

THE MEANING OF PEER SUPPORT IN OVERCOMING ACADEMIC STRESS OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengungkap makna dukungan teman sebaya dalam membantu mahasiswa pascasarjana mengatasi stres akademik. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif fenomenologi deskriptif, dengan landasan teori Edmund Husserl dan modifikasi metode Amedeo Giorgi. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis menggunakan prosedur fenomenologis untuk mengidentifikasi esensi pengalaman yang dialami. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dukungan teman sebaya, baik secara emosional maupun informasional, berperan penting dalam menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang suportif dan harmonis. Dukungan ini terbukti meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologis dan motivasi belajar mahasiswa. Nilai-nilai budaya seperti gotong royong dan solidaritas memperkuat dampak positif tersebut. Namun, efektivitas dukungan bervariasi tergantung pada kebutuhan dan kondisi masing-masing individu. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi bagi pengembangan kebijakan pendampingan serta pembentukan jejaring sosial di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: Dukungan Teman Sebaya, Fenomenologi Deskriptif, Mahasiswa Pascasarjana, Stres Akademik, Solidaritas

Abstract

This study aims to reveal the meaning of peer support in helping postgraduate students overcome academic stress. The approach used is qualitative descriptive phenomenology, based on Edmund Husserl's theory and a modification of Amedeo Giorgi's method. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews and analyzed using phenomenological procedures to identify the essence of the experiences experienced. The results of the study indicate that peer support, both emotional and informational, plays an important role in creating a supportive and harmonious learning environment. This support has been shown to improve students' psychological well-being and learning motivation. Cultural values such as mutual cooperation and solidarity strengthen these positive impacts. However, the effectiveness of support varies depending on the needs and conditions of each individual. These findings contribute to the development of mentoring policies and the formation of social networks in higher education environments.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Descriptive Phenomenology, Peer Support, Postgraduate Students, Solidarity

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INTRODUCTION

Graduate education represents an advanced academic stage that entails a variety of intellectual, psychological, and emotional demands. Postgraduate students often face intensive academic workloads, rigorous research responsibilities, financial constraints, and pressure to meet high academic standards (Hidayat & Darmawanti, 2022). These challenges can lead to heightened levels of academic stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and even burnout (Basar et al., 2021). According to a national survey by the Indonesian Psychological Association, approximately 64% of postgraduate students in Indonesia report experiencing moderate to severe academic stress, with 37% stating that it negatively impacts their concentration, emotional well-being, and academic performance. Additionally, WHO data 2022 suggests that the mental health burden among university students in Southeast Asia is increasing, with postgraduate students being particularly vulnerable due to role overload and lack of institutional psychological support (Faqih, 2020).

Academic stress, as a multidimensional phenomenon, has been linked to impaired academic performance, reduced life satisfaction, and diminished psychological well-being. In response to this growing concern, scholars have explored various protective factors that may buffer students against psychological distress (Shabana Akhtar & Naeem Akhtar, 2024). One such factor is peer support, which

plays a critical role in creating a psychologically safe and emotionally supportive academic environment (Nnadozie & Khumalo, 2023).

Theoretically, social support theory emphasizes the stress-buffering function of interpersonal relationships, particularly those with individuals facing similar challenges (Dalimunthe & Daulay, 2024). Peer support comprises emotional, informational, and appraisal components, all of which are relevant in the context of academic strain. Prior studies have confirmed the positive influence of peer relationships in enhancing student motivation, promoting resilience, and reducing feelings of isolation (Yuhbaba et al., 2024). Emotional empathy, shared academic experiences, and mutual encouragement foster an atmosphere of validation and belonging.

However, a critical review of previous literature reveals a research gap in capturing the *subjective and contextualized meaning* of peer support among postgraduate students in Indonesia. Quantitative studies such as Homer et al., (2021) and Simanjuntak, (2022) have documented correlations between peer support and academic motivation or mental health outcomes, yet they often overlook the nuanced, lived experiences behind these correlations. Furthermore, much of the existing literature tends to generalize peer support mechanisms without examining how such support is internalized, constructed, and interpreted within specific sociocultural contexts, such as

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Indonesia, where values like *gotong royong* and *kolektivitas* may uniquely shape peer dynamics (Akbar & Hayati, 2023).

To fill this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective meaning and perceived value of peer support among postgraduate students coping with academic stress. Unlike prior research that often treats peer support as a static variable, this study investigates how such support is experienced and interpreted by individuals within their social and academic environments. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the *internalization process* of peer support as an emotional coping mechanism, offering culturally relevant insights that may inform more effective and empathetic student support strategies in Indonesian higher education settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design, aiming to explore the lived experiences of postgraduate students regarding peer support in coping with academic stress. The research was grounded in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, as operationalized through the analytical steps developed by (Asrar & Taufani, 2022). However, beyond theoretical foundations, the research process was conducted systematically with clearly defined stages of data collection and analysis.

Research Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were three postgraduate students from different academic disciplines: Economic Law, Psychology, and Civil Engineering. These participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria that they: (1) are currently enrolled in a postgraduate program, (2) have experienced academic stress, and (3) have received or perceived peer support during their studies. This diversity of disciplines was intended to capture varied yet comparable perspectives on peer support. The participants' identities were anonymized using initials (DKAR, MD, I) for ethical reasons.

Development of Interview Questions

The interview questions were constructed based on the theoretical framework of social support, particularly drawing from House's (1981) in Rohmatillah, (2021) typology of social support emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. These types were adapted to the academic context to explore how peer interactions influence stress management. In addition, phenomenological principles guided the wording of open-ended questions to elicit rich, first-person narratives. A semi-structured interview format was used, allowing participants to express their experiences freely while ensuring thematic consistency across interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. All interviews

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were conducted in a comfortable and private setting agreed upon by the participants to ensure psychological safety. With the consent of participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Prior to data collection, informed consent and ethical clearance were obtained.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Giorgi's (2009) in Septiana, (2021) five-step phenomenological method, adjusted for practical application:

1. Reading the entire transcript to gain a general sense of the whole experience.
2. Identifying meaning units related to peer support and academic stress.
3. Transforming meaning units into psychologically sensitive expressions.
4. Synthesizing invariant themes across participant narratives.
5. Constructing a general structural description that captures the essence of the phenomenon.

During analysis, the researcher applied epoché (bracketing) by setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to fully attend to the participants' accounts.

Data Triangulation

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, this study employed methodological and data triangulation:

1. Method triangulation was applied by comparing findings from different participants across disciplines.

2. Data source triangulation involved re-checking responses through follow-up discussions and member checking, where participants were invited to review the interpreted themes for accuracy.
3. Peer debriefing was also conducted with qualitative research colleagues to challenge interpretations and maintain objectivity.

Through this rigorous and transparent methodology, the study aimed to accurately capture and represent the nuanced experiences of postgraduate students in receiving peer support during stressful academic periods, particularly within the cultural context of Indonesian collectivism, where values such as *gotong royong* and solidarity play a crucial role.

RESULTS

To attain a nuanced comprehension of the significance of peer support in managing academic stress throughout postgraduate studies, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with three participants originating from distinct academic disciplines namely, Master of Economic Law, Master of Psychology, and Master of Civil Engineering. The primary objective of these interviews was to explore their perspectives, lived experiences, and the forms of support perceived as most impactful during their academic journey.

The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format, incorporating pre-formulated core questions while allowing flexibility for the informants to elaborate on their

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personal narratives and contextual insights. The collected data were then systematically organized by aligning the responses with corresponding guiding questions from each participant. This classification facilitated a more

detailed thematic analysis of the various dimensions of peer support articulated during the interviews. Below is a synthesized summary of the key insights obtained.

Table 1
Research Interview Result Matrix on Peer Support for Postgraduate Students' Academic Stress

No	QUESTION	INFORMANT 1 (DKAR, Master of Economic Law)	INFORMANT 2 (MD, Master of Psychology)	INFORMANT 3 (I, Master of Civil Engineering)
1	How do you interpret peer support in dealing with academic stress during postgraduate studies?	Helps express complaints and reduce stress	Very important, helping each other reduce the burden	Support is very meaningful and most helpful
	Can you tell us about a time when you felt really helped by your peers?	Spending time together for simple activities	When encouraged and asked how are you	Help when stuck thesis informationally and emotionally
	What form of support did you feel the most? Emotional, informational, or other?	Emotional, friends become good listeners	Emotional, strengthening each other	Informationally, help direction and view of the task
2	What type of peer support helped you the most in managing academic stress?	Empathy, sense of security, positive validation	Emotional support	Moral and psychological support
	In your opinion, which of these supports is more helpful in reducing academic stress?	Empathy because of understanding pressure	Helping each other without bringing down	Moral and psychological support
	How do you feel when asking friends for help in academic activities?	Initially embarrassed, then feeling relieved and comfortable	Initially awkward, then comfortable and helped	Unpleasant, but grateful friends want to help
3	In the context of Indonesian culture, do you think peer support influences reducing academic stress?	Mutual cooperation and empathy help reduce stress	Culture of helping if utilized properly	The culture of helping each other is very influential
	Do you feel that values such as mutual cooperation or solidarity influence interactions between peers?	Increase interactions such as sharing materials, joking	Cultivating comfort in communication	Creating harmony and togetherness

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	In your opinion, what is the difference in the role of peer support compared to support from family or lecturers in dealing with academic stress?	Friends are more relatable, family understands less about the times	Friends understand better because they experience it firsthand	Friends provide emotional support, family/lecturers are more about the material
4	In certain situations, whose support do you rely on the most?	Boyfriends, because they understand the most	Friends for academic stress, but family is still important	Family remains number one in all conditions
	What do you usually expect from peers that you can't get from lecturers or family?	A sense of mutual understanding without judging	Can help each other with assignments or materials	Psychological assistance because of equality of thought
	In your experience, how has peer support affected your psychological well-being during postgraduate studies?	Reduces stress and makes you calm during discussions	Reducing anxiety in assignments	Reducing stress through relaxation activities with friends
5	Does this support make you feel more optimistic, calm, or confident?	More calm, optimistic, and confident	Feeling someone understands, feeling supported	Calm and confidence increase
	Have there been any significant changes in your mental health since having this support?	Not significant, but helps overcome stress	Yes, anxiety is reduced	Yes, from being reluctant to being enthusiastic because of support

Source: Interview, 2025

Insights derived from in-depth interviews with three postgraduate students from diverse academic disciplines reveal that peer support plays a pivotal role in mitigating academic stress. This aligns with House's (1981) in Tama, (2022) Social Support Theory, which categorizes social support into four types: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. Among these, the participants highlighted emotional and informational support as particularly impactful.

Emotional support was reflected in peers' empathetic listening, motivational

presence, and shared understanding of academic pressures. This observation is consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) in Lim Xin Yi, (2023) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which posits that emotional support enhances an individual's coping capabilities when dealing with high-stress situations.

In addition, informational support was perceived as essential, particularly in navigating academic challenges such as understanding course content, completing assignments, and managing thesis work (Aratrika Datta, 2024). These findings suggest that peers not only

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provide emotional reassurance but also function as informal educational resources that bolster academic self-efficacy. This is in line with Vygotsky's constructivist notion of peer-assisted learning and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes learning through social interaction.

Furthermore, the interviewees noted a distinction between the support provided by peers and that from family or academic supervisors. Family members were generally seen as offering moral and financial support, while lecturers or advisors were perceived as emotionally distant. In contrast, peers were regarded as more relatable due to their similar academic burdens and experiences, making their support more contextually relevant. This observation supports Cohen and Wills' (1985) in Lynam, (2021) Buffering Hypothesis, which proposes that contextually appropriate social support can act as a buffer against the detrimental effects of stress.

Cultural elements also appear to reinforce the presence of peer support. Indonesian collectivist values such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), solidarity, and shared struggles contribute to the emergence of psychosocial support within academic communities. These cultural norms not only enhance the functionality of peer support but also strengthen social cohesion among students.

In summary, supportive peer relationships significantly assist graduate

students in coping with academic demands. Beyond stress reduction, such support promotes psychological well-being, fosters emotional stability, builds confidence, and enhances motivation to complete academic pursuits.

DISCUSSION

Interviews conducted with three postgraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds reveal that peer support plays a pivotal role in managing academic stress. These findings align with House's (1981) in Virginie, (2016) social support framework, which categorizes support into four dimensions: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal. All four types were consistently evident in the participants' accounts, suggesting that postgraduate students rely on their peers not only for practical assistance but also for emotional reassurance and academic information sharing.

This observation echoes the results reported by Maulana, (2019), who found that peer relationships significantly alleviate academic stress among final-year students, particularly during thesis completion. The presence of peers undergoing similar academic demands contributes to feelings of empathy and shared experience, thereby reducing the sense of isolation. Supporting this, Maszura et al., (2024) emphasized that during the COVID-19 pandemic, peer support emerged as a crucial buffer against stress among postgraduate

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students, especially given limited face-to-face interaction with faculty and family.

In the context of stress coping mechanisms, these findings reinforce the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in (Sari, 2019). Participants appeared to engage in both emotion-focused coping (such as seeking empathy and venting) and problem-focused coping (such as sharing study strategies and information), utilizing peer relationships as a dual-function coping resource. This adaptive function demonstrates how peer interactions contribute to stress regulation in complex academic environments.

Annisa et al., (2025) similarly argued that peer support exerts a stronger influence on academic resilience among master's students than faculty support. This is reflected in the informants' perceptions that peers are more accessible, communicate more informally, and possess a shared understanding of academic pressures due to their common context.

From a sociocultural lens, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates peer assistance as a form of scaffolding, enabling students to overcome academic challenges they could not surmount alone. In this framework, peer support serves not only as an educational aid but also as an emotional buffer.

Cultural norms in Indonesia, which emphasize collectivism, further reinforce the salience of social bonds among students.

Darmawanti, (2022) found that students in collectivistic societies are more likely to turn to close social networks including peers when coping with both academic and emotional stressors. This cultural context provides additional explanatory value to the current findings.

Additionally, peer support manifested through the exchange of learning strategies, shared academic resources, and informal collaborations, all of which enhanced learning motivation and efficiency. This aligns with Basar et al., (2021), who found that students actively involved in informal study groups were more likely to complete their final projects compared to those lacking active social support.

In conclusion, peer support emerges as a significant protective factor in the academic stress experiences of postgraduate students. Higher education institutions should therefore consider fostering environments that promote positive social interactions, peer learning communities, and platforms for student-to-student dialogue as proactive strategies to mitigate academic stress.

A key strength of this study lies in its in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences using a phenomenological approach, which enables rich and nuanced understanding of peer support in the Indonesian postgraduate context. The diversity of academic backgrounds among participants also enhances the transferability of findings across disciplines.

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However, the study is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal data limits insights into how peer support evolves over time. Future research could incorporate a larger and more varied sample, as well as mixed methods designs, to broaden understanding and validate the findings across contexts.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Peer support plays a vital role in assisting postgraduate students in managing academic stress, particularly through complementary emotional and informational assistance. Within the Indonesian cultural context, which highly values mutual cooperation and communal solidarity, peer interactions often foster a nurturing and cohesive learning environment. This, in turn, contributes not only to enhanced psychological well-being such as increased calmness and self-assurance but also to greater academic motivation. Nonetheless, the impact of such support varies depending on each individual's unique circumstances and personal needs.

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has certain limitations. The use of a qualitative phenomenological approach with a relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data were collected from students within specific academic and cultural contexts, which may not

fully represent the experiences of diverse postgraduate populations.

In light of these findings, higher education institutions are encouraged to facilitate the creation of study groups and peer networks that systematically strengthen peer support systems. Students, likewise, are advised to cultivate open communication and empathetic relationships as adaptive strategies for coping with academic pressures. Future research is recommended to explore moderating variables—such as personality traits, academic disciplines, or institutional support—that may influence the relationship between peer support and academic stress, thereby enabling more targeted and effective interventions across diverse educational settings.

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