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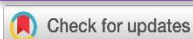
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Adolescent Empathy in Everyday School Interactions: A Qualitative Study in an Indonesian Junior Secondary School

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Abstract

Empathy is a multidimensional social-emotional capacity that is closely connected to adolescents' peer relationships and prosocial conduct, yet its everyday enactment may be constrained by interpersonal and contextual pressures. This qualitative descriptive study explored how students at Susteran Junior High School, Purwokerto, Indonesia, recognized peers' emotional states, translated empathic understanding into social action, interpreted empathy within friendship, and experienced barriers to empathic behavior. Eight students four from Grade 7 and four from Grade 8 participated in face-to-face guided interviews and school-context observations. Interview audio, researcher keyword notes, and observation notes were reviewed through descriptive coding, cross-informant comparison, and thematic grouping. Four themes were identified. Students described recognizing distress through facial expressions, silence, withdrawal, and behavioral change; responding through listening, encouragement, comfort, collaborative help, and problem-solving; and viewing empathy as a basis for safety, acceptance, equality, and mutual support in friendships. At the same time, shyness, fear of being misunderstood, limited self-confidence, academic workload, peer influence, and intensive social-media use were described as barriers to acting empathically. The findings suggest that empathy in this setting is best understood as a context-dependent practice that connects emotional awareness with prosocial action rather than as a uniformly expressed individual trait. Because the study involved eight students in one school and relied mainly on qualitative accounts, the findings are analytically informative but not statistically generalizable. School-based efforts should therefore combine repeated opportunities for perspective taking, supportive peer interaction, reflective dialogue, and adult role modelling while remaining sensitive to the social conditions that enable or inhibit empathic action.

Keywords: Adolescent Empathy; Character Education; Peer Relationships; Prosocial Behavior; School Social Interaction

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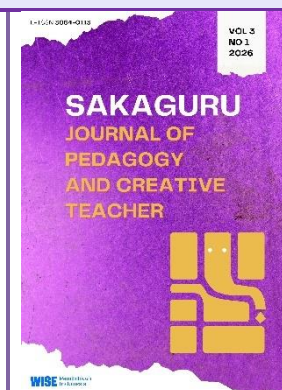
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INTRODUCTION

Empathy has become a central construct in research on adolescent development because it links the capacity to understand another person's perspective with the capacity to respond to another person's emotional condition. Contemporary accounts conceptualize empathy as multidimensional rather than as a single feeling: cognitive components involve perspective taking and recognition of another person's internal state, whereas affective components involve emotionally resonating with or caring about that state [1], [2], [3]. This distinction is especially important in school settings, where students must not only recognize that a peer is distressed but also decide whether, when, and how to respond in socially appropriate ways. During adolescence, these capacities continue to develop alongside changes in social cognition, emotion regulation, identity, and peer orientation, making school interactions a consequential context for observing how empathy is interpreted and enacted [4], [5], [6].

Empathy is also closely connected with prosocial behavior, although the relationship is neither automatic nor uniform. Longitudinal and meta-analytic evidence indicates that empathic concern and perspective taking are associated with helping, cooperation, and other forms of prosocial conduct, but the strength of these associations varies across developmental periods, social situations, and forms of empathy [6], [7], [8], [9]. A systematic review of adolescent empathy and prosocial development similarly shows that individual characteristics, family processes, peer contexts, and wider social environments interact in shaping whether empathic understanding becomes observable prosocial action [10]. This distinction matters educationally because students may be able to identify a friend's emotional state yet still hesitate to offer support because of embarrassment, uncertainty, competing demands, or concern about how peers will interpret their behavior.

Peer relationships are a particularly important setting for this developmental process. Meta-analytic and empirical studies show that supportive parent-child and peer relationships are associated with higher empathy, while secure peer attachment and positive friendship experiences can strengthen prosocial orientations and emotional responsiveness [11], [12], [13]. In adolescence, peer approval becomes increasingly salient, which means that peer groups can both enable and inhibit caring behavior. A student may be more willing to listen, comfort, or help when empathic action is socially accepted, but may withdraw when showing concern is perceived as intrusive, embarrassing, or inconsistent with peer-group norms. Empathy should therefore be examined not only as an individual psychological characteristic but also as a relational practice embedded in particular friendship cultures and school climates.

Schools are among the few social institutions in which adolescents repeatedly encounter peers from different backgrounds under shared norms, routines, and adult guidance. Evidence from school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) research demonstrates that structured opportunities to develop social awareness, perspective taking, relationship skills, and responsible decision making can improve social-emotional competencies and adjustment [14], [15]. Experiential programmes and empathy-focused interventions also indicate that role taking, guided reflection, cooperative activity, and explicit empathy training can strengthen empathy-related outcomes and prosocial behavior, although intervention effects depend on developmental fit, programme design, implementation quality, and outcome measurement [16], [17], [18], [19]. These findings support a view of empathy as educable, but they also caution against assuming that a single classroom activity will produce stable empathic behavior across situations.

The broader school environment also matters. School belonging, relational safety, and classroom climate shape whether students feel secure enough to communicate, disclose difficulty, and respond to peers, and meta-analytic evidence identifies belonging as a meaningful correlate of students' social and psychological adjustment [20], [21], [22]. In this respect, empathy can function simultaneously as an individual capacity and as part of a relational school ecology: students who feel accepted may be more willing to disclose distress, while classmates in supportive environments may be more likely to notice and respond constructively. Conversely, competitive pressures, social exclusion, fear of negative evaluation, or weak relational norms may constrain the expression of empathy even when students understand what an empathic response would look like.

Digital communication adds a further layer of complexity to adolescent empathy. Research does not support a simple conclusion that online interaction uniformly erodes empathy. Longitudinal work has found that social-media use can coexist with or even predict changes in certain empathic capacities, while other studies suggest that intensive screen exposure may reduce opportunities to practice reading nonverbal cues in face-to-face contexts [23], [24]. Research on virtual empathy further indicates that online communication can support empathic exchanges while also creating conditions in which emotional cues are thinner, delayed, or easily misinterpreted [25]. Accordingly, students' references to social media should be treated as perceptions of a contextual barrier within their own experience rather than as proof that digital media directly causes lower empathy.

Empathy is also relevant to safe and inclusive school communities. School-wide SEL and supportive climate practices have been associated with lower bullying victimization and more constructive peer relations, suggesting that relational competencies are intertwined with how students experience safety and belonging [26]. Developmental analyses of school-based empathy interventions further show that effective programmes must align with students' age, social context, and opportunities to translate emotional understanding into behavior [17]. For faith-based schools, these educational concerns may intersect with explicit moral traditions that emphasize compassion, human dignity, solidarity, and responsibility for others. The key educational question is therefore not whether a school endorses empathy as a value, but how students recognize, interpret, and enact that value in ordinary interactions with peers.

At Susteran Junior High School, Purwokerto, empathy is particularly relevant to the school's character-formation context and its emphasis on compassion within Dominican spirituality. Field reflections underlying the present study indicated that students sometimes encountered peers who appeared distressed, withdrawn, or in need of help, yet responses varied: some students listened,

comforted, encouraged, or helped, while others described hesitation, academic pressure, peer influence, or digital habits as obstacles to offering support. This local pattern provides a useful setting for examining empathy as it occurs in everyday school life rather than as a score on a standardized scale or as the outcome of a specific intervention.

Existing international research has provided strong evidence on the measurement and developmental structure of empathy [5], [6], its association with prosocial behavior [7], [10], the role of peer relationships [11], [12], [13], and the potential of school-based programmes to promote social-emotional competencies [14], [15]. However, these literatures leave a complementary qualitative question: how do junior-secondary students themselves describe the moment-to-moment recognition of a peer's emotional condition, the social actions that follow that recognition, the meaning of empathy in friendship, and the barriers that prevent empathic intentions from becoming action? Addressing this question can add contextual depth to predominantly quantitative and intervention-oriented evidence by showing how empathy is negotiated within the ordinary social ecology of one school.

Accordingly, this study aimed to explore students' everyday experiences of empathy in school social interactions at Susteran Junior High School, Purwokerto. It addressed three questions: (1) How do students recognize and interpret peers' emotional states in everyday school interactions? (2) What empathy-related actions and meanings do students describe in their peer relationships? and (3) What internal and external barriers do students perceive when attempting to enact empathy?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to develop a context-sensitive account of how students recognized, interpreted, and enacted empathy in everyday school interactions. Qualitative description was selected because it permits close representation of participants' accounts without requiring the stronger ontological commitments of phenomenology or grounded theory [27]. The design was also consistent with qualitative inquiry focused on meaning, context, and comparison across information-rich cases [28]. The study was exploratory and interpretive; it was not designed to estimate the prevalence of empathy, test an intervention, or establish causal effects.

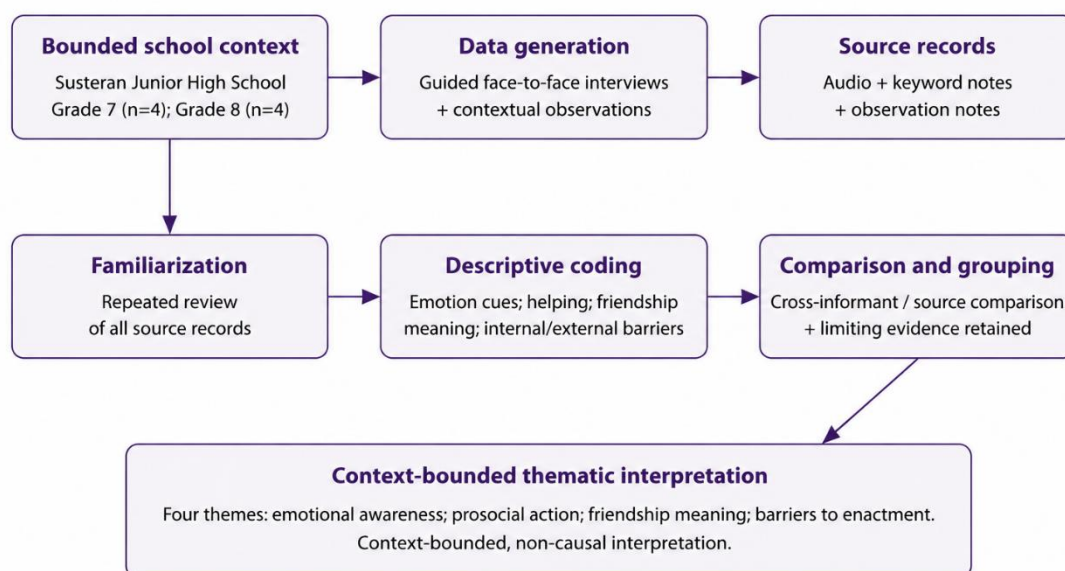


Figure 1. Data Generation and Descriptive-thematic Analysis Pathway

Figure 1 summarizes how the available data sources were connected to the analytical process. The visualization is methodological rather than quantitative: it shows the progression from the bounded school context and eight participants, through interviews and contextual observation, to descriptive coding, comparison, thematic grouping, and context-bounded interpretation. The final stage explicitly limits inference to students' reported and observed experiences and does not imply causal impact or population-level prevalence.

Participants and Research Context

The study was conducted at Susteran Junior High School, Purwokerto, Indonesia. The source records indicate eight student participants: four students from Grade 7 and four from Grade 8. This total reconciles the participant description in the abstract and the data-collection record and corrects the earlier Methods sentence that referred to only four students. Participants were selected purposively on the basis of their willingness and ability to provide relevant accounts of peer interaction. The purpose of the sample was to obtain information-rich perspectives rather than statistical representation or thematic saturation; in qualitative interviewing, the adequacy of a small sample depends on the specificity and information power of the cases in relation to the research aim [29]. Participation was described as voluntary, and student names were replaced by informant labels in the manuscript. The available source records do not provide a formal ethics-approval number or detailed documentation of parental/guardian consent and student assent; these procedures therefore cannot be asserted beyond the information contained in the study records.

Data Generation

Data were generated through face-to-face guided interviews and observations of students' behavior and social interaction within the school setting. The interview guide used open-ended prompts addressing four areas supported by the source material: experiences of feeling understood by peers; actions taken when a peer appeared to be experiencing difficulty; perceived meanings of empathy and care within friendship; and internal or external barriers to showing concern. Interviews were supported by researcher keyword notes and mobile-phone audio recordings, which were used to preserve and clarify participants' accounts during analysis. Reflexive interviewing can strengthen attention to participants' perspectives when the interviewer remains alert to context and to the interpretive nature of the encounter [30]. The source records do not specify standardized interview duration, a formal pilot test of the guide, or a complete verbatim-transcription protocol; consequently, the present analysis treats the recorded material and notes as the documented qualitative corpus rather than claiming a transcript-based phenomenological procedure. Observations were used as contextual corroboration of school social interaction; because a formal observation schedule and frequency were not documented, observational material was not treated as an independent behavioral outcome measure.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis followed a descriptive-thematic pathway informed by established principles of thematic analysis and qualitative trustworthiness [31], [32], [33]. First, interview notes, audio records, and available observation notes were reviewed repeatedly to build familiarity with the data. Second, descriptive codes were assigned to statements concerning emotion recognition, withdrawal or behavioral cues, listening and helping, encouragement and problem solving, meanings attached to friendship, shyness, fear of misinterpretation, academic workload, peer influence, and social-media use. Third, codes were compared across informants and, where possible, across interview and observational sources to identify convergent and limiting evidence. Fourth, related codes were grouped into four interpretive themes: emotional awareness of peers; empathy-related prosocial action; empathy as a value in friendship; and barriers to empathic enactment. Theme labels were then checked against the source records so that interpretations remained close to what students actually reported. No intercoder-reliability statistic, formal member checking, or external audit is documented in the source records; the analysis therefore emphasizes transparent coding logic, source checking, and retention of constraining evidence rather than claiming procedures that were not recorded. Reporting decisions were guided by international qualitative-reporting principles emphasizing coherence among research questions, sampling, data generation, analysis, and the evidentiary basis of interpretations [34], [35], [36].

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

Analysis generated four themes that capture how students described empathy in everyday peer interaction: emotional awareness of peers, empathy-related prosocial action, empathy as a value in friendship, and barriers to empathic enactment. Table 1 provides an analytic summary. The themes represent patterns in the eight students' accounts and contextual observations rather than measured levels of empathy.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Students' Empathy-related Experiences

Theme	Core indicators	Representative evidence	Interpretive boundary
Emotional awareness of peers	Recognizing silence, withdrawal, facial or behavioral change	Students noticed when a peer appeared down or unusually quiet	Recognition did not always lead automatically to action
Empathy-related prosocial action	Listening, encouraging, comforting, helping with problems or tasks	Students described offering emotional and practical support	Action depended on confidence, timing, and social context
Empathy as a value in friendship	Safety, acceptance, equality, mutual support	Students associated a good friendship with being understood and supported	Meanings were based on students' accounts rather than a standardized scale
Barriers to empathic enactment	Shyness, fear of misinterpretation, low confidence, workload, peer influence, social-media habits	Students described wanting to help but sometimes withholding action	Barriers were perceived by students and should not be interpreted as causal effects

Emotional Awareness of Peers

Students commonly described empathy as beginning with attention to subtle changes in peers' behavior. Silence, withdrawal, facial expressions, and changes in usual interaction patterns were treated as cues that something might be wrong. Informant 4 explained, "At that time, a friend was sitting quietly in the corner of the classroom; I knew something might be going on, so I tried to strike up a conversation first." The account illustrates a process of inferring another person's emotional condition from observable social cues. The finding is best interpreted as students' reported use of cognitive perspective taking and emotional sensitivity, rather than as evidence of a formally measured empathy level.

Across participants, recognizing distress was described as relational and context dependent. Students did not refer to a fixed checklist of emotional signs; instead, they compared a friend's current behavior with what they considered typical for that person. This suggests that familiarity within peer relationships may provide contextual knowledge that supports emotion recognition. At the same time, recognition alone did not guarantee intervention, which became more apparent in students' descriptions of uncertainty and fear of being misunderstood.

Empathy-related Prosocial Action

When students believed that a peer was experiencing difficulty, they described responses such as listening, encouraging the peer to talk, providing comfort, helping with assignments or problems, and offering motivation. Informant 2 stated, "I encouraged him to talk about his problems, and I tried to be a good listener and offer encouragement and support." These accounts show how emotional awareness could be translated into concrete social action. Importantly, the actions ranged from low-intensity support, such as listening, to more active forms of assistance, suggesting that students understood empathic behavior as flexible rather than as a single prescribed response.

The accounts also indicate that helping was not described as reward seeking. Students more often framed assistance in terms of concern, friendship, or a desire to make a peer feel better. However, the study did not independently observe the frequency or effectiveness of these actions, so the results support an interpretation of perceived prosocial orientation rather than a behavioral estimate.

Empathy as a Value in Friendships

Students repeatedly described empathy as an attribute of a good friendship. Informant 3 explained, "One of my classmates was feeling down. Since I care about my friends, I encouraged him to stay positive." Participants linked being understood and supported with feeling safe, accepted, valued, and equal within a peer group. In their accounts, empathy therefore functioned not only as an individual emotional capacity but also as a relational expectation: friends were expected to notice difficulty, listen without immediate judgment, and remain available when support was needed.

This interpretation also reveals the social significance of empathy in the school environment. When students described comfort and acceptance, they were referring to the quality of peer relationships rather than to a formal psychological-safety measure. Their reflections nevertheless suggest that empathic interaction can contribute to how students experience belonging and mutual respect in everyday school life.

Barriers to Empathic Enactment

Students also identified a gap between wanting to care and feeling able to act. Internal barriers included shyness, hesitation, fear of being perceived as intrusive or performative, and limited self-confidence. Informant 4 stated, "I'm afraid that if I reach out, people will think I'm just trying to be cool or act like I care." This concern illustrates the role of anticipated peer evaluation: empathic intentions may be suppressed when students worry that their motives will be misread.

Academic workload was another perceived barrier. Informant 1 explained, “When I have a lot of assignments, sometimes I don’t have time to pay attention to my friends.” Students also mentioned peer influence, the wider social environment, and intensive social-media use as conditions that could reduce attention to face-to-face interaction. These claims are reported as participants’ perceptions. The study did not measure screen time, workload, or peer-network characteristics and therefore cannot establish that any of these factors caused lower empathy.

Discussions

The first two themes support a multidimensional understanding of empathy. Students described recognizing emotional cues and inferring that a peer might be distressed, then deciding whether to listen, encourage, comfort, or help. This sequence is consistent with models that distinguish cognitive perspective taking from affective concern while recognizing that both can contribute to social responding [1], [2], [3]. Developmental evidence also shows that perspective taking and empathic concern continue to change through adolescence and are linked to later social competencies [4], [5]. The present findings extend these literatures by illustrating how students themselves describe the transition from noticing a peer’s condition to choosing an everyday response.

The results also align with evidence connecting empathy and prosocial behavior [6], [7], [8], [9]. Yet the qualitative accounts make visible an important qualification: prosocial action is not an inevitable consequence of empathic awareness. Students sometimes understood that a friend needed support but hesitated because of shyness, fear of peer judgment, or competing academic demands. This context sensitivity is consistent with reviews showing that adolescent empathy and prosocial behavior are shaped by interacting individual and environmental conditions [10]. Educationally, the implication is that fostering empathy requires more than teaching students how to identify emotions; schools also need relational norms that make supportive action socially safe and practicable.

Students’ descriptions of empathy as a basis for safety, acceptance, and equality within friendships are consistent with research linking relationship quality to empathy and prosocial behavior [11], [12], [13]. Peer attachment can provide both opportunities and motivation for perspective taking, while supportive friendship experiences can reinforce the expectation that concern will be reciprocated. The current accounts similarly show that students’ willingness to offer help was embedded in what they believed a good friend should do. Empathy thus appears not only as an individual capacity but also as a relational norm negotiated within peer groups.

This relational interpretation connects the study to broader research on school belonging and climate. Belonging and supportive classroom environments are associated with students’ social and psychological adjustment [20], [21], [22], while school-wide SEL and positive climate practices can reduce relational risks such as bullying victimization [26]. The present study did not measure school climate, but students’ references to comfort, mutual support, and fear of peer judgment indicate that the social environment can either facilitate or constrain empathic enactment. For Susteran Junior High School, the school’s emphasis on compassion can be most meaningful when it is reflected in peer norms that make listening, asking about a friend’s wellbeing, and offering help ordinary rather than socially risky behaviors.

The findings are compatible with international evidence that empathy-related competencies can be supported through structured educational experiences. Universal SEL programmes have demonstrated benefits for social-emotional competencies and adjustment [14], [15], while experiential and empathy-focused programmes show that perspective taking, role enactment, guided reflection, and cooperative experiences can strengthen empathy-related outcomes [16], [17], [18], [19]. However, intervention research also shows variability in effects. This reinforces the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and to connect empathy education with authentic peer situations, developmental level, and the social norms of the school.

Within the present context, empathy development could therefore be supported through recurring opportunities for active listening, peer support, collaborative problem solving, reflection on ambiguous social situations, and carefully structured perspective-taking activities. Such practices would be consistent with the school’s compassion-oriented character formation while remaining grounded in established social-emotional learning principles. The purpose should not be to prescribe a single ‘correct’ emotional response, but to strengthen students’ ability to notice, interpret, communicate, and choose respectful action while maintaining appropriate interpersonal boundaries.

Students’ references to social media and workload require a nuanced interpretation. Research on digital communication and empathy is mixed: social-media engagement does not uniformly reduce empathy, and longitudinal evidence suggests that particular forms of online interaction may coexist with empathic development [23]. At the same time, time away from screens has been associated with improved recognition of nonverbal emotion cues in preteens, while virtual communication can both support and constrain empathic exchange depending on the availability of social cues [24], [25]. The current study

therefore treats social media as a perceived contextual pressure rather than a demonstrated causal mechanism.

Academic workload can be understood similarly. A student who is focused on completing assignments may have fewer attentional resources or opportunities to engage with a struggling peer, but the present data do not show whether workload objectively reduces empathy. What the interviews demonstrate is that students themselves experience caring as something that competes with time, confidence, and social risk. This distinction is theoretically useful because it shifts attention from asking whether students 'have empathy' to asking under what conditions empathic understanding can be enacted in everyday school life.

The study contributes a context-rich account of adolescent empathy by integrating four elements that are often examined separately: recognition of peers' emotional states, translation of that recognition into prosocial action, relational meanings of empathy within friendship, and barriers that interrupt empathic enactment. Rather than treating empathy as a stable trait or as an intervention outcome, the findings position it as a situated social practice. This perspective complements measurement, developmental, and intervention research by highlighting the micro-level decisions students make when they notice distress in peers.

For practice, schools should evaluate empathy-building efforts through multiple indicators and perspectives. Student reflections can reveal perceived meanings and barriers, but future evaluation should combine interviews with systematic observation, peer-relationship measures, teacher perspectives, and longitudinal evidence. Such triangulation would help distinguish between knowing what empathy means, intending to respond empathically, and consistently enacting supportive behavior across settings.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study shows how eight junior-secondary students described empathy as a process that begins with noticing changes in peers' emotional and behavioral cues and may continue through listening, encouragement, comfort, practical help, and problem solving. Students also understood empathy as a friendship value associated with acceptance, equality, safety, and mutual support. At the same time, shyness, fear of being misunderstood, limited self-confidence, academic workload, peer influence, and intensive social-media use were perceived as barriers that could interrupt the movement from empathic awareness to action. The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that all students at the school possess a particular level of empathy or that the identified barriers causally reduce empathic behavior. They provide a context-bounded account of how participating students understood and negotiated empathy in everyday school life. The educational implication is that empathy development should combine emotional recognition and perspective taking with social conditions that make caring action safe, respectful, and feasible. Future studies should broaden the participant base, document ethics and data-generation procedures in greater detail, use systematic observation and multiple informant groups, and examine empathy development longitudinally or through mixed-method designs.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations constrain interpretation. First, the study involved eight purposively selected students from a single school, so the findings are analytically transferable only with attention to context and are not statistically generalizable. Second, the source records provide limited demographic information and do not document standardized interview duration, a formal pilot of the interview guide, a complete verbatim-transcription protocol, or a structured observation schedule. Third, no formal member checking, independent coding audit, or intercoder-reliability procedure is documented. Fourth, participants were minors, but the available manuscript records do not provide a formal ethics-approval number or detailed documentation of parental/guardian consent and student assent; these procedures should be verified from original institutional records before publication. Fifth, perceived barriers such as workload, peer influence, and social-media use were not independently measured. Finally, the study did not include longitudinal, comparative, or quantitative evidence that could determine change over time or causal relationships.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The researchers collaboratively designed the study, conducted interviews, analyzed the data, and wrote the entire manuscript for this article during three online meetings and two intensive in-person meetings held over three full days. The first author's primary role was to propose the topic, suggest the research methods and subjects, conduct interviews, and describe the data. The second author played a key role in organizing the ideas coherently, analyzing the data, and reviewing the English translation. Meanwhile, the third author contributed by expanding the references, reviewing the entire text, and providing additional ideas.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The researcher used Claude.ai to help code the research findings and Google Scholar to search for relevant, up-to-date sources.

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