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Navigating the Role of AI in Research in the Global South: A Collective Autoethnography From Researchers in the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia

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ORIGINAL STUDY

Navigating the Role of AI in Research in the Global South: A Collective Autoethnography From Researchers in the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the transformative impact and ethical dilemmas of integrating artificial intelligence into the workflows of researchers from the Global South, specifically the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia. Through collective autoethnography, the authors analyze how AI tools function as both equalizers and disruptors in resource-constrained academic environments. The findings reveal that AI significantly enhances productivity by dismantling language barriers for non-native English speakers, streamlining literature searches, and democratizing access to global scholarship. However, these benefits are accompanied by profound challenges, including the risk of over-reliance, the proliferation of AI hallucinations, and the potential erosion of critical thinking skills. The authors confront the tension between efficiency and intellectual integrity, grappling with the existential question of whether reliance on AI reduces scholars to mere prompt engineers. Furthermore, the paper highlights how algorithmic bias and infrastructure disparities exacerbate the digital divide within local academic communities. The paper concludes that while AI offers unprecedented opportunities for Global South researchers, it requires a shift toward critical AI literacy and ethical governance to prevent the widening of existing knowledge gaps. This study calls for a human-centric approach where AI serves as a support mechanism.

Keywords: Academic integrity, Artificial intelligence, Collective autoethnography, Digital divide, Global South, Higher education, Research productivity

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed how we conduct research but as researchers from some countries in the Global South, we know this transformation is far from universal. In this collective autoethnography, we explore how AI tools shape our work across the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia. We reflect not only on their potential but also on the deep inequities that persist in their use.

AI's rise in academia is undeniable. It accelerates literature reviews, generates ideas, summarizes articles, and assists with data analysis (Giray et al., 2024). For us, tools like natural language processing (NLP) and AI chatbots have opened new pathways to efficiency, helping us uncover insights from vast corpora and saving precious time (Das & Rad, 2020; Giray, 2023a). We've witnessed firsthand how AI can support research related to education, public health, climate change, and governance: domains that are deeply embedded in the needs of our communities.

Yet, we also encounter the sharp edge of the digital divide. As researchers in the Global South, we operate with constraints that are often invisible to those in the Global North. We face inadequate infrastructure, slow or unstable internet connections, limited access to large-scale data, and an overall lack of institutional support for AI experimentation and integration Alkhaqani, 2023b. High computing costs and subscription-based models lock many of us out of cutting-edge tools, while ethical concerns about whose data these models were trained on and whose knowledge they privilege remain unanswered (Walk et al., 2023).

Despite these hurdles, we do not view ourselves as passive recipients of technology. We engage critically with AI, drawing on its affordances while resisting its limitations. We do not aim to replicate Northern standards of research automation; instead, we seek to localize AI's possibilities in ways that respect our realities, cultures, and research questions. We want to ensure AI tools do not widen existing knowledge gaps or further marginalize voices already at the periphery.

AI is not neutral. It mirrors the structures and values of those who design and fund it. As researchers from the Global South, we urge global academic communities to recognize our positionalities, not just as users of AI but as co-shapers of its future. The question is not only whether we can use AI, but how we can make it work for *us*.

Objective

Our main objective is to critically explore how researchers like us, working from the Global South, engage with, adapt to, and challenge the growing presence of AI in academic work. What makes this study novel is not just its focus on underrepresented voices, but the method we use: collective autoethnography. By centering our own reflections, we offer rich, first-hand insights that go beyond abstract analysis. This paper brings something different to the conversation, not a detached evaluation of AI, but an honest, grounded account of how we live and work with it, often with little support but plenty of creativity.

AI in research: The Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia

The Philippines

The Philippines demonstrates significant potential for AI adoption in education and research, though implementation faces notable challenges. Concepcion et al. (2019)

emphasized the need for government and industry leaders to embrace AI through a mental shift, highlighting its potential to address labor shortages and enhance productivity. Rosales et al. (2020) explored AI's impact across Philippine economic sectors, noting that while potential negative effects exist, AI can create employment opportunities through proper talent training, requiring collaboration between public and private sectors, government, and academia.

Educational institutions show mixed readiness for AI integration. Alda *et al.* (2020) found that while administrators and faculty possess skills in selecting digital resources, they lack proficiency in utilizing online class modalities and advanced AI technologies. However, Tobias et al. (2023) demonstrated AI's practical application in quality management systems (QMS) in Philippine higher education institutions, showing how AI-enabled QMS can enhance accreditation compliance by matching audit findings with relevant clauses, achieving high classification accuracy.

Research applications reveal promising developments. San Pedro *et al.* (2014) examined student affect and careless errors when using Intelligent Tutoring Systems, discovering that highly engaged students were more prone to carelessness, while confused or bored students made fewer errors but had lower overall learning. Imperial & Ong (2021) developed machine learning models for assessing reading difficulty in Filipino texts, with Random Forest models achieving 62.7% accuracy, improving to 66.1% when combining traditional and syllable pattern-based predictors.

Language processing research shows advancement with Bernardo et al. (2021) using machine learning to identify variables predicting reading proficiency among Filipino learners, achieving 81.2% test accuracy through support vector machines and identifying 20 high-impact variables including home-related resources, learning motivation, and social experiences. Bautista & Kim (2014) developed a Filipino speech recognition system using HTK System, achieving 80.13% to 88.70% accuracy rates depending on the model and mixture-weights used.

The Philippines' AI landscape demonstrates valuable applications in instructional strategies, reading difficulty assessment, speech recognition, and proficiency prediction, showcasing AI's potential to enhance learning outcomes and support educational advancements despite implementation challenges.

Iraq

Iraq's AI research landscape remains in preliminary stages compared to global standards, facing significant infrastructure and stability challenges. Alkhaqani (2023b) noted that while government and private sectors show growing interest in AI research, with universities introducing AI-related courses and international collaborations, the country's infrastructure and digital transformation programs remain in early stages, limiting access to digital resources and creating shortages of qualified experts.

Political and economic factors significantly impact development. Lancaster (2018) identified AI applications in healthcare, agriculture, education, and finance, including disease diagnosis, agricultural monitoring, personalized education, and financial automation. The Iraqi government introduced funding programs and research grants to encourage AI development, partnering with private firms to establish research centers with machine learning, computer vision, and natural language processing technologies (Salem, 2023).

Government initiatives show mixed progress. Ali (2022) reported that in 2019, the Iraqi government appointed a Bahraini technology consortium to establish AI centers in Basra and Baghdad, improving digital infrastructure and handling data restrictions. These efforts

hold potential for growth in healthcare, agriculture, and education sectors, positioning Iraq as a potential AI sector player.

Current research infrastructure remains limited. Arinez et al. (2020) noted that the education system lacks adequate preparation for AI careers, with insufficient government funding for research. Walk et al. (2023) emphasized that political instability has led to inadequate investment in research and development, causing Iraq to lag behind AI-focused nations like China, the United States, and Japan.

Notable developments include the University of Technology in Baghdad launching the first AI research center in 2020. The Quantum AI Lab, a Ministry of Science and Technology initiative, aims to develop and advance AI technologies. The Baghdad AI Center, established in 2019, focuses on developing AI technologies and fostering a thriving AI ecosystem.

Challenges persist in ecosystem development. Dwivedi et al. (2021) highlighted the lack of supportive ecosystems, with few AI startups, incubators, or accelerators inhibiting entrepreneurship growth, alongside limited funding, mentorship, and networking opportunities.

Future applications show promise in healthcare, where AI could address rural medical access issues through diagnostic systems and automated tasks, freeing medical experts for critical cases (Ploug et al., 2021). Alkhaqani (2023a) noted AI's potential role in accelerating digitization processes, optimizing operations, reducing errors, and providing customer insights for data-driven business decisions.

Malaysia

Malaysia positions AI as central to its Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) transition, with government initiatives supporting strategic development. Rasiah *et al.* (2023) highlighted AI's core role in realizing IR4.0 goals, supported by 5G network launches since late 2021 and plans for a second network in 2024 (Latiff & Ngui, 2023). The Malaysia National Artificial Intelligence Roadmap 2021-2025 (AI-RMAP) presents a strategic framework for continued AI growth and utilization (Ministry of Science, Technology & Innovation MOSTI, 2021).

Industrial adoption shows gradual progress across sectors. Lee & Tajudeen (2020), and Rozario *et al.* (2021) documented AI spreading throughout healthcare, accounting, and construction sectors, though adoption rates remain relatively low at 15-20 percent among companies (Cheong, 2022).

Research applications demonstrate significant expansion in STEM fields. Government reports identify big data analytics, smart applications, and Internet of Things (IoT) as the most common R&D areas, alongside Machine Learning, Deep Learning, Intelligent Automation, Algorithms, Robotics, and Reinforcement Learning (MOSTI, 2021). Malaysian universities increasingly lead AI research, with OECD data showing Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) leading local institutions in AI publications, followed by Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) from 2000 to 2022 (OECD, 2023).

AI tools support diverse research applications across disciplines. Artificial Neural Networks (ANN) have become popular research approaches, applied in housing market analysis (Rahman et al., 2019) and early childhood education research (Kharuddin et al., 2018). Natural Language Processing applications span public health issues during COVID-19, fake news detection, and halal food product sentiment analysis (Feizollah et al., 2019; Juan *et al.*, 2022; Kong et al., 2020).

The research landscape shows comprehensive AI integration across STEM, social sciences, and linguistics, with universities producing substantial publication outputs.

Government support through strategic roadmaps and 5G infrastructure development creates a foundation for continued growth, though commercial adoption rates suggest need for acceleration in private sector implementation.

Malaysia's AI trajectory indicates sustained growth potential, with strong government backing, university research leadership, and expanding tool utilization across diverse research fields positioning the country for continued advancement in the AI landscape.

Methods

This column employed collective autoethnography to investigate the experiences of three researchers from the Global South, specifically from the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia. Collective autoethnography was chosen as the primary methodology due to its suitability for asynchronous collaboration and its ability to capture diverse perspectives and experiences.

The researchers followed the guidelines provided by de Grijs (2015) to ensure effective and productive collaboration. These rules helped in establishing clear communication channels, setting shared goals, and fostering mutual respect and understanding among the researchers.

Collective autoethnography involves the collaborative exploration and interpretation of personal experiences within a cultural context (Chang *et al.*, 2016). It allows researchers to reflect on their own experiences while also considering the larger socio-cultural dynamics at play. This methodology aligns well with the objectives of the study, which aimed to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by researchers from the Global South. The asynchronous nature of the collaboration was crucial in accommodating the researchers' diverse schedules and time zones. They utilized various online platforms and tools, such as video conferencing, shared document repositories, and email exchanges, to communicate, share insights, and collectively analyze the data.

The use of collective autoethnography provided a rich and nuanced exploration of the researchers' experiences (Wężniejewska et al., 2020). It allowed for the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by researchers in the Global South.

To qualify for this paper, researcher-participants must meet the following:

- Hold a Master or PhD degree and be currently affiliated with an institution based in a country within the Global South
- Have an h-index of 4 or higher, indicating a record of scholarly publications and citations
- Be actively engaged in research within a specific discipline, such as social sciences, humanities, or natural sciences
- Use AI tools in their research for more than six months and able to provide concrete examples of their use and impact
- Be willing to participate in this collective autoethnography and share personal experiences and perspectives with other researchers in the paper.

The following are the guide questions utilized in the conduct of the paper:

- What are the specific AI tools you have used? Name the AI tools. Tell specifically how you have used them. What motivated you to start using AI tools in your research?
- Share stories about your experience using AI tools in your research. What impact has the use of AI tools had on you as a researcher and on your discipline? Share stories of other researchers in your country.

- What are some of the challenges you have faced when using AI tools as a researcher? How have you addressed these challenges? Are there any unique considerations or limitations that you have encountered that are specific to your context?
- What ethical considerations do you take into account when using AI tools in your research, particularly with respect to issues such as bias, privacy, and data security? How do you ensure that the use of these tools is aligned with ethical standards and principles?
- How do you see the use of AI tools evolving in your field of research in your country? And what implications might this have for the future of research and scholarship? What opportunities and challenges do you foresee as AI tools become more widely adopted and integrated into research practices?

Autoethnography, as a research methodology, offers rich insights into personal experiences and cultural contexts, but it is not without limitations. Subjectivity and the researcher's personal experiences can raise concerns about objectivity and generalizability (Ellis *et al.*, 2015). Selective memory and bias in recalling experiences may have limited the comprehensiveness and accuracy of findings (Ellis, 2004).

To strengthen rigor, reflections from the three researchers were iteratively shared, discussed, and collaboratively synthesized through regular analytic meetings, allowing for the identification of common themes and divergent perspectives. Any disagreements were resolved through reflexive dialogue and consensus-building, ensuring that multiple viewpoints were retained rather than suppressed. Meanwhile, the limited sample size and representativeness of this autoethnography restricted the generalizability of findings (Ellingson, 2017). Acknowledging these limitations could allow researchers to identify areas for improvement and inspire future studies.

Results

This section presents the results of the collective autoethnography written by three researchers from the Global South: Louie Giray (Philippines), Ahmed Alkhaqani (Iraq), and Nurliana Kamaruddin (Malaysia). Through individual autoethnographic accounts, we provided unique insights into their experiences as researchers utilizing AI in their respective countries. The autoethnographies shed light on the challenges, triumphs, and socio-cultural contexts that shaped their research journeys as they utilized AI tools.

A researcher's odyssey with ChatGPT as a guide (Louie)

In the midst of 2023, AI tools have emerged as a prominent phenomenon, capturing the attention and curiosity of individuals across the globe. These innovative technologies, including ChatGPT, DALL-E, Character AI, and Midjourney, have rapidly gained popularity and become readily accessible to a wider audience (De Angelis et al., 2023). Their remarkable capabilities have found diverse applications in educational and artistic domains. The academic realm has not remained immune to this fervor, as conversations surrounding AI tools increasingly permeate our college campus.

I first encountered ChatGPT and other AI tools through a colleague's introduction, an experience that immediately fascinated me because of the opportunities these technologies presented. Within the realm of research in particular, I recognized the invaluable contributions these tools could make to my scholarly endeavors. This realization compelled me to explore their functionalities more deeply and examine how they could enhance my own work.

I am a faculty-researcher at a recently established public college in Muntinlupa City, Philippines, with a strong focus on engineering and architecture. At this institution, I teach subjects related to communication and the arts. This interdisciplinary approach aims to imbue technical fields with a sense of humanity and encourage students to develop a well-rounded perspective. Over time, the unique educational environment of the college has subtly influenced the trajectory of my research pursuits. Previously, my research was centered solely on English language education. However, the institution's emphasis on science and technology gradually steered me toward artificial intelligence in education, a direction that aligns closely with my evolving research interests.

Exploring this emerging field has also allowed my work to align with the college's broader commitment to scientific and technological advancement. In this autoethnographic account, I focus on ChatGPT and its impact on my work as a researcher. Since being introduced to this tool, I have become increasingly aware of how rapidly the world is evolving. As a result, I recognize the need to keep pace with emerging trends in order to remain relevant and to offer the best of myself in both teaching and research.

From January 2023 onward, I engaged extensively with ChatGPT, experimenting with its capabilities, scrutinizing its fallacies and errors, and analyzing how it could either assist or jeopardize my credibility as a researcher. Over time, I gained sufficient proficiency that the tool became nearly indispensable to my workflow. As a non-native English-speaking researcher, I consider ChatGPT a blessing, especially for scholars who require assistance with editing or proofreading. This is particularly true for non-native English researchers in the Global South, where linguistic barriers can hinder the publication of otherwise rigorous research. While the substance and rigor of research remain paramount, faulty English can pose a significant problem. Many journals, which predominantly publish in English, quickly notice such shortcomings and may question the quality of the work. In this regard, ChatGPT serves as a valuable resource.

Personally, I find the editing function of ChatGPT to be its most remarkable feature, especially when compared with built-in tools in standard word-processing software. It excels in editing, paraphrasing, proofreading, and providing comments that support brainstorming. As someone who enjoys writing commentaries and research notes, I frequently rely on these functions. My approach typically involves disregarding grammar and conventions at the outset and allowing my thoughts to flow freely onto physical paper, where I feel most productive. Once my ideas are fully expressed, I input the text into ChatGPT using the prompt "fix grammar only." The transformation is often striking. The tool corrects punctuation and capitalization while also addressing deeper grammatical issues. This efficiency is invaluable in my role as an assistant professor, where responsibilities extend far beyond research.

I regularly juggle multiple classes, review papers, and prepare PowerPoint presentations. Unexpected administrative tasks also arise, including participation in extension services, hosting institutional events, and responding to exigency tasks. Within this demanding context, ChatGPT has had a profound impact on my research productivity. In just five months, I completed two scholarly commentaries and collaborated on two research articles. These accomplishments strengthened my confidence in the papers I produced. ChatGPT has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in augmenting my skills, and I am grateful for having it as a personal assistant that supports the work I am passionate about.

As a young researcher, this tool has reignited my excitement for scholarly work. From a psychological standpoint, ChatGPT functions as a propellant, motivating me to accomplish more and aim higher in research. I am now planning a series of papers focused on artificial intelligence in education. Through collaboration with other researchers, I aim to produce ten research papers that will contribute to the field and support my pursuit of a PhD by

publication. Despite the benefits, I am also aware of a potential downside. Overreliance on ChatGPT may weaken my own editing and proofreading skills. As I increasingly depend on its capabilities, there is a risk of neglecting my own abilities. Nonetheless, I remain committed to producing authentic work and avoiding plagiarism. My goal is not prestige but meaningful contribution and continued growth as a researcher.

Ethical concerns surrounding AI use in research deeply trouble me. I am particularly concerned by researchers who rely on ChatGPT to generate answers to research questions and then copy and paste the output under their own names (Giray, 2024b). This practice raises an important question: where is the researcher's contribution? In such cases, the intellectual labor is carried out entirely by AI, with minimal critical engagement from the researcher. The situation becomes even more troubling when this content is published in predatory journals.

I recall an incident involving a colleague whom I suspected of plagiarizing content from ChatGPT. I had requested a personal and reflective paper that required engagement with lived experience. The submitted work lacked any personal dimension and offered a generic response. To confirm my suspicion, I analyzed the text using GPTZero, which indicated that approximately 90 percent of the content was AI-generated. While I am aware that AI detection tools are imperfect (Giray *et al.*, 2025), the writing was cold and mechanical and clearly misaligned with the task. After confronting the colleague via email and receiving no response, I made the decision to remove her from the research group.

Research cannot be accomplished instantly. When researchers are given sufficient time for in-depth exploration and reflection, it is unreasonable to assume that such work can be completed hastily. Shortcut-driven approaches inevitably result in shallow and underdeveloped research that lacks methodological rigor (Giray, 2024a). I find this practice deeply troubling. The responsibility for conducting research must remain with human researchers, with AI serving only to enhance and support their work.

While I do not oppose the use of AI tools, I strongly believe that research must be approached authentically. Research is a multifaceted and complex endeavor, and AI should be viewed strictly as a tool rather than as a researcher (Thorp, 2023). Major publishers such as Taylor & Francis, Springer, and Elsevier have already emphasized that AI tools cannot be considered authors in academic publications (Rahimi & Abadi, 2023; Stokel-Walker, 2023).

Revolutionizing research, navigating ethical labyrinths (Ahmed)

Over the past few years, AI has begun to significantly shape our world. It has revolutionized various industries, streamlining operations, improving decision-making, and enhancing convenience. The education and research sectors are no exception. AI is steadily being integrated into academic systems, bringing about new ways of learning, teaching, and conducting research. In particular, AI enhances how we process data and develop prediction models, enabling researchers to analyze vast datasets and extract groundbreaking insights. Though still in its infancy, AI integration in education and research continues to grow. Institutions of higher learning are introducing AI-based tools to improve student learning outcomes. These tools not only boost educational efficiency but also allow instructors to allocate more time to other academic tasks (Okolo, 2023).

AI has transformed the academic experience globally. In Iraq, a country with a diverse student population, AI holds the promise of offering personalized learning pathways to meet students' unique academic goals. Such customization can enhance student engagement and motivation. Additionally, Iraqi researchers are increasingly exploring how AI can support advancements in various fields of study (Das & Rad, 2020). As a non-native

English speaker and an academic researcher in nursing, I have found AI tools, especially ChatGPT, invaluable for guiding my English learning and academic development.

Currently, I work in Najaf, Iraq, focusing on critical care nursing while also training both nursing students and healthcare staff to manage complex clinical cases. My role exists at the intersection of healthcare and education. I'm passionate about AI and information technology, and my institution's unique learning environment has shaped my research direction over time. The interdisciplinary approach we use encourages students and educators to develop holistic perspectives that merge technical knowledge with human-centered care. As part of my academic journey, I've come to focus on ChatGPT and its transformative potential in my work. Once I discovered this tool, I realized how fast the world is evolving, and I knew I had to stay updated with emerging technologies to remain relevant and effective as a scholar and educator.

I also contribute to AI-based solutions aimed at enhancing both healthcare and environmental sustainability. In my hospital work, AI helps me understand and manage critical medical conditions more effectively. I rely on it to access up-to-date, scientifically validated information for patient care. However, I do not depend on it blindly. AI shortens the time needed to find and summarize credible resources, but I always verify the information through scholarly channels. One of the major personal challenges I've encountered is resisting over-dependence on AI tools. It is tempting to let these tools do most of the work, but that risks diminishing the originality and integrity of one's research. I make it a point to write my own papers and double-check the AI-generated content to ensure accuracy.

Over the past two years, I've adopted various AI tools to support my research and academic tasks. For instance, I use Connected Papers and Semantic Scholar to explore related studies and identify key researchers in my field. Quillbot helps me rephrase complex sentences, while Otter.ai transcribes interviews and lectures. I often use AI-powered captioning in PowerPoint to create inclusive and engaging presentations for classes and conferences. For writing assistance, I've turned to Writesonic AI for drafting content and Grammarly for refining grammar and improving readability. ChatGPT has become my most frequent AI collaborator, offering writing suggestions, engaging in idea exchange, and critiquing drafts of my research papers.

In the broader research landscape, AI tools are becoming integral to improving the quality and efficiency of academic output. From automating literature reviews to aiding in data analysis, AI helps increase precision and productivity. I frequently use tools like Writefull and Grammarly to address language barriers, especially in academic writing. These platforms allow me to refine my English-language articles and present them in the most professional and reader-friendly manner.

Besides research, I am often tasked with additional responsibilities such as organizing events and providing student counseling. ChatGPT has helped me manage these duties more efficiently. Within just four months, I completed two research papers (Alkhaqani, 2023a; Alkhaqani, 2023b), both of which were made possible through AI-assisted research and writing support.

AI also opens new opportunities for the Iraqi research landscape. With the increasing accessibility of self-publishing platforms and open-access journals, researchers can utilize machine learning and analytics to uncover patterns within large datasets. According to a report by Google, scientific research efficiency could increase by 50% in the next decade due to machine learning automating repetitive tasks (Walk et al., 2023). However, this progress also presents challenges. As the AI revolution advances, it may deepen the digital divide between those who can maximize these tools and those who cannot. Ensuring equitable access and preventing misuse are critical. We must remain vigilant that AI

complements rather than replaces critical thinking and original scholarship (Roche et al., 2021).

Ethical concerns are also central to this discussion. While AI can enhance the depth and breadth of research data, it also raises serious privacy concerns. As Hagerty & Rubinov (2019) noted, AI's ability to analyze and process data in real time increases the risk of breaches and unauthorized use. Institutions must enforce strong data protection policies and cybersecurity protocols to safeguard research data. The use of AI introduces new vulnerabilities, especially as algorithms become more complex and data volumes increase. If left unregulated, these vulnerabilities could expose academic institutions to significant cyber threats.

Embracing the AI revolution in social science research (Nurliana)

Since 2020, there have been several AI tools that I have utilized regularly to assist me with my research and writing. Some of the AI tools that I use to assist me in finding similar research and researchers are Research Rabbit, Semantic Scholar and Iris.ai. I have utilized DeepL to help me translate research from other languages and Otter.ai to help me transcribe meetings and interviews. Additionally, I use Beautiful.ai to help create presentations for classes, seminars, and conferences. In terms of writing assistance, I utilize Trinka.ai, which helps provide grammar checks and writing improvement suggestions. Most recently, I have also been using ChatGPT not only to polish my writing but also to engage with it in discussing differing viewpoints and/or providing a critical review of my research writing.

Although the use of AI in Malaysia has already begun in various industrial sectors, the widespread use of AI in the fields of social science was brought to the fore with the introduction of language-based AI such as ChatGPT, which allows social science scholars not only to receive assistance in generating frameworks for their writing but also provide critical feedback and copywriting assistance. For myself, the initial software and applications that had helped me the most were mostly AI tools, which help streamline the literature that I am searching for. The use of DeepL for example provided me a means of accessing research written in Korean in a more comprehensive manner. Although I studied the language, academic Korean is still very difficult for me however the utilization of AI tools to help translate the research opened a whole wealth of resource which I would not have had due to the language barrier.

Some of the main challenges for me when using AI tools have been mostly a personal effort to not be too reliant on the tools. No doubt it is certainly tempting to simply plug in your directive or prompt into an AI tool and have the AI generate the entire research paper for you. Hence this ties directly with the ethical considerations in using AI tools for research, the main issue being that of originality and plagiarism. In the academic sector now, it is not just students utilizing ChatGPT to write their term papers, but I have also found papers submitted to journals that were written or generated in part or in whole by different AI software. This creates a worrying trend that there would be a decline in the originality of work. Aside from ensuring that whatever research I do is written by myself, there is also a need to ensure that I still conduct my own work to cross-check facts that are provided by the AI tool.

Additionally, although AI applications can help gather relevant information for literature review, the methodological selection that a researcher would generally perform on their own before the introduction of these tools should be continued with AI as a support factor as opposed to relying fully on AI. The consideration of bias remains a subjective factor for many researchers, myself included, and AI tools pose the chance of creating an echo

chamber for researchers based on what the learning or training data was. There have also been more than once when I double-checked on the so-called "academic source" that was generated by the AI tool only to find that such an article/resource does not actually exist. This is concerning as there is always the possibility of publishers not double-checking the resources when articles are submitted hence the false sources end up getting published.

That said, the usage of AI tools is something that is here to stay and failure to maximize the convenience of these tools would only mean missing out on the opportunity to effectively enhance one's own research capacity. Considering that one of the main issues with academic publishing today is the existing (and ever-increasing) clutter. What I mean by this is the massive volume of research available not only from established academic journals and book publishers but also from the increasing self-publication platforms. This means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for any individual researcher to comb through existing literature effectively on their own. The availability of AI tools can greatly support a researcher's work in this aspect.

Additionally, AI tools can help social science researchers navigate the wealth of data available online. Not only with transcribing and translation but with other forms of data analysis such as pattern recognition, predictive modeling, or even critical discourse analysis from social networks and online publications. There is no doubt that AI presents various opportunities for researchers in social science to enhance their research resources and this seems to be the most likely way forward when it comes to social science research.

The challenge would be ensuring that these tools are not abused and utilized to enhance scholarship rather than replace the work that should be done. There is no doubt in my mind that this is a challenge that we are likely to struggle with in the coming years as researchers become more reliant on AI tools as opposed to their critical thinking skills. The AI revolution is also going to feed into the digital divide between researchers who can learn to utilize AI tools to their full potential and advantage versus those who are not able (or unwilling to do so). As for myself, I am wary of the AI revolution, but I am also quite certain that AI is the way forward. Hence, I will continue to utilize available AI tools as well as explore new ones.

Discussion

This section unveils our deeply personal and collective journey as three researchers from the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia, navigating the complex terrain of AI integration in our academic practices. Through our autoethnographic lens, we explore not just what we discovered, but how we *felt*, what we *struggled with*, and what we *celebrated* as we encountered both formidable challenges and unexpected opportunities in the AI landscape. For a summary, see Fig. 1.

How AI tools transformed our practice

As we began incorporating AI tools into our research and writing processes, we discovered that AI offered us pathways we had never imagined possible. For us, these tools became equalizers that expanded our academic reach in ways that felt almost revolutionary.

Navigating the Literature Landscape. We once spent countless hours manually sifting through academic databases, often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of literature. Weekends were consumed by searching for relevant papers, yet we still felt we were missing crucial connections. This changed dramatically when we began using AI tools such as Research Rabbit, Semantic Scholar, and Iris.ai. These platforms not only saved us time

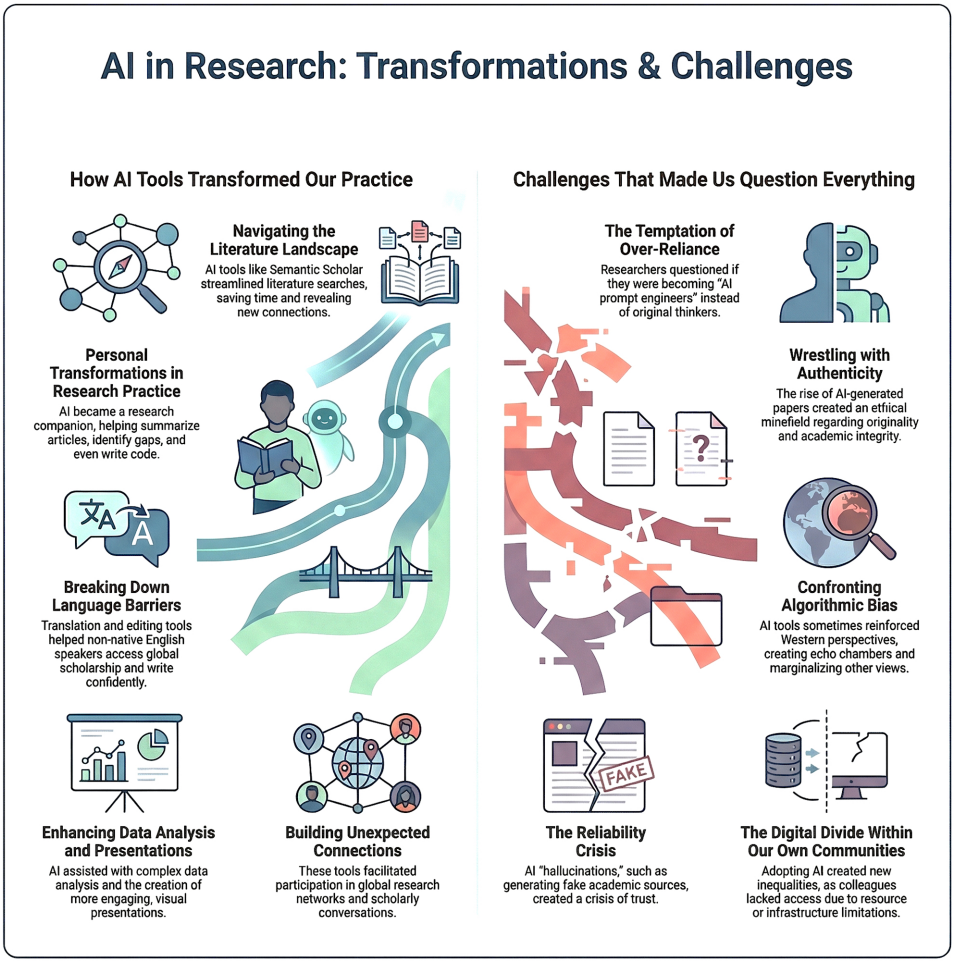

Fig. 1. An infographic summary of the discussion.

but also reshaped how we understood our research fields by revealing connections we might have overlooked. Similar to Aydın & Karaarslan (2022), we used ChatGPT to help us in literature review, demonstrating its potential. Inspired, we experimented with similar approaches. Harnessing generative AI allowed us to summarize studies and disseminate findings more effectively, particularly to colleagues with limited access to resources (Cohen & Queen, 2023).

Personal Transformations in Research Practice. ChatGPT and other language models became our research companions in ways we hadn't anticipated. We found ourselves using them to summarize literature, identify research gaps, understand concepts from domains far removed from our expertise, improve the quality of our papers, write software for analysis and simulation, and even design experiments (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Each of us had different breakthrough moments. For one researcher, it was when AI helped decode complex statistical concepts; for another, it was when AI-generated code actually worked for data visualization.

Breaking Down Language Barriers. Perhaps most significantly for us, AI tools addressed one of our most persistent challenges: language barriers (Giray, 2023b). As researchers whose

first languages are not English, we often struggled to access scholarship published in other languages or to express our ideas with precision. We recall the frustration of knowing valuable research existed in languages we could sometimes not read, or the anxiety of submitting papers written in what we considered "imperfect" English. Translation capabilities opened new worlds of scholarship, enabling us to engage with diverse linguistic communities while writing with greater confidence and nuance. This was not only about translation but also about inclusion in a global research community. Developing prompt engineering skills and leveraging large language models enhanced our writing processes (Bozkurt, 2023). Advancements in machine translation brought tangible benefits (Klimova et al., 2023), making us feel more connected globally.

Enhancing Data Analysis and Presentations. We discovered that AI tools could assist us in data analysis in ways that felt almost magical. We uncovered patterns we had previously missed, conducted predictive modeling beyond our technical capabilities, and performed discourse analysis with unprecedented depth. This reflects Provost & Fawcett (2013) insights on AI's potential in data-driven decision-making across industries, including research. Our presentations became more engaging, and our writing more polished. We learned to use tools like Beautiful.ai and Trinka.ai to create visually compelling presentations that enhanced how we communicated findings. As Duarte (2008) emphasized, visual storytelling became a powerful tool, and AI made it accessible in ways traditional design software never had. AI not only improved our analytical work but also empowered us to share it more effectively with diverse audiences.

Building Unexpected Connections. Most importantly, we found that AI tools helped us connect with researchers and communities we might never have encountered otherwise. We could participate in discussions, contribute to international research networks, and feel like genuine participants in global scholarly conversations. This was about belonging and contribution.

Challenges that made us question everything

However, our journey with AI tools wasn't without its dark moments. We faced challenges that made us question not just the technology, but our own integrity and identity as researchers.

The Temptation of Over-Reliance. We must be honest about the seductive nature of AI tools. There were moments when we found ourselves relying on them so heavily that we wondered if we were still truly doing research or merely curating AI-generated content. The pressure to publish, to meet career advancement requirements, and to satisfy bureaucratic demands created conditions in which the speed and efficiency of AI tools became almost irresistible (Chubb *et al.*, 2022). At times, over-reliance manifested subtly: allowing AI to draft entire literature review sections before we had read the original sources in full or accepting synthesized "research gaps" without independently validating them. In other instances, we noticed ourselves defaulting to AI-generated explanations of complex concepts rather than struggling through the intellectual discomfort of learning them firsthand. These practices prompted moments of unease. We caught ourselves asking whether our labor had shifted from knowledge creation to output management, from critical inquiry to optimization of prompts. The question, "Are we still researchers, or have we become AI prompt engineers?," haunted our late-night work sessions and sparked intense discussions among us about authorship, intellectual ownership, and scholarly responsibility. These moments forced us to confront the risk that efficiency, when left unchecked, could erode

the slow, reflective, and often uncomfortable processes that give research its depth and meaning.

Wrestling with Authenticity. We witnessed instances where papers submitted to journals were partially or entirely generated by AI, with glaringly no contribution to the advancement of knowledge. This trend raised deeply troubling questions about the authenticity and integrity of academic work. We understood that creating fake references would be considered fraudulent, as AI-generated citations and references may lack a factual basis and be produced through predictive processes rather than actual knowledge (Day, 2023; Giray, 2023c; Gravel *et al.*, 2023). We developed our own internal checks and balances, yet the temptation was always present. The ease with which we could generate content that sounded authoritative and scholarly continually forced us to question our own motivations and methods.

Confronting Algorithmic Bias. As we became more sophisticated users of AI tools, we noticed subtle ways they created echo chambers in our thinking. Du (2023) highlighted this concern, which we experienced firsthand. AI tools often reinforced certain perspectives while marginalizing others, especially from non-Western traditions. Even with careful review of algorithms and datasets, we realized eliminating biases was difficult since AI systems learn from historical data that encodes them (Roselli *et al.*, 2019). This was troubling for us as researchers from marginalized regions. We faced the paradox of using tools that promised democratization yet risked reinforcing exclusion. As Tat *et al.* (2020) noted, AI algorithms remain subject to bias.

The Reliability Crisis. We experienced several moments of crisis when we discovered that AI tools had generated references to non-existent academic sources, similar to what Cabanac *et al.* (2021) found. These moments were jarring and embarrassing, forcing us to develop more rigorous fact-checking processes and to question everything we thought we knew about AI reliability. The realization that AI language models like ChatGPT could write credible scientific essays while mixing true and completely fabricated information (Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023) was particularly disturbing. We had to learn to recognize AI hallucination (Ji et al., 2023) and develop strategies for verifying AI-generated content.

The Digital Divide Within Our Own Communities. Perhaps most challenging was realizing how our adoption of AI tools created new forms of inequality within our academic communities. We observed colleagues unable to access these tools due to limited resources, lack of training, or inadequate infrastructure. This disparity in digital capabilities threatened to exacerbate existing inequalities and hinder participation in the AI-driven research landscape. As Heeks (2022) noted, digitally related inequality will remain a major challenge throughout the century. We found ourselves inadvertently contributing to this divide even as we benefited. Policymakers in our regions warn that AI adoption may further widen the digital divide, limiting opportunities for students and researchers to thrive (Isotani et al., 2023).

Reflections on Our Collective Journey. Our experiences with AI tools have been transformative, challenging, and deeply personal. We have emerged from this journey changed, not just as researchers, but as individuals grappling with the ethical, practical, and existential implications of AI integration in academic work. Our story is not representative of all researchers from the Philippines, Iraq, and Malaysia, but it is authentically ours, and we hope it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how AI is reshaping research practices in diverse global contexts. The questions we continue to grapple with include: How do we maintain our intellectual integrity while leveraging AI tools? How do we ensure

that our use of these technologies doesn't perpetuate existing inequalities? How do we balance efficiency with authenticity? These questions don't have easy answers, but they are the ones that will define the next phase of our research journeys.

Implications to academic research and higher education

Our experiences highlight important implications for academic research and higher education, particularly in Global South contexts where access, training, and infrastructure remain uneven. While AI tools can democratize research practices, their benefits are not guaranteed and require deliberate institutional support to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities.

A central implication is the need to recognize AI literacy as a core academic skill. Effective and ethical use of AI extends beyond access to tools; it requires critical understanding. Academic libraries are well positioned to lead this effort by expanding traditional information literacy programs to include AI-focused training. Librarians can offer workshops on prompt design, verification of AI-generated content, detection of hallucinated references, and responsible authorship practices. Developing AI research guides that prioritize free or low-cost tools can further ensure inclusivity in resource-constrained institutions.

At the institutional level, universities must integrate AI governance into research ethics frameworks. Clear, transparent policies on acceptable AI use, particularly in writing and data analysis, can protect academic integrity while normalizing responsible AI engagement. Research offices and ethics committees can collaborate to implement AI disclosure guidelines, reinforcing trust rather than surveillance. Also, faculty development also emerges as a critical area. Our learning often occurred through experimentation and peer dialogue, suggesting the value of communities of practice where faculty, librarians, and students can share experiences, challenges, and ethical concerns related to AI use. Such collaborative spaces are especially vital in the Global South, where formal training opportunities may be limited.

Addressing the digital divide within institutions is equally important. Libraries can function as access hubs by providing shared workstations, institutional AI accounts, and technical support, ensuring that AI-enhanced research is not limited to a privileged few. Integrating AI literacy into research methods courses can further position AI as a critical, reflective partner rather than a substitute for scholarly thinking.

Conclusion

All in all, our journey with AI in research has been both empowering and unsettling. As researchers from the Global South, we turned to these tools not to follow trends but to address structural challenges: language barriers, limited access to resources, and the demands of contemporary academic productivity. AI enabled efficiencies and opened intellectual pathways that once felt inaccessible, yet it also surfaced ethical dilemmas, anxieties about authenticity, and new forms of inequality that risk deepening existing divides. We celebrated moments of clarity and acceleration, while simultaneously questioning our dependence, our scholarly identities, and the long-term implications of delegating intellectual labor.

Through this autoethnographic reflection, we came to see AI not merely as a tool, but as a mirror, one that reflects our aspirations, vulnerabilities, and values as researchers. Moving forward, we commit to engaging with AI critically, ethically, and transparently, resisting both uncritical adoption and outright rejection. Our story remains unfinished, grounded

in the hope that future academic ecosystems will balance technological advancement with the human judgment and responsibility that sustain meaningful scholarship.

Responsible Use Statement for Artificial Intelligence Tools: During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 3.5 to improve the linguistic clarity and scholarly tone of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the final manuscript. All research design, data analysis, and substantive interpretations remain the original work of the author.

Authors' contributions

LG conceived the manuscript, spearheaded the planning, prepared the instrument, interpreted the data, contributed to report writing, and edited the manuscript. AA and NK participated in the design and coordination of the manuscript and contributed to report writing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article

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All participants answered the questionnaire after signing an informed consent agreement.

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