

**UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

**GENDER MODERATING THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG ACADEMIC  
STRESS, MALEVOLENT CREATIVITY, AND ACADEMIC DISHONEST  
BEHAVIOURS AMONG POST GRADUATE STUDENTS**



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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

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**A thesis in the Department of Counselling Psychology,  
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of the requirements for the award of degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
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**NOVEMBER, 2024**

## DECLARATION

### STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, with the exception of quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my own original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

Name: Jamal Mohammed Dauda

Candidate's Signature.....

Date.....

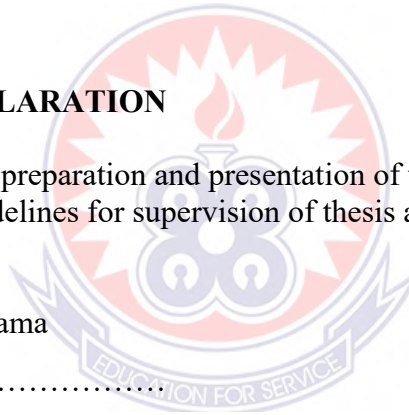
### SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work was supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of thesis as laid down by the University of Education, Winneba.

Name: Dr. Inuusah Mahama

Signature.....

Date.....



## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my family for their love and support



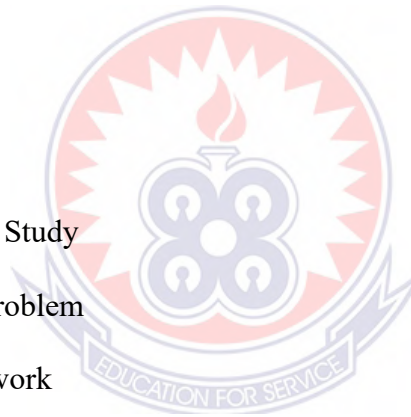
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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how gender influences the link among academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours among Ghanaian postgraduate students. The study aims to investigate the levels of academic stress, malevolent creativity, and dishonest behaviours among students at the University of Education, Winneba, as well as how gender influences these relationships. It draws on the Person-environment fit theory by French et al., Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviours, and the Dark Triad Theory. 450 postgraduate students participated in the study, which used a descriptive survey approach. The psychological toll of academic demands was highlighted by the findings, which showed a strong correlation between academic stress and both academic dishonesty and malevolent creativity. Often used as a stress-reduction strategy, malevolent creativity took the form of damaging or dishonest activities. However, the association between academic stress and dishonest conduct was not significantly moderated by gender. The study comes to the conclusion that ethical training programs and stress management techniques are essential for lowering the incidence of unethical academic behaviour. The implementation of counselling services and courses targeted at giving students better coping mechanisms for stress are among the recommendations. Additional study ideas include investigating environmental and cultural elements that can affect academic dishonesty in various Ghanaian educational contexts.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Background of the Study

These days, one of the most common psychological disorders in people is stress. It illustrates the discrepancy between the availability of biological and psychological resources for the same and the physical and psychological requirements (Deb et al, 2016). Stress, according to Neeta & Singh (2020) is any change in the body's equilibrium, and any negative stress is also known as distress. Distress arises when tension increases during daily activities or while completing a task; there is no longer any enjoyment and no apparent relief (Neeta & Singh, 2020). This might lead to poor decisions. The general characteristics of someone in distress include being over-aroused, tense, unable to relax, touchy, easily upset, irritable, easily startled, nervous, jittery, fidgety, and intolerant of interruption or delay. Fundamentally, stress can be divided into psychological and physical categories (Hong, 2023). Humans' physical and mental states are both impacted by stress (Turner et al., 2020). These days, practically everyone is affected by this human mental illness, regardless of their gender, age, race, financial situation, level of physical fitness, name, or notoriety. Individuals and families have been experiencing the severe pains of this human psychological disorder. Notwithstanding the victims' mental health, it also has an impact on their ability to work, marriage, relationships, and physical well-being (Turney & Sugie, 2020). Stress happens when people feel under pressure because they believe they cannot meet the demands of their surroundings. While stress can occasionally be beneficial, chronic stress can cause serious health problems (Jain & Singhai, 2018). According to researchers, stress is not just a stimulus or reaction; rather,

it is a whole process that can affect a victim's thoughts, actions, and feelings (Lovallo & Buchanan, 2017).

Gender has been found to be a significant factor that can affect students' behaviors and academic results (Halpern, 2014; Schoonenboom, 2018). Male and female students may respond and experience academic stress differently, which could impact their academic performance and lead to dishonest behavior, according to recent research. In Ghana, for instance, female university students reported higher levels of academic stress and anxiety than their male counterparts, according to a study by Nonterah et al. (2015). This increased stress was linked to a higher chance of using academic dishonesty as a coping strategy, including plagiarism and cheating (Tindall et al., 2021).

However, research indicates that male students are more likely to display malicious innovation, which is the ability to generate novel and useful concepts to harm others. (Cropley & Kaufman, 2019). This malevolent creativity could potentially lead to the development of more sophisticated methods of academic dishonesty (Cropley et al., 2014).

Furthermore, a study by Amabile and Pratt (2016) found that the relationship between academic dishonesty and malicious innovation may be moderated by gender. They found that male students with higher levels of malevolent creativity were more likely to engage in academic dishonesty than female students with similar levels of malevolent creativity.

Academic stress is becoming a more common concern among students in modern educational settings. Students frequently face significant pressure in the academic setting

due to rigorous coursework, competitive settings, and high expectations; this is the reason for academic stress (Tus, 2020).

Around the world, students frequently struggle with academic stress, characterised by feelings of pressure, anxiety, and overwhelm related to academic demands (Dewi et al., 2019). In Ghana, students face various stressors, including high academic expectations, competition for limited resources, and cultural norms emphasising academic success (Adu-Mireku, 2017). Academic stress can result in detrimental effects including worse academic performance, mental health issues, and the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms (Herdian, 2021).

Students' academic behaviours and results, as well as their physical and emotional health, can all be significantly impacted by academic stress. (Herselman et al., 2022). The distinct difficulties and demands connected with pursuing an education give rise to the complicated and varied phenomenon known as academic stress. It encompasses various stressors, including high workload, performance expectations, time constraints, and peer competition (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016; Simbolon, 2015).

Academic stress refers to the emotional response to the demands and pressures associated with academic life (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These demands can stem from various sources such as examinations, coursework, deadlines, interpersonal relationships with peers or faculty members, and personal issues (Simbolon, 2015). Academic stress can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand, it can motivate students to work harder and improve their performance (Liu et al., 2017). On the other hand,

excessive academic stress can negatively impact students' mental health and well-being (Kumaraguru et al., 2015).

Numerous scholars have highlighted how academic stress impacts students' lives (Barseli et al., 2017; Tus, 2020). In addition to this, students may develop creative behaviours as a result of intellectual stress. According to Simbolon (2015), academic stress is defined as tension or mental and emotional stress brought on by the rigours of college life. Students who experience academic stress do so in learning environments (Azhar, 2015). Furthermore, stress resulting from academic expectations that are beyond the individual's capacity for adaptation is referred to as academic stress (Herdian, 2021).

The incapacity of students to adjust to the numerous demands of the classroom, in other words, is the root cause of academic stress, which can lead to discomfort and behavioural, bodily, and psychological alterations (Herdian, 2021). Every student may have a different cause for their stress. Students have numerous difficulties as a result of academic stress since it prevents them from acquiring the complete body of knowledge needed for personal development. According to Neeta and Singh (2020), students' lives are also being profoundly impacted by non-academic pressures such as their family, surroundings, work, and financial situation.

The main causes of academic stress, other than homesickness, are the demands of school, academic performance, financial strain, career, and the expectations of parents and teachers regarding academics. According to Deb et al. (2016), children who lack social support and coping strategies may get overwhelmed by these demands, increasing their risk of stress, hopelessness, and even suicide. Additionally, poor sleeping patterns,

additional obligations, and a hefty workload are all significant stressors for students (Aafreen, 2018). Various stressors, such as assignments, examinations, and workload, contribute to their perceived stress levels (Sani et al., 2018). The enormity of academic stress can lead to negative creative behaviours in terms of malevolent creativity and dishonest academic behaviours (Searle, 2022).

Traditionally considered a good trait, creativity is the ability to come up with original and worthwhile ideas or solutions. According to Kaufman and Beghetto (2017) and Plucker et al. (2015), creativity is the capacity to produce novel, valuable concepts, solutions, or artefacts that are impactful, original, and relevant in a certain field or subject.

According to Bedu-Addo et al. (2023), creativity is a latent quality that is acknowledged as beneficial for all people. Malevolent creativity, on the other hand, is a unique kind of creativity that entails coming up with original concepts for immoral or destructive ends. Malevolent creativity in the academic setting could take the form of creative ways to cheat or commit academic dishonesty without being caught (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015). Malevolent creativity can appear in the academic setting as plagiarism, cheating, or other types of academic dishonesty intended to obtain unfair benefits (Heilman et al., 2017).

Similarly, malevolent creativity, according to Bedu-Addo et al. (2023), is the act of being cunning, egotistical, negative, and clever at the expense of others in the same or other circumstances. Academic dishonesty has also been connected to malevolent creativity, which is the creation of new and practical ideas with the intention of hurting other people. (Saana et al., 2016).

Malevolent creativity refers to the antisocial and destructive aspects of creativity (Hao et al., 2016). According to some research, malevolent creativity frequently arises in individuals who are aggressive by nature (Hao et al., 2016), in circumstances where unfair and frightening social structures are present (Cheng, Baas, & De Dreu, 2018), and in response to both personal and environmental influences (Gong & Liu, 2016).

Malevolent creativity is not synonymous with aggression or violence, but rather involves using one's cognitive abilities to devise creative ways to harm others or oneself (Hunter et al., 2022). Malevolent creativity has been linked to various negative outcomes, such as bullying behaviours (Dow, 2023), cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014), and academic dishonesty (Szabó et al., 2022). While some studies suggest that high levels of academic stress may increase malevolent creativity due to heightened feelings of frustration and anger (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2021), other studies propose that low levels of academic stress may facilitate malevolent creativity by providing more time for students to engage in creative thinking about how to cheat academically (Sijtsema et al., 2015).

Academic stress is a significant factor that may cause pupils to participate in malicious creative behaviour. Other precursors to malevolent creativity include high levels of irritation, a lack of empathy, dissatisfaction, or grievance.

According to Murtza and Rasheed (2023), people may be more likely to participate in malicious creativity to obtain benefits or surpass their peers in a highly competitive academic environment where achievement may be valued more highly than moral considerations. Continuous stress can alter thought patterns and impact cognitive

functions, potentially increasing a person's vulnerability to harmful or unpleasant ideas and thoughts (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2020; Gupter & Mangal, 2019).

According to Saana et al. (2016), academic dishonesty among students is a serious problem that Ghanaian universities face, in addition to academic stress. Academic integrity is crucial since these behaviours may carry over into the workplace (Ashford & Allison, 2009; Saana et al., 2016). Understanding the elements that contribute to academic dishonest behaviours such as gender becomes essential in this situation. A wide range of immoral actions that compromise the credibility of educational institutions are considered academic dishonesty. These behaviours include plagiarism, collusion (illegitimate collaboration on assignments or exams when prohibited), fabrication (creating false data or information in research projects, papers, or tasks), and cheating (unauthorized collaboration, using unauthorized materials during exams, or any other means of gaining an unfair academic advantage) (Choo & Tan, 2023; Emerson & Smith, 2022; Kelly et al., 2022; Simpson, 2016; Sorgo et al., 2015).

Bachore (2016) identifies plagiarism and exam cheating as the two types of academic dishonesty. Using notes, formulas, or other information in a programmable calculator or other electronic device without explicit teacher permission, copying from others, or sending or receiving unauthorised information via a communication device such as a cell phone, pager, or electronic translator are all examples of exam cheating. Additionally, it is completing a test on behalf of another student or permitting someone else to do so and requesting inappropriate help, including cash or other advantages. On the other hand, plagiarism encompasses actions like giving or receiving inappropriate assistance on a

task that should be completed independently and incorporating any content that is not based on one's own writing and research into any assignment that is turned in for credit. These actions damage educational institutions' reputations, jeopardise the classroom atmosphere, and diminish teacher and student trust (Eaton & Christensen Hughes, 2022). Academic dishonesty is becoming a bigger problem in Ghana, as students are reportedly using unethical methods to succeed academically (Saana et al., 2016). Any behaviours that transgress the ethical norms of academic work are considered academic dishonesty. Among these are plagiarism, exam or assignment cheating, data or result fabrication, lying about one's credentials or accomplishments, and working together on individual assignments without the required permission (Freeman et al., 2014).

A global problem, academic dishonesty impacts students from all cultural backgrounds. Nonetheless, there is proof that the frequency and kinds of academic dishonesty activities vary by gender. Male students are more prone than female students to cheat on tests, and female students are more likely than male students to plagiarise (Jereb et al., 2018; Freeman et al., 2014). Additionally, the association between academic stress and academic dishonesty has been found to differ by gender. For instance, a study of university students in Nigeria revealed that when under a lot of stress, female students were more prone than male students to commit academic dishonest behaviours (Ifeagwazi, 2019). However, these findings are not consistent across all studies. For instance, a study conducted among Ghanaian university students found no significant difference between male and female students in the relationship between academic stress and plagiarism (Nketsiah et al., 2023)

Academic dishonest behaviours are caused by a variety of factors, including cultural influences, the use of technology to enable academic dishonesty, a lack of education and awareness of academic integrity, and pressure to maintain a competitive edge and get good grades (Thomas, 2017). To satisfy the expectations of their parents, peers, and society, many students feel pressured to cheat or plagiarise. Some students also do this unknowingly since they do not know what constitutes plagiarism or cheating. Furthermore, some students might not be fully aware of the negative effects academic dishonesty might have on their future employment (Thomas, 2017).

The difficulty of tests and exams, time limits, the inconvenience of course materials, the pressure to get good grades, ignorance of the policy, and the desire to acquire extra points to improve grades are the main causes of academic dishonesty, according to Bachore (2016). The way an assessment task is presented may also affect the likelihood of cheating. For example, assignments that place a strong focus on following precise guidelines are more likely to be linked to dishonest academic practices than assignments that give students a choice in their methodology. (Kanat-Maymon, Stavsky, Shoshani & Roth, 2015). Academic dishonesty has repercussions for both individuals and educational institutions and compromises the integrity of the educational process (Cuadrado et al., 2019). Academic dishonesty can be caused by a variety of factors, including the pressure to maintain a competitive edge and achieve high grades, a lack of knowledge about academic integrity, the difficulty of tests and exams, time constraints, the inconvenience of course materials, unclear policies, and cultural influences (Bachore, 2016; Thomas, 2017). Extreme academic pressure results in explanations and defences for engaging in academically dishonest behaviours since academic stress raises the risk of academic

dishonesty (Macaulay, 2015). Stress may be seen by students as an essential tool for success in a high-stakes setting, which may lead them to justify unethical behaviours. According to Azigwe et al. (2016), students who are under a lot of academic stress may consider academic dishonesty as a means of gaining an advantage or performing better. Under extreme pressure, the desire for academic performance or desired grades may take precedence over moral considerations.

Academic stress can lead to both motivation and opportunities for dishonest behaviours. Students may become more inclined to act dishonestly if they feel more pressure to perform well academically or if they are afraid of the repercussions of failing (Liu & Siu, 2019). Additionally, under pressure, like during time-constrained assignments or high-stakes tests, students may have the chance to cheat or plagiarise. As demonstrated above, it is evident that students' behaviour is impacted by academic stress, leading to both academic dishonesty and malicious creative behaviours. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend the connection between academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonest behaviours to establish a welcoming, encouraging, and moral learning atmosphere in Ghanaian high schools.

Understanding how gender moderates the relationships between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours is essential for developing targeted interventions that address gender-specific vulnerabilities and promote ethical conduct among students in Ghana.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Academic stress has become a major issue in higher education around the world, as students face mounting pressure from rigorous coursework, cutthroat classrooms, and elevated academic standards. These pressures have been linked to psychological challenges such as anxiety and depression, which undermine students' academic performance and overall well-being (Deb et al., 2016; Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). In many African contexts, including Ghana, academic stress is exacerbated by socio-economic hardships, inadequate institutional resources, and uncertain post-graduation opportunities, thereby intensifying the academic strain experienced by university students (Ojo-Adeyemo et al., 2017; Adu-Mireku, 2017).

Despite substantial research on student stress, limited empirical attention has been given to the potential for academic stress to elicit malevolent creativity, whereby individuals employ creative thinking for harmful or unethical purposes. Although global studies suggest that stress can influence the expression of such creativity (Simpson, 2016; Cropley et al., 2015), this relationship remains underexplored within African higher education. In Ghana specifically, little is known about whether academically stressed students may channel their cognitive resources into creative yet harmful strategies as a means of coping with academic pressures.

Academic dishonest behaviours, including cheating, plagiarism, and related unethical behaviours continue to pose a major challenge within higher education institutions. Prior research indicates that students often resort to dishonest practices in response to high levels of academic stress (Pompilus & Pompilus, 2021; Zamroni et al., 2018).

Studies from African countries, including Ghana, document high rates of academic dishonesty associated with intense academic pressure, competitive classroom environments, and insufficient institutional support (Akpan & Udoh, 2019; Saana et al., 2016). However, there is a notable gap in understanding whether malevolent creativity serves as a pathway through which academic stress contributes to dishonest academic behaviour, particularly within the Ghanaian tertiary education context.

Although gender differences in academic stress and academic dishonesty have been examined, the moderating role of gender in the interplay among academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty remains insufficiently researched, especially in African settings (Freeman et al., 2014). Evidence suggests that males and females differ in stress appraisal, coping patterns, and moral decision-making (Hussain et al., 2018; Misra & McKean, 2000).

These differences imply that gender may shape how stress affects both creative cognition and subsequent unethical actions. Within Ghanaian higher education, where socio-cultural norms and gendered expectations persist, such moderating effects may be particularly salient. Yet empirical research examining these gendered pathways is scarce. Understanding how gender moderates the relationships between academic stress and malevolent creativity, and between malevolent creativity and academic dishonesty, is crucial for designing gender-responsive interventions that enhance both student well-being and academic integrity.

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

This research was guided by the Person-environment fit theory by French et al. (1982), the Theory of Planned Behaviours (TPB) by Ajzen (1991), and the Dark Triad Theory by Paulhus and Williams (2002).

### 1.2.1 The Person-Environment Fit Theory

The Person-environment fit theory was developed by French et al. (1982). The Person-environment fit theory suggests that individuals experience stress when there is a misalignment or lack of compatibility between their characteristics and the demands of the environment in, which they find themselves.

This theory states that stress arises when one or more person-environment interaction domains—such as relationships, job, educational environments, and other social contexts—do not function as intended. Three elements make up the theory: fit, environmental influences, and personal considerations.

**Person factors:** A person's qualities, including their goals, values, abilities, coping mechanisms, and personality traits, are referred to as person factors. People's perceptions and interactions with their surroundings are influenced by these elements. The experience of academic stress can be attributed to specific personality features. Because they are more likely to experience anxiety, self-criticism, and high expectations, pupils who exhibit high levels of neuroticism or perfectionism, for instance, may be more likely to experience stress (Bojanić et al., 2018). Additionally, students' reactions to and management of stressful events can be influenced by a variety of coping mechanisms and styles. Positive reappraisal, problem-solving techniques, and seeking out social support are examples of effective coping mechanisms that are frequently linked to reduced

academic stress. On the other hand, unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse or avoidance can make stress levels worse (Hassanbeigi et al., 2013). Higher levels of academic stress may be a result of perfectionism, particularly maladaptive types like self-critical perfectionism. Due to the pressure to always attain perfection, students who have unrealistic expectations for themselves and are afraid of making mistakes may suffer from increased stress (Hill & Curran, 2019; Stoeber et al., 2018).

***Environmental factors:*** Environmental factors encompass the physical, social, and organisational aspects of the environment, including high workload, performance expectations, time constraints, peer competition, job demands, social support, work-life balance, and cultural norms. These factors shape the expectations, demands, and resources provided by the environment. The existence of a highly competitive educational climate can exacerbate academic stress among students (Kumar et al., 2014). When educational institutions or systems prioritise rankings, comparisons, or limited opportunities, students may experience heightened stress due to the pressure to outperform their peers. The fear of falling behind or not meeting high standards can contribute to a sense of pressure and anxiety and eventually lead to stress.

Once again, students may experience academic stress as a result of financial hardships, including excessive tuition, living expenses, or having to work part-time while they are in school (Douce & Keeling, 2014). As students balance the competing demands of making a living and concentrating on their academics, financial limitations can pose a serious challenge. Stress levels can rise as a result of juggling employment and school or feeling under pressure to perform well academically in spite of financial difficulties.

According to Kumar and Sundaram (2016), students may experience more academic stress if they don't feel that their family, friends, or teachers are supporting them. Feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and increased stress can result from not having a strong support system. Academic stress can be greatly exacerbated by the strain of high-stakes tests and assessments, such as entrance exams or final exams, claim French and Mulder (2024). Stress levels might rise as a result of fierce rivalry, the weight of results, and the fear of failing.

***Fit:*** The degree to which environmental and personal factors mesh or match is referred to as fit. Stress may be less likely when a person's personal traits, resources, and coping mechanisms align well with the requirements or features of the educational setting. When paired with an intellectually encouraging environment, a student who has strong self-efficacy, for instance, may feel less stressed (Lazarus, 1999).

On the other hand, stress may result from a mismatch between students' expectations and the realities of the classroom. For example, students may become frustrated and anxious if they have irrational expectations about the workload or the grading system (Miller et al., 2020). A misfit or incongruence between a person and the environment may lead individuals to experience stress, dissatisfaction, and negative outcomes.

Three types of fit are proposed by the theory in addition to the components: person-supervisor fit, person-job fit, and person-organization fit.

***Person-supervisor fit:*** the extent to which an individual and their management or boss get along. According to Kaur et al. (2018), when students and their supervisors have strong bonds or compatibility in terms of communication styles, mentoring strategies, and

research interests, a more agreeable and supportive relationship may ensue. This beneficial collaboration can reduce academic stress and enhance mental wellness. According to Winston et al. (2020), a strong person-supervisor fit can lead to effective coaching and mentoring. When postgraduate students feel their supervisors understand, support, and counsel them, it can boost their self-esteem, motivation, and overall academic experience. As a result, academic stress could be reduced.

***Person-job fit:*** the fit between a person's values, interests, and abilities and the particular requirements and features of a work. Academic stress may be influenced by how well a student's chosen courses align with their academic inclinations. When students have the opportunity to choose courses that align with their abilities, interests, and learning styles, it can enhance their sense of control and reduce the stress associated with mismatched coursework (Furda et al., 2021). Also, the fit between students' skills and the academic demands of their program can influence academic stress levels. If students perceive a match between their abilities and the requirements of their courses or assignments, it can contribute to increased confidence and reduced stress (Feldman et al., 2019).

***Person-organisation fit:*** the degree to which a person's values, objectives, and abilities align with the principles and culture of the company they work for. In the educational context, when there is a fit between students' personal values, goals, and the academic institution's culture, it can contribute to reduced academic stress. Students who feel that their values align with the values promoted by the institution are more likely to have a sense of belonging and experience less stress (Li et al., 2015).

Understanding the connection between academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonest behaviour is possible through the use of the person-environment fit hypothesis. If students perceive a discrepancy between their ability to cope with academic stressors and the demands imposed on them, it can lead to negative outcomes (Harrison, 1978). For example, if students feel overwhelmed by stress and lack effective coping strategies or resources, they may engage in maladaptive behaviours like malevolent creativity (e.g., finding harmful or destructive outlets for stress) or academic dishonesty as a coping mechanism. Additionally, students are more likely to feel stressed when they believe that their skills, resources, or coping strategies do not match the demands of their academic environment (Lazarus, 1999).

The Person-environment fit theory also emphasises individual coping strategies and adjustment. Students are more likely to employ adaptive coping mechanisms and behave ethically in the classroom when they believe that their resources and the demands of the educational setting are more aligned. Conversely, when the fit is poor, they may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms, leading to malevolent creativity or academic dishonest behaviours as maladaptive responses to stress (Harrison, 1978)

### **1.2.2 Theory of Planned Behaviours (TPB)**

Icek Ajzen (1991) established the theory of Planned Behaviours (TPB). According to the TPB, **attitudes**, **subjective norms**, and **perceived behavioural control** are the three main elements that affect behavioural intentions.

**Attitudes:** A person's favourable or negative assessment of engaging in a specific action is referred to as their attitude. People may view plagiarism, cheating, and other unethical behaviour differently when it comes to academic dishonesty. These attitudes can be

influenced by factors such as moral beliefs, personal values, or the perceived benefits and consequences of engaging in such behaviours (Ajzen, 1985).

A study by Gullifer and Tyson (2010) investigated the attitudes of undergraduate students toward academic misconduct. The findings revealed that students with more positive attitudes toward academic dishonesty were more likely to engage in cheating behaviours.

Lack of empathy makes students more likely to act dishonestly in their academic pursuits because they may fail to see the harm that could be done to others. When people don't think about how their activities may affect other people, they can be more inclined to act unethically (Saxberg et al., 2016). According to Zellars et al. (2015), students who exhibit higher degrees of narcissism are more likely to commit academic dishonesty because they may put their own happiness or gain ahead of morality.

Positive attitudes towards academic dishonesty can contribute to the development of rationalisations that justify engaging in such behaviours. Rationalisations act as cognitive tools to minimise perceived wrongdoing and alleviate guilt, making it easier for individuals with positive attitudes to engage in academic dishonesty (Stephens, 2017).

***Subjective norms:*** The term "subjective norms" describes how people perceive social pressures and how much they think their teachers, peers, or significant others support or oppose academic dishonest activity. Ajzen (1991). Students' intentions to engage in or refrain from dishonest activity may be significantly influenced by their perceptions of the standards around academic integrity. Research suggests that students' perceptions of their peers' engagement in dishonest behaviours positively influence their own attitudes and intentions towards academic dishonesty (Anderman & Murdock, 2007). Perceptions of

social norms regarding academic dishonesty are also important. If students believe that academic dishonesty is widespread and tolerated within their academic community, it may weaken their perceived social pressure to act ethically and increase the likelihood of engaging in such behaviours (Baird, 1980).

***Perceived behavioural control:*** Perceived behavioural control refers to one's belief in their ability to perform or refrain from a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of academic dishonesty, it relates to the perceived ease or difficulty of avoiding cheating or plagiarism, as well as the availability of alternative ethical strategies for academic success. Factors such as self-efficacy, self-control, or external constraints can influence an individual's perceived behavioural control (Witherspoon et al., 2012).

Self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's own ability to succeed. Ferreira and Pereira (2018) assert that strong self-efficacy students are more likely to behave morally and resist the urge to cheat in class. Moral disengagement, the term describing the mental processes that allow people to justify or rationalise their unethical behaviours, may also interact with perceived behavioural control. Students who exhibit good perceived behavioural control may be more likely to cheat on tests if they also employ moral disengagement strategies, such as exaggerating the consequences or downplaying the seriousness of the activity (Arroyo, 2018).

According to the study, postgraduate students' intentions and propensity to engage in academic dishonesty and malicious creativity can be influenced by their attitudes toward these practices. For example, if students think that damaging innovation or academic dishonesty are ways to cope with academic stress or achieve desirable outcomes, their

attitudes may improve and they are more likely to engage in these activities. Once more, students' perceptions of what their professors, lecturers, classmates, or institutional standards anticipate in terms of academic honesty and inventiveness can be clearly influenced by subjective norms. Perceptions of a social setting that accepts or even promotes these bad habits may increase the probability of committing academic dishonesty or malicious inventiveness. Intentions and behaviour can also be influenced by students' perceived control over their time management, coping mechanisms, and task completion skills. In order to deal with the perceived pressures of school, children may turn to dishonest behaviours or malicious innovation if they feel powerless or have few other options.

### **1.2.3 The Dark Triad Theory**

The psychologists Paulhus and Williams (2002) originated the Dark Triad Theory. According to the Dark Triad Theory, certain psychological qualities are linked to evil or immoral actions. The term "Dark Triad" describes three different but connected psychological traits: Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism.

*Narcissism*: Exaggerated feelings of importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of concern for others are characteristics of narcissism. High narcissistic individuals may employ creative malevolence to influence others or further their own agendas. A study by O'Connor et al. (2018) examined the connection between the Dark Triad qualities and creative achievement. They found that while there was a correlation between narcissism and creative success, it was mediated by unethical behaviours. This suggests that those with narcissistic tendencies may be more inclined to employ immoral means of achieving creative success, which may involve malicious innovation.

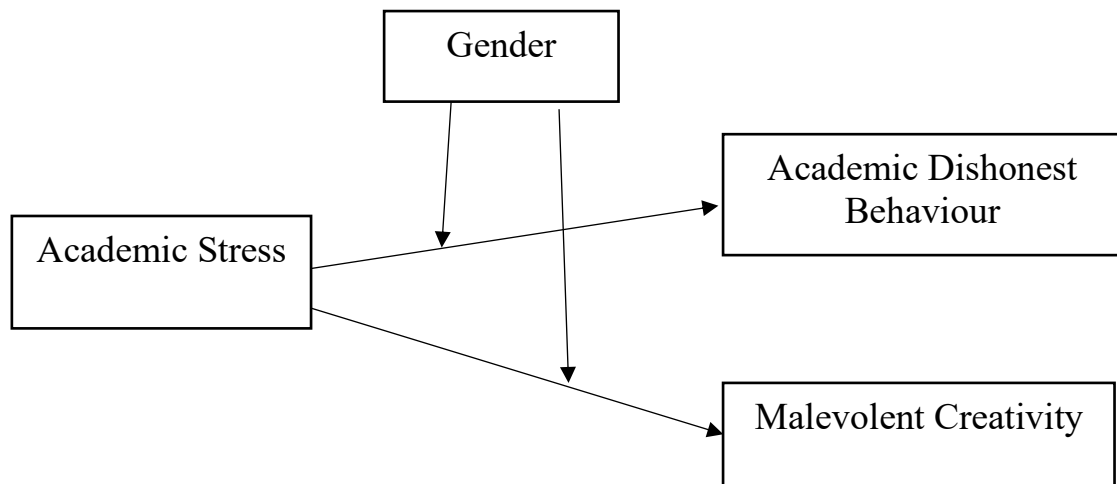
**Psychopathy:** Lack of empathy, flimsy feelings, and a disrespect for moral and social standards are traits of psychopathy. Because they are prepared to manipulate and hurt others without feeling guilty, people with high levels of psychopathy may exhibit a tendency for malicious creativity. Muris et al. (2017) looked into the connection between college students' Dark Triad tendencies and malevolent creativity. The study discovered a link between malicious cleverness and psychopathy. This indicates that those with higher levels of psychopathy are more likely to come up with creative and harmful ideas. Additionally, a study by Foulk et al. (2016) looked at how the Dark Triad qualities impact workplace innovation. They found that psychopathy was associated with both creative and aberrant behaviours in the workplace. Psychopaths were more likely to engage in damaging or unethical creative practices. According to the Dark Triad Theory, these findings demonstrate a link between students' evil ingenuity and psychopathy.

**Machiavellianism:** Machiavellianism involves a manipulative and exploitative orientation toward others, as well as a focus on achieving personal goals and self-interest. Individuals high in Machiavellianism may utilise malevolent creativity as a strategic means to accomplish their objectives. The connection between creativity and Dark Triad personality traits, such as Machiavellianism, was investigated in a study by Murdock and Goffin (2016). According to the study, there may be a connection between the production of destructive creative ideas and these personality qualities, since those with greater levels of Machiavellianism were more likely to display malevolent creativity. This suggests that pupils who exhibit high degrees of Machiavellianism are more likely to be ingenious in a malicious way. The Dark Triad theory suggests that individuals who possess these personality traits may be more likely to engage in behaviours that involve

the intentional generation or use of creative ideas for harmful or selfish purposes. They may be adept at using their creative thinking and problem-solving abilities to deceive, manipulate, or exploit others.

According to the study, postgraduate students with narcissistic qualities are more likely to commit academic dishonesty or malicious creativity in order to succeed at the expense of others, maintain a superior image, or obtain personal praise. Also, postgraduate students who display Machiavellian traits may be more inclined to engage in manipulative behaviours, such as deceiving others or engaging in academic dishonesty, to improve their academic performance or gain an advantage over their peers. Postgraduate students displaying psychopathic traits may exhibit a callous disregard for the academic integrity of others, engaging in malevolent behaviours for personal gain or to satisfy their desires, without concern for the well-being or rights of others. Postgraduate students who possess the Dark Triad qualities may be more likely to engage in malevolent creativity and academic dishonesty. These characteristics might affect their incentives and propensity to conduct dishonestly in times of academic stress or intense competition.

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework involves the interplay of four key elements: Academic stress, academic dishonesty, gender, and malevolent creativity. This framework illustrates how academic stress can influence the emergence of malevolent creativity and academic dishonest behaviours. It also demonstrates how gender affects linkages of malevolent innovation, academic stress, and academic dishonesty.

Academic stress represents the stressors and pressures that students experience in their academic pursuits. These stressors encompass factors such as high workload, performance expectations, time constrain and peer competition. Malevolent creativity signifies the generation of creative ideas with harmful or unethical intent. Academic stress is posited to exert its influence on malevolent creativity and academic dishonest behaviours. As students grapple with the stressors associated with their academic responsibilities, they may resort to creative problem-solving to cope with these stressors, which may lead to the exhibition of academic dishonest behaviours. Gender, on the other hand, will act as the moderating variable in this study, influencing the relationship between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours. Students in Ghana will be divided into male and female groups to investigate the ways in which gender affects the connection between academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonest activity.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The study looks at how gender influences the relationship between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and dishonest academic behaviour among Ghanaian students. In

order to successfully address the needs of various student populations, educators and policymakers can customise interventions by recognising gender-specific trends.

### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

1. To determine the levels of academic stress among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba.
2. To determine the levels of academic dishonest behaviours among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba
3. To determine the levels of malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba.
4. To establish the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba.
5. To establish the moderating role of gender in the relationship among academic stress, academic dishonest behaviours, and malevolent creativity among students at the University of Education, Winneba.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

1. What are the levels of academic stress among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
2. What are the levels of academic dishonest behaviours among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?

3. What are the levels of malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
4. What is the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
5. What is the moderating role of gender in the relationship among academic stress, academic dishonest behaviours, and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

This study holds considerable importance in the context of developing effective interventions and preventive measures that promote ethical conduct and psychological well-being within educational institutions. First, this study may help direct the creation of interventions that focus on stress reduction strategies and promote healthy coping mechanisms among postgraduate students by demonstrating the impact of academic stress on malicious innovation and academic dishonest behaviours. Additionally, this study intends to investigate the complex dynamics of moderation by gender in academic contexts, with a particular emphasis on academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonesty. The results of the survey will provide educators, counsellors, and legislators with important information to help them create plans to help students deal with stress and promote an integrity-based society.

### **1.8 Delimitations to the Study**

The study was focused solely on postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years. The target group included students from South, North, and Central campuses. Data was collected through questionnaires and analysed using statistical techniques, focusing on the traditional gender binary of male and female.

### **1.9 Operationalization of Terms**

**Gender:** the conventional male/female gender binary.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

The literature review is covered in chapter two, which is divided into two sections: the conceptual review and the empirical review.

#### **2.1 Conceptual Review**

##### **2.0.1 Concept of Stress and Academic Stress**

Stress, according to Yaribeygi et al. (2017), is the body's reaction to outside challenges. Additionally, Bhargava and Trivedi (2018) state that stress is a sense that a person experiences when they are unable to fulfil their personal and social responsibilities. The complex phenomenon of stress is contingent upon an individual's ability to adapt to different circumstances. It has a more profound effect on our minds, emotions, behaviours, and physiology. According to Shahsavarani et al. (2015), it happens when people lack the skills necessary to meet all requests.

Academic stress is defined as stress resulting from work and studies that exceed students' capabilities (Safarzaie et al., 2017). Persistent stress causes mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Patias et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2021). According to Simbolon (2015), academic stress is the mental and emotional strain brought on by the rigours of college life. Academic stress is a type of stress that students continuously endure in connection with academic difficulties, according to Jain et al. (2017). This suggests the tension, annoyance, stress, and worry that students' academic lives are experiencing. Students who experience academic stress do so in learning environments (Azhar, 2015). To put it another way, children's incapacity to adjust to the numerous demands of school

leads to academic stress, which in turn causes discomfort and behavioural, physical, and psychological problems.

Academic stress mostly affects students because of the various strains they face, including the need to do well in class and the duty to complete (Noson & Shastri, 2016). High expectations, social anxiety, multidimensional performance, and grade competition are just a few of the academic factors that can lead to academic stress.

Two forms of stress (distress) exist: positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (stress). Eustress is defined as constructive or pleasant stress that can inspire and improve output.

It is often associated with challenging but manageable experiences, providing individuals with excitement and fulfilment (Hargrove et al., 2015). Eustress is characterised by feelings of enthusiasm, engagement, and a perceived ability to cope with the stressor (Tarvainen et al., 2019). For example, taking on a new project, pursuing personal goals, or engaging in a thrilling activity can induce eustress. It can lead to increased motivation, focus, and a sense of accomplishment.

Contrarily, distress is defined as detrimental stress that surpasses a person's capacity for successful coping. Feelings of worry, overload, and a sense of helplessness over the stressor are linked to it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Overwhelming workloads, ongoing pressures, or significant life events that are viewed as dangerous or beyond one's control can all lead to distress (Tarvainen et al., 2019). Chronic health issues, high expectations, and extended or severe work-related stress are a few examples of discomfort. Numerous detrimental psychological and physical consequences, including exhaustion, burnout, and

a decline in well-being, can result from stress (Anasori et al., 2022; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

## **2.0.2 Causes and Sources of Academic Stress**

Stressors are the events or stimuli that significantly alter a person's physical or mental responses. Due to the high academic and social expectations for advancing their professions, students experience a variety of psychological changes (Pedersen & Jodin, 2016). The main causes of academic stress, excluding homesickness, are the demands of studies, time limits, academic accomplishment, financial difficulty, career, parents, and professors' expectations for assignments.

Additionally, students experience stress due to a rigorous workload, additional obligations, and poor sleeping habits (Aafreen, 2018). Their perceived stress levels are influenced by a number of stressors, including homework, exams, and assignments (Sani and others, 2018).

According to Neeta and Singh (2020), the causes of academic stress can be categorised into seven main groups: peer pressure, social pressure, parental pressure, teacher pressure, test and exam anxiety, time management and infrastructure stress, and self-inflicted stress. These could be caused by a variety of school-related pressures, such as homework, classroom management and punishment procedures, extracurricular activities, and public performance. Additionally, Pompilus and Pompilus (2021) list a number of significant factors that contribute to student stress, such as academic stress caused by fear of failing, poor time management, financial difficulties, a lack of social life, a lack of

interactions with teachers, an inability to adapt to the school environment, and an inability to form networks and partnerships with teachers or peers.

Postgraduate students frequently experience particular stressors associated with program requirements, such as overwhelming workloads, expectations for their research, and feelings of loneliness, according to Bergen et al. (2019). This stress may negatively impact their motivation, psychological health, and general academic performance. Students may experience extra stress due to financial issues like tuition costs, student loans, or having to work to support themselves. Overall stress levels can be influenced by financial concerns and the need to balance financial obligations with academic ones (Wang, 2017). Bhargava and Trivedi (2018) claim that students experience stress and anxiety as a result of daily, lengthy assignments, meeting deadlines, and worrying about receiving low grades. In a similar vein, Jayanthi et al. (2015) assert that parental expectations also significantly influence whether or not students encounter academic stress.

Hj Ramli et al. (2018) claim that excessive expectations in college cause emotional and mental strain in addition to academic stress. Students' inability to manage their time, organise their studies, and prepare for exams are additional variables that contribute to academic stress. However, some students also fear that they will receive decent grades but fail any element of the exam (Shakeel et al., 2022). Academic stress can be exacerbated by inadequate support networks, such as limited mentorship, poor social support, or restricted access to academic resources. Students may find it difficult to

successfully manage academic obligations in the absence of suitable coping mechanisms and resources (Brailovskaia et al., 2017).

Students experience academic stress due to a variety of responsibilities they must perform, including tests, assignments, and other academic pressure. Teachers and parents frequently place a great deal of pressure on students to do well in school. These demands put students under additional stress and force them to study harder (Jain & Singhai, 2018). Parents' and instructors' demanding behaviours confuse the pupils and cause stress. Shakeel et al. (2022) claim that unexpected exams, a mountain of homework, and exam results induce academic stress for college students. In addition to these, other factors that contribute to students' stress include the absence of library resources, biased and unsupportive behaviours of teachers, exam pressure, and unwarranted discipline from teachers.

### **2.0.3 Consequences of academic stress among students**

Although stress is often perceived negatively, moderate levels of academic stress can act as a motivational force that enhances students' focus, performance, and resilience. According to Niaz (2015), mild to moderate stress can serve as an internal motivator, driving students to work harder and strive for academic excellence. Similarly, Utwain and According to Daly (2015), students with moderate stress levels were more driven and performed better academically than those with extremely low stress levels.

Oberle et al. (2015) argue that manageable levels of stress help students develop essential coping mechanisms, problem-solving skills, and emotional regulation strategies, which can benefit them not only in academia but also in professional and personal domains.

Through exposure to moderate challenges, students cultivate perseverance, adaptability, and effective decision-making skills, attributes necessary for lifelong success.

Furthermore, mild academic stress can foster a stronger sense of responsibility and self-discipline. As students strive to meet academic demands, they develop persistence, consistency, and time management abilities (Smeding et al., 2009; Niaz, 2015). These competencies not only enhance academic performance but also translate into improved productivity and success in other areas of life. According to Stoeber et al. (2018), moderate academic stress correlates positively with adaptive goal orientations such as mastery and achievement approach orientations. Hence, when appropriately managed, academic stress can stimulate focus, personal growth, and achievement motivation among students.

Conversely, when academic stress becomes excessive, chronic, or poorly managed, it can have far-reaching negative effects on students' mental, physical, and academic well-being. High levels of academic stress have been associated with increased anxiety, depression, restlessness, and emotional exhaustion (Aziz & Khan, 2022; Smith, 2017). According to Kessel et al. (2016), it might show up physiologically as symptoms including headaches, sleeplessness, exhaustion, elevated blood pressure, and weakened immunity. Students' health and academic performance may be jeopardised by these symptoms.

Cognitively, chronic stress impairs memory, attention, and problem-solving skills, limiting students' ability to concentrate and process information effectively (Girotti et al., 2018; Akhtar & Akhtar, 2024). Such cognitive disruptions can lead to diminished

academic performance and reduced creativity. Research consistently shows that excessive stress interferes with information retention and learning, resulting in lower grades and academic dissatisfaction (Fernandez et al., 2017; Núñez et al., 2015).

In addition, academic stress is linked to maladaptive behaviours and poor study habits, including procrastination, avoidance of coursework, and ineffective time management (Jain et al., 2017). Students often experience pressure to meet high expectations from teachers, peers, and parents, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and failure (Lal, 2014). When these pressures become overwhelming, students may disengage from learning, experience social isolation, or resort to unethical behaviours such as academic dishonesty (Virtanen et al., 2019; Ryff, 2014).

Kötter et al. (2017) emphasise that academic stress can trigger a vicious cycle of poor performance and heightened anxiety, leading to declining motivation, reduced creativity, and burnout. Shakeel et al. (2022) further report that stress can cause students to lose interest in studies, perform poorly in examinations, and withdraw socially. Long-term exposure to academic stress can also contribute to serious health issues such as depression, sleep disorders, and, in severe cases, academic attrition or failure to graduate (Yan et al., 2018; Maheshwari & Shaukat, 2019; Pascoe et al., 2020).

#### **2.0.4 Malevolently Creativity**

The creation of original and potentially dangerous concepts or solutions is known as malevolent creativity, and it can take many different forms, such as academic dishonesty (Cropley et al., 2015).

Creativity is almost universally seen as a beneficial attribute in both academics and industry. Being expressive, hardworking, forward-thinking, pushing boundaries, and employing innovative thinking are all components of creativity. However, the idea that creativity has a "dark side" and may be abused has gained more and more credence in recent years. Malevolently creative behaviours include commonplace actions of deception, bullying, and stealing intended to cause harm to others (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015).

Malevolent creativity potential, as defined by Harris and Reiter-Palmon (2015), is the willful use of one's creative potential to disrespect cultural values, destroy property, injure oneself or others, or disturb the social order. MC potential has traits that are typical of creativity in general, like novelty and usefulness: damagingness, in addition to its own unique qualities (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015). Hao et al. (2016) define "malevolent creative conduct" (MC activity) as harmful and toxic actions that people frequently take when they use their MC limit. Malevolent Creative behaviours include but are not limited to defamatory remarks, slander, harassment, and actions of reprisal against others. Among the other kinds are acts of terrorism as well as theft, plagiarism, fraud, and property destruction done for the advantage of others. MC potential exhibits characteristics of both general and unique creativity, including originality and utility (Harris & Reiter-Palmon, 2015). Additionally, MC potential has a unique attribute known as harmfulness.

In the larger area of creativity research, there is growing interest in malicious creativity, which is defined as creative ideas or behaviour that have unfavourable effects (Hunter et

al., 2022; Cropley et al., 2015). According to Cropley and Cropley (2010), some scholars argue that certain forms of academic stress may put people at risk for using malicious innovation as a coping strategy or as a means of obtaining unfair advantages. Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) suggest that the pressure to excel academically and increased competition may lead to an increase in evil or immoral inventive ideas or behaviours.

According to certain studies, college students are more prone than teenagers to play practical jokes and participate in deceit (Al-Mahdawi et al., 2022; Kapoor & Kaufman, 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Even though these MC actions might not seem like much harm at first, if they are not stopped, they can have disastrous results. In order to recognise and stop extreme MC behaviours, it is crucial to understand how they are produced.

### **2.0.5 Causes of Malevolent Creativity**

Individual emotional states, motivating tendencies, unjust circumstances, and emotional intelligence can all have an impact on malevolent creative behaviours (Gutworth et al., 2016; Hao et al., 2020). Developing and implementing creative potential requires higher levels of mental flexibility or persistence (Bishop, 2018; Intasao & Hao, 2018). It might also be the way of thinking that transforms MC potential into novel and harmful behaviours. For example, Hao et al. (2020) found that college students who were driven by proximity (proximity) to succeed were more adaptable and risk-taking, whereas those who were driven by avoidance (avoidance) were more conservative and tenacious. The MC potential favourably predicts their MC behaviours based on these cognitive traits.

According to Perchtold-Stefan et al. (2021), hostile personality traits can also positively predict MC actions when they lead to angry pupils having more perseverance in their

thought processes. Perchtold-Stefan et al. (2022) found that students with impulsive antisocial schizotypy who have high MC potential, are highly flexible in their thinking, and are adept at remote associations also use their MC potential more frequently in their daily lives by acting in ways that are strange and bizarre and could hurt themselves or others. Detectably predicting MC behaviours may be challenging, though, due to other aspects of MC potential. High MC potential individuals are also more likely to be self-aware, honest, and morally driven, according to earlier studies that used questionnaires. According to Gonzales (2022), this implies that they do not always translate their potential into MC behaviours.

In accordance with Hunter et al.'s framework for malevolent innovation transformation (2022), having innovative and harmful ideas is a requirement for implementing them. MC behaviours are then finally illustrated through a sequence of intermediate links motivated by aptitude, ethics, and reward. Numerous other studies have applied the same reasoning, demonstrating that those who are more creatively malevolent in their daily lives are also more likely to be capable of generating novel and harmful concepts. (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2020, 2021).

Malevolent creativity is influenced by both environmental and individual factors, according to a previous study (Gong & Liu, 2016). Malevolent creativity is related to the social environment, cultural context, and complexity of society. For example, in trials involving divergent thinking, frightening social situations sparked malicious creative ideas, while unfair social contexts attracted more evil solutions (Baas et al., 2019).

However, a review also found a high correlation between the formation of malevolent creativity and mood and personality (Gong & Liu, 2016). Neglected children frequently struggle to recognise emotions and remember their emotional experiences. These problems with emotion processing and regulation that continue throughout adulthood can lead to malevolent creativity (Jennissen et al., 2016; Young & Widom, 2015).

Furthermore, the development of evil creativity may be impacted by cultural issues ranging from childhood mistreatment. It has been demonstrated that safe and ideal home conditions, such as a high socioeconomic status and attentive parents using kind and orderly parenting practices, have an impact on the development of benevolent creativity (Jankowska & Karwowski, 2018; Moltafet et al., 2018). Conversely, adverse childhood experiences, such as abusive or negligent parenting or a high level of parent-child conflict, impair personality development and result in a more malignant, cynical interpersonal attitude (Csathó & Birkás, 2018).

Additionally, a longitudinal study supported the notion that neglect generally impairs social functioning by showing a correlation between long-term child neglect and violence or crime later in life (Logan-Greene & Jones, 2015). Teenagers who endure neglect as children are therefore more likely to act in prosocial ways and to have maliciously biased thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews (Llorca et al., 2017). Jia et al. (2020) discovered that three personality traits machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism—were positively correlated with malicious creativity. This implies that individuals who exhibit high levels of malevolent inventiveness also have high levels of Dark Triad personality traits.

According to Bedu-Addo et al. (2023), psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and negligent parenting may also be indicators of malevolent creativity among Ghanaian university students. The study highlights how important it is to consider both environmental and human factors when determining how wicked creativity emerges.

### **2.0.6 Academic Dishonest Behaviours among Higher Education Students**

Academic dishonesty as defined by Simpson (2016) as the wilful use of or attempt to use material (cheating), the fabrication of facts or quotes (fabrication), the facilitation of academically dishonest behaviour by others (facilitation), and the use of another person's words, ideas, or statements as one's own (plagiarism). These activities can take many different forms, and they are typically regarded as breaking academic regulations and standards.

According to Choo and Tan (2023), a student exhibiting any of the following behaviours can also be considered academic dishonesty: (a) submitting work that is not their own (Thomas, 2017); (b) giving or receiving illegal help from others or materials brought into an online or offline classroom (Emerson & Smith, 2022; Kelly et al., 2022; Sorgo et al., 2015); (c) using prior knowledge of the test or quiz contents without permission (Minarcik & Bridges, 2015); (d) intentionally using someone else's original ideas or materials without giving credit where credit is due; (e) academic sabotage.

Depending on the type of behaviour, academic dishonesty can be divided into two categories: plagiarism and exam cheating (Bachore, 2016). Copying, using electronic devices without permission from the teacher, providing unauthorised information, taking

examinations for another student, and improperly requesting help including by giving money or benefits are all examples of exam cheating. Contrarily, plagiarism includes giving or receiving inappropriate assistance with individual assignments as well as including non-original content into assignments for credit, such as by copying from another student or using for-profit term paper services. Bachore (2016).

### **2.0.7 Causes of Academic Dishonest Behaviours among Higher Education Students**

According to Bachore (2016), the primary causes of academic dishonesty include the challenge of the tests and exams, time constraints, the inconvenience of the course materials, the pressure to achieve high grades, a lack of knowledge about the policy, and the desire to earn extra points in order to improve grades. A lack of understanding and awareness of academic integrity, pressure to maintain a competitive edge and attain good grades, the use of technology to enable academic dishonesty, and the influence of cultural factors are some of the elements that lead to academic dishonest behaviour, according to Thomas (2017). Students feel compelled to cheat or plagiarise to meet the expectations of their parents, peers, and society; others, too, are unaware of what constitutes cheating or plagiarism and, therefore, engage in these behaviours unintentionally (Thomas, 2017).

Cheating behaviours are linked to academic stress (Barseli et al., 2017). Students who are under scholastic stress have trouble thinking clearly on a psychological level. It is believed that students' academic stress has an impact on unethical behaviours like academic dishonesty (Herdian et al., 2021). A study by Herdian et al. (2021) found that academic stress had an impact on academic dishonesty. The study discovered a strong

correlation between academic stress and academic dishonesty. The study found that when academic stress increases, so does academic dishonesty.

### **2.0.8 Relationship between Academic Stress, Malevolent Creativity, and Academic Dishonest Behaviours**

Academic dishonest behaviours, malevolent innovation or creativity, and academic stress are all intricately and multidimensionally related. Within the academic setting, the distinction between harmful and ethically acceptable creative ideas becomes hazy, even if academic stress may heighten the tendency for malevolent innovation as a coping mechanism or to achieve perceived benefits (Cropley et al., 2015; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Likewise, academic stress may increase students' propensity to commit academic dishonesty since they may see it as a way to get over obstacles and achieve their goals (Davis et al., 2015; Harper et al., 2019). Creativity that is malicious and academic dishonesty

A multitude of factors influence the connection of academic dishonesty, malevolent creativity, and academic stress. A big part is played by individual variances in coping strategies and moral judgment. Academic dishonesty may be less likely to occur when effective coping mechanisms are used, such as asking for social assistance or solving problems. (Davis et al., 2015; Buagayan et al., 2024). Furthermore, institutional policies and interventions that promote academic integrity and awareness have shown promising results in preventing and reducing academic dishonesty (Sefcik et al, 2020; Guerrero-Dib, 2020).

According to Davis et al. (2015), those who are under a lot of stress may be more likely to commit academic misconduct. Stressors that increase students' motivation to cheat or plagiarise include time constraints, workloads, and fear of failing. In a similar vein, Harper et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between stress and academic dishonesty in college students, they found that stress and cheating were positively correlated.

### **2.0.9 Gender Differences in Academic Stress**

Studies show that the types and prevalence of academic dishonesty differ by gender. Exam cheating is more common among male students than female students, and plagiarism is more common among female students than male students (Akpan & Udoh, 2019; Freeman et al., 2014).

Additionally, the association between academic stress and academic dishonesty has been found to differ by gender. For instance, a research of university students in Nigeria revealed that while under a lot of stress, female students were more likely than male students to commit academic dishonesty (Ojo-Adeyemo et al., 2017). Studies have indicated that students' experiences and perceptions of academic stress vary by gender. For instance, research suggests that female students could experience more academic stress than their male counterparts (Graves et al., 2021). This implies that students' responses to academic pressures and obstacles may be significantly influenced by their gender.

## 2.1 Empirical Review

Previous empirical work has explored academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty independently, but few studies have examined their integrated effects. Shakeel et al. (2022) found that university students experience stress due to examinations, parental pressure, and unpreparedness, though gender differences were not significant. Subramani and Kadiravan (2017) similarly linked stress to deteriorating mental health and argued that institutional support is often inadequate. However, these studies largely focused on psychological outcomes, not behavioural or ethical consequences.

Conversely, Balbuena and Lamela (2015) and Thomas (2017) examined academic dishonesty, identifying academic pressure, lenient policies, and moral relativism as key enablers. Herdian et al. (2021) established a direct positive link between academic stress and academic dishonesty, demonstrating that as stress increases, dishonest behaviours rise correspondingly. Yet, these studies did not explore how creative cognition, specifically malevolent creativity, mediates or moderates this relationship.

Research on malevolent creativity (Jia et al., 2020; Bedu-Addo et al., 2023) attributes it to early environmental neglect, dark personality traits, and emotional instability, but has rarely examined academic contexts. Smith and Jones (2018) connected academic stress to malevolent creativity, noting gender differences, but did not link these findings to academic dishonesty.

Furthermore, Johnson and Brown (2015) found that males exhibit higher tendencies toward cheating than females, while Ojo-Adeyemo et al. (2017) observed that stress influences female students' likelihood of dishonesty more strongly. These studies collectively suggest that gender moderates the relationship between stress and unethical behaviour, though their conclusions remain fragmented.

Thus, in contrast to earlier research, this study looks at how academic stress and malicious creativity interact together to cause academic dishonesty while also taking gender variations into account. It aims to fill the empirical gap by integrating these three constructs within a single analytical framework, an approach scarcely addressed in prior literature.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

The chapter was about conceptual review, which delved into the foundational theories and key constructs within the study. The empirical review, on the other hand, highlighted a comprehensive, systematic, and structured analysis of existing literature and research studies on the topic.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

The methodologies and processes used in the study's execution were covered in this chapter. These comprise the following: the population (postgraduate students), the sampling procedure (multiple sampling techniques), the research design (descriptive survey design), the instruments used for data collection, the validity and reliability of the instruments, ethical considerations, and the processing and analysis of the data.

#### **3.1 Research Paradigm**

In this research study, the philosophical underpinning of positivism guided the overall approach, emphasising the application of objective and empirical methods to investigate phenomena. Positivism views knowledge as derived from observable facts and quantifiable data, fostering a systematic and structured inquiry process. Complementing the philosophical stance of positivism, a quantitative approach was employed to gather and analyse numerical data, aiming to uncover patterns, relationships, and trends within the research domain. Quantitative methods allow for variables' measurement and statistical analysis, providing a basis for generalisation and prediction.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

Design in research is the foundation upon which the study is built or enlarged. For the study, a descriptive survey design was employed. Descriptive survey design provides a snapshot of the current status of the phenomenon under study as it occurs naturally (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). A descriptive survey methodology was also used in

this study to collect data on student academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty. Because it allowed the researcher to spot trends and patterns among the pupils, the design was suitable. It also helped the researcher gain insights into how academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours relate to each other or change over time. Supporting the stance above, Creswell and Creswell (2017) and Babbie (2016) indicated that descriptive surveys offer researchers the opportunity to observe, depict, and summarise characteristics of a large group, population, or phenomenon at a specific time.

Ensuring the quality of data in descriptive survey research is paramount to drawing valid and reliable conclusions. Substandard data can lead to misleading interpretations and obscure insights, undermining the effectiveness of the descriptive analysis process. The quality of the data gathered determines the validity and reliability of the conclusions, regardless of how extensive the descriptive data is (Johnson & Christensen, 2016).

### **3.3 Population**

The study's target population consisted of 3,108 postgraduate students from the University of Education, Winneba, located in the Effutu Municipality in Ghana's Central Region, of which 2,045 were males, and 1,063 were females from 10 faculties and 52 departments (School of Graduate Studies, 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years).

The population came from the entire postgraduate student population from the South, North, Central, and Ajumako campuses. The accessible population for the study included all postgraduate students who were admitted during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years, of the 10 sample faculties and 52 departments, with a figure of 976. The accessible population included both MPhil and PhD students, and also included students

from different departments and faculties. Postgraduate students were chosen because the majority of them combine their professional jobs with their academic work, in addition to additional obligations, including family and social activities.

### **3.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure**

Based on the claim made by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) that a sample size of 450 is appropriate for a population between 3000 and 5000, the study's sample size was 450 respondents. According to Nwana (1992), a sample size of 40% or more is appropriate if the population is a few hundred. The sample size was also suitable for the study as it satisfied the requirements of Sekaran and Bougie (2016), who recommended a minimum sample size of 100 respondents for a descriptive survey, as well as the recommendation that a sample size of 30 or more was suitable for quantitative research (Boddy, 2016).

In order to make the interpretation and analysis more understandable, this figure was used. Simple random sample (lottery technique with replacement), stratified sampling, and systematic sampling were employed in the selection of respondents, which was predicated on a multiple sampling methodology.

Because the three campuses of the University of Education, Winneba are all situated within the Effutu Municipality, the Municipality was chosen using a purposive sample technique.

At different points during the investigation, the lottery technique with replacement, or simple random sample approach, was employed. For example, eight of the ten faculties in the research were sampled using it. Additionally, 26 of the 52 tested departments were selected using the basic random sampling technique. Every variable that was submitted to the sample procedure had an equal and fair chance thanks to the lottery approach with

replacement. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), simple random sampling gives every member of a specified population an equal and independent probability of being chosen for the sample. The researcher has no influence whatsoever over the sample selection process.

Table 1: Sampled Faculties and Departments

<b>Faculties</b>	<b>Departments</b>	<b>Number</b>
Faculty of Social Science Education	6 out of 7	285
Faculty of Science Education	3 out of 8	125
School of Education and Life-Long Learning	2 out of 3	66
Faculty of Health, Allied Sciences and Home Economics Education	3 out of 7	100
Faculty of Applied Behavioural Sciences in Education	2 out of 3	130
School of Creative Art	2 out of 5	95
School of Foreign Languages	2 out of 3	75
School of Business	2 out of 5	100
Total = 8	Total = 26 out of 52	Total = 976

**Source: School of Graduate Studies enrolment (2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic year)**

Postgraduate students from the various disciplines were chosen using proportional stratified sampling. This was predicated on the demographic disparities in the sample size, which included subpopulations with varying numbers of students. As a result, proportions were given to each stratum because treating them all equally and lumping them together could harm the scientific method. The decision was pertinent to the study

because it was inevitable that different groups' opinions would be compared. Mathematically, the formula for stratified-proportionate sampling is shown below:

$$n_i = \left(\frac{N_i}{N}\right) \times n, \quad n_i = \frac{285}{976} \times 450$$

**Where:**

$n_i$  = Sample size for stratum

$N_i$  = Population size of stratum

$N$  = Total population size (sum of all strata sizes).

$n$  = Total sample size required.

**Table 2: Sample Distribution**

Faculties	Population	Sample
Faculty of Social Science Education	285	131
Faculty of Science Education	125	58
School of Education and Life-Long Learning	66	30
Faculty of Health, Allied Sciences and Home Economics Education	100	46
Faculty of Applied Behavioural Sciences in Education	130	60
School of Creative Art	95	44
School of Foreign Languages	75	35
School of Business	100	46
Total = 8	976	450

**Source: Field Survey, 2024**

A systematic process was employed to identify patients from each strata to constitute the final sample for the research. A systematic process was employed to identify patients from each strata to constitute the final sample for the research. The approach was

employed to choose postgraduate students from the sample supplied for each department. A determining number was established and used as the basis for the selection. In using this procedure, the accessible population was used to divide the sample size, and the results of this process served as the determining number, which is often called the **Kth** term. Using the Kth term as a yardstick, the first respondent was randomly selected, and then, after counting, other respondents were selected that matched the **Kth** term. This process was applied to all departments to arrive at their assigned sample sizes. Specifically, the **Kth** term for this study was **2** from the mathematical method below:

$$\mathbf{Kth} = \frac{N}{s}, \text{ where}$$

N= Accessible Population

s= Students Sample Size

$$\left[ 2 = \frac{976}{450} \right]$$

Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, and Nigam (2013) credited the systematic sampling procedure as moderate in usage, less costly, and high with internal and external validity, simple to apply and convenient to most selection issues. Conversely, the systematic sampling procedure limits the chance of subjects who may be far behind after getting the sampling at the initial stages.

### **3.5 Data Collection Instruments**

Adopted instruments and performance measures were used as data gathering tools.

The adapted instruments will include the Stress Scale, Academic Dishonesty and Malevolent Creativity scales.

### *Stress scale*

Stress Scale (SS) by Klutsey and Mahama (2023). The Stress Scale is a measurement tool used to assess the level of stress experienced by students in academic settings. It aims to identify and quantify the various stressors that students encounter during their educational journey. The scale assesses how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded a person feels their life is, providing insights into their stress levels based on their responses to specific questions.

The scale typically includes items related to how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded a person feels their life is, providing insights into their stress levels based on their responses to specific questions. The Stress scale measures two distinct dimensions of stress: Mental and Emotional Strain and Physical and Behavioural Stress. There are two dimensions and twenty items in the SS. Statements such as "felt everything around you was overwhelming?" and "been easily fatigued or tired?" are included in Dimension 1, "Mental and Emotional Strain," which consists of twelve items.", etc. "Physical and Behavioural Stress" is the first dimension. It consists of eight questions with comments like "did you find it hard to relax or ease yourself?" and "did you have trouble unwinding?" etc. To fit the research setting, few words were changed, and the personal pronoun "I" was added at the beginning of each remark. The previous scale used a 5-point Likert-type scale with scores ranging from always to never (Always = 5, Very often = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, and Never = 1). To eliminate neutral points, the scale was changed to 4-point. This ensures that every respondent will have a favourable or unfavourable assessment of the statements. Respondents were only permitted to choose one response set for the instrument's closed-ended question structure.

### *Academic dishonesty scale*

Bashir and Bala (2018) created the Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS), an updated measure. The Academic Dishonesty Scales quantify the degree to which people commit different types of academic dishonesty. It evaluates actions like plagiarism, exam cheating, copying, and other unethical academic work activities. The ADS showed adequate internal consistency, with a high alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.831$ ). The scale also demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.71 to 0.84. It was developed based on expert opinions and literature reviews, ensuring content validity. The exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses clearly show that the ADS measures the theoretical notion of academic dishonesty. The ADS is able to differentiate between pupils who commit academic dishonesty and those who do not, according to its specificity.

Academic dishonesty is measured by the ADS in six different ways: exam cheating, plagiarism, outside assistance, past cheating, lying about tasks, and fabrication. The ADS consists of 23 components in six dimensions. "Cheating in Examination" is the first dimension. It has five items and phrases such as "I use signals to fetch answers from my friends during an examination.". Dimension two is named "Plagiarism". It has four items and has statements like "For submitting an assignment, I copy and change a few sentences/lines/words and phrases from other sources.". The third dimension, "Outside Help," comprises four elements and comments such as "I enlist assistance from others to finish an individual task or assignment.". Dimension four is named "Prior Help", it has three items and has statements like, "I write expected answers on table/wall/hand/paper, etc. in prior time.". Dimension five is named "Falsification" which also has three items

and has statements like “I submit the assignment in my name after getting it prepared by my friends.”. Dimension six was named “Lying about Academic Assignment” which has four items and has statements like “I give false explanations when I miss the deadline of my educational project.”. Scores on the original scale range from always to never. The original Likert-type scale had five points (always=5, frequently=4, sometimes=3, rarely=2, and never=1); however, in order to eliminate neutral points, the scale was changed to four points. To make sure every respondent has a favourable or unfavourable impression of the assertions, this is done. The instrument's items have a closed-ended format, meaning that responders may only choose one set of answers.

### ***Malevolent creativity scales.***

Developed by Hao et al. (2016), the Malevolent Creativity Scale is an adaptation of the Malevolent Creativity Scale (MCS). The Malevolent Creativity scale gauges a person's propensity to come up with innovative ideas that are damaging, immoral, or destructive. It evaluates the degree to which people are likely to use their creativity for bad things, such creating nefarious plans, acting in destructive ways, or harming other people or society. There were thirteen things on the three-dimensional scale. "Hurting people" is the first dimension, and it has six questions and comments such as "How often do you think about ideas to take revenge when being unfairly treated?" "Lying" was the second dimension, which had four questions and comments such as "How often do you think about excuses to justify your wrongdoings?" Dimension three, "Playing tricks," consists of three items and comments such as "How often do you think of ideas on the margins of rules, when conventional ways do not work?". The original scale had scoring from often to usually. The 5-point Likert-type scale used to assess the original scale was changed to

a 4-point scale in order to eliminate neutral points. This was done to ensure that every respondent's view of the statements was either good or negative. The instrument's questions were closed-ended, so that responders could only choose one set of answers. The choice of these specific instruments: The Stress Scale (Klutsey & Mahama, 2023), Academic Dishonesty Scale (Bashir & Bala, 2018), and Malevolent Creativity Scale (Hao et al., 2016) was based on their proven psychometric properties and contextual relevance to academic research environments similar to that of Ghana.

The Stress Scale (SS) was developed and validated among Ghanaian students, making it particularly suited for this study's context. Its items were designed to reflect cultural stressors such as family responsibilities, academic workload, and institutional pressures, which are characteristic of higher education in Ghana. This makes the SS both culturally appropriate and contextually reliable for assessing stress among Ghanaian postgraduate students (Klutsey & Mahama, 2023).

The Academic Dishonesty Scale (ADS) by Bashir and Bala (2018) was selected because it comprehensively captures diverse dishonest behaviours, including examination malpractice, plagiarism, and falsification behaviours that have been widely reported within sub-Saharan African academic contexts (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020; Amponsah & Owusu, 2021). To ensure cultural appropriateness, the wording of certain items was slightly adapted to reflect local academic practices.

The Malevolent Creativity Scale (MCS) (Hao et al., 2016) was chosen because of its focus on the use of creativity in socially undesirable ways, an underexplored area in African educational research. The instrument was reviewed by local experts in

psychology and education to ensure its items were interpretable and relevant to Ghanaian postgraduate students. For instance, examples involving “revenge” and “trick-playing” were verified to align with locally understood forms of social or academic misconduct. These instruments were therefore selected not only for their established international reliability but also for their cultural adaptability, conceptual fit, and empirical suitability within the Ghanaian academic environment.

### **3.6 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments.**

The tools were reviewed by experts to make sure they accurately reflected the notions of academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonesty. The tests were evaluated for clarity, relevance, and cultural suitability by one psychometrician from the University of Education, Winneba's Faculty of Educational Foundations and two senior professors in the Department of Counselling Psychology. The experts assessed whether each item reflected the theoretical dimensions identified in the literature and was understandable to Ghanaian postgraduate students. Feedback from the panel resulted in minor revisions to item wording.

Following expert assessment, 45 postgraduate students who were not included in the main trial participated in a pilot study using the updated instruments. Participants were asked to rate each item's relevancy, language, and clarity. According to their comments, the items were culturally relevant and simple to understand, indicating acceptable face validity. These students were chosen for the study because their characteristics matched those of the final sample size. Several scholars have suggested that a pilot study can employ a sample size of 10% or more, which justifies the usage of 45 students (Connelly,

2008; Hertzog, 2008). Given that there were 450 participants, 45 constituted 10% of the whole research sample.

This was made possible by the use of the SPSS-AMOS Version 25.0 statistical package for service solutions analysis of moment structure software. My supervisor, a research specialist, manually verified the questionnaire's validity. My supervisor measured the content validity, which shows how well the instrument's content reflects its intended purpose. The researcher was better equipped to identify any issues with the survey tools and make the required adjustments as a result.

Cronbach's alpha was computed to determine the test instrument's reliability. This was determined following the instrument's pilot test. Item consistencies were assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliabilities; satisfactory internal consistency is indicated by alpha values of 0.70 and above (Pallant, 2010).

Table 3 presents the reliability of the various subscales for pilot testing.

**Table 3: Reliability Results for Pre-Test Data and Final Data**

<b>Pilot-Testing of Data Results</b>			<b>Final Data Collection Results</b>	
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Reliability</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Reliability</b>
<b>ADB</b>	23	<b>.733</b>	23	<b>.827</b>
<b>MC</b>	13	<b>.808</b>	13	<b>.764</b>
<b>SS</b>	20	<b>.788</b>	20	<b>.804</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2024**

### **3.7 Data Collection Procedures**

To fully explain the study's objectives to the respondents, the researcher made official visits to the chosen campuses, which were the South, North, Central and Adjumako campuses, which were selected randomly. The researcher had a conversation with respondents about research-related ethical issues. In this method, the respondents received clear information about the study's objectives, privacy concerns, and anonymity. The surveys were distributed once the researcher got access to the respondents. The goal of the survey and how it should be completed was explained to the chosen respondents. On points that the respondents felt were unclear, additional explanation was provided. Because of the nature of the study, self-styled identifiers were given to sampled respondents to facilitate tracking and maintain anonymity. Ten days were spent in each of the three sampled campuses during the data collection period of three weeks. Each campus took 7 days to administer the tools. The time required to administer the questions was between 15 and 20 minutes.

### **3.8 Data Processing and Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to statistically assess the data for the study topics. IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 was used to gather and analyse the data. A frequency distribution table, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to illustrate the results. Because study questions one, two, and three aimed to determine the degrees of academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonest practices, they were examined using a one-sample t-test. Since the goal was to determine the impact of academic stress on academic dishonest conduct and malicious creative behaviour, correlation analysis or Spearman correlation was used

to address research question four. Since the goal was to determine the moderating influence of gender in the link between academic stress, academic dishonest practices, and malevolent creativity, the fifth research question was addressed utilising moderation analysis or Andrew Hayes Process Macro.

### **3.9 Ethical Consideration**

The researcher conducted the study in accordance with recognised protocols. An Institutional Review Board ethical approval from the University of Education, Winneba was requested. The researcher requested an introductory letter from the Department of Counselling Psychology. The researcher sought permission from participants and allowed them to decide whether to participate in the study. Anonymity of participants was considered, and the participants were made to understand the implications of their responses and how they would be used.

### **3.10 Limitations**

The study's focus on a single institution (University of Education, Winneba) may limit the generalizability of the results to other educational contexts in Ghana or beyond, as different institutions may have varying cultures and pressures that influence student behaviour. Furthermore, the use of participant self-reported data might be biased by social desirability or erroneous self-evaluation. This may have an impact on the reliability of the results pertaining to academic stress, malicious inventiveness, and academic dishonesty.

## Chapter Summary

In summary, the study adopted a descriptive survey design underpinned by a positivist paradigm. The chosen instruments, Stress Scale, Academic Dishonesty Scale, and Malevolent Creativity Scale, were selected for their strong psychometric foundations and cultural adaptability within the Ghanaian higher education setting. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to verify reliability, while expert review, pilot testing, and confirmatory factor analysis were used to prove validity. In order to examine the connections between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba, these techniques made sure that the data gathered was reliable and pertinent to the context.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

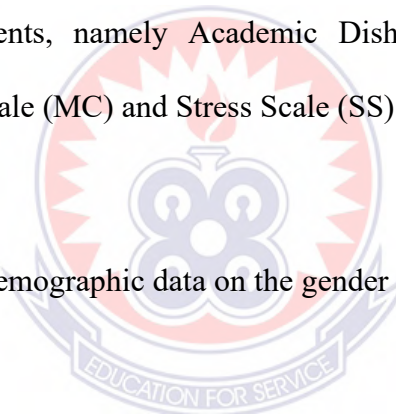
### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to investigate how gender influences the link between academic stress, malicious innovation, and academic dishonesty among Ghanaian students. A descriptive survey design was employed in the investigation. The results of the data analysis are the main topic of this chapter, which also covers the conclusions that were drawn from it. To collect information from respondents, a questionnaire was used. Four hundred and fifty postgraduate students answered the questionnaire. There were three types of instruments, namely Academic Dishonest Behaviour Scale (ADB), Malevolent Creativity Scale (MC) and Stress Scale (SS).

#### **4.1 Demographic Data**

The table below shows demographic data on the gender and age of the respondents.



**Table 4: Demographic variables of the participants**

Demographic Variables	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	276	61.3
Female	174	38.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age</b>		
19-30	190	42.2
31-40	221	49.1
41-50	35	7.8
51-above	4	.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	250	55.6
Married	200	44.4
<b>Level</b>		
MPhil	431	95.8
PhD	19	4.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>YEAR</b>		
1	330	73.3
2	120	26.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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Source: Field Survey, 2024

It was shown in Table 4 that males constituted a majority of the sample, 276, making up approximately 61.3% of the total respondents. This indicated a significant male presence in the data set. In contrast, women represented 174)38.7% of the respondents.

According to Table 5, with 49.1% of the sample falling into the 31–40 age range, the majority of respondents were in their early middle years, suggesting that many of the people surveyed were early-career professionals juggling work and school. Additionally, 42.2% of the respondents were in the 19–30 age range, while those in the 41–50 and 51+ age groups made up 7.8% and 0.9% of the sample, respectively, suggesting that the majority of the postgraduates were in their early middle years. Again, Table 4 showed that 250, representing 55.6% of the respondents, were married, while 200, representing 44.4% were single.

Additionally, from Table 4, the MPhil program had a total of 431 students, accounting for 95.8% of the total respondents, and the PhD consisted of only 19 students, representing 4.2% of the total respondents. The first-year cohort comprised 330 students, accounting for 73.3% and the second-year cohort consisted of 120 students, representing 26.7% of the total respondents.

## **4.2 Analysis of Data from Research Questions**

### **4.2.1 Research Question 1: What are the levels of Academic Stress among postgraduate students in the University of Education, Winneba?**

This research question sought to determine the levels of academic stress among postgraduate students in the University of Education, Winneba. A four-point Likert scale was used to gather data and was scored as “1= Always, 2= Sometimes, 3= Frequently,

and 4= Never”. The data were analysed using a one-sample t-test.  $1+2+3+4=10$ .  $10\div 4=2.5$ . Thus, 2.5 multiplied by the number of statements under the variable, which is 20, gives the criterion mean/test value 50. Based on this, a mean score above 50 was deemed to be high, which implies that respondents experienced a high level of academic stress; a mean score below 50 implies that respondents experienced a low level of academic stress, meaning they had rarely experienced academic stress. The results are presented in Table 1

**Table 5: One-Sample t-test for Levels of Academic Stress**

Academic Stress			Test Value=50				95% C. I. D		
N	Mean	Std. D	S.E.M	t	df	Sig.	MD	Lower	Upper
450	58.55	8.84	.427	20.53	449	.000	8.55	7.7344	9.3723

**Source: Field Survey, 2024**

From Table 1, as shown above, the study included 450 participants. The results move significantly [ $t(449) = 20.53, P \leq .000$ ]. The level of academic stress was high, with a mean value of ( $M=58.55, SD=8.84$ ), which was above the criterion mean of ( $M=50$ ). In other words, the majority of students reported feeling pressured, overwhelmed, or emotionally strained by their studies, indicating that students generally experience a moderate to high level of academic stress, and that the participants' levels of academic stress vary.

The significance value (p-value) was ( $p = .000$ ), which is less than the common alpha level of .05. This indicates that the result is statistically significant, suggesting strong evidence that the average level of academic stress differs from the test value of 50.

#### 4.2.2 Research Question 2: What are the levels of Academic Dishonest Behaviours among postgraduate students in the University of Education, Winneba?

Determining the prevalence of academic dishonesty among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba, was the aim of this study question. Data was collected using a four-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "always," 2 "sometimes," 3 "frequently," and 4 "never." A one-sample t-test was used to evaluate the data.  $10 \div 4 = 2.5$ ;  $1+2+3+4 = 10$ . Therefore, the criteria mean/test value is 57.5 when 2.5 is multiplied by the number of statements under the variable, which is 23.

Accordingly, a mean score of 57.5 or more was considered high, indicating that respondents had encountered a considerable degree of academic stress; a mean score of less than 57.5 indicates that respondents had encountered academic stress seldom.

The results are presented in Table 6

**Table 6: One-Sample t test for Levels of Academic Dishonest Behaviours**

Academic Dishonest Behaviours				Test Value=57.5		95% C. I. D			
N	Mean	Std. D	S.E.M	t	df	Sig.	MD	Lower	Upper
450	77.98	9.00	.424	48.28	449	.000	20.48	19.6441	21.3114

**Source: Field Survey, 2024**

From Table 6, the results move significantly [ $t(449) = 48.28, P \leq .000$ ]. The mean level of academic dishonest behaviours among the 450 participants was high, with a mean value of ( $M=77.98, SD=9.00$ ), which was above the criterion mean of ( $M=57.50$ ). This means that academic dishonesty is relatively common among students. Many admitted to behaviours such as copying assignments, getting outside help, or using unfair means

during exams. While not every student engaged in such acts, the overall pattern suggests a worrying prevalence of dishonest practices in postgraduate studies.

#### **4.2.3 Research Question 3: What are the levels of Malevolent Creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?**

This research question sought to determine the levels of malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba. A four-point Likert scale was used to gather data and was scored as “1= Always, 2= Sometimes, 3= Frequently, and 4= Never”. The data was analysed using a one-sample t-test.  $1+2+3+4=10$ .  $10 \div 4=2.5$ . Thus, 2.5 multiplied by the number of statements under the variable, which is 13, gives the criterion mean/test value 32.5. Based on this, a mean score above 32.5 was deemed to be high, which implies that respondents experienced a high level of malevolent creativity. A mean score below 32.5, on the other hand, implies that respondents experienced a low level of malevolent creativity, meaning they had rarely experience malevolent creativity. The results are presented in Table 7

**Table 7: One-Sample t test for Levels of Malevolent Creativity**

Malevolent Creativity				Test Value=32.5			95% C. I. D		
N	Mean	Std. D	S.E.M	t	df	Sig.	MD	Lower	Upper
450	40.32	6.36	.300	26.10	449	.000	7.82	7.2354	8.4135

**Source: Field Survey, 2024**

From Table 7 as shown above,  $[t(449) = 26.10, P \leq .000]$ . The level of malevolent creativity among the participants was high, with a mean value of  $(M=40.32, SD=6.36)$ , which was above the criterion mean of (32.5). This implies that, on average, participants exhibit a moderate to high level of malevolent creativity. This suggests that students

frequently generate or consider harmful, deceptive, or manipulative ideas, for instance, “tricking” peers or finding unethical shortcuts. Although such creativity reflects ingenuity, it also highlights the dark side of problem-solving under academic stress.

The p-value is .000, which is less than the alpha level of .05, indicating that the result is statistically significant. This suggests there is strong evidence that the average level of malevolent creativity is different from the test value of 32.5.

#### **4.2.4 Research Question 4: What is the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?**

This research question sought to determine the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba. A four-point Likert scale was used to gather data and was scored as “1= Always, 2= Sometimes, 3= Frequently, and 4= Never”. The data was analysed using a Correlational Analysis. Correlational analysis was used to examine if there was a relationship between academic stress and malevolent creativity and academic stress and academic dishonest behaviours. The results are presented in Table 8

**Table 8: Correlational Analysis of the Influence of Academic Stress on Academic Dishonest Behaviours and Malevolent Creativity**

		1	2	3
1	Pearson Correlation	1	.518**	.332**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	450	450	450
2	Pearson Correlation	.518**	1	.468**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	450	450	450
3	Pearson Correlation	.332**	.468**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	450	450	450

**\*\*.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Source:** Field Survey, 2024

As shown in Table 8, there was a strong positive correlation ( $r = .518, p < .01$ ) between academic stress and malevolent creativity. This suggests that malevolent creativity among postgraduate students increases as academic stress increases. In other words, this means that students who feel more stressed are more likely to think or act in harmful or manipulative ways.

Also, a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .332, p < .01$ ) existed between academic stress and academic dishonest behaviours. This indicates that higher levels of academic stress were associated with an increase in academic dishonest behaviours. In other words, the more stressed students are, the more likely they are to cheat or cut corners academically.

Additionally, a moderate positive correlation ( $r = .468$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was found between malevolent creativity and academic dishonest behaviours. This suggests that students who are more creatively manipulative also tend to engage in dishonest academic practices. Overall, the findings suggest that academic stress fuels both unethical creativity and dishonest behaviours among postgraduate students

#### **4.2.5 Research Question 5. What is the moderating role of gender in the relationship among academic stress, academic dishonest behaviours, and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?**

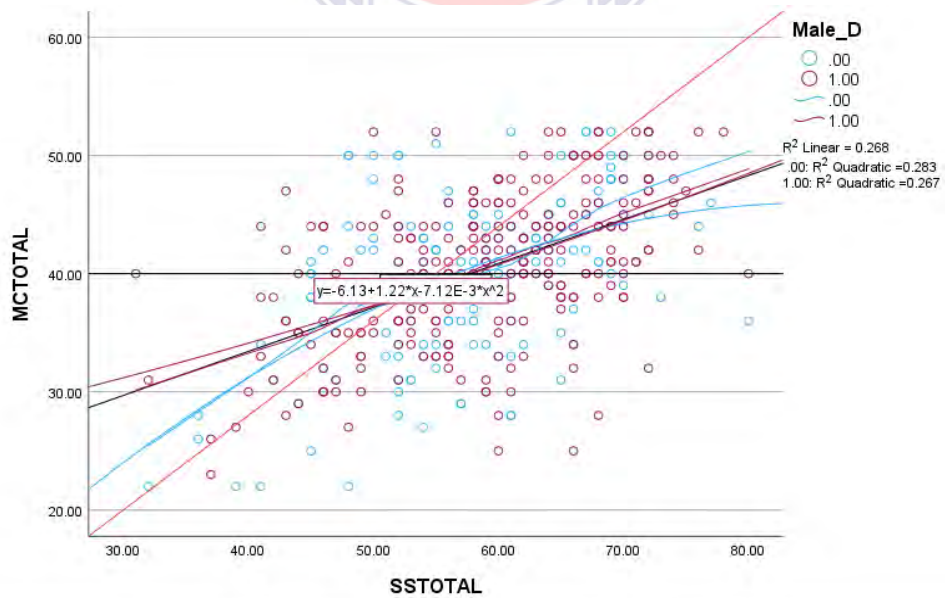
This research question sought to establish the moderating role of gender in the relationship among academic stress, academic dishonest behaviours, and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba. A four-point Likert scale was used to gather data and was scored as “1= Always, 2= Sometimes, 3= Frequently, and 4= Never”. The data was analysed using a moderation analysis or Andrew Hayes Process Macro. This was used to examine conditional effects, thus to understand the effect of academic stress and malevolent creativity on academic dishonest behaviours, depending on the moderator, gender. The results are presented in Table 9

**Table 9: Moderation Analysis of the Effect of Academic Stress and Malevolent Creativity on Academic Dishonest Behaviours, with Gender as a Moderator**

	R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
Model	.5189	.2693	29.7415	54.7825	3.00	446.00	< .001
	Coeff	Se	t	P	LLCL	ULCI	
Constant	40.28	.414	97.34	< .001	39.46	41.09	
Academic Stress	.4071	.048	8.44	< .001	.3123	.5019	
Malevolent Creativity	.0883	.528	.167	.8672	-0.95	1.13	
Int_1	-.060	.060	-.910	.363	-0.174	0.064	

Source: Field Survey, 2024

**Graphical Representation of the Effect of Academic Stress and Malevolent Creativity on Academic Dishonest Behaviours, with Gender as a Moderator**



**Figure 1: Scatter Plot Graph**

From Table 9 and Graph, the overall model was statistically significant,  $F(3, 446) = 54.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , with MSE of 29.74 and explained 26.93% of the variance in academic dishonest behaviours ( $R^2 = .2693$ ). Academic stress was a significant predictor of academic dishonest behaviours,  $[B = 0.407, SE = 0.048, t = 8.441, p < .001, 95\% CI (0.312, 0.502)]$ . This suggests that academic dishonest behaviours also increase as academic stress increases, holding other variables constant. Also, Malevolent creativity did not significantly predict academic dishonest behaviours,  $B = 0.088, SE = 0.528, t = 0.167, p = .867, 95\% CI [-0.950, 1.127]$ . Thus, malevolent creativity does not appear to impact academic dishonest behaviours in this sample significantly.

The interaction term between academic stress and gender (Int\_1) was not statistically significant,  $[B = -0.055, SE = 0.060, t = -0.910, p = .363, 95\% CI (-0.174, 0.064)]$ . This suggests that gender does not significantly moderate the relationship between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty. This implies that the relationship among academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty is similar across both male and female postgraduate students.

In conclusion, academic dishonest conduct is positively correlated with academic stress, while malevolent creativity is not a significant predictor. The association between academic stress and academic dishonest behaviour is not moderated by gender, suggesting that there is no discernible difference between male and female students in the impact of academic stress on dishonest behaviour. Therefore, while academic stress increases the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviours, this effect is not dependent on gender.

## 4.3 Discussion

### 4.3.1. Levels of Academic Stress

The study revealed that postgraduate students experienced moderate to high levels of academic stress, significantly exceeding the test value of 50. This suggests that students are under considerable academic and psychological pressure, which could adversely affect both performance and well-being. The variation in stress levels (as shown by the standard deviation) indicates that while some students cope effectively, others face significant challenges in managing academic demands. Such variability aligns with Person–Environment Fit and Job Stress Theory, which posits that stress arises when the demands of one’s environment exceed personal coping resources or abilities (Caplan, 1987). In this study, some students may perceive the postgraduate environment as overly demanding, creating a misfit that leads to elevated stress. Many postgraduate students juggle academic responsibilities with employment, family obligations, and financial constraints, factors that likely exacerbate stress levels

The findings of the study correspond with a study done by Deb et al. (2016). The study found that high academic stress often leads to negative coping mechanisms, including dishonesty. This is consistent with the findings that stress fuels academic misconduct. Herdian et al. (2021) also confirmed that academic stress directly influences dishonest behaviours, with higher stress levels correlating with increased cheating and plagiarism.

Further, Shakeel et al. (2022) found that students under stress, particularly when dealing with exams and deadlines, are more prone to unethical behaviour, reinforcing your findings that stress contributes to dishonest actions.

The findings are also consistent with a study by (Maymon & Hall, 2021), as they reviewed first-year student stress, emphasising the role of social support in mitigating stress levels. Key findings highlighted that first-year students face multiple stressors, including academic pressure, adapting to new environments, and financial concerns. Social support, particularly from family, friends, and university services, plays a crucial role in reducing stress. This finding is further corroborated by studies by Budu (2014), who investigated the perceived stress level and sources of stress in undergraduate and diploma nursing students and found that students experienced daily hassles in dealing with the numerous challenges of college life.

Furthermore, Adom, Essel, and Chukwuere (2019) found that "lack of planning of work schedule, procrastination, setting unrealistic academic goals, as well as sleeping and exercise habits" were signs of academic stress in students and faculty in Ghanaian higher education institutions. These findings are consistent with the results of this study. The commonality of all the data suggests that kids in all contexts experience stress.

#### **4.3.2. Levels of Academic Dishonest Behaviours**

The study found that participants displayed high levels of academic dishonesty, indicating a widespread challenge in maintaining academic integrity. While some students reported engaging in dishonest practices frequently, others did so less often, suggesting individual and contextual variability. From the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), such behaviours can be interpreted as the result of attitudes, perceived social norms, and perceived behavioural control. Students who believe that dishonesty is common or socially tolerated and who perceive that they can get away with it are more likely to act dishonestly.

This aligns with Yang et al. (2017), who reported similar findings in East Asian contexts, noting that academic pressure is a significant antecedent of dishonesty. The high stress observed in this study likely acts as a catalyst, creating conditions in which dishonest acts are rationalised as necessary or harmless. Ali, Tariq, and Khalid (2024) also demonstrated that contextual pressures such as grade expectations, poor institutional enforcement, and peer norms contribute significantly to academic misconduct.

Within the Ghanaian context, this finding raises questions about the ethical climate of higher education institutions, including the enforcement of integrity policies and the culture surrounding academic competition. The results suggest a need for stronger institutional ethics programs and supportive learning environments that reduce stress-induced misconduct.

#### **4.3.3 Levels of Malevolent Creativity**

The findings also revealed moderate to high levels of malevolent creativity, suggesting that some students use creative thinking for manipulative or unethical purposes. This is an important and often overlooked dimension of creativity. According to Dark Triad Theory (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), traits such as Machiavellianism and psychopathy can drive individuals to use creativity in self-serving or harmful ways. Under stressful academic conditions, such traits may manifest as strategic dishonesty or manipulation in academic work.

This is particularly relevant in academic settings where creativity is typically associated with innovation and problem-solving. The study suggests that while some individuals may exhibit higher tendencies toward malevolent creativity, others may not. Factors

influencing this variability could include individual personality traits, environmental influences, and social contexts.

The findings are supported by Hao et al. (2016), who found that students with high levels of malevolent creativity tend to exhibit more sophisticated and harmful academic misconduct under pressure, aligning with your thesis findings

Again, the results align with those of Bedu-Addo et al. (2023). According to the study's findings, persons who are denied their emotional and physical needs may turn to harming other people, lying to them, and using deceit or tactics while interacting with others. Numerous literature studies address inappropriate actions that stem from unsuitable parents. Furthermore, their results demonstrated that personality factors might have an impact on people's malevolent creativity actions.

The study's conclusions also align with Beaussart et al., 2013, who revealed that creative individuals may be more prone to dishonest behaviours, indicating that creativity isn't always constructive. The results add to discussions of "malevolent creativity," where creative problem-solving can be used for malevolent creativity. Their study also revealed that prosocial motivation mediated the relationship between social exclusion and malevolent creativity.

This phenomenon resonates with the Person–Environment Fit Theory, in which an environment that overemphasises performance and competition without adequate emotional or structural support may push students toward “*dark creativity*” as a coping mechanism. Thus, what institutions label as misconduct might, in some cases, reflect maladaptive attempts at coping with intense academic demands.

#### **4.3.4 Influence of Academic Stress on Academic Dishonest Behaviours and Malevolent Creativity**

The study found that academic stress was strongly positively correlated with both academic dishonesty and malevolent creativity. This indicates that students who are under a lot of stress are more inclined to act dishonestly in their academic performance and think creatively in an unethical way. From a theoretical perspective, Person–Environment Fit and Job Stress Theory help explain this pattern: when perceived demands (e.g., deadlines, workload) exceed coping resources, students experience strain, which may lead them to seek alternative, sometimes unethical means to achieve success.

Cropley et al. (2015) similarly found that stress can foster malevolent creativity as individuals seek unconventional, often unethical solutions. Runco and Jaeger (2012) argued that creativity, when disconnected from moral grounding, can easily shift toward manipulative or deceptive behaviours.

The findings of this study, therefore, highlight the *dual nature of stress*: while it can motivate productivity in manageable doses, excessive stress distorts cognitive processes, promoting maladaptive coping behaviours such as dishonesty. This linkage between stress, creativity, and dishonesty underlines the need for supportive institutional structures that prioritise student well-being and ethical engagement

#### **4.3.5 Moderating role of gender in the relationship between Academic Stress, Academic Dishonest Behaviours, and Malevolent Creativity**

According to the moderation study, the association between academic stress, malevolent inventiveness, and academic dishonesty was not substantially influenced by gender.

Stated differently, stress had a comparable impact on male and female pupils, and the correlations between the two did not change based on gender.

This finding contrasts with studies such as Ojo-Adeyemo et al. (2017), which found that female students were more likely to engage in dishonest behaviour when under stress, and Freeman et al. (2014), who observed gender-based differences in cheating types. However, the current results suggest that in this Ghanaian postgraduate context, socio-cultural and educational dynamics may minimise traditional gender distinctions in how stress influences unethical behaviour.

Several explanations account for this divergence:

**Cultural Context:** In Ghanaian higher education, both men and women increasingly share similar academic roles, workloads, and societal expectations. The push for academic success and the pressure to meet high performance standards may override traditional gender role differences, leading to a *convergent behavioural pattern* under stress.

**Evolving Gender Norms:** Over the past decade, gender roles in academia have become more equitable. Both male and female postgraduate students often work, manage families, and face comparable academic and social expectations. This parity may explain why stress exerts similar effects across genders.

**Theoretical Insight:** As to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, attitudes, conventions, and perceived control have a greater impact on intentions than gender itself. Gender will not substantially change behavioural results if both male and female students believe that

academic dishonesty is an appropriate or required coping mechanism under stressful situations.

**Measurement Considerations:** It is also possible that the measures of dishonesty and creativity capture general tendencies rather than gender-specific patterns. Future research might examine whether gender moderates *specific types* of dishonest behaviours (e.g., plagiarism vs. cheating) rather than overall dishonesty.

Thus, the non-significant moderation effect suggests a contextually neutral influence of gender, reflecting a shift toward uniform behavioural responses under academic pressure. This finding underscores the need for stress management and ethics interventions that target all students equally, rather than assuming gendered differences in vulnerability.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter examined the study's results in light of current research and pertinent theoretical frameworks. The results indicated that postgraduate students generally experience moderate to high levels of academic stress, which significantly influences academic dishonesty and malevolent creativity. The study further established that academic stress positively predicts dishonest behaviours, though malevolent creativity was not a significant predictor in the moderation model.

Importantly, gender did not moderate the relationships among these variables, suggesting that male and female students respond similarly to academic stress. This outcome reflects the changing cultural and educational landscape in Ghana, where gender parity in academic engagement has become more prominent.

Grounded in Person–Environment Fit Theory, Dark Triad Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the findings underscore that academic dishonesty is a complex phenomenon arising from misalignment between environmental demands and personal capacities, intensified by psychological and contextual factors. Addressing academic dishonesty, therefore, requires a holistic institutional approach, reducing stressors, promoting ethical behaviour, and fostering environments where both genders can thrive without resorting to maladaptive coping strategies.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.0. Introduction

This chapter presents the summary, conclusion and recommendations of the study. The chapter also includes implications for counselling and suggestions for further study.

#### 5.1 Summary of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the moderating role of gender in the relationship between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours among students. The study was conducted at the University of Education, Winneba. Five research questions were formulated.

1. What are the levels of academic stress among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
2. What are the levels of academic dishonest behaviours among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
3. What are the levels of malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?
4. What is the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?

5. What is the moderating role of gender in the relationship among academic stress, academic dishonest behaviours, and malevolent creativity among postgraduate students at the University of Education, Winneba?

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. 450 postgraduate students from various departments and faculties within the University of Education, Winneba were selected using a variety of selection strategies, including stratified, systematic, and basic random sampling (lottery method with replacement). Data was gathered using a questionnaire modified from the Academic Dishonest Behaviour Scale (ADBS), Malevolent Creativity Scale (MCS), and Stress Scale (SS). The data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

## **5.2 Findings**

The study's conclusions were as follows:

Students' academic stress levels ranged from moderate to high. This stress level was much higher than the test score of 50, suggesting that a large number of students experience high levels of pressure that may have an impact on their academic performance and general well-being. High levels of academic dishonesty were discovered in the survey, indicating that it is a common problem among students.

The research also found that participants displayed moderate to high levels of malevolent creativity. This suggests that some students may use creativity in harmful ways, such as cheating or engaging in dishonest academic practices.

Additionally, a somewhat good association was found between academic stress and dishonest behaviours, while a high positive correlation was found between academic

stress and malevolent creativity. This implies that pupils who are under a lot of stress are more prone to act dishonestly and creatively in a malicious way. Although academic stress was a predictor of academic dishonest activity, the association between stress and unethical behaviour was not significantly moderated by gender.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

The study concludes that academic stress is a significant driver of both academic dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity. When students experience high academic pressure, they may resort to unethical behaviours as a coping mechanism. Creativity, therefore, is not inherently positive; under stressful conditions, it can be channelled toward manipulative or dishonest ends. The non-significant moderating effect of gender suggests that stress affects male and female students similarly within the Ghanaian higher education context. This finding contrasts with some Western studies where gender differences are pronounced, possibly due to differing cultural expectations, academic environments, and gender role socialisation patterns.

### **5.4 Contributions to Knowledge**

This study makes several important contributions to both academic literature and educational practice, especially within the Ghanaian and African higher education contexts:

**Empirical Contribution:** This is one of the few studies in Ghana and among the few in sub-Saharan Africa to empirically test the interrelationships among *academic stress*, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonesty, while incorporating gender as a

moderating variable. The study thus extends the global discourse on academic integrity by providing evidence from an African context.

**Theoretical Contribution:** By integrating three major theoretical frameworks the Person–Environment Fit Theory, Dark Triad Theory, and Theory of Planned Behaviour the study advances a multidimensional model of academic misconduct that considers stress, personality, and behavioural intention together. This integrative approach offers a richer understanding of why students engage in unethical academic practices.

**Contextual Contribution:** The findings highlight how socio-cultural and institutional factors in Ghanaian Universities, such as pressure to excel, limited supervision and support, and competitive academic environments, shape students’ responses to stress. The study thereby contributes context-specific insights to the literature on academic misconduct in developing educational systems.

**Practical Contribution:** The study’s findings inform counselling, teaching, and institutional policy by showing that stress management and academic integrity interventions must be designed to target both genders equally, focusing on coping strategies rather than gender-based assumptions.

**Methodological Contribution:** The study demonstrates how the combination of standardized psychometric tools and locally relevant contextual data can effectively capture complex psychological and behavioural phenomena in African educational research

## 5.5 Contributions to Literature and Practice

This study provides significant contributions in three major dimensions, theoretical, empirical, and practical, particularly within the context of Ghanaian and African higher education systems.

**Theoretical Contribution:** The study extends the Person–Environment Fit Theory and Job Stress Theory, Dark Triad Theory, and Theory of Planned Behaviour by empirically integrating them into a unified framework. It demonstrates that stress not only affects emotional well-being but can also trigger malevolent creativity and unethical decision-making, especially under academic pressure. The inclusion of gender as a moderating variable contributes new understanding of stress and behavioural theories in non-Western educational contexts.

**Empirical Contribution:** Empirically, the study provides context-specific evidence from Ghana that links academic stress to both dishonest behaviours and malevolent creativity, a relationship scarcely explored in African settings. It fills a gap in the literature by demonstrating that gender neutrality in stress response may be more pronounced in collectivist, interdependent cultures such as Ghana's, where social expectations and academic competition affect students similarly.

**Practical and Policy Contribution:** Practically, the findings inform university policy, counselling, and ethical education in Ghana and across Africa. They highlight the need for institutional strategies that balance academic demands with student well-being. The study also provides a foundation for developing national-level policies on academic

integrity and student mental health under the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC). It advocates for counselling units to incorporate ethics-based psychological support, thus bridging the gap between academic performance and moral development.

### **Contribution to Ghanaian and African Educational Literature**

This study adds to the corpus of knowledge in Africa by placing academic dishonesty and creativity in the context of Ghanaian higher education, where societal pressures, academic competitiveness, and resource limitations all coexist. It challenges Western-centric assumptions about gender differences and unethical behaviour, offering a culturally grounded understanding of how stress influences student conduct in African Universities.

### **5.5 Ethical Implications and Educational Policy Considerations**

The findings of this study carry significant ethical and policy implications for higher education institutions in Ghana and similar contexts:

**Ethical Awareness and Integrity Education:** Universities must institutionalise academic integrity education, including compulsory ethics modules and integrity pledges, to reinforce moral responsibility among students. Promoting ethical literacy helps prevent the normalisation of dishonest behaviours.

**Reducing Academic Pressure Ethically:** Academic policies should emphasise balanced workloads, flexible deadlines, and adequate student, supervisor interaction. Ethical academic cultures can only thrive in environments that support psychological well-being.

**Policy Framework for Stress Management:** The results support the formulation of a national policy on student mental health and academic integrity under the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC). Such policies should mandate universities to include mental health assessments, peer mentoring, and resilience training as part of their student support structures.

**Ethical Counselling Practice:** Counsellors must uphold confidentiality and informed consent while addressing students' stress and ethical dilemmas. Integrating ethics-focused psychological support ensures that counselling interventions remain both effective and morally sound

## **5.6 Recommendations**

The University should design and implement comprehensive stress management programs aimed at helping postgraduate students cope with academic demands. These could include time management workshops, mindfulness sessions, and peer-support groups. Regular stress assessments should be integrated into academic advising systems to identify and support students experiencing high levels of stress before it leads to burnout or unethical behaviours.

Institutions should strengthen academic integrity education by embedding ethics and honesty modules into the postgraduate curriculum. Universities should conduct regular seminars and workshops on plagiarism, research ethics, and responsible conduct of scholarship. Instructors should also reinforce integrity through clear communication of rules, transparent grading systems, and the use of plagiarism detection tools.

Educators should also encourage positive creativity and innovation by providing opportunities for students to apply creative thinking ethically. Universities should establish mentorship programs that guide students on transforming creative potential into constructive research and problem-solving outcomes rather than manipulative or dishonest practices.

Universities should balance academic workload and expectations. Faculty should coordinate deadlines to avoid stress accumulation and promote a supportive academic culture that values well-being over excessive performance pressure.

Since the influence of academic stress on academic dishonest practices was shown to be identical for both male and female postgraduate students, the University Counselling Unit should provide equal consideration to both male and female students when preparing stress management programs.

### **5.7 Implications for Counselling**

Counselling services should incorporate regular stress management workshops for students, focusing on healthy coping mechanisms to reduce stress. These programs could teach relaxation techniques, time management skills, and cognitive-behavioural strategies to help students manage academic demands without resorting to dishonesty.

Counsellors should adopt early intervention techniques by identifying students at high risk of academic stress or unethical behaviours, such as through regular academic stress assessments. Providing personalised coping strategies tailored to each student's stress level and personality may prevent stress from escalating into malevolent creativity or dishonesty.

Institutions should implement clear, strong policies on academic integrity to discourage dishonest behaviours. Given that academic stress significantly contributes to academic dishonesty and malevolent creativity, policies that reduce excessive academic pressure, like promoting flexible deadlines or balancing workload, could mitigate these behaviours.

### **5.8 Suggestions for Further Research**

As technology has become more prevalent in education, future studies could look at how students' levels of academic dishonesty and creativity are impacted by digital tools and online learning environments, particularly when stress is present.

Additional research could examine how environmental and cultural factors affect the connection between academic dishonesty, malevolent creativity, and academic stress in various educational contexts or geographical areas. Students' behaviour under stress may exhibit distinct patterns that can be found through cross-cultural analysis.

Future studies could also look into how ethical education initiatives affect the decline in academic dishonesty. Research might examine whether incorporating ethics into the curriculum aids students in making wiser choices when faced with academic pressure.

Again, future studies could investigate the effectiveness of various coping strategies in reducing academic dishonesty and malevolent creativity among students

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**APPENDIX A**

**UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

**DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY**

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS**

The questionnaire is for data collection on the topic **Gender moderating the relationship between academic stress, malevolent creativity, and academic dishonest behaviours among students**. The information given on this questionnaire is for academic purposes only. Answers are confidential and will only be used by the researcher. Please answer all questions honestly. Thank you for your assistance.

**SECTION A**

1. AGE    19-30     31-40     41-50     51 and above
2. MARITAL STATUS:    Single     Married
3. GENDER:    Male     Female
4. PROGRAMME OF STUDY: .....
5. NAME OF FACULTY: .....
6. LEVEL:    (a) MPhil     (b) PhD
7. YEAR:    1     2     3     4     5

**SECTION B**

Each item in this section says something about a particular **Academic Dishonest Behaviours**. I would like to know to what extent you have been doing what the item says. In each case, please indicate your response by placing an “√” over the blank space representing HOW OFTEN you practice any of the items below. Please make your answers as true FOR YOU as you can.

- 1= Always                      2= Sometimes.                      3= Frequently                      4= Never**

NO	Items	AL	ST	FQ	NV
1	During examination I use signals to fetch answers from my friends.				
2	I use prohibited things like hidden notes, calculators and other electronic devices during examination				
3	I interchange my allotted book with other student to get a better grade in the examination				
4	During an examination, I solve the answers on the question paper and hand them over to my classmates.				
5	During a test, I try to copy from another student				
6	I copy summary of a story/poem/chapter from a textbook I claim it as completed by me.				
7	For submitting assignment, I copy and change few sentences/lines/words and phrases from other sources.				
8	I use online resources in my personal educational assignment/project without citing the author.				
9	For personal comments, I manipulate scientific information on the internet and claim it as written by me.				
10	I attempt to make special considerations to attain or get favours i.e. (bribery)				
11	In an individual work/assignment I take help from others to complete it.				
12	I used unfair means to obtain information about the content of the test before it was given.				
13	Before the examination, I try to know the questions asked in the paper				
14	I write expected answers on table/wall/hand/paper etc., in prior time.				
15	I interchange my allotted seat near an efficient student to get a better grade in the examination.				
16	Before examination I encourage other classmates to cheat.				
17	I submit the assignment in my name after getting it prepared by my friends.				
18	I damage library books so that classmates do not get required content.				
19	In a course I submit the same educational assignment more than one time.				
20	I give false explanations when I miss the deadline of my educational project.				
21	I buy a project/assignment/paper online & submit it as my individual effort.				
22	Before the exam I pay someone to write a paper/homework for me.				
23	I provide false excuses to teacher, to gain extra time on project/assignment.				

### SECTION C

Each item in this section says something about a particular **Malevolent Creativity**. I would like to know to what extent you have been doing what the item says. In each case, please indicate your response by placing an “✓” over the blank space representing HOW OFTEN you practice any of the items below. Please make your answers as true FOR YOU as you can.

1	How often do you think about ideas to take revenge when being unfairly treated?				
2	How often do you have ideas about new ways to punish people?				
3	How often do you have ideas about how to suppress people who are in your way?				
4	How often do you engage in an original form of sabotage?				
5	How often do you have ideas to hurt yourself?				
6.	How often do you think about the strategies of hurting others in the rough world?				
7	How often do you fabricate lies to simplify a problem situation?				
8	How often do you think about excuses to justify your wrongdoings?				
9	How often do you tell lies without worrying about being nailed?				
10	How often do you think of ways to conceal your misdoings from others?				
11	How often do you have ideas about how to pull pranks on others?				
12	How often do you play tricks on people as revenge?				
13	How often do you think of ideas on the margins of rules, when conventional ways do not work?				

1= Always

2= Sometimes.

3= Frequently

4= Never

**SECTION D**

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by placing a “√” over the blank space representing **how often** you felt or thought a certain way.

**1= Always****2= Sometimes.****3= Frequently****4= Never**

	<b>Items</b>	<b>AL</b>	<b>ST</b>	<b>FQ</b>	<b>NE</b>
<b>1</b>	I felt everything around me was overwhelming.				
<b>2</b>	I have been easily fatigued or tired				
<b>3</b>	I experienced sleep problems				
<b>4</b>	I lost concentration on the tasks I was performing				
<b>5</b>	I felt angry for no reason				
<b>6</b>	I felt alone while others are around				
<b>7</b>	I experienced forgetfulness or memory problems				
<b>8</b>	I postponed things or actions I should do immediately				
<b>9</b>	I become easily agitated or angered for no reason				
<b>10</b>	I struggled to sleep even after a hard day's work				
<b>11</b>	I had interpersonal challenges with family, friends, and work colleagues				
<b>12</b>	I felt pains and aches all over my body				
<b>13</b>	I found myself unproductive at work				
<b>14</b>	I felt drowsy even with the least activity I engage in				
<b>15</b>	I had the urge to take in some chemicals (e.g., drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, fizzy drinks etc.)				
<b>16</b>	I felt it was impossible to ease myself or feel relaxed				
<b>17</b>	I experienced difficulty unwinding				
<b>18</b>	I felt unenthusiastic about my daily activities				
<b>19</b>	I felt easily tensed.				
<b>20</b>	I lost appetite (eats less) even for my favourite food				