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The Importance of Interpersonal Communication Skills for Emotional Well-Being and Life Satisfaction Among Vocational School Students

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication skills are one of the most important *soft skills* in facing the challenges of the 21st century, both in the context of academics, the world of work, and social life. For Vocational High School (SMK) students, this ability is very crucial because vocational school graduates are not only required to master technical competencies, but also social skills to be able to adapt to a dynamic work environment. However, the increasing dependence of adolescents on the use of gadgets has an impact on decreasing the intensity of meaningful face-to-face interactions, thereby hindering the development of interpersonal communication skills. Based on this phenomenon, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the patterns of interpersonal communication that develop among vocational school students. The method used in this study is *literature review*, which is to review various literature and previous research results by examining various scientific sources in the fields of psychology, education and pedagogics, philosophy, health, and guidance and counseling practices. The results of the study show that interpersonal communication skills contribute significantly to social development, emotional well-being, and job readiness of vocational school students. However, the high intensity of using gadgets has the potential to weaken empathy, the intensity of direct communication, and the ability to build positive social relationships. As an implication, schools need to strengthen the role of teachers and Guidance and Counseling (BK) services as well as all school stakeholders to contribute to efforts to improve students' interpersonal communication skills for the realization of a happier and more meaningful life. The results of this study recommend that researchers look for strategies to improve interpersonal communication skills that

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are implemented in the school environment, especially at the vocational level.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging verbal and nonverbal messages that are the basis of human social life (Devito, 2019). These skills include empathy, active listening, and the ability to adjust communication styles according to social contexts. For Vocational High School (SMK) students, these skills are very important because adolescence is a period of social identity formation and professional readiness (Santrock, 2021).

In the context of the world of work, interpersonal communication skills are included in the category of *employability skills* or *soft skills* that determine the success of graduates (OECD, 2020). Companies assess the ability to communicate and collaborate as key factors of productivity (Robles, 2012). Without this ability, vocational school graduates will have difficulty establishing working relationships and facing conflicts in the professional environment.

Psychologically, effective communication helps shape adolescents' confidence and emotional well-being. Adolescents who are able to interact healthily with their social environment have better emotional regulation (Goleman, 2018). Conversely, low communication skills can result in social isolation and difficulty adapting (Hargie, 2011). The phenomenon of increasing gadget use exacerbates this condition by reducing the intensity of meaningful face-to-face interactions (Misra et al., 2016).

Vocational education now emphasizes the importance of a balance between *technical skills* and *social-emotional skills* according to the *Vocational Employability Framework* of UNESCO (2015). Therefore, learning at vocational schools needs to be directed not only at mastering technical competencies, but also strengthening communication skills, empathy, and cooperation so that graduates are ready to face the challenges of the modern world of work.

The digital era has brought significant changes to adolescent communication patterns. The tendency to communicate online decreases the frequency and depth of face-to-face interactions (Santrock, 2021). Research by Misra, Cheng, Genevie, and Yuan (2016) shows that the presence of a mobile phone in a conversation can decrease emotional closeness and the quality of interaction, a phenomenon known as *The iPhone Effect*.

Another study by Przybylski and Weinstein (2017) reinforces the findings, where the presence of mobile phones reduces empathy and trust between individuals. The study of Twenge and Campbell (2018) also found a negative correlation between excessive use of gadgets and face-to-face communication skills. In Indonesia, research by Nurhafani (2023) on vocational school students showed that the use of gadgets for more than five hours per day decreased cooperation and empathy skills.

The phenomenon of *phubbing*, which is ignoring the interlocutor because of focusing on the phone, has become a new social problem among students. Sari and Fitriyani (2022) found that 72% of vocational school students feel neglected when talking to a friend who is busy with their mobile phones. As a result, empathy and social skills decline. Alghamdi and Alzahrani's (2022) research also showed a significant negative relationship between the duration of gadget use and *communication competence*.

From the point of view of social psychology, excessive use of gadgets causes a *displacement effect*, which is the replacement of face-to-face social interaction time with

passive online activities such as *scrolling* social media (Valkenburg, 2022). This reduces teens' opportunities to practice active listening skills and understand body language. Therefore, schools have a strategic role in balancing

the use of digital technology by strengthening direct social interaction (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

Teachers and counselors need to instill *digital literacy* and *digital self-regulation* so that students are able to use gadgets wisely (UNESCO, 2019). The integration of learning through discussions, *role plays*, and collaborative projects has been proven to be effective in increasing empathy and cooperation (Wibowo & Herlina, 2022). Guidance and Counseling (BK) services also play an important role through preventive, curative, and developmental approaches in helping students manage the use of gadgets and strengthen interpersonal communication (Prayitno & Amti, 2019; Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2020).

Collaborative strategies between teachers, homeroom teachers, and school counselors need to be developed to foster a culture of healthy communication. Mulyana's research (2023) shows that *the collaborative counseling model* is able to reduce the use of gadgets by up to 30% and increase interpersonal communication scores by 18%. School policies such as "gadget-free zones" can also strengthen real social relationships (Rahmawati, 2021). Thus, strengthening interpersonal communication skills through humanistic and collaborative approaches is an important foundation for vocational school students to become empathetic, adaptive, and ready to face the challenges of the 21st century (Goleman, 2018; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

2. Theoretical Review and Multidisciplinary Perspectives

2.1. Psychological Perspective

In developmental psychology, adolescence is seen as an important phase of self-identity formation, social independence, and adaptability to the environment (Santrock, 2021). Erikson (1968) calls this stage identity *versus role confusion*, which is a period in which individuals try to understand their identity through social interaction. Interpersonal communication skills are the main means for adolescents to develop empathy, confidence, and the ability to adapt to social-emotional differences. Grobler's (1999) research shows that adolescents' communication patterns are often immature, such as lack of listening or being competitive in conversations, thus hindering the development of empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

For Vocational High School (SMK) students, interpersonal communication is the key to success in a collaborative learning environment. Lack of the ability to actively listen and understand other people's perspectives is often the cause of group conflicts and difficulties in cooperation (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2020). Therefore, guidance and counseling services play an important role in helping students understand the dynamics of social communication and build more positive interactions. From the perspective of social psychology, Altman and Taylor (1973) through *Social Penetration Theory* explain that interpersonal relationships develop through a *gradual and trust-based* process of self-disclosure.

However, the digital age has changed this process to be more superficial as online communication tends to focus on self-image rather than authenticity (Valkenburg, 2022). Many teens display their ideal versions of themselves on social media, reducing the space for reflective conversations that build empathy (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). From the

point of view of clinical psychology, skills such as *active listening* (Rogers & Farson, 1987) are very important because they help adolescents understand the emotions of others, strengthen social relationships, and support mental well-being (Hargie, 2011). Thus, interpersonal communication is not only a tool of interaction, but also the foundation of the psychological and social health of today's adolescents.

2.2. Educational and Pedagogic Perspective

In the realm of education, interpersonal communication skills are an important part of *21st Century Skills*, which demand the ability to collaborate, think critically, adapt, and communicate effectively (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Modern education not only emphasizes knowledge transfer, but also the development of social-emotional intelligence so that students are able to participate productively in society and the world of work (OECD, 2020). For Vocational High School (SMK) students, this ability is crucial because graduates are not only required to master *hard skills*, but also *soft skills* that support career success and psychological well-being (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

The learning process in vocational schools needs to be directed to hone the ability to convey ideas, listen actively, and work together effectively (Robles, 2012). However, research shows that many vocational school students still have difficulty speaking in public, facing group conflicts, and showing low empathy (Wibowo & Herlina, 2022). To overcome this, the learning paradigm must shift from *teacher-centered* to *student-centered learning* through approaches such as *project-based learning (PjBL)*, *cooperative learning*, and *problem-based learning (PBL)* which have been proven to improve *social-emotional learning* (Johnson & Johnson, 2019).

In addition to the pedagogical approach, BK teachers have an important role in developing students' interpersonal communication through proactive and preventive guidance services (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2020). *Life skills training* programs that combine empathy, assertiveness, and conflict resolution skills have proven to be effective (Prayitno & Amti, 2019). Nugroho's research (2022) found that job simulation-based training was able to improve students' communication skills by up to 40% and reduce interpersonal conflicts in the industrial practice environment, showing that vocational learning integrated with communication training has a direct impact on *work readiness*.

Vocational education can also strengthen communication skills through cross-disciplinary learning, such as collaboration between entrepreneurship teachers and BK teachers in presentation exercises and communication feedback (UNESCO, 2019). In addition, a school culture that values openness and communication without intimidation creates *psychological safety* that supports students' courage in expressing themselves (Rahmawati, 2021). Thus, improving interpersonal communication in vocational schools is not enough to be done theoretically, but requires direct experience, social reflection, and ongoing counseling assistance so that students are able to communicate meaningfully and adaptively.

2.3. Philosophical Perspectives

In a philosophical view, interpersonal communication is not just a social skill, but the deepest expression of human existence as a dialogical being. Aristotle referred to human beings as *zoon politikon*, social beings who find their meaning through relationships with others (Aristotle, trans. 2000). The ability to communicate is therefore at the core of ethical and social life, not just a means of exchanging information. In the context of vocational education, this emphasizes that the success of vocational school students is

not only measured by technical competence, but also by their ability to establish meaningful human relationships in the world of work and social life.

Martin Buber (1958) through his philosophy of dialogue affirms that true human relationships are realized in authentic dialogue, in which individuals view others as equal subjects (*I-Thou*), not as objects or tools (*I-It*). In the digital age, teenage communication tends to shift to superficial and instrumental, as it takes place more through screens than face-to-face encounters. Emmanuel Lévinas (1969) added that true ethics arise from encounters with "the faces of others," which fosters an awareness of moral responsibility. This loss of sensitivity in vocational school students can lower their empathy, social responsibility, and professional integrity in the future.

Existential philosophy as stated by Viktor Frankl (1985) emphasizes that humans find the meaning of life through authentic relationships with others. Meaningful interpersonal communication provides an existential basis for adolescents in the midst of a fast-paced digital world. In the context of value education, Paulo Freire (2005) emphasized the importance of dialogical education as a means of liberation and the formation of critical awareness. Therefore, education and counseling guidance services in vocational schools need to integrate reflective, empathetic, and dialogical values so that students not only become skilled workers, but also communicative human beings who are ethical and happy in their lives.

2.4. Health Perspective

Interpersonal communication skills have an important role in maintaining the mental health and psychosocial well-being of adolescents, especially for Vocational High School (SMK) students. The ability to express feelings, understand the emotions of others, and interact effectively helps individuals achieve psychological balance. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), mental health is not only the absence of psychological disorders, but also the ability of individuals to establish positive social relationships and manage their emotions. Thus, interpersonal communication serves as a *protective factor* that protects adolescents from emotional distress and supports their psychological well-being.

Research shows that individuals with good communication skills have lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Skills such as *active listening*, empathy, and assertiveness increase *social support* which acts as a buffer against psychological stress, especially in adolescence (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). In contrast, weak interpersonal communication is often associated with an increased risk of loneliness and *social anxiety* (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). Superficial digital interactions without authentic emotional presence exacerbate the phenomenon of *social disconnectedness*, where adolescents appear to be "connected" online but instead feel emotionally isolated.

From a neuropsychological perspective, warm and empathetic social interactions have been shown to stimulate the release of the hormones oxytocin and dopamine that increase happiness and trust (Kemp & Guastella, 2017). Fitriyah and Suryani (2022) research in Yogyakarta found that vocational school students with high communication skills have better psychological well-being, especially in positive relationships and mastery of the environment. In fact, healthy interpersonal communication also impacts physical health through a decrease in stress hormones and an increase in immunity (Holt-

Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Thus, interpersonal communication skills not only support social success, but also become the foundation of adolescent holistic mental health and well-being.

2.5. Guidance and Counseling Perspective

From the perspective of guidance and counseling (BK), interpersonal communication skills are a fundamental aspect in the personal and social development of students. BK services function not only to help solve problems, but also to develop self-potential and the ability to interact effectively in the school environment and society (Prayitno & Amti, 2019). For Vocational High School (SMK) students, BK services play an important role in fostering empathetic, assertive, and ethical communication skills, which are urgently needed in the modern world of work (Yusuf & Nurihsan, 2020).

Interpersonal communication skills are also included in the social development tasks of adolescents as stated by Havighurst (1972), namely building mature relationships with peers and developing responsible social roles. BK facilitates this process through *personal-social guidance* and *group guidance services* that allow students to practice expressing themselves, understanding the feelings of others, and resolving conflicts constructively. This approach is in line with the principle of *experiential learning* (Kolb, 1984), where students learn through direct experience and interpersonal reflection.

In counseling practice, the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers (1951) is an important basis for the development of empathic communication through the principles of *empathic understanding*, *unconditional positive regard*, and *genuineness*. Through warm and authentic counseling relationships, students learn to build open and respectful communication. Meanwhile, Bandura's (1986) social learning theory explains that communication skills can be strengthened through observation and imitation of social models such as teachers or counselors. Techniques such as *behavioral rehearsal* and *role-playing* have been proven to be effective in practicing active listening skills, expressing assertive opinions, and giving positive feedback (Corey, 2017).

Research by Lestari and Syahputra (2022) shows that group counseling-based interpersonal communication training in vocational schools can increase student empathy and cooperation by up to 35%, while Mulyana (2023) found that the *Collaborative Counseling* model can reduce passive communication behavior and increase *social connectedness*. BK services also function as a preventive intervention against the impact of superficial digital communication. Rahayu (2021) found that digital communication ethics education in BK reduces *phubbing behavior* and increases face-to-face interaction. In accordance with the *ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors Framework* (ASCA, 2021), interpersonal communication skills are a core competency that must be developed in schools. Thus, BK services play a strategic role in shaping a generation of vocational school students who are able to communicate wisely, empathically, and with dignity in the midst of the challenges of the digital era

3. Positive Implications of Development

Interpersonal communication skills have a strategic role in shaping career readiness, psychological well-being, and social character of Vocational High School (SMK) students. Mastering this ability provides multidimensional advantages including social,

emotional, professional, and moral aspects. In the context of vocational education, interpersonal communication is an important foundation for the development of adaptive personalities and the ability to work together in complex modern work environments (OECD, 2020).

One of the main benefits of mastering these skills is the long-term improvement of social skills. Students who have high interpersonal communication skills tend to be able to work together in teams, express opinions assertively, and resolve conflicts constructively (Robles, 2012). Research by Wibowo and Herlina (2022) showed an increase in teamwork skills of up to 37% after interpersonal communication training at vocational schools. This skill is an important provision for *work readiness* and productivity in the world of work.

In addition to improving social skills, interpersonal communication also strengthens students' psychological and emotional well-being. Adolescents who are able to interact with empathy and are open tend to have lower levels of stress and anxiety (Segrin & Flora, 2019). The study of Fitriyah and Suryani (2022) found that students with high communication skills showed better psychological well-being, especially in aspects of positive relationships and mastery of the environment. The social support that arises from healthy communication serves as a protector against the academic and social pressures faced by vocational school students.

Interpersonal communication also strengthens the quality of relationships between students, teachers, and families. The ability to listen actively and express oneself empathetically builds a respectful relationship (Rogers, 1951; Hargie, 2011). Hamre and Pianta (2006) emphasized that positive relationships between students and teachers contribute to improved learning outcomes and social skills. In the family context, open communication can reduce intergenerational conflict and strengthen emotional support for adolescents.

Another significant benefit is the ability to prevent and resolve conflicts. Effective communication allows individuals to express their opinions clearly without causing misunderstandings (Goleman, 2018). Nugroho's research (2022) proves that interpersonal communication training can reduce group conflicts by up to 30%. These skills help create a peaceful school culture and encourage productive collaboration between students.

In the context of digitalization, interpersonal communication also serves as a protector from the phenomenon of social alienation. Excessive use of gadgets often leads to *digital disconnectedness*, where adolescents feel connected online but emotionally isolated (Nowland et al., 2018). Strong communication skills help students maintain the quality of face-to-face relationships, understand emotional expressions, and interpret social presence in real terms (Valkenburg, 2022). Thus, this ability is a counterweight to the negative effects of superficial digital interactions.

In an increasingly global world of work, interpersonal communication skills also strengthen adaptability and cross-cultural collaboration. Vocational school students who are skilled in interacting openly and empathetically will be better prepared to face a multicultural work environment (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). These skills support the formation of professional character who values differences and is able to forge productive relationships in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural teams.

Finally, healthy interpersonal communication not only increases social success, but also contributes to a happier and more meaningful life. Viktor Frankl (1985) and Martin Buber (1958) emphasized that the meaning of human life is born from authentic relationships with others. Teens who are able to establish empathic relationships will have an easier time coping with stress, feeling accepted, and living life with optimism. Thus, the development of interpersonal communication skills is not only an academic need, but also a spiritual and emotional foundation for the happiness of the whole human being

4. Practical Recommendations

Efforts to strengthen interpersonal communication skills among vocational school students must be carried out collaboratively, in stages, and continuously. An effective approach does not only focus on students as individuals, but also involves the entire Education ecosystem within the School. The following strategies were developed based on the theory of *the whole-school approach* (Weare, 2015) which emphasizes the integration of academic, social, and emotional education programs in creating a healthy communication culture in schools.

4.1. Integration of Soft Skills Module in the Vocational Curriculum.

Interpersonal communication skills need to be explicitly included in the vocational curriculum through *soft skills* modules that include effective communication, empathy, communication ethics, and professional collaboration (OECD, 2020). Implementation can be done through subjects such as Entrepreneurship or Indonesian with *role-play* and *case discussion methods*. Nugroho's research (2022) shows that the integration of these modules is able to increase the communication skills of vocational school students by up to 38% in three months.

4.2. Interpersonal Communication Training Program or Workshop.

Schools can organize communication training or *bootcamps* that train students in managing emotions and expressing opinions assertively using *the Interpersonal Effectiveness* approach (Linehan, 2015). BK teachers can facilitate group discussions and practice active listening in a safe atmosphere. Lestari and Syahputra (2022) found that this kind of training increases communication skills by 35% and reduces conflicts between students by up to 25%.

4.3. "No Gadgets" Timing for Face-to-Face Interaction

The "gadget-free zone" policy during breaks or social activities helps students practice direct interaction and strengthen empathy (Rahmawati, 2021). Teachers can model warm face-to-face communication, while parents apply *Family Digital Agreements* to regulate the use of gadgets at home (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). This step trains students to read facial expressions and emotions that are irreplaceable by digital communication (Valkenburg, 2022).

4.4. Reflection and Feedback Regular Communication

Weekly reflection activities such as *the Communication Reflection Session* help students evaluate the way they communicate, including the successes and challenges they face. Teachers can use *role-play videos* to allow students to observe their own expressions and body language (Corey, 2017). This reflection fosters *meta-communication awareness* and the ability to improve communication patterns independently.

4.5. Encouraging Social and Collaborative Activities

Activities such as *student organizations*, *debate clubs*, and *community service projects* are means of practicing real communication that foster leadership and empathy (Wibowo & Herlina, 2022). The *Student Peer Mentoring program* is also effective in strengthening social relations between students. According to La Greca and Harrison (2005), this kind of social engagement improves the emotional well-being and prosocial abilities of adolescents.

4.6. **Collaboration with External Institutions and the Professional Community**

Collaboration with universities, HR practitioners, or counseling institutions can expand professional communication training for vocational school students (OECD, 2020). Schools can also collaborate with social communities to run *community-based communication projects* that foster social empathy and moral responsibility. This cross-institutional collaboration enriches students' real-world communication experiences.

5. **CONCLUSION**

Interpersonal communication skills are one of the key competencies of the 21st century that play an important role in shaping the social personality, job readiness, and emotional well-being of vocational school students. In the context of vocational education, this ability is not only a support for academic and professional success, but also a foundation for the formation of empathetic, adaptive, and ethical individuals in the midst of complex social dynamics.

From various theoretical and empirical perspectives that have been studied, it can be concluded that interpersonal communication skills have a multidisciplinary dimension that reinforces each other.

- 5.1. From a psychological perspective, these skills help teens understand themselves and others, develop empathy, and strengthen social identity.
- 5.2. From an educational and pedagogical perspective, interpersonal communication is an integral part of collaborative learning and the development *of soft skills* that are relevant to the needs of the world of work.
- 5.3. From a philosophical perspective, interpersonal communication has an existential and moral meaning: a form of authentic dialogue that affirms humanity in the midst of a digital world.
- 5.4. From a health perspective, interpersonal communication has been shown to be a protective factor against stress, social isolation, and mental well-being disorders.
- 5.5. From the perspective of guidance and counseling (BK), these skills can be developed through humanistic, behavioral, and collaborative counseling services that foster self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to resolve conflicts constructively.

The high intensity of gadget use among vocational school teenagers is a big challenge that can erode face-to-face interaction and social empathy. Therefore, education needs to take strategic and systematic steps to balance the use of technology with strengthening human communication skills. The strategy includes the integration of *soft skills modules* in the vocational curriculum, practice-based interpersonal communication training, the implementation of *gadget-free zones*, the habituation of social reflection, and cooperation with external institutions.

The development of interpersonal communication skills is not only the responsibility of BK teachers, but is the responsibility of all components of education:

schools, teachers, parents, and students themselves. Through a collaborative and reflective approach, vocational education can produce a generation that is not only ready to work, but also ready to live as a generation that is socially intelligent, emotionally resilient, and humanly happy.

Thus, interpersonal communication skills are not only a tool for interaction, but also a means to build a more meaningful, balanced, and happy life. In this context, vocational school students who master healthy interpersonal communication will be better able to live their social lives positively, establish productive professional relationships, and become competitive individuals in the midst of the challenges of the fast-paced and competitive digital era.

6. AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. The author confirms that the paper is free of plagiarism.

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