

AN ASSESSMENT OF CHATGPT USE AMONG FIRST-SEMESTER COLLEGE STUDENTS

EVALUACIÓN DEL USO DE ChatGPT EN ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS DE PRIMER SEMESTRE

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Abstract-- This study evaluated the use, perceptions, and academic impact of ChatGPT among forty-four first-semester college students using a positivist quantitative approach. These results showed an overall low-to-moderate adoption profile consisting of limited knowledge and mostly expressive rather than academic use. The majority of academic uses included text translation and understanding content presented in class, indicating that students primarily use the tool for lower-order cognitive tasks. However, even with this early use of generative artificial intelligence, we observe significant ethical scrutiny through the lens of educational integrity from participating students expressing critical reflection. As for the downside, distraction while studying and an unwillingness to do their share were among the top issues identified, with low scores for performance decrease. To conclude, the major transition to and workload of higher learning lauds a time where adaptability and vulnerability is arguably at its peak. Consequently, explicitly pedagogic strategies and digital literacy programs should be a focus in the first years of higher education, as they have shown to foster critical skills, above all original thinking and an ethical, responsible and educational use of these technologies.

Keywords-- Academic adaptation, ChatGPT, Higher education, Academic integrity, Artificial intelligence.

Abstract-- Este estudio cuantitativo analizó un total de cuarenta y cuatro estudiantes del primer semestre para comprender el uso, las percepciones y el impacto académico de ChatGPT. El análisis reveló un uso predominantemente moderado a bajo (conocimiento y uso ocasional), principalmente para fines personales. Los casos de uso más citados fueron la traducción y la comprensión, que probablemente sean tareas simples de realizar a nivel cognitivo. Se plantearon preocupaciones sobre la integridad académica por parte de los participantes. Señalaron la distracción y la disminución del trato personal entre los aspectos negativos, mientras que la reducción del rendimiento fue mínima. Finalmente, el ingreso reciente a la educación superior contextualiza un período de transición importante y de alto riesgo. Por esta razón, es urgente que, en las instituciones de educación superior, que son responsables desde hace algún tiempo de forzar la exhibición y el uso de estas herramientas junto con su comunidad, incluyendo metodologías pedagógicas específicas desde el primer ciclo escolar para promover un aprendizaje crítico y una imaginación original con una enseñanza ética y responsable para un mejor uso con fines educativos.

Keywords-- Adaptación académica, ChatGPT, Educación superior, Integridad académica, Inteligencia artificial.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the advent and consolidation of generative artificial intelligence has completely reshaped the higher education landscape. In particular, recently released ChatGPT—an OpenAI language model, publicly available since November 2022 has had a disruptive impact on university academic environments and provoked expectations and questions about its teaching/learning use as well as pedagogical, ethical and evaluation ramifications. This tool embodies an opportunity for support with academic adaptation and integrity but also a risk to the development of fundamental competencies — critical thinking, academic writing, intellectual autonomy for students transitioning into their first semester at college. This research assesses the implementation, perceptions and effects of ChatGPT on this particular cohort within the university community, providing empirical data to guide evidence-based decision-making at both institutional and pedagogical level.

International Background

From an international perspective, the use of ChatGPT in university settings has been the subject of numerous studies documenting both its benefits and risks. Below, we present the most relevant findings identified in the international scientific literature.

Ngo (2023) conducted pioneering research with 200 university students in Vietnam, combining online surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore perceptions regarding the use of ChatGPT in learning. The results revealed that, in general, students have a favorable attitude toward the tool, valuing its ability to support academic tasks, although they also acknowledge barriers related to the reliability of information and ethical implications. This study was one of the first to provide systematic empirical evidence on student perceptions of ChatGPT in the university educational setting.

Ravšelj et al. (2025) conducted one of the most extensive studies to date on students' perceptions of ChatGPT in higher education, with a multinational sample involving universities from multiple countries and continents. Their results show that student attitudes towards this technology differ widely according to cultural context, discipline, and prior exposure getting experience of artificial intelligence tools so their recommendations therefore stress that any strategies or institutional policies around the use of AI need to be contextualized.

Li et al. (2024) performed a scoping review of ethical issues related to the application of ChatGPT in higher education literature written in English, Chinese and Japanese. They found that the key issues were with regards to academic integrity, reshaping assessments and data privacy. Their findings highlight the need for empirical studies that will help to build institutional policies governing the responsible use of generative AI in university classrooms.

Nemt-allah et al. (2024) developed and validated a scale to measure ChatGPT use among graduate students offering a tool with sound psychometric properties for future research in the space. The results indicate that the swift commercial uptake of ChatGPT by academic staff leads to valid concerns about dependence on AI-generated content, originality, and integrity in scientific knowledge production.

Dogaru et al. (2025) gap on perception of ChatGPT's influence in academic learning, finding that while personalized learning is enabled by ChatGPT, its overuse indicates a reliance on technology and may hamper proper academic citation practices. The study calls for institutional policy around AI literacy to inspire critical thinking and academic integrity in the context of technology.

At Australian universities, Sullivan, Kelly and McLaughlan (2023) explored what ChatGPT means for academic integrity and student learning. Their results suggest that the tool contradicts age-old ways of assessing students, and recommend that universities rethink how they evaluate learning since more complex tasks that we engage at university are not ideal for generative AI style completion.

Latin American Context

Academic studies on the use of ChatGPT at universities in Latin America have been highly inclusive since 2023, taking into account the unique sociocultural, technological and institutional contexts specific to the region.

García Sánchez (2023) researched the experience and perception of higher education students in Mexico on the use of ChatGPT. The findings revealed that students utilize the tool as an extra resource in their academic tasks — most of which are fact-finding and text-generating in nature — but express uncertainty about the accuracy and reliability of generated texts. In this sense, it presupposes the most basic work in the Mexican context on how generative AI affects academic practices in university spaces.

In line with this direction, Morales Caluña and Cervantes Díaz (2024) examined the perception and use of ChatGPT among Ecuadorian university students through Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to uncover behavioral patterns. They confirmed strong student interest in employing ChatGPT for

academic purposes, but described a significant hesitancy among students to admit that they were even using it. The study demonstrates that the motivation to use this tool transcends demographics including gender.

A recent study by Diaz-Leon and Iraola-Real (2024), investigated the actual use and intention to use ChatGPT among Peruvian university students, providing empirical data in a Latin America setting where little research has been conducted combined with low prior activity on the issue. The findings indicate that the use of ChatGPT has progressively increased within higher education contexts in Peru, and factors such as perceived usefulness and ease of use predict significant intention to continue using the tool for academic uses.

In a phenomenological qualitative study, Loayza-Maturrano (2024) explored the use of ChatGPT in academic writing by university students in Lima (Peru), collecting data via semi-structured interviews with faculty members, students and experts. Their findings show that, although the tool may help improve fluency and textual structure in academic writing, unsupervised use undermines the cultivation of communication skills that are fundamental to a university education.

Soto Ortiz and Reyes Flores (2024) conducted research in Mexico aimed at describing university students' perceptions of ChatGPT use, considering both its positive aspects—time optimization, support in completing assignments, and perceived improvement in academic performance—and negative aspects, notably the risk of dependency and the inhibition of critical and creative thinking.

Horizontes (2025) published a quasi-experimental study conducted with 236 incoming students at the School of Engineering of a public university in Lima, Peru, during the year 2024. The study evaluated the impact of ChatGPT use on first-year university students, concluding that, although the freshmen already had prior knowledge of the tool, a specific training intervention significantly increased their responsible academic use of it and their information literacy skills. It highlights the importance of specifically studying first-year students, who represent the group most vulnerable to the unregulated use of AI.

Study Objective

The overall objective of this study is to evaluate the use, perceptions, and academic impact of ChatGPT on first-semester college students, identifying patterns of use, attitudes toward the tool, and its potential

effects on academic performance, integrity in assessments, and the development of competencies specific to higher education.

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study is grounded in four fundamental dimensions: theoretical, practical, social, and institutional.

Theoretically, the research provides new insights into the role of generative artificial intelligence technologies in higher education - a very dynamic field with many empirical gaps to fill and particularly for students early in their university career. The literature review indicates that most of the published studies to date have focused on advanced-level or graduate students, and failed to attend to the experiences of first-year students, who are at a stage in their academic careers where they are forming crucial academic habits..

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this research will offer empirical evidence to higher education institutions on policies for the responsible use of ChatGPT, new assessment practices that reinforce critical thinking skills and artificial intelligence literacy programs focused on first year students.

At the same time, on a social front, ChatGPT access and proficiency among adolescence demand immediate consideration around equity in education, as students utilizing this tool differently may widen or narrow performance gaps. In order to provide a top-notch, equitable university experience, it is important to understand how first-semester college students (a time of high vulnerability and adjustment) use such technology.

Third, from the institutional perspective, universities must update their regulatory and pedestrian frameworks to be able to catch up with an emergence of generative AI. This study gives local evidence that can help higher education institutes find a balance between readiness for technological change, preservation of academic integrity standards and enhancement of core competencies in universities.

Study Limitations

Like any research effort, this study acknowledges the existence of limitations that frame the scope and interpretation of its results:

- Social desirability bias. Given that the use of ChatGPT may be perceived as questionable in terms of academic integrity, there is a possibility that participants may tend to underestimate the frequency or actual purposes of its use, affecting the validity of self-reports.

- Temporal scope. The academic period which this study goes with is limited. As ChatGPT rapidly continues to evolve technologically, the implications for institutional and student attitudes may lead to this being a short-lived finding.
- Contextual specificity. The findings generated cannot possibly generalise to other higher education Institutions with different socio-economic, cultural or pedagogical profiles from the one in which this research took place.

DEVELOPMENT

Research Paradigm

This study is framed within the positivist paradigm, which conceives of reality as objective, measurable, and capable of being understood through empirical methods and systematic procedures. From this perspective, scientific knowledge is constructed through controlled observation, quantitative measurement, and hypothesis testing, separating the researcher's subjective judgments from the phenomenon under study (Ricoy, 2006). This paradigm is relevant to the present study given that it seeks to identify patterns of ChatGPT use in a defined student population, based on quantifiable and generalizable data.

Creswell (2014) notes that the positivist paradigm—or postpositivist in its contemporary version—grounds quantitative studies in deterministic assumptions, oriented toward variable reduction, the formulation of specific questions and hypotheses, and the use of standardized measurement instruments. Under this approach, the results obtained from representative samples allow for the identification of trends and comparisons in educational contexts

Research Approach

The approach adopted is quantitative, which, according to Hernández-Sampieri et al. (2014), is characterized by data collection using standardized instruments, analysis through statistical methods, and the search for patterns that allow for the description or explanation of the phenomenon under study. This represents an appropriate way of assessing ChatGPT usage by first-year collegiate students such that the frequency, modes, and participant justifications could be quantified in a systematic and replicable manner.

Consistent with the above, García Sánchez (2023) conducted a descriptive-quantitative study on the use and perception of ChatGPT in higher education students, using questionnaires on a Likert scale as the

primary research tool. This methodological strategy is consistent with the objectives of the present study, as it allows for the collection of comparable and representative data from the student population under analysis.

Participants

The sample consisted of 44 first-semester students from a higher education institution, of whom 29 were men (65.9%) and 15 were women (34.1%), aged between 17 and 20 years. Participants were selected using non-probabilistic convenience sampling, taking into account the group's accessibility and homogeneity in academic level (first semester). All students present at the time of the survey administration who voluntarily agreed to participate, following informed consent, were included. Those who did not complete the entire survey were excluded

Instrument

The study described in this document employed a structured set of instruments to collect sociodemographic and technical information on the use of artificial intelligence. A detailed overview of the instrument used is presented below:

Instrument Technical Specifications

- Name: Survey on the Use of AI Tools in Higher Education.
- Structure: It consists of a personal data form and a main questionnaire with 25 items.
- Validation: The instrument was validated by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Mazatlán School of Nursing, and its internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha.

Sections of the Instrument

The questionnaire is organized into four key categories to measure students' interaction with ChatGPT:

1. Sociodemographic Form (7 items): Collects variables such as age, gender, marital status, occupation, monthly income, and grade point average.
2. Knowledge and Use (4 items): Measure of familiarity with the tool; response options; not at all familiar, somewhat familiar, very familiar
3. ChatGPT Usage (5 questions): Type of use (personal, professional or academic) + Morality and Job loss.

4. Academic Use (11 items): Explores if the technology helps students track what they are learning, recall key concepts, and organize their ideas – things we should be concerned with when assessing a tech tool
5. Negative effects (5 items): Assesses distraction, academic performance decline and poor sleep routine.

Measurement Scale

For the categories of management, academic use, and effects, a 5-point Likert scale was used:

- (5) Always.
- (4) Often.
- (3) Sometimes.
- (2) Almost never.
- Never.

This methodology allowed the researchers to perform descriptive and inferential statistical analyses using SPSS software version 25.00.

Procedure

The study was conducted in three phases.

In the first phase (instrument design and validation), a self-developed questionnaire was created, structured into two sections: the first containing items on sociodemographic data (gender, age, major) and the second containing items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always) to explore the frequency of ChatGPT use, the academic purposes for which it is used, perceptions of its usefulness, and concerns associated with its use. The instrument underwent expert review (by three faculty researchers in the field of educational technology), and Cronbach's alpha was subsequently calculated to verify its internal consistency prior to final administration.

In phase 2 (instrument administration), participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of their responses and other issues before agreeing to participate. Throughout normal class hours, teacher-directed settings were utilized to administer the questionnaire in person (same formulation and conditions for how it was administered) to each participant with instructor approval.

During phase three (processing of the data), the data was inputted into a digital base for later statistical processing. Review of the integrity of each questionnaire was carried out to remove missing or conflicting responses in all questionnaires completed before proceeding with analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Firstly was performed a descriptive analysis, with absolute and relative frequencies, measures of central tendency (arithmetic mean) and measures of dispersion (standard deviation) for each item of the questionnaire and for the sociodemographic variables. This enabled us to describe the profile of the participants and characterize general patterns of ChatGPT use.

Data Analysis

Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample

The sample consisted of a total of 44 first-semester college students. Regarding the distribution by sex, 29 participants were male (65.9%) and 15 were female (34.1%), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of participants by gender.*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	29	65.9
Female	15	34.1
Total	44	100.0

Source: *Author's own calculations.*

In terms of age, the most common ages were 18 – 19 years which reflects that majority profile of students entering higher education. The majority of participants were single, without financial livestock dependents and had low to middle monthly animal family incomes. The reported grade point average was 7.0 to 8.4 in the first year, equivalent to an intermediate level of student achievement among this population of new college entrants.

Knowledge and Use of ChatGPT

Regarding the level of knowledge and familiarity with ChatGPT, the results reveal a picture of nascent use. As shown in Table 2, 47.7% of students reported having “little” knowledge of the tool, 29.5% indicated they knew “nothing” about it, and only 22.7% stated they knew “a lot” about it. These data

suggest that, as these are first-year students, formal exposure to artificial intelligence tools within the academic setting is still limited.

Table 2. *Level of knowledge about ChatGPT.*

A lot	10	22.7
Little	21	47.7
None	13	29.5
Total	44	100.0

Source: *Author's own work.*

Regarding frequency of use, 52.3% of students indicated that they use the tool occasionally, 27.3% have never used it, and only 20.5% reported frequent or regular use. These findings are consistent with the profile of students who are in the process of adapting to university life and have not yet systematically integrated AI tools into their educational process.

Use of ChatGPT

Regarding the type of use students make of ChatGPT, personal use predominated over academic and professional use. The overall average for this category was 2.8 out of 5 points on the Likert scale, indicating a low-to-intermediate level of proficiency, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Using ChatGPT.*

Item	Mean	DE
Use for personal activities (entertainment, general information search)	3.4	0.91
Use for academic purposes (homework, research, summaries)	2.7	1.02
Use for professional or work purposes	1.8	0.87
Perception that ChatGPT could replace human labor	2.9	1.14
Ethical concerns about the use of AI in education	3.1	1.08
Overall average for the category	2.8	

Source: *Author's own calculations.*

It is noteworthy that ethical concerns regarding the use of AI in education received an average score of 3.1, indicating that students, even with limited use, are already reflecting on the implications of these technologies for their academic education.

Academic Use of ChatGPT

The academic use category received an overall average of 2.6 points, placing it at a low-to-middle level on the scale. The items with the highest scores corresponded to support in text translation and understanding class topics, while items related to content retention and exam preparation received the lowest scores, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Academic use of ChatGPT.*

Item	Average	SD
Comprehension of topics explained in class	3.0	1.05
Organization of ideas for written assignments	2.9	1.10
Searching for bibliographic references	2.7	0.98
Answering questions outside of class hours	2.8	1.03
Preparing summaries of long texts	2.9	1.07
Exam preparation	2.3	1.01
Retention of course content	2.1	0.95
Translation of texts into another language	3.2	1.12
Participation in online activities or educational platforms	2.4	0.99
Support with writing and proofreading	2.6	1.04
Support in learning new subjects or disciplines	2.5	1.00
Overall average for the category	2.6	

Source: *Author's own analysis.*

The item with the highest score was the one related to text translation ($M=3.2$), which could indicate that students rely on the tool with greater confidence for specific linguistic tasks than for more complex cognitive processes associated with deep learning.

Perceived Negative Effects

In the negative effects dimension, the overall mean was 2.5 points, reflecting that, although adverse effects are not perceived with high frequency, there is a moderate presence of some of them in the study population, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. *Perceived negative effects of using ChatGPT.*

Item	Mean	SD
Distraction during academic activities	2.8	1.09
Decline in academic performance	2.2	0.97

Impact on sleep habits	2.6	1.11
Reduced effort in tasks	2.7	1.05
Feeling of dependence on the tool	2.3	1.00
Overall category average	2.5	

Source: *Author's own calculations.*

The most relevant point on distraction while doing academic activities was rated highest ($M=2.8$), indicating that when the use of it occurs, it usually disrupts the concentration of the student. When it came to the decline in academic performance, that was rated the lowest of this category ($M=2.2$), confirming once again that usage is low.

In total, the results reveal a relatively low-to-moderate profile of ChatGPT utilization among first-semester college students. This trend is largely due to where a majority of the respondents still are in their educational pathways: newly entering tertiary education comes with a period for adjusting and learning, which means knowledge of sophisticated technology tools takes time to implement. Nevertheless, the ethical reflections and the perception of effects such as distraction and less individual effort indicate key aspects to be addressed in pedagogical strategies that favor the use of artificial intelligence appropriately within the university context.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a low-to-moderate profile of ChatGPT use among first-semester university students, with an overall average of 2.6 out of 5 points for academic use and 47.7% of participants reporting “little” familiarity with the tool. These results are consistent with those reported by Horizontes (2025), who, working with 236 freshmen at a Peruvian public university, found that first-year students, while possessing prior knowledge of ChatGPT, have not yet developed a systematic and responsible academic use of it, highlighting precisely that this group is the most vulnerable to the unregulated use of AI.

As for the main type of use, study participants made more use of the tool for personal activities ($M=3.4$) rather than strictly academic activities ($M=2.7$), which reflects a trend previously documented by García Sánchez (2023) in the Mexican context, identifying that university students were using ChatGPT mainly as supplementary information and writing tools, but with caution about their validity. Likewise, Morales Caluña and Cervantes Díaz (2024) in Ecuador observed that, while there is widespread motivation to use

the tool, students express some hesitation in openly acknowledging its academic use, which could explain the social desirability bias also present in the self-reports of the analyzed sample.

Regarding negative effects, distraction during academic activities was the item with the highest score ($M=2.8$), a finding that aligns with Dogaru et al. (2025), who found that the use of ChatGPT in STEM settings correlates with technological dependence, and with Soto Ortiz and Reyes Flores (2024), who documented in Mexico that among the most frequent negative perceptions are the risk of dependence and the inhibition of critical thinking. However, the low score for decreased academic performance ($M=2.2$) is consistent with the still-incipient use reported and with the observations of Nemt-allah et al. (2024), who note that the consequences on original intellectual production manifest primarily in more advanced phases of use.

Finally, ethical concerns received an average score of 3.1, suggesting that, even with limited use, students are already reflecting on the implications of AI for their education. This is consistent with Li et al. (2024), whose comprehensive review identifies academic integrity as the central concern regarding the use of ChatGPT in higher education, and with Sullivan, Kelly, and McLaughlan (2023), who note that this tool challenges traditional models of university assessment, making it urgent to reformulate pedagogical strategies that promote the responsible use of AI from the very first semesters.

Conclusions

This study evaluated the use, perceptions, and academic impact of ChatGPT among 44 first-semester college students, revealing a low-to-moderate adoption profile consistent with the characteristics of this stage of education. The conclusions derived from each research objective are presented below.

Concerning the frequency and for what purposes ChatGPT is being used, it is concluded that most students use ChatGPT from time to time and mainly privately; therefore, its academic usage has not been established yet. The most common academic uses involved text translation and understanding class content while exam preparation and content retention were the least likely suggesting that such tools will be used for broader yet lower order cognitive tasks.

With regard to perceived benefits and risks, students moderately acknowledge the practicality of ChatGPT for academic purposes; however, they also express ethical concerns on its usage, which is a reflective and non-uncritical attitude towards this tool—in support of fostering responsible use practices at the start of their university trajectory.

As for perceived negative effects, although these occur at a low-to-moderate level, distraction and reduced personal effort were the most frequently cited effects, pointing to priority areas for attention in orientation and digital literacy programs aimed at first-year students.

Finally, it is concluded that higher education institutions should incorporate explicit pedagogical strategies regarding the ethical and critical use of artificial intelligence starting in the first semester, before patterns of dependency or misuse become entrenched. The findings of this study provide local empirical evidence that can guide the design of context-specific institutional policies for the responsible use of ChatGPT in higher education.

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Collaborative Work Table

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