

The Effect of Friendship Quality towards the Mental Health of Indonesian Migrant Students

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the influence of friendship quality on the mental health of overseas students through a qualitative approach. Migrant students often face significant emotional and social challenges due to separation from family and friends. Good friendship quality is expected to provide important emotional support in coping with stress and loneliness. This study involved in-depth interviews with 10 overseas students from various universities in Indonesia, who were purposively selected to obtain diverse perspectives. The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and emerging themes related to friendship experiences and their impact on mental health. The results showed that overseas students who have quality friendships tend to feel more connected, have better emotional support, and experience lower levels of anxiety. In addition, factors such as trust, open communication, and common interests are important elements in building friendship quality. This study suggests that overseas students should be active in building positive social relationships and educational institutions should provide programs that support social interaction. The findings are expected to provide insights for students, educators, and policy makers in an effort to improve the mental health of overseas students.

Keywords: Friendship Quality, Mental Health, Migrant Students, Qualitative Approach, Emotional Support

1. Introduction

Overseas students are those who pursue higher education outside their original region, typically in a different country or city (Aurel et al., 2023; Katuuk et al., 2023). In order to obtain a better education, they leave behind their family environment and old friends, which often brings its own set of challenges. Feelings of loneliness, academic pressure, and difficulties in adaptation are common issues faced by overseas students. Friendship becomes one of the key components in this context that can influence their well-being.

Friendship plays a very important role in the lives of students, especially for those who are studying away from home. Good social relationships can provide emotional support, help reduce stress, and enhance a sense of connection. High-quality friendships can create a strong support network, which is crucial for overseas students in facing various academic and social challenges. Additionally, friendships can contribute to the development of social skills and boost self-confidence, both of which are essential for adapting to a new environment.

Research shows that good-quality friendships are positively associated with mental health. Students with strong social relationships tend to experience lower levels of anxiety and depression (Suharweny & Pratisti, 2022). Conversely, students who feel isolated or have poor social relationships are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues (Alshammari et al., 2023). Therefore, it is



important to understand how the quality of friendships can influence the mental health of overseas students, who often face unique challenges in building social relationships in a new environment.

This study aims to examine the influence of friendship quality on the mental health of overseas students. The main questions addressed are: how does friendship quality affect the mental health of overseas students, what factors within friendship quality have the most significant impact on mental health, and how do differences in friendship quality affect the mental health of overseas students from different social backgrounds?

This study is conducted to identify the influence of friendship quality on the mental health of overseas students. Additionally, it aims to explore the factors that most significantly shape friendship quality and to analyze the differences in the impact of friendship quality on mental health based on the social backgrounds of overseas students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Friendship Quality

2.1.1. Definition and Dimensions of Friendship Quality

Overseas students are individuals who pursue higher education outside their home region, often in a different city or country. They leave behind their family environment and old friends to pursue better educational opportunities, which often brings its own set of challenges. This process of relocation involves not only physical changes but also significant social and emotional adjustments. Overseas students frequently need to adapt to a new environment, different cultures, and unfamiliar lifestyles, all of which can impact their mental well-being.

In the context of education, overseas students often face various challenges, including high academic pressure, difficulties in building social networks, and feelings of loneliness. They may feel alienated from friends and family back home, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation (Thoits, 2011). Therefore, the quality of friendships becomes crucial for overseas students, as strong social relationships can provide emotional support and help them cope with the stress they encounter during their studies (Juli & Sulistyowati, 2023).

High-quality friendships can contribute to better mental health for overseas students. Strong and supportive friendships can help them feel more connected and reduce feelings of loneliness. By building positive relationships, overseas students can enhance their psychological well-being, which is essential for facing academic and social challenges in a new environment. Thus, understanding the dynamics of friendships among overseas students is key to supporting their mental health during their studies.

2.1.2. Factors Influencing Friendship Quality

Several factors can influence the quality of friendships, including:

- a) **Campus Social Environment:** The social environment on campus, including its culture and atmosphere, significantly impacts students' ability to build relationships. Campuses that encourage social interaction through spaces for gatherings, student organizations, and extracurricular activities can facilitate better friendships.
- b) **Extracurricular Activities:** Participation in extracurricular activities, such as clubs, organizations, or sports teams, provides opportunities to meet and interact with other students. These activities not only help overseas students build social networks but also allow them to share common interests and experiences.

- c) Support from Lecturer and Staff: Caring and supportive lecturers and staff play a crucial role in helping overseas students feel accepted in the campus environment. This support can include academic guidance, career advice, or simply showing concern for students' well-being.
- d) Openness and Diversity: Campuses that promote openness and value cultural, ethnic, and social diversity create a more inclusive environment. This allows overseas students to feel more comfortable building relationships with new peers, thereby enhancing the quality of their friendships.
- e) Frequency of Social Interaction: The frequency of interaction with classmates and other students is vital. Students who actively engage in social interactions, both inside and outside the classroom, tend to build stronger relationships. Activities such as group study sessions, attending social events, or simply gathering at campus cafes can increase the frequency of interaction.

2.2. Mental Health

2.2.1. Definition of Mental Health

Mental health refers to a state of psychological well-being that includes an individual's ability to manage stress, function effectively in daily life, and contribute to their community. Mental health is not merely the absence of mental disorders but also encompasses positive aspects of emotional and psychological well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), good mental health enables individuals to better cope with life's challenges, adapt to changes, and overcome difficulties that may arise in daily life.

Good mental health also plays a vital role in building healthy relationships with others. Individuals with good mental health are more likely to interact positively with friends, family, and colleagues (Bartley et al., 1998). They can manage their emotions more effectively, communicate clearly, and show empathy toward others. This not only improves the quality of social relationships but also contributes to a sense of connection and social support, which is crucial for individual well-being.

Moreover, good mental health enables individuals to reach their full potential. When someone is emotionally and psychologically balanced, they are better equipped to pursue personal and professional goals and contribute positively to society. Therefore, it is important to understand that mental health is not just about avoiding disorders but also about developing skills and strategies that support overall well-being. For students, especially overseas students, maintaining mental health is crucial for facing the academic and social challenges they encounter in a new environment.

2.2.2. Factors Influencing Students' Mental Health on Campus

- a) Academic Pressure: Students often face pressure to achieve high academic performance. Piling assignments, exams, and the demand to maintain a high GPA can lead to stress and anxiety, negatively impacting mental health.
- b) Social Isolation: Overseas students may feel isolated from friends and family back home, leading to feelings of loneliness. This social isolation can worsen mental health, especially if they struggle to build new relationships on campus.
- c) Physical Health: Poor physical health such as lack of sleep, unhealthy eating habits, and insufficient physical activity, can negatively affect mental health. Students who neglect their physical health may be more vulnerable to mental health issues.
- d) Social Support: The availability of social support from friends, family, and educational institutions is crucial for mental health. Students with strong support networks are better equipped to handle stress and challenges.

- e) Community Involvement: Engagement in campus communities, such as participation in student organizations or volunteer activities, can enhance a sense of connection and reduce feelings of loneliness. These activities also provide opportunities to build deeper relationships with others.

2.3. Relationship Between Friendship Quality and Mental Health

2.3.1. Previous Research

Research by Kahn & Antonucci (1980) confirms that high-quality friendships contribute to better mental health, particularly among students. They found that students with strong and supportive social relationships tend to have lower levels of anxiety and depression. Additionally, research by Taylor et al. (2004) shows that social support from friends can act as a buffer against stress, helping individuals cope with challenges in daily life.

Another study by Segrin (2000) indicates that individuals with high-quality friendships experience higher life satisfaction and fewer mental health issues. These findings suggest that friendship quality not only directly impacts mental health but also influences other aspects of life, such as life satisfaction and overall well-being.

2.3.2. Relevant Theories

Several theories can explain the relationship between friendship quality and mental health, including:

- a) Social Support Theory: This theory posits that social support from friends and family helps individuals cope with stress and life challenges. Strong social support provides a sense of security, enhances feelings of connection, and reduces loneliness. Research shows that individuals with robust social support networks tend to have better mental health (Kort-Butler, 2018).
- b) Attachment Theory: Developed by Bowlby (1969), this theory explains how early relationships with caregivers influence social relationships in adulthood. High-quality friendships can create positive attachment experiences, contributing to better mental health. Individuals with positive social experiences are more likely to build healthy and supportive relationships in the future.
- c) Subjective Well-Being Theory: This theory emphasizes the importance of individuals' perceptions of their own well-being. High-quality friendships can enhance subjective well-being, which in turn contributes to better mental health. Individuals who feel satisfied with their social relationships tend to have a more positive outlook on life and are better equipped to handle stress (Diener, 1984).
- d) Resilience Theory: This theory explains how individuals can overcome difficulties and life challenges with support from their social environment. High-quality friendships can enhance resilience, helping individuals cope with stress and reducing the risk of mental health issues (Van Breda, 2001).

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

3.1.1. Qualitative Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the influence of friendship quality on the mental health of overseas students. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives (Sugiyono, 2022). This approach enables the researcher to delve into the nuances and complexities of social relationships and their impact on mental health, which cannot be measured quantitatively. It

also provides participants with the freedom to share their stories and experiences openly, resulting in rich and informative data.

3.1.2. Data Collection Method (In-Depth Interviews)

The data collection method used in this study is in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to obtain detailed and comprehensive information about the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of overseas students regarding the quality of their friendships and their mental health. Through interviews, the researcher can explore unexpected topics and gain broader insights into how friendships influence their mental health.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Participant Selection Criteria (Migrant Students)

The participants in this study are overseas students pursuing education at universities outside their home regions. The selection criteria include students who have lived on campus for at least one semester, ensuring they have sufficient experience to share about friendships and mental health. Additionally, participants are expected to have diverse backgrounds, including differences in majors, ages, and regions of origin, to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

3.2.2. Number of Participants and Backgrounds

This study involves 10 overseas students as participants. This number is considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, where the information obtained begins to repeat and no longer provides new insights. The participants consist of students from various majors, such as social sciences, engineering, and health, as well as from different regions in Indonesia. This diversity is expected to provide a broader picture of the experiences of friendship and mental health among overseas students.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

3.3.1. Interview Technique

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms, such as Zoom, depending on the comfort and preference of the participants. Some participants chose to conduct interviews in person, while others preferred using Zoom for convenience or practical reasons. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, with the researcher acting as a facilitator guiding the discussion. The researcher created a comfortable and open atmosphere, allowing participants to freely share their experiences and perspectives. Open-ended questions were used, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences in depth. This approach allowed the researcher to collect rich and varied data, reflecting the different perspectives of each participant, whether interviewed in person or via Zoom.

3.3.2. Use of Interview Guide

An interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure that all important topics related to friendship quality and mental health were covered. The guide included main questions and relevant sub-questions but allowed flexibility for the researcher to explore emerging topics during the interview. By using the interview guide, the researcher could maintain focus while remaining open to new information that might arise from the participants.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Thematic Analysis Method

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The researcher thoroughly read the interview transcripts to understand the context and meaning behind each statement. Through thematic analysis, the researcher grouped relevant information and identified key themes emerging from the participants' experiences.

3.4.2. Coding Process and Theme Identification

After identifying the themes, the researcher conducted further analysis to understand the meaning behind each theme. This process involved reviewing the interview transcripts to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives. The researcher also looked for patterns or relationships between the emerging themes and considered the social and cultural contexts that might influence the experiences of overseas students. In this way, the analysis focused not only on what the participants said but also on how and why they said it.

The results of the thematic analysis were presented in narrative form, describing the experiences of overseas students regarding the quality of their friendships and their mental health. The researcher included direct quotes from the interviews to provide strong illustrations of the identified themes, allowing readers to understand the context and nuances of the shared experiences. Additionally, the researcher discussed the implications of these findings in a broader context, including how friendship quality can contribute to the mental health of overseas students and recommendations for enhancing social support in the campus environment.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Participant Description

This study involved 10 overseas students from various regions in Indonesia who are pursuing education at different universities across the country. Among the 10 participants, 6 were female and 4 were male. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23 years, with the majority being between 20 and 22 years old. The participants came from various majors, including social sciences, engineering, and health, providing diverse perspectives on friendship experiences and mental health. Most participants had lived in Yogyakarta for more than one semester, giving them sufficient experience to share about the challenges and benefits they faced as overseas students. With this diverse background, the voices of the overseas students represented in this study are expected to provide deep insights into the dynamics of friendship and mental health among them.

4.2. Key Findings

4.2.1. The Influence of Friendship Quality on Mental Health

The results of the study indicate that friendship quality has a significant impact on the mental health of overseas students. Students with strong and supportive social relationships tend to experience lower levels of anxiety and depression. Conversely, those who feel isolated or have poor-quality friendships reported higher levels of stress and loneliness. These findings align with previous research showing that social support can act as a buffer against stress.

4.2.2. Factors in Friendship Quality That Influence Mental Health

Several factors in friendship quality identified as influential in this study include emotional support, trust, and frequency of interaction. Participants who felt strong emotional support from their friends reported feeling more capable of handling academic and social challenges. Trust in friendships was also an important factor, as participants felt safe sharing their feelings and experiences. Additionally, a high frequency of interaction among friends contributed to strengthening social bonds and enhancing a sense of connection.

4.2.3. Differences in Influence Based on Social Background

This study also found differences in the influence of friendship quality on mental health based on participants' social backgrounds. Students from more diverse social backgrounds, such as those with cultural and economic differences, reported varying experiences in building friendships. Some participants from more homogeneous backgrounds found it easier to adapt and build relationships, while those from more diverse backgrounds faced challenges in adjusting to cultural differences. This suggests that social context can influence friendship dynamics and their impact on mental health.

4.3. Interview Results from Overseas Students

To support the research findings, here are some quotes from participants reflecting their experiences regarding friendship quality and mental health:

- a) Amel from STIA "AAN" Yogyakarta: "During my first and second semesters, I was in a toxic environment on campus, which made my mental health deteriorate. However, when I started having friends who always supported me, I felt calmer. They helped me get through tough times, especially during exams. Without them, I might have felt extremely stressed."
- b) Laras from STIA "AAN" Yogyakarta: "I felt uncomfortable when I first moved to Jogja for college. I didn't feel like I fit in with my peers because of the age gap (I took a 2-year gap year), which made me lonely as I was afraid to talk to others. It started with my freshman group, where I was eventually approached by a groupmate. I realized that we are all here to learn, and nothing else should matter. With that mindset, I began making friends with other students. I also joined campus organizations and committees. Having friends reduced my homesickness, lack of confidence, and feelings of not being accepted."
- c) Putri Wulandari from Tjut Nyak Dhien University: "Being an overseas student is a challenging yet rewarding experience. I had to be independent in everything, from managing finances to taking care of daily needs and maintaining mental health. At first, it was tough being away from family and familiar surroundings, but I gradually learned to adapt. I made my new environment comfortable by building good relationships with friends in my new city."
- d) Ifa from Indonesia University: "The support from my friends means a lot. When I face personal issues, they are always there to listen. I don't feel alone, and that helps me stay positive."
- e) Nindiya from Nusa Megarkencana University: "In my third semester, I decided to join a campus organization. At first, I was scared, but it turned out to be less intimidating than I thought. In the organization, I gained a lot of knowledge and was surrounded by supportive friends. I feel happy being around good people."
- f) Rina from Malikussaleh University: "I felt lonely when I first moved to Aceh. To cope, I joined committee activities and made friends on campus to avoid falling ill due to loneliness. Having friends reduced my homesickness, and I found people with similar talents by joining a student organization."

- g) Andi from Gadjah Mada University: "I felt very lonely at first, but after joining a student organization, I found friends with similar interests. That made me feel more connected and happier."
- h) Riski from Ahmad Dahlan University: "I once had a conflict with a friend, and it caused me a lot of stress. However, after we talked and resolved the issue, our relationship became stronger. I learned that open communication is key to maintaining friendships."
- i) Bintang from Muhammadiyah Surakarta University: "I feel very lonely during major holidays like Eid al-Adha and New Year because my friends return to their hometowns, and I stay alone in my boarding house."
- j) Imam from Syiah Kuala University: "I went through tough times during my final exams. My friends were always there to study together and offer encouragement. Their support helped me stay focused and less stressed."

These quotes affirm that positive friendship experiences can provide significant emotional support for overseas students. Support from friends not only helps them cope with academic stress but also enhances a sense of connection and life satisfaction. Additionally, the experience of adapting to different social backgrounds shows that openness and good communication among friends can strengthen relationships and create a positive environment.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of friendship quality in supporting the mental health of overseas students. By understanding the factors that influence friendship quality, educational institutions can design programs that promote positive social interactions and help overseas students feel more connected and supported. This study also provides insights for students to actively seek and build high-quality relationships, which can ultimately enhance their mental well-being during their studies in a new environment.

4.4. Discussion

4.4.1. The Link Between Friendship Quality and Mental Health

The results of the study show a significant link between friendship quality and the mental health of overseas students. Students with strong and supportive social relationships tend to experience lower levels of anxiety and depression. Emotional support from friends plays a crucial role in helping students cope with academic stress and social challenges. High-quality friendships, characterized by trust, open communication, and emotional support, can enhance a sense of connection and life satisfaction, thereby contributing to better mental health. These findings align with social support theory, which states that positive social relationships can act as a buffer against stress and improve psychological well-being.

4.4.2. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research indicating that friendship quality positively influences mental health. For example, Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) found that individuals with strong social relationships have a lower risk of experiencing mental health issues. Additionally, Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2014) showed that social support can reduce the negative effects of stress. This study adds to the evidence that high-quality friendships are crucial for overseas students, who often face challenges in adapting to new environments and building social networks.

4.5. Research Implementation

4.5.1. For Overseas Students

This study provides important insights for overseas students on the importance of building high-quality friendships. Students are encouraged to actively seek and establish positive social relationships through student organizations, extracurricular activities, and daily interactions. By building a strong support network, students can improve their mental health and reduce feelings of loneliness and stress. Additionally, students should recognize the importance of good communication in maintaining healthy and supportive friendships.

4.5.2. For Educational Institutions

The findings of this study also have implications for educational institutions. Universities and other educational bodies should develop programs that support social interactions among students, such as orientation activities, study groups, and social events. By creating a supportive environment, institutions can help overseas students feel more connected and reduce feelings of isolation. Furthermore, institutions should provide easy access to mental health services to help students cope with issues arising from academic and social pressures.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the quality of friendship has a significant influence on the mental health of overseas students. Students who have friends who support and help each other tend to feel calmer and less stressed. Factors such as emotional support, mutual trust, and frequency of interaction play an important role in building quality friendships. In addition, students' social background also affects the way they build friendships and their impact on mental health. These findings emphasize the importance of having good friendships for migrant students so that they can feel happier and mentally healthier.

To improve the quality of friendships among overseas students, it is recommended that students be actively involved in social activities and organizations on campus. Joining study groups, clubs, or communities that match interests can help students find friends who have something in common. In addition, it is important for students to develop good communication skills in order to build stronger and more supportive relationships. Increasing the frequency of interaction, both in person and through online platforms, can also strengthen the social bonds between them.

On the other hand, educational institutions should develop mental health support programs specifically for overseas students. This program can include counseling services, workshops on stress management, and activities that facilitate social interaction. Providing a space or forum for students to share their experiences and challenges can help create a sense of connectedness and support. With these measures, it is hoped that overseas students can feel more supported and connected, which in turn can improve their mental health and well-being during their study period in a new environment.

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