

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY IN WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS – THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL AND MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

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This study focused on the role of contextual factors and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, as well as achievement goals as motivational determinants of academic dishonesty in written assignments among higher education students. We aimed to explore the potential mediating role of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals in the relationship between contextual factors and academic dishonesty in written assignments. 414 students from three social and humanities faculties of the University of Zagreb participated in the study. Students filled out the questionnaire which included measures of contextual factors of academic dishonesty, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, achievement goal orientation, and rate of engagement in academic dishonesty in written assignments during their studies. Contextual factors predicted academic dishonesty in written assignments both directly and via self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goal. The findings indicate the importance of both context of learning and motivational beliefs in understanding academic dishonesty in higher education.

Keywords: *academic dishonesty; written assignments; contextual factors; motivational beliefs; higher education*

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1. Introduction

Previous research done in the Croatian context has shown a relatively high prevalence of dishonest behaviours in the higher education system. For instance, over 90% of students attending health-related studies have engaged in dishonest behaviour at least once, while over 60% of students in the technical field have used “cheat sheets” and received unauthorised assistance during exams (Petрак & Bartolac, 2014; Putarek *et al.*, 2022). Considering the negative impact of academic dishonesty on educational outcomes, as well as its positive association with undesirable organisational behaviour, the interest in the topic of cheating remains persistent (Bouville, 2010; Mulisa & Ebessa, 2021).

Academic dishonesty can be defined as actions that violate existing rules regarding task execution or exam-taking, which are prescribed by the institution or competent authority (Cizek, 2004). Such behaviours give unfair advantage to students and influence the accuracy of assessments of their achievements. In this paper, academic dishonesty, academic misconduct, and cheating will be used as synonyms, in accordance with the definitions of other authors (e.g., Yu *et al.*, 2017). Academic dishonesty encompasses various behaviours, such as cheating during exams, submitting written works that were partially or entirely authored by someone else, or failing to cite used literature (McCabe *et al.*, 2012). According to the integrated framework of academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006), individual and contextual factors determine achievement goals that an individual sets, their level of self-efficacy, and how seriously they perceive the consequences of cheating. All these factors influence the likelihood that an individual will engage in cheating behaviours.

Previous research done in the Croatian and international context often did not make a distinction between different forms of academically dishonest behaviours, and the focus was often on cheating during exams. Still, findings from international research indicate that students perceive cheating in written assignments as a “milder” transgression compared to rules violation during exams (McCabe *et al.*, 2001; Owunwanne *et al.*, 2010; Yardley *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, some authors suggest studying specific forms of academically dishonest behaviours and their predictors (Stone *et al.*, 2014). The focus of this research is academic dishonesty in written assignments, specifically the role of con-

textual and motivational predictors and their interrelation in predicting its occurrence.

1.1. Motivational factors of academic dishonesty

Achievement goals refer to the purpose of engaging in certain behaviours. According to the achievement goal theory, we can distinguish two dimensions in their foundation: focus (mastering the task or task performance) and the valence of goals (approach or avoidance) (Elliot & Hulleman, 2017). Mastery goals relate to the orientation towards the learning process or improvement in a skill or a task, with a frame of reference centered on individual progress. On the other hand, individuals who set performance goals have the aim of leaving an impression of competence or performing better than others. The other valence refers to whether the individual intends to achieve a positive outcome (approach) or avoid a negative outcome (avoidance). In addition to the aforementioned types of goals, the fifth goal of work-avoidance has been introduced (Elliot, 1999; King & McInerney, 2014). Individuals who set work-avoidance goals define success as putting in minimal effort that results in satisfactory outcomes.

Research mostly indicates a negative correlation between academic dishonesty and mastery-approach goal, as well as with performance-approach goal, and a positive correlation between cheating and work-avoidance goal, while inconsistent results are found for the relationship between dishonesty and performance goals (whether approach or avoidance) (Baran & Jonason, 2020; Pavlin-Bernardić *et al.*, 2016; Putarek & Pavlin-Bernardić, 2020; Van Yperen *et al.*, 2011). However, it is theoretically expected that students who set performance goals, especially performance-avoidance goals, will engage in cheating more frequently, as they are focused on leaving an impression of competence, have more negative attitudes towards learning, increased fear of failure, and fear of being perceived as incompetent by their peers (Elliot & Murayama, 2008).

Self-efficacy is one of the central motivational constructs, as it refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1986). It is expected that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy will persist more in their work despite difficulties, have

higher levels of intrinsic motivation for the task, and feel less disappointment in the event of failure. Related to the construct of self-efficacy is self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully use various learning strategies, perform tasks, participate in class, and resist distractions during learning (Usher & Pajares, 2008).

Regarding the relationship between academic dishonesty and self-efficacy, as well as self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, research suggests a negative correlation between the constructs (Murdock *et al.*, 2001; Putarek *et al.*, 2022). The relationship between self-efficacy and achievement goals is more complex. Previous research has indicated a positive correlation between self-efficacy and mastery goals, as well as performance-approach goal, and a negative correlation between self-efficacy and work-avoidance goal (e.g., Diseth *et al.*, 2012; Dull *et al.*, 2015; Schweder *et al.*, 2022). A meta-analysis done by Huang (2016) suggests a positive correlation between self-efficacy and mastery-approach goals, as well as with performance-approach goals, while the correlation between self-efficacy and work avoidance goals is low or non-existent.

In contrast, the relationship between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals has rarely been examined, although the theoretical assumption is that the pattern of correlation will be similar to one between self-efficacy and achievement goals (Usher & Pajares, 2008). According to the hierarchical model of approach and avoidance motivation, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning is an antecedent to the achievement goals that students set (Elliot & Church, 1997). As such, expectations of success are channelled into behaviours (i.e., achieving educational outcomes and grades) throughout achievement goals. For instance, if a student believes she or he cannot successfully use various learning strategies, cannot participate in lessons and is unable to perform expected class activities, she or he will more likely set performance or work avoidance goals. In return, to avoid negative outcomes or personal effort, there is a greater possibility of his or her engagement in cheating behaviours. In a recent study Putarek and Pavlin-Bernardić (2020) conducted with secondary school pupils, the mediating role of achievement goals in the relationship between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and active cheating was examined.

The results suggest that achievement goals do not mediate the relationship between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and cheating, but that engagement is the sole mediator in this relationship. However, the study only considered motivational factors and the findings can be generalised only to the population of secondary school pupils.

1.2. Contextual factors of academic dishonesty

Contextual reasons for academic dishonesty include a range of different factors related to the norm of cheating among peers, classroom organisation and learning environment, perceived quality of teachers, and the consequences of academic dishonesty (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). Findings from numerous studies suggest that contextual factors of cheating explain a greater percentage of the variance in engaging in cheating than individual and motivational factors (Putarek *et al.*, 2022; Sabbagh, 2021).

One of the most frequently cited contextual predictors of academic dishonesty is the perception of the acceptability of cheating among peers. Factors such as peer behaviour, peer approval of dishonesty, and reporting academic cheating are significant predictors of academic dishonesty, even when considering individual predictors of cheating (Barbaranelli *et al.*, 2018; McCabe & Treviño, 1997; Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). An equally important factor contributing to the prevalence of academic cheating is the existence of honour codes or clearly established rules about what academic dishonesty is and its consequences (McCabe *et al.*, 1999). However, even if official procedures for dealing with cheating behaviours exist, they must be integrated into the institution's culture to be effective (McCabe *et al.*, 2001; O'Neill & Pfeiffer, 2011).

Another important factor contributing to the occurrence of academic dishonesty is related to the organisation of classes and the behaviour of the teachers. It has been shown that the perceived quality and relevance of the course from the student's perspective predicts the intention to cheat (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). Educator's enthusiasm is associated with less occurrence of academic dishonesty, while low course satisfaction, a competitive classroom environment focused on task performance, and a lack of opportunities for interaction predict

more frequent engagement in cheating behaviours (Orosz *et al.*, 2015; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999). Qualitative research with students suggests that the most common antecedent of cheating is a feeling of insufficient preparation or a lack of time for preparation, which students attribute to their own characteristics as well as to the organisation of the study program and course obligations (Minarcik & Bridges, 2015).

According to the integrated framework of academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006), contextual factors increase the likelihood of realising the intention to engage in academic dishonesty, while motivational factors shape this intention. Before engaging in cheating behaviours, students first ask themselves what's the purpose of the task or the activity and judge whether they can achieve the needed outcome. As such, contextual factors are expected to be antecedents of various motivational factors associated with cheating, such as self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals. Empirical research indicates that contextual factors such as the perception of academic dishonesty as unethical, as well as promoting competition in classrooms are associated with more prevalent cheating behaviours (Bong, 2005; Elias, 2009). Moreover, motivational beliefs, including self-efficacy and achievement goals, are mediators of the relationship between the perception of the incentivised and competitive classroom environment and students' academically dishonest behaviours (Bong, 2008).

However, less research has been focused on the association of contextual factors with self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, as well as on the potential mediating role of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning in the relationship between contextual factors and academic cheating. Furthermore, according to the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997), it would be expected that self-efficacy for self-regulated learning precedes the formation of students' achievement goals. Thus, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals may serially mediate the relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and academic dishonesty in written assignments.

2. The aim of the study, research questions, and hypotheses

In this study, we aimed to explore the interplay between contextual and motivational factors of academic dishonesty, drawing upon the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997), and the integrated model of academic dishonesty (Murdoch & Anderman, 2006). We focused on academic dishonesty in the context of written assignments, a less explored construct in the field (Stone *et al.*, 2014). Consistent with the premises of the aforementioned theoretical models, we expected that contextual factors would be correlated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments via self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals. In this regard, we anticipated that self-efficacy for self-regulated learning precedes achievement goals, in line with the theoretical considerations of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997). However, to determine the existence of direct and indirect paths between contextual factors of cheating and academic dishonesty, we needed to test the fit of the models which presume various combinations of direct and indirect paths between included constructs.

In the Model 1, only an indirect relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments was assumed (as in Figure 1). In the Model 2, in addition to the indirect relationship in the first model, a direct path between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and the rate of cheating was added. In the Model 3, in addition to the relationships in the first model, a direct association between the contextual factors and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments was assumed. In the Model 4, both indirect and direct relationships between contextual factors of academic dishonesty, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and academic dishonesty were presumed.

Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

1. Are contextual factors, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, and achievement goals associated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments?
2. Do self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals play a mediating role in the relationship between contextual factors and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments?

Based on the literature review and previous research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Contextual factors, performance goals, and work-avoidance goal are positively associated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and mastery goals are negatively associated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments.

H2: Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals mediate the relationship between contextual factors and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. Contextual factors and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning also directly predict the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments.

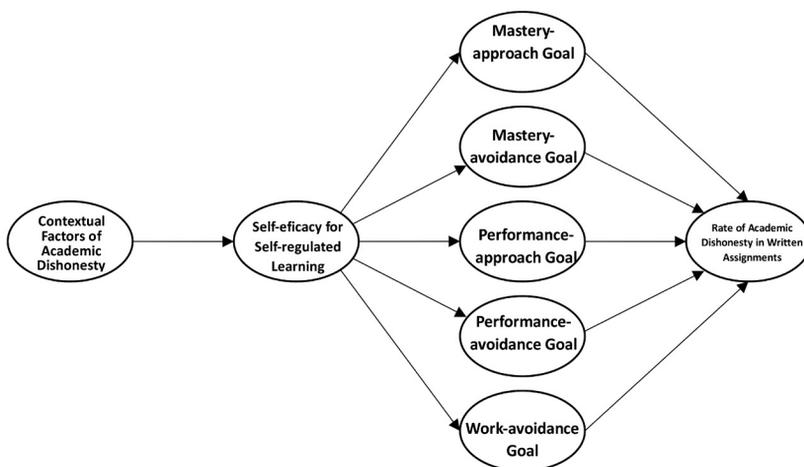


Figure 1. The assumed Model 1, in which only indirect relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments was assumed.

Note. For simplicity purposes, only the latent variables are shown in the Figure.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

414 students (76% female, 24% male) from three social and humanities faculties of the University of Zagreb participated in the study. With the agreement of the authorities of the higher education institutions involved, the names of the faculties are not disclosed. Students from all academic years participated in the research, with the highest representation of students from the 3rd year of undergraduate or 1st year of graduate studies (59%). The average age of the participants was 22.45 years (SD = 2.39), ranging from 18 to 39 years.

3.2. Instruments

Contextual Factors of Academic Dishonesty in Written Assignments Scale was constructed based on the literature review and preliminary qualitative focus group research (further information about the prestudy can be found in the data collection subsection). The scale consists of 15 items and includes contextual factors such as lack of negative consequences for cheating, lack of interest in the course, inappropriate behaviour of teachers towards students, poor organization of study programme, etc. Participants were asked to indicate whether they would engage in academically dishonest behaviour in written assignments in the situation described in the statement. Responses were provided on a scale from 1 to 5 (from “Does not apply to me” to “Completely applies to me”). An example item is: “I would cheat in written assignments if I consider the organisation and quality of the study programme to be poor.” The higher score on the scale indicates the greater significance of dissatisfaction with the contextual factors in the decision to engage in academic dishonesty in written assignments. Conducting confirmatory factor analysis, with allowing residual covariance of two items due to method factors (lexical similarity of items), we found a satisfactory fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2(89) = 279.14, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.93, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .09, RMSEA\ 90\% \text{ CI} [.08, .11], SRMR = .05$), as well as high scale reliability ($\alpha = .95$).

Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning Scale (Bandura, 2006) was adapted for the purposes of this research, for example, the item “I

am sure I can organise my school obligations” was changed to “I am sure I can organise my college obligations.” The scale consists of nine statements, with a response scale from 1 to 7 (from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”). Allowing for the covariation of residuals for two items due to method factors (lexically similar content of items), a good fit of the measurement model was found ($\chi^2(19) = 65.92, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.00, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, RMSEA\ 90\% CI [.05, .10], SRMR = .05$). The scale had an adequate level of internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

Achievement Goal Orientation Scale (Rovan, 2011) was also adapted for the purpose of the assessment of students’ general achievement goals, as the original scale measured specific achievement goals in mathematics (the word ‘mathematics’ was replaced with the term ‘during the studies’). The scale consists of 15 items, and the participants expressed their degree of agreement on a response scale from 1 to 5 (from “Disagree” to “Agree”). The scale contains five subscales, with three items for each of the five achievement goals: mastery-approach (e.g., “I want to learn as much as possible.”), mastery-avoidance (e.g., “I worry that I won’t learn all that I could learn”), performance-approach (e.g., “I strive to be successful compared to other students”), performance-avoidance (e.g., “I am concerned that I will have worse results than other students.”), and work-avoidance goal (e.g., “I don’t want to do anything more than I have to.”). Using confirmatory factor procedure, we established a measurement model consisting of five latent factors with three indicators per factor, corresponding to the assumed five-factor structure of the scale ($\chi^2(88) = 177.84, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.82, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05, RMSEA\ 90\% CI [.04, .07], SRMR = .05$). The reliabilities of the individual subscales were satisfactory, with $\alpha = .78, \alpha = .83, \alpha = .83, \alpha = .93, \text{ and } \alpha = .82$ for mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, performance-avoidance, and work-avoidance goal, respectively.

Academic Dishonesty in Written Assignments Scale was developed based on the preliminary research using focus groups. The scale includes 10 different forms of academically dishonest behaviours in written assignments (copying someone else’s whole work, copying parts of someone else’s work, buying papers, literal translation, selling papers, not citing used references, not using paraphrasing, citing unused sources, self-plagiarism, and getting unauthorised assistance). The participants were asked to estimate the number of written assignments they

had during their studies so far. They were then asked to estimate the percentage of written assignments in which they engaged in cheating behaviour, using a scale from 0 to 100%, with an interval of 10% between scale points. An example item is: “How often during your studies have you copied parts of someone else’s written assignment?” Due to high uniqueness and low variability, two items related to buying or selling written assignments were removed. Ultimately, a measurement model with eight items was established ($\chi^2(19) = 37.83$, $p < .01$, $\chi^2/df = 0.95$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, RMSEA 90% CI [.04, .11], SRMR = .05), with satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .82$).

3.3. Data collection

Data presented in this study was collected during the first author’s master’s thesis research (Šimon, 2020). Qualitative prestudy took part in November 2019. Three 45-minute focus groups with a total number of 18 participants from various humanities and social sciences studies were conducted. Students were recruited through social media sites. We developed a semi-structured protocol, with main themes focused on the nature of the written assignments at students’ studies, as well as their definitions of, perceived occurrence, consequences, influences on, and attitudes toward cheating. By subsequently using concept and theoretical coding, as well as through the development of overarching categories (Saldaña, 2016), we identified ten forms of academically dishonest behaviours on written assignments which guided us in the development of the scales used in the main study. More information on the prestudy can be found in Šimon (2020).

The main study was conducted in March 2020, at the beginning of the summer semester when the participants had already had the opportunity to engage in academically dishonest behaviours in the current academic year. After obtaining approval from the faculty authorities, a group paper-pencil questionnaire was administered in person during compulsory course lectures, mostly in the presence of teachers. The questionnaire took up to 15 minutes to complete. The purpose of the research was explained and the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the anonymity of participants, was emphasised. However, in mid-March, the coronavirus pandemic was declared and all faculties of the University of Zagreb organised classes exclusively in an online envi-

ronment. An online version of the questionnaire identical to the paper-pencil format was created and forwarded to students by course teachers. A link to the questionnaire was also posted in the social media groups of the faculties included in the study. Ultimately, 235 participants completed the questionnaire in person and 179 online. Further information on the characteristics of individuals who completed the questionnaire in each format is provided in the data analysis subsection.

3.4. Data analysis

All data analysis procedures were conducted in the R program (v4.3.1; R Core Team, 2021), using the *lavaan* package for conducting confirmatory factor procedures, structural linear modeling, and testing mediation (Rosseel, 2012). The *listwise* method was used for handling missing data and all analyses were performed on the data from the 390 participants who had complete responses.

Before conducting data analysis, independent samples t-tests were performed to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in the manifest variables values between the participants who completed the paper-pencil and the ones who completed the online version of the questionnaire. Statistically significant differences were found for motivational construct items (self-efficacy for self-regulated learning scale and achievement goal scale) and two items on the contextual factors of academic dishonesty scale. However, no statistically significant differences were found for items related to the criterion of the rate of cheating. Due to similar results on relevant variables, all participants, regardless of the testing method, were treated as a single sample.

To address the research questions, we employed structural linear modeling procedures and tested for mediation effects. When using structural linear procedures, full measurement models of the scales described in the instruments subsection were used and incorporated into the structural model that posits specific relationships between constructs at the latent level. Considering the demonstrated psychometric properties of the scales, average scores of the scales were used in the calculation of descriptive statistics.

Four alternative structural models were tested to determine direct and/or indirect relationships between contextual factors of academic

dishonesty, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, achievement goals, and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. Mardia test showed the data deviated from a multivariate normal distribution (skewness coefficient $p < .001$, kurtosis coefficient $p < .001$) and the maximum likelihood method with the Satorra-Bentler rescaling method and robust standard errors was used (Finney & DiStefano, 2013).

Model fit indicators, including χ^2/df , CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, were used as fit indices, with acceptable values being ≤ 3 , $\geq .90$, $\leq .05$, $\leq .05$, respectively (Brown, 2015). To determine which model fits the data best, we used chi-square difference tests and the principle of parsimony (choosing the model with more degrees of freedom between two equally suitable models; Brown, 2015). Ultimately, after selecting the model that best fits the data, we tested the significance of indirect effects using the bootstrapping method with 5000 resamples (Hayes, 2022).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the indicators of descriptive statistics and correlations of the constructs used in the research. The included demographic variables such as year of study, age, and gender were not associated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. GPA was negatively correlated with contextual factors of academic dishonesty, work-avoidance goal and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. GPA was, however, positively associated with self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, mastery and performance goals. Contextual factors of academic dishonesty and work-avoidance goal are moderately to strongly positively correlated with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. In contrast, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and mastery-approach goal are weakly to moderately negatively correlated with the rate of academic dishonesty. These findings are in line with our first hypothesis. However, performance-approach is weakly negatively correlated with academic dishonesty. Mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals are not correlated with the rate of cheating in written assignments. These findings contradict our first hypothesis, so we can say that it is partially confirmed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between used variables (N = 390)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Year of Study	3.57	1.21	1–5											
2. Age	22.45	2.40	18–39	.63***										
3. Gender	-	-	-	-.15**	-.13*									
4. GPA	3.80	0.51	2–5	.28***	.17***	.05								
5. Contextual Factors of Academic Dishonesty	2.15	0.95	1–5	-.10	-.12*	-.09	-.26***							
6. Self-efficacy in Self-regulated Learning	4.87	1.01	2.11–7.00	.03	-.01	.17***	.26***	-.22***						
7. Mastery-approach	3.96	0.74	1.67–5.00	-.02	.07	.03	.26***	-.39***						
8. Mastery-avoidance	3.60	1.05	1–5	.03	.08	.23***	.12*	-.21***	.09	.36***				
9. Performance-approach	2.97	1.05	1–5	.07	.05	-.03	.48***	-.32***	.39***	.39***	.26***			
10. Performance-avoidance	2.46	1.22	1–5	-.01	-.01	.14**	.20***	-.21***	.08	.18***	.43***	.55***		
11. Work-avoidance	2.77	1.08	1–5	-.07	-.10	-.14**	-.34***	.37***	-.48***	-.53***	-.21***	-.30***	-.14**	
12. Rate of Academic Dishonesty in Written Assignments	13.22	13.61	0.00–72.50	.00	-.02	.04	-.25***	.55***	-.17***	-.20***	-.08	-.16**	-.07	.33***

Note. *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

4.2. Mediation Model

Fit indices for all tested models can be found in Table 2. Model 1, which posits only indirect relationships between included latent variables, and Model 2, which proposes all indirect relationships and direct relationship of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments, have shown equally good, but the poorest fit among tested models ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.03$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p > .05$). Model 3, which includes all indirect relationships and direct relationship of contextual factors of cheating and academic dishonesty, has shown better fit than Model 1 ($\Delta\chi^2 = 356.32$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .001$) and as an equivalent model has shown a better fit than Model 2. We observed a statistically significant difference between the fit of Model 3 and Model 4, which posits both indirect and direct relationships between included variables ($\Delta\chi^2 = 252.13$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .001$). As Model 3 has more degrees of freedom (in acknowledgement of the parsimony principle) and in Model 4 proposed structural relationship between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning with our criterion is not significant ($B = 0.60$, $SE = 1.33$, $\beta = .04$, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.21]), we selected the Model 3 as the final structural model (Figure 2.). In our final model, a moderate to strong association was found between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty ($B = 8.98$, $SE = 1.35$, $\beta = .59$, 95% CI [0.50, 0.68]). Furthermore, only the work-avoidance goal was associated with our criterion of cheating ($B = 3.55$, $SE = 1.44$, $\beta = .25$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.43]).

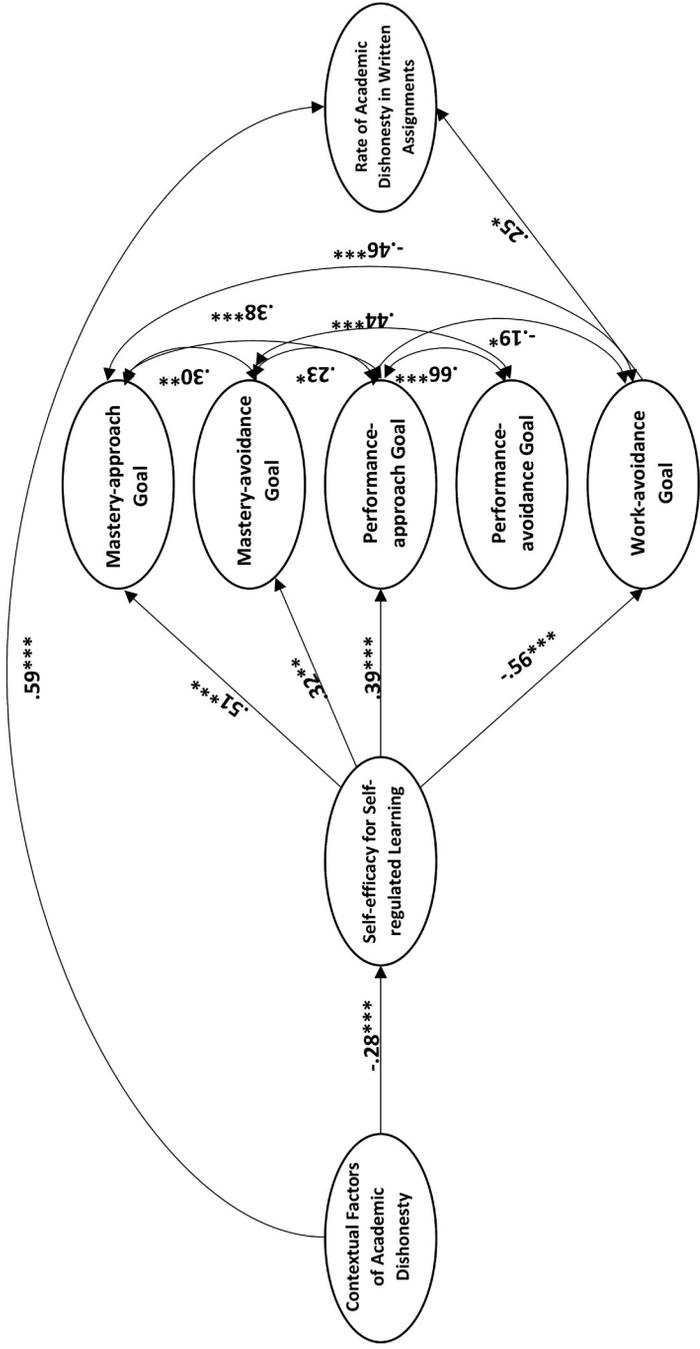
Table 2. Fit indices of four alternative mediation models

Model	Model Fit Indices						Chi-square Difference Test			
	χ^2	<i>df</i>	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA	RMSEA 90% CI	SRMR	Model	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
1	1743,04** *	1017	1.71	.91	.05	.04 - .05	.11	1-2	0.03	1
2	1743,07** *	1016	1.72	.91	.05	.04 - .05	.11	2-4	104.22***	1
3	1386,72** *	1016	1.36	.91	.05	.04 - .05	.07	1-3	356.32***	1
4	1638,85** *	1015	1.61	.92	.04	.04 - .05	.08	3-4	252.13***	1

Note. *** $p < .001$

To address the second research question, we inspected the statistical significance of indirect effects. By implementing the bootstrapping method, we confirmed the existence of a weak indirect effect of contextual factors of academic dishonesty on the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments via self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goal (B = -0.15, SE = 0.13, β = -0.01, 95% CI [-0.61, -0.01]).

Figure 2. The final structural model of the relationships between contextual reasons for academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments, with self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goal as mediating variables



Note. Due to the model complexity, only latent variables and standardized factor loadings of structural paths are displayed in the Figure.

*** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$

5. Discussion

As cheating behaviour among higher education students is prevalent in the Croatian context (i.e., Petrak & Bartolac, 2014; Putarek *et al.*, 2022), we examined the role of contextual factors of academic dishonesty, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, and achievement goals as underlying mechanisms of the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments at the higher education level. Furthermore, building upon the integrated framework of academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006) and the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997), we investigated whether self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and achievement goals (serially) mediate the relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and academic dishonesty in written assignments. Considering the lack of research that conceptually distinguishes different forms of academically dishonest behaviour (Stone *et al.*, 2014), especially in the Croatian educational context, this paper provides a unique contribution and encourages further research into potential contextual and motivational factors of cheating in written assignments.

As expected, we observed a moderate to strong positive correlation of both contextual factors of academic dishonesty and work-avoidance goal with the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. Moreover, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and mastery-approach goal were weakly to moderately negatively correlated with the rate of academic dishonesty. These findings are in line with the theoretical expectations and the empirical evidence on the relationship between achievement goals, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and academic dishonesty (i.e., Pavlin-Bernardić *et al.*, 2016; Putarek & Pavlin-Bernardić, 2020; Van Yperen *et al.*, 2011), as well as on the importance of contextual factors in predicting cheating (i.e., Barbaranelli *et al.*, 2018; Putarek *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, relationships between performance goals and cheating, as well as between mastery-avoidance goals and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments were not aligned with our expectations. While performance-approach goals were weakly negatively correlated with academic dishonesty in written assignments, we did not obtain a significant correlation with the criterion for mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals. Our findings are similar to the find-

ings of Krou *et al.* (2021), as well as those of Fritz *et al.* (2023), who found no significant relationships between performance goals and academically dishonest behaviours, as well as between mastery-avoidance goal and cheating. Fritz *et al.* (2023) observed heterogeneity in the relationship between achievement goals and academically dishonest behaviour, which they attributed to the type of measurement used in a study. As they reported, average nil effects of performance goals on academic dishonesty were found in studies using self-assessment measures of academic dishonesty, while experimental studies suggested a significant positive association. Furthermore, Fritz *et al.* (2023) found varying correlations between mastery-avoidance goal and academic cheating, which may be attributed to differences in the definition of academic dishonesty across various studies. This highlights the need for differentiating between different forms of cheating. As our study focused on cheating in written assignments, our findings may be limited only to related behaviours.

Regarding our second research question and hypothesis, we found that the model which includes both direct and indirect relationships between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments had the best fit to the data. In this model, we found a moderate to strong positive relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty. It seems that students' dissatisfaction with various aspects of their studies is a crucial aspect of the decision to engage in academic dishonesty in written assignments, which has been previously shown in the studies focused on cheating as a broader construct and contract cheating in higher education (Bretag *et al.*, 2018; Orosz *et al.*, 2015; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999; Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009).

Furthermore, in this model, the only type of achievement goal that correlated with the criterion of academic dishonesty was the work-avoidance goal. It seems that goal-setting related to minimal work resulting in satisfactory results (i.e., minimal passing grade) is indicative of engagement in cheating behaviours in written assignments (Fritz *et al.*, 2023; Šeremet *et al.*, 2018). More importantly, we confirmed the serial mediation of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goals in the relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written

assignments. This result suggests that a decrease in self-efficacy for self-regulated learning which follows an increase in the self-assessed significance of contextual factors of cheating »triggers« students' setting of work-avoidance goals, which then results in more engagement in cheating in written assignments.

It seems that contextual factors may precede the formation of motivational beliefs, as according to the theoretical assumptions of the integrated framework of academic dishonesty (Murdock & Anderman, 2006). Higher education students seem to first assess the educational context and its aspects and then evaluate their ability to achieve the desired outcome, in line with previous findings related to the mediating role of motivational beliefs in the relationship between contextual factors and cheating (Bong, 2005, 2008; Elias, 2009). Regarding the psychological mechanisms underlining students' behaviours assumed by the hierarchical model of achievement motivation (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997), we partially confirmed them by observing the mediating role of the work-avoidance goals in relation to cheating on written assignments. Our results indicate that self-efficacy for self-regulated learning is seemingly an antecedent of the formation of work-avoidance goals. This corroborates the theoretical expectation that expectations of lack of success will result in the minimal effort put in by students, which consequently leads to cheating behaviours. However, we emphasise that the obtained indirect path is weak and no other indirect paths were statistically significant, which suggests more research related to the mediating role of achievement goals (especially work-avoidance goals) is needed.

5.1. Practical implications

The results of this study suggest that, on average, higher education students in Croatia cheated in 13 % of their written assignments. On average, students in this study completed 80 written assignments during their studies, suggesting that each student cheated on approximately 8 of them. It seems that academic dishonesty in written assignments is quite prevalent, and, therefore, the ethics and consequences of cheating are major topics to (re)consider, discuss, and define in Croatian higher education.

Our results also indicate the importance of the educational context in higher education. Dissatisfaction with study programme organisation, the perceived norm of cheating among peers and other context-related aspects can be influenced and improved by faculties and universities, as they are clearly critical aspects of students' decision to engage in cheating (Bretag *et al.*, 2018; Putarek *et al.*, 2022). Previous research has also shown that an increase in teachers' enthusiasm and the quality of the relationship between students and teachers can also benefit the academic ethics of the students (Orosz *et al.*, 2015; Pulvers & Diekhoff, 1999).

Related to the motivational factors of cheating, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goal are important factors in the decision to cheat in written assignments. It is possible that dissatisfaction with the educational context will not translate into students' cheating if they develop self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and are prone to setting more adaptive achievement goals, e.g. mastery-approach. This has implications for the development of motivational beliefs throughout the whole educational path, which should support mastery goals setting and student autonomy, self-organisation and learning skills (Bureau *et al.*, 2022; Krou *et al.*, 2021). That places the educators in the important role of emphasising and setting appropriate achievement goals in classrooms, as well as in supporting students' learning competencies and self-efficacy.

5.2. Study limitations

All measures included in this study were students' self-reports. This introduces the question of social desirability and the validity of their assessment, especially in the context of the topic of cheating. To mitigate that, the inclusion of different measures of cheating, as well as the use of an experimental approach, are important considerations in the research field of academic dishonesty.

Furthermore, we used some well-known measures but also constructed new instruments related to context factors and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. These measures are, therefore, not validated in the Croatian context. However, we highlight our focus on written assignments and not on the broad (and quite diverse)

construct of cheating as the advantage of our study (Krou *et al.*, 2021; Stone *et al.*, 2014).

In this study, we explored the role of contextual factors and motivational beliefs in the prediction of academic dishonesty in written assignments. We focused on the aspects of the educational context that hinder students' adaptive motivational beliefs. Further research on the interplay of contextual and motivational factors should also include contextual factors which promote students' motivation to enhance the understanding of these conflicting contextual influences.

Even though our postulated serial mediation model is strongly theoretically supported, our study design is correlational and cross-sectional. Therefore, we cannot confirm or disprove our mediational hypothesis with certainty, as we do not have a firm grounding for causality assumptions (Hayes, 2022). Finally, our study is set in the Croatian higher education system and only with caution should our findings be generalised to other contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between contextual factors of academic dishonesty, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, achievement goals and the rate of cheating in written assignments, as less researched construct in the field of academic dishonesty. Besides correlational relationships, we were interested in the possible mediating role of motivational variables in the association between contextual factors and cheating in written assignments.

While expected results were obtained for the relationship between self-efficacy for self-regulated learning with cheating, as well as for mastery-approach goal and work-avoidance goal with criterion, the performance-approach goal was negatively correlated with academic dishonesty in written assignments. Furthermore, we observed no association between performance-avoidance goal and cheating, as well as between mastery-avoidance goal and cheating in written assignments. These results are in line with the recent meta-analytical findings, which suggest heterogeneity of the relationship between motivational beliefs and cheating due to differences in measurement type and definition of academic dishonesty in various studies.

Using structural modeling and testing serial mediation, we found a direct association between contextual factors of academic dishonesty and the rate of academic dishonesty in written assignments. However, the contextual factors predicted cheating behaviours indirectly via serial mediation of self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and work-avoidance goal. This indicates the various psychological mechanisms through which the students engage in cheating in written assignments in higher education. The implications of the study include the importance of the educational and classroom context which supports adaptive motivational beliefs and promotes academic integrity in the higher education.

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AKADEMSKO NEPOŠTENJE U PISANIM RADOVIMA – ULOGA KONTEKSTUALNIH I MOTIVACIJSKIH ČIMBENIKA

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Ovo istraživanje u fokusu ima ulogu kontekstualnih čimbenika i samoefikasnosti u samoreguliranom učenju te ciljeva postignuća kao motivacijskih odrednica akademskog nepoštenja u pisanim radovima kod visokoškolskih studenata. Cilj nam je bio istražiti potencijalnu medijacijsku ulogu samoefikasnosti u samoreguliranom učenju i ciljeva postignuća u odnosu između kontekstualnih čimbenika i akademskog nepoštenja u pisanim radovima. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 414 studenata s tri fakulteta društvenog i humanističkog usmjerenja Sveučilišta u Zagrebu. Studenti su ispunjavali upitnik koji je uključivao mjere kontekstualnih čimbenika akademskog nepoštenja, samoefikasnosti u samoreguliranom učenju, ciljeva postignuća i čestine uključenosti u akademsko nepoštenje u pisanim radovima tijekom studija. Kontekstualni čimbenici predviđali su akademsko nepoštenje u pisanim radovima, kako izravno, tako i posredstvom samoefikasnosti u samoreguliranom učenju i cilja izbjegavanja rada. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju na važnost okružja učenja i motivacijskih uvjerenja u razumijevanju akademskog nepoštenja u visokom obrazovanju.

Ključne riječi: akademsko nepoštenje; pisani radovi; kontekstualni čimbenici; motivacijski čimbenici; visoko obrazovanje