

# The Age Of The Internet And Its Effect On Plagiarism And Creative Theft

Melissa Tyndall, South College, USA

## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the intersectionality between plagiarism in the classroom and the theft of creative work (such as poetry). Through secondary research about academic plagiarists, as well as a primary study on both creative and academic plagiarism, this paper uncovers if respondents understand what plagiarism is, the motivations for both types of intellectual theft, and whether the ease of access to this information on the Internet plays a part in that theft. Also, it aims to uncover methods of prevention for creative and academic plagiarism.*

**Keywords:** plagiarism, creative theft, academic dishonesty, college writing

The #writingcommunity on Twitter is close-knit, so in 2018, it did not take long before writers all became digital witnesses to what *Vulture* called “Poetry Twitter Erupts over a Plagiarist in Their Midst” (Rosenfield, 2018). During this time, a photo of a young woman, who bragged she got a line of her own poetry tattooed on her arm, circulated the Internet. She held her arm up the camera and beamed. However, the Pushcart-nominated poet, Ailey O’Toole, was a plagiarist. The line she tattooed on her arm was almost identical to one in a poem in *blud* by Rachel McKibbens. O’Toole claimed it was not intentional, that she was paraphrasing, and “hoped to put [their] poems into conversation with each other” (Rosenfield, 2018). However, at least four more poets came forward that O’Toole had also stolen their lines, leading to literary magazines across the country pulling her work, and Rhythm and Bones Press canceling the publication of her first collection of poems (Flood, 2018). Rosenfield’s (2018) article raises a lot of questions about O’Toole’s motivations, especially when she went as far as to “tattoo someone else’s poetry on her skin and try to pass it off as her own.” Some blamed her young age or mental illness, while others argued she might be entitled or even racist (Rosenfield, 2018). Those motivations may seem unlikely, but it was something McKibbens (2018) herself suggested in a tweet where she claimed:

Plagiarizing work is nasty as-is, but it becomes something else entirely when it is a white person commodifying the trauma, work & lived experiences of writers of color. Bottom line. Y'all can give it one name, but it is, indeed, more than that.

It was hardly the first time people blamed mental illness for acts of plagiarism. In a *Psychology Today* piece, Jean Kim (2014) wrote about Sen. John Walsh of Montana, “who dropped out of a senate race due to the [plagiarism] allegations” and his aide suggested this was due to his PTSD. Kim (2018), however, argues that plagiarism is the result of “memory error condition” and is a “deliberate, planned, coherent act of writing.” She adds that people with “mood disorders (including famous artists and writers), who tend to have no trouble coming up with their own ideas and material, and if anything, seem the least likely types to merely copy someone else’s work” (Kim, 2018). This suggests plagiarism is premeditated.

Creative plagiarism is not uncommon. In 2019, a similar incident happened to me. A poet bragged on Twitter they won a prize from a prestigious organization (after their college contributed money for to be part of a contest). The first lines were almost identical to a poem I published in an online magazine in 2015, after coming in the top 10 in a peer-reviewed contest. Both poems ended on an image of a window. The poet also had a book out, so I contacted the book publisher but received no response. After I reached out to the organization who gave the poet the award, they responded, “We have reviewed the poems against each other, and while they both speak to a similar topic and utilize a similar conceit, they diverge in style, form, and language” (a line we would not use in academia). Over the next few months, several creatives I know also had work stolen by other artists, such as paintings and video seminars, but there never seemed to be any consequences for the thieves. Even as someone who had dealt with plagiarism in the academic

sphere for over a decade, I was not prepared for plagiarism to bleed over into the lives of creative people as frequently as it seemed to. I was perplexed by the motivations for this behavior and wondered whether it deviated from the reasons students plagiarized work in the classroom.

As academics, the motivation for plagiarism seems obvious—the ease of access to information on the Internet, students not knowing how to cite, or even a combination of laziness and lack of time management skills. However, that, too, is not so cut and dried. Studies, such as the one conducted by Fish & Hura (2013, p. 35), indicate the definitions for what constitutes plagiarism vary from word-for-word or wholesale copying, to parts or ideas taken from another source without credit. A Morgan & Reynolds (cited in Adler-Kassner, Anson, & Howard, 2019, p. 239) text pointed out ironic cases where one university reproduced “the plagiarism policy statement of another university without attribution.” Reasons students plagiarize, however, depends on who you ask. Journals, articles, and professors state motivation ranges from ignorance about what plagiarism is to nefarious intent. Such an incident was cited in Hartwig (2015, p. 38), where, when the professor confronted the student with proof she had taken her paper from an online paper mill, she claimed, “I didn’t plagiarize” and “I don’t know how my paper got there.”

According to tutors interviewed by Awdry and Sarre (2013), students “most commonly cite external factors as the reasons behind their plagiarism” such as poor time management, work conflicts, parental expectations (for high grades), and even “family and personal commitments” (p. 38). The study also indicated that women were slightly less prone to plagiarizing than men, and when they plagiarized, they claimed it was unintentional, whereas men admitted it was intentional. The study also found that younger students (18-21 and 22-25) were more likely to plagiarize than older students (Awdry & Sarre, 2013, pp.40-41). Respondents confirmed tutors’ theories about time management and “desire to gain a higher grade,” but also added they:

did not know how to do the work; and temptation from external sources. One respondent added that he or she would plagiarise again as it had enhanced their work. Other responses indicated that some students are looking for an ‘easy way out’ and would choose to plagiarise rather than complete the work themselves. Students were further asked to state whether they would plagiarise if they knew that they wouldn’t be caught; 17% responded that they would plagiarise. (Awdry & Sarre, 2013, p. 42)

From an anecdotal perspective, my female students caught plagiarizing vehemently deny ever seeing the source material before, even when given the original text paired with their own work. Male students in the same predicament admitted to plagiarizing as a result of procrastination and panic.

The study on “Students’ Perceptions of Plagiarism” (Fish & Hurra, 2013, pp.33-34) suggests a motive for plagiarism is the belief their peers commit plagiarism, thereby making it acceptable, or at the very least, they perceive it as having little-to-no consequences. This can also stem from a lack of academic rigor or instructor failing to check student work for plagiarism (Fish & Hurra, 2013, p. 34), if citing is taught in the class at all. This plays into the criminological theories of Clarke and Cornish (cited in Awdry & Sarre, 2013, p.36), which indicate: offenders weigh up the benefits of their actions against the risks of potential sanctions before deciding on their course of conduct. Deviants, according to this view, rationally decide on the best outcome for themselves in any given situation. These authors posit that crime is a purposive act and that all people are predisposed to criminality if the right balance of factors is present.

In other words, if there is no risk of being caught, either by the instructor or plagiarism software like Turnitin, there is potentially a higher likelihood of plagiarism. Based on Awdry and Sarre’s (2013) research on Rational Choice Perspective, it seems students would be less likely to plagiarize if the task was too difficult or the risk of being caught was too great, though others thought it a personal achievement if they could game the system (p. 38). The authors, however, admitted that with multiple Turnitin attempts and purchased papers, students could potentially beat the system (Awdry & Sarre, 2013, p.40). However, this is easily solvable.

The divisiveness of plagiarism in both the academic and creative spheres made me curious as to whether or not students, and people overall, had a clear grasp of what plagiarism was. (I did not want to focus on ESL students or students who made an evident attempt at citing, but perhaps had not quoted material properly.) If not, was it due to the easy access of information on the Internet? Did people take for granted an author or creator was behind what they

were stealing? Did this ease cause confusion about the ownership of information and art found online? Furthermore, what was the motivation for intellectual and creative theft?

## **METHOD**

A survey was conducted about plagiarism and was distributed over three social mediums—LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. The link to the survey was also disseminated to 90 students across four classes over the course of three months. Though the 91 respondents were not required to supply demographic information, those who participated ranged from traditional-age freshman composition students to a 67-year-old respondent who self-reported he had taken the survey. The survey was comprised of 10 multiple-choice (MC) and short answer questions (SA). The questions asked participants to define plagiarism/creative borrowing (MC), questioned student plagiarism motivations (MC), questioned motives for creative theft (MC), what percentage of similarly constitutes theft (MC), if reposting other people's tweets without credit how the Internet works or theft (MC), if one form of plagiarism is worse than another (MC), if it's a common/rampant problem that we should be concerned about (MC), and what should be done about it (MC). In addition, respondents were asked to share personal instances of theft by another party, how it made them feel, and what happened to the perpetrator (SA). Respondents were also asked to provide suggestions for plagiarism prevention (SA).

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 is the collected data from all respondents from the end of August to mid-November 2019. The table represents the top four answers for each question based on the highest to lowest percentage of respondents who selected these four answers in their responses. Respondents who gave an "other" answer for the first question all claimed that plagiarism was a blend between direct copying and stealing the spirit or idea of a text. Similarly, respondents who answered "other" for academic plagiarism motives also gave "all of the above" as an answer. As for creative motives, "other" respondents believed it was a blend of "all of the above," and as one respondent put it, "I think they find something articulated in a way that better captured their thoughts." The percentage of theft question allowed respondents to pick their own percentages of what constitutes plagiarism, which ranged from 1 to 100 percent. However, 50 percent was the most common.

Respondents were divided almost in half when asked "Do you consider people reposting other people's tweets/social media posts without credit for attention/to go viral theft or plagiarism (this did not mean retweeting)? Is that stealing original ideas or simply how the Internet works?" Even "other" respondents were divided on an answer. One person posed it was possible for two people to have the same idea without knowledge of the other person's post, but others stated "I think it is how the internet works but that does not mean it is right. It is still intellectual theft," "it's how the internet works because popular people take non-popular people's ideas," and "Stealing is complex when it comes to the internet vs tangible items. On the internet, ideas are shared and diverse. Giving credit where credit is due is a good thing, but when you repost someone's idea when it doesn't involve money or disclaimers for example, is that truly stealing? Or is that sharing?" Despite these differing views, respondents all agreed that plagiarism is a problem, that academic and creative theft were of equal severity, and there should be consequences for plagiarism. Most answered that the plagiarist should be confronted and educated. Those who answered "other" responded that a blend of the choices should be the answer—especially if the plagiarism was not an isolated incident.

Some studies claim "use of automated plagiarism-checking programs perpetuates a frame that reduces the objective of instruction to preventing, detecting, and punishing plagiarism instead of helping students analyze and participate in the practices of writing" (Adler-Kassner, Anson, & Howard, 2008). However, in follow-up discussions with 12 English Composition II students (11 females and one male), when asked if they felt "policed" by the use of the tool, they responded that it was a deterrent. In addition, they offered the information that they used the tool to perform self-checks of their work after they submitted (since we set the percentages to be visible to students). They reported seeing low percentage numbers made them feel relieved. In my classes, if a high plagiarism percentage arises from not citing properly, I use a printout of the results as a teaching tool—not a punishment. Plagiarism is also prevented in the composition classes prior to final drafts of essays since students build papers for both classes in steps over a series of four weeks per essay.

The 72 short-answer respondents had a variety of replies when asked the multi-part question, “If someone has stolen from you, how did you discover it? How did you feel? What was done about it? If nothing, why? Was it because the perpetrator has more followers/sales/credentials than you? No one believed you/saw the similarities? Did they take work from others, too?” Most of those who had been plagiarized in an academic setting stated they had to self-report to instructors, but there were little-to-no consequences for the thief. Only one of those respondents noted the plagiarist received a “0” for the assignment. Though most said they expect thieves to face the consequences, a few others, surprisingly, felt flattered by the theft and did nothing because they assumed anything worth stealing meant their work was “good.” Those who had not experienced theft in the academic or creative realms compared this to incidents in their careers or personal thefts of property. At least two respondents reported their supervisors had taken credit for their ideas. Even though the personal items stolen were as inexpensive as a pen or pencil, and one was severe as a home invasion, the words “betrayed” and “violated” arose several times in responses about theft. This indicates that students may be more responsive if instructors frame plagiarism as a personal violation of the author or creator of the work.

When asked if there is there anything that can be done to prevent plagiarism before it happens, some respondents said there was nothing anyone could do or suggested the same methods many professors already use in the classroom. The most frequent answer was to educate people on how to cite sources correctly. Others suggested plagiarism detection software, not only for academic work, but also to “scan for” creative theft online. Several indicated that teachers should inform students of the consequences of plagiarism (one respondent proposed that plagiarists be automatically dropped from the class). Though unsure of how to execute the plan, respondents also suggested making information less accessible, or at the very least, more difficult to copy and paste to thwart plagiarists.

**TABLE 1**

Plagiarism survey results by question

Question	Top Answer	Second Answer	Third Answer	Fourth Answer
Definition	Verbatim (48.35%)	Spirit/Idea (34.07%)	Other (17.58%)	None
Academic Motive	Lazy/Procrastinate (51.65%)	Don't Know How to Cite (19.78%)	Think Won't Get Caught (15.38%)	Other (13.19%)
Creative Motive	Glory, Reward, Money (42.86%)	Think It's Original Idea (24.18%)	Think Won't Get Caught (25.27%)	Other (7.69%)
What % is Theft	50% (29.21)	100% (11.23)	75% (7.87)	25% (5.62)
Stealing Tweets	Intellectual Theft (46.15%)	Just How Internet Works (41.98%)	Other (10.99%)	None
Which is Worse	Equally Bad (83.52%)	Academic Theft is Worse (9.89%)	Creative Theft is Worse (4.4%)	Unsure/Depends on Motive (2.20%)
Is it a Problem	Yes (83.33%)	No (10%)	Other (6.67%)	None
Consequences	Confront & Educate (70.33%)	Report to Higher Authority (17.58%)	Other (7.69%)	Cancel Culture (4.40%)

**Note: This details the multiple-choice results for 91 respondents per question for survey questions 1-8. Questions 9-10 were short answer and are described in the text of the report. Generally, an “other” response was some form of “all of the above” unless otherwise detailed in the text.)**

## DISCUSSION

Based on the response, it is easy to eliminate the idea students or creatives plagiarize because they are unaware of what plagiarism is. Based on anecdotal experience, I assumed the reason for student plagiarism would be time management or procrastination, which was confirmed by the results. Though I anticipated creative motivation was most likely accolade-based, it was surprising to see the number of respondents who selected “think won't get caught” at a 10 percent rate over academic plagiarists. These two motivations, however, were confirmed by an article in *The Cut* called “Inside the Mind of a Plagiarist,” where three women were interviewed about their history with plagiarism. All three were not only highly aware of their actions and knew it was stealing, but also expressed enjoying the “highs” of getting away with theft as well as the rewards that came with their bosses, parents, and professors believing it was

original work (Tsoulis-Reay, 2018). O’Toole also reemerged on Twitter during this study, during which time she posted a screenshot of a statement where she claimed she got “caught up in the whirlwind of fame and validation on Twitter” in combination with her lack of self-confidence (O’Toole, 2019). This, in conjunction with the survey results indicates a potential for overlapping motivations between the two genres—which is praise or success, even if the perpetrator is fully aware she did not earn it, think she will not be caught, or committed the theft due to insecurity about her skills.

It seems that those with the intent to plagiarize will continue to do so if the motivation is rooted in time management issues or a desire to receive accolades (even if it is praise for the work of others). The only method for instructors to continue using is teaching students the importance of citing as well as other deterrents such as Turnitin. Though it may seem like “policing” students to others, for some, that is a safety net that helps professors as well. I, for example, work at an institution where I receive 100 to 200 assignments per week and faculty expectations dictate we have to grade those within five days (in addition to responding to three student discussion board posts per day, four days per week). This benefit to both parties, rather than the worry this will come across as “policing” the students, can be apparent if the detection tool is explained as a teaching method as opposed to a vehicle for punishment.

As Hartwig (2015) suggests, students should also have a common idea of what plagiarism is. That can be done through original assignments in classes and a widely distributed/publicized, standard plagiarism policy across all disciplines (Adler-Kassner, Anson, & Howard, 2019, p. 235, 241). This is something all faculty should understand and practice rather than leaving it up to English faculty. These policies should also be universally adhered to. At one school I taught at, for example, a student plagiarized and received a “0” per the policy. However, the student (who had been enrolled in college one month) had a faculty member from her discipline come with her to my office to fight the grade and argue that the action was not “indicative of her usual behavior” in their classes though “she has not turned in anything written to us.” The instructor then advocated for the student to be able to resubmit the work for credit. This not only is offensive to writing faculty, but undermines campus policy and illustrates there are no consequences for students who plagiarize, despite the “three-strike” rule I have encountered at most colleges I have taught at.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of the study was the small sample size and amount of time the survey was posted online. In future studies, it would be pertinent to add questions to the study and place more emphasis on creative theft and plagiarism since ways to thwart creative theft, beyond self-reporting, are still in question. One question that may uncover more motivations for both academic and creative plagiarists is respondents’ perceptions of ownership of work online. A new study should also investigate whether framing plagiarism as personal theft would change perceptions. Furthermore, it should ask respondents which consequences for plagiarism are most effective. It would also be interesting to add the expertise of, or a study by a mental health professional who can shed light on the cognitive dissonance of thieves who respond positively or receive joy from accolades they know are not real for work they did not do.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is no question that respondents are somewhat aware of what plagiarism is or how it is defined. It seems that the ease of access to information online is not a primary motivator, but merely a tool for those who already intend to plagiarize due to poor time management or desire for reward. Modes for prevention in academia are education, consistent and campus-wide policy for plagiarism (including consequences), plagiarism detection software, and original assignments students can build toward so they are not tempted to plagiarize the night the project is due. However, those methods will still not be sufficient for someone with ill-intent to steal the intellectual and creative property of others for personal gain. Resolutions for this issue would require further study, possibly from a psychological perspective—especially when it comes plagiarists tattooing a line someone else wrote on their arm and deeming it their own.

### **AUTHOR NOTE**

Melissa Tyndall is an Assistant Professor at South College where she also serves as the English Lead for all campuses and director of the Writing Lab at the Nashville Campus. The former award-winning reporter and poet has taught college-level communication and English for 13 years. She has also presented at the Popular Culture/American Culture

Association and Association of Writers & Writing Programs conferences.

## REFERENCES

- Adler-Kassner, L., Anson, C., & Howard, R. (2008). Framing plagiarism. In Eisner C. & Vicinus M. (Eds.), *Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism: Teaching Writing in the Digital Age* (pp. 231-246). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sxx1.23>
- Awdry, R. & Sarre, R. (2013). An investigation into plagiarism motivations and prevention techniques: Can they be appropriately aligned? *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 9(2), 35-49. Retrieved from <https://ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/IJEI/article/download/891/644>
- Fish, R. & Hurra, G. (2013). Students' perceptions of plagiarism. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13(5), 33-45. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ1017029).
- Flood, A. (2018). Prize-nominated poet's debut cancelled as plagiarism accusations build. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/06/prize-nominated-poets-debut-cancelled-as-plagiarism-accusations-build>
- Hartwig, D.W. (2015). Student plagiarism and first-year composition: A study. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 43(1), 38-56. Retrieved from <https://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/TETYC/0431-sep2015/TETYC0431Student.pdf>
- Keefer, L. A., Brown, M. & Rothschild, Z. K. (2019). Framing plagiarism as a disease heightens students' valuation of academic integrity. *International Journal of Psychology* doi:10.1002/ijop.12581
- Kim, J. (2014). Don't blame plagiarism on mental illness. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culture-shrink/201410/dont-blame-plagiarism-mental-illness>
- McKibbens, R. [@RachelMcKibbens]. (2018, Dec. 01). Plagiarizing work is nasty as-is, but it becomes something else entirely when it is a white person commodifying the trauma, work & lived experiences of writers of color. Bottom line. Y'all can give it one name, but it is, indeed, more than that. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/rachelmckibbens/status/1068975621479505926?lang=en>
- Rosenfield, K. (2018). Poetry Twitter erupts over a plagiarist in their midst Retrieved from <https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/poetry-twitter-erupts-over-plagiarist-ailey-otoole.html>
- O'Toole, A. [@ms\_ocoole]. (2019, Oct. 21). Hi. My name is Ailey O'Toole and I am the woman who plagiarized from several writers last year. I know this is long overdue, but I am here now to say I'm sorry. Retrieved from [https://twitter.com/ms\\_ocoole/status/1186334362318639104](https://twitter.com/ms_ocoole/status/1186334362318639104)
- Tsoulis-Reay, A. (2018, Dec. 11). Inside the Mind of a Plagiarist. *The Cut*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecut.com/2018/12/what-its-like-to-be-a-plagiarist.html>