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Plagiarism in theses: A nationwide concern from the perspective of university instructors

Majid Farahian1*, Farshad Parhamnia2 and Farnaz Avarzamani1

Abstract: The present study aimed to delve into the perceptions of Iranian university instructors concerning the reasons for the prevalence of plagiarism in Iranian students’ theses. A self-designed questionnaire was completed by 291 instructors in different universities in Iran and the obtained data were analyzed quantitatively. Additionally, six participants took part in a semi-structured interview and the obtained statements were recorded and analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that motivation, social environment, self-efficacy, institutional regulations, supervision and control of theses, culture, creativity, education, technology, and socioeconomic status, respectively, are the underlying factors affecting plagiarism. In addition, we found that there is a significant difference between university instructors with different academic ranks regarding their perceptions of the impact of personal characteristics on the incidence of plagiarism. Based on the results, we should consider plagiarism not only as an issue related to students but also to faculty members. As such, we need to take the ideas of both groups into account to uproot the problem.

Subjects: Education Studies; Higher Education; Sociology of Education

Keywords: perspective; plagiarism; thesis; university instructors

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Since the advent of the Internet, university students have had access to countless books and articles which had been a great asset for both students and research communities around the world. However, due to various factors, plagiarism which means, according to Cambridge Dictionary, using another person’s ideas or work and pretending that it is your own has been a widespread problem in academic writing since then. In this regard, many scholars in many different countries investigated the reasons for student plagiarism using self-report surveys and interviews. However, in recent years, the importance of studying faculty members’ perceptions in terms of the contributing factors to plagiarism has become more evident. In the present study, we considered instructors’ viewpoints in order to gain more insights into the misconduct in Iranian universities. We believe our findings might help to tackle plagiarism more effectively as we took the ideas of the instructors into consideration.
1. Introduction

There are different reported rates of plagiarism among university students around the world. For example, in an analysis over 15 years, Curtis and Tremayne (2019) found out that the incidence of student plagiarism shows a decreasing trend in the Australian context as the awareness of students raised during 10 years, though no considerable change occurred in the last 5 years of the study. However, Curtis and Tremayne (2019) noted that there is still a concern about contract cheating or ghostwriting, as a type of academic plagiarism, which refers to paying a third person to have your academic writing assignments done. Newton’s (2018) also reported that contract plagiarism was on the rise both in western and eastern countries from 1978 to 2016.

Different researchers have tried to find the reasons behind plagiarism, mostly from the viewpoint of students. As an instance, Jones (2011) who studied students’ views reported that the main reason for student plagiarism was to gain better grades. As he states, they plagiarize since they are too busy, do not have enough time, lack interest, and do not consider plagiarism as an important issue. They also feel under pressure from the side of peers. Chien (2016) investigated a sample of Taiwanese students’ views regarding plagiarism and revealed that although the students had some degrees of familiarity with plagiarism, they had a problem recognizing it. Moreover, the students recognized cultural attitudes as the main reason for their plagiarism. In this regard, Heitman and Litewka (2011) identified poor writing, paraphrasing, and referencing skills as reasons for intellectual property infringement in non-Anglophone countries. Yu et al. (2017) who investigated factors that result in cheating among college students found that academic cheating is significantly associated with demographic characteristics, character qualities, college experience, and student perceptions, and attitudes.

Although investigation of students’ beliefs and perceptions concerning the reasons of plagiarism contributes to a better understanding of the roots of the issue, it may not be as enlightening as one expects. One of the reasons put forward in studies by Risquez et al. (2013) and MacDonald and Nail (2005) is that what students report may not reflect their real beliefs and understanding of plagiarism and may underestimate their engagement in the misconduct. It was also highlighted by Culwin (2006) that students may under-report their academic dishonesty. This is a critical issue because without considering perceptions of both students and faculties, the prevalence of academic misconduct cannot be controlled and the solutions may not work in the long-run (Clegg & Flint, 2006).

Retrospectively, investigation of the faculty perception has been carried out sporadically in comparison to the research done on students’ ideas so far. On top of that, research on dissertation or thesis in higher education, in particular, are relatively scarce. The major importance of the present study lies in the fact that thesis writing is a turning point in students’ academic experience, as it is often their first experience of conducting an original research. Thereupon, the way thesis writing is treated is momentous since it affects students’ future activities as potential future scholars. Among the studies carried out in this regard, Moore (2014) explored both the accuracy of referencing and the instances of plagiarism in theses. The findings revealed that 31 percent of theses had major referencing inaccuracies which were misleading or plagiarized. In light of the assumption that graduate students could properly cite and paraphrase, Gilmore et al. (2010) probed cases of plagiarism in graduate students’ research proposals. Contrary to what researchers surmised, plagiarism was frequent in the students’ proposals and thus should be taken more seriously.

Regarding the importance of in-depth studies of thesis plagiarism in higher education and the scarcity of research in this area, specifically university instructors’ perceptions in the Iranian context, the present study is an attempt to examine Iranian instructors’ beliefs regarding plagiarism in theses with the consideration of their academic ranks. The following section will exclusively touch on the issue of plagiarism in the Iranian context. To avoid repetition, the terms thesis and dissertation have been used interchangeably in the present study.
1.1. Plagiarism in Iranian context

Based on the researchers’ observation grounded in their contact with university instructors and students, universities have proliferated across the country and thousands of people are rushing towards getting a degree in higher education. As the competition in higher education raises and universities lower their admission criteria, institutions face difficulties to raise or keep to the standards (Shahghasemi & Manijeh, 2015). This is where academic integrity is overlooked and breached.

Though the theft of intellectual property is illegal in Iran, a large number of students take advantage of it (Ghazinoory et al., 2011). Apart from inadvertent paraphrasing and getting texts from sources on the internet without referencing, some students pay a third person to prepare their thesis. Under the mask of guiding students, the ghostwriting industry offers to write a part or the whole thesis.

Although the major part of the responsibility of checking students’ works lies on the shoulders of university faculty, they do not sufficiently engage with the students to detect plagiarism and many Iranian instructors are tolerant of their students’ misconduct (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016). Plagiarism, as a type of academic dishonesty, seems to be rampant in universities (Zamani, Azimi, and Soleymani, 2012). In this regard, the standards and policies are not strict enough (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016) and despite the present manual of the Iranian ministry of education in which a warning has been issued against plagiarism, in reality, it seems that not all instructors and students are aware of the rules.

Iran’s continuous rise of admission in higher education programs in the past decade on one hand and growth of enthusiasm to study in higher education in recent years (Ghazinoory et al., 2011) on the other hand have made thousands of people rush to universities to apply for M.A or Ph.D. courses. Although there is no published record of the incidence of plagiarism in the country, Iran has been identified as a country with a high rate of plagiarism in academic journals (Fang et al., 2012). It has also been claimed that plagiarism can be found in a lot of Iranian university theses (Keyvanara et al., 2013) and this is known as a common issue which many university instructors are dealing with as the theses go through validation stages concerning plagiarism issues by both detection software and reading.

To identify and prioritize the main factors leading to plagiarism, Zamani et al. (2012) reported that the first most important factor leading to students’ plagiarism was getting high grades. Other influencing factors from the highest to the least important were: lack of students’ self-efficacy, lenient rules and regularities to punish plagiarism, social-cultural factors, lack of students’ awareness of citation rules, instructors’ low familiarity with plagiarism, pressure factors, lack of training on academic misconduct, lack of fear of the consequences, and easy access to information via virtual environments. Yasami and Yarmohammadi (2014) explored Iranian postgraduate perception of plagiarism. The reasons for plagiarism included time pressure, lack of ideas, getting a good grade, lack of understanding of the assignment, not showing respect for the course or the instructor, and lack of interest in the assignment. Furthermore, Babaii and Nejadghanbar (2016) found that students’ lack of familiarity with the concept of plagiarism, poor academic writing skills, lack of time, laziness and deceitfulness, low language proficiency, unfamiliarity with the subject of writing, and teachers’ high expectations, teachers’ carelessness and leniency were the reasons for plagiarism among the students. The policies of the educational system were also responsible for the students’ misconduct.

The investigation of underlying reasons for committing plagiarism of theses, though well investigated in the international spectrum, is given scant attention in the Iranian context. In addition, it seems that the bulk of research on plagiarism has pivoted more on students’ points of view and less attention, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, has been given to that of instructors. Since university instructors are the major sources who can provide their students with information on plagiarism (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013) and because they have the experience of guiding the
students throughout the completion of their theses, the present study explored their views about the reasons regarding plagiarism among higher education students. As such, the following research questions were suggested:

(1) What are university instructors’ perceptions regarding the reasons behind students’ plagiarism in theses?
(2) Do university instructors with different ranks have different perceptions about the reasons behind students’ plagiarism in theses?

2. Method

2.1. Participants
The participants were 291 available university instructors from different universities across the country. They were from various disciplines. Six instructors who participated in the study agreed to take part in the semi-structured interview. Since the researchers had no direct access to all the participants, some questionnaires were created and gathered via Google Forms. Of all instructors who received the digital questionnaire, 242 uploaded the answers. For those 49 participants to whom we had access, one of the researchers delivered the questionnaires in a face to face meeting and gathered them. All respondents were told that their names would remain anonymous.

The instructors were male and female of different rankings comprised of full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, and lecturers. The largest portion of university instructors (97.6 %) in the present study hold a Ph.D. as their academic degree.

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the university instructors’ academic ranks in our sample. Academic rank here refers to the rank of faculty members in university namely, professor, associate professor, assistant professor, or lecturers. As it is shown, the majority of instructors were assistant professors. It should be mentioned that we classified associate and full professors in one group because there were only 3 members in the full professor’s group and thus such a combination made it possible to conduct the inferential comparisons.

2.2. The instrument
A questionnaire developed by Farahian et al. (in press) was employed in the study. The scale contains 34 items with a 5-point Likert scale (from “Not at all” to “Extremely”). As reported by the authors, the subscales and items of the survey were designed after careful analysis of the literature. Figure 1 illustrates the 10 subscales with the 3 broad categories (i.e. personal characteristics, organizational factors, & external factors) upon which the researcher-made survey was designed. As the interpretation of the exploratory factor analysis reveals, the questionnaire is a reliable and valid scale.

2.3. Data collection and analysis
The data for the present study were collected by distributing the questionnaire either by paper or email (Google Form) among instructors from different universities. Both the paper and email forms had the same items and formats. The university instructors’ names and emails were obtained from

| Academic Rank                  | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Lecturers                     | 7         | 2.4     |
| Assistant Professors          | 246       | 84.5    |
| Associate Professors& above   | 38        | 13.1    |
| Total                         | 291       | 100     |
the available university websites. The participants were informed that the obtained information and their participation would remain confidential. They were also told that their participation was voluntary. We conducted descriptive analyses to present the findings of the respondents’ ideas on the possible reasons of student plagiarism in universities.

Two weeks after the final collection of the data, a semi-structured interview was conducted. Only six instructors volunteered to take part in the interview which was held at their universities. With a time limit of 40 minutes, one of the researchers interviewed the participants. The interviewer began the interview by explaining the purpose of the interview. Then, the interviewees were asked about the cases of thesis plagiarism in their departments. As the next question, they were asked if they knew what the reasons were behind students’ plagiarism. The questions were already reviewed by two experts for validity purposes.

The qualitative data from the interviews aimed to verify the data obtained from the survey. The interview questions inquired what the reasons for students’ plagiarism in their thesis were. The researcher responsible for the interview audio-recorded the interviews and then transcribed them. To find codes and categories, content-analysis was carried out. It should be stated that to analyze data both inductive and deductive approaches were used. Inductive analysis, as Patton (2002) explains, “involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453), whereas, based on Patton, in a deductive analysis the data are analyzed based on the framework present in the related literature. Finally, to check the validity of the obtained patterns and themes external check was done by an experienced and knowledgeable Ph.D. holder.

3. Findings

3.1. Findings of the questionnaire

The respondents were asked to determine the extent to which each of the items is responsible for students’ plagiarism in Iran. Since the original scale was in Persian and because the term “payan-nameh”
is used to refer to both thesis and dissertation in Farsi, only the term “thesis” is used throughout the questionnaire which denotes both thesis and dissertation.

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics for the university instructors’ perspectives regarding the reasons for students’ plagiarism in theses are displayed in Table 2. The following paragraphs describe the results of each subscale of the survey separately.

3.1.1. Creativity
Statements 1 to 3 delved into the respondents’ perspectives to find out whether the scant attention paid to the students’ creativity in writing may negatively affect their academic integrity. The definition of creativity that we considered is proposed by Sternberg (1999) who believes that “creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)” (p. 3).

As it is shown in Table 2, the highest percentage of the agreement belongs to the statement 1. About 87% agreed that lack of attention to individual creativity in research, in particular, its role in compiling theses is considerably responsible for the likelihood of student plagiarism. As regards the second and third statements of the creativity, 80% and 70.5 of the instructors showed that the supervisors’ and advisors’ disregard for student creativity is, to a very large extent, responsible for student plagiarism. Therefore, it is apparent from the data that disregarding students’ creativity may lead to plagiarism.

3.1.2. Self-efficacy
As defined by its pioneer, Bandura (1997), self-efficacy refers to “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments”(p. 3). Regarding the second subscale which consisted of 2 items, the results show that, of all respondents, 85.9% believed that students’ low confidence in their academic writing abilities can lead to their academic misconduct. Interestingly, the response to the second item was quite different in that, this time, 86.2% of the instructors considered students’ low confidence in their abilities to conduct genuine research to be of slight or no importance in plagiarism.

3.1.3. Motivation
Regarding the motivation subscale which comprises 4 items, most of the instructors (97.6%) indicated that not having enough motivation to write the thesis may contribute to plagiarism.

In response to item number 2, more than 92.2% believed that no relationship can be found between the quality of the thesis and students’ future world of work. As to the ease of admission into postgraduate studies which results in the lack of incentive to compete with others 91.18% stated that the situation demotivates students to compete with others. Concerning the lack of difference(s) between good and poor performance in thesis writing, the frequency of responses (93.4%) showed that the instructors believe that good performance in thesis writing should be praised in one way or another.

3.1.4. Education
As can be viewed from Table 2, lack of adequate training to students on one hand, and supervisors, and advisors, on the other hand, received 83.4% and 69.7% positive responses. In response to the statement which inquired whether university instructors’ poor academic background leads to plagiarism, over 72.5% of the participants showed agreement.

3.1.5. The process of developing theses
As for the factors related to research, among positive statements, 84.9% of respondents strongly believed that supervisors’ do not adequately supervise students’ thesis and 86.9% believed that examiners’ lack of attention to plagiarism in the thesis. Thus, it can be said that the respondents consider internal and external examiners’ role as important in recognizing cases of academic misconduct.
Table 2. The instructors’ beliefs about reasons for students’ plagiarism in theses

| Categories       | Items                                                                 | Not at all | Slightly | Moderately | Very | Extremely |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------|------------|------|-----------|
|                  |                                                                       | F          | %        |            |      |           |
| Creativity       | Lack of attention to individual creativity in research, in particular, its role in compiling a thesis | 12         | 4.1      | 26         | 82   | 121       | 50         |
|                  |                                                                       | 26         | 8.9      | 82         | 28.2 | 41.6      | 17.2       |
|                  | Supervisors’ disregard for student creativity in writing a thesis    | 14         | 4.8      | 44         | 99   | 101       | 33         |
|                  |                                                                       | 44         | 15.1     | 99         | 34.0 | 34.7      | 11.3       |
|                  | Advisors’ disregard for students’ creativity in writing a thesis     | 32         | 11.0     | 54         | 78   | 86        | 41         |
|                  |                                                                       | 54         | 18.6     | 78         | 26.8 | 29.6      | 14.1       |
| Self-efficacy    | Students’ low confidence in their abilities to conduct genuine research | 8          | 2.7      | 33         | 53   | 125       | 72         |
|                  |                                                                       | 33         | 11.3     | 53         | 18.2 | 43.0      | 24.7       |
|                  | Students’ low confidence in their academic writing abilities.        | 15         | 5.2      | 25         | 44   | 142       | 65         |
|                  |                                                                       | 25         | 8.6      | 44         | 15.1 | 48.8      | 22.3       |
| Motivation       | Not having enough motivation to do the thesis -                      | -          | -        | 7          | 49   | 94        | 141        |
|                  |                                                                       | -          | -        | 7          | 16.8 | 32.3      | 48.5       |
|                  | Lack of relationship between the quality of the thesis and students’ prospective career | 2          | .7       | 21         | 45   | 77        | 146        |
|                  |                                                                       | 21         | 7.2      | 45         | 15.5 | 26.5      | 50.2       |
|                  | Ease of admission into postgraduate studies which results in lack of incentive to compete with others | 2          | .7       | 22         | 37   | 107       | 123        |
|                  |                                                                       | 22         | 7.6      | 37         | 12.7 | 36.8      | 42.3       |
|                  | Lack of a difference(s) between good and poor performance in thesis writing | 4          | 1.4      | 15         | 79   | 98        | 95         |
|                  |                                                                       | 15         | 5.2      | 79         | 27.1 | 33.7      | 32.6       |
| Education        | Lack of adequate training for students about cheating and plagiarism  | 11         | 3.8      | 37         | 99   | 95        | 49         |
|                  |                                                                       | 37         | 12.7     | 99         | 34.0 | 32.6      | 16.8       |
|                  | Lack of adequate training for supervisors and advisors regarding supervising the theses | 12         | 4.1      | 76         | 79   | 94        | 30         |
|                  |                                                                       | 76         | 26.1     | 79         | 27.1 | 32.3      | 10.3       |
|                  | University instructors’ poor academic background.                    | 19         | 6.5      | 61         | 83   | 80        | 48         |
|                  |                                                                       | 61         | 21.0     | 83         | 28.5 | 27.5      | 16.5       |
| Institutional Regularities | Lack of supervisors’ adequate supervision over students’ thesis | F    | 9   | 35  | 80  | 107 | 60   |
|                           | %             | 3.1  | 12.0 | 27.5 | 36.8 | 20.6 |
|                           | Examiners’ lack of attention to plagiarism in theses.       | F    | 6   | 32  | 71  | 124 | 58   |
|                           | %             | 2.1  | 11.0 | 24.4 | 42.6 | 19.9 |
|                           | Lack of proper supervision of the departments over the process of compiling a thesis by students | F    | 4   | 31  | 63  | 113 | 80   |
|                           | %             | 1.4  | 10.7 | 21.6 | 38.8 | 27.5 |
|                           | A large number of theses for the supervisors to guide      | F    | 4   | 32  | 62  | 115 | 78   |
|                           | %             | 1.4  | 11.0 | 21.3 | 39.5 | 26.8 |
|                           | Non-relevance of supervisors’ and advisors’ field of study with the theses they supervise. | F    | 14  | 52  | 94  | 81  | 50   |
|                           | %             | 4.8  | 17.9 | 32.8 | 27.8 | 17.2 |
|                           | Students’ low familiarity with the selected topics         | F    | 1   | 59  | 78  | 98  | 55   |
|                           | %             | 1.4  | 11.0 | 21.3 | 39.5 | 26.8 |
|                           | Lack of adequate monitoring of theses by supervisors and advisors. | F    | 2   | 42  | 78  | 116 | 53   |
|                           | %             | 0.7  | 14.4 | 26.8 | 39.9 | 18.2 |
| Supervision and control of theses | The prevalence of the belief that there will be no problem in the case of fraud | F    | 10  | 49  | 71  | 115 | 46   |
|                           | %             | 3.4  | 16.8 | 24.4 | 39.5 | 15.8 |
|                           | Lack of decisive action against academic dishonesty        | F    | 6   | 26  | 44  | 114 | 101  |
|                           | %             | 2.1  | 8.9  | 15.1 | 39.2 | 18.7 |
| Socioeconomic status     | The high cost of the tuition fee of universities           | F    | 34  | 84  | 65  | 85  | 23   |
|                           | %             | 11.7 | 28.9 | 22.3 | 29.2 | 7.9  |
|                           | Family pressure on students to graduate in a shorter time  | F    | 37  | 112 | 64  | 63  | 15   |
|                           | %             | 12.7 | 38.5 | 22.0 | 21.6 | 5.2  |
|                           | Workplace pressure on students to graduate in a shorter time | F    | 30  | 95  | 97  | 49  | 20   |
|                           | %             | 10.3 | 32.6 | 33.3 | 16.8 | 6.9  |

(Continued)
|                  | Value | Frequency | Percentage | Total |
|------------------|-------|-----------|------------|-------|
| **Culture**      |       |           |            |       |
| Instructors' indifference towards professional ethics | F 11  | 57        | 93         | 97    | 33    |
|                  | % 3.8 | 19.6      | 32.0       | 33.3  | 11.3  |
| Widespread use of other research materials without citing the source | F 1   | 30        | 69         | 141   | 50    |
|                  | % .3  | 10.3      | 23.7       | 48.5  | 17.2  |
| Acceptance of plagiarism as a social value in the community | F 2   | 47        | 63         | 104   | 75    |
|                  | % .7  | 16.2      | 21.6       | 35.7  | 25.8  |
| Lack of exclusion of dishonest individuals in the academic community | F 6   | 40        | 42         | 116   | 87    |
|                  | % 2.1 | 13.7      | 14.4       | 39.9  | 29.9  |
| Lack of contradiction between moral value and plagiarism | F 24  | 46        | 85         | 90    | 46    |
|                  | % 8.2 | 15.8      | 29.2       | 30.9  | 15.8  |
| **Social Environment** |       |           |            |       |
| Prevalence of theses writing agencies | F 13  | 22        | 76         | 106   | 74    |
|                  | % 4.5 | 7.6       | 26.1       | 36.4  | 25.4  |
| Ghostwriters who market themselves | F 12  | 12        | 52         | 114   | 101   |
|                  | % 4.1 | 4.1       | 17.9       | 39.2  | 34.7  |
| Students who act as ghostwriters | F 10  | 20        | 67         | 97    | 97    |
|                  | % 3.4 | 6.9       | 23.0       | 33.3  | 33.3  |
| **Technology**   |       |           |            |       |
| Lack of a countrywide web database for detecting plagiarism of theses on the Web | F 38  | 44        | 82         | 83    | 44    |
|                  | % 13.1| 15.1      | 28.2       | 28.5  | 15.1  |
| Students' lack of adequate skill in seeking information from electronic sources especially those on the Web | F 20  | 59        | 99         | 74    | 39    |
|                  | % 6.9 | 20.3      | 34.0       | 25.4  | 13.4  |
With regard to the third and fourth items, the results are relatively similar in that most of the instructors maintained that lack of supervision of the departments and large numbers of theses that are assigned to each instructor may contribute to academic dishonesty. The subsequent item which refers to the mismatch between the faculties’ field of study and the theses they supervise, however, revealed that 77.8% of the respondents believed that the mismatch increases the likelihood of plagiarism. Next, Students’ low familiarity with the selected topics received around 79.4% of the respondents’ acknowledgment. The last item of the subscale (Lack of adequate monitoring of theses by supervisors and advisors) received 84.9% of the instructors’ agreement. This indicates that the impact of such an issue is strong.

3.1.6. Institutional regulations
The responses to the two items in the subscale show that perhaps, plagiarism prevention measures used in Iranian universities are not tight enough. As to the statement lack of decisive action against academic dishonesty and the prevalence of the belief that there will be no problem in the face of fraud a large number of the respondents (89% and 79.7%) showed their agreement indicating that plagiarism prevention measures and applying penalties are necessary. It seems that the development of institutional policy is important and above that pursuing the progress of the policy is a priority.

3.1.7. Socioeconomic status
It seems that, based on the findings, students’ socioeconomic status is not considered as a prominent underlying reason for plagiarism. Nearly more than half of the instructors believed that high cost of the tuition fee (40.6%), family pressure (51.2%), and workplace pressure on students (42.9%) to graduate in a shorter time do not have a significant influence on higher education students to engage in the academic misconduct.

3.1.8. Culture
The responses to the fourth subscale, labeled culture, reflects instructors’ values and perspectives toward the role of the culture in plagiarism. When asked whether the indifference of instructors in professional ethics results in plagiarism, 76.6% of the respondents considered culture to be an important factor.

When asked whether the use of other research materials without citing the source is widely accepted in the society, only 10.6 respondents opted to disagree (10.3% slightly & 6.3% not at all) and 89.4 percent believed that they agree with the statement. In contrast, the response to plagiarism is an accepted social value received 83.1% agreement. The lower agreement may be due to the social stigma of the term plagiarism. The remaining two items in the culture subscale revealed fairly analogous results in that large percentage (84.2) of the instructors believed that dishonest individuals are not excluded from society and at the same time (75.9) of the participants reported that there is no contradiction between moral values and plagiarism.

3.1.9. Social environment
Prevalence of thesis writing agencies received 87.9% agreement which implies that based on the respondents’ beliefs the agencies have a significant impact on the misconduct. About 91.8% thought that Ghostwriters who market themselves may contribute to students’ plagiarism and 89.6% believe that students who act as ghostwriters have a significant role in the misconduct.

3.1.10. Technology
Regarding Lack of a countrywide web database for detecting plagiarism of theses on the Web, nearly half the respondents (71.8%) considered it to be responsible for the occurrence of student plagiarism. This shows that if instructors have access to the related websites, they can monitor the possibility of their students’ plagiarism. As to students’ lack of adequate skill in seeking information from electronic sources especially those on the Web 72.8% showed strong agreement.
To answer the research question which aimed to figure out whether university instructors with different ranks had different perceptions about the reasons behind student plagiarism, the inferential data analysis was carried out.

Since the assumptions of the ANOVA as a parametric test were not met, we conducted its non-parametric counterpart, namely Kruskal-Wallis. Table 3 presents the results.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test showed there was no significant difference between the three groups as to personal characteristics, and organizational factors since the value of significance was higher than 0.05. However, as for the external factors, the difference between the three groups was significant with respect to mean rank and p-value (p < 0.05).

### 3.2. Findings of the interview

In response to the first question which inquired what the underlying reasons for plagiarism were, the interviewees stated that students’ unfamiliarity with the concepts of plagiarism, inadequate training regarding citation rules, lack of decisive action against academic dishonesty, lack of motivation among postgraduate students, and instructors’ lack of adequate care to the process of thesis development were the prime reasons for the misconduct. As one of the instructors mentioned:

“Students have a shallow understanding of intellectual property; moreover, ineffective enforcement of the laws, which are not monitored by the instructors and the authorities paves the way for plagiarism.”

The other instructors pointed out that:

“Students have a little awareness of plagiarism and they think plagiarism is just copying the whole work of their classmates. They need to get familiar with different instances of plagiarism.”

Two instructors argued that if supervisors have a keen eye for details and monitor the whole process of developing theses, the likelihood of any misconduct decreases. This is echoed in the following statement:

“Most Iranian instructors do not care much about and do not monitor the process of theses development. When students know that there is no serious supervision, they become more lenient toward academic dishonesty.”

### Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test for multiple comparisons

| Factors             | Degree                  | N  | Mean Rank | Chi-Square | Asymp. Sig. |
|---------------------|-------------------------|----|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Personal Characteristics | Lecturer*               | 7  | 153.7     | 1.659      | .436        |
|                     | Assistant Professor     | 246| 148.2     |            |             |
|                     | Associate Professor and above | 38 | 129.7     |            |             |
| Organizational Factors | Lecturer               | 7  | 175.9     | .965       | .617        |
|                     | Assistant Professor     | 246| 144.7     |            |             |
|                     | Associate Professor and above | 38 | 148.3     |            |             |
| External Factors    | Lecturer               | 7  | 222.2     | 6.137      | .046        |
|                     | Assistant Professor     | 246| 145.1     |            |             |
|                     | Associate Professor and above | 38 | 137.7     |            |             |

*The term lecturer, in the present study, refers to those instructors who have M.A degree.
Other instructors also acknowledged the role of the supervisors and stated:

“University instructors are to blame. If they raise students’ awareness, check and monitor the theses, plagiarism would reduce in number.”

Regarding the preventive measures, the instructors stated that educating both students and teachers is necessary. However, as they mentioned raising students' awareness is much more important:

“We cannot expect a student who does not have the basic familiarity with academic misconduct and citation rules to follow rules and regularities.”

They also argued that measures should be taken by authorities to check final version of dissertations delivered to supervisors. In this regard, an instructor stated:

“There is no agreement among the instructors regarding how to penalize those who plagiarize. Some of them show no reaction to the plagiarist. Others suffice to harsh reprimands. Even the authorities have the slightest idea as to how to react. If the plagiarist is temporarily suspended from studying, that would be a lesson for others.”

They also stated that universities have to follow stricter rules to admit students into postgraduate programs. As an instructor said:

“Easy admission of students has had disastrous consequences. We have students who hardly ever have the motivation to study and make use of every opportunity to get easy marks.”

Another instructor stated that there are various kinds of pressures on the students and each one may affect students’ decision to intentionally plagiarize. As he argued:

“In Ph.D. levels, there is a heavy pressure on students to publish papers extracted from their dissertations in prestigious journals. Since they think they lack enough creativity to have their papers published, they get help from thesis writing agencies.”

4. Discussion
Investigating university instructors’ beliefs is regarded to be essential for understanding the underlying factors affecting students’ plagiarism in educational settings. In recent years, there has been much emphasis on developing creativity in higher education (Kampylis, 2010; Kampylis et al., 2009); however, there is scant research on the association of academic misconduct and individual differences. Based on the findings, if enough attention is not given to students’ creativity, students may tend to copy the works of others either intentionally or unintentionally.

Self-efficacy is also an underlying factor affecting plagiarism in our sample. In fact, students’ low confidence in their academic writing abilities is perceived as an important obstacle for academic integrity. This is in line with Murdock and Anderman (2006), and Marsden et al. (2005) who reported that a low level of academic self-efficacy predicts academic dishonesty. It has also been noted that students who are insecure and uncertain about their writing skills have a poor academic writing performance (Pajares, 2003). Postgraduate students who need to write in another language can face even a bigger challenge since they may also have insufficient target language knowledge which can persuade them to overcome the challenge by committing plagiarism (Riasati & Rahimi, 2013).

The findings on motivation are in tandem with those of Comas-Forgas and Sureda-Negre (2010), in that lack of motivation among students can be one of the causes of plagiarism. In the same vein, Rocher (2018), indicated that level of students’ engagement with the academic tasks originates from their motivation, which in turn is affected by other variables including self-efficacy and
the stimuli in the environment. Furthermore, low self-efficacy has been reported to be related to low levels of academic motivation, which may motivate students to plagiarize and escape the demands of academic tasks (Finn & Frone, 2004).

The findings showed that one of the factors contributing to plagiarism is supervisors’ lack of reaction towards the theft and students’ lack of familiarity with how to cite properly. Previous studies also confirm such findings (e.g., Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016; Chen & Chou, 2015). Therefore, it seems crucial that research administrators work with university instructors especially supervisors and advisors to give them adequate awareness regarding their responsibilities.

While in universities students may be caught for plagiarizing, adequate measures are seldom taken to educate, remind, or punish the plagiarist. Mild reprimands of some supervisors may not be effective if students do not think that they have to take the issue seriously. It should be noted that even in those universities where there are legal consequences for plagiarism, academic misconduct still happens (Habali & Fong, 2016). This shows that regulatory procedures including educating students and developing social values can take a more fundamental role than mere punishment. Therefore, it seems necessary to promote awareness about plagiarism, declare vivid rules and procedures and then impose penalties in case of the misconduct.

In the present study, university instructors agreed that lack of a country-wide database may help plagiarism in that since electronic versions of theses have been developed in a few universities it is difficult to access such databases to check the instances of fraud. Consequently, it is not easily possible for instructors to detect this kind of plagiarism incidences. Establishment of a nationwide thesis database and storing electronic versions of theses may help to alleviate some of the problems involved in plagiarism since it can help administrators check the submitted works against archived dissertations.

Additionally, students’ lack of adequate skills in seeking information from electronic sources deserves attention. Postgraduate students in the country are getting more and more access to digital information on the web; however, unable to use the vast amount of resources effectively, students may resort to copying and pasting the first paper they get access to.

Choosing the area of interest in which the students have expertise is also of importance. It seems necessary to ask students to be careful while choosing the topic of their thesis since their inadequate familiarity with the subject may interfere with their motivation and also make their tasks much more demanding. This may result in insufficient paraphrasing.

Although some researchers (e.g., Liu, 2005; Ryan & Louie, 2007) attribute plagiarism to reasons other than culture, others (e.g., Sowden, 2005; Pennycook, 1996) argue that West and East have different attitudes towards plagiarism. In response to the questions which inquired if plagiarism in Iranian universities is culture-bound, in the present study the instructors confirmed such a possibility. While it should be acknowledged that among other causes “inadequate language proficiency and writing skills may be the main reason for Asian ESOL students’ plagiarism problem” (Liu, 2005, p. 239), the role of culture cannot be overlooked. Cultural differences may lead non-Western instructors and students who may inherit a collectivist view of knowledge towards the issue to have different perspectives towards individual and public property and may not be able to distinguish public from individual properties (Chien, 2016) or even do not care about the misconduct since “copying can be seen as cultural specific matter” (Amiri & Razmjoo, 2015). Having such perspective in mind, instructors and thesis supervisors do not make serious attempts to prevent plagiarism (Rezanejad & Rezaei, 2013; Zamani et al., 2012).

Academic performance has been associated with social status (Osonwa et al., 2013; Welch, 2014). In this regard, Yu et al. (2017) reported that among other factors, the academic misconduct of college students is significantly associated with their socioeconomic status. In a study conducted in Iran
(Khodaie & Salehia, 2011), the researchers reported that there is a positive relationship between social and economic status and school students' plagiarism. In contrast, in the present study, the majority of the instructors did not believe that financial pressure on the students from the work or family contribute to plagiarism. Perhaps, since the relation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement is contingent upon different factors such as students' age and level of education (Sirin, 2005), the instructors did not find it as a contributory factor to the misconduct.

The interview data consolidated the findings of the questionnaire. As the interviewees reported, students' unfamiliarity with the concepts of plagiarism, inadequate training regarding citation rules, lack of decisive action against academic dishonesty, lack of motivation among postgraduate students, and instructors' lack of adequate care to the process of thesis development were the reasons for their plagiarism. Pressure on Ph.D. candidates was also recognized responsible for the misconduct. This is in line with Jereb et al. (2018, p. 3) asserting that "pressures sometimes push students to indulge in unfair means such as plagiarism as a shortcut to performing better in exams or producing a certain number of publications".

Regarding the instructors' academic ranks, no significant difference was found concerning personal and organizational factors. This is partially supported by Pincus and Schmelkin (2003) study in that the instructors' perceptions with different academic ranks were not considerably different regarding the reasons for student plagiarism. Notwithstanding, we found that instructors' ideas were significantly different in terms of external factors. In fact, instructors were notably inclined to think that external variables might affect the likelihood of committing plagiarism. This might be due to the varying understanding and conceptualization of plagiarism among faculty members with different ranks and even tenure status (Gottardello et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion
Since a large number of Iranian university graduates may not be able to find suitable jobs that match their skills, sometimes the only option is to pursue a graduate degree. Some of the enrolled students are incompetent and do not possess the required skill for doing assignments. Furthermore, the huge growth of universities in the country necessitates more instructors who need training on how to encounter the inevitable problems of higher education (Ghazinoory et al., 2011). Accordingly, we need to take both students and university instructors into account while examining the reasons behind the high rate of student plagiarism in theses.

It seems that supervisory needs more attention and instructors can be encouraged to be more vigilant about the process of thesis development (Ghadirian et al., 2014; Yusafi et al., 2015). Moreover, training, monitoring, and evaluation of students' theses are of great importance due to the fact that Iranian students seldom hear about plagiarism before entering university (Babaii & Nejadghanbar, 2016).

As a complementary part of the postgraduate training, a course called seminar is incorporated into the curriculum in which necessary education regarding compiling theses is expected to be given to students. However, based on the researchers' experience, these courses turn a blind eye to the issue and suffice to teach theoretical subjects. As such, it seems that it is the responsibility of all faculties to provide students with the necessary instruction and direct them to properly cite the materials which do not belong to them (Madray, 2007). In this regard, it may benefit departments to use plagiarism detection software in monitoring written works.

All in all, as a social phenomenon, plagiarism is not merely related to students' training and education. It needs awareness of faculty members which is quite essential for building a better plan to curb plagiarism. Such an understanding may happen under the aegis of the establishment of a shared understanding of this concept and its prominent reasons. This cohesion within the instructors' community at the national scale is highly unlikely to happen without knowing the
existing prevalent perceptions about plagiarism among the faculty members. In addition, we need such knowledge so as to be able to find better solutions to uproot the problem.

A major limitation of the present study is related to the sample. Random sampling is needed to represent the target population since this type of sampling provides strong protection against bias and helps the researcher place more confidence in inferences.

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