Media psychologists at the University of Cologne have studied how students' individual needs, conceptions and reasons relate to cheating behavior in online exams.

Online exams have become a more common type of exam at
universities, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. They are advantageous because they save time and offer flexibility. However, cheating attempts present a big challenge for lecturers. This is why universities have been working on ways to thwart cheating in online exams by putting organizational and technical measures into place.

According to the psychologists Dr. Marco Rüth and Professor Dr. Dr. Kai Kaspar from the Faculty of Human Sciences at the University of Cologne, cheating attempts can also signal that psychological aspects and deeper-seated problems which affect students' learning behavior and well-being are not given enough attention. This is where their current study comes into play.

The study is titled "Cheating behavior in online exams: On the role of needs, conceptions, and reasons of university students" and has been published in the Journal of Computer Assisted Learning.

The results of the study are based on an anonymous online survey in which 339 students from different universities in Germany took part. The extensive study consisted of three parts.

The first part of the study revealed that it is less likely for students to cheat when lecturers demonstrate why the exam content is necessary in their future professional practice instead of solely pointing out the value of good grades for their future careers. Cheating behavior is also less likely to take place when the exam tasks are presented as authentically as possible and are linked to future job requirements.

Questions testing knowledge that check if course content has been learned by heart, however, encourage cheating attempts. In addition, cheating attempts become less likely when the lecturers offer the students detailed feedback on the exam results instead of only announcing grades.
In the second part of the study the research team examined how students' perceptions of online exams are related to their previous cheating attempts and their intentions to cheat in future online exams. The results have shown that three considerations are of particular importance.

The more negative students' perception of online exams was, e.g. that online exams impair learning, the more intense was their reported cheating behavior in past online exams.

Furthermore, students' cheating behavior and cheating intention was higher the stronger the impression of the students was that online exams stimulate collaboration and mutual support among students. Conversely, students' cheating behavior and cheating intention was lower the stronger the opinion of the students was that online exams can contribute to the improvement of teaching.

The third part of the study examined students' main personal reasons for and against cheating in online exams. The three main reasons cited for cheating behavior were the significance of grades, the perception that exams were unfair and the belief that there is a marginal risk of being caught.

Among the most common reasons against cheating were moral norms and values such as honesty as well as the fear of being caught and the subsequent consequences like being expelled.

Overall, the results of the study show that psychological factors—such as individual needs, conceptions and reasons—play an important role in the cheating behavior in online exams.

"A stronger consideration of these factors when designing courses and exam formats can reduce cheating behavior and, in the long term, positively influence students' learning behavior and their well-being."
said Dr. Marco Rüth, corresponding author of the study. "This could eventually strengthen the acceptance of online exams as a format at universities."


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