

Exploring relational aggression and gender dynamics: a global and Indonesian perspective

Yuda Syahputra, Neviyarni Neviyarni, Afdal Afdal

Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Padang State University, Padang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Girls generally use less physical aggression than boys. However, does this mean that girls are more likely to use relational aggression. With this question in mind, our study aims to analyze the relational aggression of students in Indonesia based on gender. This type of research used is comparative research. The sample in this study was 510 respondents consisting of 19.6% male and 80.4% female. The relational aggression scale (RAS) was used to collect data on student relational aggression in various regions in Indonesia. The analysis technique used is descriptive and differences with the Welch test. The results show that there are significant differences in male and female relational aggression, with an average score difference of -0.30 logit between men and women. In addition, there are fluctuations in the level of relational aggression in the context of gender from year to year in some countries, such as the United States, China, Australia, and others. Recommendations for future research are to integrate a more in-depth social and cultural analysis in Indonesia.

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Corresponding Author:

Afdal Afdal

Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Padang State University

Padang, Indonesia

Email: afdal@konselor.org or afdal.kons@fip.unp.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

School relational aggression has significant repercussions on the psychological well-being of adolescents. It has been emphasized that understanding various manifestations of this behavior is crucial for explaining its diverse causes and associated factors [1]. Murray-Close *et al.* [2] further distinguish peer aggression, considering both its nature (overt vs. relational) and its purpose (reactive vs. instrumental). Overt aggression (OA) involves direct confrontation, while relational aggression (RA) is defined as actions aiming to harm victims' social status and isolate them, often employing their peers [3]. Physical aggression is included in overt aggression, physical aggression inflicts or threatens physical harm on others [4], while relational aggression operates through harming relationships themselves [5]. While most studies focus on OA [6], RA remains insufficiently researched despite its negative impact on adolescents [7], likely due to its subtlety. Previous research indicates that RA relates to adjustment issues in aggressors, including increased loneliness, lower self-esteem [1], and life satisfaction, along with lower moral development [8]. Adolescents highly involved in RA report poorer family and school environments and weaker teacher relationships compared to non-involved peers [9]. RA is also tied to reduced popularity and more social integration problems in classrooms [10].

Various significant factors contribute to explaining aggression, including social reputation [11], family dynamics and communication [12], [13], attitudes toward authority [14], psychological distress [15], and suicidal thoughts [16]. In the context of social relationships, it has been observed that when adolescents seek social recognition through transgressive behaviors, their likelihood of engaging in violent actions increases [17], [18]. In this regard, using RA can help aggressors maintain or enhance their status within the peer group [19]. While

the attitude toward institutional authority has been extensively examined in OA studies [20], it remains unexplored in RA-focused research. Similarly, family functioning and communication have been recognized as crucial in aggression studies overall [13], but limited attention has been given to RA. The prevalence of RA across genders is contentious. Some studies suggest higher RA rates among girls [21], while others indicate greater prevalence among boys [14], and some find no gender differences [22].

The study of relational aggression has become a focus of research in the past twenty years. This form of aggression is defined as any deliberate action with the intent of damaging others' social standing [23]. Examples of relational aggressive behaviors encompass manipulation, social exclusion, and the spread of rumors [23]. Some authors prefer the term indirect aggression [24] or "social aggression" [25] instead of relational aggression [23], [26]. Nonetheless, the term relational aggression has a comprehensive scope, as it captures the result of these aggressive actions (impacting relationships) and encompasses various types of aggression (e.g., indirect and direct, as discussed by Bowen [24]). Relational aggression refers to a form of non-physical aggression where the intention of the aggressor is to harm or threaten relationships [27]. This type of aggression can manifest in various interpersonal contexts, such as peer interactions, work relationships, family dynamics, and romantic partnerships [23]. Relational aggression encompass deliberate acts like excluding an individual from an activity or group, spreading malicious rumors, and engaging in defamatory gossip [23], [28]. Research on relational aggression during early childhood suggests that these behaviors often take on direct forms, being clearly visible to the victim, bystanders, and adult observers, and are rooted in the immediate situational context (for example, statements like "I won't be your friend anymore unless you give me that toy," "You can't come to my house because you are mean," along with actions like covering ears to signal ignoring; [29]). Relational aggression has been linked to an array of internalizing and externalizing problems, including antisocial behavior, substance abuse, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, anxiety, physical aggression, impaired prosocial behavior, as well as traits associated with antisocial and narcissistic personalities [30]–[32].

Studies exploring relational aggression have consistently found that girls tend to be more inclined toward engaging in behaviors of relational aggression [33], [34]. Past research has indicated that during childhood, peer relational aggression is more prevalent among females compared to males, and females also tend to experience more relational victimization [35]. However, these gender disparities seem to become less prominent in late adolescence and adulthood. In fact, numerous studies examining populations of older adolescents and adults have found limited or no significant gender differences in relational aggression [22], [36], though a few others suggest that men may display higher levels of both relational aggression and victimization than women [5]. Previous studies revealed that of 20 studies investigating relational aggression based on gender in various countries, 17 studies recorded significant differences in relational aggression scores. Some of the regions included in this study include the United States in 1995, 2005, 2012, and 2016; England in 2001; Russia in 2014; and Spain in 2023. However, in Indonesia no one has conducted research on relational aggression based on gender. Additionally, it is important to examine gendered relational aggression in Indonesia to understand the specific context in this country and contribute insights that can assist in the development of prevention strategies appropriate to Indonesian culture and society. The aim of this research project has therefore been to analyze the relational aggression of students in Indonesia based on gender.

2. METHOD

This type of research used is comparative research. Comparative research is a research method that compares and analyzes phenomena or variables in two or more different groups. In this context, comparative research can be used to compare levels of relational aggression between individuals of different genders. The variables are still the same as the research independent variables but the sample is from more than one group, or has two sample groups [37].

2.1. Participants

The sampling technique utilized in this investigation is accidental sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. This method permits the researcher to select online respondents based on chance [38]. In other words, individuals who encounter the researcher via online advertisements, emails, blogs, social media, and online groups of the Indonesian guidance and counseling teacher council are selected to distribute the scale of relational aggression to students in their respective schools. Informed consent was obtained electronically before data was collected from the respondents. The sample in this study was 510 respondents (Mean (M)=18.81, standard deviation (SD)=5.3) consisting of 19.6% male and 80.4% female as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of research respondents (n=510)

Class	Major	Gender	Province	Domicile
X, n=166	Science, n=268	Male, n=100	Aceh, n=22,	City, n=366
XI, n=247	Social studies, n=242	Female, n=410	West Sumatra, n=189	Sub-District, n=87
XII, n=97			DKI Jakarta, n=120	Village, n=57
			West Java, n=143	
			Lombok, n=36	

2.2. Ethics approval

In accordance with the established ethical standards and guidelines, the approval with the reference number 315/EC/IKI/V/2023 was formally granted by the Indonesian Counselors Association in Jakarta, Indonesia. Participants, demonstrating a conscientious approach, willingly consented to actively partake in the research process and endorsed the dissemination of results through publication, acknowledging the pivotal role of ethical approval in ensuring the integrity and credibility of the study.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Relational aggression scale (RAS)

The Relational aggression scale (RAS) was adapted to the Indonesian version by theory Murray-Close *et al.* [5] based on aspects of relational aggression, namely: proactive (5 items), reactive (6 items), and romantic (2 items). The RAS is a 13-item scale, in which items are answered in a five-point response format, including: always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never. Examples of items include "I let my friend's chat or message in". This scale has an acceptable reliability (Cronbach's of 0.79; item reliability at a rasch of 0.99) and good validity with a Raw variance explained by measures of 43.8% [39]–[42].

2.3.2. Data analysis

The analysis technique used the item response theory (IRT) approach with the Rasch Model analysis, this study tested the descriptive and differences with the Welch test [43], [44] using the winsteps computer program (version 5.1.5) along with its instructional manual [45], referencing the works of Boone *et al.* [46]. To achieve the research objectives, there are several that will be analyzed, including: i) relational aggression descriptive test; ii) test differences in relational aggression based on gender; iii) differences in students' ability to respond to gender-based relational aggression scales; and iv) the trend of relational aggression in the world in terms of gender.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In discussing the results of this research regarding the condition of relational aggression in male and female, various aspects that emerge from the findings of this research will be discussed in depth. All of this will help us better understand the phenomenon of relational aggression in the context of male and female and identify potential areas for further research in this area.

3.1. Relational aggression appraisal focused on gender differences

The examination of relational aggression, a form of harmful conduct involving manipulation and social connection destruction, has garnered growing attention in academic research. Researchers have begun to meticulously dissect the nuanced ways in which males and females experience and express relational aggression, moving beyond the mere acknowledgment of its existence. Furthermore, the results of the descriptive analysis of male and female relational aggression are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Relational aggression descriptive viewed from gender

Person count	Mean measure	S.E. mean	Median	SD	Model separation	RMSE	Code
510	-2.04	0.05	-2.10	1.12	1.22	0.71	*
100	-1.80	0.11	-1.88	1.14	1.41	0.66	M
410	-2.10	0.05	-2.10	1.11	1.16	0.73	F

Information: * = Total; M = Male; F = Female
RMSE = Root Mean Square Error

In Table 2, it shows that male (M=-1.80 logit) has a higher average than female (M=-2.10 logit). The mean standard error values for male and female show good conditions because they have a low value of 0.11 for male and 0.05 for female. The mean value of the data distribution for male is higher than for female, -1.88

is the mean value out of 100 male who fill out relational aggression, and -2.10 for the middle value for female. Table 3 shows a sig=0.021 relational aggression, this indicates a p-value<0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference in male and female relational aggression.

Table 3. The results of the Welch Test of relational aggression in terms of gender

Mean Measure	S.E.	Welch		
		t	d. f.	Prob.
0.30	0.13	2.33	148	0.021

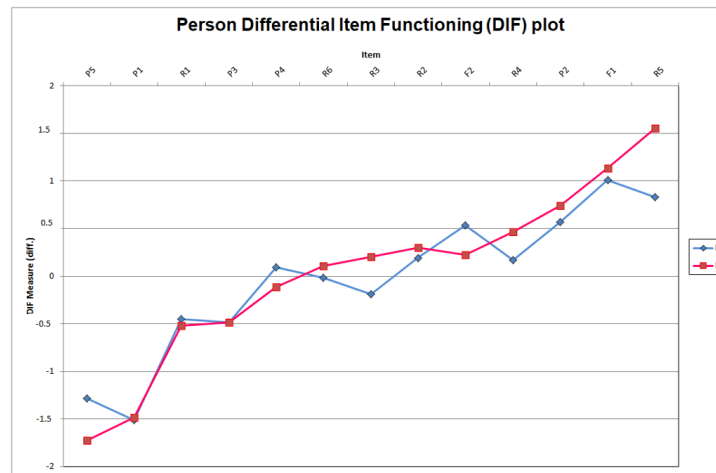


Figure 1. Differences in relational aggression in terms of gender. Ability to answer instruments; Gender, L=male, and P=female items, P1-P5=items proactive, R1-R6=items reactive, F1-F2=items romantic

Male are marked in blue with triangular markers and female in pink with circle markers as shown in Figure 1. The results show that the ability of female to answer the relational aggression scale is higher than that of male. That is, female is more careful in responding than male, so male tend to get higher scores than female. In addition, based on the theory of relational aggression by Murray-Close *et al.* [5], found that female students tend to be more relationally aggressive in romantic and reactive contexts. This means that relational aggression among female students is not only limited to everyday social interactions, but also significantly influences the dynamics of their romantic relationships. This form of aggression is often reactive, meaning it occurs in response to conflict or stress in the relationship. Meanwhile, from the proactive aspect, both genders have the same ability to respond to the relational aggression scale.

4. DISCUSSION

This study found that there were significant differences in male and female relational aggression. In Indonesia, the phenomenon where men tend to be more frequently involved in acts of relational aggression can be caused by a complex combination of social, cultural, and psychological factors. However, when viewed from the relational romantic aggression between lovers, it shows a contradiction with the results of this study. Several previous studies investigating peer relational aggression in children and adolescents [33], [34], suggesting that these gender disparities could persist into adulthood and extend to romantic relationships later in life [47]. This finding is consistent with Goldstein [22] research, which also observed a significantly higher prevalence of relational aggression among women compared to men in young adults' romantic relationships. This pattern could stem from gender-related differences in the reporting of romantic relational aggression, potentially indicating that men might be less inclined to disclose their engagement in relational aggressive behaviors than women. Alternatively, it's possible that men may exhibit alternative forms of aggression, such as physical or verbal aggression [48], [49]. Norms of masculinity that sometimes promote dominance, competition, or displays of power may encourage some males to use exclusion as a way to maintain position or authority in a group [50]. In addition, social pressure to show dominance, belief in the superiority of certain groups, or even the urge to assert group identity can influence why men tend to engage in acts of exclusion [51].

Furthermore, the cross-cultural examination of relational aggression based on gender underscores the need to consider cultural influences and societal norms [52], for instance, the Minang culture of West Sumatra has the highest average score of 58.4 compared to all other cultures, especially the differences that striking in Minaang and Javanese culture. The reason why researchers focus on these two cultures is because they have contradictory cultural systems, such as patriarchy and matriarchy [53]. This may influence the manifestation of relational aggression, particularly among female pupils, who may feel more empowered to express it. In contrast, Javanese culture tends to be more patrilineal, with males playing a predominate role in the family and society [54]. This may have a distinct effect on the manifestation of relational aggression, with women possibly playing a smaller role in relational aggression. The following is information on gender differences that can significantly shape the manifestation and interpretation of relational aggressive behavior in various regions of the world.

The results of the analysis of 20 studies on relational aggression based on gender indicate that 17 studies suggest significant differences in relational aggression scores across various regions of the world as shown in Table 4 [55]-[72]. Nevertheless, there are three countries in Indonesia that draw attention for not showing differences in relational aggression scores based on gender, namely in the African-American region [55], United States [56], and Mexico [57]. Another interesting fact is the existence of eight studies involving various countries, including the United States in 1995, 2005, 2012, and 2016; England in 2001; Russia in 2014; and Spain in 2023. The findings from these studies consistently support the conclusion that there are meaningful differences in the levels of relational aggression between males and females worldwide, including in Indonesia as presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of the study of relational aggression in the world

No	Reference	Years	Gender differences	Country
1	[58]	1995	M>F	United States
2	[55]	1998	NS	African-American
3	[59]	2001	M>F	English
4	[60]	2005	M>F	United States
5	[61]	2007	M<F	United States
6	[56]	2008	NS	United States
7	[62]	2012	M>F	United States
8	[63]	2012	M<F	Australia
9	[2]	2014	M>F	Russian
10	[64]	2014	M<F	China
11	[4]	2014	M<F	Russian
12	[65]	2015	M<F	United States
13	[66]	2016	M>F	United States
14	[67]	2016	M<F	Iran
15	[68]	2018	M<F	China
16	[57]	2019	NS	Mexico
17	[69]	2020	M<F	United States
18	[70]	2021	M<F	Scotland
19	[71]	2023	M>F	Spanish

Information: Gender, M=Male, F=Female; NS=Not Significant

In addition, the data that reveal the high interest of US researchers in studying relational aggression can actually be analyzed from several perspectives. The topic of relational aggression becomes increasingly relevant in the social and cultural context of the United States, where interpersonal relationships, communication, and social interaction play an important role in everyday life. Increased awareness of the impact of relational aggression in a variety of contexts, from the school setting to the workplace, could stimulate US researchers' interest in exploring this phenomenon more deeply [56], [62], [72].

Figure 2 has two parts; part 'a' shows trends in male relational aggression and 'b' trends in female relational aggression. Figure 2(a) shows a scatter plot illustrating trends in relational aggression among men across locations and ethnic groups from 1995 to approximately 2025, with several data points for the United States showing study or measurement variation over time. Meanwhile, Figure 2(b) shows scores that may reflect levels of relational aggression among women across countries and ethnic or linguistic subgroups. As with the trends in men, there are several data points for "United States" that show results over time. There are also data points for other countries such as India, Australia, Iran, China, and Scotland, as well as for ethnic subgroups such as African-American, English, Russian, and Spanish, with the African-American and English subgroups showing lower scores at baseline period. This indicates variation in relational aggression among women across locations and groups, and as with the men's data, additional information about methodology and score definitions are needed for complete interpretation.

Studies conducted by researchers around the world have examined the behavior of males and female engaging in relational aggression globally. One country that stands out, boasting the highest relational aggression scores, is the United States. Conversely, in China exhibit lower levels of relational aggression. In China, relational aggression is linked with levels of popularity. Research findings regarding gender disparities in popularity and the correlation between aggression and popularity have produced uncertain outcomes. Ethnographic researchers have noted that popular girls are inclined to employ relational aggression more frequently than popular boys (e.g., Rosier *et al.* [73]), while quantitative studies have yielded mixed results. Cillessen & Mayeux [74] discovered that relational aggression exhibited a more robust connection with popularity among girls in Grades 7 and 8, even after accounting for social preference, although other researchers have not encountered similar effects [75].

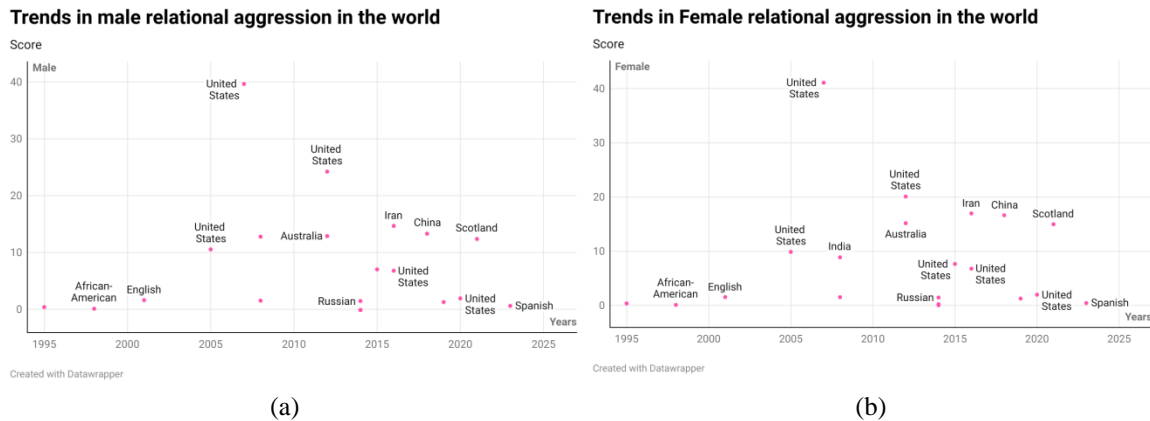


Figure 2. Trends in male and female relational aggression in the world, (a) male, (b) female [2], [4], [63]–[71], [55]–[62]

The influence of gender on the concurrent or longitudinal associations between popularity and overt aggression has generally not been detected [76]. Meanwhile in Spain, relational aggression is associated with parenting style, where there is the influence of father parenting on children's relational aggression based on gender moderated by temperament [71]. Figure 3 presents an interesting picture of the variability in levels of relational aggression by sex in a number of countries in recent years. The data show variation in the degree of relational aggression between males and females, with the differences likely to be insignificant in most cases across countries.

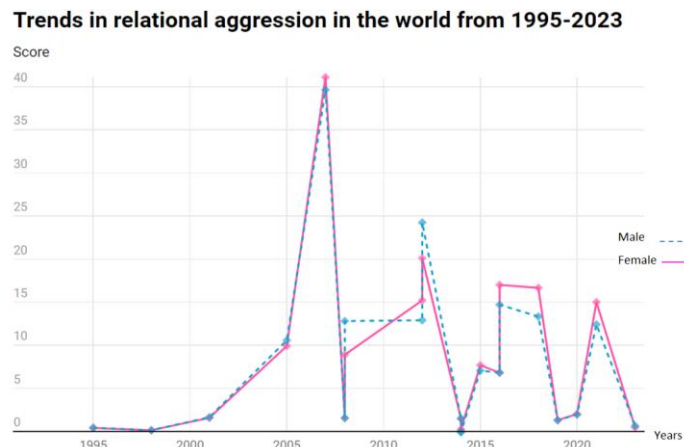


Figure 3. Relational aggression in the world from 1995 to 2023

There are fluctuations in the level of relational aggression from year to year in some countries, such as the United States [62], [65], [69]. In addition, the results of this literature also indicate consistent differences in the level of relational aggression between countries such as the United States, China, Australia, and others. The fluctuations in the data presented in this Figure 3 could be influenced by several factors, including variations in research methods, changes in social and cultural dynamics over time, as well as the influence of temporal and social contexts such as significant events occurring in specific years. Furthermore, differing sample characteristics between countries and years, along with individual factors like social skills and internal conflicts [77], may also contribute to the observed variability in relational aggression levels depicted in this data. It's important to acknowledge that data fluctuations are a common phenomenon in human behavior research, and accurate interpretation requires a comprehensive understanding of the various factors impacting these fluctuations.

This study's limitations include a sample size that may not be large enough to capture variations of sufficient magnitude, limited generalization due to the study's focus on five provinces in Indonesia, the use of measurement tools that may have limitations, the absence of consideration of contextual factors such as age, parental education level, or other relevant factors, and a gender imbalance in the sample of respondents. The implication of this research is the importance of considering various factors that influence the level of relational aggression in more in-depth research. By considering the variation in sample characteristics between countries and years, as well as individual factors influencing relational-aggressive behavior, research can be more contextualized and yield a deeper understanding of these trends. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers integrate more social, cultural, and contextual analyzes in designing research on relational aggression. In addition, a deeper understanding of this variability can provide a more solid basis for developing appropriate interventions and effective strategies for dealing with relational aggression in various social and cultural settings.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that there are significant differences in male and female relational aggression. Males tend to engage in acts of relational aggression more frequently because domination, competition, or displays of power may encourage some males to use acts of exclusion as a way to maintain position or authority in a group. In addition, there are fluctuations in the level of relational aggression in the context of gender from year to year in some countries, such as the United States, China, Australia, and others. By considering the variation in sample characteristics between countries and years, as well as individual factors influencing relational-aggressive behavior, research can be more contextualized and yield a deeper understanding of these trends. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers integrate more social, cultural, and contextual analyzes in designing research on relational aggression.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Yuda Syahputra    is a lecturer who is currently pursuing a doctorate in the Guidance and Counseling department at Padang State University. He has taught at Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta for more than 3 years. He has also been involved in developing question and review items for stress and anxiety tests during the COVID-19 pandemic for Padang State University and has been involved as editor and reviewer for several Sinta accredited journals. His current research interests include analysis of the Rasch model, CFA and EFA. He can be contacted at email: yuda@konselor.org.



Neviyarni Neviyarni    is Professor and Lecturer at Study Program Guidance and Counseling Universitas Negeri Padang. She has more than 20 years of experience as an Academician at Universitas Negeri Padang, where she currently serves as Professor and Head of the Masters and Doctoral Guidance and Counseling Study Programs at the Faculty of Education. Her current research interests include student learning and development at various levels and areas of education. The topics of publication are social, education, guidance and counseling, education, learning strategies. She can be contacted at: neviyarni.suhaili911@gmail.com.



Afdal    is Professor and Lecturer at Study Program Guidance and Counseling Universitas Negeri Padang. He was appointed lecturer in the university since 2008. He has been a lecturer at the Department of Guidance and FIP UNP. As a scientist and researcher, he often received research grants, both from UNP and from the ministry. Research topics that are usually carried out are related to Domestic Violence, Marriage Counseling, Careers and Counseling in various special populations. He is the founder of the Research Center for Adolescent and Family Development (RC-AFD) and member of Cyberpsychology Intervention and Research Center Universitas Negeri Padang since 2021. Apart from being a researcher, he has also been entrusted with the Coordinator of the Counselor Professional Education Study Program since 2018-2019. Currently serving as Dean of Faculty Education UNP since June, 2023. He can be contacted at email: afdal@konselor.org, afdal.kons@fip.unp.ac.id.