



Digital Literacy as Ethical Competence: Research Integrity in AI-Mediated Academic Work among LIS Students in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores how digital literacy shapes research integrity among final-year Library and Information Science students at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, within AI-mediated academic environments. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from thirty participants through interviews and focus groups and analysed thematically to capture students' experiences of digital research and ethical decision making. The findings show that although students display strong ethical awareness linked to their professional identity, this does not always translate into practice. Digital competence supports source evaluation and reference management, but also enables uncritical copying, use of rewriting tools, and uncertain engagement with artificial intelligence, especially under academic pressure. Behaviour is further influenced by inconsistent supervision, unclear institutional guidance, and peer norms. The study reframes digital literacy as an ethical competence rather than a purely technical skill, showing that its role in research integrity depends on intention and context. It contributes evidence from an underexplored African setting and highlights the need for clearer, discipline-sensitive policies on AI use, alongside stronger supervision and integrity education.

Keywords: Digital literacy; research integrity; artificial intelligence in education; ethical competence; Higher Education

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana literasi digital memengaruhi integritas penelitian di kalangan mahasiswa tingkat akhir Program Studi Ilmu Perpustakaan dan Informasi di Universitas Ilorin, Nigeria, dalam lingkungan akademik yang dimediasi oleh kecerdasan buatan (AI). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari tiga puluh peserta melalui wawancara dan kelompok fokus, kemudian dianalisis secara tematis untuk menggali pengalaman mahasiswa dalam penelitian digital dan pengambilan keputusan etis. Hasil Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun mahasiswa menunjukkan kesadaran etis yang kuat yang terkait dengan identitas profesional mereka, hal ini tidak selalu tercermin dalam praktik. Kompetensi digital mendukung evaluasi sumber dan pengelolaan referensi, tetapi juga memungkinkan penyalinan tanpa kritis, penggunaan alat penulisan ulang, serta keterlibatan yang tidak pasti dengan kecerdasan buatan, terutama di bawah tekanan akademik. Perilaku tersebut semakin dipengaruhi oleh pengawasan yang tidak konsisten, panduan institusional yang tidak jelas, dan norma-norma teman sebaya. Studi ini mendefinisikan ulang literasi digital sebagai kompetensi etis, bukan sekadar keterampilan teknis, dan menunjukkan bahwa perannya dalam integritas penelitian bergantung pada niat dan konteks. Studi ini menyajikan bukti dari konteks Afrika yang belum banyak dieksplorasi serta menyoroti perlunya kebijakan yang lebih jelas dan sensitif terhadap disiplin ilmu terkait penggunaan kecerdasan buatan, di samping pengawasan yang lebih ketat dan pendidikan integritas.

Kata kunci: Literasi digital; integritas penelitian; kecerdasan buatan dalam pendidikan; kompetensi etika; Pendidikan Tinggi

Introduction

The expansion of digital technologies in higher education has reshaped how knowledge is produced, accessed, and evaluated. Students now work in environments defined by instant access to information, open access repositories, and increasingly sophisticated digital tools. More recently, artificial intelligence (AI) applications capable of generating, summarising, and rephrasing academic content have added further complexity to scholarly work. While these developments improve efficiency, they also raise important concerns about research integrity.

Digital literacy is widely recognised as essential for academic success, yet it is often reduced to technical proficiency rather than understood as a broader capability that includes critical evaluation, ethical judgement, and responsible knowledge production (Georgopoulou et al., 2025). This distinction is particularly important for research integrity, where the ability to access and use information must be guided by academic norms and ethical responsibility. The assumption that digitally skilled students will naturally behave ethically remains insufficiently examined (Simos et al., 2026). These concerns are especially relevant for the digital generation. Although students are generally confident in using digital platforms, this familiarity does not necessarily translate into information literacy or ethical research behaviour. The ease of copying and reusing digital content, combined with academic pressure and uneven supervision, increases the risk of misconduct, including plagiarism and uncritical use of automated tools.

In Nigerian universities, efforts to integrate information and communication technologies into teaching and research have intensified these challenges. While access to digital resources has improved, less attention has been given to developing the ethical competencies required for responsible use. This has created a gap between students' digital capabilities and their understanding of ethical research practice, particularly in relation to emerging technologies such as AI. Library and Information Science (LIS) students are especially relevant in this context. Their training in information ethics, scholarly communication, and digital resource management positions them as future custodians of knowledge systems. Examining how they approach research provides an

opportunity to assess whether this training translates into ethical behaviour within digitally mediated environments.

Digital literacy has evolved from a focus on technical skills to include critical evaluation, cognitive processing, and ethical responsibility. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) describes it as a set of survival skills in digital environments, while Lankshear and Knobel (2008) emphasise its grounding in social practices shaped by cultural norms. In higher education, Mackey and Jacobson (2011) extend this through metaliteracy, where learners act as both consumers and producers of information and are accountable for its ethical use, including attribution and source credibility. Despite this broader understanding, digital literacy is still often equated with operational competence. Students who are proficient with digital tools are frequently assumed to possess the critical and ethical capacities required for scholarly work. Evidence suggests otherwise. Selwyn (2016) argues that familiarity with digital technologies does not necessarily lead to critical understanding or responsible use. Students may appear confident while lacking the evaluative judgement and ethical awareness required for academic work. This tension between technical proficiency and ethical competence is central to this study. Digital literacy can support responsible scholarship, but it can also enable uncritical copying, superficial engagement with sources, and improper attribution. Its influence depends on how it is enacted in practice.

Academic integrity is commonly defined through principles such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Bretag et al., 2019). While traditionally associated with plagiarism, fabrication, and unauthorised collaboration, digital technologies have reshaped both its forms and drivers. Digital environments provide access to vast information resources, which support learning but also increase opportunities for misconduct due to the ease of copying and redistribution (Eaton, 2021). Research shows that academic dishonesty is often influenced by contextual factors such as time pressure, assessment demands, and peer behaviour, rather than deliberate intent (McCabe et al., 2012; Pecorari, 2013). This challenges approaches that focus solely on detection and punishment. Recent work adopts a developmental perspective, emphasising ethical reasoning and understanding of academic conventions. Bretag et al. (2019) argue that integrity should be embedded in teaching and learning rather than enforced only through regulation. Ethical behaviour is therefore shaped by institutional culture, supervision, and peer norms. Digitally mediated environments further complicate these dynamics, as boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable

practices, particularly in paraphrasing and reuse of content, are often unclear. Without consistent guidance, students may struggle to distinguish legitimate practice from misconduct. Academic integrity thus depends on both individual responsibility and institutional clarity.

AI introduces an additional layer of complexity. Tools based on large language models can generate, summarise, and rephrase text, raising questions about authorship, originality, and accountability. While these tools can support learning, they also challenge established understandings of academic integrity. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) highlight the increasing integration of AI in education, while more recent studies show that AI-assisted writing does not fit neatly within traditional definitions of plagiarism, particularly when used as support rather than substitution (Cotton et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). This creates uncertainty for both students and institutions. Authorship becomes especially difficult to define when AI contributes substantially to text production. At the same time, the accessibility of these tools, combined with academic pressure, may encourage their use without careful consideration of ethical implications. The literature increasingly calls for a shift towards responsible use, supported by clear institutional guidance, although empirical evidence from non-Western environments remains limited.

Within African higher education, the relationship between digital literacy and academic integrity remains underexplored. Much of the existing research focuses on access to technology yet access alone does not ensure responsible use. Studies indicate that students often struggle with evaluating sources, applying citation practices, and understanding academic conventions. These challenges are shaped by prior educational experiences, institutional support, and consistency in enforcement. As a result, engagement with digital tools does not always align with responsible scholarship. In Nigeria, increased reliance on digital resources has not been matched by equivalent development in information literacy and ethical awareness. Limited guidance and inconsistent supervision further contribute to uncertainty, particularly regarding emerging technologies such as AI. LIS students therefore provide a useful case for examining how disciplinary training interacts with these broader challenges.

Across the literature, three major points emerge. Digital literacy includes ethical as well as technical dimensions but is often treated narrowly. Academic integrity is shaped by both individual knowledge and social and institutional factors. Artificial intelligence introduces new ambiguities that challenge established definitions of

acceptable academic practice. Despite these insights, the relationship between digital literacy and research integrity remains insufficiently examined, particularly in African contexts. There is a need for qualitative research that explores how students experience and negotiate these issues in practice.

This study addresses the identified gap by examining how digital literacy shapes research integrity among final-year Library and Information Science (LIS) students at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. It integrates digital literacy theory (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) to explain research integrity as the interaction of digital competence, behavioural intention, and the academic environment. The novelty of this study lies in examining digital literacy, research integrity, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI) within a single qualitative framework in the Nigerian LIS context, where these issues have rarely been investigated together. Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) how does digital literacy shape LIS undergraduates' understanding of research integrity in Nigeria; (2) how do institutional and social contexts influence their ethical research behaviour; and (3) how do LIS undergraduates interpret and negotiate the use of AI in academic work.

Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how final-year Library and Information Science (LIS) students understand and enact research integrity in digitally mediated research environments. The study was conducted at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, involving 30 final-year LIS undergraduates selected through purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on three criteria: they were enrolled in the final year of the LIS programme, had completed research methodology courses, and were actively undertaking their final-year research projects. These criteria ensured that all participants had direct experience with digital research tools, academic writing, and institutional research practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interview guide covered participants' experiences of digital literacy, research integrity, institutional support, peer influence, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic work. Individual interviews lasted approximately 40–60 minutes, while each focus group discussion lasted about 90 minutes. All sessions were conducted with participants' informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The combination of interviews and FGDs enabled the researcher to obtain both

in-depth individual experiences and shared perspectives on ethical research practices in digital environments.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data before being manually coded. Similar codes were grouped into categories and refined into themes representing participants' experiences of digital literacy, research integrity, institutional influences, peer interactions, and AI use in academic research. The findings were interpreted in relation to the research objectives to explain how these factors shape students' ethical research behaviour. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was conducted by comparing interview and focus group data, member checking was carried out with selected participants, and an audit trail documenting the coding and theme development process was maintained. Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Result and Discussion

Digital Literacy and Students' Understanding of Research Integrity

The findings show that digital literacy plays a central role in shaping how students understand research integrity, but not in a straightforward way. Participants demonstrated strong ethical awareness, often linking research integrity to their emerging professional identity as future information professionals. Their training in information ethics, citation practices, and scholarly communication informed this understanding, with emphasis placed on proper attribution and responsible information use. Some also expressed a responsibility to model ethical behaviour in their future careers. This supports the view that digital literacy, when grounded in disciplinary training, extends beyond technical competence to include ethical responsibility in knowledge production (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). Also, a clear gap emerged between understanding and practice. Although students knew what constitutes ethical research behaviour, they acknowledged that they did not always act accordingly. This aligns with literature showing that awareness of academic integrity principles does not necessarily prevent misconduct, particularly under competing pressures (Eaton, 2021; Pecorari, 2013).

Digital competence itself was found to have a dual effect. On one hand, students' proficiency in using databases, search engines, citation managers, and plagiarism

detection tools supported effective research practices and increased confidence in handling academic tasks. On the other hand, the same competencies enabled practices such as copy-and-paste behaviour, reliance on rewriting tools, and the use of AI to modify text. Some participants expressed uncertainty about whether such outputs could still be considered their own work. This highlights that digital literacy does not automatically lead to ethical behaviour; rather, it expands what students are able to do. This finding is consistent with Selwyn (2016), who argues that digital proficiency does not necessarily translate into critical or ethical use..

Institutional and Social Contexts Influencing Ethical Research Behaviour

The findings indicate that ethical research behaviour is strongly shaped by institutional and social contexts, particularly academic pressure, supervision, and peer influence. Students frequently described how deadlines, workload, and the desire for high academic performance influenced their decisions. Under such pressure, some admitted taking shortcuts, even when they understood the ethical implications. In these situations, completing tasks often took precedence over maintaining ethical standards. This supports research showing that academic misconduct is often driven by situational factors rather than deliberate intent (McCabe et al., 2012), and aligns with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, where perceived behavioural control can be reduced under pressure.

Supervision and institutional practices also played a significant role. Participants reported that clear guidance, regular feedback, and active engagement by lecturers encouraged ethical behaviour. When lecturers emphasised integrity and closely monitored work, students were more careful. Conversely, inconsistent supervision created uncertainty and increased the likelihood of less rigorous practices. This reflects Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasises the role of modelling and reinforcement in shaping behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Although institutional policies were acknowledged, they were often less influential than direct lecturer interaction, particularly when policies were not clearly communicated.

Peer influence further shaped behaviour. Students described how interactions with classmates helped them interpret acceptable practices. In some cases, peers reinforced ethical conduct through mutual checking and support. In others, exposure to misconduct reduced its perceived seriousness and contributed to its normalisation.

These findings suggest that academic integrity is not only governed by formal rules but also shaped by shared norms within student communities

Students' Interpretation and Negotiation of AI Use in Academic Work

The findings reveal considerable uncertainty in how students interpret and use AI in academic work. Although participants were generally aware of AI tools, many were unclear about what constitutes acceptable use. Several pointed to the absence of clear institutional guidance, leading them to rely on personal judgement or peer advice. This resulted in varied and sometimes inconsistent practices. Students reported using AI tools for tasks such as paraphrasing and improving writing, yet expressed concern about whether such use compromised originality. This uncertainty reflects broader debates in the literature, where AI challenges traditional definitions of authorship, originality, and academic misconduct (Kasneci et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2023). The distinction between assistance and misconduct becomes less clear when AI tools contribute to content generation or transformation. In the absence of explicit guidelines, students negotiated AI use pragmatically, balancing academic expectations, time pressures, and perceived norms. However, this often led to ethically ambiguous decisions. The findings suggest that institutional responses have not kept pace with technological developments, leaving students to navigate these challenges without sufficient support.

Across all three research questions, the findings reinforce the study’s theoretical position that research integrity is shaped by the interaction of capability, intention, and context. Digital literacy provides the necessary skills, but its ethical application depends on students’ attitudes, perceived expectations, and the surrounding environment. The Theory of Planned Behaviour explains how these factors shape intention, while Social Cognitive Theory highlights the influence of supervision, peer behaviour, and institutional context.

Table 1. Internet AccessMethods and Library Use Patterns (N=300)

Theme	Core Description	Key Insight
Ethical Awareness as Professional Identity	Strong awareness of research integrity linked to LIS professional training and identity	Awareness does not consistently translate into practice
Digital Competence as Both Enabler and Risk	High proficiency in digital tools supports research but enables unethical shortcuts	Digital literacy functions as a conditional capability

Academic Pressure and Ethical Compromise	Time constraints and workload shape ethical decision making	Pressure reduces ability to act in line with ethical knowledge
Supervision and Institutional Influence	Lecturer guidance and institutional clarity shape behaviour	Consistency in supervision reinforces ethical practice
Peer Influence and Normalisation of Practices	Peer interactions shape perceptions of acceptable conduct	Misconduct may become normalised within student groups
AI Uncertainty and Emerging Risks	Limited clarity on acceptable AI use leads to varied practices	Lack of guidance increases ethical ambiguity

Table 1 summarizes the six overarching themes identified through the thematic analysis, illustrating the multidimensional nature of research integrity among Library and Information Science (LIS) undergraduates. The findings demonstrate that research integrity is not shaped by a single factor but emerges through the interaction of students' ethical awareness, digital competence, institutional environment, social relationships, and the growing influence of artificial intelligence. While participants generally exhibited a strong understanding of research integrity as part of their professional identity, this awareness alone was insufficient to ensure ethical research practices. Instead, students' decisions were continuously influenced by contextual factors, including academic pressure, lecturer supervision, peer norms, and uncertainty surrounding the ethical use of AI in academic work.

These integrated findings indicate that research integrity among Library and Information Science (LIS) undergraduates cannot be explained solely by students' knowledge of ethical principles. Instead, ethical research behaviour emerges through the interaction between individual competencies, institutional environments, and the evolving digital landscape. Although participants generally demonstrated strong ethical awareness as a result of their disciplinary education, the findings reveal that this awareness did not consistently translate into ethical practice. Digital literacy enabled students to access scholarly resources, manage references, and conduct research more efficiently, yet the same competencies also created opportunities for ethically questionable practices, including inappropriate reliance on paraphrasing tools and artificial intelligence. These findings indicate that digital literacy should be understood not only as a technical capability but also as an ethical competence that requires critical judgement and responsible decision-making throughout the research process.

The study further demonstrates that ethical research behaviour is strongly influenced by contextual factors beyond students' individual intentions. Academic workload, time constraints, lecturer supervision, institutional communication, and peer interactions collectively shaped participants' decisions when conducting research. Students who received consistent guidance and constructive feedback from lecturers were more likely to demonstrate responsible research practices, whereas unclear institutional expectations and exposure to unethical peer behaviour increased the likelihood of ethical compromise. These findings suggest that research integrity should be viewed as a socially situated practice that develops through continuous interaction between individual agency and the surrounding academic environment rather than as an individual characteristic alone.

The findings also highlight the transformative influence of artificial intelligence on contemporary academic practice. While participants recognised AI as a valuable resource for improving writing quality and research efficiency, many remained uncertain regarding the ethical boundaries governing its use. The absence of explicit institutional guidance encouraged students to rely on personal judgement and peer interpretations, resulting in inconsistent understandings of acceptable AI-assisted practices. This finding suggests that the rapid development of generative AI has outpaced existing academic integrity policies, creating new ethical challenges that extend beyond conventional concerns regarding plagiarism and citation. Consequently, universities need to strengthen institutional guidance while integrating ethical digital literacy into research education so that students can utilise emerging technologies responsibly.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the theoretical framework underpinning this study by demonstrating that research integrity develops through the interaction of capability, intention, and context. The Theory of Planned Behaviour explains how students' ethical intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, whereas Social Cognitive Theory illustrates how lecturer supervision, peer behaviour, and institutional environments reinforce or weaken ethical research practices. Accordingly, strengthening research integrity requires more than improving students' digital skills; it also requires supportive institutional cultures, consistent supervision, and clear policies governing the ethical use of emerging technologies. This study therefore contributes to the growing literature by demonstrating that research integrity in digitally mediated higher education is a

dynamic and socially constructed process that requires the integration of technological competence, ethical reasoning, and institutional support.

Conclusion

This study concludes that digital literacy shapes research integrity among final-year Library and Information Science (LIS) students through the interaction of ethical awareness, digital competence, institutional support, and the academic environment. Although students demonstrated a strong understanding of research integrity and recognised it as an important component of their future professional identity, ethical research behaviour was influenced by contextual factors, including academic pressure, lecturer supervision, peer interactions, and the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI). These findings indicate that strengthening research integrity requires not only the development of digital competencies but also the integration of ethical reasoning, consistent institutional support, and clear guidance on the responsible use of emerging technologies. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by demonstrating that digital literacy should be viewed as an ethical competence that supports responsible research practices in digitally mediated learning environments. However, the study was limited to final-year Library and Information Science students at a single Nigerian university; therefore, the findings are not intended for broad statistical generalisation. Future research should involve participants from different academic disciplines and institutional settings, employ comparative or mixed-methods designs, and further investigate how institutional policies and AI governance influence research integrity across diverse higher education contexts.

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