Denying the accusation of plagiarism: power relations at play in dictating plagiarism as academic misconduct

Idhamsyah Eka Putra1,2 · Nur Inda Jazilah3 · Made Syanesti Adishesa4 · Dhia Al Uyun5 · Herlambang Perdana Wiratraman6

Accepted: 16 May 2022 / Published online: 28 May 2022 © The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract
In academia, plagiarism is considered detrimental to the advancement of sciences, and the plagiarists can be charged with sanctions. However, the plagiarism cases involving three rectors of universities in Indonesia stand out, as they could defend their stand for not committing academic misconduct despite evidence found. By analyzing the three rectors’ cases, the present study aims to answer how power relations take a role in plagiarism discourse in Indonesia, particularly in determining what is considered academic misconduct and what is not. By employing critical discourse analysis, we found that when the accusation of plagiarism appears during rectorial elections, the accused could equivocate that the accusation was meant to undermine them as a political opponent. When the accused plagiarists win the election, they have more power to deny and tackle the accusations of plagiarism. The findings indicate that plagiarism issues can be politicized, in which by those in power it can be used as a tool to undermine their political opponents, whereas the accused plagiarists can claim that the actual problem is personal and not about plagiarism. It is also shown that in the real context, whether something is called plagiarism or not is subject to interpretation by those in power.

Keywords Plagiarism · Academic misconduct · Political power · Cultural context

In academia, plagiarism is considered an academic misconduct and a major ethical concern by deliberately using someone else’s intellectual property or data as one’s own, without acknowledgment such as citing the sources of the data (East 2010). Often, it is viewed as “a form of...
intellectual theft” (Ashworth et al. 1997, p. 200). There is a consensus among scholars that plagiarism is detrimental to the advancement of scientific research since it blurs the line between new findings and replications (Dougherty 2020; East 2010; Weber-Wulff 2014). In consequence, those who are found to commit plagiarism may face suspension or dismissal from the institution.

De jure, Indonesia is one of the countries that impose a strict rule regarding plagiarism, in which it can be charged as a criminal act with a maximum imprisonment of two years and/or a maximum fine of two hundred thousand Indonesian Rupiah, as stated in The Law No. 20 of 2003 on National Education System (Article 70; see Akbar & Picard 2019). Nonetheless de facto, there have been accused plagiarists who were not charged with formal sanctions (in detail, see the “Plagiarism in Indonesia” section). Recently, three rectors of different public universities were accused of plagiarism (Tempo 2021). All three denied the misconduct, and up until now, they have not faced any formal punishment, despite factual evidence found. In fact, such accusations did not prevent them from being appointed as rectors by the Ministry of Education (hereafter the Ministry).1

While there have been research reporting who were and were not given formal sanctions for academic misconduct (Horbach et al. 2019), how those in power deny the accusation of misconduct and maintain their reputation is still understudied. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an approach, the present study aims to examine plagiarism cases of the three rectors and how power relations and rhetorical arguments of what can be called as plagiarism are used to deny the accusations.

Plagiarism around the world; its cases and historical debates

Historically, plagiarism is defined by Englisch (1933) as a “conscious decision” to claim someone else’s work as our own. Interestingly, Englisch himself was later accused of plagiarism and said such a definition would exempt him from plagiarism (Weber-Wulff 2014), as he was not aware of his misconduct. Therefore, an obvious limitation to this definition was the apparent emphasis on plagiarism as a deliberate act. One may claim to unknowingly commit plagiarism and thus receive little to no repercussions. This is evident in the case of Franziska Giffey who allegedly plagiarized in her dissertation, in which “49 of 265 pages included unattributed quotes and copying-pasting from other works” (DW 2021). Giffey’s official statement on her case was that she “remain adamant that I wrote my thesis to the best of my belief.” She also added “I regret it if I made mistakes in this,” implying the conditional nature of any ethical mistakes that had occurred. Although striped of her doctorate, Giffey remained active in politics to this day.

Currently, with the help of software, plagiarism detection has become easier to do; although more subtle forms of plagiarism are still difficult to detect. For example, stealing ideas without acknowledgement in an academic context can happen through paraphrasing another’s argument and presenting another’s line of thinking (Gibaldi 2003). One can argue that there is only a limited way to convey an idea; thus, it is inevitable that some sentences sound alike. Consequently, in some cases, it is difficult to unequivocally determine whether an argument is a stolen idea from learned sources or mere coincidental similarity.

1 Higher education institutions are regulated by a Directorate General of Higher Education (Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi/Dirjen DIKTI). From 2014 to 2019, DIKTI was integrated under the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education. In 2019, DIKTI was re-integrated under the Ministry of Education.
In addition, it is commonly known that if the academic work has 100 percent similarity to other people’s work, one must be a plagiarist. But it is still debatable whether 10 percent, 20 percent, or 30 percent of similarity is the lowest percentage of tolerance. Hence, several key issues remained to be solved in regard to what constitutes plagiarism.

Unsurprisingly, people may be tempted to use plagiarism as a quick way to obtain a prestigious post. This is commonly found in a competitive field, where high scholastic achievement is seen as a proof of expertise. This is certainly evident in the case of plagiarism by a person in a position of power. A notorious example is the former German Defense Minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who in 2011 was found to have heavily plagiarized his dissertation. It contained various types of plagiarism, such as taking a word-for-word copy of a passage and degrading it as a footnote/bibliography/appendix, or copying a text then disguising it with minor changes. When zu Guttenberg downplayed the extent of his plagiarism, the German public worked collaboratively to expose it and found about 94% of the dissertation contained plagiarism (Weber-Wulff 2014). As a result, he lost his doctorate and resigned as minister.

The case of plagiarism becomes even more complicated when it is done to one’s own work, namely self-plagiarism. One common form of self-plagiarism is salami slicing, in which results of a study were deliberately divided (or “sliced”) into several publications (Martin 2013). This may result in redundant publications, as the author would have to repeat several phrases or reuse some parts of the previous publication. Thus, the line between poor academic practice and intentionally misleading the readers as to the originality of the writing can be rather ambiguous and open to interpretation.

One controversial case of self-plagiarism involved a prominent economic scientist in the Netherlands, Peter Nijkamp, and his doctoral student (Horbach & Halfmann 2019; Horbach et al. 2020). A large part of the doctoral thesis was found to be recycled from other works of Nijkamp, without proper citations. This case led to a fierce debate on how self-plagiarism can be considered wrong, as in an academic misconduct. Nijkamp himself denied the accusation of self-plagiarism and until his retirement he was never charged as guilty (Horbach et al. 2020).

In terms of cultural factors, it was previously thought that plagiarism might be more prevalent in collectivist culture where knowledge could be considered common properties for public use. To illustrate, students from Asian backgrounds may use the phrase “It is said that...” without referring to any specific author (Martin 2011). However, recent studies suggest it was in fact individualists who plagiarize more than collectivists (Kasler et al. 2021; Martin 2011). This may be due to strong emphasis on self-interest in individualism, which in highly competitive fields could stimulate people to cut corners for the sake of gaining advantage. An implication of this finding is the possibility that even in collectivistic countries, fierce competition may increase individualistic tendencies and encourage self-serving behavior such as plagiarism. This can be seen in the infamous plagiarism case of several Chinese government officials (The Straits Times 2019). There were prominent officials who held high positions, such as Supreme Court judges, former top public security officials, and former vice-president who were found to plagiarize. In China, de jure, there will be sanctions given when someone is found for plagiarism. Interestingly, to this date, none of the Chinese officials was punished for their academic misconduct (The Straits Times 2019).

In Indonesian academic environment, plagiarism can also be a tempting shortcut in fulfilling the demands of obligations as a researcher. With the government’s target to improve the quality of higher education, there is higher pressure for lecturers in Indonesia to obtain a doctorate (Kyrychenko 2018) and to produce as many scientific papers as possible in
international journals. Nonetheless, despite attention to academic misconduct and integrity has increased, we see that such cases in Indonesia have not been seriously handled. We will explain in detail about plagiarism in Indonesia in the following part.

**Plagiarism in Indonesia**

One early plagiarism case in Indonesia that triggered fierce debates among litterateurs came from a classic novel titled *Tenggelamnya Kapal van Der Wijck* (The Sinking of the van der Wijck Ship; first published in 1938/1976) written by Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah or popularly known as Hamka. Of its popularity, the novel has been re-printed many times. In 1962, the novel was criticized for its similar plots to *Sous les Tilleuls* (Under the Limes; 1832/2016) written by Alphonse Karr. Hamka never responded to the accusation and decided to stay silent. Nonetheless, there were prominent litterateurs who defended Hamka. One of them was H. B. Jassin (1967), who claimed that in terms of socio-cultural context, the story is different; thus, it cannot be categorized as plagiarism. Regardless of the debate, in 2013, *The Sinking of the van der Wijck Ship* was adapted into a movie, and it became the highest grossing movie of 2013 in Indonesia.²

Other than the case of Hamka’s novel, there have been other cases of plagiarism involving public/prominent figures which were exposed by the news media (Partikelir 2011; Tempo 2014). Among others, for example, is the case of plagiarism found on Amir Santoso. He was accused of hijacking scientific works from his colleagues and students. Consequently, his doctoral degree was stripped by the University of Indonesia. What is interesting is the case of Yahya Muhaimin, in which his doctoral thesis was found to be similar to several scientific papers. Nonetheless, after about ten years from the case, Muhaimin was appointed as the Indonesian Minister of Education from 1999 to 2001.

Also notable is the recent plagiarism case of five doctoral students supervised by Djaali, who was a rector of Jakarta State University (Sumandoyo 2017). Because of a plagiarism and corruption scandal, Djaali was removed from his position as a rector in 2018 (Rosser 2022). All accusations were denied by Djaali, and he claimed that he did not do any wrongdoing. To the plagiarism case of his doctoral students, Djaali stood by his position that nothing is wrong with all five doctoral theses. However, despite indications of plagiarism found, no penalty or sanctions have been charged. Instead, they were given a chance to prepare a new doctoral thesis. Most of the students accused were high-ranking local governance administrative officials; therefore, it is difficult not to speculate why they were given special treatment. Next, we present how power plays a key role in shaping opinions.

**Critical discourse analysis and its use to understand how knowledge/opinion is built**

We employ our analytical lens through critical discourse analysis (CDA; Van Dijk 1993) that focuses on examining “between discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships” (p. 283). What

² See http://filmindonesia.or.id/movie/viewer/2013#.YWkYKZpBw2y.
we mean as discourse is spoken or discussion topics that are situated and action-oriented within a certain social context (Van Dijk 2000). It is situated because how a topic is discussed is connected to the context that links to some kind of sequence of interactions (Potter & Edwards 2001). It is action-oriented, because people share things to others, through their specific ways, guided by their understanding, norms, and perceptions (Potter & Edwards 2001).

Through CDA, the analysis will be beyond the content of the arguments or talks. The relationship between the locutors’ characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic background and social status) and the social context in which the arguments and talks are delivered (who the recipient/audience is, what mode/method of communication is used, what the topic is) will also be the central of investigations (Wodak and Meyer 2001).

By using CDA as an approach, the subject of the study is also seen as an active agent. For example, in seeing people accused of academic misconduct as active agents, we can learn how they deal with the accusation. Often, students are seen as those who are highly vulnerable to academic misconduct. Hence, they are monitored more frequently for plagiarism compared to faculty staff, like lecturers and researchers (Gullifer & Tyson 2014; Nilsson et al. 2009). When they are found for academic misconduct such as plagiarism, despite having no room for evasion, students might claim that they did not know what they did was considered plagiarism. In this case, the end of the investigation can be varied. Regardless of excuses claimed by the students, if they are still considered thieves, harsh sanctions may be applied. However, if they are considered learners (Nilsson et al. 2009), in which students are seen as still in the learning stage, then light sanctions may be applied.

In the case of scientists or lecturers, fierce debates between the accused and the accusers for academic misconduct are commonly found. Often, their status as faculty members are perceived as the main source of understanding on academic misconduct like plagiarism and cheating (Gullifer & Tyson 2014). The phenomenon of replication crisis in psychology research (Hagger et al. 2016; Klein 2014) exemplifies this. Numerous research in psychology failed to be replicated, in which many of those are accused of data fabrication. Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist who became famous after her TED talk went viral, is one example of scientists struggling to defend their research from accusations of misconduct. Cuddy’s study about power posing (Carney et al. 2010) was accused for p-hacking3 as by other researchers, the experiment failed to replicate (Dominus 2017). However, Cuddy stood by her position that she and her team have done a proper and adequate method in which it had gone through a rigorous peer-review process (Dominus 2017). As we know, this case is still debatable (Elsesser 2020), and up until now, the study about power posing (Carney et al. 2010) is still in publication by Psychological Science (i.e., it is not retracted).

Things, however, will be different in the case of plagiarism, especially when the evidence of plagiarism is valid and legit. We can see it in the case of two computer scientists, Visvanathan and Lushington (Bavley 2014). Not just one, but three articles by them had been found to be lifted from other works. Visvanathan ignored the plagiarism concerns, whereas Lushington knew it was plagiarism, but he still got the articles published. Nonetheless, both were detected for plagiarism and found to be committed the misconduct of plagiarism.

---

3 P-hacking assumes that even though it is found to be statistically significant (i.e., \( p < .05 \)), if the statistical power is low, there is a high probability that the observed finding happened just by chance. Or, the scientists might have attempted to manage nonsignificant results to be significant. In this case, replication studies are necessary (see further explanation about p-hacking in Head et al. 2015).
Little is known, however, how lecturers or scientists deny and successfully tackle the accusation of plagiarism. We argue that this may be related to the cultural context where social status determines the use of power.

**Discourse, culture, and power**

Hofstede (see Hofstede 2001; Hofstede & McCrae 2004) and Triandis (2001) introduced types of cultural dimensions that are found across societies globally. According to them, these types of cultural dimensions may influence people to develop a certain mindset and behaviors (see Markus & Hamedani 2007). For instance, Indonesia is known as a society that focuses more on group/collective interest than personal/individual interest, and compared to other countries, Indonesia adopts a higher degree of power distance and inequality. This means that social status is hierarchical and can determine those who are in power or not. In everyday interactions, those in power direct the conversation, tend to be listened to (i.e., signifier) than listening (i.e., signified/recipient); they perceive to be superior than others who are perceived as inferior. People in lower status are motivated to conform with authority. Rarely social status in Indonesia is derived from merit.

It is important to note that we consider culture as subject to change, in which such cultural dimensions of power distance and inequality are not fixed. Nonetheless, in the context we presently study, we see that power, as in those in high status, play a role in dictating what can be called as plagiarism and whether it is (categorized as) an academic misconduct. In this regard, we argue that such understanding about plagiarism can play a role in how plagiarism is defined and conceptualized.

In every higher education institution, faculty staff are demanded to understand academic ethics and academic misconduct as, by the students, they will be placed as the main sources of understanding (East 2010). Unfortunately, however, the understanding capacity is found to be varied. Such limited understanding about academic misconduct may be prevalent in non-Western countries, where scholars are not groomed properly for academic publications.

A study conducted by Khathayut and Walker-Gleaves (2021) about the understanding of plagiarism at a university in Thailand found that many lecturers have limited understanding and low awareness of plagiarism. This will affect how the university sees plagiarism, whether it is considered a serious problem, and how it takes action to handle it. In this case, without a doubt, sufficient action will not take place.

In Indonesia, universities are understood as a place where smart people with their expertise gather, the kind of people who are usually asked for advice or to serve as high-ranking government officials such as a minister (McRae & Robet 2020). Most state universities are among the best universities. More often, the position of rector in state universities is occupied by a high-ranking academic faculty member such as a professor or senior lecturer (equivalent to associate professor). Thus, in a university, a rector is highly regarded and respected not just as the top education management but also as an academia, and their influence can even be beyond the area of academia. Hence, it is not surprising for a rector to be connected to political elites (Mudhoffir 2017) or appointed as a commissioner of state-owned enterprises.

In our understanding, the rectorate also plays a key role in determining moral reasoning of what is good or bad, and right or wrong. In one case, an academic member who criticized the Indonesian president ended up being accused of insulting the president, and in consequence, he was discharged from any teaching role (Farasonalia 2020).
Overview of the present study: three examples of how people could deny the accusation of plagiarism in Indonesia

We limit the study to analyze plagiarism cases involving three rectors, as well as full professors, of public state universities in Indonesia: Fathur Rokhman (FR), Muryanto Amin (MA), and Muhammad Zamrun Firihu (MZF).

FR is an acting rector of Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), located in Central Java province, since 2014. His education background and academic expertise is sociolinguistics. MA was just appointed as the rector of Universitas Negeri Sumatera Utara located in Medan, North Sumatra, in January 2021. His educational background and expertise is political science. MZF has been the acting rector of Halu Oleo University (UHO) located in Kendari, Southeast Sulawesi, since July 2017, and he was re-elected in 2021. His educational background and expertise is physics.

All three universities are one of the best in each province. The rectors were recently accused of committing plagiarism, but they managed to deny the accusations. Although plagiarism cases are commonly found among lecturers or faculty members in Indonesia, the three rectors’ cases stand out because not only did they deny the accusations, they were also able to tackle it and defend their claim of not committing academic misconduct, despite evidence found.

Hence, the present study aims to answer how power relations and the understanding of plagiarism and academic misconduct take a role in plagiarism discourse in Indonesia. Additionally, we also seek to understand how accused plagiarists managed to deny the accusations despite the evidence found, and what rhetorical arguments they used to defend themselves.

Methods

Data sources

Our primary data were obtained from open source data on the Internet such as online news media and investigative reports conducted by the university’s ethics committee, the Indonesian Ombudsman, Tempo Magazine, and the monograph by Kaukus Indonesia Untuk Kebebasan Akademik (KIKA; The Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom). All sources used took issues related to the accusation of plagiarism conducted by the three rectors: FR, MA, and MZF.

First, except the report from KIKA, the second and fourth authors searched data sources related to the issues raised through Google Search. All collected data, then, were stored in Google Drive. Afterward, the third and first authors selected the data sources and used only the ones that could provide more evidence, such as direct statements from the three rectors.
and the accusers. Finally, all data used were moved and are available in the Open Science Framework at https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism.

**Analysis**

In the present study, the focus of the analysis is the discourse on plagiarism, with which it does not attempt to find evidence for plagiarism indication. Particularly, through CDA (Van Dijk 2000; Wodak and Meyer 2001), our concern was to investigate the ways the three rectors denied the accusation of plagiarism and how they attempted to divert the issue that it is a black campaign to ruin their reputation.

As such, to understand the discourse, other than analyzing statements from the rectors, we also analyzed reported statements from other parties: political rivals, faculty members who accused or defended the rectors, ethics committee, the Directorate General of Higher Education, the Indonesian Ombudsman, and KIKA. Hence, we could analyze how one argument countered another.

Additionally, in order to understand the process of the events on why and how the accusations of plagiarism emerged and were then denied, the findings are reported in chronological ways. In doing so, we can identify why and how the accused developed counter arguments and gained supporters, even though solid evidence was found. In the “Findings” section below, we present extracts selected as examples of evidence.

**Findings**

In this part, we report the three cases of plagiarism separately, starting with the case of FR.

**Case 1: Fathur Rokhman**

The accusation of plagiarism toward FR could not be separated from the 2014 rectorial election at Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES) where the rivalry between FR and Supriadi Rustad (SR) started. The two reported each other to the police: FR reported SR for document falsification while SR reported FR for perpetrating a hoax on SR’s employment status.

In the 2018 UNNES rectorial election, accusation of plagiarism toward FR arose, for his doctoral thesis at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM); FR received his doctorate in 2003. At that time, FR was the acting rector of UNNES. Serat.id was the first online media that exposed the case to the public, reporting that Evaluasi Kajian Akademik (EKA; The Academic Performance Evaluation), a team which was developed by the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (hereafter the Ministry), had found evidence. None-theless, FR accused Serat.id to be in alliance with SR since the office of Serat.id is located in the neighborhood of the Dian Nuswantoro University, where SR is affiliated with. FR

---

4 Completed data sources can be seen in https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism with subject “Data for case 1: FR.”.
5 The team was established by the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education (Kemenristek-dikti) after Rakyat Peduli Pendidikan Tinggi and YAS made a report on the FR case to the Ministry.
6 Serat.id. June 30, 2018. https://serat.id/2018/06/30/tim-eka-mengantongi-bukti-artikel-plagiat-fathur/
suspected there was a political motive behind the accusation, as SR had been the head of EKA since 2015 even though the team handling FR’s case was led by another person.\footnote{It is also informed through his LinkedIn page https://www.linkedin.com/in/supriadi-rustad-43201a36/} This was denied by SR, and SR even claimed that her wife and daughter were threatened by FR’s staff.

**Extract 1**

I think FR continuously threatens my wife, daughter, and the university I’m affiliated with. My old friends also said that they have also been investigated. (SR, taken from supriadirustad.wordpress.com, 2018) (See in detail all extracts with Indonesian and English version in Supplementary 1)

Of this enmity between FR, SR, and the EKA team, on October 6, 2018, the Ministry announced that FR could not be charged of committing plagiarism, even though similarities were found. The primary reasons were that, first, FR’s work accused of plagiarism was written in 2002; and second, plagiarism was just formally regulated in 2010 in the Regulation of the Minister of Education (Permendiknas) No. 17/2010. Hence, according to the Ministry, despite the case raised in 2018, the plagiarism case of FR is deemed to appear before the rule about plagiarism was regulated, as stated:

**Extract 2**

I would have laid the rectors off if they were found to commit plagiarism from 2010 and up. Fathur should not be a plagiarist, since the case was not in 2010 (i.e., before the regulation). (The Minister M. Nasir, taken from Antara news, 2018)

The case of FR continued and a complaint about the slow investigation was filed to the Indonesian Ombudsman. In 2019, the Ombudsman issued a press release stating that based on their investigation, there was maladministration (abuse of authority, incompetence, and inappropriate action of destroying evidence) found. As stated:

**Extract 3**

The Ombudsman has conducted a series of investigations and found maladministration in handling the case of plagiarism. The findings of maladministration by the Ombudsman. (Ombudsman Indonesia, taken from Ombudsman.go.id, 2019)

Interestingly, FR stated “these are evidence that can refute the accusation of plagiarism towards me.” FR then presented some documents,\footnote{Among the documents shown by FR are his 1997 dissertation proposal, three dissertation drafts (2000, 2001, and 2002), 2000 final dissertation draft.} where during his disposition defense in front of the Ombudsman’s investigators (2000 dissertation draft) he reported that it had been destroyed.

In response to the case, the Ethics Committee of UGM (DKU) developed an ad hoc investigation team. On March 9, 2020, DKU announced that FR did indeed commit plagiarism and they recommended revoking his doctoral title.\footnote{The document is called “Keputusan DK-UGM Nomor 2/UN1/DKU/2020.”} But again, FR denied the accusation.
Surprisingly, rather than supporting the findings of the DKU team, the rector of UGM appointed four experts to provide other opinions and legal advice relating to the law of evidence and intellectual property rights. The experts concluded that FR did not plagiarize and that the DKU findings were invalid for not considering the 2000 dissertation draft. This is in contrast to Tempo magazine’s investigation that presented two striking findings; a reference to a 2001 book while the draft was supposedly written in 2000, and a page printed using a laser printer, a technology invented after 2000.10

Furthermore, in 2020, KIKA also conducted an in-depth research on the case, emphasizing on (1) FR’s attempts to cover his plagiarism and (2) perspectives on plagiarism as a crime and academic ethics violation. As a response, the Head of Public Relations of UNNES stated that KIKA’s accusation was not evidence-based and questioned who KIKA is, and what their motivations are.

**Extract 4**

Who is KIKA? For what purpose? What interest? Also, what are KIKA’s motivations to make such a statement? (Head of Public Relations of UNNES, taken from Tempo.co, 2021)

This statement emphasized that the case has moved from personal issue to collective issue, in which FR is at least supported by the rectorate team.

Additionally, FR stated that such irresponsible accusation should not be the main focus during the pandemic, as he states:

**Extract 5**

Ignore that irresponsible issue. It will subside. We now focus on our concern for the Covid-19 pandemic and help the government for economic recovery as well as prepare UNNES for the PT BH. (FR, taken from Suarakarya.id, 2021)

FR also claimed that it is all clear, based on the UGM rector’s decision, that there is no plagiarism found. As this article is written, FR is still the acting rector at UNNES, and the case seems to be intentionally abandoned as there are no further actions from both UGM and the Ministry.

*Case 2: Muryanto Amin*11

The controversy of MA’s case commenced after he was elected as the rector of the Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) on December 3, 2020. The previous USU rector, Runtung Sitepu (RS), claimed to have received a complaint from the USU faculty members about four almost identical articles, one in Indonesian and three in English, published in different journals. RS decided to investigate the case by establishing an ad hoc team.

The team investigated four of MA’s articles, with Jonner Hasugian (a lecturer on Library Science) as the team leader. The investigation team used a scientific method by quantifying similarities, and they found similarities between the articles. JH states:

---

10 See https://koran.tempo.co/read/nasional/455456/anggota-senat-permasalahkan-keputusan-rektor-ugm-soal-plagiarisme.

11 Completed data sources can be seen in https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism with subject “Data for case 2: MA.”.
Extract 6

There was an article published in three different journals. When we investigate, there was one that had been published in Indonesian, then was translated to English and published again. (JH, taken from Kumparan.com, 2021)

The investigation led to the issuance of rectorate letter no. 82/UN51/R/SK/KPM/2021 on January 14, 2021 announcing that MA was found to commit self-plagiarism.

Of this issue, MA’s spokesperson asserted “All the accusations of plagiarism could not be proven […] it is all the Ministry’s decision.” Surprisingly, in opposition to rector RS, three vice rectors of USU instead accused RS as the one who did plagiarism. One of the vice rectors questioned the legality of the investigation team as they were not asked to discuss.

Extract 7

What the rector followed up on, seems like something not official. […] Runtung Sitepu formed an ethics commision without involving vice rectors I, II, and V. If this is important, we should have been involved. We don’t even know the people in the investigation team. So we see that the impartiality is questionable. (Vice Rector Rosmayati Tanjung, taken from Mediaindonesia.com, 2021)

Moreover, through his clarification letter to Media Indonesia news outlet, MA admits that he did commit self-plagiarism as he stated that “the journal is a part of my doctoral dissertation in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Indonesia” but he defended that self-plagiarism is not acknowledged by the American Political Science Association (APSA). He also stated that:

Extract 8

[…] Self-plagiarism and double publications were not regulated yet in the Regulation of the Ministry of Education 17/2010. (MA, taken from Mediaindonesia.com, 2021)

Interestingly, the Ministry decided that MA did not commit any plagiarism as written in the letter:

Extract 9

For legal certainty and accountability for the implementation of the Tridharma of Higher Education at USU, it is necessary to revoke Rector’s Decree no. 82/UN51.R/SK/KPM/2021 about sanctions for violations of norms, academic ethics, and morals, on behalf of Dr. Muryanto Amin in the case of plagiarism. (The Minister Nadiem Makarim, taken from medcom.id, 2021)

Additionally, the acting head of Directorate General of Higher Education, Nizam, also stated that it is not self-plagiarism; instead it is considered as re-publishing in different outlets and publishers.

Extract 10

In Muryanto’s case, what is happening is the republishing of his own work. And the publication is on the principle of open access, which means the copyright is
still owned by the author, so there’s no copyright infringement [...] Infringement happens if we give up the copyright to the publisher of the journal, and then we publish it again in another journal. (Nizam, taken from Tempo.co, 2021)

Based on the letter, MA was considerably innocent and is still currently the acting rector of USU.

On the other hand, based on Tempo’s investigation, MA was found to be closely related to the regime’s circle including the current President’s son in law. MA is said to be one of the political consultants for the President’s son in law during the mayoral election in Medan.12

**Case 3: Muhammad Zamrun Firihu**13

The plagiarism case of MZF also appeared during the rectorial election. However, different from the two cases above, the plagiarism case of MZF, the rector of Halu Oleo University (UHO), occurred twice: during the 2017 and 2021 rectorial election.

In July 2017, the case first sparked when thirty professors of UHO, who stood against MZF and were supporters of his opponent, stated:

**Extract 11**

MZF’s works were analyzed using Checker software and Turnitin where many similarities between MZF’s works and others’ works were found. It is also found that the MZF’s works did not comply with the writing conventions as regulated in the Regulation of the Minister of Education No. 17/2010 on Preventions and Countermeasures for Plagiarism in Universities. (the Professors, taken from Rakyatsultra.com, 2021)

The professors also reported the case to the Minister, leading to a team being established to investigate the case further. The accusation was denied by MZF, as the investigation conducted by the team from the Directorate General of Higher Education found that MZF did not commit plagiarism. He states:

**Extract 12**

[…] It is all done. But they were not satisfied with the Ministry’s investigation, and a number of professors reported it to the Ombudsman. I also went there as a defendant, and explained everything there. The Ministry’s team explained repeatedly. (MZF, taken from Inisultra.com, 2021)

In this case, the Ministry’s team did indeed claim that they did not find any plagiarism issue, and then MZF was inaugurated as a rector, officiated by the Directorate General Ali Ghufron Mukti. Concerning this issue, the thirty UHO professors reported the case to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman found that MZF did plagiarize with 72% similarities, which served as a basis for their recommendation to revoke MZF’s title and remove him from his position as the UHO rector.

---

12 See [https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1428569/kerita-swaplagiarisme-yang-menyeret-muryanto-rektor-usu-yang-baru-dilantik](https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1428569/kerita-swaplagiarisme-yang-menyeret-muryanto-rektor-usu-yang-baru-dilantik).

13 Completed data sources can be seen in [https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism](https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism) with subject “Data for case 3: MZF.”
The Ombudsman also claimed that the inauguration was vulnerable to maladministration. It is mainly because during the rectorial election, there might have been partiality from the Minister at the time\textsuperscript{14} and possibly a cooperation between the Ministry and Senate.\textsuperscript{15} The Ombudsman also continuously observed the issue during the 2017 election. However, the case was declared solved when a team established by the Ministry concluded that MZF did not commit any plagiarism, as they stated in their Minutes of Meeting no. 1891–1/02/HK/2017 on July 14, 2017.

\textbf{Extract 13}

Conclusion: it cannot be categorized as plagiarism […] To draw the conclusion, the team emphasized more on the substance and contributions of the articles written by MZF. Specifically in science, technology, and medical, textual similarities do not always mean plagiarism. It should be emphasized more on the works produced or its contributions to the development of science. (The Ministry team, taken from Inisultra.com, 2021)

MZF also said that it is impossible for the Ministry to protect and inaugurate him as the university rector if he is guilty, as he expressed:

\textbf{Extract 14}

Well, maybe because the upcoming rectorial election is near. But I have to emphasize that until today I am still the rector of UHO, and my title has never been revoked. The Ministry would not keep me if I’m guilty. (MZF, taken from Haluanrakyat.com, 2021)

Again, in the 2021 rectorial election, MZF’s plagiarism recurred, as reported by one UHO professor on March 5, 2021. Unlike in the 2017 rectorial election where MZF won, in the 2021 election, the Directorate General wrote a letter to the UHO Senate, stating that MZF was not qualified to be a candidate in the 2021 election due to his plagiarism scandals.\textsuperscript{16} In a letter dated April 15, 2021, signed by the Directorate General, it is written that MZF failed to qualify during the selection of rector candidacy. The recommendation in the letter was based on the review and analysis by the Fact Finding Team, concluding that MZF has committed plagiarism; and as a consequence, the Directorate General requested the Senate to follow up the recommendation.

However, an ad hoc team, consisting of UHO lecturers who hold structural positions under MZF as the rector, was established to investigate the case, as one of the team members stated:

\textbf{Extract 15}

The Senate must investigate the case further, whether the Ministry’s investigation results are valid. The results of the two investigations should be compared side by side later. (Senate members’ representative, taken from Indosultra.com, 2021)

\textsuperscript{14} See https://ombudsman.go.id/news/r/pelantikan-rektor-universitas-halu-oleo-rentan-maladministrasi.
\textsuperscript{15} See https://kumparan.com/kendaronesia/dugaan-kongsi-senat-bebaskan-rektor-uho-dari-kasus-plagiat-1vNBo1fznUx/full.
\textsuperscript{16} See https://sultra.tribunnews.com/2021/04/19/7-fakta-prof-muhammad-zamrun-calon-rektor-dikti-sebutterbukti-plagiat-guru-besar-termuda-uho.
This ad hoc team and the Senate then concluded that MZF did not commit any plagiarism, leading to MZF winning the selection of rector candidates. The chief of the Senate stated:

**Extract 16**

So, we Senate agreed on giving a clarification on the plagiarism case to the Directorate General of Higher Education. We also provide MZF a chance to clarify. (Chief of Senate, taken from Sultra.Tribunnews.com, 2021)

MZF also suspected that there was a political issue behind this as the accusation of plagiarism appeared during a rectorial election, as he claimed that his publication has been going through expert judgment.

**Extract 17**

In the process of writing and publishing a journal article, what is assessed is similarity, and this needs expert judgment. In the Regulation of the Ministry of Education no. 17/2000, which is the reference for the Ombudsman to issue the recommendation, article 11 stated that plagiarism issues should be handled by the university’s senate. (MZF, taken from Sultrakini.com, 2021)

Interestingly, despite the fact that the Directorate General has sent a letter to the Senate stating that MZF did plagiarize, and that the 30 professors as well as the Ombudsman found similarities between MZF’s work and other people’s works, MZF was still elected to be the UHO rector for 2021–2025. This indicates that the ad hoc team and the UHO Senate neglected the (previous) existing report and findings.

**Discussion**

The present study analyzing the case of three rectors accused of plagiarism has provided explanations on how plagiarism issues shifted to political disputes in a university. Such cases emerged during rectorial elections in which the accused plagiarists countered that the accusation was meant to undermine them as political opponents. When those accused of plagiarism won the election, they gained an even more powerful position to deny and counter the accusations.

It has been known that conflicts in academic environments are common (Hearn & Anderson 2002). This can be because of differences in scientific perspectives, competition disputes for faculty promotion and tenure, or managerial positions. Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, it is rarely found in the political contest of rectorial elections. What is interesting is, in our case, the discursive strategy (Wodak and Meyer 2001) to counter the accusation of plagiarism during an election is claiming it as a black campaign. Hence, the topic shifted from academic issues to political issues, in which it is not about academic integrity, but about whether the accuser hated the accused.

In discussing about whistle blowers in academia (Stroebe et al. 2012), a study conducted by Horbach et al. (2020) have demonstrated that senior scientists tended to report indications of academic misconduct compared to those in junior positions. It is also the case we raised. What is different in Indonesia, however, are the issues of academic misconduct used by senior faculty members as a tool to damage their political opponent’ reputations. Thus,
in this case, indications of academic misconduct will be reported only when it can give political benefit.

In our present findings, we also see that the case of plagiarism involving disputes among powerful members of academia will rely on who is the winner and who has more dominance, which can determine whether or not the accusation of plagiarism is a tool of propaganda. Among the accused, other than used to counter the accusation, denial arguments are found to be useful strategies to maintain a positive image (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Putra et al., 2021). Here in our study, the power relations can play a substantial role in dictating plagiarism issues. The accused can claim that there is nothing wrong in their work, and the dispute is merely political.

Likewise, when we link the Indonesian case of the three rectors with the case in China where its government officials were not punished for plagiarism (The Straits Times 2019) or the case in the Netherlands where a university did not take any measure against a prominent economic scientist for the accusation of self-plagiarism (Horbach et al. 2019), we can understand that who can be punished or not can be determined by power relations. In the Indonesian case, not only can they deny the accusation, those who are in power can even determine what can be called plagiarism and whether it is considered an academic misconduct.

Regarding the role of the Directorate General of Higher Education and the Minister of Education in addressing plagiarism issues of the three rectors, it is difficult not to speculate that they are not neutral, that their positioning is to defend the accused. In Indonesia, a rector of a state university is appointed by the minister, including the three rectors we analyzed. The case of MA blatantly shows that the government authority is not neutral. Instead of stating that they condemn self-plagiarism, they claimed that self-plagiarism has not been regulated in the present rules. This is not even to mention the neglect of the poor quality of the publications. Hence, the case of MA has extended the problems on what scale of self-plagiarism is considered academic misconduct (see Horbach & Halfman 2019).

The case of FR is an example of how powerful a rector is in Indonesia. FR received his doctorate from UGM. There was an ethics committee investigating FR’s case and they found an indication of plagiarism in FR’s doctoral thesis. Nonetheless, the rector of UGM formed a new investigation team under his command, and this team refuted the findings of the ethics committee, stating that there were no violations found in FR’s doctoral thesis. The rector of UGM used this finding as the basis to state that FR is not guilty, neglecting other evidence from other investigations.

We have explained that there have been cases where accused plagiarists did not receive any formal punishment. This can be because the university did not take serious attention in handling the plagiarism issue (Khathayut and Walker-Gleaves 2021). In regard to Djaali’s five doctoral students (Rosser 2022; Sumandoyo 2017), they were even given a chance to rewrite the doctoral thesis. This is an indication that, in Indonesia, despite having a strict rule regarding plagiarism, punishment can be avoided. In fact, the three cases we raised also exemplify that in the hands of a powerful person, accusation of plagiarism can be diverted as a feud between two groups, the group of the accused and the accuser. It becomes us versus them. Likewise, denial arguments were expressed not just by the accused plagiarists but also by those who stood by them. The conflicting sides raced to gain support, to convince that they are on the right side. To the best of our knowledge, this case is relatively novel and has not been considered by previous investigations of plagiarism (see East 2010; Kaposi & Dell 2012; Nilsson et al. 2009).
It is known that Indonesian society focuses more on the collective where a social status can determine superiority. However, we cannot claim that the findings of the present study are merely influenced by Indonesia’s cultural context without other factors at play. Further studies investigating in different cultural contexts may help enrich the plagiarism issue and how it relates to culture and power. It will also be comparably interesting to investigate rectors who find similar accusations, fight to deny it, but are finally charged with sanctions. In doing so, further studies may be able to investigate how a rector, or other people in power, can and cannot avoid a sanction.

Moreover, in many places, plagiarism is more likely to be reported than other cases of academic misconduct such as p-hacking (Head et al. 2015), data fabrication (Horbach et al. 2020), or publications in predatory journals (Grudniewicz et al. 2019). Taking into account our present study, if the case of plagiarism can be denied despite the clear-cut evidence of misconduct found, there are more academic misconducts unexposed. This is, of course, not uniquely the case in Indonesia, but we argue that it is prevalent in the place where academic publications are still grim, particularly in the so-called non-Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al. 2010). Hence, as scientific publications about academic misconduct from non-WEIRD societies are still scarce, more research taking on such issues is suggested.

As a final point, what we can learn from the findings of the present study is that even though plagiarism is known to be detrimental to the advancement of science, it cannot escape politicization. Power relations can determine who can be punished or not. When the accusation of plagiarism emerges during a political contestation in a university, the accused plagiarists can deny the accusation, arguing that the true problem is not about plagiarism, but that the accusation is meant to undermine them as a political opponent. Of this issue, we suggest that an independent and authoritative body or unit to handle academic misconducts such as plagiarism should be established. This authoritative body may function in providing information about types of academic misconduct and may take a role to develop the scientific ecosystem which has awareness that academic misconduct is detrimental not just for the advancement of science, but also for the institution and personal reputation. If this can be applied, whistleblowers either from powerful or less powerful faculty members may appear.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00875-z.

Acknowledgements We thank members of KIKA for their support of this project and wish to thank Maria Shafita for her contribution in language editing.

Author contribution Idhamsyah Eka Putra conceptualized and developed the idea, design of the present research, and the finalization of the manuscript. Nur Inda Jazilah and Dhia Al-Uyun contributed to data collecting and reporting results. Nur Inda Jazilah contributed to data analysis. Made Syanesti Adishesa contributed the plagiarism cases in general. Herlambang Wiratratman contributed to share info of plagiarism in Indonesia. All the authors approved the final manuscript for submission.

Data availability All data are available in the Open Science Framework at this link https://s.id/DataForPlagiarism.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.
Horbach, S. P. J., & Halfmann, W. (2019). The extent and causes of academic text recycling or “self-plagiarism.” *Research Policy, 48*(2), 492–502. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.09.004

Horbach, S. P. J., Breit, E., & Mameldun, S.-E. (2019). Organisational responses to alleged scientific misconduct: Sensemaking, sensegiving, and sensehiding. *Science and Public Policy, 46*(3), 415–429. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scy068

Horbach, S. P. J. M., Breit, E., Halfmann, W., & Mamelund, S.-E. (2020). On the Willingness to report and the consequences of reporting research misconduct: The role of power relations. *Science and Engineering Ethics, 26*(3), 1595–1623. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-020-00202-8

Jassin, H. B. (1967/2020). Apakah “Tenggelamnya Kapal Van der Wijck” Plagiat? Retrieved from https://kurutaka.id/2020/11/25/nukilan/apakah tenggelamnya-kapal-van-der-wijck-plagiat/

Kaposi, D., & Dell, P. (2012). Discourses of plagiarism: Moralist, proceduralist, developmental and inter textual approaches. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 33*, 813–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.686897

Karr, A. (1828/2016). *Sous les tilleuls*. Createspace Independent.

Kasler, J., Zysberg, L., & Gal, R. (2021). Culture, collectivism-individualism and college student plagiarism. *Ethics and Behavior, 31*, 488–497. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508622.2020.1812396

Khathayut, P., & Walker-Gleaves, C. (2021). Academic faculty conceptualisation and understanding of plagiarism – A Thai university exploratory study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45*(4), 558–572. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1795093

Klein, S. B. (2014). What can recent replication failures tell us about the theoretical commitments of psychology? *Theory and Psychology, 24*(3), 326–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354314529616

Kyrchenko, V. (2018). Indonesias higher education: Context, policy, and perspective. *Asian Journal of Higher Education, 33*, 813–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.686897

Klein, S. B. (2014). What can recent replication failures tell us about the theoretical commitments of psychology? *Theory and Psychology, 24*(3), 326–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354314529616

Kyrchenko, V. (2018). Indonesias higher education: Context, policy, and perspective. *Asian Journal of Higher Education, 33*, 813–830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.686897

Partikelir, A. (2011). Karena njiplak kerja terhormat. *Tirto.id*. Retrieved from https://tirto.id/tirto-id/tamu-plagiat-disertasi-di-universitas-negeri-jakarta-cvruz

Tempo. (2014). 8 kasus plagiat yang menghebohkan Indonesia. *Tempo.co*. Retrieved from https://nasional.tempo.co/read/555420/8-kasus-plagiat-yang-menghebohkan-indonesia
Tempo. (2021). Academic dishonesty. Tempo.co. Retrieved from https://magz.tempo.co/edisi/1427/2021-02-01
The Straits Times (2019). Top Chinese officials, including former vice-president, plagiarised university theses: Review. Retrieved from https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/top-chinese-officials-including-former-vice-president-plagiarised-university-theses
Triandis, H. C. (2001). *Individualism and collectivism*. Routledge.
Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse and Society*, 4(2), 249–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006
Van Dijk, T. (2000). Ideologies, racism, discourse: Debates on immigration and ethnic issues. In J. T. Wal & M. Verkuyten (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on racism* (pp. 91–116). Adelshot: Ashagate.
Weber-Wulff, D. (2014). False feathers. *Springer-Verlag*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-39961-9
Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. Sage.

**Publisher’s note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.