

Productivity, efficiency, and optimization: research through the lens of AI Marketing

Produtividade, eficiência e otimização: pesquisa sob a lente do marketing da IA

Productividad, eficiencia y optimización: la investigación bajo la óptica del marketing con IA

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Abstract

The rapid emergence of AI-driven tools that promise to ‘revolutionize’ academic research has introduced new ideas of what it means to develop scholarly work. These platforms, marketed as research assistants or co-authors, promote particular visions of productivity, efficiency, and optimization that deserve critical scrutiny. This study investigates how such framings are constructed through the promotional discourses of publicly available AI research tools websites. By analysing the discourses used to frame these tools, I ask: How are the researchers and their craft framed by AI marketing, and what ethical and epistemic assumptions underpin these framings? Drawing from critical discourse studies, I examine how appeals to ‘efficiency,’ ‘accessibility,’ or ‘responsibility’ are mobilized to position AI as indispensable for research, while simultaneously obscuring issues of power, bias, and dependency. The analysis highlights tensions between the promise of democratized research and the reinforcement of techno capitalist logics that reduce scholarship to measurable outputs. By focusing on marketing discourses, this study interrogates how AI is influencing understandings of research itself. Ultimately, I argue that these promotional discourses are not neutral but actively participate in redefining the ethics and practice of educational research.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI); Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); techno capitalism; academic capitalism; platformization.

Resumo

O rápido surgimento de ferramentas impulsionadas por IA que prometem “revolucionar” a pesquisa acadêmica introduziu novas concepções sobre o que significa desenvolver trabalhos

acadêmicos. Essas plataformas, comercializadas como assistentes de pesquisa ou coautoras, promovem visões específicas de produtividade, eficiência e otimização que merecem um exame crítico. Este estudo investiga como tais perspectivas são construídas por meio dos discursos promocionais presentes nos sites de ferramentas de pesquisa baseadas em IA disponíveis ao público. Ao analisar os discursos utilizados para apresentar essas ferramentas, questiono: de que maneira os pesquisadores e seu ofício são retratados pelo marketing de IA, e quais pressupostos éticos e epistêmicos sustentam essas representações? Com base nos estudos críticos do discurso, examino como apelos à “eficiência”, à “acessibilidade” ou à “responsabilidade” são mobilizados para posicionar a IA como indispensável à pesquisa, ao mesmo tempo em que ocultam questões de poder, viés e dependência. A análise destaca as tensões entre a promessa de uma pesquisa democratizada e o reforço de lógicas tecnocapitalistas que reduzem a atividade acadêmica a resultados mensuráveis. Ao concentrar-se nos discursos de marketing, este estudo investiga como a IA está influenciando a própria compreensão do que é a pesquisa. Por fim, argumento que esses discursos promocionais não são neutros, mas participam ativamente da redefinição da ética e da prática da pesquisa educacional.

Palavras-chaves: Inteligência Artificial (IA); Análise Crítica Do Discurso (ACD); tecnocapitalismo; capitalismo acadêmico; plataformização.

Resumen

La rápida aparición de herramientas impulsadas por inteligencia artificial (IA) que prometen «revolucionar» la investigación académica ha introducido nuevas concepciones sobre lo que implica desarrollar trabajo académico. Estas plataformas, comercializadas como asistentes de investigación o coautores, promueven visiones particulares de productividad, eficiencia y optimización que merecen un análisis crítico. Este estudio investiga cómo se construyen tales enfoques a través de los discursos promocionales de los sitios web de herramientas de investigación basadas en IA disponibles al público. Al analizar los discursos empleados para presentar estas herramientas, planteo la siguiente pregunta: ¿cómo son representados los investigadores y su labor por el marketing de la IA, y qué supuestos éticos y epistémicos sustentan dichas representaciones? A partir de los estudios críticos del discurso, examino cómo se utilizan argumentos sobre «eficiencia», «accesibilidad» o «responsabilidad» para posicionar a la IA como un elemento indispensable para la investigación, ocultando al mismo tiempo cuestiones de poder, sesgo y dependencia. El análisis pone de relieve las tensiones entre la promesa de una investigación democratizada y el refuerzo de lógicas tecnocapitalistas que reducen la labor académica a resultados cuantificables. Al centrarse en los discursos de marketing, este estudio examina cómo la IA está influyendo en la propia concepción de la investigación. En última instancia, sostengo que estos discursos promocionales no son neutrales, sino que participan activamente en la redefinición de la ética y la práctica de la investigación educativa.

Palabras-clave: Inteligencia Artificial (IA); Análisis Crítico Del Discurso (ACD); tecnocapitalismo; capitalismo académico; plataformización.

1 AI research assistants and the reframing of scholarly work

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly moved from being a largely invisible infrastructure supporting digital systems to becoming an increasingly visible participant in scholarly work. In recent years, a growing ecosystem of AI-powered platforms has emerged,

promising to transform how research is conducted. Marketed as AI research assistants, these tools claim to support literature search, data analysis, evidence synthesis, manuscript drafting, and citation management with unprecedented efficiency. However, these platforms do more than introduce new functionalities; they actively participate in shaping particular understandings of what it means to do research.

This shift is significant because of how these technologies frame the nature of research itself. Rather than presenting research as an interpretive, iterative, and often uncertain process, AI platforms frequently construct it as a series of tasks that can be streamlined, optimized, and, to some extent, automated. This reframing aligns with broader technocapitalist logics that prioritize efficiency, scalability, and productivity across knowledge sectors (Suárez-Villa, 2009; Kellner, 2023). As such, the rise of AI research tools raises important questions not only about technological capability, but also about how academic work is being reframed, reorganized, and revalued.

Existing scholarship on AI in education and research has largely focused on issues such as accuracy, bias, authorship, and academic integrity (Balalle; Pannilage, 2025; Kumar *et al.*, 2024). Studies have examined the implications of AI-assisted writing (Abdul-Jabbar; Bhatt, 2025; Kim *et al.*, 2024), the risks of hallucinated information (Adel; Alani, 2025), and the ethical boundaries of machine-generated content (Zhang *et al.*, 2026). While these contributions are essential, they tend to approach AI primarily as a tool whose effects can be evaluated in terms of outcomes or usage. By contrast, established critical scholarship has begun to situate AI within broader political-economic and sociotechnical dynamics, examining how AI systems are embedded in logics of platformization and data extraction (Williamson; Macgilchrist; Potter, 2023).

Less attention has been given to the discursive dimension of these technologies – specifically, how AI research platforms are presented, justified, and normalized through their own promotional materials. This gap is significant because marketing discourses do not merely describe tools; they shape expectations, construct user identities, and articulate particular visions of what research should be. In the context of educational technology, such discourses have historically played a central role in aligning pedagogical and scholarly practices with broader economic and technological agendas (Clark, 2024; Heinsfeld; Marone, 2023; Ideland; Serder, 2023). Yet, the ways in which contemporary AI platforms frame research – and the implications of these framings for academic labor and knowledge production – remain underexplored.

This study therefore examines how AI-driven research platforms construct

scholarly work through their marketing discourse. Rather than evaluating the technical performance of these systems, the analysis focuses on how research itself is framed within the discourses used to promote them. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study investigates how AI research platforms articulate the relationship between technology and scholarship, and how they position the researcher within this relationship. Specifically, it asks: How are researchers and their craft framed in AI marketing, and what ethical and epistemic assumptions underpin these framings?

Focusing on publicly available websites and platform materials, the analysis explores how themes such as efficiency, accessibility, and responsibility are mobilized to position AI as indispensable to research. By interrogating these discourses, the paper argues that AI research tools are not simply neutral innovations, but discursive actors that participate in shaping contemporary understandings of knowledge production and in constructing new expectations about how research should be conducted and what counts as efficient or legitimate scholarly practice. In doing so, this study contributes to critical conversations about the discursive constructions surrounding contemporary scholarship and the future of academic work, foregrounding the performative, political and ideological dimensions embedded in the seemingly practical promises of AI-assisted research.

2 Research as labor: Technocapitalism and knowledge production

Recent scholarship on the use of AI illustrates how these technologies are being positioned in the research process. Studies highlight that AI systems are increasingly used to support literature reviews by automatically identifying and summarizing key concepts and themes, as well as to generate research questions and suggest new lines of inquiry (Christou, 2023). Additionally, AI is described as contributing to theory development by analyzing existing frameworks and suggesting the creation of novel approaches. A similar dynamic can be observed in emerging methodological discussions that seek to conceptualize AI as part of the interpretive process, enabling new forms of dialogic engagement where machine-generated associations introduce nuances or contrasts that might otherwise remain unexplored (Frieze, 2026).

Conversely, discussions of AI in research have proposed more critical ways of engaging with these technologies. Rather than positioning AI as a singular object of study or as a straightforward tool to be adopted, these initiatives invite researchers to interrogate how AI is conceptualized, experienced, and embedded within broader practices and power structures, while emphasizing methodological pluralism (Costello *et al.*, 2025). Additionally,

scholars have also proposed verification practices as a low-barrier intervention to mitigate the risks associated with AI-generated outputs (Veletsianos, 2025). Rather than rejecting these tools outright, these perspectives emphasize the need for researchers to critically assess, validate, and transparently communicate the reliability of AI-assisted contributions. Critical views foreground the multiplicity of AI interpretations, uses, and enactments, and underscores the need to examine the social, cultural, and epistemic conditions under which it is integrated into research and teaching.

Nevertheless, this literature emerges within a research landscape already influenced by the logics of optimization and technological solutionism. Even calls for methodological pluralism or humanistic grounding must contend with a broader environment in which AI is frequently marketed as inevitable, necessary, and inherently beneficial. The increasing integration of AI into academic research does not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, it builds upon longer-standing transformations that have progressively reframed research as a form of labor governed by logics of productivity, efficiency, and measurable output. Scholars have extensively documented how academic work has been reshaped under neoliberal conditions, where knowledge production is increasingly aligned with market-oriented values and managerial practices (Slaughter; Rhoades, 2004; Münch, 2014; Mula-Falcón; Caballero, 2022; Eren, 2025).

Within this context, research is no longer understood as an intense intellectual endeavor but as a form of labor subject to optimization. The contemporary academy has been characterized by intensifying pressures for constant productivity, where scholars are expected to continuously produce outputs, having metric assemblages as central mechanisms for assessing scholarly value (Gill, 2009; Burrows, 2012; Mula-Falcón; Caballero, 2022). Such dynamics are closely tied to broader processes of academic capitalism, through which universities increasingly operate according to market logics, prioritizing efficiency, competition, and revenue generation (Slaughter; Rhoades, 2004; Münch, 2014; Eren, 2025). In this environment, research is positioned as a productive activity that must be continuously accelerated, optimized, and rendered visible through quantifiable outputs. The emphasis on speed – publishing faster, processing more data, reviewing more literature – becomes a defining feature of contemporary scholarly work.

These dynamics precede the emergence of AI-driven research tools. The framing of research as a workflow to be streamlined and optimized has been developing over decades through processes of managerial governance, metricization, and digitalization (Mula-Falcón; Caballero, 2022; Eren, 2025). What AI introduces is not a new logic, but rather an

intensification of existing rationalities. By promising automation, AI research platforms amplify the expectation that scholarly work can – and should – be performed more efficiently and at greater speed. In this sense, AI does not simply support research practices; it reinforces and extends a broader epistemic and institutional orientation toward optimization. Tasks that were once understood as inherently interpretive, time-consuming, and iterative – such as reading, coding, or drafting – are increasingly described as processes that can be accelerated through computational assistance.

This orientation toward optimization is further illuminated when situated within the broader dynamics of technocapitalism, a system in which technological innovation and knowledge production are ever more subordinated to capitalist imperatives of accumulation and control (Suárez-Villa, 2009; Kellner, 2023). Within this framework, knowledge itself becomes a central site of economic value, and processes of innovation are oriented toward efficiency, scalability, and market expansion. The incorporation of AI into research practices can be understood as part of this broader shift, where scholarly activities are increasingly mediated by platforms that promise to enhance productivity while embedding users within proprietary technological ecosystems. This perspective aligns with the rise of platform capitalism, in which digital platforms act as intermediaries that organize, extract, and monetize data generated through user activity (Srnicsek, 2017; Gilbert, 2024). AI research tools can be situated within this model as emerging platforms that mediate knowledge production. By positioning themselves as essential infrastructures, these tools do not merely assist researchers; they seek to become embedded within the core workflows of academic practice. In doing so, they contribute to the platformization of research, where scholarly work is increasingly conducted through – and dependent upon – digital systems that structure how knowledge is accessed, processed, and produced.

3 Methodological approach

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how AI-driven research platforms construct particular ideas of academic work through their promotional language, addressing the following research question: How are the researchers and their craft framed by AI marketing, and what ethical and epistemic assumptions underpin these framings? CDA is particularly suited for investigating how language participates in the production and normalization of power relations, ideologies, and social practices (Fairclough, 2010). Rather than treating discourse as merely descriptive, CDA approaches language as a social practice that both reflects and shapes broader socio-economic and institutional

structures. In the context of educational technology, such an approach allows for a critical examination of how technological solutions are framed, legitimized, and normalized within academic environments.

3.1 Data collection

The dataset consists of the homepages of ten widely advertised AI research platforms: Elicit, Sparkdoc, Consensus, Semantic Scholar, ResearchRabbit, Gatsbi, SciSpace, Perplexity AI, AnswerThis and Paperguide. The homepage was selected as the primary unit of analysis because it functions as the principal point of entry for potential users. In digital platforms, the homepage is strategically designed to communicate the core value proposition of a product, highlight its most persuasive claims, and frame how prospective users should understand the tool's capabilities and benefits (Marone; Heinsfeld, 2023). As such, it represents the most concentrated site of marketing discourse and provides insight into how these platforms position themselves within the academic research ecosystem.

While a broader ecosystem of AI tools exists – including platforms focused on qualitative data analysis, coding assistance, or writing enhancement (e.g., grammar and style correction tools) – this study deliberately focuses on platforms that are explicitly marketed as research assistants for academic audiences, often supporting multiple stages of the research process. Focusing on these broader platforms allows the analysis to capture how AI is discursively constructed not merely as a tool, but as a transformative infrastructure for knowledge production.

To ensure consistency in the dataset, screenshots of each platform's homepage were captured on March 13, 2026. Capturing the pages simultaneously minimizes temporal variation in promotional messaging and ensures that the analysis reflects a coherent snapshot of how these tools are currently being marketed. The screenshots serve as the primary textual corpus for analysis, allowing for close examination of headlines, taglines, feature descriptions, and other promotional language presented to potential users.

3.2 Analytical procedure

The analysis draws specifically on Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse as operating simultaneously at three interconnected levels: (1) the textual level, focusing on linguistic and rhetorical features; (2) the discursive practice level, examining how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed; and (3) the social practice

level, situating discourse within broader ideological, economic, and institutional contexts. This framework enables a multi-layered examination of how AI research platforms frame scholarly labor, productivity, and knowledge production.

At the textual level, the analysis focuses on the vocabulary, metaphors, value-laden descriptors, and rhetorical strategies used to promote these tools. Particular attention is given to recurring terms such as *efficiency*, *acceleration*, *discovery*, *insight*, *productivity*, and *automation*, as well as to the ways in which researchers are positioned within these discourses. At the discursive practice level, the study examines how these texts function as marketing discourses within the rapidly expanding ecosystem of AI-driven academic tools. Finally, at the level of social practice, the analysis situates these marketing discourses within broader transformations in higher education and knowledge production. The discourses identified are interpreted in relation to ongoing shifts toward datafication, productivity metrics, and technocapitalist logics that increasingly frame academic labor as a process to be optimized and accelerated. Through this layered analysis, the study seeks to illuminate how the promotional discourse of AI research tools contributes to redefining not only how research is conducted, but also how the role of the researcher itself is understood.

4 Analysis and interpretations

Across the ten platforms analysed, the marketing discourse converges around four interrelated themes that collectively restructure the nature of scholarly work. First, research is framed as a problem of speed, where acceleration becomes a central virtue and time-intensive practices are positioned as inefficiencies to be overcome. Second, scholarly inquiry is reconfigured as a structured workflow, decomposed into discrete, automatable tasks that can be executed through platform interfaces. Third, the researcher is constructed as an overwhelmed and underinformed user in need of guidance, simplification, and support, thereby legitimizing the intervention of AI systems. Finally, these tools are presented as comprehensive ecosystems, advancing the platformization of research by absorbing multiple stages of knowledge production into unified environments. Collectively, these themes suggest that AI marketing does not merely promote tools to support research, but actively participates in redefining what research is, how it should be conducted, and who the researcher is within this evolving landscape. In the sections that follow, each of these themes is examined in detail.

4.1 Acceleration as a dominant logic

One of the strongest recurring themes across the platforms is the construction of research as too slow, too cumbersome, or too labor-intensive, and therefore in need of acceleration. The excerpts below present illustrative examples of this theme drawn from the broader corpus. Italics were applied to direct citations to emphasize key elements of the original text.

[1] *50% increase in research productivity* (AnswerThis)

[2] We need to *move quickly*, without sacrificing quality. Our research needs to be *more dynamic to stay relevant in a rapidly-changing world* (Elicit)

[3] Turn days of literature review into a *few minutes* (Consensus)

[4] *Speed up* your research with accuracy and ease (Paperguide)

The discourse across platforms is structured around a highly consistent semantic field centered on speed, time compression, and productivity enhancement. Recurrent lexical items such as *accelerate*, *faster*, *instant*, *minutes*, *time savings*, and *productivity* form a tightly clustered vocabulary that redefines research as a temporal problem to be optimized. These are accompanied by verbs of transformation and intensification – *supercharge*, *speed up*, *transform* – which suggest not incremental improvement but qualitative shifts in pace and performance. Temporal contrasts play a particularly important rhetorical role, with phrases such as “weeks” versus “minutes” or “days” versus “a few minutes” compressing the duration of research into dramatically shortened timescales. In parallel, quantification strategies – “50% increase in research productivity,” “80% time savings” – lend an appearance of precision and measurability to these claims, reinforcing their credibility. Imperative and promissory constructions (“Say hello to more time,” “Speed up your research,” “Get instant paper insights”) position the user as both agent and beneficiary of this acceleration, while framing time not as a condition of inquiry but as an inefficiency to be eliminated.

These linguistic patterns operate as a shared marketing logic that normalizes acceleration as both necessary and desirable within academic work. Despite differences in functionality, platforms converge on a common narrative: research is too slow, and AI is the mechanism through which it can – and should – be sped up. The repetition of similar verbs and temporal framings across platforms suggests not isolated design choices, but a stabilized discourse circulating within a competitive ecosystem of AI research tools. Importantly, this acceleration is rarely presented in isolation; it is consistently paired with assurances of quality, accuracy, or rigor (“without sacrificing quality,” “with accuracy and ease,” “reliable”). This

coupling functions rhetorically to preempt critique, resolving the potential tension between speed and epistemic care before it can emerge. In doing so, these platforms position themselves not merely as tools that assist research, but as infrastructures that redefine its expected pace and performance standards.

4.2 Procedural logic, automatable workflow

A second dominant theme is the transformation of research into a structured workflow composed of discrete, automatable tasks. This shift rearticulates scholarly activity as a procedural logic, where knowledge production is framed as a sequence of simple, manageable and optimizable operations.

[5] Research results in *3 simple steps* (AnswerThis)

[6] Master your research with *simple clicks* (Gatsby)

[7] Enjoy *effortless* organization and *automation* of your content (Sparkdoc)

[8] Transform the entire literature review process into a *streamlined* and joyful experience (Research Rabbit)

The discourse across platforms is organized around the idea of process optimization, simplification, and automation. Recurrent lexical items such as *workflow*, *process*, *steps*, *streamline*, *simplify*, *organize*, and *automation* signal a reconfiguration of research into structured, procedural units. These are reinforced by verbs that imply reduction of complexity and effort as well as adverbs that emphasize ease and frictionlessness, such as *effortlessly*, *automatically*, *quick*, *easy*. Particularly striking are formulations that compress research into discrete, actionable sequences, such as “3 simple steps” or “one-click generation,” which linguistically transform scholarly work into executable commands. The recurrence of “one-click,” “auto-drafts,” and “automatically extract” further reinforces a grammar of immediacy and delegation, where action is shifted from the researcher to the system. In this framing, complexity is not engaged but removed, and intellectual labor is recast as something that can be operationalized through interface interactions.

These linguistic patterns contribute to a broader rearticulation of research as a standardized workflow that can be optimized, managed, and increasingly delegated to AI systems. Across platforms, there is a clear convergence in how scholarly activity is represented: not as a situated, iterative, and interpretive process, but as a sequence of tasks that can be modularized and improved through technological intervention. The repetition of terms such as “workflow,” “process,” and “steps” across platforms suggests the stabilization of a shared discourse in which research becomes legible as a system of inputs and outputs.

This framing is crucial for the marketing logic of these tools: once research is decomposed into discrete operations – searching, extracting, organizing, writing – it becomes possible to position each operation as something that can be automated, accelerated, or enhanced by AI. In this sense, the discourse does not simply describe research practices; it actively restructures them in ways that make platform intervention appear both natural and necessary.

4.3 Overwhelmed, overworked, and underinformed

A third highly recurrent theme concerns the subject positions offered to the researcher and to AI. Across the platforms, researchers are repeatedly framed as overwhelmed, burdened, underinformed, or in need of algorithmic guidance. This framing constructs scholarly work not only as complex, but as increasingly unmanageable without technological intervention.

[9] Turn *long days* into a breeze with the help of Sparkdoc (Sparkdoc)

[10] What if exploring research could feel more like discovery, and less like *soul-crushing drudgery*? (Research Rabbit)

[11] Stand on *the shoulders of giants* (Elicit)

[12] Eliminate *writer's block* by generating complete drafts built on your references and scholarly database (Paperguide)

This discourse is structured through a dual lexical pattern that simultaneously problematizes the researcher and elevates AI as solution. On one hand, researchers are associated with expressions that signal cognitive and affective strain: *overwhelmed*, *long days*, *messy desktop*, *soul-crushing drudgery*, *increasingly pressing challenge*, or being “knee-deep in literature reviews.” These formulations construct research as excessive, exhausting, and difficult to navigate. On the other hand, AI is described through a contrasting set of verbs and evaluative phrases that promise enhancement and correction: *understand*, *discover*, *enhance*, *eliminate*, *help*, *stay on top*, *scale confidently*, *write smarter*, *think better*. Superlative and intensifying expressions – “10x more evidence-based,” “understand a paper at a glance,” “eliminate writer’s block” – further position AI as amplifying human cognitive capacities. Metaphorical language also plays a key role, as in “stand on the shoulders of giants” or “give your writing an extra spark,” which symbolically attributes intellectual augmentation to the system. Together, these lexical choices produce a contrastive structure in which the researcher appears as lacking, and AI as the entity that restores competence, clarity, and control.

This pattern contributes to the construction of a deficit-oriented subjectivity, where the researcher is positioned as insufficient in the face of contemporary knowledge

production. The rapid expansion of scientific literature is repeatedly invoked as a problem that exceeds human capacity, thereby legitimizing the need for algorithmic mediation. In this context, AI is not simply presented as a helpful tool, but as a necessary cognitive partner that enables researchers to remain competent, relevant, and productive. Importantly, this discourse also reframes expertise: the skilled researcher is no longer the one who reads extensively, synthesizes deeply, or engages critically with uncertainty, but the one who can efficiently leverage AI to “understand,” “discover,” and “produce” knowledge outputs. The repetition of this framing across platforms suggests a broader discursive shift in which scholarly authority becomes increasingly tied to the effective use of AI systems.

4.4 Platformization of scholarly work

A fourth recurring theme concerns the positioning of these platforms not merely as tools, but as defining what research should look like. Rather than simply supporting existing practices, these systems articulate a “new” and “better” way of doing research, presenting themselves as benchmarks against which scholarly work is to be measured.

[13] Beyond writing, Gatsby sparks *research innovation* (Gatsby)

[14] Write your first paper with us, and *never look back* (Sparkdoc)

[15] The *new standard* for academic research (Consensus)

[16] Together, we’re building *a better way to do research* (Research Rabbit)

This discourse is structured through the articulation of a new normative vision of what research should be, actively seeking to redefine scholarly practice. The recurrent use of evaluative terms – *new*, *better*, *innovation*, *standard* – positions these platforms as markers of progress, implicitly casting prior modes of research as outdated, inefficient, or insufficient. Imperative and future-oriented formulations further reinforce a sense of transition, suggesting a shift toward a different model of academic work. Alongside this, references to integrated environments, where users can move from ideation to writing, synthesis, and analysis within a single system – such as “all in one place” and “end-to-end platform” – contribute to framing research as an activity that unfolds within these platform-defined spaces. Altogether, these linguistic choices construct not just a set of tools, but a reconfigured vision of scholarly work aligned with platform-mediated practices.

These representations contribute to the normalization of platform-based research infrastructures, where scholarly activity is increasingly mediated through integrated digital environments. The emphasis on seamlessness – “handle everyday research tasks,” “one workflow” – reduces the visibility of transitions between stages of research, collapsing what

were previously distinct practices (searching, reading, analyzing, writing) into a continuous, platform-managed flow. In this configuration, the value of the platform lies not only in performing tasks, but in orchestrating the entire research process, positioning itself as the primary interface between the researcher and knowledge production. This also introduces subtle forms of lock-in: statements such as “never look back” or “research starts here” suggest that once inside the system, there is little reason to operate outside of it. As a result, the platform becomes not just a support structure, but an infrastructural condition for doing research.

5 The political economy of AI-mediated research

Although a semantic or rhetorical analysis could have identified recurring linguistic patterns and promotional strategies, CDA enabled this study to examine how these discourses construct broader understandings of research, scholarly labor, and academic productivity. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond textual features and interrogate how assumptions related to efficiency, optimization, and the role of the researcher became normalized and legitimized within broader technocapitalist contexts shaping contemporary academic work.

Taken together, the four themes presented indicate that the promotional discourse of AI research platforms does not simply describe tools; it actively participates in reshaping the conditions under which scholarly work is understood and performed. Across the corpus, research is reconfigured as accelerated, proceduralized, and increasingly platform-mediated, while the researcher is positioned as both overwhelmed and in need of augmentation. These patterns are not incidental. They align closely with broader transformations associated with technocapitalism and academic capitalism, where knowledge production is increasingly organized around metrics, efficiency, and scalability (Chubb; Cowling; Reed, 2022). In this context, AI does not simply offer a neutral enhancement of research practices but becomes entangled with existing pressures to produce more, produce faster, and with greater visibility.

The emphasis on speed, optimization, and workflow reflects a wider academic culture structured by intensified competition, performance evaluation, and continuous output production. In this context, the recurring depiction of researchers as overwhelmed – facing “increasingly pressing challenges” and expanding bodies of literature – is not merely rhetorical. It reflects broader structural conditions in which academic work is increasingly governed by logics of efficiency, productivity, and performative visibility. However, the ‘solutions’ offered by these platforms – automation, acceleration, and delegation – do not

address the root of this condition. Instead, they risk deepening it. By enabling faster production cycles, these tools contribute to transforming scholarly work into something closer to a production line, where efficiency gains are quickly absorbed into rising expectations for output. What is presented as relief from overload may, in practice, reinforce the very system that produces it: a feedback loop in which automation sustains and intensifies the demand for constant productivity.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the ways in which these platforms quantify and publicize their reach and impact. Across the materials analyzed, platforms repeatedly foreground large-scale metrics: “500K+ literature reviews drafted” (AnswerThis), “5 million researchers” (Elicit), “10 million users” (Consensus), “trusted by 1 million+ researchers worldwide” (Research Rabbit), or “more than 60,000 institutions” (SciSpace). These figures function as markers of legitimacy and inevitability. By emphasizing scale, adoption, and institutional diffusion, the platforms position themselves as already embedded within the fabric of academic life. This produces a subtle normative pressure: if millions of researchers are already using these systems, then participation becomes not just advantageous, but expected. At the same time, these metrics reflect a deeper alignment with technocapitalist values, where success is measured through growth, reach, and volume, a logic that sits uneasily with understandings of scholarship as a practice grounded in depth, critique, and intellectual care.

From an epistemic perspective, these developments raise important concerns. As the analysis suggests, research is increasingly framed as something that can be decomposed into tasks, accelerated, and executed within platform environments. This reconfiguration risks privileging forms of knowledge production that are compatible with automation – summarizable, extractable, and scalable – while marginalizing forms of inquiry that require sustained engagement, ambiguity, and interpretive depth. Moreover, as these platforms expand to encompass multiple stages of research – from ideation to writing – they begin to mediate not only how knowledge is accessed, but also how it is structured, synthesized, and presented. In this sense, AI does not simply support research; it participates in shaping its epistemic boundaries.

Ethically, these concerns are amplified by the opacity of the systems themselves. As several scholars have noted, AI models operate as black-box systems, making it difficult to assess how outputs are generated, which sources are prioritized, and what biases are embedded in their training data (BaHammam, 2023; Cruz-Aguilar, 2026; Madanchian; Taherdoost, 2025). Within the promotional discourse analyzed here, this opacity is largely

absent. Instead, platforms are framed as reliable, transparent, and citation-backed, suggesting that epistemic trust can be secured through surface-level indicators such as references or structured outputs. This framing risks obscuring deeper questions about epistemic authority, accountability, and dependency, particularly as researchers increasingly rely on systems whose internal operations remain inaccessible.

This discourse resonates with forms of technological solutionism that frame AI as a means of freeing researchers from the perceived burdens of traditional scholarly work. In doing so, it introduces an implicit trade-off: the partial delegation of analytical and interpretive agency in exchange for speed and efficiency. The adoption of AI is thus positioned as a progressive shift away from slower, more labor-intensive modes of inquiry – particularly those associated with qualitative traditions, which risk being recast as outdated or overly burdensome – toward a model of research aligned with immediacy and automation (Paulus; Marone, 2025).

Importantly, this shift also redefines the role of the researcher. As the analysis indicates, scholars are repositioned less as primary interpreters of knowledge and more as managers of workflows and curators of AI-generated outputs. Interpretation becomes, at least partially, a process of selecting, validating, and assembling machine-generated content. This redistribution of epistemic labor raises fundamental questions about authorship and the nature of intellectual work. What does it mean to ‘know’ in a context where meaning is increasingly co-produced with systems trained on prior data? And what is lost when the slow, uncertain, and situated dimensions of scholarship are reframed as inefficiencies to be optimized?

These tensions further underscore the need to situate AI not only as a methodological tool, but as part of broader political, economic, and discursive systems shaping contemporary academic work. The integration of AI into research reflects and extends the same logics of optimization, acceleration, and scalability that characterize technocapitalist transformations of academic labor. The platforms examined in this study operate within this terrain, as part of a broader reconfiguration of academic labor and knowledge production under these conditions. The promise of efficiency, accessibility, and scalability is real but so too are the risks of standardization, dependency, epistemic narrowing, and intensified production pressures. As such, engaging critically with these systems requires moving beyond questions of functionality to consider how they reshape not only how research is done, but what research is and what it might become.

6 Research futures for sale

The analysis presented in this study suggests that AI research platforms do not merely respond to the evolving needs of researchers; they actively participate in constructing a particular vision of what research is and what it should become. Across platforms, research is consistently framed as a process that is burdensome, time-consuming, and in need of optimization. In this framing, the researcher appears as an overwhelmed knowledge worker – confronted with an unmanageable volume of information – and AI emerges as the necessary companion that restores efficiency, clarity, and control. Scholarly work is thus rearticulated as a set of processes to be accelerated, streamlined, and (partially) delegated.

The researcher, within this emerging configuration, is neither replaced nor fully centered. Instead, they are repositioned. On one hand, they are constructed as dependente – unable to navigate the complexity of contemporary knowledge production without algorithmic assistance. On the other, they are reframed as managers of workflows, curators of outputs, and validators of machine-generated insights. This dual positioning reflects an underlying epistemic shift: knowledge production is no longer understood primarily as an interpretive, situated, and often slow practice, but as a process that can be decomposed, structured, and optimized through computational means.

These framings carry significant ethical and epistemic assumptions. First, they assume that speed and efficiency are inherently desirable qualities of research, often without interrogating what may be lost in their pursuit. Second, they privilege forms of knowledge that can be easily processed, extracted, and recombined, potentially marginalizing modes of inquiry that rely on ambiguity, reflexivity, or contextual depth. Third, they obscure the situated and constructed nature of AI outputs, presenting them instead as reliable, comprehensive, and implicitly objective representations of knowledge. In doing so, they risk reinforcing existing epistemic hierarchies and reproducing dominant patterns within academic knowledge production. While platforms frequently invoke accessibility and democratization, this inclusivity is uneven, mediated by platform access, infrastructural dependency, and alignment with dominant knowledge systems.

Understanding AI research platforms as sites of ideological discourse rather than neutral tools is therefore essential for moving beyond the hype in debates on AI in educational research. The question is not only whether these systems work, but what kinds of research practices they make desirable and ultimately normative. As these tools become increasingly embedded in academic workflows, they also shape how research is publicly understood: as faster, more efficient, and increasingly automated. This shift has implications

not only for how research is conducted, but for how it is valued by institutions, by funders, and by society at large.

This raises a fundamental concern: if these platforms become hegemonic infrastructures of knowledge production, what kinds of research and whose knowledge will be rendered visible, credible, or even possible? The promise of efficiency obscures the fact that these systems are trained on historically produced datasets that already reflect dominant epistemologies, linguistic hierarchies, and geopolitical imbalances. As such, their outputs are not neutral syntheses of knowledge but reiterations of existing structures of visibility and exclusion, now accelerated and naturalized through algorithmic mediation. To accept these tools as default companions in research is, therefore, to risk normalizing a form of scholarship that is increasingly detached from critical judgment and aligned with technocapitalist imperatives of optimization, extraction, and scale. In this sense, AI research platforms do not merely support research; they participate in redefining its boundaries in ways that may ultimately constrain, rather than expand, the possibilities of knowledge production.

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