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“It’s not about laziness, it’s about efficiency”: Youth Perspectives on Generative AI in Higher Education Through the Lens of TikTok

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Abstract: *This study explores how young people on TikTok discuss the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. Through a qualitative analysis of 980 TikTok posts and their associated comments, we identify three key themes: (1) the commercialization of AI tools on TikTok, emphasizing undetectability, speed, and grade improvement; (2) conflicting views on AI ethics and the purpose of higher education; and (3) the emergence of new forms of community-building and identity exploration centered around AI. The study highlights TikTok's significant role as a platform for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing around AI—yet one that is deeply marked by commercial dynamics. Our insights offer valuable implications for researchers, educators, policymakers, and technology developers seeking to understand student needs and concerns regarding generative AI, while also illuminating broader shifts in how young people perceive learning, academic success, and the purpose of higher education in a rapidly changing technological landscape.*

Keywords: *generative AI, higher education, TikTok, social media, academic integrity, educational technology*

Introduction

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has sparked intense debates about its implications for learning, academic integrity, and the future of work. As AI tools become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, college students find themselves at the forefront of navigating this technological shift. Emerging research on this topic has found that students across cultural contexts recognize the potential benefits of generative AI, like improved writing support and self-directed learning, but also express concerns about academic integrity, reliability, and ethical implications, highlighting the need for structured guidance and a nuanced integration of AI tools in educational settings (Baek et al., 2024; Chan and Hu, 2023; Dello Stritto et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2023; Kizilcec et al., 2024; Obenza et al., 2023; Smolansky et al., 2023).

In order to support the responsible and productive integration of generative AI into higher education, understanding student perceptions and attitudes towards this technology is vital (Dello Stritto et al., 2024; Firat, 2023; Kelly et al., 2023)—and, given the salience of social media platforms in the everyday lives of young people, social media represents a valuable space for doing so. In particular, TikTok, with its vast user base of young people and capacity for quick, engaging content creation, serves as a rich platform for understanding the current debates, challenges, and opportunities around the academic uses of AI through the eyes of students,

Analyzing relevant videos and comments around AI and higher education, this study examines how youth on the platform conceptualize and debate the use of AI in academic contexts. Through thematic analysis of TikTok videos and comments, we ask: (1) What themes emerge in how youth on TikTok discuss generative AI in educational contexts? (2) What do these themes reveal about young people's perspectives, attitudes, and understandings of AI's educational uses and misuses?

By exploring these questions, we aim to contribute to several critical areas of inquiry. First, we shed light on the evolving relationship between technology and education from the perspective of its primary stakeholders—the students themselves. Second, we examine how social media platforms like TikTok function as spaces for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and community building around emerging technologies. Finally, we consider the broader implications of AI integration in education for issues of equity, academic integrity, and career preparation. Our study thus builds on existing literature examining student perceptions of the impact of AI on higher education (e.g., Baek et al., 2024; Chan and Hu, 2023; Kizilcec et al., 2024; Obenza et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024), youth educational discourses on social media (e.g., Literat, 2021; Sacks et al., 2021), and the ethical considerations surrounding AI use in academic settings (e.g., Crompton and Burke, 2023; Dello Stritto et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2023). By focusing on TikTok as a site of investigation, we extend this body of work to include the unique dynamics of short-form video content and its role in shaping discourse among young people.

Our findings offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and technology developers seeking to understand and address the needs and concerns of students in the AI era. Moreover, by examining how youth discuss and envision the use of AI in education, we gain a window into their broader perceptions of learning, academic success, and the evolving purpose of higher education in a rapidly changing technological landscape.

Student Perceptions of Generative AI in Higher Education

Although artificial intelligence had been used and researched in higher education contexts long before the rise of generative AI (see Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019, for a meta-review), the release of ChatGPT in November 2022 marked a key turning point in terms of public attention. The platform received over a million subscribers within a week of its launch (Mollman, 2022) and more than 200 million as of August 2024 (Fried, 2024). Since then, there has been a sharp surge in both the development of generative AI technologies, and in the research on generative AI across domains.

Scholarship on AI within education contexts reveals a complex landscape of benefits and challenges. On the one hand, research has found that generative AI tools can enhance learning experiences, particularly for non-native English speakers (Baek et al., 2024; Warschauer et al., 2023) and in creative fields (Dehouche and Dehouche, 2023). These technologies offer potential for personalized feedback, improved assessment (Crompton and Burke, 2023), and support for research tasks such as idea generation and information synthesis (van Dis et al., 2024). However, key concerns include academic integrity issues (Baek et al., 2024), the potential for overreliance, especially among second language learners (Warschauer et al., 2023), and the risk of biased or inaccurate content (Crompton and Burke, 2023). While the potential of generative AI in higher education is evident, continued research is needed to address these challenges and leverage potential benefits (van Dis et al., 2024).

On the specific topic of student perceptions of AI, research reveals consistent themes across various cultural contexts, suggesting that student views on the benefits and risks of generative AI in education are broadly consistent across geographical contexts. For instance, studies from Australia (Kelly et al., 2023), the UK (Singh et al., 2023), and the Philippines (Obenza et al., 2023) indicate that while students' awareness and experience with AI tools vary, there is a widespread consensus on the need for increased support and guidance. Across the globe, students see AI as beneficial for writing support, idea generation, and self-directed learning (Chan and Hu, 2023; Obenza et al., 2023; Firat, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023), yet they share concerns about academic integrity, the reliability of AI-generated content, and ethical implications (Baek et al., 2024; Chan and Hu, 2023; Firat, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023).

Research in the United States largely echoes these international findings (Kizilcec et al., 2024), while also pointing to some demographic variability. For example, a recent survey by Baek et al. (2024) revealed that U.S. college students' use of ChatGPT varied by demographics such as age, gender, major, and language proficiency, with higher usage among older students, non-native English speakers, and STEM majors. Concerns about academic integrity, the potential for AI misuse, and fear of institutional punishment were prominent among American students as well (Baek et al., 2024). Moreover, while they acknowledged AI's value for personalized support and quick information retrieval, there was also a prevailing pessimism regarding its broader impact, particularly on the perceived value of education and future job prospects (Baek et al., 2024; Dello Stritto et al., 2024).

At the same time, the vast majority of research studies discussed above have relied on surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students. The reliance on self-reported data can introduce biases such as social desirability and inaccurate self-assessment (Chan and Hu, 2023; Obenza et al., 2023)—biases that are particularly salient when it comes to the topic of formal education (Literat, 2021). Here, we focus on social media—particularly, the youth-favorite short video platform TikTok—as a means to capture the perspectives of a wide swath of young people in the spaces and modes where they choose to self-express.

Indeed, a rich body of interdisciplinary research has foregrounded social media platforms as spaces where young people share educational achievements and challenges, give and receive support, and connect with peers around academic experiences (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Cole et al., 2017; Literat, 2021). Within higher education, for instance, social media enables students to share experiences and struggles around applying to colleges, progressing through courses of study, and making post-graduation plans (Sacks et al., 2021). This knowledge-sharing extends beyond swapping study tips to narrative storytelling that reflects how young people's personal and social contexts—such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (see, e.g., Literat, 2021; Stornaiuolo and Thomas, 2017)—impact their educational experiences. Harnessing platform affordances and cultural representations (Wargo, 2017), young people often find the process of sharing educational experiences online empowering and validating, while simultaneously expressing the ways in which they feel disempowered by aspects of these same experiences (Stahl and Literat, 2022; Wargo, 2017).

At the same time, while social media platforms offer valuable access to peer discourse around educational topics, scholarship in platform studies cautions against treating these spaces as neutral or transparent. Platforms actively shape discourse through algorithmic curation, content moderation policies, and business models that prioritize engagement and advertiser interests (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018). TikTok exemplifies these dynamics through its algorithmically-driven "For You" page and commercial incentives that blur boundaries between organic expression and promotional content (Abidin, 2021). Platform governance—including API access restrictions and metadata structures—also shapes what researchers can observe and how (Marres and Weltevrede, 2013). Rather than enabling straightforward access to "authentic" student perspectives, platform-based research involves navigating complex entanglements between user expression, commercial interests, and technical infrastructures. In the last section of this article, we further examine how TikTok's affordances both enabled access to youth discourse and introduced commercial dynamics that themselves became research findings.

Research Design

Our study, a qualitative analysis of public videos and comments on the youth-oriented short video platform TikTok, asks the following: 1) How do youth on TikTok talk about generative AI in educational contexts? 2) What does this talk tell us about young people's perspectives, attitudes, and understandings of the educational uses and misuses of AI?

Data Collection

Data was collected using the TikTok API, the official interface to download TikTok data. This involved securing approval from the institutional review board at [anonymized university] as well as TikTok for Developers. We obtained both approvals in June 2024 and collected the data in July 2024.

We collected all the videos that had “AI” (or “artificial intelligence”) and “college” in their hashtags or keywords,¹ were posted between July 2023 and June 2024, and had the United States as their location.² The aim was to cover a full academic year and to have a unity of context by limiting the posts to one geographical location. The decision to focus on the US was made because of the amount of available data, both in terms of posts and background studies. The other geographical location widely available on TikTok for this type of content is Europe, but the variety of higher education systems (e.g., academic calendars, types of examinations, language of instruction, role of higher education, percentage of enrolled youth, etc.) in those countries would have made contextualisation and comparisons extremely difficult.

Our search resulted in 3374 posts. Data included the video id, the posting date, the user id (but not the username), the hashtags used, the description added by the user, the post URL, as well as the number of likes, shares, comments, and views. A preliminary inspection of the data revealed that two users produced 1160 of the videos (458 and 702 videos, respectively). The top 10 videos and a random sample of 20 videos were analyzed for each of these users, and not a single video was related to AI or college. They were therefore removed before the sample was selected, leaving us with 2214 posts.

Out of these 2214, 1000 posts were selected for an in-depth qualitative analysis. For each month, we selected the top 10 posts by number of likes (n=120), to ensure we include high-engagement content that likely reflects what students most commonly encounter given TikTok's algorithmic amplification. The remaining 880 posts were selected randomly, but ensuring that each month was represented proportionally (e.g., a month representing 12% of the total number of posts was sampled to represent 12% of the analyzed videos, excluding the top videos). This two-tiered approach balances the inclusion of high-engagement content (which may over-represent viral or promotional posts), while ensuring our corpus also captures lower-engagement content. The data was then randomly split into subsamples for each of the coders, and ordered chronologically.

It is also worth noting that, while the TikTok API enabled systematic access to public discourse at scale, it also required significant interpretive labor to make data "research ready" (Marres and Weltevrede, 2013). Most notably, the API does not distinguish promotional from organic content through metadata—despite TikTok requiring disclosure of branded partnerships— and therefore

¹ Keywords are words found in the user-provided description or captions of the video.

² Using the TikTok API, location is generally determined based on IP address geolocation and GPS tracking, as is the practice for most social media platforms. While users can in theory opt out of some geolocalisation, the process is complex and varies between devices, meaning very few users avail of this option. Furthermore, TikTok still infers general geolocalisation (e.g., at the level of the region/country instead of specific coordinates) that are then attributed at the level of the account. This metadata is what is used in the TikTok API, meaning that it is unlikely that relevant posts were missed because of the localisation search term.

necessitated manually categorizing each video. Additional manual work, as described above, included identifying and removing spam accounts, reviewing videos that became inaccessible, and interpreting geolocation data. This labor-intensive preparation process reveals that platform-based research requires substantial researcher intervention to navigate platform structures designed for purposes other than research.

We note that, given our methodological approach, we cannot verify the exact ages of users beyond self-identification (users stating they are college students) and contextual clues (references to current enrollment, dorm rooms, campus activities, student life). The vast majority of content appeared to be from college-age users based on these indicators, aligning with TikTok's demographic profile). A small minority of videos came from adult professionals (e.g. professors, journalists, AI/tech experts) whom we did not exclude but paid less analytical attention to. We note this as a limitation while also recognizing that the platform's user base and content context suggest our corpus predominantly captures youth perspectives on AI in higher education.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2012), a flexible qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Our analysis followed six phases: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data through repeated review of both video content and associated comments; (2) generating initial codes through the four-category system described below (narrative summary, genre description, open notes, and comment descriptions); (3) searching for themes by collating codes into broader patterns across both videos and comments; (4) reviewing themes through multiple iterations to ensure coherence; (5) defining and naming final themes; and (6) producing the findings.

Given the multimodal nature of TikTok data—combining visual elements (imagery, text overlays, demonstrations), audio (voiceover, music), performative elements (creator presentation style), and textual elements (captions, comments)—our approach also incorporated content analysis techniques for categorizing video genres (e.g., advertisement, vlog, tutorial) and identifying commercial content. Comments were treated as extensions of each video's discursive context, analyzing how commenters responded to, debated, or extended the themes present in videos. All accessible comments on the 980 videos were reviewed as part of our analysis, focusing our attention on substantive comments relevant to our research questions, particularly examining high-engagement comment threads where meaningful exchanges occurred. Comments provided crucial insights into peer debates, shared practices, and affective responses that supplemented the video content itself. Themes emerged from patterns across both videos and their comment threads: for instance, the theme of "detection anxiety" was evident in both video content (e.g., tutorials on avoiding detection) and comment discussions (e.g., debates about false accusations).

The procedure for the thematic analysis was discussed by the coders, who are all authors of this article. It was decided to organize the analysis into four categories: a narrative summary of the video, a description of the genre (e.g. vlog, comedy, advertisement, etc.), open notes regarding important aspects of the videos in light of the research questions and the literature (including notes on the context of the video if relevant), and finally a brief description of the comments on the

video, if any. Spreadsheets were created for each coder, which included the original metadata collected via the TikTok API, the four categories above, as well as the number of posts made by the user in the overall dataset, and whether a video was part of the top 10 videos for that month.

The first author coded her entire sample, which was then used to train the other coders. The rest of the sample was coded by the rest of the team, with each video coded by one person—although coders started working on their dataset in dialogue with the others to address early questions. During the data analysis, 20 videos were not accessible—having been removed or being set as private—so the final dataset analyzed included 980 videos. The entirety of the notes on the 980 videos was then reviewed twice: once by the first author, to draft the findings, and once by the second author, to sense-check the findings section and prepare a separate quantitative analysis of the data. All the authors then reviewed the results section and comments were discussed and incorporated where relevant.

While the TikTok posts and comments analyzed were posted publicly, the boundaries between public and private information in online spaces are often ambiguous (Franzke et al., 2020). Acknowledging this, and considering the fact that our research involves young people,³ we implemented additional privacy safeguards, adhering to the Association of Internet Researchers' guidelines for ethical online research (Franzke et al., 2020): thus, in the findings, we omit usernames and any potentially identifying information, and we blur any facial features in the screenshots we use.

Descriptive Overview of the Data

Looking at the data overall, we found that user activity was quite stable over time, with two spikes in activity in September 2023 and February-March 2024. To get a sense of the content captured in our corpus and to investigate what this additional activity was about, we grouped the genre of each post in one of the following categories: ads (promotional videos for college- oriented AI tools)⁴, content posts (non-promotional user posts related to AI and education), AI-generated content (users posting visual content generated with AI on a topic related to education, e.g. AI-generated images of college mascots), and unrelated content (content that was not related to AI and college). The sample was re-coded with these categories by the second author, based on the genres indicated by the coders. Each code was checked against the notes taken by the original coder, and in case of doubt the original videos were reviewed. No intercoder reliability was calculated, as the focus of

³ Of course, based on our methodological approach, we cannot ascertain the exact ages of users in our corpus. While the vast majority of content seemed to be posted by young people (many of whom self-identified as college students in videos or comments), a small minority of videos were posted by adult professionals (professors, journalists, AI/tech experts). We did not remove these from the sample, but we did not pay as much attention to them in the analysis.

⁴ Coding for commercial content was only done at the level of the post. While some of the accounts posting ads were primarily commercial accounts, it is common practice on TikTok to pay individual users with a large number of followers to promote content. The publication of an ad was therefore not necessarily a sign that an account was commercial. Conversely, commercial accounts sometimes post genuine content unrelated to their product to create engagement.

this study is the qualitative analysis that follows. Here, the aim was just to get a quick overview of the data in order to have a rough estimate of 1) the proportion of advertisement and unrelated posts in the dataset and 2) the kinds of posts creating the spikes in activity.

Table 1. Overview of the number of posts per month and per type

Month	Number of posts				
	Total	Ads	Content posts	AI generated content	Unrelated content
July 2023	69 (100%)	28 (40.6%)	16 (23.2%)	7 (10.1%)	18 (26.1%)
August 2023	80 (100%)	32 (40%)	18 (22.5%)	5 (6.3%)	25 (31.3%)
September 2023	166 (100%)	147 (88.6%)	12 (7.2%)	4 (2.4%)	3 (1.8%)
October 2023	68 (100%)	41 (60.3%)	11 (16.2%)	12 (17.6%)	4 (5.9%)
November 2023	61 (100%)	28 (45.9%)	12 (19.7%)	12 (19.7%)	9 (14.8%)
December 2023	64 (100%)	21 (32.8%)	17 (26.6%)	11 (17.2%)	15 (23.4%)
January 2024	73 (100%)	27 (37%)	14 (19.2%)	14 (19.2%)	18 (24.7%)
February 2024	97 (100%)	24 (24.7%)	16 (16.5%)	11 (11.3%)	46 (47.4%)
March 2024	94 (100%)	48 (51.1%)	19 (20.2%)	20 (21.3%)	7 (7.4%)
April 2024	64 (100%)	27 (42.2%)	16 (25%)	15 (23.4%)	6 (9.4%)
May 2024	73 (100%)	33 (45.2%)	17 (23.3%)	10 (13.7%)	13 (17.8%)
June 2024	71 (100%)	28 (39.4%)	12 (16.9%)	6 (8.5%)	25 (35.2%)
Total	980 (100%)	484 (49.4%)	180 (18.4%)	127 (13.0%)	189 (19.3%)

Figure 1. Number of videos per category over time.

“It’s not about laziness, it’s about efficiency”: Youth Perceptions on Generative AI in Higher Education Through the Lens of TikTok

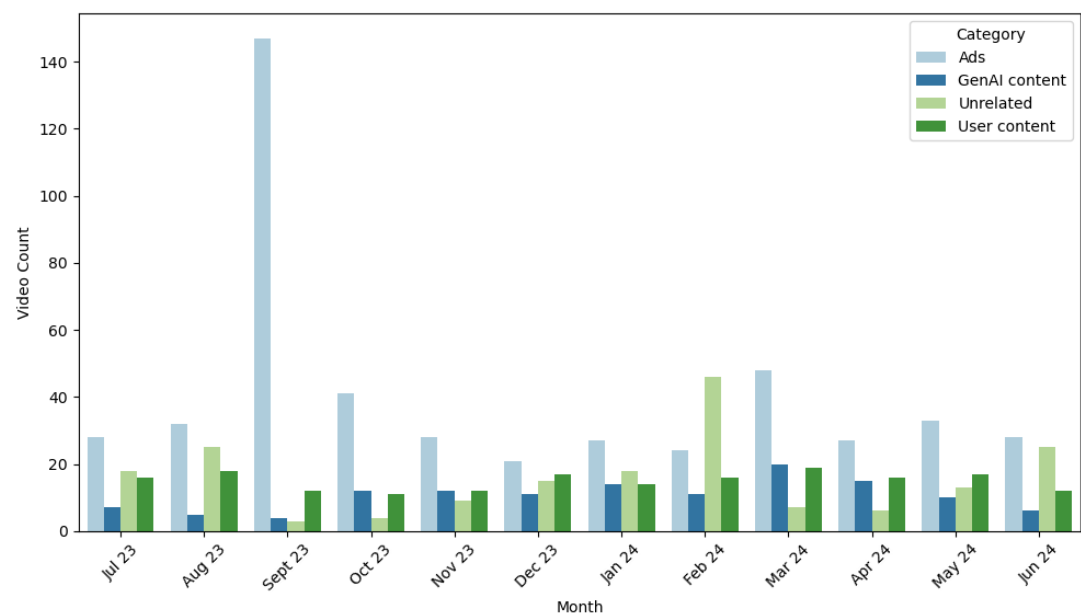


Table 2. Overview of the count and average number of comments per month and per type

Month	Number of comments (Mean)				
	Total	Ads	Content posts	AI generated content	Unrelated content
July 2023	599 (8.21)	145 (5)	412 (25.75)	11 (1.57)	31 (1.63)
August 2023	1654 (19.69)	474 (14.36)	1102 (58)	3 (0.6)	75 (3)
September 2023	230 (1.37)	33 (0.22)	164 (12.62)	28 (7)	5 (1.67)
October 2023	829 (11.2)	203 (4.61)	572 (44)	51 (4.25)	3 (0.75)
November 2023	2827 (44.17)	57 (1.97)	949 (73)	1811 (139.31)	10 (1.11)
December 2023	12061 (180.01)	67 (3.19)	10875 (572.37)	1102 (100.18)	17 (1.13)
January 2024	1364 (17.49)	86 (3.19)	1009 (63.06)	245 (16.33)	24 (1.26)
February 2024	1239 (11.91)	169 (7.04)	368 (21.65)	659 (54.92)	43 (0.93)
March 2024	2816 (28.44)	223 (4.65)	75 (3.95)	2496 (108.52)	22 (3.14)
April 2024	5887 (82.92)	2851 (101.82)	1725 (95.83)	1278 (79.88)	33 (5.5)
May 2024	2786 (34.83)	601 (17.17)	185 (10.88)	1971 (179.18)	29 (2.23)
June 2024	743 (8.85)	429 (14.3)	22 (1.83)	129 (18.43)	163 (6.52)
Total	33035 (33.71)	5338 (11.03)	17458 (99.99)	9784 (77.04)	455 (2.41)

Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a detailed monthly breakdown of post types, and show that a large proportion of the posts were either ads or unrelated to AI and college (67.3%). The increase in activity in September was almost entirely due to ads. This includes 86 ads for apps promising to create nude pictures of women based on a fully clothed picture, all published in September 2023 and still accessible one year later. The second spike, around February/March 2024 seems to be mostly due to unrelated content (February) and ads (March). Indeed, a substantial portion of the data (18.9%) was unrelated to AI and college. The majority of posts in this category seemed to be examples of wave-riding, where creators attempted to use trending hashtags and topics to boost visibility online (Christensen, 2013); it is interesting to note the prevailing expectation that AI and college, in combination, would be trending topics. Rather than treating the high proportion of ads and unrelated content as requiring dataset "cleaning," we analyzed all 980 videos, as this composition itself is a significant finding about the informational environment students navigate on TikTok. Throughout our findings, we specify which insights derive from promotional videos, content posts, or comments.

Finally, Table 2 gives an overview of the number of comments per category over time. While variations over time are often driven by a few viral posts, a few differences emerge. First, advertisements and unrelated posts (using multiple trending hashtags in an attempt to create engagement received very comments. Second, posts directly discussing AI and college were by far the most commented on.

Findings

Selling AI on TikTok: Undetectability, Speed and Grade Improvement

A striking feature of the TikTok content analyzed is the prevalence of advertisements for AI tools. Almost half of the corpus consisted of videos promoting various AI tools geared toward college students—tools that promised to generate notes from lecture recordings, summarize readings, write essays, generate citations, and more.⁵ Ads hold analytical value as insights into how AI is promoted to young people, and more broadly, how TikTok functions as an increasingly commercial space. The findings in this first section draw primarily from the analysis of the promotional videos in our corpus, but we note a general commercial rhetoric that shapes the broader discourse as well: for instance, concerns about cost and discussions of efficiency and undetectability emerged in non-promotional videos as well (and comments posted on them), suggesting the potential influence of marketing on how students conceptualize AI's value proposition.

The AI tools advertised in our corpus were usually promoted by young people who self-identified as college students, thus creating a sense of peer recommendation and relatability, but also blurring

⁵ Our corpus also included several ads for an AI tool meant to remove clothing from photographs, which were posted repeatedly by the same account in a spam-like manner. While these were not explicitly connected to college, they used the #college tag (in addition to #highschool) in order to target young demographics. Such apps are generally illegal in most jurisdictions, as they can violate privacy rights, consent laws, and regulations concerning digital manipulation and exploitation.

the line between genuine user experiences and sponsored content. Notably, despite TikTok requiring proper disclosure of commercial content,⁶ the vast majority of these promotional videos lacked appropriate labeling. Indeed, “promotional content” or “paid partnership” labels were extremely rare in our sample. Beyond violating platform guidelines, this lack of transparency raises ethical concerns—and was sometimes brought up by other users in the comments. For instance, on an influencer’s video about her brother using a specific AI tool to do his homework, a commenter wrote: “All of ya’ll in the comments are so naive 😂 She’s clearly being paid by commission and should be reported to the FTC for failing to disclose that.” Our corpus also featured AI companies seeking to recruit college students to promote their tools on TikTok, offering financial incentives such as \$10 for each new user sign-up.

While most ads were quite explicit in promoting specific tools and their promised benefits, some promotional videos were more sneakily disguised as college advice or vlogs. For example, a user who positioned themselves as a “lazy student”—yet had a profile clearly associated with a specific AI educational tool—shared a slideshow of “study habits that took me from a 3.2 to a 4.0 GPA 🧑🏫🧠📚.” Using this specific AI tool was last in a list of other tips, like the need to understand instead of memorizing, the use of the Pomodoro method for schoolwork, and the recommendation of writing down notes after typing them. Such advice videos often portrayed AI as a “college hack”, among other tips on how to cut costs (e.g. only buy the books you can resell) or be successful in college (e.g. join a club, find your people). Other videos subtly introduced AI tools as part of the creator’s routine (as in a college student’s vlog of a day in her life before finals week, with a sneaky ad for AI at the end of the video) or their life story (e.g. a Harvard student sharing his journey to Silicon Valley, while also advertising the AI tool he developed). In the latter video, and others like it, AI is presented from an entrepreneurial standpoint, as developed by students, for students; using humor and personal stories, such videos aim to make the process of AI development relatable and aspirational.

Most promotional videos involved some kind of demonstration of what the recommended tool can do, and were usually filmed in students’ dorm rooms, classrooms (sometimes even mid-lecture), or other study spaces like libraries or quads. A minority of videos took a more abstract approach, with some being entirely AI-generated. An interesting example was an ad consisting entirely of B-roll footage from a first-person video game (Figure 1): listing off the features of the promoted AI tool while navigating a gameworld from a first-person perspective, the ad seemed to suggest that navigating college is like navigating a video game, requiring mastery, strategy and quick maneuvering. And, indeed, the idea of “winning” came up in several promos and slogans (e.g. “a tool made to help you win”), bringing up the question of what it actually means to “win” at college.

⁶ TikTok requires all promotional content to be explicitly labeled as such, using the content disclosure setting when posting the video (TikTok, n.d.). This setting marks the video as “promotional content” (when promoting the user’s own brand or business) or “paid partnership” (when posting branded content on behalf of another business)



Figure 1. A promotional video using videogame imagery to pitch an AI tool for students

However, while the videos might have employed a variety of styles and marketing strategies as reflected above, they consistently emphasized three key selling points: undetectability, speed, and grade improvement.

Undetectability and “Humanization”

The undetectability of the AI-generated output was perhaps the most touted feature overall, directly appealing to students' desires to use AI without detection by their professors or institutional plagiarism detection systems—and clearly, undetectability was a key concern for students, as comment threads often focused on whether these tools are indeed able to evade detection systems like Turnitin. Several tools advertised in the corpus even made reference to this in the names of the apps and services advertised (“undetectable.ai”, “Stealth GPT”). Undetectability was often associated with “humanization.” There were repeated mentions of AI products giving “humanized” answers or “humanized” writing, where “humanized” was framed as being higher quality, in terms of adopting a writing style that can elude detection. Along the same lines, many comments in our corpus—on ads and other videos—came from essay writers pitching their ghostwriting services, with the same implication that human labor is still better than AI. Contrasting with the above, some ads framed AI as enhancing students beyond normal human capabilities: for instance, an AI study tool was promoted with an action clip of Arnold Schwarzenegger firing a shotgun, captioned: “Me answering every question on my midterm using [AI tool]... AI made me superhuman.”

Speed and Efficiency

Speed was another frequently touted benefit, with advertisements promising to "replace hours of reading in seconds" and complete tasks "in the blink of an eye." Videos often blamed professors for assigning an unrealistic amount of work, and offered AI as a solution to manage heavy workloads and tight deadlines. AI tools were often framed as “hacks” to improve efficiency and “take back your time”—with the implication that schoolwork is taking up too much of students’ time, at the expense of other pursuits. For example, a video promoting an AI essay writer showed a college student going about his day, with a zen-like demeanor: strumming his guitar, reading, and folding laundry (Figure 2). Meanwhile, his voiceover, also captioned in text blurbs on the video, read:

I had a project due today at midnight and instead of frantically running around to complete my paper like the rest of my classmates, I took the day to do some self-care, reading, guitar practice, and even folding some laundry. So what are you waiting for? Try out [AI tool] today and start maximizing your time just like me!



Figure 2. A college student shows off all the things he did with the time saved by using AI: guitar practice, reading, folding laundry

Grade Improvement

Finally, grade improvement was the third pillar of these marketing strategies. Many advertisements featured before-and-after screenshots of grades, implying a direct causal relationship between AI use and grades as a marker of academic success. One such video, posted by an AI company but

supposedly from the perspective of a student, used a *Stranger Things* meme to compare “my dog shit grades b4 using Ai vs After 🤔🤔” (Figure 3). In the description of the video, the AI company boasted that “our new AI will boost your grades or well [sic] pay you \$50.” Despite this pitch, the video had relatively low engagement, with only 7 likes and 0 comments.

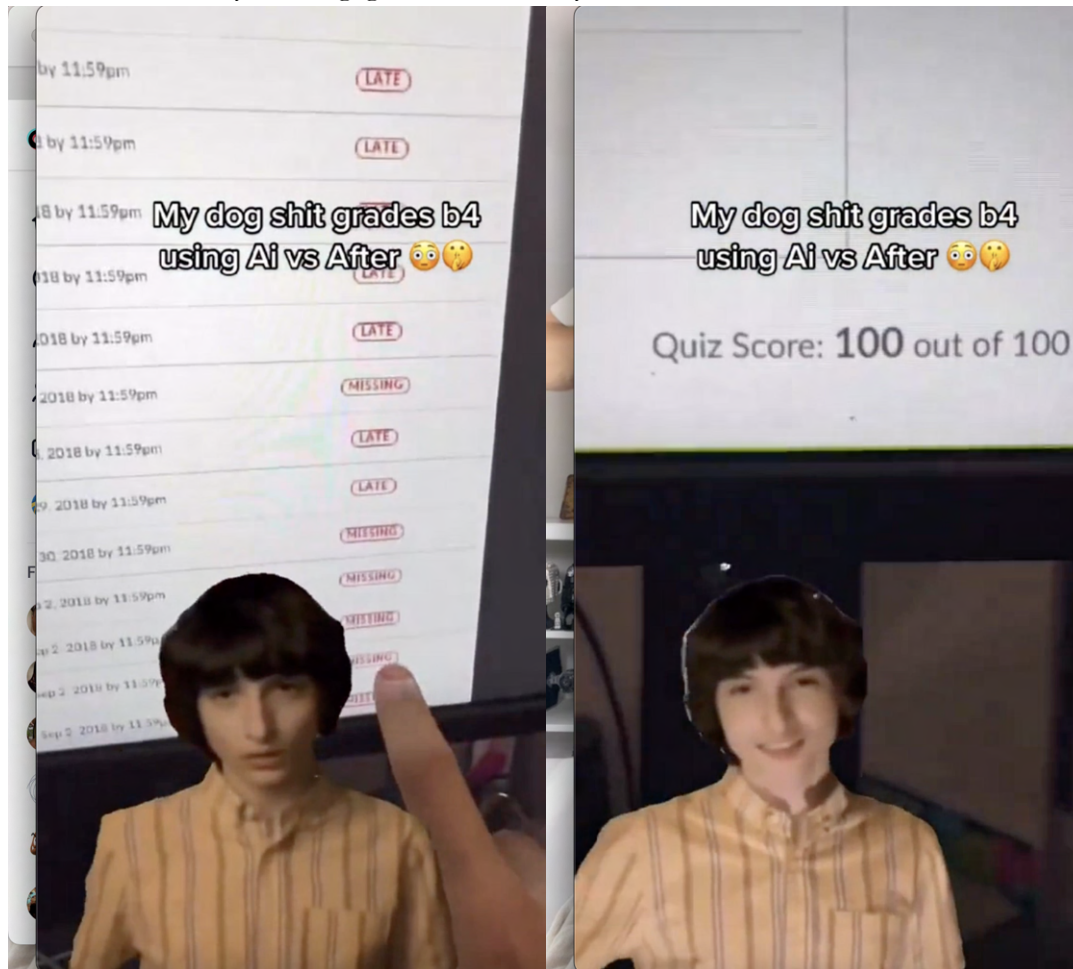


Figure 3. An AI tool promises to improve grades, with before-and-after screenshots of a student's assignments, and a promise to pay \$50 if it fails to do so

Yet something that is *not* mentioned in these videos, but is clearly paramount for young people, is cost. Comment threads on these promotional videos often revolved around affordability, with commenters inquiring whether the advertised tools are free, and others revealing hidden costs and frustration with subscription models:

sadly [the AI tool promoted] costs. which isn't that good for broke students. but for people who can afford it it's amazing.

Make sure you let everyone know that there's a monthly fee for this product

I can't wait until it's just a free app designed by someone who isn't going to charge ridiculously for it!

As the comments above illustrate, TikTokers commenting on these videos—many of whom identified as “broke” or “poor” college students—seem worried about the potential for AI tools to exacerbate existing educational inequalities, while the frustration with hidden costs and subscription models reflected a broader exhaustion with the commercialization of educational support tools.

Conflicting Views on the Ethics of AI—and the Purpose of College

The integration of AI into higher education has sparked intense debates about academic integrity and ethics, and our data unsurprisingly captured a wide range of perspectives on the ethics of AI use in education. We use "ethics" here to refer to students' moral considerations regarding AI use in education—particularly concerning academic integrity (whether AI use constitutes cheating), fairness (equity of access to AI tools), the purpose of learning (whether efficiency or deep understanding should be prioritized), and authenticity (the value placed on original versus AI-assisted work). Student ethical frameworks often combined principled concerns ("learning requires effort and struggle") with pragmatic considerations ("everyone else is using it, so I'm disadvantaged if I don't").

Academic Integrity Debates

In particular, comment sections richly revealed conflicting views on whether AI use constitutes cheating or serves as a legitimate learning tool. For example, comments on a video news report about the use of AI in universities illustrate such clashes of opinion:

So fucking what!!! Nothing wrong with using tools readily accessible to complete tasks.

[in reply] That's not what's happening. It's not a calculator.

[in reply] Using AI to do your thinking for you isn't "working WITH tech." It's cheating.

[in reply] Technology is not scary. People getting degrees without having learned to think is scary.

I think it's just lazy to rely on AI for everything. What's the point of going to school then?

[in reply] It’s not about laziness, it’s about efficiency. Why spend hours on something AI can do in minutes?

[in reply] But isn’t the whole point of education to actually learn and develop skills?

[in reply] You’re still learning by editing and refining what the AI gives you. It’s like having a rough draft.

As seen in the exchanges above, discussions often mirrored the marketing discourse around AI (e.g. “it’s not about laziness, it’s about efficiency. Why spend hours on something AI can do in minutes?” -- a comment that was posted by a non-promotional account). But they also extended to broader questions about the purpose and value proposition of higher education in the AI era. Some users argued that if AI can easily complete college-level tasks, it further undermines the value of the degree; others contended that the true value of education lies in the learning process and critical thinking skills developed, which cannot be replicated by AI. The penetration of AI into higher education thus foregrounded a stark divide between those that held a cynical, transactional view of higher education (“the degree is nearly worthless so why would anyone care about how it was got?”) and, on the other hand, those who argued for the intrinsic value of learning and personal growth that comes from educational experiences. Exchanges like the ones below, posted on a promotional video for an AI tool, are vivid examples of these contrasting views:

People that cheat are so dumb, why would u cheat in college 🧠 your paying for the education, I don’t know 🏆🏆🏆

[in reply] You're not paying for an education, you're paying for a piece of paper... lmao

chat gpt is the reason we won't be able to function as a species in the future, no one puts effort into education anymore

[in reply] Omg I don’t understand why you would go through school just to get a 9-5 that you barely can live off of... School so pointless after 10 grade anyways you already learned all the basic and anything you don’t know you can research"

The Purpose of Higher Education

However, while we encountered critical opinions too, the majority of college students posting in our corpus seemed to have a positive attitude towards AI. For instance, in a mirror selfie taken in a campus bathroom, with her Stanley cup and backpack visible in the foreground, a student shared: “Something i’m not afraid to say as a college student- / Chat GPT is a great learning tool. the way AI can break concepts down until you fully understand them is something most professors just can't do” (Figure 4). This take focuses on the benefits of AI for comprehension and deep learning, in stark contrast to the ads that focused on cheating and getting work done quickly.



Figure 4. A student’s endorsement of ChatGPT, filmed in a campus bathroom

Equity and Access Concerns

What is more, some users argued that AI levels the playing field for disadvantaged students: they claimed that AI tools can help students who juggle jobs or lack access to private tutors, or those that struggle with learning disabilities like dyslexia. Such discourses framed AI use as an equalizer in education.

In fact, with very few exceptions (a couple of videos about AI potentially perpetuating biases with respect to race and beauty standards), explicit concerns about the dark side of AI were surprisingly rare. The most prominent such concern—voiced especially in the comments of promotional videos—related to data privacy. For instance, on a young woman’s video about using an AI conversation tool as therapy, despite the overall appreciation of the tool, some users brought up concerns about data use and privacy:

Ya but trusting an algorithm to give you relationship/mental health/possibly medical advice?? What company is behind it and wht R the motives?

This seems like it’s teaching ai how to be more relatable lol

If the product is “free” then you’re the real product.

Is no one else concerned 🙄 like what are they doing with all this data their collecting on you??"

[in reply] I agree. They already know so much about us through our apps, and now with this they'll also have access to our thoughts.

In general though, despite instances of data literacy as in the comments above, we noted a rather low level of AI literacy overall. While there was some technical knowledge shared in the comments (especially by users who self-disclosed as being computer science or engineering students), we also found plenty of misinformation about how AI works, which remained uncorrected or was sometimes perpetuated in the comments. This, coupled with the relative lack of discussion surrounding the problematic aspects of AI, points to the significance of AI literacy as a key priority looking ahead—an issue which we take up again in the final part of the paper.

Anxieties, Aspirations and Community-Building around AI

These ethical debates about AI's legitimacy intersect with practical concerns about how AI integration is reshaping student experiences, identities, and futures. The integration of AI into higher education is not just changing academic practices; it is also influencing how students experience college life and how they perceive their prospects post-graduation. TikTok served as a platform for exploring these implications, revealing anxieties, aspirations, and new forms of community-building centered around AI.

Illustrating a sense of shared experience, videos and comment sections often featured students commiserating about the challenges of navigating AI in academia, sharing tips, and offering encouragement. Many videos sought to share useful AI tools and practices, often within compilations,⁷ while commenters tagged their friends on the most useful videos (indeed, many comments, especially on advice or demo videos, consisted entirely of user tags). With the exception of the promotional videos addressed earlier, the tips included in these videos were generally for constructive, ethical uses of AI, rather than cheating (e.g. using AI to create flash cards or multiple choice questions based on readings). For instance, a student applying to law school explained how she uploaded essays of successful law school applicants to ChatGPT, and asked it to find commonalities. Then she asked ChatGPT to generate a list of questions that would help her write her own personal statement based on these successful traits. In comments, TikTokers shared their best practices (e.g. "i ask it for feedback after i finish writing"; "I use ChatGPT to help outline my presentations! It gives me so many good ideas", "I did this for a scholarship, got good feedback, and I got it!").

⁷ At the same time, there was also the concept of "gatekeeping" AI tools, with users expressing a desire to maintain exclusivity over certain AI resources. This reflects a tension between the desire to share helpful resources and the fear that widespread adoption might lead to increased detection or reduced effectiveness.

Detection Anxiety

A prevalent concern among students, in both videos and comments, was the fear of false accusations of AI use. The incident of "Marley the Grammarly girl"—referenced in several videos in our corpus, by Marley herself and by other users—exemplifies this anxiety. This case, where a college student was accused of using AI and put on disciplinary probation when she claimed to have only used Grammarly, sparked extensive discussions about the reliability of AI detection methods and the potential for false positives.⁸ Indeed, the widespread apprehension about being unfairly accused was compounded by skepticism about the reliability of AI detection tools; the top comment on the top-liked video in our corpus (with over 1.6 million likes) pointed out that the popular plagiarism tool Turnitin “labels the constitution as ai generated.” Many videos in our corpus shared strategies to “prove” non-use of AI, such as using Google Docs’ revision history as evidence of original work.

While these strategies aim to protect students from false accusations, they also highlight the atmosphere of suspicion and the perceived burden placed on students to demonstrate their academic integrity. In this atmosphere of paranoia, the mere act of posting about AI on TikTok was often perceived as risky. Some creators included disclaimers at the beginning of their videos, claiming they’re “not being serious” or posting “for entertainment purposes,” in case any professors or school authorities come across their videos. On a college student’s video promoting an AI tool, a commenter warned: “Yalll this is a lowkey dangerous sponsorship bc if your university sees this, and you ever get flagged for AI on a paper this could be used as evidence of previous use 😭”

It is interesting to note that the anxiety surrounding unfair accusations seemed to be particularly acute for neurodivergent students. For instance, comments on a video about AI detection strategies highlighted how students with ADHD or autism may be more likely to trigger false positives in AI detection systems due to their writing styles:

All of this is discrimination against autistic people. "Robotic", "lack of human voice", all soon to be blanket statements for false positives.

[in reply] THIS. I write very robotically myself, and my professor did accuse me of AI

Bruh, im autistic. Anything I write will look Ai generated. It’s just how I talk and write.

In view of these concerns, there was a strong call within our corpus for clear and consistent AI policies from educational institutions. Users frequently pointed out discrepancies between syllabus

⁸ The case received substantial media coverage as well. After Marley was placed on probation and consequently lost her scholarship, Grammarly made a donation to her tuition funds and later hired her as a student ambassador and the protagonist of their social media advertising campaign (Young, 2024).

statements, school-wide policies, and student handbooks. Professors often engaged in these discussions, both through comments on student videos and by creating their own content addressing AI policies or giving advice on how to use AI ethically. Their perspectives seemed to be welcomed, especially when they demonstrated openness towards AI—an attitude in line with that of most college students in our sample. On a professor's video that gave advice for prompt engineering in order to get feedback on your paper from ChatGPT, the one and only comment conveyed appreciation in unmistakable Gen Z style: "I drizzle for this content prof."

Career Implications

The potential impact of AI on future job markets was a significant concern in both videos and comments. Several "man-on-the-street"-style interviews filmed on college campuses focused on this theme, with TikTokers asking their peers what their major was, and whether they thought that AI would take over their future jobs. Other videos focused on identifying "AI-proof" careers, advising students to aim for jobs that, in the words of a popular video in our corpus, "don't tie you to a desk", such as architecture, engineering, or construction.

Computer science majors seemed particularly concerned about the impact of AI on their field's future viability, as evidenced by the numerous videos and comments addressing this career path. Some views were downright pessimistic. For instance, a popular young tech influencer on TikTok argued that AI will have a devastating impact on the labor market for computer scientists. His video, captioned in all-caps "DONT GO INTO COMP SCI!!!", attempted to steer college students away from this major and jokingly advised them to "maybe learn how to plumb" instead, implying—as above—that jobs requiring physical presence and manual skills might be less susceptible to AI replacement. The comment thread was filled with panicked students, with many claiming that they're reevaluating their career trajectories ("I'm already majoring in comp science am I cooked?"; "time to pick a new major"; "well look like i gotta go the history path damnit i really wanted to code"). This anxiety was further captured in memes and humorous content, such as a video using a Ryan Gosling meme of "me watching the homeless man pull out his degree in computer science" (Figure 5).

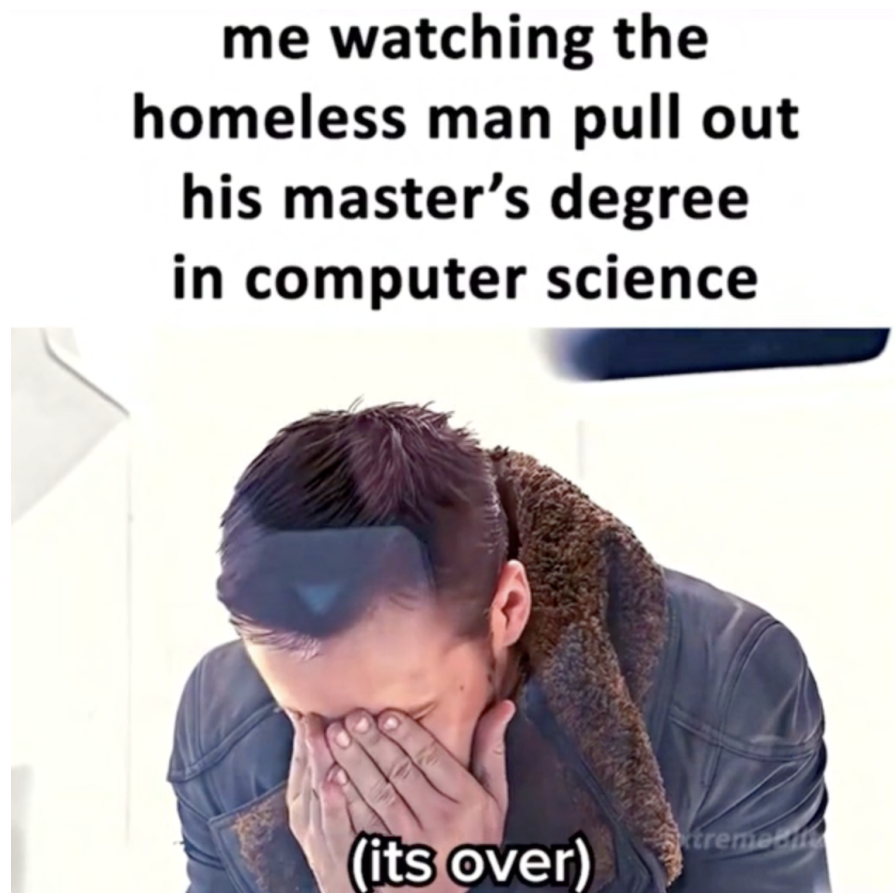


Figure 5. A meme capturing students’ anxieties surrounding the impact of AI on the job market, particularly for careers in computer science

Visioning, Exploring, and Imag(in)ing College Life with AI

Alongside these career anxieties, some TikTokers used AI technology creatively to imagine themselves in their dream jobs, in a kind of visioning process. For example, a nursing student used Remini, an AI photo enhancer app, to depict herself as a nurse (Figure 6). Her slideshow starts with a bathroom selfie, before transitioning into a series of AI-generated images of herself as a nurse, dressed in scrubs and wearing a stethoscope. “[u]sing this trend to stay motivated in school”, she wrote atop the selfie in the first frame.

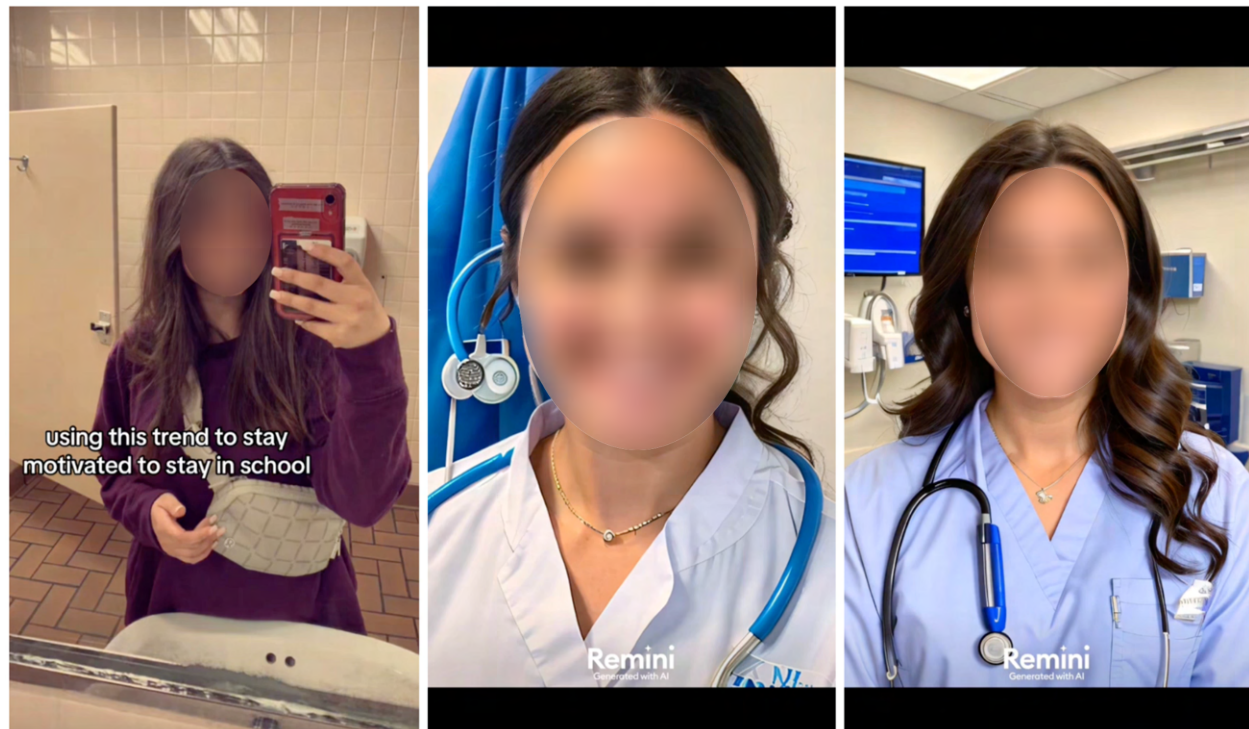


Figure 6. A nursing student uses AI for career visioning and self-motivation

Other types of AI-enabled visioning included using TikTok's AI filters to experiment with different styles or personas, almost like trying on clothes. Some of these also asked for viewers' feedback: for instance, on a slideshow that depicted her as various AI-generated athletic types (e.g. "The Fitness Freak"; "The Sporty Spice"; "The Pro-Pitcher"), a creator asked "Which one would you like to date most? 🤖💪"). Such uses suggest that AI is not just a tool for academic work but may also be a means of personal discovery, self-expression, and creativity for young people—with fascinating implications for identity development and exploration.

Indeed, use of the AI filter was highly popular in our corpus, with more than 100 videos consisting of creative imaginings of college life using AI—speculating, for instance, what college campuses might look like according to a specific theme (e.g. "Gryffindor University"; "Capricorn University"; "Fall University"; "Nike University"), how dorm rooms would be decorated according to various aesthetics or for different college majors, or even charting the development of a college crush via AI-generated images. These videos had extremely high engagement, in terms of both likes and comments; in comments, users reacted passionately to these depictions, tagged their friends, and often requested other themes or aesthetics. Perhaps in view of this high rate of engagement, official college accounts also joined the fray, such as a regional state university's experimentation with TikTok's AI filter to expand photos of its campus. The adoption of these trends by official university accounts hints at the budding role of AI in higher education marketing, as well as its potential to spark imagination and foster community engagement around shared educational experiences.

Discussion

Our analysis addresses two interrelated questions about youth discourse on AI in higher education through TikTok. Regarding the predominant discourse about AI (RQ1), we identified three primary discursive modes: commercial rhetoric emphasizing undetectability, efficiency, and grades; peer debates about ethics, academic integrity, and educational purpose; and affective expressions of anxiety, aspiration, and creative identity exploration. These modes often intertwine—commercial language shapes student rhetoric, ethical debates occur in comments on promotional videos, and platform affordances enable both knowledge-sharing and misinformation. Regarding what this reveals about youth perspectives (RQ2), our findings illuminate pragmatic attitudes toward AI as a tool, deep concerns about equity and false accusations, fundamental questioning of higher education's value proposition, and innovative uses of AI for identity development. We discuss these findings below in relation to implications for educational practice, platform dynamics, and future research.

Educational Paradigms in the Age of AI: Challenges and Opportunities

Our analysis illuminates the complex ways in which young people are grappling with the integration of AI into higher education, revealing implications for scholars, educators, and technology developers alike. On the one hand, we found that many students posting and commenting on TikTok viewed AI as a valuable tool for enhancing learning, improving efficiency, and leveling the playing field for disadvantaged students. This aligns with previous research highlighting the potential benefits perceived by students, especially in terms of personalized learning (Baek et al., 2024; Crompton and Burke, 2023). On the other hand, concerns about academic integrity, job prospects, and the value of traditional education were also prevalent, echoing findings from survey-based studies (e.g., Chan and Hu, 2023; Obenza et al., 2023).

The latter point about the value of a college degree must also be contextualized within the current landscape of American higher education. Our findings revealed a growing skepticism among young people about traditional educational paths and the perceived return on investment given the high cost of a college education. While AI is adding fuel to the fire, this skepticism may also be influenced by broader factors. In the U.S., public perceptions regarding the return on investment value of a college education are influenced by the rising cost of living and high student debt, and may further be fanned by right-wing political rhetoric that criticizes ideological bias in academia and promotes alternative vocational pathways (see, e.g., Cineas, 2023). This skeptical stance is likely to be exacerbated by the perceived impact of AI on students' educational and (pre-)professional journeys.

Our study also highlights several practical implications for education stakeholders. Chief among these is the urgent need for clear, consistent, and transparent AI policies in educational institutions. Students in our sample repeatedly expressed frustration with the discrepancies between syllabus statements, school-wide policies, and student handbooks regarding AI use. This lack of clarity not only creates confusion but also contributes to an atmosphere of anxiety and suspicion. Looking

ahead, it is imperative for institutions to prioritize developing comprehensive, consistent AI policies that not only address potential misuse but also provide clear guidelines for ethical and productive AI integration in academic work.

The equity implications of AI in education emerged as another crucial theme in our findings. Our research design, collecting data in-situ on social media, allowed us to grasp how cultural contexts and social dynamics influence young people's discussions and opinions about AI in education. In particular, two key aspects of equity stood out: disability and cost. Regarding the former, our findings reveal concerns among neurodivergent students about AI detection systems potentially discriminating against their natural writing styles—the intersection between (dis)ability and AI in academic contexts is a valuable area for further research, and one that needs to center the perspectives of neurodivergent students both thematically and methodologically (Averett, 2021). Second, regarding cost, the frustration expressed by students regarding the cost of AI tools echoes broader concerns about educational technology and its potential to exacerbate rather than alleviate existing inequalities (Garcia and Lee, 2020).

Importantly, our findings point to a critical need for AI literacy among students. While much of the current discussion around equity in AI education focuses on access to tools, the more significant gap may lie in students' ability to use AI effectively for learning, rather than merely as a shortcut for completing assignments (Baek et al., 2024; Warschauer et al., 2023). The enthusiasm we observed for peer-to-peer sharing of AI tips and best practices indicates a strong desire among students for practical guidance on how to leverage AI technologies in their academic work. This suggests that institutions should prioritize developing comprehensive AI literacy programs that go beyond mere tool familiarity to foster critical thinking about AI's capabilities, limitations, and ethical implications in educational and, increasingly, professional contexts (see, e.g. Warschauer et al., 2023, for a helpful framework).

Significantly, our findings reveal that AI is not just shaping students' academic practices, but also influencing their sense of identity and future aspirations. As students use AI to visualize different versions of themselves—a process that can be both playful and aspirational—they are engaging in new forms of self-discovery and representation. Looking ahead, young people's use of AI filters for creative imaginings of self (and of their environments, like the AI-generated college campuses or dorm rooms we saw in our data) represents a novel form of identity exploration that is ripe for further research. As research on youth online self-expression (e.g., Stahl and Literat, 2022; Wargo, 2017) has shown, these representational processes can matter greatly in terms of youth development and identity formation. In our data, for instance, we've seen how AI-generated images can reinforce stereotypes and biases (e.g. leaning into stereotypes of a school/type of student, or augmenting selfies to make users more conventionally attractive), but also inspire and motivate (e.g. helping students visualize their future careers—though it must be noted that these imaginings can be, by nature of the technology used and how it is critically used, heavily stereotyped). These complexities underscore the value of this line of inquiry, and we hope that future research can zoom in on the nuances of these processes and the scope of their potential impact.

Social Media's Role in Shaping AI Discourse and Educational Practices

Our study underscores the significant role that social media platforms like TikTok play in shaping youth perceptions of AI and facilitating knowledge-sharing around emerging technologies. As illustrated by previous research on social media's role in facilitating educational discourse among young people (e.g., Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018; Cole et al., 2017; Literat, 2021), peer support networks can play a crucial role in helping students adapt to new developments in formal education, including of the technological kind (Literat, 2021). What is more, in addition to peer-to-peer connections, our findings also highlight the role of TikTok in facilitating dialogue between students and educators about AI use in education—a potentially valuable opportunity for perspective exchange and intergenerational dialogue.

Yet these platforms serve not only as spaces for peer-to-peer learning and community- building, but also as sites of tension between educational discourse and commercial interests. The composition of our dataset—with almost half the corpus consisting of promotional content — reflects TikTok's commercial model, where boundaries between advertising and user content are strategically blurred (Abidin, 2021; Duffy and Hund, 2019). Students seeking AI information encounter discourse dominated by companies selling products, often disguised as peer advice through influencer partnerships with poor disclosure practices. This commercial saturation also complicates the interpretation of student perspectives. For instance, the efficiency framing that pervades user discourse—exemplified by the title quote, "It's not about laziness, it's about efficiency"—mirrors promotional language marketing AI as time-saving tools. Whether individual students adopted this framing from advertisements or arrived at similar language independently cannot be determined; what is observable is that efficiency rhetoric circulates across both commercial and user-generated content, suggesting commercial messaging provides readily available linguistic frameworks for articulating AI use.

Given the centrality of commercial dynamics, our study reinforces the takeaway that youth expression on social media, including around educational experiences, is increasingly commodified, with platform economies monetizing interactions and tying youth cultures to consumption (Lombana-Bermudez et al., 2020; Ørmen and Gregersen, 2023). What is more, the pervasiveness of undisclosed promotional content—as well as the visibility of ads for illegal “clothing removal” technology—raises questions about the regulation of commercial content on social media platforms, an issue that has received too little attention in the literature to date.

Last but not least, it is worth noting again that the AI discourse we analyze here is heavily shaped by algorithmic dynamics; this affects both what we captured in our high-engagement sample and what students actually encounter on the platform. For instance, detection anxiety, cost concerns, and efficiency framing emerged as dominant themes in our data, while algorithmic bias, data privacy, and labor implications appeared marginally. This distribution likely reflects both genuine student priorities and which issues gain visibility within TikTok's commercial discourse space (van Dijck et al., 2018). What is more, algorithms prioritize engagement metrics over informational quality (Gillespie, 2014), meaning sensational content gains visibility regardless of accuracy. Here, for instance, we saw how the tech influencer's oversimplified warning against computer science

careers went viral and seemed to shift commenters' perceptions, while professors' nuanced guidance appeared rarely.

Limitations and Conclusion

While our study provides valuable insights into youth perspectives on AI in higher education, it is limited by its focus on public TikTok posts from U.S. users. Future research could benefit from cross-platform and international perspectives, building on comparative work like that of Kizilcec and colleagues (2024); additionally, longitudinal studies could help track how perceptions evolve as AI technologies advance and become more integrated into educational settings. It is also important to note that our study captures only what users choose to post publicly, which may not necessarily reflect their private beliefs or practices. The potential for surveillance—especially by professors or institutions, which students seem to be aware of—and the public nature of the platform may influence the content and opinions shared.

Our sampling strategy prioritized high-engagement content (top 10 posts by likes monthly), which may introduce bias toward algorithmically amplified promotional content. However, the high proportion of advertisements in our corpus (49.4%) likely reflects both sampling bias and TikTok's actual commercial saturation—students seeking AI information on the platform navigate a heavily commercialized discourse space. We therefore treat this not solely as a methodological limitation but as a finding about the informational environment students encounter.

Despite these caveats, the present approach offered a unique window into how young people perceive and engage with generative AI in higher education through the lens of TikTok. By analyzing nearly a thousand TikTok videos and their associated comments, we were able to capture spontaneous, peer-to-peer discussions about AI in education, providing insights that might not be as readily accessible through traditional survey or interview methods. Our findings highlight the need for more nuanced understandings of how young people are navigating the ethical, practical, and personal implications of AI in education. As AI continues to evolve and integrate into academic settings, platforms like TikTok will likely remain crucial spaces for discussion, debate, and community-building among students grappling with these technological changes. By paying attention to these online discourses, we can gain valuable access to students' concerns, aspirations, and evolving practices, capturing the zeitgeist of a generation grappling with this transformative technology in real-time.

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