"OMG It's not a big deal:" Generation Z's perceptions of academic integrity and cheating in the 21st century: A phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine Generation Z's perceptions of cheating in relation to academic integrity, more specifically plagiarism. Utilizing a phenomenological design the researcher identified three key themes, which included social media assistance, helping not cheating, and Google as a learning tool. From these findings, it can be inferred that with the advent of social media and the accessibility of technology, our newest generation enrolled in middle and high school have a relaxed attitude toward academic integrity. The issues that arise from this study provide teachers, administrators and parents reason to pause and question the appropriate use of technology in our connected 21st Century classrooms.

Keywords: academic integrity, plagiarism, adolescent, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (GenZ) is often described as individualistic, self-directed and highly motived. They are described as exceedingly connected and implement active "use of communication and media technologies" (Desai & Lela, 2017, p. 802) such as YouTube, Snap Chat and Instagram. Previous generations may call them self-centered and egotistical, but GenZ has a uniqueness that no other generation can claim. They were born into a technologically advanced digital world full of fast-paced sharing of information and bragging rights on social media. Their first language is technology (Reeves & Oh, 2008), and they easily and seamlessly process and perceive information better than past generations. The world around them looks much differently than their predecessors.

In this research, GenZ is defined as those born from 1990 to present day. They vary from previous generational cohorts in many ways. For instance, McCrindle (2010) state they were born to older mothers. One reason can be attributed to mothers with careers making this generation born into primarily professional families, maybe the first of its kind. Moreover, they have fewer siblings than any other era. The small family nucleus makes them the most educated generation, and they are projected to stay in education for longer than ever (McCrindle, 2010). Furthermore, this generation is tolerant of differences and embrace diversity both in their real and virtual lives. This is ever so evident in the inclusive classrooms in which they were raised. Finally, the GenZ population is always connected and spend much of their lives in that world (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). "They are the first global, most technologically literate and socially empowered generation ever" (Desai & Lele, 2017, p. 807). Tabscott (2009) cites this generation as characteristic of eight distinct terms that include "collaboration, freedom, scrutiny, customization, fun, integrity, speed and innovation" (p.6).

With the fast-paced instantaneous world in which GenZ lives, lies the issues of instant gratification and existence in a world of quick answers to hard problems. They have never

existed in world without the Internet, and they succeed at gathering, spreading information in social media platforms quickly, and accurately (Relander, 2014). This is especially true in both their social and academic worlds, which have collided maybe for the first time. GenZ will be the first generation to face issues of cheating and academic integrity in a digital world.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

At the forefront of the technology explosion the newest generational cohort, GenZ, will struggle with the idea of how to navigate the world of academia. GenZ is the first generation to face issues of academic integrity in a digital world within a digital generation. The issues of cheating in this current environment is at the forefront of school agendas. Elementary, middle and high school teachers are facing an alarming number of students using social media and the Internet to cheat. Stuber-McEwen et al., (2009) found a correlation between cheating and academic dishonesty in high school students. Those who admitted to cheating in high school were more likely to cheat in college, and when caught in high school, they were not deterred from cheating again. This issue cannot be ignored. The problem of academic dishonestly may start well before the teen years. In elementary school teachers utilize pedagogical techniques that capitalize on cooperative and team-based learning. Parents over involvement in children's schoolwork may also send a message that assistance with homework, even excessive help, is acceptable when children are young. This parental view is often damaging. "Parents are denying the children the opportunity to do the work themselves and to experience the resulting satisfaction or frustration" (Aaron & Roche, 2013-2014) associated with failure to earn a good grade. Parents may make the mistake of not allowing their children to experience failure. Once children enter middle school and high school, the pressure to succeed is even more exaggerated and increasing pressure is on the student to earn high marks.

Research has indicated a significant rise in academic dishonestly over the past 30 years (McCabe, 2001). The majority of students report that cheating is dishonest but most do it anyway (Stephens & Gelbach, 2007). This affinity to cheating has been studied widely, primarily focusing on individual and contextual features, most notably school and home culture. Academic dishonesty, cheating and Internet plagiarism, is on the rise, and many would agree, rampant at all levels of education. Jones (2011) states that 92% of students surveyed indicated they have known someone who has engaged in cheating behaviors at the university level. Of that, 59% said they have intentionally cheated. Academic dishonestly is widespread and flagrant, which makes the examination of our children's stance every so important before they enter secondary and post-secondary educational settings.

The digital generation may be at higher risk for cheating than past generations or the opportunity to share answers is just more readily at their fingertips. Nonetheless, if GenZ will stay in school longer than past generations, the examination of their attitudes of such unethical behaviors must be explored.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the dispositions of adolescents in relation to academic integrity and plagiarism among their peers. Technology is an integral part of GenZ's lives, and now more than ever it is imperative that schools, parents and other stakeholders ensure this generation consumes the tools of technology in a respectful and responsible manner.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological study utilizing interviews as the primary unit of analysis to gleam the essence of the experiences of adolescents in relation to academic integrity. Creswell (2013) posits that phenomenology is best used when the researcher wants

to explore "the lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people" (p. 78). The "essence' of this "lived experience" can best be described through this method (Moustakas, 1994). The link between increased use of technology and an increase in cheating behaviors by adolescents may influence their perceptions and attitudes toward plagiarism.

Participants

The participants chosen for this study were 15 students enrolled in middle school and highschool in Western Pennsylvania. The gender make up consisted of ten boys and five girls ranging from 11-14 years old, all of which were Caucasian. Participants were asked to meet with the researcher individually to be interviewed lasting between 40-50 minutes. Parental consent was obtained prior to the interview. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of participants in the study.

Table 1
Demographics of participants

Phase	Age	Gender	Grade
P1	12	M	6
P2	12	M	7
P3	14	F	8
P4	11	F	6
P5	13	M	8
P6	13	F	7
P7	13	M	7
P8	12	F	6
P9	12	F	7
P10	11	M	6
P11	13	M	8
P12	12	M	7
P13	14	M	8
P14	13	M	7
P15	13	M	8

FINDINGS

The findings indicate three distinct yet overlapping themes emerged from the data. The themes included; *social media assistance, helping is not cheating,* and *Google is a learning tool.* Each theme will be discussed in the sections that follow.

Social Media Assistance

The first theme, *social media assistance*, was prevalent throughout the interviews. Participants were explicitly asked if they believed using Snap Chat, or other social media platforms to share answers is cheating from their perspective. Interestingly, participants struggled with what it meant to cheat. For instance, ten participants mentioned that helping a friend on Snap Chat is acceptable to some degree, that is, sharing a picture of a math question with the answer would be suitable. P6 stated, "If you share a homework answer on social media that's okay, but if you share an answer on a test in class, that is definitely cheating." Another participant, P10 stated, "It is being helpful if you send a friend a picture of homework." Josephson Institute of Ethics (2006) reported that young people were developing a more lassie faire attitude toward cheating. It would seem that dishonesty among students in becoming a problem worldwide (Anderman & Murdock, 2007). Moreover, Lathrop and Foss (2000) found the decline of integrity among adolescents and teens seems to be related to access to the Internet and social media. This was evident in the participants' responses. Nice participants agreed that helping on social media, in any form, was not only common but also expected, among peers. P5 stated, "The minute someone snaps a question or posts on their story, everyone helps. That is what we do. Oh my god, it's not a big deal."

These types of responses paint the portrait of the issues teachers, at all educational levels, are facing on a daily basis. Whether it is permissible by adult ignorance or adult acceptance, adolescents believe it is to be the norm. The mere fact that the lack of face-to-face interaction exempts the illusion of cheating. If students are not cheating in person, it does not seem to count. Alarmingly, McCabe (1999) found that most high school students believed cheating to be the norm. Social norms seem to dictate that students cheat because they are unaware of the rules. Burrus, McGoldrick, and Schuhman (2007) suggest that students often cheat because of the absence of a clear set of rules and expectations. Given the ever-changing role that technology plays in adolescents' lives, it is imperative teachers have malleable policies concerning academic integrity, specifically cheating using technology and social media.

Helping is not cheating

The second theme, *helping is not cheating*, centered on the conversation of friendship. All five females' participants were adamant that friends help friends, which includes answers to homework, quizzes and tests. P6 stated, "I always help my friends in class and out of class. I'll snap a picture of the answer if they need it." When asked if she would do this in class or during a test, she replied, "Yes, if it's a good friend. Everyone does." According to Buhrmester (1996), friendships between adolescents are built on a mutual participation in activity and serves as a determining factor if an adolescent feels "included." This inclusion in activities would drive many young teens to help their friend cheat on an exam or homework. Laird, Pettit, Dodge, and Bates (1999) suggest that peer relationships play an important role in adjustment for young people. This may explain why teens who feel pressure to cheat to help a friend may do it anyway despite their moral fabric or ethical standing on the issue.

This theme is laden with the idea that friendship plays an important role in an adolescent's identify. P13 reflected on the experience that occurred the previous school year.

> *I shared an answer on a math quiz in Snap Chat and someone took a*
> *screenshot and their mom saw it. They figured out it was me and me*

and my friend got into trouble. We had to take a zero on the quiz. I wasn't that mad because I was helping someone that needed help.

The concept of academic integrity does not seem to resonate with most participants interviewed. Only one participant articulated what it meant to have ethical awareness. P11 stated,

"I do a lot of hard work in school and I won't share it-plus it's just wrong to share answers-it's cheating and nobody likes a liar or a cheater." Some researchers (Forsyth & William, 1984; Velasquiz & Rostanowski, 1985) have examined the moral development and dilemmas of adolescents. According to Kohlberg's moral stage theory, the issue is embedded in morality "where a person's actions, when freely performed, may harm or benefit others" (Eisenberg, 2004, p. 165). Moreover, Eisenberg (2004) found those middle school students' perceptions of cheating as a moral or a-moral act did have an effect on their attitude toward cheating overall. Albeit, Zimmerman (1999) found a connection between students' moral compass and their behavior associated with cheating.

As far back as 1998, 70 % of high school students and 54 % of middle school students admitted to cheating on a test or quiz. Moreover, the older a student becomes, the less likely they are to tell on a friend (Educational Testing Service Research Center, 1999). This holds true today as illustrated from the adolescents in this particular study. The moral lens from which we view this seemingly victimless crime is the issue that pervades today's classrooms. The issue is compounded by Sullivan's work (2001) where students at the university level falsified grades to earn highly sought after internships. This moral dilemma occurs in exemplary students as well as those with questionable ethical foundations.

Google is a Learning Tool

The third theme, *Google is a learning tool*, was apparent throughout the interviews. This theme illustrates the mindset of some adolescents that the Internet is a space where answers are readily available for the taking. Participants were very clear that friends, parents and teachers often referred to Google when the needed a quick answer to a question. Participant 10 stated, "Whenever I don't know something or I ask my teacher a question and she doesn't know the answer, she tells me to Google it." That school of thought permeates the data in this study. If schools bear the responsibility of integrating technology for educational purposes and adopting a more student-centered, active learning setting, it is the duty of schools to create a space where that happens organically. According to Yelland (2006), learning with technology must be more than merely creating learning assignments and activities digitally; it must also be about constructing opportunities for authentic learning in new ways. These new ways of learning must include not only the *hows* of using technology but also the *whys*. Likewise, Dede (2000) states, "We have the technical and economic capacity to develop technologically rich learning environments for children to prepare them for life as adults in a world very different from the one we have known" (p. 180). With this in mind, teachers must cultivate an educational atmosphere that "exemplifies the new way of living in the 2st century" (Yelland, 2006, p. 122). This new way of living and learning can illuminate learning opportunities that access the Internet.

Participants were also able to cite instances where Google was used as a learning tool in their classrooms with success. Participant 2 states, "My teacher really understands technology and he teaches us so much. He also teaches us how to trust or not trust what we read online." This support and facilitation of investigative education endeavors by students is aligned with what many in education would attest to as best practices. Intellectual endeavors by students may

look much different today from in the past, and teachers bear the responsibility to help students by understanding and shifting through the data to find answers to their questions. Resnick (2000) asserts that with the advent of technology new forms and ways of inquiry are possible, and the possibilities of sharing and disseminating that information for a wider audience is a byproduct.

CONCLUSIONS

With the instantaneous access to information, it is hard to imagine adolescents understanding the impact of cheating and the consequences of such actions as they age. Additionally, GenZ process their surroundings much differently that the adults in their lives, but cheating is most likely universally unacceptable. The battle inside an adolescent's underdeveloped brain makes it difficult for them to see the real issue, which is to retain integrity in academic endeavors is reflective of one's honesty in other parts of their lives. On the other hand, an adolescent is ever consumed with their social standing and how their peers perceive them. The dilemma that GenZ faces is only different from previous generations in that they can cheat with ease and accuracy more than the previous generational cohorts can. More worrisome is that this will permeate their professional and personal lives as they age.

The casual links of brain development, social standing and adolescents' mindset are intertwined and interdependent on many variables. This research indicates that friendships and peer relationships rank high on many adolescents' priority list. This overwhelming need to "fit it" may be more powerful than we know. Historically, society has established that grades earned in high school "pave the path to students" futures (Isakov & Tripathy, 2017, p. 1), which may perpetuate the cheating cycle. Moreover, societal concerns of those who cheat is worth considering. Literature supports that those engage in academic dishonestly are more likely to cheat in other parts of their lives aside from school (Sims, 1993). With this, society withstands the responsibility, which translates to schools.

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