

# **Social Relationship Factors Affecting Cheating Behaviour of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Business Students**

## **Introduction**

Numerous Western studies have examined individual or contextual factors affecting students' cheating behaviour (Anderman and Murdock 2007; McCabe, Butterfield, and Trevino 2001; Whitley 1998). But many of these variables were stable demographic or well-researched academic factors. Some findings were inconsistent (Whitley 1998). It is useful to examine variables that effective approaches can be developed to prevent student cheating. Researchers notice the importance of social motivational factors measuring teacher-student and peer relationships in the learning environment (Murdock, Hale and Weber 2001; Murdock, Miller and Kohlhardt, 2004; Murdock, Miller and Goetzinger 2007).

## **Objectives and Significance of Study**

Three social relationship factors are tested in this study, approachability of teacher, relationship goals of students and perceived cheating norms by students. They are particularly relevant to Chinese higher education. First, they have never been tested in higher education. Second, a large research gap exists in the Greater China region. China has become a major player in the world economy. But there are frequent media reports of Chinese students' cheating behaviour (Chen 2011; Ma, McCabe and Liu 2013; Zhang 2012). Additionally, a large number of Chinese students are studying in the West where high prevalence rates of cheating behaviour are noticed among them. The Western educators have to understand their ethical behaviour (Kutner 2015).

Third, different ethical behaviours exist across cultures and nations (Magnus, Polterovich, Danilov and Savvateev 2002). But research findings about ethical values of Chinese managers are mixed (Hanafin 2002; Redfern and Crawford 2004). Noticeable differences in ethical attitudes are found between Chinese and Hong Kong managers that they can be more so than between Hong Kong and the U.S. (Lam and Shi 2008), since Hong Kong has a longer history of industrialization and development than China. We conjecture that the cheating behavior of mainland Chinese students will be more pervasive than those in Hong Kong. The first hypothesis is developed below.

Hypothesis 1: Mainland Chinese business students will have a higher frequency of cheating and stronger perception of peer cheating than their counterparts in Hong Kong.

In the school context, people often criticize the teaching practice in mainland China as controlling and teacher-student interaction is minimal (Liu 2003; Yuan 2006). The teacher-student relationship in Chinese societies is usually embedded in the socio-cultural traditions. Specifically, according to

Confucian thoughts of *li* (禮 similar to rites), a student should treat his teacher as his father. A popular Chinese idiom states that *yiri weishi zongshen weifu* (一日為師, 終身為父 once my teacher, forever my parent) (Li and Du 2013). We therefore hypothesize a negative association between teacher-student relationship and cheating. But Hong Kong is more westernized and its higher education development is faster than China (Mok and Lee 2002). A location difference should moderate the negative relationship between teacher's approachability and students' cheating behaviour in China and Hong Kong.

Hypothesis 2: Higher approachability of teacher will negatively affect students' cheating behaviour.

Hypothesis 3: Location difference moderates the negative relationship between approachability of teacher and students' cheating such that the approachability of teacher will be less negatively related to cheating in China than in Hong Kong.

Social control theory explains that youths in close relationships would abstain from delinquency because they do not want to disappoint people they feel close to (Liska and Reed 1985). Newhouse (1982) and Calebrese and Cochran (1990) found a negative relationship between alienation and cheating. In mainland China, students are encouraged to develop cooperative and prosocial attitudes and behaviour (Chen, Liu, Chang and He 2008). Also, with collectivistic principle, students have been nurtured in political, social and academic activities organized to reflect collectivistic ideology (Chang 2004). We develop another two hypotheses as follows.

Hypothesis 4: Strong relationship goal of students will negatively affect students' cheating behaviour.

Hypothesis 5: Location difference moderates the negative relationship between relationship goal of students and cheating such that relationship goal of students will be more negatively related to cheating in China than in Hong Kong.

Moreover, impact of perceived cheating norms on cheating behaviour is strong (Jordan 2001; Rettinger and Kramer 2009) as social learning theory emphasizes the influence of examples on deviant behaviour. Students are more likely to cheat if they think cheating is widespread (Bandura 1986). And following hypothesis 1's logic, we develop another two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 6: Stronger perceived cheating norms will positively affect students' cheating behaviour.

Hypothesis 7: Location difference moderates the positive relationship between perceived cheating norms and cheating such that perceived cheating norms will be more positively related to cheating in China than in Hong Kong.

## **Methods and Data Sources**

This research used survey method for investigation. Respondents comprised a sample of undergraduate business students from two universities located in Zhuhai and Shanghai of China as well as two universities in Hong Kong. Business students are chosen because studies show that they cheat more (McCabe 2005). A total of 1,329 questionnaires were collected between December 2014 and April 2015.

The independent variables were approachability of teacher (Cokley et al. 2004, 2007), relationship goal of students (Patrick, Hicks and Ryan 1997) and perceived cheating norms modifying from nine prior cheating behaviors using Finn and Frone (2004) and 3 items from Etter, Cramer and Finn (2006). The dependent variable was prior cheating behaviour from nine cheating items in Finn and Frone (2004) and three items from Etter, Cramer and Finn (2006). Location difference (“0” - Hong Kong; “1” - China) acted as a moderator of the variables. Other control variables included gender (“0” - male; “1” - female), number of siblings (“0” - 0; “1” - 1; “2” - 2; “3” - 3 or more), year of study (“1” - 1; “2” - 2; “3” - 3; “4” - 4 or higher); and rating of academic performance (“1” - bottom 20 percentile; “2” - 20-40 percentile; “3” - 40-60 percentile; “4” - 60-80 percentile; “5” - top 20 percentile).

## **Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations of study variables. Both variables, approachability of teacher ( $r = -.064, p < .05$ ) and relationship goal of student ( $r = -.158, p < .01$ ) were negatively correlated with prior cheating behaviour. But perceived cheating norms of students and cheating behaviour had a positive association ( $r = .403, p < .01$ ). Table 2 compares students' self-reported cheating behavior and perceived cheating norms in Hong Kong and China. Surprisingly, except items 4, 6 and 8 on plagiarism, students in mainland China reported lower own cheating rates than their counterpart in Hong Kong. However, opposite phenomena was observed for their perceived cheating norms. Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. Results are shown in Table 3. Model 2 shows that relationship goal of students was negatively related to students' cheating behavior ( $\beta = -.165$   $p < .001$ ) and a positive relationship existed between perceived cheating norms and cheating ( $\beta = .434$   $p < .001$ ), supporting hypotheses 4 and 6. However, the association between teachers' approachability and cheating behaviour was insignificant ( $\beta = .035$ , n.s.), rejecting hypothesis 2.

In Model 4, the interaction between location and approachability of teacher was insignificant ( $\beta = .098$ , n.s.). But the interaction between location and relationship goal of student was significant ( $\beta = .716$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Although hypothesis 3 was not supported, hypothesis 5 was confirmed. The main effect of perceived cheating norms on students' decision to cheat was strongly positive ( $\beta = .434$   $p < .001$ ). The location factor moderates the perceived cheating norms and cheating that the relationship was stronger in China than Hong Kong ( $\beta = -.483$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Hypothesis 7 was confirmed. In addition, based on Aiken and West's (1991) procedure for computing slopes, the form of significant interaction is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We attempted to develop a model to fill the void of cheating research using social relationship factors in Chinese societies. It also contributes to the comparative literature on academic dishonesty by comparing mainland Chinese and Hong Kong business students' cheating behaviour. The findings were interesting. Except different forms of plagiarism, self-reported cheating behaviour was less pervasive in China than in Hong Kong. But opposite findings were observed for perceived cheating norms. Two reasons might explain. First, there could be cross-cultural differences in beliefs of what is or is not academic dishonesty between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students. It might reflect the prevailing Chinese culture of plagiarism. Second, cheaters could be more likely to believe a larger percent of their dishonest peers than those reported by non-cheaters (Jordan 2001). Both groups might underreport their cheating behaviour. But the mainland Chinese students, with lower ethical standards, might have underreported to a greater extent.

The results did not show direct effect of teacher's approachability on students' cheating behavior and there was no interaction between the moderator and teacher's approachability. Western literature on teacher-student relationship and cheating could not apply to Chinese context. Probably, we should discredit the premise that controlling behaviour of Chinese teachers is negatively associated with academic performance. Eastern societies could value conformity, harmony and hierarchical relationships (Ho 2001; Zhou, Lam and Chan 2012). Teacher's approachability and cheating behaviour were therefore not related.

For both Chinese and Hong Kong students, when students' relationship goal was strong, lower cheating behaviour was observed, in line with the Western literature. But the drop of cheating behaviour was more significant in China than Hong Kong when relationship goal was strong. Being more collectivistic, peers in mainland China may exert a greater influence on individual behaviour because of the emphasis on interdependence, group loyalty and conformity to group norms.

The results had also shown a large main effect of perceived cheating norms on students' decision to cheat in China and Hong Kong, with the location factor acting as a moderator. Perceived cheating norms had a stronger positive effect on cheating in China than in Hong Kong, reflecting a stronger peer culture of cheating in China. Beliefs about peers' cheating behaviour could have a more pronounced effect on other students' own intentions to cheat in China.

We have both theoretical and practical importance. First, we enrich the academic integrity literature by demonstrating the importance of social variables in explaining students' cheating behaviour in Chinese higher education context. Second, we advance the literature on social learning and social control theories by demonstrating that these concepts could be relevant to students' cheating behaviour in Chinese business schools. Besides, faculty members should enforce integrity policy to control the cheating norms. Students should perceive social and emotional support from peers so that they can pursue academic and prosocial behaviour.

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**Table 1 Means, standard deviations and correlations of study variables**

Variable	Mean	s.d.	Gender	No. of siblings	Year of study	Rating of academic performance	Perceived cheating norm	Teacher's approachability	Relationship goal of student	Location	Prior cheating behaviour
Gender	.393	.489	1								
No. of siblings	.802	0.852	-0.018	1							
Year of study	2.199	1.092	0.020	.112**	1						
Rating of academic performance	3.217	1.009	-0.015	-.115**	.058	1					
Perceived cheating norm	2.364	.981	.067*	-.094**	.096**	.038	1				
Teacher's approachability	3.374	.721	.092**	-.079**	.002	.192**	-.072**	1			
Relationship goal of student	4.101	.536	-0.034	-.093**	-.113**	.059	.095**	.174**	1		
Location	.483	.500	0.011	-.248**	-.070*	.016	.418**	-.045	.268**	1	
Prior cheating behaviour	1.505	.574	.162**	.061*	.123**	-.088**	.403**	-.064*	-.158**	-.035	1

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Bracketed values on the diagonal are the Cronbach's alpha value of the scales.

**Table 2 Cheating Behaviours and Perceived Cheating Norms of Students in Hong Kong and China**

	<i>N</i>	Mean	s.d.	t-test sig.
<b>Own cheating behavior</b>				
1. I cheated on a test/examination for my own gain.	681# 632	1.504 1.335	.814 .623	.000 .000
2. I gave someone else information on a test/examination.	682 634	1.792 1.549	.906 .717	.000 .000
3. I received someone's information on a test/examination.	680 632	1.768 1.392	.950 .676	.000 .000
4. I copied someone else's homework.	681 632	1.761 2.229	.898 .939	.000 .000
5. I had someone else do my homework for me.	680 632	1.443 1.313	.853 .673	.002 .002
6. I copied almost word-for-word materials from an encyclopaedia or book for one of my homework assignment.	680 630	1.428 1.575	.794 .767	.001 .001
7. I bought a paper online and submit it as my own.	681 630	1.286 1.076	.758 .395	.000 .000
8. I copied and pasted an essay or sentence(s) from the internet and submitted it as my own.	680 629	1.404 1.685	.792 .829	.000 .000
9. I used mobile phone or other technological device to cheat.	680 619	1.334 1.176	.745 .499	.000 .000
<b>Perceived cheating norms</b>				
1. I perceive that someone cheated on a test/examination for his/her own gain.	679 628	2.009 2.889	1.133 1.006	.000 .000
2. I perceive that someone else give information to others on a test/exam.	679 630	1.990 2.670	1.069 1.008	.000 .000
3. I perceive that someone received information from others on a	680 630	2.025 2.657	1.111 1.023	.000 .000

test/examination.				
4. I perceive that someone copied other's homework.	679 629	2.208 3.210	1.162 1.110	.000 .000
5. I perceive that someone had someone else do his/her homework for him/her.	681 624	2.051 2.679	1.098 1.082	.000 .000
6. I perceive that someone copied almost word-for-word materials from an encyclopaedia or book for one of his/her homework assignment.	681 634	1.883 2.842	1.044 1.097	.000 .000
7. I perceive that someone bought a paper online and submit it as his/her own.	680 632	1.649 2.479	.970 1.027	.000 .000
8. I perceive that someone copied and pasted an essay or sentence(s) from the internet and submitted it as his/her own.	679 634	1.910 2.909	1.051 1.082	.000 .000
9. I perceive that someone used mobile phone or other technological device to cheat.	678 634	1.982 2.754	1.163 1.075	.000 .000

# Numbers in the first and second rows are figures reported by Hong Kong and China students respectively.

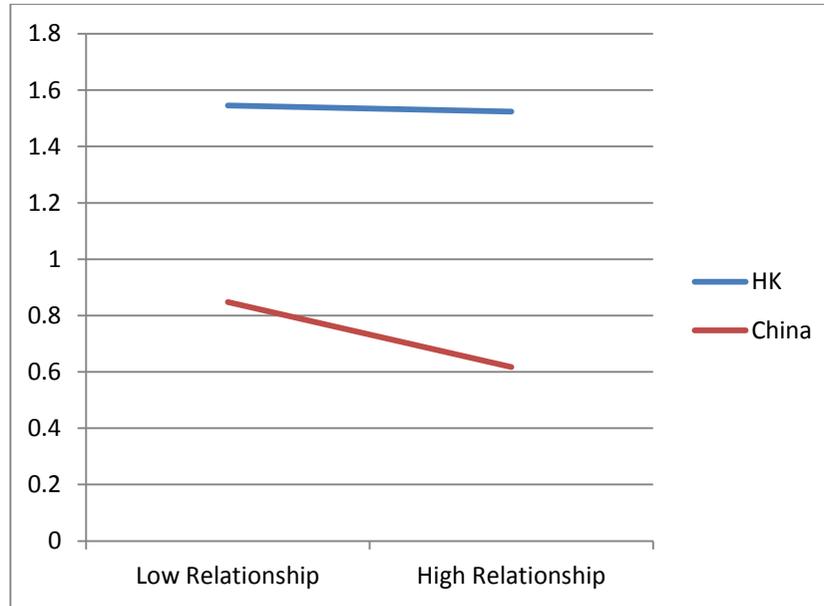
**Table 3 Results of hierarchical regression analysis**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
Gender	.154***	.119***	.121***	.109***
Number siblings	.060*	.088**	.047	.044
Year of study	.102**	.015	.025	.022
Academic performance	-.033**	-.091**	-.096***	-.102***
Teacher's approachability		.035	.019	.043
Students' relationship goal		-.165***	-.127***	-.198***
Perceived cheating norm		.434***	.503***	.620***
Location			-.185***	-.379***
Approachability x Location				-.098
Relationship goal x Location				.716**
Perceived cheating norm x Location				-.483***
Adj $R^2$	.043	.234	.258	.283
$\Delta R^2$	.047***	.192***	.025***	.026***
$F$	13.030***	47.572***	47.450***	39.277***

Dependent variable – prior cheating behaviour

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

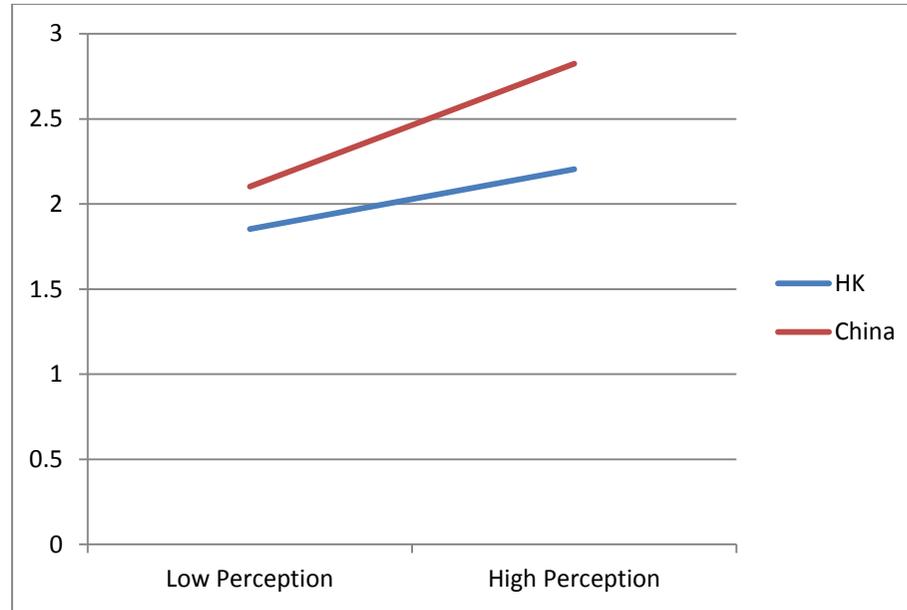
Standardized coefficients are reported.



Y – own cheating behaviour

X - Relationship goal of students

**Figure 1. Interactive effect of location and relationship goal of students on students' cheating behaviour**



Y – own cheating behaviour

X – Perceived cheating norms by students

**Figure 2. Interactive effect of location and perceived cheating norms on students' cheating behaviour**