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# Ethical Perception of University Students about Academic Dishonesty in Pakistan: Identification of Student's Dishonest Acts

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### **Abstract**

The current research work aims to explore major activities performed by the university students during academic misconducts and their perception regarding such activities. The study further explores the ethical limits drawn by the students about academic dishonesty. Case study methodology is utilized in this research. Sixty-one post graduate and doctoral students were interviewed. Pattern analysis is conducted to analyze the information received through structured interviews of the participants. Study finds the key activities through which students are involved in such misconducts and make a comprehensive agreement on academic dishonesty that has become the normal part of life in education system of Pakistan. Furthermore, students opined that these activities are ethically wrong habits and may be avoided.

### **Keywords**

Academic Dishonesty, Perception, Ethics, University Students

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## **Ethical Perception of University Students About Academic Dishonesty in Pakistan: Identification of Student's Dishonest Acts**

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### **Introduction**

Education has become an important factor of every individual for survival in this competitive era. There are thousands of higher education institutes around the world that provides quality education to their respective students. In Pakistan, there are about 140's higher education institutions that impart quality education to the students ([www.hec.gov.pk](http://www.hec.gov.pk)). The major focus of these institutions is to provide opportunity to the individuals to be resource personnel for the country. However, these institutions in departing quality education among which academic dishonesty in an important one have faced numerous problems. Academic dishonesty has become a major issue in higher education institutions in Pakistan and this activity has an increasing trend day-by-day (Nazir & Aslam, 2010). To address this fact, the emphasis of this paper is on the ethical perceptions of students about academic dishonesty and intensity (sample basis) of students involved in academic misconducts through various activities. The paper is in five sections, which deal in turn with defining problem statement, defining and exploring major categories of ethical perceptions in the literature about academic dishonesty, setting objective of the study, description of sample, measures and results. The paper rounds off by exploring the major categories of ethical perceptions about academic dishonesty.

### **A Review of Literature**

Academic dishonesty can be defined as "students attempt to present others' academic work as their own" (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002). It includes many activities such as cheating (seeking help from peers) on examination, copying other student assignment, plagiarism, collaborating with others on individual assignments and using unauthorized material during examination (Hughes, Julia, & McCabe, 2006). Academic dishonesty as a concept and its increasing trend can be traced from the last decades as Drake (1942) argue that academic dishonesty among college students reaches up to 23%. Though, the reported rate of cheating is 49% in 1960 (Golden, 1960). One of the studies including survey of five thousand students conducted by Bowers in 1963 finds that three out of four

students are involved in at least one type of academic dishonesty activities (McCabe & Trevino, 1996). In 1992, Researcher found that 74% college students engage in cheating behavior (Jendrek, 1992) and this behavior growing day-by-day as Graham et al. (1994) reported rate of cheating is 90% (among 94 college students in UK) in 1994. They further conclude that the type of cheating behavior is varied and the most common cheating behavior is cheating during test hours and plagiarism from books and articles. The overall perceptions of researchers about academic dishonesty at educational institutions have become a chronic problem. Interestingly, there is a widely held belief among majority of students despite differences in academic ability, age and background that Cheating has become a normal part of life (Baird et al., 1980). A study by Harding (2001) finds that students have widely held belief that they are less involved in cheating activities as compared to their peers. Researcher such as Hall and Kuth (1998) concludes that student cheats due to lack of material information and laziness and they are more involved in cheating activities if social norms (peers attitudes, awareness of academic rules and regulations) are more supportive (Whitley et al., 1999).

Academic dishonesty consists of a number of activities among which one of the most important activities is plagiarism. Plagiarism as defined in Collins Dictionary of the English Language (Hanks, 1979), plagiarisis ‘the act of plagiarising’, which means use of appropriate ideas or passage from other’s work. It includes literary theft, copying the ideas of others without crediting them.

The concept of plagiarism is not limited up to students but it can also be found in the field of journalism (Lieberman, 1995) and politics (Perin, 1992). However, more specific to knowledge industry, the important task of the knowledge industry is to handle information obtained from different sources so, the scope of plagiarism in academic institution is high than other fields. In academics, plagiarism involves many activities such as copying other author’s writing without acknowledgement by PhD students (Morgan & Thomson, 1997) or copying the student’s work by their respective supervisors (Smith, 1995) etc. According to Park (2003), students are involved in plagiarism activities in the following four main ways:

- a. “Stealing material from another source and passing it off as their own for example:
  - i. Buying a paper from a research service, essay bank or term paper mill (either pre-written or specially written),
  - ii. Copying a whole paper from a source text without proper acknowledgement,
  - iii. Submitting another student’s work, with or without that student’s knowledge (e.g., by copying a computer disk).
- b. Submitting a paper written by someone else (e.g., a peer or relative) and passing it off as their own.
- c. Copying sections of material from one or more source texts, supplying proper documentation (including the full reference) but leaving out quotation marks, thus giving the impression that the material has been paraphrased rather than directly quoted.
- d. Paraphrasing material from one or more source texts without supplying appropriate documentation categories academic dishonesty as Normal part of life” (Park, 2003, p. 475)

In the context of Pakistan, being collectivistic culture of society, people are more conscious about their self-respect and self-esteem. That is why, it is an unethical to ask directly a student about cheating and plagiarism and identify him as a cheater. It is in this

context, this study has replaced the term cheating and plagiarism into an ethical acceptable language such as seeking help from peers during examination, collaborating with others on individual assignments, and seeking help from internet during assignment preparation. In terms of the resources of plagiarism, this study takes Internet as a single source of plagiarism which means that how students indulge in plagiarism activities while using Internet facility. In the literature of ethical perception of the students about academic dishonesty, different forms of student's perception are used which can be broadly defined in terms of following three categories:

### **Academic Dishonesty considered as normal part of life**

Academic dishonesty as argued by the students has become the normal part of life. As, Baired (1980) supports this argument and finds that 85% of students feel that cheating is a normal part of life and students are more acceptable toward this through supportive behavior by their peers. Researcher such as Harding (2001) also reported that 95% of students believe that they are less involved in cheating activities as compared to their peers.

### **Academic dishonesty as Ethically Wrong**

Grimes (2004) reported that while more than 85 percent of the US students (40 percent of the transitional economies students) believed that cheating in college/university is ethically wrong. Based on Grimes' study, present research utilizes this category in the present study, which means whether the university students of Pakistan consider academic dishonesty as an ethically wrong behavior, or not?

### **Academic dishonesty as nevertheless acceptable**

Grimes (2004) also concludes that 49 percent felt it was nevertheless acceptable which means that although Academic Dishonesty is an unethical practice but they do it even knowing to it. Based on this finding by Grimes (2004), another category of student's perception is used in the present study.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The study has two major objectives

- a) To get knowledge about the key acts of academic dishonesty and their intensity at university level.
- b) To explore the ethical perceptions of students about academic dishonesty.

### **Methodology**

This is an exploratory study. The case study strategy is utilized to explore the perception and ethical precincts of students about seeking help from peers during examination, collaborating with others on individual assignments, and seeking help from internet during assignment preparation. The core reason to select case study strategy is to deeply determine the perceived behavior of the students that what they think about academic dishonesty and how they get involved in such deeds. That is, to explore whether it is an ethical or unethical practice? Whether Pakistani culture and social norms are supportive towards these activities or not?

## Sample

As mentioned above, case study methodology is used in the present research, and the participants consist of students at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. The sample size consists of 61 respondents. Post graduate and doctoral students are selected for the case study because they have rich information and experience regarding such activities due to high qualification level and high number of years spends on education. The study has limited generalizability because of the case study methodology however; it has considerable level of analytical generalizability due to qualified participants of postgraduate students in the context of Pakistan.

### *Ethical considerations:*

Asking students to expose whether they have cheated lift up many ethical considerations. Among these are, (i) respect for the rights of students and higher authorities, (ii) issues and asking questions during interview in a way that appropriate data can be collected. For that reason, prior approval from the university administration and appointments for interviews is taken. This also ensures the voluntary participation of students.

## Data Collection

Personal interview method is selected to collect data from the students about academic dishonesty. The selection of personal interview method is based on two reasons:

- 1) To get detailed information about the academic dishonesty.
- 2) Respondents are easy to access for personal interviews.

The help of other students are taken to assist during interview to ensure the validity of data. However, pictures were taken during interview to further enhance the reliability and generalizability of the study.

## Protocol

Personal interview are utilized as method of the research study and following steps has taken during data collection process.

- a) Appointment for interview time.
- b) Clearly inform the respondent about nature of the study.
- c) Ensures the confidentiality of information provided by respondent.
- d) Make suitable arrangements (environmental setting) for conducting interviews.
- e) A team consist of two members interview the respondents (approximately 30-40 minutes).
- f) After interviewing researcher summarize the interview.
- g) Interview schedule for respondents (4 students per day)
  - a. Time: 6:00 –10:00 pm

## Measurements

After basic inquiry regarding personal profiles, structured interviews based on the following question are performed.

### Preliminary questions

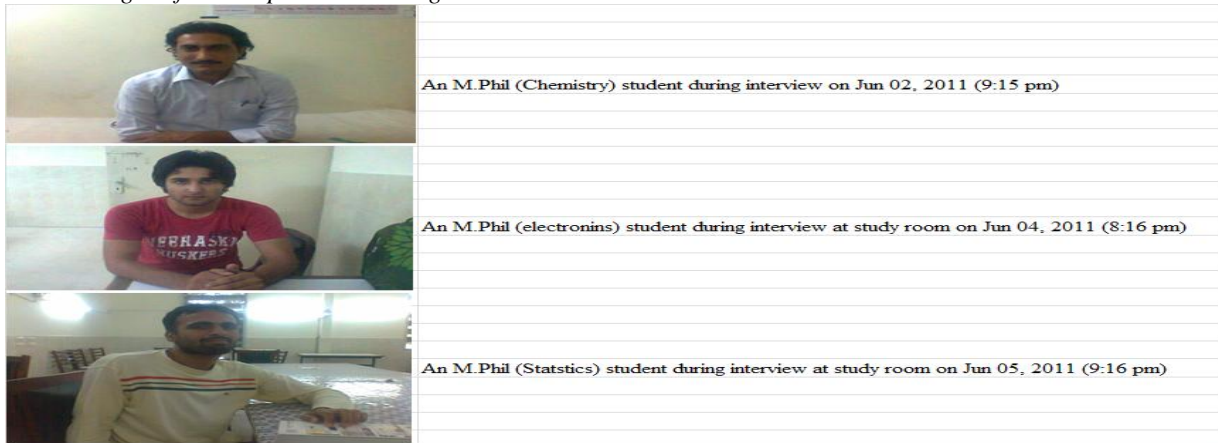
- a) Have you ever make help of your colleague during exam hours? If yes, How?
- b) Have you ever sought help from your colleague during exam hour? If yes, How?
- c) Have you ever help out your friend on his individual assignment? If yes how?
- d) Have you ever sought help from colleague about individual assignment? If yes, how?
- e) Have you ever take help from internet resources while making assignment? What kind of resources accessed? How it is presented in assignment (through referencing or not)?
- f) How do you see these practices in our society?
- g) In an ethical manner, how do you perceive about such practices?
- h) How do you perceive these activities in a fair manner?
- i) Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Participants

Respondents are the university student of Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. As from Table 1, sixty one students are interviewed having following demographic and educational backgrounds along with visual images of some students to ensure the reliability of the interviews.

**Table 1**  
*Demographical Characteristics of the Respondents*

Age Group	Qualification and Subject area	Total number of years spend in education	Number of respondents
21-25	M. Phil Physics	16-18	19
21-25	M. Phil Statistics	16-18	8
21-25	M. Phil Electronics	16-18	5
21-25	M. Phil Physics	19-20	4
21-25	M. Phil Bio Chemistry	19-20	4
21-25	M. Phil Chemistry	16-18	3
26-30	M. Phil Physics	16-18	3
26-30	M. Phil Physics	19-20	2
26-30	M. Phil Chemistry	16-18	2
26-30	M. Phil Bio Chemistry	16-18	2
26-30	PhD	21-22	2
21-25	M. Phil Chemistry	19-20	1
21-25	M. Phil Statistics	19-20	1
21-25	M. Phil Electronics	19-20	1
21-25	M. Phil Bio Chemistry	16-18	1
26-30	M. Phil Statstics	16-18	1
26-30	M. Phil Electronics	19-20	1
31-35	PhD	21-22	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>61</b>

**Figure 1***Visual Images of the Respondents during Interviews*

## Results

Qualitative software (Nvivo 9) is utilized to analyze the information received from university students during the interviews. Identifying the major patterns in the data through various coding nodes as Figure 2 provides the coding similarities of all respondents based on Pearson's coefficient of correlation performs pattern analysis. The numerals at the end of each node represent the respondents by grouping them into four major clusters.

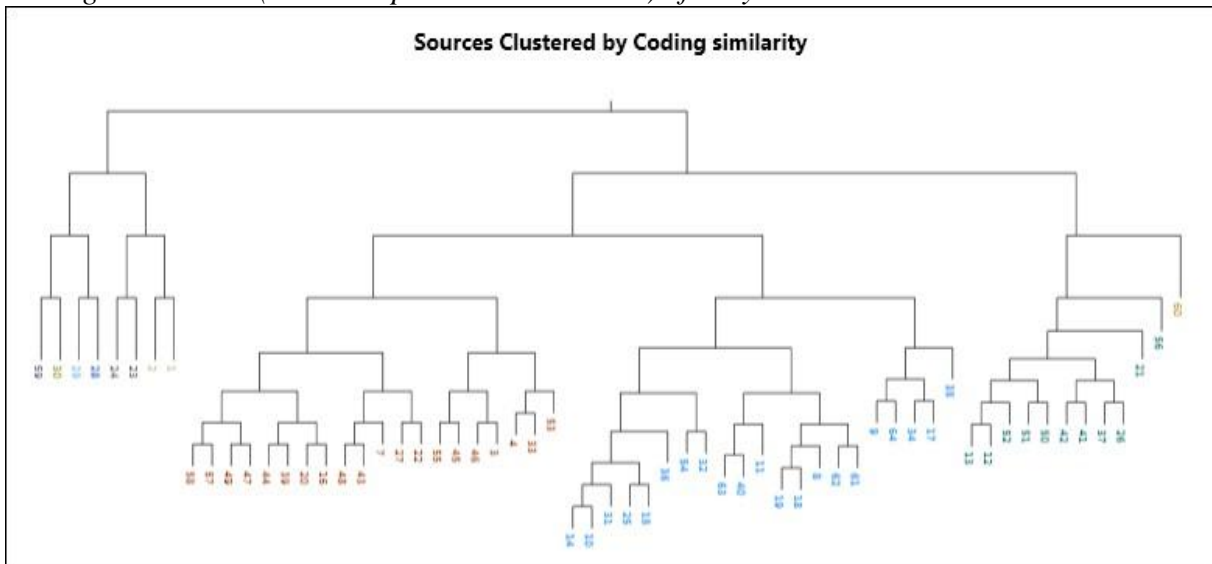
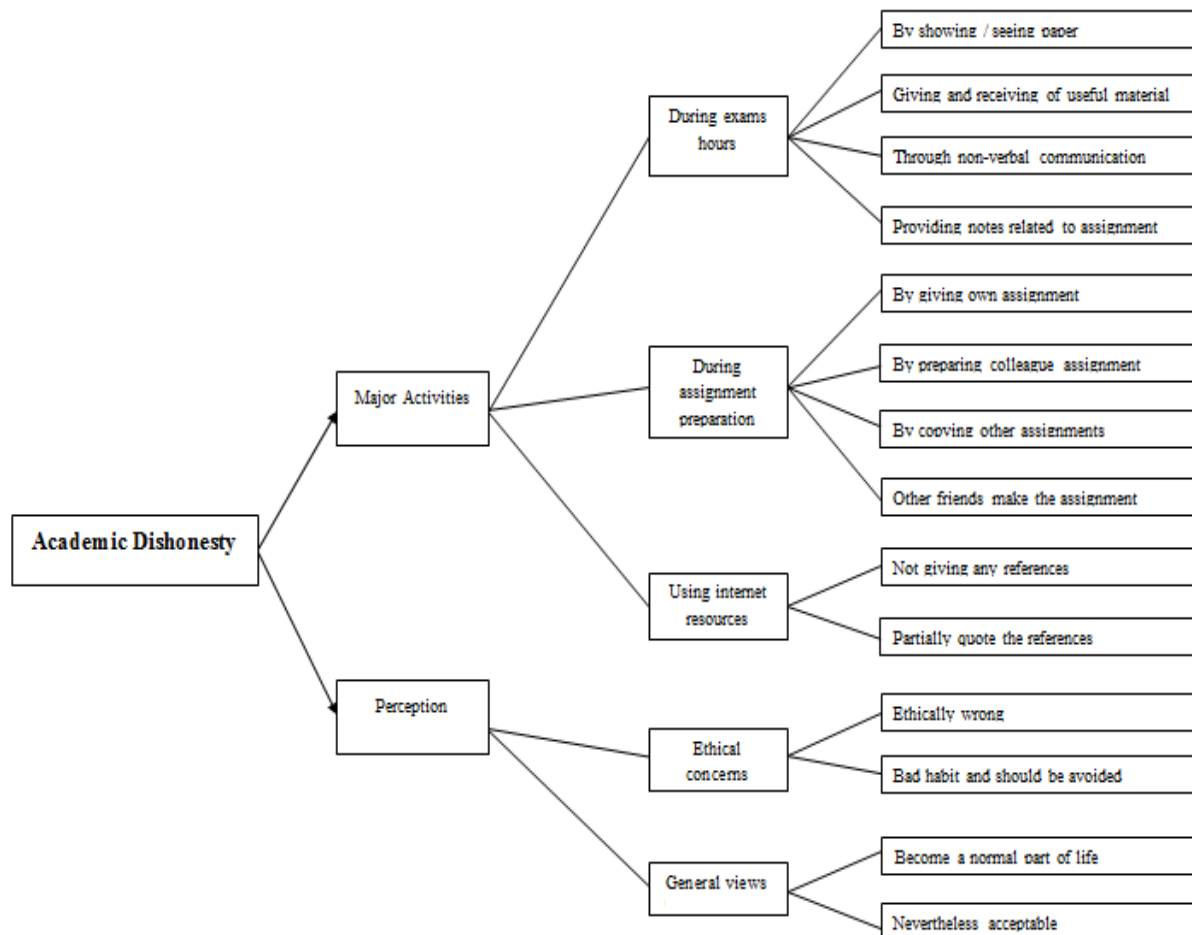
**Figure 2***Coding similarities (based on pearson correlation) of sixty one students*

Figure 3 depicts the major activities performed by the students during academic misconducts such as during exams hours, assignment preparation and using internet resources and their perception about educational dishonesty. Perception is further divided in two facets that is, (i) named perception based on ethical concerns and, (ii) general views by identifying four major codified patterns.

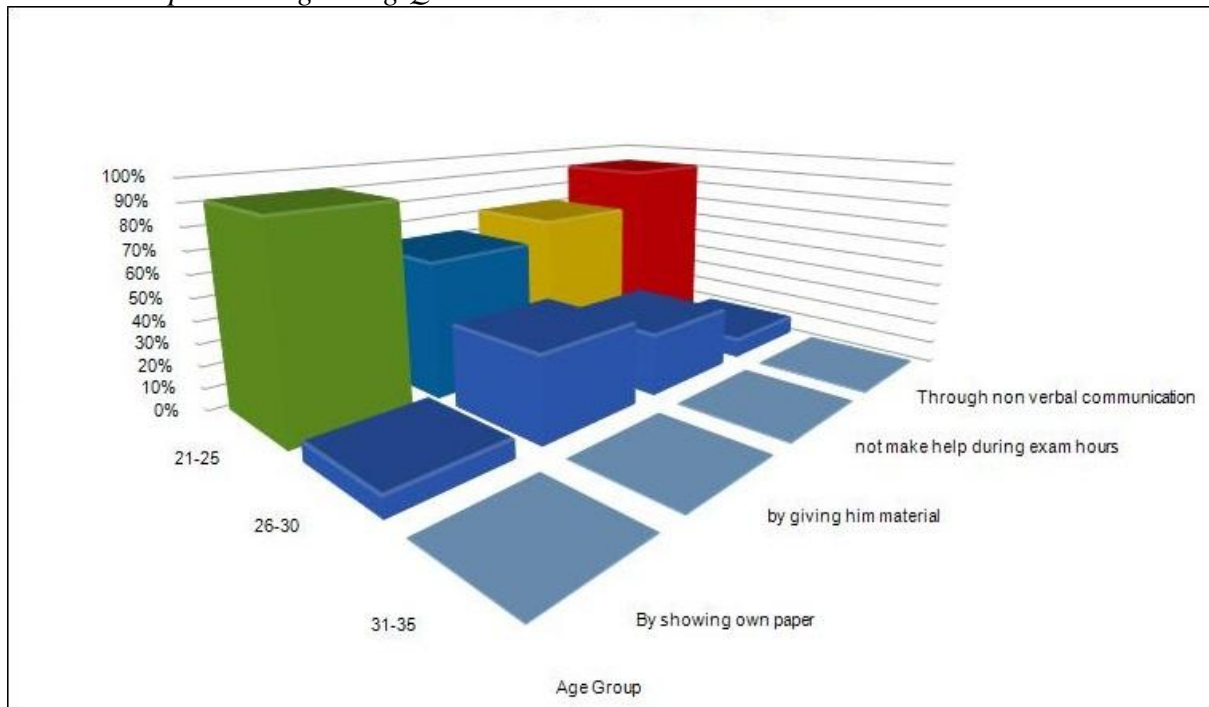


**Figure 3**  
Coding model of Academic Dishonesty



In accordance with the interview protocol, several questions were asked during interviews. While replying to questions 1 (Have you ever make help of your colleague during exam hours? If yes, How?), respondents identified four broad misconducts as depicted in Figure 4 i.e., helping others by showing their paper, by providing material and through non-verbal communication while 71.5% of the respondents with age range from 21-25 and 28% with age from 26-30 years argued that they are not involved in such activities.

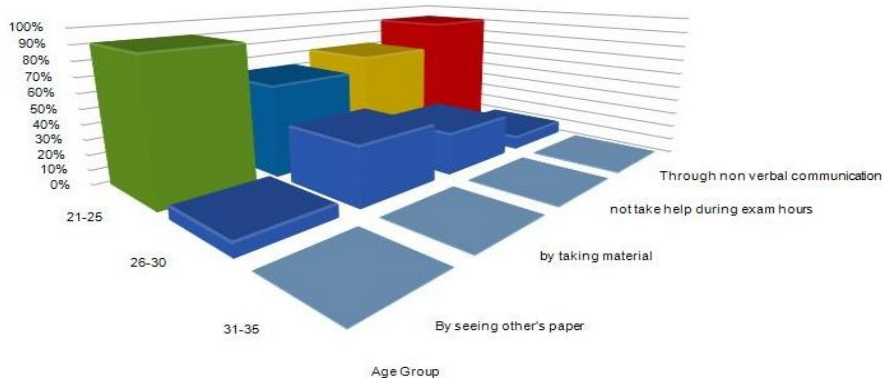
**Figure 4**  
Students Responses Regarding Question# 1



Reflective Notes: By asking leading questions during interview to get rich information. A number of students were agreed that they help out their colleagues by showing their own paper however these colleagues are their best friends and their relationships means a lot for them that is why, they took such type of risk by showing their paper during exam hours which indicates that social relationships matters a lot in such activities of academic misconduct.

In response to question 2 (Have you ever sought help from your colleague during exam hour? If yes, How?), students focused on three ways of taking help from others during exams hours which include (i) by seeing other's paper; (ii) by taking material; and, (iii) through non-verbal communication however, further description regarding this is provided in Figure 5.

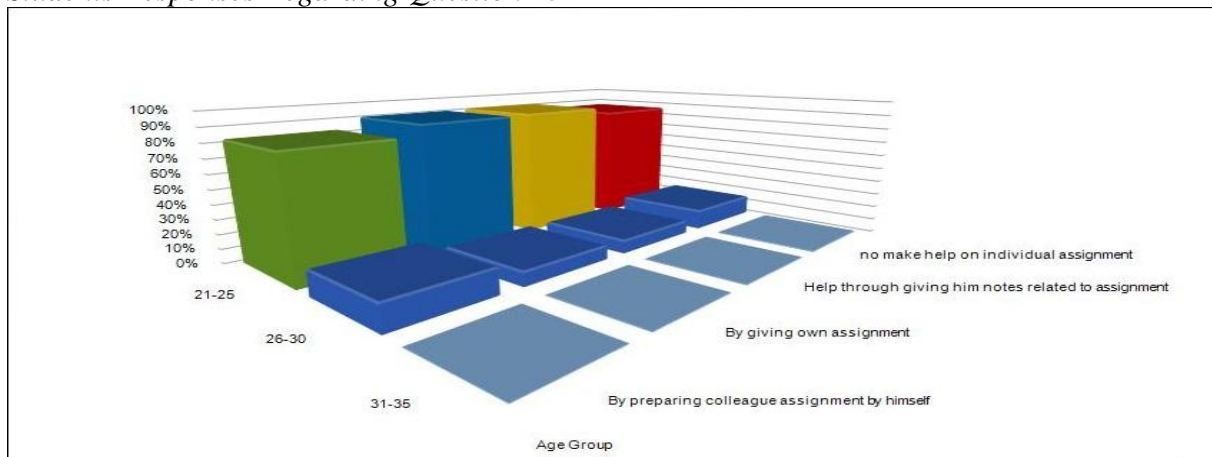
**Figure 5**  
Students Responses Regarding Question# 2



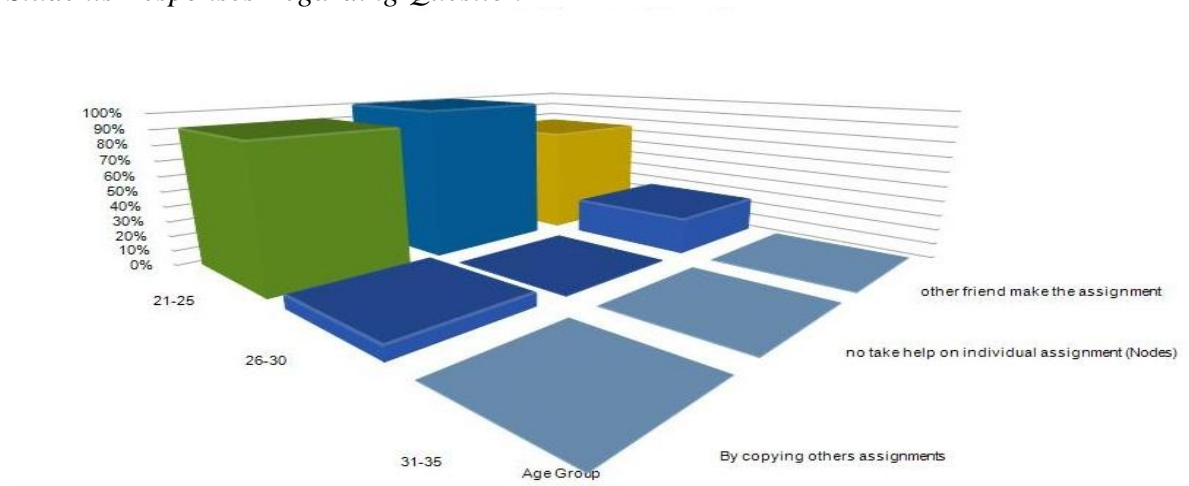
Reflective Notes: When students were asked about getting help during exam hours most of the students restrict to reply because they consider it as a matter of self-respect as one of the students said to me while asking this question “Could you please skip this question?”

Queries 3 (Have you ever helped out your friend on his individual assignment? If yes how?) and 4 (Have you ever sought help from colleague about individual assignment? If yes, how?) highlight the key activities performed in assignment preparation as a part of academic dishonesty. Major activities include helping out by giving one’s own assignment, by giving / taking assignments and by making colleagues assignments. However, in depth descriptive analysis of these activities with respect to respondent’s age are shown in Figures 6 and 7.

**Figure 6**  
*Students Responses Regarding Question# 3*

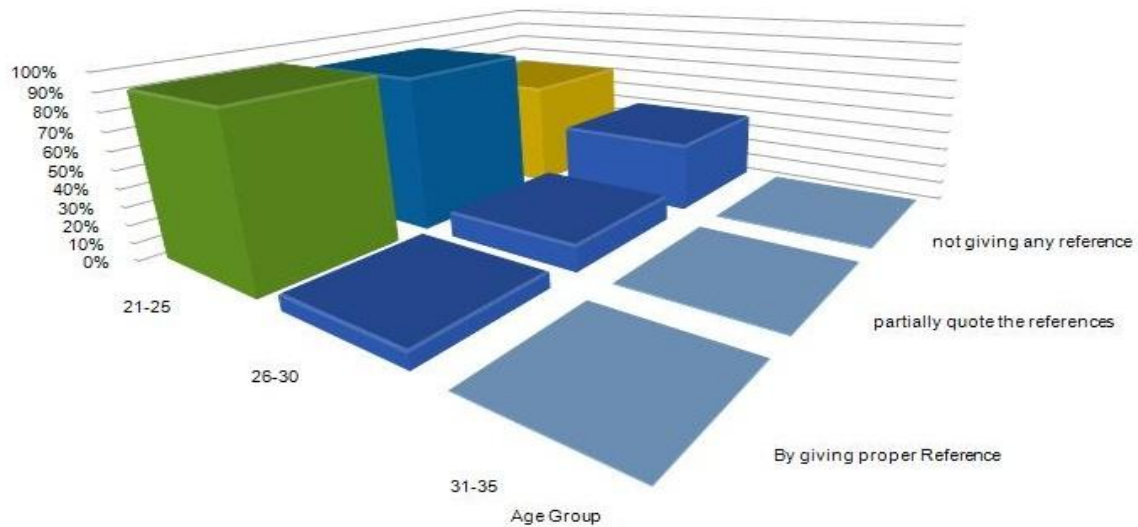


**Figure 7**  
*Students Responses Regarding Question# 4*



Comparatively, in response to question 5 (Have you ever taken help from internet resources while making assignment?), a high percentage of the respondents as can be seen in Figure 8 responded that they provide proper references for the author’s contents while lesser supports partial referencing and not giving any references at all.

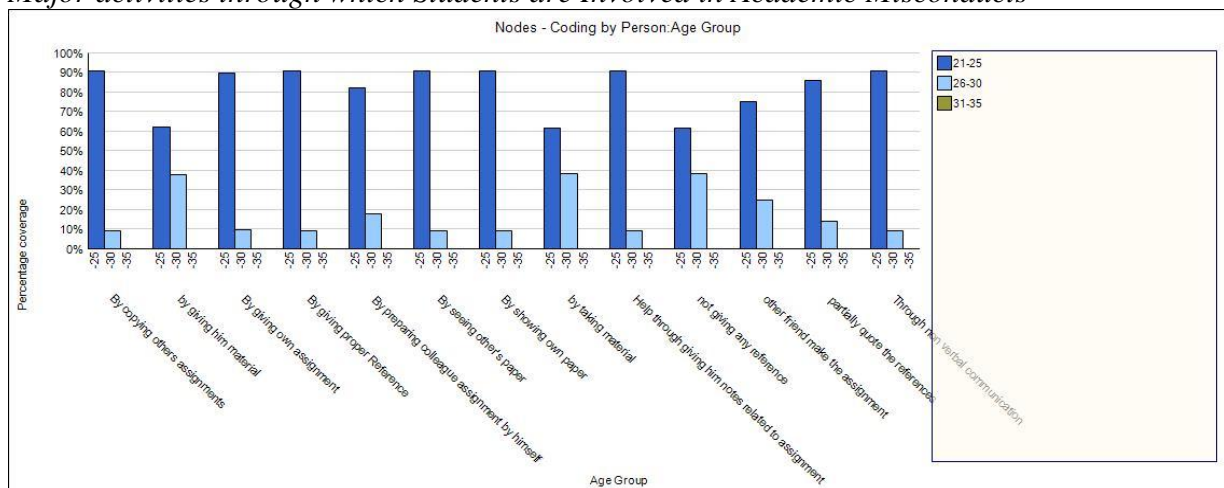
**Figure 8**  
*Students Responses Regarding Question# 5*



Reflective Notes: students were agreed upon the statement that they take help from internet during assignment preparation and “copy paste” the material just because of shortage of submission time of assignments. Sometime, they are also involved in such activities of copying the material without referencing the author due to bulky number of assignments assigned to them and they have to submit them in a short span of time.

Figure 9 provides the key activities through which students are usually involves in academic dishonesty however the participants with the age range from 21 to 25 years seems to be highly involved in such misconducts as compared to participants with higher ages.

**Figure 9**  
*Major activities through which Students are Involved in Academic Misconducts*

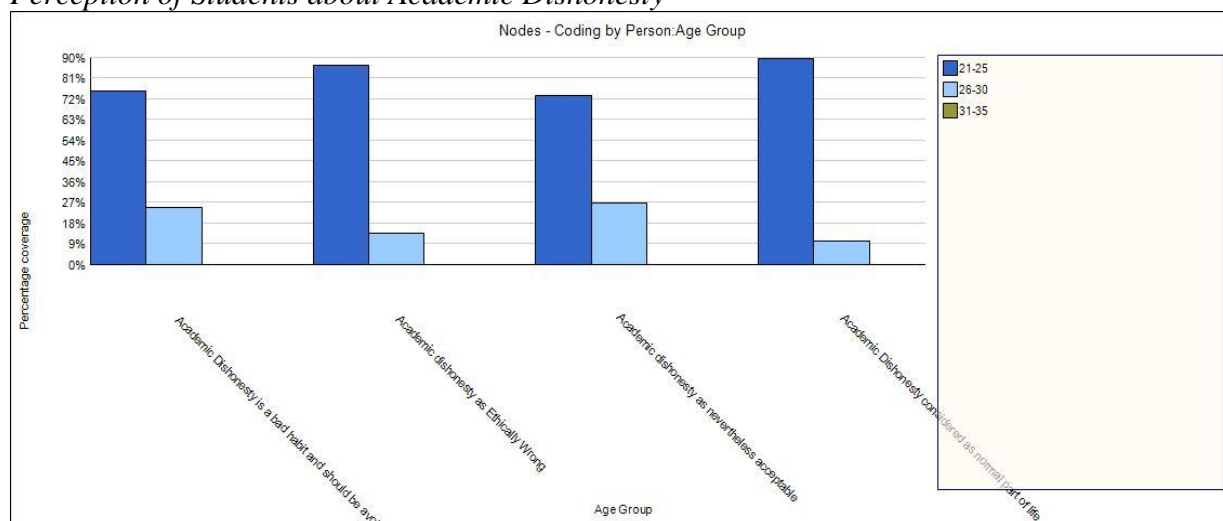


## Perception about Academic Dishonesty

After asking preliminary questions to identify above mentioned key activities, the students asked about the ethical perception about academic dishonesty. About 51% of the respondents having age from 21 to 35 years claimed that academic dishonesty has become the normal part of life while the 48% students perceived this as ethically wrong activity as illustrated in Figure 10. However, 47.5% students considered academic dishonesty as unethical but acceptable practice in the context of Pakistan and agreed upon that academic dishonesty is a bad habit and may be avoided. Despite of these activities, students are also agreed upon the fact that they involve in such activities to save their social relationships. Surprisingly, few of the respondents argued that they are involved in such activity to get respect and status from colleagues. (As one of the respondents told that “I help that person during exams only because I wish to get remembered in a good faith by him”). Majority of the students who negates to involve in such activities argued that they are not involved in such activities because it is a bad habit and one of the students surprisingly comment that “I will prefer to get F (fail) Grade instead of doing cheating”. Respondents are also agreed on the major issue that such activities destroyed the student abilities, creativity level and sometimes make a good and hardworking students as a dull student.

**Figure 10**

*Perception of Students about Academic Dishonesty*



## Discussion

The aim of the present research work is to identify the main activities through which university students are involved in academic dishonesty. This study identifies ten major activities as illustrated in Figure 3 which are commonly adopted by the students to participate in such misconducts. The second aim of this research work is to determine the ethical perception of university students about academic dishonesty. Significant numbers of students are in favor that academic dishonesty is a normal part of life but an ethically wrong activity. Such categories of ethical perceptions have already existed in literature however another category emerged through this study that is, academic dishonesty is a bad habit and should be avoided which clearly indicates that university students at Pakistan are willing to do their utmost effort not to involve in such activities. However, time constraints and relationship preferences lead the students to adopt an attitude of task completion even through unfair

means like academic misconducts. Another finding from this study is that usually the students in their early career of research degree (age from 21-25 years) are highly involved in educational misconducts due to less know how about the research areas and starts copying the other author's contents without proper referencing.

### Conclusion and Implications

This research work is conducted to gauge the major activities through which students are mainly involved in academic dishonesty acts. This also throws light on the perception of university students about academic misconducts as majority of the students are in favor that it is bad habit and should be avoided to ensure educational quality at university level. In addition, this will provide guidelines to universities administration and enable them to develop suitable strategies about their approach towards the management of academic dishonesty.

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