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The Relationship Between Perceived Social Support and Intolerance of Uncertainty Among University Students Writing Their Final Projects

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Abstract

Writing a final project confronts students with uncertainty about supervision, revisions, and the time of completion, which may give rise to intolerance of uncertainty (IU). Based on the stress-buffering perspective, perceived social support is expected to be related to lower IU, yet direct evidence among Indonesian students writing their final projects is still limited. This study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived social support and IU among university students who were writing their final projects. A quantitative correlational design was used. The participants were 335 active students who were writing a final project and had attended at least one supervision session, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected online with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and the Indonesian version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-12 (IUS-12). Because the scores were not normally distributed, the data were analysed with Spearman correlation in Jamovi. Perceived social support was not significantly related to IU ($\rho = 0.065$, $p = 0.236$); the direction was positive and the strength very weak, so the hypothesis of a negative relationship was not supported. Social support scores were relatively high, and the limited variation may have reduced the ability to detect a relationship. These findings provide no evidence of a relationship between perceived social support and IU in this sample, and cognitive and coping variables deserve attention in future research.

Keywords: social support; Spearman correlation; thesis writing; uncertainty intolerance; university students

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a final project, known in Indonesian higher education as a *skripsi* or *tugas akhir*, is one of the last and most demanding stages of an undergraduate programme. Unlike regular coursework, which follows a fixed schedule of lectures and assessments, it requires students to manage an independent research process, to adjust to the directions of their supervisors, and to cope with uncertainty about the progress of the work, the outcome of each revision, and the time of completion. Final-year students who are working on a thesis have been reported to experience high levels of academic stress (Tanjungsari et al., 2024), and uncertainty is a feature of the process that students can seldom control. These circumstances make it relevant to examine intolerance of uncertainty (IU), a dispositional characteristic that arises from negative beliefs about uncertainty and leads people to react negatively to situations whose outcomes are unknown (Sajjad & Jabeen, 2024). In the context of thesis writing, IU may attach to the unknown results of the research, the supervision process, requests for revision, and the date of graduation. Among university students, a higher level of IU has been associated with academic burnout (Qiang et al., 2024) and with psychological distress (Novita et al., 2023). A similar pattern was found in individuals who experience a quarter-life crisis, although the contribution of IU to distress could be reduced by personal growth initiative (Balqis et al., 2023). A systematic review also positions IU as a cognitive vulnerability that is related to distress among university students (Wang et al., 2026), and a study of young Italian adults showed that IU and future anxiety mediated the link between climate change worry and psychological distress (Regnoli et al., 2024). IU is therefore a relevant construct for understanding how students respond to the uncertainty that surrounds the completion of a final project.

Intolerance of uncertainty refers to the tendency of an individual to evaluate uncertain situations negatively and to find them difficult to bear, whether in thoughts, feelings, or behaviour (Freeston et al., 1994). The condition arises when uncertainty is perceived as a threat even though the feared event may never occur (Carleton, 2016). The construct has two dimensions. Prospective IU is the tendency to worry about what is unknown and to have a strong need to know what will happen, whereas inhibitory IU is the tendency to be inhibited from acting, or to avoid situations, because uncertainty is uncomfortable (Carleton, 2016). Both dimensions are measured with the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-12 (IUS-12), which has been translated, adapted, and validated in Indonesian by Nur Istiqomah et al. (2022). During thesis writing, prospective IU can be seen in a student's worry about the research results or the graduation date, while inhibitory IU can be seen in a tendency to postpone supervision meetings or to avoid working on revisions because

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the student feels unsure about the result. IU has also drawn attention in research on Indonesian students who are writing a thesis (Han & Dariyo, 2023), and it has been linked to a wider range of cognitive processes and anxiety-related problems (Morriss, 2025; Vander Haegen & Etienne, 2016). Individuals with high IU are more vulnerable to psychological distress, so the ability to face and accept uncertainty is important for maintaining psychological condition, particularly under academic demands.

How individuals appraise uncertainty may depend on the social resources available to them, one of which is perceived social support. Perceived social support is the belief of an individual that he or she receives care, affection, acceptance, esteem, and help from the people around them when facing difficulty (Zimet et al., 1988). The concept emphasises how individuals perceive the availability of support rather than how much help they actually receive. It is commonly measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which covers three sources of support, namely family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). The 12-item Indonesian version of the MSPSS has good internal consistency and satisfies the measurement criteria of the Rasch model (Sulistiani et al., 2022). Studies of university students show that perceived social support is related to lower stress among first-year students (Mclean et al., 2023), that it is related to better psychological and emotional well-being and less stress in a systematic review of 51 studies (Ruihua, 2025), and that it is related to resilience through coping styles (Cao et al., 2024). The role of support in difficult circumstances is explained by the stress-buffering theory, which states that social support reduces the negative effect of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In line with this theory, social support was found to mediate the relationship between academic stress and perceived health among university students (Asensio-Martínez et al., 2023) and to be related to mental health through the perception of stress (Acoba, 2024). In thesis writing, the belief that family, friends, or supervisors can be asked for help may make uncertainty about revisions or completion time feel less threatening, so perceived social support is expected to be related to lower IU.

Several international studies have examined the link between perceived social support and IU. A study of 880 university students in Turkey showed that lower perceived social support was related to higher IU, which in turn contributed to anxiety (Çarıkçı-Özgül & Işık, 2024). Among more than one thousand students in Wuhan, perceived social support moderated, and weakened, the negative effect of IU on mental health (Zhuo et al., 2021), and Miller et al. (2024) reported that the interaction between perceived family support and IU predicted procrastination among students in the United States. These studies were conducted outside Indonesia and mostly treated

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social support as a moderator rather than testing its direct relationship with IU. Evidence from Indonesian students who are writing a thesis is limited and fragmented: Han and Dariyo (2023) examined IU and psychological well-being without including perceived social support, Tan and Sumargi (2025) examined social support as a predictor of happiness without including IU, and Wardani et al. (2023) examined social support and anxiety about completing studies. The question matters for Indonesian students because the *skripsi* or *tugas akhir* is generally a graduation requirement, final-year students working on it report high academic stress (Tanjungsari et al., 2024), and its progress depends on supervision decisions, revision requests, and deadlines that students cannot fully control. If perceived social support is related to how students tolerate this uncertainty, strengthening support could become part of thesis guidance; if it is not, guidance would need to target uncertainty more directly. The present study therefore contributes the first direct test, to the authors' knowledge, of the relationship between perceived social support and IU among Indonesian students writing a final project, using the Indonesian versions of the MSPSS and the IUS-12 in a sample of 335 students from various universities. The research question was whether perceived social support is related to IU among university students who are writing a final project.

Based on the stress-buffering framework (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and the earlier findings described above, the hypothesis of this study was formulated as follows. H_1: There is a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty among university students who are writing a final project, meaning that the higher the perceived social support, the lower the intolerance of uncertainty. The null hypothesis (H_o) is that there is no significant relationship between the two variables. H_1 was tested with Spearman correlation, as described in the Research Methodology, and is revisited in the Results and the Conclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative approach with a correlational design to examine the relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty among university students who were writing a final project. The data were primary data collected through an online questionnaire survey. Participants were selected through non-probability sampling with the purposive sampling method, based on the criteria of being an active student who was writing a *skripsi* or final project and having attended the supervision process at least once. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary, and the confidentiality of the participants' data was maintained. The final sample consisted of 335 students from various universities in Indonesia, and no

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responses were missing. In the analysis, perceived social support was positioned as the independent variable (X) and intolerance of uncertainty as the dependent variable (Y).

Two instruments were used. Perceived social support was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which consists of 12 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, so that the total score can range from 12 to 84. The scale measures the perception of support from family, friends, and significant others. The Indonesian version of the MSPSS was validated by Sulistiani et al. (2022) using the Rasch approach. Intolerance of uncertainty was measured with the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale-12 (IUS-12), which covers the dimensions of prospective and inhibitory intolerance of uncertainty. The Indonesian version of the IUS-12 has passed the processes of translation, adaptation, and validation by Nur Istiqomah et al. (2022). Both instruments were used to obtain a total score for each variable, and a higher score indicates a higher level of perceived social support or a higher level of intolerance of uncertainty, respectively.

Data were analysed with the Jamovi software. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the participants and the distribution of the scores of both variables. Before the hypothesis was tested, the distribution of the data was examined with the Shapiro-Wilk test. The relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty was analysed with Spearman correlation, which does not require normally distributed data. H_1 was tested with a significance level of 0.05 using a two-tailed test, so that a relationship in the unexpected direction could also be detected; H_1 was considered supported only if the coefficient was negative and $p < 0.05$. The results were interpreted from the significance value, the direction of the relationship, and the size of the correlation coefficient. To describe the precision of the estimate, an approximate 95% confidence interval for the coefficient was calculated by the authors with the Fisher z transformation, and the squared coefficient was used to express the proportion of shared rank variance.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study involved 335 students who were writing a final project, consisting of 195 women (58.2%) and 140 men (41.8%). The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 26 years, and the largest group was aged 22 to 24 years (73.1%); 22 years was the most frequent single age, accounting for 46.6% of the participants. The participants came from various universities in Indonesia. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Participants (*N* = 335)

Characteristic	Category	*n*	%
Sex	Male	140	41.8
	Female	195	58.2
Age	19–21 years	79	23.6
	22–24 years	245	73.1
	25–26 years	11	3.3
Total		335	100.0

The analysis included all 335 participants without missing data, so all data could be used to test the relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty. The mean score of perceived social support was 64.60 (*SD* = 9.84; range 34–84; median 66.00), which is close to the upper limit of the possible range of 12–84, whereas the mean score of intolerance of uncertainty was 44.50 (*SD* = 7.08; range 22–60; median 45.00), a moderate-to-high level. The Shapiro-Wilk test produced $p < 0.05$ for both variables (Table 2), so the data did not satisfy the assumption of a normal distribution and the analysis was continued with Spearman correlation.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Normality Test

Statistic	Perceived social support (MSPSS)	Intolerance of uncertainty (IUS-12)
N	335	335
Missing	0	0
Mean	64.60	44.50
Median	66.00	45.00
Standard deviation	9.84	7.08
Minimum	34	22
Maximum	84	60
Shapiro-Wilk *W*	0.970	0.985
Shapiro-Wilk *p*	< 0.001	0.001

Spearman correlation (Table 3) produced a coefficient of ρ = 0.065 with $p = 0.236$ ($N = 335$, $df = 333$). The direction of the relationship was positive, but its strength was very weak and it was not statistically significant. H_1, which predicted a significant negative relationship, was therefore

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not supported, and H_0 could not be rejected at the 0.05 significance level. The squared coefficient ($\rho^2 \approx 0.004$) indicates that less than 0.5% of the variance in ranks was shared between the two variables. The approximate 95% confidence interval of the coefficient, calculated by the authors, ranged from −0.046 to 0.174, so the data are compatible with a negligible negative relationship or a small positive one but are not compatible with a moderate negative relationship such as the one that the stress-buffering perspective would suggest. With a sample of 335, a correlation of about 0.153 or larger in absolute value could be detected with 80% power at the 0.05 level, so a relationship of that size, if present, would probably have been found.

Table 3. Spearman Correlation Between Perceived Social Support and Intolerance of Uncertainty

Statistic	Perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty
Spearman's *ρ*	0.065
95% CI	[−0.046, 0.174]
df	333
p	0.236

DISCUSSION

The analysis showed no significant relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty among students who were writing a final project (ρ = 0.065; *p* = 0.236; *N* = 335). The coefficient is close to zero, so the relationship between the two variables can be regarded as very weak, and no evidence was found that variation in perceived social support is related to the level of intolerance of uncertainty in this sample. This finding differs from the initial expectation that was based on the stress-buffering theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which describes social support as a resource for facing stressful situations. The theory, however, does not state that social support is always directly related to every psychological response, because the benefit of support may depend on the characteristics of the stressor and on how well the support matches the needs of the individual. In addition, the buffering effect is usually described as a process that operates when stress is present, which means that it may appear in the relationship between a stressor and its psychological consequences more than in the level of a dispositional tendency such as IU. A dispositional tendency that has developed from beliefs about uncertainty may be relatively stable, and a student's perception of the support from family and friends may not change how that tendency is expressed.

The link between perceived social support, intolerance of uncertainty, and anxiety was

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earlier reported by Çarıkçı-Özgül and Işık (2024), and it formed part of the basis for expecting a relationship in the present study. That pattern was not found when perceived social support and IU were tested directly among students who were writing a final project. The difference in results may be related to the characteristics of the participants and to the form of uncertainty experienced. Thesis writing involves supervision, revision, academic demands, deadlines, and uncertainty about the final result, and each student may experience these differently depending on the pattern of supervision and the demands faced. The result may also reflect the fact that the earlier study was conducted in a different cultural and educational setting. For these reasons the discrepancy should not be read as a contradiction of earlier work but as a sign that the relationship may depend on context and on the outcome under study.

The findings of Zhuo et al. (2021) show that social support can be examined not only in relation to IU but also according to its role in the relationship between IU and the psychological condition of individuals. Among students in Wuhan, social support weakened the relationship between IU and both anxiety and depression. This means that social support may help to reduce the connection between difficulty in facing uncertainty and the emergence of psychological problems. Similarly, Miller et al. (2024) found that perceived family support and IU interacted in predicting procrastination. These findings, however, do not directly show that social support is related to a lower level of IU. They point to a moderating role rather than to a direct association, and the present study tested only the direct association. The relationship between perceived social support and IU therefore still needs to be examined directly, and future studies of students writing a final project may test whether perceived social support moderates or mediates the effect of IU on outcomes such as anxiety, procrastination, or the delay of thesis completion.

Perceived social support is not the only factor that may be related to intolerance of uncertainty. In earlier findings, IU was frequently linked to anxiety, coping strategies, and cognitive processes (Morriss, 2025; Vander Haegen & Etienne, 2016). Among university students, for example, IU was related to social anxiety through rumination, with a pessimistic explanatory style as a moderator (Li et al., 2020). These findings point to the possibility that IU is closer to internal cognitive factors of the individual than to external relational conditions such as social support. Because such factors were not measured in the present study, this remains a conjecture that needs to be tested in later research. It is also possible that students who experience high IU seek support less actively or perceive the support they receive as less helpful, which would offset a protective association in cross-sectional data, but the present design cannot test this explanation.

The results must be interpreted with several limitations in mind. First, the data were not

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normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk, $p < 0.05$), so Spearman correlation was used, which captures only monotonic relationships; a non-monotonic pattern would not be detected. Second, the study used a cross-sectional and self-report design, so the direction of the relationship cannot be inferred and the answers of the participants may be affected by self-assessment bias. Third, the perceived social support scores in the sample tended to be high ($M = 64.60$; $SD = 9.84$; range 34–84) and leaned toward the upper limit of the scale (median = 66.00; maximum = 84), so variation at low levels of support was relatively limited. This condition may reduce the ability of the analysis to detect a relationship with intolerance of uncertainty. Fourth, the analysis used the total scores of the MSPSS and the IUS-12, which do not show whether the three sources of support (family, friends, and significant others) or the two dimensions of IU (prospective and inhibitory) are related differently. Finally, the sample was recruited through purposive sampling, and the results cannot be generalised to all students in Indonesia.

From a practical perspective, increasing perceived social support cannot yet be regarded as a factor that directly lowers intolerance of uncertainty in students who are writing a final project. Support from family, friends, and significant others can remain a psychological resource, but the data of this study do not show a direct relationship between such support and IU. Student guidance during final-project writing should therefore not rely only on the availability of social support but should also consider developing the ability of students to face and manage uncertainty, for example through clear information about supervision schedules, stages, and expectations. Further research may consider coping strategies, anxiety, and emotion regulation as other variables, and test the position of perceived social support as a moderator or mediator. It may also analyse each source of social support and each dimension of IU separately, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of their relationship, and recruit participants with more varied levels of perceived social support.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a study of 335 university students who were writing a final project, no evidence of a relationship between perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty was found in this sample ($\rho = 0.065$; 95% CI [−0.046, 0.174]; $p = 0.236$). The coefficient was positive and very weak, so H_1, which predicted a significant negative relationship, was not supported. This result does not show that perceived social support and intolerance of uncertainty are unrelated; it indicates only that the expected negative relationship could not be detected among the participants of this study, whose perceived social support scores tended to be high. Within this

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sample, perceived social support therefore cannot be regarded as a factor directly related to how students tolerate uncertainty.

The conclusion is limited by the cross-sectional, self-report design, the high and narrow range of perceived social support scores, and the use of total scores. Future studies are advised to examine each source of social support and each dimension of IU separately, to recruit participants with more varied levels of support, and to test perceived social support as a moderator or mediator of the relationship between IU and outcomes such as anxiety or procrastination. In practice, guidance for students writing a final project should not rely only on the availability of social support but should also help students face and manage uncertainty, for example through clear information about supervision schedules, stages, and expectations.

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