



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**VERBAL AGGRESSION IN SOCIAL MEDIA CORRELATION  
WITH ONE'S MENTAL HEALTH DURING PANDEMIC**

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

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**VERBAL AGGRESSION IN SOCIAL MEDIA CORRELATION WITH ONE'S  
MENTAL HEALTH DURING PANDEMIC**

ANIS NATASHA BINTI CHE ISMAIL

This project is submitted  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a  
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK  
(2022)

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## ABSTRACT

Surging use of social media during the pandemic has shown a new trend of behaviour for Malaysian citizens. It was as the topic discussed at that time involved criticizing and downgrading significant figures such as politicians and artists for their behaviour of disobeying Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) during pandemic using vulgar and harsh language openly in social media. This situation has been called out by Senator Dato' Razali Idris as the number one mental illness in Malaysia. To make it worse, Malaysia also has been ranked second as the most aggressive country for cyber bullying. This has shown that this issue needed immediate attention. Due to that, this research study was conducted to investigate the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health during pandemic by looking at depression, anxiety and stress level using a cross sectional survey on 75 undergraduate students of University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The current research findings has shown that there was significant positive but weak correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health during pandemic. The overall conclusion for this finding was drawn after three alternative hypotheses that showed the result of weak positive correlation between verbal aggression, depression, anxiety and stress during pandemic after being tested with Spearman's Correlation was supported with all p-values showing less than 0.05.

*Keywords:* Verbal aggression, online aggression, social media, cyberbully, mental health, depression, anxiety, stress, pandemic

## ABSTRAK

Peningkatan penggunaan media sosial ketika waktu pandemik telah menunjukkan perubahan dari sikap perilaku manusia terumatanya dalam kalangan rakyat Malaysia. Hal ini terjadi apabila tajuk-tajuk perbincangan yang diadakan secara terbuka di media sosial banyak melibatkan penghinaan dan kritikan kepada pihak-pihak tertentu seperti ahli-ahli politik dan artis-artis yang melanggar dan tidak mematuhi *Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)* ketika pandemik dengan menggunakan bahasa-bahasa yang agak kasar berserta kesat. Kejadian ini telah mendapat perhatian Senator Dato' Razali Idris apabila beliau menyatakan bahawa kejadian ini ialah suatu penyakit mental nombor 1 di Malaysia. Tambahan lagi, Malaysia juga turut disenaraikan dan dinobatkan sebagai negara kedua agresif untuk buli siber. Hal ini menunjukkan bahawa isu ini memerlukan perhatian yang segera. Oleh itu, kajian ini dilaksanakan untuk menyiasat korelasi hubungan antara keagresifan verbal di media sosial dan kesihatan mental individu ketika pandemik dengan melihat kepada kemurungan, kebimbangan serta stress menggunakan kaedah kajian *cross-sectional survey* terhadap 75 orang pelajar UNIMAS. Dapatan kajian yang dilaksanakan telah menunjukkan bahawa terdapat korelasi positif ketara tetapi lemah antara keagresifan verbal di media sosial dan kesihatan mental individu sewaktu pandemik. Kesimpulan dapatan kajian ini dibuat setelah terbukti terdapat tiga hipotesis alternatif yang menunjukkan hasil korelasi positif yang lemah antara keagresifan verbal, kemurungan, kebimbangan dan stress sewaktu pandemik selepas ketiga-tiga hipotesis alternatif disokong dan diterima setelah menggunakan Spearman's Correlation dengan semua nilai-p menunjukkan nilai kurang daripada 0.05.

*Kata kunci:* Keagresifan verbal, keagresifan atas talian, media sosial, buli siber, kesihatan mental, kemurungan, kebimbangan, stress, pandemik

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This chapter provide an overall framework of the research study conducted. It was mainly covering the research background, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, hypotheses, conceptual framework, significance and the limitations of this study.

#### **1.1 Background of Study**

The infection of COVID-19 in Malaysia started to spread more widely after a religious event who was taking place at Sri Petaling, Kuala Lumpur (Elengoe, 2020). During the first phase of COVID-19, Malaysia was having a change of government. Although, the changing of hand was done during a hectic moment of the country, the new Malaysian government at that time managed to put the first and second wave of COVID-19 infections under control until Malaysia able to achieve single-digit to zero daily cases of COVID-19.

The happy moment does not last long as one miscalculated moved were done by the past government, Sabah's 16<sup>th</sup> Election. Malaysia was strike with the third wave of COVID-19 after thousands of political campaigners returned to their home causing surged number of COVID-19 cases reported throughout the whole Malaysia (Rampal & Seng, 2021). Not only that but the strict Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) also began to become loose such as from 14 days of self-quarantined to only 10 days of self-quarantined. Since then, issues of double standard started to flood around the social media as some politicians and significant figures were seen openly disobeying SOPs such as not wearing mask in crowded gathering. All of this have sparked dissatisfaction in many Malaysians especially for those who were



already in struggling state to cope with new norm. Not only that, students who had been struggling with the online class also affected with the sudden arisen COVID-19 case as they were not allowed to study at the university or schools. This eventually had caused the sudden surging use of social media. Many Malaysians seek for social media to express their dissatisfaction, condemn the selfish acts, and release their pent-up frustration by posting and retweeting inappropriate insults using aggressive language especially towards the leaders. This verbally aggressive behaviour had been called out by the Chairman of the Caucus of the People's Welfare Committee of the Senate, Senator Datuk Razali Idris as number one mental illness in Malaysia (Velusamy, 2021). With this sudden arising trend of verbal aggression in the social media, Malaysia was ranked second for being the most aggressive country for cyberbullying (Fadzly Hanaffi, 2020). This was making these issues more concerning and alarming. Hence, it needed an immediate attention.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

As the COVID-19 pandemic was still an ongoing event throughout the whole world, it best to say, the current research regarding the impact of pandemic on one's mental health was still limited and remained unclear. To add on, most of the time verbal aggression had been neglected by the past researchers as their study were putting more focus on the correlation of physical aggression and mental health. It was because physical aggression reflected an obvious abnormality of one's mental health while verbal aggression was not. As the world was advancing with modern technologies, everything started to go in digital-based even in learning. This called out for changed in human behaviour patterns and not to mention, it was obviously will also alter and affect the pattern of one's mental state in future. Due to this, it was crucial to understand the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's

mental health during pandemic in order to develop appropriate interventions for population future used. As a result, the current study aimed to investigate the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health during pandemic among students in University of Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS).

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

#### **1.3.1 General Objective**

This study was conducted with a few objectives:

1. To investigate the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health during pandemic among the students in UNIMAS.
2. To understand the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health among the students in UNIMAS.

#### **1.3.2 Specific Objectives**

1. To study the correlation between online verbal aggression with one's depressed state during pandemic
2. To understand the correlation between online verbal aggression with one's anxious state during pandemic
3. To investigate the correlation between online verbal aggression with one's stress level.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

#### **1.4.1 General Research Questions**

1. What is the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health during pandemic among the university students in Malaysia?

2. What is the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on verbal aggression in social media and one's mental health among the university students in Malaysia?

#### **1.4.2 General Research Questions**

1. Does online verbal aggression make one's feeling depressed in real life?
2. What is the correlation between online verbal aggression and one's anxious state?
3. What is the correlation between online verbal aggression with one's stress level?

#### **1.5 Research Hypotheses**

Ha1: Verbally aggressive behaviour in social media was significantly correlated with depression during pandemic.

Ha2: Verbally aggressive behaviour in social media was significantly correlated with anxiety during pandemic.

Ha3: Verbally aggressive behaviour in social media was significantly associated with stress during pandemic.

#### **1.6 Conceptual Framework**

##### **1.6.1 Conceptual Definition:**

Aggression is defined as any type of behavior that is being carried out toward a directed individual with an intention for physical or psychological harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, as cited in Taylor & Smith, 2019). Verbal aggression is defined as a behavior attacking one's self-concept in order to make psychological pain (Infante, 1995, as cited in Taylor & Smith, 2019). The verbal aggression may include name-calling, insulting one's character, physical appearance, competence, and background, making sexual or racial

ridicules and threats. According to Rosner and Kramer (2016), it may involve unconfirmed negative rumors regarding brands, companies and public figures such as pop star or politicians. In addition to that, verbal aggression may vary in term of negative emotional expression such as disgust and hatred to negative behavior consequences of slandering, threat and insulting. Based on Rosner and Kramer (2016), online verbal aggression may cause and led to an online “firestorm” in which they described as a wave of negative and angry comments in social media if the aggression topic met the agreement and interests of others social media users. The trend of verbal aggression pattern may vary across cultures and individuals, but its common characteristics are abusive language and attacks. Verbal aggression also may occur openly such as a direct verbal aggression attack on an individual or directed toward an absent target (hostile statement about third party without mentioning their names) which some referred as venting (Rosner & Kramer, 2016). For this study, the researcher focused on using and analysing the trend cyber-aggression to measure the verbal aggression on social media.

Whereby based on Legg and Felman (2020), mental health is defined as cognitive, behavioral and emotional wellbeing in which focusing on what people feel, think and behave. According to him, sometimes people used mental health to refer to the absence of mental disorder. In correlation with verbal aggression in social media, the researcher focused on using stress level, anxiety and depression as the measurement for one’s mental state.

### **1.6.2 Operational Definition:**

This current study has used two types of questionnaires to assess the correlation between verbal aggression in social media and one’s mental state during pandemic among UNIMAS students. For verbal aggression in social media, it was being assess using Cyber-

Aggression Typology Questionnaires (CAT-Q) by Runions, Bak and Shaw (2016). Next, for mental health during pandemic, it was being assess using Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 items (DASS-21) by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). Later, the data gathered from this survey would be analysed by SPSS using Spearman's Correlation test. When the p-value is more than 0.05, the research hypotheses provided will be rejected while when the p-value is less than 0.05, the research hypotheses will be supported.

### **1.7 Significance of Study**

This study offered great contribution on the conceptual and managerial aspects. Firstly, by understanding the correlation between verbal aggression and one's mental state during pandemic, this study abled to provide better understanding and explanation about its occurrence in Malaysia. The data gathered from the university students in Malaysia would act as the foundational framework to explain about individual emotions from their verbally aggressive posting or tweeting that eventually spilled out one's mental state. With this, it would provide direction for initial inquiry related to this study for future study expansion. This new knowledge would be really helpful for future used especially when there is an occurrence of fast technology advancement trend. Not only that, the information gained from this research also useful for designing future mental health intervention especially for cases that occurred under the same circumstances. Lastly, this research may also act as a steppingstone to develop a new potential field in psychology, cyberpsychology which may have a crucial need for future population as the technology continue to evolve.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter provided a brief summary for work of past research related to this study. It was basically covering related issues regarding the research study, related findings and theories. This chapter basically help the researcher to investigate the gap between past research and way to bridging the gap to put in this research study.

Currently, there were limited number of past research that specifically mentioned or called out for this research topic especially in the context of Covid-19 pandemic as it was still an ongoing situation for every part of the world. Due to that, the researcher has decided to analyze the related research area and concept to gather the related information for this study. Some of the related research areas were about verbal aggression that happen in daily lives, pandemic distress disclosure on social media, online verbal venting, cyberbullying, digital aggression, cyber-aggression, social media violence, incivility and mental illnesses during pandemic.

#### **2.1 Related Issues**

One of the main concerns regarding online verbal aggression was its linkage with one's real-life violence behaviour. According to past research, there were strong correlation between verbal aggression and physical aggression. It was because verbally aggressive vitally important in predicting one's physical aggression among children and adolescents (Taylor & Smith, 2019). Based on a study by Roberto (1999), verbally aggressive adolescent boys' had higher probability to get suspended from school caused by fighting rather than boys who

were not verbally aggressive. Not to mentioned, study conducted by Marcum, Higgins and Ricketts (2010) also suggested that too much exposure on social media aggressive behaviours and activities left a detrimental psychosocial effect on children and adolescents. It was as the young cyberbully perpetrators who conduct social media aggression seemed to hold a belief on having violence against peers was a normative behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). With this kind of belief, online verbal aggression might induce disruptive behaviour which may become more severe mental health problem in the future such as antisocial personality disorder or conduct disorder.

Apart from that, study by Patton et al. (2014) also mentioned about school shootings which were one of the most tragic occurrences resulting from between cyber-bully and real-life aggression. There were two cases of school shooting recorded in Finland which occurred in November 2007 and September 2008. According to Kiilakoski & Oksanen (2011), both offenders were young males who initially document and share their thoughts, ideas and intention of conducting the massacre on the Internet. Internet was widely used platform by millions of users. It could reach out to any type of people anywhere and anytime in which sometimes become the cons of Internet. At school, these young offenders' ideas were not supported and encouraged by their offline friends. Hence, it triggered their guilt to conduct the massacre and make them to be fearful. However, as these young offenders has shared their ideas on the Internet, they attracted people with alike mind with them until they got to join pro-school-shooting online group. Their idea was supported by Finnish and international Internet societies in the group. Once people who were mind alike sit together, they induce higher pressure group pressure among them. Surprisingly, study by Spears, Postmes, Lea and Wolbert (2002) found that this kind of group pressure was stronger in virtual setting rather

than physical life interactions. This at last reinforce them to carried out their aggression ideation into realities.

## **2.2 Theory or Model**

According to aggression model, there two type of aggression which were physical and non-physical aggression. Non-physical aggression included verbal aggression and relational or social aggression. Non-physical aggression was defined as an intentional harming on other's social relationship by gossiping, spreading rumours, bullying, ostracizing an individual and dismissing the opinions of others. However, understanding the general aggression model only would not be able to accommodate all explanation for the whole picture of this research topic. Hence, the researcher would like to relate this research topic with two main theories which were deindividuation theory and social identity theory.

### **2.2.1 Social Identity Theory**

According to Rosner and Kramer (2016), group-based influence may affect individuals' behaviour even though the group was not physically present. This statement was crucially important in order to understand how online verbal aggression may occur with its unpredicted consequences on one's mental health. According to social identity theory, this so-called group-based influence may be exerted more stronger when a shared social identity was salient. It was because social identity theory assumes that individual self-concept was not only build by their own personal identity, but it also included several social identities which usually belong to group they belong to where they were able to assimilate themselves according to their in-group and perceive greater consonance with other in-group members opinions and attitudes.