

TOXIC FRIENDSHIPS AMONG STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON NURTURING SURVIVORS

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of toxic friendship is increasingly prevalent in school environments, particularly among junior high school students who are in the stage of identity exploration. Friendships, which ideally serve as spaces for emotional support, often develop into interactions characterized by pressure, manipulation, and negative behaviors. This study aims to explore the patterns of addressing toxic friendship at SMPT Darul Dakwah, focusing on three aspects: (1) the forms or characteristics of toxic friendship among students, (2) the contributing factors, and (3) the role of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in managing these issues. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving eighth-grade students, PAI teachers, and guidance counselors (BK teachers). The findings reveal that toxic friendship manifests in forms such as group exclusivity (cliques), social exclusion, verbal bullying, and emotional manipulation. The contributing factors include family parenting patterns, peer group influence, and the intensity of social media use. PAI teachers implement preventive strategies (instilling religious values), curative approaches (Islamic counseling), and rehabilitative efforts (fostering respect and positive cooperation). These findings highlight the strategic role of PAI teachers in cultivating healthy peer relationships and recommend stronger collaboration with guidance counselors and the school to prevent and address toxic friendship.

Keywords: Development Patterns; Islamic Education Teacher; Adolescents; SMPT Darul Dakwah.

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INTRODUCTION

Humans are social beings who constantly need others in their lives. One of the most influential forms of social interaction in individual development, particularly during adolescence, is friendship. Friendships function as spaces to share experiences, provide emotional support, and shape self-identity. According to Zulfah et al. (2023), friendships are usually formed on the basis of similarities in personality, attitudes, gender, or age, enabling adolescents to develop a strong emotional bond with their peers.

However, not all friendships develop healthily. In reality, there are relationships that instead create negative impacts, commonly referred to as toxic friendships. The term "toxic" refers to something harmful or unhealthy, and in the context of friendship, it is marked by manipulative behavior, dominance, belittling, and both verbal and non-verbal bullying (Hidayatillah, 2023; Elly, 2022). Suzanne (2015) defines toxic friendship as a relationship that only exists when there are specific needs, characterized by excessive jealousy, attempts to isolate, and unhealthy competition among friends.

The phenomenon of toxic friendship is commonly found among junior high school students, who are in the stage of searching for self-identity. This period is characterized by rapid social development and a strong need to be accepted by peer groups. Candra (2023) emphasizes that peer interaction plays a vital role in shaping adolescents' social identity. However, such interaction can become problematic when it transforms into relationships full of pressure, anxiety, and emotional exploitation (Sari, 2024). Research by Fadhillah & Siregar (2024) even shows that adolescents trapped in toxic friendships are vulnerable to mental health decline, depression, and decreased academic performance.

Based on data from the Indonesian Teachers Federation (FSGI), school bullying cases increased in 2024, with around 36% occurring at the junior high school level (Saputra, 2024). This finding indicates that junior high schools are a vulnerable stage for peer conflicts, including toxic friendships. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) also show a similar trend, with 226 bullying complaints in schools recorded in 2023, most of which were triggered by peer group dynamics (Abdussalam, 2020).

This condition becomes even more complex in Islamic boarding school-based environments such as SMPT Darul Dakwah. Dormitory settings and close emotional bonds among students often form exclusive circles, which in some cases develop into unhealthy friendship patterns. Research by Malyana (2025) at Pondok Pesantren Al-Amien Putri Prenduan revealed that emotional closeness in student friendship groups can strengthen solidarity but, at the same time, foster exclusivity that limits wider social interaction. Similar findings were reported by Badriyah (2022), who noted that behaviors such as insulting, belittling, and spreading gossip are forms of toxic friendship frequently found among boarding school students.

In the context of Islamic education, the phenomenon of toxic friendship must be addressed seriously through the role of teachers, particularly Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers. IRE teachers hold responsibility not only for the cognitive aspect but also for nurturing students' moral and social behavior. Anwar et al. (2024) highlight that character building can be carried out through exemplary conduct, religious habituation, and continuous evaluation. This is further emphasized by Khotimah & Inayati (2023), who state that the role of IRE teachers is not limited to the classroom but also involves instilling Islamic values in students' daily lives.

Aulia et al. (2023) show that IRE teachers can foster noble character (akhlaq al-karimah) and prevent negative behavior through persuasive approaches, Islamic counseling, and structured religious activities. Thus, IRE teachers play a strategic role in creating a healthy social environment, preventing the emergence of toxic friendships, and instilling values of togetherness and mutual respect.

Based on preliminary observations at SMPT Darul Dakwah, there are strong indications of toxic friendship behaviors among eighth-grade students, such as excessive criticism, lack of empathy, belittling peers, and jealousy. Some students even consider such phenomena normal, which risks normalizing unhealthy behavior in friendship. This condition underlines the urgency of conducting in-depth research on the nurturing patterns of IRE teachers in addressing toxic friendships in the school.

Accordingly, this study focuses on three main objectives: (1) identifying the forms or characteristics of toxic friendships among junior high school students, (2) analyzing the influencing factors, and (3) describing the nurturing patterns implemented by IRE teachers to address this

phenomenon. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of Islamic character-building strategies and serve as a reference for schools and parents in preventing and overcoming toxic friendships among adolescents.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, aiming to explore in depth the subjective experiences of students as well as the nurturing patterns implemented by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in addressing the phenomenon of toxic friendship within the school environment. The phenomenological method was chosen because it aligns with the focus of the study, namely to understand the meaning of students' lived social experiences. Thus, the research does not merely describe the phenomenon, but also reveals the essence and meaning of unhealthy peer interactions. As stated by Creswell & Creswell (2018), phenomenological studies emphasize efforts to portray individuals' lived experiences in the form of meaningful and in-depth narratives.

The research was conducted at SMPT Darul Dakwah, a pesantren-based educational institution in Mojokerto with strong social, cultural, and religious characteristics. The subjects were determined through purposive sampling, a technique in which informants are deliberately selected based on specific considerations. Informants consisted of eighth-grade students who were indicated to have experienced or witnessed toxic friendship behaviors, as well as Islamic Religious Education teachers and Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers who play a direct role in the nurturing and handling of students' behavioral problems. The researcher's presence in the field was participatory, involving direct engagement in observation, interviews, and interactions with both students and teachers. This approach was intended to obtain a holistic and contextual understanding of the ongoing social dynamics.

Data collection techniques consisted of three main methods: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to examine patterns of student interactions within peer circles both inside and outside the classroom. In-depth interviews were conducted with PAI teachers, BK teachers, and students using a semi-structured interview guide, enabling flexibility and richness of data. This type of interview allowed the researcher to freely explore students' experiences, particularly concerning the forms of toxic friendship encountered, influencing factors, and the nurturing received. Documentation was employed as supporting data, including records of student guidance, school activity archives, and preliminary questionnaires to validate primary data.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Mutia, 2024). In the reduction stage, the researcher selected and focused on data relevant to the research focus. The reduced data were then presented in descriptive narrative form to facilitate the identification of patterns. The final stage was drawing conclusions by comparing data from multiple sources, ensuring that the findings were verified and held scientific validity. To maintain data credibility, triangulation of sources, techniques, and time was applied—by comparing interview results with observations and documentation, as well as conducting member checks with informants to confirm that the researcher's interpretations matched their lived experiences. Furthermore, reflection with supervisors and peer discussions were conducted to uphold the objectivity of the study.

Through this methodology, the research is expected to generate a profound understanding of the phenomenon of toxic friendship among junior high school students, while also providing a comprehensive portrayal of the nurturing patterns implemented by PAI teachers in preventing, addressing, and rehabilitating unhealthy peer relationships at SMPT Darul Dakwah. Consequently, the results of this study may offer both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Islamic education as well as strategies for character-building in pesantren-based schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Concept of Toxic Friendship

Toxic friendship is a term used to describe unhealthy, manipulative, and harmful relationships that negatively impact the individuals involved. According to Amin, Wajdi, & Syukri (2020), toxic friendship is characterized by domination, demeaning attitudes, manipulation, and excessive emotional dependence. Such relationships often cause one party to feel pressured, isolated, and to lose self-confidence.

This phenomenon becomes more prominent during adolescence, particularly among junior high school students who are in the stage of identity formation. At this developmental stage, friendships play a highly significant role. Zulfah et al. (2023) emphasized that adolescents have a strong need to build social identity through peer interactions. However, friendships do not always provide positive support; in many cases, they become sources of conflict, anxiety, and social pressure.

Sari (2024) further explained that toxic friendships often manifest in manipulative behaviors, emotional exploitation, as well as verbal and non-verbal bullying. This indicates that the phenomenon is not merely a matter of daily interaction, but also concerns mental health, emotional well-being, and even the academic development of adolescents.

From an Islamic perspective, the concept of toxic friendship contradicts the values of true companionship. Ibn Miskawaih (in Wirayudha et al., 2017) stated that friendship should be built upon honesty, noble character, and integrity. Friendships based on harmful behaviors not only violate social ethics but also damage one's morals and spiritual values.

Factors Causing Toxic Friendship

Toxic friendships do not emerge suddenly but are influenced by various interrelated factors. Based on research and literature, the main contributing factors include:

a. Family Factors

Parenting style plays a major role in shaping children's social behavior. Nasution & Rambe (2023) showed that children who lack parental affection tend to seek compensation outside the home, often through manipulative and dominant behaviors toward peers. Furthermore, authoritarian parenting with minimal emotional communication also triggers tendencies to form unhealthy friendships.

b. Peer Factors

Exclusive peer groups often become spaces where toxic friendships arise. Malyana (2025), in her study on modern Islamic boarding schools, found that peer circles are formed out of emotional needs, closeness, and solidarity. However, such exclusivity can lead to problems when behaviors such as exclusion, gossip, or belittling emerge within the group.

c. Social Media Factors

Interactions through social media often worsen the dynamics of toxic friendship. Kartiko & Istiqomah (2022) explained that social media facilitates behaviors such as indirect insults, online gossip, and cyberbullying. This extends conflicts that originally took place in the real world into the digital realm, thus broadening their impact.

d. Traumatic Experiences

According to Fiona (2023), past experiences such as verbal abuse, bullying, or humiliation can trigger toxic behaviors in individuals. Amy Tatsumi, a psychotherapist, affirmed that childhood trauma often drives individuals to develop manipulative relationship patterns as compensation for feelings of insecurity.

Thus, toxic friendship can be seen as the result of complex interactions between family, peer groups, social media, and personal experiences.

Nurturing Approaches in Islamic Education

In the context of Islamic education, nurturing students' behavior is a primary focus, including efforts to prevent and overcome toxic friendships. The approaches carried out by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers include preventive, curative, and rehabilitative measures.

- a. Preventive: PAI teachers instill Islamic values through moral education, role modeling, and religious habituation activities. The goal is to prevent students from falling into harmful friendship behaviors (Anwar et al., 2024).
- b. Curative: If toxic friendship has already occurred, PAI teachers provide nurturing through Islamic counseling and persuasive approaches to correct students' behavior. Aulia et al. (2023) highlighted that PAI teachers can serve as counselors for students involved in toxic friendships.
- c. Rehabilitative: Teachers cultivate mutual respect, cooperation, and positive solidarity through group activities. This aims to restore students' social relationships to a healthier state.
- d. Khotimah & Inayati (2023) emphasized that PAI teachers' nurturing is not limited to the classroom but also extends to students' daily interactions. Thus, PAI teachers play a holistic role in guiding students spiritually, morally, and socially.

The Role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers

PAI teachers have a strategic role in creating a healthy social climate at school. They do not merely teach religious subjects but also function as character builders. According to Aulia et al. (2023), PAI teachers act as educators, facilitators, and counselors who integrate Islamic values into students' daily lives.

Moreover, the role of PAI teachers becomes more effective when carried out in collaboration with Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers. Tanjung et al. (2024) stressed that school collaboration with parents and counselors strengthens efforts to prevent toxic friendships. This aligns with the goals of Islamic education, which emphasize balance between cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of students' development.

Therefore, PAI teachers serve as the front line in guiding students to build healthy, harmonious friendships rooted in Islamic values.

Discussion

Based on research conducted at SMPT Darul Dakwah, the phenomenon of toxic friendship among eighth-grade students was found in various distinctive forms. Friendships that should serve as spaces for emotional support instead developed into relationships filled with pressure. One of the most prominent forms was the emergence of exclusive friendship groups or circles, in which members tended to feel superior to those outside the group. This situation led to social exclusion, gossip, and repeated mockery, both verbal and non-verbal. Emotional manipulation was also found, as some students felt pressured to conform to group rules to avoid being ostracized. Social pressure (peer pressure) became even stronger in matters related to lifestyle, social media use, and imposed standards of interaction.

Students themselves acknowledged this oppressive pattern of friendship. One student from class VIII-A stated:

"In our circle, we have to follow the dominant friend. If we don't, we usually get excluded or not invited to hang out anymore."

Another student shared:

"I was once spoken badly about by my circle friends just because I often played with another group."

These statements reveal that gossip, mockery, and social exclusion are tangible forms of toxic friendship in the school environment.

This phenomenon did not occur in isolation but was influenced by multiple factors. From the family side, authoritarian parenting styles and lack of emotional attention caused students to seek validation from peers. The school counselor emphasized in an interview:

"Most of these children live in dormitories, so when they lack communication with their parents at home, they seek recognition through their circle at school. But often, this recognition goes in the wrong direction."

Peer group influence was also very strong, where each member felt compelled to obey unwritten rules in order to remain accepted. Another dominant factor was the intensity of social media use. One female student stated:

"When I see my friends' stories, sometimes I feel jealous. In the circle, we often get compared about who is more popular or has more followers."

This indicates that social media not only functions as a communication tool but also becomes a source of psychological pressure that reinforces toxic friendship behavior. Individual characteristics such as selfishness, stubbornness, and poor social skills further exacerbated these dynamics.

In terms of nurturing approaches, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play an essential role in addressing this phenomenon through preventive, curative, and rehabilitative patterns. The preventive approach was implemented by internalizing religious values through lessons on morality, Qur'an recitations, and other religious activities. One PAI teacher explained:

"I always emphasize the importance of ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood). We should never belittle our friends. If there is a problem, I usually talk privately or in groups, using a religious approach."

The curative approach was carried out through Islamic counseling, both individually and in groups, targeting students directly involved in toxic friendships. Meanwhile, the rehabilitative approach was realized through positive activities, such as teamwork in extracurricular programs, congregational prayers, and student mentoring. Another PAI teacher added:

"Activities like congregational prayers, group projects, and mentoring are directed so that the students learn cooperation instead of bringing each other down."

Collaboration between PAI teachers, school counselors, and the school administration strengthened the effectiveness of this guidance.

These findings align with the Need to Belong theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which states that individuals have a fundamental need to be accepted within a group. When this need is not fulfilled in a healthy way, adolescents tend to remain in harmful relationships to avoid loneliness. In the context of SMPT Darul Dakwah, the formation of circles reflects the desire to be accepted, but this need was expressed in unhealthy ways. This phenomenon also corresponds with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that microsystems such as family, peers, and school significantly shape adolescents' social behavior.

The research findings also reinforce Amin and Wajdi (2020), who demonstrated that communication patterns in toxic friendships tend to involve excessive criticism and lack of empathy. Similarly, Zubaidah, Yeni, and Irman (2022) confirmed that toxic friendships lower students' self-esteem and cause emotional distress. The study also resonates with Badriyah's (2022) research in Islamic boarding schools, which revealed patterns of insulting, gossiping, and excessive emotional dependence among student circles. However, the study at SMPT Darul Dakwah provides new insights by highlighting the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers as religious mentors who use Islamic approaches to address this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

The research at SMPT Darul Dakwah reveals that toxic friendship is a significant social issue among students, manifesting in cliques, exclusion, bullying, and emotional manipulation that negatively affect academic achievement and psychological well-being. Contributing factors include family background, weak parent-child communication, peer influence, and excessive social media use that fosters gossip, envy, and low self-esteem. To address this, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a key role through preventive efforts such as instilling Islamic values and noble character, curative approaches via counseling, and rehabilitative strategies that promote teamwork and respect. The study concludes that these approaches are effective but require collaboration with Guidance and Counseling teachers, schools, and parents, alongside the development of sustainable character-building programs and the integration of Islamic values in learning to cultivate healthy, supportive friendships.

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