

# Motivational Perspectives on Student Cheating Behaviour: Toward an Integrated Model of Academic Dishonesty

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## Abstract

Academic dishonesty is a serious issue that undermines the values and principles of students and poses a threat to the integrity of educational institutions. To address this issue, it is important to identify its root causes, mainly because it is linked to the attitudes towards unethical behaviour in the workplace. It is crucial to gain a deeper understanding and insights into this issue to develop effective solutions and prevent it from happening. Therefore, this study aims to identify the factors that motivate students to engage in academic dishonesty. The survey instrument was based on Beck and Azjen's (1991) modified theory of planned behaviour, which consists of five components: moral obligation, attitude towards cheating, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and perceived locus of control. The survey was conducted among 300 respondents in public and private higher education institutions in Melaka. The findings revealed that three factors significantly influence the intention to commit academic dishonesty: moral obligation, attitude towards cheating, and perceived locus of control. Conversely, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control were

insignificant in predicting the intention to commit academic dishonesty among Malaysian students. These results led to the development of the Integrative Model of Academic Dishonesty, which could help to reduce the prevalence of academic dishonesty among students. Future research could investigate the most effective methods for promoting ethical conduct and determining whether students understand the negative impact of academic misconduct on their employment prospects.

**Keywords:** Academic Dishonesty, Academic Integrity, Academic Misconduct, Cheating Behaviour

## **Introduction**

Academic dishonesty is a pervasive and complex issue that can have far-reaching consequences. It undermines the fairness and legitimacy of academic assessments and erodes the trust and credibility of educational institutions. Despite efforts to combat it, academic dishonesty remains a persistent and complex issue that requires ongoing attention and intervention. Academic dishonesty occurs when students intentionally engage in prohibited behaviours to gain an unfair advantage in an academic setting (Zhao et al., 2021). Such unethical conduct includes cheating, which can take various forms, such as using unauthorized materials, copying other students' work, or receiving unauthorized assistance during exams (NIU, 2022).

Research shows that academic dishonesty is a persistent problem that needs to be addressed proactively. Studies indicate that almost half of the respondents (48.6%) admitted to having cheated at least once during their academic career, while 28.2% reported cheating multiple times during the previous academic year (Chala, 2021). Meanwhile, research conducted by Krou et al (2021), academic dishonesty is positively associated with motivation and extrinsic goal orientation. This means that students who prioritize achieving good grades and external rewards are more likely to engage in academic dishonesty.

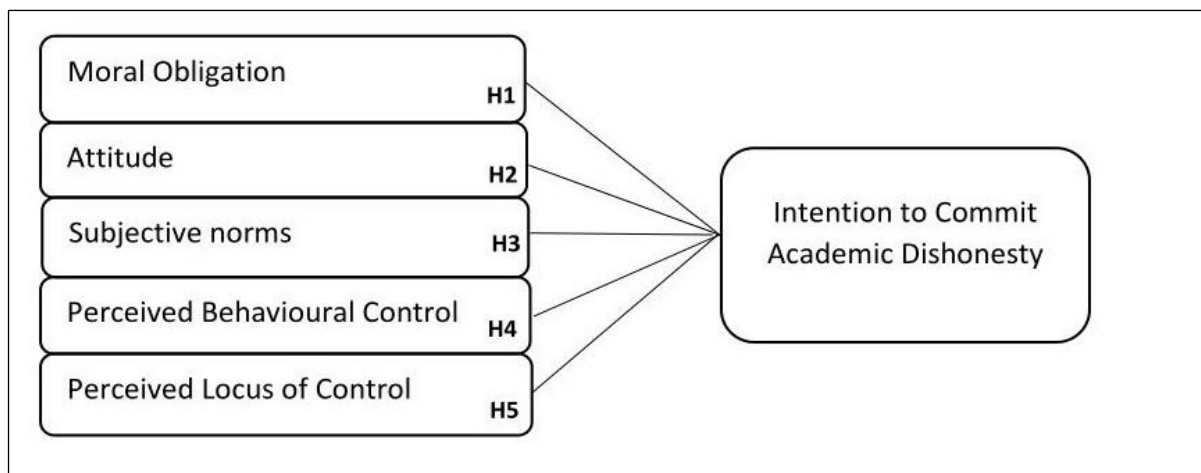
Academic dishonesty is a growing concern, not just for educational institutions but also for the workforce (Hendy, 2021). Several studies have revealed that students who cheat in college are more likely to engage in unethical behaviour when they enter the workforce (Baran & Jonason, 2020). This is because academic dishonesty reflects a person's attitude towards unethical behaviour, which can translate into their professional life. It is essential to understand that academic dishonesty is not a victimless crime. It undermines the integrity of the entire educational system, and it also harms those students who work hard and earn their degrees honestly.

Guerrero-Dib et al. (2020) have suggested that both academic institutions and employers should work together to ensure that ethical behaviour is promoted and upheld. This can be achieved by introducing strict measures to prevent cheating at educational institutions and by providing training to employees to ensure that they are aware of ethical standards and the consequences of unethical behaviour. Employers can also consider using a screening process to identify candidates who have a history of academic dishonesty, thereby minimizing the risk of unethical behaviour in the workplace (Ljubin-Golub et al., 2020).

In light of these unethical issues, this study employed a modified version of Azjen's theory of planned behaviour in an attempt to dictate student motivational factors to engage in academic dishonesty. Therefore, the following five hypotheses and a research framework (Figure 1) were developed.

H1: Moral obligation influences the intention to commit academic dishonesty.

- H2: Attitude towards cheating influences the intention to commit academic dishonesty.
- H3: Subjective norms influence the intention to commit academic dishonesty.
- H4: Perceived behavioural control influences the intention to commit academic dishonesty.
- H5: Perceived locus of control influences the intention to commit academic dishonesty.



The study aims to examine the attitudes of full-time undergraduate students towards academic misconduct behaviours in Melaka. The population of the study comprises students from both public higher education universities, such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), and private higher education institutions, such as Universiti Melaka (UNIMEL) and Universiti Multimedia (MMU) in Melaka. The sample selection was based on non-probability convenience sampling, and a total of 300 respondents were considered.

For the study, a self-administered closed questionnaire was used. The questionnaire items were adapted from Beck and Azjen's (1991) modified theory of planned behaviours. The five components of the theory include a moral obligation, attitude towards cheating, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and perceived locus of control. These components were measured using the Likert scale, where the metrics ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

High scores on the Likert scale indicate accepting and favourable attitudes towards academic misconduct behaviours, while low scores indicate unfavourable or unaccepting attitudes. The study aims to explore the different attitudes of students towards academic misconduct and to see how these attitudes vary across different institutions. Table 1 lists the number of items for each variable, and the study results will be analysed and reported in detail.

Table 1  
*Item variance*

| <b>Variable</b>               | <b>No. of items</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| Moral obligation              | 10                  |
| Attitude towards cheating     | 12                  |
| Subjective norms              | 5                   |
| Perceived behavioural control | 11                  |
| Perceived locus of control    | 12                  |

The study collected data from a diverse group of respondents, with demographic profiles including gender, level of study, programme, and current semester. Data analysis revealed that out of the total respondents, 59% were female (n=178) and 41% were male (n=122). The education levels of the respondents were distributed between two levels of study, diploma (n=152, 51%) and degree (n=148, 49%). The selection of respondents was completely random, ensuring that the sample accurately represented various programmes and the current semester as this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' demographic characteristics and how they relate to the research questions.

Table 2

*Demographic profile*

| Variable              | N   | (%) |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|
| <b>Gender</b>         |     |     |
| Male                  | 122 | 41  |
| Female                | 178 | 59  |
| <b>Level of study</b> |     |     |
| Diploma               | 152 | 51  |
| Degree                | 148 | 49  |

**Results and Discussion****Descriptive Statistics for Public Higher Education Institutions**

Table 2 presents a comprehensive overview of the significant correlations observed among all variables for public higher education institutions. The analysis yielded a p-value range of .000 to .326, with a significance level set at  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 2

*Equality of mean and variances I*

| Q   | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Sig. ( $p < 0.05$ ) |
|-----|-------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1.1 | 2.436 | .7997          | .000                |
| 2.2 | 3.567 | .5235          | .001                |
| 3.5 | 2.773 | .7610          | .251                |
| 4.3 | 2.453 | .8402          | .326                |
| 5.7 | 3.524 | .6323          | .000                |

The results provided an insightful look into the attitudes and beliefs of participants regarding academic integrity. When asked about their moral obligation, the highest mean score of 2.436 (with a standard deviation of .7997) was achieved for the question "I intend to get test information from a student who has taken it." This indicates that a significant percentage of respondents may be inclined towards unethical behaviour. The second question, which explored attitude towards cheating, had the highest mean score of 3.567 (with a standard deviation of .5235) for the statement "It is always wrong to cheat." This suggests that most participants have a strong moral stance against cheating.

However, the fifth question, which delved into subjective norms, revealed that the highest mean score of 2.773 (with a standard deviation of .7611) was obtained for the statement, "I believe that there were cheaters among my friends, and they have not been caught." This implies that social pressure and influence may be contributing factors to academic dishonesty. The third question, which assessed perceived behavioural control, had the

highest mean score of 2.453 (with a standard deviation of .8402) for the statement "It is easy to understand the policy on exams," indicating that participants felt confident in their ability to comprehend the exam guidelines. Finally, the seventh question, which explored perceived locus of control, had the highest mean score of 3.524 (with a standard deviation of .6323) for the statement "I believe that information on the Internet sources is readily available at the click of a mouse." This suggests that participants believe that information is easily accessible and readily available, thereby potentially contributing to academic dishonesty.

### Descriptive Statistics for Private Higher Education Institutions

Table 3 summarizes significant correlations among all variables specifically for private higher education institutions. The p-values for all variables ranged between 0.000 to 0.765, while the significance level was established at  $p < 0.05$ . This table provides a clear and detailed understanding of the relationships between various elements within private higher education institutions.

Table 3

#### *Equality of mean and variances II*

| Q   | Mean  | Std. Deviation | Sig. ( $p < 0.05$ ) |
|-----|-------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1.1 | 2.920 | .6629          | .000                |
| 2.2 | 3.350 | .6252          | .001                |
| 3.5 | 2.879 | .8295          | .251                |
| 4.3 | 2.550 | .8655          | .326                |
| 5.7 | 3.269 | .5651          | .765                |

The results indicate interesting insights regarding students' attitudes towards cheating. The question that scored the highest mean score ( $M=2.920$ ,  $SD=.6629$ ) was related to moral obligation and concerned obtaining test information from a student who had taken the test. This suggests that students may feel a sense of obligation to gather information from others in order to perform better on tests. The second question with the highest mean score ( $M=3.349$ ,  $SD=.6252$ ) enquired about the attitude towards cheating and stated that it is always wrong to cheat. This shows that a significant number of students hold strong ethical beliefs and consider cheating to be completely unethical.

The third question, which was related to perceived behavioural control, asked whether the policy on exams was easy to understand, and scored a mean of ( $M=2.550$ ,  $SD=.8655$ ). This suggests that students may find it difficult to comprehend exam policies, which could potentially lead to confusion surrounding expectations and rules. The fourth question on subjective norms, which asked whether cheating frequently happens during tests and examinations, scored the highest mean ( $M=2.879$ ,  $SD=.8295$ ). This highlights that students perceive cheating to be a common occurrence, which could influence their behaviour. Finally, the first question on perceived locus of control, which asked whether the instructions of the assignment were understood clearly to avoid plagiarism, scored the highest mean ( $M=3.269$ ,  $SD=.5651$ ). This indicates that most students are aware of the importance of avoiding plagiarism and try to understand the instructions clearly to avoid any unintentional plagiarism.

### **Comparison between Public and Private Higher Education Institutions**

The results of the statistical analysis in this study shed light on the factors that significantly influence students' intention to commit academic dishonesty. Out of all the hypotheses tested, only three were found to have a significant impact on this intention - moral obligation, attitude towards cheating, and perceived locus of control. Furthermore, when comparing public and private institutions, it was found that two of these hypotheses were significant in relation to academic dishonesty - moral obligation and attitude towards cheating. These variables were found to be prevalent in both public and private higher education institutions, indicating that students in either setting have equal opportunities to engage in academic misconduct if they receive support from their peers. Moral obligation, in particular, was identified as a key motivational predictor that could influence students' decision to either engage in or abstain from academic dishonesty. The findings also indicate that a student's attitude towards cheating has a significant impact on their intention to commit academic dishonesty. The study confirms previous research that suggests that individuals who have a higher motivation to comply are more likely to engage in cheating behaviours (Blachnio et al., 2022). This implies that if students have a favourable attitude towards cheating, they are more likely to commit academic misconduct, regardless of whether they attend a public or private higher education institution (Kamarudin et al., 2017).

The study suggests that there is a significant relationship between a student's perceived control over their actions and their likelihood to engage in academic dishonesty. However, this relationship is only applicable to private higher education institutions. Surprisingly, the level of perceived control does not influence students in public institutions. This finding implies that students in private higher education institutions have a higher level of internal or external control. Students with a higher internal locus of control believe that they are responsible for their academic dishonesty, while those with higher external control tend to attribute their actions to external factors such as luck, fate or timing. Thus, perceived locus of control is a crucial indicator as it can influence a student's decision to engage in academic misconduct. The study highlights the importance of understanding the role of perceived locus of control in preventing academic misconduct and promoting academic integrity among students.

To address this issue, previous studies recommend a collaborative network should be established among lecturers throughout the learning institution (Dias-Oliveira et al., (2022). This network would serve to create awareness about the negative impacts of academic dishonesty, enforce policies that promote academic integrity, and enhance the quality of attitude and behaviour of the students. The ultimate goal is to promote ethical behaviour among students and ensure they develop the necessary skills to become responsible and honest citizens.

### **Academic – Dishonesty Behaviour Model**

Using these three hypotheses that are prevalent in both public and private higher education institutions; 1) moral obligation, 2) attitude toward cheating and 3) perceived locus of control, the researchers developed an integrated academic dishonesty - behaviour model that implies students' decision to engage in a specific behaviour can be predicted by their intention to engage in that behaviour (Figure 2). As a general rule, the stronger the intention to engage in a behaviour, the more likely its performance should be.

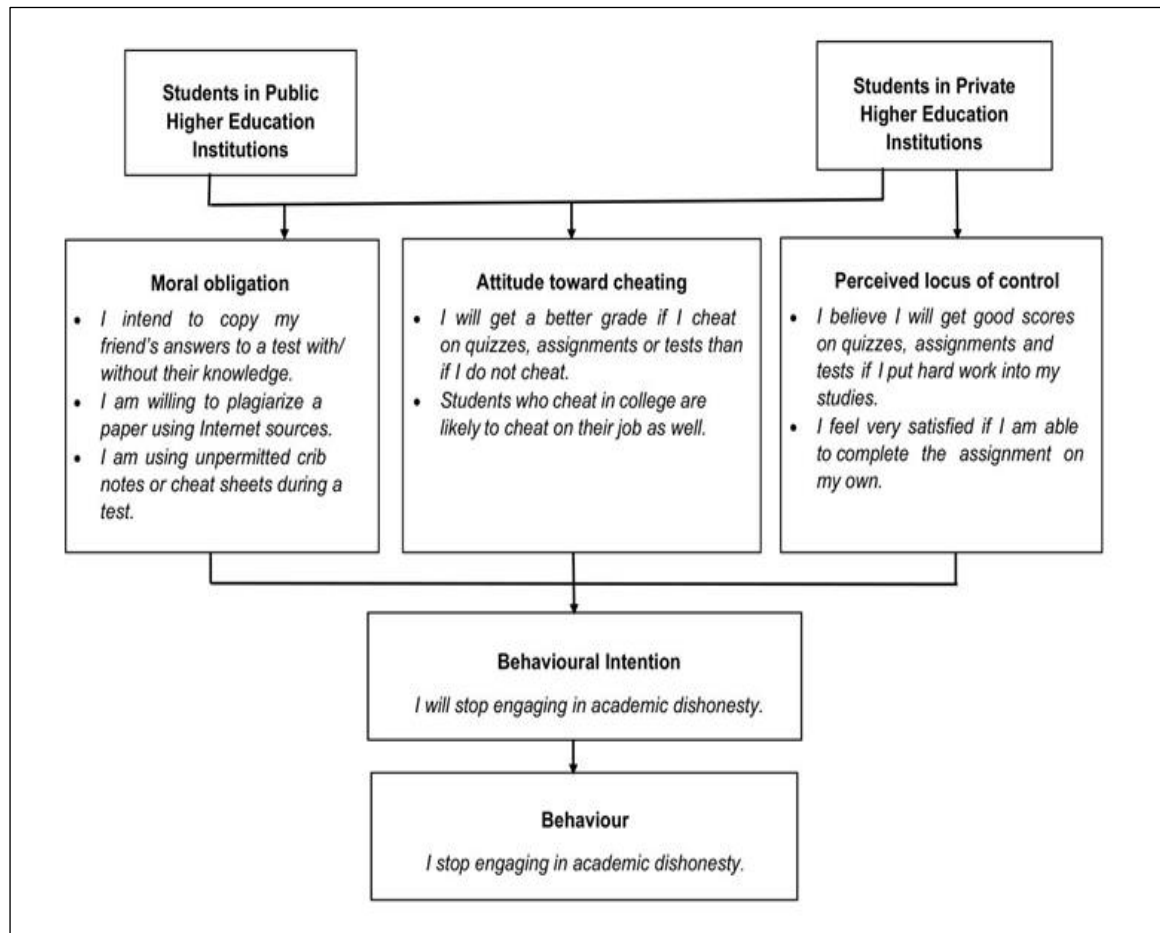


Figure 2: Academic Dishonesty – Behaviour Model

The aim of this model is to accurately anticipate instances of academic dishonesty among students, both in public and private higher education institutions. It consists of three key components that together form a comprehensive approach to preventing academic cheating. The first component is moral obligation, which refers to a student's sense of responsibility to uphold ethical standards in their academic work. The second component is the attitude towards cheating, which takes into account a student's personal beliefs and values regarding cheating. The third component is perceived locus of control, which refers to a student's belief in their ability to control their own behaviour and resist the temptation to cheat. By addressing these three components, this model provides a robust framework for minimizing or halting academic dishonesty, thereby promoting academic integrity and fairness in higher education.

In comparison between students in public and private higher education institutions, two components are significant with the intention of academic dishonesty, which are moral obligation and attitude toward cheating. Both of them are prevalent in public and private higher education institutions. It implies that students from either type of institution have the same opportunities to perform academic dishonesty if they have an obligation arising out of considerations of right and wrong. The moral obligation acts as a motivational predictor for students, which can lead to either performing or refusing to perform an action. It also highlights that students' attitudes towards cheating play a crucial role in shaping their behaviour, affecting their academic performance and, consequently, their future prospects.

Some of the incidences in light of this feature are;

- *I intend to copy my friend's answers to a test with/without their knowledge.*
- *I am willing to plagiarize a paper using Internet sources.*
- *I am using unpermitted crib notes or cheat sheets during a test.*

Attitude toward cheating also has a significant influence on committing academic dishonesty. The manner in which an individual views cheating holds immense power in determining whether they resort to academic dishonesty. This implies that students enrolled in both public and private higher education institutions may engage in academic dishonesty if they hold a lenient attitude towards cheating. To combat this issue, it is imperative to establish a collaborative network among lecturers throughout the learning institution. This network will prove to be instrumental in creating an environment of awareness, ensuring strict enforcement against academic dishonesty, and improving the overall quality of student's attitudes and behaviour. The incidences that support this feature are;

- *I will get a better grade if I cheat on quizzes, assignments or tests than if I do not cheat.*
- *Students who cheat in college are also likely to cheat on their job.*

The other variable, which is the perceived locus of control, is only valid in private higher education institutions, as it does not have a significant influence on students in public higher education institutions. It can be seen through these incidences;

- *I believe I will get good scores on quizzes, assignments and tests if I put hard work into my studies.*
- *I feel very satisfied if I am able to complete the assignment on my own.*

This variable indicates that students in private higher education institutions have a higher level of internal or external control. It is observed that these students tend to possess a stronger sense of either internal or external control. Those with a higher locus of control internally tend to assume responsibility for their academic dishonesty and take ownership of their actions. Conversely, students with a higher level of external control are more likely to attribute their actions to external factors such as luck, fate, or timing. This perceived locus of control is a critical determinant of student acts of academic dishonesty, making it an essential aspect to consider while assessing such behaviours.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendation**

Conclusively, the three hypotheses that are prevalent in both public and private higher education institutions, 1) moral obligation, 2) attitude toward cheating, and 3) perceived locus of control, led to the development of the integrative academic dishonesty – behaviour model. By examining the interdependence between these intentions and students' behaviour, the model confirms that students who believe they will not engage in academic dishonesty are less likely to do so. This demonstrates the importance of these variables in shaping students' intentions and helping them to avoid academic misconduct.

The integrative academic dishonesty – behaviour model contributes to the current literature on behaviour models by providing a primary framework for understanding the factors that influence ethical or unethical actions, particularly in academic settings. It has also contributed additional empirical evidence to the current literature for behaviour models. Future research could investigate the most effective methods for promoting ethical conduct and determining whether students understand the negative impact of academic misconduct on their employment prospects.



This model is an important tool for educators, policymakers, and researchers who are interested in reducing academic dishonesty and promoting ethical behaviour among students. It provides a clear understanding of the variables that influence students' intentions and behaviour, which can be used to develop effective interventions and strategies. By implementing these interventions and strategies, educators can help students understand the importance of academic integrity and the negative consequences of academic misconduct. This will not only benefit the students themselves but also society as a whole, as it will ensure that the next generation of professionals is well-educated, ethical, and responsible.

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