

Research Writing, Ghostwriting and Academic Cheating in the Age of AI: A Scoping Review

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Abstract: The practice of employing a ghostwriter in writing biographies and political speeches is an accepted practice. It is however not accepted in research and academic writing where originality, validity, and research integrity are paramount in producing credible research output. The pervasiveness of evolving AI-powered writing tools begs the question: could using AI writing assistants be seen as a form of ghostwriting? Traditionally, factors such as a lack of confidence, limited academic acumen, and rigor y enticed emerging scholars to resort to third-party writers. Existing similarity checking tools are effective in identifying possible plagiarism cases, but prove to be limited in detecting academic cheating where a ghostwriter was used. What are the underlying reasons, and how do universities manage this form of academic misconduct in the age of AI? Guided by the PRISMA Extension protocol, this scoping review explored the trends reported in recent studies. Google Scholar, Scopus, and ProQuest databases we searched and 55 recent studies were selected and analysed thematically to identify trends and gaps in current research.

Keywords: Academic Writing, AI-powered Research Writing Tools, Contract Cheating, Ghostwriting, Scoping Review

1. Introduction

Employing a ghostwriter when writing autobiographies, political speeches, and even policies is a common and generally accepted practice. In academic writing where reporting and sharing quality research and academic writing is paramount, this practice is unethical. Young researchers often find academic writing daunting. Using someone's research, knowledge, ideas, or conclusions and passing them off as your own work without the necessary attribution, is still viewed as plagiarism (Kampka *et al.*, 2025; Guruge, 2025). Furthermore, academic cheating includes taking, sharing, and receiving prohibited materials or information and circumventing the evaluation procedure (Kampa *et al.* 2025). Factors such a lack of academic and research confidence, and limited academic acumen may entice emerging scholars to reach out to third-party writing assistance. These may include sourcing the assistance of AI research writing tools or full contract cheating that involves paying ghostwriters to write and then presenting work as original research. The question is: how prevalent is the use of ghostwriters among postgraduate students? What is reported on the latest trends and research gaps, as well as integrity problems that AI tools and applications present?

Guided by the PRISMA Extension protocol, (PRISMA-ScR) (see Page *et al.*, 2020), this scoping review explored trends, gaps, and reported best practices. Google Scholar, Scopus, and ProQuest were searched, and 55 recent studies we deemed eligible and thematically analysed.

1.1 Academic Contract Cheating and Ghostwriting Practices

It is expected that students produce their own original research output towards. Several studies (including Nayak & Hedge, 2022; Gugge, 2025) warn that there is an alarming increase in consulting web-based commercial agencies or individuals to write their assignments and dissertations. This is an illicit form of ghostwriting availed on the internet, offering readymade work or customised papers to students. This form of contract cheating is different from plagiarism and is more difficult to detect and address. Factors such as an academic immaturity, and a lack of information literacy skills contribute to these practices. Kampa *et al.* (2025) opine that workload, and even a disinterest among lecturers as contributors to this behaviour. New AI technologies offer new and very sophisticated services for academic writing, enabling the dereliction of student responsibilities that could potentially limit their growth and exposure required. Questions are raised around the effectiveness of existing academic policies to manage this rapidly emerging form of contract cheating.

1.2 The use AI Research Writing Tools and Research Assistants

Recent studies (Dergaa *et al.*, 2023; Monika *et al.*, 2024) indicate that students are increasingly using AI tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Google Translate as legitimate aids for fact-checking, idea generation, and language editing (Aljuaid, 2024; Chauke *et al.*, 2024; Monika, 2024). However, there are many illicit uses of AI. Aljuaid (2024) mentions the use of paraphrasing tools such as Quillbot for automatic paraphrasing, where students

cannot derive meaning from engaging in readings themselves. Unchecked use of AI tools may result in compromised research quality and ethics (Padillaah, 2023). Upholding transparency, honesty, and personal effort is crucial to maintaining ethical standards in academia.

Pertinent to this study is the question: *what are the trends and gaps in recent reported studies around the use of AI in academic research writing? Could using AI writing assistants be seen as a form of ghostwriting?* Studies remind that having plagiarism policies in place is no longer sufficient. A concerted effort must be made to provide the correct support, and inculcate research and writing skills (Aljuaid, 2024). The intersection of research ethics, integrity, and the concept of post-plagiarism reflects how academic norms are evolving in the age of digital content creation, artificial intelligence, and open science.

2. Research Design

Guided by the PRISMA Extension protocol (PRISMA-ScR), (Page *et al*, 2020), this scoping review explored the prevalence of this problem, trends, gaps, as well as reported best practices. The chosen databases provided 55 hits and qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify trends and gaps in current research.

2.1 The Search Strategy

Peer-reviewed articles in English, published between 2019 and 2025, were considered. The following criteria were used to filter the results: (1) the context of the discussion is focused on tertiary academic writing and research; (2) where the discussion includes ethical considerations and how to implement them. Based on the recent escalation AI and GenAI developments (as reported by Floridi, 2019 and others), the study is limited to research reported during the last six years.

The search strategy covers constructs of AI writing assistants, plagiarism and academic cheating, research ethics, quality and integrity, academic writing, research, and academic literacies, AI and AI writing assistance. The databases included in this study are Google Scholar, Scopus and ProQuest. Databases were queried from January 2025 to May 2025.

Keywords included are: ghostwriting OR ghostwriters, AI technology AND research ethics. Websites were searched according to their local search functionality. A combination of the following keywords was used: "Artificial Intelligence", "ethics", "Information ethics", "research quality", research integrity", "academic cheating", "contract cheating", "academic misconduct" and "plagiarism", as systematically as possible within the search functionality and capabilities of each website.

2.2 The Selection of Sources of Evidence

These results of each search were filtered according to document type, publication date, and then further refined to look for aspects such as Information or research ethics. A data log of the search strategies and complete results, with links, were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies included in the literature search met the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- *Inclusion criteria:* studies focusing on academic institutions, such as universities or colleges. Studies reported in full-text, peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers between 2019 and 2025, covering concepts of ghostwriting, and AI-assisted research writing tools in the titles, abstracts, or keywords were identified and included. Only studies in English were considered and selected.
- *Exclusion criteria:* Studies in corporate, industry, and school settings were excluded. Non-peer reviewed sources were excluded. The following document types were excluded: books, book chapters, grey literature, articles with abstracts only, patents, and reports, and duplicate studies found in the databases. Studies in other languages that are not English were excluded.

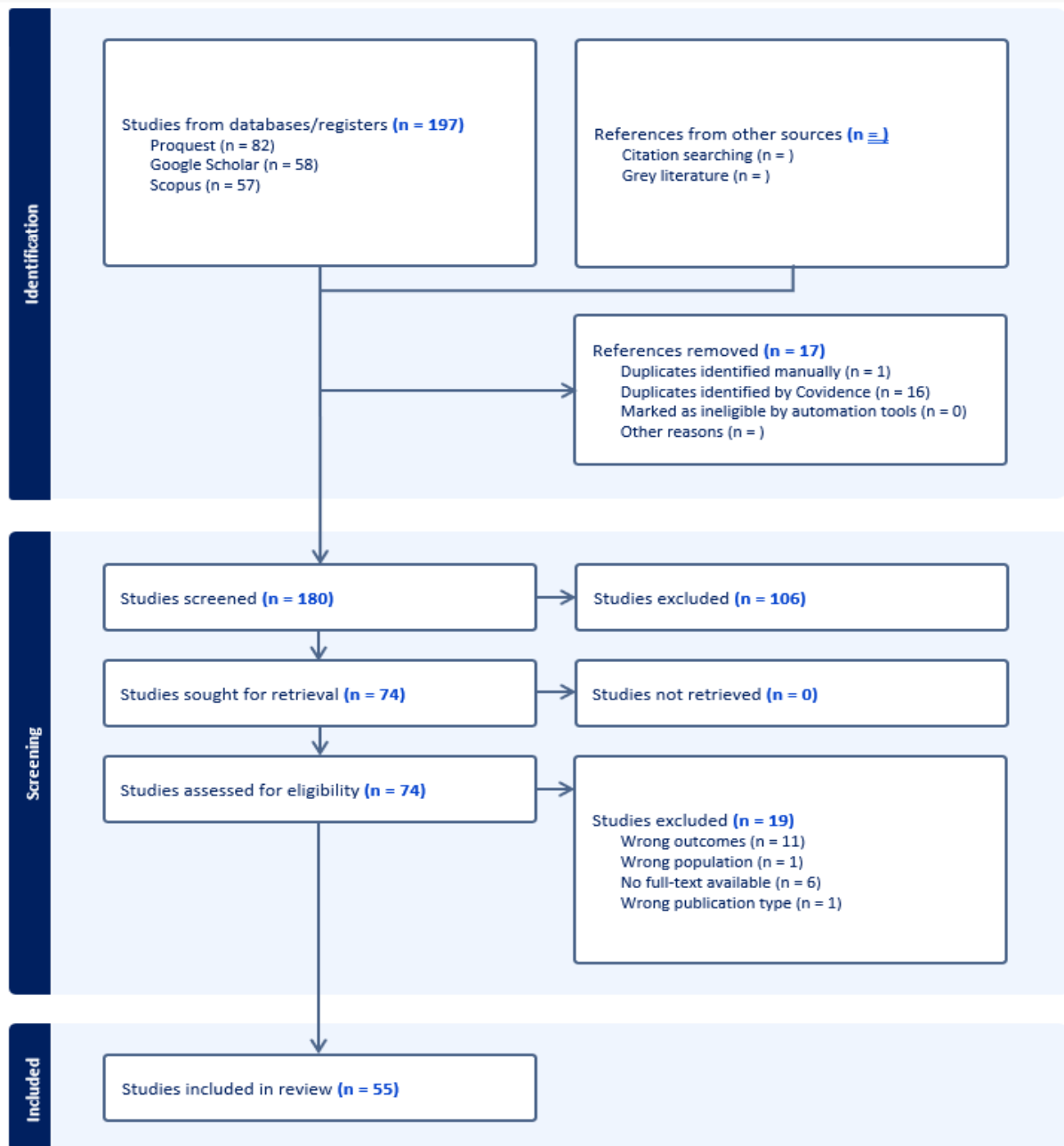


Figure 1: PRISMA flow for screening and extraction in Covidence

2.4 Knowledge Synthesis of Eligible Sources

The PRISMA-ScR flowchart presented in Figure 1 explains the identification, screening, inclusion/exclusion, and extraction for this scoping review. It outlines each step taken, which enhances not only the transparency, but also the reproducibility and rigour of the review process followed.

The review included searches in ProQuest (n=82); Scopus (n=57); and Google Scholar (n=57), totalling 197 records included in the initial abstract screening. Seventeen duplicates were removed, with 16 identified automatically by Covidence and 1 was identified manually. Of the 180 studies screened based on their titles and abstracts, 106 were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria, leaving 74 studies. Full-text reviews followed, and 19 studies were excluded. Reasons included: wrong outcomes (n=11), wrong population (n=1), no full-text available (6), and wrong publication type (n=1). Once the full-text screening was completed, 55 studies were included for extraction. The studies were exported to EndNote and to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to commence the thematic data analysis.

3. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The data extracted from the full-text publications was included in a workbook. The data were then analysed thematically, and the results and discussion of which are presented next.

Table 1: Summary of Results

Publication Years	Research Methods	Themes	Authors
2019 - 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic reviews Case studies Quantitative Survey questionnaires Content analysis Qualitative interviews 	A. Ethics	Bist (2024); Deslauriers. (2025); Rana (2025); Vučković et al. (2023); Vasylyshyna (2024); Skulmowski (2024); Schroter (2020); Kumar, Pratap & Pateria (2022); Andrade-Hidalgo, Mio-Cango & Iparraguirre-Villanueva (2024); Mireku, Dzamesi & Bervell (2023).
		B. Plagiarism	Abdullah(2024); Kampa et al (2025); Rana (2025); Deslauriers (2025); Vučković et al. (2023); Stacy (2022); Kumar, Pratap & Pateria (2022); Jamieson & Howard (2019); Nguyen (2021); Kukali (2022); Sozon, (2024); Eaton (2023); Tarisayi (2023).
		C. Contract cheating,	Ashan, Akbar & Kam (2022); Kampa et al (2025); Sweeny (2022); Vučković et al (2023); Takrimi, (2023); Svirina, & Anand, (2022); Hill, Mason, & Dunn (2021); Liyanagamage et al (2025); Nartgün (2024).
		D. Ghostwriting	Clark et al (2025); DeTora et al (2029); Kampa et al (2025); Svirina & Anand (2022); So (2025); Padillah, (2024); Andrade-Hidalgo (2024); Hamza et al (2022); Lancaster(2019); Xu & Li (2023).
		E. Governance and Policies	Yi (2022); Clark et al (2025); Luo (2024); Goel, & Nelson (2024); Mpolomoka et al. (2025).
		F. Teaching support	Andrade-Hidalgo, Mio-Cango, & Iparraguirre-Villanueva (2024); Kumar, Pratap & Pateria; Gitonga, Gatiti, & Mlingi (2022);Vučković et al (2023); Clark et al (2025); Hamza et al (2022), Costa et al (2024)
		G. Research quality, integrity	Ashford (2021); Nayak, & Hegde (2022); Vučković et al (2023); Skulmowski (2024); Deslauriers (2025); Hamza et al (2022); Guruge (2025); Hamza et al (2022); Sweeny (2022); Thacker (2022); Nannan Benoit Nemery & Dierickx (2019); Muñoz-Cantero, & Espiñeira-Bellón (2024); Jamieson & Howard (2019).
		H. Authorship	Rana (2025); Skulmowski (2024); Schroter et al, (2020); Hill, Mason & Dunn (2021); Aliuconis, Poškut' & Gefenas (2020); Badreldin et al (2021); Pruschak & Hopp (2022); So (2025); Dergaa (2025); Monika, Divyavarsini & Suganthan(2023); Teixeira da Silva (2023); Teixeira et al (2024), Anani et al 2025)
		I. Research misconduct	Vučković (2023); Rana (2025); Deslauriers (2025), Jamieson & Howard (2019); Palla & Singson (2023); Perkins et al (2020); Zhaksylyk (2023).
		J. Consequences	Yi (2020); Deslauriers (2025); Hamza et al (2022); Hutson (2024).

3.1 Coverage by Country

The studies covered in here are from UK, Canada, China, Iran, Montenegro, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, France, South Africa, Ghana, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and USA.

3.2 Research Methods

The research methods used in the articles screened, included systematic reviews, large-scale empirical studies, quantitative survey questionnaires, case studies and content analysis. After analysing the data from the selected sources, ten(10) common and reoccurring themes were identified:

(A) Ethics, (B) Plagiarism and post plagiarism, (C) Contract cheating, (D) Ghostwriting, (E) Governance and Policies, (F) Teaching and Learning, academic support, (G) Research Quality and Integrity (H) Authorship, ownership and AI co-authoring, (I) Research Quality, (J) Consequences

3.2.1 A. Ethics

With the advent of AI and practices such as ghostwriting, contract cheating, and plagiarism, ethics in academic research is particularly challenging. This undermines trust and quality of research. Academic integrity is crucial to ensuring researchers' reputation and upholding ethical standards (Vasylyshyna, 2024). Rana (2025) and Andrade-Hidalgo et al. (2024) note that generative AI add to this concern by blurring the line between ethics and abuse of the technology's capabilities. Skulmowski (2024) refers to the "ghostwriter effect" or silent partner, where the use of AI in their research is not disclosed., which impacts transparency. Kumar *et al.* (2022) mention that institutional credibility is diminished by the failure to act on the academic misbehaviour. Schroter et al. (2020) suggest that guidelines, criteria, and policies for authorship should be clear to improve publication ethics. Training and awareness should take place to help enforce ethics in research.

3.2.2 B. Plagiarism and Post-plagiarism

With the advent of AI research writing tools, plagiarism is no longer just about verbatim copying or poor referencing. Concerns are now around authorship, originality, and attribution in a complex digital environment. Eaton (2023) introduces the concept of post-plagiarism, where advanced AI technologies is part teaching and learning. Rana (2025) mentions that students witnessing unchecked academic dishonesty will believe that this is normal. The blurring of the distinction between what is a student's own work and what is fraudulent, distorts students' perception and erodes academic knowledge gained through legitimate studies.

3.2.3 C. Contract Cheating, Academic Dishonesty

Contract cheating is one of the most serious threats to academic integrity (Ahsan, Akbar & Kam, 2022). Svirina and Anand (2022) point to plagiarism and contract cheating (ghostwriting) as foremost transgression. Students morally disengage while doing research. Authors see contract cheating as fraud due the commercialisation of higher education, and far more serious than plagiarism. Sweeny (2022) warns that any form of academic conduct is detrimental to academic standards and ethics. It is key in upholding academic and research integrity and credibility higher education.

3.2.4 D. Traditional and AI-assisted Ghostwriting

Author essay and paper mills are widely advertised on the internet. Skulmowski (2024), and Rana (2025) note that using generative AI tools such as ChatGPT can blur the line between ghostwriting and academic support and assistance. Skulmowski (2024) mentioned that AI-generated content is sometimes submitted without the author declaring their use of the AI tool, which in effect, can be considered ghostwriting. Svirina and Anand (2022) articular targeting students with limited English language acumen. This raises concerns around the role of AI in academic authorship. (Andrade-Hidalgo, 2024). The term ghost-authorship has surfaced in especially bio-medical scholarly, also deemed ethically questionable. Ghost authorship refers to a situation where individuals who have made substantial contributions to research, data analysis, or manuscript writing are not named or disclosed in the author byline or acknowledgments. This is not the same as the concept of honorary or guest authorship, where individuals who made minimal or no contributions are included as authors. Svirina and Anand (2022) laments that ghostwriting practices deter from gaining knowledge first hand, which they describe as the primary value of educational and research.

3.2.5 E. Governance and Policies

Luo (2024) found that universities did not as yet succeed in delivering robust policies on handling AI such as the use of GenAI, and are subsequently ill-equipped to manage the ethical use. Ashan, Akbar and Kam (2022) state universities are responsible for policies and monitoring the implementation of these to not only detect academic dishonesty. These acts would include ghostwriting, plagiarism and contract cheating. Yi (2022) mentions that it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect and enforce transgression committed with the use of AI tools. Authors remind, however, that available tools like Turnitin, PlagScan and Urkund, prove to be in detecting ghostwriting and contract cheating. Ashan, Akbar and Kam (2022) argue that this could be because reports by paid third parties are often well-written and adequately referenced.

3.2.6 F. Teaching and Learning and Academic Support

It is also recommended that educators apply practical approaches that include the integration of the tools identified in this review and AI literacy, foster collaboration between educator and AI experts to design more effective pedagogical strategies, promote the use of controlled environments that allow students to use AI safely, and continuously train educators in the ethical use of technology, all with the goal of ensuring responsible teaching aligned with educational values. Hamza *et al* (2025) found that over 60% of students who did not receive training in academic integrity was unfamiliar with concepts of contract cheating and ghostwriting. They also found that 69% of students never received prior training on integrity.

3.2.7 G. Authorship and Co-authorship

Many AI tools used in academic writing may function more as a co-author (Skulmowski 2024) rather than the copy and pasting seen in plagiarism. Authorship in academic publishing represents a critical aspect of scholarly integrity, establishing who deserves credit and bears responsibility for research contributions. The notion of AI as co-author is not yet interrogated and more clarity and research are needed to inform guiding frameworks.

3.2.8 H. Consequences

Reportedly, there is a real danger of becoming over-reliant on AI assistance in academic writing. Vasylyshyna (2024) warns of a decline in critical thinking, creativity, and independent problem-solving among researchers. Takrimi (2023) adds that trend is evident particularly on PhD level, where the consequences of ethics transgressions could be severe. While AI has the potential to revolutionize the way academic research is conducted, it also raises important questions about ethics, bias, accountability, and the preservation of authentic scholarly work (Vasylyshyna, 2024).

3.2.9 I. Research Misconduct and Research Quality

Research misconduct threatens the quality and credibility of scholarly outputs. It includes acts such as plagiarism, ghostwriting, and unethical co-authorship (Deslauriers, 2025). Such misconduct is not limited to students, but it also involves academic staff and professionals, which undermines trust and academic integrity in institutions. Vučković *et al.* (2023) highlighted the need for comprehensive education on ethical writing and the enforcement of clear institutional guidelines as forms of preventative measures. According to Rana (2025), generative AI creates additional concerns such as inaccuracies, bias, and intellectual contributions that cannot be accounted for (therefore, impacting accountability). Intellectual dishonesty, such as data manipulation and deceptive citation practices (such as self-plagiarism), also impacts research quality (Deslauriers, 2025). In order to maintain good scholarly quality standards, institutions should focus on continually training students on research ethics, create strict peer-review mechanisms, and establish a culture of transparency and accountability.

4. Conclusion

The problem posed by traditional ghostwriting, contract cheating, and new forms of plagiarism enabled by AI tools is a growing concern for researchers and universities alike. Furthermore, the commercialisation of education with essay mills and online ghostwriters coupled with the pervasiveness of AI tools exacerbate this dilemma. Studies indicate a significant increase in the use of AI in research writing that goes undetected. Most authors agree that this phenomenon poses a threat to academic integrity and research quality. In addition, a worrying trend is student's moral disengagement. Xu (2023) add that the supply and demand, albeit underground, sustain this trend. Lancaster (2019) profiled third party academic writers. He calculated that

ghostwriters generated over US\$270,000 per annum from essay writing. Universities should address this issue decisively.

Hardly any of the screened articles mention improved information and AI literacy. This is regrettable, as effective academic-, digital-, AI- and research literacies could alleviate the problem. Implementing simple language policies and guidelines, as well as offering training to both students and academics to help alleviate the challenges of contract writing. Better detection tools and enforcing consequences for academic misconduct must be explored.

As technology evolves, the challenges posing detrimental to academic integrity must be faced decisively. Striking a balance between harnessing AI's potential and preserving the values of education will be critical in shaping an ethical AI-powered educational landscape. Thus, we can ensure that AI becomes a force for good in education, empowering students to be authentic. Transdisciplinary research may be an avenue to explore ethical implications of advanced technologies in education.

Ethics Declaration

This paper used secondary data which don't require ethics clearance.

AI Declaration

This paper did not make use of AI to write content; Covidence was used as a tool to extract and organise data for thematic analysis.

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