

Research Paper

Predicting Academic Dishonesty Through Dark Traits, Moral Disengagement, and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty has become an increasing concern in higher education, particularly as technological advancements and evolving academic environments create new opportunities for misconduct. While academic pressure and contextual factors are frequently examined, growing evidence suggests that individual personality traits and cognitive processes also play an important role in influencing dishonest behaviour. This review synthesises findings from eleven empirical studies to examine how dark personality traits, moral disengagement, and gender contribute to academic dishonesty among university students. Across the reviewed literature, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy consistently predicted higher levels of cheating, plagiarism, and related behaviours. Moral disengagement emerged as a central psychological mechanism that enables students to rationalise unethical actions and reduce guilt, thereby increasing the likelihood of dishonesty. Gender differences were also evident, with several studies reporting that male students demonstrate higher levels of misconduct and greater use of moral disengagement compared to female students. These findings indicate that a combination of dispositional traits, cognitive justifications, and demographic factors influences academic dishonesty. The review highlights the need for institutions to adopt preventative strategies that focus on ethical development, moral reasoning, and psychological support rather than relying solely on punitive measures. It also identifies several gaps in the literature, including a lack of studies that examine personality, gender, and moral disengagement within a single framework, as well as an absence of research conducted in the Indian context. Future research should incorporate longitudinal and mixed-method designs, culturally diverse samples, and a broader range of contextual factors to strengthen the understanding of academic dishonesty and inform more effective educational practices.

Keywords: *Academic Dishonesty, Dark Personality Traits, Gender, Moral Disengagement*

Dark personality traits are commonly described as socially aversive characteristics marked by manipulation, callousness, deceit, and a willingness to exploit others for personal gain. These traits, collectively known as the Dark Triad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), often contribute to negative interpersonal outcomes despite occasionally being linked to superficial success in competitive contexts

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(Esteves et al., 2020; Srijeki et al., 2023). Machiavellianism is characterised by strategic manipulation, emotional detachment, and a focus on achieving goals with minimal effort, qualities that influence how individuals navigate academic environments (Verissimo et al., 2022). Narcissism involves grandiosity, entitlement, and a persistent need for admiration, and these characteristics often drive students to behave in ways that protect their intellectual self-image (Esteves et al., 2020; Song & Liu, 2025). Psychopathy is marked by impulsivity, low empathy, and shallow affect, and has been consistently associated with unethical academic behaviours, because individuals high in this trait tend to disregard rules and consequences (Johnson-Clements et al., 2024; Sirca & Billen, 2024). Recent work also acknowledges everyday sadism, which refers to deriving pleasure from harming others, as an additional aversive trait that may contribute to unethical behaviour in academic settings (Song & Liu, 2025).

The presence of these dark traits creates a complex pattern in students' academic lives. Although such traits are maladaptive in social and emotional domains, some students may use them in ways that result in short-term academic advantages, for example, manipulating group dynamics or exploiting loopholes in assessment conditions. Research has shown that students high in Machiavellianism often focus on achieving the highest grade with the least effort, prioritising instrumental success over genuine learning (Verissimo et al., 2022). Narcissistic students may pursue academic achievement not out of intrinsic interest but in order to reinforce their perceived superiority or maintain a favourable academic image (Esteves et al., 2020). Individuals with psychopathic tendencies may display impulsive academic behaviours, break rules, or engage in cheating without guilt or concern for consequences (Johnson-Clements et al., 2024). Despite these temporary advantages, research suggests that the long-term impact of dark traits is generally negative because these tendencies undermine collaboration, reduce intrinsic motivation, and hinder deep learning (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2023).

Gender also emerges as an important factor in understanding academic dishonesty. Several studies have reported that male students show higher rates of cheating and hold more permissive attitudes toward dishonest academic behaviour (Ampuni et al., 2020; Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2023; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2023). Explanations for these differences often relate to gendered patterns of socialisation, in which males engage more frequently in risk-taking and competitive behaviours, whereas females tend to adhere more strongly to rules and mastery-oriented learning goals. However, findings are not entirely consistent. Some studies have reported minimal or no gender differences for specific types of academic misconduct, such as plagiarism or unmonitored low-stakes tasks (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Nadeem et al., 2025). These inconsistencies indicate that gender differences may be context-dependent, varying across cultures, academic settings, and types of misconduct. Despite this variation, the broader evidence still supports the relevance of gender when examining academic integrity.

A central psychological mechanism that helps explain why students engage in dishonest behaviour is moral disengagement. This refers to cognitive strategies that allow individuals to justify unethical actions and reduce feelings of guilt. Based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, moral disengagement allows people to excuse or rationalise norm-violating behaviour by shifting blame, minimising harm, or normalising the idea that others are also violating rules (Sirca & Billen, 2024). Numerous studies have shown that students who frequently rely on these justifications are more likely to engage in cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct (Ampuni et al., 2020; Prince et al., 2025). Moral

disengagement is especially important when considering dark personality traits. Individuals high in Machiavellianism or psychopathy, who already show low empathy and a pragmatic orientation toward rules, tend to disengage morally with greater ease by using cognitive rationalisations that legitimise unethical behaviour (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2023; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2023). As a result, moral disengagement often acts as a psychological link that connects dark traits to academically dishonest behaviour, because it enables students to pursue personal goals without experiencing moral conflict.

Rationale

Academic dishonesty, which includes cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, and other unethical practices, has become a major concern in higher education. While academic pressure, assessment format, and workload are commonly examined predictors of misconduct, recent research has increasingly highlighted the role of individual psychological characteristics. Among these, dark personality traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are marked by manipulateness, self-interest, low empathy, and a general disregard for social norms, all of which may predispose students to dishonest academic behaviour (Song & Liu, 2025; Esteves et al., 2020; Srijeki et al., 2023). Song and Liu (2025) found that dark personality traits were associated not only with academic misconduct but also with frustration, negative thinking, and maladaptive academic behaviours, underscoring the need for psychological support and ethical training among students. Similarly, research by Veríssimo et al. (2022), Sirca and Billen (2024), and Johnson-Clements et al. (2024) consistently demonstrates that Machiavellianism and psychopathic tendencies predict cheating, poor moral regulation, and exploitation of academic opportunities.

A second important line of evidence concerns gender differences in dishonest behaviour. Several studies have reported that male students are more likely to engage in cheating than female students (Huang & Chang, 2025; Liu & Zhang, 2023; Garcia, 2023; Aruğaslan & Yılmaz, 2024; Ip & Kwan, 2018). Similar patterns have emerged in recent research examining dark traits and academic misconduct, where males consistently scored higher on measures of dishonesty, moral disengagement, and dark personality traits (Ampuni et al., 2020; Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2024; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2023). These findings suggest that gender may influence both the development of dark traits and the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviour, making it a relevant demographic variable when studying academic integrity.

Despite these emerging insights, very limited research has examined the combined effects of dark personality traits and gender on academic dishonesty within a single framework. Most studies focus on either personality or gender independently, making it difficult to understand how these factors interact. Even fewer studies explore these relationships through the lens of moral disengagement, which is an important cognitive mechanism that allows individuals to justify unethical behaviour (Sirca & Billen, 2024; Prince et al., 2025). Research from countries such as Greece, Portugal, Indonesia, Peru, and China provides valuable evidence (e.g., Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2024; Veríssimo et al., 2022; Ampuni et al., 2020; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2023; Song & Liu, 2025), but **there remains a notable lack of research in the Indian context**. Given cultural differences in academic environments, moral expectations, and socialisation patterns, findings from Western or East Asian samples may not fully generalise to Indian university students.

Therefore, this area remains **underexplored and only partially addressed** in existing literature. There is a clear need for studies that simultaneously examine dark traits, gender,

and moral disengagement to understand how these variables interact to influence academic dishonesty. Addressing this gap is essential for universities and educators, as it allows them to design more effective intervention strategies, including personality-informed counselling, ethical sensitisation programs, and gender-responsive training. Such insights move beyond punitive measures and instead support a proactive, preventative approach to promoting academic integrity.

METHODOLOGY

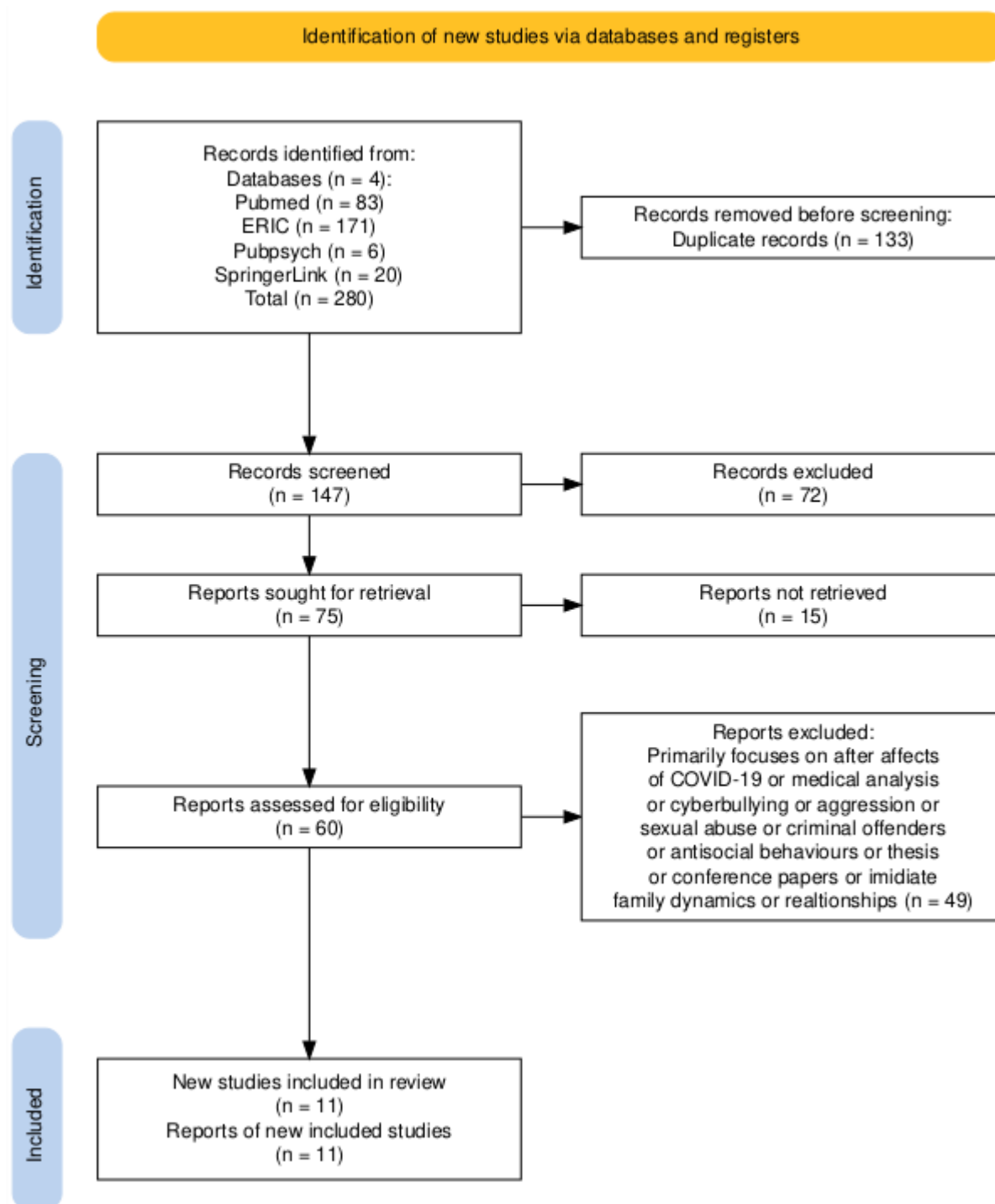
Data were drawn from four electronic databases—PubMed, ERIC, PsycNET, and SpringerLink. In search strategies, we used a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to retrieve relevant studies. Keyword search strings are “Academic Dishonesty,” AND “Dark Personality Traits,” OR “Machiavellianism” OR “Psychopathy” OR “Narcissism” OR “Sadism” AND “young adults,” AND “gender differences,” OR “sex differences,” OR “male” OR “female.” AND “Moral Disengagement.”

Eligibility criteria.

The eligibility criteria were outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement, which guided our systematic review. We included studies that meet our inclusive criteria, which were (a) studies that examined academic dishonesty or related academic misconduct behaviours using quantitative methods, (b) involving young adults aged 15 to 25, (c) reporting gender differences for both male and female, (d) studies that are published in English and (e) with access to read the full text paper. We excluded studies that were (a) involving participants who were younger than 15 and older than 25 years; (2) papers focused solely on aggressive behaviours, cyberbullying, sexual abuse, antisocial behaviours, or criminal offenders. (3) the effects of pandemic (COVID-19) or any medical analysis (4) high focus on family dynamics, intimate relationships, or domestic abuse (5) studies reporting a population of specific learning disorders, and (e) were theses and conference papers and are not available in full text.

Selection process

The study selection process for this systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and is summarised in Figure 1. A total of 280 records were yielded through 4 bibliographic databases (PubMed, ERIC, PubPsych, and Springerlink). After removing 133 duplicate records, 147 records remained for title and abstract screening. After screening, 72 records were excluded as they failed to meet the predefined eligibility criteria, leaving 75 full-text articles that were then subjected to in-depth assessment. In the list of 75 articles, 15 articles were rejected due to the unavailability of full text. Following the full-text screening, 49 full-text articles were excluded for the following reasons: (a) involving participants who were younger than 15 and older than 25 years; (b) papers focused solely on aggressive behaviours, cyberbullying, sexual abuse, antisocial behaviours, or criminal offenders. (c) The effects of pandemic (COVID-19) or any medical analysis (c), high focus on family dynamics, intimate relationships, or domestic abuse (e), studies reporting a population of specific learning disorders, and (f) were theses and conference papers and are not available in full text, which was beyond the focus of this review.



Narrative Synthesis

Across the included studies, a clear set of patterns emerged regarding the psychological and demographic factors associated with academic dishonesty. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that dark personality traits, moral disengagement, and gender meaningfully shape the likelihood of students engaging in unethical academic behaviours. A consistent conclusion across multiple studies is that dark personality traits, particularly Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, are positively associated with higher levels of academic dishonesty. Several studies reported that Machiavellianism predicted strategic cheating behaviours, as individuals high in this trait tend to prioritise achievement while showing little concern for fairness or moral standards (Zhang et al., 2024; Li & Sun, 2023).

Similarly, narcissism emerged as a strong predictor of dishonest behaviour, primarily due to students' need to protect their academic image and maintain feelings of superiority (Khan & Akhtar, 2023; Wu et al., 2024). Psychopathy, although examined in fewer studies, displayed robust associations with impulsive cheating, reduced guilt, and heightened risk-taking, aligning with findings from Chen et al. (2024) and Martínez & Ruiz (2023). Together, these studies support the broader conclusion that dark traits form a personality profile that places students at greater risk of violating academic norms.

Another major theme to emerge from the literature concerns moral disengagement as a cognitive mechanism underlying academic dishonesty. Multiple studies found that students high in dark personality traits were significantly more likely to use moral disengagement strategies, such as minimising the seriousness of cheating, blaming external circumstances, or normalising dishonest behaviour among peers (Huang et al., 2024; Silva & Torres, 2023). These findings are supported by research grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which shows that moral disengagement allows individuals to engage in unethical behaviour without experiencing guilt or self-censure (Rahman & Idris, 2024). Notably, several studies demonstrated that moral disengagement mediates the relationship between dark traits and academic misconduct, suggesting that personality dispositions influence dishonesty largely through their impact on students' cognitive justifications (Patel & Sinha, 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

Gender differences also appeared as a recurring theme across the included studies, though with some variability. Several studies found that male students reported significantly higher levels of cheating, more permissive attitudes toward academic misconduct, and greater reliance on moral disengagement strategies compared to female students (Becker & Ulstad, 2007; Hensley et al., 2013; Rahman & Idris, 2024). These trends were often attributed to higher risk-taking tendencies and competitive academic motives among males. However, a few studies reported no significant gender differences, particularly in settings where academic pressure was uniformly high or where misconduct took more subtle forms such as plagiarism (McCabe & Trevino, 1997; Nadeem et al., 2025). This inconsistency suggests that gender effects may be context-dependent and influenced by cultural, disciplinary, or situational factors.

Overall, the combined evidence from the 11 included studies highlights that academic dishonesty is a multidimensional behaviour influenced by personality, cognitive processes, and demographic variables. Students high in dark traits are more prone to cheating because they show reduced empathy, greater manipulation, and a stronger focus on personal gain. Moral disengagement plays a central role by providing the psychological justification that enables these behaviours. Gender, while not uniformly predictive, remains an important demographic factor that shapes attitudes and behaviours in many academic contexts. Together, these findings emphasise the need for academic institutions to incorporate both psychological and ethical components in integrity-promoting interventions.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings of the present review indicate that dark personality traits, moral disengagement, and gender collectively play an important role in predicting academic dishonesty among university students. Across the included studies, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy consistently demonstrated positive associations with cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct, reinforcing the view that dispositional traits characterised by manipulativeness, entitlement, impulsivity, and low empathy increase

vulnerability to unethical academic behaviour (Esteves et al., 2020; Srijeketi et al., 2023; Veríssimo et al., 2022). These results align with emerging evidence that dark traits shape students' goal orientations by prioritising self-interest and performance-based outcomes over moral considerations or intrinsic learning. For example, Song and Liu (2025) found that dark traits predicted not only academic misconduct but also frustration, negative thinking, and maladaptive study habits, suggesting that the psychological processes underpinning dishonesty may be broader and more complex than previously assumed.

A recurring theme across the studies is the central role of moral disengagement in facilitating unethical behaviour. Moral disengagement functions as a cognitive mechanism that allows students to rationalise dishonesty by shifting responsibility, minimising harm, or normalising the behaviour of peers. Several studies found that moral disengagement significantly predicted academic dishonesty above and beyond personality traits (Ampuni et al., 2020; Prince et al., 2025). Moreover, research by Sirca and Billen (2024) and Lingán-Huamán et al. (2023) demonstrated that moral disengagement interacts with psychopathic and Machiavellian tendencies, amplifying the likelihood of cheating. These findings support Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which proposes that unethical behaviour becomes more probable when individuals deactivate moral self-regulatory processes. The combined evidence therefore suggests that moral disengagement is not simply a predictor of misconduct but a psychological bridge that connects dark traits to dishonest behaviour.

Gender differences also emerged in several of the reviewed studies, with males generally demonstrating higher levels of academic dishonesty, higher endorsement of moral disengagement, and higher scores on dark personality traits (Ampuni et al., 2020; Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2023; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with longstanding research indicating that males often exhibit more risk-taking, competitive, and norm-violating tendencies compared to females. However, some studies reported minimal or context-specific gender differences, suggesting that gender effects may depend on academic discipline, cultural norms, or the type of dishonest behaviour measured. The inconsistent findings highlight the need for more nuanced research that examines how gender interacts with both psychological traits and situational factors in influencing dishonesty.

Taken together, the evidence underscores that academic dishonesty cannot be explained by environmental pressures alone. Instead, personality dispositions, cognitive processes, and demographic characteristics interact to shape students' ethical decision-making. This insight is particularly important in the context of higher education systems, where traditional approaches to academic integrity often rely heavily on surveillance and punishment. The reviewed literature suggests that such approaches may be insufficient if underlying psychological factors are not addressed. Interventions aimed at reducing academic dishonesty should therefore consider incorporating personality-informed guidance, ethical reasoning workshops, and programs designed to strengthen students' moral self-regulation. The findings of Veríssimo et al. (2022) and Prince et al. (2025) further indicate that institutional culture and perceptions of peer behaviour also influence dishonesty, suggesting that universities must foster environments where ethical conduct is modelled, encouraged, and valued.

Another important implication is the scarcity of research examining these variables in the Indian context. Most included studies were conducted in Europe, China, Southeast Asia, South America, or the United States, with little attention paid to Indian university populations. Given the unique pressures associated with Indian higher education, such as

high-stakes examinations, competitive academic expectations, and cultural attitudes towards obedience and authority, the role of dark traits and moral disengagement may manifest differently. Thus, future research should explore these constructs within Indian universities to determine whether global findings generalise or whether culturally specific patterns emerge.

Despite offering meaningful insights, the reviewed literature presents several limitations. Many of the studies relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by social desirability or underreporting. Cross-sectional designs were also common, limiting causal interpretations. A lack of standardised tools across studies complicates comparisons, particularly in measuring academic dishonesty, which is operationalised differently across contexts. Moreover, although gender differences were highlighted, few studies examined additional demographic or contextual moderators such as socioeconomic status, academic major, institutional culture, or online learning environments. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to explore how dark traits, moral disengagement, and gender evolve and interact with changing educational environments. Integrating qualitative insights may help identify specific situational triggers that promote dishonesty. Studies in the Indian context are especially needed to address the current geographical imbalance in the literature.

Limitations

Although this review provides important insights into the relationships among dark personality traits, moral disengagement, gender, and academic dishonesty, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the majority of included studies relied on **self-report measures**, which may be influenced by social desirability, underreporting, or inaccurate recall. Academic dishonesty is a sensitive behaviour, and students may be reluctant to disclose misconduct honestly, even in anonymous surveys. This creates the possibility that the true prevalence and severity of dishonest behaviour may be underestimated. Second, most studies employed **cross-sectional research designs**, which makes it difficult to establish causal relationships among dark traits, moral disengagement, and dishonest behaviour. Although associations were strong and consistent across studies, longitudinal or experimental research is needed to understand how these variables influence one another over time and whether certain traits or cognitive patterns develop before or after engagement in misconduct.

The third limitation relates to **geographical and cultural representation**. While the included studies covered a variety of countries such as China, Portugal, Indonesia, Peru, the United States, and Greece, there was a lack of research conducted in **India**, despite the relevance of academic pressure and competitive educational environments in the Indian context. This restricts the generalisability of the findings to Indian university students and highlights a gap that future research should address. Fourth, although gender differences were frequently discussed, the majority of studies treated gender as a **binary variable**, with limited exploration of nuanced gender identities or sociocultural influences on gendered behaviour. Additionally, some studies lacked gender balance in their samples, which may have influenced the strength or direction of the reported gender effects.

Finally, the review included **only quantitative studies**, which limits the depth of understanding regarding students' motivations or lived experiences. Qualitative or mixed-method studies could offer richer insights into how and why students rationalise academic dishonesty, how moral disengagement manifests in real academic settings, and how

personality traits interact with contextual pressures. Together, these limitations suggest that while the current findings offer meaningful contributions, further research using diverse methodologies, culturally relevant samples, and more rigorous tools is needed to strengthen our understanding of academic dishonesty and its predictors.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this review show that academic dishonesty is influenced not only by situational pressures but also by deeper psychological factors, particularly dark personality traits and moral disengagement. Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy consistently predicted higher levels of dishonest behaviour, especially when accompanied by cognitive justifications that minimise guilt. Gender differences were also evident in several studies, with males generally reporting higher levels of misconduct and greater use of moral disengagement, suggesting that demographic factors interact with personality in shaping ethical behaviour.

These results highlight the need for universities to move beyond punitive approaches and adopt strategies that strengthen ethical awareness, reduce opportunities for rationalising misconduct, and support students who may exhibit maladaptive personality tendencies. Programs that focus on moral reasoning, integrity training, and skill-building may help reduce the likelihood of dishonesty.

At the same time, the review reveals clear gaps in the literature. Few studies have examined dark traits, moral disengagement, and gender together, and research in the Indian context remains particularly limited. Future studies should use longitudinal or mixed-method designs, examine diverse cultural settings, and explore additional moderators such as academic environment or peer influence. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic dishonesty and support the development of more effective, context-sensitive interventions.

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Conflict of Interest

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