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Exploring postgraduate students' understanding and integration of a theoretical framework

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Author:
Phethani P. Mudau[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Applied Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Phethani Mudau,
phethaniprogress94@gmail.com

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Background: The integration of a theoretical framework is a fundamental component of postgraduate research, as it provides conceptual grounding, guides data analysis, and strengthens scholarly argumentation. However, many postgraduate students struggle to understand, select, and meaningfully integrate theoretical frameworks into their research projects.

Objectives: This study explored postgraduate students' understanding of theoretical frameworks and examined how they integrate them into their research.

Method: The study employed a qualitative case study research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from postgradaute (masters and doctoral) students at a South African university. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to students' conceptual understanding and application of theory.

Results: The study found that many postgraduate students have a limited and fragmented understanding of theoretical frameworks. Although they can define theoretical frameworks in general terms, they struggle to justify their selection of a specific theory and to integrate it consistently across their research design, data analysis, and discussion.

Conclusion: The study concludes that postgraduate students require more structured and explicit guidance in conceptualising and applying theoretical frameworks. Strengthening theoretical literacy is essential for enhancing the coherence, depth, and academic rigour of postgraduate research.

Contribution: This study contributes to scholarship on postgraduate research development by highlighting gaps in students' theoretical integration and recommending targeted pedagogical interventions, including enhanced research methodology training and supervisor support, to improve theoretical engagement in postgraduate studies.

Keywords: theoretical framework; postgraduate students; research supervision; theoretical integration; academic writing.

Introduction

To produce rigorous postgraduate theses, dissertations, journal articles, or working papers, research students must not only conduct a strong literature review but also understand and integrate a relevant theoretical framework throughout their work (Anfara & Mertz 2014). A theoretical framework provides the conceptual lens that anchors a research project and shapes how the research problem is conceptualised, investigated, analysed, and interpreted (Kourgiantakis et al. 2020; Van der Waldt 2024). The framework not only provides a structure for understanding the phenomenon under investigation but also enables researchers to situate their work within existing bodies of knowledge, fostering analytical coherence and scholarly contribution (Kirschner 2002). The integration of theoretical frameworks is widely acknowledged as central to academic research quality (Mudau, Cekiso & Mandende 2025; Piot et al. 2022; Van Vuuren 2016). In social science and education research, theoretical frameworks guide the formulation of research questions, influence methodological choices, and frame the interpretation of findings in relation to scholarly debates (McGuire & Lay 2020; Sewell et al. 2021). By providing intellectual scaffolding for the research, theory enhances the clarity, focus, and explanatory power of scholarly inquiry (Lane 2017). Despite this recognised importance, postgraduate students often find understanding and applying theoretical frameworks challenging (Wallengren-Lynch et al. 2022).

Graduate researchers frequently express confusion and frustration when selecting appropriate theoretical perspectives and embedding them convincingly within their studies, which can

weaken the conceptual grounding and academic rigour of their work (Reamer 2019). Grant and Osanloo's (2014:12) influential work metaphorically describes the theoretical framework as the 'blueprint' underpinning a dissertation, guiding every stage from problem formulation through methodology to analysis and interpretation; without it, the coherence of the research endeavour may be compromised. Nevertheless, empirical research on postgraduate students' actual understanding and integration of theoretical frameworks, especially in the context of academic writing and thesis development, remains limited. While studies such as Van der Waldt (2024) examine the role and construction of theoretical frameworks conceptually, fewer investigations focus on how postgraduate students themselves comprehend, implement, and articulate theory in their writing.

This gap is similar to earlier findings in related areas; for example, research indicates that many postgraduate candidates struggle to develop and apply conceptual frameworks owing to a superficial understanding of theory, inadequate supervisory support, and limited engagement with foundational scholarly literature (Chalawila & Muchanga 2022).

This study makes a specific contribution to postgraduate research education by providing empirical evidence from humanities-based master's and doctoral students at a South African university, highlighting not only difficulties in understanding theoretical frameworks but also a distinct pattern of chapter-bound and procedural engagement with theory. Unlike prior studies that broadly report challenges with theoretical use, this study shows that students often confine theoretical frameworks to structural sections of the thesis rather than employing them as continuous analytical tools throughout the interpretation and discussion.

In addition, the findings reveal that confusion between theoretical and conceptual frameworks functions as a central barrier to the coherent integration of theory, a nuance that is often under-theorised in the existing postgraduate education literature (Grant & Osanloo 2014). The study also demonstrates how institutional conditions, particularly limited structured coursework, reliance on supervisor-driven guidance, and uneven explicit instruction in theory use, shape students' engagement with theoretical frameworks in context-specific ways (Grant & Osanloo 2014). These insights extend existing scholarship by offering a more fine-grained understanding of how postgraduate students enact theory in writing in a South African higher education context.

If a study of this nature is not explored further, the persistent difficulties postgraduate students experience in understanding and integrating theoretical frameworks are likely to remain unaddressed, resulting in research that lacks conceptual clarity, coherence, and scholarly depth. Without empirical insights into how students interpret and apply theory in their academic writing, supervisors and institutions may continue to rely on implicit expectations rather than targeted pedagogical support, thereby reproducing confusion and superficial use of theory across postgraduate research. Over time, this may undermine the quality and credibility of theses, dissertations, and published outputs, limit students' ability to position their work within existing scholarly debates and weaken the overall contribution of postgraduate research to knowledge production.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to closing this gap by exploring postgraduate students' understanding of theoretical frameworks and how they integrate these frameworks into their research writing at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. By illuminating the specific challenges, conceptual strategies, and integration practices of postgraduate students, this research offers valuable insights for supervisors, research educators, and curriculum designers seeking to strengthen theoretical rigour in postgraduate research training. This investigation is expected to inform pedagogical interventions, enhance students' conceptual competence, and promote more coherent and theory-informed academic writing. To achieve this goal, the current study sought to address the following research questions: (1) *What is postgraduate students' understanding of a theoretical framework?,* (2) *How do postgraduate students integrate a theoretical framework into their research writing?*, and (3) *What challenges do postgraduate students experience in selecting and applying theoretical frameworks?*

Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework grounded in Academic Literacies Theory, complemented by Threshold Concepts Theory, is particularly relevant to a study exploring postgraduate students' understanding and integration of theoretical frameworks. Academic Literacies Theory, developed by Lea and Street (1998, 2006), conceptualises academic writing and research practices not merely as technical skills but as socially situated practices shaped by disciplinary conventions, power relations, and epistemological assumptions. From this perspective, difficulties encountered by postgraduate students in understanding and integrating theoretical frameworks can be understood as struggles to negotiate disciplinary ways of knowing and meaning making rather than as individual deficits. The theory, therefore, contributes to this study by providing a lens through which students' engagement with theory is interpreted as a process of acculturation into disciplinary discourse, highlighting how institutional expectations and tacit knowledge influence their use of theory in research writing.

In contrast, Threshold Concepts Theory (Meyer & Land 2003, 2005) explains the cognitive and epistemological

transformation required to master difficult disciplinary knowledge. Threshold concepts are described as transformative, integrative, and often troublesome forms of knowledge that, once understood, fundamentally change how learners perceive a discipline. In this study, the understanding and application of theoretical frameworks are conceptualised as a threshold concept that postgraduate students must engage with to achieve coherent, theoretically informed research writing.

While Academic Literacies Theory explains the social and discursive context in which students engage with theory, Threshold Concepts Theory explains the transformative learning process involved in mastering theory itself.

Together, these theories provide complementary analytical lenses: (1) Academic Literacies Theory foregrounds the institutional, disciplinary, and communicative contexts of postgraduate writing, while (2) Threshold Concepts Theory foregrounds the cognitive transformation required to understand theoretical frameworks.

By documenting students' conceptual struggles and strategies, the study applies these theoretical perspectives to postgraduate research writing in a specific higher education context. Rather than merging the theories into a single explanatory model, the study uses them in a complementary way to analyse both the social context and the learning process involved in theory integration.

Literature review

The effective utilisation of a theoretical framework remains a central challenge in postgraduate research writing, as it serves as the conceptual backbone that informs the research design, analysis, and interpretation of findings. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the theoretical framework serves as the structural foundation from which research problems, questions, methodology, and interpretations derive coherence, often likened to a blueprint that guides the development of a scholarly study. Without a clearly articulated theory, the research may lack direction and fail to situate findings within extant scholarship, thereby weakening both internal and external validity.

Despite its foundational importance, postgraduate students frequently struggle to understand and apply a theoretical framework. Empirical findings from Chalawila and Muchanga (2022) show that postgraduate candidates often lack a clear conceptual understanding of frameworks and are unable to connect them meaningfully to their research practices. Many participants in their study could not apply theoretical constructions to link literature, methods and findings, focusing instead on methodological procedures at the expense of conceptual coherence. This highlights both students' conceptual gaps and the role of instructional support in research methodology courses as critical factors shaping theory integration.

Similarly, Guendouz (2025) found that English first language master's students experienced significant difficulty in translating broad theoretical frameworks into operational conceptual models. Students faced challenges in understanding the scope of theory, clarifying its relevance to specific research questions, and applying it systematically to design and analysis. This suggests that the transition from theory to empirically usable constructions is a key impediment in postgraduate research development.

The literature also emphasises that theoretical and conceptual frameworks are distinct yet interrelated constructs within research designs, and confusion between them can impede postgraduate students' scholarly development. Luft, Jeong and Idsardi (2022) note that clarifying the roles of literature reviews, theoretical frameworks and conceptual frameworks is crucial for novice researchers, particularly in education and related disciplines, because each component serves a distinct function in justifying research choices and interpreting data. Without such clarity, frameworks may be misapplied or omitted, compromising interpretive rigour.

Van der Waldt (2024) conceptualises theoretical frameworks in social science research as both epistemological and analytical lenses that shape research questions and the interpretation of findings. These frameworks are not only organisational tools but also philosophical anchors that reflect a researcher's assumptions about knowledge and reality. This perspective underscores the complexity postgraduate students face when aligning theoretical lenses with disciplinary paradigms and research aims.

Although much of the educational research literature has concentrated on conceptual and methodological issues in postgraduate training, the empirical investigation of students' actual comprehension and enactment of theory in writing remains relatively under-explored.

Research on epistemological awareness highlights how theoretical positioning guides research design, methodological choices, and disciplinary claims; however, it often does not examine how students apply these positions in academic writing. A 2025 study at a Tanzanian public university found that postgraduate students' engagement with research paradigms is shaped by prior educational background, supervision and mentoring practices, institutional research culture, and preparation in research methods (Mislay & Anania 2025). These findings indicate that structural and contextual factors significantly influence theoretical readiness.

Complementing this, a qualitative study of master's students in an Masters of Education (MEd) programme revealed a dominant orientation towards transmissional academic writing, in which writing is mainly viewed as knowledge reproduction rather than knowledge construction (Giner-Gomis, Iglesias-Martínez & Lozano-Cabezas 2025). This suggests limited integration of theoretical frameworks in writing practices despite exposure to postgraduate research training. Together, these studies highlight a gap between

conceptual understanding of research paradigms and their enactment in academic writing, emphasising the importance of supervision, curriculum design, and instructional support.

In addition to discipline-specific research, studies in mathematics education (Osmanoğlu & Özgeldi 2024) show that although many theses use theoretical frameworks, the quality of integration varies across methodological orientations and research designs. This suggests that disciplinary norms and expectations also shape how theory is understood and applied in postgraduate research.

Recent African scholarship highlights persistent challenges in postgraduate supervision and academic writing across higher education institutions on the continent. Studies have reported issues including inconsistent supervisory practices, limited explicit instruction on theoretical frameworks, and students' difficulties with academic writing and thesis construction. These challenges are often compounded by large supervisory loads, varying institutional research capacities, and unequal access to research training support. This body of literature provides an important regional lens through which to interpret postgraduate students' experiences and situates the present study within broader African higher education debates on research training and supervision.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the pervasiveness and persistence of postgraduate students' struggles with theoretical frameworks, both in conceptual clarity and in practical application.

They also point to the need for pedagogical strategies that foster explicit instruction, reflective engagement with theory and systematic integration of frameworks into the research process.

Furthermore, empirical research investigating how students learn to integrate theory into writing remains underdeveloped, highlighting the gap that the current study seeks to address.

Research methods and design

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. As noted by Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2022), qualitative research involves the use of non-numerical data, such as textual, visual or audio material, to develop an in-depth understanding of ideas, perspectives and experiences. It seeks to explore the underlying reasons behind individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and motivations by generating rich, detailed data through methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Consistent with this approach, a case study design was employed. Baxter and Jack (2010) describe a case study as an in-depth research strategy used to explore a complex issue, event or phenomenon in its real-life context. This design concentrates on a specific 'case', such as an individual, group or institution, to generate detailed and context-specific insights through multiple sources of evidence. The case study approach was considered appropriate for this research, as it aimed to develop a comprehensive, contextually grounded understanding of postgraduate students' experiences of integrating theoretical frameworks into academic writing.

Data collection method

The study was conducted at a South African university in the Faculty of Humanities, specifically in the Department of Applied Languages. The participants were drawn from master's and doctoral programmes in which postgraduate study is primarily research based. At both levels, students are not required to complete structured coursework; instead, they engage in full thesis (doctoral) and dissertation (masters) research. This institutional arrangement emphasises independent scholarly inquiry, with students expected to develop, conduct, and write up their research projects under the guidance of assigned supervisors.

Data were collected through individual, face-to-face interviews lasting 45 min – 60 min, conducted in English with postgraduate students. According to Liu, Fan and Jiang (2025), face-to-face interviews involve direct, in-person interaction between the interviewer and the participant to obtain in-depth information. They also explain that this method enables immediate clarification, observation of non-verbal communication, rapport building, and flexible probing.

The interview questions were developed in line with the research aim and research questions focusing on postgraduate students' experiences of understanding and integrating theoretical frameworks in academic writing. Interviews were conducted on campus between September 2025 and November 2025 during participants' available time slots, and all participants consented to audio recording.

Research participants and sampling methods

The study participants were postgraduate research students from a single South African university in the Faculty of Humanities (Department of Applied Languages).

A total of 20 participants were interviewed (n = 20), consisting of 12 master's students and 8 doctoral students. The sample included 5 men and 15 women aged 25 years – 42 years.

Participants were recruited through voluntary sampling, with information letters distributed via departmental postgraduate communication channels and notice boards and the self-selection of interested students into the study.

Inclusion criteria were:

- Registered master's or doctoral students in the Department of Applied Languages.
- Currently engaged in thesis or dissertation writing.
- Willingness to participate voluntarily.

No participants were excluded based on academic performance or stage of study, provided they met the listed criteria.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher first familiarised himself with the data through repeated reading of transcripts to gain an understanding of patterns and meanings.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, which included: (1) familiarisation, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

To enhance analytical rigour, a codebook was developed containing initial codes, definitions, and example excerpts. A sample of transcripts (20%) was independently reviewed by a peer researcher familiar with qualitative methods to enhance interpretive consistency. Differences in coding interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Themes were refined through iterative comparison across the data set to ensure coherence and representativeness. Each theme was defined and supported with illustrative participant quotations.

Data saturation was considered reached when no new themes emerged after analysis of the final set of interviews.

Reflexivity statement

The researcher is a lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, Department of Applied Languages, and is also positioned in the broader field of postgraduate education. This positionality offered certain advantages, particularly in facilitating rapport with participants and enabling a nuanced understanding of postgraduate research processes, supervisory dynamics, and the challenges of integrating theoretical frameworks.

However, this insider positioning also introduced the possibility of bias, particularly the risk of interpreting participants' accounts through the lens of prior professional experience and assumptions about postgraduate academic writing. To mitigate this, sustained reflexive engagement was undertaken throughout the research process.

Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout data collection and analysis to critically examine emerging interpretations and ensure that findings remained firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's expectations or disciplinary assumptions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) (No. REC2024/01/005 HUM).

Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection through signed consent forms.

To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (Postgraduate Student [PGS] 1 – PGS 15), and any identifying information was removed or masked during transcription and reporting.

All audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. Data were securely backed up on an encrypted drive to prevent loss or unauthorised access.

In line with institutional research ethics requirements, all data will be securely retained for 5 years after publication, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Results

This section presents the study's findings, organised thematically in line with the research questions. To ensure anonymity, participants are identified using the code PSG 1 – PSG 15, corresponding to the 15 postgraduate students who participated in the interviews. The themes reflect shared patterns in postgraduate students' understanding of theoretical frameworks, their integration into research writing, and the challenges they encounter in selecting and applying theory. Although the themes are presented separately, they are interrelated and collectively illustrate the complexity of theory engagement in postgraduate research.

Theme 1: Limited and fragmented understanding of a theoretical framework

A prominent theme was postgraduate students' fragmented understanding of theoretical frameworks and their function in postgraduate research writing. Across master's and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) levels in Applied Languages and Humanities in a South African university context, participants consistently described theory as a structural requirement rather than an analytical tool.

As one master's student explained:

> 'I know that a theoretical framework is important, but I see it as something included to meet requirements. I struggle to connect it to my research questions or analysis.' (PGS 4, master's, Applied Languages, male)

Similarly, a PhD participant noted:

> 'I include theories because other theses have them, but I do not really understand how they shape the study.' (PGS 1, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, male)

This reflects what Academic Literacies Theory (Lea & Street 2006) describes as a dominant 'study skills' orientation, where theory is treated as textual compliance rather than epistemological positioning. In the context of South African postgraduate education, where students often transition from coursework-based undergraduate writing into independent research degrees, this indicates limited explicit scaffolding into disciplinary ways of thinking.

From a Threshold Concepts perspective (Meyer & Land 2005), theory emerges as a troublesome concept that has not yet been fully integrated into students' cognitive frameworks. The inability to connect theory across research questions, methodology, and analysis suggests that the threshold has not been crossed.

A key additional tension identified in this context is confusion between theoretical and conceptual frameworks:

> 'I mix them up because I don't know where one ends and the other begins.' (PGS 9, master's, Applied Languages, female)

This suggests uneven disciplinary enculturation, where students remain at a surface level of conceptual engagement owing to limited explicit instruction in the use of theory within postgraduate supervision structures common in African higher education contexts.

Vignette 1: Fragmented understanding of theory

A master's student in Applied Languages (PGS 4) demonstrated a procedural understanding of theory. The participant described including theory primarily to satisfy academic requirements, without explaining how it informed the research design or analysis. Despite successfully inserting a theoretical framework chapter, there was no clear linkage between theory and the rest of the study, reflecting a compartmentalised understanding of research writing.

This reflects limited disciplinary enculturation into theoretical reasoning in postgraduate writing practices.

Theme 2: Theory perceived as abstract, intimidating and difficult to apply

Participants consistently described theoretical frameworks as abstract, emotionally intimidating, and difficult to apply in practice. This perception was often linked to the complex and specialised language used in theoretical literature. As a result, many students experienced uncertainty and hesitation when attempting to engage with theory in their writing.

One master's student stated:

> 'When I read theory, it feels very abstract and far removed from my research.' (PGS 6, master's, Applied Languages, female)

A PhD participant added:

> 'Theory intimidates me because of the complex language … It feels meant for experts, not students like me.' (PGS 12, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, female)

Another participant expressed avoidance:

> 'I try to avoid theory because I am scared of applying it incorrectly.' (PGS 3, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, male)

These accounts indicate that theory functions as 'troublesome knowledge' (Threshold Concepts Theory), characterised by emotional resistance, uncertainty, and avoidance. From an Academic Literacies perspective, this also reflects limited access to the specialised discourse of theory, which is often not explicitly demystified in postgraduate pedagogy. In the South African context, where supervision ratios and research training opportunities may be uneven across institutions, such emotional and conceptual barriers may be intensified owing to limited structured engagement with theory.

Vignette 2: Emotional avoidance of theory

A PhD participant in Humanities (PGS 12) expressed strong emotional resistance towards theoretical texts. The participant described the theory as inaccessible and overwhelming, leading to avoidance of deeper engagement. Despite repeated attempts at reading, the participant remained uncertain about interpretation, illustrating how emotional responses, such as anxiety and fear, constrained theoretical engagement.

This demonstrates theory functioning as 'troublesome knowledge' that disrupts confidence and inhibits learning progression.

Theme 3: Superficial and mechanical integration of theory

Participants reported that theory is often introduced in early chapters but not sustained throughout the research process. This resulted in a disconnection between theoretical frameworks and later stages of analysis and discussion. Consequently, theory was frequently treated as a structural requirement rather than an analytical tool. One PhD participant explained:

> 'I explain the theory in one chapter, but when I get to analysis, I don't know how to bring it back.' (PGS 11, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, female)

A master's student added:

> 'I included theory because it was expected, not because I knew how to use it.' (PGS 7, master's, Applied Languages, female)

Another participant noted:

> 'I quote theorists a lot because I'm afraid of changing their meaning.' (PGS 2, master's, Applied Languages, female)

This pattern reflects what Academic Literacies Theory identifies as 'genre compliance', where students reproduce

expected academic structures without fully engaging in epistemic meaning making. From a Threshold Concepts perspective, theory has not yet become integrative or irreversible, as students are unable to consistently apply it across analytical stages of their work.

However, one participant demonstrated emerging integration:

> 'Once I started revising my work, I slowly understood how theory connects to my findings.' (PGS 10, master's, Applied Languages, male)

This suggests that threshold crossing may occur gradually through iterative writing and feedback processes. It is more likely to develop where supervisory support is consistent and explicit. This indicates that conceptual understanding of theory is scaffolded over time rather than achieved immediately.

Vignette 3: Mechanical use of theory

A PhD student in Humanities (PGS 11) demonstrated a clear separation between theory and analysis. While the theoretical framework was well presented in the methodology chapter, it was not used during data interpretation. The participant acknowledged uncertainty about how to connect theory with findings, leading to a descriptive rather than an analytical discussion of the results. This indicates partial engagement with theory without full integration into the research process.

Theme 4: Challenges in selecting an appropriate theoretical framework

Participants reported difficulty in selecting suitable theoretical frameworks and aligning them with the research design. This challenge was often linked to uncertainty about how to evaluate the relevance and applicability of different theories. As a result, many participants relied heavily on supervisor guidance rather than independent theoretical decision-making. One master's student stated:

> 'There are so many theories, I don't know which one fits my study.' (PGS 13, master's, Applied Languages, male)

A PhD participant noted:

> 'My supervisor suggested a theory, but I didn't fully understand why it was chosen.' (PGS 8, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, male)

Another explained:

> 'We were never really taught how to choose a theoretical framework.' (PGS 5, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, female)

This highlights a structural gap in the institution's postgraduate training, where explicit instruction on theory selection is limited. From an Academic Literacies perspective, theory selection is a tacit disciplinary practice that remains under-instructed. In many African postgraduate contexts, this aligns with broader literature highlighting uneven preparedness for independent theoretical engagement at master's and doctoral levels.

Vignette 4: Dependence on supervisor for theory selection

A master's student in Applied Languages (PGS 8) relied heavily on supervisor direction when selecting a theoretical framework. Although a theory was recommended, the participant struggled to independently justify its relevance. This limited the student's ability to articulate theoretical alignment in the study design, indicating weak ownership of theoretical decision-making.

This reflects limited epistemic autonomy in theory selection processes.

Theme 5: Limited supervisory and institutional support

Participants consistently reported insufficient explicit guidance on theory integration.

This was particularly evident in the limited instructional focus on how theory connects to analysis and interpretation. As a result, students often had to develop understanding through trial and error and supervisor feedback. One student explained:

> 'Supervisors assume we already know theory, but many of us are still learning.' (PGS 5, master's, Applied Languages, male)

Another added:

> 'Workshops focus on methods, not theory.' (PGS 14, master's, Applied Languages, female)

A further participant stated:

> 'I learned theory through mistakes and supervisor corrections.' (PGS 10, master's, Applied Languages, male)

From an Academic Literacies perspective, this reflects the presence of a 'hidden curriculum', where theoretical expectations are implicit rather than explicitly taught. In Threshold Concepts terms, students are left to negotiate conceptual thresholds without adequate scaffolding, resulting in slow, uneven progression among participants.

Vignette 5: Lack of structured guidance

A master's student in Applied Languages (PGS 10) described learning theory primarily through supervisor corrections rather than structured teaching. The participant reported repeated revisions without prior conceptual guidance, leading to uncertainty and trial-and-error learning. While progress was eventually achieved, the process was slow and unstructured. This illustrates gaps in explicit pedagogical scaffolding for theoretical learning.

Theme 6: Gradual development of theoretical understanding

Despite these challenges, some participants reported gradual improvement in their understanding of theory.

This improvement emerged through repeated engagement with reading, writing, and supervisor feedback. Over time, participants began to develop a clearer and more functional understanding of how theory operates in their research.

One master's student reflected:

> 'At the beginning I didn't understand theory, but slowly I started seeing how it connects to my data.' (PGS 10, master's, Applied Languages, male)

Another noted:

> 'I used to see theory as a burden, but now I understand its value.' (PGS 6, master's, Applied Languages, female)

A PhD participant explained:

> My whole way of thinking changed once I understood theory properly.' (PGS 15, Doctor of Language of Practice, Applied Languages, female)

These accounts demonstrate threshold crossing, in which theory shifts from problematic to an enabling analytical tool. From an Academic Literacies perspective, this transformation reflects gradual entry into disciplinary discourse practices through sustained engagement, writing, and supervisory feedback.

Vignette 6: Positive transformation through iteration

A master's student in Applied Languages (PGS 10) demonstrated clear developmental progression in theoretical understanding. Initially struggling to interpret theory, the participant gradually developed the ability to apply it meaningfully through iterative writing, feedback, and revision. Over time, theory shifted from being a confusing requirement to an interpretive tool guiding data analysis.

This reflects threshold crossing, where understanding becomes more integrated and transformative over time.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate postgraduate students' experiences with understanding and integrating theoretical frameworks into their research writing. The study's results showed that students faced challenges related to conceptual understanding, application, selection, and integration of theory throughout their theses. Regarding conceptual understanding, participants frequently demonstrated a fragmented, procedural grasp of theoretical frameworks, often treating them as required chapters rather than as analytical lenses guiding research questions, methodology, and data interpretation. This finding aligns with Chalawila and Muchanga (2022), who reported that postgraduate students often struggle to connect theoretical constructs meaningfully to research practices. Participants also described theory as abstract, dense, and intimidating, which contributed to anxiety, cautious engagement, and reliance on reproduction rather than critical analysis. From the perspective of Academic Literacies Theory, these difficulties reflect students' struggles to acquire tacit disciplinary knowledge and epistemological access to the conventions of scholarly writing (Lea & Street 2006). Threshold Concepts Theory also explains these challenges, framing theoretical frameworks as transformative and troublesome knowledge that requires sustained cognitive effort and practice to integrate effectively into research (Meyer & Land 2005). The findings also highlight that confusion between theoretical and conceptual frameworks compounded students' uncertainty, often leading to superficial engagement and weak conceptual coherence, a pattern echoed by Luft et al. (2022).

Importantly, although this study was conducted in a single South African higher education institution, the challenges identified appear consistent with broader postgraduate research training contexts, suggesting that these difficulties may not be institution-specific but rather indicative of wider systemic issues in postgraduate supervision and research education.

The study's findings also revealed that students' integration of theoretical frameworks was frequently superficial and mechanical. Even when an appropriate theory was selected, it was often limited to the early chapters of the thesis, with little evidence of use in analysis or discussion.

Students reported relying heavily on quotations and replicating theory to satisfy institutional expectations, rather than using it to guide interpretation or argumentation. Similar patterns have been observed in previous studies (Guendouz 2025; Piot et al. 2022; Van Vuuren 2016). In addition, selecting an appropriate theoretical framework proved a significant challenge, with many participants uncertain about evaluating the relevance of theories or aligning them with research questions and methodology. Limited supervisory and institutional support further exacerbated these challenges, as students reported implicit guidance and an emphasis on methodology over theory. Despite these difficulties, some students described gradual improvement in their understanding and use of theory through iterative writing, feedback, and reflection. This developmental process illustrates the transformative potential of engaging with theory over time, as predicted by Threshold Concepts Theory, and underscores the importance of structured pedagogical support and sustained practice in fostering theoretically coherent postgraduate research (Grant & Osanloo 2014; Lea & Street 2006).

While the study is contextually situated in a South African university, the convergence of these findings with international literature suggests a degree of transferability, particularly to similar postgraduate contexts where students are required to engage with theoretical frameworks in thesis writing.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that while postgraduate students recognise the importance of theoretical frameworks, effective comprehension, selection, and integration remain challenging, necessitating explicit instruction and scaffolded opportunities for practice.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited by its relatively small, qualitative sample drawn from a single South African university in the Faculty of Humanities, which may restrict the breadth of perspectives captured. As a result, the findings should be understood as context-specific rather than statistically generalisable. In addition, the focus on master's and doctoral students in a single disciplinary area limits representativeness across other fields such as the social sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, where experiences of engaging with theoretical frameworks may differ. The timing of data collection in a single institutional setting also means the findings reflect a particular academic and supervisory context at a specific point in time. However, despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights that may be transferable to similar postgraduate research environments where students are required to integrate theoretical frameworks into their academic writing.

Conclusion

According to this study, postgraduate students face multiple significant challenges in understanding and integrating theoretical frameworks into their research writing. The primary difficulties are both cognitive and practical, including fragmented conceptual understanding, uncertainty in selecting appropriate frameworks, superficial integration of theory into data analysis, and confusion between theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Students also reported affective challenges, such as anxiety, fear of misinterpretation, and feelings of inadequacy when engaging with theory. These findings suggest that many postgraduate students lack the conceptual, analytical, and metacognitive skills required to use theoretical frameworks as guiding tools, often resulting in descriptive or mechanical use of theory rather than critical, coherent, and integrated application. Based on the findings, it is recommended that postgraduate training incorporate explicit instruction on selecting, applying, and integrating theoretical frameworks, alongside opportunities for iterative practice, feedback, and reflective engagement. Supervisors should provide structured guidance to help students align theory with research questions, methodology, and data interpretation. Future research could explore specific pedagogical interventions to improve theoretical literacy and investigate institutional, disciplinary, and supervisory factors that influence students' capacity to navigate this threshold knowledge effectively. Enhancing support in these areas has the potential to improve conceptual rigour, analytical depth, and overall quality of postgraduate research outputs.

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Competing interests

The author, Phethani P. Mudau, declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Phethani P. Mudau: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Phethani P. Mudau, upon reasonable request.

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