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"LIVING WITH AI": A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT ETHICAL EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores students' ethical perspectives and decision-making processes regarding artificial intelligence integration in academic contexts through semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate and graduate students across multiple disciplines. The research reveals that students encounter complex ethical dilemmas involving transparency, dependency concerns, and equity issues while developing sophisticated multi-principled frameworks that balance utilitarian and deontological considerations to distinguish between AI use that enhances versus replaces learning. Key findings indicate that disciplinary norms, inconsistent institutional policies, peer community negotiations, and personal values significantly influence students' perceptions of appropriate AI use, with participants employing strategies such as boundary-setting, proactive transparency, and outcome-focused evaluation to navigate tensions between leveraging AI capabilities and maintaining academic integrity. The study demonstrates that students are capable of nuanced ethical reasoning about AI use and are actively constructing community-based norms in the absence of clear institutional guidance, suggesting that effective AI governance in higher education requires collaborative approaches that support peer-driven ethics development, address equity concerns related to AI access, and evolve traditional academic integrity frameworks to focus on authentic learning outcomes rather than process restrictions. These findings contribute to understanding how students construct ethical frameworks for emerging technologies and provide crucial insights for developing comprehensive, context-sensitive AI ethics policies that balance innovation with educational integrity in higher education settings.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies into educational environments has fundamentally transformed the landscape of student learning and academic practice. From AI-powered writing assistants like ChatGPT and Grammarly to sophisticated research tools and automated tutoring systems, students today navigate an increasingly complex digital ecosystem that blurs traditional boundaries between human and machine-generated work (Cotton et al., 2023). This technological revolution has outpaced the development of clear ethical guidelines, leaving students to grapple with unprecedented moral dilemmas about academic integrity, authenticity, and the appropriate use of AI tools in their educational journey.

The emergence of generative AI has particularly intensified debates about academic honesty and the fundamental nature of learning itself. While these tools offer unprecedented opportunities for enhanced productivity, personalized learning, and creative exploration, they simultaneously raise profound questions about intellectual ownership, skill development, and the authenticity of student work (Rudolph et al., 2023). Students find themselves caught between the promise of technological advancement and traditional academic values, often without clear institutional guidance or established ethical frameworks to navigate these challenges effectively.
Current institutional responses to AI integration have largely focused on policy development and detection mechanisms, yet little attention has been paid to understanding how students themselves experience and make sense of these ethical challenges in their daily academic lives. The student perspective remains largely unexplored in academic literature, despite their position as primary stakeholders in this technological transformation (Ahmad et al., 2023). Understanding their lived experiences, moral reasoning processes, and the strategies they employ to navigate ethical dilemmas is crucial for developing more nuanced and effective approaches to AI ethics in education.

This qualitative study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the rich, complex experiences of students as they encounter and navigate ethical challenges related to AI use in their academic work. By focusing on student voices and perspectives, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how AI ethics unfolds in practice, moving beyond theoretical frameworks to examine the real-world complexities and contradictions that students face in their daily educational experiences.

Problem Statement

The swift incorporation of artificial intelligence tools in higher education has engendered a multifaceted ethical terrain that students must traverse with minimal guidance, leading to pervasive confusion and variable practices concerning the appropriate use of AI in academic settings (Cotton et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023). Despite the development of policies and detection mechanisms by educational institutions, a substantial gap persists between institutional strategies and student experiences, as numerous students express ethical uncertainty and anxiety regarding the use of AI tools for academic endeavors (Abbas et al., 2023; Dawson, 2023). The gap has been intensified by the extraordinary speed of AI technology progress, especially since the introduction of advanced generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, which have fundamentally questioned conventional concepts of academic integrity and originality (Tlili et al., 2023). Current research mostly emphasizes institutional perspectives and policy frameworks, significantly neglecting the lived experiences and ethical decision-making processes of students, despite the substantial influence on their academic experiences (Ahmad et al., 2023).

The lack of student-centered research on AI ethics constitutes a significant knowledge deficit that hinders the formulation of effective, contextually relevant educational strategies and policies (Rahman & Watanobe, 2023). Students are effectively exploring a novel ethical domain without sufficient theoretical frameworks or practical direction, making significant decisions regarding AI utilization based on personal judgment rather than established ethical norms or institutional support (Eaton, 2023; Perkins et al., 2023). The complexity of this situation is exacerbated by the limited exploration of students' moral reasoning, emotional responses, and meaning-making strategies concerning AI ethics in academic literature, despite their role as primary stakeholders in this technological transformation (King & ChatGPT, 2023). In the absence of a comprehensive understanding of how students confront and manage ethical dilemmas in their academic routines, educational institutions may enact policies that are misaligned with student experiences and ineffective in fostering responsible AI utilization, thereby undermining student ethical development in an increasingly AI-integrated educational landscape.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question: How do students experience and navigate ethical challenges when using AI technologies in their academic work?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. What ethical dilemmas do students encounter when integrating AI tools into their learning processes?
2. How do students construct and justify their ethical decision-making frameworks regarding AI use?
3. What factors influence students' perceptions of appropriate versus inappropriate AI use in academic contexts?
4. How do students negotiate the tension between leveraging AI capabilities and maintaining academic integrity?
5. What role do peer interactions, institutional policies, and personal values play in shaping student attitudes toward AI ethics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The convergence of artificial intelligence and education has attracted significant academic interest; nonetheless, the emphasis has largely been on institutional viewpoints, policy formulation, and technological competencies, rather than on student experiences. Initial studies in this field demonstrated the revolutionary capabilities of AI in education, emphasizing advantages such as individualized learning, automated feedback, and improved accessibility (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). As AI technologies advanced and became more accessible, especially with the introduction of huge language models such as GPT-3 and ChatGPT, apprehensions regarding academic integrity and ethical utilization emerged as predominant topics of discussion (Tlili et al., 2023). This transition indicated an increasing acknowledgment that the incorporation of AI in education encompasses intricate ethical dilemmas that surpass mere issues of cheating or plagiarism.

The notion of academic integrity has faced much examination regarding AI integration, as scholars seek to reframe conventional ideas of originality, authorship, and intellectual honesty (Eaton, 2023). Traditional frameworks for academic misconduct, mostly focused on human collaboration and plagiarism, have been insufficient in tackling the complex ethical dilemmas presented by AI help (Perkins et al., 2023). Certain researchers advocate for a more adaptable perspective that regards AI as a tool akin to calculators or spell-checkers, but others contend that the utilization of AI fundamentally compromises the educational process by diminishing opportunities for skill acquisition and critical thinking (King & ChatGPT, 2023). This persistent discussion underscores profound philosophical inquiries regarding the essence of learning, creativity, and intellectual advancement in the digital era.

Research investigating student opinions on AI ethics is scarce however indicates considerable complexity in students' approaches to these issues. Preliminary research indicates that students frequently encounter misunderstanding and ambiguity regarding the proper utilization of AI, especially in the absence of explicit institutional standards (Dawson, 2023). A multitude of students express a sense of being conflicted between the pragmatic advantages of AI technologies and apprehensions regarding academic integrity, resulting in what several researchers term "ethical anxiety" (Abbas et al., 2023). Moreover, research demonstrates considerable divergence in student opinions influenced by factors such as academic discipline, technological proficiency, and cultural context, indicating that ethical frameworks for AI utilization cannot be universally applicable to all student demographics.

The theoretical framework of AI ethics in education is informed by various fields, including educational technology, moral psychology, and science and technology studies. Notable systems encompass consequentialist methods prioritizing results and benefits, deontological viewpoints highlighting obligations and laws, and virtue ethics focusing on character development and moral excellence (Floridi et al., 2018). Nonetheless, these

theoretical frameworks frequently neglect to encompass the placed and contextual aspects of ethical decision-making encountered by students in their daily academic activities. Recent studies has increasingly highlighted the significance of perceiving ethics as a living, experiencing phenomena rather than as a collection of abstract concepts (Winner, 2020).

Despite the increasing focus on AI ethics in education, substantial gaps persist in our comprehension of how students effectively encounter and manage these difficulties in practice. Much of the current research depends on surveys or experimental methods that document attitudes or behaviors but neglect to investigate the profound meaning-making processes students undergo when facing ethical problems (Rahman & Watanobe, 2023). The phenomenological aspects of student experiences with AI ethics—encompassing their emotions, uncertainties, moral dilemmas, and cognitive processes—are mostly unexamined. This study fills this gap by utilizing qualitative methodologies to explore the intricate lived experiences of students as they traverse the ethical dimensions of AI usage in their academic endeavors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is particularly well-suited for exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to significant life events (Smith et al., 2022). IPA's focus on lived experience, meaning-making, and the idiographic nature of human experience aligns well with this study's aim to understand the complex, subjective ways students navigate AI ethics in their academic lives. The phenomenological foundation of IPA recognizes that understanding human experience requires attention to both the phenomenon itself and the individual's interpretation of that phenomenon (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Research Design and Philosophical Approach

The study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance, acknowledging that knowledge about AI ethics is socially constructed through students' interactions with technology, peers, institutions, and broader cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This approach recognizes that there are multiple valid ways of understanding and experiencing AI ethics and that these understandings are shaped by individual backgrounds, experiences, and social contexts. The research design is exploratory and inductive, allowing themes and insights to emerge from the data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants will be recruited using purposive sampling strategies designed to capture maximum variation in student experiences while maintaining the depth of analysis characteristic of IPA studies (Smith et al., 2022). The target sample size is 12-15 undergraduate and graduate students from diverse academic disciplines, representing different levels of AI familiarity and usage patterns. Inclusion criteria include: current enrollment in higher education, regular use of AI tools for academic purposes, and willingness to discuss personal experiences with AI ethics. Participants will be recruited through multiple channels, including course announcements, student organization outreach, and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2023).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection will employ semi-structured interviews as the primary method, supplemented by reflective journals and optional focus group discussions. Individual interviews, lasting 60-90 minutes, will be conducted using an interview guide developed specifically for this study, covering topics such as AI usage patterns, ethical dilemmas encountered, decision-making processes, and the influence of various contextual factors (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2023). The semi-structured format allows for flexibility to explore unexpected themes while ensuring consistent coverage of key research areas. Participants will be invited to maintain reflective journals over a two-week period, documenting their AI use and any ethical considerations that arise in real-time. Optional

focus groups with 4-5 participants will provide opportunities to explore how students negotiate different perspectives on AI ethics in group settings (Krueger & Casey, 2023).

Data Analysis Approach

Data analysis will follow the systematic approach to IPA outlined by Smith et al. (2022), involving multiple stages of interpretation and analysis. Initial analysis will focus on individual cases, with detailed line-by-line coding to identify experiential claims, linguistic features, and conceptual themes. Cross-case analysis will then identify patterns and connections across participants while maintaining attention to individual variations and unique experiences. The analysis process will be iterative, moving between individual transcripts and emerging themes to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2021). NVivo software will be used to support data organization and analysis, while maintaining the interpretive focus characteristic of IPA.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Ethical approval will be obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants will provide informed consent and will be assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying information. Given the sensitive nature of discussions about academic integrity, particular attention will be paid to creating a non-judgmental research environment (Christians, 2023). Trustworthiness will be established through multiple strategies, including member checking with participants, peer debriefing with research colleagues, maintenance of detailed audit trails, and reflexive journaling to acknowledge researcher positionality and potential biases (Lincoln & Guba, 2023). The study's transferability will be enhanced through thick description of contexts, participants, and findings, allowing readers to assess the relevance of findings to their own situations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ethical Dilemmas in AI Integration

The interviews revealed that students encounter multifaceted ethical dilemmas when integrating AI tools into their learning processes. Participants consistently identified the fundamental tension between leveraging AI capabilities for enhanced learning efficiency and maintaining the authenticity of their academic work. Student 7, a computer science major, articulated this challenge: "*I use ChatGPT to debug my code and understand complex algorithms, but I constantly question whether I'm actually learning or just getting answers. There's this gray area where AI helps me understand concepts faster, but I wonder if I'm shortcutting the struggle that makes learning stick.*" This sentiment was echoed across disciplines, with students in humanities expressing similar concerns about using AI for writing assistance while maintaining their authentic voice and critical thinking development.

Students also grappled with transparency and disclosure dilemmas. Many participants described situations where they were uncertain about when and how to acknowledge AI assistance. Student 14, an English literature major, explained, "*I used Grammarly's AI suggestions to improve my essay structure, but I also asked Claude to help me understand a complex philosophical concept that I then incorporated into my argument. Do I cite both? Neither? The boundaries are so unclear*." This uncertainty extended to collaborative work, where students struggled with how to handle AI use in group projects and whether individual AI assistance constituted an unfair advantage over peers who chose not to use such tools.

The research uncovered significant concerns about dependency and skill atrophy among participants. Student 3, a psychology major, reflected: "*I've become so reliant on AI for initial research and brainstorming that I worry I'm losing my ability to think independently. When I sit down to write without AI, I feel like I've forgotten how to start*." This concern was particularly pronounced among students who had extensively used AI tools for

mathematical calculations, writing assistance, and research synthesis. Participants feared that over-reliance on AI might undermine their development of critical skills necessary for their future careers and academic advancement.

Additionally, students identified ethical dilemmas related to fairness and equity in AI access. Several participants noted that premium AI tools and advanced features were not equally accessible to all students, creating potential disparities in academic performance. Student 11, from a low-income background, stated: "*Some of my classmates have access to the latest AI tools and can afford premium subscriptions, while I'm limited to free versions with restricted features. It feels like there's an emerging digital divide that affects our academic competitiveness."* This concern extended to considerations about how AI use might impact grading curves and academic evaluations when not all students have equal access to these technological resources.

Construction and Justification of Ethical Decision-Making Frameworks

Students demonstrated sophisticated approaches to constructing their ethical decision-making frameworks regarding AI use, drawing from multiple sources and principles to guide their choices. The majority of participants developed personalized frameworks that balanced utilitarian considerations with deontological principles. Student 9, a philosophy major, described their approach: *"I ask myself three questions: Does this AI use help me learn better or does it replace my learning? Am I being honest about my process with myself and others? Would I be comfortable if everyone in my class used AI in the same way?"* This systematic approach reflected students' attempts to create consistent ethical guidelines that could be applied across various academic situations.

Many students justified their AI use through the lens of tool augmentation rather than replacement. They drew parallels between AI and other accepted academic tools such as calculators, spell-checkers, and research databases. Student 16, an engineering student, explained: "*I view AI as an advanced calculator for ideas. Just as we don't solve mathematical problems by hand when calculators are available, I don't see why I should struggle with basic research tasks when AI can help me focus on higher-level analysis and synthesis."* This framework allowed students to justify AI use while maintaining a sense of academic integrity by emphasizing the value-added nature of their human input and analysis.

The concept of learning intent emerged as a crucial factor in students' ethical frameworks. Participants distinguished between using AI to enhance understanding versus using it to circumvent learning altogether. Student 5, a history major, articulated this distinction: "*When I use AI to help me understand primary sources or to generate study questions, I'm using it to facilitate my learning. But when I ask it to write my analysis for me, I'm replacing my learning. The key is whether the AI interaction makes me think more deeply or think less."* This framework required students to continuously evaluate their motivations and the educational outcomes of their AI interactions.

Students also incorporated consequentialist reasoning into their frameworks, considering the broader implications of their AI use on their academic community and future professional development. Several participants expressed concern about maintaining the integrity of academic evaluation systems and ensuring fair competition among peers. Student 20, a business major, reflected: *"I have to think about whether my AI use is fair to other students and whether it's preparing me for real-world challenges. If everyone uses AI differently, how do we maintain meaningful academic standards? I try to use AI in ways that would still be beneficial if everyone did the same thing*." This perspective demonstrated students' awareness of the collective impact of individual ethical decisions and their responsibility to broader academic communities.

Factors Influencing Perceptions of Appropriate AI Use

The research identified multiple interconnected factors that significantly influenced students' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate versus inappropriate AI use in academic contexts. Disciplinary norms emerged as a

primary influence, with students in different fields developing distinct perspectives based on their academic cultures and professional expectations. Students in computer science and engineering generally viewed AI use more favorably, seeing it as part of their technological fluency and future professional toolkit. Student 8, a software engineering major, noted: "*In our field, we're expected to use the most efficient tools available. Not using AI would be like refusing to use modern development frameworks – it doesn't make sense professionally.*" Conversely, students in humanities disciplines expressed more reservations, emphasizing the importance of developing personal voice and critical thinking skills without technological mediation.

Institutional policies and faculty guidance played a crucial role in shaping student perceptions, though participants noted significant inconsistency across courses and instructors. Student 12, a biology major, described the confusion: *"In my statistics class, the professor encourages us to use AI for data analysis and interpretation, but in my research methods course, another professor explicitly forbids any AI use. The lack of clear, consistent guidelines makes it difficult to develop a coherent approach to AI ethics.*" Students expressed frustration with ambiguous policies and called for more explicit guidance about acceptable AI use in different academic contexts. Those who received clear guidelines from instructors reported feeling more confident in their ethical decision-making.

Peer interactions and social norms significantly influenced students' AI use patterns and ethical perceptions. The research revealed the emergence of informal peer communities that shared information about AI tools and collectively negotiated ethical boundaries. Student 6, a communications major, explained: "*My study group has developed our own rules about AI use. We share which tools we're using and how, so everyone has equal access to information. We also discuss ethical concerns and try to reach consensus about what's appropriate for different assignments.*" These peer networks served as important spaces for ethical reflection and norm development, often filling gaps left by unclear institutional policies.

Personal values and individual risk tolerance also substantially influenced students' perceptions of appropriate AI use. Students with strong orientations toward academic perfectionism tended to be more cautious about AI use, fearing that it might compromise the authenticity of their achievements. Student 15, a pre-medical student, reflected: "*I have very high standards for myself, and I worry that using AI might give me an unfair advantage or prevent me from truly mastering the material I need for medical school. I tend to be more conservative in my AI use because I want to be absolutely certain I'm genuinely prepared.*" Conversely, students with more pragmatic orientations toward education viewed AI as a valuable efficiency tool that could help them manage heavy course loads and competing responsibilities more effectively.

Negotiating Tensions Between AI Capabilities and Academic Integrity

Students employed various strategies to negotiate the fundamental tension between leveraging AI capabilities and maintaining academic integrity, demonstrating creative approaches to ethical technology use. One prominent strategy involved establishing clear boundaries around different types of AI assistance based on the nature of academic tasks. Student 4, a journalism major, described their approach: "*I use AI for initial brainstorming and to help me organize my thoughts, but I never let it write my actual articles. I see it as a research assistant and idea generator, not as a writer. The actual analysis, argumentation, and voice have to be authentically mine*." This boundary-setting approach allowed students to benefit from AI capabilities while preserving what they considered the core elements of their academic work.

Many participants developed transparency practices as a way to maintain integrity while using AI tools. Some students proactively disclosed their AI use to instructors, even when not explicitly required, as a way to maintain ethical consistency. Student 10, a sociology major, explained: "*I include a brief note at the end of my papers describing how I used AI in my research and writing process. Even if the professor doesn't require it, I feel more comfortable being open about my process. It also helps me reflect on whether my AI use was appropriate*." This transparency approach helped students feel more confident about their ethical choices and provided a framework for ongoing self-reflection about AI use boundaries.

Students also negotiated these tensions by focusing on learning outcomes rather than process purity. They evaluated their AI use based on whether it enhanced or diminished their educational experience and skill development. Student 13, a mathematics major, reflected: "*I ask myself whether using AI for this problem will help me understand the underlying concepts better or whether it will prevent me from developing necessary problem-solving skills. Sometimes AI can help me get unstuck and see solution approaches I wouldn't have considered, but other times I need to struggle through problems myself to really learn*." This outcome-focused approach required students to continuously assess the educational value of their AI interactions.

The research revealed that students often engaged in experimentation and iterative refinement of their AI use practices as they gained more experience with these tools. Many participants described evolving their approaches over time as they better understood both AI capabilities and their own learning needs. Student 18, a political science major, noted: "*My AI use has become more sophisticated and, I think, more ethical over time. Initially, I was either avoiding it completely or using it too broadly. Now I have a better sense of when and how AI can genuinely enhance my learning without compromising my academic integrity. It's been a process of trial and error, but also of developing better self-awareness about my learning goals*." This evolutionary approach suggested that students view AI ethics as an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed set of rules, requiring continuous reflection and adjustment as both technology and academic contexts change.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Emergent Themes in Student AI Ethics

The findings reveal that students are actively constructing sophisticated ethical frameworks for AI use in academic settings, despite limited institutional guidance. Their approaches demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between technology and learning, moving beyond simple prohibitions or unrestricted use toward contextual ethical reasoning. Students consistently emphasized the importance of intentionality in AI use, distinguishing between applications that enhance learning and those that substitute for it. This distinction suggests that students are developing what might be termed "pedagogical ethics" – moral frameworks specifically designed to optimize educational outcomes while maintaining academic integrity.

The research illuminates the significant role of peer communities in shaping AI ethics among students. Unlike traditional academic integrity issues that often involve individual decision-making, AI use appears to be increasingly negotiated through collective discourse and shared norm development. Students are creating informal ethical communities that serve multiple functions: information sharing about AI capabilities, collective boundary-setting about appropriate use, and mutual accountability for ethical decisions. This peer-driven approach to ethics development suggests that effective AI governance in academic settings may need to incorporate and support these organic community processes rather than relying solely on top-down policy implementation.

The findings also highlight the emergence of disciplinary variations in AI ethics, with different fields developing distinct approaches based on their professional cultures and learning objectives. Computer science and engineering students tend to view AI as a natural extension of their technological toolkit, while humanities students express greater concern about preserving human creativity and critical thinking. These disciplinary differences suggest that effective AI ethics policies may need to be tailored to specific academic contexts rather than implemented as universal institutional mandates.

Implications for Academic Integrity and Educational Practice

The study reveals fundamental tensions between traditional conceptions of academic integrity and the realities of AI-enhanced learning environments. Students' sophisticated reasoning about AI use challenges existing academic integrity frameworks that were developed for pre-AI contexts. Their emphasis on learning outcomes over process purity suggests that academic integrity policies may need to evolve from focusing on preventing specific behaviors toward ensuring authentic educational experiences and skill development.

The research indicates that students are ready for more nuanced conversations about AI ethics than current institutional policies typically provide. Rather than blanket prohibitions or permissions, students are seeking guidance that helps them navigate contextual ethical decisions. This suggests opportunities for developing more sophisticated academic integrity frameworks that acknowledge the potential benefits of AI while maintaining educational rigor and fairness.

The findings also point to the importance of addressing equity concerns related to AI access. Students' awareness of disparities in AI tool availability suggests that institutions need to consider how differential access to AI capabilities might affect academic fairness. This could involve providing institutional access to AI tools, developing guidelines that account for access disparities, or creating alternative assessment methods that don't disadvantage students with limited AI access.

Theoretical Contributions to Technology Ethics in Education

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on technology ethics in educational contexts by providing empirical insights into how students construct ethical frameworks for emerging technologies. The findings suggest that students employ multi-principled ethical reasoning that combines utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethics approaches in contextual ways. This hybrid approach to ethics reflects the complex nature of AI technology and its varied applications in academic settings.

The study also contributes to understanding how moral agency operates in technologically mediated educational environments. Students' emphasis on intentionality and learning outcomes suggests that they maintain a strong sense of personal responsibility for their educational experiences, even when using AI tools. This challenges concerns that AI use necessarily diminishes student agency and suggests that technology can be integrated into learning in ways that preserve and even enhance moral development.

The research provides evidence for the importance of community-based ethics development in technology adoption. The finding that students rely heavily on peer networks for ethical guidance suggests that individual moral reasoning may be insufficient for navigating complex technological contexts. This has implications for how institutions approach ethics education and policy development in rapidly evolving technological environments.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how students navigate the complex ethical landscape of AI use in academic settings. The research demonstrates that students are actively constructing sophisticated ethical frameworks that balance the benefits of AI capabilities with concerns about academic integrity, learning authenticity, and educational equity. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting AI tools, students are engaging in nuanced ethical reasoning that considers contextual factors, learning outcomes, and community impacts.

The findings suggest several key implications for higher education institutions. First, there is a clear need for more explicit and consistent guidance about appropriate AI use across different academic contexts. Students expressed frustration with ambiguous policies and inconsistent expectations across courses and instructors. Developing clear, context-sensitive guidelines that acknowledge the legitimate educational benefits of AI while maintaining academic standards could help students make more confident ethical decisions.

Second, the research highlights the importance of supporting peer-driven ethics communities among students. These informal networks serve crucial functions in norm development and mutual accountability that formal

policies alone cannot achieve. Institutions might consider creating structured opportunities for students to engage in collective reflection about AI ethics and to share best practices for responsible AI use.

Third, the study reveals the need to address equity concerns related to AI access. As AI tools become increasingly important for academic success, disparities in access could create new forms of educational inequality. Institutions should consider strategies for ensuring equitable access to AI capabilities or developing assessment approaches that account for differential AI availability.

The research also suggests that traditional academic integrity frameworks may need substantial revision to address the realities of AI-enhanced learning environments. Rather than focusing solely on preventing certain behaviors, integrity policies might emphasize ensuring authentic learning experiences and skill development. This could involve developing new approaches to assessment that value the process of learning with AI tools rather than treating such use as inherently problematic.

Finally, the findings indicate that students are capable of sophisticated ethical reasoning about AI use when provided with appropriate support and guidance. Rather than viewing students as potential violators of academic integrity, institutions might approach them as partners in developing ethical frameworks for AI use in education. This collaborative approach could lead to more effective and sustainable policies that reflect both institutional values and student experiences.

Further Research

Several important directions for future research emerge from this study. First, longitudinal research is needed to understand how student perspectives on AI ethics evolve over time as both their experience with AI tools and the technology itself continues to develop. This could provide insights into the stability of ethical frameworks and the factors that influence their evolution.

Second, comparative research examining AI ethics across different institutional contexts, cultures, and educational systems would provide valuable insights into the role of institutional factors in shaping student perspectives. Such research could inform the development of context-sensitive approaches to AI governance in higher education.

Third, experimental research investigating the actual learning outcomes associated with different approaches to AI use could provide empirical evidence to inform ethical frameworks. Understanding which AI applications genuinely enhance learning versus those that might undermine educational objectives could provide a stronger foundation for ethical guidelines.

Fourth, research examining faculty perspectives on student AI use and how these perspectives interact with student viewpoints could illuminate areas of alignment and tension that need to be addressed in policy development. Understanding the full range of stakeholder perspectives is crucial for developing effective governance approaches.

Fifth, research investigating the long-term professional and personal development implications of different approaches to AI use during education could provide insights into the broader consequences of current ethical choices. This could inform both individual decision-making and institutional policy development.

Finally, research examining the effectiveness of different approaches to AI ethics education and policy implementation could provide practical guidance for institutions seeking to support responsible AI use among students. This could include studies of peer-based ethics programs, policy communication strategies, and assessment approaches that account for AI use.

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 carried out the fieldwork, prepared the literature review and overlooked the whole article's write up. Authors 2, 3 wrote the research methodology and did the data entry analysis and interpretation of the results.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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