

## The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Academic Writing: What is Ethical and What is Not

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to assess the use of artificial intelligence in academic writing by identifying ethical and unethical practices in the use of the technology. Ethics in academic writing has to do with principles and practices that academic have to apply and use to promote honesty and integrity in the preparation and dissemination of their scholarly works. The study used qualitative research that uses in-depth interviews to collect data from academicians working in three higher learning institutions in Tanzania. A total of 17 academicians were sampled with the use of a purposive sampling technique. A sample size of 17 was determined by the saturation principle. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The study identified seven ethical practices, which are brainstorming research ideas, identifying relevant models/frameworks/theories, reading concepts generated by AI, editing and proofreading, data analysis, and translation. Three unethical practices were identified, which include not acknowledging the use of AI, overreliance on AI, and using AI to fabricate data. The line between ethical and unethical practices is drawn by considering the extent to which AI assisted a researcher in writing academic documents. This extent may be determined by examining whether what AI did in a particular academic work could have been done by asking for assistance from a natural person and whether what AI did could have been done by any other technology that is acceptable in academic writing. The study recommends various measures to be undertaken to avoid malpractices in academic writing.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Academic Writing, ChatGPT, Research Integrity, Research Ethics

### INTRODUCTION

Unethical practices in academic writing have been a never-ending debate among scholars for decades (LaDuke, 2013; Roig, 2012; Teixeira Da Silva et al., 2024). To promote honesty and integrity in academia, some practices have been considered unethical, especially in the preparation and dissemination of scholarly works. Due to advancements in science and technology, new forms of malpractices have been emerging, identified and condemned among scholars (Tang et al., 2024).

Admittedly, technology has been rapidly changing which requires academicians to identify other emerging forms of malpractices in the scholarly world (Akgun & Greenhow, 2022). Artificial intelligence deserves a spotlight on how it is being used in academic writing. Artificial intelligence is the ability of machines, such as computers, to simulate human intelligence (Du-Harpur et al., 2020). Computerized systems can do prompted activities that require human natural intelligence to do.

The use of AI in academic writing is considered acceptable to some scholars when appropriately used, while to some it is considered unacceptable (Van Dijk et al., 2023). Notably, students use the technology to assist them in preparing their class assignments and other academic-related projects like dissertations (Barrett & Pack, 2023; Fitria, 2021; Nazari et al., 2021).

Moreover, some scholars use the technology in preparing papers that are published in journals. This has led to controversies on whether it is okay to use AI such as ChatGPT in academic writing or not. Further, the absence of clear principles guiding the use of AI in academic writing has left academics at a crossroads on what is acceptable and what is not (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023). This gives the impression that there are possibilities that some authors engage in academic malpractices unknowingly, while others do it knowingly with the intention to deceive those assessing academic written materials.

The need to have an understanding of what is ethical and what is not is important so as to draw a clear line of what scholars are expected to do and what is not expected, as far as using AI in academic writing is considered timely. These ethical dilemmas can potentially cause problems in having global standards that define integrity, fairness, honesty, and trust in academic writing. This paper focused on assessing opinions and perceptions of academicians on what they consider ethical and unethical in the use of AI in academic writing and paving the way in understanding accepted and unaccepted practices.

#### *Research questions:*

The study focused on answering the following research questions;

1. What are ethical practices in academic writing when artificial intelligence is used?
2. What are unethical practices in academic writing when artificial intelligence is used?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *The Concepts of Artificial Intelligence and Academic Malpractices*

Artificial intelligence has been transforming various industries rapidly since its emergence in the early 1950s (Collins et al., 2021; Kaul et al., 2020). The use of generative AI particularly Chatbot is now a debatable and trending topic in academic writing (Tang et al., 2024). A chatbot is an electronic system (generally a software) that simulates conversations by responding to keywords or phrases it recognizes and that can be integrated into various platforms, such as websites, mobile apps, and messaging platforms (Salvagno et al., 2023).

In appreciating the use of AI in academic writing, Shofiah et al. (2023) argue that AI can be used in two main ways. Firstly, using AI throughout the whole process of writing and secondly, using it to assist in some few areas and assessing the caliber and soundness of written content. The latter seems acceptable while the former seems to be unacceptable hence unethical. This gives an impression that the use of AI is not a problem and it is inevitable, the question lies on how one uses it. Most academic journals receive and publish papers that are written in English but not all authors are native English speakers. AI has been effectively used as a language assistant to help correct grammatical and other language related errors (Duymaz & Tekin, 2023; Shofiah et al., 2023).

Academic malpractices are of many forms, they range from provision of false information and data, using other people's materials without acknowledging them, misrepresentation of findings (Roig, 2012). Learning institutions have been strict in prohibiting these malpractices by looking for ways of detecting them and penalizing those found committing them. Artificial intelligence is one of powerful technologies that is capable of producing texts based on prompts that the user provides (Gao et al., 2022). Some scholars make use of them to prepare academic materials that can be used for academic use. The question of whether that is okay or not is easy to answer. One of form of academic malpractice happens when one uses other peoples' work pretending that it is his/hers (Roig, 2012). One of ways of getting away with it, is acknowledge the source by citing the relevant source of the said material. Another controversial issue that may arise out of it is "how much information can one person (author) take from one source". Some guidelines restrict the amount of information that a person can copy from a single source. This gives an impression that copying 'large' parts of materials from AI may be questionable. Van Rooij (2022) as cited by Friederich & Symons (2023) is of the view that the use of AI in academic writing should be strictly prohibited since it is a form of 'automated plagiarism'

Since AI technology is capable of doing various tasks as prompted by users there are high chances of misusing the technology by prompting to provide certain information as per the user's demands to suit certain interests known by him/her. This can be presented for assessment if not detected by those assessing the materials.

### *The Danger of Unethical Practices in Academic Writing*

Some practices are forbidden in academic writing for various reasons. If AI is used inappropriately, it can bring about problems in academia. Firstly, it may promote dishonesty which in turn makes research and academic writing less reliable (Uzun, 2023). Artificial intelligence chatbots like ChatGPT are prone to inaccuracies and falsification (Currie, 2023). Making the material generated by AI accessible to public domains through publications and other ways of disseminating scholarly works may mislead other scholars and decision makers who rely on the published scholarly works. These malpractices may also produce lazy academicians who do not use their own intellectual abilities to reason and argue (Ahmad et al., 2023; Livberber & Ayvaz, 2023). Moreover, these malpractices may lead to awarding grades, degrees and academic promotion to undeserving people. Arguably, academic writing is used to assess intellectual capabilities of scholars which may later lead to awarding them various incentives as the result of their respective academic work. If assessment is not well done by whoever is involved in assessing them and allow undeserving people to get the said awards it would make the whole process meaningless and ineffective. Further, this may discourage those who work hard using their own human intelligence in writing their scholarly work. One of the requirements for most scientific writings is the need for the material to have originality; the use of AI such as ChatGPT potentially affects this quality. The language produced tends to be less original and robotic. Further, inconsistencies and non-human tone can be detected in the texts (Salvagno et al., 2023).

#### Factors influencing the inappropriate use of technology in academic writing

The use of AI in academic writing has various motives. While the literature has not clearly identified factors that influence people to use AI in academic writing inappropriately. Some literature shows why academics engage in academic malpractices. The study of Mwilongo et al. (2024) found that the workload that lecturers have is among the factors that influence them to engage in misconceptions in academic writing. The explanation behind this is, academicians find themselves in multiple tasks that are difficult to handle, hence they look for shortcuts, including plagiarism. Another reason is the pressure in academia that requires scholars to publish their work for rewards such as promotion and graduation (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). To deal with the said pressure, academicians find themselves looking for easier ways to prepare their scholarly works, including cheating. Another obvious factor is insufficient skills and knowledge in handling academic-related tasks, including writing class assignments, projects, dissertations, theses and academic papers (Itua et al., 2014; Kumayas & Lengkoan, 2023). This goes hand in hand with laziness in preparing scholarly works. Admittedly, academic writing needs commitment as it takes time, energy, and resources that people need to use to write quality scholarly works.

## **METHODS**

This is a qualitative exploratory study that used in-depth interviews to collect data from the respondents. The study used academics from Mzumbe University, Sokoine University of Agriculture, and the University of Dodoma. All these Universities are based in Tanzania. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify the respondents for the study. The choice of the respondents was based on two factors. The first one is being in academic work in a higher learning institution in Tanzania, familiar to the authors of this article. The second factor was that the respondent had to be an academician and was actively involved in academic writing. Being actively involved in academic writing was subjectively defined by having at least four (4) articles published in the last two years in peer-reviewed journals. The sample size was obtained by using the saturation principle that requires a researcher to collect data until subjectively reaching the saturation point (Mwita, 2022). The sample size included 17 respondents who are identified in

this article anonymously as respondent 1, respondent 2, ..., respondent 17. Data analysis involved thematic data analysis techniques as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006). The process started with conducting interviews, which lasted for an average of 44 minutes for each respondent. Researchers recorded information provided by the respondents using an audio recorder and a notebook. The recorded information was transcribed in a process to make sure the written texts from interviews were consistent with the context of the respondents. This went hand in hand with familiarization with the collected data. Initial codes were created by the researchers, followed by careful examination of the data to identify repeated themes that emerged from the identified codes. The themes were then reviewed and defined, followed by systematically writing the results according to the identified themes.

## RESULTS

### Ethical Practices in Using AI in Academic Writing

#### *Brainstorming Research Ideas*

Looking for suggestions about research ideas from AI was considered ethical by the respondents as they believed it has no harm on research integrity. It was noted that academicians normally ask AI, especially ChatGPT, to generate various research ideas for them before starting to write their research projects. When they were asked more about why they find it ethical, they were of the opinion that asking for ideas can be done to anyone or anything without the need to acknowledge him/her in a research project or manuscript. Respondent 3 commented that,

*“Previously, I used to do a simple Google search to see trending topics in my discipline and see the need or demand in the literature before starting to do them. Now I think, AI is a more effective technology to do that, so I usually prompt ChatGPT to generate ideas for me”.*

The respondents were of the view that brainstorming ideas with the assistance of AI does not violate any principles of ethical writing simply because it just gives researchers the best research options and does not create the main texts or contents of an academic material.

#### *Identifying Relevant Models, Frameworks, and Theories*

Another thing that the respondents identified as ethical is asking AI to propose a model, framework, or theory that supports a particular study. The fact that there are so many models, theories, and frameworks that can be used in research studies, and some may be unfamiliar to some researchers. Asking AI to name or identify appropriate theories for a particular study may help a researcher to use an appropriate and relevant theory in the early stages of designing a research project. The use of appropriate research models, theories, and frameworks seems to improve the quality of research and published research output such as articles, papers, reports, and theses.

Respondent 7 commented that,

*“I see no problem in prompting ChatGPT to mention theories that are appropriate in a study related to school dropout as a result of poor learning infrastructure. You know I could have asked any person who is informed to tell me and not acknowledge him or her in my study, and this has no harm in research ethics. I find it similar to asking ChatGPT to do that.”*

The above quotation gives an implication that when using AI technology to assist a researcher in doing something that could have been done by another natural person without any need to acknowledge their assistance, then that is considered ethically fine.

This raised another question: “In what circumstances does the use of AI need to be acknowledged to avoid academic malpractices?”. The responses show that researchers considered generation of texts that are used in research, as they are or paraphrased, needs to be declared by academicians in their written materials. This helps to uphold honesty and integrity in academic writing.

Using texts generated by AI to intentionally or unintentionally deceive readers that there are researchers' own text ideas is considered plagiarism. On the other hand, asking AI to identify theories and thereafter searching for materials related to the theories from other sources to be included in an academic write-up is considered ethical.

On the issue of whether AI has to be acknowledged when used in identifying appropriate models, theories, and frameworks, Respondent 15 replied that;

*"I can assure you for a fact that so many researchers and authors of various academic works do this, and I personally find no problem with that. Academic writing may involve a number of people who have to be acknowledged in a final document. If everyone gets acknowledged in a paper or a report, our published papers would have a very long list of people whose contributions are so minor that to are acknowledged."*

### *Reading Concepts Generated by AI For Understanding*

Academic writing requires a writer to have an understanding of different concepts and terminologies. Researchers may have insufficient knowledge of these terminologies then required to read for understanding. Artificial intelligence technology contains countless definitions and meanings of these concepts. The respondents were of the view that reading texts generated by AI as definitions of concepts to have an understanding before starting writing poses no problem if those generated texts are not used in a document.

It was observed that researchers sometimes wish to gain an understanding of concepts or emerging sub-disciplines that they are not familiar with. In a situation like this, AI seems to be a resourceful technology to be used to gain knowledge before writing about it. Response 12 said that;

*"I use AI to acquire knowledge of various concepts and terminologies as they are used by other researchers. You might read a very complicated definition from a book or a paper, then you need a simpler definition to understand it better. ChatGPT always gives me definitions that are easier to understand."*

It was noted that the ability of AI to be given instructions by its users through prompts has made it easier for writers to understand complex words. One of the respondents explained that writers may use phrases like "In a layman's language, define...". Texts generated by AI from a prompt like that may help those who could not understand a definition from other authors. This was found to be more relevant to English non-native speakers who have to write English texts to understand things before writing them. This was well put by respondent 8, who said;

*"I write my documents in English, but I am a Swahili native speaker who happened to learn English from my teacher, who was also a Swahili native speaker and was not that good at using the language. My English proficiency level is not sufficient enough to understand some words that an average native English speaker would understand. In most cases, I need ChatGPT to break down things for me to understand."*

### *Editing and Proofreading*

Artificial intelligence technology was found to be one of the effective technologies that authors use in editing and proofreading their works, and they considered it ethical. This research was done among academicians whose English is their second language, and others, their third language. Some of the respondents admitted that their academic works are always with grammatical errors and typos that have to be read and corrected by native English speakers or experts in editing and proofreading English language services, which are sometimes unaffordable or inaccessible for other reasons.

AI was considered a technology that could effectively edit and proofread documents to make them error-free. The use of AI for editing and proofreading was also considered ethical by writers. Respondent 17 said that,

*"I find editing and proofreading by using AI easy, effective, and ethical. It is like when you ask a person to edit the text that you wrote. What is done is making the document"*

*read with less errors and better quality. When I submit my papers to the journal that have been proofread by AI, it increases the chances of the papers being accepted and published.”*

### *Data Analysis*

It was noticed that AI is capable of doing multiple research-related tasks, including data analysis. Some interviewed respondents admitted that they use AI to analyze data, while some said they do not do it simply because they have alternative software that assists them in analyzing data. Generally, both groups were in agreement that the use of AI in data analysis has no ethical problem. However, it was necessary to acknowledge that AI was used in data analysis. When probed why they think the use of AI is okay, the respondents were of the view that data analysis in research is always done with the assistance of technology, since analysis of complex data cannot be easily done by using human intelligence.

*“Personally, I have never used any AI technology to conduct data analysis. However, I find no problem if another person does that. By just using logical reasoning, we always use SPSS, Stata, Microsoft Excel, and other software to do our analysis. I find no problem using AI for data analysis because it is another technology similar to those I have mentioned, perhaps this is a more advanced one.”* Respondent 1

### *Translation*

Research involves an understanding of the existing body of knowledge. Some researchers find difficulties understanding some published documents when written in another language they can't understand. These documents might be important in the process of writing their own works hence understanding them is crucial. It was found that AI is sometimes used to translate these documents for the said writers. This practice was found okay by the researchers as it does not violate any research ethical principles. Respondent 4 insisted that;

*“Some articles in different research databases have their respective titles written in English and sometimes the abstracts but the rest of the content is in another language that we do not understand at all. I sometimes copy the texts and paste on ChatGPT for translation and I think it makes my writing easier”*

## **Unethical Practices in Using AI In Academic Writing**

### *Not acknowledging The Use of AI*

The most frequent unethical practice that the respondents mentioned is the use of AI in academic writing without acknowledging the fact that it was used in writing. The respondents equated it to academic dishonesty which should not be accepted. The respondents are of the view that when AI has substantial contribution in writing any academic material, the contribution has to be acknowledged by the authors.

### *Over Reliance on AI*

While the use of AI has seemed acceptable in academic writing, the extent to which it is used may lead to crossing the line and being condemned as unethical practice. It is expected that human intelligence will always be used substantially in preparing academic materials that is why their names appear as authors. When artificial intelligence has been used more than natural intelligence in academic writing then this may be considered unethical. The respondents were of the view that some tasks can be done by AI but some have to be done by authors themselves to justify their authorship.

On the question “where should we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable extent”, the respondents had divided opinion, however, they generally agreed on the fact that generation of texts that are used to create the content of the material should basically be the output of human efforts and not artificial intelligence. Respondent 12 had this to say;

*“If you write a full-length paper and ask AI to draft an abstract from your own texts, I think that is fine but if you create an abstract and ask AI to generate a full-length paper from the abstract, I find it totally not acceptable”*

The above quotation entails that AI should be used to assist in a few tasks that would not make AI the main character in the authorship rather technology that gave a helping hand in some tasks that are justifiable.

#### *Using AI to Fabricate Data*

It was observed that artificial intelligence is capable of creating data that do not exist based on prompts given by the user. Writers may take advantage of this power of AI to generate data and use them in their material. The respondents were of the view that data fabrication has been unacceptable practice for decades in research even before AI. Emergence of AI makes this practice even easier and when used can lead to research dishonesty which is dangerous in academic writing as it has so many implications particularly in data use.

Table 1. Summary of The Findings

Ethical Practices in academic writing when using AI	Unethical Practices in academic writing when using AI
Brainstorming research ideas	Not acknowledging the use of AI
Identifying models, frameworks and theories	Overreliance on AI
Reading concepts generated by AI for understanding	Using AI to fabricate data
Editing and proofreading	
Data analysis	
Translation	

Source: research, 2024

## DISCUSSION

This study focused on identifying ethical and unethical practices in using Artificial intelligence in academic writing. A total of six (6) ethical practices were identified. They include brainstorming research ideas, identifying relevant models, frameworks and theories, and reading concepts generated by AI for understanding. Others are editing and proofreading, data analysis and translation. On the other hand, three (3) unethical practices were identified which are not acknowledging the use of AI when used, overreliance on AI and the using AI to fabricate data. Previous literature offers similar findings as it acknowledges the relevance of AI in academic writing. However, the issue of unethical practices emerges to be an area of serious concern as well (Duymaz & Tekin, 2023; Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024).

Artificial intelligence is potentially a useful technology when appropriately used in academic writing. Arguably, there are possibilities of using in an unethical way and therefore make the use of AI unethical as the findings of this study shows. Based on the findings, the use of AI will be termed ethical when three parameters are considered. The first one is when its use is limited to what a writer would have done without it and yet there is no violation of any research ethical principles. For example, if a writer would consult a natural person to assist him in identifying trending topics in a particular discipline to research on and that I considered ethical then doing the same to an AI should also be considered the same. The second one is, the use of AI in doing what other technologies have been used to do and considered ethical. A good example of this is the use of data analysis software such as SPSS, Stata, Nvivo, Microsoft Excel, etc. When AI is used in data analysis, this could also be considered ethical. The third parameter is extent of use and acknowledgement of use. How much work AI has done in a paper or any academic write-up should be put into consideration since when AI has a bigger role to play in writing than AI then this might raise ethical concerns. On the other hand, acknowledging the

contribution of AI is crucial to promote honesty and integrity in academic writing. When this has not been done then this may lead to research malpractices.

Arguably, even before AI emerged authors have engaged in various unethical behaviors and practices (Bennett & Taylor, 2003; Uzun, 2023). Institutions and different individuals have been looking for ways to control these practices (Makarova, 2019; Malgwi & Rakovski, 2009). With the emergence of AI in academic writing, controlling these practices is more challenging (Carobene et al., 2024). The question of who should control who is more valid now than ever in the history of academic writing. How control has to be done is a more difficult and more valid question. The need to examine whether AI was used and to what extent it was used is crucial in order to protect integrity of scientific writing. Arguably, editorial boards and reviewers in academic journals have an important role to play to ensure that published work is free from academic dishonesty.

There are numerous cases of malpractices involved the use of AI in academic writing. For instance, on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2024 Journal of Surfaces and Interfaces by Elsevier published an article titled “*The three-dimensional porous mesh structure of Cu-based metal-organic-framework - aramid cellulose separator enhances the electrochemical performance of lithium metal anode batteries*”. Among other things, it came to be known that the texts of the article were generated by ChatGPT. On 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024 the journal retracted the article for failure to acknowledge the use of AI generated texts which is against the journal policy. Similarly, on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024 an article “A comparative analysis of blended learning and traditional instruction: Effects on academic motivation and learning outcomes”. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 2024 the article was retracted by PLOS ONE due to failure to comply with ethical standards one being a concern that the article contained texts generated by ChatGPT.

Admittedly, controlling unethical practices in academic writing is not an easy task because some authors may bypass screening tests and controls have not been identified put in place by journals (Baloglu & Çakali, 2023). This gives an implication that this should involve multiple stakeholders to identify and punish dishonesty writers. It should be noted that unethical practices in academic writing are sometimes promoted by those involved in publishing scientific works. This always happens when editors and reviewers do not do their job carefully. Moreover, journals may not have effective ways of detecting unethical use of AI. Another potential problem that may rise in quest to control unethical practices is when people do not know what to control. As discussed before, the definition of what is ethical and what is not is not clear among different stakeholders in academic writing. Absence of policies that define what is wrong and what is right makes control of what is wrong difficult.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed at identifying what researchers consider to be ethical practices and those they consider unethical with regard to the use of AI in academic writing. The study involved academicians in Tanzania who were actively involved in writing academic works. Based on the responses of the respondents it can be concluded that there are various practices that researchers consider ethical in academic writing. On the other hand, there are practices that are unethical and therefore should be avoided by researchers when using artificial intelligence in writing their academic related materials, particularly research output such as research reports and articles. Generally, it is ethical to use artificial intelligence in academic writing when AI is used to assist what a researcher would have asked another natural person or a software to assist him or her in doing certain research tasks and considered acceptable. Moreover, acknowledging the use of AI in academic material that uses AI is necessary. Going beyond this parameter would result in unethical practices in academic writing.

As the use of AI keeps on increasing, knowledge generation and dissemination is expected to become easier and faster. However, lack of sufficient and effective controlling mechanisms may lead to more cases of ethical malpractices that are dangerous to the scholarly world. Future

research should focus on how effective controlling mechanisms are avoid unethical practices in the use of AI.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends the following;

1. Academic institutions such as higher learning institutions, publishers of scholarly works and indexing data bases have to formulate policies that define ethical and unethical practices when AI is involved in writing scholarly works. Further, the institutions have to strictly control unethical practices in academic writing to promote honesty and integrity
2. The use of AI detection tools has to be put in place to ensure that scholarly materials are screened before they get published. Making these tools easily accessible will make it easier to control malpractices in academic writing.
3. Capacity building programmes to authors, journal editors, reviewers, students and lecturers in higher education have to be implemented. These programmes have to focus on raising awareness on issues relating to ethics in academic writing and how to avoid malpractices in academic writing.

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