

# Attitude towards Plagiarism among Sherubtseans

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**ABSTRACT:** Academic writing is a specifically arduous task for students as it is associated with an assortment of cognitive and linguistic processes which students find difficult to achieve and make it a normative task to handle. In order to fulfil the writing requirements of academia, students often resort to using other people's works and ideas without citing the source, a practice which is commonly referred to as plagiarism. As the practice of plagiarism becomes habitual, students become desensitized to the act and do not consider it a serious crime, and hence continue to practice it. Subsequently, the objective of this study was to find out and understand the rationale behind students committing plagiarism and their attitude towards the act. In addition, this research further explored and endeavoured to relate the practice of plagiarism with sociological and individual behaviour. This study employed a qualitative approach and the data was collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews which were semi-structured in nature. Participants were selected from among Sherubtse College students using purposive sampling and were representative of each department, namely, Social Science; Mathematics and Computer Science; Environmental and Life Sciences; and Arts and Humanities. The study deduced the causes of plagiarism to be demanding schedules; inadequate reading, language, and writing skills; and economy of effort. Given the prevalence of plagiarism among students and the tendency for both students and lecturers to take it for granted, it is of utmost importance for institutions to instil the concept of integrity, and teach reading, writing, and time management skills.

**Keywords:** plagiarism, academic writing, internet, sociological

## Introduction

Plagiarism is the act of copying others' work without proper citation or acknowledging the original author (Ahmadi, 2014). It includes copying others' work from various online and offline platforms such as websites and books. The practice of plagiarism dates back to when people started to read and write, however, in recent years, increased access to the internet has

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made it easier to copy others' work as students can retrieve articles and works without much effort. Additionally, due to recent development of and increased accessibility to plagiarism detection software, it has become much easier to check students' works for plagiarism and consequently penalize them, leading to an increase in reported cases. Plagiarism should be considered as a serious crime and dealt with accordingly, primarily because it is unethical and is similar to stealing and theft, and undermines academic values and morals. However, despite the presence of various plagiarism detecting tools, students still commit plagiarism without fear of its consequences, which can include imprisonment in severe cases. For instance, in 2021 students of Sherubtse College pursuing BSc. Mathematics and Physics committed plagiarism in their examination which resulted in suspension of the entire class for one semester. Additionally, students of Bachelor of Arts in Population and Development Studies at Sherubtse were also caught sharing materials through pen drives during their semester-end examinations, leading to the suspension of half the class for a year. This points to the need for students in Bhutan to be taught academic skills in lower levels of education.

This research paper also focuses on how sociological behaviour affects students' attitude towards plagiarism, taking into account studies that show how societal norms affect attitudes towards other concepts as well (Culwin & Lancaster, 2001; Dawson & Overfield, 2016; Granitz & Loewy, 2007; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Martin, 2012; Park, 2003).

Until recently, the norm was to accept assignments without checking them for plagiarism, which resulted in students scoring high marks despite them submitting plagiarized assignments. Universities also did not take serious action when students were caught plagiarizing work. However, with developments in technology, people have strategized different solutions to overcome plagiarism. Most universities now view plagiarism as a serious crime and have started to use plagiarism detection software such as URKUND and Turnitin. There are also laws at the university level that lay out the consequences of plagiarism, which range from grade reduction to expulsion (Royal University of Bhutan [RUB], n.d.). Thus, the practice of plagiarism is now significantly under control, and there are fewer students who commit plagiarism. Much research has been conducted by Bruton and Childers (2016), and Awasthi (2019), in various other countries and universities, such as 'The ethics and politics of policing plagiarism' and 'Plagiarism and misconduct, a systematic review', however, research on plagiarism has not been conducted in Bhutan before. Therefore, this served as motivation to conduct a study on the students' attitude towards plagiarism in one of the universities in Bhutan.

This research paper further delved into the effects of plagiarism on an individual's life and methods of reducing and preventing such practices.

### **Research Objectives**

Sherubtse College is a multidisciplinary college with a wide range of degree courses. Sherubtse College has a total of 1582 students out of which 706 are male and 820 are females. On average, each student is assigned an average of ten written assignments every semester which

increases the possibility of instances of plagiarism. It is seen that the majority of the students plagiarize their work and use other software such as Quill Bot, Prepostseo in order to paraphrase their work. The objective of this research was to find out the rationale behind students committing plagiarism and Sherubtse College students' attitude towards plagiarism. Students do not take plagiarism as a serious crime and continue to practice it. Bhutanese students in general are arrogant in the academic field. Society plays a vital role in shaping an individual and their mentality about a particular thing. Therefore, this research also sought to relate the practice of plagiarism with sociological and individual behaviour.

## **Literature review**

Plagiarism can be a confusing concept to contend with for its definition and uses are various. Plagiarism however, can be summarized as the act of using someone else's words, ideas organization drawings, designs, illustrations, statistical data, computer programs, inventions or any creative work as if it were new and original to a person committing the act (Liddel, 2008); this would be inclusive of intellectual property and materials from public domain. The causes for plagiarism are several and can be attributed to various factors. In addition, plagiarism is not a consequence of the individual inclinations; external factors must also be considered. These external factors can arise from sociological elements as well such as socialization, one's social milieu, and sociological proclivities innate to a person. Therefore, the study of plagiarism must be multi-faceted and a wider approach is required, which this study resolved to achieve.

Green (2002) argues that plagiarism, which is known as the theft of intellectual property, has existed for a very long time. It emerged from the time when humans invented works of art and research. In recent discussions of students' perceptions of plagiarism, a recurring issue has been that plagiarism is a sophisticated topic which has been studied by many, using different types of frameworks (Fish & Hura, n.d.). Plagiarism includes counterfeiting others' works as one's own work, replicating and providing false information about the source. The popular process is to change the words but keep the same sentence structure without acknowledging the source (Blum, 2011). Plagiarism is considered to be a severe crime or academic misconduct. In other words of Park (2003), the term plagiarism means to copy others words and ideas, which is not considered to be general knowledge, and plagiarism is sometimes known as the misuse of others' work. Plagiarism is widely considered to be an illegal act. Many university students tend to commit plagiarism despite knowing its consequences.

Ahmadi (2014) places plagiarism in four categories, namely, accidental, unintentional, intentional and self-plagiarism. Accidental plagiarism is the first type of plagiarism where a person plagiarizes their work because they do not possess any knowledge about that particular topic and do not know rules of citation and referencing. Secondly, in unintentional plagiarism, a person does not intend to copy others' work. Whereas, intentional plagiarism is intentionally copying others work without citation. Finally, self-plagiarism is a type of plagiarism in which the author publishes their work on some other platform or website but they do not acknowledge

their actual work. Students in university of Bhutan fall under the category of unintentional and intentional plagiarism because as students have access to the internet and other advanced technologies, they copy ideas from whatever source is available on the internet but do not know how to cite or reference sources properly, which Culwin and Lancaster (2001) consider as plagiarism. On the other hand, when students have limited time to do their assignments and when they are not confident with their language, they tend to intentionally copy others' words and use them in their assignments. Thus, these kinds of factors contribute to the increase in the rate of plagiarism which falls under academic misconduct.

Martin (2012) argues that the practice of plagiarism is influenced by an individual's societal background. In his work "Culture and unethical conduct: Understanding the impact of individualism and collectivism on actual plagiarism", the author says that international students plagiarize more than domestic students in countries such as the United States. Plagiarism has not been taught to students in their culture. The theory of cultural relativism is relevant in this literature. According to this notion, differences in societal behaviour and belief should not be judged on what is right or bad, but rather from the viewpoint of others or through the lens of others. This philosophy also contends that each society has its own culture, customs and practices which should all be treated equally. Dawson and Overfield (2016) have found that there are certain characteristics which can help predict the likelihood of an individual committing plagiarism. Even in Bhutan, where this research is based, various societies have different values and practices, which also contributes towards developing a varied attitude towards plagiarism. This demonstrates how culture varies from place to place and how it aids in the education of people about plagiarism. Similarly, in Sherubtse College, students come from all walks of life, including people from rural and metropolitan areas, people who have been exposed to global cultures and students who have yet to be exposed to the outside world; hence it is important to take into consideration the nature of relative phenomenological experiences of these students.

Plagiarism by university students is defined as a sin known as "the unoriginal sin" or "sin against originality" in Park (2003). This article employs ethical philosophy to demonstrate why plagiarism is regarded as a sin or immoral practice. Ethical theory provides a comprehensive understanding of our ethical obligations or what we should do. This philosophy guides a person's actions by stating what is correct and incorrect. Telling a falsehood to your parents, for example, is deemed bad and goes against societal norms. Plagiarism is also against a university's and other institutions' policies and regulations. Because many students at Sherubtse College are Buddhist, ethical theory is the best theory to explain such phenomena. As a result, lying, stealing, and duplicating other people's work without their permission is considered a sin. This idea is significant to this research because it leads us to assume that plagiarism is contrary to our religion, university rules, and self-cheating.

In their book "Cultural Values, Plagiarism, and Fairness: When Plagiarism Gets in the Way of Learning" (2005), Hayes and Introna argue that kids learn by copying other people's work, linking plagiarism to the growth of students. The theory of social learning is supported

by this article. The social learning hypothesis describes a process in which a person learns new skills by watching and copying others. While copying others' work, students must read and process it. Students gain new knowledge through plagiarizing since they must put the sentences in the correct order for the assignment to be presentable. This article also employed criminological theory, which explains why people engage in criminal and deviant behaviour. Due to inadequate time management, students frequently plagiarize their work. This theory would aid this research in determining why students at Sherubtse College plagiarize despite knowing the repercussions. Culwin and Lancaster (2001) state lack of time and students' lack of confidence in their own writing skills as likely reasons for committing plagiarism.

Rational choice theory, which explains that individuals use their self-interest to make different choices in life which will give them the benefit in life (Granitz & Loewy, 2007), is also relevant, particularly when studying attitudes towards plagiarism. Individuals have the right to choose whether to plagiarize their work or to do it ethically. In rational choice theory, people do not make decisions through traditional beliefs, unconsciousness and environmental influence, rather they make decisions by looking at the risk and benefits of that particular act. So students tend to plagiarize their work when they want to gain good grades (benefit).

## **Research methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach and the data was garnered through focus group discussions which were semi-structured in nature and through in-depth interviews. The study was based in Sherubtse College, which consists of four forums: Social Sciences; Mathematical and Computer Science; Environmental and Life Sciences; and Arts and Humanities. Participants were representatives of each forum. For the focus group discussion, the participants were selected through purposive sampling and were not differentiated based on their gender, religion, ethnicity, or other cultural backgrounds. A total of 20 students (10 male and 10 female) selected from the population participated in the focus group discussions.

### **Focus Groups Discussion and In-depth interview**

The research methodologies employed in order to understand the practice of plagiarism were focus group discussion and in-depth interview. These methods were chosen as it had been effective in gathering detailed information in a short period of time and could be conducted according to the convenience of the students and the researchers. Through the in-depth interview the researchers were able to harvest honest feedback and were able to understand the students' perspectives as it was shared in a casual conversation-like manner. The in-depth interview was intentionally chosen with the objective of understanding the answers at a deeper level that is by reading the facial expressions of the interviewees, monitoring their tone and changes in their body language. The physical gestures while they answered were a key element in actually measuring the honesty of their answers and it made asking follow up questions easier

and in accordance to their overall answer, which is inclusive of the physical cues mentioned above along with what they have said.

The focus group discussion was carried out in two different groups. The first group consisted of the male students and the second group were that of the female students. This segregation was done in order to clear the stereotypical perspective that male counterparts are bolder and therefore, plagiarism cases are usually higher in male students compared to female students. By having a separate focus group for male and female students, understanding and evaluating the rationales and reasons behind plagiarism could be understood more clearly, from both perspectives and the differences in their thoughts about plagiarism could also be measured.

### **Design and Analysis**

The answers provided by the participants were recorded in the form of voice recording, which were then transcribed. The transcription was coded and as a result the objective of the research was achieved by comparing the responses of the participants. Additionally, secondary data were collected through articles and statistics which are already published.

### **Results and Discussion**

The key findings are generally attributed to students viewing plagiarism as a means to complete their academic course work. Though a large number of the respondents understand that plagiarism is unethical and immoral, they state that academic pressure drives them to plagiarize materials from the internet either through the usage of paraphrasing tools or copying it verbatim. The findings also indicate that the motivations for plagiarizing among various factors were three-fold, namely, demanding schedules (lack of time), inadequate language and general writing skills, and economy of effort, as detailed below.

#### **Students' perspective on plagiarism and examining their attitudes towards plagiarism**

Students were asked to provide their perspective on plagiarism in order to examine their attitudes on plagiarism. This topic delved on how students perceive plagiarism and their understanding of its consequences; it assessed the students' moral and ethical standpoint towards plagiarism. Students believed that plagiarism was unethical academically however asserted that it was necessary as a consequence of academic pressure, PM1 (male participant 1) stated "I mean I know that plagiarism is wrong, but the pressure to complete the assignment and the marks it carries, I am compelled to plagiarize." In addition, their view of plagiarism is primarily predicated on the need for urgency characterized by academic tasks and believed that students naturally plagiarized as a last resort. The students consider plagiarism a necessary evil, especially in college where they are without parental supervision: they procrastinate and stall academic tasks and cram for last minute completion of assignments, which indicates the inadvertent dependence on plagiarism as a consequence. Focus participants stated that plagiarism, according to Sherubtse students, is a serious offense academics can commit, and the

duplication of work was considered unethical and a total disregard of the hard work done by those who wrote the material.

Interestingly, one student compared plagiarism to gambling. If a person is not caught cheating, then it is not considered cheating. PM3 remarked,

Regardless of plagiarizing being an immoral act, for me it is more like gambling. When I plagiarize I risk getting caught, but if I do not get caught, what I copied is considered to be of my own by the tutor.

Two thirds of the male participants concurred with this view; this implies that to be accused of plagiarizing, one must be caught in the act. Hence this provides an overarching idea of plagiarism being not of individual honesty but of social scrutiny. However, in contrast, Sherubtse students believed that plagiarism to a certain degree was acceptable, especially given the fact that reference of articles and books is a prerequisite to writing an assignment or any task.

Students' view of plagiarism is predicated on a two-point scale: verbatim plagiarism is considered unethical and immoral, but plagiarism of a certain degree, which varied with each respondent and with the usage of paraphrasing tools, is considered normative and consistent with academic honesty. Therefore, students in collective consensus considered plagiarism as inevitable, and the consideration of its immorality and unethical nature was directly proportional to the degree of plagiarism practiced.

### **Student's motivation to plagiarize**

Students' motivation to plagiarize consisted of several factors ranging from the desire to look smarter to the lack of information about what constitutes the idea of plagiarism. However, throughout the two sets of focus group discussions conducted, the general consensus from the participants on the motivation to plagiarize seemed to be outlined by three affective factors discussed below.

#### ***Demanding schedules (lack of time)***

Sherubtse students tend to be engulfed by various tasks which are either academic or other, leisure activities. Students were of the view that there is a conflict between personal and academic life, that is to say, students who are seriously pursuing their aims and goals which are beyond the academic realm tend to consider academic tasks as secondary and plagiarize merely as a consequence of necessity. Further attributable to the lack of proper time management skills, students usually resort to plagiarizing their course work.

PF3 claimed that for most students, demanding schedules such as multiple assignments and course work is the primary cause of plagiarism. In college, students assert that they do not usually have the time to write original essays for each of the many assignments by reading several sources because their social and personal obligations are demanding and require immediate attention; these are inclusive of attending gatherings, picnicking during the weekends, sporting

activities, social services, and other miscellaneous activities. Martin's (2011) theory of cultural relativism may also apply here as Bhutanese culture prioritizes social bonding.

Additionally, PM6 shared, "I am interested in sports and have a passion for it. I cannot stop what I love doing for academic tasks which may not help me at all in the future in the area I want to excel in." This is in line with Granitz and Loewy's rational choice theory (2007) where students weigh the benefits and consequences of plagiarism and their own interests, and deduce that the rational choice would be to focus on their field of interest which has more immediate benefits. This also supports Park's (2003) article which studied reasons for plagiarism through ethical philosophy. However, it seems to have no utility when committing plagiarism. Despite the act being contrary to Buddhist beliefs, self-interest seems to take over. PM8 stated "I do understand that it is ethically wrong and against my own religious beliefs, but when it comes to my own interests, I do not compromise." Therefore, one's own ethics seem to remain passive in the face of urgency and academics.

In addition, the burden of collision of multiple assignment due dates constitutes another factor. Consequently, assignments are usually incomplete and completed only during the day of the deadline, leading to plagiarism in order to submit the assignment on time. PF1 stated that her lack of time management skills leads her to plagiarize. "I procrastinate a lot and leave all of my academic tasks only at the last moment, so I have to pull an all-nighter to submit my assignments hence I plagiarize quite a lot," she said. Therefore, the practice of plagiarism among students can be attributed to the lack of time as students have to meet various obligations and the lack of proper time management skills. This is inconsistent with the theory of reasoned action which suggests cheating to not be a result of environmental factors such as time (Simkin & McLeod, 2010, p. 9).

### *Inadequate reading, language skills, and writing skills*

The language of English not being the *modus operandi* of communication amongst Bhutanese students tends to be a challenge for students. During the discussions, PM2 asserted that the practice of plagiarism can be attributed to inadequate language skills which leads to the inability to understand ideas and concepts which are laid out in their references. In addition, the lack of writing skills further leads to the inability to articulate ideas. He said "I do not read at all, and I only write when I get assignments. I cannot write any assignment without plagiarizing, and I cannot even dream of writing it on my own. I lack writing and language skills." Writing is formalized thinking and students as a consequence of lack of writing habits, do not possess the cognitive skills to articulate and organize ideas. This leads to difficulty in integrating source material into their own argument. Hence, as mentioned, one of the underlying factors which is quite subtle in nature which leads to the practice of plagiarism is the lack of reading habits, inadequate language, and writing skills which inadvertently lead students to plagiarize work. This is concurrent with a study conducted by Nashruddin in 2013 among Indonesian university students surrounding the reasons students cheat. Similar to Bhutanese

students, Nashruddin's were using English as a second language, making them lack confidence in using the language to write assignments, leading them to plagiarize.

While the participants acknowledged the existence of a module on academic skills in their first year, they viewed it to be wholly insufficient and also pointed to the lack of an established resource centre to approach when they need help with employing proper guidelines in academic writing. In the absence of a reliable resource centre, students resort to filling the knowledge gap through widely available materials on the internet. Taking the help of the internet to fulfil academic needs is one of the main reasons for students resorting to plagiarism.

### *Economy of effort*

Economy of effort is generally defined as the tendency of organisms to act efficiently and minimize the expenditure of energy and restricting unnecessary movements. In this context, it is translated as the perceived convenience of cheating or the laziness of students. This was one of the most often mentioned factors in the discussion. The participants of the focus group believe that students usually copy the work of other authors verbatim in order to avoid the burden of reading and writing and complete their assignments, which takes a significantly larger amount of time. Plagiarism solves their problems quickly so that students have the time to do other things and be engaged in other activities. PF4 said, "I would rather spend time doing something I like, so plagiarizing is an easy way out for me." Overall, there was a general consensus from the participants that the economy of effort or the convenience of cheating and the laziness of students play an immediate fundamental role in the practice of plagiarism. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Hayes and Inrona (2005) in which some individuals are inclined to carry out an act despite knowing that it is deviant because of other factors that push them towards the decision. These students, despite understanding the consequence of plagiarism, resort to deviant behaviour and habits which arises mainly because of demanding schedules and economy of effort.

Another reason that emerged from the discussions that is worth mentioning includes the contention that students usually resort to plagiarism mainly as a consequence of not understanding the degree of seriousness that is associated with plagiarizing, they consider plagiarism as possessing 'innovative skills' and 'thinking out of the box' and not viewed as misconduct that warrants immediate disciplinary action. Additionally, participants of the focus group propounded that the environment they were born into and the process of socialization played a vital role in determining the degree to which a student plagiarizes. Students who are disciplined from an early age tend not to plagiarize, however, students more specifically from the digital age (Generation Z) tend to plagiarize more often. The study from Park (2003) that suggests that ethical theory (individuals are inclined to choose decisions that they perceive to be morally correct and avoid decisions believed to be morally incorrect) is linked to the reasons individuals decide to commit plagiarism is relevant here. Students who do not believe plagiarism to be wrong as a result of their upbringing feel free to commit it, whereas those who perceive plagiarism as morally wrong choose to not commit it.

In addition to the factors outlined above, several other factors were also stressed by the participants. These factors were inclusive of lack of information in understanding academic honesty and the consequence of plagiarism. The unwillingness to take risks, the desire to get good grades or be seen as smart were also some of the reasons. Some agreed that getting away with cheating was one of the factors which contributed to the practice of plagiarism. All of this suggests that the reasons as to why students plagiarize are multi-dimensional in nature and are not easily visible.

Intentional plagiarism seems to be quite prevalent which involves intentionally copying the works of others; this is as a consequence of the factors mentioned above. Further, plagiarism is not linked with learning in the case of Sherubtse students. This is in contrast with Hayes and Introna's (2005) study that links plagiarism to social learning theory. Students commit plagiarism as a means to merely complete an assignment and not as a process of learning. These focus group participants hinted that they do not learn from plagiarism primarily because they do not commit to longitudinal plagiarism which involves committing plagiarism through careful research and picking resources and paraphrasing.

Furthermore, it is also quite interesting to note that, the prevalence of plagiarism among the male participants of the focus group seems to be more as opposed to female students. This result is similar to that of a study done by Clariana et al. (2013) among university students in Spain, which showed that male undergraduate students cheated significantly more than female students in Spain. The reasons for this consist of better reading habits among females, commitment to academics, and encouragement among the few mentioned during the focus group.

## **Conclusion**

The occurrence of plagiarism generally among undergraduate students of Sherubtse College seems to be pervasive. This research sought to understand the attitude or perception of these students towards plagiarism as well as the consequent reasons they commit the act. This was done through two semi-structured focus group discussions. The responses were then juxtaposed against existing research on the same topic conducted in other countries (dis)similar to Bhutan and analysed using social learning, criminological, ethical, reasoned action, and cultural relativism theories. It was learned that Sherubtse students engage in both intentional and unintentional forms of plagiarism. The former was as a result of their misunderstanding or varied understandings of the definition of plagiarism as well as the lack of skills to recognize and avoid practices that constitute as plagiarism.

The reasons for the latter were cited to be students' priorities being other than academic, lack of academically appropriate reading and writing skills, demanding social obligations and lack of time management skills for a few. Additionally, students claimed to be ill equipped with the requisite academic reading and writing skills, which, when compounded with the existence of too large a number of assignments in too short of the amount of time to

write them in, a large number of social/extracurricular obligations, as well as the lack of an established resource centre to approach when confronted with the inability to follow proper guidelines, students felt like they have no choice but to submit plagiarized work. This occurs sometimes also regardless of their ethical and moral views on plagiarism. Additionally, students did not see copying as an opportunity to imitate proper academic writing, which means that they did not learn in the process of plagiarism.

However, it must be noted that the sample size of this study is fairly small (20 students) and was limited to only students of Sherubtse College. It is important to remember that the scope of the research was only to study the attitude towards and reasons for plagiarism among this demographic. We did and do not intend to form generalizations about the larger student population. Additionally, it must be noted that these responses were gathered from FGDs which can sometimes lead to groupthink, defined by Janis (1971) as “the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action” (p. 260), which could have resulted in the general consensus among student respondents and a lack of anomalous responses.

What is quite clearly evident from the discussion is that understanding the academic policies and rules is not sufficient to assist students in avoiding plagiarism pitfalls even with students’ good intentions. Second, it is important to teach writing skills and at the same time equally important to concurrently to teach time management skills. Finally, students try to gain most of their achievement through the least possible effort, which is quite a difficult attitude to alter.

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