

Ethical and cultural perspectives on ChatGPT use in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing now faces additional challenges because users cannot identify when they use their human abilities instead of ChatGPT generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool assistance. The rapid emergence of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT has raised important ethical and cultural questions in higher education, particularly concerning authorship, originality, and responsible academic practice. The research obtained 55 open-ended survey responses from students who studied at different levels and pursued various subjects across multiple geographic areas. Among these responses, 23 provided sufficiently detailed reflections and were analyzed for qualitative insights. Using a qualitative research design, the research applied Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify three connected themes which include students' ethical perceptions of ChatGPT use, perceived benefits and concerns in academic work, and the role of cultural context in shaping AI acceptance. Students acknowledge the helpful features of ChatGPT but they remain unclear about plagiarism rules and academic authenticity standards and institutional policies. The findings indicate that students generally perceive ChatGPT as a supportive learning tool when used responsibly, while also expressing concerns regarding dependency and unclear institutional guidance. Overall, the study highlights the need for clearer institutional policies and culturally informed AI literacy to support responsible use of generative AI in academic writing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The educational environment has undergone a rapid transformation because of artificial intelligence (AI) which now shapes student understanding of learning processes and creative work and authorship practices [1]. The educational sector faces a major transformation because ChatGPT and other generative AI tools challenge the traditional distinction between human and automated authorship in academic writing [1], [2]. Although AI increases access and improves personalized support, it also raises concerns about originality, academic integrity, and cultural legitimacy in knowledge development [3], [4]. AI tools in education bring two main advantages to learning through better accessibility and customized instruction but they create multiple problems regarding authorship and authenticity and cultural validity in knowledge development [3], [4]. The educational world now views ChatGPT as a cultural force which operates within postdigital educational systems [5].

Research shows that students need to study ChatGPT through its operational features and their personal beliefs about right and wrong when using the system [6], [7]. The educational community maintains opposing views about AI tools because some support their ability to establish learning equality but others fear they will decrease academic standards and convert education into a commercialized system [8], [9]. Despite the growing literature on generative AI in education, limited research has explored how students themselves interpret the ethical legitimacy of using ChatGPT in academic writing and how cultural contexts shape these interpretations. Research about student moral views regarding ChatGPT academic usage remains limited because scientists have not conducted sufficient studies to understand their beliefs about academic fairness and intellectual integrity.

The technology acceptance model (TAM) [10] and unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) [11] models show users choose technology implementation through their assessment of operational advantages and interface simplicity. The models study individual mental processes but they do not account for cultural elements and ethical considerations which affect how people accept technology. Educational institutions need to research student AI legitimacy assessment methods by analyzing their collective values and institutional rules and disciplinary requirements.

The research gap receives solutions through the application of postdigital and sociocultural theoretical frameworks. The postdigital educational framework treats technology as an essential part of modern learning because it enables digital and human elements to create shared educational experiences [12]. The digital habitus framework [13] and moral economy framework [14], [15] help explain how students develop their values and ethical awareness and institutional cultures affect their AI adoption choices. The ChatGPT ethical debate goes past plagiarism rules because it represents a core battle about academic trust and authorship and educational fairness in contemporary learning environments.

The research investigates student perspectives regarding ChatGPT academic writing requirements and their evaluation of its educational advantages and disadvantages. It further examines students' qualitative feedback to understand how these perceptions contribute to the development of AI-related cultural values within educational environments. In doing so, the study highlights the need for digital educational environments to support students' ethical behavior [16]. The research combines behavioral models of technology adoption with sociocultural theories to demonstrate how cultural values and moral principles affect technology acceptance.

This study contributes to existing research by moving beyond purely technological explanations of AI adoption and examining how ethical reasoning and cultural context shape students' acceptance of ChatGPT in academic writing. While prior studies have primarily focused on perceived usefulness and ease of use, this research provides qualitative evidence of how students negotiate authorship, fairness, and academic integrity within diverse cultural settings. Accordingly, the research addresses some questions:

- How do students perceive the ethical dimensions of using ChatGPT for academic writing? (RQ1)
- What concerns or benefits do students associate with using ChatGPT in their academic work? (RQ2)

2. METHOD

The increasing use of AI in the educational process requires both technical assessment and knowledge of the ethical and cultural perspective of students towards them. As mentioned, students' reflections on the use of ChatGPT are situated within postdigital and sociocultural contexts that extend beyond purely technological models of adoption. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to address these moral and contextual interpretations, allowing participants to express their own perspectives and experiences regarding the phenomenon.

2.1. Research design

The qualitative design used in this study follows a descriptive interpretive approach grounded in postpositivist reasoning with sensitivity to phenomenological understanding. Although earlier studies on the adoption of technology tended to depend on quantitative models [10], [11], qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate to learn the why and how of moral justifications of students in the use of ChatGPT. The design is based on the fact that the Creswell and Creswell [17] believes that the qualitative methods allow exploring the social meanings that people create and Bryman [18] stresses the flexibility of the interpretive inquiry that helps unveil the social reality.

This design corresponds to the interpretive paradigm, which pays importance to the subjective experience and contextual knowledge rather than measurement alone. The approach therefore allows deeper examination of students' ethical reasoning and cultural interpretations of AI-assisted academic work. In doing so, the study extends behavioral technology adoption models such as TAM and UTAUT by incorporating sociocultural perspectives including moral economy and digital habitus.

2.2. Participants and context

Participants were drawn from a larger group of 84 undergraduate and postgraduate students that had already completed a quantitative survey on ChatGPT perceptions. In this qualitative aspect, 55 students responded to answer two open-ended written questions examining ethical perceptions and perceived benefits or concerns related to ChatGPT use. Among these responses, 23 contained sufficiently detailed reflections and were therefore selected for in-depth qualitative analysis. The participants belonged to various disciplines of research such as business, education, and computing, and were of various institutional and geographical backgrounds. Such heterogeneity was deliberate, given that academic disciplines tend to represent quite different epistemic cultures that influence how AI tools are used in coursework [19]. The fact that students of undergraduate and postgraduate programs were included also enabled the comparison between the levels of academic maturity, which are complex in terms of the spectrum of AI literacy in higher education [1], [8].

2.3. Data collection

The data was obtained with the help of two open-ended questions administered through an online survey. The first, questioned students on whether they viewed the use of ChatGPT in academic writing as ethical or not and the reasons. The second question was to identify the advantages or issues they related to using ChatGPT in their academic practice. These open-ended questions were to generate value-rich thoughts, and not reporting, which is consistent with the interpretive suggestion of Saunders *et al.* [20] to prompt statements that encourage expansion and explanation. Participants submitted their responses anonymously through a secure online form managed by the researchers. The method was a balance between accessibility and reflection time, which aligns with the argument by Punch [21] that asynchronous qualitative survey allow a deeper reflection among the respondents.

2.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was done in accordance with the six-phase process as developed by Braun and Clarke [22]. The process of analysis included: i) being familiarized with all open-ended answers; ii) preliminary coding of ethically-oriented, culturally-oriented and pragmatically-oriented statements; iii) coding the codes in a set of preliminary themes; iv) re-reading and consolidating overlapping categories; v) naming and defining the themes; and vi) forming analytical stories that would be backed by illustrative quotes.

To ensure internal consistency and depth of interpretation, the coding was done manually, and checked against cross-coding. The reasoning was inductive-deductive hybrid, with emergent ideas being explained in terms of theoretical frames, including postdigital culture [12], digital habitus [13], and moral economy [14]. Although the frequency of words was considered to determine repeated moral and utilitarian words, there were more interests placed on interpretive coherence and not quantification.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The research followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines [23] of respect, consent and anonymity. The informed consent was given by all the participants freely during the introduction of the survey. No individual names and institutional names were gathered. The transparency of purpose, reflexivity, and secure data handling were used as ethical rigor particularly in line with recommended practices for managing and sharing research data [24], as suggested by Creswell [17]. Since this study did not entail any vulnerable groups or sensitive individual information, formal institutional review was not required. The study was conducted with ethical responsibility in the digital learning environment [16]. In particular, it manages to reconcile behavioral paradigms of technology utilization with sociocultural orientations to emphasize the way moral and cultural values contribute to acceptance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Students' ethical perceptions of ChatGPT use in academic writing

The thematic analysis revealed that students framed ChatGPT's ethical use not as a binary moral question but as a matter of context, intention, and institutional expectations. This indicates that ethical judgment is not fixed but negotiated within academic environments. The majority viewed its use as conditionally ethical, provided that it supports learning rather than replaces intellectual effort.

As one undergraduate business student from Asia (Participant 23, Business UG) explained, "*It helps me organize my writing and express ideas better, but using it for the whole paper feels unfair to others who work hard.*" This statement reflects a moral balance between assistance and authenticity. Students perceived AI as a legitimate support tool for grammar and structure but rejected it as a substitute for authorship. This suggests that students distinguish between augmentation and substitution in defining acceptable AI use.

These reflections echo Selwyn [6] contention that educational technologies continuously redraw ethical boundaries rather than dissolve them, challenging what counts as diligence and fairness.

A recurrent ethical concern centered on learning integrity and cognitive growth. A postgraduate education student from the Middle East (Participant 41, Education PG) wrote, *“If we depend too much on ChatGPT, we will lose our ability to think and write on our own. It should guide, not do the job.”* This aligns with Mhlanga [9] argument that responsible AI literacy depends on preserving the reflective struggle inherent in human learning. The findings therefore indicate that students associate ethical use with maintaining cognitive effort rather than merely following institutional rules. The data suggested that students see ethical use as a process of self-regulation rather than compliance with institutional directives.

Several participants, particularly from computing disciplines, emphasized that ethics depend on institutional clarity. One undergraduate computing student from Africa (Participant 12, Computing UG) remarked, *“Every university should explain what is acceptable because students interpret it differently.”* Such remarks reinforce Williamson and Piattoeva idea [16] that educational legitimacy is produced through governance structures, not abstract moral codes. This highlights the role of institutional guidance in shaping shared ethical norms around AI use.

Taken together, these insights illustrate what Thompson [14] conceptualized as a moral economy—a shared sense of fairness negotiated within a cultural field. Students’ responses reflected an internalized academic habitus [25], in which acceptable behavior is defined relationally, shaped by peers, teachers, and institutional discourse. Overall, the findings demonstrate that ethical perceptions of ChatGPT are socially constructed and context-dependent rather than universally defined. Within this moral landscape, ChatGPT functions as a symbolic marker of evolving academic values, where responsibility, effort, and fairness are reinterpreted in the postdigital learning environment.

3.2. Benefits and concerns of ChatGPT in academic work

The second research question explored students’ perceived advantages and concerns of integrating ChatGPT into their learning processes, particularly in the academic writing context. The results reveal a dual orientation: enthusiasm toward efficiency and language improvement, balanced by unease about accuracy and dependency. Students widely appreciated ChatGPT as a learning facilitator. A postgraduate business student from Europe (Participant 7, Business PG) observed, *“It saves a lot of time and helps me write more clearly in English, especially for professional reports.”* Similarly, a computing undergraduate from Asia (Participant 18, Computing UG) noted, *“ChatGPT helps me understand complex topics by explaining them simply. It’s like a personal tutor.”* These comments underscore AI’s role as an enabler of academic accessibility, particularly for multilingual learners who gain linguistic confidence through AI-mediated feedback. This finding aligns with previous studies [1], [2], who highlight AI’s potential to democratize academic participation by reducing cognitive and linguistic barriers.

However, many participants expressed doubts about reliability. A business postgraduate from Africa (Participant 29, Business PG) stated, *“It gives answers that sound right but are sometimes wrong. You have to check everything before trusting it.”* Such caution reveals an emergent critical digital literacy, consistent with Ng’s argument [19] that evaluative judgment forms the cornerstone of responsible AI engagement. This suggests that students are not passive users of AI but actively evaluate its credibility.

The most persistent concern, however, involved the erosion of academic skills. One education undergraduate from the Middle East (Participant 35, Education UG) reflected, *“If we rely too much on it, our creativity and thinking will fade. It’s like letting the machine do the learning for us.”* This sentiment echoes Selwyn [6] critique of automation’s epistemic risks, suggesting that while ChatGPT supports surface-level productivity, it may hinder deeper cognitive development.

Students’ dual stance—valuing efficiency while fearing dependency—illustrates how the adoption of ChatGPT operates within what Davis [10] and Venkatesh *et al.* [11] describe as perceived usefulness and ease of use, yet extends beyond these constructs to include ethical comfort. This demonstrates that technology acceptance in educational contexts is shaped not only by functionality but also by moral and cultural considerations. Students did not merely evaluate the technology on functional grounds; they considered its alignment with personal and cultural values, shaping what might be called ethical acceptance.

3.3. Integrative cultural interpretation

The interplay between ethical judgment and pragmatic benefit indicates a broader cultural transformation in how students understand academic authorship. Across all disciplines, participants displayed elements of what Romele [13] terms a digital habitus—a set of adaptive dispositions governing how individuals interact with AI in everyday academic work. Students from business and computing fields, typically operating in outcome-driven contexts, demonstrated pragmatic acceptance of ChatGPT as a legitimate productivity enhancer. By contrast, those from education and humanities backgrounds emphasized originality and moral reflection. A postgraduate humanities student from Europe (Participant 47,

Education PG) summarized this distinction appropriately: *“For us, writing is personal thinking. ChatGPT can help polish it, but it can't replace my mind.”* This contrast suggests that disciplinary cultures influence how students define acceptable AI use.

Regional differences add further depth to these findings. Students' reflections often mirrored broader cultural orientations consistent with Hofstede's cultural-dimension theory [26]. Respondents from Asia and the Middle East-contexts characterized by higher power distance and collectivist values-tended to define ethical use through institutional guidance and shared responsibility. *“It depends on how the university explains the rules,”* noted one participant from the Middle East, highlighting deference to authority. In contrast, students from Europe and Africa, representing lower power distance and more individualist orientations, framed ethics as a matter of personal accountability: *“Each of us must decide what's fair,”* remarked a business undergraduate from Africa. This pattern supports Hofstede's proposition that culture shapes moral reasoning by influencing how individuals relate to authority, uncertainty, and collaboration. These findings suggest that ethical interpretations of AI use are not universal but are shaped by culturally embedded norms, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive frameworks in higher education.

These cross-regional comparisons indicate that ethical comfort with ChatGPT is not merely a pedagogical, technological factor but a cultural phenomenon that is mediated by values regarding autonomy, fairness, and community standards. Ethical legitimacy in higher-power-distance cultures is derived from institutional rules, whereas in individualist contexts it emerges from self-regulation and moral reflection, whereas in individualism context it arises, based on self-control and ethical reflection. These results support Bourdieu view [25] that academic practice is embedded within social fields where legitimacy is continuously negotiated. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the integration of ChatGPT in higher education represents a shift from technological adoption toward cultural negotiation, where students actively interpret and redefine the meaning of authorship, fairness, and learning. This pattern also highlighted in recent research on the ethical and pedagogical implications of generative AI in education [2], [4], [27]. Higher education, therefore needs to develop ethical digital competence [7], which is the ability to make a judgment, so that they can take advantage of technology in a responsible manner without losing intellectual independence. Recent studies further emphasize that developing critical AI literacy is essential for ensuring responsible and context-aware use of generative AI tools in academic environments [8]. The cultural patterns identified here demonstrate that perceptions of fairness, authorship, and technological benefit vary not only by discipline but also by regional value systems. The following conclusion consolidates these insights, relating them to global educational ethics and proposing directions for fostering culturally aware AI literacy in higher education.

4. CONCLUSION

The study examined students' perceptions of ChatGPT as a digital learning partner across different academic disciplines and cultural contexts. The findings indicate that students perceive the use of ChatGPT as conditionally ethical, depending on whether it supports learning or replaces individual intellectual effort, thereby directly addressing the research questions on ethical perceptions and perceived benefits and concerns. Students recognized the usefulness of ChatGPT in improving efficiency and academic writing, but also expressed concerns regarding dependency, academic integrity, and unclear institutional guidelines. These findings demonstrate that acceptance of ChatGPT is shaped not only by perceived usefulness but also by ethical judgment and cultural interpretation. Furthermore, differences across regions showed that students from collectivist contexts tended to rely on institutional rules to define acceptable use, whereas those from more individualist contexts emphasized personal responsibility.

The study highlights important implications for higher education institutions, suggesting the need for clearer policies, culturally informed AI literacy frameworks, and guidance on responsible academic use of generative AI tools. It also indicates that ethical digital competence should be understood as both a technological and cultural capability. However, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data and a qualitative sample, which may not be generalizable across all educational contexts. Future research could adopt longitudinal or comparative designs to examine how students' ethical perceptions evolve over time as AI becomes more integrated into academic practice. Such work would further support the development of inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to AI use in higher education.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft

E : Writing - Review & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We hereby state that we do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have emerged to affect the work we have reported in this paper. Thus, one can say that we do not have a conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We are informed consenting to all individuals who are included in this study. No personal identity/information involving any group of the participants were required to be supplied with during the data collection process.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for educational research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and no personal or sensitive data were collected. As the study involved adult participants and did not include sensitive information, formal institutional ethical approval was not required.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [MA], upon reasonable request.

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