



Epistemological frameworks of thesis proposal defence: Students' positionality

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<https://doi.org/10.51867/scimundi.6.2.4>

ABSTRACT

This study examined the epistemological underpinnings of thesis proposal defence, with particular attention to how postgraduate students construct and negotiate their positionality within evaluative academic contexts. Rooted in an interpretivist paradigm and employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study was informed by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) to explore how social interaction, institutional support, and evaluative practices shape students' experiences during proposal defence. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with four second-year Mphil and three first-year PhD students who had undergone proposal defence at a public University in Ghana. The findings suggest that proposal defence is a socially mediated process shaped by institutional expectations, interpersonal interactions, and power relations rather than a straightforward assessment of research competence. Participants' experiences of progression, preparedness, and academic legitimacy were influenced by the quality of supervisory support, their ability to engage effectively with evaluative interactions, and their familiarity with academic expectations. The study further suggests that students' positionality is dynamic and develops through participation in academic practices and interactions with supervisors and evaluators. Based on these findings, the study proposes a sociocultural understanding of postgraduate proposal defence, emphasizing the role of social mediation, academic participation, and institutional support in shaping students' experiences and identity development. The study recommends more transparent, equitable, and development-oriented evaluative practices that support postgraduate students' academic growth within higher education contexts.

Keywords: Academic Identity, Epistemology, Proposal Defence, Positionality, Postgraduate Education, Sociocultural Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

The thesis proposal defence is a crucial stage in postgraduate education, enabling students to demonstrate their readiness for independent research before a panel of academic assessors. In Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programmes, the defence process assesses the feasibility, originality, and methodological rigour of proposed studies. Historically, this process has been treated as an objective and procedural academic activity governed by established assessment norms (Schneijderberg, 2021). However, emerging scholars suggest that proposal defence is far more complex than a technical assessment of research competence. It is a socially situated and interactional academic process in which evaluative outcomes are influenced not only by the quality of students' proposals but also by their participation in academic interactions, their preparedness, and their ability to engage with institutional expectations.

At the heart of this complexity is epistemology, broadly understood as the study of the nature and justification of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). Research methods and assessment systems in postgraduate education are shaped by assumptions about what constitutes knowledge, how it is generated, and who has the authority to evaluate it. Interpretivist epistemology, which emphasizes social interaction and subjective interpretation in the construction of



knowledge (Schwandt, 2000), is particularly relevant to understanding proposal defence. From this perspective, proposal defence is not merely a neutral assessment of objective facts but a context-dependent process in which knowledge claims are interpreted, negotiated, and evaluated within specific institutional and academic settings. Students' positionality is central to this process. Positionality refers to an individual's worldview and the position they adopt within particular social, institutional, and political contexts, which in turn shapes how they understand, experience, and participate in those contexts (Holmes, 2020). Within proposal defence, students' positionality may be reflected in their confidence, preparedness, engagement with panel members, and ability to participate effectively in academic discussions while navigating institutional hierarchies. These factors influence how students experience the defence process and how they perceive evaluative outcomes. Students who are more familiar with academic expectations and research conventions may be better positioned to navigate evaluative encounters, often benefiting from forms of academic cultural capital acquired through prior educational and institutional experiences (Bourdieu, 1986).

The processes through which students develop, negotiate, and experience positionality during proposal defence remain insufficiently explored. Existing literature has focused primarily on procedural and technical aspects of postgraduate assessment, including theoretical framing, methodological rigour, and research design (Schneijderberg, 2021). Comparatively less attention has been paid to the social, interactional, and developmental dimensions of proposal defence, particularly the ways in which institutional support, academic participation, and interpersonal interactions shape students' experiences. This gap is especially evident within African postgraduate contexts. Furthermore, much of the existing research has concentrated on doctoral viva examinations at advanced stages of candidature rather than on proposal defences, which occur during the formative stages of students' academic development and identity formation (Choi et al., 2021; Tian & Liu, 2024).

This gap is significant because proposal defence serves not only as an evaluative mechanism but also as a developmental academic experience. Students who receive limited supervisory support, inadequate preparation, or insufficient opportunities for academic engagement may experience challenges that affect their confidence, participation, and perceptions of competence. Like many African universities, the public University in Ghana operates within a multilingual and multicultural academic environment where students must navigate diverse disciplinary expectations and evaluative standards. These contextual realities warrant empirical investigation.

Guided by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated within an interpretivist paradigm, this study explores how postgraduate students construct and negotiate their positionality during thesis proposal defence and how social interaction, institutional support, and evaluative practices shape their experiences of preparedness, participation, and academic development. The study focuses on second-year Mphil and PhD students at a public University in Ghana who have undergone the proposal defence process.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. How do postgraduate students construct and negotiate their positionality during thesis proposal defence?
- ii. How do social interactions, institutional support, and evaluative practices shape students' experiences of preparedness, academic development, and progression during proposal defence?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is informed by Sociocultural Theory (SCT), developed by Vygotsky (1978), which conceptualizes learning and knowledge construction as socially mediated processes. According to SCT, cognitive development occurs through interaction with others within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Knowledge is therefore not acquired in isolation but is constructed through participation in social activities and engagement with more knowledgeable members of a community. Sociocultural theory is particularly relevant to the study of thesis proposal defence because proposal defence is not only an assessment of research competence but also an academic and social process through which postgraduate students interact with supervisors, panel members, and institutional expectations. Through these interactions, students negotiate their academic identities, develop confidence in their scholarly abilities, and gain access to the norms and practices of academic research communities.

A central concept within SCT is social mediation. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is facilitated through interaction with more knowledgeable others who provide guidance and support. Within postgraduate education, supervisors, examiners, and experienced researchers function as mediators of academic development. Their feedback, questioning, and evaluative comments shape how students understand research standards and assess their own competence as emerging scholars.

The theory also emphasizes scaffolding, which refers to the support provided to learners as they acquire new knowledge and skills. Supervisory guidance, feedback on research proposals, mock presentations, and pre-defence



consultations can all be understood as forms of scaffolding that assist students in preparing for proposal defence. Students who receive limited support may experience greater uncertainty and vulnerability during evaluative encounters. Another important SCT concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the distance between what learners can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more experienced individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Proposal defence may therefore be viewed as a developmental academic space in which students are challenged to extend their existing knowledge through interaction with supervisors and panel members. The evaluative process does not merely judge competence but can also contribute to academic growth and learning.

This study also draws on the sociocultural understanding that identity develops through participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Through engagement in proposal defence, postgraduate students participate in the norms, expectations, and practices of the academic community. Their experiences of confidence, preparedness, legitimacy, and anxiety are shaped by the extent to which they are able to participate effectively within this community. Sociocultural theory, therefore, provides an appropriate framework for understanding how postgraduate students construct and negotiate positionality during proposal defence. It enables the study to examine how institutional support, supervisory relationships, academic participation, and evaluative interactions shape students' experiences, perceptions of competence, and academic identity development.

2.2 Empirical Review

Edu-Buandoh (2020) examined thesis defence practices in a Ghanaian university and found that examiner questioning patterns often reflected broader institutional power relationships that influenced students' participation. The study's grounding in a Ghanaian academic context is a key strength; however, its focus on thesis rather than proposal defence and on examiner behaviour rather than students' lived experiences limits its applicability to the present study. This study extends Edu-Buandoh's work by foregrounding how students construct and negotiate positionality within the earlier and more formative context of proposal defence. Kemoli and Ogara (2016) found that success in PhD thesis defence is influenced not only by research quality but also by candidates' ability to communicate effectively, respond to questions, and demonstrate confidence. Although valuable, the study focuses on final-stage doctoral defence rather than proposal defence, where students are still developing research competence and academic identities. The present study addresses this limitation by focusing on students' experiences during the earlier stages of postgraduate research.

Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) investigated how researchers negotiate insider-outsider positionality in Ghanaian fieldwork contexts and found positionality to be fluid, interactional, and shaped by participants' expectations. Although situated within fieldwork research rather than academic assessment, the study's conceptualization of positionality as dynamic and relational provides useful insight for understanding proposal defence experiences. Mafumbate (2025) explored postgraduate students' experiences during proposal writing and defence from a wellness perspective, finding that communication, emotional stress, preparation, and institutional support significantly influence students' experiences. The study's attention to emotional and academic dimensions is particularly relevant. However, it provides limited insight into how students interpret and negotiate their academic identities during proposal defence. The present study addresses this limitation by examining proposal defence as a socially mediated academic experience shaped by interaction, institutional support, and evaluative practices.

Choi et al. (2021), in a systematic review of doctoral students' identity development, found that experiences within doctoral education including academic evaluation, feedback, validation, and scholarly participation, play an important role in shaping the development of academic identity. Similarly, Tian and Liu (2024) demonstrate that engagement with scholarly knowledge and disciplinary expectations influences how academic competence is perceived and assessed. These findings suggest that participation in academic practices contributes significantly to the development of scholarly identity and confidence. Together, the existing literature offers valuable insights into postgraduate assessment, supervision, academic participation, and identity development. However, limited research has examined how postgraduate students construct and negotiate positionality during proposal defence within a sociocultural framework, particularly in African university contexts. Although existing studies have explored assessment, supervision, and student experiences in postgraduate education, they have paid comparatively little attention to how social interaction, institutional support, and evaluative practices shape students' experiences of proposal defence and academic development. This study addresses that gap.

III. METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological design grounded in a qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the epistemological dimensions of thesis proposal defence and the positionality of postgraduate students within it. The central problem driving this methodological choice is that proposal defence is not a stable, observable procedure whose outcomes can be explained solely through external and measurable variables. Rather, it is an experiential, interpretive, and



intersubjective phenomenon. What occurs during a proposal defence is shaped by how students understand, experience, and interpret evaluative encounters, as well as by the meanings they attach to academic expectations, institutional authority, and social interactions. Investigating such a phenomenon therefore required a design capable of accessing participants' subjective lived experiences directly.

Phenomenology, which is concerned with the study of experience as it is lived and interpreted by individuals, was therefore considered appropriate for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological inquiry does not assume that proposal defence possesses a single objective reality that can be understood from an external perspective. Rather, it seeks to understand how individuals experience and make meaning of the same phenomenon differently depending on their backgrounds, experiences, academic preparation, and institutional contexts. This approach enabled the researchers to explore in depth how postgraduate students construct and negotiate positionality during proposal defence, including experiences of anxiety, uncertainty, academic identity development, and participation within evaluative academic settings. Qualitative inquiry, as Cohen et al. (2018) note, is concerned not with statistical generalization but with developing an in-depth understanding of phenomena as experienced by participants themselves. Phenomenology strengthens this orientation by placing participants' lived experiences at the centre of inquiry.

3.1 Participant Selection

Because the study required participants who could provide rich accounts of direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation, purposive sampling was adopted as the participant selection strategy (Creswell, 2014). Proposal defence is a specific academic experience that not all postgraduate students encounter at the same stage or under comparable circumstances. Consequently, the credibility and depth of the data depended on selecting participants for whom the experience was recent, meaningful, and formative. Seven postgraduate students from a public University in Ghana who had undergone proposal defence were purposively selected. Participants represented different postgraduate programmes and had recently completed the proposal defence process. To maintain confidentiality and minimise the possibility of participant identification, pseudonyms (Student A to Student G) were used throughout the study.

The sample size is consistent with the epistemological orientation of phenomenological research, which prioritises depth and richness of experience rather than statistical representation. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that phenomenological studies commonly involve between three and ten participants because the objective is to develop a detailed understanding of a shared lived experience rather than to generalise findings to a wider population. Lecturers were not considered for this study because the purpose of this study is to explore students' positionality on thesis proposal defence, and not that of the lecturers or supervisors.

3.2 Instruments and Procedure

The choice of data collection instrument was informed by the need to access participants' lived experiences of a socially sensitive and high-stakes academic process. Proposal defence requires students to interpret and make sense of evaluative interactions shaped by institutional expectations, supervisory support, academic participation, and power relations. A semi-structured interview guide was therefore selected as the primary data collection instrument because it is particularly suited to generating rich experiential and interpretive data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. This method enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to probe, clarify, and explore emerging issues in greater depth (Creswell, 2014). This flexibility was particularly important because students' experiences of proposal defence, including how they perceived their preparedness, confidence, institutional support, and academic development, could not be fully anticipated in advance. As Cohen et al. (2018) observe, interviews are especially valuable in qualitative research because they provide access to participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. The interview guide was organised around the study's research questions, focusing on students' construction and negotiation of positionality and the ways social interactions, institutional support, and evaluative practices shaped their experiences during proposal defence.

Participants were approached at times and locations convenient to them and were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection commenced. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were utilised to ensure flexibility and accessibility without compromising the quality of data collected.

3.3 Data Analysis

The objective of the analysis was to identify patterns across participants' lived experiences and to understand how they interpreted proposal defence as an evaluative and developmental academic experience. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021), was adopted as the primary analytical procedure.



Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated from segments relevant to the research questions, particularly those relating to positionality, preparedness, supervision, institutional support, confidence, participation, and academic development. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories, from which themes were developed through an iterative process.

The analysis was interpretive in orientation and informed by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory provided a lens for understanding how participants' experiences were shaped by social interaction, supervisory relationships, institutional support, and participation in academic practices. Concepts such as social mediation, scaffolding, academic identity development, and participation in scholarly communities informed the interpretation of the themes. This approach enabled the analysis to move beyond description and to explain how students constructed meaning from their proposal defence experiences within broader social and institutional contexts.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, whereby participants reviewed interview transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their accounts. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and proposal defence context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of all stages of the research process, thereby creating an audit trail that could be examined by other researchers. Confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts and maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process to minimise researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were particularly important because participants discussed a high-stakes institutional process that continued to influence their academic progression. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from the findings. Data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Finding

4.1.1 How Postgraduate Students Construct and Negotiate their Positionality during Thesis Proposal Defense

Four themes emerged from the data: pre-defence positionality: anxiety, anticipation and self-perception; dynamic negotiation of positionality through participation and interaction; post-defence emotional reconstruction and identity development; and institutional mediation of positionality.

Pre-Defence Positionality: Anxiety, Anticipation, and Self-Perception: The findings reveal that students enter the proposal defence space with a pre-constructed sense of vulnerability, characterized by anxiety, uncertainty, and anticipation of judgement. Most participants described significant emotional tension prior to their presentations:

"I was a little bit nervous" (Student A, 8th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"Unsure, scared even, as to the outcome" (Student C, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"There is that anxiety... that they'll reject your work." (Student E, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These responses show that students initially position themselves as subordinate participants within a high-stakes evaluative setting. This positionality is shaped by the perceived authority of the examination panel and by uncertainty about the institutional criteria governing outcomes. Mafumbate (2025) identifies emotional stress as central to postgraduate experiences, while Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that positionality is constituted through individuals' perceptions of institutional power structures. The present findings are consistent with Ma et al.'s (2024) narrative review, which demonstrates that PhD students' anxiety has intensified globally, with the supervisory relationship and development prospects among the primary contributing factors.

Variation exists, however, in how students construct this initial positionality. One participant framed the defence more positively:

"It is a normal thing... an opportunity to share ideas with the panel" (Student B, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

This contrasting account confirms that positionality is influenced by prior experience, personality, and perception of the academic process (Morrissey et al., 2026). The anxiety stated here reflects both emotional tension and epistemological doubt about how knowledge claims will be judged (Schwandt, 2000). Positionality During



Defence: Negotiation Through Participation and Interaction: During the proposal defence, students actively negotiated their positionality through participation in academic interaction and engagement with panel members. A key finding is that confidence was not static but developed through involvement in the evaluative process. Several participants indicated that once they began presenting and interacting with the panel, their confidence improved:

"When I realized I was able to engage the audience... I felt kind of confident" (Student D, 17th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"Everything became okay, and then I was flowing" (Student F, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

From a sociocultural perspective, these experiences suggest that confidence and academic identity develop through participation in academic practices rather than existing prior to engagement. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning and development occur through social interaction, while Wenger (1998) emphasizes that participation in academic communities contributes to identity formation. The findings therefore suggest that some participants experienced increased confidence as they became active participants in the evaluative process. At the same time, not all participants reported positive experiences. Some described difficulties that constrained their participation:

I started by reading the slides, and I didn't like it myself" (Student A, 8th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

There were some things you wish you could explain... but it seems like you are just supposed to oblige" (Student G, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These experiences suggest that students entered the proposal defence process with differing levels of preparedness, confidence, and familiarity with academic expectations. In sociocultural terms, such differences may reflect variations in prior academic socialization and access to supportive learning experiences. Post-Defence Positionality: Emotional Reconstruction and Identity Development: Following the proposal defence, participants reflected on their experiences and reassessed their sense of academic competence and belonging. For some participants, the experience strengthened confidence and reinforced their emerging scholarly identities.

"I felt relieved... that I was able to deliver" (Student B, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

For others, the experience generated uncertainty and self-doubt:

"I felt a little sad" (Student C, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"You don't even know your work any longer" (Student D, 17th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"The idea of failing alone is not emotionally good" (Student F, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These findings suggest that proposal defence extends beyond evaluation and contributes to students' perceptions of themselves as developing scholars. Sociocultural theory views identity as emerging through participation in social and institutional practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). The findings therefore indicate that proposal defence can influence how students perceive their competence, confidence, and membership within the academic community. However, these experiences were not uniform, as some participants continued to experience uncertainty even after the defence process. Institutional Mediation of Positionality: Institutional structures and support systems emerged as important influences on students' experiences of proposal defence. A recurring concern was the absence of early supervisory guidance and opportunities for academic preparation.

"The department should have assigned students to supervisors before the proposal defence" (Student A, 8th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

"Students should present their work to lecturers prior to the defence to ensure readiness" (Student G, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These findings suggest that students' experiences are shaped not only by individual effort but also by the support structures available within the institution. From a sociocultural perspective, supervisory guidance functions as a form of scaffolding that supports students' academic development (Vygotsky, 1978). The absence of such support may limit students' preparedness and confidence during evaluative encounters. Consistent with Chen (2025), the findings indicate that supervisory relationships and institutional support play an important role in shaping academic identity development and participation in postgraduate education.

4.1.2 Evaluative Interactions and Institutional Practices Shape Students' Experiences of Preparedness, Development, and Progression during Proposal Defense

Three themes emerged from the data: evaluative interaction as a marker of preparedness; evaluative feedback and academic progression; and institutional power relations and disciplinary expectations as shaping students' experiences of evaluation. Evaluative Interaction as a Marker of Preparedness: The findings suggest that students' sense of preparedness during proposal defence is closely linked to their ability to participate effectively in academic interaction. Rather than being assessed only on the written proposal, participants experienced preparedness as something demonstrated through engagement, explanation, and responsiveness during interaction with panel members. Some participants described moments in which difficulties in responding to questions shaped their perception of their own preparedness:



"There were some questions I couldn't answer well, and I could feel the panel judging me for it" (Student B, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

This experience indicates that preparedness is not only an individual cognitive state but is also constructed through interaction with evaluators during the defence process. From a sociocultural perspective, such interactions provide opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding and participate in academic practices, while also revealing gaps in familiarity with disciplinary expectations. In this sense, evaluative encounters function as learning spaces in which students' academic competence is made visible through participation and engagement rather than solely through written work. Evaluative Feedback, Participation, and Academic Progression: Most participants reported that their proposal defence resulted in conditional approval accompanied by recommendations for revision. These findings suggest that the defence process is not only evaluative but also developmental, offering students opportunities to refine their work and strengthen their research direction.

Student C explained:

"They made some recommendations... so I don't think they will ask me to come back again" (Student C, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

Student E similarly noted:

"They've made a lot of relevant inputs... so I can continue" (Student E, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These accounts indicate that evaluative interactions during proposal defence often function as formative guidance that supports students' academic development and progression. However, the developmental value of feedback depends on how clearly it is communicated and how effectively students can interpret and apply it. In some cases, students reported substantial revisions following feedback:

Student D stated:

"I had to change my topic... and reshape" (Student D, 17th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

From a sociocultural perspective, feedback can be understood as a form of social mediation that guides students' development within academic communities. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others, and in this context, evaluators and supervisors provide input that helps shape students' understanding of research expectations. However, the effectiveness of this mediation depends on clarity and consistency. Neupane Bastola and Hu (2023, 2024) observe that feedback is often interpreted differently by students and supervisors, with students sometimes experiencing ambiguity or uncertainty. In proposal defence situations, where multiple evaluators provide feedback simultaneously, this challenge may become more pronounced, influencing how students interpret expectations for revision and progression.

Institutional Power Relations and Disciplinary Expectations in Evaluation: The findings indicate that institutional hierarchies and disciplinary differences shape students' experiences of evaluation and participation during proposal defence. Some participants described the defence environment as one in which interaction was influenced by authority dynamics, affecting how comfortably they were able to engage.

Student F remarked:

"Everyone wants to show off that they know" (Student F, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

Student G explained:

"Responding to panel comments could be interpreted as challenging them" (Student G, 18th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

Student B added:

"Discussions sometimes resemble academic quarrel" (Student B, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

These accounts suggest that evaluative encounters are not neutral interactions but are shaped by institutional roles, expectations, and power relations that influence participation. From a sociocultural perspective, these conditions form part of the institutional context within which students learn to position themselves as emerging scholars. Rather than viewing power only as a discursive phenomenon, these findings indicate that it is embedded within institutional structures that shape participation, confidence, and academic identity development. Participants also highlighted the influence of disciplinary diversity on evaluation. In some cases, differing methodological and epistemological expectations created uncertainty:

Student C explained:

"The qualitative people want one thing, and the quantitative people want another; you are caught in the middle" (Student C, 16th April, 2026, Cape Coast).

This finding suggests that evaluative judgements are shaped by multiple disciplinary perspectives, requiring students to navigate competing academic expectations within a single evaluative event. Such situations may create complexity for students who are still developing familiarity with different research traditions and academic norms.



From a sociocultural standpoint, this reflects the reality that postgraduate students are developing membership within diverse academic communities, each with its own expectations, standards, and interpretive practices.

4.2 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that thesis proposal defence is a socially mediated and emotionally significant academic process in which students' positionality, participation, and experiences are shaped by interaction, institutional support, and evaluative practices. Across both research questions, a central insight emerged: students' experiences and perceptions of evaluative outcomes are influenced not only by the quality of their research proposals but also by their opportunities for academic participation, the support available to them, and their ability to engage with institutional expectations. Consistent with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the findings suggest that proposal defence functions not only as an assessment activity but also as a developmental academic space in which learning, identity formation, and scholarly participation occur simultaneously.

Positionality as a Constructed and Negotiated Academic Identity: The finding that students entered the proposal defence process with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and anticipation of judgement is consistent with previous research on postgraduate experiences. Mafumbate (2025) identified emotional stress as a significant feature of proposal writing and defence, while Ma et al. (2024) found that supervisory relationships and concerns about academic progression contribute substantially to postgraduate anxiety. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating how students' initial perceptions of vulnerability are shaped by uncertainty regarding institutional expectations and evaluative outcomes. From a sociocultural perspective, these experiences reflect students' positioning within a community of academic practice in which they are still developing confidence, competence, and legitimacy as emerging scholars. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning and development occur through social interaction, while Wenger (1998) suggests that identity is constructed through participation in communities of practice. The findings indicate that students often entered the defence process perceiving themselves as novices whose academic standing would be judged by more experienced members of the academic community.

A particularly important finding is that positionality was not fixed but changed throughout the defence process. Participants who became actively engaged in discussions with panel members often reported increased confidence and a stronger sense of academic participation. This finding suggests that academic identity develops through participation rather than existing prior to engagement. As students interacted with evaluators, defended their ideas, and responded to questions, some began to perceive themselves as legitimate contributors to scholarly discussions. This observation supports Wenger (1998) view that participation in academic communities contributes to identity formation and scholarly development. Post-defence reflections further demonstrated that proposal defence has important implications for academic identity. While some students reported feelings of relief, achievement, and increased confidence, others experienced uncertainty and self-doubt. These findings are consistent with Choi et al. (2021), who argue that academic evaluation plays an important role in shaping doctoral identity development. The present study suggests that proposal defence influences not only students' perceptions of their research competence but also their sense of belonging within the academic community. Consequently, the emotional climate surrounding evaluation deserves attention because it may influence students' motivation, persistence, and future academic participation.

Academic Participation, Preparedness, and the Development of Competence: The findings suggest that perceptions of preparedness during proposal defence extend beyond the written proposal itself and include students' ability to participate effectively in evaluative interactions. Participants frequently associated preparedness with confidence, responsiveness, and the ability to explain and justify their research decisions. This indicates that academic competence is experienced as both a cognitive and social process. Sociocultural theory provides a useful framework for understanding this finding. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning occurs through participation in socially mediated activities, while Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize that competence develops through engagement within communities of practice. Proposal defence may therefore be understood as a setting in which students demonstrate not only knowledge but also their ability to participate in the practices of academic inquiry and scholarly discussion.

The findings also suggest that students enter proposal defence with differing levels of academic preparation and familiarity with institutional expectations. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital remains relevant in explaining why some students appear better equipped to navigate evaluative settings. Students who have greater exposure to academic conventions, research practices, and scholarly interaction may possess advantages that facilitate participation and confidence. However, the present findings indicate that these advantages are shaped and reinforced through institutional experiences rather than existing solely as individual attributes. Participants' accounts also highlighted challenges associated with conflicting disciplinary expectations. Students reported difficulties navigating situations where qualitative and quantitative perspectives generated different recommendations. These experiences illustrate the complexity of participating within academic environments characterised by multiple epistemological



traditions. Such challenges may create uncertainty for students who are still developing their academic identities and understanding of disciplinary expectations.

Institutional Support and the Social Mediation of Academic Development: A recurring theme throughout the findings was the importance of institutional support in shaping students' experiences of proposal defence. Participants frequently expressed concerns about delayed supervisory allocation, limited opportunities for preparation, and inadequate guidance prior to the defence process. Within sociocultural theory, supervisors can be understood as important mediators of learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is facilitated through interaction with more knowledgeable others who provide guidance and support. Supervisory relationships therefore function as forms of scaffolding that enable students to develop research competence, confidence, and familiarity with academic expectations. The findings suggest that students who lacked consistent supervisory support often entered proposal defence feeling underprepared and uncertain.

These observations are consistent with Chen (2025), who found that supervisory relationships play an important role in shaping doctoral students' academic identity development. The present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that the effects of supervision are evident not only during research training but also during evaluative encounters such as proposal defence. Institutional support structures therefore appear to influence both students' preparedness and their capacity to participate confidently in academic evaluation. The findings also indicate that power relationships remain an important aspect of proposal defence. Participants described situations in which panel members dominated discussions or where differing disciplinary expectations created uncertainty. However, rather than viewing these experiences solely as manifestations of discourse-based power, the present study interprets them as features of broader institutional and academic structures that shape participation. Addressing these challenges requires transparent assessment procedures, supportive supervisory practices, and opportunities for students to develop familiarity with evaluative expectations before entering the proposal defence process.

A Sociocultural Framework for Understanding Proposal Defence: Drawing on the findings and sociocultural theory, this study proposes a sociocultural framework for understanding postgraduate proposal defence. The framework suggests that students' experiences of proposal defence are shaped across three interconnected phases: pre-defence preparation, participation during defence, and post-defence reflection and development. In the pre-defence phase, students' experiences are influenced by institutional conditions such as supervisory support, academic preparation, prior educational experiences, and access to academic resources. These factors shape students' confidence, preparedness, and expectations before entering the evaluative setting. During the defence itself, students negotiate their positionality through participation in academic interaction. Engagement with panel members, opportunities to explain and justify research decisions, and responsiveness to feedback contribute to the development of confidence and academic identity. From a sociocultural perspective, these interactions function as opportunities for learning, participation, and scholarly development.

In the post-defence phase, feedback and evaluative outcomes influence how students interpret their experiences and assess their academic competence. Positive and constructive feedback may strengthen confidence and reinforce academic identity, whereas unclear or contradictory feedback may contribute to uncertainty and reduced confidence. Consequently, proposal defence should be understood not merely as an evaluative event but as a socially mediated developmental process with implications for students' ongoing academic growth. This framework contributes to higher education research by highlighting the interconnected roles of social interaction, institutional support, academic participation, and identity development in shaping proposal defence experiences. It further suggests that efforts to improve proposal defence should focus on strengthening supervisory support, increasing transparency in evaluation, and creating developmental opportunities that enable students to participate confidently within academic communities.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that thesis proposal defence is not merely a procedural or technical assessment of research competence but a socially situated and interactional academic process in which meaning, competence, and academic legitimacy are constructed through participation in evaluative encounters. Students enter the proposal defence with varying levels of anxiety, confidence, and preparedness, and these initial conditions shape how they position themselves within the academic space of evaluation.

The study shows that positionality is not fixed but develops dynamically before, during, and after the defence through students' engagement with panel members, supervisory support structures, and institutional expectations. From a sociocultural perspective, these experiences reflect how learning and identity development occur through social interaction and participation in academic communities (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). Students' confidence



and sense of competence were found to evolve as they engaged in dialogue, responded to questions, and interpreted feedback within the evaluative setting.

The findings further indicate that students' experiences of preparedness and progression are strongly shaped by social mediation processes within the institution. Supervisory support, feedback practices, and opportunities for academic engagement function as forms of scaffolding that influence how students navigate the proposal defence process. Where such support is limited or inconsistent, students are more likely to experience uncertainty and reduced confidence in their academic positioning.

Institutional expectations and disciplinary diversity also emerged as important contextual influences. Students often navigated multiple and sometimes competing academic expectations, reflecting the presence of different epistemological traditions within evaluation panels. These conditions highlight the complexity of participation in postgraduate academic communities, where students must continuously negotiate their emerging scholarly identities.

Overall, the study reconceptualizes proposal defence as a developmental academic experience rather than a purely gatekeeping exercise. It argues that the defence process contributes to students' academic identity formation when supported by clear guidance, constructive feedback, and equitable institutional practices. Improving the proposal defence process therefore requires strengthening its developmental orientation through enhanced supervision, transparent evaluation practices, and structured opportunities for academic participation and preparation.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen postgraduate proposal defence as a developmental academic process. First, institutions should ensure the early allocation of supervisors prior to proposal defence. Early supervisory engagement can provide sustained academic scaffolding, helping students refine their research topics and develop stronger familiarity with academic expectations. Second, departments should institutionalize structured pre-defence preparation sessions. These sessions should allow students to present their proposals informally to supervisors and faculty members, thereby receiving formative feedback that enhances confidence and preparedness before the formal defence.

Third, postgraduate programmes should incorporate structured training in academic participation and scholarly communication. This may include workshops on oral academic presentation, responding to critical questions, and simulated or mock defence sessions that mirror real evaluative conditions. Such interventions can strengthen students' ability to participate effectively in academic interactions. Fourth, proposal defence should be explicitly framed as both an evaluative and developmental process. Feedback practices should therefore emphasize clarity, constructiveness, and developmental guidance, enabling students to revise and improve their work meaningfully. Fifth, institutions should develop clearer and more transparent evaluation criteria across disciplines. This would help reduce inconsistencies arising from differing disciplinary and epistemological expectations within panels and support fairer evaluative experiences for students.

Sixth, recognizing the emotional and psychological dimensions of proposal defence, institutions should provide structured academic support systems, including counselling services, peer support groups, and orientation programmes that demystify the defence process for postgraduate students. Finally, future research should expand the scope of inquiry by including larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions, as well as incorporating perspectives from supervisors and panel members. Observational studies of actual proposal defence sessions would also provide valuable insight into real-time interactional and institutional processes shaping postgraduate evaluation.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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