Introduction

Plagiarism within university settings is a widespread phenomenon that manifests itself in a variety of forms and includes transgressions that can be classified as instances of academic dishonesty (i.e., student cheating) as well as instances of research misconduct. Although the bulk of research into plagiarism as academic misconduct has been carried out in English-speaking nations (e.g., Australia, the United States), studies have now been emerging, documenting this transgression in many countries across the world. One country that has received some attention in recent years is Iran, a nation that is experiencing significant academic and scientific growth.

Iran is an Islamic republic with a population of about 76 million. When the Islamic Revolution happened in 1979, there were approximately 150,000 university students in Iran. By 2008, there were 3.5 million university students (Tofighi Darian, 2009). That number now stands at about 4.5 million students (Sedighi, 2014). At the professional level, there are more than 55,000 faculty members with a PhD working at Iranian academic institutes (Sedighi, 2014). Also, many doctoral-level students will be looking for new teaching and research positions, plus some of the several thousand students currently studying outside Iran (Moslemi Naeini, 2013) who will likely return to Iran. The number of tertiary academic institutes in Iran was 223 in 1979, but, in 2013, this number has reached 2,540 (Bolookat, 2014). With so many young academics in the pipeline and a faltering economic situation, it is likely that additional academic positions necessary to meet the needs of the country will not be created. Thus, securing an academic position already is increasingly competitive and will likely become even more so in the near future. An additional complication is that few international students enroll in the Iranian universities. So, the universities may have to lower their admissions criteria to enroll more students and survive. But, even with lower academic standards, students in the humanities will still need to prepare term papers and write theses. However, if some of these students lack proper academic skills, how will they be able to complete their assignments? In addition, one has to wonder how all of those unemployed PhD or MA graduates will be able to make a living.

In this article, we study what we call the “plagiarism industry” in Iran. We have interviewed a group of enterprising students who, at the time of the interviews, were earning a living, or had done so in the past, by writing other students’ term papers and theses. The qualitative data obtained have provided us with insights that reveal the complexities of this plagiarism industry and offer clues about the causes, effects, and the economic realities that underlie this activity. But first, we will examine the state of plagiarism in Iran according to the available literature.

Plagiarism in Iran

Over the past decades, Iran has had such a sharp increase in science production that it was placed among the 31 countries
of the world that published the so-called “top 1% most cited publications” (Habibzadeh, 2008, p. 171). From 1996 to 2007, Iranian researchers published 8,797 citable medical papers (Scopus®) and ranked 39 in the world, but their H index (an index that estimates the importance and impact of contributions by a scientist or a country) was 40, placing Iran in the 69th position. There are many factors contributing to this relatively low citation rate, including the vicious cycle of poor methodology and plagiarism (Farrokh, 2009). Plagiarism is not something special to Iran or even to our time. But, as mentioned earlier, the extraordinary demand for having an academic certificate has convinced many people that they can make a lot of money by selling academic services. In the most notable example, the late Ali Kordan, an ally of the Iranian President, was fired from his job as Minister Interior in 2008 when he was found to have lied about having received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University (Burke, Tomlinson, & Coope, 2012). And in 2009, Nature published an article with a peculiar title “Iranian ministers in plagiarism row,” which was a reaction to a chain of scandals in which some academic journals found papers by some of the Iranian authorities were in fact plagiarized and were subsequently retracted (Butler, 2009). After that episode, a group of researchers responded to the charges by pointing out that much of the fraud has been perpetrated by politicians, and not Iranian full-time academics (Bloch, 2012). Moreover, in an effort to further combat the perception that Iranian academics might in some way condone these activities, some of the Iranian professors and researchers founded the weblog “Professors Against Plagiarism.”

**Research on Plagiarism in Iran**

A number of studies have been carried out in Iran in an effort to examine the various parameters of plagiarism. For example, Ojaghi, Keyvanara, Cheshmeh Sohrabi, and Papi (2011) carried out a qualitative study on faculty members at University of Esfahan, Iran, in which the authors sought the opinion of study participants regarding the main causes of plagiarism in Iran’s academic community. The professors who participated in this research identified two major variables as important in this respect. Internally, those who have been raised in families in which ethical conduct is regarded seriously were said to be less likely to plagiarize. In addition, participants felt that plagiarism is more likely to occur in a climate in which such behavior is more common and less likely to be met with criticism and punishment. With respect to the latter point, it is interesting to point out that Donald McCabe, one of the most prominent authorities in academic dishonesty, has consistently found that one of the strongest predictors of academic dishonesty is the academic integrity climate of an institution (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). That is, based on several studies using thousands of North American students, these authors conclude that students are more likely to cheat if they believe that other students engage in this behavior and get away with it. Finally, Ojaghi et al. also revealed that among their 21 participants, some admitted that the PhD certificates of some current professors in the Iranian universities are not genuine.

Fealy, Biglari, and Pezeshkirad (2012) conducted a survey on 225 graduate students in large public university in Tehran in an effort to determine how these students viewed plagiarism. They found that most of the students had slightly unfavorable or neutral attitudes toward plagiarism. They also found a significant difference between those who attended article-writing courses and those who did not, in viewing plagiarism unethical. Their survey showed that only about 40% of their respondents said they do not plagiarize, which means that the remaining 60% are overtly saying they resort to plagiarism to prepare their term papers. Similarly, Khamesan and Amiri (2011) surveyed 400 students from 4 faculties and 30 majors at a different university and their results revealed that fewer than half of the students would not resort to plagiarism when they felt the need to do so, while more than a half of their respondents said that plagiarism is common in their university. They also found that the number of male students who said they resorted to plagiarism was significantly higher in comparison with that of female students. Based on their survey and other data, they concluded that plagiarism is very common in Iran.

In one study, Amirkhani, Vahdat, and Khezrian (2010) conducted a survey on 250 students in a public university to see whether there was any correlation between psychological characteristics and Internet plagiarism, and reported that extroversion, academic talent, and emotional stability are among the important factors preventing students from doing plagiarism on the Internet.

**Ghost Writing as Alternative to Plagiarism**

Although most students who plagiarize seem to do so by taking textual material that is already freely available to them via paper or online sources, a small percentage of them (about 5%) are known to have confederates produce the work on their behalf or purchase the work via one of the many online essay writing services or “paper mills” that have emerged over the years (Scanlon & Neumann, 2002). In view of the economic realities facing Iran and given the current academic climate at many Iranian academic institutions, we wanted to examine the problem of plagiarism from the perspective of those who offer term papers and essay services or seek such services in Iran. For this purpose, we carried out informal interviews with a sample of students ranging from those holding Baccalaureate degrees to those holding PhD degrees. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the extent of this particular type of plagiarism in Iran and the conditions that give rise to this behavior.
Method

Subjects

A convenience sample consisted of 143 BA, MA, and PhD students in humanities from a major Iranian University participated in this research (see Table 1). Age data were not collected.

Materials

All respondents were asked the following two questions (“Have you ever heard a classmate of yours paid somebody else to do his or her homework/final paper?” and “Have you ever worked on a project of somebody else in exchange of money?”). If they answered in the affirmative, they were then interviewed.

Procedure

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, we knew from the beginning that getting students to reveal their true opinions and actual practices regarding their academic writing would be no easy task. After all, even after assuring them of the anonymity of their responses, people are probably not going to be completely open about their unethical behaviors if they know that their responses are going to be presented in a paper. Therefore, part of the inclusion criteria for the interview was based on a subjective determination on the part of the interviewers (E.S. and S.A.) that the respondents were being honest. Thus, during a period of 18 months from May 2012 to November 2013, we interviewed 143 students in different majors of humanities. These majors included social sciences, communication studies, management, theology, political relations, psychology, regional studies, and so on. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, most of the interviews were carried out during social chats in a friendly atmosphere, so the interviewees, all of whom were known to the interviewers, were not aware of the purpose of chats. Only in cases in which there was a mutual trust between interviewee and interviewer, the participant was informed about the nature of conversation. Those who reported that they did not write papers or theses for other students were asked only two questions. But, those who said that their job was or is to do other people’s academic work were interviewed in greater depth.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we present a summary of the responses to each of the questions and use selected participant responses to illustrate some of the findings.

In response to the question, “Have you ever heard a classmate of yours paid somebody else to do his or her homework/final paper?” 117 of 143 participants said “yes.” This figure means that 81% of participants reported to have witnessed somebody in their academic circle paying somebody else to do his or her scientific assignment. All 100% of the PhD students, 88% of MA students, and 72% of BA students in humanities said that they have witnessed a case. Some of the participants elaborated the instances of such transactions. For example, a MA-level female, age 25, reported,

I know a former classmate of mine who was divorced and got money from her ex-husband. She said she does not bother herself doing these “stupid things.” She said in each semester she employs the best people to write her an original paper. She said sometimes, just a smile would be enough.

A female, PhD, age 32, commented, “It is very common. I am wondering, did you not see many posters offering such services on street walls?”

In response to the question, “Have you ever worked on a project of somebody else in exchange of money?” a total of 29 of the respondents answered affirmatively, and a majority of them were PhD students. All these respondents reported to have prepared somebody else’s assignment at least once (see Table 2).
It is noteworthy that only 6 of 76 (8%) of the female respondents said “yes” to this question, suggesting that females are less likely to engage in these unethical academic practices, whereas 34% of male respondents reported to have done so. Also, as noted above, it seems that those with more education are more likely to engage in this activity, perhaps because they are expected to have better writing skills and be more knowledgeable about the subjects that they are asked to write about. One other factor could be due to the fact that higher levels of education are by nature associated with higher age status, which means that the individual has more responsibilities, and most of these responsibilities need money.

Those who denied writing paper for money offered various reasons for their reluctance to do so. For example, a 29-year-old PhD male reported that though I have had many such offers, I could never convince myself writing for somebody else. I, like everybody else, prefer to be the sole owner of my work. If someone cannot write, he or she can give up and go for some job else.

A 19-year-old female BA student said, I am very busy and I cannot do my work the way I like. I have no time to do such thing . . . yes, if somebody offers me a good payment and I am sure of the ability of myself to do so, I may consider it.

Another female, age 23, in a BA program said, “I don’t do it because it is robbery. It is as ugly as that. But people justify it for themselves.” Similarly, a 19-year-old male BA student did not think that the act was ethical: “If it becomes a routine, you will simply witness someone who is stupid becoming a top student of our class just because he or she is rich and can afford to pay PhD students.” Finally, a 31-year-old female PhD student who felt strongly against writing assignments for other students said,

Not only I have never done it, I push back every one who makes me such offers . . . yes, indeed I have had such offers, but I have never accepted them. Everyone needs money, but at what price?
I think it is better to steal money from the poor and not enter such a dirty job.

For the 29 students who claimed to have at least one time done somebody else’s work in exchange of money, we asked them to provide details about different aspects of this activity, and what follows represents a summary of these findings.

Rationale for Engaging in Ghost Authorship
The vast majority of the respondents justified their ghost writing activities by claiming that they were in financial distress or felt pressure to generate some additional income. The following remarks by various respondents illustrate this point. A 33-year-old male PhD student reported,

Well, I am not from the capital and you know that the capital is a wild city. Without money, I could barely eat. My family could not afford to secure enough money for me. Therefore I did it five or six times.

According to a 22-year-old male BA student, “Every human being has a minimum of needs. I only do it when I am in financial pressure.” A 25-year-old male MA student remarked,

It goes back to when I had to support my younger brother. Actually, no one expected me to support him. But, I was the older brother and I was naturally supposed to do so. It also gave me the opportunity to live on my own and therefore I helped my family to stay on their feet after the financial losses they experienced at that time.

Others rationalized their actions in terms of professional status. For example, a 34-year-old male PhD student argued, “I have spent my life to become a professional, but I cannot afford to buy a car. So I have to accept offers to write theses. This is life; don’t be stupid.” A 28-year-old BA male remarked, “I do this because I need money. This is very stupid not to accept money. Without money, you are dead.”

Who Are the Customers?
We were interested in learning about the characteristics of those who seek ghost writing services, and we, therefore, asked them to describe them in some detail. Their responses indicated that a large proportion of their customers were wealthier students who attended a nearby private university with several branches in the Tehran area. Of course, not all the student-customers were from that one university. Moreover, in some cases, the respondents indicated that some of their customers were actual professors. Interestingly, several respondents indicated that they were approached by many more female than male students. Some customers tended to be governmental managers who felt the need to further their studies to get to better qualify for a promotion or to simply ensure that they can maintain their current position. There was also the suggestion that as an increasing number of Iranians have advanced degrees, these government managers feel somewhat intimidated by the prospect of having to work in a system in which many of their subordinates are better educated than their managers. The following responses illustrate these trends. A 38-year-old male PhD student stated,

They are mainly from [. . .] University. They are wealthy. They pay you well and they pay well for everything. But, they are not just from [. . .] university. There are other customers as well. Most of them are women who want to write their thesis. There
are also men . . . They are mainly older than ordinary students. I think they just came here to get a degree and they don’t care for quality.

A 32-year-old female PhD student reported that “they are from many backgrounds. But because I don’t work professionally, my customers are mainly from my university and [. . .] University.” Another female respondent, a 25-year-old MA student, stated the following:

I only occasionally got such offers. Most of them are from my university but I have also offers from [. . .] University and other academic institutes. I am more comfortable working with women because they know me and I know them by nature. The other reason is that I am a girl and I cannot quarrel with men about money. Given that there are enough requests coming from women, why should I bother myself quarreling with men?

Finally, a 33-year-old male PhD student commented,

I only work with [. . .] University students because I don’t want my friends and colleagues at my university to know about it. Moreover, their professors are not rigorous as ours. My experience is that they accept everything the students email them. Most of my customers are women.

One 32-year-old female PhD student reported that one of her customers was a college professor. She stated,

For example, I know a professor who likes to publish many academic articles. He pays me well and I write the articles for him. Sometimes he includes me as author, but at other times, he lists himself as sole author.

**How They Find Each Other**

In English-speaking countries, if a student wishes to purchase a term paper for use in a course, all she or he needs to do is an Internet search for term papers, academic essays, and theses. A plethora of sites purport to have stocks of thousands of papers, which are sorted by topic. Many of these sites also offer custom-written papers, which students can arrange to order from the privacy of their own home as long as she or he has an Internet connection and a credit card. Our current sample of 29 ghost authors revealed a variety of different ways of promulgating and arranging for these services. For example, a 32-year-old male PhD student stated,

Both [informal] social network and advertisements are important. I also have a liaison with corporations which are active in the industry. They call me and give me the proposal. I will tell them my price. Then they add 30% and share it with the customers. I like working for myself, indeed. But it is not possible to find all of the customers via social networks.

The above arrangements are similar to those described some years ago by Witherspoon (1995) and more recently by Tomar (2012). This job is illegal, and moreover, academia is a special place in which plagiarism is harshly criticized. Yet, this business needs both parties to get to know each other. Therefore, it seems that only those who are less professional in this business accept jobs from the same institutes. More professional people find their customers in other institutes. Examples follow:

One 25-year-old female MA student reports that requests for papers “. . . are mainly from the people whom I know, but in some cases I find them through shared friends. Sometimes, students from [. . .] University come to our faculty and try to find the right person.” Our research reveals that most of the orders are facilitated by social network. But, for professionals, advertising institutes are involved. They overtly advertise in faculties in every university. A 33-year-old male PhD student stated that “women talk to each other more openly as compared to men and so, most of them find me through their friends.” Another 33-year-old male PhD student said that “they come to faculty and ask for help and the faculty members redirect them to you. Even now I have occasionally received these proposals.” Finally, a 29-year-old male BA, said that he worked with a bunch of people. They give me the projects and I do it. I have been told not to try to come in direct contact with customers; otherwise, they will dismiss me. I am contented with the stipend and there is no reason for raising conflict of interest complaints.

**Originality and Quality**

We tried to explore the degree of originality and the quality of the ghost-written works. Here, respondents’ answers to our questions suggest that most of the ghost-written papers they produce are not very original and not necessarily of good quality. For example, a 32-year-old male PhD student stated the following:

Frankly, I have dozens “Reviews of Literature,” “Methodology sections,” “Results,” etc. For each customer, I assemble the texts and it’s done. After 6 months, you get to know professors and understand how to assemble the thesis in a way that he or she approves it. I don’t even think that most of them read the thesis thoroughly. Generally, I write a MA thesis in a single day.

The approach to ghost writing of picking and choosing from a collection of archived sections of papers was also mentioned by a 34-year-old male PhD student in connection with offering his services to a university professor:

When I was doing it for my professor, I did it brilliantly. I expected him to at least include my name as a co-author. He paid me well but refused to include my name. Therefore, I didn’t bother myself working hard for the next work. Also, I found that neither he nor somebody else doesn’t read the articles critically. Therefore, I still do that whenever I am in need of money. I got same money for less effort. For others, however, I don’t take
much time. I have many texts on my laptop. This is just a matter of mingling texts and selling them.

One theme that was repeated several times was the apparent lack of evaluation of students’ works by their professors. For example, a 27-year-old male BA student revealed the following:

At first I was very sensitive about the quality. Now, I don’t care. Let me give you a wonderful example. You don’t believe it. Four years ago, when I was a BA student, I entered this job. I wrote a thesis for a MA student. It had been thoroughly copy-pasted with slight modifications. The student paid my stipend and invited me to attend his defense session. Amidst the discussions on quality of his thesis, I browsed the thesis and with a great horror found I had forgot to remove the acknowledgment of the previous thesis. I couldn’t believe that. I immediately came out of the session but in the evening he called me and said he got a somehow good point.

Conclusion
Collectively, the available evidence, together with the material generated by the respondents in this informal study, suggests that the state of academic integrity in Iran is not unlike that of other Western nations. Copy pasting from online sources seems to be a common form of plagiarizing from sources, and there is even some indication that the Iranian authorities are trying to do something about it, though their actions may actually facilitate the ghost writing by copy pasting for a select lucky few who have access to a lot of scholarly content. Consider the following remarks by a 28-year-old male BA student:

Previously, there was a possibility of downloading full text theses in Persian language. My friends have downloaded so many of them. Now, the Ministry of Science and Technology does not let users download them anymore. In fact, they are no longer on the Internet. Do you know what that means? That means you can simply copy-paste material and nobody could know it by searching on the Internet. That’s the reason people come to us and pay us well.

As Witherspoon (1995) and Tomar (2012) have shown, many North American students at various academic levels will hire ghost writers to generate their term papers, theses, and dissertations, and, in spite of the astronomically high cost of tuition in North American academic institutions, or the dire economic realities facing Iranians, students in both areas of the world continue to cheat by paying others to do their academic work for them.

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Author Biographies

Ehsan Shahghasemi is PhD Candidate in Communication at University of Tehran and researcher at Center for Cyber Policy Studies at the same university. His research focus on cyberspace and intercultural communication.

Manijeh Akhavan is MA in Communication from the University of Tehran. She is currently a researcher at Center for Cyber Policy Studies at University of Tehran.