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# Exploring Academic Misconduct in Graduate Students Using the Theory of Planned Behavior

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**Abstract:** The paper examined the utility of the theory of planned behavior for predicting graduate students' behavior of academic misconduct including fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. The models based on the theory of planned behavior proposed that graduate students' intention to engage in academic misconduct behavior might be influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavior control and moral obligation. A sample of 91 graduate students completed an online survey. With the exception of moral obligation, we found that attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavior control have significant impact on the graduate students' intention to perform academic misconduct behaviors in the form of fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. The results have given further support to the use of the extended version of the theory of planned behavior.

**Keywords:** the theory of planned behavior; graduate student; academic misconduct

## 1. Introduction

Integrity constitutes a core component of the Core Socialist Values, a traditional Chinese virtue, and a fundamental foundation for reducing social operating costs, building a harmonious society and realizing the Chinese Dream. Integrity carries distinct connotations and behavioral norms across different industries and fields. For graduate education-a vital segment of higher education-integrity governs students' conduct in academic learning and research. As the reserve force of China's scientific research workforce, graduate students' academic integrity bears far-reaching implications for the future development of the country's research sector. A large body of international research also confirms a strong correlation between academic misconduct during student years and unethical professional conduct later in life.

In recent years, extensive media coverage of graduate academic misconduct has drawn widespread attention from academia, universities and the general public. A Google search conducted on March 5, 2017 using the keywords "graduate student" and "academic misconduct" returned 2.05 million results, among which 42,200 were news articles. Against this backdrop, universities nationwide have formulated dedicated regulations to penalize graduate academic misconduct. At the national level, the Ministry of Education issued the Measures for the Prevention and Handling of Academic Misconduct in Institutions of Higher Education (Decree No. 40 of the Ministry of Education) on June 16, 2016. On September 25, 2019, the Ministry of Science and Technology jointly issued the Trial Rules for the Investigation and Handling of Scientific Research Breaches of Trust with 20 other central departments (Document No. Guoke Fajian (2019) 323). These rules were revised and reissued by the Ministry of Science and Technology together with 22 departments on August 25, 2022 as the Rules for the Investigation and Handling of Scientific Research Breaches of Trust (Document No.

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Guoke Fajian (2022) 221), which establish specific criteria for identifying and sanctioning academic misconduct.

Three categories of misconduct most relevant to graduate research are defined as follows: (1) plagiarism or appropriation of others' academic achievements; (2) falsification of others' research outcomes; (3) fabrication of research data, materials, literature or annotations, or fabrication of fictitious research findings. Empirical studies have verified the prominence of these three misconduct types. In a survey of 20 domestic senior professors conducted by Liu Zhibo and Kong Chuqian to identify influencing factors of graduate academic integrity crises, fabricating and altering survey/experimental data, followed by paper plagiarism, received the highest weighting among five categories of academic integrity violations [1]. International frameworks adopt analogous definitions: Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council classifies academic misconduct into fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (FFP). Accordingly, this study centers on two prevalent graduate academic integrity violations: falsification of survey/experimental data and plagiarism.

Research on graduate academic integrity aims to curb academic misconduct and foster sound academic ethics among graduate students through environmental, institutional and self-cultivation interventions. To achieve this goal, it is first necessary to uncover the root causes of academic dishonesty. Early scholarship attributed misconduct primarily to external environmental factors, such as prevailing social ethos, flawed evaluation systems, supervisor influences and inadequate moral education [2,3]. In recent years, scholars have shifted focus to graduate students' internal psychological mechanisms. For instance, Liu Yan, Kang Jianshan and Zhang Nan independently identified utilitarianism, herd mentality, anxiety and risk-taking as key psychological drivers of academic misconduct. Drawing on attribution theory, Zhang Nan further empirically verified that anxiety exerts the strongest causal influence, followed by utilitarian values and herd mentality [4,5]. However, these psychological factors remain fragmented and lack systematic integration, limiting their capacity to comprehensively explain academic misconduct.

Li Jianguo, Jia Yu and Guan Libing reviewed a decade of domestic research on graduate academic integrity and concluded that existing literature lacks depth and systematic rigor, relying heavily on experiential summaries with non-standard empirical designs [6]. Most existing questionnaires are self-developed with unvalidated reliability and validity, and empirical analyses adopt overly simplistic statistical methods. In contrast, foreign scholars predominantly adopt established theoretical frameworks to integrate diverse psychological factors for systematic analysis of academic integrity behavior, including General Strain Theory, Multidimensional Ethics Scale and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Among these, the TPB is the most widely applied, capable of explaining 33%–48% of variance across studies of health, social and economic behaviors.

While the TPB has been deployed in academic integrity research, international applications mostly target undergraduate populations and single types of academic dishonesty. Domestic studies have applied the TPB to classroom cheating, yet few empirical analyses address research misconduct specifically. Han Xiaobin and Liang Zhendong only qualitatively analyzed the drivers of academic misconduct based on the core psychological constructs of the TPB [7]. To the authors' knowledge, few published domestic or international empirical studies adopt the TPB to simultaneously examine both data falsification and plagiarism among graduate students.

Against this backdrop, this study constructs a reliable and valid measurement scale within the TPB framework to explore the internal psychological mechanisms underlying graduate students' intentions to commit data falsification and plagiarism. The findings provide a theoretical foundation for designing effective academic evaluation and governance systems. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 develops research hypotheses regarding interrelations between psychological factors shaping graduate academic misconduct intentions based on TPB logic; Section 3 details scale development and data collection procedures; Section 4 presents descriptive statistics

and hierarchical regression results quantifying the predictive power of each psychological factor on misconduct intentions; Section 5 discusses the analytical results, draws conclusions and proposes avenues for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Hypotheses**

Fishbein and Ajzen proposed the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) in 1975, which posits that an individual's behavioral intention is determined by their attitude toward the behavior and subjective norms surrounding it. The subsequent Theory of Planned Behavior extended the TRA by introducing a third predictor: perceived behavioral control. The TPB holds that behavioral intention—the degree of willingness to perform a given action—mediates the effects of three core constructs on actual behavior. Due to the strong correlation between intention and real behavior, this study uses misconduct intention as the dependent variable, defined as graduate students' willingness to falsify survey/experimental data or plagiarize academic papers.

### *2.1. Behavioral Attitude*

Behavioral attitude refers to an individual's evaluative preference for performing a specific action. Harding and Stone separately confirmed that behavioral attitude significantly predicts student academic misconduct. Storch sampled 244 undergraduates and identified a strong correlation between attitudes toward academic dishonesty and actual misconduct. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Hypothesis 1a: Graduate students' attitudes toward falsifying survey/experimental data exert a significant positive effect on their intention to engage in such behavior.
- Hypothesis 1b: Graduate students' attitudes toward paper plagiarism exert a significant positive effect on their intention to engage in such behavior.

### *2.2. Subjective Norm*

Subjective norm captures the perceived social pressure to perform or avoid a behavior, shaped by the opinions of salient referents such as family members and close peers. Iyer and Eastman found that students with heightened perceived social expectations exhibit stronger moral restraint against academic misconduct. Rajah-Kanagasabai and Roberts also identified a significant correlation between subjective norms and academic misconduct intentions among university students. Thus:

- Hypothesis 2a: Subjective norms regarding data falsification significantly predict graduate students' intention to falsify survey/experimental data.
- Hypothesis 2b: Subjective norms regarding plagiarism significantly predict graduate students' intention to plagiarize papers.

### *2.3. Perceived Behavioral Control*

Perceived behavioral control reflects individuals' perceptions of how easy or difficult it is to perform a behavior, informed by past experience and anticipated barriers. Stone's empirical research validated perceived behavioral control as a robust predictor of student cheating, a result replicated by Rajah-Kanagasabai and Roberts. Conversely, Harding found no significant association between perceived behavioral control and academic misconduct intention or behavior. To resolve this inconsistency within the graduate student context, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- Hypothesis 3a: Perceived behavioral control over data falsification significantly predicts graduate students' intention to falsify survey/experimental data.
- Hypothesis 3b: Perceived behavioral control over plagiarism significantly predicts graduate students' intention to plagiarize papers.

### *2.4. Moral Obligation*

Prior academic misconduct research has incorporated moral obligation as an extended TPB construct, which measures an internal moral drive to accept or reject unethical conduct. This study tests its predictive capacity for graduate academic misconduct intentions:

- Hypothesis 4a: Moral obligation regarding data falsification significantly predicts graduate students' intention to falsify survey/experimental data.
- Hypothesis 4b: Moral obligation regarding plagiarism significantly predicts graduate students' intention to plagiarize papers.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Scale Development

Drawing on Ajzen's formal definitions of TPB constructs, measurement items were adapted from validated questionnaires developed by Alleyne, Stone, Rajah-Kanagasabai and other scholars. The survey instrument consists of two sections: Section 1 collects demographic information including gender, age and discipline; Section 2 contains Likert 5-point scale items measuring the latent variables outlined in the hypotheses: misconduct intention, behavioral attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and moral obligation.

##### 3.1.1. Measurement of Behavioral Intention (Example: Data Falsification)

Three items measure intention to alter survey/experimental data:

1. Given the opportunity, I would not mind modifying individual survey or experimental data points.
2. I would never alter any data from surveys or experiments.
3. In my future research, I might modify individual survey or experimental data points.

Response options range from "Extremely Likely" to "Extremely Unlikely." Item scoring was reverse-coded where necessary to ensure higher values represent greater academic integrity and lower values represent willingness to commit misconduct. Scale reliability was assessed via Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient; construct validity was tested through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The Test of Reliability and Validity

| Latent Variable              | Principal Component Factor Analysis           |            | Cronbach alphas |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------|
|                              | Variance Explained by Principal Component (%) | Eigenvalue |                 |
|                              | Data Falsification Constructs                 |            |                 |
| Behavioral Intention         | 70.73                                         | 2.12       | 0.78            |
| Behavioral Attitude          | 79.61                                         | 2.39       | 0.86            |
| Subjective Norm              | 73.50                                         | 2.21       | 0.79            |
| Perceived Behavioral Control | 72.66                                         | 1.45       | 0.61            |
| Moral Obligation             | 71.30                                         | 2.14       | 0.77            |
| Plagiarism Constructs        |                                               |            |                 |
| Behavioral Intention         | 84.32                                         | 2.53       | 0.89            |
| Behavioral Attitude          | 65.52                                         | 1.97       | 0.70            |
| Subjective Norm              | 78.46                                         | 2.35       | 0.85            |
| Perceived Behavioral Control | 71.24                                         | 2.14       | 0.79            |
| Moral Obligation             | 76.60                                         | 2.30       | 0.81            |

##### 3.1.2. Measurement of Behavioral Attitude (Example: Data Falsification)

Respondents evaluated the statement "Modifying individual survey or experimental data is..." across three semantic differential pairs:

1. Trivial / Severely Unacceptable
2. Irrelevant / Highly Unethical
3. Harmless to research rigor / Gravely undermines research rigor

Higher scores reflect negative evaluations of data falsification (pro-integrity attitudes). All three items passed reliability and validity screening and were retained.

##### 3.1.3. Measurement of Subjective Norm (Example: Data Falsification)

Unique to graduate student contexts, salient referents include supervisors alongside parents and close peers:

1. If I altered survey/experimental data, my supervisor would view this act as...
2. My parents' attitude toward me altering survey/experimental data is...
3. If I altered survey/experimental data, my closest classmates/friends would hold a low opinion of me.

Lower scores correspond to "No concern at all" / "Completely impossible"; higher scores correspond to "Strongly oppose" / "Highly probable." All three items were retained following validity and reliability checks.

### 3.2. *Measurement of Perceived Behavioral Control*

#### 3.2.1. Data Falsification

Three original items were developed:

1. Altering survey or experimental data would be...
2. If I wished to, I could easily modify survey or experimental data.
3. Even if my survey/experimental data contain flaws, I would refuse to alter them.

Factor loading analysis eliminated the third item due to a loading value of only 0.46 (below the 0.5 threshold for acceptable convergent validity).

#### 3.2.2. Plagiarism

All three perceived behavioral control items for plagiarism met reliability and validity criteria and were retained.

#### 3.2.3. Measurement of Moral Obligation (Example: Data Falsification)

1. Altering survey/experimental data would make me feel guilty.
2. Altering survey/experimental data violates my personal moral standards.
3. I believe altering survey/experimental data is entirely wrong.

Lower scores represent "No guilt whatsoever" / "No moral violation" / "Not wrong at all"; higher scores represent "Extreme guilt" / "Absolute moral violation" / "Completely unethical." All three items were retained.

Validity testing confirmed that all principal components extracted had eigenvalues greater than 1, with most constructs explaining over 60% of total variance. CFA revealed all item factor loadings exceeded 0.5 with z-values > 2, establishing satisfactory construct validity. For reliability, all Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values surpassed 0.7 except for perceived behavioral control in the data falsification model ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ). While Nunnally recommends  $\alpha \geq 0.7$  for robust internal consistency, Cortina and Rhodes note that shorter multi-item scales can demonstrate acceptable reliability with  $\alpha$  values near 0.5. The scale was therefore deemed psychometrically adequate for analysis.

### 3.3. *Survey Administration*

Data collection spanned one week, March 1–7, 2021. Participants were graduate students at Jiangsu University, recruited via an online web-based questionnaire link distributed across campus research groups. A pilot survey was conducted within the research team to revise ambiguous items prior to full-scale distribution. A total of 105 questionnaires were collected; 14 incomplete or ineligible responses (from non-graduate respondents) were excluded, yielding 91 valid responses with an effective response rate of 86.67%.

Respondents completed the survey anonymously, with clear preamble explanations of research objectives. The questionnaire contained 34 items: 4 demographic questions followed by 30 Likert-scale measurement items. Average completion time was 178 seconds (variance = 102 seconds), equating to an average of 5.24 seconds per item, indicating reasonable response quality.

Sample demographics:

- Gender: 16 male (17.58%), 75 female (82.42%)
- Mean age: 24.57 years (variance = 2.32)
- Discipline: 93.41% humanities/social sciences, remainder STEM
- Degree stage: 86.81% master's students, remainder doctoral students

## 4. Empirical Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents means, variances and Pearson correlation coefficients for all latent variables across the two misconduct categories.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics

| Variable                           | Mean | Variance | Behavioral<br>Intention | Behavioral<br>Attitude | Subjective<br>Norm | Perceived<br>Behavioral<br>Control | Moral<br>Obligation |
|------------------------------------|------|----------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Data Falsification                 |      |          |                         |                        |                    |                                    |                     |
| Behavioral<br>Intention            | 4.17 | 0.91     | 1.00                    |                        |                    |                                    |                     |
| Behavioral<br>Attitude             | 4.41 | 0.73     | 0.64**                  | 1.00                   |                    |                                    |                     |
| Subjective<br>Norm                 | 4.41 | 0.74     | 0.71**                  | 0.62**                 | 1.00               |                                    |                     |
| Perceived<br>Behavioral<br>Control | 4.08 | 0.91     | 0.63**                  | 0.45**                 | 0.58**             | 1.00                               |                     |
| Moral<br>Obligation                | 4.49 | 0.64     | 0.64**                  | 0.70**                 | 0.70**             | 0.52**                             | 1.00                |
| Plagiarism                         |      |          |                         |                        |                    |                                    |                     |
| Behavioral<br>Intention            | 4.48 | 0.78     | 1.00                    |                        |                    |                                    |                     |
| Behavioral<br>Attitude             | 4.54 | 0.63     | 0.71**                  | 1.00                   |                    |                                    |                     |
| Subjective<br>Norm                 | 4.59 | 0.59     | 0.76**                  | 0.76**                 | 1.00               |                                    |                     |
| Perceived<br>Behavioral<br>Control | 3.90 | 0.96     | 0.52**                  | 0.38**                 | 0.39**             | 1.00                               |                     |
| Moral<br>Obligation                | 4.57 | 0.65     | 0.68**                  | 0.71**                 | 0.72**             | 0.32*                              | 1.00                |

p < 0.01; \*\* p < 0.001

All Likert scale values range from 1 to 5, with higher scores representing stronger pro-integrity intentions and attitudes. Mean intention scores for both misconduct types exceed 4; plagiarism intention (M = 4.48) is higher than data falsification intention (M = 4.17), demonstrating that participants report stronger aversion to plagiarism. Excluding perceived behavioral control, all latent variable means for plagiarism are higher than those for data falsification, indicating graduate students maintain stricter psychological safeguards against plagiarism.

Perceived behavioral control measures the perceived ease of committing misconduct: plagiarism is perceived as operationally simpler (lower mean score = easier to perform), while altering survey/experimental data is viewed as relatively harder. For data falsification, moral obligation carries the highest mean score, suggesting internal self-morality acts as the primary restraint. For plagiarism, subjective norm yields the highest mean, meaning external social expectations constitute the dominant constraint against copying.

Nearly all inter-variable correlations are strong and statistically significant. The weakest correlation appears between perceived behavioral control and moral obligation for plagiarism (r = 0.32), consistent with theoretical logic: perceived behavioral control reflects practical technical feasibility (objective dimension), while moral obligation reflects internal ethical judgment (subjective dimension). Across both misconduct categories,

subjective norm correlates most strongly with behavioral intention, likely a product of sustained national media, institutional and governmental emphasis on academic integrity in China-creating powerful social normative pressure on graduate students. This finding diverges from Carpenter's international research, which identified behavioral attitude as the primary predictor of misconduct intentions, a discrepancy attributable to cross-cultural differences in social ethical norms.

#### 4.2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression was deployed to test the predictive power of behavioral attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and moral obligation on misconduct intentions, sequentially validating the TRA and baseline TPB frameworks. All regression models passed multicollinearity diagnostics. Regression steps were structured as follows: (As shown in Table 3).

1. Step 1 (TRA): Enter behavioral attitude and subjective norm
2. Step 2 (Baseline TPB): Add perceived behavioral control
3. Step 3 (Extended TPB): Add moral obligation

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Regression Analyses

| Predictor Variable                                    | Data Falsification Intention |      |                |              | Plagiarism Intention |      |                |              |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|------|----------------|--------------|
|                                                       | $\beta$                      | t    | R <sup>2</sup> | $\Delta R^2$ | $\beta$              | t    | R <sup>2</sup> | $\Delta R^2$ |
| Step 1: Theory of Reasoned Action                     |                              |      |                |              |                      |      |                |              |
| Behavioral Attitude                                   | 0.42**                       | 3.77 |                |              | 0.38*                | 3.08 |                |              |
| Subjective Norm                                       | 0.61**                       | 5.58 | 0.568          |              | 0.70**               | 5.26 | 0.623          |              |
| Step 2: Baseline TPB (+ Perceived Behavioral Control) |                              |      |                |              |                      |      |                |              |
| Behavioral Attitude                                   | 0.37*                        | 3.49 |                |              | 0.33*                | 2.77 |                |              |
| Subjective Norm                                       | 0.44**                       | 3.82 |                |              | 0.62**               | 4.90 |                |              |
| Perceived Behavioral Control                          | 0.28*                        | 3.48 | 0.621          | 0.053*       | 0.19*                | 3.48 | 0.669          | 0.046*       |
| Step 3: Extended TPB (+ Moral Obligation)             |                              |      |                |              |                      |      |                |              |
| Behavioral Attitude                                   | 0.33*                        | 2.74 |                |              | 0.24                 | 1.93 |                |              |
| Subjective Norm                                       | 0.40*                        | 3.21 |                |              | 0.52**               | 3.82 |                |              |
| Perceived Behavioral Control                          | 0.27*                        | 3.33 |                |              | 0.19*                | 3.51 |                |              |
| Moral Obligation                                      | 0.11                         | 0.72 | 0.623          | 0.002        | 0.22                 | 1.97 | 0.683          | 0.014        |

P < 0.01; \*\* p < 0.001

Step 1 TRA models explain 56.8% of variance in data falsification intention and 62.3% of variance in plagiarism intention. Incorporating perceived behavioral control in Step 2 significantly improves model explanatory power ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.053$  and  $0.046$  respectively), raising total explained variance to 62.1% and 66.9%. All three baseline TPB constructs (attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control) exert statistically significant effects on both misconduct intentions, fully verifying Hypotheses 1–3.

The incremental contribution of moral obligation in Step 3 differs sharply across the two misconduct models. For data falsification intention, adding moral obligation only marginally increases  $R^2$  ( $0.621 \rightarrow 0.623$ ), reduces adjusted  $R^2$ , and yields a non-significant regression coefficient ( $t = 0.72$ ). For plagiarism intention, moral obligation modestly boosts  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  with a borderline significant t-statistic of 1.97, delivering minor incremental explanatory value. Hypothesis 4 is therefore rejected for both misconduct types.

While moral obligation exhibits strong zero-order correlations with misconduct intention in bivariate analysis, it loses predictive significance when combined with the other three TPB constructs. Multicollinearity testing ruled out severe variance inflation as an explanation. Conceptual overlap between subjective norm (external social moral expectations) and moral obligation (internal personal moral standards) likely accounts for this result: the two constructs capture overlapping ethical judgment mechanisms, diluting moral obligation's unique predictive contribution in multivariate regression.

## 5. Conclusions

This study applies the Theory of Planned Behavior to systematically analyze graduate academic misconduct, examining how behavioral attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and moral obligation shape intentions to falsify research data and plagiarize academic works. Correlation analysis confirms strong interrelations between all psychological constructs; subjective norm displays the strongest correlation with misconduct intention, indicating external social pressure and institutional expectations serve as the dominant deterrent against graduate academic dishonesty. Sustained public advocacy and institutional oversight of academic integrity are therefore critical to curbing misconduct.

Perceived behavioral control scores are comparatively low across both misconduct categories, meaning graduate students perceive data falsification and plagiarism as practically easy to execute. This underscores the need for institutional mechanisms that raise the opportunity cost of academic misconduct, including stricter paper screening, data auditing and punitive accountability systems. The baseline TPB framework demonstrates robust explanatory power for both forms of academic misconduct, explaining over 60% of variance in behavioral intentions. This represents one of the first theory-driven empirical analyses of graduate academic misconduct in domestic Chinese scholarship.

Although moral obligation fails to significantly enhance TPB predictive power in this sample, future extensions to the TPB can address this limitation. Prior ethical behavior research has split the broad subjective norm construct into injunctive and descriptive norms to separately model internal self-ethics and external social standards, which may substitute for standalone moral obligation measures. Additionally, habitual academic conduct (both ethical and unethical) exerts long-term behavioral inertia unaccounted for in the baseline TPB. Subsequent research may integrate descriptive norms and behavioral habit variables into an extended TPB model to further improve explanatory capacity for graduate academic integrity conduct.

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