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ETHICAL USE OF ChatGPT IN RESEARCH WRITING

USO ÉTICO DO ChatGPT NA REDAÇÃO DE PESQUISAS

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Abstract
The exponential integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT into academic contexts has raised critical ethical and pedagogical questions regarding their responsible use in research writing. This study explored the lived experiences of 150 students across secondary, undergraduate, and graduate levels in a Science and Technology University in the Philippines concerning the ethical use of ChatGPT in academic paper writing. Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, the research sought to interpret how students understand instructor guidance, negotiate trust in AI outputs, and manage tensions between assistance and academic integrity. Data were collected through open-ended survey responses and analyzed thematically using an interpretive approach. Findings revealed five essential structures of experience: (a) holding ethical boundaries, (b) conditional trust through verification, (c) prompting as an acquired skill, (d) tension between helpfulness and dependence, and (e) access-driven workarounds. Participants consistently framed ChatGPT as a supportive yet potentially risky tool, requiring verification, transparent acknowledgment, and sustained authorship of thinking. The study concludes that ethical AI use is not merely rule compliance but an evolving moral and epistemic practice shaped by instruction, infrastructure, and academic culture. This research contributes to the body of knowledge by advancing a phenomenological understanding of ethical AI engagement across academic levels and by conceptualizing responsible AI use as a negotiated practice of boundary-setting, verification, and authorship preservation.

Resumo
A integração exponencial de ferramentas de inteligência artificial (IA) generativa, como o ChatGPT, em contextos acadêmicos levantou questões éticas e pedagógicas críticas sobre seu uso responsável na redação de pesquisas. Este estudo explorou as experiências vividas por 150 alunos do ensino médio, graduação e pós-graduação em uma universidade de ciência e tecnologia nas Filipinas sobre o uso ético do ChatGPT na redação de trabalhos acadêmicos.Guiada pela fenomenologia hermenêutica, a pesquisa buscou interpretar como os alunos entendem a orientação dos instrutores, negociam a confiança nos resultados da IA e gerenciam as tensões entre assistência e integridade acadêmica. Os dados foram coletados por meio de respostas a pesquisas abertas e analisados tematicamente usando uma abordagem interpretativa. Os resultados revelaram cinco estruturas essenciais de experiência: (a) manter limites éticos, (b) confiança condicional por meio de verificação, (c) solicitação como uma habilidade adquirida, (d) tensão entre utilidade e dependência e (e) soluções alternativas orientadas pelo acesso. Os participantes consistentemente enquadraram o ChatGPT como uma ferramenta de apoio, mas potencialmente arriscada, que requer verificação, reconhecimento transparente e autoria sustentada do pensamento. O estudo conclui que o uso ético da IA não é apenas o cumprimento de regras, mas uma prática moral e epistêmica em evolução, moldada pela instrução, infraestrutura e cultura acadêmica. Esta pesquisa contribui para o corpo de conhecimento ao promover uma compreensão fenomenológica do envolvimento ético com a IA

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em todos os níveis acadêmicos e ao conceituar o uso responsável da IA como uma prática negociada de estabelecimento de limites, verificação e preservação da autoria.

Palavras-chave: *Integridade Acadêmica. Barreiras e Aceitação. Fenomenologia Hermenêutica. Educação Filipina. Redação de Pesquisas.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has reshaped educational practices worldwide, particularly in relation to academic writing and knowledge production. Globally, GenAI tools are increasingly used to support idea generation, language refinement, summarization, and structural organization of scholarly texts, especially among novice researchers and multilingual learners (Kasneci et al., 2023. Mariani & Dwivedi, 2024). In higher education contexts, these technologies are frequently framed as cognitive and linguistic support systems rather than substitutes for human reasoning (Malloy & Gonzalez, 2024. Li & Alias, 2025. Yao & Fan, 2025). However, alongside these affordances, persistent ethical concerns—such as authorship ambiguity, academic integrity, and excessive dependence on automated systems—continue to dominate scholarly discourse (Stokel-Walker & Van Noorden, 2023. Cabunita & Namoco, 2026). This global tension between innovation and ethics provides the backdrop against which local educational systems negotiate their responses to the integration of GenAI.

Among the various generative AI platforms, ChatGPT has emerged as one of the most widely used tools in educational settings (BrowserCat, 2025. Freeman, 2025). Its accessibility, conversational interface, and capacity to generate context-sensitive academic text have positioned it as a preferred resource for students across disciplines and academic levels (Rudolph, Tan, & Tan, 2023). Empirical studies report that students frequently use ChatGPT for brainstorming academic topics, improving grammar, and clarifying conceptual explanations (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023. Cabuguin et al., 2024. Cabunita & Namoco, 2026). Despite these benefits, the same studies caution that

students' understanding of ethical boundaries remains uneven, often shaped by informal practices rather than institutional guidance. This dual aspect—high utility coupled with ethical uncertainty—has become a defining feature of ChatGPT use in academic research contexts.

In the Philippine context, the relevance of this issue is further intensified by the central role of research in the education system. Research is a required subject in senior high school and a core course or culminating requirement in undergraduate and graduate programs, reflecting national goals to strengthen inquiry-based learning and research productivity (DepEd, 2025. CHED, 2019). Despite its importance, numerous studies have documented that Filipino students commonly perceive research as one of the most difficult academic requirements, citing challenges in academic writing, methodological rigor, and confidence in academic discussion (Dela Cruz et al., 2024. Castillo, 2025. Zieve-Cohen, Huynh, & Giaimo, 2025). Within this context, ChatGPT is often experienced as a practical support tool that reduces cognitive load and anxiety, particularly for students who struggle with English as the primary language of academic communication.

However, the educational benefits associated with generative AI use in the Philippines are complicated by the limited availability of clear institutional policies and implementation guidelines. While some higher education institutions have issued provisional advisories, comprehensive and standardized policies on acceptable GenAI use in research remain scarce (An, Yu, & James, 2025. Cabunita & Namoco, 2026). This policy gap places both learners and teachers in an ethical dilemma: the pedagogical value of ChatGPT is recognized, yet its legitimacy in formal research outputs remains uncertain. Faculty members, in particular, are caught between encouraging responsible innovation and upholding traditional standards of academic integrity, often relying on personal judgment rather than shared institutional frameworks.

1.1 Theoretical framework of the study

The Sociocultural Theory of Learning, grounded in Vygotsky's perspective, offers a useful lens to understand how students navigate this dilemma. From this viewpoint, learning is mediated by tools and social interaction, and cognitive development occurs

through guided participation with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978. McLeod, 2025). ChatGPT can be understood as a mediating artifact that supports students' engagement with complex research tasks, while research supervisors and instructors function as sources of scaffolding that shape ethical judgment and scholarly practice. When such guidance is present, the use of generative AI may ease students' research burden by increasing clarity and confidence. In the absence of guidance, however, the same tool may intensify ethical uncertainty and dependence, underscoring the socially situated nature of ethical learning in research writing.

Adding to this perspective, the Ethics of Care provides an interpretive framework which emphasizes relational responsibility, mentorship, and contextual decision-making in ethical practice (Osuntade, 2025). Applied to GenAI use in research, this lens shifts the discussion away from rigid compliance toward shared responsibility between students and supervisors. Ethical research writing, from this standpoint, is cultivated through dialogue, feedback, and trust rather than prohibition alone. Students' continued use of ChatGPT despite ethical concerns can thus be interpreted not as misconduct, but as a negotiated practice shaped by caring academic relationships that emphasize prioritizing learning, growth, and accountability (Aydin & Karaarslan, 2023. Zieve-Cohen, Huynh, & Giaimo, 2025).

These conditions point to a clear research gap. While existing studies have examined attitudes, acceptance, and ethical perceptions of generative AI, there remains a limited understanding of how students experience the ethical tensions surrounding ChatGPT use while completing research projects under supervision, particularly across different academic levels. This gap leads to the following research question: How do students make sense of ethical concerns related to the use of generative AI within the context of guidance from their research supervisors? Addressing this question allows the study to seize the essence of students' meaning-making processes rather than merely evaluating policy compliance.

The significance of this study extends across multiple stakeholder groups. For policymakers, the findings can guide the development of context-sensitive and pedagogically grounded AI guidelines. Curriculum designers may use the insights to embed ethical AI literacy within research courses. Teachers, instructors, and professors can draw on the results to improve supervisory practices that balance innovation with

integrity. Students benefit from having their experiences recognized and legitimized within ethical discourse, while future researchers are provided with empirical and theoretical foundations for further inquiry into generative AI in education. Collectively, this study adds to a more humane, relational, and context-aware understanding of ethical GenAI use in academic research.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

This study used a phenomenological research design to uncover the essence of students' lived experiences and meanings regarding the ethical use of ChatGPT in their research projects. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to a particular phenomenon as it is experienced in everyday life (Moustakas, 1994. Van Manen, 2016). In the context of this study, phenomenology is considered most appropriate because the focus is not on measuring the frequency or effectiveness of generative AI use, but on exploring how students make sense of ethical tensions, guidance, and responsibility while using ChatGPT in academic research writing. This approach allows the researcher to bracket preconceived assumptions and attend closely to participants' descriptions, thereby capturing the shared essence of their experiences across academic levels.

2.2 Participants of the study

The study participants were 150 students enrolled in research courses at different academic levels, ranging from senior high school to doctoral programs. All participants were taking a research subject in which writing a research paper was a major course requirement. The data were collected during the first semester of Academic Year 2025–2026 at a science and technology university in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, as suggested by Ferguson, Yonge, and Myrick (2004), and the students were informed that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their academic standing. The participant pool was intentionally

selected using Patton's (2002) principle of maximum variation sampling to capture a wide range of perspectives and shared experiences regarding the use of ChatGPT across different levels of research exposure and academic writing.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected through an online, open-ended questionnaire that allowed participants to reflect freely and articulate their experiences in their own words. The questionnaire included prompts focusing on four main areas: (1) participants' prior knowledge and use of ChatGPT and generative AI, (2) their current experiences using ChatGPT in academic writing and research-related tasks, (3) their views and lived experiences concerning the ethical use of ChatGPT in research projects, and (4) the nature of guidance or supervision they received from their research instructors or advisers regarding AI use. The use of an online format enabled accessibility and encouraged candid reflection, particularly given the ethical sensitivity of the topic.

2.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This involved familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, and refinement to capture patterns of shared meaning across participants' narratives. The analysis focused on identifying themes reflecting students' ethical reasoning, the perceived benefits and burdens of ChatGPT use, and the role of supervisory guidance in shaping their practices. In keeping with recent methodological developments, ChatGPT was also used as a supportive analytical tool to assist in organizing large textual datasets and refining preliminary thematic groupings, following the methodological guidance of Morgan (2023) and Naeem, Ozuem, and Ranfagni (2023). Importantly, all interpretive decisions, theme validation, and final analytic judgments remained the responsibility of the researcher.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. In accordance with the guidelines of Creswell and Poth (2025), the identities of student participants were kept anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Individual responses were securely stored by the primary researcher and used solely for analytic reference. The themes presented in this study represent collective, synthesized meanings derived from participants' narratives, ensuring that no single participant could be identified from the reported findings. Prior to data collection, the required permissions and clearances were obtained from the relevant school authorities. These measures ensured that the study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research and protected the rights, privacy, and welfare of all participants.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Theme 1: holding the line: living within ethical boundaries

The theme Holding the Line captures how students experienced ChatGPT as a morally regulated academic practice rather than a neutral technological convenience. Within their research classes, ChaGPT use was situated inside clearly articulated ethical boundaries—boundaries that established authorship, accountability, and the limits of acceptable assistance. Three interrelated categories illuminate this theme: (1) ethics framed as responsible use rather than replacement of thinking. (2) explicit recognition of academic integrity risks. and (3) proper citation and disclosure as moral accountability.

Participants described instructor guidance as repeatedly reinforcing that ChatGPT must not replace intellectual labor. CF1 recalled being reminded of "Ethical guidelines on AI usage… Responsible use of AI in research… How to avoid over-reliance on AI tools…" which positioned AI as an aid bounded by restraint. DF3 reflected that their instructor would "Set Clear Guidelines for Ethical Use… AI is a tool for assistance, not a substitute for original thought…" clearly distinguishing support from substitution. HSF60 summarized this ethos simply: "Use it ethically and responsibly," while HSM2 personalized the boundary: "Don't let it replace you." These narratives reveal a shared interpretation that ethical AI use depends on preserving the student's cognitive ownership.

Participants also emphasized that guidance extended to warnings about academic integrity risks. DF2 explained that teachers discussed "the do's and don'ts… emphasize… critical thinking so the students will not depend…" showing the perceived danger of dependency. CF4 advocated to "Provide students with specific guidelines on how to use Generative AI ethically and responsibly." MF7 recounted lessons on "Ethical AI Use – Teach responsible AI practices, emphasizing academic integrity, proper citation…" and HSF52 added, "Set rules for it instead of just banning it…" These accounts illustrate that AI was not rejected outright. instead, it was regulated through structured ethical instruction.

Finally, students experienced citation and acknowledgment as visible markers of accountability. HSF34 referred to guidance on "Verifying accuracy… How to properly cite or acknowledge AI assistance." HSM4 described their practice of "cross-referencing… not as a sole information source." HSF51 further demonstrated vigilance by "Asking for the full reference, DOI, and the link…" Through these narratives, citation becomes more than procedural—it becomes ethical transparency.

The findings suggest that ethical AI engagement is internalized through guided academic socialization. From the perspective of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), instructors' ethical directives function as mediating tools that scaffold students' development of self-regulated scholarly practice. The boundary initially articulated externally—"do not replace your thinking"—becomes internalized as an academic value. Moreover, this finding corresponds with the report of (Kasneci, et al. (2023) which argues that generative AI must be integrated through structured ethical frameworks to preserve academic integrity and critical thinking, and with the study of Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway (2024) noting that explicit institutional guidance shapes how students interpret AI as support rather than substitution (Cotton et al., 2023). In this study, participants' lived accounts demonstrate how such ethical framing was not an abstract policy but a formative experience embedded in classroom instruction.

From the standpoint of Ethics of Care (Noddings, N, 2013), instructors' insistence on responsible use reflects relational attentiveness to students' intellectual growth. Rather than imposing prohibition, teachers demonstrate care by protecting students from practices that may erode authorship and critical reasoning. This is consistent with present-

day educational research, which emphasizes that transparent AI policies promote reflective engagement rather than misuse (Cotton et al., 2023. Kasneci et al., 2023).

The implication is clear: effective AI integration in research education requires explicit ethical framing, structured citation guidance, and reflective dialogue about authorship. When students learn to "hold the line," they are not simply complying with rules—they are forming a scholarly identity grounded in responsibility, accountability, and intellectual integrity.

3.2 Theme 2: trusting, yet verifying: dwelling in cautious reliance

This theme reflects how students experienced trust in ChatGPT not as automatic but as something provisional—earned through verification and sustained by constant checking. Rather than accepting AI-generated outputs at face value, participants described a careful engagement formed by encounters with inaccuracies, fabricated references, and outdated information. Three categories illuminate this conditional trust: (1) disruptions brought by inaccurate or outdated outputs. (2) recurring experiences with fabricated or non-existent references. and (3) the emergence of verification as a disciplined scholarly practice.

Participants frequently described moments when confidence in ChatGPT was shaken by incorrect or outdated information. HSF1 summarized this bluntly: "Inaccurate results." DF3 provided a more detailed account, explaining that "Responses included outdated or incorrect information… I had to double-check everything…" HSM4 echoed this vigilance, noting that ChatGPT "Sometimes gave inaccurate or outdated information… I had to double-check…" Meanwhile, HSF32 expressed wider concern about the tool itself, stating, "ChatGPT… is outdated…" These narratives show that trust was repeatedly interrupted, prompting students to reexamine the reliability of the system.

Beyond general inaccuracies, a more serious academic concern emerged: fabricated or non-existent references. DF4 reported, "Sometimes, related literature is not correct or doesn't exist." MF6 observed that "Sometimes ChatGPT provides references that do not exist." HSF51 described encountering "Giving non-existent and made-up studies…" and HSF19 shared, "It would provide fake references so I would have to find them myself." The recurrence of these experiences across participants indicates saturation

regarding fabricated citations. Trust, in these cases, was destabilized not simply by error but by the perceived risk to scholarly credibility.

In response to these disruptions, students described adopting deliberate verification practices. DF2 explained, “I validate the information on Google Scholar.” HSF4 narrated that “I double-checked… cross-referenced with other sources…” HSF27 reinforced this practice by “Cross-checking AI-generated content with credible sources.” CM1 described integrating AI with manual research, stating, “Combined ChatGPT’s help with my own manual research and used trusted sources for validation…” Through these accounts, verification becomes habitual rather than occasional—a routine embedded in their research workflow.

The findings indicate that students develop what may be termed critical trust—a stance that neither fully rejects nor blindly accepts AI output. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), these verification practices represent internalized academic regulation. Initially prompted by instructor guidance or negative experiences, students begin to self-monitor, cross-check, and validate independently. The external norm of verification becomes an internal scholarly discipline.

This theme also concurs with emerging literature on AI literacy, which stresses the importance of teaching students to critically evaluate generative AI outputs rather than assume accuracy (Kasneci et al., 2023). Trust, therefore, is reframed as a skill—something to be calibrated through reflection and corroboration. Furthermore, Cotton et al. (2023) highlighted that the use of generative AI requires active verification to preserve academic discipline. In this study, trust was not given. it was negotiated.

From the perspective of epistemic responsibility in academic integrity theory, verification becomes an ethical obligation. Students recognize that unverified AI output may compromise research validity. Thus, trust is conditional upon evidence. The recurrence of fabricated citation experiences accentuates the need for structured AI literacy training that explicitly addresses hallucinated references and source validation. This theme reveals that students do not inhabit naive technological optimism. Instead, they maintain a careful relationship with AI—trusting yet verifying—thereby forming a more discerning and responsible research practice.

3.3 Theme 3: finding the right words: learning to speak to the machine

This theme reflects how students experienced prompting not as a simple technical input, but as a developing academic skill that directly shaped the quality of AI-generated output. Participants reported that ChatGPT's usefulness depended largely on how clearly, specifically, and strategically they formulated their prompts. Three categories structure this theme: (1) prompt formulation as challenging and cognitively demanding. (2) weak prompts leading to vague or misaligned outputs. and (3) improvement techniques becoming routine practice.

Participants described prompt construction as unexpectedly difficult. DF1 acknowledged, *"Using the proper prompts in order to get the information you wanted."* HSF60 admitted uncertainty, stating, *"Not knowing what to prompt."* HSF2 elaborated on the effort involved: *"The prompts could be quite long, and some prompts are difficult."* CF1 reflected on inconsistency between input and output, explaining, *"Sometimes it talks not connected… so we need to learn how to prompt rightly."* These accounts reveal that prompting required deliberate thinking. students recognized that the clarity of their instruction determined the clarity of AI responses.

When prompts lacked precision, students reported receiving vague or irrelevant answers. HSF8 described, *"Getting vague answers that didn't match my topic."* MF4 observed that ChatGPT *"may give… vague answers especially when the prompt is not specific…"* HSF25 expressed frustration with *"Wrong answers that is not connected to my instructions,"* while HSM21 noted that *"Answers were too general or not specific to my topic."* The recurrence of such experiences across participants indicates saturation: vague output was consistently linked to weak prompting.

Over time, students began to adopt fine-tuning strategies. CF3 narrated that when misunderstandings occurred, they would *"Adjust the prompt or ask follow-up questions…"* HSF7 shared, *"I rephrased questions or asked for more detail."* HSF63 described a systematic process: *"Rephrase… ask follow-up… double-checked…"* while HSM32 emphasized persistence, *"Keeping improving the prompt until i get the answer i desired."* These stories illustrate that prompting evolved from confusion into an iterative skill-building process, forming a more disciplined approach to AI interaction.

The findings suggest that prompting functions as a form of metacognitive engagement. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), interaction with AI becomes a mediated activity where language serves as the primary tool shaping cognitive development. As students refine prompts, they simultaneously improve their own conceptual clarity. The need to articulate precise questions encourages reflective thinking, transforming AI use into a scaffolded learning process.

This interpretation is in agreement with Mollick and Mollick (2023), which highlights prompt design as a central competency in effective AI interaction. Moreover, Bozkurt (2023) emphasized that generative AI requires iterative, context-rich instructions to produce meaningful academic outputs. In this study, students' lived accounts demonstrate that prompting became an intellectual exercise in clarity, precision, and refinement.

Additionally, this theme corresponds with constructivist learning theory, which claims that knowledge construction emerges through active engagement and iterative refinement (Bruner, 1996). Prompt revision mirrors this process—students construct meaning through trial, feedback, and adjustment rather than passive reception. Educational technology research has similarly emphasized that effective AI interaction requires prompt literacy, positioning it as an emerging academic competency (Mollick & Mollick, 2023).

The implications of this theme are significant for research instruction. First, prompt engineering should be explicitly taught as part of AI literacy, including exercises in specificity, contextual framing, and iterative refinement. Second, instructors should model how weak prompts produce weak outputs, helping students recognize the cognitive responsibility embedded in AI interaction. Finally, prompting should be framed not as a shortcut to answers but as a reflective practice that sharpens analytical thinking.

This theme reveals that learning to "speak to the machine" is inseparable from clarifying one's own ideas. The quality of AI output reflects the quality of the student's inquiry. In this way, prompting becomes not simply a technical act, but a formative academic discipline.

3.4 Theme 4: remaining the thinker: negotiating help without surrender

This theme captures the lived tension students described between the productivity benefits of ChatGPT and the risk of intellectual dependence. While AI was experienced as helpful in generating ideas, organizing drafts, and accelerating workflow, it simultaneously raised concerns about over-reliance, erosion of critical thinking, and diminished academic ownership. Three categories illuminate this dynamic: (1) over-reliance as a perceived threat to learning and integrity. (2) deliberate boundary-setting where AI is used as a starting point rather than final authority. and (3) emotional and relational consequences, including judgment and mislabeling.

Participants narrated their experiences with ChatGPT as a careful balancing act between benefit and dependence. Several openly acknowledged the risk of over-reliance. CF2 reflected that when one becomes too dependent, *"You will no longer trust… your own knowledge… depending to it…"* suggesting that reliance on AI could weaken confidence in personal understanding. MF7 described the need for restraint, emphasizing *"Avoiding excessive [use]…"* as a deliberate practice. HSF11 admitted moments of displacement, stating, *"I rely on AI's ideas neglecting mine,"* while HSM30 succinctly characterized the issue as *"personally, over reliance."* These accounts reveal a shared awareness that unchecked AI use could gradually erode independent thinking.

At the same time, students described intentionally drawing boundaries to preserve authorship. DF3 explained, *"I treated ChatGPT's suggestions as drafts… not final outputs,"* positioning AI as preliminary support rather than an authoritative source. HSF16 similarly described *"Using ChatGPT as a starting point rather than a final authority…"* showing a conscious effort to maintain control over the writing process. HSF9 clarified that AI was used mainly for *"brainstorming… while doing deeper analysis on my own,"* and HSM32 emphasized ownership by stating, *"Only use it for a draft and then make it your own."* These narratives illustrate active self-regulation, where AI assistance is deliberately contained within student agency.

The tension extended beyond cognition into relational and emotional dimensions. HSF42 recounted *"Getting rejected by the teachers,"* reflecting how AI involvement could affect evaluation. HSF54 expressed frustration and distress, sharing, *"My original work is branded as AI-generated… upsetting…"* revealing the emotional weight of

misattribution. DF2 broadened the concern, noting that students might *"depend... and deprive them to think critically..."* Together, these narratives show that the experience of AI use is not only about efficiency. it is also about credibility, fairness, and the preservation of one's academic identity.

The findings highlight an existential negotiation of agency. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), tools mediate cognition. however, when mediation becomes substitution, internal cognitive development may be weakened. Participants' narratives suggest an awareness of this risk. Their effort to treat AI as a "starting point" reflects an attempt to preserve internal cognitive processes while benefiting from external scaffolds.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), too much dependence on AI may threaten autonomy—the sense of being the origin of one's own actions. Students' repeated emphasis on "making it your own" signals a desire to maintain autonomy and competence. When AI outputs were misattributed as entirely machine-generated (as in HSF54's account), this challenged not only academic credibility but also psychological ownership of work.

This duality represents broader discussions in previous studies, in which scholars note that generative AI can both enhance learning productivity and challenge independent reasoning when uncritically adopted (Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi, 2023. Selwyn, 2024). In the present study, students' narratives reveal that this tension was not abstract—it was deeply personal and relational. Similarly, Pum (2056) emphasized that AI-assisted learning requires explicit boundary-setting to prevent dependency. The participants' lived experiences reiterate these scholarly concerns: without careful guidance, AI's helpfulness may unintentionally weaken intellectual growth.

This theme reveals that students do not passively surrender to AI assistance. Instead, they inhabit a continuous negotiation—embracing support while resisting dependency. To remain a thinker is not automatic. it necessitates intentional boundary-setting, critical awareness, and ethical self-regulation in a technologically mediated academic landscape.

3.5 Theme 5: working within limits: navigating constraints and uncertainty

This theme reflects how students' experiences with ChatGPT were formed not only by ethical reasoning and cognitive negotiation, but also by structural constraints for instance limited internet connectivity, paywalls, and uneven instructional guidance. AI use was not lived in an ideal digital environment. rather, it was embedded within material and institutional conditions that influenced both access and ethical decision-making. This theme is supported by three categories: (1) platform and connectivity barriers. (2) workaround behaviors prompted by free-version limitations. and (3) uncertainty resulting from uneven instructor guidance.

Participants described how technical and financial constraints impeded their consistent use of ChatGPT. MF5 (CAA) noted experiencing *"Internet connection problem and limited access to ChatGPT."* HSF18 (IBA) similarly pointed to *"Internet connection, and… AI tends to be broad…"* suggesting that unstable access compounded the challenge of obtaining precise responses. HSM10 (SIE) explained that *"if the internet is slow, it would affect ChatGPT,"* while HSF57 (PAL) identified systemic restrictions, stating, *"Paywall and limits on how many questions you can ask…"* These narratives show that AI use was often interrupted or determined by infrastructural limitations beyond students' control.

In response to such constraints, participants described adaptive strategies. CF1 (MAS) admitted, *"can't afford… premium, so I used a lot of accounts,"* indicating the creation of multiple accounts to bypass usage caps. HSM5 (LRI) shared that *"If… reach… limit di nami maka type,"* highlighting the abrupt disruption caused by quota restrictions. MM1 (LFU) explained, *"Free account only means limited use only."* HSF54 (BAW) described borrowing access, stating, *"I use my sibling's account instead after I reach the limit…"* These stories reveal how financial and platform limitations prompted workaround behaviors that intersect alongside ethical considerations.

Apart from technological barriers, participants also experienced inconsistency in instructional guidance. CF1, DF1, and HSM5 each stated simply, *"…No guidance provided."* This repetition indicates that some students navigated AI use without structured direction, relying on self-experimentation or peer learning rather than

institutional clarity. The absence of guidance created uncertainty, further complicating ethical decision-making.

The findings suggest that ethical AI practice cannot be separated from structural conditions. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning is mediated not only by cognitive tools but also by social and environmental contexts. When access is uneven or guidance is inconsistent, students must independently negotiate both technical and ethical boundaries. This self-navigation may foster adaptability, yet it also risks inequity.

The accounts of paywalls and borrowing access correspond to digital divide scholarship, which highlights disparities in technological access as shaping educational outcomes (Pierce & Clleary, 2024). Discussions from previous studies further frame technological governance within principles of equity and social justice, emphasizing that digital inclusion is integral to responsible innovation (Silva & Carvalho, 2021. Opoku, 2025). In this study, structural constraints directly influenced students' engagement patterns (Branzuela, Namoco, & San Diego, 2022), including workaround strategies that blur ethical boundaries. In addition, the World Economic Forum emphasized that digital technologies must be examined within broader frameworks of access, equity, and social responsibility, arguing that technological governance cannot be detached from structural realities (Stonier, 2024). In this study, participants' narratives reveal that ethical AI engagement is mediated by availability, affordability, and institutional consistency. The absence of instructor guidance, as reported by multiple participants, reinforces the role of institutional mediation in forming responsible AI use. Without clear frameworks, students are left to interpret ethical norms independently, which may lead to inconsistent practices.

This theme reveals that ethical AI engagement is not merely a matter of intention. It is situated within economic, infrastructural, and institutional realities. Students' lived experiences demonstrate that working within limits requires adaptability, negotiation, and resilience—yet also calls for systemic support to uphold equitable and responsible AI integration.

4 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ethical use of ChatGPT in academic writing across educational levels is not primarily a matter of prohibition or unrestricted adoption, but of negotiated responsibility shaped by guidance, verification practices, prompting competence, autonomy regulation, and structural access. Students from secondary to graduate levels consistently positioned ChatGPT as a supportive yet morally bounded tool—valuable for idea generation and drafting, but requiring verification, citation transparency, and deliberate preservation of authorship. The lived tension between helpfulness and dependence, coupled with the need for calibrated trust and contextual access, reveals that ethical AI engagement is both cognitive and relational. The novel contribution of this study lies in its hermeneutic-phenomenological articulation of ethical AI use as a formative process in scholarly identity construction rather than a compliance issue. By foregrounding students' lived meanings across levels, this research extends the body of knowledge beyond policy discourse and technical AI literacy frameworks, offering an interpretive model that situates ethical ChatGPT use within moral boundary-setting, epistemic responsibility, and self-regulated academic agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, particularly the themes of moral boundary-setting, conditional trust, prompt literacy, negotiated autonomy, and structural constraints, and considering the study's limitations (single-context qualitative design, self-reported narratives, and absence of long-term monitoring), the following actionable and practical recommendations are offered:

For Policy Makers

Educational policies are recommended to articulate clear, level-specific guidelines on responsible AI use, emphasizing verification, disclosure, and preservation of authorship rather than blanket prohibition. Institutions should also address access inequities by providing structured AI support and infrastructure to prevent unethical workaround practices driven by resource limitations.

For Curriculum Designers

Research and writing curricula may integrate AI literacy as a core competency, explicitly teaching prompt construction, output verification, and reflective authorship to sustain critical thinking. Assessment designs should require transparency in AI use and include reflective components that ensure students remain the primary thinkers behind their work.

For Future Researchers

Subsequent studies may employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to examine how ethical AI engagement evolves over time and affects writing quality and cognitive development. Cross-context and cross-level investigations are also necessary to understand how institutional policies, social elements, and access conditions shape responsible AI use.

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USE OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT version 5.2 to improve language clarity and readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Authors' Contribution

Dr. Sarah O. Namoco: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Dr. Adu Emmanuel Ifedayo: Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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