

Relationship Between Social Maladjustment and Deviant Behaviour Among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Deviant behaviour among adolescents and young adults has become a persistent worry in higher education, given its damaging effects on academic performance, psychological health, and social functioning (Valdebenito et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2017). This study set out to examine how social maladjustment relates to deviant behaviour among undergraduate students, drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and a correlational design to test whether social maladjustment predicts deviant behavioural tendencies. Forty undergraduates (M = 20.96 years, SD = 2.15) were recruited through multi-stage sampling and completed the Deviant Behaviour Variety Scale (Sanches et al., 2016) and the Social Maladjustment Scale (Wiggins, 1966); data were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A significant positive relationship emerged between social maladjustment and deviant behaviour, suggesting that students who struggle to adjust socially are more prone to deviant acts. These findings point to social competence deficits as a meaningful contributor to behavioural deviance in tertiary institutions, and the study recommends that universities introduce targeted psychosocial interventions to strengthen students' social functioning and curb maladaptive behaviours.

Keywords: *Social maladjustment, deviant behaviour, undergraduate students, adolescence, planned behaviour theory*

Introduction

Deviant behaviour among adolescents and young adults has increasingly become a global social and educational challenge. Such behaviours interfere with academic progress, social integration, and long-term psychological adjustment (Shey & Lukong, 2018). Deviance refers to actions that significantly violate established social norms or infringe on the rights and expectations of others (Pérez-Acosta, 2008; World Health Organization, 2018), and these behaviours often emerge during adolescence, carrying associations with later criminal involvement, substance abuse, and early mortality risk (Border et al., 2018). Beyond these outcomes, deviant tendencies have also been linked to psychiatric disorders, interpersonal conflict, and occupational maladjustment (Berry et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2017).

Adolescence itself is widely recognised as a developmental stage marked by psychological instability, identity exploration, and heightened vulnerability to external pressures (Sánchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012). Peer influence, academic stress, family expectations, and environmental demands often combine to shape how young people behave (Feist et al., 2013), and when their coping mechanisms prove inadequate, maladaptive patterns can take hold. One such pattern is social maladjustment, understood as difficulty forming and sustaining meaningful social relationships because of deficits in social competence, emotional regulation,

and interpersonal skills (Sam, 2022). This difficulty is closely tied to antisocial cognition and personality traits that predispose individuals toward rule-breaking (Bonta & Wormith, 2013), and it commonly shows up as aggression, truancy, substance use, and other antisocial conduct. The present study draws on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which holds that behaviour is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Within this framework, students' behavioural choices reflect an interplay of personal beliefs and environmental influences, which suggests that maladjustment could raise the likelihood of deviant action. Much of the existing literature on adolescent deviance has focused on peer influence, substance use, personality traits, and environmental stressors (Valdebenito et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2017), and family-level factors such as parental monitoring and parenting style have also been examined as predictors of deviant behaviour among Nigerian undergraduates, though with limited predictive support in that context (Chinawa et al., 2024). Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to social maladjustment itself as a direct correlate of deviant behaviour within university populations, particularly in Nigeria. Most studies emphasise external predictors, leaving a gap in our understanding of how internal deficits in social adjustment contribute to behavioural deviance among undergraduates. This study addresses that gap by examining the link between social maladjustment and deviant behaviour in a tertiary institution setting.

Hypothesis

Social maladjustment will significantly relate to deviant behaviour among undergraduate students.

Method

Participants

Four hundred and thirty undergraduates from the Department of Psychology at Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) took part in the study — 293 females and 107 males, with a mean age of 20.96 years ($SD = 2.15$). They were drawn through a combination of cluster, simple random (balloting), and purposive sampling techniques.

Instruments

1. Deviant Behaviour Variety Scale (DBVS; Sanches et al., 2016): a 19-item dichotomous scale that assesses engagement in deviant acts over the preceding 12 months.
2. Social Maladjustment Scale (Wiggins, 1966): a 25-item measure of interpersonal and adaptive social difficulties.

Procedure

Participants were drawn from undergraduate students in the Department of Psychology at ESUT using a multi-stage sampling technique that combined clustering by level of study, random selection through balloting, and purposive inclusion of eligible respondents. Trained student facilitators administered the questionnaires, which were then retrieved, screened for completeness, and analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation via SPSS.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted a correlational design. Data were analysed with Pearson Product Moment Correlation using SPSS Version 25.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (APA 7th Edition)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Deviant behaviour	77.32	20.00	1	.440**	.481**	.025
2. Social maladjustment	49.18	7.64		1	.282	.187
3. Age	20.95	2.15			1	-.425
4. Gender	1.77	0.43				1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Descriptive statistics showed a relatively high mean level of deviant behaviour ($M = 77.32$, $SD = 20.00$), pointing to moderate engagement in antisocial or rule-breaking activity within the sample. Social maladjustment recorded a moderate mean score as well ($M = 49.18$, $SD = 7.64$), reflecting some variability in how well students adapted socially.

Correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between social maladjustment and deviant behaviour ($r = .440$, $p < .01$), meaning that as social maladjustment rose, so did deviant behavioural tendencies. Age also showed a moderate positive relationship with deviant behaviour ($r = .481$), which may reflect developmental or maturity-related shifts in behavioural expression. Gender, on the other hand, was not meaningfully related to deviant behaviour ($r = .025$), suggesting that in this sample, deviant tendencies were not shaped by sex differences.

Discussion of Findings

These findings confirm that social maladjustment predicts deviant behaviour among undergraduate students in a meaningful way. One plausible explanation is that students with poor social adjustment often struggle with interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, and conformity to group norms — struggles that can breed frustration, social isolation, and greater susceptibility to peer influence, all of which raise the odds of deviant action. This result fits with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which holds that behaviour is shaped by internal beliefs and perceived social expectations; students with maladaptive social perceptions may form behavioural intentions that stray from institutional norms. The finding also aligns with antisocial cognition theory, which ties rule-breaking to distorted belief systems and poor social integration (Bonta & Wormith, 2013). The absence of a significant gender effect suggests that in this context, deviant behaviour is shaped more by psychosocial factors than by biological or sex-based differences, while the positive link with age may reflect greater exposure to social freedoms and reduced supervision as students move through academic levels.

Implications of Findings

These results reinforce the Theory of Planned Behaviour by showing that students' behavioural outcomes are not purely externally driven but also shaped by their internal capacity for social adjustment. They also extend antisocial cognition frameworks by suggesting that deficits in social functioning can act as a precursor to deviant behavioural intentions, particularly during emerging adulthood. Practically, the findings point to a need for universities to build structured social development programmes into student welfare systems. Counselling services, peer mentoring, and social skills training could all help reduce maladjustment and its behavioural fallout, while early identification of socially maladjusted students may help prevent escalation into more serious forms of deviance.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single institution, both of which restrict how far the findings can be generalised. Reliance on self-report measures also raises the possibility of social desirability bias, with participants potentially underreporting deviant

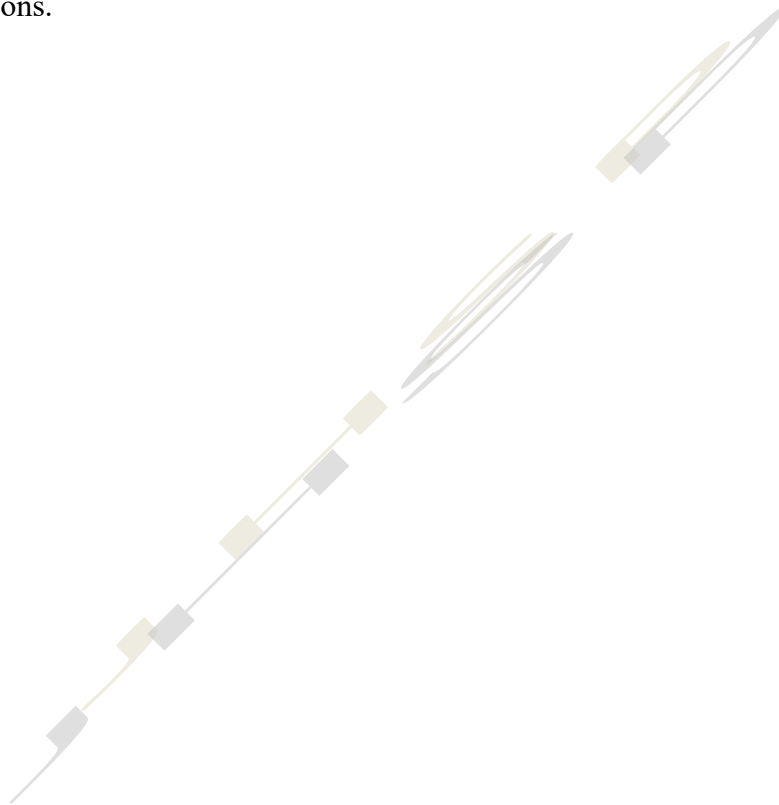
behaviour. Finally, the cross-sectional design rules out any causal interpretation of the relationships observed.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research would benefit from larger, more diverse samples drawn across multiple institutions, along with the inclusion of additional psychological and environmental variables.

Summary and Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between social maladjustment and deviant behaviour among undergraduate students, and it found a significant positive association: students with poorer social adjustment were more likely to engage in deviant behaviour. This suggests that social functioning plays a central role in behavioural regulation on university campuses. Ultimately, deviant behaviour among students cannot be fully understood without accounting for underlying difficulties in social adjustment, and strengthening students' interpersonal and adaptive capacities may be an effective way to reduce deviant tendencies in tertiary institutions.



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