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The Kids Are Alright: Examining How U.S. Public Relations Students Ethically Navigate Artificial Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence tools have alarmed many in higher education given their potential threat to academic honesty. For public relations educators, for whom ethics education is an important consideration, the implications of these tools warrant close consideration. Using a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey of students in a U.S. collegiate journalism and public relations department (N = 256), this study determined that while ethical issues need to be addressed, students seek to use the tools in a manner consistent with professional guidelines.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, public relations, college students, education, ethical positioning, academic honesty

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The introduction of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools based on machine learning algorithms has left many in higher education reeling as they struggle to address the threat to academic honesty created by these readily available tools, with some professors arguing that AI is damaging the academic culture beyond repair (Massaro, 2023). Students, however, seem to disagree based on their adoption of AI as a tool for their studies. In a Fall 2023 survey by Tyton Partners, nearly half (49%) of all U.S. students reported using AI tools, while faculty adoption lagged by nearly 30% (Bharadwaj et al., 2023). The study however, also indicated that faculty are warming up to the use of AI in the classroom, with 75% indicating students "need to know how to effectively use [AI] in order to succeed in a professional setting" (Bharadwaj et al., 2023, p. 7.)

Although using AI in education has been around for a long time with tools, such as spelling and grammar checks, digital dictionary, and thesaurus capabilities, the introduction of generative AI added multiple layers of complexity to the conversation (O'Connell, 2024). When writing and creating content with AI in education, the potential for reinforcing bias, returning incorrect information on a topic, fabricating ideas (hallucinations), and creating concern for copyright and privacy violations can all lead to ethical hesitations (Robert, 2024). For students, the basic knowledge of using the tools is a key factor in their failure to adopt them (Schiel et al., 2023). Even losing the feeling of pride from completing an assignment was given as a factor in undergraduate students' resistance (Johnston et al., 2024). Students said they would trust AI more if it was developed by a trusted academic source (Korhonen, 2024). Faculty take the drawbacks of using AI a step further, including isolation or feeling disconnected, which might lead to increased dropout rates. From an ethical standpoint, many students seem to agree as over half of undergraduate students said completing assignments or exams using AI tools is a form of cheating or plagiarism (Nam, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the integration of AI in public relations education presents numerous opportunities for public relations professionals. Cision suggests that public relations firms and practitioners can ethically use a range of applications, including chatbots, social media automation, content creation, and sentiment analysis (O'Connell, 2024). In education, AI allows faculty to develop more personalized and adaptive learning experiences, enhance education quality, and prepare students for the evolving landscape of public relations (Bond et al., 2024). Still, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) cautions practitioners in their guidance on the ethical use of AI that while AI presents many opportunities, human oversight is a must (Staley et al., 2023). According to a report from The Department of Educational Technology, balancing human and computer input, protecting students' privacy, and focusing on building trust are important directives in implementing AI into the classroom (Cardona et al., 2023). Similarly, the PR Council's (2023) AI Guidelines emphasizes the need for proper and full sourcing, identifying and avoiding biases, and maintaining transparency as recommendations for public relations professionals and directives to be taught in public relations classes.

This new study aims to examine how U.S. public relations students use AI in the classroom and how their ethical perceptions influence their adoption. Are there differences between public relations students and non-public relations students regarding the ethical considerations of AI use, and what are the broader implications for public relations education? Using a mixed-methods approach based on an online survey administered to students completing courses in an undergraduate journalism and public relations program, this study seeks to better understand public relations students' current knowledge and perceptions of how AI can be utilized, their ethical positioning, and their use of AI in the classroom.

Literature Review

The Role of Ethics in Public Relations

Public relations educators and professionals place a high priority on the ethical practice of public relations. The PRSA's Code of Ethics sets forth principles and guidelines built on core values such as advocacy, honesty, loyalty, professional development, and objectivity, which are reinforced in the PRSA professional and student chapters, annual programming, conferences, and in the accreditation program (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.). Despite all these efforts, recent results from the 2023 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report indicate new professionals are not adequately prepared in ethics. According to the 2023 CPRE report, "ethics was ranked third among the most desired knowledge, skills, and abilities for entry-level practitioners. However, practitioners indicated that entry-level practitioners are not meeting their expectations in this area," (Bortree et al., 2023, p. 70). This report cited similar results to the 2017 CPRE report, which indicates that little progress has been made in terms of ethics education (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

Academic dishonesty is a major concern in higher education, especially with cheating and plagiarism, which are the most common unethical behaviors among college students (McCabe et al., 2012). Now with the proliferation of AI, the temptation and ease to cheat and plagiarize has heightened as students become more technologically savvy (Brown, 2019.)

As new and continuing ethical challenges emerge in the public relations industry, especially around areas of AI, it's important to examine how college students who are preparing to enter the industry are navigating this new terrain and how ethics plays a role in their decision-making and critical thinking skills. The need to prepare students for an increasingly complex communications world begins in the classroom. This

corresponds to one of the key findings from the ethics chapter in the CPRE 2023 report, which explains that both educators and practitioners highly value personal behavior, integrity, accountability, and trustworthiness and ranked ethics as the highest competency for preparation for the workplace (Bortree et al., 2023).

Teaching Ethics in the University PR Classroom

While public relations educators acknowledge that ethics instruction should be an important part of public relations education, very few programs offer dedicated public relations ethics courses. Instead, many educators are opting to embed ethical instruction into their existing courses, most effectively through case studies, simulations, and class discussions (Silverman et al, 2014). Recommendations from academic research have suggested public relations ethics can be taught through as little as one unit in one 75-minute class meeting (Smudde, 2011). Furthermore, suggested assignments take a broad view of the benefits of ethics (Ward et al., 2020), as opposed to specific ethical instruction and development. However, other assignment recommendations encourage individual ethical explorations through case study narratives (Eschenfelder, 2011), an approach that encourages individual exploration, critical thinking, and specific analysis.

Although the CPRE has recommended that journalism and mass communication schools and departments require specific courses on public relations ethics, most programs have been slow to adopt such classes, with ethics instruction taking place in broader mass communication law and/or ethics classes, as modules within other practitioner-oriented courses, or through interdisciplinary study outside of the departments (Del Rosso et al., 2020).

Ethical Inclinations of Students

There is a growing body of scholarship interested in the ethical inclinations of college students, with results suggesting ethical education

and learning styles can significantly impact college students' ethical values (Susilowati et al., 2021). The ethical inclinations of peers can also impact ethical behaviors (Joseph et al., 2010), and students who more easily recognize the emotions of their peers are able to recognize peers' unethical behaviors (Joseph et al., 2009). The importance of peer behaviors when it comes to ethical decision-making supports previous research signaling Bandura's social learning theory as a key indicator for students' tendency to cheat (McCabe & Trevino, 1993).

Research on student ethics has been especially focused on high-stakes professional programs, such as accounting (Hidayat, 2019; Lang et al., 2010; Nugroho et al., 2023) and engineering (Harding et al., 2012). Likewise, journalism ethics has been a focus of educational research, with previous studies suggesting a media ethics course can impact students' value systems and ethical outlooks (Plaisance, 2006), and that ethical values can differ between graduating and first-year journalism students (Detenber et al., 2012). Notably, graduating students with practical newsroom experience have less absolute ethical perceptions than students beginning their journalistic education (Reinardy & Moore, 2007). However, research also suggests journalism students are much more concerned with professional journalistic ethics and penalties than they are with general academic ethics and penalties (Conway & Groshek, 2009).

Ethics in PR Students

Early research examining the ethical inclinations of public relations students suggested that while they believed they were more ethical than their peers, their ethical decision-making was influenced by their peers, as well as subjective norms (Pratt & McLaughlin, 1989). With the vocational nature of journalism and public relations, students have an opportunity to learn more about ethics through work experiences and the socialization that often comes from involvement in student media organizations and internships (Conway & Groshek, 2009).

Furthermore, while students who focused on journalistic areas of study (e.g., print and broadcast news) showed greater concern for ethics than non-journalistic students (i.e., PR and advertising), ethical concern among both groups grew over the course of their university educations (Conway & Groshek, 2008). However, public relations students were able to recognize the tension and negotiation between the needs of the practitioners' clients and the needs of the larger public when considering ethical decision-making. Furthermore, students recognized the fact that professional codes of ethics tend to emphasize risk-management and reputation over social good, which caused students to hold the codes in low regard (Fitch, 2013).

Further research exploring public relations student ethics has sought to understand students' motivations to cheat or plagiarize, make comparisons between majors or concentrations, as well as note any cultural differences. In a study examining the ethical motivations of students' tendencies to cheat or plagiarize, Vasquez (2022) found that "undergraduate public relations students are fundamentally moral and use a deontological approach when they judge cheating or plagiarizing as right or wrong before intending to act upon it" (p. 12). A study comparing the professional ethical orientations of public relations and advertising students found that public relations students were more likely to agree that working for an ethical company is important, they were more likely to believe their industry was ethical, and they were more likely to believe the public viewed their industry as ethical (Fullerton et al., 2013). Furthermore, in comparison to Russian students, the U.S. students viewed public relations as a more inherently ethical profession whose purpose is societal good, with collaboration and transparency as key values (Erzikova, 2011).

Ethics Position Theory

Ethics position theory argues that individuals' moral decision-

making varies along two dimensions: idealism and relativism (Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977). The more idealistic an individual is, the more concerned they are with protecting people from harm, while relativistic individuals believe ethics can vary depending on the situation, society, and/or culture. Ethics position theory suggests individuals generally fall into one of four moral types based on their position along the two dimensions:

> 1) *Exceptionists* (low idealism and relativism) "disagree that morality is purely personal and recognize that moral principles do not always minimize harm" (O'Boyle & Forsyth, 2021, p. 3);
> 2) *Subjectivists* (low idealism, high relativism) are skeptical of cross-cultural moral codes, and the "do not strongly endorse the 'do no harm' mandate" (O'Boyle & Forsyth, 2021, p. 3);
> 3) *Absolutists* (high idealism, low relativism) are concerned with minimizing harm, but also believe moral standards are absolute; and
> 4) *Situationists* (high idealism, high relativism) "do not believe that moral standards provide a bright line between what is morally good and bad," but they are also "committed to promoting human well-being" (O'Boyle & Forsyth, 2021, p. 3).

Research has specifically examined the ethical positioning of journalism students within the context of a specific ethics course, as well as across their college education. Journalism students completing a media ethics course showed tempered levels of relativism and idealism at the completion of the course, though they remained situationists with high levels of both factors; however, journalism students were more idealistic and less relativistic that their non-journalism counterparts (Plaisance, 2006). Furthermore, students in their final year of journalism study were less relativistic than first-year students, and more relativistic students were less concerned with journalistic ethical principles and contentious news gathering methods (Detenber et al., 2012).

Research Questions

Based on this theoretical framework, the purpose of this study is to examine how public relations students use ethics to guide their adoption of AI in the classroom, and how it may differ from other majors. This review of the literature suggests that ethical positioning among public relations college students, especially as it pertains to their understanding and adoption of AI, deserves more scholarly attention. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the most recurring uses and knowledge about AI among public relations students?

RQ2: Do public relations students differ from their peers in their average use of AI tools?

RQ3: Do public relations students differ from their peers in terms of their ethical positioning?

RQ4: Do senior public relations students differ from their underclassmen peers in terms of their ethical positioning?

RQ5: Do public relations students differ from their peers in their engagement in and assessment of ethically problematic behaviors using AI?

RQ6: Does one's ethical position impact a willingness to engage in ethically problematic behaviors with AI?

Method

To address the research questions, a cross-sectional survey was administered to students taking courses in a journalism and public relations department in a Southwestern, private university. The department offers programs of study in journalism, public relations, digital media, and advertising. While the department does not offer a specific course in public relations ethics, students are required to complete a media law and ethics course. Furthermore, students have opportunities to engage in individual case studies and address ethical issues within other existing public relations courses.

Sample

Students were recruited by departmental instructors during the fall 2023 semester and offered extra credit in exchange for their participation. The sample (N = 256) was 75.8% female (n = 194), 23% male (n = 59), with three respondents choosing to self-identify or not report. The average age was 19.5 (SD = 2.28). The sample was predominantly White (77.2%, n = 196), 10.2% Hispanic or Latino (n = 26), 5.9% Asian (n = 15), 4.7% Black or African American (n = 12), and 2% other races (n = 5). Regarding academic level, the sample was 41% freshmen (n = 105), 27.3% sophomore (n = 70), 12.5% junior (n = 32), and 18.8% senior (n = 48), with one graduate student. The average self-reported GPA was 3.46 (SD = 0.38), and 72.7% had chosen a major (n = 186). Of those who had chosen a major, 37.6% were in the journalism and public relations department (n = 70). Of the journalism majors, 68.2% were in the public relations concentration (n = 45).

Procedure

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board in November 2023. Upon reviewing the informed consent information, participants were given an open prompt addressing their knowledge and uses of AI technologies. To encourage thoughtful responses to the open-ended prompt, the survey did not allow students to advance until 60 seconds had passed. Upon completing the open-ended prompt, students were asked to respond to close-ended survey questions regarding their use of AI tools and their ethical responses to their uses, as well as provide demographic information. Finally, upon successful completion of the survey, students were eligible to receive extra credit from their respective courses.

Measures

Qualitative Measure

The questionnaire included brief instructions to answer one open-ended prompt to assess the students' current knowledge and uses toward AI.

Students were invited to type their responses in an essay text box via a prompt that read as follows:

> "Recently, generative AI (artificial intelligence) has received a lot of attention in the media and on college campuses. Based on what you may have heard about AI, use the space below to write down as many uses for AI tools that you have heard of or have done yourself."

Quantitative Measures

AI tool use was measured using a list of common tools utilized by students generated by Google's AI tool, Bard (now known as Gemini) (Google, 2023). Using Google search, the prompt, "top AI tools used by college students," was used to create a list of common tools. In addition, two options were included: "I have used other AI tools, but none of these," and, "I have never used AI tools." Respondents who selected these options were not able to select the other options; however, respondents could pick multiple options of the other tools. The complete list of tools and their frequencies are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of Artificial Intelligence Tool Use

AI Tool	Frequency	Percentage
Chat GPT	184	71.9%
EssayGrader	15	5.9%
Google Bard	13	5.1%
Firefly	4	1.6%
Stepwise Math	3	1.2%
Khanmigo	1	0.4%
Copyscape	1	0.4%
Other AI Tools	21	8.2%
Never Used AI Tools	49	19.1%

Note. Percentage is of the total respondents ($N = 256$) who indicated they used each tool.

For each tool selected by respondents, they were then asked how often they used each tool on a six-point scale ranging from "only used once" to "very frequently." The scores for each tool's use were then summed to create an AI-use index (M = 3.33, SD = 1.90), with larger scores indicating more overall AI tool use.

To measure common uses of AI tools by students, the AI tool ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) was used to produce a list of behaviors. The following prompt was entered into ChatGPT:
"You are a professor conducting research into college students' usage of AI tools. Create a list of the top 10 ways college students are using AI bots, and provide references."

From the list generated by ChatGPT, seven items were selected to be included in the final study. For each behavior, students were asked how often they use AI to engage in each activity, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from "never" to "very frequently." Respondents were then asked if they believed engaging in each activity constituted cheating (academic dishonesty), measured on a five-point scale ranging from "definitely not" to "definitely yes." Table 2 includes the list of the seven activities, as well as descriptive statistics for each measure.

Table 2

Descriptives of Academic Artificial Intelligence Behavior and Attitudes

Behaviors	How often do you use AI to do the following activities?		Do you think using AI tools to do the following is cheating (academic dishonesty)?	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Create essays or papers for class	1.64	1.28	4.24	1.03
Help with grammar, spelling, and style for writing assignments	3.30	2.10	1.94	1.08
Generate answers to questions on take-home tests	1.62	1.34	4.14	1.22
Generate ideas for writing	2.97	1.97	2.18	1.10
Find research for class papers	2.20	1.79	2.38	1.18
Help with studying and study habits	2.37	1.92	1.58	0.87
Provide tutoring assistance	2.39	1.92	1.63	0.88

Ethical positioning was measured using the short Forsyth Ethical Positioning Questionnaire (FEPQ-5) (O'Boyle & Forsyth, 2021). Both idealism and relativism were measured with five-item scales with 5-point, Likert measures ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Idealism was measured with items including, "One should never psychologically or physically harm another person," and, "The existence of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained" ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.72$, $\alpha = .85$). Relativism was measured with items including, "What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another," and, "Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual" ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.77$, $\alpha = .82$).

To assess social desirability bias, overclaiming was measured (Joseph et al., 2009; Randall & Fernandes, 1991). Respondents were asked to indicate how familiar they were with five different consumer goods in four different categories: 1) newly released movies, 2) products, 3) television programs, and 4) designer labels. For each category, three of the options were actual goods, and two were fake. For instance, the movie category included three actual movies released at the time of the survey: The Marvels, Napoleon, and Wish; as well as two fake movies: Turned to Gold, and Katherine's Mistake. Responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "not familiar at all" to "very familiar." Responses to the eight fake items were summed to create an overclaiming index, with the lowest possible score being 8, and the highest possible score being 40. On average, respondents did not exhibit excessive overclaiming ($M = 11.19$, $SD = 4.52$).

Demographic measures included gender, age, and racial identity. In addition, respondents were asked their academic year or level (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student), self-reported GPA, and whether or not they had chosen a major. For those who had chosen a major, they were asked if they were a journalism major, and if they

were a journalism major, they were asked their concentration (e.g., public relations, broadcast, advertising, etc.)

Results

Knowledge and Attitudes Toward AI

Research question one sought to understand students' current knowledge and adoption of AI tools by asking an open-ended question. The open-ended question was analyzed using procedures described by Miles & Huberman (1994) for qualitative data analysis, which involves breaking down the data into three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The researchers examined the 256 individual responses and eliminated two because the students had not provided a response to the prompt, thereby making the final sample 254. The researchers open coded individually and then discussed their findings and reached an agreement based on their similar interpretations of the data. The five major themes are reflected in Table 3, and Figure 1 illustrates the visual depiction of the most occurring responses in a word cloud.

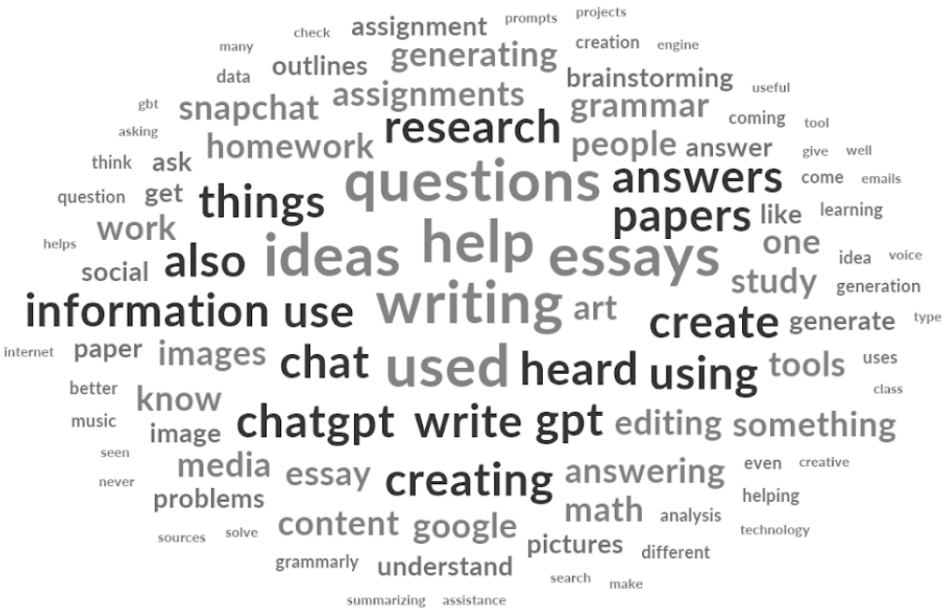
Table 3

Thematic Analysis of AI Attitudes and Knowledge

Top Five Themes	Selected Thematic Keywords	Frequency
Study assistance	Answers to questions, research, outline, summaries, understanding a topic, homework, solving math, grammar, spelling, punctuation, citations, translations, editing	167 (65.23%)
Written content	Essays, articles, emails, social media, resumes, news stories, letters, podcasts, press releases	117 (45.70%)
AI tools	Chat GPT, Snapchat AI, Grammarly, Open AI, Packback, Quizlet, Claude, Siri, Google AI, Tela Type, Notion, Jasper, Google Bard	106 (41.41%)
Creative outlets	Ideation, images, graphics, art design, music composition, photo editing, websites, gaming, movie/TV, animation	94 (36.72%)
Cheating	Fake images & videos, voice manipulation, fabricate famous people, cheating, deep fakes	23 (8.98%)

Figure 1

Word Cloud of Most Common Words in Open-Ended Responses



Note. Word cloud displays most common words entered in response to open-ended prompt. Larger words were more common, with words in color representing the most common words.

As Table 3 illustrates, the top five themes reveal the most common forms of AI adoption and knowledge among students: study assistance, written content, creative outlets, AI tools, and cheating. Study assistance (82%) was the most common theme, which included providing answers to questions, facilitating understanding of complex topics, assisting with summarizing concepts, and solving math problems. The next key theme was written content (55%), which included various forms of writing examples that students are tasked to do in their courses, such as writing essays, articles, social media, and news stories. The third most common theme revealed the various ways students are using AI for creative

purposes (48%), such as music composition, creating images, art design, and coming up with new ideas through the ideation process. The fourth theme demonstrated students' familiarity or current usage of various AI tools (45%), such as ChatGPT, Snapchat AI, Grammarly, and Google AI. The final theme addressed cheating (11%) and revealed significantly less knowledge and attitudes about this area compared to the other four themes.

Differences in AI Use

Research question two asked if public relations students differ from their peers in their average use of AI tools. To address this question, a one-way ANOVA was performed comparing the AI-use index between undeclared majors, non-journalism majors, non-public relations journalism majors (e.g., news media, advertising, etc., $n = 15$), and public relations students. There were no significant differences between undeclared ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 2.12$), non-journalism ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.89$), journalism ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 2.23$), and public relations majors ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(3,198) = 0.46$, $p = .71$. To answer the research question, public relations students do not differ from their peers in terms of AI tool use.

Differences in Ethical Positioning

Research question three asked if public relations students differ from their peers in terms of their ethical positioning. Two one-way ANOVAs were performed comparing idealism and relativism between undeclared, non-journalism, journalism, and public relations students. For idealism, the results were significant, $F(3,246) = 3.79$, $p = .01$. Tukey post-hoc analyses revealed that public relations majors ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.65$) expressed significantly more idealism than undeclared majors ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.73$), $p = .008$. The differences between non-journalism ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.73$) and journalism ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.64$) majors and the other groups were not significant, $p > .05$. For relativism, the results were significant, as well, $F(3,245) = 4.04$, $p = .008$. Tukey post-hoc analyses revealed that public relations students ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.76$) were less relativistic than undeclared majors ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.73$). There

were not significant differences between non-journalism (M = 3.26, SD = 0.79) and journalism (M = 3.44, SD = 0.68) majors and the other groups, p > .05. To address the research question, public relations students are more idealistic and less relativistic than their peers who had not yet declared a major.

Research question four asked if senior public relations students differ from their underclassmen public relations peers in terms of their ethical positioning. To address this research question, independent samples t-tests were performed comparing idealism and relativism between senior public relations majors and non-senior public relations majors (e.g., freshman, sophomore, and junior). For idealism, there were no significant differences between seniors (M = 4.23, SD = 0.71) and non-seniors (M = 4.20, SD = 0.62), $t(42) = -0.13$, $p = .90$. Likewise, for relativism, there were no significant differences between seniors (M = 2.89, SD = 0.82) and non-seniors (M = 3.23, SD = 0.69), $t(41) = 1.50$, $p = .14$. To answer the research question, public relations senior students do not differ from public relations underclassmen in terms of ethical positioning.

Predictors of Ethical Behaviors and Attitudes

Research question five asked if public relations students differ from their peers in their engagement in ethically questionable uses of AI, and if they differ from their peers in their assessment of ethically dubious behaviors. Research question six asked if their ethical position impacts their willingness to engage in ethically dubious behaviors with AI. To address these final two research questions, a series of hierarchical linear regressions were utilized predicting engagement in AI behaviors that would be interpreted as cheating, as well as participants' opinions that these behaviors constituted cheating. Table 4 presents the results of the regressions.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Ethical Behaviors and Attitudes

	Frequency of Using AI Tools						Perception of Behavior as Cheating					
	Create essays or papers for class			Generate answers to questions on take-home tests			Create essays or papers for class			Generate answers to questions on take-home tests		
Variables	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SD*	*β*	*B*	*SD*	*β*	*B*	*SD*	*β*
Step 1												
GPA	-0.19	0.21	-.06	-0.24	0.22	-0.07	0.12	0.17	0.05	0.07	0.20	0.02
Overclaiming	0.03	0.02	0.12	0.03	0.02	0.11	-0.04	0.01	-0.15*	-0.04	0.02	-0.14*
R^2		.02			.02			.03			.02	
F		2.22			2.00			3.20*			2.60	
Step 2												
GPA	-0.16	0.21	-0.05	-0.29	0.22	-0.08	0.13	0.17	0.05	0.06	0.20	0.02
Overclaiming	0.03	0.02	0.11	0.03	0.02	0.11	-0.04	0.01	-0.16*	-0.04	0.02	-0.15*
Undeclared	-0.35	0.25	-0.12	0.30	0.26	0.10	-0.30	0.20	-0.13	-0.05	0.24	-0.02
Non-Journalism	-0.63	0.23	-0.24**	-0.23	0.24	-0.09	0.07	0.18	0.03	0.09	0.21	0.04
Journalism	-0.46	0.34	-0.10	0.32	0.36	0.07	0.27	0.27	0.07	0.37	0.32	0.08
ΔR^2		.03			.03			.03			.01	
ΔF		2.63			2.67*			2.51			.70	
Step 3												
GPA	-0.17	0.22	-0.05	-0.24	0.23	-0.07	0.12	0.18	0.05	0.08	0.21	0.03
Overclaiming	0.03	0.02	0.10	0.03	0.02	0.10	-0.04	0.01	-0.16*	-0.04	0.02	-0.15*
Undeclared	-0.44	0.26	-0.15	0.21	0.28	0.07	-0.26	0.21	-0.11	-0.09	0.25	-0.03
Non-Journalism	-0.68	0.23	-0.26**	-0.27	0.24	-0.10	0.09	0.19	0.04	0.07	0.22	0.03
Journalism	-0.46	0.34	-0.10	-0.07	0.36	0.06	0.28	0.28	0.07	0.34	0.33	0.08
Idealism	-0.29	0.12	-0.16*	0.11	0.12	-0.04	0.08	0.10	0.05	-0.02	0.11	-0.01
Relativism	-0.10	0.11	-0.06		0.12	0.06	0.00	0.09	0.00	0.05	0.11	0.03
ΔR^2		.03			.004			.003			.001	
ΔF		4.09*			.49			.34			0.11	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Step one of each regression entered control variables. Self-reported GPA was utilized as a control, as prior research has shown its association with academic dishonesty (Cuadrado et al., 2019). Overclaiming was

also utilized as a control, to address the impact of social desirability, consistent with previous research (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). Step two of each regression entered the majors, dummy coded as undeclared, non-journalism majors, and non-public relations journalism majors, with public relations majors as the reference. Step three entered the two ethical positioning variables: idealism and relativism.

The regressions addressed AI behaviors that would most likely violate the university honor code: using AI to create essays for class, and using AI to answer short-answer questions on a take-home exam. Respondents reported engaging in both activities at low levels, as evidenced by their means (essays: $M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.28$; exams: $M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.34$), and both activities were perceived as academic dishonesty (essays: $M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.03$; exams: $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.22$). Thus, using these items to represent ethically questionable activities in terms of academic honesty is supported by the participant's response.

The first two regressions predicted engagement with these behaviors. For the use of AI to create essays, the final step of the regression was significant, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F(2,239) = 4.09$, $p = .02$. There was a significant, negative relation between being a non-journalism major and using AI to create essays ($B = -0.68$, $SE = 0.23$, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .003$), which exerted the most influence in the model. Public relations students were more likely than non-journalism students to use AI to create essays. Furthermore, there was a significant, negative relation with idealism and using AI to create essays ($B = -0.29$, $SE = 0.12$, $\beta = -.16$, $p = .01$). The more idealistic an individual, the less likely they are to use AI to create essays. For the next behavior, using AI to generate answers to take-home tests, the final step was not significant, $\Delta R^2 = .004$, $\Delta F(2,239) = 0.49$, $p = .61$. There were no differences between public relations and other majors, and ethical positioning did not influence this behavior.

The final two regressions predicted perceptions that these activities were cheating. Neither of the final steps of each regression were

significant: $\Delta R^2 = .003$, $\Delta F(2,239) = 0.34$, $p = .71$ (essay), and $\Delta R^2 = .001$, $\Delta F(2,239) = 0.11$, $p = .89$ (test). There were no differences between public relations students and other majors concerning beliefs these activities were cheating, and ethical positioning did not influence these beliefs.

To address research question five, public relations students were more likely to use AI to create essays than non-journalism students, but there was no difference for using AI to generate answers on exams. Furthermore, there were no differences in their assessment of these activities as unethical. To address research question six, increased idealism led to less cheating on essays, but not exams. Neither factor impacted beliefs regarding the ethics of each behavior.

Discussion

Like most tools, AI products can be used for purposes both good and bad. Previous research has shown that there are legitimate ways to use technology for studying and learning, and there are ways to use them to cheat and plagiarize on academic work (Brown, 2019; McMurtrie, 2023). This is why it's important for students and educators to remain actively engaged in ongoing education and training in ethics, especially around AI (Pollack, 2024).

The qualitative data that emerged from the open-ended question about students' current knowledge and uses of AI revealed that students are mostly using AI for good educational purposes. As Table 3 illustrates, the top five themes reveal the most common forms of AI knowledge or adoption among college students: study assistance, written content, AI tools, creative outlets, and cheating. However, upon closer examination of these five themes, it appears that cheating is identified as the least frequent theme, indicating that most students may not be using or recognizing AI as a deceitful tool for unethical purposes. Instead, the results indicate that students are using AI in productive and educational ways to help them be successful in their academic work. While these findings indicate students' current knowledge and uses of AI, it doesn't clearly provide additional insights about their specific application or context. In other words, simply

using AI tools does not automatically mean one is engaging in academic dishonesty; it depends on how the tools are used (Easton, 2023). This falls in line with Coffey's (2023) insights, which explain that the application of AI tools depends heavily on how often they are using it and in what capacity. For example, this study revealed that daily users mainly use AI for summarizing text and findings answers to questions, whereas non-daily users are using it primarily to facilitate understanding of complex topics and assist in writing assignments. Furthermore, the open-ended responses do not provide additional elaboration beyond what is written. For example, when a student indicated that they used ChatGPT to write essays, it is not clear what their process was or the end result. Did they use the AI tool to configure a rough draft and then edit and rewrite it in their own voice before submitting the assignment for a grade? These specific actions or steps are not included in the open-ended responses, which opens the door for further inquiry to examine students' application processes and overall experiences using AI in and outside of the classroom.

Overall, these top qualitative themes mostly indicate that students are acclimating quite well to this new technology and will most likely be in a good position to continue to work with AI as a complementary, functional tool. With students being digital natives and early adopters of new technology, it's no surprise that they have surpassed faculty in adopting AI tools. In fact, a survey by Statista found that 65% of U.S. undergraduate students already reported that AI will have a positive impact on their learning (Korhonen, 2024). Perhaps more importantly, these findings closely mirror what is currently happening within the public relations industry. For example, the 2024 IPR AI Report revealed that communication leaders are primarily using AI for productive and efficient processes, such as brainstorming, generating ideas, summarizing, editing, and creating content (McCorkindale, 2024, p. 12). Similarly, a 2023 Muck Rack AI study revealed that 61% of practitioners are actively using AI tools and the majority are using it for writing tasks, such as press

release, social media copy, and crafting pitches (Muck Rack, 2023, p. 11). In both cases, it appears that students and practitioners are using AI for relevant and productive purposes. Educators who are already familiar with AI or are currently teaching classes that largely integrate AI best practices acknowledge that students will need to learn how to properly and ethically use it in the workplace in order to be successful in the future (Coffey, 2023). By empowering students now to explore AI tools and gain the skills and resources needed to thrive in this new era, educators will be able to bridge the skills and knowledge gap between the classroom and the industry. For example, educators can create in-class assignments or activities that pose real-world scenarios with issues that need to be addressed. In small groups, students can engage in critical thinking and practice using AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, Gemini, etc.) in real-time, and then share their process and results with the class and gain feedback. Additionally, students involved in PRSSA and PR student-run agencies can also gain valuable practice and insights by working closely with their faculty advisors to develop best practices for client work.

The qualitative findings were supported by the quantitative results, which suggested that respondents were more likely to believe that ethically-questionable AI behaviors occurred less frequently. However, it is worth noting that public relations students were more likely than non-journalism students to use AI to generate written output, such as essays. As ethical education is an important aspect of public relations education, this finding warrants further consideration; however, contributing factors should be considered. For example, it is likely that public relations students are asked to generate more writing in their coursework mainly due to the vocational nature of the field in comparison to non-journalism students. It is also possible that public relations students may lean on AI to fulfill non-PR focused written assignments (e.g., essays and reflections). However, it is preferable for public relations students to avoid leaning

on AI for unethical behaviors at a higher rate than non-journalism peers, especially given the importance of ethical training. Previous research suggests that students in journalism programs were more likely to hold strong opinions about professional ethics and were more lenient when it comes to academic ethics (Conway & Groshek, 2009). Since this current study examined academic ethics as opposed to professional ethics, it is possible this dichotomy was at play. Perhaps the emphasis on professional ethics in public relations education, with its reliance on case studies and particular ethical dilemmas, is missing a broader, character-focused approach to cultivating ethical decision-making.

A character-infused approach in ethical decision-making is often overlooked in favor of either a teleological (consequences and outcomes) or a deontological (rules and responsibilities) approach (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022). However, when an individual makes a bad decision, their poor judgment and character is implicated or questioned. In other words, "actions join together to form conduct, which leads to habits, and in turn, forms character" (p. 187). As this study suggests, students can benefit from exposure to real-world ethical scenarios and training opportunities in the classroom through case studies, class discussions, and simulations to "help students critically analyze and solve ethical dilemmas" (Vasquez, 2022, p. 66). Conway and Groshek (2009) suggest that participation in student media organizations, clubs, or internship opportunities can also play a positive role in shaping a students' character and ethical lens due to the interaction and socialization aspects. As these examples suggest, students who are only exposed to ethical concepts or theories may be limited in their ethical education because they are not engaging in experiential training, which values application, continuous learning, and reflection- all crucial elements for character development (Vasquez, 2022).

In regard to ethical positioning, not unlike previous research (Plaisance, 2006), public relations students were more idealistic and less

relativistic than students with undeclared majors, suggesting an absolutist outlook. This supports previous research indicating that the public relations function emphasizes a deontological ethical approach, which is focused on attributes, such as duty, respect, honesty, fairness, and justice (Bowen, 2005; Place, 2010). Similarly, Vasquez (2022) found that public relations students were mostly deontologically-oriented when it came to making ethical decisions, meaning that they focused more so on rules, rights, and responsibilities. This may attribute to why some students in this study perceived AI behaviors as forms of academic dishonesty and identified cheating as one of the top five themes in the open-ended question.

However, unlike research examining news-focused journalism students (Detenber et al., 2012), there were no differences between senior and non-senior public relations students. Given the survey's lack of specificity regarding respondents' particular educational activities, including internships, student associations, and whether or not they had completed the media ethics course, care should be taken in interpreting this finding. Nevertheless, it appears that students are either drawn to public relations due to certain ethical positions, or as a result of early coursework that can shift these ideas. Notably, only idealism influenced students not to cheat on class essays. Broadly speaking, ethical positioning did not predict the identification of and the refusal to participate in unethical behaviors.

Implications for PR Educators

AI adoption within the halls of the academy have left educators wondering what to do about a technology that could enable students to fabricate assignments and tests without actually learning. Although the temptation to ban AI from the classroom is an option, there is an opportunity to embrace this revolutionary technology and learn to use it wisely. This means educators can help students engage in and develop their AI literacy to understand the shortcomings, pitfalls, best practices,

and use it responsibly and ethically. Students must find ways to strike a balance between using a tool that can produce efficiencies and assist in learning, and blindly over-relying on machine learning and forsaking critical thinking and ethical standards.

Overall, this study shows that U.S. college students are curious about AI and are using it for good purposes. The perception or assumption that students are mainly using AI to cheat appears to be inaccurate and could negatively influence teachers' attitudes toward their students. However, this study reflects the findings from one institution that also has a Christian affiliation and therefore is not going to be representative of all universities across the country. While the researchers acknowledge that in some places, educators may be having more difficulty managing AI in the classroom, they still emphasize that care should be taken not to rush to judgment and assume guilt simply because the student is using an AI tool. Educators have an opportunity to embrace AI, engage their students in honest dialogue, and teach them best practices, including ethical approaches and responsible uses, especially since the industry is moving in that direction.

According to the Institute of Public Relations AI report, most practitioners indicate they are comfortable with AI and view it as a "tool rather than a strategy, used to supplement and enhance the work of communications" (McCorkindale, 2024, p. 6). The growth of AI initially cast fear among professionals that their jobs would be replaced by AI, but now the growing sentiment has changed to "it's not AI that will take my job, it's someone who knows how to use AI" (Coffey, 2023).

As more AI tools continue to be deployed and embraced in industry roles, there will be a higher expectation placed upon graduating students and young professionals to know how to use AI effectively and responsibly. Educators can help students develop their AI literacy by working together in partnership at the university and classroom level by openly discussing the capabilities and limitations of AI, and creating AI

guidelines and policies to clarify how AI can and should be used so that they learn these habits before entering the workforce. Several universities across the country have created committees, teaching centers, policies, and are using various communication channels to educate students, faculty, and staff about AI (McMurtrie, 2023). For example, some universities have created web pages that specifically provide information, resources, guidelines, and examples to educate students and faculty about AI use. On these pages, they explain what constitutes cheating and plagiarism, and provide clarity regarding proper citation, copyright rules, and the importance of disclosing when AI is used.

A final implication for educators to consider is to emphasize a greater attention on teaching ethics as a stand-alone course, with an emphasis on ethical decision-making models and moral development theories, as indicated in previous studies (Bowen, 2005; Cabot, 2005; Neill, 2017). In this study, most students identified as absolutists in their primary ethical positioning when it came to using AI tools, which is high in idealism and low in relativism. In other words, students were more likely to endorse moral standards of what is right or wrong regardless of the situation or outcome. For example, if a student used ChatGPT to answer questions on a take-home exam, it would be considered wrong. It doesn't matter if the outcome was positive (e.g., the student received an A), an absolutist ethical position focuses on the action and not the consequence. This can also suggest that if a student uses ChatGPT to write an essay or press release, they are more likely to be bound by a sense of duty to follow the rules and finalize the paper in their own voice before submitting it for a grade. This ethical orientation is a form of deontology, which closely aligns with public relations and its code of ethics that endorses honesty, fairness, duty (Public Relations Society of America, n.d.), as well as transparency and a focus on the process and not the outcome or consequences (Place, 2010).

Additionally, educators may consider addressing academic dishonesty in a clear and transparent way. Technology, which will continue

to advance and evolve, especially around AI, may not be the biggest barrier to ethical literacy. If a student is intent on cheating, they will find a way. The bigger issue for educators is to talk to students about "why one shouldn't cheat and why it's destructive and counterproductive in the long-term" (Brown, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of the current study is its reliance on cross-sectional data from one particular U.S.-based institution. As such, it only represents the experiences of a group of students from one semester in a specific educational context. Since the sample of public relations students was limited, and the survey relied on a cross-sectional survey where specific course completion and educational experiences were not measured, care should be taken interpreting the lack of differences in ethical positioning found in the current investigation. Future research should expand upon this study to include other universities in different regions, and extend the period of data collection to recruit a larger sample of public relations students. In addition to longitudinal methods, quasi-experimental methods could be employed to further explore the relations between ethics education and ethical behaviors and positioning. This will be particularly helpful as the AI tools continue to be adopted by public relations students. Additionally, this study briefly used qualitative analysis to understand students' current knowledge and uses of AI through a one-question prompt. Future studies should expand upon this approach through in-depth interviews or focus groups with both students and educators to better understand the intricacies and specific processes students are using with AI tools, how they're acquiring knowledge and skills in this space, and also gain perspectives from the faculty who are teaching students how to increase their AI literacy.

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