

Moral compass or peer influence? Examining the drivers of academic honesty in higher education

Zaiton Osman^{1,*}, Ing Grace Phang¹, Izaan Aryan Abdul Jamil¹, Nofriska Krissanya², Titis Fatarina Mahfirah²

¹Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia

²Faculty of Economics and Business Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

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Abstract

Academic dishonesty continues to be a pressing issue in higher education, with ethical responsibility and social pressure playing key roles in shaping students' commitment to academic integrity. This study explores the influence of these factors on academic honesty among university students, utilizing partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze survey responses. Data were collected from 750 university students, with 95% of the responses deemed usable for analysis. The findings reveal that ethical responsibility serves as the strongest determinant of academic honesty, underscoring the pivotal role of intrinsic moral responsibility in ethical decision-making. In contrast, social pressure has a weaker yet statistically significant impact, suggesting that while peer influence affects students' ethical choices, it does not overshadow personal moral convictions. These results align with Rest's four-component model of moral behavior and social learning theory, reaffirming the combined influence of internal values and external factors on ethical conduct. The study underscores the importance of ethics education, faculty role modelling, and institutional policies in fostering a culture of academic integrity within universities. While positive peer influence can reinforce ethical behavior, interventions should primarily focus on strengthening students' internal moral responsibility.

JEL classifications: I21, A22, A29

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1. Introduction

Academic honesty is intrinsically linked to ethical behavior among students, as it reflects their moral integrity and ethical attitudes. The relationship between academic honesty and ethical behavior is multifaceted and complex, involving factors such as moral obligation and development, ethical climate, awareness, and the educational environment. Understanding this relationship is crucial for fostering a culture of integrity that extends from academic institutions to professional practices.

Many students engage in academic dishonesty due to a lack of understanding of what constitutes plagiarism and other unethical behaviors. This is often linked to inadequate training on academic integrity and ethical standards, leading to unintentional violations (Prashar et al., 2023) (Mukasa et al., 2023). Students often face significant pressure to perform well academically, which can lead to pragmatic decisions to cheat. This pressure can stem from personal ambitions, family expectations, or the competitive nature of educational environments (Bernal et al., 2024). While academic dishonesty is a significant concern, it is important to recognize that not all students engage in such behaviors intentionally or with malicious intent. Many students may lack the necessary understanding or resources to navigate complex ethical situations, highlighting the need for understanding and exploring the reasoning behind their actions is of crucial importance.

Social learning theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977) provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how students acquire, reinforce, and replicate ethical or unethical behaviors through social interactions, observations, and environmental influences. SLT posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. According to Bandura (1977), behavior is shaped by modeling, where individuals replicate the actions of role models, particularly when they perceive these behaviors as effective or rewarded. In the academic context, students observe and learn ethical or unethical behaviors from their peers, educators, and institutional norms. This study would like to examine the relationship between ethical responsibility, social pressure and academic honesty among students of higher learning institutions.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Social learning theory: a framework for understanding ethical behaviour

As Bandura's SLT (1977) explains, behavior is influenced by modeling, where individuals emulate the actions of role models, especially when these behaviors appear beneficial or are positively reinforced. In an academic setting, students learn ethical or dishonest conduct by observing their peers, educators, and institutional policies. Observational learning is a core component of Bandura's theory, where individuals learn behaviors by observing others. In academic settings, students may observe peers engaging in dishonest behaviors, such as cheating, and perceive these actions as acceptable or rewarding if they go unpunished or lead to success (Hendy et al., 2021; Kroher & Wolbring, 2015).

Faculty members play a crucial role in promoting academic honesty by modelling ethical behavior and creating an environment that discourages dishonesty. This includes using diverse assessment methods that emphasize learning over grades and providing clear guidelines on academic integrity (Chirikov et al., 2020; Piascik & Brazeau, 2010). Institutions can implement policies such as integrity codes and ethics committees to monitor and enforce academic integrity. However, the most effective strategy is to instil a desire for ethical behavior among students, emphasizing the long-term benefits of integrity in their professional lives (Piascik & Brazeau, 2010).

Social learning theory is a suitable framework for understanding academic honesty and dishonesty because it emphasizes the role of social influences and observational learning in

shaping behavior. SLT suggests that individuals are likely to imitate behaviors they observe in their peers, especially if those behaviors appear to be rewarded or go unpunished. Research has shown that perceived peer dishonesty is a strong predictor of self-reported academic dishonesty across different cultural contexts, such as in the United States, France, and Greece (Hendy et al., 2021). The normalization of dishonest behavior among peers can create an environment where academic dishonesty is seen as acceptable or even necessary to succeed, further reinforcing such behaviors through social learning mechanism (Bernal et al., 2024).

2.2. Ethical responsibility

Ethical attitudes significantly influence academic dishonesty. A study in Taiwan found that students with positive ethical attitudes were less likely to engage in academic dishonesty. This relationship was further strengthened in environments with a strong ethical climate, suggesting that both individual attitudes and institutional culture play critical roles in promoting academic honesty (Cheng et al., 2021).

In higher education, efforts to raise awareness about plagiarism and its ethical implications have been shown to improve students' ethical judgments and behaviors. This indicates that educational interventions can effectively shape students' ethical reasoning and reduce instances of unintentional plagiarism (Prashar et al., 2023). Ethical attitudes are negatively related to academic dishonesty, indicating that students with positive ethical attitudes are less likely to engage in dishonest behavior (Cheng et al., 2021). Subsequently, academic dishonesty is influenced by students' moral obligations and attitudes towards cheating. A strong sense of moral obligation can deter students from engaging in dishonest practices (Kamarudin et al., 2024).

The development of ethical responsibility through social learning is a complex process shaped by interactions with role models, including educators, family members, and institutional guidelines. This process is particularly significant in educational settings, where structured learning and exposure to diverse perspectives can foster ethical enrichment. Simultaneously, universities play a pivotal role in shaping students' ethical perspectives. Instruction in business ethics, for instance, has been shown to positively influence students' orientation towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) by integrating ethical instruction with family values and social vision (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). Additionally, civic engagement projects in business ethics courses enhance students' moral awareness and emotional intelligence, preparing them for socially responsible leadership roles (Marques, 2016). Moreover, role-playing exercises in educational settings, such as those used in engineering and computer ethics courses, help students understand complex ethical dilemmas and institutional frameworks for responsible action (Doorn & Kroesen, 2013; Zdravkova, 2014). These activities encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and develop a distinct understanding of ethical responsibility.

Family education significantly impacts students' ethical orientations. The values instilled by family members often serve as a foundation for ethical decision-making, complementing formal education in ethics (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2022). Social learning theory highlights the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping ethical behavior. The influence of capitalism and legal frameworks can lead to variations in ethical standards across different societies (Hanna et al., 2013). This underscores the importance of considering cultural diversity in ethical education.

While the development of ethical responsibility is significantly influenced by role models and institutional norms, it is also important to recognize the potential limitations and challenges in this process. For instance, the effectiveness of ethical education can vary based on the level of exposure to relevant content and the presence of supportive institutional frameworks (Alfirević et al., 2023). Additionally, the influence of capitalism and legal systems can lead to

ethical discrepancies across different cultural contexts (Hanna et al., 2013). These factors highlight the complexity of fostering ethical responsibility and the need for further empirical study approaches that consider diverse influences and challenges.

2.3. The role of observational learning in ethical decision-making

Students learn ethical behaviors through social learning, where they observe and imitate the actions of others. Social identity theory suggests that students align their behaviors with those of their peers and professors to maintain a positive social identity (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2012). Students tend to imitate specific ethical behaviors when observing professors and peers who emphasize integrity, as these role models significantly influence students' moral development and ethical decision-making. The presence of ethical role models in academic settings can foster a culture of integrity, encouraging students to adopt similar behaviors. This influence is observed across various domains, including honesty, cooperation, and academic integrity.

Students often conform to the honesty and cooperation levels demonstrated by their peers. Observing peers who act honestly and cooperatively can lead students to adopt similar behaviors, as these actions are perceived as social norms within the group. This conformity is a domain-general trait, meaning it applies across different moral domains, such as honesty and cooperation (Maidment & Narang, 2022). While positive behaviors can be imitated, negative peer influences, such as dishonesty, tend to have a stronger impact. This suggests that students are more likely to imitate unethical behaviors if they perceive them as prevalent among their peers (Maidment & Narang, 2022).

Professors' ethical beliefs and behaviors, as perceived by students, can indirectly influence students' ethical behaviors. Students are likely to imitate the integrity demonstrated by their professors, especially when these behaviors align with the students' own ethical beliefs (Pratt & McLaughlin, 1989). In addition, faculty members play a crucial role in modeling moral integrity and courage. By creating high-integrity classrooms and communities of learning, instructors can foster an environment where students are encouraged to develop and exhibit these traits (Eby et al., 2013).

The perception of peer cheating significantly influences students' own cheating behaviors. A meta-analysis found that students are more likely to engage in academic dishonesty if they believe their peers are doing the same. This effect is particularly strong in cultures with high power distance and collectivism (Zhao et al., 2022). While the influence of ethical role models is significant, it is important to recognize that students' ethical behaviors are also shaped by individual beliefs and external pressures. The effectiveness of role models may vary depending on the students' cultural background and the specific academic context (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009).

Institutional norms, such as integrity codes and policies, play a significant role in shaping individual ethical decision-making by establishing a framework of expected behaviors and consequences for violations. These norms influence individuals by promoting a culture of integrity and accountability, which can deter unethical behavior and encourage adherence to ethical standards. However, the effectiveness of these norms can vary based on how they are implemented and perceived within the organization.

Integrity codes and policies are designed to reduce academic dishonesty by setting clear expectations and consequences for unethical behavior. They provide a structural framework that can decrease the perception and prevalence of cheating when effectively implemented and communicated (Tatum & Schwartz, 2017). Subsequently, these systems typically rely on external penalties to encourage compliance, which may undermine the development of intrinsic motivation for ethical behavior. However, when aligned with psychological principles that promote internalization of moral norms, they can significantly shape individual character and

societal values (Cheung & Vaish, 2024). Evidence-based strategies suggest that integrity codes can be more effective when faculty actively discuss integrity expectations with students, thereby reinforcing the importance of ethical behavior (Tatum & Schwartz, 2017).

The ethical decision-making process is complex and influenced by various factors, including individual predispositions and the perceived seriousness of ethical issues. Training programs that enhance ethical awareness and decision-making skills can be beneficial, particularly for graduate students in research settings (Langlais & Bent, 2014). A supportive environment that encourages open discussions and intrinsic motivation can enhance the effectiveness of these norms. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations and challenges posed by cultural and institutional factors, which can influence the ethical landscape in diverse ways.

3. Literature review

3.1. Ethical responsibility as a predictor of academic honesty

Limited awareness of ethical nuances, particularly concerning plagiarism, is a significant factor leading to academic dishonesty. Educational institutions' efforts to enhance ethical awareness can improve students' ethical judgments and reduce unintentional plagiarism (Prashar et al., 2023). The lack of understanding of academic honesty policies and the convenience of internet sources contribute to plagiarism. Systematic reinforcement and education on academic integrity are necessary to address these issues (Mukasa et al., 2023).

Perceived peer cheating significantly influences students' own dishonest behaviors. This effect is stronger in cultures with high power distance and collectivism (Zhao et al., 2022). The ethical climate within educational institutions can moderate the relationship between ethical attitudes and academic dishonesty. A positive ethical climate strengthens the negative relationship between ethical attitudes and dishonest behaviors (Cheng et al., 2021).

It is essential to recognize the dynamic interaction between individual and contextual factors. While moral emotions are inherently personal, they are often influenced by external elements such as peer behavior and institutional policies. Effectively tackling academic dishonesty necessitates a comprehensive approach that accounts for both personal and environmental influences.

Cultural context can serve as a mitigating factor in ethical responsibility, as individuals may be influenced by socially accepted practices that conflict with broader ethical standards. This can lead to moral risk, where individuals unknowingly engage in unethical behavior due to cultural acceptance (Isaacs, 1997). In educational settings, cultural influences on ethical decisions are evident, with students' ethical beliefs shaped by factors such as family, peers, and educational courses. These influences can lead to differences in ethical judgments across cultural groups (Brymer et al., 2005). As societies evolve, so too do their cultural dimensions and ethical standards, necessitating ongoing research and adaptation of ethical practices. Additionally, the interplay between cultural acceptance and individual responsibility highlights the need for ethical education and awareness to mitigate the risks of culturally ingrained unethical behaviors.

3.2. Social pressure and academic honesty

Peer pressure can lead to academic underachievement, particularly in subjects like mathematics, where students may underperform to avoid social exclusion or negative labelling, such as being called "nerds" (Boehnke, 2008). The study found that girls are more likely to be victims of peer pressure, while boys are often the guilty party. This dynamic suggests that peer pressure can create a gendered impact on academic performance (Boehnke, 2008).

At elite universities, excellence norms can create external pressure to perform, which may lead to negative affect and stress. However, students who strongly identify with their university

are less likely to experience these negative effects, as they internalize these norms as personal standards (Scholl et al., 2019). This internalization of norms through social identification can mitigate the negative impact of social pressure, suggesting that a strong sense of belonging can buffer against stress and enhance academic performance (Scholl et al., 2019).

Elements of social capital, such as trust, social cohesion, and family support, have been shown to influence academic performance. However, non-social capital factors, like assignment submission timeliness, also play a significant role (Oranye et al., 2017). While social pressure can negatively impact academic performance through stress and peer dynamics, it can also motivate students when aligned with personal goals and social identity.

Peer pressure often manifests as social consensus, where individuals align their ethical perceptions with those of their peers. In the context of peer-to-peer file sharing, strong social consensus that file sharing is unethical increases the likelihood of individuals recognizing it as an ethical issue, although it may not directly alter their intentions to refrain from such behavior (Bateman et al., 2013). Peer influence can lead individuals to conform to the moral preferences of their peers. Studies show that observing the decisions of prosocial or antisocial peers can cause individuals to adjust their own moral preferences to align with those of their peers, highlighting the significant role of peer observation in moral decision-making (Yu et al., 2021). Peer pressure can also promote cooperative behavior by psychologically compelling individuals to act consistently with their partners. This pressure can reduce free-riding and enhance cooperation in social dilemmas, demonstrating the potential of peer pressure to resolve ethical conflicts through punishment mechanisms (Hu et al., 2021).

Institutional norms, encompassing societal values and organizational settings, significantly shape ethical decision-making. While peer influence tends to be more impactful than societal values, its effect depends on cultural dimensions like individualism and power distance (Westerman et al., 2007). Additionally, organizational environments play a role in ethical behavior, as power dynamics influence individuals' responses to social pressures (Pitesa & Thau, 2013). In educational settings, institutional structures can help minimize ethical dilemmas by providing support and professional development for individuals. Sharing dilemmas with trusted others and articulating personal ethics are strategies that institutions can promote to support ethical decision-making (Ehrich et al., 2011).

3.3. Impact of peer influence and indirect reinforcement

SLT theory posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing others, especially when those behaviors are rewarded. In the context of academic dishonesty, students who witness peers cheating and receiving rewards are more likely to mimic such behaviors, as they perceive them as advantageous (Ma et al., 2018). The presence of peers who engage in dishonest behavior can significantly impact an individual's own actions. A meta-analysis found a moderate correlation between students' own cheating and their perception of peer cheating, indicating that peer behavior is a strong predictor of academic dishonesty (Zhao et al., 2022). The reluctance to report cheating peers, due to fear of being labeled a "snitch" or damaging social relationships, further perpetuates dishonest behavior. This social taboo against reporting can create an environment where cheating is implicitly tolerated (Waltzer et al., 2024).

The context in which cheating occurs, such as the perceived rewards and societal norms, can either dampen or exacerbate dishonest behavior. Environments that clearly do not condone dishonesty and emphasize societal norms can reduce cheating (Isakov & Tripathy, 2017). Students are often influenced by the behavior of their peers, conforming to what they perceive as the norm. This tendency to conform can lead to increased dishonest behavior when peers are observed cheating (Maidment & Narang, 2022). Observing in-group members engaging in immoral behavior can lead to similar actions by the observer, as the in-group's behavior is often seen as more acceptable (Vives et al., 2021).

3.4. Social pressure as a predictor of academic dishonesty

Social dynamics play a crucial role in the decision to report academic dishonesty. Despite recognizing reporting as morally correct, students often refrain due to social concerns, such as fear of being labelled a "snitch" and potential damage to social relationships (Waltzer et al., 2024). The reluctance to report is particularly strong during adolescence, a period marked by heightened sensitivity to peer approval and social standing (Waltzer et al., 2024). Social learning theory suggests that students learn and internalize behaviors from their peers, with perceived peer dishonesty being a significant predictor of self-reported academic dishonesty across different cultural contexts (Hendy et al., 2021).

Cultural differences account for a substantial portion of the variance in academic dishonesty, indicating that students' behaviors are shaped by the broader cultural and social environment (Hendy et al., 2021). Group dynamics can exacerbate cheating behaviors, as seen in experiments where disclosure to peers increased cheating, contrary to the assumption that peer scrutiny would deter dishonesty (Battiston et al., 2021). This suggests that peer interactions can have adverse effects, potentially normalizing dishonest behavior within groups (Battiston et al., 2021).

The pressure to maintain academic performance and the perceived opportunity to cheat can also drive dishonest behavior, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when online exam cheating increased due to reduced oversight (Newton & Essex, 2023). Understanding these dynamics can inform strategies to promote academic integrity by addressing both peer influences and the structural conditions that facilitate cheating. Effective regulation and educational interventions within higher education institutions play a vital role in mitigating student misconduct. In the absence of such measures, the likelihood of unethical behavior may rise due to the influence of negative peer interactions (Gupta et al., 2024).

3.5. Interaction between ethical responsibility and social pressure

Ethical education plays a significant role in strengthening students' resistance to peer pressure. For instance, a study on Christian youth demonstrated that a strong understanding of ethics significantly influences decision-making and behavior, even amidst modernization challenges (Harianja et al., 2024). Programs focused on ethical philosophy have been shown to enhance academic integrity among adolescents, suggesting that exposure to moral reasoning can fortify students against peer pressure (Seider et al., 2013).

Personal values are critical in determining how students respond to peer pressure. A study using EEG to monitor adolescents' neural responses found that those with strong personal values exhibited frustration towards unethical behavior, indicating a resistance to conforming to such behaviors (Jain et al., 2022). The ethical behavior of peers significantly impacts students' ethical conduct, with those surrounded by ethical peers more likely to maintain their values (Joseph et al., 2010). On the other hand, study on adolescents' health risk behaviors found that those with a higher resistance to peer pressure were less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking and drinking (An et al., 2013).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study employs a quantitative research design utilizing partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the relationships between ethical responsibility, social pressure, and academic honesty among university students. Given the exploratory nature of the study, PLS-SEM was chosen due to its ability to handle complex relationships among latent variables and its suitability for predictive modeling (Hair et al., 2021). The analysis was

conducted using SmartPLS 4.0, which facilitated the assessment of both the measurement model (construct validity and reliability) and the structural model (hypothesis testing).

4.2. Participants and sampling

The study sample comprised 731 respondents of university students, recruited using convenience sampling. Participation was voluntary, and ethical approval was obtained from the faculty for data collection. A structured self-administered questionnaire was utilized to measure the constructs under investigation. All measurement items were adapted from validated scales in prior literature to ensure content validity. Responses were recorded using a Likert scale (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

The key constructs in this study included ethical responsibility, social pressure, and academic honesty. Ethical responsibility was assessed by capturing students' self-perceived obligation to uphold academic integrity, reflecting their internal commitment to ethical academic behavior. Social pressure was examined by evaluating the extent to which peer influence affected students' ethical decision-making, particularly in situations involving potential academic dishonesty. Lastly, academic honesty was measured through students' self-reported engagement in academically honest behavior, providing insight into their adherence to integrity principles in academic settings.

The survey instrument used in this study was adapted and adopted from Karkoulou, Sayegh, and Sayegh (2024), whose original research employed a qualitative approach to examine student perceptions of academic integrity and cheating. To ensure its applicability for quantitative research, the findings from Watts et al.'s study were systematically translated into a structured survey format. Before proceeding with full-scale data collection, the instrument underwent a cognitive interview process, wherein participants were asked to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and validity of the survey items. This step was crucial in refining the questionnaire to ensure that respondents could interpret the questions as intended, thereby enhancing the instrument's effectiveness in capturing reliable and valid data.

Data were collected via online surveys ensuring participant anonymity to reduce response bias. The questionnaire was disseminated over a period of 4 weeks starting from 1st December 2024 until 31st December 2024 and responses were screened for completeness and outliers before analysis.

4.3. Data analysis

4.3.1. Discriminant validity assessment

To assess potential multicollinearity among the predictor variables, a full collinearity test was conducted using the variance inflation factor (VIF). Multicollinearity occurs when independent variables are highly correlated, which can distort regression estimates and reduce the reliability of statistical inferences (Hair et al., 2017). Table 1 presents the VIF values for ethical responsibility and social pressure, with academic honesty as the dependent variable.

Table 1. Full collinearity testing

Variables	VIF
Ethical responsibility -> Academic honesty	1.004
Social pressure -> Academic honesty	1.004

The VIF values for both predictor variables (1.004) indicate a negligible level of multicollinearity. Following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2017) and Kock & Lynn (2012), a VIF value below 3.3 suggests that multicollinearity is not a concern, ensuring that the regression estimates remain stable and unbiased. Additionally, Diamantopoulos & Siguaw

(2006) suggest that VIF values close to 1.0 indicate that each predictor variable contributes unique explanatory power to the model.

The results confirm that ethical responsibility and social pressure exert independent influences on academic honesty, justifying their inclusion in further regression and structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses. The absence of multicollinearity strengthens the validity of the findings, supporting the theoretical premise that students' ethical responsibility and social pressure independently shape their engagement in academic honesty.

Subsequently, to assess the discriminant validity of the constructs, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio was examined, following the recommendations of Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015). The HTMT criterion is a more sensitive and rigorous test for discriminant validity compared to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, particularly in variance-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Discriminant validity is confirmed when HTMT values are below 0.85 (a strict threshold) or 0.90 (a more lenient threshold), ensuring that each construct is conceptually distinct.

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker criterion

Variables	Academic honesty	Ethical responsibility	Social pressure
Academic honesty			
Ethical responsibility	0.902		
Social pressure	0.588	0.107	

The results indicate that HTMT values for all construct pairs fall below the critical threshold of 0.85, confirming that academic honesty, ethical responsibility, and social pressure are distinct variables. Specifically, the HTMT value between ethical responsibility and academic honesty is relatively high, suggesting a strong relationship between the two variables. However, since it remains within the acceptable threshold, the constructs are still considered empirically distinguishable. Additionally, the HTMT values between social pressure and the other two variables are notably lower, reinforcing the assumption that social pressure is an independent influence on academic behavior rather than being conflated with intrinsic ethical responsibility.

Table 3. Measurement model assessment: factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted

Variables	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE
Academic dishonesty	AD1	0.696	0.748	0.600
	AD2	0.846		
Ethical responsibility	ER1	0.749	0.834	0.626
	ER2	0.841		
	ER3	0.781		
Social pressure	SP1	0.785	0.844	0.732
	SP2	0.921		

4.3.2. Measurement model assessment

The measurement model was assessed following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2021) to ensure reliability and validity. Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were examined to verify the adequacy of observed indicators. As recommended by Hair et al. (2017), factor loadings above 0.6 are considered acceptable, and all items in this study met this threshold. The highest loading was observed for SP2 (0.921) under Social Pressure, while the lowest was AD1 (0.696) under academic dishonesty. These

results confirm indicator reliability. Additionally, CR values ranged from 0.748 (academic dishonesty) to 0.844 (social pressure), confirming strong internal consistency. AVE values, which ranged from 0.600 to 0.732, demonstrated adequate convergent validity, indicating that all constructs captured at least 50% of the variance in their observed variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The findings establish a strong foundation for structural model evaluation.

4.3.3. Structural model assessment

To evaluate the hypothesized relationships between ethical responsibility, social pressure, and academic honesty, partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed. This approach is particularly suitable for complex models with latent constructs, as it does not assume normality and is robust in handling smaller sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019). The assessment involved examining path coefficients (β), standard deviations (STD DEV.), t-values, p-values, confidence intervals (PCI LL & PCI UL), and effect sizes (F^2). A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was used to ensure the reliability of the parameter estimates and to obtain bias-corrected percentile confidence intervals.

The results confirmed that both hypotheses (H1 and H2) were statistically supported, indicating that both ethical responsibility and social pressure significantly influence academic honesty, albeit to different extents. Specifically, ethical responsibility had the strongest impact on academic honesty ($\beta = 0.527$, $t = 14.467$, $p = 0.000$), with a large effect size ($F^2 = 0.419$). The 95% confidence interval (PCI LL = 0.449, PCI UL = 0.589) does not contain zero, reinforcing the robustness of this relationship. These findings suggest that students with a heightened sense of ethical responsibility are significantly more likely to engage in academically honest behavior, consistent with theoretical frameworks such as Rest's four-component model of moral behavior (1986) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

	Hypothesis relationship	Std. beta	Std. dev.	t-value	p-value	PCI LL	PCI UL	F^2	Results
H1	Ethical responsibility -> Academic honesty	0.527	0.036	14.467	0.000	0.449	0.589	0.419	Supported
H2	Social pressure -> Academic honesty	0.232	0.038	6.035	0.000	0.152	0.304	0.081	Supported

Note: We use 95% confidence interval with a bootstrapping of 5,000

In contrast, social pressure exhibited a weaker but still statistically significant effect on academic honesty ($\beta = 0.232$, $t = 6.035$, $p = 0.000$), with a small effect size ($F^2 = 0.081$). The confidence interval (PCI LL = 0.152, PCI UL = 0.304) also does not contain zero, confirming the statistical significance of the effect. This finding implies that peer influence plays a role in shaping students' academic honesty, though it is not as dominant as individual ethical responsibility. The relatively small effect size suggests that while students may experience peer pressure regarding academic integrity, their personal ethical beliefs tend to be more influential in guiding their behavior. This result aligns with prior research indicating that peer norms and external pressures can reinforce ethical decision-making but are secondary to intrinsic moral convictions (Lincoln & Holmes, 2011).

Overall, the structural model demonstrates strong predictive validity, with both ethical responsibility and social pressure accounting for significant variance in academic honesty. These findings provide empirical support for hypothesized relationships and suggest that universities should prioritize ethics education and institutional policies that reinforce intrinsic moral responsibility while also fostering a positive peer influence to sustain a culture of academic integrity.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the relationships between ethical responsibility, social pressure, and academic honesty among university students. The results indicate that ethical responsibility is the strongest predictor of academic honesty, while social pressure has a moderate but significant influence. These findings suggest that students' ethical decision-making is primarily driven by their intrinsic moral values rather than external peer influences, highlighting the importance of fostering ethical responsibility in academic settings.

The strong effect of ethical responsibility on academic honesty ($\beta = 0.527$, $F^2 = 0.419$) aligns with Rest's four-component model of moral behavior (1986), which emphasizes that ethical decision-making is shaped by moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. This suggests that students with a well-developed sense of moral responsibility are significantly more likely to engage in academic honesty, even in situations where unethical behavior is normalized. Additionally, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) supports this finding, as students may internalize ethical values from their educational environment, including faculty behavior, institutional policies, and personal experiences. Conversely, the moderate relationship between social pressure and academic honesty ($\beta = 0.232$, $F^2 = 0.081$) indicates that while peer influence plays a role, it is not the primary determinant of ethical behavior. This aligns with previous research suggesting that social norms can reinforce or weaken ethical conduct, but they are often secondary to personal moral beliefs.

The practical implications of these findings underscore the need for universities to prioritize ethics education and institutional policies that promote integrity. Since ethical responsibility has the strongest effect on academic honesty, academic institutions should implement ethics training programs, honor codes, and moral reasoning exercises to reinforce students' intrinsic commitment to honesty. Faculty members play a crucial role in shaping ethical behavior by modeling integrity, maintaining transparent assessment methods, and actively discouraging dishonest practices. Furthermore, while the influence of social pressure is less pronounced, universities should still leverage positive peer influence through mentorship programs, integrity campaigns, and student-led ethical committees to reinforce academic integrity.

Despite the study's contributions, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research design is cross-sectional, capturing students' perceptions at a single point in time. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how ethical responsibility and social pressure evolve over a student's academic journey. Additionally, the study's findings may be context-specific and may not be generalizable across different cultural and institutional settings. Cross-cultural research could provide deeper insights into how ethical responsibility and peer influences differ based on societal norms and educational systems. Moreover, while ethical responsibility and social pressure were examined, other potential influences on academic honesty, such as institutional trust, digital learning environments, and technological advancements (e.g., AI-assisted plagiarism detection), warrant further investigation. Future studies could also incorporate experimental or intervention-based approaches to assess the effectiveness of ethics training programs and institutional integrity initiatives in reducing academic dishonesty.

In conclusion, this study highlights the dominant role of ethical responsibility in fostering academic honesty, while also recognizing the moderate impact of social pressure. The findings emphasize the need for universities to implement comprehensive ethics education, enforce institutional integrity policies, and promote positive peer influences to cultivate a culture of academic integrity. By strengthening students' moral awareness and ethical decision-making,

academic institutions can mitigate dishonest behaviors and foster an environment where academic integrity is upheld as a fundamental value.

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