# Predictive Effects of Big Five Personality Traits on Attitude to Plagiarize

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## ABSTRACT

*The objective of this study is to examine the predictive effects of five personality traits on attitude to plagiarize. Specifically, we hypothesized that conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extroversion are predictors of attitude to plagiarize. Using survey questionnaire, data were collected form a convenience sample of 165 diploma students of UiTM Pahang. We used multiple linear regression to analyze the data. The results of this study show that only agreeableness and neuroticism were significant predictors to attitude to plagiarize.*

**Keywords**. *conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, extroversion, attitude to plagiarize*

## Introduction

Plagiarism, which amounts to academic cheating and fraud, is a form of intellectual dishonesty. According to Moulton and Robinson (2002), plagiarism is dishonestly taking and copying other people's work without proper accreditation and acknowledgement. Plagiarism can be either with or without intention (Smith, Ghazali & Minhad, 2007). There are various ways in which one can plagiarize, ranging from taking someone else's work with intention or without intention and claiming that works despite the fact it is copied from someone else's work. According to Smith et al (2007), downloading material of other people's works and converting it to our own, copying other people's works without proper acknowledgment and accreditation, using other people's works without their knowledge and turn it to be our own, paraphrasing any words wholly or partly without proper documentation, and failing to properly quote other people's works constitute as plagiarism.

In respect to the effect of plagiarism, Smith et al. (2007) point out that upon discovery of plagiarism by the respective university authority, the plagiarist may be subject to expulsion, suspension, and mark degrading. Plagiarism among university students, however, is still a problem despite the measures that have been taken by the academic institution. On the basis of a research conducted by Smith et al (2007), it was reported that 56 percent of the United States college student and 40 percent United Kingdom university student commit plagiarism. In another study, Jones, Juliet, and Bartlett (2005) argue that there is a high possibility that student who commits plagiarism is likely to do the same in the workplace that carries serious offences. As such, this indicates that plagiarism does not only affect the academic world but also it affects the society.

Universiti Teknologi MARA (i.e., UiTM) applies various methods to combat issues of plagiarism among it students. These efforts are to ensure that the students who graduated from the university possess excellent quality. Like any other academic institutions, however, plagiarism is unavoidable. According to a survey on plagiarism among students conducted by the Institute of Quality and Knowledge Advancement (InQKA) UiTM in 2010, 48% of 1884 student-respondents admitted committing plagiarism. Some of the reasons cited by the respondents were "too many assignments to complete during the semester", "poor time management and laziness – forced to complete assignments at the eleventh hour, thus copy", "plagiarism is very common and almost every student does it", "I want to get a good grade for my paper", "cannot resist the temptation with the readily available resources in the Internet and they are accessible", "the lecturer wouldn't know, so not likely to be caught", and "never been told it was against academic regulation" (Institute of Quality and Knowledge Advancement, 2011). Although these reasons represent both internal and external that causes the students to plagiarize, little is known how the students' personality traits may predict their attitude to plagiarize. Therefore, this paper intends to examine the predictive effects of students' personality traits on their attitude towards plagiarism.

## Hypotheses Development

Attitude refers to the perception and action towards something either positively or negatively. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary (2012), attitude refers to the way one thinks and feels about and behaves towards somebody or something. A similar definition is found in Hodgetts and Hegar (2005), which is "a person's feelings about objects, activities, events, and other people...." (p.81). Therefore, attitude to plagiarize may be defined as the way a person thinks and feels about plagiarism that shapes the person's tendency to favor plagiarism positively or negatively.

One of the antecedents to attitude is personality trait. This is in line with Brink's (2008) argument that personalities may determine attitude. In the current work, we focus on the Big Five personality traits, which are conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion. These personality traits have been studied widely in academic research especially in organizational psychology and psychometrics development study (cf., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003; Wortman, Richard, & Donellan, 2012). A probable reason for its popularity is that it represents the common dimensions for various specific traits (e.g., McShane & von Glinow, 2008). Thus, we expect that the Big Five personality traits may predict students' attitude to plagiarize.

The elaboration of the Big Five personality traits is found in Zhang (2006) and Bruck (2003). First, people who are high on conscientiousness tend to have high degree of responsibility, care, trust, and possess the value of leadership. They tend to be focused and are able to manage themselves and others effectively (Zhang, 2006). In contrast, people who are low on conscientiousness are particularly lack of focus in working towards their goals that because they are careless, aimless, and unreliable (Bruck, 2003). Therefore, students who are high on conscientiousness will have less tendency to plagiarize than those who are low on conscientiousness. It is because they are responsible towards completing their assignment authentically. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 1*:    Conscientiousness negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize.

Second, agreeableness may be defined as the extent to which a person agrees with someone else. Zhang (2006) argues that people who are high on agreeableness tend to be tolerant, trusting, accepting, and they value and respect other people's opinion and differences. On the other hand, people who are low on agreeableness tend to be egoistic, competitive, inevitable and skeptical of other's intentions (Bruck, 2003). As such, students who are high on agreeableness tend to have negative attitude towards plagiarism than those who are low on agreeableness. It is because high agreeableness students may follow the norms of academia; that is, plagiarism is unethical. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 2*:    Agreeableness negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize.

Third, the extent to which a person possesses negative thinking and feelings is known as neuroticism. People who are high on neuroticism tend to posses negative thinking such as embarrassment, guilt, pessimism, and low level of confidence (Zhang, 2006) whereas people who are low on neuroticism possess high emotional stability that leads to calmness. Therefore, students who are high on neuroticism will avoid plagiarism. Although they may have low level of confident in completing their assignments, they will avoid plagiarism because such act may cause them to feel embarrass and guilty. They may be afraid of being shunned by their friends and lecturers for committing plagiarizing acts. In contrast, students who are low on neuroticism may ignore other people's disagreement on plagiarism. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 3*:    Neuroticism negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize.

Fourth, openness may be defined as the extent to which a person is open to experience new things in life. Therefore, people who are high on openness is more creative, acceptable, and ready to embark new things and change in the positive ways than those who are low on openness (Zhang, 2006). In line with this argument, McShane and von Glinow (2008) argue that people who are low on openness are resistant to change, less open to new ideas, and more fixed in their ways. As such, students who are high on openness will have negative attitude towards plagiarism than those who are low on openness. It is because they believe that plagiarism is wrong whereas students who are low on openness may try to plagiarize in unique ways such as fabricating and falsifying data and information (Kizza, 2009). Hence, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 4*:     Openness negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize.

Fifth, people who tend to be sociable, cooperative, and talkative are those who are high on extraversion whereas characteristics such as independent and quiet person describe people who are low on extraversion (e.g., Bruck, 2003; Zhang, 2006). Students who are high on extraversion will less likely to favor plagiarism than students who are low on extraversion. These students may not be plagiarizing because they may want to be accepted by the community at large, especially their friends and lecturers. In contrast, students who are low on extraversion may have the tendency to plagiarize because they do not always socialize with their friends and lecturers as to know what behaviors amount to plagiarizing. Furthermore, by working on their assignments independently without much discussion with their friends and lecturers, they may be plagiarizing unintentionally. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 5*:     Extraversion negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize.
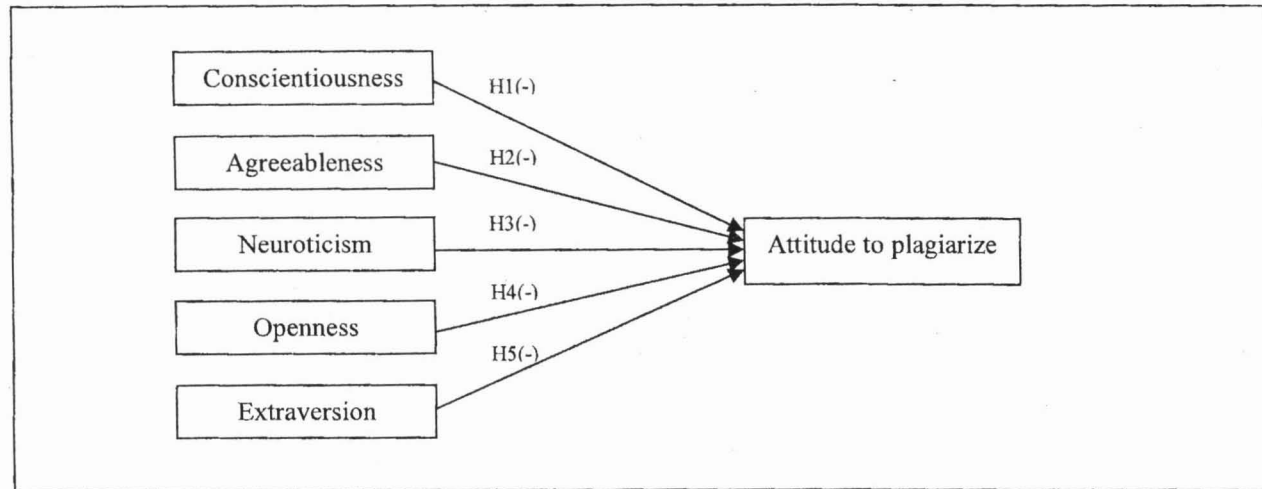


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the present study. To summarize, we hypothesize that four study variables (i.e., conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion) negatively predict attitude to plagiarize. Only agreeableness is hypothesized to positively predict attitude to plagiarize.

## Method

Using a convenience sampling, 200 survey questionnaires were distributed to diploma students of UiTM Pahang majoring in business management and accountancy. Only 165 complete responses, however, were returned. The survey questionnaire consists of three sections, which tap on demographic information (i.e., section A), attitude to plagiarize (i.e., section B), and Big Five personality traits (i.e., Section C).

Majority of the respondents were female (78%), were from faculty of business management (90%), and were in semester four of their diploma years (76%). All of them were Malay. The average age of the respondents was 21 years old (s.d. = 1.14). Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they have any knowledge about plagiarism. A majority of them reported that they had prior knowledge about plagiarism (90%). Only ten of the respondents reported that they had no prior knowledge about plagiarism. Another six, however, did not indicate their answers. The results of demographic analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic results

| Demographic categories | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 36 | 21.8 |
| Female | 129 | 78.2 |
| | | |
| Age | | |
| 19 to 21 | 114 | 69.1 |
| 22 to 24 | 49 | 29.7 |
| 25 and above | 2 | 1.2 |
| | | |
| Faculty | | |
| Accounting | 16 | 9.7 |
| Business Management | 149 | 90.3 |
| | | |
| Race | | |
| Malay | 165 | 100.0 |
| | | |
| Semester | | |
| 1 | 0 | 0.0 |
| 2 | 12 | 7.3 |
| 3 | 2 | 1.2 |
| 4 | 125 | 75.8 |
| 5 | 16 | 9.7 |
| 6 | 10 | 6.1 |
| | | |
| Prior knowledge about plagiarism | | |
| Yes | 149 | 90.3 |
| No | 10 | 6.1 |
| No answer | 6 | 3.6 |

Attitude to plagiarize was measured using ten items adapted from Egan (2008) and Mavrinac, Brumini, Billić-Zulle, and Petrovečki (2010). A single factor emerges from the factor analysis using principle axis factoring and direct oblimin. The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin value for this factor was .78. A 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree was used to measure the extent of a respondent's positive attitude towards plagiarism. A sample item is "if my friends give me permission to use his or her assignment, I do not think there is anything wrong with that".

Big Five personality traits were measured using Gosling's et al. (2003) Ten Items Personality Inventory. The reason that we chose this brief measure is because we wanted to reduce the respondent's acquiescence bias and time in answering our survey questionnaire. Although this scale optimizes the content validity, it was not designed to maximize the internal consistency reliability (Gosling, 2011). Following this line of argument, we did not report the alpha value for this measure. For each dimension, there are only two items. A 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly was used to measure to which extent the pairs of traits apply to the respondents.

In addition, we also sought respondents' demographic information. That is, we asked the respondents to write down their age, gender, race, faculty that they are attached to, their current semester, and whether they have prior knowledge about plagiarism. All these information was dummy coded for analyses.

## Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. We conducted a two-stage analysis, which include primary analyses that focus on data cleaning and main analyses that focus on testing the hypotheses. Data cleaning involves detecting the univariate and multivariate outliers, and testing linearity and normality assumptions, homoscedasticity assumption, and multicollinearity assumption. Our analyses show that there no outliers, both

univariate and multivariate, were present and that none of the assumptions were violated. Having cleaned the data, we proceeded with testing the hypotheses using multiple linear regression.

Table 2: Summary of multiple regression analysis using the enter method for variables predicting attitude to plagiarize ($n = 165$)

| Variable | $B$ | $SE\ B$ | $\beta$ | $t$ | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conscientiousness | .11 | .08 | .16 | 1.36 | .18 |
| Agreeableness | -.18 | .08 | -.24 | -2.37 | .02 |
| Neuroticism | -.15 | .07 | -.21 | -2.00 | .05 |
| Openness | .15 | .08 | .20 | 1.84 | .07 |
| Extraversion | .02 | .07 | .02 | 0.26 | .80 |

*Note.* $R^2 = .10$, Adjusted $R^2 = .07$
*$p < .05$

Table 2 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis using the enter method. Hypothesis 1 that states conscientiousness negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize was not supported [$\beta = .16$, $t$ (159) = 1.36, $p = .18$]. Hypothesis 2 that states agreeableness negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize, however, was supported [$\beta = -.24$, $t$ (159) = -2.37, $p < .05$]. Similarly, hypothesis 3 that states neuroticism negatively predicts positive attitude to plagiarize was supported [$\beta = -.21$, $t$ (159) = -.200, $p < .05$]. Nevertheless, hypotheses 4 and 5 that states both openness and extraversion negatively predict positive attitude to plagiarize were not supported. Specifically, we found that there was no significant negative relationship between openness and attitude to plagiarize [$\beta = .20$, $t$ (159) = 1.84, $p = .07$] and neither the relationship between extraversion and attitude to plagiarize [$\beta = .02$, $t$ (159) = 0.26, $p = .80$].

## Discussion

The objective of our study is to predict the relationships between the Big 5 personality traits and attitude to plagiarize. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 165 diploma students of UiTM Pahang majoring in business management and accountancy. The results of the multiple regression show that only two out of five hypotheses were supported. Specifically, only agreeableness and neuroticism significantly predict attitude to plagiarize negatively.

Students who are high on agreeableness tend to be tolerant, trusting, accepting, and they value and respect other people's opinion and differences (Zhang, 2006). In support of this theoretical argument, we speculate that these students may respect the value that plagiarism is unethical. They may listen to their lecturers' advice in avoiding plagiarism. As such, they are less likely to favor plagiarism. Similarly, students who are high on neuroticism may not have favorable attitude towards plagiarism because they are afraid of being humiliated or shunned by their friends and lecturers if they are caught plagiarizing. Having characteristics such as easily embarrass and feeling guilty, we speculate that they may not plagiarize even if their confidence level is low. It is interesting if this speculated relationship be examined in future studies.

Our results also show that there are no significant relationships between (1) conscientiousness, (2) openness, and (3) extraversion on attitude to plagiarize. A reason for its insignificance is that these relationships may be moderated by some other individual variables given its weak coefficients. For example, achievement goal orientation may moderate the relationship between conscientiousness and attitude to plagiarize. Although the students who are high on conscientiousness may be responsible, their goal to achieve good results may cause them to favor plagiarism. Demographic variables may also play important roles in moderating the relationships between the three personality traits and attitude to plagiarize. As we did not test the potential moderating role of the demographic variables, we may only speculate such relationships.

## Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations that we acknowledged in our study. First, we used a convenience sampling to generate the data from our respondents because we were not able to get the exact number of diploma students of UiTM Pahang. Therefore, we were not able to generalize our study findings beyond our sample respondents. We suggest that future studies replicate our study by using different samples and probability sampling technique so that the results may be generalized to the population of interest.

Second, three of the hypothesized relationships were found to be not significant predictors of attitude to plagiarize. This indicates the present of moderating variable. Thus, we suggest that future studies explore on the effects of moderating variable such as achievement goal orientation on the relationships between the Big 5 personality traits and attitude to plagiarize. The moderating variable may explain under what circumstances the relationships differ.

Third, we chose to utilize a brief version of the Big Five in our effort to reduce the acquiescence bias of the respondents and the time to answer our survey questionnaire. As a result, we were not able to report the internal consistency reliability of the ten Big Five items of the Ten Items Personality Inventory. It also constrained us from capturing more variance for the Big Five personality traits. Therefore, we suggest that future studies utilize a longer of the Big Five so that these constraints may be uplifted.

Last, readers should use our results cautiously because we used self-report responses that may be subject to social desirability bias in testing our hypotheses. As we did not utilize a social desirability measure, we suggest that future researchers include such a measure so that the bias effects of social desirability may be offset. Alternatively, future researchers may use different respondents when measuring the Big Five personality traits and attitude to plagiarize by asking the students to respond to the earlier measure whereas asking the lecturers or peers to respond to the latter measure.

## Conclusion

Plagiarism is not a new phenomenon in academia. Many studies have focused on addressing the issue of plagiarism among students. In the present study, we extend the findings of a descriptive study conducted by InQKA UiTM by examining the predictive effects of the Big Five personality traits on attitude to plagiarize. Our results show that students who are high on agreeableness and neuroticism are less likely to tolerate plagiarism. Although our study may provide some insights into the relationships between the Big Five personality traits and attitude to plagiarize, more studies should be conducted so that a holistic view on plagiarism may be provided.

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