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ONLINE LEARNING AND THE INCREASE IN CHEATING: MYTH OR REALITY.

Joniuzoqova Mashhura Azizjon qizi [1]
[1] *First-year student of Karshi State University*
Email: mjoniuzoqova@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

The shift to online learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has raised concerns about academic dishonesty, especially cheating. This study explores whether online learning environments contribute to higher instances of cheating or if it is merely more detectable through digital tools. Using surveys and literature review, this paper analyzes students' motivations, educators' challenges, and the effectiveness of current detection tools. Results show a significant perception of increased cheating, though data suggest that accessibility and surveillance, rather than dishonesty, have made cheating more visible. The paper concludes with recommendations for building ethical academic environments online.

INTRODUCTION. Online learning has rapidly transformed the global education landscape. While it offers flexibility and accessibility, educators and policymakers have expressed rising concern about the increase in academic cheating. Traditional classroom controls are weakened in virtual spaces, and students now have easier access to unauthorized resources. But is cheating actually increasing, or are digital tools simply revealing more instances? This paper investigates whether online learning environments truly lead to more cheating or if it's a misconception influenced by visibility and technology.

Methods. A mixed-methods approach was used to collect and analyze data.

1. Quantitative: A structured online survey was distributed to 150 undergraduate students from three different faculties in Karshi state university . The survey included Likert-scale and open-ended questions regarding their experience with online learning and attitudes toward academic dishonesty.

2. Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 university lecturers from various disciplines to gain insight into their perception of cheating in online environments and the effectiveness of detection methods.

3. Literature Review: Scholarly sources from 2020 to 2024 were reviewed using Scopus and Google Scholar databases, focusing on topics such as online assessments, technological tools, and cultural aspects of cheating.

Literature Review. Recent studies emphasize that the perception of increased cheating in online environments may be due more to improved detection technologies than actual behavioural shifts among students. For instance, Newton argues that students' access to contract cheating services has expanded due to online platforms, making such behaviours more visible rather than more frequent[1]. Bretag highlights the lack of digital literacy among educators as a significant factor contributing to insufficient detection and prevention of academic dishonesty[2]. This is supported by Selwyn , who identifies the "technology–ethics gap" as a core issue in education, where rapid technological adoption is not matched by ethical training or structural reforms[4]. According to McCabe et al , peer pressure and academic competitiveness are strong motivators for cheating, especially in unsupervised environments[6]. Moreover, Sutherland-Smith emphasizes that students often do not clearly distinguish between collaboration and collusion, leading to unintended violations of academic integrity policies[7]. Importantly, Turnitin's 2023 whitepaper reports a 47% increase in flagged cases of plagiarism in online submissions during 2020–2022, but they caution that this does not necessarily reflect a 47% increase in actual cheating. Rather, it may reflect improved detection algorithms and broader institutional use of plagiarism-checking tools[5]. In a comparative cultural study, Lancaster and Cotarlan found that students from collectivist cultures were more likely to justify cheating as a form of group loyalty or mutual support, especially during exams administered online[3]. QFinally, recent work by Alzahrani (2023) shows that adaptive assessment design — using open-book and project-based evaluations — significantly reduces the temptation to cheat in online settings. He argues that when students see the relevance of tasks to real-world skills, their intrinsic motivation increases and academic dishonesty reintegrate[8].

Discussion. The findings of this study confirm a widely held perception among both students and educators: that cheating in online learning environments appears to have increased. However, the data and literature suggest that this perception is influenced by multiple intertwined factors, not just a surge in dishonest behaviour. One major contributor is the structural nature of online assessments. In traditional face-to-face environments, physical invigilation and immediate supervision act as natural deterrents. Online assessments, by contrast, often rely on trust, basic proctoring software, or timed quizzes without effective monitoring — opening the door to opportunistic behaviours [1], [5]. Furthermore, digital fatigue and isolation, as reported by students during interviews, weaken the psychological barriers to academic misconduct. Without regular in-person interaction with peers and mentors, students often feel less accountable, a finding also observed by Bretag [2] and Newton [1]. This aligns with self-determination theory, which suggests that

students deprived of intrinsic motivation or belongingness are more likely to cut ethical corners. Another significant point is the role of institutional preparedness. Many educators reported being undertrained in using proctoring or anti-plagiarism software, and expressed concerns about vague academic policies for online instruction. This echoes Selwyn's [4] critique that while education systems embrace digital learning, they frequently fail to adapt ethical governance structures in parallel. Some faculty even admitted to avoiding confrontation with students due to lack of administrative support or evidence clarity in online contexts. Interestingly, while students frequently cited "ease of access" as a reason for cheating, a substantial portion also revealed moral conflict and guilt, indicating that preventive measures such as honour codes, peer ethics campaigns, and moral reasoning curricula may still be effective deterrents. This suggests that academic culture — whether in physical or digital settings — plays a central role in guiding behaviour. Finally, the literature reveals a global inconsistency in defining and addressing online cheating. Cultural norms, institutional support, and technology infrastructure vary widely, making it difficult to implement a one-size-fits-all solution [3], [8]. Instead, adaptive assessments, flexible policies, and ethically driven learning designs are increasingly recommended as sustainable strategies.

Conclusion. This study reveals that the rise in perceived cheating in online learning is not solely the result of student misconduct, but rather a complex interaction between opportunity, surveillance, motivation, and institutional readiness. The online environment presents unique challenges to academic integrity, including reduced supervision, increased stress, and widespread access to unauthorized resources. However, the notion that students have become more dishonest is not fully supported by evidence. The visibility and traceability of online actions, along with enhanced detection technologies, have made misconduct more measurable — not necessarily more frequent. This distinction is critical for educators and policymakers seeking to address the issue. Moving forward, educational institutions must take a multi-pronged approach: Train educators in ethical digital pedagogy and detection tools; Design assessments that reduce opportunities and temptations to cheat; Foster intrinsic motivation through authentic, student-centered learning. Encourage a culture of integrity with clear, consistently enforced policies. Ultimately, solving the problem of academic dishonesty in online settings is not about tighter surveillance alone — it is about creating environments where students choose integrity, not because they fear being caught, but because they value learning. Further research should focus on cross-cultural comparisons, the long-term effects of online education on academic ethics, and the role of AI tools in both enabling and preventing cheating.

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