

COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR IN TOXIC FRIENDSHIP OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITAS ISLAM RIAU

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Abstract

Communication behaviors of toxic friendships happen when people in a *friendship circle* claim they are "friends" but treat the other harshly. This research aims to explore communication behavior in this toxic circle. This research used descriptive qualitative with non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation as data collection techniques to understand the matter. Data was analyzed in three steps: reduction, serving, and conclusion. The result found that the core problem of toxicity in friendship lies in different perspectives on what is considered a degrading word. For instance, one of the individuals used the word to greet the other and saw it as a sign of friendliness, while the other felt degraded. According to the data analysis from informants, the toxic friendship communication behavior experienced by the informant was verbal criticism or belittling, lack of empathy, and harsh words—non-verbal forms such as silent treatment, facial expressions, and stubbornness. Then, the impacts experienced by the victim are anger, low self-esteem, and uncomfortableness.

Keywords: communication behavior, *Toxic Friendship*, college students

INTRODUCTION

The difference in perspectives and opinions in a friendship is a casual dynamic in the friendship process. The emergence of conflict between individuals is caused by differences in perception, lifestyle, and appearance, and this influence influences a person's behavior and lifestyle (Sejati et al., 2023).

Friendship can bring harm and good things at the same time. People will be influenced to become better when they are friends with good people in a good environment and vice versa. This is in line with Coleman's statement that the level of self-acceptance shown in a close relationship between two or more people, which involves vulnerability to each other, can determine the quality of a friendship (in Sejati et al., 2023).

Toxic friends have signs such as being selfish, lacking affection for friends, lying, inconsistent speech, joking out of bounds, not being trustworthy, and acting or behaving rudely, ultimately leading to conflict. Having a dangerous relationship like this can then cause individuals to feel tired both physically and mentally due to the stress caused by a toxic friendship environment (Jonathan et al., 2022). As an addition, Jan Yager stated that toxic friendships (or negative friendships) can make a person depressed, causing anger, insecurity, and anxiety. This also includes negative thoughts and pessimism, deep hatred, envy, negative criticism, endless sadness, and frustration. *Friends* who influence negative things must be watched out for (Sejati et al., 2023).

Campuses are environments that are rich in social interactions and individual relationships. An active campus social life is often where social relationships grow and develop. This environment facilitates interaction between individuals with diverse backgrounds and personalities. This makes the campus a suitable place to understand the dynamics of friendship relationships, including toxic friendships. On campus, the researcher can easily reach informants with different experiences regarding friendship, both positive and *toxic* or negative.

This research began with researchers conducting a pilot study regarding the friendships of several students at Universitas Islam Riau. The pilot results show that friendships on campus are toxic, as some students often receive constant criticism and harsh words and usually disappear.

This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how toxic communication occurs in friendships so that readers are aware of the symptoms or signs of toxic friendship so that they can avoid and not carry out toxic treatment towards their friendship group.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is communication between two people experiencing certain stages of interaction and relationships, starting from the level of familiarity to the level of separation, which repeats itself repeatedly (Anggraini et al., 2022). Interpersonal communication refers to the way people communicate with others. Interpersonal communication is the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages to exchange ideas, exchange information, find personal information, and fulfill individual needs conveyed by the sender of the message to the recipient. Interpersonal communication depends on existing facts and is usually carried out by people who know each other (Arbi et al., 2021).

Communication Behavior

Communication behavior is all a person's verbal and non-verbal behavior. According to Kwick in Notoatmojo (2003), behavior is the actions or actions of an organism that can be observed and even studied (Amir & Wajdi, 2020).

Verbal communication is communication that uses words, spoken or written. Usually, communication occurs directly face-to-face or can include media intermediaries such as telephone, social media, or other media (Mustofa et al., 2021).

Nonverbal communication is communication that is presented in nonverbal form, which is permanent and always present. Nonverbal communication is more honest in expressing what you want to convey. Nonverbal communication can be represented by symbols such as gestures, colors, gestures, facial expressions and intonation, tone of voice, and so on (Kustiawan et al., 2022).

Toxic Friendship

Toxic friendship can occur if the friendship experienced causes negative emotions in a person. Instead of being supportive, this shows a feeling of helplessness, and if left unchecked, it will get worse. This causes problems such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and depression (Zulfah et al., 2023).

According to Jan Yager, toxic friendship can be called false friendship. Toxic friendship is a type of friendship that is destructive and dangerous and is one-way. This pseudo-friendship does not want to share or judge each other and always feels right (Sejati et al., 2023). Jan Yager stated that several characteristics of a toxic friendship have been detailed: criticism, lack of empathy, stubbornness, and dependence.

Toxic Friendships, according to Prof. Victoria Andrea Muniz Serra, are those who say the words to be friends, but their actions will cause pain because their behavior is not what we expect in a friendship (Ardha Kesuma, in Dalimunthe et al., 2024)

METHODOLOGY

This research uses descriptive qualitative research methods. The subjects in this research were students at Universitas Islam Riau who had or were experiencing, through their claim, a toxic friendship. Subjects in this study used a purposive sampling technique. According to Arikunto, 2006 purposive sampling is a sampling technique that is not based on random, regional, or strata but on considerations that focus on certain objectives formulated in advance by the researcher (Lenaini, 2021).

In this research, the data collection techniques used were non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The data analysis technique in this research is source triangulation. The data analysis technique in this research uses the Milles & Huberman model, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion.

Table 1. Informants

No	Name	Faculty	Friendship Duration	Explanation
1.	I.A	<i>Ilmu Komunikasi</i>	4 year	Victim
2.	N.M.W	<i>Manajemen</i>	3 year	Victim
3.	M.S	<i>Hukum</i>	4 year	Victim

4.	D.D	<i>Ilmu Komunikasi</i>	4 year	Victim
5.	S	<i>Ilmu Komunikasi</i>	4 year	Victim
6.	D.Y	<i>Ilmu Komunikasi</i>	4 year	Offender
7.	S.N	<i>Ilmu Komunikasi</i>	4 year	Offender

Source: Researcher's Data, 2024

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The informants in this research were students at the Universitas Islam Riau. 7 informants have been carried out in observation and interviews. Five of the seven informants were *the victims* of the toxic friendship, and two of the informants were the ones who carried out the toxicity of the friendship.

The victims showed a sense of inferiority in the friendship while the other person performed dominating energy. For example, it took a while for them to tell the other party they were uncomfortable and consider the other emotions more than themselves. The results of this research describe how toxic friendship communication behavior performs in the informants' groups, verbally and non-verbally. As a matter of information, the impact caused by the friendship will also be covered in this part.

The friendship between students in this research began with long-distance friendship when COVID-19 hit. Conversation is limited through media communication.

The friendships of the informants in this research were bonded through mediated communication in the first couple of semesters (approximately 1 year). In this group, they began to choose each other to be friends. However, when lecturers started to be face-to-face, these friendships developed into toxic ones. So, the toxicity was not felt at the beginning of the friendship.

Apart from that, researchers found that toxic communication behavior lies in different perceptions and values between the victim and the perpetrator on using *swear words* in conversation. The swear words that have been said by the perpetrator verbally were: *pantek*, *anjing*, and *bodoh* (all in mix with the local and Indonesian languages) to the victims in their casual conversation as part of the sentence and sometimes as greetings.

According to the informants who have been interviewed as victims, they once stated to the perpetrator how wrong swear words are to be used at them. However, they got a cold reply. The perpetrator said that the victim was too stiff and could not understand the concept that this was a form of intimacy with her. The researcher cross-checked this answer with the said perpetrator, and she agreed with her statement. She said, *"It is a joke..."*. Researchers conclude that the perpetrator acted unaware that everyone was raised in a different environment.

However, that does not mean they can be said to be trapped. The informants in this study knew they were being treated wrongly but were still in it. Several informants knew or had felt that the friendship was toxic, but they thought the friendship would be changed shortly. This change did not come, even though the friendship relationship

persisted; several informants simply decided to reduce interaction or maintain boundaries in the friendship.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN TOXIC FRIENDSHIP

Criticize and Belittle

According to the interviews with informants, researchers identified forms of humiliation received from informants, such as negative criticism and being called ugly. Informant was once called tacky in their makeup, criticized for having acne and excessive sense of fashion, and even body-shamed by correcting the height of the victims.

Criticism in this term that the group members have felt has negatively affected the self-esteem of the people inside. The victims felt degraded in their self-confidence and kept questioning their decision not to appear tacky. All for not getting an evaluation from the perpetrator.

Apathetic

From the interview, researchers identified a lack of empathy from the perpetrator despite the condition of members of the group. She despised one's financial difficulties and said there was no sense of togetherness. Hence, the absence of interpersonal communication efforts within the group caused weaknesses in closure and the quality of connectedness in the group..

Harsh Words

From the data collection results, researchers identified harsh words received from informants, namely using the words “....njing” and “babi” that refer to animals such as dogs and pigs as a greeting, which is considered inappropriate in Indonesia. Then “*pantek*”, which also means *vulgarity in the Indonesian language*, was used as an accessory sentence, and so on, like what DY used against IA, who used the word dog as a greeting via WhatsApp or in person. Meanwhile, S received a dog greeting from his friend directly.

The words dog and pig in the sentence above are forms of abusive language that fall into the animal category. The use of dog and pig as harsh words is associated with the bad qualities of these animals. So, it can be concluded that using the word dog has a negative meaning (Muhammad Fikri Salim & Iman, 2022).

Picture 1
Screenshot via WhatsApp victim and subject



Source: Screenshot via Whatsapp (2024)

TOXIC FRIENDSHIP'S COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR NONVERBAL

Silent Treatment

From the interviews, researchers identified silent treatment obtained from informants, namely, when the perpetrator felt that the victim's opinion did not match his opinion, the perpetrator would carry out silent treatment or silence the victim. From this silent treatment, the perpetrator does not tell what he is feeling, but the perpetrator hopes that the victim will know what he is feeling. James Alturch, the author of *The Power of Yes and the Power of No*, said that ignoring someone is the worst way to solve a problem (Amalia et al., 2023).

Stubbornness

Stubbornness in toxic friendships in this research refers to the nature or behavior of a person in a friendship relationship, which shows an unwillingness to change his opinion or views, even though the advice or input is given to be for his good. However, they still ignore and do not want to hear the input.

Facial Expressions

From the results of observing nonverbal behavior in these friendships. Researchers only saw that when they were talking to each other, the perpetrator was furrowing his forehead with a sour face as if annoyed. This made the atmosphere awkward, but none of his friends annoyed the perpetrator that night, so one of them asked, "Why haven't you been in such a good mood?" The perpetrator answered, "It is okay," then smiled without telling what he felt.

Based on the explanations above, it can be concluded that the results of this research reveal that communication behavior in toxic friendship circles, as experienced by several informants, includes various forms of verbal communication, such as criticism or belittling, no empathy, and harsh words. Apart from that, the nonverbal aspects of toxic friendship can be seen in behaviors such as silent treatment, stubbornness, and facial expressions.

THE IMPACT OF TOXIC FRIENDSHIP BEHAVIOR IN INFORMANTS' FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

From some of the toxic friendship behaviors above, toxic friendships will hurt the friendship group. One of the parties will become a victim. The impact of toxic friendships that several informants experienced was feeling uncomfortable, having difficulty making decisions, and feeling irritated or angry.

Low Self-Confidence

Based on the research results, the impacts experienced by the informants included low self-confidence, which made them depressed, and difficulty in making decisions. This is due to a lack of support, so they feel the decisions are wrong. Apart from that, one of

the informants had visited a psychologist to find out what was wrong with him or his relationship with his friends.

Anger or Annoyance

Anger can be considered a very strong behavioral potential, which reflects deep emotions that arise and are felt within a person. As is the case based on information obtained from several informants, they experienced intense feelings of irritation and anger towards the attitude of their friends. These feelings arise as a response to certain actions or behaviors that are considered inappropriate, giving rise to anger.

Discomfort

The feeling of discomfort experienced by victims when in their friend group can be very disturbing. As felt by informants IA and MS, the impact of this situation was the emergence of deep discomfort when they had to interact within the friendship group. When these group meetings occur, their discomfort affects not only their experience of friendship but also their mood.

From several explanations presented, it is clear that communication behavior related to toxic friendships has a significant impact. The impact of toxic friendship should not be considered trivial because if it is allowed to continue, this can cause anger, reduced affection, and various other forms of negative behavior. Therefore, the impact of toxic friendships must be taken seriously and cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSION

The toxic friendship verbal communication behavior experienced by the informant included criticism or belittling, lack of empathy, and use of harsh words. Nonverbally, the toxic behavior experienced by the informants was shown through silent treatment, stubbornness, and facial expressions. This verbal and nonverbal toxic friendship behavior shows that the informant's friendship relationship is unhealthy and detrimental, where one party benefits. In contrast, the other party feels disadvantaged, thus causing the relationship to become toxic.

The impact of toxic friendship communication behavior in the informant's friendship group is anger or irritation that arises because of the perpetrator's attitude, low self-confidence, and feelings of discomfort in the victim. So this impact affects the informant's self-quality, such as having difficulty making decisions because there is no support from those around him. So, the negative effects of toxic friendships cannot be ignored.

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