

Impact of Peer Labelling on the Wellbeing and Academic Performance of Secondary School Students

Tauqeer Abdullah¹

Abstract

Negative peer labelling in schools can profoundly affect students' well-being and academic performance. This study aimed to examine the impact of peer labelling on students' academic performance, with emotional, social, and behavioural well-being considered as mediating factors. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving a sample of 390 students labelled by their peers across 31 public primary schools in Bhakkar, a district in Punjab, Pakistan. Data were collected using four self-developed scales aligned with the study variables and analysed through structural equation modelling (SEM) using SPSS and AMOS. The findings revealed that peer labelling significantly influences students' academic performance. Moreover, students' emotional, social, and behavioural well-being were also found to be significantly associated with their academic outcomes. Notably, the indirect effects of peer labelling, mediated through emotional, social, and behavioural wellbeing, were stronger than its direct impact on academic performance. The study concludes that negative peer labelling, when combined with compromised emotional, social, and behavioural well-being, adversely affects students' academic achievement.

Keywords: *Peer labelling, Emotional Well-being, Social & Behavioural Well-being, Academic Performance, Bullying*

1. Introduction

Peer labelling refers to the informal and often negative categorization of students by their classmates based on perceived characteristics, behaviours, or academic capabilities (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020). In educational environments, such labels are frequently assigned without any formal assessment or justification and may include derogatory terms like "lazy," "slow," "attention-seeker," or "troublemaker." These labels tend to reflect the prevailing peer norms and cultural biases in a school setting rather than objective traits of the individual. While peer labelling might be considered a

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Peshawar, Peshawar

common social phenomenon, emerging evidence shows it can have serious and lasting consequences on students' emotional wellbeing, social integration, and academic performance. According to Farooq et al. (2023), children who are negatively labelled by their peers often internalize these perceptions, which may lead to chronic issues of low self-esteem, anxiety, and even depression. This internalization process results in a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby students start to conform to the expectations implied by the label, further compromising their academic and personal development (Abdullah et al., 2023; Matos et al., 2023).

In the context of Pakistani schools, where high academic achievement and conformity to social expectations are often emphasized, the effects of negative labelling can be even more acute. Education systems in Pakistan frequently prioritize rigid standards and teacher-centered instruction, with limited attention paid to students' socioemotional needs (Naveed et al., 2020). Within such an environment, peer interactions play a critical role in shaping students' self-perception and school experience. When peers engage in labelling, especially in classrooms lacking inclusive practices or emotional support systems, students who are negatively perceived may become isolated or face ridicule (Wenham, 2020). These experiences significantly diminish a student's sense of belonging and safety in school, which are essential components of academic engagement. Recent studies in Pakistan, such as those by Najmussaqib and Mushtaq (2023), highlight a growing incidence of emotional and behavioural issues among school-aged children, many of which are linked to peer conflicts, bullying, and lack of supportive classroom climates.

The emotional consequences of peer labelling are far-reaching. Students subjected to negative peer labels often report feelings of shame, sadness, and frustration. If these emotional responses are not addressed, they may evolve into more serious psychological issues, such as social anxiety or depressive symptoms (Alnawaiser, 2021). These students may also develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, including withdrawal from classroom activities, avoiding peer interactions, or even acting out in disruptive ways. These behavioural responses are typically misunderstood by educators as disobedience or lack of motivation, leading to punitive consequences that further alienate the student. According to Naveed et al. (2020), the link between bullying — including verbal and emotional labelling — and declining school performance is strong, suggesting that emotional distress directly undermines cognitive and academic functioning. The resulting behavioural issues not only reinforce the existing negative labels but also impede the student's ability to access support or demonstrate academic improvement (Abdullah et al., 2023).

The academic implications of this dynamic are considerable. When students are persistently labelled in negative terms, they may begin to doubt their intellectual abilities, lose interest in learning, and refrain from taking academic risks. As participation drops and performance declines, the label becomes more entrenched, confirming peers' perceptions and trapping the student in a cycle of underachievement and stigma. Research from South Asia has shown that emotional and behavioural wellbeing are strong predictors of academic engagement and performance (Abdullah et al., 2024). In this context, understanding how emotional and socio-behavioural wellbeing mediates the relationship between peer labelling and academic outcomes is essential. While global literature has explored similar dynamics, there is a notable gap in studies focusing on how these factors interact specifically in the Pakistani school system, where cultural values, competitive pressures, and a lack of psychological support services complicate the educational experience.

Previous studies have extensively explored the effects of labelling on individuals, particularly in educational contexts. However, there is limited research on how emotional and socio-behavioural wellbeing interact as mediating factors in the relationship between peer labelling and academic performance, particularly in the specific socio-cultural context of Pakistani schools. Most existing studies have examined labelling as a general phenomenon, often focusing on teacher or community labelling, with less attention paid to the unique dynamics of peer interactions. Furthermore, while emotional and behavioural wellbeing are often recognized as outcomes of labelling, their mediating role in shaping academic performance has not been comprehensively investigated. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Pakistani schools, where cultural and societal norms significantly influence peer interactions and academic expectations. The current study aimed to address these gaps by examining the specific impact of peer labelling on students' academic performance, with emotional wellbeing and socio-behavioural wellbeing as mediating variables.

1.1 Theoretical Foundations of Labelling (Becker, 1963)

This study is grounded in Labelling Theory and supported by Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1925), both of which provide essential perspectives on how identity and behaviour are shaped through social interactions. Labelling Theory posits that deviance and behavioural patterns are not inherent traits but are socially constructed through the process of labelling individuals who deviate from perceived norms (Becker, 2018). This theory explains how societal reactions, particularly the assignment of negative labels, can influence an individual's self-concept and behaviour, often reinforcing the very attributes the labels intend to criticize. Once labelled, individuals may

internalize those descriptors, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies and patterns of behaviour that align with the label (Scheff, 1974).

Building on this, George Herbert Mead's concept of the socially constructed self explains how individuals form their identities through interaction and interpretation of others' responses to them (Mead, 1913). In the school environment, peer labelling becomes a potent force in shaping students' self-perceptions and subsequent behaviour. Mead emphasized the role of the "generalized other" — the internalized view of societal expectations — in influencing how individuals adjust their behaviour to fit perceived norms. In the classroom, this is reflected in how students adopt or resist peer labels such as "weak," "slow," or "troublemaker," which are laden with social meaning and potential stigma.

Within this framework, emotional wellbeing (feelings of anxiety, self-worth, sadness, etc.) and socio-behavioural wellbeing (peer relationships, classroom conduct, engagement, and social inclusion) are conceptualized as distinct but interrelated mediators. Emotional wellbeing refers to the internal psychological state of the student, while socio-behavioural wellbeing encompasses observable actions and social integration. Both constructs are influenced by peer labelling and have direct implications for academic engagement and achievement. Treating socio-behavioural wellbeing as a composite of social (peer relationships, group inclusion) and behavioural (conduct, discipline, class participation) dimensions allows for a more holistic understanding of the student experience.

These theoretical insights provide a foundation for examining the pathways through which peer labelling affects academic performance, both directly and indirectly via emotional and socio-behavioural wellbeing. The mediating role of these constructs is particularly important in the context of developing countries such as Pakistan, where social dynamics in schools are shaped by academic competition, cultural norms, and peer influence.

1.2 Significance of the study

This study holds significant value in both academic and practical domains. At a theoretical level, it contributes to the growing body of literature on student wellbeing, peer dynamics, and academic outcomes by focusing specifically on the underexplored phenomenon of peer labelling. While considerable research has examined the effects of teacher labelling, bullying, and stigma in educational settings, relatively few studies have addressed how labels assigned by students' peers affect emotional health, social behaviour, and academic achievement, especially in non-Western educational contexts.

By incorporating emotional and social-behavioural well-being as mediating variables, this study extends current understanding of how internal psychological processes and interpersonal challenges intersect to influence students' academic trajectories. This approach provides a nuanced explanation of not just whether peer labelling affects performance, but how and why these effects occur, offering insights grounded in psychological and educational theory. Practically, the study is particularly relevant for school leaders, teachers, counsellors, and policymakers in Pakistan and similar educational settings where academic pressure is high, yet emotional and psychological support structures are limited. In Pakistan, where the education system often places a premium on grades, obedience, and conformity, students labelled as "weak," "disruptive," or "different" are frequently marginalized or misunderstood. These negative peer-driven perceptions can contribute to social isolation, emotional distress, and disengagement from learning, factors that are rarely addressed in formal school policies or classroom interventions. By revealing the mechanisms through which peer labelling undermines student wellbeing and academic success, the findings of this study can help educators identify at-risk students more effectively and design targeted interventions to build inclusive, psychologically safe learning environments. It can also serve as a basis for developing training modules for teachers on the socio-emotional dynamics of classrooms. Contextually, this research fills a critical gap in the educational landscape of Pakistan, where there is a dearth of empirical studies exploring peer-related psychological factors affecting students. Although some work has been done on bullying and classroom management, the cultural and social implications of peer labelling as a subtle yet powerful social force have not been sufficiently studied. This is particularly important in rural and public-sector schools, where resources for mental health and emotional support are scarce, and teachers may lack training in social-emotional learning. By collecting and analyzing data from public primary schools in Bhakkar a less-researched district in Punjab, this study not only generates context-specific insights but also amplifies voices and experiences from underserved regions, adding diversity and depth to existing educational research.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent does peer labelling influence students' academic performance?

RQ2: What is the relationship between peer labelling and students' emotional well-being?

RQ3: How does peer labelling affect students' social and behavioural wellbeing?

RQ4: What is the nature of the relationship between students' emotional well-being and their academic performance?

RQ5: How is students' social and behavioural wellbeing related to their academic performance?

RQ6: Do students' emotional well-being mediate the relationship between peer labelling and academic performance?

RQ7: Do students' social and behavioural well-being mediate the relationship between peer labelling and academic performance?

2. Literature Review

Peer labelling refers to the informal attribution of identities to individuals based on observable traits, behaviours, or performance, often by classmates or social groups. Unlike teacher labelling, which has been widely examined in educational literature, peer labelling remains an under-researched yet influential form of social categorization. Labels such as "lazy," "troublemaker," or "failure" can become internalized, significantly shaping a student's self-concept and behaviour (Arslan, 2021). Recent research emphasizes the social construction of these labels within peer networks and their link to exclusion and stereotyping. In schools, especially those with rigid academic hierarchies, peer labelling can reinforce social boundaries and intensify marginalization, leading to adverse educational outcomes (Mueller, 2019).

The emotional consequences of peer labelling are profound and often long-lasting. Students subjected to negative labelling may experience emotional distress, including anxiety, low self-worth, and depressive symptoms (Arslan & Yildirim, 2021). These emotional reactions can interfere with cognitive functions such as attention and memory, ultimately affecting learning and performance. For example, a longitudinal study by Eyuboglu et al. (2021) found that early peer-reported labels were strongly correlated with emotional maladjustment and reduced academic engagement over time. In cultural contexts like Pakistan, where academic success is heavily emphasized and emotional support is often stigmatized, peer-imposed labels can severely undermine a student's confidence and psychological safety within the

classroom. This emotional toll may not be visible immediately but accumulates as students internalize the beliefs and expectations embedded in the labels.

Beyond emotional well-being, peer labelling also impacts students' social and behavioural development. Negative labels can disrupt peer relationships, lead to social exclusion, or foster antisocial behaviours in response to rejection (Zhang et al., 2024). Behavioural reactions may include aggression, withdrawal, or defiance, often misinterpreted by teachers as disciplinary issues rather than coping responses to social rejection. A recent study by Feng and Wang (2018) found that students labelled negatively by peers were more likely to display externalizing behaviours, such as classroom disruption and disengagement, as a form of self-protection. These behavioural issues, in turn, reduce students' chances of meaningful participation in school activities and collaborative learning tasks, further limiting academic progress. When viewed through this lens, behavioural difficulties are not just consequences of individual disposition but reflections of social labelling and exclusion processes.

Several scholars have highlighted the mediating role of emotional and behavioural wellbeing in the relationship between negative social experiences and academic outcomes. For instance, Khan et al. (2019) argue that social stressors like peer rejection or labelling affect students' academic performance indirectly by first disrupting their emotional regulation and social competence. In Pakistan, research by Khalil et al. (2020) demonstrated that emotional difficulties, such as anxiety and low self-confidence, significantly mediated the impact of peer interactions on academic performance among middle school students. Despite growing interest in this area, few studies have examined these dynamics in primary school populations or in rural educational settings. The current study addresses this gap by investigating how peer labelling affects academic performance through the mediating roles of emotional and socio-behavioural wellbeing, using data from public primary schools in Bhakkar district.

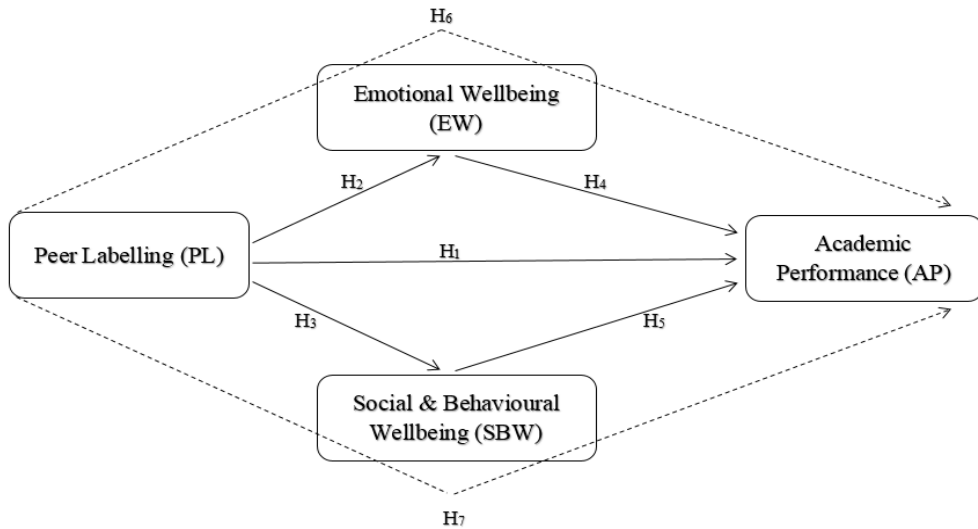


Figure 1. Hypothetical Model

Hypotheses

H₁ – Peer labelling has a statistically significant relationship with students’ academic performance.

H₂ – Peer labelling has a statistically significant relationship with students’ emotional wellbeing.

H₃ – Peer labelling has a statistically significant relationship with students’ social and behavioural wellbeing.

H₄ – Students’ emotional wellbeing has a statistically significant relationship with their academic performance.

H₅ – Students’ social and behavioural wellbeing has a statistically significant relationship with their academic performance.

H₆ – Students’ emotional wellbeing mediates the relationship between peer labelling and academic performance.

H₇ – Students’ social and behavioural wellbeing mediates the relationship between peer labelling and academic performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method and Participants

The study adopted a quantitative research approach utilizing a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the effects of negative peer labelling on students' emotional, social-behavioural wellbeing, and academic performance. This design was appropriate for collecting data at a single point in time to examine relationships among the study variables within a naturally occurring school setting.

The target population for the study consisted of all male students in grades 3 to 5 enrolled in public primary schools in District Bhakkar, Punjab, Pakistan. District Bhakkar is divided into four administrative subdivisions: Bhakkar, Mankera, Kallur Kot, and Darya Khan. According to data provided by the District Education Office Primary (DEOP), there were 719 public primary schools for boys across the district, collectively serving a population of 13,182 male students in grades 3 to 5. The researcher employed purposive sampling technique for data collection. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because the study specifically targeted students who had experienced negative peer labelling. A total of 390 students were selected as the sample. This sample size was determined to ensure sufficient representation of the target population, allowing for generalizability of the findings.

3.2 Instrumentation

To measure the research variables, four structured interview scales were developed, targeting the key variables: peer labelling, emotional wellbeing, social and behavioural wellbeing, and academic performance. Each scale consisted of 5-point Likert statements, with response options ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree". To ensure the validity of these scales, a multi-step process was employed. Initially, content validity was established by consulting a panel of five highly experienced experts. The experts rigorously reviewed the scales to ensure that each item was relevant, clear, and adequately covered the constructs under investigation. Additionally, construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). EFA was conducted to identify the underlying factor structure of the scales, ensuring that items grouped logically under the intended constructs and demonstrated convergent validity (see AVE values in Table 3). CFA further validated the scales by testing the hypothesized factor structure, confirming that the scales exhibited discriminant validity (see MSV & MaxR(H) values in Table 3 and HTMT values in Table 4). Furthermore, all scales underwent a pilot testing phase to ensure their feasibility and consistency. A sample of 35 peer-labelled students was initially surveyed to evaluate the practicality of the scales and the overall

research design. In addition, to establish reliability, a combination of methods was employed. The test-retest method was used to determine the scales' stability over time. For this purpose, 40 additional students were surveyed twice, with a one-month interval between the two administrations (see Table 2). Additionally, internal consistency of the scales was verified using two methods. Split-half reliability was ensured by splitting all the items within each construct into an even-odd format, and their relationships were analyzed (see Table 2). Cronbach's alpha was further applied to evaluate internal consistency among the items (see Tables 2 & 5). To further ensure consistency among the items, composite reliability (CR) was calculated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (see CR values in Table 2).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Given the vulnerable nature of the research population—male students in grades 3 to 5 — ethical integrity was central to the research process. The study strictly adhered to ethical standards for research involving minors, in line with the ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) and institutional research ethics protocols. Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the relevant District Education Authorities and the administrative heads of all participating schools. In addition, written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all student participants. The consent forms were written in simple and clear Urdu language and explained the purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and measures to ensure privacy and anonymity. Only those students whose guardians gave explicit consent were included in the study. Because the participants were children aged approximately 8 to 11 years, age-appropriate verbal assent was also obtained from each student prior to participation. Researchers explained the study's purpose and procedures in child-friendly language and emphasized that participation was voluntary and that students could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Special care was taken in identifying students who had been negatively labelled by peers, as this involved sensitive issues related to peer perception and self-esteem. Rather than directly asking students if they were labelled, the identification process was handled discreetly with the support of class teachers and school counsellors. Teachers, based on their classroom experience and knowledge of peer dynamics, helped to identify students who frequently faced negative peer labelling (e.g., being called "lazy," "weak," or "disruptive"). These students were approached respectfully and with compassion to avoid reinforcing any sense of stigma. To protect participants' anonymity, all responses were recorded using identification codes instead of names. Data were stored securely, and access was limited to the principal investigator. No

personal information was disclosed or published in any form. Additionally, participation did not involve any physical or psychological risk, and the survey instruments were carefully reviewed to ensure they did not include distressing content. Throughout the study, the research team maintained a supportive and empathetic attitude toward all participants. If any student appeared distressed during the process, their participation was halted, and appropriate emotional support was offered in coordination with school staff.

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and AMOS. The analysis began with principal components analysis (PCA) as part of EFA process. It helped to reduce the dimensionality of the dataset by condensing a large number of variables into a smaller and more manageable set of factors. Following this, CFA was conducted to construct a measurement model for assessing the validity and reliability of the constructs (see Figure 2). A structural model was then developed to test the study's hypotheses. This model enabled the estimation of both direct and indirect relationships among variables and allowed for the analysis of mediation effects (see Figure 3). Prior to structural modelling, the normality of the data was verified by calculating the Z_{skew} scores for skewness.

$$Z_{\text{skewness}} = \frac{\text{skewness}}{\sqrt{\text{s.e. skewness}}}$$

According to the criteria outlined by Ho (2013), Z_{skew} values exceeding ± 1.96 indicate a rejection of the normality assumption at the 0.05 alpha level. For this study, the Z_{skew} values for all items, calculated based on their skewness statistics, were found to be within the acceptable range of ± 1.96 , confirming that the data did not significantly deviate from normality (see Table 5).

4. Results

Initially, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were conducted to evaluate the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The KMO value was 0.947, which is well above the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating that the sample size and data were adequate for performing EFA. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity showed a statistically significant result ($X^2 = 1663.254$, $df = 507$, $p = .000$), confirming that there are significant relationships among the variables to proceed with factor analysis.

Table 1

Goodness of Fit Measures

	X ²	df	X ² /df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	PClose
Peer Labelling	1165.31	507	2.298	0.980	0.051	0.038	0.071
Academic Performance	1072.91	507	2.116	0.987	0.054	0.041	0.069
Social & Behavioural Wellbeing	1364.40	507	2.691	0.969	0.066	0.046	0.066
Emotional Wellbeing	1445.93	507	2.851	0.961	0.070	0.049	0.063

Note. Cut-off criteria of Hu and Bentler (1999) was followed in fit indexes.

The fit indices showed acceptable to excellent model fit for all research constructs (see Table 1). Peer labelling revealed ($X^2 = 1165.31$, $df = 507$, $X^2/df = 2.298$), with the comparative fit index (CFI) at 0.980. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.051, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was 0.038, with a PClose value of 0.071, indicating excellent fit. Similarly, academic performance exhibited ($X^2 = 1072.91$, $df = 507$, $X^2/df = 2.116$). CFI was 0.987, SRMR = 0.054, RMSEA = 0.041, and PClose = 0.069, reflecting a highly satisfactory model fit. Similarly, social & behavioural wellbeing exhibited ($X^2 = 1364.40$, $df = 507$, $X^2/df = 2.691$). CFI was 0.969, SRMR = 0.066, RMSEA = 0.046, and PClose = 0.066, indicating acceptable fit. Finally, emotional wellbeing reported ($X^2 = 1445.93$, $df = 507$, $X^2/df = 2.851$). CFI was 0.961, SRMR = 0.070, RMSEA = 0.049, and PClose = 0.063, revealing excellent fit indices.

Table 2

Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (α), Test-Retest, and Split-half Reliability

				Test-Retest Reliability				Split-half Reliability			
	CR	α		RT	RT	RT	RT	O	O	O	O
PL	.989	.852	T	.72**	--	--	--	E .84**	--	--	--
AP	.994	.801	T	--	.85**	--	--	E --	.75**	--	--
SBW	.988	.790	T	--	--	.80**	--	E --	--	.80**	--

EW	.96	.79	T	--	--	--	.78*	E	--		.76*
	8	1					**		--	--	**

Note. *** $p < 0.001$. T = test, RT = retest, E = even, O = odd.

Table 2 shows reliability analyses with multiple methods. According to the statistics, peer labelling revealed ($CR = 0.989$, $\alpha = 0.852$), indicating strong internal consistency. Similarly, academic performance exhibited ($CR = 0.994$, $\alpha = 0.801$), confirming internal consistency. Social and behavioural wellbeing also showed significant results ($CR = 0.988$, $\alpha = 0.790$), and emotional wellbeing revealed ($CR = 0.968$, $\alpha = 0.791$), demonstrating strong internal consistency. In addition, all constructs demonstrated strong test-retest and split-half reliability, exceeding standard thresholds with significant results ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3

Discriminant and Convergent Validity through Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	PL	AP	EBW	EW
PL	0.82	0.53	0.993	0.907			
	2	4					
AP	0.91	0.53	0.995	0.584**	0.959		
	9	4		*			
SB	0.88	0.19	0.992	0.421**	0.553**	0.941	
W	6	1		*	*		
EW	0.71	0.23	0.974	0.560**	0.779**	0.414**	0.84
	7	0		*	*	*	7

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3 demonstrates the discriminant and convergent validity of the constructs using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE), which exceeded the threshold of 0.50 for all constructs, confirming that each construct explains more than half of the variance in its observed variables. Discriminant validity was established by ensuring that the AVE for each construct was greater than its maximum shared variance (MSV), meeting the required criterion. Additionally, reliability was supported with high values of MaxR(H), surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.70 for all constructs. See Figure 2 for correlation matrices among the constructs.

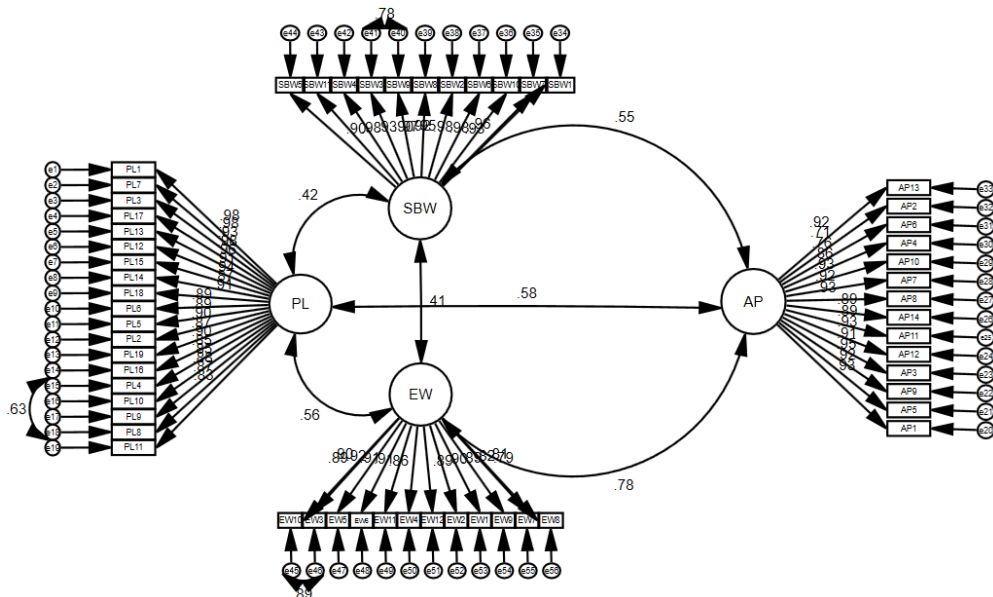


Figure 2. Measurement Model

Table 4 presents the grouped psychometric properties and discriminant validity of the constructs. The HTMT values show significant inter-construct relationships among the constructs. All values are well below the threshold of 0.85, confirming strong discriminant validity. These findings, combined with the descriptive statistics, suggest that the constructs are psychometrically robust, distinct, and well-suited for further structural modelling.

Table 4

Grouped Psychometric Properties and Discriminant Validity through HTMT Criterion

	M	SD	PL	AP	EBW	EW
PL	3.5015	1.37103				
AP	3.4457	1.39352	0.5375			
SBW	3.3757	1.40630	0.5020	0.4760		
EW	3.5183	1.33875	0.4592	0.4414	0.5260	

Table 5 summarizes the psychometric properties of the constructs, with values of factor loading (FL), Cronbach's alpha (α), and Z values for data normality assumptions. The threshold for normality, as determined by Z_{skew} values of skewness, was ± 1.96 , and all these values fell within this range, confirming the data's suitability for analysis. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha

values of each variable are $> .70$, signifying high internal consistency within variables.

Table 5

Psychometric Properties

Factor 1: Peer Labelling (PL)		M	SD	FL	α	Z_{skew}
PL1	Peers in my school label me as 'lazy'.	3.49	1.40	.903	.94	1.74
PL2	Labelled a 'dumb' by my peers.	3.48	1.39	.852	.81	1.76
PL3	Peers used the term 'weak' to describe me.	3.43	1.36	.892	.85	1.69
PL4	Peers labelled me as an 'underachiever'.	3.55	1.34	.820	.91	1.82
PL5	Peer labelled me as 'clumsy'.	3.56	1.41	.860	.78	1.88
PL6	Peers use labels like 'loser' or 'failure'.	3.55	1.42	.860	.80	1.85
PL7	Labelled as 'slacker' by my peers.	3.51	1.39	.900	.79	1.81
PL8	Peers labelled me as 'annoying'.	3.47	1.34	.845	.82	1.81
PL9	Peers in my school label me as 'outcast'.	3.43	1.43	.846	.88	1.59
PL10	Peers have labelled me as 'slow'.	3.46	1.40	.826	.86	1.64
PL11	Labelled as 'cheater' by my peers.	3.46	1.39	.775	.81	1.61
PL12	Peers labelled me as 'incompetent'.	3.48	1.34	.876	.92	1.81
PL13	Peers labelled me as 'unmotivated'.	3.54	1.38	.882	.93	1.89
PL14	I have been called a 'clueless'.	3.50	1.33	.845	.84	1.85
PL15	Peers have labelled me as 'careless'.	3.57	1.37	.866	.87	1.93
PL16	My peers have labelled me as 'irresponsible'.	3.48	1.39	.864	.85	1.76
PL17	Labelled as 'dependent' by my peers.	3.52	1.39	.889	.83	1.87

PL18	I have been labelled as 'quitter'.	3.46	1.35	.864	.83	1.72
PL19	Peers used term 'illiterate' to describe me.	3.59	1.39	.834	.87	1.92
Factor 2: Emotional Wellbeing (EW)		M	SD	FL	α	Z
EW1	PL has made me feel less confident.	3.46	1.43	.792	.90	1.46
EW2	PL made me to question about my abilities.	3.50	1.42	.796	.83	1.56
EW3	PL made me feel ashamed of who I am.	3.52	1.39	.870	.82	1.88
EW4	PL has lowered my self-esteem.	3.59	1.27	.779	.89	1.93
EW5	PL made me feel like I am not good enough.	3.50	1.41	.825	.78	1.73
EW6	Feel stressed when think how peers label me.	3.38	1.46	.818	.84	1.38
EW7	It made me feel anxious in social situations.	3.56	1.37	.708	.80	1.91
EW8	I made worry about what others think of me.	3.55	1.34	.721	.88	1.84
EW9	Feeling nervous about attending school.	3.68	1.28	.739	.93	1.83
EW10	Labelling made me feel upset and unsettled.	3.55	1.36	.817	.88	1.90
EW11	It made me feel lonely and disconnected.	3.39	1.47	.815	.95	1.38
EW12	I feel hopeless about improving myself.	3.54	1.43	.791	.94	1.64
Factor 3: Social & Behavioural Wellbeing (SBW)		M	SD	FL	α	Z
SBW1	PL made it harder to form friendships.	3.36	1.40	.890	.85	1.40
SBW2	PL made feel excluded in group activities.	3.35	1.40	.925	.82	1.32
SBW3	Peers avoid including me in social circles.	3.42	1.35	.883	.87	1.42
SBW4	PL made me feel less connected to peers.	3.38	1.38	.903	.93	1.44

SBW5	PL made me feel judged by others in school.	3.32	1.37	.878	.91	1.16
SBW6	PL made me less likely to trust my peers.	3.35	1.38	.930	.94	1.38
SBW7	Made me hesitate to ask for help from peers.	3.40	1.39	.848	.80	1.42
SBW8	Made me avoid drawing attention to myself.	3.39	1.39	.916	.83	1.37
SBW9	PL made me to withdraw from my peers.	3.42	1.38	.892	.89	1.47
SBW10	PL made me avoid school activities.	3.38	1.40	.930	.86	1.46
SBW11	PL made feel more inclined to misbehave.	3.36	1.41	.919	.93	1.40
Factor 4: Academic Performance (AP)		M	SD	FL	α	Z
AP1	PL discouraged from doing best in school.	3.48	1.41	.840	.84	1.65
AP2	I feel like my academic efforts don't matter.	3.41	1.42	.819	.87	1.81
AP3	I lose interest in completing my assignments.	3.56	1.36	.847	.92	1.69
AP4	No questioning to avoid further judgment.	3.43	1.40	.811	.89	1.60
AP5	Less motivated to participate class activities.	3.38	1.47	.838	.81	1.63
AP6	PL made it harder to concentrate on studies.	3.44	1.41	.809	.90	1.66
AP7	PL made me feel distracted during lessons.	3.36	1.41	.820	.82	1.67
AP8	Embarrassed to engage in discussions.	3.44	1.43	.823	.79	1.67
AP9	Believing I cannot achieve academic success.	3.42	1.45	.774	.92	1.71
AP10	I doubt my ability to perform well on exams.	3.52	1.41	.817	.78	1.73
AP11	Incapable meeting academic expectation.	3.48	1.41	.763	.87	1.67
AP12	More likely to procrastinate on school tasks.	3.35	1.46	.855	.87	1.69
AP13	Discouraged seeking help from peers.	3.48	1.38	.806	.94	1.72

AP14	Stop putting effort into my academic goals.	3.49	1.41	.843	.92	1.68
------	---	------	------	------	-----	------

Additionally, across all four factors, FL values consistently met the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the items reliably measured their respective constructs.

Table 6
Mediation Analysis

Outcome Variable		Predictor Variable	β	SE	t	Bootstrap p LBCI	Bootstrap p UBCI
AP	←	PL	0.135** *	.036	3.729	0.0565	0.2348
SBW	←	PL	0.411** *	.045	9.040	0.3225	0.5111
EW	←	PL	0.501** *	.040	12.517	0.4188	0.6023
AP	←	SBW	0.229** *	.036	3.729	0.1574	0.3308
AP	←	EW	0.642** *	.043	14.784	0.5220	0.7502

Note. *** $p < .001$. Bootstrapping was set at 5,000 samples. Bootstrap confidence interval was set at 95%.

Table 6 presents the direct effects of independent variables on dependent variables. The findings show that peer labelling has a weak but statistically significant positive impact on students' academic performance ($\beta = 0.135$, $p < .001$), indicating that negative peer labelling has a substantial impact on students' academic performance. Similarly, peer labelling also significantly influences students' social and behavioural wellbeing ($\beta = .411$, $p < .00$). Furthermore, peer labelling has a significant impact on students' emotional wellbeing ($\beta = 0.501$, $p < .001$), indicating that peer labelling negatively influence students' emotional wellbeing (also see Figure 3).

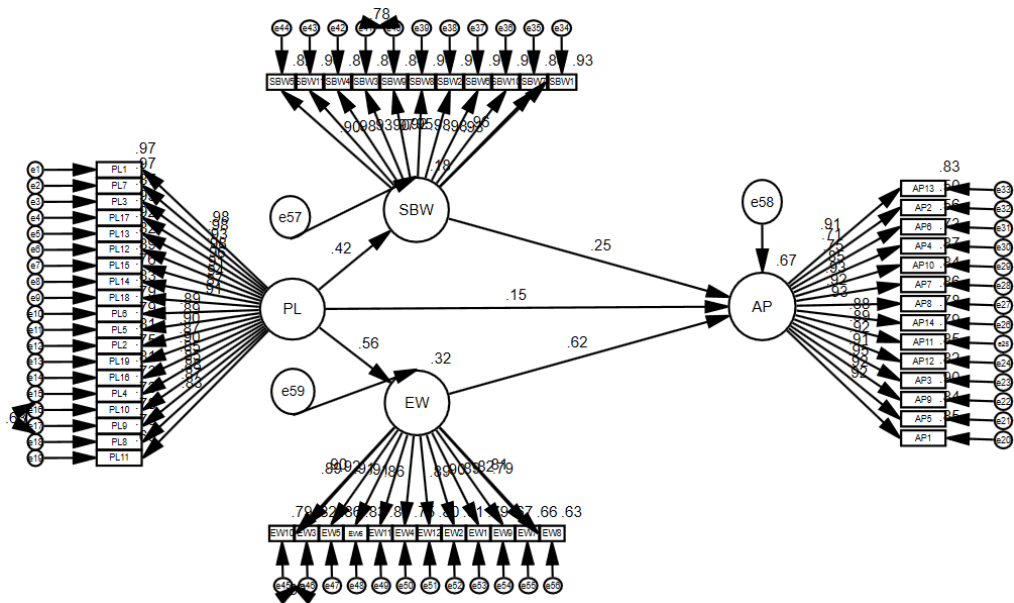


Figure 3. Structural Model

Additionally, the study found a small but significant impact of students' social and behavioural wellbeing on their academic performance ($\beta = 0.229$, $p < .001$), indicating that improvements in students' social and behavioural wellbeing are associated with better academic performance. Finally, students' emotional wellbeing had a strong impact on their academic performance ($\beta = 0.642$, $p < .001$), indicating that students' emotional wellbeing does influence their academic performance.

Table 7

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Peer Labelling on Academic Performance through Social & Behavioural Wellbeing and Emotional Wellbeing

	Effect/ β	SE	Bootstrap LBCI	Bootstrap UBCI	p	Relative Effect Size
Total	0.5983	.044	0.5222	0.6867	.000	---
Direct	0.1461	.048	0.0607	0.2451	.001	24.42%
Indirect	0.4522	.036	0.3862	0.5263	.000	75.58%

Note. Bootstrapping was set at 5,000 samples. Bootstrap confidence interval was set at 95%.

Table 7 presents the total, direct, and indirect effects of peer labelling on students' academic performance through social & behavioural wellbeing

and emotional wellbeing. The study found a strong total impact of peer labelling on students' academic performance ($\beta = 0.5983$, $p = .000$, LBCI = 0.5222, UBCI = 0.6867). The direct effect of peer labelling on students' academic performance is small but statistically significant ($\beta = 0.1461$, $p = .001$, LBCI = 0.0607, UBCI = 0.2451), accounting for 24.42% of the total impact. Finally, the indirect effect, representing the impact of peer labelling on students' academic performance through social & behavioural wellbeing and emotional wellbeing, is also significant ($\beta = 0.4522$, $p = .000$, LBCI = 0.3862, UBCI = 0.5263, comprising 75.58% of the total effect. These findings demonstrate that while indirect impact via students' social & behavioural and emotional wellbeing dominates, there is still a notable direct influence of peer labelling on students' academic performance.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of negative peer labelling on students' academic performance, with a particular focus on the mediating roles of emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing. The findings significantly support all stated hypotheses, confirming that peer labelling is strongly associated with detrimental academic outcomes and that this relationship is further influenced by students' emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing.

H1 posited that peer labelling is significantly associated with students' academic performance. The results affirm this, aligning with previous research suggesting that negative labelling leads to decreased academic motivation and achievement (O'Driscoll et al., 2012). As theorized by Mead (1925, 1978) and Becker (2018), students form self-concepts based on how others perceive and interact with them. When labelled as "slow," "troublemaker," or "lazy," students often internalize these labels, leading to diminished self-confidence and motivation. This self-perception becomes a limiting factor, affecting participation, risk-taking, and persistence in academic tasks. As Becker (2018) argued, these labels may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, where students behave in ways that reinforce negative expectations, perpetuating poor academic outcomes.

H2 and H3 examined the relationship between peer labelling and emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing, respectively. The findings show a strong association, indicating that students subjected to negative labelling experience heightened emotional distress and altered behavioural patterns. This is consistent with Scheff's (1974) and Mead's (1978) social constructionist perspectives that identity and emotions are co-constructed through interactions. Labelled students often feel shame, anxiety, or frustration, which may manifest as withdrawal, disruptive behaviour, or

defensive aggression (Thomson, 2012). The emotional toll and social alienation caused by persistent peer labelling compromise students' ability to engage meaningfully with academic and social environments, corroborating studies by Kelly and Norwich (2004) and O'Driscoll et al. (2012).

H4 and H5 addressed the influence of emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing on academic performance. The findings demonstrate that students with impaired emotional and behavioural wellbeing are more likely to experience academic decline. This supports prior research indicating that emotional dysregulation and social withdrawal contribute to inattention, lack of engagement, and reduced academic effort (Cathy, 2012; Kelly & Norwich, 2004). Mead and Becker (2011) emphasized that social approval and validation are central to self-evaluation. When such feedback is negative and persistent, it leads to diminished self-worth and academic disconnection.

H6 and H7 tested the mediating roles of emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing between peer labelling and academic performance. The results showed that these mediating pathways were more statistically significant than the direct effect of peer labelling on academic performance alone. This reinforces the idea that peer labelling does not influence performance in isolation but through its psychological and behavioural consequences. Emotional insecurity may lead to disengagement, while behavioural issues may provoke disciplinary actions or peer rejection — both of which limit learning opportunities. This interaction forms a vicious cycle, as theorized by Becker (2018) and observed in school-based labelling literature (Kelly & Norwich, 2004).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings provide robust support for labelling theory and social self theory. These frameworks help explain how external social reactions — especially those from peers — become internalized, reshaping self-identity and behaviour over time (Mead, 1925; Becker, 2018). In the school environment, peers often function as the “generalized other” (Mead, 1978), whose collective judgments heavily influence students' perceptions of self-worth and competence. As O'Driscoll et al. (2012) noted, when students perceive that their peers see them as incapable or unworthy, they are more likely to underperform or disengage academically.

This study contributes meaningfully to the growing discourse on student wellbeing and academic performance by introducing a multi-dimensional framework that explores both emotional and social-behavioural wellbeing as mediators — a relatively underexplored area, particularly in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. While past studies have examined the general impact of labelling, few have specifically explored peer labelling and

its nuanced consequences on both internal emotional states and external behavioural adaptations. The study's setting in Pakistan adds to its originality, highlighting how cultural and systemic pressures — such as academic competitiveness, rigid norms, and lack of psychosocial support — may intensify the impact of peer interactions.

Moreover, this research shifts the focus from adult-imposed labels (e.g., from teachers or institutions) to peer-to-peer labelling, which is often less visible but equally, if not more, influential in early developmental stages. By establishing empirical evidence for the mediating role of wellbeing, the study provides valuable direction for school policy, teacher training, and psychological interventions aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive school climates.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study revealed the significant negative impact of peer labelling on students' emotional and social wellbeing, which in turn is reflected in their academic performance. The findings are consistent with G. H. Mead's social self theory, which posits that an individual's self-concept develops through the process of social interaction and labelling by others. Peer labelling, especially negative labelling, can cause a child to internalize harmful perceptions. Consequently, they suffer from decreased emotional well-being. This is usually manifested in anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. All of this, in turn, affects social behaviour in the form of withdrawal and unwillingness to participate in classes or social activities. These disturbances in emotional and social functioning create a mediating effect between peer labelling and academic performance, with students who struggle with negative self-concept being less likely to fully engage in their education. The findings of the study also confirm labelling theory, which states that people who are labelled negatively by society, or their peers in this case, may begin to behave in ways that meet these labels, thus creating a vicious cycle of low performance and disengagement.

7. Implications and future research directions

The findings of this study have several important implications for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals working with students. First, the significant impact of peer labelling on academic performance underscores the importance of fostering positive peer relationships and promoting inclusive school environments. Schools should implement programs aimed at reducing peer labelling and bullying, as these negative interactions can have long-term consequences on students' emotional and social well-being. Educators may also be trained to recognize the signs of

peer labelling and its effects on students, and develop strategies to intervene early. Additionally, supporting students who have been labelled negatively, through counselling or academic mentoring, can help mitigate the detrimental effects on their self-concept and academic engagement.

Future research may explore the long-term effects of peer labelling on academic and psychological outcomes, as well as the potential for resilience and recovery among students who have experienced negative labelling. It would be valuable to investigate the role of intervention programs in reducing the impact of peer labelling, particularly those that focus on promoting self-esteem, social skills, and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, future studies could examine the interplay between peer labelling and other factors, such as family dynamics, teacher-student relationships, and socioeconomic status, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding academic performance.

References

- Abdullah, T., Ali, J., & Alam, A. (2024). Academic stress and its impact on students' emotional well-being and performance at universities. *Journal of Educational Psychology and Pedagogical Sciences (JEPPS)*, 4(1), 13-30. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28241207.v1>
- Abdullah, T., Haq, A. U., & Qureshi, A. W. (2023). Assessing the role of teachers & parents in developing strategies against social media misuse among students. *Gomal University Journal of Research*, 39(3), 341-354. <https://doi.org/10.51380/gujr-39-03-07>
- Alnawaiser, A. (2021). Labelling in Special Education. *Multicultural Education*, 7(1), 216-221.
- Arishi, A., Boyle, C., & Lauchlan, F. (2017, December). Inclusive education and the politics of difference: Considering the effectiveness of labelling in special education. British Psychological Society. <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/29377>
- Arslan, G. (2021). School bullying and youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors: Do school belonging and school achievement matter? *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 20(1), 2460–2477. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-021-00526-x>
- Arslan, G., Yıldırım, M., & Leung, M. M. (2021). Mediating effect of personal meaning in the prediction of life satisfaction and mental health problems based on coronavirus suffering. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 638379. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.638379>

- Becker, H. S. (2018). Labelling theory reconsidered 1. In *Deviance and social control* (pp. 41-66). Routledge.
- Cathy, B. (2012). Deviant labelling in school: the pupils' perspective. In *Pupil Strategies (RLE Edu L)* (pp. 94-107). Routledge.
- Eyuboglu, M., Eyuboglu, D., Pala, S. C., Oktar, D., Demirtaş, Z., Arslantaş, D., & Ünsal, A. (2021). Traditional school bullying and cyberbullying: Prevalence, effect on mental health problems and self-harm behavior. *Psychiatry Research*, 297, 113730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2021.113730>
- Farooq, S., Yousaf, T., & Shahzad, S. (2023). Prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems among adolescents in pakistan: a cross-sectional study. *Journal of Pakistan Psychiatric Society*, 20(01), 22-26. <https://doi.org/10.63050/jpps.20.01.230>
- Feng, Q., & Wang, X. (2018). The psychological effects of academic labeling: The case of class tracks. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 46(2), 568-581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2017.10.004>
- Ho, R. (2013). *Handbook of univariate and multivariate data analysis with IBM SPSS*. CRC press.
- Hu, L. T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural equation modeling: a multidisciplinary journal*, 6(1), 1-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118>
- Kelly, N., & Norwich, B. (2004). Pupils' perceptions of self and of labels: Moderate learning difficulties in mainstream and special schools. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74(3), 411-435. <https://doi.org/10.1348/0007099041552297>
- Khalil, A., Gondal, F., Imran, N., & Azeem, M. W. (2020). Self-stigmatization in children receiving mental health treatment in Lahore, Pakistan. *Asian journal of psychiatry*, 47, 101839. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2019.10.019>
- Khan, P., Irfan, A., Khan, M. U., & Akhtar, T. (2019). Teachers' negative labeling of students: it's impact on students' self esteem and personality. *The Discourse*, 5(2), 1-14.
- Matos, R., Campos, L., Martins, F., Deakin, J., Carneiro, A., Fox, C., & Markina, A. (2023). At the 'risky' end of things: labelling, self-concept and the role of supportive relationships in young lives. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(3), 313-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2174007>

- Mead, G. H. (1978). The social self. *Psychiatry*, 41(2), 178-182.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1978.11023971>
- Mead, G. H. (1925). The genesis of the self and social control. *The International Journal of Ethics*, 35(3), 251-277.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/intejethi.35.3.2377274>
- Mead, G. H. (1913). The social self. *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 10(14), 374-380. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2012910>
- Mead, G. H., & Becker, H. S. (2011). Labeling theory. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 150-155.
- Mueller, C. (2019). Adolescent understandings of disability labels and social stigma in school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(3), 263-281.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1576940>
- Najmussaib, A., & Mushtaq, A. (2023). Estimation and linkage between behavioral problems and social emotional competence among Pakistani young school children. *Plos one*, 18(5), e0278719.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278719>
- Naveed, S., Waqas, A., Shah, Z., Ahmad, W., Wasim, M., Rasheed, M., & Afzaal, T. (2020). Trends in bullying and emotional and behavioral difficulties among Pakistani schoolchildren: A cross-sectional survey of seven cities. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 123. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00123>
- O'Driscoll, C., Heary, C., Hennessy, E., & McKeague, L. (2012). Explicit and implicit stigma towards peers with mental health problems in childhood and adolescence. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, 53(10), 1054-1062.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02580.x>
- Scheff, T. J. (1974). The labelling theory of mental illness. *American sociological review*, 444-452. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094300>
- Thomson, M. M. (2012). Labelling and self-esteem: does labelling exceptional students impact their self-esteem?. *Support for Learning*, 27(4), 158-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12004>
- Wenham, L. (2020). 'It was more a fear of the school thinking that I'd be a troublemaker'—Inappropriate use of internal exclusion through labelling by association with siblings. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 18(3), 154-187. <http://www.jceps.com/archives/10176>

Zhang, Y., Fang, Y., Wang, Y., Liu, S., Wang, X., Zhang, S., & Chen, Z. (2024). Peer victimization and adolescent mental health: School-level victimization as a moderator. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 39(21-22), 4647–4666. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241244473>