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Ethical and transparent use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI): Ethics letter three (3) from the African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC)

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ABSTRACT

This letter targets authors, reviewers, editors, teachers, researchers, practitioners and students. In this letter, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) means computer-aided creation of text, images, data or results in ways that mimic human production. AI is a generator of possible meanings, which may be correct or incorrect, rather than a definitive source or reference. It generates responses based on patterns in the data it has been trained on, but it lacks the ability to verify facts or context like a human would. Generative AI relies largely on universalised and dominant Western knowledge and ideological positions, shaped by coloniality, capitalism and patriarchy. Furthermore, the data it is trained on often contains very little, and at times no, African content. The trainers are also rarely Africans. Thus, rich African culture and values that scholars are currently advocating are left out. Ubuntu ideologies must be upheld to break out of colonialisation. This letter contains guidelines and requirements for the ethical use of generative AI in scholarly and research related activities.

KEY TERMS: *Africa, Artificial Intelligence (AI), ethics, social work, development, research, practice*
;
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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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INTRODUCTION

This letter targets authors, reviewers, editors, teachers, researchers, practitioners and students. In this letter, generative AI means computer aided generation of text, images, data or meanings in ways that mimic human capacity (Africa Social Work and Development Network, ASWDNet, 2024). AI is a generator of information and possible meanings, which may be correct or incorrect, rather than a definitive source or reference. It generates responses based on patterns in the data it has been trained on but lacks the ability to verify facts or context like a human would. Furthermore, the data it is trained on often contains very little, and at times no, African content at all. The trainers are also rarely African. Biased responses of generative AI also perpetuate dominant and universalised Western knowledge and ideological positions, shaped by coloniality, capitalism and patriarchy (Benyera, 2021; Eke, Wakunuma, Akintoye and Ogoh, 2025). In this letter, we emphasize critically engaging AI outputs, recognising that generative AI often reflects colonial, racial, and gender biases embedded in its training data, authors are encouraged to use AI critically, rejecting outputs that perpetuate harm, misrepresentation, or erasure. Unless there is a critical engagement with generative AI, there is a risk that scholars and researchers in African contexts may unconsciously align with and perpetuate these positions.

PRINCIPLES

1. Generative AI is not a source. Generative AI is a tool that generates possible meanings or responses, which may be inaccurate or incomplete. It must therefore not be used and cited as if it is a scholarly source or reference. If used, it must be acknowledged and referenced correctly (see Open disclosure and acknowledgement here below).
2. Generative AI must be used ethically. Its use must avoid plagiarism, fabrication, or forms of artificialism that misrepresent authorship or original thinking.
3. Generative AI must not replace human creativity and authorship. The intellectual contribution of the author must remain central and substantive.
4. Disclosure is best practice. Any use of generative AI in the development of a manuscript must be transparently disclosed. Failure to do so will result in immediate rejection or withdrawal of the submission.
5. False or fabricated citations constitute academic misconduct. Any citation generated by AI must be verified for accuracy. Referencing non-existent or AI-invented sources is a serious breach of academic integrity.

USING AI ETHICALLY AND TRANSPARENTLY

Ethical ways

If authors choose to use generative AI, we ask that they use it in ethical ways, and at all times avoid merely copying and pasting from AI applications. AI may be used to help generate ideas and images, but it is important to remain mindful that AI can provide ideas and information that is incorrect, colonising, biased or not grounded in Africa's knowledge and literature. African literature, knowledge, values and theories are generally excluded from AI generated content due to the dominance of universalised Western knowledge and ideological positions.

Open disclosure and acknowledgement

When using generative AI, for whatever reason, an acknowledgement or disclosure statement must be provided, describing how it was used, why and how it was ensured that content was produced that valued African sources. In the statement, indicate all the initial and further refining questions and prompts that were used. The content obtained from generative AI must be indicated as such and reasons for using it must be provided. This is on the grounds that content generated by AI has to be clearly indicated to ensure transparency, integrity and accountability in any form of communication. Disclosing AI generated content helps maintain honesty and trust by preventing misrepresentation, especially in academic writing because evidence abounds that AI generated material may contain biases, inaccuracies and even outdated information. Hence, acknowledging its use allows readers to critically evaluate its reliability. Noticeably, many institutions and publishers have ethical guidelines requiring AI disclosure to uphold intellectual integrity and prevent plagiarism concerns.

Acceptable uses

Generative AI may be used ethically and transparently for the following purposes:

1. Language improvement: To enhance grammar, clarity, and fluency in English, particularly where English is not the author's first language. The original meaning and scholarly integrity must be preserved.
2. Drafting bullet points or outlines: To support the early stages of idea development, such as generating structured bullet points—not full drafts—for manuscripts or presentations.
3. Image generation: To produce visual representations of ideas where the author is unable to draw, paint, model, or otherwise create them manually. All images must be free from bias, stereotypes, and culturally inappropriate depictions.
4. Translation: To assist with translating content between languages. Authors are responsible for verifying the accuracy and contextual appropriateness of AI-generated translations.
5. Data analysis: To support textual content analysis or other forms of text mining, where AI tools are used to identify patterns, word frequencies, or co-occurrences in large bodies of textual data. To support other forms of data analysis, conditional to ethical approval of the research methodology and full declaration of usage (See Open disclosure and acknowledgement above).

CONCLUSION

Knowledge generation is shifting from human beings towards online entities playing the role of cognitive thinking, imagination, and creativity (Beyera, 2021). Generative AI furthermore reproduces bias, inaccuracies and ideologies that may not be easily recognised. In research and scholarship in the African context, it is therefore critical that the benefits of generative AI are accessed responsibly and ethically. It is also important that the principles of Ubuntu underline the responsible use of generative AI (Suliman et al, 2024). These include reinforcing collective accountability and honesty; recognising its role as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for human interaction; and ensuring that its contribution is free from bias, inaccuracies or unethical usage.

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