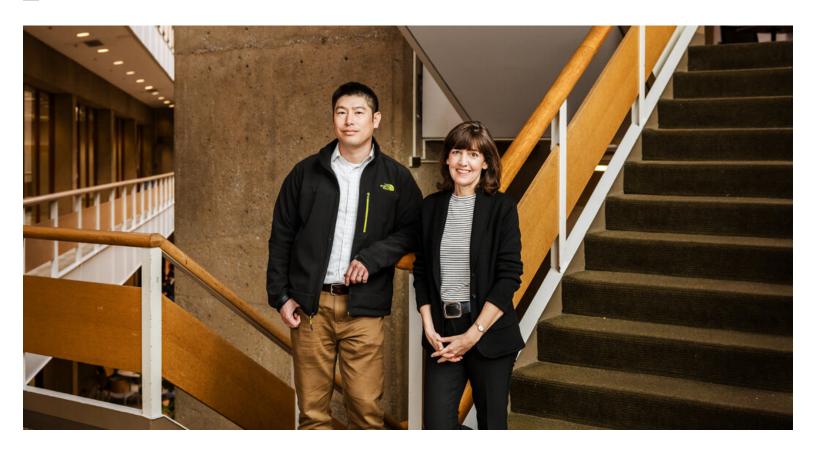# Cheating Fears Over Chatbots Were Overblown, New Research Suggests

nytimes.com/2023/12/13/technology/chatbot-cheating-schools-students.html

Last December, as high school and college students began trying out a new A.I. chatbot called ChatGPT to manufacture writing assignments, fears of mass cheating spread across the United States.

To hinder bot-enabled plagiarism, some large public schools districts — including those in Los Angeles, Seattle and New York City — quickly blocked ChatGPT on school-issued laptops and school Wi-Fi.

But the alarm may have been overblown — at least in high schools.

According to new research from Stanford University, the popularization of A.I. chatbots has not boosted overall cheating rates in schools. In surveys this year of more than 40 U.S. high schools, some 60 to 70 percent of students said they had recently engaged in cheating — about the same percent as in previous years, Stanford education researchers said.

SKIP ADVERTISEMENT
"There was a panic that these A.I. models will allow a whole new way of doing something that could be construed as cheating," said Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at Stanford Graduate School of Education who has surveyed high school students for more than a decade through an education nonprofit she co-founded.

But "we're just not seeing the change in the data."

ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI in San Francisco, began to capture the public imagination late last year with its ability to fabricate human-sounding essays and emails. Almost immediately, classroom technology boosters started promising that A.I. tools like ChatGPT would revolutionize education. And critics began warning that such tools — which liberally make stuff up — would enable widespread cheating, and amplify misinformation, in schools.

Now the Stanford research, along with a recent report from the Pew Research Center, are challenging the notion that A.I. chatbots are upending public schools.

Many teens know little about ChatGPT, Pew found. And most say they have never used it for schoolwork.

Those trends could change, of course, as more high school students become familiar with A.I. tools.

Many Teens Have Never Heard of ChatGPT

This fall, Pew Research Center surveyed more than 1,400 U.S. teenagers, aged 13 to 17, about their knowledge, use and views of ChatGPT. The results may seem counterintuitive, given the plethora of panicked headlines last spring.

Nearly one-third of teens said they had heard "nothing at all" about the chatbot, according to the Pew survey, conducted from Sept. 26 to Oct. 23, 2023. Another 44 percent said they had heard "a little" about it.

Only 23 percent said they had heard a lot about ChatGPT. (The Pew survey did not ask the teens about other A.I. chatbots like Google's Bard or OpenAI's GPT-4.)

Responses varied by race and household income. About 72 percent of white teens said they had heard about the chatbot compared with about 56 percent of Black teens, Pew said.

About 75 percent of teens in households with annual incomes of $75,000 or more said they had heard about ChatGPT, Pew found, compared to just 41 percent of teens in households with annual incomes of less than $30,000.

Pew also asked teens whether they had ever used ChatGPT to help with their schoolwork. Only a small minority — 13 percent — said they had.

The Pew survey results suggest that ChatGPT, at least for now, has not become the disruptive phenomenon in schools that proponents and critics forecast. Among the subset of teens who said they had heard about the chatbot, the vast majority — 81 percent — said they had not used it to help with their schoolwork.

"Most teens do have some level of awareness of ChatGPT," said Jeffrey Gottfried, an associate director of research at Pew. "But this is not a majority of teens who are incorporating it into their schoolwork quite yet."

Cheating Rates Haven't Changed Much

Cheating has long been rampant in schools. In surveys of more than 70,000 high school students between 2002 and 2015, 64 percent said they had cheated on a test. And 58 percent said they had plagiarized.

Since the introduction of ChatGPT in 2022, the overall frequency of high school students reporting they recently engaged in cheating has not increased, according to the Stanford researchers.

SKIP ADVERTISEMENT

The new research does not shed light on how frequently college students may employ chatbots as cheating bots. The Stanford and Pew researchers did not survey college students about their use of A.I. tools.

This year, the Stanford researchers added survey questions that specifically asked high school students about their use of A.I. chatbots. This fall, 12 to 28 percent of students at four East Coast and West Coast high schools said they had used an A.I. tool or digital device — such as ChatGPT or a smartphone — within the last month as an unauthorized aid during a school test, assignment or homework.

Among the high school students who said they had used an A.I. chatbot, about 55 to 77 percent said they had used it to generate an idea for a paper, project or assignment; about 19 to 49 percent said they had used it to edit or complete a portion of a paper; and about 9 to 16 percent said they had used it to write all of a paper or other assignment, the Stanford researchers found.

The findings could help shift discussions about chatbots in schools to focus less on cheating fears and more on helping students learn to understand, use and think critically about new A.I. tools, the researchers said.

"There are other ways to think about A.I. — not simply as this uncontrollable temptation that undermines everything," said Victor R. Lee, an associate professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education who researches A.I. learning experiences and led the recent research on cheating with Dr. Pope. "There's so much more that could and should be talked about in schools."

SKIP ADVERTISEMENT

'Not Acceptable' for Essay Writing

While schools are still developing acceptable usage rules for the A.I. tools, students are developing nuanced views on using ChatGPT for schoolwork.

Only 20 percent of teens aged 13 to 17 said they thought it was acceptable for students to use ChatGPT to write essays, Pew found. But nearly 70 percent said it was acceptable for students to use the A.I. chatbot to research new topics.

U.S. teens aged 13 to 17

This does not mean that students are not trying to pass off chatbot-generated texts as their own schoolwork.

Christine Meade, an Advanced Placement history teacher at a high school in Vallejo, Calif., said chatbot cheating was widespread among 12th graders last spring. She even caught a few using the A.I. chatbots on their smartwatches during school tests.

But this year, after she told her students they could use ChatGPT and Bard for certain research projects, the situation "completely changed," she said.

"I had a bunch of students in my A.P. history class use chatbots to generate a list of events that happened right after the Civil War, in the 1880s," Ms. Meade said. "It was pretty accurate — except for the 1980s event during the Reagan administration."