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Evaluating Markers of Authentic Identity in AI and Human Writing

Background

As generative AI (GenAI) becomes more pervasive in academic settings and daily life, studying its impact on students' creativity and identity grows increasingly important. Research on AI in classroom use of GenAI is still in its infancy, but some studies suggest that the intentional use of these technologies can aid, rather than harm, equity-minded teaching.

For example, Bowen and Watson's (2024) discussion of "I care," "I can," and "I matter" links to equity ideas of belonging and transparency, offering suggestions for AI-based assignments that foreground these motivators. Other recent studies focus upon the reproduction of stereotypes in CoPilot's output, contrasting with the specificity of experience in student work; Busker and others (2023) analyze stereotype prevalence in ChatGPT. Finally, researchers like McBride et al. (2024) have offered blueprints for productively integrating GenAI into classrooms, emphasizing processes of contextualizing, grappling with, and playing with AI tools to empower student creativity.

Research Question

To what extent will integrating GenAI into a 100-level Media Writing class encourage students to 1) understand the distinction between their own unique human voices, tied to their identities, and the standardized voice of ChatGPT, and 2) interrogate its benefits and pitfalls to the process of self-expression?
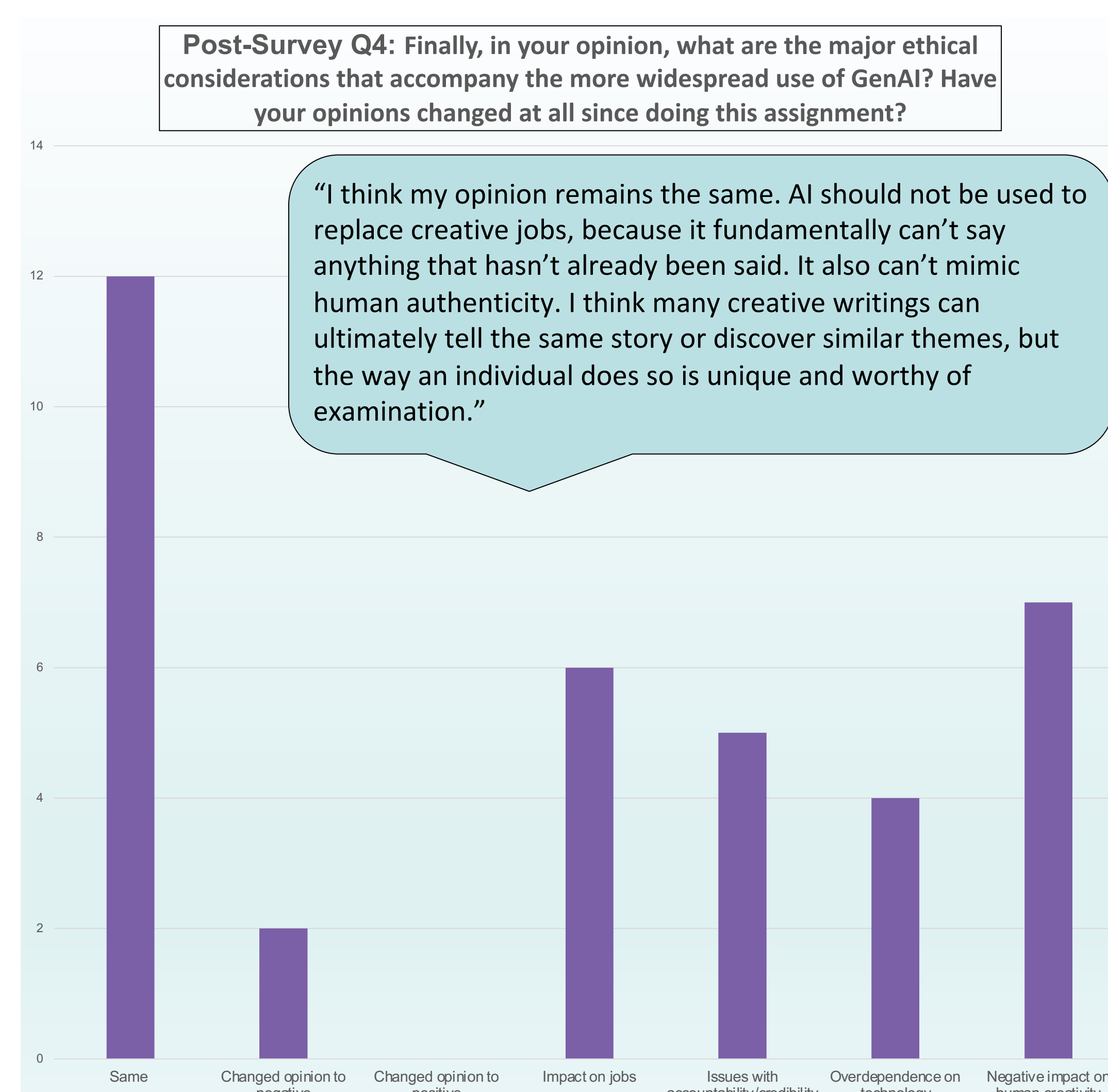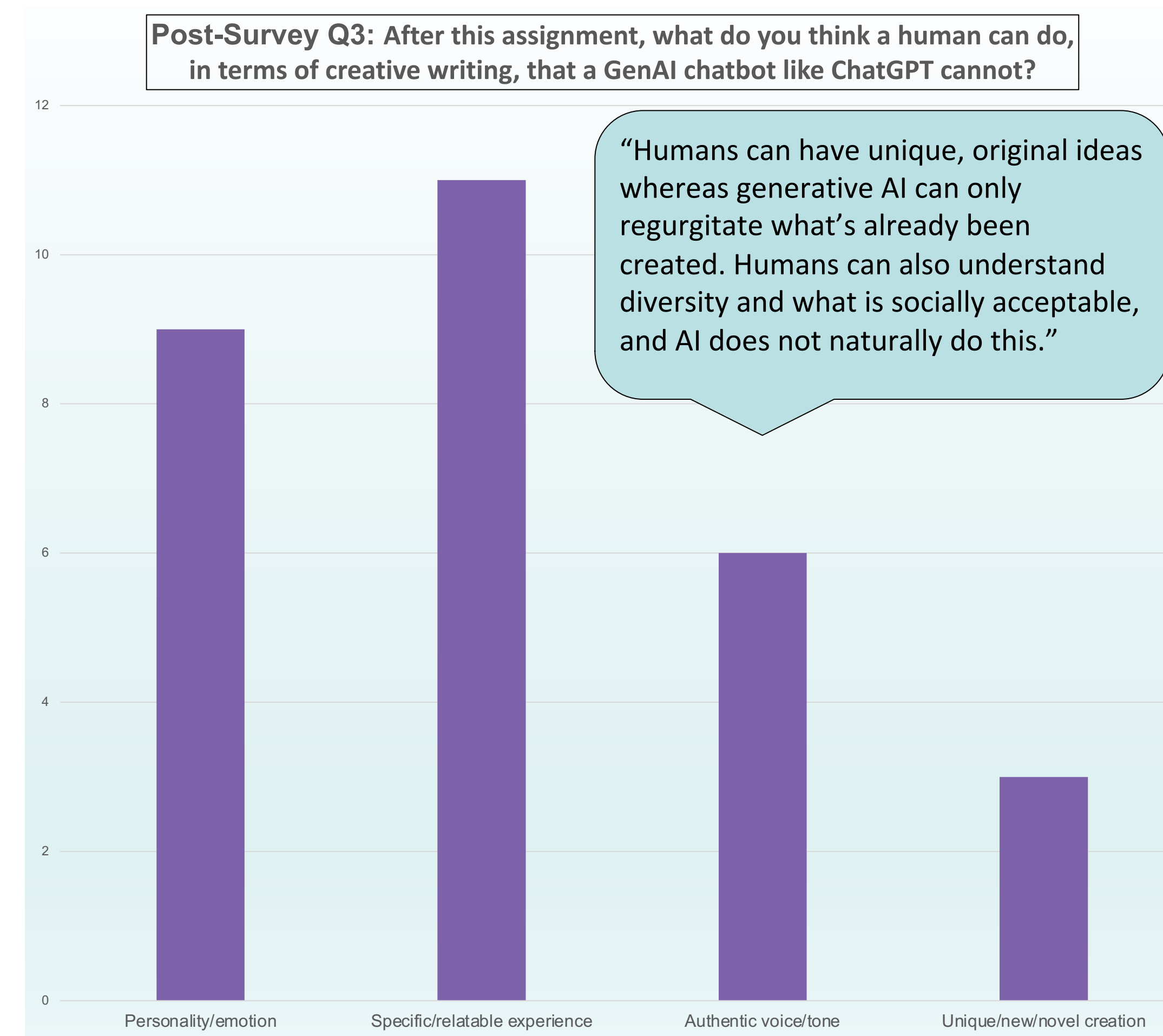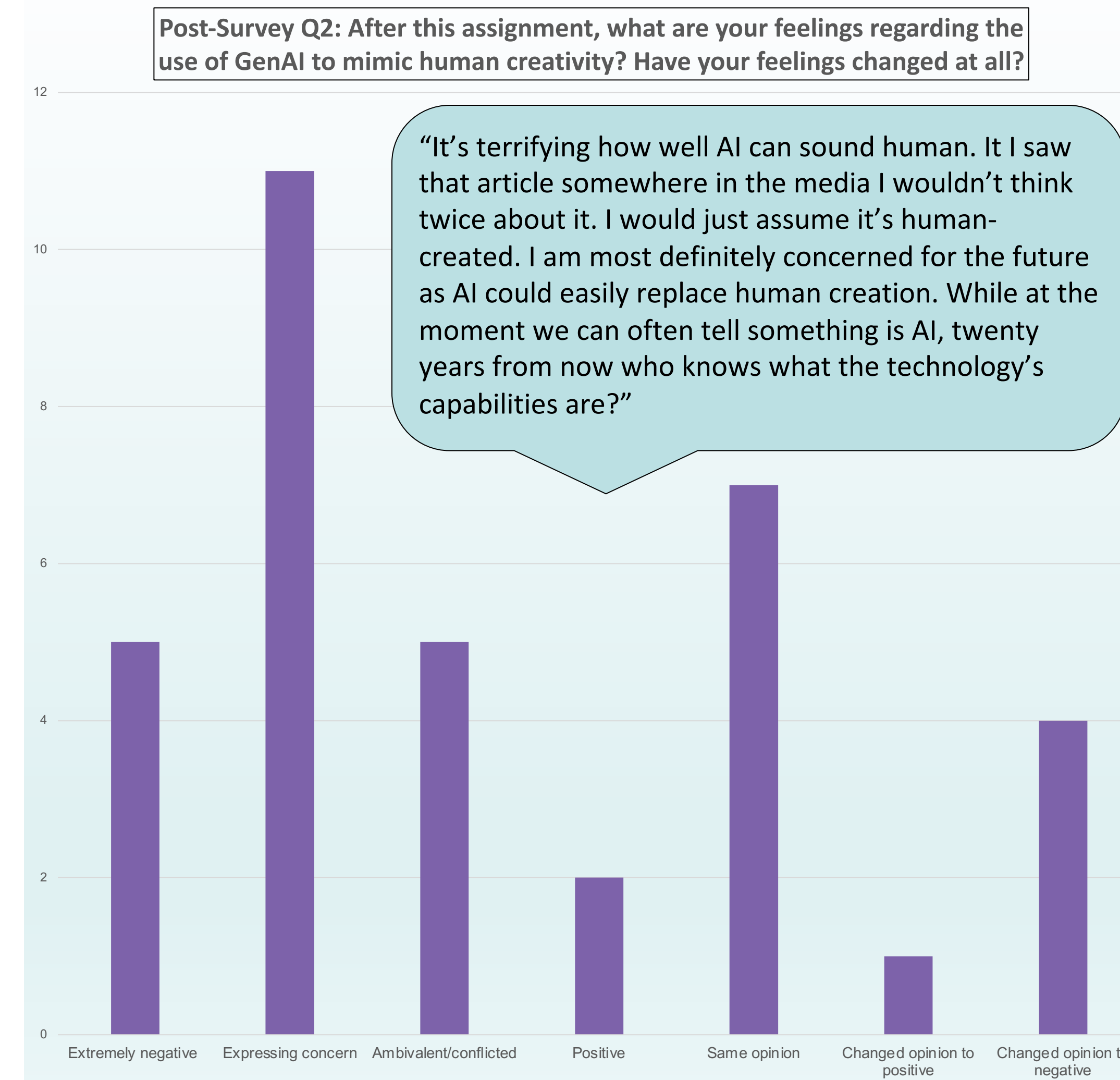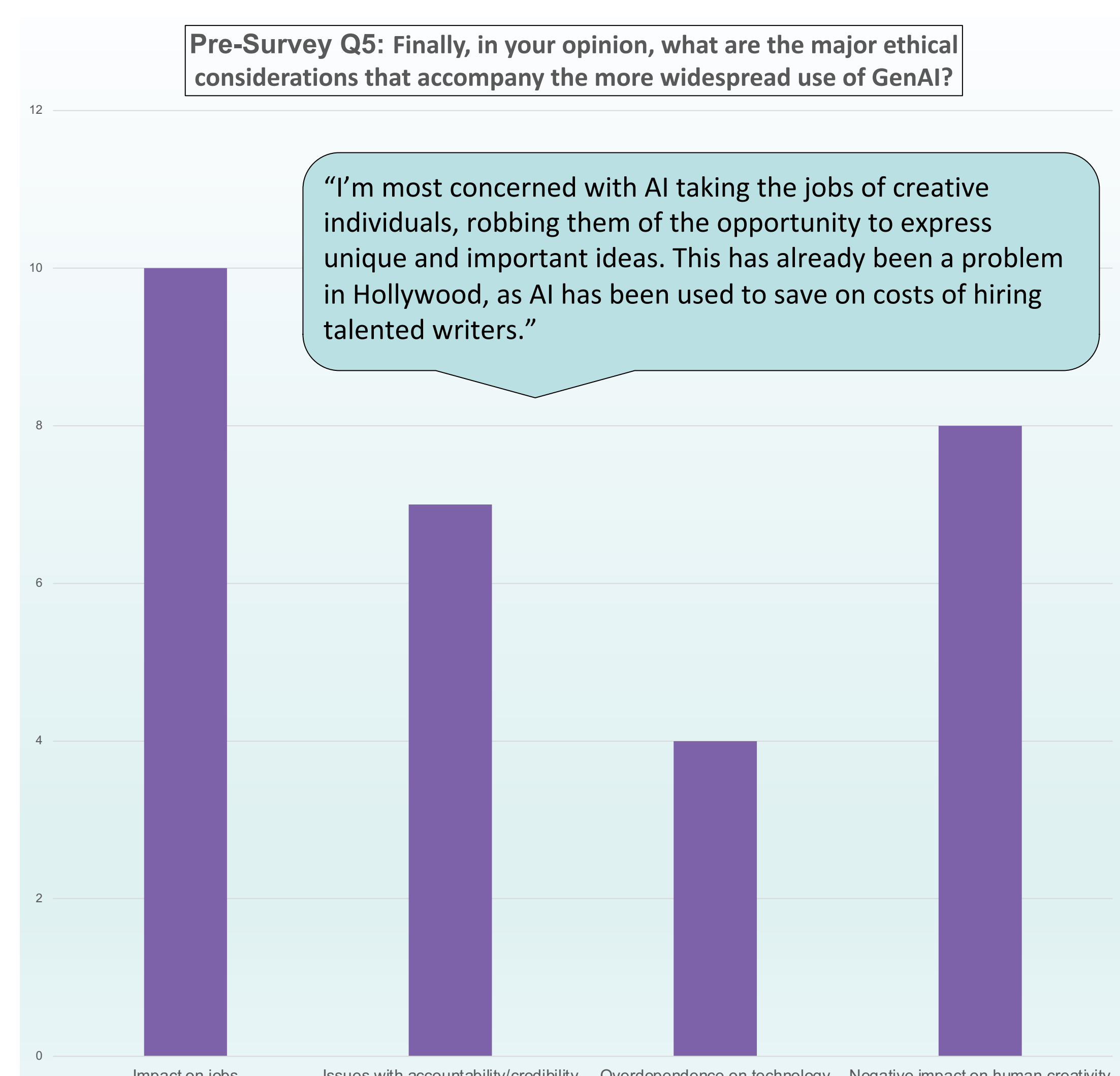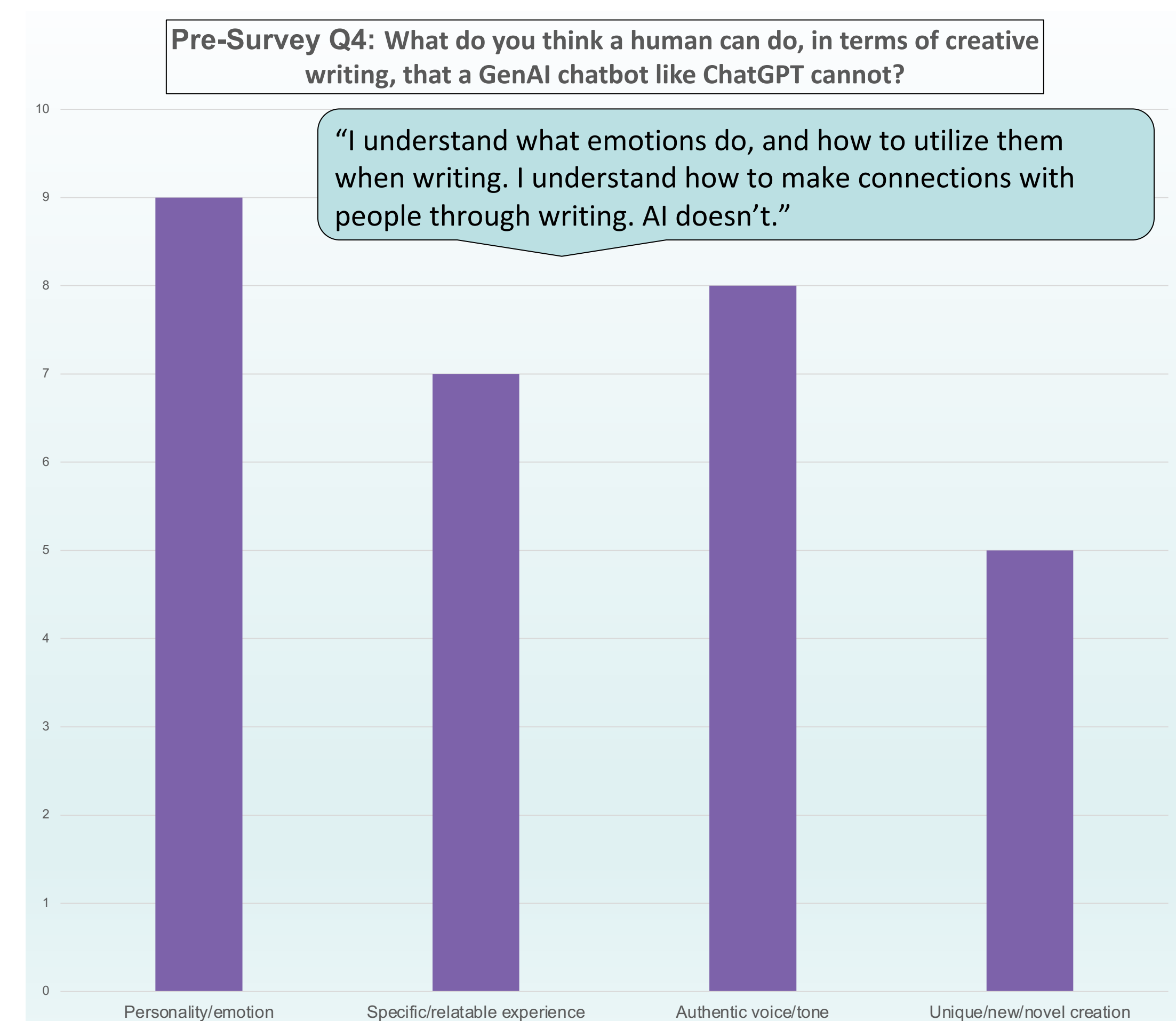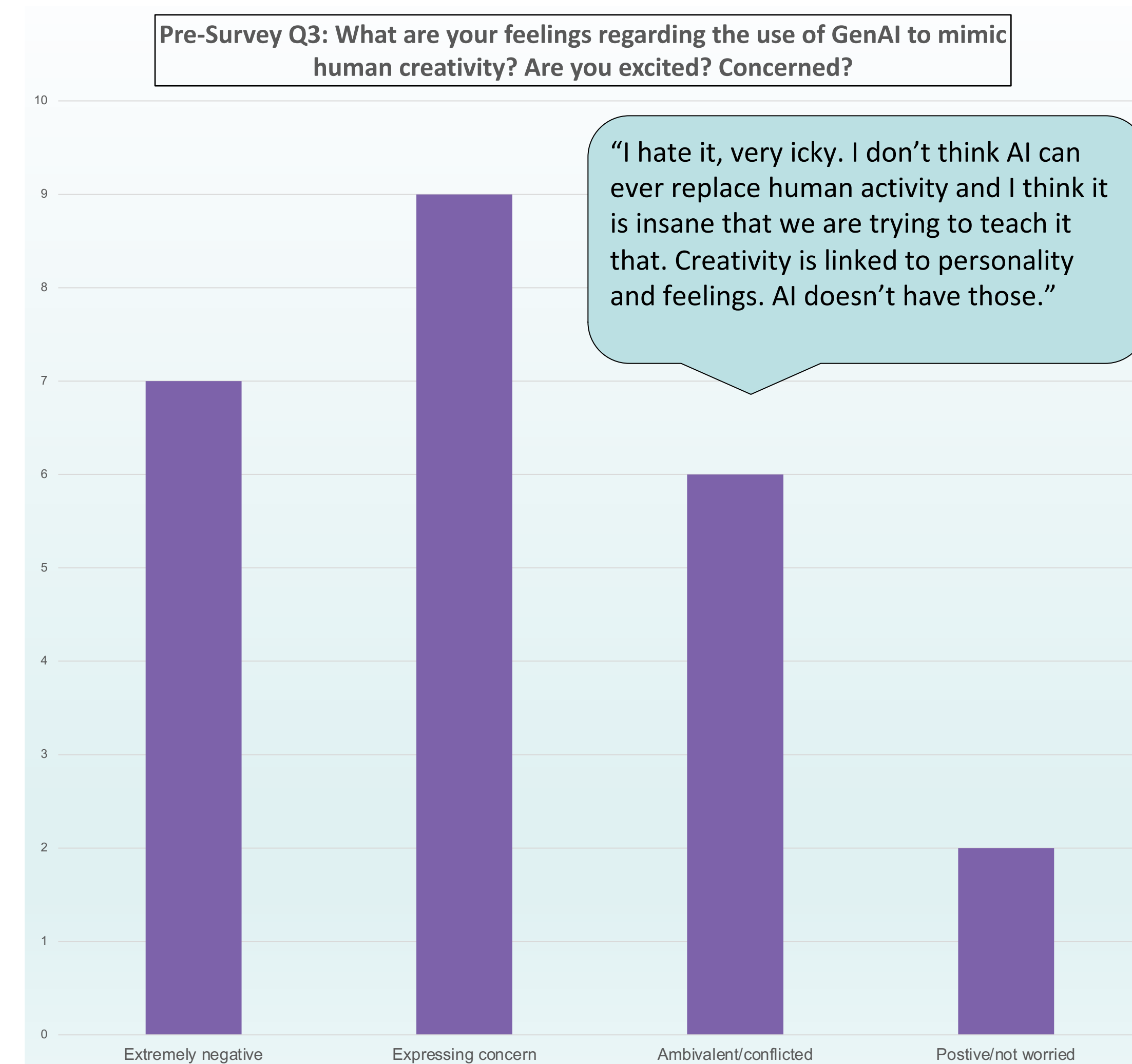
The Study

This project uses grounded content analysis of responses to open-ended questions in surveys to determine student reactions to the use of AI and impacts on perception of human qualities of writing. A class unit and assignment in my fall 2024 section of MSTU 107: Foundations of Media Writing (40 students; 20 participated in the study, which was voluntary):

1) Asked students to complete a pre-assignment survey on their experience with and thoughts on GenAI.
2) Introduced the relationship between identity and voice in writing, and asked students to reflect upon their identities and write about a place that means something to them.
3) Introduced Microsoft CoPilot and invited students to talk about the ethical implications of its use.
4) Asked students to craft a prompt to have CoPilot generate an essay of the same length and topic as their personal essay.
5) Asked students to evaluate the output of CoPilot according to a provided rubric, complete an open-ended reflection, and complete a post-assignment survey.

These surveys constitute the data I reviewed. I identified common themes in open-ended responses about the use of AI for creative work, human vs. AI output, and ethical concerns and noted the prevalence of those themes in responses before and after students completed the assignment.

Survey Questions & Results

Pre-Survey Q3: What are your feelings regarding the use of GenAI to mimic human creativity? Are you excited? Concerned?

> "I hate it, very icky. I don't think AI can ever replace human activity and I think it is insane that we are trying to teach it that. Creativity is linked to personality and feelings. AI doesn't have those."

Post-Survey Q2: After this assignment, what are your feelings regarding the use of GenAI to mimic human creativity? Have your feelings changed at all?

> "It's terrifying how well AI can sound human. It I saw that article somewhere in the media I wouldn't think twice about it. I would just assume it's human-created. I am most definitely concerned for the future as AI could easily replace human creation. While at the moment we can often tell something is AI, twenty years from now who knows what the technology's capabilities are?"

Pre-Survey Q4: What do you think a human can do, in terms of creative writing, that a GenAI chatbot like ChatGPT cannot?

> "I understand what emotions do, and how to utilize them when writing. I understand how to make connections with people through writing. AI doesn't."

Post-Survey Q3: After this assignment, what do you think a human can do, in terms of creative writing, that a GenAI chatbot like ChatGPT cannot?

> "Humans can have unique, original ideas whereas generative AI can only regurgitate what's already been created. Humans can also understand diversity and what is socially acceptable, and AI does not naturally do this."

Pre-Survey Q5: Finally, in your opinion, what are the major ethical considerations that accompany the more widespread use of GenAI?

> "I'm most concerned with AI taking the jobs of creative individuals, robbing them of the opportunity to express unique and important ideas. This has already been a problem in Hollywood, as AI has been used to save on costs of hiring talented writers."

Post-Survey Q4: Finally, in your opinion, what are the major ethical considerations that accompany the more widespread use of GenAI? Have your opinions changed at all since doing this assignment?

> "I think my opinion remains the same. AI should not be used to replace creative jobs, because it fundamentally can't say anything that hasn't already been said. It also can't mimic human authenticity. I think many creative writings can ultimately tell the same story or discover similar themes, but the way an individual does so is unique and worthy of examination."

Findings

After this assignment, students expressed even more negativity and concern about AI and its impact on human voice than before. Some students reported being shocked at how well CoPilot could replicate their personal essay. Many students noted that they felt the same apprehension as before, although some pointed out that GenAI has a ways to go before it can fully replicate human creativity. Students pointed to human qualities of writing like specificity of experience, emotion, personality, uniqueness, and even "soul" in their own writing.

Anecdotally, this study also had the side effect of eliminating unauthorized student use of AI in assignments (that I could identify). I theorize that asking students to closely analyze their own work in contrast to GenAI output encouraged them to reject the use of CoPilot as a shortcut for creative work, at least for the duration of the class. I will be looking for this connection this spring when I conduct these surveys in the same course with a different group of students.

Overall, this exercise allowed students to articulate the value they place on their own voice in writing, and provided an outlet to speak about their fears, hopes, and concerns. Representative survey comments are included to the left and below.

> "Humans can go into depth and explain what they mean. Humans can write about **lived experiences and emotions**, but a GenAI chatbot can't do that. **Human creative writing is often specific**, whereas writing done by AI seems to be broad and nonspecific. Each of us brings **individuality** to writing."

> "My writing painted a very **clear picture of the place** that I was trying to describe. Humans have the minds to include **specific details and why they are important** to us. AI writing uses a lot of adjectives but lacks in-depth "thinking." The excerpt it gave me seemed like it could apply to many places."

> "GenAI writing has to base itself on **cliches and stereotypes** to fill in the blanks not offered by the prompt. This makes the final product sound **robotic and movie-esque.** Human writing is filled **with uniqueness and warmth** since humans put lots of **emotion and passion** into their writing."

> "Overall I am more concerned than before that AI will be able to replicate human creativity in writing. However, I think it is difficult for it to not make **stereotypical assumptions and present cliches.** I'm sure in the future that will be improved upon though, and at that point, it may be pretty hard to distinguish human v. AI writing."

> "I still have the same concern. **Though AI might not be as good as humans at being creative, corporations will still see the difference in pay and not care.**"

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Thanks!