



The Dynamics of Unhealthy Friendships and Their Impact on Students' Mental Health: A Phenomenological Case Study at State Universities in Jember Regency

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the dynamics of unhealthy friendships and their impact on the mental health of students at state universities in Jember Regency. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research investigates students' subjective experiences in navigating interpersonal relationships characterized by manipulation, value suppression, and power imbalance. Data were collected through observation, documentation, in-depth interviews, and semi-structured questionnaires. The findings indicate that 78% of respondents have experienced unhealthy friendships, which significantly affect their psychological well-being, including increased stress, decreased self-confidence, sleep disturbances, diminished motivation to study, and reduced academic performance. These results underscore the need for systemic interventions by higher education institutions to raise student awareness regarding the risks of unhealthy friendships and to provide adequate psychosocial support. Recommendations include strengthening mentoring programs, peer counseling, and healthy communication education as preventive and responsive measures to foster a supportive campus social ecosystem that promotes student mental health.

Keywords: Mental health, state university students, unhealthy friendships.

1. Introduction

The university period represents a critical phase in an individual's life (Worsley, Harrison, & Corcoran, 2021), particularly in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. During this stage, students are not only confronted with academic demands but also with complex psychosocial challenges (Gull, Kaur, Abuhasan, Kandi, & Nair, 2025). One of the most significant aspects of student social life is friendship (Buote et al., 2007; Shields, 2024). While friendships often serve positive impact (Amati, Meggiolaro, Rivellini, & Zaccarin, 2018) as sources of emotional support and contribute to identity formation and psychological development (Wang et al., 2024), not all friendships have a positive impact. Some interpersonal relationships may take on unhealthy patterns, which in turn may disrupt students' mental well-being.

Unhealthy friendships, or can be called toxic friendships (Santoso & Khusumadewi, 2024) or negative friendships (Rahimah, Abidin, & Fadhila, 2022), can be defined as interpersonal interactions characterized by power imbalances, emotional manipulation, and other detrimental behaviors such as harassment, social exclusion, excessive control, and verbal abuse. In many cases, such friendships detrimental (Rahimah et al., 2022) that generate significant psychological stress (Kurkhuli & Archvadze, 2025), including heightened anxiety, symptoms of depression, and disruptions to social functioning and personality stability (Pasya, Wulandari, & Lixia, 2024). The adverse impacts of toxic relational dynamics of friendship underscore the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how these relationships develop and affect mental health among university students.

The urgency of this study lies in the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among university students, many of which remain undiagnosed or are not explicitly recognized as consequences of problematic social relationships, including unhealthy friendships. While prior research has largely focused on academic stress (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Córdova Olivera et al., 2023; Deng et al., 2022; Pérez-Jorge, Boutaba-Alehyan, González-Contreras, & Pérez-Pérez, 2025), family-related pressures (Deng et al., 2022; Xu, Shen, & Wang, 2023), or economics (Jones et al., 2023; Knapp & Wong, 2020) as major contributing factors, the specific role of unhealthy friendships remains underexplored, especially in non-metropolitan areas such as Jember Regency. This geographic context is particularly relevant, as local social and cultural dynamics may significantly influence both the formation of interpersonal relationships and students' perceptions of them.

This research adopts a phenomenological approach to explore and understand students' subjective experiences in navigating unhealthy friendships at state universities in Jember Regency. This approach enables the in-depth exploration of meanings that students assign to their experiences, as well as the psychological consequences arising from those relationships. In doing so, this study not only fills a gap in the academic literature but also provides context-specific data that may inform the development of social and psychological interventions grounded in students' lived experiences.

The primary aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of unhealthy friendships and their implications for students' mental health. The findings are expected to provide practical contributions in the form of increased student awareness regarding the importance of healthy social relationships and to support the development of preventive and responsive strategies to address unhealthy friendships in university settings. Moreover, this research seeks to serve as a valuable reference for university counselors, psychologists, and administrative

stakeholders in formulating mental health programs and policies that are more attuned to students' social realities.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences regarding unhealthy friendships. Data collection is conducted through various techniques, including observation, documentation, in-depth interviews, and semi-structured questionnaires. In-depth interviews serve as the primary method to explore students' personal experiences, while questionnaires complement the research by providing a broader quantitative perspective on the general characteristics and mental health impacts of unhealthy friendships.

Through a phenomenological lens, the research focuses on the subjective meanings constructed by participants concerning the dynamics of unhealthy friendships. Observation and documentation help researchers understand the social context underlying the phenomenon, while the combination of in-depth interviews and questionnaires enables a comprehensive analysis from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Thus, this study is expected to provide a holistic understanding of the effects of unhealthy friendships on students' mental well-being.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Responden Description

Table 1. Description of Research Respondents

No	Respondent Characteristics	Number (n = 100)	Percentage (%)
1	Gender		
	- Male	42	42%
	- Female	58	58%
2	Age		
	- 18-20 years old	30	30%
	- 21-22 years old	65	65%
	- ≥ 23 years old	5	5%
3	Field of Study		
	- Health Sciences	35	35%
	- Engineering/Computer Science	20	20%
	- Economics/Business	25	25%
	- Social Sciences/Humanities	20	20%
4	Academic Level		
	- Semester 2-4	40	40%
	- Semester 5-6	45	45%
	- Semester 7 and above	15	15%
5	Experienced Unhealthy Friendship	78	78%
6	Experienced Mild Mental Health Issues*	67	67%

Note: *Mild mental health issues are based on self-reported symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and decreased motivation; not clinically diagnosed.

Based on the demographic data of 100 participants in this phenomenological study, the majority of respondents were female (58%), while male participants constituted 42%. Most respondents were between 21 and 22 years old (65%), followed by those aged 18–20 years (30%), and a smaller group aged 23 years or older (5%). In terms of academic discipline, the respondents represented four major fields, with the highest proportion from health sciences (35%), followed by economics/business (25%), engineering/computer science (20%), and social sciences/humanities (20%). Regarding academic standing, the highest proportion of respondents were in semesters 5–6 (45%), followed by semesters 2–4 (40%), and a minority in semester 7 or higher (15%).

Substantively, the data reveal that 78% of the respondents had experienced unhealthy friendships, indicating a high prevalence of negative social dynamics among university students. Furthermore, 67% reported experiencing mild mental health issues, including symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and reduced motivation. Although these symptoms were self-reported and not clinically diagnosed, the high percentage underscores the potential linkage between dysfunctional peer relationships and student mental well-being. This finding provides a strong basis for further exploration of the psychosocial implications of unhealthy friendships in the academic lives of students at state universities in Jember Regency.

3.2 Survey on Unhealthy Friendships Among State University Students in Jember Regency

Table 2. Impacts of Unhealthy Friendships on Students

No	Impact of Unhealthy Friendships	(%)
1	Experienced manipulation by friends	78%
2	Experienced stress after interactions	65%
3	Decreased self-confidence	74%
4	Felt pressured to act against personal values	68%
5	Experienced social exclusion	63%
6	Decreased motivation to study and academic performance	71%

The findings of this study indicate that unhealthy friendships do indeed have a impact on students' mental health. While these results contrast with the findings of Esperansa et al. (2023), who reported that toxic friendships do not significantly affect students' mental well-being, This survey results is similar to the results of the study Muhiddin, Dewi, & Massinai (2023) and Fadhilla & Siregar (2024) which found that there is an influence between variables, toxic friendships, and students' psychological well-being.

Based on the questionnaire distributed to 100 students from three state universities in Jember Regency, the prevalence of unhealthy friendship experiences appears to be notably high. A total of 78% of respondents reported having experienced manipulation in their peer relationships, and 65% stated that they experienced increased stress following such interactions.

Moreover, 74% of the students indicated a decline in self-confidence due to unhealthy friendships. In addition, 68% reported feeling pressured to conform to peer expectations that conflicted with their personal values, while 63% felt socially excluded as a result of such relationships. Notably, 71% of respondents acknowledged that unhealthy friendships led to decreased motivation to study and a decline in academic performance. These findings underscore the adverse psychosocial and academic consequences that dysfunctional peer relationships can have on university students.

Unhealthy friendship is a prevalent phenomenon among university students (Wibowo, Kristyanti, Nugraha, Putri, & Abdillah, 2025). This form of friendship is often characterized by a lack of mutual support, imbalance in the relationship, and the presence of harmful dynamics. Students who are involved in such friendships may experience negative consequences for both their mental well-being and academic performance.

Findings from the study indicate that students enrolled in state universities within Jember Regency frequently encounter unhealthy friendships. Within these relationships, students often report feelings of discomfort, low self-confidence, and a diminished sense of self-efficacy. These conditions may arise from various contributing factors, including personality differences, divergent interests, and incompatible life goals.

One common manifestation of unhealthy friendship among students involves relationships rooted in self-interest. In such cases, individuals often perceive themselves as being exploited for others' benefit without receiving equitable reciprocation. This perception can significantly undermine their self-esteem and perceived competence. Another form of unhealthy friendship is based on domination and control, where one party consistently dictates decisions, thereby limiting the other's autonomy. Such dynamics often lead to feelings of restriction, discomfort, and disempowerment.

The study further reveals that students involved in unhealthy friendships exhibit higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to those who are not in such relationships. This aligns with findings by Zulfiana et al. (2023), which highlight that toxic (unhealthy) interpersonal relationships are detrimental not only to physical

health but also to mental well-being. These adverse effects may stem from external pressures, a lack of self-confidence, and feelings of inadequacy.

In addition to mental health challenges, students engaged in unhealthy friendships may also experience negative academic outcomes. They frequently report a lack of motivation to study, insufficient capacity to cope with academic challenges, and low confidence in their ability to achieve academic goals.

Therefore, it is essential for students to develop the ability to identify and address unhealthy friendships. A healthy friendship should be founded on mutual trust, respect, and autonomy. Students must also recognize their right to make independent decisions and to choose their social connections freely.

To cope with unhealthy friendships, students are encouraged to engage in self-reflection, understand both their own needs and those of others, and develop effective communication strategies. Furthermore, it is crucial for students to realize that they are not alone in dealing with such challenges. Various resources are available to support them, including peers, family members, and mental health professionals.

3.3. Factors Influencing Unhealthy Friendships Among University Students in Jember Regency

Unhealthy friendship is a prevalent phenomenon among university students. Such friendships are typically characterized by a lack of support, imbalance, and dysfunction. A variety of factors can contribute to the emergence of unhealthy friendships among students, which can be broadly categorized into internal and external factors.

Internal factors influencing unhealthy friendships include personality traits and unmet personal needs. Students with unstable personalities or unfulfilled emotional or psychological needs are more susceptible to forming unhealthy relationships. In addition, individuals with a strong need for attention and social validation may also be more vulnerable to becoming involved in detrimental friendships.

External factors encompass social and cultural environments. Students who are embedded in unsupportive social networks or exposed to unhealthy cultural norms are at higher risk of developing unhealthy friendships. Moreover, limited access to resources and information may further exacerbate this vulnerability, reducing students' ability to seek help or make informed decisions in social interactions.

Past experiences also play a significant role in shaping friendship patterns. Students with adverse childhood experiences or unresolved trauma may be predisposed to unhealthy relationship dynamics. Unrealistic expectations and idealized notions of friendship can similarly heighten the risk of entering dysfunctional social bonds.

Findings from the study indicate that students in higher education institutions within Jember Regency who exhibit unstable personality traits and unfulfilled personal needs are more likely to experience unhealthy friendships. Furthermore, those situated in socially unsupportive environments and with limited access to resources are also more prone to these negative relational patterns.

The factors influencing unhealthy friendships among university students vary depending on individual circumstances and contextual dynamics. Thus, it is essential for students to gain awareness of these contributing factors and develop strategies to mitigate their impact. Addressing unhealthy friendships requires self-awareness, understanding of others' needs and perspectives, and the ability to communicate personal boundaries and expectations effectively. Students must also recognize that they are not alone in confronting such issues, as various support systems – such as peers, family members, and mental health professionals – are available to assist them.

In conclusion, understanding the factors that contribute to unhealthy friendships and learning how to address them is critical for students' psychosocial development. With such awareness, students will be better equipped to navigate interpersonal challenges and enhance their overall quality of life.

3.4. The Impact of Unhealthy Friendships on the Mental Health of University Students in Jember Regency

Unhealthy friendships can have detrimental effects on the mental health of university students. Such relationships often lead to discomfort, low self-confidence, and feelings of inadequacy among students. These conditions may contribute to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Dewi, 2024).

Findings from this study indicate that students at state universities in Jember Regency who have experienced unhealthy friendships report higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to those who have not. Several contributing factors may underlie this condition, including peer pressure, lack of self-esteem, and a persistent sense of incompetence.

Unhealthy friendships also appear to negatively affect students' sleep quality. Those involved in such relationships are more likely to experience difficulties falling asleep, insomnia, and other sleep disturbances, which are often linked to elevated stress and anxiety levels.

Furthermore, academic performance may be compromised as a result of unhealthy friendships. Students who experience toxic peer interactions often struggle with understanding course materials, attending lectures regularly, and completing academic tasks. These academic challenges are typically associated with the

psychological distress they endure (Agormedah, Britwum, Amoah, Adjei, & Kusi-Appiah, 2024).

Empirical data suggest that students experiencing unhealthy friendships tend to exhibit lower academic performance than their peers (Fadhilla & Siregar, 2024). The underlying causes are believed to stem from chronic stress and emotional strain, which hinder cognitive functioning and academic engagement.

In addition to academic and psychological outcomes, unhealthy friendships also affect students' overall quality of life. Individuals in such relationships may find it difficult to understand themselves, develop social skills, or form healthy interpersonal connections. These difficulties are often exacerbated by ongoing psychological distress.

To address unhealthy friendships, students must develop self-awareness, understand the needs and expectations of others, and learn effective communication strategies. It is also essential for them to recognize that they are not alone in facing such challenges; various support systems are available, including peers, family members, and mental health professionals.

In conclusion, it is crucial for students to recognize the adverse effects of unhealthy friendships on their mental health. Taking proactive steps to manage these relationships can significantly improve their overall well-being. In the long term, addressing unhealthy friendships can lead to better mental health outcomes, enhanced academic performance, and improved quality of life. Thus, raising awareness and providing appropriate support for students is essential in mitigating the negative impacts of unhealthy peer relationships.

3.5. Efforts to Address University Students' Mental Health Issues Caused by Unhealthy Friendships in Jember Regency

Table 3. Strategies for Addressing Mental Health Issues Among University Students Caused by Unhealthy Friendships

No	Strategy	Description
1	Self-awareness and recognition of unhealthy friendships	Students must understand themselves and recognize the signs of unhealthy friendships, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression.
2	Building a strong support network	Establishing relationships with friends, family, and mental health professionals can provide emotional support and a sense of security.
3	Practicing effective stress management	Activities such as meditation, yoga, and physical exercise help in reducing stress and promoting psychological resilience.
4	Understanding they are not alone	Realizing that others may face similar unhealthy situations can reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen students' confidence.

5	Practicing effective communication	Clear, open, and respectful communication helps students address difficult interpersonal situations in a healthy and constructive manner.
6	Recognizing the need for time and effort	Acknowledging that overcoming unhealthy relationships is a gradual process fosters patience and persistence in rebuilding mental well-being.

Table 3 outlines six strategic efforts aimed at addressing mental health challenges experienced by university students due to unhealthy friendships. These strategies emphasize the importance of self-awareness, social support, and psychological resilience. Recognizing the signs of toxic friendships enables students to protect their emotional well-being early on, while building a strong support network – consisting of friends, family, and mental health professionals – provides a foundation for coping with distress. Moreover, effective stress management practices, such as mindfulness, physical activity, and relaxation techniques, are essential for maintaining emotional stability in the face of interpersonal conflict.

Equally important is the recognition that such experiences are not unique, which helps reduce social isolation and fosters a sense of solidarity. Practicing open and respectful communication empowers students to assert boundaries and manage unhealthy interactions constructively. Lastly, the understanding that recovery from the psychological effects of unhealthy friendships is a gradual and ongoing process encourages patience and long-term commitment. Together, these strategies form a holistic framework for strengthening students' mental health and enhancing their capacity to navigate complex social environments within the academic setting.

Addressing mental health concerns stemming from unhealthy friendships demands a multi-faceted and long-term commitment. Students should be encouraged to develop self-awareness, cultivate strong support systems, engage in effective stress-reduction practices, recognize shared experiences, communicate constructively, and remain committed to a gradual process of healing and personal growth.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that unhealthy friendships are a prevalent phenomenon among students at state universities in Jember Regency, with 78% of respondents reporting having experienced them. Manipulative, value-suppressing, and imbalanced friendships were found to negatively impact students' mental health, including increased stress, diminished self-confidence, and reduced motivation to study. Furthermore, unhealthy friendships also contributed to declining academic performance and overall quality of life, as evidenced by the prevalence of symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, and difficulties in forming healthy social relationships.

Systematic efforts by educational institutions are needed to raise student awareness about the signs of unhealthy friendships and their mental health consequences. Students should be equipped with self-reflection skills, healthy communication techniques, and easy access to psychological support services. Additionally, universities should foster a supportive social ecosystem through mentoring programs, peer counseling, and psychosocial education to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of detrimental friendships. This approach is believed to enhance students' psychological resilience and long-term quality of life.

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