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CHATBOTS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND USER TRUST ISSUES

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Abstract
The integration of chatbots into academic libraries has revolutionized user services, providing users with real-time assistance, round the clock availability, and increasingly personalized interactions. By automating repetitive tasks and handling frequent inquiries, chatbots have enhanced efficiency and accessibility, addressing the growing demand for instant information. However, this technological shift comes with significant ethical implications that challenge traditional library values. Key concerns include data privacy, as chatbots often collect and process sensitive user information, raising the risk of breaches or unauthorized usage. Transparency is another critical issue, as users may not always be aware that they are interacting with a machine, which could compromise their trust in the system. Additionally, the algorithms that power chatbots can perpetuate biases, whether through skewed training data or inherent system flaws, leading to the potential spread of misinformation or exclusion of marginalized voices. The quality of information provided by chatbots is also a concern, as these systems may not always be equipped to assess the reliability of the sources they draw upon. This paper explores these ethical dilemmas and the potential consequences for user trust, which is fundamental for the successful implementation of AI-driven services in academic libraries. Drawing on current literature, the article advocates for a human centered and ethically grounded approach to the design, deployment, and continuous assessment of chatbots in academic settings, ensuring that their use aligns with the core values of privacy, equity, and accountability.

Keywords: *Chatbots, Academic Libraries, Ethics, User Trust, Privacy, AI*

Introduction

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has ushered academic libraries into a new era of service delivery, fundamentally transforming how users interact with information systems and services. Among the most notable developments is the increasing adoption of chatbots AI-driven conversational agents designed to simulate human dialogue (Shawar & Atwell. 2017). Chatbots in academic libraries now handle a range of functions, from answering basic reference queries and assisting with catalogue searches to providing support for research consultations. library orientations, and even facilitating information literacy training. According to Thompson, (2019), some institutions such as the University of Oklahoma and

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North Carolina State University have successfully implemented chatbot technologies to expand their service reach, enhance user engagement, and offer 24/7 support to students, faculty, and researchers.

This technological shift reflects a broader trend toward automation and personalization in higher education, where the expectation for instant, seamless digital services is rapidly becoming the norm. Students, accustomed to interacting with AI in their daily lives through virtual assistants, online customer support, and smart devices increasingly expect academic libraries to offer similar levels of responsiveness and accessibility. Chatbots provide a practical solution to staffing constraints, allowing libraries to maintain a high level of service even during non-traditional hours. Moreover, by automating routine and repetitive inquiries, chatbots enable human librarians to focus on more complex, high-value tasks that demand critical thinking and professional expertise.

However, despite these operational advantages, the integration of chatbots into academic library services raises profound ethical concerns that cannot be overlooked. As these AI systems become more deeply embedded in library operations, they provoke critical questions about privacy, security, transparency, accountability, bias, and the overall integrity of the information provided. Academic libraries, which has long been regarded as bastions of trust, confidentiality, and intellectual freedom face the risk of undermining these foundational principles if chatbot technologies are deployed without careful ethical scrutiny.

One of the primary concerns revolves around data privacy. Chatbots often require access to personal information to tailor responses to individual users. However, according to Huq, Aziz, & Chowdhury, (2019),the storage management, and potential misuse of this data present serious risks. In environments governed by strict privacy norms, such as academic institutions, any perceived or actual breach of confidentiality could erode the trust that users place in the library. Additionally, chatbots may inadvertently disseminate misinformation or provide inaccurate answers, particularly if their databases are not regularly updated or if they rely on flawed training data. This raises critical questions about the reliability of AI-driven information services and the ethical responsibility of libraries to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the information they provide.

Another ethical dilemma relates to algorithmic bias. Since chatbots learn from data, they can reproduce and even amplify existing biases present in their training sets, leading to unequal treatment of users or the marginalization of minority perspectives. Furthermore, the lack of transparency about how chatbot algorithms make decisions that often referred to as the "black box" problem can make it difficult for users to understand or challenge the responses they receive. Without clear disclosures that users are interacting with an AI system, and without the option to escalate conversations to human staff, users may unknowingly rely on chatbot advice in situations where human expertise would be more appropriate.

Given these challenges, it becomes imperative to examine how these ethical dilemmas surrounding chatbot use, impact user trust which is a critical component of effective library service delivery. If users cannot trust the digital services provided by libraries, the broader mission of libraries as safe, supportive environments for inquiry and learning is compromised. Therefore, this article critically analyzes the ethical risks associated with chatbot deployment in academic libraries and explores how these risks influence user trust. It also proposes practical solutions and ethical guidelines to ensure that chatbot implementation aligns with the core values of academic librarianship, safeguarding user trust while embracing the benefits of technological innovation.

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The Promise of Chatbots in Academic Libraries

Chatbots present clear and compelling advantages for academic libraries in an increasingly digital world. One of the most notable benefits is accessibility: chatbots offer 24/7 assistance, enabling users to seek help beyond the traditional working hours of library staff, thereby overcoming human limitations (Brandtzaeg & Følstad, 2017). This ensures that students, researchers, and faculty members can access support whenever they need it, regardless of time zones or busy schedules.

Efficiency is another major advantage, as chatbots can manage repetitive and straightforward inquiries such as directions to resources, account information, or basic research tips, freeing up librarians to focus on more complex, high-value tasks that require professional expertise (Rathi & Given, 2017). Moreover, advances in machine learning allow chatbots to deliver a degree of personalization by adapting responses based on a user's search history, preferences, and behavior patterns, leading to a more user-centered experience.

Finally, cost-effectiveness is a significant consideration for budget-conscious institutions: automated services can lead to substantial savings over time by reducing the need for extensive human staffing during off-peak hours. In an environment where users increasingly expect instantaneous, digital interactions, Kashef, Nejatian, & Khajeheian, (2021), opined that chatbots offer a crucial bridge between traditional library services and the fast-paced expectations of today's academic communities. However, these benefits must be carefully balanced against emerging ethical concerns.

Ethical Dilemmas in Chatbot Deployment

1. Privacy and Data Security

Chatbots collect and process a wide range of user data to provide personalized and efficient responses, including personal identifiers, search histories, user interaction patterns, and even sensitive academic or research-related information (Mero, Tarkiainen, & Tobon, 2020). While such data collection can enhance the user experience, it simultaneously introduces significant risks regarding data breaches, unauthorized access, and potential misuse. In academic library settings, where confidentiality and intellectual freedom are foundational values, safeguarding user privacy is particularly critical (American Library Association. 2017). However, many academic libraries employ commercial chatbot platforms that often rely on third-party cloud services for data processing and storage. This reliance on chatbot in the words of Voigt & Von dem Bussche, (2017), raises complex questions about data ownership, data sovereignty, and compliance with privacy laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

Complicating matters further is the often inadequate implementation of transparent and robust user consent mechanisms. In many cases, users are unaware of the extent and nature of the data being collected or how it might be used beyond the immediate interaction. This lack of clarity undermines the principles of informed consent and ethical data stewardship (Cummings, 2020). Without clear, user-friendly privacy policies and explicit consent procedures, academic libraries risk violating not only legal obligations but also eroding the deep trust traditionally placed in them by their communities.

2. Transparency and Disclosure

As the conversational abilities of chatbots advance, users may not always realize they are interacting with artificial intelligence rather than a human being (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). This growing sophistication blurs the human-machine boundary, increasing the risk of

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misunderstandings about the entity providing information. Ethical design in the words of West, Whittaker, &Crawford (2019), demands clear and upfront disclosure that users are engaging with a non-human agent. Such transparency should not be buried in terms of service agreements but should be prominent during the interaction itself. Without proper disclosure, users might unknowingly share sensitive information, believing they are communicating with a trusted human librarian. This can erode trust not only in the chatbot but also in the academic institution deploying it. Rebuilding lost trust is challenging and can cause long-term reputational harm. Clear communication about the chatbot's capabilities and limitations is therefore critical for maintaining ethical standards and encouraging informed user engagement (Cave, Coughlan, & Dihal, 2019).

3. Information Accuracy and Bias

Academic libraries have long been esteemed as bastions of reliable, accurate information, a reputation that is especially critical to uphold as services become increasingly digitized. While chatbots offer rapid responses, they rely on pre-programmed databases, algorithmic retrieval systems, and external information repositories, introducing risks of disseminating outdated or incorrect information (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Unlike human librarians who critically assess information in real time, chatbots often lack the contextual sensitivity needed to evaluate appropriateness or currency. This limitation is further compounded by bias, which can be inadvertently embedded through skewed training datasets, biased programming, or reliance on problematic sources (Noble, 2018; Binns, 2018).

Such biases may marginalize minority voices, reinforce stereotypes, or perpetuate systemic inequities within academic environments. Given libraries' profound influence on scholarly work and student learning, it is an ethical imperative to ensure that chatbot outputs are inclusive, representative, and regularly updated. Libraries must implement rigorous monitoring, conduct periodic audits for bias and accuracy, and engage diverse stakeholders in chatbot design and evaluation (Smith, 2020). Failure to address these concerns risks not only the integrity of library services but also the erosion of the trust users place in academic institutions as guardians of credible information.

4. Accountability and Liability

As academic libraries integrate AI-driven chatbots into their services, the question of accountability becomes increasingly urgent (Jobin, Ienca, & Vayena, 2019; Fjeld et al., 2020). Unlike human librarians, whose actions are guided by professional codes of ethics, chatbots operate through programmed algorithms and data-driven outputs, making it difficult to attribute responsibility for errors, bias, or harm (Crawford & Calo, 2016). This opacity can lead to significant ethical and operational risks. Libraries must establish clear protocols for error correction, continuous monitoring of chatbot responses, and escalation to human staff when necessary (Fjeld, Achten, Hilligoss, Nagy, & Srikumar, 2018). Accountability frameworks should include systematic logging of interactions, regular audits to detect bias or inaccuracies, and user-friendly mechanisms for reporting issues (Whittlestone, Nyrup, Alexandrova, & Cave, 2019).

Responsibility must be clearly distributed among libraries, AI developers, and any third-party vendors involved. Failure to implement robust safeguards exposes institutions to reputational harm, erosion of user trust, and legal liabilities under data protection and consumer rights legislation (European Commission, 2020). Thus, ethical chatbot deployment is not merely a technical concern but a governance imperative that demands ongoing

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oversight, periodic ethical audits, and explicit assignment of responsibility throughout the chatbot's lifecycle.

User Trust Issues

Factors Influencing User Trust in Library Chatbots

Trust in library chatbots is a complex and multidimensional construct shaped by several interrelated factors. One major influence on trust in library chatbots is perceived competence: users are more likely to trust chatbots that consistently deliver accurate, relevant, and timely information (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2013). Conversely, if a chatbot frequently provides incorrect or vague responses, users' confidence in the system quickly deteriorates. Another key factor is perceived integrity; trust is strengthened when users believe that the chatbot operates in their best interests, rather than serving hidden agendas or commercial motives (Komiak & Benbasat, 2016). Equally important is transparency, which involves openly communicating that the user is interacting with an artificial agent and clearly explaining the chatbot's capabilities and limitations (Lee & See, 2014).

Users are more willing to trust systems that do not attempt to obscure their non-human nature. Additionally, control and agency significantly impact trust, as users value the ability to opt out of chatbot interactions, escalate issues to human librarians, or provide feedback on chatbot performance (Gnewuch, Morana, & Maedche, 2017). This sense of empowerment reassures users that they are not trapped in an automated system. In the context of academic libraries—where students and researchers have high expectations for information accuracy and ethical service standards even minor breaches of trust can have profound and lasting consequences (Jin, 2021).

Trust Erosion through Negative Experiences

Negative user experiences such as receiving irrelevant or inaccurate responses, encountering breaches of personal data, or facing non-transparent and deceptive chatbot behaviours can have a profound and lasting impact on user trust (Binns, Veale, Van Kleek, & Shadbolt, 2018; Reddy, Holzer, & McNamara, 2020). When users perceive their interactions as unreliable, feel that their privacy is compromised, or sense deception regarding chatbot capabilities, trust in the academic library's digital services can deteriorate rapidly. Unlike positive experiences, which require consistent reinforcement to build trust, a single negative incident can cause significant damage, often leading to user disengagement (Luger & Sellen, 2016).

In academic libraries traditionally viewed as champions of privacy and reliable information such failures are especially damaging, potentially tarnishing the institution's broader reputation (Kashef, Nejatian, & Khajeheian, 2021). Moreover, users' heightened expectations for ethical standards from educational institutions increase the risks associated with trust breaches (West, Kraut, & Ei Chew, 2019). Rebuilding compromised trust is a slow and challenging process that demands transparency, time, and proactive re-engagement. Therefore, libraries must prioritize ethical, user-centered chatbot design from the outset, emphasizing clear communication, robust data protections, high information quality, and seamless human support to safeguard trust before erosion occurs.

Recommendation for Ethical Chatbot Development

1. Adoption Ethics Framework

Libraries should formally incorporate established AI ethics frameworks into their

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chatbot deployment strategies to ensure responsible and ethical service delivery. Frameworks such as those proposed by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE, 2019) emphasize key principles including transparency, accountability, fairness, and user agency. These guidelines help align chatbot operations with user rights and broader societal expectations.

1. Involve Users in Design

Engaging users in the chatbot development process through participatory design approaches ensures that ethical issues are identified and addressed proactively. By involving diverse user groups in testing and feedback sessions (Robertson & Salehi, 2020), libraries can develop chatbot systems that are more inclusive, better aligned with community values, and more responsive to real user needs.

2. Prioritize Privacy by Design

To uphold the longstanding tradition of confidentiality in libraries, chatbot systems should adopt a "Privacy by Design" approach. This involves minimizing data collection to only what is strictly necessary, anonymizing user information, and implementing robust encryption measures (Cavoukian, 2010). Additionally, user consent mechanisms must be transparent, easily understandable, and provide clear options regarding data usage and retention.

3. Enable Human Escalation Paths

Chatbots must be designed with seamless escalation paths, enabling users to transfer to a human librarian whenever queries become complex, sensitive, or require expert judgment. Rather than serving as a complete replacement for human expertise, a chatbot should function as an initial support system that recognizes and respects the limits of automation (Shin & Biocca, 2018).

4. Conduct Regular Ethical Audits

To ensure the continued ethical functioning of chatbot systems, libraries should conduct regular audits that evaluate factors such as algorithmic bias, data security vulnerabilities, and overall performance. These assessments (Whittlestone, Nyrup, Alexandrova, & Cave, 2019) help identify emerging risks, improve system reliability, and reinforce user trust by demonstrating a strong commitment to ethical practices.

Conclusion

Chatbots in academic libraries offer a transformative opportunity to enhance user services by delivering efficient, accessible, and personalized assistance. However, this shift toward digital interaction also introduces significant ethical challenges. Issues such as privacy violations, misinformation, algorithmic biases, lack of transparency, and unclear accountability mechanisms pose serious risks that can undermine user trust. Without careful attention to these concerns, chatbots may inadvertently damage the long-standing reputation of academic libraries as trusted institutions that protect user privacy and provide accurate information.

To ensure chatbot integration aligns with the core values of academic libraries, institutions must approach deployment with a strong commitment to ethical principles, including transparency, privacy, and inclusivity. A user-centric design should be foundational,

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guaranteeing that the technology meets the diverse needs and expectations of the academic community. Ethical vigilance is essential to building and maintaining trust—an indispensable element for successful library service delivery.

Ultimately, chatbots should not be viewed as replacements for human librarians but as extensions of library values that augment and enhance existing services while upholding the ethical standards cherished by the academic community. Only through thoughtful, well-regulated design and a relentless focus on user trust can chatbots become valuable allies in the academic information landscape rather than potential adversaries. The future success of these digital tools depends on their responsible and ethical implementation and management.

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