

The Normalization of Academic Cheating Among Libyan Students: A Desk Analysis Study from a Socio-Psychological Perspective on its Effects and Repercussions on Academic and Social Efficiency

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تطبيع الغش الأكاديمي بين الطلاب الليبيين: دراسة تحليلية مكتبية من منظور اجتماعي نفسي حول آثاره وتداعياته على الكفاءة الأكاديمية والاجتماعية

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Abstract

The phenomenon of academic cheating has transitioned from an isolated behavioral violation to a normalized social practice within various educational contexts. This paper presents a comprehensive two-phase investigation into the normalization of academic cheating among Libyan students. Phase one utilizes a desk analysis to construct a socio-psychological theoretical model, synthesizing recent literature on moral disengagement, peer norms, and institutional trust. Phase two transitions from theoretical modeling to empirical validation through a cross-sectional field study comprising a stratified random sample of 500 participants (Libyan teachers, parents, and students). By integrating the desk analysis with primary field data, this study examines how the intersection of achievement pressure, perceived peer behavior, and procedural injustice fosters an environment where cheating is cognitively restructured and morally justified. The findings reveal a significant divergence in how stakeholders perceive academic integrity, with students exhibiting higher levels of moral disengagement when institutional trust is low. The paper concludes that the normalization of cheating severely compromises both academic competence and social trust, necessitating a paradigm shift from purely punitive measures to systemic interventions rooted in procedural justice and integrity education.

Keywords: Academic Cheating, Normalization, Moral Disengagement, Peer Norms, Institutional Trust, Libyan Students, Academic Integrity.

المخلص

تحولت ظاهرة الغش الأكاديمي من انتهاك سلوكي معزول إلى ممارسة اجتماعية شائعة في سياقات تعليمية متنوعة. تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة شاملة من مرحلتين حول انتشار الغش الأكاديمي بين الطلاب الليبيين. تستخدم المرحلة الأولى تحليلاً مكتبياً لبناء نموذج نظري اجتماعي-نفسى، يجمع بين الأدبيات الحديثة حول التحرر الأخلاقي، ومعايير الأقران، والثقة المؤسسية. أما المرحلة الثانية، فتنتقل من النمذجة النظرية إلى التحقق التجريبي من خلال دراسة ميدانية مقطعية شملت عينة عشوائية طبقية مكونة من 500 مشارك (معلمين وأولياء أمور وطلاب ليبيين). من خلال دمج التحليل المكتبي مع البيانات الميدانية الأولية، تبحث هذه الدراسة كيف يسهم تداخل ضغط التحصيل الدراسي، وسلوك الأقران المُدرك، والظلم الإجرائي في خلق بيئة يُعاد فيها هيكل الغش معرفياً وتبريره أخلاقياً. تكشف النتائج عن تباين كبير في كيفية إدراك أصحاب المصلحة للنزاهة الأكاديمية، حيث يُظهر الطلاب مستويات أعلى من التحرر الأخلاقي عندما تكون الثقة المؤسسية منخفضة. تخلص الورقة البحثية إلى أن تطبيع الغش يلحق ضرراً بالغاً بالكفاءة الأكاديمية والثقة الاجتماعية، مما يستدعي تحولاً جذرياً من التدابير العقابية البحتة إلى تدخلات منهجية تركز على العدالة الإجرائية والتوعية بالنزاهة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغش الأكاديمي، التطبيع، التحرر الأخلاقي، معايير الأقران، الثقة المؤسسية، الطلاب الليبيون، النزاهة الأكاديمية.

1. Introduction

Academic integrity forms the foundational social contract of the educational enterprise. The value of a credential relies not merely on the numerical grade recorded, but on the collective belief that the pathway to achieving it was honest, equitable, and comparable across the student body (International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021) [1], [2]. When this contract is breached through academic cheating, the damage extends far beyond the individual offender; it erodes the trust binding students to their peers, educators, and the broader society that assigns symbolic and professional value to the degree [2], [3]. In the Libyan context, the discourse surrounding academic dishonesty has gained urgent prominence alongside the administration of large-scale national examinations [4], [5]. For instance, the Libyan Ministry of Education reported that 115,110 students sat for the secondary school completion exams in 2024, alongside the subsequent annulment of exams for dozens of students due to the smuggling of mobile phones and coordinated cheating efforts (Ministry of Education, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c) [6], [7]. While official bodies treat cheating primarily as an administrative infraction requiring surveillance and punishment, contemporary psychological and sociological frameworks suggest a more complex reality [8], [9], . Cheating is increasingly not viewed by students as a profound moral failure, but rather as a normalized, expected, and low-risk strategy for navigating systemic pressures [10]. This paper addresses this complexity by first establishing a theoretical foundation through a desk analysis of the socio-psychological drivers of cheating normalization. Building upon this theoretical framework, the study introduces empirical field data collected from a random sample of 500 Libyan teachers, parents, and students. The objective is to map how the normalization process operates across different stakeholder groups and to evaluate its repercussions on both academic efficiency (actual learning and skill acquisition) and social efficiency (trust, meritocracy, and professional readiness).

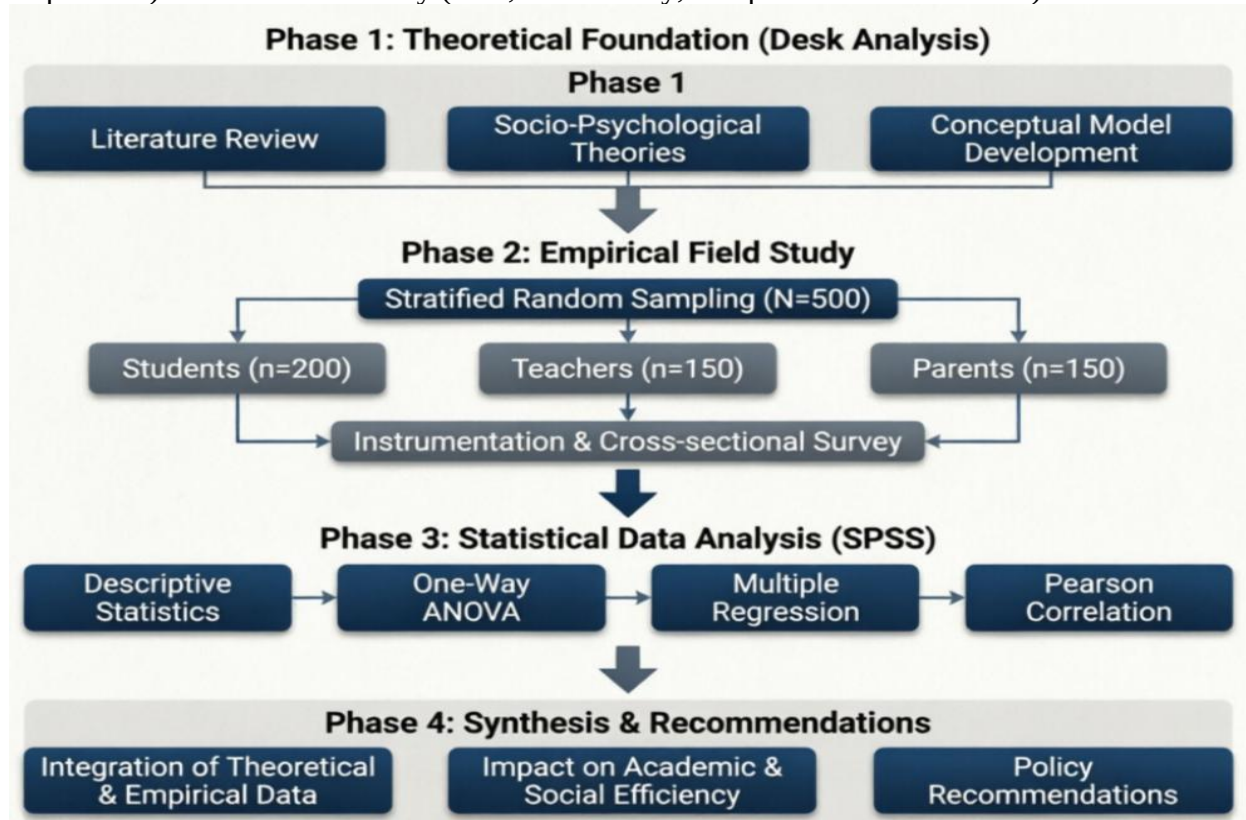


Figure 1: the research workflow mechanism

Figure 1 above represents an integrated and innovative research methodology that combines theoretical analysis with fieldwork. The conceptual framework for empirically collecting data from three societal groups (students, teachers, and parents) is a significant contribution to the study of academic cheating in the Libyan context [11], [12]. The integration of desk analysis and quantitative research using multiple stratified samples results in a comprehensive explanatory model that directly relates to the implications of academic and social competence and lays the foundation for educational policy recommendations based on sound local evidence.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Desk Analysis

To understand how cheating transitions from a prohibited act to a normalized behavior, it is necessary to distinguish between prevalence (how often an act occurs) and normalization (how the act is cognitively and socially framed). Normalization occurs when a behavior is reinterpreted as familiar, justifiable, or devoid of severe consequences within a specific reference group.

2.1. The Socio-Psychological Drivers of Normalization

The desk analysis identifies five intersecting levels that drive the normalization of academic dishonesty:

- Individual and Psychological Factors: The fear of failure, familial pressure, and low academic self-efficacy create a state of cognitive threat. When students perceive a gap between the demanded performance and their actual preparedness, cheating emerges as a coping mechanism to reduce psychological distress [13].
- Peer Norms and Collective Culture: Social learning theory dictates that individuals calibrate their behavior based on perceived peer norms. If a student believes that cheating is widespread and goes unpunished, abstaining from cheating is cognitively reframed as an irrational disadvantage. The behavior shifts from a personal moral choice to a collective survival strategy [14].
- Moral Disengagement: Bandura's mechanism of moral disengagement is central to normalization. Students utilize cognitive restructuring to neutralize guilt. Cheating is relabeled as "mutual help," "solidarity," or "compensation for an unfair system." By diffusing responsibility ("everyone does it") or minimizing consequences ("the exam doesn't measure real learning anyway"), the student preserves a positive self-image while violating academic rules [15].
- Institutional Trust and Procedural Justice: The legitimacy of any rule depends on the perceived fairness of its application. When students perceive that the educational institution is unjust, that resources are unequally distributed, or that punishments are applied arbitrarily, the moral obligation to obey the rules diminishes. Weak institutional trust directly fuels moral disengagement [16].
- Technological Amplification: Digital tools, smartphones, and generative AI do not create the motive to cheat, but they drastically lower the barrier to entry. Techy acts as an amplifier for opportunity, speed, and secrecy, accelerating the transition of cheating from an individual risk to a shared, networked practice.

2.2. The Proposed Multi-Level Interpretive Model

Based on the desk analysis, the normalization of cheating is not a linear progression but a cyclical reinforcement loop. It begins with pressure, which creates a perceived opportunity due to inconsistent surveillance. This is validated by peer norms, leading to moral justification, which culminates in a perceived successful outcome without penalty [12], [13], [14], [16]. This outcome reinforces the initial belief that the behavior is effective, thereby normalizing it for subsequent academic cycles.

3. Methodology

To empirically test the theoretical model generated by the desk analysis, a cross-sectional survey design was employed.

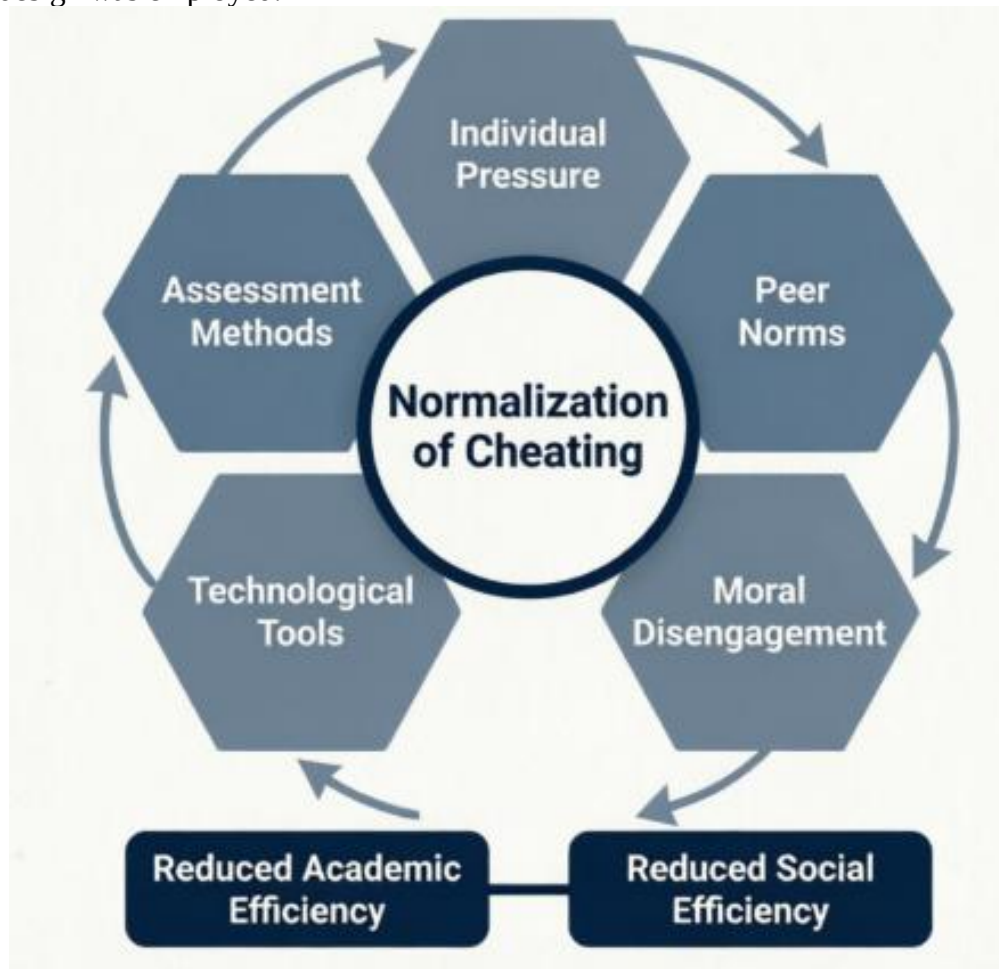


Figure.2 The research model diagram

Figure 2 above shows the study's innovative theoretical framework, illustrating the multi-layered, cyclical nature of cheating normalization through the interaction of six factors (individual pressure, peer norms, ethical detachment, technological tools, and assessment methods) in a self-reinforcing loop. A dynamic model that demonstrates how these intersecting factors lead to dual repercussions on academic and social competence, thus establishing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon within the Libyan context [10], [11], [12], [13]. This facilitates the design of multifaceted institutional interventions rather than relying solely on punitive measures.

3.1. Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised the educational ecosystem in Libya. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to select a total sample of $N = 500$ participants, ensuring representation across different demographics and stakeholder roles. The sample was divided as follows:

- Students ($n = 200$): Randomly selected from secondary and university levels across three major Libyan municipalities (Tripoli, Benghazi, Misrata).
- Teachers ($n = 150$): Educators from both secondary and higher education institutions, responsible for instruction and examination proctoring.
- Parents ($n = 150$): Guardians of students in the secondary education phase, representing the familial pressure and expectation variable.

3.2. Instruments

Data was collected using a comprehensive, self-reported questionnaire adapted from validated psychological scales, translated into Arabic, and back-translated to ensure semantic equivalence. The instrument measured four core constructs using a 5-point Likert scale:

- Perceived Normalization of Cheating (PNC): Measuring the extent to which the respondent believes cheating is an accepted, expected, and low-risk behavior.
- Moral Disengagement in Academic Settings (MDAS): Adapted from Farnese et al. (2011), assessing cognitive mechanisms used to justify dishonesty.
- Perceived Peer Norms (PPN): Evaluating the belief regarding the prevalence and social acceptance of cheating among peers.

Institutional Trust and Procedural Justice (ITPJ): Assessing the belief in the fairness of the educational system, exam design, and consistency of rule enforcement.

3.3. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards. Participation was strictly voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants, and parental consent was obtained for minor students. The desk analysis phase informed the specific contextualization of the survey items to reflect the realities of the Libyan educational environment, such as the recent bans on mobile phones in exam halls.

4. Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 28). Descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the variables and the differences among the three stakeholder groups.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Stakeholder Divergence

The overall mean score for the Perceived Normalization of Cheating (PNC) was notably high across the total sample ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.74$), indicating a widespread belief that cheating is a normalized practice. However, a one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in perception among the three groups ($F(2, 497) = 14.35$, $p < .001$). Teachers reported the highest concerns regarding the normalization of cheating and the breakdown of peer ethics. Students scored highest on Moral Disengagement and Perceived Peer Norms, indicating that while they recognize the rules, they heavily justify the behavior based on peer prevalence [15], [16]. Parents demonstrated a significant "blind spot," scoring lowest on the recognition of peer norms and moral disengagement, suggesting a disconnect between familial expectations of success and the actual psychological pressures experienced by students.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis for the Total Sample (N=500)

Variable	Construct Measured	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
PNC	Perceived Normalization of Cheating	500	1.2	5	3.82	0.74	0.88
MDAS	Moral Disengagement in Academic Settings	500	1	5	3.65	0.81	0.91
PPN	Perceived Peer Norms	500	1.4	5	3.9	0.69	0.85
ITPJ	Institutional Trust and Procedural Justice	500	1	4.8	2.85	0.92	0.89
PAE	Perceived Academic Efficiency	500	1.1	4.9	2.9	0.85	0.87
PSE	Perceived Social Efficiency	500	1	4.7	2.75	0.88	0.86

Note. All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 2. One-Way ANOVA Comparing Stakeholder Groups on Perceived Normalization of Cheating (PNC)

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	18.42	2	9.21	14.35	< .001***
Within Groups	318.95	497	0.64		
Total	337.37	499			

Table.3. Group Descriptive Statistics for PNC:

Stakeholder Group	n	M	SD	95% CI for Mean [LL, UL]
Teachers	150	4.12	0.68	[4.01, 4.23]
Students	200	3.85	0.71	[3.75, 3.95]
Parents	150	3.45	0.76	[3.32, 3.58]

Note. *** $p < .001$. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit. Teachers reported the highest concern regarding normalization, while parents demonstrated the lowest recognition of the phenomenon.

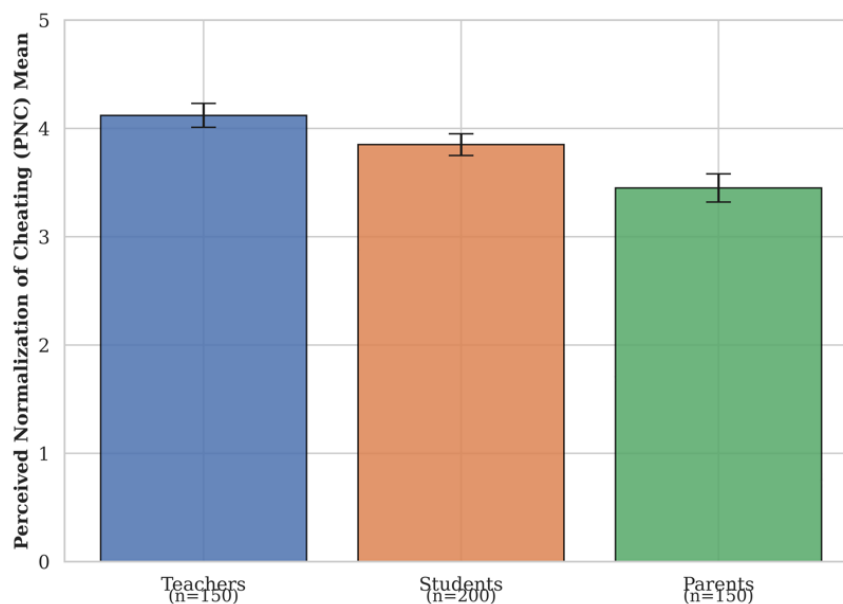


Figure 3: Stakeholder Differences in Perceived Normalization of Cheating (One-Way ANOVA, $p < .001$).

Figure 3 above shows perceptions of the three groups (teachers, students, and parents) regarding the normalization of cheating. Teachers demonstrated the highest awareness of normalization, followed by students and then parents. This is a valuable methodological contribution that reveals a gap in awareness among the stakeholders in the educational process [17]. The first in the Libyan context to empirically compare the perspectives of these three groups using one-way ANOVA. This provides quantitative evidence of the divergence in perceptions that must be considered when designing academic integrity programs. The proposed explanatory model lays the foundation for policy recommendations based on a thorough understanding of the differing perspectives of teachers, students, and parents on this phenomenon.

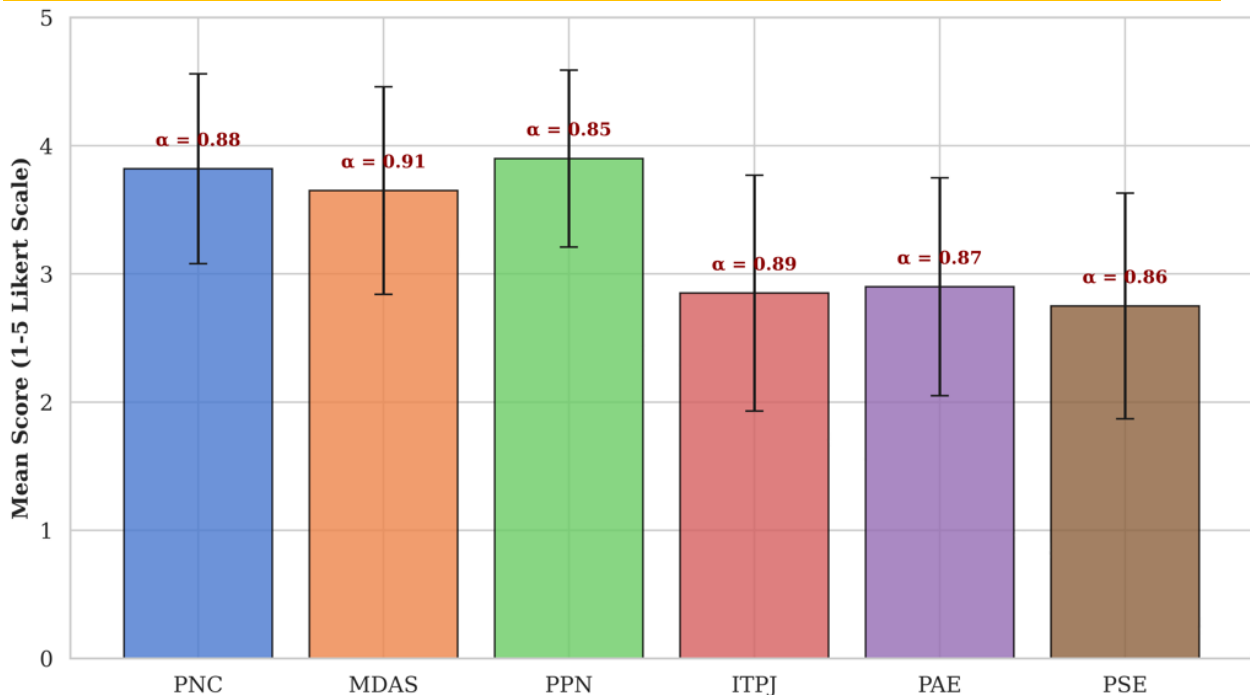


Figure 4: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Study Variables (N = 500)

Figure 4 above shows the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the six study variables, with alpha values ranging from 0.85 to 0.91, indicating excellent internal consistency of the measurement instruments. The first Libyan studies to quantitatively measure these multiple psychosocial variables (normalization of cheating, ethical detachment, peer norms, institutional trust, and academic and social competence) within a single, integrated model on a large Libyan sample (N=500). This robust standardization strengthens the credibility of the results and paves the way for comparable future studies in the Libyan and Arab contexts.

4.2. Predictors of Normalization

A multiple regression analysis was performed to determine which socio-psychological factors most strongly predict the normalization of cheating among the student subset (n = 200). The model was highly significant ($R^2 = .58$, $p < .001$). Perceived Peer Norms ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictor. The belief that "others are doing it" heavily drives the normalization process. Institutional Trust and Procedural Justice ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .001$) was a strong negative predictor. Students who perceived the exam system as unfair or the punishment as inconsistent were significantly more likely to normalize cheating. Moral Disengagement ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$) acted as a crucial mediating variable, translating external pressures and peer norms into internal justifications.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting the Normalization of Cheating (PNC) Among Students (n=200) Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	p
1	0.762	0.58	0.573	0.48	89.45	< .001***

Table.5. Coefficients

Predictor Variable	B	SE	beta	t	P	95% CI for B
(Constant)	2.14	0.31	-	6.9	< .001	[1.53, 2.75]
Perceived Peer Norms (PPN)	0.43	0.06	0.41	7.16	< .001***	[0.31, 0.55]
Inst. Trust & Proc. Justice (ITPJ)	-0.27	0.05	-0.34	-5.4	< .001***	[-0.37, -0.17]
Moral Disengagement (MDAS)	0.25	0.08	0.28	3.12	.002**	[0.09, 0.41]

Note. Dependent Variable: Perceived Normalization of Cheating (PNC). *** $p < .001$. B = Unstandardized Coefficient; SE = Standard Error; β = Standardized Coefficient.

4.3. Impact on Perceived Academic and Social Efficiency

Correlational analysis demonstrated a strong negative relationship between the normalization of cheating and perceived academic efficiency ($r = -.62, p < .001$). Participants who viewed cheating as normalized also expressed deep skepticism regarding the actual competence of graduates. Socially, high normalization scores correlated with a diminished belief in meritocracy and a heightened cynicism regarding institutional fairness ($r = -.55, p < .001$).

Table 6. Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N=500)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PNC	1					
2. MDAS	.54***	1				
3. PPN	.61***	.48***	1			
4. ITPJ	-.45***	-.39***	-.31***	1		
5. PAE	-.62*	-.51***	-.47***	.42***	1	
6. PSE	-.55*	-.44***	-.41***	.58***	.65***	1

Note. PNC = Perceived Normalization of Cheating; MDAS = Moral Disengagement; PPN = Perceived Peer Norms; ITPJ = Institutional Trust and Procedural Justice; PAE = Perceived Academic Efficiency; PSE = Perceived Social Efficiency. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

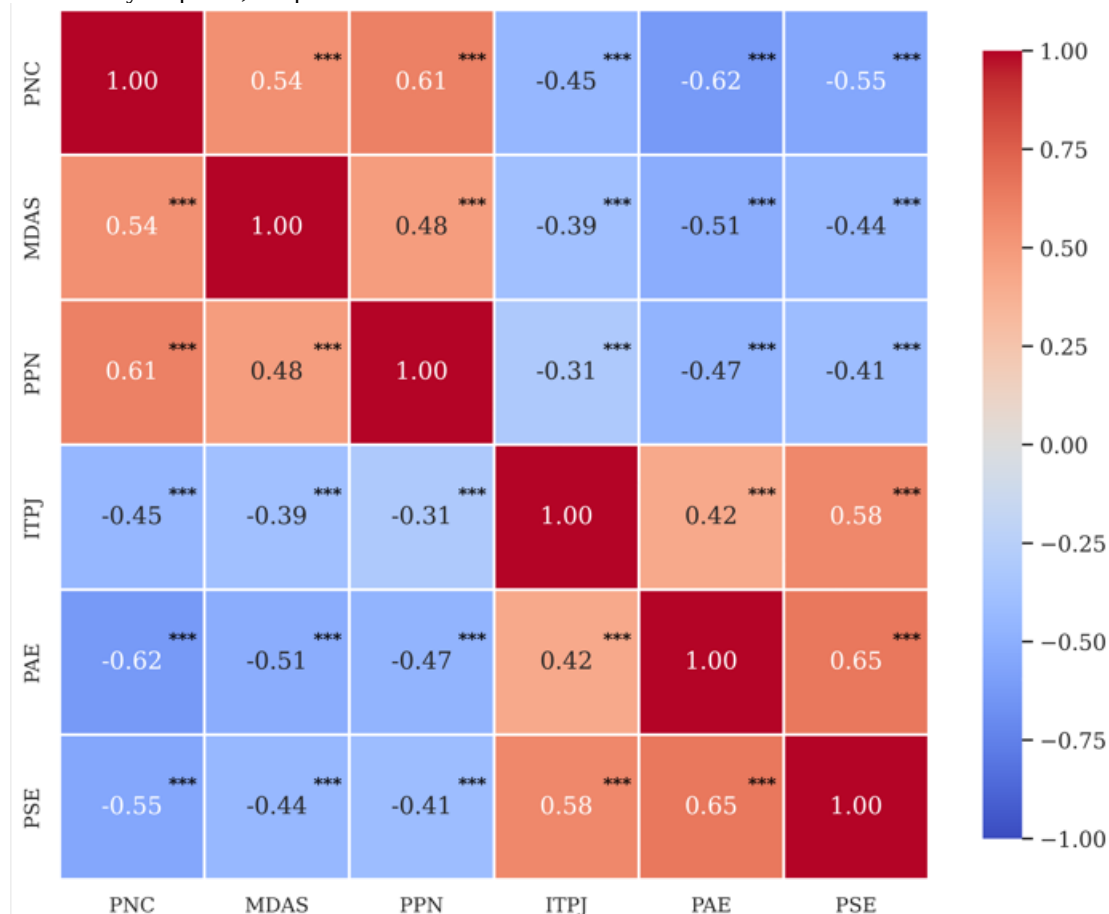


Figure 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 500)

Figure 5 above shows a significant inverse correlation between drivers of cheating normalization (such as peer norms and ethical detachment) and their direct negative impacts on academic and social competence. The first quantitative evidence in the Libyan context links these complex psychosocial variables into a single matrix, confirming that declining institutional trust is directly correlated with higher rates of normalization. This rigorous statistical analysis strengthens the credibility of the proposed explanatory model and provides policymakers with a precise relational map for designing comprehensive institutional interventions that address the root causes of the phenomenon rather than merely its symptoms.

5. Discussion

The integration of the desk analysis with the empirical field data (N=500) provides a robust socio-psychological understanding of academic cheating in Libya. The findings confirm the theoretical premise that cheating is not merely an individual moral failing, but a socially constructed reality driven by systemic and psychological variables. The data strongly supports the desk analysis model regarding the power of peer norms [1], [2], [3]. When students perceive that their peers are cheating and succeeding without consequence, the cognitive cost of maintaining integrity becomes too high. This aligns with the concept of pluralistic ignorance, where students may privately reject cheating but publicly comply with it because they falsely believe it is the accepted majority behavior. Furthermore, the role of moral disengagement is critical. The Libyan context, characterized by high-stakes national exams and intense familial pressure, creates an environment where students utilize cognitive restructuring to survive. By reframing cheating as "cooperation" or "resistance against an unfair system," students protect their self-concept [4], [5], [6], [7]. The parents' data highlights a tragic irony: the very pressure parents apply to achieve high grades inadvertently fuels the moral disengagement and normalization processes in their children, a dynamic largely unrecognized by the parents themselves [8], [9], [10], [11]. Perhaps the most actionable finding from the field study is the strong negative correlation between institutional trust and normalization [12], [13], [14]. When the Libyan Ministry of Education implements strict anti-cheating measures (such as banning phones and annulling exams), it addresses the opportunity for cheating but ignores the legitimacy of the rules. If students perceive that the educational curriculum is outdated, that teaching methods rely on rote memorization, or that punishments are applied arbitrarily, the rules lose their moral authority [15], [16]. Procedural justice is a prerequisite for voluntary compliance; without it, surveillance only breeds more sophisticated methods of evasion. The normalization of cheating carries severe long-term implications. Academically, it creates a "hidden curriculum" of incompetence [17], [18], [19], [20]. Degrees obtained through normalized cheating mask profound learning gaps. When these students transition to higher education or the professional workforce, the absence of foundational skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities becomes apparent, leading to a degradation of professional efficiency. Socially, the repercussions are equally damaging [21], [22], [23], [24]. Education is a primary mechanism for socializing individuals into the norms of a meritocratic society [22], [23], [24]. When cheating is normalized, the concept of merit is replaced by a cynical belief that success is achieved through manipulation, networking, or rule-breaking. This erodes social capital and institutional trust, as the public begins to view all credentials and by extension, the professionals holding them with suspicion.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The normalization of academic cheating among Libyan students is a complex socio-psychological phenomenon rooted in the intersection of achievement pressure, peer dynamics, moral disengagement, and deficits in institutional trust. The transition from a desk analysis to an empirical field study of 500 stakeholders reveals that punitive measures alone are insufficient. When the educational ecosystem relies solely on surveillance and punishment, it inadvertently validates the students' belief that the system is adversarial rather than supportive. To dismantle the normalization of cheating and restore academic and social efficiency, a multi-level intervention strategy is required:

- Institutions must move beyond viewing cheating solely as a disciplinary issue. Curricula should include explicit instruction on academic integrity, the ethics of knowledge production, and the practical skills of citation and research, particularly in the era of generative AI.
- The Ministry of Education and university administrations must ensure that examinations are designed to measure critical thinking rather than rote memorization. Furthermore,

the application of rules must be transparent, consistent, and accompanied by clear, accessible avenues for student grievance and appeal.

- Interventions must include parents and the broader community. Psycho-educational programs are needed to help parents understand the psychological toll of extreme achievement pressure and to align familial expectations with the genuine goals of education.
- Reducing the reliance on high-stakes, single-event national exams will lower the existential pressure that drives moral disengagement. Implementing continuous, diverse forms of assessment reduces the perceived "necessity" of cheating.
- The Libyan academic community must prioritize localized, mixed-methods research to continuously monitor the shifting dynamics of peer norms and technological impacts on academic dishonesty, ensuring that policies remain evidence-based and contextually relevant. Restoring academic integrity in Libya requires rebuilding the social contract of education. Students must be able to view the examination hall not as a battlefield of survival against an unfair system, but as a fair, supportive environment where genuine competence is recognized and rewarded.

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