



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section(s): *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Criminalizing examination cheating: Surveillance, punishment and newspaper discourse**

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ABSTRACT

Although there are considerable studies in Kenya on examination cheating, there is very limited focus on how the media discursively constructs the issue. To address this gap, this article, using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, examines how Kenyan daily newspapers discursively construct examination cheating. Corpus was drawn from news and opinion articles, and their headlines published in the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* between 2022 and 2024. Sampling followed a cyclic and iterative procedure until discursive saturation was reached. The analysis was complemented by corpus tools; AntConc (Version 4.3.1) to aid in finding frequencies, salient lexical and grammatical patterns and SKELL Engine to further support the analysis of collocations. The analysis reveals that examination cheating is dominantly constructed as a crime. Lexical patterns like collocation, metaphors and overwording link cheating with control, punishment and institutional authority. Grammatical choices foreground state institutions as powerful agents while backgrounding students, teachers, and parents, who are mainly represented as offenders or passive subjects. Institutional and elite voices dominate the discourse of examination cheating, while the voices of other actors are either marginalized, backgrounded or entirely silenced. Alternative perspectives that address structural pressures such as high-stakes testing and inequality are barely mentioned. Through intertextuality, legal, crime and economic discourses are recontextualized to reinforce the criminalization of examination cheating. The moral and ethical dimensions of examination cheating are also rarely explored. The study concludes that Kenyan newspaper discourse plays a central role in criminalizing examination cheating thereby legitimizing surveillance, normalization and punishment.

KEYWORDS: crime, critical discourse analysis, disciplinary power, examination cheating, newspaper discourse

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1.0 Introduction

National examinations are fundamental in determining students' academic and career trajectories. Nevertheless, cases of cheating which manifest in various forms such as plagiarism, impersonation and unauthorized resource use continue to undermine the fairness and credibility of these assessments. Cheating cases have been rising due to the advancement in technology particularly the use of Artificial Intelligence. Research shows that examination cheating continues to occur across various regions and education levels with reports indicating increased cases in U.S.A, UK, Asia and Africa (Akbarirad et al., 2021; Liu & Alias, 2023; Miles et al., 2022).

The outcomes of national examinations, such as the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) determine students' entry into institutions of higher learning and consequential access to employment opportunities (Simiyu, 2025). Recent reports have indicated that examination irregularities have been on the rise, with many candidates implicated for cheating in national examinations. For instance, in the year 2024, there were 840 candidates who had their results cancelled, marking the highest number cancelled since 2016 (Kihaki, 2025). Results of 2829 candidates were also withheld in the same year following suspicion that they were involved in the examination cheating. In 2023, 4113 candidates had had their results withheld for similar reasons.

Examinations in Kenya are taken very seriously and the media extensively reports on examination issues including cheating. Richardson (2007) holds that, newspapers do not simply report events. Through selective use of language, they construct realities that shape societal attitudes toward any particular issue. The *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* are the most widely read and influential newspapers in Kenya (MCK, 2024). This makes the analysis of their discourses very important and insightful.

In Kenya, much of the research on cheating has been done in fields such as education (Aggrey et al., 2024; Kemei et al., 2023; Petronilla, 2023), nursing Wamalwa (2023), engineering (Cooke & Hawwash, 2022), philosophy (Waweru, 2020). Despite the vital role of newspapers in shaping discourse on examination cheating, there has been limited exploration on how they discursively construct examination cheating. To address this gap, this article seeks to answer the following research question: How is the act of examination cheating discursively constructed in Kenyan daily newspapers?

Discourse and Examination Cheating

Examination cheating has been studied globally from a discursive perspective by various scholars. These studies focus on cheating at various levels of education. Blame and criminalization seem to be a central finding in these studies. These discourses often apportion blame to ordinary actors while the powerful tend to be shielded from responsibility.

This trend can be seen in (Catalano & Gatti, 2017), who using social semiotics and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, examine how teachers were constructed by the media in the wake of the Atlanta schools' cheating scandals. Results reveal that, teachers were portrayed as selfish, incompetent and criminals. The study critiques the neglect of systemic pressures like high-stakes testing environments.

Roe (2023) employs the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) to investigate how contract cheating is represented in the UK's *The Daily Mail*, and how readers interact with this topic. Like in Catalano and Gatti (2017), we see the discourse of "othering" where students involved in the act are "othered" and blamed for benefiting from the UK education system. The students are positioned as fragile, lacking integrity, moral strength, grit and intelligence. The study highlights the power of the media in naturalizing the blame and criminalization culture of ordinary people in examination cheating.

Martin, Fisher-Ari and Kavanagh (2020) investigate teachers' experiences during a high-profile standardized testing cheating scandal in Atlanta's urban schools. Drawing on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, they analyze reflection writings of novice teachers over several months. Again, the findings reveal that teachers' experiences were dominated by systemic normalization, surveillance, monitoring and control, which created a punitive and oppressive environment. Teachers often felt disempowered, anxious, and complicit, with some internalizing the pressure to cheat as a response to high-stakes accountability policies. Martin et al. (2020) offers valuable insights into how discourses around accountability and testing practices construct disciplinary environments that foster cheating. Its application of Foucault's disciplinary power can inform our analysis of how media narratives and discursive strategies in Kenyan newspapers may shape perceptions and portrayals of examination cheating, especially in how such acts are socially constructed and legitimized through media discourses.

This tendency by authorities to shift blame, escape responsibility and politicize exam cheating is again seen in Groves and Nagy (2022). Using a Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA), they explore the criminalization and politicization of advertisement of academic cheating services by individuals and businesses. Their findings reveal a disconnect between legislation and the way the contract cheating problem is represented in Australian Parliament. They argue that concerns about contract cheating were used by the government as an excuse to control tertiary institutions.

These studies that examine blame and criminalization on examination cheating provide insights into how authorities fail to address systemic conditions that produce cheating using discursive resources. However, this large body of research addresses this important issue outside the Kenyan context.

Other studies explore cheating from an ethical dimension. Nwobodo (2024) for example, uses hermeneutics to examine the widespread problem of examinations cheating in Africa, with particular focus on the Igbo people of Nigeria. The study reveals that, the moral dimension inherent in the African understanding of truth renders examination malpractice a profound violation of societal values. It claims that, examination malpractice distorts reality and undermines the integrity of the educational systems. The author holds that, education systems built on falsehood, produce incompetent graduates who cannot address the challenges of the modern world. This article provides a philosophical foundation for viewing examination cheating as a profound moral and cultural issue, rather than just an administrative or legal problem.

This ethical angle to cheating is also adopted by Azadi, Azari and Iraj (2024) who explore the phenomenon of academic cheating among high school girls in Tehran. Using CDA and Foucault's theory of discourse and power, cheating is seen as embedded in institutional discourses where power produces truth and normalizes deviant behavior. The findings reveal that, students justified cheating as a socially accepted or even strategic response to structural pressures such as success expectations, surveillance and inequality.

There are studies which evaluate how actors involved in cheating are presented as victims in the media. Bitrus-Ojiambo, Mwangi and Mwaura (2022) investigate how Western media outlets portray and frame the issue of contract cheating involving Kenyan students and graduates. The study adopts the Media Framing Theory to analyze media narratives from CBS, BBC, *Daily Mail* and Kenyan blogs. It finds that Western outlets often frame Kenyan contract cheating within narratives of poverty, unemployment and economic exploitation. Kenyan writers are also portrayed as laborers in a global industry.

Much of the literature on examination cheating in Kenya seems to fall outside discourse studies. This literature, mainly domiciled in education, dominantly discusses factors, attitudes, implications and measures against cheating (e.g., Aggrey et al., 2024; Bifwoli & Momanyi, 2020; Kemei et al., 2023; Kerubo & Oliver 2025; Petronilla, 2023).

2.0 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which adopts a three-dimensional model. Fairclough (2016) emphasizes that, discourse reflects and constructs social realities and therefore, at the social practice level, a social theory is necessary. This study therefore adopts Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and punishment, to allow a more comprehensive analysis of examination cheating as a socially constructed and institutionally driven phenomenon.

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's CDA focuses on how language reflects and reinforces power dynamics in media representations. He integrates linguistically oriented discourse analysis with sociological and ideological theories, thereby promoting an interdisciplinary approach to discourse studies. He conceptualizes discourse analysis as operating across three interrelated dimensions: text, discourse practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2013).

At the level of text, Fairclough (2013) argues that, analysis should focus on how linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar and semantics function to reinforce or challenge power structures. The discursive practice level examines how texts are produced and consumed. This level further considers how discourse shapes and is shaped by journalistic conventions, editorial policies and broader societal influences. At the social practice stage, discourse is analyzed in the context of society. Discourse both represents and reinforces the existing power structures hence it is important to examine the connections between broader societal issues and media portrayals.

2.2 Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and punishment

This theory helps us understand how modern institutions control people through mechanisms like surveillance, normalization and punishment (Foucault, 1977). Normalization legitimizes punishment of what is defined as deviance by institutions. To Foucault "the whole domain of the non-conforming is punishable" (Foucault, 1977; p. 179). Continuous monitoring and observation produces docile bodies. Foucault observes that, "discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile bodies'" (p.138). Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish* how prison practices are deployed in other social institutions like hospitals and schools. These institutions are organized around controlling and managing individuals' time and space. He shows how surveillance, normalization and punishment are used to ostensibly bring order. Thus, in the Kenyan context, schools and examination centres are transformed into disciplinary institutions rather than learning. The aim of discipline is to establish "presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual" (Foucault 1977; p. 143).

Punishment is seen as a corrective measure. Newspapers' reporting of examination cheating where monitoring, surveillance and punishment are normalized produces and reproduces the same social structures. Foucault discusses examination as a tool of controlling and managing people. It "combines the techniques of observing hierarchy and those of normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish" (Foucault 1977, p. 184).

3.0 Methodology

This study integrates corpus-assisted linguistic tools with Fairclough's (2013; 2016) qualitative discourse analysis. This ensures that interpretations are based on textual evidence, while revealing underlying ideological patterns.

The study selected articles published between 2022 and 2024, with particular attention to the months of November, December and one month after the release of examination results, when reporting on examination cheating is most prominent. The headlines, news and opinion articles were selected. The headlines provide precise perspectives which have ability to sway readers. According to Van Dijk (1988), they express the main topic of news or opinion article. News articles offer firsthand accounts, documenting reactions in real time, policy responses and shifting public discussions (Wlezien & Soroka, 2024). They claim to be factual and tend to quote institutional voices. They use reported speech particularly the third person. Opinion articles on the other hand, are evaluative. They offer in-depth analysis, critique, editorial stance as well as a deeper understanding of different ideological positions because of the expert voices of writers (Firmstone, 2019). They tend to adopt the first person "I" and the collective "we." These three text types, even though distinct in their discursive functions, are complementary since they combine to reveal underlying ideologies.

Sampling followed a cyclic and iterative procedure, in which data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously until saturation (Mautner, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The analysis follows Fairclough's (2013) analytical model: description, interpretation and explanation. The corpus draws from the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. As mentioned earlier, these are the Kenyan leading newspapers (MCK, 2024). First, relevant articles were identified using an article selection checklist and subjected to preliminary reading.

Second, corpus tools were used to support systematic analysis. Newspapers articles were uploaded to AntConc to generate frequency lists and identify salient lexical patterns and grammatical preferences since it is micro tool specific only to corpus uploaded. SKELL Engine henceforth (SE) was further used to examine collocations and similar words in varied contexts since it is a macro tool. To get results from AntConc, a symmetrical search window of five words on either side of the node word (search term or keyword) was employed. The ± 5 (+right side, -left side) span was to strike a balance between precision and interpretability. This approach assessed the contextual significance of node words, revealing interconnections among concepts and actors in discourse. Additionally, n-grams and clusters of two to four words were analyzed to explore recurring multi-word units that clarified meaning within the texts.

4.0 Results and discussion

In Fairclough's dialectical approach, discourse has a dialectical relationship with social structures. Rather than separate the three levels that is, text, discursive practice and social practice, this analysis integrates them. This integration allows us to show how linguistic and discursive strategies simultaneously produce and reproduce the discourse of reality.

In order to provide clarity and transparency of analysis, a systematic coding scheme is used in this section to provide reference to the analyzed texts. The *Daily Nation* articles are coded as N; *The Standard* as S. Articles are further assigned unique identifiers of the type of article. NH and OH, are for headlines of news and opinion articles respectively. NA represents the body of news article and OA, opinion article. These are all followed by date of publication to the end of every code.

Table 1 shows David Muchunguh (*Daily Nation*) and Mike Kihaki (*The Standard*) have written more than one article because they are tasked with educational assignments in these newspapers. This to be significant since, such journalists seem to be the ones trusted to write within the ideological parameters of their newspaper.

Table 1: Distribution of articles on examination cheating in Kenyan daily newspapers

S/N	Date	Newspaper	Type of Article	Headline	Author
1	4/11/24	Daily Nation	News article	Knec steps up efforts to curb cheating in KCSE exams	David Muchunguh
2	9/11/24	Daily Nation	News article	Students, parents, teachers fall prey to KCSE scammers	David Muchunguh
3	14/11/24	Daily Nation	News article	KCSE scam: How suspect was nailed	David Muchunguh
4	9/11/23	Daily Nation	News articles	Cases of cheating rock KCSE exams	Nation Team
5	7/11/23	Daily Nation	News article	State warns against cheating as KCSE exams begin nationwide	Nation Team

6	14/11/23	Daily Nation	News article	Exams council issues alert of fake KCSE test papers being sold online	Mercy Simiyu and David Muchunguh
7	19/7/23	Daily Nation	News article	Inside the dirty tricks of KCSE cheating cartels	David Muchunguh
8	12/11/22	Daily Nation	News article	Abet examination cheating at own peril, Officials told.	David Muchunguh
9	11/12/22	Daily Nation	News article	KCSE cheating. Three arrested	Ruth Mbula and Fred Kibor
10	8/1/25	The Standard	News article	Swindlers lure parents, students in KCSE exam grades con game	Lewis Nyaundi, Nairobi
11	10/1/25	The Standard	News article	Shameful return of cheats as 840 results cancelled	Mike Kihaki
12	9/1/24	The Standard	News article	Results of over 4,000 students withheld over cheating claims	Aloys Michael
13	5/11/24	The Standard	News article	Cheat in tests at your own peril, Education CS Ogamba warns	Mike Kihaki
14	22/11/24	The standard	News article	KCSE exams end today amid security and integrity efforts	Irene Githinji
15	17/11/23	The Standard	News article	We have sealed all loopholes for exam leaks, says Machogu	Mike Kihaki
16	1/11/22	The Standard	News article	Three students in court for selling fake exam papers	Paul Ogemba
17	26/11/22	The Standard	News article	100 schools on high alert over exam cheating fears	Daniel Chege
18	12/11/24	Daily Nation	Opinion article	On exam leak, fix Kneec not Telegram	Macharia Gaitho, Former general of special projects
19	16/2/23	Daily Nation	Opinion article	Exam cheating ticking bombs	Moses Munoko, advocate of the High Court of Kenya.
20	11/11/23	Daily Nation	Opinion article	Exams: Anatomy of national failure	Eric Ng'endo, Advocate of the high court
21	24/11/23	Daily Nation	Opinion article	Kudos, Kneec, but center managers your weakest link	John Chumo, Mr Chumo is an educational research, evaluation and assessment expert and physics teacher.
22	13/11/24	The Standard	Opinion article	Find culprits, social media is innocent on KCSE leaks	Franco Nzaro, Kakamega
23	15/11/24	The standard	Opinion article	Exam cheating manifestation of deep-rooted decay in moral principles	Mohamud M Abdi, Lawyer

24	13/11/23	The Standard	Opinion article	End exam malpractices; they are giving Kenya a bad name	Collins Oyuu, KNUT secretary general
25	14/11/23	The Standard	Opinion article	Let us all guard the integrity of national examinations	Joshua Omache, Kibabii University
26	28/11/22	The Standard	Opinion article	Government should end all examination malpractices	Samwel Obegi, Migori

4.1 Discursive construction of examination cheating as a crime

The analysis reveals how the newspapers systematically use linguistic and discursive strategies to discursively construct examination cheating as a crime.

4.1.1 Lexical strategies in the criminalization of examination cheating

Collocation, metaphors, naming and reference, overwording and use of numbers are some of the most widely used strategies to enable in the criminalization of examination cheating.

i) Collocation

Discourse studies frame collocation as a tool for understanding social reality through habitual associations (Stubbs, 2001). These patterns influence interpretations and stabilize specific perspectives, particularly in institutional and media contexts (Hunston, 2022). In both newspapers, concordance results from AntConc (Version 4.3.1) show that the node word *cheating* most frequently collocates with words such as *curb*, *aiding*, *exam* and *cases*. This can be seen in the table below:

Table 2: Collocational Profile of the Node Word *cheating* in the Corpus
(Span ±5; source: AntConc (Version 4.3.1))

Collocate	Rank	Freq(Scaled)	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
curb	1	170	10	9	1	2	32.912	3.662
aiding	2	90	8	8	0	2	32.752	4.257
exam	3	1750	26	22	4	2	25.108	1.676
cases	4	380	11	7	4	2	22.058	2.639

In table 2, Freq (Scaled) shows the normalized frequencies while FreqL and FreqR indicate how often the collocates occurs to the right and left of the node word. Range tells about the presence of collocates in both newspapers. Likelihood and Effect values present the statistical strength and magnitude of association with the node word *cheating* respectively.

Table 2 shows that, *curb*, for example, is widely used in the constructions where government institutions are positioned as drivers of actions. Let us consider the following samples:

NNH- 4/11/24

SNA- 26/11/22: *We have and will put measures to curb exam cheating*

SOA- 13/11/23: *...examinations papers to curb early exposure which was the cause of cheating in the past...*

In the headline NNH- 4/11/24, news story SNA-26/11/22, and opinion article SOA- 13/11/23, *curb* functions as a process verb of inhibition and control presenting cheating as continuing threat that must be handled through surveillance, policies and law enforcement, which is in line with (Foucault's, 1977), idea of disciplinary power. The use of this verb in various articles supports a view of cheating as being deviant, criminal behavior that can be managed and not a structurally created educational issue.

The collocate *aiding* consistently occurs in constructions that do not only present candidates as culprits but extends it to other accomplices such as the teachers, invigilators and security guards as shown by the following examples:

SOA-13/11/23: *It will be a big shame to the profession if it turns out to be true that senior members of our teaching fraternity have been involved in aiding cheating in the ongoing KCSE examinations.*

SNA- 10/1/25: *91 professionals, including teachers, were reported to have participated in aiding cheating*

NOA- 11/11/23: *There were numerous reports about the arrest of teachers and suspension of some centre managers for*

aiding cheating.

In SOA-13/11/23, SNA-10/1/25, NOA- 11/11/23, *aiding* takes us to criminal and legal discourses. This lexical choice suggests the purposeful facilitation of the misconduct. *Aiding* has been grammatically patterned with *cheating* and tends to precede it as a modifier and a way to tightly bind it to the node. Moreover, *aiding* appears in contexts of words and phrases such as *arrest* (NOA- 11/11/23), *reported* (SNA-10/1/25) and *big shame* (SOA- 13/11/23). From these examples, it is clear that the Kenyan newspapers represent cheating within discourses of control, prevention and institutional intervention in keeping with Foucault's theorizing.

The common association of *cheating* with *exam* reinforces a limited and institutionalized framing that positions cheating in the context of examination. This rules out other types of academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism or falsification. Moreover, the collocate *cases* places *cheating* within the legal and criminal discourses.

These results on collocational patterns are supported by recent corpus-based studies. Tariq, Saba and Alam (2025) for example, in their examination of media framing of climate change, demonstrate that collocations and semantic prosody in editorials are subtle ways of influencing how readers understand responsibility, blame, and seriousness.

Notably, the lack of strong moral collocates in the AntConc data supports the claim that cheating is viewed more as a violation of laid down procedures than as an ethical issue. Based on Foucauldian understanding, this representation justifies surveillance and punishment.

ii) Metaphor

Fairclough (2013) contends that metaphors are ideological, and in media discourse they are especially significant, because they help naturalize particular interpretations of events and legitimize certain institutional responses.

In our corpus, cheating is represented using metaphors of warfare, disease, moral decay, crime and corruption. In the headlines we find, "nailed" (NNH-14/11/24, "rock" (NNH-9/11/23), "dirty tricks" (NNH-19/7/23) "sealing loopholes" (SNH-17/11/23), "Anatomy" (NOH-11/11/23), "weakest link" (NNO-24/11/23), "deep-rooted decay" (SNO-15/11/24), "ticking bombs" (NOH-16/2/23) and "prey" (NNH-9/11/24). These metaphors link cheating to crime thereby legitimizing punishment and security responses. They also present authorities as heroic defenders of examination integrity.

Opinion articles such as NOA-24/11/23, NOA, 24/11/25, NOA-16/02/23, SOA-15/11/24, SOA-28/11/22 also extensively deploy metaphors.

Examination cheating is represented using disease and contamination metaphors. The newspapers construct cheating as a pathological threat requiring medical intervention. *Daily Nation's* Eric Ng'eno writes: "Given the impunity at exam centers, every other apple in all the barrels will be horribly putrescent" (NOA- 11/11/23). The metaphor "putrescent" transforms educational institutions into contaminated food stores that need to be salvaged. Examining the word "putrescent" in SE, it majorly modifies "flesh", "plague-spot", "smell" or "meat." The association of examination centers with things that are easily rotten or decaying equates the centers to the rot and moral degradation in the society.

Similarly, the "apples" in the "barrels" represents the actors in the examination centers who are equally going to be rotten. The metaphor "apple" dehumanizes and objectifies the students. Thus, they are denied moral agency. The rotten apples cannot be salvaged; they can only be discarded. In line with Foucault's argument, this representation justifies extreme measures like imprisonment, expulsion, cancelling and withholding of results. The question is not why they cheat but how they can be removed from the system hence reform is ruled out. "Barrels" resonates with Foucault's view of educational institutions as carceral where bodies can be put under surveillance.

Some columnists depart from this trend of wholly criminalizing cheating and attempt to diagnose the systemic nature of the problem. They include Macharia Gaitho metaphorical description of examination cheating as "reflection of a wider national malaise" (NOA-12/11/24). Chumo on his part, critiques the metaphorical construction of examinations as a "*do-or-die event*" (NOA- 24/11/23).

The use of disease and contamination metaphors in this study aligns closely with Omoke (2025) finding that Kenyan newspapers frame the economy and governance as sick bodies requiring painful but necessary treatment.

These metaphors repetitively advance the argument that examination cheating is a crime that must be punished. In Foucault's view, such metaphors support strict control, surveillance and state authority.

iii) Naming and Reference

Richardson (2007), observes that "the way people are named in news discourse can have significant impact in the way they are viewed" (p.49). The way social actors are named, not only identifies the groups they are associated with, but can also signal how the namer and the named relate. In our corpus, people linked to examination cheating are repeatedly called "scammers" (NNH-9/11/24), "cartels" (NNH-19/7/23), "swindlers" (SNH-8/1/25), "cheats" (SNH-10/1/25). These words are very powerful referencing terms because of the visibility of headlines. These nomination strategies are also evident in both the news and opinion articles. For instance, "suspects" (NNA-19/7/23), "cheats" in SOA-15/11/24 and "cartels" (SOA-28/11/22). Drawing

on Foucault (1977), we can conclude that, this type of naming naturalizes and normalizes that people involved in examination cheating are common criminals.

iv) **Overwording**

Overwording refers to the excessive use of related words to describe a phenomenon (Fairclough, 2013). It includes, synonyms, near synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms and repetitions. Alternative interpretations are marginalized when a phenomenon is frequently named using comparable terms from the same semantic area. This strategy serves to normalize a particular interpretation in news discourse by making it seem obvious and logical.

Lexical terms such as “cheating” (NNH-4/11/24; NNH-7/11/23; SNH-9/1/24), “scam” (NNH-14/11/24), “malpractice” (SOH-13/11/23; SOH-28/11/22), “irregularities” (NNA-9/11/23), “cartels” (NNH-19/7/23), “swindlers” (SNH-8/1/25), “scammers” (NNH-9/11/24) occur repeatedly and interchangeably. The overwording, from a Foucaudian perspective, normalizes the idea that examination cheating is a criminal act.

v) **Use of Numbers**

Our corpus reveals the use of numbers to quantify the cheaters and the scale of cheating. For example, in headline (SNA-10/1/25) we are told “840 results cancelled.” In (SNH-9/1/24), we have “results of over 4000 students withheld” and “100 schools” (SNH-26/11/22) are on the spotlight over cheating. Although written in numerals, these figures are modifying numeratives and the scale of the problem is clearly emphasized by their use.

Out of context, these numbers look very alarming. But, when we consider the total number of candidates who sat for these examinations, we realize that it is a very small percentage involved in cheating. In 2022, 881, 416 sat for the KCSE examinations, 899, 453 in 2023 and 962,512 in 2024. The 840 results cancelled in 2024, for example, constitute only 0.087%. This statistical discourse justifies the use of punitive measures against those linked to examination cheating.

4.1.2 Syntactic strategies: Agency, Authority and Othering

Syntactic choices are important in indexing ideologies. Richardson (2007) for example holds that, the choices made in producing a text influence the way we think and act.

i) **Transitivity and Agency**

Transitivity shows who performs an action and who is affected. Halliday (1976) describes processes as what people do, see, and hear. Drawing on Halliday, Fairclough (2013) contends that processes are performed by participants and that the position of participants in a sentence reveal certain ideology. He discusses three types of process: actions (SVO), events (SV), and attributions (SVC). An action involves two participants, an agent and a patient, and the agent acts upon the patient in some way.

In the headlines NNH- 7/11/2023 and NNH- 14/11/23, “State” and “Exams council” are the active agents while the patients are not even mentioned. These indicate typical SV sentences. They are non-directed actions involving only one animate participant and answers the question “what did the subject do?” (Fairclough, 2013).

We also see SVO, SVC and SVA structures in the headlines of both news and opinion articles. The SVO sentences such as, NNH-4/11/24, SNH-17/11/23, SOH-28/11/22 foreground institutional actors as agents of power and control. These agents are, “KNEC”, “government”, and “we” in SNH-17/11/23 represents the ministry. In the examples, “cheating” is the object that is “curbed”, “its loopholes sealed” and “ended.” The SVC structure in NNH-14/11/24 for example focuses on state, label and moral positioning and not on actions. The “suspect” is profiled and given the attribute of a criminal. This justifies authorities’ punitive measures. SNH-9/1/24 has SVA structure, where justification for withholding results is based on the adverbial element “over cheating claims.”

The trend is similar in the body of both news and opinion articles as exemplified by (SNA-09/1/24): *The ministry has now set up a functional National Examinations Appeals Tribunal*

“The ministry” is portrayed as the active agent with capacity of setting up tribunals. Again, there is no patient that the agent is acting upon.

The sentence structures place law enforcement and state authorities at the centre of agency, foregrounding state power of issuing warnings and alerts just as always done to criminals. Through these transitivity structures, both news and opinions articles construct examination cheating as a field where institutional power acts upon deviant individuals. The giving of agency to powerful groups like state, examination council and the ministry resonates with Foucault’s observation that, examinations is “a ceremony of power...and the deployment of force” (Foucault, 1977; p. 184).

ii) **Modality**

Fairclough (2013) distinguishes between two types of modality that is, relational and expressive modality. Relational modality deals with the authority of one participant in relation to others. Expressive modality demonstrates the speaker’s or writer’s authority with respect to the truth or probability of a representation of reality. The two newspapers use both types of modality which overlap in their functions.

As noted in methodology, news articles claim to be factual. The use of non-modal verbs to express modality is particularly pervasive both in the headlines and the body of the articles. The headlines widely convey total commitment and authority through the use of verbs and verb phrases such as “warns” (NNH-7/11/23), “issues alert” (NNH-14/11/23), “results cancelled” (SNH-10/1/25), “sealed all loopholes” (SNH-17/11/23). The usage of such non-modal verbs in the headlines ideologically function to reinforce institutional authority, disciplinary measures, decisiveness and legitimacy.

There are similar usages in the body of news articles. For example, “Several individuals *have been arrested* in Eldoret...” (SNA- 5/11/24), (SNA-10/1/25), “anyone who will *be found to have cheated*” (NNA-12/11/22), “19 teachers *were suspended*” (SNA-24/11/24), “three people *were arrested*...” (NNA-11/12/22), “Lamu County Commissioner Louis Rono *assured* all the candidates” (NNA- 7/11/2023), “a man *arrested* ...” (NNA-9/11/23). The verbs are used to naturalize institutional power. They encode punitive actions, vigilance and immediacy which are presented as organized and ongoing. The total commitment expressed by these verbs construct examination cheating as a security and criminal issue which is not debatable.

Modal auxiliary verbs are equally powerful in creating both expressive and relational modality. Analysis of modal auxiliary verb usage reveals, in one of *The Standard* articles, a regional commissioner is quoted: “*We know the notorious schools and although we will not condemn them now...*” (SNA-26/11/22).

Later in the same article, the reporter gives a commentary that “they have and will put measures to curb exam cheating and will apprehend those responsible and punish them” (SNA-26/11/22).

The examples express both expressive and relational modality. They reveal both the commissioner’s total commitment to the truth as well as power over others. The repeated use of “will” in the phrases “will apprehend” and “will punish them” and verbs such as “are” in “are on our radar” expresses strong commitment. This implies that these state actions are not optional but obligatory. Similarly, the use of collective pronouns “we” and “our” with modal verb “will” also indicates the commissioner’s authority over others. In as much as he fully commits, it is not him who “will apprehend” them but he will, through others. Delegated authority is expressed as direct.

Analysis of the opinion articles reveals extensive use of modal verb to express modality. Opinion writers such as, Mohamud Abdi, Collins Oyuu, Samwel Obegi, Moses Munoko, Macharia Gaitho express certainty about punitive responses using these verbs.

“Must” frames state intervention as moral imperative rather than policy choice. This is evident in the following examples:

SOA- 15/11/24: ...we must also employ a more proactive approach to addressing this moral turpitude.

NOA-12/11/24: Examination cheating is just one of the unacceptable practices that must be vigorously countered...

NOA- 16/2/23: Our children must be told that it is a way to success, not the only one.

The usages of “must” create strong obligation that it is the institutional duty to punish hence, leading to moral necessity. Corpus data from AntConc confirm that will is among the most frequent modal verbs across both newspapers, frequently appearing in proximity to verbs such as *enforce, eliminate, curb, and punish*. This suggests the authorities’ commitment to dealing with criminal offenses. Halliday (2004) points out that, modal operators can be classified into three groups according to value: high, median and low.

Table 3: Distribution of modal verbs in corpus

Modality value	Modal verb	Frequency	Expressive meaning	Percentage
High	<i>must</i>	20	necessity	5.5
Median	<i>Will</i>	205	High degree of certainty	56.0
	<i>Should</i>	47	obligation	12.8
	<i>Would</i>	12	conditioned certainty	3.3
	<i>Can</i>	52	possibility	14.2
	<i>shall</i>	4	certainty	1.1
Low	<i>May</i>	11	Possibility/probability	3.0
	<i>Might</i>	6	Weak probability	1.6
	<i>Could</i>	9	Possibility/ability	2.5
Total		366		100

The verb 'will' accounts for 56.0% of modal cases in the analysis of expressive and relational verbs, indicating a notable prevalence of median-value modality. Together, the median value modals account for 87.4%. This puts newspapers in an authoritative position without seeming to be extreme and forceful. It means that a discourse of inevitability is supported by discussions of exam cheating that center more on projected outcomes and institutional responses, such as punishments. By portraying future behaviors as fixed and normalizing institutional judgements as common sense, this reliance on 'will' restricts interpretive flexibility. Absolute necessity, obligation and moral severity are conveyed by high expressive modality 'must' since it carries greater force of commitment and authority over others thereby justifying institutional responses. Conversely, less than 10% are low-value modals (may, might, could), which frequently portray cheating as a possible danger rather than a complex educational problem.

iii) Use of Pronouns

Fairclough (2013) argues that, pronouns are tied to the relations of power and solidarity. Pronouns are therefore, central in positive self-representation and negative other representation in media discourse. This is clear in the following examples:

SNH-17/11/23

SNA-26/11/22: *"We know the notorious schools and although we will not condemn them now, they are on our radar during this examination period...will put measures to curb exam cheating and will apprehend those responsible and punish them"*

SOA-15/11/24: *As we laud the government's efforts in dealing with the criminal syndicates, we must also employ a more proactive approach to addressing this moral turpitude.*

State officials consistently use inclusive "we" pronouns when describing their actions, creating collective authority evident in SNH-17/11/23 and SOA-15/11/24. This inclusive "we" positions state agents as unified protectors of collective interests implying that the authorities have power to speak, act and control the act. For example, in SNH- 17/11/23, Machogu, the Cabinet Secretary for education says, *"We have sealed all loopholes for exam leaks."* This positions government agencies as good people, with power to protect the integrity of examination.

Conversely, when referring to those involved in cheating, the discourse employs distancing pronouns such as "they," "them" and "those," the classic discourse of othering.

For instance, in SNA-26/11/22 the Regional commissioner uses phrases such as "...not condemn *them* now," *"they* are on our radar," and "apprehend *those* responsible." This indicates the pronoun shift that clearly establishes boundaries between legitimate authority (we) and deviant others (them). It presents the offenders; cheats and those who aid in cheating as bad people who should "be condemned," "apprehended" and "punished" for jeopardizing the integrity of examinations. This is perfectly aligned with Foucault's (1977) view that, "the non-conforming is punishable" (p. 179).

4.1.3 Voice and discursive power

Voice, according to Fairclough (2013), refers who speaks, how they speak and whose voices are excluded or silenced. CDA studies have consistently shown that news discourse generally privileges elite voices (e.g., Fairclough, 1995; Richardson, 2007; Van Dijk, 2008; Machin & Mayr, 2025). Both newspapers demonstrate bias in voice selection that privileges institutional authority while marginalizing the minorities.

The headlines of both the news and opinion articles strongly exhibit discursive power of elite voices, which sometimes come out in the form of imperatives. For example, in NNH-12/11/22, SNH-5/11/24 and SNH-17/11/23, voice has been assigned directly to state officials and education bureaucrats. The use verbs like "told" (NNH-12/11/22), "warns" (SNH-5/11/24) and "says" (SNH-17/11/23) foregrounds ministerial authority and places other actors (students, teachers, parents) in the role of objects of instruction and surveillance. The assertive and definite tone in "We have sealed all the loopholes" (SNH-17/11/23) represents the ministry as competent, vigilant and in control. This justifies institutional dominance in determining the problem and its solutions.

The privilege and authority of the elite voices has equally been exemplified in opinion headlines such as NOH-24/11/23, NOH- 12/11/24, SOH- 13/11/24, SOH- 13/11/23, SOH- 14/11/23. The dominant voices in the opinion articles are those of the writers who are experts, for example, leaders of unions, lawyers and policy commentators. The columnists have a tendency of giving orders, for instance, "find culprits" (SOH- 13/11/24) and "fix Kneec" (NOH- 12/11/24). They also evaluate institutions and attribute blame. The imperative tone and judgmental attitude present them as ethical and professional figures with the right to assess deviance.

Analysis of quotation patterns in the news and opinion articles also reveal a clear hierarchy which can be best categorized into two major stratifications. The first stratification is the primary authority. These are the dominant, mostly quoted voices in the news articles. They consist of Education Cabinet Secretary, KNEC officials, Regional Commissioners, police commanders, county education directors and TSC officials. The following quotations fall within this pattern:

SNA-5/11/24: *We have asked the Judiciary to expedite cases, aiming for a one-month resolution for those found guilty of exam malpractice.*

NNA- 14/11/23: *I can assure you with absolute confidence there is no single genuine paper that can circulate on social media platforms. Those fellows try to collude with somebody somewhere and look for an image of the paper that is being done, and share it on Telegram. We are working with the Ministry of ICT and all those cases have been neutered, so there's no effect.*

In SNA-5/11/24 the Education Cabinet Secretary, Machogu is quoted while in NNA- 14/11/23, we hear the voice of KNEC CEO, Dr. Njeng'ere.

These examples demonstrate how the interpretations of examination cheating are attributed to elite voices. The choice of language by these institutional figures emphasizes their authority and attitude. The cabinet secretary for example, alludes to the judiciary and almost purports to speak to the judiciary. The KNEC CEO, apports blame as if he has personally conducted the investigation. Statements like “*We have asked the Judiciary to expedite cases*” (SNA-5/11/24) and “*I can assure you with absolute confidence*” (NNA- 14/11/23) are made without question and they establish institutional actors as the principal definers of reality. These elite voices legitimize surveillance, punishment and the criminalization of examination cheating. The other stratification is marginal voices consisting of those who are directly involved and affected by examination cheating. They include; teachers, parents and students. These voices are backgrounded, rarely quoted or completely silenced. When they appear, they are not positioned as contributors to policy but as complainers. The following is an example where they are clearly backgrounded; we do not hear about them. It is the reporter who talks about them in the third person:

NN8- 9/11/24: *Parents, students, and teachers have lost millions of shillings to fraudsters luring them with the promise of delivering to them advance Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination papers*

Here, “parents”, “students” and “teachers” appear as consumers requiring protection rather than primary subjects in examination cheating issue.

Opinion writers' own voices dominate the discourse through the use of “I” and the collective “we” to invoke a sense of shared interest with the reader. These include the voices of the *Daily Nation* columnists such as, Eric Ng'eno, Advocate of the high court, John Chumo, an educational researcher, Macharia Gaitho, former managing editor, special projects. In *The Standard*, these voices are of Mohamud M Abdi, Lawyer and Collins Oyuu, KNUT secretary general. These columnists use their positions as experts to speak with authority about examination cheating.

For instance, John Chumo writes:

NOA-24/11/23: *It is an open secret that school principals, who are also the centre managers, have vested interests in the outcome of the exam. Therefore, in order to bolster the integrity of the KCSE in the future, the council should consider assigning centre managers roles outside their work stations.*

His use of “should consider” positions him as a professional advisor offering solutions rather than a neutral observer.

In *The Standard*, Oyuu uses the pronoun “our” to distance KNUT from teachers who are accused of being involved in examination cheating:

SOA-13/11/23: *It will be a big shame to the profession if it turns out to be true that senior members of our teaching fraternity have been involved in aiding cheating in the ongoing KCSE examinations.*

His position as KNUT's secretary general allows him to adopt a tone of critique which is also patronizing and moralizing.

Conversely, citizen contributors represent the most marginalized voices in opinion discourse. Importantly, the *Daily Nation* completely silences their voices. On the other hand, *The Standard* gives the ordinary citizens space to air their voices. These contributors include: Franco Nzaro, Joshua Omache, Tobias Osano and Samwel Obegi. However, these citizens are relegated to brief columns of only between 140-170 words rather than around 700 words for “expert” columnists.

Some of the citizen contributors offer radically different views about examination cheating from the elite voices as exemplified here:

SOA-13/11/24: *All we can say is that due to the greed of some of Kneec officials who have been giving out the papers in exchange for cash, there are leakages and now innocent Telegram users are facing difficulties in running their daily businesses due to the closure of the site.*

This voice of Nzaro, stands out for directly criticizing KNEC officials. His voice reflects public frustration and demonstrates that ordinary citizens are victims of institutional failure. Such voices are excluded and only a small space is offered to some of them to provide a counter-discourse.

4.1.4 Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity: The hybridization of education discourse with crime and legal discourses

Intertextuality refers to the way a text draws upon, incorporates, or responds to other texts (Fairclough, 2013). Since texts are not consumed or produced in isolation, they must be understood in relation to other texts (Richardson, 2007). “The interdiscursivity of a text is an aspect of its intertextuality, a question of which genres, discourses and styles it draws upon, and how it works them into particular articulations” (Fairclough, 2013; p. 234). The analysis shows that in representing cheating, the newspapers merge educational discourse with crime, legal and economic discourses.

The following are examples of how both newspapers draw from legal texts and discourses.

NNA- 9/11/24: *Section 4.2 of it states: “Any person who: a) gains access to examination material and knowingly reveals the contents, whether orally or in writing, to an unauthorised party, whether a candidate or not, will be in violation of Section 27 of the Act and the penalty will be imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years, or a fine not exceeding two million shillings or both”*

SNA-1/11/22: *“At an unknown place and date within the country, you jointly conspired to deceive members of the public through Telegram that there are Kenya National Examinations Council leakages for the 2022 exams, a fact that you knew to be false”*

NNA- 9/11/24 quotes extensively from the KNEC Act 29 of 2012, which prohibits illegal access to examinations materials. Similarly, SNA-1/11/22 embeds legal text into its reporting, giving news reports a judicial quality.

The direct quotation of KNEC Act in NNA- 9/11/24 recontextualizes legal language into the news text. By specifying the penalties, the article represents cheating as a crime that should be punished. This naturalizes legalistic responses to educational issues.

Similarly, in SNA-1/11/22, the article reproduces verbatim court proceedings into educational reporting. Here, the newspaper directly quotes the charge-sheet read by a Nairobi chief magistrate to three accused offenders. This demonstrates how news articles integrate legal discourse into journalistic commentary on educational matters making the discourse to fit naturally into their reporting. Legal language is reproduced to legitimize state intervention and suppress alternative explanations.

The newspapers also draw from crime texts and discourses as shown in the following examples:

NNA- 14/11/24: *The previous day, the detectives had followed him to Ngata area in Nakuru, where he played pool with his friends, but did not make an arrest...*

NNA- 19/7/23: *...the police recovered mobile phones, SIM cards and identity cards...*

NOA- 11/11/23: *Two of the most critical agencies of a future citizen’s education, parents and teachers, are often implicated in conspiracies to steal examinations. The third principal accomplice is equally, ... the security officers and invigilators hired for the explicit purpose of securing the examination centre and protecting the integrity of the examination, are regularly admitted into the nefarious plot to subvert our education system.*

The NNA- 14/11/24 and NOA- 11/11/23 samples read like crime reports of investigative journalism nature rather than an education story. NNA- 19/7/23 narrows down the reporting to how a suspect was arrested while watching a football match before detectives “confiscated his gadgets for forensic investigations.” The narration employs crime story elements which according to The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2016), includes: conspiracy, accomplices and criminal plots. This blending of education and crime discourses transforms examination cheating into a criminal investigation narrative. Therefore, the newspapers create stories that focus on individual faults, sensationalism and need for punishment.

Intertextuality and interdiscursivity extend to economic discourses. *Daily Nation* for examples, describes cheating as consumer scams. It reports that:

NNA- 9/11/24: *Parents, students, and teachers have lost millions of shillings to fraudsters luring them ...*

Quantifying financial losses “Sh12.5 million in a single day” (NNA- 9/11/24) and using words like “fraudsters” and “luring,” draw from discourse of corruption.

By intertextually and interdiscursively drawing on legal, crime and economic discourses, the newspapers in Foucaudian terms, legitimize surveillance and punishment.

5.0 Conclusion

This study sought to investigate how examination cheating is discursively constructed by Kenyan newspapers. Data from the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* reveal that, the act of cheating is largely constructed as a crime. Analysis of the corpus comprising news and opinion articles and their headlines, systematically shows how linguistic and discursive strategies were

employed to achieve this construction. The newspapers' articles naturalize punitive and surveillance-based responses and marginalize structural explanations through repetitive lexical choices, grammatical patterns and selective voicing.

Corpus-assisted analysis reveals that collocational patterns tend to relate cheating with control, regulation and criminal responsibility. Metaphors of war, disease, corruption and moral decay represent cheating as a threat to the integrity of national education which has to be battled, contained, or eliminated. The grammatical patterns including transitivity, modality and use of pronouns, position institutions as influential agents and background students, teachers and parents, who are mostly represented as perpetrators or passive victims. Institutional voices predominate while the voices of ordinary citizens are marginalized or silenced.

Drawing on Foucault (1977), the article shows how blame and criminalization of cheating justify surveillance, normalization, punitive action and control. Authorities avoid responsibility, and justify inaction about the structural conditions that create cheating such as high-stakes testing, inequality and high level corruption.

This study is significant because it demonstrates the power dynamics that shape the way media discourse represents examination cheating. It specifically deepens our understanding of the interplay between language, power, and policy dynamics in education. A fusion of Fairclough's CDA and Foucault's disciplinary power exposes the ideologies that underpin the discourse of examination cheating.

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