

## The Dynamics of Psychological Reactance in Society Towards Physical Distancing Policy

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**Abstract.** In the July 2021 period, Covid-19 cases in Indonesia jumped sharply. The Indonesian government responded to the spike in cases by implementing a physical distancing policy called PPKM (Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat). One of the public's responses to the policy is reluctance or disobedience to existing policies because they experience psychological reactance. This research was conducted with the aim of understanding the dynamics of community psychological reactance related to the physical distancing policy in Indonesia. The study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's thematic analysis. Sampling was done by using homogeneous variance purposive sampling technique. Collecting data used in this study is to conduct interviews. Research informants totaled 3 people. This study resulted that the three informants felt that their activities were limited during the implementation of the Physical distancing policy. The existence of the physical distancing policy also caused the three informants to feel threatened, both directly and indirectly in economic and academic terms, and their freedoms were disturbed. The form of reactance experienced by each informant was disappointment with the government. The responses of the three informants in an effort to restore their freedom include; not obeying the PPKM rules and breaking them by staying together with the crowd.

**Keywords:** covid-19, psychological reactance, physical distancing, qualitative

**Abstrak.** Pada periode Juli 2021 kasus covid-19 di Indonesia melonjak tajam. Pemerintah Indonesia merespon lonjakan kasus tersebut dengan menerapkan kebijakan physical distancing yang diberi nama PPKM (Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat). Salah satu respon masyarakat terhadap kebijakan tersebut adalah enggan atau tidak menaati kebijakan yang ada karena mengalami reaktansi psikologis. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan tujuan untuk memahami dinamika reaktansi psikologis masyarakat terkait kebijakan *physical distancing* yang ada di Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik Miles dan Huberman. Pengambilan sampel dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik purposive sampling varian homogen. Pengumpulan data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah dengan melakukan wawancara. Informan penelitian berjumlah 3 orang sedangkan kredibilitas data menggunakan triangulasi sumber. Penelitian ini memberikan hasil bahwa ketiga informan merasa terbatas aktivitasnya selama pemberlakuan

kebijakan *physical distancing*. Adanya kebijakan *physical distancing* juga menyebabkan ketiga informan merasa terancam baik secara langsung maupun tidak langsung dalam hal ekonomi dan akademik serta terganggu kebebasannya. Wujud dari reaktansi yang dialami masing-masing informan berupa kekecewaan terhadap pemerintah. Respon ketiga informan dalam usaha mengembalikan kebebasannya antara lain; tidak taat aturan PPKM dan melanggar dengan cara tetap berkumpul dengan orang banyak.

***Kata kunci:*** *covid-19, kualitatif, physical distancing, reaktansi psikologis*

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## **Introduction**

The implementation of physical distancing policies in Indonesia has been enforced since the early stages of the pandemic, both on a small and large scale. On a small scale, in the education sector, policies such as remote learning have been applied, while in the work domain, there has been an encouragement for work from home (WFH) arrangements (Kresna & Ahyar, 2020). On a larger scale, the government implemented the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) policy on April 2, 2020, until the enforcement of the Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM) level in August 2021 (Permatasari, 2021). This study focuses on the scope of physical distancing measures, specifically the implementation of the PPKM without levels enforced by the government in the July-August 2021 period.

During this pandemic, it's undeniable that the freedom of individuals and communities has significantly decreased. For instance, the enforcement of work from home, remote learning, limitations on operating hours for stores or supermarkets until 8:00 PM with 50% visitor capacity, temporary closures of public facilities, tourist spots, artistic, and sports activities—all aimed at curbing the spread and formation of COVID-19 clusters (Minister of Home Affairs Instruction No. 15 of 2021). These government directives advise everyone to consistently wear masks, frequently wash hands, maintain distance, and avoid crowded places (Adiwena et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of individuals feeling restricted and losing their freedoms triggers behaviors of resistance to reclaim their lost freedom, often leading to illicit actions or despair, known in psychology as psychological reactance (Miron & Brehm, 2006). When an individual's freedom is threatened, whether indirectly or directly, it stimulates their motivation to protect that freedom (Chatterjee et al., 2017). Generally, everyone desires the freedom to act, and psychological reactance plays a role in driving individuals to regain their freedom (Miron & Brehm, 2006).

Individuals who perceive their freedom as disturbed or threatened undergo psychological reactance. One manifestation of psychological reactance is non-compliance and efforts to regain freedom (Steindl et al., 2015). Instances of non-compliance are observed among students despite the implementation of physical distancing and PPKM, where many are found gathering at local shops during school hours or online classes (Gunawan, 2021). In a broader context, many people still do not wear masks, hold celebrations and wedding receptions, and even government officials conduct work visits during the enforcement of physical distancing policies and PPKM (Nugroho, 2020; Priyo, 2020; Rosidin, 2021).

The threat and loss of freedom resulting in psychological reactance vary across ages and genders. Research suggests that psychological reactance is more prevalent among younger individuals (18-23 and 24-29 years old), while older individuals (30-40 years old) experience it to a lesser extent. The cause of this prevalence is that younger individuals tend to want control over everything and resist being restricted, whereas older individuals tend to have more life experience, allowing them to perceive fewer situations as threats to their freedom.

Examining studies related to psychological reactance, this variable is relatively under-researched. However, it has become a new trend in recent years, especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhtar et al., 2020; DeFranza et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2021; Puspita, 2020; Reiss et al., 2020; Soveri et al., 2021; Sprengholz et al., 2021; Taylor & Asmundson, 2021).



Figure 1. VOS Viewer Psychological Reactance

The studies conducted on psychological reactance have predominantly focused on inter-variable testing rather than comprehensively understanding the dynamics of psychological reactance among individuals themselves. However, according to Miron & Brehm (2006), reactance can be directly assessed through measuring subjective experiences (feelings) accompanying the drive to restore freedom.

Aligned with this perspective, the researchers feel a need for further investigation to unravel the dynamics of phenomena within society related to the existing physical distancing policies in Indonesia, utilizing the framework of psychological reactance theory. The aim of this study is to comprehend and dissect the societal reactance dynamics towards physical distancing policies in Indonesia. This research endeavors to offer insights and considerations for the government as policy-making authorities and the community as participants concerning the societal dynamics resulting from physical distancing policies.

### **Method**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. The use of phenomenology in this research aims to capture the authentic situations of a naturally occurring phenomenon experienced by individuals related

to the psychological reactance of society toward physical distancing policies in Indonesia.

Data collection techniques in this study involve interviews and self-reports. Prior to the interviews, subjects are requested to fill out a self-report form through a Google Form link. This technique is employed to understand the initial conditions of the informants and provide an initial overview to the researcher regarding the attitudes, opinions, and activities of the informants regarding the implementation of physical distancing recommendations by the Republic of Indonesia government. The researcher chooses the self-report technique because in comprehending psychological reactance, understanding the attitudes of rejection or disagreement towards anything that limits individual freedom and poses a threat is crucial. The informant's stance of rejection and disagreement will be assessed through self-reports, determining whether the informant is suitable for an interview or not. Meanwhile, during the interview process, the researcher utilizes a semi-structured interview format.

The sampling technique in this research utilizes a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling with homogeneous variation. The selection of samples occurs as the researcher enters the field and continues throughout the study by choosing specific individuals deemed capable of providing necessary data.

There are a total of 6 participants in this study, comprising 3 primary informants and 3 secondary informants. Primary informants include NWM, HS, and NO (2 males and 1 female), while secondary informants are close friends of the primary informants, namely FRP, IF, and BGSW (2 females and 1 male). Data triangulation in this study employs source triangulation, where secondary informants play a role in validating the credibility of interview data. The data analysis technique utilized in this research follows the Miles and Huberman model.

## **Result**

Based on the research conducted with three informants from Blora Regency, Kudus Regency, and Bojonegoro Regency, where the informants showed non-

compliance with existing physical distancing policies, it became apparent that there were varying dynamics of psychological reactance, yet some commonalities emerged among them. For instance, all three informants are students within the adolescent to early adult age range, leading to relatively similar daily activities such as online lectures, completing assignments, involvement in organizations, socializing at coffee shops or in open environments, and engaging in hobbies like sports or arts.

The psychological reactance dynamics experienced by the three informants were framed through the 4 aspects of psychological reactance in Brehm & Brehm's (1981) theoretical framework. The first aspect is the presence of freedom. All informants felt constrained and unable to express themselves freely, including in activities such as sports and socializing, due to the implementation of PPKM.

The second aspect, elimination or threat to freedom, revealed that the informants agreed that the PPKM policies posed economic and academic threats and disrupted their freedom by confining them at home and restricting visits to tourist destinations. They also found the mobility regulations during PPKM, especially the expensive SWAB and PCR testing, challenging and felt uneasy about potential police interventions for exceeding permitted times.

The third aspect, arousal of reactance or experiencing reactance directly or indirectly, illustrated that all informants suffered economic impacts due to PPKM, and they believed the government's inconsistent application and lack of solutions exacerbated these consequences. They harbored feelings of resentment, disappointment, and foolishness towards the government's harsh enforcement, political tendencies, and failure to set a good example. The informants felt uncertain due to the prolonged PPKM and vague solutions, affecting societal stability.

Regarding the last aspect, restoration of freedom, NWM and HS chose to remain silent despite disagreeing with and being disappointed by the PPKM policy, expressing their disagreement internally. Conversely, HS and NO chose not to wear masks in close proximity, only wearing them as a formality when encountering the police. NWM, on the other hand, opted to wear masks, even double masks,

considering it a preventive measure for personal safety. HS and NO chose to forgo expensive SWAB and PCR tests when traveling, as they were costly and had a short validity period of two days. One informant, NO, disregarded government advice, disbelieving in COVID-19 and provoking peers to breach regulations. Lastly, in an attempt to reclaim lost freedom, all three informants similarly disregarded PPKM regulations, gathering with friends, hosting events, *tasyakuran*, *tahlilan* and exceeding prescribed time limits for gatherings and activities.

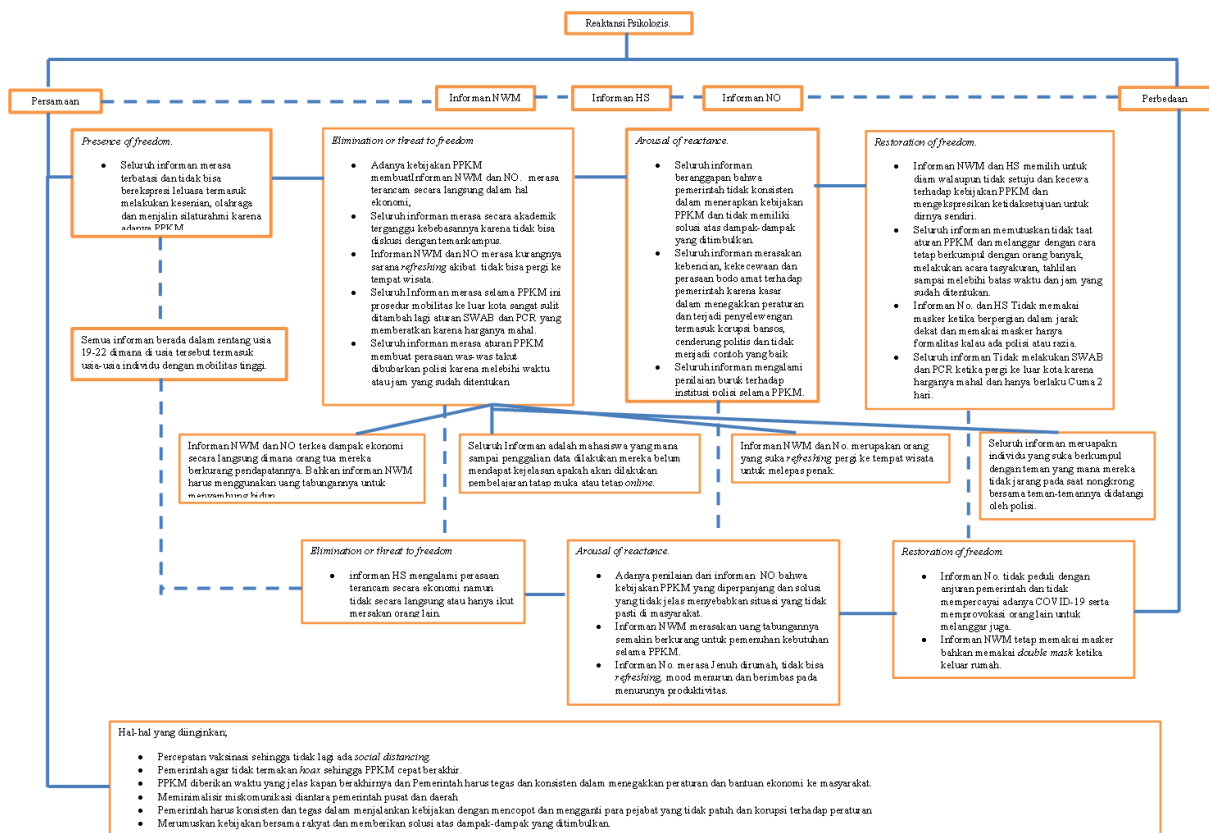


Figure 2. Research Findings

## Discussion

Based on previous research by Salendra (2014) and Wahyudi (2013), adolescents and young adults currently consider gathering at cafes or coffee shops and engaging in tourism as part of their culture and self-actualization. Many of them frequent these places for tasks, social connections, and prestige. They often visit

tourist spots for personal satisfaction and enjoyment. It can be concluded that adolescents and young adults have a high need for mobility. Thus, when this need is obstructed due to PPKM policies, anything hindering this mobility is perceived as a threat, limiting their freedom and triggering psychological reactions. This finding aligns with a survey by the Central Statistics Agency (2022), stating that the majority of respondents over 60 years old felt unaffected by outdoor activity restrictions, while those aged 17-30 felt significant boredom due to the limitations.

The discovery regarding the economic threat experienced by the informants, whether directly or indirectly, aligns with Unicef (2020). Even though young people might not be direct economic players, they are affected due to the economic impact on their families. For instance, income reduction, sudden job loss, and similar circumstances affect them indirectly. However, the case differs for informant HS, who did not experience direct economic impact but felt the economic ramifications experienced by society. This situation can be explained by prior findings by Sittenthaler, Traut-Mattausch, & Jonas (2015), suggesting that one might feel restricted or threatened despite not being directly involved or only experiencing representative reactions. This representative reaction occurs when individuals experience external threats dominated by the factor of "feeling" what others experience, especially in social and economic aspects.

Furthermore, all three informants believed that the government lacked consistency in implementing PPKM policies and failed to provide solutions for the resulting impacts. HS and NO felt that the prolonged PPKM policy and unclear solutions created an uncertain situation in society. This confirms Lusianawati's study (2020), explaining that government actions to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic often overlap, such as urging people to stay home but not ensuring their livelihoods or allowing the annual exodus while advising staying at home.

According to Han et al. (2021), public perception of the government's inconsistency and lack of integrity in implementing COVID-19-related policies is a significant factor affecting public compliance. Additionally, this research explains



that public trust in the government influences compliance with government-made policies. Low public trust in the government leads to low compliance with established policies.

In responding to physical distancing and PPKM policies, all three informants expressed hatred, disappointment, and a sense of foolishness toward the government for its harsh enforcement, malpractices, including corruption in social aid distribution, political tendencies, and not setting a good example. HS and NO believed that the extended PPKM policy and unclear solutions created an uncertain situation in society.

Based on the descriptions provided by the informants, it can be interpreted that during the implementation of physical distancing and PPKM policies, there is a condition of unmet political expectations among the informants regarding the government's policies. Fulfilled political expectations influence the public's trust in the government, and conversely, unmet public political expectations lead to disappointment and distrust toward the government (Starke, 2018). This distrust in the government is exacerbated by cases of social aid corruption. All three informants felt disappointed with the government and its handling of physical distancing and PPKM policies. The greater the impact experienced by society on an issue, the potential for shifting public trust in the government's commitment to protecting citizens' rights related to disasters (Launa & Lusianawati, 2021).

In an attempt to reclaim lost freedom, some informants chose to remain silent despite disagreeing with the PPKM policy. The response of informants choosing silence despite their psychological reactions, feeling threatened and restricted in their freedom, does not always result in rebellion or vocally expressing their disagreement. The condition where informants choose to remain silent and accept unfavorable circumstances is often referred to as learned helplessness (Azari, 2020). The responses exhibited by each informant to regain their freedom reinforce previous findings on societal non-compliance responses (Herdiana, 2020; Kartono et al., 2020; Perkasa, 2020).

This study has some limitations, including 1) the inability to conduct observations directly on client behavior and attitudes, 2) the inability to explain the difference in restoration of freedom responses among informants, and 3) the inability to provide detailed explanations for individuals not fully compliant with restrictions but still adhering to health protocols, similar to the experience of informant NWM.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the research findings regarding the psychological reactions of society to physical distancing policies in Indonesia, it can be concluded that the implementation of physical distancing policies has made people feel threatened and deprived of their freedom in economic, educational, and social aspects. The manifestations of the reactions experienced by each informant include disappointment toward the government. The response of the three informants in an attempt to reclaim their freedom includes non-compliance with PPKM regulations by gathering in large groups.

These findings can serve as input for the government as the policymaking authority to consider the political expectations of the people before implementing physical distancing policies like PPKM. In this research, the political expectations of the informants include:

- a) The government should provide reassurance to the public and enforce regulations more assertively (without being harsh) in implementation.
- b) The government should set an example in enforcing the rules it establishes. For instance, if there are rules to stay at home, the government officials should also refrain from unnecessary travels or visits outside the country or region.
- c) Avoiding the politicization of policies for specific interests.

For individuals in society experiencing psychological reactions due to physical distancing policies like PPKM, it is advisable to express their grievances directly to the government. This could start by communicating concerns to local

government levels and engaging in more discussions to collectively formulate strategies to address the existing issues.

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