

Examining the Effect of Gender and Educational Level on Iranian EFL Graduate Students' Perceived Reasons for Committing Plagiarism¹

Examinando el Efecto del Género y el Nivel Educativo en las Razones Percibidas por los Estudiantes Graduados de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera Iraníes para Cometer Plagio

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Abstract

The present study aimed at examining the role of gender and educational level of Iranian EFL graduate students in determining the main reasons for committing plagiarism from their point of view. To this end, a convenient sample of 159 M.A. and Ph.D. students partook in the study. To gather the necessary data, a 32-item Likert-Type questionnaire was administered and the results were subjected to a two-way MANOVA. Results of the study indicated that neither the students' gender nor their educational level had any significant effect on the perceived reasons for engaging in plagiarism. Moreover, the interaction effect of these two variables did not show any significant effect either. Descriptive statistics, however, showed that students' personal and attitudinal characteristics took on paramount importance compared to other factors. This can signal the intentionality of plagiarism among Iranian EFL graduate students, thereby suggesting the need for making more informed decisions on how to deal with this problem.

Keywords: *educational level; gender; Iranian EFL graduate students; plagiarism.*

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como propósito examinar el papel del género y nivel educativo de los estudiantes iraníes graduados de inglés como lengua extranjera para determinar las principales razones para cometer plagio desde su punto de vista. Para tal fin, se toma una muestra conveniente de 159 estudiantes de maestría y doctorado que participaron en el estudio. Para reunir los datos necesarios, un cuestionario tipo Likert con 32 preguntas fue administrado y los resultados fueron sujetos a un análisis multivariante de la varianza en dos vías. Los resultados indicaron que ni el género o el nivel educativo de los estudiantes ni el efecto de la interacción de estas dos variables tuvieron un efecto significativo sobre las razones para involucrarse en el plagio. La estadística descriptiva, sin embargo, mostró que las características personales y actitudinales de los estudiantes adquirieron una importancia primordial comparado con otros factores. Esto puede ser señal de la intencionalidad del plagio entre los estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera, de este modo se sugiere la necesidad de tomar decisiones más informadas sobre como abordar este problema.

Palabras clave: nivel educativo; género; estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera; plagio

Resumo

O presente estudo tem como propósito examinar o papel do gênero e nível educativo dos estudantes iranianos formados de inglês como língua estrangeira para determinar as principais razões para cometer plágio desde seu ponto de vista. Para tal fim, toma-se uma amostra conveniente de 159 estudantes de mestrado e doutorado que participaram no estudo. Para reunir os dados necessários, um questionário tipo Likert com 32 perguntas foi administrado e os resultados foram submetidos a uma análise multivariante da variância em duas vias. Os resultados indicaram que nem o gênero ou o nível educativo dos estudantes nem o efeito da interação destas duas variáveis tiveram um efeito significativo sobre as razões para envolver-se no plágio. A estatística descritiva, porém, mostrou que as características pessoais e atitudinais dos estudantes adquiriram uma importância primordial comparado com outros fatores. Isto pode ser sinal da intencionalidade do plágio entre os estudantes iranianos de inglês como língua estrangeira, deste modo, sugere-se a necessidade de tomar decisões mais informadas sobre como tratar este problema.

Palavras chave: nível educativo; gênero; estudantes iranianos de inglês como língua estrangeira; plágio

Introduction

Plagiarism, “the act of using another’s work without appropriate acknowledgement,” (Devlin & Gray, 2007, p. 182) is widely known as an unethical behavior (Deckert, 1993; Mallon, 1989). Because of the negative views held towards plagiarism, most academic institutions attempt to take special measures to deter their students from committing it (Jaszi, 1994). In Peru, as an example, the “zero-tolerance” strategy implemented against plagiarism and cheating proved effective in that students in fault no longer engaged in plagiarism (Carnero et al., 2017). However, contrary to this view, some scholars argue that plagiarism can be differentiated from cheating in that cheating is an intentional act while plagiarism can be either intentional or unintentional (James, McInnis, & Delvin, 2002). Given this specific characteristic of plagiarism as opposed to cheating, it may convincingly be argued that all plagiarists may not be dishonest and deceitful people; rather, some other causes may bring about such unethical behavior and labelling all plagiarists as deceitful people and punishing them based on untested assumptions and guesses can be unfair and unjustified (Devlin & Gray, 2007).

Given that such stereotyping may be as unethical as plagiarism itself, it seems that an urgent need is felt to examine students’ ideas of why they plagiarize and identify the most important factors which contribute to this unethical behavior. If the results of such a scrutiny reveal that students have engaged in plagiarism deliberately, say, to deceive the instructors, they may deserve to be punished severely. If, on the other hand, lack of knowledge or awareness of this unethical behavior is the main reason, punishment does not serve as an appropriate procedure and some training courses or awareness-raising tasks are more reasonable. In Australia, for example, “most universities adopt penalties seen as appropriate to the level of intention.” (Stuhmcke, Booth & Wangmann, 2016, p. 3) That is, they “formally separate ‘plagiarism’ or inadvertent plagiarism from ‘misconduct’ or intentional plagiarism.” (Stuhmcke et al., p. 3)

Even though plagiarism has recently been a matter of considerable concern for Iranian scholars and researchers (e.g., Alimorad, 2018; Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Khamesan & Amiri, 2011; Rashidi, Rahimi, & Dehghan, 2016; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013; Tahriri & Eslam-Navaz, 2014; to name a few), there are still several unexplored territories which need to be attended to in this context. One of the important areas in need of closer examination is the main perceived reasons for committing plagiarism. Uncovering the primary causes of plagiarism may help us in determining the most suitable ways to deal with this phenomenon. Numerous researchers have attempted to find the most prominent reasons for Iranian students’ engagement in plagiarism; nevertheless, to the best of the present researcher’s knowledge, no study has endeavored to systematically examine the role of these students’ gender and educational level in perceived reasons for plagiarizing. To fill this gap, the present study attempted to

unearth the effect of these two important factors on Iranian EFL graduate students' main perceived reasons for engaging in this unethical behavior.

Literature Review

About a decade ago, Iranian scholars and researchers were condemned for not being honest in their academic duties. Butler (2009), for instance, published a paper in *Nature Journal* and reported some Iranian authorities as plagiarists. Given that such a daunting situation may lead to the negative publicity of Iranian academic staff all over the world, a plethora of Iranian researchers attempted to examine this misconduct from diverse perspectives. While a few researchers were mainly concerned with university teachers' ideas (Ojaghi, Keyvanara, Cheshmeh Sohrabi, & Papi, 2011; Rashidi et al., 2016), the majority of them examined students' point of view. From among the studies done on students, some of them examined students' perceptions of plagiarism (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016; Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Mahdavi Zafarghandi, Khoshroo & Barkat, 2012; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013) whereas students' familiarity with the concept was the main goal of some other studies (Tahriri & Eslam-Navaz, 2014).

A third group of research projects, on the other hand, delved into the most prominent reasons contributing to plagiarism on the part of university students or the ways through which this unethical behavior could be prevented. In 2010, Amirkhani, Vahdat, and Khezrian, for example, pointed out that extroversion, academic talent, and emotional stability could deter Iranian students from engaging in plagiarism. Investigating the issue from another angle, Khamesan and Amiri (2011) found that one of the determining factors which led to plagiarism could be the gender of the students with male students being more likely to plagiarize than the female ones. They, however, did not attempt to examine the role of gender more deeply.

Attempting to uncover the main reasons for plagiarism, Riasati and Rahimi (2013) concluded that lack of understanding of the concept, insufficient linguistic abilities, inadequate research and writing skills, lack of familiarity with and interest in the topics and the pressures from their family members and the society could be principal reasons for plagiarizing in the context of Iran. Moreover, in another study, Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013), as one part of their study, came to the conclusion that the most important reason for committing plagiarism was the easiness of doing it. Tahriri and Eslam-Navaz (2014) reported lack of enough instruction and familiarity with the concept as well as students' laziness as the reasons for this misconduct.

More recently, Babaii and Nejadghanbar (2016) conducted a mixed-method study to examine plagiarism from diverse perspectives. As one of the phases of their study, they strived to discover the main reasons leading to plagiarism in the context of Iran. It was found that some causes such as unfamiliarity with plagiarism, academic

writing skills deficiency, lack of enough time, laziness and deceitfulness, low language proficiency, and unfamiliarity with the subject of writing could be attributed to students themselves. In addition to these, teachers were also considered to be responsible for this unethical behavior because of their careless and lenient behavior and because of having high expectations from students. Policies of the educational system were also mentioned as another reason in this study.

Conducting a qualitative study, Amiri and Razmjoo (2016) investigated Iranian students' perceptions of plagiarism as well as the main reasons for doing it. Results of semi-structured interviews showed that teachers' ignorance, students' insufficient research and writing skills, the pressure to prepare high quality assignments, peer pressure and the easiness of engaging in plagiarism were mentioned as the main reasons. It is worthy of notice, however, that the participants of their study were undergraduate students who are unlikely to be familiar with academic research skills.

Recently, as one part of her study, Alimorad (2018) attempted to uncover Iranian graduate students' perceptions of their reasons for plagiarizing. The participating students in her study thought that the most important reason for this misconduct was their being unable to write scientifically. Hence, they believed that open discussion and negotiation could help solve this problem in the university context.

The role of students' gender and educational level has by no means been neglected in the studies on plagiarism. Several researchers worldwide pointed to the important effects these two factors can have on students' committing plagiarism. In some situations, it is reported that even training courses may not necessarily produce desired results. For example, in Brazil, Krokosz and Ferreira (2019) pointed to a gap between theoretical and practical knowledge regarding plagiarism for graduate students. They emphasized that although the technical training related to the correct use of research sources is necessary in the capacity-building process, it is not sufficient to prevent plagiarism practices. Becker and Ulstad (2007) studied the undergraduate students of three AACSB-accredited universities, two schools from the Midwest, one public and one Jesuit and one East coast Jesuit school. They found that female students consistently rated the items of the questionnaire as less acceptable than male students, which was indicative of their differing perceptions. In the context of Spain, Sureda-Negre, Comas-Forgas, and Oliver-Trobat (2015) came to the conclusion that men had significantly higher levels of perpetration than women, which highlights the impact of gender on plagiarizing by students. Considering both students' gender and their educational level, BavaHarji, Chetty, Ismail, and Letchumanan's findings (2016, p. 106) made it clear that "the act of intellectual theft was more evident among the males than female, junior than seniors."

As for the context of Iran, Ahmadi (2014) investigated, among other factors, the role of these two variables. He found that while students' gender did not have any effect

on the type and amount of plagiarism used by Iranian EFL majors, their academic level did have a significant effect on it with B.A. students more plagiarizing than their M.A. counterparts.

As can conspicuously be observed, previous research has yielded conflicting results with regard to the role of gender and educational level in academic dishonesty. Although results of some studies indicate that there exists a relationship between students' gender and their ethical behavior (Ameen, Guffey & McMillan, 1996) with most of the studies finding greater prevalence of plagiarism among male university students as compared to their female counterparts (Athanasou & Olasehinde, 2002; BavaHarji et al., 2016; Becker & Ulstad, 2007; Brunell, Staats, Barden & Hupp, 2011; Egan, 2008; Lin & Wen, 2007; Straw, 2002), in the context of Iran, Ahmadi (2014) found no noticeable role of gender in engaging in plagiarism by university students. Nevertheless, regarding the educational level, he found that B.A. students engaged in plagiarism more than M.A. students, which indicates the educational level of the students may exert an influence on their academic dishonesty. More recently, the findings of BavaHarji et al. (2016) supported the idea that educational level can be a determining factor in committing plagiarism. Also, Yang's (2014) study revealed that students of different genders and educational levels displayed different understandings of plagiarism. However, although the role of gender and educational level of the students has been vastly investigated from diverse perspectives, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no study has attempted to examine the effect of these two factors on the students' main perceived reasons for plagiarizing; that is, whether and to what extent students' gender and their educational level affect the perceived causes of plagiarism.

It seems that further research in this area is needed to shed more light on the most prominent reasons why Iranian EFL graduate students tend to plagiarize rather than write their academic papers themselves. Moreover, although numerous Iranian researchers and scholars have tried to study plagiarism, no study has systematically examined the role of gender and educational level, as two important contributing factors, in tempting students to resort to plagiarism. To fill this lacuna, the present study is an attempt to delve into the potential role these two factors may play in doing this unethical and unaccepted behavior as perceived by graduate students.

Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

The objectives of this study were three-fold. Firstly, since some researchers have considered the students' gender as a determining factor in committing plagiarism (e.g., Khamesan & Amiri, 2011), as the first goal of the study, it aimed at examining male and female students' ideas to find out whether there was any difference between these two groups in terms of the importance attached to the main contributing

reasons. Secondly, previous research has yielded conflicting results with regard to the effect of students' educational level on their committing plagiarism. While some studies found no relationship between educational level and their understanding of plagiarism claiming that recognizing plagiarism continues to be a challenging task for students even up to the end of their academic lives (e.g., Mahdavi Zafarghandi et al., 2012), other studies indicated that their educational level affects the type and amount of plagiarism committed (e.g., Ahmadi, 2014; Sikes, 2009). This argument prompted the present researcher to further investigate the role of years of study in Iranian EFL students' committing plagiarism to see whether students of different educational levels have similar or divergent perceptions of the reasons for plagiarizing. Thirdly, the interaction effect of these two factors was studied to discover the way female and male students at different educational levels justified this behavior. To attain these objectives, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL graduate students' perceptions of the reasons for plagiarizing?
2. Is there any significant difference between M.A. and Ph.D. students' perceptions of the reasons for plagiarizing?
3. Is there any interaction effect of these two variables (gender and educational level) on these students' perceived reasons for plagiarizing?

Significance of the Study

Nowadays, plagiarism is mostly condemned as an unethical behavior which leads to deceiving people by not acknowledging or misappropriating other people's possession of an academic piece of writing (Mallon, 1989; Sutherland-Smith, 2003). Such a negative attitude towards plagiarism will surely bring about negative views towards those who commit plagiarism as well. However, it has rightly been argued that at least in some cases, students plagiarize not to deceive others including their teachers but because they do not have enough knowledge or understanding of the concept or because of their unfamiliarity with appropriate referencing styles (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016; Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Delvin & Gray, 2007; Riasati & Rahimi, 2013; Tahriri & Eslam-Navaz, 2014). In such circumstances, although the primary cause of plagiarism is unintentional, the students may be unfairly stigmatized as dishonest and deceitful people whose ideas cannot be relied on. Moreover, these "criminals" are likely to be punished severely even though they may not deserve to be treated so harshly. To partly alleviate such problems, we need to first identify the main reasons for plagiarizing on the part of the students and then, on the basis of this evidence, we can determine the most appropriate procedures for dealing with this behavior.

Methodology

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in the context of Iranian universities where undergraduate students are never or seldom taught what plagiarism is. Instruction on such unethical behavior commonly starts from graduate or post graduate levels. Moreover, university teachers are mainly responsible for deciding on how to deal with those students who commit plagiarism and the punishment varies from lowering their scores to failing them or sending them to responsible authorities. To deal with this problem, the authorities refer to a behavioral guiding manual which forbids the misappropriation of others' ideas and warns against such unethical deeds severely (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016). Plagiarists' punishment method will be determined based on this manual and "will depend on the type and severity of the unethical behavior and range from payment of fines, to suspension from studies, and in the most serious cases, criminal court charges." (Iranian Students' Behavioral Guiding Manual, n.d. as cited in Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016, p. 3) However, it seems that the majority of Iranian university students are aware of neither the existence of such a manual nor the punishments recommended for such misconduct and they are punished for what they have unintentionally and unknowingly done while they belatedly understand the seriousness of the situation when severe punishments are meted out to them. Therefore, it seems that before castigating these students, we need to listen to their voices to know what their reasons are and then, on the basis of their real intents, it can more fairly be decided how to deal with them.

Participants

Overall, the participants of this study (N=159) were recruited from five universities; three public (N=71) and two private (N=88) universities through the convenience sampling procedure. Depending on the city in which the universities were located, the researcher either attended their classes in person and administered the questionnaire (i.e., one public university) or sent them the questionnaire through email (i.e., two public and two private universities). It is worth mentioning that given that the researcher was an instructor in the former university, the participating students knew her; however, in the latter four universities, the participants did not know her. Accordingly, necessary instructions on how to complete the questionnaire were given to the participants either orally (i.e., in the university where she could attend in person) or in written form (i.e., in the four universities where students were contacted through email). From this sample, 77 students were male while 82 were female. Their age ranged from 23 to 37 averaging 27.64. They were chosen from two educational levels, M.A. (N=128) and Ph.D. (N=31). The rationale behind choosing these two educational levels was because in the Iranian context, as in all over the world, M.A. graduates are expected

to publish papers in order to be accepted to doctoral programs. For Ph.D. students, on the other hand, publishing papers may be more vital because almost all academic job opportunities or promotions necessitate having quality published papers. All of them were studying TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at the time of this study. Moreover, all were from the same cultural and native language background (Persian). It is worthy of notice that the participants were free to choose to either fill in the questionnaire or withdraw from the study whenever they desired.

Instrument

This quantitative study employed a questionnaire to gather the needed data. Two major parts constituted this questionnaire. In the first part, the participants were asked to provide their demographic information including their gender, age, and university level (M.A. or Ph.D.). The second part of the questionnaire was composed of 32 five-point Likert items on students' reasons for plagiarizing which were adopted from previous studies on plagiarism (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2016; Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Comas-Forgas & Sureda-Negre, 2010; Delvin & Gray, 2007; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013; Riasati & Rahimi, 2013; Tahriri & Eslam-Navaz, 2014). The responses to these items ranged from 5 representing strongly agree to 1 indicating strongly disagree.

Although the items of the questionnaire were arranged randomly in the administered version, with a view to getting a clearer picture, the researcher classified them into four major contributing reasons based on available literature as well as her own understanding of the subject. That is, reasons for engaging in plagiarism were categorized into students' personal and attitudinal characteristics (items 2, 3, 4, 10, 18, 19, 21, and 27), students' lack of enough skills and abilities (items 1, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 24, 25, 26, and 29), teachers' characteristics (items 14, 15, 17, 20, and 32), and characteristics of the context (items 5, 9, 13, 16, 22, 23, 28, 30, and 31). Content and face validity of the questionnaire were confirmed by two expert judges and its reliability was estimated using KR-21 formula whose index turned out to be 0.74 which seemed acceptable for the purposes of the current study.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

As mentioned above, to collect the necessary data, the researcher administered the questionnaire to EFL graduate students of one public university. Since in each university, there is a limited number of graduate students, an attempt was made to access more students by using an online version of the questionnaire which was sent to students of four other universities (i.e., two public and two private). Given the number of items of the questionnaire (32), to be on the safe side, as recommended by Pallant (2011), the number of the sample size was decided to be at least 150 graduate students.

After the data collection phase, students' responses to the items of the questionnaire were subjected to a Two-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) using SPSS version 23 to examine the effects of students' gender and educational level, as two independent variables, on their perceived reasons for plagiarizing. Each composite reason, namely, students' personal and attitudinal characteristics, their lack of enough skills and abilities, teachers' characteristics, and the characteristics of the context was considered as one dependent variable in this phase. Prior to performing MANOVA, the data were tested to see whether they conformed to MANOVA assumptions. After ensuring that the assumptions were not violated, the researcher proceeded with the main MANOVA analysis. All these results are reported in the following sections.

Results and Discussion

Before running MANOVA, descriptive statistics across students' gender and educational level was calculated. Results of these analyses are reported in tables 1 and 2 below.

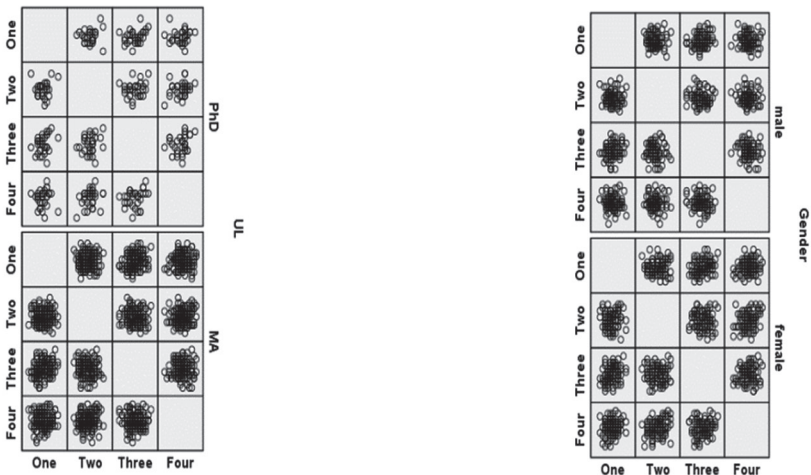
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Students' Gender

	Male		Female	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Students' personal and attitudinal characteristics	26.80	2.53	27.51	2.21
Students' lack of skills and abilities	21.97	2.52	22	2.66
Teachers' characteristics	13.57	2.48	14.32	2.58
Characteristics of the context	21.74	2.67	21.79	2.95

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Students' Educational Level

	Male		Female	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Students' personal and attitudinal characteristics	27.37	2.36	26.32	2.35
Students' lack of skills and abilities	21.96	2.66	22.09	2.30
Teachers' characteristics	13.96	2.52	13.93	2.74
Characteristics of the context	21.85	2.83	21.38	2.76

As noted above, prior to running MANOVA, a preliminary testing of its assumptions was performed. To this aim, first, univariate/multivariate normality was checked using Mahalanobis distances whose maximum value was 12.68 which, given the number of dependent variables in this study (i.e., 4), was less than the critical value (18.47). Therefore, it could safely be assumed that there were no substantial multivariate outliers and we could proceed to check other assumptions. Then, the assumption of linearity was checked by generating a matrix of scatterplots between each pair of the variables, separately for different groups (i.e., male/female, M.A./Ph.D.). As is evident in figures 1 and 2, given that the plots did not show any obvious evidence of non-linearity, the assumption of linearity was met.



Figs. 1 and 2. Scatterplots for Students' Gender and Educational Level

Next, the assumption of the homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was checked. As Table 3 shows, the significance value was .43 which was larger than .001 indicating that this assumption was not violated.

Table 3. Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices

Box's M	33.314
F	1.020
df1	30
df2	8178.192
Sig.	.436

a. Design: Intercept + Gender + UL + Gender * UL

Finally, Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances was checked. As observed in Table 4, none of the variables recorded significant values; therefore, we could assume equal variances, which indicates that this assumption was also satisfied.

Table 4. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances^a

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Students' personal and attitudinal characteristics	1.380	3	155	.251
Students' lack of skills and abilities	.844	3	155	.472
Teachers' characteristics	.303	3	155	.823
Characteristics of the context	.779	3	155	.507

a. Design: Intercept + Gender + UL + Gender * UL

Then, to find out whether there were statistically significant differences across the participants' gender and their educational levels, multivariate tests were checked. Table 5 displays the results of these tests. A close inspection of the test of Wilks' Lambda shows that none of the values are statistically significant. Hence, in terms of their gender, there was no statistically significant difference between males and females, $F(4, 152) = 2.24$; $p = .06$; Wilks' Lambda value = .94; partial eta squared = .05. This effect size (5 percent) is a medium one (Cohen as cited in Pallant, 2011) indicating that 5% of the variance in the students' overall perception scores was explained by their gender.

Regarding their educational level too, as revealed in the table, no statistically significant difference was found between M.A. and Ph.D. students' ideas, $F(4, 152) = 1.41$; $p = .23$; Wilks' Lambda = .96; partial eta squared = .03. The effect size (3%), which is a medium one (Cohen as cited in Pallant, 2011), shows that these students' educational level explained 3% of the variance in their perception scores. Furthermore, the interaction effect of these two variables showed no significant difference, $F(4, 152) = 1.03$; $p = .39$; Wilks' Lambda = .97; partial eta squared = .02. Considering the small effect size (2%, Cohen as cited in Pallant, 2011), one can conclude that only 2% of the variance in the students' perception scores was explained by the interaction between their gender and educational level.

Table 5. Multivariate Tests^a

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis		Partial Eta	
				df	Error df	Sig.	Squared
Gender	Wilks' Lambda	.944	2.242 ^b	4.000	152.000	.067	.056
University level	Wilks' Lambda	.964	1.411 ^b	4.000	152.000	.233	.036
Gender * University level	Wilks' Lambda	.974	1.032 ^b	4.000	152.000	.392	.026

a. Design: Intercept + Gender + UL + Gender * UL

b. Exact statistic

Considering the above-mentioned results, the answer to the first research question is that male and female Iranian EFL graduate students' perceived reasons for committing plagiarism did not differ significantly. Hence, in terms of all four major categories of the perceived reasons, namely, personal and attitudinal characteristics of the students, students' lack of skills and abilities, teachers' characteristics, and characteristics of the context, both male and female groups attached almost equal importance to all these factors.

Nevertheless, considering the means and standard deviations (Table 1), it can be argued that among these four major factors, in both male and female groups, students' personal and attitudinal characteristics received the highest mean (Male: $M=26.80$, $SD=2.53$; Female: $M=27.51$, $SD=2.21$). A closer inspection of the items which constituted this factor may imply that Iranian graduate students intentionally and knowingly engaged in plagiarism because they hold negative attitudes towards teachers and/or assessment tasks (Item 4) and wanted to deliberately show their objection to such assessment tasks (Item 3) to deceive their teachers (Item 19). A disappointing and warning point is that from these students' point of view, it is OK to plagiarize (Item 2) and plagiarism was neither a kind of cheating (Item 10) nor an unethical behavior (Item 27).

Students' lack of skills and abilities occupied the second rank (Table 1) indicating that for both genders, this factor assumed less importance compared to the first one (Male: $M=21.97$, $SD=2.52$; Female: $M=22$, $SD=2.66$). This finding points out that although reasons such as a genuine lack of understanding of scholarship and referencing requirements (Item 1), students' limited skill base in academic and learning skills (items 7 & 8), their poor research skills (Item 11), their poor knowledge of subject matter (Item 12), their lack of motivation and lack of interest in the topics assigned (items 24 & 25), their being lazy and disorganized (Item 26), and their misunderstanding and ignorance about why and how they should avoid plagiarism (Item 29), which can be attributed to their lack of knowledge and understanding and hence, be considered

unintentional, were also important from these students' perspective, the intentional reasons were ranked higher by these participants.

Characteristics of the context stood as the third most important factor from both male ($M=21.74$, $SD=2.67$) and female ($M=21.79$, $SD=2.95$) graduate students' point of view. This means that they do not think there would be a low chance of being caught/effectively penalized (Item 5). Furthermore, plagiarism is not the result of academic workload pressure or lack of enough time (Item 9) or even the ease of access offered by the Internet to find, process, and edit information (Item 13). Imitating peers (items 16 & 31) or not being offered training and instructional courses in academic assignments (items 22 & 23), access to the digital world (Item 28), and lack of balance between the tasks being assigned and the credit received for them (Item 30) were not the main causes of committing plagiarism as perceived by these students. However, what seems to be promising in this situation is the importance attached to the role of teachers by these students. As revealed by the results, male ($M=13.57$, $SD=2.48$) and female ($M=14.32$, $SD=2.58$) students unanimously believed that it is not difficult for teachers to detect plagiarism instances (Item 14), teachers are computer literate (Item 15), they read the assignments carefully and evaluate them fairly (items 17 & 32), and they do not assign very complicated and difficult assignments (Item 20).

These results highlight the order of importance of the underlying motives leading to committing plagiarism. Although no previous study investigated the role of gender in determining the major perceived causes of plagiarism, this finding reveals that there was no difference between male and female graduate students in terms of the main reasons for plagiarizing, which is contrary to what Khamesan and Amiri (2011) found in their study. The same finding contrasts with the results of studies conducted by Riasati and Rahimi (2013), Rezanejad and Rezaei (2013) and Tahriiri and Eslam-Navaz (2014) who reported lack of understanding of the concept and enough instruction, and inadequate research and writing skills the most prominent factors leading to plagiarism. Riasati and Rahimi (2013) also pointed to the role of micro (family members) as well as macro (society) contexts as the principal reason for plagiarizing in the context of Iran, which is not supported by the findings of this study because context was ranked as the third most important factor in this study rather than the first factor.

Furthermore, despite finding students' laziness and deceitfulness as one of the major causes, Babaii and Nejadghanbar (2016) referred to other less intentional factors as the main contributing reasons, which is opposed to what was found in the present study. Contrary to our findings, the student sample in their study considered teachers' careless and lenient behavior as well as their high expectations from students as determining factors leading to plagiarism. Moreover, policies of the educational system, as one aspect of the context, was also referred to as one of the main factors, which was not supported by the findings of the current study in that the participants in

this study placed it in the third order of importance. The same finding, however, lends support to what Ahmadi (2014) found in the context of Iran. His findings indicated that gender played no role in the type and amount of plagiarism used by Iranian students.

In response to the second research question, given that there was no statistically significant difference between M.A. and Ph.D. students' perceptions, it can be argued as the students' progress in their educational credentials, their reasons for engaging in plagiarism do not noticeably fluctuate. That is, higher level students may commit plagiarism because of the same underlying causes as those of their lower level counterparts. This shows that the educational level of the students plays no major role in determining the main reasons for plagiarizing.

This finding may be contrary to expectations in that graduate students are envisaged to abandon plagiarizing as they develop their academic, research and writing skills and become more independent and autonomous researchers. Although this finding cannot be indicative of the amount of plagiarism committed by students, it points to the almost permanent nature of the underlying reasons for plagiarizing among graduate students. Surprisingly, the four composite factors were arranged in the same order as the one observed in the previous section. That is, students' personal and attitudinal characteristics (Male: $M=27.37$, $SD=2.36$; Female: $M=26.32$, $SD=2.35$), their lack of skills and abilities (Male: $M=21.96$, $SD=2.66$; Female: $M=22.09$, $SD=2.30$), characteristics of the context (Male: $M=21.85$, $SD=2.83$; Female: $M=21.38$, $SD=2.76$) and teachers' characteristics (Male: $M=13.96$, $SD=2.52$; Female: $M=13.93$, $SD=2.74$) were respectively considered the most to the least important factors by both M.A. and Ph.D. students. This situation can raise the alarm for university teachers and responsible authorities because it can draw their attention to the fact that ethics and ethical principles may be gradually disappearing from our academic discourse community.

As suggested by this finding, no difference was observed between the perceptions held by M.A. and Ph.D. students regarding the main reasons for engaging in plagiarism. This finding may partially contradict results of previous research which pointed out that factors such as insufficient linguistic abilities, inadequate research and writing skills, lack of enough instruction and unfamiliarity with the concept are the main contributing reasons leading to plagiarism (Alimorad, 2018; Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013; Riasati & Rahimi, 2013; Tahriri & Eslam-Navaz, 2014). It may also be indirectly in contrast to BavaHarji et al.'s (2016) conclusion that referred to the prevalence of plagiarism among juniors (Year 1) as compared to seniors (Years 2 & 3). Viewing the same issue from another perspective by comparing undergraduate and graduate students, Ahmadi (2014) found that the students' educational level affected plagiarism with B.A. students more plagiarizing than their M.A. counterparts, which is not in line with the findings of the present study.

Given that no statistically significant difference was observed for the interaction effect of gender and educational level, the answer to the third research question can also be given. The combined effect of these graduate students' gender and their educational level had no significant effect on their perceived reasons for plagiarism. As this finding showed, neither gender or the educational level nor the interaction effect of these two factors affected the reasons for committing plagiarism. This means that M.A. and Ph.D. male students hold similar perceptions to those of their female counterparts. Given that this area of inquiry has almost been overlooked, it is highly recommended that more in-depth investigations be conducted to explore the reasons why graduate male and female students intentionally attempt to deceive their instructors by committing plagiarism.

Conclusions

This study sought to uncover any potential differences between the perceived reasons for plagiarizing held by male and female M.A. and Ph.D. students. Results of the study suggested that male and female students held similar perceptions in that for both groups, students' personal and attitudinal characteristics occupied the first rank while their lack of skills and abilities, characteristics of the context, and teachers' characteristics were the second, third, and fourth contributing factors, respectively. In a similar vein, the same order of importance was observed for these four factors as perceived by M.A. and Ph.D. students. Given that these students reported their intentional deceitfulness as the most important factor, it may not be unjustified to take special measures to explore the reasons for this academic dishonesty which seems to be surging among Iranian graduate students. Therefore, based on the definition put forward by Stuhmcke et al. (2016), this kind of plagiarism can be referred to as misconduct or intentional plagiarism which deserves to be punished severely. The positive point is that as perceived by these students, teachers' characteristics received the least importance indicating that despite engaging in plagiarism, these students do not underestimate their teachers' ability and skills in detecting it. They also think that their teachers devote enough time and energy to evaluating and examining their assignments while paying careful attention to whether they have been copied or not, which can be encouraging because it can indicate that graduate students have not lost trust in their teachers yet.

Implications

Results of this study can have some implications for university authorities, curriculum and syllabus designers, teachers, graduate students and researchers. As the main responsible agents, university authorities need to examine and identify the main reasons for plagiarism and take special measures to deter graduate students from committing it. If students intend to deceive their instructors, more severe punishment methods may by themselves not be sufficient and a broader investigation may be needed to get to the root of such unethical behavior. In a similar vein, curriculum and syllabus designers' important role cannot be overlooked. By designing suitable training courses and relevant workshops for both teachers and students and incorporating them into the curriculum, they can play a substantial role in improving the situation. University teachers, too, can play an effective role in this regard by trying to raise the students' awareness of the adverse consequences of plagiarism in the broader discourse community and by negotiating with them and soliciting their ideas and perceptions. Graduate students should also be warned that academic dishonesty is condemned throughout the world and they may lose many important job opportunities in the future if their dishonesty is detected and proved. However, researchers are the most important group who need to shoulder the responsibility to examine this issue more thoroughly to identify and extract not only the micro factors but also the macro ones which exert a powerful influence on the graduate students' behavior leading them to such misconduct.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Like most other studies, this study is not void of limitations, which makes us approach its findings more cautiously. Although an acceptable number of graduate students (i.e., 159) participated in this study, they were chosen based on a convenience sampling procedure, which may introduce a systematic bias into the study and make its results less generalizable. Another problem is the use of a single instrument which may not give us a true picture of Iranian EFL graduate students' perceptions. It is highly recommended that more robust data collection tools be employed simultaneously because data and instrument triangulation can allow us to view the students' perceptions from diverse perspectives. Finally, in addition to quantitative studies, qualitative and mixed-method research can also be conducted to portray a clearer picture of how the reasons for plagiarizing are perceived by graduate students.

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Appendix

In the name of God

I would like to thank you for taking time to complete the following survey on plagiarism. The data collected from the survey will be used in the writing of a research paper. I would like to emphasize the fact that the data collected will be kept CONFIDENTIAL and ANONYMOUS. Thank you for your cooperation.

Gender: Male Female

Age: _____

University level: M.A. Ph. D.

University type Public Private

I think graduate university students plagiarize because	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1. of a genuine lack of understanding of scholarship and referencing requirements that leads to unintentional plagiarism.					
2. of their personal values that may be influenced by social pressure – it's OK to plagiarize.					
3. they want to deliberately show their objection to assessment tasks.					
4. they hold negative attitudes toward teachers and/or assessment tasks.					
5. they think that there is low chance of being caught/effectively punished.					
6. they do not understand the concept and do not know what it exactly means in practice.					
7. of their limited skill base in academic skills such as academic writing, critical analysis, constructing an argument and paraphrasing.					
8. of their limited skill base in learning skills such as time, group, workload and stress management.					

I think graduate university students plagiarize because	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
9. of pressure due to academic workload requirements and to running out of time.					
10. they do not consider plagiarism as a kind of cheating.					
11. of poor research skills.					
12. of poor knowledge of subject matter.					
13. of the ease of access offered by the Internet and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) to find, process and edit information.					
14. they believe that the teacher will find it hard to find out the work has been copied.					
15. they think or know that the teacher is not very skilled at using the Internet.					
16. they want to imitate their friends because the other students copy.					
17. they think or know that the teacher does not read the assignments carefully.					
18. they believe that copying and downloading things from the Internet is right.					
19. they want to deceive their teachers and make a fool of them.					
20. teachers assign very complicated and difficult assignments which they cannot handle.					
21. they believe that they will get a better grade by copying than by doing it themselves (lack of confidence in their own abilities).					
22. of lack of training in academic assignments.					
23. of lack of clear instructions as to how to carry out the assignments.					
24. of lack of motivation.					

I think graduate university students plagiarize because	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
25. of lack of interest in the topics assigned.					
26. they are lazy and disorganized.					
27. they think plagiarism is not unethical.					
28. they are tempted to take the opportunity and use the digitization of information.					
29. of their misunderstanding and ignorance about why and how they should avoid plagiarism.					
30. they think there is no balance between the work set and the value conceded by teachers in the overall course grade.					
31. of peer pressure; they have learned it from other senior students.					
32. teachers do not pay attention to whether the students have copied something or have written it themselves. They will not evaluate the assignments carefully and fairly.					

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