PLAGIARISM: THE CURSE OF INTERNET IN AFRICAN ACADEMIA?

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Plagiarism is the act of taking credit for someone else's work or idea, with or without their consent and incorporating it into one's work without full acknowledgement.[1] Plagiarism could be in different forms such as verbatim quotation, cutting and pasting from the internet, inappropriate paraphrasing, inaccurate citation, self-plagiarism amongst others. Plagiarism matters because it is a breach of academic integrity. Intellectual honesty is a sacred principle that underlies academia such that one is obliged to acknowledge the originators of ideas, words and data which forms the basis for one's work. Plagiarism is highly unethical and can have serious consequences on a researcher's career, institution, and other academic affiliations.

A meta-analysis conducted on publications about scientists admitting to plagiarism reported about 1.7% of scientists admitted to have self-plagiarised at one time or the other, while about 30% admitted to knowing a colleague who had plagiarised.[2] A recent systematic review and survey of African medical journals for plagiarism in the research was conducted using Turnitin text-matching software. The software generated an overall similarity index (OSI) and the number of sentences copied in each of the articles selected. The authors reported a form of plagiarism in 63% of the articles checked, with 27% being level 1 (some plagiarism – involving one or two sentences), 19% being level 2 (moderate plagiarism – three to six sentences) and 17% being level 3 (extensive plagiarism – six or more sentences).[3] The authors also reported 47% plagiarism in the introduction section, 30% in the methods, and 39% in the discussion section. There was little or no widespread plagiarism in the results section of included articles.[3] While this report has its limitations which only included articles from the African Journals Online (AJOL) database, there appears to be obvious evidence of substantial plagiarism.

Plagiarism is a global problem in academia, but it is one malady with a great potential to afflict most African academicians and journals. The reasons include weak or lack of institutional policies on plagiarism and reluctance to punish offenders; lack of researchers' writing skills and English proficiency; researchers' desperation to gain promotion as part of the so-called "publish or perish phenomenon"; and the easy access to a vast array of literature made possible by the internet.[4]

Although it appears that the internet has made plagiarism easier, plagiarism and cheating have always been around before the advent of the internet. A study conducted in 1991 (pre-internet era) amongst students at Rutgers University reported that two-thirds of the students admitted to cheating at least once.[5] One could argue that in the pre-internet era, plagiarism was more difficult, and researchers had to work hard to even get materials to plagiarise, which is not the case in the internet era. The internet has perhaps made researchers lazier both in the management of time and engagement in project-related mental activities due to the vast amount of accessible literature available at their fingertips.[6]

Like a double-edged sword, the internet has also made plagiarism detection easier. Prior to the advent of the internet, it might have been tedious and difficult to detect plagiarism, but this is no longer the case. Plagiarism detection online softwares such as iThenticate®, Turnitin®, Grammarly®, etcetera, have made it easier to detect plagiarism. Turnitin for example gives an overall similarity index score of any write-up to previous write-ups online, and the user (Journal, researcher, university) decides what percentage to use as cut off to determine an acceptable level of similarity score.[7,8] While there's no universally specified similarity score, most Universities and journals do not accept above 15% cut-off.[9] Nevertheless, even when the similarity score is lower than the specified cut-off, the author may still be considered to have plagiarized if he/she had copied a statement(s) verbatim from other sources without the use of quotation marks ("") or italics on the copied texts before referencing.

The internet has brought the issue of plagiarism in academia to the limelight, more than ever before. While some may perceive plagiarism as if it were the invention of the internet, plagiarism predates the internet. The internet's impact on plagiarism is still ongoing, as the internet evolves, so too will its role in plagiarism. The onus lies on African authors to make proper use of the internet while writing, so it becomes a cure to the potential malady of plagiarism in African academia rather than a curse.

Researchers and academicians should take responsibility for upholding honesty and integrity.[4] Quality time should be spent on improving their proficiency in

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English language by developing comprehension and paraphrasing skills. Researchers should learn how to properly quote and cite all materials used within the text and proper referencing at the end of their write-ups.[10] Proper permission should be obtained from other authors or journals to reproduce tabular, graphical, pictorial attachments, or use texts under copyright.[10] African journals should use electronic anti-plagiarism software, educate researchers on plagiarism, and promote ethical publishing.

The curse of plagiarism occurs from authors' inappropriate use and attribution of resources used for their work, including materials from the internet. There are lots of online plagiarism software that can prevent authors from this "curse", and equally assist academic institutions and journals in detecting plagiarism before publishing academic materials.

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