

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXAM ANXIETY AND CHEATING BEHAVIOR: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATES IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

by

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## Abstract

*Cheating behavior is a critical educational concern across all academic levels globally. The trend is pervasive among higher education students and undermines human and national developments. This study examined cheating behavior among students in tertiary institutions in Enugu State, Nigeria, based on their subjective exam anxiety. Two hundred and thirty-seven undergraduates participated in the study. The students were conveniently pooled from different institutions of higher learning between February and April 2022. They completed self-report measures of the Cognitive Exam Anxiety Scale and the Cheating behavior Scale. The data were analyzed using a Pearson-moment correlation. The finding revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior,  $r(235) = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ . Importantly, exam anxiety explained 12.6% of the variation in cheating behavior. The finding has implications for educational and institutional development.*

**Keywords:** *Exam anxiety, cheating behavior, undergraduates, higher education.*

## BACKGROUND

Higher education is an important institution that aims to offer students with improved information. It gives people a way into the workforce (Kromydas, 2017). As a result, higher education provides a unique opportunity for personal growth as well as high-quality choices for improving overall achievement equity. It is a platform that prepares people for a variety of life requirements and societal concerns (Feday, 2017). A well-managed focused, and expanding tertiary education system is critical for producing talented and well-trained graduates for today's economy and national growth. Tertiary education provides endless opportunities for social mobility and economic development, from offering training for direct professional application to developing stages of learning complexity toward post-graduate courses and research. It has the authority to deliver high-quality education to bring about much-needed change.

The concept of tertiary education encompasses public and private universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Indeed, they have contributed significantly to human and economic development. However, cheating behavior has become one of the most devastating and conspicuous forms of indiscipline in the Nigerian education system (Jekayinfa et al., 2011). Although, education is a vital avenue to improving students' knowledge, attitude, and ethical behaviors devoid of learning dishonesty (Azulay Chertok et al., 2014). However, there is a growing alarm about the prevalent unethical behaviors relative to cheating among undergraduates in tertiary institutions.

Cheating behavior is a rampant and troubling phenomenon in the educational sector (Krou et al., 2021), which encompasses cheating, plagiarism, and falsification of data or citations (Hamlin et al., 2013). It is common and establishes a concern in higher education (Finchilescu & Cooper, 2018). Indeed, intimations suggest that most students perceive cheating as a pathway to success and a competitive concept (Muhney et al., 2008). Cheating behavior describes students' dishonest attitudes regarding academic exams and practices. It denotes an educational activity that violates established evaluation standards and other institutional policies, regulations (Bayaa et al., 2016). Cheating behavior occurs when students indulge in actions intended to obtain undue benefit relative to evaluation (Guthrie, 2009). It is regarded as unprincipled and fraudulent intellectual larceny capable of denting an institution's reputation and jeopardizing societal development (Maina et al., 2014). Accordingly, Faucher and Caves (2009) referred to the phenomenon as behaviors aimed at exchanging academic information through unauthorized channels and evading the standard evaluation procedures in an educational context.

Cheating is a global problem that affects both developed and developing countries (Arhin & Jones, 2009; Chapman & Luptone, 2004; Denisova-Schmidt, 2016; Ogunji, 2011; Smith, 2010; Tadesse & Getachew, 2011). Most significantly, there is ample evidence that academic cheating is widespread in higher education across the world (Aaron & Roche, 2013; Adzima, 2020; Brimble, 2016; Elahi et al., 2013; Farisi, 2013; Feday, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Linn & Wen, 2007; Mustapha et al., 2017; Radulovic & Uys, 2019). Nonetheless, according to Olutola (2016), the rate at which university students participate in different acts of dishonesty has long been a source of worry for academics and university administration.

Previous studies have underscored the pattern and prevalence of cheating behavior in the Nigerian educational context (see., Achibong, 2013; Buraimo et al., 2020; Chukwuemeka, 2013; Okoroafor et al., 2016; Olabisi, 2009; Olasehinde-William, 2006; Omonijor et al., 2014; Onu et al., 2021; Osisioqu & Maman, 2017; William & Aremu, 2019). For example, Maina (2014) investigated students' awareness and indulgence in plagiarism and their perception of punishment for cheating behavior. The research used data from 200 tertiary institution students in Nigeria's Gombe State. The results indicated that 90% of students had previously plagiarized, 68 percent had inserted textbooks and other sources in the bibliography of assignments, and 50 percent had authored books they had never read. Furthermore, the survey found that students who were only somewhat aware of plagiarism (63%) and those who were entirely ignorant (20%) were more likely than those who were fully aware (17%). The study showed that most students plagiarize from the internet (90%), and when asked whether it would be fair to discipline plagiarists, 42% of students disagreed. The study provides insight into the harm accruing from cheating behavior.

Academic dishonesty is a complicated activity driven by a variety of situational, contextual, and individual factors (Fields, 2003). For example, research has linked dishonesty among students to gender and study level (Ampunni et al., 2020), sensation seeking and self-control (Portnoy et al., 2019), pressure for a high score, and time scarcity (Bachore, 2016). Business and research (2020) investigated characteristics impacting cheating behavior among 391 Malaysian accounting students using a quantitative manner. According to the study, the study predicted cheating conduct by impression management, motivation, and personal attributes, but not by peer behavior or university regulations. The study also discovered that cheating behavior differed considerably by gender and CGPA.

Similarly, in a study of 390 Polish undergraduate students, Baran and Jonason (2020) investigated the influence of psychopathy, achievement objectives, and self-efficacy as predictors of cheating behavior. According to their findings, the disinhibition element of psychopathy and mastery-goal orientation predicted the frequency with which students engaged in a cheating activity. Furthermore, mastery-goal orientation moderated the link between psychopathy's disinhibition, meanness, and dishonesty. Peled et al. (2019) also evaluated motivation, students' attitudes, personality characteristics, and cultural backgrounds as determinants of cheating behavior in higher education traditional and distance-learning courses. The study used structural equation modeling to survey 2475 students in six different educational institutes. They found that the variables predicted cheating behavior. The participants tend to engage less in cheating behavior in online courses than in face-to-face lessons. The studies acknowledged risk factors and potential mechanisms leading to students' academic dishonest behavior. However, research looking at the relationship between exam anxiety and cheating behavior remains scarce, hence the justification for the present study.

Exam anxiety is a common psychological trend among school students (Zhang & Qin, 2020) and a psychological state in which people experience extreme distress and anxiety in testing situations. Exam anxiety is a widespread and primarily detrimental emotion in learning (Roos et al., 2020). The trend is experienced by many students in many school subjects

(Danthony et al., 2020) and could lead to academic misconduct. Research suggests that exam anxiety increases at the thought of an examination (Lotz & Sparfeld, 2017), thus divulging most students to sharp practices to cope with the outcomes. This study operationalizes exam anxiety as a subjective affective reaction to academic evaluations. The term constitutes the behavioral, phenomenological, and biological reactions to appraising situations (Donati et al., 2020). Exam anxiety impairs students' ability to adequately express information during evaluation (Shadach et al., 2017). While many people feel stressed and anxious before and during exams, a small degree of uneasiness increases mental attentiveness and prepares pupils for test obstacles. However, considerable research has been conducted to investigate the relationship between exam anxiety and academic outcomes such as achievement (Balogun et al., 2017; Chapell et al., 2005; Hysseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2018; Morosanovar et al., 2020), well-being (Steinmay et al., 2016), and mental condition (Steinmay et al., 2016). (Dai et al., 2020; Ng & Lee, 2016; Schaeffer et al., 2007). The primary goal of this study is to investigate exam anxiety as a little-studied variable that may impact students' engagement in cheating activity among undergraduates in Enugu state, Nigeria.

**Hypothesis:** *Exam anxiety would positively correlate with cheating behavior among undergraduates in Enugu state Nigeria.*

## Method

A correlational research design was adopted in the study. The population comprised undergraduates from tertiary institutions in Enugu State, Nigeria. The samples for the survey included male and female undergraduates conveniently pooled from different study disciplines in public and private higher education institutions in the state.

## Measure

Exam anxiety was measured using a modified version of the 22-item Cognitive Exam anxiety Scale (Cassady & Johnson, 2002). It was revised and validated in Nigeria (Balogun & Olanrewaju, 2016). The scale's items were changed to fit the current research samples. The 15 elements on the scale are rated on a four-point Linkert scale, with 1 being "not at all typical of me" and 4 being "quite typical of me." The scale includes the following items: "I can't sleep because I'm worried about the computerized test." "I find myself worrying about the repercussions of failing throughout the test." "At the start of an exam, I'm usually so worried that I can't think straight."

The Cheating Conduct Scale was used to assess cheating behavior (McCabe & Trevino, 1997). The scale is a 12-item questionnaire that evaluates dishonesty among university students. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never = 0 to many times = 5, respondents were asked to rate the frequency they had engaged in certain behaviors. "Copying from someone else during a test without their consent" and "assisting others in cheating on a test" are two examples." The cheating behavior score runs from 12 to 60, with 12 indicating no self-reported cheating at all and 60 showing regular cheating. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.794, according to McCabe & Trevino (1997). Indeed, many authors have made use of the scale. For example, Onu et al. (2021) adapted the scale to Nigerian culture and obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .86 on the scale. Higher scores on these measures imply a higher level of engagement in academic dishonesty.

## Procedure

Data collection was made more accessible with the help of research assistants. The appropriate heads of the public and private tertiary institutions chosen for the study gave their permission. Students enrolled in scientific and non-science courses were approached and informed about the project. The research instrument was only supplied to students who agreed to participate in the study. A total of 280 questionnaires were distributed to the pupils. However, only 237 of the scales were adequately completed, and statistical analysis was performed. The research took place between February and April of 2022.

## Result

To test the research assumption that exam anxiety would positively correlate with students cheating behavior. The data collected from the respondents were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 23). A Pearson's product-moment correlation was performed to determine the correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior. Two hundred and thirty-seven participants were recruited. Analyses revealed that the relationship is linear, both variables were normally distributed as calculated by Shapiro-Wilk's test ( $p > .05$ ), and there were no observed outliers. Indeed, there was a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior,  $r(235) = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ . Importantly, exam anxiety explains 12.6% of the variation in cheating behavior.

**Table 1:**

Table showing correlation between the main variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
1. CBA	3.29	0.34	.12**	
2. Exam anxiety	4.71	0.42	-.33	.44**
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.12.6			

Note. *N* = 237, \*\* = *p* < .01 (two-tailed).

## Discussion

The current study investigated the correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior among undergraduates. The paper hypothesized that exam anxiety would positively correlate with cheating behavior among the students. The data were subjected to Pearson moment correlation. The finding showed a significant, moderate positive correlation between exam anxiety and cheating behavior. Thus, the expectation that exam anxiety will significantly correlate to students' academic dishonest behavior was affirmed. Notably, the *R*<sup>2</sup> indicates that the independent variable accounted for 12.6% variance in cheating behavior. The finding of this study shows that the affective reactions occasioned by the pronouncement and thoughts of examination might potentiate the appearance of anxiousness that could lead to cheating in exams. The study's result corroborates previous studies that found a positive correlation between exam anxiety and academic cheating (Behroozi et al., 2017; Hammoudi & Benzerroug, 2021; Mih & Mih, 2016; Nwosu et al., 2020; Wenzel & Reinhard, 2020). For instance, the finding is aligned with a previous study which found that about 34.2% of the total variation in dishonest tendencies is accounted for by exam anxiety (Bassey & Iruoje, 2017). Hence, the result impacted knowledge regarding unethical behaviors in tertiary institutions.

The current finding could be explained in line with the understanding that fear of failure, school environment, teacher's pedagogical knowledge, poor study habit, and previous experience could trigger the state of anxiety and prompt survival motives. Research suggests that negative self-talk during preparation for an exam is also related to feelings of anxiety during assessments (Encandela et al., 2014). The current finding confirms exam anxiety correlates to dishonest behavior in academics. Thus, the study attempts to understand contributory factors in dishonesty and a possible control direction.

## Conclusion

Academic integrity is critical in any teaching and learning environment. Still, the increased concern with student dishonesty on assessments, particularly exams, has led researchers to explore the correlates of cheating in tertiary institutions. Although the trend is prevalent across all educational levels, the present study focused on tertiary institutions. Yanxia (2017) noted that exam anxiety was a commonly known or assumed factor that could significantly influence test-takers' performance. However, the study provides evidence linking exam anxiety to cheating behavior in tertiary institutions in Enugu State, Nigeria. The findings contribute to the literature by revealing exam anxiety as a psychological concern that could motivate cheating in academic engagements, including examinations, presentations, and debates. Although, the study is challenged with certain limitations. For instance, caution is advised in generalizing the result due to the sampling method applied. Also, the data collection was based on self-report. Hence, the issue of common method variance becomes a concern. Nevertheless, the study recommends that school managements adopt simulation test exercises to prepare the students for exams and provide a robust enlightenment intervention. Future researchers should expand the samples to include students at all levels and explore cause-effect relationships to broaden our knowledge of the relationship between exam anxiety and cheating behavior.

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