Normalization of Student Cohabitation and Its Implications for Social Functioning: An Ecological Social Work Perspective from Jember, Indonesia

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Abstract

Student cohabitation has become an increasingly visible phenomenon in university towns; however, it is often normatively framed as moral deviation or individual misconduct. Limited attention has been given to understanding cohabitation as a social–ecological process that shapes students' social functioning, particularly from a social work perspective in non-Western contexts. This study aims to analyze the normalization of student cohabitation and its implications for social functioning through an ecological social work lens. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis involving students engaged in cohabitation, boarding house managers, and community actors in Sumbersari Village, Jember Regency, Indonesia. The data were analyzed thematically to capture the interactions among individual experiences, relational dynamics, and environmental structures. The findings indicate that student cohabitation is normalized through emotional closeness, practical considerations, and permissive housing environments. Students develop adaptive attitudes such as indifference to social judgment, personal rationalization, and selective disclosure of their relationships. Regarding social functioning, cohabitation produces ambivalent outcomes. On one hand, it strengthens emotional support and academic motivation; on the other, it may limit broader social engagement and increase emotional dependency, particularly when relational disruptions occur. This study demonstrates that student cohabitation should be understood as a social–ecological phenomenon rather than a purely individual choice. Its main contribution lies in advancing social work scholarship by positioning cohabitation as an issue of social functioning within a person-in-environment framework. The findings highlight the importance of preventive, community-based social work interventions in higher education settings, particularly those aimed at promoting healthy relationship literacy, emotional autonomy, and sustainable social support systems for students.

Abstrak

Kata Kunci:
Kohabitasi mahasiswa, keberfungsian sosial, teori sistem ekologi, normalisasi sosial, pekerjaan sosial.

Kohabitasi mahasiswa merupakan fenomena yang semakin terlihat di kawasan pendidikan tinggi, namun masih kerap dipahami secara normatif sebagai penyimpangan moral atau persoalan individual. Kajian yang menempatkan kohabitasi sebagai proses sosial-ekologis yang memengaruhi keberfungsian sosial mahasiswa, khususnya dari perspektif pekerjaan sosial di konteks non-Barat, masih sangat terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis proses normalisasi kohabitasi mahasiswa serta implikasinya terhadap keberfungsian sosial melalui perspektif pekerjaan sosial berbasis ekologi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi non-partisipan, dan studi dokumentasi terhadap mahasiswa pelaku kohabitasi, pengelola kos, serta aktor lingkungan di Kelurahan Sumbersari, Kabupaten Jember. Analisis data dilakukan secara tematik untuk menangkap interaksi antara pengalaman individual, dinamika relasional, dan struktur lingkungan sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kohabitasi mahasiswa dinormalisasi melalui kedekatan emosional, pertimbangan praktis, serta lingkungan hunian yang permisif. Mahasiswa mengembangkan sikap adaptif berupa ketidakpedulian terhadap penilaian sosial, rasionalisasi personal, dan keterbukaan selektif dalam mengelola relasi. Dari sisi keberfungsian sosial, kohabitasi menghasilkan dampak yang ambivalen. Di satu sisi, kohabitasi memperkuat dukungan emosional dan motivasi akademik; di sisi lain, praktik ini berpotensi membatasi partisipasi sosial yang lebih luas dan meningkatkan ketergantungan emosional, terutama ketika relasi mengalami gangguan. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa kohabitasi mahasiswa perlu dipahami sebagai fenomena sosial-ekologis, bukan sekadar pilihan individual. Kontribusi utama penelitian ini terletak pada penguatan perspektif pekerjaan sosial dengan memposisikan kohabitasi sebagai isu keberfungsian sosial dalam kerangka person-in-environment. Temuan penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya intervensi pekerjaan sosial yang bersifat preventif dan berbasis komunitas di lingkungan perguruan tinggi, khususnya dalam penguatan literasi relasi sehat, kemandirian emosional, dan sistem dukungan sosial mahasiswa yang berkelanjutan.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, student cohabitation has become increasingly common and visible in higher education settings across both Western and non-Western societies. A growing body of literature suggests that during emerging adulthood, living together is no longer widely viewed as a normative violation but rather as part of broader transformations in young people's intimate relationships, influenced by changing values, educational mobility, and the demands of modern life (Arnett, 2024; Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Smock, 2000). In many contexts, cohabitation is often understood as an adaptive strategy to meet emotional needs, enhance psychological security, and achieve economic and practical efficiency, either prior to or independent of formal marriage (Kravdal et al.,

2023; Kou & Li, 2025; Kuang, 2025). Nevertheless, the social consequences of this practice remain contested, particularly regarding its implications for social relationships, psychological well-being, and individuals' capacity to fulfill broader societal roles.

Most research on cohabitation has been dominated by sociological, family, developmental psychological, and demographic perspectives, with primary focus on relationship stability, relational satisfaction, and transitions to marriage (Foran et al., 2022; Manning & Smock, 2005; Rhoades et al., 2012; Smock, 2000; Stanley et al., 2006). While these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of intimate relationship dynamics, they remain relatively limited in conceptualizing cohabitation as a matter of social functioning shaped by ongoing interactions between individuals and their environments. From a social work perspective, intimate relationships represent arenas of social transactions that influence social support, role expectations, and individuals' adaptive capacities in everyday life. Consequently, their impacts extend beyond personal well-being to include social participation and role functioning (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Midgley, 1995; Zhang & Axinn, 2022).

In Indonesia, student cohabitation presents a complex and multifaceted issue. Although Indonesian society remains characterized by collectivist values, strong religious norms, and strict social regulation of intimate relationships, students' lived experiences often diverge from these ideals. High educational mobility, reduced family supervision, and dense boarding-house living arrangements create new social spaces where values are negotiated pragmatically. Jember Regency exemplifies these conditions. As the third-largest educational hub in East Java, Jember hosts more than 78,000 students across approximately 20 higher education institutions (BPS East Java, 2022). The high concentration of students, particularly in boarding-house areas, makes the region a fertile ground for shifts in relational practices, including cohabitation.

Sumbersari District is one of the primary student activity centers in Jember, characterized by dense student housing, weak community-based social control, and minimal family involvement in students' daily lives. These conditions contribute to a relatively permissive environment regarding cohabitation. For some students, living with a partner is seen as a practical solution for emotional fulfillment, psychological security, and financial efficiency. However, beneath these rationalizations lie complex social consequences, including social stigma, value conflicts with surrounding communities, and potential disruptions to students' social functioning.

Public discourse in Indonesia frequently frames cohabitation as an issue of

moral deviance and social order, often linked to legal and moral regulations under the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP) (Danardana & Setyawan, 2022; Safitri & Wahyudi, 2023; Soponyono, 2013; Sulistiyono et al., 2018). With the intensification of moral politics in the 2023 KUHP, cohabitation is increasingly regarded as a moral offense, debated within the frameworks of rights and pluralism (Putri, 2025). Meanwhile, psychological studies tend to emphasize individual motives, personality structures, and intrapsychic dynamics (Ardiansyah et al., 2022; Nurchakiki, 2016). Although valuable, these perspectives remain insufficient to fully capture cohabitation as an everyday lived experience that shapes students' social functioning across relational, academic, and participatory domains.

Within social work, social functioning refers to individuals' capacities to meet basic needs, perform social roles, maintain healthy relationships, and adapt to changing social demands (Midgley, 1997). For students, social functioning extends beyond academic performance to include emotional independence, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and engagement within campus and community life (National Association of Social Workers, 2008; Rauer et al., 2013; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009; Turi et al., 2025). Intensive intimate relationships-including cohabitation-may serve as sources of emotional support that strengthen social functioning; however, they may also create vulnerabilities by fostering emotional dependency or narrowing social networks (Manning et al., 2011; Rauer et al., 2013).

Ecological Systems Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding student cohabitation as a socially embedded phenomenon that arises from multi-level interactions between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the microsystem level, cohabitation is closely linked to emotional intimacy and personal needs. At the mesosystem level, living environments, peer networks, and campus cultures shape norms and tolerance toward cohabitation. At the exosystem level, limited housing regulations and institutional support structures influence students' living arrangements. At the macrosystem level, broader generational shifts in values regarding intimacy and personal autonomy are reflected. From this perspective, cohabitation is not an isolated act but a product of dynamic and interconnected socio-ecological systems.

Several studies suggest that during emerging adulthood, cohabitation can provide emotional and practical support that enhances short-term well-being, particularly when it is perceived as a means of achieving closeness, comfort, and adaptive coping during the transition to adulthood (Hewitt & Vidal, 2025; Jankowiak et al., 2025; Rhoades et al., 2009a). However, other research highlights more complex outcomes: processes of "dyadic withdrawal" may reduce interactions with

external friends and reshape social networks, while the dissolution of cohabiting relationships is associated with increased stress and depressive symptoms (Kalmijn, 2003; Rhoades et al., 2011). Thus, the implications of cohabitation for social functioning and psychosocial well-being are highly contextual, depending on factors such as cohabitation goals, clarity of commitment, and the availability of surrounding social support (Brown et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2006).

Despite these insights, studies explicitly situating student cohabitation within a social work framework-particularly in Global South contexts-remain scarce. The limited research connecting cohabitation with social functioning and person-in-environment perspectives highlights a significant gap in the literature. However, social work carries both scientific and practical mandates to understand intimate relationships as integral to psychosocial well-being and community life, rather than merely as moral or private concerns.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to analyze the normalization process of student cohabitation in Sumbersari, Jember Regency, and its implications for students' social functioning through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study explores how cohabitation is practiced, understood, and negotiated in students' everyday lives, as well as how it influences their social relationships, emotional independence,

and social participation. The primary contribution of this research lies in advancing a social work perspective that conceptualizes cohabitation as a contextual socio-ecological phenomenon and as a foundation for developing preventive and community-based interventions within campus and student residential environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohabitation refers to the practice of unmarried intimate partners living together without a formal marital bond. Over the past two decades, this practice has increased significantly among young people, particularly university students. In the literature, cohabitation is understood not merely as a form of premarital relationship but as a social practice reflecting transformations in intimate relationship patterns, values of personal autonomy, and adaptive strategies for navigating the structural demands of early adulthood (Arnett, 2024; Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Cohabitation is frequently interpreted as a means of fulfilling emotional needs, enhancing psychological security, and achieving economic and practical efficiency, especially within contexts of educational mobility and limited student resources (Kravdal et al., 2023; Smock, 2000). However, cohabitation remains contested due to its ambivalent implications for social relationships, psychosocial well-being, and individuals' functioning within broader social networks. These complexities call for analytical

Student Cohabitation in Global and Emerging Adulthood Contexts

Student cohabitation is widely understood within the broader framework of emerging adulthood, a transitional life stage characterized by identity exploration, the formation of intimate relationships, and increasing independence. International studies indicate that cohabitation is increasingly perceived as a legitimate and functional form of relationship among educated youth (Arnett, 2024; Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). In this context, living together is not merely a substitute for marriage but often represents an adaptive strategy to address emotional, economic, and practical challenges during the period of study (Kravdal et al., 2023; Kuang, 2025).

Sociological and demographic literature often characterizes cohabitation as a for long-term commitment, although it does not always lead to marriage (Manning & Smock, 2005; Smock, 2000). Decisions to cohabit are influenced by structural factors such as living costs, housing availability, and prevailing social norms within higher education settings. However, the predominant focus on relationship stability and family transitions tends to overlook how cohabitation affects students' everyday social functioning.

Impacts of Cohabitation on Social Relationships and Psychosocial Well-Being

Relationship psychology research suggests that cohabitation can provide short-term benefits, including emotional support, a sense of security, and stress regulation, particularly during the transition to adulthood (Hewitt & Vidal, 2025; Rhoades et al., 2009). Partner support may also contribute to increased subjective well-being and academic motivation among students.

At the same time, the literature highlights more ambivalent outcomes. Cohabitation without clear commitment may foster emotional dependency, restrict social networks beyond the partner, and increase psychosocial vulnerability when relationships dissolve (Kalmijn, 2003; Rhoades et al., 2011). Stanley et al. (2006) introduced the concept of versus deciding, illustrating how cohabitation often arises through gradual, unreflective transitions rather than deliberate decisions. Such patterns may result in less structured relationships and influence individuals' role balance. For students, this can affect social participation, community engagement, and emotional autonomy (Brown et al., 2017).

Cohabitation, Social Functioning, and Perspectives in Social Work

From a social work perspective, cohabitation is not merely a private relational matter but a socially embedded phenomenon

shaped by norms, structures, and broader environmental interactions. The person-in-environment framework conceptualizes human behavior as the product of reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social contexts (Rogge & Cox, 2001). Through this lens, cohabitation constitutes a relational practice with direct implications for social functioning (Cleece et al., 2025).

Social functioning refers to individuals' abilities to meet basic needs, perform social roles effectively, build and maintain healthy relationships, and adapt to evolving social demands (Midgley, 1997; Payne, 2020). For students, social functioning encompasses not only academic achievement but also emotional independence, role management during early adulthood, and sustained social engagement.

Cross-national research demonstrates that academic and social integration are key determinants of well-being and successful transitions into adulthood (Arnett, 2024; Boudreault-Bouchard et al., 2013; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009). Literature in social work and public health identifies intimate relationships as central contexts for the formation of social support and the regulation of stress. Cohabiting relationships may provide both emotional and instrumental support, thereby enhancing adaptive capacities during emerging adulthood (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris & Bernardi, 2015).

Highly exclusive relationships may weaken social capital by reducing access to broader networks, thereby increasing emotional dependency and psychosocial vulnerability (Manning et al., 2014). Consistent with the person-in-environment perspective, the impact of student cohabitation on social functioning depends largely on relational quality, the availability of social support, and the characteristics of housing and educational environments (Manning, Brown, et al., 2014; Ungar, 2011).

The impacts of cohabitation are not universal but are shaped by dynamic interactions among relational quality, social support systems, and social environments. Cohabitation should be understood as an ecological relational practice rather than merely a personal relationship status (Akesson et al., 2017; Rogge & Cox, 2001). Studies indicate that communication quality, stability, and conflict resolution are stronger predictors of psychosocial outcomes than cohabitation itself (Brown, 2004; Rhoades et al., 2009b).

Support from family, peers, and campus networks serves as a crucial buffer against psychosocial stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Ruihua et al., 2025). Supportive housing environments and educational institutions also play a significant role in promoting students' mental health and social functioning (Akesson et al., 2017; Deng & Lee, 2025). Therefore, social work interventions addressing student cohabitation should prioritize enhancing adaptive capacities and fostering supportive environments rather than relying on moralistic

or behavior-control approaches (Saleebey, 1996).

Social-Ecological Approaches and the Normalization of Cohabitation

The social-ecological approach, particularly Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, provides a robust framework for understanding student cohabitation as a multilevel social phenomenon arising from dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013). Cohabitation is thus not merely an individual choice but a product of reciprocal relationships among personal needs, social networks, institutional arrangements, and broader cultural values. This perspective closely aligns with the person-in-environment approach in social work, which emphasizes the contextual analysis of relational practices (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

At the microsystem level, cohabitation often arises from the need for affection, emotional closeness, and psychological stability during emerging adulthood. Studies indicate that cohabitation can serve as an adaptive strategy for securing emotional support amid academic pressures and life transitions (Arnett, 2024; Manning & Cohen, 2012). At the mesosystem level, interactions among boarding-house environments, peer networks, and campus culture shape increasingly permissive norms regarding cohabitation. When cohabitation becomes common among peers, it is more likely to be perceived as socially acceptable (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Sassler, 2004). This normalization is reinforced by weak informal sanctions and strong peer legitimacy. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, limited housing regulations, the absence of institutional policies regarding intimate relationships, and generational shifts toward personal autonomy further accelerate normalization processes (Bachrach, 2013; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Through social normalization, practices once considered deviant gradually become accepted via habituation and cognitive–affective rationalization (May & Finch, 2009).

From a social work perspective, examining cohabitation through a social ecological lens highlights that its effects on students' social functioning are contextual rather than universal. Therefore, responses to cohabitation should prioritize enhancing individual adaptive capacities and fostering supportive social environments instead of focusing solely on behavioral control or moral judgment (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences of cohabitation and its implications for social functioning. A phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings individuals construct from their lived experiences within specific social contexts

(Creswell & Poth, 2017; van Manen, 2007). In social work research, qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for capturing the complex and multilayered dynamics of person–environment interactions, especially when the phenomenon under study—such as cohabitation—cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement alone (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The research was conducted in Sumbersari Village, Jember Regency. This location was purposively selected because of its high concentration of university students and boarding-house accommodations, making it a primary social space where cohabitation is normalized.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis to ensure data richness and facilitate cross-source corroboration. In-depth interviews were conducted with students living in cohabitation, boarding-house managers, and local community members familiar with the social dynamics of student housing environments. Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow flexible exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and reflections while maintaining a thematic focus. Non-participant observation was conducted to understand patterns of social interaction, housing management practices, and forms of social control within boarding-house environments. Document analysis complemented this data by examining housing regulations, neighborhood records, and other relevant supporting materials.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling based on criteria that included students residing in boarding houses and having direct experience with cohabitation. This technique was considered effective for accessing socially sensitive and relatively closed groups.

Table 1. List of Research Informants

No.	Informant Code	Category	Interview Period
1	ID	Student currently cohabiting	March 2025
2	IN	Student currently cohabiting	March 2025
3	IB	Student currently cohabiting	March 2025
4	IP	Student currently cohabiting	March 2025
5	IL	Student with past cohabitation experience	March 2025
6	IS	Student currently cohabiting	March 2025
7	IPK	Boarding-house manager	March 2025
8	IWG	Community member	March 2025

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving six stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and the construction of an

Data Analysis

analytic narrative. The analysis was conducted iteratively, with findings interpreted through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory to examine the relationship between cohabitation and social functioning across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed, including method and source triangulation, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail to enhance transparency and credibility. This methodological approach allowed the study not only to describe cohabitation practices but also to critically analyze them as social phenomena with implications for students' social functioning.

RESULTS

This section presents the main findings regarding the normalization of student cohabitation and its implications for social functioning within boarding-house environments in Sumbersari, Jember Regency. These findings are based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, field observations, and supporting documents. The analysis examines how cohabitation is practiced and normalized, as well as its impact on students' social relationships, emotional independence, and social participation within a broader socio-ecological context.

The Normalization of Cohabitation: Patterns and Processes

The normalization of student cohabitation typically does not result from a clearly planned decision at the beginning of a relationship. Instead, cohabitation develops gradually through increasing interaction intensity and emotional involvement. Many participants described their transition into cohabitation as something that "just flowed" from dating to living together, without a distinct moment of formal decision-making.

"At first, we just spent time together, then stayed over more often, and eventually, we ended up living together" (IN). "Because we went everywhere together, it felt strange not being with him. I feel safer and calmer when we're together" (ID).

These accounts suggest that emotional closeness and comfort are primary motivations for cohabitation. Students often regarded their partners as key sources of security, emotional stability, and psychological support while living away from home. One informant described how daily routines-waking up, attending classes, and spending evenings together-fostered a sense of comfort that became difficult to give up. Cohabitation often developed from habitual time spent together, starting with activities such as studying, late-night conversations, or falling asleep at a partner's place.

Field observations further revealed that many cohabiting students organized their daily lives in ways that resembled small households.

Couples were often seen shopping for daily necessities, cooking together, and spending time in public campus spaces as pairs. This pattern suggests that cohabitation serves as a means of fulfilling strong emotional needs, particularly for students with limited social support from family or close friends.

Beyond emotional factors, structural conditions also played a significant role. The boarding-house environment in Sumbersari is characterized by flexible housing rules and weak social control, creating a tolerant space where cohabitation can occur with minimal immediate consequences. Interviews with boarding-house managers and local residents indicated that, as long as no overt conflict arises, the presence of mixed-gender couples in one residence is generally tolerated.

"As long as they're not causing trouble or disturbing others, it's fine. Partners staying over happens quite often" (IPK). I know that some students live together as male and female couples (IWG).

Students acknowledged that this situation made them feel secure cohabiting without significant social pressure. Observations showed that male–female interactions in boarding-house environments occurred freely, even at night, without direct reprimands. Informal neighborhood records indicated that warnings only arose when cohabitation generated complaints, such as noise or interpersonal conflicts. These findings demonstrate that cohabitation is not merely an individual choice but is shaped by the interaction between personal needs and structural opportunities within student housing environments.

Practicality and convenience also reinforced decisions to cohabit. Students often viewed cohabitation as an efficient way to manage time, expenses, and daily activities. Some participants reported that living together was more economical than paying for a boarding room that was seldom used.

"At first, we just worked on assignments here because the Wi-Fi was faster, and then it just continued" (IP). "Instead of paying for a room I rarely use, it's better to live together. It's more economical" (IB).

These accounts suggest that cohabitation is frequently adopted as a pragmatic response to the flexible and resource-constrained conditions of student life. Over time, such practices are rationalized as reasonable and acceptable choices, thereby accelerating their normalization.

Students' Attitudes Toward Cohabitation

Cohabitation practices were linked to an increasing disregard for social judgment. Many cohabiting students adopted attitudes of indifference toward social evaluation, prioritizing personal comfort and intimate relationships over societal expectations. Negative judgments from others were often deemed irrelevant as long as they did not directly impact their lives.

"If people judge me, I don't care. What matters is that I'm comfortable. Besides, many people here do the same, so it feels normal" (IP).

Observations indicated that cohabiting couples made little effort to conceal their relationships. The presence of an opposite-sex partner in boarding houses rarely elicited reprimands from owners or neighbors, provided no open conflict occurred. This normalization was further reinforced through social comparison. Students often evaluated cohabitation by referencing peer behavior, leading them to perceive it as a situational norm in certain environments.

This contributed to reduced anxiety about stigma, particularly in permissive contexts. Such attitudes functioned both as self-protective mechanisms and as indicators of internalized values that legitimize cohabitation. Many students also reported reduced interaction with friends. Living with a partner consumed much of their time and energy. Some participants admitted that they met friends less frequently out of concern for their partner's feelings or because friends began to distance themselves. In some cases, students declined social invitations due to their partner's preferences. This pattern indicates a narrowing of social networks, which may potentially limit broader social functioning. Students also developed personal justifications and rationalizations for cohabitation. Interviews revealed that cohabitation was framed as a

rational, mutually agreed-upon decision rather than a moral transgression. "We both agreed, so we don't feel it is wrong." (IN). Such rationalizations frame cohabitation as a legitimate personal choice rather than deviant behavior.

In daily practice, students neither actively concealed nor openly displayed their cohabitation. Instead, they practiced selective openness—being honest when asked but maintaining privacy otherwise. As one student stated, "If someone asks, I'm honest, but I don't tell everyone" (IS). This approach reflects a moderate level of social acceptance in certain environments while also demonstrating students' awareness of potential stigma.

Implications of Cohabitation for Students' Social Functioning

Regarding social functioning, the findings suggest that cohabitation does not directly impair academic performance. On the contrary, partners often serve as emotional support systems that enhance study motivation. Students reported that their partners helped maintain morale, accompanied them throughout academic processes, and provided support during periods of academic stress.

"Having a partner makes me more motivated to work on my thesis" (IL). "When I'm stressed about classes, I have someone to talk to" (IN).

Documentation of academic activities and attendance records indicated that cohabitation did not hinder students' roles as

learners. In non-academic areas, many students remained active in campus organizations and activities. Interview and participation records suggest that students were often able to separate their personal lives from formal social responsibilities.

However, cohabitation significantly influenced social interactions with peers and the surrounding community. Some students socially withdrew due to stigma, environmental pressures, or personal decisions to prioritize their relationships. In several cases, students relocated because of perceived community scrutiny.

> "The neighbor in front kept watching us, so I moved to another boarding house" (IL). "I rarely hang out with friends now; I spend more time with my partner" (IB).

Emotional dependency emerged as one of the most significant impacts. Students who centered their emotional lives around their partners experienced difficulty adapting after breakups. Interviews revealed feelings of loss, loneliness, and decreased academic focus following the dissolution of their relationships. "After we broke up, I felt empty. I couldn't focus on anything" (IN).

Post-breakup observations revealed tendencies toward social withdrawal and decreased activity. However, there was variation among individuals; some students maintained emotional independence and continued to engage socially in healthy ways.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that student cohabitation in Sumbersari represents a social phenomenon undergoing normalization through the dynamic interplay of individual, relational, and structural factors. Cohabitation cannot be understood merely as a personal choice or private preference; rather, it emerges from a socio-ecological configuration that shapes students' lived experiences. Within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), cohabitation practices arise, are maintained, and are interpreted through reciprocal interactions across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, which collectively influence students' social functioning.

At the microsystem level, cohabitation is primarily motivated by needs for affection, psychological security, and emotional closeness within intimate relationships. This perspective aligns with the emerging adulthood literature, which identifies romantic relationships as central sources of emotional regulation and psychological support during the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2024; Rhoades et al., 2009a). For many students-especially those studying away from home-intimate partners often serve as substitutes for geographically and emotionally distant family support. However, this study also demonstrates that intensified intimacy through cohabitation may foster emotional dependency, thereby increasing

psychosocial vulnerability when relationships are disrupted or terminated. This pattern echoes findings by Brown et al. (2017) and Rhoades et al. (2011), who argue that cohabitation without balanced alternative support networks can negatively affect post-conflict adaptation.

At the mesosystem level, boarding-house environments and student communities play a pivotal role in normalizing cohabitation by serving as spaces where multiple life domains-such as romantic relationships, peer networks, and academic life-intersect and influence one another. Within the bioecological framework, interactions across these domains generate relatively stable patterns of meaning and practice when supported by permissive local norms (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Research on cohabitation indicates that residential contexts and student social networks shape perceptions of the acceptability of living together, particularly in settings where community-based social control weakens and residential privacy increases (Smock, 2000).

The literature on social norms further suggests that acceptance of cohabitation is strongly influenced by expectations and standards within immediate environments. When cohabitation becomes visible and common, it is increasingly perceived as a legitimate relational choice (Perelli-Harris & Bernardi, 2015). Empirical studies in off-campus student contexts also demonstrate that peer pressure and residential community norms

are significantly associated with attitudes toward and practices of cohabitation (Saheed & Seedat-Khan, 2024). These dynamics reflect broader processes of social normalization, whereby repeated behaviors and social legitimation gradually shift situational moral boundaries, rendering previously deviant behaviors part of everyday life (Krzyżanowski, 2020; May & Finch, 2009).

At the exosystem level, this study highlights how the absence of clear housing regulations and the limited involvement of governmental and university institutions in student social welfare indirectly perpetuate the persistence of cohabitation. Flexible housing policies effectively shift the responsibility for managing relational risks onto individuals without providing adequate psychosocial support mechanisms. International literature on student housing suggests that policy approaches emphasizing the privatization of student life often overlook relational and social welfare dimensions (Cooke et al., 2020; Zhang & Axinn, 2022). Within this context, cohabitation emerges as an adaptive strategy for independently managing emotional, economic, and practical needs, even though it may have long-term social implications for social functioning.

At the macrosystem level, generational shifts in values regarding intimacy and private life provide a significant structural context for the normalization of cohabitation. Globally, cohabitation is increasingly accepted as a

legitimate non-traditional relationship form, particularly among educated youth, reflecting broader trends toward personal autonomy and relational flexibility (Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Although Indonesian society remains influenced by relatively conservative cultural and religious norms, this study reveals ongoing value negotiations among students as they navigate dominant social expectations and everyday realities. Cohabitation is framed as a rational and contextual choice, provided it does not provoke open conflict within the surrounding community. These findings support the argument that the normalization of cohabitation in non-Western contexts does not necessarily indicate a decline in values but may instead represent a pragmatic adaptation to evolving youth life structures (Kravdal et al., 2023; Kuang, 2025).

From the perspective of social functioning, the findings reveal an ambivalent dynamic. On one hand, cohabitation may enhance students' functioning in academic and daily roles by providing emotional support, psychological stability, and practical cooperation with partners. This aligns with studies demonstrating that partner support positively influences academic engagement and subjective well-being (Rauer et al., 2013; Severiens & Schmidt, 2009). On the other hand, cohabitation may limit social functioning within friendship networks and community participation, particularly by narrowing social

ties and increasing emotional dependency. These patterns suggest that social functioning should not be evaluated solely based on academic role performance but also on individuals' ability to maintain relational balance and diverse social capital (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Midgley, 1995; Noorkamilah, 2021).

The theoretical implications of these findings reaffirm the relevance of the person-in-environment perspective for understanding student cohabitation as a contextual and relational phenomenon. Cohabitation cannot be evaluated dichotomously as either functional or dysfunctional; rather, it should be viewed as a social practice whose consequences depend on relationship quality, the availability of social support, and individuals' adaptive capacities. Within the transition to adulthood, cohabitation reflects ongoing negotiations among emotional needs, personal autonomy, and social expectations.

In public discourse, cohabitation is often interpreted through normative frameworks that emphasize conformity to social and cultural values. While such perspectives play an important role in reflecting societal norms, they may not always capture the full complexity of students' lived experiences, including dimensions of social well-being and psychosocial support needs. A strong emphasis on social evaluation may also lead some students to be more cautious or selective in

seeking available support resources (Payne, 2020; Saleebey, 2013).

In this context, social work interventions within university settings are particularly relevant when oriented toward strengthening students' capacities to build healthy relationships, maintain emotional autonomy, and broaden supportive social networks. Relational education, preventive counseling, and the strengthening of student housing communities represent constructive, capacity-building approaches. From this perspective, cohabitation may be understood as a strategic entry point for developing more contextual, supportive, and sustainable student welfare services.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that student cohabitation in Sumbersari, Jember Regency, cannot be understood solely as an individual choice or a deviation from social norms. Instead, it constitutes a social practice shaped by complex interactions among personal, relational, and structural factors. Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory, the study demonstrates that the normalization of cohabitation occurs through layered dynamics involving students' intimate relationships (microsystem), boarding-house environments and peer networks (mesosystem), weak housing regulations and limited institutional oversight (exosystem), and broader generational shifts in values regarding intimacy and personal autonomy (macrosystem).

The findings reveal that students' decisions to cohabit are primarily driven by needs for affection, emotional comfort, and practical as well as economic considerations. Cohabitation is perceived as a pragmatic strategy for managing the demands of student life, particularly among those living away from their families and facing academic pressures. Permissive social environments and minimal social control further reinforce this practice, transforming cohabitation from a perceived deviant behavior into a normalized aspect of student life. This process reflects the gradual and contextual internalization of new values that support the acceptance of cohabitation.

Regarding attitudes, cohabiting students tend to exhibit indifference toward social judgment, reduce interactions within certain friendship circles, and construct personal justifications for their lifestyle choices. These attitudes serve as adaptive strategies to maintain emotional comfort and relational stability, while also indicating shifts in social relationship patterns. The normalization of cohabitation occurs not only at the behavioral level but also at cognitive and affective levels, as students develop personal moral frameworks that may diverge from dominant social norms.

The implications of cohabitation for students' social functioning are mixed. On one hand, cohabitation can enhance both academic and non-academic performance by providing emotional support, motivation for learning, and practical cooperation. Many students continue

to fulfill their academic and organizational responsibilities effectively. On the other hand, cohabitation may impede social functioning by reducing community interaction, narrowing social networks, and increasing emotional dependency. When cohabiting relationships are disrupted or end, some students experience social and emotional adjustment difficulties that negatively impact their academic engagement and daily life.

Theoretically, this study emphasizes the importance of analyzing student cohabitation through comprehensive social-ecological and social-functioning perspectives. Cohabitation does not inherently cause social dysfunction; rather, it can serve as either a source of support or vulnerability, depending on environmental contexts and individuals' capacities to maintain balanced social roles. Therefore, normative approaches that rely on blame or punitive measures are inadequate for understanding and addressing this phenomenon.

The findings underscore the critical role of social work within campus and student community settings. Interventions should prioritize enhancing healthy relationship literacy, preventing emotional dependency, and developing psychosocial support systems within boarding-house communities and campus services. Employing a person-in-environment approach is essential to help students maintain balanced social functioning while acknowledging the realities of their lived experiences and emotional needs. Thus, this study contributes not only to academic discourse but also to the development of more contextual, humane, and sustainable social intervention strategies that support student well-being.

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