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Gender, Field of Study, and Interpersonal Deviance Behaviour Among South African University Students: The Moderating Role of Study Year

Crispen Chipunza[1*]

AFFILIATIONS

[1]Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: cchipunza@cut.ac.za*

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Abstract: Leaders of universities worldwide are concerned about the high prevalence of interpersonal deviant behaviour among students. This research examined how gender and field of study relate to such behaviour, and whether these relationships are moderated by the level of study among students at a South African university. A quantitative approach was employed, utilising a multi-staged sampling procedure that incorporated both purposive and random sampling techniques. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 213 university students. Structural Equation Modelling through Smart PLS 4.0 assessed both direct and moderation effects. Results show that gender had no significant association with interpersonal deviant behaviour, while the field of study exhibited a significant negative relationship with it. The level of study moderated the relationship between field of study and interpersonal deviant behaviour, with junior students demonstrating a stronger reduction in deviant behaviour compared to their senior counterparts. By highlighting the limited contextual applicability of some classical theories, this study contributes to the literature on student deviant behaviour, particularly within institutions of higher learning. The study recommends policy reforms focused on ethics education for all students, regardless of gender, as well as targeted personal development initiatives for students rather than generic approaches.

Keywords: Gender, field of study, study level, interpersonal deviant behaviour, university students.

1. Introduction

Interpersonal deviant behaviour (IDB) in students refers to any act that deviates from the codes of conduct and policies governing student behaviour within a university setting, particularly concerning interactions with others (Kibria et al., 2025; Richard, 2011). Such behaviours include abuse of group work arrangements, bullying, theft from other students, physical violence, rape, and cyberbullying. Globally, there is growing concern among university management (Akinnubi et al., 2021; Choi, Jung & Lee, 2023) regarding the pervasiveness of a wide range of these student deviant behaviours. These behaviours strike at the heart of every university, threatening the strategic goals and reputation of institutions of higher learning (Chikwature et al., 2016). Researchers (Osagie & Olumuyiwa, 2022; Okere, 2025) have also indicated that if student deviant behaviour is not addressed, it may lead to negative outcomes such as dishonesty among graduates in professional and work environments.

In South Africa, the alarming prevalence of deviant behaviour among university students and youth is reported in print and electronic media, student surveys (Vink, 2025; Ngwane, 2021; Mwamwenda, 2016), and student disciplinary proceedings (Govender, 2014). Previous studies addressing this problem have concentrated on antecedent factors such as political consciousness (Morwe, Garcia-Espana & Luescher, 2018) and peer pressure (Finchilescu & Cooper, 2018). There has also been an attempt to view university students' deviant behaviours from an excitement-seeking perspective (de Bruin & Rudnick, 2007), while Louw (2024) highlighted the declining values among students as a

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cause of deviant behaviour. In other global contexts, Sunday et al. (2025) studied the desire for good grades, lack of preparation, and fear of failure as predictors of student deviance, while Phuong (2022) focused more on prevention and intervention models of student deviant behaviours. Taken together, these findings indicate a theoretical gap in previous studies, as most have focused on antecedents of deviant behaviour in general, without delineating the different types. Literature states that there are two types of deviant behaviour: interpersonal and organisational deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Furthermore, the focus of these prior studies on factors external to the students and their academic contexts is questionable, while those that considered internal factors, such as the desire for grades, can be criticised for trivialising the range of personal reasons that may explain deviant behaviour in university students. Evidence suggests that deviance can be understood from a gender differences perspective (Rustamjonovna, 2024) and that the most common form of deviance among students is interpersonal deviance, as opposed to organisational deviance (Ololube & Dibu, 2019). Additionally, literature on student deviant behaviour in South Africa is scarce, particularly in relation to academic context factors such as the field of study and the study level of students. To address these theoretical gaps, this study applies the Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963) to understand how gender, field of study, and study level predict interpersonal deviant behaviour among university students at a South African university.

Examining the extent to which university students' interpersonal deviant behaviour is influenced by gender, field of study, and study level in South Africa is crucial. Firstly, university environments in South Africa are now regarded as egalitarian (Beckman, 2008), with no differentiation in terms of gender in the activities students partake in or the programmes they enrol in. Secondly, despite the country's efforts to mainstream gender across various sectors of the economy, these endeavours are often undermined by reports of persistent gender inequality, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, and systemic issues like violence against women (Commission for Gender Equality Annual Report, 2023/2024). Thirdly, research by Sekgobela et al. (2024) and Etenget al. (2021) has demonstrated that gender differences exist in student behaviours within the Southern African higher education sector. Fourthly, fields of study such as Accounting and Engineering are classified as scarce in the country but still attract more males than females. At the same time, funding for females in these scarce programmes is consistently prioritised over that for males, while fields such as Human Resources and Education receive less funding, even though priority is still given to females (Akala, 2018). Lastly, reports on the prevalence of interpersonal deviance among university students (Vink, 2025; Van den Berg, 2021) in the country have not indicated any differences between males and females. Therefore, confirming the differences in gender, field of study, and study level concerning interpersonal deviant behaviours has significant implications for tailoring gender and discipline-specific strategies aimed at reducing interpersonal deviant behaviour within higher education institutions in the country.

1.1 Problem statement

Concerns about the prevalence of student deviant behaviour at South African universities have recently become a subject of debate among scholars. Several attempts to understand this prevalence, using various external and internal factors, have been criticised for failing to consider specific deviant behaviours and a broad range of personal factors, such as gender, alongside those within the academic context, such as study level and field of study. This narrow perspective, unfortunately, raises questions like, 'To what extent do students' personal and academic-related factors explain their deviant behaviour?' To address the shortcomings of previous research and potentially answer this question, this study specifically focuses on understanding university students' interpersonal deviant behaviour by examining the influence of personal factors such as gender, field of study, and year of

study as moderating variables at a selected university in South Africa. Based on this problem, the following objectives were raised to guide the study:

- To determine the effect of gender on interpersonal deviant behaviour by students.
- To explore the effect of the field of study on interpersonal deviant behaviour by students.
- To examine the moderating effect of year of study on the relationship between gender and interpersonal deviant behaviour.
- To determine the moderating effect of year of study on the relationship between field of study and interpersonal deviant behaviour.

2. Theoretical Review and Hypotheses

The theoretical review below provides a conceptual foundation for comprehending the key relationships examined in this study.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Several theories have been applied in previous studies to explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of deviant behaviour in different contexts (Wickert, 2022; Zlatanova, 2015; Kidwell Jr & Martin, 2005). Examples of these theories include Socialisation Theory (Becher, 1989), General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1984), and Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987). While all these theories are considered, this study focuses on Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963). The theory emphasises the role of social labelling in the development of deviance. It acknowledges that although deviant behaviour arises from numerous antecedents, once individuals are labelled in a specific manner, they encounter new challenges stemming from both their own reactions and those of others to the label. These challenges increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour becoming stable and, in some cases, chronic. Applied to this study, this suggests that societal labels assigned to males and females during the socialisation process may result in gender-based expectations, which manifest as differences in the choice of field and observations of deviant behaviours among university students. With regard to the field of study, first-year students may be more sensitive to labelling, as they are still forming their identity within the university, compared to those in subsequent years. As such, the year of study may alter vulnerability or resistance to these labels, thus acting as a moderating factor.

2.2 Forms of student interpersonal deviant behaviour in South Africa

Interpersonal deviant behaviours among students in South African universities manifest in several forms that highlight broader challenges at both societal and institutional levels. Known forms include academic dishonesty, substance abuse, scribbling in exams, plagiarism, vandalism associated with protests, and gender-based violence (GBV) (Steyn, 2022; Gill & Isaacs, 2025). Research indicates that interpersonal deviant behaviour among students results from pressure to excel and poor levels of academic preparedness at the tertiary level. Additionally, Mammen (2016) found that student interpersonal deviant behaviour is often exacerbated by institutional challenges, such as a lack of resources. This is supported by evidence from Morojele et al. (2021), who indicated that students in the South African higher education sector abuse substances such as alcohol and drugs, leading to harm among peers due to inadequate support systems. Furthermore, a study by Bhana et al. (2021) highlighted the link between the rise in GBV and unsafe university environments. The prevalence of student disciplinary cases in institutions of higher learning in the country has also been reported as a result of students' dissatisfaction with institutional policies or management's failure to understand students' socio-economic conditions (Luescher et al.,2017). This evidence underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the triggers of interpersonal student deviant behaviours, without necessarily limiting the analysis to institutional challenges.

2.3 Student gender and deviant behaviour

Key findings have been reported globally regarding gender differences and deviant behaviour in higher education institutions. For example, male students are reported to exhibit higher levels of deviant behaviour than females (Oguntayo et al., 2020). Conversely, Olasupo et al. (2021) did not find significant differences between male and female students concerning deviant behaviours. Similar patterns have been reported in Israel; Bonny-Noach and Shechory-Bitton (2020) found that male undergraduate students were involved in deviant behaviours, including traffic violations on campus, compared to females. In South Africa, male students have been found to enact violence against females (von Meullen & van der Waldt, 2022; Singh, 2023). In line with Labelling Theory,the studies emphasised socialisation patterns and gender norms as antecedents of the differences in deviant behaviours. Similar patterns were reported in Japan and the United States of America (USA), where cultural factors influenced the magnitude of gender differences in deviant behaviours among college students (Kobayashi et al., 2008; Bonny-Noach & Korn, 2018). None of these studies, however, focused on the academic typology of deviant behaviours concerning the observed differences. In addition, factors related to deviant behaviour that are linked to academia, such as field of study, have not been associated with the observed differences. Despite this, these various studies underscore the importance of considering different contextual factors to understand the deviant behaviour of university students. It is thus hypothesised that: ***H1:*** *Gender has a significant effect on IDB.*

2.4 Field of study and deviant behaviour

While evidence is still limited on the relationship between specific academic disciplines and deviant behaviour, several studies have provided insights without specifically delineating interpersonal deviant behaviour per se. For example, in South Africa, the prevalence of substance abuse has been associated with students in the Arts, Community and Health Sciences, and Natural Sciences, suggesting that certain academic contexts may correlate with deviant behaviours (Blows & Isaacs, 2022). In Nigeria, student deviant behaviours such as bullying, examination malpractices, and absenteeism from lectures were more prevalent among Business Studies students (Gidado et al., 2024). Using the Labelling Theory's argument that deviance is not inherent in an act but is socially constructed through labels imposed by powerful institutions and social actors, it can be contended that the field of study becomes a key social context in which student behaviours can be interpreted, classified, and, in some instances, stigmatised as deviant. Complementing this evidence, Joshi et al. (2024) have taken a psychoanalytic view and reported on the relationship between student personality types, such as narcissism and psychopathy, and the attraction to certain academic disciplines. These traits are often associated with deviant behaviours (Russell et al., 2022) and, therefore, may be linked to specific study disciplines. Although most of these studies did not emphasise interpersonal deviant behaviours per se, it is possible to suggest that the assumed relationship between the field of study and interpersonal deviant behaviours in the current study holds true. Therefore, it is hypothesised that: ***H2:*** *The field of study has a significant effect on IDB.*

2.5 Moderating role of year of study

No known study has investigated the moderating effect of year of study on the relationship between gender and field of study with interpersonal deviant behaviour in a university setting in South Africa. However, some studies (Zulkafli et al., 2022) have identified year of study as a significant moderating variable for depression among university students, with first- and second-year students more likely to experience higher levels of depression. In another study by Jeffords et al. (2020), it was found that year in school moderated the relationship between psychological flexibility and college self-efficacy, with psychological inflexibility having a greater effect on students starting college compared to those who had been enrolled for multiple years. A related study byRubio et al. (2021) identified year of study as a risk factor for burnout subtypes among psychology and nursing undergraduate students, rather than a moderating variable. Additionally, one study found that social

media literacy among first-year students varied by year of study, with first-year students demonstrating the lowest competency. These varying studies illustrate the moderating effect of year of study in specific contexts, suggesting the need for further investigations. It is thus hypothesised that: ***H3:*** *Study level (SL) significantly moderates the relationship between gender and interpersonal deviant behaviour.* ***H4:*** *Study level (SL) significantly moderates the relationship between fields of study and interpersonal deviant behaviour*

2.6 The proposed research model

Grounded in the theoretical framework, existing literature, and the formulated hypotheses, the conceptual framework illustrating the proposed relationships among the study variables is presented below.

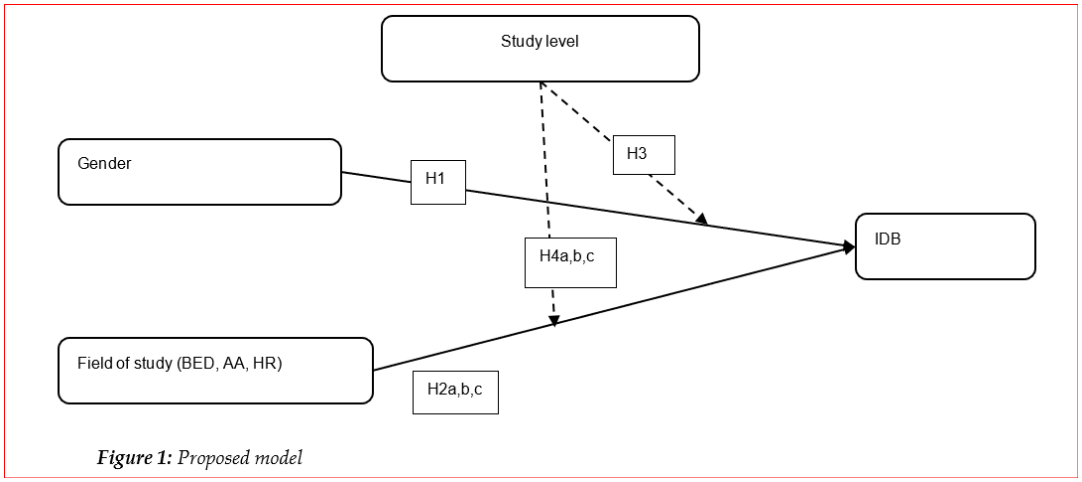

Figure 1: *Proposed model*

Figure 1 posits that gender and field of study exert significant direct effects on students' interpersonal deviant behaviour, and that these relationships are moderated by study level, such that the strength of the effects varies between junior and senior students**.**

3. Methodology

The research followed a correlational research design. This quantitative design allows for the examination of the level of association between variables. In this study, the design facilitated the analysis of the level, degree, and direction of the relationship between the variables (Devi et al., 2022). In this design, the researcher's role is that of an observer, collecting data using an instrument without influencing the research process (Slater & Hasson, 2024). The design was employed to examine the relationship between gender, field of study, and interpersonal deviant behaviour. The participant population consisted of 332 undergraduate students conveniently selected from three different disciplinary areas: education (Bachelor of Education), Human Resource Management, and Accounting and Auditing at a South African university. According to Pascaru-Goncear (2023) and Ololube and Dibu (2019), student deviance at the university level can be linked to specific academic programmes. Data were collected from 213 students: Bachelor of Education (49), Accounting and Auditing (44), Human Resources (60), and Engineering (60). This sample size was regarded as acceptable, representing a response rate of 64%, in line with the guidelines of Mellahi and Harris (2016).

Interpersonal deviant behaviour was measured using an instrument developed by Spector et al. (2010). Where necessary, the items were adjusted to suit the context of the study, specifically interpersonal deviant behaviour commonly found among university students, such as stealing a fellow student's pen. With the help of a recruited and trained research assistant, a self-administered

structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire had two sections, A and B. Section A contained categorical variable items on the personal characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, field of study, level of study, and age. Section B included items measured using an ordinal scale on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using Smart PLS software 4.0. For descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages were calculated for the demographic data, whereas inferential analysis focused on conducting structural equation modelling (SEM), which helped to determine the relationships between the different study variables. This was achieved by first confirming the adequacy of the measures through fitting the measurement model and, secondly, establishing the links between variables through the structural model (Hair et al., 2021).

4. Presentation of Findings

4.1 Demographic profiles of the respondents

The demographic profiles considered were gender, field of study, year of study, and age. This demographic data was used to categorise the respondents in accordance with the study's objectives. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic data of all the participants*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Gender	Males	91	42.7%
	Females	122	57.3%
Program/Field of study	BED	49	23%
	Accounting and Auditing	44	20.7%
	Human Resources	60	28.2%
	Engineering	60	28.2%
Study level	Junior	56	26.3%
	Senior	157	73.7%

BED = Bachelor of Education

The results in Table 1 indicate that the gender distribution included a higher proportion of female participants (57.3%) compared to males (42.7%). The findings show that the chosen programmes enrolled more females than males. Regarding the participants' field of study, the largest groups were those studying Human Resources (28.2%) and Engineering (28.2%), followed by students in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme (23.0%), and those in Accounting and Auditing (20.7%). Most participants (73.7%) were classified as senior students, suggesting progression beyond the first year of study, while junior students constituted 26.3% of the sample.

4.2 Reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the results for discriminant validity are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: *Reliability and validity results*

Factor loadings		**Factor loadings**	**CA**	**CR**	**AVE**	**Square root of AVE**
IDB1	Making fun of someone's life at university	0.765	0.771	0.843	0.519	

IDB2	Stealing something belonging to another student	0.681	0.720
IDB3	Starting an argument with someone at university	0.681	
IDB4	Verbally abusing someone at university	0.663	
IDB5	Blaming someone at university because of my errors	0.801	

IDB1 = Interpersonal deviant behaviour item 1, up to 5

As shown, the Composite Reliability (CR) value of 0.843 exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency among the measurement items (Hair et al., 2021). Similarly, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is 0.519, which surpasses the minimum acceptable level of 0.50, confirming that the construct explains more than half of the variance in its indicators and demonstrating good convergent validity. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.771 further supports the reliability of the construct, confirming consistent responses across items.

No items were removed based on the factor loading minimum criteria of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2017). The AVE value of 0.519 and factor loadings above 0.5 indicate good convergent validity, showing that the indicators adequately represent the Individual Deviant Behaviour construct. Discriminant validity is supported by the square root of the AVE (0.720) being higher than the correlations with other constructs, confirming that the construct is distinct from others in the model. These results affirm that the IDB measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing confidence in its use for further analysis.

4.3 Goodness of fit

The model's overall fit was assessed using key indices to ensure suitability before testing the proposed hypotheses. Briones-Penalver et al. (2018) state that R^2 and Q^2 values should be above zero to indicate predictive relevance. Additionally, the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) should be less than 0.08, while the Normed Fit Index (NFI) is expected to exceed 0.90. Table 3 presents the goodness-of-fit results.

Table 3: *Goodness of fit results*

Endogenous latent variable	R^2	Q^2	SRMR	NFI
IDB	0.116	0.057	0.060	0.910

IDB = Interpersonal deviant behaviour

Table 3 shows that the R^2 (0.116) and Q^2 (0.057) values are both above zero, confirming the model's predictive relevance for the endogenous construct, consistent with Hairet al. (2017). Furthermore, the SRMR value of 0.060 is below the 0.08 cutoff, and the NFI value of 0.910 exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating that the model has an acceptable overall fit.

4.4 The structural model

As previously mentioned, SmartPLS software was used to analyse the data and apply the partial least squares (PLS) approach to discover the correlations between the measurement elements. In this analysis, Engineering (ENG) was the reference group, with dummy variables representing other fields of study, namely Business Education (BED), Human Resources (HR), and Accounting and Auditing (AA). This allowed comparisons of how students from these disciplines differ in their attitudes towards IDB relative to ENG students. Table 4 presents the PLS results for the structural model.

Table 4: *Structural model's PLS results*

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	T	P-values	Decision
H1	Gender → IDB	-0.231	0.937	0.349	Not Supported
H2a	BED → IDB	-1.019	2.842	0.004	Supported
H2b	HR→IDB	-1.041	3.211	0.001	Supported
H2c	AA → IDB	-1.472	5.072	0.000	Supported

IDB = Interpersonal deviant behaviour, BED = Bachelor of Education, HR = Human Resources, AA = Accounting and Auditing

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that gender does not have a statistically significant effect on Interpersonal Deviant Behaviour (IDB) (β = -0.231, p = 0.349). Although the negative relationship suggests that one gender may engage less in deviant behaviour, this finding is not statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. In terms of fields of study, the findings reveal that students from Bachelor of Education (BED) (β = -1.019, p = 0.004), Human Resources (HR) (β = -1.041, p = 0.001), and Accounting and Auditing (AA) (β = -1.472, p = 0.000) demonstrate statistically significant negative relationships with IDBwhen compared to Engineering (ENG) students (the reference group). These results indicate that students in these three disciplines are significantly less likely to engage in deviant behaviour compared to those in Engineering. Therefore, Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c are supported.

4.5 The moderating role of field of study

The third and fourth hypotheses examine the moderating role of study level (SL) (i.e., whether a student is a junior or senior) in the relationship between gender and Interpersonal Deviant Behaviour (IDB), as well as between field of study and IDB. Table 5 presents the findings from the moderation analysis.

Table 5: *The moderating role of study level (SL)*

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	T statistic	P-values	Decision
H3	SL x Gender → IDB	-0.308	1.019	0.308	Not Supported
H4a	SL x BED → IDB	1.193	2.880	0.004	Supported
H4b	SL x HR → IDB	1.153	3.071	0.002	Supported
H4c	SL x AA → IDB	1.209	3.540	0.000	Supported

IDB = Interpersonal deviant behaviour, BED = Bachelor of Education, HR = Human Resources, AA = Accounting and Auditing, SL = study level

The interaction between study level and gender is not statistically significant (β = -0.308, p = 0.308), indicating that the relationship between gender and IDB does not vary meaningfully based on whether a student is a junior or senior. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is not supported. However,the moderating effects are significant for BED (β = 1.193, p = 0.004), Human Resources (β = 1.153, p = 0.002), and Accounting and Auditing (β = 1.209, p = 0.000). These results suggest that the impact of a student's field of study on IDB significantly varies depending on their study level. Therefore, Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c are supported, confirming that study level moderates the relationship between field of study and deviant behaviour. The moderating effects for BED, HR, and AA illustrate how study level influences the relationship between these fields and IDB relative to the baseline group of Engineering students.

4.6 Slope analysis

The slope analysis results indicate that for students registered in each of the three disciplinary areas, junior students exhibited a stronger decrease in deviant behaviour compared to their senior counterparts. Figure 2 visually represents the results of this analysis, clearly illustrating how the relationship between BED and IDB varies by study level (SL).

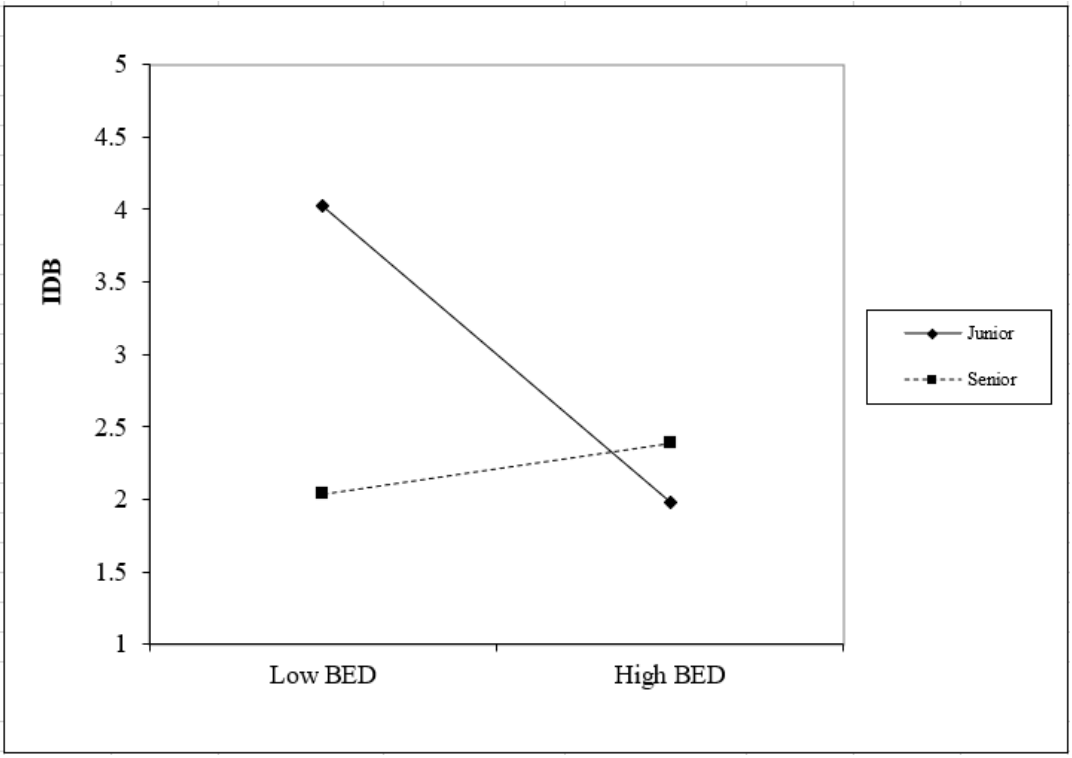

Figure 2: *Study level moderation effect on Bachelor of Education BED and IDB*

The results indicate a significant moderating influence of study level (SL) on the relationship between Business Education (BED) and IDB. Junior students in BED exhibit a stronger decrease in deviant behaviour compared to their senior counterparts. This means that the effect of studying BED on reducing IDB is more pronounced at the junior level than at the senior level.

Figure 3 visually represents the results of this analysis, clearly illustrating how the relationship between HR and IDB varies by study level (SL).

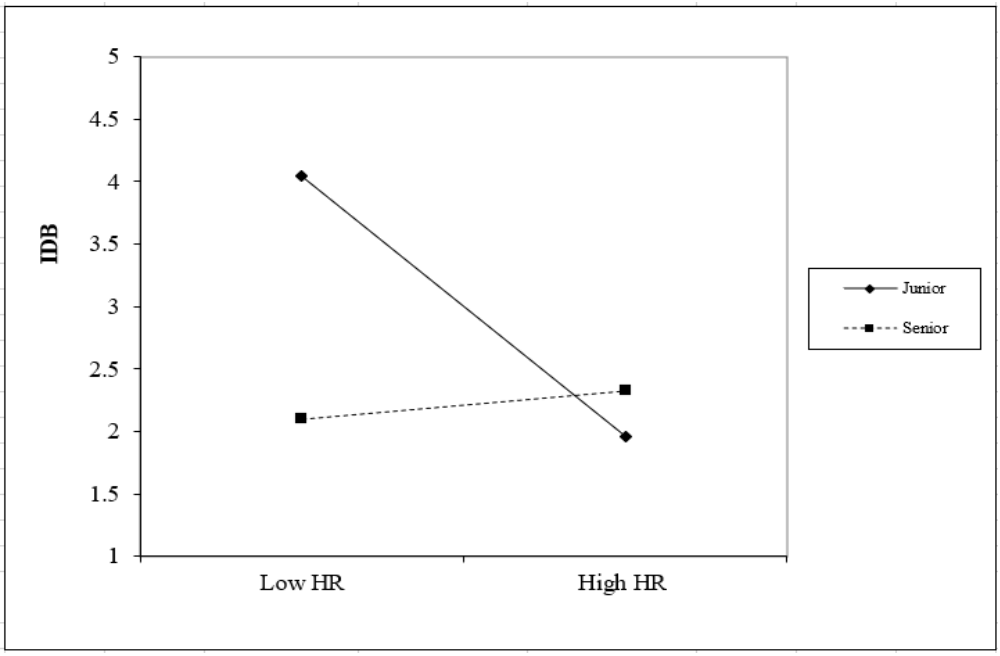

Figure 3: *Study level moderation effect on Human Resources (HR) and IDB*

The results indicate a significant moderating effect of study level (SL) on the relationship between Human Resources (HR) and IDB. Junior HR students experience a greater reduction in deviant behaviour than senior students, suggesting that the impact of studying HR on lowering IDB is stronger at the junior level than at the senior level.

Figure 4 visually represents the results of this analysis, clearly illustrating how the relationship between AA and IDB varies by study level (SL).

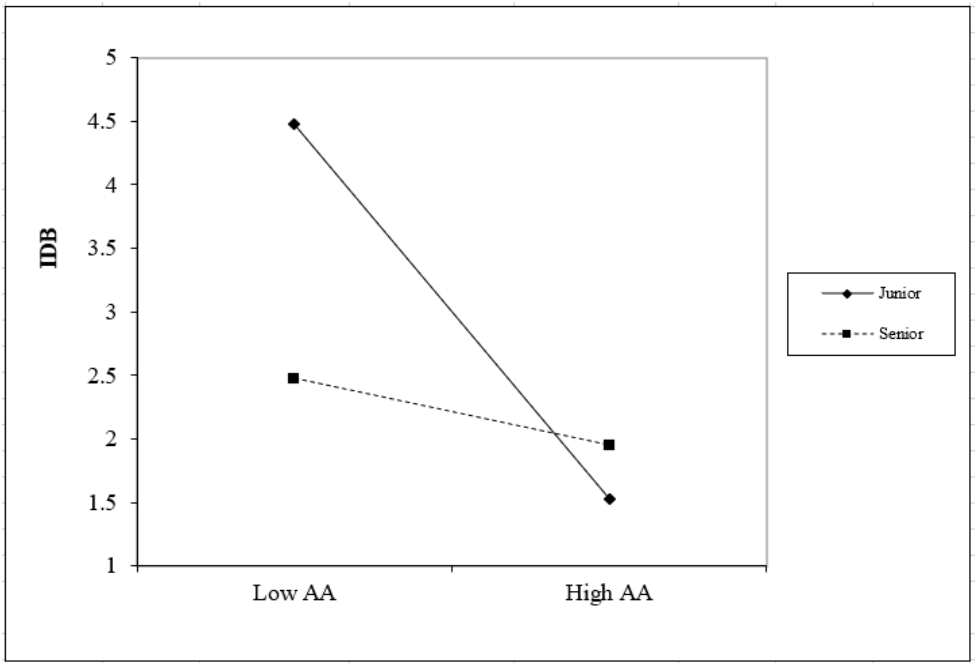

Figure 4: *Study level moderation effect on Accounting and Auditing (AA) and IDB*

The results reveal a significant moderating effect of study level (SL)on the relationship between Accounting and Auditing (AA) and Individual Deviant Behaviour (IDB). It indicates that the reduction in deviant behaviour associated with studying AA is more substantial among junior students, suggesting that the influence of the AA field on lowering IDB is stronger at the junior level than at the senior level.

Figure 5 further illustrates the complete model, including all coefficients and factor loadings, providing a visual summary of these findings.

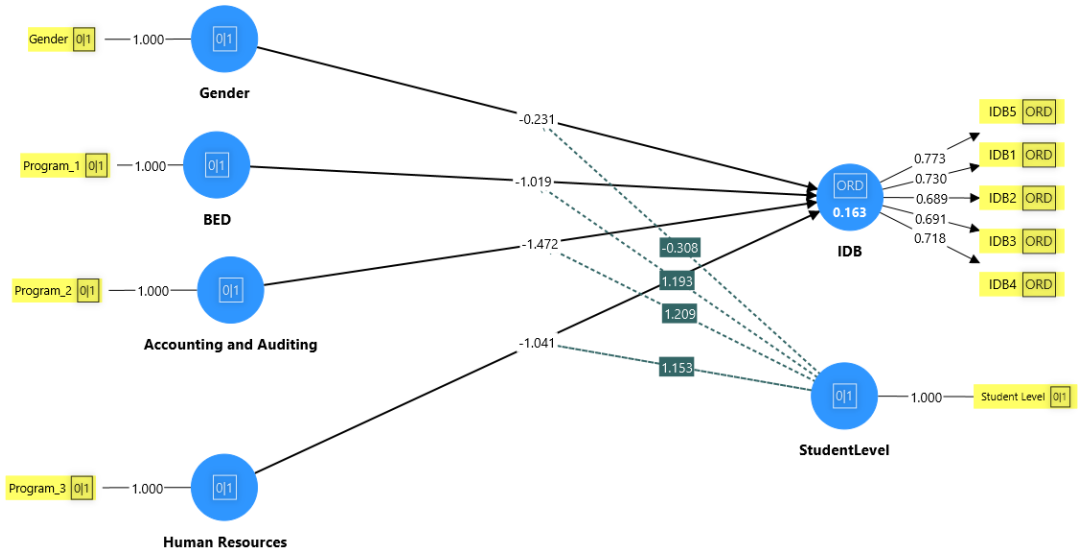

Figure 5: *SEM with model parameters*

The labels 'ORD' and '0|1' in the blue node indicate that the variables were measured on ordinal and binary scales, respectively. The model results show that approximately 16.3% of the variance in Individual Deviant Behaviour (IDB) is explained by gender and field of study, suggesting a moderate level of predictive power for these variables.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that gender does not affect interpersonal deviant behaviour. This finding contrasts with much of the current literature (Oguntayo et al., 2020; Bonny-Noach & Shechory-Bitton, 2020), which indicates differences between males and females in terms of deviant behaviour. However, Olasupo and Fagbenro (2021) support the conclusion that they found no difference between male and female students regarding deviant behaviours. Similarly, Lim and Teo (2009) reported that gender was not a significant predictor of cyberdeviance in educational settings. From the perspective of Labelling Theory, the results imply that interpersonal deviance among university students is not a function of being male or female, but rather how such behaviours are socially interpreted, labelled, and responded to. This suggests that interpersonal deviance may only be considered deviant when institutions or significant others label it as such, and this labelling may operate similarly across genders within the studied context.

Additionally, the South African university environment is currently regarded as egalitarian (Antyukhova, 2024), where traditional male-female roles are not encouraged. As a result, similar behavioural patterns between males and females, as in this case, can be expected. Despite this egalitarian emphasis, male and female university students may be experiencing different strains in terms of academic pressures and poor socio-economic circumstances. In line with Labelling Theory, this means that although both genders may be exposed to comparable circumstances on campus,

they are equally likely to internalise or resist deviant labels, resulting in no observable gender difference in interpersonal deviance. This suggests they may both develop or adopt similar coping strategies, thus equalising the likelihood of gender-based variations in interpersonal deviance.

All fields of study exhibited a negative association with interpersonal deviant behaviour. These findings do not align with previous studies, which associated certain types of deviant behaviours, such as bullying and examination collusion, with particular academic disciplines (Gidado et al., 2023; Blows & Isaacs, 2022). Other studies (Ololube & Dibu, 2019; McCabe et al., 2006) supported this finding by reporting that students in health and education fields were less likely to cheat or justify deviant behaviours. Similarly, the finding can be understood within the frameworks of Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963), which suggest that norms, values, and expectations of certain academic disciplines may shape students' behaviours. Disciplines such as Accounting and Auditing, Human Resources, and Education all emphasise ethical responsibility and interpersonal understanding. Consequently, students undertaking these programmes may be socialised away from deviant behaviour within the university context.

The moderation effects of study level were significant for Bachelor of Education, Human Resources, and Accounting and Auditing students. The findings indicate several developmental and contextual factors that may be at play, as the decrease in deviant behaviour is more pronounced among junior students in all cases. This is supported by Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963), which suggests that deviant behaviour is not inherent but is instead attributed to social labelling and the subsequent internalisation of those labels. At most universities, first-year students are in the early stages of academic socialisation and identity formation. This fluidity of academic identity makes them sensitive to external evaluations of their behaviours, prompting them to avoid negative labels such as being referred to as 'problematic or unprofessional.' Previous studies have demonstrated that enculturation into specific disciplines is stronger during the initial years at university (Braxton & Bayer, 1999). In contrast, senior students, having had a more stabilised university experience, may have acquired entrenched reputations or labels, whether positive or negative. Labelling Theory argues that entrenched and internalised labels do not easily lead to individuals altering their behaviours when confronted with new social expectations or when new labels are assigned. Due to their familiarity with university expectations and norms, senior students may have developed the ability to reinterpret interpersonal deviance as inconsequential, particularly when their past acts of such deviance did not result in severe sanctions from university authorities.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the relationship between gender, field of study, and interpersonal deviance among students from three disciplinary areas at a selected South African university. The results supported the non-inherent tenet of Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963) by revealing that gender does not significantly influence interpersonal deviance among the students. The relationship between field of study and interpersonal deviant behaviour was negative, indicating that students across all three disciplinary areas were less likely to engage in such behaviour in the study context. This suggests that, in line with the tenets of Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963), some disciplinary programmes in South African university environments instil norms, values, and expectations that prevent students from engaging in interpersonal deviant behaviours.

While classical theories predict a strong link between gender and interpersonal deviant behaviour, the findings of this study lead to the conclusion that, among South African university students, gender and interpersonal deviant behaviour do not have a relationship. This implies that factors such as the egalitarian nature of universities today should not be overlooked and may warrant further exploration.

The non-significant influence of gender on interpersonal deviance prompts university management, particularly those responsible for student welfare and experience, to reconsider strategies for reducing interpersonal deviance among students. This should involve a focus on factors such as ethical climate and peer pressure influence, rather than gender-based approaches. Consequently, policies regarding student behaviour on campus should be revised to incorporate ethics education expectations that are embraced by all students, regardless of gender. Simultaneously, the significant effect of fields of study suggests that academic advising and personal development initiatives for students should be targeted rather than generic.

Theoretically, the support for Labelling Theory, which posits that there are no inherent differences between males and females, reinforces the applicability of this theory in the egalitarian university environments of South Africa. Additionally, the negative effect of the field of study on interpersonal deviant behaviour highlights the need for the development and expansion of models that take into account various contextual and psychological factors to explain the relationship between study programmes and a decrease in student interpersonal behaviours. Lastly, focusing on only one typology of deviant behaviour and tailoring the items to those deemed deviant by students serves as a precursor for further investigation in this area.

6.1 Limitations

Notwithstanding the above contributions, the study's focus on one university in South Africa limits the generalisation of the results to other universities. Secondly, the use of self-reported measures to gauge interpersonal deviant behaviours may have resulted in some common method biases and social desirability aspects; therefore, the accuracy of the reported behaviours may be questionable. Thirdly, the combination of less severe and more severe items of deviant behaviour in one scale may have compromised the construct validity of the scale used to measure interpersonal deviant behaviour. Lastly, the use of a single moderating variable may have compromised the explanatory power of the model.

Given these limitations, further studies could include other universities and expand the number of programmes within the South African context. Additionally, future research could consider incorporating other dimensions of deviant behaviour—specifically, those directed at the organisation. Future measurements of interpersonal deviant behaviour should not combine items referring to severe acts with those referring to less severe acts. To mitigate social desirability effects, future studies may consider requesting respondents to report on the perceived occurrence of certain types of deviant behaviours within their environments. Finally, consideration should also be given to including different moderating variables, such as locus of control and organisational support.

7. Declarations

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Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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