

Peer Support for Final-Year Students: A Phenomenological Study in The Context of *Sét tong Dârâ-Trétan Dhibi'* Value

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how final-year university students interpret the local Madurese value of *sét tong dârâ-trétan dhibi'* as manifested through peer interactions and social support within informal spaces such as coffee shops. The research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture participants' live experiences in dealing with academic pressure, particularly during the thesis completion period. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with three main criteria: (1) final-year students (minimum seven semester); (2) actively involved in meaningful peer support interactions (emotional, informational, or academic) within gathering places such as cafes or coffee stalls; and (3) willing to openly share their experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and non-participant observations. The analysis was conducted continuously through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings reveal that cafes and coffee shops have shifted in meaning beyond leisure spaces, transforming into essential safe spaces for final-year students. These spaces represent the cultural essence of *sét tong dârâ-trétan dhibi'*, reflecting solidarity and peer brotherhood amid academic stress. Peer interactions in these setting are not merely casual conversations but constitute reciprocal exchanges of life experiences and crucial social support that contribute to mental well-being and academic persistence. Thus, *sét tong dârâ-trétan dhibi'* serves as a form of collective coping rooted in local cultural solidarity.

Introduction

Final-year students are situated in a demanding academic transition marked by cognitive, emotional, and social pressure. Thesis completion often becomes a major source of stress because it requires research competence, academic writing skills, time management, and psychological endurance. Students at this stage also face expectations from supervisors, family members, peers, and institutional requirements (Handara, 2022). These pressures may increase anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and vulnerability to reduced psychological well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). Recent studies show that academic stress is closely associated with students' mental health, coping capacity, and academic persistence (Barbayannis et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding how final-year students cope with thesis-related pressure is important for developing more responsive support systems.

In responding to academic pressure, social support becomes a key protective resource for students. Peer support is particularly meaningful because students often feel more understood by friends who experience similar academic struggles (Brazill et al., 2021). Through peer interaction, students can share emotional burdens, exchange academic strategies, and receive validation in a less judgmental atmosphere (Soto & Walsh, 2019). Peer relationships may also help students normalize thesis-related difficulties and reduce feelings of isolation (Gao et al., 2025). Previous

studies indicate that peer support can strengthen coping, reduce psychological distress, and improve students' emotional adjustment in higher education contexts (Simmons et al., 2023). Thus, peer support may function as an informal psychological buffer during the thesis completion process.

However, peer support does not always occur within formal institutional settings such as counseling centers, mentoring programs, or structured peer-counseling services. In many student communities, support emerges naturally through everyday conversations, spontaneous gatherings, and informal social encounters (Zhang et al., 2024). These informal interactions may feel more accessible because they are flexible, familiar, and less hierarchical than formal services (Teng & Bui, 2020). For final-year students, informal peer interaction can provide emotional comfort as well as practical academic assistance. Students may discuss thesis revisions, supervisor feedback, research problems, and strategies for maintaining motivation. This shows that informal peer support has both emotional and academic functions in students' coping processes (Fang et al., 2022).

Cafés and coffee shops have increasingly become meaningful informal spaces for university students. These places are no longer used merely for consumption but also function as spaces for studying, discussion, social connection, and emotional regulation (Li et al., 2025). For students, cafés may provide a relaxed atmosphere that supports self-disclosure, motivation, and a sense of belonging (Taştan & Polatoğlu Serter, 2026). The neutral and flexible character of cafés allows students to express frustration, discuss academic uncertainty, and receive peer encouragement more naturally (Ni & Ishii, 2023). Recent studies show that cafés and eating-drinking places can operate as informal learning spaces, third places, and social environments that support well-being (Fung & Chan, 2025). Therefore, cafés and coffee shops may become safe spaces for peer-based academic and emotional support.

In the Madurese cultural context, peer support cannot be separated from local values of kinship, solidarity, and moral responsibility (Fahmi & Jufri, 2020; Windari & Ambarwati, 2025). One relevant cultural value is *setlong dâra-trétan dhibi*, which reflects a sense of brotherhood beyond biological family ties (Hasan & Qomariyah, 2023). This value positions others as close kin who should be cared for, protected, and supported during difficult situations. In student interactions, this cultural meaning may shape how peers listen, help, motivate, and accompany one another during thesis completion (Salamet, et al. 2025). Recent studies on Madurese society describe *taretan dhibi* as an expression of social closeness, emotional attachment, collective identity, and religious moderation (Mustajab, et al. 2024). Thus, peer interaction in cafés or coffee shops may be understood not only as psychological support but also as culturally embedded solidarity.

Although peer support has been widely studied, most previous research has focused on formal or institutional contexts (Olana & Tefera, 2022; Perkins et al., 2019). Less attention has been given to spontaneous peer support that emerges in informal spaces such as cafés and coffee shops (Greenwood et al., 2017). This creates an empirical gap in understanding how students construct emotional safety, academic solidarity, and collective coping in everyday social environments (Parmar, et al. 2025). The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological exploration of peer support among final-year students through the Madurese cultural value of *setlong dâra-trétan dhibi*. This study conceptualizes cafés and coffee shops as informal peer-counseling ecosystems shaped by local cultural solidarity. Therefore, this study aims to explore how final-year students interpret *setlong dâra-trétan dhibi* as manifested in peer support within cafés and coffee shops as safe spaces for coping with thesis-related academic pressure.

Methods

Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. A phenomenological design was selected because it allows researchers to explore participants' lived experiences and the subjective meanings they construct in relation to peer support during the thesis completion process. The focus of this study was not to measure variables quantitatively, but to gain an in-depth understanding of how final-year students experience, interpret, and give meaning to social support in informal settings. This design was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine how the local cultural value of *setlong dâra-trétan dhibi* is understood and manifested in students' peer interactions. In particular, the study focused on cafés and coffee shops as informal social spaces where students share academic pressure, emotional concerns, and practical support during thesis completion.

Participants

The participants in this study were six final-year students who were at least in their seventh semester and were actively involved in peer-support interactions in cafés or coffee shops. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which enabled the researcher to identify individuals who had direct and relevant experiences related to the focus of the study. The inclusion criteria were as follows: first, participants had to be final-year students, at least in the seventh semester; second, they had to have meaningful experience in peer support, including emotional, informational, or academic support; third, they had to be actively involved in gatherings at cafés or coffee shops as spaces for discussion and support during thesis completion; and fourth, they had to be willing to participate in in-depth interviews openly and voluntarily. The number of six participants was considered adequate for a phenomenological study because the primary emphasis was on the depth and richness of lived experience rather than broad population representation. All participants were selected based on their capacity to provide detailed accounts of how peer support was experienced and culturally interpreted in informal student spaces.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' meanings of cafés or coffee shops as safe spaces, the forms of emotional, informational, and academic support exchanged among students, and the manifestation of *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi*' in peer solidarity. The interview format allowed the researcher to use guiding questions while also giving participants sufficient space to narrate their experiences freely and reflectively. In addition to interviews, non-participant observation was conducted to directly observe patterns of social interaction among final-year students when they gathered in cafés or coffee shops. During observation, the researcher did not participate in the students' activities but focused on capturing verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional expressions during thesis-related discussions, and spontaneous forms of peer support that emerged naturally in the setting.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed continuously using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data reduction stage, interview and observation data were selected, focused, organized, and categorized according to the themes relevant to the research questions. In the data display stage, the reduced data were presented in the form of thematic narratives and finding tables to facilitate interpretation and comparison across participants. In the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher identified recurring patterns, interpreted the meanings emerging from participants' experiences, and continuously verified the findings against the field data. To ensure trustworthiness, this study used source triangulation by comparing information from different participants and technique triangulation by comparing interview data with observational findings. Ethical principles were also applied by informing participants about the study objectives, interview procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time; all participants provided consent before the interviews, and their identities were anonymized using initials to protect confidentiality and privacy.

Results

The findings indicate that cafés or coffee shops were no longer perceived merely as places for consumption or leisure. For final-year students, these spaces had shifted into meaningful informal social environments where they could manage academic pressure, share emotional burdens, and receive peer-based support during thesis completion. The Madurese cultural value of *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi*' was also reflected in students' peer interactions through solidarity, emotional presence, academic assistance, and collective coping. Based on interviews and non-participant observations involving six informants, five major themes emerged from the data: cafés or coffee shops as safe spaces, cultural solidarity through *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi*', emotional support, instrumental academic support, and informational support (see table 1).

Cafés or Coffee Shops as Safe Spaces for Final-Year Students

The first theme shows that cafés or coffee shops were experienced as safe spaces by final-year students. Participants described these places as neutral, relaxed, and less judgmental environments where they could express academic stress more freely. For them, drinking coffee was not merely a lifestyle routine but also a symbolic invitation to gather, listen, and share burdens related to thesis completion. One participant stated,

Coffee is a kind of code. For example, if a friend says, "Let's go for coffee," we already know they're having problems. Especially now that we're focused on our thesis, we're definitely hanging out more often, drinking coffee. We both understand and share the struggles of writing a thesis. There are several coffee shops we frequent; they've become our bases for gathering, whether to vent about personal issues or discuss our thesis (W1/MA).

The account of informant W1/MA suggests that going to cafés or coffee shops carried a symbolic meaning beyond the act of drinking coffee. The phrase "let's go for coffee" functioned as an implicit social code among peers, signaling that someone might be experiencing personal or academic difficulties and needed companionship. In the context of final-year students working on their theses, coffee shops were described as familiar "bases" where students could gather, express frustration, discuss personal concerns, and share the difficulties of thesis completion. This experience indicates that cafés and coffee shops operated as informal peer-support spaces. Students did not need to explicitly state that they were under pressure, because the invitation to have coffee was already understood as an emotional signal. Such shared understanding reflects a sense of solidarity, mutual recognition, and emotional closeness among students facing similar academic demands. In this sense, coffee shops became psychologically safe environments where students could feel accepted, listened to, and free from judgment.

Another participant emphasized that coffee shops helped reduce stress after receiving thesis revisions from supervisors. The participant explained,

"Writing a thesis can be a headache, especially once you've received revision notes from your advisor. When you're overwhelmed with revisions, you'll always go out for coffee or hang out with friends. Once you're together and sharing, the stress feels less overwhelming. Having coffee with friends is like resetting your mind, making your head feel lighter and ready to start revising (W2/AC).

This finding suggests that informant W2/AC highlights the role of coffee shops as spaces for emotional recovery after stressful academic encounters, particularly after receiving revision feedback from supervisors. The informant described thesis writing as mentally exhausting, especially when revision notes created feelings of confusion, pressure, and fatigue. In such moments, going out for coffee with friends became a way to reduce emotional burden, regain composure, and restore readiness to continue working on the thesis. This account suggests that coffee shops served as informal spaces for emotional decompression. Through conversation, peer presence, and shared reflection, thesis-related stress became more manageable. The metaphor of "resetting the mind" indicates that drinking coffee with friends was not merely a recreational activity, but also a coping mechanism that helped students reorganize their thoughts, reduce psychological tension, and rebuild their motivation to resume academic work.

Taken together, the two informants' accounts show that cafés or coffee shops were experienced not merely as places of consumption or lifestyle expression, but as meaningful safe spaces for final-year students. For W1/MA, coffee shops represented spaces of peer solidarity, where students could recognize emotional signals, share burdens, and provide informal support without fear of judgment. For W2/AC, coffee shops functioned as spaces of psychological recovery, helping students relieve academic stress after difficult thesis-related experiences. Thus, cafés and coffee shops became important informal settings where final-year students could express academic pressure, receive social support, and collectively process the emotional demands of thesis completion.

Emotional Support as the Core of Peer Support

The third theme indicates that emotional support was the most dominant form of peer support in cafés or coffee shops. From the perspective of Person-Centered Counseling Theory, this support can be understood as an informal helping process built on empathy, acceptance, active listening, and psychological presence. Students did not position their peers as professional counselors, but they experienced peer interaction as a safe relational space where they could express academic pressure, emotional exhaustion, and confusion about thesis revisions without fear of being judged. One participant stated:

Having coffee isn't just about hanging out and being stylish in a cafe, but more of a moment to support each other. For those of us struggling with our thesis, we feel like we share the same fate. So, when a friend finishes their assignment, we usually have coffee together, share our revisions, and support each other. (W4/AK).

This statement shows that gathering in cafés or coffee shops was interpreted as an emotionally meaningful moment of mutual support. The phrase "we share the same fate" reflects a shared academic identity among final-year students who faced similar thesis-related struggles. From a person-centered perspective, this shared identity created a relational climate of empathic understanding, where students felt that their experiences were recognized and validated by peers

who genuinely understood their situation. The support offered was not directive or judgmental, but emerged through companionship, listening, and emotional presence.

At the same time, this finding can also be explained through Social Support Theory, particularly emotional support. The students provided encouragement, empathy, and validation when their peers felt overwhelmed by thesis demands. The presence of friends helped reduce the feeling of being alone and allowed students to experience their academic burden as something shared rather than faced individually. In this sense, emotional support functioned as a psychological buffer that helped students regulate stress and regain motivation to continue their thesis work. Participants also reported that peer relationships in cafés or coffee shops allowed them to show vulnerability without shame. One participant explained:

There is no such thing as pride, shame, or anything like that. If we feel like we're having trouble and don't know how to revise, we don't hesitate to ask a friend. They always respect helping to find a way out, providing motivation, inviting them to discuss thesis revisions together (W5/BS).

The statement of W5/BS highlights the importance of unconditional positive regard in peer support. Students felt accepted even when they admitted confusion, difficulty, or academic weakness. This condition is central to person-centered counseling because individuals are more likely to express themselves openly when they feel respected and not judged. The absence of shame in asking for help indicates that the peer environment had become psychologically safe, allowing students to disclose vulnerability and seek support naturally. This finding also reflects the integration of emotional, instrumental, and informational support. Friends did not only listen or comfort one another, but also helped find solutions, gave motivation, and discussed thesis revisions together. Therefore, peer support in this study cannot be reduced to emotional companionship alone. It represents a person-centered peer helping process supported by concrete forms of social support. Through cafés and coffee shops, students experienced a relational space where empathy, acceptance, practical help, and academic information were exchanged in a culturally meaningful way.

Taken together, the findings show that emotional support was central to peer support among final-year students. From a Person-Centered Counseling Theory perspective, cafés and coffee shops became informal helping spaces where students experienced empathy, acceptance, genuineness, and psychological presence. From a Social Support Theory perspective, these interactions provided emotional, instrumental, and informational resources that helped students cope with thesis-related stress. Therefore, peer support in this study can be understood as a culturally embedded, counseling-like support process that strengthens students' emotional resilience and academic persistence.

Table 1. Main findings of *séttong dârâ-trétan dhibi'*.

Main finding	Manifestation of finding	Informant quotation
Cafés or coffee shops as safe spaces	Cafés or coffee shops were interpreted as safe spaces for reducing academic stress and sharing thesis-related pressure informally	“Kopi itu semacam kode. Misal ada teman yang bilang ayo ngopi, itu kita sudah paham kalau dia pasti ada masalah. Apalagi sekarang lagi fokus-fokusnya ngerjakan skripsi, pasti makin sering ngumpul, ngopi. Sudah sama-sama paham, sama-sama merasakan susah ngerjakan skripsi. Adalah beberapa tempat ngopi yang sering kami kunjungi, sudah seperti markas kami buat ngumpul entah untuk lepas uneg-uneg masalah pribadi atau bahas skripsi.” (W1/MA)
Cultural solidarity through <i>séttong dârâ-trétan dhibi'</i>	Local cultural values of brotherhood were manifested in loyalty, emotional sensitivity, shared struggle, and the commitment not to let peers struggle alone.	“Kami bukan sekedar teman, tapi sudah seperti saudara. Kami saling terbuka, saling berbagi, misal sudah mandek ngerasa buntu untuk lanjutin ngerjakan skripsi, kami bilang apa adanya, tidak ada yang ditutupi.” (W3/RF)
Emotional support	Peer support was expressed through empathy, active listening, emotional validation, and motivation when students faced thesis revisions.	“Skripsi itu bikin pusing, terutama kalau sudah dapat catatan revisi dari pembimbing. Kalau sudah mumet mikirin revisian pasti dibawa ngopi, ngumpul sama teman-teman. Kalau sudah ngumpul saling sharing jadi ngerasa nggak terlalu mumet. Ngopi dengan teman-teman ibarat ngereset otak, kepala jadi lebih ringan untuk mulai ngerjain revisian lagi.” (W2/AC)

Instrumental academic support	Students provided practical assistance by correcting thesis chapters, finding references, discussing revisions, and helping with data analysis.	“Ngopi bukan sekedar buat nongkrong-nongkrong gaya-gayaan di kafe, tapi lebih ke momen untuk saling dukung. Bagi kami yang sesama pejuang skripsi, kami merasa punya nasib yang sama. Jadi kalau ada teman yang habis bimbingan, kami biasanya ngopi bareng, kita sharing-sharing revisiannya apa, saling kasih support lah.” (W4/AK)
Informational support	Students exchanged strategies for writing the thesis, selecting methods, understanding supervisors’ expectations, and completing thesis examination procedures.	“Nggak ada kata gengsi, malu, atau semacamnya. Kalau ngerasa kesusahan, nggak ngerti lagi buat ngerevisi, kita nggak lagi sungkan untuk nanya ke teman. Mereka selalu respect ngebantu nyari jalan keluar, dikasi motivasi, diajak diskusi bareng bahas revisian skripsi.” (W5/BS)

Cultural Solidarity through *Séttong Dârâ–Trétan Dhibi’*

The second theme concerns the manifestation of *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* in students’ peer solidarity. This local Madurese value refers to a sense of kinship and brotherhood that goes beyond biological family relations. In the context of final-year students, this value appeared in loyalty, emotional closeness, shared struggle, and a commitment not to let peers face academic difficulties alone. One participant stated,

We’re not just friends, but like brothers. We’re open with each other and share things with each other. For example, if we’re stuck or feeling stuck on our thesis, we tell it like it is, without hiding anything (W3/RF).

This statement reflects W3/RF shows that peer relationships among final-year students were understood as more than ordinary friendship. The statement “we are not just friends, but like brothers” reflects the internalization of *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* as a cultural value that transforms peer connection into a form of symbolic kinship. Within this relationship, students felt able to be open, honest, and emotionally transparent when facing difficulties in completing their theses. This interpretation suggests that *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* created a relational climate marked by trust, loyalty, and shared vulnerability. Students did not need to maintain a strong or perfect image in front of their peers. Instead, they could openly admit confusion, stagnation, or academic frustration. In this sense, peer solidarity became a culturally grounded support system that allowed students to share their academic struggles without fear of being judged or misunderstood.

The value of *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* was also visible in students’ sensitivity toward their peers’ emotional conditions. Participants described how they could recognize academic pressure even when their friends did not explicitly express it. One participant explained,

Sometimes, we understand without even saying a word. If one of us, who’s usually lively, suddenly becomes quieter, or if we discuss their thesis progress, they divert to something else, we all know they’re stressed. When that happens, we’ll talk to them. It’s not about judging, but it’s about caring so that no one feels alone. We’re all in this together (W6/AW).

This finding shows that informant W6/AW highlights another dimension of *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’*, namely emotional sensitivity toward peers. The informant described how students could recognize signs of stress even when their friends did not directly express their difficulties. Changes in behavior, such as becoming quieter or avoiding conversations about thesis progress, were interpreted as emotional signals that required care and attention. This account shows that cultural solidarity was expressed not only through direct conversation, but also through attentive presence and emotional awareness. The phrase “it is not about judging, but about caring” indicates that students approached their peers with empathy rather than criticism. Such spontaneous care reflects a collective coping process in which students felt responsible for one another’s emotional well-being. Therefore, *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* functioned as a cultural mechanism that encouraged students to notice, approach, and support peers who were experiencing academic pressure.

Taken together, the two informants’ accounts demonstrate that *séttong dârâ–trétan dhibi’* served as a cultural foundation for peer solidarity among final-year students. For W3/RF, this value was reflected in the transformation of friendship into symbolic kinship, enabling openness, trust, and shared academic struggle. For W6/AW, it appeared in emotional sensitivity, spontaneous care, and the collective commitment to ensure that no student faced thesis-related

pressure alone. Thus, *séttong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'* strengthened students' capacity for collective coping by creating peer relationships that were emotionally close, culturally meaningful, and psychologically supportive.

Table 2. Theoretical mapping of *séttong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'* in student peer support.

Aspect of <i>séttong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'</i>	Meaning in Student Peer Support	Key Concept in Person-Centered Counseling Theory
Sense of kinship	Friends are not perceived merely as peers, but as companions who share the same academic struggle.	Unconditional positive regard
Shared struggle	Students feel that they experience similar academic pressures, particularly in completing their undergraduate thesis.	Empathic understanding
Emotional solidarity	There is a sense of care, empathy, and willingness to encourage one another when facing difficulties.	Empathy and emotional validation
Mutual assistance	Support appears in concrete forms, such as helping with revisions, sharing references, or accompanying friends while working on their thesis.	Facilitative relationship
Social loyalty	Students feel that they should not let their friends struggle alone in difficult academic situations.	Genuine relationship / congruence

Discussion

The findings of this study show that peer support among final-year students was not merely a form of casual friendship or ordinary social interaction. Rather, it functioned as an informal helping relationship that provided emotional safety, academic assistance, and collective coping during thesis completion (Basque et al., 2026). Cafés and coffee shops were experienced as meaningful spaces where students could express pressure, disclose vulnerability, exchange academic strategies, and receive support from peers who shared similar struggles (Ferreira et al., 2021). These findings strengthen the understanding that peer support can operate outside formal counseling settings and may emerge naturally in everyday student environments. Recent evidence shows that peer support interventions in higher education can contribute to students' mental health and well-being, especially when students seek support from others who share similar academic and emotional experiences (Pointon-Haas et al., 2023). In this study, such support was shaped not only by students' academic needs, but also by the Madurese cultural value of *séttong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'*, which emphasizes brotherhood, solidarity, and mutual care.

From the perspective of person-centered counseling theory, the peer support found in this study reflects core conditions of a helping relationship, namely empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and psychological presence (Ort et al., 2023). Students felt safe to share their academic frustration because their peers responded with understanding rather than judgment (Stephens et al., 2026). This finding is consistent with recent person-centered literature showing that therapeutic relationship conditions, including acceptance and empathic understanding, are associated with clients' sense of authenticity and openness in the helping process (Bayliss-Conway et al., 2021). The findings show that invitations to drink coffee were often understood as emotional signals, indicating that a friend might need to be accompanied, listened to, or supported. This suggests that cafés and coffee shops became informal person-centered spaces where students could experience acceptance and emotional validation (Makhathini & Kanosvambhira, 2026). Although peers did not act as professional counselors, their empathic presence created a counseling-like atmosphere that helped students feel understood and less alone (Noegroho et al., 2026). The role of

cafés and coffee shops as safe spaces also demonstrates that psychological safety is not always produced by formal counseling rooms or institutional programs (Lee, 2022). In the experiences of participants, safety emerged from familiarity, equality, and the absence of hierarchy. Students could talk more freely because the café setting felt neutral, relaxed, and less intimidating than formal academic spaces (Maspul, 2025). This finding is important because final-year students often face pressure from supervisors, family expectations, institutional demands, and their own fear of failure (Krishna & Grund, 2025; Zheng et al., 2023). In such conditions, peer interaction in informal spaces can become a meaningful source of emotional relief. The café, therefore, functioned not only as a physical place, but also as a relational space where students could regain emotional balance before returning to their thesis work.

The findings also indicate that emotional support was the core of peer support among final-year students. This is strongly aligned with person-centered principles because emotional support was expressed through active listening, empathy, validation, and encouragement (EL-Awad et al., 2026). Participants described that they did not feel ashamed to admit confusion or ask for help because their peers respected them and responded supportively (Weston et al., 2026). This condition reflects unconditional positive regard, where individuals feel accepted even when they are struggling, confused, or unable to meet academic expectations (Doslea et al., 2025). Recent psychotherapy literature also emphasizes that positive regard involves warmth, acceptance, respect, and affirmation, which help individuals feel emotionally safe within a helping relationship (Ullah et al., 2023). In the thesis completion process, this kind of acceptance is crucial because students may experience self-doubt, anxiety, and fear of being perceived as academically weak (Córdova Olivera et al., 2023). Peer support helped reduce these negative feelings by providing a space where vulnerability was not treated as failure, but as a shared human experience (Wainwright et al., 2026). At the same time, Social Support Theory helps explain the specific forms of support exchanged among students (Ma et al., 2026). The findings show that peer support appeared in emotional, instrumental, and informational forms. Emotional support was reflected in empathy, encouragement, and the willingness to listen (Ríos Andrade et al., 2026). Instrumental support appeared in practical academic assistance, such as helping with thesis revisions, finding references, discussing supervisor feedback, and assisting with data analysis. Informational support emerged through the exchange of strategies, experiences, and knowledge about thesis procedures. These forms of support show that peer support was holistic. Students did not only comfort one another emotionally, but also helped each other move forward academically. This is in line with studies showing that perceived social support is associated with lower stress and better adjustment among university students (McLean et al., 2023).

The integration of person-centered counseling theory and social support theory provides a stronger interpretation of the findings. Person-centered counseling theory explains the quality of the relationship that made peer support meaningful (Cavé et al., 2024), while social support theory explains the forms of assistance that students exchanged. In other words, peer support became effective not only because students gave advice or shared information, but because these forms of support were delivered in a relational climate marked by empathy, acceptance, trust, and shared understanding (Aslan et al., 2025). Without such a person-centered climate, advice or academic assistance might be perceived as judgmental or pressuring. However, because the support emerged within close peer relationships, students experienced it as caring, respectful, and strengthening (Smith et al., 2022). Previous research also shows that social networks, social capital, and social support play an important role in students' academic success in higher education (Mishra, 2020). The cultural value of *sétong dârâ-trétan dhibi* further deepens the meaning of peer support in this study. This value positions peers not merely as friends, but as symbolic siblings who share emotional and moral responsibility for one another. The findings show that students were sensitive to changes in their friends' behavior, such as becoming quieter or avoiding conversations about thesis progress. This sensitivity reflects a culturally grounded form of empathy (Milovanović, 2026). Students did not wait for their peers to explicitly ask for help; instead, they noticed emotional signals and approached them with care. This shows that *sétong dârâ-trétan dhibi* strengthened the person-centered quality of peer support by encouraging emotional presence, nonjudgmental care, and collective responsibility.

These findings also contribute to the counseling literature by showing that peer support can be understood as a culturally embedded informal counseling process (Stanek & Lee, 2026). In many higher education contexts, student support is often discussed through formal services such as counseling centers, academic advising, or structured peer mentoring (Coman et al., 2026). However, this study shows that meaningful support may also occur in informal spaces where students naturally gather and build trust (Crisp et al., 2020). Cafés and coffee shops became micro-settings of peer helping, where students practiced listening, validating, motivating, and assisting one another. This does not mean that peer support should replace professional counseling. Rather, it suggests that peer support can complement formal counseling services by becoming an early layer of emotional and academic support (He et al., 2026). Program evaluation evidence suggests that student-led peer support services can be beneficial in university contexts,

particularly as accessible support systems for students experiencing stress and mental health concerns (Suresh et al., 2021). Practically, the findings suggest that universities should recognize the importance of informal peer-support ecosystems among final-year students (Yang et al., 2026). Counseling centers and academic departments may design peer-support programs that adopt person-centered principles, such as empathic listening, emotional validation, nonjudgmental communication, and referral awareness (Engeroff et al., 2026). Students can be trained to become supportive peers who know how to listen, provide encouragement, and recognize signs of serious psychological distress that require professional help (Colella et al., 2026). In addition, academic supervisors may encourage collaborative thesis communities where students can share progress, discuss obstacles, and support one another in healthy and constructive ways.

The findings also have cultural implications for counseling practice. In the Madurese context, local values such as *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'* can be used as cultural resources to strengthen counseling and peer-support interventions. Rather than treating culture as a background variable, counseling practice can integrate local values of brotherhood, solidarity, and mutual care into support programs for students (Perron et al., 2024). This culturally responsive approach may make counseling services feel more familiar, acceptable, and meaningful for students (Li et al., 2007). Studies on Madurese social and religious life show that local practices can strengthen social solidarity, collective identity, and mutual responsibility within the community (Jannah et al., 2021; Jailani, 2024). By connecting person-centered counseling principles with local cultural values, universities can develop support systems that are both psychologically relevant and culturally grounded (Zamroni et al., 2022). However, this study also has limitations. The study involved six participants and focused on final-year students who experienced peer support in cafés or coffee shops. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all students or all cultural contexts. The study also focused on students' lived experiences, so it did not measure the psychological outcomes of peer support quantitatively. Future studies may involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, compare peer support across different cultural settings, or examine the relationship between peer support, academic stress, resilience, and thesis completion outcomes. Future research may also explore how informal peer support can be integrated with university counseling services without reducing its natural, flexible, and culturally meaningful character.

Overall, this study demonstrates that peer support among final-year students is a meaningful informal helping process grounded in empathy, acceptance, shared struggle, and cultural solidarity. Through the lens of person-centered counseling theory, peer support can be understood as a counseling-like relationship that provides psychological safety and emotional validation (Al Doghan & Zakariya, 2025). Through social support theory, it can be seen as a source of emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance. The value of *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'* enriches this process by framing peer relationships as brotherhood and collective responsibility. Thus, cafés and coffee shops are not merely leisure spaces, but culturally meaningful safe spaces where final-year students support one another in coping with the emotional and academic demands of thesis completion. This interpretation is consistent with recent studies showing that peer support in higher education is feasible, acceptable, and relevant for strengthening student well-being, especially when it is adapted to students' social and cultural contexts (Osborn et al., 2022).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that cafés and coffee shops have undergone a shift in meaning and function. They are no longer understood merely as recreational or consumption spaces, but have transformed into essential safe spaces for final-year students as they navigate academic pressure during thesis completion. As informal spaces, cafés and coffee shops provide a relaxed and neutral atmosphere that enables students to express stress, anxiety, and academic difficulties more comfortably. The local Madurese cultural value of *settong dêrâ-trétan dhibi'* is clearly manifested in the peer support developed among final-year students. This value of brotherhood strengthens solidarity and loyalty, positioning peers not merely as friends but as companions in a shared academic struggle who support one another in difficult situations.

The peer support that emerges in informal spaces such as cafés and coffee shops is holistic and reciprocal. It includes emotional support through empathy, active listening, and validation of feelings; instrumental support through assistance in reviewing thesis chapters and finding references; and informational support through the exchange of strategies and academic experiences. Thus, culturally grounded peer support functions as a collective coping mechanism that helps final-year students maintain their mental health while also supporting successful study completion. This study contributes to the field of Guidance and Counseling, particularly to the discourse on peer

counseling. The findings suggest that peer support is not limited to formal campus-based services, but can also grow naturally within informal socio-cultural spaces that are closely connected to students' everyday lives.

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Ayu Raudatul Jannah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Writing Original Draft, Supervision.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

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