens-of-thousands of messages I am getting owe me an apology.

I WAS A FAN OF BYU
I NOW HAVE A TOTALLY DIFFERENT
VIEW OF THE SCHOOL.

If you call my unfortunate and ignorant act as

"rude at the very least" I would be anxious to know what you would call the acts of these BYU students/fans/alumni???

Clearly, it wasn't only the spammer and the other subscribers to Cougar-Net who were injured in this episode. BYU, too, was injured, though there is no official connection between the list and the university and though the university was not involved with the exchange of messages in any way. The spammer's resentment does not, however, appear to extend to the Mormon church which sponsors BYU.

Responses to the Spammer's Explanation

Cougar-Net participants were not of one mind in their reactions to the subscriber's spam and subsequent explanation/complaint. Some shared his view that he was the more injured party and were embarrassed by the behavior of their list colleagues. One apologist eloquently expressed this point of view.

Yesterday at work I read a bounced message to C-net from someone that contained an explanation of what happened with the [spammer]. The message was from the spammer. I send it to [the list co-owner] to post here if it had not gotten through. I'm not subbed to C-Net at work and could not post it myself.

In my message to [the list co-owner] I told him and I'll tell you now that I was and am very embarrassed for all the members of the list that retaliated to [the spammer.] We or I guess I should say they did more harm to [the spammer] than he ever did to us. His was a mistake made from lack of knowledge. The actions of members of this list, were on the other hand, arrogant, malicious, cruel, and totally uncalled for. I felt then and now that I had been betrayed by friends.... Those that returned [un]kindness for [un]kindness to [the spammer] have now caused me to be painted with the same brush as you used to slap him.... All of those that Spammed [the spammer] owe him, BYU, BYU fans, and the members of this list an apology. You had no right to do what you did. I told [the list co-

owner] that if I could I would unsub all those that had returned salvos at [the spammer]. It would not be my place to take such action, and [I] would not know who to unsub. . . but if I knew and it was my place I would. BYU, it's fans and the members of this list that did not retaliate all have a black eye because of some thoughtless people.

Other list members were incensed by the spammer's message and insisted with varying degrees of hostility that he got just what he deserved.

As one who did not SPAM the [spammers] I am a little puzzled. Was it my imagination, or did they post at least 20 times a very long, repetitive request to be unsubscribed from cougar-net.... Sorry to the [spammers], but didn't they SPAM 600 people? What did they think would happen?

* * * * *

Even though I didn't spam [the spammer], I sent a letter to his postmaster in complaint of his actions, I can't condone what he did. I don't care if you do have a "lack" of knowledge about how email works, it is rude to send over 30 messages saying the same thing, whether it is to a mailing list or to a single individual. Anyone with a small amount of common sense should be able to realize this. Finally, his apology wasn't much of one. A couple of sentences of "I'm sorry" then a tirade of "look at how abused I am." Reminds me of another apology I heard recently.... [a clear reference to President Clinton's *mea culpa* in the Monica Lewinsky affair] Maybe my thoughts might seem mean spirited. But as a person who manages his own mailing list, spam in any form gets real old real fast. The Internet is a tool like any other, you should make sure you know how to use it properly or you just might get burned.

* * * * *

There are always 'newbies' that don't pay attention on how to unsubscribe, even when

it's posted at the bottom of EVERY message sent to the list, but in each case, most of them only send one or two messages saying 'please remove me from the list'. For a newbie who knows nothing about Email, he sure was smart enough to figure out how to setup an auto-reply to all the messages he received. And if he didn't auto-reply, but rather individually responded to each of those posts with his 'spam', then HE is the one being EXTREMELY rude!!

* * * * *

I respectfully disagree with the notion that just because he clicked a button without reading the fine print, and then configured his email to automatically respond to all c-net messages with his PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE message, that I need to apologize to him for hurting his feelings. We are all responsible for our own actions. If he had read the directions, there would not have been a problem. And I'm still at a loss to understand how 600 people upsetting one person is worse than one person upsetting 600... I don't think our actions were worse than his. Ignorance is no excuse.

DISCUSSION

There is a clear consumer retaliation analog in many of the passages quoted above. Retaliation occurs when consumers take matters into their own hands believing they have been treated unjustly and have not received adequate redress of grievances. These consumers may have complained and received what they perceive to be an inadequate response, or believing complaints to be ineffective, they may have retaliated without bothering to complain (Huefner and Hunt 1994). They retaliate to "get even" or "settle the score."

In the passages quoted above, it is clear that some subscribers to Cougar-Net have engaged in retaliation. Redirecting large quantities of e-mail, threatening legal action, sending mail bombs, and writing obscene messages are various methods of getting even. In their efforts to get the spammer's ISP to discipline him, Cougar-Net participants acted in ways typical of consumers unhappy with commercial spam. Consumers call for legislative

regulation and seek to get offenders blacklisted (Boldt 1999; CAUCE 1999). But they also boycott the products the spammers market (Ebert 1996; Mueller 1999), an option that wasn't open to members of C-Net since the spammer's message did not mention a product.

But more appears to be at work than simple retaliation. Some responses seem to grow out of a more enduring grudge against spammers. Hunt and colleagues (Hunt and Hunt 1988; Hunt et al. 1990; Huefner and Hunt 1992) have defined consumer grudgeholding as an extreme form of exit. Grudgeholding "carries a heavy emotional loading, and it persists over long periods of time" (Huefner and Hunt, 1992, p. 228). Grudgeholding is characterized by long-term avoidance and long-term negative word of mouth. Past offenses are not quickly forgotten.

One respondent indicated that the spammer reaped the consequences of frustration that had been building for some time: I "just got fed up with being hit by one spammer too many." Another has developed a standard retaliatory response to spammers that reflects an enduring hostility towards them:

I did what I always do with spammers, I contacted his ISP directly, told them of the situation and asked that action be taken. I received a reply from them saying they would take care of it.

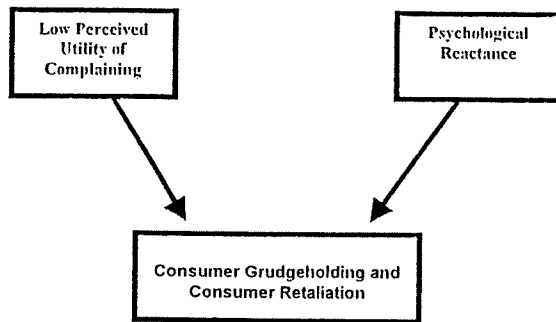
These responses do not seem to reflect a momentary pique that will pass. They grow out of an enduring grudge.

What do these data tell us about how and why consumers develop grudges and retaliate? First, as a caveat, they show that many people who suffer an injury do not feel impelled to strike back, and, indeed would be mortified if perceived to be vindictive. Lee Tanner and others responded in this way. Others who did have pretty strong feelings against the spammer and who repudiated the apologist's response after he posted it to Cougar-Net nevertheless took no action against the spammer. These list members would seem to represent consumers for whom the utility derived from complaining about the unsolicited messages is too low to motivate an act of retaliation. In her seminal article on complaining behavior, Kowalski

(1996) points out that many people respond (or fail to respond) in this way to an unsatisfactory commercial interaction. On the net, this non-response may be especially likely among the well informed since, as previously mentioned, it is often difficult and/or pointless to complain to a spammer (CAUCE 1999; Wright 1998).

While the ineffectualness of complaining may lead to inaction, Wright and Larsen (1997) have suggested that low perceived utility for complaining may also lead to the opposite response, retaliation. The transition from complaining to retaliation (the pattern exhibited by the informant who became fed up with spam and finally retaliated) is modeled in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2
Antecedents to Grudgeholding and Retaliation



Psychological reactance is another possible explanation for the visceral response consumers have to spam (see Exhibit 2). Reactance is a motivational arousal to overcome loss of personal freedom (Brehm 1966). Reactance impels people to seek the restoration of freedoms they believe they have lost. The greater the importance of the freedoms perceived to be lost the greater the response (Brehm 1993; Wortman and Brehm 1975). In the example discussed above, some Cougar-Net subscribers are highly involved with the list. Their level of involvement is apparent in their welcoming the same large number of messages from the list that so surprised the spammer and motivated his effort to unsubscribe.

Some of these subscribers felt that the readability of the list they value so highly was threatened by the spammer's insertion of a great deal of digital clutter. Because their ability to enjoy reading sports-related messages was threatened by the

spammer, they *reacted* against the source of that loss of freedom, and retaliated against him in various ways, all in an effort to restore the normal functioning of Cougar-Net.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several peculiarities of Cougar-Net and Cougar-Net participants may limit the generalizability of this study to other consumers and other e-commerce venues. Since most participants on the list share a religious affiliation, it is possible that the perspective represented by the apologist may loom larger in this episode than it would in a similar episode where participants did not share a common religious commitment. Conversely, precisely because the venue links religion and sports, life domains where involvement is often very high (Sirgy et al. 1998), some participants may have been less inclined to ignore a threat to the venue than they would have been on a less involving web site. Participants on Cougar-Net are peculiar, too, in that many are far more technologically sophisticated than the average person. Having been involved with the Internet for a long time, they may be more committed to social conventions--including strictures against broadcast communications--that governed the net before it became a mass medium, and they may be more able to retaliate given the impulse to do so than the average Internet user would be. Finally, because the perceived violator of netiquette did not have a commercial interest that the spam victims knew about, it was not possible for them to retaliate by directly attacking the business operations of the perceived miscreant. If the spam were explicitly commercial, a direct attack on business operations would be more likely.

The focus of this study has been the likely retaliation costs of an unsolicited electronic communication. While this study makes it clear that those costs are real, some businesses may, nevertheless, be willing to risk retaliation from some recipients of e-mail if they are able to gain the business of other recipients. Indeed, virtually any commercial communication, even those that are not entirely unsolicited, have the potential to evoke retaliation. As the Internet comes to be used more widely for commercial communications, researchers will need to focus on the probable ratio

of costs and benefits of such communications. They will need to focus, too, on ways of minimizing the retaliation costs while maximizing the sales and public relations benefits of e-communications with potential customers. While the Internet is a commercial medium with almost unparalleled potential, that potential will be destroyed if businesspeople are unable to find ways to communicate that maximize the dissemination of information while minimizing for consumers unnecessary expenditures of time and money.

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