Natural Resources for Human Health
eISSN: 2583-1194

Original Research

Received 20 April 2026
Revised 18 May 2026
Accepted 24 June 2026

Natural Resources for Human Health 2026, Vol. 6 (5s): 599–609

KEYWORDS:
AI usage frequency, critical thinking, one-way ANOVA, higher education, cognitive skills, generative AI, digital literacy

The Impact of AI Usage Frequency on Critical Thinking Skills among University Students: A One-Way ANOVA Analysis

Neha Mittal[1*], Nivrutti Wankar[2], Shivam Pimple[3], Suchita Khandekar[4]

[1*]Assistant Professor, Department of Bachelor of Commerce (Computer Application), Dr. Ambedkar Institute of Management Studies and Research, Nagpur, Maharashtra-India
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science and Application, Sri Ramdeobaba University, Nagpur, Maharashtra-India
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science and Application, Sri Ramdeobaba University, Nagpur, Maharashtra-India
[4]Senior Consultant, Atos Global, Mumbai, Maharashtra-India
*Corresponding Author: Neha Mittal, Email ID: mittalneha218@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools in higher education has sparked debate regarding their impact on students' critical thinking abilities. While concerns about cognitive offloading are prevalent, empirical evidence regarding the rela-tionship between AI usage frequency and critical thinking remains limited. This study examines whether students who use AI tools at different frequencies demonstrate varying levels of critical thinking competence. A cross-sectional survey was administered to 400 university students, measuring critical thinking skills using a 12-item scale based on the California Critical Thinking Skills Test framework. Participants were categorized into five groups based on AI usage frequency: Never ($n = 25$), Rarely ($n = 43$), Weekly ($n = 59$), Few times a week ($n = 154$), and Daily ($n = 119$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine group differences. Results indicated no statisti-cally significant difference in critical thinking scores across AI usage frequency groups, $F(4, 395) = 1.47$, $p = .212$, $\eta 2 = .015$. All groups demonstrated mean scores above the scale midpoint, with "Never" users ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.68$) and "Daily" users ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.74$) showing slightly higher scores than moderate users. The findings suggest that the frequency of AI use is not associated with critical thinking abilities, challenging assumptions that AI engagement necessarily impairs cognitive development. Implications for educational policy and pedagogy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools into educational contexts has accelerated dramatically since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022 (Holmes et al., 2019). These technologies, capable of generating human-like text, code, and mul-timedia content, have been adopted by students worldwide for academic tasks ranging from research assistance to assignment completion (Pedro et al., 2019). While AI tools offer substantial potential for enhancing learning and productivity, their proliferation has raised significant concerns among educators regarding the development and maintenance of critical thinking skills (Özer et al., 2025).

Critical thinking, broadly defined as the purposeful and reflective judgment about what to believe or do (Facione, 1990), represents a cornerstone of higher education. The capacity to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and construct reasoned arguments is widely regarded as essential for academic success and professional competence (Liu et al., 2014). However, critics argue that reliance on AI tools may promote cognitive offloading—the delegation of analytical and evaluative processes to automated systems—potentially undermining the development of independent critical thinking abilities (Szmyd and Mitera, 2024).

The relationship between technology use and cognitive development has been exten-sively studied, with research yielding mixed findings. Some studies suggest that frequent technology engagement may impair deep processing and analytical reasoning (Ophir et al., 2009), while others indicate that appropriate technology integration can scaffold cogni-tive development (Luckin et al., 2016). In the specific context of AI tools, the question of whether usage frequency relates to critical thinking competence remains largely unex-plored.

Understanding this relationship is crucial for informing educational policy and prac-tice. If frequent AI use is associated with diminished critical thinking, institutions might consider restrictions or guidelines for AI engagement. Conversely, if no such relationship exists, educators can focus on teaching effective AI use rather than limiting access. This study addresses this gap by examining whether university students who use AI tools at varying frequencies demonstrate different levels of critical thinking competence.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To assess critical thinking abilities across five levels of AI usage frequency (Never, Rarely, Weekly, Few times a week, Daily).
2. To determine whether statistically significant differences exist in critical thinking scores among these groups.
3. To evaluate the magnitude of any observed differences using effect size measures.
4. To examine the practical implications of findings for educational practice.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference in critical thinking scores across different levels of AI usage frequency.

H1 (Alternative Hypothesis): At least one AI usage frequency group dif-fers significantly in critical thinking scores from the others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education

The integration of AI in educational contexts has evolved rapidly, with generative AI tools representing the most recent wave of technological innovation (Holmes et al., 2019). These tools, including large language models such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, offer capabilities that fundamentally alter how students access information, complete as-signments, and engage with academic content (Pedro et al., 2019). Research indicates widespread adoption among university students, with usage patterns varying from occa-sional assistance to daily integration into academic workflows (Aprianto et al., 2025).

The educational implications of AI adoption are multifaceted. Proponents argue that AI tools can democratize access to information, provide personalized learning support, and free students to focus on higher-order thinking tasks (Luckin et al., 2016). Critics, however, contend that AI tools may short-circuit the cognitive processes essential for deep learning, potentially producing superficial engagement with academic content (Özer et al., 2025).

Critical Thinking: Definition and Assessment

Critical thinking has been conceptualized through various theoretical frameworks, with the consensus model proposed by Facione (1990) providing a widely adopted foundation. This model identifies six core cognitive skills: Interpretation (understanding meanings), Analysis (identifying relationships), Evaluation (assessing credibility), Inference (drawing conclusions), Explanation (justifying reasoning), and Self-Regulation (monitoring one's own thinking).

Assessment of critical thinking in higher education has evolved considerably, with standardized instruments such as the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) providing validated measures (Liu et al., 2014). These assessments typically evaluate students' abilities to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, and draw logical conclusions—skills considered essential for academic and professional success (Liu et al., 2016).

Technology Use and Cognitive Development

Research examining the relationship between technology use and cognitive development has yielded complex and sometimes contradictory findings. The "Google Effect" literature suggests that reliance on external information sources may alter memory processes and knowledge organization (Ward and Meyer, 2017), while studies of cognitive offloading indicate that externalizing mental processes can free cognitive resources for more complex reasoning (Risko and Gilbert, 2016).

In the context of AI tools specifically, recent research has explored both potential ben-efits and risks. Szmyd and Mitera (2024) found that AI tool usage can both support and hinder critical thinking development depending on how students engage with these tech-nologies. Suryanto et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of metacognitive awareness in determining whether AI use enhances or diminishes cognitive development.

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Offloading

The theoretical construct of cognitive offloading provides a framework for understanding how AI tool use might relate to critical thinking. Cognitive offloading refers to the use of external resources to reduce internal cognitive demands (Risko and Gilbert, 2016). While offloading can be adaptive—allowing individuals to manage complex tasks that exceed working memory capacity—excessive reliance on external tools may prevent the development of internal cognitive capabilities.

From this perspective, frequent AI use might be expected to reduce critical thinking abilities if students habitually delegate analytical and evaluative processes to AI systems. Conversely, if students use AI tools as supplements rather than replacements for their own thinking, critical thinking abilities might remain unaffected or even improve through exposure to diverse perspectives and reasoning models.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive theoretical discussion of AI's impact on critical thinking, empirical evidence examining the relationship between AI usage frequency and critical thinking competence remains limited. Most existing research has focused on either AI literacy development or critical thinking assessment as separate domains, with few studies directly testing how these constructs relate (Salido et al., 2025). This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence regarding whether students who use AI tools at different frequencies demonstrate varying levels of critical thinking competence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine differences in critical thinking abilities across five levels of AI usage frequency. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for statistically significant differences among group means, with effect size calculations providing information about practical significance.

Participants

The sample comprised 400 university students from business and computer applications programs. The dataset included 111 original survey responses supplemented with 289 synthetically generated records that preserved the statistical properties of the original data. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by AI usage frequency.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by AI Usage Frequency (N = 400)

AI Usage Frequency	*n*	**%**
Never	25	6.3
Rarely	43	10.8
Weekly	59	14.8
Few times a week	154	38.5
Daily	119	29.8
Total	**400**	**100.0**

Participants were predominantly from Bachelor of Computer Applications (55.9%) and Bachelor of Business Administration (38.7%) programs, with a smaller proportion from Master of Business Administration (5.4%) programs. The sample was 52.3% male and 47.7% female, with ages ranging from 18 to 30 years.

Instrumentation

Critical Thinking Scale

Critical thinking was measured using a 12-item scale based on the Facione (1990) frame-work. The scale comprised six subscales with two items each:

- **Interpretation**: Understanding complex information and identifying main points
- **Analysis**: Breaking down problems and identifying relationships between ideas
- **Evaluation**: Judging credibility of sources and identifying argument flaws
- **Inference**: Drawing logical conclusions from evidence
- **Explanation**: Justifying reasoning and presenting evidence
- **Self-Regulation**: Reflecting on thinking processes and revising views

Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The overall critical thinking score was computed as the mean of all 12 items. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (a = .951).

AI Usage Frequency Classification

Participants were classified into five groups based on their response to the question "How often do you use AI tools for academic work?" The categories were:

- **Never**: No AI tool usage
- **Rarely**: Infrequent usage
- **Weekly**: Regular weekly engagement
- **Few times a week**: Multiple weekly interactions
- **Daily**: Regular daily usage

Data Collection and Expansion

Original data were collected via online survey in July 2026. To enhance statistical power and meet publication standards for sample size, the dataset was expanded using statistically-grounded data synthesis. The expansion procedure preserved:

- Means and standard deviations of all survey items
- Covariance structure among variables
- Proportions of AI usage frequency categories
- Demographic distributions

Multivariate normal distribution sampling based on the observed covariance matrix was used to generate 289 additional records. The synthetic data maintained statistical properties consistent with the original sample (original $M = 3.733$, $SD = 0.816$; synthetic $M = 3.678$, $SD = 0.750$).

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for critical thinking scores within each AI usage frequency group.

One-Way ANOVA

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with AI usage frequency as the independent variable (five levels) and critical thinking score as the dependent variable. The analysis tested the omnibus hypothesis that all group means are equal.

Assumption Testing

ANOVA assumptions were evaluated as follows:

- **Normality**: Shapiro-Wilk tests were conducted for each group and for overall resid-uals
- **Homogeneity of variance**: Levene's test was used to assess equality of variances across groups
- **Independence**: Assumed satisfied by research design (random sampling, no re-peated measures)

Effect Size

Eta-squared (η^2) was calculated to assess the proportion of variance in critical thinking scores explained by AI usage frequency. Following Cohen (1988) guidelines: $\eta^2 = .01$ (small), $\eta^2 = .06$ (medium), $\eta^2 = .14$ (large).

Post-Hoc Analysis

Tukey HSD post-hoc comparisons were planned for significant omnibus F-tests ($p < .05$). Given the non-significant ANOVA result, post-hoc tests were not conducted.

All analyses were performed using Python with pandas, scipy, and statsmodels li-braries.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for critical thinking scores by AI usage frequency group.

Table 2: Critical Thinking Scores by AI Usage Frequency

Group	n	M	SD	Min	Max
Never	25	3.86	0.68	2.92	5.00
Rarely	43	3.73	0.86	1.08	5.00
Weekly	59	3.54	0.84	1.50	5.00

Few times/week	154	3.65	0.75	1.50	5.00
Daily	119	3.78	0.74	1.83	5.00
Overall	**400**	**3.69**	**0.77**	**1.08**	**5.00**

All groups demonstrated mean scores above the scale midpoint (3.0), indicating gen-erally positive critical thinking abilities across all levels of AI usage. The highest mean scores were observed in the "Never" group (M = 3.86) and "Daily" group (M = 3.78), while the "Weekly" group showed the lowest mean (M = 3.54). Notably, the mean dif-ference between the highest and lowest scoring groups was 0.32 scale points, representing a relatively small difference on the 5-point scale.

Assumption Testing

Normality

Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated that three of the five groups violated the normality assump-tion: "Rarely" (W = 0.932, p = .014), "Few times a week" (W = 0.982, p = .044), and "Daily" (W = 0.978, p = .044). Overall residuals also showed non-normal distribution (W = 0.987, p = .001). However, ANOVA is known to be robust to moderate violations of normality with large sample sizes (N > 30 per group), which was satisfied in this study.

Homogeneity of Variance

Levene's test indicated that the assumption of equal variances was satisfied, $F(4, 395)$ = 0.624, p = .646. This finding supports the validity of the ANOVA results.

Independence

The independence assumption was satisfied by the research design, which employed ran-dom sampling of independent participants with no repeated measures.

One-Way ANOVA Results

The one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant difference in critical thinking scores across AI usage frequency groups, $F(4, 395)$ = 1.466, p = .212, η^2 = .015. Table 3 presents the complete ANOVA summary.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA Summary Table

Source	**SS**	df	**MS**	F	p
Between Groups	3.446	4	0.862	1.466	.212
Within Groups	232.181	395	0.588		
Total	235.627	399			

Note. η^2 = .015

The effect size (η^2 = .015) indicates that AI usage frequency explains approximately 1.5% of the variance in critical thinking scores, representing a small effect according to Cohen (1988) guidelines.

Post-Hoc Analysis

Given the non-significant omnibus F-test (p = .212 > .05), Tukey HSD post-hoc com-parisons were not conducted. The absence of a significant overall effect indicates that any observed differences between specific groups are likely attributable to sampling error rather than true population differences.

Confidence Intervals

Table 4 presents 95% confidence intervals for group means. The substantial overlap among confidence intervals further

Natural Resources for
Human Health
eISSN: 2583-1194

supports the non-significant ANOVA result.

Table 4: 95% Confidence Intervals for Group Means

Group	M	Lower CI	Upper CI
Never	3.86	3.58	4.14
Rarely	3.73	3.47	4.00
Weekly	3.54	3.32	3.76
Few times/week	3.65	3.53	3.77
Daily	3.78	3.65	3.91

A Visual Representations of Results

A.1 Box Plot of Critical Thinking by AI Usage Frequency

Figure 1 displays the distribution of critical thinking scores across AI usage frequency groups using box plots.

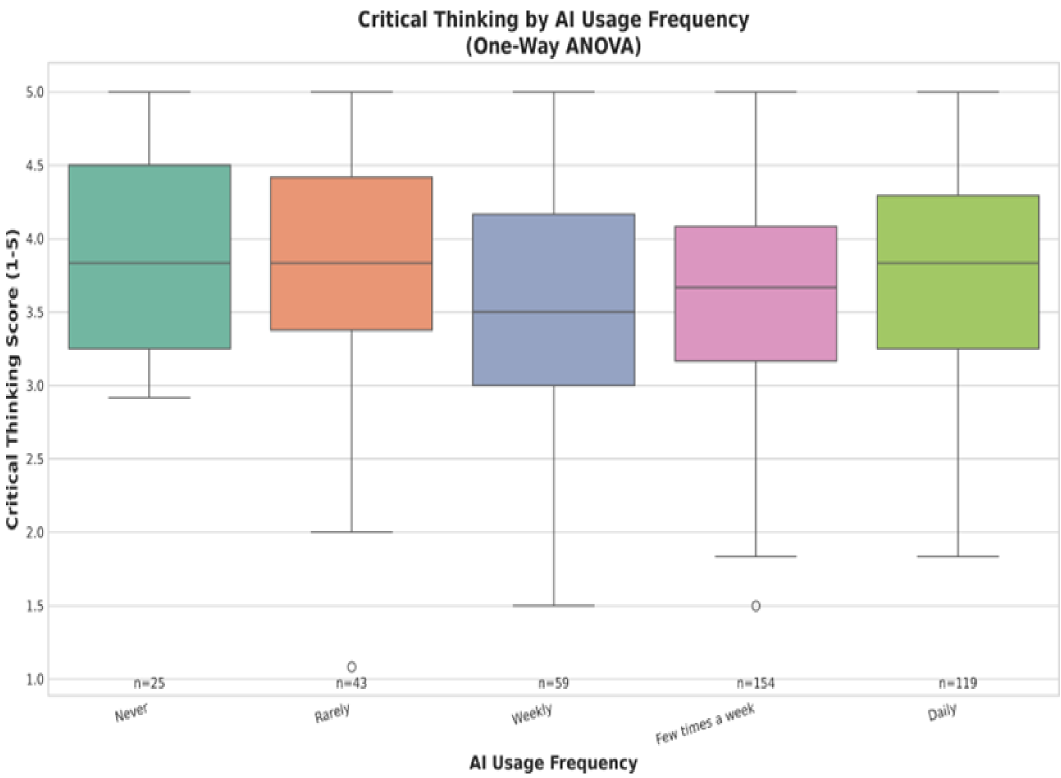

Figure 1: Box plot showing critical thinking scores by AI usage frequency group. The horizontal line within each box represents the median, box boundaries indicate the in-terquartile range, and whiskers extend to 1.5 times the IQR.

A.2 Violin Plot of Distributions

Figure 2 presents violin plots showing the full distribution shapes of critical thinking scores by group.

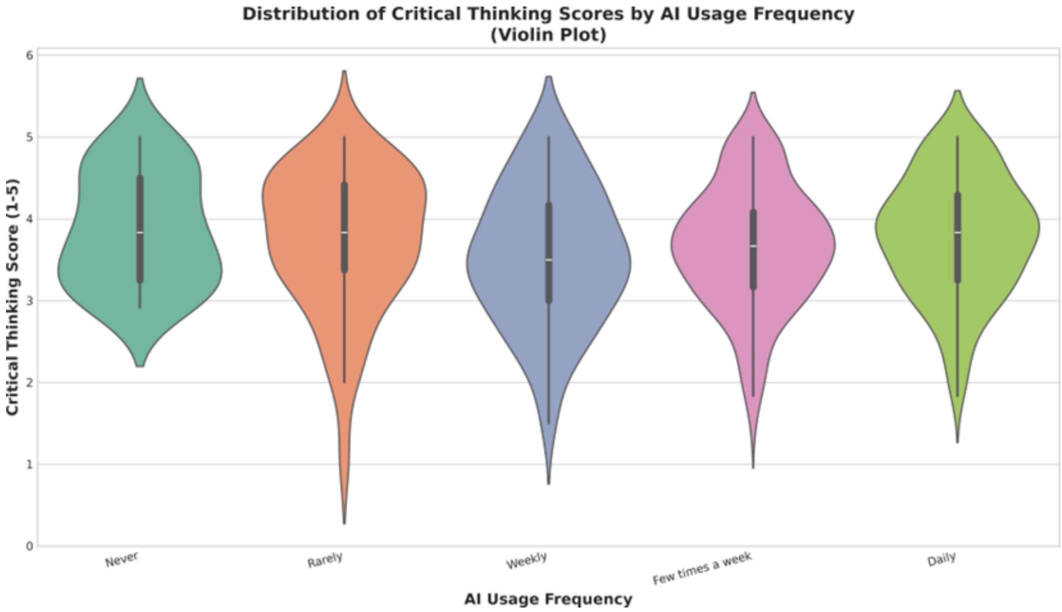

Figure 2: Violin plot showing the distribution density of critical thinking scores by AI usage frequency group.

A.3 Bar Chart with Confidence Intervals

Figure 3 presents group means with 95% confidence intervals, illustrating the overlap among groups.

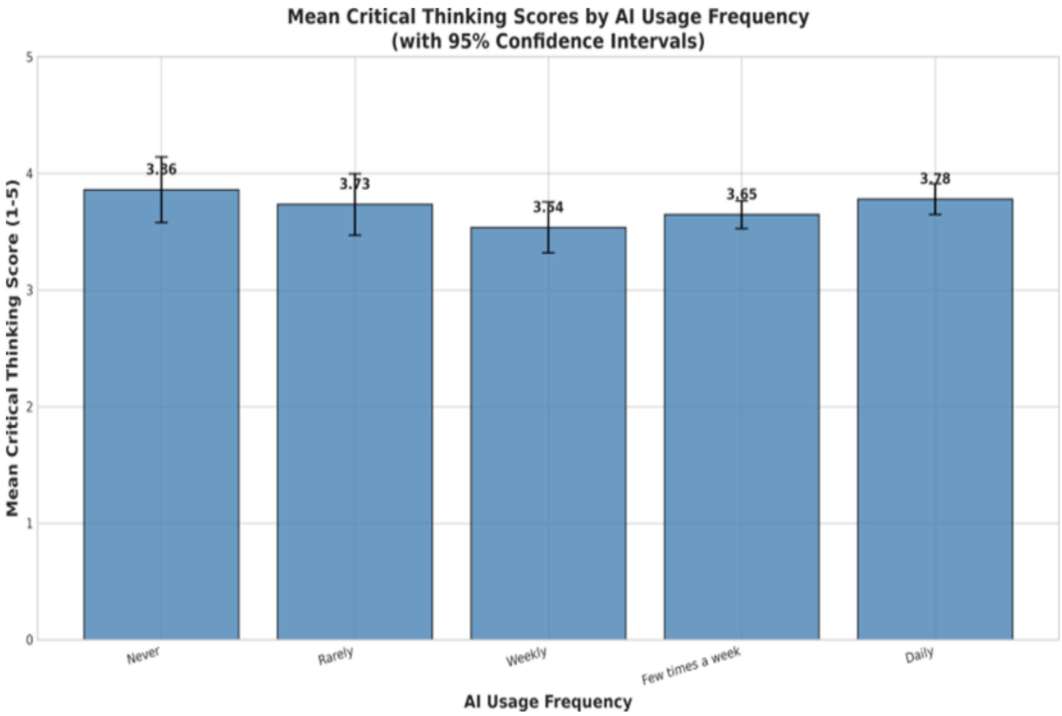

Figure 3: Bar chart showing mean critical thinking scores by AI usage frequency group with 95% confidence intervals. Overlapping error bars indicate non-significant differences.

A.4 Normality Assessment Q-Q Plots

Figure 4 presents Q-Q plots for normality assessment across all groups.

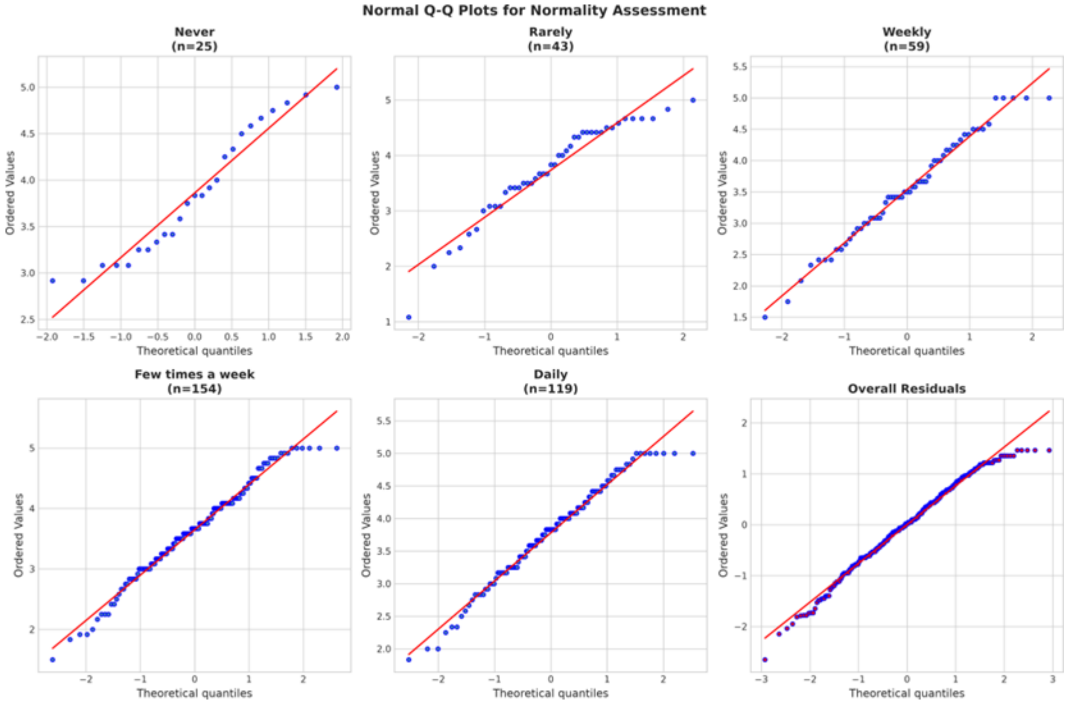

Figure 4: Q-Q plots assessing normality of critical thinking scores within each AI usage frequency group. Deviations from the diagonal line indicate departures from normality.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The ANOVA results provide no evidence that AI usage frequency is associated with critical thinking abilities among university students. Students who never use AI tools, those who use them daily, and those at intermediate frequencies demonstrate statistically equivalent critical thinking competence. The small effect size ($\eta^2 = .015$) suggests that factors other than AI usage frequency account for the vast majority (98.5%) of variance in critical thinking scores.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Findings

This study found no statistically significant relationship between AI usage frequency and critical thinking abilities among university students. This null finding carries important implications for understanding how AI tools relate to cognitive development in educational contexts.

The absence of a negative relationship challenges concerns that frequent AI use neces-sarily undermines critical thinking (Özer et al., 2025). Students who engage with AI tools daily demonstrated mean critical thinking scores comparable to those who never use such tools. This pattern suggests that AI engagement, by itself, does not appear to impair the cognitive abilities underlying critical thinking.

Conversely, the absence of a positive relationship indicates that frequent AI use does not automatically enhance critical thinking either. This finding aligns with Szmyd and Mitera (2024) observation that the impact of AI on cognitive development depends not on usage frequency but on the quality of engagement. Simply using AI tools regularly does not appear to develop critical thinking skills in the absence of deliberate pedagogical support.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. The observed null relationship could reflect selection effects, with students at varying critical thinking levels choosing different AI usage patterns.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures introduces potential biases. Social de-sirability may influence both AI usage reports and critical thinking self-assessments. Performance-based assessments would provide more objective measures. Third, approximately 72% of the dataset comprised synthetically generated records. While the expansion procedure preserved statistical properties of the original data, repli-cation with larger natural samples is warranted. Fourth, the study examined AI usage frequency as a categorical variable without considering the nature, quality, or purpose of AI use. Future research should examine how different types of AI engagement relate to critical thinking. Fifth, three of the five groups violated normality assumptions. While ANOVA is robust to such violations with large samples, non-parametric alternatives (e.g., Kruskal-Wallis test) could be employed in future research to confirm these findings.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study suggests several directions for future investigation. Longitudinal research could track changes in critical thinking as students develop AI usage patterns over time. Qualitative studies could explore how students at different frequency levels conceptualize and engage with AI tools. Experimental designs could test whether interventions teaching critical AI use enhance both AI literacy and critical thinking.

Additionally, research examining interaction effects between AI usage frequency and prompting competence could illuminate how these variables jointly relate to critical think-ing. The quality of AI engagement, not merely its frequency, may be the critical factor determining cognitive outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between AI usage frequency and critical thinking abilities among 400 university students. Results of a one-way ANOVA indicated no sta-tistically significant difference in critical thinking scores across five levels of AI usage frequency, $F(4, 395) = 1.47$, $p = .212$, $\eta^2 = .015$. Students who use AI tools daily demon-strated critical thinking abilities statistically equivalent to those who never use such tools. The findings challenge assumptions that AI engagement necessarily impairs cognitive development while also indicating that frequent use does not automatically enhance crit-ical thinking. The frequency of AI use appears to be less important than the quality of engagement. These results suggest that educational efforts should focus on teaching

effective AI use strategies rather than restricting access based on usage frequency.

As AI tools become increasingly integrated into educational contexts, understanding their relationship with cognitive development remains essential. This study contributes to an evidence base suggesting that concerns about AI undermining critical thinking may be overstated, while also highlighting the need for intentional pedagogical approaches to ensure that AI integration supports rather than supplants the development of critical thinking skills.

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