Academic Integrity during the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Social Media Mining Study

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ABSTRACT

Academic integrity has been a frequently reported challenge in online education. Given the widespread transition to online program delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask the following question: *How do college students feel about online cheating?* Our analysis is based on academic discussions on the Reddit social curation platform in Fall 2020 and, for comparison, Fall 2019. We found more discussions related to cheating in 2020 than in 2019, and the topics have expanded from plagiarism in programming assignments to online assessments in general. Topic modelling of the Fall 2020 discussions revealed three concerns raised by students: that cheating inflates grades and forces instructors to increase the difficulty of assessments; that witnessing cheating go unpunished is demotivating; and that academic integrity policies are not always communicated clearly.

Keywords

academic integrity, online education, social media, text mining

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have reported that online academic misconduct has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic [12, 6, 2, 4, 3, 18]. We therefore ask the following question in this paper: *How do college students feel about online cheating?* To answer this question, we turn the Reddit social curation platform (reddit.com). Reddit hosts over 100,000 user-created discussion communities refereed to as *subreddits*. Within a subreddit, users create posts that other users comment on. Subreddit names begin with "r/" and correspond to the subreddit topic, e.g., r/politics or r/relationship_advice.

Descriptive subreddit names make it easy to locate discussions about specific topics or discussions initiated by various kinds of users. Of interest to our study are over 80 subreddits corresponding to Canadian and U.S. universities, which we call *academic subreddits*. We collected all posts and comments on academic subreddits created during the Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters (September through December inclusive) that match at least one keyword related to cheating, such as 'cheat' or 'misconduct'. Our analysis consists of two steps. First, collecting data from the same time period in 2019 and 2020 allows us to compare cheatingoriented discussions from before the pandemic, when classes were held in person, and during the pandemic, with most courses delivered online. To do so, we train a logistic regression classifier to distinguish between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 content based on the words used. Next, we analyze Fall 2020 discussions in detail. We apply the Non-negative Matrix Factorization algorithm [20], which clusters posts and comments based on the words used and allows us to identify common discussion topics.

Related Work: Social media have become a go-to source of public opinion on a variety of topics. In particular, academic subreddits have been analyzed in recent work on students' mental health [1, 16], but academic integrity was not discussed. The closest works to ours are those in [4] and [5], which interviewed a small set of undergraduate students and educators. The participants identified some positive aspects of online education, but expressed concerns about cheating and the level of difficulty of online assessments. Our social media analysis explores these and other concerns in detail.

2. DATA AND METHODS

Previous work on students' mental health [1, 16] identified 83 *aca-demic* subreddits corresponding to major U.S. and Canadian universities. We analyze the same subreddits in this paper, listed in the first column of Table 1 (U.S.) and Table 2 (Canadian). We collected all posts and comments on these subreddits from the Fall 2019 semester, when classes and examinations were held in person, and the Fall 2020 semester, when most campuses moved to online delivery (September-December inclusive). We downloaded the data using a publicly-accessible Reddit interface at pushshift.io.

Next, we retain only those posts and comments that contain at least one of the following keywords: 'cheat', 'plagiari', and 'misconduct'. We perform *substring* matching, meaning that 'plagari' also matches 'plagiarize' and 'plagiarism'. Tables 1 and 2 report the number of posts ("P") and comments ("C") on each U.S. and Canadian academic subreddit, respectively, in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. The "Before" numbers correspond to all posts and comments. The "After" numbers correspond to posts and comments that matched at least one cheating-related keyword; note that there are three times as many such posts and comments in 2020 than in 2019 (7,809 vs. 2,524) even though the total number of posts and comments on academic subreddits has not changed much from 2019 to 2020 (see the total "Before" numbers in the last row of Tables 1 and 2).

We then perform standard text pre-processing. Following previous work on Reddit topic modelling [10, 16], we remove posts and

Table 1: Number of posts and comments on U.S. academic subreddits in 2019 and 2020 before and after filtering to find cheatingrelated discussions (C: Comments, P: Posts).

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| bostoncollege 3493 1006 0 0 753 188 0 0 cmu 3388 657 27 2 2764 517 3 0 washu 3159 572 4 0 1134 259 0 0 Vanderbilt 2581 555 9 1 1447 311 0 0 Harvard 2219 634 1 1 2294 517 1 0 UMBC 2036 457 21 3 2479 464 4 0 duke 2020 469 2 1 1397 317 7 2 mit 1758 532 3 0 1651 373 4 0 BrownU 1363 438 2 1 1315 276 0 0 IndianaUniversity 1225 588 1 1 1797 543 9 1 Caltech 494 130 0 0 220 59 0 0 | stanford | 3944 | 1223 | 13 | 2 | 3782 | 882 | 10 | 0 |
| cmu3388657272276451730washu315957240113425900Vanderbilt258155591144731100Harvard221963411229451710UMBC2036457213247946440duke202046921139731772mit175853230165137340BrownU136343821131527600IndianaUniversity122558811179754391Caltech494130002205900 | bostoncollege | 3493 | 1006 | 0 | 0 | 753 | 188 | 0 | 0 |
| washu 3159 572 4 0 1134 259 0 0 Vanderbilt 2581 555 9 1 1447 311 0 0 Harvard 2219 634 1 1 2294 517 1 0 UMBC 2036 457 21 3 2479 464 4 0 duke 2020 469 2 1 1397 317 7 2 mit 1758 532 3 0 1651 373 4 0 BrownU 1363 438 2 1 1315 276 0 0 IndianaUniversity 1225 588 1 1 1797 543 9 1 Caltech 494 130 0 0 220 59 0 0 | cmu | 3388 | 657 | 27 | 2 | 2764 | 517 | 3 | õ |
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| $ \begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $ | UMBC | 2036 | 457 | 21 | 3 | 2479 | 464 | 1 | Ő |
| $\begin{array}{c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c c $ | duke | 2020 | 469 | 21 | 1 | 1397 | 317 | 7 | 2 |
| Init 1736 332 3 0 1311 373 4 0 BrownU 1363 438 2 1 1315 276 0 0 IndianaUniversity 1225 588 1 1 1797 543 9 1 Caltech 494 130 0 0 220 59 0 0 Tatal 500470 00940 3122 476 482647 \$5014 1258 171 | mit | 1758 | 532 | 2 | 0 | 1651 | 373 | 1 | 0 |
| $ \begin{array}{c ccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc$ | BrownU | 1362 | 132 | 2 7 | 1 | 1315 | 275 | 0 | 0 |
| $\begin{array}{c ccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc$ | IndianaUniversity | 1225 | +J0 588 | ے 1 | 1 | 1707 | 5/3 | 0 | 1 |
| $\begin{array}{c ccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc$ | Caltach | 1223 | 120 | 1 | 1 | 220 | 50 | 9 | 1 |
| | Tatel | 494 | 130 | 2122 | 476 | 492647 | 0501A | 1250 | 171 |

comments with fewer than 40 or more than 4000 characters: short ones are unlikely to be meaningful (and may correspond to URLs), while long ones may mention more than one topic. We also remove stopwords and lemmatize the remaining words using the Python NLTK parser.

To distinguish between cheating-related discussions before and during the pandemic, we train a logistic regression classifier to predict whether a post or comment was written in Fall 2020 or Fall 2019. We use term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) word scores as features in the model. We chose logistic regression due to its interpretable nature: words with positive coefficients represent Fall 2020 content and words with negative coefficients represent Fall 2019. Our model obtained a 10-fold crossvalidation accuracy score of 73%, a precision of 76%, a recall of 96% and an F1-score of 86%.

(We also tested logistic regression models with additional features, including word bigrams, the sentiment of the post or comment

(computed using the Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner (VADER) [8]) and linguistic features computed using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) [17]. After adding these features, accuracy improved by two percent to 75%. However, none of these additional features were assigned large coefficients and therefore are not considered further in the remainder of the paper.)

Finally, we apply the Non-negative Matrix Factorization (NMF) topic modelling algorithm [20], which was used in prior work on Reddit mining [14, 7, 11], on the Fall 2020 posts and comments that match at least one cheating-related keyword. We again represent each post and comment using the TF-IDF scores of the words occurring in it. NMF clusters documents into topics and assigns a list of representative terms called *topic descriptors* to each topic. NMF also calculates the "representativeness" score of each topic descriptor, and we report the top-10 highest-scoring descriptors for each topic. Moreover, we report top-10 frequent word n-grams (for n up to three, i.e., sequences of up to three consecutive words) for each topic.

Table 2: Number of posts and comments on Canadian academic subreddits in 2019 and 2020 before and after filtering to find cheating-related discussions (C: Comments, P: Posts).

| Subreddits | Í | 2020 | | | | 2019 | | |
|----------------------|--------------|-------|--------------|-----|--------|-------|-----|-----|
| | Before After | | Before After | | | | | |
| | C | Р | С | Р | C | Р | С | Р |
| uwaterloo | 72244 | 8372 | 381 | 58 | 88996 | 9888 | 130 | 17 |
| UofT | 54343 | 8460 | 701 | 86 | 67649 | 9375 | 171 | 23 |
| UBC | 40058 | 5281 | 766 | 42 | 39416 | 5039 | 109 | 11 |
| uAlberta | 33265 | 7164 | 341 | 58 | 49494 | 8270 | 137 | 23 |
| McMaster | 24556 | 5188 | 219 | 45 | 14932 | 2638 | 27 | 3 |
| mcgill | 21380 | 3376 | 167 | 15 | 20852 | 3067 | 58 | 6 |
| vorku | 15671 | 4065 | 228 | 46 | 22078 | 3862 | 47 | 6 |
| CarletonU | 15455 | 2531 | 207 | 11 | 16874 | 2706 | 43 | 2 |
| Concordia | 10065 | 2394 | 192 | 27 | 10292 | 2185 | 27 | 7 |
| | 9717 | 1856 | 122 | 10 | 11758 | 1764 | 35 | 2 |
| wlu | 8097 | 1788 | 97 | 16 | 5499 | 1203 | 13 | 4 |
| uvic | 7291 | 1178 | 85 | 3 | 4756 | 828 | 11 | 3 |
| rverson | 6503 | 2282 | 87 | 6 | 14922 | 2927 | 37 | 8 |
| queensuniversity | 5234 | 1107 | 18 | 1 | 4758 | 824 | 6 | 2 |
| umanitoba | 4408 | 861 | 66 | 7 | 3183 | 717 | 3 | 1 |
| uoguelph | 3381 | 794 | 51 | 8 | 3691 | 693 | 5 | 2 |
| Dalhousie | 1807 | 401 | 21 | 4 | 2019 | 407 | 6 | 2 |
| usask | 1177 | 290 | 0 | 0 | 666 | 178 | Ő | ō |
| brocku | 1007 | 366 | 2 | ŏ | 1442 | 329 | 4 | 2 |
| memorialuniversity | 785 | 183 | 6 | 1 | 637 | 147 | 2 | ō |
| UdeM | 422 | 90 | 1 | 0 | 174 | 48 | ō | Ő |
| lakeheadu | 119 | 59 | 2 | 1 | 51 | 21 | ŏ | ŏ |
| uleth | 112 | 35 | 0 | 0 | 82 | 33 | Õ | õ |
| University Of Regina | 96 | 30 | ĩ | Õ | 8 | 11 | Õ | õ |
| AcadiaU | 69 | 29 | 1 | 0 | 60 | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| UOAM | 67 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 48 | 17 | 0 | 0 |
| uwinnipeg | 65 | 24 | 2 | 1 | 15 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| unb | 62 | 35 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 12 | 0 | 0 |
| laurentian | 33 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| stfx | 32 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| SMUHalifax | 24 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 21 | 9 | 0 | 0 |
| nipissingu | 13 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| UPEI | 12 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| stthomas | 6 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| BishopUniversity | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| UNBC | 3 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| mta | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| cbu | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| MSVU | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| uottawa | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 83 | 43 | 0 | 0 |
| usherbrooke | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 337585 | 58337 | 3764 | 447 | 384501 | 57305 | 871 | 124 |

Additionally, NMF assigns a *closeness score* for each documenttopic pair, indicating how close the document is to a topic. To obtain more information about the topics produced by NMF, for each topic, we manually inspect 5% of the posts and comments with the highest closeness scores.

NMF requires the number of topics as input. Following previous work [15], we run NMF to produce between 5 and 50 topics and compute the *coherence* score for each. Coherence measures the extent to which the top representative terms representing each topic are semantically related (higher is better). We obtained the highest scores for 5 and 20 topics. A preliminary analysis of the NMF output at five topics revealed that most topics consisted of several discussion themes. This observation suggested that a larger number of topics may be more appropriate, and thus we selected 20 topics.

3. RESULTS

We begin with the results of our logistic regression analysis, shown in Table 4 in the Appendix. The most positive coefficients, predicting Fall 2020 posts and comments, include 'chegg' (an online platform for answering college and high school questions), as well as words related to online proctoring such as 'proctor', 'proctorio', 'zoom', 'camera', 'webcam' and 'privacy'. The most negative coefficients, predicting Fall 2019 posts and comments, suggest inperson examinations ('cheat sheet', 'bring', 'sit') and programming assignments and projects ('code', 'program', 'project').

Next, we move to topic modelling. Table 3 shows the NMF topic descriptors, the frequent n-grams, and the percentage of posts and comments assigned to each topic. We group the topics into the following three categories based on the information in Table 3 and manual inspection of a sample of posts and comments.

First, about 40% of the posts and comments include concerns about cheating leading to grade inflation, which in turn leads to assessments becoming more difficult. Students have observed grade inflation (Topic 13) and expressed concerns that Fall 2020 examinations will be more difficult to reduce the class average (Topics 1 and 20). Moreover, students commented on various methods used by

Table 3: Fall 2020 topic modelling results

| # | Topic descriptors | Frequent N-grams | % |
|----|--|---|------|
| 1 | work, really, time, way, learn, try, hard, help, | 'feel like', 'work hard', 'first year', 'high school', 'office hour', 'mental health', 'learn mate- | 10.4 |
| | school, good | rial', 'get catch', 'make sure', 'in person' | |
| 2 | say, academic, email, integrity, case, code, | 'academic integrity', 'academic dishonesty', 'integrity violation', 'academic integrity viola- | 10.3 |
| | worry, report, flag, mean | tion', 'get flag', 'student conduct', 'academic offense', 'would say', 'get catch', 'even though' | |
| 3 | think, probably, pretty, fine, worry, fair, sure, | 'think would', 'think people', 'think get', 'like think', 'get away', 'make sure', 'really think', | 6.4 |
| | reason, away, good | 'feel like', 'think go', 'think make' | |
| 4 | student, university, honest, case, punish, inter- | 'international student', 'student get', 'many student', 'chinese student', 'honest student', 'aca- | 5.7 |
| | national, chinese, issue, school, conduct | demic integrity', 'student would', 'mental health', 'academic dishonesty', 'first year' | |
| 5 | know, want, let, wrong, happen, person, tell, | 'let know', 'want know', 'know people', 'get catch', 'know would', 'lot people', 'feel like', | 5.5 |
| | need, mean, consequence | 'know know', 'know go', 'student know' | |
| 6 | prof, email, mark, ta, ask, tell, send, chance, | 'prof make', 'first year', 'email prof', 'open book', 'feel like', 'prof say', 'prof ta', 'prof would', | 5.4 |
| | midterm, try | 'make sure', 'ask prof' | |
| 7 | question, answer, time, ask, quiz, look, minute, | 'answer question', 'go back', 'multiple choice', 'short answer', 'exam question', 'one ques- | 5.1 |
| | similar, wrong, google | tion', 'look answer', 'question answer', 'question exam', 'choice question' | |
| 8 | test, open, book, note, close, online, tab, inter- | 'open book', 'open note', 'make test', 'take test', 'test open', 'close book', 'book exam', 'open | 4.9 |
| | net, easy, search | book exam', 'exam open', 'book test' | |
| 9 | people, lot, stop, say, agree, mean, proctor, | 'people get', 'lot people', 'many people', 'people would', 'get catch', 'people like', 'mental | 4.8 |
| | probably, maybe, care | health', 'people go', 'know people', 'feel like' | |
| 10 | like, feel, sound, look, yeah, lol, bad, thing, lot, | 'feel like', 'seem like', 'look like', 'sound like', 'something like', 'even though', 'would like', | 4.8 |
| | shit | 'make feel', 'online school', 'like people' | |
| 11 | exam, proctor, final, online, open, book, sheet, | 'take exam', 'final exam', 'open book', 'online exam', 'make exam', 'proctor exam', 'write | 4.7 |
| | time, hour, note | exam', 'take home', 'home exam', 'person exam' | |
| 12 | use, software, proctor, proctorio, computer, | 'lockdown browser', 'secondary device', 'make sure', 'proctor software', 'take exam', 'get | 4.5 |
| | browser, note, flag, lockdown, webcam | flag', 'student use', 'use respondus', 'virtual machine', 'use note' | |
| 13 | course, year, average, math, midterm, final, as- | 'first year', 'take course', 'last year', 'math course', 'feel like', 'midterm final', 'year course', | 4.5 |
| | signment, fail, term, quiz | 'course average', 'final exam', 'class average' | |
| 14 | class, curve, online, semester, average, fail, | 'take class', 'class average', 'online class', 'class get', 'one class', 'feel like', 'math class', | 4.4 |
| | homework, lot, easy, problem | 'class take', 'in person', 'make sure' | |
| 15 | grade, curve, average, semester, high, final, let- | 'good grade', 'letter grade', 'final grade', 'get good', 'get good grade', 'grade get', 'get grade', | 4.2 |
| | ter, higher, better, good | 'grade inflation', 'grade curve', 'better grade' | |
| 16 | professor, happen, try, evidence, accuse, report, | 'professor make', 'take exam', 'make exam', 'professor would', 'professor might', 'make sure', | 4 |
| | tell, prove, probably, email | 'student professor', 'professor try', 'in person', 'tell professor' | |
| 17 | catch, happen, wonder, lol, hear, dumb, expel, | 'get catch', 'people get', 'people get catch', 'first time', 'catch people', 'catch get', 'use chegg', | 3.7 |
| | time, lmao, guy | 'get away', 'without get', 'without get catch' | |
| 18 | chegg, post, account, use, ip, information, ad- | 'use chegg', 'ip address', 'chegg account', 'get catch', 'post chegg', 'question chegg', 'post | 2.8 |
| | dress, answer, view, solution | question', 'chegg exam', 'chegg answer', 'answer chegg | |
| 19 | group, chat, leave, join, share, report, quiz, | 'group chat', 'share answer', 'get trouble', 'group member', 'join group', 'class group', 'leave | 2.5 |
| | snitch, post, want | group', 'academic integrity', 'group project', 'study group' | |
| 20 | make, harder, sure, sense, hard, easier, difficult, | 'make sure', 'make harder', 'make exam', 'make sense', 'harder make', 'want make', 'make | 1.4 |
| | mistake, thing, pretty | mistake', 'make difficult', 'make feel', 'want make sure | |

instructors to combat cheating and reduce grades, such as grading on a curve (Topics 14 and 15) and using anti-cheating and online proctoring software (Topics 9 and 11).

Next, students reported feeling demotivated when they know that cheating happens in examinations (Topics 4 and 5) and often goes unpunished (Topics 3, 10 and 17). Students discussed examples of cheating that instructors failed to identify, such as seeking answers on Google and question-answering websites such as Chegg (Topics 7, 8 and 18), and discussing solutions in online chat groups (Topic 19).

Finally, students reported concerns about new methods used to prevent cheating in online examinations. They worried that some legitimate actions may be misconstrued as cheating: looking away from the computer screen, accidentally pressing a button, or disconnecting from a video meeting due to internet connectivity issues (Topics 6 and 12). Furthermore, some students reported being accused of cheating during online examinations, but did not realize they did anything wrong (Topics 2 and 16).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Logistic regression analysis suggests that cheating-related discussions on academic subreddits have expanded from plagiarism in computer programming (representative of Fall 2019) to online assessments in general. The word 'chegg' was associated with Fall 2020 content, suggesting an increase in the use of Chegg and related websites, which is consistent with prior work [6, 3]. Furthermore, words indicating online proctoring were predictive of Fall 2020 content, e.g., 'camera', 'webcam' and 'record'. Inspection of the posts and comments containing these terms revealed students' concerns about their privacy during online examinations. Similar concerns were raised in recent work [4, 9].

Topic modelling analysis identified three discussion themes in Fall 2020. First, students believe that cheating causes grade inflation, which motivates instructors to make assessments harder and introduce strict anti-cheating protocols such as not being able to scroll back to a previous question on an online examination. Some of these concerns have been highlighted in previous work [18, 19, 2, 4, 13, 3], and our analysis reflects students' opinions on this topic. Second, unpunished cheating lowers students' morale and motivation. Students report feeling demotivated when classmates cheat and obtain high grades. Third, students report not knowing exactly what constitutes cheating and what is allowed, underscoring the importance of clear academic integrity policies. These concerns were often reported in the context of online examinations, with students unsure of how their actions are being monitored.

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APPENDIX

Table 4: Words with the most positive and most negative logistic regression coefficients

| Term | coefficient | Term | coefficient |
|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| chegg | 2.19 | sheet | -3 |
| online | 1.79 | cheat sheet | -2.95 |
| proctor | 1.79 | code | -1.87 |
| open | 1.62 | project | -1.68 |
| covid | 1.55 | plagiarism | -1.51 |
| zoom | 1.45 | phone | -1.47 |
| prof | 1.37 | plagiarize | -1.32 |
| pandemic | 1.25 | relationship | -1.31 |
| proctorio | 1.11 | sit | -1.1 |
| flag | 1.09 | talk | -1.02 |
| cheat | 1.08 | sexual | -0.98 |
| chat | 1.06 | notice | -0.94 |
| camera | 1.03 | bring | -0.93 |
| internet | 1 | textbook | -0.93 |
| privacy | 1 | international | -0.92 |
| book | 1 | misconduct | -0.78 |
| cheater | 0.98 | appeal | -0.78 |
| webcam | 0.95 | program | -0.79 |
| 100 | 0.93 | go | -0.79 |
| format | 0.92 | front | -0.81 |
| screen | 0.9 | report | -0.81 |
| open book | 0.89 | try cheat | -0.81 |
| sem | 0.88 | ask | -0.81 |
| record | 0.88 | homework | -0.82 |
| math | 0.88 | dean | -0.82 |
| term | 0.87 | practice | -0.83 |
| average | 0.86 | allow | -0.88 |
| respondus | 0.85 | partner | -0.88 |
| email | 0.83 | final | -0.89 |
| semester | 0.83 | english | -0.9 |