Unethical Research Practices in Nepal: The Dark Side and the Ethical Solutions Ahead

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Abstract
Background: Academic research in Nepal is growing, but ethical issues remain significant challenges. This study explores unethical practices, their root causes, and proposes solutions to improve research ethics in Nepal.

Methods: A qualitative exploratory approach was used, involving semi-structured interviews with 11 experts, including professors (3), academic researchers (6), and journal editors-in-chief (2). Purposive sampling ensured diverse perspectives from individuals actively engaged in Nepal's

research ecosystem. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring ethical concerns and practices.

Results: The study uncovered widespread unethical practices such as data falsification, gift authorship, bypassing ethical reviews, biased peer review, unregulated AI use, and research driven by career incentives with limited societal impact. Additional issues include poor research communication, improper data disposal, unethical sampling, non-compliance with journal guidelines, and reliance on outdated analytical tools. These challenges arise from weak institutional oversight, limited awareness, and a "publish-or-perish" culture.

Conclusion: The study recommends implementing reforms such as mandatory data verification, clear authorship guidelines, and cross-disciplinary ethics committees. These measures aim to align Nepal's research practices with global standards while addressing local challenges.

Novelty: This study provides the first comprehensive examination of unethical research practices in Nepal, offering context-specific, actionable solutions to improve research ethics in resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: Research ethics, academic integrity, data fabrication, peer review, Nepal.

Introduction

Ethics in research refers to the principles and guidelines that ensure scientific inquiry is conducted responsibly, fairly, and with integrity. At its core, research ethics aims to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants, including human subjects, animals, and the environment, while maintaining the credibility and reliability of research outcomes (Miteu, 2024; Bos, 2020). Key ethical principles include informed consent, requiring participants to be fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits before voluntarily agreeing to participate, and confidentiality, which safeguards participants' personal information (Arellano, Alcubilla, & Leguízamo, 2023). Researchers must also strive to minimize harm, avoiding physical, psychological, or social damage to participants (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021). Additionally, integrity and honesty are fundamental, ensuring accurate reporting of findings, transparency in methods and data, and proper attribution to prevent plagiarism (Zhaksylyk, Zimba, Yessirkepov, & Kocyigit, 2023). Fairness and equity further demand that participants are selected without discrimination and that the benefits of research are shared equitably, especially in collaborative or global contexts (Byström, Einarsson, & Nycander, 1999).

The Universalist perspective, as outlined in the Belmont Report (1979), emphasizes globally consistent standards such as respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). In contrast, the relativist perspective argues for adapting ethical standards to fit cultural, social, and economic contexts, as highlighted by Macklin (1999). The utilitarian perspective focuses on maximizing societal benefits while minimizing harm, prioritizing outcomes over processes (Resnik, 2020),

whereas the deontological perspective emphasizes adherence to moral rules and duties, such as informed consent and transparency, regardless of consequences (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Feminist and postcolonial perspectives critique traditional frameworks for being individualistic and hierarchical, advocating for inclusivity, equity, and decolonization in research ethics (Harding, 1991; Smith, 2012). Meanwhile, the pragmatic perspective seeks a balance between universal principles and contextual flexibility, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Pimple, 2002). However, despite these universally recognized ethical principles, the research community in Nepal has faced several ethical challenges. Practices such as plagiarism, data fabrication, lack of informed consent, and disregard for participant confidentiality have been reported, undermining the trustworthiness of research outputs (Resnik, 2018). Moreover, the absence of robust institutional frameworks and limited awareness of ethical standards contribute to the persistence of these issues. Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, pose additional challenges, amplifying the need for accountability and vigilance in research practices (Nadeem, Ismail, Daud, & Mehmood, 2025). In this context, it becomes crucial to prioritize ethical considerations at every stage of the research process right from planning to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. This study aims to uncover the unethical practices prevalent within the Nepali research community, exploring their causes, implications, and consequences. By examining these issues, the research seeks to raise awareness, promote ethical literacy, and propose practical and actionable solutions to address these concerns. Ultimately, this study aspires to foster a culture of ethical research practices in Nepal, ensuring that the research community contributes positively to society while upholding the integrity of scientific inquiry.

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore and analyze unethical research practices in Nepal and propose ethical solutions. The methodology focused on collecting in-depth information from expert respondents who were actively engaged in the research field. A total of 11 experts participated in the study, including 3 professors, 6 academic researchers, and 2 journal editors-in-chief. The following methods were used:

Research Design: The study utilized an exploratory research design to investigate the nature and prevalence of unethical practices in Nepal's research community. This design allowed for a complete understanding of the underlying issues and the contextual factors contributing to unethical behaviors.

Data Collection: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected experts. These interviews provided detailed insights into real-life experiences, observations, and perspectives on unethical research practices. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share their experiences and opinions freely.

Sampling Method: The study employed purposive sampling to select respondents who had direct experience and knowledge of the research process and ethical challenges in Nepal. The participants were strategically chosen to include diverse perspectives from professors, academic researchers, and journal editors-in-chief, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Data Analysis: The qualitative data collected from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying, organizing, and interpreting key themes related to unethical practices, their root causes, and potential solutions.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the purpose of the study, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all findings were reported honestly and transparently.

Limitations: The study acknowledged potential limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative data and the reluctance of some participants to disclose sensitive information. Additionally, the relatively small sample size of 11 respondents may limit the generalizability of the findings. The manual analysis approach, without using software tools like NVivo or ATLAS.ti, may also have restricted the depth and systematic organization of data analysis. Efforts were made to mitigate these limitations by fostering trust and creating a comfortable environment during interviews.

Results

Data Fabrication/Falsification: Unethical activities like data fabrication and falsification are quite common in the Nepalese research community. The practice of altering or creating fake data, whether qualitative or quantitative, is commonly observed in bachelor's reports, thesis, and even master's level dissertations in Nepalese colleges. Some researchers also follow similar unethical patterns to enhance their academic profiles. Additionally, there is a growing trend of reusing the same dataset for multiple research with different titles. This not only compromises the originality of the research but also raises serious questions about its credibility. By recycling data, researchers fail to contribute new knowledge, which is a fundamental purpose of academic research. Furthermore, a more severe form of academic dishonesty involves copying entire published papers, making minor modifications such as changing variables or paraphrasing sentences, and then republishing the work under a new title. This practice, often referred to as "academic plagiarism" or "paper recycling," severely undermines the integrity of the research process. It not only deceives the academic community but also erodes trust in the research output of the country.

Solution: To address these challenges, mandatory data audits should be implemented by universities and journals to randomly check submitted works for fabricated or falsified data. Furthermore, strict monitoring systems must be established, requiring researchers to submit raw data alongside their reports to ensure authenticity and uphold research credibility. These measures

are vital for promoting ethical research practices and safeguarding the integrity of academic contributions in Nepal.

Gift authorship: Gift authorship is the unethical practice of including individuals as authors on a research paper even though they have not made any meaningful contributions to the study. This misrepresents the true contributors, violates academic integrity, and undermines fairness and accountability in research. In the context of Nepal, research collaboration across multidisciplinary fields is steadily increasing, which is a positive trend for fostering innovation and diverse perspectives. However, it has also led to a rise in gift authorship. It is now common for researchers to include friends, financial supporters, senior colleagues, or professors as co-authors, even if they have not contributed to the study. This is often done to gain personal favors, strengthen professional relationships, or boost the credibility of the research. Many of these "gift authors" have no involvement in designing the study, collecting or analyzing data, interpreting results, or writing the paper. In some cases, professors or senior researchers are included simply to increase the chances of publication or enhance the paper's academic image, regardless of their involvement. This practice not only exploits their status but also disregards the contributions of those who actually worked on the research. Gift authorship damages research integrity by undervaluing genuine efforts, breaking trust in the academic community, and giving unfair advantages to those involved. Over time, it discourages honest researchers and promotes favoritism and dishonesty in academia.

Solution: To address this issue, universities, journals, and academic institutions should enforce strict authorship guidelines, such as those established by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). Requiring all authors to submit a detailed contribution statement outlining their specific roles in the research process can ensure fairness and accountability, preserving the integrity of academic work in Nepal.

No Ethical Approval Taken before Data Collection: Globally, it is a well-established practice to obtain ethical approval before collecting data for research, especially in academic and scientific fields. Leading journals, such as those indexed in Scopus and Science Citation Index (SCI), strictly require ethical clearance for publication, ensuring that research adheres to ethical standards. However, in Nepal, the practice of obtaining ethical approval is notably weak, particularly in the fields of management and social sciences. While Tribhuvan University (TU) is said to have an ethical approval board, this system is not effectively implemented in management and humanities colleges. Many universities in Nepal either lack ethical committee's altogether or fail to enforce the process of ethical review and approval. This gap undermines the credibility of research conducted in these fields, as ethical guidelines play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of participants, ensuring integrity in data collection, and maintaining the overall quality

of research. On a positive note, the Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) has established a clear and robust system for ethical approval, especially for research in health and medical sciences. However, such practices need to be extended and standardized across all academic disciplines, including management and humanities, to ensure that research in Nepal meets international ethical standards and maintains its credibility on a global platform.

Solution: Academic institutions and journals in Nepal must make ethical approval a mandatory requirement for all studies involving human or animal subjects. Extending and standardizing these practices across all academic disciplines, including management and humanities, will help align Nepalese research with international ethical standards, enhancing its credibility on a global platform.

Peer Review and Publication Ethics: The peer review process is a cornerstone of academic publishing, serving as a critical mechanism to ensure the quality, credibility, and integrity of research. It involves the evaluation of a manuscript by independent experts in the field who assess its validity, originality, and significance before it is published. However, in the Nepalese context, many journals claim to follow a peer review process on their websites and in their author guidelines, but in practice, this is often not the case. Instead of undergoing a thorough review by independent experts in the field, many papers are assessed solely by the editor, who may evaluate the quality based on personal judgment rather than rigorous academic standards. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of transparency in the review process. Many journals do not provide detailed information about their review policies or timelines, and a large number of them do not even have a standardized review format or process in place. This lack of structure and accountability undermines the reliability and credibility of the published research. Another concerning issue is the prevalence of pay-to-publish practices. Many authors in Nepal are willing to pay a fee to have their papers published without undergoing any form of review or scrutiny. This "pay-to-publish" culture not only compromises the quality of research but also promotes unethical publishing practices, where financial incentives take precedence over academic rigor. As a result, such publications often fail to meet international standards and contribute to the growing problem of low-quality research in the academic community.

Solution: Nepalese journals must implement transparent and standardized peer-review systems, utilizing external reviewers to ensure objectivity and maintain research quality. Establishing clear guidelines and removing pay-to-publish practices will promote credibility and elevate the standard of academic publishing in Nepal to align with global expectations.

No Regulation of AI Use in Research: Currently, there are no clear rules or guidelines for using AI tools in academic research in Nepal. While international journals, like those indexed in Scopus and SCI, have set limits on AI use, such as allowing no more than 20% AI-generated content or

completely banning it. Nepalese academic institutions have not put similar regulations in place. Globally, the use of AI in research, including for data analysis, literature reviews, and text generation, is carefully monitored. Many reputable journals require authors to disclose how they used AI and set limits to ensure research remains ethical and credible, preventing AI from replacing human judgment or distorting results. In Nepal, Tribhuvan University (TU) has banned AI in exams. However, there are no clear rules regarding AI use in research, such as for theses or faculty publications. This lack of guidelines leaves students and researchers uncertain about how to use AI responsibly in their academic work. Without clear regulations, there are risks of ethical issues, like plagiarism, data manipulation, or unverifiable AI-generated content. This can undermine the authenticity of research and lead to dishonest practices. The absence of consistent rules across institutions and departments further weakens academic standards and prevents Nepal from aligning with international academic norms.

Solution: Universities, journals, and academic institutions must create comprehensive policies on responsible AI use in research. These guidelines should clearly specify acceptable uses, require authors to disclose AI involvement, and set boundaries to ensure that human judgment remains central to academic research.

No Innovation, No Human Benefit, Just for Professional Development: The primary purpose of research is to generate new ideas, develop theories, create innovative methods or systems, and identify solutions to problems. Research is meant to contribute positively to society and address issues that can benefit humanity and the environment. However, in recent times, research has increasingly shifted from these noble objectives to a focus on personal career advancement. Many researchers are more concerned with publishing papers to secure job promotions, enhance their professional profiles, or meet institutional requirements, rather than seeking genuine solutions or improving society. This trend has led to a decline in the quality of research, as the focus is now more on quantity how many papers can be published; rather than the substance and impact of the research. When researchers prioritize personal gain over social or environmental contributions, the true purpose of research is compromised. The emphasis on professional development often means that the innovative and problem-solving aspects of research are sidelined, leading to a more self-centered approach to academic work. As a result, the core meaning of research is being diverted from addressing societal needs to serving individual ambitions, ultimately reducing its overall value and potential to create positive change.

Solution: Researchers must focus on conducting research that can provide significant societal value and organizational impact. Collaboration between various disciplines should be encouraged to foster innovative solutions to real-world problems and ensure that research remains aligned with its core mission of benefiting humanity.

No Results Communication: A fundamental ethical principle in academic research is to communicate the results to the participants or respondents who provided data. They should be informed about how their input contributed to the research and what the findings are. However, in practice, this principle is often ignored. Many researchers publish their papers and consider the work finished, without sharing the results with the individuals who participated. Even academics are unaware of the journal name or publication details. This lack of communication means that the respondents, who may not have access to academic publications or knowledge of research processes, are left in the dark about the outcomes of their contributions. This issue is particularly concerning because these participants, often from less privileged or non-academic backgrounds, are not given the opportunity to see how their input has been used or what impact their responses may have had on the research. They are not informed about the findings that may directly relate to the issues they care about or the questions they were asked to answer. This practice undermines the ethical responsibility researchers have toward their respondents, making the research process feel more one-sided and exploitative rather than a collaborative and mutually beneficial endeavor. It also reduces the value of their participation, as they never get to see the tangible outcomes of their involvement.

Solution: To address this issue, it is essential to require researchers to communicate their findings to participants through accessible channels such as summary reports, workshops, or presentations. Platforms should also be developed where participants can easily access research findings relevant to them. This approach would foster transparency, ensure participants feel valued, and maintain the ethical integrity of the research process.

No Systematic Disposal of Data: One of the critical aspects of ethical research practices is the proper disposal of data after it has been analyzed and used. However, in many cases, there is no systematic or secure process for disposing of research data. Once the data analysis is completed, researchers often fail to follow proper protocols for the secure and responsible disposal of both hard and soft copies of the data. Physical copies of data, such as survey forms or interview notes, are often discarded carelessly, or worse, sold to scrap waste collectors "Kabadi". These collectors then resell the questionnaires, interview notes, or FGD records to street vendors like "Chana chatpate" sellers, resulting in the spread of sensitive information throughout the city, putting participants' privacy at risk. Similarly, digital copies of data are often deleted in a manner that doesn't ensure full erasure. As a result, these files can potentially be recovered or accessed by unauthorized individuals, further compromising data security. This lack of attention to proper data disposal is common among researchers, many of whom don't realize the importance of protecting the confidentiality and privacy of the data after the research is complete. When data is not disposed of securely, it leads to risks like data breaches, identity theft, and the unethical use of sensitive information. It also damages the credibility and integrity of the research process, showing a failure

to take responsibility for handling data appropriately. Ethical research requires not only the careful storage of data during the study but also its safe disposal after analysis, ensuring participant privacy is protected and maintaining the integrity of the research.

Solution: To address this issue, researchers must be educated about the importance of data privacy and secure disposal practices. Developing clear data retention policies that specify how long data should be retained and how it should be securely disposed of after this period is essential. Researchers should be required to follow these policies to ensure that participant privacy is protected and the integrity of the research is maintained. By implementing these measures, academic institutions can safeguard the confidentiality of participants and enhance the ethical standards of research practices.

Unethical Sampling: Determining the right sample size is crucial in academic research to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The sample size depends on whether the data is collected from individual respondents or groups. According to Cochran (1977) and Hedges & Hedberg (2007), the approach differs for individual and grouped data. For individual respondents, sample size is determined by factors like population variability, margin of error, and confidence level. For grouped data, factors like homogeneity, heterogeneity, and clustering effects need to be considered. However, in Nepal, many researchers, without proper knowledge or by ignoring these principles, use arbitrary sample sizes, such as 200 or 400, without considering these distinctions. This approach compromises the quality of research and violates ethical standards. Using fixed sample sizes without proper calculation leads to inaccurate results, invalid inferences, and misleading decisions. A sample that is too small may not represent the population well, while a sample that is too large adds unnecessary complexity and cost. This unethical practice also undermines the credibility of research. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure their studies accurately reflect the population and produce reliable results. Without proper sample size calculation, the conclusions drawn may be misleading, affecting policy-making, business decisions, and scientific progress. In Nepal, researchers need to follow proper statistical guidelines when determining sample size to improve the quality of research and maintain trust in the academic community.

Solution: To address unethical sampling practices, researchers must be provided with training on ethical and scientifically sound sampling methods, ensuring they understand how to determine sample size based on the data type and research goals. Additionally, researchers should be required to justify their chosen sample size and sampling method in their proposals, grounding these decisions in statistical principles and research objectives. Finally, including the sampling methodology as a key criterion in the peer review process will help prevent unethical practices, ensuring that the sample size and method align with the study's goals and enhancing the overall quality and integrity of the research.

Failure to Follow Journal Guidelines: In academic research, one of the core principles is to follow to the submission guidelines set by the respective journals. These guidelines ensure consistency, transparency, and professionalism in the publication process. However, in some cases, authors do not follow these established procedures and instead submit their manuscripts through informal channels, such as email or personal connections. When authors bypass journal submission systems and use email or personal contacts to submit their work, they undermine the formal submission process. This practice can lead to several issues, such as a lack of transparency, improper peer review, and even potential biases in the selection of articles for publication. Journals usually have strict guidelines for manuscript submission, including formats, citation styles, and necessary documents (like cover letters or ethical approval forms). By failing to follow these rules, authors risk having their work rejected or delayed. Additionally, submitting papers through personal connections or informal channels may also raise ethical concerns. There is a potential for favoritism or conflicts of interest if the publication process is influenced by personal relationships rather than merit. It compromises the integrity of the academic publishing system and can diminish the quality of research disseminated to the public. Moreover, using email or personal connections to submit papers may also result in a lack of proper documentation. Official submission systems track important details like submission dates, revision histories, and communication between authors and editors. By neglecting this, both the authors and the journal may lose critical information needed for future reference or validation.

Solution: Researchers should always follow the journal's official submission guidelines, using the proper submission systems instead of informal methods like email. Papers that do not follow the journal's guidelines should be rejected. Journals should enforce these rules to ensure fair, transparent review processes and prevent bias or favoritism. This maintains the professionalism of the publishing process and upholds the quality of academic work.

Use of Outdated Tools to Analyze Data: One of the significant issues in academic research in Nepal is the use of outdated software and tools for data analysis. While there are many advanced, up-to-date software options available globally for analyzing research data, a large number of researchers in Nepal continue to rely on older, less efficient tools, or even free trial versions, or old student editions of the software. This practice not only compromises the quality of research but also raises ethical concerns. Using outdated software, or trial/student versions that lack full functionality, can lead to inaccurate analysis, limiting the reliability and validity of research findings. These versions may have restricted features, fail to handle large datasets efficiently, or lack the updated algorithms required for precise analysis. Modern tools often come with improved algorithms, better data processing capabilities, and more comprehensive features that ensure precise and efficient data analysis. When researchers fail to use such tools, the data analysis may

be flawed, leading to incorrect conclusions that can misguide policy-making, business decisions, or scientific progress. Moreover, relying on outdated software or limited trial versions can raise ethical issues related to transparency and reproducibility. Many modern research tools offer detailed logs of the analysis process, helping researchers explain and justify their findings. Older software or student versions, however, might not have these features, making it harder for others to replicate the study or verify the results. This lack of transparency undermines the credibility of the research and violates ethical principles of accountability in the scientific community. Additionally, failing to use up-to-date tools can create gaps in research methodology and prevent researchers from staying competitive in a rapidly evolving field. Researchers in Nepal who continue to rely on outdated or trial versions may struggle to meet international standards, limiting their ability to collaborate with global scholars. This can affect their professional standing, as they may be seen as using less reliable or outdated methods in their work, undermining the credibility of their research.

Solution: Researchers should use up-to-date software for data analysis to ensure accurate and reliable results. Using updated tools should be mandatory in research. This improves research quality, ensures transparency, and aligns with global standards.

Conclusion

The prevalence of unethical research practices in Nepal poses a significant threat to academic integrity, credibility, and societal trust. Key issues such as data fabrication, gift authorship, lack of ethical approval, weak peer review, unregulated AI use, career-driven research, poor results communication, improper data disposal, unethical sampling, non-compliance with journal guidelines, and reliance on outdated analytical tools collectively undermine the quality and impact of research. To combat these challenges, systemic reforms are necessary. Strengthening institutional oversight, enforcing transparent peer review, adopting ethical guidelines, promoting responsible AI use, ensuring proper data management, and prioritizing research with societal benefits are critical steps. By implementing these solutions, Nepal's academic community can uphold ethical standards, enhance research credibility, and contribute meaningfully to global knowledge. Ultimately, fostering a culture of integrity, accountability, and innovation will ensure that research in Nepal aligns with international best practices while serving the greater good.

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