

Recognizing and Demonstrating Originality in Theses and Dissertations in Communication and Mass Media Research

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Abstract

Irrespective of the institutional, ideological and disciplinary divergence, the hallmarks of most theses and dissertations in communication and media oriented researches are unanimously acknowledged to be autonomous empirical, conceptual or theoretical works that make original contribution to knowledge. However, substantial and considerable disagreement and confusion exists regarding what constitutes originality and how contribution to knowledge can be demonstrated. Originality in communication and media research is primarily significant as it culminates in the production of new knowledge which can address the topic area or discipline. The concept of originality as it relates to theses and dissertations in communication and media programmes is complex and multifaceted hence identifying, articulating and conveying it requires enormous time, contemplation and effort. A good dissertation or thesis in the field of communication or media studies should clearly outline the classic ways in which the work is original by providing a succinct, focused and critical appraisal of the specific contribution to knowledge in the selected domain. This paper examines the concept of originality in theses and dissertations in the field of communication and media studies, and highlights directions in which candidates can recognize and demonstrate their individual contributions to knowledge.

Key words: Original, Originality, PhD, Research, Contribution to Knowledge.

Introduction

Originality is a fundamental attribute apparent or inherent in all serious, significant and interesting theses and dissertations. It essentially enables authors, candidates and researchers to identify, formulate and articulate their individual contributions to knowledge in a specific area of interest. However, irrespective of institutional, disciplinary and ideological orientations, variation exists regarding what can constitute or establish originality in thesis, dissertations and all non- certificate researches and how the contribution to knowledge can be clearly demonstrated and recognized. In communication and media studies, the substance of theses and dissertations is fundamentally determined and acknowledged to be an independent and autonomous document that makes an original contribution to knowledge by providing solution to an existing or potential communication problem or improving the understanding or application of specific communication theory or model. Original work is, therefore, significant substantially because it results in the production of new knowledge which addresses the topic area or discipline.

Conceptualizing and operationalizing originality poses significant challenge and dilemma to most doctoral candidates and empirical researchers; consequently, it becomes a crucial source

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of uncertainty and anxiety or depression. Gill and Dolan (2015) observed that while there are much literature on how to achieve PhD, relatively little guidance either in the literature or by most universities is given to candidates, supervisors and examiners about how originality can be clearly defined, demonstrated and objectively assessed. The aim of this paper is to examine what originality is- and what is not, and how doctoral students in communication and media related programmes can recognize, appreciate and demonstrate their contribution to knowledge in any chosen area.

Constituents of Originality in Theses

Originality is frequently associated with an idea, concept or event that is truly novel or unique. In relation to doctoral engagements, many studies have explored what doctoral examiners from various academic disciplines look for in a PhD and how they recognize originality. Gill and Dolan (2015) observed that these studies have highlighted some commonalities in most disciplines regarding what constitutes originality. For example, a PhD can be original in a number of areas, including the approach, topic area, hypotheses, method, data, findings or theories (Phillips 1994, Mullins and Kiley 2002, Delamont, S. Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. 2004, Cryer 2006, Phillips and Pugh 2010, Wisker 2012).

Variations in the definition of originality exist and persist but Phillips and Pugh (2010 cited in Gill and Dolan 2015) designed and outlined 15 fundamental areas that they believe can constitute originality in PhD. They include:

1. Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time.
2. Continuing a previously original piece of work.
3. Providing single original technique, observation or result in otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research.
4. Carrying out original work design by supervisor
5. Having many original ideas, methods and interpretations all performed by others under direction of postgraduate.
6. Showing originality in testing somebody else's idea/theory.
7. Carrying out empirical work that has not been done before.
8. Making a synthesis of things that have not been put together before.
9. Using already known material but with new interpretation.
10. Trying out something in this country that has previously been done only elsewhere.
11. Taking a particular technique and applying it in a new area.
12. Bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue.
13. Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies.
14. Looking at areas not previously explored in a particular discipline.
15. Addition to knowledge in a way that has not been done before.

These elements of originality can be contextualized or domesticated to all forms and types of communication and media researches to balance and determine the originality of the research idea, approach, method, theory or findings.

Challenges Associated With Originality

According to Gill and Burnard (2012) originality is undoubtedly specific to discipline, and is nebulous and vague that it is almost meaningless to most PhD candidates. This complexity and ambiguity are probably a factor of the multifaceted nature of the concept. Phillips and Pugh (2010) earlier observed that the lack of single, focused and definitive framework for the conceptualization of originality in theses and dissertations have posed considerable concern for many doctoral candidates who subsequently struggle to decipher how originality can be properly established, demonstrated and evaluated. They further argued that the problem is compounded by the lack of institutional guidelines and poor communication between candidates and supervisors about what constitutes originality in theses or dissertations.

Considerations for Originality in Communication and Media Theses

Locke, Spirduso, Silverman, (2007) argued that an essential area of concern is the magnitude and degree of originality required. Confusion often exists in this area because original research is often interpreted as that which has never occurred before or is truly groundbreaking, but Holloway and Walker (2000) cited in Gill and Dolan (2015) observed that most PhDs do not achieve this standard. This calls for the need for candidates and researchers in communication and media studies to accept ownership and demonstrate authority in their area of research.

How genuine is Originality?

Gill and Pugh (2015) observed that a frequent challenge associated with originality is the naïve and unsubstantiated claim by doctoral candidates by merely outlining why they believe their work to be original. For example, a doctoral student working on cultural communication may claim that ‘no empirical phenomenological study was conducted to examine the purposes, meaning and context of the popular textual and visual messages featured on public transport vehicles in Lagos before.’ Even if correct, these isolated and solitary claims are usually indicative of a limited perception and understanding of the concept of originality and a failure to critically demonstrate how the study meaningfully contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the area. Further information is required to illustrate how the meaning, purpose and context of textual and visual messages in Lagos compare and contrast with the textual and visual messages in Kano (for instance) and other relevant or analogous research. Examiners of such work will hardly get real or concrete sense of what is known as a result of the research that was not known before.

Failure by candidates to comprehensively clarify such issues is evidently challenging and problematic as students cannot precisely and concisely compress their argument on originality which signify substantial flaw in their methods, theories and structures. Consequently examiners may not award PhD to a candidate that has not made significant contribution to knowledge. In many instances, it is not the entire work that is not original but the fundamental/original contribution to knowledge has not been conveyed adequately and appropriately.

Originality Considerations for Doctoral Candidates

Addressing the issue of originality effectively requires candidates to establish what is new and unique in their work and determine how this can be explicated. However, doing something original is not in itself enough to obtain a PhD; candidates have to demonstrate in a scholarly manner, how their research adds to the extant body of knowledge and what the potential wider implications of this new knowledge are for the subject, discipline and related research (Gill and Dolan, 2015).

The following considerations are proposed by Gill and Dolan (2015) as factors to recognize and appreciate by candidates and researchers in the critical process of demonstrating originality in their work.

a) Establish what is original

According to Dunleavy (2003) and Murray (2006) determination of originality and uniqueness in a research requires considerable time and effort, hence the fundamental need for regular and constructive supervision during the process. Supervisors can formulate, modify or refine the original contribution and the subsequent development of the theses. At this stage it is crucial for candidates to have or keep an open mind and explore other potential areas of originality.

The stage may also demand the prudent and careful exploration of some relevant, good-quality doctoral theses and the corresponding examination of how they frame or address the issues. Critical and pragmatic thinking about the works of others may culminate in the location of one's work and realistically situate its contribution to the discipline without much challenge. Developing coherent and consistent scholarly contribution to knowledge usually requires significant contemplation, reflection and refinement. This implies that originality should be perceived as a cumulative entity which rarely arises from single insight. At each point, supervisors should advice accordingly to ensure that arguments about concepts, theories, methods and findings are either logical or scientific and most importantly consistent.

b) No absolute or inclusive formula

Cryer (2006) argued that despite the complexity of formulating the original contribution to knowledge it is important to recognize that there is no absolute criterion, prescriptive principles or definitive solutions to follow. He observed that it is indeed challenging and frustrating to most candidates but determining the ways in which work is original is precisely what PhD is all about. Consequently the emphasis should not be on the 'right answer' but on realizing that there are many relevant possibilities for originality in doctoral research. The more candidates understand and appreciate this, the better their position, experience and confidence in articulating the specific areas in which their work is different, unique and original. The dominant concern for candidates should apparently be a critical consideration of how their research makes meaningful contribution to knowledge and how this information can be best communicated or conveyed.

c) Be realistic

There are many common problems and challenges associated with originality in the PhD, such as making over ambitious, poorly supported claims to originality. It is significant that any potential assertions of uniqueness are logical, realistic, properly substantiated and appropriately supported with relevant evidence (Gill and Dolan, 2015).

Holloway and Walker (2000) and Cryer (2006) emphasized that while most doctorates' contribution to knowledge are likely to be cumulative, there are possibilities that some aspects may be so unique or potentially controversial that students need to exercise caution on how best to present this information in the thesis. Cryer (2006) argued that there are inherent risks associated with pursuing a highly original theme, not because it is bad but because it is potentially unsafe.

d) Frame work within the existing relevant evidence

Phillips and Pugh (2010) cited in Gill and Dolan (2015) argued that new and existing knowledge are inextricably related, hence demonstrating what is new requires an indication of what was previously known. Consequently, situating and integrating one's work critically in existing relevant literature can help to ensure that any novel contribution to knowledge is both apparent and clear. Candidates should not assume that what they are doing is new, simply because they have not read the wider literature. Candidates should, therefore, be fully aware of the existing state of knowledge in the area.

e) Clear indication of contribution to knowledge

It is fundamental for candidates to ensure that examiners, supervisors and members of the research community on reading the thesis, should not have to guess what the contribution to knowledge is. Candidates should clearly, concisely and convincingly articulate the contribution to knowledge where appropriate (Dunleavy, 2003). Moreover, Murray (2006) stressed the need for any such contribution to be properly introduced, well written, logically presented, understandable and properly substantiated. To make it easy for the examiners and supervisors, the contribution should be situated in the abstract and where appropriate thereafter.

Brabazon (2010) and Gill and Burnard (2012) suggested that there should be a succinct, dedicated section towards the end of the thesis where candidates can set out in an unambiguous, scholarly manner what was known about the topic and what relevant, new information has been discovered as a result of the research.

f) Disseminate where possible

It is crucial for candidates to strive to disseminate relevant work in good quality, peer-reviewed journals and conferences. This can help to further refine ideas and theories as well as improve scholarly skills. Examiners will have favorable attitude towards the publication since the work was subjected to peer-review process. Any relevant publication should, where

appropriate, be cited in the thesis and full paper included in the appendix as an evidence of originality and advancement of the frontiers of knowledge.

Conclusion

For theses and dissertations to be original, they must be interesting and significant thereby making substantial contribution to the body of knowledge in the relevant area or solving an existing socio-political, professional or ideological challenge. Despite the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept a good thesis should clearly outline the different ways in which the work is original in a succinct, focused and articulate approach.

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