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Plagiarism among University Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesizes empirical evidence on plagiarism among university students, with a particular focus on students' perceptions, the prevalence and forms of plagiarism, detection approaches, and the challenges associated with identifying and preventing academic misconduct. The review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational, technological, and institutional factors influencing plagiarism in higher education. A total of ***30*** *peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024 were systematically retrieved from Scopus, IEEE, and other major academic databases. The studies were selected through a rigorous screening and eligibility process in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. The included studies were critically evaluated and qualitatively synthesized to identify recurring themes, patterns, and gaps in the existing literature on plagiarism among university students. The review demonstrates a persistent gap between students' recognition of plagiarism as an unethical academic practice and their understanding of its diverse forms, including direct, paraphrased, self-, and AI-assisted plagiarism. The evidence indicates that plagiarism is primarily driven by academic pressure, limited academic writing proficiency, inadequate knowledge of citation and referencing conventions, time constraints, and insufficient institutional guidance. Although plagiarism detection tools such as Turnitin and Grammarly have improved the identification of textual similarity and encouraged academic integrity, their effectiveness remains constrained by technological limitations, disciplinary differences, multilingual contexts, and the increasing sophistication of AI-assisted writing. These findings suggest that plagiarism should be viewed not only as an issue of academic dishonesty but also as a consequence of broader educational and institutional shortcomings. The review highlights the importance of adopting a comprehensive institutional approach to academic integrity by strengthening plagiarism awareness, enhancing academic writing and referencing instruction, implementing transparent and consistent academic integrity policies, and integrating context-sensitive detection technologies. Such measures can support ethical scholarship while reducing unintentional and deliberate plagiarism across diverse educational settings. This review offers an up-to-date synthesis of* ***30*** *empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024, providing a holistic perspective on plagiarism by integrating evidence on students' perceptions, underlying causes, detection technologies, and institutional responses. Unlike previous reviews that primarily focus on detection methods or prevalence, this study combines educational, technological, and policy perspectives into a unified framework, identifies key research gaps, and offers evidence-based recommendations to guide future research and institutional practices in promoting academic integrity.*

Keywords: Plagiarism, Challenges, Awareness, Types of Plagiarism, Plagiarism software, Plagiarism detection tools

Introduction

Plagiarism has become one of the most significant ethical challenges confronting higher education, threatening academic integrity, the credibility of research, and the quality of scholarly communication. It is broadly defined as the presentation of another person's words, ideas, data, or intellectual contributions as one's own without appropriate acknowledgment. However, plagiarism is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond direct text copying to include improper paraphrasing, mosaic plagiarism, source-based plagiarism, self-plagiarism, contract cheating, and the unauthorized use of conceptual frameworks and research findings (Awasthi, 2019; Velmurugan, 2024). These diverse manifestations complicate both the identification and prevention of plagiarism, particularly within increasingly digital and technology-driven learning environments.

The rapid expansion of internet-based learning resources, digital libraries, and online collaboration platforms has substantially transformed how students access and utilize academic information. While these developments have enhanced educational opportunities, they have simultaneously increased the ease with which academic content can be copied, modified, and redistributed without proper attribution. More recently, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including ChatGPT, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and other large language models, has introduced an additional dimension to academic integrity. Unlike conventional plagiarism, AI-assisted writing can generate original-looking text that may not be detected by traditional similarity-based plagiarism detection systems. Consequently, universities now face the dual challenge of distinguishing legitimate AI-supported learning from unethical AI-assisted authorship while maintaining principles of transparency, originality, and responsible scholarship.

Although plagiarism is widely recognized as a serious academic offense, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that many university students continue to engage in plagiaristic practices. Importantly, plagiarism does not always arise from deliberate academic dishonesty. Numerous studies suggest that students often lack sufficient understanding of citation conventions, referencing styles, paraphrasing techniques, and ethical academic writing practices (Ahmed, 2015; Cleary & Sayers, 2017). Additional contributing factors include academic pressure, limited time management skills, language barriers among multilingual learners, inadequate institutional guidance, cultural differences regarding authorship, and insufficient training in research methodology. These findings indicate that plagiarism should be understood not merely as an issue of student misconduct but also as a consequence of broader educational, institutional, and contextual factors.

To address plagiarism, higher education institutions have implemented a range of preventive and corrective measures, including academic integrity policies, honor codes, plagiarism awareness programs, writing support services, and technological detection systems. Software such as Turnitin, iThenticate, MOSS, JPlag, PlagScan, and Grammarly has become an integral component of institutional efforts to identify textual similarity and discourage unethical academic behavior (Vani & Gupta, 2016; Mansoor & Al-Tamimi, 2022; Mozgovoy et al., 2010). These systems have significantly improved the detection of verbatim copying and

source-code plagiarism and have enhanced transparency during manuscript evaluation and student assessment.

Nevertheless, existing plagiarism detection technologies continue to face considerable limitations. Most commercial systems primarily rely on text similarity matching and therefore struggle to identify sophisticated paraphrasing, translated plagiarism, idea plagiarism, cross-language plagiarism, and the unauthorized appropriation of conceptual structures (Chrispin et al., 2020; Olivia-Dumitrina et al., 2019). The rapid adoption of generative AI has further complicated plagiarism detection because AI-generated content often exhibits low textual similarity despite incorporating synthesized information from multiple sources. As a result, conventional plagiarism detection tools may produce false negatives, while emerging AI-content detectors remain limited by inconsistent accuracy, disciplinary variation, linguistic diversity, and concerns regarding fairness and reliability. These developments underscore the need for academic integrity frameworks that combine technological solutions with educational interventions and ethical guidance.

Despite the substantial body of research on plagiarism, the existing literature remains fragmented. Previous studies have primarily investigated individual dimensions of plagiarism, such as students' attitudes toward academic misconduct, classifications of plagiarism, technological detection methods, or institutional prevention strategies. Likewise, many review articles concentrate predominantly on detection technologies or conceptual discussions of plagiarism without comprehensively integrating educational, technological, behavioral, and institutional perspectives. Furthermore, much of the earlier literature predates the widespread adoption of generative AI, leaving limited evidence regarding how AI-assisted writing is reshaping plagiarism practices, student behavior, and institutional responses. Consequently, educators and policymakers lack a contemporary, evidence-based synthesis that simultaneously examines students' perceptions, evolving forms of plagiarism, technological detection approaches, AI-related challenges, and practical strategies for strengthening academic integrity.

This represents a significant research gap. To date, no recent systematic review has comprehensively synthesized empirical evidence published between 2010 and 2024 by integrating students' perceptions of plagiarism, the prevalence and forms of academic misconduct, plagiarism detection technologies, emerging AI-assisted plagiarism challenges, and the institutional barriers to effective prevention within a single analytical framework. Addressing this gap is essential for informing evidence-based educational policies and developing more comprehensive academic integrity strategies that reflect the rapidly changing digital learning landscape.

Accordingly, the present systematic review synthesizes 30 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024 to provide an up-to-date and comprehensive understanding of plagiarism among university students. Specifically, the review aims to: (1) examine students' perceptions and understanding of plagiarism; (2) identify the most prevalent forms and underlying causes of academic misconduct; (3) evaluate commonly used plagiarism detection methods and their effectiveness; (4) investigate emerging challenges associated with AI-assisted plagiarism and contemporary digital learning environments; and (5) identify evidence-based strategies that can

strengthen academic integrity policies and educational practices in higher education. By integrating findings across these interconnected dimensions, this review offers a holistic perspective on plagiarism that extends beyond technological detection alone and provides practical recommendations for educators, institutional leaders, researchers, and policymakers seeking to promote ethical scholarship in the era of artificial intelligence.

Objectives

- To identify the awareness of plagiarism among University Students.
- To identify the prevalence challenges of plagiarism among University Students.
- To identify the efficiency of tools for the detection of Plagiarism.

Research Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR**)** methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The PRISMA approach was selected to ensure a transparent, systematic, and reproducible process for identifying, screening, evaluating, and synthesizing the relevant literature on plagiarism among university students. The review focused on four key dimensions: students' perceptions of plagiarism, forms of plagiarism, plagiarism detection methods, and challenges associated with detecting academic misconduct. To enhance the credibility of the review, methodological quality and potential sources of bias were considered during the screening and evaluation stages.

Stage 1: Planning

The planning stage involved defining the review objectives, developing the search strategy, identifying relevant databases, and establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across five academic database Scopus, IEEE Xplore, Emerald Insight, Wiley Online Library, and LISTA as well as Google Scholar to ensure broad coverage of the literature.

The search was limited to studies published between 2010 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings. To improve transparency and reproducibility, a structured search strategy was developed using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and phrase searching. The search terms were grouped into three thematic categories:

Plagiarism Concepts: ("Plagiarism" OR "Types of Plagiarism" OR "Academic Plagiarism" OR "Cyber Plagiarism" OR "AI in Plagiarism")

AND

Detection Methods: ("Plagiarism Detection Tools" OR "AI Detection of Plagiarism" OR "Automated Plagiarism Checkers" OR "Plagiarism Software" OR "Plagiarism Prevention Techniques")

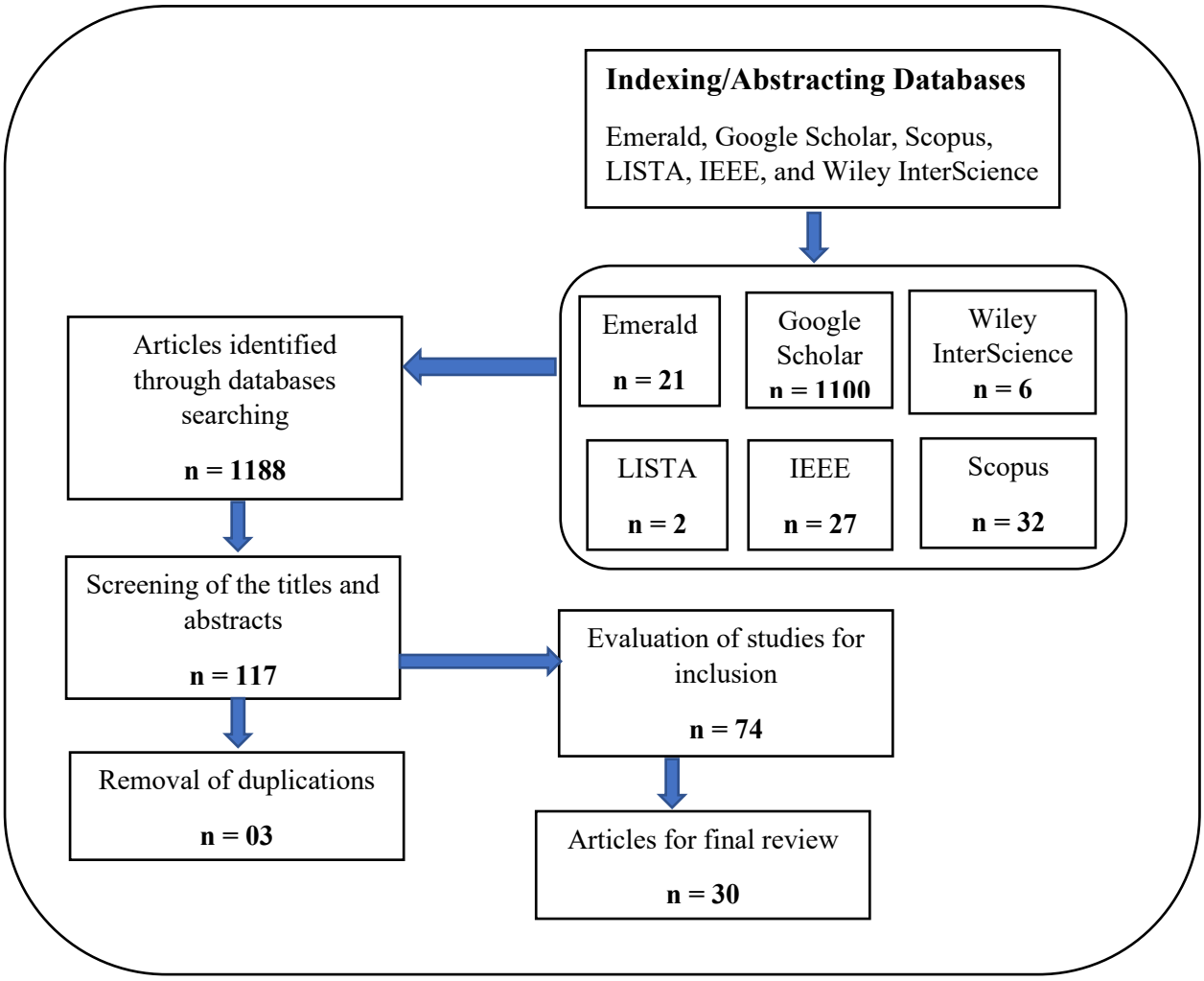
AND

Academic Integrity and Challenges: ("Plagiarism in Research" OR "Academic Integrity" OR "Impact of Plagiarism" OR "Challenges of Plagiarism" OR "Factors of Plagiarism" OR "Ethical Issues in Plagiarism")

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established prior to the search process to ensure consistency throughout the review. Studies were included if they (a) focused on plagiarism in higher education, (b) addressed plagiarism perceptions, types, causes, detection methods, or prevention strategies, (c) were published in English, and (d) provided sufficient methodological detail. Editorials, book reviews, theses, duplicate studies, and publications unrelated to academic plagiarism were excluded. In addition, the methodological quality of the included studies was assessed based on the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of the research design, methodological transparency, and relevance to the review objectives. Potential sources of bias, including selection and publication bias, were also considered during the screening process to ensure the reliability of the synthesized evidence.

A total of **1,188** records were initially identified from the selected databases and Google Scholar. Database contributions included Google Scholar (**n = 1,100**), Scopus (**n = 32**), IEEE Xplore (**n = 27**), Emerald Insight (**n = 21**), Wiley Online Library (**n = 6**), and LISTA (**n = 2**).

Figure 1
PRISMA Flow Diagram



Articles identified through databases searching 1188 Screening of the titles and abstracts = 117 Removal of duplications = 03 Evaluation of studies for inclusion = 74 Articles for final review = 30 Indexing/Abstracting DatabasesEmerald, Google Scholar, Scopus, LISTA, IEEE, and Wiley InterScience Emerald n = 21 Google Scholar n = 1100 Wiley InterScience n = 6 LISTA n = 2 IEEE n = 27 Scopus n = 32

Stage 2: Selection

The selection stage followed the PRISMA screening procedure. First, duplicate records (n = 3) were removed. The remaining studies underwent title and abstract screening to assess their relevance to the review objectives. Studies that did not address plagiarism in higher education, lacked empirical evidence, or failed to meet the inclusion criteria were excluded.

Following the initial screening, 117 articles were retained for detailed examination. Subsequently, full-text assessments were conducted to evaluate the methodological quality, relevance, and contribution of each study. A total of 74 studies met the eligibility requirements and proceeded to the quality assessment stage. The complete screening and selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Stage 3: Extraction

A standardized data extraction procedure was employed to ensure consistency across the selected studies. Information extracted from each article included publication year, country of study, research design, sample characteristics, research objectives, plagiarism types investigated, detection methods employed, key findings, and reported challenges.

To strengthen methodological rigor, a quality assessment framework was incorporated. Each study was evaluated against five criteria:

1. Relevance to the review objectives.
2. Clarity of research methodology.
3. Adequacy of data collection procedures.
4. Transparency of findings and conclusions.
5. Contribution to knowledge on plagiarism in higher education.

Each criterion was scored using a three-point scale: 2 (fully meets the criterion), 1 (partially meets the criterion), and 0 (does not meet the criterion). Studies achieving a minimum quality threshold were retained for the final review. This assessment ensured that only methodologically sound and relevant studies informed the synthesis.

Table 1:
Included and Excluded Papers

S.No	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	Articles published in the English language.	Articles not published in the English language
2	Research papers published from 2010 to 2024	Research papers published before 2010
3	Papers covering key variables of the study.	Articles not covering key constructs of the study
4	Only peer-reviewed research papers	Conference proceedings, books, book chapters, gray literature, dissertations, magazine articles, institutional reports, newspaper articles, and institutional newsletters, etc.
5	Research papers were published in the world's renowned digital databases and Google Scholar, i.e., LISTA, Scopus, Wiley, Emerald, and IEEE Xplore.	Articles published in institutional repositories, blogs, search engines, and social networking websites
6	Articles matching the study's topic.	Research papers do not match the study's topic.

Stage 4: Execution

The final stage involved validating the selected studies and synthesizing the findings. Risk of bias was assessed by examining research design quality, sampling procedures, data collection methods, and reporting transparency. Studies were categorized as having low, moderate, or high risk of bias, and these assessments were considered during data interpretation.

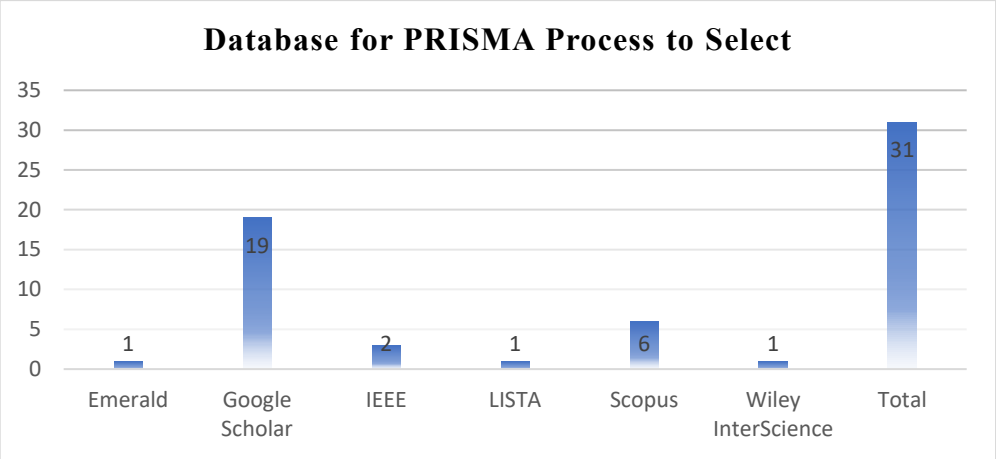
Following quality assessment and validation, 30 studies were retained for the final review. A narrative synthesis approach was employed because of the methodological diversity of the included studies. The findings were organized into four thematic areas: students' perceptions of plagiarism, forms of plagiarism, plagiarism detection methods, and challenges associated with plagiarism detection and prevention.

The systematic review process ensured transparency, methodological rigor, and comprehensive coverage of the literature, thereby providing a robust evidence base for understanding plagiarism among university students and informing academic integrity policies and practices.

Results

A total of 330 primary studies were identified through the search. The PRISMA results are compiled in the following areas based on the study's goals. As shown in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Fig. 1), the majority of articles on cyber plagiarism among college students were published in Google Scholar and Scopus.

Figure 2
Database for PRISMA process to select articles



Plagiarism Among University Students

The study examines the effects of plagiarism among university students, including awareness of plagiarism, its types, detection methods and tools, and challenges encountered during the research writing process.

Awareness

Of the 30 reviewed studies, the majority reported that students recognized plagiarism as unethical academic behavior; however, many demonstrated an incomplete understanding of its different forms and proper citation practices. Several studies consistently identified inadequate knowledge of referencing conventions, limited academic writing skills, ineffective time management, and academic pressure as the primary factors contributing to plagiarism (Ahmed, 2015; Cleary & Sayers, 2017; Chang et al., 2015; Giannakouli et al., 2023). Institutions commonly addressed these issues through academic integrity policies, honor codes, plagiarism awareness programmes, and plagiarism detection software (Drisko, 2023; Kolhar & Alameen, 2021; Javaeed et al., 2019). Overall, the evidence indicates a persistent gap between students' awareness of plagiarism as unethical behaviour and their ability to apply academic integrity principles correctly.

Types of Plagiarism

The reviewed studies identified plagiarism as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising both intentional and unintentional practices**.** Direct plagiarism, copy-and-paste plagiarism, paraphrasing plagiarism, mosaic plagiarism, source-based plagiarism, and idea plagiarism were the most frequently reported forms**.** Several studies also discussed less common forms, including structural plagiarism, metaphor plagiarism, style plagiarism, authorship plagiarism, accidental plagiarism, and complete plagiarism (Awasthi, 2019; Badiger et al., 2017; Eisa et al., 2015; Velmurugan, 2024). Collectively, the findings suggest that while direct copying remains the easiest form to detect, disguised and idea-based plagiarism continue to present considerable challenges because they involve substantial modification of the original content.

Plagiarism Detection Methods and Tools

The reviewed literature identified a wide range of plagiarism detection systems currently used in higher education**.** Turnitin, iThenticate, Grammarly, JPlag, MOSS, PlagScan, Urkund, Copyscape, PlagAware, Dupli Checker, Viper, and PlagTracker were among the most frequently reported tools(Badiger et al., 2017; Cheers et al., 2021; Chowdhury, 2020; Hambi & Benabbou, 2020; Gosavi & Deshmukh, 2021). Across the studies, Turnitin and iThenticate emerged as the most widely adopted systems because of their extensive databases and similarity detection capabilities. However, the reviewed evidence consistently indicated that existing tools perform well in identifying verbatim copying but remain less effective in detecting sophisticated paraphrasing, cross-language plagiarism, idea plagiarism, and AI-generated content (Nadhri et al., 2021; Naik et al., 2015). These findings demonstrate that technological solutions should complement rather than replace educational interventions and expert judgment.

Challenges

The reviewed studies consistently identified multiple factors contributing to plagiarism among university students. Academic pressure, poor time management, inadequate academic writing skills, insufficient understanding of citation and referencing, language barriers, easy access to online resources, and limited awareness of academic integrity policies emerged as the most frequently reported challenges (Drisko, 2023; Eisa et al., 2015; Giannakouli et al., 2023; Hasan & Khan, 2018). More recent studies also highlighted the growing influence of generative artificial intelligence, which has complicated plagiarism detection by producing original-looking text with low similarity scores. Furthermore, many plagiarism detection systems were found to have limitations in identifying paraphrased text, translated content, figures, equations, tables, and AI-assisted writing, requiring manual review to verify originality (Husain et al., 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that plagiarism is influenced by educational, technological, institutional, and ethical factors rather than being solely an issue of academic dishonesty.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 30 empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024 to examine university students' awareness of plagiarism, the various forms of plagiarism, available detection methods, and the challenges associated with preventing academic misconduct. Rather than viewing these findings independently, the synthesis reveals that plagiarism is a multidimensional issue influenced by educational, technological, institutional, and behavioural factors.

The findings suggest that although most students recognize plagiarism as unethical, this awareness does not necessarily translate into ethical academic practice. This disconnect indicates that awareness alone is insufficient to reduce plagiarism. Instead, students require practical training in academic writing, citation, paraphrasing, and responsible research practices. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that inadequate writing skills, academic pressure, poor time management, and limited institutional support contribute to

plagiarism more substantially than intentional academic dishonesty alone. These findings imply that universities should complement disciplinary policies with preventive educational interventions that strengthen students' academic competencies.

The review also demonstrates that plagiarism has evolved beyond traditional copy-and-paste practices. While direct plagiarism remains common, more sophisticated forms including paraphrasing, idea plagiarism, structural plagiarism, source-based plagiarism, and AI-assisted plagiarism have become increasingly prevalent. The widespread availability of generative artificial intelligence tools has further complicated plagiarism detection, as AI-generated text may contain minimal textual similarity while still raising concerns regarding originality, authorship, and academic integrity. Consequently, institutions should reconsider existing academic integrity policies to address the ethical use of AI rather than relying solely on conventional definitions of plagiarism.

Although plagiarism detection software such as Turnitin, iThenticate, Grammarly, JPlag, and PlagScan has significantly improved the identification of textual similarity, the findings indicate that these tools cannot independently ensure academic integrity. Most existing systems perform effectively when detecting verbatim copying but remain limited in identifying paraphrased content, cross-language plagiarism, conceptual plagiarism, graphical content, and AI-generated writing. These limitations reinforce the importance of combining technological solutions with human judgment, institutional policies, and educational support rather than relying exclusively on automated detection.

Collectively, the reviewed evidence suggests that plagiarism should not be viewed merely as individual misconduct but as a broader educational challenge requiring coordinated institutional responses. Universities should prioritize academic integrity education, strengthen writing support services, regularly update plagiarism policies to address emerging AI technologies, and encourage responsible research practices throughout students' academic development.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, only studies published in between 2010 and 2024 were included, which may have excluded relevant research published in other languages. Second, the review was limited to studies retrieved from Scopus, IEEE Xplore, Emerald Insight, Wiley Online Library, LISTA, and Google Scholar, meaning that relevant studies indexed in other databases may not have been captured. Third, because the included studies employed diverse methodologies, populations, and outcome measures, a quantitative meta-analysis was not feasible, and the findings were synthesized qualitatively. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of generative artificial intelligence means that some recent developments in AI-assisted plagiarism and detection technologies may not yet be fully represented in the existing literature.

Future Research

Future research should investigate the long-term impact of generative AI on academic integrity and evaluate the effectiveness of emerging AI-aware plagiarism detection systems across different disciplines and languages. More empirical studies are needed to compare institutional

plagiarism policies, assess the effectiveness of academic integrity training programmes, and examine cultural and regional differences in students' perceptions of plagiarism. In addition, future systematic reviews should incorporate newly published studies and explore advanced detection techniques based on semantic analysis, machine learning, and large language models. Longitudinal research examining how students' understanding of plagiarism develops throughout their academic careers would also provide valuable insights for designing more effective educational interventions.

Conclusion

Plagiarism remains a significant challenge in higher education, affecting academic integrity, research credibility, and institutional trust. This systematic review synthesized evidence from 30 empirical studies examining students' perceptions of plagiarism, common forms of academic misconduct, plagiarism detection methods, and the challenges associated with preventing and identifying plagiarism.

The findings indicate that although students generally recognize plagiarism as unethical, many lack a comprehensive understanding of its various forms and appropriate citation practices. Academic pressure, limited academic writing skills, inadequate knowledge of referencing conventions, and the rapid growth of AI-assisted writing continue to contribute to plagiarism. Although plagiarism detection tools such as Turnitin and iThenticate play an important role in promoting academic integrity, they should be viewed as complementary resources rather than complete solutions.

The principal contribution of this review lies in integrating fragmented evidence into a comprehensive framework that connects students' perceptions, evolving forms of plagiarism, technological detection approaches, and institutional challenges. By highlighting the educational and technological dimensions of plagiarism, the review demonstrates that strengthening academic integrity requires a balanced strategy that combines plagiarism education, effective institutional policies, responsible use of artificial intelligence, and continual improvement of plagiarism detection technologies. These findings provide practical guidance for educators, university administrators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to foster ethical scholarship in contemporary higher education.

Conflict of Interest Statement:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Authors ‘Contribution

Authors contributed equally to the idea and writing of the article. All of the authors approved the content of the manuscript and agreed on all aspects of the work

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