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STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON THE USE AND THE ETHICAL
PRACTICES CONCERNING AI TOOLS IN ACADEMIC
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This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot in higher education has incited new questions about their role in academic writing and ethical practice. This study aims to explore students' reflections regarding the use of AI tools in academic writing and to examine students' awareness and practices related to the ethical and responsible use of AI tools in academic writing. Focusing on Malaysian undergraduates enrolled in an academic writing course, the study analysed 24 student-written reflections using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that students generally reflect AI tools as useful for enhancing writing productivity, overcoming writer's block, and improving grammar and clarity. However, many students also expressed concerns about overdependence on AI, reduced critical thinking, and loss of writing confidence. In terms of ethics, students demonstrated awareness of academic integrity, reporting practices such as validating AI-generated content, paraphrasing, and limiting reliance on AI outputs. Some also raised concerns about plagiarism, unoriginality, and misuse during online assessments. The study highlights a growing sense of responsibility among students but also points to the need for clearer institutional guidelines and more structured support. These findings contribute to the discussion on AI in education by offering insight into how students weigh the benefits and ethical challenges of AI-assisted writing, and call for targeted academic literacy initiatives and ethical training to support responsible and informed use of AI tools in higher education.

Keywords:

AI Tools, Academic Writing, Ethical Awareness, Student Reflections

Introduction

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in higher education has become increasingly prevalent, especially in academic writing. Such tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot are now widely accessible and are frequently utilised by students to assist with grammar correction, paraphrasing, vocabulary enhancement and idea generation (Kasneci, Becker, Sesin, Bannert, & Spinner, 2023; Ou, Stöhr, & Malmström, 2024). Given their struggle to manage multiple academic demands, these tools not only offer immediate but also often effective support, enabling undergraduates to improve the clarity, coherence and structure of their written work.

In Malaysia, the integration of digital technologies in education gained significant momentum during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning began to become the norm. Since then, many students have continued using AI tools to manage their academic workload, especially within courses that require extensive writing (Ramli, Mat, Tazijan, Zakaria, & Mahmud, 2025). Recent surveys suggest that more than half of students in higher education now engage with AI tools in some form (Zhai, Wibowo, & Li, 2024; Pallivathukal et al., 2024). While these tools offer significant benefits, their growing presence in academic settings has also prompted important discussions about ethical use. For instance, research has shown that although students often understand the concept of plagiarism, they may not fully comprehend how ethical writing is applied in real academic practice (Mat Yusoff, Mohamad Marzaini, Hao, Zainuddin, & Basal, 2025; Al-Shaibani, Mahfoodh, & Husain, 2016).

As AI tools become more embedded in the academic writing process, it is essential to examine how students perceive both the advantages and limitations of these tools. On the one hand, they are valued for productivity, language support, and idea generation. On the other, concerns have been raised about overdependence, authenticity of voice, and academic dishonesty (Hwang, Liao, Blodgett, Olteanu, & Trischler, 2025; Jacob, Tate, & Warschauer, 2024). In view of that, this study explores students' experiences in using AI tools in their writing. Furthermore, a clear understanding of how students engage with issues of authorship, authenticity, and responsible use is vital for informing institutional guidelines and teaching practices. In other words, with growing reliance on artificial intelligence among Malaysian undergraduates, this study aims to explore how students experience using these tools and how such tools are used with ethical awareness and responsibility. Accordingly, the study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore students' reflections regarding the use of AI tools in academic writing.
2. To examine students' awareness and practices related to ethical and responsible use of AI tools in academic writing.

Literature Review

Understanding Academic Ethics and Plagiarism

Academic writing is built on principles of originality, responsibility, and transparency. Plagiarism, which is using someone else's work without proper credit, is widely recognised as a serious violation of these principles. According to McCabe and Trevino (1993), students' understanding of ethical standards is influenced by both institutional norms and individual awareness. While policies and rules play a role, individual beliefs and past experiences also shape ethical behaviours. Childers and Bruton (2016) similarly emphasised that students who have not received adequate instruction in proper citation practices may engage in plagiarism unintentionally, highlighting the importance of pedagogical support in fostering ethical writing habits. This perspective can be situated within the Academic Integrity Framework, which emphasises honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility as guiding principles for academic conduct (Bretag, 2016).

Within the Malaysian educational context, research shows that although students are generally aware of plagiarism in theory, their actual writing practices do not always reflect that understanding. For instance, Husain (2016) found that while many students could define plagiarism, some continue to engage in ethically ambiguous writing practices, often due to insufficient training in citation and referencing. Likewise, Mat Yusoff et al. (2025) observed that students often equate plagiarism only with direct copying and may not fully understand more subtle forms such as inadequate paraphrasing or improper source integration. These findings highlight the need for more practical instruction on academic integrity, especially with constant evolution of writing technologies and practices.

Ethical Challenges in the Age of AI Tools

As digital tools and AI platforms become more integrated into writing tasks, the need to revisit students' understanding of ethics becomes more urgent. While institutions may provide general plagiarism policies, the reality of writing with AI assistance may present students with situations lacking clear ethical guidelines students may not be fully prepared to handle. Furthermore, students often express uncertainty over whether AI-generated text represents original work (Chiu, Gonda, & Macabeo, 2023). This tension can also be examined through the lens of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which highlights perceived usefulness and ease of use as drivers of technology adoption (Davis, 1989). In the context of AI, while students may recognise these benefits, ethical concerns can complicate their acceptance. Without clear institutional guidelines, such concerns push students to rely heavily on their own judgment, which varies significantly depending on their level of experience and academic maturity.

AI Tools as Writing Support

AI-powered tools like Grammarly, Quillbot, and ChatGPT have become prevalent in academic settings (Kasneci et al., 2023). These tools are used by students to fix grammatical errors, rephrase sentences, expand or shorten content, and overcome writer's block. For example, Grammarly provides grammar, punctuation, and clarity suggestions in real time, while Quillbot offers alternative wordings for more concise or fluent expression. ChatGPT, on the other hand, helps students brainstorm ideas, summarise readings, or even construct rough drafts when given prompts. These features can save time and boost writing confidence, particularly among students who struggle with language fluency or are unsure of how to organise their ideas

(Kasneci et al., 2023). Ou et al. (2024) described these tools as “assistants” that help students perform better without necessarily replacing the students’ own thinking.

Perceptions of Usefulness and Dependency

From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), AI tools function as mediating artefacts that scaffold learners’ performance. However, overdependence on such mediation may reduce opportunities for students to develop independent cognitive skills and authentic voices in writing. In this regard, the use of AI in writing is not without its challenges. While students may rely on these tools to improve quality, concerns have been raised about their overuse of and dependency on the tools. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2023) pointed out that some students may become too reliant on AI-generated suggestions which could potentially weaken their ability to develop ideas on their own. Furthermore, the lack of clear boundaries between assistance and authorship has incited ongoing debates about what counts as “original” work when AI is involved.

Related to these debates, recent studies have explored how students perceive the impact of AI tools on their writing confidence and creativity. For example, Hwang et al. (2025) found that while writers appreciated the efficiency of AI tools, they often felt that the generated content did not fully capture their personal voice, leading to concerns about authenticity in their work. Similarly, Draxler et al. (2024) observed that users of AI-generated text sometimes did not feel a sense of ownership over the content, despite presenting it as their own. This highlights a disengagement between the writer's intentions and the AI output. Jacob et al. (2024) further emphasised the challenges second-language writers face in maintaining their unique voice when collaborating with AI tools. These findings suggest that while AI tools can be beneficial, they may also make it harder for students to express their own ideas and feel a true sense of ownership over their academic writing.

Responsible Use and Institutional Response

In Malaysia, studies have shown that while students are enthusiastic about using AI tools, many are unsure about the ethical limits of such usage (Pallivathukal et al., 2024). To illustrate, some students use AI primarily for grammar and vocabulary, while others use it to generate content which raises concerns about authorship and integrity. As institutions begin to respond to the rise of AI in education, clear guidelines and proactive teaching will be needed to help students make ethical decisions. Given this responsibility, educators play a key role by embedding the responsible use of AI tools within broader academic literacy instruction. Embedding the responsible use of AI within institutional policies can be aligned with the Academic Integrity Framework, ensuring that new technologies are integrated without compromising core academic values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Bretag & Mahmud, 2015).

Although international literature on AI in education is expanding, few studies have specifically examined the Malaysian higher education context. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing presence of AI tools in local classrooms and academic work. Recent research by Mat Yusoff et al. (2025) analysed Malaysian students’ perceptions of AI in higher education and found a mix of optimism, curiosity, and uncertainty. Their findings indicate that while students generally acknowledge the usefulness of AI in academic tasks, many remain cautious due to unclear institutional policies and a lack of formal instruction on responsible usage.

Beyond the Malaysian context, systematic reviews such as the one by Zhai et al. (2024) reveal that excessive reliance on AI dialogue systems can weaken cognitive functions, especially critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and decision-making, particularly when students accept AI-generated content without questioning or evaluating it. Since Malaysia's academic environment increasingly incorporates these tools, understanding how students manage dependency alongside ethical awareness is crucial.

Past Studies on AI in Academic Writing

To provide a clearer overview of prior research, Table 1 summarises key studies that have examined students' perceptions, practices, and challenges in using AI tools for academic writing.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Past Studies on AI Tools in Academic Writing

Author(s) & Year	Context	Focus	Key Findings
Kasneci et al. (2023)	Global	Opportunities & challenges of ChatGPT in education	Students perceive AI tools as useful for support, but risk overdependence
Chiu et al. (2023)	Philippines	Ethical use of AI in education	Students uncertain about originality; rely on personal judgment
Mat Yusoff et al. (2025)	Malaysia	AI in higher education curricula	Students optimistic about AI but concerned over unclear guidelines
Hwang et al. (2025)	International	Authenticity in co-writing with AI	Writers noted AI content often lacked personal voice, raising authenticity concerns
Draxler et al. (2024)	Europe	Ownership of AI-generated text	Users sometimes presented AI text as their own despite lacking authorship feeling
Ramli et al. (2025)	Malaysia	ESL learners' strategies	Students valued AI for convenience but remained cautious of plagiarism
Jacob et al. (2024)	Second-language context	AI-assisted discourse	Second-language writers struggled to maintain their own voice

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore students' perceptions and ethical awareness in using AI tools to support academic writing. Data were collected through student-written reflections. This approach allowed students to express their views authentically, drawing from personal experience. The reflections were examined from an emic perspective, focusing on how students themselves make meaning of their practices, beliefs, and concerns regarding AI-assisted writing. This design is supported by Creswell and Poth (2018), who highlight the value of open-ended, narrative-based data in understanding lived experiences. Reflections, in particular, have been shown to offer insight into learners' attitudes and internal

processes (Ryan & Ryan, 2013), while an emic perspective helps researchers uncover meaning as constructed by participants themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The overall process followed four steps: (1) students were invited to complete a reflection task, (2) participation was voluntary, and 24 complete reflections were selected, (3) data were collected under clear ethical procedures, ensuring anonymity and informed consent, and (4) the reflections were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure.

Context and Participants

A total of 54 students enrolled in the English for Communicative Competence course were all invited to complete a written reflection as part of the class activity. However, only 24 student reflections were included in the analysis, based on voluntary participation and completeness of responses. This sample size was considered sufficient for a qualitative study of this nature, as depth of responses rather than breadth was the main priority (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Employing a thematic exploration (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018), the richness of the select students' written reflections provided sufficient depth to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights aligned with the research objectives.

All students had previously completed diploma-level education and had experiences with academic writing tasks. Their background made them suitable for this study, which sought to explore the reflections on the use and the ethical considerations among students who were actively engaged in academic writing tasks with the help and support of AI tools.

Data Collection

The students' reflections were submitted as part of a learning activity in class, with a clear explanation that participation in the research component was entirely voluntary. Students were also informed that their reflections could be included in the study anonymously and that no grades or evaluations would be influenced by their responses. Moreover, participants were reassured that the analysis would focus on the content of their reflections, specifically the ideas and themes emerged from their narratives. The study involved no risk or coercion and was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research within educational settings.

Data Analysis

Following the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and recurring ideas across the student reflections. This included familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identifying and refining themes, and reporting key insights supported by student excerpts. The coding was conducted manually, beginning with line-by-line analysis to capture recurring patterns, followed by grouping codes into categories and overarching themes. These themes were then reviewed for coherence, defined clearly, and supported with representative quotations from the reflections. The analysis focused on themes such as perceived usefulness of AI tools, challenges in maintaining originality, ethical considerations, and reflections on writing skills. By focusing on patterns of thought and experience, this method provided insight into how students navigate the use of AI in their academic writing and what it means to them personally.

Findings

Reflections on the use of AI Tools in Academic Writing

This section presents the combined findings related to students' reflections on the use of AI tools in academic writing, including how these tools are seen to support or hinder their writing abilities. Thematic analysis of 24 student reflections revealed five overarching themes: enhancing productivity, supporting idea generation, language improvement, cognitive concerns and overdependence, and writing confidence and skill ownership. Selected excerpts and literature are included to support each theme.

Enhancing Writing Productivity

Students commonly highlighted time-saving as a major benefit of AI-assisted writing, noting how these tools enhanced convenience and efficiency. One shared that AI "can be really helpful... because they save time," while another remarked that the ideas "just keep popping," reducing the effort required to complete assignments. These reflections suggest that convenience and speed are central to students' positive attitudes toward AI-assisted writing.

This aligns with findings by Kasneci et al. (2023) and Ou et al. (2024) who noted that AI tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT are perceived as time-saving aids that improve writing flow and task efficiency. As described in the literature, such tools offer real-time assistance that particularly benefits students navigating complex writing tasks (Kasneci et al., 2023).

Idea Generation and Creative Support

AI tools were also widely appreciated for their role in facilitating idea development, especially during early writing stages. Students used them to overcome writer's block, expand their thinking, or scaffold their creativity. One student explained, "[They] help generate ideas when I'm stuck," while another shared, "AI has given me a lot of ideas that I couldn't imagine or thought."

While some described AI as offering structured support that matured their ideas into clearer paragraphs, others still recognised the need for personal input. "It gives me a start, but I still have to work on the ideas further," one student reflected. These findings resonate with Ou et al. (2024) and Zainuddin, Bukhari, and Mohamad (2024), who described AI as an assistive tool that enhances creative thinking without replacing student agency.

Language and Clarity Support

Language-related support was another key benefit highlighted by students. AI tools like Grammarly and Quillbot were frequently used for grammar correction, sentence restructuring, and vocabulary enhancement. "I usually use Grammarly to fix any errors," one student shared. Another stated, "They help you prepare the structure for your writing... recommending methods to arrange ideas and sentences."

Students also reported that these tools contributed to their vocabulary development and comprehension, especially as second-language learners. One noted, "Sometimes I learn new words by using AI," while another commented that ChatGPT helped them understand difficult content. These findings align with previous studies (Kasneci et al., 2023; Zainuddin et al., 2024), which describe AI as offering real-time feedback that supports language development and writing clarity.

Cognitive Concerns and Overdependence

Despite the benefits, many students expressed concerns about becoming overly dependent on AI, leading to reduced cognitive engagement. Some shared that constant reliance on AI weakened their critical thinking and creativity. “Relying too much on AI might limit my own critical thinking and creativity,” one student wrote. Another added, “You totally relied on them to give the ideas or structure first.”

Several reflections revealed a growing awareness of how this overuse could diminish their learning outcomes. “At the end, when students need to sit for a test, they can’t do really well because they are always using and hoping the answer from the AI,” one student observed. Others admitted that writing became more passive, leading to concerns such as “my writing skills can go from bad to worse if I always use AI.”

These perspectives support the findings of Hwang et al. (2025) and Jacob et al. (2024), who cautioned that excessive dependence on AI may interfere with students’ development of independent writing and thinking skills.

Writing Confidence and Skill Ownership

In addition to concerns about cognitive engagement, students also reflected on the long-term impact of AI on their writing confidence and skill ownership. Some feared losing their voice and identity as writers. “Your assignment might be outstanding, but what about you? Do you gain something or lose everything?” one student questioned.

However, many also showed awareness and effort to balance support and autonomy. One student shared, “I only use AI for brainstorming, then validate and paraphrase everything,” while another explained, “Using AI helps me start, but I’ll do more research and refine it myself.” These efforts reflect students’ attempts to remain in control of their learning process and preserve their development as independent writers.

This theme echoes insights by Zhai et al. (2024) and Ramli et al. (2025), who noted that while students appreciate digital tools, many strive to regulate their use to retain authorship and continue developing their skills.

The main themes and representative excerpts from student reflections are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Supporting Evidence for RQ1

Theme	Subthemes	Supporting Evidence (Excerpts)
Enhancing Writing Productivity	Time-saving, efficiency, writing flow	“AI tools can be really helpful for academic writing because they save time.” “The ideas just keep popping, so I can finish my assignments faster.”
Idea Generation and Creative Support	Brainstorming, idea expansion, overcoming writer’s block	“They help generate ideas when I’m stuck and don’t know how to start.” “Sometimes AI gives me deep reasoning or ideas that I wouldn’t think of on my own.”

		“AI helps combine and mature my ideas into more structured paragraphs.”
Language and Clarity Support	Grammar correction, vocabulary, comprehension, structure	<p>“I usually use Grammarly to fix any errors in my writing.”</p> <p>“Sometimes I learn new words by using AI.”</p> <p>“They help me organise my ideas and improve how I structure my writing.”</p> <p>“ChatGPT helped me understand the coding from previous coder responses.”</p>
Cognitive Concerns and Overdependence	Loss of thinking skills, passive writing, lack of originality	<p>“Relying too much on AI might limit my own critical thinking and creativity.”</p> <p>“You totally rely on the tools to give you ideas and structure first.”</p> <p>“If everyone uses AI, then all the content will sound similar.”</p> <p>“Using AI sometimes makes students become lazier.”</p>
Writing Confidence and Skill Ownership	Declining confidence, control, long-term skill development	<p>“Sometimes I feel like my writing skills can go from bad to worse if I always use AI.”</p> <p>“Your assignment might be outstanding, but what about you? Do you gain something or lose everything?”</p> <p>“I only use AI for brainstorming, then I validate and paraphrase everything.”</p> <p>“AI helps me get started, but I still do the research and improve it myself.”</p>

Ethical and Responsible Practices Concerning AI Tools in Academic Writing

Analysis of student reflections revealed three main themes related to how students reflect and manage the ethical practices of using AI tools in academic writing. These include: responsible use through validation and paraphrasing, awareness of plagiarism and integrity risks, and ethical balance through self-regulation. Students demonstrated a range of strategies and reflections indicating both awareness of academic standards and personal responsibility.

Responsible Use through Validation and Paraphrasing

Many students expressed an active effort to ensure their use of AI tools remained ethical and responsible. A common strategy involved validating the accuracy of AI-generated content. One student wrote, “Should I need any help from AI, I still need to validate the source of the idea,” while another noted, “AI helps me start, but I’ll look for real references and facts to back it up.” These responses indicate students’ awareness that AI tools should be complemented with real academic sources.

This reflects earlier findings that students are often uncertain about the originality of AI-generated content and must rely on personal judgment in the absence of clear guidelines (Chiu et al., 2023). Students in this study appear to be navigating this uncertainty by cross-checking information and avoiding blind acceptance, which is a sign of ethical engagement.

Paraphrasing and rewriting AI outputs also emerged as a key practice. Students emphasised that they did not directly copy content from AI tools. “Even when I use ideas from AI, I always rewrite in my own words,” one reflected. Another explained, “I don’t copy-paste from AI - it helps me brainstorm, then I write the content myself.” Several also noted that while AI contributed to their productivity, they intentionally avoided full reliance. As one student stated, “Indeed, it helps with productivity, but I wouldn’t rely on it completely.”

These reflections align with earlier findings by Chiu et al. (2023), who stressed the importance of developing ethical awareness and responsible practices when using AI, particularly in the absence of clear institutional guidance or explicit training in citation and paraphrasing. This is especially relevant in the Malaysian context where Ramli et al. (2025) highlighted that students' ability to manage AI use responsibly is often shaped by their level of digital literacy and previous exposure to academic writing norms.

Awareness of Plagiarism and Integrity Risks

Students demonstrated a clear understanding of the ethical risks associated with AI use, particularly the potential for plagiarism. “AI content sometimes contains misinformation and also raises plagiarism risks,” one student commented. Others raised concerns about unoriginal content, especially when many students rely on the same tools: “There’s a risk that many people end up with similar responses if they all use the same tool.”

These concerns are consistent with local research, including Mat Yusoff et al. (2025) and Al-Shaibani et al. (2016), who observed that while students may be able to define plagiarism in theory, they often struggle with recognising more subtle forms such as excessive reliance on reworded or paraphrased material, especially when generated by AI.

Concerns about academic dishonesty were especially apparent in the context of assessments. One student wrote, “Students are likely to use AI tools during online tests, in other words, cheating,” while another added, “Some just copy the answer and submit it. That’s not real learning.” Students also perceived a loss of learning value when overusing AI. “If you always use AI to do your work, you won’t learn anything,” one reflected. Another observed, “During discussions, everyone’s answers are the same. It’s useless.”

These reflections further support Chiu et al. (2023) and Mat Yusoff et al. (2025) who emphasised that academic dishonesty involving AI is a growing concern, particularly in settings where institutional guidelines are still evolving. This highlights the need for clearer academic policies and student training that address both intent and impact.

Ethical Balance and Self-Regulation in AI Use

Beyond compliance with academic rules, many students expressed a desire to use AI tools ethically by maintaining ownership of their work. One student explained, “AI helps with brainstorming and structure, but I still do the writing.” Others highlighted similar views. For

example, one shared, “It gives me a start, but I finish the writing with my own research and voice.”

There was also evidence of personal commitment to learning and skill development. One student stated, “We must have a balance between technology and real life,” while another reflected, “I know I can use AI, but I want to keep improving my own skills too.” These responses show that many students are not only aware of ethical expectations but are also actively shaping their use of AI to remain in control of their learning and maintain their identity as independent writers.

These reflections align with existing research on academic integrity and plagiarism awareness. McCabe and Trevino (1993) and Childers and Bruton (2016) highlighted that students’ ethical behaviour is shaped by both institutional culture and personal understanding. In the Malaysian context, Husain (2016) and Pallivathukal et al. (2024) suggest that students may not always translate theoretical awareness into ethical practice. The reflections suggest that students are becoming increasingly aware of the ethical complexities involved in using AI, particularly when it comes to questions of originality and authorship. This point is also highlighted by Chiu et al. (2023) in their discussion of digital writing practices.

This form of self-regulation also reflects findings by Zainuddin et al. (2024) and Ramli et al., (2025) who reported that while Malaysian students are open to digital tools, they are also conscious of personal and academic boundaries. Their ability to reflect on usage choices demonstrates ethical literacy, which is a key component of responsible digital citizenship in higher education today.

Table 3 presents a summary of key themes and student excerpts related to their perceptions of academic integrity, responsible use, and originality when using AI tools in academic writing.

Table 3: Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Supporting Evidence for RQ2

Theme	Subthemes	Supporting Evidence (Revised Excerpts)
Responsible Use through Validation and Paraphrasing	Verifying AI content, paraphrasing outputs, avoiding full reliance	<p>“Should I need any help from AI, I still need to validate the source of the idea.”</p> <p>“Even when I use ideas from AI, I always rewrite in my own words.”</p> <p>“I use it only for grammar checking or when I’m stuck, not for the full content.”</p> <p>“Indeed, it helps with productivity, but I wouldn’t rely on it completely.”</p>
Awareness of Plagiarism and Integrity Risks	Plagiarism awareness, misuse in tests, loss of learning	<p>“AI content sometimes contains misinformation and also raises plagiarism risks.”</p> <p>“Using AI in tests is cheating.”</p> <p>“If you always use AI to do your work, you won’t learn anything.”</p>

Ethical Balance and Self-Regulation in AI Use	Using AI as support, not substitute; preserving authorship	<p>“During discussions, everyone’s answers are the same. It’s useless.”</p> <p>“AI helps with brainstorming and structure, but I still do the writing.”</p> <p>“It gives me a start, but I finish the writing with my own research and voice.”</p> <p>“I want to keep improving my own skills too.”</p> <p>“We must have a balance between technology and real life.”</p>
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Conclusion

This study explored how university students reflect their usage of AI tools in academic writing and examined their understanding as well as practices of ethical and responsible use of such tools. The objectives of the study were achieved, as the analysis provided insight into both students’ practical use of AI tools and their ethical awareness. Based on the thematic analysis of student reflections, the findings show that many students regard tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quillbot as valuable supports. More specifically, the tools help them improve writing efficiency, generate ideas, and clarify language. At the same time, students also expressed concerns about becoming too dependent on AI, describing how heavy reliance could lead to less deep thinking, weaker writing habits, and a growing doubt in their own abilities.

In addition to the practical benefits, students also showed a growing awareness of their ethical responsibilities when using AI. Many described how they actively checked AI-generated content for accuracy, rephrased suggestions in their own words, and made efforts to keep their work authentically their own. These practices reflect a thoughtful approach to using technology with integrity. Nevertheless, concerns about plagiarism, the temptation to misuse AI during assessments, and the risk of increasingly similar student writing indicates ongoing uncertainties. Without clear institutional guidance, students are left to handle these challenges on their own. This highlights the need for stronger support in digital literacy, meaningful academic integrity education, and opportunities for ethical reflection, especially in diverse, multilingual learning environments like Malaysia where digital tools are rapidly reshaping how students write and learn.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on AI integration in academic writing by providing insight into how students navigate the benefits and challenges of AI tools. It also reinforces the need for universities to establish clearer policies and embed AI ethics into academic literacy instruction. Future research could expand the scope to include perspectives from educators or policy-makers, examine AI usage across different academic disciplines, or explore longitudinal changes in students’ writing behaviour over time with the use of AI tools. As AI continues to evolve, ongoing reflection on how it reshapes academic practices will remain essential for both students and institutions.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on AI integration in academic writing by providing an emic perspective on how Malaysian undergraduates balance benefits and ethical concerns. The implications point to the importance of clear policies and embedding AI ethics into literacy instruction. While the reflections offered rich insights, the study was limited

by its small qualitative sample, and future research could expand to include larger cohorts, perspectives from educators, or longitudinal analysis of writing behaviour over time. As AI continues to evolve, ongoing reflection on how it reshapes academic practices will remain essential for both students and institutions.

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