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Humanising Generative AI in Open and Distance Learning: Paraphrasing as a Cognitive and Ethical Learning Practice

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Abstract

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools in higher education is reshaping academic writing practices, particularly within Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) contexts marked by uneven digital access and emerging forms of AI support. This study examines how South African ODeL students describe and rationalise their use of large language model tools in academic writing, with specific attention to paraphrasing as a cognitive and ethical practice. Drawing on sociocultural learning theory, discourse theory, and AI and verification literacy frameworks, the study conceptualises paraphrasing not merely as textual rewording but as a discursive practice through which students negotiate authorship, responsibility, and academic legitimacy. Using a qualitative interpretive design, open-ended responses from 70 students enrolled in mathematics-related modules at a South African ODeL institution were analysed. The findings indicate that students consistently frame paraphrasing as an ethical practice aligned with institutional expectations, even when their engagement with AI involves varying degrees of automation. These accounts suggest that ethical engagement with AI is enacted discursively through self-positioning rather than through demonstrable verification of content. By foregrounding student discourse, the study contributes to Global South scholarship on responsible AI use by highlighting how integrity, authorship, and learning are negotiated in AI-mediated ODeL environments.

Keywords: open and distance e-learning, generative artificial intelligence, paraphrasing, AI and verification literacy, academic integrity, sociocultural theory

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining force in higher education, reshaping how students access, produce, and validate knowledge. Tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, Grammarly, and QuillBot, collectively referred to as generative AI (GenAI) tools, are increasingly embedded in learning processes, especially in open and distance education, where digital mediation is fundamental to teaching and learning. These technologies promise to enhance accessibility, feedback, and self-directed learning (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), yet they also raise concerns about authorship, ethical use, and the erosion of cognitive engagement (Zhou & Schofield, 2024; Ngoveni, 2025b). Within Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL), where students primarily rely on technology for interaction, AI's influence is both pedagogical and moral, shaping what students perceive as legitimate knowledge creation.

While much of the Global North literature celebrates GenAI's potential to support creativity and personalised learning (Long & Magerko, 2020; Walton et al., 2025), research from the Global South highlights structural and contextual asymmetries that complicate these benefits. Unequal access to data, bandwidth, and institutional support limits the depth of AI engagement in developing contexts (Ngoveni, 2025a; Czerniewicz et al., 2020). In many cases, ODeL students use GenAI not as an enhancement but as a compensatory mechanism to replace scarce academic support. This reality demands a contextualised understanding of how students use, interpret, and rationalise AI tools in resource-constrained environments.

Recent South African scholarship provides valuable insights into these tensions. Ngoveni (2025a) identifies a growing "AI literacy gap" among ODeL students, in which enthusiasm for AI-assisted learning exceeds the ethical and evaluative understanding required for its responsible use. Institutional approaches remain largely regulatory rather than developmental, focusing on detection instead of scaffolding critical AI literacy. Research involving mathematics students

in ODeL contexts frequently describes engagement with GenAI tools in terms of paraphrasing, a term that, while ethically reassuring on the surface, may conceal limited conceptual processing or unverified rewording of AI outputs (Ngoveni, 2025a; Ngoveni, 2025b). Students' reliance on AI and paraphrasing tools can result in linguistic substitution rather than conceptual understanding, revealing a broader pedagogical dilemma in which automation risks displacing authorship and ethical engagement becomes performative (Hammond et al., 2023; Roe & Perkins, 2022). Related studies further indicate that AI-assisted tutoring can enhance formative learning and student confidence in South African ODeL programmes, yet may also encourage overreliance when AI-generated explanations are treated as authoritative (Maphalala et al., 2025). Moreover, GenAI-enabled self-directed learning is mediated by students' digital literacy, institutional support structures, and socio-economic context, underscoring the relational and situated nature of ethical engagement with technology (Maphalala et al., 2025; Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025). These South African findings resonate with emerging global research. Corbin et al. (2025) characterise AI in assessment as a "wicked problem" that requires adaptive, dialogic responses rather than prohibitionist policies. Walton et al. (2025) highlight that sustainable AI-mediated learning depends on developing students' *evaluative judgement*, their ability to appraise and trust the quality of feedback. Henderson et al. (2025) further show that students' acceptance of AI feedback depends less on automation and more on perceived transparency and pedagogical credibility. Collectively, these studies suggest that responsible AI engagement requires more than technical skill; it requires a reflective understanding of learning, trust, and ethical reasoning.

Within this global and local discourse, the present study investigates how ODeL students describe and rationalise their use of GenAI tools in academic writing, particularly in relation to paraphrasing. Gee (2025) argues that language is a social practice, implying that paraphrasing is inherently collaborative and embedded in the social context of learning, as students construct meaning together. Guided by academic literacies and discourse-oriented perspectives, the study interprets paraphrasing as a linguistic, cognitive, and social practice that reflects students' negotiations with digital tools, institutional expectations, and self-perceived agency. In particular, Ivanič (1998) frames writing as the enactment of discursive identity, while Fairclough (2003) emphasises discourse as a site of social struggle and institutional positioning, both of which are essential to understanding paraphrasing as ethical and performative.

Research Question:
How do ODeL students describe their use of GenAI tools in assignments, and what meanings do they attach to their practice of paraphrasing when using those tools?

Through addressing this question, the study contributes to the growing body of research on humanising AI use in ODeL from the Global South. It repositions student discourse as a lens for understanding ethical literacy and cognitive engagement, thereby informing institutional strategies to foster reflective, context-sensitive approaches to AI-assisted learning.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This study was guided by a sociocultural and discourse-based theoretical framework, supported by the complementary constructs of AI literacy and verification literacy. These perspectives together explain how students make sense of their engagement with AI tools and how they linguistically perform ethical and academic identities within an ODeL environment.

2.1 Sociocultural Theory: Learning as Mediated Practice

The foundation of the study rests on Sociocultural Theory (SCT), as developed by Vygotsky (1978), which conceptualises learning as a socially mediated activity shaped by cultural tools, language, and context. SCT asserts that cognitive development occurs through participation in shared practices mediated by artefacts, physical or symbolic, that enable meaning-making (Wertsch, 1991). In the context of this study, GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, Grammarly, and QuillBot serve as mediating artefacts through which students access, transform, and produce knowledge.

In ODeL settings, where human interaction is often limited, these GenAI tools act as surrogate collaborators. They assist students in formulating ideas, checking grammar, and simplifying complex concepts. However, such mediation also brings new layers of cognitive and ethical negotiation. The act of *paraphrasing* becomes more than rewording text; it represents a process of reconciling individual understanding with institutional norms of academic integrity and the algorithmic tendencies of digital tools. From a sociocultural perspective, students' statements such as "I paraphrase before adopting it" or "I use AI for structure" reveal their efforts to navigate the tension between autonomy and assistance in a digitally mediated learning environment.

2.2 Discourse Theory of Academic Integrity

To explore how students linguistically express these negotiations, this study draws on a discourse-oriented understanding of academic integrity, informed by the academic literacies tradition (Lea & Street, 1998) and theories of discoursal identity

(Ivanič, 1998; Gee, 2025). Rather than treating integrity as a static moral quality, this view interprets it as a socially situated and linguistically constructed phenomenon. Students demonstrate integrity through their academic writing, particularly in how they describe, justify, or distance themselves from particular practices. When participants report actions like "I paraphrase," "I humanise it," or "I change it to my understanding," such utterances are read as identity work, aligning with institutional norms while negotiating personal meaning. Fairclough (2003) frames discourse as social action, suggesting that paraphrasing itself is a social practice embedded in educational power relations and institutional norms. This lens enables a deeper understanding of ethical agency, not only as behavioural compliance but also as a rhetorical positioning within the discourses of ODeL academic life.

2.3 AI Literacy and Verification Literacy

To complement these sociocultural and discursive dimensions, the study draws on the constructs of AI literacy (Long & Magerko, 2020) and verification literacy (Zhou & Schofield, 2024). AI literacy encompasses the ability to comprehend, assess, and utilise AI systems responsibly. Verification literacy extends this by emphasising the student's capacity to assess the reliability and truthfulness of AI-generated outputs before adoption. In higher education, and particularly in ODeL contexts, these literacies are essential for developing self-regulated and ethical engagement with intelligent technologies.

Students' references to "checking with the study guide," "changing it a bit," or "reading before adopting" can therefore be interpreted as indicators of varying levels of AI and verification literacy. Some responses reflect critical awareness, suggesting that students view AI as a learning partner to refine their understanding. Others, however, signal procedural or superficial engagement, in which paraphrasing is treated as a mechanical step to avoid detection rather than a reflective act of authorship. These variations underscore the importance of cultivating a deeper form of AI literacy that fosters accountability and discernment, rather than dependency.

2.4 Integration and Relevance to the Study

Integrating these perspectives provides a comprehensive lens for interpreting students' engagement with AI tools. Sociocultural Theory explains how GenAI functions as a mediating artefact that shapes students' learning and ethical reasoning. Discourse Theory reveals how students linguistically perform integrity and agency through their descriptions of paraphrasing. AI and verification literacy frameworks introduce a cognitive dimension, showing how critical evaluation skills influence responsible technological use.

Together, these frameworks enable the study to interpret paraphrasing as a multi-layered phenomenon, simultaneously cognitive, ethical, and linguistic. It is through these arguments that the study examines how students' discussions about AI use reflect deeper negotiations of learning, authorship, and morality in the evolving landscape of ODeL education.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Expanding Role of AI in Higher Education

The rapid integration of AI in higher education has transformed how students read, write, and think. Generative systems, such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, Grammarly, and QuillBot, are increasingly utilised for idea generation, language refinement, and paraphrasing; however, they also raise concerns about authorship, originality, and ethical implications. According to Roe and Perkins (2022), automated paraphrasing tools complicate the distinction between legitimate academic writing and algorithmic manipulation. Similarly, Bretag et al. (2019) argue that AI's capacity to simulate reasoning and style requires educators to reconceptualise assessment practices. A systematic review of AI use in higher education concluded that while AI enhances accessibility and productivity, it simultaneously amplifies issues of critical detachment, overreliance, and the erosion of reflective learning (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

3.2 Emerging Constructs of AI and Verification Literacy

Scholars have increasingly recognised AI literacy as a core competence for students navigating digital learning environments. Long and Magerko (2020) define AI literacy as the ability to understand, evaluate, and use intelligent systems responsibly, combining technical knowledge with ethical reasoning. More recently, Michalak and Ellixson (2025) emphasise that higher education must integrate AI literacy into curricula to promote agency and critical thinking rather than passive acceptance of machine-generated content. In parallel, verification literacy, the ability to validate the authenticity and reliability of AI-produced material, has gained prominence as a critical extension of digital competence. Zhou and Schofield (2024) contend that verification literacy enables students to question AI outputs, detect bias, and recognise the epistemic boundaries of algorithmic systems. Together, these literacies form the foundation of responsible AI engagement, particularly in self-directed contexts such as ODeL. Comparable large language model (LLM)-driven feedback systems have similarly been shown to enhance learner engagement and personalisation while raising ethical questions about trust, transparency, and oversight (Noroozi et al., 2025; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2024).

3.3 Paraphrasing, Integrity, and the Automation of Authorship

The ethical dimension of AI use becomes most visible in paraphrasing practices. Traditionally, paraphrasing represented intellectual reformulation, a demonstration of comprehension and synthesis. However, studies reveal that students often conflate paraphrasing with surface rewording, especially when supported by automated GenAI tools (Bretag et al., 2019; Roe & Perkins, 2022). Roe and Perkins (2022) further warn that AI-powered "humanisers" encourage mechanical substitution rather than conceptual engagement. When students claim they "always paraphrase" or "change it to their own words," such statements may signify a performative rather than authentic understanding of academic integrity (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). These discursive patterns mirror Bretag et al.'s (2019) assertion that integrity in the digital age must be viewed not as compliance but as a dynamic, educative practice shaped by context, technology, and institutional culture.

3.4 ODeL Contexts and the Ethics of Autonomy

Within ODeL systems, where students often study independently, the pedagogical and ethical implications of AI use are intensified. As Ngoveni (2025a) observes, digital inequality in open learning contexts can drive students to rely heavily on tools that mediate comprehension and expression. In such environments, paraphrasing becomes a means of survival, a cognitive and linguistic strategy used to navigate gaps in academic language, confidence, and formative feedback. Czerniewicz et al.(2020) similarly notes that limited access to human support increases students' dependence on digital tools, which in turn influences their ethical awareness and evolving notions of authorship. Moreover, recent studies in the International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education illustrate how generative AI is reshaping pedagogy across disciplines (Wessels, 2025; Sungkur & Shibdeen, 2025).

Manta et al. (2025) argue that promoting academic honesty in online education requires pedagogical strategies that foster reflection and transparency, rather than punitive measures. This is echoed by Mahna et al. (2025), whose cross-national study found that university students utilised generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, to support reading, writing, and idea generation. However, they also reported risks such as plagiarism, false citations, and overreliance on automation. These findings underscore the global and multilingual complexities of ethical engagement with AI and reinforce the urgency of institutional frameworks that cultivate AI and verification literacies in tandem with ethical reasoning.

3.5 Research Gap

Although research on AI use and academic integrity has grown, few studies have explored how students themselves narrate and justify their AI-supported writing practices, especially in the Global South. Most prior work focuses on policy, detection software, or faculty perspectives, leaving limited insight into students' discourse about AI, paraphrasing, and ethical reasoning. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how students describe their use of AI tools in assignments and how these narratives reflect differing levels of critical literacy and moral awareness within the ODeL environment.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, grounded in a constructivist epistemology that views knowledge as socially and linguistically constructed through interaction and context. The interpretivist stance was appropriate because the study sought to understand how students made sense of their engagement with AI tools, particularly their use of paraphrasing as both an ethical and learning practice. Rather than treating ethical awareness or digital competence as fixed attributes, the study viewed these as negotiated and evolving constructs shaped by students' encounters with AI-mediated learning environments. This orientation enabled an in-depth exploration of the language students used to describe their practices and the meanings they attached to their own actions. By intentionally centring student discourse, the study responds to a gap in AI-in-education scholarship that has tended to prioritise institutional and expert narratives, often marginalising learners' own ethical self-understandings.

4.2 Research Design

A qualitative content analysis design within an interpretive framework was adopted. Inferential statistical analyseswere not employed, as the study's purpose was interpretive rather than comparative, prioritising meaning, positioning, and discourse over frequency or prediction. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design was intentionally adopted to capture students' ethical positioning at a specific historical moment, during the early stages of the mainstreaming of generative AI in higher education. The study aimed to explore students' discourse on the use of AI tools, focusing on how they described and rationalised their actions when interacting with AI-generated content. While descriptive in intent, the design extended beyond surface-level reporting to interpret the latent meanings and ethical reasoning embedded in participants' accounts. Descriptive statistics were employed sparingly to contextualise the relative prominence of identified categories; however, the analysis remained primarily qualitative and interpretive. This approach provided conceptual depth and analytic clarity, consistent with methodological guidance outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2023) and Nieuwenhuis (2019).

4.3 Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a South African Open and Distance e-Learning institution that offers teacher education programmes. The ODeL environment, characterised by geographic dispersion and heterogeneous digital access conditions, provided a suitable context for examining students' engagement with AI tools in learning and assessment. Participants were adult students enrolled in mathematics-related modules in which AI-assisted writing and paraphrasing tools were accessible.

A total of 70 students voluntarily participated in the study. Of these, 47 participants, approximately two-thirds (67.1%), self-identified as residing in rural areas, while 23 participants (32.9%) identified as residing in urban areas. This contextual information was used to sensitise interpretation to varied learning conditions rather than to facilitate systematic rural–urban comparisons. The analytic focus remained on how students articulated their engagement with AI tools and conceptualised paraphrasing as a learning and ethical practice.

To ensure anonymity while allowing analytic traceability across excerpts, participants were assigned pseudonymous identifiers during analysis and reporting. Participants from urban contexts were labelled PU1, PU2, PU3, and so forth, while participants from rural contexts were labelled PR1, PR2, PR3, and so on. In this system, "P" denotes participant, "U" denotes urban, and "R" denotes rural. This approach enabled consistent attribution of quotations without compromising confidentiality.

4.4 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with presumed prior exposure to AI tools in their academic activities. The aim was not statistical generalisation but the generation of rich, information-laden accounts capable of illuminating students' ethical reasoning and cognitive engagement with AI-supported learning. Recruitment was conducted via the institutional online platform, and participation was entirely voluntary. Students were informed of the study's purpose and provided electronic consent prior to participation. This sampling approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) emphasis on purposive selection when the research objective is to access meaning, interpretation, and experience rather than measurable outcomes.

4.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through an open-ended online survey designed to elicit students' reflections on their use of AI tools in learning and assessment. The instrument consisted of three prompts. The first two items asked participants to indicate their geographical context (rural or urban) and whether they used generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, Grammarly, and QuillBot in their studies. These items served a contextual purpose and were not subjected to thematic analysis.

The third prompt constituted the analytical core of the dataset. Participants were asked to describe how they used AI tools in their assignments or studies, and whether they cut and pasted generated content or paraphrased it before use. This open-ended question invited participants to articulate their practices, justifications, and ethical reasoning in their own language. Responses were submitted anonymously via the institutional platform and exported as text for qualitative analysis.

4.6 Data Analysis

Analysis focused exclusively on participants' narrative responses concerning their use of generative AI tools and their understanding of paraphrasing. An interpretive content analysis was conducted following iterative procedures described by Miles et al. (2014). The researcher first engaged in repeated readings of the data corpus to develop familiarity with participants' language, tone, and perspectives. Initial inductive codes were generated by attending to recurrent words, phrases, and expressions indicative of action and reasoning, including terms such as paraphrase, copy and paste, humanise, idea generation, structure, and rewording.

These first-cycle codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories representing dominant patterns of AI engagement: Paraphrasing, Idea Generation and Structuring, Mixed Use, Non-Use, and Automated Rewording. Both manifest and latent meanings were examined. Manifest analysis captured explicit descriptions of reported practices, while latent analysis explored the ethical positioning and self-presentation implied in participants' discourse (Laari, 2025). Descriptive statistics were used only to indicate the relative prominence of categories and to contextualise usage patterns, without detracting from the analysis's interpretive focus. The analysis deliberately did not evaluate the technical accuracy or performance of specific AI tools, focusing instead on how students narrate and justify their engagement with AI as part of ethical and cognitive meaning-making.

Direct quotations were selected to exemplify each category, prioritising excerpts that demonstrated reflexivity, tension, or ethical reasoning. All quoted material was attributed using the PU and PR identifiers to ensure analytic transparency and coherence across themes.

4.7 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the dataset, iterative coding, writing analytic memos, and peer debriefing with a colleague familiar with AI ethics in education. Transferability was facilitated through a thick description of the research context, enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings to comparable ODeL settings. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytic refinements. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive journaling, which supported critical examination of interpretive choices and potential biases.

As a lecturer within the same ODeL institution, the researcher maintained reflexive awareness of insider positionality. While this positionality afforded contextual sensitivity, it also required deliberate separation between institutional assumptions and participants' reported experiences. Reflexivity thus functioned as both an ethical safeguard and an analytic resource (Shelton et al., 2025).

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the College of Education Ethics Review Committee (Ref. No. 7209) at a South African ODeL institution. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No identifying personal or institutional information was collected, and all data were anonymised prior to analysis. In line with principles of responsible AI research, the study focused exclusively on students' self-reported descriptions of their engagement with AI tools and did not collect, analyse, or retain any AI-generated outputs.

4.9 Methodological Reflection

The use of open-ended self-reported data enabled the capture of students' authentic expressions regarding their engagement with AI tools. However, such data are susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly when addressing ethically sensitive practices such as paraphrasing. Rather than treating social desirability as a contaminating bias, the study interprets participants' language as data in its own right, revealing how ethical legitimacy and academic identity are discursively performed. Acknowledging this limitation, the analysis treated participants' language not merely as reports of behaviour but as data in its own right. How students spoke about paraphrasing was interpreted as indicative of their ethical positioning and identity negotiation within academic discourse.

From this interpretive standpoint, discourses of paraphrasing were understood as performative. Students linguistically constructed themselves as responsible and ethical learners, even where their practices involved varying degrees of automated assistance. Simultaneously attending to content and form enabled the study to offer a nuanced account of the moral and pedagogical dimensions of AI-assisted learning in the ODeL context.

5. Findings

The analysis revealed five interrelated patterns in how students engaged with generative AI tools: Paraphrasing, Idea Generation and Structuring, Mixed Use, Automated Rewording, and Non-Use. While analytically distinct, these patterns should not be read as discrete behavioural categories. Rather, they represent discursive positions through which students negotiated legitimacy, responsibility, and authorship within AI-mediated academic practices. Across all themes, participants aligned with institutional norms of academic integrity, often using language that foregrounded effort, understanding, and ethical intent.

5.1 Paraphrasing as Ethical Self-Positioning and Cognitive Labour

Paraphrasing was not described merely as a mechanical rewriting task. Instead, participants framed it as an ethical and cognitive act through which they asserted authorship and learning. In doing so, they positioned themselves as active knowledge constructors rather than passive recipients of AI output.

For example, one participant stated:

"I paraphrase it before adopting it because I want the work to be in my own words and to understand what I am submitting." (PR4)

This quotation demonstrates how students use paraphrasing as a form of ethical self-positioning and as a signal of active engagement. Rather than reporting a mechanical act, the participant frames paraphrasing as part of learning and constructing authorship.

Similarly, another participant noted:

"I read what the AI gives me and then rewrite it in my own words so that I can understand the content properly." (PU3)

The sequencing of actions, reading followed by rewriting, constructs paraphrasing as a process of internalisation. AI-generated text functions as an intermediary artefact, not an endpoint. A third participant reinforced this moral boundary:

"I do not just copy and paste. I paraphrase because that is how I learn and avoid plagiarism." (PR9)

The explicit rejection of "just copy and paste" operates as a moral disclaimer. The participant's language reflects awareness of institutional surveillance and normative expectations, positioning paraphrasing as a visible marker of ethical academic identity.

5.2 AI as Cognitive Scaffold Rather Than Author

Participants who described using AI for idea generation and structuring consistently drew a boundary between support and substitution. AI was positioned as a tool that facilitated thinking without undermining ownership.

One participant explained:

"I use AI to help me get ideas and organise my work, but I write the assignment myself." (PR3)

The contrastive conjunction "but" performs important discursive work here, separating legitimate assistance from illegitimate delegation. Another participant similarly stated:

"It helps me to see how to structure my answers, especially when I am not sure how to start." (PU5)

This excerpt reveals AI's role in overcoming cognitive entry barriers rather than producing content. A third participant reinforced this positioning:

"I only use it to guide me on what to include, not to write for me." (PR14)

Across these accounts, students framed AI as a cognitive scaffold that supports planning and organisation, while preserving human authorship. This framing reflects a human-centred understanding of AI use, where responsibility for meaning-making remains with the learner.

5.3 Mixed Use as Moral Negotiation

The Mixed Use category is analytically significant because it exposes the tension between pragmatic academic practices and ethical self-presentation. Participants in this category acknowledged copying or pasting AI-generated content, yet almost immediately mitigated this admission by describing revisions, checks, or rewrites.

For instance:

"I sometimes cut and paste, but I make sure that I change the wording and check it with the study guide." (PU1)

The phrase "make sure" signals responsibility and care, suggesting that ethical legitimacy is restored through subsequent effort. Another participant explained:

"I copy what AI gives me first, then I rewrite it in my own words before submitting." (PR11)

Here, copying is framed as a temporary step rather than a final action. A third participant echoed this reasoning:

"I do copy and paste, but I don't leave it like that. I edit and paraphrase everything." (PU7)

These responses illustrate how students discursively normalise mixed practices while still aligning themselves with institutional norms. The emphasis on revision functions as a moral repair mechanism, allowing students to reconcile efficiency with integrity.

5.4 Automated Rewording and the Reconfiguration of Authorship

Participants who described automated rewording articulated a subtle shift in how authorship is understood. Rather than equating originality with linguistic production, they foregrounded ownership of ideas.

One participant stated:

"I use AI to reword sentences so that they sound more academic, but the ideas are mine." (PR18)

The explicit separation of ideas from wording signals a reconfiguration of academic contribution. Another participant noted:

"It helps me to paraphrase properly when my English is not good." (PU9)

Here, AI is positioned as a linguistic support that compensates for perceived deficits rather than as an intellectual substitute. A third participant explained:

"Sometimes I use it to humanise what I have written so that it sounds better." (PR22)

The term "humanise" is particularly revealing, suggesting that students view AI as capable of enhancing rather than erasing human presence in academic writing. This challenges traditional binaries between human and machine authorship.

5.5 Non-Use as Ethical or Identity-Based Resistance

Although non-use was less frequently reported, its inclusion is analytically important as a form of ethical positioning. The limited number and brevity of non-use responses constrained deeper sub-categorisation, but their presence signals ethical plurality within AI-mediated academic contexts.

One participant stated:

"I do not use AI tools for my assignments." (PR27)

Another explained:

"I prefer to do my work on my own without AI." (PU12)

A third participant noted:

"I have not used AI tools in my studies." (PR31)

While brief, these statements suggest a deliberate distancing from AI-mediated practices. Non-use here may reflect ethical caution, lack of access, or a preference for traditional academic practices. Importantly, non-use functions as its own form of moral positioning within an environment where AI use is increasingly normalised.

6. Discussion

This study explored how ODeL students describe and rationalise their use of generative AI tools in academic writing, with a particular focus on paraphrasing as a cognitive and ethical practice. Interpreted through a sociocultural and discourse-based theoretical framework, supported by AI and verification literacy constructs, the findings demonstrate that students' engagement with GenAI is best understood as a process of discursive negotiation, rather than as straightforward compliance or misconduct. Accordingly, the study was not concerned with comparing the technical performance of particular AI tools, but with examining how students made sense of and justified their AI use within broader ethical and cognitive discourses. In alignment with academic literacies and discourse-based perspectives, the study does not operationalise misconduct as a fixed category, but examines how students themselves invoke and negotiate integrity through language and practice. Students' language reveals how ethical awareness, authorship, and learning are constructed and performed within the constraints and affordances of AI-mediated ODeL environments.

6.1 Paraphrasing as Mediated Action and Discoursal Identity

From a sociocultural perspective, the prominence of paraphrasing in students' accounts reflects how GenAI functions as a mediating artefact in learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Students' descriptions of "paraphrasing before adopting" AI-generated content illustrate mediated action, where understanding is negotiated through interaction with both algorithmic tools and institutional norms. Rather than replacing cognition, AI serves as an intermediary resource that students engage with to produce academically acceptable texts.

However, when interpreted through discourse theory, these same descriptions reveal paraphrasing as a form of identity work (Ivanič, 1998). Students' repeated emphasis on paraphrasing, avoidance of "copy and paste," and references to plagiarism function as linguistic markers of ethical alignment. In line with Gee's (2025) conception of language as social practice, these utterances do not simply report behaviour; they position students as legitimate academic subjects within an institutional discourse of integrity. This supports Fairclough's (2003) argument that discourse operates as a site of power and regulation, shaping what counts as acceptable academic conduct.

The findings thus extend the existing literature by showing that, in AI-mediated contexts, paraphrasing increasingly operates as a discursive signal of compliance rather than as evidence of deep conceptual engagement. This aligns with concerns raised by Bretag et al. (2019) and Roe and Perkins (2022), who caution that automated paraphrasing tools risk reducing academic integrity to surface-level textual modification.

6.2 AI as Cognitive Scaffold and the Limits of Mediation

Students' accounts of using AI for idea generation and structuring resonate strongly with Sociocultural Theory's emphasis on scaffolding within the zone of proximal development. GenAI tools functioned as surrogate collaborators, particularly in ODeL contexts where immediate human support is limited. This finding supports earlier work by Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) and Maphalala et al. (2025), who note that AI-mediated support can enhance confidence and task engagement in distance education.

However, the findings also reveal the limits of unstructured mediation. While AI-supported entry into tasks and organisation of responses, students rarely described engaging in critical evaluation or conceptual interrogation of AI-generated content. From an AI literacy perspective (Long & Magerko, 2020), this suggests partial literacy, where functional use is present but epistemic judgement is underdeveloped. Walton et al. (2025) similarly argue that evaluative judgement does not emerge automatically from exposure to AI tools but requires explicit pedagogical cultivation.

The present study adds nuance by showing that, in the absence of structured guidance, students rely on personal heuristics to draw boundaries between assistance and authorship. This reinforces the need for pedagogical frameworks that explicitly operationalise responsible AI use in ODeL settings.

6.3 Mixed Use and the Discursive Repair of Ethical Legitimacy

The Mixed Use category offers a particularly important contribution to the literature. Students' narratives demonstrate how ethical legitimacy is discursively repaired when practices potentially conflict with institutional norms. Admissions of copying are quickly followed by references to rewriting, checking, or paraphrasing, reflecting what can be understood as procedural rather than principled ethical reasoning.

This pattern aligns with Corbin et al.'s (2025) characterisation of AI in assessment as a "wicked problem," where traditional regulatory approaches fail to address the underlying ambiguity students face. The findings also echo Henderson et al.'s (2025) observation that trust in AI-mediated feedback often depends on perceived legitimacy rather than transparency or verification. In this study, students' confidence in their ethical standing derived from how they used AI, not from what they verified.

From a discourse-theoretical standpoint, these practices illustrate how students navigate competing demands for efficiency, performance, and integrity. The emphasis on revision and paraphrasing functions as a rhetorical strategy that reconciles automation with acceptable academic identity, supporting Ngoveni's (2025a) argument that AI literacy gaps are often masked by confident but superficial engagement.

6.4 Automated Rewording, Language, and Reconfigured Authorship

Findings related to automated rewording reveal a notable shift in students' conceptualisation of authorship. By separating ownership of ideas from ownership of language, students implicitly challenge traditional academic assumptions that originality is inseparable from linguistic production. This resonates with academic literacies perspectives, which recognise writing as socially situated and shaped by access to linguistic resources (Lea & Street, 1998).

In multilingual, resource-constrained ODeL contexts, AI-assisted rewording appears to serve as a compensatory linguistic resource, particularly for students who perceive their academic English as inadequate. This aligns with Czerniewicz et al.'s (2020) argument that digital tools often mediate rather than eliminate structural inequalities. However, without verification literacy (Zhou & Schofield, 2024), such practices risk reinforcing dependence on algorithmic authority and limiting deeper epistemic engagement. The study contributes to the literature by foregrounding how students themselves articulate this reconfiguration of authorship, revealing the ethical tensions that emerge when language support is automated.

6.5 Non-Use, Resistance, and Ethical Plurality

Although less prevalent, non-use of AI tools constitutes an important discursive position. These accounts reflect ethical caution, identity-based resistance, or preference for traditional academic practices. In discourse terms, non-use functions as an alternative moral stance within an environment where AI use is increasingly normalised. These findings challenge assumptions of universal AI adoption, often implicit in the Global North literature (Walton et al., 2025; Noroozi et al., 2025) and underscore the importance of recognising ethical plurality in ODeL contexts. As Ngoveni (2025b) and Maphalala and Nkosi (2025) argue, responsible AI integration must accommodate diverse learner orientations rather than impose uniform expectations.

7. Conclusions

This study examined how ODeL students describe their use of generative AI tools and how they understand paraphrasing in AI-mediated academic writing. The findings show that students do not present their AI use as unregulated or opportunistic. Instead, they frame their practices in relation to academic integrity, responsibility, and authorship. Across different patterns of use, paraphrasing serves as a key mechanism through which students justify their AI engagement, signal understanding, and align with institutional expectations. This indicates that ethical engagement with AI is enacted through students' language and self-positioning rather than through simple adherence to rules.

The study contributes by reframing paraphrasing as a discursive ethical practice rather than a technical safeguard against plagiarism. By integrating sociocultural mediation, discourse theory, and AI literacy, the study shows how students negotiate authorship and legitimacy in AI-mediated ODeL contexts. The findings support a shift from detection-oriented approaches to pedagogical models that emphasise guided mediation, verification literacy, and the reflective use of AI, offering empirically grounded insights from a Global South distance-education setting.

8. Limitations

This study was based on self-reported accounts of students' AI use, which may reflect socially desirable positioning, particularly in relation to ethically sensitive practices such as paraphrasing and plagiarism. As an interpretive qualitative

study, the findings illuminate how students make sense of and justify their engagement with AI, rather than providing verified accounts of actual practice. The focus on a single South African ODeL institution also means that the findings are shaped by contextual factors such as institutional culture, assessment practices, and uneven digital access. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures students' perspectives at a particular moment in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, and patterns of engagement with generative AI may shift over time as tools, policies, and pedagogical responses develop. Finally, the use of open-ended survey responses, while valuable for capturing students' own language, limits the depth of probing that is possible through interviews, observational data, or think-aloud methods. These alternative approaches would allow researchers to move beyond self-presentation and better examine the real-time decision-making that shapes students' interactions with AI tools. The study was also not intended to produce statistical generalisations, but rather to provide analytical insight into how students discursively construct ethical and cognitive positions when engaging with AI-mediated academic writing.

9. Implications and Recommendations

The findings suggest that students' engagement with generative AI is already ethically reflexive but unevenly supported at the level of epistemic judgement. Rather than relying on detection-oriented responses, ODeL institutions may benefit from pedagogical approaches that foreground guided mediation, reflective authorship, and verification literacy. Integrating AI literacy into curricula could help students evaluate and reconstruct AI-generated content, clarify authorship, and move beyond surface-level paraphrasing practices. The study also highlights the importance of attending to contextual inequalities, particularly in rural ODeL settings, where access to AI tools should be accompanied by instructional and mentoring support. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal and multimodal designs to examine how students' ethical positioning and AI-mediated learning practices evolve over time.

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Author contributions

Dr M. A. Ngoveni and Dr M. S. Mokgwathi conceptualised the study, collected the data, and drafted the manuscript. Prof. M. A. Graham reviewed and refined the methodology and contributed to the analysis and presentation of the data. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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