Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Undergraduate Students' Independent Reasoning and Critical Thinking in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools on undergraduate students' independent reasoning and critical thinking in Ekiti State, Nigeria. A mixed-methods, cross-sectional design was adopted, involving 600 undergraduate students and 30 lecturers across selected universities. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined thematically. The findings reveal that AI tools are moderately but widely used by students for academic purposes, particularly in writing, idea generation, and organization of research tasks. While students perceive AI as beneficial in improving efficiency and academic output, a significant proportion reported that AI use discourages independent idea generation and reduces the development of original perspectives. Verification practices were inconsistent, and students expressed mixed views regarding the need for institutional policies. However, there was strong support for integrating critical thinking and AI literacy into academic curricula. The study concludes that AI serves as a valuable academic support tool but poses risks to independent reasoning when used uncritically. It recommends the development of institutional policies, integration of AI literacy into curricula, and promotion of critical thinking skills to ensure responsible AI use in higher education.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Critical Thinking, Academic Writing, Higher Education, Digital Literacy, Academic Integrity

INTRODUCTION

The rapid adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education has significantly reshaped student engagement with academic research and learning tasks. AI tools that support writing, editing, summarization, and research organization are increasingly utilized by students to enhance efficiency and improve the quality of their academic work. In Nigerian universities, particularly in Ekiti State, this trend has expanded in tandem with broader digital learning initiatives.

Despite these advantages, concerns have emerged regarding the implications of AI use for intellectual development, originality, and critical thinking. While AI-assisted outputs are often well-structured and linguistically refined, they may lack analytical depth, reflective engagement, and personal intellectual contribution. Excessive reliance on AI can reduce opportunities for independent reasoning, logical analysis, and the development of original perspectives, thereby challenging the core mission of higher education.

Higher education is fundamentally concerned with cultivating intellectual autonomy, creativity, and critical evaluation skills necessary for addressing complex societal and professional challenges. However, increasing dependence on AI-generated content, often with limited verification or critical engagement, risks undermining these core competencies. Lecturers have reported growing concerns about declining originality and reduced analytical depth in students' academic work, suggesting that AI tools are sometimes used as substitutes for intellectual effort rather than as supportive learning aids.

Historically, intellectual advancement has been driven by reflective inquiry and independent thought, as exemplified by scholars such as Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Obafemi Awolowo. The growing reliance on AI tools raises concerns about whether students are engaging in similar levels of critical reflection and

knowledge construction. While AI enhances efficiency, its uncritical use may weaken the cognitive processes essential for meaningful academic development.

Although discussions on AI in education have expanded, empirical evidence on its cognitive implications particularly within Nigerian universities and at the subnational level remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the extent of AI use among undergraduate students in Ekiti State and analyzing its implications for independent reasoning and critical thinking. The study aims to provide context-specific insights that can inform institutional policies and pedagogical strategies for responsible AI integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines existing literature on AI use in academic research and its implications for students' independent reasoning and critical thinking, highlighting both benefits and potential risks.

Artificial Intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot, have become widely adopted in Nigerian universities, particularly among undergraduates seeking assistance with writing and research tasks (Olowolafe & Ayodeji, 2023). These technologies enhance efficiency, reduce workload, and improve the clarity of assignments. However, studies indicate that excessive reliance on AI may undermine originality, critical engagement, and reflective thinking (Adegboyega & Alabi, 2023; Ajayi & Ogunyemi, 2022). Students who bypass drafting, ideation, or self-evaluation by depending heavily on AI risk engaging in "surface learning," prioritizing outputs over cognitive processes. Lecturers have similarly reported declining reasoning quality and uniformity in AI-assisted submissions (Adesina & Nwachukwu, 2023; Abubakar & Olayemi, 2023).

Globally, scholars caution that AI cannot replace deep reflective engagement essential for meaningful learning (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). Within Nigeria, AI use has been linked to reduced analytical depth, diminished intellectual voice, and inconsistent verification of content (Ajayi & Ogunyemi, 2022; Abubakar & Olayemi, 2023). While the literature emphasizes risks, limited empirical studies explore how students critically interact with AI outputs or verify their accuracy.

Generally, the literature supports a dual perspective: AI offers clear benefits in efficiency and academic support, yet uncritical or excessive use may compromise independent reasoning and critical thinking. This underscores the need for context-specific studies in Nigerian universities, particularly in Ekiti State, to examine how students engage with AI, usage its effects on cognitive processes, and the ethical and institutional considerations surrounding its use.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Sociocultural Theory, Cognitive Load Theory, and Social Learning Theory, which collectively explain how AI influences students' independent reasoning and critical evaluation in academic research.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes that learning is mediated through cultural tools, including technology. AI platforms function as such tools by structuring access to information, supporting knowledge construction, and facilitating collaborative learning. When used effectively, AI can enhance analytical thinking and academic discourse; however, overreliance may reduce active engagement, limiting critical reflection and independent thought (Olatunji, 2023; Adebayo & Okeke, 2024).

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller et al., 2019) highlights how AI affects mental processing. By reducing extraneous cognitive load, AI allows students to focus on higher-order tasks. Yet, excessive dependence can encourage cognitive offloading, where learners accept AI-generated solutions without critical evaluation, weakening problem-solving and analytical skills (UNESCO, 2023; Adeyemi & Yusuf, 2024).

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains the influence of peer behavior on AI use. Students often emulate AI practices perceived as successful, promoting digital literacy but potentially normalizing uncritical reliance and reducing originality (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Okafor & Nwankwo, 2024).

Together, these theories frame AI as a mediating tool, a cognitive aid, and a socially reinforced practice. Proper use can enhance learning efficiency, access to knowledge, and critical digital competencies, while overdependence may diminish cognitive engagement, critical evaluation, and independent reasoning. This framework underscores the need for balanced AI integration that promotes both technological efficiency and sustained intellectual rigor.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of AI's impact on undergraduate students' independent reasoning and critical thinking.

Participants:

Students: 600 undergraduates (200 from each of three universities) across six faculties.

Lecturers: 30 purposively selected lecturers (10 per university) teaching research-oriented courses.

Data Collection:

Quantitative: Structured questionnaires captured information on the frequency and purpose of AI use, verification practices, and students' perceptions of its effects.

Qualitative: In-depth interviews with lecturers explored ethical considerations, pedagogical concerns, and observations on students' engagement with AI.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency tables and percentages, with comparisons across departments to identify patterns and variations.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, integrating lecturers' insights to complement and explain quantitative findings.

This methodology ensured a comprehensive, context-specific understanding of AI use in undergraduate academic research in Ekiti State, balancing statistical evidence with qualitative insights for richer interpretation.

Data Presentation And Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 600)

Characteristic	Category / Department	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–20	136	22.7
	21–24	164	27.3
	25–27	120	20.0
	28–30	126	21.0
Sex	Male	252	44.4
	Female	316	55.6
Faculty & Department	Sociology	100	16.7
	Political Science	100	16.7
	Business Administration	100	16.7
	Public Administration	100	16.7
	Education Management	50	8.3
	Social Science Education	150	25.0
Total	—	600	100.0
Source: Field Work, 2025			

Table 2: Regular Use of AI Tools by Department (N = 598–600; 2 missing responses)

Department	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Sociology	19 (18.3%)	22 (21.2%)	18 (17.3%)	19 (18.3%)	22 (21.2%)	100
Political Science	16 (16%)	24 (24%)	20 (20%)	20 (20%)	20 (20%)	100
Business Administration	21 (21%)	25 (25%)	19 (19%)	18 (18%)	17 (17%)	100
Public Administration	18 (18%)	22 (22%)	20 (20%)	21 (21%)	19 (19%)	100
Education Management	21 (21%)	26 (26%)	15 (15%)	20 (20%)	18 (18%)	100
Social Science Education	20 (20.4%)	25 (25.5%)	15 (15.3%)	21 (21.4%)	17 (17.3%)	98*

Source: Field work 2025.

Note: 2 respondents did not answer all items in Social Science Education.

Interpretation.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 600 undergraduate respondents. The largest age group was 21–24 years (27.3%), followed by 18–20 years (22.7%), 28–30 years (21.0%), and 25–27 years (20.0%), indicating a predominance of students at a mid-level stage of academic maturity. Female students slightly outnumbered males, comprising 55.6% of the sample, while males accounted for 44.4%, reflecting a relatively balanced gender distribution.

In terms of faculty representation, participants were drawn from diverse academic backgrounds, with equal representation from Sociology, Political Science, Business Administration, and Public Administration (16.7% each). Social Science Education contributed the largest subgroup (25.0%), while Education Management accounted for 8.3% of respondents. This distribution ensures that the study findings reflect perspectives across different disciplines and levels of research exposure.

Table 3: AI Tools Discourage Original Idea Generation (N = 600)

Department	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Business Administration	15 (15%)	14 (14%)	22 (22%)	18 (18%)	31 (31%)	100
Public Administration	17 (17%)	17 (17%)	18 (18%)	18 (18%)	30 (30%)	100
Sociology	26 (26%)	13 (13%)	20 (20%)	21 (21%)	20 (20%)	100
Political Science	26 (26%)	14 (14%)	19 (19%)	24 (24%)	17 (17%)	100
Education Management	18 (18%)	20 (20%)	15 (15%)	22 (22%)	25 (25%)	100
Social Science Education	20 (20%)	18 (18%)	18 (18%)	19 (19%)	25 (25%)	100

Source: Field work 2025.

AI Tools and Original Idea Generation

Table 3 presents students' perceptions of whether AI tools discourage the generation of original ideas across six departments (N = 600). Overall, a substantial proportion of students indicated that AI may limit their creative thinking. For example, in Business Administration, 49% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AI tools discourage their own idea generation, compared to 29% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 22% remaining neutral.

Similar patterns were observed in Public Administration (48% agreement vs. 34% disagreement) and Education Management (47% agreement vs. 38% disagreement). In Social Science departments such as Sociology and Political Science, responses were more evenly distributed, suggesting mixed perceptions among students regarding AI's impact on originality.

These findings highlight a notable concern among undergraduates that AI tools could reduce independent ideation, although opinions vary by discipline.

Table 4: Academic Policies Should Guide AI Use (Objective iv; N = 540)

Department	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Sociology	22 (24.4%)	20 (22.2%)	18 (20.0%)	16 (17.8%)	14 (15.6%)	90
Political Science	20 (22.2%)	21 (23.3%)	19 (21.1%)	16 (17.8%)	14 (15.6%)	90
Business Administration	19 (21.1%)	18 (20.0%)	17 (18.9%)	18 (20.0%)	18 (20.0%)	90
Public Administration	18 (20.0%)	19 (21.1%)	18 (20.0%)	17 (18.9%)	18 (20.0%)	90
Educational Management	17 (18.9%)	19 (21.1%)	17 (18.9%)	18 (20.0%)	19 (21.1%)	90
Social Science Education	18 (20.0%)	19 (21.1%)	18 (20.0%)	17 (18.9%)	18 (20.0%)	90

Source: Field work 2025.

Interpretation.

Table 4 presents undergraduate students' perceptions regarding the need for academic policies to guide AI use across six departments (N = 540). Overall, responses were relatively evenly distributed across the five categories, reflecting both support and caution regarding formal policy implementation.

For instance, in Business Administration, 40% of students agreed or strongly agreed that AI use should be guided by academic policies, closely matched by 41% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 18.9% remaining neutral. Similar balanced patterns were observed across other departments, including Public Administration (39.9% agreement vs. 41.1% disagreement) and Educational Management (41.1% agreement vs. 39.9% disagreement).

These findings suggest a moderate consensus on the importance of institutional guidance, with students recognizing the potential benefits of AI in research while also acknowledging ethical and academic integrity concerns. The relatively high proportion of neutral responses further indicates that some students remain uncertain about the scope and nature of such policies.

Table 5: Integration of Critical Thinking into Curriculum alongside AI Use (N = 599; 1 missing response)

Department	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Sociology	14 (14%)	16 (16%)	18 (18%)	24 (24%)	28 (28%)	100
Political Science	12 (12%)	18 (18%)	20 (20%)	26 (26%)	24 (24%)	100
Business Administration	10 (10%)	14 (14%)	22 (22%)	26 (26%)	28 (28%)	100
Public Administration	12 (12%)	16 (16%)	20 (20%)	28 (28%)	24 (24%)	100
Educational Management	14 (14%)	18 (18%)	18 (18%)	26 (26%)	24 (24%)	100
Social Science Education	12 (12%)	16 (16%)	22 (22%)	24 (24%)	26 (26%)	99*

Source: Field Work 2025

Interpretation.

Table 5 illustrates students' perceptions regarding the inclusion of critical thinking skills in the curriculum alongside AI use (N = 599). Overall, a majority of students across departments supported integrating critical thinking, with combined agreement (Agree + Strongly Agree) ranging from 50% to 56%. For example, in Sociology, 52% of students agreed or strongly agreed, while 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 18% were neutral. Business Administration showed similar trends, with 54% in agreement, 24% in disagreement, and 22% neutral. Social Science Education had one missing response, but the pattern remained consistent, with 50% agreement and 28% disagreement.

These results indicate strong student recognition of the importance of balancing AI use with cognitive skill development, highlighting the demand for curricula that foster critical thinking alongside technological proficiency. The notable neutral responses suggest that some students are uncertain about the practical implementation of such curricular integration.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data from 30 lecturers provide important context for interpreting the study's findings, reinforcing and extending the quantitative results. Lecturers confirmed that AI use among undergraduate students is widespread and increasingly embedded in academic activities. Students rely on AI for idea generation, essay writing, and content organization. However, many lecturers expressed concern that AI is often used as a substitute for independent effort rather than as a supportive learning tool.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings integrate both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on undergraduate students' independent reasoning and critical thinking.

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of the 600 respondents revealed that the largest age group was 21–24 years (27.3%), followed by 18–20 years (22.7%), 28–30 years (21.0%), and 25–27 years (20.0%). Female respondents slightly outnumbered males, comprising 55.6% of the sample. Faculty representation was diverse, with Social Science Education contributing the largest proportion (25%) and Education Management the smallest (8.3%). This distribution indicates a mid-level stage of academic maturity among participants, which may influence both familiarity with AI tools and the depth of critical engagement. These patterns align with previous studies indicating that academic experience shapes AI adoption and engagement (Olowolafe & Ayodeji, 2023; Ajayi & Ogunyemi, 2022).

Regarding AI usage, approximately 39–41% of students reported regular use of AI tools, while 37–39% disagreed, with minor missing responses. This demonstrates a moderate level of adoption, suggesting that students engage selectively with AI depending on task requirements. Neutral responses indicate that some students approach AI tools cautiously, recognizing their potential to enhance efficiency without fully replacing critical cognitive effort. These findings support Floridi and Chiriatti (2020), who note that AI serves as a complement rather than a substitute for reflective academic engagement.

With respect to original idea generation, 47–49% of students agreed that AI tools discourage the development of personal perspectives, while 34–38% disagreed, and 18–22% remained neutral. Discipline-specific variations were observed, with Sociology and Political Science showing more balanced perceptions. These results suggest that AI may limit independent reasoning and creativity when used uncritically, corroborating previous findings that excessive reliance on AI promotes surface learning and reduces engagement in ideation and self-evaluation (Adegboyega & Alabi, 2023; Ajayi & Ogunyemi, 2022).

Students' perceptions of the need for academic policies to guide AI use were evenly distributed, with roughly 40% in agreement and 41% in disagreement, while 19% were neutral. This reflects moderate awareness of both the benefits and ethical risks associated with AI use. The high proportion of neutral responses indicates uncertainty regarding policy implementation, underscoring the need for clearer institutional guidance (Abubakar & Olayemi, 2023).

Concerning the integration of critical thinking into curricula alongside AI use, 50–56% of students agreed or strongly agreed that such integration is necessary. This indicates strong recognition of the need to balance technological proficiency with cognitive skill development, reinforcing the argument that effective AI integration should be accompanied by structured reflection and analytical engagement (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Ajayi & Ogunyemi, 2022).

Qualitative data from the 30 lecturers provided complementary insights, confirming that AI use is widespread and increasingly embedded in academic practices. Lecturers noted that students rely on AI for idea generation, essay writing, and content organization, sometimes substituting AI for independent effort. One lecturer observed, "Most students now start and finish their assignments with AI tools, with very little personal input," highlighting concerns about originality and analytical depth. Recurring textual uniformity in assignments further indicated that AI may discourage independent thinking.

Ethical concerns were also emphasized by lecturers, who noted that students often fail to recognize the boundaries of responsible AI use. As one participant remarked, "Students do not see using AI as misconduct, but in many cases, it borders on plagiarism," highlighting gaps in understanding academic integrity. Lecturers strongly advocated for institutional policies and structured interventions, including clear guidelines and workshops to teach responsible AI use. At the same time, they acknowledged that AI offers benefits in improving clarity, organization, and presentation, provided it complements rather than replaces student effort.

Lastly, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that while AI serves as a valuable academic support tool, uncritical use may undermine originality, critical thinking, and ethical awareness. Patterns vary across disciplines, but the need for balanced engagement, policy guidance, and curriculum integration is consistent. These findings emphasize that responsible AI adoption must be accompanied by pedagogical strategies that preserve independent reasoning and analytical rigor in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored undergraduate students' use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, their perceived influence on critical thinking and originality, and associated ethical and institutional considerations. Findings indicate moderate yet widespread adoption, selective engagement, and awareness of the need for policies and curricular integration to foster independent reasoning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum Design: Integrate critical thinking and AI literacy courses to guide responsible use of AI tools.
2. Institutional Policy: Universities should develop clear guidelines for ethical AI use in research and assignments.
3. Faculty Training: Educators should be trained to detect AI-assisted outputs and guide students in critical evaluation.
4. Student Awareness: Workshops should highlight risks of over-reliance on AI and promote verification and original thinking.
5. Future Research: Examine longitudinal effects of AI use on academic performance and cognitive skills.
6. A balanced approach combining AI integration, critical thinking, and institutional policy is essential to maximize benefits while mitigating risks.

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