

Trolling and the Trolled: Underground Black Propaganda Campaigns in the Philippines to Influence Online Opinions

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ABSTRACT

Black propaganda campaigns continuously thrive through online political trolling that remains largely hidden from mainstream media to victimize the public and disrupt digital political discourses. In the Philippines, political trolling was even used as a strategy to win the 2016 election. Six years later, similar practices were reportedly observed during the 2022 Philippine election. This article aims to provide recent findings after analyzing underground political troll activities on social media to influence public opinion during the 2022 Philippine election and identify the social media users' awareness level. Guided primarily by Harold Lasswell's Theory of Political Propaganda, the study's framework explains how political trolling activities can corrupt public opinion within digital spaces. Employing a mixed method with an exploratory sequential design, the study utilized two approaches: (1) content analysis of identified political troll campaigns and (2) survey questionnaires administered to one hundred social media users. The results have revealed that political trolls deployed varying narratives and emotional appeals depending on the campaign type: (1) creating artificial engagements to glorify political biases, (2) smearing political opponents to condemn them, and 3) starting online propaganda wars mixing both practices to execute an "us versus them" strategy. The survey findings have indicated that the respondents were familiar with political trolls but possessed only a basic understanding of political trolling. Overall, the results illustrate the end-to-end relationship between political trolling activities and public awareness regarding underground black propaganda campaigns.

Keywords: black propaganda, elections, political trolling, public opinion, social media, troll

INTRODUCTION

The truth in the 21st century has been under attack, and a democratic country without truth is flawed. A functioning democratic society needs a real, definitive, and accurate notion of truth to exist (Rosenfield 2019). From a political communication standpoint, continuous aggrandizement of misinformation, disinformation, and malformation (MDM) (Nagy 2024) poses a threat to an individual's democratic power and the formation of public opinion. In the Philippine democratic landscape, truth framing on social media is patronized as a political campaign strategy. The practice, culturally known as political trolling, has evolved from a mere phenomenon into a thriving masked industry. Being hidden from the mainstream media, political trolling practically employs digital workers and sources media talents to shield and boost political patrons' reputations and election campaigns (Ong and Cabañes 2019).

With the Philippines being coined as the world's social media capital (Lopez 2021) and grappling with the challenge of being the first in digital illiteracy (Abarca 2023), trolling has been a political crisis for local communications and media industries. With over 89 million Filipino social media users, 99% of them staying online to check their accounts (Malig 2021), the public heavily relies on digital platforms for media consumption, governance, and citizenship. The number of Filipino social media users even surpasses the number of 2022 registered voters.

The nature of new media grants the mass media industry and regular citizens equal access to social platforms, where the roles of sender and receiver are reciprocally distributed through a communication network. In contrast to traditional media, new media focuses on technology and fosters an interactive community (Yujie et al. 2022). The shift has sparked the interest of black propagandists to directly influence public opinion without compromising their real-life personas for political, economic, and social gains. The democratized content creation (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 59–68) has then invented an underground disinformation factory that glamorizes public images, fabricates online content, and provokes citizens within the online political realm.

With the ubiquitous use of the Internet, the role of social media in voters' selection has progressively increased over the years. In the United States, which pioneered the globalization of mainstream online platforms, the two-time President Donald Trump stated in an interview that Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram helped him claim victory in the 2016 presidential race (CBS News 2016). Columbia SIPA researchers suggested that Russian trolls' online activities influenced the U.S. 2016 presidential election in the direction of Trump (Almond et al. 2022). Similarly, Trump credited TikTok, a Chinese-owned social media app (He 2024), for securing the youth votes in his 2024 re-election campaign (Cooney 2024).

Exploring the influence of algorithms, scholars studied platform-enabled political trolls who disrupted Malaysia's online civic space. Internet trolling utilizes the conveniences of algorithms to cultivate the practice, in which the international ownership of social media apps plays a crucial role (Lee and Kerr 2020). The digital world allows the manipulation of transnational public debates, the stimulation of hate speech and violence through disinformation, and the legitimization of algorithms to build a distinct digital ecosystem for each platform user, contributing to elements ruling law, political beliefs and systems, free thought, and critical awareness.

In a different approach, Louden and Frank (2021) focused on the role of fake news content during Canada's 2019 federal election. The use of trigger topics and facts combined with unverifiable false facts was weaponized to manipulate social media users; evidence also suggests a suspected foreign interference. Echo chambers hijack political discourse and foster polarization, resulting in problematic online behaviors and the spread of fake news, purposely written, well-crafted, and sensationalized information that imitates mainstream news (Citron 2025). A kind of trolling coined as patriotic trolling has emerged in Thailand's digital political forums that dangerously portrays government critics as state traitors. Unlike political trolling, where third-party actors intervene, patriotic trolling is orchestrated by the incumbent junta (the Thai state) to monitor and suppress dissidents online (Sombatpoonsiri 2018). The Philippines' political trolling is a case in point of hired third-party actors to execute trolling campaigns that were first predominantly observed during the 2016 Philippine campaign period.

Every six years, the Philippines organizes the general election, encompassing voting for the executive and legislative branches of the government at every level, with the most recent held on May 9, 2022. The Philippine Commission on Elections (COMELEC) statistics reported that the 2022 election had the highest voter turnout despite the restrictions of COVID-19, with more than 68 million Filipino electors residing locally and overseas. The unprecedented turnout highlights the growing political interest of Filipinos, especially in electing public officials (Parrocha 2022).

With the growing active citizenship and digital use, grassroots supporters and keyboard armies exploited the democratized platforms to execute manipulation tactics, mobilize to silence critics, and establish the illusion of national public support. Rodrigo Duterte, a 2016 presidential candidate, publicly acknowledged deploying hundreds of keyboard warriors known as the DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters), which led him to become the 16th Philippine President (Ranada 2017). Duterte established a vast online following and fans who leaped to his defense, aggressively argued with his critics, and blindly applauded his leadership style.

An Oxford study cited that Duterte's camp paid PHP 10 million (US\$200,000) for an online campaign to promote and defend him against political opponents (Howard and Bradshaw 2017, 21; Gavilan 2016). Behind the mind conditioning were found to be media, communications, and marketing professionals who led million-peso-budget projects. Previous researchers described the community as the shadow industry, a covert sector providing tools for digital manipulation and acting as a weapon for the right price by building artificial buzz and reputation protection for political figures (Ong and Cabañes 2019). Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay (2020, 353–374) further examined the phenomena and found that Duterte's online fans were partly a reflection of offline, grassroots political support. However, with political trolling that corrupts public perceptions to sway votes and supporters (Suciu 2020), there is a high probability that some grassroots supporters were a ramification of political trolling.

The success of Duterte's 2016 trolling campaign set a precedent for subsequent elections. Political candidates and officials have routinely paid vast cyber-troll armies with multiple fake accounts to smear opponents, prop themselves up, initiate debates to shake politics, and infiltrate public perceptions (Bengali and Halper 2019). The Philippines has become a reference point in utilizing political troll practices, including click farms and all sorts of political gaslighting (Villamera

2022, 86–93; Mahtani and Cabato 2019). From then, the Filipino public is left confused, victimized, and disempowered.

With vast similarities in campaign strategies used in the 2016 and 2022 Philippine general elections, this study further explored political trolling as a concept, defining its techniques, types, and limitations. The trolling practice is rooted in paid campaigns, whereas its manipulation effects extend beyond securing votes, but a role shifting from passive bystanders to unwitting political trolls—this is closely tied to the reciprocal nature of new media. This article focuses on two perspectives: political trolling (the practice and its messages) and the trolled (the receiver of the messages) to further illustrate the relationship of trolling and its recipients within the black propaganda context.

In the first part, this study determined how political trolls conducted their black propaganda campaigns online during the 2022 Philippine election in terms of creating artificial engagements, smearing political opponents, and starting online propaganda wars. The first perspective centers on grounding political trolling as a concept; hence, it does not involve the political actors and figures associated. This article provides substantial recent information about the practice, including clearly laying out the manipulative stories, misleading narratives, and disinformation strategies manifested on social media as efforts to influence public opinion online. The political figures may successfully position themselves in the government seats, but only for a limited time; in contrast to political trolling as a black propaganda campaign that can be deployed every subsequent election.

The conducted study also identified Filipino social media users' awareness level of political trolls and political trolling. The covert industry and its online activities thrive in being underground to victimize the public with their political motives. Hence, the article at hand provides findings on the degree of Filipinos' consciousness of the concepts relating to trolling campaigns.

THE MODERN-DAY BLACK PROPAGANDISTS

Through the lens of Harold Lasswell's Theory of Political Propaganda (1927), this article explains the parallel concepts of classic propaganda and political trolling. The political communication theorist defined propaganda as a strategic manipulation of significant symbols and management of collective attitudes to acquire a desired response. Primarily, the significant symbols and language of stimulus-response are the drivers to reaffirm biased attitudes toward others and nullify undesired responses. He further fortified the concept by stating that a propagandist is an individual who intensifies the attitudes that support his bias, attracts the indifferent, significantly not acquiring attitudes that can cause a hostile bent, and reverses attitudes hostile to his bias (Lasswell 1927, 627–631).

In promoting an engineered framing of mind, the black propagandist utilizes structure, myths, techniques, and cultural materials to push and deceive the collective in harmony with his objectives. The research supplemented the study analysis with Roland Barthes' Semiotics Theory (1957) to interpret the semiotic meanings of the texts transmitted by the political trolls (Griffin 2012, 332–343). Standing in Barthes' semiology perspective in text analysis, Lasswell's propagandist definition directly translates to the three concepts of political trolling, where creating artificial engagements intensifies, smearing political opponents attracts the indifferent by positioning the rivals as a bad

choice, and starting online propaganda wars reverses attitudes by emitting provoking arguments—while all are unveiling underground.

Lasswell added that collective attitudes are not permanent and can be altered under the impetus of significant symbols and different modes, including violent intimidation (Lasswell 1927, 628), which mirrors the existence of political trolling. The trolling practice stems from influencing the collective bias to eventually end up with a desired response suitable for propaganda-driven motives. The weak spot that is subject to influencing is the flawed tendencies of the public in creating their own personal, social, and political perceptions, as explained by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's Cognitive Bias Theory (1970), Peter Wason's Confirmation Bias (1960), and Robert Zajonc's Mere Exposure Effects Theory (1968).

Due to the limited capacity of the brain to process a huge pool of information online, a person may use his cognitive bias for selection (Korteling et al. 2023; Wilke and Mata 2017) and confirmation bias for continuous consumption (Peters 2022, 1351–1376), while the frequency of information exposure, leading to familiarity (Zajonc 1968, 1–27), is cultivated by the user's behavior and social media algorithms. Using subjective reality, nitpicking information, and boosting the exposure of black-propaganda-driven political content on social media can ultimately affect an individual's political views and perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory sequential research started with a qualitative method through content analysis, followed by a quantitative method using survey questionnaires (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018, 84–91). The content analysis focused on political comments from identified political troll accounts, whose findings contributed to developing the survey questionnaires. Before deriving a combined conclusion, each research stage was analyzed and interpreted separately.

STAGE 1: IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL TROLL ACCOUNTS AND COMMENTS

With the nature of political trolls being over-engaged in political content, the inquiry detected troll accounts through their online engagements. The research established three data pool variations after constructing and deploying the *3-step data extraction to locate political troll accounts*. The first database was formed with the implicit data collected from publicly available data streams. The study compiled one thousand highly relevant 2022 Philippine (PH) election-related posts (76% videos, 22% images, and 2% texts) published prior to the voting day (May 9, 2022) on Facebook (500 posts) and TikTok (500 posts). Political posts were selected based on virality factors, including metrics of views, engagements, and commenters.

Exactly 1,713 top commenter accounts were extracted from the first data pool (71% from Facebook and 29% from TikTok) to create the second database. The selection of these top commenters was based on the richness of their contributions to the political discourse. Publicly accessible information about the commenters was acquired, including the account name, account link, and comment. It is crucial to base selection on numerical metrics as high engagements translate to wider exposure and influence; hence, the second data pool circumscribed filtering to highly engaged commenter accounts. The study then initiated the troll analysis for a judgment

sampling with the nine-item criteria checklist, a simplified, constructed list from the combined results of previous troll studies and investigative news articles reporting the nature of PH political trolls.

Nine-Item Criteria Checklist to Identify a Political Troll Account

A social media account labelled (1) *solely for politics* limits online interaction to political content, indicated by profile display photos symbolizing a political party, and most publicly shared posts tackle only specific political figures and ideologies. A fake name, nickname, incomplete name, and fake profile display photos to hide one's identity checks the (2) *anonymous* item. Fake account operators strategically utilize anonymity online (Ong and Cabañes 2019). Evaluating the (3) *biased political stance* item includes excessive favoring of a political figure or party to provide an impression of widespread support (Mahtani and Cabato 2019). A discrepancy between the number of engagements and followers indicates (4) *inauthentic followers* (e.g., an account highly focused on politics with a high following but with a low number of engagements). Political trolls use propaganda tools consisting of numerous fake followers, spreading manipulated media to earn voters' support (Howard and Bradshaw 2019). The use of (5) *low-quality profile photos or shared photos* that are cropped, artificial intelligence (AI)-generated, and deepfake are also used as an indicator. Many trolls share doctored images and videos to further their agendas, often utilizing subpar digital materials in the process (Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

Sock puppets (6) create false online identities to handle multiple social media accounts, which can be identified by mutual connections with other fake accounts, a newly created account in time for election campaigns, the use of low-quality images, and a lack of personal information. A huge number of automatic (semi-) or manually made fake profiles are deployed to establish an image of being well-loved by the public (Crosby 2022). Online activities of trolls have different behavioral patterns (Atanasov et al. 2019, 1023–1034). A high frequency of election-related and political posts produced/shared in a day and aggressive interaction with other users with differing opinions indicate an (7) *unusual pattern of online behavior*, including engaging with election-related fake news detected by the platform. The use of (8) *deceptive, provoking, and evasive language* in participating in online political discourse is a criterion item, indicating copy-pasting paragraphs from unknown sources, being aggressive and sarcastic, fake crediting public works, and excessive praising. Analyzing deceptive language cues can lead to accurately identifying online political trolls with F1=82% and recall 88% (Addawood et al. 2019). *Sudden inactivity (or less activity) after elections* (9) on social media is the last item. Political trolls are remunerated through election campaigns, thereby reducing online activities when the campaign period ends (Magsino 2019; Gavilan 2016).

In objectively interpreting the results, the number of checks determined the troll tagging. The study found that 15% (264) of the gathered top commenters from Facebook and TikTok are political troll accounts. The sampling plan is directly marked by the identified political troll accounts, comments, and public information stored in the third database.

Content Analysis

Following Klaus Krippendorff's Content Analysis Model (2013), the study unitized political comments as texts categorized based on the three research variables after coding: 1) emotions, 2) content theme, 3) content messages, 4) social media account behavior, and 5) interpreting semiotics/semantics.

Troll Code #	Unit of Analysis Text Categories	Description	Political Comments		
#1	a) Creating artificial engagements	Political comments that express fake and non-organic support for a political candidate.	Words, phrases, sentences, and signs and symbols.		
#2	b) Smearing political opponents	Political comments that target a specific political candidate/s to spread fake stories, rumors, and baseless accusations.			
Cont.	c) Starting online propaganda wars	Political comments that provoke other online users to start political debates and spread hatred and chaos online.			
Coding Category Items					
Emotions		Content Theme	Content Messages	Social Media Account Behavior	Semiotics/ Semantics Interpretations
Hope, patriotism, love, confidence, trust, impressiveness, etc. Disappointment, shame, annoyance, dismissiveness, rejection, passive-aggressive humor, distrust, etc.		1. Political Campaign 2. Politics and Celebrities 3. Political Human Interest 4. Political News Updates 5. Political Memes 6. Political Opinion 7. Political Survey	The overall narrative/s of the text, including political loyalty, political hero, perfect tandem, virtuous leader, political puppet, fake news spreader, etc.	Type A - a consistent, frequent user. Type B - a frequent user becomes inactive or less active after the 2022 PH elections. Type C - a consistent moderate user. Type D - a less active user. Null - unable to analyze due to inaccessible information and/or repetitive political trolls.	Colors, catchphrases, context, emojis, and signs and symbols. Word used, sentences in relation to the context, tone of the text, text presentation, punctuation marks, hashtags, etc. Fact-checking of the claims, information, and stories.

Table 1: A codebook for conducting content analysis. Source: author.

In applying a deductive approach, the codebook, as seen in Table 1, served as a guide where all the categories were predetermined, and the frequency of codes was counted. Code names replaced the names of the 2022 PH political candidates mentioned, which helped the researcher objectively analyze the texts. Twenty political comments were excluded after initial categorization due to the inability to classify the nature of the texts (e.g., personal contexts and other user tagging). Inferencing and narrating of the results were conducted afterwards.

STAGE 2: MEASURING THE LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF FILIPINO SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Rensis Likert's scales (1932) were primarily utilized in collecting explicit data from 100 Filipino social media users of legal age gathered through a simple random sampling. The survey questionnaires were constructed using the Filipino language and conducted through a Microsoft survey tool with four sections: demographics, social media use, and awareness level of political trolls and political trolling. Demographic questions (i.e., age, sex, location of residence, educational level, employment status, and monthly household income) were included in the first section. The respondents then measured their social media usage during the 2022 PH campaign elections through a frequency-based Likert scale: *always*, *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely*, and *never*. Five statements were rated to identify the degree of (1) browsing, (2) reading the comment section, (3) liking and sharing election-related posts, (4) commenting on election-related posts, and (5) posting election-related photos and videos.

An 11-point Likert scale to quantify the level of awareness was integrated into the third and fourth survey sections to acquire interval data (Wu and Leung 2017, 527–532). With twenty statements describing political trolls and political trolling, the respondents rated their awareness from zero as the lowest, five as the midpoint, and ten as the highest. The formulated statements were derived from the results of the content analysis and the review of related literature.

Statistical Analysis

The demographic variables, characterizing the gathered sample of the survey (Lee and Schuele 2010), and the ordinal variables, describing the respondents' social media use, were measured and summarized by mode, the frequently occurring value in a dataset. The levels of awareness about political trolls and political trolling were treated as interval variables, primarily concerned with the meaning of the differences between values (Albert and Tullis 2022). Despite their ordinal nature, research showed that using an 11-point Likert scale reduces the underlying issues and has a closer approach to distribution (Wu and Leung 2017, 527–532).

The ratings gathered from the two 11-point Likert scales were computed by adding all scores and dividing them by the total number of respondents to derive the average or mean scores. The data were analyzed through corresponding ratings, meaning the higher the mean, the higher the level of awareness. To supplement the mean (M), the study also reported the dispersion of the data through standard deviation (σ), and analyzed by the lower the value, the smaller the scatter (Andrade 2020, 409–410). In interpreting the results, zero to two mean scores were referred to as *not aware*, three to four mean scores as *less aware*, five to six mean scores as *slightly aware*, seven to eight mean scores as *much aware*, and nine to ten mean scores as *fully aware*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The black propaganda campaigns during the 2022 PH elections

Among the 264 highly engaged troll comments (20 items were excluded), the study categorized 122 items that were intended to boost a campaign (white trolling), 84 items to attack political opponents (black trolling), and 38 items to start political arguments (gray trolling).

Creating artificial engagements (white trolling)

After counting the frequency of codes, the study found ten positive emotions to associate with a political candidate/s: pride, love, confidence, hope, enthusiasm, patriotism, determination, trust, impressed, and empathy in descending order. Top of the list is pride—characterized by using first-person pronouns, mentioning awards, recognitions, and qualifications of the supported political candidate, and solidifying the feeling of satisfaction with his family lineage to express a higher degree of political loyalty and support.

Narratives and strategies	Description	Examples (extracted comments from identified political trolls)
1. Political loyalty	shows loyalty to a political candidate/s that started before the 2022 PH elections and is fortified by his family lineage.	Troll code #1091: "Congrats 🎉🎊 You had my vote, and I'll <u>vote for you again</u> come May 9." Troll code #1678: "Ok, I vote for you, and <u>all my family chose you.</u> "
2. Voter's gratification	gains satisfaction or pleasure from supporting and voting for a political candidate.	Troll code #1387 [translated to English]: "OMMMMGGGGGGG ❤️❤️ It's beautiful. My province is Albay ❤️❤️"
3. The "perfect tandem"	praises and campaigns two political candidates in one context who run for two different government positions.	Troll code #1381: " <u>Son</u> of the great president and <u>daughter</u> of legend president" Troll code #43: "Candidate A and Candidate C <u>perfect tandem</u> "
4. Association of patriotism with a political candidate	uses narratives associating love for one's country with voting or supporting a political candidate.	Troll code #584: "FOR <u>LOVE OF COUNTRY</u> let us vote for the man..."
5. The "political hero"	positions a political candidate as a hero who can save the nation.	Troll code #52: "If this dictator's son could bring unity, make <u>our nation great again and free from oligarchs</u> , I'll vote for him, 100 times."
6. The "virtuous leader"	characterized by narratives that a political figure has high moral standards, deserves praise, and is respectable.	Troll code #644: "Candidate B's <u>inspiring, inclusive and competent leadership</u> is the type of leadership we need today..."

7. Association of God with a political candidate	relates God with a political candidate.	Troll code #655 [translated to English]: <i>"Fightinggggg Yorme, you are crucially needed to lead, serve and govern for the next six years to come by <u>God's grace and divine intervention...</u> God first 🙏💜"</i>
8. Fake <i>vox populi</i> strategy	uses collective pronouns or statements to misrepresent public opinion; then, other troll accounts engage to create the illusion of the majority.	Troll code #1339 [translated to English]: <i>"<u>We are solid</u> to Candidate A"</i>
9. The "most qualified leader"	uses superlative adjectives to position the supported political candidate as the top choice.	Troll code #9: <i>"Candidate A <u>the most qualified</u> presidential make our nation great again PH ❤️❤️"</i>
10. The "winning certainty"	refers to direct statements of claiming victory.	Troll code #200: <i>"We support you! Our <u>soonest President...</u>"</i>
11. Parasocial relationship with a politician	expresses intimate statements and one-sided emotional bonds where an individual feels a connection or attachment to a politician despite no direct and two-way interaction.	Troll code #957 [translated to English]: <i>"Sir idol Candidate I, <u>you are in my prayers every day</u> on my own devotion to our lord savior..."</i>
12. Copy-pasting strategy	characterized by duplicate narratives in different content themes or contexts.	Troll codes #891 and #1156 [translated to English]: <i>"STILL STRONG #CANDIDATEA CANDIDATEC2022"</i>
13. Historical revisionism	intends to revise or reinterpret the history favorable to the supported political candidate.	Troll code #75: <i>"Let's <u>rewrite history</u> to make the Philippines great again..."</i>
14. Other disinformation narratives	intend to spread deceptive information to make the political candidate more favorable.	Troll code #75: <i>"...Candidate A for President... <u>is backed by a Quadrillion dollar worth of gold reserve...</u>"</i>
15. Association of famous personalities with a political candidate	relates celebrities to a political candidate.	Troll code #1054 [translated to English]: <i>"Great, very powerful speech by <u>John Arcilla</u>. We are with Candidate B..."</i>

Table 2: Identified black propaganda campaign to create artificial engagements (white trolling).

Source: author.

Table 2 shows all the identified black propaganda campaigns that intend to create the illusion of strong, widespread support. At the top of the list is political loyalty, which positions the candidate as the long-trusted political figure. The loyalty narrative is solidified by adding the statement that the candidate is also backed up by the white troll's long line of family lineage, which, from a different perspective, can be considered as a political dynasty. Although in the middle of the white trolling list, this study considered fake vox populi strategy as the most manipulative tactic as it imposes the image of majority by a two-step process: (1) a white troll account to leave a positive statement using collective pronouns to refer as the public opinion, and once posted, (2) all other types of

political troll accounts engage by liking or backing up the statement—hijacking the genuineness of the political discourse in each election-related post and silencing other opinions.

Approximately 45% of the content themes found belonged to *political news updates*, and an average of 32% were equally distributed to *political human interest stories* and *political opinion*. Around 26% of white troll accounts were classified as Type B, meaning that they were actively posting or sharing content frequently during the 2022 PH elections but became disinterested after, while around 25% of accounts were *null* due to insufficient public data or repetitive trolls. The troll comments intended to create artificial engagements mainly used positive tones to express superficial support; however, the degree of text intensity varied. Numerous political comments added excessive exclamation points and uppercase letters for strong emotional emphasis, while others preferred emojis. The texts were direct support, adding names and hashtags to amplify the content of the supported political candidate. Several comments utilized color symbols, specifically red, green, and pink, signifying certain political candidates for the 2022 PH elections.

Smearing political opponents (black trolling)

Nine emotions were extracted from black troll comments, namely passive-aggressive humor, hate, anger, distrust, dismissiveness, rejection, annoyance, disappointment, and shame, in descending order. The identified black trolls strategized humor as a disguise for hate and anger, referring to it as passive-aggressive humor. The primary codes found were laughing and crying emojis (53 codes). Like white trolling, most black trolls engaged in content produced by official news agencies (61%), followed by posts that showed *political opinion* (21%). Nevertheless, unlike the white trolls, the majority (25%) of black troll accounts were found to be Type A (consistently frequent social media users) and Type C (consistently moderate social media users).

Narratives and strategies	Description	Examples (extracted comments from identified political trolls)
1. Political disapproval	expresses strong disfavor for a political candidate.	Troll code #127: " <i>Never again Candidate C and Candidate A.</i> "
2. Public mockery online	defined by narratives that intend to use humor in ridiculing a political candidate.	Troll code #1116 [translated to English]: " <i>The <u>face</u> is so big, you can't even see the Malacañang Palace.</i> "
3. Dismissal and devaluation of qualifications	undermines or devalues one's skills and qualifications.	Troll code #688 [translated to English]: " <i>There's a lot of talk, and it's all nonsense...</i> "
4. The "unvirtuous politician"	positions a political candidate as someone who does not show high moral standards.	Troll code #909 [translated to English]: " <i>Wehhhh Lenlen. <u>Hypocrite!</u></i> "
5. Negative campaigning	highlights negative issues of a political candidate, despite not being related to the context.	Troll code #1128 [translated to English]: " <i>If you are weak-minded, this is the simplest explanation <u>why</u> you should not vote for Candidate A...</i> "

6. The “political puppet”	labels a political candidate as a puppet of a political party.	Troll code #1557 [translated to English]: <i>“Pass to the <u>puppet of the yellow people</u>.”</i>
7. The “fake news spreader”	accuses a political candidate of spreading disinformation.	Troll code #1018 [translated to English]: <i>“You’ve done all the things to slander others, you’re diligent in <u>making up stories</u>... you’re good at <u>lying</u>...”</i>
8. Historical revisionism	intends to revise or reinterpret the history unfavorable to the political opponent/s.	Troll code #353: <i>“If history is written by the victors, then the Yellow Liberal Party together with the CPP and leftist groups wrote our history and were taught in schools and universities. That is the <u>greatest fraud of all time</u>.”</i>
9. Red-tagging	labels individuals as communists or terrorists.	Troll code #106: <i>“... 23. <u>NPA (New People’s Army) supporter</u>...”</i>
10. Media bias	tags news media networks as biased.	Troll code #46: <i>“I used to read Al Jazeera’s posts here. I just found out it is like <u>Rappler</u> right now! What a shame.”</i>
11. Shifting strategy	shifts the blame, credit, or votes to another political candidate.	Troll code #1591: <i>“If you don’t want to vote for Candidate A, <u>please just vote for Candidate J</u> 😊”</i>
12. Repost strategy	characterized by narratives that intend to be reposted or reused, while the original source is unknown.	Troll code #1065: <i>“<u>REPOST CTTO: WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF CANDIDATE A WINS</u>...”</i>

Table 3: Identified black propaganda campaign to smear political opponents (black trolling).

Source: author.

The black trolling narratives gathered mainly utilized *political disapproval*—the exact opposite of *political loyalty* in white trolling. As shown in Table 3, the top narrative can be described as the dissemination of strong, unjustified disapproval statements to condemn the political opponents of their supported candidates and is slightly related to the *negative campaigning* strategy placed 5th in the list. *Political disapproval* uses straightforward personal disfavor statements; meanwhile, *negative campaigning* focuses on actively advocating for swaying votes by using disinformation.

One subject under vilification was the common structure of black troll texts, referring to a political rival, a critic, an institution, a news agency, etc. The statements were primarily attacks on the opposition as an attempt to silence and reduce credibility. Compared with white trolling, the smearing practice seldom used uppercase letters or hashtags for the whole text, interpreted as the objective was not to amplify emotions or the social media posts through algorithms, but to simply character assassinate. Black trolls were generally sarcastic in online political discourse, used laughing expressions and emojis, added negative adjectives for descriptions, and recalled past or

reinvented negative issues for reference. Nicknames, profanity, and mockery were also prominent traits.

Starting online propaganda wars (gray trolling)

Local self-identifying political trolls classified only white and black troll farms (Magsino 2019; Mahtani and Cabato 2019). However, upon further textual analysis to identify items that intend to start online propaganda wars, the researcher identified a separate textual pattern and subsequently termed it gray trolling, a hybrid of white and black trolling practices.

Narrative and strategy	Description	Example (extracted comment from an identified political troll)
'Us versus them' strategy	a mind conditioning tactic where "them", other entities that do not align with the motives of political trolls, are being attacked while "us" is being defended to start chaos online.	Troll code #45: "[defending a political figure] Excuse me, ma'am... the late Pres. Ferdinand Marcos was [combined defense statement and attack on history and the truth] NOT A DICTATOR. He was <u>loved by the Filipinos</u> so please stop calling him that [attack on a media organization] if you are not a <u>biased media</u> ... [additional defensive statements] take a look now the <u>Filipinos love the Marcoses</u> because they are <u>good people... good leaders</u> and the <u>best to lead a country the Philippines...</u> CANDIDATE A FOR PRESIDENT..."

Table 4: Identified black propaganda campaign to start online propaganda wars (gray trolling).

Source: author.

In initiating online debates, political trolls combined both attacking and defensive statements within a single context, simultaneously glorifying one subject while condemning another to reinforce an idea of "us versus them". In the example analysis seen in Table 4, several sentences are categorized as defense tactics, while the others are attack efforts to silence the critics of the supported candidate. The opposing side ("them") encompassed not only political rivals but all entities that did not share the same political ideologies or align with the political trolls' motives, including media networks, opposition supporters, other political parties, historical narratives, and even objective truth.

In terms of the text presentation, gray trolling exhibited paragraph-long online comments due to its nature of combining different white and black trolling narratives. In the example above in Table 4, the first, second, and fourth phrases are categorized as defensive statements combined with white trolling strategies (seen in Table 2), such as *historical revisionism* favorable to the supported political figure (*not a dictator*), *fake vox populi* strategy (*loved by the Filipinos; Filipinos love the Marcoses*), the *virtuous leader* narrative (*good people, good leaders*), and the *most qualified candidate*

narrative (*the best to lead*). Simultaneously, the second statement is also an attack on history and the truth. The third phrase is an attack to silence the media using the *media bias* narrative under the black trolling practice list, as shown in Table 3.

Approximately 74% of gray trolls first employed attack statements, which were subsequently followed by defensive statements; conversely, 26% initiated with defensive statements. Pride and determination were the most prominent emotions expressed in defensive statements, whereas distrust and hate characterized the attack statements. Furthermore, 71% of gray trolls were observed to engage in *political news updates*, and 34% of the accounts were classified as *null*.

The social media users

Most of the survey respondents were females (62%) who belonged to the Gen Z generation, born between 1997 and 2012 (44%), followed by the Millennial generation, born from 1981 to 1996 (25%). The respondents were mainly undergraduate and bachelor's degree holders (40%), workers (37%), and students (37%) at the time of the survey rollout. Following the monthly household income groups provided by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (Garcia 2024), the respondents were mainly classified under the poor income group (34%), earning less than PHP 12,030 monthly. The respondents were primarily *always* browsing (38%), *sometimes* reading the comment section (33%) and *liking and sharing* political posts (32%), *rarely* leaving political comments (35%), and *never* posting political posts (42%).

Political Trolls		
Statements	Mean and Standard Deviation	Level of Awareness
1. Political trolls use fake social media accounts or fake online personas.	6.38 3.30	Slightly Aware
2. Political trolls on social media can be paid or not paid.	6.84 2.97	Much Aware
3. Political trolls exist in other countries as well.	6.08 2.80	Slightly Aware
4. Political trolls are one of the sources of fake news.	6.98 2.92	Much Aware
5. Political trolls have different kinds: Commenters, influencers, or strategists.	7.11 2.57	Much Aware
6. Political trolls aim to create chaos and debate in the comment section of social media posts about politics.	7.06 2.68	Much Aware
7. Political trolls aim to influence your opinion in favor of a supported political candidate by all means, so they create lies and deceptive social media content.	7.15 2.54	Much Aware
8. Political trolls use the biased media narrative whenever a report criticizes their supported political candidate/s.	7.00 2.52	Much Aware

9. Political trolls use the biased media narrative whenever a report criticizes their supported political candidate/s.	6.10 2.73	Slightly Aware
10. Black trolls execute online harassment and intimidation of the political opponents of their supported political candidates.	6.15 2.72	Slightly Aware
Political Trolling		
Statements	Mean and Standard Deviation	Level of Awareness
1. Sock puppet strategy and hundreds of fake social media accounts	3.48 2.62	Less Aware
2. Astroturfing, fake 'vox populi' strategy, and glorification	3.66 2.69	Less Aware
3. Sealioning and "us vs. them" strategy	4.03 2.91	Less Aware
4. Disinformation, misinformation, and deception	7.09 2.95	Much Aware
5. Devaluation and accusations	6.58 2.85	Much Aware
6. Association of God, celebrities, and patriotism with a political candidate	6.72 2.94	Much Aware
7. Negative campaigning and repost strategy	6.70 2.81	Much Aware
8. Historical revisionism and red-tagging	6.52 2.94	Much Aware
9. Using emotions	6.80 2.82	Much Aware
10. Underground	5.91 3.08	Slightly Aware

Table 5: Social media users' awareness about political trolls and political trolling. Source: author.

All the statements deployed in the survey questionnaires are shown in Table 5 above, which consists of two concept groups: (1) political trolls and (2) political trolling. In the first group, four (4) statements were found to have a slightly low awareness score, referring to the use of fake social media accounts and personas (#1), existence of political trolls in other countries (#3), and the two types of political trolls set by self-identifying ones (#9 and #10), while the remaining statements were found to have average awareness scores. The second group had relatively lower scores in the three (3) concepts stating particular strategies, such as sock puppeting strategy and numerous social media accounts deployment (#1), astroturfing, fake *vox populi* strategy, and glorification (#2), and lastly, sealioning and the "us versus them" strategy (#3), while one (1) statement accumulated slightly lower awareness score which describes the nature of political trolling being underground (#10).

The colors of political trolling

The study concludes that political trolls strategically implemented a set of organized emotions, signs, symbols, narratives, and strategies tailored to each communication objective within the black propaganda campaigns. Political trolls first define the communication objective, which is determined by the type of political trolling, and then establish the elements of black propaganda. With the campaign distinctions of white, black, and gray trolling, the identified political trolls functioned accordingly based on their role and purpose during the 2022 Philippine elections.

In intensifying fake support, glorification narratives with positive emotions are the weapons of white trolls, whereas in smearing political opponents, black trolls operate to disseminate condemnation narratives with negative emotions, often accompanied by humor. Symbolizations, hashtags, exclamation points, and uppercase texts are predominantly used to amplify engagement and visibility. Negative referencing and sarcasm are relevant aspects to vilify rivals and character assassinate. Political trolls (white trolls, 45%; black trolls, 61%; and gray trolls, 71%) aim to disrupt the political discourse exchanged in the social media posts of official news networks. Notably, the role of most white trolls (26%) dissipates after elections. In comparison, black trolls (25%) remain active even after elections, and gray trolls (34%) have higher account privacy. Attacking statements (one being condemned as the objection) and defensive statements (one being glorified as the position) paired in one context are evident in starting online propaganda wars. The strategic narrative is summarized into “us vs. them,” where the majority (74%) used attack sentences first, followed by defensive sentences. Therefore, the communication objective for this campaign is to provoke the receiver first, then positively prompt the supported political candidate.

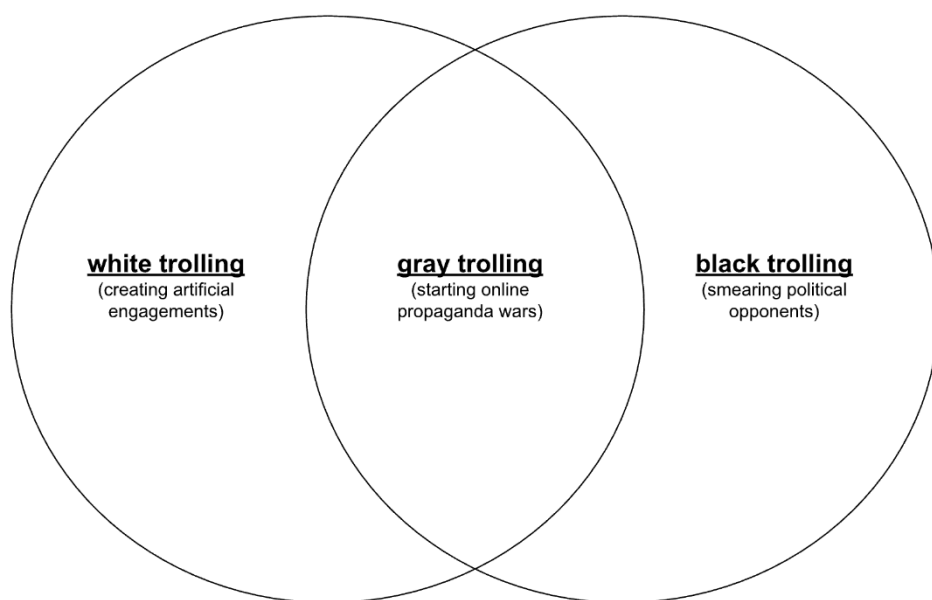


Figure 1: Types of political trolling. Source: author.

Although the emergence of gray trolling can be intentional or an unintentional result while conducting the white and black trolling, the study can only prove its existence through the patterns found after dissecting the texts. As illustrated in Figure 1 above, gray trolling borders between white and black trolling, combining the narratives and strategies listed in both practices to paint the image

of two opposing political sides, where the trolls are the protagonists, while the other side is antagonized.

Basic understanding of political trolling

The study concludes that the respondents, mainly Gen Z, are *much aware* of political trolls ($M=6.69$, $SD=2.21$), they are familiar with the topic and can explain key details and aspects, but are only *slightly aware* ($M=5.75$, $SD=2.17$) of political trolling, having a basic understanding and can provide surface-level descriptions. Among other age groups, Gen Z is coined as the *woke* generation, an informal word rooted in the word *awake*, meaning having high social awareness about societal issues and using social media for expression (Merriam-Webster 2017). Hence, this study urges continuous exploration of the trolling concepts, especially in older age groups.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between political trolling and the awareness level of social media users lies in forming public opinion within digital civic spaces. Political trolls consistently invent new digital strategies and creatively produce speculative, misleading, and fabricated narratives to hinder genuine online political discourses and hijack discussions in the direction of their supported political ideology. The results of the study suggest that political trolls' support started from being artificial, organized, and active political victimization, gaslighting others into the formation of manipulated allies who follow similar online problematic behaviors and practices. From here, the distinctions between grassroots supporters, gaslighted supporters, and artificial supporters online are becoming more difficult.

However, considering that political trolling proves to be thriving in being deceptive, hidden, and undetected, as shown in the identified black propaganda campaigns categorized in white, black, and gray trolling, and the conducted survey resulted to ranging from mid to low awareness level scores from considerably long-time social media users, this study concludes that a high level of awareness about the concepts of trolling and trolls can lower the risk of falling into the campaigns and impacting one's political perceptions. From the end-to-end perspective, the lower the awareness of the online users about the black propaganda practices, the more political trolling expands its ramifications in influencing opinion online.

Furthermore, as the study finds parallel concepts of Lasswell's propaganda in the early 20th century and political trolling in the 21st century, the study presumes that the trolling industry is unlikely to subside in the next years despite regulations and extensive troll media studies; instead, the practice continuously resists and reinvents itself. The phenomenon becomes an information war between truth advocates and black propagandists. From here, future studies can theorize political trolling as a concept with well-defined and differing facets, dependent on the degree of being underground.

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