



ChatGPT Use and Academic Integrity in EFL Academic Writing: Exploring the Association Among Master's Students

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Abstract

The rapid integration of generative AI in higher education has sparked intense debate regarding its potential to undermine student ethics. While concerns about academic dishonesty abound, empirical evidence linking AI dependency to actual integrity levels remains scarce, particularly in EFL contexts. Grounded in Academic Integrity Theory, this study investigated the correlational relationship between ChatGPT use and academic integrity among first-year EFL Master's students. A quantitative design was employed using validated questionnaires to measure usage patterns and ethical conduct. Data from 25 participants were analyzed through normality testing, descriptive statistics, and Pearson product-moment correlation. Results indicated that students reported high levels of both ChatGPT use ($M = 79.00$) and academic integrity ($M = 81.97$). Crucially, the correlation between the two variables was weak and statistically non-significant ($r = .326$, $p = .112$), indicating that no statistically significant association was detected between ChatGPT use and academic integrity in this sample. These findings suggest that frequent AI engagement does not necessarily correlate with lower ethical standards among advanced EFL learners. The study highlights the potential for students to integrate AI responsibly and underscores the importance of institutions focusing on AI-literacy training.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid and unprecedented growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, particularly Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, has fundamentally transformed the landscape of higher education. This technological disruption has created a new paradigm in how students approach academic writing and research, challenging long-held conventions of authorship and learning. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, the impact is even more profound. EFL students often grapple with significant challenges in academic discourse, ranging from linguistic precision and vocabulary limitations to the mastery of complex genre norms. For these learners, ChatGPT provides unparalleled, immediate cognitive and linguistic support. Recent studies indicate that these tools function effectively for vocabulary enhancement, structural restructuring, concept extension, and the provision of iterative feedback, consequently augmenting students' perceived learning efficacy and writing confidence (Bhuiyan et al., 2025; de Oliveira, 2025; Soelistiyowati et al., 2024). The tool's ease of use and instant response time position it as a critical educational technology that can reshape self-regulated learning, metacognitive awareness, and engagement with academic literature (Haenlein et al., 2023; Zhao, 2023). In this context, generative AI systems are progressively conceptualized not merely as passive language tools but as active cognitive collaborators in academic writing endeavors. As students increasingly integrate these technologies into their workflow, the distinction between human authorship and machine assistance becomes progressively fluid, necessitating a deeper examination of how such tools function, whether as scaffolds for legitimate learning or as shortcuts for avoiding academic effort.

However, the educational potential of ChatGPT is inextricably coupled with considerable ethical dilemmas that complicate its integration into the classroom. The academic community is currently divided, engaging in a vigorous debate regarding the implications of AI on academic honesty. On one side of the spectrum, extensive research highlights the pedagogical benefits. For instance, Soelistiyowati et al., (2024) found that when used as a drafting partner, ChatGPT significantly lowers the anxiety associated with writing in a second language, allowing students to focus on higher-order thinking skills rather than grammatical mechanics. Similarly, Bhuiyan et al. (2025) demonstrated that iterative interaction with AI can improve students' understanding of academic tone and style. These studies suggest that AI-assisted writing can be a legitimate form of literacy where the student acts as an editor and architect of ideas.

Conversely, a significant body of literature underscores the developing crises pertaining to plagiarism, authorship uncertainty, text falsification, and excessive dependence on AI-generated content. Scholars such as Cotton and Cotton (2023) and Huang and Lee (2023) warn that the seamless generation of human-like text undermines conventional notions of academic integrity, making it difficult to verify whether a student has truly mastered the content. Niloy et al. (2024) further argue that this dependence risks atrophying students' critical thinking and writing abilities. Systematic reviews have shown that generative AI has created new typologies of academic dishonesty that are notoriously difficult to detect with traditional testing methods or plagiarism software. This opacity causes significant institutional anxiety regarding the validity of assessments, as standard detection tools often fail to identify AI-generated text accurately or produce high rates of false positives (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Moreover, empirical research demonstrates that students' moral decision-making about AI utilization is not isolated but is significantly impacted by perceived peer norms, the ambiguity of institutional policies, and contextual pressures to achieve academic success (Mahama et al., 2023; Nouri et al., 2023). These conflicting bodies of literature, one emphasizing utility and the other emphasizing risk highlight the necessity for a theoretical framework to comprehend the complex interaction between students' utilization of ChatGPT and their ethical obligations. Without clear guidance, the availability of these tools might be perceived not as a resource for learning, but as an opportunity structure that encourages misconduct.

To navigate this complexity, this study utilizes the Academic Integrity Theory formulated by McCabe and Treviño (1997) to contextualize these dynamics. This theory asserts that academic conduct, whether ethical or unethical, is influenced by the interaction of individual traits, peer actions, and institutional contexts. The core postulate is that academic dishonesty arises not merely from individual purpose or a lack of moral character, but from social norms, opportunity structures, and perceived behavioral acceptability within academic communities (Bretag, 2016; Newton, 2016). In the specific context of AI-assisted writing, the theory posits that students' utilization of ChatGPT is likely influenced by a triad of factors: their personal ethical awareness, institutional regulations

regarding AI usage (or the lack thereof), and peer standards defining acceptable AI-assisted authorship. ChatGPT, in this view, represents a significant contextual element, a readily available opportunity structure that may affect students' compliance with academic integrity norms. Responsible usage can enhance students' academic integrity by facilitating learning and reflection, but irresponsible or unregulated usage may cultivate reliance, diminish authorship authenticity, and encourage dishonest behaviors (Athar, 2025; Fernando & Li, 2024; Rasul et al., 2024). Consequently, Academic Integrity Theory offers a robust framework for examining the behavioral associations of ChatGPT utilization among EFL master's students, emphasizing that ethical behavior depends on students' moral commitment and the institution's ethical climate rather than just the availability of technology.

Despite the proliferation of research on AI in education, a critical evaluation of the current landscape reveals a distinct gap. Even though more researchers are exploring AI and academic integrity, empirical studies that specifically investigate how the frequency of using ChatGPT correlates with academic integrity scores remain limited. A significant portion of the current literature focuses on philosophical debates, pedagogical assessments, or descriptive accounts of perceptions, rarely demonstrating quantifiable correlations between AI usage patterns and students' ethical behavior (Chen et al., 2023; Liu & Zhao, 2023; Tan & Zhang, 2023). Recent empirical studies regarding students' interaction with ChatGPT have predominantly concentrated on learning efficacy, acceptance (via models like TAM), or perceived utility, rather than integrity-related outcomes (Bhuiyan et al., 2025; Li & Cheng, 2025; Park & Lim, 2023). Likewise, research on academic integrity in AI-mediated learning frequently focuses on policy analysis, assessment reform, or institutional responses, seldom investigating behavioral correlations at the student level (Newton, 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Alarmist perspectives suggesting that AI would destroy academic integrity often lack empirical behavioral data to support such claims. This highlights a noticeable research gap: empirical evidence quantitatively examining the association between ChatGPT usage intensity and students' academic integrity in EFL academic writing remains sparse, particularly within postgraduate settings.

Notably, there is a paucity of studies focusing specifically on EFL master's students. This demographic is unique; they are anticipated to exhibit elevated academic literacy and ethical responsibility, yet they are increasingly dependent on generative AI technologies to fulfill high-stakes academic writing requirements and publication demands. As a result, we do not know enough about whether using ChatGPT frequently makes these advanced students more aware of ethics through guided learning or, conversely, makes them more likely to act irresponsibly to meet deadlines. It remains unclear whether frequent engagement with the tool acts as a scaffolding mechanism that supports honest authorship or as a crutch that compromises it. This is an urgent issue for institutional policy and AI literacy development (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2025; Fang, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023). It is imperative to fill this gap because as the adoption of generative AI accelerates, institutions need to promote safe AI practices immediately. Addressing this is crucial to move beyond the assumption that AI inevitably erodes honesty and instead understand how students distinguish between legitimate academic assistance and unethical shortcuts.

In response to these identified gaps, the current study provides a conceptual model based on Academic Integrity Theory, suggesting that the use of ChatGPT serves as a behavioral and contextual element that may affect students' compliance with academic integrity norms. Responsible interaction with ChatGPT may facilitate learning and bolster integrity, whereas irresponsible or excessive usage may compromise honest authorship, thereby corroborating McCabe and Treviño's (1997) claim that contextual and normative settings influence academic conduct. This study seeks to investigate the relationship between ChatGPT utilization and academic integrity among first-year EFL master's students in academic writing contexts. The subsequent research inquiries direct the examination: The subsequent research inquiries direct the examination:

1. How often do students use ChatGPT?
2. How high is the level of academic honesty among students?
3. Is there a meaningful correlation between students' utilization of ChatGPT and their academic integrity?

This study seeks to enhance ongoing discussions regarding AI in higher education by offering evidence-based insights into the intersection of generative AI tools and ethical academic conduct, thereby guiding institutional policies, assessment frameworks, and responsible AI literacy.

METHODS

The population of this study consisted of first-year EFL master's students enrolled in the English Education Department at Universitas Negeri Malang. A purposive sampling technique (specifically criterion sampling) was employed to select participants who met the specific requirements of the study. The inclusion criteria required participants to be in their first semester and to have prior experience using ChatGPT for academic writing tasks. A total of 25 eligible participants were recruited through an open invitation distributed via departmental academic WhatsApp groups. The final sample comprised 3 males and 22 females. Information regarding age was not collected, as the study focused specifically on the participants' academic level rather than biological age. Participation was strictly voluntary and uncompensated; students explicitly consented to having their data used for research purposes without receiving monetary reward or course credit. Consistent with this voluntary nature, strict ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequences, anonymity was strictly maintained, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines and emphasized responsible and honest reporting practices (Newton, 2023).

To ensure the quality and rigor of the data collection instruments, a comprehensive adaptation and validation process was conducted. The survey incorporated items adapted from two established theoretical frameworks: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) to measure ChatGPT Use (encompassing Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Behavioral Intention, and Actual Use) and the Academic Integrity Survey (AIS) (McCabe & Treviño, 1997) to assess Academic Integrity (covering plagiarism awareness, ethical judgment, and writing conduct). The source items were contextually adapted to reflect student engagement with generative AI tools specifically within EFL academic writing tasks. To establish content validity, the adapted instrument was subjected to expert judgment by two senior lecturers in English Language Teaching (ELT) and educational technology, who evaluated the items for clarity, contextual relevance, and construct alignment. Minor revisions in phrasing were implemented based on their feedback. Face and construct validity were further evaluated during a pilot test involving ten students who shared identical characteristics with the target population but were excluded from the final sample. Participants confirmed the clarity and comprehensibility of the items within the AI-mediated writing context. Following validity verification, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The analysis yielded an alpha value of .86 for the ChatGPT Use Scale and .86 for the Academic Integrity Scale. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), these values indicate strong internal consistency, confirming that the adapted instruments were both valid and reliable for quantitative analysis.

Data were gathered using a digital survey hosted on Google Forms which presented items sequentially. The instrument consisted of two main measurement scales. The first section measured ChatGPT Use using a 20-item structure adapted from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), covering constructs of Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Behavioral Intention, and Actual Use. The second section assessed Academic Integrity using a 15-item scale adapted from the Academic Integrity Survey (AIS), measuring plagiarism awareness, ethical judgment, and writing behaviors. Participants interacted with the materials by reading statements on their screens and selecting responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

To ensure the quality of the data, a pilot test was conducted prior to the main study involving ten students who shared similar characteristics with the target population but were not included in the final sample. Since the instruments were adapted from established frameworks (TAM and AIS), the pilot focused on evaluating the internal consistency of the items in the current context. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The analysis yielded an alpha coefficient = .86 for the TAM-adapted ChatGPT Use Scale and = .86 for the AIS-adapted Academic Integrity Scale. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), these values indicate strong internal consistency, confirming that the instruments were reliable for quantitative analysis.

The data collection procedure was conducted in November 2025 following the acquisition of ethical clearance. The researcher distributed the survey link via the department's academic WhatsApp groups. The procedure required participants to first review an informed consent page detailing the study's purpose, to examine the relationship between ChatGPT use and academic integrity and anonymity assurances. Upon agreeing, they were given specific instructions to read

each statement carefully, respond based on personal experience using ChatGPT, and use the 5-point Likert scale to indicate the level of agreement. Participants then completed the demographic section, followed by the ChatGPT Use items and the Academic Integrity items. Although the estimated completion time was stated as 10–15 minutes, no strict time limit was imposed, allowing participants to work at their own pace. Submission of the completed form constituted final consent.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 29. As suggested by Day (1988), standard statistical techniques are referred to without exhaustive explanation. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were computed to interpret the collected information regarding variable levels. The normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which is suitable for small sample sizes ($N < 50$). To test the hypothesis, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was employed to interpret the relationship between ChatGPT use and academic integrity, with statistical significance set at $< .05$. The interpretation of correlation coefficients followed Cohen's (1988) guidelines, as present in Table 1

Table 1. Cohen's (1988) Guidelines for Interpreting Correlation Coefficients

Correlation (r)	Interpretation
0.10 – 0.29	Small (weak) correlation
0.30 – 0.49	Medium (moderate) correlation
0.50 – 1.00	Large (strong) correlation
0	No correlation
Negative values	Same strength but negative direction (e.g., $-.30$ = moderate negative correlation)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Normality test between ChatGPT Use and Academic Integrity

	Shapiro-Wilk Statistics	df	Sig.
ChatGPT Use	.966	25	.552
Academic Integrity	.987	25	.981

This section presents the empirical findings regarding the relationship between ChatGPT usage and academic integrity among EFL master's students, followed by a comprehensive discussion that interprets these results through the lens of Academic Integrity Theory and existing scholarly literature. The analysis proceeds from a statistical examination of data normality and descriptive trends to a critical evaluation of the correlational evidence, culminating in a theoretical synthesis that addresses the study's broader implications for higher education.

Data Normality and Methodological Prerequisites

Before engaging in inferential analysis, it was imperative to verify the distributional characteristics of the dataset to ensure the validity of the parametric tests employed. As outlined in the methodology, the study utilized the Shapiro-Wilk test, a robust measure for assessing normality in smaller sample sizes ($N = 25$). The results, summarized in Table 2, indicate that both key variables adhered to the assumptions of a normal distribution.

The significance values for ChatGPT Use (.552) and Academic Integrity (.981) substantially exceeded the conventional alpha threshold of .05. This statistical confirmation is crucial; it suggests that the behaviors observed, both the adoption of AI tools and the maintenance of ethical standards are not skewed by outliers or irregular patterns within this specific population. The normal distribution allows for the confident application of Pearson's correlation coefficient to explore the linear relationship between the variables.

The Ubiquity of AI: ChatGPT as a Normalized Cognitive Scaffold

The descriptive analysis of students' engagement with ChatGPT reveals a significant shift in the operational dynamics of academic writing within the EFL context. As detailed in Table 3, the

participants reported a notably high frequency of ChatGPT usage ($M = 79.00$; $SD = 10.67$), with scores ranging from a minimum of 60.00 to a maximum of 100.00.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for ChatGPT use and Academic Integrity

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	
						Sta	Std. er
ChatGPT Use	25	60.00	100.00	79.0000	10.67318	-.568	.902
Academic Integrity	25	62.67	100.00	81.9736	9.19013	-.216	.902

This high mean score indicates that for this cohort of first-year master's students, ChatGPT has transcended the status of a novelty or an optional resource; it has arguably become an integral component of their cognitive infrastructure. Interpreting this through the framework proposed by Haenlein et al. (2023) and Zhao (2023), the data suggests that students are utilizing generative AI not merely as a search engine, but as a cognitive collaborator. In the specific context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning, where students frequently grapple with linguistic precision, genre constraints, and vocabulary nuances, the high usage likely reflects a strategy of cognitive offloading. By delegating lower-order writing tasks such as grammar correction or sentence restructuring to the AI, students can allocate more cognitive resources to higher-order tasks like critical analysis and argument development.

This finding empirically corroborates the optimistic strand of recent literature, particularly the work of Soelistiyowati et al. (2024) and Bhuiyan et al. (2025). These scholars have argued that in Indonesian and broader Asian EFL contexts, AI tools serve as critical scaffolding mechanisms that enhance perceived learning efficacy. The high usage rates observed here are not indicative of dependency in a negative sense, but rather of digital resilience the ability to leverage available technologies to overcome the inherent challenges of writing in a second language. The consistency of this usage (indicated by the relatively compact standard deviation) implies that this AI-assisted workflow has become a shared norm within the academic culture of the participants.

The Persistence of Academic Integrity in a Digital Age

Perhaps the most compelling descriptive finding is the resilience of academic integrity amidst this high-tech adoption. As shown in Table 3, students reported a robust mean Academic Integrity score of 81.97 ($SD = 9.19$). The distribution, characterized by a negative kurtosis (-.216), suggests a slight flattening, indicating that while there is some variability, the vast majority of students cluster around the higher end of the ethical spectrum.

This finding stands in sharp contrast to the alarmist narratives that have dominated early discourse on Generative AI. Scholars such as Cotton and Cotton (2023) and Niloy et al. (2024) hypothesized that the ease of text generation would inevitably erode traditional notions of authorship and lead to a decline in ethical standards. If these deterministic perspectives were universally applicable, one would expect a cohort with high AI usage ($M = 79.00$) to exhibit substantially lower integrity scores. Because specific ethical awareness was not directly measured in this study, the retention of high integrity ($M = 81.97$) offers a tentative interpretation that these advanced learners may maintain a clear distinction between legitimate assistance and unethical practices. This speculative explanation aligns with empirical literature suggesting that postgraduate and advanced EFL learners often utilize AI to enhance metacognitive awareness and language scaffolding rather than to bypass ethical writing standards (Niu & Li, 2023; Park & Lim, 2023).

This phenomenon can be interpreted through Niu and Li's (2023) concept of ethical differentiation. It appears that these master's students are capable of distinguishing between legitimate assistance (e.g., using AI for ideation, polishing, and feedback) and academic misconduct (e.g., plagiarism or contract cheating). This aligns with the findings of Park and Lim (2023), who noted that advanced learners often use AI to enhance their metacognitive awareness rather than to bypass learning. The high integrity scores indicate that the "moral panic" surrounding AI in education may be overstated, particularly when applied to postgraduate students who possess a stronger professional identity and intrinsic motivation compared to undergraduate populations often cited in alarmist studies.

Correlational Analysis: Decoupling Usage from Misconduct

The central inquiry of this research whether increased ChatGPT use correlates with a decline in academic integrity was addressed through Pearson's correlation analysis. The results, presented in Table 4, reveal a non-significant, weak positive relationship ($r = .326$, $p = .112$).

Table 4. Correlations Between ChatGPT use and Academic Integrity

ChatGPTUse	Pearson Correlation	ChatGPTUse	AcademicIntegrity
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1	.326
	N	25	.112
AcademicIntegrity			25
	Pearson Correlation	.326	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.112	
	N	25	25

This statistical outcome provides preliminary insights into the relationship between AI adoption and student ethics. Rather than demonstrating that ChatGPT usage is not a predictor of academic dishonesty, the absence of a statistically significant correlation ($r = .326$, $p = .112$) simply indicates that there is insufficient evidence of a statistically significant linear association between the two variables within this sample. Given the relatively small sample size ($N = 25$), this finding must be interpreted with caution and tempered as a localized, tentative pattern rather than a definitive conclusion. Nonetheless, it suggests that within this specific cohort, higher frequency of AI engagement did not systematically co-occur with lower academic integrity standards.

The non-significant finding serves as empirical evidence against the theory of technological determinism in academic misconduct. Huang and Lee (2023) and Rodrigues et al. (2024) expressed concerns that the mere availability of AI would act as a corruption of character, creating an irresistible opportunity structure for cheating. However, the data from this study suggests that opportunity does not equal outcome. Students who used ChatGPT extensively (near the maximum score of 100) were statistically no more likely to compromise their integrity than those who used it moderately. In fact, the direction of the correlation though weak and non-significant was positive ($r = .326$), hinting at a counter-intuitive possibility: that students who engage deeply with AI tools might be more aware of the ethical nuances required to use them responsibly.

This result reinforces the argument that Generative AI acts as a neutral instrument. Its impact on integrity is not inherent to the technology itself but is mediated by the user's intent. As Tan and Zhang (2023) noted, the benefits and challenges of ChatGPT are dual-sided. The current data indicates that for this specific demographic, the benefits (learning support) are being realized without the challenges (loss of integrity) manifesting in a measurable way. This decouples the act of using AI from the act of cheating, supporting Fernando and Li's (2024) assertion that responsible usage is a distinct behavioral category from academic dishonesty.

Theoretical Discussion: A Contextual Interpretation

To understand why high AI usage does not lead to lower integrity, we must turn to Academic Integrity Theory (McCabe & Treviño, 1997). This framework posits that academic conduct is shaped by a triad of influences: individual factors, peer behavior, and institutional context. The findings of this study provide a modern validation of this theory in the age of AI.

McCabe and Treviño argued that opportunity structures (how easy it is to cheat) are less predictive of misconduct than contextual factors (peer norms and ethical climate). ChatGPT represents the ultimate opportunity structure, it is free, fast, and accessible. If opportunity were the primary driver, integrity scores would have collapsed. The stability of integrity observed here confirms that contextual factors remain supreme. The students in this study are part of a Master's program in English Education, a discipline that inherently values language and literacy. It is plausible that the ethical climate of the department, combined with the students' developing professional identities as future educators, acts as a protective buffer. They do not cheat, not because they can't, but because their social and professional context defines such behavior as unacceptable.

Although peer norms were not directly measured in this study, social context offers a plausible theoretical lens for interpreting these findings. Mahama et al. (2023) and Nouri et al. (2023) emphasized that perceived peer norms significantly shape students' ethical decision-making

regarding technology. In an environment where AI tool adoption is prevalent ($M = 79.00$), student perceptions of what constitutes misconduct may evolve within their academic community. As Bretag (2016) asserted in an expanded model of academic integrity, community standards and shared ethical expectations often dictate behavior more strongly than formal rules. It is plausible that this cohort operates under an informal consensus where using ChatGPT for scaffolding (such as grammar refinement) is viewed as acceptable, whereas relying on it for ghostwriting is recognized as unethical. This hypothetical dynamic could explain how high usage frequency coexists with high integrity scores, though future empirical work directly measuring peer influence is necessary to confirm this interpretation.

Intrinsic Motivation and Professional Identity

Furthermore, the specific demographic of EFL Master's students offers a plausible explanatory context for these findings. Prior literature suggests that academic integrity behavior is closely tied to students' academic competence, individual achievement goals, and educational background (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2025; McCabe & Treviño, 1997). Unlike undergraduate populations frequently examined in broader integrity literature (e.g., Balalle & Pannilage, 2025), postgraduate learners often navigate higher academic demands, publication pressures, and developing professional identities. It is plausible that these advanced learners view AI primarily as a cognitive scaffold and writing collaborator to refine their language, rather than a substitute for authentic scholarship (Huang & Wang, 2025), thereby mitigating the risk of overreliance warned against by Niloy et al. (2024). Although intrinsic motivation and academic maturity were not directly measured as empirical variables in this study, these individual characteristics provide a tentative theoretical rationale for why high AI adoption coexists with strong integrity standards within this cohort.

Pedagogical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the governance of AI in higher education. Although these preliminary insights are based on a small, self-reported sample of postgraduate students ($N = 25$), the finding that high usage frequency does not correlate with lower integrity suggests that rigid institutional bans on ChatGPT may be overly restrictive. Policies that treat all generative AI engagement as inherent misconduct may fail to capture the nuanced ways advanced learners utilize these tools. Instead, higher education institutions could consider incorporating an AI literacy approach, as advocated by Fang (2023) and Kohnke et al. (2023). Educators might explicitly guide students on distinguishing between ethical cognitive scaffolding (e.g., language refinement and feedback) and unethical cognitive replacement (e.g., unacknowledged content generation). By fostering transparent classroom discussions about responsible AI integration, institutions can help cultivate clear ethical boundaries that reflect authentic academic workflows.

The study supports a shift in assessment strategy. Since students are using AI as a collaborator, assessments should evaluate the process of collaboration rather than just the final product. Rasul et al. (2024) suggest that holistic frameworks for integrity must include new forms of evaluation. For example, students could be asked to submit their AI logs alongside their drafts, explaining how they critically evaluated and modified the AI's output. This turns the black box of AI into a transparent learning tool, further cementing the link between usage and integrity.

While this study offers robust insights, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size ($N=25$) is relatively small. While sufficient for a preliminary correlational study within a specific department, a larger sample might reveal subtle, non-linear relationships that this analysis could not detect. Second, the reliance on self-reported measures introduces the potential for social desirability bias. As noted by McCabe and Treviño (1997), students may overreport their integrity, although the anonymity of the survey aimed to mitigate this.

Future research should aim to bridge the gap between reported behavior and actual behavior. Mixed-methods studies that analyze actual writing samples or log-files of student-AI interactions would provide a more granular understanding of how usage patterns (e.g., prompting strategies) relate to text originality. Additionally, comparative studies between undergraduate and postgraduate students could confirm whether the maturity factor hypothesized here is indeed a protective variable.

In brief, this study provides compelling empirical evidence that challenges the prevailing narrative of AI as a threat to academic integrity. The findings demonstrate that EFL master's students are capable of integrating ChatGPT into their academic workflow at high frequencies without compromising their ethical standards. When interpreted through Academic Integrity

Theory, the results underscore that ethical behavior is sustained not by restricting technology, but by fostering a strong professional culture and clear peer norms. As Generative AI becomes ubiquitous, the path forward lies in pedagogical adaptation, viewing the student-AI partnership not as a crime scene, but as a new frontier of literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to empirically examine the relationship between ChatGPT utilization and academic integrity among EFL master's students, directly addressing the prevalent concern that generative AI serves as a catalyst for academic misconduct. By synthesizing the behavioral patterns of high AI usage with consistently high ethical standards, the findings refute the narrative of technological determinism. The absence of a significant correlation between the frequency of AI engagement and ethical compromise demonstrates that students are capable of integrating ChatGPT as a cognitive scaffold without surrendering their moral agency. This outcome validates the theoretical premise that academic integrity is not fragilely dependent on the absence of opportunity, but is rather sustained by internal moral frameworks, professional identity, and a supportive institutional culture.

Consequently, these insights suggest a critical shift in educational policy from prohibitive restriction to proactive adaptation. Rather than viewing AI as an inherent threat, institutions should cultivate critical AI literacy, focusing on transparent usage frameworks and process-oriented assessments that evaluate how students collaborate with these tools. Future research should expand upon these preliminary findings by employing mixed-method designs and behavioral tracking to overcome the limitations of self-reported data and small sample sizes. Ultimately, ensuring the integrity of academic writing in the AI era requires a pedagogical approach that empowers students to use technology responsibly, transforming potential shortcuts into meaningful pathways for advanced literacy development.

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DECLARATION OF AI USE

The authors used Google Gemini to enhance the language, clarity, and readability of the manuscript. Following the use of this tool, the authors carefully reviewed and revised the AI-assisted content as necessary. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the publication.

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