From Assistance to Abuse: Investigating AI's Role in Academic Dishonesty

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Abstract.

This study examines students' perspectives on plagiarism, academic integrity, and AI-generated plagiarism in the context of AI-assisted academic dishonesty. The use of semi-structured interviews with five university students, who were caught employing AI tools in their study, helps to clarify how tech advancements and academic pressures get intertwined in students' lives for making decisions and giving their ethical opinions. The results indicate that students, in general, have a clear line between AI-produced text and conventional plagiarism, regarding AI as a positive facilitator and not a negative source of misconduct. Their view of academic honesty is shaped by the amount of work, the fear of not performing well, and the unclear rules from the university concerning the use of AI that is acceptable. The same students also mentioned that the AI's power of convenience, fast processing, and personal contact made the misuse of it very easy and also helped to gain acceptance of it among friends. Eventually, the study assert that the problem of AI-assisted dishonesty can only be solved through a combination of institutions' clearer policies, institutions' supportive learning environments, and teachers' practices that responsible and ethically integrate AI in higher learning.

Keywords: Academic dishonesty; AI-giarism; academic integrity and technology affordance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of AI in education has recently been addressed as a prominent issue. In its development, AI comes up with dual purposes. Some people are definitely against AI being involved in education. Some others, on the other hand, believe that AI could bridge the gap between students and educators in terms of their relationship in learning contexts. Students from various disciplines are prefering applications like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot to assist with writing, translation, and research tasks. It is because these technologies provides efficiency, accuracy, and personalized feedback, which makes them powerful learning supports (Sari & Abrar, 2024). The absence of authentic work challenges teachers to assess students, because AI-generated work typically appears original and of high quality. (Abbas, 2023) suggested that the limited feedback and time of educators to serve students also negatively impacts learning. Widespread dishonesty can lead to a devaluation of the academic work and qualifications. The need to revise assignment design and learning assessment is accompanied by the need to teach digital ethics and responsible use of AI. AI-assisted cheating involves technology, but it more importantly involves educational dishonesty and a need for the education system to redefine integrity and adapt to the digital age (Cotton et al., 2024a) Recently, many researchers have conducted studies on the use of AI and its potential impact, examining both its positive and negative aspects. For instance, (Dangin et al., 2023) found that AI-powered writing skills could lead students to dependency on AI. Furthermore, (Dergaa et al., 2023) also revealed that students express concern related to their potential reliance on AI as a task executor rather than a learning partner.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The feedback from AI is given immediately, which allows the students to think and change their work more rapidly (Dergaa et al., 2023). AI also gives support to those students who have language difficulties or who are afraid of being judged when writing by allowing them to practice and learn without being judged which is a safer atmosphere. This has made learning more inclusive and supportive for various kinds of students.(Qasem, 2023) argued that AI's role is not limited to just writing support, as it can also function as an online tutor that aids the students in grasping difficult concepts and getting ready for the exams. A number of the learning sites incorporate AI for the purpose of customizing the study resources,

changing the lesson's level of difficulty, and monitoring the students' progress. The teachers' use of these technologies may result in a decrease in their workload while at the same time gaining an understanding of the students' learning behaviors that can lead to the adoption of teaching strategies more aligned with the students. In this regard, AI enhances rather than replaces the role of the educator as it makes learning more interactive and based on data. When responsibly applied, AI turns into a precious ally in the process of actively engaging students, self-improvement, and developing independent study skills.
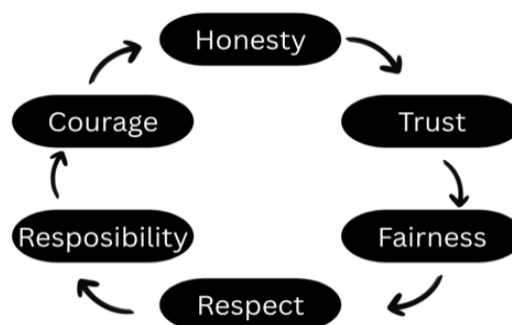
AI-Assisted Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty could be construed as students' activities in claiming others' work as their own, and with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), these practices have been done in complex way. AI-assisted academic dishonesty occurs when students misuse AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and QuillBot to generate essays, paraphrase content, or solve problems without genuine intellectual involvement as their original ideas.Students often justify these practices due to factors such as high academic pressure, perceived low risk of detection, and lack of clear institutional guidelines on AI use. The challenge for educators is distinguishing between ethical AI-assisted learning (using AI for idea generation) and unethical AI-assisted dishonesty (submitting AI-generated work as original). Thus, this study is going to explore the students' side of the misuse of AI by adopting some major theories such as the Academic Integrity Theory, the Self-efficacy, and the Technological Affordance Theory.

Academic Integrity Theory

According to the International Center for Academic Integrity (2021), there are 6 main fundamental values in academic integrity, such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. Honesty means the peak of academic integrity. It includes trust where students need to be transparent about their academic performance. In this point, it means students must demonstrate the resources they used and explain each step of their work process, while also avoiding AI-generated outputs that could substitute for their own thinking or learning. These values allow students not only to protect the academic integrity of their work, but also to support the development of long-standing values and habits for future personal and professional growth (Ihekweazu et al., 2023).

Technology affordance

Technology affordance theory centers on the ways the specific functions and features embedded in different technologies shape the ways individuals use them (Andra Prayudi et al., 2021). This theory looks beyond what a tool was designed to do and instead looks at what users think can be done with it. In the case of education, students use digital technologies according to what they think the technology can offer them in terms of speed, ease, individualization, and privacy. These perceived affordances shape students' behaviors, motivation, and choices on the tasks at hand. In the case of students' use of AI tools, this theory can explain the responsible and learning-oriented use of AI tools on the one hand, or the academic dishonesty on the other hand (Lena Folabit & Currell Jita, 2024). If educators know the AI tools they use offer features like immediate text generation or seamless paraphrasing, they can better anticipate students' use of such tools in ways that help educators rationalize students' use of ethical learning, and support balanced learning activities.
Research Questions:

1. How do students perceive plagiarism?
2. How do students perceive the academic integrity of AI use?
3. How do students perceive AI and AI-giarism?

III.   METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). By means of purposive sampling, this study selected five students who were identified as producing AI-generated work. Furthermore, to collect the data, this study employed semi-structured interviews grounded in the main theories. Eventually, the data gained from interview were analysed thematically to answer the research questions.

IV.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students perception and plagiarism

From five students interviewed, the findings revealed a complex and often conflicted understanding of plagiarism, academic integrity, and the role of AI in academic work. First, most students showed an unclear or inconsistent perception of plagiarism. Actually, they recognized traditional forms of copying as wrong. But, they often viewed AI-generated text differently, describing it as "assistance," "a tool," or "just another source," rather than a form of plagiarism. This blurred understanding appeared to make AI-based misconduct less intentional.The findings show that students are still trying to make sense of what plagiarism and academic honesty really mean in an era where AI is everywhere. It is in line with (Ihekweazu et al., 2023) that while they clearly understand that copying a friend's work or taking text directly from the internet is wrong, their feelings about AI are much more complicated and biased. (Cotton et al., 2024b) also found that many students talked about AI because it were simply a helpful assistant, something like a smarter dictionary or an online tutor rather than a creator of text that could put them at risk of plagiarism. Because of this, by using AI, they didn't feel like "cheating" to them since it felt practical, convenient, and even normal. This confusion makes AI-related misconduct seem less intentional or serious in their point of view. Their views reveal a growing mismatch between how institutions define plagiarism and how students actually experience technology in their daily academic work, pointing to the need for clearer, more empathetic guidance on what responsible AI use really looks like (Sweeney, 2023).

Students' perception on the academic integrity of AI use

Second, students' perceptions of academic integrity in the context of AI use were shaped strongly by personal pressures and the learning environment. Although all students acknowledged that integrity is important, they admitted that heavy workloads, unclear assignment expectations, and anxiety about performance pushed them toward AI misuse. Some believed that using AI was acceptable as long as they "edited the answer," while others felt that current academic policies did not match the realities of new technologies. This suggests that their understanding of integrity is not fixed but negotiable depending on context.The findings also show that students' sense of academic integrity becomes much more flexible when they are under pressure. It is in accordance with (Bergdahl & Sjöberg, 2025) that students all agreed that honesty in academic work matters, their actions often shifted when they faced heavy workloads, blurred instructions, or fear of performing poorly. In these moments, AI became a kind of safety net, something they could turn to when they felt overwhelmed or unsure. Some students felt that as long as they edited or "personalized" the AI's output, they were still being honest, while others believed that current rules simply haven't caught up with how AI is used in real learning situations (Zheltukhina et al., 2023). As (Sinha, 2022) reveals that this academic integrity isn't a rigid principle for many students but something they negotiate based on stress, expectations, and the practical realities of their environment.

Students' perception of AI and AI-giarism.

Finally, students viewed AI and AI-giarism through a practical, benefit-focused lens. They highlighted AI's usefulness for generating ideas, drafting assignments, and reducing stress, but they also admitted that these conveniences made it tempting to rely too heavily on the tool. Several students described their misconduct as "accidental" or "unplanned," saying that AI slowly shifted from a helper to the main writer. Interestingly, most students did not believe AI-giarism was equally wrong as traditional cheating because "everyone uses AI anyway," showing a normalization of AI misuse among peers. Overall, the findings suggest that student behavior is shaped not only by individual decisions but also by technological affordances, academic pressure, and evolving norms around AI use.The findings show that students tend to

look at AI and even AI-giarism through a very practical, almost everyday lens. (Gasaymeh et al., 2024) found that for stdents, AI isn't just a shortcut; it's a stress reliever, an idea generator, and a way to survive demanding academic tasks. Because of this, (Hasanein & Sobaih, 2023) revealed thatrevealed that many students described their misuse of AI not as something they planned to do, but as something that "just happened" over time, AI slowly moved from being a small helper to doing most of the work without them fully realizing it. What stands out is how normalized this behavior has become: several students felt that using AI isn't as wrong as traditional cheating simply because "everyone else is doing it." This shared mindset shows that their choices are influenced not only by personal intentions but also by the culture around them, the pressures they face, and the ease with which AI tools offer help (Jarrah et al., 2023). In other words, their understanding of what counts as misconduct is being actively shaped by technology, stress, and shifting peer norms, rather than by clear ethical boundaries.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that the students' AI misuse for academic purposes is caused by ambiguous perceptions, academic pressure, and the strong pull of the technology itself. They also saw the generation of AI text as a different category from traditional plagiarism and considered it more of a harmless act than a serious violation. They were aware of the academic integrity issue, yet their choices were mainly influenced by the factors of workload, stress, and the belief that academic rules have not kept pace with the new reality of AI. The quality, speed, and the individualization that AI provided made it difficult for them to not use the tool more than what they intended, thus gradually leading to the acceptance of AI-giarism among colleagues. The findings indicate that the prevention of dishonesty through AI must not be based only on the detection or punishment of the offenders; institutions should instead offer clearer directions, revised policies, and assessment methods that are learning-focused and consequently help students understand the ethical boundaries while at the same time supporti.

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