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Lived Experiences of Master's Students Using ChatGPT: A Phenomenological Study

Jessa May G. Granada*[1], Bless Joy G. Adlaon [2], Robin C. Aclan[3], Mary Rose Domato[4], Anabel E. Olasiman[5], Leslie Rose B. Suello[6], Daryl G. Virtudazo[7], Luzminda G. Machete[8]

[1]Tiny Thoughts Kinder House, Inc., Sawang, Guindulman, Bohol, Philippines
[2]Aparche Christian School, Lomangog, Ubay, Bohol, Philippines
[3]Beracha Christian Gospel Academy, Inc., Cantagay, Jagna, Bohol, Philippines
[4]Panadtaran Elementary School, Panadtaran, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines
[5]Suba Elementary School, Suba, Anda, Bohol, Philippines
[6]Cabugan Elementary School, Cabugan, Guindulman, Bohol, Philippines
[7]Saint Paula's Learning Center, Cogtong, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines
[8]Bohol Island State University-Candijay Campus, Cogtong, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: jessamay.granada@bisu.edu.ph

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Abstract. The increasing use of ChatGPT in education has prompted inquiries into its impact on learning, yet limited research has examined in depth students' experiences with this tool. This phenomenological study examined the academic integrity, critical thinking, and emotional challenges encountered by master's students in using ChatGPT for educational purposes. Ten master's students, selected through purposive sampling, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were gathered through recorded and transcribed interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. To ensure credibility and reliability, member checking and an audit trail were employed. Findings revealed four major themes: convenience and accessibility, where students valued ChatGPT's ability to simplify complex concepts; concerns of over-reliance, as students feared dependency might reduce independent thinking; integrity in usage, as participants emphasized balancing AI support with academic honesty; and challenges to creativity and critical thinking, where doubts arose regarding originality and depth of reasoning. These results suggest that while ChatGPT enhances efficiency and accessibility, it also presents risks that may affect intellectual independence and authenticity. The study implies the importance of developing institutional guidelines on responsible AI use, integrating digital literacy and AI ethics into curricula, and encouraging critical engagement with AI-generated content. By addressing these concerns, higher education can maximize the educational benefits of ChatGPT while safeguarding academic integrity and fostering deeper learning.

Keywords: Academic support; ChatGPT use; Master's students; Phenomenology.

1.0 Introduction

Artificial Intelligence emerged and changed how we do things, including the learning experience. Introduced by OpenAI in 2022, ChatGPT is built on the GPT architecture and has gained considerable popularity (Sallam,

2023). Incorporating ChatGPT into education has generated significant interest owing to its potential to improve learning experiences. With its ability to deliver prompt and tailored responses, ChatGPT can serve individual student needs, provide primary feedback, and help understand complex concepts (Sánchez, 2023). Hence, master's students need to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to thrive amid these dynamic changes.

Several recent studies feature the breakthroughs of the use of ChatGPT. Habibi et al. (2023) noted that the development of Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (ChatGPT) enables it to generate human-like text and respond to users' conversational input. Lund & Wang (2023) noted that ChatGPT has strong potential to improve the quality and efficiency of learning practices, such as generating personalized content, helping with homework, and providing feedback to students. At the same time, Wang et al. (2023) noted that ChatGPT's natural language interface enhances user engagement, especially among higher education students, making learning more interactive and enjoyable. Moreover, it has been identified that higher education students rely on ChatGPT to generate ideas and even write entire research articles (Stokel-Walker, 2023). Despite the benefits of ChatGPT in educational settings, there are challenges in handling this tool. As stated by Chaudhry et al. (2023), potential data-driven patterns of ChatGPT may affect accuracy and reliability, as well as its varying content quality and consistency. Additionally, overreliance on ChatGPT may discourage critical thinking (Jafari & Keykha, 2023).

Based on the study of Yunus Dogan, et al (2025), AI can also support the development of computational thinking skills, contribute to efficient educational content by enabling personalized learning experiences, and allow AI-driven robots to interact with children to create tailored learning experiences. Additionally, AI-powered tools such as augmented reality and virtual reality can make learning more engaging and enhance children's understanding of information. The emergence of generative AI, including large language models (LLMs), has reshaped educational applications by offering interactive, real-time feedback, content generation, and adaptive tutoring. While LLMs are widely applied in secondary and higher education, recent developments indicate potential applications in early childhood learning, including personalizing language instruction and fostering creativity through AI-assisted storytelling and interactive dialog systems. Generative AI provides age-appropriate conversational interfaces, helping preschool learners improve comprehension skills and develop curiosity-driven inquiry through structured interactions. Additionally, AI-powered visual recognition tools can facilitate early learning in subjects such as literacy and numeracy by adapting teaching content based on student responses [68,69].

Recognizing the conversational content generation capabilities of chatbots like ChatGPT, a study explored their applications in teaching practices. Jukiewicz (2024) examined the role of ChatGPT in automating scoring and feedback and found a strong positive correlation with human teacher evaluations. Rahman and Watanobe (2023) demonstrated ChatGPT's supportive role in programming education, reporting high student satisfaction while highlighting potential challenges, including bias, academic integrity concerns, and over-reliance on the technology.

In the field of education, six studies explored the use of chatbots to support teaching practices. Among these, four focused on utilizing chatbots to guide students in developing conceptual understanding across various educational contexts. Fidan and Gencel (2022) examined the impact of integrating AI chatbots and peer feedback mechanisms into educational videos as tools for pre-service teachers, focusing on their effects on learning performance and intrinsic motivation in online learning environments. Their findings revealed that, compared to traditional learning methods, groups utilizing chatbots and peer feedback achieved higher learning performance and greater intrinsic motivation. This suggests that AI-driven feedback mechanisms can be effective teaching tools in online education.

The study by Gerlich (2025) found a significant negative correlation between frequent AI tool use and critical thinking abilities, mediated by increased cognitive offloading. Younger participants showed greater reliance on AI tools and lower critical thinking scores than older participants. Furthermore, higher educational attainment was associated with better critical thinking skills, regardless of AI usage. These results highlight the potential cognitive costs of reliance on AI tools, underscoring the need for educational strategies that promote critical

engagement with AI technologies.

A recent study by Gerlich (2025) explores the relationship between AI usage and cognitive skills, highlighting several key concerns. The research found a negative correlation between frequent AI use and critical thinking, suggesting that individuals who rely heavily on automated tools may struggle with independent reasoning. One contributing factor is cognitive offloading, where AI users engage less in deep, reflective thinking and instead prefer quick AI-generated solutions.

This over-reliance could lead to a range of issues, including diminished critical thinking (Iskender, 2023), analytical thinking (Ferrajão, 2020), and decision-making abilities (Pokkakillath & Suleri, 2023), susceptibility to AI-generated errors or AI hallucinations (Hatem et al., 2023), increased instances of plagiarism (De Angelis et al., 2023), and challenges related to a lack of transparency (Carvalho et al., 2019) and algorithmic biases (Mbalaka, 2023). Moreover, habitual reliance on AI for decision-making may reduce individuals' motivation to engage in independent thinking and analysis, potentially weakening essential cognitive abilities (Grinschgl & Neubauer, 2022) and leading to automation bias (Gsenger & Strle, 2021).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming an influential tool for educational change, shaping how students learn and improving the learning experience. One significant impact is seen in personalized learning, where AI enables the creation of adaptive platforms that tailor educational content to each student's unique needs. These platforms utilize machine learning algorithms to analyze student performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and dynamically adjust the curriculum in real-time, providing a personalized learning path (Dwivedi et al., 2023) As AI technologies become integral to the learning environment, both positive and challenging consequences emerge, shaping the dynamics between students, educators, and the educational process (Tsai et al., 2023). It encourages proactive engagement with AI's development context, anticipating industry demands, seizing opportunities, and collectively working towards advancing higher education in the new era (Xia & Li, 2022). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the use of ChatGPT shows distinct differences between urban and rural areas. Universities in cities usually have advanced technological facilities, stable internet, and better access to digital equipment. According to recent reports, only 40% of rural areas in the Philippines have reliable internet access, compared to 80% in urban centers (Estrellado, 2023).

Nevertheless, there is a problem-gap: comprehensive research on the influence of AI usage persists, while surveys chart adoption rates; how Filipino master's students make sense of ChatGPT in day-to-day academic work remains under-described. By exploring how master's students perceive and use AI tools, this study offers a phenomenological account that clarifies how students negotiate benefit-risk tensions, complementing prior survey-based accounts. AI tools serve as assistants and virtual teachers to students, especially master's students. It has become a frequently heard term in recent years, reflecting the rapid advances in technology. It can suggest improvements and provide feedback on grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors. This can save master's students much time and has the potential to revolutionize education by offering them personalized learning experiences and improving their language and writing skills. However, it is important to note that ChatGPT should be used as a tool to support learning, not as a replacement for human teachers. This study explicates the lived experiences of master's students using ChatGPT for academic tasks in Bohol, Philippines, to inform AI literacy policy and classroom practice.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design for this study used a qualitative analysis to examine the experiences of master's students using ChatGPT for academic purposes. This method allows the participants to respond to the questions more meaningfully. Qualitative data for this study were collected through interviews to explore perceptions and understand master's students' experiences regarding their professional development, using ChatGPT. Attention was also given to obtaining these findings through semi-structured interviews with the chosen master's students. This type of question provides the most suitable structure to guide participants' experiences, allowing comparison from the given general question, which can be utilized in thematic analysis. Subsequent interviews were conducted to elicit the utmost information and clarity from the participants' initial responses. This approach facilitates in-depth experiences between the researcher and the multiple sources of evidence for this

study. The conversion of the data adheres to the ethical principle to ensure the safety and privacy of the participants. Information provided will be strictly confidential.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

This research involved ten (10) master's students from four municipalities of the 3rd District of Bohol, Philippines. Participants were recruited across these municipalities through peer referrals, ensuring a diverse group from various academic institutions and localities. Primary contacts were asked to share the details with qualified participants following a snowball sampling approach. The procedure focuses on master's students with significant experience in using ChatGPT in academic tasks. To be part of the study, participants must have satisfied the following conditions: Must have a Bachelor's Degree in Education with a unit in a Master's Degree, be a resident of Bohol, and have used ChatGPT for at least three (3) academic activities. Whereas, master's students who had a unit in the Master's Degree and had no experience using ChatGPT for academic tasks were excluded from the study. Participants answer the three (3) given questions. Participants must be open to sharing in-depth narratives of their lived experiences using the AI tools. Ten (10) master's students from different municipalities were selected as our participants. To ensure a broad range of perspectives, the replies were based on each question's understanding. This selection aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how AI tools significantly impact master's students.

2.3 Research Instruments

The study used a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide designed to collect data on master's students' experiences with ChatGPT for academic purposes. The questions were composed and established on this study's objectives, without reference to any existing instrument. To ensure content validity, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by expert validators, who provided feedback on the transparency and relevance to the study's intent. No revisions were made based on the expert's recommendations before the data collection.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

This phenomenological research employs a systematic approach to explore the in-depth use of ChatGPT by master's students. A semi-structured interview with ten (10) master's students who used ChatGPT for at least three (3) academic assignments. Participants were enlisted through peer referral. After obtaining consent, individual interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience and conducted face-to-face or via Messenger video call. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. During data collection, responses are transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of participants' accounts. It is then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common ground in the participants' answers and their patterns and themes. To ensure data accuracy, credibility, and confidentiality, code names are assigned to each participant. Participants have been asked to review excerpts from their transcripts, and all data, interviews, transcripts, and notes are securely stored to maintain the utmost confidentiality. This careful maintenance ensures the integrity and privacy of data. The questions were intended to motivate discussion based on participants' responses. (1) What were your experiences in using ChatGPT? Probe: The participants will share personal experiences in using ChatGPT; (2) What are the impacts of using ChatGPT in your learning? Probe: The participants will connect his/her academic experience in using ChatGPT during Graduate School; (3) What are your initial feelings when you started to use ChatGPT? Probe: Participants will share their initial feelings when they first use ChatGPT.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

Based on qualitative research best practices, the phenomenological study ensures it collects rich, distinct insights through semi-structured, face-to-face and online interviews, while remaining ethically rigorous and methodologically sound. It is analyzed through the thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers adapted the transcripts and coded them to determine keywords correlated with ChatGPT use in academic purposes. Codes were categorized and refined into themes. Coding templates and research notes were consistently updated to keep thorough documentation of the analytical process and ensure data accuracy and consistency. Credibility was supported through peer debriefing with expert validators and member checking with participants. Reflexive journaling was utilized to prevent bias. The researchers maintain self-awareness to safeguard interpretations and deliberate on participants' experiences rather than personal inferences. Contextual

details were documented to facilitate the transferability of the finding.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical principles for participants, ensuring their rights and dignity were protected. They were given complete information through a consent form to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, and to reduce social impairment for the participants. In this case, the data must be kept restricted, with pen names appearing in all transcriptions and reports, and securely filed. Moreover, participants must give their consent before engaging, and they must be provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, the methodology used, the possible risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without implication. Voluntary participation is presented to the participants without any pressure or coercion. Respecting participants' voices and experiences in interviews can yield findings that are not only valid and reliable but also meaningful and impactful in addressing the research's complex issues.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The analysis of participants' lived experiences as master's students using ChatGPT for academic purposes revealed three central themes. As illustrated in the figure, the three main themes that resulted from the interview of the participants' combined statements of their experiences as master's students using ChatGPT are (i) effective academic support tool; (ii) cognitive offloading; and (iii) hesitation and curiosity.

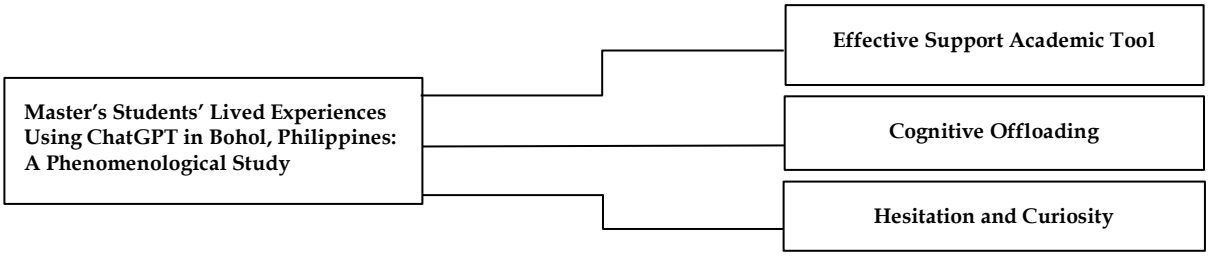

Figure 1. *Themes*

3.1 Effective Support Academic Tool

Table 1 presents the first theme, "Effective Support Academic Tool," which captures participants' insights into how ChatGPT eases learning.

Table 1. *Theme 1: Effective Support Academic Tool*

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	No. of Participants	No. of Excerpts
Effective Support Academic Tool	Academic Support	Academic Resource Access; Guided Learning; Convenience	8	10

Participants consistently characterized ChatGPT as a strong and user-friendly academic assistant. It was thought to significantly increase master's students' productivity and learning efficiency by enabling explanations, summarizing scholarly texts, and providing writing feedback. This result is consistent with recent research that highlights how AI is revolutionizing education. ChatGPT and other AI tools can personalize access to knowledge, especially for students who may find it challenging to use traditional academic resources (Kasneci et al., 2023). Similarly, Zhao (2022) found that students who used AI-based writing assistants reported improvements in their academic work in grammar, clarity, and structure.

Based on the interview, ChatGPT has been very positive and helpful to master's students, especially during their journey. It became one of the go-to tools whenever they needed information or assistance. In addition, a master's student said:

Master's student 1: "*I find it very useful because it makes learning easier and more efficient. When used wisely to deepen knowledge and improve communication, it becomes a powerful tool for both personal and professional growth. I am still amazed at how much easier and more convenient studying is.*"

Master's student 2: "*It helped me come up with ideas and understand difficult topics when I was confused. I could ask questions anytime and get quick answers. I still did the hard work myself, but ChatGPT made some parts easier and faster. It also helped me organize my thoughts and check my writing or answers in my assignments before submitting.*"

Master's student 4: "*Using ChatGPT has been a transformative experience in my academic journey. It serves as a helpful companion when I need clarification on complex concepts, quick summaries, or assistance in drafting academic content.*"

Master's students 1, 2, and 4 highlight how ChatGPT supports learning and communication while also noting its transformative impact on studying. They emphasize practical benefits, simplicity, and time-saving. Master's student 1 noted that ChatGPT is a helpful tool in education, as it supports competent, straightforward learning. This AI tool is not limited to education; it also boosts individual and professional development by providing comprehensive information and organizing ideas for better communication. Master's students 2 and 4 had a positive experience using ChatGPT as a helpful resource for understanding complex concepts, as it provides prompt answers relevant to the topic. The participants were not overly dependent on this AI tool; however, it helped present ideas in a coherent, logical form.

Together, these perspectives emphasize how ChatGPT provides practical benefits, simplicity, and time-saving. Master's students view ChatGPT as an effective and supportive academic tool. The results emphasize how AI, particularly ChatGPT, is transforming the learning process of master's students. Participants consistently highlight its usefulness in enhancing productivity, improving writing, and simplifying complex academic content. While master's students still take responsibility for their own learning, they consider ChatGPT a valuable companion in making their academic tasks more manageable and less time-consuming. Institutions should recognize the role of AI in education and consider integrating it more thoughtfully into academic settings. Proper guidance on how to use tools like ChatGPT ethically and effectively can empower students to make the most out of AI without compromising academic integrity.

ChatGPT is an advanced form of generative AI (Go, 2024). Integrating ChatGPT helps manage time-consuming tasks, potentially reallocating human resources toward more complex or creative endeavors. ChatGPT can assist with data entry, sorting, and fundamental analysis. This approach can reduce errors and improve the efficiency of these processes. As cited by Caratiquit, K., & Caratiquit, L. (2023), ChatGPT can produce timely and pertinent responses by leveraging its vast database and proficient language models, according to Zaremba and Demir (2023).

Thus, it only implies that the use of ChatGPT aids in easing the fears that the master's students are wary of, since it guarantees accessibility and inclusivity by catering to diverse communication styles as well as in handling the tasks to be done that need immediate attention (Caratiquit, K, & Caratiquit, L., 2023).

3.2 Cognitive Offloading

Table 2 reveals the second theme, "Cognitive Offloading", which highlights concerns like intellectual laziness and overdependence.

Table 2. *Theme 2: Cognitive Offloading*

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	No. of Participants	No. of Excerpts
Cognitive Offloading	Mental Laziness	Reduces Motivation to Think Critically; Risk of Developing Laziness; Overreliance	9	10

Master's students acknowledged that ChatGPT facilitates understanding complex topics and fosters deeper engagement when used critically. However, they also expressed concern that prolonged use might discourage original thought, reducing their motivation to question, analyze, and synthesize knowledge independently and risk their critical thinking.

In an interview, Master's student 2 mentioned: "*I have realized there is a downside too. Because it makes information so easy to access and explains things so clearly, it can sometimes make me less likely to think critically or question what I am reading. It is tempting to accept the answers it gives instead of working through ideas myself. So even though it supports independent learning, I have found I need to stay mindful and actively engage with the material, rather than*

letting the tool do all the thinking for me".

In addition, Master's student 7 indicated: *"ChatGPT helped me a lot in my learning. However, the risk is that I will no longer have to use my mind. I relied so much on ChatGPT that my brain decided to pause and stop functioning the way it did before. I lost my creative side."*

Master's student 2 emphasizes the cause-and-effect of using this tool. It is undeniable that ChatGPT is accessible and provides explanations to questions. However, it leaves students naive and confused with the information it provides, as there are instances where the answers are not close to the given question. Due to deadlines, the student ends up just using the answers presented to meet the time limit. In dealing with these difficulties in using this AI tool, Master's student 2's answer demonstrates initiative and balance. The participant is aware that this tool will serve only as a guide and will not copy all the information without verifying it.

The participant also notes that ChatGPT is convenient for accessing academic resources and information, as it delivers prompt answers and ideas. It helps understand complex concepts by providing breakdowns of explanations that make them easier to grasp, raising concerns about the erosion of originality, critical thinking, and the effects of dependency on academic tasks. It has grown reliant on this AI tool, leading to mental laxity and costing them their creative edge, leaving them feeling less motivated to develop their own ideas.

As Ampo (2025) stated, many students reported that AI provides immediate analysis, leading them to believe they may struggle or feel incapable of independently analyzing literary works without AI assistance. This dependency highlights a potential issue of cognitive offloading – the tendency to diminish the development of critical thinking and analytical skills within a literary criticism course. Moreover, Murray and Pérez (2023) argue that while large language models enhance access to information, they do not necessarily cultivate higher-order thinking unless deliberately integrated into pedagogy. Similarly, van Dis et al. (2023) warn that passive consumption of AI-generated content can lead to cursory engagement and hinder the development of critical thinking skills. Participants' narratives suggested a need for structured academic guidance in the use of AI tools. Therefore, it is highly necessary to actively instruct users to evaluate and verify content produced by artificial intelligence critically.

This illustrates a significant weakness: the use of ChatGPT might undermine students' critical thinking and lead to an overreliance on the tool (Vargas-Murillo, 2023). Likewise, Cai (2023) found an overdependence and diminished intellectual engagement, leading to a decrease in critical thinking. However, ChatGPT facilitates self-directed learning among students by functioning as a readily accessible knowledge repository.

Hence, it is essential to integrate AI dialogue systems in a balanced manner that promotes the development of critical and analytical thinking skills. Educational strategies should emphasize the importance of questioning AI-generated content, comparing it with human-generated insights, and understanding its limitations. Encouraging reflection on the biases present in AI outputs and engaging students in activities that require critical evaluation and synthesis of information from diverse sources can foster a more nuanced and critical approach to using AI tools (Dergaa et al., 2023).

3.3 Hesitation and Curiosity

Table 3 presents the third theme, "Hesitation and Curiosity," in which participants express mixed feelings about the use of ChatGPT.

Table 3. *Theme 3: Hesitation and Curiosity*

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	No. of Participants	No. of Excerpts
Hesitation and Curiosity	Hesitant and Uncertainty	Doubt; Curiosity	9	10

The third theme highlights the emotional complexity of using ChatGPT. Participants reported feelings of hesitation, curiosity, and confusion about the ethical boundaries of using AI in academic settings. While some viewed it as a legitimate learning aid, others feared accusations of academic dishonesty or felt that their learning was becoming inauthentic. This emotional ambivalence aligns with Flanagan et al. (2023), who explored students' psychological responses to AI use and found that uncertainty about institutional policies often leaves

students feeling conflicted.

From the interview, Master's student 10 stated: *"I was hesitant at first because I do not believe in AI. However, when I started using it, I was amazed by how close its answers were to the correct ones. However, let us not be too dependent on it so we can still retain our critical thinking skills."*

The respondent felt hesitant at first to use the tool but acknowledged what it can offer, noting that it should not be used as a dependency in academics, but rather as an aid to guide and support critical thinking. McGee (2023) emphasizes that students' internalized academic values, such as the importance of effort, originality, and intellectual integrity, can clash with the perceived "ease" ChatGPT offers. In the study by Ampo et al. (2025), a participant noted that ChatGPT can sometimes be unreliable due to its inaccuracies and therefore needs to be verified by teachers or students.

This theme is particularly insightful because it reveals that using ChatGPT is not just a technical or academic experience; it is also an emotional and ethical one. The feelings of hesitation, curiosity, and confusion shared by participants reflect the internal conflict many students face as they navigate new technologies in education. This suggests that students are aware of both the benefits and risks of AI tools and are actively seeking a responsible way to integrate them into their academic practices.

Therefore, institutions must provide more straightforward guidelines, ethical training, and open discussions about the proper use of AI in academic settings. Without such support, master's students are left to navigate these tools on their own, which can lead to confusion, guilt, or fear of being accused of dishonesty even when their intentions are good. These results also suggest that emotional and ethical dimensions should be part of the conversation when integrating AI in education, not just practical or technical aspects.

4.0 Conclusion

ChatGPT aligned with the participants' initial impression, showing hesitation because it might compromise their personal information or intrude into their personal space. The participants become curious and skeptical about the reliability of the information provided by ChatGPT. These feelings contradict the benefits of utilizing this AI tool as a practical academic support, since it provides convenient access to well-defined answers and saves time in completing academic tasks.

Nonetheless, to help master's students maintain integrity in their academic performance, it is also essential to understand the limitations. Thus, promoting self-awareness of over-reliance can lead to various disadvantages, such as the risk of stagnation of critical thinking and the inability to examine the quality and reliability of sources. At the same time, this study encourages one to be a responsible user, in a sense, by constantly verifying the data.

Therefore, schools need to include Artificial Intelligence courses in the Master's Degree curriculum to help students become AI-literate and critically evaluate AI results. Policymakers should also establish clear policies on the ethical use of AI. These initiatives should aim to educate master's students about the potential biases and limitations of AI tools and to promote critical thinking when engaging with AI-generated content. The study contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG) 4 on Quality Education by strengthening technology integration. By doing so, students will be better equipped to use AI responsibly and thoughtfully in both academic and professional settings.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, Data Gathering, Data Analysis, Writing Introduction, Results, and Discussion for Theme 1, Editing Methodology
Author 2: Writing Introduction, Data Gathering, Writing the Results and Discussion for Theme 2
Author 3: Data Gathering, Writing Research Environment
Author 4: Data Gathering, Writing Introduction, Data Gathering Procedure, Results and Discussion Theme 1, and Conclusion
Author 5: Data Gathering, Writing Research Instruments
Author 6: Data Gathering, Writing Research Design, Results and Discussion Theme 3, and Conclusion
Author 7: Data Gathering, Writing Introduction
Author 8: Writing Introduction

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

We declare no conflict of interest.

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