frontiers | Frontiers in Education

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 30 July 2024
DOI 10.3389/feduc.2024.1393968

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 29 February 2024
ACCEPTED 11 July 2024
PUBLISHED 30 July 2024

CITATION
Lo NP-K (2024) Cross-cultural comparative analysis of student motivation and autonomy in learning: perspectives from Hong Kong and the United Kingdom.
Front. Educ. 9:1393968.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1393968

Cross-cultural comparative analysis of student motivation and autonomy in learning: perspectives from Hong Kong and the United Kingdom

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Introduction: This research project examines student perspectives on independent learning in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. Independent learning describes learning undertaken by students outside of standard institutional learning environments. Prior research has suggested that motivations to undertake independent learning and the strategies involved may differ across cultural contexts, institutions, and individual learners.

Methods: This research employs primary qualitative research consisting of interviews with 16 students in Business Studies (eight British and eight Chinese). The study takes a social constructionist approach to better establish the ways in which culture may serve as a mediator for motivation to learn independently and the strategies pursued to this end.

Results: The study's findings note key differences in the motivations to complete independent learning across either cohort, as well as distinct conceptualizations of what strategies and practices facilitate effective independent learning.

Discussion: This research highlights significant cultural differences in the motivations, strategies, and skills related to independent learning between students in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. It also notes the potential for socioeconomic factors, institutional structures, and assessment methods, alongside culture, to contribute to these differences.

KEYWORDS

independent learning, learner motivation, university education, United Kingdom, Hong Kong

Introduction

This study examines the ways in which student motivation and the development of independent learning (IL) skills might differ across two different cultural contexts: that of the United Kingdom and that of Hong Kong. The study addresses a gap in the literature as to the ways in which student attitudes to student motivation and independent learning among teachers differ across these two contexts. This recognizes the ways in which cultural factors might impact how students become motivated to study and likewise the independent learning skills and strategies they adopt to this end. These questions are explored through undertaking

primary qualitative research consisting of interview with 16 students drawn from across British and Hong Kong universities subjected to thematic analysis. The following introductory section describes the study's rationale, aims and objectives, and describes its research questions.

Independent learning describes the process by which individuals take responsibility for their own learning rather than relying on instruction or guidance from teachers or other educators (Meyer et al., 2008). There are a number of supposed benefits to undertaking IL backed up by research, such as improved learning outcomes (Berthold et al., 2007), better grades (Meyer et al., 2008), and a good work-life balance (Romero, 2011). Furthermore, students who practice IL go on to have better learning skills beyond formal education and appear to be correlated with improved career outcomes (Shi, 2017). There are therefore a number of reasons why it may be beneficial for learners to engage in independent learning.

In practice, IL usually means taking charge of one's own learning outside of the classroom, which in itself requires the development of certain strategies for independent learning as well as relevant learning skills (Vinikas, 2023). This is to say that effective independent learning appears to be contingent upon certain competencies – a claim that is backed up by research For example, effective IL appears to be contingent upon organizational skills, such as goal setting, time management, and making effective use of resources (Nabizadeh et al., 2019). Some learning strategies appear to be better correlated with improved learning outcomes than others, (Harvey and Chickie-Wolfe, 2007), though past research into independent learning has suggested that its conceptualization might differ across cultural contexts (Susiani et al., 2022). This complicates the matters, as it is unclear, according to current research, whether the variation in IL strategies across different cultures may be correlated with differing learning outcomes.

A further relevant factor when it comes to IL appears to be motivation. At a theoretical level, a desire to undertake independent learning, or at the very least, a broad motivation to learn ought to serve as the driving force behind practicing IL. The relationship between student motivation and IL is supported by research that positively correlates self-reported student motivation with time spent engaging in independent learning (Sumbawati et al., 2020). There is also research to suggest that motivation corresponds with better outcomes from independent learning (Rustamovna and Obloberdiyevna, 2023). However, there is research to suggest that what motivates individuals to learn differs across cultural context (McCaffery, 1986). This indicates some of the difficulty with making generalized statements about the relationships between student motivation and independent learning that are transferrable across all cultural contexts.

The above background demonstrates both the importance of understanding how IL can be harnessed by students, including the conditions and competencies that facilitate practicing IL. However, with regards to both IL and motivation, cultural context can apparently mediate how students are motivated to learn and how they conceptualize and undertake IL. For this reason, it is important to better understand how learners across diverse cultural contexts are motivated to engage in independent learning.

As the literature review below reveals, there is a gap in the research in this regard. Studies indicate that there are cultural differences in what motivates students to engage in independent learning (McCaffery, 1986), though extant studies within Chinese and British contexts are largely outdated or not pertinent to university-level study (Kember and Gow, 1990; Lai, 1994; Hockings et al., 2018). Some studies note also that motivation does not necessarily correlate with better outcomes from independent learning (Bin Abdulrahman et al., 2023), making examination of strategies and practices also potentially important, with such strategies and practices being themselves subject to cultural variation (Lo et al., 2023). The identified gaps thus require further research into the relationship between culture and IL in order to better understand such relationships as well as to inform support for students within these specific contexts. In aid of this, this study compares student motivation and IL across two contexts: the United Kingdom and Hong Kong.

This research project has several aims and objectives behind it. First, it aims to better understand how the factors that motivate students to engage in independent learning might differ across cultural contexts. Second, it aims to understand how independent learning is differently conceptualized across cultural contexts and how this might affect the strategies used by students to this end. Third, it seeks to discover what commonalities exist between cultures that otherwise differ with respect to the relationship between student motivation and independent learning. These aims and objectives have guided the development of the research questions below.

The aims and objectives listed above may be formulated as research questions in order to guide the design of this research project. This study's three research questions are:

- How do students of British and Hong Kong universities perceive their motivation to engage in independent learning?
- How do British and Hong Kong university students conceptualize independent learning?
- What skills and strategies do university students from the United Kingdom and Hong Kong associate with effective independent learning?

Answering these research questions has guided the design of the research, as is detailed in the Methodology section below.

The research project is presented according to the following structure. First, a review of the literature is carried out, focusing on the relationships between motivation and independent learning, as well as examining how social and cultural factors play a role in mediating these practices. The study's Methodology section describes and justifies the project's research methods and design, setting out the rationale behind using primary qualitative research and specifically the thematic analysis of interview data. The study's findings are thereafter reported, reporting findings for analysis of interviews with students in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong separately before discussing the similarities and differences across their responses. These findings alongside reflection on the study's contributions and limitations are summarized in the concluding section.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature on the topics of student motivation and independent learning, focusing especially on literature carried out from within cross-cultural contexts and especially those of Hong Kong and the United Kingdom.

The potential for learner motivation to be conceptualized differently across cultural contexts is implied by the diversity of theories explaining learner motivation. For example, there are five main theories of learner motivation across the current literature: attribution theory; expectancy value theory; self-efficacy theory; achievement goal theory; self-determination theory (Svinicki and Vogler, 2012). Specific theories such as attribution theory allow for culture to play a role in learner motivation and how it corresponds with learning outcomes (Ogan et al., 2009), while other perspectives such as self-efficacy hold cognitive factors as instrumental (Bandura et al., 2001). There is therefore little consensus on the mechanisms at a theoretical level.

From the perspective of attribution theory, for example, learners will typically attempt to account for past successes and failures by attributing these outcomes to various causes (Weiner, 2010). This is highly dependent upon past experience and subsequent expectations for how learning events should occur, according to which a failure, for example, might be attributed to different actions or circumstances in comparison with past experiences of successful learning. Repeat success or failure might thus be attributed to the student's inherent aptitude for learning, to the quality of teaching received, or perhaps to their study strategies. Whether students engage in independent learning and how they do this is therefore supposedly explicable in terms of how students attribute their learning outcomes to independent learning experiences. Research suggests that students' learning outcomes are influenced by their attributions, which can be shaped by their past experiences and expectations (Hatteberg, 2022). These attributions can be influenced by the quality of teaching and the students' learning processes (Christ et al., 2022). Students' expectations of teaching and learning, particularly their readiness for independent learning, are also important factors (Tomlinson et al., 2023). Furthermore, students' digital competences, self-organization, and independent learning abilities can influence their acceptance of digital learning (Scheel et al., 2022).

Expectations are relevant also in other theories of motivation, such as expectancy value theory. The expectancy-value theory of motivation, as discussed by Lee and Song (2022), Wang and Xue (2022), Jiang and Zhang (2023), and Poort et al. (2023), is a crucial lens through which to understand the motivation of students in completing learning tasks. This theory emphasizes the perceived expectancies and value of tasks, which can vary across different cultures and influence student motivation. For instance, in language education, learners' perceived ability and the value they place on learning can significantly impact their motivation (Wang and Xue, 2022). In MOOC learning, academic self-efficacy and task value are key factors influencing learning persistence (Lee and Song, 2022). In intercultural group work, self-efficacy, perceived benefit, and perceived cost are important predictors of student engagement (Poort et al., 2023). In high school students, their expectancy, value, and cost beliefs in math and English domains can significantly impact their engagement and achievement (Jiang and Zhang, 2023). These studies collectively highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the diverse cultural and individual factors that shape students' motivation in completing learning tasks.

Learners are motivated to engage in tasks such as independent learning when they assign a certain value to that task and on the basis of how likely they feel they are to achieve that task (Leaper, 2011). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) argue that there are four main ways in which tasks are categories: the status value of whatever its attainment confers; the utility of the task to the individual; the intrinsic enjoyment value of the task; and what the cost of completing the task successfully may be. Studies show that student motivation is indeed linked to some of these factors, such as their expectation as to how likely or easy it will be to complete a task perceived as valuable (Wigfield et al., 2006). More importantly, there is a balancing act between the perceived value domains of tasks: what is socially valuable may not be equivalent to what is personally useful to a client. For instance, a student may be motivated to engage in independent learning as it will confer skills that are useful to their career, but demotivated as it is a solitary task and decreases their social status. How different cultures potentially value various learning tasks and outcomes is therefore highly influential with respect to how students are motivated to complete learning tasks according to the expectancy-value theory.

An alternative perspective on interpreting student motivation is that of self-efficacy theory. Self-efficacy theory holds that students are motivated by their expectation of success with respect to a task (Bandura et al., 2001). Unlike expectancy value theory, which attaches value to outcomes of tasks, self-efficacy theory holds that student motivation is linked to whether they believe they will successfully complete the task. If a student feels that they are unlikely to successfully complete the tasks, they will be demotivated toward completing it regardless of its intended outcome. This theory elevates the role of self-regulation in study as a consequence of this, effectively rendering all independent study as contingent upon whether a student feels they can successfully meet their aims through completing independent study (Tuckman and Sexton, 1991). A student that does not believe they have sufficient strategies to learn independently will therefore, according to this theory, be unmotivated to make the attempt at all and potentially become disillusioned with attaining the intended outcome of that learning also (e.g., attaining a university degree). How students feel about independent study and their capacity to undertake it successfully is therefore potentially illustrative of how far they will attempt to study at all.

A further theoretical approach to understanding learner motivation is achievement goal theory, which links learner motivation to specific task-related goals. Achievement goal theory sorts the intended goals for undertaking learning into types, such as ego-related goals – where individuals desire to be perceived as competent – and mastery-involved goals – where individuals seek to master tasks and skills (Nicholls et al., 1990). According to this theory, students may prefer one type of goal over another – e.g., some may seek to learn because it will improve their social standing, whereas others may seek to learn to make them more competent at completing specific tasks. This is related to the individualist-collectivist social value types discussed below, but is also relevant in terms of how it affects the study decisions made by students. For example, those motivated by ego-involved goals will tend to pick tasks they already excel at, whereas those motivated by mastery-involved goals will tend toward tasks where performative failure is a possible outcome (Svinicki and Vogler, 2012).

A further relevant theory of learner motivation is self-determination theory. This theory proposed that all motivations are ultimately internal, with external factors – such as rewards for learning – being effectively internalized (or not) by the student (Deci et al., 1994). How far an individual subscribes to the value of their culture is therefore contingent on how far they have integrated those values

through the process of introjection (Ryan and Deci, 2000). This theory is therefore relevant insofar as it can potentially explain deviations from social norms where students do not integrate cultural values related to learning tasks, instead relying on alternative internal motivations to learn. It may be expected, for instance, that students in a strongly individualistic society might be more prone toward different internalized values and motivations owing to the phenomenon of value pluralism.

While not subscribing to a single theory of learner motivation, this study recognizes the potential for cultural factors to influence student motivation, as reflected in past research. For instance, Hofstede (2001) argues that individualist cultures such as the United Kingdom emphasis personal achievement and self-expression, leading to intrinsic interests motivating learning. The argument here is predicated upon the idea in part that pluralism within society renders individuals more likely to follow their own pathway in terms of education, setting their own standards for achievement and thus rendering motivation more intrinsic than extrinsic in its determination. However, individualism may also be associated with competitive more so than cooperative institutional cultures (Leibbrandt et al., 2013), suggesting also a role for extrinsic motivation to exert an influence over student behavior.

By way of contrast, more collectivist cultures such as that of China may see students motivated by more external factors, such as social status and contributing toward familial standing (Triandis, 2001). The role that one plays toward collective achievements and the opportunity to exhibit fulfillment of one's social responsibilities are assumed to motivate students in such environments. Theoretically, such societies are associated with a supportive educational environment, whereby students support each other to attain shared ends and goals rather than competing with each other (Shi et al., 2024). It is notable also that within Chinese society, familial reputation continues to play a significant role in perceptions regarding individual social roles related to study and work (Xu et al., 2007).

This broad typology for societal cultures and their relationship with student motivation is supported by research suggesting that students in individualistic cultures are motivated by mastery for its own sake, while students in collectivist cultures are more focused on goals related to performance associated with external validation (e.g., high grades, career progression) (Schunk et al., 2014). However, it is not necessarily the case that British and Chinese contexts will map perfectly onto individualist and collectivist types. For instance, some studies indicate that Chinese educational culture is highly competitive, fitting in within more of an individualist than collectivist culture (Kato and Shu, 2016). It is the case therefore that how far such assumptions may be applied in a given cultural context require empirical evidence to test.

Applying Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory to independent learning, there is conceivably a mechanism by which cultural values might impact attitudes toward autonomous learning. Other researchers also conceive of the individualist-collectivist dichotomy/spectrum as influencing educational goals, with some cultures emphasizing personal development and critical thinking and others conformity and shared knowledge (Kim, 1994). Factors such as cultural values relating to education, educational practices, and societal expectations for educational outcomes might also shape student attitudes toward IL and likewise toward the strategies they pursue insofar as some strategies may be viewed as more valuable or effective than others according to sociohistorical tradition. An individualistic society might, for example, view learning as an individualized process focused around self-regulation, whereas collectivistic societies might see students engaging in independent learning as a more communal activity.

The rationale behind studying learner motivation at all is with respect to its assumed relationship with learner behavior and performance. Motivation plays an important role in influencing learner behavior, with intrinsic motivation driven by internal rewards such as interest and enjoyment, and external motivation driven by grades and social recognition (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Students with strong intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage in strategies associated with deep learning, such as problem solving and critical thinking, as well as being more likely to independently seek out new resources and monitor their progress toward self-identified goals (Zimmerman, 2000). On the other hand, students with strong extrinsic motivations are more inclined toward rote memorization and rehearsal, with potential deficits in being able to apply knowledge in new scenarios (Lin et al., 2003). The ways in which students are motivated thus influences how they learn and potentially also how effective the strategies and practices they select prove (Pintrich, 2003).

There are a number of studies that suggest that learner motivation has a positive effect on learner performance. For example, a Chinese study carried out by Hwang et al. (2004) found that students were able to enjoy an increased learning performance based partially on the effort put into independent learning, but also contingent upon the efficacy of the strategies they employed to this end. Other studies carried out in different cultural contexts concur that motivation coupled with effective strategy is important. For example, a study carried out with German students found that learning motivation was crucial in determining student performance, but noted distinctions between motivation *style*, such as between self-efficacy and personal identity styles (Schick and Phillipson, 2009). This indicates that while motivation is generally effective, not all motivation sources and styles are equal. This may be attributable to cultural differences in what motivates students and how this motivation is manifested in strategies. Other studies contradict the general efficacy of motivation toward effective performance. For instance, a British study of 51 students found that persistence among motivated learners did not equate to higher final performance (Vollmeyer and Rheinberg, 2000). There is therefore the potential for the effects of motivation and the efficacy of certain IL strategies to differ across cultural contexts.

This problematizes understanding the relationships between learner motivation and independent learning. Some studies have noted that social factors can mediate student motivation and learner performance. For example, one study by Hosen et al. (2021) found that social media functions and individual motivation might be leveraged by higher education institutes to improve learning performance among university students, though this was not directly linked to IL. Other forms of learning practices such as knowledge sharing behavior have also been strongly linked to normative and behavioral beliefs, indicating that individual factors such as motivation might be linked to learning behaviors associated with IL.

Research studies broadly affirm the efficacy of IL on learner performance. For example, one study of medical students used both self-reporting of student assessments of their learning progress alongside testing their performance in examinations to assert that both self-perceived and actual performance were positively correlated

with time spent engaging in IL (Serrat et al., 2014). A review of the research literature on independent learning and its benefits found that improved academic performance was an outcome to practicing independent learning, as was increased motivation and confidence, as well as a more accurate self-impression of one's own level of learning or competency (Meyer et al., 2008). This indicates the importance of motivation translating into actual IL practice to improve performance, as well potentially IL having the capacity to itself enhance student motivation. However, other studies note differences in learning outcomes across groups who were taught different IL strategies (Anada, 2019).

That favored strategies may differ across cultural contexts is implied by research also. One study carried out in the United Kingdom compared foreign students with a native control group and found that the foreign group had more diverse understandings of IL and effective strategies, though that these moved closer to the native group over the course of their education in the United Kingdom (Spiro et al., 2012). Another study comparing student IL strategies across Asian and European cultures, demonstrating more differences between the two cultural groups than between countries within those groups (Marambe et al., 2012). The study noted especially a tendency for rote learning strategies such as memorization across Asian groups, though noted some commonalities across all groups also. However, the study did not measure whether some strategies were indeed more effective within certain contexts than others, or whether some strategies were generally more effective irrespective of cultural context.

A review of the literature on the subject also indicates that IL is contingent not only upon motivation – reflecting perhaps emotional and attitudinal states – but also meta-cognition, referring to how individuals understand and process information, or how effective they are at learning (Anderson, 2012). This implies the potential for a significant degree of variation in IL strategies between individual learners. How students go about IL is potentially subject to cultural differences. Theories of IL associate successful outcomes with a variety of strategies and skills, including self-regulation (Dignath et al., 2008), metacognition (EEF, 2021), and rehearsal (Biyikli and Dogan, 2015). According to a social constructionist perspective, culture may be expected to play a significant role in mediating how individuals conceive of and regard IL strategies (Maines, 2000).

That learner motivation plays a role in mediating the efficacy of IL is implied also by research. One study with Hungarian student found that self-motivation played a significant role in independent learning behavior but noted also self-regulatory strategies as influential on learner behavior (Kormos and Csizer, 2015). This reflects the reality that students may be motivated to learn but may lack the ability to regulate their time or efforts sufficiently to engage in IL. Other studies also suggest that learner autonomy and IL skills are a vital factor, without which motivation is futile (Sharafuddin and Allani, 2015). For these reasons, it is important to recognize IL skills and strategies as important alongside motivation, contributing together to IL efficacy and translating into performance.

How learner motivation to engage in IL and what that looks like ideally to students in the contexts of Hong Kong and the United Kingdom has not been adequately compared according to past research. Studies on the strategies employed by students in United Kingdom higher education do exist and indicate that British students tend to favor reinforcing and organizing skills at a secondary level, which develop into extending and applying skills at university level (Hockings et al., 2018). However, comparable data from within the context of universities in Hong Kong is not available. While a number of studies have been carried out in Hong Kong on IL strategies, these are largely out of date (Kember and Gow, 1990; Lai, 1994). Furthermore, there is a lack of research from either context into how students perceive IL and how motivation interacts with their engagement in IL. This reflects a gap that this study is designed to close.

Methodology

This section presents the methodology behind this study, setting out its research methods and justifying them with regards to the study's aims and research questions. This begins by describing the project's theoretical framework before describing the study's research methods and design, as well as defending some of the study's decisions in terms of research ethics.

Theoretical framework

This study is carried out from within a social constructionist research paradigm. This holds that social practices contribute to the construction of cultural norms and that these norms themselves will influence individuals' social practices (Jung, 2019). By the same token, individuals make sense out of the world as mediated by cultural factors, influencing how they construct their own perception of social reality (Searle, 1996). This means that in understanding how individuals engage in learning practices, it is necessary to consider culture and its influence upon their understanding of learning and its processes.

There are also epistemic consequences as a consequence of a social constructionist perspective on research itself. For one, it entails using research methods that can assist in understanding individual beliefs, perspectives, motivations, etc. as well as their actions or behaviors. This is because individual practices are motivated by intentionality, making individual perspectives important to study (Pulla and Carter, 2018). Conversely, a narrowly positivist epistemology may be rejected on this basis because of it cannot admit immaterial phenomena to study (Burr, 2003). This has consequences for how research projects may be designed.

Research design

As recognized above, a social constructionist framework encourages studying individual perspectives and how these might interact with actions, recognizing also the cultural factors that might impact them. This recommends itself well to qualitative research at a theoretical level given the association of social constructionism with an interpretivist paradigm for research, focusing on the cognitive decision-making behind social practices themselves (O'Reilly, 2009). However, the practical demands of research questions must also be factored into methodological choices (Cresswell and Poth, 2017).

Qualitative research may be preferable to quantitative research in this context given some of the practical demands of the research questions. For one, they seek to understand student perspectives, making them better suited to qualitative research. Qualitative methods

are useful for establishing and analyzing experiences, meaning and perspectives, suiting them better to the above research questions:

> Qualitative research questions differ from quantitative research questions. Because qualitative research questions seek to explore or describe phenomena, not provide a neat nomothetic explanation, they are often more general and openly worded. […] Instead of asking how one variable causes changes in another, we are instead trying to understand the experiences, understandings, and meanings that people have about the concepts in our research question (DeCarlo et al., 2020, §9.4).

Such an approach to research better suits the research questions, which do not compare variables but perceptions of IL across contexts.

A drawback to using qualitative methods in isolation, however, is that this precludes the prospect for triangulating one set of findings against another (Mertens and Hesse-Biber, 2012). In order to offset this, robust protocols for data collection and analysis ought to be developed and employed in qualitative research (Noble and Smith, 2015).

Data collection

Deciding upon an appropriate data collection method requires assessing their suitability to the type of data required to answer research questions. As the study pertains to the perspectives of students on a given topic related to IL, data collection methods that allow for the collection of data pertaining to experiences, perspectives and attitudes are ideal. While some instruments such as surveys allow for participants to report beliefs in a timely and quantifiable manner, they typically are less detailed than interview-style methods and may be better suited to quantitative analysis (Jansen, 2010).

Comparatively, interviews can provide more detail on individual perspectives (Jansen, 2010). This is because participants are typically more forthcoming in their responses to interview question as compared to survey questions (Gill et al., 2008). The naturalistic and conversational aspects to interviews encourage more detailed and personalized responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2005), which is central to providing useful data for this study. This is especially true of one-to-one interviews, which put more emphasis on individual rather than group perspectives and are less prone to social desirability bias as compared with focus groups (Ryan et al., 2013; Peters and Halcomb, 2015).

Designing an interview study requires consideration of the types of questions used within the study. Open-ended questions are typically favored because they encourage more detailed responses (Allen, 2017), while also do not limit what answers participants can give, as may be the case with closed questions (Clark et al., 2019). Designing interview questions also means tailoring them to a study's research questions to ensure the relevance of responses (Brinkmann, 2020), something that has been pursued in the design of the interview questions attached in Appendix A.

How to go about interviewing participants is also a relevant consideration. A semi-structured approach is often favored in educational research due to the flexibility it allows researchers (Whiting, 2008). Taking an overly structured approach can mean that researchers cannot prompt participants to remain on-topic or to expand upon certain topics (Wethington and McDarby, 2015), while an unstructured approach may be too open to the interviewer leading the conversation (Burgess, 1982). A semi-structured approach sits between these two extremes and follows the structure of the set questions while allowing the interviewer some recourse to prompt the participant without leading them toward certain responses (Magaldi and Berler, 2020).

Sample

This interview study uses 16 participants, consisting of eight students in British universities and eight students in Chinese universities. Guidance on research methods identifies between six and 10 participants as an ideal number for subjection to thematic analysis (Fugard and Potts, 2014; Hammersley, 2015), which typically requires smaller samples that quantitative methods of analysis (Morse, 2014). Thus, two analyses of eight interviewees each are carried out.

The participants themselves are drawn from universities across Hong Kong and the United Kingdom in order to provide a more representative sample of perspectives from a range of institutions. Likewise, all are Business Studies students in order to prevent differing perspectives on IL skills as a consequence of studying different subjects. Students were reached through the researcher placing advertisements for an online study in groups for Business Studies students across social media sites. As Table 1 shows, these students are split evenly in terms of gender and are all undergraduate or postgraduate students aged under 30.

The interviews were completed using one-to-one interviews with the researcher carried out over video-messaging software and recorded using a screen capture program. Audio files were then submitted to a digital transcription program and were manually corrected from verbatim to clean transcription. While verbatim transcription can provide more nuance and detail for qualitative analysis, instances of broken English in interviews with speakers for whom English is a second language can seriously impede comprehension and analysis, meaning that clean transcription is often preferred for analyzing such data (Tang, 2023).

Thematic analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis as its main means of analyzing the interview data. Thematic analysis is one of the central methods of qualitative analysis and is often favored due to its theoretical freedom and methodological flexibility (Nowell et al., 2017). It allows for the researcher to search across a set of data and identify patterns across that dataset, achieved through attaching 'codes' to pieces of data that can then be developed into 'themes' (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). As such, themes that are particularly emphasized or common across the data can be described by the researcher without limiting themselves to describing them only in quantitative terms, but also in considering the qualitative nature of responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Undertaking thematic analysis requires arriving at an approach to coding. Coding data involves attaching a label to collections of data across the dataset, which in the case of interview data typically means excerpts or passages from interviewer responses, or sometimes simply individual words (Guthrie, 2010). Coding can be either deductive – where codes are predetermined by the researcher – or inductive – where codes are generated intuitively as the data is analyzed (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). An advantage to inductive coding is that it does not

TABLE 1 Participants in interview study.

UK Stud.	Sex	Age	Institution	HK Stud.	Sex	Age	Institution
1	M	27	UK University 1	1	M	19	HK University 1
2	M	19	UK University 2	2	M	21	HK University 2
3	M	22	UK University 3	3	M	24	HK University 3
4	M	25	UK University 4	4	M	27	HK University 4
5	F	29	UK University 5	5	F	22	HK University 5
6	F	21	UK University 6	6	F	21	HK University 6
7	F	19	UK University 7	7	F	19	HK University 7
8	F	20	UK University 8	8	F	19	HK University 8

assume what sort of themes may be raised, which is useful when analyzing responses to open-ended questions (Boyatzis, 1998).

A drawback to the approach is that it may be comparatively open to researcher bias due to the role of the researcher in interpreting open-ended data (Holloway and Todres, 2003). Additionally, poor understanding of qualitative research methods and an emphasis on teaching quantitative methods can mean that researchers may be tempted to focus on the numerical frequency of codes as opposed to their significance to research questions (Gil-Rodriguez and Hefferon, 2011). As such, researchers should remain aware of their own biases when engaging in coding as well as developing robust protocols for engaging in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Ethical considerations

When undertaking primary qualitative research, interaction with human participants means that there are ethical concerns which must be reflected in the planning of studies. For instance, relevant institutional ethical guidelines ought to be followed in order to ensure that research methods are ethical and not discriminatory (BERA, 2018), while other guidelines might refer to legal requirements related to participant treatment or data protection (NFER, 2019). Likewise, institutional guidelines for research projects must be followed and the relevant permissions sought and received.

Beyond these guidelines, there are other factors that must be considered. For instance, it is essential to properly inform participants as to what will be required of them as participants and how their data will be stored and used prior to attaining their consent (Sin, 2005). In order to protect participants from social or professional repercussions due to the content of their responses, anonymization of participants should also be practiced wherever possible (Saunders et al., 2015). Furthermore, participant data must be stored securely and deleted when no longer required, in keeping with data protection ethics (Mourby et al., 2019). Through these methods, an ethical approach to primary research can be pursued.

Findings

This section reports findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with 16 students from across universities in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, as outlined in Table 1. These findings are split across analyses for students from Hong Kong and the United Kingdom, before being discussed in a separate section below.

TABLE 2 Thematic findings to analysis of HK interviews.

Motivations	Independent learning
Academic attainment	Autonomy
Career development	Resources
Social outcomes	Motivation
Competition	Environment
Independent learning strategies	
Time management	
Organization	
Rehearsal	
Reinforcement	

Hong Kong students

The thematic analysis of the interviews carried out with Business students from universities across Hong Kong produced 12 themes across three thematic categories, as outlined in Table 2. These themes are then discussed in more depth in the subsections that follow.

Motivations

A number of themes were raised in response to questions on the motivations of students to engage in independent learning. In the case of the students from Hong Kong, these themes were: academic attainment, career development, social outcomes, and competition.

Academic attainment

The students interviewed unanimously cited academic attainment as the main impetus behind their engaging in IL. Participant HK7 stated that they needed to engage in self-study to 'ensure that I get the grades I need' whereas Participant HK2 conceptualized their learning motivation in terms of 'getting onto a good postgraduate program'. Of the participants, two stated that they enjoyed learning for its own sake, but they also cited academic attainment as important motivating factors. When pushed on the subject, some articulated academic attainment in terms of personal growth and development, or standards for personal achievement, whereas others viewed it in more instrumental terms as facilitating academic or career progression. This therefore ties in to some degree with the second theme raised in relation to motivation.

Career development

The participants interviewed viewed career development as a vital motivating factor in engaging in independent learning. This was explicit in five of the interviews, though may be argued to be implicit in other interviews. For instance, in the case of Participant HK3: 'If I do not put in the extra study required, I'm not going to have the skills I need to do what I want in life, so it is best that I make sure that I'm studying outside of class well'. The connections between personal development, academic attainment and career development were strong amongst the cohort, with no participants excluding one aspect as failing to motivate them. This suggests perhaps a view of personal development as geared toward career outcomes. How this might be mediated by culture is a factor that requires consideration also.

Social outcomes

Some of the students interviewed reported social aspirations as a reason for wanting to engage in IL. However, these motivations were quite varied. For instance, HK8 stated that all her friends were 'very studious' and that studying in the library together was something of a social event. HK6 connected academic attainment and career development to social climbing, arguing that academic preparation would allow her to increase her social standing in later life. Specifically, she cited improving English as an additional language in her free time as contributing to this. Social status and its connection with career outcomes was also mentioned by HK1 and HK3, who appeared to be very aware of how important networking is to their career progression and cited study as improving their ability to network effectively. In general, social status was an underlying preoccupation across the dataset that may be contrasted with the British cohort below.

Competition

The students interviewed highlighted the competitive nature of academic and professional environments and underscored a motivation to outperform their peers. HK4 spoke at some length about this as a cultural issue, having studied outside China previously:

> Coming back to the city, you forget how competitive Chinese education is. There is a need to stand out and be recognized as the best, which extends back into early education. That wasn't really the case in [American university], you want to do well but for yourself, whereas here it's well compared to others.

This impetus to do well as compared with others was present in the responses of many other participants, who viewed competition for jobs as very pronounced. The perceived poor state of the economy was mentioned by HK8 and competition with graduates who had studied at universities outside of China was cited by HK4 and HK5, who viewed these degrees as perceived as more valuable by employers in Hong Kong. Responses where competition was strongly recognized as a motivating factor appear to have been stronger among male respondents, the majority of whom emphasized that a competitive learning environment motivated them to engage in extra learning outside of class. Competition was nevertheless a clear theme motivating students across the responses.

Independent learning

Students were asked how they conceptualized independent learning and why they viewed it as important. Four themes were raised in this regard: autonomy, resources, motivation, and environment.

Autonomy

Students conceptualized independent learning in terms of possessing and exercising autonomy over their own education. Students viewed IL as an essential part of their academic journey, describing it as a necessary part of gaining a university education. There was a strong sense in which practicing IL was essential to performing well at university and that this facilitated greater autonomy over one's own learning and career. The ways in which students were autonomous was in terms of selecting which topics to study, deciding upon study methods, and taking ownership of their own learning process. Some students also stated that self-directed projects outside of their formal courses – such as learning to code or acquire a new spoken language – also reflected the autonomous philosophy behind IL.

Resources

The students interviewed reported the importance of accessing and making efficient use of learning resources as part of the IL process. This meant locating, for example, textbooks and journal articles, or accessing suitable websites and blogs related to their subject. Interestingly, however, only a minority reported extending their learning beyond the prescribed curriculum in this process, suggesting perhaps that they focused on accessing materials prescribed by the module conveners. Factors such as assessing the credibility of resources were not mentioned. However, the importance of engaging with and understanding resources without teacher or lecturer assistance was emphasized.

Motivation

Students argued the importance of self-motivation to drive IL. As discussed in the previous subsection, the motivations behind students varied across individuals, though there were some commonalities between them. Uniquely, participant HK2 argued that they were not motivated to learn but that they required to find motivation in order to progress their academic career:

> I really struggle to find motivation to get up and do it, because I am just wanting to do other things. Like watch TV, or do something else, something fun. But I need to get onto this course for my career, so I need to get and up and do the study.

This perhaps reflects a distinction between the emotional experience of motivation as an attitudinal disposition toward learning and the practical requirement that individuals engage in IL to meet their academic goals. Motivation thus comes from many different sources and might not necessarily reflect a self-driven desire to learn but rather to attain.

Environment

A factor discussed by the participants with relation to IL was the suitability of their learning environment. A number of the participants cited themselves as preferring to study in the library, though did not necessarily view this as engaging in group or collaborative study: 'When we study together, I feel like we are actually studying alone, but we have our friends to be with while we do it' (HK7). Studying in a group environment was thus deemed to be social, while Participant HK1 stated that he liked to study in the campus coffee shop as he did not like to be too alone when studying. Participant HK6 was the only

participant who outwardly stated that they preferred to study alone in order to avoid distractions, while the rest appeared to study in groups or in public at least some of the time. Noticeable across the cohort, however, was a tendency of the female participants to emphasize especially *enjoyment* of collaborative study, whereas for male respondents the focus was competitive rather than collaborative.

Independent learning strategies

The students from Hong Kong raised four themes that may be classified as strategies of independent learning: time management, organization, rehearsal, and reinforcement.

Time management

The students interviewed conceived of IL strategies often in terms of how they managed their time. HK5 cited 'efficient organizing of hours in the day' as critical to their successful approach to IL, whereas HK2, HK3 and HK6 produced timetables for their self-study. Students spoke at length about the importance of setting realistic tasks and achievable goals that could be accomplished with the independent study time available to them, as well as prioritizing which tasks were the most important. One participant even spoke of dividing up their time according to how much certain aspects of the course contributed to their grade, before restrategising to focus more time on their weakest areas of academic performance. Time management was thus a focus of discussion with regards to IL strategies.

Organization

Related to time management, students discussed their organization skills and strategies at length. Some such as HK2 and HK6 considered themselves to be poor organizers and felt this held them back in their IL, whereas others cited it as among their main strengths contributing to the success of their IL. Using planners and very structured notes was deemed to be important, with HK7 describing how their color-coded their notes according to quite an elaborate system. In general, organization was deemed to be very important with regards to facilitating effective IL.

Rehearsal

One of the clearest IL strategies discussed by the participants was 'rehearsal', involving rehearsing practices designed to prepare them for undertaking tests and examinations. Five of the students mentioned sitting mock tests in their own time in order to practice writing under exam conditions, with examinations being deemed particularly important. Some described liking open exams because they could use rote learning to rehearse and memorize answers before the exam itself. With regards to coursework, some described also writing 'practice essays' ahead of actual submissions. The idea that going through the processes of completing a task improved one's ability to complete similar tasks in future was prevalent across the interviews.

Reinforcement

A related but distinct practice described by the participants was that of reinforcement, describing repetitive practices aimed and reinforcing knowledge and improving retention. Some students descried revisiting the same material several times in the same session, or alternatively over several study sessions spread out. Techniques included rote learning and memorization in order to improve their learning. This indicates perhaps a lack of critical engagement with learning material and raises the question as to how far students in Hong Kong perceive themselves as assessed on this front.

United Kingdom students

Interviews with British students attending university in the United Kingdom revealed again 12 themes across motivations, independent learning, and independent learning strategies, reported in Table 3 and split across the subsections that follow.

Motivations

British students interviewed demonstrated four themes related to those raised by Chinese students, though distinct in several ways. These were: academic attainment, personal development, passion for the subject, and career adaptability.

Academic attainment

British students expressed a motivation for academic attainment that, as with the Chinese cohort, varied in their rationale and reasoning. For instance, some viewed academic attainment in terms of personal achievement and excellence, with Participant UK7 stating, 'I want a first for me'. Others contextualized academic attainment as making their families proud or helping them gain the career they wanted. There was a sense in which gaining better grades generally opened doors to more opportunities, though some students were vague as to what their specific aims were. Additionally, there were apparent distinctions across respondents according to gender, with female respondents more likely to emphasize the importance of academic attainment to their motivations. However, academic attainment was cited by every student as a motivating factor.

Personal development

A motivation to educate themselves for their own personal development irrespective of academic outcomes was cited by three of the students interviewed. Participant UK5 stated that she 'just loved to learn' and that extracurricular education was something she pursued for its own sake. She stated, for example, that she learnt the piano for her own sake and that she did not put it on her university application. With respect to subject-specific learning UK2 stated that

TABLE 3 Thematic findings to analysis of UK interviews.

Motivations	Independent learning
Academic attainment	Autonomy
Personal development	Resources
Passion for subject	Research
Career adaptability	Environment
Independent learning strategies	
Work-life balance	
Collaboration	
Extension	
Application	

he felt that educating himself broadly on the discipline would make him a 'more rounded person', reflecting a desire for an holistic education. In general, the British students were more broad in how they conceptualized their motivation to learn and valued IL as part of a personal education rather than for its practical benefits alone.

Passion for subject

A passion for Business as a subject was common across the participant's responses. While some did cite making more money through improved career prospects, this was less emphasized as compared with enjoyment of learning about their subject. UK6, for example, stated that she was interested about how more women could become involved in Business, whereas UK3 stated that he loved reading around the subject, reading deeply into economic theory also. Across the cohort, a real emphasis on enjoyment of learning and interest in their chose discipline was emphasized.

Career adaptability

While the British students interviewed did mention their career prospects and opportunities for greater earning as motivating, they appeared to emphasize more the doors that would open to them with more skills related to their education. For example, UK1 highlighted that deep learning across the subject was more important than academic attainment:

> I think grades are not actually as important as the opportunity we have to learn. With my business, I can apply what I'm learning now. So I'm more concerned about what I can adapt to my business than what's coming up in the exams to be honest.

Others described also their entrepreneurial intent, while UK7 stated that she wanted a broad education in Business so that she could go into teaching it and perhaps even into research. As such, there was a motivation to engage in IL so as to be more adaptable to different career pathways.

Independent learning

The British participants in the study discussed the ways in which they conceptualized independent learning and felt that it was important to them. These were split across the following four themes: autonomy, resources, research, and environment.

Autonomy

As with the students from Hong Kong, students from the United Kingdom emphasized the importance of autonomy over their own learning. For example, UK6 spoke at length about the importance of this to her holistic development:

> You can't rely on teachers or professors to tell you how you're going to live your life. You have to make decisions about your career and what you want it to look like. By the same token, you can't let the content of a module dictate what you learn. You need to be able to go beyond this so you can control what path you're fit to go down. So that's why I read outside the course material.

Students described also their tendency to engage in extracurricular projects that did not confer any credit, with UK2 describing, for instance, a competition he entered to develop a set business idea into a plan. IL was linked by HK1 to entrepreneurialism, indicating the subject-specific relevance than IL was deemed to have among the Business students.

Resources

With regards to using resources, British students emphasized less the challenge of accessing suitable resources, and more about the importance of going beyond set material. UK5 stated that this was expected of students in terms of assessment, indicating in part an impetus for IL in course design. However, there was also mentioned the importance of evaluating the credibility of sources, with UK2 discussing the permissibility of 'gray literature' such as those produced by private companies rather than peer-reviewed research. UK6 also described their process as 'synthesizing' learning across resources, which contrasts heavily with the emphasis on rote learning and memorization raised by students in Hong Kong.

Research

As is hinted in the previous subsection, British students conceptualized IL as akin to engaging in research. This is distinct from learning from textbooks and indicates a degree of criticality in the approach to evaluating the content of resources. IL was deemed important in helping students generate new insights from across literature that could then be applied to their academic work. UK1 stated that researching the subject was important with regards to developing a 'personal theoretical framework' for understanding the 'mechanisms' behind Business practices. It is notable also that the students felt that IL helped them prepare for assessments, with many citing its application to coursework, indicating perhaps the relative increased importance of coursework to grade outcomes in the British system.

Environment

British students typically described their research process as private and engaged in through personal note-taking, either in physical or digital documents. Students typically reported less time spent studying in the library, with three participants referencing using the library to withdraw books rather than to study there. However, some students also referred to engaging in collaborative projects (see below), but described this process as largely carried out online or in coffee shops as opposed to the library. Study appears to be a less social practice for the British cohort as compared with that of Hong Kong.

Independent learning strategies

The interviews with the students in the UK revealed a number of different approaches to undertaking independent learning, focusing on: work-life balance, collaboration, extension, and application.

Work-life balance

The students interviewed emphasized the importance of a healthy work-life balance over engaging too much in study. Participant UK6 summed up a common attitude among these students:

> I think there's much that can be lost through focusing too much on what you're learning all the time. I mean of course academically, because we're all learning all the time. You need to think about becoming a well-rounded person and having hobbies and opinions rather than just studying for one subject all day long. That's not going to make you a useful person in future.

The idea that excessive studying could either be damaging to well-being, mental health, or in fact detrimental to a general education was commonplace across the interviews. This was reported with respect to time management, but it is notable that time management for IL was usually discussed within a context of other commitments. UK3 also stated that universities typically favor a well-rounded individual, indicating also the potential demand for engaging in holistic education through IL.

Collaboration

Beyond IL, some students also cited engaging in collaboration with other students outside of the classroom as part of their strategy. One student, for example, described starting a business with a fellow student, referring to it as 'more of a practice business' than a serious venture. Others described extracurricular collaborative projects of a similar nature they engaged in to try and improve their understanding, as well as the Business Studies society and discussion groups. Extracurricular lectures and seminars were also discussed as was voluntary attendance at conferences. As such, IL was viewed as facilitated by a collaborative approach that was distinct from the textbook learning described by Hong Kong students.

Extension

In this vein, the British students described extending their study beyond the curriculum and seeking out additional readings, attending seminars, and participating in extracurricular activities related to Business Studies. They also described educating themselves on subjects beyond Business, some of which were complementary (e.g., Economics, Politics, Philosophy), others being somewhat irrelevant. The importance of languages were relatively absent as compared with the Chinese students, for whom language was deemed far more important, perhaps a consequence of English as a business *lingua franca*.

Application

Beyond expanding their factual and theoretical knowledge, the British students interviewed also discussed opportunities for applying their knowledge in practice. Extracurricular projects served as an opportunity to practice skills related to Business Studies as compared with the rehearsal approach of Hong Kong students which referred less to transferrable skills and more to specific procedures. Half of the British students interviewed described already engaging in business ventures of some kind, whereas no Chinese students mentioned this nor work experience. Practical application was therefore comparatively emphasized among the British students involved in the study.

Discussion

Reflecting upon the findings reported above, there are a number of areas where there are commonalities between the British and Hong Kong cohorts but also areas of significant divergence. Beginning with motivation, the students interviewed highlighted a desire to engage in independent learning in order to boost their academic attainment, citing a variety of reasons why academic attainment might be important to them, ranging from personal development to career progression. It is arguable that the Hong Kong students interviewed were more focused on career development as opposed to personal development, citing a more competitive culture with regards to both academic attainment and competition in the labor market. The British students did not perceive this level of competition and did not generally cite competition with others as a reason for their IL.

According to an achievement-goal theory analysis of this phenomenon, it may be argued that the Chinese students were more noticeably focused on ego-involved tasks – those that confer social status – whereas the British focus on personal development indicates mastery-involved goals behind student motivation. Naturally, there are variations across the cohorts interviewed above, though this is explicable from the perspective of self-determination theory, which holds that external motivations – for instance, social status – is present in student motivations only insofar as it is internalized by the learner. It is therefore perhaps predictable that students in a more individualist society should have social values attached to learning outcomes integrated to a lesser degree into their own motivations due to pluralism across society relating to the values attached to learning outcomes and a focus on following individual, internal motivations as opposed to social conformity.

There may thus be cultural differences behind this discrepancy integrated into the two student cohorts. For instance, Hong Kong students emphasized the difficult nature of the Chinese economy as precipitating competition between students, but the British economy has arguably also fared poorly at the time of the interviews but the British students seemed optimistic about their prospects for success in business. It may be that Britain has a more entrepreneurial culture than Hong Kong due to the realities of their relative political and economic systems. In the case of Hong Kong, there have historically been restrictions on setting up businesses within China's political systems, indicating perhaps an impact upon private ventures and a reliance upon employment in existing companies (Lardy, 2016). Similarly, Chinese workplace culture is comparatively bureaucratic and hierarchical, whereas Britain's is increasingly informal, reflecting higher degrees of social mobility (Bond, 2004; Guo and Cionea, 2017). This may be reflected also in the emphasis among Chinese students on social status, whereas networking was less emphasized among the British students. In other words, students in Hong Kong may be more ego-involved in their learning motivations and British students more mastery-involved.

Gender differences appear to play a role also in these responses. The analysis noted Hong Kong males were more likely to perceive a competitive environment as a positive driving force than female students – a trend reflected in past research into learning motivation among students in Hong Kong (Salili and Lai, 2003). Likewise, it is noticeable that British male students de-emphasized academic attainment as a driving factor behind their independent study. This seems to reflect the findings of an outdated study on gender differences among students across British and Hong Kong contexts, which found that British boys were less motivated by academic success than both British girls and Hong Kong students (Wong et al., 2002). Within the United Kingdom, the perceived importance of education attainment among male students has long lagged behind that of female students (Rampino and Taylor, 2013), while traditional gender roles in Hong Kong might render men as more competition oriented due to the perceived responsibilities of men for enhancing their family's reputation through success (Chow and Lum, 2008, p. 25). How cultural factors impact gendered responses is thus one aspect to how cultural differences can differently impact student motivation and independent learning practices.

Cultural distinctions may also be reflected in the ways in which the students conceptualized IL as important to them. British students discussed motivations for personal growth and development, facilitated by a broader knowledge base achieved through IL. Holistic education

was deemed to be valuable by students, both in terms of academic progression but also in terms of their personal growth and well-being. British students valued getting a better work-life balance in their study, managing their time to prioritize well-being and personal development, whereas students from Hong Kong were comparatively focused on organizing their study time in the most efficient manner. Organization was deemed particularly important by Hong Kong students, reflecting perhaps a culture where structures and expectations are more rigid, whereas British students were comparatively unconcerned about deadlines or making efficient use of time.

From the perspective of self-efficacy, utilizing organization in order to reduce the time costs of study and increasing the chance of learning success makes sense with respect to increasing the odds that a learning behavior or task will prove successful and therefore worthwhile. The importance of meta-cognition has been a focus of previous research (Anderson, 2012), and organizational skills may here be linked to learning skills related to meta-cognition, providing an effective framework for independent learning. Why students from Hong Kong should prefer this more organized, arguably more procedural approach to independent learning as compared with British students thus itself requires some exploration.

Students from Hong Kong may be perceived as recreating the structure of institutional learning in their IL, such as through timetabling and studying together in libraries, recreating the structure and arrangement of the school classroom. Comparatively, British students largely favored studying alone and viewed IL more in terms of independent research. Critical thinking skills were emphasized as important in order to assess the credibility of resources and to synthesize their findings, whereas rote-learning, memorization and rehearsal were deemed important practices by students from Hong Kong. There is therefore a more individualistic attitude to learning among the British students as well as more criticality in how they handle information, reflective of the individualist-collectivist paradigm expectations set out above (Hofstede, 2001). However, their learning also appears to be somewhat less focused, favoring an holistic and rounded education over practices that will maximize their grades. A minority of British students appeared unconcerned with their grades altogether.

This may reflect differing career pathways envisaged in either case, with Hong Kong students envisaging employment and British students self-employment. Indeed, this seems to be reflected in some of the strategies also. British students' emphasis on extension of knowledge beyond the test and indeed the discipline itself indicates a perceived need to develop personal grand theories regarding business, the economy, politics, etc., reflecting some of the skills required by company owners and high-level management. Application of these skills was also sought out through collaborative projects, whereas rehearsal of procedures was more practiced by Hong Kong students. Comparatively, the students from Hong Kong focused on learning facts set out by textbooks and in set readings, indicating preparation for compliance with institutional norms. Indeed, British students emphasized flexibility and adaptation as important career skills to inculcate through IL, whereas this was not discussed at length by any student in Hong Kong.

Expectancy-value theory can offer some kind of explanation for these differences. According to this approach to understanding learner motivation, student motivation and learning behavior will depend strongly on how the student assigns value to a learning task and its outcomes. In a competitive environment, the attainment value of tasks will presumably take precedence, while collectivism also awards more social status to grouped learning strategies rather than independent learning. Comparatively, students from Britain where educational values are more pluralistic may view education as broadly holding some kind of intrinsic value – i.e., as good in and of itself – or may instead be focused on the utility value of skills or knowledge acquired (Javed et al., 2022). There is a distinction here between whether what is valued is the knowledge or skill itself, what the knowledge or skills can attain in terms of outcomes, or rather the educational qualification and how this relates to social position.

This can perhaps to some extent also explain the tendency for students in Hong Kong to apparently prefer studying in groups rather than alone. Achievement goal theory focuses not only on the outcomes of learning tasks in terms of knowledge, skills or qualifications acquired, but also in terms of the immediate outcome of the learning practice itself. It may be expected that a more homogenous and socially-oriented society should encourage ego-involved learning tasks according to which studying itself is a social activity with its own situational value. The British cohort, by way of comparison, appeared to be far more comfortable with solitary studying habits, indicating more internalized motivations with respect to their actual studying practices. How far such distinctions in terms of strategy resulted in different outcomes in practice was not measured by the study, though the prospect that cultural differences of these kinds could be linked to differing learning outcomes through encouraging distinct independent learning strategies is a suggestion that might potentially bear fruit through further research.

Whether these distinct practices are downwind from culture or from institutional structures and norms is unclear and presents something of a chicken-and-egg problem with regards to social norms and their cultural origins or manifestation. This may also be applied to the causal origins of the individualist-collectivist divide and its apparent effect noticeable with regards to how students conceptualize and approach independent learning with respect to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations. It may be that broader aspects to Chinese and British culture manifest in their attitudes to learning, that structural features steer students into these attitudes, or that they are directly resultant from latent theoretical and value-based perspectives on work and learning. What is clear, however, is that there are significant differences in how Business students from the United Kingdom and Hong Kong conceptualize IL, their motivations toward practicing it, and their strategies to this end. The specific ways in which these students differ constitutes an original contribution to the literature on this topic, raising the prospect for further research in this area.

Conclusion

This research project has analyzed the ways in which the perspectives of Business students from across universities in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom conceptualize and practice independent learning, including the ways in which they are motivated to take control of their own learning. Through engaging in interviews with 16 participants – eight British and eight Chinese – thematic analysis of their responses has been used to develop two distinct sets of themes relevant to this study's three research questions:

- How do students of British and Hong Kong universities perceive their motivation to engage in independent learning?
- How do British and Hong Kong university students conceptualize independent learning?

- What skills and strategies do university students from the UK and Hong Kong associate with effective independent learning?

In the category of Motivation, Hong Kong students were motivated by academic attainment, career development, social outcomes, and competition, whereas British students were motivated by academic attainment, personal development, a passion for the subject, and career adaptability. With respect to IL and its importance, both sets of participants discussed autonomy, educational resources, and their learning environment, though British students conceptualized IL in terms of research as opposed to discussing again their motivation to engage in IL. In terms of independent learning strategies, Chinese students emphasized time management, organization, rehearsal, and reinforcement, whereas British students diverged from this significantly, indicating the importance of work-life balance and strategies of collaboration, extension, and application.

The differences between these two cohorts are manifold. First, students in Hong Kong are motivated by social status and career progression, whereas British students seek personal growth and are inspired by a passion for the subject. Similarly, while Chinese students view their career trajectory in terms of progression up various employed positions, British students of Business seem to prioritize either entrepreneurialism or adaptability to careers outside of Business. There was a palpable sense of insecurity among the Hong Kong students with respect to employment prospects and job security, whereas British students were relatively unconcerned by unemployment or underemployment and were optimistic about their prospect for success. Generally speaking, Chinese students were more concerned about achieving qualifications that would allow them to attain stable and lucrative employment and consequently studied course material with a view to maximizing their grades. However, differences within these cohorts were also noted, with British male students less inclined toward valuing academic attainment over intrinsic motivations for learning.

In terms of IL, British students were more inclined to view IL in individualistic terms as personal research, to go out with set materials, and to engage with resources critically. By way of comparison, students at Hong Kong universities valued rehearsing exam answers and learning by rote, favoring memorization over critical engagement and applying learning in practice. This indicates that British students were more concerned with their holistic education than examination results as compared with the Chinese cohort. Study was also a more social practice for Chinese students, whereas social study facilitated collaboration for British students rather than providing an opportunity to socialize. British students reported less concern with making time for study, structuring study, and organizing study, instead aiming at enhanced well-being and a more rounded education. Whether these distinctions are primarily cultural or structural in their origins – and how far the two may be differentiated – is not clear from this research, though the fact that such differences exist is apparent. However, differences within these cohorts again suggest at least some role for cultural factors playing a role, with male Chinese students, for instance, favoring a more competitive over collaborative learning environment as compared with female Chinese students.

This study has thus contributed to the literature on this topic. It has suggested that there are significant cultural differences between motivation to engage in IL and strategies and skills of IL as perceived by students across two different cultural contexts. The interplay of this with other variables such as socioeconomic factors, institutional structure and assessment methods indicates that there are a number of potential variables that can affect how students perceive IL as being effective and meeting their aims for education. The study points the way to further research in this area as to the specifics of the strategies involved and clearer statistical differences between such groups. This may be explored through engaging in further quantitative research in this subject area that can illustrate how significant and prevalent specific views and/or learning behaviors are.

While the study therefore expands knowledge in this subject area, it may benefit from further research into the specifics of motivational theories subscribed to by students, the interaction between IL and institutional features, the specific strategies favored in different cultural environments, and the efficacy of IL strategies within specific educational systems or institutional structures. The role that non-cultural variables might play in determining student preferences and behaviors also requires study in order to differentiate between different and overlapping causal influences. Conducting quantitative research using deductive coding (e.g., for attributing preference for motivations, skills or strategies) may be useful with regards to expanding knowledge in this subject area. In turn, such research alongside the findings to this study can better inform how students may be trained or coached to improve their independent learning.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by PolyU CPCE Ethics Committee Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

NL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author declares that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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Appendix 1

Interview questions

1. How would you conceptualize or define learning motivation within an academic context?
2. How would you conceptualize or define independent learning within an academic context?
3. What motivates you to engage in learning for your course outside of the classroom?
4. Can you share specific instances as to where you felt particularly motivated or demotivated to engage in your own independent learning?
5. What specific aspects or elements do you see as crucial to understanding what motivates university students to engage in independent learning?
6. What do you view as the relationship between your independent learning and academic performance?
7. What skills do you associate with effective independent learning?
8. In what specific ways do you feel these skills have been developed either through your university experience or through your own practice?
9. What specific strategies for engaging in independent learning you feel are most effective?
10. What support systems or resources might universities offer to help students engage better in independent learning?