Navigating the ChatGPT Theological Terrain: Considerations for Graduate Theology Students

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Abstract

With discussions across disciplines, AI technologies are here to stay. For both professors and students, academic debates raise ethical and moral questions. This study attempts to address the latter issue through these research questions: Can graduate theology scholars use ChatGPT for their publications? What are the advantages and drawbacks of using ChatGPT in scholarly publications for graduate Theology students? What are the implications for graduate Theology students? What guidelines should be followed when using ChatGPT? The literature shows that professors are already worried about potential scholastic perversions resulting in plagiarism and academic fraud. Originality, creativity, synthesis, and critical thinking, diligent editing are still necessary. AI technologies have theological ramifications for soteriology and ecclesiology. ChatGPT's biblical knowledge is theologically unsound and prone to errors. It's unreliable in translations of ancient Biblical texts and should not replace professional knowledge of languages, particularly when handling intricate linguistic problems. Thus, AI technology should be viewed as a supportive tool for missions. It should not replace spiritual discernment, the Holy Spirit's guidance, theological understanding, or insights into the Christian experience.

Keywords: ChatGPT, theology graduates, critical thinking, artificial intelligence

Introduction

The fastest public generative AI deployment in history has been demonstrated with ChatGPT (Generative Pretrained Transformer). Since its launch in November 2022, ChatGPT has transformed academic writing. According to Stokel-Walker (2022) the San Francisco-based company OpenAI, ChatGPT was introduced as an AI chatbot. By 2023, predictions indicated that 46% of online content would be AI-generated, and many experts believe this is just the beginning. It took Facebook two years to reach one million users, while Instagram achieved this in two and a half months. In contrast, ChatGPT accomplished this milestone in only five days. The effects are currently being felt and will continue to impact higher education institutions (Koch, 2023)

In agreement with Louw (2023), Koch (2023) confirmed that large language models (LLMs), Google's Bard, Microsoft's Bing Chat, Socrat.AI, and Anthropic's Claude, Google Bard, and Facebook's LLaMA, Midjourney, Dall-E, and Stable Diffusion are among the notable generative AIs that are useful in the academic setting. According to Kulkarni et al. (2024), current and upcoming advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) systems have the potential to completely transform the research process, either positively or negatively. Dempere et al. (2023) highlighted OpenAI's ChatGPT's innovative design and many educational uses. Research assistance, automated grading, and improved human-computer interaction are benefits of ChatGPT and other AI chatbots in higher education institutions. What about graduate studies and publishing?

Theological outputs and publications related to graduate theological education are typically needed. Because publications are rigorous (Frick & Mason, 2022), graduate

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theology students who are under pressure from their ministerial workloads may find ChatGPT to be a convenient alternative. Due to increased competition for jobs and visibility, the use of ChatGPT may compromise the integrity and value of pedagogical processes when creating content on spiritual or theological topics (Wang et al., 2024). Yet, there is a dearth of literature on the vulnerabilities of graduate theology students regarding the use of ChatGPT in their scholarly works.

This paper addresses this gap by answering the following research questions: Can graduate theology scholars use ChatGPT for their publications? What are the advantages and drawbacks of using ChatGPT in scholarly publications for graduate theology students? What are the implications for graduate theology students? What precautionary measures must graduate theology students take when using ChatGPT? What are the guidelines to be followed when using ChatGPT?

Can Graduate Theology Scholars Make use of ChatGPT for their Publications?

According to Roose (2023) and Shankland (2022), ChatGPT helped students with their scholarly work and finalized their intellectual pieces. Shrivastava (2022) revealed that students will likely use ChatGPT and similar technologies to finish essays faster, endangering the development of critical thinking and synthesis skills. According to Meckler and Verma (2022) and Stokel-Walker (2022), academics are already worried about potential scholastic perversions of the usage of AI technologies.

Some professors have been urged to dissuade students from utilizing ChatGPT when working on dissertations (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Similarly, Rosenblatt (2023) observed that *NBC news*, ChatGPT has been banned on educational networked computers by the City of New York's Education Division making it unavailable to learners as well as instructors

In consonance with Horton (2023), Stokel-Walker (2023a) notes that ChatGPT has entered the literary world. Both experimental subjects and research assistants, who generate ideas and conduct analyses, use AI. ChatGPT has also been used as a writing tool to help authors produce logical and grammatically sound content. To further complicate the complexity of ChatGPT, it was listed as a co-author in four medical research journals, according to Stokel-Walker. Van Slyke (2024) acknowledged that ChatGPT was an author or co-author of more than 200 publications available on Amazon.

Moreover, ChatGPT mimics language patterns from various online textual resources to produce realistic and persuasive words. This approach can generate essays, literature summaries, research gaps, and preliminary research ideas. Van Dis et al. (2023) found that AI can be used for peer review, publication preparation, and experimental planning.

AI has been used at breakneck speed to co-author publications, conduct analyses, and generate new ideas. According to Van Dis et al. (2023), ChatGPT has generated significant interest among writers. Concerns were expressed by Dempere et al. (2023) over wider societal and economic ramifications, including the loss of jobs, the digital literacy gap, the security of online tests, AI-induced fear, and plagiarism.

Given that AI systems are trained on administrative tasks mimic human cognitive processes, and occasionally behave like people, Markuckas (2022) wondered whether AI would replace human thought processes. Previous comments have been made regarding the use of ChatGPT in pedagogical operations (Koch, 2023). Munawar and Misirlis (2024) proposed that future research should examine how ChatGPT is changing the educational landscape and the degree of adoption. Firat (2023) suggested analyzing the moral ramifications of AI in education and how universities would prepare to incorporate AI.

What are the Advantages and Drawbacks of Utilizing ChatGPT in Scholarly Publications for Graduate Theology Students?

Advantages of utilizing ChatGPT. Scholarly articles have used ChatGPT (Boas & Boas, 2023; Brown & Marsden, 2023; Thorp, 2023). It produces excellent writing and data, including word suggestions based on contextual cues and syntax. It generates content quickly and at a lower cost. Despite much debate surrounding large language models (LLMs), when compared to Grammarly or Microsoft Word AI, LLMs produce a wealth of scholarly work and themes, in addition to predicting possible word sequences (Susarla et al., 2023). In tasks previously reserved for human experts, the emergence of LLMs has introduced tools that address the needs of the living (Drucker, 1954).

For graduate students, ChatGPT has limitations in academic publishing. Notwithstanding the transformative architecture of ChatGPT and its many applications in the educational field, Dempere et al. (2023) pointed out its drawbacks, including perversions and violations of privacy rights, deceptive and decreased human engagement, and the potential for site intrusion. While ChatGPT may help writers find literature, Kim (2024) claims that the free CPT3.5 has poor accuracy compared to GPT 4, which is known for its remarkable precision. Besides, ChatGPT was only educated on data through September 2023 and had little understanding of events after that date (Thompson, 2023).

Louw (2024) confirmed that the outputs are fundamentally predictive based on the data used to train the algorithms and they may not always produce objectively factual information. It cannot accept picture input or produce images accurately. Furthermore, its data privacy guarantees have not yet been subjected to a rigid assessment (Naghiyev, 2024)

Drawbacks of Utilizing ChatGPT for Graduate Theologians. Theologians should be conscious of ChatGPT's limitations, as its knowledge is neither absolute nor unquestionable (Brown & Mardsen, 2023). According to Marbun (2023), critical thinking and data verification are still required to boost the legitimacy of integration and knowledge, even though ChatGPT and AI offer numerous advantages for educators and learners.

The knowledge of ChatGPT is not comparable to that of a specialized biblical scholar. While it shows a good grasp of biblical content and familiarity with various Bible books, major characters, events, and themes, it may not always capture the nuances and depths that come from years of focused study and spiritual reflection (Johnson, 2022). Similarly, Garcia (2023) claimed that while ChatGPT can perform basic translation tasks between Greek and Hebrew, it cannot replace professional translation software or linguists' knowledge, particularly when handling intricate linguistic problems in ancient texts.

ChatGPT can make authoritative theological judgments but also offer information about different interpretations of biblical passages. Therefore, it cannot replace prayer, spiritual discernment, or the Holy Spirit's guidance (Thompson, 2023). Furthermore, AI may occasionally offer opposing views without making a clear distinction between interpretations that are mainstream and those that are fringe. The graduate student should be ready to critically assess and compare the material to a reputable biblical scholarship (Wilson, 2023).

Goldberg (2022), in agreement with Tallman and Marlowe (2024), noted that ChatGPT may be biased and prone to errors, providing false information because of query misinterpretation, gaps in its training data, or biases in the training process itself. These biases reflect the data it was trained on, which may include specific denominational or theological viewpoints. There may be 'plausible-sounding but incorrect nonsensical answers' in ChatGPT's theological debates, which may not accurately represent the spectrum of theological thought (p. 4). Given this potential, students should critically approach AI's responses (Kim, 2024).

According to the author's opinion, text generation systems trained on massive quantities of data may forecast outputs based on user inputs. He quickly pointed out that because technologies are designed to learn and improve, happy outcomes should be voted up, while unfavorable ones should be voted down. Additionally, such forecasting information cannot always lead to objectively factual knowledge (Louw, 2024). Jonathan Walter stressed the need for adaptation in his book From Gutenberg to GPT: The Church's Need for Technological Adaptation, but he also warned that it is crucial to acknowledge the ethical, theological, and moral implications that AI brings to the table both now and in the decades to come, even as we explore our options and use what makes sense (Walter, 2023).

Louw (2024) stressed that although an AI chatbot can provide a sermon outline that looks like a sermon, it cannot replace the Holy Spirit's direction, theological knowledge, emotions, and insights into the Christian experience. Besides, just as humans are flawed and must be fact-checked to maintain trustworthiness, and AI is no exception.

It does not have real-time information or internet browsing capabilities. According to Tallman and Marlowe (2024), while ChatGPT produces useful responses, it restricts interaction with unconventional or diverse theological ideas and might not fully reflect the range of theological thought. ChatGPT does not have feelings or experiences of personal faith, even though it can process and produce text about spiritual and religious subjects. Kim (2023) states ChatGPT cannot testify, pray, or give spiritual guidance like a human pastor or a spiritual leader. Despite being able to discuss moral and ethical issues from various viewpoints, ChatGPT lacks intrinsic moral principles and the capacity to form moral opinions. Rather than being prescriptive, its answers to moral questions should be considered informative (Lebacqz, 2022).

What are the Implications for Graduate Theology Students?

Graduate theology students serve various ministries. Louw (2023) cited numerous benefits of AI in the pastoral ministry. AI can also create and improve basic content, including creating blurbs for upcoming events, ads, or sermon or podcast descriptions for online posts; AI-generated intro/outro music tracks; creative presentation title ideas; logo options for ministries and T-shirts; formatting presentation slides according to your content; and proofreading correspondence and sermon manuscripts (Koch, 2023). AI can also perform meeting transcriptions, translations, summarizations, and task assignments. According to Louw, AI can instantly produce images for sermon slides, church bulletins, newsletters, posters, certificates, bookmarks, etc. It can manage administrative tasks such as visiting, transportation, and communication. Writing might help with planning and idea generation. Finally, it can help people to understand ideas.

There are several empirical studies. Religious organizations usually hire graduate students from theological schools. These groups provide funding or plans for their staff to enroll in graduate theological education courses. Usually, a theological output is needed. According to Lazar et al. (2023), ChatGPT offers several advantages, including fostering dialogue, critical thinking, teamwork, and ideation. Instead of waiting for an email response from the teachers, students immediately receive their exam answers as feedback. However, serious issues have arisen. Accordingly, ChatGPT in the classroom can potentially compromise the integrity and worth of pedagogical processes (Munawar & Misirlis, 2024). Because these tools are inaccurate and prone to incorrect writing styles, academic integrity is a problem. However, cheating poses a severe risk. In addition, it casts doubt on the reliability of these algorithms. Third, graduate students will not learn how to write independently if they rely excessively on the information produced by AI. This failure results in

a worse experience with critical thinking on a personal level.

Graduate students who depend on AI for religious material should be cautioned. Remembering that ministry has a spiritual component that should not be sacrificed is critical. In his experiment on AI-generated lyrics for the classic book *Steps to Christ,* Louw (2023) found a fundamental lack of comprehension and theological contextual awareness that could quickly result in outright heresy. Given this risk, avoiding predictive technology while producing information about spiritual or theological subjects could be wise. The reason is simple – they frequently misrepresent the core doctrines of Christianity and divine revelation (Louw, 2023, p. 8–9).

Graves (2023), an editor, prompted ChatGPT with each paragraph that incorporated 50-75% of the revisions and accepted only 12 of the original 179 suggestions. Graves observed that ChatGPT raises questions on the validity of theological authority, concluding that, as technology develops, ChatGPT presents moral and ethical issues in theological knowledge and practice. Graves (2023) cited how AI technologies have been integrated into theological education and religious organizations. It has provided tools for scholars to access and analyze large amounts of theological literature. Although they aid in sermon preparations, they also have implications for ecclesiology and soteriology.

What Precautionary Measures Must Graduate

Theology Students take when Using ChatGPT?

Global attempts to regulate, limit, and outlaw this technology have failed because of its rapid proliferation (Brown & Marsden, 2023). Furthermore, it perceives sarcasm as a direct contradiction and does not understand human emotions. Humans are better at emotionally transmitting words than AI. Human beings are defined by their emotions. AI cannot create anything other than what it is created to do and lacks creativity. Readers cannot develop emotional bonds with AI. The shortcomings of AI authoring tools include their near-zero accuracy. Graduate students must verify that the material within the Zeitgeist is suitable for readers.

Bom (2023) added more warning. Careful editing is required because the text produced by this technology does not follow the format of scientific publications. It has limitations in that authors should carefully assess the content's accuracy before utilizing it in scholarly works, even though it helps correct grammatical and construction mistakes. Bom (2023) used AlphaGo as an example and claimed it makes one error with inaccurate data. Students must supply accurate information and facts to receive the correct responses. However, it is currently unsuitable for long-term reproduction because of these flaws.

How about utilizing ChatGPT for attribution? While some researchers deny authorship and cite ChatGPT, Chrisinger (2023) acknowledges that prior studies support it. Although ChatGPT assists in creating a manuscript, it cannot be regarded as an author because it is not responsible for its mistakes, according to a recent scientific editorial (Stokel-Walker, 2023a; Thorp, 2023). ChatGPT only incorporates available sources, many of which are inconsistent and often inaccurate, and thus, cannot correctly credit its sources.

AI technologies should not be acknowledged as authors; if they are, they must be stated in the Methodology section (Kocak, 2024). Any ethical violations or plagiarism from AI-generated work will be the responsibility of scholars (Thorp, 2023). Since AI is still far from entirely replacing humans, researchers should not rely solely on it (Kulkarni et al., 2024). Even if AI technology is developing at an exhausting rate, researchers need to thoroughly consider both what they write and how they write it.

Furthermore, although AI systems can help users streamline and carry out their research, they may hinder our ability to grow as theorists, hinder our capacity for critical thought, and ultimately

lead to inaccurate, biased, or misleading data and quick fixes. When misused, this instrument can result in plagiarism and academic fraud (Birks & Clare, 2023), undermining critical thinking, inventiveness, and profound comprehension, the most crucial abilities needed in this dynamic environment.

What are the Guidelines to be Followed when using ChatGPT?

The first is specificity. Inquire ChatGPT regarding precise terms or titles (Johnson, 2022). Second, the inquiry's pertinent context improves comprehension and responses. Third, according to Brown and Mardsen, 2023), using clear and precise language is critical. According to Garcia (2023), a complicated question should be broken into smaller components. According to the literature (Lebacqz, 2022; Wilson, 2023), it is necessary to use follow-up questions to clarify the general question and indicate the kind of information that is needed.

Thompson (2023) added that a theology student can present several points of view when addressing interpretive problems. According to Goldberg (2022), a student can request literary or linguistic analysis to understand the composition and significance of the biblical text. According to Kim (2023), it is crucial to ask for pertinent academic commentary on Bible texts.

Louw (2024) questioned if artificial intelligence should suddenly replace people make skills that people have spent years developing obsolete, or shape young minds for bad rather than good. The pastor stressed the advantages of AI tools that carry out new tasks, such as picture-generating tools like Dall-E, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney. These tools employ machine learning to analyze the visual data and produce new images. They start with random noise and work their way up to recreate images relevant to the keywords that a user inputs.

Given their propensity to distort the foundations of Christianity and divine revelation, these predictive technologies should not be used to produce information on spiritual or theo-

logical issues. Artificial intelligence should not replace the guidance of the Holy Spirit, theological knowledge, feelings, and insights into the Christian experience. Despite ChatGPT's biblical expertise, its content cannot be theologically sound or true of the original text. Instead of being used in place of careful human intervention, technology should be seen as an improved tool to support mission work. Make use of artificial intelligence to generate concepts while working diligently.

This paper advocates policy frameworks to govern AI use in theological education in seminaries. There should be mandatory attribution of AI-generated content and established boundaries for AI assistance in academic work. Owing to the evolving advancements in AI technologies, the faculty would require frequent training on AI tools to match rapid developments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that artificial intelligence technologies are here to stay. It has restrictions, and usage guidelines are necessary. It should be clear to graduate theology students who only use ChatGPT and other adaptive tools for their academic papers that scholarly work raises moral and ethical questions that worry instructors. Pastors and graduate theological students acknowledge that AI is potentially prone to open heresy because it lacks theological contextual knowledge and awareness of religious motifs. In the context of bible study, Johnson (2022) posited that ChatGPT is a sophisticated research assistant and cautioned that it should not replace human discernment, critical thinking, and guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting scripture. Instead of replacing advanced skills, such as originality, creativity, synthesis, and critical thinking, AI technology should be seen as a facilitator.

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