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Research Article

ChatGPT acceptance in South African universities: Analyses of two contradictory e-newspaper articles

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ABSTRACT

Universities have not widely accepted chatbots across the globe because of concerns about the threats they pose to the credibility of academic activities. This paper examines the media framing of messages about chatbots with the view to understand how this is likely to impact on South African universities' acceptance of ChatGPT. Framing as theoretical standpoint and critical discourse analysis as a methodology are used to provide an in-depth review of two purposively sampled e-newspaper articles. Results show that the e-articles differ in their framing and tone regarding the acceptance of ChatGPT. The conflicting media views are likely to lead to a divided South African academic community on the matter. We encourage universities to embrace chatbots for their benefits while also taking steps to mitigate their threats.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, chatbots, ChatGPT, e-newspaper articles, critical discourse analysis, universities.

Introduction

COVID-19 was a devastating problem to confront every part of the world in recent years that seriously hindered growth (Küçük, 2023). In education, especially in developing countries, they were found unprepared for the use of technology because of lack of training for educators and the absence of devices for learners (Bujorean, 2021; Ndaba & Ngcobo, 2024; Turturean, 2021). Yet, one of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic was an increased urgency to establish robust biotechnology infrastructures (Ntombela, 2021). Technology continues with its global march, with chatbots increasing their visibility in different facets of life. The trending sample is an artificial intelligence (AI) application called ChatGPT (Generative Pre-Trained), which was released by OpenAI on the 30th of November 2022 to global acclaim. The excitement about ChatGPT saw it attracting 100 million users in a space of about two months during which period it received rave reviews (Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) 2023). This interest has been evident in the academic field, with students presenting their high trust and dependence on AI tools (Mohd Zaini & Abdul Aziz, 2024; Ndaba & Ngcobo, 2024).

ChatGPT is a chatbot or virtual assistant which facilitates human-like automated, personal assistance by drawing from various internet sources in real-time (Liebrenz et al., 2023). It satisfactorily mimics human speech through audio input and or text input. The need for communication, public relations, marketing among other aspects has seemingly brought a conflation of roles between different fields and professions since they can all use chatbots. Zhai (2022) posits that ChatGPT is poised to influence "every aspect of society" because it can, among other functions, write academic papers, keep records of staff and student enrolment, rate performance of students and conduct 'personal' classes with students. Despite their generally impressive initiatives towards research in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), many South African universities have not yet embraced chatbots, especially on their websites. SARUA (2023) extends the rejection by universities to a global level, noting countries like Hong Kong and Australia. The concerns raised by universities include academic integrity that is at stake due to issues of plagiarism and assessments of students. However, SARUA (2023) clarifies that this is not the position taken by all universities as some have embraced AI as the new reality that has implications for students' preparedness when they enter the world of work. It is, for this reason, recommended that universities should take a stance that involves the accommodation of these new AI applications by introducing critical thinking aspects in their teaching and learning (SARUA, 2023).

This paper seeks to contribute to the relatively new but burgeoning discourse on chatbots and their application at universities. Technological developments are of interest to universities because they train the future work force that needs to be aligned with the expectations of future employers (Barannikova & Zaslavskaya, 2023). The paper makes its contribution by analyzing media reporting about ChatGPT because the application is new and has generated quite a debate and attention across the globe, especially in academic cycles. Media reporting is worth analyzing due to its potential to frame messages such that they pursued different actors in society to adopt attitudes that can either be favorable or unfavorable toward acceptance of digital technologies (Engås et., 2023; Fu & Gao, 2023; Matundu & Mapudzi, 2023; Yoong, 2023). The media is invested in technology because its entry provokes controversy which then compels journalists to participate in the discourse about technology and create their own reality for the readers (Simons & Strovsky, 2022; Shilina & Scolari, 2022). ChatGPT's established societal influence on attitudes and its reputation provide strong impetus for this investigation (Dipankar Sharma et al., 2024).

Research Methodology

This study employed critical discourse analysis (CDA), where two purposively sampled e-newspaper articles were analysed. CDA was adopted both as a theory and as a methodological framework. The interest in CDA emanates from the fact that it enables one to reveal power dynamics and perpetuation of certain ideologies in language usage (Foucault,1972). As such, it has mainly been used to conscientize readers about hidden agendas behind media discourse when reporting news. The discourse would be revealed during critical analysis of language used when constructing texts (Mouna, 2021). Language in terms of word choices made by the two writers to categorise groups or issues were in this study used as a form of analysis to determine the writers' attitudes (Mouna, 2021). CDA is relevant for this study on technology because by CDA is multidisciplinary by its nature (Van Dijk, 2017).

Furthermore, a non-probability sampling method supported the investigation by selecting part of a population. For this investigation purposive sampling was helpful due to the large population group found, making it impossible to include every component. The researchers typed keywords such as 'impact', 'use of' 'chatbots', and 'higher education' in the Google search engine. The massive availability of material made the sampling easier on 'ChatGPT', the latest chatbot that has been tipped to make a significant impact on key facets of society such as education, marketing, and health. The number of found 2023 e-newspaper articles was sixteen and the selection of the two was influenced by the fact that they presented opposing views and were published by different newspapers. Moreover, they both focused on the use of ChatGPT in HEIs. CDA facilitated an analysis of the two articles through the identification of "themes and features" (Bal, 2014: 23). Hence, the presentation of findings and their discussion of this paper was made into four themes. CDA examines the occurrence, recurrence and significance of sentences, images and words in texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In a qualitative study like this, researchers are 'instruments' because, they rely on their ability to interpret, describe, prescribe and proscribe situations, data, situations, possible solutions and what should not be done, respectively (Chenail, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This, therefore, requires researchers to be aware of their biases especially when the subject of their study affects them (Chenail, 2011). This bias risk was eliminated by relying on verbatim evidence from the selected articles as a guideline of analyses.

Due to the analysis of e-newspaper articles, framing theory is utilised in this study. The selection of newspaper articles as objects of analysis was because of the impact of news coverage on society's acceptance of new AI tools (Chuan, Tsai & Cho, 2019; Pham & Nguyet, 2022). Framing theory in mass communication is made useful by its four broad elements which enable researchers to analyse the sender, the receiver, the message and culture (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). In the context of this study, the senders are the two authors of analyzed articles, the receivers of interest are the South African universities' stakeholders, the message is the ideology framed about ChatGPT and the impact this has on the culture of universities when they accept any of these conflicting messages.

The writers of articles that were selected for analysis are credible and authoritative sources of the subject under study. Michele van Eck, whose article "CHATGPT signals the end of education as we know it" appeared in The Saturday Star, is an associate professor and head of Department (Private Law) at UJ (Van Eck, 2023). Sthembiso Lebuso is a multimedia journalist at City Press, which is published by Media 24, a subsidiary of Naspers, the biggest media house in Sub Sahara. The article titled "How SA universities plan to deal with ChatGPT" was written by Lebuso (2023). Saturday Star is published by Independent News and Media SA, one of South Africa's biggest media groups. For ease of analysis and comprehension, the two articles were coded in the order of their dates of publishing. Therefore, A1 (Article 1) refers to Lebuso's article (02 February 2023) and A2 refers to van Eck's article (14 February 2023).

Media attitudes

The results and their discussion follow a thematic presentation of A1 and A2 data that is in four themes. The themes are: effect of titles on readers, introduction to ChatGPT and its impact on universities and society, the thin line between threats and benefits of ChatGPT to universities, and the way forward. This section further entails the integration of relevant literature that has been discussed before this part of the paper. At the center of this section is to affirm or refute the TAM as its theoretical framework through which attitudes to

technology are assessed. The factors of interest that are presented by TAM are the perceived ease of use (PEOU) and perceived usefulness (PU). Moreover, the reviewed relevant literature is considered in the discussion of findings.

Theme 1: Effect of titles on readers

A1 is entitled, "How SA universities plan to deal with ChatGPT" (Lebuso, 2023) which creates interest among readers especially academics and students or other university stakeholders. The words of interest in the title are "How" and "plan" as they signal that universities have a plan to deal with ChatGPT and the reader is going to be provided with steps that can be followed as provided by the writer of the article. The readers are immediately made aware that there are challenges the writer perceives with the use of this technology, but the writer has solutions to make it to be perceived as easy to use.

In the same breath, one would ask "How?" after seeing the heading "CHATGPT signals the end of education as we know it" (A2) (Van Eck, 2023), prompting one to read further. The words of interest for readers could be "end of education" and "we" in "as we know it". The thought of "end" might immediately depress readers and make them adopt a negative attitude towards the discussed technology because they fear its use could bring an end to what they value. As they critically analyse the title the readers might wonder who is categorized as "we". The readers might feel being coerced to be part of those who see "the end of education" and be curious about what is it that they are assumed by the writer to "know" about education.

This finding evokes a sense represented by TAM about attitudes toward the acceptance of technology as predicted by PU and PEOU (Assaker, 2019; Davis et al., 2023; Khafit et al., 2020). The writers of the used newspaper articles frame their messages in a manner that portrays conflicting attitudes to the adoption of ChatGPT (Chuan, Tsai & Cho, 2019; Pham & Nguyet, 2022). The writers of the used newspaper articles frame their messages in a way that shows conflicting attitudes towards the adoption of ChatGPT. A1's selection of words in the title can be seen as positive about chatbot acceptance, while A2's selection is negative, suggesting conflicting perceptions of usefulness and ease of use from the senders to the receivers of this mass communication (Davis, 1989; Davis et al., 2023; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015).

Theme 2: Introduction to ChatGPT and its impact on universities and society

From the outset, A1 provides details about ChatGPT, informing or reminding the reader that ChatGPT is a product of OpenAI, a US AI research laboratory (SARUA, 2023). ChatGPT is further introduced by the columnist as "way more powerful than the chatbots" because it "provides detailed responses…" and is "backed by Elon Musk" and has "university leaders scratching their heads" trying to find a plan they can follow to deal with this useful and powerful technology. Mentioning the well-known Elon Musk, the founder and donor of AI who also owns Twitter among other businesses suggests the enormity of the AI tool. Moreover, ChatGPT has the attention of "university leaders" who are thinking hard about it. This serves to give credibility to the presented technology and makes the reader to perceive ChatGPT as useful. OpenAI's website is quoted as saying ChatGPT is a follow-up to InstructGPT, which suggests that it has better features. Indeed, the company claims that its tool admits when it errs, challenges wrong assumptions, and discards unsuitable requests. A limitation of opinion columns is their propensity for bias which may rub on the readers. AI's tone is clearly in favor of ChatGPT, which in TAM terms suggests that he has a positive PU and PEOU (Malatji et al., 2020; Marangunić & Granić, 2015; Taherdoost, 2018).

However, A2 is not explicit in her introduction of ChatGPT. A2 first describes society as describes society as "consumed with technology…" and the choice of the word "consumed" has a negative connotation. She uses a delayed lead sentence punctuated by figurative language to create suspense. A2 contrasts the past and the present, suggesting that what was once considered an illusion in the past has become a reality: "the science fiction of yesterday has become the scientific reality of today". This may lead the receiver to construe the sender as positive about technology. Such a perception does not last long because A2 immediately labels ChatGPT as "the threat to traditional education structures, schools and universities" because it can write assignments. More concerning to the sender is that it "provides information in a human manner…" with "…the potential of replacing the function of educators." The framed messages further intensify the press's role in influencing the acceptance of certain ideologies by creating unfavorable attitudes towards systems (Engås et al., 2023; Fu & Gao, 2023; Matundu & Mapudzi, 2023; Yoong, 2023). These framed contradictory messages from the media have the potential to divide the academic community and society at large in their acceptance of new technology (Engås et al., 2023; Fu & Gao, 2023; Matundu & Mapudzi, 2023; Yoong, 2023).

Theme 3: The thin line between threats and benefits of ChatGPT to universities

Light-hearted expressions characterize both articles to describe a serious issue in different ways. A1 presents readers with positive portrayals of university authorities, who are depicted as intellectual individuals actively seeking solutions to address the issue, while cautioning against adopting an avoidant stance. This contrasts with A2's use of negative images in which educators are portrayed as cornered boxers "tempted to throw in the towel, sit on the corner" as indication of surrender. As if that is not enough, A2 rhetorically asks if ChatGPT poses a threat to traditional teaching and learning and adds insult to injury by adding that students may not require teachers if they use the tool (Costa, 2018; Adamopoulou & Moussiades, 2020). Such a threat

is likely to influence educators not to accept this technology if it is going to take their jobs in a country where unemployment is already high, and the future of the economy is gloomy (PwC, 2023).

A1 further makes the audience aware that ChatGPT is beneficial because it can "write a song…or write a thesis", "causing such a stir globally" and it has "the most sophisticated large language model.". This suggests that it is perceived as useful and easy to use by different types of people for different tasks (Taherdoost, 2018). Even though there might be concerns with these abilities, A1 cautions the university leaders that they "cannot prohibit students from using ChatGPT"', instead, they should come up with a "plan to educate students (and staff) about" it. This suggestion is congruent with SARUA's (2023) view that higher education should involve introducing critical thinking aspects in teaching and learning.

A2 admits "There are certain advantages" but downplays them by noting that "despite these advantages, CHATGPT has the potential…substituting…skills are taught and transferred…skills required of school and university graduates" can be taught by it. This is, of course, true about most technological tools, as they are not immune to criticism (SARUA, 2023; Willems, 2023).

A2 further asked ChatGPT about the future of universities that adopted ChatGPT and it said, "in the end, it was their end", "No more professors to befriend", "buildings stand empty now, A ghost town". This further emphasizes the negative perceptions held by A2 as evident in her repeated use of the word "end". To influence readers, A2 states that chatbots will replace professors who are friendly without mentioning that ChatGPT facilitates human-like automated, personal assistance (Liebrenz et al., 2023). This is selective reporting designed to frame the intended message so as to influence the non-acceptance of new AI tools by universities (Chuan, Tsai & Cho, 2019; Pham & Nguyet, 2022). A2 challenges the view expressed by chatbots' proponents, who consider it as a good substitute for human beings since chatbots can perform efficiently leading to improved organizational and individual communication (Costa, 2018; Adamopoulou & Moussiades, 2020) and confirms Moyo's (2022) concern about Africa being reluctant to keep up with the times causing them to remain behind.

A2, like A1, has personal pronouns "our" and "we", which indicate subjectivity. Also, like A1, this does not preclude A2 from providing different opinions. Due to her legal background, Van Eck (2023) employs language in a remarkably erudite way despite her article being the longest of the two under review. For instance, she uses metaphoric expressions like "propelled", and "consumed with technology", to show how innovations are threatening to transform the way people live by performing some of their duties (Adamopoulou & Moussiades, 2020; Costa, 2018; Zhai, 2022). Though this paints a grim picture, 'normal' life has not yet died but is on the "brink", there is "a very real risk of rendering traditional educational structures obsolete". Use of an article, adverb and adjective in quick succession "a very real risk" is likely to alarm the reader and therefore draw their attention (Fu & Gao, 2023; Matundu & Mapudzi, 2023).

The second paragraph in A2 is repleted with terms that the average South African newspaper reader will not understand though several middle-class people (a significant part of the paper's readership) will do. Terms like "Fourth Industrial Revolution and the technological development of big data, cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence (albeit in its infancy) are used loosely. In addition, A2 graphically contrasts traditional learning with ChatGPT: "Openai's latest development in artificial intelligence" poses a "threat to traditional education structures, schools and universities", the "fall of the traditional education structures, signaling the replacement of educators and the start of a posthuman era of education". The repeated use of "traditional education" enlightens the receiver on what the sender initially meant in the title when she used the words "education as we know it". A2 believes that South African universities should not accept new technologies as this would change their culture (Moyo, 2022). This is self-contradictory because at one point she appears to welcome the new technologies: "the science fiction of yesterday has become the scientific reality of today".

Theme 4: The way forward

Both writers end their discourse by suggesting the way forward for universities on the acceptance of ChatGPT. Yet, their approach is not the same.

On the one hand, A1 consults various leaders at universities to find out "how" they "plan" to deal with ChatGPT, as per his title. This serves to give his discourse a semblance of objectivity. To corroborate its claims, A1 quotes reputable sources and ends with a quotation that refutes more than confirms A2's negative claims about ChatGPT. Senior director of academic affairs at Wits University, Diane Grayson echoes what the column states about ChatGPT: "can be useful", but can be "factually incorrect, controversial, biased" so students need "to engage with critically" and "they need to reference it". This somewhat masks the limitations of the tool, such as the absence of mechanisms to control its usage. Weaknesses, such as inconsistencies and unreliability, though mentioned, are downplayed (SARU, 2023). Grayson further says Wits plans to educate staff and students about the advantages and disadvantages of the tool to avoid issues such as plagiarism. In agreement, Tshilidzi Marwala UJ vice-chancellor at the time, called for policy reviews to maintain ethical standards because chatbots "offer many benefits". Phaphama Tshisikhawe, spokesperson for the TUT was also cautiously optimistic. She was more realistic than the other consulted university leaders. She spoke at length about weaknesses of ChatGPT such as plagiarism risk owing to difficulties in tracking sources of content on the tool, propensity for bias if used to train models in the sciences, especially predictive modelling tasks. Tshisikhawe added that ChatGPT can "offer many benefits in higher education" without mentioning them, which suggests that they are not as significant as risks such as inaccurate, biased,

vague and irrelevant responses. Tshisikhawe provides a sober insight, that ChatGPT "carries significant risks and dangers" and urges policymakers to critically consider the merits and demerits of the tool. Indeed, the government and several universities have adopted chatbots by coming up with transformative policies that also guard against the unethical use of technology (Government of South Africa, 2022; Maleke, 2021; Wits University, 2020). These are in line with SARU (2023) which points out weaknesses and yet promotes the chatbot by suggesting what can be done to overcome them. A1 ends on a hopeful note by saying education is all about how people utilize knowledge that they have accumulated. There is a sense of optimism about chatbots that with careful utilization, some of the threats can either be eliminated or managed (Krlev & Spicer, 2023).

On the other hand, A2 relies on her opinions to suggest the way forward making her article to be subjective throughout. Towards the end, A2 suddenly changes from a light-hearted, (over)celebrating tone of the tool to a serious and realistic one in which it concedes that no machine can replace human beings both as learners and teachers because there are feelings such as fulfilment in finally realizing something which machines cannot do. She however states that this fulfilment occurs "after hours of struggling" which might not be acceptable to many university stakeholders who prefer technology because of its PU and PEOU (Davis, Granić, & Marangunić, 2023; Malatji Van Eck, & Zuva, 2020; Marangunić & Granić, 2015; Taherdoost, 2018). A2 further argues that ChatGPT will "bring the education system as we know it to extinction" because it "cannot be said that a person is educated", such as a doctor, if they rely on "internet connection to perform open-heart surgery" including a lawyer who seeks "access to the latest case law database" and swears "never will be the case". In reality, this cannot be said to be the case at all as most professionals, if not all, and ordinary people rely on technology to keep up with the latest developments in their professions. Many people can be said to perceive technology as useful and easy to use rather than consulting humans. Take for instance when one needs directions to some place, we find technology more reliable than humans. The penultimate paragraph candidly states that technology is a means to an end, not an end in itself: "technologies are simply tools that fit into a greater puzzle of our humanity" which signals a pessimistic ending (Eppel & Rhodes, 2018).

Conclusions

Different writers hold opposing views in the public discourse on technology acceptance. Bearing in mind the influence media can have on society through framing of certain messages, the varying attitudes are likely to leave the academic community uncertain about what direction to take on ChatGPT. It would help if universities took the best out of the two presented views. The general impression is that chatbots have benefits for the academic community, but they need to be used with caution. This suggests the importance for universities to regulate the usage of chatbots and provide more education about them rather than prohibit them altogether. It is necessary to avoid overreliance on them, as one needs to verify certain information thoroughly before accepting it and adhere to ethics.

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