

## **The relationship between emotional intelligence, maximizing tendencies and business students' perceptions of cheating**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cheating in college is a serious and increasing phenomenon. Cheating among business students is even more concerning. Significant research investigated the psychological determinants of cheating. The current study investigates emotional intelligence and maximizing tendencies as potentially related to cheating ethics perception among business students. A sample of undergraduate business students in a large university was surveyed. The results indicate that students who are more emotionally intelligent and those scoring high on maximizing tendencies perceived cheating actions as more unethical compared to other students. Several demographic differences also appeared.

Keywords: College cheating, emotional intelligence, maximizing tendencies.



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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of college cheating is very concerning to educators, administrators and employers. Widespread cheating hurts non-cheaters who find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, and such behavior reduces the value of the college degree and negatively reflects on the integrity of the academic institution (McCabe et al. 2006). Some studies show widespread cheating among college students (e.g. Yardley et al. 2009). In Colleges of Business, the situation may even be more serious. Nonis and Swift (2001) found that business students who cheat in college were more likely to cheat in the workplace compared to non-cheaters. This serious development led to increased research on college cheating, and especially in Colleges of Business.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate two psychological determinants of cheating perception among business students: Emotional Intelligence and Maximizing/satisficing. Emotional intelligence has been introduced in the psychology literature as a positive trait that allows a person to identify and understand their feelings and appropriately take action based on this understanding (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Maximizing tendencies refer to an individual's willingness to expend significant effort to achieve their high-standard goals compared to satisficing tendencies that allow someone to expend minimum effort to achieve good-enough goals (Schwartz et al. 2002).

Using a sample of undergraduate business students, the study examines these psychological variables as potentially related to ethical perception of different types of cheating actions.

The article is organized as follows: Following this introduction is a discussion of the prevalence of cheating as well as emotional intelligence and maximizing/satisficing tendencies. This is followed by an explanation of the sample and research measures used in the study. Results are presented along with conclusions and implications for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Business Students and Cheating

Significant education research has investigated the incident of college cheating. Studies have reported that college cheating is a widespread problem. Davis et al. (1992) reported that approximately 75% of students admitted to cheating at least once in high school or college. A more recent study by Burton et al. (2011) showed that almost 86% of alumni admitted to cheating at least once during their college years. This increasing rate of cheating is even more alarming when a recent study by Bernardi et al. (2016) showed that only 64% of students viewed college cheating as unethical. In Colleges of Business, instructors and employers have raised particular concern over business students' cheating perception and behavior. Research by Burton and Near (1995) considered academic dishonesty among business students to be the equivalent of business and/or organizational wrongdoing. The authors argued that cheating on a paper was the equivalent of misreporting time worked and plagiarism being the equivalent of exchanging forged reports for a promotion. Nonis and Swift (2001) confirmed that college cheating was a strong predictor of workplace cheating. Unfortunately, research also found that business students tended to have lower ethical standards and therefore a higher tolerance for cheating compared to non-business students (Lau and Haug 2011). Surprisingly, research showed that 31% of faculty

did not know their institution's mechanism for reporting students suspected of cheating (Blau et al. 2017). These alarming findings encouraged researchers to understand the phenomenon of college students' cheating, particularly among business students.

Green (2004, 140) defined college cheating as "a rule-breaking behavior associated with the intention of gaining an unfair advantage over a party or parties with whom the cheater has a norm governed relationship". Studies have examined the situational, contextual, demographic and psychological factors affecting the decision to cheat. Situational factors such as large class sizes and the prevalence of cheating among other students increased an individual's likelihood of cheating (O'Rourke et al. 2010). Rawwas et al. (2004) found that the opportunity to cheat was the largest determinant of the likelihood of cheating. Popoola et al. (2017) found that students were less likely to cheat if they studied their university's honor code and internalized it. Contextual factors included the perception that in-class cheating was more unethical than outside-class cheating (Elias, 2017). Recently, cheating has evolved from copying homework to more sophisticated schemes involving texting and purchasing online solutions manuals and testbanks (Liebler, 2012). The proliferation of online classes has also led to the increased likelihood of cheating. Malesky et al. (2016) found websites promising an online student a grade of A by having someone take the class in exchange for a payment. Demographic factors also received extensive attention in research on college cheating. Olafson et al. (2013) found that non-cheaters are typically older students, females and have higher GPAs. Demographic factors affecting cheating are not tested in the current study and are the subject of a more detailed ongoing separate study.

### **Psychological Factors Related to Cheating**

In order to understand college cheating and minimize it, researchers have paid attention to the potential effects of psychological factors on cheating. Specifically, they investigated whether individual differences among students affect their perception of cheating ethics. Davis and Ludvingson (1995) argued that stress and family pressure were important determinants of cheating. Rettinger and Jordan (2005) found that religiosity had a positive effect on the likelihood of cheating. Martin (2011) concluded that students scoring high on individualism were more likely to cheat compared to those scoring high on collectivism. Bloodgood et al. (2010) found that students scoring high on Machiavellianism were more accepting of cheating compared to other students. Elias (2017) found that academic entitlement was an important determinant of cheating where more entitled students viewed cheating actions as less unethical compared to other students. In a recent study, Rettinger (2017) theorized that students who decide to cheat do so based on their perceptions of the social acceptability of cheating and their self-perception as a person of integrity. The author introduced the concept of neutralization where cheating students neutralized their moral injunction against cheating.

The current study extends the existing literature on the psychological determinants of cheating by examining two factors; Emotional Intelligence and a Maximizing attitude as potentially related to the ethical perception of cheating.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

The concept of emotional intelligence has received considerable attention in the literature in the last decades. Trait emotional intelligence was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer

(1990, 189) as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions”. It represents a distinct personality characteristic, with those possessing it gaining a significant competitive advantage in college, employment and life in general. Mayer et al. (1999) focused on it as a skill that can be developed through learning and experience. They defined it as “the ability to recognize the meaning of emotions and to reason and problem-solve based on their relationships” (Mayer et al. 1999, 271). Having emotional intelligence is an advantage in romantic relationships (Goleman, 1995). It also promotes a positive body image (Swami et al. 2010), facial processing (Castro-Schilo and Kee, 2010) and results in higher income levels and socioeconomic status (Cote et al. 2010). Ciarrochi et al. (2000) found that emotional intelligence was positively correlated with life satisfaction. In the workplace, emotional intelligence was positively related to salary levels, especially at the highest organizational levels (Rode et al. 2017). The authors concluded that emotional intelligence helps individuals acquire the social capital needed for success in their career.

At the college level, emotional intelligence has been extensively studied and found to have positive consequences for college students. Extremera and Fernandez-Berrocal (2006) found that emotional intelligence was positively related to better health among college students. Mikolajczak et al. (2009) related it to less stress and mood deterioration in college. Significant research found that emotional intelligence was a good predictor of college GPA and academic achievement (Parker et al. 2004), academic performance (Perera and DiGiacomo, 2013) and writing achievement (Shao et al. 2013). Garg et al. (2016) found that emotional intelligence was significantly associated with freshmen adjustment to the university.

The current study is the first to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and cheating perception. Perera and DiGiacomo (2015) argued that students scoring high on emotional intelligence minimize the negative effects of negative emotions in stressful academic settings. These negative emotions can include the temptation to cheat. Perera and DiGiacomo (2013) also posited that individuals scoring high on emotional intelligence have a dispositional tendency towards self-control, which may serve as an adaptive mechanism to achieve academic goals. Since cheating is inconsistent with self-control, the following hypothesis is tested:  
H1: Students scoring high on emotional intelligence will view cheating actions as more unethical compared to those scoring low.

Very limited research has examined differences in emotional intelligence based on demographic factors. Sierra et al. (2013) found that female students in Spain had higher emotional intelligence than males. The current study extends this area of research by examining if emotional intelligence is different based on demographic factors such as gender, age, class grade and major. The relationship between emotional intelligence and overall GPA is also examined.

### **Maximizing/Satisficing Tendency**

Simon (1955) introduced the concepts of maximizing and satisficing. He argued that some people, due to abilities or limitless options, can not make the best possible decisions in the way posited by economic theory. He termed those individuals “satisficers” as compared to “maximizers”. Schwartz et al. (2002) refined this concept and defined maximizers as those who strive to make the best choice and expend substantial effort for the best option. On the other hand, satisficers strive to make choices that meet their standards and expend less effort for a

good-enough option without necessarily being the best (Schwartz et al., 2002). Ma and Roesse (2014) explained that maximizers tended to compare their achievements to others and were determined to be the best. Luan et al. (2018) found that maximizers prefer a high-value and effort-consuming option for themselves and for others. However, satisficers preferred this option for others but not for themselves.

Significant research investigated the consequences of these personality traits in the workplace and in college. Maximizers tend to be more prone to regret (Moyanno-Diaz et al. 2013), more perfectionist (Chang et al. 2011), less optimistic (Schwartz et al. 2002) and greedier (Seuntjens et al. 2015). Maximizers were also found to be less open and happy (Purvis et al. 2011) and had lower life satisfaction (Chang et al. 2011). Ma and Roesse (2014) also found that maximizers were more likely than satisficers to return and switch products. Cheek and Schwartz (2016) concluded that maximizers undermine their own well-being by constantly striving to make the best choice.

In a college setting, maximizing was highly regarded. Stohs (2016) found that satisficing students were content with getting Cs to earn their degree, while maximizers aimed for the highest possible GPA. Satisficers earned 65% of the failing grades but only 12% of the high grades (Stohs, 2016). The author noted that some faculty argue that satisficers should not be in college and indeed many selective universities screen-out the satisficers. Iyengar et al. (2006) found that maximizers had more success in their job hunts and achieved a higher mean salary compared to satisficers.

The current study examines the concept of maximizing/satisficing in the context of college cheating. No research has examined this relationship. However, a theory can be developed based on previous research. Lai (2010) found a significant positive correlation between maximizing and risk aversion. Therefore, it can be assumed that maximizers will not take the risk of getting caught cheating. However, since satisficers expend less effort to achieve their minimum goals, they might be more likely to cheat. The current study only tests the ethical perception of cheating and not the actual behavior. The following hypothesis is tested:  
H2: Business students scoring high on maximizing tendencies will perceive cheating actions as more unethical compared to satisficers.

Limited research examined the demographics associated with maximizing tendencies and Stohs (2016) found no difference between males and females in satisficing tendencies. The current study examines gender, age, class grade and major as potentially related to maximizing/satisficing tendencies among business students.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Sample Selection**

The sample for this study consisted of undergraduate business students at a large AACSB-accredited university on the West Coast. A questionnaire was developed containing the measurement scales. It was administered in a variety of business classes to junior and senior students during class time. Upper-level students were chosen in order to allow them enough time to adjust to the university setting. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete and anonymity as guaranteed. A useable sample of 370 students was obtained. A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix.

## Survey Measures

Several measures were used in this study. In order to test cheating ethical perception, the instrument developed by Simha et al. (2012) was used. Previous research discovered differences in the ethical perception of cheating based on the context of cheating (i.e. in-class and outside-class) (Rawaas et al. 2004). Simha et al. (2012) developed 16 statements that present students with cheating actions in class (10 statements) and outside class (6 statements). Each respondent records their perception of the ethics of each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (highly ethical) to 7 (highly unethical). The survey yields two factors (in-class cheating and outside-class cheating) and a total score. Elias (2017) used this questionnaire and found that students perceived in-class cheating actions as more unethical than outside-class cheating actions.

Emotional intelligence was measured using the instrument developed by Wong and Law (2002). It measures trait emotional intelligence which is a lasting construct showing how a person uses their understanding of their emotions to make decisions (Wong and Law, 2002). The questionnaire consisted of 16 statements with each respondent recording their agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The survey yielded four factors. They comprise four dimensions: Self-emotion appraisal (the ability of someone to understand their own emotions), others' emotion appraisal (the ability to understand others' emotions), use of emotion (the ability of someone to set goals and self-motivate based on their emotions), and regulation of emotions (the ability to control one's temper and personal emotions). A total score for emotional intelligence is also obtained. The survey exhibited high internal consistencies for each factor ranging from .74 to .82 (Wong and Law, 2002). In the current study factor analysis was conducted and four distinct factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1. The questionnaire has been used globally in more than 15 countries with high reliability (Libbrecht et al. 2014).

Maximizing tendencies were measured using the instrument developed by Lai (2010). Significant research used the instrument developed by Schwartz et al. (2002) that measured maximizing/satisficing. Diab et al. (2008) criticized its factorial structure and argued that the maximizing scale should be one-dimensional and internally consistent. Lai (2010) developed a questionnaire that combined items from Schwartz et al. (2002) and Diab et al. (2008). The statements refer to high standards in decision-making but avoid the decision difficulty originally developed by Schwartz et al. (2002) and later criticized by other researchers. Lai's (2010) questionnaire consisted of five statements and yielded only one maximizing score. Each respondent recorded their agreement with each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher maximizing tendencies. The questionnaire had a reliability of .90. Lai (2010) reported that the measure was strongly positively correlated with desire for consistency, risk aversion, self-efficacy and need for cognition.

## STUDY'S RESULTS

The first step in data analysis is to calculate means and standard deviations for all variables. These values are reported in Table 1 (Appendix). The results showed that in-class cheating was viewed as more unethical than outside-class cheating and the total cheating score of 6.04 indicates that business students viewed the cheating actions as very unethical. Regarding

emotional intelligence, students scored the highest on the use of emotion in decision-making (mean of 5.70) and the lowest on the regulation of emotion (mean of 5.27). Overall emotional intelligence had a mean of 5.5 indicating that students were moderately emotionally intelligent. Regarding maximizing, students scored a mean of 5.5 also indicating a moderately high maximization tendency.

Table 1 also contains an analysis of the statistically significant demographic factors affecting emotional intelligence and maximizing tendencies among business students. In general, female business students scored higher on emotional intelligence compared to male students and also higher on maximizing tendencies compared to male students. Older (25 years of age or more) students scored higher on emotional intelligence and maximizing tendencies compared to younger students. No other demographic factors reached statistical significance.

In order to test H1 regarding emotional intelligence and cheating ethical perception, correlation analysis was used. Table 2 (Appendix) reports the correlation results. There was a strong positive relationship between each factor of emotional intelligence (except self emotion) and cheating ethical perception as well as a strong relationship between total emotional intelligence and cheating ethical perception. Generally, students who were more emotionally intelligent were more likely to perceive cheating actions as unethical compared to others with less emotional intelligence. H1 is therefore supported.

Regarding maximizing tendencies, there was a strong positive correlation between maximizing tendencies and cheating ethical perception. That indicates that maximizers viewed the cheating actions as more unethical compared to satisficers. H2 is therefore supported.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study extended the literature on cheating in college by relating two psychological variables to the perception of cheating ethics among business students: Emotional Intelligence and Maximization. The results showed that students with higher emotional intelligence were more likely to perceive cheating actions as unethical compared to less emotionally intelligent students. Although the study's design does not imply causation the results point to the importance of instructors focusing on students' emotional intelligence, especially younger students and males. Higher emotional intelligence has been linked to many positive consequences (Schwartz et al. 2002). In this study, such students perceived cheating as highly unethical, which is the first step in the actual behavior of cheating avoidance. It appears that such students are able to recognize their emotions and apply self-control in a cheating context.

The study also found that maximizers perceived cheating actions as more unethical than satisficers. The literature generally found negative consequences of maximization. The current study finds a positive consequence of maximization. Previous research found that maximizers were very risk averse (Lai, 2010). Cheating is a risky activity and the penalties can be substantial. It is possible that these students recognized this fact and found cheating to be inconsistent with achieving their goals and high standards. On the other hand, satisficers attempt to reach good-enough goals and may think about cheating as an easy way to achieve these goals.

The study is the first to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, maximization and ethics. It is interesting to replicate this study in the workplace to determine if questionable workplace actions are also related to these psychological variables. The study's results should be interpreted in light of the following limitation: It was conducted in a large urban university on the West Coast. Many students have low-socioeconomic status and are first-

generation in their families to attend college. The results may or may not be generalizable to students in other institutions. The effect of such factors on emotional intelligence and maximization is also an interesting direction for future research.

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Demographic Differences (N=370)**

<b>Panel A: Means and Standard Deviations</b>					
	<u>Mean (SD)</u>				
In Class Cheating	6.34 (.91)				
Out of Class Cheating	5.85 (.80)				
Total Cheating Ethics	6.04 (.79)				
Self Emotion Appraisal	5.59 (1.19)				
Others' Emotion Appraisal	5.44 (1.08)				
Use of Emotion	5.70 (1.08)				
Regulation of Emotion	5.27 (1.29)				
Total Emotional Intelligence	5.50 (.87)				
Maximizing Tendency	5.50 (.87)				
<p>Ethics Scales: 1 = Highly Ethics and 7 = Highly Unethical            All other Scales: 1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree            Higher values indicate higher emotional intelligence            Higher values indicate higher maximizing tendency</p>					
<b>Panel B: Demographics and Emotional Intelligence</b>					
	Self Emotion	Others' Emotion	Use of Emotion	Regulation of Emotion	Total Emotion
<u>Gender</u>					
Male		5.26***	5.54***		5.38***
Female		5.62***	5.86***		5.62***
<u>Age</u>					
< 25 years	5.46***	5.35**	5.63*		5.41***
25 or >	5.86***	5.63**	5.84*		5.69***
<b>Panel C: Demographics and Maximizing Tendencies</b>					
	Maximizing				
<u>Gender</u>					
Male	5.38***				
Female	5.62***				
<u>Age</u>					
< 25 years	5.41***				
25 years or >	5.69***				
<b>*** p&lt;.01; ** p&lt;.05; * p&lt;.10</b>					

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlation between Cheating Ethics, Emotional Intelligence and Maximizing Tendency**

	In-class Cheating	Outside-Class Cheating	Total Cheating
Self Emotion		.11**	.09**
Others' Emotion	.12***	.17***	.16***
Use of Emotion	.16***	.22***	.21***
Regulation of Emotion	.12***	.16***	.15***
Total Emotional Intelligence	.16***	.22***	.21***
Maximizing Tendency	.16***	.22***	.21***

\*\*\* p<.01; \*\* p<.05

**STUDY'S SURVEY**

Please record your ethical impression of each of the following actions according to the following scale (adapted from Simha et al. 2012):

<i>Highly Ethical</i>	<i>Moderately Ethical</i>	<i>Slightly Ethical</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Slightly Unethical</i>	<i>Moderately Unethical</i>	<i>Highly Unethical</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

- \_\_\_\_\_ Copying homework assignments from others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Allowing others to copy homework assignments from you
- \_\_\_\_\_ Collaborating with others on assignments meant to be completed alone
- \_\_\_\_\_ Obtaining exam questions illicitly beforehand
- \_\_\_\_\_ Fabricating bibliographies on assignments/papers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Copying from a source without citing the source
- \_\_\_\_\_ Obtaining papers from the web and turning them in as your own work
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making others write papers for you, and then turning them in as your own work
- \_\_\_\_\_ Referencing materials without reading them
- \_\_\_\_\_ Making false and fraudulent excuses to postpone assignments and/or tests
- \_\_\_\_\_ Collaborating with others on tests meant to be completed alone
- \_\_\_\_\_ using unauthorized cheat-sheets on an exam
- \_\_\_\_\_ Looking at or copying from others' exam copies
- \_\_\_\_\_ Allowing others to look at or copy from your exam copy
- \_\_\_\_\_ Using unauthorized electronic equipment in exams
- \_\_\_\_\_ Changing one's answers after getting the grade to increase one's score

Regardless of the previous statements, please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements (adapted from Wong and Law (2002) and Lai (2010)).

<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Moderately Disagree</i>	<i>Slightly Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Slightly Agree</i>	<i>Moderately Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

- \_\_\_\_\_ I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have good understanding of my own emotions
- \_\_\_\_\_ I really understand what I feel
- \_\_\_\_\_ I always know whether or not I am happy
- \_\_\_\_\_ I always know my friends' emotions from their behavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am a good observer of others' emotions
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am sensitive to the feelings and emotions of others
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have good understanding of the emotions of people around me
- \_\_\_\_\_ I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them
- \_\_\_\_\_ I always tell myself I am a competent person
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am a self-motivated person
- \_\_\_\_\_ I would always encourage myself to try my best
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am able to control my temper and handle difficulties rationally
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am quite capable of controlling my own emotions
- \_\_\_\_\_ I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry
- \_\_\_\_\_ I have good control of my own emotions
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whenever I'm faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment
- \_\_\_\_\_ My decisions are well thought through
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am uncomfortable making decisions before I know all of my options
- \_\_\_\_\_ Before making a choice, I consider many alternatives thoroughly
- \_\_\_\_\_ No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself