Research Article

PLAGIARISM: A PERSPECTIVE FROM A CASE OF A NORTHERN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism, is a global problem that has bedevilled the academia. It is regarded as unethical and immoral intellectual thievery that could negatively impact on not only the repute of an academic institution, but the prosperity of a society. This study was designed to investigate student's awareness and indulgence in plagiarism and their perception of punishment towards Plagiarists. Towards this end, a sampling survey approach employing questionnaires and interviews was used to collect data from a total of 200 Gombe State University students (Nigeria). The result of the interviews showed that 90% of students have plagiarized at one time in the past, 68% have included textbooks and other sources in the bibliography of assignments, out of which 50% had written books that they didn't even consult. The data from questionnaires showed that the proportion of students whose awareness of plagiarism was partial (63%) and those completely unaware (20%) were higher than those (17%) aware of it. Further, the data showed that the majority of students plagiarize from the Internet (90%) and when asked about whether it would be fair to punish Plagiarists, 42% of students disagreed. Generally, this appears to confirm other reports about the incidence of plagiarism in the academia and pinpoints under awareness as its major cause. Hence, this calls for a campaign to increase students' awareness of plagiarism and its ethical and moral implications; the need for plagiarism detection tools and development of more strict measures for Plagiarists.

INTRODUCTION

Academic dishonesty, especially plagiarism is a global concern in the academia. Derived from the Latin word plagiare; a verb meaning abduct or kidnap (Mangalore, 2006), plagiarism has been defined as an act of reproducing another individual's ideas, document, or any other form of information without acknowledging the fount of that information(Hashim *et al.*, no date). According to Douglas Harper, the word originates from plagiarius meaning seducer, plunder, or kidnapper (Online Etymology Dictionary). According to the American Heritage New Dictionary; it is an act of copying the thoughts and language of someone else without crediting the primordial author. It is unethical, immoral (Shahabuddin, 2009), considered a theft of intellectual property, as such it is of interest to criminal law (Green, 2002). Plagiarism is rampant in the academia, among both students and lecturers/researchers (Shahabuddin, 2009), and it occurs either knowingly or unknowingly.

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However, whatever or however the case may be, plagiarism is considered as information theft (Ahmad, 2011), considered as a severe offense (Stephen, 2005), as such, there are currently many measures designed towards combating it, such as the implementation of plagiarism detecting systems, as well as establishing penalties for the act (Lukashenko *et al.*, 2007). The advent of the Internet, World Wide Web and Social Media has undoubtedly taken our civilization a step higher, and especially, provided scholars with a useful avenue for the rapid spread and exchange of ideas and information. In fact, the content of the surface web has been estimated to be up to 19 Terabytes (Bergman, 2001). However the ease of access to these millions of resources via the Internet has also resulted to an increase in the rate of plagiarism (Tarantino *et al.*, 2013; Shephard, 2007; Simon *et al.*, 2001); a term called cyber-plagiarism (Simon *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, a recent worldwide survey by Turnitin, (2012) identified 10 different types of cyber-plagiarism, the three topmost being; (1) Clone - "an act of submitting another's work, word-for-word, as one's own"; (2) CTRL-C - "a written piece that contains significant portions of text from a single source without alterations" and (3) Find-Replace - "the act of

changing key words and phrases but retaining the essential content of the source in a paper".Hence, plagiarism is considered as a breach of professional conduct (Simon *et al*, 2001; Campbell, 2006), whether it is intentional, unintentional, much, or little. It is categorized into many types; direct text copying, "patch work", paraphrased, truncation, excision etc (Wan *et al.*, 2011). It is thus suggested that people mainly plagiarize due to either ineffective ways of detection, poor writing skills and/or ignorance.

It was no surprise when Romanian Prime Minister V. Ponta was recently alleged to have plagiarized most of his PhD thesis (Schiermeier, 2012). Ma *et al.* (2007) classified plagiarism as copying verbatim without acknowledgement whilst not putting the content in double quotes; copying verbatim with acknowledgement but without putting the content in double quotes; copying someone else's ideas (not verbatim) without acknowledging. In general plagiarism can be classified into two broad categories; plagiarism due to refusal to cite sources and plagiarism due to an improper citation (Ma *et al., 2008*), the former is usually intentional, while the latter is mostly unintentional. Plagiarism if left unchecked could yield graduates and scholars of low standard who could impact on societal development by promoting corruption in public service and tarnishing University's reputation (Gullifer and Tyson, 2010; Marsden *et al.*, 2005). There is no sufficient survey of plagiarism in the Nigerian academia, but there are reports about its rampancy in the system (reviewed in Onuoha and Ikonne, 2013), this thus prompted this study.

RELATED WORK

The significance of plagiarism, especially in the academia, has stimulated numerous studies in the past. In a research conducted at the University of Florida in1987 it was revealed that 68.1% of the students engaged in plagiarism and other academic misconducts (reviewed in Simon *et al.*, 2001). Accordingly, the 'Who's who Among American high school students' - a survey conducted in 1998 on American best performing students revealed that 80% of them plagiarized to get to the top of their class, and 50% of them thought it wasn't a crime (Pamela and Patricia, 2013). In another studyit was observed that 55% of the respondents admitted to have plagiarized in the past (Wan *et al.*, 2011). One of the causative factor of plagiarism could be unawareness. Indeed, a research conducted by (Wan *et al*, 2011) on engineering students studying in Malaysia revealed that most of the students know very little about plagiarism and what makes it a serious offence. Furthermore, the research revealed that the students had not been given a very formal and concise orientation about it by the school. Moreover, the advent of the Internet and WWW has made plagiarism remarkably easy.Indeed, in their article Ma *et al.* (2008) observed that the Internet has increased the rate of plagiarism amongst students. Although, at the moment, several plagiarism detection tools have been developed which effectively detect plagiarism. Ali *et al.* (2011) reviewed these tools, pointing out their merits and demerits. Their findings show that none of the tools are 100% efficient, but considering the different features of the existing detection tools, they argue that a hybrid system could raise the capability of detection. However, besides the usage of software tools, Ma *et al.* (2008) suggested that counselling by the teachers, and embarking on serious punishments could help in reducing this misconduct.To

add to the list, a survey by Ma *et al.* (2007) with the sole purpose of finding out middle school students' attitude towards plagiarism subjected both students and parents to interviews and focus group methodology, and the result revealed that the students knew a little about some types of plagiarism, such as "copy and paste". Furthermore, in another study, Dupree and Sattler, (2010) pointed out that 74.2% of students in their reportadmitted to have plagiarized in one way or the other in the previous year. In addition both students and faculty participants admitted that the plagiarising via the Internet is fairly common.

Many articles have stressed the alarming increase in plagiarism and the need to fight it. For instance, Lathrop and Foss, (2000) pointed out several ways through which technological advancement enhances plagiarism in this era of Internet and how common it is among students. Worst of all some students regard it as an act done by everybody. Eventually when such acts go unchecked, the bad eggs end of cheating the good ones that refuse to plagiarize by getting higher grades. Indeed, high school students even justified their cheating, saying that it will be unfair to themselves if they avoided cheating since those that do not cheat get 90%, while the cheats get 100% (ETS and Adcouncil, c1999).The attitudes of Plagiarists, the ethical and moral implication of plagiarism has instigated many publications about the need for punishment of plagiarism. In his article Bailey (2011) pointed out the need for academic institutions to create plagiarism policies.

Considering the fact that plagiarism could be intentional or not, severe or less, Bailey suggested that plagiarism policies that have already been set by academic institutions should be made flexible to ensure justice and equity (Bailey, 2011). Weighing different options of penalties, Todd Pettigrew (Pettigrew, 2010) stated that asking the plagiarist to rewrite an assignment as a result of the act is too feeble to be called a punishment; while on the other hand, he argues that the verdict of expulsion is too harsh. Pettigrew goes on to suggest a gradual punishment; a zero mark to be awarded to a first timer, then a zero mark and a bad remark on the student's Score sheet (transcript) in case of a second attempt. Then if the student goes on to plagiarize a third time, he should be suspended or expelled. He concluded by saying "It begins with a fair policy conscientiously enforced".

In Nigeria, there are disturbing reports about a plague of plagiarism at different levels of the academic sector (Onuoha and Ikonne, 2013). Studies from the western region of Nigeria on university students revealed a varying academic dishonesty among respondents, ranging from those that buy papers, plagiarize from the Internet, to those that copy from their colleagues (Babalola, 2012; Adebayo, 2011). This fault in the educational background of some Nigerian students was suggested to contribute to their failure to perform optimally abroad (e.g. in the UK), where academic writing rules are taken seriously (Orim *et al.*, 2013). There are no reports on academic dishonesty in northern Nigerian universities. And it is clear from what has been reviewed so far that the awareness, perception and degree of plagiarism is essential for the maintenance of an institution of high repute. Therefore, this study was motivated by the importance of plagiarism in shaping the academia, its awareness in northern Nigerian Universities, in an effort to motivate institutions to promote a campaign that would eradicate or reduce it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to gather necessary information for the research, sampling survey was used. As stated by (Ross *et al.*, 2006) there are two major types of survey; complete and sampling. The former also called 'census' requires meeting every member of the group under question. As opposed to complete survey, sampling selects a few out of the total population; amongst its numerous advantages arethe fact that data collection and processing is quick, in addition it is also cost effective (Ross *et al.*, 2006). Hence, the data from this study were collected from 200 students of Gombe State University, randomly selected from 10 departments of the institution (Accounting, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Geography, Mathematics, Physics, Business, Public Admin, English, and Political Science). In order to gather the required data, two of the most common fact finding techniques (Whitten *et al.*, 1997; Phellas *et al.*, 2011) were used; Questionnaires and Interviews. The data collected were in three major categories; A, B, and C, representing the level of awareness; extents to which students plagiarized in the past and the source of the information; and the students' view on the punishment of plagiarism, respectively. The punishments included in the questionnaires were: 1st time offenders: Zero score for the assignment; 2nd time offenders: Automatic failing of the course; 3rd time offenders: Temporary/permanent withdrawal from the school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 200 students that participated, the result from the interviews showed that about 90% have plagiarized at one time in the past, 68% percent have included textbooks and other sources in the bibliography of assignments, out of which 50% had written books that they didn't even consult. Out of the respondents, 32% have not included reference in their assignments. The summary of results, from the different categories (A, B and C) are shown in figures 1, 2 and 3.
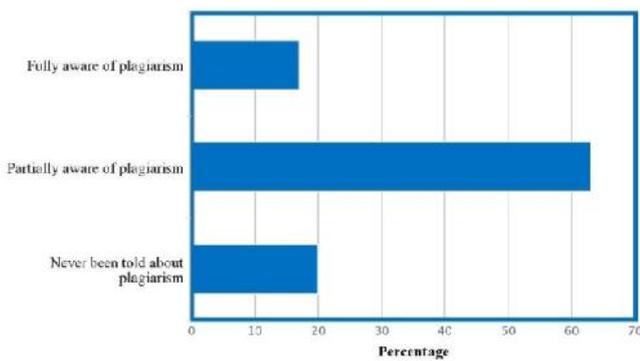

Figure 1. Students' level of awareness of plagiarism

It is clear from the category A analysis that a high proportion of students know little about plagiarism and the amount of students that never heard about plagiarism were higher than those that were fully aware of it.Based on the interviews and the the analysis afterwards depicted in Figure 1, about 63% of the students do not have full awareness of plagiarism, 20% claimed they have never been told about plagiarism and how to avoid it, while 17% have an idea about it. Apparently, from this data, lack of awareness seems to be one of the greatest causes of this misconduct, and this is not restricted to the Nigerian academic system (Wan *et al.*, 2011).

In agreement, it was previously reported that this under awareness, and thus poor writing skill background, contribute to students' failure to perform at their best when studying abroad where writing rules are very strict (Orim *et al.*, 2013).
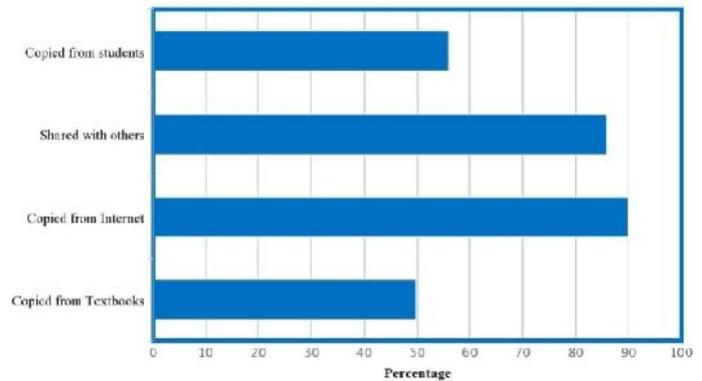

Figure 2. Levels of plagiarism and their sources

The result shows different categories of plagiarism practiced by the respondents, ranging from copying from one another, to copying from the internet or text books. Among these, more students plagiarized from the internet. The analysis from category B revealed that the primary source of plagiarism among the students is the Internet (90%), followed closely by work sharing amongst students (86%); copying of work from fellow students (56%) and finally plagiarizing from text books (49.5%). This shows that students could plagiarize from many sources, but the primary and probably the easiest, is the Internet. Indeed, this supports Ma *et al.* (2008) view that the Internet has increased the rate of plagiarism.
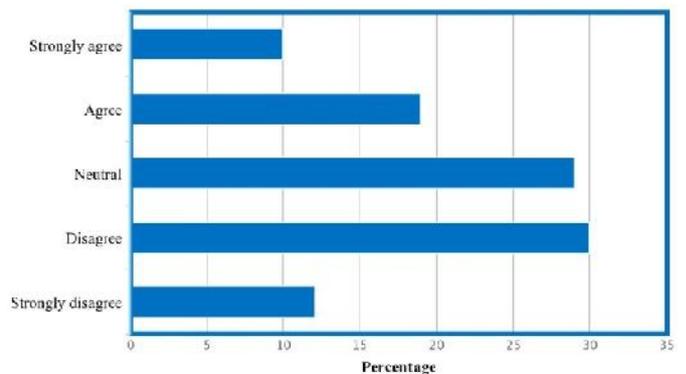

Figure 3. Students' view of the punishment for plagiarism

The outcome of the survey revealed that the highest proportion of students disagree that punishment is fair for Plagiarists, while the lowest proportion strongly agree that punishment is fair. In the C category, when asked about their view of the punishment to those who plagiarize, 29% (10% strongly, while 19% not strongly) agreed it is fair; 29% were neutral; while 42% (30% not strongly, while 12% strongly) disagreed, stating that the rules are too strict and thus the punishment would be unfair. The students' response to punishment for Plagiarists shows that they lack a clear understanding of the ethical and moral implication of plagiarism. Therefore, it could be argued that students would likely risk plagiarizing again and again, even if more severe punishments were to be introduced, as long as they are not made to understand its moral and ethical implication.

Although plagiarism is not always deliberate, it could be unconscious, arising from information overload on the brain, probably leading to "memory disruptions and failures", a term referred to as Cryptomnesia (Black, 2009; Brown and Murphy, 1989). But the present study documents cases of deliberate plagiarism. However, the study showed that the students of the University have very little know how of plagiarism and its effects.

As supported by the evidence from our results, this could largely arise due to the lack of awareness about plagiarism, ill perception of the seriousness of plagiarism and thus the need for punishment when caught, lack of consequence to students found guilty of plagiarizing and/or perception of task as boring by students (Orim *et al*, 2013; review by Onuoha and Ikonne, 2013). This makes it highly likely for these students to commit the "Clone", "CTRL-C" or the "Find-Replace" type of plagiarism (Turnitin, 2012). Other possible causative factors could be poor time management, the scare of failure, focus on achievements and grades, failure of teachers to investigate students' written work for plagiarism and/or challenge those found guilty with punishments (Babalola, 2012; Adeniyi and Taiwo, 2011). Although, the absence of plagiarism detection tools in the Nigerian academic system makes it partly difficult for teachers to fully identify a case of plagiarism, thus, making it highly likely for students to continue indulging even if they were aware of the offence. Still though, some students are of the view that lecturers do little in guiding them about good academic writing (Adeniyi and Taiwo, 2011). Indeed, many students submit their work without citing any reference (Babalola, 2012).

Even though submission of work without reference constitute a serious academic writing deficit that should be penalized by teachers, many a time, students go unpunished, thus justifying teachers contribution to the increase in this academic misconduct. In fact, there is a growing concern over the credibility of some lecturers in the academia after the dismissal of many staff identified to have indulged in one or more academic dishonesty, including plagiarism and publishing in fake journals (Punch, 2013; Kayode-Adedeji, 2013). Sadly, it was previously reported that over 70, 000 abstracts were found very similar, out of which some were found to be outright plagiarism, while some appear like double publishing (reviewed in Shahabuddin, 2009). On a global scale, plagiarism is common even in the scientific community, with its gravity varying from nation to nation (Citron and Ginsperg, 2014).Therefore, it is fair to admit that there is an embarrassing academic misconduct among both students, teachers and researchers.

As such, there is a serious need at all levels - the University Commission, Academic Staff Union, the University board and students to cooperatively work towards eradicating or minimizing this unethical and immoral intellectual thievery in order to save the integrity of the academia and enable it to nurture competent scholars that could shape the society positively. With the likely implication of plagiarism on societal development (Gullifer and Tyson, 2010; Marsden *et al.*, 2005), leaving this academic dishonesty unchecked could contribute to the production of unqualified scholars who could contribute to the development of a sustained corrupt system and institutions of very poor repute.

Although others have reported cases of plagiarism arising from buying works, such as from paper mills (Babalola, 2012), our interview revealed that some students pay Internet café attendants to browse, "copy and paste" and printout assignments for them. In majority of cases, these attendants know little about the student's course of study and thus would be highly unlikely to make rightful judgment about the most suitable article to get for the students from the Internet. Not only is this a gross misconduct, but suggests that these students do not necessarily read and understand what they plagiarize. One would argue that only lack of Internet proficiency and or laziness would lead students to indulge in this academic dishonesty. The result from our analysis also showed that many students share with their colleagues the information they plagiarized from the Internet and/or textbooks, while some copy directly from their colleague's completed work.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms other findings about the rampancy of plagiarism in the Nigerian academia. It also indicates that the level of awareness among students also very low. Together with other studies, this shows that it could partly be attributed to students' poor awareness of the ethical and moral implication of plagiarism, lack of strict rules and punishment and the lack of plagiarism detection systems. Considering the significance of plagiarism on institutional repute and societal development, it is therefore recommended that Nigerian universities strongly rise up to fight plagiarism by first creating a means of getting students fully aware, such as through the development of modules, like a taught course in the students' curriculum, especially for first year students, that specifically deals with plagiarism. Furthermore, universities should develop strict rules and punishment for Plagiarists. It is also worth noting that plagiarism cannot be efficiently detected manually, hence there is the need to employ plagiarism detection software which help to locate plagiarism effortlessly.

FUTURE STUDIES

This study provides evidence of deliberate plagiarism among the respondents, and judging from their responses on punishments for Plagiarists, and other observations about incidences of plagiarism in Nigerian universities, this raises concerns over habitual plagiarism. As such, further studies shall investigate the neurobehavioural habituation of plagiarism and whether this could influence the occurrence of unconscious plagiarism.The performance and implementation of existing plagiarism detection algorithms shall be reviewed. Then an improved algorithm with enhanced performance for both on-line and offline plagiarism detection shall be developed.

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