

## Silence Out of Fear: A Case Study of the Spiral of Silence in Social Media Doxxing Victims

Sansa Aldira Ramadhani<sup>1</sup>, Rifqi Taufiqurrohman Khodari<sup>2</sup>, Naili Ulfiah<sup>3\*</sup>, Aprilia Rosydawati<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

Email : sansa21001@mail.unpad.ac.id<sup>1</sup>, rifqi23001@mail.unpad.ac.id<sup>2</sup>,  
naily23001@mail.unpad.ac.id<sup>3\*</sup>, aprilია22005@mail.unpad.ac.id<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

This study examines the spiral of silence phenomenon experienced by doxxing victims on Indonesian social media. Doxxing, as a form of cyberbullying involving unauthorized disclosure of personal information, has generated significant psychological and social consequences for victims. Evidence indicates that 21.05% of fact-checkers have encountered intimidation and doxxing on digital platforms, while reports from AJI (Alliance of Independent Journalists) Indonesia document numerous content creators experiencing fear of expression following such digital attacks. The research employs a qualitative approach through case study methodology, incorporating in-depth interviews with four informants who experienced doxxing within the past two years. Findings reveal that victims endure emotional trauma manifested through fear, anxiety, and withdrawal from both online and offline social interactions. The fear of social isolation compels victims toward self-censorship by locking accounts, removing content, and restricting online activities. The internalization of fear occurs through perceptions that attacking groups possess superior strength, rendering silence a chosen defense mechanism. Victims' motivation to return to social media stems from social support provided by family, friends, and communities, alongside functional necessities in daily life. Adaptations implemented include communication self-regulation, modification of online identity through pseudonyms or anonymous accounts, and pursuit of emotional support from fellow victim communities. These findings confirm that doxxing not only violates individual privacy but also generates a broader spiral of silence effect, transforming digital communication dynamics from open dialogue arenas into repressive and surveillance environments.

**Keywords:** doxxing, spiral of silence, cyberbullying, social media, self-censorship

Corresponding Author; Naili Ulfiah  
Email: naily23001@mail.unpad.ac.id



### INTRODUCTION

*Doxxing* phenomenon that has occurred in Indonesia in recent years demonstrates how the disclosure of personal information can have a serious impact on individual lives and the dynamics of communication in the digital space. *Doxxing* not only causes victims to lose control of sensitive data such as home addresses, telephone numbers, or family identities, but also creates deep fear and psychological distress. Research conducted on a fact-checking network shows that 21.05% of respondents have experienced intimidation or *doxxing* via social media (TerasMaluku, 2025). This figure provides a clear indication that *doxxing* is not an isolated incident, but rather a fairly common digital phenomenon that is increasing in frequency in Indonesia. This situation is reinforced by the results of a 2024 report from the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia, which stated

that journalists, content creators, and activists are groups that are highly vulnerable to digital attacks, including *doxxing*. Many of them feel afraid to express their opinions after experiencing the deliberate disclosure of their personal data (Wendratama et al., 2024). This concern arises not only from the possibility of further attacks, but also from the fear of surveillance, threats, and pressure from parties disturbed by their views. This psychological impact leads many victims to choose to limit digital interactions, delete accounts, or even withdraw from *online public spaces entirely*.

It's not just the direct victims who feel the impact. Other social media users who witness *doxxing incidents* can also experience similar fears. Seeing someone attacked or having their identity forcibly revealed makes them more cautious about using social media. Many people feel that differing or controversial opinions could make them the next target. The psychological pressure to stay safe leads to a tendency to avoid discussions deemed sensitive. This reaction creates a digital atmosphere filled with uncertainty and fear. As people begin to hold back and feel reluctant to speak, the digital space becomes increasingly devoid of diverse views. This phenomenon of fear of speaking is strongly linked to the concept of *the Spiral of Silence*, a theory developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974. According to this theory, a person tends to choose silence when they feel their opinion is at odds with the majority or when there is a threat of social rejection (Eriyanto, 2017). In the context of social media, *doxxing* becomes a factor that exacerbates this "silence," as users fear that any form of expression or unpopular opinion could trigger a digital attack. In other words, *doxxing* becomes a tool that not only attacks one individual, but also affects wider groups of people through collective fear.

Further, *doxxing* is part of a broader form of *cyberbullying*. *Cyberbullying* is not limited to insults, teasing, or humiliation, but has evolved into more complex and dangerous acts, one of which is the deliberate dissemination of personal information to embarrass or pressure someone (Azim & Bilkis, 2023). Another study (Slonje et al., 2013) explained that these forms of *cyberbullying* have become increasingly common due to the fast, widespread, and anonymous nature of the internet. Individuals can disseminate personal information in mere seconds, and this information can persist for a long time or be difficult to completely erase. As a result, victims not only face momentary pressure but can also face long-term consequences. The increasing prevalence of *cyberbullying is inextricably linked to the massive use of social media in Indonesia*. The rise in *doxxing cases* aligns with the growing intensity of society's use of digital platforms as a space for interaction. A study by (Evita et al., 2023) shows that Generation Z has made social media an integral part of their daily lives. For them, social media is not just a place for entertainment, but also a tool for building identity, building relationships, and seeking information. The presence of digital platforms opens up a vast space for expression, but at the same time, creates new risks for its users.

Quantitative data from (Pandjaitan, 2024) shows that 68.9% of Indonesians actively use social media. *WhatsApp* is the most widely used platform at 85.3%, followed by Instagram at 73.5%. Data from (Solihin, 2023) even shows that the average Indonesian

spends more than three hours daily on social media, making it one of the countries with the highest usage rates in the world. This large amount of time and intensity makes social media a primary space where various forms of communication, interaction, conflict, and digital violence occur. As social media use becomes more widespread, the digital communication space is also evolving into a complex arena. On the one hand, social media provides freedom for every individual to speak, express themselves, and share stories. However, on the other hand, this freedom is often not balanced with a sense of responsibility.

A study by (Fiorentina et al., 2018) explains that while information technology allows people to freely express their opinions and identities, this free access also opens up opportunities for digital violence such as *cyberbullying* and *doxxing*. When someone feels anonymous or protected by a screen, it becomes easier to attack or humiliate others without considering the consequences.

The accumulation of these facts demonstrates that digital violence, such as *doxxing*, is not merely a matter of individual privacy or security. Its impact is far broader and related to the overall communication dynamics of society. Fear of speaking out, social pressure, and the tendency to remain silent are indicators that the digital space is experiencing a functional distortion. Social media, which should be a space for dialogue, has instead become a risky space for many. Given this phenomenon, it is important to examine the relationship between *doxxing* as a form of *cyberbullying* and the Spiral of Silence theory. This research not only provides an understanding of how digital violence impacts victims emotionally but also explains how these actions influence people's communication patterns in the digital space. With society's increasing reliance on social media in their daily lives, understanding how fear and social pressure shape communication behavior is crucial. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze how *doxxing* as a form of *cyberbullying* can strengthen the *Spiral of Silence phenomenon* in social media users, and how this dynamic changes the way people think, speak, and behave in the digital public space.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative methods are the right foundation for this research because they are able to explore the deeper meaning behind human behavior and experiences. According to (Lim, 2025), qualitative methods are research approaches used to understand social and human phenomena from the perspective of the people involved. In general, this method focuses on collecting non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, to gain in-depth insights into an issue or experience. This statement shows that qualitative research goes beyond collecting data but also seeks to understand reality as perceived by individuals. In other words, researchers attempt to interpret the meaning behind participants' actions and experiences in order to build a holistic understanding of a social phenomenon. In this context, qualitative methods provide a strong foundation for the application of the Phenomenological Approach, which focuses

on exploring individual subjective experiences to uncover the deepest meaning of a social event.

### **Case Study as a Research Approach Used**

The case study approach was chosen because it allows the research to deeply highlight complex, specific phenomena within a real-life context. Case studies emphasize a thorough understanding of the subject and their environment, making them suitable for researching *doxxing victims* on social media. Mariah and Sukendro (Mariah & Sukendro, 2025) assert, "This research uses a qualitative approach to understand social phenomena and human problems. The research method used is a case study." This approach not only explores facts but also understands the subjective experiences, perceptions, and emotional reactions of victims to the threat of publicizing personal information. In this research, the case study focuses on the experiences of individuals as victims of *doxxing*, including the silent behavior that arises from fear, perceptions of majority opinion, and the coping mechanisms they employ. With a narrow yet in-depth focus, researchers can understand the complex interactions between digital social pressure, fear of isolation, and changing communication patterns on social media. Qualitative case studies allow for the identification of specific cases to understand social phenomena in a single, holistic unit of analysis, including how communication behaviors evolve after a *doxxing incident*. Furthermore, case studies also provide flexibility to adjust data collection methods. Researchers can conduct in-depth interviews, digital observations, and document analysis to build a comprehensive picture of victims' experiences. The case study approach not only emphasizes individual narratives, but also facilitates understanding of broader social patterns in the digital world (Mariah & Sukendro, 2025).

### **Case Study Design with In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews**

The case study design in this research integrates semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection technique. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed researchers to prepare a question guide while still allowing for exploration of informants' narratives and experiences. Hati, Meltareza, and Wiryani (Hati et al., 2024) assert, "These semi-structured interviews were used to explore informants' narratives, views, and direct experiences related to their daily communication practices." This technique provides flexibility to investigate the emotional experiences, perceptions of fear, and behavioral adaptations of *doxxing victims*. The interview process included core questions related to *doxxing experiences*, emotional reactions, perceptions of majority opinion, and changes in communication patterns on social media. Additional questions were tailored to informants' responses, resulting in richer and more contextual data (A'yun, 2025). This technique also allowed researchers to observe body language, tone of voice, and expressions that indicate informants' levels of anxiety or fear, supporting the interpretation of the spiral of silence phenomenon. In addition to interviews, the case study design took ethical safeguards into account. Informants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and any sensitive data was kept confidential.

This approach ensured data integrity while respecting victims' rights to psychological and digital safety (Hati et al., 2024) . This design is expected to yield in-depth understanding of the internalization of fear, silent behavior, and coping strategies employed by victims, enabling this study to comprehensively answer the research questions.

In this study, the use of primary and secondary data is essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, particularly in the context of the experiences of *doxxing victims* on social media. Primary data is data collected through processes undertaken to collect data independently for research purposes. Primary data is obtained through questionnaires, interviews, *focus group discussions* , and observations. Meanwhile, secondary data is data collected from published sources, meaning that the data has been collected by others for other purposes and can be used for other purposes in research. Secondary data comes from notes, books, research articles, and internet articles (Taherdoost, 2021) . All data must be relevant to the topic of *cyberbullying*, *doxxing* , and social behavior in digital media.

The population and sample size in this study were designed to obtain relevant and in-depth data in accordance with the objectives of the case study approach, namely to understand the subjective experiences of victims *of cyberbullying and doxxing* on social media. The study population was Indonesian social media users who had been victims *of doxxing* (the unauthorized distribution of personal data). The research sample was selected purposively, namely 4–8 informants who had experienced *doxxing* at least once in the past two years, were active on social media, and were willing to be interviewed and able to verbally reflect on their experiences. This small, in-depth approach aligns with the recommendations of case studies, which emphasize depth of experience over quantity of participants. The focus of the research was not on the number of respondents, but rather on the depth and authenticity of the experiences expressed by victims. By involving individuals who have actually experienced *doxxing* and are able to reflect on those experiences, researchers can explore richer and deeper meanings about the social and psychological impacts they experience.

In qualitative research, the data analysis process is a crucial step in uncovering the hidden meanings behind participants' experiences. Therefore, a method capable of systematically organizing and interpreting data is required. Thematic analysis is an analytical technique for discovering meaningful patterns from data that describe real-life experiences. This analysis begins with textual data and aims to organize the meanings found within the data into patterns, and ultimately themes (Sundler et al., 2019) . This technique helps researchers identify similarities, differences, and relationships between meanings emerging from participants' narratives, thereby enabling a comprehensive and reflective depiction of their experiences. Thematic analysis is used to interpret the results of interviews with victims *of cyberbullying and doxxing* to provide a deeper and more contextual understanding of the meaning of personal experiences.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Emotional and Social Impact of Doxxing on Victims' Communication Behavior**

Based on interviews, doxxing has a significant emotional impact on victims. Nearly all informants said they felt afraid, panicked, and shocked when they learned their personal data had been shared. LA shared that she received numerous messages from unknown numbers containing photos of her ID card and her work information. This made her tremble, have difficulty sleeping, and feel extremely threatened. NDR also experienced similar feelings when her identity and workplace were shared by people who disagreed with her opinions on social media. RMD even admitted to becoming hypervigilant and becoming afraid every time she heard a small noise outside her house, as if someone was coming. KIPUT also experienced shock and panic when she learned her data was published by a fandom group with which she was currently feuding.

Besides the emotional impact, the social impact is also very pronounced. Many victims choose to withdraw from their surroundings. LA began to distance herself from her office friends because she felt embarrassed and afraid of bringing personal problems to work. NDR became more withdrawn and often daydreamed. RMD said some friends distanced themselves for fear of being dragged into the conflict, leaving her feeling even more alone. Supporting informants such as MH and NK also noticed clear changes: the victims became quiet, anxious, and less cheerful than usual.

On social media, changes in victims' behavior were evident. Nearly all informants admitted to locking their accounts, deleting old posts, and reducing their online activity after experiencing doxxing. LA stopped using Instagram for a period and deactivated Twitter because she was too afraid to see notifications. NDR and RMD no longer dared to comment on sensitive issues, preferring to remain observers. KIPUT, which had previously been active in expressing its opinions, also chose to remain silent for fear of further attacks.

Overall, this research shows that doxxing not only impacts victims' digital privacy but also significantly impacts their emotional and social well-being. Victims experience persistent fear, stress, and insecurity. They also withdraw from social circles and become more cautious, even limiting their communication on social media. In other words, doxxing makes victims lose their sense of security, both in their daily lives and in their digital activities.

### **The Process of Internalizing Fear, Perceiving Majority Opinion, and the Decision to Remain Silent**

The acute emotional turmoil triggered by doxxing, which involves the dissemination of personal data and physical threats, immediately triggers the victim's primary defense mechanism: fear of social isolation. For the informants, speaking out is no longer simply about facing rejection, but inviting a real invasion of their private space. In this extreme situation, silence *becomes* the most instinctive and considered the safest option. Informant 3 (RMD) chose to remain silent because he felt defending himself would only "make matters worse," while Informant 4 (LA) instinctively deleted social

media apps to avoid trauma-inducing notifications. Ironically, this silence leads to severe psychological consequences; while it provides a small "sense of security" by not provoking new conflict, the victims feel so isolated, helpless, and "out of control" that their mental state "collapses."

This phenomenon of silence demonstrates that doxxing is a highly effective catalyst for enforcing self -*censorship* . Victims drastically alter their communication behavior on social media. Informant 3 (RMD), who was previously active in expressing opinions, suddenly transformed into a "passive observer" who only dared to watch without commenting. Protective measures such as locking accounts, deleting posts, and limiting interactions were seen as realistic *defense mechanisms* for regaining control over privacy. This change occurred because doxxing impaired victims' *quasi-statistical sense* , their ability to assess dominant public opinion. They perceived the attackers as having far greater power and being supported by *an online mob* , so resisting would only invite further isolation.

This fear was then internalized into extreme caution. Informant 1 (KIPUT) chose to be "more mindful and calculating in interactions," while Informant 2 (NDR) became "more careful about uploading" even for trivial matters. This sense of surveillance was reinforced by Informant 4 (LA), who felt "everyone could spy on me." In essence, the threat of doxxing successfully transformed social media from an arena for dialogue into an environment that felt authoritarian. This change in behavior was not due to the victim agreeing with the attacker's opinion, but rather driven by a deep and real fear of the consequences of voicing a dissenting opinion.

### ***Doxxing Victims to Return to Social Media***

Across the four cases analyzed, the victims' motivations for returning to social media showed distinct yet interconnected patterns. Informant 1 (Kiput) returned to social media activity thanks to emotional support from family, friends, and netizens who defended him. This feeling of support reassured him that he still had the right to express his opinion, while also encouraging him to resist giving in and allowing the perpetrator to "win" by silencing his voice. In contrast, Informant 2 (NDR) returned to social media primarily for daily needs. For him, social media is a space for obtaining information, building social relationships, and maintaining a routine. Despite lingering fears, he continued to return because the platforms are an essential part of his life and work.

Meanwhile, Informant 3 (RMD) demonstrated a motivational pattern more related to emotional recovery. She returned to active life after receiving continuous support from close friends and a community of doxxing victims, which made her feel less alone. Understanding that digital spaces can be safely re-entered through privacy management and behavioral changes was a strong reason for her return to social media, albeit with a more anonymous identity. Informant 4 (LA) was motivated to return due to practical and social needs, particularly related to work and daily interactions. Furthermore, support from friends and a community of debt-free advocates provided a sense of security, enabling her to return to social media, albeit with caution.

Based on these four cases, it can be seen that the motivation to return to social media use is not due to the trauma having disappeared, but rather due to internal drives (the desire to regain control, the need to express themselves) and external support (family, friends, community). Victims meet their psychological and social needs through behavioral adaptations, such as increasing privacy, limiting interactions, or changing their online identities. These findings suggest that social support and functional needs are important factors in enabling victims to overcome their fear and re-enter the digital space with greater caution.

### **Doxxing Victims' Adaptation: Self-Control, Online Identity, and Social Support**

Based on interviews with four informants who had experienced doxxing, the post-incident adaptation of doxxing victims showed a series of structured responses as a form of self-defense, consisting of drastic changes in online behavior, modifications to self-identity, and social support received by the informants.

Post-doxxing self-control occurs through conscious decisions to limit or change how informants interact on social media. This is a direct response to the fear and anxiety predominant among all informants.

All informants reported a phase of withdrawal *from* public interaction as the most immediate and realistic self-protection measure. Upon returning to active life, all informants practiced extreme mindfulness in interactions, indicating behavioral learning

Post-incident adaptations included physical changes to social media profiles to reduce association with their real identities, particularly for informants whose personal data was explicitly shared. Informants RMD and LA took steps to change their usernames to more anonymous ones, remove/replace their profile photos with illustrations, and no longer display their real identities. Informant KIPUT, who needed to use her real identity for work purposes, chose to maximize *privacy. settings* and be more careful in managing digital footprints.

Social and community support played a crucial role in the informants' psychological recovery and decision to remain active. Core emotional support, such as family, especially the KIPUT mother, was the most consistent provider of emotional support. KIPUT, RMD, and LA informants found support in their communities (Menfess di X, Komunitas Korban *Doxxing* , Pejuang *Debt-Free* ).

### **CONCLUSION**

This study revealed that doxxing, a form of cyberbullying, not only violates digital privacy but also changes the way victims communicate on social media. Interview findings indicate that all informants experienced severe psychological impacts after the incident, such as fear, panic, and prolonged anxiety, which significantly affected their quality of life. This emotional impact changed the way victims interacted both in the real world and online. Victims tended to withdraw, lose confidence, and feel insecure about expressing themselves. All four informants reported experiencing sleep disturbances, hypervigilance of their surroundings, and a deep fear of the possibility of physical attacks



or further threats. Some informants even experienced rejection or distancing from close friends for fear of being dragged into conflict, adding to the burden of social isolation they felt. On social media, informants showed a significant increase in caution, characterized by restrictions on digital activity and high selectivity in interactions. They became more sensitive to the views of the majority and tended to choose silence as a self-defense strategy. This was triggered by fears of social rejection and the potential negative consequences that might arise if they expressed dissenting opinions.

*Spiral Theory of Silence* is relevant in this research because threats to victims' privacy and safety create the perception that digital spaces are controlled by a dominant group with the potential to attack. In response, victims choose silence as a defense mechanism, not out of alignment with majority opinion, but out of fear of negative consequences. They perceive that expressing dissenting opinions will lead to social isolation and further attacks, so silence is seen as the safest option.

The process of internalizing fear in *doxxing victims* involves several phases. Initially, victims experience shock and panic upon realizing their personal data has been exposed. Later, they begin to understand that the threat is real and has the potential to impact their lives. In response, victims develop defense mechanisms such as self-control and withdrawal from public interactions. This fear then transforms into extreme caution that persists, even after the threat subsides. Perceptions of the majority opinion also change, leading victims to feel their voice is worthless or even dangerous to express, making silence the safest option to avoid conflict and protect their remaining privacy.

Interestingly, despite experiencing profound trauma, all four informants ultimately decided to return to social media. The victims' motivation to return to social media was influenced by social support, daily needs, and emotional recovery. Professional needs and social interactions encouraged them to remain active, while support from family, friends, and the community gave them the courage to return, albeit with a more cautious and cautious approach. Social support plays a crucial role in the psychological recovery process for doxxing victims. The presence of support from family and the community provides significant emotional validation while reducing feelings of isolation. A safe and supportive digital community provides an important platform for victims to share their experiences and gain empathy, thus accelerating the healing and recovery process.

During the adaptation process, doxxing victims made adjustments to their digital behavior, such as modifying their digital identities and seeking social support. They demonstrated caution in their interactions, consciously limiting the type of content they shared, avoiding sensitive topics, and being more selective in their interactions. Social media identity changes also included changing their usernames to more anonymous ones, deleting their original profile photos, and increasing their account privacy settings. Seeking social support was also a crucial part of adaptation, whether through *online communities* of fellow victims, support groups, or trusted friendships. Self-control became a crucial pillar in their efforts to navigate *post-doxxing digital challenges*.

*Doxxing* victims' trauma recovery is a complex process that requires time and patience. Victims experience lingering fear and wariness, even after returning to social media. They heal by sharing their experiences, joining victim communities, and seeking counseling or therapy. However, access to professional help is often limited, making informal support from social circles crucial. Social support and the need for digital participation provide strength for victims to bounce back, albeit in a more cautious manner. These findings have important implications for understanding the dynamics of communication on social media, particularly in the context of digital violence.

Doxxing It's not just an individual issue, but a threat to freedom of expression and diversity of opinion in the digital public sphere. Collective efforts are needed to create a safer digital environment and respect everyone's right to speak without fear of attack. Public education about the dangers of doxxing and the importance of respecting others' privacy is also needed to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of four informants limits the generalizability of findings to broader doxxing victim populations with diverse demographic backgrounds and cultural contexts. Second, the qualitative nature of the study, while providing depth, may introduce researcher subjectivity in data interpretation. Third, the study focuses primarily on victims' post-incident experiences without examining the perpetrators' perspectives or motivations, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of doxxing dynamics. Fourth, the temporal scope is limited, as the long-term psychological effects beyond the immediate recovery period were not extensively explored. Finally, this study was conducted within a specific cultural and legal context, which may limit the transferability of findings to other jurisdictions with different privacy laws and social norms.

Future research should address these limitations through several directions. First, longitudinal studies tracking doxxing victims over extended periods (1-3 years) would provide insights into long-term psychological recovery trajectories and sustained behavioral changes. Second, comparative studies across different cultural contexts could examine how societal norms and legal frameworks influence victim experiences and recovery processes. Third, quantitative research with larger sample sizes could validate the patterns identified in this study and establish statistical correlations between doxxing severity, social support levels, and recovery outcomes. Fourth, intervention studies evaluating the effectiveness of various support mechanisms—including professional counseling, peer support groups, and digital literacy programs—would provide evidence-based recommendations for victim assistance. Fifth, mixed-methods research incorporating perpetrator perspectives could illuminate the socio-psychological factors driving doxxing behavior, informing prevention strategies. Finally, interdisciplinary research integrating communication theory, clinical psychology, and legal studies could develop comprehensive frameworks for understanding, preventing, and responding to digital violence in evolving social media landscapes.

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