



Academic Dishonesty in the Digital Era: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Dealing with academic dishonesty has become more rampant in the online learning environment era since it gives students easy access to their academic assessments. This study explored academic dishonesty in the digital era among criminology students in a private institution in Ozamiz City. It was conducted in a private institution delivering online learning in Ozamiz City during the school year 2021-2022. 12 participants in this research were selected through purposive sampling. The qualitative type of research using a case study with Yin's method of data analysis was used. There were five themes that emerged in this study, namely: 1) motives of cheating, 2) factors that influence cheating, 3) ways to successfully cheat, 4) the prevalence of cheating, and 5) moral transgression of cheating. The participants verbally confessed their cheating experiences in the online class, why they committed such acts, the factors that influenced them to cheat, and their realizations afterward. Although cheating has become more common with the advent of the digital world that hampers the quality of education, proactive measures to prevail in academic integrity should be observed. It is recommended that the instructors will always validate the students' answers through oral assessments. Hence, the key to prevent or minimize cheating in an online class is the instructor itself. Their ability to create an authentic assessment which involve a more critical and problem solving questions to their examination and quizzes.

Keywords: academic dishonesty, academic integrity, cheating, digital era, online learning

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty is a threat to the process of learning. The act itself is incompatible with higher education's core values. Furthermore, dishonesty compromises the individual student's integrity and the institution's reputation (Ferguson et al., 2022; Burke & Sanney, 2018). These issues are increasing among learning institutions with the advent of digital technologies, which substantially impact students' learning experiences. Although technology brings many advantages to education, it also contributes to disadvantages, particularly in the assessment process of the students' learning. The availability of the information will facilitate cheating and plagiarism among students (Al-Nuaimi, & Uzun, 2023; Rapanta et al., 2021). According to several researches conducted in Romania, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the United States, approximately 47% of 88% of the students have engaged in academic dishonesty in their examinations and other forms of academic assessment (Baran & Jonason, 2020; Ahmed, 2018). For various reasons, students engage in academic dishonesty to increase their chances of passing the program or to compete academically with the school requirements.

Although cheating is not a new phenomenon, however, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought an impact on students' attitudes toward cheating. The shifting in the teaching modality posed problems to academic integrity (Krou et al., 2021). Current studies linked the pandemic to a decline in ethical standards of education among students, particularly plagiarism issues (Amzalag, Shapira, & Dolev, 2021; Reyneke, Shuttle worth, & Visagie, 2021; Meccawy, Meccawy, & Alsobhi, 2021). Access to the internet provides students with vast and instant resources, which many find easier to plagiarize and create a new one without

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any hassle (Yazici et al., 2023; Bdair, 2021). Digital cheating, as they call it, is a problem among college students (Ahmed, 2018). Accordingly, 77 percent of students believed copying and pasting one or two words from online sources without proper citations was not a big problem.

Various studies are pointing out the reason for academic cheating. Those students who believe their teachers are unconcerned or uninterested in whether or not they understand the topic are more inclined to cheat. Additionally, teachers who are permissive, excessively difficult, or harsh in their classrooms are more likely to increase cheating incidence (Peterson, 2019). According to Chory and Offstein (2018), students who feel close to their teachers are more honest. However, teachers' capacity to create a strong connection with students becomes more difficult in online learning environments. Students who feel "separated" from their peers are more prone to participate in deception, such as cheating (Mubarak, Cao, & Zhang, 2022; Daumiller & Janke, 2020; Carter Jr, Rice, Yang, & Jackson, 2020).

Compared to typical classroom settings, online classes may only help intensify these emotions of detachment and, as a result, may contribute to academic dishonesty (Gottardello & Karabag, 2022; Eshet, Steinberger, & Grinautsky, 2021). Further, students often cheat in online classes because they know their teachers lack skills or are inexperienced in using various computer software, especially online plagiarism detection applications.

Hence, several studies have proven that the rise of online resources hampers the quality of education in some ways. However, no study explores the students' motives, influential factors, and moral transgression when they resorted to cheating in their education. Therefore, this study explored academic dishonesty in the digital era among criminology students in a private education institution in the province of Misamis Occidental. Furthermore, this program was chosen since students were expected to be public servants and future law enforcement officers in the country. In addition, criminology students in the Philippines were known to have unique attitudes among other programs. Moreover, the information gained from this study is intended to clarify existing perspectives on cheating. It may also help educational institutions create strategies for students and faculty to minimize academic dishonesty in this digital era.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study utilized the qualitative approach using the case study design. This approach describes an empirical investigation into a case or cases by answering "how" or "why" questions about the phenomenon of interest (Yazan, 2015). The researcher's significant role and the field notes gathered through interviews were crucial in the coherent pattern. The study used research questions derived from the objectives and literature reviewed. This study was conducted in one of the private institutions in Misamis Occidental, located in the northern part of Mindanao, Philippines. It was participated by Criminology students who confessed that they often committed academic dishonesty in their online classes. They were identified through snowball sampling based on the set inclusion criteria: 1) criminology students, 2) officially enrolled for at least one semester during 2020-2022 under the flexible online learning mode of instructional delivery, and 3) willing to participate.

It uses the semi-structured interview to solicit relevant information. Before the study was conducted, all questions were approved by the research committee, and pilot testing was done to ensure suitability. These procedures ensured that the questions were suitable for obtaining pertinent information from the participants and could answer the research problem. Before the actual interview, informed consent was first obtained, and all ethical issues were addressed, such as voluntariness, confidentiality, anonymity, and risk-free conditions. The researcher utilized N Vivo Software to analyze the data and identify key codes. Cuevas (2020) asserts that the last phase in data analysis entails an external phenomenological analyst who evaluates the formulated themes before they are used in this study.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was participated by 12 Criminology students from the first-year to third-year level with ages ranging from 19 to 23 years old. Before these participants were included in the study, they must admit their cheating or any dishonest deeds for academic purposes. It revealed in the study the various forms of academic dishonesty they committed, including why they did such acts, how they were being caught and sanctioned, and their realizations after being caught and sanctioned. They also detailed and shared how their acts affect their lives as students. Their responses were grouped into codes, and the themes emerged from it. Five emergent themes have been developed, namely: (1) Motives of cheating; (2) Factors that influence cheating with two sub-themes: Family factors, Personal factors; (3) Ways to successfully cheat; (4) Prevalence of cheating; and (5) The moral transgression of cheating.

Motives of Academic Dishonesty

Being a student has always been challenging, especially in online classes. Various challenges they need to face to attend classes. Some students have trouble at home or don't have a good signal or other unfavorable circumstances that hamper their overall learning process. These challenges pushed the students to cheat and other forms of dishonesty to pass the subjects. The pressure and stress led the students to do everything they could, including committing cheating and other academic dishonesty. Moreover, those graduating students were more compelled to commit cheating due to their status and striving to graduate from their program. These provide instant motivation to cheat just to comply with the requirements.

These are the unfolded statements of the participants.

"The reason why I created it is that it's the most convenient thing to do, especially searching the answers in google during the online class." (P4)

"Online class is very draining; I somehow think that passing the subject is more important than learning in the class." (P5)

"I was very desperate to pass the subject that time because I am 50 50 when my scores in quizzes and I was thinking, maybe If I could pass the oral recitation, it would lift somehow my failing grade." (P8)

"It feels like a survival technique for me because, as we all know, an online class is very draining, I felt the instant transition and 'culture-shocked, and I know I'm not the only one who do cheating." (P9)

Students cheat to obtain a passing, good, or higher grade because it is more convenient than struggling to study the lessons. The rationale behind this can be based on several issues. One theory behind cheating involves the fraud triangle based on three elements. Accordingly, any student may cheat when these elements are present: incentive/pressure, opportunity, and rationalization/ attitude (Burker & Sanney, 2018). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, all actions require the individual's purpose to perform or specific behavior. Students are obviously under pressure to earn passing grades or for those scholars to have good grades as a requirement in their scholarship program. In the presence of opportunity, students will seize the opportunity to cheat and other academic dishonesty to obtain passing grades. Their ability to rationalize their actions makes them less guilty of committing such dishonesty (Anderman & Koenka, 2017). Through this realization, the students may feel they have not done any wrongful act.

Moreover, the thinking that "everyone is doing it" suggests that cheating is a part of being a student and is a normal process. The statement "I just need to pass the subject" are ways in which students rationalize and justify their behavior regarding dishonesty. The participants may believe that everyone else

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is cheating and that if they do not, they will be left behind, resulting in retaking the subjects. Many students nowadays believe getting a good score is more important than learning something (Becker, Geer & Hughes, 2017).

This theme revealed the gloomy outlook of the students toward education. The concept of cheating may no longer be bad in students' eyes, and this becomes a precautionary measure to pass the examination and subjects in general. Hence, this misconception and misdirection of their thinking may impede the overall educational system and impact the student's future employment.

Factors that Influence Academic Dishonesty

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to different modalities in learning delivery to students. Various alternatives, such as modules and virtual classes, were also introduced. While some students enjoy this learning method, others do not appear to be interested. Distractions are constantly present for students and are even more prevalent at home since they are not in a classroom setting. Aside from the signal and other unfavorable conditions, students also faced additional hindrances that may disrupt their learning process. These include various household chores and other obligations. All of this makes genuine learning, thinking, and engagement more difficult on their part.

Two sub-themes emerged from the main theme: family and personal factors. These sub-themes are the factors that influence the students to academic dishonesty.

Family Factors.

Attending online classes at home with family members has become the main influence on academic dishonesty. Since the participants attended classes in the home-based setting, many of them were exposed to different challenges, from their different obligations to the household chores they needed to attend. Parents often forget that their child or children are also students; they must attend and comply with requirements. Parents may interrupt their students in the middle of the class to perform some household chores, like the situation of participants 1:

"I cannot focus on my studies because my parents always tell me to do this, do that, wash the dishes, buy this, buy that" (P1).

In the case of participant 6, she had to attend to her child's needs since she was already a mother. Therefore, she needs to simultaneously attend class and simultaneously be a mother to her child. It is a difficult situation for P6, but she has no choice if she wants to finish his studies. This was her confession:

"I did the cheating because I was left with no choice. I have a child to be taken care of and a subject to pass" (P6).

The shared statement of participants 1 and 6 revealed that house obligations and various householdchores were contributory factors that pushed the students to commit cheating to comply and pass the subject. Hence, these factors or circumstances must be addressed because the students were in a home-based setting. Moreover, parents may call their children to perform different chores, and with no intention, they forget they have classes to attend (Javier et al., 2022; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021).

Personal Factor.

Errant students often use misbehavior as their alibis in committing cheating the class. Blaming the situation is the common ground of the students in justifying wrongdoing. The problem is not the situation but their attitude towards learning.

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These were the confessed statements from the participants;

"I committed cheating due to lack of time to study." (P1)

"I am a forgetful person, so even if I study, I cannot still answer. That's why I have this friend who helped me with my oral." (P10)

"The reasons why I did it is because there were times I forgot the topic, and I admit I got lazy because of an online class. I don't do so much effort in my studies anymore unlike in face to face that I somehow study the lessons at night because we were asked to do advance study and we will share to the class what have we understand." (P5)

"I had a hard time understanding the topics in an online class. A face-to-face class is much better because it gives us time to review the discussions with my classmates. Unlike in an online class, we're staying in our home attending classes while working in our store or doing the household chores" (P12)

"I started struggling in my studies since I am also a full working time and a student at the same time and when I got closed with my classmate who is cheating also." (P9)

Many students claim that they are simply trying to pass the class when it comes to cheating. Many think that the transition from traditional to online education hinders their ability to acquire and retain information. The students resorted to cheating and other forms of dishonesty to cope with the situation. Participants blamed their situations for committing cheating and other forms of dishonesty. Various studies confirmed that students under online learning modalities had faced challenges from their connectivityissues to their personal challenges (Ferri et al., 2020; Khalil et al., 2020; Daviset al., 2019). Studies showed that online learning provided advantages to the students, such as accessibility of learning resources and flexibility of time. However, it also showed major disadvantages, particularly in their personal issues (Bdair, 2021; Nurse & de Miguel, 2021; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020).

For participants 10 and 5, they confessed that their forgetfulness and laziness were the reasons for committing cheating. The attitude is the main contributor to cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty. Previous studies revealed that students with diverted attitudes toward learning are the main problem of committing dishonesty. These issues of students' attitudes have become profound in the online class since the teacher has difficulty addressing the problem immediately since they are not physically present (Lapitan, 2021; Zamora-Antuñano, 2021; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020).

These emergent themes expressed that the problem is not their current situation but their attitude towards the learning process. Their willingness to learn diminished, while their desire to comply and finish the course became dominant. More students focused on the outcome of their study, which is passing and finishing the course, and forgot the true intention of enrolling and attending the class.

Ways to Successfully Commit Academic Dishonesty

Three sub-themes were developed from the main theme; namely (1) using internet resources (2) peer collaboration (3) looking into notes, handouts, and classmates' answers. These sub-themes have emerged from the responses of the participants.

Online learning gives flexibility in the process of teaching from the class schedule until the resources being used in the class. This flexibility offered by the online learning modality provides advantages to all enrolled students. However, this learning setup also provides a wide way for students to practice and successfully cheat. Furthermore, since the learning materials can be accessed easily with no restriction, students take this opportunity to access their need to answer or comply with the requirement.

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Although in general concept, readily learning materials that can be accessed any time on the internet provides great advantages for any learner. This setup allows any student to widen their understanding of the learning topics. In addition, communicating, collaborating, and sharing ideas with other students were also essential as part of the learning process. However, this can be a disadvantage to some students who heavilyrely on the internet and their classmates as their source of information.

Using Internet Resources.

Connectivity and accessible resources were important to comply with the class requirements. The internet provides quick and readily information to comply or answer in the examination. Students heavily rely on the answer provided by the internet. They no longer think and provide a great number of effort. All they need to do is access the cyber web.

These are the admitted statement of the participants:

"That will be cheating when making reaction and reflection paper. our teacher will give us essay activities most of my outputs were from the internet." (P2)

"I searched answers in google." (P7)

"I look for answers from the google." (8)

"I'm not good at writing long paragraphs. I'm not good at English. I got an answer from Google. I got caught when I could not explain my answer when my instructor asked me during synchronous class about my output." (P11)

"Copy and paste ideas from google." (P12)

The quick and readily information or answers motivated the students to commit cheating. The shared information on the internet makes the students effortless to comply with their requirements. Studies have proven that the internet provides advancement in education but also negatively affects students (Dutta & Smita, 2020; Reich et al., 2020). It is true that through the internet, students nowadays can access any materials needed to widen their understanding of the learning topic. However, this became an issue because students rely on instant information, which hampers the overall learning process (Gronauer & Diepold, 2022; Al-Kumaim et al., 2021; Almaiah et al., 2020). For the past decades, cheating has been a severe issue on college campuses (Chirumamilla et al., 2020). With the advancement of web-based resources, the possibility of improving grades or passing the course became limitless. Accessing various materials and information is much easier with the advent of technology. The study supported by Peterson (2019) found that 73.8 percent of students believed it was easier to cheat in an online class due to the easy availability of resources to complete their academic activities.

Peer Collaboration.

Since it is difficult for the teacher to check the environment setting of the students who attended classes or examinations, they work together to accomplish something. It is a good strategy in which the students learn the value of cooperation and collaboration. However, if this strategy was used abusively to the extent that even on their examination, they rely on the answers from their classmates. This hampered the true intention of learning.

These are the statement shared by the participants:

"If we are in the same house, we will divide the questions. For example, I answered number 1, they answered the rest, and we will share our answers to finish the activity or quiz with the deadline given." (P4)

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"During an oral examination, I have a friend beside me to coach me with the questions." (P10)

The studies revealed that collaboration between students is recognized by various education practitioners worldwide as an ideal way to improve learning among the students, particularly in group performance tasks. But this may also have a negative effect if the students rely on their peers (Al_airaji et al., 2022; Saleh & Meccawy, 2021; Bucciol et al., 2020). Students take advantage of collaboration with their fellow students to answer in the examination. The negative effect is that students may be able to pass the required subject but fail to attain the course's intended learning outcomes. This circumstance may affect their chances of passing the board examination and future employment in the government or any private sector.

Looking into Notes, Handouts, and Classmates Answer.

Cheating became obvious during the online learning modality by looking at the notes and classmates' answers. Students were tempted to open their notes or look at classmates' answers because no one looked at them.

These are the revealed statement of the participants:

"If I don't know the answer, I'll look into my classmate's answer and rephrase it if it's an essay" (P4)

"While answering quizzes, I open the PowerPoint that our teacher uploaded, in short, I multitask. I didn't study before opening the quiz" (P5)

"In my experience through the online examination, I take a peek of my notes every time I'm not fully sure with answers, and I can say that it is still a type of dishonesty" (P6)

"I copy answers from my classmate, and the worst was I recorded my oral recitation" (P8)

The participants find it easy and convenient to look for their handouts and other learning materials provided to them since teachers have little opportunity to catch them. Since nobody was monitoring, especially during examinations, students had various options to correct and check their answers. Studies confirmed that students who undergo modular or distance learning are prone to open a wide source of information (Al_airaji et al., 2022; Daty, 2022). The desperation of the students to pass the examination with less effort pushes them to look at their notes and copy the answer of their classmates.

Likely, any person is tempted to commit wrongdoing if nobody monitors their behaviors (Gronauer& Diepold, 2022; Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). Any person behaves properly if somebody is present and monitoring their behavior. The teachers' absence allows students to commit different ways just to pass the examination (Daty, 2022; Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

The emergent theme revealed that the participants' have various options to cheat to pass the subject. The participants have wide opportunities to cheat either using internet resources, peer collaboration, or looking into notes, handouts, and classmates' answers. All of these were available because no one checked or monitored their behaviors.

Prevalence of Academic Dishonesty

Academic Dishonesty is not only present during online modalities. Decades ago, before the pandemic, it was one of the most common forms of dishonesty among educational institutions. It is a prevalent issue among students regardless of their education levels. Because of its rampant issue, it is now difficult to trace back where or when the cheating started. The only certain answer is that students are tempted to cheat when encountering difficult situations.

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These are their unraveling stories:

"I started cheating 2-3 months after the pandemic happened, but I cheated only on those questions that are beyond my understanding. Most of the time, I avoided cheating. If I am to count the times I cheated, probably only 15 questions I searched answers online." (P1)

"I was in grade 12 when the online classes started, and then it's hard that's why when we have a class...." (P4)

"I started doing it when the online class started. It made my school life easier" (P5)

"I've did cheat for how many years now, may I started just when the pandemic happened when we're no longer having our face to face classes" (P7)

"I started just recently" (P9)

"I started cheating just this semester. I started during the 2nd cycle". (P10)

"To be honest, it's my first time to cheat the moment I have no idea what to put in my essay." (P11)

"I started cheating during my second year when I'm still in the process of adjusting from face to face to online class real quick." (P12)

The shared statements of the participants it supported in the studies of Curtis and Vardanega (2019), and Waltzer and Dahl (2023). Studies showed that the majority of students—probably more than 90%—cheat during their academic careers. The participants' cases become rampant in the online classes. They cheat for varieties of reasons. The only certainty is that they committed cheating along their educational journey. Although some participants admitted that they chose to commit cheating in a difficult situation. This situation of participants was supported by the sociological and criminological theory of strain developed by Robert king Merton in 1938, as cited byRocque, and Lasselle-Rocque (2021). According to the notion of strain theory, people pressure individuals to achieve goals though they lack of means. So naturally, this causes stress, leading any individual to commit anti-social behaviors (Gronauer, & Diepold, 2022).

The theory relates to the study since parents become the source of pressure through their expectations of their students. The students also felt this pressure, which led them to commit whatever means, including cheating, to comply and pass the subject or requirement. The pressure on the students' situation pushes them to choose the wrong way rather than the right way.

The Moral Transgression of Academic Dishonesty

Moral transgression is the act of a person breaking their moral principles. These moral principles are known as social norms and accepted behaviors in doing the right things. Participants of the study were fully aware of their actions. They know that they violated not only the rules and regulations of the school but also their moral principle.

These are their shared contrition of the participants:

"I felt so embarrassed with myself, my teacher, and my classmates. I repented, and I promised to myself not to cheat again." (P1; P2)

"Yes, I felt guilty, and I do regret knowing that my teachers lack sleep in making the exam, making the quizzes the activities, studying their lessons, and all I repay to them is

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"Yes, at first, the conscience and guilt is there. I know it's not a good mindset, but they can't blame us because an online class is really draining." (P3; P7)

"Yes, I felt guilty since the tuition is expensive and what I just cheated on it. It feels like I cheated on my parents, they're paying thousands for my tuition, but I learned nothing." (P4)

"I felt guilty and embarrassed. It feels like I am washed with cold water with her words. And I felt remorse and anger for myself." (P5; P6; P10; P11; P12)

"Yes, I felt guilty for my parents because I know how much they struggled just to send me to school, yet I didn't strive hard and just resorted to cheating." (P8; P9)

All the participants of the study felt similarly after committing cheating. They all felt guilty, ashamed, and regretted their action. They were aware that their action was wrong and against their moral principles. Studies showed that a normal person felt guilty after committing a certain violation. Moreover, these feelings of guilt and shame after committing a violation are good indicators of moral realization (Al-Nuaimi, & Uzun, 2023; Waltzer, & Dahl, 2023; Yazici et al., 2023; Reyneke, Shuttleworth, & Visagie, 2021; Hurst et al., 2022; Batavia et al., 2020; It revealed their willingness to accept the consequence and reform their wrongdoing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The benefits of online education to students are numerous and undeniable. Taking an online course is an excellent educational alternative, especially when traditional learning conditions provide many challenges, as what the pandemic brought. However, like with everything, there are certain fundamental limitations to online education that can be problematic. Online classes caused students' academic struggles, especially students who were not comfortable having their class at home, were bombarded with activities, and lived in rural areas with minimal internet connections. These factors lead students to academic dishonesty such as plagiarism, copying works and answers from classmates, and peer collaboration to cheating. From the statements of the participants, it revealed that they indulged to cheating in order to pass thesubject. Academic growth was hampered by online education. Without someone to encourage them which made it difficult to be accountable for their learning. Online learning has also isolated them from their peers.

In some circumstances, students did not give time for themselves to comprehend with the assessments given to them; most likely they resorted to digital world which made everything easier, just like searching the questions of their online examinations, quizzes, and activities in the different online applications. Online education also affected them a great deal of independence, which is important for learning. Family factors and personal factors also caused them many distractions that disrupted their learning. Self-assessment was also substantially lower in online education. Moreover, the participants confessed that at the end of the day, they were not only cheating to their teachers but also to themselves. They all felt guilty, ashamed, and regretted their actions and doing their best not to resort in cheating again.

From the results of the study, it is recommended that the instructors always validate the students' answers. It can be done through an oral assessment, and the students may do it while their cameras are open. The instructors may change their examination questionnaires as often as possible to discourage the students from simply looking up all the answers from the previous examination. These methods may require the instructors to take additional time to modify and enhance their assessments. Another, the instructor may conduct a class orientation at the start of the online class to lay down all the rules and regulations, including academic integrity and disciplinary procedures, to discourage cheating and other unethical practices. Seminars and training on character development may be given to the students to minimize the chances of committing academic dishonesty. Lastly, the key to prevent cheating in the virtual class is the instructor's ability to make an authentic assessment for their students.

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