

*Rethinking Academic Dishonesty: Challenging Indonesia's Cultural Pressure for
Collectivism and Altruism*

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Abstract

Despite mitigation efforts implemented across nations, academic dishonesty is an enduring issue within the education sector. A popular form of it in Indonesia is contract cheating, which is difficult to unveil and trace due to the culture of collectivism and altruism deeply rooted within its society. Indonesia is reputed for its culturally hospitable and helpful ethos; however, it is suspected that the same cultural aspects also serve as the foundation of this phenomenon to thrive. This paper aims to explore and analyze the persuasion process that university students do in contract cheating and the influential cultural factors behind it. These cultural factors, which are embedded in interactions between students and ghostwriters resulting in voluntary assistance and subsequent deception following assignment submission, are identified and analyzed using Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory and Hofstede's six cultural dimensions. Additionally, this study presents perspectives from ghostwriters and students who engage in contract cheating on societal judgments against them, accompanied with societal perceptions and attitudes towards contract cheating. Employing phenomenology as its main method, this research gathers data through literature reviews and interviews with three main informants, two of whom have experience as voluntary ghostwriters in contract cheating. Results indicate that various cultural dimensions, cultural pressures, and expectations of compliance significantly influence individuals' susceptibility to engage in contract cheating, especially when familial or professional ties are involved. Collectively, these cultural factors cultivate an environment for contract cheating to thrive remarkably while remaining tacit in modern society.

Keywords: Academic Dishonesty, Contract Cheating, Indonesian Culture, Collectivism, Altruism

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Introduction

Academic dishonesty is a major problem that has been getting recognition as time goes by (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002), with various implementations of the practice ranging from peeking at other student's answer sheets to full-fledged plagiarism. Various studies revealed that the percentage of college students who participate in academic dishonesty can go up to 98 percent (McCabe et al., 2012) while still increasing over the past several decades. The practice flourishes within society as if it belittles integrity and ethics, which is mentioned as one significant mainstay where high standards of behavior are employed to be a criterion of evaluation towards the quality of higher education given in any university community (Speight, 2016).

One of the many academic dishonesty practices is contract cheating, which is defined by Lancaster (2022) as the practice where third parties are used by students to help them accomplish their educational studies by replacing them in doing assessments in courses. It is carried out in various ways that yield several different benefits, with one of the most popular being through a formal or informal work agreement that generates income. On this side, contract cheating has grown to the extent that it runs as a profitable industry that students are able to access (Lancaster, 2022) with many of the third parties, referred onwards as ghostwriters, taking considerable profit out of the capital resources circulating inside the discreetly operating market. Offers of contract cheating services have even been openly marketed on the internet, giving the industry more spotlight and inviting more users to make transactions. On the other side, ghostwriters who accept contract cheating propositions from students without the promise of any financial benefit are also common. Cases like this happen when students give other types of non-financial benefits to the ghostwriters involved.

Developing countries like Indonesia are not exempted from the academic phenomenon impacting all levels of education. Locally referred to as "*joki tugas*", the practice has grown into a worrisome phenomenon, especially where it meets the culture of collectivism and altruism. These values are deeply rooted in various layers of its society, earning it the title of one of the most hospitable countries in the world. On par with Pakistan, Indonesia was on the 47th place out of 53 nations in terms of individualism index values conducted by Hofstede and Pedersen (2002), with a considerably low score.

In the Indonesian culture, these two values manifest in commendable forms. Collectivism can be found in how people treat one another, particularly in a group setting involving a number of people. So can altruism, which relates to the high levels of selflessness in people, where they would be more willing to help others in times of need. These two values contribute to shaping the image of Indonesian society in the eyes of the world, where non-Indonesians often perceive the Indonesians to be hospitable and helpful.

Unfortunately, the same ways that make people be on their best behaviors in a culture, which are formed and passed down to younger generations with the best intentions, are not always utilized with the best intentions. The two values put pressure on the young generation to think that being helpful and generous will make them more accepted in the society, successfully shaping the tendency in children with ineptitude in social skills or less power among their peers to lean towards people-pleasing tendencies. At the other end of the social power spectrum, there are also students who exploit these students with this submissive trait to serve their own interests.

Many studies do not deeply explore the cultural underpinnings of academic dishonesty in Indonesia, especially because they did not consider the effect of sociocultural aspects towards academic dishonesty behaviors. This flaw creates a gap between behavior and factors that drive them into acting it out, which will be covered in the study. The strong values in the Indonesian culture strengthen the hypothesis that the contract cheating phenomenon among Indonesian university students is highly influenced by these values, and the very values, which are strongly embedded in their personalities by society, become one of the main drivers for them to engage in academic dishonesty in general. It is assumed that there are additional factors to be further identified and analyzed in this study.

Cognitive Development Theory

As Piaget proposed, there are important mental processes that happen as individuals learn about the environment surrounding them (Piaget, 1952), the same applies to the phenomenon of contract cheating. Children construct their own understanding of the world through experiences they obtain while interacting with the environment around them. This can be done through connecting with their peers, the power figures in charge of them, or simply observing other people that are available for them to learn from. This also implies that the process of persuasion taking place in the phenomenon did not start simply because the student wants to cheat; it is implied that there is an underlying cause of that action that they gained from a mental process happening during their childhood after observing such behavior from their surroundings.

In this theory, a child goes through four stages during their growth, which are the (1) Sensorimotor Intelligence, happening from birth to 2 years of age, (2) Pre-operational Thinking, undergone at ages 2 to 7, (3) Concrete Operational Thinking, from age 7 to 11, and (4) Formal Operational Thinking, happening after age 11. The most relevant stages to the contract cheating phenomenon are the concrete and formal operational stages, in which children are already at the age of seven where formal education starts.

Hofstede's Six Cultural Dimension

Another lens to look at the presented problem is a cultural lens that Geert Hofstede formulated in 1980. To understand cultural differences, Geert Hofstede categorized culture into six main dimensions. The understanding gained from the research results will explore academic dishonesty practices by specifically examining the power distance dimension and the individualism-collectivism dimensions.

The Power Distance dimension, which talks about how important hierarchy is for a society, is defined by Hofstede and Bond (1984) as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally". This dimension emphasizes dependency on hierarchy and right inequality between power holders and non-power holders. In Indonesian culture, authority and hierarchy are deeply ingrained within society. People are expected to regard their superiors with respect and not question because it would be considered rude and unmannerly.

As the polar opposite of individualism, collectivism has its roots in sociology, among which was Ferdinand Tönnies who conceptualized the renowned notions of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Defined by Hui (1988), collectivism consists of a collection of feelings, beliefs, behavioral intentions, and behaviors related to solidarity and concern for others. In daily life,

it can be seen through how much people consider whether their decisions and/or actions would impact others, how much they are willing to share resources, how susceptible they are to social influence, how much they are concerned with how others see them, how much they value interdependence, and how much they feel involved in others' lives (Hui & Triandis, 1986).

From the country's own ideology, Pancasila, Indonesian society has been taught about the concepts of collectivism and altruism. Together, the five moral pillars of the country encourage closeness, selflessness, and willingness to help others. This teaching is then realized and referred to as "gotong royong" in local communities, which is a practice of building collective effort to achieve a specific goal. Its importance is instilled by participating in activities in the surrounding environment, which is related to the smallest organizational unit closest to and observable by children from even before school-age, namely the nuclear family. Nations with a strong collectivism value tend to encourage members of society to perceive themselves as a small part of a bigger community, and they are taught to be loyal to their communities because these communities protect them (Hui, 1988). Members of the community share a "salient sense of we-ness" which reflects high levels of cohesivity to the point that they feel what they do (Hui, 1988). In Indonesia, this value is visible in attitudes of the society that places in-groups like family and peer groups as of high importance (Hofstede Insights, 2024).

Altruism, as the last concept incorporated in the study, is also an essential value in the Indonesian culture. Despite having different definition by subfield, we generally view altruism as "a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare" (Batson & Shaw, 1991). It also relates to high levels of selflessness in people, where they would be more willing to help others in times of need. Together with collectivism, these two values contribute to shaping the image of Indonesian society in the eyes of the world, who is often perceived as hospitable and helpful.

Methodology

This study applies phenomenology as a qualitative-descriptive approach to understand the contract cheating phenomenon and provide a comprehensive description.

Literature review enables exploration of Indonesia's cultural aspects and values, subsequently helping identify gaps and collect findings that may have been overlooked before in research that do not apply cultural viewpoints in its analyses. In-depth interviews were conducted with three key informants who are young adults selected because of their hands-on experience as ghostwriters involved in contract cheating with and without financial benefits during their time in university and after completing their undergraduate education. All informants willingly gave consent for their interview results to be used as data in this study. The identities of the three informants are not disclosed to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Findings and Analysis

Along with the formulation of the six cultural dimensions concept, Hofstede pioneered the analysis and scoring of nations of the world on the dimensions since 1986. The Culture Factor Group has made the data publicly available on a website titled Hofstede Insights, which exhibits results, analysis, and explanations of the six cultural dimensions of various

nations. The figure below displays comparable results for three countries: France, Indonesia, and the United States of America.

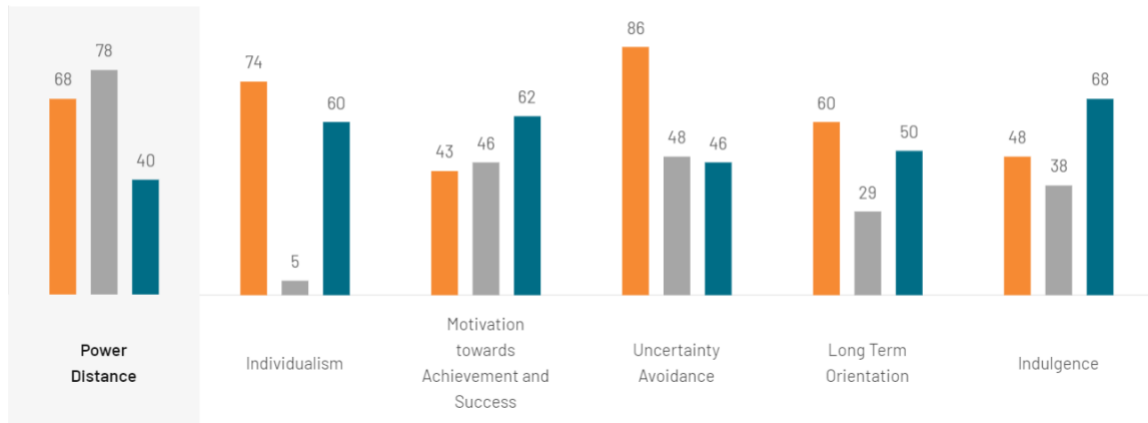


Figure 1: Country Comparison Tool: Hofstede’s Six Cultural Dimensions in France (Orange), Indonesia (Gray), and the United States of America (Green) (Hofstede Insights, 2024).

The Power Distance Index (PDI) for Indonesia reaches a score of 78 out of 100 points, which shows that Indonesia depends heavily on hierarchy and that there is a stark contrast between the rights given to power holders compared to those given to non-power holders (Hofstede Insights, 2024). This also means that even in terms of social standing, a person will have an advantage over another person if they are perceived as being in a higher position. Examples of these figures include being a superior at work or a classmate coming from a more reputable social background. Meanwhile, from the same graph, Indonesia only scored 5 out of 100 points in terms of individualism. The score is a strong indication of how the country holds in-groups on high regard, preferring conformity to the norms and ideals set in society and the in-groups to which they belong (Hofstede Insights, 2024).

Two main concepts that the Indonesian society values highly are family loyalty and filial piety, which tie an individual to responsibilities to cater to the needs of their family regardless of one’s own condition. These are concepts widely understood and implemented in a nearly forceful way despite parts of the family refusing to adhere to these norms. An individual is expected to practice filial piety, being loyal to their parents and siblings for as long as they live, including taking care of the parents when they grow old. These values are shown in interpersonal interactions, nationwide customs, and norms in daily life. For example, there is a common concept in Indonesia that if two people are getting married, they have to “marry the entire family”, implying that responsibilities to maintain relationship with the extended family will also fall upon the partner’s shoulders, including providing financial aid and supporting other family members in need. These social expectations contribute towards a student’s cognitive development by imposing selflessness and readiness to help, even when the student is actually unwilling to do so.

Aside from the student’s personality traits that are dependent on their cultural background, institutional-level causes are not out of the question (McCabe et al., 2012). One factor is the fact that factors that determine students’ tendency to cheat include the culture of the classroom under the influence of the professor and the culture of the university (Speight, 2016:105). Like the role of a parent within a family, educators hold control over the atmosphere through rules and regulations in a classroom setting within a university. The tendency to engage in academic dishonesty can arise from the levels of authority

implementation abilities of the professor; on one end of the spectrum, the implementation of an educator's authority in the form of excessive restriction and discipline can cause students to resort to doing everything possible to excel academically and satisfy the educator according to the high scoring standards applied in the class.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the spectrum, negligence and too much freedom given by the educator are also a potential trigger. A laissez-faire leadership style implemented in a classroom provides a base for students to think that they will get what they want in class, leading them to think that the course and attendance in class are but a formality (İhtiyaroğlu, 2019). Further supported by the passive and insensitive attitude of the educator, students' motivation to truly learn something in class plummets and thus rendering them prone to engage in academic dishonesty.

Either learning setting enables a situation where students learn to arrange systematical and well-coordinated efforts to cheat instead of putting honest efforts to improve academically. A basic example of the practice happening inside a classroom is when students share answers during an examination. This behavior is learned since children first enrolled in grade schools, making it impactful on the development of their moral and ethical foundations. This behavior is also nurtured by the examples students have been able to observe from authority figures, who sometimes provide unethical examples, such as overlooking students who copy each other's answers, or even engaging first-hand in academic dishonesty practices in various ways. The role models partaking in this process, such as teachers, principals, and school counselors all have their own leadership styles and can choose to apply a stricter or looser approach in disciplinary actions. Both the strict discipline or negligence done by these authority figures can nurture the growth of the perception that people are permitted to do so without significant consequences given by society (Speight, 2016), because it is seen as a selfless act of aid and guidance towards one another. It is assumed that these practices thrive because there is a lack of punishment from the authority figures in charge. Students then perceive that this behavior is acceptable, aside from them gaining academic advantage along the way.

When students start mimicking academic dishonesty practices at grade school level, a student who engages in contract cheating tends to only see as far as themselves being of help to other students, but it changes as they realize that it is also a way to obtain social benefits. Students find that after partaking in acts of academic dishonesty and providing help to others, they gain more favor and positive reception by their peers, and they feel like they rise up to a position within the social circle where they can befriend others more easily. This peer acceptance reinforces the belief that academic dishonesty behaviors are permitted, as long as authority figures are kept in the dark about it.

The inconsistency between the ideal situation and the reality around them creates conflicting double standards in a student, where they can apply one standard that is more socially accepted for a specific situation but measure the same situation with a different standard when their involvement in it is required. In terms of academic cheating, the two standards usually consist of one that follows the social norms and ethics and one that brings advantage to themselves. The usage of the standards differs based on whether the situations involve fulfilling their interest or simply restating ideal perceptions towards the same situation that happens generally. The two roles in a contract cheating transaction manifest these standards differently; students have pressing interests to fulfill their roles in society, and therefore apply double standards that benefit them more. However, they regard the overall practice as

reprehensible behavior. On the other side, ghostwriters adhere to a stronger moral compass when it comes to implementing the double standards unto themselves. Despite engaging in contract cheating for other people, they are able to apply the ethically correct standard unto themselves because they feel that it is the right thing to do.

Repetitive exposure of academic dishonesty from the environment at the concrete and formal operational stages of cognitive development theory serves as a nutrition for double standards in a student, which will soon be crucial in their higher educational level, where some students finally came upon the realization that ghostwriting activities can bring more than mere social benefits. When students develop enough financial awareness, their motivation shifts from simply gaining social benefits menjadi lucrative benefits. From the student's side as an initiator with responsibilities to maintain above-average academic records, they feel that spending time completing these assignments is a less advantageous option compared to spending time doing an activity that is more financially, socially, or emotionally rewarding. In implementing the double standard, students generally choose to apply a stricter standard towards other people's academic cheating behavior in general yet favor the more lenient standard towards themselves for the sake of fulfilling their interest.

Meanwhile, the rewards can be different from the ghostwriter's side depending on their underlying motivation. A part of the ghostwriter community is only willing to offer their service for financial benefits, but there are also some who will volunteer to help regardless of whether the drive behind their service offer is genuine or forced altruism.

Compared to the students, ghostwriters have double standards that, on one side, is stricter towards themselves, but more lenient towards other's academic dishonesty behaviors on the other side. Despite the ghostwriters having a morally and ethically just view towards academic dishonesty and contract cheating specifically, they still engage in it because the drive to do it is stronger compared to their concern of the looming ethical consequences. In practice, the actions done as the application of the double standards varies according to what the ghostwriter deems suitable with the student's interest. These actions range from simply giving pointers on what to do, to writing complete sections in the said assignment verbatim.

Although the existence of double standards fosters inequality and unfairness in an academic context, this shows that both students and ghostwriters still possess a certain level of academic integrity, albeit partial and biased according to their respective standpoints and interests. Their acknowledgement of their obligation to adhere to academic integrity values is observable from their understanding of moral and ethical standpoints of what they do and how they are fully aware of the existing social standards. They still have full understanding that their participation in contract cheating is something that is ethically wrong, yet due to their desire to fulfil their conflicting interests, they will still engage in contract cheating activities and reap benefits from them.

Consequently, many students take advantage of the situation because there are societal expectations to be fulfilled to uphold the cultural values. One has to always be helpful in every situation to be labeled as a good person. The implementation of these two values goes wrong because they are used to taking advantage and putting pressure on other people to do them a "favor" despite not aligning with ethics and social norms. Like fuel to fire, both values backfire and actually worsen the phenomenon of academic dishonesty existing in society.

Indications of this practice are also found at higher levels of education. However, the differences in interest that motivate students to engage in contract cheating at each level make the factors driving this practice across levels of education cannot be generalized. For undergraduate students, the two underlying reasons found by all three informant ghostwriters are unwillingness and low self-confidence to do assignments. Students whom they helped have a profile of full-time students who were not employed during their studies, so they actually had enough time and resources to complete their assignments on their own. However, they regarded themselves as unable to do these assignments alone as a result of unwillingness, and so asked for the ghostwriters to “help” them, eventually dumping the workload unto the ghostwriters and contributing little to the tasks that were supposed to be their responsibility.

At master and doctoral levels, the practice does not necessarily die down. Meanwhile, at these students have a set of motivations and drives that differ greatly from their undergraduate counterpart. A big part of the graduate students community comprises of people in the rise of their career with an established status. Some, but not all, students with an ongoing career and a hierarchical superiority in their workplace tend to strategize to use their authority to take advantage of available resources and manpower, which results in ‘delegating’ their assignments to subordinates they deem capable. It is where power distance, collectivism, and forced altruism affect ghostwriters into complying to ‘help’ their superiors. This practice is normalized in workplaces, and subordinates might even earn advantages such as the superiors’ willingness to overlook missed deadlines or petty mistakes that others are reprimanded for. Meanwhile, refusal might be perceived as an act of disobedience with possible consequences like receiving unfair treatment from superiors or ostracism from peers.

Based on the discussion, we can outline the flow of the contract cheating process between a student and a ghostwriter. The findings and the process of contract cheating are summarized in the model below.

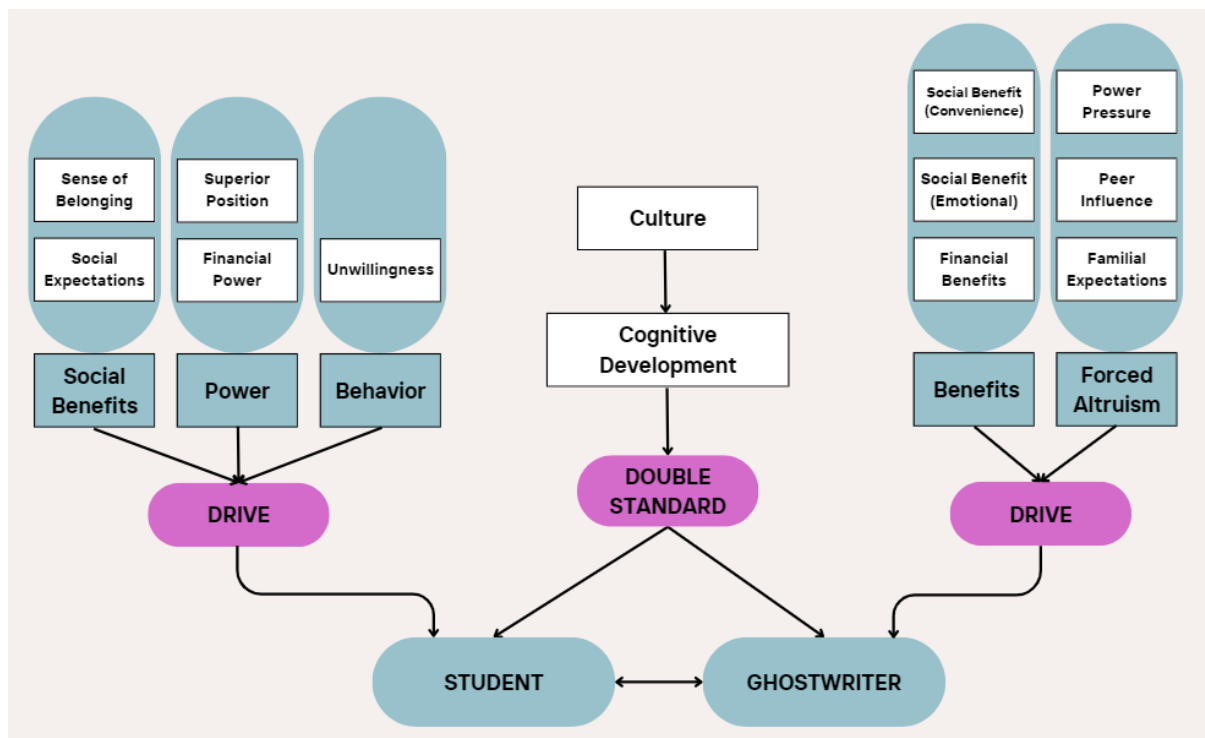


Figure 2: Contract Cheating Process Model.

At the center of the model are the student and the ghostwriter, who are both affected by the double standards and their respective drives. The double standards part consists of three elements: culture, in this case “Indonesian”, plays a big part in affecting the cognitive development of an individual, which in turn sets up the double standards that affect both roles. Both the student and the ghostwriter involved have motivations that drive them to perform contract cheating, each with different influential factors. A student who initiates contract cheating is driven by the prospects of awaiting social benefits, which consist of fulfilled social expectations and a sense of belonging. A certain degree of power play might also be present, which happens due to them being in a superior position that can directly or indirectly influence the ghostwriter, or because they have the financial power and means to do so. And the single and most personal of all the factors is unwillingness to do assignments they must complete on their own, which makes up the behavior factor.

The student and the ghostwriter interact with each other while being affected and driven by all these background factors. During interaction, the student urges the ghostwriter to ‘help’ them by playing on their altruistic value, imposes power over the ghostwriter, and may offer benefits for the ghostwriter. Meanwhile, other than to obtain benefits, the ghostwriter feels the pressure to comply because either they sense the power pressure as a subordinate, they receive peer pressure from the fellow student, or expectations to manifest family loyalty and filial piety. Not all of these factors have to be present at the same time; it could be only one or two depending on the case and the relationship between the two individuals. Nevertheless, these factors play their respective parts in influencing the decision-making process of the ghostwriter until they finally comply with the demands of the student, and the contract cheating practice is set in motion.

Conclusion

The essence of academic dishonesty, especially contract cheating, are all done by students for the sake of putting up a façade of high academic and social performance. Students’ motivations of contract cheating revolve around shaping an image of a stellar pupil in the eyes of their superiors in the academic world. From the ghostwriter’s point of view, social performance is more essential to uphold, particularly due to the existence of direct and indirect pressure from the students and their relatives. The collectivism values, including filial piety, family loyalty, as well as altruism and selflessness, are more prominent in influencing the ghostwriter into helping the student without regard to their willingness to help.

Inside the student’s and the ghostwriter’s life, they both carry the load to perform their best as a functional part of the society according to their respective role as a child, a sibling, and a scholar. To fulfil their roles, they deliberately engage in academic dishonesty acts for the sake of attaining the ideal image, albeit disobeying the ethics and moral standard that society adheres to in the process. Like a coin with its two sides, students cover one side to show the better-looking side, despite knowing full well that the dirty side does not cease to exist. Consciously, they are aware of it being a serious breach of academic integrity, but they push through while bearing the burden of societal and cultural demands on their shoulder.

Limitations of the research lie in the fact that the three key informants are not part of the systematically arranged professional network of ghostwriters such as those marketed publicly. The research focus also limits perspective to how culture, in this case Indonesian, impacts the process of academic dishonesty. It takes the perspective of ghostwriters who

engage in contract cheating as voluntary participants without the intention of gaining financial incentives and does not discuss much about the viewpoint of ghostwriters offering services for financial benefits.

Decision makers at the institutional or governmental level will have to review the existing system and applied methods used to encourage student's academic and character development, and reconsider more effective and practical ways to tackle this issue to eradicate the double standards in the society.

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