The "ChatGPT Hyphen": A Pilot Study on Folk Theories of AI Text

Do STEM and Humanities Students Perceive Punctuation Differently?

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Introduction

As Large Language Models (LLMs) integrate into daily workflow, users develop "folk theories" to detect machine-generated text. A prevailing theory in online discourse is that the **em dash (—)** is a hallmark of AI writing (Abebe, 2025). This study investigates whether this perception is universal or socially stratified based on academic discipline.

Methodology

I conducted a field survey ($N = 18$) at the Sadler Center to measure the "Perceived AI-Likeness" of standard em dash usage.

- **Stimuli:** 8 sentences featuring prescriptively correct em dashes (drawn from Merriam-Webster).

- **Variables:** Participants rated the text on a Likert scale for "Machine-like" quality.

- **Segmentation:** Responses were cross-referenced with the participant's primary academic field (STEM vs. Humanities/Arts).

Preliminary Observations (Pilot Data)

Given the limited sample size ($N = 18$), these results represent pilot trends rather than statistical significance. However, the initial data suggests a potential divergence in disciplinary ideology.
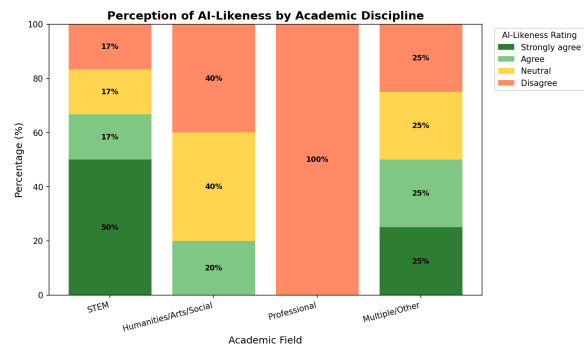

Fig 1: Pilot data suggests STEM students (left) may be more likely to flag em dashes as "AI-Like" than Humanities students (middle). Note: 'Applied' category (n=3) shows 100% disagreement due to small sample size.

As shown in Figure 1, **50% of the STEM cohort** flagged the text as machine-like, whereas **0% of the Humanities cohort** selected this option. While the "100%" result in the Vocational column is an artifact of the small sample count, the split between STEM and Humanities warrants further investigation.

Methodological Validation

This pilot confirms that the survey instrument successfully isolates "AI Perception" as a variable distinct from writing confidence. The study establishes a reproducible protocol for exploring "AI Detection" not as an objective skill, but as a **social ideology** driven by disciplinary training.

References:
Abebe, N. (2025). *With the em dash, A.I. embraces a fading tradition.* NYT Magazine.