VAISHNAVH NAGARAJAN

www.vaishnavh.github.io
vaishnavh@google.com

Professional Career

- **Research Scientist**, Google *Fall 2021 - present*
- **Ph.D. in Computer Science** *Fall 2015 - Summer 2021*
  Carnegie Mellon University (CMU)
  Advisor*: J. Zico Kolter*
  Thesis: Explaining generalization in deep learning: progress and fundamental limits [arxiv]
- **Bachelors in Technology** *2011 - 2015*
  Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras GPA: 9.88/10.0 (Rank 2)
  Advisor*: Balaraman Ravindran*
  Thesis: KWIK Inverse Reinforcement Learning

Preprints

[1] **Roll the dice and look before you leap: Going beyond the creative limits of next-token prediction** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan*, Chen Henry Wu*, Charles Ding, Aditi Raghunathan.

- Also in ICLR 2025 Workshop on Workshop on Spurious Correlation and Shortcut Learning: Foundations and Solutions

Conference Publications

[2] **The pitfalls of next-token prediction,** [arxiv]
Gregor Bachmann* and Vaishnavh Nagarajan*.
International Conference on Machine Learning (**ICML 2024**)

- Also **oral** presentation in ICLR 2024 Workshop "How Far Are We From AGI?"

[3] **What do larger image classifiers memorise?** [arxiv]
Michal Lukasik, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Ankit Singh Rawat, Aditya Krishna Menon, Sanjiv Kumar
Transactions on Machine Learning Research (**TMLR 2024**)

[4] **Sharpness-Aware Minimization enhances feature quality via balanced learning** [openreview]
Jacob Mitchell Springer, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Aditi Raghunathan
International Conference on Learning Representations 2024 (**ICLR 2024**)

[5] **The cost of scaling down large language models: Fact recall deteriorates before in-context learning** [arxiv]
Tian Jin, Nolan Clement, Xin Dong, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Michael Carbin, Jonathan Ragan-Kelley, Gintare Karolina Dziugaite
International Conference on Learning Representations 2024 (**ICLR 2024**)

[6] **Think before you speak: Training language models with pause tokens** [arxiv]
Sachin Goyal, Ziwei Ji, Ankit Singh Rawat, Aditya Krishna Menon, Sanjiv Kumar, Vaishnavh Nagarajan.
International Conference on Learning Representations 2024 (**ICLR 2024**)

- Also in NeurIPS 2023 Workshop on Robustness of Few-shot and Zero-shot Learning in Foundation Models

[7] **On student-teacher deviations in distillation: does it pay to disobey?** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Aditya Krishna Menon, Srinadh Bhojanapalli, Hossein Mobahi, Sanjiv Kumar.
In Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 36 (**NeurIPS 2023**)

[8] **ResMem: Learn what you can and memorize the rest** [arxiv]
Zitong Yang, Michal Lukasik, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Zonglin Li, Ankit Singh Rawat, Manzil Zaheer, Aditya Krishna Menon, Sanjiv Kumar
In Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 36 (**NeurIPS 2023**)

[9] **Assessing generalization of SGD via disagreement.** [arxiv]
Yiding Jiang*, Vaishnavh Nagarajan*, Christina Baek and J. Zico Kolter
International Conference on Learning Representations 2022 (**ICLR 2022**)
Spotlight paper

- Also in ICML 2021 Workshop on Over-parameterization: Pitfalls and Opportunities

[10] **Understanding the failure modes of out-of-distribution generalization.** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Anders Andreassen and Behnam Neyshabur
International Conference on Learning Representations 2021 (**ICLR 2021**)

[11] **A learning theoretic perspective on local explainability.** [arxiv]
Jeffrey Li*, Vaishnavh Nagarajan*, Gregory Plumb and Ameet Talwalkar
International Conference on Learning Representations 2021 (**ICLR 2021**)

[12] **Provably safe PAC-MDP exploration using analogies.** [arxiv]
Melrose Roderick, Vaishnavh Nagarajan and J. Zico Kolter
In Proceedings of the 24th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Statistics (**AISTATS 2021**)

[13] **Uniform convergence may be unable to explain generalization in deep learning.** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan and J. Zico Kolter.
In Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 32 (**NeurIPS 2019**)
Oral paper (0.55% acceptance) and winner of **The Outstanding New Directions Paper Award**

- *In Workshop on Understanding and Improving Generalization in Deep Learning*. (**ICML 2019**; **spotlight** talk in workshop)

- *In IAS/Princeton Workshop on Theory of Deep Learning 2019* (**spotlight** talk)

[14] **Deterministic PAC-Bayesian generalization bounds for deep networks via generalizing noise-resilience.** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan and J. Zico Kolter.
International Conference on Learning Representations 2019 (**ICLR 2019**)

[15] **Revisiting adversarial risk.** [arxiv]
Arun Sai Suggala, Adarsh Prasad, Vaishnavh Nagarajan and Pradeep Ravikumar
In Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Statistics (**AISTATS 2019**)

[16] **Geriatrix: Aging what you see and what you don't see. A file system aging approach for modern storage systems**
Saurabh Kadekodi, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Greg Ganger and Garth Gibson
Proceedings of the 2018 USENIX Conference on Usenix Annual Technical Conference (**ATC 2018**)

[17] **Gradient descent GAN optimization is locally stable** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan and J. Zico Kolter.
In Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 30 (**NeurIPS 2017**)
Oral paper (1.2% acceptance)

[18] **Lifelong learning in costly feature spaces.** [arxiv]
with Avrim Blum and Maria-Florina Balcan.
In Proceedings of the 28th International Conference in Algorithmic Learning Theory (**ALT 2017**)

[19] **Learning-theoretic foundations of algorithm configuration for combinatorial partitioning problems.** [arxiv]
with Maria-Florina Balcan, Ellen Vitercik and Colin White.
In Proceedings of the 30th Annual Conference on Learning Theory (**COLT 2017**)

[20] **Every team deserves a second chance: Identifying when things go wrong.** [PDF]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan*, Leandro S. Marcolino* and Milind Tambe.
In Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and Multi-agent Systems (**AAMAS 2015**)

Journal Publications

The following are journal versions of conference papers listed above.

[21] **Lifelong learning in costly feature spaces.**
with Avrim Blum and Maria-Florina Balcan.
In Theoretical Computer Science **(invited)** (**TCS 2019**)

[22] **Every team deserves a second chance: An extended study on predicting team performance.**
Leandro S. Marcolino, Aravind Lakshminarayanan, Vaishnavh Nagarajan and Milind Tambe.
In Journal of Autonomous Agents and Multi-Agent Systems (**JAAMAS 2016**)
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Workshops/Short papers

[23] **Avoiding Spurious Correlations: Bridging Theory and Practice** [openreview]
Thao Nguyen, Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Hanie Sedghi, Behnam Neyshabur
NeurIPS 2021 Workshop on Distribution Shifts: Connecting Methods and Applications (**2021**)

[24] **Theoretical insights into memorization in GANs.** [PDF]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan, Colin Raffel and Ian Goodfellow.
In Workshop on Integration of Deep Learning Theories (**NeurIPS 2018**)

[25] **Generalization in deep learning: the role of distance from initialization.** [arxiv]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan and J. Zico Kolter.
In Workshop on Deep Learning: Bridging Theory and Practice (**NeurIPS 2017**)
spotlight talk in workshop)

[26] **A reinforcement learning approach to online learning of decision trees.** [arxiv]
Abhinav Garlapati, Aditi Raghunathan, Vaishnavh Nagarajan and Balaraman Ravindran.
In Proceedings of the 12th European Workshop on Reinforcement Learning, International Conference on Machine Learning (**EWRL-ICML 2015**)

[27] **KWIK inverse reinforcement learning.** [PDF]
Vaishnavh Nagarajan and Balaraman Ravindran.
The Multi-disciplinary Conference on Reinforcement Learning and Decision Making. (**RLDM 2015**)

Talks

- Going beyond the creative limits of next-token prediction
  - Learning workshop (**invited**) *Spring 2025*
- The pitfalls of next-token prediction
  - CMU 15-789 Guest Lecture (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - CMU AI Lunch (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - Simons Institute Workshop on Emerging Generalization Settings (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - Amazon Search Research Talk Series (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - Microsoft Research (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - Princeton Guest Lecture (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
  - NYU CILVR Seminar (**invited**) *Fall 2024*
- Understanding the failure modes of out-of-distribution generalization.
  - IISA 2022 (**invited**) *Fall 2022*
  - CMU AI lunch *Mar 2021*
- Uniform convergence may be unable to explain generalization in deep learning.

- CMU Lecture (**invited**) *Fall 2022*
- Google Research (New York) Learning Theory (**invited**) *Oct 2020*
- Center for Human Compatible AI, UC Berkeley (**invited**) *Aug 2020*
- Google Brain (Mountain View) Deep Learning Phenomena (**invited**) *Jul 2020*
- NeurIPS 2019 Oral presentation *Dec 2019*
- CMU AI Lunch *Nov 2019*
- IAS/Princeton University Workshop on Theory of Deep Learning: Where next? *Oct 2019*
- ICML Workshop: Understanding and Improving Generalization in Deep Learning *Jun 2019*

- Generalization in deep learning: The role of distance from initialization
  - NeurIPS Workshop on Deep Learning: Bridging Theory and Practice *Dec 2017*
- Gradient Descent GAN optimization is locally stable.
  - NeurIPS 2017 Oral presentation *Dec 2017*
  - CMU AI lunch *Oct 2017*
- Lifelong learning in costly feature spaces.
  - ALT 2017 *Oct 2017*
- Learning the best algorithm for max-cut, clustering, and other partitioning problems.
  - Learning, Algorithm Design & Beyond Worst-Case Analysis, Simons Institute, Berkeley. (**invited**) *Nov 2016*
  - CMU Theory Lunch *Nov 2016*

Service

- Reviewer for:
  - ALT 2021
  - ICLR 2023, 2021 (**outstanding reviewer award**);
  - NeurIPS 2024, 2023, 2021, 2020 (top 10% reviewer), 2019 (top 50% reviewer), 2018 (top 30% reviewer)
  - ICML 2024 (Expert Reviewer), 2023 (Expert Reviewer), 2022, 2021 (Expert reviewer), 2020, 2019 (**top 5%** reviewer)
  - COLT 2019
  - AISTATS 2023 (top 10% reviewer), 2019
  - UAI 2022
  - JMLR
  - Nature

    - Workshops: ICML PODS 2022, ICML OPPO 2021, ICLR 2023 ME-FoMo, NeurIPS 2023 DistShift
- Area Chair
    - ICML 2025
    - COLM 2025
    - NeurIPS 2025
    - NeurIPS 2023 R0-FoMo Workshop
- Mentor at Learning Theory Alliance Workshop (**invited**) *Fall 2022 & 2023*
- Fatima Fellowship Mentor. *2022*
- Member of CMU Computer Science MS admissions committee. *Spring 2018*
- Representative of the Computer Science Department in the SCS4ALL PhD Committee, a student advisory council for the CMU School of Computer Science. *Fall 2017 - Fall 2018*
- Organized the Learning Theory Reading group in CMU. *Fall 2016*

Mentorship

- Chen Henry Wu (PhD student at CMU as of 2025)
- Gregor Bachmann (PhD student at ETH Zürich as of 2024)
- Sachin Goyal (PhD student at CMU as of 2024, hosted as intern at Google)
- Zitong Yang (PhD student at Stanford as of 2025)
- Jacob Springer (PhD student at CMU as of 2024)
- Yuri Galindo (mentee through Fatima Fellowship)
- Marcus Blake (Software Engineer at Google as of 2024, mentee through Learning Theory Alliance)
- Kimia Hamidieh (PhD student at MIT as of 2024)
- Nuredin Ali (PhD student at the Universiy of Minnesota as of 2024)
- Thao Nguyen (PhD student at UW as of 2024)
- Yiding Jiang (PhD student at CMU as of 2024)
- Melrose Roderick (postdoc at Mila as of 2024)
- Jeffrey Li (PhD student at UW as of 2024)

Teaching

- Teaching assistant, 10-715: Advanced Introduction to Machine Learning *Fall 2016*
- Teaching assistant, 15-780: Graduate Artificial Intelligence *Spring 2018*

Internships

- **PhD Research Internship** *Summer 2020*
  Google X
  Host: Behnam Neyshabur
  Theoretically explained when and why machine learning models fail to generalize under test-time distribution shifts.

- **PhD Research Internship** *Summer 2019*
  Bosch Center for AI
  Host: David Reeb
  Developed generalization bounds for high-dimensional linear models that circumvent limitations of uniform convergence bounds.

- **PhD Research Internship** *Summer 2018*
  Google Brain
  Host: Colin Raffel, Ian Goodfellow
  Explained why Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) counterintuitively do not memorize their training data. Explored metrics for measuring diversity of GAN samples and developed a theoretically-grounded technique for improving sample diversity.

- **Undergraduate Research Internship** *Summer 2014*
  University of Southern California (USC)
  Advisor: Milind Tambe
  Identified that a machine learning model can predict the success/failure of an artificial multi-agent team playing Computer Go.

- **Undergraduate Internship** *Summer 2013*
  Report Bee
  Advisor: Madhavan Mukund, Chennai Mathematical Institute
  Designed an index that quantifies learning experiences of schoolchildren. Implemented the model within Report Bee's web application.

Scholastic Achievements

- Among **national top** 1% candidates in national level olympiads (2011) in **five different fields**, namely, Informatics, Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Astronomy.
- Directly qualified for the Indian National Math Olympiad (INMO) 2011 based on outstanding performance in the Regional Math Olympiad 2010 and INMO 2010.
- One of the 35 students that qualified further for the national selection camp for International Chemistry Olympiad.
- Secured **All India Rank 70** (out of 0.5 million candidates) and State Rank 3 in IIT Joint Entrance Examination 2011, **All India Rank 56** (out of 1.1 million candidates) in All India Engineering Entrance Examination 2011 and **All India Rank 16** (out of 0.1 million candidates) in Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology Admission Test 2011

Honors and Awards

- **Reviewer Award** at ICLR 2021 for being an outstanding reviewer.
- Winner of the **Outstanding New Directions Paper Award** at NeurIPS 2019 (given to only one out of ~ 1400 accepted papers).
- Awarded the ACM-India/IARCS student grant to attend AAMAS 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.
- One of ~ 30 Viterbi-India scholars selected by Viterbi School of Engineering (USC) and Indo-US Science and Technology Forum for a fully funded research internship in Summer 2014.
- Awarded the prestigious KVPY Fellowship 2009 by the **Government of India** to attract highly motivated students for pursuing a research career in science.
- Invited participant in the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research Programme on Youth for Leadership in Science 2009.

Other Activities

- Board member of CMU Indian Graduate Student Association (IGSA). *Dec 2015 - Dec 2018*
- National Service Scheme Volunteer involved in Scientific Toys & Assistive Technology. *2011-12*
- Taught basic maths to underprivileged primary school children in villages in India, in association with the NGO, *AID India*. *Dec 2011*
- Scribe for the students of Vidya Sagar (formerly, the Spastics Society of India). *2008-09*