

## Systematic Collective e-Cheating in a Saudi Arabian Higher Education Context: A Case Study

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** The primary purpose was to investigate organized group cheating in a Middle Eastern institution during the shift to e-learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019.

**Method:** The study explores the personal experiences of ten Saudi Arabian English as a Foreign Language program graduates in a higher education institution through in-depth interviews via qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis. The study was guided by Ajzen's theory of planned behavior.

**Results:** A novel type of misconduct coined *systematic collective e-cheating* was identified and discussed. In addition, insights on the causes and types of e-cheating in a Middle Eastern context were provided.

**Conclusions:** Academic misconduct was directly influenced by a rapid transition to e-learning, societal culture, and subjective norms, all of which jointly contributed to shifts in ethical perceptions leading to increased reports of cheating.

**Implication for Theory and/or Practice:** Education professionals need to be aware of underlying issues related to unethical behavior and encourage students to understand and address negative ideologies regarding ethics on a societal level. Efforts must also be made to raise instructor awareness of academic misconduct in e-learning through comprehensive professional development programs. Furthermore, with the increased use of technology in education, if the social, cultural, and perceptual factors are not addressed, educational systems will be impacted, affecting the credibility and value of academic degrees should cheating become the norm.

**Keywords:** *altered perceptions, cheating, Saudi Arabia, theory of planned behavior, cheating in collectivist cultures*

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## Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 had a direct impact on educational institutions around the world. Teachers and students were suddenly moved to remote digital platforms for which they were not prepared. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) claimed that the global impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching was challenging, as about 1.6 billion learners shifted to e-learning environments. Many teachers, especially in higher education, required specific skills, teaching materials, and appropriate instructional design (Hadiyanto et al., 2020). However, most of these educational establishments do not have the resources or the time to redesign course delivery, train instructors, or even develop solutions for sudden technology adaptation (Nguyen et al., 2020). As a result, the challenge of unethical practices such as cheating in online exams had to be faced. Consequently, this research specifically focuses on this type of academic misconduct, since it is an integral element of assessment in global higher education (Starovoytova & Namango, 2016). Additionally, cheating as an unethical behavior is directly linked to students' values and has long-term consequences on their future behavior and prospects (Awosoga et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need for more cross-cultural studies to explore cheating in the online environment in more depth. Thus, a qualitative research approach exploring this multifaceted phenomenon was deemed worthy, especially since most academic integrity research focuses on comprehending the different determinants of student cheating from a quantitative context. This study provides a deeper perspective into the psyche of misconduct through the voices of students who lived through the experience of cheating directly or as witnesses to the process. This information can help education professionals understand the underlying motives and rationale behind this type of dishonest behavior and accordingly identify and implement effective changes to policy and prevention measures to eliminate or reduce it.

## Literature Review

Academic misconduct, both in face-to-face learning and online environments, is prevalent at all levels of education (Parnther, 2020). However, the literature has not been able to conclusively confirm the link between the different types of testing and a specific type of academic misbehavior (Holden et al., 2020) or that online assessments may result in more infractions in comparison to tests administered in face-to-face contexts (Moralista & Oducado, 2020). While reported cheating percentages have been varied in the literature, it is imperative to address the issue from an educational perspective (Gamage et al., 2020; Janke et al., 2020). Recent studies have identified different challenges resulting from the sudden shift to online delivery of courses during the pandemic. Some of these issues include how higher education institutions worldwide responded to COVID-19 (Bensaid & Brahimi, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020), how faculty and student perception of academic integrity changed over time, and the establishment of systems that prevent or decrease cheating in online learning environments (see Parnther, 2020). Research focus has also been placed on the impact of rapid digitalization of exams (Janke et al., 2020) and the critical evaluation of measures taken to safeguard against online cheating (Gamage et al., 2020). Such technology-driven challenges highlight the shift in how education is continually changing. While conclusions drawn from these studies, based mostly in Western educational environments, are alarming, the literature suggests that the phenomenon of cheating is universal (Crawford et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of understanding cheating as it relates to assessment, especially in higher education.

Academic misconduct has been reported in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia, although research on the topic is still scarce (Ahmed, 2018; Alghamdi et al., 2018). A few notable studies have been conducted on both traditional and online academic misconduct in higher education. For example, Alhadlaq et al. (2020) found that having a high grade-point average (GPA), attending ethics courses, and authoring published manuscripts helped increase positive attitudes towards ethical behavior. Another study by AlAteeq et al. (2020) identified a correlation between high-stress levels and virtual cheating behavior. Results of another

study indicated that students believe they must help their friends and that seeing others receive higher grades after engaging in unethical activities while escaping punishment encourages misconduct (Ebaid, 2021). In addition, Abdulghani et al. (2018) found that male students cheated more, and those with higher GPA scores were the least likely to cheat. The authors concluded that the sociocultural makeup of the Saudi Arabian society affected people's ethical perceptions.

According to Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (TPB), the subjective norms of society play an important role in explaining why a specific behavior happens (Ajzen, 1985, 2020; Beck & Ajzen, 1991) and that differences in cultural norms are the reason why academic dishonesty varies across cultures (Pickering & Hornby, 2005). Saudi Arabians belong to a collective cultural society rooted in Islamic teachings and Arab traditions that value social groups in terms of both loyalty and protection (Ourfali, 2016). Consequently, many Saudis believe that supporting other students is essential, and this support is linked to inherent early childhood characteristics embedded throughout the culture (Razek & Coyner, 2013). This belief also validates the reason Saudi students prefer to work collaboratively in groups and venerate peer recommendations (Alamri et al., 2014). They also highly value the social impressions of others (Razek, 2014). These expectations can create pressure to accept or conform to group behaviors such as cheating and can directly influence identities.

Furthermore, collaboration on exams has been reported and framed as a means of helping others. Alghamdi et al. (2016) found that students perceived e-learning as an educational environment that encourages collaboration and open discussion via social media, even on exams. Such unstructured learning environments may create unmonitored channels for student collaboration and, eventually, engagement in academic misconduct (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). In addition, a few studies found discrepancies between moral beliefs and actions, with most Saudi students denouncing cheating but still taking part in it (Abdulghani et al., 2018; Hosny & Fatima, 2014; Razek, 2014; Tayan, 2017). TPB's moral obligation component might shed light on this contradiction. According to the theory, a person's feelings can play a major role in the obligation or refusal to engage in cheating behavior (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). Thus, the sense of compatibility with one's values and principles can prevail over one's moral beliefs. While useful, the mentioned studies do not explain the process or show links to societal norms to better comprehend why such behavior happens. However, some of the concepts identified, such as the perception of right and wrong, helping, and the use of technology warrant more study and are helpful starting points to understanding the phenomenon in more depth.

Generally, researchers have found empirical evidence to explain this type of misbehavior. Some researchers claim that the Middle Eastern cultural framework values social acceptance over academic integrity (Wowra, 2007). Therefore, one would expect that e-learning in higher education, which had been rapidly gaining momentum via blended approaches long before the pandemic (Dziuban et al., 2018), would experience higher percentages of misconduct. Nonetheless, the evidence is conflicting. While some researchers claim there is a difference between the two types of teaching environments (King & Case, 2014), others found no difference (Ladyshevsky, 2015). A recent paper by Eaton (2020) acknowledged a difference between distance learning and remote learning implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He argued that the former includes educational professionals trained explicitly for online teaching and a more mature student base. Both conditions make it less likely that cheating would occur at the same rates as in other learning environments. Eaton asserted that teachers in traditional teaching and learning settings were not prepared for the shift to e-learning during the pandemic. They had little or no experience with digital platforms, and so they applied the same assessment practices they typically used in the traditional classroom. The sudden shift to remote learning meant that there was a lack of time to prepare adequately for online learning and the technological, social, and psychological factors that came with the shift. These elements need to be explored in-depth to understand and develop a realistic understanding of this phenomenon.

Many researchers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic have found various reasons for academic misconduct such as heavy study loads (Costley, 2018) and easy access to course material while doing

assessment tasks (Heriyati & Ekasari, 2020). In addition, personal beliefs of students about cheating and their competitiveness to get high grades were reported as reasons for academic misconduct (Nwoye et al., 2019). More reasons include low English proficiency (Williamson, 2019) and strong peer influences (Abdelrahim, 2021; Griebeler, 2019). Other reasons that were found to contribute to academic dishonesty are students' ignorance of integrity policies (Murtaza et al., 2013) and their negative perception of an instructor (Ives, 2020). Faith is yet another factor that could be related to academic misconduct. While some researchers have found mixed results in cheating reports in religious environments, it was concluded that these instances were mostly influenced by social pressure (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Yu et al., 2017). Even studies investigating the cheating behavior of Muslim students have shown that personal values affect cheating more so than moral or religious principles (Ahmed, 2018; Hadjar, 2017).

Focusing specifically on learning environments initiated by COVID-19, some researchers have identified a rise in student mental health issues (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021; Fu et al., 2021). This could have been caused by a fear of failure because of unfamiliar modes of teaching and testing (Hamdan et al., 2021), lack of communication and interaction with instructors and peers (Aboagye et al., 2020), or lack of proctoring (Gamage et al., 2020). Subjective societal norms can explain tendencies during the pandemic to complete exams collaboratively and to seek help from others (Nguyen et al., 2020). This link is more evident in collectivist societies such as in Saudi Arabia that encourage a more cooperative environment but at the same time maintain what Sutherland-Smith (2013) referred to as academic competitiveness; students feel socially obligated to excel but at the same time have the desire to help peers.

Researchers have also identified different types of cheaters, including those who want to outsmart the teacher, are lazy, copy answers from others, use crib notes, collaborate, sell, or give exams to others, switch exam papers, ghost for others, change answers or grades of tests, purchase essays, and/or plagiarize (Wade & Stinson, 1993). Bain (2014) identified further characteristics including those who use technology such as laptops and mobile phones to access information or contact third parties. Another type of cheating that has developed out of the pandemic is the use of voice and video conferencing technology such as Zoom, FaceTime, and WebEx (Nizam et al., 2020). Researchers predicted that technology would increase opportunities for academic dishonesty and that this would result in higher rates of cheating (Simkin & McLeod, 2010; Tayan, 2017). As many students have advanced digital and media literacy, it is no surprise that mastering such skills can facilitate online cheating. The demands of the 21st century require a demonstration of speed, productivity, and performance (Rabi et al., 2006), thus shifting student values from idealism to materialism (Callahan, 2004). It is evident from the above studies that the motives and types of cheating behavior have been developing to fit the changing times.

Interestingly, students who cheat are rarely caught, and little has been done by those responsible to prevent it (Daumiller & Janke, 2019). Based on TBP's perceived behavioral control component, if academic misconduct is perceived as easy, it will encourage engagement; conversely, participation in such acts will be discouraged if it is viewed as difficult (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). Understandably, values and behaviors have changed due to the shift to remote learning in this specific context. While the situation is unique, it reflects how increased adaptation of technology could affect misconduct in the future. This is highly relevant to education, as digital growth is accompanied by the continuous development of cheating methods. This continues to raise ethical, moral, and cultural implications. Therefore, a deeper understanding of cheating behavior through qualitative research can help reveal trends in thought and opinions related to such a complex topic as cheating behavior.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to investigate the attitudes, perceptions, and justifications of Saudi Arabian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) female graduates towards online cheating through the following research questions:

1. What are the main types of cheating experienced by students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying transition to online learning?
2. What are the main factors that have influenced cheating in this specific context?
3. How have students' perceptions of academic integrity and misconduct changed with the shift to digital learning?

## Methods

This research employed a qualitative design using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach pays particular attention to understanding the meaning and quality people attach to lived experiences from their perspective through a specific context and using small sample sizes to ensure data richness. It enables in-depth data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Tuffour (2017) argued that IPA draws on three areas of theoretical principles: phenomenology, the study of meaningful lived human experiences; hermeneutics, the interpretation of the meaning participants apply to lived experiences; and idiography, which focuses on deep analysis and human understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Therefore, IPA's psychologically informed approach and use in investigating topics of complex process-based nature was deemed an appropriate approach for the study.

Ten Saudi English language major graduates in a Saudi Arabian higher education institution were recruited. All students were females between the ages of 20 and 23 years. They were raised in this society, shared related cultural norms, were part of the same educational setting, and went through similar circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment included purposeful and snowball methods as they could "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). This stopped when the saturation point was reached in the data collected and no new information was revealed. A pilot study was conducted to test the validity of the interview guide one month prior to the initial research. While ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics review board, confidentiality and anonymity were also taken into consideration due to the sensitivity of the research topic. Protection of participant identities and collected data was outlined in the signed consent form to ensure information would not be disclosed to anyone outside the research project. Moreover, data were stored on encrypted computer-based files that cannot be accessed. In terms of anonymity, no personal identifiers, were used to link responses to study participants as pseudonyms were used (e.g., P1, P2, etc.). On a final note, all those who participated in the research were recent graduates with no ties to the university; this helped make them more comfortable answering the interview questions and less threatened by repercussions. All participants were assured they could withdraw any time.

The data were collected through individual face-to-face interviews that lasted between 1 and 2 hours using a protocol containing 48 semi-structured, opened-ended questions (see Appendix). This allowed continuous probing of the topic to generate a deeper understanding of people's opinions and experiences (Adams, 2015). The questions in the guide were developed after an extensive review of the literature and several discussions with academic professionals and students in informal settings in addition to the pilot study. The two researchers examined all the questions before and after conducting the pilot study to eliminate leading questions. The interviews started with a brief introduction of the research and the reason it was being

conducted. This was then followed by questions about the participants and their chosen major. The warm-up questions were then followed by more in-depth questions about the impact of COVID-19 on their life, education, peers, their experience with cheating, personal experiences, and culture. Finally, the interview ended with questions about honor codes, responsibilities, suggestions to decrease cheating, and future jobs. All the interviews were conducted through the ZOOM video conferencing service by one of the researchers. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the data were analyzed collaboratively by the two researchers using the Dedoose software Version 8.0.35 ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)). This qualitative and mixed methods web-based application analyzes text, photos, and audio files and facilitates collaborative work. It is similar and compatible with other qualitative software such as NVivo.

All interviews were conducted mainly in English and were transcribed by the principal researcher. The second researcher validated the interviews by comparing transcriptions with the recordings and reviewing the Arabic translation of some parts. The second stage involved data analysis by both researchers using Dedoose. After the first researcher analyzed the data, the second researcher went through the codes and emergent themes to establish the reliability of the analysis. The researchers then continuously explored, interpreted, and collaboratively discussed the findings. Thus, the analysis process went through three stages: literal, reflexive, and interpretive (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Numerous meetings between the two researchers, both in person and via Zoom, took place until it was agreed that saturation was reached. To ensure validity, two other colleagues were asked to analyze segments of the data independently (Long & Johnson, 2000). It is worth noting that the researchers do not aim to generalize the findings, especially that the sample size is small; however, the conclusions can encourage additional in-depth work in this area.

## Results

This qualitative research study provides insights on the topic of academic cheating during the COVID-19 pandemic. As expected, cheating spiked and grades rose during the pivot to remote instruction. As their normal changed, many learners were under increased stress and temptation to cheat. However, it was not just a haphazard experience. These were students, many of whom claimed to have never cheated before during in-person courses but who started to cheat or were witnesses to cheating of others when classes shifted to an online platform. In the following sections, a comprehensive description of what went on during this period is presented. The data revealed that only one student (P4) admitted to cheating from the beginning of the interview while two others did this halfway through their interviews (P3 & P8). The remaining interviewees claimed they did not agree to cheating but did admit to participating once or twice when pressured by peers.

The analysis, which is supported by quotes from all ten participants, identified three higher-level themes that directly impacted the development of cheating in a Saudi all-female higher education context. These are (a) the shift to digital learning, (b) Saudi social norms, and (c) participants' altered perceptions of academic misconduct. Building on these foundational themes, the mechanics of cheating in this specific e-learning environment during the pandemic are then explored with the goal of reaching a better understanding of the processes involved. This was done by discussing the emergence of cheating groups, the relations between those involved, and their precautions to avoid exposure.

## Themes

### The Shift to Digital Learning

With the onset of COVID-19, there was a sudden transition in Saudi universities from traditional education to e-learning that forced teachers and students to adapt quickly to high-tech learning environments. As one study participant explained: "I feel that the speed in the shift made the girls panic" (P1). Similarly, many teachers were not prepared to deal with the features of the university's online teaching platform. As a result, they increased assessments or made them more challenging to compensate for the change in course delivery

and to curb cheating. As a result, some students argued that the amount of work assigned made them become “so frustrated” (P2), while others complained that instructors were creating assessments where “The answers weren’t in the book!” (P3) and were preventing them from achieving “a good grade if they didn’t cheat” (P4).

The pandemic also caused a change in the home environment for many students, causing anxiety, confusion, and exhaustion. During traditional on-campus classes, students from every level put in the effort to study and learn. They were studying on their own or “even looking for other students who can help them” (P3). However, the pivot caused by COVID-19 was a surprise. They became anxious, were confined to their homes, and they noted increased sleep, excessive media usage, and decreased physical activity. In their virtual environments, many became increasingly “bored” (P3). This unique situation resulted in a rapid shift in the way teaching and learning was conducted and caught students off-guard. It further resulted in unprecedented levels of cheating that directly affected the level of education being provided, as reported by one student that many “students were cheating, not learning” (P5). This situation made some learners feel as if “It wasn’t as important ... to give it my all” (P2), especially since there was no supervision of proctoring examinations, as it was not a university requirement for them to be monitored during online examinations. Therefore, there was “No fear” (P4) because it was difficult to provide evidence that cheating occurred. It is worth mentioning that for many Saudi Arabian students, technology and social media have become an indispensable part of their social lives. Thus, while the sudden transition to e-learning was a major factor that influenced the increase in cheating, it was further shaped by the social culture of the students’ environment.

### **Saudi Social Norms**

It is clear from the data that increased online cheating during the COVID-19 context resulted from a variety of factors facing both teachers and students. While the situation mirrors general cheating trends discussed in the literature review, it also links directly to how people in collectivist environments such as Saudi Arabia interact, build and maintain bonds, and value the perception of others. This might be considered a positive characteristic of local society; however, it can also lead students to prioritize social standing over moral actions. Therefore, it is essential to understand the impact of social culture on cheating. The participants in the study highlighted the strong bonds between students as a motive for cheating. They either belonged to the same social network or knew each other from traditional classroom settings before the pandemic forced the move to online learning. As one student explained, they were “friends and classmates” (P6), and they understood each other so well that they were aware of their peers’ “academic levels in [traditional] classes” (P7). They knew the high and poor achievers. Moreover, being from the same department strengthened their bonds, which made them feel obligated to “help each other” and “stand together” no matter what their “level of intelligence” was (P4). These relations played a pivotal role in promoting cheating as it was framed in a way that linked academic success to external elements of society such as supporting one another. While this has always been prevalent in Saudi Arabian culture, the unique COVID-19 situation, coupled with the rapid shift to online learning made cheating easier to justify and commit and resulted in shifts in moral perceptions.

### **Participants’ Altered Perceptions of Academic Misconduct**

Students who were cheating, including high achievers, were going through an unusual ethical situation. They were not associating themselves with reality. Some participants described the online learning situation as “Not real” (P4), “In another world,” “Sleep mode” (P3), “Open book all the time” (P8), “No limits” (P1), and “So strange” (P6). The situation made them feel like it was not a proper educational environment, making unethical actions justifiable. This contradiction in perception was seen as a direct result of the situation they were experiencing. As one student explained, “With all the stress they were put under, so many of them started to cheat” (P4). Surprisingly, many students did not relate the situation to religious or ethical beliefs, which are important in the local context. Participants further claimed that all students understood the religious implication of cheating as it played an integral part in their faith and upbringing. However, they still justified their actions by debating what constitutes a sin or reward in Islam. As one student put it, “You see, they believe if she doesn’t help her, it becomes haram (an act forbidden by God)” (P6) or if she does help, then “God will

help her tomorrow” (P1). These types of views illustrate confusion in students’ conception of faith and what they believe constitutes appropriate collaboration. Some participants even reported that they had to “find other ways of approaching this topic” (P9) as they found it difficult to advocate against cheating from a religious perspective. Thus, it was framed in the context of aiding or “helping” to support one another. According to several of the participants, such a conception was a challenge in traditional classrooms and with the shift to e-learning it became even harder to justify as the pandemic took away many facets of their typical environment.

When the participants were asked about their perception of the repeatedly mentioned concept of “helping” or “assisting others to cheat,” two interesting ideas emerged. First, it was apparent that the word “help” was used as an alternative to academic misconduct. According to the participants, this word choice became an accepted norm during traditional classrooms but was used more excessively during remote learning as a synonym for cheating. As one participant explained, “There is a hidden meaning behind the word ‘help’, and we understand it very well” (P1). Secondly, many of these students did not relate this type of misconduct to ethics or religion. One of the participants even equated it to “doing a good deed” (P4). She explained that cheating has to do with a person’s intent: “If my intention is good, then it isn’t cheating, but if my intention is bad, then it is cheating” (P4). Notably, dishonest behavior prevailed over religious and ethical beliefs, and more importantly, over rational thinking.

### **Cheating in the Context of the Study**

Due to the sudden transition to e-learning and the strong societal connection between students, collective misconduct became prominent. Those who were identified as having cheated shared the same academic struggles and usually high-grade goals. However, what made them different from other students was their ability to use social bonds and technology collectively and systematically to cheat. Accordingly, the study has identified three main characteristics of collective e-cheating that were unique to the specific context of the study. They are the development of digital groups, student relationships, and fear of exposure.

#### **Digital Groups**

According to the participants, the main medium used for collective academic misconduct was the WhatsApp messaging application. The participants revealed three types of groups that were created to help students cheat. The first was the department group, which had approximately 250 student members from the same university department. Although this group was not usually used for academic misconduct, students planning orchestrated cheating usually checked the WhatsApp’s chat history of the group members to identify good as well as weak students who might be interested in cheating or facilitating cheating to approach them in their efforts to collectively cheat. Through this group, the potential non-cheaters were also identified which serves the purpose of not involving them in any future cheating attempt. The second type of group consisted of a number of small personal groups. Such groups were made up of eight to ten invited students, usually friends or a friend of a friend, and they focused on a specific course. Finally, there were invitation-based groups, which had a larger number of students (15–20) who were enrolled in several courses. Most of the group members have already completed most departmental courses but wanted to help others in passing their courses or attaining higher grades. To become a member of these groups, students needed to fulfill certain criteria. For the first group, students had to be part of the English Department. However, with the latter two types, there were more complex steps to achieve membership. First, they were required to be a friend of the person who created the group. Second, they should study and prepare for tests. Third, to bring someone into the group, existing members must vouch for their trustworthiness. Finally, everybody in the group should adhere to the unspoken rule of not informing on each other. Moreover, if anybody broke any of the rules, a new group that excluded the offending students would be formed.

Interestingly, the smaller WhatsApp groups had a specific naming system. The word “cheat” was not used in the title or the group’s description, instead a pseudo-title would be used such as “*Helping*,” “*SOS*,” “*FBI*,” “*Services*,” and “*Full Marks*” (P9), in either English or Arabic. Students even claimed that some names had religious connotations to help conceal the real intent, such as “*May God Grant Us Forgiveness*” (P8). These acts illustrate that they understood the immorality of the behavior. It is also clear that a sophisticated cheating process was unfolding. Ultimately, technology was utilized to create an elaborate systematic network focused on cheating with a united goal.

### **Student Relationships**

The data revealed several social relationships that affected student group formation and their involvement in cheating. The first was peer pressure. Strong bonds were identified as a major cause for unethical behavior, even if one did not agree with it. The justification is that they did not want to lose a friend by being stingy or appearing as though they were “smarter than them” (P1). As a result, they felt pressured to engage in unethical behavior. Surprisingly, some of the study participants who clearly stated their objection to cheating at the beginning of the interviews later subtly claimed that they helped a friend once or twice and that they would help again if there was a need. Thus, peer pressure was very important in the Saudi Arabian context, to the extent that some would change their moral values in return for group acceptance.

The second type of relationship was among the members of the personal and invitation-based groups that were created for collaborative cheating. Such relationships were based on previous on-campus friendships or social connections as mentioned previously. As one student explained: “If I trust someone, I will put her in the group with us, and if another one of the group members knows someone she trusts, she will add them in the group too and like that” (P4). Group trust was an issue that was taken seriously, especially since the idea of being exposed was a cause for concern. Despite their decision to cheat, many of the students still wanted to preserve their “ideal” social image and reputation. This tension between being exposed and actually committing cheating ended in most cases with the decision to cheat provided that trust is established. Interestingly, most participants claimed that they would never expose cheaters, especially friends. They felt it was not their responsibility, with many of them arguing that it is “something between the cheater and God or their conscience” (P3). That said, worry about exposure was negated by the situation as a participant explained, “They need help too. No one cares about snitching because the girls in these groups need help” because of their low grades or to maintain their high GPA (P4). Thus, although fear still existed, they rationalized the situation to be something less unethical than it was. The third type of relationship was coined by several participants as cheating acquaintances. One student explained how this relationship can develop between cheaters: “I cheat, and she cheats, and we work together and then say goodbye” (P8). Thus, relationships do not have to be strong or even present. One of the participants claimed that even enemies lower their standards “without any shame” (P5) and approach others for help.

The fourth and most interesting relationship is between a martyr cheater and other group members. In this situation, one or more students sacrifice themselves by being the first to take an exam with the collective help of the group. Sometimes there is a rotation process between the members, while at other times, one student goes in freely for the group’s sake, fully understanding the consequences. Surprisingly, even if these martyrs receive low grades, they are not upset with the other members. As one student explained, “If I can’t get it, I want my friend to get the grade. We have to help each other!” (P1). As the tests are sometimes too difficult for them to answer on their own or because of weak language proficiency, these cheaters do not mind the sacrifice as it is for their own sake and for the group. This type of relationship has a direct connection to the collectivist nature of Saudi Arabian society.

Throughout the interviews, the idea of collectivism appeared numerous times in different contexts. Many participants argued that academic misconduct was being normalized by the university community. Thus, “It is normal for all of us to work together for this cause” (P3). Another student went on to claim that students even

guilt others into cheating: “Shame on you for not helping!” (P2) as if it is something to be ashamed of because it goes against group needs. One of the participants even explained how the collective goals had been incorporated into the intricacies of the cheating itself: “They would tell them or give them a sign like a red dot on the wrong answers (sent as screenshots in the WhatsApp group) so none of the girls get it wrong because ‘We made this mistake, so don’t make it too’” (P10). Apparently, these students were looking out for each other, and sacrifices were accepted for the group cause.

### **Fear of Exposure**

All study participants claimed that university students do not inform on each other, especially in smaller groups where participants knew one another. Despite this, they still had doubts and took precautions if groups included friends of friends. This was more evident in larger groups where members checked identities as one participant stated, “We do a whole FBI investigation on them” (P3) to make sure it is not an instructor in disguise, but a student that can be trusted. Another precaution was that some students tried to frame their cheating as assisting others. “Just in case someone asks, I can say I wasn’t cheating, I was helping” (P4). Sometimes the precautions had to do with the fear of being exposed among friends as cheaters. These students usually do not join the smaller groups. Instead, they will ask for help from a friend who is already in one of these groups, who then “forwards all the answers to her” (P8). Another precaution is to make sure to enter the test on time, as one student explained: “Even if you go in and don’t answer a single question, it is okay. Just wait until the whole group answers the questions together” (P8). According to the participants, many teachers believe that late test comers are cheating. Still, according to the participants, the cheaters “are always one step ahead of the instructors” (P4). They are always trying to override the system by understanding how the testing platforms work and identifying potential loopholes.

## **Discussion**

It is apparent that students understood the unethicity of their behavior and the risks involved in cheating. The shift in educational setting, the altered perceptions, and the social collectivist element all played important roles in how cheating was consciously organized and executed. Ultimately, an elaborate system of formation of cheating groups was developed and implemented. It goes far beyond typical cheating that has been described in the literature. In this system, all those involved understood their roles and supported a collective group goal.

Although many studies have investigated online cheating in higher education, we believe our study has tapped into an uncharted area of unethical conduct at a sophisticated collective group level. It has uncovered a direct link between the decline of ethics and increased technological advancements, specifically, the use of social media applications to facilitate academic misconduct. It also identified a relationship between ease of cheating and collaboration. Therefore, it has illustrated accelerated academic misconduct at a level rarely investigated in such depth in the Middle East or within an EFL context. As was evident in the analysis, cheating went beyond ordinary unethical behavior and resulted from increased and unprecedented stress levels. The participants who cheated in this study went through pressures that were difficult to handle, and as a result, resorted to cheating. In addition, there were no evident consequences implemented by teachers, departments, or the university. Not being reported or caught and not hearing about disciplinary actions against students help vindicate and encourage this type of negative behavior. It is not surprising then that in today’s goal-oriented society, many students want to accomplish goals in the easiest way possible for the sake of obtaining fast results (Kaufman, 2008). Hence, the intense strain, absence of consequences, and ease of cheating led to behavior that perhaps triggered self-centered and unethical reasoning.

In this case study, academically weak students found the situation an opportunity, while some high achievers used it to maintain their high GPAs. Although the former was to be expected to some degree, it is the latter

that was unanticipated as academic cheating is usually associated with low achievers. It seems that when students feel that the educational environment is no longer operating fairly, they can disregard its rules and policies, which may explain what happened to these students. Another reason could be that they have a high-performance orientation to achievement, where they work to meet course demands but rely on external indicators of success (Murdock et al., 2004). Therefore, their motivation comes from demonstrating competency by outperforming others with less proficiency by getting higher grades (Daumiller & Janke, 2019). According to Anderman (2007), performance-focused students are associated with increased academic dishonesty, higher justifiability of misconduct, and acceptability of cheating. It is worth noting that even mastery-oriented students have been found to cheat in certain circumstances, including when assessment is too difficult to implement, no proctoring exists, or when invited by a peer to cheat (Niiya et al., 2008). This appealing situation for both types of high-achieving learners could have led them to such behavior as all the conditions were right. Consequently, the perception of cheating changed. These students not only cheated but accepted it as a type of normative behavior, especially since the risks of being caught were almost non-existent. People's motivation to cheat often relates to the norms of the group they are part of (Ajzen, 1985; Beck & Ajzen, 1991) with peers being a strong influence (Beasley, 2014; Griebeler, 2019). Thus, if group members develop an "immoral atmosphere," it will be the basis of how they will behave and, more importantly, how they rationalize academic misconduct. This is consistent with Gino et al.'s (2009) claim that exposure to other people's unethical behavior can increase a person's dishonesty. Daumiller and Janke (2019) found that appearance goals combined with the social norm of accepting cheating to improve performance can lead to increased academic misconduct. These EFL students understood the risks involved, but the temptations were strong, and acceptance of this type of behavior became a norm.

Students justified cheating behavior using what Haines et al. (1986) referred to as neutralizations that are "similar to rationalization which can be used before, during, or after deviant behavior to deflect the disapproval of others and self" (p. 344). Students use these concepts to validate their improper actions because of the influences they claim were beyond their control, such as situational-based neutralizers (e.g., COVID-19), course-based neutralizers (e.g., difficult, irrelevant), instructor-based neutralizers (e.g., no scruples, difficult assessment, no proctoring), and student-based neutralizers (e.g., peer pressure, low-language proficiency, wanting a high GPA, wanting to pass). These EFL students used these concepts to justify cheating for both themselves and others. Hence, alterations of perception through the rationalizing of neutralizers justified misconduct and helped set the scene for group cheating.

TPB states that the relations between members of a society play a significant role in creating individual identities. This was evident in this study, especially in how Saudi Arabian students perceived cheating, claiming to be against it while still being involved. Most of these students progressed through their educational journey with a high sense of commitment to the group. This connection has been embedded in them since early childhood and overrides all other societal rules. Therefore, for these students, cheating has roots in their social context. Collectivist societies not only rely on close long-term commitments with significant others but also encourage group loyalty. The emphasis is on putting the group's needs over those of individuals (Jiang et al., 2018). Such strong relations encourage adherence to collective norms and interests (Beck & Ajzen, 1991), especially if they felt socially obliged to help each other (Aljurf et al., 2020). These collective norms were evident in the data and directly impacted perceptions of right and wrong. This could explain why students in the study rarely reported cheating no matter what kind of relationship they had with other students (Abdulghani et al., 2018). This also confirms the claim that Middle Eastern students feel socially obliged to help each other cheat (Aljurf et al., 2020). This could be the reason martyr cheaters were not upset when they received low grades, as it was done for the sake of the group. It could also explain why friends, acquaintances, or even enemies, supported each other to cheat as they prioritized the good of the group over the welfare of the individual. These EFL learners understood the situation everybody was in (i.e., language proficiency differences, importance of grades, etc.). However, in remote learning environments, they needed to feel they belong to a larger learning community (Alghamdi et al., 2016). Therefore, it was not

surprising that they formed groups and planned to cheat. Consequently, the study illustrated that Saudi Arabian social bonds were strengthened by the shift to a more technically advanced educational environment, leading to instances of collective cheating.

Taken together, the results suggest that a collective, systematic type of academic misconduct unfolded and was accepted as a normative act by those involved in it or who witnessed it. The main factors that determined the cohesion of these cheating groups were their small numbers, similar societal beliefs and educational backgrounds, strong group dynamics, reasonable precautions, flexibility, and shared goals. These EFL students were able to put in place specific procedures and adhere to certain rules. Thus, the groups' social norms played a role in how they were structured as the collective benefits outweighed the individual ones. From the latter, a concise definition of collective and systematic e-cheating (CSE) can be put forward as *a structured group behavior found in e-learning environments with strong social bonds that view academic misconduct as a norm because of altered ethical perceptions*. This type of cheating is concerning and thus needs to be addressed.

## Limitations of the Study

Although the current case study provided in-depth insights into the behavior of female EFL university students regarding academic integrity, it is not without limitations. As the aim was to gain truthful responses from participants, it is assumed that students were completely honest. Given the sensitivity of the topic, it can be expected that students may not have been completely truthful. Another limitation is that it concentrated on a small sample of female participants from a similar educational setting, thus limiting data analysis by gender, size, and academic department. However, despite its limitations, the current study provides a starting point to encourage additional work in this area.

## Implications for Practice and Theory

As increased levels of technology integration appear to be the future of education, the constructs comprising TBP could be used to shift student attitudes against academic misconduct. The theory emphasizes the role of a person's feelings and how these can either promote or impede cheating. Accordingly, one solution to alleviate this behavior could be to make basic changes to university procedures and policies. This can be done through the introduction of short-term responses such as implementing punishment for unethical conduct. It can also be done through long-term solutions that focus on the continuous emphasis on the university's honor code through the curriculum, lectures, and visiting alumni, or the promotion of a university-wide awareness campaign against academic misconduct throughout the study years both directly and indirectly.

The participants live in a collectivist society, and they were aware that their cheating behavior would be perceived negatively by those around them if exposed. They knew that their actions might bring shame to their families since social impressions are highly valued in the Saudi Arabian society. Yet, their feelings about such misbehavior were altered and their cheating behavior justified. Therefore, more in-depth work is needed to see how such perceptions can be manipulated to guide students to refrain from committing cheating in a collectivist society. Through TBP's perceived behavioral control component, another solution can also be put forward. The design of new digital monitoring solutions can help discourage cheating as it will make such behavior difficult. Doing this will help make students feel a moral obligation towards following university regulations as their reputation would be at stake as was the case for many of them during traditional on-campus learning.

Theoretically, it would be interesting to conduct cross-cultural studies that compare student cheating behaviors in collectivist and non-collectivist societies and identify ways to address the issue. Another line of

inquiry would be to investigate gender differences in terms of cheating perceptions and ideologies. Future research could also study the application of practical solutions to academic misconduct and conduct a longitudinal study to compare the effect of cheating on the students at both university and societal levels.

## Conclusion

Strong social bonds and changes in perceptions supported a systematic collective approach to academic misconduct reported by a small number of EFL students in higher education. It is interesting how learners can have conflicting opinions about cheating, varied ideas regarding how to commit such acts, and have different motives for doing them. This could explain the reason for the scarcity of research into group-organized cheating. The significance of our study lies in the kind of sophisticated cheating that, to our knowledge, has not been identified and studied before in this way.

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## Appendix

### The Research Interview Guide

#### Part 1

1. Why did you join this department and not another one?
2. How would you describe the difficulty of your major?
3. Cheating may exist in educational institutions during students' years of study whether online or face to face. So, what level(s) do you think online unethical behavior may happen in the most? While answering the question, think about the three major stages in your EFL program: the foundation year (levels 3-4), the introductory year (levels 5-6), and the major year (level 7 & 8). Why?
4. How prevalent is online cheating in your department?
5. What kind of effect do you think the circumstances of COVID 19 had on online cheating?
6. Define online cheating in your own words.
7. What are the most common types of online cheating among language students that you know of?
8. In the past three months, were you aware of or know of any incident(s) of online cheating involving language students in your department? Can you talk about one in detail?
9. In the past three months, tell me in detail, if possible, about an online experience where you think you cheated or know about someone who did in the past three months but in a creative way.
10. Why do you think some students cheat online?
11. Can you explain the difference between online cheating in Arabic instruction courses and English instruction ones?
12. Can you explain how the shift from traditional classrooms to online teaching affected the students' cheating behavior?
13. What role does technology play in facilitating/not facilitating online cheating?

#### Part 2

1. If you knew that a fellow student cheated online, what would be your reaction? Why? Why not?
2. What kind of resources do you use on the Internet to help you do a whole assignment, homework, project, or research paper?
3. How do you cite them in an assignment, paper, or project?
4. Where does cheating occur the most? Homework, assignments, research papers, quizzes, or final exams? Why?
5. Tell me about a time you think you collaborated with a fellow language student on an assignment or homework or saw another student do so when you were not supposed to do so? If yes, how did you do it? Why?
6. Tell me about a time when you were facilitated friends' or other students' access to exam information while doing their exams. How? Why?
7. Tell me about a time you asked a fellow language student for information during an exam or saw another student do so? If yes, how do they do it? Why?
8. How do you think learning changed in the time of corona?

#### Part 3

1. How do YOU perceive such practices in your department? How do you feel about them?
2. How do you think language students perceive cheating in general?
3. Give me the profile of a potential online cheater.
4. How would you classify yourself in terms of being engaged in cheating?
5. Explain the difference between cheating from an ethical and a religious point of view in your opinion.

6. Explain the difference between cheating from an ethical and a religious point of view from other students' point of view.
7. What is the difference between cheating and facilitating cheating to others?
8. How do you think your culture influences your decision/or others to engage or not engage in such behavior?
9. What is your family's view about cheating? How would your family feel about your cheating if they ever knew you did it? How would you feel about being caught?
10. What precautions do cheating students take when they cheat online?
11. What are the different kinds of cheaters?
12. How do cheating students you know of plan cheating sessions?
13. Are there special names for the cheating groups?
14. What are the limits drawn by the students about cheating?
15. Would you cheat if everyone else did? Why?
16. Would you cheat if your teacher was ok with it? Why?
17. What is the difference between easy and difficult subjects in terms of cheating?
18. What is the worst kind of cheating you ever saw/heard of online and what is the simplest form of cheating you ever saw/heard of online?
19. Do you know of anybody who got caught cheating online?
20. Were you ever informed of the academic consequences of unethical behavior? How?
21. What kind of methods are used by your instructors to stop or decrease online cheating?
22. Why do you think some instructors may overlook online cheating attempts?
23. How does getting to know the instructors' way in writing online quizzes/exams may help cheaters?
24. How good is your department in monitoring online cheating?
25. What kind of preventative methods can the department you belong to do to decrease academic dishonesty?
26. Whose responsibility is it to prevent cheating? Students? Instructor? Or institution?
27. What do you think your future job will be?

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