THE AI DEGREE: EXPLORING THE DRIVERS OF AI TOOL USE IN THE MASTER'S DISSERTATION WRITING OF EFL GRADUATES

Amira Sarra Hiouani [1] **Nor El Houda Khiari** [2]
[1] Larbi Ben Mhidi University (Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria)
hiouani.sarra@univ-oeb.dz
[2] Mohamed Cherif Messaadia University (Souk Ahras, Algeria)
n.khiari@univ-soukahras.dz

Abstract: This paper explores the motivations substantiating the impulsive use of Artificial-Intelligence-powered systems in the writing of the master's dissertations of a group of former EFL students within a specific educational setting in Algeria. Through a relatively small-scale qualitative research design that employed semi-structured interviews, data were collected and thematically analysed to delve into the participants' experiences and viewpoints vis-a-vis their reasons for use, perspectives around the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in their educational trajectories, and perceptions of ethical considerations encircling such unsupervised usage. Considering these aims, the paper's contributions are threefold; findings reveal an intricate interplay of motives that predominantly include time, the reported absence of guidance, linguistic barriers, and inexperience with dissertation writing. The results also manifest in a blurred sense of ethicality, particularly since generative AI use is continuously juxtaposed with plagiarism. Lastly, evidence attests to a major digital discrepancy that highlights issues related to access to educational training and instructional material. The paper further raises questions about the future of higher education learning and provides suggestions about rigid regulations and training opportunities apropos AI usage for students.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, EFL students, ethicality, impulsive use, motives, regulations.

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[1] **Corresponding author** : Amira Sarra Hiouani
ORCID ID : https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6494-2844

1. **Introduction**

It is a palpable truth that AI has managed to establish a presence into numerous aspects of individuals' lives, and academia happens to be no exception. With the augmented release of several open AI engines that require little to no conditioned access, many students around the globe found solace in knowing that their academic tasks were no longer to be perceived as daunting. This occurred due to the assistance provided to them by AI systems that have the ability to decipher simple probes and provide solutions to many educational problems posed to them by students. As a matter of fact, AI is by no means a novel entity, as it has been in existence for several decades. Nevertheless, the launch of ChatGPT was a pivotal point in the path of students apropos open access to generative AI. It unproblematically granted them unprecedented access to information and task completion abilities.

With the abundant perceived and reported benefits of AI integration into academia, several concerns inherently arise, particularly in relation to academic writing and creativity. The 2022/2023 academic year cohort of English language majors at a university located in the eastern part of Algeria, being the first year group to have access to generative AI, have been observed to collectively use ChatGPT to write major parts of their master's dissertations. Even though several AI language models, such as Gemini and Perplexity, succeeded ChatGPT and presently even compete against it at several levels, the current study mostly focuses on ChatGPT as it was the main generative AI model that the students used at the time of writing their dissertations. This paper sheds light on the reasons that underpin students' unmonitored use of AI servers to write their dissertations as well as potential ethical considerations entailed by such use. Through examining the facets that encircle this trend, the study aims to explore the complex nature of unregulated use of AI technology from the perspective of students who disclosed using it throughout their entire dissertation-writing journey.

Following the emergence of generative AI, there has been an explosion of research conducted to investigate its potential in fields like education. Numerous studies (Alberth, 2023; Burkhard, 2023; Santiago-Ruiz, 2023; Utami & Winarni, 2023; Zou & Huang, 2023), to name a few, sought to explore its benefits and drawbacks as well as the perceptions and attitudes of the educational community towards its integration in academia. Nevertheless, most studies seem to have predominantly explored attitudes and perceptions towards AI, rather than examining its practical implementation in academic work. There appears to be a shortage of studies carried out around exploring the practical use of AI tools in dissertation writing as well as the cognitive frameworks of individuals who extensively and wrongfully used it. The current paper, consequently, focuses on exploring how AI was actually utilised to accomplish high-stakes academic tasks such as dissertation writing. It targets a group of former students who substantially used AI, mainly ChatGPT, to write dissertations and delves into their motivations for use as well as their perceptions of its role. To this end, the following research questions were raised:

1.   How do the motives that underlie the students' use of AI tools in the writing of their master's dissertations relate to the perceived benefits and challenges of using AI?

2.   How is the role of AI tools in academic writing perceived by the students?

3.   How do students navigate the potential ethical considerations and challenges they encounter while using AI tools to write their master's dissertations?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Role of Technology in Academia

The role of technology has become pivotal in modern education. Not only has it become a constituent part of the everyday lives of students and teachers alike, but it has become inevitable especially since institutions essentially rely on it to dispatch a diverse array of information (Idri & Outmoune, 2021). There has been a major shift to digital learning platforms (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Labed & Sebbah, 2021), which seemingly involves a movement away from traditional means of knowledge acquisition. The prior predisposition to technological tools such as social media platforms, which have been extensively used to share educational content and exchange education-related information in the Algerian context, facilitated the adoption of e-learning tools by institutions which was compelled by the Covid-19 global pandemic (Alyoussef, 2023).

Haleem et al. (2023) discuss how beneficial digital technologies are in the lives of students elucidating various advantages that predominantly include the construction of knowledge and comprehension skills, the formation of a comprehensive learning atmosphere, the evolution of collaboration and communication skills, the diversification of knowledge, and the general boost in access to educational resources. They also emphasise the challenges of the increasing spread of digitalisation in education, which encompass the unavoidable reduction of the quality of instruction, particular financial challenges to low-income families, and potential cheating opportunities. Even though the study provided valuable contextualised insight into the strengths and shortcomings that the incorporation of technology in modern education presents, it appears to still assume that digital technologies are promptly within reach of all students and educators apart from low-income families and neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, this viewpoint overlooks the massive digital inequalities that take place globally.

Along these lines, the shift in the use of technology in academia was also accompanied by a redefinition of conventional learning and its tenets, ethics, and requirements. In their paper about the partial role of technology in the education of young learners, Szymkowiak et al. (2021) indicated that the educational upbringing of learners dictated their perception of formal learning and that it was crucial to tailor educational approaches to the students' preferences and expectations. Nevertheless, they also emphasised the idea that in spite of being "digital natives" (p. 3), the young generation of learners does not appear to possess any more knowledge, expertise, or intelligence than the previous generations, and that the quick and relatively effortless access to digital resources is but an unorthodox way of approaching and obtaining information. The conclusion drawn by Szymkowiak et al. (2021) seems to lack empirical evidence as it apparently relies on stereotypical assumptions about the digital capabilities of young learners. Addressing them as "digital natives" without corroborating this claim with actual research appears to stem from a disregard of the multiplicity of digital literacy skills among learners, which could be translated into an oversimplification of the intricate relationship between learners and technology.

2.2. The Growing Significance of AI Tools in Education

In their attempt to provide an elaborate definition of AI, Holmes and Tuomi (2022) put forward a set of multidisciplinary delineations as to what exactly was regarded as AI. They concluded that despite the general disagreement around the characterisation of AI, it could be seen as an assemblage of automated systems that essentially relied on human predetermined design to impart information and suggestions upon an array of issues and concepts. These systems were seen to be equipped with the capability of independently making adjustments and alternations to their behaviour based on contextual factors that were dictated by

interaction with humans. This type of automation and autonomy was believed by Zhai et al. (2021) to evolve enough for machines not to necessitate specific human programming especially after attempts to explore the potential of integrating neuroscience alongside AI capacities. The latter is considered to conceivably provide optimal opportunities for learning through the amelioration of human-computer interaction.

Prior to AI accounting for what it does in current times, it was mainly perceived as an Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS), and was often tackled in opposition to other forms of computer-based instruction (CBI) (Ma, et al., 2014; Steenbergen-Hu & Cooper, 2014). For instance, Ma, et al. (2014) discussed the prospective utility of ITS in comparison to typical forms of instruction. Their study approached the issue of AI from an 'intelligent instructor' point of view, which potentially sought to establish a certain position as to how the advantages of ITS paved the way for a more nuanced and prolific approach to teaching which included increased interactivity, adaptation, instancy of feedback, as well as personalised task selection and a more foregrounded learner direction. In addition, they emphasised that the multidimensionality of ITS led to a high-end task selection and personalisation from the part of learners as opposed to traditional forms of CBI, which also paves the way for customised feedback that takes into account the learners' history of exchange as well as their weaknesses and strengths. Despite the fact that the study offers a pioneering perspective on the potential effectiveness of ITS, it failed to adequately explore the contextual dimensions that might affect the potency of ITS, which seems to have led to a relatively narrow understanding of the impact of ITS across a multiplicity of educational situations.

By the same token, Steenbergen-Hu and Cooper's (2014) study results made a ruling in favour of human tutoring as opposed to ITS. Nevertheless, they suggested that the potential of ITS stretched beyond a mere comparison with human tutoring performance since it was perceived as influential in areas that were not easily and invariably realisable by human tutors. Steenbergen-Hu and Cooper (2014) specifically addressed feedback as one of the most important tenets of ITS, yet rooted for the necessary evolution of Intelligent Tutoring Systems to become compatible with the human brain.

Zhai et al. (2021) emphasised the role of swarm intelligence in education as crucial in terms of the developments present in AI because it was believed to interfere with the traditional teacher-student rapport by absorbing and substituting the quality of passive grasping from students with the tendency to create, challenge, and question to teachers' authority of knowledge. This reshaping of relationships can often be seen as an obstacle since the very pith of contesting the traditional teacher-student relationship may either receive resistance from the part of teachers or lead to complete over-dependance. Zhai et al. (2021) also sought to address the generally positive influence of AI techniques on the educational path of learners, yet still acknowledged the challenges faced by AI insertion that had to do with the aforementioned rapport, ethics, as well as the technicality of using AI in the educational landscape.

2.3. Artificial Intelligence in Education: Use and Limitations

In recent years, the use of AI tools has taken a decisive turn especially since OpenAI launched ChatGPT in 2022 (Caldarini et al., 2022). The rise of ChatGPT sparked keenness among companies and individuals alike, especially students, seeking to leverage its services for quick and optimal solutions for a variety of different problems including conversations, song creations, story compositions, and assignment elucidations. This technology, built upon intelligent retrieval and learning algorithm, generates human-like text by analysing and comprehending immense amounts of data that include language patterns and structures (Grassini, 2023; Haleem et al., 2022).

Ever since this launch, multiple studies explored its usage by students from various perspectives. Farhi's et al. (2023) study, for instance, revealed that not only was ChatGPT positively perceived by students, but it also proved to be beneficial in a wide range of tasks including essay writing, translation, as well as poetry composition. It was also discussed that despite it being preferred by students in terms of academic application, it still raised ethical dilemmas that were mainly seen at the level of over-dependance which could potentially lead to the hinderance of creativity and critical thinking capacities among students (Farhi et al., 2023). This point is elaborated upon later in this article.

Similar to Farhi's et al. (2023) results, Kumar's et al. (2024) discussed the importance of using AI tools including ChatGPT in the educational context and highlighted the requirement for further research for the ultimate sake of optimising its implementation. The study displayed the potential benefits of ChatGPT in education which involve the facilitation of research, the improvement of learning opportunities, especially as far as personalised learning is concerned, and the revolutionization of teaching methodologies. Along similar lines, Chan and Hu (2023) addressed the numerous benefits that AI technologies offered for students which were said to vary between customised learning experiences, research support, as well as the automation of administrative responsibilities.

According to Chan and Hu (2023), the students' willingness to make use of AI originates from its perceived value in improving learning opportunities and outcomes, which is a leading cause in the facilitation of writing and the assistance in the collection and analysis research. Students perceptibly recognised the immediate and personalised help that AI provides, particularly in areas where support from their teachers, advisors, or peers might be limited. For this reason, AI was foreseen to revolutionise traditional learning methods which also animates a significant reduction of teachers' workload. Nevertheless, the students also expressed concerns regarding the incorporation of AI tools, which mostly revolved around accuracy and transparency, privacy and ethical dilemmas, as well as competency development, which includes over-reliance, and the deterioration of criticality and creativity among students. For these reasons, transparency in terms of AI systems, vigorous privacy protections, and clear ethical guidelines were suggested by Chan and Hu (2023) as potential solutions for the challenges perceived by the students in the study for the ultimate sake of ensuring responsible and beneficial usage of AI tools in educational settings.

In order to address the challenges posed by the use of ChatGPT, which include the generation of incorrect information and the prospective impossibility of plagiarism detection, Lo (2023) discusses suggestions that include strategies that guarantee less reliance on AI tools. These comprise the refinement of assessment tasks to involve ones that make use of multimedia elements in order to obstruct plagiarism, as well as the incorporation of oral presentations, and the improvement of AI detection tools. Their main suggestion was the necessity for students and teachers to undertake AI-detection training courses for the sake of optimising the educational value of AI tools, including ChatGPT, and for students to be aware of the importance of academic integrity and personal effort. By the same token, Baidoo-Anu and Anash (2023) discussed the advantages of ChatGPT which were said to include customised teaching, time-saving essay correction, language translation, as well as interactive and adaptive learning. The potential disadvantages they explored touched upon the absence of human interchange, possible bias in training data, generation of erroneous knowledge, lack of privacy and contextual apprehension, and over-dependence upon AI tools. Even though Baidoo-Anu and Anash's (2023) study provided valuable creative insight into the benefits and drawbacks of generative AI, it somewhat failed to address them from a practical point of view as most of the points provided seem to have been based on prediction alone. Therefore, it would have been more engrossing if those were empirically contextualised.

The limitations of AI were discussed from a slightly different perspective by Haleem et al. (2022) who viewed them in terms of the capabilities of ChatGPT itself. Although it was said to show significant potential with regard to content creation and the ability to assist users in writing and editing, it was still perceived to lack critical and complex problem-solving abilities which would probably be misleading to users. In addition, ChatGPT was believed to lack reliability in terms of the answers provided, as well as a potential presence of biases and inaccuracies. According to Haleem et al. (2022), these challenges could be addressed through a careful consideration when selecting training data and models, as well as guaranteeing human supervision over AI creations before they actually get dispersed to the public.

2.4. The Potential of AI Tools in Academic Writing

Adiguzel's et al. (2023) study highlighted the prominent role of ChatGPT in students' writing. They asserted that it provided numerous opportunities for students to enhance their writing for various endeavours including academic ones. Not only is this improvement said to cover the process of writing itself, but also intrinsic motivation, which enables a more thorough comprehension of concepts. This perspective aligns with the results of Farhi's et al. (2023) study which concluded that ChatGPT was perceived by students as a resource that supported their productivity, motivation, and engagement, which all play a decisive role in the creation of decent quality writing owing to the practical assistance that it provides.

Along similar lines, Utami and Winarni's (2023) participants reported enhanced learning motivation when using AI tools in academic writing, which is attributed to their eagerness to explore new educational territories. Analogously, the study also revealed that students held positive attitudes towards the use of AI tools in academic writing attributing to its perceived usefulness and ease. AI chatbots were generally believed to improve students' writing performance especially as far as overcoming difficulties in outlining their writing was concerned. Nevertheless, issues that concern the originality of ideas were discussed indicating that AI-assisted writing could have a serious impact on the unprecedentedness of ideas. As a solution, Utami and Winarni (2023) suggested a need for collaborative practices between students and AI in writing assignments as a supplementary writing tool to minimise the biases that seemingly inconvenience students' writing.

Waltzer, Cox, and Heyman (2023) were more practical in approaching perspectives towards academic writing and developed a test through which they sought to evaluate the capability of teachers and students to identify the difference between essays generated by AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, and those written by students. The results of the study revealed that the teachers' experience in teaching English or using ChatGPT was not a sufficient factor in the accurate detection of AI-produced writing. In addition to some linguistic cues such as transitional expressions, teachers typically regarded any "high-quality" essays as written by AI, which indicated that their perceptions of AI writing included that it was of superior quality. The results also revealed that teachers held a more negative stance towards the use of ChatGPT in academic writing as opposed to students who were more optimistic about it. Waltzer et al. (2023) advised against the over-interpretation of their findings and called for alliance between teachers and researchers to lessen the perceived risks and to improve students' writing skill and critical thinking.

As opposed to the results of Waltzer's et al. (2023) study which generally disclosed pessimism from the part of teachers towards the use of AI tools in writing, Nguyen's (2023) results revealed that teachers predominantly held a positive stance towards the use of ChatGPT in writing classes. Their attitudes appeared to have stemmed from their recognition of its benefits in feedback, lesson planning, as well as the overall enhancement of students' writing and motivation. Nevertheless, the teachers reportedly also presented concerns about

the potential over-reliance on AI tools which would possibly lead to issues with academic integrity. Other than being contextual, part of the reason why teachers were generally optimistic about the use of ChatGPT in writing classes appears to be the fact that they, themselves, relied on it to create learning resources. Even though the authors claimed that their study was of a mixed-methods nature, the way they approached their qualitative part appeared to somewhat lean towards the quantitative side especially since their interview questions were almost entirely structured. This seems to have led to a confined perspective as far as the actual perceptions of teachers were concerned despite the fact that the study was generally informative and promising.

Relatively similar to Waltzer's et al. (2023) results, Santiago-Ruiz's (2023) study delved into teachers' perceptions of ChatGPT use as well as its employment by students in academic writing. There was a divergence of opinions within teachers between ones who held a neutral position and did not feel the need to change their teaching approach because they perceived no direct impact on their teaching practices, and ones, forming the predominant view, who actively sought to detect and prevent the use of AI tools due to the perceived harm it caused, and lastly ones who were in favour of using it seeking to leverage its assistance and capabilities. The similarity with Waltzer's et al. (2023) study lies in that this last category happens to include younger teachers who also used ChatGPT themselves. The teachers concerned exhibited more focus on the implementation of better methods for using ChatGPT rather than detection or prevention.

Delving into the highlights and obstacles dictated by the use of AI tools in academic writing, Burkhard (2023) classified the potential consequences of their use into three themes comprising discerned benefits, interim risks, and durable threats. Regarding the impact of AI tools, the study revealed that despite the perceived advantages of technological advancements, which mainly include individualised writing assistance, there appeared to be continuous tensions relating to the short-term issues that accompany the use of AI-powered tools, namely privacy problems, lack of reflection, and academic theft, as well as the long-term ones which mainly encompass the depletion of writing identity and proficiency. These were met with suggested coping strategies which mainly revolved around transparency in the use of AI tools steering away from absolute interdiction or unsupervised permission. To alleviate the potential undesirable outcomes, participants in the study emphasised the need for promoting critical thinking and enhancing the sense of responsibility among students through verified education of AI tools. Despite the valuable vision provided by Burkhard's (2023) study, it still appears to lack depth in terms of the questions asked to the participants as they seemed to have been provided with a limited perspective in regard to the enveloping issue of AI use in academic writing.

2.5. The Use of AI Tools in Dissertation and Thesis Writing

A quantitative study was conducted by Zou and Huang (2023) for the sake of investigating Chinese doctoral students' acceptance of AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, in thesis writing as well as the factor influencing this possible acceptance. The findings revealed that the participants demonstrated a strong willingness to use ChatGPT in writing given that their attitudes were generally positive especially since they mainly perceived ChatGPT in terms of ease of use and not in relation to ethicality issues. It was also revealed that their past experiences with using AI tools affected their future endeavours in this regard in a rather positive way as they were deemed to facilitate their acceptance and use regardless of the ethical issues it may raise.

Echoing Zou and Huang's (2023) results, Ngo's (2023) study revealed that the participants held positive attitudes towards the use of AI tools in academic writing, perceiving it as a time-saving tool that offers easy access to information while providing customised tutoring and help in the production of ideas. Furthermore, Ngo's (2023) study disclosed certain challenges that pertain to citations, efficient language use, and assessment of source quality as reported by the participants. As potential solutions to these problems, the participants suggested the endorsement of guidelines that regulate the use of AI tools in academia, the promotion of academic integrity, and the constant verification of outputs provided by tools such as ChatGPT. Even though Ngo's (2023) results partially align of those of Zou and Huang's (2023) particularly in relation to the attitudes held by participants, and regardless of the relatively different ams of both studies, the former's study appears to be a lot more encompassing of divergent views that surround the use of AI tools.

Along similar lines, Ben Merabet (2024) conducted a study in which she sought to unveil EFL teachers' and students' familiarity and use of AI tools, particularly Quillbot, in MA dissertation writing. The findings disclosed a high familiarity from the part of students with AI tools and a teachers' awareness of that familiarity. The latter was accompanied by concerns about academic integrity and potential over-reliance on AI tools although their benefits were very well acknowledged by educators. Students also reported extensively using Quillbot as a paraphrasing and summarising tool that perceptibly saved time and energy and potentially allowed them to focus on the acquisition of more critical information.

Alberth (2023) inquired into the human-AI co-authorship of research papers and theses. Even though the inclusion of AI to assist in writing was perceived as a general contribution to academia, it still raised concerns around its ethicality especially in relation to the blurred boundaries that concern plagiarism. Additionally, Alberth (2023) emphasised the need for embedded regulations that take into consideration that potential of AI in education yet sets clear boundaries as to what is allowed and what is not. According to him, that should also be accompanied by evaluated assessment procedures that penalise the unauthorised use of AI tools. Despite the perceived extensive use of AI tools in dissertation and thesis writing in particular, research conducted in this area surprisingly remains poor.

3. Methodology

For the sake of answering the aforementioned questions, a qualitative research design has been deemed the most suitable for its objective is to capture the essence of individuals' experiences, behaviours, and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Since the current study primarily sought to explore the students' experiences and perspectives regarding the use of AI servers to write their master's dissertations, qualitative research seemed to be an obvious choice. A basic interpretative study was conducted, allowing for a smooth communication with the participants. Any type of observations would not have been possible given that the students had already used AI tools in the previous year and their presence in the department was merely for data collection purposes.

3.1. Setting and Participants

The study took place in a department of English at a university located in the eastern part of Algeria and involved graduates of English who finished their master's studies in the same setting. Ten students were purposefully selected for having extensively used AI tools in their dissertation-writing process. As they happened to be a group of the researchers' former students, contacting them did not appear to be an issue. One of the researchers obtained access to their previous year Facebook group with the help of a student, who can be described as a gatekeeper in this context, and privately contacted as many potential participants as she could. When the required number of students who admitted to using AI technology to generate

content for their dissertations was met, the participants' informed consent was obtained, and they signed a participant information sheet and a consent form ensuring their total anonymity as well as the confidentiality and privacy of the gathered data. Therefore, the names that are found in this paper are but aliases that were used to maintain a sense of individuality for participants and to ensure a narrative flow.

3.2. Procedures

The study made use of semi-structured interview sessions, each lasting between 1h30 and 2h00 in total, at 30-minute intervals to ensure the participants were at full energy during every interview session. Semi-structured interviews are favourable in terms of the in-depth understanding they offer the researchers with especially since they grant them an exploratory experience. The interview questions were primarily focused on participants' perspectives regarding their previous unsupervised and extensive use of AI tools, mainly ChatGPT, to write their dissertations. Even though the intention was to explore the use of AI tools in general, it was found out that all of the students relied on ChatGPT as it was practically the only AI bot available at the time they began writing their dissertations. The questions revolved around their motivations, perceptions of the ethical dilemmas that potentially accompanied their usage, and frequency and nature of use. Since the study was exploratory in nature, the participants were allowed ample time to reflect upon their experiences without being recurrently interrupted, and prompts were occasionally inserted. Upon the completion of all interview sessions with the participants, the interviews, which were recorded on two different devices in each session, were transcribed. Then, with the help of the NVivo software, thematic analysis was employed to ensure the coding, description, analysis and interpretation of participants' perspectives, and ultimately the generation of themes.

3.3. Trustworthiness and Positionality

To ensure the credibility of findings and interpretations, the researchers ensured that methodological transparency was a priority throughout every step of the research process. The researchers made use of member checking, as they made sure the findings and interpretations were shared with the participants themselves for verification. Therefore, the relevance and rightness of analysis was continuously bound by the feedback of participants. Additionally, peer review and consultation between the two researchers was constantly used to strengthen the study's ground and to corroborate their commitment to rigour. As one of the researchers happened to be a former teacher of the participants, their positionality in the field had a role to play in the research process. On the one hand, this positionality dictated the power relations between the researcher and participants, as most of them were eager to participate in the study and share their experience, particularly given the good rapport they had with the teacher in the previous years. On the other hand, the same relationship could have affected the findings. Notwithstanding the researchers' attempts to maintain objectivity, despite that not being the focal point of qualitative research, it was acknowledged that personal experiences could potentially affect the researcher's data collection and interpretation. To ensure that was not an issue, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to mitigate the impact of potential biases through their acknowledgement. The fact that the study was a collaborative effort of two researchers was also a leading factor in this mitigation, contributing to a nuanced understanding of students' motivations and perspectives regarding the use of AI tools in their dissertation-writing experiences.

4. Results

The analysis of semi-structured interviews yielded results that were thematically grouped into ethical considerations, time limitations, linguistic incompetence, lack of mentorship, unfamiliarity with dissertation writing, inaccuracy of AI detection tools, and enjoyment of the process. These themes are explored below:

4.1. Disclosure of Ethics in AI-Assisted Dissertations and the Plagiarism Paradox

This overarching theme is concerned with the apparent blurriness of ethicality and moral boundaries. The majority of participants expressed their unreserved opinions about the practicality of AI servers without considering that to be a form of academic theft or dishonesty since they were "technically not stealing anyone's work", in the words of Nour, a participant. A similar statement was made by Lina who said:

> I'm not plagiarising and I'm not stealing. It's literally no one's words. It's artificial by definition. I'm just asking ChatGPT for information and it's providing me with them, written and explained. So, why would I bother reading books or articles when it does the summarisation for me. I say work smart not hard.

Lina's understanding of academic integrity appears to be restricted by the idea of the lack of theft. Like many other students, in her opinion, the absence of theft somehow entailed the presence of ethics. After multiple interview sessions, it was still unclear whether the statements she made sprang from conviction, in the sense that she perceived ethicality in the absence of theft, or if she knowingly had no alternative explanation for the paradox entailed by the artificialness of the information she borrowed.

On the other hand, Jawad seemed to be fully aware of the difference, but decided to look at it from the perspective of choice:

> […] It's not entirely right because I didn't write it myself, I must say, but I didn't harm anyone in the process, and if I don't do it, I'll harm myself, so it's like ethical in a new sense. (Jawad)

Jawad's opinion appears to be an attempt to redefine ethicality. Although he did explain at the beginning that he was aware of the possible immorality of his doings, he eventually came to the realisation that his use of AI did not harm anyone, was not a form of plagiarism, based on the very definition of the term, and was actually necessary to him, for reasons that shall be elaborated upon later in this article. This reconsideration of ethics and what is typically entailed by them could be a coping mechanism employed by Jawad to escape the inconsistency between necessity and the traditional definition of morality.

A similar view was held by Akram, who, along the lines of what Lina said, stated that:

> The purpose of the literature review is to help me contextualise my findings and to report the previous findings to the reader. What's the point of reading and summarising if reading what AI says contextualises things for me and explains the previous findings to the reader or the examiner? I think that the whole idea of the literature review should change now because it has nothing to do with plagiarism. On the contrary, I think we're being creative.

Unlike Jawad, who sought to redefine ethics, Akram called for the redefinition of the purpose of the literature review so that it matches the developments of the modern world, which, in turn, indirectly breeds a call for the redefinition of ethics since, from his standpoint, the 'traditional' view of the literature review necessitates the involvement of the author in the writing process, but the 'modern' view does not. Therefore, condemning the use of AI servers

to write the literature review becomes pointless, which leads to Ramy's view concerning the idea that shared use of AI somewhat devalues immorality in its essence.

On this issue, Ramy said:

> Everyone's using it, not just me. In the past, riba [usury] was a taboo, but nowadays almost everybody does it. From using it to get electric appliances to buying a car or a house, or to exchange currency; it's been so normalised that frowning upon it makes you seem uncivilised. This also applies to using AI; everybody's making use of it so why not me. I'll stay behind if I don't. (Ramy)

According to Ramy, the collectivity of use condones its immorality. Regardless of the morality and correctness of the statement itself, it fundamentally speaks volume of the denotation of ethics according to Ramy. Not only does the perception of ethics seem to be indistinct, but it also appears to construct a sense of indifference as to what is ethical and what is not. Additionally, stating that Ramy would lag behind if he did not abide by group dynamics insinuates that competition and status outclassed academic integrity and morality. It is worth mentioning that the participants here were talking about complete reliance on AI to write entire parts of their dissertations, such as the literature review, and not mere assistance with thought or language, which is why the issue puts ethics at stake.

4.2. Time-pressured Dissertations and the Exploration of Quick Solutions with AI Writing Tools

The second theme has to do with time as a perceived constraint by the participants. Many participants reported being restricted by time since, in their opinion, a period of five to six months is insufficient for the completion of a decent master's dissertation. Jawad expressed this concern saying:

> We only started working on the dissertation in the second semester because the first semester was packed with exams and assignments. Like ain't nobody got time for the dissertation at all. ChatGPT saved me so much time and effort. If it weren't for it, I would still be struggling.

Along similar lines, Asma asserted:

> I was able to spend more time on more important things like the practical part. Students have partners to work with, so they usually split the sections, but in my case, ChatGPT was my partner and it helped me write the literature review section in no time.

Like other participants, Asma was pressured by time; she seemed to partly justify her use of AI tools by the fact that she was individually writing the dissertation and wanted to work on the methodology section more efficiently. Although this might falsely seem like a valid reason for the use of ChatGPT, it still was exaggerated and has gone against the purpose of the literature review in the first place, unless it was perceptually redefined in her opinion as explained in the previous subsection.

To further strengthen her point, on another occasion, Asma stated: "Nobody looks at the literature review anyway, so why waste my time". This appears to be a common view among the participants as several of them including Akram, Jawad, and Nour believed that examiners typically skipped through the literature review without giving it much importance. Therefore, the idea of spending time to write it became a vain attempt. When asked where they obtained that idea, the participants' answers varied between their supervisors and students who had previously graduated upon the completion of their dissertations. This was a common

misconception among not only the participants but many other students in the department to the point where the literature review was disparaged and not taken seriously.

Students also expressed their aspirations about a possible change in future plans about the master's degree. Regarding this issue, Farah stated:

> I'm not proud of it and I know it's seen as wrong by many people, but I'm not entirely the one to blame. Why don't they make us start working on the dissertation from the first year like when we're Master 1 students. That should give us time. I'm a perfectionist and that usually gives me a hard time since my work needs to be neat, but I can't do everything in a few months. They also give us an obscene amount of assignments so when am I expected to do it all?

Farah's point about assignments matches that of Jawad, except that Farah seemed to speak from a place of shame and guilt, while Jawad appeared to be unbothered about the exaggerated use of AI.

More importantly, the suggestion made by Farah about expanding the period of MA dissertation writing also seems to spring from a place of culpability. When I asked her why she had not started earlier since she wanted to, her response was that she was unaware of the fact that writing a dissertation would be that difficult and that she regretted not beginning and not contacting a supervisor any earlier. Farah appears to be torn between the guilt of not setting about writing the dissertation in her first year, and the perceptibly unavoidable regret of using ChatGPT to help her write her dissertation. Her lack of familiarity with dissertation writing and not contacting a supervisor shall be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

4.3. Manoeuvring Language Deficiencies by the Use of AI Assistance in Dissertation Writing

Students have also explicitly stated that their command of the English language was inadequate. This deficiency was translated into a factual struggle to meet the level expected of them in writing their dissertations. In this respect, Malak stated:

> To be honest with you, I don't think that my language skills would enable me to write a dissertation. There are students who can write very well, but I make a lot of mistakes and I didn't want my supervisor to think I was stupid especially since his other supervisees are smart and their English is very good.

Based on this statement, expressing the desire to produce accurate language does not seem to be the by-product of self-assessment alone. One of the main factors that appear to have contributed to using AI is a persona that Malak wanted to display. This persona seems to spring from concealed rivalry and self-doubt as per other statements that she made.

Along similar lines, in an attempt to justify her ultimate use of ChatGPT, Abir stated:

> I didn't use it at first and I was determined not to because I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, but my supervisor was not satisfied with anything that I wrote and she said that my writing was poor. So, I decided to use it in order to get it over with those comments, and the teacher didn't notice and even if she noticed; she didn't say anything.

Abir's statement raises two important issues. The first one has to do with her inability to produce accurate English, which, according to her, was the main reason why she used ChatGPT. This was particularly clear in the way the interview was held as she resorted to using Arabic on multiple occasions during the interview in an attempt to get her points through.

The second issue pertains to her supervisor either not noticing or not giving sufficient importance to the sudden change in her writing style. This was raised by a number of other students who expressed their belief that using AI servers served their supervisors' agendas so that they would not while away their time correcting unavoidable grammar errors or mistakes. The trustworthiness of this needs to be further investigated as it requires a separate research that targets advisors themselves, but whether it be true or not, the fact that students collectively made that assumption about their advisors demonstrates the level to which they were willing to drag their arguments in order to prove that their use of ChatGPT was justifiable.

Abir carried on to say that she mostly used ChatGPT to rephrase what she wrote and that the ideas themselves were hers. This was also expressed by Malak who stated: "I don't think this counts as plagiarism because the ideas are originally mine. I just wrote my ideas in my way and asked AI to correct and improve it." While the majority of participants reported almost entirely relying on AI to write their literature review chapters or to write their dissertations altogether, Malak and Abir's irreconcilable statements take the issue of ethicality discussed earlier to a different dimension, since not only does it blur the boundaries of the morality of students and advisors in like manner, but it also seems to call for the reappraisal of ethicality in writing. This is particularly critical since the use of AI tools is contemporary and has not been abundantly explored in contexts similar to the one under scrutiny yet.

4.4. The Perceived Invisibility of AI-Generated Content

Another common theme is that students seem to collectively assent to the idea that AI generated content cannot be reliably detected by the accessible online tools. There seems to be an illusion of invisibility among the students around the use of AI servers, which, in turn, contributes to promulgating the use of AI. Appertaining to this issue, Malak, reporting a statement made by one of her classmates in their group chat, demonstrated: "They don't have one accurate detector out there. It's not like they're going to check every single dissertation. They can't do [anything]", to which many students, including Malak, seemed to agree. Based on this statement, students seem to share the idea that they can get away with using AI to generate dissertation content. Moreover, they seem to seek and find comfort in knowing that using AI is not exclusive to them, and that alone should provide a rationale for the use of AI in case it was detected.

When asked if she was worried about getting caught, her response was: "I just took my chances, and even if they do catch me, it won't just be me. I have entire conversations of people confessing to using it. They can't take that away from everybody". Malak's fairly incendiary statement, although expressed jokingly, is proof of the gamble that students were willing to take due to their perceptions of limited surveillance as to AI generated dissertation content. In addition to the perceived teacher oversight, Malak seemed to firmly believe that the collective use of ChatGPT was by the majority of students is her getaway.

Similarly, Asma affirmed: "I don't think they will check, to be honest. My english has always been good so they won't doubt it. They may doubt other students who do it, but not me, because they know what I'm capable of". When asked why she still used AI even though she had sufficient command of the language, she reported being too busy analysing the data she collected through the assistance of AI tools. This relates to the point discussed above about the students undermining the literature review section. In addition, there is an apparent underestimation of examiners' discernment as of using AI tools and an overgeneralisation in terms of teachers' deliberate and unintentional oversight.

Students also seem to collectively fail to consider the possible consequences of unethically using AI if caught. This possibly springs from the fact that this was the first cohort to actively engage in AI-exploiting activities since the official launch of ChatGPT in November, 2022. Students have not formally been made aware of the outcomes since they were practically the first cohort to ever use it jointly in the department of English. Several students including Nour, Ramy, and Farah seemed to agree that that administration and teachers not only overlooked it, but also did not delineate the consequences if evidence were to be found that they used AI to a specific degree, which is possibly one of the main reasons why many students were imprudently using it.

4.5. Students as Dissertation Novices and the Illusion of Empowerment

As students came to explore uncharted dissertation territory, their lack of knowledge and experience appear to be among the most seemingly arguable reasons for AI use. The majority of students are considered to be novices since they possessed little to no previous knowledge about writing dissertations. In this regard, in order to justify her use of ChatGPT to obtain knowledge and to write the literature review and discussion, Abir stated:

> We had modules about methodology but it's nothing like writing a dissertation […] The methodology modules were too specific especially when we talked about the literature review. That was in our third year if I remember, how can I remember those details?

A common occurrence among students is that the knowledge they obtain has a short lifespan primarily because it is perceived as a means to an end and not as an end in itself.

Many students perceive whatever information that they receive at university as a vehicle for obtaining marks to eventually get hold of their diplomas. This seems to have led to a poor retention of knowledge as it is typically obliterated from their brains the second their exam is over. As a result, many of them seemingly leverage AI as a writing and dissertation knowledge assistant. This includes Abir whose justification appears to have been a consequence of complete convictions that using ChatGPT was her only way of obtaining her degree since she had very little memory left of how to write the dissertation.

While Abir did acknowledge the reception of knowledge apropos dissertation writing and partially blamed herself for failing to remember, Amir believed that it was entirely the "system's" fault. He asserted so by stating:

> […] We never had a single module that dealt with dissertation writing. To this day, I have no idea how I did it, but I did it with the help of ChatGPT and I'm proud of myself. They didn't teach us; they didn't tell us what to do. They just threw us into the pond and expected us to intrinsically be able to swim like ducklings.

What appears to be ambiguous is how Amir mentioned being proud of something that he did not entirely accomplish by himself. This relates to the idea discussed above about the blurriness of ethical boundaries among the participants. Amir's statement professedly implies a sense of absence of guilt especially since he avowed that using AI was his only way given his limited knowledge about dissertation writing. Placing the blame on the "system", as he chose to call it, is his way of rationalising what he did. Moreover, stating that he was proud of himself also implies a certain degree of empowerment. This also relates to a statement he made about not regretting using AI in the writing of his dissertation, which shall be elaborated upon in relation to another theme.

This idea was more directly expressed by Asma who stated: "I'm happy that I could rely on a ChatGPT. It made me feel safe knowing that I was not alone and that I had something to

rely on. Nobody's going to judge me because everybody's doing it". Students feel empowered by the use of AI despite their lack of experience and knowledge about dissertation writing. Based on Asma's statement, the empowerment comes from a place of perceived confidence. Not only does she appear to be confident in the knowledge that is effortlessly presented to her by ChatGPT, but also in the collective use of it, which seems to have constructed a sense of lack of shame and a certain confusion as to what exactly is discreditable.

4.6. The Lack of Guidance as a Trojan Horse for Leveraging AI Tools

Several participants attributed their purportedly inevitable use of AI tools to a perceived lack of supervision and guidance. Even though advisors customarily filled in administrative papers that proved that they had met their students at least twice a month, the quality of supervision itself was questioned by some participants. Regarding the quality of feedback, Amir said: "She only focused on the form, like APA and stuff. She never gave me feedback about the content or the quality of my analysis or even provided good quality resources. So, I had to ask ChatGPT to help me with that."

Along similar lines, Jawad stated:

> It was my only way of getting a good mark. I needed it in the outline, the grammar, the resources, the writing, the interpretation of data, and all. My supervisor only focused on APA and grammar, but she didn't correct me. She only gave me the mistakes.

Students appear to consider AI to be a compass in the alleged absence of guidance and supervision. Stating that he felt lost and unable to correct the mistakes pointed out by his advisor indicates a level of self-awareness as to what exactly Jawad was capable of, linguistically speaking. However, expecting the advisor to be responsible for all the details that he mentioned designates a blurriness in terms of the responsibilities expected of him.

By the same token, Malak stated:

> We lack supervision and guidance in writing dissertations. Our teacher had many supervisees and it was hard for her to give us her maximum. I think that students in the coming cohorts need more supervisors so that they can give their best to each one of them.

Malak did not criticise her former supervisor per se, but blamed the structure instead. According to her, the lack of supervision and guidance was accredited to the lack of supervisors which, in turn, goes back to the large number of students in each cohort. On another occasion, Malak also mentioned that she did not feel at ease with her supervisor because he was a male. She asserted that had her advisor been a female, she would have had the opportunity to ask more questions and have more discussions with her. This highlights the significance of the student-supervisor rapport in dissertation writing making it a lead reason in the resort to AI writing tools even though it was not addressed by the majority of students.

4.7. The Perceived Fun with Functionality

The idea that AI is excitingly futuristic was shared among a few participants. Akram, for instance, stated: "Using AI is fun and it's amazing what technology can do. I mean I never got to fully exploit it as a student, so this was my chance. The future cohorts will find homework so much easier". Akram's statement somewhat indicates that his use of AI tools did not spring from a place of need, but from a place of curiosity and exploration. Stating that that was his last chance to "exploit" AI insinuates a sense of not wanting to miss out especially that many students have actually been using AI to accomplish the slightest tasks given to them by their teachers. Using the term "exploit", in particular, indicates that Akram

tried to make full use of AI capacity, which potentially included resources, writing, the literature review, analysis, and so forth. This corroborates what he said in another interview session about not being selective in terms of what he used AI for.

Another point of view that pertained to this theme was expressed by Farah who stated:

> AI is so fun to use and it's very useful too. It's like not having to pay someone to do things for you and you won't need to write anything especially that our level is not that good. It's like a free fun pass.

This appears to validate an opinion that is typically held by teachers which is that many students are drawn towards the idea of passing with minimal effort. Farah did not show any uneasiness saying that AI did the job for her, which relates back to the point discussed earlier about the blurriness of moral boundaries. To Farah, and many other students, passing became a right, which seems to justify any means that they could use to achieve it. In addition, the point she made here also seems to corroborate what she stated on another occasion regarding AI "saving" her due to her dissertation knowledge and language deficiencies, which relates to the language impairments explored earlier in this paper.

Amir's statement about how glad he was about the lack of effort that he had put into the writing of his dissertation can also be translated in terms of "fun and functionality" as he said:

> […] I don't regret it […] not just because it made my life easier, but because it was an enjoyable experience. I had to constantly remind myself that I was not conversing with a human being. I mean, technically, it's the product of humans, but it developed so much and I found it mesmerising, helpful, and fun at the same time. Sometimes, I even asked questions about things I knew just for the fun of it.

This statement indicates that Amir's sense of empowerment, as examined earlier, was also tied to his enjoyment of the process. Describing the use of ChatGPT as "fun" and "mesmerising" depicts his motivation to use it for the sake of further exploring its capabilities. Therefore, the use of ChatGPT was not merely a way of achieving his academic goals, but also to indulge his curiosity and leisure pursuits.

5. Discussion

This paper aimed to explore the unreserved use of AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, by former students in the writing of their master's dissertations. It specifically sought to delve into their perceptions regarding the role of AI tools in academic writing, their motives for such use, as well as the potential ethicality measures and challenges encountered by them while so doing. Having thematically analysed the data obtained from interviewing ten participants who were purposefully selected for admitting to exploiting AI to write entire sections of their dissertations, seven intertwining themes emerged, the amalgamation of which provided answers to the research questions raised earlier in this paper. The first research question, particularly, is relatively answered throughout the themes themselves as they were categorised as the primary motives for the exaggerated use of AI tools in dissertation-writing.

The first theme addressed the most prominent motive, which had to do with the place of ethicality in the use of AI tools in the participants' dissertation writing. Even though it does not strictly appear to be a cause, it is fundamentally so due to the fact that the absence of ethical penitence seems to have partially paved the way for the participants to irresponsibly leverage ChatGPT to write whole sections of their dissertations. The majority of participants demonstrated a strong conviction of using AI tools without any apparent consideration of the morality issues that typically accompany such use. They appeared to constantly compare the use of AI servers to plagiarism in a "lesser of two evils" manner, which seems to have constructed a shield against any remorse that would possibly accompany their use especially

after combined with other motives that were elaborated upon earlier and that shall be further discussed below.

This finding also serves to provide an answer to the third research question which dealt with the potential ethical considerations and challenges the students possibly encountered while using ChatGPT. As previously indicated, morality did not appear to be an issue to the participants as most of them regarded the use of AI chatbots to be a prerequisite. Since necessity outweighed ethicality from their perspectives, as most of them reported being in "survival mode", it was rather understandable that they would contrast plagiarism to the use of AI tools to justify their apparent lack of ethical challenges. Therefore, the navigation of potential ethical concerns seems to have occurred in the form of denial over possibly admitting to deliberately overlooking the ethical concerns that arise from such unrestrained use. Aligning with the findings of Alexander et al. (2023), Mhlanga (2023), and Sallam (2023), it becomes fairly imperative that educational institutions pave the way for more translucency in terms of the proper use of AI technology particularly while taking ethical boundaries into consideration as the participants in the current study appear to seriously lack knowledge on what should be regarded as unethical in the first place.

Time was another prominent motive that the former students vigorously used to justify their insertion of AI generated content into their dissertations. It was found that they perceived AI tools as a solution to their time management issues that even served to lessen the pressure forced upon them by their inability to meet the demands of dissertation writing within a limited period of time. A number of participants indicated that they only began writing their dissertations in the second semester as they were too immersed into exam revision in the first semester, while some others made suggestions regarding the inclusion of the first year of their master's journey into the writing of their dissertations and even dedicating the entire second year to dissertation writing. It was noteworthy, however, that some participants who had this motive reported being cautious about the quality of their content and writing. It was indicated that working on the practical part of the dissertation was far more important than "merely reporting" what other researchers have done because that was where the contribution lied in their opinion. Since they were allegedly constrained by time, working on the practical part of their dissertations was bound by the use of AI tools as these granted them with enough time to ensure quality content by easing the process of reviewing the literature for them.

Additionally, the fact that the use of AI tools was constantly placed into a contrasting position with plagiarism also appeared to argue in favour of the former. The participants who solely wrote the theoretical and literature review parts using ChatGPT seemed to be convinced that their work was ethical and that their focus on the practical element of their dissertations could potentially justify the inclusion of AI generated content. While the participants' suggestions and concerns about time could be contextually understood, it can be argued that that had always been the case for all students even before the surfacing of generative AI. Pinning the blame on time for their inability to produce dissertations can be perceived as a failed attempt to disassociate themselves from their responsibilities, which is relatively accurate since the same cohort of participants has been labelled "Covid-19 students" among the teachers' community. With all the facilitations the students were granted, including their relatively conditioned ability to skip classes to even lowering the passing bar to 09/20 in some universities, it is hardly surprising that students would feel entitled to such convictions and acts, which also relates to their pseudo-empowerment as shall further be discussed.

Another notable theme is related to the students' linguistic deficiencies. Several participants exhibited awareness of the fact that their language abilities would not allow them to write decent dissertations, which is another motive for using generative AI. While some of

them resorted to the use of ChatGPT by themselves, others found themselves compelled to do so since the quality of their writing was not deemed acceptable by their advisors. This issue raised a pronounced concern that has to do with the teachers' deliberate overlooking of AI-generated content. This is further related to the perceived invisibility of AI-generated content, which is subsequently discussed below. Another quandary raised by these linguistic deficiencies is possible subjacent problems with the scientific structure itself, in the sense that it is quite contestable that students, who happen to be aware of their language impairments, were allowed to write dissertations in the first place and that they even managed to make it to this academic level to begin with. Not only does this put the scientific structure into question, but it also speaks volume of the level of students as this did not seem to be uncommon among them, nor was it even disclaimed in the slightest way possible.

Apropos the perceived transparency of AI-generated material, the analysis established that the former students held a common belief that there was little to no monitoring of AI use. The absence of regulations has proven to provide students with discretionary power with regard to their uncensored use of ChatGPT. The participants concerned were satisfied that the majority of available AI detecting engines were not well grounded and that they would risk the possibility of being exposed for their exposure would entail major fundamental flaws that were better left uncovered. This clearly also relates to the level of entitlement expressed above in relation to the motive of time. In addition, the students also seemed to hold the belief that their own supervisors had no interest in detecting AI-generated content. That is, not merely were the technical causes, such as the detectors, perceptibly unavailable, but so were the foundational intentions of advisors. It was believed that the teachers found it more efficient to review grammatically and semantically accurate content, and that examiners would not be able to utterly prove that AI was used to write certain parts of the dissertations especially when the remaining parts were so immaculately worked on to match the overall style of the dissertation. These misconceptions can plausibly be eradicated through rigid and well pronounced restrictions around the use of AI in academic writing, which corresponds with the findings of Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2023) who also recommended qualified guidance to both teachers and students around the proper use of generative AI in education. This was also addressed by Adiguzel, Kaya, and Cansu (2023) who advocated for the incorporation of open AI technology within the academic environment whilst fostering accountable application.

Some participants also expressed recognition of their lack of expertise and knowledge for when it came to dissertation writing, which is another reason why they opted for AI servers. This appeared to grant them a false sense of empowerment especially since they blamed teachers for not offering them with enough knowledge to write dissertations. This sense of empowerment appears to spring from their perceptions of having overcome academic writing, time management, and research challenges through the use of ChatGPT. Having AI do research for them particularly while attempting to review the related literature appears to have boosted their feeling of achievement especially since a few of them actually attributed AI productions to themselves for being the ones whose digital literacy allowed for such assistance to take place. Therefore, being dissertation novices did not get in the way of them writing good quality chapters, which seems to account for their feeling of liberation and belief in their abilities.

The main reason why that is described as "false" is that, practically, none of the participants addressed how that sense of capability was a result of them enhancing their dissertation writing knowledge or accelerating their research. They were merely praising the power of generative AI and claiming that as their own without actually specifically referring to how its use might have assisted in the generation of initial literature review summaries, for instance, or in the initial identification of patterns regarding their data analysis. Therefore, to

answer the second research question regarding students' perceptions of the role of AI systems in academic writing, the functions can rather be described as relatively shallow because they mostly served as a remedy for the challenges faced by the participants. AI is, thus, perceived more as a substitute for the their own intellectual work than as a tool to upgrade their writing and critical skills, as the majority of participants did not address how AI assisted in their linguistic or knowledge development to the most trivial extent, but mostly focused on how it helped them fulfil responsibilities.

This remedial effect can also be discerned at the level of the reported absence of direction and mentorship by advisors. A few participants indicated that they were forced to use ChatGPT due to the lack or misplacement of the guidance they received from their supervisors. Taking the participants' words for face value would have provided a solid ground to justify their use of AI technology had they properly used it. Nevertheless, the same participants who complained against their supervisors' help admitted to having ChatGPT fully write sections for them. That is, had they truly needed guidance, the way they used generative AI would have been entirely different. It is worth mentioning that is not to deny or argue against the fact that some advisors actually fail to provide guidance and support to their students, which remains an unfortunate reality for many students in many universities and specialties. However, in the particular context of the students involved in this study and whose reasons for exploiting AI included the absence of mentorship, this argument appears to carry depths of irresponsible use of AI tools even if it has a certain level of truth to it.

This also highlights the existent lack of training on how to properly and ethically use AI tools since the apparently mistaken use of it could potentially go back to the fact that students are inherently deficient in knowledge on how to appropriately use it. It also sheds light on the importance of the student-advisor rapport as it plays a pivotal role in the students' academic and perhaps even personal trajectories. Thus, even though the scope of this paper revolves around the unsupervised and unconditioned generative AI use, issues like the relationships between teachers and their supervisees should not go unnoticed especially since they can often be seen as leading causes in the resort to unethical tools such as academic theft and deliberate deviation from originality.

The last motive has to do with the participants' exploratory tendencies towards "tech marvels". Some of them reported leveraging ChatGPT not merely for operational efficiency but also for finding gratification in the process of dissertation writing. Typically, that gratification is obtained through achieving good results after making valuable effort when students experience the fulfilment of their endeavour. However, for students who would prefer achieving results with minimal effort, immersing themselves in the experience, experiencing a mere glimpse of the futuristic side of technology, and reviewing their digital literacy capabilities can be among the only ways to obtain a sense of accomplishment from the experience. Similar to most other motives, these explorations and experiences can be achieved through deliberate and supervised training on how to properly use AI tools.

Having examined the motives, it is important to review the remaining part of the first research question regarding the perceived benefits and challenges of using AI tools. It is rather evident that generative AI is mostly seen as an advantage by most participants. The findings demonstrated that the participants trivialised any perceived challenges they might have faced due to constant juxtapositions they made with the gains of AI-usage. Not only was it a way to execute tasks with minimal effort and utmost haste, but it also appears to have helped increase their confidence and provide them with an artificial sense of empowerment. The study uncovered a massive gap between how well-educated students are in relation to AI technologies and how much access they have to them.

6. Conclusion

Using a basic interpretative qualitative research design that employed semi-structured interviews, the study sought to reach the main aim which was embodied in the exploration of the motivations that seemingly drove former students of English to rely on AI technology in their dissertation writing process. Being a relatively contemporary area, the number of studies conducted around the use of AI tools has been extensively growing. However, most studies that had already been conducted were concerned with prior perceptions of use, plans for implementation, or views on efficacy. This paper provided a comprehensive analysis that delved into the graduates' perspectives and perceived motives and scrutinised their perceptions of ethicality apropos AI uncontrolled usage. It was revealed that AI was mainly perceived as a privilege since participants did not appear to consider its challenges especially since they had already obtained their degrees. It would have been possible to obtain different results had the study been conducted during the writing of their dissertations since the variable of stress could potentially affect their perceptions of challenges and responsibilities. Within the specific context of this study, AI-use was legibly more perceived by participants as a replacement for their effort than as a contribution to their hard work and critical endeavours. Moreover, as this usage was continuously contrasted with plagiarism, the participants did not appear to perceive AI use in the way they did to be unethical. Since it was inherently opposed to theft in their opinions especially since AI chatbots typically accompanied their literature review, they appeared to hold a blurred view of ethical consciousness.

The findings of the study impose an urgent, and certainly necessary, implementation of robust regulations that limit the unhinged use of AI tools in academic writing. It is an undeniable truth that generative AI can be of great assistance if used accurately and ethically by students; therefore, guidelines and restrictions that penalise substitutionary AI use must be created by educational institutions for the sake of mitigating the risks of it being used unethically and uncontrollably. It also seems to be imperative to raise the awareness of students and teachers alike about the use of AI in academia in order to maximise authenticity and inspire creativity. This can take place by delineating the risks and ethical boundaries, and by particularising how AI tools can be best benefitted from through training. Institutions can accede to paywalled and subscription-based websites that have been proven to accurately detect AI-produced content, and provide free access to teachers in order to facilitate the process of AI detection. By so doing, rather than being perceived as a substitute for their own academic and critical effort, AI may potentially be eventually seen as a writing assistant or a 'study buddy' that supports the learners' intellectual development, boosts their motivation, and realistically empowers them.

Although this paper provides in-depth insights of the perceived role of AI tools in the educational setting as well as the motivations of students for having extensively used it, it could be improved through the incorporation of triangulation by also obtaining the views of teachers about the same cohort of students in relation to their use of ChatGPT. In addition, the sample size was relatively small and restricted to one educational setting and one cohort of participants who had access to practically just one AI chatbot, which may affect the generalisability of findings, despite that not being the main concern of qualitative enquiry. Furthermore, a more thorough exploration of the long-term effects of such irresponsible AI use on writing and criticality skills can also benefited from. Future research could also make use of scrutinising the efficacy of integrating AI tools into the curriculum through experimental studies rather than ones that are exploratory or descriptive in nature.

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