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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Effect of Social Support and Conflict on Academic Performance of Foundation Year University Students

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Abstract

This article investigates the effects of the psychometric constructs of social support and conflict on students' academic performance in the foundation programme of the Bachelor of Commerce degree at a South African university. The foundation programme is an extended curriculum providing access to students from poorly resourced schools, quintiles 1–3. The research design was quantitative. Data were collected from 151 Bachelor of Commerce students in their foundation year at a South African university. Data were gathered using a closed-ended questionnaire, which included elements adopted from the Interpersonal Relationship Inventory developed by Tilden, Nelson, and May, and through document analysis. The data were analysed using spreadsheet formulas and a two-way ANOVA in SPSS version 25. The results suggest there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that social support and conflict have no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy, Economics, and Mathematics. The findings also reveal no interaction effect between the independent variable Social Support Rank and the independent variable Conflict Rank. Further analysis of the estimated marginal means of student academic performance shows that performance is most similar across all conflict groups when social support is present (medium or high social support). This finding aligns with social exchange theory, which seeks to predict interaction behaviour. The findings suggest that successful foundation programme implementation should consider the effect of social support on student performance, especially when conflict is present, and incorporate interventions that provide student support. It should be noted that, due to the exploratory nature of this study, the general applicability of the findings has not been tested. This study contributes to research aimed at understanding the successful implementation of university foundation programmes.

Keywords: Academic Performance; Conflict; Foundation Programme; Social Support.

Introduction

A country's developmental agenda depends directly on its educated population, and higher education institutions – particularly universities – play a central role in cultivating this foundation. Students are the cornerstone of any university; therefore, their academic performance is a key indicator for achieving institutional throughput targets (De Hart et al., 2011). Although substantial research has examined student academic performance at South African universities, focusing on socioeconomic, environmental, and psychological factors, most studies have concentrated on the undergraduate level. This study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on students' academic performance during their foundation year within the South African university context, aiming to improve retention and throughput.

This study examined the effects of social support and conflict as psychometric constructs on students' academic performance in the Bachelor of Commerce foundation programme at a South African university. The study has two distinguishing features. First, it was conducted at the foundation level of a residential South African university, where successful completion leads to entry into the Bachelor of Commerce degree programme. Second, it investigates students' perceptions of social support and conflict at this

foundational level, thereby addressing a gap in the existing literature.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate the effects of social support and conflict on students' academic performance at the foundation level of the Bachelor of Commerce degree at a South African university.

Literature review

The relationship between social support and student academic performance highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in educational settings. Social support – defined as the perception and reality of being cared for, valued, and part of a social network – has been shown to significantly influence academic outcomes. It enhances academic performance by providing emotional and motivational resources that students can draw upon during challenging times. Achdiyah (2023) emphasises that social support can strengthen students' motivation and assist them in transitioning from high school to university, thereby improving their academic performance. This view is supported by Liu (2024), who notes that perceived social support can reduce academic pressure, fostering greater academic engagement among students.

The sources of social support that benefit students are varied. Tennant et al. (2015) found a link between social support and student academic performance, emphasising the need to provide adolescent students with emotional support while recognising that the impact of support from teachers differs across genders. Similarly, Crisp, Taggart, and Nora (2015) found that interactions with supportive individuals are among the factors required for academic success among undergraduate Latino college students. Beyond individual relationships, collaboration as a form of social support among university students has also been shown to positively influence academic performance (Othman & Musa, 2014). Importantly, support extends beyond peers; students' perceived social support from family also plays a positive role in achieving good academic results (Castro et al., 2015; Hamdan-Mansour et al., 2015). Recognising that many students live away from home and their established support structures, Cho and Yu (2015) argue that universities themselves need to provide social support to maintain students' psychological well-being.

The presence of supportive relationships, particularly with teachers, creates an environment conducive to learning that is critical for academic success. Moreover, the role of psychological well-being as a mediator in the relationship between social support and academic success is significant. Miežienė et al. (2022) found that psychological well-being mediates the effects of social support and school social capital on academic outcomes, suggesting that students who feel supported are more likely to experience higher levels of well-being, which in turn enhances their academic performance. This aligns with Elsayed et al. (2021), who assert that perceived social support from family and peers is crucial for maintaining academic motivation and self-efficacy, both of which are essential for academic success. Additionally, social support significantly influences academic resilience. Ikpeama (2024) discusses how social interactions can reshape students' attitudes and aspirations, ultimately influencing their academic resilience. This resilience is vital for overcoming academic challenges, particularly in stressful situations such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social support was identified as a critical resource for managing academic stress (Ismail et al., 2022).

While social support positively influences academic outcomes, conflict has the opposite effect. The impact of conflict on student academic performance involves a complex interplay of familial, social, and institutional dynamics. Research demonstrates that conflicts, particularly within families, can significantly detract from students' academic achievements. Elsayed et al. (2022) highlight that students exposed to inter-parental conflict often experience diminished concentration in school, which correlates with lower academic performance. This is supported by evidence showing that higher levels of inter-parental conflict are associated with increased psychological issues among adolescents, further detracting from their academic success

(Elsayed et al., 2022). Liu (2023) reinforces this, demonstrating that parent-adolescent conflict negatively impacts academic engagement.

Beyond familial conflict, peer conflict also affects academic performance. Wang et al. (2022) found that adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience internalising problems, which can lead to lower academic performance and increased peer conflict. This suggests that academic struggles can exacerbate social conflicts, creating a detrimental cycle that affects overall student well-being and performance. However, individual factors can moderate these effects. O'Connor et al. (2022) demonstrate that graduate students with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to manage conflicts, thereby minimising their negative impact on academic outcomes. This indicates that building self-efficacy among students could be an effective strategy to counteract the adverse effects of conflict.

In addition to familial and peer conflicts, broader institutional conflicts can disrupt academic performance. Yusuf (2021) discusses how conflicts within educational institutions can lead to disorganisation, decreased productivity, and disruptions in the academic calendar, all of which negatively affect student learning experiences. Similarly, Gyimah and Bonsu (2020) found that conflicts between teachers and students, often arising from unfair treatment or punitive measures, can weaken relationships and reduce academic effectiveness. Furthermore, the emotional toll of conflict, particularly in familial settings, can lead to academic burnout. Zhang et al. (2022) note that parental marital conflict can create emotional pressure that adversely affects students' academic interests and attitudes towards learning, manifesting as academic burnout that further diminishes performance.

The South African higher education context provides a pertinent illustration of how institutional alienation functions as a form of conflict affecting students. During the nationwide "Fees Must Fall" student protests in 2015/16, one of the main grievances raised was institutional alienation. Students reported a general sense of alienation at universities and did not feel that they belonged at these institutions of higher learning, hence the outcry to decolonise them (Badat, 2016; Calitz, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2017). This sense of alienation connects directly to the conflict-performance relationship. Furrer and Skinner (2003) identify children's emotional experience when participating in learning activities as particularly important for academic achievement. When this positive emotional experience is lacking, negative emotions associated with conflict can adversely impact academic performance. The feeling of connectedness or belonging also includes students who perceive the social world as hostile (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Eccles et al. (1993) explain that there is a negative impact on student academic motivation when personal and positive relationships decrease in the classroom. It is this decrease in positive relationships that the present study refers to as the perception of conflict by students. Rattan et al. (2015) explain that student mindset is critical in improving academic performance, finding that changing student mindsets as an intervention is underutilised and warrants greater attention.

The evidence suggests that various forms of conflict, whether familial, peer-related, or institutional, have significant negative implications for student academic performance. The interplay of psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and emotional health in the context of conflict underscores the need for supportive interventions to help students navigate these challenges effectively.

Theoretical framework

Social support offers benefits throughout an individual's life. The concept of social support is linked to academic success from the earliest stages of a child's academic development (Dubow et al., 1991; Perera & DiGiacomo, 2015). DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004) similarly suggest a positive relationship between social support and academic performance among undergraduate university students. Understanding the mechanisms by which social support influences behaviour – and, by extension, academic performance – requires a theoretical framework that explains interpersonal interactions and their consequences.

Social exchange theory provides such a framework. First developed by Homans (1958) and later expanded by Emerson (1976), the theory is widely used across disciplines including psychology, sociology, economics, and education (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Edwards et al., 2001; Emerson, 1976; Huston & Burgess, 1979; Nord, 1969; Shore & Barksdale, 1998). At its core, the theory holds that when an interaction occurs, it is more likely to be repeated if the person receives approval (reward) or positive reinforcement, rather than disapproval (cost) (Homans, 1958). The theory therefore posits that the likelihood of an interaction being repeated can be predicted, assuming the person whose interactions are being predicted behaves rationally.

It should be noted that rewards can take various forms, such as social recognition or gestures like a smile, a nod, or a pat of approval. Similarly, costs – understood as aversive stimuli resulting from an interaction – can also take various forms, such as public humiliation, gestures like a frown or raised eyebrows, or rewards foregone (effort and time that could have been used elsewhere). Building on these foundational concepts, Homans (1974) proposes the following:

The Success Proposition: "For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action" (Homans, 1974, p. 16).

The Stimulus Proposition: "If in the past the occurrence of a particular stimulus, or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person's action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action, or some similar action, now" (Homans, 1974, p. 22).

The Deprivation-Satiation Proposition: "The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes for him" (Homans, 1974, p. 29).

Homans (1974) further suggests that rewards can vary in extent, incorporating the concept of "degree of rewards" through an additional proposition:

The Value Proposition: "The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action" (Homans, 1974, p. 25).

These propositions from social exchange theory provide the theoretical foundation for the two constructs examined in the present study: social support, representing reward or positive reinforcement, and conflict, representing cost. This framework suggests that students who experience supportive interactions (rewards) are more likely to engage in behaviours conducive to academic success, whereas those who experience conflict (costs) may disengage from academic pursuits.

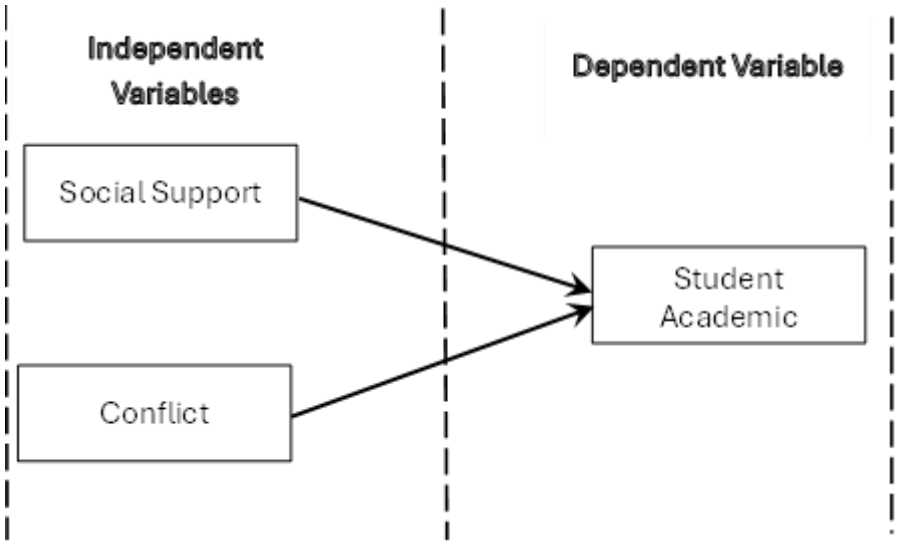


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Research Hypothesis

In order to meet the set-out objective of this study the following research hypothesis were posed and investigated for each module offered at the foundation level (Academic Literacy, Economics and Mathematics). The Null hypothesis is defined by HXa, where X = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

MODULES INVESTIGATED
Academic Literacy
H1a: Social Support has no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy.
H1b: Social Support has a significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy.
H2a: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy.
H2b: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy.
H3a: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy
H3b: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Academic Literacy
Economics
H4a: Social Support has no significant effect on student performance in Economics.
H4b: Social Support has a significant effect on student performance in Economics.
H5a: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Economics.
H5b: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Economics.
H6a: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Economics.
H6b: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Economics.
Mathematics
H7a: Social Support has no significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.
H7b: Social Support has a significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.
H8a: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.
H8b: Conflict has no significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.
H9a: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.
H9b: Social Support and Conflict interaction has no significant effect on student performance in Mathematics.

Materials and Methods

This quantitative study involved 151 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce Foundation Programme (BCom Foundation). The BCom Foundation Programme operates across two university campuses, separated by a geographical distance of 71 kilometres.

Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire comprising the short form of the Interpersonal Relationship Inventory, which contains 26 items. Of these, 13 items collect data to assess respondents' perceptions of social support, while the remaining 13 items assess perceptions of conflict. To ensure consistency in interpretation, all variables were positively worded.

After data collection, two ranked variables were created: Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank. Each variable comprised five levels, calculated from the questionnaire data, ranging from a minimum to a maximum total score. For social support, these levels were: No Social Support, Low Social Support, Unsure (Neutral), Medium Social Support, and High Social Support. This procedure was repeated for the conflict construct, resulting in five corresponding levels: No Conflict, Low Conflict, Unsure (Neutral), Medium Conflict, and High Conflict.

A two-way ANOVA was then conducted using SPSS version 25, with Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank as the independent variables and module mark as the dependent variable.

Findings

The reliability analysis included all 151 cases. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both constructs.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Social Support	0.740	13
Conflict	0.797	13

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the Social Support scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.740, suggesting that 74% of the variability in the composite score of the 13 items was attributable to true score variance, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. The Conflict scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.797, indicating that 79.7% of the variability in its composite score represented internally consistent, reliable variance. Both values exceeded the widely accepted threshold of 0.7 for determining acceptable reliability (Cortina, 1993; Cronbach, 1951; Taber, 2017).

Having established the reliability of both constructs, the study proceeded to examine their effects on academic performance. It was hypothesised that social support might affect academic performance, although this effect might differ across conflict groups. A two-way analysis of variance was conducted to test the academic performance of students across five levels of social support (high, medium, unsure/neutral, low, and none) and five levels of conflict (high, medium, unsure/neutral, low, and none).

Academic Literacy

Prior to conducting the two-way ANOVA, Levene's test was performed to assess the homogeneity of error variance across groups. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Academic Literacy

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	1.966	11	129	.131
Based on Median	1.610	11	129	.103
Based on Median and with adjusted df	1.610	11	99.898	.107
Based on trimmed mean	1.968	11	129	.037

Note. Dependent variable: Academic Literacy. Design: Intercept + Social Support Rank + Conflict Rank + Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank.

Table 3: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Academic Literacy

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Corrected Model	648.061[a]	16	40.504	1.569	.086	.163
Intercept	87671.417	1	87671.417	3397.049	.000	.963
Social Support Rank	16.840	3	5.613	0.217	.884	.005
Conflict Rank	196.011	4	49.003	1.899	.115	.056
Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank	304.312	9	33.812	1.310	.238	.084
Error	3329.246	129	25.808			
Total	502433.120	146				
Corrected Total	3977.307	145				

Note. [a]R^2 = .163 (Adjusted R^2 = .059).

The results presented in Table 2 reveal a non-statistically significant Levene's statistic based on the mean (p = .131). Consequently, the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable (Academic Literacy) is equal across groups could not be rejected, confirming that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met.

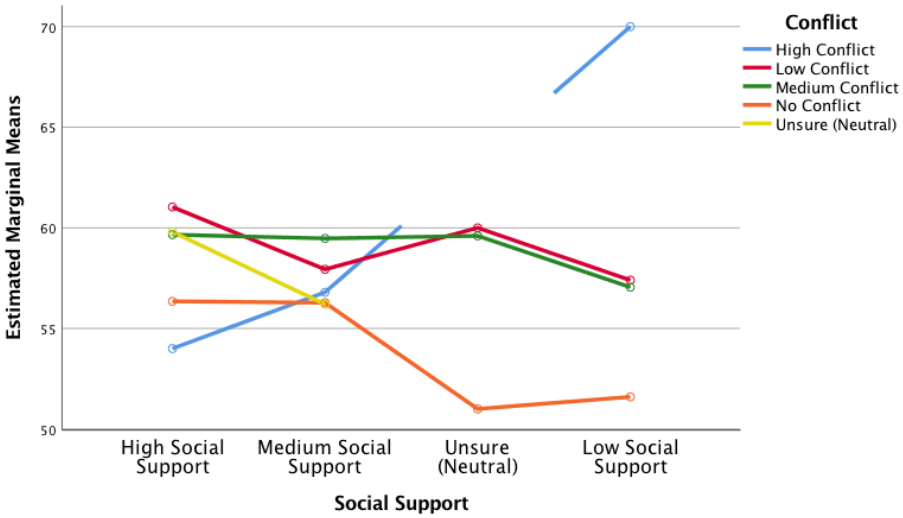
Having satisfied this assumption, the two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank on Academic Literacy. The results are presented in Table 3.

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that Social Support Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Academic Literacy, $F(3, 129) = 0.217$, p = .884, partial η^2 = .005. Similarly, Conflict Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Academic Literacy, $F(4, 129) = 1.899$, p = .115, partial η^2 = .056. These findings reveal that neither independent variable exerted a significant main effect on the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the interaction effect between Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank was not statistically significant, $F(9, 129) = 1.310$, p = .238, partial η^2 = .084. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no interaction effect. It can be concluded that the effect of social support on Academic Literacy does not differ across levels of conflict, and vice versa.

Figure 2 illustrates the estimated marginal means of Academic Literacy across the five levels of Social Support Rank, with separate lines representing each level of Conflict Rank.

Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means of Academic Literacy



The horizontal axis displays the levels of social support (No Social Support, Low, Unsure, Medium, and High), while the vertical axis represents mean student academic performance in Academic Literacy. Each line traces the academic performance of students within a particular conflict group (High, Medium, Unsure, Low, and No Conflict) across the social support levels.

Visual inspection of the graph reveals that mean academic performance across all conflict groups converges most closely at the Medium Social Support level, followed by the High Social Support level. This pattern of convergence is consistent with the non-significant interaction effect reported in Table 3, suggesting that the relationship between social support and Academic Literacy does not substantially differ across conflict groups.

Economics

Prior to conducting the two-way ANOVA for Economics, Levene's test was performed to assess the homogeneity of error variance across groups. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Economics

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	1.068	12	131	.392
Based on Median	0.871	12	131	.578
Based on Median and with adjusted df	0.871	12	122.035	.578
Based on trimmed mean	1.061	12	131	.398

Note. Dependent variable: Economics. Design: Intercept + Social Support Rank + Conflict Rank + Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank.

Table 5: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Economics

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η^2
Corrected Model	1854.457[a]	16	115.904	1.100	.361	.118
Intercept	122020.403	1	122020.403	1158.444	.000	.898
Social Support Rank	387.945	3	129.315	1.228	.302	.027
Conflict Rank	966.259	4	241.565	2.293	.063	.065
Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank	922.868	9	102.541	0.974	.465	.063
Error	13798.397	131	105.331			
Total	638368.530	148				
Corrected Total	15652.854	147				

Note. [a]R^2 = .118 (Adjusted R^2 = .011).

The results presented in Table 4 reveal a non-statistically significant Levene's statistic based on the mean (p = .392). Consequently, the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable (Economics) is equal across groups could not be rejected, confirming that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met. Having satisfied this assumption, the two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank on Economics. The results are presented in Table 5.

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that Social Support Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Economics, $F(3, 131) = 1.228$, p = .302, partial η^2 = .027. Similarly, Conflict Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Economics, $F(4, 131) = 2.293$, p = .063, partial η^2 = .065. Although Conflict Rank approached significance, these findings reveal that neither independent variable exerted a significant main effect on the dependent variable at the conventional alpha level of .05.

Furthermore, the interaction effect between Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank was not statistically significant, $F(9, 131) = 0.974$, p = .465, partial η^2 = .063. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no interaction effect. It can be concluded that the effect of social support on Economics does not differ across levels of conflict, and vice versa.

Figure 3 illustrates the estimated marginal means of Economics across the five levels of Social Support Rank, with separate lines representing each level of Conflict Rank.

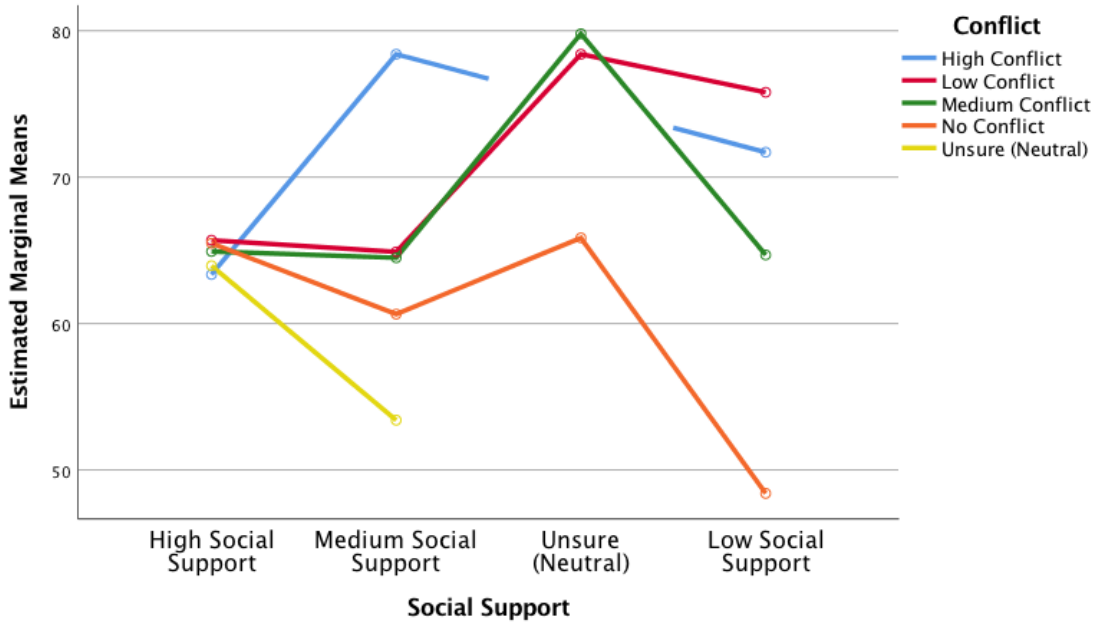


Figure 3: Estimated Marginal Means of Economics

Table 6: Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Mathematics

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	0.576	12	131	.858
Based on Median	0.522	12	131	.898
Based on Median and with adjusted df	0.522	12	118.940	.897
Based on trimmed mean	0.586	12	131	.850

Note. Dependent variable: Mathematics. Design: Intercept + Social Support Rank + Conflict Rank + Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank.

The horizontal axis displays the levels of social support (No Social Support, Low, Unsure, Medium, and High), while the vertical axis represents mean student academic performance in Economics. Each line traces the academic performance of students within a particular conflict group (High, Medium, Unsure, Low, and No Conflict) across the social support levels.

Visual inspection of the graph reveals that mean academic performance across all conflict groups converges most closely at the High Social Support level. This pattern of convergence is consistent with the non-significant interaction effect reported in Table 5, suggesting that the relationship between social support and Economics does not substantially differ across conflict groups.

Mathematics

Prior to conducting the two-way ANOVA for Mathematics, Levene's test was performed to assess the homogeneity of error variance across groups. The results are presented in Table 6.

The results presented in Table 6 reveal a non-statistically significant Levene's statistic based on the mean (p = .858). Consequently, the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable (Mathematics) is equal across groups could not be rejected, confirming that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met.

Having satisfied this assumption, the two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank on Mathematics. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Mathematics

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial η²
Corrected Model	3799.000[a]	16	237.437	1.246	.242	.132
Intercept	110790.097	1	110790.097	581.488	.000	.816
Social Support Rank	1053.374	3	351.125	1.843	.143	.040
Conflict Rank	986.348	4	246.587	1.294	.276	.038
Social Support Rank × Conflict Rank	2389.743	9	265.527	1.394	.197	.087
Error	24959.265	131	190.529			
Total	602379.570	148				
Corrected Total	28758.265	147				

Note. [a]$R^2 = .132$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .026$).

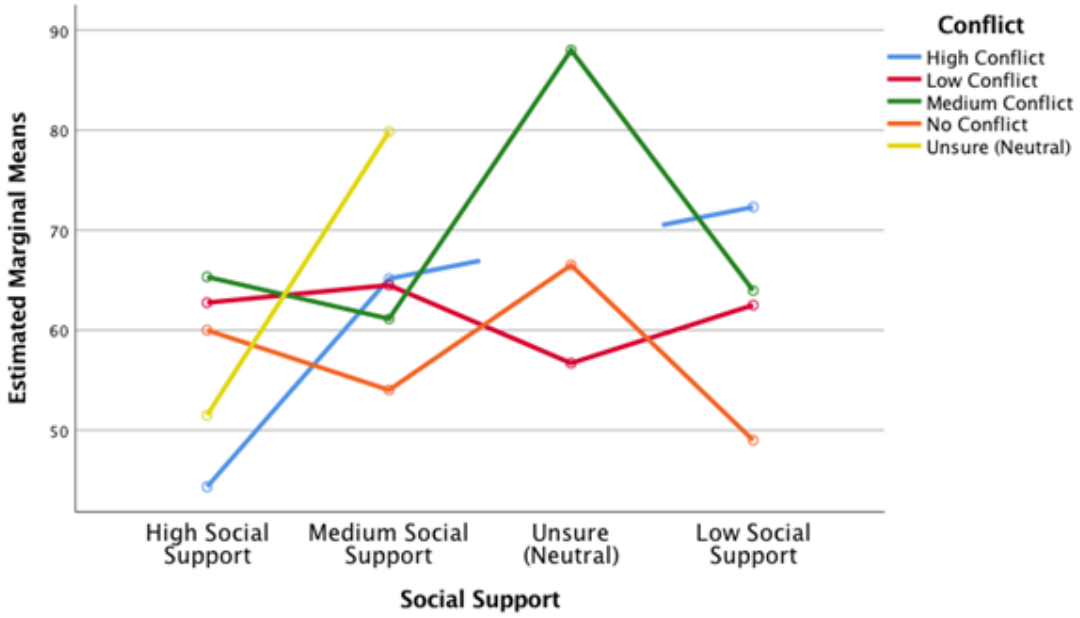


Figure 2: Estimated Marginal Means of Mathematics

The results presented in Table 7 indicate that Social Support Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Mathematics, $F(3, 131) = 1.843$, $p = .143$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$. Similarly, Conflict Rank did not have a statistically significant main effect on Mathematics, $F(4, 131) = 1.294$, $p = .276$, partial $\eta^2 = .038$. These findings reveal that neither independent variable exerted a significant main effect on the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the interaction effect between Social Support Rank and Conflict Rank was not statistically significant, $F(9, 131) = 1.394$, $p = .197$, partial $\eta^2 = .087$. Therefore, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no interaction effect. It can be concluded that the effect of social support on Mathematics does not differ across levels of conflict, and vice versa.

Figure 4 illustrates the estimated marginal means of Mathematics across the five levels of Social Support Rank, with separate lines representing each level of Conflict Rank.

The horizontal axis displays the levels of social support (No Social Support, Low, Unsure, Medium, and High), while the vertical axis represents mean student academic performance in Mathematics. Each line traces the academic performance of students within a particular conflict group (High, Medium, Unsure, Low, and No Conflict) across the social support levels.

Visual inspection of the graph reveals that mean academic performance across all conflict groups converges most closely at the High Social Support level. This pattern of convergence is consistent with the non-significant interaction effect reported in Table 7, suggesting that the relationship between social support and Mathematics does not substantially differ across conflict groups.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of the psychometric constructs of social support and conflict on foundation students' academic performance at a South African university. The study employed nine hypotheses to examine the effects of the two independent variables (social support and conflict) on the dependent variable (academic performance).

Based on the application of analysis of variance (ANOVA) across the various identified levels for the two constructs of social support and conflict (high, medium, unsure, low, and none) against academic performance in each of the three modules taken by foundation students, there was insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis in all cases. These findings indicate that neither social support nor conflict had a statistically significant effect on student academic performance. Furthermore, the study revealed no significant interaction effect between the independent variables.

However, a further analysis through plotting the estimated marginal means of student academic performance revealed an important pattern: student academic performance was most similar across all conflict groups when social support was present at medium or high levels. This finding is grounded in social exchange theory, which seeks to understand social interactions and can, in part, explain student learning in classrooms and during tasks requiring group work (Edwards et al., 2001; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958, 1974; Nord, 1969). The study suggests that the presence of social support (high or medium) is important as it represents approval; regardless of the level of conflict perceived by students (high, medium, unsure, low, or none), the effect on students' academic performance becomes minimal, as evidenced by similar mean performance across groups.

A possible explanation for these results lies in the institutional support structures embedded within the Bachelor of Commerce Foundation Programme. The programme has institutionalised a number of measures designed to support students academically and socially, including open-door student consultation, an academic orientation period facilitated by college counsellors that runs throughout the semester as part of the formal module structure on a weekly basis, grouping students with mentors, career discussions where various professionals meet with students, and dedicated programme coordinators who monitor student academic performance, provide guidance, and act as point persons for managing student academic and social challenges, including performing student referrals (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). These institutionalised support mechanisms may buffer the potential negative effects of conflict on academic performance, thereby contributing to the non-significant findings observed in this study.

Implications for Future Research

This study examined foundation students in the Bachelor of Commerce degree at a South African university, underpinned by social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958, 1974; Nord, 1969), to understand the effects of the psychometric constructs of social support and conflict on student academic performance. Despite an attempt to clearly distinguish between positive (social support) and negative (conflict) constructs, a limitation of this study is its reliance on cross-sectional snapshot data. Longitudinal approaches are recommended as they provide a more holistic understanding of social exchanges over time. This

study establishes a foundation upon which longitudinal research examining the effects of social support and conflict on student performance in foundation programmes can be built.

Furthermore, future research is recommended to distinguish overlapping constructs in social exchanges and their effects on student performance in foundation programmes (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Identifying these constructs could provide valuable insight into how best to design and implement foundation programmes at universities. Additionally, investigating mediating factors such as psychological well-being, academic engagement, and resilience would contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge in this area.

Implications for Practice

The results indicated that when estimated marginal means of student performance were plotted against social support, performance was similar across all conflict groups when students in the foundation programme perceived social support to be high or medium. This finding has important practical implications. Universities and policymakers interested in developing strategies for implementing successful foundation programmes should consider interventions that teach academic mindsets to foundation students. Such programmes should be integrated into the academic curriculum as a core course rather than offered as supplementary support.

Additionally, programmes that foster a sense of belonging within the academic institution ought to be considered for implementation. This includes the use of academic materials that integrate belonging-oriented mindsets and pedagogical approaches that emphasise student connection to the institution and their peers.

Conclusion

The evidence from the broader literature suggests a robust link between social support and student academic performance. The presence of supportive relationships, whether from peers, family, or lecturers, creates an environment that fosters motivation, reduces academic pressure, and enhances overall academic outcomes.

This study argues that in the foundation programme of the Bachelor of Commerce degree, neither social support nor conflict had a statistically significant effect on academic performance. However, the study provides evidence that when social support is present, the effect of conflict on student academic performance is minimal across all modules (Academic Literacy, Economics, and Mathematics). These results can, to some extent, be explained by the various student support initiatives embedded within the programme. These include real-time monitoring and evaluation of student results, close relationships built into the programme with student services offering personal counselling support, and various group sessions. Contributing factors may also include the open-door policy encouraging student consultations and dedicated classes exclusive to foundation programme students for study and other academic activities, such as tutorials, all of which may contribute to building and maintaining perceptions of social support and belonging.

Although this analysis is based on a cross-sectional view, the study sets the stage for further research into understanding the effect of interpersonal relationships on students in foundation programmes. Future longitudinal research examining these psychometric constructs of social support and conflict and their effects on student academic performance is recommended. Such research would deepen our understanding of how social dynamics influence academic outcomes over time and inform the development of more effective support interventions.

Disclosure

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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