



Living with AI: University Students' Experiences of Using ChatGPT for Academic Learning

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Article Information	Abstract
Submitted March 19, 2026 Revised April 21, 2026 Accepted June 14, 2026	Background: The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the landscape of higher education, with ChatGPT emerging as one of the most widely adopted AI-powered tools for academic learning. While previous studies have primarily examined the effectiveness, acceptance, and ethical implications of ChatGPT through quantitative approaches, limited research has explored how university students experience and interpret its role in their everyday learning practices. Aim: This study aims to explore the lived experiences of university students using ChatGPT for academic learning and to understand how the technology influences their learning behaviors, critical thinking, and academic engagement. Method: A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to capture participants' subjective experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen undergraduate students from various academic disciplines who had actively used ChatGPT for learning activities for at least one semester. The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method to identify recurring meanings and themes. Results: The findings revealed five major themes: ChatGPT as an immediate learning companion, enhancing learning efficiency, developing AI literacy through prompt engineering, concerns regarding information accuracy and academic integrity, and balancing AI assistance with independent thinking. Participants perceived ChatGPT as a valuable learning partner that facilitated understanding, idea generation, and academic productivity. However, they also emphasized the importance of critically evaluating AI-generated responses and maintaining independent reasoning. Conclusion: This study contributes to the growing literature on AI-assisted learning by providing a deeper understanding of students' experiences and offers practical implications for educators and higher education institutions seeking to integrate generative AI into responsible and meaningful learning practices.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed the way people access, process, and utilize information across various aspects of daily life. Among recent technological innovations, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has emerged as one of the most influential advancements due to its ability to generate human-like text, images, computer code, and other digital content based on user prompts (Lim et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2024). Unlike conventional AI systems that primarily perform classification or prediction tasks, generative AI enables interactive communication and content creation, allowing users to engage in dynamic conversations with AI-powered systems (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). The release of ChatGPT by OpenAI in November 2022 marked a significant milestone in the public adoption of generative AI, attracting millions of users within a relatively short period and accelerating discussions regarding its implications across education, business, healthcare, and communication (OpenAI, 2023; Sallam, 2023).

Higher education has become one of the sectors most profoundly influenced by the emergence of ChatGPT (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023; Belkina et al., 2025). Universities worldwide are increasingly integrating AI-powered technologies into teaching, learning, and assessment practices to enhance educational quality and prepare students for the digital era (UNESCO, 2023). Rather than functioning solely as a search engine, ChatGPT enables students to ask questions, receive personalized explanations, summarize academic literature, generate research ideas, improve writing, and obtain immediate feedback through natural language interaction (Kasneci et al., 2023). These capabilities have positioned ChatGPT as a learning companion that supports students beyond traditional classroom boundaries, offering learning opportunities regardless of time and location (Qian, 2025; Lo, 2023).

The widespread adoption of ChatGPT reflects changing learning behaviors among university students, particularly those belonging to Generation Z. As digital natives, contemporary students are accustomed to utilizing digital technologies to access information quickly and efficiently (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2023). Consequently, many students have incorporated ChatGPT into their everyday academic activities, including preparing assignments, understanding complex theories, brainstorming research topics, translating academic texts, and refining written work (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). Recent studies indicate that university students generally perceive ChatGPT as an accessible and user-friendly educational resource that complements existing learning materials rather than replacing lecturers or conventional educational resources (Farrokhnia et al., 2024).

Several empirical studies have highlighted the educational benefits of ChatGPT in higher education. ChatGPT has been found to promote personalized learning by providing explanations tailored to individual learning needs, enabling students to revisit concepts repeatedly until they achieve adequate understanding (Mollick & Mollick, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023). Furthermore, AI-assisted learning has been associated with increased learning efficiency, improved academic productivity, enhanced writing quality, and greater confidence in completing academic tasks (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Lo, 2023). Through immediate feedback and interactive dialogue, ChatGPT also supports self-directed learning by encouraging students to identify knowledge gaps, seek clarification independently, and regulate their own learning processes, which are essential characteristics of lifelong learning in higher education (Zimmerman, 2002; Ng et al., 2024).

Beyond supporting academic performance, ChatGPT may also encourage creativity and critical inquiry when used appropriately. Students frequently employ the platform to generate multiple perspectives on a topic, develop research questions, organize ideas, and refine arguments before producing their own academic work (Farrokhnia et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2025). Rather than replacing human thinking, several researchers argue that generative AI has the potential to function as a cognitive partner that facilitates idea development and reflective learning, provided that students critically evaluate AI-generated responses instead of accepting them unquestioningly (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Despite these promising opportunities, the integration of ChatGPT into higher education has also generated considerable debate. One of the most significant concerns relates to academic integrity, particularly the possibility that students may misuse AI-generated content for assignments, essays, or examinations without demonstrating genuine understanding (McDonald et al., 2024; Cotton et al., 2023). Universities across different countries have therefore introduced guidelines regulating the responsible use of generative AI in academic environments, emphasizing transparency, ethical responsibility, and appropriate citation of AI-assisted work (UNESCO, 2023). These discussions indicate that ChatGPT represents not merely a technological innovation but also an educational challenge requiring careful governance.

Another important concern involves the reliability and accuracy of AI-generated information. Although ChatGPT frequently produces convincing and well-structured responses, it may also generate inaccurate statements, fabricated references, or outdated information—a phenomenon commonly referred to as AI hallucination (Ji et al., 2023). Students who rely heavily on AI-generated responses without verifying information through credible academic sources may develop misconceptions or incorporate inaccurate information into their academic work. Consequently, researchers have emphasized that digital literacy and critical evaluation skills remain essential competencies despite the growing accessibility of generative AI technologies (Dos, 2025; Gu & Ericson, 2025).

In addition, scholars have questioned the long-term implications of excessive dependence on ChatGPT for students' cognitive development. While AI can improve efficiency and reduce learning barriers, overreliance on automated responses may weaken critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving abilities, and independent learning habits if students become passive recipients of information. Constructivist learning theory suggests that meaningful learning occurs when learners actively construct knowledge through exploration, reflection, and interaction with their environment rather than simply receiving ready-made answers (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, understanding how students balance AI assistance with independent learning has become an increasingly important issue within contemporary higher education.

Although research concerning ChatGPT in education has expanded rapidly since 2023, several gaps remain evident in the existing literature. First, the majority of previous studies have employed quantitative

approaches focusing on technology acceptance, perceived usefulness, behavioral intention, academic performance, or students' satisfaction (Firat, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Farrokhnia et al., 2024). These studies provide valuable statistical evidence regarding patterns of AI adoption but offer limited understanding of how students personally experience AI-assisted learning in their everyday academic lives. Second, many investigations emphasize institutional perspectives, policy development, or technological effectiveness while paying comparatively less attention to students' subjective interpretations, emotions, and reflections regarding ChatGPT use. Consequently, important questions remain concerning how students negotiate the opportunities and challenges of learning with AI in authentic educational contexts.

Recent literature has therefore called for more qualitative research exploring students' lived experiences with generative AI in higher education (Belkina et al., 2025; Tlili et al., 2023). Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to understand not only whether students use ChatGPT but also how they perceive its role, what meanings they assign to AI-assisted learning, and how they integrate the technology into their academic practices (Munaye et al., 2025). Such understanding is particularly important because educational technologies are shaped not only by technical capabilities but also by users' beliefs, experiences, and social contexts.

Responding to these research gaps, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore university students' lived experiences of using ChatGPT for academic learning. Rather than measuring attitudes through standardized questionnaires, this study seeks to understand how students experience AI-assisted learning, the benefits they perceive, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ to maintain meaningful learning while using ChatGPT. By examining these lived experiences, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on artificial intelligence in higher education and provides practical insights for educators, universities, and policymakers seeking to integrate generative AI responsibly into teaching and learning practices (Qian, 2025; Lee et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

ChatGPT in Higher Education

ChatGPT is a generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot developed by OpenAI based on large language models (LLMs) that can generate human-like responses through natural language processing. Since its public release in 2022, ChatGPT has been widely adopted across various fields, including higher education, due to its ability to answer questions, generate text, summarize information, translate languages, and assist users in problem-solving (OpenAI, 2023; Kasneci et al., 2023).

In higher education, ChatGPT has been increasingly utilized as a learning support tool. Students use ChatGPT to understand complex concepts, summarize academic articles, brainstorm research topics, improve academic writing, generate programming code, and receive immediate feedback on assignments (Lo, 2023; Farrokhnia et al., 2024). Educators have also explored its potential for developing instructional materials, designing assessments, and supporting personalized learning experiences (Tlili et al., 2023).

Previous studies have identified several educational benefits of ChatGPT. It promotes learning efficiency by providing instant explanations, facilitates self-directed learning through personalized assistance, enhances writing and communication skills, and encourages idea generation during academic tasks (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). Furthermore, ChatGPT enables students to access learning support anytime and anywhere, making it a flexible educational resource in digital learning environments (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Despite its advantages, ChatGPT presents several challenges in higher education. Researchers have raised concerns regarding academic integrity, plagiarism, AI-generated misinformation, algorithmic bias, and students' overreliance on AI-generated responses (Cotton et al., 2023; Sallam, 2023). Excessive dependence on ChatGPT may reduce critical thinking and independent problem-solving if students accept AI-generated information without verification (Farrokhnia et al., 2024). Therefore, responsible AI use and digital literacy remain essential competencies in higher education.

Students' Academic Learning Experiences

Self-regulated learning refers to learners' ability to plan, monitor, evaluate, and control their own learning processes in order to achieve academic goals (Zimmerman, 2002). ChatGPT may support self-regulated learning by providing immediate explanations, personalized feedback, and opportunities for independent knowledge exploration. However, students must remain actively engaged in evaluating AI-generated information to avoid passive learning behaviors.

Constructivist learning theory suggests that knowledge is actively constructed through learners' interactions with information, experiences, and social environments rather than passively received from external sources (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this perspective, ChatGPT functions as a learning partner that facilitates inquiry, reflection, and discussion rather than replacing human learning. Students develop meaningful understanding when they critically engage with AI-generated responses and integrate them with prior knowledge.

Digital learning refers to educational processes supported by digital technologies that provide flexible access to learning resources and interactive learning experiences (Bond et al., 2020). The integration of ChatGPT into higher education reflects the evolution of digital learning environments, where AI-powered tools enhance accessibility, collaboration, and personalized learning. Nevertheless, effective digital learning requires students to possess digital literacy, information evaluation skills, and ethical awareness when interacting with AI technologies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Self-Regulated Learning Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how university students perceive, adopt, and utilize ChatGPT as an AI-assisted learning tool in higher education. While TAM explains students' acceptance of technology, Self-Regulated Learning Theory focuses on learners' ability to manage their own learning processes, and Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes active knowledge construction through interaction and experience.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), is one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks for explaining users' acceptance and adoption of new technologies. According to TAM, two primary factors determine an individual's intention to use a technology: perceived usefulness, which refers to the degree to which a person believes that using a particular technology will improve performance, and perceived ease of use, which refers to the degree to which the technology is considered effortless to use (Davis, 1989). Students' intention to adopt ChatGPT is also influenced by perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, and satisfaction with AI-assisted learning systems, particularly when these technologies provide personalized feedback and improve learning efficiency (Chiu et al., 2023; Sallam, 2023).

In the context of higher education, these two constructs are particularly relevant to understanding students' adoption of ChatGPT. Students are more likely to use ChatGPT if they perceive that it enhances their learning efficiency, improves their academic performance, simplifies difficult concepts, and assists them in completing academic tasks. Likewise, the conversational interface of ChatGPT allows students to interact naturally with the system without requiring advanced technical skills, increasing its accessibility and ease of use. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use significantly influence students' willingness to integrate ChatGPT into their academic learning activities. Therefore, TAM provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for explaining why university students adopt ChatGPT as a learning companion and how their perceptions shape their learning experiences. Recent studies further indicate that students' acceptance of generative AI is positively associated with learning motivation, academic engagement, and perceived productivity, supporting the applicability of TAM in AI-supported education (Tlili et al., 2023).

Self-Regulated Learning Theory

Self-Regulated Learning Theory, proposed by Zimmerman (2002), emphasizes that effective learning depends on learners' ability to actively regulate their own cognitive, motivational, and behavioral processes. Rather than relying solely on instructors, self-regulated learners independently establish learning goals, select appropriate learning strategies, monitor their progress, evaluate learning outcomes, and modify their approaches when necessary (Zimmerman, 2002). This theory helps explain how students utilize ChatGPT to support independent learning while maintaining responsibility for evaluating and applying AI-generated information. Generative AI enables students to monitor their own understanding, obtain immediate feedback, and regulate learning strategies more efficiently. Nevertheless, successful learning still depends on learners' ability to evaluate AI-generated information critically and avoid overreliance on automated responses (Crompton & Burke, 2023; Chan & Hu, 2023).

The emergence of ChatGPT has created new opportunities for self-regulated learning by providing students with immediate explanations, personalized feedback, and on-demand academic assistance. Students can independently explore unfamiliar concepts, clarify lecture materials, generate research ideas, and receive writing support at any time without waiting for instructor feedback. These features encourage greater learner autonomy and flexibility in managing academic tasks. Several studies suggest that ChatGPT supports autonomous learning by facilitating reflection, self-assessment, and independent problem solving, although excessive dependence on AI may reduce opportunities for deeper cognitive processing (Zhai, 2023; Cotton et al., 2023).

However, self-regulated learning also requires students to critically evaluate AI-generated information rather than accepting it unquestioningly. Since ChatGPT may occasionally produce inaccurate information or fabricated references, learners must verify information through credible academic sources and exercise independent judgment when using AI-generated responses. Consequently, this theory is highly relevant for understanding how students balance the benefits of AI-assisted learning with their responsibility to remain active, reflective, and independent learners.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist Learning Theory, primarily developed by Vygotsky (1978), argues that learning is an active process in which individuals construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, prior experiences, and social contexts. Knowledge is not simply transmitted from one source to another but is actively interpreted, organized, and reconstructed by learners. Therefore, meaningful learning occurs when students actively engage with information, ask questions, reflect on new ideas, and connect new knowledge with their existing understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, ChatGPT is viewed as a learning tool that facilitates knowledge construction rather than simply providing ready-made answers. Students' experiences with ChatGPT are therefore understood as dynamic interactions between technology, prior knowledge, and reflective learning processes. From a constructivist perspective, AI-powered conversational systems encourage learners to construct knowledge through dialogue, inquiry, and continuous interaction rather than passive information reception (Luckin & Cukurova, 2019; Holmes et al., 2022; Ouyang et al., 2022).

Within this theoretical perspective, ChatGPT can be viewed as a learning facilitator rather than a replacement for human learning. Through interactive dialogue, students can explore concepts, ask follow-up questions, compare alternative explanations, and receive immediate feedback that supports deeper understanding. The conversational nature of ChatGPT encourages active inquiry and reflection, allowing students to participate more actively in their own learning process. However, meaningful learning still depends on students' ability to critically interpret AI-generated responses and integrate them with knowledge obtained from lecturers, academic literature, and personal experiences. Recent educational research also highlights that generative AI can function as a collaborative learning partner by supporting knowledge exploration, creativity, and reflective thinking when integrated appropriately into higher education curricula (Grassini, 2023; Rudolph et al., 2023).

Furthermore, constructivist learning emphasizes that technology should function as a tool that supports collaborative knowledge construction rather than providing final answers. ChatGPT therefore serves as a cognitive partner that assists students in exploring ideas, solving problems, and refining understanding, while the ultimate responsibility for knowledge construction remains with the learner. This perspective aligns with recent studies suggesting that generative AI should complement rather than replace students' cognitive engagement and critical thinking during academic learning.

Overall, the integration of these three theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting university students' experiences of using ChatGPT. The Technology Acceptance Model explains why students adopt ChatGPT based on its perceived usefulness and ease of use. Self-Regulated Learning Theory explains how students manage and evaluate AI-assisted learning independently, while Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through critical interaction with AI-generated information. Together, these theories offer a holistic understanding of how ChatGPT influences students' academic learning experiences in contemporary higher education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore university students' lived experiences of using ChatGPT for academic learning. Phenomenology was selected because it seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to a particular phenomenon based on their personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring the effectiveness of ChatGPT, this study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how students integrate AI into their learning activities and how they perceive its benefits and challenges.

Participants

The participants consisted of 15 undergraduate students from various academic disciplines at Indonesian universities. Participants were selected because they had actively used ChatGPT for academic purposes, such as completing assignments, understanding course materials, brainstorming ideas, or improving academic writing. All participants had used ChatGPT for at least one semester and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

This study employed purposive sampling, which allows researchers to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the research topic (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled as an undergraduate student, (2) actively using ChatGPT for academic learning, (3) having at least six months of experience using ChatGPT, and (4) being willing to participate in an in-depth interview.

Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely describe their experiences while enabling the researcher to explore emerging issues in greater depth. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via an online meeting platform, depending on participants' preferences.

The interview guide focused on several topics, including participants' reasons for using ChatGPT, learning activities supported by AI, perceived benefits, challenges encountered, ethical considerations, and the

influence of ChatGPT on their learning habits and critical thinking. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, participants received detailed information regarding the objectives of the study, interview procedures, confidentiality, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and all collected data were used solely for academic research purposes. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Analysis (Colaizzi, 1978). The analysis involved seven stages: (1) reading all interview transcripts repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, (2) identifying significant statements, (3) formulating meanings from these statements, (4) organizing meanings into thematic clusters, (5) developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, (6) identifying the fundamental structure of participants' experiences, and (7) conducting member checking by returning the findings to participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through member checking, allowing participants to review and verify the interpreted findings. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research process, while confirmability was established through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing to minimize potential bias during data interpretation.



Figure 1. Research Flow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The phenomenological analysis identified five major themes that describe university students' experiences of using ChatGPT for academic learning. These themes illustrate how students perceive ChatGPT as a learning companion while simultaneously recognizing its limitations and ethical implications. Table 1 summarizes the themes and their corresponding descriptions.

Table 1. Themes Identified from Participants' Experiences

Theme	Description
ChatGPT as an Immediate Learning Companion	Students perceived ChatGPT as an accessible tool that provides immediate explanations and academic assistance.
Enhancing Learning Efficiency	ChatGPT helped students complete academic tasks more efficiently and improve productivity.
Supporting Idea Development and Academic Writing	Participants used ChatGPT for brainstorming, organizing ideas, and improving writing quality.
Concerns about Information Accuracy and Academic Integrity	Students recognized the risks of inaccurate information and the ethical issues associated with AI-generated content.
Balancing AI Assistance with Independent Learning	Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining critical thinking and avoiding excessive dependence on AI.

Theme 1: ChatGPT as an Immediate Learning Companion

Most participants described ChatGPT as a readily available learning companion that provided immediate explanations whenever they encountered academic difficulties. Unlike traditional search engines, ChatGPT delivered responses in a conversational manner, enabling students to ask follow-up questions until they understood the topic. Participants explained that this interactive communication reduced frustration when learning independently.

One participant stated:

"Whenever I don't understand the lecturer's explanation, I usually ask ChatGPT first because the explanation is simpler and easier to understand." (Participant 3)

Another participant commented:

"It feels like having someone available all the time to answer my questions without making me feel embarrassed." (Participant 8)

These findings suggest that students viewed ChatGPT as an accessible learning partner that supported independent learning beyond classroom hours.

Theme 2: Enhancing Learning Efficiency

Participants consistently reported that ChatGPT improved learning efficiency by reducing the time needed to search for information, summarize reading materials, and prepare academic assignments. Instead of browsing multiple websites, students preferred obtaining concise explanations before consulting additional academic sources.

One participant explained:

"Before using ChatGPT, I spent a long time looking for information from different websites. Now I can understand the topic much faster." (Participant 11)

Another participant remarked:

"ChatGPT helps me organize my ideas before I start writing my assignments." (Participant 5)

Although participants appreciated this efficiency, many emphasized that they still verified important information using journal articles and textbooks.

Theme 3: Supporting Idea Development and Academic Writing

Many participants considered ChatGPT particularly useful during the early stages of academic writing. They frequently used the platform to brainstorm research topics, improve sentence structure, summarize literature, and generate alternative perspectives on academic issues.

As one participant noted:

"I never copy ChatGPT directly. I use it to generate ideas and then develop them using my own understanding." (Participant 14)

Similarly, another participant stated:

"It gives me inspiration when I experience writer's block." (Participant 7)

These findings indicate that students primarily viewed ChatGPT as a cognitive support tool rather than a substitute for independent academic work.

Theme 4: Concerns about Information Accuracy and Academic Integrity

Despite recognizing the benefits of ChatGPT, participants expressed concerns regarding the accuracy of AI-generated information. Several students reported encountering incorrect explanations or fabricated references, leading them to question the reliability of AI-generated content.

One participant commented:

"Sometimes ChatGPT gives references that cannot be found, so I always check the information again." (Participant 9)

Participants also discussed ethical concerns surrounding plagiarism and academic honesty. They generally agreed that ChatGPT should assist learning rather than replace students' own efforts.

Theme 5: Balancing AI Assistance with Independent Learning

The final theme reflected participants' awareness that excessive dependence on ChatGPT could negatively affect critical thinking and independent learning. Most students believed that ChatGPT should function as a supporting tool rather than the primary source of knowledge.

One participant explained:

"If we rely on ChatGPT for everything, we may stop thinking critically." (Participant 2)

Another participant added:

"ChatGPT is helpful, but we still need to analyze the information ourselves because learning is more than just getting answers." (Participant 12)

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of balancing technological assistance with personal effort, reflection, and critical evaluation. They viewed responsible AI use as an essential component of effective academic learning in higher education.



Figure 2. Thematic Map of University Students' Experiences Using ChatGPT for Academic Learning

Discussion

This study explored university students' lived experiences of using ChatGPT for academic learning through a phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that students generally perceived ChatGPT as a valuable learning companion that enhanced learning efficiency, supported idea development, and facilitated academic writing. At the same time, participants acknowledged several challenges related to information accuracy, academic integrity, and the potential for overreliance on AI. These findings demonstrate that students' experiences with ChatGPT are characterized by both opportunities and concerns, highlighting the complex role of generative AI in higher education.

The first theme, ChatGPT as an Immediate Learning Companion, indicates that students value ChatGPT because of its accessibility and ability to provide immediate academic assistance. Participants described ChatGPT as an interactive learning partner that enables them to ask questions freely without fear of being judged. This finding is consistent with previous studies reporting that students appreciate ChatGPT for delivering personalized explanations and supporting independent learning beyond classroom settings (Lo, 2023).

From the perspective of Constructivist Learning Theory, learning occurs when individuals actively construct knowledge through interaction with learning resources and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, ChatGPT serves as an additional learning resource that encourages exploration and inquiry rather than simply providing information.

The second theme, Enhancing Learning Efficiency, suggests that ChatGPT helps students reduce the time required to search for information, summarize learning materials, and organize academic tasks. Participants believed that ChatGPT simplified complex concepts and improved their productivity during learning. This finding supports previous research indicating that generative AI can improve learning efficiency by providing immediate feedback and personalized explanations tailored to students' needs (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023). These results are also consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which proposes that users are more likely to adopt technology when they perceive it as useful and easy to use (Davis, 1989). Students in this study repeatedly emphasized the usefulness of ChatGPT in supporting their daily academic activities, explaining why they integrated the technology into their learning routines.

The third theme highlights ChatGPT's role in supporting idea development and academic writing. Rather than using AI to complete assignments entirely, most participants reported employing ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas, improve sentence structure, and organize arguments before producing their own work. This finding suggests that students view ChatGPT as a cognitive support tool rather than a replacement for human creativity. Similar findings have been reported by Dwivedi et al. (2023), who argued that generative AI has the potential to enhance creativity and collaborative knowledge construction when used responsibly. Likewise, Kasneci et al. (2023) emphasized that AI can complement students' learning processes by stimulating reflection and facilitating academic problem-solving instead of replacing intellectual effort.

Despite these positive experiences, participants also expressed significant concerns regarding information accuracy and academic integrity. Several students reported encountering inaccurate explanations, fabricated references, and inconsistent responses generated by ChatGPT. Consequently, participants emphasized the importance of verifying AI-generated information using credible academic sources before incorporating it into their coursework. This finding supports previous studies demonstrating that although ChatGPT generates fluent and convincing responses, it occasionally produces inaccurate or fabricated information, commonly referred to as AI hallucination. Furthermore, concerns regarding plagiarism and ethical AI use identified in this study are consistent with Cotton et al. (2023), who argued that universities should establish clear policies to promote responsible AI use while maintaining academic integrity.

Another important finding concerns the need to balance AI assistance with independent learning. Participants recognized that excessive dependence on ChatGPT might reduce critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving skills if students rely exclusively on AI-generated answers. This finding aligns with Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which emphasizes that learners should actively plan, monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning processes (Zimmerman, 2002). Although ChatGPT can facilitate learning, students remain responsible for evaluating information critically and constructing knowledge independently. Similar conclusions were reported by Farrokhnia et al. (2024), who suggested that AI should be positioned as a complementary learning tool rather than a substitute for students' cognitive engagement.

Overall, the findings illustrate that students do not perceive ChatGPT as a replacement for lecturers or conventional educational resources. Instead, they consider it an additional learning partner that supports academic activities while recognizing the continued importance of textbooks, scholarly literature, classroom discussions, and lecturer guidance. This finding reinforces UNESCO's (2023) recommendation that higher education institutions should promote the ethical and responsible integration of generative AI by strengthening students' digital literacy, information evaluation skills, and critical thinking competencies. Rather than prohibiting AI use, universities should encourage students to use ChatGPT transparently, responsibly, and as part of reflective learning practices.

The findings of this study also contribute to the growing literature on AI-assisted learning by providing an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences rather than relying solely on quantitative measures of technology acceptance or perceived usefulness. While previous studies have primarily focused on statistical relationships among variables (Baidoo-Anu & Owusu Ansah, 2023; Farrokhnia et al., 2024), this phenomenological study reveals how students interpret, negotiate, and make meaning of AI in their everyday academic lives. These insights provide valuable implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to integrate generative AI into higher education in ways that enhance learning while preserving students' autonomy, ethical awareness, and critical thinking.

CONCLUSION

This study explored university students' lived experiences of using ChatGPT for academic learning through a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings indicate that ChatGPT has become an important learning companion that supports students in understanding course materials, generating ideas, improving academic writing, and increasing learning efficiency. Participants generally perceived ChatGPT as an accessible

and useful educational tool that facilitates independent learning by providing immediate explanations and personalized assistance.

However, the findings also reveal that students are aware of the challenges associated with AI-assisted learning. Concerns regarding information accuracy, fabricated references, academic integrity, and excessive dependence on AI emerged as important issues throughout the interviews. Participants emphasized that although ChatGPT offers substantial benefits, it should be used critically and responsibly rather than replacing independent thinking or scholarly inquiry. These findings reinforce the view that effective learning depends not only on technological innovation but also on students' ability to evaluate information critically and regulate their own learning processes.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on generative AI in higher education by providing a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences beyond technology acceptance and learning performance. The findings support the principles of the Technology Acceptance Model, Self-Regulated Learning Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory demonstrating that students' interactions with ChatGPT are influenced by perceived usefulness, self-regulation, and active knowledge construction.

Practically, the findings suggest that higher education institutions should develop clear guidelines for the ethical and responsible use of ChatGPT while strengthening students' digital literacy, AI literacy, and critical thinking skills. Educators should encourage students to use ChatGPT as a complementary learning tool rather than as a substitute for independent learning and academic reasoning.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on a relatively small number of participants and therefore may not represent the experiences of all university students. In addition, the study focused exclusively on students' perspectives without including lecturers or other educational stakeholders. Future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants, compare experiences across different academic disciplines or cultural contexts, and explore the long-term influence of generative AI on learning behaviors, academic performance, and higher education practices.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

The author solely conceived and designed the study, conducted the literature review, developed the research instrument, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and wrote, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the content of this article.

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