

Religiosity, Spirituality, and Academic Resilience: A study of First-Generation black students

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ABSTRACT

First-generation university students are believed to face a myriad of challenges around the world. Although religiosity and spirituality are believed to serve as protective factors in times of adversity, there is little literature on how religiosity and spirituality impact the academic resilience of first-generation university students in South Africa. Black students in South Africa have historically been disadvantaged due to imbalances created by the apartheid system. This study aimed to examine the religiosity, spirituality, and academic resilience of first-generation black students. A correlational research design was used with a web-based questionnaire that combined demographics, Daily Spiritual Experience, Centrality of Religiosity and the Academic Resilience Scale. Data were collected from 239 North-West University (NWU) first-generation black students, aged 18 years or older, with voluntary convenience sampling used. The study adopted a quantitative approach. Data were analysed using descriptive analysis and inferential analysis that included bivariate correlation and hierarchical multiple regression. The respondents reported a high mean religiosity of $M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.6$, with $\alpha \sim 0.76$ on the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. A high score of 4.52, median 4.65, on the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale suggests generally frequent spiritual experiences. Participants scored a mean of 2.42 on the Academic Resilience Scale. This suggests that the participants have a moderate level of academic resilience. Spirituality was positively correlated with resilience ($r = .42$, $p < 0.01$), while religiosity showed a weaker relationship. The study contributes to the growing corpus of research examining the relationship between university students' academic drive and religiosity.

Keywords: Religion, Spirituality, Academic Resilience, First-generation Students, Black students, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a very religious country with more than 90% of her people considering religion to be important in their lives. The majority of South Africans identify as Christians.¹ In a study on the Howard Campus of the University of KwaZulu Natal, 98.4% of the participants reported attending a religious program once a week.² The participants were involved in several religious activities, and

¹ Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey* (Statistics South Africa, 2004).

² Anthonia Omotola Ishabiyi and Sultan Khan, "Religious Associational Life amongst Black African Christian Students at Howard College Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2020/v33n2a3>.

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most were members of religious communities. People are spiritual beings who use their spiritual resources to cope with life challenges. Several studies have confirmed that spirituality is a source of resilience for human beings.³ Previous research reported that “It is an important aspect of human diversity as it shapes major dimensions of peoples’ lives and provides a significant source of strength”.⁴ Spirituality is a universal phenomenon,⁵ suggesting that it is experienced by all individuals. Spirituality constitutes a core yet intangible aspect of human existence that extends beyond the material world.⁶ Spirituality is commonly understood as an inherent capacity that offers meaning, inspiration, a sense of connectedness to others, self-regulation, and a purposeful life.⁷ Spirituality plays a crucial role in shaping people’s worldviews and guiding their life decisions.⁸ Although spirituality is often linked to religious doctrines and rituals, it may also manifest itself as a profoundly personal journey of expressing one’s relationship with the self, a transcendent being, and the natural world.⁹ In South Africa, spirituality is notably varied, reflecting the rich multicultural landscape and encompassing multiple avenues to deepen the spiritual life of an individual. These include, among others, African traditional practices such as ancestral veneration, Christian traditions, Islam, and Hinduism.¹⁰

Although extensive research has examined religious affiliation and overall religiosity in the South African context, relatively few studies have focused specifically on the religious and spiritual lives of first-generation black university students. This gap is regrettable, as such work could substantially improve and inform the practice of youth and student ministries. Accordingly, this article investigates the religious and spiritual lives of first-generation black students at a multi-campus public university in South Africa, with particular attention to the ways in which religion and spirituality shape their academic resilience. Hence, this study was designed to fill the gap in literature by adding on to the existing literature in the field students’ studies by investigating how academic resilience is impacted by religiosity and spirituality amongst first-generation black students in South African public universities.

In the educational context, academic resilience is defined as a student’s ability to flourish and attain success despite academic difficulties.¹¹ Martin further described academic resilience as the ability to face and surmount risks and barriers that obstruct academic progress.¹² More precisely, it refers to the ability to secure improved academic outcomes after experiencing setbacks such as academic failure. This study examines key behavioural components that reflect academic resilience, including adaptive help-seeking, academic reflection, perseverance in academic tasks, lower levels of negative affect, and emotional responsiveness.¹³

³ C.Gnanaprakash, “Spirituality and Resilience among Post-Graduate University Students,” *Journal of Health Management* 15, no. 3 (2013): 383–96; J Irene Harris et al., “Religious Strain and Postconventional Religiousness in Trauma Survivors,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7, no. 2 (2015): 173; Albert Bernard-Repsold Janse van Rensburg, “Introducing the South African Spirituality Scale (SASS): Measuring Spirituality among Medical Students in a Heterogeneous Clinical Environment,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, June 26, 2020, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1741529>.

⁴ Erica Timko Olson, *The Relationship Between Spirituality, Resilience and Anxiety Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students* (The University of Arizona, 2018).

⁵ Updesh Kumar and Rohtash Singh, “Resilience and Spirituality as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among University Students,” *Journal of Psychosocial Research* 9, no. 2 (2014): 227.

⁶ Nurnazar Pirnazarov, “Philosophical Analysis of the Issue of Spirituality,” *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology* 29, no. 5 (2020): 1630–32.

⁷ Fiona Timmins and Silvia Caldeira, “Understanding Spirituality and Spiritual Care in Nursing,” *Nursing Standard* 31, no. 22 (2017).

⁸ Erika Engelbrecht-Aldworth and Albert Renier Wort, “The Evolution of Defining Spirituality over the Last Century,” *Vir Die Musiekleier/To the Music Director* 41, no. 1 (2021): 102–40.

⁹ Miigis B Gonzalez et al., “Spiritual Connectedness through Prayer as a Mediator of the Relationship between Indigenous Language Use and Positive Mental Health,” *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 27, no. 4 (2021): 746.

¹⁰ Nontembeko J Bila and Charlene L Carbonatto, “Culture and Help-Seeking Behaviour in the Rural Communities of Limpopo, South Africa: Unearthing Beliefs of Mental Health Care Users and Caregivers,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 6 (2022): 543–62; Johannes J Knoetze, “Theological Education, Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development in Africa: What Does God Have to Do with It?,” *HTS Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (2022): 1–6.

¹¹ Simon Cassidy, “The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7 (November 18, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01787>.

¹² Andrew J Martin, “Academic Buoyancy and Academic Resilience: Exploring ‘Everyday’ and ‘Classic’ Resilience in the Face of Academic Adversity,” *School Psychology International* 34, no. 5 (2013): 488–500.

¹³ Suciani Latif, “Students’ Academic Resilience Profiles Based on Gender and Cohort,” *Jurnal Kajian Bimbingan Dan Konseling* 5, no. 4 (2020).

Previous research has highlighted several factors that undermine student resilience, such as insufficient resources, food insecurity, overwhelming workload, reduced motivation, unhealthy lifestyle patterns, difficulty understanding course content, challenges in completing assignments, poor adjustment to academic expectations, ineffective study strategies, low self-efficacy, limited emotional regulation, and lack of adaptive coping strategies.¹⁴ Consequently, some students refrain from seeking assistance from peers or lecturers, leaving them to face academic struggles alone. Rather than persevering through challenges such as examination pressure, they may withdraw or resort to procrastination. Increased stress and anxiety can intensify negative emotions, impairing concentration and problem-solving ability. Furthermore, a lack of reflective learning practices and decreased self-efficacy erode students' confidence and drive.¹⁵

Inadequate resilience-building practices can lead to mental health issues, subpar academic achievement, postponed graduation, and, in certain situations, university dropout.¹⁶ Students must reframe setbacks as opportunities for growth rather than failures to reduce these dangers. Adaptive help seek, thoughtful engagement with learning processes, and persistent dedication to academic goals in the face of pressure or hardship are necessary to develop resilience.¹⁷ Coping strategies are crucial in this regard. These include using religious and spiritual coping mechanisms in addition to depending on social and emotional support.¹⁸

The impact of spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience is evident when university students face numerous challenges.¹⁹ These challenges can be financial problems, lack of resources, and inadequate social support.²⁰ Developed countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom have well-established and well-funded higher education systems, despite the growing economic and social gaps in higher education around the world. On the other hand, South Africa continues to face challenges with limited resources, financial constraints, and inadequate infrastructure.²¹ Africa, as one of the global south continents, has high dropout rates in universities, and this can be attributed to poor wellbeing of students and the community, perpetuated by broader socio-economic challenges, low-income levels, and limited funding opportunities.²²

The demonstrated role of spirituality and religion in helping people cope with academic challenges highlights the importance of examining how they relate to academic resilience among university students. This is especially pertinent in South Africa, where universities continue to face dropout rates of more than 40%.²³ These high attrition rates are largely linked to socio-economic hardship, insufficient academic and emotional support, financial constraints, and reliance on ineffective coping mechanisms.²⁴ Students exposed to academic adversity are at higher risk of anxiety, depression, and maladaptive behaviours, including substance use.²⁵

¹⁴ B. P Zungu, "Socio-Economic and Academic Challenges Faced by Black Undergraduate Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds at the Wits School of Education," *Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand*, 2022.

¹⁵ Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

¹⁶ Jason Bantjes et al., "Mental Health and Academic Failure among First-Year University Students in South Africa," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2021): 396–408.

¹⁷ Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

¹⁸ Latif, "Students' Academic Resilience Profiles Based on Gender and Cohort."

¹⁹ Carolina F Du Plessis, Tharina Guse, and Graham A Du Plessis, "'I Am Grateful That I Still Live under One Roof with My Family': Gratitude among South African University Students," *Emerging Adulthood* 11, no. 4 (2023): 923–32.

²⁰ Du Plessis, Guse, and Du Plessis, "'I Am Grateful That I Still Live under One Roof with My Family': Gratitude among South African University Students."

²¹ Christine Tsou, "Global Challenges in Higher Education: A Narrative Literature Review," 2024.

²² Catarina Félix de Oliveira et al., "How Does Learning Analytics Contribute to Prevent Students' Dropout in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review," *Big Data and Cognitive Computing* 5, no. 4 (November 4, 2021): 64, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bdcc5040064>.

²³ T. Marwala and L. Mpedi, "If We Want to Fix Our Economy, We Must Increase University Graduation Rates," *Daily Maverick*, 2022.

²⁴ Nicola Branson and Emma Whitelaw, "South African Student Retention during 2020: Evidence from System-wide Higher Education Institutional Data," *South African Journal of Economics* 92, no. 1 (2024): 9–30.

²⁵ Antonio Ragusa et al., "Effects of Academic Self-Regulation on Procrastination, Academic Stress and Anxiety, Resilience and Academic Performance in a Sample of Spanish Secondary School Students," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1073529.

In contrast, some students employ adaptive coping strategies that mitigate the effects of stressors by drawing on cognitive, social, and emotional resources from their religion and spirituality.²⁶ Growing evidence indicates that spirituality and religion may function as key protective factors that support greater wellbeing and academic resilience among university students.²⁷ Nevertheless, South African scholarship has predominantly examined religious affiliation and overall religiosity in the South African context; relatively few studies have focused specifically on the religious and spiritual lives of first-generation black university students.²⁸ The study adopted a qualitative approach, and the paper proceeds by providing the aim and objectives of the study, literature overview, methodology, presentation of results, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

The study aimed to examine the religiosity, spirituality and resilience of first-generation, black university students at North-West University. This was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To determine the level of religiosity of first-generation black university students.
2. To determine the level of spirituality of first-generation black students.
3. To determine the academic resilience of first-generation black students at North-West University.
4. To describe the influence of religiosity and spirituality on the academic resilience of first-generation black students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and spirituality are often confused and sometimes used interchangeably, though the two mean different things. In contrast, spirituality centers on a deeply personal, inward quest for meaning, transcendence, and connection with the sacred, whereas religiosity is characterized by commitment to organized systems of doctrine, shared rituals, and established moral codes.²⁹ Spirituality allows people to be optimistic during difficult times and identification with God/gods presence helps which improves their level of resilience when faced with challenges.³⁰

Transitioning to university poses challenges for most students mainly because they must leave their family behind and join new social networks.³¹ There is strong evidence to suggest that being a first-generation student is associated with poor academic performance.³² Scholars noted that Mexican first-generation students had higher chances of dropping out of college compared to non-first-generation students. First-generation students are at higher risk of poor mental health compared to continuing students.³³ A study from South Africa involving 356 undergraduate students at a university in Gauteng found that 98.9% of the participants identified as religious and had strong fundamentalist religious beliefs, which contributed to elevated levels of spirituality and, consequently, improved overall well-being. The study further revealed that prayer and participation in religious services, whether online or in person, were the most common religious activities, while fasting and meditation were the least practiced. These religious practices showed a positive association with students' spiritual

²⁶ Engelbrecht-Aldworth and Wort, "The Evolution of Defining Spirituality over the Last Century."

²⁷ Imron Imron, Imam Mawardi, and Aysenur Şen, "The Influence of Spirituality on Academic Engagement through Achievement Motivation and Resilience," *International Journal of Islamic Educational Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2023): 314–26; Jincy Cherian, Preet Kumari, and S P Sinha, "Self-Concept, Emotional Maturity and Spirituality as Predictors of Academic Resilience among Undergraduate Students," *International Journal of Applied Research* 7, no. 1 (2021): 7–11.

²⁸ Adrian D. van Breda and Linda C. Theron, "A Critical Review of South African Child and Youth Resilience Studies, 2009–2017," *Children and Youth Services Review* 91 (August 2018): 237–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.022>.

²⁹ Gnanaprakash, "Spirituality and Resilience among Post-Graduate University Students."

³⁰ Harold G. Koenig, "Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications," *ISRN Psychiatry* 2012 (December 16, 2012): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.5402/2012/278730>.

³¹ Rocío Gómez Molinero et al., "Optimism and Resilience among University Students," *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2018): 147–54; A Robbins, E Kaye, and J C Catling, "Predictors of Student Resilience in Higher Education," *Psychology Teaching Review* 24, no. 1 (2018): 44–52.

³² Amber Jimenez, Brandy Piña-Watson, and Gabriela Manzo, "Resilience through Family: Family Support as an Academic and Psychological Protective Resource for Mexican Descent First-Generation College Students," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 21, no. 3 (2022): 352–63.

³³ Rebecca Covarrubias, Andrea Romero, and Michael Trivelli, "Family Achievement Guilt and Mental Well-Being of College Students," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 24, no. 7(July 21, 2015): 2031–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-0003-8>.

well-being, and the students reported particularly high levels of spiritual well-being in the transcendental and personal dimensions.

Studies in the United States of America have shown that high levels of spirituality and spiritual involvement among college students are positively associated with high levels of resilience.³⁴ Positive coping strategies to counteract stress among college students may include encouraging resilience and fostering spiritual well-being.³⁵ In a study among university students, a positive relationship was established between a strong spiritual approach to life, resilience and greater psychological wellbeing.³⁶ Some students may have their religious beliefs and interpretation from their upbringing, which influences the way they perceive the world, including education, and their encounter with religion and spirituality may emanate from a culturally inculcated background.³⁷ According to previous scholars, religious beliefs are for many a source of guidance, reassurance, support, and resilience.³⁸

A study by Swart indicates that, when confronted with adversity, South African school children often draw on traditional ancestral practices, prayer, and church attendance.³⁹ Belief in a higher power provides them with the strength to continue with their lives and offers emotional comfort in difficult periods.⁴⁰ Although research shows that spirituality can be a vital source of academic resilience for many students, for others, heavy reliance on spiritual beliefs may diminish their sense of personal agency, causing them to neglect practical problem-solving approaches essential for managing academic challenges.⁴¹ Some scholars further contend that spiritual practices do not benefit all students equally, as individual belief systems and cultural background shapes their impact. Regarding gender and age differences, females generally display higher resilience than males, likely because they are more inclined to engage in spiritual activities and seek help when needed. In contrast, younger students, particularly first-year students, often encounter difficulties adjusting to higher education, partly due to underdeveloped coping skills and a tendency in some cases to prioritize socializing and alcohol consumption over academic responsibilities. In addition, resilience typically increases with age as individuals accumulate life experience, while students under 20 years of age often remain dependent on caregivers, which can hinder the development of independent strategies for dealing with academic stress.

Resilience is very important during university life, and it is an important factor that contributes to the positive wellbeing of students.⁴² Studies have reported that students high in resilience cope better with problems and perform better academically compared to those low in resilience.⁴³ A study at Birmingham University reported that higher levels of spirituality and religiosity improve the self-esteem of students, leading to higher resilience.⁴⁴ In a study on religiosity, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students were reported to be more resilient compared to students of other religions.⁴⁵ Several scholars have interrogated the concept of academic resilience, though little is known about the influence of religiosity and spirituality on it (academic resilience) in the context of South African higher education.⁴⁶ Academically resilient students can advance despite the challenges that confront them.

³⁴ Gnanaprakash, "Spirituality and Resilience among Post-Graduate University Students."

³⁵ Olson, *The Relationship Between Spirituality, Resilience and Anxiety Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students*.

³⁶ Kumar and Singh, "Resilience and Spirituality as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among University Students."

³⁷ Siobhan E Laird and Prospera Tadam, *Cultural Diversity in Child Protection: Cultural Competence in Practice* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

³⁸ Margaret Holloway and Bernard Moss, *Spirituality and Social Work* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

³⁹ Megan Lynn Swart, "Understanding How Hope Manifests for South African Youth during Times of Adversity" (University of Pretoria, 2021).

⁴⁰ Anjali Miriam Dey and Thomas Joseph Parayil, "Spiritual Life during Testing Times: How Spirituality Can Help," *Vinayasādhana* 11, no. 2 (2020): 27–33.

⁴¹ Al Fuertes, "Students in Higher Education Explore the Practice of Gratitude as Spirituality and Its Impact on Well-Being," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1078.

⁴² Kumar and Singh, "Resilience and Spirituality as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among University Students."

⁴³ Molinero et al., "Optimism and Resilience among University Students."

⁴⁴ Robbins, Kaye, and Catling, "Predictors of Student Resilience in Higher Education."

⁴⁵ Kate L Jansen, Rebecca Motley, and Joseph Hovey, "Anxiety, Depression and Students' Religiosity," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 13, no. 3 (2010): 267–71; Brandon M. Brown et al., "Changes in Politics and Religiosity Among Students at a Protestant University," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 63, no. 1 (March 6, 2024): 117–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12891>.

⁴⁶ Ruth Mampane and Cecilia Bouwer, "The Influence of Township Schools on the Resilience of Their Learners," *South African Journal of Education* 31, no. 1 (2011): 114–26; Motlalepule Ruth Mampane, "Factors Contributing to the Resilience of Middle-

Some of the challenges commonly experienced by black students, especially first-generation black students who come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, are discussed below.

Challenges facing black students in South Africa

The higher education system in South Africa is characterized by a legacy of apartheid that saw the marginalization of black students. Although strides are being made to transform the higher education system, historically black universities continue to lag in terms of infrastructure compared to historically white universities. Several policy documents, such as the Education White Paper, the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa and the Sourdine Report, have sought to re-center transformation, change, reform and social justice in their orientation.⁴⁷ However, these have “substantively failed to sufficiently dismantle the underlying epistemic logic of apartheid in South African higher education.”⁴⁸ Hlatshwayo⁴⁹ argues that black students continue to suffer structural racism and marginality. Institutional racism, marginalization, and oppression of black students and black academics in historically white universities are well documented. In a study by Kessi et al., it was reported that some black students felt black when entering historically white universities because they experienced discrimination. These students were accused of “lacking in competencies, lowering standards and not worthy of their university places.”

Globally, first-generation university students come from racial minority groups,⁵⁰ but the case is different in South Africa, where most of them come from black families.⁵¹ This is so because of imbalances and inequalities of the apartheid government that side-lined black people. There are 26 universities in South Africa, ranging from universities of technology, comprehensive universities, and traditional universities. Although the South African government has introduced a financing scheme (National Student Financial Aid Scheme [NSFAS]), a significant number of students are excluded from the scheme. These students, whose parents or guardians earn between R120 000 and R600 000 have assumed the name “missing middle”.⁵² The assumption is that parents of such students can afford to pay their tuition and meet their financial needs, which is not always the case. First-generation black students in a study by Hlatshwayo reported feeling alienated in a historically white university because they seemed like ‘space invaders. Some students come from poor families, which forces them to save part of their grant allowance and remit it home. Differences in home background have been found to explain learning gaps.⁵³

However, despite these challenges, several resilience strategies for black students have been identified, such as “motivating one another, helping each other financially, supporting each other with food, passing on information....”⁵⁴ Supporting university students is crucial to their academic performance and completion of studies in record time. Access to a university without the necessary

Adolescents in a South African Township: Insights from a Resilience Questionnaire,” *South African Journal of Education* 34, no. 4 (2014).

⁴⁷ Hlatshwayo, Mlamuli Nkosingphile. "Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight." *Acta Academica* 52, no. 2 (2020): 163-180.

⁴⁸ Hlatshwayo, Mlamuli Nkosingphile. "Being black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight":170

⁴⁹ Hlatshwayo, Mlamuli Nkosingphile. "Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight."

⁵⁰ Jillian Ives and Milagros Castillo-Montoya, "First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: A Systematic Review," *Review of Educational Research* 90, no. 2 (2020): 139–78.

⁵¹ Elling N Tjønneland, "Crisis at South Africa's Universities—What Are the Implications for Future Cooperation with Norway?" (CMI Brief , 2017).

⁵² Tjønneland, "Crisis at South Africa's Universities—What Are the Implications for Future Cooperation with Norway?"

⁵³ Debra Lynne Shepherd, "The Open Door of Learning-Access Restricted: School Effectiveness and Efficiency across the South African Education System," 2016.

⁵⁴ Mlamuli Nkosingphile Hlatshwayo, "Being Black in South African Higher Education: An Intersectional Insight," *Acta Academica: Critical Views on Society, Culture and Politics* 52, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 171, <https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i2/9>.

support is not an opportunity.⁵⁵ Therefore, there is a consensus that student affairs divisions should provide enough support to students.⁵⁶

Contemporary life associated with competition has the potential to put pressure on students to take an aggressive approach to life. In addition to that, academic life itself exerts a lot of pressure, and those who do not cope may perform badly or even drop out of university. According to previous research findings, it was concluded that ‘the university atmosphere presents many social and emotional challenges that affect the mental health and psychological well-being of students if the student is not resilient and handles these challenges properly’.⁵⁷ A study conducted in the United States of America by The Centre for Collegiate Mental Health in 2015 found that 56.9% of college students experienced anxiety. This was worse for students in demanding programs with a clinical practice component, with the potential to decrease the students’ academic performance and increase their dropout rate. A 2016 study reported that students who reported lower levels of spirituality grappled with higher levels of burnout and poor academic performance.⁵⁸ The following results were further noted about first-generation students in the United States: these students reported low levels of academic engagement, had fewer interactions with lecturers in the classroom, contributed less frequently to class discussions, and were less likely to ask insightful questions.⁵⁹

Although earlier studies have confirmed the importance of religion and spirituality as resilience sources, there is a dearth of information on the benefits of religiosity, spirituality, and resilience of university students in South Africa. Most black students at South African universities come from a disadvantaged background and rely on bursaries for funding. The high crime rate in South Africa, together with moral decay, puts pressure on students as they must cope with drug and substance abuse, feelings of insecurity, broken relationships, and the economic and social impact of the post COVID-19 pandemic. Single parenthood is prevalent in South Africa, leaving many female university students having to go through college life while taking care of their children at home. Despite these numerous problems, not much effort has been devoted to the role of religiosity and spirituality as sources of resilience for university students. Human beings are spiritual beings, and studies of resilience may be incomplete without focusing on spiritual aspects.⁶⁰ Transitioning to college can be difficult for some students, especially first-generation students whose families may not understand what it means to be a university student or how to assist the student. Such students may experience depression, anxiety, stress, and sleep disorders. Resilience factors such as spirituality and religiosity can therefore increase adaptability and prevent mental health problems.⁶¹

Studies on first-generation students have largely focused on their challenges and little attention has been paid to their spirituality, religiosity and resilience.⁶² Scholars, educators, and student affairs practitioners have a responsibility to understand this group of students, as failure to understand them may lead to overlooking important ways to support their learning.⁶³ First-generation black students in South Africa come from families with little or no experience with higher education systems. Such families cannot guide students in the same way as parents with higher education experience.⁶⁴ In

⁵⁵ Chinaza Uleanya and Bongani Thulani Gamede, “Comparative Learning Challenges Experienced by Students in Rural Universities of Developing Nations in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* 20, no. 2 (2018): 90–100.

⁵⁶ Chinaza Uleanya and Yasmin Rugbeer, “Investigation of First-year Learning Experiences in a Rural University in South Africa,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8, no. 1 (2020): 29–46; Uleanya and Bongani Thulani Gamede, “Comparative Learning Challenges Experienced by Students in Rural Universities of Developing Nations in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁵⁷ Kumar and Singh, “Resilience and Spirituality as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among University Students.”

⁵⁸ Jéssika Leão Fabbris et al., “Anxiety and Spiritual Well-Being in Nursing Students: A Cross-Sectional Study,” *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 35, no. 3 (September 20, 2017): 261–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010116655004>.

⁵⁹ Krista M Soria and Michael J. Stebleton, “First-Generation Students’ Academic Engagement and Retention,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no. 6 (2012): 673–85.

⁶⁰ Vincent Mabvurira, “Influence of African Traditional Religion and Spirituality in Understanding Chronic Illnesses and Its Implications for Social Work Practice: A Case of Chiweshe Communal Lands in Zimbabwe” (University of Limpopo, 2016).

⁶¹ Olson, *The Relationship Between Spirituality, Resilience and Anxiety Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students*.

⁶² Ives and Castillo-Montoya, “First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: A Systematic Review”; The Pell Institute, “Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States” (University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

⁶³ Ives and Castillo-Montoya, “First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: A Systematic Review.”

⁶⁴ Ives and Castillo-Montoya, “First-Generation College Students as Academic Learners: A Systematic Review.”

addition, first-generation students view tertiary education as a path to a better life than what their parents have, and this may cause psychological problems should they not perform well. It has also been noted that first-generation black students do not have the same social capital as students from university-educated families, and they are likely to face challenges in navigating the university.⁶⁵ The fragile situation of first-generation black students could have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic since “incremental accumulation of distress during the pandemic could be consequential”.⁶⁶ These results have been corroborated by researchers who stated that, “At no time in history have Student Affairs and Services been impacted so widely, rapidly and deeply by a health emergency”.⁶⁷ It is against this backdrop that the current study seeks to examine the religiosity, spirituality, and resilience of first-generation black university students in a multi-campus university in the North West Province of South Africa.

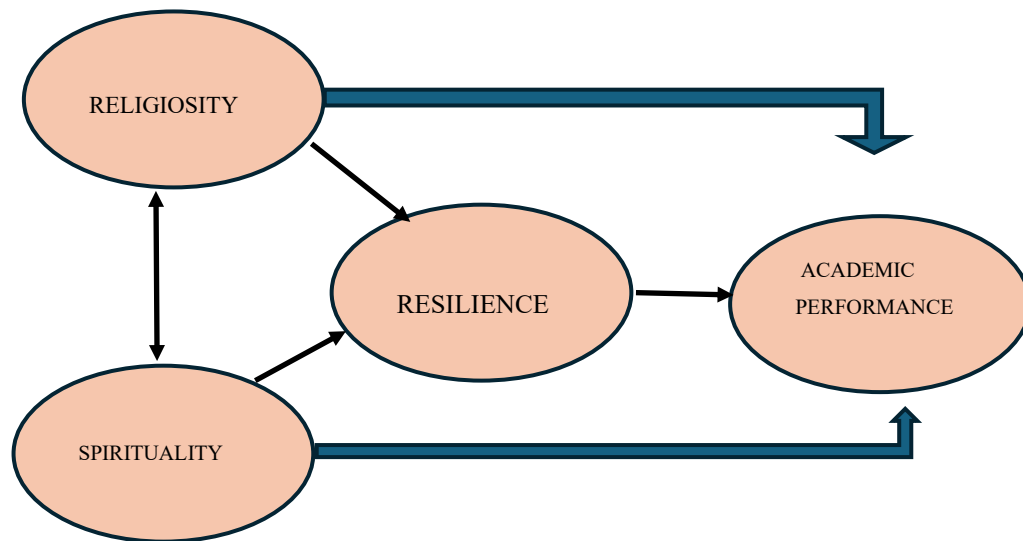


Figure 1: Conceptual model of effect of religion, spirituality and resilience on academic performance.

According to the conceptual model above, there exists a direct relationship between religiosity, spirituality and resilience in determining the academic performance of first-generation black university students in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

A correlational research design was adopted to investigate spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience among first-generation black students at a public university in South Africa. A correlational study was used because it examines the relationship between two or more variables and typically involves two or more scales to collect data,⁶⁸ making it suitable for this study on spirituality and academic resilience. Therefore, the study used the 10-item Centrality of Religiosity Scale developed by Huber and Huber,⁶⁹ which measures the centrality, importance, and religious meaning in personality, and the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) developed by Underwood.⁷⁰ It is a 16-

⁶⁵ Soria and Michael J. Stebleton, “First-Generation Students’ Academic Engagement and Retention.”

⁶⁶ Sarita Sood and Ananya Sharma, “Resilience and Psychological Well-Being of Higher Education Students During COVID-19: The Mediating Role of Perceived Distress,” *Journal of Health Management* 22, no. 4 (December 10, 2020): 606–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972063420983111>.

⁶⁷ Birgit Schreiber, Teboho Moja, and Thierry M Luescher, “Racism and Corona: Two Viruses Affecting Higher Education and the Student Experience,” 2020.

⁶⁸ Frederick J Gravetter and Lori-Ann B Forzano, *Research Methods for the Behavioral Sciences* (Cengage learning, 2018).

⁶⁹ Stefan Huber and Odilo W Huber, “The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS),” *Religions* 3, no. 3 (2012): 710–24.

⁷⁰ Lynn G. Underwood and Jeanne A. Teresi, “The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, Theoretical Description, Reliability, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Preliminary Construct Validity Using Health-Related Data,” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 24, no. 1 (February 2002): 22–33, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15324796ABM2401_04.

item self-report measure designed to assess ordinary experiences of connection with the transcendent in daily life”⁷¹ and the Academic Resilience Scale-30 (ARS-30) by Cassidy.⁷² The scale measures the resilience process in response to academic adversity.⁷³

Study setting

This research was carried out at North-West University, located in South Africa. In 2024, NWU was ranked the fourth largest university by enrolment, boasting a total of 56,958 students on its three campuses. Additionally, NWU is situated in two provinces in South Africa: Gauteng Province and North-West Province. It consists of three campuses: Mahikeng Campus (MC), Potchefstroom Campus (PC), and Vanderbijlpark Campus (VC). It is a component of organizations for students impacted by educational adversities.

Population

The study population included all first-generation black students from North-West University, which consists of three campuses: Mahikeng, Potchefstroom, and Vanderbijlpark. The NWU was chosen as the research location due to financial and time limitations, the availability of gatekeepers, and the feasible size of the population.

Sampling, sampling technique, and sample size

The present study employed voluntary convenience sampling to select participants for quantitative data. This sampling method involves allowing participants to voluntarily decide whether to or not to participate in the study if they meet the inclusion criteria.⁷⁴ This sampling was beneficial in guaranteeing that the demographic traits of the students were accurately represented in the current research. The population of first-generation black students at North-West University is defined by various demographic traits, including gender, age, and campus location. Given that the total number of first-generation black students at North-West University cannot be determined as the university does not capture this information, the calculation of the study’s sample size became challenging. Nonetheless, for statistical analysis and generalization of findings, the study used 239 participants.

Sample inclusion criteria

The current study comprised first-generation black students registered at North-West University in 2024 and were from all ethnic groups and both males and females. This was because first-generation black students are mostly pressured to complete the course within a stipulated period (mostly 3–4 years) to assume financial responsibilities of their families, and the workload increases as they proceed to the higher levels of the course.

Sample exclusion criteria

The current study did not include students of non-black race and those who were not first-generation university students, as they are believed not to be exposed to various challenges as first-generation black university students.

Ethical procedure

The ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the North-West University with the protocol number NWU-00180-22-A1. The study was conducted in line with the Helsinki Declaration on studies involving humans. A consent form was provided outlining the following terms: purpose of the study, risks and benefits, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants could withdraw at any time and would not be penalised in any form.

⁷¹ Lynn G Underwood, “The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Overview and Results,” *Religions* 2, no. 1 (2011): 29–50.

⁷² Cassidy, “The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure.”

⁷³ Cassidy, “The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure.”

⁷⁴ Kobus. Maree, *First Steps in Research*. (Van Schaik publishers, 2007).

Data collection procedure

A recruitment phase was established to promote the study and register participants who met the inclusion requirements. An advertisement poster was created for this purpose. The advertisement was authorized to be distributed through the North-West University eFundi platform, which serves as the official course management and online learning system of the institution. The researcher developed an online survey that consisted of five parts. The first section included the consent form, detailing terms such as voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the option for participants to withdraw at any time, while the second section contained demographic questions aimed at gathering participants' demographic information. Section three included the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), a 16-item self-assessment tool designed to evaluate students' spiritual experiences by Underwood.⁷⁵ Section four included the 10-item Centrality of Religiosity Scale by Huber and Huber.⁷⁶ Section five featured the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30), a 30-item instrument that examines resilience in students' academic contexts, developed by Cassidy.⁷⁷ The survey was converted into a digital format through Google Forms, and the access link was provided in the eFundi portal, allowing qualified participants to fill out the survey online using their personal devices with internet connections (e.g., smartphones, laptops, etc.). The following is the description of the scale that was used.

Measurements

Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) by Lynn G. Underwood

The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), created by Underwood, is a 16-item self-report instrument that uses a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = many times, 2 = every day, 3 = most days, 4 = some days, 5 = once in a while, 6 = never), covering items 1–15. The sixteenth item includes four response options: not close at all, somewhat close, very close, and as close as possible.⁷⁸ It aims to evaluate a person's typical interaction with the divine in everyday experiences. Different cultures have utilized the scale successfully. The scoring of the scale indicates that lower scores relate to a higher frequency of Daily Spiritual experiences, with a score of 1 representing “many times a day”. The DSES scale demonstrates strong internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.89 to 0.95, along with a test–retest reliability of 0.85. The scale's English version has been validated for South African students, showing an internal consistency of 0.85. Consequently, the 16-item DSES is appropriate for measuring spiritual experience in South Africa.⁷⁹

Centrality of Religiosity Scale by Huber and Huber (CRS-10)

The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS-10) was created by Huber, is a 10-item self-report instrument utilizing two distinct 5-point Likert scales to measure the frequency and intensity of religious activity and belief (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = Very often).⁸⁰ This scale measures the general intensities of five theoretically defined core dimensions of religiosity. The dimensions of public practice, private practice, religious experience, ideology and the intellectual dimensions can together be considered as representative for the total of religious life. In the calculation of the CRS score, the item sum score is divided by the number of scored scale items. This allows for a range of the CRS score between 1.0 and 5.0. For the categorization of the groups of the highly religious, religious, and non-religious, with the following thresholds: 1.0 to 2.0: not religious, 2.1 to 3.9: religious, 4.0 to 5.0: highly religious. Studies have reported high correlations between CRS values and self-reports of

⁷⁵ Underwood and Teresi, “The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, Theoretical Description, Reliability, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Preliminary Construct Validity Using Health-Related Data.”

⁷⁶ Huber and Huber, “The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS).”

⁷⁷ Cassidy, “The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure.”

⁷⁸ Underwood and Teresi, “The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, Theoretical Description, Reliability, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Preliminary Construct Validity Using Health-Related Data.”

⁷⁹ Innocentia Millicent Shube, “Validation of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale in a Group of Black South African Students” (North-West University, n.d.).

⁸⁰ Huber and Huber, “The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS).”

the importance of religion for daily life, with coefficients of 0.78 in a student sample and 0.67 in the international Religion Monitor.⁸¹

Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30) by Simon Cassidy

The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30), created by Cassidy, consists of 30 items using a 5-point Likert scale that spans from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Scores for each item range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater agreement with the statement.⁸² ARS-30 demonstrates excellent reliability, boasting a Cronbach alpha of 0.90 for the overall scale, exceeding the minimum necessary Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.70. The ARS-30 includes 3 subscales that show excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha scores of 0.83 for perseverance (items 1–5, 8–11, 13, 15–17, 30), 0.80 for reflection and adaptive help-seeking (items 18, 20–22, 24–27, 29), and 0.78 for negative affect and emotional response (items 6, 7, 12, 14, 19, 23, 28). Although ARS-30 has not been officially validated in South Africa, it has been widely used in regional research. For instance, Adigun and Ndwandwe, academic resilience in deaf students and Aloka, analysed its contribution to academic adaptation in first-year distance students.⁸³ Each ARS-30 element is rated from 1 to 5, where higher ratings suggest greater agreement. Total scores range from 30 and 150, where higher scores indicate greater academic resilience.⁸⁴

Data analysis

Data were analysed using IBM Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 29. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies and percentages) summarized demographic variables, while inferential statistics tested the relationship between spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience.⁸⁵ The level of spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience of first-generation black students was also measured. Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Description of participants

A total of 239 participants from nine faculties of North-West University completed the online questionnaire. Most of the respondents (n=144) were females, while 95 were males. Their ages ranged from 17 to 58 years, with a modal age of 21 years and a mean age of 21.4 years, SD = 2.1. They were drawn from various faculties within the university as follows; Faculty of Education (n=43), Faculty of Humanities (n=60), Faculty of Engineering (n=6), Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (n=33), Faculty of Health Sciences (n=25), Faculty of Law (n=12), Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (n=53) and lastly Faculty of Theology (n=4). Three respondents did not indicate their faculties.

Religiosity of the students

The students reported high religiosity (M = 4.1, SD = 0.6, alpha ~0.76). All dimensions of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale were high, as shown in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 2, female students scored higher on the CRS than male students. There was no notable relationship between religiosity and age. Participants of various ages exhibited a wide spectrum of religiosity scores. Theology faculty students

⁸¹ Michael Ackert et al., "Validation of the Short Forms of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale in Georgia," *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 57; Stefan Huber and Volkhard Krech, "The Religious Field between Globalization and Regionalization: Comparative Perspectives," *What the World Believes: Analyses and Commentary on the Religion Monitor*, 2008, 53–93.

⁸² Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

⁸³ Olufemi Timothy Adigun and Ntokozo Ndwandwe, "Academic Resilience Among Deaf Learners During E-Learning in the COVID-19 Era," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 7, no. 2 (June 20, 2022): 27–48, <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2022.8>; Peter J O Aloka, "Academic Resilience as Predictor of Academic Adjustment among Freshmen in Distance Learning Programme at One Public University," *Social Sciences and Education Research Review* 10, no. 1 (2023): 151–61.

⁸⁴ Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

⁸⁵ Kevin R. Murphy, "In Praise of Table 1: The Importance of Making Better Use of Descriptive Statistics," *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 14, no. 4 (December 14, 2021): 461–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.90>.

showed the highest average religiosity score at 4.6, while Natural and Agricultural Sciences students had the lowest average religiosity score at 3.3.

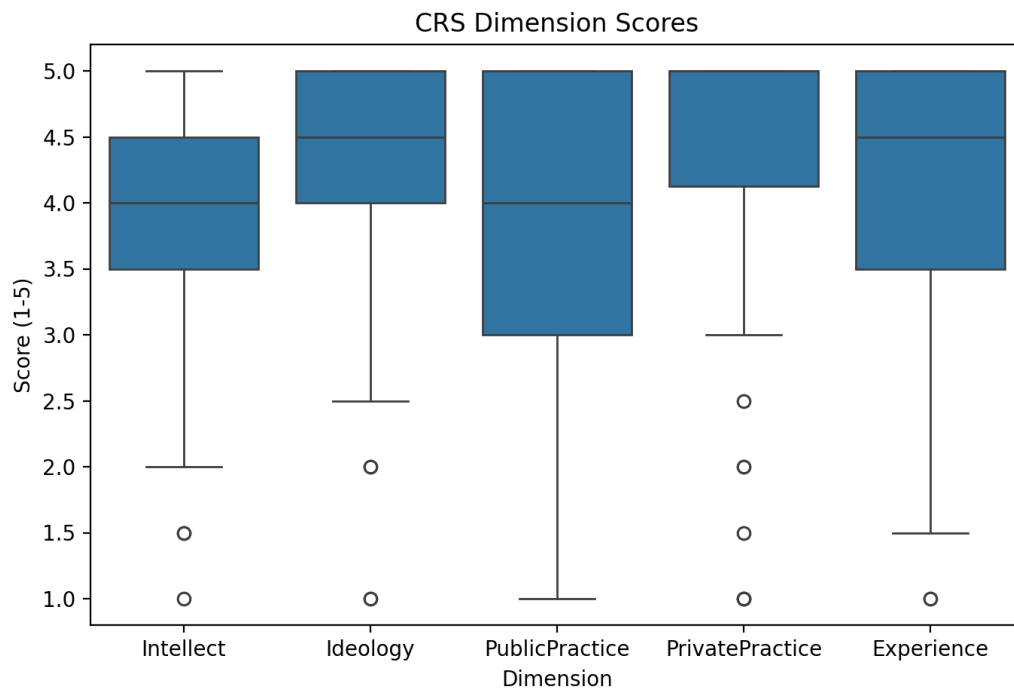


Figure 2: Dimensions of the Centrality of the religiosity score

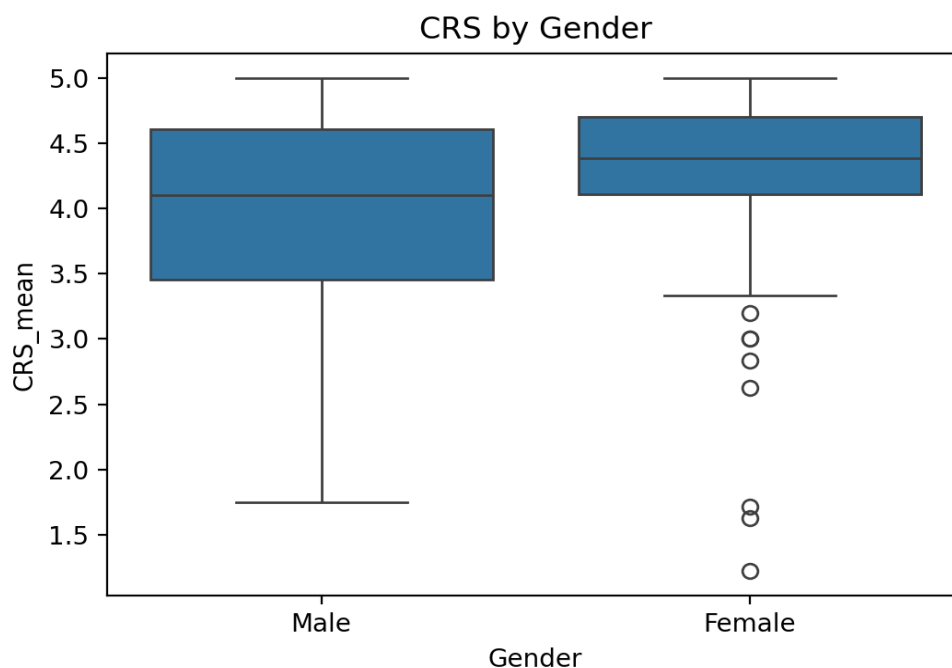


Figure 3: Religiosity scores by gender

The students of the Faculty of Theology recorded the highest religiosity level of 4.7, followed by the Faculty of Engineering with a score of 4.4. Other faculties were as follows. Health Sciences 3.9, Humanities 3.8, Economic and Management Sciences 3.8, Education 3.7, and Law 3.4.

Spirituality of the students

The data set had 238 participants; 192 answered at least one DSES item. The average of the mean scores of the participants was approximately 4.52, the median 4.65, suggesting generally frequent spiritual experiences.

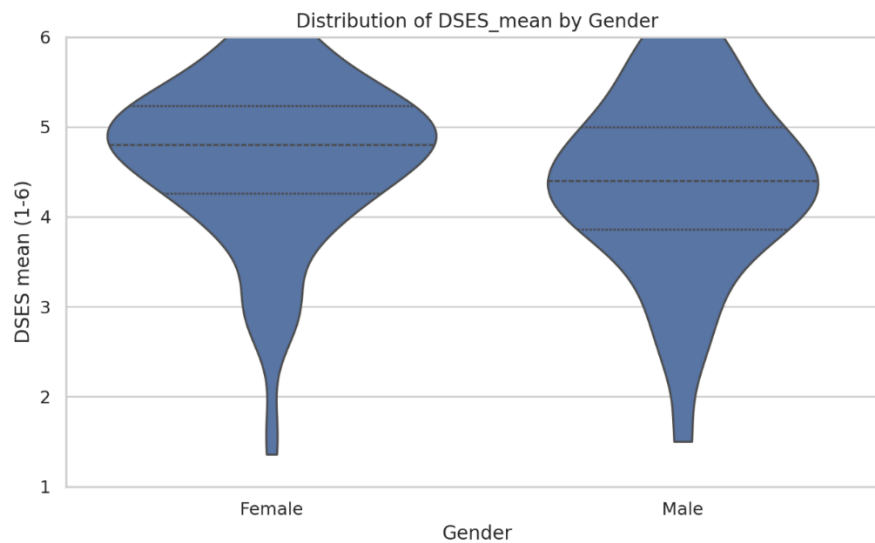


Figure 4: Daily spiritual experiences of participants by gender

Both male and female students reported high spiritual experiences, as shown in Figure 3. However, the Mann–Whitney U test indicated a statistically significant difference in the mean DSES between males and females ($p \approx 0.012$).

Academic resilience

Participants scored a mean of 2.42 on the Academic Resilience Scale. This suggested that the participants had a moderate level of academic resilience. However, it is important to note that the score ranged from a minimum of 1.27 to a maximum of 4.60, suggesting a wide spectrum of resilience scores among participants. Academic resilience appeared to be high among younger age groups, with a high mean score observed at 17 years (2.63) and 18 years (2.56).

Relationship between religiosity, spirituality, and academic resilience

Spirituality was positively correlated with resilience ($r = .42$, $p < 0.01$), while religiosity showed a weaker relationship. Regression revealed that spirituality significantly predicted resilience ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$), while religiosity was not a significant predictor. Together, both explained 18% of the variance in resilience. $R^2 = 0.20 \rightarrow 20\%$ of resilience is explained by religiosity + spirituality. β for spirituality = 0.35, $p < .01 \rightarrow$ spirituality significantly increases resilience. β for religiosity = 0.08, $p = .22 \rightarrow$ religiosity is not a significant predictor. A correlation of $r = 0.45$ between spirituality and resilience means that students with higher spirituality tend to be more resilient, with a moderate effect size.

DISCUSSION

The study results indicated that high spirituality was significantly correlated and predicted greater academic resilience while religiosity showed a weaker relationship. These results contradict findings from earlier scholars who reported elevated levels of religiosity by participants, which was typical among Black Africans. Numerous scholars agree that Black Africans commonly display strong religious inclinations.⁸⁶ The respondents' marked religious devotion may also reinforce the view of

⁸⁶ Mabvurira, "Influence of African Traditional Religion and Spirituality in Understanding Chronic Illnesses and Its Implications for Social Work Practice: A Case of Chiweshe Communal Lands in Zimbabwe"; Maria Goreth Sisiani et al., "The Influence of African Traditional Spirituality on Christian Practices in Africa," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis* 6, no. 9 (2023): 4210–14.

South Africa as a highly religious nation. These outcomes align with earlier studies carried out at the Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where 98.4% of the sample described themselves as religious.⁸⁷

The study findings showed that higher levels of spirituality were strongly associated and could significantly predict increased academic perseverance among university students. This is consistent with previous research indicating that students who are spiritually engaged often derive motivation from a belief in a higher purpose, which supports their persistence in the face of difficulties.⁸⁸ In this way, spirituality appears to function as a protective factor, as proposed by the academic resilience theory, helping students cope with hardship and maintain their dedication to academic objectives.⁸⁹ Spiritual theory also underscores that spiritual experiences cultivate meaning, purpose, and engagement, which may clarify why students with strong spirituality continue striving rather than abandoning their studies.⁹⁰

The findings suggest that lower levels of spirituality were associated with stronger emotional reactions among undergraduate students. These results may indicate that students' specific contexts and lived experiences shape how they emotionally respond to academic demands. However, the existing literature suggests that spirituality improves mental wellbeing and reduces the likelihood of depression and substance abuse, thus fostering academic resilience.⁹¹ Consequently, institutions are encouraged to implement support initiatives, such as workshops on study strategies and exam preparation.

Spirituality was recorded to be high among first-generation black students who reported positive academic performance in the current study. This result is consistent with previous research showing that students with stronger spiritual orientations are more likely to reflect on their experiences, seek feedback, and draw lessons from challenges or failures.⁹² Such students also tend to demonstrate constructive help-seeking patterns, approaching peers or lecturers for support rather than withdrawing.⁹³ Spirituality appears to promote effective coping, a sense of social connection, and self-regulation,⁹⁴ while reducing the likelihood of maladaptive behaviours such as substance abuse.⁹⁵ Taken together, these factors contribute to academic resilience and improved mental wellbeing. Besides, within the academic resilience framework, spirituality is conceptualized as a major protective factor, while spiritual theory presents it as a source of meaning and psychological fortitude during hardship.⁹⁶ Spirituality also fosters social connectedness and a sense of control, thereby supporting resilience,⁹⁷ and is consistent with spiritual theory, which associates spiritual wellbeing with hope, life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning in life.⁹⁸

⁸⁷ Statistics South Africa, *General Household Survey*.

⁸⁸ Jorge L. Villacís, Jesús de la Fuente, and Concepción Naval, "Good Character at College: The Combined Role of Second-Order Character Strength Factors and Phronesis Motivation in Undergraduate Academic Outcomes," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 16 (August 4, 2021): 8263, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168263>; Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

⁸⁹ Cassidy, "The Academic Resilience Scale (ARS-30): A New Multidimensional Construct Measure."

⁹⁰ Arlin Cuncic, *What to Know about Logotherapy: This Type of Therapy Helps You Find Your Purpose in Life* (Very well Mind, 2025).

⁹¹ Cherian, Kumari, and Sinha, "Self-Concept, Emotional Maturity and Spirituality as Predictors of Academic Resilience among Undergraduate Students"; Jeannie A Perez, "The Associations among Gratitude, Spirituality, and Positive/Negative Affect: A Test of Mediation," *Academia Lasalliana Journal of Education and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2021): 61–72.

⁹² Perez, "The Associations among Gratitude, Spirituality, and Positive/Negative Affect: A Test of Mediation"; Derek Cavilla, "The Effects of Student Reflection on Academic Performance and Motivation," *Sage Open* 7, no. 3 (July 25, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017733790>; Ikenna Q Ezealah, *The Role of Self-Reflection in the Spiritual Quest to Make Meaning of Experiences* (Clemson University, 2019).

⁹³ Chih-Yueh Chou and Chun-Ho Chang, "Developing Adaptive Help-Seeking Regulation Mechanisms for Different Help-Seeking Tendencies," *Educational Technology & Society* 24, no. 4 (2021): 54–66.

⁹⁴ Timmins and Silvia Caldeira, "Understanding Spirituality and Spiritual Care in Nursing."

⁹⁵ David Choon Liang Teo et al., "Religion, Spirituality, Belief Systems and Suicide," in *Suicide by Self-Immolation: Biopsychosocial and Transcultural Aspects* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 183–200.

⁹⁶ Sally Sargeant and Jacqui Yoxall, "Psychology and Spirituality: Reviewing Developments in History, Method and Practice," *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 2 (2023): 1159–74.

⁹⁷ Olson, *The Relationship Between Spirituality, Resilience and Anxiety Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students*.

⁹⁸ Paramabandhu Groves, "Spiritual and Religious Influences," in *The Handbook of Alcohol Use* (Elsevier, 2021), 399–417; Imron, Mawardi, and Şen, "The Influence of Spirituality on Academic Engagement through Achievement Motivation and Resilience."

The results of this study contribute to the growing corpus of research that examines the relationship between university students' academic drive and religiosity. In contrast to previous research that found a strong, if moderate, positive correlation between religiosity and academic motivation, the data did not reveal a significant association between religiosity and academic resilience. According to earlier scholars, the concept of religious strain was introduced to explain the phenomenon by which religiosity can lead to a strenuous relationship with God and consequently lead to a decrease in coping and mental health.⁹⁹ This suggests that the lack of a significant relationship between religiosity and academic performance may be due to the time and academic commitment required to succeed in university, leaving less time for organized activities or finding a place of worship.

These prior findings suggest that students with stronger religious beliefs and commitments are more likely to report greater motivation in their academic work.¹⁰⁰ Taken together, the literature, theoretical frameworks, and current results suggest that adversity alone does not dictate outcomes; rather, it is students' responses to challenges, including their use of protective factors, such as spirituality, play a crucial role.

Limitations

The study used a quantitative methodology, which limits the depth of exploration into spirituality, religiosity and academic resilience due to their subjective nature. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce response bias, introduced selection bias, favouring students with internet access and willingness to engage with spiritual and religious topics, and the use of ARS-30, which has not been validated in the South African context, potentially affecting validity. Furthermore, quantitative analysis may overlook contextual nuances and may have a possible technique bias. Future research may consider a wider geographic scope to increase the generalisability of the findings and should employ qualitative methods to deepen insight into spirituality's role in academic resilience, exploring cultural factors in diverse student populations to enrich understanding and support. Subsequent studies could explore a wider geographic range to improve the applicability of the results and should use qualitative approaches to enrich the understanding of the impact of spirituality and religiosity on academic resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Educators ought to acknowledge the importance of spirituality and religiosity in managing academic stress by integrating discussions on spiritual and religious wellbeing into advising, providing workshops with spiritual and religious elements, and establishing supportive environments for spiritual and religious exploration. In health practice, particularly in counselling, considering clients' spiritual aspects improves holistic care and therapeutic outcomes. Educating practitioners must perform spiritual and religious evaluations to assert their personal beliefs and align interventions with the strengths of clients. These findings encourage policymakers and university leaders to adopt inclusive frameworks that recognize various spiritual and religious practices as vital for student wellbeing and academic achievement. Incorporating spirituality and religiosity into student support services can enhance validation, engagement, and positive results.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the religiosity, spirituality and academic resilience of first-generation, black students at a South African public University has provided valuable insights into the intricate challenges and coping mechanisms these students encounter. The global landscape of higher education is rapidly evolving, making investigating these dynamics both pertinent and pressing. A primary inference drawn from this research is the significant influence of spirituality and religiosity on resilience and academic performance. The complexities arising from leaving home, being the first to go to university and the academic and financial pressures inherent to the tertiary educational environment are substantial.

⁹⁹ Lois S Harris, *Effects of Gender and Spirituality on Adults' Resilience to Daily Non-Traumatic Stressors* (Walden University, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Fateme Ghaedi Heidari et al., "The Relationship between Religiosity and Depression among Medical Students," *Asian Journal of Nursing Education and Research* 6, no. 3 (2016): 414.

However, an encouraging revelation from this study is the protective role of a sense of belonging (spirituality and religion). The ability to harness resilience and personal growth from potentially distressing experiences offers a promising avenue to mitigate the ramifications of being a first-generation university student and all its demands. The study findings have illuminated the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges of these students, providing a holistic perspective. Empirical findings underscore the vital role of support systems, whether familial, among peers, religious, or institutional. Such networks can be transformative, converting potentially adverse experiences into personal and academic growth catalysts. This underscores the imperative for academic institutions and policy frameworks to cultivate environments conducive to first-generation university students to holistically develop and grow.

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