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Original Article

AI AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE, CHEATING IN EXAMS, AND THEIR RELATION WITH ADHD SYMPTOMS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Ayas Uddin [a], Imad Ud Din [b], & Faheem Uddin [c]

[a] BS Psychology Student, Department of Psychological Studies, University of Swat, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: ayas555isd@gmail.com
[b] BS Psychology Student, Department of Psychological Studies, University of Swat, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: Imaduddin319@gmail.com
[c] Coordinator, Department of Psychological Studies, University of Swat, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: faheem@uswat.edu.pk

*Correspondence to: Mr. Ayas Uddin, BS Psychology Student, Department of Psychological Studies, University of Swat, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: ayas555isd@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

To know how cheating behavior is correlated with ADHD symptoms, AI and social media use, enrollment motivation, and cognitive failures. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used to measure AI and social media use, cheating in exams, ADHD symptoms, and the enrollment type of university students by implementing self-report questionnaires to measure natural occurring of these variables. A convenient and snowball sampling of 110 university students aged from 19 to 28 years (M = 22.30, SD = 1.73) were given the self-report questionnaires. Consequently, findings revealed that statistically, there was no significant difference in academic dishonesty among students enrolled by personal choice and those enrolled due to chance (external pressure). Neither social media addiction, daily social media use, nor daily AI tool usage showed a significant relationship with academic cheating. Similarly, the relationship among academic dishonesty and cognitive failures was positive but not statistically significant. However, a slight positive correlation was found between social media addiction and ADHD symptoms (ρ = .425, $p < .001$), showing that students with higher levels of problematic social media use tended to report greater ADHD symptom severity. These findings provide valuable empirical evidence for psychologists, educators and policymakers aiming to foster academic honesty and integrity in educational institutions and highlight the need for universities to promote responsible and ethical technology use, strengthen academic integrity policies, and provide mental health interventions that address problematic digital behavior and attentional difficulties among students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities and other academic institutions are facing growing challenges worldwide. These challenges include the dramatic rise in the use of AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools and the distressing use of social media platforms, academic cheating or dishonesty, and an increasing incidence of cognitive difficulties including attention deficits, hyper activities, and cognitive failures among the university students. Each of these variables gained scholarly attention of researchers and theorists. The relationship among them remained underexplored in Asia specifically in Pakistan based Universities. Literature review in this paper synthesizes the existing empirical and scientific researches and foundational writings relevant to these four core hypotheses of this study. The four hypotheses are;

H1: Students enrolled by chance (parental or peer pressure) exhibit significantly higher cheating behavior than students enrolled by personal choice. H2: Students with excessive AI and social media use exhibit significantly greater cheating behavior than students with low or moderate use. H3: Social media addiction is significantly positively correlated with ADHD symptoms. H4: Students with higher cheating behavior exhibit significantly greater cognitive failures. The literature review is structured in several sections which begins with defining the terms such as academic cheating, ADHD, cognitive failure, and enrollment by chance vs chance etc. Then it examines the core causes of cheating thoroughly, it then goes to AI and social media use as predictors of cheating and cognitive failures. Lastly, the review concludes with identifying gaps in the existing literature for this study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Cheating: Its definition and its prevalence globally and in Pakistani Higher Education Institutes

As Devis defines cheating as deceiving others by defrauding, trickery, misleading and fooling, but when it comes to academic cheating or academic dishonesty, it refers to any act committed by student that mislead, deceive or fool the instructor leading that the submitted work of student was the student's own work (Davis et al., 2011). Globally speaking, Don McCabe conducted a study from the year 2002 to 2015, which found that 65% to 75% of undergraduates admit to cheating one time at least, 19% to 20% admit to cheat at least five times, and 62% admit to cheat in assignments once at least (Academic Integrity Initiatives, n.d.). According to the website known as plagiarism-detector.com, the 2025 statistics showed 68% of undergraduates admitted to cheating, 39% copied from internet without citing, 11% of papers showed >25% similarity, and 17% of students used AI for assignments (Plagiarism Statistics, n.d.). Likewise, academic cheating and academic dishonesty are widespread problems in the educational institutes of Pakistan. Research showed that up to 83.4 % of undergraduates in Pakistan admit to engaging in some of academic cheating (Ali et al., n.d.). Another survey study conducted by Anwar Ul Haq and his colleges found that various Pakistani Universities show, over 50% to 80 % of students admit to cheating to some extent (Anwar Ul Haq et al., 2020). And Approximately 58% of college students in some regions reported using unfair means or cheating specifically to get higher grades for university admission (Abro et al., 2022).

Causes and Motivation of Cheating or Academic Dishonesty

The core reasons behind these cheating behaviors in Pakistani students were found; to get higher grades in order to meet high expectations of parents and society, to overcome high academic anxiety and fear of failing, a large number of students view cheating as a "normal part of life" and copy from peers without feeling guilt, and overcrowded classrooms and a strict focus on memorization (rote learning) over critical thinking push some students to cheat simply to pass exams (Anwar Ul Haq et al., 2020). Losing scholarships and students with severe perfectionist traits may view anything less than a perfect score as unacceptable, see others do it and succeed, work overload with poor time management and study skills are also some of the reasons to cheating (Emily, 2025). Moreover, excuse making, failure to manage demands of student life, circumstances that support academic dishonesty, self-justification behaviors are also reasons to cheating and academic dishonesty (Academic Integrity, n.d.).

A rich body of scholarship has identified the determinants of academic cheating at three levels of analysis: individual, social, and systemic. At the individual level, low academic self-efficacy, fear of failure, procrastination, and diminished moral obligation are consistently among the strongest predictors. At the social level, peer norms represent one of the most robustly documented predictors of individual cheating behavior. At the systemic level, academic pressure environments characterized by high-stakes examinations, unrealistic workloads, and inadequate student support services create the structural conditions under which cheating becomes a rational survival strategy. When confronted with scenarios such as potential parental punishment or the risk of missing academic opportunities due to exam failure, students may resort to cheating as an immediate risk-avoidance response (Yin et al., 2025). A consistent theme across Pakistani cheating research is the role of fear of failure and the social consequences of poor academic performance in driving dishonest behavior. In a collectivist culture where family expectations are tied closely to educational achievement and where the social cost of academic failure extends beyond the individual student to the family unit, the motivational architecture for cheating is

particularly intense. This cultural context informs the study's focus on parental pressure as a driver of both enrollment type and cheating behavior.

Enrollment type (Chance vs Choice) and Cheating

A conceptually significant but empirically underexplored variable in the academic cheating literature is the nature of students' motivation for enrolling in their program of study. The present study distinguishes between students enrolled by genuine personal choice and students enrolled due to parental expectations or peer influence. Self-Determination Theory provides the principal theoretical framework for understanding this distinction. SDT posits that autonomous motivation, driven by personal interest and values, produces greater psychological engagement, persistence, and ethical behavior, while controlled motivation (which is driven by external pressures and contingent rewards) undermines intrinsic interest and increases the probability of negative academic outcomes, including dishonesty (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A fundamental mismatch between the students' personal objectives and the academic pathways they are pursuing constitutes a source of negative strain and ultimately leads to deviant coping behaviors, such as academic dishonesty and cheating in exams thus students rationalize these negative behaviors for achieving the externally imposed goals, for instance, a degree, parental or societal approval. A quasi-experimental design study found that high pressure situations significantly increased the likelihood of cheating behaviors in students and students who adopt performance goals rather than mastery goals also exhibit greater cheating prevalence (Yin et al., 2025). Despite the clear theoretical foundation for a relationship between enrollment motivation and cheating behavior, this specific variable has received almost no direct empirical attention in the existing literature. Most studies treat enrollment status as a demographic control rather than a substantive predictor, and a very little is known about comparative studies on cheating rates between choice-enrolled and pressure-enrolled university students. The present study addresses this gap, representing a meaningful original contribution to the academic integrity literature.

AI Tools and Social Media Use and Academic Cheating

The recent advancements in AI and the very common use of social apps have become revolutional things in the contemporary academic systems (Shahzad et al., 2024). A research study conducted in three schools of USA found that with the coming of advanced AI chatbots, the students' cheating behaviors remained relatively unchanging. However, some variations in reported behaviors differed depending on the type of academic cheating (Lee et al., 2024). Surprisingly, another study conducted by Shahzad and colleges in China found that that AI and social media have a good impact on academic functioning and mental well-being among students at university level. Further, smart learning aids as a positive arbitrating variable, expanding the beneficial effects of AI and social media on both academic performance and mental well-being (Shahzad et al., 2024). But cross-culturally, this gap is still not explored in Pakistani higher education institutes.

Social Media use, ADHD Symptoms, Cognitive Failures, and Academic Cheating

One of the most significant and rapidly growing areas of inquiries in psychology concerns the correlation between social media use and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptomology. ADHD refers to "A behavioral syndrome characterized by the persistent presence of six or more symptoms involving (a) inattention (e.g., failure to complete tasks or listen carefully, difficulty in concentrating, distractibility) or (b) impulsivity or hyperactivity (e.g., blurting out answers; impatience; restlessness; fidgeting; difficulty in organizing work, taking turns, or staying seated; excessive talking; running about; climbing on things) (APA, 2026). The symptoms, which impair social, academic, or occupational functioning, start to appear before the age of 7 and are observed in more than one setting" (APA, 2026). Globally, ADHD affects about 5% to 7% of children and 2.5% to nearly 5% of adults (Wachsman, Study: Rise in ADHD Diagnoses, 2025). A cross-sectional study found that watching reels, stories, and other shorts and the number of hours spent on social media during the study period are independent risk elements for ADHD (Hassan et al., 2025). Another study further confirms that screen addiction (excessive use of internet, video games, and social media apps) very badly affects attention span, and interest in reading books (Uddin et al., 2024). Over time, this extraneous load trains attentional systems toward rapid stimulus switching and novelty-seeking while simultaneously degrading the capacity for sustained, effortful attention required for academic performance.

Furthermore, the over-reliance on AI tools to generate answers , construct arguments or solve a problem on their behalf, this over-reliance on AI tools bypass the human natural effortful cognitive processes such as; retrieval practices, encoding, and generative processing, which all are very necessary for long term memory formation (Gerlich, 2025). The clinical implications of these findings align directly with the constructs of memory lapses, attentional failures, and action slips that will be measured in this research study. The correlation between ADHD Symptoms and Academic cheating widely represents the academic integrity literature, but still, this is one of the less studied areas in Pakistan. Anderman and colleagues (2022), in a study of 855 adolescents found that students with significant attention problems were considerably more likely to engage in academic cheating than their neurotypically functioning peers. The researchers noted that a large proportion of students with attentional difficulties do not receive formal diagnoses or academic accommodations, making them particularly vulnerable to the convergence of academic underperformance and the associated temptation to cheat (Anderman et al., 2022). In conclusion, the review reveals a coherent but little-studied empirical ground in which excessive AI and social platforms use, the thwarting of academic autonomy, and the resulting cognitive and motivational deficits converge to elevate the probability of academic dishonesty.

Research Objectives

1. To determine the prevalence and extent of academic cheating among university students;
2. To examine whether enrollment type (choice vs. pressure) predicts cheating behavior;
3. To test the relationship between social media addiction and ADHD symptoms severity;
4. To investigate whether cheating behavior is associated with cognitive failures and ADHD symptoms.

Hypotheses

H1: Students enrolled by chance (parental or peer pressure) exhibit higher cheating behavior than students enrolled by personal choice.

H2: Students with excessive AI and social media use exhibit greater cheating behavior than students with low or moderate use.

H3: Social media addiction is positively correlated with ADHD symptoms.

H4: Students with higher cheating behavior exhibit greater cognitive failures.

III. METHOD

Participants

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Cross-sectional design permits the immediate measurement of multiple variables within a single data repository point. Participants were 110 university students (N = 110; males n = 82, 74.5%; females n = 28, 25.5%), ages varied from 19 to 28 years (M = 22.30, SD = 1.73). Mean CGPA was 3.42 (SD = 0.45). Participants represented 24 academic departments including Psychology, Computer Science, Biotechnology, Economics, English, and other fields. Enrollment motivation scores indicated that 98 participants (89.1%) were classified as choice-enrolled and 12 (10.9%) were classified as pressure-enrolled, parental expectations, peer influence.

Measures

[I] Demographic Information: Relevant background information were obtained through demographic questionnaire based on age, gender, academic department, CGPA, daily social media use (in hours), daily AI tools use (in hours), and enrollment motivation was assessed using binary question by asking whether students had enrolled in their present academic field by their own choice or due to parental or peer pressure. [II] Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS): Social media addiction was evaluated utilizing Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale a 6-item self-report battery using a 5-point Likert scale as 1 = Very rarely to 5 = Very often (Andreassen et al., 2017). The BSMAS assesses the six central elements of behavioral addiction applied to social media: mood modification, salience, withdrawal, relapse, and conflict. Total scores range from 6 to 30, with scores equal or greater than 19 considered symptomatic of problematic use. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .630. [III] Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS-v1.1): ADHD symptom severity was evaluated utilizing the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale, Version 1.1 (Kessler et al., 2005). It is an 18-item self-report checklist created in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO). Items are graded on a 5-point scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always). The

instrument yields two subscales: Inattention (Subscale A, 12 items; items 1-4, 7-12) and Hyperactivity/Impulsivity (Subscale B, 6 items; items 5-6, 13-18). Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .720 for Subscale A (Inattention) and .588 for Subscale B (Hyperactivity). [IV] Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ): Participants cognitive failures were measured applying the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ) (Broadbent et al., 1982). This scale is a 25-item measure asking respondents how frequently they experience lapses in memory, attention, and action during daily activities over the past six months. Questions are marked on a 5-point scale ranges from 0 = Never to 4 = Very often while the total scores vary from 0 to 100. The CFQ showed very good internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's alpha = .899). [V] Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS): Academic cheating behavior was assessed using an adapted version of the Academic Dishonesty Scale (McCabe & Trevino, 1993), expanded with items from the Academic Dishonesty Instrument (Iyer & Eastman, 2008) and modified by Faradiena (Faradiena, 2019). The 16-item scale measures the frequency of cheating behaviors across four dimensions: direct exam cheating, collaboration-based dishonesty, plagiarism-related behaviors, and smartphone use during exams. Items are marked on a 4-point frequency scale. The ADS demonstrated outstanding internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's alpha = .900).

Procedure

Data were collected using a Google Forms questionnaire distributed among university students between June and July 2026. Participation was entirely voluntary, and anonymity was assured. The questionnaire included an informed consent statement at the beginning, and participants were unrestricted to withdraw at any time. All items were presented in English language. All statistical analyses were computed using SPSS 32.0. The Internal consistency for each scale was assessed by Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all continuous variables. Independent Samples T-Test was computed for H1, Pearson correlation was computed to test H2, and Spearman's rho was computed for H3, and H4 accordingly.

IV.RESULTS

Data Screening and Missing Data

A total of 116 questionnaire responses were received. Six responses were identified as invalid or incomplete thus excluded, yielding a final analytic N of 110.

H1: Enrollment Type and Academic Dishonesty

Table I: Independent Sample t test for Enrollments

	Choice Enrolled (98)		Pressure Enrolled (12)			
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	t	p
Academic Dishonesty	30.47	11.49	32.42	9.98	-.56	.57

An independent-samples *t*-test was computed to compare academic dishonesty scores between students who chose their university program based on their own interest and those who reported their enrollment because of parental or peer pressure. There was no statistically significant difference in academic dishonesty amongst the two groups, $t(108) = -0.56$, $p = .576$. Students in Choice Enrolled Students (M = 30.47, SD = 11.49) reported similar levels of academic dishonesty to Pressure Enrolled Students (M = 32.42, SD = 9.99).

H2: Social Media Addiction and Academic Dishonesty

Table II: Descriptive Statistica and Correlation

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.
1. Academic Dishonesty	30.68	11.31	-	.082
2. Social Media Addiction	16.50	4.15		-

A Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between social media addiction and academic dishonesty. The analysis disclosed an exceptionally weak positive correlation, which was not statistically significant,

r(108) = .082, *p* = .393. Therefore, the hypothesis that higher social media addiction is linked with greater academic dishonesty was not followed.

Students with Higher daily AI Use Exhibit Significantly Greater Academic Cheating Behavior

Table III: Descriptive Statistica and Correlation

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.
1. Daily hours of AI tool use	5.027	2.43	-	.154
2. Academic Dishonesty	30.68	11.31		-

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

A Spearman correlation was computed to examine the relationship between daily AI tool usage (in hours) and academic dishonesty. The analysis showed a substantially weak positive correlation, which was not statistically significant, r = .154, *p* = .108, *N* = 110. Thus, students who showed greater daily AI use did not report significantly higher levels of academic dishonesty. Therefore, this hypothesis was not supported.

H3: Social media addiction is significantly positively correlated with ADHD symptoms.

Table IV: Descriptive Statistica and Correlation

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.
1. Social Media Use	16.50	4.155	-	.425*
2. ADHD symptoms	48.49	9.074		-

**p*< .001

Again, Spearman correlation was directed in order to study the relationship between social media addiction and ADHD symptoms, consequently, analysis revealed a moderate, statistically significant positive correlation between social media use and ADHD symptoms, r = .425, p < .001, N = 110. These results specify that students with higher levels of social media addiction tended to report greater ADHD symptom severity. Therefore, third hypothesis was supported.

H4: Students with higher cheating behavior exhibit significantly greater cognitive failures.

Table V: Descriptive Statistica and Correlation

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1.	2.
1. Academic Dishonesty	30.68	11.314	-	.136
2. Cognitive Failures	39.06	16.579		-

To examine the relationship between academic dishonesty and cognitive failures, a Spearman rank-order correlation was conducted. After conduction, the analysis revealed a weak positive correlation, which was statistically insignificant, ρ = .136, p = .156, N = 110. Thus, students with higher levels of academic dishonesty or cheating behaviors did not report significantly greater cognitive failures. Eventually, hypothesis was not supported.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship among social media and AI use, academic cheating behavior, ADHD symptoms, and cognitive failures in a sample of 110 university students, with specific attention to differences by enrollment motivation type. After statistical analysis, the finding revealed the following results. The first one hypothesis initially assumed that students not enrolled genuinely would cheat more than choice enrolled students, grounded in self-determination theory and general strain theory. After statistical analysis, this hypothesis was found statistically insignificant difference in academic dishonesty between the two groups. Students in Group 1 (choice enrolled students) reported similar levels of academic dishonesty to students in Group 2 (pressure enrolled students). This finding, while unexpected, is theoretically interpretable through several aspects. First, it is

important to acknowledge that the enrollment scale in this study used a binary like scoring system with limited psychometric quality, which may have led to misclassification of students. The 'Choice' group was considerably larger than the 'Pressure' group, which was rising questions about representativeness and statistical power for sub group comparisons. Thus, this interpretation requires empirical testing with larger samples and a more psychometrically sound enrollment motivation measure.

The second hypothesis was also not followed. The analysis revealed a very weak positive correlation. Henceforth, the hypothesis that higher social media use/addiction is accompanying with greater academic dishonesty was not proved. Subsequently, a Spearman correlation was computed to assess the correlation between daily AI tool usage and academic dishonesty. The analysis uncovered a very weak positive correlation, which was statistically insignificant. These findings diverge from the theoretical prediction derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior and from the popular assumption that excessive/heavy users of social media apps are more susceptible to academic shortcuts. The non-considerable relationship between social media addiction, AI use and cheating, despite a trend in the expected direction, suggests that AI and social media use may affect cheating indirectly - perhaps through cognitive impairment rather than through direct attitudinal normalization of cheating. This interpretation is consistent with the mediation pathway proposed in Cognitive Load Theory: social media increases extraneous cognitive load, which impairs memory and attention, which in turn may increase cheating risk under examination pressure. The direct path between AI or social media use and cheating intent may be weaker than theories grounded in attitudinal processes suggest. Future studies should test mediation models using structural equation modeling.

The third hypothesis, Social Media Addiction and ADHD Symptoms, was substantially supported. The analysis uncovered statistically significant positive association between social media addiction/use (BSMAS Total scores) and ADHD symptoms (ASRS Total scores). These findings indicate that students with over use of social media apps tended to report greater ADHD symptom severity. It is consistent with cross-sectional evidence from Tanta University showing that daily hours on social media were independent risk factors for ADHD screening positivity (Lissak, 2018). Lastly, the fourth hypothesis, Academic Dishonesty, and Cognitive Failures, was not statistically supported. The analysis revealed a weak positive correlation. Therefore, students with higher levels of academic dishonesty did not report significantly greater cognitive failures. Thus, H4 was not supported. Although previous research has linked executive functioning deficits to poor academic performance, cognitive failures may not directly influence students' decisions to engage in cheating. Instead, academic dishonesty may be well clarified by motivational, ethical, and contextual factors than by routine cognitive functioning.

Limitations and Implications

Quite a few shortcomings should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design put a stop to causal inferences regarding the observed associations. Second, convenience and snowball sampling of 110 participants from an only university limits the generalizability of the outcomes to other universities or institutes. Third, all measures depend on on self-report questionnaires, which are subject to social desirability bias and inaccurate self-perception. Finally, AI usage was measured only by self-reported daily hours rather than by the specific purposes or quality of AI use, which was limiting the interpretation of AI-related findings. The findings have several practical implications for universities and mental health professionals. First, institutions should continue promoting academic integrity through clear policies, ethical education, and assessment methods that reduce opportunities for cheating. Second, because problematic social media use was significantly correlated with ADHD symptoms, universities should consider implementing psychoeducational programs addressing healthy digital habits, attention management, and self-regulation strategies. Third, AI technologies should not be viewed solely as tools for academic dishonesty. Instead, universities should establish clear guidelines regarding appropriate and ethical AI use while helping students develop AI literacy and responsible academic practices.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research study examined the relationships among the use of AI and social media, cheating in exams or academic dishonesty, enrollment type, ADHD symptoms, and cognitive failures in university students. Findings of

the present study revealed that enrollment type, social media use, and daily AI use were not significantly correlated with academic dishonesty, academic cheating was also not significantly associated with cognitive failures. However, a moderate positive relationship was found between social media addiction and ADHD symptoms. Overall, these results highlighted the importance of responsible AI use, academic integrity, and attention management strategies in university settings.

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