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TABLE of CONTENTS

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF MACROECONOMIC VARIABLES ON KLCI MALAYSIA'S STOCK MARKET RETURN: THREE DECADES OF OBSERVATION Aqilah Syafiqah Abd Aziz ¹ , Farah Farisha Akhdar Ahmad ² , Melissa Nur Hazirah Masrom ³ , Ahmad Syahmi Ahmad Fadzil ⁴ & Nur Fatihah Shaari ⁵	1 - 14
THE NORMALISATION OF TROLLING ON SOCIAL MEDIA Che Nooryohana Zulkifli ¹ , Nur Afiqah Ab. Latif ² , Ruzai Syarilili Aiyu Abdul Rashid ³ & Mohamad Putera Idris ⁴	15 - 26
EXPLORING OLDER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF AGEING IN PLACE: A SCOPING REVIEW Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof ¹ & Suziana Mat Yasin ²	27 - 38
POVERTY ASSESSMENT INITIATIVES IN SELECTED ASEAN COUNTRIES Roshima Said ¹ , Noor Zahirah Mohd Sidek ² , Azlyn Zawawi ³ & Mahadir Ladisma @Awis ⁴	39 - 53
INVESTIGATING THE MACROECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF HOUSING PRICE INDEX (HPI) IN MALAYSIA Luqmanul Hakim Johari ¹ , Muhammad Naqib Zainuddin ² , Muhammad Nur Affandi Ja'afar ³ , Muhammad Nurizz Hakim Razali ⁴ , Nurul Amira Bazli ⁵ & Ahmad Syahmi Ahmad Fadzil ⁶	54 - 71
PRE-SERVICE SCIENCE TEACHER'S MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE CHEMICAL BONDS Nur Farha Shaafi ¹ , Nurul Nabilla Mohammad Khalipah ² & Nabilah Abdulla ³	72 - 98
REALISING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS VIA ORGANISATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH WORK PLAN: RESOURCE-BASED VIEW PERSPECTIVE Corina Joseph ¹ , Nur Izyan Ismail ² & Siti Aimi Yasin ³	99 - 113
NEW TRENDS OF CLOUD KITCHEN TECHNOLOGY AND CONSUMERS' PURCHASE DECISIONS: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY Nurul Syahirah Idris ¹ , Muhammad Afiq Zulkifly ² , Muhammad Safuan Abdul Latip ³	114 - 126
SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER IN MALAYSIA: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND FUTURE DIRECTION Mohamad Hafiz Rosli ¹ , Nor Azah Jahari ² , Muzairihana Md Moid ³ , NorHazwani Hassan ⁴ , Farahwahida Mohd@Abu Bakar ⁵	127 - 138
FREE TOOLS FOR PARAPHRASING: TO USE OR NOT TO USE Ho Chui Chui	139 - 156
TRAINING, REWARDS, AND APPRAISAL SYSTEM: PREDECESSORS AND INFLUENCES ON JOB PERFORMANCE Nur Ayunis Syairah Mohamad Zaidi ¹ & Nurul Hidayana Mohd Noor ²	157 - 169
IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS SHAPING MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES' ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIORS Shaiful Annuar Khalid ¹ , Norshimah Abdul Rahman ²	170 - 187
REAKSI PEMIMPIN DAN MASYARAKAT TERHADAP BANTUAN PRIHATIN NASIONAL Intan Syahriza Azizan ¹ & Junaida Ismail ²	188 - 194
LAPISAN MAKSUD DALAM KENYATAAN MEDIA ISTANA NEGARA 24 NOVEMBER 2022: SATU ANALISIS TEKSTUAL Nazima Versay Kudus ¹ & Wan Noorli Razali ²	195 - 202

PEMBANGUNAN SISTEM STUDENTS' COMPREHENSIVE ONLINE EXERCISES (SCORE) SEBAGAI LATIHAN TAMBAHAN BAGI KURSUS MATH2 Shahida Farhan Zakaria ¹ , Afida Ahmad ² , Liana Najib ³ , Nor Athirah Mohd Zin ⁴ , Siti Nur Alwani Salleh ⁵ , Suhardi Hamid ⁶ & Ahmad Afif Ahmarofi ⁷	203 - 215
ONLINE TEACHING-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE LOCKDOWN PERIOD OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC Roshidah Safeei ¹ , Hawa Syamsina Md Supie ²	216 - 229
INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL EFFICIENCY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN MALAYSIAN AND SINGAPOREAN MANUFACTURERS Naqiah Awang ¹ , Nur Syafiqah Hussin ² , Fatin Adilah Razali ³ & Shafinaz Lyana Abu Talib ⁴	230 - 241
DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY AT CENTRE OF FOUNDATION STUDY IN MANAGEMENT Zahayu Md Yusof ¹ , Lim Qing Jun ² , Goh Hong Quan ³ , Anis Hanisah Sobri ⁴ & Nur Athirah Mahmud ⁵	242 - 254
A STUDY ON MOTIFS OF SASAK TRADITIONAL WEDDING UNDERGARMENT DODOT AND BENDANG IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIO-CULTURE Lalu Rizkylan Hakiky ¹ & Arba'iyah Ab. Aziz ²	255 - 270
A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR DYSLEXIC CHILDREN: UTILISING A MULTI-SENSORY APPROACH Norarifah Ali ¹ , Azhari Md Hashim ² , Mohamad Hariri Abdullah ³ , Muhammad Nidzam Yaakob ⁴ & Roslinda Alias ⁵	271 - 283

THE NORMALISATION OF TROLLING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Trolling has become common among social media users. This study examines how university students perceive trolling culture on social media. Its primary goal is to ascertain whether trolling is a social media norm, while the secondary goal is to determine users' typical responses when they are being trolled on social media. A quantitative research method was used in this study. Sixty students from a public university provided their responses through a Likert Scale survey. We analysed the data using descriptive analysis SPSS version 25. The results indicate that most respondents expressed their worries and concerns about the present culture of trolling, which is becoming increasingly prevalent on social media. This study also unearths the common responses among users when they were trolled on social media. Thus, this study provides insights into the seriousness of trolling culture on social media, especially among young adults like university students.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

In many countries, including Malaysia, online space has become a breeding ground for insubordination, including cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and other types of harassment (Espiritu, n.d.; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). The practices of "doxing" (disclosing somebody's location and private information) and the rise of "shame campaigns" (a widespread movement of shaming a specific individual or organisation online) are examples of the types of online harassment that have resulted from Web 2.0 (Mason, 2021, as cited in Polak and Trottier, 2020). According to several studies, a variety of harsh comments, such as personal insults and exclusionary tactics, are deemed to be "trolling" that are commonly practised on websites and social media (Herring et al., 2002; Luzón, 2011; Shachaf & Hara, 2010; Thacker & Griffiths, 2012 as cited in Cook et al., 2017).

Before the emergence of Facebook and other social networking sites, trolls caused havoc on Usenet newsgroups, internet forums, and message boards (Suciu, 2020). Trolls typically adopted false or fabricated names to ensure their identities would be protected. Racial, sexual, and political provocations are the main types of trolling. Trolling also includes hate speech, rape threats, death threats and body shaming by an individual or group that aim to promote hatred among social media users (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). This form of aggressive and manipulative behaviour can be found in comment threads of news articles, political organisations pages or individuals' social media accounts (Espiritu, n.d.).

Fortunately, trolls may be blocked on cell phones using the WhatsApp app, Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites, but only when the administrators receive reports against them. Since most people utilise the internet every day, cybercriminals tend to have more opportunities and thus, the number of people who have fallen victim to trolling continues to rise. According to Pew Research Center, as cited in Swenson-Lepper and Kerby (2019), most internet users have observed and experienced online harassment such as name-calling, offending, attacking, stalking, harassing, or sexually assault. As a result, this inappropriate behaviour has affected many users, especially teenagers and young adults. Ortiz (2020) stated that trolling victims reported feeling unhappy, fatigued, and traumatised, which has caused them to withdraw from meaningful discussions on social media so that they could refrain from this mistreatment.

Despite the backlash and resistance against the activity, many who support trolling claim it serves as self-expression and identity (Boler, 2007; Kennedy, 2006, as cited in Andersen, 2021). It is perceived as a part of entertainment, and trolls mostly do not have any intention to cause violence (McCosker, 2014; Ortiz, 2020). Komac and Cagiltay (2019) discovered that the most common reason for trolling is personal pleasure. They also cited Bishop (2014), who describes two types of trolling, which are "kudos trolling" (for entertainment) and "flame trolling" (for insulting). Hence, trolling could occur unintentionally and intentionally.

1.2 Problem Statement

One of the fundamental reasons to use the internet is that people need to maintain connections with others, regardless of where they are physically located. According to Rainie et al. (2017), the internet currently acts as a platform for information sharing and executing communal activities among individuals, businesses, and government members. People tend to share their views, establish relationships with others, and even discuss topics they could not discuss in person. The internet, particularly social media, has made it feasible for people to expand their network and associate with others who may not even share common interests (Andersen, 2021; Biały, 2017; Kaplan, 2010). Ideally, with correct and proper usage, people could easily capitalise on social media and establish relationships and networks, which may eventually inspire various impactful behavioural patterns (Hejlová et al., 2019).

However, since people use the internet and social media to manage almost every aspect of daily life activities, the negative impacts also continue to grow, and trolling is one of them (Beyer, 2014; Case & King, 2018). It has been observed that people are growing less responsible; therefore, breaking the law and hurting others do not appear to affect their self-integrity or values. The upshot of this issue is that it could lead to an increase in cybercrimes and cause mental and physical distress among the victims of trolling. Worst of all is the growing acceptance of trolling as a part of everyday life, where people no longer care how it affects others (March, 2020). People will feel trauma resulting from bullying-related activities, impairing their mental and emotional health in the long run (Rachamalla, 2021).

The current body of literature could not provide enough evidence on how young adults in Malaysia handle the negative consequences of social media, such as trolling. As a result, we feel that this research could provide insights into understanding how this group of people feel every time they are trolled on social media and their common reactions to it. Several studies have been done to determine the effects of trolling on people's emotions and brains, and the findings have been somewhat distressing. According to Zamri et al. (2022), trolling is a form of cyberbullying that can significantly affect a person's mental health, and troll victims will most likely experience mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm. Therefore, by understanding the respondents' feelings and identifying the typical responses, proper precautionary actions can be taken to curb the act of trolling from becoming an act of normalisation in society.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This quantitative study aims to determine if trolling has become a norm on social media. The first objective is to determine whether the culture of trolling is tolerated on social media platforms, and the second objective is to identify the common responses when people are trolled on social media.

Based on these objectives, the research questions are formed as follows:

- 1) Is trolling being tolerated on social media?
- 2) What are the common responses among victims when they are trolled on social media?

1.4 Significance and limitations of the study

This study aims to raise awareness among youth about the prevalence of trolling on social media and appropriate ways to manage social media accounts and online behaviour. By understanding the proper actions to take when being trolled on social media, users can be better equipped to deal with trolling culture and, as a result, avoid any unfavourable outcomes associated with trolling. This study also intends to encourage social media users to be more cautious in publishing posts or posting comments online since some users may not realise that they have actually supported the trolling culture and normalised this online misconduct.

This study has a few limitations involving the sampling size and demographic factors. Since only degree and diploma students from a public university were allowed to participate in this research, the findings could not generalise the perceptions of all university students and certainly not the entire youth population in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the results may serve as an indicator of how this particular group of people perceives trolling and how they typically respond to it. Besides that, considering that trolling happens to people of all ages, the results may represent the thoughts and perceptions of this particular age group only, of those from 21 to 23 years old.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trolling activities on social media

An activity intended to provoke a response from another user or to start a discussion or controversy is known as trolling (Beyer, 2014; Cole & West, 2016). Trolling includes cyber-bullying, revenge porn, stalking and sexting (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). According to Case and King (2018), trolls can be categorised into a wide range of subgroups. Some subgroups include insult trolls, persistent argument trolls, profanity trolls, all-caps trolls, and show-off trolls. Trolling can be done by uploading provocative, digressive, unnecessary, or off-topic content in an online group. Many people like trolling, highlighting the strong desire to respond and the gullibility of others. Trolls believe that they can distract the target from the message and gain much power through trolling (Philips, 2015, as cited in Ortiz, 2020). In this instance, nothing could be further from the truth in the perception of trolls as illogical and negatively affecting how people frequently communicate (Essed, 1991, as cited in Ortiz, 2020).

According to Biaty (2017), trolls are classified into two types: 'traditional' trolls and 'hybrid' trolls. The first type attempts to disrupt social media communication because of personal issues (unhappiness, disappointment, psychological problem), whereas some organisations employ the second type of trolling to support and carry out their agenda. Biaty discussed a few trolling approaches used by some organisations to disseminate propaganda, infiltrate opponents' communications, and spread fake stories. Hence, trolls have manipulated social media's power to make fake news and misinformation go viral immediately.

One of the most alarming developments in trolling is the proliferation of revenge porn. One in 25 Americans was harassed by revenge pornography in 2016, based on a study by the Data & Society Research Institute (2016), as quoted in Case and King (2018). According to the survey, 7% of youth aged between 15 and 29 may be attacked or targeted for posting nude or nearly nude pictures. This act is related to rape threats that have emerged from "rape culture. "Rape culture" is defined as a socio-cultural context in which rape-related sexual comments are considered "normal" or "acceptable" (Keller et al., as quoted by Lumsden & Morgan, 2017). Trolls use these kinds of acts to express aggression against women. On online dating websites, males have more tendency to troll because they are more "psychopathic, narcissistic, Machiavellian, and sadistic" than women (March et al., 2017, as cited by Espiritu, n.d.).

Racist provocation is another form of trolling. According to McCosker (2014), some comments online could be described as vitriolic provocations - meticulously constructed provocations created to elicit recurring responses and usually include racial prejudice in a way that directly acts against the more commonly expressed cultural pride. A self-identified troll used negative connotations to describe immigrants, black people, and women and insisted on being heard through trolling (Ortiz, 2020).

2.2 Normalisation of trolling culture on social media

Numerous factors could contribute to the normalisation of the trolling culture on social media. It was found that people who have communicated via email, chat relays, and blogs could have encountered abnormal, dishonest, violent, or hostile behaviour since the 1980s (Donath, 1999, Kim & Raja, 1991, as cited in Ortiz, 2020). While social media may make it easier for us to make new acquaintances and strengthen our ties to the community, it may also have adverse effects, one of which is the culture of trolls. Numerous social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Clubhouse have given people a platform to harass others with derogatory remarks, provocative questions, and threatening language.

The anonymity of social media has made it easier for users to express themselves freely and perceive the action as entertainment. Dahlberg (2001), as cited in McCosker (2014), recognises trolling as an attempt to humiliate, distress, and disrupt and claims that it is commonly performed simply for humour but is occasionally oriented by more 'serious' intentions, especially

when it is associated with political agendas. Trolling could also result from content shared by social media users to support their idols, such as celebrities or politicians. Olson (2020) concludes that people would involve in an online fight for a common goal of supporting their idols.

March (2022) illustrates two theories explaining the normalisation of trolling - i) the General Strain Theory and ii) the Broken Windows Theory. According to the first theory, stressed individuals could behave negatively towards other individuals who might not be related to the causes of their stress. Meanwhile, the second theory describes the snowball effect in which internet users learn trolling from other users. The more they are exposed to trolling activities on social media, the more likely they are to troll. This then normalises the actions, resulting in more trolling.

2.3 The effects of trolling

Some of the most frequently reported symptoms among trolling victims include heightened emotional distress and shame and a higher probability of experiencing clinical or subclinical symptoms (such as those for depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (Stangor et al., 2022; Zamri et al., 2022) Many of the studies examined in an REA report comparable behavioural effects, including substance abuse, shame, humiliation, low self-esteem, paranoid delusions, avoidance of social life, and detrimental effects on interpersonal relationships such as with other family members and intimate partners (Myers and Cowie, 2017; Englander et al., 2017; Maltby et al., 2016; Jenaro et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017; Wilson & Seigfried-Spellar, 2022; Pearson, 2016).

Victim blaming is another effect of trolling. Lumsden and Morgan (2017) discussed how "silencing strategies" used by trolls have resulted in victim blaming. "Silencing strategies" aims to discourage an individual from participating in a further debate, such as responding to a vitriol post on social media. The common advice to the victims is "do not feed the troll" to prevent them from getting more offensive feedback. They reported a few cases involving public figures who had been victims blamed in media reports due to "silencing strategies". Another study by Andrew (1996), as cited in Herring et al. (2002), highlighted a successful trolling that had caused the victim to get blamed and expelled from high school. Trolling is a serious threat to our future, especially to young people. Long-term victims may end up at the bottom of the social scale, whereas successful bullies may rise to higher positions.

Furthermore, trolling can lead to suicide if the victim is unable to deal with the pressure and distress caused by the harassment. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2009), as cited in Stangor et al. (2022), youngsters who disclose being cyberbullying victims face a wide range of stresses, such as mental illnesses, alcohol use, and in severe cases, suicide. Several studies indicate that online bullying could lead to more suicidality in teenagers as compared to traditional bullying (Jeffrey et al., 2020; Stangor et al., 2022). According to the Mail Online (as cited in Dunlop, 2013), a 14-year-old girl hanged herself after alleged abuse and harassment on the social media website; Ask.FM.

3. Methodology

A quantitative method was used in this study to collect responses via a questionnaire. The respondents were university students consisting of 60 respondents, 29 males and 31 females. They were asked to complete a Google Form survey to express their opinions on whether trolling is becoming more common on social media, along with the common responses when online users are trolled. A Google Form questionnaire was chosen because it is quicker and easier to prepare, and it is also helpful to provide ease to all respondents who were doing online and distance learning (ODL) at the time of conducting this research. The questionnaire contained 31 questions and was distributed to the respondents using a Google form link sent to multiple students' WhatsApp groups. The questionnaire was divided into three Sections: A, B, and C. Section A is the respondents' demographic details, section B aims to answer Research Question 1, and the last section addresses the second Research Question.

All questions in sections B and C were answered using the 5-point Likert scale. We have employed non-probability sampling that entails non-random selection determined by convenience, thus making it simpler to gather data. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic was widespread at the time of writing, we could not meet the respondents physically; thus, this method was the most workable. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the data. The questionnaire has gone through a reliability test, and Cronbach's Alpha scores show high internal consistency in all sections of the questionnaire.

Table 1
Result of the reliability test of the questionnaire

Sections	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
A	.823	6
B	.863	15
C	.877	10

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Details

The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 21 and 23. Data showed that most respondents had more than four social media accounts. Respondents utilised WhatsApp media the most (45%), followed by Twitter (21.7%), Instagram (15%) and Facebook (11.7%). It was also found that 56.7% of participants spent more than three hours daily on social media.

Most respondents (83.3%) browsed social media during their leisure time, 10% did so in the morning, and the remaining during class and mealtime. 36.7% of respondents said they posted on social media once a year, 28.3% said they did so each month, and the remaining respondents frequently posted on social media each month. Nearly all the respondents expressed fear of posting their responses. Only 20% are willing to post on social media, while 80% are frightened.

4.2 Investigating if trolling culture is tolerated on social media

Our first Research Question is to investigate if trolling has become a norm and tolerated on social media, and section B of the questionnaire justified this. This section contains ten questions (including questions related to students' understanding of trolling) with corresponding Likert scale answer choices. The following table shows the tabulated data collected from Section B of the questionnaire.

Table 2
Data Analysis of Section B (level of understanding and experience)

Questions	(Strongly Agree to Agree)	(Neutral to Strongly Disagree)
1. I think the act of an individual bullying other people on the internet is considered trolling.	82%	18%
2. I can see many people getting involved in trolling on social media.	85%	15%
3. It seems that people love mocking and trolling others on social media.	80%	20%
4. I feel women are likelier to be trolled on social media than men.	48.3%	51.7%

5. I feel that the main predators of trolling are men.	55%	45%
6. The normalisation of trolling culture on social media has led to many other abusive acts, such as body shaming and name-calling.	90%	10%
7. I was once emotionally provoked on social media.	40%	60%
8. I have experienced scams on social media.	73%	27%
9. I encounter trolls on social media at least once a week.	48.3%	51.7%
10. I don't mind if those close to me get trolled, as long as it doesn't involve me.	34.6%	65.4%

The data clearly shows that most respondents (82%) believed that the act of trolling is a part of bullying. This data proves that university students understand and are aware of trolling culture on social media. The majority of respondents concurred that it is common for them to witness individuals being trolled on social media and to witness several individuals making fun of and trolling others. In addition, 80% of the respondents were under the impression that people take pleasure in ridiculing other users on social media. Interestingly, 51.7% of the respondents believed that most trolling victims are female, which also made them believe that most predators behind trolling behaviour on social media are men.

We also investigated the students' experiences of being trolled on social media. Forty per cent admitted that they once became the targets of cyberbullying on social media, and most were aware of how trolling culture occurs in their daily lives. Besides that, 73% of the respondents confirmed that they had been the victims of fraud while using social media. In order to prove the negative impact of trolling, 90% asserted that tolerating trolling on social media could lead to many other abusive acts, such as body shaming and name-calling.

4.3 Identifying the common reactions when people are trolled on social media

This section aims to assess respondents' responses and actions when they came into contact with trolling culture on social media. The section aims to address the second Research Question of this study. The following table tabulates the data obtained from Section C of the survey.

Table 3
Data Analysis of Section C

Questions	(Strongly Agree to Agree)	(Neutral to Strongly Disagree)
1. I am willing to help anyone being trolled and bullied on social media.	85%	15%
2. I am willing to advise those who have been involved in trolling on social media.	81.7%	18.3%
3. I believe educational institutions need to be more proactive in helping students involved with trolling cases.	86.6%	13.4%
4. I believe Government and Non-Government Organisations should provide a youth helpline that students can get help when having trouble, especially regarding trolling occurrences.	91.7%	8.3%
5. I believe an Anti-Cyberbullying organisation should be established to investigate cyberbullying or trolling cases in the community.	90%	10%
6. I think it is fun and entertaining to see how people troll others.	18.4%	81.6%
7. I can easily lose my temper when I am trolled.	91.6%	8.4%

8. Whenever I am trolled, I feel embarrassed to continue staying on social media.	88.3%	11.7%
9. Whenever I am trolled, I tend to hurt myself.	26.6%	73.4%
10. I will have low self-esteem and self-confidence each time I receive negative comments on social media.	71.7%	28.3%

The first part of this section examined the respondents' readiness to assist social media troll victims; surprisingly, most felt they should be part of it. Most respondents also believed that educational institutions should be involved in addressing problems spurred by the trolling culture. The majority of respondents (91.7%) agreed that the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must establish a youth helpline to assist those threatened by trolling on social media. Most respondents (90%) also confirmed that these trolls must be called in for further investigations to prevent the activity from worsening. These findings also indicated the ideal responses people should take every time they are trolled on social media: both individuals and agencies mentioned must come together and play their part as responsible members of society.

A total of 91.6% of respondents agreed that they usually get angry when they are trolled, while 88.3% felt embarrassed about it and 71.7% experienced low self-esteem and self-confidence with negative remarks they received on social media. The high percentage experiencing these negative reactions proves that people do not usually feel good about the act of trolling, which could eventually affect their self-esteem and mental health. Even worse, 26.6% of the respondents agreed that they had the tendency to hurt themselves when they were trolled on social media. Although trolling is proven to have various negative impacts, 18.4% of the respondents felt entertained by reading the derogatory remarks made by the trolls on social media.

5. Discussion

This study has confirmed that trolling is gradually becoming a common practice among users on social media. Most respondents agreed that they have witnessed cyberbullying and fraud on social media, including trolling. The findings demonstrated that normalising trolling on social media could result in several other violent acts. The result is supported by Myers and Cowie (2017) and Englander et al. (2017), who explained the behavioural effects of trolling and how it could transform into other kinds of violence. The findings also found that people commonly perceive trolling as a source of fun and entertainment, which explains why it continues to prevail. It corresponds well with the study done by McCrosker (2014) and Ortiz (2020), which verified that trolling occurs for enjoyment, while Komac and Cagiltay (2019) found that personal amusement is the main factor of trolling.

Since the percentage of those who have been trolled is higher than those who were not, it clearly demonstrates how pervasive trolling culture is on social media. The respondents perceived it as one form of cyberbullying that can affect a person's well-being and health. As a result, the findings have confirmed the past studies in our literature review, highlighting the seriousness of the trolling culture on social media (Herring et al., 2002; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Suci, 2020). The findings clearly indicate that the victims mostly felt bitter whenever they were attacked online. They may express their anger, which could beget more violence on social media. It is also worrisome when the victims are usually feeling emotionally stressed out by the abusive remarks that may lead to mental disorders like anxiety and depression, which in certain cases could finally end with horrifying suicidal cases (Dunlop, 2013).

This study also has proven that most people have always wanted interventions from educational institutions to educate users and inadvertently help the victims. Creating strong interventions applicable across the lifetime is crucial for assisting victims and breaking the cycle of cyberbullying (Jeffrey et al., 2020). Most victims do not seem to know the appropriate responses or actions to be taken and will end up feeling stressed or depressed. Programmes that

engage students in identifying cyberbullying solutions improve students' self-efficacy, empowerment, and confidence, as well as their likelihood of reporting online abuse to an adult (Slonje et al., 2012, as cited in Jeffrey et al., 2020).

Our findings also found that women are likelier to be trolled, and men are the main predators of trolling. This idea corresponds to a study by Gammon (2014), as cited in Swenson-Lepper and Kerby (2019): it was identified that men are more likely than women to involve in a malevolent discourse. According to Jane (2014b), as cited by Lumsden and Morgan (2017), women are considered "weak" and serve to provide "sexual satisfaction for men," but they are then disrespected for this "self-same portrayal." This idea proves that women usually become the victims and are forced to be silent about the situation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, trolling has been normalised in today's society. Every minute, more people are indirectly lured into the troll culture since so many people utilise the internet today. We can see that trolls infiltrate all facets of social media and online activity. They say rude things, cause fights, or make depressing comments about other people, all of which come from individuals and have a terrible impact on internet users. Due to its rapid growth, it is clear that the culture of trolling is becoming more acceptable among social media users. This misconduct has various adverse effects, including psychological impacts and suicide (Stangor et al., 2022). Without proper interventions, the internet may soon become a place where people insult and denigrate one another and fail to recognise and value one another's differences. Therefore, the findings of this research also urge proper interventions to ensure our youth today could step into the future with morality and ethical behaviours, especially in online space. Swenson-Lepper & Kerby (2019) suggested that more education about the ethical consequences of using social media is necessary for university and high school students. This means that courses related to ethical online behaviours, including ways to deal with cyberbullying, must be implemented. Besides cultivating more positive values and manners among internet users, they can also be educated on how to react to cybercrimes accordingly. Therefore, everyone will soon understand that they must act ethically and civil no matter where they are.

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