

## **Academic Integrity: Understanding Essence of Undergraduates' Plagiarism in Their Research Writing at a Southern Chinese University**

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### **Abstract**

In China, plagiarism among undergraduate students has been a protuberant issue preventing the robust development of tertiary education. The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research was to acquire a profound understanding of the essence of the phenomenon through the process of students' research writing at Shaoyang University (SYU), a southern Chinese University. Employing a step-wise combination of purposive and random sampling techniques, 11 participants were selected to partake in the study's online, face-to-face, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. On completion of data analysis, seven themes emerged: poor literacy about plagiarism; few learning experiences related to plagiarism; disapproval of plagiarism with different tolerance levels; difficulties encountered during academic writing; sophistication in detouring the plagiarism detecting tool; reasons for committing plagiarism; and under-evaluation of disciplinary study. Based upon the rich findings, the study proposed a preliminary holistic solution to mitigate plagiarism, with school administration, policy makers, instructors, and students performing and abiding to their respective roles, and with the literacy education related to plagiarism at the center.

**Keywords:** Chinese undergraduates, essence, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), plagiarism, reasons

### **1. Introduction**

Plagiarism among undergraduates has garnered a growing amount of attention, as it contributes significantly to the erosion of academic integrity. Plagiarism is the act of duplicating or rewriting someone else' words in whole or in part, or stealing someone else' ideas without acknowledgement (Park, 2003). Forms of plagiarism include copying, pasting, patch-writing, or paraphrasing without attribution, presenting incorrect or incomplete citations or references, purloining, and contract deception (Park, 2003; Mohammad et al., 2018).

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

Frequently, the attitudes of undergraduates are quite diverse or even contradictory. It was believed that students were morally ambivalent regarding academic dishonesty and were tolerant of dishonesty among their peers (Poenaru, 2019). It was discovered that students' attitudes deteriorated as they approached graduation (Sutherland-Smith, 2018).

Numerous academicians have investigated the reasons why undergraduate students plagiarize. Intentional plagiarism is premeditated and unintentional plagiarism occurs accidentally (Fatemi & Saito, 2020). It was necessary to respect the traditions of other cultures to comprehend the reasons (Van Horne et al., 2018). According to Šprajc et al. (2017), information technology is primarily to blame for plagiarism. Hu & Sun (2017) examined the anti-plagiarism policies of eight Chinese universities and found that all of them were dominated by regulations regarding how to punish offenders but severely lacked educational approaches. Nabee & Pisa (2021) demonstrated that a lack of knowledge about plagiarism led to high rates of plagiarism among students. According to Onah et al. (2021), the majority of students cited limited time, complexity of duties, and the desire for top grades as the primary reasons for plagiarizing.

Various approaches to combating plagiarism have been devised. Singh & Remenyi (2016) concluded that detection tools were ineffective due to the sophistication with which students circumvented databases. Sorea & Repanovici (2020) discovered that when college students were asked to remark on online materials, instances of plagiarism decreased drastically. Rayhan (2021) claimed that promoting awareness about plagiarism could significantly reduce instances of plagiarism.

Due to the gravity of the issue and the paucity of relevant studies, it is imperative that responsible Chinese academicians devote more resources to plagiarism research. Considering this, the initial and most important stage is to comprehend the phenomenon's essence. As a result, undergraduate students at Shaoyang University (SYU), a university in southern China, were selected as the focus of this study. It was anticipated that the findings would provide a solid foundation for policies and measures that would help combat plagiarism at SYU and other similar ordinary tertiary institutions.

## 2. Methodology

This study was designed as an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA contributes to the comprehension of individual's lived experiences (Tuffour, 2017). This study's methodology was fashioned in a way that yielded valuable insights into the complex mechanism that could influence undergraduates' experiences with plagiarism in their research writing. As there was no predetermined assumption, only a general research query was posed: What are the essence of plagiarism in the research writing of SYU undergraduates? The Adult Learning Theory (Loeng, 2018) permeated the entirety of the research process, with adults' autonomy in learning and utmost respect for adult learners receiving the most weight.

## 2.1 Participants

The study's target population were the undergraduate senior students at SYU who were about to conduct their research writing. The study's sampling procedure consisted of two stages. The first sampling was a purposive sampling, and the second was a random sampling from the population eligible for selection.

As purposive sampling required researchers to be subjective while selecting study participants according to prior knowledge about their study, the study selected its participants based on the four characteristics of the participant being a senior student, performing their research writing in the spring semester of 2022, clear on the research purpose, and willing to participant in the study.

Without focusing on the disciplinary majors of the participants, the study randomly selected 11 participants from six different majors. By enlisting 11 participants, the researcher accounted for the possibility that several of them might decide to withdraw during the course of the study. Nonetheless, it turned out that they all stayed with the study to the very end.

## 2.2 Instrumentation

### 2.2.1 Design

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. During face-to-face and individual VooV meetings, participants were asked topic-related open-ended questions. These questions guided the participants to describe their personal experiences in their own words and then to provide additional interpretations of those experiences (Arsyad, 2017).

Before, during, and after their research writing, the participants were asked a variety of questions about their attitudes, learning experiences, obstacles, and underlying causes. Before each of these three interviews, a brief conversation took place with each participant to collect demographic data and establish rapport. The duration of each interview ranged between 20 and 40 minutes.

### 2.2.2 Ethical Consideration

Before conducting the study, the researcher obtained approval from the college's Academic Board and posted a recruitment notice on the college's website, which outlined the research's purpose and methodology, and emphasized confidentiality. The researcher protected the participants in the following ways: No identifying information would be divulged, and each participant was given a pseudonym. The recordings were to be kept only by the researcher and destroyed after the publication of the findings, though the transcripts were to be preserved for an additional three years. During the interview, the researcher maintained a certain distance from the participants to ensure complete respect and avoid casting judgment as maintaining a suitable distance reduces researcher bias (Lauterbach, 2018).

## 2.3 Data Analysis

Guided by Smith & Shinebourne’s (2012) research, the researcher employed six stages to analyze the data: (a) repeatedly perusing the transcript; (b) recording initial remarks; (c) identifying themes in the first case; (d) connecting the themes in the first case; (e) continuing the same analysis in the remaining cases; (f) creating a theme list across cases. For recording, converting, analyzing, and identifying themes, Microsoft Office Excel was utilized. Table 1 is an illustration of the coding process.

*Table 1: An Example of Coding Process*

Transcript Example	Initial Coding	Thematic Coding	Theme Built Across Themes
Q: What is your reaction when you see or hear of plagiarism-related cases?	not right wrong		
LQ: I’m against it. I think it’s not right. Totally wrong.	not care if own benefit not affected	strongly against it in nature	
However, I don’t care if, it doesn’t harm my benefit... I mean, if I’m the author, if my paper is copied by someone, or it happens to my good friends, I’ll get very angry. I will sue that person to protect my own rights. It’s not accepted.	angry if it happens to self or friends sue if harmed protect own rights if harmed not accepted	powerfully protect self when harmed indifferent when others' benefit is harmed	Disapproval of plagiarism with different tolerance levels

## 2.4 Trustworthiness of Data

In this study, the researcher used bracketing to maintain an objective stance towards subjective experiences by separating them from the original accounts and remaining open to the actual experiences (Husserl, 2019). During data analysis, reflective practices and cyclical bracketing were utilized as the researcher did not always recognize her own preconceptions.

After each interview, each participant received a copy of the transcript and was requested to verify the authenticity of the responses before the next interview.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Participant Demographics

The 11 participants spanned six distinct disciplines. However, in this IPA study, with such a small sample size, it was pointless to focus on the discipline differences. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, each student was provided with a pseudonym for identification purposes. The participants' pseudonyms, genders, ages, and disciplines are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2: Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Age	Major
JYH	M	21	International Economics & Trade
YY	M	22	Energy Engineering
XM	M	21	Management Science
ZX	F	21	Finance
LQ	F	21	Management Science
CY	F	21	Chemistry
LJY	M	23	International Economics & Trade
LJ	F	22	Finance
LHX	F	22	Food Engineering
JZX	F	21	International Economics & Trade
WBH	M	23	Management Science

### 3.2 Emerging Themes

The transcripts were translated from Chinese to English, and the translation, linguistically speaking, might have lost some colloquial characteristics, though this did not affect the comprehension of the meanings.

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

## 3.2.1 Themes Emerging Before Research Writing

### Theme One: Poor Literacy about Plagiarism

Regarding the plagiarism-related literacy, the participants provided imprecise descriptions that partially matched the definition. They mentioned that plagiarism practices included idea theft, ghostwriting, and idea borrowing, but they were unclear about patch-writing, paraphrasing, and direct quotation, etc. Their lack of specificity suggested that they were seemingly unfamiliar with the nuances of certain rules. Therefore, a little common sense regarding plagiarism could not compensate for their very low literacy. Consider XM's response as an example:

I find several papers. I select a part from this paper and a second part from that... Suppose most part of my paper is from them. I myself contribute none or just a little. You can say I commit plagiarism. However, if I contribute a larger part, then it's not plagiarism.

### Theme Two: Few Learning Experiences Related to Plagiarism

It was confirmed that there were no predetermined courses in the curricula for students to comprehensively enhance their understanding of plagiarism and practice regulated academic writing. The students had very limited learning experiences related to surfing the internet, chance conversations with teachers, conversing with former graduates, etc. In a sense, their unsystematic educational experiences explained their fragmented understanding of plagiarism. Take into consideration LJ's response as an example:

I like to log in Weibo to scan the news comments on some hot topics. I was a fan of Zhai Tianlin, a famous actor. He was found... had paid someone else... to do his doctoral writing. That's, really, terrible. His diploma was revoked. I felt very sorry for him. He isn't popular any more. From this kind of reports... and comments, I got to know something about plagiarism.

### Theme Three: Disapproval of Plagiarism with Different Tolerance Levels

The participants, generally speaking, were not morally ambivalent. The common attitude shared by them was that they all disapproved plagiarism, though there were nuances, in that some carried absolute detest, some presented more tolerance, and some showed an indifferent attitude if their own benefit was not harmed. CY expressed her empathy for her peers:

I think it's immoral... However, it's understandable... I mean most of us are kind of... lazy (blushed). We don't have many creative ideas. To finish the task, many choose to plagiarize. But I do think... we should make more efforts in the research writing.

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

## 3.2.2 Themes Emerging During Research Writing

### Theme One: Poor Academic Research Skills

The participants cited difficulties in acquiring data and generating new ideas as their primary obstacles in writing. Their concerns were specifically about how to conduct research, which was what the students should have learned and understood prior to conducting their research writing. Their shared difficulties revealed a severe flaw in the university's instructional planning: not a single course was designed to instruct students on how to conduct research. LJY was writing a paper on the export of Xinjiang cotton but was unable to locate the data he needed. He stated the following:

My structure is okay. I'm writing my paper. However, I've got only the data of years ago. I have data of 2019...and before that. I have no way... to find the newest data. I checked some websites, but... no success.

### Theme Two: Sophistication in Detouring Detection

During the writing process, the participants discovered that the only plagiarism-related index they needed to consider was the duplicate ratio, which was to be checked by Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), from which the college had purchased an expensive detection service. Their responses to the methods of evading detection were filled with bitter amusement, which was surprising given their previous attitudes. Methods such as paraphrasing or patch-writing without citation, data fabrication, multiple translations, purchasing online services, etc. were mentioned. Evidently, the use of duplicate checking tools alone was insufficient to determine whether or not the pupils had committed plagiarism. ZX said like an expert:

Suppose you think this paragraph... is what you need. You just...translate it into a minor language, like Arabic, like Korean, like Italian. Then you translate it into, like Russia or French. Finally, you translate it back to Chinese. Haha, the repetition rate could drop to... below 10 percent. Sorry (blush), but now everyone knows about that.

## 3.2.3 Themes Emerging After Research Writing

### Theme One: Reasons for Committing Plagiarism

Without exception, every participant admitted that they were unable to completely avoid plagiarism in their research writing, but the researcher exhibited total empathetic understanding and won their trust. Therefore, they actively investigated the phenomenon's causes and contributed a lengthy list of reasons. None of them, however, mentioned the role of Internet convenience, which may be explained by the Internet's profound penetration into their lives.

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

## ***Insufficient Professional Knowledge Reserve***

Participants indicated that they lacked a sufficient knowledge base, which led to a lack of self-confidence during the writing process and a high propensity for plagiarizing. JYH complained frequently and stated:

I didn't work hard. Er ... yes I'm listed ... among the top one-third students, in my class, but, but it doesn't mean, I've well grasped the knowledge, especially the ... professional knowledge. The writing needs me to ... have a good professional knowledge base. I don't have it. I just don't have it. I don't have the confidence. I was just writing others' ideas...

## ***Teachers' Negative Attitude Toward Avoiding Plagiarism***

Teachers surprisingly viewed assisting students with their research writing as a tedious chore rather than an educational endeavor, which explained why they chose not to emphasize avoiding plagiarism. LJ formulated her position as follows:

Before the writing, I was, very very worried and...nervous, for, I didn't know how to fulfill it. I sent many questions to my adviser, but I... seldom got detailed replies. She... did help me to adjust the structure. She did tell me not to plagiarize, but, she didn't tell me what practices, belonged to plagiarism. She only emphasized, the repetition ratio.

## ***Little Knowledge of Attribution Rules***

Before the third round of interviews, the researcher sent a message to each participant explaining some fundamental rules about plagiarism and inviting them to check their own papers for any unavoidable instances of plagiarized content. During the follow-up interviews, they all admitted that perpetrating plagiarism was inevitable. They reflected that they were unsure of when, where, and how to give credit to the authors they had cited, particularly when paraphrasing, quoting, or borrowing ideas, which resulted in numerous instances of unintentional plagiarism. LHX expressed her thought as follows:

When... quoting someone's sentences, directly, direct quotation marks should be used, or it's plagiarism. I really didn't know about that, not at all. I never knew it before you yesterday mentioned the rules.

## ***Poor Time Management***

Participants mentioned that too much work, losing time due to sloth or procrastination, and similar factors led to poor time management, which in turn led to their tendency to plagiarize. JYH uttered the following:

We are lazy... at least I am. I can't make good use of my time. It's... my big problem. I played cards with roommates, read novels... When I wanted to do something for my research writing, it was... often my bed time.

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

## *Peer Influence*

Throughout the writing process, participants and their colleagues maintained frequent communication. They reported that their classmates' plagiarizing behavior inspired them to engage in similar actions. YY was slightly annoyed as he described his experience:

I spent... half a day. I sat before my computer. I didn't work out... even two paragraphs, for, I was racking my brains, to express myself. However, one of my roommates announced to me that, he finished one chapter within two hours. I went over, to have a look. What he did, was just... copying and pasting. It was stimulating my nerves. Unfair! I felt, it was unnecessary...to work hard on the writing.

## *No Predictable Severe Consequences*

When senior students were creating their research papers, they frequently communicated with former graduates to learn more about the writing task, the regulations, and the level of difficulty. The information gathered suggested that almost no former senior students at SYU were punished for plagiarism as long as their papers passed duplicate checking. ZX's comments were as follows:

I have a good friend. She graduated last year. I called her when I was writing... my research paper. She said, 'easy, you just find several papers, and you put them together. You just need to lower the repetition rate.' I was astonished. I asked her what if my adviser caught me... and criticized me. She laughed. She said it would be impossible. She said everyone practiced like that. No one was refused to graduate because of that.

## *Poor Function of the Plagiarism Detection Tool*

Even though their advisers had requirements for the quality of the research paper, such as a reasonable structure, a strong connection to social, economic, or industrial reality, a low repetition ratio, and the most recent data, plagiarism was not emphasized, and all the indexes with the exception of repetition rate appeared irrelevant. In theory, duplicate verification fell under the umbrella of detecting plagiarism, while in practice, it was merely a technical issue for the younger generation. JYH stated:

The low repetition rate, er, doesn't mean that... you haven't plagiarized. The CNKI paper checker, has a lot of problems... or loopholes. If you are willing to, pay some money to a special WeChat mini program. You just lie in bed, playing games and soon the problem is solved. It's just... a joke.

## **Theme Two: Undervaluing Disciplinary Study**

The majority of students, according to the participants, placed a far higher priority on passing practical exams that they believed were crucial to their future employment, such as primary or middle school teacher's certificate exams, Band Four or Six English exams, civil service exams, etc., than on their disciplinary study, as in many of these exams disciplinary

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

knowledge was not required. Consequently, the courses to which students paid the most attention were typically the general ones, such as English, mathematics, and politics. They remarked that civil servants, teachers, etc., were the most respectable professions after graduation today. Few students were inclined to work in the private sector. CY stated:

Many guys are busy, very busy. Me too. We take exams, all kinds of exams. I want to be... a primary school English teacher. My major has nothing to do with this. Many want to be civil servants. Civil service exams, the content has no connection, no direct connection with many majors. Sometimes we think, it's useless... to study the disciplinary courses.

## 4. Discussion

By highlighting the lived experiences of 11 SYU participants, this IPA study successfully achieved its goal of delving into the underlying causes of plagiarism among undergraduates. The findings fully exposed the mechanism underlying the phenomenon of undergraduate students plagiarizing in their research writing in the SYU context, revealing the sharp conflicts between the students' prevalent plagiarizing practices and their unsystematic literacy training, between their final acceptance of the practices and their common sense of morality, between the institution's educational goal and curriculum design, and between the institution's plagiarism-related regulations and its slack control.

Existing literature on this sensitive topic in China is relatively limited, with almost no IPA studies focused on listening to, analyzing, and comprehending students' voices. Without a clear understanding of what was transpiring in Chinese students' academic lives and what ideas were deeply ingrained in their minds, the majority of the conducted studies attempted to mitigate the issue by borrowing lessons from other countries. This research contributed to the body of knowledge regarding Chinese students' perceptions of their plagiarizing experiences and provided a solid foundation for the development of effective policies and measures.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Suggestion on Mitigation of Plagiarism

This study has enhanced our comprehension of the extent to which SYU undergraduates plagiarized in their research papers. Based on the findings, the researcher's reflections, and previous researchers' contributions, a preliminary holistic solution to combat plagiarism is proposed, with policymakers and administration, instructors and students playing their respective roles, and literacy education at the center.

Firstly, programs can be established to provide students with opportunities to enhance their plagiarism-related literacy, and assessment methods and content can be reformed or modified to encourage their active participation (Fatemi & Saito, 2019).

19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

Secondly, policymakers must optimize the related policies, which are dominated by regulatory discourses and lack educational content to convey the fundamentals of plagiarism literacy; a rigorous management system must be established to ensure that the administration effectively implements the regulations. In addition, the use of a variety of detection tools is encouraged so that the most appropriate tool can be selected for the detection purpose (Bautista & Pentang, 2022).

Thirdly, it is the responsibility of the instructors to patiently and clearly explain the regulations to their students with passion and a proactive attitude toward instilling the value of academic integrity, which will make the students more circumspect when tempted to commit plagiarism (Peters & Cadieux, 2019).

Lastly, as adult learners, students are expected to further develop their independent and critical thinking regarding this issue by making their voices known and comprehending the rationale behind the relevant regulations, and then by taking responsible actions (Cheers et al., 2021).

## 5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

In light of the limitations of this study, it is recommended that more qualitative studies of a similar nature be conducted to broaden the scope of the research, either within various institutions or across institutions.

Developing effective instructional programs related to plagiarism may be a second research direction, as to which programs will work better, how the programs will be implemented effectively, etc. (Graham et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021).

The study's findings regarding instructors' indifference may be addressed in a third direction. What made the majority of instructors to turn a blind eye to the plagiarism phenomenon? Why did they lack enthusiasm for the guidance work? Was their behavior already the norm? Were they experiencing their own problems? All of these are worthy of in-depth investigation, as instructors are in direct contact with their students, and their attitudes and practices have a substantial impact on not only their students' reactions and practices regarding plagiarism but also their lifelong professional development (Romanowski, 2021).

Evaluation of the quality of undergraduate instruction materials may be done in a different direction. What the researcher is requesting is that it be conducted from the student's perspective to determine if what they have acquired conforms to what the instructional planning has designed, as the participants in the study indicated that they were not prepared in their disciplinary knowledge, that the majority of students undervalued their disciplinary study, and that there were no severe consequences for plagiarism.

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19-21 of August 2022

Paris, France

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