

## Navigating Turnitin's Limitations: Ph.D. Students' Perceptions and Departmental Strategies for Academic Integrity at the University of Ibadan

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### **Abstract**

This study examines Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness in detecting plagiarism and the departmental strategies used to address its limitations at the University of Ibadan. The focus is on disciplines that face technical writing challenges, namely English, History, Law, Cultural and Media Studies, and Gender Studies. Anchored in Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), the study employed semi-structured interviews with fifteen Ph.D. students drawn from the Faculty of Arts (five from English and five from History), the Faculty of Law (two students), and the Institute of African Studies (two from Cultural and Media Studies and one from Gender Studies). Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal two major themes: students' perceptions of Turnitin's utility and limitations, and departmental adaptive strategies. While participants acknowledged Turnitin's usefulness in promoting academic integrity, they expressed concerns about its high rate of false positives, particularly in legal citations, and its limited capacity to detect non-English and archival sources. These challenges contributed to low response efficacy and high response costs, including extensive citation reformatting. In response, departments adopted adaptive measures such as post-field seminars, pre-submission Turnitin checks, paraphrasing guidance, and supervisory support. These strategies reflect high response efficacy and self-efficacy within the PMT framework. However, their largely informal implementation highlights the absence of institutional standardisation. The study recommends the development of formal, discipline-sensitive plagiarism policies, including the establishment of a departmental or university-wide plagiarism review committee and customised Turnitin settings for specific disciplines. Training for supervisors and postgraduate students on interpreting similarity reports is also advised. Such measures would strengthen academic integrity, reduce inequities in thesis evaluation, and improve the effectiveness of plagiarism detection across diverse academic fields.

**Keywords:** Turnitin, Academic Integrity, PhD students, Perceptions, Department strategies

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## Introduction

The growing prevalence of plagiarism in academic research has heightened institutional concerns about safeguarding integrity in postgraduate scholarship. Plagiarism, defined as presenting another individual's work, ideas, or intellectual property as one's own without proper attribution (Ogunsuji & Fagbule, 2020), undermines academic integrity and erodes trust in scholarly work. It manifests in various forms, including verbatim copying, paraphrasing without credit, and claiming authorship of another's work (Abduldayan, Yusuf, & Olatunde, 2019). In contrast, similarity refers to textual overlap between a submitted work and existing publications, which may not necessarily indicate plagiarism but requires scrutiny to ensure originality (Idiegbeyan-ose, Nkiko, & Osinulu, 2016). To combat plagiarism and promote academic honesty, institutions worldwide have adopted anti-plagiarism software, such as Turnitin, which compares submitted texts against vast databases of academic literature, websites, and student submissions (Adekannbi & Megwaonye, 2020). While these tools aim to deter academic misconduct, their effectiveness varies across disciplines, languages, and resource types, raising questions about their universal applicability.

The use of plagiarism detection software offers significant advantages, including deterring students and researchers from engaging in unethical practices (Babalola, 2012). Such tools empower faculty to address academic misconduct systematically (Adeniyi & Taiwo, 2011) and are particularly effective for detecting internet-based plagiarism due to their affordability, user-friendliness, and rapid processing (Chaudhuri, 2008; Fiedler & Kaner, 2010). In universities employing Turnitin, students exhibit greater awareness of academic ethics, paying closer attention to proper citation and paraphrasing practices (Aboyade *et al.*, 2025). However, the limitations of these tools are well-documented. Studies highlight issues such as inconsistent results, inability to detect plagiarism in non-digitised sources or non-English languages, false positives, and limited access to specialised databases (Chaudhuri, 2008; Meo & Talha, 2019; Nketsiah, Imoro, & Barfi, 2024). These shortcomings necessitate a critical examination of how such tools are implemented, particularly in diverse academic contexts.

Turnitin, introduced in 1997, is a widely adopted text-matching tool designed to identify similarities between submitted documents and existing sources, thereby promoting academic integrity (Babalola, 2012; Meo & Talha, 2019; Ogunsuji & Fagbule, 2020). It is used by over 90% of tertiary institutions in the United Kingdom (Aboyade *et al.*, 2025) and has become a cornerstone of plagiarism prevention globally. However, scholars argue that Turnitin functions primarily as a similarity index tool rather than a definitive plagiarism detector (Fiedler & Kaner, 2010). Its originality reports indicate textual matches but do not inherently confirm plagiarism, requiring human judgment to interpret results (Idiegbeyan-ose *et al.*, 2016; Meo & Talha, 2019). This distinction is critical, as over-reliance on Turnitin without contextual analysis may lead to misinterpretations of academic integrity.

The limitations of Turnitin are particularly pronounced in specialised disciplines. For instance, Kaner and Fiedler (2008) found that Turnitin reported zero plagiarism in engineering theses

due to its lack of access to professional databases, allowing students to exploit this gap by sourcing materials from inaccessible repositories. Similarly, Meo and Talha (2019) noted that Turnitin struggles to detect similarities in fields such as law, anthropology, and archaeology, where technical terminology or case law citations may inflate similarity indices, or in disciplines like linguistics and history, where under-detection occurs due to limited database coverage. Non-digitised resources, such as hardcopy materials or university library archives, further evade Turnitin's scope (Chaudhuri, 2008). In a study of Indian universities, Kale *et al.*, (2019) highlighted Turnitin's ineffectiveness in detecting plagiarism in regional-language theses, with comparative tests against URKUND yielding inconsistent similarity scores (e.g., 6% versus 0% or 5% versus 90% for the same document). These findings underscore the need for tailored approaches to plagiarism detection across disciplines.

### **Literature Review**

The adoption of Turnitin in Nigerian universities emerged in response to growing concerns about plagiarism and declining academic integrity, prompting institutional collaboration to deploy technology-based solutions for similarity detection (Enekano, 2013). Since its introduction, scholarly attention has focused on Turnitin's role in promoting ethical scholarship, shaping attitudes toward plagiarism, and regulating academic misconduct within higher education institutions (Adeniyi & Taiwo, 2011; Adekannbi & Megwaonye, 2020; Jolaosho, 2024). Empirical studies consistently indicate that Turnitin increases awareness of citation ethics and deters overt plagiarism; however, they also reveal persistent limitations related to incomplete database coverage, restricted access to non-digitised sources, and challenges in discipline-specific writing contexts. At the University of Ibadan, a 2017 institutional policy mandates that all Ph.D. theses be subjected to Turnitin screening, with clearly defined similarity thresholds as a prerequisite for graduation (Adekannbi & Megwaonye, 2020). While this policy underscores the university's commitment to academic integrity, empirical evidence suggests that its uniform application across disciplines has generated concerns regarding equity and contextual relevance. Studies have shown that similarity scores are often inflated in disciplines such as Law due to extensive case law citations, while fields that rely on non-English texts, translations, or archival materials remain poorly captured by Turnitin's database (Meo & Talha, 2019; Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024). These findings suggest that similarity indices may not always accurately reflect plagiarism, particularly in disciplines with specialised writing conventions.

Research on faculty and student perceptions further illuminates these challenges. Adekannbi and Megwaonye (2020) reported faculty dissatisfaction with Turnitin's inability to accommodate disciplinary nuances, particularly in legally and textually dense fields. From the student perspective, Alua, Asiedu, and Bumbie-Chi (2023) found that while students recognise Turnitin as a valuable deterrent to academic dishonesty, they express concerns about misinterpretation of similarity reports in the absence of contextual evaluation. Similarly, Nketsiah *et al.* (2024)

observed that postgraduate students acknowledge Turnitin's role in promoting accountability but remain sceptical of its effectiveness in detecting plagiarism involving non-English or specialised sources. These empirical findings converge thematically on the need for human judgment and disciplinary sensitivity in interpreting similarity reports. Thematically, existing literature points to three recurring issues: the technological limitations of Turnitin, discipline-specific writing challenges, and the tension between standardised plagiarism policies and contextual academic practices. Studies emphasise that reliance on similarity indices alone risks conflating legitimate academic conventions, such as extensive referencing or quotation, with plagiarism (Chaudhuri, 2008; Meo & Talha, 2019). Consequently, scholars advocate for complementary approaches that integrate technological tools with academic oversight to ensure fairness and accuracy in plagiarism assessment (Jolaosho, 2024).

Protection Motivation Theory has been applied in related contexts to explain how individuals and institutions respond to perceived threats to academic integrity by adopting coping mechanisms that balance risk and efficacy (Lee, 2011; Vance et al., 2012). Within plagiarism studies, this theoretical lens has been used to interpret how awareness of plagiarism risks motivates compliance behaviours and institutional safeguards. However, empirical applications of this framework to understand departmental and student responses to Turnitin's limitations remain limited in the Nigerian context. While existing studies have examined Turnitin's effectiveness and institutional adoption in Nigeria, they have largely prioritised policy analysis and faculty perspectives, with limited attention to Ph.D. students' experiences and the informal, discipline-specific strategies used to navigate Turnitin's constraints. This gap in the literature necessitates a focused examination of how Turnitin is perceived and operationalised within departments facing specialised writing demands, thereby leading to the central gap addressed in this study.

### **Problem Statement**

Existing scholarship has established that Turnitin functions primarily as a text-matching tool rather than a comprehensive plagiarism detection system, with notable limitations in identifying similarities drawn from non-digitised sources, non-English texts, and discipline-specific forms of writing such as legal case citations and archival materials (Meo & Talha, 2019). These technical constraints often result in inflated similarity indices, false positives, or undetected instances of plagiarism, particularly in disciplines that rely heavily on specialised citation practices. Such challenges are especially significant within the Nigerian higher education context, where plagiarism has been identified as a persistent threat to academic integrity, exacerbated by increased internet access and evolving digital research practices (Adeniyi & Taiwo, 2010; Ogunsuji & Fagbule, 2020). At the University of Ibadan, Adekanbi and Megwaonye (2020) examined academics' attitudes toward Turnitin and reported considerable dissatisfaction with its application, particularly in the Faculty of Law, where conventional legal citations were found to distort similarity results without necessarily indicating plagiarism. Their findings suggest

that the university's standardised plagiarism policy inadequately accommodates disciplinary writing conventions and risks compromising fairness in doctoral thesis evaluation. Similar concerns have been echoed in studies examining student awareness and utilisation of plagiarism detection tools in Nigerian universities, which emphasise that effective plagiarism management requires contextual interpretation rather than sole reliance on similarity scores (Abduldayan, Yusuf, & Olatunde, 2019; Idiegbeyan-Ose, Nkiko, & Osinulu, 2015; Aboyade et al., 2025).

Compounding these challenges is the growing influence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools in Nigerian higher education, which has further blurred traditional boundaries between originality and textual reuse, thereby intensifying institutional concerns about plagiarism and authorship (Peters & Olojede, 2025). While Turnitin has been positioned as a primary institutional response to these evolving threats, its capacity to address emerging and discipline-specific forms of textual appropriation remains contested. Studies indicate that although both faculty and students recognise Turnitin's role in promoting academic honesty, concerns persist regarding its accuracy, fairness, and interpretive validity when applied without adequate human oversight (Alua, Asiedu, & Bumbie-Chi, 2022; Ogunsuji & Fagbule, 2020). Despite these institutional and scholarly insights, existing research has largely privileged academics' perspectives, with limited empirical attention paid to Ph.D. students' experiences and perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness. Moreover, there is scant documentation of the informal or supplementary strategies adopted by departments to compensate for Turnitin's limitations in practice. This absence of student-centred and department-level evidence obscures how similarity reports are interpreted, how compliance with institutional thresholds is negotiated, and how academic integrity is practically sustained within discipline-specific contexts. Grounded in Protection Motivation Theory, this study addresses this gap by examining Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness and the adaptive strategies employed by departments at the University of Ibadan to mitigate its limitations, thereby contributing evidence necessary for more equitable and context-sensitive approaches to plagiarism detection in doctoral education.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of Turnitin as a plagiarism detection tool in Ph.D. thesis evaluation at the University of Ibadan by analysing doctoral students' perceptions and the departmental strategies adopted to address discipline-specific writing challenges and uphold academic integrity.

1. To explore students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness in detecting plagiarism in Ph.D. theses across departments with discipline-specific writing challenges at the University of Ibadan.
2. To identify the supplementary measures adopted by departments to address Turnitin's limitations and ensure academic integrity in Ph.D. thesis evaluation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), developed by Rogers in 1975, to examine how Ph.D. students and departments at the University of Ibadan respond to the threat of plagiarism in the context of Turnitin's implementation. PMT is a cognitive framework that explains how individuals and groups adopt protective behaviours in response to perceived threats, validated across diverse domains, including academic integrity, through over 65 studies (Miraja *et al.*, 2019). In this research, PMT frames plagiarism as a threat to academic standards, with Turnitin serving as a primary coping mechanism, while highlighting how students' perceptions and departmental strategies address the tool's limitations in discipline-specific academic writing.

PMT posits that protective behaviours arise from two cognitive processes: threat appraisal and coping appraisal. Threat appraisal involves assessing the severity of a threat (e.g., the impact of plagiarism on academic integrity and graduation eligibility) and vulnerability (e.g., the likelihood of plagiarism being detected or misjudged by Turnitin). Coping appraisal evaluates response efficacy (e.g., the perceived effectiveness of Turnitin in detecting plagiarism), self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in using Turnitin or adhering to academic integrity standards), and response costs (e.g., time and effort required for proper citation or supplementary checks) (Vance *et al.*, 2012). These processes lead to adaptive behaviours, such as improved citation practices or manual plagiarism checks, or maladaptive behaviours, such as exploiting Turnitin's limitations (Miraja *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, PMT is applied to explore Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness in detecting plagiarism, particularly in departments with discipline-specific writing challenges, such as law, engineering, or Arabic studies, where Turnitin may produce false positives or fail to detect similarities in non-digitised or non-English sources (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024). Students' threat appraisal is shaped by the University of Ibadan's 2017 policy, which mandates a maximum similarity index of 24% (including references) or 15% (excluding references), with non-compliance resulting in failure to graduate (Adekamni & Megwaonye, 2020). Students in disciplines with technical writing requirements may perceive higher vulnerability due to Turnitin's limitations, such as inflated similarity scores from case law citations in law or undetected plagiarism in specialised databases (Alua *et al.*, 2023). Their coping appraisal involves assessing Turnitin's response efficacy (e.g., whether it accurately detects plagiarism in their field) and self-efficacy (e.g., their ability to navigate Turnitin's requirements through proper citation or seeking faculty guidance). Positive perceptions may lead to adaptive behaviours, such as meticulous referencing, while negative perceptions may result in scepticism or reliance on inaccessible sources (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024).

Similarly, PMT frames departmental responses to Turnitin's limitations as protective behaviours to safeguard intellectual integrity. Departments may perceive plagiarism as a severe threat to academic standards, with vulnerability heightened in fields where Turnitin is less effective, prompting adaptive strategies like manual reviews of theses to verify originality.

(Kaner & Fiedler, 2008; Lee, 2011). These measures reflect departments' response efficacy (belief in the effectiveness of supplementary checks) and self-efficacy (confidence in implementing them) (Vance *et al.*, 2012). Prior research supports PMT's applicability to anti-plagiarism efforts, with Lee (2011) finding that faculties adopt anti-plagiarism tools when they perceive plagiarism as a severe threat and believe in the tools' efficacy. Aboyade *et al.*, (2025) and Haag *et al.* (2021) further highlight that, academic institutions implement protective measures, such as Turnitin, to deter unethical practices, aligning with PMT's focus on threat mitigation.

By integrating students' and departments' perspectives, PMT provides a cohesive framework to investigate how the University of Ibadan's Turnitin policy is navigated in practice. It illuminates how students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness influence their academic behaviours and how departments supplement the tool to address discipline-specific challenges, ensuring fairness and academic integrity in Ph.D. thesis evaluation.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness in detecting plagiarism and to identify departmental measures to address its limitations in discipline-specific contexts at the University of Ibadan. Qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing in-depth insights into participants' experiences and contextual nuances, aligning with the study's objectives to understand students' views and departmental practices within the framework of Protection Motivation Theory (PMT).

### ***Population and Sampling***

The study population comprises Ph.D. students from the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Law, and Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan. These units were purposively selected due to the discipline-specific technicalities in their academic writing, such as extensive case law citations in law, non-English texts in arts disciplines (e.g., Arabic and Islamic Studies, Linguistics), and archival or culturally specific sources in African Studies, which pose challenges for Turnitin's plagiarism detection. The Faculty of Arts includes departments such as Arabic and Islamic Studies, Linguistics, and History; the Faculty of Law includes the Departments of Private and Business Law and Public and International Law; and the Institute of African Studies focuses on interdisciplinary research, including African languages, history, and cultural studies, sharing disciplinary proximity with the Faculty of Arts. A total of 15 Ph.D. students were selected using purposive sampling to ensure participants had direct experience with Turnitin during their thesis preparation. Specifically, 10 students from the Faculty of Arts, 2 from the Faculty of Law, and 3 from the Institute of African Studies were chosen based on their engagement with Turnitin and exposure to discipline-specific writing challenges.

***Data Collection***

Data were collected through semi-structured key informant interviews, which allow flexibility to explore participants' perceptions while maintaining focus on the research questions. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Ph.D. students, focusing on their experiences with Turnitin, perceptions of its effectiveness in detecting plagiarism, and awareness of departmental processes for thesis evaluation. An interview guide was developed, covering topics such as students' views on Turnitin's accuracy in their discipline, challenges with technical writing conventions, and knowledge of supplementary departmental measures. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to encourage open and candid responses.

***Data Analysis***

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted manually, involving: familiarising with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, generating initial codes related to students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness and departmental measures, identifying themes (e.g., perceived limitations of Turnitin, adaptive citation practices, departmental interventions), reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence, and defining themes in relation to PMT's concepts of threat appraisal (e.g., perceived risks of plagiarism detection) and coping appraisal (e.g., students' citation behaviours, departmental strategies) (Rogers, 1975; Vance *et al.*, 2012). Themes were directly linked to the research questions, addressing students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness (RQ1) and departmental measures to mitigate its limitations (RQ2).

***Ethical Considerations***

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising transcripts, Turnitin reports and storing data securely. No identifiable information was included in the analysis or reporting.

**Findings and Discussion****Turnitin's Utility and Limitations in Discipline-Specific Thesis Writing**

This study investigated Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness in detecting plagiarism and the departmental measures employed to address its limitations at the University of Ibadan. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 Ph.D. students; 10 from the Faculty of Arts (5 from English, 5 from History), 2 from the Faculty of Law, and 3 from the Institute of African Studies (2 from Cultural and Media Studies, 1 from Gender Studies) using thematic analysis revealed a single overarching theme: balancing Turnitin's utility and limitations in discipline-specific thesis writing. This theme captures students' mixed perceptions of Turnitin's accuracy in their fields and the adaptive strategies departments use to ensure academic integrity,

particularly in disciplines with technical writing challenges, such as legal citations in Law, archival sources in History, non-English texts in English, and culturally specific materials in Cultural and Media Studies and Gender Studies. The findings are interpreted through Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) and contextualised within the broader literature on plagiarism detection.

### **Students' Perceptions of Turnitin's Effectiveness**

Ph.D. students expressed ambivalence about Turnitin's effectiveness, valuing its role in promoting academic integrity but questioning its applicability to their discipline-specific writing. Students in the Faculty of Law highlighted Turnitin's tendency to flag legitimate case law citations as plagiarism, inflating similarity scores. One Law student stated,

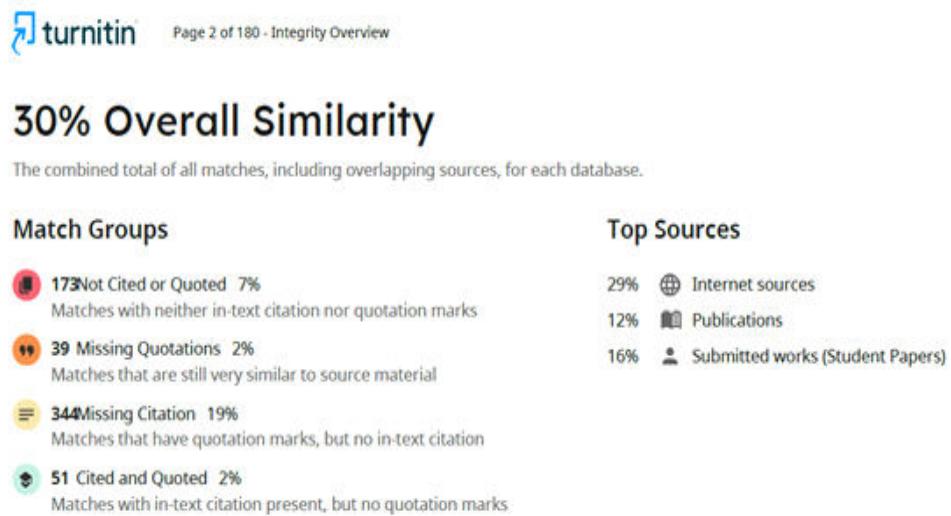
Turnitin consistently flags my case law references as copied, even though I've meticulously cited them according to legal writing standards, which is incredibly frustrating and feels deeply unfair. In legal research, citing cases is standard practice, but Turnitin doesn't seem to recognise these as legitimate citations and marks them as plagiarism, inflating my similarity score to levels that don't reflect my actual work. This makes me doubt its accuracy for legal writing, as it fails to understand the nature of our discipline, where case law is the backbone of our arguments. I spend hours reformatting or paraphrasing citations just to lower the score to meet the university's 24% threshold, which is time-consuming and stressful, especially knowing that failing to comply could delay my graduation. It feels like Turnitin is punishing me for following academic conventions rather than helping me prove my work's originality. I wish the university would consider how Turnitin misinterprets legal references and adjust its policy to be fairer for law students (**Interview/Law Student/November, 2024**).

This aligns with Adekannbi and Megwaonye's (2020) findings that Law academics at the University of Ibadan criticised Turnitin for misinterpreting legal writing conventions. Similarly, students in English and History reported challenges with Turnitin's handling of extensive quotations and archival sources. An English student noted, "I often think this Turnitin is good but also a waste of time. As long as I cite the author, I should not be termed as plagiarism, but you know the University law is to do this Turnitin." This reflects frustration with Turnitin's rigid application, especially for literary analyses requiring frequent quotations (Meo & Talha, 2019).

Students from the Institute of African Studies, particularly those in Cultural and Media Studies and Gender Studies, highlighted Turnitin's shortcomings in identifying similarities in non-English texts (e.g., Yoruba or Hausa sources) and culturally unique materials, such as oral traditions or local manuscripts. A Cultural and Media Studies student commented, "My thesis relies on oral narratives from Nigerian communities, but Turnitin doesn't detect these sources, leaving me uncertain about whether it's truly assessing my work." A Gender Studies student noted, "I cite African feminist texts in indigenous languages, but Turnitin overlooks them,

rendering its report incomplete.” These observations align with Nketsiah *et al.* (2024), who identified Turnitin’s limitations with non-English and non-digitised sources, amplifying students’ concerns about its fairness in evaluating their work. “I reference African feminist texts in local languages, but Turnitin misses those, making its report incomplete.” The respondent continues,

Many of these feminist texts are scattered across online platforms, and even when I use them with proper citations, Turnitin sometimes flags them as potential plagiarism, which is frustrating because these texts are essential to my work in Gender Studies. I have no choice but to include them to engage with African feminist scholarship authentically, but meeting the university’s strict 24% similarity threshold forces me to overwork myself. I spend countless hours rephrasing or reformatting citations, trying to balance maintaining the integrity of African feminist perspectives with complying with Turnitin’s standards. It feels like I’m being penalised for using culturally relevant sources, and it makes me question whether Turnitin is suited for our field. (**Interview/Gender Studies/November, 2024**)



**Figure 1: Turnitin similarity percentage from an IAS student**



## 11% Overall Similarity

The combined total of all matches, including overlapping sources, for each database.

### Match Groups

- 305 Not Cited or Quoted 7%  
Matches with neither in-text citation nor quotation marks
- 48 Missing Quotations 1%  
Matches that are still very similar to source material
- 78 Missing Citation 2%  
Matches that have quotation marks, but no in-text citation
- 6 Cited and Quoted 0%  
Matches with in-text citation present, but no quotation marks

### Top Sources

- 10% Internet sources
- 7% Publications
- 5% Submitted works (Student Papers)

**Figure 2: Same Turnitin result after it was worked on by the IAS student**

Through PMT, these perceptions reflect students' threat appraisal, viewing plagiarism as a severe threat due to the University of Ibadan's 2017 policy mandating a maximum similarity index of 24% (including references) or 15% (excluding references), with non-compliance preventing graduation (Adekannbi & Megwaonye, 2020). Students' vulnerability varies by discipline, as Turnitin's limitations, false positives in Law and English, under-detection in History and African Studies heighten the risk of unfair evaluation (Kaner & Fielder, 2008). In terms of coping appraisal, students exhibited low response efficacy, doubting Turnitin's ability to accurately detect plagiarism in their fields. This led to adaptive behaviours, such as meticulous citation practices, consulting supervisors, or avoiding certain sources to lower similarity scores. However, high response costs, such as time spent reformatting citations, fostered frustration, with some students resorting to maladaptive behaviours, like selectively using sources Turnitin cannot detect (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024; Alua *et al.*, 2023). These findings highlight a tension between Turnitin's utility and its limitations, particularly in disciplines with technical or culturally specific writing requirements.

Students reported various departmental measures to mitigate Turnitin's limitations, ensuring robust plagiarism detection. In the Faculty of Law, supervisors conduct manual reviews of Turnitin reports to verify flagged case law citations. A Law student noted, "My supervisor goes through the Turnitin's report line by line to check if case law citations are legitimate, because Turnitin often gets it wrong." In the Faculty of Arts, English and History departments employ peer reviews and consultations with subject experts to validate the originality of quotations and archival sources. An English student stated, "Our department has a committee that reviews high similarity scores to ensure my literary quotes aren't mistaken for plagiarism."

A History student added, “We have experts who check our use of archival documents, since Turnitin can’t access those.”

In the Institute of African Studies, departments like Cultural and Media Studies and Gender Studies use specialised panels to evaluate theses involving non-English or culturally specific sources. A Cultural and Media Studies student remarked, “Our department brings in Yoruba language experts to verify oral sources, because Turnitin doesn’t cover them.” These measures align with Adekannbi and Megwaonye’s (2020) recommendation for a plagiarism check committee to address discipline-specific challenges. Through PMT, these strategies reflect departments’ coping appraisal, with high response efficacy as they perceive manual reviews and expert consultations as effective solutions (Lee, 2011). Departments demonstrate self-efficacy by confidently implementing these practices and acknowledge the severity and vulnerability of plagiarism as a threat, particularly in disciplines where Turnitin is less effective (Haag *et al.*, 2021).

The findings reveal a delicate balance between Turnitin’s role as a plagiarism detection tool and its limitations in discipline-specific contexts. Students’ low response efficacy drives adaptive behaviours, such as enhanced citation practices, but also frustration due to high response costs, particularly in Law and English, where reformatting citations is labour-intensive (Alua *et al.*, 2023). In History and African Studies, Turnitin’s inability to detect non-digitised or non-English sources undermines its utility, prompting students to rely on departmental guidance (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024). Departments’ supplementary measures; manual reviews, peer evaluations, and expert consultations demonstrate a proactive response to Turnitin’s shortcomings, reflecting high self-efficacy and a commitment to academic integrity (Aboyade *et al.*, 2025). However, these measures are informal and vary across departments, indicating a lack of standardised guidelines within the university’s policy.

The results align with prior studies, such as Kale *et al.*, (2019), who noted inconsistent similarity scores in non-English contexts, and Meo and Talha (2019), who highlighted Turnitin’s challenges in technical fields. The University of Ibadan’s rigid policy may disproportionately affect students in Law, English, History, Cultural and Media Studies, and Gender Studies, where technical or cultural writing inflates scores or escapes detection. PMT provides a robust framework for understanding these dynamics, as students’ and departments’ responses reflect threat and coping appraisals in navigating plagiarism risks (Vance *et al.*, 2012). The findings suggest the need for policy revisions to formalise adaptive strategies, such as establishing a university-wide plagiarism committee to address discipline-specific needs, as proposed by Adekannbi and Megwaonye (2020). This would ensure fairness and uphold academic standards across diverse fields.

The implications extend to other institutions using Turnitin, particularly in multicultural or resource-constrained settings where non-English or non-digitised sources are common (Kale *et al.*, 2019). Future research could explore faculty perspectives to complement student

insights or assess the feasibility of integrating alternative plagiarism detection tools tailored to specific disciplines.

### **Departmental Adaptive Strategies to Mitigate Turnitin's Limitations**

Students reported that departments across the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Law, and Institute of African Studies implement structured strategies to mitigate Turnitin's limitations. A key measure is the organisation of post-field seminars, where students present their thesis drafts to faculty and peers before final submission to the Postgraduate College. These seminars allow departments to identify potential issues with Turnitin reports early. A History student stated, "After my fieldwork, our department held a post-field seminar where I presented my draft. The panel flagged sections that might trigger Turnitin, like archival citations, and advised me on how to adjust them." Similarly, an English student noted, "The post-field seminar in our department helped me refine my literary analysis to avoid high similarity scores from quoted texts." In the Institute of African Studies, a Cultural and Media Studies student remarked, "Our post-field seminar included a Yoruba language expert who reviewed my oral narrative sources, ensuring they wouldn't be misread by Turnitin."

Departments also encourage students to run Turnitin checks on their drafts before submitting to the Postgraduate College for final evaluation. This pre-submission process helps students address flagged content proactively. A Law student explained, "My supervisor advised me to run my thesis through Turnitin before sending it to the PG College. It showed high similarity for case law case citations so I revised them to lower the score." A Gender Studies student added, "Our department insists we check Turnitin reports early, which helped me adjust citations for African feminist texts that Turnitin flagged incorrectly." This practice aligns with Adekannbi and Megwaonye's (2020) findings, which highlight the need for tailored approaches to address Turnitin's limitations in legal and culturally specific writing.

Another critical strategy is advising students to avoid direct quotations from existing materials and instead paraphrase while properly acknowledging authors. This guidance mitigates Turnitin's tendency to flag legitimate quotations as plagiarism, particularly in disciplines like English and Law. An English student reported, "My supervisor told me to paraphrase literary texts instead of quoting directly, even if I cite authors like Achebe, to keep my similarity score low." A Law student noted, "I was advised to summarise case law points rather than quote directly, which helps avoid Turnitin flagging them as copied, though I still cite the cases." In Cultural and Media Studies, a student stated, "Our department encouraged paraphrasing oral histories while citing their cultural context, as direct quotes from Yoruba narratives confused Turnitin." This strategy reduces false positives and aligns with Meo and Talha's (2019) observation that Turnitin struggles with heavily quoted content.

Supervisors also play a pivotal role by encouraging students to "work better," providing constructive feedback to enhance thesis quality and navigate Turnitin's requirements. A History student shared, "My supervisor pushed me to refine my archival citations to make them clearer,

which not only lowered my Turnitin score but also improved my writing.” A Gender Studies student remarked, “My supervisor encouraged me to strengthen my arguments with African feminist sources while guiding me on paraphrasing to meet the university’s 24% threshold.” These supervisory efforts foster academic rigor and help students address Turnitin’s limitations, as noted by Nketsiah *et al.* (2024).

Through PMT, these departmental measures reflect coping appraisal, with high response efficacy as departments perceive post-field seminars, pre-submission Turnitin checks, paraphrasing guidance, and supervisory encouragement as effective solutions to Turnitin’s shortcomings (Lee, 2011). Departments demonstrate self-efficacy by confidently implementing these strategies, leveraging faculty expertise to address discipline-specific challenges, such as case law citations in Law or non-English sources in African Studies (Haag *et al.*, 2021). The threat appraisal is evident in departments’ recognition of plagiarism as a severe threat, with heightened vulnerability in disciplines where Turnitin misinterprets citations or fails to detect non-digitised sources (Kaner & Fiedler, 2008). These adaptive behaviours align with PMT’s focus on protective actions to uphold academic integrity.

The findings highlight proactive departmental responses to Turnitin’s limitations, supporting Adekannbi and Megwaonye’s (2020) recommendation for tailored plagiarism checks. Post-field seminars provide a structured platform to pre-empt Turnitin issues, aligning with Aboyade *et al.*, (2025), who note that academic institutions adopt proactive measures to deter unethical practices. Encouraging pre-submission Turnitin checks empowers students to address flagged content early, reducing the risk of non-compliance with the university’s 24% similarity threshold (Adekannbi & Megwaonye, 2020). Advising paraphrasing over direct quotations addresses Turnitin’s sensitivity to quoted material, a challenge noted by Meo and Talha (2019) in technical fields like English and Law. Supervisory encouragement enhances thesis quality and aligns with Kale *et al.*, (2019) findings on the role of faculty guidance in navigating plagiarism detection tools.

However, the informal and varied nature of these measures, post-field seminars in History and African Studies, paraphrasing advice in English and Law, supervisory feedback across all disciplines suggests a lack of standardised guidelines. This variability could lead to inconsistencies in thesis evaluation, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Kaner & Fiedler, 2008). The emphasis on paraphrasing, while effective, may discourage students from using direct quotes essential to disciplines like English, where literary analysis relies on original texts (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, the reliance on supervisory encouragement raises concerns about scalability in larger departments, where faculty workload may limit individualised support (Alua *et al.*, 2023).

The findings underscore the need for a formalised university policy to standardise adaptive strategies, such as integrating post-field seminars and pre-submission Turnitin checks across all departments. A plagiarism check committee, as proposed by Adekannbi and Megwaonye (2020), could coordinate these measures, ensuring fairness and consistency. This is particularly

critical for disciplines like Cultural and Media Studies and Gender Studies, where non-English sources require specialised evaluation (Nketsiah *et al.*, 2024). The implications extend to other institutions using Turnitin in diverse academic contexts, where tailored strategies can enhance plagiarism detection (Kale *et al.*, 2019). Future research could explore faculty perspectives on these measures or assess the feasibility of alternative tools for non-English or non-digitised sources.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that Ph.D. students' perceptions of Turnitin's effectiveness at the University of Ibadan are closely intertwined with the adaptive strategies employed by departments to address the tool's limitations in disciplines with specialised writing conventions, including English, History, Law, Cultural and Media Studies, and Gender Studies. Although students generally acknowledge Turnitin's role in promoting academic integrity, persistent challenges, such as false positives arising from legal citations and the software's limited capacity to detect non-English and archival sources, undermine its perceived effectiveness and increase compliance-related burdens. In response, departments have developed supplementary measures, including post-field seminars, pre-submission Turnitin checks, paraphrasing guidance, and sustained supervisory support. When viewed through the lens of Protection Motivation Theory, these practices demonstrate high levels of response efficacy and self-efficacy among both students and supervisors in mitigating plagiarism-related risks. However, the largely informal and department-specific nature of these interventions reveals an institutional gap between the university's standardised plagiarism policy and the diverse realities of disciplinary writing practices.

To address this gap, the study recommends the formalisation of discipline-sensitive plagiarism management frameworks, including the establishment of a departmental or university-wide plagiarism review committee, the customisation of Turnitin settings to reflect disciplinary norms, and structured training for postgraduate students and supervisors on the interpretation of similarity reports. Implementing these measures would promote greater consistency, fairness, and transparency in Ph.D. thesis evaluation, while strengthening academic integrity across diverse scholarly contexts.

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