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Knowledge, Attitudes, and Cognitive Dissonance Regarding Academic Misconduct Among University Students

Subrata Kumer Pal[1] & Seraj Uddin[2]
[1]Department of Management, Rajshahi College, Rajshahi-6100, Bangladesh
[2]Nawabganj Government College, Chapainawabganj-6300, Bangladesh
Email: subrata1990kdi@kdis.ac.kr

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty or misconduct is an alarming concern and is crippling academic integrity. Furthermore, mental health is directly and indirectly related to academic performance and well-being. The knowledge-attitude dissonance regarding the identification of academic misconduct is the primary objective of this research. Moreover, the paper focuses on the association between knowledge-attitude dissonance and psychological uneasiness among students. It employed a quantitative research design, in which 402 survey responses were collected from university students in Bangladesh and analyzed statistically. This paper found that knowledge of unethical features and adverse consequences did not differ by gender, institutions, or field of study; however, attitudes toward the advantages of misconduct varied by institutions and field of study. There was dissonance between knowledge and attitude toward academic misconduct among students that caused mental discomfort. The results of this paper will be useful to policymakers and administrators for improving academic ethical practice and maintaining mental health.

***Keywords**: Misconduct, Dishonesty, Integrity, Mental, Dissonance*

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INTRODUCTION

Misconduct or dishonesty in academic sectors has become a worldwide concern (Arie & Jacob, 2021; Hippazi, 2022; Locquiao & Ives, 2020; Rettinger et al., 2024). Moreover, academic integrity becomes a considerable issue in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era (Bertram Gallant & Rettinger, 2025). According to the University of Cambridge (2023), the motive of dishonesty or misconduct in the academic sector is to obtain illegal and unjustifiable benefits through any activities, attestation, and the help of others. Therefore, cheating, copying from other work, illicit relationships, data manipulation, and bringing illegal materials to an exam are all considered forms of academic dishonesty (Khalid, 2015; Kidwell & Kent, 2008). Alam (2016) and Jahan and Islam (2021) stated that misconduct is now an alarming topic that is spreading throughout Bangladesh. In the education sector and society, academic dishonesty or misconduct is considered a big challenge (Hamid, 2023). Academic integrity encompasses a diverse range of individuals, including researchers, students, teachers, academic administrators, coordinators, and community members (University of Wollongong, 2024). The reputation of students, teachers, and institutions can be hampered by misconduct practices (Miles et al., 2022; Tawiah et al., 2022; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2001). Furthermore, it promotes unethical practice in professional life (Klainberg et al., 2015). Students' knowledge, attitude, behavior, sense of seriousness, study pressure, and time management are important factors in considering the origins and prevention of academic misconduct, (Keith, 2018; Tiong et al., 2018). On the other hand, psychological pain may result from knowledge-attitude dissonance. Psychological discomfort, which includes depression, anxiety, and stress, has a detrimental impact on mental health and academic performance (Agormedah et al., 2024; Carranza Esteban et al., 2022; Franzen et al., 2021; Lepp et al., 2014; Mirhosseini et al., 2021; Nieuwoudt, 2023). The goal of this paper is to assess awareness and attitude toward dishonesty during exams. In addition, this study focuses on the psychological uneasiness caused by cognitive dissonance.

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University students of two institutions in a metropolitan city were surveyed to collect data, which was analyzed quantitatively, and the findings were presented based on research questions and hypotheses. The research questions are as follows.

1) Does the knowledge of academic misconduct among students differ based on gender, institutions, and fields of study?
2) Does the attitude toward academic misconduct among students differ based on gender, institutions, and fields of study?
3) Does dissonance exist between knowledge and attitude toward academic misconduct?
4) Does knowledge-attitude dissonance cause psychological discomfort?

The awareness and understanding of misconduct in academic areas is defined as knowledge of academic dishonesty (Schrader & Lawless, 2004; Sfetcu, 2022). Students of public and private universities in Bangladesh had a minimum level of awareness of academic dishonesty, where females engaged less in dishonest practices (Arefeen et al., 2020). On the other hand, knowledge of misconduct can vary based on gender, field of study, and institutional policy (Benson & Enstrom, 2023; Harding et al., 2007; Jereb, 2018; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe, 1997). University students must be aware of plagiarism to foster a positive academic environment (Upadhyay et al., 2023). Mostofa et al. (2021) stated that understanding plagiarism and its removal software could reduce plagiarism significantly, and that understanding could differ by personal and demographic characteristics. It is assumed that novices are adequately informed about academic misconduct, including its tenets, trends, and procedures, which will enable them to take preventative measures (Locquiao & Ives, 2020, 2024; Miles et al., 2022). However, a lack of information about academic misconduct can make it more difficult to act morally and with integrity (Hyeong-woo, 2021; Nortes et al., 2024). Academic dishonesty can be reduced by raising students' awareness of negative repercussions (Johansen et al., 2022; Tambaya et al., 2020).

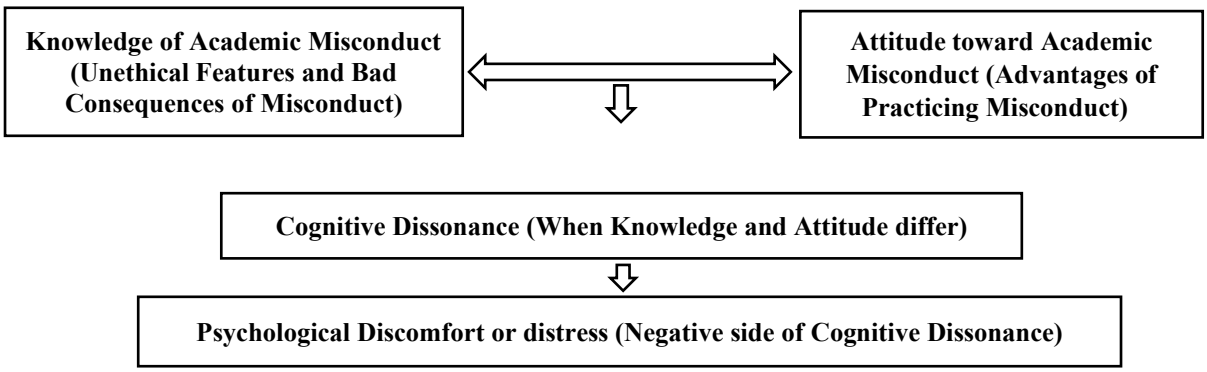
Attitude toward academic dishonesty refers to an individual's cognitive and affective evaluation of misconduct within an academic context, which may be either positive or negative (Bain, 1928; Culbertson, 1968; Kumar et al., 2023). According to a study by Elzubeir and Rizk (2003), the respondents who did not participate in unethical behavior in academic areas had negative feelings about it. Students' opinions against academic dishonesty were shown, and they were urged to understand academic misconduct to reduce its incidence (Khan, 2019). According to a study on online learning in Malaysia conducted by Hasri et al. (2022), students have typically engaged in less academic dishonesty and view misbehavior as a significant type of cheating. Medical students worldwide take academic dishonesty or misconduct very seriously (Homayouni et al., 2024; Iqbal, 2023). Previous studies identified several primary drivers of cheating behavior, including academic pressure (28%), laziness (38%), and the desire to improve grades (78%). Other contributing factors, such as financial pressure, scholarship requirements, poor time management, and irregular daily routines, have also been widely documented (Awosoga et al., 2021; Khalid et al., 2014; Krou et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2023), with students frequently displaying positive attitudes toward plagiarism. Gender differences also exist in attitudes and awareness of academic misconduct (Whitley et al., 1999; Yang, 2012). However, studies by Forinash et al. (2010), Ip et al. (2018), and Rabi et al. (2006) found no discernible differences in attitudes toward misconduct between genders in terms of misconduct behavior.

A divergent response among psychological components results in cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Broadly, the mental condition when an individual's knowledge, beliefs, and new information show disagreement is denoted as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Thus, cognitive dissonance is produced when information, attitude, and behavior regarding academic misconduct are inconsistent (Aronson, 1969; Clark et al., 2004; Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones &

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Mills, 2019). Dissonance is a feeling of mental discomfort that can be lessened by changing one's attitude or eliminating dissonance (Elliot & Devine, 1994). O'Rourke et al. (2010) found that students believed cheating to be wrong, but they engaged in it because there was cognitive dissonance. Dilakshini and Kumar (2020) mentioned that inconsistency among information, emotions, and behavior leads to cognitive dissonance and mental discomfort. The knowledge-attitude dissonance can occur when a discrepancy exists between knowledge and attitude toward academic dishonesty. On the other hand, Zhu et al. (2022) reviewed and stated that psychological discomfort or distress encompassed many issues like depression, anxiety, stress, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Viertiö et al., 2021). Séré de Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2019) demonstrated in their study that psychological discomfort was the mediator between cognitive dissonance and motivation to change. The cognitive inconsistency caused unhappiness or stress, made one feel powerless or guilty, and caused discomfort (Levy et al., 2018; Villines, 2024). Similarly, Archvadze (2025) mentioned that symptoms of cognitive dissonance were feeling unease or anxiety, giving new explanations or excuses, ignoring information, opposing opinions, increasing self-criticism, feeling guilty or ashamed, feeling stress and concerns, and changing attitudes.

Figure 1: Cognitive Dissonance and Psychological Discomfort on Academic Misconduct (Explained by Author)



RESEARCH METHOD

Study area

Two famous academic organizations in Rajshahi city were selected as the study area. According to BSS (2022), the National University of Bangladesh ranked Rajshahi College several times among the top. On the other hand, Uddin and Rana (2023) referred to Rajshahi University as the second most popular public university in Bangladesh. It also maintained participation from major demographic areas irrespective of age, sex, field of study, and religion.

Sampling

There were over 65,000 graduate and undergraduate-level students in these two institutions, where 38,291 were from Rajshahi University and about 26,000 from Rajshahi College (Banglapedia, 2023; Rajshahi College, 2025). A minimum of 382 samples is needed when the population is more than 75,000 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Around 450 students responded to the survey, and 710 surveys were sent. Therefore, the response rate was 56.62%, and 402 respondents' data were analyzed.

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Research Instrument

The previous studies of Ahmed et al. (2024), Bisping et al. (2008), Chung et al. (2019), Kidwell and Kent (2008), and Pal (2025) helped to develop questionnaires of knowledge and attitude toward misconduct. Knowledge-related items measured respondents' awareness of the unethical features and bad consequences of misconduct, where questions K1-K15 and K18 showed unethical features, and K16, K17, and K19 showed bad consequences. Moreover, attitude-based items helped to detect respondents' feelings or beliefs about the advantages of misconduct, and discomfort items helped to identify psychological responses because of knowledge-attitude differences. The back translation method was adapted to translate questionnaires into Bengali for respondents' better understanding (Brislin & Freimanis, 2001).

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered via an anonymous survey administered using the Qualtrics online platform from October 2024 to May 2025. The non-probability sampling type was used because of time limitations and easy access. The study followed a quantitative research design, and related statistical techniques were used.

Data Analysis

The IBM SPSS 26.0 Package was used to evaluate the hypothesis through frequency analysis, factor analysis, independent-samples t-test, paired-samples t-test, and one-way ANOVA. Attitude items were scored in reverse during analysis, as in the study by Başer et al. (2025). Reverse scoring is important for the consistent interpretation of data, reducing social desirability bias, maintaining bipolar constructs, and mitigating acquiescence (Ferrando et al., 2025; García-Fernández et al., 2022). It also reduces distracted and generalized responses (İlhan et al., 2024) and helps with practice in psychometric test construction (May et al., 2022).

FINDINGS

Of the 402 respondents surveyed, 58.2% identified as male (n = 234), 41.3% as female (n = 166), and 0.5% as other gender identities (n = 2). The sample comprised students from Rajshahi University (78.6%, n = 316) and Rajshahi College (21.4%, n = 86). In terms of academic discipline, more than half of the participants were enrolled in Arts and Social Sciences (55.5%), followed by Business (18.4%), Law, Fine Arts, and Education combined (14.4%), and Science-related majors (11.7%). Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 28 years, with nearly all participants (99.5%) declaring a religious belief. Detailed demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Kim (2013) stated that when the sample size was more than 300, the normality test, including the Shapiro-Wilk test and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, would be unreliable, and the skewness and kurtosis values would be under 2 and 7, respectively (Demir, 2022; Matore & Khairani, 2020). Additionally, the data are considered normal when the sample size is more than 30 (Allende-Alonso et al., 2019). In this study, the Z-value of Kurtosis was between -4 and +4, and the Z-value of skewness was between -2 and +2, where the Q-Q plot was normal. Livingston (2018) mentioned that the independent and internal consistency of data is called reliability. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), Cronbach's alpha is widely used for measuring data reliability. Taber (2018) stated that the acceptable range of Cronbach's alpha is 0.45-0.98, and the high levels are 0.73-0.95. Table 2 shows that all items were acceptable or high in this study.

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Table 1: Demographic Data

N (Number of Respondents) = 402	Frequency	Percentage
Age (Years)		
17 Years – 28 Years	402	100%
Gender		
Male	234	58.2%
Female	166	41.3%
Other (Transgender, Third Gender)	2	.5%
Institutions		
Rajshahi University	316	78.6%
Rajshahi College	86	21.4%
Fields of Study Name		
Arts and Social Sciences	223	55.5%
Business	74	18.4%
Science	47	11.7%
Other (Law, Fine and Art, Education)	58	14.4%
Religious Belief		
Belief in Religion	400	99.5%
No Belief in Religion	2	.5%

Table 2: Cronbach's alpha measurement

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Total	30	.794
Knowledge	19	.885
Attitude	6	.754
Discomfort	5	.627

Test validity indicates that test findings are accurately reflected by the test scores of the appropriate measurement instrument (Livingston, 2018). Construct validity is commonly evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient (Özdemir et al., 2019). With a sample size of $N = 402$, degrees of freedom $df = 400$, and a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, all questionnaire items yielded correlation values ranging from .497 to .755 ($p < .01$). These values exceeded the critical r-value of .0978, indicating that all items were statistically significant. Furthermore, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) categorized the 30 items into three distinct dimensions, adhering to the acceptable factor loading threshold of .30 (Bandalos & Finney, 2018, as cited in Gebremedhin et al., 2022; Sürücü et al., 2022). Most items in this study demonstrated factor loadings greater than .40.

As presented in Table 3, the results of the one-way ANOVA indicated no statistically significant differences in students' knowledge and attitudes toward academic dishonesty across gender categories. Consequently, hypotheses H1a and H2a were not supported.

The independent samples t-test examined the comparison of Rajshahi University and Rajshahi College in terms of knowledge and attitudes concerning academic misconduct, as shown in Table 4. Based on the test results, hypothesis H1b was not supported, while H2b was supported. Therefore, knowledge of dishonesty did not differ, but attitudes differed, grounded in institutions.

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Table 3: One-Way ANOVA of students' knowledge and attitude on academic misconduct based on gender

Variables	Gender	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Knowledge (H1a)	Between Group	.010	2	.005	.036	.965
	Within Group	53.242	399	.133		
	Total	53.252	401			
Attitude (H2a)	Between Group	.579	2	.289	.636	.530
	Within Group	181.359	399	.455		
	Total	181.937	401			

$p < .01$, $p < .05$ *, and $p < .10$* are statistically significance level*

Table 4: Independent-sample t-test of students' knowledge and attitude on academic misconduct between Rajshahi University and Rajshahi College

Variables	Institutions	*N*	Mean	*SD*	*df*	*t*-value	*p*-value
Knowledge (H1b)	Rajshahi University	316	4.4374	.36702	400	.754	.451
	Rajshahi College	86	4.4039	.35554			
Attitude (H2b)	Rajshahi University	316	2.5617	.67506	138.186	2.087	.035**
	Rajshahi College	86	2.3915	.65468			

$p < .01$, $p < .05$ *, and $p < .10$* are statistically significance level*

Students' knowledge and attitudes toward academic misconduct were measured and differentiated based on their fields of study using a one-way ANOVA. The results of the ANOVA test are shown in Table 5. According to the findings, H1c was not accepted, and H2c was approved. Academic domains with different attitudes toward dishonesty did not affect knowledge of academic misconduct.

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA of students' knowledge and attitude toward academic misconduct based on fields of study

Variables	Fields of Study	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Knowledge (H1c)	Between Groups	.634	3	.211	1.598	.189
	Within Groups	52.618	398	.132		
	Total	53.252	401			
Attitude (H2c)	Between Groups	3.431	3	1.144	2.550	.055*
	Within Groups	178.506	398	.449		
	Total	181.937	401			

$p < .01$, $p < .05$ *, and $p < .10$* are statistically significance level*

The findings of the paired samples t-test pertaining to the distinctions between attitudes and knowledge about academic misconduct are shown in Table 6. The data support the acceptance of hypothesis H3. Knowledge and attitude were not in harmony. In addition, the findings of the correlation coefficient (-.109) between attitude and knowledge showed that attitude and knowledge were negatively correlated.

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Table 6: Paired Samples t-test of students' knowledge and attitude on academic misconduct

Pair	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
Knowledge-Attitude (H3)	1.90493	.80016	.03991	47.732	401	.000

*0.01>p***, 0.05>p**, and 0.1>p* are statistically significance level*

Table 7 illustrates the frequency analysis of 5 items of the psychological discomfort-related questionnaire. Most of the students felt psychological discomfort and answered Agree (A) and Strongly Agree (SA). Across items D1 to D5, the proportion of respondents who reported experiencing mental discomfort was 76.37%, 85.32%, 85.02%, 91.79%, and 97.51%, respectively.

Table 7: Frequency analysis of psychological discomfort items (Strongly Disagree = SD, Disagree = D, Neutral = N, Agree = A, Strongly Agree = SA)

Psychological discomfort items *N (Number of Respondents)* = 402	**SD**	**D**	***N***	**A**	**SA**
D1-Moral dilemma for knowledge-attitude dissonance	11	35	49	219	88
D2-Feeling angry for knowledge-attitude dissonance	2	16	41	199	144
D3-Feeling morally repugnant for knowledge-attitude dissonance	1	3	16	199	183
D4-Feeling demotivated for knowledge-attitude dissonance	4	11	18	220	149
D5-Feeling repentant for knowledge-attitude dissonance	1	1	8	214	178

DISCUSSION

The results showed that there was no significant difference among various genders in the context of misconduct knowledge and attitude. The majority of male, female, and other gender respondents were aware that misconduct was unethical and had some bad consequences. Similarly, most of the respondents of all gender felt that misconduct could bring some advantages. On the other hand, knowledge did not vary between Rajshahi University and Rajshahi College students, whereas attitude varied. Both institutions' students knew the unethical features and bad consequences of dishonesty. But Rajshahi University students thought that misconduct was more beneficial than at Rajshahi College. Respondents from all academic fields were aware of the unethical features and bad consequences of dishonesty. Furthermore, the majority of respondents from the arts and social sciences, and business disagreed on the benefits of misconduct practice. Nevertheless, other fields (law, fine arts, art, and education) and science students felt that misconduct brings advantages in academic performance. Harding et al. (2007) and Karabag and Berggren (2013) found that scientists with a science background were more prone to misconduct. Respondents knew unethical features and bad consequences of dishonesty, but felt misconduct had some positive outcome. Such differentiation can lead to knowledge-attitude dissonance. O'Rourke et al. (2010) examined the absence of interaction between direct knowledge and neutralizing attitudes that was similar to the cognitive dissonance approach. There was also a negative correlation between knowledge and attitude toward academic misconduct. In addition, most of the respondents felt a variance between knowledge and attitude that caused psychological discomfort. Most students experienced moral dilemma, anger, repugnance, demotivation, and repentance, which caused mental distress. Similarly, Byrne et al. (2023), Dilakshini and Kumar (2020), Harmon-Jones et al. (2025), Séré de Lanauze and Siadou-Martin (2019), and Shah and Lacaze (2025) illustrated the effects of cognitive dissonance on psychological discomfort and unease.

In this study, no statistically significant variation in academic misconduct knowledge and attitude was observed based on gender, institution, or field of study. However, educational

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policymakers, administrators, and managers should remain attentive to potential demographic differences when developing and implementing integrity policies. Notably, the theory of cognitive dissonance provided a novel perspective on education and misconduct, connecting knowledge-attitude dissonance with students' mental health and academic performance. As highlighted by Eaton et al. (2023), further research is recommended to understand the relationship between academic integrity violations and student mental health. Institutions may benefit from implementing counseling and mental health awareness programs to address such issues. Targeted initiatives can help reduce knowledge-attitude dissonance and promote academic integrity, while also taking into account diverse demographic contexts. Coordination between institutional policies and students' mental well-being should be prioritized. These findings offer valuable insights for national-level policymakers and administrators addressing ethical and psychological concerns. This research contributes to the field by exploring an innovative aspect of the academic environment. There is some scope for future research on this study. Various educational levels, a larger sample size, a variety of universities and geographic locations, various sampling techniques, and other study designs can all be used in future studies to enhance reliability and validity.

CONCLUSION

Academic integrity is imperative for developing ethical human capital in a society. Improving knowledge levels among students and changing their attitudes toward dishonesty can be an integral and considerable way to maintain academic integrity. On the other hand, the integrity policy should be developed by considering various demographic factors. There were differences between knowledge and attitude toward misconduct, which was called dissonance, and that led to psychological discomfort. Finally, mental well-being can be ensured by reducing the gap between knowledge and attitude toward academic dishonesty.

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