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# The Mediating Role of Moral Development and Religious Orientation in the Relationship of Narcissism and Bullying with Academic Cheating among Upper Secondary School Students

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A B S T R A C T

**Objective:** This study aimed to model the effects of narcissism and bullying on academic cheating through the mediating roles of moral development and religious orientation among upper secondary school students.

**Methods and Materials:** This applied correlational study was conducted among upper secondary school students in Zanjan during the 2024–2025 academic year. A total of 311 students, including 167 boys and 144 girls, were selected using multistage cluster sampling. Data were collected using Murdock and Stephens' Academic Cheating Questionnaire, the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory by Ames, Rose, and Anderson, the Illinois Bullying Scale by Espelage and Holt, Manavipour's Moral Development Scale, and Allport and Ross's Religious Orientation Scale. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients, path analysis, and bootstrap testing in SPSS version 28 and AMOS version 24.

**Findings:** The proposed model demonstrated acceptable fit indices (GFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.053). Narcissism positively and significantly predicted academic cheating ($\beta = 0.168$, $p = 0.003$), and bullying also positively and significantly predicted academic cheating ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$). Moral development negatively predicted academic cheating ($\beta = -0.202$, $p < 0.001$). Intrinsic religious orientation ($\beta = -0.181$, $p < 0.001$) and extrinsic religious orientation ($\beta = -0.187$, $p < 0.001$) also negatively and significantly predicted academic cheating. Narcissism ($\beta = -0.270$, $p < 0.001$) and bullying ($\beta = -0.320$, $p < 0.001$) negatively predicted moral development. Indirect effect analysis showed that moral development significantly mediated the relationships between narcissism ($\beta = 0.054$, $p = 0.002$) and bullying ($\beta = 0.065$, $p < 0.001$) with academic cheating. Intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation also showed significant mediating effects.

**Conclusion:** The findings indicate that moral development and religious orientation function as protective mechanisms in the relationships of narcissism and bullying with academic cheating. Preventive and educational interventions aimed at reducing academic cheating may benefit from strengthening moral reasoning, empathy, moral self-regulation, and the internalization of religious values among upper secondary school students.

***Keywords:*** *Narcissism, Bullying, Academic Cheating, Moral Development, Religious Orientation, Upper Secondary School Students.*

## 1. Introduction

Academic cheating is one of the persistent behavioral and moral challenges in educational systems and has become a major concern in school psychology because it directly undermines the validity of assessment, the development of academic competence, and the formation of responsible student identity. Academic cheating includes a wide range of dishonest behaviors, such as copying from peers, using unauthorized materials, sharing answers, falsifying assignments, and justifying dishonest performance as a normal or necessary response to academic pressure. Although cheating is often viewed as a situational response to examination stress or competitive schooling, psychological research increasingly emphasizes that academic dishonesty is shaped by the interaction of personality traits, peer norms, motivational beliefs, moral reasoning, and contextual affordances. Studies on academic misconduct show that students' cheating behavior is not merely a technical violation of school rules, but a complex developmental phenomenon associated with self-regulation, moral judgment, identity formation, and the quality of the educational climate (Rosari et al., 2026; Stephens, 2018).

The importance of studying academic cheating is especially evident during adolescence, a period marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. Upper secondary school students are in a developmental stage in which autonomy, peer approval, achievement pressure, identity exploration, and sensitivity to fairness become particularly salient. Schools are not only instructional environments but also developmental contexts in which students internalize norms related to responsibility, justice, competition, cooperation, and self-discipline (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Adolescence is also a period of heightened sensitivity to reward, status, peer evaluation, and social comparison, which may increase vulnerability to both academic misconduct and aggressive peer behavior when moral self-regulation is weak or when achievement is pursued without internalized ethical standards (Steinberg, 2014). Therefore, examining academic cheating among upper secondary school students requires attention to both personal characteristics and moral-social mechanisms that may either intensify or reduce dishonest behavior.

Academic cheating has been linked to multiple motivational and contextual factors, including performance pressure, low academic motivation, perceived peer cheating, weak teacher-student relationships, and reduced internal commitment to learning. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that achievement goals and motivational orientations play a meaningful role in academic dishonesty, particularly when students prioritize external performance outcomes over mastery, learning, and personal improvement (Fritz et al., 2022; Krou et al., 2021). In a similar direction, studies have shown that academic cheating may interfere with actual learning, because students who rely on dishonest strategies may avoid cognitive effort and fail to consolidate knowledge and skills (Zhao et al., 2023). Evidence from different cultural contexts further indicates that academic cheating is influenced by both individual and environmental conditions, including perceived academic burden, opportunity, peer practices, and insufficient ethical commitment (Alotaibi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that academic cheating is best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in personality, moral development, and the social ecology of schooling.

One of the personality variables that may contribute to academic cheating is narcissism. Narcissism refers to a personality tendency characterized by exaggerated self-importance, entitlement, superiority, admiration seeking, and a reduced tendency to accept personal limitations. Contemporary models describe narcissism as a spectrum that may include both grandiose and vulnerable forms, with common features such as self-enhancement, antagonism, and heightened concern with status and recognition (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Recent research has continued to clarify the complexity of narcissism, showing that it is not a single homogeneous trait but a multidimensional construct with different interpersonal, emotional, and behavioral consequences (Miller et al., 2021). From an educational perspective, narcissistic traits may increase the likelihood of academic dishonesty because narcissistic students may feel entitled to success, be less willing to tolerate failure, and be more likely to rationalize unethical behavior when their desired self-image is threatened.

Empirical findings support the relationship between narcissism and academic dishonesty. Narcissism has been associated with cheating, particularly through exhibitionistic tendencies, reduced guilt, and the desire to maintain a superior self-presentation (Brunell et al., 2011). Research on scholastic cheaters also indicates that academic dishonesty is associated with personality profiles marked by lower ethical restraint and stronger self-serving motivations (Williams et al., 2010). More recent studies on dark personality traits show that narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and related antagonistic traits predict academic cheating and other forms of misconduct, suggesting that



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dishonest academic behavior may partly reflect a broader pattern of self-centeredness, manipulation, and reduced moral inhibition (Esteves et al., 2021; Song & Liu, 2025). In the Iranian context, research has also examined the relationship between dark personality traits, moral idealism, conscientiousness, honesty-humility, and academic cheating, highlighting the relevance of personality and moral dispositions in explaining dishonest academic behavior (Mikaeeli Manee et al., 2025).

The study of narcissism is also important because cultural and generational changes may shape self-focus, entitlement, and social comparison among young people. Research on birth cohort changes has suggested increases in narcissistic personality traits among students over time, raising concerns about how self-enhancement and entitlement may affect social and academic behaviors (Twenge & Foster, 2010). At the same time, cross-cultural work on narcissism and well-being shows that narcissism may have different implications depending on cultural norms, relational expectations, and the balance between self-confidence and interpersonal responsibility (Sedikides et al., 2026). In educational environments, these issues become particularly relevant because students are required to balance self-advancement with fairness, respect for rules, and responsibility toward peers. When narcissistic needs for superiority and success are not regulated by moral standards, students may be more inclined to justify cheating as a legitimate means of protecting status or avoiding failure.

Bullying is another important variable that may be associated with academic cheating. Bullying refers to repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance, including physical, verbal, relational, and increasingly digital forms of aggression. Classic and contemporary research emphasizes that bullying is a persistent school-based problem with significant psychological, social, and academic consequences for both aggressors and victims (Olweus & Limber, 2018). Predictors of bullying and victimization include individual characteristics, peer group processes, school climate, family factors, and broader social norms related to aggression and dominance (Cook et al., 2010). Bullying behaviors among children and adolescents have been described as an ongoing public health and educational issue that requires attention to developmental, interpersonal, and contextual risk factors (Tsitsika et al., 2014). Because bullying involves harm, coercion, dominance, and reduced sensitivity to others' rights, it may share psychological mechanisms with academic cheating, particularly moral disengagement, low empathy, and weak self-discipline.

The connection between bullying and academic cheating can be conceptualized through the broader framework of self-regulation and moral conduct. Both bullying and cheating involve violations of social or institutional norms, and both may be facilitated by rationalization, diffusion of responsibility, minimization of harm, or prioritization of self-interest over ethical obligations. Students who engage in bullying may be more likely to disregard rules, exploit social situations, and justify harmful behavior, which may generalize to dishonest academic contexts. Recent discussions of lying, cheating, bullying, and narcissism emphasize that these behaviors may be linked through deficiencies in self-discipline, moral development, and the internalization of prosocial norms (Bear, 2024). Moreover, studies on dark personality traits in aggressors and victims of school bullying suggest that antagonistic traits may be meaningfully related to bullying roles, indicating overlap between aggressive behavior, personality pathology, and moral-emotional functioning (Estevez et al., 2025).

Moral development is a central protective mechanism that may explain why some students with risk-related personality or behavioral tendencies engage in cheating whereas others do not. Moral development refers to the progressive formation of moral reasoning, moral judgment, responsibility, justice orientation, and sensitivity to the consequences of one's actions for others. In educational psychology, moral development is viewed as a foundation for academic integrity because it helps students evaluate not only whether a behavior is useful, but whether it is fair, honest, and consistent with internalized values. Moral reasoning has been identified as a key factor in bridging the gap between academic integrity policies and students' actual behavior, because rules alone may be insufficient when students do not personally endorse the moral meaning of honesty (Stephens, 2018). The availability of a moral development scale for students also provides a basis for empirically examining moral growth as a measurable psychological construct in educational contexts (Manavipour, 2012).

Moral development may mediate the relationship between narcissism and academic cheating because narcissistic students may show weaker concern for fairness, less guilt after dishonest behavior, and greater tendency to prioritize self-enhancement over responsibility. When moral development is stronger, however, students may be better able to regulate entitlement, evaluate the consequences of

cheating, and resist self-serving rationalizations. Moral judgment is also relevant to students' evaluations of merit, fairness, and resource distribution. Developmental research on judgments of merit and inequality suggests that children and young adults consider fairness-related criteria when evaluating unequal outcomes, indicating that moral reasoning continues to develop across childhood and youth and may shape responses to academic competition (Forbes et al., 2026). Therefore, moral development may function as a psychological pathway through which personality traits affect academic conduct.

Moral development may also mediate the relationship between bullying and academic cheating. Bullying reflects difficulty respecting others' rights and maintaining prosocial behavioral boundaries, and these difficulties may reflect lower moral reasoning or weaker internalization of moral norms. Students who bully may be more likely to justify harm, deny responsibility, or minimize the seriousness of rule violations. These same mechanisms can facilitate academic cheating when students perceive dishonesty as harmless, common, or necessary. Conversely, higher moral development may reduce both aggressive and dishonest tendencies by strengthening empathy, responsibility, and sensitivity to justice. In this respect, moral development is not merely an abstract cognitive variable but a practical regulatory capacity that can inhibit unethical behavior across interpersonal and academic domains.

Religious orientation is another potentially important protective factor in the relationship between narcissism, bullying, and academic cheating. Religious orientation generally refers to the motivational meaning of religion in a person's life and is often differentiated into intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. Intrinsic religious orientation reflects internalized religious commitment, in which religious values guide personal conduct and moral decision-making. Extrinsic religious orientation reflects the use of religion for social, emotional, or instrumental benefits. Religious orientation may be related to academic cheating because religious beliefs can provide moral standards, meaning, self-monitoring, and a sense of accountability. Research on religion and well-being has emphasized the mediating role of meaning in life, suggesting that religious frameworks may contribute to psychological adjustment by helping individuals interpret their experiences and regulate behavior through value-based meaning systems (Sasaki & Kim, 2016). A recent meta-analytic review also indicates that religious orientation is meaningfully related to mental health, supporting the psychological relevance of religious orientation as more than a purely doctrinal variable (Sjovag, 2024).

In the context of academic dishonesty, religious orientation may reduce cheating by strengthening moral commitment, responsibility, and perceived accountability. However, the effect of religion may depend on the degree to which religious values are internalized rather than used only for external approval. Empirical work on religious orientation and academic deviance has examined how intrinsic and extrinsic orientations may differ in their association with dishonest behavior, suggesting that the motivational quality of religiosity is important in understanding academic integrity (Jolicoeur, 2010). When religious orientation is internalized, students may be more likely to view academic honesty as part of personal moral identity. When religious orientation is primarily external, its protective function may be weaker or dependent on social monitoring. Nevertheless, both forms may still be relevant in cultural contexts where religious values influence social expectations, moral norms, and educational behavior.

The inclusion of religious orientation as a mediator is particularly meaningful in adolescent samples because adolescence is a period in which personal values, identity commitments, and moral beliefs become increasingly differentiated. Religious orientation may provide adolescents with a framework for interpreting responsibility, self-control, justice, and respect for others. It may also moderate or mediate the effects of risk-related traits by providing a counterweight to entitlement, aggression, and moral disengagement. In this regard, religious orientation may weaken the pathway from narcissism and bullying to cheating by strengthening inner standards and reducing the likelihood that students will rationalize dishonest behavior. At the same time, the quality of religious orientation must be considered carefully, because religious identity that is not internalized may not consistently prevent unethical behavior.

Recent educational changes have further intensified the need to study the psychological mechanisms of academic cheating. Expanding digital learning environments, the normalization of online resources, and new technologies such as generative artificial intelligence have changed the opportunities and rationalizations available for academic misconduct. Research on dark personality traits, academic misconduct, frustration, negative thinking, and generative AI use habits indicates that emerging academic environments may create new contexts in which personality vulnerabilities are expressed through dishonest behavior

(Song & Liu, 2025). At the same time, adolescent innovation, academic resilience, distance-learning self-efficacy, and academic performance have become increasingly important in understanding how students adapt to changing educational demands (Qi, 2025). These developments indicate that academic cheating should be examined through models that include both risk factors and protective developmental mechanisms.

Previous studies have separately examined academic cheating, narcissism, bullying, moral reasoning, and religious orientation, but fewer studies have integrated these variables into a single path model among upper secondary school students. Existing evidence shows that academic cheating is associated with motivational, personality, and contextual factors (Mirzakhani et al., 2023; Rosari et al., 2026). Other studies show that dark traits and narcissistic tendencies are linked to academic dishonesty (Brunell et al., 2011; Esteves et al., 2021; Mikaeeli Manee et al., 2025), while bullying research highlights the role of aggression, peer dynamics, and moral-social deficits in adolescent maladjustment (Cook et al., 2010; Estevez et al., 2025; Tsitsika et al., 2014). However, a more comprehensive explanatory model is needed to clarify whether moral development and religious orientation operate as mediating mechanisms through which narcissism and bullying influence academic cheating.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to model the effect of narcissism and bullying on academic cheating through the mediating roles of moral development and intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation among upper secondary school students.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### *2.1. Study Design and Participants*

The present study was applied in terms of its objective and correlational in nature, using a path analysis design. The statistical population consisted of all students in the 2024–2025 academic year. In predictive models, a sample size between 300 and 500 participants can be considered sufficient. To ensure sampling adequacy and considering the possibility of incomplete questionnaire responses and outlier data, 350 participants were selected using cluster sampling. Of this number, 50 questionnaires were excluded from the analysis because they had been completed incompletely by the participants, and data analysis was performed using 311 questionnaires. In the present study, the inclusion criteria were residence in Zanjan, being within the age range of 14 to 18 years, not using psychiatric medications during the previous three months, not attending counseling or psychotherapy sessions during the previous three months, and obtaining parental consent for the student's participation in the study. The exclusion criteria were failure to answer the questionnaire items completely or having a random or inconsistent response pattern.

To conduct the study, an ethics code was first obtained from the university ethics committee. During implementation, the following ethical requirements were observed. The research instruments were prepared and approved by the supervisor and advisor professors. Subsequently, an introduction letter was obtained from the university for the Department of Education of Zanjan. From each educational district of Zanjan, eight schools were randomly selected, including four girls' schools and four boys' schools, and from each school, three classes were randomly selected. The intended sample was then selected from eligible students in the selected classes. Because of the large number of schools, data collectors were used, and they received the necessary training for accurate data collection. In the next step, written informed consent was obtained from the students and their parents. Accordingly, the written agreement of adolescents and their parents was first obtained through completion of the relevant consent forms. These forms were distributed by trained research assistants during in-person meetings with parents. The process of distributing and collecting the questionnaires was carried out in the classroom environment in the presence of trained research assistants, who explained the objectives of the study to the students. This process was conducted in full compliance with research ethics principles, including scientific honesty, confidentiality, and the right to voluntary withdrawal.

### *2.2. Measures*

Academic Cheating Questionnaire: This scale was designed and developed by Murdock and Stephens (2005) to assess students' academic cheating. The questionnaire consists of 20 items and includes four components: perceived peer cheating, belief in cheating, neutralization of responsibility, and cheating behavior. The perceived peer cheating subscale is scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to very much (5). Belief in cheating is scored on a three-point scale (yes = 1, not sure = 2, and no = 3). Cheating behavior is scored on a three-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to more than once (3), and the neutralization of responsibility subscale is dichotomous (1 =


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disagree and 2 = agree). Murdock and Stephens (2005) calculated the reliability of the questionnaire scales using internal consistency. The alpha coefficients obtained were 0.73 for belief in cheating on assignments, 0.70 for belief in cheating on examinations, 0.79 for neutralization of responsibility, 0.71 for cheating behavior on assignments, and 0.75 for cheating behavior on examinations. In the study by Rabbani (2012), the reliability of the questionnaire was also examined using internal consistency. The obtained coefficients were 0.70 for belief in cheating on assignments, 0.71 for belief in cheating on examinations, 0.69 for neutralization of responsibility, 0.71 for cheating behavior on assignments, and 0.72 for cheating behavior on examinations, indicating the reliability of this questionnaire in the Iranian cultural context. In the study by Mizakhani, Taleh-Pasand, and Sotoudeh-Asl (2023), the construct validity of this scale was examined using confirmatory factor analysis, which showed that the questionnaire structure had an acceptable fit with the data. In addition, the reliability coefficients of the subscales were calculated as 0.79 for perceived peer cheating, 0.70 for belief in cheating, 0.71 for neutralization of responsibility, and 0.78 for cheating behavior. In the present study, the reliability of this scale was obtained using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.92.

Sixteen-Item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16): This questionnaire is the shortened version of the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory developed by Ames, Rose, and Anderson (2006), and it was developed by Mohammadzadeh in 2009 to assess characteristics related to narcissistic personality. This questionnaire has no subscales and evaluates narcissism based on a unidimensional approach. The NPI-16 consists of paired statements from which the respondent must choose one option. The test–retest reliability coefficient reported by the original developers of the test was 0.85 over a five-week interval. Convergent validity was examined by calculating the correlation coefficients between NPI-16 scores and scores obtained from the extraversion and openness to experience indices of the Big Five Inventory (BFI). These coefficients were calculated as 0.32 for extraversion and 0.41 for openness to experience. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire was obtained using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.74.

Illinois Bullying Scale: This scale was developed by Espelage and Holt (2001) to assess bullying and victimization among individuals aged 8 to 18 years. It includes 18 items and three subscales: bullying (9 items), victimization (4 items), and fighting (5 items). In the present study, the victimization subscale was used. The scale is scored using a five-point Likert index ranging from never (1) to seven times or more (5). A higher score in each dimension indicates greater occurrence of behaviors related to that dimension in the respondent. In this study, the questionnaire was used for preliminary screening of victimized students. Espelage and Holt reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.70 for the victimization scale, indicating desirable internal consistency for this questionnaire (Espelage & Holt, 2013). Chalmeh (2013), in a factor analysis conducted using the principal components method and varimax rotation, showed that this instrument consists of three factors titled bullying, fighting, and victimization, which explained more than 61% of the total variance. The same study also reported satisfactory internal consistency among the dimensions of the Illinois Bullying Scale and the total score, indicating the construct validity of the instrument. In that study, a desirable correlation was also found between the dimensions of the bullying scale and the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (1992), indicating the concurrent validity of the scale. In the present study, the reliability of this scale was obtained using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.83.

Moral Development Scale: The Moral Development Scale was developed by Manavipour (2012). This test includes 13 items and measures four moral levels, including pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, post-conventional morality, and social morality. Respondents select their answers on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In this questionnaire, items 5, 6, 11, and 12 are reverse scored. Manavipour (2012) considered a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.93 in a student sample as confirmation of the reliability of the developed scale. In the present study, the reliability of this scale was obtained using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.76.

Religious Orientation Scale (ROS): This scale was designed by Allport and Ross (1950) and consists of 21 items scored completely on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 4. Allport and Ross (1967) reported the correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic orientation as 0.21. In addition, extrinsic religious orientation includes 11 items, and intrinsic religious orientation includes 9 items. Feagin (1963) presented a 21-item version that included all of Allport's items plus one additional item. This item has a high positive correlation (0.61) with Allport's extrinsic scale. In the present study, the 21-item form was used. The scoring method of this instrument is based on a Likert scale ranging from strongly



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agree to strongly disagree, with scores from one to five assigned to the responses (option A = 1 to option D = 5), and statements 1 to 12 receive a score of three according to the response level. The total score of statements 1 to 12 indicates the respondent's extrinsic religious orientation, and the total score of statements 13 to 21 indicates intrinsic religious orientation, which is reverse scored. In Feagin's studies (1963), the correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic orientation was calculated as 0.20, which is very close to the correlation of 0.21 reported by Allport. The reliability of the questionnaire based on Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.71 by Janbozorgi (2007), and in Sadri's study, its test–retest reliability was obtained as 0.74. The reliability of the questionnaire was also calculated using the coefficient reported by Demirchi et al.

### *2.3. Data Analysis*

Data analysis was performed at two levels. At the descriptive level, descriptive statistical indices such as frequency, percentage, minimum score, maximum score, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were used. At the inferential level, Pearson's correlation test was first used to examine the relationships among the variables. In addition, the conceptual model (Figure 1) was examined using modeling. Before using these two tests, the assumptions of path analysis were examined, including the Durbin–Watson test to assess the assumption of independence of observations, the variance inflation factor (VIF) to examine the absence of collinearity among predictor variables, and skewness and kurtosis to assess the normality of the data. Regarding the fit of the conceptual model, fit indices including adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), comparative fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and incremental fit index (IFI), all with a cutoff point greater than 0.80, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi^2$/df) with a value smaller than 3, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with a cutoff point smaller than 0.08 were used. To estimate indirect effects, the bootstrap estimation method was applied. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 28 and AMOS version 24. The maximum alpha error level for testing the hypotheses was set at 0.05.

## 3. Findings and Results

Among the 311 participating students, 167 students (53.7%) were boys and 144 students (46.3%) were girls. In terms of age, 122 students (39.2%) were 15 years old, 113 students (36.3%) were 16 years old, 66 students (21.2%) were 17 years old, and 10 students (3.2%) were 18 years old. Regarding fathers' education, 116 fathers (37.3%) had below-diploma education, 120 fathers (38.6%) had a diploma, 46 fathers (14.8%) had a bachelor's degree, and 29 fathers (9.3%) had a master's degree or higher. Mothers' education was as follows: 108 mothers (34.7%) had below-diploma education, 143 mothers (46%) had a diploma, 42 mothers (13.5%) had a bachelor's degree, and 18 mothers (5.8%) had a master's degree or higher. In terms of educational grade, 190 students (61.1%) were studying in Grade 10, 92 students (29.6%) in Grade 11, and 29 students (9.3%) in Grade 12. In addition, 228 students (73.3%) were studying in the theoretical branch, 52 students (16.7%) in the fine arts conservatory, and 31 students (10%) in the technical and vocational conservatory. Finally, in terms of economic status, 35 students (11.3%) reported poor economic status, 127 students (40.8%) reported moderate economic status, 125 students (40.2%) reported good economic status, and 24 students (7.7%) reported excellent economic status. The mean and standard deviation of the research variables, as well as the assumptions of normality of data distribution and linearity, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Indices of the Research Variables*

| Variables | Mean | Standard Deviation | Skewness | Kurtosis | Tolerance Statistic | Variance Inflation Factor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Narcissism | 6.27 | 3.05 | 0.455 | 0.103 | 0.87 | 1.15 |
| Bullying | 18.37 | 7.92 | 0.936 | -0.019 | 0.87 | 1.15 |
| Moral development | 43.00 | 7.83 | -0.379 | -0.472 | 0.74 | 1.35 |
| Intrinsic religious orientation | 25.61 | 6.68 | -0.175 | -0.169 | 0.81 | 1.23 |
| Extrinsic religious orientation | 33.39 | 6.93 | -0.153 | -0.503 | 0.92 | 1.09 |
| Academic cheating | 94.43 | 17.62 | -0.167 | -0.671 | — | — |

The present table reports descriptive and diagnostic indices for the five main research variables, including narcissism, bullying, moral development, intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation, and academic cheating. The



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means indicate the level of each variable in the studied sample, such that the highest mean belonged to academic cheating (94.43), and the lowest belonged to narcissism (6.27). The standard deviations also indicate the dispersion of responses, with academic cheating (17.62) showing the highest dispersion and narcissism (3.05) showing the lowest dispersion. The skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were between -2 and +2, indicating a relatively normal distribution of the data. In addition, the tolerance statistic values, all above 0.70, and the variance inflation factor values, all below 1.35, indicated the absence of severe collinearity among the predictor variables.

Overall, the results of examining the statistical assumptions indicated that all assumptions were met, and Pearson's correlation and path analysis as parametric tests could be used; therefore, the results of these tests were considered valid. The correlation matrix among the research variables is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Pearson Correlation Matrix among the Research Variables*

| Variables | | Narcissism | Bullying | Moral Development | Intrinsic Religious Orientation | Extrinsic Religious Orientation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Narcissism | r | 1 | | | | |
| | p | <0.001 | | | | |
| Bullying | r | 0.173 | 1 | | | |
| | p | 0.002 | | | | |
| Moral development | r | -0.341 | -0.325 | 1 | | |
| | p | <0.001 | <0.001 | | | |
| Intrinsic religious orientation | r | -0.153 | -0.261 | 0.367 | 1 | |
| | p | 0.007 | <0.001 | <0.001 | | |
| Extrinsic religious orientation | r | -0.160 | -0.126 | 0.188 | 0.248 | 1 |
| | p | 0.005 | 0.026 | <0.001 | <0.001 | |
| Academic cheating | r | -0.127 | 0.354 | -0.283 | -0.311 | -0.152 |
| | p | 0.025 | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 | 0.007 |

The results of the Pearson correlation matrix showed that all relationships among the research variables were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Narcissism had a positive and significant relationship with bullying ($r = 0.173$) and negative and significant relationships with moral development ($r = -0.341$), intrinsic religious orientation ($r = -0.153$), and extrinsic religious orientation ($r = -0.160$). Bullying also showed negative and significant relationships with moral development ($r = -0.325$), intrinsic religious orientation ($r = -0.261$), and extrinsic religious orientation ($r = -0.126$). In examining relationships with academic cheating, narcissism had a significant correlation coefficient of -0.127, bullying had a coefficient of 0.354, moral development had a coefficient of -0.283, intrinsic religious orientation had a coefficient of -0.311, and extrinsic religious orientation had a coefficient of -0.152. The strongest correlations were related to the relationship between bullying and academic cheating and the relationship between moral development and intrinsic religious orientation ($r = 0.367$).

**Table 3**

*Goodness-of-Fit Indices of the Model*

| Index Name | $\chi^2$/df | GFI | AGFI | IFI | CFI | NFI | RMSEA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Model estimates | 2.07 | 0.90 | 0.88 | 0.94 | 0.90 | 0.90 | 0.053 |

The results of Table 3 show that all calculated goodness-of-fit indices used to examine the fit of the model were within the acceptable range, and the collected data were compatible with the proposed model; therefore, the model was confirmed. Figure 2 presents the results of the model with standardized coefficients.


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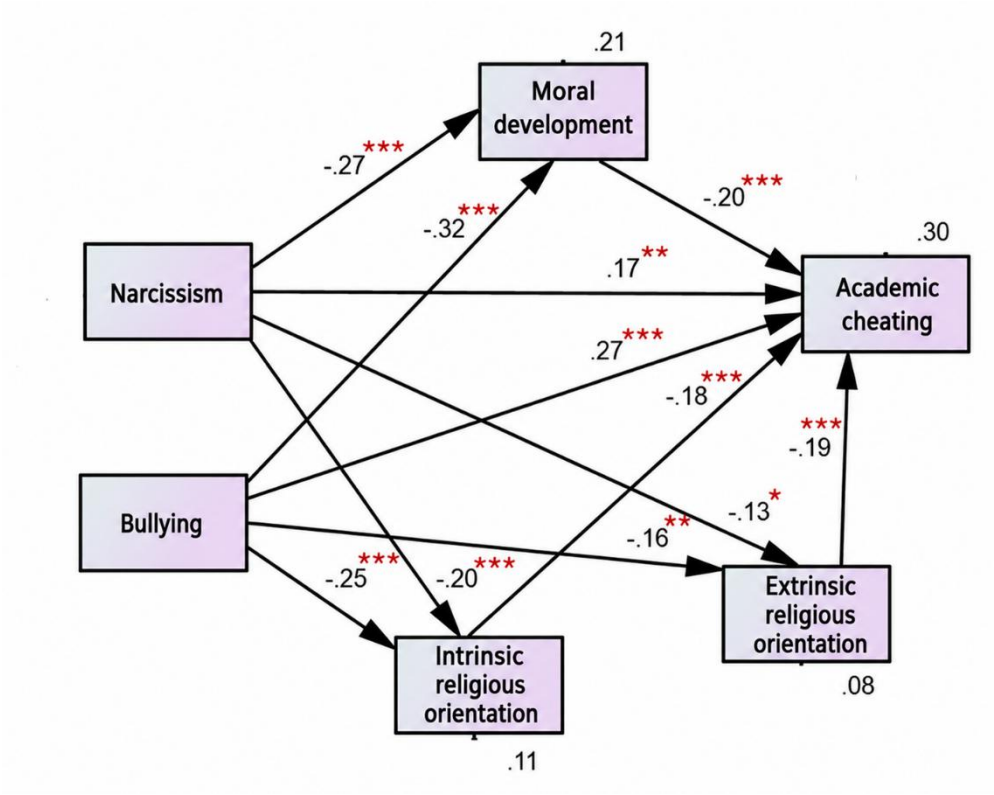
**Figure 1**

*Fitted model of the mediating role of moral development and religious orientation in the relationship of narcissism and bullying with academic cheating among upper secondary school students, with standardized coefficients.*




The results of the second to sixth hypotheses are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Direct Path Coefficients of the Research Variables*

| Direct Path | Standardized Coefficient | T Value | Probability Value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Narcissism → Academic cheating | 0.168 | 3.08 | 0.003 |
| Bullying → Academic cheating | 0.274 | 5.13 | <0.001 |
| Moral development → Academic cheating | -0.202 | -3.60 | <0.001 |
| Narcissism → Moral development | -0.270 | -5.03 | <0.001 |
| Bullying → Moral development | -0.320 | -6.29 | <0.001 |
| Narcissism → Intrinsic religious orientation | -0.196 | -3.50 | <0.001 |
| Narcissism → Extrinsic religious orientation | -0.131 | -2.34 | 0.020 |
| Bullying → Intrinsic religious orientation | -0.248 | -4.40 | <0.001 |
| Bullying → Extrinsic religious orientation | -0.163 | -2.99 | 0.004 |
| Intrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | -0.181 | -3.38 | <0.001 |
| Extrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | -0.187 | -3.45 | <0.001 |

The results of Table 4 show that all direct paths in the research model were statistically significant. Narcissism, with a standardized coefficient of 0.168, and bullying, with a standardized coefficient of 0.274, had direct and positive effects on academic cheating, whereas moral development, with a coefficient of -0.202, intrinsic religious orientation, with a coefficient of -0.181, and extrinsic religious orientation, with a coefficient of -0.187, had direct and negative effects on academic cheating. In addition, narcissism had negative effects on moral development with



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a coefficient of -0.270, on intrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of -0.196, and on extrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of -0.131. Similarly, bullying had negative effects on moral development with a coefficient of -0.320, on intrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of -0.248, and on extrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of -0.163. The results of the indirect effects are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Estimation of Indirect Effects in the Model Based on the Bootstrap Test*

| Indirect Path | Standardized Coefficient | T | Probability Value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Narcissism → Moral development → Academic cheating | 0.054 | 3.06 | 0.002 |
| Bullying → Moral development → Academic cheating | 0.065 | 3.48 | <0.001 |
| Narcissism → Intrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | 0.035 | 2.52 | 0.013 |
| Narcissism → Extrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | 0.024 | 2.13 | 0.039 |
| Bullying → Intrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | 0.044 | 2.83 | 0.006 |
| Bullying → Extrinsic religious orientation → Academic cheating | 0.030 | 2.37 | 0.024 |

The results of Table 5 show that all indirect paths in the research model were statistically significant. Narcissism had an indirect effect on academic cheating through moral development with a standardized coefficient of 0.054, through intrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of 0.035, and through extrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of 0.024. In addition, bullying had an indirect effect on academic cheating through moral development with a coefficient of 0.065, through intrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of 0.044, and through extrinsic religious orientation with a coefficient of 0.030. The strongest indirect effect was related to the path from bullying to academic cheating through moral development, and the weakest effect was related to the path from narcissism to academic cheating through extrinsic religious orientation.

## 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to model the effect of narcissism and bullying on academic cheating through the mediating roles of moral development and intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation among upper secondary school students. The findings confirmed the proposed model and showed that the model had acceptable fit indices. This indicates that the hypothesized relationships among narcissism, bullying, moral development, religious orientation, and academic cheating were consistent with the observed data. In general, the results support the assumption that academic cheating is not merely an isolated educational behavior, but a multidetermined psychological and moral phenomenon shaped by personality traits, aggressive behavioral tendencies, moral reasoning, and value-based orientations. This interpretation is consistent with studies emphasizing that academic dishonesty is influenced by personality, motivation, opportunity, ethical judgment, and the developmental context of schooling (Alotaibi et al., 2024; Rosari et al., 2026; Stephens, 2018).

The first major finding showed that narcissism had a positive and significant direct effect on academic cheating. This means that students with higher narcissistic traits were more likely to engage in cheating behaviors. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that narcissistic characteristics, particularly entitlement, superiority, admiration seeking, and reduced guilt, are associated with academic dishonesty (Brunell et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2010). Narcissistic students may experience academic failure or ordinary performance as a threat to their self-image and may therefore use cheating as a compensatory strategy to preserve a superior self-presentation. From this perspective, cheating may function as a self-enhancement mechanism through which narcissistic individuals attempt to maintain status, avoid shame, and secure external recognition. This explanation is also aligned with the narcissism spectrum model, which conceptualizes narcissism as involving self-importance, antagonism, and regulatory strategies aimed at protecting a grandiose or vulnerable self-concept (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). Recent reviews of narcissism similarly show that narcissistic traits are linked to interpersonal and behavioral outcomes that reflect self-centeredness and difficulty accepting personal limitations (Miller et al., 2021; Sedikides et al., 2026).

The positive relationship between narcissism and academic cheating can also be explained through the broader literature on dark personality traits. Studies have shown that dark triad traits predict academic cheating and misconduct because such traits are associated with manipulation, low honesty-humility, reduced conscientiousness, and weaker moral inhibition (Esteves et al., 2021; Mikaeeli Manee et al.,



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2025). In the same direction, recent research has indicated that dark personality traits are associated with academic misconduct, frustration, negative thinking, and problematic use of new academic technologies, suggesting that students with antagonistic traits may be more prone to exploit available opportunities for dishonest academic gain (Song & Liu, 2025; Strowd, 2023). Narcissism may therefore increase academic cheating not only through desire for achievement, but also through a self-serving cognitive style in which rules are perceived as less binding when they obstruct personal success. The present finding supports the view that academic integrity interventions should not focus only on surveillance and punishment, but also on the personality-based rationalizations that make cheating psychologically acceptable to some students.

The second major finding showed that bullying had a positive and significant direct effect on academic cheating. In other words, students with higher bullying tendencies were more likely to report academic cheating. This finding is consistent with theoretical and empirical perspectives that place bullying and cheating within a broader pattern of rule-breaking, weak self-discipline, and moral disengagement (Bear, 2024). Bullying involves intentional harm, power imbalance, and disregard for the rights of others; academic cheating similarly involves violation of fairness, disregard for institutional rules, and unfair advantage over peers. Therefore, both behaviors may share underlying mechanisms such as low empathy, poor moral self-regulation, externalization of responsibility, and justification of harmful or unfair behavior. Previous studies have identified multiple predictors of bullying and victimization, including individual, peer, family, and school-level factors, and have emphasized that bullying is embedded in the developmental ecology of adolescence (Cook et al., 2010; Tsitsika et al., 2014). The present finding extends this literature by showing that bullying is not only an interpersonal problem but may also be connected to academic misconduct.

The effect of bullying on academic cheating can also be understood in relation to school climate and peer norms. Students who engage in bullying may be more likely to belong to peer contexts in which dominance, competition, and norm violation are socially reinforced. If aggressive behavior is used to gain power or status, academic cheating may also become a strategy for maintaining advantage without respecting rules of fairness. Research on bullying has emphasized that aggressive and victimization roles are associated with broader psychosocial vulnerabilities and personality traits (Estevez et al., 2025; Olweus & Limber, 2018). The present results suggest that the behavioral profile associated with bullying may generalize to the academic domain, especially when students lack moral constraints or when cheating is perceived as common and low-risk. This finding is also consistent with the view that schools function as developmental contexts in which students learn not only academic content but also behavioral norms, social responsibility, and ethical conduct (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Another important finding was that moral development had a negative and significant direct effect on academic cheating. This means that higher levels of moral development were associated with lower levels of cheating. This result is consistent with the argument that moral reasoning is central to academic integrity because students must understand cheating not only as a rule violation but also as an ethical issue involving fairness, responsibility, and respect for others' efforts (Stephens, 2018). When students have stronger moral development, they are more capable of evaluating the consequences of dishonest behavior, resisting self-serving justifications, and acting in accordance with internalized ethical standards. The present result is also aligned with the use of moral development as a measurable educational construct in student populations (Manavipour, 2012). In this regard, academic cheating may be reduced when students progress from externally controlled moral reasoning toward more internalized and principled moral judgment.

The negative effect of moral development on cheating can also be interpreted in relation to fairness and merit. Academic environments are based on the assumption that grades and evaluations should reflect actual learning and effort. When students cheat, they distort this merit-based system and undermine both personal learning and collective fairness. Developmental research has shown that children and young adults consider merit and fairness when evaluating inequalities, suggesting that moral reasoning plays an important role in how young people judge academic and social outcomes (Forbes et al., 2026). Moreover, experimental evidence shows that academic cheating interferes with learning among middle school students, indicating that dishonest behavior has consequences beyond moral violation; it also weakens educational development (Zhao et al., 2023). Therefore, the protective role of moral development in the present study may reflect students' greater ability to recognize the ethical and educational costs of cheating.

The findings also showed that intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation had negative and significant direct effects on academic cheating. This indicates that students with stronger religious orientation reported lower academic cheating. This finding supports the view that religious orientation may provide a value-based framework for self-regulation, accountability, and moral behavior. Intrinsic religious orientation, in particular, may reduce cheating because religious values are internalized and become part of the student's moral identity. Students with stronger intrinsic orientation may avoid cheating not merely because of external punishment, but because dishonesty conflicts with their internal standards. This explanation is consistent with research showing that religious orientation is associated with meaning, psychological adjustment, and moral conduct (Sasaki & Kim, 2016; Sjovag, 2024). It is also aligned with research examining the influence of religious orientation on academic deviance, which suggests that religiosity can be relevant to understanding dishonest academic behavior (Jolicoeur, 2010).

The significant negative effect of extrinsic religious orientation on academic cheating is also noteworthy. Although intrinsic religious orientation is usually considered more strongly connected with internalized moral commitment, extrinsic orientation may still reduce cheating in cultural contexts where religious participation, social expectations, and moral reputation are important. Students with extrinsic religious orientation may avoid cheating because dishonest behavior could conflict with social approval, family expectations, or community norms. Therefore, both intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations may function as protective factors, although their psychological mechanisms may differ. Intrinsic orientation may operate through internal moral conviction, while extrinsic orientation may operate through external accountability and social regulation. In adolescent populations, where identity, social belonging, and value internalization are still developing, both forms of religious orientation may have behavioral relevance.

Another key finding was that narcissism and bullying had negative and significant effects on moral development. This means that students with higher narcissism and bullying tendencies tended to show lower moral development. This finding is theoretically coherent because narcissism involves self-centeredness and entitlement, whereas bullying involves aggression, domination, and reduced concern for others. Both characteristics may weaken the development or expression of moral reasoning by prioritizing self-interest over fairness and empathy. This interpretation is consistent with studies linking narcissism, bullying, lying, cheating, and weak self-discipline within a common developmental and moral framework (Bear, 2024). It is also compatible with research showing that dark personality traits are associated with academic cheating and aggressive behaviors, indicating that moral and personality vulnerabilities may cluster together (Esteves et al., 2021; Estevez et al., 2025).

The findings further showed that narcissism and bullying had negative and significant effects on intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. This suggests that students with higher narcissistic and bullying tendencies may be less oriented toward religious values and less guided by religiously grounded self-regulation. This result can be explained by the incompatibility between narcissistic entitlement or bullying-related aggression and religious values emphasizing humility, responsibility, self-control, and respect for others. When self-enhancement, dominance, or aggression is prioritized, religious orientation may become weaker as a guiding motivational system. The broader literature indicates that religious orientation is related to meaning, well-being, and mental health, and may therefore serve as a psychological resource for regulating behavior (Sasaki & Kim, 2016; Sjovag, 2024). The present findings suggest that lower religious orientation may be one pathway through which narcissism and bullying become linked to academic cheating.

The mediation results showed that moral development significantly mediated the relationships of narcissism and bullying with academic cheating. Because narcissism and bullying negatively predicted moral development, and moral development negatively predicted cheating, the indirect effects were positive. In other words, narcissism and bullying may increase academic cheating partly by weakening moral development. This finding is important because it identifies moral development as a psychological mechanism rather than merely a parallel correlate. Narcissistic or bullying-prone students may not inevitably cheat; rather, the risk of cheating appears to increase when these traits are accompanied by lower moral reasoning and weaker ethical self-regulation. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship emphasizing that moral reasoning bridges the gap between academic integrity expectations and actual student behavior (Stephens, 2018). It is also consistent with motivational meta-analyses showing that academic dishonesty is shaped by internal motivational and regulatory processes, not only by opportunity (Fritz et al., 2022; Krou et al., 2021).

The mediation results also showed that intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation significantly mediated the relationships of narcissism and bullying with academic cheating. This means that narcissism and bullying may increase academic cheating partly by reducing religious orientation, which in turn is associated with lower cheating. These results highlight the protective function of religious orientation as a value-based regulatory mechanism. Students with stronger religious orientation may be more likely to interpret cheating as morally unacceptable and may experience stronger internal or social barriers against dishonest behavior. The mediating role of religious orientation is consistent with evidence that religious frameworks can support meaning, well-being, and moral accountability (Jolicoeur, 2010; Sasaki & Kim, 2016). It also shows that the relationship between personality risk factors and academic misconduct may be reduced when students possess internalized value systems that discourage dishonest behavior.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the present findings contribute to the literature by integrating personality, behavioral, moral, and religious variables in one explanatory model of academic cheating. Previous research has separately emphasized the roles of narcissism, dark personality traits, achievement motivation, bullying, and religious orientation in academic and social misconduct (Brunell et al., 2011; Fritz et al., 2022; Krou et al., 2021; Tsitsika et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2010). The present study extends these findings by showing that moral development and religious orientation can explain part of the pathways through which narcissism and bullying affect academic cheating among upper secondary school students. This is particularly relevant in adolescence, a period in which identity, moral judgment, academic resilience, and self-efficacy are actively developing (Qi, 2025; Steinberg, 2014). Therefore, academic cheating should be addressed as a developmental and ethical issue rather than only as a disciplinary violation.

## 6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the correlational and path analysis design does not permit definitive causal conclusions, even though the proposed model was theoretically grounded and statistically supported. Second, all variables were measured using self-report questionnaires, which may be affected by social desirability, response bias, or underreporting of sensitive behaviors such as cheating and bullying. Third, the sample was limited to upper secondary school students in Zanjan; therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings to students from other cities, educational systems, age groups, or cultural contexts. Fourth, the study examined moral development and religious orientation as mediators, but other potentially important mechanisms such as empathy, moral disengagement, academic pressure, teacher-student relationship quality, parental monitoring, peer norms, and school climate were not included in the model.

Future studies are recommended to use longitudinal and experimental designs to examine the causal direction of the relationships among narcissism, bullying, moral development, religious orientation, and academic cheating. It is also suggested that future research combine self-report questionnaires with teacher reports, peer reports, behavioral indicators, and qualitative interviews to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of cheating and bullying behaviors. Researchers may also compare different educational levels, genders, school types, and cultural contexts to determine whether the proposed model functions similarly across groups. In addition, future studies could examine other mediating and moderating variables such as empathy, moral disengagement, academic motivation, self-control, perceived peer cheating, family religious climate, school ethical climate, and digital cheating opportunities.

Based on the findings, schools and educational counselors should design preventive programs that address academic cheating through moral, emotional, and behavioral education rather than relying only on punishment. Interventions should focus on strengthening moral reasoning, responsibility, empathy, honesty, self-control, and awareness of the consequences of cheating for both personal learning and collective fairness. Anti-bullying programs should be integrated with academic integrity education because bullying and cheating may share common mechanisms related to weak self-regulation and disregard for others' rights. Counselors and teachers should also pay attention to students with narcissistic and aggressive tendencies and help them develop healthier achievement goals, tolerance of failure, respect for rules, and internalized values. In culturally appropriate contexts, value-based and religiously informed educational approaches may also be used to strengthen students' internal commitment to honesty and ethical conduct.



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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. The present article was derived from a doctoral dissertation in Counseling at Islamic Azad University, Zanjan Branch, and has received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of that university under the ethics code IR.IAU.Z.REC.1403.106. Ethical standards were observed, including obtaining an ethics code from the university ethics committee, obtaining consent from the participants and their parents for the distribution of questionnaires and implementation of the related educational procedures, observing scientific honesty and integrity, obtaining informed consent for participation in the study, ensuring the anonymity of the scales and the participants, and maintaining the confidentiality of their information.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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