

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS UNDERLYING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN FREE FIRE GAMERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF KERINCI MALAY CULTURE

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychological mechanisms underlying aggressive behavior among Free Fire gamers in the context of Kerinci Malay culture. By employing in-depth interviews, this research explores the interplay between cultural values, game-related experiences, and individual psychological factors. A case report of an individual (HA) exhibiting Free Fire addiction and a propensity for aggression was conducted. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Findings indicate that a confluence of factors, including cultural concepts of honor and esteem, customs and traditions, social context contribute to aggressive tendencies. These results highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of cultural and psychological determinants of online aggression to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Keywords: psychological mechanisms, aggressive behavior, free fire gamers, kerinci malay culture

Introduction

The phenomenon of online game addiction has become a global concern in recent decades. Previous studies have identified various negative impacts of game addiction, ranging from mental health issues to social disturbances. Excessive gaming can lead to gaming disorder, which is associated with anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts, especially exacerbated during the pandemic when online activities surged (Darvenkumar & Rajasekaran, 2024). Research has found that individuals addicted to online games exhibit higher levels of verbal and physical aggression compared to non-addicted players (Safitri & Fikri, 2022; Sena & Japar, 2024). Additionally, studies indicate that online games can negatively impact social behavior among adolescents, leading to issues such as the use of harsh language, neglect of responsibilities, and decreased empathy (Jitoku et al., 2024; Muminah et al., 2023). Furthermore, the addictive nature of online games can result in the neglect of religious practices and family obligations, as observed in Muslim adolescents who report prioritizing gaming over important daily activities (Nora, 2023). Although some studies highlight the potential benefits of online games, existing evidence indicates significant risks, especially when gaming becomes excessive and disrupts daily life and social interactions (Mofu & Rumthe, 2024; Santhan & Fredrick, 2024). In Indonesia, the rapid growth of the online gaming industry has led to an increase in the number of players,

including among the youth. Free Fire, as one of the most popular battle royale games, has attracted researchers' attention due to its competitive and intense nature, which can trigger aggressive behavior.

The relationship between culture and violence is highly complex and multifaceted, as evidenced by various studies. Violence is often embedded in cultural practices, serving as a form of communication and social interaction, particularly within the context of family and community (Efimova, 2024). Research indicates that cultural norms significantly influence attitudes towards violence, such as support for child violence, which varies across different cultural backgrounds. For instance, secularism and post-materialist values negatively correlate with such support, suggesting that cultural shifts can reduce violence (Hassan, 2024). Furthermore, cultural violence is closely related to religious beliefs, where certain interpretations can exacerbate or alleviate conflicts (Zangrandi, 2022). It is important to note that while culture can provide a framework that facilitates violence, ultimately, it is individuals and societies that enact violent behaviors, highlighting the role of agency within cultural contexts (Eralp, 2022). Additionally, popular culture often intertwines with violence, reflecting and reinforcing cultural narratives (Bain-Selbo, 2023). Therefore, understanding the relationship between culture and violence requires an approach that considers both structural and individual factors.

Previous research has shown that factors such as exposure to violent content, identification with aggressive characters in games, and the need to prove oneself can increase the risk of aggressive behavior in gamers. Studies indicate that exposure to violent content in video games can elevate aggressive behavior in players, especially among adolescents. One study found a strong positive correlation (88.9%) between violent scenes in games and aggression levels in teenagers (Dewi, 2020). Factors such as aggression motivation and aggressive personality traits have been found to influence aggressive behavior (Sama & Fransisco, 2023). However, a study reported no significant relationship between playing violent online games and aggressive behavior in children (Sari et al., 2022). Self-control was found to have a significant negative impact on aggressiveness in professional adolescent gamers (Jamal & Sugiarti, 2021), indicating that self-control can reduce aggressive tendencies. These findings highlight the complex interaction between game content, individual factors, and environmental influences in shaping aggressive behavior among gamers, emphasizing the need for further research to fully understand this relationship. However, few studies have specifically examined the influence of Malay culture on this phenomenon.

This research aims to address the lack of understanding among adolescents about how Malay cultural values, such as concepts of honor, self-esteem, and revenge, interact with the psychological mechanisms underlying game addiction and aggressive behavior in adolescents (Auliahadi & Salmal, 2022; Juliawati et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021). Therefore, this study will contribute by specifically identifying Malay cultural values relevant to the fighting urges in Free Fire game addicts. Additionally, this research will reveal the exposure to violent content in Free Fire that may reinforce these urges in individuals with certain cultural values. By understanding the cultural roots of this behavior, it is hoped that more effective interventions can be developed to prevent and address violence related to game addiction. The importance of this research lies in the fact that Malay culture has unique and complex values that can influence individual behavior. Previous studies have touched on the relationship between culture and violence, but they have been limited to broader contexts. This research will fill the knowledge gap by focusing on Malay culture and Free Fire as a popular medium.

This research is unique in several ways. First, it is the first study to uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying aggressive behavior in Free Fire gamers within the context of Kerinci Malay culture. Second, this research differs from previous studies conducted by Tiara (2024), which only revealed aggressive actions in online game players. Third, this study is a case report, allowing the researcher more freedom to uncover the main issues faced by Free Fire gamers.

Method

This research employs the case report method to describe the psychological mechanisms underlying aggressive behavior in Free Fire gamers within the context of Kerinci Malay culture. A case report is a research method that provides an in-depth description of one or several cases that have been or are being handled. This method allows researchers to give a comprehensive picture of the situation and the interventions carried out (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). In this study, the reported case involves a client who is indicated to have aggressive behavior and is already addicted to Free Fire.

The subject of this research was deliberately selected considering characteristics relevant to the research objectives, namely an adolescent with the initials HA who has been addicted to Free Fire, has played Free Fire intensively for at least one year, experiences disruptions in daily life due to game addiction, and is willing to provide honest and open information during the research. Data were collected using structured interview guidelines and participatory observation.

The case analysis procedure involves identifying HA's problems with unique or interesting criteria that have the potential to contribute to the scientific literature. Then, data collection is carried out in individual counseling sessions by analyzing the problems experienced by HA. Next, data analysis is conducted by describing the problems, reviewing the literature, and analyzing the findings. This research uses a qualitative approach to collect and analyze data. Data were collected through thematic analysis, a qualitative analysis method used to identify patterns and themes in the data obtained in the study.

This research has obtained ethical approval from the client who is the subject of the study. This approval was obtained directly from the client. The client has given permission to the researcher to record the therapy sessions. These recordings are audio-only and do not include video. The client has also agreed to the use of their name with initials in scientific publications and research. This is done to maintain the confidentiality of the client's personal data.

Result and Discussion

The subject, HA, is 16 years old and started playing Free Fire in the seventh grade of junior high school. Initially, he only played with his friends on weekends to pass the time. However, over time, the intensity of his gaming increased. He often spends hours in his room playing, even late into the night. If he runs out of internet data, HA borrows his parents' phone or looks for public places that provide free Wi-Fi to play. His addiction to Free Fire has lasted for the past two years, and he finds it difficult to reduce his playing time. This addiction has negatively impacted HA's psychological and social condition. When meeting his friends, HA easily gets angry when joking around, sometimes leading to fights and even aggressive behavior. HA also feels confused about his inability to control his anger.

Honor and Self-Esteem

In Malay culture, especially Kerinci culture, honor and self-esteem are very important. Losing honor or feeling humiliated can trigger a desire for revenge or to prove oneself, which in the context of online gaming can manifest as aggressive behavior.

“Yes, you could say that. If I keep losing, it feels like I’m embarrassed in front of my friends. Especially if I’m insulted or mocked, it makes me really want to retaliate” (Line 20).

“Yes, I think men should be strong and brave. If I keep losing, it feels like I’m not manly.” (Line 25).

This shows that the strong concepts of honor and self-esteem in Kerinci Malay culture have significant implications for individual behavior, especially in competitive social interactions like online gaming. Loss or threat to honor is often associated with feelings of anger, frustration, and a desire for revenge. In the context of online gaming, these negative emotions can trigger aggressive behaviors such as virtual violence, bullying, or harsh communication.

Customs and Traditions

In Malay culture, especially the old Kerinci culture, customs and traditions still emphasize revenge or retaliation for wrongs, which can influence individual behavior, including in the context of online gaming.

“Actually, I don’t really think about it. When playing games, the important thing is to win and level up. But sometimes, there are some values of competition and revenge if I lose, making my anger surge wanting to retaliate.” (Line 40).

“Online games are indeed interesting, but I feel they can divert my attention from my cultural values in the village. I feel I become more individualistic, less respectful to parents, and less concerned about the surrounding environment.” (Line 49).

This shows that the concept of revenge in the old Kerinci Malay culture, often associated with self-esteem and honor, has strong psychological roots. When feeling wronged or humiliated, individuals tend to respond with acts of revenge to restore their self-esteem. In the context of online gaming, this psychological mechanism can be reinforced by the anonymity and competitive nature of the games, triggering aggressive behavior that can negatively impact individuals and the online community.

Social Context

The social structure in Malay society, especially Kerinci Malay, such as kinship systems and social groups, can influence how individuals respond to conflicts and challenges.

“The competitive environment in online games makes me more focused, disciplined, and accustomed to working with others. But, it also sometimes makes me more sensitive to criticism and easily emotional.” (Line 61).

“I have become more individualistic and less social with friends in the real world. Yet, social interaction is important for my development.” (Line 70).

This shows that the social structure in Kerinci Malay society, particularly the kinship system and social groups, has a significant influence on how individuals respond to conflicts, including in the context of online gaming. The strong kinship ties and clear

social hierarchy in Kerinci Malay society can shape individual behavior patterns in facing challenges and conflicts. For instance, the pressure to maintain the family's or social group's good name can drive individuals to act aggressively or defensively in online games.

Honor and self-esteem play crucial roles in shaping individual behavior, particularly in contexts where humiliation is perceived. Research indicates that feelings of humiliation can lead to aggressive responses, especially in competitive environments like online gaming. For instance, individuals with lower self-esteem may exhibit a stronger link between exposure to violent video games and aggressive behavior, as their need to reclaim honor can drive them to retaliate or prove themselves (Zaharim et al., 2023). The concept of honor is deeply embedded in various cultures, where the loss of honor can trigger severe social repercussions, including violence, as individuals seek to restore their reputation (Krause et al., 2023). Furthermore, the Islamic perspective emphasizes the importance of self-esteem and dignity, suggesting that humiliation leads to unhappiness and a desire to defend one's honor at all costs (Mashkour, 2023). Perceived threats to one's "Code of Honor" are strongly associated with anger and aggression, with self-esteem partially mediating this relationship (McGill et al., 2021). In online gaming, trolling behavior is more prevalent among males and individuals with high trait psychopathy and sadism. Interestingly, high self-esteem combined with high trait sadism predicts increased trolling behaviour (March & Steele, 2020). Competitive motivation and aggression are positively associated with cheating in online games, while self-esteem decreases cheating tendencies (Lee et al., 2021). Trolling, often motivated by amusement, boredom, or revenge, can negatively impact the self-esteem of those experiencing it (Thacker & Griffiths, 2012). Thus, the interplay between honor, self-esteem, and aggressive behavior is significant, particularly in environments that challenge an individual's sense of worth.

Research suggests that cultural factors influence online gaming behavior and interactions. The tradition of "pantang larang," which encompasses various life rules and prohibitions, serves as a cultural guide that reinforces normative values and beliefs, potentially fostering a mindset that prioritizes retribution for perceived wrongs (Ardiansyah & Umam, 2024). This cultural backdrop may contribute to aggressive behaviors in online gaming, where cyberbullying is prevalent. Research indicates that cyberbullying in social media, including gaming platforms, can lead to severe psychological consequences, such as increased stress and even suicidal tendencies (Ismail et al., 2023). Furthermore, the prevalence of Internet Gaming Disorder among Malaysian adolescents, linked to psychosocial factors like stress and impulsivity, suggests that cultural attitudes towards revenge may exacerbate these issues (Mohamed et al., 2023). Thus, the interplay between traditional values and modern gaming behaviors highlights the need for culturally sensitive interventions to mitigate negative outcomes in online environments (Ghazi et al., 2024). In online gaming environments, verbal violence can occur, particularly in social settings like coffee shops. This behavior may be triggered by neglect of cultural values and Islamic Sharia principles, as well as factors such as stress and weak rule enforcement (Afnizal et al., 2023). The internet's features, including pseudoanonymity and rapid information dissemination, can facilitate vengeful actions online. This "vengeance culture" manifests in various forms, such as sharing private information or organizing cyber mobs, and can have real-world consequences (Hai-Jew, 2014).

The social structure in Malay society, particularly kinship systems and social groups, significantly influences individual responses to conflicts and challenges, including in online gaming contexts. Research indicates that Malaysian youth exhibit high levels of social interaction anxiety, which correlates with online gaming addiction

(Masrek et al., 2022; Mohamed et al., 2024). This anxiety can stem from cultural expectations and social norms that shape interpersonal interactions, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as increased gaming (Mohamed et al., 2024). Furthermore, the neglect of cultural values among online gamers has been linked to verbal violence, suggesting that social dynamics within gaming communities can exacerbate conflicts (Afnizal et al., 2023). Additionally, motivations for gaming, such as social interaction and avatar identification, play a role in the development of Internet Gaming Disorder, highlighting the complex interplay between social structures and individual behaviors (Bong et al., 2019). The social structure in Malay society significantly influences family dynamics and individual responses to challenges, including those posed by technology and online gaming. Kinship systems, age, seniority, and gender play crucial roles in shaping family relationships and unity. Islamic principles and Malay cultural norms guide social interactions and family obligations (Harun, 2014). While family unity is strong in Malay society, the impact of social media and internet use differs between rural and urban families, with urban families showing more individualistic tendencies and negative effects (Wok et al., 2016). Thus, the kinship and social frameworks in Malay society are crucial in understanding how individuals navigate conflicts in both real and virtual environments.

This study is limited by its sample size, which was drawn exclusively from the Malay Kerinci community. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to broader populations, such as Malay communities in other regions or other ethnic groups. Additionally, the research was focused on the context of online gaming, and thus the results may not be applicable to other forms of aggressive behavior or different social contexts.

Conclusion

Aggressive behavior in Free Fire displayed by individuals from Kerinci Malay culture cannot be separated from their cultural roots. The values of honor, self-esteem, the custom of revenge, and the strong social structure in Kerinci Malay society shape the mindset and behavior that tend to trigger aggressive actions when facing challenges, including in the context of online gaming. Therefore, efforts to reduce aggressive behavior in online games need to consider the broader cultural context. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies with other cultures to see the extent of cultural influence on aggressive behavior in Free Fire.

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Author Contributions Statement

This research was made possible by the contributions of several individuals. DJ and HY were instrumental in conceptualizing the study. FIK diligently collected primary data, while R contributed to the initial draft. D conducted in-depth data analysis, leading to significant findings. The close collaboration among the authors facilitated the successful completion of this research.

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