

Research Article

Moral Development in University Education: Integrity Awareness, Social Responsibility, and Moral Behavioral Intention among Chinese University Students

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Abstract

This study examines how integrity awareness, social responsibility, and moral behavioral intention are related in the moral development of Chinese university students. Although universities commonly emphasize honesty, civic duty, and ethical conduct, students may not always translate moral understanding into readiness to act when they face academic pressure, peer influence, interpersonal concerns, or uncertainty about institutional support. Using a mixed-methods explanatory design, the study drew on survey data from 500 undergraduates in five universities in Eastern China and semi-structured interviews with 18 students. The quantitative findings indicate that integrity awareness positively predicts moral behavioral intention both directly and indirectly through social responsibility. The qualitative evidence further shows that peer norms, academic competition, interpersonal relations, institutional responsiveness, and social media-related academic practices influence whether students feel able to act on moral judgments. The study contributes to higher education management by showing that moral development depends not only on students' moral cognition but also on institutional conditions that activate responsibility and support ethical action. The findings suggest that universities should combine integrity governance, responsibility-based curriculum design, faculty modeling, experiential learning, transparent procedures, and digital ethics guidance to reduce the gap between moral knowledge and ethical intention.

Keywords

Integrity awareness, Social responsibility, Moral behavioral intention, Moral development, Chinese university students, Higher education management

1. Introduction

Moral development has become a central concern for contemporary universities because graduates are expected to demonstrate professional competence, civic responsibility, and ethical judgment. In the Chinese higher education context, this expectation is closely connected with the educational mission of cultivating morally grounded and socially responsible citizens. At the same time, the moral environment surrounding university students has become more complex. Academic pressure, employment uncertainty, social media, consumer culture, and peer comparison all influence how students interpret responsibility and make ethical decisions.

The central difficulty is not simply that students lack knowledge of moral norms. Many students can clearly recognize that plagiarism, cheating, falsifying information, online abuse, or indifference toward public responsibility is improper. The more difficult issue appears when moral understanding is tested by concrete circumstances. A student may understand that academic dishonesty damages fairness but still copy an assignment when deadlines, grades, or peer behavior create pressure. Another student who witnesses unethical conduct may disapprove of it but remain silent when intervention could damage friendship, trust, or group relations. These examples reveal a practical gap between moral cognition and moral behavioral intention.

This study addresses that gap by examining the relationship among integrity awareness, social responsibility, and moral behavioral intention among Chinese university students. The guiding question is how students' recognition of integrity becomes connected with their willingness to act ethically, and why social responsibility matters in this process. Rather than treating moral education as classroom instruction alone, the study approaches moral development as an educational management issue involving curriculum, institutional procedures, peer culture, faculty modeling, and student support systems.

The study makes three contributions. First, it links moral cognition and behavioral intention through the mediating role of social responsibility, thereby extending theories of moral development that distinguish moral knowledge from moral action. Second, it combines quantitative modeling with interview evidence to explain why students may hesitate to act ethically even when they recognize what is morally appropriate. Third, it translates the findings into implications for higher education management by showing how universities can design institutional conditions that make responsible action more realistic, visible, and protected.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

A substantial body of moral education scholarship indicates that ethical conduct is not produced by moral knowledge alone. Students may identify a moral issue correctly but still fail to act because of

weak motivation, social pressure, uncertainty, or limited confidence in institutional support. This distinction is important for higher education because universities often emphasize moral values through courses, policy statements, and disciplinary rules, while students experience moral choice through everyday academic and social situations.

Rest's four-component model provides a useful foundation for understanding this gap. In this model, moral action involves four connected components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation. Moral sensitivity refers to recognizing that a situation contains ethical implications. Moral judgment concerns deciding which action is morally appropriate. Moral motivation refers to giving priority to moral values when they compete with personal advantage, loyalty, convenience, or fear of social loss. Moral implementation concerns the practical ability and courage to carry out the chosen action. These components help explain why a student may know that dishonesty is wrong but still remain inactive when the situation involves friendship, grades, competition, or uncertainty.

Ajzen's theory of planned behavior also helps explain the formation of moral behavioral intention. According to this theory, intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In university life, these elements are closely connected. Students may personally value ethical behavior, but their intention to act may weaken if peer norms tolerate misconduct or if they believe that reporting or intervening will not be supported. Conversely, ethical intention becomes stronger when students believe that responsible action is valued by peers, teachers, and institutional procedures.

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement further explains why individuals may excuse unethical behavior while maintaining a positive self-image. Students may minimize harm, shift responsibility to external pressure, or describe dishonest behavior as an unavoidable response to academic competition (Bandura, 1999). These mechanisms are especially relevant in higher education settings where grades, scholarships, internships, and employment opportunities can create strong incentives. Moral education therefore needs to address not only rules but also the psychological and social processes that allow students to justify misconduct.

In this study, integrity awareness refers to students' recognition of honesty, fairness, rule observance, and trustworthiness in academic and social life. Social responsibility refers to students' perceived duty to consider the welfare of others, the university community, and wider society. Moral behavioral intention refers to students' readiness to choose ethical action when facing pressure, ambiguity, or competing values. Social responsibility is conceptualized as a motivational bridge between integrity awareness and moral behavioral intention. When integrity is understood not merely as personal correctness but also as responsibility to others, moral cognition is more likely to become action-oriented.

Previous discussions of academic integrity, digital ethics, and values education also support this framework. Academic integrity scholarship emphasizes that institutional culture, assessment design, and clear guidance influence student conduct (Bretag, 2016). Recent work on generative artificial intelligence has made this issue more urgent because students need to understand the boundary between acceptable academic assistance and dishonest substitution (Cotton et al., 2024; Perkins, 2023). Policy and international education discussions similarly emphasize the need to prepare learners for responsible participation in shared futures (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Participants

The study employed a mixed-methods explanatory design that included both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The quantitative phase surveyed 500 undergraduate students from five universities in Eastern China. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 18 students. The interview data were used to explain the statistical relationships and to explore students' own accounts of moral choice in university life.

The survey measured three constructs: integrity awareness, social responsibility, and moral behavioral intention. The questionnaire was designed to reflect the theoretical concepts discussed above and the higher education context in which students encounter academic, interpersonal, and digital ethical issues. The qualitative interviews further examined how students interpreted ethical dilemmas, peer pressure, institutional support, and the practical risks of taking moral action.

3.2. Measures

Integrity awareness was measured through items reflecting recognition of honesty, fairness, academic rules, trustworthiness, and respect for shared standards. A representative item was: "Academic honesty should be maintained even when dishonest behavior may bring short-term benefits." Higher scores indicated stronger recognition of integrity norms, while lower scores indicated weaker recognition or greater tolerance of rule violation.

Social responsibility was measured through items reflecting concern for classmates, the university community, and society. A representative item was: "When making decisions at university, I should consider how my behavior may affect others and the academic community." Higher scores indicated a stronger sense of obligation toward others, whereas lower scores indicated a more individualistic or self-protective orientation.

Moral behavioral intention was measured through items reflecting students' readiness to act ethically under pressure or ambiguity. A representative item was: "If I encounter academic misconduct,

I would be willing to respond in an appropriate and responsible way.” Higher scores indicated stronger readiness to choose ethical action, while lower scores indicated hesitation, avoidance, or uncertainty when moral action involved personal or relational cost.

The instrument was examined through reliability testing, validity examination, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. Because the present article focuses on the core explanatory pattern, detailed item-level information and score interpretation are summarized in Appendix A.

3.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed to examine the relationships among the three constructs and to test whether social responsibility mediated the link between integrity awareness and moral behavioral intention. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to estimate the direct, indirect, and total effects. The qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring explanations for why students may or may not act on their moral judgments.

4. Findings

The results showed a clear positive relationship among the three constructs. Integrity awareness positively predicted social responsibility, and social responsibility positively predicted moral behavioral intention. Integrity awareness also retained a direct positive effect on moral behavioral intention. The mediation analysis indicated that social responsibility partially mediated the link between integrity awareness and moral behavioral intention. Thus, moral cognition influenced ethical intention in two ways: directly through students’ own understanding of integrity and indirectly through a stronger sense of responsibility toward others and the university community.

The SEM results are presented in Table 1. The standardized path from integrity awareness to social responsibility was 0.58. The path from social responsibility to moral behavioral intention was 0.42. The direct path from integrity awareness to moral behavioral intention was 0.29. The indirect effect through social responsibility was 0.24, and the total effect was 0.53. These results are meaningful because they indicate that integrity awareness does not operate only as abstract moral knowledge. Its influence becomes stronger when students connect integrity with responsibility to peers, institutions, and society. Descriptive results suggested that students showed relatively clear recognition of integrity norms, while responsibility and behavioral readiness were less stable and more dependent on situational conditions.

Table 1

Summary of Core SEM Results

Path or effect	Standardized estimate	Interpretation
Integrity awareness -> Social responsibility	0.58	Significant positive effect
Social responsibility -> Moral behavioral intention	0.42	Significant positive effect
Integrity awareness -> Moral behavioral intention	0.29	Significant direct effect
Indirect effect through social responsibility	0.24	Partial mediation
Total effect	0.53	Strong overall influence

Note. IA = integrity awareness; SR = social responsibility; MBI = moral behavioral intention.

5. Qualitative Interpretation

The interview evidence helped explain why integrity awareness does not automatically lead to ethical intention. Five themes were especially important. The first theme concerned the tension between moral recognition and social pressure. Students usually understood what honesty or responsibility required, but they hesitated when ethical action might produce conflict, embarrassment, or disadvantage.

The second theme was the instability of responsibility under competitive pressure. When grades, credentials, awards, or employment opportunities were at stake, some students prioritized self-protection over responsibility to the academic community. This finding suggests that moral education must address competing values. Loyalty, friendship, and self-protection are not always negative values, but they may compete with honesty and integrity when students are placed in difficult social or academic situations.

The third theme involved peer norms and situational cues. Students were more willing to act ethically when they believed that classmates, teachers, and institutional rules supported similar standards. When misconduct seemed common or weakly regulated, moral intention weakened. The fourth theme concerned emotional and interpersonal considerations. Students considered friendship, trust, fear of isolation, and possible interpersonal consequences when deciding whether to intervene. The fifth theme was passive disapproval: many students privately rejected unethical behavior but did not act because they doubted whether their response would be effective or institutionally supported.

Together, these themes show that moral behavior is not merely a personal attribute. It is shaped by campus climate, assessment practice, peer culture, teacher example, and the perceived safety of ethical action. Social responsibility becomes stronger when students believe that responsible behavior

is realistic, valued, and supported by university structures.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Interpretation and Contribution

The findings support the view that moral education should be understood as a developmental and institutional process rather than as the transmission of moral knowledge alone. The positive path from integrity awareness to moral behavioral intention is consistent with theories that emphasize the importance of moral cognition. However, the mediating role of social responsibility extends this view by showing that moral cognition becomes more action-oriented when students feel accountable to others and to the wider academic community.

The results also align with Rest's four-component model. Integrity awareness is closely related to moral sensitivity and judgment, but behavioral intention depends on motivation and implementation as well. Social responsibility strengthens the motivational component by encouraging students to view ethical action as a duty to others rather than merely as personal compliance. The interview themes further show that implementation is influenced by peer norms, relational risk, and perceived institutional support. This explains why students may recognize misconduct but still avoid action.

The findings also extend the theory of planned behavior. Peer norms and institutional expectations shape subjective norms, while visible procedures and safe reporting channels influence perceived behavioral control. When students believe that ethical action is supported and protected, intention becomes stronger. In contrast, when students believe that action will produce interpersonal loss or institutional inaction, intention becomes weaker. The findings are also compatible with moral disengagement theory because academic pressure and competition can encourage students to rationalize misconduct or shift responsibility away from themselves.

6.2. Practical Implications for Higher Education Management

For higher education management, the central task is to align moral goals with institutional arrangements. If universities rely only on lectures about correct values, students may acquire moral vocabulary without developing stable moral agency. Integrity awareness must be connected with situations in which students practice responsibility. Case discussion, reflective writing, discipline-based professional ethics, service learning, peer mentoring, and participation in campus governance can help students experience responsibility as a lived practice rather than as an abstract ideal.

Academic integrity should also be treated as a developmental issue. Disciplinary rules remain necessary, especially for serious misconduct, but punishment alone cannot build internalized integrity. Universities should provide explicit guidance on plagiarism, citation, collaboration, data use, research

conduct, and AI-assisted writing. At the same time, students should learn not only specific prohibitions but also the broader principles of honesty, originality, transparency, fairness, and accountability. Principle-based education is important because new academic technologies and changing assessment practices will continue to create situations that cannot be fully covered by fixed rules.

The results further indicate that social responsibility should be embedded across curriculum, practice, and campus governance. Responsibility cannot be cultivated through slogans or isolated activities. It develops when students occupy meaningful roles, see teachers demonstrate fairness, and experience institutional procedures that are consistent and trustworthy. Faculty members are especially important because students often learn moral expectations through observation. If teachers assess fairly, cite sources properly, respect students, and respond responsibly to academic problems, students are more likely to view university moral expectations as credible.

Universities should also create visible structures for ethical consultation and problem-solving. Possible institutional programs include an honor code office, an ombudsman office, an academic integrity center, or an ethics center that provides guidance, handles reports, and supports students who face ethical uncertainty. Such structures can reduce the perceived risk of ethical action. Student affairs offices, academic departments, integrity bodies, counseling services, and community partners should coordinate prevention, guidance, intervention, and feedback rather than working separately.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from universities in Eastern China, so the findings should be interpreted within that regional and institutional context. Future studies could compare students across different provinces, institutional types, and academic disciplines. Second, the study focused on behavioral intention rather than directly observed ethical behavior. Future research could include longitudinal designs or behavioral indicators to examine whether moral intention leads to actual conduct over time. Third, the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence and digital learning environments requires further research on how students interpret originality, assistance, collaboration, and accountability in technology-mediated academic practice.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship among integrity awareness, social responsibility, and moral behavioral intention among Chinese university students. The central finding is that integrity awareness matters, but its influence becomes stronger when students develop social responsibility. Responsibility functions as a bridge that helps transform moral recognition into willingness to act. For higher education management, the implication is that moral development requires more than instruction,

warning, or punishment. Universities need coherent systems in which integrity is clearly defined, responsibility is practiced, ethical action is protected, and teachers serve as credible examples.

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Author contributions

The sole author was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualization, and project administration, and has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

No formal ethics approval number was issued for this study.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. (This manuscript contains no identifiable personal data in any form.)

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