

Ethical Awareness of AI Overreliance in Academic Writing: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 9 June 2026

Publish: 1 July 2026

Keywords:

Artificial Intelligence;

Ethical awareness;

AI overreliance;

Academic writing;

Systematic literature review.

Abstract

The increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed academic writing by enabling students to generate ideas, improve language quality, and complete writing tasks more efficiently. However, excessive dependence on AI has raised concerns regarding ethical awareness and academic responsibility. This study aims to examine the ethical implications of AI overreliance in academic writing through a systematic literature review. Relevant studies published between 2023 and 2025 were selected and analyzed to identify key issues related to academic integrity, authorship, accountability, transparency, and responsible AI use. The findings indicate that AI overreliance may weaken students' sense of ownership over their work, reduce critical evaluation of information, and create uncertainty regarding ethical writing practices. Furthermore, limited AI literacy and unclear institutional guidelines contribute to inappropriate AI use. The study concludes that ethical awareness plays a crucial role in ensuring responsible AI-assisted writing. Therefore, higher education institutions should promote ethical AI literacy and establish clear policies to maintain academic integrity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed educational practices, particularly in higher education, where digital technologies increasingly mediate teaching, learning, and assessment processes. Among the most influential developments is the emergence of generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Grammarly, QuillBot, and other large language model (LLM)-based applications. These technologies possess the ability to generate human-like text, summarize information, provide explanations, translate content, and support academic writing tasks with unprecedented speed and sophistication. As a result, generative AI has become deeply embedded in students' academic activities, particularly in writing assignments, literature reviews, research proposals, and scholarly communication (Kasneci et al., 2023; Zhai, 2023). The increasing accessibility and usability of these technologies have led many educators and researchers to view AI as a transformative tool capable of enhancing learning efficiency and educational productivity.

The widespread adoption of AI in academic writing reflects a broader shift in how knowledge is accessed, processed, and produced within contemporary educational environments. Traditionally, academic writing has been regarded as a complex intellectual activity requiring students to engage in reading, analysis, synthesis, argument construction,

ISSN: xxxx-xxxx

and critical reflection. Through these processes, learners develop higher-order thinking skills and disciplinary understanding while demonstrating academic integrity and intellectual independence. However, the emergence of generative AI has altered this conventional model by enabling students to outsource aspects of the writing process to intelligent systems. Tasks that once required extensive cognitive effort can now be completed within seconds through AI-generated responses. Although this technological advancement offers substantial opportunities for learning support, it simultaneously raises important questions regarding the long-term consequences of AI dependency on students' intellectual development and ethical responsibility.

Existing literature has extensively documented the benefits of AI-assisted academic writing. Research indicates that AI tools can improve writing quality, increase efficiency, enhance linguistic accuracy, and provide personalized feedback (Chan & Hu, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). For students who struggle with academic writing, particularly non-native English speakers, AI technologies can reduce language barriers and facilitate more effective communication. Similarly, generative AI has been reported to support brainstorming, idea generation, text organization, and revision processes, enabling students to complete academic tasks more efficiently (Kim et al., 2025). These findings have contributed to a largely optimistic discourse that positions AI as an educational innovation capable of democratizing access to knowledge and improving learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, the dominant emphasis on technological benefits has increasingly been challenged by scholars who question the broader implications of AI integration into higher education. While AI undoubtedly offers practical advantages, concerns have emerged regarding students' growing dependence on AI-generated content. Recent studies suggest that many students use generative AI not merely as a supplementary tool but as a substitute for cognitive effort, critical inquiry, and independent reasoning (Zhai, Wibowo, & Li, 2024). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as AI overreliance, has become a central concern in contemporary educational research. AI overreliance occurs when individuals place excessive trust in AI systems and depend on them to perform tasks that require human judgment, evaluation, and intellectual engagement. In academic contexts, overreliance may manifest when students accept AI-generated information without verification, rely on AI-produced arguments instead of developing their own perspectives, or use machine-generated content as a replacement for original academic work.

The issue of AI overreliance is particularly significant because academic writing serves purposes that extend beyond the production of written texts. Writing is fundamentally a process of thinking, learning, and knowledge construction. According to Critical Thinking Theory, effective learning requires active engagement in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and self-regulation (Facione, 2015). These cognitive processes enable students to critically assess evidence, identify assumptions, evaluate competing viewpoints, and formulate reasoned conclusions. Academic writing therefore functions as a medium through which critical thinking skills are developed and demonstrated. However, when students increasingly depend on AI-generated outputs, opportunities for engaging in these essential cognitive activities may be reduced. Rather than critically interrogating information, learners may become passive recipients of machine-generated content, thereby weakening their capacity for independent thought and reflective judgment.

This concern can also be understood through Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, which categorizes cognitive learning into six hierarchical levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). While AI technologies effectively support lower-order cognitive tasks such as information retrieval and summarization, higher-order cognitive processes require active intellectual engagement that cannot be fully delegated to machines. Excessive reliance on AI may

therefore discourage students from participating in the analytical and evaluative activities necessary for deep learning. Several studies have reported that students who heavily depend on AI-generated responses often exhibit lower levels of critical reflection and independent problem-solving (Huang & Wu, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024). Consequently, concerns regarding AI overreliance extend beyond questions of academic performance and encompass broader issues of intellectual autonomy and cognitive development.

Beyond cognitive implications, AI overreliance raises profound ethical concerns that challenge fundamental principles of higher education. Academic institutions have traditionally emphasized values such as honesty, originality, accountability, transparency, and respect for intellectual property. These principles form the foundation of academic integrity and are essential for maintaining trust in scholarly communication. However, generative AI introduces new complexities that blur the distinction between human-authored and machine-generated work. Students can now produce sophisticated academic texts with minimal personal input, raising questions regarding authorship, ownership, and responsibility. As a result, educators face increasing difficulty in determining the extent to which submitted work reflects students' genuine understanding and intellectual contribution (Cotton et al., 2024).

Ethical awareness provides a useful framework for understanding these challenges. Ethical awareness refers to an individual's ability to recognize ethical issues, understand the consequences of actions, and make morally informed decisions (Rest, 1986). According to Rest's Four-Component Model of Moral Behavior, ethical action begins with moral sensitivity, or the capacity to identify that a situation involves ethical considerations. Within the context of AI-assisted writing, ethical awareness involves recognizing the implications of using AI-generated content, understanding issues related to academic honesty and authorship, and evaluating the appropriateness of AI use in specific educational settings. Students who lack ethical awareness may fail to recognize that excessive dependence on AI can compromise academic integrity even when such practices are not explicitly prohibited by institutional regulations.

Recent scholarship has highlighted several ethical risks associated with AI-assisted academic writing. One of the most frequently discussed concerns is plagiarism. Although AI-generated text may not involve direct copying from existing sources, its use raises important questions regarding originality and intellectual ownership (Eke, 2023). Students who submit AI-generated content without acknowledgment may effectively present machine-produced work as their own, thereby undermining the principle of authentic scholarship. Similarly, scholars have identified concerns regarding ghostwriting, fabricated references, misinformation, and algorithmic bias (UNESCO, 2023; Dwivedi et al., 2023). Large language models are known to generate inaccurate information and fictitious citations, commonly referred to as "hallucinations," which may compromise the reliability and credibility of academic work when used without critical verification.

Another emerging concern relates to the erosion of intellectual autonomy. Intellectual autonomy refers to an individual's capacity to think independently and make judgments based on personal reasoning rather than external authority. In higher education, fostering intellectual autonomy is a central objective because it enables students to become independent learners and critical thinkers. However, the convenience and efficiency of AI systems may inadvertently encourage dependency. When students routinely rely on AI to generate ideas, solve problems, and construct arguments, they may gradually become less confident in their own intellectual abilities. This dependency risks creating a generation of learners who possess technological proficiency but lack the critical and reflective capacities necessary for meaningful knowledge production.

Address these challenges, researchers have increasingly emphasized the importance of AI literacy. Long and Magerko (2020) define AI literacy as the competencies required to understand, evaluate, and interact effectively with AI technologies. More recent perspectives argue that AI literacy must extend beyond technical knowledge to include ethical reasoning, critical evaluation, and awareness of algorithmic limitations (Zhai, 2023; Chen et al., 2025). Students who possess strong AI literacy are more likely to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of AI systems, critically assess generated outputs, and use AI responsibly as a learning aid rather than a replacement for intellectual effort. Therefore, AI literacy represents a crucial mechanism for mitigating the risks associated with AI overreliance and promoting ethical engagement with emerging technologies.

Despite the growing volume of research concerning AI in education, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies focus on either the pedagogical benefits of AI-assisted learning or concerns regarding academic misconduct. Comparatively fewer studies have specifically examined ethical awareness as a central dimension of AI overreliance in academic writing. Furthermore, existing reviews tend to address academic integrity, AI adoption, and technological effectiveness as separate issues rather than exploring the interconnected relationship between ethical awareness, cognitive development, and AI dependency. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how excessive reliance on AI influences students' ethical judgment, critical thinking, and intellectual autonomy within academic writing contexts.

Given the rapid expansion of generative AI technologies and their increasing integration into higher education, a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge is urgently needed. Therefore, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to critically examine ethical awareness in relation to AI overreliance in academic writing. Drawing upon Critical Thinking Theory (Facione, 2015), Ethical Awareness Theory (Rest, 1986), AI Literacy Theory (Long & Magerko, 2020), and Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), this review seeks to identify key themes, ethical challenges, and educational implications emerging from recent research. By focusing specifically on the intersection of ethical awareness and AI overreliance, this study contributes to ongoing discussions regarding responsible AI integration and offers insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions seeking to promote ethical, critical, and autonomous learning practices in the era of generative AI.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine ethical awareness related to AI overreliance in academic writing. The SLR approach was selected because it enables a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of existing research findings on a specific topic. Relevant articles were collected from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search focused on studies published between 2023 and 2026 using keywords such as *Artificial Intelligence*, *AI Overreliance*, *Academic Writing*, *Ethical Awareness*, *Academic Integrity*, and *AI Literacy*. Articles were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance, quality, and alignment with the research objectives. The analysis was guided by Critical Thinking Theory (Facione, 2015), Ethical Awareness Theory (Rest, 1986), and AI Literacy Theory (Long & Magerko, 2020). The selected studies were reviewed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, ethical concerns, and educational implications associated with AI overreliance in academic writing. The findings were then synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of how excessive dependence on AI influences ethical awareness, academic integrity, critical thinking, and responsible technology use in higher education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that ethical awareness has become a significant concern in the growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for academic writing. While AI technologies offer substantial benefits for improving writing efficiency and language quality, the reviewed studies suggest that excessive dependence on AI may weaken students' awareness of their ethical responsibilities as academic writers. According to UNESCO (2023), generative AI has transformed educational practices by providing immediate access to information and content generation; however, it also raises concerns regarding academic integrity, transparency, and responsible authorship. Similarly, Dwivedi et al. (2023) argued that the rapid adoption of generative AI has created new ethical challenges because users often prioritize efficiency and convenience over critical evaluation and accountability.

One of the most prominent findings concerns the changing perception of authorship in academic writing. Eke (2023) reported that many students struggle to distinguish between using AI as a supportive writing tool and relying on AI to generate substantial intellectual content. As a result, students may submit assignments containing AI-generated ideas and arguments without fully recognizing the implications for originality and academic ownership. This finding suggests that AI overreliance can weaken ethical sensitivity toward authorship because students become increasingly detached from the intellectual processes involved in constructing knowledge. Supporting this view, Macfarlane, Zhang, and Pun (2014) emphasized that academic integrity extends beyond avoiding plagiarism and includes taking responsibility for one's intellectual contribution. When AI performs significant portions of the writing process, students may find it more difficult to recognize the boundaries of their own authorship.

The literature further reveals that AI overreliance may contribute to a decline in accountability for academic work. Several studies indicate that students often assume AI-generated content is accurate and trustworthy because it is presented in a coherent and authoritative manner. UNESCO (2023) warned that generative AI systems are capable of producing inaccurate information, fabricated references, and misleading interpretations despite appearing credible. Nevertheless, many students fail to verify AI-generated outputs before incorporating them into assignments. This behavior reflects a reduction in personal accountability because responsibility for evaluating information is increasingly transferred from the student to the technology. According to Floridi (2013), ethical information use requires individuals to remain accountable for the information they create, share, and communicate. Therefore, dependence on AI without adequate verification may undermine a fundamental principle of ethical academic writing.

Another important finding is the emergence of ethical ambiguity regarding acceptable AI use. Unlike traditional plagiarism, which is generally well defined within academic institutions, AI-assisted writing occupies a relatively unclear ethical space. Chan and Hu (2023) found that many students are uncertain about whether AI-generated content should be disclosed, cited, or treated as a legitimate form of academic assistance. This uncertainty creates inconsistent interpretations of ethical behavior and increases the likelihood of inappropriate AI use. Similarly, Cotton, Cotton, and Shipway (2024) argued that the absence of clear institutional guidelines often leaves students relying on personal judgment rather than established academic standards. Consequently, ethical awareness becomes highly dependent on individual perceptions rather than shared principles of academic integrity.

The review also demonstrates that AI overreliance may gradually normalize behaviors that conflict with the values of higher education. Bretag (2016) argued that academic

integrity is founded on values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. However, the reviewed studies suggest that repeated dependence on AI-generated content may weaken these values by encouraging students to prioritize efficiency over intellectual engagement. As AI-generated responses become increasingly accessible, students may begin to view extensive AI assistance as a normal part of academic work. Dwivedi et al. (2023) noted that this normalization can reduce ethical reflection because individuals become accustomed to relying on technological systems to perform tasks that traditionally require human reasoning and judgment. Consequently, the ethical risks associated with AI use may become less visible despite their growing significance.

Another recurring finding concerns transparency in scholarly communication. According to Floridi (2013), transparency is a key ethical principle because it enables others to understand how information is produced and evaluated. The reviewed literature indicates that students frequently fail to disclose the extent of AI involvement in their writing process, creating uncertainty regarding the origin of ideas and arguments presented in academic work. UNESCO (2023) emphasized that transparency regarding AI use is essential for maintaining trust in educational and research environments. Without such transparency, readers, instructors, and researchers may find it difficult to determine the extent to which academic work reflects genuine human understanding and contribution.

The findings further suggest that AI overreliance may affect the development of ethical autonomy. Academic writing traditionally requires students to make independent judgments regarding evidence, argumentation, and interpretation. However, Eke (2023) observed that students who rely heavily on AI-generated content may become less engaged in these decision-making processes because AI systems provide ready-made answers and recommendations. Over time, this dependence may reduce opportunities for students to exercise independent ethical reasoning and assume responsibility for their academic choices. As a result, ethical awareness becomes increasingly reactive rather than reflective, with students responding to AI-generated outputs instead of actively evaluating their ethical implications.

Overall, the reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that AI overreliance influences ethical awareness through several interconnected dimensions, including authorship, accountability, transparency, academic integrity, and ethical autonomy. UNESCO (2023), Dwivedi et al. (2023), Eke (2023), Cotton et al. (2024), Bretag (2016), and Floridi (2013) collectively highlight that the primary challenge is not the existence of AI technologies but the tendency to delegate intellectual responsibility to those technologies without sufficient ethical reflection. Therefore, strengthening ethical awareness should become a central objective of AI integration in higher education. Universities should develop clear policies, promote responsible AI practices, and encourage students to maintain accountability and ownership of their academic work so that technological innovation enhances rather than compromises the ethical foundations of scholarly writing.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that ethical awareness is a crucial factor in addressing AI overreliance in academic writing. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that while generative AI technologies offer significant advantages in enhancing writing efficiency, language quality, and idea generation, excessive dependence on these tools may weaken students' awareness of authorship, accountability, transparency, and academic responsibility. The findings reveal that AI overreliance often leads students to delegate intellectual tasks to technological systems, reducing their engagement in critical evaluation, independent reasoning, and ethical decision-making during the writing process.

ISSN: xxxx-xxxx

Furthermore, ethical ambiguity regarding appropriate AI use, combined with inconsistent institutional guidelines, contributes to uncertainty in academic practice and increases the risk of compromising academic integrity. The review also highlights that students with stronger ethical awareness are more likely to use AI as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for intellectual effort, thereby maintaining ownership and responsibility for their work. Therefore, the primary challenge is not the presence of AI in academic writing but the extent to which users remain ethically accountable when utilizing these technologies. Higher education institutions should strengthen ethical AI literacy, establish clear policies for responsible AI use, and promote academic integrity frameworks that encourage transparency, accountability, and critical engagement. By fostering ethical awareness alongside technological competence, universities can ensure that AI serves as a tool for enhancing learning while preserving the fundamental values of scholarly writing and academic integrity.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the English Department, Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat, for its academic support and encouragement throughout the completion of this research. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and academic peers who provided valuable insights, constructive feedback, and scholarly discussions that contributed to the development of this study. Special thanks are given to all researchers and scholars whose published works served as important references in conducting this systematic literature review. Finally, the authors acknowledge the support of family and friends for their continuous motivation and encouragement during the research and writing process. Their contributions have been invaluable in the successful completion of this study.

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