Stories behind Academic Cheating: Cheaters' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The real-life stories of criminology students who have committed academic dishonesty are examined in this research study, Stories Behind Academic Cheating: Cheaters' Perspective. The study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the contextual and personal elements that impact cheating behaviors, the rationalizations and explanations used, and the perceived repercussions of these behaviors. In-depth interviews with criminology students were used to gather data, and Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology was used for analysis. Peer pressure and social pressure, the pressure to succeed drives academic cheating, procrastination and lack of preparation, reasons, and rationalizing cheating as a necessity or norm were the four main themes that surfaced. The results show that academic dishonesty frequently results from a vicious cycle of stress and unethical behavior caused by outside pressures, poor preparation, and internal defenses. Through stress management programs, time management workshops, and a supportive academic atmosphere, educational institutions can address the underlying causes of cheating and promote a culture of academic integrity, as this study highlights. This study intends to help develop more potent interventions to lessen academic dishonesty and encourage moral behavior by comprehending the viewpoints of people engaged.

Keywords: academic cheating, coping mechanism, lack of preparation, procrastination, rationalization of cheating, social pressure, stress and academic dishonest

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty is a rampant and troubling phenomenon in the educational sector. Although demographic factors have been linked with students' academic dishonesty in literature, many of these aspects are difficult to change. However, students' motivation, a known malleable factor, may allow for opportunities to shape students' beliefs, goals, and values, which can, in turn, mitigate academic dishonesty (Krou et al., 2021). According to Peculea et al. (2020), academic dishonesty is the opposite of academic integrity; it is characterized by various ways students are dishonest in their academic practices. As an education concept, cheating is considered academic dishonesty; whenever a student or even a teacher does an action against the standard norms of an academic institution, specifically in the teaching and learning process, it is believed to be a kind of cheating (Ahmadi, 2020).

Cheating is a kind of fraud or attempt to gain dishonest advantages in an academic institution, and it has been increasing dramatically for the last 50 years with the growth of technology. In some countries, this phenomenon has changed into a problematic factor in schools. Plagiarism is also considered a type of cheating if it occurs intentionally. More efforts are being made to mitigate the severity of cheating in academic institutions using technological-based devices (Ahmadi, 2020). Cheating is not a new phenomenon, yet the ways that students cheat and their attitudes toward cheating have changed.The Internet Age has brought tremendous opportunities for students and teachers in teaching and learning, but it has also challenged academic integrity (Dawson, 2020).

Academic stress arises from the demanding nature of academic pursuits, including exams, assignments, and expectations from teachers and parents (Jarvis et al., 2020). Students often experience pressure to perform well, leading to anxiety, fear of failure, and a sense of overwhelm (Kiran & Javaid, 2020). These stressors can result in physical symptoms like headaches and fatigue, along with emotional challenges such as irritability and low

self-esteem. Academic stress can also impair cognitive functions like concentration, memory retention, and problem-solving abilities. It affects students' overall well-being and can have long-term consequences on their academic performance and mental health (Clabaugh et al., 2021). Addressing academic stress is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment.Recent studies suggest that stress is a pervasive element in the student experience, which may correlate with an increase in academically dishonest behaviors (Lopena et al., 2021).

Academic stress and academic dishonesty lie in how stressors can influence students' decision-making processes (Anitha & Sundaram, 2021). When under significant stress, students may feel pressure to succeed at all costs, leading them to consider dishonest actions like cheating or plagiarism. The fear of failure or the desire to meet unrealistic academic standards can push students towards unethical behaviors as a means of coping or achieving academic goals (Cohen & Baruch, 2022). Chronic academic stress can also lead to a mentality in which to justify the ends, which raises the risk of using dishonest tactics even more. That is why treating academic stress is important for students' overall health as well as for developing a culture of academic integrity and lowering the incidence of dishonesty in the learning environment.

Exams and papers are two of the most prevalent ways of evaluating students' abilities (Comas-Forgas et al., 2021). Exam cheating (asking for help from classmates), plagiarism of other students' work, collaboration on individual assignments, and the use of unlawful materials during examinations are all instances (Malik et al., 2023). The outcomes of these exams may have a significant impact on students' future selves and professions, as well as their economic and social standing (Fontaine et al., 2020). Moreover, engaging in such dishonest behaviors not only erodes the trustworthiness of educational credentials but also raises ethical concerns regarding the preparedness and integrity of the future workforce. It perpetuates a cycle of incompetence and dishonesty, which may spill over into professional practices, ultimately diminishing public confidence in professionals and the institutions that credential them.

Several research studies have shown that academic dishonesty is dominating among students. As mentioned in the work of Aguilar (2021), academic dishonesty has been a concern beginning in elementary school and continuing through doctoral programs. It has been discovered that several factors contributing to its increase include expectations from instructors, families, and colleagues, the school setting, a self-centered culture, and rapidly changing media. Ten to 80% of students have experienced cheating at least once throughout their education. Some effective factors for cheating include fear of rejection or failure in subjects, difficult courses/subjects, the large volume of content, insufficient study time, and professors' unreasonable expectations from students (Saeidi et al., 2022). The findings revealed that most students are actively engaged in most academic cheating behaviors, with a prevalence rate of about 80%. It was also found that most students exhibit higher tolerance for most forms of academic cheating behaviors, which were evidenced by their lower perceptions of the seriousness of the behaviors. (Dejene et al., 2022).

Academic cheating in higher education institutions is universally considered a serious problem, as stated in Chala's work (2021). Students who have a low-stress tolerance, a high-risk tolerance, poor work ethics, and a lack of motivation are more likely to cheat (Grira& Jaeck, 2019). Students' perception regarding the severity of cheating behavior affects both the frequency and likelihood of the activity, i.e., cheating behavior. For example, if a student believes that copying from friends on exams is trivial cheating, a greater frequency of this activity would be reported. A student who does not perceive certain cheating behaviors as being unethical is more likely to cheat (Ghanem &Mozahem, 2019). According to Adzima (2020), in both face-to-face and online environments, younger students are found to engage in cheating behaviors more often, while those students with higher GPAs are found to cheat less.

While studies acknowledge the prevalence of stress among students, there is limited exploration into how universities can implement effective support mechanisms to address stress and uphold academic integrity. This research aims to expand the empirical evidence surrounding cheating in academic contexts and enrich the understanding of academic dishonesty from the viewpoint of those directly involved, namely, the students. Moreover, this study intends to determine the effectiveness of counseling services, mentorship programs, and academic resources in reducing stress levels and fostering ethical behavior, which could provide valuable insights.

By focusing on criminology students, a group expected to uphold high ethical standards in their professional lives, this research strives to explore how these students perceive cheating and rationalize their engagement in such behaviors, particularly under the influence of stress. By bridging this gap, researchers can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions tailored to the unique needs of criminology students, promoting academic honesty and student well-being. Understanding the role of institutional support systems in mitigating stress and preventing academic dishonesty is crucial in addressing these issues and concerns.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of criminology students involved in academic cheating at a university in Misamis Occidental, Philippines. The researchers aimed to capture the essence of students' perceptions and understandings of academic dishonesty through in-depth interviews. Participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences, and data was gathered using an interview guide and audio recording. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological reduction method, which involved bracketing, horizonalization, clustering themes, and creating textural and structural descriptions to synthesize participants' experiences and reveal the essence of academic cheating.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of the Participants

The study participants are criminology students from one of Misamis Occidental's higher institutions, ages 19 to 23. All of the participants are single, and most are currently in their third year.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Code Name	Age	Sex	Year Level
P1	22	Male	3rd year
P2	21	Male	3rd year
P3	22	Male	3rd year
P4	19	Male	3rd year
P5	23	Female	4th year
P6	18	Female	1st year
P7	21	Female	4th year

Peer Influence and Social Pressure

Students' behaviors are significantly shaped by peer pressure and societal pressure, especially when it comes to choices about academic integrity (Zhang & Yin, 2020).

These social dynamics are shown in the transcript to be strong influences that can either covertly or explicitly discourage students from making their academics a priority and occasionally even lead them to engage in unethical behavior like cheating. Unspoken pressure may cause a student to take shortcuts rather than put in more effort in order to keep up academically with their peers. In this situation, cheating becomes a strategy for preserving one's position in the social hierarchy rather than merely avoiding failure (Noorbehbahani et al., 2022). Social factors significantly influence academic behavior. Peers and friends frequently influence views, making it simple to place a higher priority on leisure and a lower value on education (P1). Seeing a colleague

cheat can normalize the behavior, which lowers responsibility and guilt (P2). Students frequently see cheating as an acceptable shortcut due to the extreme pressure to perform well academically, particularly in competitive settings where grades are valued more highly than learning (P4).

"Sometimes, we get influenced by our friends or the people around us, and it can make us not want to study. They might say things like, 'It is too tiring to study' or 'It is not worth it,' and before we know it, we start to feel the same way. It is easier to hang out or do other things instead of putting in the effort to study. In those moments, the temptation to relax and avoid the hard work of studying becomes strong, especially when everyone around you is also saying it is not a big deal." (P1, 1-7)

"When I start to feel guilty about cheating, I try to ease my conscience by reminding myself that I am not the only one doing it. I convince myself that it is okay because it is not just me—everyone else seems to be cheating, too. This way of thinking helps me feel less responsible for my actions and less guilty about it. I started to rationalize that if everyone else is doing it, it cannot be all that wrong. It is a way to justify my behavior, almost like the fact that others are cheating makes it acceptable or less immoral. In my mind, it becomes less about my personal choices and more about the fact that it is a common practice, so it does not seem as serious or harmful. This mindset helps me push aside any feelings of guilt and allows me to continue without constantly second-guessing myself." (P2, 119-125)

"When I decide to cheat, I often justify it to myself by thinking that in order to pass and succeed academically, I need to get high scores. It feels like the only way to ensure that I do not fail or fall behind is by finding a shortcut, especially when the pressure to perform well is so high. In my mind, good grades are the ultimate measure of success, and cheating seems like an easy way to guarantee that I get the marks I need. I tell myself that if I do not cheat, I might not be able to achieve the high scores expected of me, and failing would be worse. I also convince myself that everyone else is doing it, so it is not that big of a deal. Ultimately, I justify my decision by focusing on the result—the grade—rather than the process of learning and doing things the right way." (P4, 224-233)

"Peer influence can be a powerful obstacle to studying. When friends or those around us downplay the importance of studying, saying it is exhausting or pointless, their negativity can be contagious. It is tempting to succumb to procrastination and leisure activities, especially when surrounded by others who share the same attitude, making it seem acceptable to skip studying altogether." (P7, 304-308)

Peer pressure and social pressure have a big overall effect on students' decision-making, especially when it comes to effort and academic integrity (Kimanzi et al., 2023). People are more prone to engage in these behaviors to fit in or meet social standards when their peers minimize the value of studying or normalize cheating (Ramberg & Modin, 2019). This creates a vicious cycle in which bad habits like procrastination and cheating become more prevalent and acceptable.

The goal of short-term success, like passing grades or avoiding failure, frequently overshadows the importance of hard work and actual learning as students internalize these societal standards. This dependence on shortcuts eventually hinders not only academic progress but also personal growth by lowering self-confidence and encouraging an attitude of reliance on unfair benefits or outside validation. Students' decisions are greatly influenced by the pressure to fit in and fulfill peer or societal expectations, which frequently leads them to abandon morally righteous and constructive actions (Haney, 2022). Fostering a supportive environment that prioritizes effort, learning, and integrity over performance outcomes is necessary to address these factors (Ali et al., 2024).

Albert Bandura's Social Learning theory explains this outcome. According to this theory, people pick up behaviors, attitudes, and social standards by watching and copying others, especially those they consider to be peers or role models. This idea holds that behavior is impacted by other people's actions and reactions in the social environment in addition to direct experiences.

Similar research emphasizes how social, and peer factors influence students' academic conduct. Longobardi et al. (2020), for example, revealed that students frequently commit academic dishonesty to conform to peer

norms, particularly when cheating is viewed as normal or socially acceptable. According to research by Anderman and Koenka (2021), competitive academic settings increase the pressure on students to do well, which causes them to put grades ahead of real learning. In the meantime, social influences not only normalize immoral behaviors like cheating but also cultivate a worldview that devalues integrity and effort, according to Murdock and Beauchamp (2019). These results highlight the necessity for educational systems to establish settings that promote teamwork, moral judgment, and an emphasis on individual development rather than performance evaluations.

These findings' implications highlight how urgently educational systems and institutions must address the widespread impact of social and peer pressure on academic integrity. First, the normalization of unethical behaviors like cheating can be lessened by cultivating a culture that prioritizes learning over performance. Programs that promote moral decision-making, self-control, and fortitude in the face of difficulty should be given top priority by educational institutions. The competitive tension that encourages dishonesty may be lessened by establishing collaborative learning environments. Students might be encouraged to learn instead of cheating to exceed peers by encouraging cooperation and support amongst themselves. The harmful mentality of depending on short-term shortcuts for success can be countered by awareness efforts that highlight the long-term importance of integrity and work.

The Pressure to Succeed Drives Academic Cheating

Students can be greatly impacted by stress and pressure to perform well, particularly in highly competitive areas (Pascoe et al., 2020). These factors frequently cause anxiety, which drives students to either use effective stress management techniques or take quickcuts like academic dishonesty. The urge to succeed and the fear of failing can impair judgment, affecting moral judgment and academic achievement (Nakhla, 2019). For students to cope well and preserve their integrity, a supportive environment is essential. Stress and pressure to perform well had a big impact on their behavior, frequently resulting in academic shortcuts like cheating. Participant 1 acknowledged that worries about the repercussions were overwhelmed by a desperate desire to succeed and a dread of failing. Participant 2 talked about feeling overburdened by juggling duties, schooling, and performance pressure, which caused them to make unusual choices. The fear of failing and the difficulty of juggling internships and coursework—long hours leaving little time for study—were brought to light by Participant 4.

"The pressure of needing to pass and the fear of failure can make you overlook the consequences and take shortcuts, like cheating, to get by. It is a moment where the desire to succeed overrides the commitment to actually doing the work." (P1, 11-14)

"Between school, other responsibilities, and the constant pressure to keep up, I felt completely drained and overwhelmed. It is easier to take shortcuts than face the reality of failing because I know I have not done what I was supposed to." (P2, 63-65)

"The fear of falling short of what I believed was expected of me was made easier by cheating. Cheating became a way to protect my image and avoid the stress of falling behind." (P4, 220-222)

"When struggling in school, desperation can lead to considering cheating as an easy way out. Fear of failure and pressure to pass can overpower commitment to honest effort, making shortcuts tempting." (P7, 308-310)

Stress is a major factor in academic dishonesty since it fosters a sense of urgency, anxiety, and excessive pressure (Ferguson et al., 2022). There are many different types of stress, such as academic stress, which arises from the worry of failing or getting poor grades; time-related stress, which arises from balancing several obligations, such as internships and school; and emotional stress, which arises from the fear of disappointing oneself or others. Desperation brought on by these pressures frequently leads students to turn to academic dishonesty as a coping mechanism or means of achieving their objectives (Mathrani et al., 2021). Students may feel under pressure to cheat in order to preserve their scholarships or to avoid incurring further costs, which can lead to financial stress.

Together, these stressors increase the pressure on students to do well, which makes them feel vulnerable and

more prone to justify unethical actions like cheating as essential for survival (Waweru, 2022). Their capacity to concentrate on ethical decision-making and long-term effects is weakened by the overwhelming weight of these stressors (Crawford et al., 2023). The results show that stress not only increases the pressure to do well but also impairs students' ability to manage their stress, leading them to take shortcuts like academic dishonesty. This emphasizes how crucial it is to treat stress by providing students with improved support networks, time management instruction, and mental health tools so they may overcome obstacles without sacrificing their moral character.

When individuals are unable to accomplish culturally acceptable aims by legal means, they may resort to deviant behavior, as explained by Robert Merton's Strain Theory. This idea states that stress results from the discrepancy between what society expects of a person (such as success or academic performance) and their capacity to satisfy those expectations because of a lack of opportunity, resources, or support. Merton distinguished five ways to cope with stress, and the one that was most pertinent to academic dishonesty was inventiveness. Innovation happens when people embrace social norms (like academic achievement) yet use unusual or illegal methods (like cheating) to reach them.

Similar research emphasizes the connection between academic dishonesty and stress. For example, McCabe et al. (2018) discovered that increased academic pressure frequently leads students to act unethically, especially when juggling several obligations. According to research by Elias et al. (2020), students who are under financial stress, such as when they fear losing their scholarships, are much more likely to cheat because they put survival above morality. Nguyen et al. (2021) also highlighted how time-related stress, such as overlapping responsibilities and tight deadlines, impairs students' judgment and causes them to justify dishonest behavior. Together, these findings highlight the necessity of all-encompassing stress-reduction tactics, like encouraging time management and offering easily available mental health tools.

These findings' implications highlight how important it is for educational institutions to address the underlying stressors that lead to academic dishonesty. Educational institutions must establish a nurturing atmosphere that places a high value on well-being, time management, and mental health. The temptation to engage in unethical behavior can be lessened by putting in place initiatives that assist students in managing their academic, emotional, and financial stress, such as academic assistance materials, stress-relieving seminars, and counseling services. Pressure can also be reduced by highlighting the value of personal integrity and promoting cooperation over rivalry. In addition, educators and administrators must establish transparent evaluation procedures and realistic, unambiguous standards while cultivating a culture that prioritizes learning and development over results. By following these guidelines, students can manage stress in a healthy way, which can enhance their academic performance and moral decision-making.

Procrastination and Lack of Preparation

Since they create an endless cycle of stress and pressure, procrastination and a lack of preparation are major contributors to academic dishonesty (Costa,2019). Students who procrastinate put off doing assignments and frequently underestimate the amount of time and effort needed. Procrastination leads to a lack of preparedness, which contributes to anxiety and failure-related fears (Pollite, 2023). Students may feel trapped and believe that the only option to accomplish their objectives in the little amount of time remaining is to cheat. Due to procrastination, a lack of preparation, and unforeseen difficulties, students frequently turn to cheating. Participant 1 acknowledged that cheating seemed like the only option to succeed when assignments were put off until the last minute. Participant 4 brought attention to the anxiety that comes with unexpected quizzes, particularly when one is ill-prepared because of other obligations. In a similar vein, Participant 7 pointed out that procrastination and laziness cause people to cheat at the last minute out of fear, even if they are aware that it undermines real learning. Participant 6 also mentioned that their difficulties were exacerbated by ambiguous quiz topics and little preparation, which made lying an alluring way out. When taken as a whole, these incidents demonstrate how academic dishonesty is fueled by stress and inadequate planning.

"You procrastinate and put off your work until it is almost too late. Then, when the exam or deadline comes around, you realize it is necessary to cheat to pass. You know you have not prepared enough, and the pressure of failing becomes too much to handle. At that moment, cheating feels like the only option because you are

desperate to get through without facing the consequences of not studying." (P1, 29-34)

"There are times when I find myself completely unprepared, especially during surprise quizzes. These unexpected tests can really throw me off, especially when I have not studied or when I have been too busy with other things. It is in those moments of panic when I realize I have not reviewed the material that I start to feel much pressure." (P4, 211-215)

"Laziness and procrastination lead to last-minute cheating due to fear of failure, despite knowing it is not a genuine solution and harms long-term learning." (P7, 314-316)

"The topic for the quiz has not been discussed yet, so we did not have enough preparation to study or even know where the quiz questions were taken from." (P6, 297-299)

The combined effect of the statements shows that academic dishonesty is more likely when procrastination and a lack of preparation lead to a vicious circle of stress and desperation (Sirois, 2022). Students who procrastinate put off preparation and make it seem like the only way to succeed is to cheat (Amigud& Lancaster, 2019).

Cheating affects the actual learning process and does not address the root cause of poor preparation, even though it could offer short-term respite. The results highlight the necessity of improved time management, more productive study techniques, and support networks to help students cope with stress and prevent procrastination (Valente et al., 2024). Educational institutions may create a more honest and productive learning environment where students are less inclined to turn to cheating as a coping strategy by tackling the underlying reasons for procrastination and lack of preparedness (Shimave, 2020).

In their 1990 book A General Theory of Crime, Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi introduced the Self-Control Theory, also known as the General Theory of Crime. According to this view, the main cause of criminal and deviant behavior is a lack of self-control. This idea holds that people who lack self-control are more inclined to act impulsively, recklessly, and selfishly without thinking about the long-term effects. This can result in risky behaviors, criminal activity, and unethical acts like academic dishonesty.

Similar research has examined the relationship between academic dishonesty, stress, and procrastination. According to Steel (2007), for example, procrastination is frequently associated with higher levels of stress and poor academic performance, which might then cause students to cheat in an attempt to relieve the strain of approaching deadlines. According to research by Newton and Stornaiuolo (2018), students who procrastinate are more inclined to cheat in order to get the grades they want since they lack good time management skills. Schouwenburg et al. (2017) noted in another study that students who struggled with time management and had high levels of stress were more likely to resort to academic dishonesty as a short-term solution to achieve their academic obligations. These studies highlight how critical it is to address the underlying reasons for procrastination.

The research implications highlight how important it is for educational institutions to deal with stress and procrastination in order to lower academic dishonesty. Workshops on study skills and time management are essential for assisting students in creating healthy coping mechanisms for the demands of the classroom. The temptation to cheat can also be lessened by encouraging a culture that prioritizes lifelong learning and personal development over immediate academic achievement. In order to help students manage their anxiety and prevent them from resorting to dishonest behavior, educational institutions should also offer support networks, such as counseling services and stress-relieving programs. Schools can establish a more encouraging and moral learning atmosphere that promotes both academic integrity and personal growth by tackling procrastination and stress as its underlying causes.

Rationalizing Cheating as a Necessity or Norm

Students who engage in academic dishonesty employ justifications and rationalizations as a way to lessen their guilt and prevent cognitive dissonance (Westbrook, 2023). Claiming "everyone is doing it" or accusing the system of being unjust are examples of justifications that alter the situation to make cheating appear acceptable

(Skorin, 2019). Saying, "It is just one exam," or "I did not have enough time to study," are examples of rationalizations that minimize the wrongdoing by downplaying its consequences. Students who are desperate and ill-prepared frequently claim that cheating is their only choice. While Participant 2 used it to prevent receiving low scores, Participant 1 considered it the simplest method to pass. Participant 6 blamed neglected topics in class, whereas Participant 4 said it was not a huge deal because other people cheated. These opinions demonstrate how academic dishonesty is fueled by pressure and difficulties.

"When you are really desperate to pass, you might convince yourself that cheating is the easiest way out." (P1, 9-10)

"I tell myself that it is okay to cheat because, if I do not, I will probably end up with a really low score." (P2, 69-70)

"I also convince myself that everyone else is doing it, so it is not that big of a deal." (P238-241)

"The topic for the quiz has not been discussed yet, so we did not have enough preparation to study or even know where the quiz questions were taken from." (P6, 297-298)

Academic dishonesty is frequently justified and rationalized in response to social pressures, personal hardships, and outside demands (Krou et al., 2019). Cheating becomes a coping mechanism for many students who are afraid of failing (Ifeagwazi et al., 2019). Because of the pressure to perform well in school, cheating may seem like the only way to avoid receiving poor grades (Wenzel & Reinhard, 2020). In a similar vein, students may consider cheating to be the easiest and fastest way to pass if they feel unprepared or overwhelmed by the challenge of studying. This kind of thinking frequently occurs when students think that cheating is easier than doing their homework and preparation.

Furthermore, students could justify cheating as a means of filling in knowledge gaps brought on by missing classes or inadequate instruction (Chankova, 2020). Peer pressure also contributes significantly to the justification of academic dishonesty. Students may feel less guilty when they see cheating as less immoral or more acceptable when it becomes commonplace among their peers (Waltzer et al., 2021).

These justifications demonstrate how pressure, a lack of preparation, and social forces frequently combine to cause academic dishonesty (Lee, 2020). Institutions must concentrate on developing a stress-relieving, resource-rich, and integrity-promoting academic atmosphere to solve this problem. Schools can assist students in making more moral decisions and create an environment where cheating is not accepted by addressing the underlying causes of cheating, which include peer pressure, fear of failing, and inadequate preparation.

Similar research has examined how personal hardships and outside influences contribute to academic dishonesty. According to Anderson et al. (2018), for example, students frequently turn to cheating as a coping mechanism for academic stress, particularly when confronted with high standards and the dread of failing. According to their research, cheating may be interpreted as a reaction to the fear of falling short of performance expectations. According to a 2019 study by Jerrim, peer pressure plays a big role in students' decisions to cheat since they often mimic their classmates' actions, especially in settings where academic dishonesty is accepted. Furthermore, D'Arcy and Irwin (2020) stressed that students who feel neglected or overburdened by the demands of their academic workload may justify cheating as a strategy to close the gap if they have not prepared for or understood the course material.

Rational Choice Theory is a pertinent theory that explains the rationalization and justification of academic dishonesty. According to this hypothesis, people evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of their options before making judgments. Students may justify cheating in the context of academic dishonesty if they believe the advantages—such as avoiding failing or earning better grades—outweigh the possible drawbacks, like being caught or losing their integrity.

The implications of these findings imply that social pressures, academic difficulties, and justifications all play a role in academic dishonesty, which is not exclusively the result of personal shortcomings. The propensity to defend cheating to cope with outside pressures or avoid failure emphasizes how important it is for educational

institutions to address these underlying issues. Schools can lessen the pressure that results in justifications for dishonesty by creating a positive learning environment that values honesty and perseverance. Students can be empowered to overcome obstacles without turning to immoral means by putting stress-reduction programs into place, setting clear objectives, and giving sufficient academic assistance. Furthermore, students' views can be changed by supporting peer responsibility and opposing a society that normalizes cheating, which will make academic dishonesty less acceptable.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that social and peer pressure significantly influence students' behavior, often prioritizing immediate success over honesty in academics. Stress from emotional, time, and intellectual demands impairs students' ability to make ethical decisions, increasing the likelihood of academic dishonesty. Procrastination and poor preparation create a cycle of stress, leading students to cheat as a quick solution. Students commonly justify academic dishonesty as a coping mechanism for societal pressures, personal hardships, and failure-related anxieties. Educational institutions need to address these underlying issues by providing better support networks, time management training, mental health resources, and encouraging effective study habits. By fostering an environment that promotes academic integrity and personal development, schools can help students make more ethical choices and reduce academic dishonesty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that educational institutions implement programs to foster a culture of integrity, focusing on moral decision-making, personal growth, and reducing social pressure. These programs should include peer mentoring, time management workshops, and campaigns to create a supportive environment for discussing challenges. Schools should also address procrastination and poor preparation by offering focused time management courses and study methods, promoting long-term academic success and integrity. Additionally, institutions should tackle the root causes of academic dishonesty—such as social pressures and inadequate preparation—by providing academic support, stress management resources, and mentorship. Emphasizing the long-term consequences of dishonesty through clear policies and awareness campaigns will further reduce cheating. Lastly, future research should explore faculty perspectives on academic dishonesty to develop strategies for encouraging moral behavior in educational settings.

Declarations

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare no competing financial, professional, or personal interests.

Consent for publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

All the authors took part in the literature review, analysis, and manuscript writing equally.

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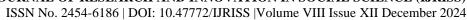
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