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Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement and Academic Integrity: Mediational Role of Moral Identity of University Students

Manahil Shafiq Qureshi[1*], Saima Kalsoom[2], Hadeeqa Shahzadi[1], & Shagufta Jabeen[3]
[1]Bahria School of Professional Psychology, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan; [2]Department of Psychology, National University of Medical Sciences (NUMS), Islamabad, Pakistan; & [3]Net-Gen Impact Consulting, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Academic integrity has appeared as a substantial concern in higher education institutions worldwide, impacting the quality of educational outcomes. This study aimed to explore the mediational role of moral identity in the relationship between perceived parental (paternal and maternal separately) moral disengagement and academic integrity of university students. For the fulfillment of these aims, a sample of undergraduate university students (N = 299) was selected from twin cities Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Male students (n=140) and female students (n=159) with age range of 18-23 years (M =20.50, SD = 1.71) years were included. The self-report measures, including the Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Induction Questionnaire, Moral Identity Questionnaire, and Academic Integrity Scale, were used. The results of Pearson product-moment correlations revealed a significant negative relationship between perceived parental (maternal and paternal) moral disengagement, moral identity, and academic integrity of university students. Furthermore, moral identity was found to be a significant positive mediator between perceived parental moral disengagement (tested separately for maternal and paternal models) and the academic integrity of university students. Moral identity positively predicted academic integrity in the mediational models, the indirect effect emerged as positive for the overall model for predicting academic integrity from perceived paternal and maternal moral disengagement of university students. Based upon these findings, the current study offers an implication for higher education institutions to design academic integrity plans and interventions that address not only institutional policies but also the moral and family-related factors that contribute to deceitful academic behaviors.

Keywords: paternal moral disengagement, maternal moral disengagement, moral identity, academic integrity, university students

Introduction

The role of parental influence on the moral choices of their children is a widespread phenomenon that requires an empirical understanding. Academic integrity is a major prerequisite for maintaining an environment conducive to just and honest learning. In higher education institutions, academic integrity is not only responsible for the stimulation of intellectual advancement but also plays an integral part in conserving the legitimacy of the degrees and certifications awarded and avoiding corruption (Denisova-Schmidt, 2025). Unfortunately, research shows that university students exhibit low academic integrity levels and high academic fraud with multiple variations (McCabe et al., 2012). There may be an

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Saima Kalsoom, Department of Psychology, National University of Medical Sciences (NUMS), Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: saimakulsum.edu@gmail.com

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interesting interplay between the academic integrity of children and perceived moral disengagement that they observe in their parents. Perceived parental moral disengagement refers to how individuals perceive their parents' propensity for moral detachment, which may influence their own moral compass (Patrick & Gibbs, 2012). Specifically, it reflects a child's perception that their parents are not effectively communicating or modeling moral values and ethical behavior, but are instead disengaged from the moral development of their child (Zych et al., 2019). Offspring may also feel that their parents do not foster in them any sense of shame or guilt and may always support their misdemeanors (Zhao et al., 2025). Children who observed their parents use moral disengagement techniques to defend their immoral behavior were more likely to take part in bullying themselves (Zych et al., 2019). Hardy et al. (2015) found out that moral disengagement was negatively related to moral identity, and it could further lead to a decline in academic integrity among university students.

Morality is not an innate attribute that appears at birth; rather, it develops gradually across the lifespan through social interactions, environmental contexts and relational factors that shape moral understanding over time (Sommerville, 2024). Parents are the primary caregivers of children and are relied upon for their development (Hammond & Carpendale, 2015). The main cause of moral depravity within the younger generation is the absence of appropriate role models for parenting, given that the parents are the first role models that children emulate (Tan & Yasin, 2020). Poor relationships, disregard for children's worries, or parents' ineffective involvement in guiding children's behaviour were proposed to crucially influence children's tendency to engage in violent and deviant behaviors as manifestation of moral neglect (Kong & Yasmin, 2022). As Maftei (2020) also found that parenting practices play a significant role in explaining deviant behaviors among youth. Therefore, it is plausible to propose that parents may justify rather than disapprove of their children's transgressions and discourage morally ethical behaviors in their children. In other words, they heighten the probability of moral disengagement in their children as Augustine and Stifter (2015) also found that kids' moral behavior was related to parents' moral behavior. Therefore, perceived parental moral disengagement can possibly turn into an internalized negative value for children considering how this phenomenon is pervasive and is also associated with immediate benefits (Camodeca & Taraschi, 2015). It is pertinent for the children to associate with their parental morality, which is important for their moral identity also.

Moral identity is viewed as one of several possible identity domains that individuals may adopt as a central basis for their overall sense of self (Bäker & Wilke, 2025; Lapsley, 2015). Moral identity is significant considering parental socialization and moral scripts shared with in family context. The findings of a recent study indicated that parenting practices are related to the moral identity of adolescents (Pititanun & Supparekchaisakul, 2025). Parents have a significant impact during the early teenage and young adult years since there is less interpersonal communication; therefore, moral personality features mostly develop and solidify during these critical developmental stages (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). It is believed that moral identity and perceived parental moral disengagement have a negative association with each other (Shahzadi et al., 2023) because individuals are less likely to have a strong moral identity if they perceive their parents to be morally indifferent. This could be because of parental moral disengagement, which can prevent them from providing moral advice and role-modeling for their children. Zych et al. (2019) revealed that elevated levels of perceived parental moral

disengagement were associated with high moral disengagement in the children, and demoted moral emotions were correlated with negative behaviors such as decreased academic integrity. Academic integrity is explained by an individual's fidelity to positive values that allows them to be able to act and behave accordingly in creating a healthy academic environment (International Center for Academic Integrity, 2021). A foundation was also laid for the modern field of academic integrity research and practice by early studies (Kohlberg, 1981; Holden, 2021; Rest et al., 1999). However, Cerda-Navarro et al. (2022) have shown that data to support cheating on examinations and other activities is believed as a major overt manifestation of academic disintegration among students in university. Stoesz and Yudintseva (2018) sated that about 80% of university students admit engaging in some form of cheating throughout their academic careers. Students who lack a solid moral identity can be more inclined to cheat or plagiarize in academic settings, which tends to effect academic integrity. A positive relationship between moral identity and academic integrity was reposted (Schindler, 2016). A reciprocal relationship exists between moral identity and academic integrity, supporting the findings of Holden (2021). Individuals can also improve their moral identity and contribute to an integrity culture in academic contexts by upholding high standards of academic honesty (Bieliauskaite, 2021).

The direct evidence for moral identity as mediator for parental moral disengagement and academic integrity of university students is scarce, especially in Pakistan. However, the indirect link (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Caganan, 2025; Clark & Bocarnea, 2023; Han et al., 2019; Harrad et al., 2024) of moral identity with moral engagement support the proposed and expected direction of the mediator outcomes such as academic integrity at university settings. Though direct measures of parental moral disengagement are scarce in university samples, social learning perspective provided theoretical support (Zhao et al., 2025) and indicate parents' justification narratives may be internalized, nurturing students' own disengagement instruments that enable cheating when under performance pressure (Hardy et al., 2015). Therefore, current study is vitally imperative in understanding the morality of young people from the perspective of a collectivistic socio-cultural context. Pakistan is a representative of the broader Asian socio-cultural orientations, in which morality may be perceived as relative and shared value to engage in unethical behaviors to maintain a positive social image and avoid dissonance. Iqbal et al. (2026) proves that academic misconduct is not merely a moral deteriorating, but a behavior influenced by personal views, social factors, and perceived organizational environment. Moreover, for younger people, it is of utmost importance to understand empirically how individuals morally disengage, and explore moral identities to minimize feelings of guilt, shame, or remorse associated with their behavior while justifying with their parents' perceived morality. However, the current study focuses on considering the traditional patriarchal cultural aspects of the perceived societal parental moral disengagement to study separately through maternal and parental measurements. Furthermore, Pakistan is going through a very rigorous socio-political evolution in which institutional systems and structures are not fully functional as per the moral and legal standards. This instability may impact the downward influence on individuals and society. Employing this rationale, the present study was planned to measure morality (parental moral disengagement, moral identity, and academic integrity) while encompassing the following objectives. The objectives of the study were to explore the association between perceived parental moral disengagement

(paternal & maternal separately), moral identity, and academic integrity of university students and to explore the mediating role of moral identity between perceived parental moral disengagement (paternal and maternal separately) and the academic integrity among university students.

Hypotheses

H1: Perceived paternal moral disengagement is negatively associated with moral identity and academic integrity among university students.

H2: Perceived maternal moral disengagement is negatively associated with moral identity and academic integrity among university students.

H3: Moral identity mediates the relationship between perceived moral disengagement and academic integrity among university students.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a correlational research strategy and cross-sectional design to collect the data on the measures of perceived parental moral disengagement, moral identity, and academic integrity of undergraduate university students.

Participants

Sample of undergraduate university students was selected by a non-probability convenient sampling technique from the undergraduate degree programs belonging to public and private universities of twin cities Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The sample of (N= 299) participants was selected, the participants consisted of (n=140) male students and (n=159) female students. The age of the participants ranged between 18 to 23 years. The inclusion criteria were university students living with their biological parents. Exclusion criteria include university students from single-parent families and those with step-parents, because family structure, supervision, socialization, communication, parenting, and modeling of moral behavior of parents may vary, especially considering the collectivistic cultural and familial context of Pakistan. The perceived parental moral disengagement was studied through the separate forms of the same instrument (Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Induction Questionnaire; Zych, 2019) to study the moral disengagement of mother and father separately. Informed consent was taken. Anonymity and confidentiality were also ensured for all the participants of this study.

Instruments

Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Induction Questionnaire (Zych, 2019)

The Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Induction Questionnaire (Zych, 2019) included 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). In this self-reported questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they perceive that their parents have given them messages that support their immoral behavior or have proven to not be good role models in terms of moral behavior. Zych et al. (2019) demonstrated the construct validity of the questionnaire, which yielded an internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of .90. The items of this scale were used separately for measuring the perceived paternal and perceived maternal moral disengagement. For example,

1. A) "My mother makes me see that, if it is for a good reason, it is fine to hit or insult someone". B) "My father makes me see that it is fine to hit or insult someone if it is for a good reason".

The Moral Identity Questionnaire (Black & Reynolds, 2016)

The Moral Identity Questionnaire (Black & Reynolds, 2016) was used to assess the moral identity of the participants. The questionnaire consists of 20 items across two factors, 12 on the moral integrity subscale (e.g. It is ok to do something you know is wrong if the rewards for doing it are great, etc.) and 8 on the Moral Self subscale (e.g. I want other people to know they can rely on me, etc.). The moral integrity subscale (items 1- 8) was reverse scored. The selections for this study were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). It had an alpha reliability of .85.

Academic Integrity scale (Ramdani, 2018)

The Academic Integrity scale (Ramdani, 2018) is a 17-item scale that measures the perceived academic integrity of the participants on its five components: honesty (e.g. I am sure that when any work done honestly, results will be satisfactory, etc.), trust (e.g. I like to discuss how to cite the reference sources that lecturers present in the classroom, etc.), fairness (e.g. I am happy to pass the course material to my friend, etc.), respect (e.g. Trusting each other's friends is a solid foundation for collaboration on campus, etc.), and accountability (e.g. I feel a good image of campus is a shared responsibility, etc.) on a 5-point Likert scale from 1-5, (5 = *Very Appropriate*, 4 = *Appropriate*, 3 = *Neutral*, 2 = *Inappropriate*, and 1 = *Very Inappropriate*). It had alpha reliability of .87. The original English versions of these instruments were used based on the rationale of bilingualism of students in higher education system in Pakistan, as English is officially used as mode of instructions and communication at university/higher education in Pakistan.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data was collected through self-report measures from the students of undergrade universities located in twin cities, i.e., Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Informed consent was taken in writing as per HEC guidelines. Data protection, anonymity, and privacy were also ensured. Since the study involved perception of students about their parental morality, only willing and motivated participants were approached individually to collect the data. To minimize social desirability bias confidentiality was maintained, data was collected in absentia of authority figures at university settings. Honest responses were encouraged to express experience-based beliefs and behaviors. Right to withdrawal was provided to get neutral responses of the participants and participants were assured that the information will be used for sole research purposes.

Results

The results of descriptive statistics, alpha reliability coefficient, and inter scale (perceived parental moral disengagement, paternal and maternal moral disengagement separately, moral identity, academic integrity) correlations, and mediation models for perceived paternal and maternal moral disengagement are presented in this section.

Table 1

Mean, Standard deviation, Alpha Reliability, Skewness, and Kurtosis for all the Scales (N=299).

Variables	*k*	*α*	*M*	*SD*	*Skewness*	*Kurtosis*
1.PPMD	20	.90	38.78	12.09	.55	.81
2.PFMD	10	.82	21.32	6.70	.56	.71
3.PMMD	10	.81	19.64	6.41	.65	.78
4.MIS	20	.85	75.94	11.45	.75	.85
5.AI	17	.86	21.14	10.33	.86	.92

Note: k= Number of items, PPMD = Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Scale, PFMD = Perceived Paternal Moral Disengagement, PMMD = Perceived Maternal Moral Disengagement; MIS = Moral Identity Scale; AI =Academic Integrity

The results in Table 1 show the composite scale for perceived parental moral disengagement demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .90). The subscales for perceived paternal moral disengagement (α = .82) and perceived maternal moral disengagement (α = .81) also showed high internal consistency and score stability. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha values for the Moral Identity Scale (α = .85) and the Academic Integrity Scale (α = .86) indicate strong reliability across all measures.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients of PPMD Total and with PFMD, PMMD, MI, & AL (N=299).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
PPMD	-	.97**	.95**	-.37**	-.28**
PFMD		-	.87**	-.33**	-.27**
PMMD			-	-.35**	-.28**
MI				-	-.22**
AI					-

Note: $p < .01$; PPMD = Perceived Parental Moral Disengagement Scale, PFMD = Perceived Paternal Moral Disengagement, PMMD = Perceived Maternal Moral Disengagement; MIS = Moral Identity Scale; AI =Academic Integrity

In Table 2, the results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis indicated that perceived parental moral disengagement was significantly and negatively correlated with moral identity and academic integrity. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was also carried out for perceived paternal and maternal moral disengagement with moral identity and academic integrity. Results indicate that perceived paternal moral disengagement was significant and negatively correlated with moral identity and academic integrity. Similarly, the results revealed that perceived maternal moral disengagement was significantly and negatively correlated with moral identity and academic integrity as composite scores. Moreover, moral identity and academic integrity were also significantly correlated into negative direction.

Mediation analysis was carried out between perceived paternal moral disengagement as paternal and maternal moral disengagement separately and academic integrity while testing moral identity as mediator through PROCESS macro v4.7 (Hayes, 2012). Following model 4, a separate mediation analysis (separate models) was carried out between perceived maternal

moral disengagement, moral identity as mediator, and academic integrity of university students.

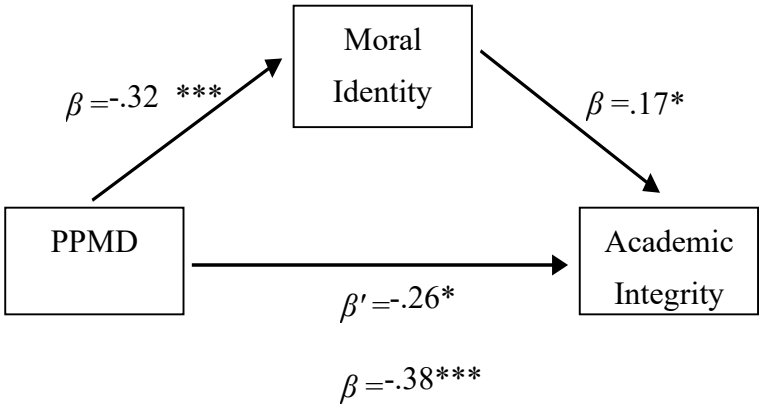
Table 3

Mediation Analysis between Perceived Paternal Moral Disengagement and Academic Integrity through Moral Identity of University Students (N=299).

Antecedent	Consequent			
	Moral Identity		Academic Integrity	
	B	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Perceived Paternal Moral Disengagement	-.32***	.09	-.18*	.08
Moral Identity	-	-	.17*	.04
Controls				
Gender	.11*	1.24	.01	.99
R^2	.14		.12	
F	14.75***		7.93***	

Figure 1

The Statistical Model for Mediation Analysis of Perceived Paternal Moral Disengagement, Moral Identity, and Academic Integrity.



Mediation analysis was run following model 4 with PROCESS macro (version 4.7) to investigate moral identity as mediator between the relationship of perceived paternal moral disengagement and academic integrity of university students. Results indicated that perceived paternal moral disengagement emerged as a significant negative predictor of moral identity and academic integrity path (as direct paths). Moral identity emerged as a significant yet positive predictor of academic integrity. The indirect effect between perceived paternal moral disengagement and academic integrity with moral identity as the mediator was negatively significant (*b* = -.057, *bootLL* = -.123, *bootUL* = -.012). These finds showed that higher perceived paternal moral disengagement was associated with lower moral identity, which, in turn, was associated with lower academic integrity.

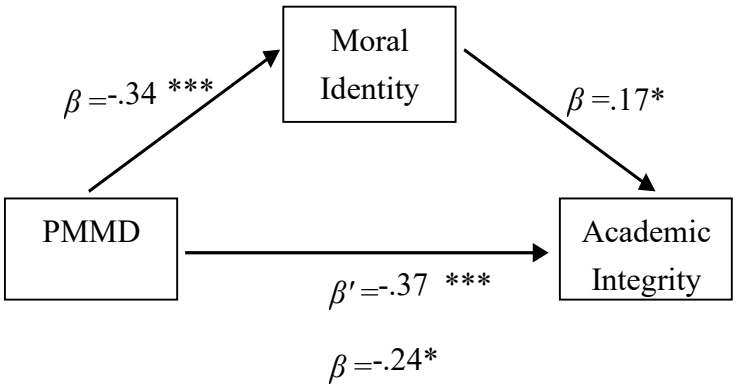
Table 4

Mediation Analysis between Perceived Maternal Moral Disengagement and Academic Integrity through Moral Identity of University Students (N=299).

Antecedent	Consequent			
	Moral Identity		Academic Integrity	
	β	*SE*	*β*	*SE*
Perceived Maternal Moral Disengagement	-.34***	.09	-.26*	.09
Moral Identity	-	-	.17*	.04
Controls				
Gender	.12*	1.25	.01	.98
R^2	.13		.12	
F	14.75***		7.93***	

Figure 2

The Statistical Model for Mediation Analysis of Perceived Maternal Moral Disengagement, Moral Identity, and Academic Integrity.



Mediation analysis was used to test the mediating role of moral identity for the relationship between perceived maternal moral disengagement and academic integrity of university students. Results indicated that perceived maternal moral disengagement emerged as a significant negative predictor of moral identity (direct path). It also showed that perceived maternal moral disengagement was a significant positive predictor of academic integrity (direct path). Moral identity was found to be a significant yet positive predictor of academic integrity. The indirect effect between perceived maternal moral disengagement and academic integrity with moral identity as the mediator was negatively significant (*b*= -.059, *bootLL* = -.125, *bootUL* = -.012). These results show that moral identity is a significant mediator between perceived maternal moral disengagement and academic integrity (Digure 2). These finds showed that higher perceived maternal moral disengagement was associated with lower moral identity, which, in turn, was associated with lower academic integrity.

Discussion

The main hypothesis of this research study was to study the mediating role of moral identity between the relationship of perceived parental moral disengagement and academic

integrity of university students. For this purpose, reliable and validated measures were used and the results of statistical analysis revealed sound evidence for reliability and validity consistent with the previous studies (Black & Reynolds, 2016; Ramdani, 2018; Zych et al., 2019). For hypothesis testing, mediational analysis through PROCESS macro considering model number 4 was run.

The first hypothesis of this study was to examine the association between perceived parental moral disengagement with moral identity and academic integrity of university students. The findings of this study indicated a significantly negative relationship between perceived paternal and maternal moral disengagement, with an individual's moral identity and academic integrity. This explains that individuals who perceived their parents as highly disengaged on morality exhibited low academic integrity and weaker moral identity. This finding is supported by Augustine and Stifter (2015), Blasi (2001), Hardy et al. (2015), Patrick & Gibbs (2012), and Zych et al. (2019), who reported that moral disengagement is negatively associated with moral identity and may contribute to a decline in academic integrity among university students. The results further corroborate the relationships observed in the present study among moral disengagement, moral identity, and academic integrity. The findings of this study indicated a significant negative relationship between moral identity and academic integrity. Individuals with a higher sense of moral identity demonstrated elevated levels of academic integrity. This finding aligns with research by Bieliauskaite (2021), who reported a reciprocal relationship between moral identity and academic integrity, wherein each construct reinforces the other. Similarly, Kennedy et al. (2017) believed that moral identity and perceived parental moral disengagement have a negative association with each other. Moreover, other studies also established consistent evidence as Schindler (2016) suggests a positive relationship between moral identity and academic integrity academic integrity, a pattern further corroborated by other empirical studies (Holden, 2021).

Another hypothesis of this research was to explore the mediating role of moral identity between perceived paternal and maternal moral disengagement (separately) and academic integrity of undergraduate university students. Testing of separate models for paternal and maternal moral disengagement was vital and relevant considering the traditional patriarchal society of Pakistan, where traditional gender norms and roles are practiced for parenting, e.g. mothers are primarily responsible for upbringing and fathers are providers for economic needs largely. The result of this study proposes that individuals who perceive higher levels of maternal and paternal moral disengagement (in separate models of mediation) showed lower levels of academic integrity, and this relationship was mediated by their perceived moral identity. Moral identity emerged as a significant mediator in the association between perceived paternal moral disengagement and academic integrity among undergraduate university students. Moral identity also emerged as a significant mediator in the relationship between perceived maternal moral disengagement and academic integrity among undergraduate university students. This finding is supported by previous studies where moral identity was also found as a significant mediator between perceived parenting styles and prosocial behaviors which include academic honesty (Fatima et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2020). The results of mediation models are in line and similar with the previous studies (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Bieliauskaite, 2021; Caganan, 2025; Clark & Bocarnea, 2023; Han et al., 2019; Harrad et al., 2024) indicating that individuals may improve their moral identity and contribute to an integrity culture in

academic contexts by upholding high standards of academic honesty. Furthermore, these findings are both meaningful and consequential when examined within the sociocultural framework of Pakistan, where collectivistic orientations, interdependence, and shared moral values play a central role in shaping individual behavior. Such a perspective enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between moral identity, moral disengagement, and academic integrity in this cultural context, especially for mediation model results which indicated that moral identity positively influenced the academic integrity after controlling the effect of paternal and maternal moral disengagement. More importantly, the findings of this study demonstrate the unique strength while exhibiting the empirical evidence of parental moral disengagement as separate construct of perceived maternal moral disengagement and perceived paternal moral disengagement by the offspring (i.e., university students) in relation to their moral identity and academic integrity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined the complex relationships among perceived parental moral disengagement, moral identity, and academic integrity among undergraduate university students. The findings revealed that higher levels of perceived maternal and paternal moral disengagement were associated with lower levels of moral identity and academic integrity, suggesting that parents' moral conduct may play a significant role in shaping their children's moral development and ethical behavior. Moreover, moral identity was positively associated with academic integrity, indicating that students with a stronger moral self-concept are more likely to uphold ethical academic practices. Importantly, moral identity emerged as a significant mediator in the relationship between perceived parental (paternal & maternal) moral disengagement and academic integrity, highlighting the mechanism through which parental moral influences may affect students' academic behavior. These findings underscore the importance of fostering moral values within the family environment to promote moral identity and strengthen academic integrity among university students.

Limitations and Recommendations

- The sample of this study consisted of people from urbanized areas only, therefore considering the setting of rural families in Pakistan would be important for future studies.
- Secondly, the data of this study was collected through a cross-sectional design, for future studies, a mixed-method/multiple method approach design can be utilized.
- Another limitation of the present study is that the instrument of Academic Integrity measured perceived notions of participants' academic integrity rather than behavior.
- It is suggested for future studies to focus on measuring observable academic integrity and dishonesty for greater reliability.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that students' perceptions of their parents' moral engagement play a crucial role in the development of their moral identity and academic integrity. Parents' moral attitudes and behaviors appear to influence their children's moral development and ethical conduct in academic settings. Drawing on these findings, awareness

seminars and educational programs for parents may be valuable in enhancing understanding of the importance of moral engagement and ethical role modeling within the family. Such initiatives could contribute to strengthening students' moral identity, reducing tendencies toward moral disengagement, and promoting higher levels of academic integrity among young adults.

Author Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. None of the authors have any financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed to have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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