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When conduct achievement does (and does not) make you smile: it depends on your self-construal

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of investigation has been devoted to studying whether academic achievement is linked to adolescents' life satisfaction, whereas limited studies have focused on conduct achievement, which serves as another common kind of achievement in school. To examine the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction, two studies were conducted using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design with a two-phase model. Study 1 (quantitative phase) demonstrated longitudinal evidence for the positive effect of conduct achievement on adolescents' life satisfaction. Critically, the lagged effect was also moderated by interdependent self-construal, with the beneficial effect becoming stronger for adolescents high in interdependent self-construal. Study 2 (qualitative phase) generated two main themes and four subthemes to understand the meaning and impact of conduct achievement to adolescents. Thematic analysis revealed that conduct achievement was regarded as a partial and subjective assessment by teachers and might elicit a positive perception of the teacher-student relationship.

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Conduct achievement; life satisfaction; independent self-construal; interdependent self-construal; moderation analysis; mixed-methods design

Introduction

Schooling occupies a great proportion of time and social interaction in the life of adolescents, directly and indirectly influencing their life satisfaction (Seligson et al., 2003; Suldo et al., 2006). Throughout their school life, adolescents are generally expected to achieve high standards both academically and in terms of their conduct (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008; Hart, 2010; Meece et al., 2006).

A great deal of investigation has been devoted to studying whether academic achievement is linked to adolescents' life satisfaction (Kirkcaldy et al., 2004; Rand et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2008). By meeting the codes of good conduct in school, one will be seen as a good and docile student in the eyes of teachers, thereby receiving a high score in conduct evaluation. However, compared to academic achievement, the influence of attaining conduct achievement on adolescent's life satisfaction remains somewhat unexplored.

To address this research gap, we investigated the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction among adolescents in the present research. To overcome the methodological shortfalls in previous research, we conducted a quantitative investigation (Study 1) and aimed at 1) moving beyond a cross-sectional design to examine the temporal influence of conduct achievement

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on life satisfaction and 2) accommodating the mixed findings in the literature by investigating if independent and interdependent self-construals would moderate the temporal influence of conduct achievement on life satisfaction. More importantly, to shed light on the findings in Study 1 (e.g. the main effect of conduct achievement and the moderation effect of self-construal), a follow-up qualitative investigation (Study 2) was conducted to seek explanations for these intriguing findings. As a whole, the present research employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to examine the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction in a two-phase model that starts with a quantitative phase and is followed by a qualitative phase.

Achievements in school and life satisfaction

McCullough et al. (2000) showed that positive daily experiences in school had a direct effect on adolescents' daily satisfaction with life (see also Ferguson et al., 2010; Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Of the varied positive events in school, school achievement is one of the most significant factors influencing student life satisfaction. To thrive in school, students are typically expected to perform well in two areas, namely showing an outstanding academic performance and a good conduct evaluation. This yields two common kinds of achievement in school – academic achievement and conduct achievement.

Broadly speaking, school achievement implies the accomplishment of certain articulated learning goals, which are typically assessed within standardized instructional environments such as classrooms and schools (Guskey, 2013). It is important to note that learning goals are multifaceted, involve different kinds of learning across areas, and can vary across different contexts, such as developmental stages and cultural environments. With this conceptualization, academic achievement refers to the extent to which a student has attained learning goals in a scholastic setting or in an academically related domain. As such, academic achievement is commonly measured using indicators such as subject test scores, course grades, or grade point average (GPA) (Benbow & Arjmand, 1990). In contrast, conduct achievement, as another aspect of school achievement, is characterized by a comparatively less standardized definition. In principle, conduct achievement refers to the extent to which a student has attained learning goals in a non-scholastic setting. Specifically, conduct achievement evaluates whether a student demonstrates appropriate behaviours in classrooms and schools, reflecting adherence to the norms and codes of school conduct. Consequently, establishing a standardized definition and measure for conduct achievement can be challenging and less straightforward, as the norms and codes of school conduct can be largely variant across cultural contexts (Brauer & Chaurand, 2010; Gelfand & Jackson, 2016). In the present study, which focuses on the Hong Kong context, we define conduct achievement based on the measurement of student attainment in three prevalent areas within Hong Kong secondary schools, namely courtesy (e.g. the aspects of politeness, good manners, and respect for others), appearance and dress (e.g. the aspects of cleanliness, tidiness, and adherence to school dress codes), and discipline (e.g. the aspects of cooperation, punctuality, and self-control).

Academic achievement and life satisfaction

Abundant evidence had concluded a positive association between academic achievement and life satisfaction among adolescents (e.g. Crede et al., 2015; Datu, 2018; Diseth et al., 2012; Kirkcaldy et al., 2004; Rand et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2008). For instance, Gilman and Huebner (2006) observed that middle and high school students with relatively higher levels of life satisfaction had attained better grades than those with relatively lower levels of life satisfaction. In the literature, the number of studies showing a positive correlation generally outweighs those showing a null correlation association (e.g. Huebner & Alderman, 1993; Rode et al., 2005; Suldo et al., 2008). Hence, it is tempting to conclude a positive relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction. Yet, this conclusion might be premature due to two methodological shortfalls.

First, most of these studies are cross-sectional studies (e.g. Crede et al., 2015; Datu, 2018; Diseth et al., 2012) in which variables may share common method variance to some extent (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Therefore, the positive correlation observed in these cross-sectional studies might possibly be spurious. As a remedy, recent research has attempted to create a time lag between variables to reduce the threat of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), examining the temporal association between academic achievement and life satisfaction (e.g. Ng et al., 2015; Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2010; Suldo et al., 2011). Second, the inconsistent association between academic achievement and life satisfaction observed across studies might reflect the existence of moderators. To reconcile the mixed findings, Crede et al. (2015) looked into a possible moderator of mother's education, and revealed that student academic achievement only predicted life satisfaction if their mothers had achieved the same or higher education as the students (see also Choi et al., 2019).

Beyond academic achievement: conduct achievement and life satisfaction

As well as performing well academically, students are expected to maintain high standards of their conduct. Yet, unlike academic achievement, limited research has examined the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. Much of the previous research on school conduct tended to measure student's problematic behaviours in school, such as cheating in tests, fighting in school, and skipping classes (e.g. Haranin et al., 2007; Rohner et al., 2010; Suldo & Huebner, 2004). In general, it was found that student misconduct in school was negatively associated with life satisfaction (e.g. Elmore & Huebner, 2010; McKnight et al., 2002; Putwain et al., 2020; Suldo et al., 2008), revealing a potential link between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. Conceptually, not committing misconduct (e.g. not fighting in school) is not necessarily the other side of the conduct coin, namely, a conduct achievement that highlights a merit (e.g. being courteous and respectful). Therefore, quantifying school conduct as problematic behaviours in school may not distinguish students who are praised for good conduct from the average student.

Apart from the findings mentioned above, previous studies also revealed indirect support on how conduct achievement can be linked to life satisfaction. For instance, to students, being rated as having good conduct in school may represent an accomplishment that enhances their sense of competence, thereby affecting their life satisfaction. It has been shown that students who were more behaviourally engaged in school experienced more accomplishment-related positive emotions, such as pride and enjoyment (Dewaele & Li, 2021; King & Gaerlan, 2014). Importantly, experiencing these emotions has been shown to contribute substantially to life satisfaction (Ataei & Chorami, 2021; King & Dela Rosa, 2019). On the other hand, a more relational-oriented account can also offer an explanation. It was observed that students who showed more constructive behaviours in school reported feeling closer to and receiving more support from their teachers, yielding a high level of interdependent happiness (Datu & Lizada, 2018; Heffner & Antaramian, 2016). The sense of happiness engendered by having harmonious relationships with others has been shown to associate with life satisfaction (Datu et al., 2016; Kwan et al., 1997). Hence, it is conceptually reasonable that students with great conduct achievement may perceive themselves as having a harmonious relationship with their teachers, thereby contributing to their life satisfaction. As a whole, we propose the following hypothesis (see Figure 1):

H1: Conduct achievement would be positively associated with life satisfaction.

Although previous studies seemed to imply a positive relationship between conduct achievement and life satisfaction, this conclusion might also be premature. As with research in academic achievement, two methodological shortfalls call into question in the conclusion. First, most of the previous research in behavioural misconduct was conducted with a cross-sectional design (e.g. Datu, 2018; Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lyons & Huebner, 2016; McKnight et al., 2002;

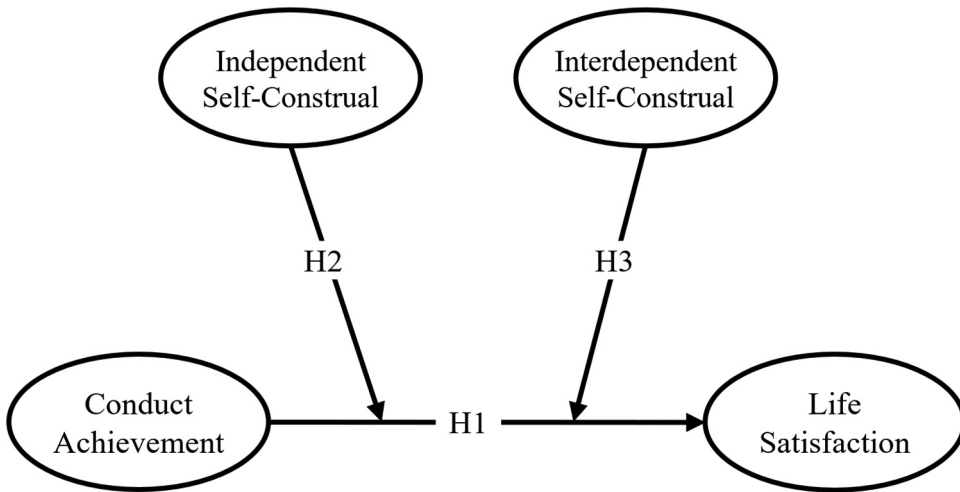


Figure 1. Conceptual model about the moderation effects of self-construals on the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction.

Suldo et al., 2008). Thus, due to the threat of common method variance, these studies may not accurately reflect a link between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. Second, a certain degree of mixed findings exists in the literature. For instance, far from finding a positive influence, Engels et al. (2016) revealed the negative consequences of school constructive behaviours, whereas Lewis et al. (2011) concluded a null relationship with life satisfaction (see also Rohner et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2006). Hence, to fill these gaps, as in the previous research on academic achievement, we aimed at 1) examining the temporal influence of conduct achievement on life satisfaction and 2) studying the potential moderators that might accommodate the mixed effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction.

The moderation role of independent-interdependent self-construal

Markus and Kitayama (1991) discussed the concept of self-construal and viewed it as a way to define and make meaning of the self. It was proposed that individuals simultaneously possess two construals of self, namely independent and interdependent self-construals (Singelis & Brown, 1995; Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). On the one hand, independent self-construal indicates one's tendency to construe the self as fundamentally individual and separate from others. People with a strong independent self-construal emphasize self-actualizing and possessing the ability to be distinct from others (Cross et al., 2011). On the other hand, interdependent self-construal highlights one's inclination to construe the self as fundamentally connected to others and defined by relationships with others. People with a strong interdependent self-construal emphasize getting along with social others and possessing the ability to maintain harmonious relationships with others (Cross et al., 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Though motivating one for personal or interpersonal achievements, independent and interdependent self-construals have been shown to moderate various psychological processes (Li et al., 2021; Marbell-Pierre et al., 2019).

Independent self-construal moderates the impact of conduct achievement

Being rated as having good conduct may represent a personal achievement to students, bringing certain accomplishment-related positive emotions, such as pride and enjoyment (Dewaele & Li, 2021; King & Gaerlan, 2014). People with a strong independent self-

construal have a stronger need for personal uniqueness and deem the pursuit of individual goals and personal accomplishments as important (Brutus & Greguras, 2008; Kagitcibasi, 2005). Cristina-Corina (2012) revealed that people with a higher independent self-construal regarded the work value of 'prestige' as more important than the work value of 'relationships with co-workers' in a competitive work setting (see also van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Verplanken et al., 2009). Hence, conduct achievement which signifies a personal accomplishment and serves as a means to distinguish oneself from others may have a stronger effect on life satisfaction, especially among those with a stronger independent self-construal, thereby yielding a moderation effect of independent self-construal. Moreover, Kwan et al. (1997) found that self-esteem, which denotes one's self-worth, was more strongly associated with life satisfaction among individualistic members who are high in independent self-construal. Consistently, Kim and Stavrositu (2018) found that socially disengaging positive emotions (e.g. superiority, pride) had a stronger association with life satisfaction than socially engaging positive emotions (e.g. friendliness, closeness) among those who are high in independence. Therefore, as a personal accomplishment, conduct achievement that enhances one's sense of self-worth, pride or superiority may have a stronger effect on life satisfaction among those who endorse a stronger independent self-construal. As such, the following hypothesis is formulated (see Figure 1):

H2: Independent self-construal would positively moderate the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction, in which the association would be stronger among those high in independent self-construal.

Interdependent self-construal moderates the impact of conduct achievement

Alternatively, being rated as having good conduct may represent an interpersonal achievement that indicates the existence of a harmonious relationship between student and teachers, bringing interpersonal happiness (Datu & Lizada, 2018; Heffner & Antaramian, 2016). Individuals with a strong interdependent self-construal have a higher need for affiliation and relatedness and are more motivated to fulfill their roles within important relationships and adhere to social norms (Kagitcibasi, 2005; Singelis, 1994). Holland et al. (2004) demonstrated that people endorsing an interdependent self-construal preferred a shorter seating distance with another person in a dyadic setting, which can be seen as a proxy of seeking interpersonal closeness. Similarly, previous studies revealed that interdependent self-construal was positively associated with the perceived importance of social goals, affiliation motivation, and a desire to be socially accepted (Brutus & Greguras, 2008; van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Verplanken et al., 2009). Thus, given that students who are rated as having good conduct would tend to perceive more acceptance from teachers (Khan et al., 2010), the effect of conduct achievement may have a stronger effect on life satisfaction among those with a strong interdependent self-construal. Put differently, this implies a moderation effect of interdependent self-construal, which strengthens the positive association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. Additionally, compared to those high in independence, Kim and Stavrositu (2018) found that socially engaging positive emotions (e.g. friendliness, closeness) were more strongly linked to life satisfaction among those high in interdependence. Consistent findings have revealed that people who perceive interpersonal harmony and who feel accepted and understood by others reported more satisfaction with life when they endorsed a stronger interpersonal self-construal (Kwan et al., 1997; Lun et al., 2008; Suh et al., 1998). Consequently, as an interpersonal reward, conduct achievement that elicits a sense of interpersonal harmony and of being understood and accepted may have a stronger effect on life satisfaction among those who endorse a stronger interdependent self-construal. Accordingly, we hypothesize that (see Figure 1):

H3: Interdependent self-construal would positively moderate the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction, in which the association would be stronger among those high in interdependent self-construal.

The present research

Although research in academic achievement and life satisfaction is burgeoning, limited research has been conducted to examine the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. To fill this gap, we conducted a quantitative investigation (Study 1) and aimed at 1) moving beyond a cross-sectional design to examine the temporal influence of conduct achievement on life satisfaction and 2) accommodating the mixed findings in the literature by testing if self-construal is a possible moderator. Particularly, we hypothesized that conduct achievement would exert a temporal influence on enhancing life satisfaction (H1 in Figure 1), and this temporal association would be strengthened by one's independent and interdependent self-construals (H2 and H3 in Figure 1).

Furthermore, we would 1) capture conduct achievement using teachers' reports in order to further minimize the threat of common method variance and social desirability effect, posing an advantage over previous studies using students' reports (e.g. Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Haranin et al., 2007; Suldo et al., 2008), and 2) include covariates of personality traits that have been seldom controlled in previous research when examining the effects of behavioural misconduct on life satisfaction.¹

As a follow-up explanation phase for Study 1, a qualitative investigation (Study 2) was conducted to seek explanations for any unanticipated findings in Study 1. This phase would help supplement the explanation of the findings in the quantitative phase, jointly yielding a more consolidated conclusion (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Creswell et al., 2003). Taken together, the present research employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design to examine the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction in a two-phase.

Study 1: quantitative phase

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 573 adolescents (257 females) were recruited from five different grades in a secondary school in Hong Kong (equivalent to Grade 7 to 11 in the American school system) with an age range from 11 to 17 ($M_{age} = 13.77$, $SD = 1.40$).² Informed consent was obtained from both the adolescents and their parents in advance. Upon recruitment, participants were invited to complete a survey consisting of the measures of their conduct achievement, life satisfaction, self-construals, personality traits, and demographic information on age and gender. To investigate the temporal effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction, each participant's level of life satisfaction was followed up one year later.

Given that the present study aimed at examining the moderation effect of self-construal on the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction, a priori power analysis was conducted with the Monte Carlo simulation method to estimate the required sample size for testing the moderation effect. Previous studies indicated that the moderation effect size in empirical research is typically around 3% to 8% (e.g. Champoux & Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991; Jaccard & Wan, 1995). In this power analysis, we took a conservative stand by assuming an effect size of 3%. To obtain at least 90% statistical power, a sample of 250 participants was required. Thus, the current sample size should provide sufficient statistical power to investigate the questions of interest in this study.

Measures

Conduct achievement. Participants' conduct achievement was evaluated by their class teachers in three areas, namely courtesy, appearance and dress, and discipline. Each participant was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*E grade*) to 5 (*A grade*) in each of the three areas. The scores in the three areas were given by the class teachers according to a conduct assessment rubric, which includes evaluative criteria or elements regarding student's politeness, compliance, responsiveness, self-control, punctuality, and rule abiding (available at <https://shorturl.at/hktUY>). The assessment rubric also considers some objective records based on the school ethos committee report (e.g. records of dress code violation, lateness, minor mistakes, and serious misbehaviours). For instance, a student was given a score of five if he or she is regarded to be polite, well-mannered, showing respect for others, considerate, always clean and tidy, highly cooperative, and having no records of dress code violation, lateness, minor mistakes, and serious misbehaviours. The average score across the three areas was computed as an index of overall conduct achievement ($\alpha = .74$).

Life satisfaction. The 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was used to measure the participants' overall evaluation of life. The five items in the Satisfaction with Life Scale were anchored on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal' ($\alpha = .81$ and $.82$ for Time 1 and Time 2, respectively).

Independent and interdependent self-construals. The 30-item Self-Construal Scale (Singelis, 1994) was used to measure the strength of independent and interdependent self-construals. Sample items include 'My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me' (independent self-construal) and 'I often have the feeling that my relationships with others are more important than my own accomplishments' (interdependent self-construal). These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .65$ and $.76$ for independent and interdependent self-construals, respectively).

Covariates. Demographic information (viz., age and gender) and personality traits were included as covariates. The 20-item Mini-International Personality Item Pool (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006) was used to measure the five-factor personality traits. The items were anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 5 (*describes me very well*) ($\alpha = .68, .72, .59, .68$, and $.68$ for extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism, respectively).

Data analysis plan

The present data has a nested structure with students nested within classes. To account for the nested structure, a design-based adjustment was employed to correct the standard error through the sandwich estimator in all analyses (Asparouhov, 2005). Latent moderation analysis was employed to account for the unreliability and measurement error in variables in two steps (Ng & Chan, 2020). In Step 1, a structural model without the latent interaction term was fitted to test the lagged prediction from conduct achievement at Time 1 to life satisfaction at Time 2 (Figure 2(a)). Parceling was used, with two to five items being randomly combined into three parcels (Little et al., 2002). In this step, the factorial invariance of life satisfaction between Time 1 and Time 2 was also tested. In Step 2, the latent moderated structural equations approach (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000) was adopted to test the latent moderation model (Figure 2(b)). All of the following analyses were conducted with the robust maximum likelihood estimators and controlled the covariates of age, gender, and the five personality traits.

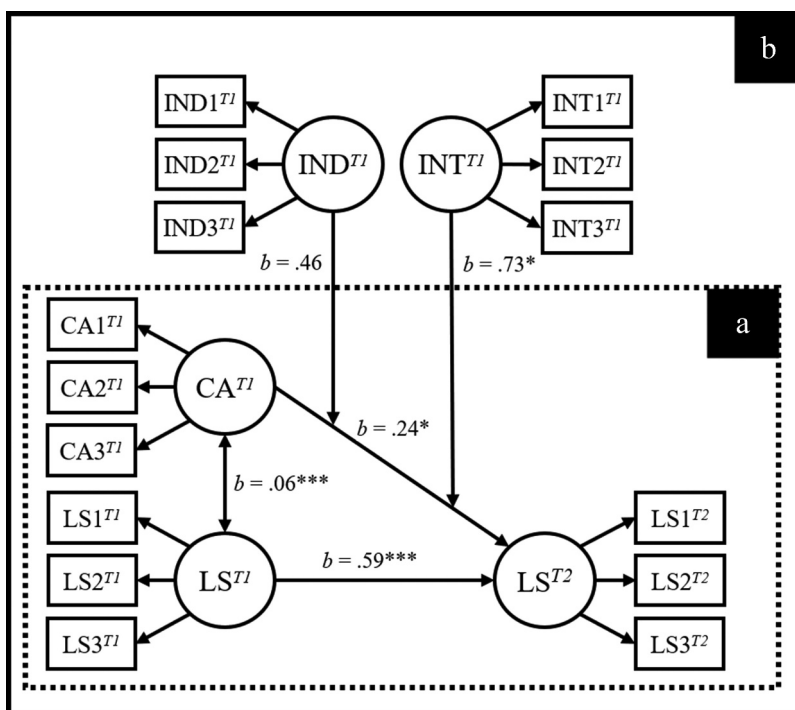


Figure 2. Latent moderation model examining the moderation effects of self-construals on the associations between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. *Note.* CA = conduct achievement; LS = life satisfaction; IND = independent self-construal; INT = interdependent self-construal; T1 = time 1; T2 = time 2. The coefficients are unstandardized estimates. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Results

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliabilities among variables are summarized in Table 1.

In Step 1, a structural equation model was fitted to examine the lagged effect of conduct achievement at Time 1 on life satisfaction at Time 2 by partialling out the autoregressive effect from the initial life satisfaction at Time 1 (Figure 2(a)). To test the factorial invariance of life satisfaction over time, a constrained model with factor loadings fixed as equal across time was compared with an unconstrained model with freely estimated factor loadings. Based on the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square different test (Satorra & Bentler, 2010), results revealed that the model fit in the constrained model did not drop significantly, $\Delta SB-\chi^2(2) = 5.02$, $p = .081$, indicating that the factor loadings of life satisfaction were equivalent across time. Overall, the constrained structural equation model fitted the data well, $\chi^2(68) = 156.46$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, NNFI = .93, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .05, 90% RMSEA CI [.04, .06]. All factor loadings were statistically significant, ranging from .59 to .89, $ps < .001$, with an average of

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among measures.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. T1 Conduct Achievement	4.30 (0.44)	.74				
2. T1 Independent Self	3.38 (0.42)	-.02	.65			
3. T1 Interdependent Self	3.65 (0.43)	.15***	.31***	.76		
4. T1 Life Satisfaction	4.84 (1.11)	.17***	.27***	.34***	.81	
5. T2 Life Satisfaction	4.59 (1.08)	.16***	.18***	.26***	.56***	.82

Cronbach's alphas are presented on the diagonal. *** $p < .001$.

.73. As expected, the initial life satisfaction positively predicted the subsequent life satisfaction over a year, $b = .59$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.71]. Importantly, conduct achievement positively predicted life satisfaction over time, $b = .24$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.44], even after taking the preceding level of life satisfaction into account (H1 in Figure 1).

In Step 2, the latent moderation effect was specified in the model (Figure 2(b)). In the structural equation model with latent interaction terms, initial life satisfaction, $b = .55$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.66], and conduct achievement, $b = .21$, $p = .034$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.40], still positively predicted the lagged life satisfaction over time, and this is aligned with the results in Step 1. Results indicated that independent self-construal did not moderate the effect of conduct achievement, $b = .46$, $p = .179$, 95% CI [-0.21, 1.12] (H2 in Figure 1). Yet, the positive influence from conduct achievement to lagged life satisfaction was conditional on one's level of interdependent self-construal, $b = .73$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [0.14, 1.33] (H3 in Figure 1). To delineate the moderation pattern of interdependent self-construal (see Figure 3), a simple slope analysis was performed to test the effect of conduct achievement on lagged life satisfaction at two levels of interdependent self-construal (1 SD above and below mean value). For those who endorsed a relatively stronger interdependent self-construal, having conduct achievement positively predicted their life satisfaction over a year, $b = .54$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.90]. Among those who had a relatively lower level of interdependent self-construal, conduct achievement had no effect on life satisfaction over time, $b = -.13$, $p = .394$, 95% CI [-0.42, 0.16].

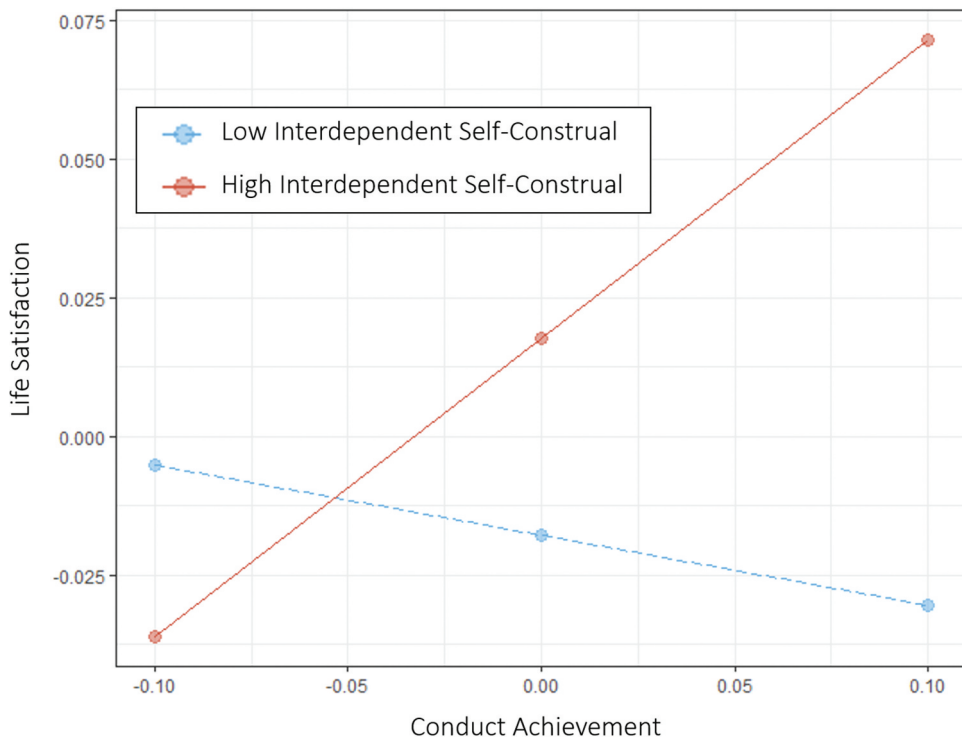


Figure 3. Simple slope plot for the moderation effect of interdependent self-construal on the association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction.

Supplementary Analyses

To assess the robustness of the results and fully utilize the collected data, we performed three sets of supplementary analyses for different purposes.

First, previous studies have indicated that self-construal might be regulated by gender (e.g. Foels & Tomcho, 2009; Russell et al., 2017) and grade level (e.g. Dixon, 2007; Takata, 1999). Therefore, we examined whether gender (male vs. female) and grade level (junior vs. senior grades) would further moderate the moderation effect of interdependent self-construal, resulting in a test of a possible three-way interaction. Using moderated regression analysis, we found that the three-way interaction effects of both gender, $b = .02$, $p = .697$, 95% CI $[-0.08, 0.12]$, and grade level, $b = .35$, $p = .425$, 95% CI $[-0.51, 1.21]$, were not significant, indicating that the previously reported moderation effect of interdependent self-construal was invariant across gender groups and grade levels.

Second, it is not uncommon to observe a skewed distribution in problematic school behaviours, such as school suspension and infractions (e.g. Amemiya et al., 2020; Hemphill et al., 2014), in previous research. To examine whether the present data posed a similar methodological concern that could impact the robustness of our results, we assessed the skewness and kurtosis of conduct achievement. The results revealed that the distribution of conduct achievement exhibited only a mild deviation from normality, with *skewness* = 0.19 and *excess kurtosis* = -0.76. According to the conventional cut-offs between -2 and +2 (George & Mallery, 2019), the distribution can be considered as approximating a normal distribution. Given the mild level of non-normality, our previously reported results should be valid, as we analysed the data using the robust maximum likelihood estimator, which is robust to mild non-normal data (Maydeu-Olivares, 2017; Yuan et al., 2005). To further address this methodological concern, we log-transformed the data of conduct achievement and re-examined whether interdependent self-construal moderated the effect of conduct achievement. The moderated regression results indicated the same moderation pattern of interdependent self-construal, demonstrating the robustness of our findings.

Third, we observed a negative correlation between age level and students' life satisfaction, $r = -.12$, $p = .006$, suggesting that older students generally reported lower life satisfaction. However, this conclusion may be premature, as the effect of age could be completely confounded by the cohort effect (i.e. grade level in this case). To fully utilize the one-year follow-up data on student's life satisfaction, we considered our design as a simplified version of an accelerated longitudinal design (or cross-sequential design) that can capture developmental changes in students' life satisfaction while accounting for cohort differences (Galbraith et al., 2017). Given that the change in students' life satisfaction was only captured by two time points in this research (unlike the typical accelerated longitudinal design with multiple time points), we conducted a mixed-design ANOVA to examine the developmental changes across different cohorts (i.e. different grade levels). The results indicated that 1) grade level did not moderate the developmental change of students' life satisfaction, $F(4, 568) = 1.96$, $p = .099$, and 2) lower life satisfaction was reported among older students in all grade levels, $F(1, 568) = 35.90$, $p < .001$.

Preliminary discussion

In Study 1 (quantitative phrase), conduct achievement did reveal a positive effect on one's life satisfaction, while this association also varied depending on different levels of interdependent self-construal. Among those who had a higher need for affiliation and relatedness (i.e. high in interdependent self-construal), conduct achievement did affect life satisfaction. For those who had a lower interpersonal need (i.e. low in interdependent self-construal), conduct achievement had no effect on life satisfaction. Thus, it is likely that, to students, conduct achievement may be perceived as an interpersonal achievement that highlights interpersonal harmony with others (e.g. teachers).

Interestingly, independent self-construal did not moderate the effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction. That means, no matter whether the students have a strong need for personal

accomplishments or not (i.e. high vs. low independent self-construal), the effect did not vary. It is possible that, for these students, conduct achievement is not perceived as a feature of their uniqueness and personal achievement.

Study 2: qualitative phase

Built upon our quantitative results, our qualitative inquiry aimed at consolidating our understanding of the meaning and impact of conduct achievement to students and thus sought to answer the following two research questions:

Research Question 1: What does conduct achievement mean to secondary school students?

Research Question 2: How important is conduct achievement to secondary school students?

Method

Participants and procedure

To gain a deeper understanding of the context in which our research was conducted while allowing for independent data collection and analysis, we recruited students from the same school to participate in the qualitative part while ensuring no overlapping of participants in the qualitative and quantitative studies. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of conduct achievement, we sampled participants based on four criteria of grade level (junior and senior grades), gender (male and female), academic performance (below and above average), and conduct rating (moderate and high levels). The sixth author utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants until data saturation was achieved (Thorogood & Green, 2013). Overall, the four participants represent different combinations: two males and two females, two juniors and two seniors, two with below average academic performance and two with above average academic performance, and two with moderate conduct ratings and two with high conduct ratings. Specifically, the participants are one boy from junior grade (JM1) with below average academic performance and a high conduct rating, one girl from junior grade (JF1) with below average academic performance and a moderate conduct rating, one boy from senior grade (SM2) with above average academic performance and a moderate conduct rating, and one girl from senior grade (SF2) with above average academic performance and a high conduct rating.

To address our two research questions, we conducted four semi-structured individual interviews using Zoom, a cloud-based online videoconferencing platform that allows secure audio and video recording and encrypted storage of data files. The interview was facilitated by the third and fifth authors, who are experts in conducting qualitative interviews. The first and fourth authors were also present in all interviews as observers. Each interview lasted between 18 and 24 minutes. Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of the first author's institution. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents and verbal informed assent was obtained from the adolescents. The parents and adolescents also agreed to have the interview audio and video recorded.

Interview protocol

Our semi-structured interview protocol was built upon our two research questions on the lived experiences of the adolescents regarding the meaning and importance of conduct achievement. After the participants answered our main research questions, follow-up questions were asked to encourage participants to confirm, clarify, and give concrete examples to elaborate on their experiences.

Data analysis plan

Data collection and data analysis were performed simultaneously. After each interview, the recorded audio clip was first transcribed into Traditional Chinese by the fourth author and was then translated into English by the first and third authors. Audio records and all transcribed and translated materials were checked repeatedly to ensure equivalence. The textual data were then imported into NVIVO 11 Plus for thematic analysis. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis by getting familiar with the qualitative data through reading and rereading, identifying and coding relevant statements, reorganizing and collating codes into potential themes, reviewing themes to ensure applicability to the two research questions, defining and naming relevant themes, and finally, establishing theoretical links between data and existing literature and selecting meaningful extracts to illustrate each theme. Thematic saturation was achieved after participant SF2 was interviewed, as no new themes were identified from further observations and analysis (Thorogood & Green, 2013).

Results

Two main themes and four subthemes emerged from the qualitative data. Theme 1: *conduct achievement is teachers' subjective evaluation and is incomplete*, with Subtheme 1.1: *in the eyes of teachers only*; and Subtheme 1.2: *not the full picture*. Theme 2: *conduct achievement is something nice but not the most important*, with Subtheme 2.1: *nice-to-have, not must-have*; Subtheme 2.2: *not the main source of life satisfaction*.

Theme 1: conduct achievement is teachers' subjective evaluation and is incomplete

The adolescents generally viewed conduct achievement as teachers' favourable evaluation of students' overt behaviour within the school context, which was subjective and biased, and did not necessarily reflect the full picture of the students' conduct.

Subtheme 1.1: in the eyes of teachers only. The adolescents believed that conduct achievement reflected how good students were '*in the eyes of teachers*' (SM2). It was '*merely from the teachers' viewpoint*' (SM2) and could be '*biased*' (SM2). Some adolescents even coined the conduct rating as an '*impression score*' (JF1), reflecting their perception that conduct achievement was an indicator of the teachers' good impression of the students. The adolescents believed that such an impression could not be easily changed once it was established, as mentioned by SM2: '*Using myself as an example, I was rather naughty during my junior years. I was always called into the teachers' office . . . And probably because of this preexisting impression, no matter how much I have changed during my senior years, I am still (perceived to be) a naughty student.*'

Interestingly, though the conduct rating was given by the head teacher, some adolescents thought that it was an integrated score drawing from the observations of different teachers. Therefore, students had to maintain a good impression not only with the head teachers, but with all other teachers as well. As expressed by JM1 and JF1:

JM1: 'It's not just how well you get along with the head teacher, but also with other teachers . . . (The head teacher) would talk to different teachers and ask around, "How did this student perform in class? Did he/she show any respect to you?"'

JF1: I think conduct rating does not come from one teacher only, it's from all subject teachers.

Subtheme 1.2: not the full picture. The adolescents believed that conduct achievement reflected only a part of the students' true conduct: '*Conduct rating is somehow related to the true conduct . . . the evaluation is based on your conduct behavior*' (JF1). However, the students also described the conduct rating as not '*that accurate*' (JF1) in depicting one's true conduct: it represented '*30–40%*' of a person's whole conduct at most (SM2 and SF2) and did not represent '*who you are*' (SF2).

The adolescents generally thought that conduct achievement failed to capture the full picture of one's conduct, as expressed by SF2: *'Conduct achievement does not necessarily reflect one's conduct. Sometimes it only reflects your (good) performance at school, not your whole person, not what you do outside, not what you do at home.'* She further explained it with an example: *'My classmates are very respectful in front of teachers. However, they talk behind the teachers' back and maliciously speculate (the teachers') intention'* (SF2).

In brief, the adolescents believed that conduct achievement was largely based on the teachers' favourable subjective impression. The rating only provided a partial or sometimes inaccurate or even contradictory depiction of students' overall conduct.

Theme 2: conduct achievement is something nice but not the most important

The adolescents generally believed that conduct achievement was relatively unimportant in their life. They believed that it was something nice to have but was never an important goal to pursue. They did not view conduct achievement as the main source of life satisfaction, as there were many other sources of happiness that contributed more to their life satisfaction.

Subtheme 2.1: nice-to-have, not must-have. Overall, the adolescents cared little about conduct achievement, as mentioned by SF2 and SM2.

(Conduct achievement) is not something I value most ... it's not something important ... it isn't of any practical use. (SF2)

It's just something to show to the parents and other teachers. (SM2)

Despite that, conduct achievement was still something nice to have, as expressed by JM1: *'I don't really care (about the conduct rating), but still, the higher the better ... just don't be too low ... it's not okay to be lower than most classmates.'* Nevertheless, they would still feel unhappy if they received a low conduct rating, as mentioned by JM1: *'I will feel disappointed, and my morale will be lowered,'* probably because conduct achievement was a *'recognition'* (JF1) to them after all.

Despite their feeling that conduct achievement was something nice to have, the adolescents generally believed that it was not important enough to make an effort for, as stated by JF1 and SM2:

I won't deliberately do something against my will just for the conduct rating. (JF1)

It won't last if I change myself intentionally to get higher conduct rating. It will be just too hard for me to change because I cannot be myself then. (SM2)

Subtheme 2.2: not the main source of life satisfaction. The adolescents did not consider conduct achievement to be their main source of life satisfaction. When asked to rank their sources of life satisfaction, family, friends, and academic achievement topped the list. However, because family was a key source of life satisfaction, if parents cared about conduct achievement, the conduct rating could impact the adolescents' relationship with their parents, which in turn would affect the adolescents' life satisfaction. For example, JF1 mentioned that her mother had high expectations of her, so if she got a low conduct rating, her mother would put pressure on her to *'act'* better in class. JF1's experience illustrates how the conduct rating could create parent-child tension and thus affect the adolescents' life satisfaction. Yet, conduct achievement was rarely valued by the parents. Most parents, according to the adolescents, rated academic achievement far more important than conduct achievement. As expressed by SM2: *'(My parents) don't care much about conduct rating ... what matters most now is academic achievement, conduct achievement is only secondary.'*

In brief, the adolescents believed that conduct achievement was merely something nice to have, but was not a main source of life satisfaction. However, conduct achievement might have an indirect effect on life satisfaction, largely hinging on how much the adolescents' parents cared about it.

Discussion

Given that the relationship between conduct achievement and life satisfaction is largely unexplored in the literature, the present research aimed at addressing this gap. Conceptually, this relationship might yield mixed findings. As such, the present research also examined whether self-construal would moderate this relationship. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was adopted, with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. In the quantitative investigation (Study 1), we found that conduct achievement positively predicted one's life satisfaction over time. Furthermore, aligned with our expectations, this temporal relationship was positively moderated by one's interdependent self-construal, with the positive association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction becoming stronger for those who endorsed high interdependent self-construal. We did not observe the moderation effect of independent self-construal; thus, our moderation hypotheses were partly supported. In the qualitative investigation (Study 2), two main themes and four subthemes were extracted to help us understand the meaning and impact of conduct achievement to students. Simply put, the students generally conduct achievement was good to have but not essential for life satisfaction. They also regarded conduct achievement as a partial, subjective assessment by teachers, reflecting their impression in the eyes of teachers.

What conduct achievement means and why it matters

The positive association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction observed in the present study is consistent with the previous research on behavioural misconduct and engagement in school. Misconduct behaviours have been shown to yield negative influences on life satisfaction (e.g. McKnight et al., 2002; Suldo et al., 2008), while school engagement behaviours (e.g. compliance with school rules) yielded positive influences on student's psychological well-being, such as positive affect and flourishing (e.g. Datu, 2018; Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Lyons & Huebner, 2016). Integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings, the present research also reveals the possible reasons why conduct achievement matters for one's life satisfaction.

First, our quantitative results show that conduct achievement is more strongly associated with life satisfaction among those who had a higher need for affiliation and relatedness (i.e. high in interdependent self-construal), whereas our qualitative investigation reveals that students generally regard conduct ratings as reflecting how teachers see them. Therefore, from the perspective of students, conduct achievement may signify having a good relationship with teachers, which then explains why it matters for life satisfaction.

Typically, teachers rate students' conduct performance based on how they behave in school. Achieving good conduct may imply that they have fulfilled their teachers' expectations of a good, docile, and cooperative student, indicating that they are in a harmonious relationship with their teachers. Empirical findings echo this. It has been found that students with more problematic behaviours in school had a lower level of closeness with teachers (Shin & Kim, 2008), a poorer teacher-student relationship (Murray & Murray, 2004; Rydell & Henricsson, 2004), and more conflicts with teachers (Nurmi, 2012). Besides, Ali et al. (2015) meta-analysed 16 effect sizes involving 2,160 students and showed that school conduct was positively associated with students' perception of teacher acceptance (see also Geng et al., 2020). Such a positive perception of the teacher-student relationship may fulfil adolescents' basic need to feel close to and get support from their teachers (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016), in turn contributing to various positive outcomes, such as more emotional security (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), better psychological adjustment (Ali et al., 2015), and higher life satisfaction (Natvig et al., 2003; Suldo & Huebner, 2005).

Second, other than symbolizing the teacher-student relationship, conduct achievement may imply that students have fulfilled their parents' expectations that they be a good student. Our qualitative inquiry shows that some parents do care about conduct achievement. Thus, it is possible for conduct achievement to affect students' life satisfaction through affecting the parent-child

relationship. Mo and Singh (2008) showed that student behavioural engagement in school was positively correlated with a positive parent-child relationship. Through obtaining conduct achievement, students may receive compliments or rewards from their parents, facilitating a better quality of parent-child relationship. Such a positive relationship with parents has a positive influence on life satisfaction (Jiménez-Iglesias et al., 2017), subjective well-being (Leung & Leung, 1992), and psychological adjustment (Ali et al., 2015).

Finally, apart from teacher-student and parent-child relationships, peer relationships should also be considered as an important perspective to understand what conduct achievement symbolizes to students. Our qualitative data indeed highlights the importance of peer relationships, with adolescents ranking their 'friends' as the primary source of life satisfaction. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that peer relationships could shape adolescents' self-concept formation (Hay & Ashman, 2003) and overall life satisfaction (Oberle et al., 2011). Since adolescents are highly influenced by peer norms and behaviours (Allen et al., 2005), peer relationships may regulate adolescents' school behaviours, such as school engagement (Li et al., 2011) and antisocial behaviours (Deković et al., 2004). For instance, it is possible for adolescents to please or challenge their favourite or disliked teachers in alignment with their peer group, as a means of maintaining or strengthening their peer relationships. Consequently, these school behaviours serve as indicators of their performance in conduct achievement, which in turn affects their life satisfaction through its influence on peer relationships.

Conduct achievement affects life satisfaction depending on self-construal

Aligned with our expectations, the temporal effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction is moderated by interdependent self-construal. Specifically, conduct achievement was positively associated with life satisfaction among those who are high in interdependent self-construal, while it has no effect on life satisfaction among those who are low in interdependent self-construal. Our qualitative inquiry may shed light on the reasons for this. In general, students believe that the conduct rating is a product of a teacher's evaluation of the student, reflecting the way teachers subjectively see them. Therefore, conduct achievement may have relevant downstream consequences through how they perceive teachers see them.

People high in interdependent self-construal are relational-oriented, emphasize social relationships, and believe others are important and valuable (Wei et al., 2022). As such, interdependent self-construal tends to motivate people to fulfil the interpersonal need (Cross et al., 2011). Since students' conduct achievement may reflect the extent that teachers positively view them, its effect should be more substantial among those who have a strong need for affiliation and relatedness. Ren et al. (2013) found that people with interdependent self-construal had more cognitive accessibility to social resources. Thus, it is possible for the students who are high in interdependent self-construal to recall more frequently the favourable memory of a conduct achievement that reflects their good relationship with their teachers, thereby yielding a stronger effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction across time. The moderation effect of interdependent self-construal observed in the present research is indeed consistent with previous studies. For instance, Shelton et al. (2017) demonstrated that having more social support predicted higher life satisfaction and lower stress and anxiety among those high in interdependent self-construal than low interdependent self-construal. De Almeida et al. (2022) showed that people high in interdependent self-construal felt and expressed higher degrees of happiness in shared situations than in non-shared situations.

As discussed above, conduct achievement may also imply a parent-child relationship that can be linked to interdependent self-construal. Under the influence of a collectivistic culture, our current sample of Hong Kong Chinese students are strongly expected to perform well in school from both the academic and conduct perspectives (Guo et al., 2022; Mo & Singh, 2008). King and Ganotice (2015) demonstrated that among students high in interdependent self-construal, family obligations predicted school engagement more strongly, revealing that students high in interdependent self-

construal tend to regard their good performance in school as a means to repay their parents for the care they have been given. Taken together, it is theoretically possible to observe a stronger effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction among students high in interdependent self-construal simply because they consider their good conduct award as being indicative of satisfying their parents' expectations.

Furthermore, the moderation effect of interdependent self-construal can be explained in a similar manner based on the relation between conduct achievement and peer relationships. For instance, attaining a favourable conduct rating (i.e. pleasing teachers who are favoured by the peer group) can signify being perceived as a 'fair' member within the peer group, thereby contributing to the maintenance of those peer relationships. Consequently, the impact of conduct achievement may be stronger among students with a high level of interdependent self-construal, as they place greater emphasis on peer relationships compared to those with a low level of interdependent self-construal. This explanation finds support in previous empirical research. For instance, Kawabata et al. (2014) discovered that relational-interdependent self-construal amplified the harmful effect of relational victimization by peers on depressive symptoms, highlighting the heightened sensitivity to peer groups among those who prioritize relational connections.

The present research did not find a moderation effect of independent self-construal on the relationship between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. Our qualitative investigation reveals that students generally believe that conduct ratings are largely determined by the subjective perception of their teachers and are incomplete in that they reflect a fraction of their 'true' conduct. Therefore, it is likely that students regard conduct achievement as an interpersonal achievement, rather than a personal achievement that can symbolize their individual effort and active agency in accomplishing this personal goal (Elliot et al., 2001). Given that many schools have reduced their emphasis and recognition on conduct achievement because in reality, academic performance is more important for the students' future development (Rana & Mahmood, 2010), future research is needed to further elucidate whether conduct achievement connotes a personal achievement and signature of uniqueness.

Implications

Briefly put, our quantitative and qualitative investigations indicated that students see conduct ratings as reflecting how teachers see them and therefore, attaining conduct achievement, which signifies a good relationship with teachers, benefits them through enhancing their life satisfaction. Besides, it had been shown that this beneficial effect was particularly salient for those who had a higher need for affiliation and relatedness (i.e. high in interdependent self-construal). These findings may have implications in school context and the developmental trajectory of adolescents.

First, educators should recognize the importance of conduct achievement and its positive impact on adolescents' life satisfaction. Apart from dominantly recognizing and promoting academic achievement among students, schools should begin with enacting initiatives to provide more explicit recognition to students with conduct achievement. To further promote conduct achievement among students, educators could consider incorporating social and emotional learning programmes into the curriculum to support the development of key skills and competencies related to conduct achievement (Taylor et al., 2017). Built upon the moderation effects of interdependent self-construal, construing students as fundamentally connected to others and defined by relationships with others may help raising their awareness about the importance of conduct achievement. In this regard, for the students who consistently exhibit problematic conduct behaviours, school counselors may provide therapeutic interventions that help students to construe a more salient interdependent self. For instance, narrative therapy techniques may be used to construct their identity in social context and in relation with others (Combs & Freedman, 2016; Elderton et al., 2014).

Second, enhancing students' awareness about the importance of conduct achievement and further promoting it among students can be crucial to prevent the development of antisocial

outcomes throughout their lives. Based on the developmental psychopathology perspective, severity of childhood conduct problems and teen conduct disorder contributed to the risk for antisocial personality disorders in adults (Fischer et al., 2002). Previous research found that the levels of callous and unemotional (CU) traits measured in early adolescence were highly predictive of antisocial outcomes throughout their lives, such as adult arrests and early adult antisocial personality disorder criterion count and diagnosis (McMahon et al., 2010). Since CU traits generally refer to a lack of guilt, empathy, concern about performance in important activities, and deficient affect, attaining conduct achievement or not could be the behavioural manifestations of one's level of CU traits. Promoting conduct achievement among adolescents may functionally regulate their levels of CU traits, thereby preventing the development of antisocial outcomes throughout their lives. Goulter et al. (2020) found that perceived warmth from parents predicted a lower level of CU traits; thus, attaining conduct achievement, which signifies the support from teachers, may increase student's perceived warmth from teachers, further lowering their levels of CU traits.

Limitations and future directions

This research has some limitations. First, the school from which we recruited our participants is commonly regarded, albeit unofficially, as a 'Band 1' school, reflecting its prestigious reputation and academic excellence. Students from such schools may exhibit different psychological and behavioural patterns compared to those from schools with lower band classifications. Previous research has indicated that students from lower band schools tended to experience more school-related problems, peer relationship issues, and adjustment difficulties compared to students from higher band schools (Hui, 2000). To enhance the broader relevance and generalizability of the current findings, future research should explore the meaning and function of conduct achievement among students across schools with different band classifications.

Second, previous research has demonstrated that in schools where teacher expectations were low, students often perceived receiving less support from teachers and exhibited higher rates of school misconduct (Demaneet & Van Houtte, 2012). These observations reflect the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy, wherein one's erroneous beliefs lead to their own fulfilment (Merton, 1948). For instance, when teachers hold low expectations towards students, they may invest less effort in teaching, and students, in turn, may respond with misconduct as a reaction to their perceived unfavourable treatment from teachers (Demaneet & Van Houtte, 2012). Similarly, in addition to teachers' expectation bias, parental expectation bias can influence adolescents' problematic behaviours in a similar manner (Madon et al., 2003). Therefore, future research should collect information about teachers' and parental expectations towards students and investigate whether these expectation biases would affect conduct achievement and its subsequent impact on life satisfaction.

Third, while the current longitudinal design provides more robust evidence of the impact of conduct achievement on life satisfaction than previous cross-sectional studies, it is still far from ideal due to three limitations. One limitation is that the current sample only included participants aged 11 to 17, leaving it unclear whether the positive effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction extends to younger age groups. Theoretically, younger children may view teachers and parents as more significant figures (Bokhorst et al., 2010), suggesting a potentially stronger effect of conduct achievement among this demographic. Another limitation is that this study only tracked life satisfaction over time, leaving the potential reciprocal relationship between conduct achievement and life satisfaction unexplored. Previous research has indicated that behavioural engagement in school (e.g. participation in class activities and respect towards teachers) remains relatively stable over time (e.g. stability coefficient = .77 in Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, a longer follow-up period for conduct achievement may be necessary to allow for a more substantial temporal fluctuation in the investigation of the reciprocal relationship between conduct achievement and life satisfaction. A further limitation is the lack of examination regarding potential mechanisms that could explain the importance of conduct achievement for

life satisfaction (e.g. teacher-student, parent-child, and peer relationships, as discussed earlier). To explicitly examine these notions, mediation and mediated moderation analyses should be used to unpack the effects of conduct achievement and interdependent self-construal (Ng et al., 2019, 2019). To address all these limitations, future research should 1) expand the age range of samples, 2) implement a cross-lagged panel study with multiple time points over a longer interval, and 3) gather information related to teacher-student, parent-child, and peer relationships.

Finally, the present research was conducted among Hong Kong Chinese, who are expected to be influenced by the collectivistic culture. A critical concern is to what extent the key findings of this study, namely the effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction and the moderation effect of interdependent self-construal, can be generalized to other cultural contexts, such as individualistic cultures. These inquiries depend on the fundamental meaning of conduct achievement for individuals in individualistic cultures. On the one hand, conduct achievement may hold a similar meaning for members of individualistic cultures, where being rated as having good conduct signifies and has implications for one's relationships with teachers, parents, and peers. In this regard, it is expected that conduct achievement may have minimal beneficial effects on life satisfaction among members of individualistic cultures, as social relationships may not be as essential to them (Kwan et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2016). Additionally, the positive moderation effect of interdependent self-construal is expected to remain, as it captures the within-culture differences in relational orientation among members of individualistic cultures (Kitayama et al., 2014). On the other hand, conduct achievement may symbolize something different for members of individualistic cultures. For example, being rated as having good conduct may represent a personal achievement and highlight their uniqueness, eliciting emotions of pride and superiority (Dewaele & Li, 2021; King & Gaerlan, 2014). In this vein, conduct achievement may have a stable positive effect on life satisfaction, aligning with previous research demonstrating the importance of personal competence in individualistic cultures (Chen et al., 2012, 2006). Based on this reasoning, one may expect a different moderation effect of self-construal, as the meaning of conduct achievement in individualistic cultures differs. Specifically, independent self-construal, rather than interdependent self-construal, should moderate the positive effect of conduct achievement on life satisfaction since individuals high in independent self-construal have a strong desire for personal uniqueness and accomplishments (Brutus & Greguras, 2008; Kagitcibasi, 2005). To examine these speculative claims, future research should be conducted to include individualistic cultures (or other culturally diverse contexts) in order to investigate whether the meaning and function of conduct achievement are culturally variant or invariant.

To conclude, this research investigated an unexplored association between conduct achievement and life satisfaction using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings, we found that conduct achievement may exert a temporal effect on life satisfaction, while students' perceived harmony in their relationships with both their teachers and parents may possibly be the mechanisms for this effect. Furthermore, it was observed that interdependent self-construal could moderate this effect and thus these moderation findings may help reconcile the mixed literature concerning the associations of behavioural misconduct and engagement in school with life satisfaction.

Notes

1. Previous studies had consistently shown that the Big Five personality traits were associated with life satisfaction (e.g. Lyons et al., 2016; Suldo et al., 2014; Weber & Huebner, 2015). Therefore, we included Big Five personality traits as the covariates to offer a more robust analysis in the present research.
2. Although there is no official banding system for secondary schools in Hong Kong, the school from which we recruited our participants is commonly regarded, albeit unofficially, as a 'Band 1' school (out of three bands). This classification is based on its high intake of Band 1 students. Band 1 students represent the top one-third of primary school graduates in terms of academic merit, as determined by

the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) System of the Education Bureau in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Research involving human participants and/or animals

The present research involved human participants. Informed consent was obtained in advance from all adolescents as well as their parents in written form. The study procedure has been approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Project No.: HSEARS20221125001). The present research did not involve animals.

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