

To Copy or not to Copy: Knowledge and Reasons for Plagiarism

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Received: June 20, 2023 Accepted: Sep. 10, 2023 Published: Sep. 28, 2023

doi:10.5296/ijssr.v11i2.21217 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijssr.v11i2.21217>

Abstract

To copy or not to copy is not an option for students to choose from, as copying one's work or ideas is plagiarism, which is an unethical act and will be subject to severe punishment. Although awareness of plagiarism is commonly provided in many ways, students still commit it. Hence, the study was conducted with two objectives which are to determine the source of students' knowledge on plagiarism, and to investigate the reasons for students committing plagiarism despite having knowledge on this matter. This quantitative research employed an online survey using a Google Form, which was distributed to the students via WhatsApp. The sample was obtained through purposive sampling. It consisted of 143 undergraduate degree students from a public university in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The data gathered was analysed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) for the descriptive analysis. The findings revealed that majority of the students knew about plagiarism and the punishment for committing it. Most of them also disagreed that they plagiarised because of the reasons stated in the questionnaire. The findings suggest that they may not commit plagiarism, or they may commit plagiarism for other reasons that were not stated in the questionnaire. Therefore, a qualitative study should be conducted to provide more insights into why students commit plagiarism.

Keywords: plagiarism, knowledge, reasons for plagiarism, tertiary students

1. Introduction

Plagiarism in academic fields, particularly among tertiary students, has gained research attention in recent times. The increasing rates of plagiarism among students have led institutions and policymakers all around the world to implement regulations and initiatives to reduce the occurrence of plagiarism. Plagiarism is described as the purposeful use of another person's language, words, thoughts, ideas, or expressions without properly identifying the source (Al-Shredi & Nisreen, 2022). This unethical practice has become prominent with the vast development of technology and easy access to sources of information, especially via the Internet.

Students may intentionally or unintentionally plagiarise to indicate that the idea is original. Previous studies reported that students' poor understanding of what constitutes plagiarism is one of the main reasons for the students to unintentionally plagiarise (Orim, Davies, & Borg, 2013; Riasati & Rahimi, 2013; Zafarghandi, Khoshroo, & Barkat, 2012; Leask, 2006). Other reasons for students to commit plagiarism are poor time management (Zafarghandi et al., 2012; Selemani, Chawinga, & Dube, 2018; Batane, 2010), failure to detect and punish the act of plagiarising (Selemani et al., 2018; Park, 2003), and a lack of competency in academic writing (Selemani et al., 2018; Batane, 2010; De Jager & Brown, 2010). In addition, technology plays a role in plagiarism as students have access to numerous applications that enable the transmission of information in dishonest ways (Al-Shredi & Nisreen, 2022). From the review of literature, the trend of the research would suggest that a lack of knowledge on plagiarism has allowed students to intentionally and unintentionally plagiarise when completing their academic tasks. However, there is a lack of research on the source of students' knowledge of plagiarism. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the source of students' knowledge of plagiarism and the reasons for them to commit plagiarism.

2. Literature Review

Academic dishonesty happens in various forms, which include cheating, collusion, and plagiarism. Cheating occurs when students breach rules to obtain better marks in examinations, while collusion is defined as inappropriate collaboration by two or more students to produce an assignment or task. While cheating and collusion are intentional, plagiarism can be both intentional and unintentional. However, it remains the most prevalent practice of misconduct among students (Ryan et al., 2009).

There are many reasons for plagiarism. Previous research revealed that students plagiarised because they did not have sufficient awareness of plagiarism (Lim & Huh, 2019; Elshafei & Jahangir, 2020). Lack of knowledge on citation techniques also contributed to plagiarism (Lim & Huh, 2019). Students may not know how to cite properly, have poor understanding of referencing or even lack proper skills in paraphrasing. Some students even think that using synonyms or changing a few words here and there in sentences equates to paraphrasing. Thus, having a poor understanding of what constitutes plagiarism is a reason why students commit this act. Other reasons for plagiarism discovered include the inability to conduct research (Halamy et al., 2023), laziness (Halamy et al., 2023), deadline pressure (Halamy et al., 2023), and the need to perform well in academics (Clarke et al., 2023).

On the other hand, there are studies that state that students do commit plagiarism intentionally, despite knowing that it is an academic crime to do so. This means that they still commit plagiarism, although they are aware it is wrong. Al-Shredi and Harb (2022) report that 40% and 20% of EFL post-graduate Masters students in a university in Libya reported that they were ‘familiar’ with the term plagiarism and plagiarized to obtain high grades. The study points out that having inadequate academic writing skills is the main reason for their need to commit plagiarism.

The Internet, being a gateway to easy access to information, is another reason for plagiarism to occur. Information that can be accessed anywhere and at any time through new technologies grants students the freedom to plagiarize. Students have the opportunity to copy, cut, and paste information. While in the process of doing this, they may forget academic ethics and engage in acts of plagiarism. Many researchers have stated that the Internet is one of the main reasons for plagiarism to occur. This is because the Internet is free for all, and since it is in the public domain, copying from the Internet does not require acknowledgement of the original source or citations (Jereb et al., 2018).

Studies have also reported that family and societal pressure are also reasons cited for plagiarism among students (Ramzan, 2012, as cited in Jereb et al., 2018). Another reason cited is students who have high-performance goals and wish to achieve high grades are more likely to indulge in plagiarism. Pressure from family to perform well in exams may also push students to take the easy way out and commit plagiarism in their assignments, projects, and even exams. Researchers have discovered other factors such as gender, socialization, efficiency gain, motivation for study, methodological uncertainties, or easy access to electronic information via the Internet and new technologies, as reasons for committing plagiarism (Jereb et al., 2018).

In addition, having too many assignments to complete within a short period of time also pushes students to plagiarize. This indicates students’ negative attitude toward the subject, whereby they either do not understand the requirements of the assignments or receive poor explanations from their lecturers or teachers. Students would rather take the risk of plagiarizing than being reprimanded for not submitting their work on time, as the risks involved in losing ‘some marks’ far outweigh the act of getting caught plagiarizing.

In a study by Jereb et al. (2018) on German and Slovene students, they equally indicated the easy use of information-communication technology and the Web as the main cause for committing plagiarism. Starovoytova and Namango (2016) add that the growth of web-based information on the Internet, paper mills, ‘ready-made’ essays, and downloadable resources such as documents, scientific papers, and even complete-theses is another main reason for plagiarism to occur. For example, a website at <http://cheathouse.com> advertises thousands of free essays in over 130 categories. The website allows access to over thousands of free articles that can be downloaded for free. Each article is “ranked” with a smiley face and comments from previous customers indicating their satisfaction. As such, the availability of information on the world wide web seems to be a contributing reason for plagiarism to occur.

Lack of enforcement and punishment for plagiarism by the respective university or institution

of higher learning has also contributed to a high number of plagiarism offenses committed by students. (Starovoytova & Namango, 2016). In their study of 25 fifth-year engineering students, 48% of the respondents admitted that they plagiarize because they have not been caught and the enforcement of punishment is weak as compared to the rewards they receive when they complete their task by plagiarizing. 33% agreed that they keep on plagiarizing, because they have not been caught yet and dare to take the risk of plagiarize. In addition, as there is currently no legal-framework, such as a “Plagiarism Policy” or like in the university, the academic-staff of the university find it quite complex, sometimes confusing, and also time-consuming, and therefore, hardly ever meet punishment for students; hence, plagiarism goes largely uncorrected and unpunished.

3. Methodology

The research employed a quantitative method. The research sample was obtained through purposive sampling. The participants chosen were undergraduates from a public university in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. who enrolled in English for Academic Writing course. The instrument for collecting the data was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed to the participants via their class WhatsApp groups. The questionnaire contained two sections. The first section consisted of several questions on the demographic profile, such as age and gender, while the second section consisted of questions on knowledge about plagiarism and reasons for students to plagiarise in academic writing. The questions in the second section used the five-point Likert scale coded as 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. Thus, the type of data collected was ordinal. The collected data were cleaned for out-of-range and missing data and analysed the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The analysis was conducted using the frequency distribution, whereby the number of times each variable occurs is simply counted in frequency statistics. It is an important area of statistics that is concerned with the number of occurrences and the percentage of such occurrences (Mishra et al., 2019). The results from the data analysis are visualized using charts and tables.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

The sample consisted of 143 undergraduate students. 86.7% (124 students) were females, and 13.3% (19 students) were males. The majority of the students were females due to the student intake that consisted of more females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 26 years old. The majority of the students were 22 years old (62.9%, 90 students). The results for gender and age are as follows.

Table 1. Cross tabulation of age and gender

Age	Gender		Total (%)
	Male	Female	
20	0	7	7 (4.9)
21	3	17	20 (14.0)
22	15	75	90 (62.9)
23	0	16	16 (11.2)
24	0	8	8 (5.6)
25	1	0	1 (0.7)
26	0	1	1 (0.7)
Total	19 (13.3)	124 (86.7)	143

4.2 Knowledge About Plagiarism

To evaluate students’ knowledge of plagiarism, they were asked whether they knew what constitutes plagiarism. Figure 1 indicates that 98.6% (141 students) of them knew what plagiarism is. Only 1.4% (2 students) chose neutral for the item.

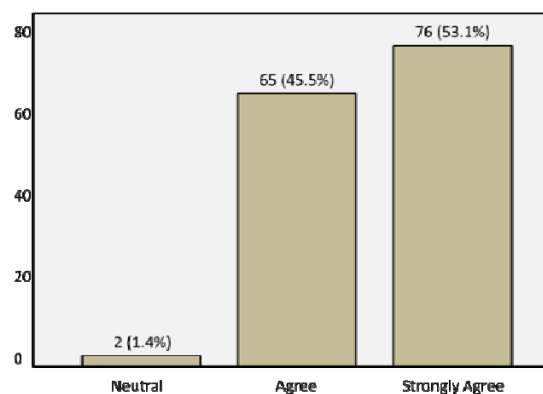


Figure 1. I know what plagiarism is

The next item was how they knew about plagiarism. There were four sources provided which were university programs, university websites, lecturers, and friends. The results revealed that knowing about plagiarism from lecturers (95.2%, 136) recorded the highest percentage, followed by university programs (83.3%, 119), friends (79.7%, 114), and university websites (65.1%, 93) (see Figure 2 till Figure 5).

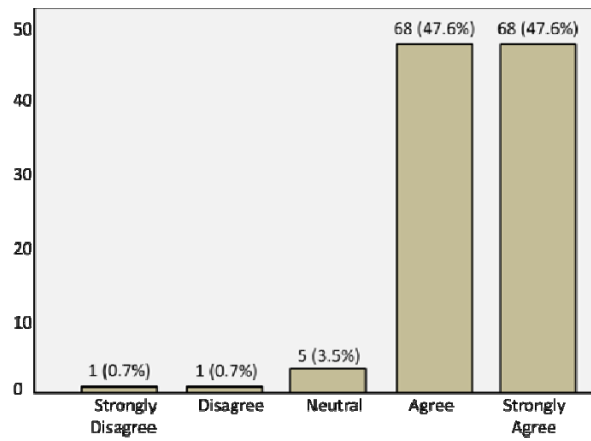


Figure 2. How do you know about plagiarism? (Lecturers)

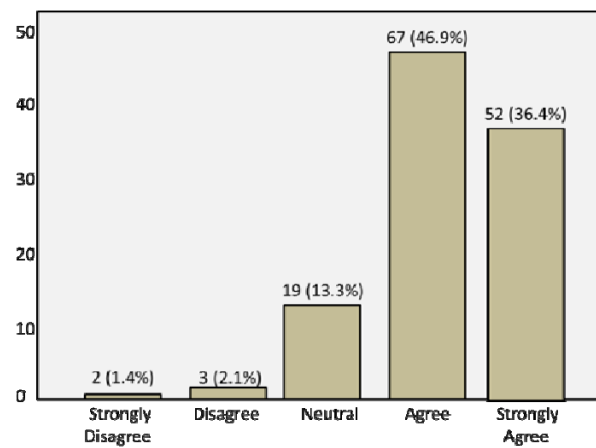


Figure 3. How do you know about plagiarism? (University Programmes)

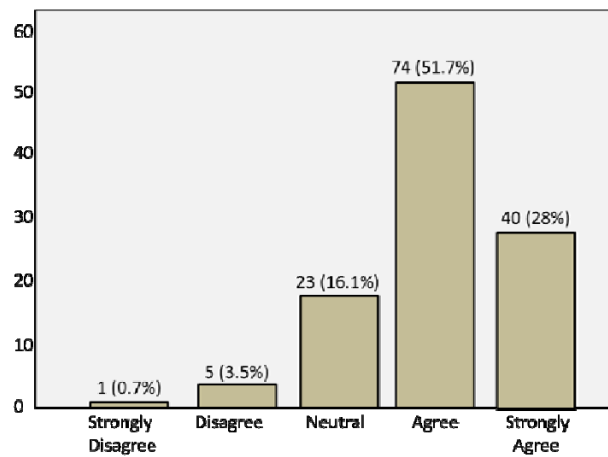


Figure 4. How do you know about plagiarism? (Friends)

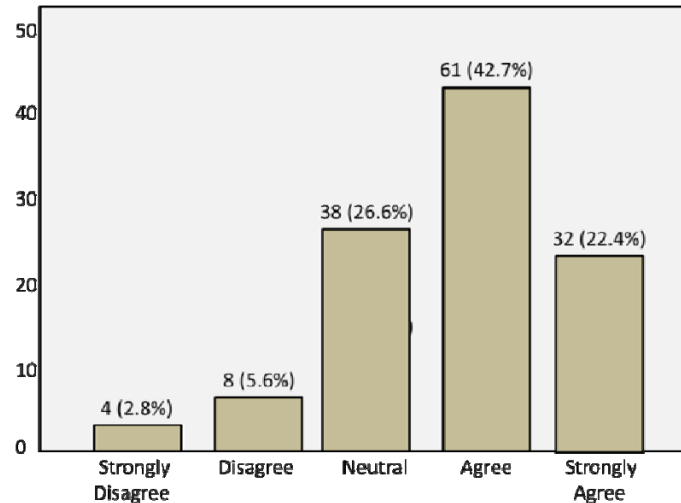


Figure 5. How do you know about plagiarism? (University Websites)

The last item for evaluating their knowledge of plagiarism is the penalty for plagiarism set by the university. Are students aware of this penalty? The results revealed that 98.6% (141 students) strongly agreed and agreed that they knew there is a penalty for plagiarism set by the university.

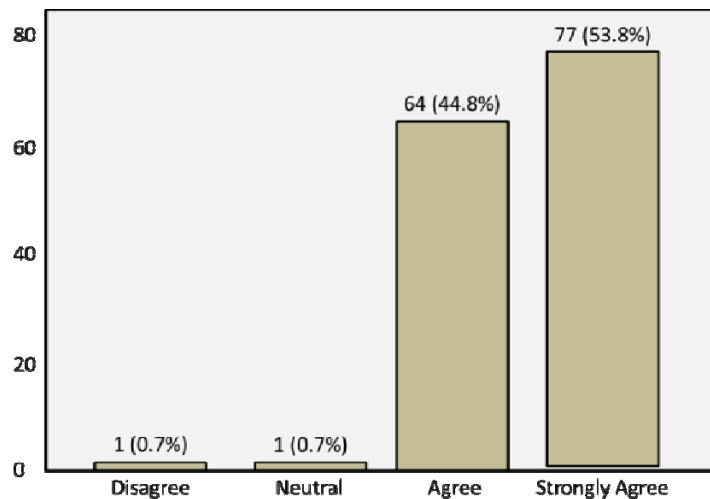


Figure 6. I know there is a penalty for plagiarism set by the university

4.3 Reasons for Students to Plagiarise

There were seven items used to investigate the reasons for students to plagiarise. The results for the items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reasons for students to plagiarise their works from the original sources

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I plagiarized because I didn't know how to write the citation of the source.	38 (26.6)	54 (37.8)	30 (21.0)	19 (13.3)	2 (1.4)
2. I plagiarized because I didn't know how to paraphrase the text from the source	37 (25.9)	54 (37.8)	33 (23.1)	13 (9.1)	5 (3.5)
3. I plagiarized because I didn't know how to summarise the text from the source.	33 (23.1)	50 (35.0)	41 (28.7)	13 (9.1)	4 (2.8)
4. I plagiarized because my classmates also did it.	57 (39.9)	54 (37.8)	19 (13.3)	8 (5.6)	3 (2.1)
5. I plagiarized because my lecturer did not emphasize the need for citations.	61 (42.7)	49 (34.3)	24 (16.8)	6 (4.2)	1 (0.7)
6. I plagiarized because it is commonly done by students.	53 (37.1)	49 (34.3)	27 (18.9)	12 (8.4)	2 (1.4)
7. I plagiarized because the rules were not strictly enforced at my university.	65 (45.5)	51 (35.7)	21 (14.7)	5 (3.5)	1 (0.7)

Note. Frequency (%).

The majority of the students strongly disagreed with the statements. The following are the results on the reasons why they plagiarised. The results are arranged from the highest percentage to the lowest percentage of disagreement (strongly disagree and disagree) on the items.

- a. Item 7: "The rules were not enforced strictly at my university" (81.2%).
- b. Item 4: "My classmates also did it" (77.7%).
- c. Item 5: "My lecturer did not emphasize the need for citations" (77.0%).
- d. Item 6: "It is commonly done by students" (71.4%).
- e. Item 1: "I didn't know how to write the citation of the source" (64.4%).
- f. Item 2: "I didn't know how to paraphrase the text from the source" (63.7%).
- g. Item 3: "I didn't know how to summarise the text from the source" (58.1%).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings and discussion of this paper relate to the sources of students' knowledge about plagiarism and the reasons for them to commit this unethical academic practice. The results indicate that the students did not commit plagiarism due to having insufficient skills to write citations, paraphrase, and summarise text taken from the sources used (more than 64.4%

strongly disagreed that this was a reason). Besides that, other factors, such as the influence of classmates, the perception that plagiarism is common among students, and the lack of emphasis on plagiarism from their lecturer, were also not factors for them to plagiarise, and thus did not influence the students to plagiarise. This indicates that while friends are cited as sources of knowledge on plagiarism, their influence seems to be relatively less significant. This suggests that students do not consider these factors to be valid reasons for them to indulge in plagiarism. Lastly, weak enforcement of the rules on plagiarism by their university is also not a reason to plagiarise as the students are aware of the punishment given by the university for plagiarism. This finding seems to align with the notion that the role of universities in promoting academic integrity can educate and help deter students from committing dishonest practices. The results of the study suggest that students did not commit plagiarism for the reasons provided in the questionnaire. It is encouraging to note that the majority of the students strongly disagreed or disagreed with the reasons given in the questionnaire, suggesting that they did not endorse the reasons given in the questionnaire as factors for plagiarism and that there is awareness in them that they have committed acts of academic dishonesty. The findings from this study seem to contradict Lim and Huh's (2019) study, which states that students plagiarize because they do not have awareness of committing this act.

However, the results of the study may also suggest that students may commit plagiarism for other reasons. Among these could be family and societal pressure, as suggested by Ramzan (2012) and Jereb et al. (2018). The availability of information and easy access to it on the Internet were also cited by researchers as reasons for plagiarism. However, the study did not examine these reasons, which could have been a contributing factor. Therefore, future research needs to examine other reasons why students plagiarise if a questionnaire is used to collect the data. Another way of finding out the other reasons why they plagiarise is by conducting qualitative research using interviews or an open-ended questionnaire. The data collected will be rich, detailed, and complex.

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