

Between Promise and Peril: Educators' Perspectives on ChatGPT and Its Impact on Professional Identity

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Abstract

This study examines how academics interpret the role of ChatGPT in higher education, focusing on its integration into academic practice, perceived risks, and implications for professional identity. While existing research has often emphasised student use or general adoption of GenAI, less attention has been given to academics' own accounts of how ChatGPT reshapes teaching, research, assessment and role meaning. Drawing on qualitative survey data from academic staff at the University of Liverpool Management School, and informed by self-identity theory and identity work, the study uses thematic analysis to examine three interrelated dimensions: functional integration, perceived risks and challenges, and academic identity and role transformation. The findings show that academics incorporate ChatGPT in bounded and conditional ways to support writing, synthesis, ideation, teaching preparation, assessment and feedback, while retaining responsibility for judgement, contextualisation and final outputs. At the same time, participants identified concerns relating to academic integrity, originality, dependency, epistemic reliability, institutional credibility and accountability. Beyond functional use and risk evaluation, ChatGPT prompted reflection on professional identity, including concerns about deskilling, role ambiguity and future relevance, alongside the reconfiguration of academics as facilitators, curators and evaluators of AI-supported knowledge. The study contributes an integrated account of ChatGPT as a socio-professional catalyst that simultaneously expands academic possibilities, introduces new risks and reshapes understanding of academic expertise, authorship and responsibility.

Keywords

Generative artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, self-identity theory, identity work, academic identity, higher education

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Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), exemplified by tools like ChatGPT, has intensified debate about the changing nature of knowledge creation, dissemination and assessment in higher education (Javaid et al., 2023). In academic contexts, GenAI has been associated with potential efficiency gains, including support for drafting teaching materials, synthesising literature and designing assessments, thereby enabling academics to redirect time towards higher-order pedagogical and scholarly work (Grimes et al., 2023; Marchandot et al., 2023). At the same time, its adoption raises fundamental questions regarding academic integrity, epistemic authority, skill development and future of the academic profession (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025; Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Silva et al., 2023; Tili et al., 2025).

Emerging scholarship suggests that the implications of GenAI in Higher Education are not merely technical or procedural but also professional and identity related. As GenAI tools increasingly perform tasks associated with academic competence, including knowledge synthesis, pedagogical preparation and assessment-related work, they foreground questions about the role and identity of academics in AI-mediated higher education (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). GenAI therefore raises questions about how academics understand their roles as knowledge authorities, mentors and ethical stewards in an increasingly hybrid human-AI environment (Islam & Greenwood, 2024; Stollberger et al., 2025). These identity shifts may also carry affective and psychological implications, including uncertainty, anxiety, enthusiasm and ambivalence about the future of academic work (Petriglieri, 2011; Stets, 2005) about the future of academic work and educators' own place within it (Gull et al., 2023; Mirbabaie et al., 2022). These tensions suggest that GenAI is reshaping not only academic work, but also academics' self-understanding and sense of professional worth.

Despite growing interest in GenAI in Higher Education, several gaps remain. First, existing research has predominantly focused on student adoption and perceptions, often using technology acceptance frameworks, leaving educator-centred perspectives comparatively underexplored (Habibi et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2023). Second, this educator-centred gap is particularly evident in management education where empirical research remains relatively limited (AlAfnan et al., 2023; Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Keiper et al., 2023; Pare et al., 2025). Third, where academics are considered, prior research often examines discrete applications of GenAI, such as assessment design, feedback generation or learning support, without integrating these into a coherent account of academic practice, risk and professional identity (Fisher et al., 2025; Pallant et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). As a result, current scholarship offers a fragmented understanding of GenAI, often treating benefits, risks and professional implications as separate rather than interrelated phenomena.

Addressing these gaps requires an approach that considers not only how ChatGPT is used in practice, but also how academics interpret its implications for their roles, responsibilities and professional identities. This study therefore adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to examine academics' experiences of ChatGPT within the University of Liverpool Management School (ULMS). Drawing on qualitative data from academic staff, the study investigates both the practical

integration of ChatGPT into everyday academic work and the interpretive processes through which its implications are understood. The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How do academics interpret the role of ChatGPT in their teaching and research practices?

RQ2: How do academics perceive the opportunities and risks associated with the use of ChatGPT in higher education?

RQ3: How does the use of ChatGPT influence academics' professional identity and role meaning?

Together, these questions enable a structured and comprehensive examination of ChatGPT across three interrelated dimensions: functional integration, risk and identity. This integrated perspective moves beyond a purely instrumental view of technology adoption to consider how GenAI is embedded within the social and professional fabric of academic work.

This study makes three contributions. First, it advances research on GenAI integration by showing how academics incorporate ChatGPT into academic practice in bounded and professionally mediated ways. Second, it extends debates on GenAI risk by demonstrating that concerns about integrity, reliability, over-reliance and institutional credibility are interconnected rather than discrete. Third, it contributes to identity-based analyses of academic practice by showing how ChatGPT prompts academics to maintain but renegotiate professional role meanings associated with expertise, authorship, judgement and pedagogical authority.

These findings highlight an ongoing process of identity negotiation, in which traditional roles are reconfigured rather than replaced. Taken together, the study positions ChatGPT not simply as a tool, but as a socio-professional catalyst that simultaneously enables new practices, introduces new risks and reshapes academic identity.

Literature Review

GenAI and ChatGPT in particular, has intensified debates about the changing nature of academic work in higher education (Javaid et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). While its capacity to support academic tasks creates opportunities for efficiency and productivity (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Grimes et al., 2023; Marchandot et al., 2023), it simultaneously raises questions about authorship, scholarly responsibility, epistemic reliability and the value of academic labour (Barros et al., 2023; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Islam & Greenwood, 2024; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Existing research reflects this duality but remains fragmented. Much of the literature examines functional applications, risks, or professional implications in isolation, limiting understanding of how these dimensions interact in practice (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Addressing this gap requires a structured synthesis across three interrelated domains, GenAI functional integration, GenAI risks, and GenAI implications for professional identity, which also underpin the research questions guiding this study. These domains emerged inductively from recurring patterns in the literature and were further aligned with the study's research questions.¹

Functional integration of GenAI in Academic Practice

A growing body of research positions GenAI as a tool that enhances efficiency in teaching, learning, and research. Studies show that ChatGPT can support the development of lecture materials, case studies, classroom activities and assessment tasks, thereby reducing time spent on routine pedagogical

¹The literature was identified through a focused review of recent peer-reviewed studies on GenAI and ChatGPT in higher education (2020–2025). The review indicated three recurring areas: functional applications, risks and challenges, and implications for academic identity. These themes emerged inductively and informed the development of the study's research questions.

work (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Jin et al., 2025; Kasneci et al., 2023; Kofinas et al., 2025; Tlili et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2024). In scholarly work, it has been associated with supporting academic writing, language refinement and the organisation and summarisation of scholarly material (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Grimes et al., 2023; Marchandot et al., 2023). These applications are often framed in instrumental terms, emphasising productivity gains and workflow optimisation. However, such accounts often underplay the interpretive and professional dimensions of technology use, including how academics evaluate, constrain or selectively adopt these tools within existing norms of scholarly practice (Watermeyer et al., 2024). As a result, GenAI is frequently positioned as a neutral assistant, rather than as a technology embedded in contested professional contexts.

Perceived risks and challenges of GenAI in Higher Education

The same capabilities that enable efficiency also generate professional and epistemic concerns. While tools that support drafting and language refinement can enhance efficiency, they also complicate assumptions about intellectual contribution and scholarly responsibility (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Marchandot et al., 2023). Similarly, the ability to summarise and synthesise information may accelerate knowledge work, but raises concerns regarding hallucinations, fabricated references, bias and superficial engagement with content (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Gao et al., 2023; Grimes et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2025). These concerns extend beyond technical limitations to broader questions of authorship and ownership, as GenAI outputs draw on diffuse and often untraceable sources of knowledge (Islam & Greenwood, 2024). In teaching contexts, the rapid generation of materials may shift the basis of academic expertise from content creation to content evaluation, contextualisation and ethical oversight (Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023). Moreover, existing literature highlights the potential for scholarly deskilling if GenAI substitutes rather than supports critical engagement in core academic activities such as reading, writing and assessment (Karamuk, 2025; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Despite these concerns, prior work often treats risks as discrete issues rather than as interconnected challenges that reshape both practice and professional meaning.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Identity and Identity Work in AI-Mediated Academic Practice

While the preceding sections synthesise empirical and conceptual research on the use and implications of GenAI in higher education, this subsection introduces the theoretical framework that guides the interpretation of the study's findings. Specifically, it draws on self-identity theory and identity work as analytical lenses to explain how academics interpret and respond to GenAI in relation to their professional roles.

Professional identity is widely conceptualised as dynamic and socially constructed, shaped through interaction with institutional expectations and role meanings (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In higher education, it has traditionally been grounded in disciplinary expertise, scholarly authorship, and responsibility for knowledge production and evaluation (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2005), which together define professional legitimacy and what counts as valuable academic work.

Recent scholarship suggests that GenAI is reshaping the conditions under which these role meanings are enacted by altering expectations around authorship, expertise, productivity, and responsibility (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). This is because GenAI increasingly performs activities through which academic expertise is demonstrated, including explanation,

synthesis, and scholarly communication. It can generate human-like text (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020), support the development of educational materials (Kasneci et al., 2023), and assist with literature-related tasks such as identifying, organising, and summarising scholarly content (Aydın & Karaarslan, 2023; Grimes et al., 2023). As these capabilities overlap with core academic practices, they raise questions about how authority, judgement, and knowledge contribution are defined and valued (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Identity-based perspectives are therefore particularly relevant, as they enable analysis of how academics interpret technological change in relation to role meanings such as expertise, autonomy, judgement, and legitimacy (Burke & Stets, 2009; Henkel, 2005; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Overall, the reviewed literature highlights the fragmented nature of current research on GenAI in higher education, where functional use, risk, and identity implications are often examined in isolation. By integrating these dimensions within a single analytical framework, this study responds to this gap and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how academics experience and interpret GenAI in practice.

Self-Identity Theory and Role Meanings in Academic Work

Self-identity theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals maintain coherence between their professional roles and sense of self. It conceptualises identity as a set of internalised role meanings that guide behaviour and are verified through social interaction (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980). Academics typically hold multiple role identities, such as teacher, researcher, and supervisor, and seek to validate these through alignment with established professional expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009). In higher education, these role meanings are closely tied to knowledge production, disciplinary judgement, and scholarly autonomy (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2005), forming the basis of professional recognition and authority.

The emergence of GenAI introduces new forms of participation in knowledge production that may disrupt these established meanings. As GenAI generates outputs that resemble academic work, traditional mechanisms of identity verification may be challenged, creating tensions where role expectations are no longer confirmed in familiar ways (Burke & Stets, 2009; Petriglieri, 2011). However, such tensions do not necessarily signal identity loss. Instead, they can trigger identity work, through which individuals revise, defend, or reconstruct valued aspects of the self in response to disruption (Beech et al., 2008; Petriglieri, 2011). In AI-mediated academic contexts, this may involve renegotiating how expertise, judgement, and responsibility are enacted as expectations around authorship, labour, and accountability evolve (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). While self-identity theory explains how role meanings are maintained and disrupted, it does not fully capture how individuals actively respond to such disruptions, a gap addressed by the concept of identity work.

Identity work and Professional Adaptation in Response to Technological Change

While self-identity theory explains how role meanings are maintained, identity work focuses on how individuals actively respond to disruption and uncertainty. It refers to the processes through which individuals construct, defend, or revise their sense of self in changing contexts (Beech et al., 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In higher education, technological change can be understood as a form of professional disruption requiring reinterpretation of established roles.

Research suggests that academics may respond by re-emphasising aspects of their work that are less easily automated, such as judgement, interpretation, and ethical responsibility (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Identity work is also evident in broader educational contexts, where professionals adjust practices to maintain legitimacy under shifting expectations. For example, Husain (2022) shows how foreign-name adoption in EFL classrooms functions as a strategy for negotiating cultural and professional norms. Similarly, in the context of GenAI, academics' responses can be understood as efforts to preserve valued role meanings while adapting to changing expectations around expertise, authorship, and responsibility (Barros et al., 2023; Petriglieri, 2011; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Building on this, identity negotiation provides a more integrative perspective by linking processes of identity maintenance and adaptation within changing professional contexts.

Identity Negotiation in the Context of GenAI

Bringing these perspectives together, identity negotiation refers to the ongoing process through which professional identities are maintained, revised, and adapted in response to changing work conditions. Self-identity theory explains the need for alignment between role meanings and external expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000), while identity work explains how individuals respond when this alignment is disrupted (Beech et al., 2008; Petriglieri, 2011).

In higher education, this process is particularly salient given the strong link between academic identity and authorship, disciplinary expertise, and intellectual responsibility (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2005). GenAI intensifies these dynamics by intervening in core academic practices such as writing, synthesis, and teaching preparation, thereby reshaping expectations of productivity, authorship, and accountability (Barros et al., 2023; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Rather than eliminating professional identity, these changes prompt reinterpretation of how valued attributes are enacted in practice (Petriglieri, 2011). This is evident in AI-assisted academic work, where issues of voice, authorship, and legitimacy must be actively negotiated (Hu et al., 2025). Conceptualising responses to GenAI as identity negotiation therefore shifts attention from technology adoption to the interpretive processes through which academics redefine professional competence in evolving institutional contexts. This integrated perspective provides the analytical foundation for examining how academics interpret the implications of GenAI across practice, risk, and professional identity.

Methods

Research Methodology

This study examines how academics interpret the role ChatGPT in their teaching and research practices, their perceptions of its opportunities and risks, and its perceived implications for professional identity and role meaning. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of these research questions, a qualitative design was adopted to capture academics' situated accounts of GenAI use in context. This approach is appropriate because practices surrounding GenAI in higher education are still emerging, and academics' interpretations of its professional implications remain under-theorised.

To ground this enquiry empirically, the study focuses on the University of Liverpool Management School (ULMS) as a single institutional case. This case-based approach enables an in-depth and contextually grounded examination of how academics engage with ChatGPT across teaching and

research practices, how they perceive associated risks, and how they interpret its implications for professional identity. While the findings are context-specific, the case provides analytically relevant insights into broader debates on GenAI integration, academic work and professional identity in higher education.

A web-based qualitative survey was developed through a structured and iterative process informed by the thematic domains identified in the literature review. Specifically, the questions were designed to capture three domains: first, academics' functional integration of ChatGPT into academic practice; second, perceived risks and challenges associated with its use; and third, perceived implications for the role and identity of academics. These domains provided a direct analytical bridge between the literature review, the research questions and the empirical analysis. The survey questions were designed to move from general to more specific reflections, enabling participants to first articulate how they use ChatGPT in practice, before reflecting on its risks and identity implications.

The survey included two sections. The first provided a brief description of the study, the informed consent information, and demographic questions covering gender, age group, length of service, academic rank, and subject group. These variables were collected to assess sample diversity and to consider whether perceptions of ChatGPT varied across demographic groups. The second section comprised four open ended questions:

Q1: Are you planning to use ChatGPT in your academic activities? If yes, how?

Q2: Do you think ChatGPT is a beneficial tool for use in Higher Education? Yes, no, why?

Q3: Can you think of any risks related to academics' use of ChatGPT? If yes, how can these be mitigated?

Q4: Do you think that ChatGPT will replace the role of the traditional academic? Yes, no, why?

The web-survey was distributed to the entire ULMS academic population (N = 205), enabling broad participation across ranks, disciplines and career stages. Compared with interviews, the survey method offered two key advantages. First, given the sensitive nature of the topic, including issues of academic integrity, identity threat and professional uncertainty, an anonymous format was considered more likely to elicit candid and reflective responses. Second, the survey reduced logistical barriers to participation, facilitating engagement from a wider range of academics. Open-ended surveys are suitable for exploring sensitive or emerging topics, as they reduce social desirability bias and allow participants to articulate views in their own terms without interviewer influence (Fricker & Schonlau, 2002; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007; Willig & Rogers, 2017).

Data Collection

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Liverpool Ethics Committee (ID8345). A non-probability purposive sampling approach was employed, with all 205 academic staff at ULMS invited to participate. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated. Data were collected between May and September 2025, yielding 43 completed responses (21% response rate).

Reliability Validity of the Qualitative Materials

Prior to analysis, the validity and reliability of the qualitative research materials were examined. As the study employed open-ended qualitative survey questions rather than standardised psychometric scales, issues of reliability and validity were addressed through the concept of qualitative trustworthiness rather than statistical measures such as Cronbach's alpha (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This distinction is important because the aim was not to test scale consistency but to ensure that the research materials

and analytical process were credible, transparent and appropriate for the study's interpretive aims (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000). To ensure content validity, the survey instrument was developed through an iterative process informed by existing literature on ChatGPT benefits and risks (Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Sarikahya et al., 2025). The questionnaire was reviewed by three senior ULMS academics with qualitative research expertise, who assessed clarity, wording, and alignment with the research questions. Their feedback informed revisions, after which the instrument was pilot tested with four academics not involved in the review process, resulting in minor refinements. Reliability in qualitative research is commonly discussed in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data (Ahmed, 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sarikahya et al., 2025; Yardley, 2000). Credibility was enhanced through independent coding by two researchers, iterative theme development, and the use of participant verbatim quotations. Transferability was supported by providing contextual detail on the institutional setting and participant characteristics. Dependability was ensured through a documented audit trail, including the coding decisions, reflexive memos, and iterative theme development. Confirmability was addressed through systematic cross-checking of themes generated via interpretations against the raw data to minimise researcher bias. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), the aim was not to establish statistical reliability but to provide a transparent, coherent, and theoretically informed account of patterns in the data. Collectively, these procedures support the validity, reliability, and overall trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Data Analysis - Thematic Analysis

To address the research questions on ChatGPT's functional integration into academic practice, perceived risks, and implications for professional identity, qualitative survey responses were analysed using thematic analysis. This approach was appropriate because it enables the identification of recurring patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while remaining sensitive to the interpretive and context-specific nature of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also allowed the analysis to remain inductively grounded in participants' responses while being informed by the study's broader conceptual interest in GenAI, academic work and self-identity (Ahmed et al., 2025; Sarikahya et al., 2025; Thompson & Byrne, 2022). To ensure methodological transparency and credibility of the research findings, the analysis followed the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing. Both researchers independently read the full dataset several times to become familiar with participants' accounts and to record initial reflections. This was followed by line-by-line open coding of the written responses, with each response examined for key ideas, evaluations and perceived implications of ChatGPT use. After initial coding, the researchers then compared and refined their code lists through three calibration meetings. Discrepancies were discussed and overlapping codes were consolidated into a shared codebook comprising 41 initial codes. This iterative process supported consistency of interpretation and contributed to the dependability of the analysis, in line with qualitative guidance on collaborative coding, auditability and transparent analytical decision-making (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Related codes were then grouped into preliminary categories based on conceptual similarity before being refined into broader themes and subthemes, following established procedures for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The full dataset was revisited to ensure that each theme was coherent, distinct and grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Saturation was assessed using the distinction between code saturation and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017; Saunders et al.,

2018). No new codes emerged after approximately 35 responses, indicating code saturation. By the completion of analysis across all 43 responses, recurring patterns and stable conceptual categories suggested that meaning saturation had also been achieved.

The thematic analysis generated three interrelated themes aligned with the research questions: (1) functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice, (2) perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use, and (3) academic identity and role transformation. These themes provide a structured account of ChatGPT as both a practical academic tool and a socio-professional catalyst in higher education. Table 1 presents a data structure illustrating the analytical progression from participant-near first-order concepts to researcher-derived second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. This representation is informed by the qualitative approach of Gioia et al. (2013) and is used here to enhance transparency in the coding and theme development process.

Table 1. Gioia-Informed Data Structure

Illustrative data extract	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
“Helps me edit and improve how I write something”; “rephrase text in my paper”; “summarizing scholarly texts”	Editing and refining writing; rephrasing academic text; summarising scholarly material	Augmenting scholarly writing and synthesis	Functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice
“Generate preliminary ideas”; “explain something complex in simple terms”	Generating ideas; simplifying complex concepts	Supporting ideation and conceptual clarification	Functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice
“Develop lecture notes. . . create case studies”	Developing lecture content; creating teaching cases	Supporting pedagogical preparation	Functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice
“Create exam questions. . . MCQs”; “generate generic comments. . . improve feedback tone”	Generating assessment items; drafting reusable feedback; adjusting feedback tone	Supporting assessment and feedback work	Functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice
“Students using AI to cheat”; “submit AI-generated content as their own”; “generic or derivative outputs”	Cheating through AI use; submitting AI-generated work; reduced originality	Threats to academic integrity and originality	Perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use
“Complete 90% of the work with little input”; “not in depth understanding of a topic”	Over-reliance on AI; reduced depth of understanding	Dependency and erosion of academic engagement	Perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use

Illustrative data extract	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
“Might not be very reliable and accurate”; “AI systems. . . biased in specific areas”	Inaccurate outputs; biased outputs	Epistemic reliability of AI outputs	Perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use
“Reputational risk to academics and institutions”	Reputational exposure for staff and institutions	Institutional credibility and accountability risks	Perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use
“What will academics become?”	Questioning future academic role	Threatened academic role meaning	Academic identity and role transformation
“Uncertainty about the role of academics”	Uncertainty about academic relevance	Identity tension and role ambiguity	Academic identity and role transformation
“We may end up demonstrating how to use ChatGPT”	Shift towards AI-use facilitation	Reframing academic role as facilitator/curator	Academic identity and role transformation

Note. This is a summary table, not the full codebook.

Findings

This section presents the empirical findings from the qualitative analysis. The findings are structured around the three aggregate dimensions generated through the analysis: (1) functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice, (2) perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use, and (3) academic identity and role transformation. These dimensions align with the study’s research questions and show how academics interpret ChatGPT as a practical support tool, a source of professional and epistemic risk, and a catalyst for reflection on academic role meaning.

Sample overview

The survey generated 43 completed responses from ULMS academics, representing a response rate of 21%. Participants included academics across career stages, subject groups and lengths of service. The sample included a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (53.4%) than female respondents (41.8%), with 4.6% preferring not to say. Most participants were aged between 31 and 49 years (69.7%). In terms of academic rank, most were senior lecturers/associate professors (51.1%) or lecturers/assistant professors (37.2%), with smaller representation from professors (9.3%) and research/teaching assistants (2.3%). Length of service varied, with the largest groups reporting five to ten years (27.9%) or more than 15 years (25.5%) in higher education. All major subject groups in ULMS were represented, with the largest proportion from Strategy, International Business and Entrepreneurship (41.8%), followed by Accounting and Finance (20.9%) and Marketing (13.9%).

Participant demographics were compared with institutional data for the wider ULMS academic workforce. No major deviations were observed, suggesting that the sample broadly reflected the School’s academic profile. However, it remains possible that academics with stronger views on

GenAI were more likely to respond. The findings should therefore be interpreted as analytically rich and indicative rather than statistically generalisable. The three aggregate dimensions recurred across demographic categories, with no systematic differences observed by gender, rank, length of service or discipline. This suggests that GenAI was experienced as a shared professional issue across the sample, albeit with varied degrees of enthusiasm, caution and concern.

Validity and Reliability of Findings

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through the systematic analytical procedures outlined in the Methods section, encompassing credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. In line with established qualitative research standards (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the themes presented below are grounded in iterative coding, independent analysis by two researchers, and the development of a shared codebook. The recurrence of themes across demographic groups, combined with the use of illustrative participant quotations, further strengthens the credibility and consistency of the interpretations. These procedures ensure a robust and transparent alignment between the data and the resulting interpretations, thereby supporting analytical rigour through established qualitative methodological principles.

Overview of Aggregate Dimensions

The analysis generated three aggregate dimensions:

1. Functional integration of ChatGPT in academic practice, which captures how academics use ChatGPT to support scholarly writing, idea generation, conceptual clarification, pedagogical preparation, assessment and feedback activities.
2. Perceived risks and challenges of ChatGPT use, which reflects academics' concerns about academic integrity, dependency, epistemic reliability and institutional credibility.
3. Academic identity and role transformation, which examines how academics interpret ChatGPT's implications for academic role meaning, professional relevance, authority and the possible reframing of the academic role towards facilitation and curation.

Together, these dimensions show that ChatGPT is not experienced simply as an additional digital tool. Rather, it is integrated into academic work in practical ways while also generating concerns about academic standards and prompting reflection on the future meaning of academic expertise.

Aggregate Dimension 1: Functional Integration of ChatGPT in Academic practice

The first aggregate dimension captures how academics integrate ChatGPT into everyday academic work. Participants generally positioned ChatGPT as an assistive tool that could support specific tasks, rather than as an autonomous substitute for academic judgement. Four second-order themes were identified namely; augmenting scholarly writing and synthesis, supporting ideation and conceptual clarification, supporting pedagogical preparation, and supporting assessment and feedback work.

Subtheme: Augmenting Scholarly Writing and Synthesis

Participants described ChatGPT as useful tool for editing, refining and rephrasing academic text, as well as summarising scholarly material:

“Helps me edit and improve how I write something, especially for academic papers.”
 Use it to rephrase text in my paper”. “I primarily use it as a support tool for checking

the clarity of explanations, structuring and drafting outlines for academic writing, and summarizing scholarly texts”.

These responses suggest that ChatGPT was used primarily as a support tool for improving academic communication and managing scholarly material. Participants did not frame the tool as replacing authorship rather, they positioned it as assisting with specific aspects of writing and synthesis that remained subject to academic review and judgement.

Subtheme: Supporting Ideation and Conceptual Clarification

Participants also described using ChatGPT to support idea generation, brainstorming and the clarification of complex concepts. Rather than relying on the tool to produce final academic outputs, many participants used it at early stages of thinking and preparation to stimulate ideas, organise thoughts or explore alternative ways of explaining difficult material.

Respondents referred to ChatGPT as useful for generating preliminary ideas or helping structure initial thinking:

“Helps me generate initial ideas.” “It is useful for brainstorming different angles before I start writing properly.” “Can help me think through possible ways of approaching a topic.”

These accounts suggest that ChatGPT was often positioned as a cognitive support tool that could assist with the early stages of academic work, particularly where participants experienced writer’s block, needed inspiration for teaching activities, or wanted to explore possible interpretations before refining them independently.

Participants also highlighted ChatGPT’s usefulness in simplifying or clarifying complex concepts for teaching purposes:

“Explain something complex in simple terms.”, “Useful when trying to explain difficult theories to students in a more accessible way.”, “Can provide examples or analogies that help simplify abstract concepts.”

In these cases, ChatGPT was used to support conceptual clarification and pedagogical translation, particularly where academics sought alternative explanations, examples or analogies that could make disciplinary concepts easier to communicate. Participants nevertheless stressed that such outputs required critical evaluation and disciplinary oversight. Simplification alone was not viewed as sufficient; academics emphasised the importance of checking accuracy, contextual relevance and conceptual appropriateness before incorporating AI generated material into teaching or scholarly work.

These findings suggest that ChatGPT was valued not only for efficiency gains, but also for its perceived capacity to support exploratory thinking, conceptual experimentation and pedagogical sensemaking during the early stages of academic work.

Subtheme: Supporting Pedagogical Preparation

Participants also used ChatGPT to prepare, develop and update teaching materials, including lecture content and case-based learning resources.

“Helps me revise an old case study with updated data”. “I will use it to assist with my learning materials. For example, I was recently updating a case study I had written myself 10 years ago. I was able to use ChatGPT to make it more realistic e.g. a better estimate of the number of staff the company would employ given the industry and an idea of a reasonable revenue for 2024”. “Assists me to search materials to enrich the materials in my module”. “I have used it to develop learning materials in topics that are not within my expertise”. “Use it to design my module content, create case studies for seminars, simplify theoretical models”.

These uses were associated with increased efficiency and flexibility in curriculum design. This theme highlights ChatGPT’s role in supporting pedagogical preparation. Academics viewed the tool as useful for generating starting points, examples or teaching resources, particularly where rapid preparation or updating of materials was required. However, these uses remained embedded in academic decision-making about learning outcomes, disciplinary relevance and pedagogical quality.

Subtheme: Supporting Assessment and Feedback Work

A further area of functional integration concerned assessment and feedback. Participants reported using ChatGPT to generate assessment items, draft reusable feedback and adjust feedback tone:

“Easy to create exam questions, multiple choice questions, etc.” “Use it to generate some generic comments based on assignment requirements to be reused across submissions when grading. “Use it to come up with revision flash cards and other materials to prepare the students for their upcoming exams”. “ChatGPT can create MCQ questions for in class recap”. “I selectively use ChatGPT to change the tone of my feedback for low-scoring submissions to make it more developmental”.

These accounts indicate that ChatGPT was used to streamline routine assessment-related tasks. Its value was associated with efficiency and consistency, particularly in generating initial drafts of questions or feedback comments. At the same time, participants’ accounts imply that academic judgement remained necessary to ensure alignment with assessment criteria, tone, learning outcomes and disciplinary expectations. Across these accounts, ChatGPT is consistently positioned as an assistive rather than autonomous system. While it enhances efficiency and supports task completion, its use remains contingent on human oversight, reinforcing the continued importance of academic judgement, authorship and disciplinary expertise.

Aggregate Dimension 2: Perceived Risks and Challenges of ChatGPT Use

The second aggregate dimension captures academics’ concerns about ChatGPT use. These concerns were not separate from the tool’s practical value, rather, they emerged from the same capabilities that made ChatGPT useful. Four second-order themes were identified namely; threats to academic integrity and originality, dependency and erosion of academic engagement, epistemic reliability of AI outputs, and institutional credibility and accountability risks.

Subtheme: Threats to Academic Integrity and Originality

Participants highlighted how ChatGPT destabilises established norms of authorship and originality raising concerns that academics might submit work drafted partly or largely by ChatGPT without adequate verification or disclosure:

“Risk that academics can submit work written by ChatGPT to conferences or journals”, and “plagiarism in academic papers”, “The information provided by ChatGPT might not be very reliable and accurate”. “There are risks that they will be uncritical about the outputs that are produced, and that they fail to distinguish between an output and a “good enough” output”. “Lower originality of contribution: Overuse of AI-generated text may lead to more generic or derivative outputs, reducing the originality and depth of academic contributions”.

These concerns reflect anxieties about the erosion of academic standards and accountability. Participants viewed ChatGPT as capable of blurring the boundaries between legitimate support, inappropriate outsourcing and reduced originality. This was especially important because originality and accountable authorship remain central to academic work.

Subtheme: Dependency and Erosion of Academic Engagement

Academics also reflected on their own risk of deskilling and overreliance. Routine use of ChatGPT for content creation, drafting or preparation of teaching materials was seen as potentially undermining scholarly craft skills, including critical engagement with readings and course design. Participants also perceived a threat to academics’ own analytical, writing and interpretive capacities if GenAI is allowed to take over cognitive and creative aspects of their role.

As one participant put it:

“Becoming reliant - so for it to deliver learning/resources as academic”.

Another worried that habitual dependence on AI might obscure gaps in subject knowledge:

“Someone might realise that they don’t properly understand the module they are teaching”.

Beyond subject mastery, there were concerns about the erosion of reflective, critical academic work:

“Relying too heavily on AI support might discourage deeper reflection and critical engagement with ideas, which are essential in academic work”.

These accounts suggest that participants did not view overreliance as a purely technical problem. Rather, they interpreted it as a potential threat to the development and maintenance of academic judgement, disciplinary confidence and scholarly craft.

Subtheme: Epistemic Reliability of AI Outputs

Participants expressed concern about the epistemic quality of ChatGPT-generated outputs. Their concerns centred less on dependency and more on the status of AI-generated content as knowledge: whether it is accurate, context-sensitive, ethically informed and sufficiently reliable for academic use.

One participant emphasised the limits of ChatGPT’s reasoning capacity:

“ChatGPT does not do critical thinking. It is only a prediction algorithm. It cannot distinguish between ethical and unethical, moral and immoral, and cannot put things in context like we humans do.”

Another participant questioned the reliability of its outputs:

“The information provided by ChatGPT might not be very reliable and accurate.”

These responses suggest that participants were concerned about the plausibility of AI-generated material, particularly where fluent outputs may appear authoritative despite lacking contextual judgement, ethical discernment or evidential reliability. In this sense, epistemic reliability was understood as a risk to the quality and credibility of academic work when AI-generated outputs are incorporated without careful verification.

Subtheme: Institutional Credibility and Accountability Risks

Participants connected the risks of ChatGPT use to broader questions of institutional credibility, professional accountability and policy clarity. Whereas the previous subthemes focused on over-reliance and epistemic reliability, this subtheme shows how participants located those concerns within a wider institutional context. For some, the reputational risk was that academics or universities might be perceived as outsourcing core academic responsibilities to GenAI:

“There is reputational risk to academics and institutions if academics are perceived to not be doing their jobs”.

Participants also highlighted uneven guidance from journals and universities on acceptable AI use and disclosure. This was especially evident in relation to academic writing and publication practices:

“Some journals are currently asking academics to fully disclose whether and how they used ChatGPT”. “Journals are asking to disclose usage of ChatGPT in the paper development”. “Right now, it seems to be a grey area on whether academics should disclose the use of ChatGPT, with some journals openly discussing it and requesting disclosure while some insist that chat GPT should not be used. Yet, there is another camp which do not refer to it at all.”

Similar concerns were raised about university-level guidance. Participants perceived existing policies as often broad in principle but insufficiently clear in operational terms:

“There needs to be a uniform policy concerning the use of chat GPT for academic submissions”. Universities need to specify what is considered acceptable and ethical when it comes to ChatGPT usage for both students and staff”.

“The boundaries of ChatGPT usage are still unclear by the universities governing bodies. How much usage of ChatGPT is considered acceptable for academic work?”

This lack of clarity appeared to create uncertainty about the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate use. Participants were concerned not only with whether ChatGPT should be used, but also with how such use might be interpreted by students, colleagues, editors and external stakeholders. One respondent referred to a scenario in which students challenged AI-generated feedback, linking this directly to institutional trust:

“There was a news article recently where students had "proof" that an academic had generated their assessment feedback using Gen AI and they were demanding their money back. There is reputational risk to academics and institutions if academics are perceived to not be doing their jobs.”

Participants also emphasised the need for critical professional judgement when using AI-generated outputs, warning against the unreflective application of tools or theories:

“Think of academics using theories or statistical analysis mindlessly without critically asking - if this is the right tool to apply”.

This subtheme shows that the perceived risks of ChatGPT extend beyond individual misuse or technical unreliability. Participants understood AI use as a matter of professional accountability, institutional trust and policy legitimacy. In this sense, ChatGPT was seen as raising governance questions about what counts as appropriate academic practice, how such practice should be disclosed, and how responsibility should be allocated when academic work is mediated by GenAI.

Aggregate Dimension 3: Academic Identity and Role Transformation

The third aggregate dimension captures how academics interpreted ChatGPT's implications for academic identity and role meaning. Participants did not only evaluate ChatGPT as useful or risky, they also reflected on what its growing presence might mean for the future role, relevance and authority of academics. Three second-order themes were identified namely; threatened academic role meaning, identity tension and role ambiguity, and reframing the academic role as facilitator or curator.

Subtheme: Threatened Academic Role Meaning

Some participants expressed concern that ChatGPT could destabilise established assumptions about the academic role. One participant captured this anxiety directly:

“Academics are responsible to produce and disseminate new knowledge. If ChatGPT manages to do that, then what will the academics become?”

This concern was linked to the possibility that activities traditionally associated with academic expertise, such as producing, explaining and disseminating knowledge, may increasingly be performed or supported by GenAI systems. Participants therefore interpreted ChatGPT not simply as a tool, but as a potential challenge to the meanings attached to academic authority and professional distinctiveness.

At the same time, several respondents reasserted the enduring value of academic work by drawing boundaries between AI-generated outputs and human academic contribution:

“We are not just content providers. We mentor, guide, and provoke critical thought, things ChatGPT simply cannot do.”

Others emphasised interpretation, judgement, creativity and relational engagement as markers of academic distinctiveness:

“AI is pattern recognition whereas academics contribute through interpretation, context, and original thought.”, “AI lacks creativity and cannot distinguish between ethical and unethical decisions.”, “It is not wholly reliable. The human touch and human connection is missing.”, “Academics create new knowledge whereas ChatGPT only gathers existing knowledge.”

These accounts suggest that perceived threat did not lead only to anxiety. It also prompted academics to defend and clarify the professional attributes they regarded as uniquely human and central to academic role meaning.

Subtheme: Identity Tension and Role Ambiguity

Participants also described uncertainty about the future relevance and boundaries of academic work. This was especially evident where respondents reflected on ChatGPT’s potential encroachment into both research and teaching:

“Research was the primary job of an academic. At the same time, ChatGPT has infiltrated our teaching... the second job of an academic. If ChatGPT ends up doing 50% of our job, assuming that we are still useful to some extent, then how are we going to compensate for that?”

This uncertainty points to identity tension, where established understandings of academic contribution become less stable. Participants questioned whether academic value would continue to be located in content production, disciplinary expertise and teaching delivery, or whether expectations would shift as AI systems became more embedded in academic work.

This role ambiguity also extended to workload and employment conditions:

“There is some uncertainty. If ChatGPT performs some of the tasks that the academics need to do, like marking or admin, then what is left for the academics? And will that impact their employment contracts, how many hours they are contracted to work, and salary?”

These accounts show that academics’ concerns were not limited to abstract questions of identity. They also included practical uncertainty about how AI-mediated work might affect the organisation, evaluation and value of academic labour.

Subtheme: Reframing the Academic Role as Facilitator or Curator

Alongside concerns about role erosion, some participants imagined a reconfiguration of academic work. One respondent anticipated a future in which academics may become less central as direct distributors of knowledge and more involved in guiding appropriate GenAI use:

“The traditional role of an academic is to engage in knowledge building research that can be used to inform their teaching and their general discipline. If students do not need the academic to distribute this knowledge the academic may end up producing knowledge that will feed into ChatGPT and ChatGPT will be responsible to teach the students. We may end up demonstrating to students how to appropriately use ChatGPT.”

This response points to a possible reframing of the academic role. Rather than positioning academics only as producers and transmitters of knowledge, ChatGPT may encourage a role centred on facilitation, curation, evaluation and responsible GenAI use. This does not necessarily imply the loss of academic expertise. Instead, it suggests a transformation in how expertise may be enacted and recognised in GenAI-mediated academic practice.

Across this aggregate dimension, participants' accounts reveal an ongoing process of identity negotiation. Academics sought to preserve valued role meanings such as expertise, authorship, judgement and pedagogical authority, while also recognising that AI-supported work may require new forms of academic practice. In this sense, ChatGPT was experienced not only as a practical tool or a source of risk, but also as a catalyst for reflecting on what it means to be an academic in a changing higher education environment.

Discussion

This study examined how ChatGPT is functionally integrated into academic practice (RQ1), the risks associated with its use (RQ2), and its implications for professional identity and role meaning (RQ3). These findings contribute to debates on GenAI in higher education by showing that functional integration, risk perception, and identity renegotiation are not separate dimensions of academic experience but mutually constitutive. The findings support prior research on the benefits of GenAI in academic writing, pedagogical preparation, assessment and feedback, and academic labour (Aydin & Karaarslan, 2023; Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020; Grimes et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Marchandot et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024), but also show that the same capabilities that make ChatGPT useful also generate concerns regarding authorship, epistemic reliability, professional judgement, and the future value of academic expertise.

Across the findings, ChatGPT emerged not as a neutral technological tool but as a socio-professional phenomenon interpreted through existing norms of scholarly responsibility, pedagogical authority and academic legitimacy. This aligns with Barros et al. (2023), who argue that GenAI reshapes interconnected domains of academic work, and with Watermeyer et al. (2024), who highlight its implications for academic labour and perceptions of value. More broadly, the finding is consistent with critical technology scholarship that cautions against treating educational technologies as neutral instruments detached from social, ethical and institutional contexts (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Selwyn, 2019).

Functional integration as Bounded Augmentation

The findings show that academics integrate ChatGPT into academic work in pragmatic and task-specific ways across scholarly writing, synthesis, ideation, teaching preparation, assessment and feedback. This supports research positioning GenAI as a tool for enhancing efficiency and workflow (Lee et al., 2024; Weidlich et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2025), particularly in teaching preparation, assessment design, and feedback generation (Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024; Fyfe et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2025; Welskop, 2023).

However, while prior literature often frames GenAI as an efficiency-enhancing tool, our findings show that its use is highly conditional and carefully bounded. Academics do not fully delegate cognitive or pedagogical authority to ChatGPT, instead, they maintain control over interpretation, evaluation and final outputs. Participants did not present ChatGPT as an autonomous substitute for academic expertise, nor did they describe its outputs as self-validating. Instead, they positioned the tool as useful only when its outputs were reviewed, adapted and situated within disciplinary,

pedagogical and assessment contexts. In this respect, the study extends prior work by showing that functional integration is not simply a matter of using GenAI to accelerate academic tasks, rather a professional practice shaped by judgement, responsibility and boundary-setting.

These findings challenge deterministic assumptions that GenAI straightforwardly automates academic knowledge work. Rather, the findings support the view that educational technologies are shaped by social and institutional contexts (Coeckelbergh, 2020; Selwyn, 2019). Interpreted through self-identity theory, this bounded and conditional use can be understood as a form of identity maintenance (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). By retaining control over interpretation, evaluation and authorship, academics preserve coherence between changing technological practices and internalised professional role meanings associated with expertise, judgement and accountability.

Risk as a Challenge to Academic Standards and Professional Legitimacy

The findings add nuance to four interconnected areas of concern, namely; threats to academic integrity and originality, dependency and erosion of academic judgement, epistemic reliability of AI outputs and institutional credibility. Importantly, these risks arise from the same capabilities that make ChatGPT useful for drafting, summarising, and generating academic content.

First, concerns regarding plagiarism, ghost-writing, and reduced originality support existing literature on GenAI and academic integrity (Eke, 2023; Silva et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2024). However, participants framed integrity not only as compliance with formal rules, but also as a matter of scholarly responsibility, originality, and accountable authorship. This extends arguments by Floridi and Chiriatti (2020) and Islam and Greenwood (2024) that GenAI complicates assumptions about authorship and ownership because outputs draw on diffuse and often untraceable knowledge sources.

Second, the findings highlight the unsettled status of GenAI in authorship practices. Participants noted inconsistencies across journals regarding disclosure and acceptable use, reflecting broader debates where GenAI tools are not recognised as authors but norms around acknowledgement remain unclear (Gatrell et al., 2024). These ambiguities were experienced as a “grey area”, generating uncertainty and concern about inadvertent breaches. The findings therefore extend existing literature by showing how policy fragmentation is experienced in practice as a source of integrity risk. Similarly, research on grading suggests that responses to AI use are shaped not only by formal rules but also by value judgements about effort and legitimacy (Luo & Dawson, 2025), a tension also evident in participants’ accounts.

Third, participants’ concerns about dependency and erosion of academic judgement point to a less developed but important dimension of GenAI risk. Routine use for drafting, idea generation, teaching preparation or assessment design was viewed as potentially undermining critical engagement, creativity and disciplinary judgement. This supports critiques of automation in knowledge work (Karamuk, 2025; O’Dea, 2024; Watermeyer et al., 2024), while extending them by linking over-reliance to perceived erosion of competence and professional confidence (Jussupow et al., 2022; Mirbabaie et al., 2022).

Fourth, participants expressed concern about the epistemic reliability of AI-generated outputs, particularly hallucinations, fabricated references, and plausible but inaccurate content (Chelli et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2025). The findings demonstrate that unreliability matters because fluent outputs may appear authoritative despite lacking contextual judgement or evidential grounding. Verification therefore becomes central to responsible academic use.

Finally, participants connected these concerns to institutional reputation and accountability. Undisclosed AI use, fabricated content, or AI-generated feedback were seen as threats not only to individual credibility but also to institutional legitimacy. This aligns with research linking academic integrity to organisational legitimacy (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025), while illustrating how such risks are experienced in everyday scenarios. Participants also viewed existing institutional policies as high-level and insufficiently operationalised, reinforcing perceptions of ambiguity (Rasul et al., 2024). This supports calls for clearer, context-sensitive governance frameworks and highlights ambiguity itself as a source of epistemic and identity risk.

This theme therefore demonstrates that ChatGPT related risk operates simultaneously at epistemic, professional and institutional levels. From a self-identity perspective, these concerns can be understood as disruptions to identity verification processes. Academic identities are sustained when individuals perceive alignment between internalised role meanings and the external recognition of their work as original, expert and intellectually credible (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Concerns regarding AI-generated content, blurred accountability, and policy ambiguity therefore reflect anxiety about whether established markers of academic competence remain recognisable in GenAI-mediated environments.

Identity Negotiation and Role Reconfiguration

The findings clearly highlight how ChatGPT prompts reflection on academic identity and role meaning. Participants not only evaluated whether ChatGPT was useful or risky but also questioned what academic work becomes when AI systems can generate text, support teaching preparation, and produce plausible scholarly outputs.

Some participants reaffirmed the distinctiveness of academic work by emphasising interpretation, ethical judgement, mentoring, creativity, and relational engagement as uniquely human capacities. These responses align with conceptual work suggesting that academics seek to preserve professional legitimacy by reasserting forms of expertise that remain difficult to automate (Shao & Sun, 2025; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Such responses can also be interpreted through self-identity theory as attempts to maintain coherence between changing technological conditions and valued role meanings (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). At the same time, participants expressed uncertainty about role erosion, changing workload expectations, and the future relevance of academic labour. These concerns reflect broader anxieties about automation in professional knowledge work (Barros et al., 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2024). Participants' concerns about deskilling and over-reliance were especially significant because they linked practical dependence on ChatGPT to the possible erosion of core academic competencies, including critical thinking, disciplinary expertise and pedagogical judgement. This resonates with research showing that AI mediated professional work can unsettle self-efficacy, role boundaries and professional confidence when technologies encroach on domains associated with expert judgement (Jussupow et al., 2022; Mirbabaie et al., 2022). The findings therefore reveal a dual process of identity maintenance and identity disruption. On the one hand, academics defended established role meanings by distinguishing human academic contribution from AI generated output. On the other hand, they recognised that the boundaries of academic work may be shifting as GenAI becomes more embedded in academic practice. This duality aligns with emerging scholarship suggesting that GenAI is reshaping understanding of expertise, authority and professional contribution in higher education (Shao & Sun, 2025; Zaimoğlu & Dağtaş, 2025).

Importantly, the findings do not support a simple narrative of technological replacement. Instead, they point towards ongoing processes of identity negotiation. Participants simultaneously used

ChatGPT, questioned its legitimacy, defended established academic values and imagined new professional roles centred on facilitation, curation, evaluation and responsible GenAI use. These hybrid and sometimes contradictory positions reflect broader identity work scholarship, which conceptualises professional identity as actively maintained, revised and reconstructed in response to changing organisational and work conditions (Beech et al., 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Petriglieri, 2011). In this sense, academics appear to both resist and accommodate GenAI while renegotiating the meaning of academic expertise.

The findings also point to important affective implications. Participants expressed anxiety and uncertainty regarding futures in which GenAI performs core academic tasks more efficiently. Identity theory suggests that disruption to identity verification can generate stress and defensive responses (Burke, 1991; Cast & Burke, 2002). Participants' requests for clearer institutional policies and stronger guidance should therefore be understood not only as requests for procedural clarity, but also as attempts to stabilise the conditions under which academic roles can be enacted with confidence. This extends work on uneven institutional responses to GenAI by showing that policy ambiguity can become an affective and identity-based burden (Rasul et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that debates about GenAI, academic skills, and professional identity are deeply interconnected and extend beyond simple questions of technological acceptance or resistance.

Concluding Remarks

This study contributes to the growing literature on GenAI in higher education by foregrounding the perspectives of UK academics. Drawing on qualitative insights from the University of Liverpool Management School, it shows that ChatGPT is experienced not simply as a technological tool, but as a socio-professional phenomenon that reshapes academic practice, professional judgement and role meaning.

The study makes three contributions. First, it shows that academics incorporate ChatGPT into practice in bounded and conditional ways. While GenAI can support writing, synthesis, teaching preparation and assessment-related work, academics retain responsibility for interpretation, contextualisation, evaluation and final outputs. Second, it shows that concerns about integrity, epistemic reliability, over-reliance and institutional credibility are interconnected rather than discrete. These risks are experienced not only as technical or procedural problems, but also as challenges to scholarly accountability, professional legitimacy and academic standards. Third, the study shows that ChatGPT prompts identity maintenance, disruption and negotiation, as academics seek to preserve and reinterpret meanings associated with expertise, authorship, judgement and pedagogical authority. Overall, the study suggests that the future of academic work will depend not simply on whether GenAI is adopted or resisted, but on how academics and institutions negotiate the tensions it creates. ChatGPT expands possibilities for academic practice while destabilising assumptions about expertise, authorship and professional contribution. Understanding this duality is essential for developing responses to GenAI that are technically robust, professionally sensitive and institutionally sustainable.

Practical implications

The study suggests that higher education is moving towards hybrid human–AI configurations of academic work, in which GenAI may support routine or preparatory tasks while academics retain

responsibility for critical judgement, contextual interpretation, and ethical oversight. The central challenge for universities, journals, and policymakers is therefore to develop governance and support structures that recognise both the practical value and professional risks of GenAI.

For universities, the findings highlight the need for clear, operational, and institution-wide policies governing GenAI use. These policies should define acceptable and unacceptable practices, establish disclosure expectations, and provide discipline-sensitive guidance that reflects differences in epistemic norms and assessment practices. High-level principles are unlikely to be sufficient where academics face practical uncertainty about authorship, feedback, assessment design, teaching preparation and scholarly writing. Universities should also invest in targeted professional development. This should include training in evaluating the accuracy, bias and reliability of AI-generated outputs (Gao et al., 2023; Tlili et al., 2025), developing effective prompting and critical AI literacy (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023), designing AI-informed assessments that protect academic integrity (Lindell & Stöhr, 2025; Xia et al., 2024), and supporting academics to adapt to changing role expectations (Shao & Sun, 2025; Watermeyer et al., 2024; Zaimoğlu & Dağtaş, 2025). Such development should not be framed only as technical training, but as support for professional judgement, identity adaptation and responsible academic practice.

For academic journals, the findings point to the need for greater consistency and transparency in policies governing the ethical use of GenAI. Journals should provide clear guidance on disclosure, acceptable forms of AI assistance and the limits of AI involvement in writing, analysis and literature synthesis. They should also reaffirm that GenAI systems cannot be attributed authorship, while strengthening editorial and peer-review processes to identify fabricated references, unverifiable claims and generic AI-generated content. Greater consistency across journals would reduce uncertainty for authors and support more responsible scholarly communication. Overall, the practical implication of this study is that GenAI governance must be both technically robust and professionally sensitive. Policies and training should not focus only on preventing misuse. They should also help academics understand how to preserve authorship, judgement, accountability and academic value in AI-mediated work.

Limitations and Future Research

A qualitative research design, while valuable for generating rich, contextualized insights into human experiences, is subject to inherent limitations. The qualitative design enabled rich, contextually grounded insights into academics' perceptions of ChatGPT, but it does not support statistical generalisation. As with qualitative inquiry more broadly, the analysis is interpretive and shaped by researcher judgement, assumptions and positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To mitigate this, the study used independent coding, calibration meetings, reflexive discussion and an audit trail, as outlined in the methodology. In addition, the study is based on a non-probability sample from a single institution, the University of Liverpool Management School (ULMS). The findings should therefore be understood as analytically rather than statistically generalisable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, given similarities with other UK and Russell Group institutions, the findings may offer relevant insights for comparable contexts, particularly when adapted to local conditions. The study also captures perceptions at a specific point in time, limiting the temporal generalisability of the findings (Bhaskar & Gupta, 2024). As technologies, policies and norms of acceptable use continue to evolve, academics' practices and concerns may also change. Future longitudinal research could examine how perceptions of authorship, expertise, risk and professional identity develop as GenAI

becomes more embedded in academic work. Furthermore, the use of open-ended survey questions enabled anonymous participation and consistency across responses, but limited opportunities for probing, clarification and follow-up (Patton, 2015). Finally, the analysis is informed by self-identity theory and identity work, which foreground how academics interpret and negotiate professional roles. This theoretical focus provides a useful lens for examining identity-related processes, but it gives less attention to other possible perspectives, such as technology acceptance, organisational change, institutional governance or socio-technical systems. Future research could examine GenAI in higher education through these alternative lenses to develop a more comprehensive understanding of its implications for academic work. Despite these limitations, this study provides meaningful insights for stakeholders that can inform and enhance the effective integration and implementation of GenAI in management education.

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Survey Questions

1. Are you planning to use ChatGPT in your academic activities? If yes, how?
2. Do you think ChatGPT is a beneficial tool for use in Higher Education? Yes, no, why?
3. Do you think that ChatGPT is an innovation that enhances student learning? Yes, no, why?
4. Can you think of any risks associated with students' use of ChatGPT? If yes, how can these be mitigated?
5. Can you think of any risks related to academics' use of ChatGPT? If yes, how can these be mitigated?
6. Do you think that ChatGPT will replace the role of the traditional academic? Yes, no, why?