

**PERSONALITY TRAITS AS PREDICTORS OF STUDENTS' EXAMINATION
MALPRACTICE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CROSS RIVER
STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The study investigated personality traits as predictors of students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross-River State, Nigeria. To guide this study, 3 research questions and 3 null hypotheses were formulated. The study employed correlational survey research design. The population of this study comprised 11,364 senior secondary two (SS II) students, consisting of 5,530 males and 5,834 females. The sample size for the study consisted of 377 senior secondary two (SS II) students of which 191 are male and 186 are female students. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) criteria for a population of about eleven thousand, three hundred and sixty four (11,364) at a 95 percent confidence level was used to draw three hundred and seventy seven (377) senior secondary two (SS II) students. The sample was drawn using a multi-stage sampling procedure. Two types of validity were employed in the study, construct and face validity. To determine the reliability coefficient of the instrument Cronbach Alpha was used. Simple linear regression was used to answer research questions and regression-test was used to test the null hypothesis. All the null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the analysis of data in the study, the following findings emerged: openness to experience predicts or accounts for up to 2.4% of students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State. Further analysis revealed a significant predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State; the 8.1% of variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to conscientiousness. Further analysis revealed a significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State; and extraversion predicts or accounts for up to 1.7% of students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State. Further analysis revealed a significant predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State. Recommendation made included; schools should incorporate character and personality development programs aimed at fostering positive traits such as responsibility, self-discipline, and ethical reasoning among students.

Keywords: Personality Traits, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, examination malpractice

INTRODUCTION

The problem of examination malpractice in secondary schools poses a serious threat to academic integrity, student development, and national progress. Examination malpractice refers to any deliberate wrongdoing connected with formal assessments or tests, designed to unfairly enhance performance or advantage. It includes a wide range of unethical behaviors such as cheating, impersonation, collusion, and falsification of results. In recent years, the persistent occurrence of examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State has raised concerns among educators, policymakers, and researchers alike (Nwaoga & Eke, 2019).

Among the numerous psychological and social factors influencing students' tendency to engage in examination malpractice, personality traits have attracted significant scholarly interest. Personality traits describe enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that differ among individuals and influence how they interact with their environments. The Five-Factor Model (FFM), also known as the Big Five, has become a widely accepted framework for examining the role of personality in behavioral tendencies. The model outlines five core traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1999; DeYoung, 2018).

This study concentrates on three of these traits—conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism due to their established relevance to ethical decision-making, rule-following, and emotional control. Conscientiousness is characterized by diligence, self-discipline, and a strong sense of duty. Students who score high in conscientiousness are less likely to engage in examination malpractice, as they tend to be goal-oriented, well-prepared, and committed to academic integrity (Zhao *et al.*, 2020). Their organizational habits and long-term focus serve as protective factors against dishonest academic behavior.

Agreeableness, reflecting traits such as honesty, trustworthiness, and empathy, also plays a crucial role in shaping students' ethical standards. Highly agreeable students are more likely to resist peer pressure and adhere to rules and norms, even under academic

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stress. They typically value fairness and are inclined to behave in socially acceptable ways that discourage malpractice (Avcı & Kiliç, 2019). Conversely, students with low agreeableness may lack concern for others and be more willing to manipulate systems for personal gain.

Neuroticism, which refers to emotional instability, anxiety, and impulsiveness, has been positively associated with risky behaviors, including cheating. Students who are highly neurotic may experience intense pressure, low academic confidence, and fear of failure factors that can increase the likelihood of engaging in examination malpractice as a coping mechanism (Komarraju & Nadler, 2018). They may be more reactive to stress and more inclined to seek immediate relief or success, even through dishonest means.

In the context of public secondary schools in Cross River State, these personality dynamics are especially important. The pressures of high-stakes examinations, inadequate preparation, lack of effective supervision, and peer influence combine to create environments where unethical academic behavior can thrive. While infrastructural, parental, and systemic contributors to examination malpractice have been extensively studied, the personality-based predictors remain relatively underexplored in the Nigerian setting (Okafor & Eze, 2020).

Identifying how specific traits like conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism relate to examination malpractice can help school authorities, counselors, and educators develop more effective, personalized interventions. For example, students who exhibit low conscientiousness or high neuroticism may benefit from targeted programs in stress management, time management, and ethical reasoning. Moreover, character education and social-emotional learning initiatives that align with students' personality profiles can contribute to reducing the incidence of malpractice in schools.

The rising concern over academic dishonesty among secondary school students in Cross River State calls for a multidimensional approach that includes psychological assessments. Given the increasing emphasis on student well-being and holistic development, this study is timely and relevant. It seeks to examine the predictive power

of selected personality traits on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State,

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study was to investigate personality traits as predictors of students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to ascertain the;

1. Predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools.
2. Predictive power of personality trait of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools.
3. Predictive power of personality trait of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?
2. What is the predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?
3. What is the predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study and will be tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀₁: There is no significant predictive power of personality trait of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

H₀₂: There is no significant predictive power of personality trait of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Ho₃: There is no significant predictive power of personality trait of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Methods

The study employed the correlational survey research design. This study was conducted in Cross River State. The population of this study comprised 11,364 senior secondary two (SS II) students, consisting of 5530 males and 5834 females senior secondary two (SS II) students (Planning Research and Statistics Department, Secondary Education Board Calabar, Cross River State, 2022/2023 academic session. The sample size for the study consisted of 377 senior secondary two (SS II) students, of which 191 are males and 186 are female. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) criteria for a population of about 11,364 at a 95 percent confidence level was used to draw 377 senior secondary two (SS II) students (191 male SS II students and 186 female SS II students). The sample was drawn using a multi-stage sampling procedure.

Two instruments were used for data collection. They include; Personality Trait Questionnaire (PTQ) and Examination malpractice Questionnaire (EMQ). Personality Traits Questionnaire (PTQ) was adapted from Psychological World (2023). However, the researcher modified them to a four-point Likert-type scale of Very accurate (VA) – 4; moderate accurate (MA) - 3; moderately inaccurate (MI) – 2; and very inaccurate (VI) – 1. Also, Section B of Personality Traits Questionnaire (PTQ) is structured to cover openness to experiences, conscientiousness, and extraversion. Examination Malpractice Questionnaire (EMQ) was Self-designed Questionnaire designed on a four-point Likert scale of strongly agreed (SA) - 4, agreed (A) - 3, Disagreed (D) - 2 and strongly disagreed (SD) -1. The face-validity of the instrument was established by given copies of the drafted questionnaires (instruments) to four experts from the University of Nigeria Nsukka. The professional guidance, critiques, suggestions, and modifications were incorporated into the relevant items, resulting in the instrument's current form. The construct validity of the instrument was determined by administering the instruments to 50 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools in Cross River State. The reliability of the <https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jtese>

instruments was ascertained by administering the instruments to 20 senior secondary two (SS 2) students in public secondary schools in Ogoja Education Zone not included in the sample of the study but shows similar characteristics with those in the sample schools. The responses of the respondents were subjected to reliability analysis, using Cronbach Alpha to determine the internal consistency of the instruments (Personality Traits Questionnaire (PTQ), and Examination Malpractice Questionnaire (EMQ)). The choice of Cronbach Alpha is because the instruments were polytomously scored. An internal consistency coefficient reliability estimate of openness to experience Cluster A was 0.76; the coefficient for conscientiousness cluster B was 0.85; the coefficient reliability for extraversion Cluster C was 0.80. The overall reliability for all the clusters was 0.85. The reliability coefficient of Examination malpractice was 0.81.

The collection of the data for the study was done using face-to-face and on-the-spot method. Simple linear regression was used to answer research questions. When the r-value lies between ± 0.50 and ± 1 , it is regarded as a strong correlation; when the r-value lies between ± 0.30 and ± 0.49 , it is regarded as a medium correlation; and when the r-value lies below ± 0.29 , it is regarded as a weak correlation. A regression t-test was utilized to test null hypotheses. All null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance. If the probability value was less than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$), the null hypotheses were rejected; however, if the probability value was greater than or equal to 0.05 ($P \geq 0.05$), the null hypotheses were retained.

RESULTS

Research Question One: What is the predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?

Table 1: Linear regression analysis of the predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.153 ^a	.024	.021	5.55039

(R²) = Coefficient of Determination

The result in Table 1 shows that the correlation coefficient between openness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State was 0.153.

This means that, there exists a very low positive relationship between openness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The Table also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.153 was 0.024. This coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates that 2.4% of variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to openness to experience. This is an indication that 97.6% of the variation in students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to other factors other than openness.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Table 2: Regression t-test analysis of significant predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	34.305	2.015		17.022	.000
	Openness	.139	.047	.153	2.974	.003

The result in Table 2 shows that t-value of 2.974 with associated exact probability value of 0.003 was obtained. This probability value of 0.003 was compared with 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis and it was found to be significant since the obtained probability value of 0.003 is less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis no significant predictive power of openness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State was rejected. The researcher therefore, concludes that there is a significant predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Research Question Two: What is the predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?

Table 3: Linear regression analysis of the predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.285 ^a	.081	.079	5.38451

(R^2) = Coefficient of Determination

The result in Table 3 shows that the correlation coefficient between conscientiousness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State was 0.285. This means that, there exists a low positive relationship between conscientiousness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The Table also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.285 was 0.081. This coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates that 8.1% of variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to conscientiousness. This is an indication that 91.9% of the variation in students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to other factors other than conscientiousness.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Table 4: Regression t-test analysis of significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	28.434	2.094		13.581	.000
	Conscientiousness	.310	.054	.285	5.688	.000

The result in Table 4 shows that t-value of 5.688 with associated exact probability value of 0.000 was obtained. This probability value of 0.000 was compared with 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis and it was found to be significant since the obtained probability value of 0.000 is less than 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis no significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State was rejected. The researcher therefore, concludes that there is a significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Research Question Three: What is the predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State?

Table 5: Linear regression analysis of the predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.132 ^a	.017	.015	5.56753

(R²) = Coefficient of Determination

The result in Table 5 shows that the correlation coefficient between extraversion and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State was 0.132. This means that, there exists a low positive relationship between extraversion and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The Table also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R²) associated with the correlation coefficient of 0.132 was 0.017. This coefficient of determination (R²) indicates that 1.7% of variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to extraversion. This is an indication that 98.3% of the variation in students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to other factors other than extraversion.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Table 6: Regression t-test analysis of significant predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	35.048	2.051		17.090	.000
	Extraversion	.133	.052	.132	2.555	.011

The result in Table 6 shows that t-value of 2.555 with associated exact probability value of 0.011 was obtained. This probability value of 0.011 was compared with 0.05 set as level of significance for testing the hypothesis and it was found to be significant since the obtained probability value of 0.011 is less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis no significant predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State was rejected. The researcher therefore, concludes that there is a significant predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State.

Discussion of the Findings

Predictive power of openness to experience on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools

The findings of the study have shown that, there exists a very low positive relationship between openness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The findings also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient indicates a variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools is attributed to openness to experience. This indication shows that the variation in students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools is attributed to other factors such as stronger moral principles, fear of consequences, academic integrity and lack of opportunity. These students may be less inclined to take risk or engage in unethical behaviour, even if they are open to new experiences and ideas. Further study also revealed that the null hypothesis no significant predictive power of openness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State was rejected.

Cazan, and Lacob, (2017) the results showed that conscientiousness, honesty and openness to experience were significantly negatively related to reports of students cheating during examination. An overall high level of maladjustment predicted the positive attitudes towards students cheating during examination. The significant associations between academic adjustment and academic dishonesty (cheating during examination) confirmed previous research in the field. The result of the study is also in agreement with the findings by Animasahun, and Ogunniran, (2014) whose result showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between some independent factors (students, social and government factors) on examination malpractice. However, teacher factor was not significant.

The finding of the study is not in agreement with the findings by Nneka, (2020) whose findings of the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between their study habit and their attitude toward examination malpractice. Male and Female students were significantly different in their attitude toward examination malpractice while the

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two groups were not significantly different in their habits. However, the finding does agree with the study by Olanike, *et al.*, (2020) the result indicated that the three predictor variables jointly accounted for the total variance in examination malpractice. Also, the three variables contributed independently to the prediction of examination malpractice: attitude towards learning, religious affiliation and emphasis on certification. The relationship between attitude towards learning and examination malpractice as well as religious affiliation and examination malpractice were negative while that of emphasis on certification and examination malpractice is positive. The results clearly showed the impact of certificate overvalue on the tendency to engage in examination malpractice.

Predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools

The findings of the study have shown that, there exists a low positive relationship between conscientiousness and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The findings also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient indicates a variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools is attributed to conscientiousness. This indication shows that students may be more likely to engage in examination malpractices despite being conscious, suggesting that: other factors such as environmental pressure or motivations, override their conscientiousness. Hence, using their conscientiousness to rather plan and execute cheating strategies. Further findings also revealed that the null hypothesis no significant predictive power of conscientiousness on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools in Cross River State was rejected.

This finding is supported by the outcome of the study by Nwankwo, and Nwankwo, (2020) that major findings of the study indicated students negative attitude towards examination malpractice; and there is low positive relationship existing between students' academic achievement motivation and attitude towards examination malpractice among secondary school students in Anambra State. The finding of the study does agree with the study by Anierobi, Nwikpo, Okeke, and Unachukwu, (2020), the findings showed that peer influence has negative correlation with students' attitude towards examination

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malpractice. Self-esteem has positive correlation with students' attitude towards examination malpractice. This finding is not supported by the findings by Cazan, and Iacob, (2017) whose results showed that conscientiousness has a significantly negatively related to reports of academic dishonesty. Academic neuroticism was the most powerful predictor of cheating behaviours, while an overall high level of maladjustment predicted the positive attitudes towards academic cheating. The significant associations between academic adjustment and academic dishonesty confirmed previous research in the field. Jibril, (2021) the Study's findings revealed that, openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness positively influence the academic performance of students and only neuroticism influences the academic success of secondary school students. The finding is not supported by the findings by Giluk, and Postlethwaite, (2015) whose results indicate that conscientiousness and agreeableness are the strongest Big Five predictors, with both factors negatively related to academic dishonesty.

Predictive power of extraversion on students' examination malpractice in public secondary schools

The findings of the study have shown that, there exists a low positive relationship between extraversion and examination malpractice of secondary school students in Cross River State. The findings also revealed that, the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient indicates a variation in students' examination malpractice in secondary schools in Cross River State is attributed to extraversion. The indication shows that students may be less likely to engage in examination malpractice due to other factors, such as: fear of been punished, their academic integrity, and the moral principles they have developed over time. However, stress levels of students may play a significant role in influencing their examination malpractices behaviour.

The finding of this study is in agreement with the outcome of the study by Eshet, Grinautski, Peled, and Barczyk, (2014), the findings indicate that personality trait of extraversion among American students was found in a positive correlation with academic misconduct. However, the finding is not supported by the findings by Baykal, and <https://journals.unizik.edu.ng/jtese>

Yildirim, (2020) who noted that extraversion personality trait in students were found to be associated with low academic self-efficacy and increasing examination malpractice. The finding is not also in agreement with the findings by Nwankwo, and Nwankwo, (2020) that there is negative attitude towards examination malpractice; and there is low positive relationship existing between students' academic achievement motivation and attitude towards examination malpractice among secondary school students in Anambra State.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that students who are naturally curious, imaginative, and open to exploring novel experiences may also exhibit a tendency to challenge conventional academic norms. In some cases, this openness to unconventional approaches can lead them to adopt unethical means of achieving academic success. Furthermore, students who lack essential traits such as self-discipline, organization, and a sense of responsibility are more prone to engaging in academic malpractice. This tendency is often linked to inadequate preparation for assessments or a general disregard for the principles of academic integrity. Additionally, highly outgoing and sociable students, driven by a desire for social approval or peer acceptance, may at times give in to peer pressure, leading them to participate in group-influenced cheating behaviours.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Schools should incorporate character and personality development programs aimed at fostering positive traits such as responsibility, self-discipline, and ethical reasoning among students. This would help in reducing tendencies that lead to examination malpractice.
2. School counselors should be trained to identify personality traits that are associated with academic dishonesty. Students with low conscientiousness or high extraversion may benefit from targeted counseling sessions focused on building integrity and coping strategies for academic stress.

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3. Parents and teachers should work collaboratively to monitor students' behaviors, provide moral guidance, and model ethical conduct. Emphasis should be placed on the value of hard work and honesty, especially for students displaying risk-prone personality traits.
4. The Ministry of Education should ensure the consistent enforcement of examination regulations and introduce ethical education as part of the curriculum. Teaching students about the consequences of examination malpractice and the importance of academic integrity can reduce the appeal of dishonest behaviors.
5. Schools should establish peer mentoring systems where students with high levels of conscientiousness and integrity can influence and support others, thereby promoting a culture of honesty and personal responsibility.

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