Originality in Question: Plagiarism and Afghan English Major Students

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Abstract: Plagiarism remains a significant challenge in academic institutions worldwide, especially in contexts where English is not the primary language of instruction. Despite the widespread recognition of plagiarism as an ethical transgression, its prevalence continues to raise concerns. There is a notable research gap in understanding the specific perceptions and motivations behind plagiarism among students in non-English-speaking regions, particularly in Afghanistan. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions and underlying factors contributing to plagiarism among undergraduate English major students in Afghanistan. Through a descriptive quantitative research design, a survey questionnaire was administered to 120 English major students at a public university to explore their perceptions and reasons for engaging in plagiaristic practices. The findings revealed that students demonstrated a moderate tolerance towards plagiarism despite acknowledging its unethical nature. Key factors influencing plagiaristic behavior include perceptions of lenient consequences, challenges with language proficiency, misconceptions about academic writing skills, and time constraints. This research contributes to the growing literature on academic integrity in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. The study concludes with recommendations for students, educators, and institutions to effectively develop strategies to combat plagiarism, ultimately promoting a culture of academic integrity and intellectual honesty.

INTRODUCTION

Plagiarism, a persistent and troubling phenomenon in academic writing, continues to challenge the integrity of scholarly communities worldwide. Defined as presenting another's work as one's own without proper acknowledgment, plagiarism undermines the fundamental principles of academic integrity and intellectual honesty (Pritchett, 2010; Masic, 2012). Educational institutions have widely condemned this unethical practice, with some scholars describing it as a "plague on our profession" (Petress, 2003, p. 625). The prevalence of

plagiarism in higher education institutions globally highlights its status as a severe form of academic misconduct that violates scholarly ethics (Heitman & Litewka, 2011).

The impact of plagiarism extends far beyond immediate academic consequences, posing significant threats to the reputation and integrity of higher education institutions. It hinders students' academic progress and has long-term implications for their skill development and professional growth (Magara, 2016). Despite implementing preventive policies, plagiarism's persistence raises concerns about the efficacy of current measures to curb this unethical practice.

The term "plagiarism" has its roots in the Latin word "plagiarius," meaning kidnapper or enslaver, and was first used in a literary context by the Roman author Martial in the first century AD (Fitzgerald, 2007). Over time, the concept of plagiarism evolved, gaining recognition in English literature through Ben Jonson's play 'The Poetaster' and its inclusion in Samuel Johnson's Dictionary (Şandor, 2014).

Weber-Wulff (2014) identifies several types: copy and paste, verbatim plagiarism, disguised plagiarism, shake and paste, source-based plagiarism, structural plagiarism, and self-plagiarism. Each of these forms presents unique challenges in detection and prevention, necessitating a comprehensive approach to maintaining academic integrity.

The reasons for plagiarism are complex. While some scholars have debated the influence of cultural backgrounds on plagiarism (Sowden, 2005), others challenge this notion, arguing that cultural acceptance is not the primary cause (Ha, 2006; Wheeler, 2009). Cleary (2017) identifies ten key reasons for intentional or unintentional plagiarism, including laziness, panic, lack of confidence, and unfamiliarity with citation practices. Other studies highlight false beliefs, academic pressure, ignorance, and contextual circumstances contributing to plagiarism (Gullifer & Tyson, 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Ambrose, 2014).

Previous research on plagiarism in academic contexts provides valuable insights into student motivations and behaviors. A study conducted in Kuwait by Al Darwish and Sadeqi (2016) revealed that EFL students plagiarized to pass courses and achieve good grades, with the internet being the primary source of plagiarized content. Shi's (2004) research explored how students' perceptions of textual borrowing were influenced by their first language and assigned writing tasks. It found that Chinese EFL learners tended to borrow chunks of text without proper citations.

In the Canadian context, Abasi and Akbari (2008) examined how ESL graduate students utilized sources in their writing and the influence of professors' pedagogical practices on plagiarism policies. Their study identified patchwriting as an academic survival strategy, particularly for students struggling with language proficiency and facing tight deadlines.

Despite the wealth of research on plagiarism in various academic contexts, there remains a significant gap in understanding this phenomenon among Afghan undergraduate English major students. While previous studies have explored plagiarism in different cultural and linguistic settings, the unique context of Afghanistan has not been thoroughly investigated.

This gap is particularly notable given the alarming increase in plagiarism cases observed among these students, even for relatively simple assignments (Hamidi & Jalal, 2019).

This study aims to address this research gap by exploring the perceptions and motivations behind plagiarism among undergraduate English major students at a public university in Afghanistan. By gaining insights into students' perceptions of plagiarism and the factors that drive them to engage in this practice, this research aims to develop more effective strategies for promoting academic integrity in this context.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform multiple stakeholders within the academic community. For students, the findings will raise awareness about plagiarism and provide strategies to maintain academic integrity throughout their educational journey. Educators will gain valuable insights into the underlying reasons for student plagiarism, enabling them to enhance their teaching approaches and implement targeted preventive measures. Furthermore, university administrators will benefit from the research outcomes in developing and refining policies to address plagiarism at the institutional level.

The current study aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What are undergraduate English major students' perceptions of plagiarism?

2. What factors motivate these students to commit plagiarism?

3. What are the strategies that can effectively address and mitigate plagiarism?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilizes a descriptive quantitative survey approach to explore perceptions and motivations related to plagiarism among undergraduate English majors. Quantitative research is based on the premise that empirical data can reveal insights into specific phenomena (Frankel & Wallen, 2004), involving collecting numerical data to provide a comprehensive analysis (Muijs, 2010; Creswell, 2014). The descriptive survey method was selected for its effectiveness in quantifying perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes and generating generalizable results (Sukamolson & Thomas, 2007; Fowler, 1988).

The target population comprises 420 undergraduate English major students at the English Department of a public university. Adhering to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) guiding principle, a sample of 120 students was selected through questionnaire distribution to ensure adequate representation.

The primary research instrument is a modified version of Boumen's (2009) "Survey of College Student Attitudes toward and Experiences with Plagiarism." This 52-item questionnaire includes five sections: demographic information, understanding of plagiarism, perceptions of plagiarism, motivations for plagiarism, and common types of plagiarism. Responses are measured using a five-point Likert scale.

To ensure content validity, the supervisor reviewed the questionnaire and pilot-tested with 30 students (Creswell, 2014). Internal reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a value of .871, which indicates acceptable reliability (Huck, 2004). Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 24.0, with mean scores categorized as low (<2.70), moderate (2.71 - 4.50), and high (>4.51).

FINDINGS

The analysis of the survey data yielded several significant insights into the perceptions, understanding, and motivations related to plagiarism among undergraduate English majors.

Demographics

Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the study's respondents. In terms of gender, the sample includes 120 male participants. The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents (61.7%) are between 20 and 22 years old. This is followed by 24.2% between 23 and 25 years old and 13.3% who fall within the 17 to 19 age range. Only 0.8% of respondents are 26 years old or older. This distribution reflects the typical age range of undergraduate students, focusing predominantly on young adults in their early twenties.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	120	100.0	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0
Age	17-19	16	13.3	13.3
	20-22	74	61.7	61.7
	23-25	29	24.2	24.2
	26-28 & above	1	.8	.8
	Total	120	100.0	100.0
Year of Study	Junior	64	53.3	53.3
	Senior	56	46.7	46.7
	Total	120	100.0	100.0
Occupational Status	Employed	39	32.5	32.5
	Unemployed	81	67.5	67.5
	Total	120	100.0	100.0
Marital Status	Single	98	81.7	81.7
	Married/Engaged	22	18.3	18.3
	Total	120	100.0	100.0

Regarding academic standing, the sample is nearly evenly divided between juniors (3rd year) and seniors (4th year), with 53.3% and 46.7% respectively. This balance allows for a comprehensive representation of viewpoints from students at different stages of their undergraduate education.

Occupational status reveals that a significant majority (67.5%) of respondents are unemployed, while 32.5% are employed. This is consistent with the full-time nature of

undergraduate studies, though it is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of students are managing both work and academic responsibilities.
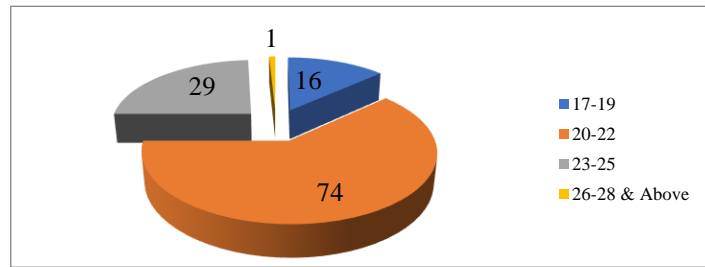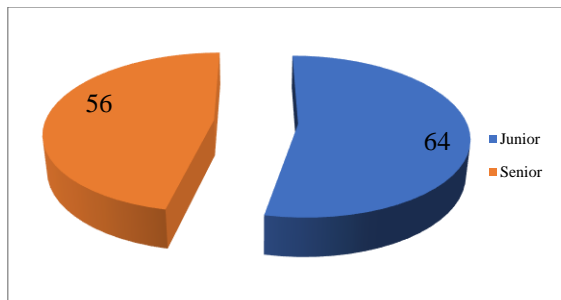

Figure 1: Age

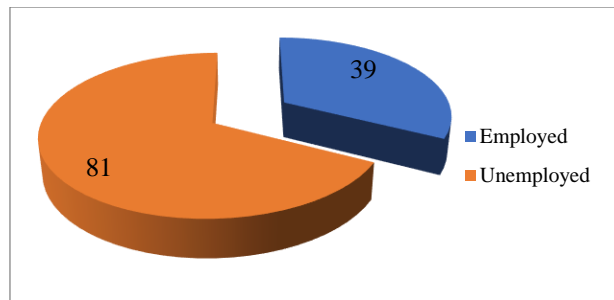**Figure 2:** Year of Study

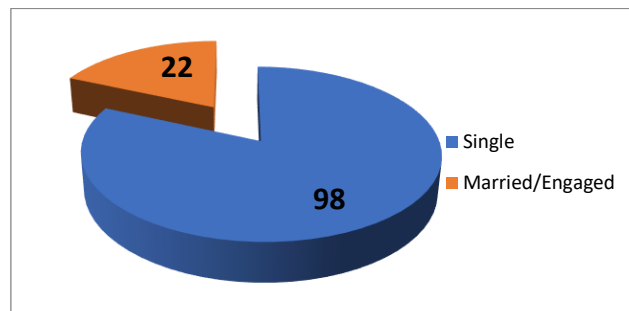**Figure 3:** Occupational Status

Figure 4: Marital Status

Regarding marital status, most respondents (81.7%) are single, with 18.3% either married or engaged. This distribution is consistent with the generally young age profile of the sample and the typical life stage of undergraduate students.

Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism

The results reveal the respondents' complex and somewhat contradictory attitudes towards plagiarism. Students' responses regarding mean score and standard deviation are analyzed in Table 2 below.

The results revealed that students generally acknowledged plagiarism as academically unethical (M = 4.17, SD = 1.04). However, this understanding was accompanied by a concerning tendency to justify plagiarism under certain circumstances. For instance, students

agreed that plagiarizing is acceptable when faced with a heavy workload (M = 4.12, SD = 1.08). They also somewhat agreed that plagiarism, involving using others' words rather than property, is not a significant issue (M = 4.10, SD = 1.07).

Table 2. *Respondents' Perception of Plagiarism*

	Mean	SD
8. Plagiarism is a violation of academic ethics.	4.17	1.04
7. When faced with numerous assignments, plagiarism is acceptable.	4.12	1.08
6. Plagiarism is a minor offense as it only borrows words, not property.	4.10	1.07
9. Students who engage in plagiarism often achieve higher grades than those who don't.	4.04	1.05
4. If I lend a paper to a student to look at who plagiarizes, I should not be punished	4.04	.98
2. Plagiarism is easier and more effective because students who don't plagiarize often lose marks by spending more time writing their assignments.	4.03	1.15
11. Self-plagiarism is harmless and shouldn't be punished.	4.00	1.09
10. *Plagiarists' names should be publicly disclosed.	3.95	1.11
12. *I don't plagiarize as I know proper citation methods.	3.87	1.05
5. I might plagiarize accidentally due to a lack of knowledge.	3.61	1.27
1. I enjoy plagiarizing.	3.01	1.34
3. *Plagiarism is against my ethical values.	2.95	1.42
Overall Mean Score on a scale of 1-5	4.01	.75

Items are reverse coded

The overall mean score for perceptions of plagiarism (M = 4.01, SD = 0.75) indicates a moderately lenient to positive perception toward plagiarism among the respondents.

Students' Reasons for Plagiarism

To explore respondents' motivations for plagiarism, they were provided with a list of 15 potential reasons. They were asked to select a value point on a scale of 1-5 (1=Strongly Disagree & 5=Strongly Agree). Their responses are analyzed in Table 3 below in terms of mean score and standard deviation.

The study uncovered several key motivators. The most prominent reason was the perception that similar scores are given to those who plagiarize and those who do not (M = 4.89, SD = 0.99). This was followed by difficulties in developing ideas for writing (M = 4.63, SD = 1.08) and the absence of punishment for plagiarism at the university (M = 4.52, SD = 1.02). Other significant reasons included lack of time for proper citation and paraphrasing (M = 4.39, SD = 1.05) and the perceived ease of plagiarizing (M = 4.10, SD = 1.20).

Interestingly, reasons such as engaging in plagiarism for fun (M = 2.94, SD = 1.26) or a lack of understanding about what constitutes plagiarism (M = 2.47, SD = 1.16) received lower agreement scores. This suggests that students are generally aware of plagiarism but engage

in it for other reasons. While these factors play a role, the results indicate that institutional factors, such as the lack of consequences for plagiarism and the perception of equal treatment for plagiarizers and non-plagiarizers, are equally, if not more, influential in students' decisions to plagiarize.

Table 3. *Respondents' Reasons for Plagiarism*

	Mean	SD
9. I plagiarize due to similar scores for plagiarized and original work.	4.89	.99
14. I plagiarize because I have difficulties developing ideas for my writing.	4.63	1.08
6. I plagiarize because there is no punishment for plagiarism in my university.	4.52	1.02
1. I plagiarize due to time constraints for proper citation and synthesis.	4.39	1.05
8. I plagiarize because it is easy.	4.10	1.20
7. I plagiarize because plagiarizers and others are treated similarly.	4.08	1.21
10. I plagiarize because I need good marks on the assignments.	4.02	1.07
5. I plagiarize because I need to pass the course.	4.00	1.03
11. I plagiarize because I want my teachers to think highly of my writing.	4.00	1.22
15. I plagiarize because I don't have sufficient research skills.	3.77	1.25
2. I plagiarize because I can't express myself well in English writing.	3.53	1.24
3. I plagiarize because I have soft and careless lecturers.	3.48	.70
4. I don't plagiarize because I feel plagiarizing is not wrong.	2.98	1.18
13. I do it for fun.	2.94	1.26
12. I plagiarize because I don't have a clear idea of what constitutes plagiarism.	2.47	1.16

DISCUSSION

The study reveals intriguing insights into students' perceptions of plagiarism and why they are inclined to engage in such practices. Contrary to the prevailing notion that plagiarism is a serious offense, the results indicate that students expressed moderately tolerant perceptions of plagiarism. Despite acknowledging its unethical nature, students demonstrated a lenient stance towards acts of plagiarism. This finding aligns with McCabe et al.'s (2012) study, which reported that students often downplay the significance of plagiarism and perceive it as a relatively minor transgression. Of particular concern is the positive perception attached to typical plagiarism scenarios. Respondents indicated that students who engage in plagiarism often receive higher scores than their honest counterparts, and more troublingly, they observed a lack of consequences for such actions. This viewpoint underscores the need for effective measures to address the issue of plagiarism and maintain academic integrity. The discrepancy between the understanding of plagiarism as an unethical act and the tolerance towards its occurrence suggests the presence of underlying factors influencing students' perceptions.

One potential explanation for these findings could be the lack of consistent and clear guidelines educational institutions provide regarding plagiarism definitions and its associated consequences. Singh and Rememi (2015) and Pecorari (2003) highlight the inconsistencies within university policies, where definitions of plagiarism and the specific scenarios that constitute it may vary. This ambiguity gives students a potential justification for their lenient perceptions, as they may believe their actions fall outside the explicitly defined boundaries of plagiarism.

The study also investigated why students were inclined to commit plagiarism, revealing several key factors contributing to this behavior. One significant reason identified was students' perception of equal treatment between plagiarizing and submitting original work. Students believed their instructors could not detect plagiarism, creating a sense of unfairness for those who completed assignments independently. This finding aligns with Gullifer & Tyson's (2014) study, which discovered that students who engage in plagiarism often believe busy instructors would not thoroughly check their assignments.

Another prominent reason identified was students' lack of ability to develop their ideas in writing effectively. Many students attributed their plagiarism to poor English language proficiency, explicitly struggling with paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing information. This is supported by the research Noori (2020) conducted in the Afghan context, which revealed that Afghan undergraduate English major students faced challenges in academic writing. This finding corroborates the research of Bahadori et al. (2012), which argued that inadequate knowledge of citation, paraphrasing, and referencing contributes to plagiarism. Similarly, Abasi and Akbari (2008) found that students with limited language proficiency often resort to patchwriting as a survival strategy.

Furthermore, students expressed a misconception that skills like paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing are primarily relevant to research-related topics rather than daily writing assignments. Limited practice in these skills and a lack of explicit instruction on avoiding plagiarism make students opt for easier plagiarizing. Sibomana et al. (2018) suggest that teaching and assessment methods may not sufficiently address plagiarism avoidance skills, further exacerbating the issue. Spiller & Ferguson (2011) also emphasize the need for improved teaching methods and clearer guidance on academic writing to discourage plagiarism effectively.

Time constraints and the pressure to meet assignment deadlines were significant factors leading to plagiarism. This finding supports Harris's (2017) claim that laziness, poor study habits, and feeling overwhelmed by workload contribute to plagiarism. Abasi and Akbari (2008) also found that heavy reading loads, imminent assignment deadlines, and high expectations from professors were contributing factors. However, it is worth noting that Eret & Gokmenoglu's (2010) findings contradict this, as they found that students primarily committed plagiarism due to writing in foreign languages rather than their native language.

These findings highlight the complex reasons behind students' engagement in plagiarism, including perceptions of equal treatment, language proficiency challenges, misconceptions about academic writing, and time constraints. The results underscore the importance of addressing language proficiency issues, providing explicit instruction on academic writing skills, and implementing clear and consistent policies to prevent student plagiarism. By understanding these underlying factors, educational institutions can develop more effective strategies to promote academic integrity and reduce instances of plagiarism.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the complex landscape of plagiarism in higher education, mainly focusing on students' perceptions and reasons for engaging in such practices. The findings reveal a discrepancy between students' understanding of plagiarism as unethical and their moderately tolerant attitudes toward it. This tolerance, coupled with the perception that plagiarism often goes undetected and unpunished, creates a challenging environment for maintaining academic integrity.

The reasons behind plagiarism are multifaceted, ranging from perceived equal treatment of plagiarizers and non-plagiarizers to language proficiency issues, misconceptions about academic writing skills, and time constraints. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing plagiarism that goes beyond simply enforcing rules and punishments.

The study highlights the urgent need for educational institutions to implement clear and consistent anti-plagiarism policies. Additionally, it is crucial to provide students with robust support and skill-building resources, particularly in language proficiency and academic writing. Promoting a cultural shift within academia, where original work is highly valued, and the consequences of plagiarism are rigorously applied, is essential for fostering a culture of academic integrity.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address the issue of plagiarism:

- Develop Plagiarism Education: Institutions should implement awareness programs beyond defining plagiarism to include practical skills in proper citation, paraphrasing, and academic writing.
- Improve Language Support: Given the link between language proficiency and plagiarism, institutions should provide robust language support services, including writing centers and workshops on academic English.
- Revise Assessment Methods: Educators should design assignments that discourage plagiarism by requiring original thought and analysis rather than mere reproduction of information.

- Implement Consistent Policies: Universities should establish clear, consistent policies on plagiarism, including defined consequences, and ensure these are communicated effectively to all students.

- Use Technology: While not a standalone solution, plagiarism detection software can be helpful when combined with education and support.

- Foster a Culture of Integrity: Institutions should work to create an academic environment that values original work and academic honesty, making plagiarism socially unacceptable among peers.

- Provide Time Management Support: Given that time pressure is a factor in plagiarism, institutions should offer resources and workshops on effective time management and study skills.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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