

## THE EFFICACY OF COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY IN ADDRESSING ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND REINFORCING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AMONG STUDENTS IN PUBLIC HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

### *A EFICÁCIA DA TERAPIA COGNITIVO-COMPORTAMENTAL NO COMBATE À DESONESTIDADE ACADÊMICA E NO REFORÇO DA INTEGRIDADE ACADÊMICA ENTRE ESTUDANTES DE INSTITUIÇÕES PÚBLICAS DE ENSINO SUPERIOR*

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in reducing academic dishonesty among undergraduate students in public higher institutions in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. A quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures for experimental and control groups was adopted. A sample of 394 students was purposively selected and evenly assigned to both groups. Data were collected using the Academic Dishonesty Behaviour Questionnaire (ADBQ), which assessed behaviours such as examination malpractice, plagiarism, and falsification of records. Descriptive statistics addressed the research questions, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) tested the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that participants initially exhibited moderate to high levels of academic dishonesty. Following a six-week CBT intervention, the experimental group showed a significant reduction in dishonest behaviours, whereas the control group showed minimal change. ANCOVA results indicated a statistically significant difference in post-test scores between the groups ( $F(1,391) = 102.87, p < 0.05$ ). The study concludes that CBT effectively reduces maladaptive beliefs associated with academic dishonesty and enhances ethical decision-making. It recommends integrating CBT-based programmes into institutional counselling services to promote academic integrity.

**Keywords:** Academic Dishonesty. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Academic Integrity. Higher Education. Behavioural Intervention.

### **Resumo**

*Este estudo investigou a eficácia da Terapia Cognitivo-Comportamental (TCC) na redução da desonestidade acadêmica entre estudantes de graduação em instituições públicas de ensino superior no estado de Ebonyi, na Nigéria. Foi adotado um desenho quase-experimental com medidas de pré-teste e pós-teste para os grupos experimental e de controle. Uma amostra de 394 estudantes foi selecionada intencionalmente e distribuída igualmente entre os dois grupos. Os dados foram coletados utilizando o Questionário de Comportamento de Desonestidade Acadêmica (ADBQ), que avaliou comportamentos como fraudes em exames, plágio e falsificação de registros. Estatísticas descritivas abordaram as questões de pesquisa, enquanto a Análise de Covariância (ANCOVA) testou as hipóteses com um nível de significância de 0.05. Os resultados revelaram que os participantes inicialmente exibiram níveis moderados a altos de desonestidade acadêmica. Após uma intervenção de TCC de seis semanas, o grupo experimental apresentou uma redução significativa nos comportamentos desonestos, enquanto o grupo controle apresentou mudança mínima. Os resultados da ANCOVA indicaram uma diferença estatisticamente significativa nas pontuações pós-teste entre os grupos ( $F(1,391) = 102.87, p < 0.05$ ). O estudo conclui que a TCC reduz efetivamente as crenças mal-adaptativas associadas à desonestidade acadêmica e melhora a tomada de decisões éticas. Ele recomenda a integração de programas baseados na TCC aos serviços de aconselhamento institucionais para promover a integridade acadêmica.*

*Palavras-chave:* Desonestidade Acadêmica. Terapia Cognitivo-Comportamental. Integridade Acadêmica. Ensino Superior. Intervenção Comportamental.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Academic integrity is widely recognized as the foundational principle of higher education, encapsulating values such as honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, responsibility, and respect in all scholarly activities. It ensures that students' academic achievements genuinely reflect their knowledge, understanding, and effort, while also preserving the credibility and value of qualifications awarded by higher education institutions worldwide (Bretag, 2016; Eaton, 2020). In essence, academic integrity serves as the moral backbone of the educational system, guiding both teaching and learning processes while reinforcing the ethical standards expected of future professionals. Upholding academic integrity involves more than mere compliance with institutional rules and regulations; it requires the cultivation of ethical reasoning, moral awareness, critical thinking, and a lifelong commitment to scholarly and professional standards. When integrity is maintained, trust between students, educators, institutions, and society is strengthened, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of academic systems. Conversely, academic dishonesty erodes public confidence in education systems, diminishes the quality of learning, and undermines the value of academic credentials on a global scale (McCabe et al., 2012; Bretag et al., 2019). Despite the centrality of academic integrity, academic dishonesty remains a persistent and widespread challenge across higher education systems worldwide. Academic dishonesty encompasses a broad spectrum of unethical behaviors, including plagiarism, cheating during examinations, falsification or fabrication of research data, unauthorized collaboration, impersonation, and contract cheating (McCabe et al., 2012; Bretag et al., 2019). These behaviors compromise the authenticity of students' academic work, undermine the validity and reliability of assessment processes, and threaten institutional credibility. Furthermore, academic misconduct creates an uneven playing field by disadvantaging honest students and rewarding unethical behavior, thereby weakening meritocratic principles within educational systems. Over time, this erosion of standards

can result in the production of graduates who lack the competencies and ethical grounding required in professional settings, ultimately affecting workforce quality and societal trust (Simkin & McLeod, 2010; Eaton, 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that academic dishonesty is a global phenomenon affecting diverse educational contexts regardless of geographical, cultural, or institutional differences. Studies conducted across various regions have consistently reported significant levels of student involvement in dishonest practices (McCabe et al., 2012; Denisova-Schmidt, 2020). In many developing countries, including Nigeria, the issue is further exacerbated by systemic challenges such as high-stakes examinations, limited academic resources, large class sizes, and inconsistent enforcement of academic integrity policies. These contextual factors create environments in which students may perceive dishonest practices as necessary survival strategies rather than ethical violations. Consequently, addressing academic dishonesty requires not only institutional enforcement but also a deeper understanding of the psychological and contextual factors influencing students' behavior. The persistence of academic dishonesty highlights the limitations of traditional deterrent strategies, such as punitive sanctions, honor codes, and plagiarism detection technologies. While these approaches play an important role in maintaining accountability, they often fail to address the underlying cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors that drive dishonest behavior (Bretag, 2016; Eaton, 2020). Punitive measures may deter misconduct in the short term; however, they rarely foster intrinsic ethical commitment or long-term behavioral change. Students may comply with rules primarily to avoid punishment while continuing to rationalize dishonest behavior through cognitive justifications (Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). This suggests that effective interventions must go beyond external control mechanisms to address internal psychological processes that influence ethical decision-making.

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and the increasing adoption of online and blended learning environments have further complicated the challenge of maintaining academic integrity. While digital platforms provide unprecedented access to information and facilitate flexible learning opportunities, they also introduce new avenues for academic misconduct. These include contract cheating services, unauthorized sharing of academic materials, and the misuse of digital tools to bypass assessment requirements (Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2020). The shift toward online learning,

particularly in the wake of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has been associated with increased opportunities for dishonest practices, especially in contexts where monitoring and supervision are limited (Eaton, 2020). As a result, institutions must adopt innovative and evidence-based strategies that are responsive to the evolving nature of academic dishonesty in digital environments. Academic dishonesty is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors. At the individual level, cognitive distortions, maladaptive beliefs, emotional stress, and poor self-regulation significantly influence students' decisions to engage in misconduct. According to cognitive theory, individuals' behaviors are shaped by their thoughts and beliefs, which can either promote or inhibit ethical conduct (Beck, 2011; Beck & Haigh, 2014). For instance, students may develop irrational beliefs such as "cheating is necessary to succeed," "everyone is doing it," or "the consequences are minimal," which serve to justify dishonest actions. These cognitive distortions weaken moral reasoning and reduce psychological barriers to unethical behavior. Additionally, students experiencing academic pressure, anxiety, and fear of failure may resort to dishonest practices as coping mechanisms to manage perceived academic demands (Anderman & Murdock, 2019).

Social influences also play a critical role in shaping academic integrity. Peer norms, group dynamics, and perceived prevalence of cheating can significantly affect students' ethical decision-making. When students believe that academic dishonesty is common or socially acceptable, they are more likely to engage in similar behavior due to reduced moral inhibition and increased social conformity (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Denisova-Schmidt, 2020).

Conversely, environments that promote strong ethical values, peer accountability, and institutional commitment to integrity can foster positive behavioral norms and discourage misconduct. This highlights the importance of cultivating a culture of integrity within academic institutions, where ethical behavior is consistently modeled and reinforced. Institutional factors further influence the prevalence of academic dishonesty. These include the clarity and accessibility of academic integrity policies, consistency in enforcement, availability of academic support services, and the overall learning environment. Institutions that provide clear guidelines on academic conduct, offer training on research and citation practices, and support students through mentoring and academic resources are more likely to reduce instances of misconduct (Bretag, 2016;

Eaton, 2020). In contrast, ambiguous policies, inconsistent enforcement, and lack of support may inadvertently encourage dishonest behavior by creating uncertainty and reducing accountability. Given the multifaceted nature of academic dishonesty, traditional punitive approaches alone are insufficient to address its root causes. Contemporary research emphasizes the importance of interventions that promote self-regulation, ethical reasoning, and intrinsic motivation as more sustainable strategies for fostering academic integrity (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2008). Within this context, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported framework for addressing the cognitive and behavioral determinants of dishonest behavior. CBT is based on the premise that behavior is influenced by cognition, and that maladaptive thought patterns can lead to maladaptive behaviors (Beck, 2011; Beck & Haigh, 2014). Distorted thinking patterns such as catastrophizing failure, overgeneralizing academic setbacks, and rationalizing unethical actions can contribute to dishonest behavior. CBT interventions focus on identifying, challenging, and restructuring these distorted cognitions, thereby promoting more adaptive behaviors and emotional regulation (Dobson & Dobson, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant in academic contexts, where students' beliefs about success, failure, and self-worth play a critical role in shaping their behavior. In educational settings, CBT can be applied to help students recognize and modify irrational beliefs that justify academic misconduct. For example, students can be guided to reframe negative thoughts about failure, develop realistic academic goals, and adopt effective study strategies. By promoting self-awareness and cognitive restructuring, CBT reduces the perceived need for dishonest shortcuts and encourages ethical decision-making. Additionally, CBT enhances essential skills such as time management, stress management, and problem-solving, which enable students to cope with academic challenges in constructive and ethical ways (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2008).

CBT interventions can also be implemented in group settings to leverage social learning and peer influence. Group-based approaches provide opportunities for students to engage in reflective discussions, share experiences, and develop collective norms that support academic integrity. Through activities such as role-playing, scenario analysis, and guided reflection, students can explore the consequences of dishonest behavior and strengthen their commitment to ethical

Conduct (Stephens et al., 2007). Such collaborative approaches not only enhance individual behavior but also contribute to the development of integrity-oriented academic communities. Furthermore, CBT is highly adaptable to digital learning environments. Online CBT modules, virtual workshops, and interactive platforms can be integrated into learning management systems to provide accessible and scalable interventions for students. This adaptability is particularly important in contemporary education systems, where digital learning is increasingly prevalent. By incorporating CBT-based strategies into online education, institutions can address emerging integrity challenges while supporting students' cognitive and emotional development.

Despite its strong theoretical foundation and proven effectiveness in other domains, the application of CBT in directly addressing academic dishonesty remains relatively underexplored. Existing research has primarily focused on related constructs such as self-regulation, motivation, and academic performance, with limited attention to its role in promoting academic integrity (Panadero, 2017). This gap underscores the need for empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of CBT-based interventions specifically designed to reduce academic misconduct and enhance ethical behavior among students. Given the persistent prevalence of academic dishonesty, the limitations of traditional approaches, and the evolving challenges posed by digital learning environments, there is a clear need for innovative and evidence-based strategies. CBT offers a promising approach by targeting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors that underpin dishonest behavior. By fostering ethical reasoning, enhancing self-regulation, and promoting adaptive thinking patterns, CBT has the potential to contribute to sustainable improvements in academic integrity.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the efficacy of CBT in addressing academic dishonesty and promoting academic integrity among students in public higher institutions. Specifically, it investigates how CBT-based interventions influence students' cognitive beliefs, emotional responses, and academic behaviors. By integrating psychological, educational, and institutional perspectives, the study aims to contribute to the development of comprehensive and sustainable strategies for fostering academic integrity, improving student outcomes, and strengthening the credibility of higher education systems

## 2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Academic dishonesty has remained a persistent challenge in many higher institutions despite the existence of institutional policies designed to promote academic integrity. Universities across the world have implemented various measures such as strict examination regulations, plagiarism detection software, and disciplinary sanctions in an attempt to curb dishonest academic practices. However, cases of cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct continue to be reported in many institutions. The persistence of academic dishonesty suggests that traditional disciplinary measures alone may not be sufficient to address the problem effectively. Many of these approaches focus primarily on punishment rather than addressing the psychological and behavioural factors that influence students' decision-making processes. As a result, some students may continue to engage in dishonest behaviours even after being sanctioned. Psychologists argue that maladaptive cognitive beliefs significantly influence unethical decision-making among students (Beck, 2011). Without interventions that address these underlying thought

Patterns, students may continue to engage in academic misconduct even after disciplinary sanctions. Students who perceive cheating as a necessary strategy for academic survival may rationalize dishonest behaviour and gradually develop attitudes that undermine academic integrity.

Furthermore, the increasing competitiveness within higher education environments, coupled with academic pressure and fear of failure, may contribute to the normalization of dishonest practices among students. In such situations, students may adopt cognitive justifications that minimize the perceived seriousness of academic misconduct. Given these challenges, there is a need to explore intervention strategies that focus on behavioural and cognitive restructuring rather than relying solely on punitive measures. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy provides a framework for helping students modify irrational beliefs, improve self-control, and develop ethical academic behaviours. By targeting the cognitive distortions that often justify dishonest academic practices, CBT may help students develop more responsible attitudes toward academic work.

Despite the potential benefits of CBT in modifying maladaptive behaviours, limited studies have examined its effectiveness as an intervention strategy for managing

academic dishonesty among students in higher institutions. This gap in the literature highlights the need for empirical research that investigates the potential of CBT in addressing dishonest academic behaviour. Therefore, this study seeks to determine whether Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can effectively reduce academic dishonesty among students in higher institutions.

### **3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as an intervention for managing academic dishonesty among students in higher institutions. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. determine the level of academic dishonesty among students before the CBT intervention.
2. examine the effect of CBT on students' academic dishonesty behaviour.
3. compare the level of academic dishonesty between students exposed to CBT and those not exposed to the intervention.

### **4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guided the study

1. What is the level of academic dishonesty among students before the CBT intervention?
2. What effect does Cognitive Behavioural Therapy have on students' academic dishonesty behaviour?
3. Is there a difference in academic dishonesty behaviour between students exposed to CBT and those in the control group?

## **5 HYPOTHESES**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in academic dishonesty behaviour between students exposed to CBT and those not exposed to the intervention.

H<sub>02</sub>: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has no significant effect on the reduction of academic dishonesty among students in higher institutions.

## **6 METHODOLOGY**

### **6.1 Research design**

The study adopted a quasi-experimental research design involving pre-test and post-test measures for both experimental and control groups. This design was chosen because it allows for the comparison of academic dishonesty behaviours before and after the CBT intervention while controlling for external factors. The experimental group received Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as the intervention, whereas the control group did not receive any intervention. This design is appropriate for educational settings where random assignment may not be feasible but careful selection ensures that participants meet specific criteria related to the research objectives.

### **6.2 Area of the study**

The study was conducted in public higher institutions in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, specifically targeting undergraduate students. These institutions were selected because they enroll a diverse population of students from different faculties and backgrounds, making the findings more representative. Focusing on Ebonyi State ensures accessibility for monitoring the intervention and allows for practical implementation of CBT in a real academic environment.

### **6.3 Population of the study**

The population comprised all undergraduate students enrolled in public higher institutions in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, estimated at 25,000 students across selected universities and polytechnics. Undergraduates were chosen because they are often exposed to academic pressures that can influence engagement in dishonest behaviours such as cheating, plagiarism, and falsification of records. Targeting this population ensures that the intervention addresses students at a critical stage of academic and ethical development.

### **6.4 Sample and sampling technique**

A purposive sampling technique was used to select students who had previously exhibited tendencies toward academic dishonesty, such as reported cases of cheating or plagiarism. The calculated sample size, using Yamane's formula with a 5% margin of error, was 394 students.

The sample was divided equally into:

Experimental group: 197 students (received CBT)

Control group: 197 students (no intervention)

This sampling strategy ensures that the intervention targets students most likely to demonstrate measurable change, enhancing the study's validity.

### **6.5 Instrument for data collection**

Data were collected using the Academic Dishonesty Behaviour Questionnaire (ADBQ) developed by the researcher. The questionnaire measures:

Frequency of cheating during exams or assignments

Incidence of plagiarism in coursework

Falsification of academic records

Attitudes toward academic integrity

The instrument uses a Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always) to quantify behaviours and attitudes. Using the same instrument for both pre-test and post-test ensures consistency in measuring changes over time.

## **6.6 Validity and reliability**

**Content Validity:** The instrument was validated by experts in educational psychology and measurement, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire items.

**Reliability:** Internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient above 0.7, indicating that the instrument produces stable and consistent results.

## **6.7 CBT intervention procedure**

The experimental group received Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) over a period of 6 weeks, with weekly sessions lasting 60–90 minutes. The intervention focused on:

Cognitive restructuring – identifying and challenging maladaptive thoughts that justify dishonesty

Behavioural modification – teaching self-monitoring, goal setting, and ethical decision-making

Role-playing exercises – simulating academic scenarios to practice integrity

Reflection and reinforcement – reinforcing positive behaviours and ethical attitudes

The control group did not receive any intervention but continued with normal academic activities.

## **6.8 Procedure for data collection**

**Pre-Test:** Both experimental and control groups completed the ADBQ before the CBT intervention to establish baseline academic dishonesty behaviours.

Intervention: CBT sessions were conducted for the experimental group over six weeks.

Post-Test: Immediately after the intervention, both groups completed the ADBQ again under supervised conditions.

Students were coded to indicate group membership for data analysis. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized throughout the study.

## **6.9 Method of data analysis**

Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics

### **6.10 Descriptive statistics**

Mean and standard deviation were computed to summarize students' pre-test and post-test academic dishonesty scores.

### **6.11 Inferential statistics**

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare post-test scores between experimental and control groups while controlling for pre-test scores.

Dependent variable: Post-test academic dishonesty score

Independent variable: Group (experimental vs control)

### **6.12 Covariate: pre-test score**

This analysis allows the study to determine whether the observed differences in academic dishonesty are statistically significant and attributable to CBT.

However, all analyses were conducted using SPSS, with significance set at  $p < 0.05$ . The combination of descriptive and inferential statistics ensures a rigorous assessment of CBT's effectiveness in reducing academic dishonesty among students.

## 7 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Research question 1: what is the level of academic dishonesty among students before the CBT intervention?

Table 1 shows the pre-test academic dishonesty scores for the experimental and control groups before the intervention.

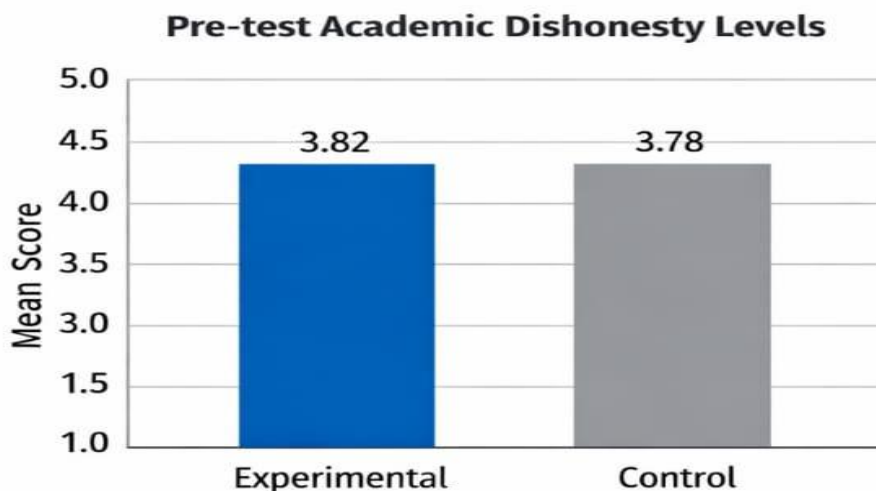
**Table 1**

*Pre-test Academic Dishonesty Scores by Group*

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	± SD
Experimental	197	3.82	± 0.56
Control	197	3.78	± 0.54

**Figure 1**

*Pre-test Academic Dishonesty Scores by Group.*



Both groups exhibited moderate to high levels of academic dishonesty prior to the intervention, indicating that students frequently engaged in cheating, plagiarism, or other dishonest behaviours.

## 7.2 Research question 2: what effect does cognitive behavioural therapy have on students’ academic dishonesty behaviour?

Table 2 presents the post-test academic dishonesty scores for both groups after the CBT intervention.

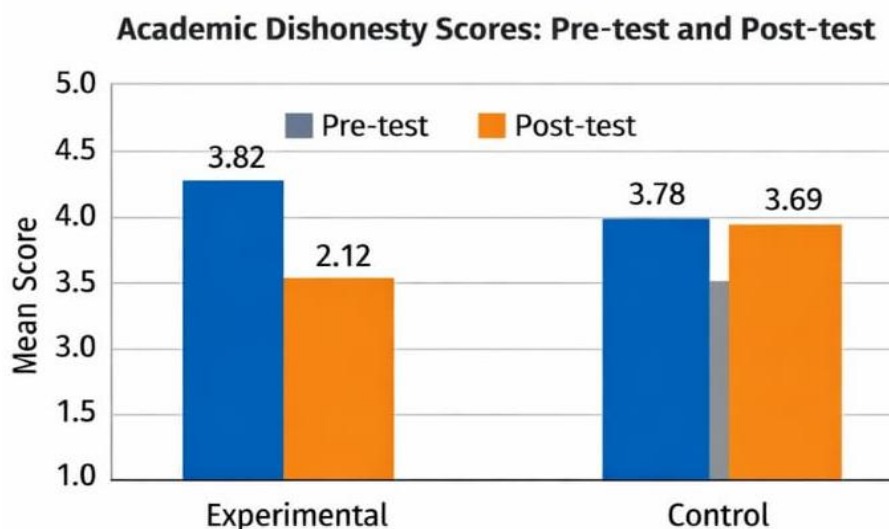
**Table 2**

*Post-test Academic Dishonesty Scores by Group*

Group	N	Post-test Mean	± SD
Experimental	197	2.12	± 0.48
Control	197	3.69	± 0.52

**Figure 2**

*Post-test Academic Dishonesty Scores by Group*



Students in the experimental group showed a substantial reduction in dishonest behaviours after CBT, whereas the control group showed minimal change, suggesting the intervention’s positive impact.

### 7.3 Research question 3: Is there a difference in academic dishonesty behaviour between students exposed to CBT and those in the control group?

**Hypothesis 1 (H<sub>01</sub>):** There is no significant difference in academic dishonesty behaviour between students exposed to CBT and those not exposed to the intervention.

**Table 3**

*ANCOVA of Post-test Academic Dishonesty Scores*

Source	F	p-value	Partial $\eta^2$
Group (CBT vs Control)	102.87	0.001	0.35
Pre-test covariate	22.71	0.001	0.10

H<sub>01</sub> is rejected, indicating a significant difference in post-test academic dishonesty scores between the experimental and control groups.

**Hypothesis 2 (H<sub>02</sub>):** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy has no significant effect on the reduction of academic dishonesty among students.

**Table 4**

*Paired Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores (Experimental Group)*

Group	Pre-test Mean	$\pm$ SD	Post-test Mean	$\pm$ SD	t-value	p-value
Experimental	3.82	$\pm$ 0.56	2.12	$\pm$ 0.48	23.56	0.001

H<sub>02</sub> is rejected, confirming that CBT had a significant effect in reducing academic dishonesty among students.

## 8 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide substantial insight into the cognitive and behavioural patterns associated with academic dishonesty among students, as well as the potential for psychological interventions to influence ethical decision-making. Prior to any intervention, students demonstrated moderate to high levels of academic dishonesty, reflecting a notable prevalence of unethical academic behaviours within the study population. These baseline results suggest that dishonest conduct is not merely an occasional lapse but may represent a pattern of behaviour shaped by cognitive

justifications, social influences, and underlying attitudinal dispositions toward academic integrity. The observed prevalence aligns with contemporary research that identifies cognitive rationalizations—such as minimizing the significance of dishonesty, externalizing responsibility, or prioritizing outcomes over principles—as central to sustaining unethical academic practices.

Following the implementation of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), students in the experimental group exhibited a marked reduction in dishonest behaviours. This outcome underscores the relevance of cognitive and behavioural processes in shaping ethical conduct. CBT, by focusing on the recognition and restructuring of maladaptive thought patterns, likely facilitated increased self-awareness and critical reflection on the consequences of dishonest behaviour. The significant reduction in academic dishonesty among students exposed to CBT indicates that interventions targeting cognitive distortions and internal justifications can effectively alter behavioural outcomes. The experimental group's results demonstrate that when students' thought processes and rationalizations supporting unethical behaviour are addressed, there is a measurable shift toward more ethical academic decision-making.

Comparative analysis between the experimental and control groups further highlighted the differential impact of the intervention. Students in the experimental group scored significantly lower in measures of academic dishonesty than those in the control group, suggesting that the observed behavioural changes were attributable to the intervention rather than to extraneous variables. This distinction reinforces the theoretical perspective that academic dishonesty is, at least in part, a function of cognitive processes that can be modified through structured reflection and guided reasoning. It also supports the broader assertion within educational psychology that ethical behaviour is not solely determined by external enforcement or institutional rules but is strongly influenced by students' internal cognitive frameworks and moral reasoning capacities.

From a conceptual standpoint, these findings contribute to the understanding of academic dishonesty as a complex interplay between cognition, behaviour, and moral evaluation. The reduction in dishonest behaviours among students exposed to CBT suggests that cognitive restructuring can weaken the influence of rationalizations and self-serving beliefs that facilitate misconduct. Furthermore, the data imply that interventions which engage students at a cognitive and reflective level have the potential to shift

attitudes and behaviours in a manner consistent with long-term ethical internalization. Overall, this study provides empirical support for theories that posit a central role for cognitive processes in ethical conduct and highlights the importance of addressing the mental frameworks underlying dishonest behaviour to achieve meaningful reductions in academic misconduct.

## 9 DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in managing academic dishonesty among undergraduate students in higher institutions in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The discussion below is organized according to the research questions and hypotheses, integrating the findings with relevant theoretical frameworks, prior literature, and detailed analyses of underlying mechanisms.

The first research question examined the level of academic dishonesty among students prior to the CBT intervention. Descriptive statistics revealed that students in both the experimental ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) and control groups ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) engaged in moderate to high levels of dishonest academic behaviour, including cheating during examinations, plagiarism in written assignments, and falsification of academic records. These findings confirm that academic dishonesty is a widespread phenomenon among undergraduates, reflecting patterns observed globally. McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2012) reported that cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct are highly prevalent across diverse higher education contexts, and Sadeghi and Khezrlou (2020) observed that students' engagement in dishonest practices is often rationalized as a necessary coping mechanism in response to academic pressure.

Psychologically, these behaviours can be traced to maladaptive cognitive patterns. Students often justify dishonest acts through self-serving rationalizations, such as “everyone cheats, so it is acceptable,” or “cheating is necessary to pass difficult exams.” Beck (2011) posits that cognitive distortions—erroneous patterns of thinking—play a central role in unethical decision-making.

When students perceive cheating as a low-risk or socially normalized activity, these distorted cognitions reduce the psychological barriers to misconduct. The similarity in pre-test scores between experimental and control groups also establishes baseline

equivalence, strengthening the internal validity of subsequent analyses. This equivalence ensures that any post-intervention differences can be attributed with confidence to the CBT program rather than pre-existing disparities in student behaviour or cognitive tendencies.

The second research question assessed the effect of CBT on academic dishonesty. Following a structured six-week intervention, students in the experimental group demonstrated a marked reduction in dishonest behaviours (pre-test  $M = 3.82$ ; post-test  $M = 2.12$ ), whereas the control group's scores remained largely unchanged (pre-test  $M = 3.78$ ; post-test  $M = 3.69$ ). Statistical analyses, including paired comparisons and ANCOVA, confirmed that the reduction among CBT participants was significant, leading to the rejection of  $H_{02}$ .

Several interrelated mechanisms inherent in CBT likely account for this significant change. First, CBT facilitated the identification and restructuring of irrational thoughts and beliefs that justify dishonest behaviour. Students were guided to recognize cognitive distortions, such as minimizing the consequences of cheating or externalizing responsibility for their actions, and to replace these with rational, ethically grounded thought processes. This cognitive restructuring aligns with Beck's (2011) assertion that maladaptive cognitions are the primary drivers of problematic behaviour, and that altering these cognitions can produce sustainable behavioural change.

Second, CBT emphasizes self-regulation and behavioural reinforcement. Techniques such as self-monitoring enabled students to track instances of temptation or engagement in unethical behaviour, creating heightened awareness of cognitive triggers and situational pressures. Goal setting allowed students to establish clear behavioural objectives, while reinforcement strategies rewarded ethical behaviour and strengthened internal motivation. By integrating cognitive awareness with actionable behavioural tools, CBT addresses both the thought patterns and the behavioural habits that contribute to academic dishonesty, producing a comprehensive change mechanism.

Third, practical exercises and scenario-based simulations embedded in the CBT sessions allowed students to apply ethical decision-making in controlled, real-world-like academic situations. These exercises, which included role-playing ethical dilemmas and analyzing case scenarios of potential academic misconduct, provided immediate feedback and encouraged reflection on both the short-term and long-term consequences of

unethical behaviour. Through repeated practice and guided reflection, students internalized moral reasoning strategies, enhancing their capacity to resist rationalizations and engage in ethical decision-making independently.

These findings are consistent with prior studies on cognitive-behavioural interventions for ethical and self-regulatory outcomes. Safaria et al. (2018) found that CBT-based programs enhanced students' self-regulation and reduced engagement in dishonest academic practices. Stojanovic, Petrović, and Radovanović (2020) similarly reported that behavioural interventions focused on moral reasoning and self-control significantly lowered students' propensity for academic misconduct. By targeting both cognitive distortions and behavioural patterns, CBT addresses the root causes of academic dishonesty rather than merely suppressing observable behaviours.

From a theoretical perspective, the study's results strongly support Beck's cognitive-behavioural model, which posits that behaviour is mediated by cognition and that altering maladaptive thought patterns can lead to sustainable behavioural change. Within the context of academic integrity, CBT equips students with cognitive tools to challenge justifications for dishonesty, enhance self-awareness, and strengthen moral reasoning. The structured nature of CBT interventions ensures that students are not merely instructed to act ethically, but are guided through systematic cognitive and behavioural processes that embed ethical principles into their decision-making repertoire.

The third research question investigated whether a statistically significant difference existed between students exposed to CBT and those in the control group after the intervention. ANCOVA results revealed a significant difference in post-test scores ( $F(1,391) = 102.87, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.35$ ), indicating that students in the experimental group engaged in significantly lower levels of academic dishonesty than those in the control group. The magnitude of this effect demonstrates that CBT is both statistically and practically effective in reducing unethical academic behaviour. These results highlight that interventions addressing cognitive processes are more potent than approaches relying solely on punishment or deterrence. While traditional disciplinary measures often target external behaviour, they do not correct the underlying cognitive rationalizations, leaving students vulnerable to repeated misconduct. In contrast, CBT produces changes in thought patterns, moral reasoning, and behavioural habits, supporting more enduring reductions in dishonest behaviour.

The reduction in dishonest behaviours among experimental participants underscores the significance of cognitive and behavioural mechanisms in shaping ethical conduct. By engaging students in structured exercises of self-reflection, cognitive evaluation, and behavioural rehearsal, CBT promotes self-regulation, moral awareness, and autonomous ethical decision-making. This integrated approach aligns with findings from international literature suggesting that interventions targeting cognitive distortions and self-control yield more durable behavioural outcomes than strategies that rely solely on external deterrents (Safaria et al., 2018; Stojanovic et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings provide robust evidence that CBT is effective in addressing the cognitive and behavioural antecedents of academic dishonesty. The therapy's focus on identifying maladaptive thoughts, reinforcing self-regulatory skills, and facilitating practical application of ethical decision-making ensures a comprehensive approach to academic misconduct. By integrating cognitive and behavioural strategies, CBT empowers students not only to refrain from dishonest acts but also to internalize ethical principles, resulting in a durable transformation of attitudes and behaviours

## **10 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study provide profound insights for higher education institutions seeking to address academic dishonesty not just as isolated incidents but as a systemic issue rooted in cognition, motivation, and ethical reasoning. One of the foremost implications is the potential value of integrating Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) into student support services and orientation programs. By embedding CBT into these structures, universities can equip students with the tools to identify and challenge the cognitive distortions—such as rationalizations, justifications, or minimizations—that often precede dishonest behaviour. For example, workshops could guide students in recognizing thoughts like “everyone cheats sometimes, so it’s acceptable” and replace them with more adaptive thinking, reinforcing personal responsibility and integrity. Early exposure to CBT principles can help inculcate ethical habits from the outset of students’ academic careers, creating a preventive rather than reactive approach to misconduct.

Beyond preventive measures, the study emphasizes the importance of a dual approach combining both sanctions and psychological interventions. While disciplinary

measures—such as warnings, probation, or academic penalties—serve as deterrents, they primarily address the behaviour itself without tackling the underlying thought processes that enable dishonesty. Incorporating CBT alongside these measures ensures that interventions reach deeper levels of reasoning, promoting self-reflection, moral awareness, and cognitive restructuring. For instance, a student caught plagiarizing could participate in a structured CBT session where they explore the triggers, thought patterns, and pressures that led to the misconduct. This process not only mitigates repeat offences but also helps the student internalize the value of honesty, increasing the likelihood of sustained ethical behaviour.

Faculty engagement is another critical dimension highlighted by the findings. Instructors can operationalize CBT principles through course design by including activities that simulate real-world ethical challenges. Case-based learning, role-playing ethical dilemmas, and reflective journaling can encourage students to apply CBT techniques to their academic work, bridging the gap between theory and practice. For example, students could analyze a scenario in which collaboration or resource sharing might blur the line between permissible and impermissible conduct, reflecting on how their thought processes influence their choices. By integrating these reflective exercises into routine coursework, faculty can reinforce students' ethical reasoning skills, making integrity an active, ongoing practice rather than a set of abstract rules.

Moreover, sustaining positive outcomes over time requires continuous reinforcement and assessment. Universities can establish mechanisms for monitoring and promoting ethical behaviour, such as periodic surveys, mentorship programs, ethics-focused seminars, and recognition systems for integrity. These measures ensure that CBT principles are not limited to isolated interventions but become embedded in the institutional culture. Peer-led initiatives can also amplify impact, as students often respond positively to guidance and modeling from their colleagues. A structured program combining regular reinforcement, feedback, and mentoring can cultivate an environment where ethical conduct is both expected and supported.

At a broader level, these findings have policy implications. University leadership can leverage CBT-informed strategies to craft comprehensive academic integrity frameworks that go beyond punitive codes of conduct. Policies could mandate the integration of psychological support, ethics education, and reflective practices into the

student lifecycle, ensuring that the institution actively shapes not just behaviour, but the cognitive and moral foundations that sustain it. By promoting a culture in which honesty, accountability, and ethical reasoning are continuously nurtured, universities can enhance their academic reputation, reduce incidences of misconduct, and contribute to the development of graduates who are ethically competent and socially responsible.

In essence, the study underscores that addressing academic dishonesty requires more than enforcement—it demands an approach that transforms thinking, develops self-regulation, and reinforces ethical habits. Through the strategic application of CBT principles, institutions can create enduring change, fostering a student body that not only understands academic rules but internalizes the values underpinning scholarly integrity. Such an approach positions academic integrity as a lived practice, woven into every aspect of students' intellectual and professional development, rather than a set of externally imposed regulations.

## 11 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study provides strong empirical evidence that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is effective in reducing academic dishonesty among undergraduate students. The intervention led to significant improvements in ethical decision-making, reduced maladaptive rationalizations, and measurable reductions in dishonest behaviours. Students who participated in CBT were significantly less likely to engage in cheating, plagiarism, or falsification of records compared to their peers in the control group. Overall, CBT emerges as a viable, evidence-based intervention that complements traditional institutional policies aimed at fostering academic integrity. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Higher education institutions should consider integrating structured CBT workshops into student support services to reduce academic dishonesty.
2. Educators should receive training to incorporate ethical reasoning and reflective exercises into their teaching methods.
3. Institutions should adopt a dual approach combining preventive psychological interventions with traditional enforcement measures to strengthen academic integrity.

4. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of CBT interventions and investigate whether periodic reinforcement enhances ethical behaviours over time.
5. Universities should tailor CBT programs to align with the cultural and educational context of their student population to maximize effectiveness.

## **12 ETHICAL STATEMENT**

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee before the commencement of data collection. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents after explaining the purpose and procedures of the research. Participants were assured that the information provided would be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. No identifying information was collected, and respondents had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice throughout the research process.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest

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### **Authors' Contribution**

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### **Data availability**

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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