

Engineering Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism and "AI-giarism"

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Abstract

Plagiarism in higher education has long been a concern, but the emergence of generative AI has complicated its boundaries by enabling new forms of "ghostwriting" that are inexpensive, accessible, and difficult to detect reliably. Recent work has introduced the term "AI-giarism" to describe the unethical use of AI to generate unacknowledged content, yet confusion continues about what constitutes misconduct. To explore how engineering students define plagiarism and misconduct in the context of AI, a survey of 149 students at a large public Midwestern university examined perceptions of various scenarios of possible misconduct involving AI-generated content. Descriptive analyses showed mixed views on what qualifies as AI-giarism, with even less consensus on more ambiguous cases. Students who used or previously used generative AI drew similar boundaries. At the same time, non-users held more conservative views, and first-year students generally reported stricter standards on AI use than upper-level peers. These findings highlight the need to refine instruments for measuring perceptions of AI-related misconduct and to deepen understanding of student perspectives on the appropriate use of generative AI in academic work.

Introduction

Plagiarism, the act of presenting the work of someone else as one's own without appropriate credit, has been a persistent issue in higher education. The concept has a straightforward definition and takes many forms (e.g., direct, self, and mosaic), which consequently lead students to understand it differently [1]. Students tend to associate the misuse of generative AI with plagiarism, but there are still nuances to consider [2]. One form of plagiarism discussed in the literature is "ghostwriting," the practice of contracting someone to complete a writing task on one's behalf. Before the release of large language models, students had to use a specific service or peer network to engage in this kind of academic misconduct. Although students tend to associate the misuse of generative AI with plagiarism, there are still nuances to consider [2]. The issue of ghostwriting is further complicated by the introduction of generative AI systems, which have democratized access to virtually free ghostwriting support for students' assignments. With calls for educators to incorporate various aspects of AI literacy and integrate these tools into students' workflows [3-5], confusion about appropriate use has understandably emerged, just as we have seen with plagiarism. As Hutson [6] invites us to rethink plagiarism in the age of AI in English composition, defining what the appropriate use of AI entails requires us, as engineering education researchers and practitioners, to engage students about its potential uses.

Perhaps the first framing of misconduct using AI in the context of plagiarism aside from terms like AI plagiarism [7] and AI-assisted cheating [8] is given by Chan [9, p. 8089], who defines the concept of *AI-giarism* as the "unethical practice of using artificial intelligence technology, particularly generative language models, to generate content that is plagiarized either from original

human-authored work or directly from AI-generated content, without appropriate acknowledgement of the original sources or AI's contribution." At the time of writing, this framing does not appear to have permeated into the field of engineering and computing education. As such, we position this paper to contribute to the ongoing conversations by quantitatively exploring engineering students' beliefs about what constitutes misuse of these tools.

Research Aim

For this full paper, we posed the following research question: *"How do engineering students associate misuses of generative AI with plagiarism and academic misconduct?"* To understand how different engineering students might respond, we disaggregated responses into three stratifications: generative AI use, major, and starting year at the University.

Relevant Literature

Although the integration of generative AI into higher education is seen as inevitable, students find that guidance on the concept of AI-giarism remains murky [10]. After the emergence of generative AI tools like ChatGPT, universities scrambled to introduce policies to provide some guardrails for appropriate use, integrating them into existing academic misconduct policies [11]. Within these policies, much like with plagiarism, their focus tends to position originality as the key issue [12]. What does it mean for work to be *original* in the age of generative AI? With AI-generated work that does not involve substantial human involvement generally considered outside the scope of copyright [13], ownership over work created in part with generative AI can be tricky to articulate. With this uncertainty, among other considerations related to AI such as the impact on creativity and human agency in writing [14], it is easy to see how drawing the line between behavior that is AI-giarism and behavior that is not AI-giarism can be a challenge for students. Determining acceptable use is perhaps the key consideration in research in this area [15], and the punishments for violating such policies are similarly vague [16]. Students are not alone in this confusion, as faculty also manage institutional expectations with the varied ways in which AI-giarism manifests in their students' work [17].

Research on AI misuse has quickly led to the development of instruments to measure individuals' perceptions of what constitutes AI misuse, aimed at understanding where the line lies for appropriate AI implementations in academic settings. For example, Gruenhagen et al. [18] administered a set of questions to gauge students' views of ethics using chatbots with items such as "Using a chatbot to help with an assessment is not necessarily cheating," "Using a chatbot for inspiration is no different than using Google or other sources of information," and "Using a chatbot to provide me with information is not cheating if I reference the information and do not copy and paste the response." On the other hand, instead of direct statements like the previous instrument, Lund et al. [19] created a 22-item instrument for students to rate a series of activities on the scale of "not academic misconduct at all" to "major academic misconduct." These items were paired with comparable items to Gruenhagen et al.'s instrument [18], such as "cheating on assignments

is unethical,” “cheating is okay as long as I don’t get caught,” and “using AI to help write papers is cheating.” As another example, Nelson et al. [20] developed a more closed-ended instrument administered in Ecuador to students in a course on academic writing in a second language, with open-ended questions such as “What specific examples can you provide for using AI technologies dishonestly in your writing?” and other items in multiple-choice format with specific correct answers. Even in the short time between the release of ChatGPT, there is diverse instrumentation to crack into the question of AI misuse. In this study, we apply one of these emerging instruments, from Chan [9], who coined the term *AI-giarism*, to explore how engineering students perceive the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI.

Research Design

We approached our research question using a descriptive quantitative design with the context of a questionnaire-based data collection strategy as part of a larger mixed-methods study. In this section, we will describe the research context, instrumentation, and analysis strategy.

Data Collection

We draw on the results of a larger questionnaire-based study ($n = 149$) conducted at a large public Midwest institution that focused on engineering students' use of external resources for their studies, specifically solution manuals, online videos, and generative AI [20]. Most relevant to this work, the questionnaire included Chan's [9] instrument, which probes what students consider to be forms of plagiarism and AI-giarism. For example, students are presented with an item such as, "The student employed AI technologies only to assist with the checking of grammar for their assignment." [9, p. 8097] and rated the extent to which they considered that act as a form of plagiarism on a seven-point Likert scale. The first item in the instrument is the proposed most egregious form of AI-giarism, the last item is not a form of AI-giarism, and the items between progress downward in the extent of AI-giarism. The second part of the instrument lists different forms of plagiarism, which students rate on the same Likert scale. Table 1 shows the items adapted from Chan's (2025) instrument.

All undergraduate engineering students at the university were invited to complete the instrument in Summer and Fall 2025 ($N = 5,735$). We received a total of 195 complete responses. After removing students who did not respond correctly to the two attention checkers placed throughout the instrument, we were left with 149 complete responses. No missingness was observed on the relevant items in this research.

Analysis

To analyze the responses, we relied heavily on descriptive statistics. Because the instrument was not designed to be treated as a latent construct and instead as an item-by-item construct, factor analysis was not pursued. To explore how different subgroups responded to these items, we segmented the data by category and year in school. We also separated the data into three groups based on their responses to an item earlier in the survey about their usage of generative AI:

adopters (those who use generative AI), rejectors (those who have tried these tools but have since stopped using them), and candidates (those who claim not to have used generative AI for their coursework). We calculated the descriptive statistics for these subgroups.

Table 1. Items adapted from Chan's [9] instrument

Item	Item Content
AI-giarism_1	The student inputs a prompt into an AI system, copied the generated response, and submitted it to the teacher. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_2	The student employed AI technologies to paraphrase some of the texts for their assignment from other sources without acknowledgement. However, the student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_3	The student inputs a prompt into an AI system. After verifying all the facts, making edits, adding references, and formatting the generated response, they submitted it to the teacher. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_4	The student used inputs from AI technologies to produce multiple AI responses for their assignment, supplementing with their own ideas. After verifying all the facts, the student then used the best parts, made edits, and submitted the work. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_5	The student used their own ideas to generate prompts with inputs from AI technologies to produce multiple AI responses for their assignment. After verifying all the facts, the student then used the best parts, made edits, and submitted the work. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_6	The student employed AI technologies to assist in generating initial ideas, and then supplemented them with their own ideas. After verifying all the facts, the student submitted the assignment with parts generated by AI tools and parts written by the student. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_7	The student employed AI technologies to rephrase some of their own written content for their assignment in order to improve the writing quality. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_8	The student drafted their assignment, sought feedback from AI technologies, and made improvements based on the suggestions provided, which may have entailed modifications to grammar and sentence structure. The student acknowledged the use of AI tools.
AI-giarism_9	The student employed AI technologies only to assist with the checking of grammar for their assignment.
AI-giarism_10	The student employed AI technologies and the Internet as search engines for resources to assist in completing their assignment, but did not incorporate any text directly from these resources in the assignment.
AI-giarism_11	The student completed their assignment without using any AI technologies or referring to the Internet.
Plagiarism_1	Copying word for word from a source without due acknowledgment of the source.
Plagiarism_2	Closely paraphrasing, or substantial copying with minor modifications (such as changing grammar, adding a few words or reversing active/passive voices), without due acknowledgment of the source.
Plagiarism_3	Translating a source in one language into another language and using it as your own, without due acknowledgment of the source.
Plagiarism_4	Collusion or unauthorized collaboration between students on a piece of work without acknowledging the assistance received.
Plagiarism_5	Use of the work of another student or third party (e.g., an essay writing service) for submission as one's original work.
Plagiarism_6	Submitting part or all of the same assignment for different courses without acknowledging it.
Plagiarism_7	Getting a ghostwriter to write your assignment.

Limitations

A handful of central limitations constrain our study. First, the data used in this work come from a single institution in the United States, which may hold beliefs different from those of students in other contexts [21]. Second, we are working with a smaller sample size than comparable work in other disciplines, which limits the kinds of analyses we can conduct, such as attempting an exploratory factor analysis to examine if the instrument has a latent factor structure. Moreover, because of the smaller sample size and the possibility that certain demographic groups are disproportionately small, some comparisons are less informative (e.g., between racial/ethnic categories). Third and finally, although the survey was administered outside the context of a specific class to minimize potential desirability bias, students remain uncertain about how particular faculty members may perceive their use of generative AI. Given that two of the authors in this work are faculty at the same institution, this aspect of our positionalities might have influenced some responses [22], [23]. Since the data are self-reported, students might not be entirely forthcoming about their perspectives.

Results

The demographic makeup of our sample is shown in Table 2. In general, our sample's composition is consistent with the university and college, and enrollment across departments matches our expectations. However, our representation of Black students is below what we would expect, whereas representation among Asian students is higher. Moreover, the representation of women is closer to parity than we would expect in the college. The vast majority of respondents were of traditional college age (i.e., 18-24), and 25% were first-generation students. Across the starting years, we had similarly sized groups in the most recent years (i.e., 2023-2025), though this waned for older students.

The descriptive statistics for the plagiarism and AI-giarism instruments are given in Table 3. Overall, students had much stronger views on plagiarism than on AI-giarism, as evidenced by the greater skew ($M_p = -2.47$ vs. $M_{AI} = 1.19$) and kurtosis ($M_p = 7.20$ vs. $M_{AI} = 1.88$) for the majority of items. To further highlight these differences, the largest mean for the AI-giarism items ($M = 4.59$) was lower than the smallest mean for the plagiarism items ($M = 5.22$).

When examining the responses to the AI-giarism items across engineering majors (Figure 1), AI-giarism scores followed highly similar declining trajectories across the survey items. Overall, agreement was highest for the earliest items (e.g., AI-giarism_1: $M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.95$) and steadily decreased across subsequent items, reaching substantially lower levels by the final items (e.g., AI-giarism_11: $M = 1.35$, $SD = 1.16$).

Table 2. Demographic breakdown of our sample

Variable	Count	Variable	Count
<i>Gender</i>		<i>Department</i>	
Man	82	Aerospace & Mechanics	13
Woman	60	Biomedical	12
Non-Binary	2	Chemical and Environmental	14
Prefer not to disclose	5	Civil, Architectural, Construction Management	19
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		Computer Science	23
Asian	34	Electrical and Computer Engineering	13
Black	1	Mechanical, Materials, and Industrial	54
Hispanic or Latine	7	Other	1
White	92	<i>Working Status</i>	
Multiracial	7	1 to 10 hours per week	16
Prefer not to disclose	8	11 to 15 hours per week	16
<i>Start Year</i>		16 to 20 hours per week	20
2020	3	21 to 30 hours per week	10
2021	14	More than 30 hours per week	29
2022	23	None, I do not currently have a job	58
2023	40	<i>First Generation Status</i>	
2024	32	First Generation	39
2025	37	Continuing Generation	110
<i>Age</i>		<i>Gen AI Use</i>	
Traditional (< 24 years)	147	Adopter	65
Post-traditional (>= 24 years)	2	Candidate	24
		Rejector	60

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for items adapted from Chan's [9] instrument

Item	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Median	Skew	Kurtosis	SE
Plagiarism_1	149	6.72	1.05	7.00	-4.63	21.44	0.09
Plagiarism_2	149	6.15	1.32	7.00	-2.26	5.10	0.11
Plagiarism_3	149	6.40	1.25	7.00	-2.66	7.13	0.10
Plagiarism_4	149	5.31	1.64	6.00	-0.98	0.27	0.13
Plagiarism_5	149	6.41	1.30	7.00	-3.02	8.98	0.11
Plagiarism_6	149	5.22	1.98	6.00	-0.78	-0.79	0.16
Plagiarism_7	149	6.46	1.27	7.00	-2.95	8.29	0.10
AI-giarism_1	147	4.49	1.95	5.00	-0.34	-1.15	0.16
AI-giarism_2	147	4.59	1.93	5.00	-0.38	-1.11	0.16
AI-giarism_3	147	2.99	1.85	2.00	0.72	-0.65	0.15
AI-giarism_4	147	2.79	1.87	2.00	0.98	-0.20	0.15
AI-giarism_5	149	2.78	1.73	2.00	0.91	-0.21	0.14
AI-giarism_6	149	2.64	1.57	2.00	0.95	0.14	0.13
AI-giarism_7	149	2.41	1.49	2.00	1.22	0.87	0.12
AI-giarism_8	149	1.89	1.23	2.00	1.83	3.47	0.10
AI-giarism_9	149	1.85	1.35	1.00	1.95	3.47	0.11
AI-giarism_10	148	2.05	1.39	2.00	1.45	1.55	0.11
AI-giarism_11	149	1.35	1.16	1.00	3.84	14.50	0.10

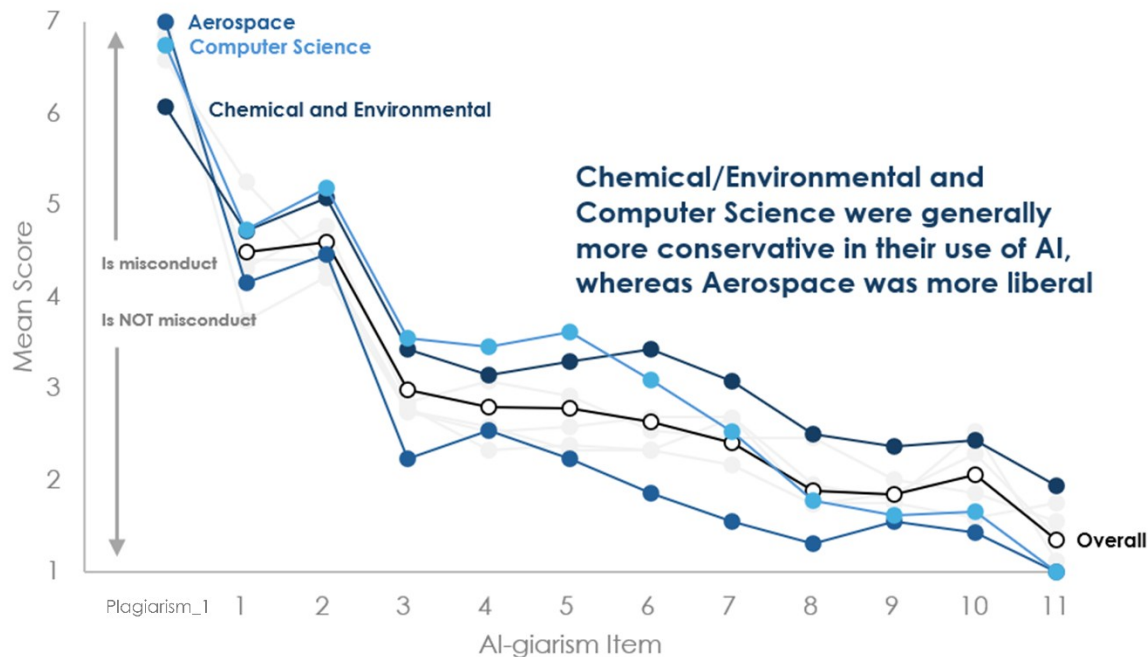


Figure 1. AI-giarism scores disaggregated by department (Item 1 is Plagiarism_1)

Across majors, students in Chemical and Environmental Engineering and Computer Science departments consistently exhibited higher mean scores on early items, indicating stronger agreement with AI-giarism concerns in scenarios involving more severe or explicit AI misuse. In contrast, students in the Department of Aerospace Engineering reported slightly lower early-item means, though their responses followed the same downward pattern observed across all disciplines. The remaining departments closely tracked the overall mean trend. No engineering major demonstrated a divergent pattern across items; rather, differences were primarily differences in magnitude rather than direction, indicating broadly shared perceptions of AI misuse across engineering disciplines.

AI-giarism scores also varied systematically by GenAI use category (Figure 2). Across all groups, mean scores declined sharply from early to later items, mirroring the overall trend observed in the full sample. Despite the shared trajectory, consistent separation between groups was observed. GenAI Adopters reported the lowest AI-giarism mean scores across most items, particularly in the mid-survey range (e.g., AI-giarism_5–7, where overall means ranged from $M = 2.25$ to 2.55), suggesting reduced concern or stigma toward AI use. GenAI Candidates generally fell between Adopters and Rejectors, while GenAI Rejectors exhibited the highest mean scores, especially on early items, suggesting stronger negative perceptions or concerns about AI use. Together, these findings suggest a gradient effect, wherein greater acceptance of GenAI tools is associated with lower AI-giarism perceptions across misuse scenarios.

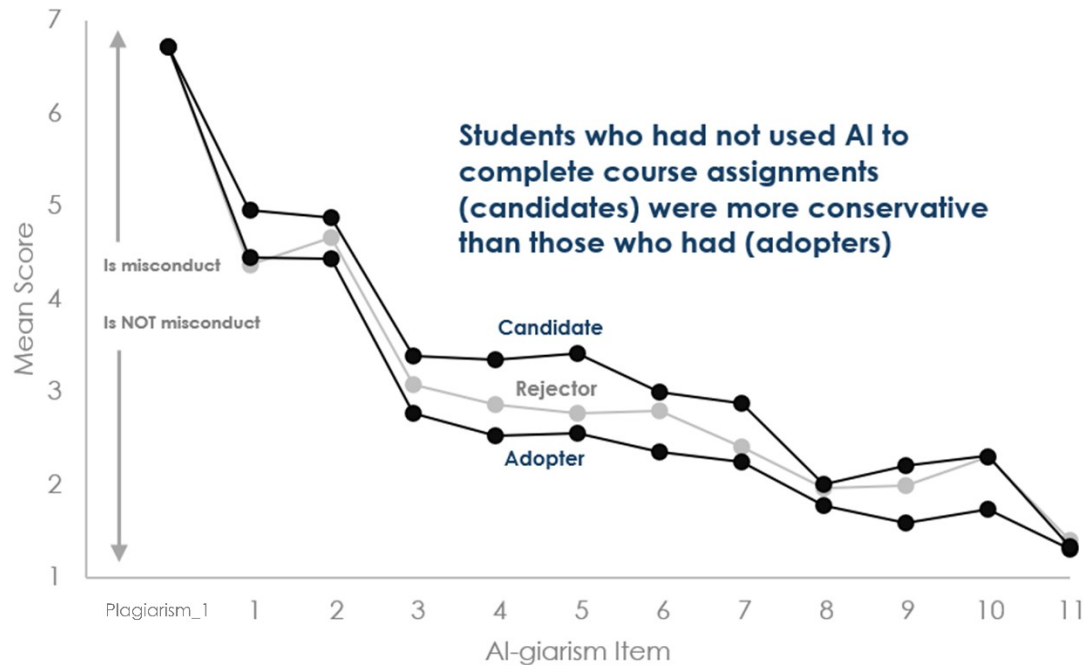


Figure 2. AI-giarism scores disaggregated by student use of AI (i.e., candidates, adopters, and rejectors); Item 1 is Plagiarism_1

When stratified by starting year, all cohorts showed the same overall decline in AI-giarism scores across items, with early items eliciting higher agreement and later items converging toward lower mean values. However, differences in magnitude emerged between cohorts (Table 4). Newer cohorts (2024–2025) tended to report higher mean scores on all items, suggesting increased sensitivity or awareness of AI-related concerns among recent entrants. In contrast, earlier cohorts (2020–2022) generally showed lower early-item means and a steeper initial decline across the first half of the survey.

Table 4. AI-giarism items disaggregated by start year, more senior students (bold italics) were more conservative than junior students (bold)

Start Year	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11
2021	4.36	4.14	2.50	2.36	2.14	1.79	2.00	1.36	1.29	1.71	1.43
2022	4.13	4.09	2.39	2.04	2.09	2.17	1.70	1.43	1.39	2.13	1.30
2023	4.32	4.65	3.02	2.80	2.98	2.92	2.28	1.82	1.7	1.88	1.27
2024	4.52	4.9	3.35	3.35	3.28	3.09	3.03	2.25	2.25	2.42	1.50
2025	4.94	4.69	3.19	2.94	2.81	2.54	2.62	2.16	2.22	2.08	1.32

Discussion

In aligning our work with the literature, we observe convergence with the established trends. In particular, it is evident that students have quite mixed perceptions of what constitutes misconduct with generative AI. We found that students in our sample were generally as conservative as those in the original sample from Chan’s work [9]. Similarly, the trend of higher consensus on plagiarism

compared with AI-giarism was upheld across samples. In other research using a different instrument, the patterns we observed generally hold as well, as in Lund et al.'s [16] study on students' perceptions of academic misconduct involving AI tool use, which found that students mainly considered AI-generated work to be a more serious instance of misconduct. In contrast, AI assistance for other smaller tasks was less of an issue. The mixed acceptance of using generative AI for smaller tasks is likely related to broader research on students' perceptions of generative AI and its impact on their schoolwork. This uncertainty is reflected in students' concerns about accuracy, privacy, and overreliance [24, 25]. Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that cultural differences significantly influence students' ethical reasoning about the appropriateness of using generative AI, providing another avenue for researchers and practitioners to explore [21].

Although we did not pursue factor analysis in this case, other applications of the instrument have explored potential underlying factor structures. For example, Gökçearsan et al. [26] translated the original instrument into Turkish and conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses with a sample of 426 university students (though the model may be overfit, as the same data were used for both analyses). The authors found three factors, 'plagiaristic AI use' (Items 1-2), 'AI-augmented writing' (Items 3-8), and 'no AI reliance' (Items 9-11), which effectively divide the scale into three boundaries. When comparing these boundaries to the patterns in our data, we see a clear drop of over 1.5 points from 'plagiaristic AI use' to 'AI-augmented writing,' though the difference between 'AI-augmented writing' and 'no AI reliance' is much closer. These findings suggest that the instrument may have more structure than originally conceived and could serve as a basis for further work to understand how students differentiate appropriate and inappropriate uses of generative AI tools.

Future Work

Based on our findings, we are currently expanding our work to include follow-up interviews with respondents based on patterns in trajectories of responses to the AI-giarism instrument. One potential step forward is to use Başer et al.'s [27] conceptual model of what drives AI-giarism to help uncover the underlying student perspectives. The model is based on the *fraud triangle*, a concept from criminology to explain the factors that lead one to engage in fraud, originally the crime of embezzlement [28], but has been expanded to be applied to academic misconduct in higher education [29]. For a student to engage in academic misconduct, whether it be plagiarism or AI-giarism, there must be pressure (e.g., assignment deadlines, grades), opportunity (e.g., ghostwriting services, homework help websites, generative AI tools), and rationalization (i.e., what process is used to frame the act of engaging in academic misconduct as ethically appropriate). Building on the work of Alshurafat et al. [27], Başer et al.'s [24] model situates these factors within three categories: opportunity facilitated by lax enforcement, students' understanding of AI, and AI's capacity. Additionally, rationalization is a combination of justifying the plagiarism, as typical, and unawareness of AI deception. We expect this model to help frame interview prompts to expand

on the patterns we see in our data. Moreover, we plan to use these interviews to refine the instrument and re-administer it in other contexts beyond our own institution.

Conclusion

In this study, we addressed the research question: "*how do engineering students associate misuses of generative AI with plagiarism?*" As part of our analyses, we explored subgroups to identify meaningful differences, focusing on three main stratifications: generative AI use, major, and starting year at the University. Through our descriptive analyses, this study provided additional evidence that the concept of AI-giarism still needs greater conceptual clarity in engineering education. The extant data, in addition to this study, collectively show that students have wide-ranging beliefs about what constitutes appropriate use of generative AI, and policies policing its use may be missing the mark in their focus. Educators should have open conversations with their students to ensure a shared understanding of what it means to engage in AI-giarism in a particular context. As generative AI technologies continue to evolve, this dialogue will likely become increasingly necessary.

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