



Morality and Academic Dishonesty among university students: Testing Extended Theory of Planned Behavior

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ABSTRACT

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This study used a cross-sectional survey at a private university in Lahore (N = 222) to test an expanded version of the TPB model that included morality as a predictor of academic dishonesty along with attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control. Socio-demographic characteristics included in the study were age, gender, major subject, and CGPA. Researchers analyzed the data using SPSS version 22. Researchers conducted factor analyses and reliability analyses to test the construct validity and internal consistency of the scales used in the study. A multivariable linear regression analysis was conducted to predict academic dishonesty from socio-demographic variables and key independent variables (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and morality). Results showed that gender and intention to commit academic dishonesty were significant predictors of academic dishonesty practices. The remaining variables were statistically insignificant, and the model explained 56% of the variance. The study concludes that academic dishonesty is a choice and can therefore be controlled by effective interventions such as altering the attitudes and perceptions of students and fostering the norm of academic integrity.

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Introduction

With the availability of new artificial intelligence websites and tools, along with multiple freelancing writing websites facilitating buyers and sellers of academic work, academic dishonesty has taken a distinct form (Zhang, 2023; Dady, 2022). Previous research has found academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism, cheating in exams, and ghostwriting, to be prevalent within several cultural settings and educational levels (Heriyati et al., 2023; Marques et al., 2019; Stephens & Nicholson, 2008). Few studies conducted in Pakistan reveal that more than 60% of the students believed that students cheat more during online examinations, while other studies have found that cheating was very frequent during examinations and assignments in Pakistani universities (Rehman, 2021; Hafeez et al., 2013; Nazir, 2010).

Likewise, studies have found students of public and private universities to be engaged in academic dishonesty by plagiarizing their work, writing assignments and project reports of other students, and manipulating data during their research projects (Iqbal et al., 2021; Ghias et al., 2014; Ramzan et al., 2012). Multiple theories have been applied to understand academic dishonesty, such as social learning theory, rational choice theory, deterrence theory, and the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Of these theories, TPB has been most appropriate in explaining violations of academic integrity (Hysaj et al., 2023; Hendy & Montargot, 2019; Tariq et al., 2017; Chudzicka-Czupala et al., 2016; Bagraim et al., 2014; Stone et al., 2010; Harding et al., 2007; Whitley & Kieth-Spiegel, 2002; Ajzen, 2002).

The traditional TPB model suggests that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape intentions towards a specific behavior, and under favorable conditions, these intentions are converted into actual behavior. This study tested an extended model of TPB by including morality as a predictive factor of academic dishonesty along with attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control among university students in Lahore. The central research question explored in the study was whether academic dishonesty is a planned behavior among university students.

2.0 Literature Review

Scholars have given different definitions of academic dishonesty and have argued that conflicting definitions and terms in academic jargon on academic dishonesty and inconsistent methodologies have obstructed the precise measurement and determination of academic dishonesty among the students (Zhang, 2023; Heriyati et al., 2023; Nagy, 2021). Despite being frequently criticized, academic dishonesty continues to be a prevalent and somewhat tolerated practice among students. Cheating behaviors, such as using notes during exams, seeking excessive assistance, plagiarizing, and aiding others in cheating, are widespread. The least common form involves submitting fully written papers created by another person (Al-Nuaimi & Uzun, 2023; David, 2015). A study by Al-Nuaimi and Uzun (2023) found that the intention to commit plagiarism was significantly influenced by several factors: attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and past behavior. Subjective norms were predicted by moral obligation and

justice, while attitudes towards plagiarism were influenced by perceived deterrence, extrinsic goal orientation, academic self-efficacy, and fear of COVID-19. Overall, these factors collectively accounted for 44% of the variance in the intention to plagiarize.

A study by Wang et al. (2023) revealed several significant findings regarding cheating tendencies among students. Firstly, previous research indicated differences in cheating behaviors based on gender, academic year, and field of study, with females reporting less cheating than males, freshmen cheating more than upperclassmen, and business students exhibiting higher cheating rates than non-business students. The analysis found significant differences in cheating intentions between males and females, with males having an average cheat intention 0.102 higher than females (Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, subjective norms (SN) differed significantly between students studying in the UK and China, with UK students having an average SN 0.21 higher than those in China (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, concerning perceived behavioral control (PBC), students majoring in management showed significantly higher levels compared to engineering and economics majors (Wang et al., 2023). Additionally, students with lower educational levels (juniors) displayed lower PBC compared to freshmen and sophomores. Researchers identified several influential factors that predict cheating behaviors. Attitude positively influenced intention toward cheating, in line with previous studies. Subjective norms positively impacted attitude, moral obligation, and intention toward cheating. Wang et al. (2023) found that moral obligation positively influenced the intention to cheat. Lastly, perceived behavioral control positively influenced intention, indicating that students confident in overcoming obstacles related to cheating showed a higher intention to engage in such behaviors in the future (Wang et al., 2023).

In examining the prediction of academic cheating, the study by Zhang (2023) uncovered several key findings. The moderating effect of perceived behavioral control was significant in predicting cheating based on subjective norms but showed no significant impact on the influence of attitude on academic cheating. Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control all significantly and positively influenced cheating. Among these factors, perceived behavioral control had the largest effect size, followed by attitude and subjective norms, respectively. However, it is important to note that the combined explanatory power of these theories of planned behavior constructs in explaining cheating behavior was relatively low, accounting for only 8.0% of the total variance in cheating. Additionally, the impact of subjective norms was relatively marginal compared to that of attitude and perceived behavioral control.

In view of the above model, following hypotheses were tested:

1. Favorable attitudes towards cheating will predict higher academic dishonesty.
2. Higher subjective norms will predict higher academic dishonesty.
3. Higher perceived behavior control will predict higher academic dishonesty.
4. Lower moral obligations will predict higher academic dishonesty.
5. Higher intentions will predict higher academic dishonesty.

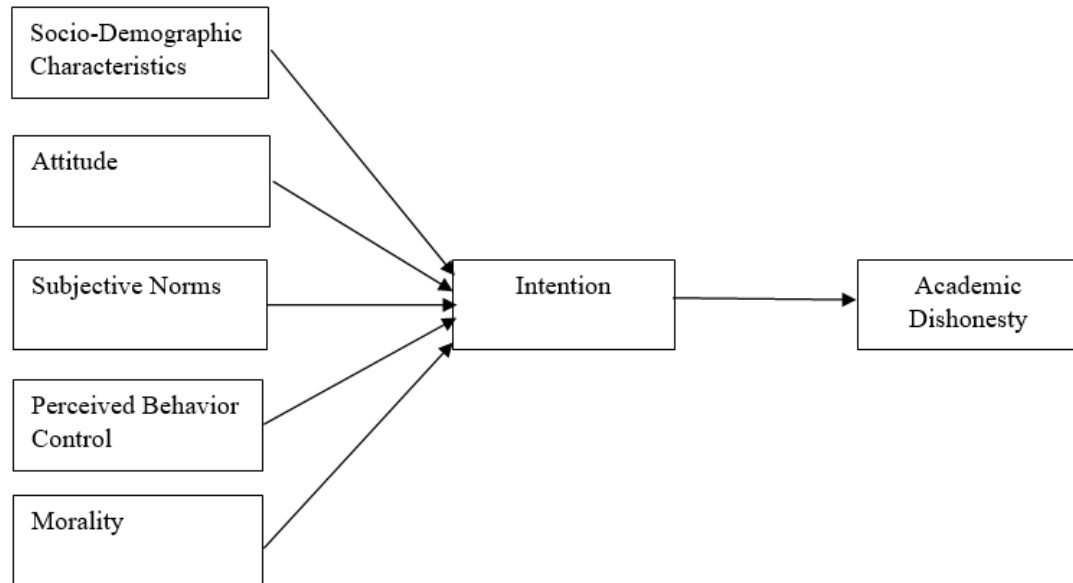


Figure 1. Extended Model of Theory of Planned Behavior (Harding et al., 2007; Ajzen, 2002)

3.0 Methodology

The study was cross-sectional in nature, and a survey was conducted at a private university in Lahore. The final sample consisted of 222 undergraduate students. The socio-demographic characteristics included in the study were age, gender, major subject, CGPA, and current semester. The key dependent variable in the study was academic dishonesty, which was measured using an Academic Dishonesty Scale comprising 23 items (Anitha and Sundaram, 2021). A sample item of the scale was, “I use signals to fetch answers from my friends during examinations.” The response categories of the scale were a 5-point Likert measure, starting from never to always. The independent variables in the study included intention, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavior control, and morality, and the response categories were 5-point Likert responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Intention was measured using five items, and a sample question to measure intention was “I intend to cheat on a class exam during the current academic term.” Subjective norms were measured using eight items, and a sample item was “If I cheated on an exam, people important to me would approve.” Attitude was measured using a semantic differential scale with five items: positive/negative, good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, superior/inferior, and thrilling/boring. Perceived behavior control was measured using four items, and a sample question was, “I believe I have the skills required to cheat in an exam.” Morality was measured using three items, and a sample question was “Cheating in an exam or test is against my principles.”

4.0 Results

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, v. 22). Factor analyses and reliability analyses were conducted to test the construct validity and internal

consistency of the items with respect to their constructs (see Table 1). Researchers dropped four items from the Academic Dishonesty Scale due to factor loadings below 0.4. One item on the intention scale was dropped as the factor loading of the respective item was lower than 0.4. Perceived behavior control was divided into two subscales with two items in each, and the subscales were ability to cheat and choice to cheat. The results summarized in Table 1 show that the scales were valid and reliable.

Table 1. Psychometric Properties of the Scales used in the study (N = 222)

Constructs	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Academic Dishonesty</i>		0.78
Item 1	0.81	
Item 2	0.81	
Item 3	0.76	
Item 4	0.84	
Item 5	0.82	
Item 6	0.72	
Item 7	0.62	
Item 8	0.94	
Item 9	0.94	
Item 10	0.77	
Item 11	0.78	
Item 12	0.84	
Item 13	0.80	
Item 14	0.84	
Item 15	0.84	
Item 16	0.76	
Item 17	0.89	
Item 18	0.89	
Item 19	0.78	
<i>Intention</i>		0.84
Item 1	0.84	
Item 2	0.84	
Item 3	0.57	0.90
Item 4	0.52	
Item 5	0.76	
<i>Attitude</i>		0.84
Item 1	0.88	
Item 2	0.88	
Item 3	0.91	
Item 4	0.90	0.70
Item 5	0.69	
<i>Subjective Norms</i>		
Item 1	0.75	

Item 2	0.81	0.75
Item 3	0.78	
Item 4	0.64	
Item 5	0.77	
Item 6	0.66	
Item 7	0.50	
Perceived Behavioral Control		
Ability to Cheat		
Item 1	0.97	
Item 2	0.96	
Choice to Cheat		
Item 3	0.42	
Item 4	0.50	
Morality		
Item 1	0.88	
Item 2	0.90	
Item 3	0.68	

To predict academic dishonesty from socio-demographic variables and key independent variables (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and morality), multivariable linear regression analysis was conducted. The value of Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.80 which was under the value of 4 showing that there was no autocorrelation. Likewise, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all the independent variables were less than 5 and the tolerance values were greater than 0.1 showing that multicollinearity was not a threat. The study was approved by University’s Institutional Review Board and the ethics of confidentiality, anonymity, no harm to participants, informed consent, and freedom to withdraw at any time were strictly observed.

The results of the model predicting academic dishonesty from socio-demographic and key independent variables used in the study are summarized as Table 2. The results show that the model predicting academic dishonesty was statistically significant as the p -value of the model was less than 0.05. The value of R^2 was 0.58 and the adjusted- R^2 was 0.56 which showed that the model explained almost 56% variance in the dependent variable (academic dishonesty).

The results presented in Table 2 further reveals that gender was a significant predictor of academic dishonesty as Males were 2.70 times more likely to engage in academic dishonesty compared to Females ($t = 2.38$, $B = 2.70$, $SE_B = 1.14$, $p < .05$). In addition to gender, intention to academic dishonesty significantly predicted dishonesty as the results show that one unit increase in intention to commit academic dishonesty resulted in 3.15 units increase in academic dishonesty practice ($t = 11.81$, $B = 3.15$, $SE_B = 0.27$, $p < .001$). The remaining variables in the model were statistically insignificant ($p > .05$).

Table 2. Multivariable Linear Regression to predict Academic Dishonesty (N = 222)

Variables	B	SE(B)	T	p -value
Age	-0.24	1.05	-0.23	.82

Gender	2.70	1.14	2.38	.01
CGPA	-0.30	1.14	-0.26	.80
Program Major (Social Science/Science)	1.16	1.33	0.88	.38
Program Major (Social Science/Others)	0.53	1.23	0.43	.67
Attitude	-0.01	0.11	-0.06	.95
Subjective Norms	0.13	0.13	1.02	.31
Perceived Behavioral Control				
<i>Ability to Cheat</i>	0.33	0.25	1.29	.20
<i>Choice to Cheat</i>	-0.31	0.34	-0.91	.37
Morality	0.29	0.24	1.18	.24
Intention	3.15	0.27	11.81	< .001

Conclusion and Future Recommendation

The study tested an extended model of TPB to predict academic dishonesty from socio-demographic variables, attitude towards academic dishonesty, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, intentions towards academic dishonesty, and morality. The study found that gender and intentions were significant predictors of academic dishonesty among university students in Lahore. Prior research has revealed that the intention to perform a behavior predicts the actual behavior, and consistent with the literature, this study also found that favorable intentions towards academic dishonesty significantly predicted students' engagement in academic dishonesty (Tariq et al., 2017; Mayhew et al., 2009).

Unlike the previous research that highlighted the relationship between attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavior control, and morality in predicting academic dishonesty, the current study found that these factors were statistically insignificant in the multivariate model, and the only variables that remained significant were gender and intentions (Mayhew et al., 2009; Harding et al., 2007; Whitley & Kieth-Spiegel, 2002; Whitley, 1998). With respect to socio-demographic variables, the predictor role of gender in literature is mixed, as few studies have found males to be more engaged in academic dishonesty compared to females, while other studies have reported no sex differences in academic dishonesty, while some research shows evidence that males have a greater likelihood of being involved in academic dishonesty as compared to females (Anderman, 2019; David, 2015). A probable reason for this can be the research design of the study and the sample taken for it. The study was cross-sectional in nature, whereas TPB can be purely tested using a longitudinal design (Tariq et al., 2017).

Prospective studies should address this limitation while designing the research. Furthermore, the study sample consisted of 222 participants from a single private sector university. Future studies should employ a larger sample from multiple universities when testing this theory. Nevertheless, the study has important policy implications as it found that higher intentions significantly predicted the behavior of academic dishonesty, which shows that academic dishonesty can be a choice and can therefore be controlled by effective interventions such as altering the attitudes and perceptions of students with respect to academic dishonesty and fostering the norm of academic integrity in them. Teachers and university counselors can play a vital role in this by inculcating the norms of integrity in students. The values of honesty and morality should

be reinforced, and students should be motivated to stick to integrity. Teachers should also design subjective and essay-type questions in class exams to reduce the chances of copying. Likewise, practical assignments involving real-life problems and scenarios should be replaced with traditional assignments to reduce the odds of cheating and copying.

Mohammad Vaqas Ali: Problem Identification and Model Development

Bakhtawar Fazal: Supervision and Drafting

Jawad Tariq: Literature search, Methodology

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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