

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN LOW SELF-CONTROL AND AGGRESSION AMONG MALAYSIAN MALE PRISONERS

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### Abstract

**Objective:** A large body of criminological research provides evidence for the role of low self-control in triggering aggressive and violent behaviour. There are actually limited cross-sectional studies in ASEAN countries that ascertain the relationships between these two constructs. The present study aimed to determine the associations between low self-control and aggression among Malaysian male prisoners. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted in two prisons located within Peninsular Malaysia. A total of 198 Malaysian male prisoners were recruited into this study. A guided self-administered questionnaire consisting of two psychometric instruments adapted to the Malaysian context was used, ie. Malay versions of the Self Control Scale (SCS-M) and Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ-M). The Pearson correlation coefficient test was employed to determine the association between low self-control and aggression. In addition, correlation was also examined between low self-control and subscales of aggression. **Results:** In general, findings demonstrated a positive and significant association between low self-control and aggression ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p > 0.001$ ). Specifically, low self-control was significantly associated with anger ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), physical aggression ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and hostility ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). No significant correlation was observed between low self-control and verbal aggression ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). **Conclusion:** The implications from this study include the importance of self-control as a salient predictor of aggression and community intervention among at-risk groups. The directions for future research are also discussed. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 17 (1): January – June 2016: XX XX.*

**Keywords:** Aggression, Low Self-control, Male Prisoners, Violent Behaviour, Malaysia

### Introduction

Violence and crime are the two destructive components which perceived as a deliberate act that violates religious, social, and cultural norms. Violence detrimentally affects daily live routines, and it is viewed as the most perplexing problem that continues to erode the

nation economically as well as morally. Various factors, including psychological factors, environmental factors and social factors are identified as underlying factors for aggressive and violent behaviour.

In relation to psychological factors, low self-control is often perceived as strong predictors

for violence and criminal activities. From a criminological standpoint, self-control is defined as “the tendency to avoid acts whose long-term costs exceed their momentary advantages” [1]. It reflects the ability as an individual to refrain from short term gratification. A local study confirmed that Alternative Five-Factor Model's personality traits such as Activity, Aggressiveness-Hostility and Impulsive Sensation Seeking significantly predicted low self-control as they explained 56.6% of the total variation [2].

A vast number of criminological literatures have acknowledged the role of poor self-control as a risk factor for aggressive and violent behaviour. Along this line of thought, several theoretical models and frameworks have considered the possible role of low self-control as a catalyst for aggressive and violent behaviour. An example is the General Theory of Crime (GTC) [3] which emphasized the importance of self-control processes in shaping aggressive and violent behaviour. A review by Mohammad Rahim et al. [4] extensively reported the linkage between low self-control and criminal behaviour. In their review, low self-control was addressed as one of the critical factors responsible for criminal and deviant behaviour. Furthermore, it was labeled as the consistent and potential predictor of antisocial behaviour [4].

In addition, number of studies [5 - 8] have specifically examined the relationship between low self-control and aggression, and found that low self-control is a strong force in developing aggressive and violent behaviour. Existing literatures [7, 9-10] have also provided strong support for the associations between poor self-control, aggression, and violent behaviour among adolescents. Furthermore, poor self-control locus has been found to increase and facilitate the aggression behaviour towards strangers [11]. Apart from that, several experiments and intervention studies were conducted to test the effects of low self-control on aggression levels. These studies found that self-control training reduced aggression and retaliation among individuals with high aggressiveness [12]. A parallel line of investigation by Finkel et al. [13] provided support for this assertion in which two weeks of self-control training reduced aggressive tendencies towards intimate partners.

Although the above investigations and studies have been put forth to explain the relationship between low self-control and aggression, there are actually limited cross-sectional studies in ASEAN countries that ascertain the relationship between low self-control and aggression levels especially among forensic and other vulnerable populations. The applicability, admissibility, validity, and reliability of the theories and existing evidence on the associations between low self-control and aggression remained unknown in non-Western cultures, such as ASEAN countries and Malaysia in particular. Thus, it is imperative to carry out research to ascertain such a relationship in non-Western community settings. Ascertaining relationships are vital for early social intervention among at-risk individuals in the community.

Therefore, the present study was conducted to shed some statistical evidence on the association between low self-control and aggression among Malaysian male prisoners. Since the problem of aggression is prevalent among forensic populations [14], the current study focused on a sample of male prisoners. It is anticipated that determining the relationship between low self-control and aggression is perceived to be of higher significance among criminals rather than members of the normal population. The results of this study add to the existing body of knowledge in ASEAN and Malaysian criminology.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design and Respondents***

The present study utilized a cross-sectional research design. The sampling frame consisted of 198 Malaysian male prisoners. The source population was the male inmates from two prisons located within Peninsular Malaysia. A series of inclusion and exclusion criteria was determined by the researchers in order to ensure that the sample selected will be representative of the population to be studied. Selection criteria include Malaysian citizens aged 21 and older, consented, and able to read and understand Malay language. Those respondents who were mentally unfit and high risk's inmates such as HIV patients and aggressive individuals were excluded from this study.

After determining the adequate sample size using a Raosoft sample calculation online software, a total number of 198 male prisoners were recruited for this study. The recruitment of the respondents was based on the non-probability sampling method, which was purposive sampling. Due to access restraints and the level of risk and dangerousness of this vulnerable group, the selections of respondents were made by the prison authorities. This type of sampling method was also selected to assure the safety of the researchers and prevent any possible opportunities to escape and perpetration of violence by the inmates.

### **Procedure**

A self-administered questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection. Proper instructions were given verbally and in writing to the respondents before the administration of the questionnaire. All respondents gave their signed informed consent before undertaking the psychometric assessment. Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia and Malaysian Department of Prisons. The questionnaire was administered in a group format of 10 to 20 men each time and were collected on the same day. The average completion time of the questionnaire was between 20 to 30 minutes for each respondent. Respondents' responses were assured with confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Measures**

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section one contained questions pertaining to socio-demographic information of the respondents. Section two and three consisted of two psychometric instruments adapted to the Malaysian context: Malay versions of the Self-Control Scale (henceforth, SCS-M) and the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (henceforth, BPAQ-M). Permission was granted by the authors of both psychometric instruments prior to usage in this study.

**Socio-demography:** This section gathered personal and socio-demographic information of the respondents such as age, ethnicity, marital status, occupation before incarceration,

highest level of education, and also alcohol-drug abuse history.

#### ***Self-Control Scale – Malay version (SCS-M):***

The Self-control scale version in Malay language (SCS-M) [15] is a unidimensional scale, consisting of 18 items, has been validated among Malaysian violent offenders, with indications of good content, construct and internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ). The scale found to be a valid and reliable assessment of self-control level among test takers [15]. Items in SCS-M were answered on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (completely like me). The items were reverse coded so that high scores indicated low self-control.

The SCS was originally developed by Grasmick et al. [16] to operationalize low self-control elements based on the GTC. The original scale consisted of 24 items, which measure the six components of self-control: impulsivity, simple tasks, risk taking, physical activities, self-centeredness and temper. The original psychometric properties seemed to be promising as the previous reports of reliability (coefficient alpha) suggest good to moderate reliability: Grasmick et al. [16] reported 0.81 and 0.73 were reported by McMullen [17].

#### ***Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire – Malay (BPAQ-M):***

BPAQ-M [18] is a 29-items questionnaire which measures a respondent's self-perceived levels of aggression. This BPAQ-M consisted of four subscales: physical aggression (physical expression of anger), verbal aggression (argumentative and hostile language), anger (agitation and sense of control), and hostility (resentment, social isolation and paranoia). In this questionnaire, nine items indicate physical aggression, whereas five items were designed to indicate verbal aggression. Seven items represented anger and eight items represented hostility. Respondents rated the frequency of the 29 aggression items on a 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (completely like me) scale. The higher scores indicate higher level of aggression. The total internal consistency of this measure was 0.91 [18].

### **Statistical Analyses**

The information was compiled into a set of

systematic and computerized data. Statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS version 20.0 for univariate and bivariate analyses. The raw information from questionnaires was entered in SPSS. Each item and answers were carefully coded and then entered.

Following data entry, preliminary analysis was conducted to detect the presence of outliers and missing values. This analysis was completed by running the frequencies of each variable and examining those frequencies for the presence of invalid values, unusual values, and also to detect missing data. In addition, preliminary analysis was also performed to test the normalization of data. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the socio demographic profile of the respondents. A bivariate analysis of correlation was employed to ascertain the association between low self-control and aggression. This was followed by a correlation analysis between

low self-control against subscales of aggression.

## Results

### *Socio-demographic Profile*

Sociodemographic information of the respondents presented in the form of descriptive statistics (Table 1). All the respondents in this study happened to be Malay male prisoners. The mean age of the respondents was 27.18 years (SD = 8.12). Most of the respondents were single (66.7%) and self employed (35.4%). With regards to highest level of education, majority of the respondents (48.5%) had upper secondary education. Meanwhile, information on alcohol-drug abuse history revealed that the majority of respondents had a history of drug misuse (47.5%) and 29.3% of respondents admitted to consume both alcohol and drugs.

**Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the respondents (n = 198)**

<b>Sociodemography</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	132	66.7
Married	40	20.2
Divorcee	10	5.0
Widower	16	8.1
<b>Highest education level</b>		
Never been to school	6	3.0
Primary	6	3.0
Lower secondary (Form 1 - Form 3)	72	36.4
Upper secondary (Form 4 - Form 5)	96	48.5
Pre-University/ Matriculation	8	4.0
Diploma/ Degree	10	5.1
<b>Occupation prior to conviction</b>		
Unemployed	30	15.2
Self employed	70	35.4
Semiskilled-unskilled	64	32.2
Clerical-skilled	20	10.1
Professionals/Managers	14	7.1
<b>Alcohol-drug abuse history</b>		
No alcohol or drug consumed	34	17.2
Alcohol consumption only	8	4.0
Drug consumption only	94	47.5
Both alcohol and drug consumption	58	29.3
Intoxicating substance consumption	4	2.0

### *Bivariate Analysis*

Since data for both variables were normally distributed, the Pearson correlation coefficient

test was performed to determine the degree of correlations among these two variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient measures the strength of linear dependence between two

variables, in this instance low self-control and aggression. Consistent with expectations, the result evidenced a significant, positive, and good correlation between low self-control and total aggression ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Due to this initial significant finding, further correlation analyses were performed to determine the associations among low self-control against four subscales of aggression. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix between low self control and subscales of

aggression. The correlation values of low self-control against aggression subscales ranged from 0.13 to 0.54. Based on the correlation matrix as in Table 2, it was observed that low self control has a significant and positive correlation with ‘hostility’ ( $r = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), ‘anger’ ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and ‘physical aggression’ ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Unlike other studies, no significant correlation was observed between low self-control and ‘verbal aggression’ ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) in the Malaysian male prisoner sample.

**Table 2. Correlation matrix of low self-control against subscales of aggression**

	Subscales of aggression, $r^a$			
	Verbal Aggression	Hostility	Anger	Physical Aggression
<b>Low self-control, <math>r^a</math></b>	0.13	0.33**	0.54**	0.50**

Note: a- Pearson correlation coefficient; \*\* Correlation is significant at 0.001 level (2-tailed)

## Discussion

A key finding in the literature on violence is that of a remarkably strong correlation between low self-control and aggressive traits within an individual. According to Buss [19], aggression is characterized as the outcome of the links between emotions (anger), thoughts (hostility), and aggressive behaviour. Though aggression has been said to be multi-determined [14], a sizable body of criminological literature [5, 20-22] had proposed that poor self-control accelerates aggressive and violent behaviour within the self. In order to shed some light on the association between low self-control and aggression in a non-Western context, the current study examined such associations among Malaysian male prisoners. In addition, the present study revealed the associations between low self-control and sub scales of aggression such as verbal aggression, physical aggression, hostility, and anger.

The main findings of the present study suggested that low self-control had a significant, positive, and good correlation with the overall level of aggression. The present findings are similar to previous studies [6, 8, 20, 23-25] in which poor self-control tends to have a strong relationship to aggressive behaviour. Individuals who lack self-controls are often characterized as individuals who failed to control his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in a positive manner. Such

individuals are more likely to exhibit higher levels of anger during frustrations, handle conflicts less constructively, and tend to display antisocial and aggressive behaviours [26].

According to DeWall et al. [27], a high level of self-control often acts as an inhibitor of aggressive behaviour in which self-control helps to override the aggressive urges. Earlier meta-analytic findings by Pratt and Cullen [8] demonstrated that poor self-control had a moderate effect size ( $r = 0.27$ ) on criminal behaviour, indicating that poor self-control is qualifiable to be labelled as one of the strongest correlates of crime. In addition, it was suggested that self-control allows individuals to delay the gratification, resist immediate influences of the situation, and enable them to control their emotional outcomes such as anger, hostility and other aggressive behaviours [28].

The second part of this study aimed to determine the associations between low self-control with specific types of aggression. Most notably, low self-control had a stronger correlation with ‘physical aggression’ and ‘anger’ compared to ‘hostility’. The present findings seemed to be concur with previous studies in which low self-control is highly correlated with ‘physical aggression’ and ‘anger’ compared to ‘hostility’ [20]. While low self-control had a significant correlation with physical aggression, anger, and hostility;

there was no evidence of a significant correlation between low self-control and verbal aggression, although a weak correlation was evident in the previous study by Hamama and Ronen-Shenhav [20].

The results of this study provided some evidence of low self-control as a salient predictor of aggressive and violent behaviour. The knowledge contributed by the present study is expected to raise awareness within the ASEAN community and Malaysia, in particular; on the importance of practicing self-control in order to deter involvement in aggressive and violent behaviours. In addition, having such knowledge is incredibly important to help the community to tackle early problems associated with self-control, which will help to nip problems in the bud in order to establish safer communities.

The findings of this study make an important contribution to ASEAN and Malaysian criminology literature by ascertaining the relationship between low self-control and aggression among male prisoners. However, the present study has several limitations. Since this study focused on a male prisoner's sample, results cannot be generalized to the overall prison population. Furthermore, since the present study recruited all Malay respondents, the findings were not applicable for other ethnicities in Malaysia. Therefore, the present findings should be considered within Malay male prison population. As for future directions, studies concerning both gender and other ethnicities are essential in order to provide a better and comprehensive finding on the associations between low self-control and aggression among the forensic population. Another viable study is to compare results of associations between low self-control and aggression between juvenile and adult offenders as a means to determine criminal pathways.

## **Conclusion**

In brief, the present study achieved its goal by ascertaining the associations between low self-control and aggression among male prisoners. The results of the present study provided some evidence on the significant relationship between low self-control and aggression in a non-Western cultural setting. Understanding

the importance of self-control in shaping aggressive behaviour will permit psychologists, psychotherapists, individual, members of the criminal-justice system, and the community to come up with various early intervention and rehabilitation efforts.

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## **Conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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