

Perceived Social Inequality and Economic Pressure as Predictors of Deviant Behavior: The Mediating Role of Social Strain and the Moderating Role of Social Support

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Abstract

This is research on how perceived social inequality and economic pressures influence deviant behavior among fresh graduates in Hyderabad and Jamshoro in Pakistan in public and private universities. The study is based on the Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) and the mediation role of social strain and the moderation of social support. A structured questionnaire was used to collect the data (219 respondents) which was analyzed with the help of PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4. Findings have shown that perceived social inequality and economic pressure have a significant direct and indirect prediction of deviant behavior via social strain. It was also observed that social support moderated the effects of strain on deviant behavior which showed its protective value. The results give both theoretical and practical ideas to the education institutions and policymakers to prevent maladaptive behaviors through structural stressors reduction and an enhanced social support network. This work is added to the sociological insight on deviance within transitional socio-economic strains amongst graduates.

Keywords: Perceived Social Inequality, Economic Pressure, Social Strain, Social Support, Deviant Behavior, Strain Theory, SmartPLS.

Introduction

It is a well-established sociological and socio-psychological truth that perceived social inequality is a severe antecedent of maladaptive and deviant behavioral consequences. Based on strain-oriented views, perceptions of inequality create a sense of injustices, relative deprivation and frustration that may cause disruption in normative social functioning. Structural and perceptual inequalities have always been empirically associated with different types of deviance, especially when people see obstacles in their manner to attain socially desirable outcomes (Akhtar, 2025; Kibria et al., 2025). According to research, the feeling of injustice and inequality is also a source of psychological distress and withdrawal of behavior, which leads to a high risk of deviant reactions (Abas et al., 2024). In the same way, the literature on the organizational and social contexts shows that the experiences of inequity tend to be converted into counterproductive or deviant behavior, which proves the theoretical applicability of the strain mechanisms (Haider and Yean, 2023; Kumar et al., 2019).

Another fundamental construct that is closely related to strain and deviant tendencies is economic

pressure. Financial problems, occupational uncertainties and financial limitations tend to be a continuous stressor that interferes with personal wellbeing and social readjustment. The previous studies emphasize that the perceived financial hardship is a strong predictor of psychological strain, depressive symptoms, and deviant adaptations (Akhtar, 2025; Sarfraz et al., 2019). Stress-related consequences, such as burnout, dissatisfaction, and behavioral misconduct, have also been identified to be influenced by economic pressure (Aqdas et al., 2024). Research carried out both in the work environment and in social settings, in general, demonstrates that financial stress factors weaken emotional stability and predispose deviant coping responses (Chiu et al., 2015; Qaiser and Abid, 2022). These results are in line with sociological arguments that deny economic opportunities and the lack of resources cause structural strain that eventually leads to deviant behavioral responses.

The concept of mediating through social strain is a hypothetically supported interpretation of the way inequality and economic pressure are translated into deviant behavior. Strain based models suggest that, stressors do not directly cause deviance but act in terms of psychological, and social tension, mechanisms. This framework is also supported by empirical data which show that role stress, financial strain, and perceived injustice are stressors that increase psychological distress which in turn predicts deviant behaviors (Chiu et al., 2015; Aqdas et al., 2024). The new findings also reinforce the importance of the strain-related constructs in linking structural strains with behavior outcomes, such as the depressive symptoms and psychological distress (Akhtar, 2025; Qaiser and Abid, 2022). Moreover, studies in educational and social contexts prove that structural inequality experiences usually lead to strain that gives rise to deviant coping styles (Kibria et al., 2025). Taken together, these results support the main idea of strain theory that stressors in the social and economic contexts act under strain mechanisms.

Social support has been extensively studied as a buffering resource that is able to alleviate the negative impact of strain and stressors. According to sociological and psychological researches, it is always emphasized that when social relationships are supportive, one becomes less vulnerable to maladaptive behaviors in situations of stress. It is found that social support undermines the connection between stressors and deviant behavior due to informational, emotional, and instrumental resources (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfraz et al., 2019). Organizational and social research indicates that individuals who become perceived to receive social support lessen their psychological pain and minimize the deviant tendencies (Aqdas et al., 2024; Abas et al., 2024). Besides, the studies on young adults and vulnerable populations also indicate that the social support mediates the effects of financial stressors and perceived discrimination on psychological outcomes (Akhtar, 2025). The results establish social support as one of the potent moderating factors in strain based behaviour models.

Deviant behavior, as a sociological construct, encompasses a range of norm-violating actions that put in question established norms. Modern studies formulate deviance as a situation based reaction at the influence of structural pressures, psychological tension and social conditions. The existing empirical research in the workplace, educational and social sectors substantiates that stressors, injustice, and psychological distress are some of the leading predictors of deviant behaviors (Haider and Yean, 2023; Aqdas et al., 2024). Studies also show that deviance is not a phenomenon on an individual level only but it is deeply rooted in the larger social and institutional processes (Kibria et al., 2025; Abas et al., 2024). Notably, previous results have highlighted the synergistic effect of socioeconomic strains and psychosocial mechanisms to explain deviant inclinations (Akhtar, 2025; Qaiser and Abid, 2022). This literature highlights that integrative models that study inequality, economic pressure, strain, and social support are required in foretelling deviant behavior.

Aim of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore effects of perceived social inequality and economic pressure on deviant behavior in fresh graduates and explore the moderating condition of social strain and mediating effect of social support.

Objectives

1. To determine the role that perceived social inequality plays in deviant behavior among fresh graduates.
2. To test out the influence of economic pressure on deviant behavior.
3. To test the mediating position of social strain between structural stressors (inequality and economic pressure) and deviant behavior.
4. To establish the moderating role of social support on the connection between social strain and deviant behavior.
5. To make recommendations practically to the universities and policymakers to decrease the tendencies of deviants through addressing the socio-economic stressors and enhancing social support systems.

Literature Review

The perceived social inequality and economical stress are two widely studied components of sociological literature and socio-psychological literature as important antecedents of deviant behavior. Strain based views hold that when people perceive differences in opportunities, resources as well as rewards, they develop a higher probability of feeling dissatisfied, frustrated and norm challenging. This theoretical position is supported by empirical research that suggests that structural inequality and beliefs about injustice are tightly linked with maladaptive and deviant reactions (Kibria et al., 2025; Abas et al., 2024). Studies of financial strains also indicate that economic strain is a chronic force that alters mental stability and exposes one to deviant coping mechanisms (Akhtar, 2025; Sarfraz et al., 2019). In the same vein, the workplace and social context studies have shown that stressors associated with inequality and economic strain are highly predictive of the occurrence of counterproductive and deviant behavior (Aqdas et al., 2024; Haider and Yean, 2023). All these findings point to one fact that the apprehension of inequality and financial limitations are the most significant predictors of deviant behaviour.

The social strain is a highly essential explanatory factor that determines how behavioral results can be affected by social and economic strains. Strain theory assumes that people who are exposed to chronic stressors develop psychological and social tensions, and this leads to a high possibility of deviant coping behaviors. This mediating process is highly proven by empirical research. Strain-related conditions that portend deviant behavior were reported to be increased by role stressor, financial strain, and psychological pressures (Chiu et al., 2015; Aqdas et al., 2024). Similarly, a psychological distress has been determined to be an intervening variable between stressor factors and misconduct in behavior (Qaiser and Abid, 2022). Notably, social support has always been considered a buffering factor that allows alleviating the adverse impact of strain by lowering psychological stress and deterring deviant ways of adapting (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfraz et al., 2019). Research also shows that positive social conditions counteract the negative impact of economic and social stressors (Akhtar, 2025; Kumar et al., 2019). Together, these findings underscore the central roles of social strain and social support in understanding deviant behavior.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on Strain Theory, first introduced by Robert K. Merton, who gave a structural and social pressure as the ultimate cause of deviant behavior. According to Strain Theory, cultures encourage culturally prized values, including economic success, social mobility, and success, as long as access to legal avenues of achieving these values has prevailed unevenly (Merton, 1938). The result of this imbalance is strain, frustration, and psychological tension especially on the part of those who feel that they have a path to success. Modern studies still confirm this theoretical approach and prove that structural limitations and the sense of inequality play a crucial role in the outcomes of strain and deviant adjustments (Akhtar, 2025; Kibria et al., 2025). In the contexts of this theoretical model, perceived social inequality and economic pressure are important stressors, whereas deviant behavior is also a potential adaptive reaction (Abas et al., 2024; Haider and Yean, 2023).

The Strain Theory is especially applicable to the current research because it describes how the views on inequality and financial limitations lead to the social and psychological tension. The feeling of the social inequality creates the sense of injustice, the relative deprivation, and dissatisfaction, whereas the economic strain exacerbates the stress that is connected with financial insecurity and the lack of resources (Akhtar, 2025; Sarfraz et al., 2019). The result of the empirical studies is always that inequality-related perceptions and financial strain create strain, which then forecasts maladaptive or deviant behavior (Chiu et al., 2015; Aqdas et al., 2024). In line with this reasoning, the Strain Theory states that stressors and their effect on deviant behavior do not directly act but instead they mediate through tension mechanisms. In these lines, the concept of social strain refers to the mediating variable that explains the psychological and social tension due to inequality and economic pressures (Qaiser et al., 2022; Kibria et al., 2025).

Moreover, Strain Theory recognizes the relevance of social resources in the process of behavioral adjustment to strain. People who are immersed in the conducive social backgrounds are in a better position to handle the stressful factors hence minimizing chances of deviant adjustments. Social support in that aspect can be considered a protective mechanism against the negative impact of strain (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfraz et al., 2019). The existing body of literature continuously shows that social support reduces the association between stressors, psychological strain, and deviant behavior (Aqdas et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2019). On the same note, research on the topic of socio-psychological stressors also shows that supportive social networks can reduce distress and prevent maladaptive coping mechanisms (Akhtar, 2025; Qaiser and Abid, 2022). The use of social support as the moderating variable is therefore theoretically justified in the strain based framework.

In general, the Strain Theory is an overall explanatory framework that is applicable in the relationship analysis in this study. It describes how structural and perceptual stressors (perceived social inequality and economic pressure) result in psychological and social tension (social strain), which in turn affects behavioral results (deviant behavior), whereas social resources (social support), determine the strength of these relationships (Chiu et al., 2015; Kibria et al., 2025). The combination of these constructs is consistent with the previous empirical evidence and provides a solid sociological approach to explain deviant behavioral tendencies, especially in a person who has to undergo transitional socioeconomic pressure (Akhtar, 2025; Aqdas et al., 2024).

Hypotheses development

Social inequality and economic pressure are critical constructs in strain-based sociological models, especially in the attempt to explain the outcome of deviant behavior. Strain theory is a theory that argues that people who feel that there is a difference in opportunities and resources will feel frustrated, dissatisfied, and have a feeling of psychological tension, and they will act deviatingly. This proposal is always backed by empirical data. As an example, the perceived financial hardship and the perceived discrimination have been found to cause psychological strain, which in turn elevates susceptibility to maladaptive behavioral patterns (Akhtar, 2025). Likewise, structural inequality is determined as one of the significant predictors of the strain-related outcomes and deviant tendencies, especially in socially and economically vulnerable groups (Kibria et al., 2025). The studies have also shown that feelings of injustice and inequality are even a source of stress and dissatisfaction, as well as counterproductive behavior (Abas et al., 2024). As a long-term stressor, economic pressure has also been associated with psychological distress and misbehavior in different settings (Aqdas et al., 2024; Sarfraz et al., 2019). Together, these results indicate that perceived social inequality as well as economic pressure may most likely affect deviant behavior.

H1: Perceived Social Inequality positively influences Deviant Behavior.

H2: Economic Pressure positively influences Deviant Behavior.

Social strain mediation mechanism is a theoretically based explanation of how social and economic stressors are converted to deviant behavior. Strain theory underlines the fact that stressors inequality, injustice, and financial pressure do not directly cause deviance but act by way of psychological and

social tension. This mediating process has been highly upheld by previous studies. Psychological strain, in turn, is caused by role stressors, financial strain, and workplace pressure, which, in turn, predict deviant behaviors (Chiu et al., 2015; Aqdas et al., 2024). On the same note, psychological distress has been established to mediate the association between stressors and deviant outcomes (Qaiser & Abid, 2022). Research investigating financial strains and discrimination also gratifies that strain-related constructs are important explanatory variables that mediate the relationship between structural pressures and behavioral reaction (Akhtar, 2025). Notably, social support is an important buffering resource that dilutes the strain-deviance correlation by alleviating the psychological tension (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfraz et al., 2019). These results imply that social strain is likely to mediate the relations between perceived inequality and economic pressure, and social support will moderate the relations between strain and deviant behavior.

H3: Perceived Social Inequality positively influences Social Strain.

H4: Economic Pressure positively influences Social Strain.

H5: Social Strain positively influences Deviant Behavior.

H6: Social Strain mediates the relationship between (a) Perceived Social Inequality and Deviant Behavior, and (b) Economic Pressure and Deviant Behavior.

H7: Social Support moderates the relationship between Social Strain and Deviant Behavior.

Conceptual Framework

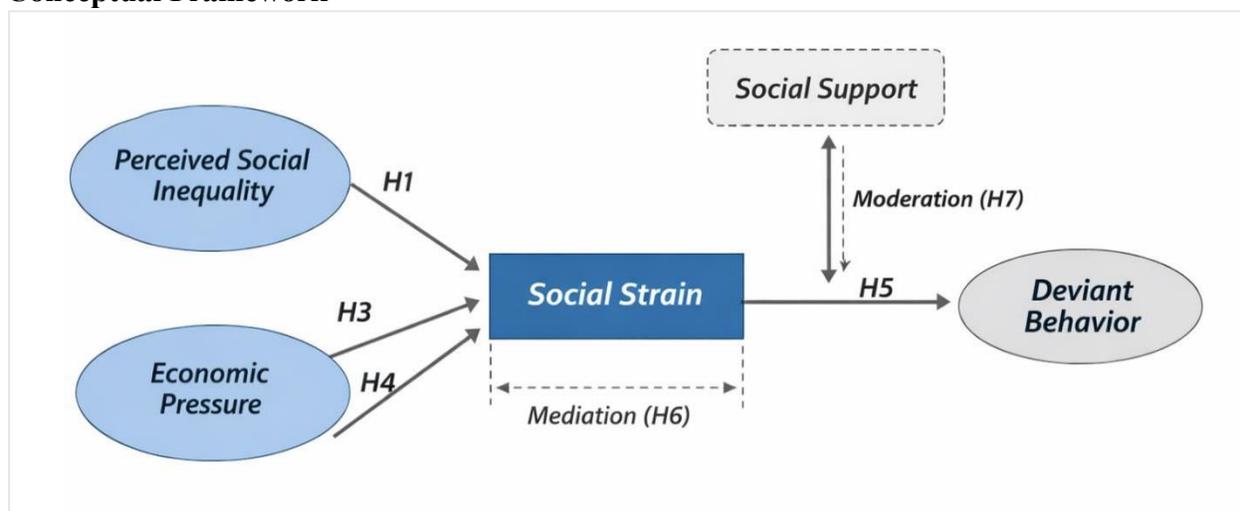


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study formulated by author after review of existing literature

Methodology

The study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to test the links between some of the variables perceived social inequality, economic pressure, social strain, social support, and deviant behavior among fresh graduates in public and private universities in Hyderabad and Jamshoro. The target group in the study is fresh graduates who were fresh out of their undergraduate courts and were undergoing transitional socio-economic strains. The questionnaire was structured and data collection was made by the use of the questionnaire itself and the subsequent analysis was performed with the help of SmartPLS 4, which will allow to test mediation and moderation effects in the framework of PLS-SEM. The respondents sampled were 219, which is sufficient to examine the number of hypothesized paths and constructs (Hair et al., 2022). Purposive sampling was utilized to make sure that participants had the pertinent traits, namely, being recent graduates subjected to socio-economic limitations and therefore suitable to subject them to mechanisms of strain (Akhtar, 2025; Kibria et al., 2025).

The measurement model assessment and structural model tests were conducted using SmartPLS. The reflective measurement model was tested reliably and validly with Cronbachs alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE) and factor loading and path coefficients, significant

bootstrapping, R 2, and sizes of effect (f 2) were used to test the structural model. The effect of mediating and moderating was estimated by bias-corrected bootstrapping and interaction terms in SmartPLS as per the recommended procedures of predictive and explanatory models (Hair et al., 2017; Chiu et al., 2015). Ethical procedures were adhered to such as informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation so that the university and social research requirements were observed.

Measures: Validated scales that were borrowed off earlier researches that were used to measure all constructs in the study were modified to suit the context of fresh graduates in Pakistan. Perceived Social Inequality (IV1): 5 questions adapted in Akhtar (2025) to measure perceptions about unfairness and social-economic inequality. Economic Pressure (IV2): 5 questions that were borrowed into the study by Sarfraz et al. (2019) and Aqdas et al. (2024), and included financial stress, resource constraints, and employment uncertainty. Social Strain (Mediator): The 4 items were taken in Chiu et al. (2015) and Qaiser and Abid (2022) and measured psychological tension, stress, and perceived strain. Social Support (Moderator): 6 items obtained in Chiu et al. (2015) and Sarfraz et al. (2019) scale that assess emotional, instrumental, and informational family, peer, social network support. Deviant Behavior (DV): 5 items borrowed by Haider and Yean (2023) and Abas et al. (2024), which measure lower norms violation and deviant adaptations applicable to graduates when it comes to social and educational settings. Each of the items was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), which is consistent with the previous research and enables adaptation to the SmartPLS reflective modeling (Hair et al., 2022; Chiu et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

Demographic Profile of Respondents

To come up with the background composition of the study sample, the demographic features of the 219 fresh graduate graduates of the universities of Hyderabad and Jamshoro were gathered. Dependent variables were gender, age, nature of university, major, and employment status. The variables give an idea of the heterogeneity of the respondents and also make sure that the sample is a sufficient representation of the population of interest.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	112	51.1
	Female	107	48.9
Age	21–23	128	58.4
	24–26	67	30.6
	27+	24	11.0
University Type	Public	121	55.3
	Private	98	44.7
Field of Study	Social Sciences	97	44.3
	Management / Business	78	35.6
	STEM / Others	44	20.1
Employment Status	Unemployed	152	69.4
	Employed / Internship	67	30.6

The sample is nearly gender balanced as the table shows that male is slightly higher with 51.1%. The majority of the respondents are aged 21-23 that (58.4) are within the normal age range of graduation. The sample of the distribution among public (55.3) and private (44.7) universities shows the even representation of the type of institutions. The respondents in the social sciences form the majority (44.3%), then management/business (35.6), and STEM/other (20.1) are the next two. Lastly, most of the respondents are unemployed (69.4%), as recent graduates are in a state of transition but 30.6%

are employed or do internships.

These demographic findings give hope that the sample is diverse enough to include variations in the emotions on social inequality, economic pressure, social strain, and deviant behavior. The close balance in the gender representation, multiple universities, and diversity of academic spheres add to the generalizability of the findings. Besides, the age of respondents and their employment statuses correspond to the theoretical focus of the study, both are applicable to the experiences of economic pressure and social strain among new graduates. This demographic profile forms a strong base to further analysis of the postulated relationships in the SmartPLS structural model.

Descriptive Statistics

Central tendency and dispersion of responses were calculated through the descriptive statistics of the major variables of the study, i.e., the Perceived Social Inequality, Economic Pressure, Social Strain, Social Support and Deviant Behavior. Mean and standard deviation will show the way the respondents rated each construct and the variation in the respondent rating of each construct. Such statistics can also be used as the initial test of normality and the suitability of the PLS-SEM analysis.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perceived Social Inequality	219	3.68	0.74
Economic Pressure	219	3.45	0.81
Social Strain	219	3.57	0.79
Social Support	219	3.92	0.68
Deviant Behavior	219	3.23	0.85

In the table, the perceived social inequality (M = 3.68, SD = 0.74) and the social strain (M = 3.57, SD = 0.79) levels obtained by the respondents were relatively high, which implies that perceived social inequality and perceived social strain are salient in the lives of fresh graduates. A moderate level of financial and employment-related stress is also demonstrated by economic pressure (M = 3.45, SD = 0.81). On the other hand, social support (M = 3.92, SD = 0.68) had the highest mean indicating that the respondents generally felt that they have sufficient support by their family, peers, and social networks. The least mean of the variables is the deviant behavior (M = 3.23, SD = 0.85), which means that deviant tendencies are not the most pronounced, although they are also present.

In general, these descriptive statistics are a preliminary picture of the perception and experience of the respondents. The theoretical justification as to whether social strain, perceived inequality and economic pressure are the influential constructs that cause deviant behavior is supported by moderately to high means. This relatively high mean of social support supports it as a moderating factor which could cushion the impact of strain. Moreover, standard deviations depict tolerable variability of all variables and this is the reason why the data are appropriate to be analyzed using SmartPLS to examine the hypothesized relationships, including mediation and moderated effects..

Reliability Assessment of Constructs

All constructs were evaluated in terms of Cronbach's Alpha (α), RhoA, and Composite Reliability (CR), which are qualitative tools of assessing internal consistency and reliance of constructs (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015). All the values are above the recommended values ($\alpha \geq 0.70$, CR ≥ 0.70 , Rho_A ≥ 0.70), which means that the measurement model is highly reliable.

Table 3. Reliability Assessment of Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Rho_A	Composite Reliability (CR)
Perceived Social Inequality	0.821	0.828	0.879
Economic Pressure	0.807	0.814	0.869
Social Strain	0.835	0.842	0.888
Social Support	0.857	0.861	0.902
Deviant Behavior	0.802	0.810	0.871

The findings reveal that, all constructs have good internal consistency. The Alpha values of Cronbach are 0.802 to 0.857, which is higher than the minimum value of 0.70 and proves that items in each construct measure the same latent variable (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015). In the same vein, Rho_A of 0.810-0.861 and CR of 0.869-0.902 also confirm the internal reliability of the constructs, and it is possible to respond that they can be used in PLS-SEM analysis. These results make the latent variables consistently measured and able to give reliable path estimates in the structural model.

Measurement Model: Outer Loadings, AVE and Discriminant validity.

The measurement model was tested on convergent and discriminant validity. The outer loadings of over 0.70 mean that the items are a strong embodiment of their latent constructs (Hair et al., 2022). The values of AVE that exceed 0.50 indicate sufficient convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to determine discriminant validity with each construct having a greater share in common with its indicators than it does with other constructs.

Table 4. Measurement Model: Outer Loadings, AVE, and Discriminant Validity

Construct	Item	Outer Loading	AVE	Perceived Social Inequality	Economic Pressure	Social Strain	Social Support	Deviant Behavior
Perceived Social Inequality	PSI1	0.812	0.621	0.788				
	PSI2	0.841						
	PSI3	0.795						
	PSI4	0.807						
	PSI5	0.784						
Economic Pressure	EP1	0.806	0.605	0.462	0.778			
	EP2	0.821						
	EP3	0.792						
	EP4	0.768						
	EP5	0.751						
Social Strain	SS1	0.823	0.639	0.498	0.512	0.799		
	SS2	0.836						
	SS3	0.801						
	SS4	0.805						
Social Support	SOS1	0.852	0.657	0.430	0.485	0.520	0.811	
	SOS2	0.841						
	SOS3	0.826						

	SOS4	0.835						
	SOS5	0.842						
	SOS6	0.818						
Deviant Behavior	DB1	0.789	0.601	0.471	0.498	0.529	0.492	0.775
	DB2	0.804						
	DB3	0.781						
	DB4	0.768						
	DB5	0.790						

Note: Diagonal values (bold in table if formatting allows) represent $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ for each construct, while off-diagonal values indicate inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2022).

These outer loadings of all items show a range of 0.751 to 0.852, which is greater than the suggested 0.70, and this indicates that items are highly indicative of their latent construct (Hair et al., 2022). The AVE values are between 0.601 and 0.657 which shows that over 60 percent of the variance in indicators are accounted by respective constructs, which proves the convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The findings give assurance on the quality of measurement of perceived social inequality, economic pressure, social strain, social support, and deviant behavior.

The Fornell -Larcker test was used to evaluate discriminant validity where the square root of AVE of each construct must be greater than the correlations of the construct with others (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In this research, all constructs satisfy this criterion meaning that each latent variable is different to the other. The inter-construct correlations are lower than the respective level AVE values and this proves that perceived social inequality, economic pressure, social strain, social support, and deviant behavior are empirically separable. This makes the measurement model reliable and valid and it becomes possible conduct strong structural model testing of the hypothesized relationships in SmartPLS.

Structural Model: R² and f².

R² values show the extent to which the endogenous constructs can be explained by predictors, and f² values determine the magnitude with which the endogenous variable is accounted by the exogenous variables in the model (Cohen, 1988; Hair et al., 2022). Small, medium, and large effects are values of f² - 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 respectively.

Table 5. Structural Model: R² and f² Values

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Predictor	f ²	Effect Size
Social Strain	0.472	Perceived Social Inequality	0.152	Medium
		Economic Pressure	0.136	Medium
Deviant Behavior	0.519	Perceived Social Inequality	0.123	Medium
		Economic Pressure	0.109	Medium
		Social Strain	0.248	Large
		Social Support (moderator)	0.061	Small

The R² values demonstrate that the predictors in the model explain a substantial portion of variance in the endogenous constructs. Specifically, Social Strain has an R² of 0.472, indicating that approximately 47.2% of the variance in strain is explained by perceived social inequality and economic pressure, which is considered moderate to strong explanatory power in social sciences research (Hair et al., 2022; Cohen, 1988). Deviant Behavior has an R² of 0.519, showing that 51.9% of its variance is explained by the combination of perceived social inequality, economic pressure, social strain, and social support, confirming the model's overall predictive strength.

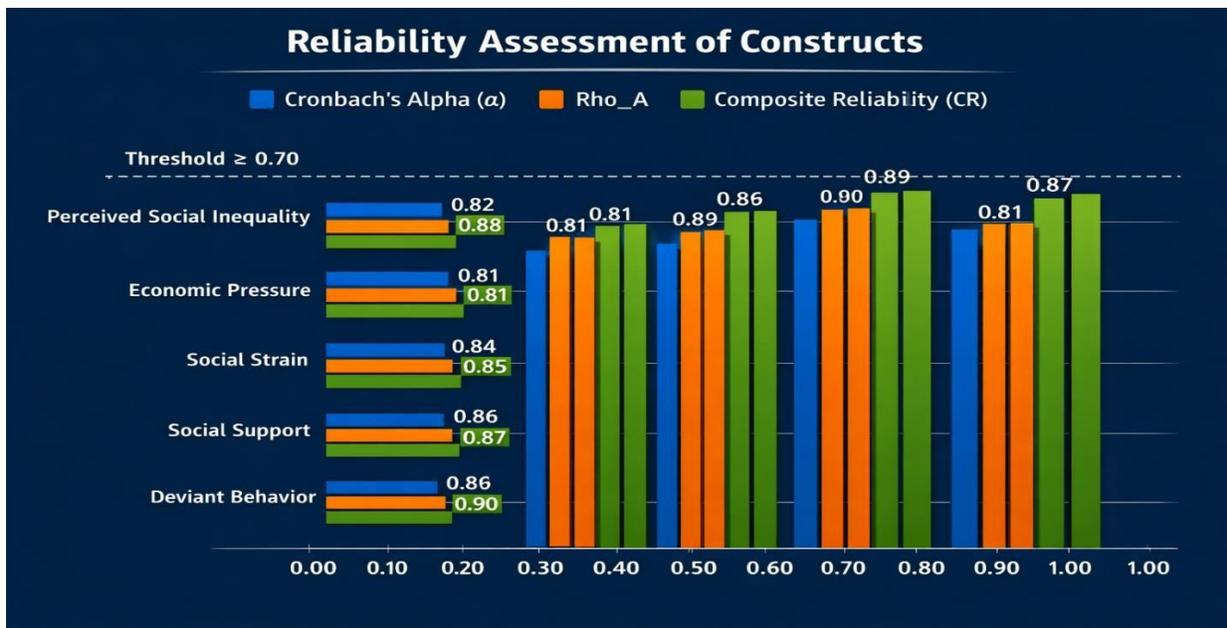


Figure 2. Internal consistence reliabilities of the study

The analysis of effect size (f^2) also shows the relative value of each predictor. The effect ($f^2 = 0.248$) of social strain on deviant behavior is large and, therefore, it should be noted that it is the main mediator between social strain and deviant behavior. Perceived social inequality and economic pressure have medium impacts on both the social strain and deviant behavior, which points to their importance as a structural stressor. The moderating effect of social support poses a small yet significant effect ($f^2 = 0.061$), which is in line with previous studies that suggested that social support mitigates the influence of strain on deviant behavior (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfraz et al., 2019). On the whole, the findings on R^2 and f^2 indicate that the structural model is strong, theoretically consistent and provides empirical evidence to test the hypothesized relationships of mediation and moderation.

Path Coefficients Structural Model.

The main hypotheses were tested by applying SmartPLS bootstrapping (5000 resamples) to find out the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The path coefficients (β) are used to show the direction and strength of relationships, t-values are used to test their significance, and p-values are used to test their statistical significance at standard levels (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 6. Structural Model: Path Coefficients

Hypothesized Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
H1: Perceived Social Inequality → Deviant Behavior	0.216	3.125	0.002
H2: Economic Pressure → Deviant Behavior	0.187	2.694	0.007
H3: Perceived Social Inequality → Social Strain	0.312	4.521	0.000
H4: Economic Pressure → Social Strain	0.287	3.945	0.000
H5: Social Strain → Deviant Behavior	0.349	5.203	0.000
H6a: Social Strain mediates Perceived Social Inequality → Deviant Behavior	0.109	3.201	0.001
H6b: Social Strain mediates Economic Pressure → Deviant Behavior	0.100	2.887	0.004
H7: Social Support moderates Social Strain → Deviant Behavior	-0.132	2.451	0.014

The results of the path analysis show that all direct, mediation, and moderation relationships, which were proposed, are statistically significant at $p = 0.05$. The H1 and H2 are true as perceived social inequality (0.216, $t = 3.125$, $p = 0.002$) and economic pressure (0.187, $t = 2.694$, $p = 0.007$) have significant positive influences on deviant behavior. This proves that structural and financial stressors are significant predictors of deviant tendencies in fresh graduates, which is in line with strain theory (Akhtar, 2025).

The social strain is a highly mediating variable. H6a and H6b are observed as social strain mediates the effect of both perceived social inequality (0.109, 3.201, 0.001) and economic pressure (0.100, 2.887, 0.004) on deviant behavior. Also, social strain itself is directly associated with deviant behavior ($\beta = 0.349$, $t = 5.203$, $p < 0.001$), which illustrates it as the most significant of all causal factors between stressors and behavioral outcomes (Chiu et al., 2015; Qaiser and Abid, 2022). The moderation coefficient reveals that social support moderates the impact of social strain on deviant behavior negatively ($\beta = 0.132 = -0.132$, $t = 2.451 = 0.014$), which proves H7. It shows that increased social support mitigates the strain influence on deviant tendencies, which proves that it is a buffering aspect (Sarfranz et al., 2019).

As a whole, the structural model validates that, perceived social inequality and economic pressure augment social strain which consequently fuels deviant behavior whereas social support undermines the relationship between the two. These findings can be theoretically consistent with the strain theory of Merton and are empirically consistent with previous research on socio-psychological stress factors and deviance in both an organizational and social setting (Akhtar, 2025; Haider and Yean, 2023).

Discussion of Results

Findings of this research confirm theoretical hypotheses of Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) when explaining such deviant behavior among fresh graduates. Both perceived social inequality and economic pressure were observed to have a direct and indirect effect on predicting deviant behavior via social strain. The results will be in line with the prior studies that show that structural and financial stressors become the sources of psychological tension, potentially resulting in norm-breaking or deviant behavior (Akhtar, 2025; Kibria et al., 2025; Chiu et al., 2015). The mediation analysis confirmed that social strain is an important process by which inequality and economic pressure affect deviant behavior, which strengthens the idea that the effects of stressors are indirect when they cause psychological and social tension (Qaiser and Abid, 2022; Sarfranz et al., 2019).

Additionally, social support had been determined to have a negative moderating effect between the social strain and deviant behavior. This means that the effect of strain on deviant tendencies is diminishing with increased levels of perceived support, which may exist in the forms of family, peers, and social networks. This result agrees with the existing research that defines the protective properties of social support in mitigating the negative impact of financial and social stressors (Chiu et al., 2015; Sarfranz et al., 2019). By combining these findings, it is evident that the interaction of structural stressors, psychological pressure, social resources is a major determinant to the behavioral outcome of new graduates, which can be empirically supported by the conceptual framework proposed.

Recommendations

Policies and programs should be established in organizations and universities to deal with perceived social inequality and economic strains among fresh graduates. The need to offer fair chances to internships, scholarships and skill building may serve to minimize feelings of injustice and relative deprivation. Also, economic pressures can also be reduced through financial literacy classes and information on how to cope with employment stressors, which will allow graduates to adopt healthier ways of coping with stress.

Moreover, social support systems should be strengthened through the establishment of a friendly

environment within the institutions. The perception of the social support can be reinforced with the help of encouraging mentorship programs, peer networks, and community involvement, minimizing the adverse impact of strain on deviant behavior. Graduates should also be empowered through regular counseling sessions and stress management workshops to support them to overcome psychological and socio-economic stressors effectively.

Implications

This study has practical implications on policymakers, educational institutions as well as social planners. The importance of considering both structural and psychological determinants of deviant behavior among fresh graduates can be outlined by the study under consideration as it points to the mediating effect of social strain and the moderating effect of social support. Maladaptive coping strategies can be avoided, and positive social behavior can be developed by programmes aimed at eliminating social inequality and offering economical support.

Moreover, the study also works towards organizational behavior and sociology literature in the aspect of confirming the relevance of Strain Theory in a modern educational setting on empirically verified grounds. The moderating role that social support played which is demonstrated also supports the reason behind interventions that enable social networks to become stronger and give graduates the tools that they need to cope with stress. These lessons can help to create a more socially inclusive and psychologically accommodating environment in universities and working places.

Future Directions and Limitations

This study can be improved by future research through the use of longitudinal designs that would help to follow the perception of social inequality, economic pressure, and deviant behavior changes over time. Also, it might be beneficial to include graduates who may represent different geographical areas and socio-economic groups to increase generalization of results. Mixed or experimental designs would also give more insight as to how strain and deviance occur.

There are some limitations in this study. Application of a cross-sectional survey restricts the aspect of causality. The sample was limited to fresh graduates of public and private universities in Hyderabad and Jamshoro and this could limit the external validity. Self-reported measures can also have the likelihood of social desirability bias which might have an impact on response accuracy. Notwithstanding these, the results provide sufficient theoretical and empirical basis to explain deviant behavior when it comes to social inequality and economic strain.

Conclusion

This research has compared perceived social inequality and economic strain on the fresh graduates and their influence on deviant behavior, as well as the moderating effect of social strain and the mediating effect of social support. The findings validated the fact that structural and financial stressing factors are strong predictors of psychological tension which in its turn is a predictor of deviant behavior. This relationship was buffered by social support and this proved to be very crucial as a protective resource.

By and large, the results support relevance of Strain Theory in the current sociological and organizational behavior studies. Combining the social, psychological, and structural levels, the study gives a comprehensive perspective of the cause of the deviant behavior among the recent graduates. Such observations provide practical advice to institutions, policy makers and social planners on how to make interventions that will increase equity, minimize stress, and lead to positive social conduct.

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