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The Meaning of Living Together: A Phenomenological Study of University Students in Bandung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the construction of meaning behind the phenomenon of living together (cohabitation) among students in Bandung City. Using Edmund Husserl's phenomenological approach, this qualitative research reveals the motives, meanings, and responses of students towards the practice of living with a partner without marriage ties. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with students and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that the decision to engage in living together is driven by a complex interaction between pragmatic-external motives (such as economic and time efficiency) and personal-emotional motives (such as the need for closeness and compatibility testing). The meanings attributed to this practice vary, ranging from a pre-marital simulation, a violation of norms, an expression of freedom, to a means of developing emotional independence. Although aware of the negative impacts (social stigma, reputation risks, and gender inequality), students still consider the personal benefits of cohabitation. This study concludes that living together for students is a liminal space full of negotiation between traditional and modern values, where meaning is formed subjectively through their direct lived experience (lifeworld).

Keywords: *Living Together, Cohabitation, Construction of Meaning, Phenomenology, Student, Socio-Cultural Values.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid social and cultural changes in the era of globalization have given rise to diverse patterns of relationships among the younger generation. One emerging phenomenon is living together or cohabitation between unmarried couples. This phenomenon often sparks debate as it directly confronts the values, norms, and morality upheld in Indonesian society, which still highly values traditions and religious teachings (Aisy et al., 2025; Ramadhan et al., 2025).

In a large city like Bandung, known as an educational hub with a large student population from various regions, student social dynamics are highly diverse. Bandung is not only an academic space but also a space for cultural interaction, lifestyle, and social experimentation. In this context, living together emerges as a lifestyle choice for some students, both from urban and regional backgrounds. This practice is laden with meaning, as each individual involved has different experiences, perceptions, and judgments (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

For some students, living together is considered normal as part of the process towards maturity, a compatibility test before marriage, or even a form of resistance against conservative values. Conversely, other students view this practice as deviant, violating religious norms, and potentially causing social problems in the future. The construction of meaning regarding living together among students is interesting to study because it illustrates how the younger generation builds their own understanding and narrative about intimate relationships outside of marriage.

This study does not intend to judge the right or wrong of the living together phenomenon but tries to understand how this meaning is constructed in the real lives of students. Using a phenomenological approach, this research focuses on the subjective experiences of students in constructing the meaning of living together based on their background and direct life experiences. From this understanding, the research is expected to contribute to the academic discourse on changing values and culture among the younger generation of Indonesia, especially students who live in the flow of globalization but still face strong traditional norms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Living Together in Social Construction

The theory of social construction by Berger and Luckmann (1966) states that reality is socially constructed through habitualization, institutionalization, and legitimization processes. The phenomenon of living together can be seen as a form of social construction where individuals interpret and give meaning based on their social interactions. In the context of students, this meaning is formed through interactions with peers, exposure to social media and popular culture, and life experiences in a more open urban environment.

B. Phenomenology and Lived Experience

Phenomenology, initiated by Edmund Husserl, emphasizes the importance of understanding individual subjective experience (lifeworld) in constructing meaning. In this view, the meaning of living together is not formed from external norms alone but from how students experience, interpret, and give meaning to their direct life experiences with their partners. Husserl's phenomenological approach allows researchers to understand the essence of the living together experience from the perspective of the students themselves.

C. Previous Research on Cohabitation

Previous research shows that cohabitation motives are complex. Beauparlant et al. (2025) identified motives such as spending time together, testing compatibility, and financial efficiency. Yeung (2024) highlighted the trend of increasing cohabitation in Asia as part of negotiation between family values, religion, and economic considerations. In Indonesia, Kadir (2024) found that most students reject the criminalization of cohabitation because it adds to the existing stigma. This research will enrich the literature by exploring the construction of meaning of living together among Indonesian students using a phenomenological lens.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method. Phenomenology was chosen to understand the essence of the lived experience of students regarding living together. The research participants were active students in Bandung City

who had direct experience or in-depth knowledge of the practice of living together. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were conducted to explore participants' motives, meanings, and responses to the social and moral impacts of living together. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing interview data from various participants and using supporting documents.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Multidimentional Motives Behind the Decision of Living Together

Pragmatic-External Motives predominantly stem from practical considerations of urban student life. Financial efficiency emerged as the most significant driver, particularly voiced by male participants. Akbar (21) explicitly stated, "From the guy's side, clearly economic factors are a big consideration. Imagine, paying for one kos or rental for two is definitely cheaper than separately." This reflects how economic pressures in a student city like Bandung create what Beauparlant et al. (2025) term "pragmatic cohabitation," where financial logic overrides traditional norms.

Beyond economics, time efficiency and practical logistics formed another crucial sub-motive. Mhysita (20) emphasized, "Besides economic factors, there's a strong comfort and practicality factor rather than wasting time and money on transportation, better to live under one roof." This practical consideration aligns with Yeung's (2024) observations across Asian urban centers, where students increasingly prioritize efficiency in managing academic and personal lives.

Personal Emotional Motives revealed deeper psychological needs driving cohabitation decisions. The need for emotional intimacy and security emerged as a fundamental human need, consistent with Mernitz et al.'s (2023) findings about post-pandemic relationship patterns. More significantly, the concept of "compatibility testing" before marriage represented a strategic approach to relationships. As Mhysita noted about her friends, "They said they wanted to 'test compatibility' first before getting serious to the next level." This reflects what Beauparlant et al. (2025) identify as "relationship experimentation," where cohabitation serves as a trial period assessing long-term viability.

Gender differences in motivational emphasis were particularly striking. Male participants tended to foreground practical benefits, while female participants, though acknowledging practical advantages, more frequently considered emotional comfort and long-term implications. Aditiya (21) observed, "Maybe for guys, they tend to see it from the simpler side like saving money, practical, and comfortable. For girls, they might consider comfort aspects, closeness, and maybe considerations about the 'future' of the relationship." This gender disparity in risk assessment echoes Kuang et al.'s (2025) findings about differential gender perspectives in cohabitation.

B. Spectrum of Meaning: Negotiating Traditional and Modern Values

The construction of meaning around living together revealed a fascinating dialectic between inherited values and contemporary experiences, creating what can be described as a "meaning spectrum" rather than a monolithic understanding. Living Together as Liminal Space emerged as a predominant framework, where cohabitation represents a transitional phase between dating and marriage. Participants frequently described it as a "pre-marital simulation" or "test drive" for relationships. Aditiya captured this essence: "Basically, it's about sharing life and living space like a household simulation but without official ties." This conceptualization aligns with phenomenological understanding of lifeworld where meaning emerges from direct daily experiences of negotiating household responsibilities, emotional intimacy, and conflict resolution (Husserl, as cited in Hasan, 2023).

Normative Conflict and Moral Negotiation represented another significant meaning framework, particularly for students from strong religious backgrounds. Akbar articulated this tension: "Honestly, personally and from my family background in Tasik, this doesn't conform. So, living together is seen as something violating and unacceptable." This internal conflict demonstrates what Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe as the struggle between socially constructed realities and personal experiences. The awareness of potential social sanctions, including gossip and family shame, created significant moral dilemmas for these students.

Modern Identity and Expressive Freedom constituted a third meaning framework, particularly among students exposed to globalized values. Some participants viewed cohabitation as personal expression and lifestyle choice. As one participant noted, it could be "a form of lifestyle or freedom expression." However, this modern perspective often coexisted with awareness of social risks, creating what Foran et al. (2022) identify as "calculated modernity" embracing contemporary values while remaining cognizant of social consequences. The campus environment served as a crucial moderating factor in meaning construction. Mhytia described how "as a student living in a more diverse environment, I learned to understand that everyone has their own considerations and life choices." This reflects the phenomenological concept of intersubjective understanding, where exposure to diverse perspectives enables reconstruction of previously held beliefs.

C. Navigating Social and Moral Landscapes: Risk Awareness and Gender Asymmetry

Students demonstrated remarkable awareness of the complex social and moral implications of their choices, revealing what can be termed "calculated risk taking" in their decision-making processes. Social Stigma and Reputation Management emerged as primary concerns across all participant categories. Mhysita articulated the pervasive fear of social judgment: "Society's views are definitely still mostly negative. It will become gossip material, get stigma, and be considered norm violating." This awareness of what Kadir (2024) identifies as "social sanctioning mechanisms" significantly influenced behavior, with many students taking measures to conceal their living arrangements.

Institutional and Familial Pressures created additional layers of complexity. Akbar highlighted the real consequences in educational environments: "It's true... they will definitely be avoided or reported to the kos owner. Family would also be ashamed if they found out." The potential impact on academic standing and future professional opportunities represented significant deterrents, with students recognizing that, as Aditiya noted, "in Indonesia, reputation is important."

Gendered Consequences and Differential Risk constituted perhaps the most striking finding. Female participants consistently articulated greater awareness of disproportionate consequences. Aditiya emphasized, "The negative impacts are much greater and risky especially risks for girls, like unplanned pregnancy, which have huge consequences." This gender asymmetry in risk perception and consequence aligns with Kuang et al.'s (2025) research on gendered experiences of cohabitation, where women bear greater social, moral, and physical burdens.

Despite overwhelming awareness of negative consequences, students engaged in sophisticated risk-benefit analysis, often concluding that personal benefits outweighed potential social costs. This reflects what Mernitz et al. (2023) describe as "pragmatic relationship management" among contemporary youth, where traditional norms are weighed against personal needs and circumstances.

V. CONCLUSION

A This phenomenological study reveals that living together among Bandung students represents a complex phenomenon of meaning construction occurring at the intersection of traditional values and modern realities. The research demonstrates that cohabitation decisions are not merely behavioral choices but profound processes of meaning making shaped by the dynamic interplay between external pressures and internal motivations.

The findings illuminate three crucial aspects of this phenomenon. First, the multidimensional motives driving cohabitation decisions reflect what Beauparlant et al. (2025) identify as "hybrid rationality," where practical considerations coexist with emotional needs in unique configurations for each individual. Second, the spectrum of meanings attached to living together from pragmatic arrangement to identity expression demonstrates the active negotiation process Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe in social construction of reality. Third, the acute awareness of social consequences, particularly the gendered nature of risks, reveals sophisticated risk assessment capabilities among contemporary youth (Kuang et al., 2025).

Theoretically, this study contributes to phenomenology by illustrating how Husserl's concept of lifeworld operates in contemporary youth relationships, where personal experience becomes the primary site of meaning construction amid competing value systems. The concept of living together as "liminal space" offers a valuable framework for understanding modern relationship transitions that defy traditional categorization.

Practically, these findings suggest several important implications. For educational institutions, there is urgent need for comprehensive relationship education that addresses the real complexities students face, moving beyond simple abstinence messaging toward practical guidance on communication, consent, and responsible

decision-making (Mernitz et al., 2023). For families, the research highlights the importance of open, non-judgmental communication about relationships, recognizing that parental guidance remains influential even as children navigate new social landscapes. For policymakers, understanding the nuanced reasons behind cohabitation trends can inform more effective youth and family policies.

Several limitations warrant mention. The focus on Bandung students limits generalizability, and the sensitive nature of the topic may have affected participant openness. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how meanings evolve over time, include more diverse student populations across different Indonesian regions, and explore the role of digital media in shaping perceptions of relationships. Additionally, investigation into the longterm outcomes of student cohabitation on subsequent marriages and family formation would provide valuable insights for understanding broader social transformations in Indonesia.

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