OVERVIEW OF ONLINE FRIENDSHIPS AMONG VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract. This study aims to describe online friendships among vocational high school (SMK) students in Kupang City. The research employed a quantitative descriptive approach involving 362 students from five public and private vocational schools in Kupang City. The instrument used was the Online Friendship Scale developed by Helmi, Widhiarso, and Husna (2017), which includes four aspects: sharing, voluntariness, companionship, and mutual support. The results indicate that adolescents are fairly active in engaging in online peer interactions; however, the intensity, closeness, and social support developed through these interactions have not yet reached an optimal level. The aspects of sharing and voluntariness reflected good openness and willingness, while companionship and mutual support were at high levels, indicating the presence of positive social support in digital media. These findings highlight the importance of digital literacy and character guidance to strengthen adolescents' social relationships in a healthy and meaningful way.

Keywords: Online Friendship, Adolescent, Social Media

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan pertemanan online pada remaja Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK) di Kota Kupang. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif deskriptif dengan jumlah sampel 362 siswa dari lima SMK negeri dan swasta di Kota Kupang. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah skala pertemanan online oleh Helmi, Widhiarso, dan Husna (2017) yang mencakup empat aspek: *sharing, voluntariness, companionship,* dan *mutual support*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa remaja cukup aktif menjalin interaksi pertemanan secara daring, namun intensitas, kedekatan, dan dukungan sosial yang terbangun belum sepenuhnya optimal. Aspek *sharing* dan *voluntariness* menunjukkan keterbukaan dan kesukarelaan yang cukup baik, sedangkan aspek *companionship* dan *mutual support* berada pada tingkat tinggi, menandakan adanya dukungan sosial positif di media digital. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya literasi digital dan bimbingan karakter untuk memperkuat relasi sosial remaja secara sehat dan bermakna.

Kata kunci: Pertemanan Online, Remaja, Media Sosial

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the way adolescents communicate and build relationships. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok have become dominant spaces for interaction, self-expression, and the formation of social identity among youth. In Indonesia, the internet penetration rate reached 79.5% in 2024 (APJII, 2024), indicating that most adolescents have daily access to online platforms. This condition makes social media a central environment where adolescents develop and maintain friendships, both with peers they already know offline and with new acquaintances online.

Online friendship refers to a social relationship that is developed and maintained through virtual interaction rather than face-to-face contact (Helmi, Widhiarso, & Husna, 2017). Previous research indicates that online friendships can provide emotional support, opportunities for self-disclosure, and a sense of belonging (Rahmayanti & Ediati, 2022). However, these interactions also carry potential risks such as miscommunication, superficial relationships, and exposure to online bullying (Ybarra et al., 2007).

Recent studies have identified several key aspects that characterize online friendships, including sharing, voluntariness, companionship, and mutual support. Together, these aspects describe the quality of online social interaction (Helmi et al., 2017; Mardiawan & Helmi, 2020). Research conducted in urban contexts, particularly among university students and young adults, indicates that online friendships are associated with psychological well-being and identity development (Rahmayanti & Ediati, 2022). However, empirical studies focusing on vocational high school students (SMK) remain limited, especially in developing regions such as Kupang, where levels of digital access and social dynamics may differ from those in major cities.

Most previous research on online friendship has focused on adolescents in general or college students in metropolitan areas, overlooking the unique characteristics of vocational high school students who experience different learning environments, peer networks, and social exposure. There is also limited empirical data on how online friendships manifest among adolescents in eastern Indonesia. This creates a gap in understanding how regional, educational, and cultural factors influence the nature of adolescents' online interactions.

To address this gap, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive description of online friendships among vocational high school students in Kupang City. Using the Online Friendship Scale developed by Helmi et al. (2017), this study explores how students engage in online friendships across four aspects: sharing, voluntariness, companionship, and mutual support. The research contributes to a more localized understanding of adolescent digital behaviour and supports the development of contextual digital literacy programs in schools.

This study aims to describe the general level and aspects of online friendship among vocational high school adolescents in Kupang City. The findings are expected to provide practical benefits for educators and policymakers in promoting positive digital interactions among adolescents and to serve as a theoretical reference for future studies on adolescent online socialization.

Method

This research employed a quantitative descriptive approach to illustrate the levels and characteristics of online friendships among vocational high school students in Kupang City. The descriptive design was chosen to obtain a factual overview of adolescents' online interactions without manipulating variables or testing hypotheses.

The population included all students enrolled in five vocational high schools in Kupang City: SMKN 1, SMKN 2, SMKN 3, SMKN 6, and SMK Swastisari, totalling 6,366 students. The sample consisted of 362 students selected through a two-stage

cluster sampling technique. The first stage randomly selected the five schools, and the second used proportional random sampling within each school based on the total student population. Participants were students in grades X and XI (aged 14–19 years) who had actively interacted with friends on social media in the last 3 months and had voluntarily agreed to participate.

Data were collected using the Online Friendship Scale developed by Helmi et al. (2017). The scale measures four main aspects of online friendship:

a) Sharing: the tendency to exchange experiences, information, or emotions online.

b) Voluntariness: the willingness to initiate and maintain online interactions freely.

c) Companionship: the sense of togetherness and engagement with online peers.

d) Mutual Support: the reciprocal emotional or social support exchanged in digital contexts.

The instrument consists of 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Reliability testing from previous studies and pilot use in this research indicated a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.880, reflecting high internal consistency.

The research was conducted after obtaining institutional approval and permission from the selected schools. Data collection involved distributing printed questionnaires directly to participants during school hours. Before completing the instrument, participants were informed of the research objectives and assured of confidentiality. All responses were then compiled and coded for quantitative analysis.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS software. The analysis included measures of central tendency (mean, median, standard deviation) and frequency distribution to determine the overall and categorical levels of online friendship.

Categorisation was based on the following criteria:

1. Low: X < Mean – 1 SD

2. Moderate: Mean – 1 SD ≤ X < Mean + 1 SD

3. High: X ≥ Mean + 1 SD

Additional tabulations were conducted to describe online friendship across variables such as school, class, gender, and age. The interpretation of results emphasised patterns of adolescent online interaction and the dominance of specific aspects within the four-dimensional framework of online friendship.

Result

The descriptive analysis showed that the mean total score for online friendship among 362 respondents was M = 60.21, with a standard deviation (SD) of 10.05. The data ranged from 16 to 80, with a median of 61. The skewness value (–0.621) indicates a slightly left-skewed distribution, suggesting that most students have relatively higher online friendship scores.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Online Friendship (N = 362)

Statistic	Value
Mean	60.21
Median	61.00
Standard Eviation	10.05
Minimum	16
Maximum	80
Skewness	-0.621
Kurtosis	1.324

The mean score of 60.21 (out of 80) indicates that students generally experience moderate to high levels of online friendship. The slightly negative

skewness implies that most respondents are socially active in online settings, using social media as a space for connection and interaction.

Based on statistical cut-off points (Mean ± 1 SD), the distribution of online friendship categories is summarised below.

Table 2.

Online Friendship Levels among Students

Category	Range Score	Frequency	Percentage
Low	<50.16	56	15.5
Moderate	50.16-70.26	238	65.7
High	>70.26	68	18.8
Total		362	100.0

Most students (65.7%) are in the moderate category, showing balanced online social behaviour. Meanwhile, 18.8% fall in the high category, which may represent adolescents who are very active in maintaining online friendships, and 15.5% in the low category, indicating cautious or limited online interaction.

This pattern suggests that online friendships among adolescents in Kupang City tend to be positive but moderate, without excessive digital dependence.

The analysis of each dimension of the Online Friendship Scale shows differences in students' levels of involvement across the four aspects.

Table 3.

Mean Scores of Each Online Friendship Aspect

Aspect	Mean	SD	Category
Sharing	15.32	2.21	High
Voluntariness	15.08	2.13	Moderate
Companionship	14.67	2.29	Moderate
Mutual Support	15.14	2.19	High

The aspect-based analysis revealed that sharing and mutual support were in the high category, indicating that students frequently exchange experiences and provide emotional support in online interactions. Meanwhile, voluntariness and companionship were in the moderate category, suggesting that adolescents are willing to maintain online friendships but within a balanced level of engagement.

This pattern illustrates that vocational high school students in Kupang maintain positive and healthy online relationships, where social media is used primarily for support and connection rather than dependence or excessive use.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the level of online friendship among vocational high school students in Kupang City predominantly falls into the moderate category, accounting for 65.7% of the participants. This finding suggests that adolescents are actively engaged in online communication, yet their involvement remains within a healthy, balanced range. This is consistent with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which states that adolescents are in the stage of identity formation and rely on social interaction, both offline and online, to explore belonging and relational stability (Erikson, 1968). This also aligns with the framework proposed by Helmi et al. (2017), who state that online friendships complement offline social relationships.

Social media facilitates broader interaction while still allowing face-to-face friendships to remain significant in adolescents' daily lives. Similarly, Santrock emphasizes that peer relationships are central to adolescents' emotional and social growth, which helps explain why students engage in online friendship while maintaining offline interactions (Santrock, 2019). In the Indonesian context, Rahmayanti and Ediati (2022) also found that adolescents primarily use digital platforms to maintain communication rather than replace offline relationships, reinforcing the adaptive nature observed in this study.

When examined by aspect, the results show that the dimensions of sharing and mutual support fall into the high category. This indicates that social media serves as a space where students exchange experiences, express emotions, and provide emotional support to one another. These findings resonate with the Social Exchange Theory, which explains that individuals engage in relationships based on reciprocal benefits—such as emotional support, validation, and shared experiences—reflected in the strong scores for sharing and mutual support.

Furthermore, the Uses and Gratifications Theory supports the interpretation that adolescents use social media to fulfil interpersonal needs, particularly the need for connection and emotional reassurance (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). The consistency of these findings with Burke and Kraut (2016), who found that supportive interactions in online environments can enhance emotional well-being, suggests that online interactions among vocational high school students in Kupang reflect their developmental need for social acceptance and emotional affirmation during the formation of personal identity.

In contrast, the dimensions of voluntariness and companionship are categorised as moderate. Although adolescents willingly engage in online interactions, the intensity remains controlled and does not dominate their offline social lives. This aligns with Hurlock's concept of balanced social development, which asserts that adolescents benefit most from maintaining multiple forms of social interaction rather than relying on a single platform (Hurlock, 1980). These findings differ slightly from studies conducted in major urban areas, where companionship scores tend to be higher due to more intensive digital access and broader exposure to social media (Rahmayanti & Ediati, 2022). In the context of Kupang, the moderate scores may be influenced by educational settings, cultural norms, and daily school routines that encourage direct social interaction. Students in vocational schools, in particular, engage in hands-on learning and group-based activities, which strengthen offline relationships and limit excessive reliance on digital platforms.

These differing patterns highlight the unique contribution of this study to the existing literature. Previous studies have predominantly examined adolescents or university students in metropolitan contexts. In contrast, the current study broadens the understanding of online friendship by examining vocational high school students in Eastern Indonesia. This shift in context demonstrates, as noted in developmental theories by Piaget and in contemporary sociocultural perspectives, that adolescents' social behaviours, including their digital interactions, are shaped by environmental, cultural, and educational factors (Piaget, Inhelder, Kagan, Jerome, Weaver, & Helen, 2000). The findings underscore that the intensity and quality of online friendships are not solely determined by technological access but are also shaped by the cultural expectations, social structure, and learning environments in which adolescents grow. Thus, this research provides important empirical evidence that enriches the field of digital adolescent interaction from a regional and developmental perspective.

Overall, this study demonstrates that online friendship serves as a constructive medium for adolescents to share experiences, seek emotional support, and sustain social relationships when used in a balanced way. Guided by the theoretical foundations above, the observed patterns indicate that vocational high school students in Kupang are capable of using social media adaptively and meaningfully, without diminishing the importance of real-world social interactions. The findings not only support previous literature but also expand scientific understanding by revealing how online friendships function within a vocational school context and a culturally distinct region of Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study aimed to describe the level and dimensions of online friendship among vocational high school students in Kupang City using the Online Friendship Scale, which encompasses four aspects: sharing, voluntariness, companionship, and mutual support. The findings reveal that the overall level of online friendship predominantly falls within the moderate category, indicating that students engage

actively in digital interaction while maintaining a balanced level of involvement. Aspects of sharing and mutual support received the highest scores, highlighting that social media is primarily used as a space for exchanging experiences and providing emotional support among peers. Meanwhile, voluntariness and companionship remained in the moderate category, suggesting that adolescents participate in online interactions voluntarily but not excessively.

These results demonstrate that online friendships among students in Kupang are adaptive and constructive. Social media functions as a supplementary social space that enables adolescents to express themselves and maintain relationships without replacing face-to-face interactions. This study contributes new insights to the field of psychology by offering empirical evidence from vocational students in Eastern Indonesia—a population that has received limited research attention. The findings underscore that the quality of online friendships is shaped not only by technological access but also by the social and cultural context in which adolescents live. Thus, this research enriches the understanding of how young people engage in digital relationships in healthy, meaningful ways.

Suggestion

Based on findings indicating that online friendships among vocational students in Kupang are generally moderate, with sharing and mutual support as the most prominent aspects, it is recommended that schools strengthen digital literacy programs that emphasize healthy, responsible, and supportive social media use. School counselors may use these results to design guidance services that promote positive communication skills, emotional regulation, and ethical online interaction. Students are encouraged to continue using social media as a space for sharing and mutual support while maintaining balance with face-to-face interactions. Future research is suggested to explore additional variables related to online friendship to develop a more comprehensive understanding of adolescents' digital social dynamics.

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