
The Meaning of Social Support for Final-Year Students in the Process of Writing an Undergraduate Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The thesis writing process is an academic stage that often generates psychological pressure for final-year university students. Such pressure may arise from academic demands, relationships with supervisors, and expectations from the social environment. In this context, social support plays an important role in helping students cope with stress and maintain motivation. This study aims to explore the meaning of social support among final-year students during the thesis writing process. The study employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological perspective. The participants consisted of three final-year students who were working on their theses and were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed three main themes: academic pressure and obstacles and the function of social support as emotional support, the role of social support in enhancing student motivation, and changes in the meaning of social support leading to the development of self-reliance. The study concludes that social support is interpreted dynamically and plays a crucial role in helping final-year students cope with academic pressure during the thesis writing process.

Keywords: Social Support, Final-year Students, Thesis Writing

1. Introduction

Final-year students represent a group at a crucial stage in their academic journey, as they are required to complete an undergraduate thesis as a requirement for graduation. The process of writing a thesis often involves not only academic demands but also considerable psychological pressure. Such pressure may arise from various aspects, including the expectation to graduate on time, relationships with supervisors, methodological difficulties, and expectations from family and the surrounding environment. These conditions make final-year students vulnerable to academic stress that can affect their psychological well-being (Fauziyah & Kelly, 2023).

The phenomenon of high stress among students who are writing their theses has

been reported in numerous studies. Bastian et al. (2021) found that students working on their theses often experience stress due to the lengthy and complex supervision process. This stress can increase when students feel they receive unclear guidance or face repeated revisions. However, the same study also found that students who receive social support from their surrounding environment, particularly from peers, tend to have lower levels of stress. Such support provides a sense of togetherness, motivation, and opportunities to share experiences during the thesis-writing process.

Conceptually, social support is defined as comfort, attention, appreciation, or assistance received by individuals from other people or their social groups (Sarafino, 2011 as cited in Tri & Hartati, 2022). Social support includes several forms, namely emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and appraisal support. In the context of final-year students, emotional support such as empathy and care can help reduce emotional pressure, while informational and instrumental support, such as guidance from supervisors and technical assistance, play a role in helping students overcome academic difficulties during the thesis-writing process.

Previous studies indicate that social support plays an important role in maintaining the psychological condition of final-year students. Risal et al. (2023) found that social support contributes to the optimism of final-year students in dealing with the thesis-writing process. Students who receive support from family, friends, and lecturers tend to view their thesis as a challenge that can be managed rather than as a burdensome task. Furthermore, Zahrah (2021) found that social support from family and supervisors was able to reduce students' academic stress during the thesis-writing process, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar findings were also reported by Jasesa (2023), who stated that final-semester nursing students with higher levels of social support experienced lower levels of stress. Emotional support from family and close friends was found to be the most influential form of support in helping students manage pressure during the thesis-writing process. This indicates that social support functions not only as practical assistance but also as a psychological resource that helps students endure challenging academic situations.

Although many studies have demonstrated the importance of social support for final-year students, most of these studies have used quantitative approaches focusing on the relationships or effects between variables. Such approaches have not fully illustrated how students subjectively interpret the social support they receive.

In fact, each student may have different experiences and perspectives in understanding social support, whether it comes from family, friends, or supervisors.

Based on a preliminary study conducted through brief interviews with several final-year students, it was found that the thesis-writing process often generates feelings of pressure, emotional exhaustion, and even a desire to give up. Students

who feel supported by their peers tend to be more resilient and regain motivation, whereas those who feel they receive little support—or support accompanied by pressure from their families—often experience higher levels of stress. These preliminary findings indicate that social support is not always interpreted positively; rather, it may have different meanings for each individual.

Based on the explanation above, this study is important to conduct in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of social support among final-year students during the thesis-writing process. This study not only focuses on the

presence of social support but also explores how students interpret various forms of social support they receive and the role of such support in helping them cope with academic pressure and maintain psychological balance during the process of completing their thesis.

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach aims to understand individuals' subjective experiences (lived experiences) and how they interpret those experiences. Qualitative research is used to explore phenomena in depth without manipulating research variables, so that the data obtained represent the participants' real experiences (Sarafino, 2011 as cited in Tri & Hartati, 2022). In this study, the phenomenological approach specifically utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative analytic approach that focuses on exploring personal experiences and how individuals make meaning of psychological phenomena (Smith & Nizza, 2021). This approach was chosen because it is suitable for examining how final-year students interpret social support while facing academic pressure during the thesis-writing process.

The participants in this study consisted of three final-year students who were in the process of completing their undergraduate thesis. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria:

- (1) active final-year students,
- (2) currently writing or having written their undergraduate thesis, and
- (3) having received social support from family, friends, or lecturers.

The selection of participants was based on the consideration that they had direct experiences relevant to the focus of the study and were therefore able to provide in-depth insights into the meaning of social support.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were designed to explore various forms of social support received by the participants, including emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and appraisal support, as described in social support theory (Sarafino, 2011 as cited in Tri & Hartati, 2022). Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to share their experiences freely and in depth. The data collection process was conducted both face-to-face and online, depending on the agreement between the researcher and the participants.

The interview data were recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim. In addition, the researcher prepared field notes to document the context of the interviews as well as the participants' non-verbal responses. The interview transcripts and field notes were then used as the primary data sources for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as described by Smith and Nizza (2021). The first stage involved repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. The next stage involved identifying significant statements that reflected the participants' experiences. These statements were then grouped into initial themes, which were further developed into major themes. The final stage of analysis involved constructing a narrative thematic description representing the participants' experiences and interpretations of social support.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through method and theory triangulation. Method triangulation was conducted by combining interview data with field notes, while theory triangulation involved comparing the research findings with social support theory and meaning-making theory (Park, 2022). In addition, the researcher conducted member checking by asking participants to confirm the results of the interpretation to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the data (Susanto et al., 2023).

3. Result

This study aims to explore the meaning of social support among final-year students during the process of writing their undergraduate thesis. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews with three key participants who were actively involved in the thesis-writing process, namely Participants B, R, and A. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. The interview transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify units of meaning emerging from the participants' experiences. These meaning units were subsequently grouped into emergent themes and subthemes, which were then formulated into substantive themes representing the participants' overall experiences.

The results of the data analysis revealed three major themes that serve as the interpretative framework of this study:

- (1) academic pressure and obstacles and the function of social support;
- (2) the role of social support and its direct impact on students' motivation; and
- (3) the diversity and transformation of the meaning of social support during the thesis-writing process.

These three themes illustrate the dynamics of final-year students' experiences in receiving, interpreting, and utilizing social support amid the academic pressures they encounter. Each theme is described in detail in the following sections and is supported by direct verbatim quotations from participants to strengthen the validity of the findings.

3.1. Academic Pressure and Obstacles and the Function of Social Support

The first theme describes the various pressures and obstacles experienced by final-year students during the thesis-writing process and how social support functions as emotional reinforcement in facing these challenges.

3.1.1 Academic Pressure and Obstacles in the Thesis-Writing Process

All participants reported that the process of writing their thesis was a highly stressful experience. The academic pressure they experienced was mainly related to their relationships with supervisors, repeated revisions, and methodological as well as administrative difficulties. One participant expressed feelings of frustration due to the lack of clear guidance from the supervisor, which made the supervision process exhausting and stressful. Another participant also stated that inconsistent directions during supervision led to repeated revisions that drained emotional energy and reduced motivation. In addition, methodological and bureaucratic challenges in the research approval process became significant sources of academic pressure.

3.1.2 The Function of Social Support as Emotional Reinforcement

In dealing with these pressures, social support was perceived by participants as an important factor that helped reduce psychological burdens. Social support functioned as a buffer against feelings of loneliness and stress experienced during the thesis-writing process. Participants expressed that having others who provided attention, empathy, and encouragement made them feel less alone in facing difficulties. Social support also helped alleviate emotional and physical burdens, enabling participants to feel stronger and continue the thesis-writing process despite various obstacles.

3.2. The Role of Social Support and Its Impact on Students' Motivation

The second theme describes the role of social support in influencing students' motivation, particularly highlighting differences in how support from peers and family is perceived.

3.2.1 Peer Support as the Most Meaningful Source of Support

The findings show that support from peers was perceived as the most meaningful source of support by most participants. Peer support was considered more relevant because of shared experiences in undergoing the thesis-writing process. Participants explained that peers provided not only emotional support in the form of encouragement and empathy but also instrumental and informational support, such as sharing references, discussing research methodologies, and giving feedback on thesis writing. This type of support directly increased participants' motivation to continue working on their thesis.

3.2.2 Family Support Between Moral Support and Psychological Pressure

Although families also provided support, participants interpreted family support in an ambivalent way. On one hand, families offered moral and material support that helped students emotionally. On the other hand, this support was often accompanied by expectations and repeated questions about graduation timelines, which instead created additional psychological pressure. Some participants reported that questions about when they would graduate made them feel stressed and burdened, even though the family intended to provide encouragement.

3.3. Diversity and Transformation in the Meaning of Social Support

The third theme shows that social support is interpreted in diverse and dynamic ways by final-year students and that its meaning evolves throughout the thesis-writing process.

3.3.1 Diversity and Ambivalence in Forms of Social Support

Participants realized that not all forms of social support had positive effects. Support that was excessive or not aligned with their needs was sometimes perceived as ineffective and even caused fatigue. In addition, there were experiences where support was perceived as pressure or toxic encouragement, meaning support delivered in ways that belittled participants' efforts or compared them with others, which ultimately reduced their self-confidence.

3.3.2 The Changing Meaning of Social Support and the Emergence of Self-Support

Over time, participants experienced a shift in how they interpreted social support. External support that was initially highly expected gradually gave way to an awareness of the importance of support from within themselves (self-support). Participants realized that although support from others is important, successfully completing a thesis largely depends on one's own ability to persist, self-motivate, and manage pressure. Moreover, participants perceived that support expressed through real presence and emotional closeness was more meaningful than support delivered only through short messages or online communication.

4. Discussion

The first theme indicates that final-year students experience various academic pressures and obstacles during the thesis-writing process, such as repeated revisions, uncertainty regarding supervisors' directions, as well as administrative and time-related pressures. These findings are consistent with previous research stating that the thesis-writing stage is one of the periods with the highest levels of academic stress among university students (Rahmah & Masfufah, 2023). In such circumstances, social support functions as emotional reinforcement that helps students manage stress and feelings of pressure. Support in the form of empathy, attention, and the presence of others makes students feel understood and less alone, enabling them to persist in dealing with academic challenges. This finding aligns with the view of Sarafino (as cited in Tri & Hartati, 2022), which states that social support acts as a buffer against psychological stress.

The second theme reveals that social support has a direct impact on students' motivation to complete their thesis. Support from peers is perceived as the most meaningful form of support due to shared experiences and a mutual understanding of the academic context being faced. This finding is in line with the results of Wijaya and Utami (2021), who found that peer support significantly contributes to increasing students' motivation and academic resilience. In addition, peer support is not only emotional but also instrumental and informational, such as sharing references and strategies for dealing with revisions, which directly assist students during the thesis-writing process. In contrast, support from family is interpreted ambivalently by the participants. On one hand, family serves as an important source of moral and material support; on the other hand, demands and expectations regarding graduation timelines may create additional psychological pressure. This finding is consistent with the study by Amithasari and Khotimah (2021), which states that social support that does not match an individual's needs may become a source of stress. This suggests that the effectiveness of social support is determined not only by the intention of the provider but also by the suitability of the support to the recipient's condition and needs.

The third theme shows that the meaning of social support is dynamic and evolves throughout the thesis-writing process. Participants realized that not all forms of support produce positive effects, particularly when support is excessive or delivered in a less empathetic manner. Furthermore, over time, participants began to develop awareness of the importance of self-support as a key factor in completing their thesis. This finding is consistent with the concept of meaning-making in stress and social support proposed by Park (2022), which states that individuals actively construct meaning from stressful experiences and the resources available to them.

The emergence of self-support indicates that students do not rely entirely on external support but also develop internal coping strategies to deal with academic pressure. External social support remains important; however, it is increasingly interpreted as a complementary factor that strengthens individuals' psychological resilience. This finding is in line with the study by Susanto et al. (2023), which emphasizes that the combination of social support and self-regulation abilities plays an important role in maintaining students' psychological well-being.

Overall, the findings of this study enrich the understanding of the role and meaning of social support among final-year students in the context of thesis completion. The results show that social support is neither singular nor static; rather, it is diverse, contextual, and evolves along with the dynamics of students' experiences. Therefore, effective social support should be tailored to individual needs and accompanied by efforts to strengthen students' ability to provide support for themselves.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion presented above, it can be concluded that social support plays an important role in helping final-year students cope with academic pressure during the thesis-writing process. Final-year students experience various pressures and obstacles, originating from academic demands, relationships with supervisors, as well as time constraints and expectations from their surrounding environment. Under these conditions, social support functions as a psychological resource that helps students manage stress and maintain their emotional well-being.

The findings of this study show that social support is interpreted in diverse ways by final-year students. Support from peers is perceived as the most meaningful form of support because of shared experiences and a mutual understanding of the academic context, which directly increases students' motivation to complete their thesis. Meanwhile, support from family is understood in an ambivalent manner: on one hand, it provides moral encouragement and a sense of security, but on the other hand, it can create psychological pressure when accompanied by expectations regarding graduation timelines.

In addition, this study finds that the meaning of social support is dynamic and may change throughout the thesis-writing process. Students not only rely on support from their social environment but also develop self-support as a strategy to persist and complete their thesis. Therefore, it can be concluded that effective social support is support that aligns with individual needs, is delivered with empathy, and strengthens the independence and psychological resilience of final-year students.

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