**Title:** Attitude of dental professionals towards plagiarism: a cross sectional study

**Author details:**

1. **Dr. Mahesh R. Khairnar**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University Dental College & Hospital, Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [kmahesh222@gmail.com](mailto:kmahesh222@gmail.com)

Phone: 7045653288

1. **Dr. Umesh Wadgave**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University Dental College & Hospital, Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [dr.w.umesh@gmail.com](mailto:dr.w.umesh@gmail.com)

Phone: 8805835602

1. **Dr. Sagar J. Shah**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University Dental College & Hospital, Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [sagarshah369@gmail.com](mailto:sagarshah369@gmail.com)

Phone: 8055830323

1. **Dr. Swarali Shah**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University Dental College & Hospital, Sangli, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [swaralishah14@gmail.com](mailto:swaralishah14@gmail.com)

Phone: 9764843770

1. **Dr. Vardhaman M. Jain**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

ACPM Dental College & Hospital, Dhule, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [dr.vardhaman.jain@com](mailto:dr.vardhaman.jain@com)

Phone: 9823982965

1. **Dr. Sagar Kumbhar**

Department of Public Health Dentistry,

Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay Dental College, Solapur, Maharashtra, India.

Email: [dr.sagar77@hotmail.com](mailto:dr.sagar77@hotmail.com)

Phone: 9763755437

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**Introduction:**

Plagiarism is one of the most common type of research misconduct and this leads to increase in published papers without adding any scientific value (1,2).Plagiarism is nothing but copying others’ work without giving them proper credit or reference and showcasing it as their own work (3).Plagiarism not only includes copying text but also using published pictures, and tables/graphs without written permission. Many cases of plagiarism are reported in the region of Asia, Europe, Australia, USA and Iran (4,5). Croatian Medical Journal has reported about 11% cases of plagiarism over a period of two yearswhile Nature Publishing Group rejected 23% of the articles because of plagiarism in 2010 (6,7).

The rising trend of “Publish or perish” mantra has alarmingly increased the plagiarism cases. The reasons for plagiarizing are poor language proficiency, deficit training in scientific writing, publications for upgradation of job, forced educational requirements to publish articles, unawareness of the future consequences of detected plagiarism and easy access to online resources (8).Detection of articles for plagiarism after publication cannot prevent the damage that has occurred to literature if the article has reached significant audiences and has received citations.

Literature shows that the awareness regarding plagiarism is substantially low among healthcare students and most of them have been engaged in practicing plagiarism at-least once (9). Few of the Indian studies reflected the lack of awareness towards plagiarism among medical and dental professionals (2,10,11).Given the limited number of studies on the dental professionals in India, this paper is an attempt to access the attitude of post-graduate students and faculty in dental colleges of Maharashtra towards the plagiarism.

**Material and Methods:**

The present cross-sectional study was conducted on convenient sample of dental post-graduate (PG) students and faculty members from four dental institutes in Maharashtra state, India. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from concerned institutional authorities of all four dental institutes and ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Committee. Purpose of the study was explained followed by obtaining a written informed consent from the participants.

**Questionnaire:** Data was collected through self-administered questionnaire which is divided into two sections. First section consisted of demographic details of the participants and the second section consisted of the Attitude towards Plagiarism (ATP) questionnaire measuring three attitudinal factors: positive attitude, negative attitude and subjective norms, developed by Mavrinac et al (12). The questionnaire was modified from five-point to a three-point Likert type scale [disagree, neither disagree nor agree and agree] to facilitate the responses. This questionnaire has been validated in Croatia and has been subsequently used in other studies including studies conducted in India (2,10,11).

A pilot survey was conducted by self-administering the modified questionnaire to 15 faculty members and PG students (who were not part of the main study) to check for internal consistency. The value of cronbach’s alpha coefficient (internal consistency reliability) was 0.74 which is acceptable. The questionnaire was again administered to same 15 faculty members and PG students after 15 days to determine test-retest reliability. The kappa coefficient value obtained was 0.7 which is good.

**Statistical analysis:** Data was collected, compiled and analyzed using SPSS version 16. P value ≤ 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. Descriptive statistics employed to describe the characteristics of participants. Comparisons were made for attitudinal scores between post graduate students and faculty members using Chi square test. Linear regression analysis was applied to assess the association between number of publications, age and gender with attitude towards plagiarism.

**Results:**

The questionnaire was distributed among a total of 276 participants out of which 216 participants (90 faculty members and 126 PG students) returned completed questionnaire. Response rate was 80.25% and 75.63% for PG students and faculty members respectively.

**Demographic characteristics of study participants (Table 1):**

Table 1 shows distribution of faculty and PG students according to age, gender and publications and mean score on ATP. For faculty members, mean score for positive attitude towards plagiarism was 22.52±5.11, mean score for negative attitude was 18.72±2.39 and mean score for subjective norms was 16.04± 4.36. For PG students, mean score for positive attitude towards plagiarism was 24.66±5.13, mean score for negative attitude was 17.40±2.41 and mean score for subjective norms was 17.87±3.35.

**Describing positive attitude (Table 2):**

Both faculty members (61.1%) and PG students (68.3%) agreed that self-plagiarism is not punishable since it is not harmful. 55.6% of faculty members and 54% of PG students agreed that self-plagiarism should not be punishable in the same way as plagiarism. However, both faculty (46.6%) and PG students (46%) disagreed on the fact that plagiarized parts of a paper may be ignored if the paper is of great scientific value. Majority of the PG students (50%) agreed upon the statement that young researchers who are just learning the ropes should receive milder punishment for plagiarism; however only 41% of faculty agreed upon the statement (p=0.05). Only 21.1% of faculty members agreed to copy a part of paper already published in foreign language as compared to 31% of PG students if one cannot write well in a foreign language (p=0.027). 72.2% faculty members did not consider short deadline as a reason to plagiarize as compared to 46.8% of PG students (p=0.001). 50% of PG students agreed upon the fact of translating a part of paper from foreign language when they do not know what to write; whereas 51.1% faculty members opposed the statement (p=0.046). 62.2% faculty members disagreed to copy from their colleague’s paper as compared to 53.2% of PG students who agreed to copy from their colleagues paper with their permission (p=0.001).

**Describing negative attitude (Table 3):**

60% of the faculty members agreed that the names of the authors who plagiarize must be disclosed as compared to 32.5% of PG students (p=0.001). Most of the study subjects felt that it is important to discuss issues like plagiarism and self-plagiarism (p=0.004). 77.8% of faculty and 57.9% of PG students agreed that Plagiarizing is as bad as stealing an exam (p=0.001). Most of the faculty (58.9%) and PG students (39.7%) agreed upon the fact that plagiarism impoverishes the investigative spirit (p=0.015). More than 50% of faculty members disagreed that a plagiarized paper does no harm science; however there was ambiguity in the attitude of PG students towards the same (agreed and disagreed in almost equal proportions). 50% of faculty members considered plagiarism as serious offense as compared to 31% of PG students (p=0.013). 39% of PG students did not considered plagiarism as a serious offense.

**Describing subjective norm (Table 4):**

56.7% of faculty members and 36.5% of PG students did not agree that they are sometimes tempted to plagiarize, because everyone else is doing it (p=0.007). Majority of faculty members (77.8%) and PG students (62.7%) disagreed that they keep plagiarizing because they haven't been caught yet (p=0.034). Only 35.6% of faculty and 25.4% of PG students agreed that they were in a plagiarism free environment. Most of the faculty members (70%) did not agree that plagiarism is not a big deal as compared 42.1% of the PG students (p=0.001). More than 50% of PG students agreed that they sometimes copy a sentence or two just to become inspired for further writing; however there was an ambiguity among faculty members regarding same (42% disagreed and 41% of them agreed). Most of the faculty and PG students agreed that they don’t feel guilty for copying a verbatim a sentence or two from their own previous paper. Most of the faculty members (53.3%) did not agreed that it is necessary to plagiarize sometimes; however 46% of PG students felt the necessity to plagiarize (p=0.001).

**Association between number of publications and gender with ATP (Table 5):**

There was a significant decrease (p=0.001) in positive attitude towards plagiarism (β = -0.195) and subjective norms (β = -0.132) as number of publications and age of the participants increased. Negative attitude showed a significant increase (β = 0.093) as age increased (p=0.001); however it increased (β = 0.015) non-significantly as number of publications increased (p=0.528).There was a significant decrease in positive attitude (β =-1.209) and subjective norms (β = -1.298) from males to females (p<0.05); however difference in negative attitude towards plagiarism was non-significant among males and females (p=0.521).

**Discussion:**

Attitude towards plagiarism is categorized in three factors: Positive attitude, Negative attitude and Subjective norms. Positive attitude towards plagiarism favors the act of plagiarism and reflects acceptance of plagiarism as an act of minor importance. Negative attitude towards plagiarism shows disapproval towards the act of plagiarism as done by others and emphasizes on negative influence of such act on academic and scientific communities and the third factor, subjective norms towards plagiarism, represents the personal perception about the extent and acceptance of plagiarism by the participants. PG students showed more positive attitude towards plagiarism as compared to faculty members which reflects PG students’ approval towards committing plagiarism. Majority of the PG students considered plagiarism as a necessity instead of a punishable offense which depicts their positive perception towards plagiarism as compared to staff members. While more negative attitude towards plagiarism among faculty members as compared to PG students shows that faculty members were well aware about ill-effects of plagiarism. Similar results were observed in the studies conducted previously among dental faculty and post-graduate students in India (2,10,11).

Favorable attitude towards plagiarism decreased with increasing age and number of publications. This signifies that research and academic integrity improves with age and improvement in scientific writing. The findings are similar to previous studies which showed improvement in academic integrity with age (13,14).More number of publications of faculty members (mean 10.03) than PG students (mean 0.66) signifies that faculty members might have developed the better writing skills and thereby leading to decreased attitude towards plagiarism. An Indian study revealed that lack of essence of writing in English (35%) is one of the commonest reasons leading to plagiarism (15). Female participants showed less favorable attitude towards plagiarism as compared to male participants. These results are in accordance with previous studies conducted (16,17,18).Females tend to be more ethically aware than males whereas males are more risk takers than females (16).

Reasons for plagiarizing are multi-faceted: poor understanding of scientific writing, intellectual property and copyrights, and ethical issues; poor language proficiency and writing skills; unawareness of the consequences of detected plagiarism; lack of confidence in expressing thoughts; lack of regulatory policies in the institutions (9).The consequences of detected plagiarism may range from retraction of published articles, blacklisting or banning the authors, loss of funding for further research, loss of self-esteem and dignity and sometimes it may cost plagiarist his/her entire career (19).This could be destructive to the reputation of co-authors, journals and institution to which plagiarist belongs to.

Plagiarism can be avoided, provided it should be a shared responsibility of authors as well as institutions. It can be avoided by: use of plagiarism detection software; developing skills in foreign languages and scientific writing; giving sufficient time for manuscript writing; using own words and ideas for the information taken from other sources; acknowledging original source for ideas, texts or illustrations; enclosing the text in quotation marks “ ” and acknowledging the source if it has been copied word to word; inclusion of education on plagiarism in academic curriculum (20). While publishing others copyrighted tables, graphs or pictures or text, authors must obtain prior permission from authors/publishers (21).

This study has few inherent limitations. Internal validity was reasonably good but the external validity was questionable since the study was conducted only in four dental institutions of Maharashtra state. Also, only faculty members and PG students who were actually available in the institutes during the visit were contacted and involved in the study. No further actions were taken to contact those who were not available and non-respondents. Like any other questionnaire study, this study was based on self-assessment and participants responded subjectively instead of any objective measurement and hence some of the questions may have been answered unfairly.

**Conclusion:**

It was evident that plagiarism was favored more by PG students as compared to faculty members. This calls for stressing the need to highlight the issue of plagiarism among students as well as faculty members and inclusion of research ethics in curriculum by concerned authorities.

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**Tables:**

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants (n = 216)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **Category** | **Faculty**  **(n = 103)** | **PG students**  **(n = 116)** |
| **Age (Mean ± SD)** |  | 34.86 ± 6.87 | 26.83 ± 2.89 |
| **Gender** | Male | 57 | 56 |
| Female | 33 | 70 |
| **Publications (Mean ± SD)** |  | 10.03 ± 8.29 | 0.66 ± 2.07 |
| **Attitude towards plagiarism**  **(Mean± SD)** | Positive | 22.52 ± 5.11 | 24.66 ± 5.13 |
| Negative | 18.72 ± 2.39 | 17.40 ± 2.41 |
| Subjective Norm | 16.04 ± 4.36 | 17.87 ± 3.35 |

**Table 2: Positive attitude towards plagiarism among study participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Statement** | **Faculty members** | | | **Post-graduate students** | | | **p value** |
| **Disagree**  **(%)** | **Neither disagree nor agree (%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** | **Disagree**  **(%)** | **Neither disagree nor agree**  **(%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** |
| 1. Sometimes one cannot avoid using other people’s words without citing the source, because there are only so many ways to describe something | 37.8 | 7.8 | 54 | 35.7 | 8.7 | 55.6 | 0.937 |
| 2. It is justified to use previous descriptions of a method, because the method itself remains the same | 17.8 | 13.3 | 68.9 | 21.4 | 17.5 | 61.1 | 0.493 |
| 3. Self-plagiarism is not punishable because it is not harmful (one cannot steal from oneself) | 21.1 | 17.8 | 61.1 | 17.5 | 14.3 | 68.3 | 0.553 |
| 4. Plagiarized parts of a paper may be ignored if the paper is of great scientific value | 46.6 | 16.7 | 36.7 | 46.0 | 10.3 | 43.7 | 0.322 |
| 5. Self-plagiarism should not be punishable in the same way as plagiarism is. | 20 | 24.4 | 55.6 | 26.2 | 19.8 | 54 | 0.500 |
| 6. Young researchers who are just learning the ropes should receive milder punishment for plagiarism | 43.3 | 15.6 | 41.1 | 27.8 | 22.2 | 50 | 0.050\* |
| 7. If one cannot write well in a foreign language (eg, English), it is justified to copy parts of a similar paper already published in that language | 68.9 | 10 | 21.1 | 50.8 | 18.3 | 31 | 0.027\* |
| 8. I could not write a scientific paper without plagiarizing | 75.6 | 10 | 14.4 | 71.4 | 8.7 | 19.8 | 0.582 |
| 9. Short deadlines give me the right to plagiarize a bit | 72.2 | 5.6 | 22.2 | 46.8 | 17.5 | 35.7 | 0.001\* |
| 10. When I do not know what to write, I translate a part of a paper from a foreign language | 51.1 | 15.6 | 33.3 | 36.5 | 13.5 | 50 | 0.046\* |
| 11. It is justified to use one’s own previously published work without providing citation in order to complete the current work. | 75.6 | 11.1 | 13.3 | 61.1 | 19 | 19.8 | 0.081 |
| 12. If a colleague of mine allows me to copy from her/his paper, I’m NOT doing anything bad, because I have his/her permission | 62.2 | 15.6 | 22.2 | 34.9 | 11.9 | 53.2 | 0.001\* |

\*- indicates significant at p<0.05; Chi-square test

**Table 3: Negative attitude towards plagiarism among study participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Statement** | **Faculty members** | | | **PG students** | | | **p value** |
| **Disagree**  **(%)** | **Neither disagree nor agree**  **(%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** | **Disagree** | **Neither disagree nor agree**  **(%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** |
| 1. Plagiarists do not belong in the scientific community | 35.6 | 31.1 | 33.3 | 46.8 | 26.2 | 27 | 0.253 |
| 2. The names of the authors who plagiarize should be disclosed to the scientific community | 13.3 | 26.7 | 60 | 31.7 | 35.7 | 32.5 | 0.001\* |
| 3. In times of moral and ethical decline, it is important to discuss issues like plagiarism and self-plagiarism | 4.4 | 1.1 | 94.4 | 12.7 | 8.7 | 78.6 | 0.004\* |
| 4. Plagiarizing is as bad as stealing an exam | 5.6 | 16.7 | 77.8 | 23.8 | 18.3 | 57.9 | 0.001\* |
| 5. Plagiarism impoverishes the investigative spirit | 15.6 | 25.6 | 58.9 | 27.8 | 32.5 | 39.7 | 0.015\* |
| 6. A plagiarized paper does no harm science | 51.1 | 14.4 | 34.4 | 39.7 | 21.4 | 38.9 | 0.201 |
| 7. Since plagiarism is taking other people’s words rather than tangible assets; it should NOT be considered as a serious offense | 50 | 17.8 | 32.2 | 31 | 30.2 | 38.9 | 0.013\* |

\*- indicates significant at p<0.05; Chi-square test

**Table 4: Subjective norms towards plagiarism among study participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Statements** | **Faculty members** | | | **PG students** | | | **p value** |
| **Disagree**  **(%)** | **Neither disagree nor agree**  **(%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** | **Disagree**  **(%)** | **Neither disagree nor agree**  **(%)** | **Agree**  **(%)** |
| 1. Authors say they do NOT plagiarize, when in fact they do | 13.3 | 16.7 | 70 | 15.9 | 28.9 | 55.6 | 0.076 |
| 2. Those who say they have never plagiarized are lying | 16.7 | 40 | 43.3 | 17.5 | 27.8 | 54.8 | 0.151 |
| 3. Sometimes I’m tempted to plagiarize, because everyone else is doing it (students, researchers, physicians) | 56.7 | 14.4 | 28.9 | 36.5 | 28.6 | 34.9 | 0.007\* |
| 4. I keep plagiarizing because I haven’t been caught yet | 77.8 | 13.3 | 8.9 | 62.7 | 27.8 | 9.5 | 0.034\* |
| 5. I work (study) in a plagiarism-free environment | 40 | 24.4 | 35.6 | 43.7 | 31 | 25.4 | 0.249 |
| 6. Plagiarism is not a big deal | 70 | 16.7 | 13.3 | 42.1 | 33.3 | 24.6 | 0.001\* |
| 7. Sometimes I copy a sentence or two just to become inspired for further writing | 42.2 | 16.7 | 41.1 | 27.8 | 14.3 | 57.9 | 0.042\* |
| 8. I don’t feel guilty for copying verbatim a sentence or two from my previous papers | 40 | 16.7 | 43.3 | 35.7 | 19.8 | 44.4 | 0.757 |
| 9. Plagiarism is justified if I currently have more important obligations or tasks to do | 60 | 20 | 20 | 49.2 | 23.8 | 27 | 0.280 |
| 10. Sometimes, it is necessary to plagiarize | 53.3 | 20 | 26.7 | 23 | 31 | 46 | 0.001\* |

\*- indicates significant at p<0.05; Chi-square test

**Table 5: Association between number of publications and gender with attitude towards plagiarism**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Independent variable** | **Positive attitude** | | **Negative attitude** | | **Subjective norm** | |
| **β value** | **p value** | **β value** | **p value** | **β value** | **p value** |
| **No. of publications** | -0.195 | 0.001\* | 0.015 | 0.528 | -0.132 | 0.001\* |
| **Gender** | -1.209 | 0.044\* | -0.218 | 0.521 | -1.298 | 0.014\* |
| **Age** | -0.147 | 0.008\* | 0.093 | 0.001\* | -0.150 | 0.001\* |

Bivariate linear regression analysis; Gender coding (Male – 1; Female – 2); \*- indicates significant at p<0.05

**Abstract:**

Plagiarism is a type of research misconduct consisting of copying other’s work or ideas without giving them proper credit. The rise of plagiarism cases has become a serious concern in the scientific world. A cross sectional study was carried out to assess their attitude towards plagiarism among dental faculty members and post-graduate students. Attitude towards plagiarism was measured using a self-administered questionnaire. Ninety faculty members and 126 post-graduate students from four dental institutions participated in the study. Post-graduate students showed more favorable attitude towards plagiarism as compared to faculty members. Attitude towards plagiarism decreased with increase in age and number of publications and from males to females. The study showed negligence of post-graduate students towards plagiarism which calls for improvement in awareness regarding plagiarism and provision of training in research ethics among health professionals.

**Keywords:** Ethics in Publishing, Plagiarism, Research, Scientific Misconduct