IJAAR PUBLISHING®

International Journal of Research in Education and Sustainable Development | ISSN: 2782-7666
Vol. 6, Issue 3 (2026) | https://doi.org/10.46654/2k17wy81

Exploring the Role of Personal Values and Peer Pressure in Shaping Business Education Students' Attitude towards Plagiarism in Academic Writing in Rivers State Universities

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Abstract

Plagiarism remains a persistent challenge to academic integrity in Nigerian Universities despite institutional policies and detection tools. This study explores the role of personal values and peer pressure in shaping Business Education Students' Attitude towards plagiarism in academic writing in Rivers State Universities. Two research questions guided the study. A phenomenological qualitative research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprised of 60 postgraduate Business Education students from Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, 2023 academic session. Participants were selected using purposive/ convenience sampling technique and data were collected through semi -structured interviews. Data collected were analyzed thematically. Findings from the study revealed that students' personal values such as honesty, integrity and responsibility significantly influenced their disposition towards plagiarism. Students with ethical value perceived plagiarism as academic dishonesty and avoided it, while those with weak value orientation rationalized it as a survival strategy. Similarly, peer pressure was discovered to have significant influence on Business Education students' decision to plagiarize particularly for fear of failure, desire to belong and pressure to maintain high grades like peers. The study concludes that personal values and peer pressure are critical determinants of business education students' attitudes towards plagiarism. It recommends that universities in Rivers State should integrate value re-orientation and peer counselling programmes into academic writing course to promote academic writing integrity.

Keywords: Personal values, Peer pressure, Plagiarism, Academic writing Business Education Attitude.

Introduction

Academic writing constitutes a fundamental component of higher education, requiring originality, integrity and ethical scholarship. However, plagiarism remains a persistence challenge in Rivers State Universities. Business Education students who are being prepared as Business teacher and professionals are expected to uphold high ethical standard in academic writing. Despite institutional policies against plagiarism, cases of academic dishonesty are on the increase. Existing literature suggests that attitudes of students toward of students towards plagiarism are not solely influenced by academic factor and social factor. Personal values which reflect individual's moral principles and ethical orientations, play a crucial role in determining whether a student perceives as acceptable or unacceptable. Similarly, peer pressure which is prevalence among University students influences their decisions to plagiarize in academic writing. In Rivers state Universities, it is obvious that these two factors significantly shape students' attitudes, yet no qualitative studies have explored their lived experiences. Hence this study fills the gap by exploring how personal values and peer pressure shape Business Education Students' attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing.

Statement of the Problem

Academic integrity is very essential to produce a credible academic writing and quality education. In Universities, academic writing is expected to reflect originality and ethical scholarship. However, plagiarism has become a serious and pervasive issue in Universities particularly, Rivers State Universities. The introduction of plagiarism detection tool, orientation programmes and institutional sanctions has little or no effect in reducing the practice. Many Business Education Students still engage in various form of plagiarism, such as copy-and-paste, inadequate paraphrasing and incomplete citation. Even, they have improved their knowledge on how to use applications to reduce the level of plagiarism so they cannot be tracked down.

Prevalence of plagiarism suggests that institutional measures or existing policies are not effective enough to control plagiarism among students. This indicates that students' attitudes regarding plagiarism can be traced to personal and social factors. It is expected that personal values such as honesty, responsibility and integrity should deter students from plagiarizing, but in the face of pressure students with weak moral value yield to it and justify their actions. Also, the University environment exposes students to peer pressure which most times fear of failure and pressure to meet up with peers who plagiarize influence them to yield positively to plagiarism which is against their academic decision. Although some time in rare occasion peer pressure promote negative attitude towards plagiarism. Business Education Students in Rivers State Universities are expected to maintain a certain level of integrity as models for future professional, but their attitudes toward plagiarism poses serious threat to their professional integrity as future teachers and entrepreneurs. Several studies focused on detection and prevention of plagiarism with limited attention to circumstance surrounding leading Business education Students to plagiarize. This points to the need to conduct a qualitative research to explore how personal values and peer pressure

Purpose of the study

This study explores the role of personal values and peer pressure in shaping Business Education students' attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing in Rivers State Universities. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine how personal values shape Business Education Students' attitudes towards plagiarism in academic writing.
2. Investigates how peer pressure influences Business Education Students' decisions to engage in plagiarism in academic writing.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do personal values influence Business Education Students' attitudes towards plagiarize in academic writing in Rivers State Universities?
2. How does peer pressure influence Business Education Students' decision towards plagiarize in academic writing in Rivers State Universities?

Methodology

The study adopted a Phenomenological qualitative research design. The population of the study was 60 postgraduate Business Education students from Rivers State owned Universities. The sample size comprised of 20 post graduate Business Education Students who had firsthand experiences of plagiarism in Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Port Harcourt. A purposive/convenience sampling technique was employed as the interview required the consent of the participants. The instrument used for data collection was a semi- structured interview questions made up of 9 questions and 15 prompts. The instrument was validated by two experts in Business Education and one in Measurement and Evaluation, all in Faculty of Education. Two of the experts scaled the instrument with inter-rater scale method. The reliability of the instrument was calculated using Pearson Product Moment correlation (PPMC) formula, it yielded a coefficient of 0.90. The interview session reached its saturation after the 15th participant. The responses from the participants were manually transcribed and coded with the aid of Microsoft word and Microsoft Excel software. The transcript was read multiple times and initial codes and excerpt were and extracts generated. Thematic data analysis was adopted.

The transcribed data was analyzed using DeepSeek AI and major themes were generated from the participants' responses.

Results

In this section the findings of the study are presented and information given by participants through the interview and their reactions on the questions are discussed.

Research Question 1

How do personal values influence Business Education Students' attitudes towards plagiarize in academic writing in Rivers State Universities?

The influence of personal value on Accounting Education Students' decision towards plagiarism in project writing identified through the interview is analyzed under core conflict, conflict resolution, hierarchy of values and pervasive importance of academic integrity. The data reveals a profound internal conflict between their value system and temptation to plagiarize in their project writing. Most of the participants stated that academic integrity is very important to them but, in the face of pressure their responses becomes unstable, ranging from steadfast adherence to their values to total deviation. Personal values are always tested and negotiated to proof its strength and sometimes it is overridden by practical demands.

Core Conflict: The central theme emerging from the data is a powerful and recurring conflict between Accounting Education Student's stated personal values such as integrity, and the practical pressures of academic life. Students describe being torn between what they believe is right and what they feel they must do to succeed.

The Nature of the Conflict: The conflict between Accounting Education Students' integrity and practicality is triggered by various situational factors, such as lack of resources, difficult tasks, or the high stakes of academic success. Participant 4 described a conflict born of financial and logistical hardship:

The temptation there was that most times when trying to do a project you might need transport, you might need data, to move around and gather data for the study. This led him to lift material from an existing project (participant4).

Participant 6 faced a conflict between his value for integrity and the temptation to take a shortcut:

Where my personal values conflict with the temptation to plagiarize was when I have before me an article or research already done and dusted with the exact data which is equally relevant for my own study. I was tempted to abandon the field work and make use of the available information. There was conflict between my value and temptation to plagiarize (participant6).

Participant7 experienced a conflict rooted in an Inadequate Knowledge and skill which led him to consider plagiarism:

My values academic integrity which does not in any way align with plagiarism practices. But somehow things become difficult that I rarely attend lectures to acquire the knowledge and skill (participant7).

Participant 13 also articulated the conflict most starkly and frames plagiarism not as a potential tool for survival in a demanding system rather than a simple moral failing.

Actually I valued academic integrity very much but what academic excellence demands is so high that there is conflict (participant13).

Conflict Resolution: The responses of Accounting Education Students on how they resolve conflict between their personal values and temptation to plagiarize reveals diverse resolution strategies which ranges from value-maintaining to value abandonment.

Maintaining Values: A significant number of Accounting Education Students remained actively resolute by choosing to uphold their values, even when it was difficult. 46.6% of the entire Participants were able to maintain their values using different approaches.

Participant 3: Chose to maintain value and standard: *I maintain my values and my standard.*

Participant 5 relied in her faith: *Actually it's a big temptation an e-e I was able to resolve it in looking up to God*

Participant 6 made a conscious decision based on Determination echoed,

I decided to stand my ground on my determination to maintain my integrity and reputation by collecting my own data or following the due process

Participant 7 resolved: *I chose to do my possible best and accept whatever the outcome was.*

Participant 9 stood firm saying: *I stood to my ground as my value is always affirmed.*

Participant 10 despite finding the work Cumbersome courageously said*: I still went back to my inner-self and did a lot of work.*

Participant 11 patiently waited for proper authorization:

I paused and waited for the authority before I could access the information I needed.

Abandoning values: Data from the participants showed that 30% of Accounting Education Students compromised or abandoned their cherished values in the face of practicality. This is a clear indication that their personal values were not strong enough to deter plagiarism when they feel pressured.

Participant 1 openly admitted *I copied and Paste*

Participant 4 expressed: *I did my data collection and lifted few thing from the already made project that was there, join them and do my own project.*

Participant 8 frankly said: *I considered my target and gave in or yielded to the temptation.*

Participant 13confessed*: In most cases, I Plagiarize*.

Participant 14 explained that when he was faced with a conflict during an exam, he chose to avoid plagiarism by leaving that question for another option. *I decide to leave that particular question for other option.*

The Hierarchy of Values: Perhaps the most telling finding is that for some Accounting Education Students' personal values like integrity are not absolute. They exist in a hierarchy, and when they conflict with other powerful motivators such as the desire for excellent grades or the fear of failure, integrity can be relegated to a secondary position.

Grades over Goodness: The pursuit of academic excellence, measured in grades, can become a superordinate value that trumps academic integrity. Participant 8 was remarkably frank about this. His decision to plagiarize was directly influenced by this hierarchy.

Academic integrity is vital to me but, I consider it secondary when I'm pursuing paper excellence (participant 8).

Participant 12 dismissed the importance of integrity in the current era. For him, the opportunity to plagiarize was the primary driver, not a deterrent. He made a striking statement concerning academic integrity stating: *I don't think academic integrity is so important in this present generation (participant 12).*

Participant 13 further devalued integrity by linking it only to the future which implies that academic integrity has little or no immediate value, she said, *Academic integrity is not very important to my future career and profession (participant 13).*

Participant 14 made a similar calculation: A*cademic integrity is not very important to me because it is not stated in the certificate.*

The Pervasive Importance of Academic Integrity: Despite the actions of some participants, it is crucial to note that an overwhelming majority of Participants affirmed that academic integrity is: Very Important (VI) or of Great Value (GV) to them. These responses points to the fact that Accounting Education Students know that integrity is important, yet many still find ways to justify compromising it. Integrity is also identified as a source of pride and future proof. Excerpts from some participants are shown below:

Participant 1 stated: *Academic integrity is very important because it makes you outstanding wherever you find yourself.*

Integrity is something very important to me because it is a proof of personality and background (participant 5).

It gives me joy and satisfaction when I tell myself the truth (participant 7).

It's really important because it brings and portrays originality to work (participant 10).

Academic integrity is so important to me because I value Knowledge a lot (participant 11).

Participant 15 saw it as part of a legacy: *I desire to mentor the younger generation on the need to acquire knowledge (participant 15).*

The influence of personal values on students' decisions to plagiarize is characterized by a powerful internal struggle. Accounting Education Students possess a strong theoretical commitment to academic integrity, universally recognizing it as Very Important. However, this principle is constantly tested by the practical demands of academic life, lack of resources, difficult tasks, and the immense pressure to achieve high grades. When this conflict arises, students respond in one of these two ways. Some draw on their values determination, self-confidence, and integrity itself to resist the temptation and find an honest path forward. Others, however, find their values to be an insufficient bulwark. For these students, the desire for paper excellence or the fear of failure becomes a more powerful motivator, pushing integrity into a secondary position. The data reveals a clear hierarchy of values for many: the tangible, immediate goal of a good grade or a completed research often outweighs the long-term principle of integrity, leading them to yield to the temptation to plagiarize despite knowing it is wrong

Research Question 2

How does peer pressure influence Business Education Students' decision towards plagiarize in Academic writing in Rivers State Universities?

This analysis explores the powerful role that peers play in shaping students' decisions to engage in or refrain from plagiarism. The data reveals that peer influence is a complex and pervasive dynamic that operates through various mechanisms such as luring, modeling, pressuring, and even supporting. Participants' reactions to this pressure are equally diverse, ranging from complete capitulation to steadfast resistance, and are often mediated by the strength of their personal values and the nature of their peer relationships.

Pervasiveness and Mechanisms of Peer Pressure: Majority of Participants (60%) confirmed that peer pressure is a real determinant force working against their decision not to plagiarize in project writing. The data made available by participants reveals that peer pressure manifests in academic lives of Accounting Education Students in various ways, which include direct engagement and luring (LM, LP, IW), normalization through observation and creating a common attitude. Peers actively encourage each other to plagiarize, often framing it as a normal or necessary behavior, as stated by some of the participants. Peers also create a common attitude (CA), they work to create a shared mindset, ensuring that members have a uniform attitude towards plagiarism, whether positive or negative. See excerpt below:

The role of peers is to lure members to do what others are doing in an environment (Participant 1).

When you see your peers plagiarizing and they are not being punished or they are not being disciplined. I was lured into doing that (participant 3).

They encouraged me to plagiarize after all everybody is doing it. I wasn't in support of it. But then they told me, if you can't beat them you join them (participant 10).

Simply witnessing peers plagiarize without consequence creates a powerful, implicit pressure. It signals that plagiarism is an accepted norm within the group. Here are some excerpts;

I saw most of my course mates just copying what one of us has already done (participant 4).

I felt pressure to plagiarize seeing that most of them have given out their own to be written for them (participant 5).

There was an assignment which required much task to accomplish, but due to time constraint and protocol involved in getting original information, I felt pressured by peers to get material from the internet (participant 12*).*

The role of peers relationship play in shaping attitude towards plagiarism is to make the peers to have a common attitude and opinion (participant 6*).*

To make sure everyone have the same attitude towards plagiarism (participant 8).

Peer relationship plays the role of convincing their members to have same attitude which may positive or negative towards plagiarism (participant 11).

Spectrum of Responses to Peer Pressure: Participants responses to peer pressure reveal a wide range of coping mechanisms, decision-making processes, and levels of personal conviction. Many participants admitted that they yielded to peer pressure and plagiarism (IYO, IHY, IY, IYP, CP, P). Their reasons for yielding plagiarism were desire to maintain social harmony and to ease stress through shortcut, confirmed by the excerpts below:

I managed by looking for doing my best and sometimes I yield to peers' opinion (participant 1).

I yielded to it because I didn't want any issue within us as friendship (participant4).

*I have. The value I have for my relationship with the group made to yield positively to plagiarism (*Participant 12).

I yielded to the pressure for peace to reign (Participant 13).

Yes, I plagiarized in order to ease stress (participant 14).

The influence of peer pressure on academic lives of 40% of the participants described actively resisting peer pressure, demonstrating the power of individual agency and personal values.

(IWDI, IR, ICDI, ISMG, IWS, KD, Ignored). Participants firmly stated: *I won't do it, there should be no point for me to do it since I know the consequence (*Participant 2)

I refused (participant 5). Participant 5 also drew on self-belief and group value for originality and stated): *I told myself that, if there are people who can do it, I too can do it no matter how long it will take me.*

*I stood to my ground you know a situation where you submit your work and your fellow peer does same but knowing fully well yours is original, and those who plagiarized get higher mark or grade. But that never affected me (*Participant 9).

I wasn't in support of it (participant 10).

Participant 11 chose a strategy of avoidance:

Most times I ignore them or keep distance with them (Participant 11)

I ignored them and isolated myself (participant 15).

Dual Nature of Peer Influence: Peers influence on participants is not inherently positive but, also negative (Neg/P, IN/PA). The data clearly shows that peer relationships can shape attitudes towards plagiarism in both directions, depending on the values of the group.

Peers as a negative force encouraging plagiarism: This is the most commonly discussed role. Peers can impose negative attitude. Participant 4 pointed out that peers lure people into behaviours that are oppose their personal values. Similarly, participant 10 stated that peers put pressure on the members to plagiarize alongside their fellow. Finally, participant 15 made it clear that peers put pressure on their members to either plagiarize on not to plagiarize. Some of the responses are highlighted below*;*

Participant 4 stated, *they lure or impose positive or negative attitude towards a phenomenon on their members.*

Participant 10 similarly said: *They lure people into behaviours that are against the person's values and belief.*

Participant 15 explained:

These responses of participants also disclosed that important peers exact positive force or encourage members to avoid plagiarism practices. Equally important, peers can be a source of support for integrity. They can impose positive attitude, encourage their members to not plagiarize and provide a model of ethical behavior for instance one of the participants narrated what a clique of friends do, how they study together and encourage each other to have negative attitude towards plagiarism showing that they value integrity and hard-work. Other participants acknowledged that there are peers who value integrity, showing that students are aware of these positive influences. Excerpts are pasted below:

In my class, a particular clique of friends value originality and integrity such that they always study together and encourage each other to do their best in portraying negative attitude towards plagiarism (participant 12)

There are peers who value integrity (participant14).

Peer pressure being a dominant and unavoidable force in students' decisions about plagiarism, operates through direct luring (LM, LP), normalization of misconduct through observation, and the creation of a common attitude (CA) within the group. The desire for social acceptance and harmony is a powerful motivator, with some students yielding to pressure specifically to avoid conflict or maintain friendships.

However, the influence of peers is profoundly dualistic (Neg/P). While many peer groups promote plagiarism, others actively foster a culture of integrity and mutual support in studying. This means a student's decision is heavily contingent on the specific peer group they associate with.

Finally, students are not passive recipients of peer influence. They exhibit a wide range of responses, from yielding (IY, IYP) to maintain social bonds to resisting (IR, ISMG, KD) through personal conviction and strategic avoidance. The decision to resist or succumb is often a negotiation between the powerful desire for peer acceptance and the strength of one's own personal values and academic goals.

Conclusion

The study concludes that plagiarism among Business Education Students is not merely an academic deficiency but a reflection of value, social pressure that require holistic intervention and a system failure.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. Rivers state Universities should integrate value re-orientation, ethics and academic integrity into Business education curriculum, particularly in research method and academic writing courses.
2. Department of Business Education should establish peer mentorship and academic integrity clubs where students with high academic integrity will mentor others to resist negative peer pressure.
3. University authority should organize regular workshop and seminars on proper citation, paraphrasing and use of plagiarism detection software to reduce plagiarism arising from lack of writing skills.
4. Rivers State Universities should implement plagiarism policies consistently but with rehabilitative approach, combining sanction with counselling to help students internalize positive values.

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