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THE IMPACT OF FRIENDSHIP CIRCLES ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC COMPETENCE IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF UNIVERSITAS BORNEO TARAKAN

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ABSTRAK

Hubungan persahabatan di kalangan mahasiswa berkontribusi signifikan terhadap pertumbuhan akademik dan psikologis mereka. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi siswa tentang hubungan persahabatan dan dampaknya terhadap kompetensi akademik mereka. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Data diperoleh dari 40 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Borneo Tarakan. Instrumen penelitian adalah kuesioner terbuka, didukung oleh wawancara langsung dengan enam siswa untuk mendapatkan data lebih lanjut. Hasil analisis tematik menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar siswa menafsirkan persahabatan sebagai hubungan emosional yang dibangun atas dasar kenyamanan, kepercayaan timbal balik, dan dukungan bersama. Faktor-faktor seperti karakter pribadi, keterampilan komunikasi, dan pengalaman bersama dalam mengatasi tantangan adalah kunci untuk membentuk persahabatan yang kuat. Koneksi emosional dalam persahabatan dipahami sebagai harmoni dan kohesi yang tumbuh secara alami melalui interaksi yang intens dan perspektif yang sama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa persahabatan yang mendukung dapat meningkatkan motivasi belajar dan kepercayaan diri serta meningkatkan kompetensi akademik, sementara hubungan negatif cenderung menjadi sumber gangguan. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya membangun interaksi sosial yang sehat di antara siswa sebagai salah satu dukungan utama untuk keberhasilan akademik. Hasil penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan strategi untuk membina hubungan sosial di pendidikan tinggi.

Kata kunci: interaksi social, kompetensi akademik, persahabatan.

ABSTRACT

Friendship relations among university students significantly contribute to their academic and psychological growth. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of friendship relationships and the impact on their academic competences. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were obtained from 40 students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Borneo Tarakan. The research instrument was an open-ended questionnaire, supported by interviews with six students directly to obtain further data. The results of thematic analysis indicated that most students interpreted friendship as an emotional relationship built on the basis of comfort, mutual trust, and mutual support. Factors such as personal character, communication skills, and shared experiences in overcoming challenges were key to forming strong friendships. Chemistry in friendship is understood as harmony and cohesiveness that grows naturally through intense interaction and shared perspectives. The results showed that supportive friendships can increase learning motivation and self-confidence and improve academic competence, while negative relationships tend to be a source of distraction. This research emphasized the importance of building healthy social interactions among students as one of the main supports for academic success. The results of this study contribute to the development of strategies for fostering social relationships in higher education.

***Keywords**: academic competence, friendship, social interaction.*

INTRODUCTION

Friendship networks play a central role in university students' academic and psychological development. While previous research consistently demonstrates that peer

interactions can shape academic outcomes (Rachmawati, Nurlaili, & Dewi, 2024; Zharya, Wolor, & Swaramarinda, 2025), much of this work highlights broad associations rather than examining the nuanced interpersonal dynamics within friendship circles. Studies show that peers influence students through shared norms, emotional support, and behavioral modeling (Javaid et al., 2025), and these influences may either strengthen or undermine academic motivation depending on the quality of the relationship.

Scholars further note that friendships shape students' attitudes, self-beliefs, and learning behaviors. For example, Bankole (2019) and Black et al. (2024) emphasize the dual mechanisms of peer selection and peer influence, showing that students' academic trajectories often mirror those of their closest peers. Interventions that strengthen positive peer interactions, such as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), are shown to enhance both social functioning and academic outcomes.

More recently, studies have introduced the idea of friendship chemistry, referring to emotional compatibility, trust, and psychological harmony among friends (Campbell & Holderness, 2015). Such emotional synchrony is associated with lower academic anxiety and greater engagement (Pulgar et al., 2022), aligning with the Self-System Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD), which argues that supportive social relationships foster competence and motivation (Shao et al., 2024). Despite these insights, few studies explore how friendship chemistry directly interacts with academic competence in Indonesian higher education, particularly within the context of English Department students.

This study argues that interpersonal and emotional aspects of friendship—such as chemistry, trust, reciprocity, and social influence—may significantly shape students' academic competence. Yet empirical evidence in this specific context remains limited. Therefore, a clearer understanding of how students' friendship circles support or hinder academic competence is needed.

This study investigates how friendship circles influence academic competence among students of the English Department at Universitas Borneo Tarakan. Specifically, it examines how emotional connection, social support, pressure, and interpersonal compatibility operate within friendship groups and how these factors contribute to or detract from students' academic development.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how friendship circles influence students' academic competence within the English Education Department. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, meanings, and interpersonal dynamics—elements that cannot be captured through numerical measures alone.

Although 40 students completed open-ended questionnaires, the primary qualitative focus was expanded through purposive sampling. This sampling technique ensured that participants who had rich, relevant experiences with peer relationships were included—aligning better with qualitative inquiry than random sampling. From the broader pool, six students were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to provide deeper insight into interpersonal dynamics and academic experiences.

Data were collected through paragraph-style open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire items drew on indicators from Țepordei et al. (2023) and Campbell & Holderness (2015), covering emotional engagement, perceived social support, interpersonal compatibility, and self-evaluation in learning contexts. Instruments were reviewed through expert content validation, and ethical procedures—including informed consent and confidentiality—were followed.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The procedure involved familiarization with all responses through repeated reading, initial coding of key phrases (e.g., "emotional support," "compatibility," "pressure," "study motivation"), clustering codes into preliminary themes, reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence, defining final themes linked to friendship dynamics and academic competence.

Themes were checked through peer debriefing and researcher reflexivity. Coding

was conducted manually, supplemented by a reflexive journal to minimize bias and maintain transparency in analytic decisions. A thematic recapitulation table summarized emerging themes and their frequency to show dominant patterns.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of friendship relationships and their effects on academic competence. Thematic analysis was employed, focusing on several categories: the definition of friendship relationships, the factors that contribute to these relationships, the significance of chemistry, the process of establishing a friendship system, and the impact of friendship relationships on academic competence.

Friendship as Emotional Bonding

The results revealed that most students described a friendship relationship as an emotional connection between two or more individuals. This concept appeared 21 times in the data and became the dominant category. Meanwhile, 8 students described friendship as a mutually reinforcing connection, while 6 described it as mutually helpful. One participant shared: "Friendship for me is emotional comfort. If I feel safe and accepted, it helps me to focus on my studies because I don't carry emotional burdens alone."

The emotional component—such as a sense of comfort, mutual understanding, and inner connectedness—was considered the foundation of genuine friendship. This finding supports the notion that friendship is not merely a social construct but a deeply affective bond that nurtures belonging and emotional wellbeing (Bukowski, Laursen, & Rubin, 2019). Similarly, Rachmawati, Nurlaili, and Dewi (2024) found that emotional closeness and trust among peers significantly enhance academic motivation and self-efficacy, indicating that affective ties form the basis for productive peer collaboration. In the Indonesian context, Putri and Nursanti (2025) emphasized that emotional peer support improves academic resilience among migrant students in Jakarta, helping them adapt to new learning environments.

Interestingly, a number of students also defined friendship as a mutually beneficial and mutually influential relationship. This reflects the reciprocal dimension of friendship, where social exchange and emotional investment create interdependence. Such reciprocity aligns with the social exchange theory, which posits that individuals maintain relationships that are emotionally rewarding and equitable (Homans, 1961). In summary, students' understanding of friendship emphasizes emotional security and reciprocity—both of which contribute to stronger interpersonal and academic connections.

Friendship Formation Factors

The data show that friendship formation among students is influenced by three main aspects: personal characteristics, individual abilities, and emotional bonds. Attributes such as openness, humor, and supportiveness often initiate friendships, while empathy and communication skills are crucial in maintaining them. As one participant noted: "I become close to people who communicate openly and can understand my feelings. It helps us support each other academically."

This aligns with Rokhmawati and Widodo (2023), who found that emotional intelligence and communication skills significantly predict friendship quality among university students. Likewise, Bekay Zharya, Wolor, and Swaramarinda (2025) demonstrated that a positive peer social environment—marked by empathy and effective communication—enhances students' learning strategies and academic achievement. These findings echo Durlak et al. (2020), who noted that social-emotional competence plays a central role in fostering positive peer relationships and academic engagement. Therefore, developing interpersonal and emotional skills is essential not only for personal adjustment but also for building supportive academic networks within friendship circles.

Friendship Chemistry

The concept of chemistry emerged as a significant theme in this study. Students described chemistry as cohesiveness, harmony, compatibility, and mutual trust within a friendship group. They viewed chemistry as a natural feeling that arises from continuous interaction and shared experiences. One participant stated: "Chemistry means that

we ‘click’ without trying. It makes studying together more effective because we understand each other’s personalities.”

In psychological terms, this corresponds to interpersonal synchrony, defined as the alignment of emotions, behaviors, and rhythms between individuals (Manson & Bryant, 2021). This harmony fosters emotional comfort and cooperation within learning environments. For instance, Yahya, Rahmania, and Tadjuddin (2022) found that emotional closeness among peers in mathematics classes improved students’ achievement motivation and learning outcomes. Similarly, Rachmawati et al. (2024) confirmed that harmonious peer relationships foster academic engagement and higher performance.

Overall, the chemistry among friends can be seen as the affective glue that sustains friendship groups, allowing members to collaborate effectively in both social and academic contexts.

The Formation of Friendship System

Based on the data obtained, respondents identified friendship forming factors as personality and individual abilities, such as empathy, humor, and communication skills. Some of the respondents mentioned that characters such as friendly, supportive, and open are the initial attraction in building strong social relationships. One student reflected: “We built our group slowly. Everyone contributes something—some are good at grammar, others at speaking. We complete each other.”

It means the process of friendship system formation is characterized by consistent interaction, mutual trust, and complementarity—where individuals balance each other’s strengths and weaknesses. In a similar context, Hidayat and Setiawan (2023) found that trust and reciprocal communication are fundamental in maintaining long-term peer relationships among Indonesian university students. Likewise, Saefullah (2024) discovered that peer motivation and social support positively influence students’ persistence in learning Islamic education, suggesting that stable and trusting friendships reinforce academic engagement. Thus, the friendship system can be understood as a dynamic and evolving structure, shaped by mutual contribution and sustained emotional investment.

Positive and Negative Influences of Friendship on Academic Competence

Most respondents agreed that friendship relationships have a positive influence on academic competence. Supportive peers provide encouragement, share study materials, and offer emotional assistance that boosts motivation and persistence. These results align with Rachmawati et al. (2024), who demonstrated that strong peer connections promote academic self-efficacy, which in turn enhances performance. Similarly, Bekay Zharya et al. (2025) found that a positive peer social environment improved learning strategies and overall academic achievement.

However, some students also reported negative effects of friendship, including distraction and decreased concentration. Several students acknowledged negative influences: “Sometimes we hang out too much. It distracts me from studying”; “If my friends are not serious, it reduces my motivation too.”

This duality reflects the twofold nature of peer influence, as noted by Arum and Cheung (2022), where peers can either facilitate or impede academic growth depending on the behavioral norms within the group. In Indonesia, Fitriani (2024) showed that supportive peer relationships enhance mathematics performance, while Siswanto and Rosa (2023) found that negative peer influence reduces learning interest and creativity in accounting courses. Therefore, fostering healthy and academically oriented friendships is crucial for students to maintain motivation and achieve success. Educators should encourage collaborative learning environments where positive peer interactions can flourish.

The findings of this study indicate that friendship circles among university students serve as both emotional and cognitive ecosystems that shape academic competence. Emotional connection and trust form the base of friendship, while communication, empathy, and shared goals sustain it. When friendships are positive, they enhance students’ confidence, motivation, and learning engagement. Conversely, negative friendships

can act as distractions and barriers to academic success.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that friendship circles significantly shape students' academic competence by providing emotional support, motivational encouragement, and collaborative learning opportunities. Friendship chemistry—marked by compatibility, trust, and harmonious interaction—emerges as a key factor strengthening students' engagement and confidence. These findings extend current understanding by highlighting how interpersonal and emotional dimensions of friendship contribute to academic competence in Indonesian higher education, specifically within an English Department context. Educators and universities can harness these insights by promoting peer mentoring and collaborative learning groups, integrating SEL-based activities to enhance emotional and interpersonal skills, designing classroom environments that encourage supportive peer interactions.

This study is limited to one department and relies on qualitative self-reports. Future research should include a broader range of faculties, incorporate mixed-methods approaches, explore how friendship chemistry interacts with academic identity and motivation longitudinally. Viewed through frameworks such as SSMMD and Social Emotional Learning, friendship circles act as vital social systems that shape students' perceptions of competence and motivation. Strengthening these social environments can promote not only academic achievement but also students' overall psychological wellbeing.

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