

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Promoting Productive Academic Conferences: Educators' Perceptions through the Interpersonal Alliance Model

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ABSTRACT

Academic conferences are essential venues for professional growth, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among educators. Anchored in the Interpersonal Alliance Model, this study examined how such gatherings promote productive professional relationships and meaningful engagement. Using a mixed survey approach, data were collected from 104 educators attending regional conferences in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. Results indicate that participants highly value conference purposes such as updating teaching trends, fostering research collaboration, and enhancing professional interaction. The findings also reveal that these events value environments characterized by respect, open communication, and reciprocal ethics which are key elements of the Interpersonal Alliance Model. Viewed from the educational programs management (EPM) framework, the study underscores the strategic role of academic conferences as integral components of institutional professional development programs. Incorporating interpersonal alliance principles into conference design and management can improve program coherence, strengthen collaborative culture, and enhance educators' motivation for continuous learning. These insights emphasize that well-structured conferences, when managed within EPM lenses, contribute not only to individual professional competence but also to institutional capacity for innovation and sustainable educational improvement.

Keywords: academic conferences; professional engagement; Interpersonal Alliance Model; educator perceptions; professional development

1. Introduction

Academic conferences are conventionally viewed as formal venues for the dissemination of research findings and the updating of teaching trends. However, this functionalist perspective often overlooks the complex human dimension that underpins these gatherings. While these conferences are often seen as formal venues for presenting research and exchanging ideas, they are also vibrant social spaces where educators connect, not just intellectually, but interpersonally. The opportunity to engage in scientific discourse with established leaders in one's field can, when strategically utilized, provide unique access to future prospects. Such interactions may even lead to the creation of tailored or previously unadvertised positions, whether in a postdoctoral role within their laboratories or faculty positions at their institutions ^[1].

Academic conferences serve as crucial platforms where educators converge to share knowledge, engage

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in professional dialogue, and foster collaborative networks that promote continuous development [2]. These gatherings not only facilitate the dissemination of current teaching trends and research findings but also nurture interpersonal connections that underpin productive academic communities. For the purposes of this study, the term "academic conferences" is used inclusively to refer to Conferences, Seminars, and Trainings (CST) where scholarly exchange and professional socialization occur.

Within these settings, participants consistently cite knowledge acquisition and the establishment of professional networks as key benefits. Importantly, the networking function varies by career stage: doctoral students primarily focus on forging new relationships, whereas postdoctoral researchers deepen existing ties, build social trust, and gain career-relevant information, such as job openings and funding opportunities [3]. Interpersonal interactions during conferences have also been identified as meaningful predictors of publication quality, albeit in ways that differ from traditional co-publication networks [4]. However, existing literature often treats "networking" as a generic outcome, failing to dissect the specific psychological mechanisms that make these interactions productive.

Central to understanding these dynamics is the Interpersonal Alliance Model [5]. Unlike general social capital theories that focus on network size, the Interpersonal Alliance Model allows for a granular examination of the quality of professional bonds. To ensure clarity in analysis, this study operationalizes the model's constructs within the conference context. *Personal Knowing* is operationalized as the presence of mutual understanding and opportunities for reflection; in a conference, this manifests as safe spaces where educators can share not just successes, but vulnerabilities and work-in-progress. *Caring* is defined as the demonstration of ethical commitments, honesty, and respect, observed when critique is constructive rather than destructive. Finally, *Social Support* refers to practical assistance and professional obligation, including the provision of resources, encouragement, and the tangible strengthening of collaborative alliances.

Positive interpersonal interactions, a supportive environment, and a shared commitment to learning are critical factors that can either foster or hinder professional development [6]. Previous studies underscore the role of social support and personal caring in educators' professional growth [7,8]. When educators are prompted to critically reflect on their identities and responses to social issues, the ensuing conversations sometimes lead to silence or resistance, limiting their potential to transform teaching practices [9]. However, there remains limited empirical exploration of how these interpersonal dynamics manifest in conference settings from the educators' own perspectives. To bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and practical conference experiences, this study investigates the following specific research questions:

1. How do educators prioritize functional purposes versus relational purposes when attending conferences?
2. To what extent are the theoretical dimensions of personal knowing, caring, and social support observable in conference settings?
3. What are the implications of these interpersonal perceptions for the design of future professional development gatherings?

By focusing on these dimensions, the study seeks to provide insights that can help organizers and institutions optimize academic conferences as environments that not only disseminate knowledge but also foster productive and supportive professional alliances.

2. Literature review

Academic Conferences as Platforms for Professional Development

Academic conferences have long been recognized as vital venues for educators to engage in knowledge exchange, professional networking, and skill enhancement ^[2,10]. These gatherings offer opportunities for participants to update teaching practices, explore emerging research, and develop collaborative projects. The dynamic nature of conferences—by combining formal presentations and workshops with informal interactions—facilitates multidimensional professional growth ^[11,12].

Recent studies reinforce this view by showing that teachers consistently regard conferences as among the most powerful forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Exposure to diverse input and innovative practices not only improves their professional competence but also serves as a visible marker of status, linking attendance to extrinsic motivations such as promotion ^[13,14]. Moreover, faculty development experiences that allow educators to set their own learning goals and trajectories are found to be intrinsically motivating and transformational, leading to excellence in teaching and scholarship and ultimately benefiting institutions ^[15,16]. This process is closely tied to the consolidation of the educator–researcher identity, which is advanced through collaboration in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where academics exchange experiences, best practices, and knowledge for collective growth ^[17,18].

These benefits are not limited to faculty members. Conference participation has also been shown to help students develop essential communication skills, such as presenting to large academic audiences and managing performance anxiety, while validating their research efforts through interaction with the broader scientific community ^[19,20]. Together, these findings highlight conferences as dynamic learning spaces that contribute to both individual growth and institutional advancement.

Interpersonal Dynamics in Professional Settings

The quality of interpersonal interactions plays a critical role in professional learning environments. The Interpersonal Alliance Model ^[5,21] provides a valuable framework for understanding how effective professional relationships are built on three interrelated dimensions: personal knowing, caring, and social support. Unlike transactional networking theories that prioritize the quantity of contacts or the exchange of business cards, the Interpersonal Alliance Model focuses on the relational quality necessary for sustained collaboration. Personal knowing involves mutual understanding and reflection, encouraging openness and trust; caring emphasizes ethical commitments, honesty, and respect; and social support includes the practical assistance, encouragement, and professional obligations that sustain collaborative work.

Building on this framework, recent research has shifted attention from isolated individual actions to the dynamic interplay between participants. Mechanisms such as complementarity, mimicry, and synchrony are increasingly recognized as underlying interpersonal processes at work, with behaviors like active listening, offering support, and using humor shown to facilitate coordination across various professional contexts—including leader–follower exchanges, team interactions, and negotiations ^[22,23]. Interpersonal factors within teams and supervisory structures have also been linked to organizational well-being; for example, equality in treatment and attentiveness by supervisors, as well as positive intrapersonal and interpersonal team functioning, predict reduced instances of worker-to-worker workplace violence ^[24,25].

The application of interpersonal interaction models such as Birtchnell’s relating theory further emphasizes the balance of control and responsiveness in developing interpersonal skills. This theoretical perspective parallels models of effective parenting that combine responsiveness and demandingness to explain how teacher–pupil–parent dynamics shape learning outcomes ^[26,27]. Within professional settings, such awareness is increasingly relevant to personnel development, as assessing candidates’ interpersonal skills during selection processes can prevent mismatches and unsatisfying training experiences ^[28].

Supporting others is not only beneficial to recipients but also activates reward-related psychological and neurobiological mechanisms in the providers themselves, reducing stress responses and promoting social engagement [29]. Similarly, fostering a culture of respect and emotional warmth, akin to the unconditional acceptance found in positive parenting, enables school leaders to cultivate environments where staff reflect on behavior and strengthen relational bonds [30]. Together, these perspectives underscore the centrality of interpersonal dynamics to professional learning and collaboration.

The Role of Personal Knowing, Caring, and Social Support in Education

In educational contexts, the importance of caring relationships and social support is well documented [8]. Educators thrive in environments where mutual respect and ethical dialogue are encouraged, contributing to a culture of continuous learning and professional accountability. Peer support, reflective practice, and constructive critique are key components that drive educators' motivation and improve teaching effectiveness [7].

Motivation itself functions as a form of mental support that directs and sustains learning activities [31]. Shared professional values can also foster intersubjectivity and a sense of belonging, which empower individuals to act confidently on their goals. In such environments, knowledge is not treated as a static entity but as a transformative tool enacted through ongoing practice beyond immediate contexts [32].

Academic conferences, as intensive professional gatherings, have the potential to embody these interpersonal qualities, serving not only as informational hubs but also as relational spaces where educators cultivate meaningful alliances that sustain their professional growth.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite recognition of the value of interpersonal dynamics in education and professional development, empirical research examining these elements specifically within the context of academic conferences remains limited. Most studies focus on conference outcomes such as knowledge acquisition or networking benefits without exploring participants' lived experiences of interpersonal engagement [11].

This limitation is reflected in broader evaluative frameworks, which often adopt a narrow, outcome-based perspective. For example, within Health Services Research, conference impact is often framed through a neoliberal lens that prioritizes measurable outcomes while overlooking the personal and relational dimensions of scholarly exchange [33]. Evaluation models frequently rely on metrics such as the number of keynote speakers or venue facilities rather than assessing qualitative, experiential factors like shifts in attitudes or perceptions [34]. Methodological commentaries note that snapshot satisfaction surveys dominate conference assessment, leaving long-term relational or reframing effects largely unexplored [35]. A similar emphasis on quantifiable outputs characterizes research assessment in higher education, where bibliometrics often overshadow the qualitative value of scholarship to communities of practice [36].

This study addresses this gap by applying the Interpersonal Alliance Model to explore educators' perceptions of how personal knowing, caring, and social support manifest in conference settings and influence their professional development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design utilizing survey methods to explore educators' perceptions of academic conferences through the Interpersonal Alliance Model framework. The combination of in-person and online data collection allowed for a comprehensive capture of participant experiences and observations during two regional conferences.

3.2. Participants

The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, targeting educators actively engaged in professional development within the Eastern Visayas region. A total of 104 educators participated in the study, representing approximately 69% of the estimated 150 attendees. This sample size is considered sufficient for descriptive inquiry. Participants varied in age, educational attainment, and professional roles, reflecting a diverse academic community. The demographic profile included: 1. Age range from 21 to 75 years, with the majority between 31 and 45 years old (31.7%); 2. Highest educational attainment ranged from Bachelor's degrees (13.5%) to Doctorate degrees (20.2%), with some participants holding Master's and post-doctorate qualifications; and 3. Most respondents were college instructors or professors (73.1%), with others serving as school heads, supervisors, deans, or program directors.

3.3. Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument was a structured survey designed to capture participants' perceptions of their conference experiences. To ensure construct validity, the instrument was divided into two distinct sections:

1. Purposes of Attendance (5 items): This section measured functional motivations such as updating teaching practices and engaging in research. Items were rated using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Not Important" to "Critically Important".
2. Interpersonal Dynamics (12 items): This section operationalized the Interpersonal Alliance Model, with four items dedicated to each construct: Personal Knowing, Caring, and Social Support. These items were rated on a scale from "Not Observed" to "Very Much Observed".

Prior to data collection, the instrument underwent content validation by academic supervisors to ensure the items accurately represented the theoretical constructs. This expert review established the face validity of the measure for the target population.

3.4. Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, in-person surveys were administered during breaks at two regional academic conferences organized by a professional educators' group. This approach allowed for the immediate participation of attendees in a relevant context. In the second phase, online surveys were distributed via email and through conference-related social media channels to reach participants who were unable to complete the survey on-site. This mixed-mode approach was specifically employed to maximize inclusivity and mitigate non-response bias from attendees with limited availability during the event. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured throughout the process, and all respondents provided informed consent prior to completing the survey.

3.5. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics including frequency counts, percentages, means, and cluster means were calculated to summarize demographic data and survey responses. The level of importance and observation was

interpreted according to established descriptive categories: Critically Important and Very Much Observed. These analyses provided insights into educators' collective perceptions of conference purposes and interpersonal experiences within the framework of the Interpersonal Alliance Model.

4. Results

4.1. Demographics

Table 1 illustrates the demographic distribution of the 104 educator participants. The majority were between 31 and 45 years old (31.7%), with a considerable number holding a Master's degree (33.7%) or Doctorate degree (20.2%). Most respondents were college instructors or professors (73.1%). This diverse profile ensures that insights reflect a broad spectrum of professional experiences and academic maturity.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
46 to 75 years old	24	23.1
31 to 45 years old	33	31.7
26 to 30 years old	21	20.2
21 to 25 years old	10	9.6
Missing/No response	16	15.4
Highest Educational Attainments		
Bachelor's Degree	14	13.5
Master's Degree	51	49.1
Doctorate Degree	22	21.2
Post Doctorate	1	1.0
Missing	16	15.4
Professional Role		
College Instructor/Professor	76	73.1
School Head/Principal	7	6.7
Supervisor/Dean	2	1.9
Director	2	1.9
Program Head	4	3.8
Missing	7	12.5

4.2. Conference participation and presenting experience

As shown in **Table 2**, most participants attended fewer than five conferences or trainings in both 2020 (38.5%) and 2021 (52.9%), with a notable decrease in higher attendance in 2021, likely reflecting pandemic-related disruptions. **Table 3** reveals that a significant portion of respondents (40.4%) presented fewer than five times, while a majority did not provide responses on this item, indicating potential hesitancy or lack of opportunity to present. These trends highlight areas for increasing active participation and scholarly contributions in conference settings.

Table 2. Number of Conferences, Seminars, or Trainings (CST) attended by Participants in 2020 and 2021

	2020		2021	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 5 trainings attended	40	38.5	55	52.9
5 trainings attended	16	15.4	6	5.8
More than 5 trainings attended	42	40.4	8	7.7
Missing/No response	6	5.8	35	33.7
Total	104	100.0	104	100.0

4.3. Importance of purposes in attending conferences

Table 3 presents participants' perceptions of the importance of various purposes in attending conferences. Contrary to the initial assumption that social interaction is the primary driver, the results show a balanced prioritization. All indicators were rated as Critically Important. "Updating of teaching trends" received the highest mean score (3.90), followed closely by "Engaging in professional interaction" (3.84) and "Research engagement" (3.83). This finding suggests that while educators deeply value the relational aspects, the functional necessity of staying current with pedagogical trends remains the top priority.

Table 3. Level of Importance to the Given Purposes in Attending Conferences as Perceived by Participants

Components	NI	SI	VI	CI	Mean	Description
	Frequency (Percentage)					
Updating of teaching trends	-	-	10 (9.6)	94 (90.4)	3.90	Critically Important
Research engagement	-	-	18 (17.3)	86 (82.7)	3.83	Critically Important
Developing research collaborations	-	-	20 (19.2)	84 (80.8)	3.81	Critically Important
Engaging in professional interaction	-	-	17 (16.3)	87 (83.7)	3.84	Critically Important
Earning Continuing Professional Development (CPD) credit units	-	2 (1.9)	18 (17.3)	84 (80.8)	3.79	Critically Important
				Cluster Mean	3.83	Critically Important

Note. NI=Not Important (1.00-1.74); SI=Somewhat Important (1.75-2.49); VI=Very Important (2.50-3.24); CI=Critically Important (3.25-4.00)

4.4. Observations of interpersonal dimensions at conferences

Table 4 details participants' observations of interpersonal dynamics based on the Interpersonal Alliance Model's components. Across personal knowing, caring, and social support, indicators were consistently rated as Very Much Observed (mean scores ranging from 3.66 to 3.92). The highest observed indicator was "The venue promotes a respectful and safe environment" (3.92) under Personal Knowing, followed by "Respect of one another's space" (3.86) under Caring. These high ratings confirm that participants actively perceive the conference environment as one that fosters safety and reciprocal respect.

Table 4. Observations at Professional Conferences as Perceived by the Participants

	NO	SO	O	VMO	Mean	Description
Frequency (Percentage)						
Personal Knowing						
1. There are opportunities for mutual reflection.	-	-	25 (24.0)	79 (76.0)	3.76	Very Much Observed
2. The venue promotes a respectful and safe environment.	-	-	8 (7.7)	96 (92.3)	3.92	Very Much Observed
3. Rules set regulate an open exchange of perceptions/opinions.	-	-	32 (30.8)	72 (69.2)	3.69	Very Much Observed
4. Engagement for mutual communication is emphasized.	-	2 (1.9)	31 (29.8)	71 (68.3)	3.66	Very Much Observed
				Cluster Mean	3.76	Very Much Observed
Caring						
1. Honest and direct evaluation is nurtured.	-	-	22 (21.2)	82 (78.8)	3.79	Very Much Observed
2. Reciprocal ethics among participants is demonstrated.	-	-	19 (18.3)	85 (81.7)	3.82	Very Much Observed
3. Conscious commitment for truthful comments is upheld.	-	-	23 (22.1)	81 (77.9)	3.78	Very Much Observed
4. Respect of one another’s space in the venue is conveyed	-	-	15 (14.4)	89 (85.6)	3.86	Very Much Observed
				Cluster Mean	3.81	Very Much Observed
Social Support						
1. Openness and professional alliance are developed.	-	-	19 (18.3)	85 (81.7)	3.82	Very Much Observed
2. Professional obligation and responsibility are highlighted.	-	1 (1.0)	14 (13.5)	89 (85.6)	3.85	Very Much Observed
3. Participants’ needs are sufficiently supplemented.	-	2 (1.9)	18 (17.3)	84 (80.8)	3.79	Very Much Observed
4. Assistance, provision, and accommodation are appropriate.	-	-	21 (20.2)	83 (79.8)	3.80	Very Much Observed
				Cluster Mean	3.82	Very Much Observed

Note. NO=Not Observed (1.00-1.74); SO=Somewhat Observed (1.75-2.49); O=Observed (2.50-3.24); VMO=Very Much Observed (3.25-4.00)

5. Discussion

5.1. The interplay of pragmatism and connection

The findings of this study offer a nuanced view of the educator's conference experience, challenging the binary distinction between functional learning and social networking. While the Interpersonal Alliance Model posits that relationship-building is central, the results indicate that educators prioritize pragmatic outcomes. The fact that "Updating teaching trends" marginally outranked "Engaging in professional interaction" suggests that educators view conferences primarily as sites for professional re-tooling. However, the high critical importance assigned to interaction confirms that these functional goals are not pursued in isolation. This aligns with foundational research stating that conferences are crucial not just for disseminating findings, but for fostering the collaborative networks that promote continuous development [2]. Furthermore, the intellectual synergies generated by these collective discussions are what allow fresh perspectives to emerge from the functional content [37].

5.2. Validating the interpersonal alliance model

Despite the functional prioritization, the strong observation of IAM constructs validates the model's relevance. Participants consistently rated the environment as one of "reciprocal ethics" and "mutual reflection." This empirical evidence supports the theoretical argument that conferences function as temporary communities of care. The high scores on "Respect of one another's space" specifically suggest that these gatherings succeed in reducing interpersonal anxiety. This confirms previous assertions that positive interpersonal interactions and a supportive environment are critical factors that foster professional development [6]. Moreover, the presence of "Caring" aligns with Noddings' [8] argument that ethical dialogue and mutual respect are essential prerequisites for educator motivation and effectiveness. As noted in organizational studies, such emotional warmth is key to strengthening relational bonds and encouraging reflection [30].

5.3. The paradox of safety and participation

A critical finding emerges when contrasting the high perceptions of safety with the low rates of active presentation. While participants observed a "respectful and safe environment," a significant portion (40.4%) presented fewer than five times. This discrepancy suggests a potential limitation: the environment is supportive (Caring), but perhaps not sufficiently empowering (Social Support) to transition attendees into active contributors. This reflects the complex nature of networking stages identified by Hauss [3], where early-career researchers often focus on forging relationships but may lack the confidence to present without specific validation. It also underscores the need for structures that allow educators to receive formative feedback on works in progress, rather than just presenting finished products [38].

5.4. Implications for practice and policy

These findings carry practical implications. First, the gap between attendance and presentation indicates a need for "entry-level" formats. Supporting novice presenters is crucial, as active participation helps developing scholars manage performance anxiety and validates their research efforts within the scientific community [19]. Second, university administrators should broaden their evaluation criteria. As argued by Nicolson [33], narrow, outcome-based metrics often overlook the personal dimensions of scholarly exchange. Therefore, funding and promotion policies should recognize the "relational objectives" of conference attendance—such as building trust and social support—as valid indicators of professional growth, rather than relying solely on the number of presentations [35].

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample size of 104 educators, while sufficient for this exploratory study, is drawn from a specific regional context. Second, the use of purposive sampling may introduce selection bias. Finally, the study relied on self-reported perceptions. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track how these interpersonal alliances translate into tangible career advancements over time.

7. Conclusion

This study confirms that academic conferences are fundamentally relational ecosystems where the pursuit of functional updates is deeply embedded within a relational context. The high value participants place on professional interaction, coupled with their strong affirmation of personal knowing, caring, and social support, demonstrates that these gatherings are experienced as deeply human and supportive environments. The findings validate the Interpersonal Alliance Model, demonstrating that regional conferences successfully foster environments characterized by reciprocal ethics and psychological safety.

However, a critical paradox remains. Although the environment is perceived as safe and caring, the data reveals a significant gap in active scholarly participation, with a large portion of educators remaining observers rather than presenters. This suggests that "safety" alone is insufficient to drive active professional development. This finding places a clear charge on conference organizers to move beyond merely providing a venue for exchange to intentionally scaffolding the transition from attendance to presentation. By recognizing the Interpersonal Alliance not just as a passive state but as an active mechanism for empowerment, educational leaders can transform these gatherings from simple listening venues into dynamic engines of professional growth.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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