Academic cheating in Ethiopian secondary schools: Prevalence, perceived severity, and justifications

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine Ethiopian secondary school students’ level of engagement, justification, and perceived severity of academic cheating behaviors. A mixed research approach was employed. In the study, 1246 students randomly selected from public and private secondary schools participated. Data were collected using questionnaires and semistructured interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of students are actively engaged in most academic cheating behaviors with a prevalence rate of about 80%. It was also found that the majority of students exhibit higher tolerance for most forms of academic cheating behaviors which were evidenced by their lower perceptions of the seriousness of the behaviors. Less probability of being caught and the absence of severe punishment was found to be the major reasons that students gave to justify their engagement in academic cheating. It is suggested that school personnel look at the strength and application of their codes of conduct.

Subjects: Environmental Psychology; Educational Research; Secondary Education; Educational Psychology

Keywords: academic cheating; perceived severity; justifications; prevalence

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The study has shown that academic cheating is rampant in Ethiopian secondary schools. The qualitative data have documented interesting stories that clearly shows the extent to how academic cheating has become widespread among secondary school students. Most academic cheating behaviors are considered not serious. Students have demonstrated a lenient attitude towards the majority of academic cheating behaviors. Justifying their active engagement in academic cheating behaviors, students have reported less probability of being caught and the absence of severe punishment as the major pushing factors. Interestingly, public and private school students have reported a similar level of engagement in academic cheating. On the other hand, males are found to be more active than their counterparts. It is suggested, therefore, that there has to be a strong and coordinated efforts of all stakeholders in taking both reactive and preventive measures and promote academic integrity.
1. Introduction

Dishonesty, both in academic and employment sectors, has been a part of the human condition since ancient times. The Chinese have been concerned about cheating for longer than most civilizations have been in existence. Bouville (2010) wrote that over 2,000 years ago, prospective Chinese civil servants were given entrance exams in individual cubicles to prevent cheating, and searched as they entered the cubicles for crib notes. The penalty for being caught at cheating in ancient China was not a failing grade or expulsion, but death, which was applicable to both the examinees and examiners. Since then, academic cheating has been a problem and continues to concern the educational communities (Jackson et al., 2002; Stephen et al., 2009).

Academic dishonesty, often described as cheating (Green, 2004), is a serious problem worldwide (Magnus et al., 2002). As defined by Stephen et al. (2009) academic cheating is deceiving or depriving by trickery, defrauding, misleading, or fooling another. They further explained that academic cheating/academic misconduct refers to acts committed by students that deceive, mislead, or fool the teacher into thinking that the academic work submitted by the student was a student’s own work. Rana and Ajmal (2013) also defined it as “students’ attempt to present others’ academic work as their own.” It includes many activities such as cheating (seeking help from peers) on examination, copying other student's assignments, collaborating with others on individual assignments, and using unauthorized material during the examination.

Studies have shown that academic cheating has become a major problem in the education sector (Berhan & Desalegn, 2014; Daniel, 2009; Grimes, 2004; Jensen et al., 2002; Lee, 2009; Mint, 2004; Nath & Lovaglio, 2009; Oskar & Lambrinos, 2008; Rana & Ajmal, 2013; Stephen et al., 2009; Strom & Strom, 2007; Thomas et al., 2013) and been recognized as an epidemic at all levels throughout the world (Grimes, 2004). According to Anderman et al. (2009) about 80% of the high achieving high school students and 75% of the college students admit having cheated. A study by Morales (2000) reported 88% of the teachers as having witnessed academically dishonest behaviors in their students. McCabe et al. (2001) concluded that the academic cheating rate has been increasing over the past 30 years. However, most studies on the subject were undertaken in western countries (Asli et al., 2011) and focused on the prevalence, determinants, and a different definition of cheating (Jan et al., 2002; Joshua, 2009; Michelle et al., 2012).

Only a handful of studies has explored how people perceive cheating behaviors (Joshua, 2009). 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 the exam 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 (Elias & Farag, 2010). Moreover, differences among countries in socio-cultural settings, demographic composition, and even educational policies and programs bring about a difference in students’ perception of cheating behavior. In support of this argument, previous studies (e.g., Godfrey et al., 1993; Jan et al., 2002; Joshua, 2009) conducted to examine students’ attitudes toward academic cheating have found evidence that students of different nationalities and of different cultures vary significantly in their perceptions of academic cheating. This justifies, therefore, the need for further studies within different contexts so that the academic communities shall have a comprehensive understanding of the nature of academic cheating worldwide. Accordingly, this study was intended to answer the following basic research questions;

(1) How do students perceive the seriousness of academic cheating behaviors?
(2) What is the prevalence of academic dishonesty among high school students?
(3) How do students justify their engagement in academic cheating behaviors?
(4) Do demographic factors (e.g., gender, school type) matter in academic cheating related behaviors?
2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Academic cheating

Academic cheating is defined as obtaining or attempting to obtain or aiding another to obtain credit for work or any improvement in evaluation of performance, by any dishonest or deceptive means. According to Stephen et al. (2009) and Lambert et al. (2003), cheating includes, but is not limited to: lying; copying from another’s test or examination; discussing at any time of questions or answers on an examination or test, unless such discussion is specifically authorized by the instructor; taking or receiving copies of an exam without the permission of the instructor; using or displaying notes, “cheat sheets,” or other information devices inappropriate to the prescribed test conditions.

Academic dishonesty is “any fraudulent actions or attempts by a student to use unauthorized or unacceptable means in any academic work (Theart & Smit, 2012). Lene et al. (2001) also defines academic dishonesty as students” attempt to present others’ academic work as their own. It includes behaviors such as cheating on exams, copying others’ students’ homework and assignment. Academic dishonesty is not a new phenomenon; indeed, it has been extensively studied in the academic context and empirical evidence indicates that it is changing and increasing in recent years (Jennifer et al., 2009; Lene et al., 2001; McCabe et al., 2001; Stephen et al., 2009).

2.2. Academic cheating behaviors

When people think of cheating, they often envision crib sheets and wandering eyes during tests. Although these practices are still quite common, both the research and our experience in schools suggest that cheating has evolved to take on many different forms. Some common cheating behaviors that researchers have studied recently include: giving and receiving test answers, copying homework or other assignments; writing on wall or desk (Becker & Ulstod, 2007; D. McCabe, 2009; Power, 2009); communicating in codes; wondering eyes when taking exams; use of crib sheets, writing on arms, legs, or hands; turning in work completed by someone else; plagiarizing word for word; presenting information without citing a source, collaborating when asked to work alone, allowing someone to copy in a test, and fabricating data (Bramucci, 2003; O’Rourke et al., 2010).

The impact of information technologies on the way people use and interacts with information has caused increasing concerns towards academic dishonesty. The research suggests that using technology for cheating is also on the rise. There is clear evidence that it has opened up new avenues for cheating. Common uses of technology for cheating include plagiarizing from the internet, using cell phones to look up questions during tests, programming answers into calculators without permission, and giving, or receiving information about exams through cell phones (e.g., sending pictures of questions or texting). A study by Benenson Strategy Group (2009) found that 35% of the teens who had cell phones reported having used them to cheat at least once, and 65% said that they were aware that others in their school cheat by using cell phones. In addition, 52% of the students surveyed reported that they had created using the internet.

2.3. Gender and academic cheating

Results regarding the influence of gender on cheating behavior have been mixed (Godfrey et al., 1993; Stephen et al., 2009). Evidence for the gender differences in cheating varies with some studies showing strong differences and others showing no differences between males and females. A good number of studies (e.g., Anderman et al., 2009; Brunell et al., 2011; Honny et al., 2010; Karim et al., 2009; Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012; Miller et al., 2007; Salleh et al., 2011; Saulsbury et al., 2011) have reported that academic cheating is more frequent in boys than in girls. On the other hand, Kari (2009) found no difference between males and females. Some other studies by Jacobson and his colleagues as cited in Lene et al. (2001), on the contrary, reported that females are more likely to cheat than males.

Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that females tend to rate most academic cheating behaviors as “most serious” and unethical than males (Joshua, 2009; Whitley, 2001; Whitley
et al., 1999). However, despite their negative attitudes towards cheating behaviors, females were found to be engaged in cheating behavior just as frequently as males. A meta-analysis conducted by Whitley et al. (1999) and Joshua (2009) reported that although women show a more ethical attitude toward cheating than men, “in practice, women were almost as likely to cheat as men.” Wilkinson (2009) suggested that a significant element in the issue of academic cheating is the students’ beliefs about right and wrong, and the level of seriousness attached to specific instances of wrongdoing. Moreover, McCabe and Trevino (1993) explained that as the perceived severity of punishment increases, the levels of individual cheating will become lower.

2.4. Reasons for cheating

There are many reasons for engaging in academically dishonest behavior. A number of studies has identified some of the reasons why students choose to engage in academic dishonesty. However, they can be generally classified into two categories: intrinsic/individual factors and extrinsic/contextual factors. Some studies (e.g., Anderman et al., 2009; Taradi et al., 2012) have identified a lack of knowledge and the prediction of failure. Moreover, cheating has been found to correlate negatively with grades, and with other variables proven to ensure academic success, such as conscientiousness, self-efficacy, learning motivation, and more frequent class attendance (Yardley, Domènech, Bates & Nelson, Yardley et al., 2009).

The second category, as external motivators, authors observe that certain academic characteristics trigger deceptive behavior. For instance, traditional lessons involving little student participation, long periods of time between assessments; the stressed, burnt out, and disengaged teachers; the physical distance in the classroom between the seat and the blackboard and teacher, and banal and repetitive curricular content. All these educational factors have been reported to increase the occurrence of academic cheating (Aydogan et al., 2009; Hart & Morgan, 2010; Nenty, 2001). Extrinsic motivators also include high pressure from parents, peers, and instructors. On the other hand, Harding et al. (20,017) and Taylor et al. (2002) stated that the more competitive and selective instructional programs are the other extrinsic factors that lead students to cheat. They further elaborate that particularly at the end of high school, students are required to work hard to prepare for university entrance. As the situation is extremely competitive and threatening, students are afraid of losing their way and getting left behind the others. All these elements can increase academic cheating (Suria-Martinez, 2011). Moreover, honor codes, students’ perceptions of peers’ behavior, students’ perceptions of faculty’s academic integrity policies, students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of these policies, students’ perceptions of the likelihood of being reported, and students’ perceptions of the severity of penalties are also among extrinsic/contextual factors.

3. Methods and materials

This study was intended to examine academic cheating in high schools with a focus on students; reasons for engagement in cheating and their perceptions of severity cheating behaviors. The literatures usually identified assignment and exam-related cheating behaviors as the most common in secondary schools. This study, however, examined exam-related academic cheating behaviors as paper and pencil classroom test and examination accounts almost 90% of the total evaluations in Ethiopian secondary schools. A mixed research approach involving both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. This design was chosen with the assumption that using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of the problem under study than either approach alone (Cohen et al., 2007). The two approaches are seen as complementary; thus, according to Creswell (2007), the limitation of one approach can be offset by the advantage of the other. The study was conducted in two regional states, namely Dire Dawa administration and Harari, found in the eastern part of the country. These regional states have a total of 47 secondary schools (15 government and 32 private). Using stratified sampling techniques, 4 government 10 privately owned schools were selected. From the total of 14,551 students found in the sample schools, 1451 (780 females and 671 males) students were selected as participants using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. In determining the sample size, the researcher used the
rule of thumb principle of sampling. According to different scholars in the field of social science researches (e.g., Janet, 2005; Lawrence, 2007; Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011), in a smaller population (under 1000), taking 30% of the total populations as a sample is considered as a representative, 10% for the moderately larger population (10,000), and 1% for the large population (over 150,000). Accordingly, 30% of the secondary schools and 10% of the students were taken as a representative sample. Moreover, 25 (13 males and 12 females) students were selected for interview using purposive sampling. The criteria used for selecting the interviewees were grade level (from each grade level), willingness, and communication skill (as suggested by home-room teachers). Data were collected using questionnaires and semistructured interviews.

Students’ engagement in academic cheating behaviors was assessed with a questionnaire developed from the literatures and previous research works. The questionnaire consisted of 10 confirmative statements (items) describing various aspects of exam-related academic cheating behaviors. Exam-related cheating behaviors that are not applicable in the Ethiopian (e.g., buying a read-made test) context was excluded. On the other hand, based on students’ feedback from the pilot study, an item “Taking an examination for someone else or having someone else takes an examination for you,” was removed because all students interviewed unanimously agreed that it is extremely difficult, and/or impossible to commit such an offense. Items were scored on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 2 (frequently). The 10 items yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.76, indicating high interitem consistency. In addition, how students perceive the seriousness of cheating behaviors was assessed using the same questionnaire. Items were scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (not cheating) to 5 (most serious). The lower the value of the perception shows that the students accept the behavior as normal (acceptable). These items yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .72, indicating a high degree of interitem consistency. Similarly, the perceived prevalence of cheating among students was examined by asking them to indicate if they had seen someone engaged in cheating (yes/no options).

To assess students’ reasons/justification for cheating, the researcher used a 13-item questionnaire adapted from Šimić Šašić and Klarin (2009). The scaling of this instrument was a Likert-type with (5 = Strongly Agree—1 = Strongly Disagree). The instrument has good or even very good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.89). The questionnaire was administered to the students before or after lectures in a paper and pencil format. Students participated on the free-will basis, and anonymity was guaranteed because the collectors did not know the names of the participants, and questionnaires were collected in a random order. Owing to our guarantee of anonymity and because their responses cannot harm their reputation, a high level of honesty was expected (Yardley et al., 2009)

In the data collection, 1451 questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 1246 (695 females and 551 males) of the questionnaires were returned fully completed while the remaining were incomplete and/or not returned. The return rate was good and adequate to conduct statistical analysis and conclude from the results. The data were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques. Accordingly, frequencies, percentages, means, and independent t-test were used for the quantitative data whereas qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data collected through interviews.

4. Results
This study was intended to examine the prevalence of academic cheating among high school students. It also assessed how students justify their engagement in cheating behaviors and perceive the seriousness of cheating behaviors. In this section, the data collected through questionnaires and interviews are presented.

Number of respondents in parenthesis

Tables 1–3 presented forms of cheating behaviors and students’ frequency of engagement in each activity rated as “never” and “at least once” (the sum of at least once and frequently). The
Table 1. Prevalence of academic cheating

| Cheating behaviors                                      | Never  | At least once |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------------|
| 1. Copying from friends at exam papers                  | 9% (112) | 91% (1134) |
| 2. Let other to copy mine on exams                      | 9.2% (115) | 90.8% (1131) |
| 3. Taking crib notes to exam halls                       | 9.7% (121) | 90.3% (1125) |
| 4. Whispering answers to nearby friends                 | 16.1% (201) | 83.9% (1045) |
| 5. Giving answers to others by signals                  | 19.8% (247) | 80.2% (999) |
| 6. Write notes on body parts before exam                | 20.3% (253) | 79.7% (993) |
| 7. Providing false excuses for missed test              | 24.9% (311) | 75.1% (935) |
| 8. Received answers from friends by signals             | 27.9% (347) | 72.1% (899) |
| 9. Texting answers to friends via phones                | 29.2% (364) | 70.8% (882) |
| 10. Received answers via text messages                  | 28.7% (357) | 71.3% (889) |
| Overall                                                 | 19.5% | 80.5% |

Table 2. Gender difference in the prevalence of cheating

| sex         | O  | E  | X² | df | P-value |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|---------|
| Male        | 461| 444| .371| 1  | 0.036 (<0.05) |
| Female      | 551| 560|    |    |         |

Table 3. Difference between private and public schools in the prevalence of academic cheating

| School   | O  | E  | X² | df | p-value |
|----------|----|----|----|----|---------|
| Public   | 596| 596| .341| 1  | 0.530 (>0.05) |
| Private  | 403| 406| | | |

Overall findings revealed that the majority (80.5%) of the respondents self-reported that they had cheated at least once so far; only 19.5% reported that they had never been involved in any form of cheating. This is an indication that cheating behavior was highly prevalent among the students who participated in the study. Descriptive statistics depicted in Tables 1–3 suggest that a high percentage of respondents (about 91%) reported having copied from friends by looking at their exam papers. Allowed others to copy their answers during test or examination. Similarly, approximately 91% of the participants admitted that they let others to copy from their exam papers. Again, more than 90% of the respondent reported that they used crib notes to cheat at least once. A significant number of the respondents (about 80%) had cooperated with other students to communicate, using signals, answers during an examination. Reported use of mobile devices for cheating, though recorded relatively the lowest frequency, is also found to be significant. More
than 70% of the students has reported that they either send or received answers using mobile phones.

Results from the interview also lend support to the survey report that cheating is prevalent in secondary schools. The interviewees confessed that cheating is a common practice everybody is involved in regardless of their sex and performance level. They indicated that it is now publicly recognized that one’s engagement in academic cheating behavior is not a big deal to be ashamed of. To put it differently, one’s engagement in cheating is considered, among the students, as acceptable behavior. They all responded that cheating is a norm in the schools. They use body signs, body parts, crib notes, classroom walls, and desks, throwing pieces of papers with answers written on it. A grade 11 student from a private school said the following;

“…you may see a person standing on the desk celebrating that he/she copied all from the student known for his/her best performance in the class. Those engaged in cheating speak publicly with pride and joy”. Cheating is now seems a whole class activity that all students actively participate. I dare to say that you will not find a student with no cheating experience. Top scorers in the class are at the forefront in organizing and facilitating cheating.

Another grade 10 student has added the following magnifying that cheating is everybody’s business.

“One’s engagement in academic cheating is not an issue he/she embarrassed with. Moreover, you cannot avoid it. The last few minutes before their entrance into the exam room, majority of the students spent on confirming their tactics and strategies of cheating with each other. Being caught concerns no one as its probability is almost zero. You know, teachers/invigilators do not care about what is going on in the exam room to the extent of leaving the exam room to let us cheat freely particularly in the periods of final examination.”

Strengthening the notion of the above, a grade 10 student from a public school has expressed that;

“…majority of students cheats during tests and final examination. The last week before finals exams, students spent their time on designing cheating strategies (identifying well performers and organize networks around them). They arrange every detail including ‘plan A and B’ Being caught is not worrisome”

Moreover, respondents in this study were also asked to indicate if they had seen someone engaged in cheating. The majority of respondents (77.1%) reported that they had witnessed someone engaged in cheating behaviors. However, this result is not surprising given our finding

| Cheating behaviors                          | Mean (N = 1246) |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Copying from friends’ exam papers     | 2.52 (.54)      |
| 2. Let other to copy mine on exams       | 3.11 (.77)      |
| 3. Taking crib notes to exam halls       | 2.97 (.43)      |
| 4. Whispering answers to nearby friends  | 2.21 (.61)      |
| 5. Giving answers to others by signals   | 2.83 (.78)      |
| 6. Write notes on body parts before exam | 3.61 (.14)      |
| 7. Providing false excuses for missed test| 1.24 (.29)      |
| 8. Received answers from friends by signals | 2.99 (.34)    |
| 9. Texting answers to friends via phones | 3.73 (.36)      |
| 10. Received answers via text messages   | 3.54 (.92)      |
| Overall                                   | 2.86 (.51)      |
that most respondents reported that they had engaged in some form of cheating. In sum, based on the results of both quantitative and qualitative data, it was possible to draw the conclusion that academic cheating is a “normal way” of functioning at secondary schools in Ethiopia. The study also examined whether there is an association between sex and engagement in cheating behaviors. To do this, a chi-square test was applied and the results are indicated in the following Table.

Table 5. Students’ reasons to engage in academic cheating. Results are ordered by decreasing values of the number of respondents who agreed with the statement

| Reasons to cheat                                      | Agree      | Not sure | Disagree |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------|----------|
| It wasn’t likely to be caught                         | 988 (79.3%)| 149 (12%)| 109 (8.7%)|
| I hadn’t heard of another student being penalized    | 901 (72.3%)| 166 (13.3%)| 179 (14.4%)|
| Other students do it (urged me to do it)              | 799 (64.1%)| 101 (8.1%)| 346 (27.8%)|
| Pressure from friends (peer pressure)                 | 784 (62.9%)| 227 (18.2%)| 235 (18.9%)|
| It was easy the temptation was too great              | 771 (61.9%)| 211 (16.9%)| 264 (21.2%)|
| I was under pressure to get good grades               | 687 (55.1%)| 177 (14.2%)| 382 (30.7%)|
| I wanted to help my friend                            | 686 (55%)| 196 (15.7%)| 364 (29.3%)|
| Cheating is a victimless crime, harms no one          | 660 (53%)| 92 (7.4%)| 494 (39.6%)|
| My teacher encouraged it                              | 541 (43.8%)| 263 (21.1%)| 442 (35.1%)|
| The assessment was too difficult                      | 447 (35.9%)| 363 (29.1%)| 436 (35%)|
| I thought the assessment was unfair                   | 311 (25%)| 373 (29.9%)| 562 (45.1%)|
| The teacher had not taught me                         | 207 (16.6%)| 303 (24.3%)| 736 (59.1%)|
| I didn’t think it was wrong                           | 88 (7.1%)| 237 (19%)| 921 (73.9%)|

P < 0.05 O = > Observed; E = > Expected.

Regarding gender differences in the prevalence of cheating, the study revealed a significant difference between males and females. Approximately 83.7% of the male respondents reported having cheated at least once. Similarly, 79.3% of the female respondents admitted that they have engaged in one of the cheating behaviors at least once. The chi-square test is found to be statistically significant at \( \chi^2 = 0.371, df = 1, p < 0.05 \). This shows that although both males and females actively engaged in academic cheating behaviors, it seems more prevalent among males than females. To put it differently, academic cheating is relatively more frequent in boys than girls.

P > 0.05; O = > Observed; E = > Expected.

Regarding the difference between private and government-owned schools in the prevalence of cheating, the study revealed no statistical difference between government and private school students. Approximately 80.6% of the government-owned school respondents reported having cheated at least once. Similarly, 79.7% of the private school respondents admitted that they have engaged in one of the cheating behaviors at least once. The chi-square test is found to be
statistically insignificant at \( x^2 = 0.178, \) df = 1, \( p > 0.05 \). This shows that both private and government school students actively engaged in academic cheating behaviors at a relatively equal level.

Six point-scale 0 (not cheating) to five (most serious cheating); \( N = 1246; \) Male = 541; Females = 695; Private school = 740; Gov't school = 506; Standard deviation in parenthesis.

Table 4 summarizes the mean perceived seriousness ratings for items pertaining to respondents' attitudes toward academic cheating behaviors. The findings indicated that respondents surveyed generally perceived most cheating behaviors to be “moderate” (with a grand mean of 2.86). Not all cheating behaviors, however, were perceived to be equally moderate cheating behaviors. The findings revealed that sending/receiving answers via cell phones perceived to be “serious” than other forms of cheating behaviors. It is interesting that cheating in the form of providing a false excuses for a missed test/exam was perceived as “trivial cheating” (mean = 1.24).

Five point-scale 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree); \( N = 1246. \)

Table 5 summarizes student's reasons for engagement in academic cheating. As can be seen from the table, students’ top reasons for engaging in academic misconduct were: “It was not likely to be caught” (79.3%); “I had not heard of another student being penalized” (72.3%); “perceptions of other students do it” (64.1%); “peer pressure” (62.9%) and “It was easy, the temptation was great” (61.9%). This implies that the learning environment in the secondary schools is conducive for students to engage in academic cheating which in turn could justify the high prevalence of academic cheating. Moreover, “being under pressure to get a good grades,” “personal interest to help friends,” and the belief that “cheating is a victimless crime that harms no one” was mentioned as reasons for engagement in different forms of academic cheating behaviors by more than half of the respondents. On the other hand, the majority (73.9%) of the respondents have reported that they engaged in academic cheating knowing that it was wrong which implies that there are no significant problems among the students in terms of awareness. The perceptions that “the teacher did not teach me well” (16.6%), “the assessment was difficult (35.9%) and unfair” (25%) were among the least reasons that motivate students to cheat.

Moreover, the qualitative data collected in the interview also confirmed the quantitative results. In the interview, low probability of getting caught, perceptions of everyone's cheat, and peer pressure were the most documented reason that study participants gave for taking part in academic dishonesty. The data from the interview also indicates that a greater number of students felt that taking part in academic cheating is acceptable.

A grade 12 student of a private school said the following;

“… cheating is now a shameless activity. almost all students in the class actively participant on any possible forms of cheating. Everybody is assigned roles that range from “let their answers copied” to “exchange of exam papers”. A single well performing student is enough to help all classmates cheats. To be honest, “not to cheats” seems like being an odd and/or deviant in behavior. A student you don’t know much could give you “answers” even before you ask him/her to do. You know why, no one tries to stop you or nothing will happen if you are caught, though less possibilities”

Strengthening this, a grade 10 student has said that;

“… academic cheating is widespread, very few are caught, and fewer than that were ever sanctioned. The examination room by itself encourage you to cheat. You cannot avoid your eye from looking at your friend's paper as he/she sits very close to your side. You may not have, sometimes, intention to cheat, but the sitting arrangement will allow you to cheat. You don't need to be smart and/or tactician to cheat"
They also indicated that they just have modelled their peers. They clearly expressed that non-cheaters were considered “odd” and even abused assuming that they would report to the school administrators or teachers. In addition, they emphasized that students who did not want to cheat were pressured to join their peers in cheating behaviors. The following story from a grade 11 private school student has more to tell us;

“… suppose you are well performers in the class then everybody thinks that you will help them cheat. If you refuse to involve in cheating, they will label you as “betrayal” and “unkind”

In general, the data clearly demonstrated that the school environment seems supportive that motivates students to cheat without fear and concern of possible negative consequences. It would be, therefore, safe to conclude that the conducive environment has contributed to the report of a higher prevalence rate of academic cheating and a “no big deal” perception about most cheating behaviors.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study have vividly demonstrated that there is a high prevalence of academic cheating among high school students. The 80.5% of the prevalence rate found in this study is in line with findings worldwide (e.g., Decoo & Colpaert, 2002; Galloway, 2012; Jensen et al., 2002; McCabe et al., 2001; Pramadi et al., 2017; Šimić Šašić & Klarin, 2009). Academic cheating behaviors of “copying answers from nearby friends”; ‘let others to copy mine; “taking crib notes to exam halls”; “whispering answers to nearby friends” and ‘giving answers to friends by signals were found to be the top five forms of cheating in which majority of students reported to engage in actively. Consistent with this finding, McCabe (2001) and O'Rourke et al. (2010) reported that copying from student exam papers and allowing other student to copy is the most common type of cheating students admitted to engage in. A recent study by Pramadi et al. (2017) also found out that copying answers from friends are the most common cheating in high schools. Well performing students also seems willing to support their friends cheat (Stevenson-Clarke & Brimble, 2007).

In addition, the study compared female and male students’ level of engagement in academic cheating behaviors to determine if there are gender differences. Accordingly, it was found to be more prone among males than females. In other words, males are more likely to cheat than females. This finding is congruent with past studies (e.g. Emiko & Miyuki, 2012; Heather & Christian, 2012; Honny et al., 2010; Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012; Salleh et al., 2011; Yehuda et al., 2013). Similarly, the study examined differences between private and public-school students in terms of the prevalence of academic cheating and found no statistically significant difference. Students at both private and public schools showed similarly high levels of engagement in academic cheating which is in agreement with the findings of McCabe (2001). On the other hand, this finding is against the findings of Quraishi and Aziz (2017) who reported that private school students engaged in academic cheating behavior more than public-school students.

With regard to students’ perceptions about seriousness/severity of cheating behaviors, the study revealed that the majority of the respondents perceived most cheating behaviors as “moderate.” In other words, the students consider that they are not making as such a big crime. Such a finding is congruent with previous researches (Asli et al., 2011; Jennifer et al., 2009; McCabe et al., 2001; Vivien & Sean, 2001; Yehuda et al., 2013). It is interesting that cheating in the form of allowing someone to copy during exams, taking crib notes, giving answers to friends by signals, and whispering the answers to friends during examinations was perceived by respondents to be moderate cheating and accordingly more incidence of these behaviors were reported. This finding is congruent with the study of Heather and Christian (2012) who found that allowing someone to copy one's answers during a test or examination and whispering the answers to friends during an examination are considered as trivial cheating, accordingly, greater frequency of this activity was reported. Similarly, Graham et al. (1994) reported that students with lenient attitudes towards academic cheating behaviors reported more cheating as compared to students with stricter attitudes.
It seems worrisome that the student culture is becoming more accepting of such behavior. Supporting this notion, Engler et al. (2008) and Khodaie et al. (2011) argues that students are perceiving cheating as a victimless crime. And it is obvious that such perception suggests an emergent culture of acceptance. Similarly, Gomez (2001) reported that many students tend to view cheating as a victimless crime, and students are demonstrating the application of the “no big deal” phenomenon.

On the other hand, this study has found that less probability of being caught, absence of severe penalties, perceptions of others does it, and peer influence are the most common reasons that students reported to justify their engagement in cheating behaviors. The results from both quantitative and qualitative data showed that the absence of reaction and concern from the school and/or teachers reinforced them to aggressively participate in the majority of cheating behaviors. Similar findings were reported in previous studies (e.g., Heather & Christian, 2012; Hutton, 2006; McCabe et al., 2001; Vandehey et al., 2007).

It is possible to argue that such an encouraging environment (i.e., perceptions of others do it, less chance of being caught, absence severe of penalty) might have facilitated the acceptance of academic dishonesty thus avoids moral blameworthiness and any sense of guilt or shame which in turn resulted in higher prevalence. Supporting this argument, D. L. McCabe (2005) stated that the probability of being caught and the severity of the punishment for that specific behavior influence frequencies of cheating incidences. Kari (2009) also contends that students believe that some academic cheating behaviors are more acceptable or tolerated than others because of the variations in disciplinary consequences of the academic dishonesty. In addition, Hutton (2006) found that students believed that engagement in academic cheating behaviors in school was alright because they saw the school doing nothing towards the behavior. Similarly, Heather and Christian (2012) underlined that the probability of being caught and penalized is the most effective predictors of student engagement in academic cheating. The severity of punishment for cheating is the value which a student weighs the benefits he/she will gain from not being caught. To put it differently, some students may rationally assess the costs and benefits of their actions.

In sum, the study found that high school students are engaging in academic cheating at an alarming rate. The study has shown that students see academically dishonest behaviors to be ordinary behaviors. Such a dishonesty goes to university education and the world of work, thus, requires immediate attention by all stakeholders.

6. Conclusion and implication
The findings of this study suggest that cheating is a way of life in the secondary schools, and the majority of students at least occasionally indulge in some academic cheating behaviors. Students are found to exhibit a higher tolerance for the various forms of academic cheating behaviors addressed in the study, as evidenced by their lower perceptions of the seriousness of the misconduct, together with a higher prevalence rate. Honesty in the realm of academia is much larger than moral and ethical issues. Students who cheat are building a non-moral and unethical character and value system which is carried into all aspects of life. Students who are dishonest in their school work are likely to act in a dishonest way in the working world following graduation. Emphasizing this further, Williams and Hosek (2003) stated that academic dishonesty increased from cheating in high schools and colleges to cheating on income taxes, politics, and athletics. In view of this, the author discussed possible implications as follows:

The students who participated in this study attributed their active engagement in academic cheating to less probability of being caught and the absence of severe punishment. To say it differently, they do not believe they will get caught. They also tend to believe that if they are caught cheating, they will not be punished severely, even if they are aware that the school has codes of conduct. This implies that the students have nothing to fear or have believed that there is no negative consequence as a result of being caught. However, according to Vandehey et al.
students’ concern for being caught and punished for cheating was far more effective as a deterrent to academic misconduct than the student’s internal feelings toward the act. Vandehey et al. (2007) further emphasized that student punishment factors continued to be the best deterrents to student academic misconduct. If students are caught cheating, accused, and have a severe admonishment, it is more likely that, according to Petress (2003), the behavior can be curtailed. Levy and Rakovski (2006) also added that students’ engagement in academic dishonesty decreased when they knew the cheating would be discovered and severely punished. In addition, teachers/invigilators shall use assigned seating and monitor students closely during the examination to increase the obstacles toward cheating. Supporting this notion, for example, Wajda-Johnston et al. (2001) have reported that teachers’ close monitoring in examination hall has reduced cheating by 65% whereas using assigned seating contributed to a reduction of cheating by 49.4%. When cheating incidents are observed, teachers and/or school principals should publicly stop and punish those engaged in cheating and make it evident that cheating is a risk that can carry severe negative consequences.

As indicated in the study all schools involved in the study have students’ code of conduct, though not functional. The existence of an honor code, by itself, is not sufficient to bring academic dishonesty under control. In other words, schools should have a solid code of conduct consisting of mitigation, detection, reporting, and penalty frameworks that should be regularly communicated to students through various channels and times in the student life cycle and calendar. As suggested by scholars (e.g., Lanier, 2006; McCabe et al., 2001; Park, 2003), a code of conduct that is clearly articulated, well defined, well implemented, participatory, and deeply embedded in the culture can act as an effective deterrent. Park (2003) underlined that honor code systems work best when students are actively engaged in the process and take part in it. Strengthening Park’s argument, McCabe, and Trevino (2002) further explained that there should be ‘student participation in school judicial or hearing bodies that review alleged infringements of the honor code. They should also have a voice on committees responsible for informing other students about the purposes and philosophy of the code, and they should play a major role in its development and implementation. Such engagement helps students, according to Park (2003), to assume ownership of it and even willingness to report instances of academic cheating.

Above all, following an educational approach would be noteworthy to bring about long term and sustainable changes within the minds of our students. Accordingly, the introduction of ethics education as a subject into secondary school curricula would seem to provide a potential means of increasing students’ ethical sensitivity and, hence, behavior. While there is evidence that ethics education can lead to heightened moral development, the link between moral development and honesty seems questionable as some studies (e.g., Bernardi et al., 2004; West et al., 2004) reported an insignificant relationship between moral development and student cheating. However, as argued by Nonis and Swift (2001), we can implement a fundamental approach involving teaching of integrity and discussion of ethical issues in every subject, with particular emphasis on the capstone subjects instead of integrating a stand-alone ethics education/subject. Such an approach, according to Nonis and Swift (2001), focuses not so much on teaching students the rules of ethical analysis, but on providing a strong ethical foundation that becomes deep-rooted within students’ personality over the duration of their studies so that they come to value integrity and honesty in their own behavior.

Lastly, an interesting implication of this study for future research is that academic cheating needs to be further investigated as learned practices in primary and secondary school classrooms. According to Passow et al. (2006), these levels of education are where students learn social norms as well as how to approach cheating. By emphasizing an understanding of academic cheating at primary and secondary school levels, we can gain additional insights about the degree, magnitude, and trends of academic cheating across the ladder of the education system. Such a study would indicate the specific area where special intervention is required to install, within students’ mind, academic integrity. Moreover, it would give us deeper insights into early and late adolescents’
attitudes about academic cheating. Finally, the findings of this study would provide alternatives to the available western-dominated literature showing how academic cheating is prevalent, perceived, and justified in the context of Africa.

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