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Autonomy and Academic Dishonesty: Exploring the Mediating Role of Trust in ChatGPT

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Abstract: *The integration of AI tools like ChatGPT in higher education has sparked worries about academic honesty and reliance on AI. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT in educational settings has created concerns about academic integrity and dependency on AI. This research explored the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty as a mediator in the relationship between trust in ChatGPT. The research design used in this study was quantitative with a cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 230 researchers working in educational institutes in Karachi and Islamabad, Pakistan, through standardized questionnaires. The results show that there are strong positive correlations between academic dishonesty and autonomy ($r = 0.98$, $p < .01$), and between trust in ChatGPT and autonomy ($r = 0.90$, $p < .01$). Trust in ChatGPT is positively correlated with academic dishonesty ($r = 0.95$, $p < 0.01$) and partially mediates the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty. The results indicate d that promoting independence and academic freedom might help curb academic dishonesty by minimizing excessive use of AI tools. The study emphasizes the need for self-directed learning and ethical utilization of AI in universities.*

Keywords: Autonomy, Academic Dishonesty, Trust, ChatGPT, Artificial Intelligence, Researchers, Algorithms, Pakistan

Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly technologized day by day, bringing about a significant revolution in the way people connect globally, access information, and conduct business. Technology has also facilitated learning, enabling students to access information easily and enhance their understanding of concepts through innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI) (Irfan et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2024; Waldock et al., 2025). Higher education and research institutions have been drastically reshaped by the swift development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, which provides tools to support writing, synthesizing literature, organizing data, and generating ideas. One of these groups, ChatGPT, has become popular for its capacity to provide coherent human-like answers to a variety of academic and research-related queries (Shen et al., 2023). While ChatGPT offers advantages in terms of efficiency, accessibility, and assistance in producing knowledge, its widespread adoption has also sparked significant concerns about academic integrity and ethical research practices (Rudolph et al., 2023). In academic settings, excessive AI-generated content can lead to potential misuse such as plagiarism, uncritical use of AI-generated content, and misattribution of authorship.

Academic dishonesty is defined as the intentional misconduct of ethical standards in academic and research activities, such as plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, and misuse of sources and/or assistance (Faucher & Caves, 2009). Such practices pose a serious threat to the reliability of scientific information, thus to the integrity of scientific communication. Past studies have shown that dishonest practices in academia can manifest beyond the students and can also happen among researchers when they feel the pressure of productivity, publishing requirements, and the reliance on technology (Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020). Limited enforcement of research ethics policies, rising publication pressure, and the increasing reliance on digital

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tools and artificial intelligence (AI) pose persistent challenges to the fight against academic dishonesty in Pakistan (Khan, 2018).

Autonomy is one of the psychological variables that can affect ethical conduct in an Academic and research environment. In Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is a dimension of the way in which a person acts, specifically, their level of voluntariness and self-directedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The more autonomous people are, the more they can regulate themselves, feel motivated by internal factors, and embrace moral principles. In research, the more autonomous a researcher is, the more likely he/she is to use independent thinking and to uphold the integrity in knowledge production, while lower levels of autonomy may lead to more reliance on external tools, and less on ethical self-monitoring (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Schraw et al., 2007).

Another psychological factor that is gaining momentum is trust in ChatGPT. Trust in AI is the hope that an AI system will be reliable, accurate, and capable of providing valid and useful information (Shen et al., 2023). Trust in ChatGPT can spur researchers to use content generated by the AI without proper verification or critical assessment, which can encourage unethical academic practices (D'Agostino, 2023). If highly persuasive academic writing is its forte, ChatGPT may inadvertently be fostering reliance and diminishing critical thinking skills (Dowling & Lucey, 2023; Gao et al., 2022).

Researchers' trust in ChatGPT is probably going to be influenced by autonomy. People with more autonomy will question the results produced by AI and not rely on it as a replacement for their own thoughts. Conversely, researchers with limited autonomy will rely more on external systems and may trust more in the answers provided by AI. It is hypothesized that the use of trust for ChatGPT can serve as a mediating variable between autonomy and academic dishonesty in academic environments.

Although the global interest in AI has grown in the academic field, there has been scant research on the psychological processes that connect autonomy, trust in ChatGPT, and academic dishonesty among researchers, especially in developing countries like Pakistan. Current research has tended to concentrate on students or on the general use of AI, but has not covered the ethical decision-making of researchers in AI-enabled settings. This is crucial to the appreciation of the interplay between autonomy and trust in AI, and how it collectively contributes to research integrity in today's context.

Hypothesis

H1: Trust in ChatGPT mediates the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty among researchers.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a quantitative cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty, with trust in ChatGPT as a mediator.

Participants

The study incorporated participants with at least one year of research experience, and with a minimum of 23 years of age and a minimum of a bachelor's degree level of qualification. Those who are working in the educational institutes of Karachi and Islamabad were added only.

Sampling Technique

The participants were recruited using the purposive sampling technique. This non-probability sampling method was suitable for the study as it involved researchers who were more familiar with the use of AI tools and academic writing practices.

Measures

In order to reach the aims of the study, by obtaining written informed consent from all the subjects, a structured questionnaire was given. The questionnaire had four sections: demographic, learner autonomy,

trust in ChatGPT, and academic dishonesty. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Learner Autonomy Scale (LAS)

The learner autonomy scale (LAS) developed by Bei et al. (2020) was used to evaluate learner autonomy. All were measured using a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The scale has a good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .83 as previously reported.

Human-Computer Trust Scale (HCTS)

A questionnaire based on the Human-Computer Trust Scale (HCTS) (Gulati et al., 2019) was used to measure the trust of ChatGPT. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has been reported to have a Cronbach's alpha of .76.

Internet-Triggered Academic Dishonesty Scale (ITADS)

The Internet-Triggered Academic Dishonesty Scale (ITADS), devised by Akbulut et al. (2008), was used to determine academic dishonesty, as the first subscale was designed to measure academic dishonesty caused by the Internet. The items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale includes items representing plagiarism, falsification, fraudulence, delinquency, and unauthorized assistance. This subscale has a reported Cronbach's alpha reliability of .91.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted within the limits of ethical guidelines set by APA 7th. All participants were given an informed consent form that included information about the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researchers ensured transparency throughout the research process and reported findings honestly, without data manipulation or biased interpretation. Data was analyzed utilizing the SPSS software, and mediation analysis was carried out through Hayes Macro.

Results

Table 1

Demographics Variables (N=230)

Demographics		***N***	***%***
Gender	Men	126	56
	Women	100	44
Qualification	Bachelor	99	44
	Masters	81	36
	Doctorate	46	20
Field Of Study	Social Science	38	17
	Life Science	80	35
	Management Sciences	108	48
Researcher's Career Stage	Entry Level	68	30
	Mid-Level	80	35
	Advanced Level	78	35
Year of Research Experience	1 - 3 years	63	28
	4 - 6 years	68	30
	7 – 9 years	36	16
	10 – 12 years	17	8
	13 – 15 years	28	12
	> 15 years	14	6

Note. *n*= Frequency; %= Percentage

The data included 230 researchers with a mean age of 35.97 years (SD = 10.93). In terms of gender, 49% (n = 113) were men and 51% (n = 117) were women. Regarding qualification, 36% (n = 83) held a bachelor's degree, 36% (n = 83) a master's degree, and 28% (n = 64) a doctorate. For the field of study, 34% (n = 78) were from Social Sciences, 32% (n = 74) from Computer Science, and 33% (n = 76) from Business Studies. In terms of researchers' career level, 36% (n = 83) were entry-level, 36% (n = 83) intermediate-level, and 28% (n = 64) expert-level researchers. Research experience was distributed as 33% (n = 76) with less than one year, 33% (n = 76) with one year, and 34% (n = 78) with two or more years of experience.

Table 2

Correlation among Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Autonomy	-	.903**	.982**
2. Trust in Chat GPT		-	.956**
3. Academic Dishonesty			-

Note. N = 230, ***p < .01*

Table 2 shows that all study variables have a significant, strong positive correlation at p < .01. Learner autonomy is strongly related to trust in ChatGPT (r = .90) and academic dishonesty (r = .98). Similarly, trust in ChatGPT is also strongly associated with academic dishonesty (r = .95).

Figure 1

Unstandardized Regression Coefficient and Standard Errors

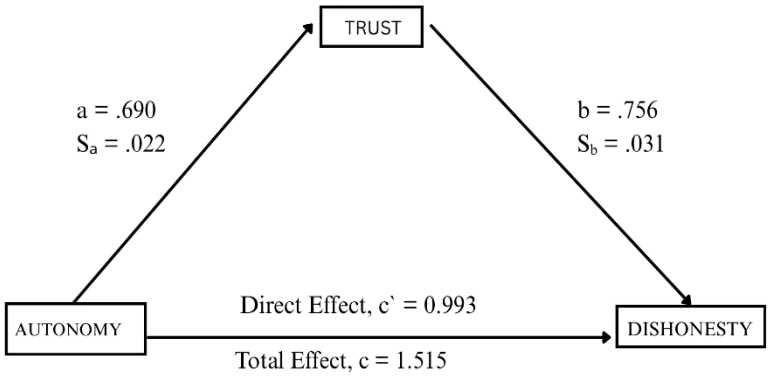

Figure 1 shows the mediation model indicating the direct and indirect effects of the studied variables and further shows that Trust in Chat GPT mediates the relationship between Autonomy and Academic Dishonesty. Table 3 describes the mediation analysis and shows a significant indirect effect of autonomy on academic dishonesty through trust in Chat GPT. Table 3 and Figure 1 further indicate that autonomy significantly predicts trust in ChatGPT (a = .69, SE = .02, p < .001), and trust in ChatGPT significantly predicts academic dishonesty (b = .75, SE = .03, p < .001). The direct effect of autonomy on academic dishonesty remained significant (c' = .99, SE = .02, p < .001), indicating a statistically significant partial mediation. The model explained substantial variance in trust in Chat GPT (R^2 = .81, F = 984.49, p < .001) and academic dishonesty (R^2 = .99, F = 11114.42, p < .001), confirming that trust in Chat GPT partially mediates the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty. The total effect of autonomy on academic dishonesty was significant (c = 1.515), while the direct effect decreased after including the mediator (c′ = 0.993), indicating partial mediation. The Sobel test further confirmed the significance of the indirect effect (z = 19.13, p < .001), suggesting that trust in ChatGPT substantially explains the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty.

Table 3

Mediation with Direct Pathways for Autonomy (Predictor Variable), Trust in ChatGPT (Mediator Variable), and Dishonesty (Outcome Variable), (N=230)

Variable / Effect	B	SE	t	p	95% Confidence Interval	
AT →DH	.993	.024	41.534	<0.001	3.244	5.344
AT →TC	.690	.022	31.376	<0.001	.646	.733
AT → TC → DH	.756	.031	24.160	<0.001	.694	.817
Effects						
Direct c`	0.993	.024	41.534	<0.001	.946	1.041
Indirect (a*b)	.522	.029			.466	.582
Total	1.515	.019	77.525	<0.001	1.476	1.553

Note: *B*= Unstandardized coefficients, SE = Standard error, LL = Lower limit, UL = Upper limit, AT = *Autonomy*, TC= *Trust in ChatGPT*, DH= *Dishonesty*

*Based on 5000 bootstrap samples

Discussion

The present study explored whether trust in ChatGPT mediates the relationship between autonomy and academic dishonesty among researchers. The mediation analysis supported the proposed indirect effect, indicating that autonomy significantly predicts trust in ChatGPT, which in turn significantly predicts academic dishonesty. This confirms that trust in ChatGPT acts as a psychological mechanism through which autonomy influences unethical academic behavior.

In particular, those who had the most freedom to use ChatGPT were the least confident of its trustworthiness. Self-directed, intrinsically regulated individuals are more likely to make their own judgments and assess external information sources rather than blindly accepting the information generated by AI. Lower trust in ChatGPT also means a lower likelihood of using AI-generated content without any criticism, which weakens the engagement in academically dishonest practices.

Higher levels of trust in ChatGPT, on the other hand, were correlated with academic dishonesty. If researchers believe that the output of AI is very accurate, then they might blindly take it as true and rely on it without proper verification, which could lead to plagiarism or misuse of AI-generated content for academic purposes. Persons using ChatGPT might falsely believe that it is accurate and may underestimate the ethical issues of relying on it without criticalness and caution (Shen et al., 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023).

Strong emphasis on educational achievement, publication pressures, and hierarchy within academic institutions in Pakistan play a significant role in shaping academic behavior. In many research situations, productivity and output, rather than process-oriented ethical research practices, are of great importance. Moreover, the levels of institutional enforcement of research ethics and the availability of formal education on academic integrity could also vary, potentially influencing ethical decision-making. In this context, the quick arrival of AI instruments like ChatGPT brings opportunities and challenges for researchers because they could view these instruments as effective means of addressing academic demands. But with less internalized ethical guidelines and critical thinking skills, the more the content produced by AI increases the chances of academic dishonesty. Additionally, cultural values such as authority respect and technological optimism could impact trust in AI systems, emphasizing the critical value of autonomy in steering responsible and autonomous research practices within Pakistan's academic landscape. Concurrently, cultural norms of authority, respect, and technological optimism might also influence trust in AI systems, highlighting the significance of autonomy to direct responsible and autonomous research behaviors in Pakistan's academic setting.

Implications

These study results are theoretically and practically significant for the higher education system and the policy makers. What the results do indicate, however, is the need to empower researchers to be autonomous by encouraging self-directed learning, critical thinking, and academic ownership. Thus, universities should create learning spaces where students are encouraged to think and do things on their own rather than relying on external resources for them.

Secondly, the study highlights the importance of providing structured training programs for the ethical implementation of ChatGPT and other AI technologies. Such training should include how to critically assess the information produced by AI, verify its accuracy, and ensure proper citation practices. Third, there should be policies and guidelines at the institutional level that clearly and explicitly establish acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI in academic and research settings. These guidelines will help to minimize ambiguity and ensure the responsible use of new technologies. Finally, to highlight the ethical obligations in AI-supported environments and promote long-term behavioral change within the research community, AI ethics and research integrity courses can be incorporated into academic programs.

Limitations and Recommendations

Some of the restrictions should be noted. Causal inferences could not be drawn as the study was cross-sectional, and social desirability bias might have been present as the study used a self-report format. In addition, it was limited to researchers from Karachi and Islamabad, and thus, the results are not easily generalisable. More studies are needed to more clearly establish causal relationships using longitudinal or experimental designs and larger sample sizes across various geographical and disciplinary areas. Further psychological research is also welcome to explore other constructs and variables that may shed light on the phenomenon of academic dishonesty involving AI.

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