



Online English Exam Cheating: A Study of Students' Perceptions, Actions, and Gender Differences in Iran

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Abstract

As online learning gains popularity in educational settings, online exams have become efficient tools for evaluation. However, more research is needed on students' perceptions of online exams in developing countries like Iran. This study investigates the perceptions of 153 undergraduate students who have taken or are taking online general English courses at Yasouj and Shahrekord universities. The research aims to understand university students' perceptions of online English tests, including the ease and frequency of cheating, various forms of cheating, and reasons for cheating. A mixed-method approach was employed, incorporating interviews followed by a 19-item questionnaire. Parallel exams were conducted to compare students' performance. The analysis also examined differences in perceptions based on participants' gender. The results indicate that cheating is easier and more prevalent in online exams than in traditional face-to-face exams. However, it does not occur more frequently in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) exams than in other subject exams. The study identified various forms of cheating used by students and the reasons for cheating in online assessments. Additionally, gender was found to influence students' perceptions of cheating in online exams significantly. Based on these perceptions, strategies to combat cheating are proposed. The implications of this study are significant for educational stakeholders, particularly teachers and students, in their efforts to promote and maintain academic integrity.

Keywords: Online English Exams, Students' Perceptions, Cheating Forms, Motivation, Gender

* Received: 18/06/2024

Accepted: 23/09/2024

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How to cite this article:

Asadpour, E., & Yazdani, H. (2024). Online English Exam Cheating: A Study of Students' Perceptions, Actions, and Gender Differences in Iran. *Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)*, 43(3), 141-166. doi: 10.22099/tesl.2024.50496.3300



Over the last decade, online education has experienced significant growth, a trend that the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated. Online education offers several advantages over traditional face-to-face education, including content availability, convenience, and lower costs (Alshamrani, 2019; Goodman et al., 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2002; Muyskens, 1997; Paepe et al., 2018; Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). However, challenges such as the internet and technology problems, lack of concentration and motivation among students, and difficulties in assessment have been reported (Fichten et al., 2009; Li & Irby, 2008; Sufyan et al., 2020). Among these challenges, accurately assessing students' abilities in online exams poses a significant problem for teachers (Martin et al., 2020).

The rise of online education has made online exams more common, bringing new challenges for maintaining academic integrity. Cheating, in the context of this study, is defined as any dishonest behavior by students to gain an unfair advantage in exams, including consulting unauthorized online sources, collaborating with others, using electronic devices to look up answers, and impersonation (Dyer et al., 2020; Srikanth & Asmatulu, 2014; Young, 2010). According to Srikanth & Asmatulu (2014) and Young (2010), cheating is perceived as more accessible and prevalent in online exams. However, some research suggests that cheating in online courses may be less frequent than in traditional classroom settings (Watson & Sottile, 2010). Because findings on the prevalence of cheating in online exams are mixed, it remains a significant issue that warrants further study.

Moreover, while some studies have examined students' and teachers' perceptions of online exams and cheating, they primarily focused on perceptions and did not employ a mixed-method design that examines male and female students' actions and perceptions specifically in English language exams (see Chirumamilla et al., 2020; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Salehi & Gholampour, 2021; Sufyan et al., 2020). This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive investigation into gender differences and performance in the context of online English exams.

This study explores the frequency and ease of cheating in online English exams compared to face-to-face and other subject exams, students' motivations and cheating forms, and gender differences in perceptions of cheating in online English exams. By addressing these issues, we seek to provide insights that could inform the development of policies and practical interventions to promote academic integrity in online education. Finally, strategies are proposed to mitigate cheating based on students' perceptions.

In keeping with these objectives, the current study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are Iranian undergraduate students' perceptions of the ease and frequency of cheating in online English tests?

RQ2. Do students cheat more in online English exams compared to face-to-face English exams?

RQ3. Do students cheat more in online English exams compared to exams in other subjects?

RQ4. What are Iranian undergraduate students' perceptions of different forms of cheating in online English exams?

RQ5. What are the motivations or reasons behind cheating among Iranian undergraduate students in online English exams?

RQ6. Do male and female participants differ in their perceptions of cheating in online English tests?

Literature Review

In today's digital era, the internet significantly influences education, with online learning and assessment gaining widespread popularity (Almazova et al., 2016). The online assessment offers several advantages, such as accessibility, convenience, and immediate feedback, making it attractive to students and teachers (Böhmer et al., 2018). However, the lack of face-to-face interaction and reduced control over the examination environment can foster cheating and plagiarism (Sufyan et al., 2020). So, although online tests can make assessments easier, they can also make assessments invalid (Munoz & Mackay, 2019).

Research by various scholars indicates that both students and teachers perceive cheating as more accessible and prevalent in online exams (Chirumamilla et al., 2020; King et al., 2009; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Salehi & Gholampour, 2021). For instance, Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) found a 196.25% increase in the use of homework-help websites during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting a rise in online cheating. Similarly, Salehi and Gholampour (2021) reported that only 39.46% of students had unfavorable attitudes toward cheating, indicating potential involvement in dishonest practices. As online testing gains popularity, the assistance of internet technologies makes cheating more challenging to detect (Watson & Sottile, 2010). However, Watson and Sottile (2010) also noted that cheating in online exams may not necessarily be higher than in traditional settings, highlighting the complexity of academic dishonesty in online education.

In the EFL setting, dictionaries, grammar checkers, translation tools, and essay generators may make it easier for students to plagiarize content (Yan, 2023). For example, Rofiah and Waluyo (2020) explored using Socrative, an online quiz tool, for vocabulary tests among Thai EFL learners. The research involved 461 students from a General English course at Walailak University in Thailand. The study suggests that while Socrative is beneficial for formative assessments, measures to mitigate cheating should be considered in instructional design because students perceived cheating related to vocabulary searching as easy in these exams. Similarly, research by Bailey and Csomay (2021) found notable differences in vocabulary complexity and word usage between papers written by EFL students and those created by contract cheating services, underscoring instructors' concerns about the authenticity of student work. Conversely, some studies found no difference between language and other subject exams regarding cheating methods (Chirumamilla et al., 2020; Noorbehbahani et al., 2022; Saleh and Meccawy, 2021). For example, Saleh and Meccawy (2021) observed typical cheating methods among EFL students, such as collaborating and sharing answers. Similarly, Chirumamilla et al. (2020) identified various cheating practices, indicating no significant difference between subjects. Correa (2014) noted that while academic dishonesty in EFL shares similarities with other disciplines, it includes unique aspects like unauthorized editing by proficient speakers and the use of online translators. Therefore, evidence on cheating in online foreign language assessments remains limited.

Concerning reasons for cheating, students often justify cheating by believing it is a standard or necessary tactic, especially when facing significant academic pressure or personal goals such as maintaining a scholarship (King et al., 2009). Another study involving 310 Iranian students revealed that the primary reason for cheating was a lack of exam preparedness (Salehi & Gholampour, 2021). Connolly et al. (2006) describe academic dishonesty and cheating through the lens of the *Fraud Triangle Model*, which defines three key reasons leading to academic fraud: opportunity, incentive or pressure, and rationalization. This model posits those dishonest actions, like cheating, typically occur when students recognize an opportunity to cheat without risk of detection. The motivation to cheat can stem from various pressures or needs, such as family expectations, peer influence, or academic demands. Furthermore, rationalization plays a significant role, where students justify their dishonest behavior by convincing themselves that such actions are commonplace or acceptable. This study employs the *Fraud Triangle Model* developed by Cressey (1953) to explore and analyze students' motivations behind

cheating (See Figure 1). Incorporating this model into the study enriches the analytical approach by precisely categorizing cheating reasons.

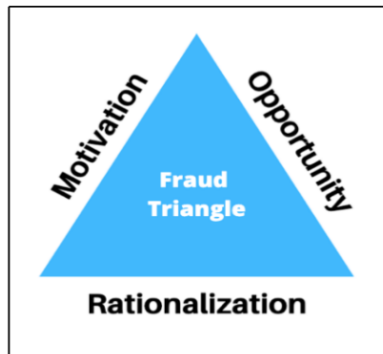


Figure 1. *Fraud Triangle* (Cressey, 1953)

Cheating in online exams can manifest in various forms. Saleh and Meccawy (2021), focusing on EFL female students, found that typical cheating methods included collaborating with peers, sharing answers, and copying from electronic websites. The least frequent form of cheating noted in this study was having someone else take the exam. Through surveys and interviews, Chirumamilla et al. (2020) also identified various cheating practices such as using forbidden aids, impersonation, having a glance, collaborative efforts, and seeking external help. To address cheating forms, Noorbehbahani et al. (2022) developed a model that categorizes cheating practices into group and individual actions and proposes some forms for each category. This study employs this model to explore and analyze cheating behaviors among university students.

Regarding gender-related perceptions and forms of cheating, students of both genders have acknowledged engaging in various dishonest practices. Studies by Moten et al. (2013), Chirumamilla et al. (2020), Case et al. (2019), and Saleh and Meccawy (2021) have documented that both male and female students employ a wide range of forms of cheating. Additionally, gender is frequently considered a crucial factor affecting cheating behavior. Some research suggests that the ways males and females cheat during exams differ, with women tending to adhere more closely to rules, whereas men are likelier to cheat (see also Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002). For example, McCabe and Trevino (1997) showed a higher inclination toward cheating among male students using their phones to look up answers during an exam or hacking into systems to obtain test answers, while females may use less detectable technological means, such as utilizing essay mills, consulting online forums for answers, or using translation tools and grammar checkers to aid in assignments without

authorization. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2002) observed a greater prevalence of cheating among male students, attributing this to men being more inclined to take risks and use more direct cheating methods such as looking up answers on their phones, giving someone else the username and password to take the exam on their behalf, or hacking systems. However, research in this area is not conclusive in that some studies have found that female students cheat as much as or more than male students. For example, Ahmadi (2012, 2014) and Salehi and Gholampour (2021) found that gender had no significant impact on cheating behaviors. Krienert et al. (2022) found that while female students generally held more negative attitudes toward cheating than their male counterparts, they were more inclined to engage in cheating through technological means such as searching the internet and online dictionaries. Similarly, DePalma et al. (1995), recruiting 67 undergraduate students (27 males and 40 females) from psychology courses at Cornell University, found that females cheated twice as often as males. Thus, the overall conclusions regarding gender and academic dishonesty remain mixed. Therefore, this study aims to further explore gender-related differences in perceptions and behaviors related to cheating in online exams.

In the context of Iran, several studies have investigated cheating and plagiarism among university students, particularly in EFL settings. Ahmadi (2012) found that cheating is prevalent among 132 Iranian university students, with the main reasons being inadequate preparation, exam difficulty, insufficient study time, and lenient instructors. Common forms of cheating include talking to peers, copying answers, and using gestures. The study also noted that gender does not influence cheating behaviors, while field of study, academic level, and occupational status do. In a subsequent study, Ahmadi (2014) highlighted students' perception that plagiarism was easy, often undetected, and not seriously penalized. These findings indicate a need for improved education on academic integrity and stricter enforcement of plagiarism policies. Salehi and Gholampour (2021) similarly surveyed 310 Iranian students and found no negative attitude towards cheating; the predominant method was allowing peers to view exam papers, primarily motivated by a lack of preparedness. Maleki (2024) used a mixed-methods approach to explore online exam cheating among 27 EFL learners, identifying student-related, teaching-related, and assessment-related factors as primary contributors, emphasizing the need to cultivate academic honesty in online learning. Similarly, Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013) examined perceptions of plagiarism among 122 language students, noting varied definitions and common practices of copying assignments, with professors often relying on guesswork for detection. Students primarily plagiarized due to the ease of doing so.

To address cheating in online exams, various technological solutions such as time limitations, proctoring software, and secure browsers have been implemented to mitigate cheating in several studies (see Bawarith et al., 2017; Kolhar et al., 2018). However, some researchers argue that these measures are insufficient without robust academic policies and preparatory measures (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2017; D'Souza & Siegfeldt, 2017; Noorbehbahani et al., 2022). According to Noorbehbahani et al. (2022), effective prevention methods in online exams require a multifaceted approach, including before- and during-exam measures. Before the exam, this includes academic integrity training, clear communication of policies, and exam design strategies such as random question selection, employing novel questions, formative assessments instead of summative ones, and open-book exams. During the exam, measures include active proctoring, time constraints, browser lock, conducting oral exams as a flowing dialogue, and requesting that students respond quickly during the oral exam.

Despite the increasing prevalence of online education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for a greater understanding of how cheating actions and perceptions differ between online and traditional face-to-face exams. Although concerns about student cheating on online tests are widespread, existing literature lacks a focused analysis of gender differences in online cheating perceptions and actions, especially among Iranian male and female students and in the context of English exams. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive investigation into gender differences and performance in the context of online English exams. This study aims to fill these gaps by employing a mixed-method approach to explore the perceptions, performance, forms of cheating, and motivations behind cheating among Iranian undergraduate students, with a specific focus on gender differences and the context of online English exams. By addressing these gaps, the study provides valuable insights that can inform the development of effective strategies and policies to promote academic integrity in online education.

Method

Participants and Context of the Study

The study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-method research design to investigate students' performance and perceptions of cheating in online English exams. In this approach, qualitative data (interviews) informed the development of a quantitative instrument (questionnaire). Participants were undergraduate EFL students from Yasouj

University and Shahrekord University who had completed or were currently enrolled in online general English courses in 2022. Initially, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants selected using a convenient sampling approach until data saturation was reached. Subsequently, 157 participants completed a questionnaire developed based on insights from the interviews. The quantitative data were collected from participants through a convenient sampling approach. They were selected based on their availability and willingness. After excluding four participants who selected the same response to all questions, 153 valid questionnaires were analyzed. The sample consisted of 80 females (52.2%) and 73 males (47.7%) as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Demographic Information of the Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	80	52.20%
Male	73	47.70%
Total	153	100%

Materials and Instruments

The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative instruments, beginning with semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' views and experiences related to cheating, focusing on its prevalence, ease, forms, and motivations. The interview questions were developed after reviewing relevant literature and theories and refined after multiple revisions (see Appendix A). Before the main administration, the interview questions were piloted with three participants to assess their clarity and relevance. The feedback received from these participants indicated that the questions were well-understood and appropriate for the study. As a result, no changes were made to the set of questions in this phase. To avoid misunderstandings and ensure the reliability of the data, interview questions were conducted in the participant's first language (Persian). Each interview took about 10 minutes for each person, and the data were collected either face-to-face or online. The participant's voice was recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed using a content analysis approach with open coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Finally, themes and variables identified from these interviews were used to develop the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 items designed to gauge participant's perceptions of cheating. It had four sections, including demographic information, the ease and

frequency of cheating, reasons, and forms of cheating during online English exams. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was reviewed to ensure alignment with the research objectives and comprehensive coverage of the relevant aspects of the construct being measured. Before the main administration, a pilot test was conducted with a similar sample group to gather feedback on the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questions. Based on this feedback, refinements were made for better clarity and understanding, including the paraphrasing and rewording of some questions. The interview and questionnaire questions were originally prepared in the participants' native language, Persian, to prevent any potential misunderstandings. An English translation of the questionnaire and interview is provided in the Appendix.

Two parallel exams, one online and one face-to-face, containing the same grammar content (English verb tenses), were administered one day apart to allow for a direct comparison of performance and cheating behaviors in these two different environments. Each exam contained ten multiple-choice items focused on grammar, targeting intermediate proficiency levels. The content had been taught during the term. The online exam, conducted on the Porsline Website, included time limitations (10 minutes) and restrictions on changing previous answers to minimize cheating opportunities. Participants took the online exam at home, and they were told to be ready for the exam at a specific time. One day after the online test, an in-person test was given in the classroom. Students were not informed in advance about the in-person exam. The one-day interval between the two tests and the lack of prior notice about the in-person exam were implemented to reduce the influence of practice effects. To ensure parallel forms, both tests were designed to be equivalent in difficulty and content. Reliability and validity were assessed through pilot testing. The tests were administered to a sample of students to identify any issues with question clarity, difficulty level, and overall structure. Feedback from the pilot test was analyzed and used to make necessary adjustments. For instance, if certain questions were found to be consistently misinterpreted by students during the pilot, the wording was clarified. Similarly, if multiple students struggled with a question deemed too difficult, the question was revised to reflect the expected skill level better. As a result, some questions in both tests were clarified and adjusted. The results of the two tests were compared using a paired t-test. The results showed cheating prevalence in two environments.

The study evaluated the actual cheating actions in the two exams alongside students' perceptions of cheating prevalence from a questionnaire. This approach helps determine whether students' perceptions align with their observed actions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Given the sensitivity and potential shame associated with plagiarism (Hyland, 2001, as cited in Babaii and Nejadghanbar, 2017), an anonymous survey approach was used to obtain reliable data. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and informed consent was obtained in all phases of data collection. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted using a convenient sampling approach until data saturation was reached. The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using the content analysis approach with open coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This process involved closely examining the data line by line and labeling segments with codes that represent different ideas or phenomena. These codes are then compared and grouped into categories that encompass broader patterns or themes emerging from the data. The quantitative phase involved administering the questionnaire and giving parallel exams. Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel to calculate frequencies, percentages, and t-tests. Data from the questionnaire were organized in rows, with each row representing a different respondent and columns representing the different themes. COUNT IF, (Frequency / Total Responses) * 100, and T.TEST functions were used to analyze data. The data were reported in tables.

Results and Discussion

Results

Research Question 1

This question inquires about Iranian undergraduate students' perceptions of the ease and frequency of cheating in online English tests.

Qualitative Analysis of students' perceptions of the ease and frequency of cheating in online English tests

The qualitative analysis of interview responses aimed to gather insights into participants' perceptions of cheating prevalence, the methods employed, and reasons for cheating in online English exams. All ten participants expressed the view that instances of cheating are higher in online examinations compared to traditional in-person exams. Selected comments are:

“Cheating can occur in regular in-person exams, but it is more prevalent in online tests.”

“It is pretty easy to cheat on online tests, and many students do it.”

“I cheat because everyone else does it in online exams.”

“Avoiding cheating in online exams is impossible, as students always find ways to break the rules.”

Quantitative Analysis of students' perceptions of the ease and frequency of cheating in online English tests

Table 2 summarizes students' perceptions of cheating in online English exams (see Table 2 on the following page). It illustrates that many students believe it is easier to cheat in online exams compared to face-to-face exams (agreed: 34.6%, strongly agreed: 30.7%). Similarly, for statement 2, most students think cheating happens more frequently in online exams than in traditional in-person exams (agreed: 38.5%, strongly agreed: 28.7%).

Table 2.

Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Cheating in Online Exams and In-person Exams

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. It is easier to cheat in online exams (compared to face-to-face exams).	9.80%	11.10%	13.70%	34.60%	30.70%
2. Cheating happens more in online exams than in face-to-face exams.	11.70%	10.40%	10.40%	38.50%	28.70%

Research Question 2

This question examines whether students cheat more in online English exams compared to face-to-face exams. While the answer can also be found in the first question, it is directly addressed here by comparing students' performances across both online and in-person testing environments. The paired sample t-test reveals a significant difference in participants' performances between parallel online and face-to-face exams. Participants scored much higher on online exams, with a mean score of 7.46, compared to a mean score of 1.91 for in-person exams. Additionally, the variance in scores was lower for online exams (1.99) than in-person exams (5.06), indicating more consistent online performance. The paired t-test yielded a p-value of 0.00, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which suggested no significant difference between the scores from online and traditional in-person assessments. The p-value of 0.05 and the highly significant t-value confirms that these differences are statistically significant. This suggests that

participants perform better and more consistently in online exams than in face-to-face exams. (See Table 3).

Table 3.
Paired sample t-test of differences between Participants' Performances in Online and Face-to-face exams

	mean	variance	p-value	t value
online exams	7.46	1.99		
in-person exams	1.91	5.06	0.05	0.00**

Note: ** indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

Research Question 3

This question asks if students cheat more in online English exams than in exams in other subjects. The survey data shows that 53.5% of respondents (30% strongly disagree, 23.5% disagree) believe cheating is not easier in English online exams compared to other subjects. Meanwhile, 25.4% have no opinion, indicating uncertainty, and 20.8% (17.6% agree, 3.2% strongly agree) think cheating is easier in English exams. This highlights a majority view against the ease of cheating in English exams than in other subjects. (See Table 4).

Table 4.
Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Cheating in Online English Exams and Other Subjects

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
3. It is easier to cheat in the English online exam (compared to other subjects).	30%	23.5%	25.4%	17.6%	3.2%

Research Question 4

This question inquired about Iranian undergraduate students' perceptions of different forms of cheating in online English exams.

Qualitative Analysis of students' perceptions of different forms of cheating in online English exams

This part of the study examines participants' views on the popular forms of cheating used by the participants. Their responses were analyzed and categorized based on Noorbehbahani et al.'s (2022) prevention model including individual and group cheating forms. Participants mentioned various cheating forms they or other students use, ranging from those carried out independently to those requiring collusion with other students.

Individual Cheating Forms

The majority of participants mentioned that students often resort to looking up information online (6 participants), utilizing a dictionary (3 participants), and consulting books (3 participants) as the main forms of cheating during exams. Examples of their comments include:

“I often look up information on Google during exams because it is quick and easy.”

“I use a dictionary to check meanings of unknown words quickly.”

“I download PDFs of my textbooks to quickly find answers during the exam.”

Group Cheating Forms

Some students referred to forms of cheating that included assistance from each other, such as creating virtual groups and getting together to exchange answers (3 participants), or seeking external help from others during the exam (4 participants). Selected comments include:

“Students form groups on WhatsApp to share answers.”

“Students gather in dormitories to collaboratively answer questions.”

“Students send photos of questions to someone else to find answers.”

“Students have someone else take the exam on their behalf.”

This analysis highlights the prevalent belief among participants that cheating is more common and more accessible in online exams than in traditional settings. The identified cheating forms, both individual and group-based, reveal students' tactics to avoid exam rules and regulations.

Quantitative Analysis of students' perceptions of different forms of cheating in online English exams

The results obtained from Table 4, which presents the undergraduate students' perceptions of forms of cheating in online exams, can be interpreted as follows:

The analysis of responses reveals a clear trend in perceptions of various methods of seeking help during tests. Methods perceived as direct cheating, such as giving someone else the username and password (66% disapproval) or obtaining answers for money (59.5% disapproval), are overwhelmingly disapproved by the majority. Conversely, using legitimate resources like books and pamphlets (56.2% approval) and dictionaries or Google Translate (54.2% approval) is generally accepted. Opinions on collaborative efforts, such as creating virtual groups (48.4% disapproval) or gathering together to answer questions (41.9% disapproval), are more divided, with a significant minority (31.4% and 37.9%, respectively) finding these approaches acceptable despite overall disapproval. This indicates a nuanced perspective among respondents, who largely reject

direct dishonest practices while showing some tolerance for resource-based and collaborative cheating forms. Table 5 presents the undergraduate students' perceptions of cheating forms in Online Exams.

Table 5.
Students' Perceptions of the Cheating Forms in Online Exams

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	strongly Agree
4. We create a virtual group and share the answers.	38.6%	9.8%	20.3%	22.2%	9.2%
5. We gather together and answer the questions together	30.1%	11.8%	20.3%	28.1%	9.8%
6. We make a video or voice call with another line during the test	43.1%	18.3%	17.6%	13.1%	7.8%
7. I search on Google and get help from different sites	35.3%	14.4%	17.6%	24.2%	8.5%
8. I get help from my books and pamphlets	19.6%	15%	9.2%	37.9%	18.3%
9. I use a dictionary and Google Translate	24.8%	11.1%	9.8%	34.6%	19.6%
10. I give the username and password to someone to try for me	52.9%	13.1%	13.7%	13.7%	6.5%
11. We divide the different parts of the book and everyone reads and answers the part related to him	39.9%	11.8%	19.6%	21.6%	7.2%
12. I ask for help from an expert in a group or individually, or we get the answers in exchange for money	49%	10.5%	17.6%	15%	7.8%

Research Question 5

This question looks at the motivations or reasons behind cheating among Iranian undergraduate students in online English exams.

Qualitative Analysis of students' motivations or reasons behind cheating

This part of the study examines participants' reasons for cheating. Their responses are analyzed and categorized based on Cressey's (1953) Fraud Triangle Framework, which defines three key elements leading to academic fraud: opportunity, incentive or pressure, and rationalization.

Opportunity

According to the Fraud Triangle Framework, cheating occurs when students recognize an opportunity to cheat without risk of detection. Most participants (seven out of ten) referred to the ease of cheating in online exams and viewed it as an opportunity. Selected comments include:

“It is pretty easy to cheat on online tests, and many students do it.”

“My classmates form virtual groups on WhatsApp or Telegram to share answers during the exam, and it remains undetected.”

“Students get help from Google, books, and dictionaries easily. There is no limitation.”

“Avoiding cheating in online exams is impossible, as students always find ways to cheat.”

Pressure

The motivation to cheat can stem from various pressures or needs, originating from family expectations, peer influence, academic demands, the volume of work, and time constraints. The competitive academic environment also adds to the pressure to cheat. Three participants' responses highlight various pressures they face:

“The coursework is overwhelming, and I do not have enough time to study properly.”

“Everyone else is getting good grades, and I need to keep up.”

“I need to perform well to meet my teacher’s and parents’ expectations.”

Rationalization

Rationalization involves students justifying their dishonest behavior. Four participants provided various reasons that illustrate how they rationalize cheating. Selected comments are:

“With the advancement of technology, cheating in online exams is not a big deal. We can easily use resources and technology to access information in real-life and work environments, so using them during exams seems justified.”

“What is the problem with cheating? We can get a better grade. It can also be a learning opportunity.”

“I cheat because everyone cheats in online exams.”

Based on rationalization views, it is crucial to focus on fostering a culture of integrity and understanding alongside implementing practical measures.

These comments illustrate how opportunity, pressure, and rationalization contribute to students' decisions to cheat. The perceived ease of cheating in online exams, the pressures of academic performance, time management, and external expectations combine with rationalizations that minimize the perceived wrongdoing of cheating, ultimately fostering an environment where academic dishonesty is more likely to occur.

Qualitative Analysis of students' motivations or reasons behind cheating

Table 6 illustrates the distribution of undergraduate students' reasons for cheating across various statements. The percentages indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with each statement, highlighting the different motivations behind academic dishonesty. Notably, a significant proportion of students cheat to pass exams (19.61% strongly agree) and to improve their GPA (26.80% strongly agree). Additionally, 35.29% somewhat agree that they cheat due to piled-up coursework and lack of time. The difficulty of learning and inattentiveness is also a factor, with 32.68% somewhat agreeing. Although social influences are less impactful, 11.11% strongly agree they cheat because others do. Lastly, 20.92% somewhat agree that they feel good about cheating and getting a good grade without being noticed by the teacher.

Table 6.
undergraduate students' reasons for cheating

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	strongly Agree
13. I cheat just to pass the exam.	24.18%	18.30%	18.95%	18.95%	19.61%
14. I cheat to get a very good grade and improve my GPA.	14.38%	12.42%	18.95%	27.45%	26.80%
15. I cheat because the coursework has piled up over the semester and I don't have enough time to study.	24.18%	9.80%	11.76%	35.29%	18.95%
16. I cheat because learning in online classes is difficult, and I have been inattentive during the term.	15.69%	9.15%	25.49%	32.68%	16.99%
17. I cheat because other students do it too.	31.37%	14.38%	27.45%	15.69%	11.11%
18. I feel good about cheating and getting a good grade without the teacher noticing.	24.18%	16.99%	19.61%	20.92%	18.30%

Research Question 6

This question explored male and female participants' perceptions of cheating in online English tests.

The results of an independent t-test obtained from Table 7 analyzing the differences in perceptions of cheating between male and female undergraduate students can be interpreted as follows:

The p-values associated with the cheating forms "I search on Google and get help from other sites," "I get help from my books and pamphlets," and "I use a dictionary and Google Translate" are all 0.00. Additionally, the p-value for the statement "Cheating happens more in online exams" is 0.045. These p-values indicate a statistically significant

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difference between male and female undergraduate students' perceptions ($p < 0.05$). The data shows that female participants are more likely to engage in these three specific cheating forms and believe that cheating occurs more frequently in online exams compared to their male counterparts, based on the mean responses. For the remaining statements, where p-values exceed 0.05, there are no significant differences between male and female students' perceptions and behaviors.

Here is the table 7 that presents male and female undergraduate students' perceptions of differences in cheating and the forms used by them:

Table 7.
Male and Female Undergraduate Students' Perceptions Differences of Cheating and Cheating Forms used by them

Statements	Mean		SD		P value
	male	female	male	female	
Prevalence of Cheating					
It is easier to cheat in online exams.	3.51	3.75	1.32	1.29	0.25
Cheating happens more in online exams than in face-to-face exams.	3.4	3.83	1.35	1.26	0.04**
It is easier to cheat in the English online exam (compared to other subjects).	2.49	2.34	1.11	1.26	0.42
Forms of Cheating					
We create a virtual group and share the answers	2.37	2.68	1.42	1.43	0.19
We gather together and answer the questions	2.7	2.79	1.35	1.44	0.69
We make a video or voice call during the test	2.15	2.36	1.31	1.37	0.33
I search on Google and get help from sites	2.25	2.84	1.31	1.44	0.00**
I get help from my books and pamphlets	2.84	3.51	1.41	1.36	0.00**
I use a dictionary and Google Translate	2.74	3.48	1.47	1.42	0.00**
The user has given his username and password to someone to try for me	1.89	2.3	1.16	1.5	0.06
We divide the different parts of the book and everyone reads and answers the part related to him	2.41	2.46	1.36	1.42	0.82
We ask for help from an expert in a group or individually, or we get the answers in exchange for money	2.12	2.28	1.35	1.4	0.50
Reasons for Cheating					
I cheat just to pass the exam.	2.86	2.96	1.54	1.39	0.68
I cheat to get a very good grade and improve my GPA.	3.23	3.55	1.4	1.35	0.16

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Statements	Mean		SD		P value
	male	female	male	female	
I cheat because the coursework has piled up over the term and I don't have enough time to study.	3.04	3.25	1.48	1.47	0.38
16. I cheat because it is easy to cheat.	3.08	3.43	1.31	1.26	0.1
I cheat because other students do it too.	2.48	2.73	1.39	1.34	0.27
I feel good about cheating and getting a good grade without being caught.	3.03	2.83	1.47	1.42	0.39

Note: ** indicates statistical significance (<0.05)

Discussion

Based on the participants' perception and performance, the online examination format facilitates dishonest practices more than traditional face-to-face exams, with cheating occurring more frequently in online settings. Several studies (Chirumamilla et al., 2020; Grijalva et al., 2006; King et al., 2009; Lancaster & Cotarlan, 2021; Noorbehbahani et al., 2022; Salehi & Gholampour, 2021) support this, suggesting that cheating is more convenient and accessible in online assessments due to factors such as lack of direct supervision, easier access to resources, and potential for collaboration among students. For example, Lancaster and Cotarlan (2021) documented a 196.25% increase in the use of the Chegg website for homework help during COVID-19. Similarly, Salehi and Gholampour (2021) found that only 39.46% of students disapproved of cheating, suggesting that many may engage in dishonest practices. This finding emphasizes the need for robust anti-cheating measures in online exams designed to ensure academic integrity. However, Watson and Sottile (2010) found that cheating was less prevalent in online courses compared to face-to-face exams, with students more likely to seek answers from peers during in-person tests.

The participants believe that cheating in the EFL context is not necessarily easier compared to other subjects. Studies by Chirumamilla et al. (2020), Noorbehbahani et al. (2022), and Saleh and Meccawy (2021) support this, showing no significant difference between cheating in language exams and other subjects. For instance, Chirumamilla et al. (2020) identified similar behaviors across subjects, including unauthorized aids and collaboration. Similarly, Saleh and Meccawy (2021) found that EFL female students commonly cheated by collaborating with peers, sharing answers, and using electronic websites, with impersonation being the least frequent method, indicating no significant difference between subjects. In contrast, Correa (2014) observed that academic dishonesty in foreign language classes differs in specific issues like unauthorized editing

by proficient speakers and online translators. Rofiah and Waluyo (2020) noted that while Socrative as a testing tool is useful for formative assessments, it also presents opportunities for cheating, particularly through easy vocabulary searching. Bailey and Csomay (2021) also highlighted significant differences in lexical features between language student papers and contract cheating papers, underscoring instructors' concerns about the authenticity of student work.

Regarding the reasons for cheating, the results from the survey support the Fraud Triangle model proposed by Cressey (1953), demonstrating how perceived pressures, opportunities, and rationalizations contribute to students' motivations to cheat. Academic pressures (such as the need to pass exams and improve GPA), the opportunities presented by the online learning environment, and personal justifications (such as feeling good about cheating and the influence of peers) all interplay to drive academic dishonesty among students. These insights highlight the complex interplay of environmental opportunities, performance pressures, and personal justifications behind students' motivations to engage in academic dishonesty. Similarly, as Noorbehbahani et al. (2022) noted, the motivation behind cheating, particularly in academic settings, can be complex and multifaceted. Various teacher-related, institutional, internal, and environmental factors explain why individuals behave dishonestly. Other research has also linked cheating to various reasons, such as its perception as a standard or essential strategy, mainly when individuals are under substantial academic pressure or striving to achieve personal goals like retaining a scholarship (King et al., 2009) and insufficient exam preparation (Salehi & Gholampour, 2021).

Based on the participants' views, cheating in online exams can take various forms, ranging from individual actions to group efforts. This aligns with the Cheating Methods Model by Noorbehbahani et al. (2022), which categorizes cheating practices into group and individual actions and proposes some forms for each category. However, the study indicates that most students prefer cheating forms that utilize their resources or tools, which are less likely to involve others or leave evidence. The least common methods involve direct cooperation with others or paying for services. These observations are consistent with various studies that highlight individual approaches to cheating. For instance, Moten et al. (2013) noted that students predominantly choose to cheat alone without involving peers. Similarly, Clark et al. (2020) found that students mainly engaged in solo cheating activities, such as using test banks and independently searching online for answers. However, other research suggests that students mostly seek peer assistance during online assessments. For example, Chirumamilla et al. (2020) and Saleh and

Meccawy (2021) indicate a tendency for students to ask for help from fellow students. Specifically, Saleh and Meccawy (2021) found that EFL female students often cheated by helping each other and sharing answers with classmates during online exams. The findings suggest that while individual cheating is more prevalent, collaborative cheating still occurs. Addressing individual and group cheating forms is essential for maintaining academic integrity in online learning environments.

Regarding the perceptions and forms of cheating concerning gender, students of both male and female genders perceive online exams as easier to cheat in compared to face-to-face exams, reporting a range of cheating forms (see Case et al., 2019; Chirumamilla et al., 2020; Moten et al., 2013; Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). The findings in the current study suggest that while both genders engage in various forms of academic dishonesty, female students may be more inclined to utilize certain technological aids and perceive online environments as more conducive to cheating. Specific individual cheating techniques, such as searching on Google, consulting books and pamphlets, and utilizing dictionaries and Google Translate, are employed by female participants. Similarly, DePalma et al. (1995) and Krienert et al. (2022) have indicated that females demonstrate a higher inclination toward engaging in some cheating behaviors compared to males, with DePalma et al. (1995) finding that females cheated twice as often as males. According to Krienert et al. (2022), female students are more likely to use technology-related techniques such as searching the internet and online dictionaries. In contrast, based on different studies (i.e., Case et al., 2019; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; Jensen et al., 2002; Kobayashi & Fukushima, 2012; McCabe & Trevino, 1997), males may be less responsible in fulfilling homework and taking exams, exhibiting more unethical behavior and a greater inclination to take risks. For example, Jensen et al. (2002) found that male students were more likely to engage in cheating, a tendency they attributed to men's higher inclination for taking risks and employing more direct cheating techniques such as cooperation with others, paying for services, looking up answers on their phones or hacking systems. McCabe and Trevino (1997) also found that male students are more likely to cheat using direct cheating methods. McCabe and Trevino (1997) added that female students tend to use less detectable means like essay mills, online forums, translation tools, and grammar checkers, which is in line with the findings of the current study. Understanding these gender-specific tendencies can help in designing more effective academic integrity policies and interventions tailored to address the unique challenges faced by each gender in online learning environments.

This study's findings align with previous research on cheating and plagiarism among Iranian university students in EFL settings, confirming a high prevalence of cheating (Ahmadi, 2012; 2014; Salehi & Gholampour, 2021; Maleki, 2024). Consistent with this study, Ahmadi (2012, 2014) identified inadequate preparation, exam difficulty, and lenient instructors as key reasons for cheating. Maleki (2024) also highlighted student-related, teaching-related, and assessment-related factors contributing to academic dishonesty in online settings. This study emphasizes that individual forms of cheating are more prevalent. Similarly, Ahmadi (2012) identifies copying answers as a common cheating practice, whereas Salehi and Gholampour (2021) found that allowing peers to view exam papers was the predominant cheating form. Furthermore, Ahmadi (2012, 2014) and Salehi and Gholampour (2021) found no significant impact of gender on cheating behaviors.

Based on students' perceptions of cheating prevalence, forms, reasons, and gender differences discussed above, no single method is universally effective in tackling cheating in online exams. A multifaceted approach that combines technological with psychological prevention measures might be the most effective way to maintain academic integrity. Similarly, various studies emphasize the importance of educating students on ethics, making the consequences of academic dishonesty clear, and applying strict technological obstacles to cheating (see Meccawy et al., 2021; Noorbehbahani et al., 2022; Saleh & Meccawy, 2021). Supporting this, Noorbehbahani et al. (2022) suggest integrating comprehensive preventive technology with psychological measures before and during online exams to combat the evolving challenge of academic dishonesty. However, some research focuses exclusively on one aspect of prevention. At the technological level, certain studies advocate for employing specific measures during online exams, such as fingerprint verification and eye-tracking, to ensure student identity and engagement (Bawarith et al., 2017; Kolhar et al., 2018). Babaii and Nejadghanbar (2017) stress the need for clear definitions of plagiarism and more severe, uniform rules to manage and penalize plagiarists.

Conclusion

This study highlights the perception and prevalence of cheating in online English exams, with a particular emphasis on the differences in cheating perceptions between genders. Cheating is perceived as more common in online exams due to the lack of supervision and easy access to digital resources. The motivations to cheat are primarily driven by academic pressures, opportunities, and rationalizations, necessitating

comprehensive strategies to address these issues. The findings also suggest that while individual cheating is more prevalent, particularly in specific contexts, collaborative cheating still occurs. This comprehensive understanding can help in developing targeted strategies. Therefore, it is essential to address cheating forms and motivations and to implement preventative measures before and during exams to maintain academic integrity in online education settings.

Institutions should offer enhanced academic support to help students manage pressures and improve their study skills. Clear academic integrity policies and education on the consequences of cheating are essential to fostering a culture of honesty. Innovative assessments, such as open-book exams, formative assessments, and oral tests instead of a final written exam, can reduce opportunities for cheating. While technological measures like proctoring software are essential, they should be part of a broader strategy that includes integrity training and clear exam rules. Tailored interventions that address the distinct behaviors of male and female students can also enhance the effectiveness of these strategies. By implementing these measures, educational institutions can promote academic integrity in online learning environments.

The study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, its scope is restricted to online exams at two universities, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include various disciplines and more universities would provide a broader perspective. The study also only examines English exams, so future research can investigate online exams in different subjects to gain a comprehensive understanding of cheating behaviors across various subjects. The data collection methods used in the study are interviews and questionnaires, and future research could benefit from incorporating additional methods, such as focus groups or observational studies, to add depth to the findings. In this study, gender has been examined over participants' perceptions, future studies can deal with other variables such as different age groups, educational levels, GPA, etc.

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback, which has significantly enhanced the quality of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors herein confirm that they do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding

The study did not receive any financial assistance or sponsorship from any organization or institution.

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Appendix A Interview Questions

1. Is the rate of student cheating higher in online exams compared to in-person exams?
2. What are the motivations for students to cheat in online exams?
3. What cheating forms do students commonly use in online exams?

Appendix B Questionnaire

Thank you very much for your participation. This research aims to examine students' perspectives on the topic of cheating in online English language exams. The identity of the participants in this study will be completely confidential. We sincerely appreciate your cooperation in this research.
Gender: Female — Male —

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	No Opinion	Somewhat Agree	strongly Agree
Prevalence and Ease of Cheating					
It is easier to cheat in online exams.					
Cheating happens more in online exams than in face-to-face exams.					
It is easier to cheat in the English online exam (compared to other subjects).					
Forms of Cheating					
We create a virtual group and share the answers					
We gather together and answer the questions					
We make a video or voice call during the test					
I search on Google and get help from sites					
I get help from my books and pamphlets					
I use a dictionary and Google Translate					
I give my username and password to someone to try for me					
We divide the different parts of the book and everyone reads and answers the part related to him					
We ask for help from an expert in a group or individually, or we get the answers in exchange for money					
Reasons for Cheating					
I cheat just to pass the exam.					
I cheat to get a very good grade and improve my GPA.					
I cheat because the coursework has piled up over the term and I don't have enough time to study.					
I cheat because it is easy to cheat.					
I cheat because other students do it too.					
I feel good about cheating and getting a good grade without being caught.					