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"I'm not guarding the dungeon": faculty members' perspectives on contract cheating in the UAE

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Abstract

Students are increasingly relying on contract cheating (CC), a phenomenon in which a third party completes the assignment, quiz, or homework for students in exchange for a fee. Using an exploratory qualitative method and underpinned by critical theory and social responsibility theory, this study explored the perceptions of faculty members regarding CC in the United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) higher education institutions. In particular, this study addressed how faculty members perceive and deal with CC in contexts where policies towards the practice are absent from higher institution honour codes. Using thematic analysis, the results showed that CC arouses the indignation of faculty and staff to the violation of individual and religious rights. Also, they believe they have a sense of responsibility towards students and the community. The results also showed that faculty members' hesitation in reporting CC incidents was due to their perceived lack of support from higher administration institutions and the lack of clear procedures in ethical manuals. This paper concludes with practical recommendations for faculty and staff, managers, department heads and decision makers to mitigate this phenomenon proactively.

Keywords Contract cheating, Academic misconduct, Critical theory, Social responsibility, UAE

Introduction

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The excerpt above exemplifies the plethora of social media accounts, particularly Instagram, used to advertise contract cheating (CC) businesses. Ironically, many of these accounts advertise their businesses on official university accounts and in comments underneath their posts. There also appears to be an algorithm-based advertising plan; if

users like such posts, they would, in turn, get a follow request from the account, and so the business of essay mills thrives.

CC is "the submission of work by students for academic credit which the students have paid contractors to write for them" (Clarke and Lancaster 2006; p. 1). One party contracts with another; it may be an essay mill, ghostwriter or even colleagues, friends or family to do their work in exchange for a fee (Bretag et al. 2019). The work produced is customised, and what renders it problematic is the high probability that it will pass detection tests, particularly when written by human suppliers that provide original work (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2019). Newton (2018) argues that since the late 70s, CC has been on the rise. Today, CC is easy, accessible and affordable (Lancaster and Clarke 2016; Newton 2018; Rigby et al. 2015). Demand-side economics is fuelling the need for such providers (Rigby et al. 2015), along with the use of social media by the same providers to advertise their services to their target audience – students (Lancaster 2019).

In turn, the customised and undetected work offered via CC has long-term effects on different fronts. For instance, after randomly searching various university student handbooks in the UAE, none explicitly mentioned CC as an example of academic misconduct. Instead, one university handbook mentioned "purchasing of assignments" as part of academic dishonesty but did not state any policy, procedure or consequence for dealing with the issue. Thus, with the prevalence of CC, it is imperative to understand how faculty members process, feel, deal with and work to mitigate it in the absence of explicit policies.

Theoretical framework

This study was conducted in the context of critical theory framework and the social responsibility theory. As for the first, formally established by the Frankfurt School (Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2011), critical theory concerns the emancipation and transformation of society to meet humankind's needs (Horkheimer 1972). Critical theory's lineage can be traced back to the "Socratic practice of examining social life, its institution, values, and dominant ideas, as well as one's own thought and action" (Kellner and Gennaro 2022; p. 24). Kellner and Gennaro further explain the concept of critical theory through a 'Greek Sense', which includes the act of "discern[ing,] reflect[ing,] and judg[ing]" (p. 24). We immersed this study in critical theory to allow the participants precisely that – the opportunity to question the justice, fairness, and overall power of CC for themselves. Kellner and Gennaro posit that critical theory "requires rigorous reflection on one's presuppositions and basic positions and argumentation to support one's positions" (p. 24). Much like critical theory, which does not prescribe how things must be perceived (Louie 2020) but equips one with the tools to question the legitimacy of these acts, our study does not offer a fixed assumption of what participants should or should not do when dealing with CC, but, rather, strives to explore the phenomenon of CC by offering a critiquing platform to participants to dissect the phenomenon of CC as they had experienced it firsthand. This was especially important in this study, where there was an apparent lack of a system pertinent to CC, and the participants had to rely on their moral compasses to deal with such issues.

Abrahams (2004) states that "Critical theory envisions a process of critique that is self-conscious, leading participants to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation" (p. 5). The tenets of critical theory also call for transformation. This

means that critical theory is not just concerned with individuals engaging in the process of critiquing; individuals are also afforded agency to transform their societies and social contexts. This is the other reason why we entrenched this study in critical theory. Not only did we want to explore the phenomenon as discerned and judged by the participants, we also wanted to explore how they dealt with the instance of CC; what they experienced in cases where they encountered such an instance; and what, if anything, they would do to minimise such a phenomenon from occurring in their educational institutions. Additionally, Abrahams (2004) argues that "critical theory raises our consciousness beyond the walls of the classroom and the boundaries of the school to broader social and cultural concerns" (p. 5). In fact, Naughton (2020) suggests CC does not only relate to educational causes, but is also rather weaved in sociological implications, as such the call for transforming societies. We also believe that the actions educators strive to take to transform society stem from their sense of responsibility towards their main stakeholders – students. For this reason, social responsibility theory was the second theoretical framework used to underpin the study. Based on the ethical values of justice and fairness, social responsibility theory posits that individuals living in society are expected to make decisions and take actions that are in the best interests of the society they live in while simultaneously fulfilling their civic duties. Much like critical theory being descriptive rather than perspective, social responsibility calls for self-regulation. This means that individuals ensure that practices within their vicinity are in line with the creation of a just and equitable society. Ehondor (2020) argues that "social responsibility theory provides an ethical basis for the avoidance of acts [,] such as plagiarism and copyright [,] as a means of promoting progress in society" (p. 138). This can be extended to include the abolition of CC, an example of an act of academic dishonesty, in the hope of maintaining a just educational system void of disparity.

Literature review

Reasons for contract cheating

Students' engagement in CC relies on demographic, psychological, institutional, situational, or individual factors (Boateng et al. 2022; Walker and Townley 2012). For instance, extant literature indicates that CC and relying on ghostwriting services are due to poor time management, family or employment responsibilities, not understanding assignment requirements, lack of motivation, lack of skills in certain subjects, lack of language and academic writing skills, and lack of training in academic misconduct (Awdry and Newton 2019; Walker and Townley 2012). In addition to these factors, students' perceptions of the course, assignment value, and teacher practices can contribute to CC. Awdry and Ives (2021) relate this behaviour to personal traits, students' country of former study, and perceiving cheating as justifiable in "believing that there are acceptable reasons to cheat" (p. 1263). The availability of companies that offer such services, the ubiquity of the internet, and technological advancements also encourage CC (Walker and Townley 2012).

In addition to poor time management and taking shortcuts to get high marks, students tend to focus on grades over performance proficiency (Boateng et al. 2022). In some cases, students calculate the risk of the reward when choosing to partake in CC (Rundle et al. 2019). In other words, if students expect mild penalties when caught, they will risk such penalties, hoping to get the tempting high grades outsourcing guarantees

them. Regardless of the motives and factors behind CC, faculty members in higher education institutes are at the forefront of this phenomenon; they chose how to deal with such instances.

Faculty perspectives on contract cheating

Although Awdry and Newton (2019) emphasise that instructors' views of CC are poorly understood, they also report that "a large proportion of staff had had some experience with student cases of CC at their university and reported that outcomes were lenient" (p. 593). Harper et al. (2019) observed that instructors who reported CC also described consequences and penalties as 'surprisingly lenient', discouraging them from reporting other cases. Many instructors believe CC is almost impossible to prove, so they do not report cases to authorities, as they expect a lack of support (Harper et al. 2019). Besides, faculty broadly support legal penalties determined by policies, including all parties involved in CC; however, reporting such cases might put instructors in the position of being the first to report a crime (Awdry and Newton 2019). Despite understanding a student's rationale, the outcomes of reporting CC, and the difficulty in proving it, faculty members have amassed techniques to detect CC.

Detecting contract cheating

Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2019) found that faculty members cognizant of CC are more likely to detect it. Moreover, they found that training can also increase detection. Today, many universities and government agencies educate faculty and administrators on the CC phenomenon and ways to minimise it. An example is the University of Calgary and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standard Agency (TEQSA). The university argues that strategies to detect cheating must ensure that the reference list matches the in-text citation, unrelated references, and wording taken directly from the assignment instructions (University of Calgary, 2023). TEQSA relies on detection via checking the metadata – the document's original author, the English and writing style used, and the text and its relation to the subject matter or assignment (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2022).

   Similarly, in New Zealand, government guidelines suggest knowing students well by observing their abilities and sudden performance changes, although such solutions can be time-consuming (Singh and Remenyi 2016). In addition to the strategies above, another way to detect and prosecute CC is through the "Doping Test" (Alin 2020). This test is a two-step process that consists of (1) substantiating the initial suspicion through obtaining and analysing two or more writing samples; the *first* is a "clean sample" verified as the student's work, and the *second* is the suspected work; and (2) obtaining evidence through a written test that is based on the suspected sample, which generates a third sample that confirms or refutes the instructor's suspicion. Finally, it is possible to detect CC through open-ended questions in end-of-semester evaluation forms. Baird and Clare (2017; p. 14) emphasised "the importance of assessment design to reduce CC, as often academics cannot control the penalties given for CC but can modify the assessments to prevent it in the first place". Through the different strategies to detect CC, faculty must eventually deal with the issue.

Managing contract cheating

Among the reported consequences of CC, universities set a wide range of penalties, such as asking students to resubmit their work, suspension, or expulsion from the university; however, minor penalties might encourage repeated violations, so universities must reassess and unify their policies (Singh and Remenyi 2016). Other penalties reported by faculty include a warning, failing an assignment, failing a course, completing academic integrity training and revoking a degree (Awdry and Newton 2019).

Long-term effects of contract cheating

Sisson and Todd-Mancillas (1984) found that cheating leads to inflated grades. When a high-grade point average is rendered meaningless, non-cheaters will have negative consequences as other mediocre students will compete for their spots, misperception by employers that graduates are ill-equipped for the workforce and lasting harm to society. Harm to society, for example, is the start of a negative cycle of cheating that pressures all actors to partake in this activity to maintain a level playing field. Another drawback of cheating is that students will not be prepared for their higher-level classes or the workforce, according to Moody (2021). Furthermore, academic institutions will be deemed ineffective and fail in their overall missions and goals (Jurdi et al. 2011). As a result, society will lose trust in academic institutions (Resurreccion, 2012, as cited in Balbuena and Lamela 2015). Cheating, particularly CC, negatively affects the quality of graduating students. Also affected could be the perception of employers and society of the effectiveness of academic institutions and a negative self-fulfilling cycle in which other students will be forced to engage in such activities. These potential outcomes exacerbate the issue, leaving academic institutions and frontline faculty to deal with such issues.

How do faculty and institutions minimise contract cheating?

Several measures could minimise CC at the tertiary level. They primarily include raising faculty and students' awareness of possible academic violations, improving teaching and learning methods, and designing creative assessment methods that prevent students from outsourcing their work (Awdry and Newton 2019; Harper et al. 2019; Reedy et al. 2021; Singh and Remenyi 2016). Most instructors noted that they try to ensure students' learning from assignments, so they explain assessment requirements, provide them with opportunities to approach them when needed, and give them constructive feedback. However, preventing CC is not the sole responsibility of instructors; other barriers can hinder the detection and minimising of CC, such as class size and workload (Harper et al. 2019). Many students surveyed said that they did not recall reading about CC among the academic integrity policies in the student handbook (Bretag et al. 2019). Otherwise, reminding students of the consequences of violating rules is part of the New Zealand guidelines to prevent CC (Singh and Remenyi 2016).

   Many studies recommend that open discussions among staff and students, and sector-wide decisions, should be held, communicated, and applied to minimise CC (Harper et al. 2019; Singh and Remenyi 2016). For example, Reedy et al. (2021) proposed an approach to minimise cheating in online settings by focusing on assessment design, reinforcing integrity and using technology. Although universities use software programmes that detect plagiarism to align with current trends and needs, they are ineffective with CC (Singh and Remenyi 2016).

Recent studies have shed light on academic integrity and CC in the UAE in particular (e.g., Al Serhan et al. 2022; Khan et al. 2019; Khan et al. 2020; Pacino 2021; Rogers 2019). However, these studies mostly tackled students' perceptions of CC as well as service providers like essay mills, rather than investigating faculty perceptions. What sets this study apart is its qualitative approach to inquiring about the phenomenon as well as the critical theory lens it utilises to better understand the phenomenon through faculty eyes.

In fact, scholars argue that what is currently missing from the literature on this topic is a qualitative exploration of CC (Ahsan et al. 2022). Out of the 51 articles on CC reviewed, faculty perceptions were surveyed in only two studies, and two other studies surveyed staff and students (Ahsan et al. 2022). Therefore, this study qualitatively explored CC from a faculty perspective and sought to answer the following research question:

How do faculty members mitigate CC in the absence of clear policies?

Methods

Research context

This study was conducted in May and June of 2022. Participants were recruited using a combination of random and purposive sampling approaches. The authors recruited faculty from different universities across the UAE who are specialised in a variety of subjects. For the most part, university instructors were randomly selected, and the final list of participants who volunteered to participate in the study worked in six different institutions in the UAE. This country boasts around 76 licenced public and private universities (website accessed in December 2022).

The UAE has always successfully provided higher education, as it hosts many branches of international institutions. The tertiary level in the UAE is known for its multicultural students and staff diversity. As a modern country, twenty-first century technological trends and needs are considered in most educational institutions, encouraging technology integration in pedagogy. Universities commonly use software such as Safeassign and Turnitin to detect cheating and plagiarism for submitted assignments. Similarly, approaches towards learner-centred teaching are encouraged, which always strive to establish autonomy in learners by involving them in their education and giving them more choices and responsibilities.

Study participants

Out of 23 university instructors who were randomly approached for this study, eight agreed to be interviewed. The eight participants who accepted the study invitation were sent consent forms via email after arranging for the actual interviews, which were conducted virtually. Participants represented different nationalities, including UAE, USA, England and India. Four female participants, Yue, Sultana, Lauren and Arwa, and four male participants, Abdulla, Adeep, Thabo and Mas (all names are pseudonyms), were recruited. The participants worked in six different universities located in five different cities. Four instructors are PhD holders, and four have an MA. Three teach in scientific colleges and five in humanities colleges. Table 1 summarises the participants' demographic information.

While sample size is important in quantitative studies for reliable statistical analysis for the sake of generalizability, sample sizes in qualitative studies, as in our study, tend

Table 1 Participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Institution	Gender	Nationality	Experience in Academia	Major
Yue	Uni. A	F	USA	13 Years	Sociology
Sultana	Uni. A	F	USA	13 Years	English
Lauren	Uni. B	F	England	17 Years	English
Mas	Uni. C	M	Indonesia	33 Years	Health & Medicine
Adeep	Uni. D	M	India	10 Years	Electrical Engineering
Thabo	Uni. E	M	Zimbabwe	13 Years	Health & Medicine
Arwa	Uni. F	F	UAE	10 Years	Education
Abdullah	Uni. B	M	UAE	10 Years	Education
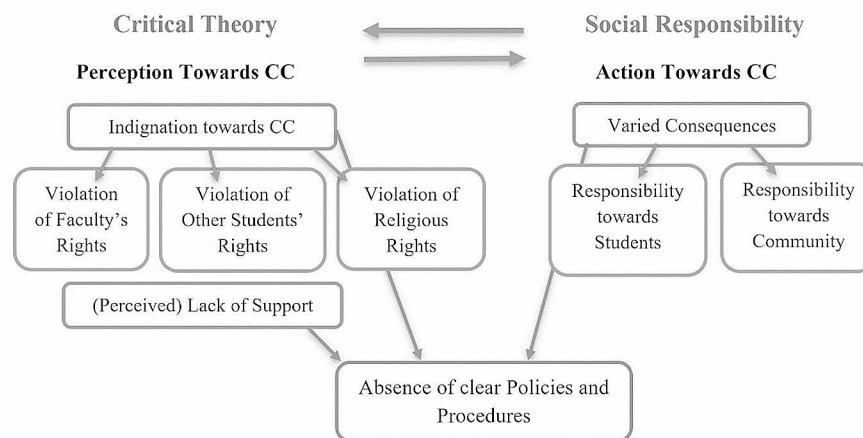
Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of summary of results

to be relatively small—between one, which is the starting point in narrative studies (Creswell 2007) and up to 35 in grounded theory studies (Sim et al. 2018). Sandelowski (1995) posits that larger sample sizes inhibit in-depth analysis in qualitative studies. Qualitative studies rely on data saturation to determine the sufficiency of data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Moreover, qualitative inquiries seek to describe and understand a phenomenon as experienced by the participants rather than generalize. It is worthy to note because of the sensitive nature of the topic some participants withdrew their participation, and other apologized after initially agreeing.

Procedure

This research uses a phenomenological qualitative study design, for "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell and Poth 2018; p. 159). This study underlies an ontological philosophical assumption, and its procedures are meant to justify the use of the phenomenological study design, which includes "details about data collection and analysis; a report of how the phenomenon was experienced with significant statements; and a conclusion with a composite description of the essence of the phenomenon" (Creswell and Poth 2018; p. 168).

A semi-structured interview was used as the primary data collection tool. Eight interviews were conducted in May and June 2022. Participants were asked questions such as the following: How would you describe your experience with contract cheating? How did

you feel when you discovered an instance? How did you deal with the incident, and why? What is your stance towards your institution's way of dealing with contract cheating?

The interviews ranged from 45 to 70 min. Interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom or Microsoft Teams, audio/video recorded and transcribed verbatim. To prepare for the analysis, the transcripts were crosschecked with the recordings to ensure clarity and accuracy.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically in stages according to Creswell and Poth (2018). First, an initial manual analysis was conducted by each researcher. Second, NVivo was used for coding data, which was collaboratively checked by the authors. Upon further analysis, themes were constructed using Bernard et al. (2017) observational techniques, such as repetitions, similarities and differences, transitions, and linguistic connectors. Identifying themes and analysing texts involve five complex tasks:

- discovering themes and subthemes,
- describing the core and peripheral elements of themes,
- building hierarchies of themes or codebooks,
- applying themes by attaching them to chunks of the actual text and.
- linking themes to theoretical models (Bernard et al. 2017).

Excerpts from the interviews were also selected to represent data and to interweave findings with the theoretical framework and literature for discussion.

Results

Indignation towards contract cheating

In striving to understand faculty members' experiences with CC through a critical theory lens, it was found that participants felt that CC was a disruption of justice at various levels. The participants indicated feelings of frustration, discouragement, sadness, anger, demotivation, disappointment and disrespect, among others. Instances of CC conjured negative emotions in the faculty members who experienced it, prompting some not to connote a specific feeling but to allude to the overall negativity it elicited. For instance, Yue, a professor of sociology, stated, "it's [the CC incident] very very…left a very strong impression on me". Similarly, Lauren, a composition instructor, exclaimed, "It's hard" to experience CC.

Violation of faculty's rights

As for the reasons behind such negative feelings towards encountering CC, participants indicated that they had wasted time preparing materials, planning assessment tools aligned to learning outcomes and curriculum standards, delivering content and giving instructions. They also indicated that they waste time striving to detect whether these instances are indeed CC because plagiarism-detecting tools cannot detect CC, specifically when contracted work is produced by human writers.

Violation of other students' rights

Most importantly, the participants were angry because the principles of equity and fairness had been violated. For instance, Lauren said, "So I do feel often angry, frustrated. I believe in fairness, so it makes me angry on the behalf of the students who are doing the work". Yue also indicated that it is unfair for students who put in the effort to submit their original work to be assessed against those who do not. But that is not the only reason it is unfair. It is unfair to the participants because CC "exacerbates social class differences; people who have money can buy it and then make a degree, people who cannot afford it, they are always behind the scene", explained Yue. As such, CC disrupts the equilibrium of fair and equitable opportunities in the social milieu of the classroom that institutes of higher education wish to maintain. Evident from these responses is not only the understanding that faculty members' negative feelings towards these encounters stem from feelings of personally being wronged but also feeling frustrated on behalf of others who submitted original work either because they intended to follow their school's code of conduct or because they did not have the means to contract their work as did their peers.

Violation of religious principles

Interestingly, individual and social underpinnings were not the only aspect that emerged from faculty interviews as reasons for thinking CC violates justice and equity. Instead, one of the participants also indicated his frustration with these instances of academic dishonesty because they violate religious principles[1]. "If you cheat, you know, it's Haram[2]. There is no 'Baraka'. I have to say that in Arabic: 'Baraka[3]'. If you cheat here and then you walk next time you [see] there's no 'Baraka'," Mas indicated. He argued that cheating is not permissible in Islam, and he often tells his students so, who are mostly Muslim Arabs. He also advises that should they cheat and get away with it, the consequences of their 'success' will not be blessed; it will not have 'Baraka' as he termed it.

For the participants, the act of CC violates many of the ethical values they believe and abide by, whether for religious, social or academic purposes, albeit for different reasons. The fact remains that they believe in its injustice. Something just does not seem right. As a result of these perceptions, faculty members believe that they are socially responsible for ensuring the equilibria of the learning (pedagogical) process by dealing with CC on a one-to-one basis.

Mitigating the conundrum of contract cheating in the absence of policies

One of the patterns among the participants' responses was the conundrum of CC. Faculty members found CC particularly challenging because of the burden of proof. Because it is essentially written by human writers (ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence were not explored in this study), faculty members lack evidence that a student's given work is unoriginal. The work may pass detecting systems such as SafeAssign or Turnitin, services available through a learning management system made available to students and faculty by institutes of higher education. This lack of evidence encourages faculty members to rely on other sources or evidence to inform them whether specific

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[1] Practising Muslims believe in Prophet Muhammad's saying "He who cheats is not from us."

[2] Haram is an Arabic word that means forbidden.

[3] Baraka is an Arabic word that means blessing.

work is unoriginal. An example is Abdullah, who said, "I can't explain how I know that, but I have like a very strong hunch". Not all the interviewed faculty members relied on their hunches. Other telltale signs were reported by the faculty members to identify a specific work as contracted. These included:

- submitted work deviating from the task's requirements,
- mentioning concepts and theories that were not included in the class but were included in the submitted work,
- submitted work not denoting to student's personal experience when the task requires personalisation or reflection,
- and submitted work comprising a writing style that is not consistent with students' writing abilities, particularly when most are second language users of English.

Then, how do those faculty members navigate dealing with CC encounters fairly and justly without clear-cut policies? Although faculty members followed the rules they thought were fair, they reported a variety of CC consequences. For instance, Sultana, a writing composition instructor, said that what is fair is to do what is "in the best interest of students". When asked how she would deal with cases of suspected CC, she said:

Typically, what I will do again is that I will reduce it [the grade] …it will be usually from fundamental required aspects, or the way it is structured is what I wanted, and so I will reduce the content grade to such an extent that they are not passing the assignment, and it makes it difficult for them to pass the class. The grade will be 25–40, something in that range. Usually, I don't write 'hey, I know you bought this paper' I never do that. That's inappropriate, anyway. I usually write something along the extent that 'Had you followed assignment parameters, a, b, c mistakes would not have happened.'

Lauren also had sentiments similar to Sultana regarding work suspected of being contracted. She also explained that she would assign the submitted work the grade she believes it deserves rather than what the grade it is worth.

The way I've personally dealt with it rightly or wrongly is, I've kind of bluffed the students, so I've given them the mark I think they deserve rather than the mark, you know, that they might think they deserve. And I've asked, I've said to them, if you think I have been unfair, you're welcome to come and write in front of me in my office. And I haven't had any takers.

Despite these reasonably elucidative steps, participants' responses were dissonant. On the one hand, they reported a clear grading scheme for suspected cases. They also reported that it would be fair to grade students regularly because of the burden of proof—the lack of evidence that the work is not students' original. Sultana indicated that proof of CC is difficult to find: "If you don't have the proof, you cannot be meeting up justice". Juxtaposed against her previous discussion of dealing with suspected cases of CC, this particular quote contradicts the process she follows. Sultana was not the only participant who showed dissonance when dealing with CC; other participants also did.

Unlike the two previous instructors, Arwa, on the other hand, indicated that she would grade the suspected assignment like she would any other submitted work because of the lack of clear evidence. She said the following on this matter:

I have to follow the rubric. No, no, no. I'm very [objective], by the way. I graded it as per the rubric… It's what you have submitted as in a relation to the rubric, the rubric criteria. Did you meet them? Did you not meet them? And that's it, you know, no feelings attached.

Abdullah, on the other hand, did not grade the paper, but confronted the students. Because it was a group project, he invited the group to his office and asked them whether this was their original paper, as they had not done well in the presentation part of the assignment. The group did not respond initially but then admitted that they had, in fact, made use of CC. Abdullah then "offered them a second chance, so they handed [him] their new submission, ah, with their own work, and it was below expectation, but at least they learned something." Adeeb was also not in favour of punitive measures when dealing with CC cases. Instead, he preferred to mentor students, saying, "So as I mentor mostly instead of giving punishment, we are just giving a mentoring to the students to change the attitudes and try to make it convincing to the students in a–in a different way".

Participants' responses in case of suspecting CC varied due to the absence of policies. Thus, instructors deal with CC in how they perceive fairness and reasonable, translating into various, and sometimes contradictory, results such as typically checking assignments for rubrics or failing students in tasks or courses. Although participants dealt with suspected cases they perceived as fair, their actions were not equal, or one might say not consistent.

Sense of responsibility

Throughout the interviews with the faculty participants, there appeared to be a strong sense of social responsibility towards the students they taught. This sense of social responsibility propelled teachers to deal with CC issues rather than ignoring them. Participants indicated that the quality of the work did not matter as long as students submitted their original work. The faculty's responsibility towards students was to see them progress. "We're gonna go step by step. You know, I'm gonna hold your hand throughout the whole process … I'm here to help you. This is my job. I'm here to support you, so whenever you need anything come back to me", as indicated by Arwa, who would reassure her students that she would help them along the way to fulfil their tasks.

As a composition instructor, Sultana also believed that her responsibility to her students was to help them learn writing: "I don't, I'm not guarding the dungeon, and I just want them to become better writers" she had indicated. Regarding CC and other forms of academic dishonesty, she said that her priority is to help students acquire the skills of writing necessary to thrive in academic pursuit rather than "guarding the dungeon". To her, the goal of producing better writers trumps the policing of academic honesty.

Faculty members were proactive towards cases of CC not only because they viewed it as their responsibility to see that students progress in academic endeavours but that they extend beyond the cumulative academic and social responsibility and into one's professional and personal life. There is a social duty to ensure pedagogical knowledge and integrity in students.

Thabo is an instructor of human anatomy and is very wary that CC during students' time as learners might lead them to malpractice when they graduate and begin work as physicians. A similar perception was shared by Arwa, whose area of expertise was to

prepare students to become teachers. She worries about the ethical implications of her students' influence on the next generation when they do not see anything morally wrong with purchasing their assignments:

> But with education, no, not you can go back from it, if you have a student with that mentality. Think about how many more students it's just gonna affect in the future. Think about how many generations will be raised based on it. Yeah, we can cheat, and yeah, we can get away with it. So again, I don't know, maybe I'm very optimistic, or I always see the bigger picture. Like whenever I teach my students in class, I don't think about them. I think about the generations that they're gonna graduate in the future. It's like you can't mess up, you know, it's this is, this is not a joke. You can't miss with this.

Certain specialisations are steeped in ethical practices; education and medicine are two examples. Unsurprisingly, faculty members teaching such specialisations show concern for the repercussions of CC on students' practices in their respective fields after graduating college.

Perceived lack of support

The sporadic approaches that faculty members practised to mitigate CC result from the perplexing nature of reporting CC due to a lack of proof and a lack of procedures in university manuals and a perceived lack of support from their institutions. Faculty members did address—or try—instances of CC. However, these were replete with inconsistencies, as discussed earlier. There was an apparent mismatch between faculty members' thoughts and actions regarding CC. For instance, on the one hand, participants such as Sultana called for failing students, but also indicated that her social responsibility towards students is to see them learn and progress. Another example is Abdullah, who called for institutions to include cheating attempts in students' transcripts, but also indicated, "I don't know how I could sleep [at night]" if he reported and "they [the administration] remove or withdraw her from the university". The main reason for such dissonance in thought and action is the absence of support that allows them to combat these unjust behaviours. Yue put it succinctly when she said:

> We need to develop a procedure to guide faculty members who have you know suspected cases and support them to pursue these cases because oftentimes, you know they feel it's not worth of their efforts, and there is no consequence.

Even though some participants feel responsible for taking action, they must ensure that students turn in their work. However, partaking in an unclear path with no consequences is demoralising. In many cases, faculty members report suspected cases of CC. However, social, psychological, and educational costs seem to outweigh the benefits of ensuring a level "playing field". Lauren recounts, "I believe one teacher did report and brought the students to the coordinator, but I think that's as far as it went". It is clear that in the realities of academia, with the multiple hats that faculty members wear, it is not worth pursuing instances of CC. On an institutional level, there is a lack of support to pursue these cases of academic dishonesty and abide by the social responsibility to which educational institutions are held. A case in point is Arwa's quote:

So, that's what we need to do in here. And then I know every department has the same issue. I know that for a fact because we as faculty members, we talk all the time. You know, we talk to everyone. So yeah, it is an issue, but it has to be brought up.

Different departments are aware of the phenomena and are experiencing the same challenges. However, this issue is not acknowledged by the institution. As a result, the lack of support is institutionalised. Everyone is talking about it, but nothing is done to address it.

Summary of results

In essence, the overall conceptual framework as displayed in Fig. 1 maps out the relationship between critical theory and social responsibility theory that the results reached. It was found that the two theories complement the understanding of CC through participants' perspectives. Results showed that the participants felt indignations towards CC for various reasons; violations of faculty's rights, other students' rights, and religious rights. Also, faculty members perceived that there was a lack of support from their institutions toward instances of CC and their reporting because there was a lack of policies and procedures guiding faculty members and stakeholders on how to deal with instances of CC in honour code manuals. On the other hand, through examining participants' statements via a social responsibility lens, the results elucidated that faculty members took measures to deal with instances of CC using varied methods. The reason they did so was due to their overall sense of responsibility towards students, and the larger community. Here, too, faculty members shouldered such responsibilities individually due to the lack of policies and procedures in honour code books.

Discussion

As juxtaposed against frameworks of critical theory and social responsibility theory, this study's findings reveal that CC is a phenomenon of which faculty members are aware, despite the lack of its explicit mention in the ethical manuals of the participating faculty's university. CC was found to trigger strong emotions in the participating faculty because teachers possess strong values and ethics to which they expect themselves and others to adhere. Educators also face pressure from society to build character and instil society's values in their students (Campbell 2003). As such, instances of academic misconduct are viewed by faculty members "as an attack on all they hold dear" (Austin 2007; p. 249). Then how do they move on from here? The participants in this study, while using various means to address CC, were proactive in this regard, meaning that they did not ignore any instances of CC with which they were confronted. This in fact is a tenant of critical theory, demonstrating that individuals take agency in challenging the status quo. According to Prentice (2020), faculty members usually deal with CC in the following four ways: (1) disregard the incident altogether, (2) modify the student's grade to reflect the CC without directly addressing it as academic misconduct, (3) confront the student without reporting to the institution's higher administration, (4) or formally report the occurrence to the designated personnel. Of these, the participating faculty members engaged in two—they adjusted their grading and confronted the students.

Additionally, the lack of procedures and clear policies remained at the crux of the actions taken by faculty concerning CC, a fact that influenced many of this study's

results. For example, the exclusion of CC and how to deal with it in university honour code manuals encouraged faculty members to create their own processes for dealing with suspected issues of CC, which led to a variety of actions to address them. Alessio and Messinger (2021) posit that "in the absence of policies and educational tools associated with online teaching and testing, faculty are left to decide themselves how to assure that there is an even and just playing field for all students (p. 6); this is what was true for the participants of this study.

Pertinent to the above aspect was also the sense of social responsibility that faculty members reported having towards their students and the community as a whole. This sense of responsibility was particularly true in education and medicine; faculty members believed that ignoring cases of cheating while students were studying in these fields would result in an extended long-term effect of such misconduct being continued when these students were employed in sensitive careers. Eaton and Christensen Hughes (2022) fittingly write:

When students engage in CC, they are not earning their credentials legitimately. The result can be that graduates of reputable schools may lack the skills necessary to serve in the profession. Even worse, they may have developed habits of unethical and deceptive behaviour that they may carry forward into their professional practice (p. 180).

It is important to understand the broader societal and cultural underpinnings influencing CC in this region. A cosmopolitan society guided by Islamic values and morals that is culturally highly collective (Al-Harthi 2005), with principles that promote helping one another is a rather unique context for CC. On the one hand, individuals are culturally inclined to help one another, which may be seen as fazaa (i.e. the initiative to support and help someone). On the other hand, Islamic teachings promote honesty and strongly warn against any form of cheating (Rogers 2019). This is reflected in the results, in which one respondent emphasized that CC is Haram and leads to a lack of Baraka. The awareness that all forms of cheating are wrong is crucial, whether based on exchanges motivated by social contracts (i.e. to help) or on economic contracts (i.e. receiving a fee for a service); everyone needs to be collectively and socially responsible so that cheating is not normalized. This, too, is a premise of critical theory, as critical theory is concerned with the idea of transforming society as a whole.

The social responsibility framework ensures that all community members, not only students, uphold ethical standards in all aspects of the community. Moreover, the exclusion of CC and procedures pertinent to it also caused faculty members to perceive that there was a lack of support from the university administration concerning the reporting of CC. Akbar and Picard (2020) suggest that "the result of a lack of policy is a lack of emphasis on academic integrity" (p.11) "and faculty cannot address plagiarism and cheating among students because of the absence of explicit responsibilities and clear procedures to combat academic misconduct" (p.13). In our study, inconsistencies—even among individual faculty members—occur when there is a lack of clear procedures, as faculty rely on their own moral compasses to deal with cases individually; in turn, this might disrupt the maintenance of equity that higher education institutions strive to achieve. A case in point is a study conducted by McCabe et al. (2003), in which they indicated that in the absence of explicit instructions in honour codes about academic integrity, faculty members "are more likely to take personal actions designed to both catch and deal with cheaters" (p. 367). Their study reported numerous benefits pertinent

to implementing honour codes regarding academic integrity. They found that not only were there benefits in terms of the reduction of cheating attempts, but also that:

> *Faculty can benefit from the development of a shared governance system that shifts some of the burden of dealing with cheating to students. This reduced burden represents an important selling point to those noncode faculty who are reluctant to take on the unwanted responsibility of monitoring and policing student cheating. Another faculty benefit suggested by this study is that honour codes may increase their perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of their school's academic integrity policies (p. 383).*

One of the emergent themes in this study was the perceived lack of support that participants felt from their respective universities. Such concerning results were also reported in previous studies in which faculty members believed that any reporting or prospective reporting of academic misconduct would be met with weak support (Hamilton and Wolsky 2022; Tabsh et al. 2017; Zivcakova et al. 2012). There were several reasons that the faculty members felt this way. One was the lack of a specific mention of CC and the consequences of dealing with it in such institutions. Other reasons included hearsay by faculty and other staff members who went through the process, but whose reported cases were dismissed or not heard of after they reported them. Yet other reasons included the perception faculty members had that in the battle against students—as that is what they considered cases of reporting—students were seen as the side that administrations of higher institutions of education tended to favour. Similarly, Prentice (2020) indicated that one of the reasons faculty members remain hesitant to report cases of breaches of academic integrity is related to the fact that they believe they lack agency over the outcome of the decision.

Furthermore, the participants of this study indicated that they did not feel good if they reported a senior student and that student was expelled. Another participant said that she would ask the administration not to suspend the student. These aspects indicate the importance of faculty members believing that they have agency over the decisions they make about the cases they report—implementation that would be worthy of consideration by policymakers in higher education institutes.

In addition, the results of this study revealed dissonance and mismatch between the thoughts and actions of faculty members and their actions in different instances of suspected cases of CC. Again, this can result from a lack of clear policies or the absence of such policies altogether. This dissonance is not necessarily a negative virtue. On the contrary, we view it as positive. Campbell (2003) indicates:

Ethics is not another form of dogmatism. The real point of ethics is to offer some tools for thinking about difficult matters, recognising from the start—as the very rationale for ethics, in fact—that the world is seldom so simple or clear-cut. Struggle and uncertainty are part of ethics, as they are a part of life (p. 9).

Having a wide range of faculty members from different types of institutions in the country is a strength of this study. The themes and patterns emerging from the study allude to the fact that while faculty might differ in mitigating the issues, collectively, they agree that institutions need to have clear policies and that not dealing with this phenomenon with a clear logic will have negative foreseeable consequences in the future. This call for change and action articulated by the participants is yet another example

of critical theory (Blake and Masschelein 2003). Not only does the study highlight how faculty members process, deal with, prevent, and manage CC in the absence of explicit policies, but it also includes recommendations that can be followed by administrators and policymakers. Through these recommendations and guidelines, faculty should experience less cognitive dissonance and frustration, as dealing with CC will be less emotionally challenging. Additionally, the uniform guidelines recognize the experiences of the different faculty members and the haphazard procedures in place in the different universities and harmonize the different practices into clear guidelines (the next section highlights the recommendations). These recommendations and uniform guidelines will help in treading a path forward that minimizes CC.

Limitations

The study is not without its limitations, one being the sample size. Even though UAE higher education in terms of private and public institutions is homogenous, it is imperative not to generalize the findings from faculty member's perspectives to all higher education institutions. The context and practices may differ from one institution to another, thus affecting faculty members' experiences. Given the limited sample size of the study, it is important to caution against generalizing the findings to all faculty members in UAE higher education institutions (Creswell 2007). Having said that, the study can aid in forming assumptions and hypotheses for other studies in the UAE and Arab contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion above, this study concludes with several recommendations for dealing with CC that will help mitigate inconsistencies among faculty members. First, a clear definition of what CC is and is not is needed, and institutional awareness of mechanisms to deal with such knotty phenomena needs to be raised. Second, standardized procedures should entail reporting CC, reviewing each unique case and choosing from the predefined disciplinary measures for CC cases. In addition, students should be provided with resources to improve their writing abilities. Finally, preventive mechanisms should include training faculty about detecting CC, minimizing it through changing assignments and encouraging innovative assessment mechanisms. Ultimately, fairness must be at the centre of uniform guidelines to deal with CC.

Information and awareness; where students and faculty get what they need to be aware

Most importantly, because CC is prevalent worldwide, institutions should not ignore this serious academic misconduct. First, institutions must raise awareness of CC among faculty, students and stakeholders (Thacker et al. 2020). Staff would feel more confident and supported by having written rules and regulations (Hamilton and Wolsky 2022). Clear policies on CC have also been reported by students as beneficial in improving academic misconduct (Tabsh et al. 2017). When students are instructed not to outsource their assignments, they might be alarmed that CC is widely recognised, that their institution and instructors are familiar with it, and that there is a considerable chance that academic institutions would deal with these cases seriously.

Clear policies and consequences for CC; centralized but flexible

Institutions must have clear policies and procedures in place designed explicitly for CC. These would include providing students with a comprehensive description of the phenomenon, how it is perceived in academia and how it will be handled if detected. Such policies and procedures should be included in the code of conduct manuals (Ahsan et al. 2022) as the official means of communicating CC descriptions and consequences to both faculty and students. The result would be one unified reference source for this information which will eliminate inconsistencies in faculty actions when dealing with CC.

With the burden of proof being a deciding factor in much of the participants' perspective of CC, it is crucial to have clear procedures for both proven CC and cases of suspected incidents. The procedure must withstand due diligence and defend innocence unless proven otherwise. It could also include a phased process starting with flagging, then warning the student, and review by an independent committee that listens to both sides. The last step would be education. However, the procedures must be able to adapt to the uniqueness of every CC case. We believe that the procedures to combat CC need not be punitive, but informative and developmental. Students must understand the inequities of purchasing outsourced papers.

Staff support and agency; a defined role to ensure their continued participation and support

Institutions must ensure that faculty members are afforded some degree of agency in the decision-making process. An example is trusting faculty members to recommend CC cases they report. When faculty members have agency and can contribute to the decision, the chances of reporting and reducing CC will increase. Finally, we recommend that institutions of higher education strike a balance between centralised policies for CC and affording case-by-case flexibility in their implementation.

Conclusions

Borrowing our students' phrase, 'the struggle is real', CC is replete with uncertainty, from its identification to its consequences. There is no right or wrong answer about how to deal with it. Without specific policies and transparency about its existence, the problem becomes even more troubling. Faculty members who rely on their moral compasses and take it upon themselves to deal with these instances should be applauded by their institutions and society for keeping the ship of equity and justice afloat in the classroom.

Abbreviations
CC   Contract Cheating
UAE   United Arab Emirates
TEQSA   Tertiary Education Quality and Standard Agency

Data availability
To protect the identities of participants, data will not be made publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the topic of study.

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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