

Between Words and Prompts: Revealing Student Practices of ChatGPT in Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the gap between students' claims about their use of ChatGPT in thesis writing and the practices revealed by their prompt records. Data is collected through in-depth interviews with six final year students from three different universities across Indonesia: Sumatra, Java, and Sulawesi. The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's approach, from which three main themes emerged. First, Framing ChatGPT as a Learning Tool, where students position ChatGPT as a learning tool that speeds up the process and clarifies ideas; Second, Delegated Authorship Through Prompts, which shows that students often give explicit commands to ChatGPT to compose parts of their thesis, even using additional tools such as Quillbot and Google Translate to refine the results; Third, Ethical Ambiguity Between What Is Said and Done, which reflects students' ignorance, defensiveness, or discomfort when faced with ethical questions related to the use of ChatGPT. This study concludes that although students claim to use AI responsibly, their practices show a form of cognitive outsourcing that they are not fully aware of. These findings highlight the importance of a critical understanding of academic AI literacy and the need to develop more contextual policies and ethical guidelines in higher education settings.*

Keywords: *academic writing, AI ethics, AI literacy, ChatGPT use, cognitive outsourcing.*

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji kesenjangan antara klaim mahasiswa tentang penggunaan ChatGPT dalam penulisan skripsi dan praktik yang terungkap melalui catatan prompt mereka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan enam mahasiswa tingkat akhir dari tiga universitas berbeda di Indonesia, yaitu di Sumatra, Jawa, dan Sulawesi. Data dianalisis secara tematik mengikuti pendekatan Braun dan Clarke, yang darinya muncul tiga tema utama. Pertama, Membingkai ChatGPT sebagai Alat Pembelajaran, di mana mahasiswa memosisikan ChatGPT sebagai alat bantu belajar yang mempercepat proses dan memperjelas gagasan. Kedua, Pendelegasian Kepengarangan melalui Prompt, yang menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa sering memberikan perintah eksplisit kepada ChatGPT untuk menyusun bagian-bagian skripsi mereka, bahkan menggunakan alat tambahan seperti Quillbot dan Google Translate untuk menyempurnakan hasilnya. Ketiga, Ambiguitas Etis antara Apa yang Dikatakan dan yang Dilakukan, yang mencerminkan ketidaktahuan, sikap defensif, atau ketidaknyamanan mahasiswa ketika dihadapkan pada pertanyaan-pertanyaan etis terkait penggunaan ChatGPT. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun mahasiswa mengklaim menggunakan AI secara bertanggung jawab, praktik mereka menunjukkan bentuk cognitive outsourcing yang belum sepenuhnya mereka sadari. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pemahaman kritis tentang literasi AI dalam konteks akademik serta perlunya pengembangan kebijakan dan pedoman etika yang lebih kontekstual di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi.

Kata kunci : penulisan akademik, etika kecerdasan buatan, literasi kecerdasan buatan, penggunaan ChatGPT, alih daya kognitif.

INTRODUCTION

Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, higher education has undergone a profound reconfiguration of writing practices and assessment logics. Universities worldwide have revised policies, reassessed academic integrity guidelines, and begun experimenting with frameworks for human–AI collaboration. Scholars describe this moment as a potential paradigm shift, as generative AI unsettles long-standing assumptions about authorship, originality, and epistemic labour (Gruenhagen et al., 2024; O’Dea, 2024). In Indonesia, where students increasingly combine tools such as ChatGPT and Quillbot in academic work, this disruption is particularly visible in how writing support and ethical awareness are negotiated (Febriani, Zakir, & Sari, 2023; Luthfiah, Salminawati, & Dahlan, 2024).

Policy debates reflect a growing recognition that reliance on punitive detection mechanisms is insufficient. AI detectors frequently misclassify human writing, especially from non-native speakers, producing false positives that erode trust (Giray, Sevnarayan, & Ranjbaran Madiseh, 2025a). Consequently, scholars and policymakers call for a turn toward process-based assessment practices emphasising transparency, disclosure, and formative feedback rather than technological policing (Jarrah, Wardat, & Fidalgo, 2023). Such approaches recognise that academic integrity is not only about catching misconduct but also about cultivating trust-based cultures of accountability and AI literacy (Walczak & Cellary, 2023)(Lancaster, 2025).

At the pedagogical level, research demonstrates that generative AI can alleviate writing anxiety, support idea development, and enhance efficiency. For instance, Indonesian workshops show that students who received training with ChatGPT reported improved ability to structure arguments and organise ideas in scientific writing (Setyawan, Anyan, & Anggera, 2024). Teachers likewise note that AI writing tools, including Quillbot and ChatGPT, positively affect content organisation and coherence in student essays (Suharto, Zubaidi, Nurdjizah, Putri, & Sekarsari, 2025). Among postgraduate cohorts, Quillbot is valued not only for productivity but also for reducing plagiarism risk through paraphrasing functions (Luthfiah et al., 2024). Yet, these benefits are accompanied by ethical tensions: while students often frame their AI use as merely “assistive,” lecturers caution that excessive dependence risks weakening autonomy and eroding critical and creative reasoning (Firdaus et al., 2025).

Crucially, most existing studies rely on perception surveys, interviews, or technical demonstrations of what AI can produce. Few have examined the prompt records—the actual language students use to elicit AI outputs. This omission is significant because prompts themselves are discursive artefacts: they reveal how students negotiate boundaries between acceptable assistance and unethical delegation. Lancaster, (2025) documents advanced prompting strategies but avoids normative claims about integrity, while Sawalha, Taj, and Shoufan (2024) demonstrate that different prompting styles affect accuracy and problem-solving performance. Similarly, Abbas (2023) shows that Indonesian students use AI

selectively in thesis writing but without clear disclosure, highlighting institutional blind spots. These insights are valuable yet leave unanswered how prompting practices function rhetorically in legitimising or sanitising AI use.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the dissonance between what students say about their ChatGPT use in thesis writing and what their prompt histories reveal. Drawing on in-depth interviews and authentic prompt records from undergraduates at three Indonesian universities, the research examines not only how ChatGPT is operationalised but also how its use is discursively framed and ethically justified.

Theoretically, the study draws on three complementary lenses that connect students' claims about "responsible" AI use to the textual traces in their prompt histories. First, Goffman's dramaturgical sociology explains how students curate a frontstage self-presentation (e.g., "just brainstorming" or "language polishing") while relegating stronger AI delegation to the backstage of actual prompts; his ideas of impression management, regions, and face-work clarify the interactional stakes in protecting one's academic "face," and frame analysis helps identify "re-keying" moves that recast similar actions (e.g., paraphrasing) as either legitimate support or unethical substitution depending on audience and situation (Goffman, 1956, 1974, 2005). Second, Carr's account of cognitive outsourcing and automation provides a vocabulary for the depth of delegation visible in prompts—when students ask the model not merely to surface ideas but to structure arguments, select evidence, or draft sections, risking deskilling and over-trust if outputs are accepted without verification (Carr, 2020). Third, following Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, we read prompts and accompanying rationalisations across textual, discursive-practice, and social-practice levels: lexical choices (e.g., nominalisations, modality), workflow transformations that launder AI text into essays, and institutional orders of discourse (policies, rubrics) that normalise "AI-assisted efficiency." We use "discursive sanitisation" as an analytic label for these legitimising strategies, aligning it with Fairclough's accounts of the marketization and technologisation of university discourse (Fairclough, 1989, 2006).

Empirically, we provide rare access to authentic prompt data, linking students' frontstage claims to backstage practices. Conceptually, we show how micro-prompting choices enact the boundary-work of integrity—where dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman), cognitive delegation (Carr), and discursive legitimation (Fairclough) intersect. Practically, we translate these insights into process-based assessment designs (prompt ledgers, reflective disclosure, verification artifacts) and into AI-literacy teaching that targets how to ask, how to verify, and how to disclose, aligning with emerging integrity guidance and with critiques of detection-only regimes (Cheng, Calhoun, & Reedy, 2025; Giray et al., 2025a).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, small-N design to examine how final-year undergraduates actually used ChatGPT in thesis writing, as evidenced by their prompt records, with respect to how they described that use in interviews. We purposively selected six final-year students who self-reported using ChatGPT during their thesis process, drawn from three Indonesian universities on Sumatra, Java, and Sulawesi to secure contextual variation rather than statistical representation (criterion-based purposive sampling). The research target was therefore graduating students with lived experience of AI-assisted academic writing in the thesis context. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and the collection of participants' prompt records (e.g., exported chats or screenshots of ChatGPT sessions used for thesis work).

Prompt records functioned as naturally occurring digital traces that enabled triangulation between what was said and what was done, and they align with emerging work showing that student prompting strategies materially shape model output and task performance (e.g., single copy-and-paste vs. reformulated vs. multi-turn prompting). Interviews focused on students' purposes for using ChatGPT, perceived benefits/risks, and ethical reasoning; prompt records were gathered with explicit consent and de-identified on receipt.

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis with an iterative, inductive orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The team familiarised themselves with the data (interview transcripts and prompt records), generated initial codes, and developed themes through iterative reviewing and refinement, attending to internal coherence and analytic rigour across the six phases articulated by Braun and Clarke (familiarisation, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining/naming, and reporting). In keeping with reflexive TA, coding reliability was not pursued via inter-coder agreement; instead, we emphasised analytic transparency through memo-writing, an audit trail, and peer debriefing to enhance credibility and interpretive depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006); see also contemporary guidance on good practice in reflexive TA). Given the topic, we also attended to AI-writing-specific integrity concerns documented in the literature (e.g., risks of cognitive outsourcing and the need to define ethical bounds of AI support in scholarly work), which informed our analytic sensitivity to how students framed "help" versus "authorship" when delegating tasks to ChatGPT or auxiliary tools (e.g., paraphrasers, translators).

Ethical procedures followed UK guidance for educational and social research. We adhered to the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2024) regarding informed consent as an ongoing process, respect for participants, privacy/confidentiality, and avoidance of harm; these guidelines explicitly attend to power imbalances in educational settings and the researcher's responsibilities in dual-role contexts. We also aligned with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human (Oates et al., 2021), particularly the core principles of respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity, and with the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics for lifecycle-wide governance (consent, data protection, risk

assessment, and transparency). Because some participants were my own students, we explicitly addressed potential power relations and bias. Recruitment communications emphasised voluntariness and clarified that participation (or non-participation) would have no bearing on academic standing, grades, or supervision; participation occurred outside assessment relationships; consent was re-affirmed at each stage (including for sharing prompt records); and students could withdraw without penalty.

To mitigate desirability bias and role-related pressures, interviews were scheduled in non-teaching contexts, identifiers were removed at source, and analysis was conducted with reflexive attention to my positionality as a lecturer (documented in analytic memos). Given the documented limitations and fairness concerns of AI-detection tools, especially their false positives, susceptibility to paraphrasing, and bias against non-native writers, we did not use AI detectors to “police” student text; instead, we relied on students’ own prompt records and process evidence, consistent with a trust-oriented, process-over-product stance in writing pedagogy. The study thus balanced data triangulation (interviews + prompt traces) with ethical safeguards appropriate to dual roles, aligning with UK guidance on respectful, competent, and responsible conduct of research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the three key themes that emerged from the analysis of students’ perspectives and prompt records regarding their use of ChatGPT in thesis writing. While students consistently claimed to use AI as a responsible learning aid, their actual practices revealed deeper forms of reliance. The findings indicate that students frame ChatGPT in three overlapping ways: first, as a learning tool that speeds up the process and clarifies ideas; second, as a medium for delegated authorship through prompts, where students explicitly instruct the AI to generate thesis components and refine them with additional tools; and third, as an area of ethical ambiguity between what is said and done, where claims of responsibility are contradicted by hesitation, ignorance, or defensiveness in practice.

Framing ChatGPT as a Learning Tool

The first theme that emerges from the data analysis is framing ChatGPT as a learning tool. When asked about how they use the ChatGPT in writing their minithesis, students across all three institutions repeatedly positioned ChatGPT as an academic aid, describing it as a source of inspiration, productivity, and clarity in the writing process. For example Participant 2, who said that:

"Yes, I use ChatGPT often, Ma'am. Most often, when I'm just starting to write, I ask ChatGPT to explain the topic I'm going to write about. That way, I understand it better." (P2, Interview).

A comparable response to that of Participant 2 was echoed by five other participants, with one interviewee further elaborating that ChatGPT helped her move past moments of stagnation, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

"When I'm confused, ChatGPT can give me ideas. For example, when I don't know how to start an introductory chapter, I type the topic into ChatGPT and it brings up some points I can use. That makes me feel more confident to continue writing." (P1, Interview).

Another student elaborated on how the tool functioned as more than just a language editor, but also as a structuring device, as follows:

"I just write in ChatGPT whatever I am thinking and ask it to structure the sentences. So it is not only about improving the language, but it truly helps me to see the flow of my ideas more clearly." (P3, Interview)

For many, ChatGPT was also framed as a productivity booster. One participant admitted:

"Everything becomes faster and I feel more productive. In the past, I could spend hours just to write a single paragraph, but now it takes much less time because ChatGPT helps me to arrange the words.." (P1,P2,P3,P4, Interview)

Beyond writing support, ChatGPT was also used to mediate understanding of complex texts. As two participants confessed:

"I asked ChatGPT to summarize journal articles... it makes me understand the content much faster than having to read everything. Sometimes I also ask it to explain in simpler language, so I can grasp the concepts more easily." (P6, Interview).

"Honestly, when it comes to reading journals, I also get help from ChatGPT. I still read the journal myself, but I also ask ChatGPT to explain to me what the main point is about." (P5, Interview)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that students consistently positioned ChatGPT in educational and ostensibly responsible terms, primarily as a tool for brainstorming, clarifying ideas, and polishing their writing. This framing reflects an

attempt to portray their use as supportive rather than substitutive of academic labour. Yet this framing also appears to mask a more complicated reality, hinting at forms of reliance and ambiguity that become clearer in the second theme.

Delegated Authorship Through Prompts

Although students initially portrayed ChatGPT as a supportive tool, their prompt histories revealed substantial delegation of authorship. The prompt records further reveal a progression in how students engaged with ChatGPT, ranging from supportive to increasingly substitutive uses. At the initial stage, prompts were oriented toward language polishing and clarification, framing ChatGPT as a tool to refine student-generated text. This was followed by prompts that sought assistance in comprehending journal articles, where ChatGPT was asked to simplify or summarize complex readings. A more pronounced reliance appeared in prompts delegating analytical tasks, with students instructing ChatGPT to evaluate or provide structured feedback based on uploaded files. The trajectory culminated in prompts that explicitly delegated authorship, where ChatGPT was instructed to compose full sections of academic writing, such as introductions, based on a set of journal articles. The following screenshots illustrate this progression.

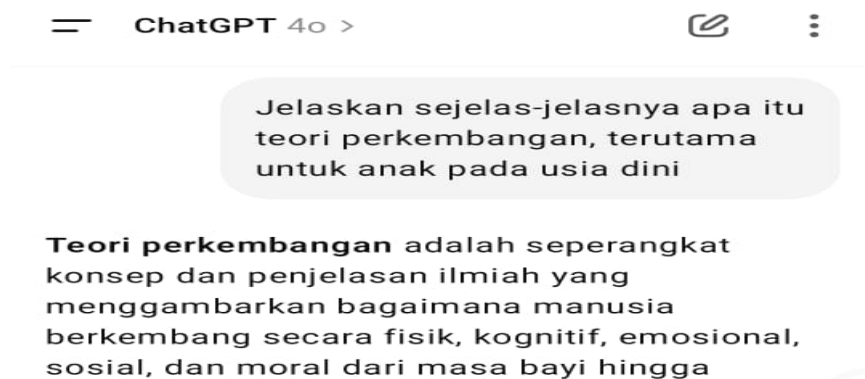


Figure 1. Example of a student's prompt requesting idea clarification in ChatGPT

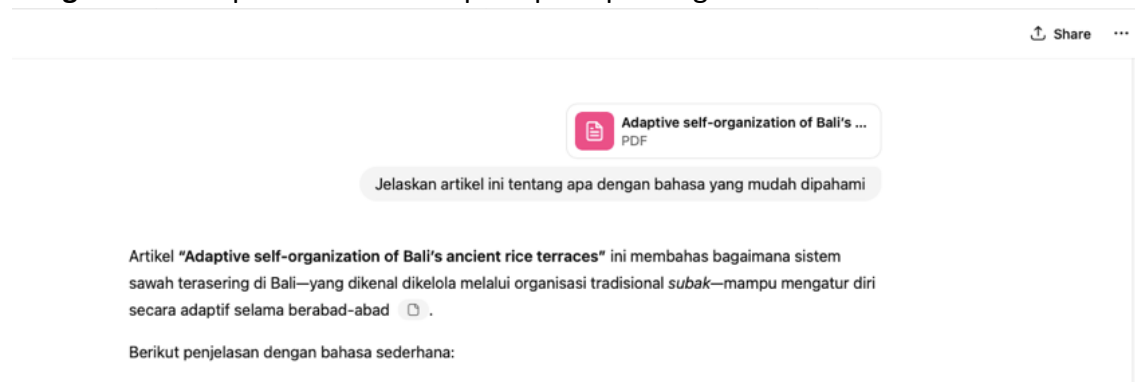


Figure 2. Screenshot of a student prompt delegating writing analysis to ChatGPT based on uploaded files

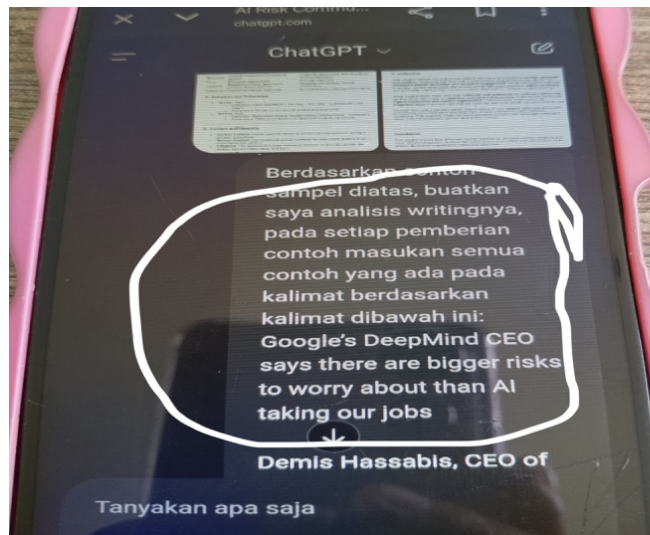


Figure 3. Screenshot of a student prompt delegating writing analysis to ChatGPT based on uploaded files

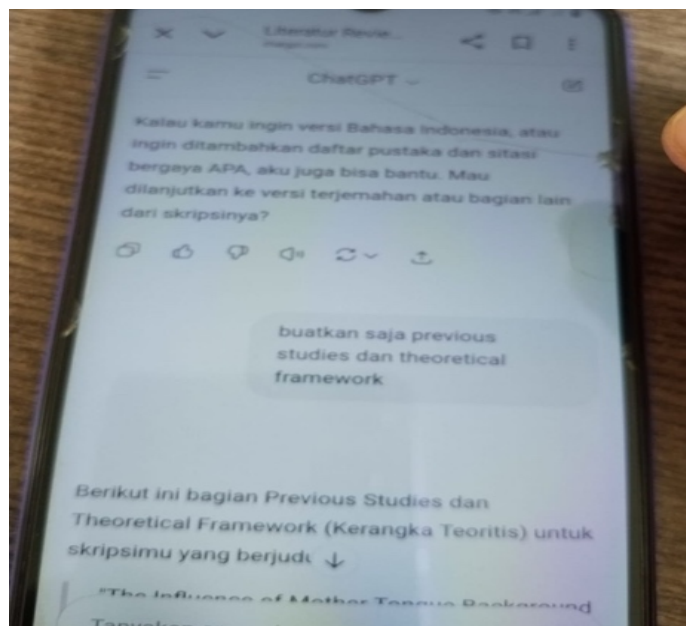


Figure 4. Screenshot of a student prompt delegating writing analysis to ChatGPT based on uploaded files

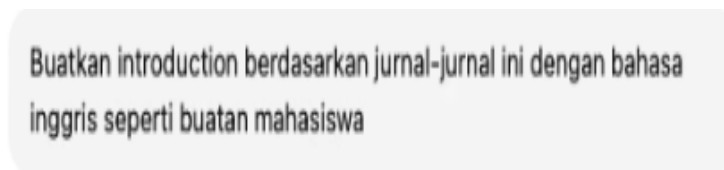


Figure 5. Screenshot of a student prompt delegating writing analysis to ChatGPT based on uploaded files

Viewed sequentially, these prompt records reveal a trajectory from supportive uses of ChatGPT to more direct delegation of authorship, culminating in requests for the system to compose extended sections of text. In several cases, this delegation extended beyond ChatGPT itself. As one participant admitted: “After ChatGPT gave me the result, I put it into QuillBot again so the sentences would be different, so it feels safer.” (P4, Interview). Another explained: “Kadang saya juga pakai QuillBot buat parafrase, biar nggak terlalu kelihatan hasil ChatGPT.” (P3).

These accounts indicate that students did not only rely on ChatGPT to generate content but also systematically reprocessed outputs through additional tools. Such practices demonstrate a layered outsourcing of authorship that blurred the distinction between assistance and ownership of text, setting the stage for the next theme on ethical ambiguity.

Ethical Ambiguity Between What Is Said and Done

When asked to reflect on the ethics of these practices, students often displayed hesitation, defensiveness, or lack of awareness. Many justified their reliance on ChatGPT by claiming that paraphrasing its output rendered it ethical. As one participant explained: “I didn’t know that was unethical. Because I also paraphrased, not just copy-pasted. So I thought that was already my responsibility.” (P2, Interview). When asked how confident they were in the results provided by ChatGPT, one participant admitted to never questioning the validity of the content it produced:

“Honestly, yes. I usually trusted it because the answers seemed complete and convincing, and I have never checked whether the references were accurate.” (P3, Interview)

Such statements reveal a striking gap between what students claim and what they practice. Outwardly, they assert responsibility; inwardly, their practices rely heavily on unverified outputs. This ambiguity mirrors broader debates in higher education, where AI detectors and integrity policies have struggled to keep pace with the blurred boundaries of human–machine authorship.

The ethical uncertainty was also visible in students’ silences. During interviews, some paused at length when asked whether their reliance on ChatGPT aligned with academic values. Their discomfort signaled not only a lack of clarity about rules but also a latent recognition that their practices might contradict their professed ideals.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a gap between the performative discourse of responsible AI use and the practical reality of delegated authorship and ethical ambiguity. Students consistently frame ChatGPT as a learning tool that enhances productivity and comprehension. However, prompt records and candid admissions reveal deeper cognitive outsourcing—delegating idea generation, structuring, and

even citation work to the AI. Ethical awareness is partial and often rationalised through paraphrasing practices, leaving students unaware of the full implications of their reliance.

This tension between front-stage claims and back-stage practices illustrates how generative AI is reshaping academic authorship in subtle but significant ways. While students describe their use of ChatGPT as assistive and responsible, their actions suggest dependency and unresolved ethical questions, highlighting the urgent need for clearer literacy frameworks and contextual policies in higher education.

Discussion

Our findings reveal a complex interplay between student writing practices and generative AI, which can be fruitfully interpreted through three theoretical lenses. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective highlights how students manage the "performance" of authorship in an AI-permeated context. Nicholas Carr's sociotechnical critique raises concerns about how outsourcing writing to AI might affect cognitive development and academic skill. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) directs attention to the language and power relations shaping what is considered legitimate or illegitimate in this new writing landscape. Together, these lenses provide a multifaceted understanding of how generative AI, academic integrity, and higher education writing practices intersect.

Dramaturgical Performances of Academic Writing

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective offers a powerful lens for understanding how students navigate the pressures of academic integrity in the age of generative AI. Goffman (1956) described social life as a stage on which individuals manage impressions through performances that distinguish between "front stage" (the visible, socially sanctioned self) and "back stage" (the hidden, often contradictory practices). Our findings show that students using AI often manage their academic identities in precisely this way. They present a front stage of independent authorship—submitting essays that appear self-written—while relegating AI use to the backstage, where text is generated, paraphrased, and edited without disclosure. Several participants admitted to inserting "deliberate imperfections" or stylistic changes into AI-generated text to avoid suspicion, echoing Goffman's (1956, p.35) insight that "every performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society." Here, the "accredited value" is independent authorship, even when backstage practices diverge from it.

This pattern aligns with earlier studies of academic dishonesty (Stearns, 2019), using a dramaturgical analysis of cheating, found that students engage in identity work to maintain credibility despite covertly violating norms. Similarly, recent research on generative AI shows that students often perceive the need to maintain an appearance of originality while quietly incorporating AI outputs (Chan & Hu, 2023). A large survey by JISC (2025) found that many students used AI in "hidden" ways,

precisely because institutional policies left them uncertain or fearful about disclosure. Thus, the dramaturgical metaphor captures the tension between the surface presentation of authentic work and the concealed practices that actually shape student writing.

Yet, dramaturgy is not only descriptive but also cautionary. By focusing on how students manage impressions, it risks normalizing deception by treating it as just another performance (Shulman, 2017). Our findings illustrate this limitation: students rationalized covert AI use as a necessary means to “save face,” but from an ethical perspective this is troubling. As long as institutional scripts equate any AI use with misconduct, students are incentivized to treat AI as a backstage tool that must remain hidden. In this way, dramaturgy helps explain how students adapt, but not whether these adaptations serve the goals of higher education.

Recent work confirms that institutional discourse is critical. Simpson (2025), in a critical discourse analysis of UK university AI policies, found that highly selective universities employed “authoritarian, hierarchical language” that placed responsibility squarely on individual students. Such discourse positioned students as potential violators, intensifying the need for concealment. Conversely, more inclusive policies that framed AI as a legitimate tool under guidance encouraged transparency. In dramaturgical terms, when the front stage is closed to transparent practices, students will continue to conceal AI use in the backstage. But when the front stage is redesigned—through inclusive policy and open dialogue—students can incorporate AI openly, shifting from deception to engagement.

Thus, while dramaturgy is invaluable for revealing the mechanics of impression management, it also points to a critical pedagogical implication: the design of the “stage” matters. If institutions persist with prohibitive discourses, students will perform authenticity while secretly outsourcing tasks, thereby reinforcing concealment. If, instead, policies invite students to openly reflect on and justify their AI use, dramaturgical performances may evolve into authentic engagement. The challenge for higher education, then, is to move beyond policing appearances and to create conditions where the performance of authorship can honestly accommodate new technological realities.

Sociotechnical Imaginaries: Automation, Learning, and Academic Skills

From a sociotechnical perspective, the integration of generative AI into academic writing raises profound concerns about the future of student learning. Nicholas Carr (2020) famously warned that digital technologies risk creating “intellectual shallows,” where efficiency is achieved at the expense of deep and sustained thought. In a later essay, Carr (2025) sharpened this critique, arguing that “the real threat AI poses to education isn’t that it encourages cheating. It’s that it discourages learning” (para. 3). Our findings resonate strongly with this claim: several students admitted that reliance on ChatGPT reduced the time they spent grappling

with complex concepts or engaging in independent analysis, suggesting a gradual outsourcing of intellectual labor.

Empirical studies reinforce this dystopian imaginary. (Walczak & Cellary, 2023), studying Polish universities, concluded that the widespread availability of generative AI heightens risks of “critical thinking erosion” and weakens the development of independent reasoning (p. 88). Likewise, Revesai (2025), in a case study of Zimbabwean undergraduates, observed that heavy AI users displayed “critical thinking atrophy, diminished writing skill development, and reduced content knowledge acquisition” (p. 6). These findings parallel our participants’ struggles with independent argumentation once accustomed to AI assistance. Other studies in Asia and Europe have also documented concerns about “automation bias,” where students uncritically accept machine outputs as authoritative, leading to reduced epistemic vigilance (Kasneji et al., 2023; Zawacki-Richter, Marín, Bond, & Gouverneur, 2019).

Yet, a purely dystopian reading risks oversimplifying the sociotechnical dynamics. Not all students in our study succumbed to passive dependence. Several used AI in deliberate and bounded ways—checking grammar, generating outlines, or brainstorming alternative phrasings—while retaining responsibility for substantive argumentation. Such practices reflect what Risko & Gilbert (2016) term cognitive offloading: the delegation of routine or low-level tasks to external tools in order to preserve mental resources for higher-order thinking. Rather than eroding cognition, offloading can serve as a scaffold for deeper engagement.

Recent research illustrates this more optimistic trajectory. Iqbal, Hashmi, Asghar, & Abid (2025) found that pre-service teachers who employed AI reflectively showed measurable gains in academic performance, largely because offloading rote mechanical tasks enabled more time for metacognitive reflection. Similarly, Liu, Kong, & Merve's (2025) systematic review of 327 studies concluded that ChatGPT can reduce writing anxiety, boost productivity, and support self-regulated learning, provided that human oversight ensures accuracy and ethical alignment. Moreover, Cheng et al. (2025) argue that the risks of “AI hallucination” or plagiarism are not inherent to the technology but stem from pedagogical contexts that fail to teach critical evaluation and responsible use.

This duality underscores the tension in Carr’s warnings. Over-reliance on generative AI may indeed hollow out critical thinking and skill development, yet strategic integration under guided pedagogies can transform AI into a scaffold rather than a crutch. Wang et al. (2025) argue that fears about AI echo earlier moral panics around the internet or calculators, and that the task is not prohibition but redesign. They recommend assessment models such as oral defenses, process portfolios, or multimodal assignments that emphasize reasoning and reflection over product alone. Our findings echo this perspective: the educational value or harm of AI was not determined by the technology itself but by the institutional and pedagogical structures shaping its use.

In sum, sociotechnical imaginaries of AI in education oscillate between dystopian fears of cognitive atrophy and utopian hopes of augmented learning. Our data suggest that both are plausible futures, contingent upon how institutions and instructors frame AI's role. If left uncritically adopted, Carr's predictions (2020, 2025) of intellectual decline may materialize; but if harnessed reflectively within redesigned pedagogies, generative AI may instead catalyze new forms of learning, creativity, and academic literacy.

Discourse, Power, and the Politics of Academic Integrity

Norman Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis (CDA) reminds us that discourse is never neutral: it constitutes social reality by shaping how phenomena are named, framed, and acted upon. In the case of generative AI in higher education, our findings show that institutional discourse profoundly conditions students' practices. Where policies framed AI use exclusively in terms of plagiarism or misconduct, students reported heightened anxiety and resorted to clandestine use. By contrast, when instructors adopted dialogic rhetoric—such as explicitly permitting AI for brainstorming or language support with proper citation—students described their practices more openly, with less sense of stigma. This confirms CDA's central claim: discourse does not merely describe practices but governs what is socially possible (Fairclough, 1995).

Simpson's (2025) analysis of UK university AI guidance documents illustrates this vividly. In her study, selective universities employed “hierarchical, authoritarian language” emphasizing individual accountability and risk of punishment, effectively constructing students as potential violators. Less selective universities, by contrast, used “inclusive and explanatory rhetoric” that framed students as partners in navigating new technologies (pp. 39–41). Our multi-campus data resonate strongly with this finding: prohibitive discourses foster secrecy and defensive rationalizations, whereas inclusive discourses enable dialogue, reflection, and ethical engagement. In Fairclough's (2001) terms, the former represents a discourse of power over, while the latter constitutes a discourse of power with.

Beyond individual policies, the wider literature shows that AI in education has been discursively polarized. Bearman, Ryan, & Ajjawi (2023) describe the oscillation between doomster narratives (AI as the “death of authorship” and end of integrity) and booster narratives (AI as transformative, democratizing, and inevitable). This binary framing was mirrored in our interviews: some faculty spoke of AI as an existential threat to academic standards, while others hailed it as a liberating pedagogical tool. Such polarized imaginaries, however, obscure nuance and leave students uncertain about what is permissible, reinforcing what Bearman et al. (2023, p. 373) call the “mythic language of crisis and salvation.” CDA here reveals the problem: when discourse swings between extremes, it forecloses the possibility of developing balanced, practice-based norms.

Encouragingly, some scholars argue for discursive shifts that move beyond prohibition. Giray, Sevnarayan, & Ranjbaran Madiseh (2025b) contend that AI-detection regimes—which rely heavily on technological policing—produce “an atmosphere of distrust and anxiety” (p. 101). Instead, they advocate for trust-based and pedagogically integrated approaches that treat AI as a literacy issue rather than a disciplinary problem. This aligns closely with our data: students in punitive contexts described AI as a “forbidden shortcut,” whereas those in trust-oriented environments reported using AI more reflectively, acknowledging its role while maintaining responsibility for their learning.

Comparable insights come from Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019), who emphasize that technology discourses in higher education often function as regimes of truth: they define legitimate knowledge practices and delegitimize others. In the context of AI, discourses of suspicion may push students toward concealment, while discourses of openness may normalize transparent engagement. Similarly, Foltýnek et al. (2020) have shown in plagiarism studies that the effectiveness of integrity regimes depends less on detection technologies and more on the discursive framing that either builds trust with students or casts them under permanent suspicion.

Thus, CDA highlights that the discourses surrounding generative AI are not neutral descriptors but normative instruments that shape behavior, power, and identity. As Fairclough (1995) reminds us, discourse both reproduces and challenges power relations. In our context, policy rhetoric does not merely communicate rules, it constructs students as either trusted partners in knowledge production or as potential cheaters under surveillance. Our findings suggest that when discourse stigmatizes AI, it drives students to the backstage of secrecy; when it acknowledges AI’s presence and guides its use, it creates a front stage where students can perform authorship more honestly. The politics of academic integrity in the AI era, therefore, will hinge on how institutions choose to speak about AI—and in turn, what kinds of student subjectivities such speech makes possible.

Integration and Theoretical Synthesis

Taken together, these three perspectives illuminate the multifaceted and contested nature of generative AI in student writing. Each lens highlights a different dimension of practice: Goffman (1956) helps us understand how students actively manage their academic identities through front-stage and back-stage performances; Carr (2020, 2025) warns us about the cognitive costs of automation and the risks of intellectual shallows; and Fairclough (1989, 1995, 2001) reveals how institutional discourses shape what counts as legitimate or illegitimate authorship. None of these perspectives alone is sufficient, but together they offer a richer synthesis.

Importantly, the lenses intersect in ways that explain our findings more fully. Carr’s concerns about shallow learning and diminished critical thinking Carr (2020, 2025) are exacerbated when students feel compelled to use AI covertly—a dramaturgical response to punitive discourses of prohibition. As Cellary & Walczak

(2023) note, the erosion of critical thinking skills in Polish higher education was linked not only to AI's convenience but also to a lack of supportive pedagogical structures. Similarly, Revesai (2025) observed that Zimbabwean students' "critical thinking atrophy" was inseparable from the institutional environments in which AI use was stigmatized. In our study, students who relied heavily on AI admitted to skipping deeper engagement, particularly when the discourse positioned AI as illicit. Thus, cognitive decline (Carr) and impression management (Goffman) converge under specific discursive regimes (Fairclough).

Conversely, shifting the discourse toward transparency has the potential to reconfigure both cognition and performance. As Fairclough (1989, 1995, 2001) reminds us, discourse not only reflects but reproduces power. When policies frame AI solely in terms of cheating, students conceal its use backstage; but when discourse acknowledges AI's role and provides guidelines for responsible engagement, the "stage" itself changes. Our findings showed that in inclusive environments, students brought AI into the front stage by reflecting openly on its role in brainstorming or editing. This aligns with Giray et al. (2025a) call to move "beyond policing" toward trust-based discourses that cultivate engagement rather than fear. Under such conditions, dramaturgical performances shift: instead of deception, students perform transparency, and AI use becomes part of the legitimate repertoire of student authorship.

This reconfigured stage also mitigates Carr's dystopian imaginary. When AI is used within transparent and pedagogically structured contexts, it can serve as a scaffold rather than a shortcut. Iqbal et al. (2025) found that pre-service teachers who employed generative AI reflectively experienced enhanced learning, precisely because offloading routine tasks freed cognitive space for metacognition. Liu et al.'s (2025) review of 327 studies similarly concluded that AI can support self-regulated learning and reduce writing anxiety when embedded within reflective pedagogy. In dramaturgical terms, the audience (faculty and policy) redefines what counts as an acceptable performance, enabling students to align their front-stage behaviors with authentic engagement rather than concealment.

The synthesis also underscores the dangers of policies that merely police outputs. Foltýnek et al. (2020) showed in plagiarism research that detection-heavy approaches foster distrust and anxiety, which in turn encourage concealment rather than integrity. Our findings echo this dynamic: punitive policies intensified deceptive performances and reinforced Carr's warnings about superficial learning. By contrast, pedagogies that normalize AI as a topic of discussion—through oral defenses, reflective process portfolios, or multimodal assessments (Werse & Smith, 2025)—can reshape both cognition and discourse, cultivating integrity alongside skill development.

In short, our study demonstrates that student use of generative AI cannot be understood without attending simultaneously to performance (Goffman), cognition (Carr), and discourse (Fairclough). The intersection of these frameworks reveals that

deception, cognitive outsourcing, and discursive exclusion are mutually reinforcing. But it also shows a pathway forward: by reconfiguring the institutional stage (Goffman), acknowledging the cognitive risks of automation while harnessing its scaffolding potential (Carr), and cultivating discourses of trust and transparency (Fairclough), higher education can move toward practices that preserve integrity while embracing technological change. As Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) argue, the challenge is not whether AI belongs in higher education but how educators frame and govern its use. Our findings suggest that only an integrated approach—drawing on identity, cognition, and discourse—will ensure that generative AI enriches rather than impoverishes academic life.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the gap between students' claims about their use of generative AI in thesis writing and the practices revealed by their prompt records, situating the findings within three theoretical frameworks: Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, Carr's critique of automation, and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. Together, these perspectives offer a nuanced understanding of how students both navigate and normalize the role of AI in academic authorship.

Three key insights emerged. First, students' behaviors reflect dramaturgical performances: they maintain a front stage of independent authorship while relegating AI to the backstage, a hidden but indispensable collaborator. Second, the sociotechnical imaginary highlights a tension between efficiency and erosion of skills: while AI affords speed and clarity, uncritical reliance risks narrowing opportunities for deeper learning, as Carr (2011, 2023) predicted. Third, discourse and power shape the boundaries of legitimacy: punitive, prohibition-oriented policies intensify secrecy, whereas inclusive, dialogic discourses foster transparency and engagement.

The study's primary contribution lies in integrating these lenses to reveal that deception, cognitive outsourcing, and discursive exclusion are not isolated issues but mutually reinforcing dynamics. Conversely, reconfiguring institutional discourses and pedagogical practices can reshape the "stage" of academic writing, enabling AI to function as a scaffold rather than a shortcut. Policies that treat students as partners, coupled with assessments that emphasize process and reflection, may help to safeguard both integrity and learning in the AI era.

At the practical level, these findings call for higher education institutions to move beyond detection and prohibition, and toward the cultivation of AI literacy. Students should be taught not only how to use generative AI tools but also when and why such use is appropriate. Assessment practices that prioritize reasoning and transparency—such as portfolios, oral defenses, or AI-use reflections—are likely to better align with the realities of AI-assisted writing.

Finally, this study opens pathways for further inquiry. Future research should examine cross-cultural differences in how students perceive the legitimacy of AI in academic work, investigate faculty perspectives and their impact on institutional

discourse, and explore longitudinally how generative AI reshapes writing skills over time. By situating generative AI not merely as a technological disruption but as a site of performance, cognition, and discourse, we underscore that the future of academic integrity will depend less on the tools themselves than on the social, pedagogical, and institutional contexts in which they are embedded.

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