# Cheating - A Moral Dilemma Influencing Academic Dishonesty

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**ABSTRACT:**

Academic dishonesty has always been frowned upon in the educational environment and is definitely a challenge for online learning. The objective of this research was to examine factors leading to fear during the assessments that influence academic dishonesty and could destroy students' ethics. The study used a mixed method research and examined the students' emotions to further explore that the students' self-esteem was connected with their ethics. The questionnaire was administered online to collect data from a pilot group of 30 students from different secondary schools. Data were analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics. The different situational factors: students unprepared, unsupervised assessment, influences from others, responsible for emotional fear factor, giving rise to emotional response and its intensity towards students' action were examined by the use of Ekman's model of "Atlas of Emotions". From the study of related literature, research articles, reports, it was found that students at both undergraduate and graduate levels admitted they cheated on the tests. To avoid the emotional pain, students cheated in exams. It was found that there was a coefficient $r = 0.7$ indicating positive correlation between self-esteem and student ethics, based on Pearson's correlation.

**Key words**: Academic dishonesty, Fear, Emotion, Pleasure and Pain, Self-Esteem

## 1. Introduction

Let us take up a scenario that what if anyone gets an opportunity to deceive during tests or assignments as a student, how many students would avail this as an opportunity? And so whatever the reasons for this temptation be, would it not leave a person to pave a way to next level, with flying colors. Just the mere thought of it, does it not give wings to the stress, allowing it to fly away. As a result, the sense of calmness and tranquility gives one pleasure according to their own justified reason.

Utilitarianism distinguishes right from wrong based on the consequences by making ethical choices as this is a form of consequentialism, which promotes "greatest happiness", which actually sets no value to pain and rejoices pleasure at any given cost. Looking at the concept of Utilitarianism, which looks at acquiring pleasure rather than pain and Eudemonia simply means "less wrong", this concept is

regarded as one step higher than Utilitarianism which deals with perfect rationality of knowing everything that was really happening (Draklight, 2013), and utilitarianism takes only pleasure as moral intrinsic value; where pain has no moral value without reasoning, which devalues pain; however, values happiness more. However, according to Plato, if the consequences of pleasure is bad, the action initially taken is condemned by the people which is regarded bad as well (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Socrates also stated that pleasure could result in evil, if the cause in first place was for the use of an evil pleasure, which resulted in pain, example food, sex, drinking etc. (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Now as for the emotions that are concerned, it also has intrinsic value, being part of Eudemonic Utilitarianism, where the decision of the moral action is part of reasoning and rationality, by taking in consideration of the power of heart and not of the mind. However, as for the actions in virtue ethics, it plays a significant role, as the emotional dimensions cannot be ignored, because it being the main essence of the soul of human being (Kuangfei X, 2015).

As an educator and an assessment consultant, the assessments have always been a very reliable tool when assessing students' progress, but looking at the fact that due to the different situational factors, the students get involved in deception intentionally or not-intentionally, example , students with low self-esteem who might be the low level ability students, when they are not appreciated in the class might lead them to search for different means to deceive during assessments, which might also lead to jeopardizing students' ethics. So would these manifested actions, be the only one to be taken into consideration or would emotions be given any importance for the students being involved in academic dishonesty?

## 1.1 Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty is a method of deceiving, that represents other person's work as their own or even getting assisted by other students. Apparently, academic dishonesty may vary in practice in different regions (Mills.W, 2010). As per Rettinger, high school students are completely oblivious to the consequences of cheating of this immoral action (Simmons.A, 2018).

## 1.2 Student Ethics and Integrity:

Leading among many factors influencing and being affected, students' ethics plays a great role in building up their character or dignity. Academic dishonesty may lead to of the destruction of students' ethics, as ethics is considered to maintain the students' integrity. This unethical behavior is seen as "corrupt" or "bad" practice. This has come from a Latin word "integer" and "integritas", which means as a whole (Macfarlane.B, et al., 2012). This is a virtue in moral education. Integrity is based on basic values of honesty, trust, respect etc. (Jurdi.R et al., 2012).

## 1.3 Self-esteem:

Low self-esteem might be considered as one of the reason that influences the academic dishonesty as the teachers assign activities or tests, the students may get the opportunity to deceive. It is seen that not only the students' ethics may be questioned but also schools' credibility and reputation may fall in jeopardy. This may be due to many factors, such as students may be being underappreciated; probably they are influenced by others, simply because they are doing it. Students' low confidence level and low self-esteem (Lutz, 2014), the

students' ability to learn and better performance ability may diminish, which might lead to an incomplete and unfulfilled life trying to find easy way out in the long run. If the action of deceiving is considered to be immoral, the factors or causes of one's emotions resulting in deceiving, are they being taken into consideration?

The situational factors, also known as the external factors are one of the circumstances which influences academic dishonesty, such as fear of failure, pressure from the parents (Rauthman J.F, 2017), or to score better results, culture memorization as this is seen as not-intentional and common practice. etc. Due to some of the factors influencing academic dishonesty, some students are willing to gamble as they are sure that they can get away with it (Simmons.A,2018).

### 1.4 Different Situational Factors influencing Academic Dishonesty:

In this digital age, an increase in cheating threatens integrity and gives rise to many factors influencing *academic dishonesty*, questioning students' ethics and self–esteem (Sanchez,2019). These offenses may be carried out by the students specifically during the learning and assessment environment which may give rise to questioning, as to why students are more inclined towards making choices that may make an argument toward *academic dishonesty*, jeopardizing their moral values and sense of prudence not only for now but also affecting their future in the long run. Students might be undergoing emotional roller coaster ride, which are hardly looked upon.

### 1.5 Influence of others:

One of the situational factors that may also be the influence of academic dishonesty causing low self-esteem in students is others' influence in deceiving or cheating. The engagement of this unethical behavior is due to the fact that they are motivated by the perception of others to be dishonest, which may elicit the desire to be deceptive. Also, the students with lower ability who are not supported by teachers are liable to deceive more as compared to high level ability students (Mill.W,2010), which might be done with some intentions to seek pleasure.

### 1.6 Unappreciated by the teachers:

The students might not be fully recognized and also not being appreciated by their teachers whether it be an online session or conventional classroom, which might lead to being deceptive due to low self-esteem. The instructors represent as the leaders of the classroom, unfortunately, may judge the students on their ability to perform and might adopt a strategy that some of the students in the classroom who might not have the ability to perform well (Gannon & Boguszak,2013) and might be labeled as low achievers, by placing their own assumptions and judgement. The students emotions are not understood as the instructors don't get to know them and this might affect the student-teacher relationship.

### 1.7 Unsupervised Online assessments:

Due to the pandemic 2020, as almost around 87% of world's student population (UNESCO 2020, McGee 2013), education was moved from conventional to online platform, and this gave rise to online teaching-learning. There are chances that there might not be direct supervision in the online learning environment from the teacher's side. This situation may give the perfect opportunity to the students to be dishonest academically during online assessments. Chances are when the students

are not given attention as the teachers focuses on the high achievers, this might create low self-esteem for few of them and may encourage students to deceive as they don't have the confidence to prove themselves that they are better than others. Therefore, students with low self-esteem may get involved in cheating (McGee, 2013). The online platform and technology has actually opened a new venue for being deceptive in online learning environment (Mills.W, 2010).

According to the International Center of Academic Integrity (ICAI), the past 12 years' statistics revealed that the graduate students' and under graduate students' responses revealed that 17% graduates and 39% undergraduates accepted that they cheated on tests, cheating in written assignments 42% and 62% respectively, (table1). According to the survey conducted, out of 70,000 high school's students in USA, 58% admitted of plagiarism (McCabe, 2015).

**Table 1** *Students statistics and cheating*

| Respondents | Graduate Students | Undergraduates* |
|---|---|---|
| Number responding | ~17,000 | ~71,300 |
| admit cheating on tests: | 17% | 39% |
| admit cheating on written assignments: | 40% | 62% |
| admit written or test cheating: | 43% | 68% |

Source: ICAI, (McCabe, 2015)

According to one of the newspapers, 9 out of 10 middle school students or 90 % admitted to copying off homework assignment and two-third admitted of exam cheating (Frank,2019). According to the survey conducted, out of 70,000 high schools' students in USA, 58% admitted of plagiarism (McCabe, 2015). As per 2010 research; college students were asked if they were to deceive a web based exam; 42% agreed saying if chance provided they would do it. In the similar study, 36% admitted to plagiarizing work (Mills. W, 2010). Also students openly admitted adding to plagiarized work, such as copied sentences, phrases, not using proper citations or acknowledgement (Spaulding. M, 2009), which might serve as a big threat to students' ethics.

Upon examining some articles, the researchers have shown that this had been very common practice in the past as be a conventional class tests / exam, the students admitted to dishonesty. The study conducted regarding the perception of the faculty and students which differed a great deal. One of the research question asked if the students would steal a copy of the test, faculty's reply as compared to the students was 62% and 42%, where students actually admitted they would definitely steal it (Spaulding. M, 2009).

US High school students, 75% of 12,000 admitted as well and even bright students admitted in 1998 survey which reported 80% committed being dishonest in exams (Frank, 2019). International statistics from UK Office of OFQUAL stated year 9-10 (GCSE), year 11-13 (AS

and A Level) were involved in misusage of unauthorized material in 2018 exams. 2735 penalties alone in 2018 were issued. Despite of penalties from figure1, these staggering numbers from 2014-2018 have been seen as an unbroken statistical record (Academic Integrity,2019).
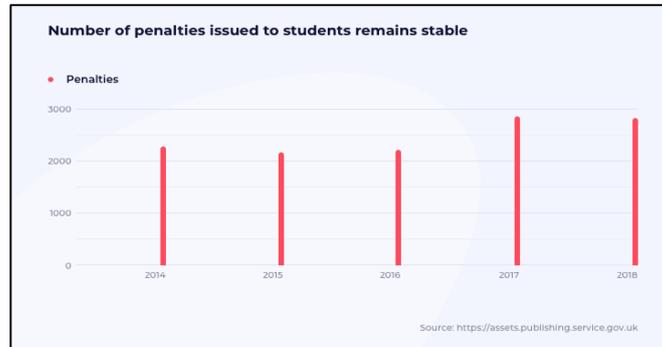


*Figure1: Number of penalties issued to students*

Sixty four percent of students have been accused of usage of unauthorized material, 2% charged with plagiarism, 75% caught using mobile phones. Among famous universities, Harvard reported of 125 cases of plagiarism, Yale reported 14% out of 1400 of cheats, 24% of copying was reported from figure 2. (Academic Integrity, 2019)
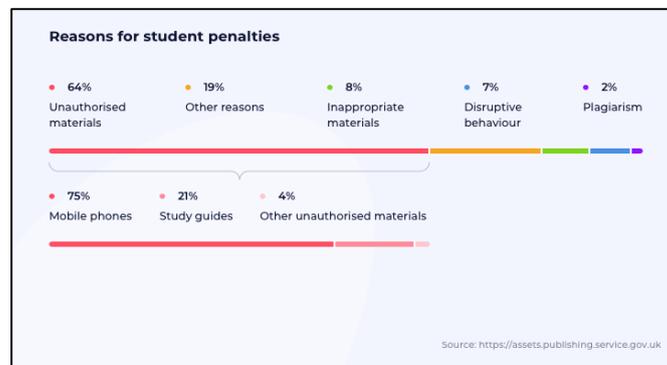


*Figure 2:  Reasons for students penalties*

## 2.    Purpose of Research

This research was aiming for understanding beliefs and emotions from student's point of view focusing on the need of attaining pleasure as per Utilitarianism rule and per Eudemonic Utilitarianism in doing the right thing with rationality, valuing their emotions which will impact a positive result towards academic to build greater self-esteem and prevent the negative emotional factor of fear, which might not compel them to take wrong measures especially this could affect their ethics and integrity.

One of the other effect of the fear factor is that it gives rise to the dangers on students' performance and ethics. Students usually, due to fear, procrastinate and due

to this reason of unpreparedness, which might lead to fear of ignorance regarding the topic, further leading to a pattern of routine absenteeism (Bledsoe.S.T & Baskin .J.J, 2014), affecting their academic performance and hence resulting in low self-esteem.

For the students to avoid the pain, their easy way out being deceptive would give them pleasure, which gives them pleasure from the utilitarianism point of view. Therefore, to avoid the path of pain and suffering, from *figure 5*; and to avoid this mental torture of emotional consequences, giving rise to different negative emotional responses, the intensity of the pain depends on the endurance of the students' strength, could be avoided by cheating.

To understand the students, the instructors might make the students feel comfortable, as to maintain better relationship. With the help of good communication, the students might get calmed as distressed and nervous students might gain some confidence. Students might be made self-aware of the emotional fear and its intensity that could lead to disaster if not dealt properly.

Considering as a compulsory part of education, academic dishonesty is morally and ethically wrong, but it is actually aiding some helpless students, who are subjected towards unreasonable conditions that force them to deceive. The different factors such as fear for better grades; fear of parents pressuring their children, no inspiration might lead the students to commit this crime. If these helpless disrespected students are placed against their will in school, there is no chance that they will follow the ethical codes of conduct. However; they would seek for pleasure in being deceptive to avoid the pain of fear (Soling.C,2015).
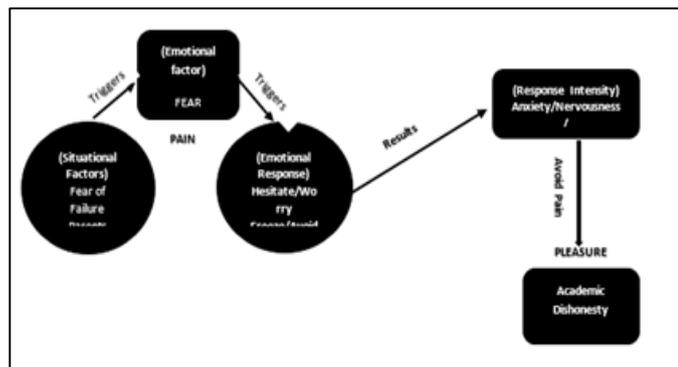


*Figure 3: Pain and Pleasure*

## 3. Study Beneficiaries

This study may be beneficial to the school's management and the teachers, as this will help the schools with the understanding of students' emotions. The management can further train assessment literate educators with the integration of information technology tools (Husain, 2021). This study might be useful to the Head of Curriculum and Assessments, Head of School etc.

## 4. Literature Review

Dating back to stoics, emotional factors are part of decision making and judgements along with the responsibility of reasoning of the action performed (Hursthouse.R & Glen.P, 2018). Dr.Paul Ekman, a psychologist and a researcher in understanding of the emotions and deception, proposed 6 basic emotions: anger, fear, surprise, disgust, joy and sadness. Emotions arises from the brain, from 3 different regions: 1. Amygdala, 2. Insula, 3. Periaqueductal gray.

The Amygdala is responsible for interpreting fear, motivation, also can identify rewards and how to attain them. Insula can interpret disgust, when someone feels pain (Halber.D,2018). This can be further explained that the brain processes each action and responds in a positive or negative way. Ekman designed a virtual model to place the thoughts of these emotions and their results.

As per Ekman, he designed an online mapping model "Atlas of Emotions" with the backed up funding by Dalai Lama (2016). As per this model, when any emotional state is triggered, responses are based on one's actions. Example: Someone insults you, you feel angry, which could result in frustration or argumentativeness. Some dear one departs, you feel sad and disappointed.

Different situational factors that influence academic dishonesty from the student's side, might be because of the triggering of the emotional factors. They might cheat because of the fear factor such as fear of failure might lead to nervousness, or the pressure of parents might lead their kids to be tensed, or even abusive. Also to gain attention from the teachers, competition among peers, old emotional memory trigger etc. are few other reasons.
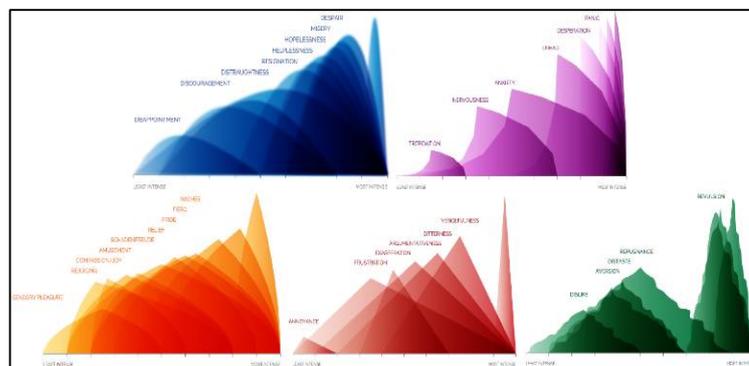


*Figure 4: Emotions*

Source: Five visualizations from Atlas of Emotions, Credit: Paul Ekman

A graphic representation infused with visual effects lists the emotions. Fear Graph of emotions starts with "trepidation", a feeling of anxiety due to fear which is on the least intense position could lead to most intense position "terror" (Atlas of Emotions, n.d), where students might take to intense level such as thinking of committing suicide, if their feelings are not understood, are under pressure and probably are blamed for their action of academic dishonesty.
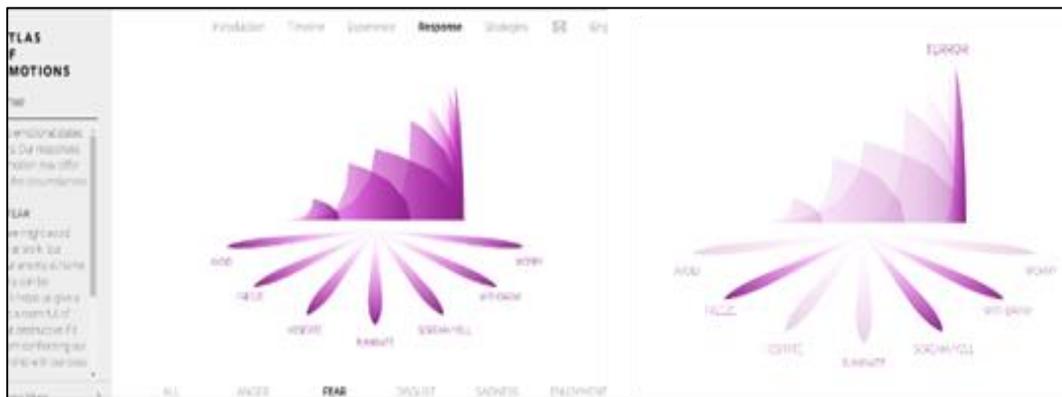
*Figure 5 :  Fear Emotion and Responses*

Source: Atlas of Emotions

## 5. Research Methodology

This research study is based on the mixed method using qualitative and quantitative analysis. It is designed to use quantitative correlation analysis to find the relationship between students' ethics and self-esteem. The research tool was pilot testing with 30 secondary school students, to test the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The students were chosen at random from different secondary schools. Questionnaires were designed and sent out to the respondents through the google survey. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The analysis results were presented by percentages and graphs.

## 6. Results and Discussion

Students' responses as per the first question, from table 2, if cheating or deceiving is considered unethical, 56.7% students strongly agree. The 53.3 % students strongly agreed said that it was easy to deceive during the online assessments. However, 33.3% strongly agreed to the fact that the students were unsupervised and this actually gave the opportunity to the students to deceive and 40% students agreed to the same. Also, according to the *table 4*, connecting to the fact that the 36.6% student agreed that good students were paid more attention by the teachers, also from *table 3,* 33.3% agreed at the same point. To get better grades, students might cheat and 50% responses strongly agreed to this, and 13% disagreed. The correlation statistics were also calculated. For those who responded to this piloted survey, from *table 5*, it was found that there was a high correlation coefficient of r= 0.7, indicating positive correlation between self-esteem and student ethics, based on Pearson's correlation.

**Table 2** *Easy to cheat*

| 4. It is quite easy to cheat during online tests. | COUNT of 4. It is quite easy to cheat during online tests. |
|---|---|
| 1 | 16.67% |
| 2 | 13.33% |
| 3 | 16.67% |
| 4 | 53.33% |
| **Grand Total** | **100.00%** |
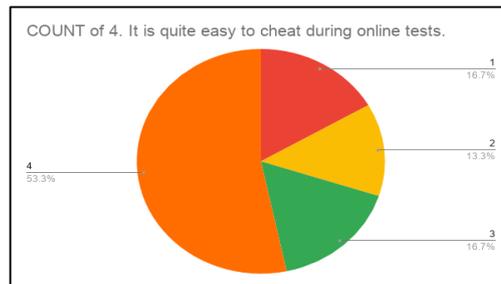


*Figure 6 Quite easy to cheat*

**Table 3** *For better grades*

| 8. Students cheat to get better grades. | COUNTof 8. Students cheat to get better grades. |
|---|---|
| 1 | 10.00% |
| 2 | 13.33% |
| 3 | 26.67% |
| 4 | 50.00% |
| **Grand Total** | **100.00%** |
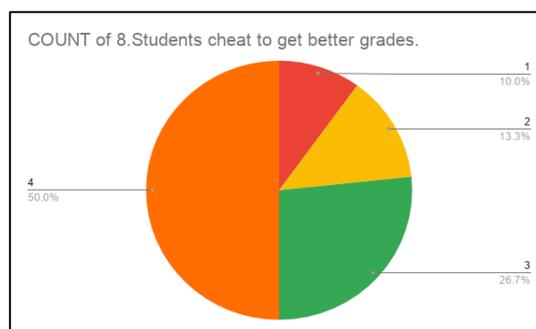


*Figure 7: Students and better grades*

**Table 4** *Teachers support good students*

| 6. Teachers only respond and provide most of the help to the good students. | COUNT of 6. Teachers only respond and provide most of the help to good students. |
|---|---|
| 1 | 33.33% |
| 2 | 13.33% |
| 3 | 36.67% |
| 4 | 16.67% |
| **Grand Total** | **100.00%** |
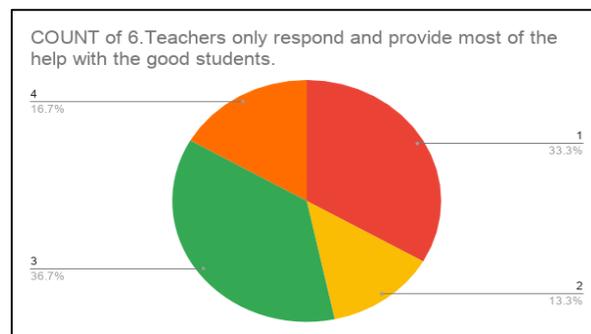


*Figure 8   Teachers support to good students*

**Table 5:** *Correlation statistics*

|  | total esteem | total ethics |
|---|---|---|
| total esteem | 1 |  |
| total ethics | 0.705218383 | 1 |

**7. Conclusion and Recommendation:**

Student self-esteem and student ethics matter a lot. If a new strategy is adopted by considering emotions of the students, there is a chance that we can see a drastic change to avoid academic dishonesty. It is recommended that the educators might need to take up emotional understanding needs of the students into consideration. School policies might like to include trainings regarding understanding students' emotion. The school management might also need to train on the assessment literacy Model built on the framework such as Digital Bloom to cater to the needs of the students as the students are equipped with different learning abilities (Husain, 2021). The Ministry of Education can initiate online or face to face training courses for the schools management, teachers and administrators to train them regarding the understanding of emotions and student psychology. Future research may use this study to  further explore on the significance as part of t-test using  different emotions segregating and comparing between different genders of secondary school students.

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