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EXPLORING FINTECH LENDING USAGE IN INDONESIA THROUGH A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of fintech lending in Indonesia has coincided with rising concerns over digital debt dependency, particularly among low-income and young populations. While regulatory and financial risks have dominated public discourse, less attention has been paid to the psychosocial and socio-cultural conditions underlying fintech lending behavior. This study examines the deviant aspects of fintech use through an integrated psychosocial-cultural lens, highlighting how such behaviors arise not solely from individual irresponsibility but from the intersection of emotional vulnerability, social marginalization, and the cultural normalisation of debt. A mixed-methods approach was employed. The first phase involved a scoping literature review to identify conceptual and theoretical gaps. The second phase applied supervised machine learning (SVM, Decision Tree, Random Forest, Neural Network) to national survey data (BPS and OJK) to detect behavioral patterns. The third phase conducted a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with five fintech users from high-risk urban areas. The findings indicate consistent patterns of emotional fragility, fintech use dependency, institutional distrust, and symbolic adaptation to debt culture. These behaviors reflect structural and psychological deviance, where fintech use serves as both a coping strategy and a socio-cultural adaptation amid economic precarity and institutional exclusion. This study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by extending strain and labeling theories in tandem with psychological theories of vulnerability and coping, reframing fintech use as a socially and emotionally constructed adaptation rather than moral failure. Policy-wise, it calls for culturally grounded financial literacy, stronger digital consumer protection, and inclusive reforms that address systemic inequality and distrust in formal institutions

Keywords: Fintech Lending, Deviant Behaviour, Machine Learning, Psychosocial Perspective

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed various aspects of life, including the financial sector. One significant development is the growth of fintech lending services, known for high accessibility, fast processing, and no collateral requirements (Ratnaningrum, Dewi, and Ilham 2024). These services offer alternative financial solutions for individuals facing economic hardship and limited access to formal institutions (Eid 2019). However, this ease of access comes with negative impacts, such as excessive debt, emotional stress, and coercive collection methods (Wijayanti and Hartiningrum 2022), further intensified by social pressure and growing consumerist values (Suciati and Mulawarman 2024; Zhao, Peng, and Li 2022).

According to the Financial Services Authority (OJK), there were 22.42 million active fintech lending accounts by December 2024. Over 60% of these users were young or early adults, a group considered socially productive but financially vulnerable (OJK 2024). In May 2024, total national fintech lending debt rose by 25.44% year-on-year, reaching IDR 77.02 trillion, despite a decline in active users (Katadata 2024; Kontan.co.id 2024). A separate report noted a 29.14% increase by December 2024 (FintechNews, 2025), which continued to IDR 78.50 trillion in January 2025 and IDR 80.07 trillion in February 2025 (OJK, 2025). During this period, the non-performing loan (TWP90) rate remained at 2.52–2.78%, indicating repayment difficulties among users (OJK 2025). From January 2024 to January 2025, OJK received 13,540 complaints about legal fintech providers, including 1,106 related to coercive collection practices (Akobiarek et al. 2025). Additionally, 74% of users cited the absence of collateral as their main reason for using these services (Widjaja 2022).

In this study, deviant behaviour refers to the irresponsible use of fintech lending services. These services, formally known as Information Technology-Based Joint Funding Services (LPBBTI), connect users and lenders directly via electronic platforms in Indonesian Rupiah (OJK 2024). Deviance occurs when users borrow compulsively, neglect financial management principles, and violate norms of rational financial behaviour.

Structural, cultural, and psychological factors shape the rise in fintech lending use in Indonesia. Sociologically, poverty and unemployment reflect unequal access to resources, leading lower-income groups to seek quick financial solutions. High population density limits access to jobs and education, raising dropout rates and reducing financial literacy. Culturally, social pressure to perform encourages individuals to borrow

despite economic limitations, as fintech becomes both a symbolic and practical tool. Psychologically, financial stress reduces self-control, increasing impulsive decision-making. Users with low self-control and high impulsivity tend to overlook long-term consequences (Rosadi and Andriani, 2023). Studies have shown that self-control significantly affects financial behaviour, with lower levels leading to riskier borrowing (Putri and Andarini, 2022). As Maslow's theory suggests, unmet basic needs often lead to short-term financial decisions despite the long-term risks. Fintech lending thus reflects an interplay of social, cultural, and psychological conditions (Trivedi, Anjanaben, and Mehta 2019).

These patterns are not unique to Indonesia. Similar issues have been documented in emerging economies. A bibliometric review by Del Sarto and Ozili (2025) reveals that services such as mobile money in Kenya, peer-to-peer lending in India, and AI-based credit in Brazil initially enhanced financial inclusion but later posed risks. These included digital exclusion, rising debt, and dependence on fast-access credit. For example, M-Pesa in Kenya promoted access but also led to impulsive borrowing, while credit algorithms in India and Brazil disadvantaged users with weak digital histories. These cases suggest fintech misuse reflects global socio-technical inequalities.

Although fintech use often begins from necessity, repeated misuse may be viewed as deviant behaviour within the framework of Social Pathology. This arises from a mismatch between societal norms of responsible finance and behaviour, shaped by digital consumer culture and often tied to low financial literacy (Bagaskara, 2024; Chen & Yin, 2024). Indicators include payment delays (Suhayati 2023), debt refinancing, misuse of personal data for collection (Wijayanti and Hartiningrum 2022), and even suicide (Nuraini and Zaky 2023). Contributing factors include unequal access to finance (Nuraini and Zaky 2023; Widjaja 2022), consumerist values (Setiawan, Radjamin, and Ariani 2024), and individual traits such as low self-control (Oktavianus, Wijaya, and Sutedjo 2025) and high impulsivity (Restike, Prasasti, and Fitriani 2024).

The social and psychological impacts of debt are well documented. Debt stress is linked to mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Sulaiman 2024). High interest rates and poor loan terms often trap users in debt cycles, leading to bankruptcy and poverty (Yulianto 2024). This undermines trust in formal finance and hinders broader financial inclusion.

This study addresses the question "What are the social, cultural, and psychological factors that predict deviant behaviour in the use of fintech lending services in Indonesia?".

While machine learning is used for classification support, the primary approach is grounded in socio-cultural and psychological perspectives. Most existing studies emphasise financial inclusion, risk modeling, or regulatory design (Ha, Le, and Nguyen, 2025; Liu et al., 2025), and although Wang, Drabek, and Wang (2022) introduce behavioural variables, such insights remain underutilised in mainstream analysis. This study addresses that gap by offering an interdisciplinary framework focused on user behaviour and contextual influences, rather than technical prediction models. By addressing this gap, the study offers an interdisciplinary framework that integrates social science approaches to enhance understanding of fintech-related deviance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating a systematic literature review, secondary data analysis using machine learning, and qualitative research. The first phase adheres to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring transparency in identifying key themes, theoretical foundations, and research gaps in the literature. The review process involved screening, eligibility assessment, and data extraction from peer-reviewed publications related to digital lending, online behaviour, and social vulnerability.

The second phase involves secondary data analysis using datasets from Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) and the Financial Services Authority (OJK). Machine learning (ML) techniques were applied using Orange Data Mining version 3.1, employing Support Vector Machine (SVM), Random Forest, Neural Network, and Decision Tree algorithms. These algorithms were selected based on their ability to capture complex, non-linear relationships among sociological variables, patterns that traditional statistical tools may overlook. Specifically, SVM handles high-dimensional classification tasks (Cortes and Vapnik 1995), Random Forest enhances accuracy through ensemble decision-making (Breiman 2001), Neural Networks simulate human cognitive processes to detect subtle associations (LeCun, Bengio, and Hinton 2015), and Decision Trees offer intuitive visualizations of decision outcomes (Quinlan 1986). The data used represent key structural and behavioural indicators, such as education, income, and social exclusion, which are central to sociological inquiry as they reflect systemic inequality and stratification. These variables influence how individuals access opportunities, make financial decisions, and experience social risk. By employing supervised learning models, the study uncovers latent correlations between socio-demographic factors and

behavioural patterns, without relying on prior theoretical assumptions. This data-driven approach complements sociological theory by revealing dynamic interactions between individuals and structures, positioning ML as a methodological bridge that enhances both empirical depth and interpretive scope.

The third phase involves qualitative research to explore participants' lived experiences (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Five participants were purposefully selected based on OJK data as of December 2024, which identified the highest number of fintech lending users in DKI Jakarta with 39 million accounts, followed by West Java with 36 million, and East Java with 14 million accounts. The selected informants were Joseph from Jakarta, Simon from West Java, and Amel, Bella, and John from East Java. To ensure confidentiality, all participant names presented in this study are pseudonyms. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on how individuals make sense of personal and social experiences through a double hermeneutic process. In this process, participants interpret their experiences, and researchers interpret those interpretations (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The analysis involved close reading, noting significant points, identifying themes, and interpreting patterns about broader social contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Literature review

A systematic literature search was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines, which involve three key stages: identification, screening, and eligibility assessment. In the identification phase, 25 relevant journal articles on fintech lending in Indonesia were retrieved from databases, with no duplicates or additional records found. During the screening phase, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 10 articles that did not meet the initial criteria. All 25 articles were successfully retrieved for full-text assessment. During the eligibility phase, 10 additional articles were excluded for specific reasons, including 5 that employed non-empirical methods, 2 with low research quality, and 3 that were thematically irrelevant. A total of 15 articles were included in the final review. The full PRISMA flow of the selection process is shown below.

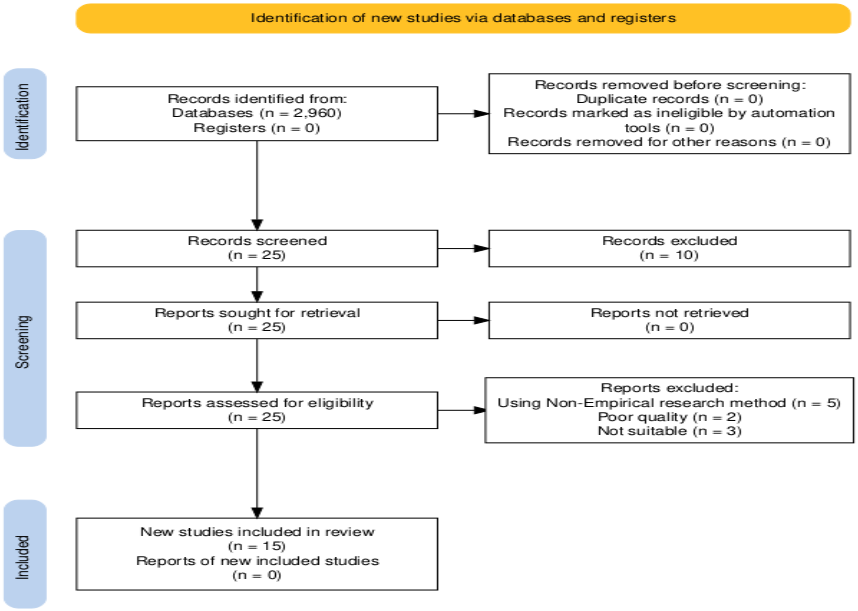

Table 1.1 **Prisma Flow Chart**

This structured selection process emphasises the commitment to maintaining academic rigor and relevance in investigating the dynamics of deviant behaviour, specifically online lending.

Literature Review

Researcher	Method	Findings
Faisal, A. A., Wiradimadja, A., Ajra, D. A., Adhitama, M. D., Ramadhan, R., & Albertus, M. (2022).	Qualitative Research.	Fintech lending (pinjol) induces depression in victims due to unethical debt collection practices and the misuse of personal data.
Alfatih, F., Muqowim, Anggara, B. (2023).	Qualitative.	Illegal fintech lending causes excessive fines, data breaches, harassment, unauthorized phone access, and loss of personal information.
Sari, A. A., Hidayati, A. N., Nasution, S. W. P., Martanto, Limba. F. B., Sa'diah, K. (2023).	Qualitative Method using Case Study Approach.	Illegal fintech lending charges high interest, causing defaults and exposing fintech use to threats and violence, while tech advances make these

		platforms harder to control.
Usman, K. P. M., Tsabita, A. S., Suganda, N. P., Somad, M. A., Turginbayeva, A. N. (2023).	Qualitative.	Fintech lending caused suicide due to psychological distress.
Yosiana, M. (2023).	Descriptive qualitative with secondary data.	Fintech lending offers easy access to funds but often comes with high interest and harsh collection tactics, risking borrowers' data and well-being.
Muttaqin, I., Nuryanti, L. (2023).	Mixed-Method	Fintech lending among students is driven by peer pressure, a consumptive lifestyle, loose regulations, and social media, making them vulnerable to debt traps.
Kanda, A. S., Mawarni, I. (2024).	Qualitative with questionnaire.	Fintech lending can negatively impact individuals' lifestyles, including causing financial pressure, increasing debt risk, and altering saving habits.
Nurapipah, W. A., Abdullah, M. N. A. (2024).	Qualitative with descriptive approach.	Fintech lending can cause serious issues like conflict, psychological distress, and loss of trust and harmony in marriage, especially when done without a partner's consent.
Manitra, R. R. M. (2024).	socio-legal method, incorporating statutory, sociological, and case study approaches, while analyzing secondary legal materials through qualitative-deductive analysis.	Illegal Fintech lending in Indonesia harms human rights and mental health through unethical collection, data misuse, and pressure, causing depression and demanding strict action.
Amos, V., Papalangi, N. (2024).	Quantitative.	Fintech lending services are frequently utilized by

		individuals experiencing fear of missing out (FOMO), to avoid missing out social experiences.
Wirawan, L. G. (2024).	Critical criminology method with a qualitative approach and structured interviews.	Illegal Fintech loans cause students severe financial loss, academic disruption, mental distress, and need for psychiatric care due to threats and heavy debt.
Habiba, S., Sissah, Siregar, E. S. (2024).	Qualitative with descriptive approach.	Fintech Lending tends to promote profligate, addiction, and mental distress.
Putra, H. D., Sabri, M., Malik, A. (2024).	Qualitative with case study approach.	Fintech Lending contributes to stress, dept trap and, deteriorating interpersonal relationship. that could lead to self-isolation.
Sucidha, I., Yuliani. (2025).	Quantitative.	Fintech lending usage is driven by loan promotions, lifestyle needs, economic pressures, social referrals, and the simplicity of the borrowing procedure.
Hidayat, R., Pertiwi, F. A. (2025).	Quantitative.	Fintech lending tends to be driven by excessive consumerism behavior.

Table 1.2 **Previous Research**

The phenomenon of fintech lending (commonly known as pinjol) in Indonesia, both legal and illegal, has grown rapidly and poses multidimensional impacts, particularly among university students and low-income communities. The ease of access, fast procedures, and aggressive marketing have made these platforms a practical solution for short-term financial needs. Studies by Yosiana (2023) and Sucidha and Yuliani (2025) highlight that simple borrowing processes, combined with lifestyle pressures and economic demands, are key drivers behind the increasing number of fintech lending users. Social influences such as FOMO (fear of missing out) and peer pressure further reinforce borrowing behaviours aimed at maintaining a socially desirable lifestyle (Amos and Papalangi 2024; Muttaqin and Nuryanti 2023). Among university students, a consumerist

lifestyle, weak regulatory control, and the pervasive role of social media contribute to heightened vulnerability to digital debt traps.

Despite the convenience offered, fintech lending services carry significant risks, including threats to mental health, personal data security, and social stability. Empirical studies (Faisal et al. 2022; Putra, Sabri, and Malik, 2024; Wirawan 2024) show that users, especially those engaging with illegal platforms, frequently experience severe psychological distress, including chronic stress, depression, sleep disorders, family conflict, and even suicidal ideation. These outcomes are often linked to coercive and unethical debt collection practices. In many cases, unchecked fintech use behaviour also disrupts interpersonal relationships; for example, hidden loans have been shown to erode trust and trigger domestic discord (Nurapipah and Abdullah, 2024).

Beyond personal harm, illegal fintech lending practices violate privacy and human rights. Research by Alfatih, Muqowim, and Anggara (2023) and Manitra (2024) reveals patterns of exploitation, including exorbitant interest rates, misuse of contact information, digital harassment, verbal abuse, and physical threats. Perpetrators often weaponise digital technologies to spread illegal platforms widely, operating beyond the reach of regulatory frameworks. Consequently, victims suffer not only financial loss but also diminished control over their personal data, further entrenching their vulnerability within the digital financial system.

This condition is worsened by low levels of financial literacy and weak legal enforcement. Although regulatory measures exist, enforcement against illegal platforms remains largely ineffective. A comprehensive, multi-level response is urgently needed: targeted financial literacy programs (particularly for university students), stronger digital regulation, and coordinated action among government agencies, financial regulators, and digital platforms to close the loopholes that allow these services to proliferate. Without such interventions, fintech lending risks drawing more individuals into cycles of debt and long-term psychosocial harm.

Secondary Data Analysis

This study applied machine learning to examine behavioural deviations in the use of fintech lending in Indonesia. By analyzing secondary data, we aimed to identify which socioeconomic factors could help predict risky or irresponsible fintech use behaviour. The variables included income, school dropout status, poverty level, type of residence, and employment status.

Five machine learning models were tested. There are Decision Tree, Random Forest, Support Vector Machine (SVM), AdaBoost, and Neural Network. All models achieved an overall accuracy of 80%. However, their performance varied in terms of how effectively they detected real cases (recall) and how often their predictions were correct (precision). Such performance metrics help to uncover how effectively each algorithm captures behavioural signals that may result from economic strain.

Model	AUC	CA	F1	Prec	Recall	MCC
Tree	0.875	0.800	0.667	0.500	1.000	0.612
Random Forest	0.875	0.800	0.667	0.500	1.000	0.612
SVM	0.812	0.800	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
AdaBoost	0.875	0.800	0.667	0.500	1.000	0.612
Neutral Network	0.938	0.800	0.667	0.500	1.000	0.612

Table 2.1 Evaluation of the Prediction Matrix for Low and High-Level Deviations

As shown in Table 2.1, four models (Decision Tree, Random Forest, AdaBoost, and Neural Network) achieved high recall scores (1.000) for detecting behavioural deviations among fintech lending users, paired with moderate precision (0.500). These results indicate that the models successfully identified all actual positive cases, but also produced a considerable number of false positives. From the perspective of Labeling Theory (Becker 1966), this pattern reflects the risk of overgeneralization, where individuals are prematurely categorised as deviant based on limited or ambiguous indicators. Such over-labeling can have negative consequences, as it may reinforce marginalization or stigmatization of users who are engaging with fintech lending as a temporary coping strategy rather than exhibiting entrenched deviant behaviour.

In contrast, the SVM model recorded a precision and recall of 0.000, indicating a complete failure to identify any deviant users. This outcome suggests an inability to capture the behavioural variance present in the dataset, potentially due to the model's sensitivity to data scaling and limited capacity for capturing nonlinear interactions. From a sociological standpoint, this limitation highlights the challenge of identifying deviance when it stems from complex, multidimensional experiences of socioeconomic strain, which linear decision boundaries cannot neatly categorise.

The Neural Network model demonstrated the highest AUC score (0.938),

signifying superior capacity to distinguish between deviant and non-deviant fintech lending users. This performance can be attributed to its ability to model complex, nonlinear relationships among predictors, which is critical when behavioural deviation results from accumulated structural disadvantages. In the context of Strain Theory (Merton, 1938), such users are not necessarily irrational actors, but rather individuals adapting to constrained financial conditions, seeking to fulfill their economic goals through accessible yet risk-laden alternatives, such as fintech lending.

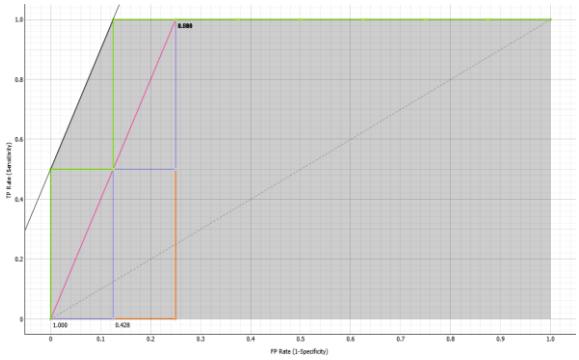

Figure 2.1 **ROC Curve for Low-Level Online Loan Usage**

As shown in Figure 2.1, Random Forest and Decision Tree performed best in identifying users with mild behavioural deviations in fintech lending, such as occasional late payments or borrowing slightly beyond their means, with AUC scores of 0.935 and 0.899 respectively. These models were effective in early detection, albeit at the expense of low precision and high recall. According to Becker's (1966) labeling theory, caution is needed in interpreting such results, as mislabeling users with temporary financial struggles may lead to unnecessary stigma and exclusion from formal credit systems.

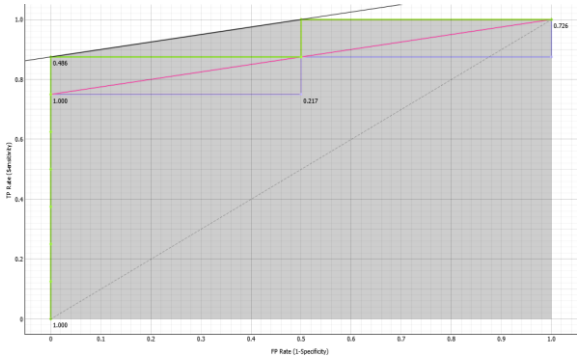

Figure 2.2 **ROC Curve for High-Level Online Loan Usage**

Meanwhile, Figure 2.2 shows model performance in detecting serious behavioural deviations, such as repeated borrowing or chronic debt. While Random Forest remained the most reliable, other models, especially SVM and kNN, performed poorly, with AUC

scores below 0.700. This suggests that severe financial misbehaviour is harder to predict, possibly due to underlying structural and psychological complexities. Merton's (1938) Strain Theory helps explain this pattern, when institutional access to financial support is blocked, users may turn to fintech lending as an adaptive but risky coping mechanism.

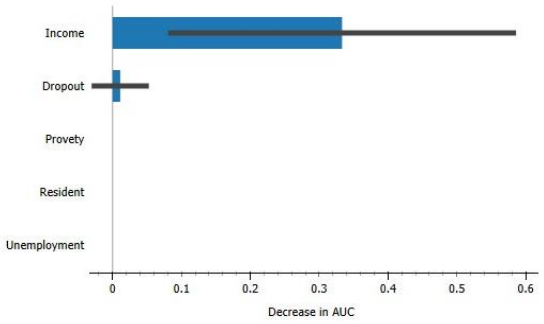

***Figure 2.3* Feature Importance**

Figure 2.3 illustrates that income level and dropout status are the most dominant predictors of deviant behaviour among fintech lending users. This pattern reflects the logic of Strain Theory (Merton 1938), which argues that when individuals are structurally blocked from accessing legitimate means such as formal financial institutions, they experience pressure to achieve culturally endorsed goals, like economic success, through alternative channels. In societies where achievement is measured by ownership and consumption, those without stable income or formal education, such as informal workers and dropouts, often lack the institutional means to fulfill these expectations.

Fintech lending platforms, with their minimal entry requirements and fast approval processes, become accessible tools for navigating financial strain. In this light, the use of fintech lending is not necessarily deviant, but a rational response to structural exclusion. It functions as a survival strategy in the absence of traditional options. Thus, income and education are not merely demographic indicators, they serve as key proxies for institutional strain and unequal access to financial legitimacy. This framing helps explain why individuals with fewer resources are more likely to rely on digital lending, even when it entails greater risk.

Qualitative Inquiry

Online Loan Usage: Urgent Needs, Instant Solutions

Participants' narrative indicate that fintech lending was frequently used as a reactive coping mechanism rather than a product of financial planning. The immediacy of financial need, especially when tied to emotional urgency was a recurring trigger.

"...I was in a pinch and needed money…I was immediately interested….and didn't think twice before, so I immediately agreed, and tried it.." (Joseph, 29, worker, Jakarta). *"My parents were sick and needed to send my younger sibling…I felt like my finances were lacking…in the end, I chose to borrow from an online application."* (Amel, 26, worker, Surabaya).

"I often had nothing in the kitchen… my child asked for milk, and I could only say, 'Wait, son,' even though I didn't know where to get the money. I was more afraid of my child going hungry than of my having debt." (Bella, 35, housewife, Surabaya).

These cases illustrate the instrumental use of fintech under duress, where the decision to engage with fintech lending was shaped more by emotional survival logic than economic calculation. The urgency of basic needs overrode financial caution.

Not all fintech use stemmed from distress. Simon borrowed out of curiosity and as a means of self-expression *"I was curious about what it would be like to have installments… I also wanted to give my friends gifts."* (Simon, early 20s, student & part-time worker, Bandung). Similarly, John initially used fintech loans to purchase game-related content. Still, his behavior escalated "Well.. back then, I was like.. I wanted to buy ML skins, but I didn't have enough money, so I used it as a loan… I'm the type of person who wants something and I have to get it… I didn't think at all at that time… I needed food, so I took it… I wanted to buy a jacket… I just took it from there.. *"*(John, 25, college student, Surabaya). Simon's and John's narratives reflect expressive consumption and low impulse control, respectively. Borrowing became less about necessity and more about immediacy, whether to experiment, fulfill desires, or bypass delayed gratification.

These patterns reflect how fintech lending serves as a coping mechanism in response to structural limitations. Strain Theory explains this as an adaptive response to blocked access to legitimate financial means, especially for individuals marginalised by income, education, or institutional barriers (Merton 1938). The fintech lending behaviour also aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where fundamental physiological and safety concerns often override rational decision-making (Trivedi, Anjanaben, and Mehta 2019). Rather than deviant, the use of digital credit is a rational survival strategy within unequal socioeconomic systems.

Functional Trust in Online Loan Platforms

Trust in fintech lending did not arise from users' belief in institutional reliability, but from their experiences of systemic efficiency. The platforms were trusted because they worked quickly and predictably, even if their broader implications were unclear.

" For the process, perhaps all online loan platforms are straightforward... only an ID card is required... and it can be disbursed on the same day... Maybe that's why many people now prefer to use online loans." (Joseph, 29, worker, Jakarta), *"The process is also easy, sis... we choose how many months we want... All the data can be manipulated... from monthly income."* (Amel, 26, worker, Surabaya).

Bella's narrative problematises this "effortless" experience *"The process was too easy… I just clicked, filled in my details, and it was immediately approved. However, no one really explained the long-term risks. I felt like I had been given a lifeline… I could immediately buy basic necessities."* (Bella, 35, housewife, Surabaya).

Simon and John expressed confidence in the platforms due to their simplicity, speed, and lack of procedural friction *"I was confident at the time because the interest and installments were reasonable... the process was also really easy, just fill in the data."* (Simon, early 20s, student & part-time worker, Bandung), *"I was confident at the time because the interest and installments were reasonable... the process was also really easy, just fill in the data."* (John, 25, student, Surabaya)

Such functional trust signals an internalization of the system's logic, users come to see fintech lending as a normalised extension of digital convenience, not as a high-risk financial commitment. This perception reflects hegemony theory (Gramsci 1971), the dominant digital-financial discourse renders borrowing as easy, harmless, and rational, masking underlying power asymmetries and long-term risks. Additionally, repeated exposure to frictionless access may gradually dull users' self-regulatory capacities, as noted in self-control theory, facilitating habitual lending behaviours with limited reflection.

Debt as a Cycle : From Quick Fix to Chronic Burden

While fintech lending initially served as a short-term solution, many users described falling into a persistent cycle of debt, marked by emotional distress and diminishing financial autonomy. " *To pay the installments, there is a burden, yes… because the loan plus interest. After that, it becomes a habit… sometimes before finishing one, I already use another… it feels like I can't be free because there are always installments."*(Joseph, 29, worker, Jakarta). *"... after I kept borrowing… I felt like my finances were starting to run out… In the end, I was digging a hole to cover a hole, sis… it felt heavy to pay it… The interest keeps going… even though we haven't paid it, it's getting harder.."*(Amel, 26, worker, Surabaya).

"I had to choose, buy rice or pay the bill. If I didn't pay, the interest would

increase. Every day I was afraid to open my phone because I knew there would be a bill notification... so I was stressed, easily angered, and couldn't sleep well. I knew this was wrong, but I didn't see any other way." (Bella, 35, housewife, Surabaya).

Although not directly trapped in debt, Simon provided a broader critique *"In the long term, the effects can lead people to become reckless, to the point of stealing and cheating. In the short term... they become dependent, and they don't try."* (Simon, early 20s, student & part-time worker, Bandung)

These narratives reflect a transformation in users' relationships with debt. What began as a situational choice turned into habitual reliance. From the perspective of Self-Control Theory, this pattern suggests difficulty in delaying gratification. The allure of short-term relief consistently outweighed the burden of long-term consequences, revealing weakened impulse regulation over time. At the same time, Labeling Theory helps explain how repeated borrowing reshaped users' identities. As debt accumulated, some individuals began to internalise the label of "debtor," experiencing shame and self-blame. Daily reminders, such as overdue notifications, reinforced this identity, making it harder to break free. In this way, the debt cycle was not merely economic but also psychological and social, sustained by both internal struggles and externally imposed roles.

Shame and Silence: The Cultural Cost of Borrowing

Beyond financial strain, participants shared emotional and social consequences of indebtedness. Within Indonesia's collectivist culture, borrowing from fintech lending platforms often evoked feelings of shame, secrecy, and identity conflict *" At first, they didn't know, because online loans are still something many people dislike. I told them after using them a few times… they started asking, 'Why do I have to borrow online?' So it was as if I couldn't manage my finances… I felt guilty too.*" (Joseph, 29, worker, Jakarta). *"My friends thought it was normal… but my family felt it was a crime… I kept it to myself, afraid of being talked about… Having debt is seen as a lowly status… as if we can't make a living."* (Amel, 26, worker, Surabaya). *"Even my husband only found out after I couldn't pay… I was so embarrassed, afraid of being judged… I'm not a spendthrift, I'm just a mother in dire straits… If I had used online loans, I would have been immediately labeled poor and wasteful."* (Bella, 35, housewife, Surabaya).

Simon experienced less personal shame but still noted social dissonance *"My friends are just surprised… I'm usually really against credit, but then I suddenly borrow money… My family seems to be really against it… But in hangouts, because I work*

freelance, I have no choice but to sometimes borrow." (Simon, early 20s, student & part-time worker, Bandung). Meanwhile, John expressed explicit discomfort when others became aware of his behaviour *"I'm embarrassed in front of my two friends… If other people have heard, where should I put my face?"* (John, 24, student, Surabaya).

These narratives illustrate how fintech lending is not merely a financial decision, but a socially embedded act laden with moral judgment. The silence and concealment reflect internalised stigma, particularly among users embedded in close-knit family or community contexts. Labelling theory helps explain how individuals come to view themselves negatively once they are marked by debt. In contrast, hegemony theory exposes how dominant financial norms frame borrowing as a personal failure rather than a structural necessity. Consequently, users internalise shame even when borrowing arises from systemic limitations.

Discussion

This research integrates psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives to explain deviant behaviour in the use of fintech lending. In this study, deviance is not treated as inherently immoral or pathological, but rather as behaviour that departs from normative financial conduct due to emotional urgency, social labeling, and structural exclusion.

Fintech lending as an adaptive deviant

In this context, fintech lending refers to app-based short-term borrowing with minimal eligibility requirements. Quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives converge on the finding that impulsive fintech use is shaped by the intersection of emotional urgency, structural vulnerability, and conflicting cultural expectations. From a psychological perspective, the decisions of fintech users often occur under acute emotional stress. While financial literacy or self-regulation may be lacking, urgency itself, often triggered by health crises or unstable income, becomes the dominant motivator. These decisions are consistent with previous findings that link impulsive financial behaviour with emotional distress and low self-control (Restike et al. 2024; Rosadi and Andriani 2023). The compulsive nature of repeated fintech use, particularly under conditions of financial instability, further reflects how digital platforms exploit cognitive vulnerabilities rather than mitigate them (Putra et al. 2024).

Structurally, machine learning results identified low income and educational dropout as significant predictors of behavioural deviation. This reflects Merton's (1938)

strain theory, where culturally endorsed goals such as economic security are unattainable through legitimate means. Fintech use then becomes an "innovative" adaptation, a deviant yet functional strategy to meet social expectations. Rather than being inherently deviant or immoral, this behaviour reflects constrained responses to systemic inequality. In this sense, fintech lending can be seen as functional deviance, a deviation that helps individuals survive within a rigid social structure.

However, deviation is not merely structural or psychological, it is also socially constructed. According to Becker's (1966) labeling theory, deviance arises through social reactions rather than the act itself. Many fintech users reported fear of disclosure and feelings of shame were shaped not by the act of using the platform, but by anticipated responses from family and community. While fintech platforms normalise borrowing through speed and accessibility, communal norms still define debt as moral failure. In this context, labeling processes determine who is perceived as deviant and under what circumstances.

Durkheim's perspective further suggests that deviance can play integrative roles. Using fintech lending during periods of personal or social disruption may function as a stabilizing mechanism rather than a breakdown of order (Turner 2014). In this way, fintech lending reflects functional deviance, behaviour that violates norms but helps individuals navigate instability. Simultaneously, when such use becomes routine and disconnected from long-term repayment ability, it may evolve into normative deviance, where socially misaligned behaviour is tolerated through institutional acceptance. This study positions fintech use not as pathology, but as a product of emotional pressure, social meaning, and structural constraint. Understanding such use requires an interdisciplinary lens attuned to how individuals manage urgent needs, social stigma, and systemic exclusion in digital environments.

Fintech Lending as normalisation of consumer behaviour

Cultural dynamics complicate this further. Fintech lending operates within a consumerist logic that frames borrowing as rational, even empowering, especially for younger fintech users. This normalization is sustained by peer validation, digital convenience, and persuasive marketing. Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of cultural hegemony, fintech use is embedded in a dominant narrative that renders indebtedness as "common sense," thereby obscuring its risks behind a veneer of cultural legitimacy. These patterns are not unique to Indonesia. Comparative studies show similar dynamics elsewhere. In China, digital finance expands access while increasing debt dependency,

especially among financially uneducated users (Yue et al. 2022). In Nigeria, instant loans improve well-being in the short term but fail to ensure financial security (Björkegren et al. 2022). Such parallels reveal that while fintech credit is often framed as empowering, it frequently amplifies vulnerability in contexts of inequality. Fintech lending operates within a consumerist logic that frames fintech lending as rational and even empowering, particularly for younger users.

From the perspective of Gramsci's hegemony, this reflects how dominant financial ideologies subtly shape public consciousness, promoting debt as a tool for self-realization rather than dependence. Fintech advertisements often portray fintech lending as a wise, modern lifestyle choice, aligning with neoliberal values of individual responsibility and economic autonomy. Labeling theory (Becker 1966), helps explain how users who frequently engage with fintech loans may be categorised as either financially savvy or, in cases of default, as irresponsible, which influences both social perception and self-identity. Psychologically, these labels can shape users' behaviour through internalisation, leading them to either confidently repeat borrowing or feel stigmatised and trapped. From an anthropological lens, fintech lending becomes a culturally embedded practice in digital societies where instant gratification and performance consumption are normalised. In this context, debt is not merely an economic concept but also a symbolic one, serving as a sign of social participation and belonging. Thus, fintech lending is sustained by a potent mix of ideological consent, identity shaping, and cultural narratives that make borrowing feel not only acceptable but desirable.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that deviant behaviour in fintech lending use is not simply a matter of individual impulsivity or financial irresponsibility, but a socio-structural phenomenon shaped by emotional urgency, systemic inequality, and cultural contradictions in the digital era. Fintech lending often functions as a form of functional deviance, a behavioural adaptation that allows individuals to survive economic instability while maintaining social expectations. Fintech lending, in this context, reflects not a breakdown of moral values but the tensions between digital consumerism, communal norms, and limited institutional support. This analysis contributes to theoretical development by integrating Strain Theory and Labeling Theory with digital-age consumer behaviour, offering a more

nuanced understanding of deviance in financial practices. Moreover, by contextualising these classical theories within a digitally mediated environment, this study offers a conceptual expansion of deviance theory to account for the normalisation of risky financial behaviours in consumerist cultures.

Future research should involve more diverse participants and explore how digital platforms, peer influence, and financial literacy interact to shape fintech lending behaviour. Additionally, examining the roles of gender, family expectations, and emotional regulation could provide a more holistic understanding. On a policy level, this study recommends implementing culturally grounded financial literacy programs that take into account local values and socioeconomic realities. Furthermore, strengthening digital consumer protection policies, such as more precise lending terms, stricter regulation of interest rates, and digital financial counseling, can help mitigate the structural vulnerabilities that lead individuals to over-rely on fintech lending. Specific efforts should also include the integration of community-based education on debt norms and government oversight to monitor exploitative lending practices in digital platforms. Such targeted interventions can bridge the gap between individual financial decisions and broader systemic reform.

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