AI Integration in Academic Pursuits:
A Phenomenological Exploration

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Abstract. This study addressed a gap in research regarding graduate students' perceptions and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in higher education, specifically focusing on English majors. Using Colaizzi's phenomenological approach and purposive sampling technique, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with seven participants from a private university in Dumaguete City. The findings revealed that integrating AI into academic tasks significantly enhanced students' educational experiences by improving research efficiency, writing quality, creativity, and access to diverse resources. However, concerns about AI reliability and over-reliance were also highlighted. Six themes emerged that illustrated students' AI utilization: (1) Discernment, which involved assessing AI-generated content; (2) Caution, emphasizing the need for ethical use and vigilance against misinformation; (3) Balance, reflecting efforts to integrate AI support while maintaining scholarly voice; (4) Efficiency, highlighting the increased speed of completing research and writing tasks; (5) Confusion, arising from varied experiences with AI; and (6) Independence, encapsulating the desire to maintain critical thinking despite AI assistance. This study enhanced understanding of the complexities of technology integration in education and offered practical recommendations for educators on ethical AI use. Key contributions included advocating for developing programs and workshops focused on responsible AI use and encouraging independent thought and critical engagement among students. Ultimately, this research aimed to inform teaching practices in a digital learning environment and equip students to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by technological advancements. It offered valuable insights into how graduate students managed the integration of AI in their academic pursuits, thus contributing to the ongoing discourse on technology in education.

Keywords: AI integration; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Graduate students; Students' experiences.

1.0 Introduction

The increasing presence of digital writing assistants in education has transformed how students approach academic tasks. These advanced tools, which generate text and suggest revisions, have become widely accessible, supporting writing and research. While they offer benefits such as instant feedback and improved writing efficiency (Lainjo & Tsmouche, 2023), concerns have emerged regarding their impact on academic honesty. Graduate students specializing in English, who are expected to cultivate strong writing skills, critical thinking, and originality, face advantages and challenges when using these tools. A key question is whether these technologies enhance their learning experience or weaken essential skills needed for academic and professional success.

As digital tools become more embedded in education, institutions worldwide are reconsidering their policies on their use in academic settings. In the United Kingdom, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge have temporarily restricted the use of automated writing programs, citing concerns about plagiarism and the decline of independent thought (Wood, 2023). In the Philippines, reports indicate that students at the University of the Philippines Diliman have allegedly relied on these tools for coursework, raising ethical concerns about excessive dependence on machine-generated content (Estrellado & Miranda, 2023). A survey conducted by Hanover Research revealed that many educational institutions share similar concerns, with 52 percent of respondents worried about a decline in creativity and critical thinking, 49 percent expressing apprehension about data privacy risks, and 31 percent fearing an increase in unoriginal work (Philippine Information Technology Organization, 2024). These concerns are particularly relevant for students majoring in English, whose academic success depends on producing well-structured arguments and literary analyses. The ability to construct meaningful, persuasive writing is a fundamental requirement in their field, and an overreliance on external assistance may hinder their ability to think independently and refine their writing skills.

Despite ongoing discussions about using digital writing assistants in education, much existing research has focused on institutional policies and general perspectives rather than student experiences. For instance, Estrellado and Miranda (2023) examined their use at the University of the Philippines Diliman but concentrated on administrative responses rather than how students interact with these technologies. Similarly, Borbajo (2023), Amante-Nochefranca (2023), and Obenza et al. (2024) explored ethical and institutional concerns but did not investigate how students integrate these tools into their writing process. Bantugan et al. (2024) studied the experiences of Chinese postgraduate students in Manila. However, they took a broad approach, exploring digital tools in education rather than their specific effects on students specializing in English. Since writing-intensive fields strongly emphasize originality, analysis, and linguistic precision, a more focused study on how these students engage with writing technology is necessary. This gap in the literature highlights the need to examine how graduate students majoring in English use digital writing assistants in their academic work. Unlike students in other disciplines, those in English studies work extensively with textual analysis, literary interpretation, and research-based writing, making the influence of these tools on their academic development more complex. While automated writing support may be valuable, its long-term effects on students' writing proficiency, ethical considerations, and academic integrity remain unclear.

Understanding these experiences is essential for educators and policymakers seeking to develop thoughtful guidelines on using digital writing assistance in higher education. This study aims to explore how English graduate students perceive the role of these technologies in their academic writing, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to maintain academic integrity while using writing assistance. By addressing these issues, the findings will contribute to discussions on developing writing proficiency and research skills while informing institutional policies that encourage responsible and ethical engagement with digital writing tools.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design
The present research employed descriptive phenomenology, investigating the lived experiences of MaEd (primary in English) students regarding their use of AI. Phenomenology became widely known due to the contributions of Edmund Husserl in 1859-1938 (Pula, 2021). It is a methodological approach to understanding and exploring individuals' everyday experiences. This approach is especially suitable for this study because it enables a deep exploration of students' subjective experiences and perceptions as they integrate AI into their academic practices, thereby uncovering nuanced insights into both the benefits and challenges associated with its use.

2.2 Research Locale
The study was conducted at Foundation University, a private institution recognized for integrating technology into education. The university provides various digital resources to support student learning, including FUEL LMS, an online platform that facilitates access to course materials, virtual classes, and interactive activities. Additionally, the FU Library offers digital resources that aid research and academic writing. These tools are crucial in students' engagement with AI, providing opportunities to explore AI-assisted learning, writing, and research support. By leveraging these platforms, students can integrate AI tools into their academic work, enhancing their learning experiences.

2.3 Research Participants

The study participants were purposefully selected based on specific inclusion criteria and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. In phenomenological research, smaller sample sizes are often used to explore participants' lived experiences (Alam, 2020). The number of participants interviewed depended on reaching data saturation, which occurs when no new themes or insights emerge, and responses become repetitive (Lincoln & Guba, cited in Hossain, 2024).

The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique to obtain the sample, selecting participants based on their direct experience with AI in academic settings. This method enhances the validity and reliability of findings by focusing on individuals with firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon (Thomas, 2022). The study interviewed seven participants, analyzing their responses after each interview to identify emerging themes. Saturation was confirmed when the seventh interview did not introduce new themes or perspectives. To ensure the completeness of the data, an eighth participant was interviewed as a validation step, reaffirming that no additional insights emerged. This process ensured that the findings accurately captured the range of experiences of MAEd-English students using AI in their academic work.

2.4 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview served as the primary tool for data collection. The interview questions, formulated in English, were open-ended and designed to elicit significant insights from participants regarding their experiences with AI in academic work. To ensure the reliability and clarity of the questions, they were pilot-tested with two graduate students who were not part of the final study. This pilot test helped refine the wording and structure of the questions, ensuring they were clear, relevant, and capable of capturing meaningful data. Additionally, the questions were reviewed by an expert in qualitative research to enhance their validity. The interviews were automatically recorded using a Voice Memos application on a cellphone, with access restricted to the researcher to maintain confidentiality.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection took place from September to November 2024. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher sought permission from the Graduate School dean to involve graduate students as participants. After obtaining approval, a list of potential participants was acquired from the designated contact person, and individuals were invited to participate based on the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw without consequences. Each participant then signed an informed consent form before proceeding with the interview.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all interview recordings were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. Transcribed data were anonymized by replacing participants' names with codes to prevent identification. Additionally, any personally identifiable information was removed from the transcripts before analysis. The anonymized data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Interviews, lasting between 20–30 minutes, were recorded using the Voice Memos application, with clarifying questions asked as needed. The researcher actively listened, intervening only for clarification and guiding discussions toward emerging themes. Verbal and non-verbal cues were also documented in a journal alongside demographic details. After transcription, the recorded materials were cross-referenced for accuracy to ensure the integrity of the data.

2.6 Data Analysis Procedure

In this investigation, the transcripts were analyzed using the data analysis method developed by Colaizzi (see Gumarang et al., 2021; Serafica & Operiano, 2024; Awal & Asaduzzaman, 2024, for recent discussions about phenomenological research)—the first step involved transcribing all interviews verbatim using the Voice Memos mobile application. For example, if a participant described AI as "a helpful but sometimes unreliable tool," this statement was transcribed exactly as spoken. The second step required identifying key statements relevant to the research question. A statement such as *"AI helps me with grammar corrections, but I still have to double-check it"* was significant in understanding AI's perceived benefits and limitations. In the third step, the researcher rephrased these statements from a third-person perspective to capture their essence; for instance, the earlier statement was reformulated as *"Participants found AI useful for grammar corrections but noted the need for human oversight."* The fourth

step involved clustering related meanings into themes. For example, statements regarding AI's accuracy and reliability were categorized under *"Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses of AI."* In the fifth step, a comprehensive description was developed, capturing participants' overall experiences, including how they used AI, their challenges, and their perceptions of its impact on academic work. To validate the findings, the sixth step involved member checking, where participants reviewed the final descriptions to confirm that their experiences were accurately represented. A participant might review the summary and respond, *"Yes, that accurately reflects my experience with AI in writing assignments."* In addition, a peer review process was conducted, where a qualitative research expert examined the themes for coherence and consistency. In the seventh and final step, any necessary refinements were incorporated based on participant feedback and peer review to ensure the findings accurately represented their lived experiences. For instance, if a participant clarified that their primary use of AI was for brainstorming rather than grammar correction, this detail was integrated into the analysis. By following these steps, the researcher ensured a rigorous and in-depth exploration of the student's experiences with AI in their academic work.

2.7 Ethical considerations

Conducting a study on the lived experiences of MaEd students majoring in English regarding their use of AI in their academic work involved several ethical considerations to ensure the rights, well-being, and dignity of the participants were upheld. The following were the key ethical considerations for this study:

Approval to conduct the study. The study was approved by the University Chancellor, with the endorsement of the Dean of the Graduate School. Once approval was granted, the researcher approached the designated contact person responsible for providing the names of the student enrollees across different year levels. Detailed protocols for implementing the study were thoroughly discussed with the designated person to ensure everyone was aligned on the process.

Informed consent. Consent was obtained from participants to respect their rights and choices. Participants were provided clear information about the study's purpose, methods, potential benefits, and possible risks. This enabled them to make an informed decision about their involvement. Also, the participants were free to withdraw from the study without repercussions or penalty.

Confidentiality and privacy. The participants' privacy was protected throughout the study. Their details and responses were handled carefully, with identifying information removed to ensure anonymity. Data were securely stored, and access was restricted to the researcher, maintaining trust and respect for the participants' privacy.

Anonymity. Anonymity was upheld throughout the study to ensure no participant could be linked to the information they provided. Personal identifiers were removed, allowing participants to share their experiences openly and without fear of exposure.

Non-maleficence. The study process was carefully designed to avoid harming or discomforting the participants. Measures were taken to respect their time and emotional well-being. Support was also provided to address any concerns or issues, ensuring the participants had a positive experience throughout the study.

Beneficence. The study aimed to help the participants better understand their experiences using AI for academic purposes. It sought insights that could enhance learning practices and support academic success.

Respect for Autonomy. The participants' independence was respected by allowing them to decide whether to participate in the study freely. They also had the right to withdraw without consequence, ensuring their choices were upheld.

Justice. The study upheld fairness by ensuring all graduate students met the requirements and had equal participation opportunities. The participants were treated equitably, with risks and benefits fairly distributed among them.

2.8 Trustworthiness
The research ensured reliability and value by focusing on several key elements that strengthened the integrity and the validity of the study by prioritizing:

Credibility. Appropriate methods were carefully chosen to ensure that the participants' experiences were accurately captured. These methods were designed to gather detailed, meaningful data reflecting the participants' perspectives and feelings. The research utilized techniques well-suited to the study's goals, ensuring the findings were based on authentic and comprehensive participant insights. These methods were also tailored to align with the specific context and nature of the study, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Transferability. Clear and detailed descriptions were provided to ensure the findings could be effectively applied in similar contexts. Comprehensive explanations of the methods, participants' experiences, and study outcomes were included, enabling others to understand the key elements influencing the results. This transparency ensured that the insights gained from the study could be adapted to or used in comparable settings, making the findings more relevant and valuable for future applications or similar studies.

Dependability. The process was well-documented and consistent, ensuring that every study step was recorded and followed systematically. Detailed records were kept of the methods, procedures, and decisions made throughout the research. This documentation allowed for transparency, clarifying how the study was conducted and providing a clear trail of evidence for each research phase. Consistency was maintained in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, ensuring the same approach was applied to all participants and situations. By documenting every detail and maintaining consistency, the research minimized errors and biases, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Confirmability. The findings were based on participants' input and free from bias, meaning the research accurately reflected the experiences, perspectives, and feedback provided by the participants without any undue influence or distortion. Efforts were made to ensure that participants' voices were heard authentically, with minimal researcher interference. This was achieved by using open-ended questions, creating a neutral environment for responses, and avoiding leading or biased questions that could shape participants' answers. Additionally, the data was analyzed without favoring any particular outcome or preconceived notions, ensuring that the conclusions drawn genuinely reflected the participants' lived experiences. Any potential sources of bias, whether from the researcher's perspective or external factors, were carefully considered and minimized to maintain the integrity and credibility of the study's findings.

3.0 Results and Discussion
After a thorough analysis of the transcripts and coding, (6) six emergent themes have emerged, capturing the lived experiences of graduate students regarding the use of AI in their academic pursuits.

Emergent Theme 1: Discernment
The first theme addresses the ethical considerations of using artificial intelligence tools in education. It explores participants' perspectives on how these tools influence originality, academic integrity, and responsible use. Interviews revealed a complex relationship with technology, where participants strive to balance its benefits with personal authenticity. They stressed the need to verify information and responsibly cite sources, ensuring original authors receive acknowledgment. While participants view these tools as valuable for enhancing learning and deepening understanding, they also cautioned against overreliance, emphasizing the importance of personal effort and critical thinking in maintaining ownership of their work. Within this first emerging theme, there are two sub-themes: Integrity and Impact.

Theme 1: Integrity
This theme illustrates several important aspects of how participants engage with AI tools in their academic work. Participants demonstrate a strong awareness of the need to maintain originality, viewing AI primarily as a tool for verification and enhancement rather than a source for generating content. This perspective reflects their concern about becoming overly dependent on AI-generated material, emphasizing the importance of being able

to justify and clarify the origins of their work. Table 1 shows the first subtheme, Integrity, highlighting the participants' ethical approach to using AI in their academic work.

Table 1. *Lived experiences of graduate school students in terms of integrity in AI usage for academic work.*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate students' lived experiences in maintaining integrity while using AI in academic work	Commitment to Academic Integrity	Originality Awareness	Integrity
	Awareness of Over-Reliance	Dependency Awareness	
	Ethical Engagement with AI	Responsible AI Use	

These statements from the participants suggest that while AI tools can help make schoolwork easier, it is important to use them wisely:

It can be used in a good way, making life easier, but you can't just copy and paste to make things easier; that's not allowed (P2).

As English teachers, we practice citing sources. The number one reason for this is to credit the original author (P6).

They see the value of tools like plagiarism checkers and content generators but warn against taking shortcuts by copying and pasting without checking the work. They highlight the need to keep their work original and include their ideas, stressing that AI should assist rather than replace their effort and creativity. In line with these perspectives, Kamila and Jasrotia (2023) argued that creating an ethical environment is crucial for advancing AI and proposing directions for future research on AI ethics.

Theme 2: Impact
This theme illustrates the participants' view of AI tools as highly accessible resources that enhance learning rather than replace traditional methods. Participants emphasized that using AI supports their education by refreshing their knowledge and helping them understand complex topics, countering the misconception that it promotes laziness. They highlighted the importance of critical engagement, stressing the need to verify information, proofread AI outputs, and use these tools strategically. Table 2 shows the second subtheme, Impact, highlighting participants' perspectives on AI tools as accessible learning aids that enhance rather than replace traditional academic methods.

Table 2. *Lived experiences of graduate school students in terms of AI as a supportive tool for learning*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate students view AI as a supportive tool that enhances their learning rather than replacing traditional academic practices.	AI as a Learning Aid	Supplementary Role of AI in Education	Impact
	Countering the "Laziness" Stereotype	AI as a Tool for Active Learning	
	Strategic and Responsible Use	Practical and Ethical AI Integration in Learning	

These statements from the participants showed that AI aids learning by simplifying tasks and promoting active engagement, showing that using it does not mean being lazy:

So, AI impacted my learning in a way that, aside from making my work easier, it also—how do I say this—it is not like you are using it because you are being lazy or because you are not learning anything. You can learn a lot from it, other than just helping you with correct spelling and punctuation because if you run certain things, it also gives you feedback on those. So, you also get refreshed, and it is not like it spoon-feeds you everything (P1).

You must double-check and then check other sources if you have enough time. Research whether the information is credible before you use it. You might end up sharing false information with others. Since you have the final say, you must double-check (P6).

It helps users quickly grasp key concepts through summarization while maintaining depth. However, they cautioned that it is also crucial to think critically and ensure that information is reliable before sharing it. This parallels the findings of Kim et al. (2020), who argued that gaining insight into teachers' and students' perspectives on AI teaching assistants, or machine educators in general, is essential for successfully incorporating new technologies into education. Similarly, the study of Demir and Guraksin (2021) revealed that students often associate AI with humans, gadgets, and the human brain.

Emergent Theme 2: Caution
The theme reflects the concerns and challenges associated with using AI in learning and education. Participants expressed skepticism about the effectiveness and reliability of AI tools, noting issues such as inaccurate translations, shallow responses, and the potential for over-reliance, which can diminish critical thinking and personal engagement. This theme has two sub-themes: Reliability and Accessibility.

Theme 3: Reliability
This theme addresses the limitations and challenges of using AI in educational settings. Participants express doubts about the effectiveness of AI tools, particularly regarding their reliability in tasks like translation and plagiarism detection. They stress that while AI can simplify some aspects of learning and assist with tasks, it may lead to over-reliance, hindering critical thinking and personal growth. Concerns are raised about the potential for AI-generated content to lack depth and emotional resonance and the risk of students resorting to copying and pasting information instead of engaging with the material. Table 3 shows the third subtheme, Reliability, which captures participants' concerns regarding the accuracy and effectiveness of AI in education.

Table 3. *Lived experiences of graduate school students concerning the effectiveness and accessibility of AI in education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate students' lived experiences concerning AI's effectiveness in education.	Inaccuracy of AI Responses	Unreliable and incorrect outputs generated by AI tools	Reliability
	Inconsistent Performance	Unpredictable reliability of AI tools	
	Lack of Human Judgment	AI's inability to apply human-like reasoning	

These statements from the participants illustrate several limitations and challenges associated with using AI in educational contexts:

AI, right? You will feed it information, but if you ask for specific sources, it might give you incorrect ones. So, since not everything is accurate, we still need to do our research. They are better at general knowledge, especially for specific information. But when it comes to specific details, like asking for sources, that is its downside (P4).

It is somewhat of a challenge regarding the authenticity of the answer, and later on, I have to double-check it myself. I would say to the AI, 'Why is it like this? Returning to the phrase's definition,' the AI would respond, 'Sorry for my mishaps.' So, it makes you doubt the credibility of AI. So, something like that, you know? One issue is the credibility and authenticity of AI's answers (P7).

They highlight that while AI can be helpful, it often struggles with accuracy and context. Participants distrusted AI's ability to provide reliable translations, specific sources, or older works. This led them to emphasize the importance of double-checking information, as AI can produce answers that lack depth and credibility. This aligns with the findings of Melchor et al. (2023), who indicated that using AI in math education offers personalized learning, enhances critical thinking, and equips students for the digital age.

Theme 4: Accessibility
This theme discusses the challenges of using AI tools in education due to technology issues. Some participants emphasized that a strong internet connection is essential for practical use. Some expressed concerns about unequal internet access, which can create unfair student situations. Without the internet, AI tools cannot be used at all. Some participants feel frustrated by limits on free use, which restrict their attempts before requiring payment. They also face technical problems, especially during high-demand times. Table 4 presents the fourth subtheme, Accessibility, which caused frustration and disadvantage for participants, as internet dependency and access issues created inequalities, financial limitations restricted AI use, and technical problems disrupted learning.

Table 4. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students Concerning the Technological Challenges of AI in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences Concerning AI's Accessibility Challenges in Education	Internet Dependency	AI tools need a strong internet connection	Accessibility
	Technical Issues	AI tools face slowdowns, glitches, and inefficiencies during peak times.	

These statements from the participants highlight various challenges in using AI tools for learning, emphasizing the crucial need for a reliable internet connection:

Some applications are not unlimited. I think they only allow seven tries for free unless you subscribe. If you pay, of course, you get unlimited questions. I guess that is one of the main drawbacks: you need to pay (P3).

The second issue is when you are in a hurry and facing technical issues, like having no internet connection, and want to get information quickly. So, we cannot control that because the Wi-Fi is uncontrollable, which is probably all regarding challenges (P7).

Without Wi-Fi or mobile data, the participants struggle to use these tools effectively. Additionally, some tools limit free usage to a few attempts and require payment for unlimited access, which participants view as a significant drawback. The high cost of AI tools compounds these challenges; this echoes the results of Melo (2023), which presented another barrier to effective integration. Many educational institutions lack the necessary resources to purchase and maintain these tools, prompting a need to explore public funding or partnerships to support their efforts. This agrees with the findings of Ahmid and Saif (2022), who emphasized that schools must provide teachers with the necessary resources, support, and recognition to implement AI-based teaching methods successfully.

Emergent Theme 3: Balance
This theme reflects how artificial intelligence is changing education in significant ways. It concludes the participants' experiences on how AI significantly improves education by enhancing the quality of student work, aiding teachers, and facilitating efficient learning processes. Many participants blend traditional learning methods with AI, emphasizing the importance of collaboration between human efforts and technology for fostering creativity in education. They also encourage educators to use AI responsibly and avoid over-reliance, which may impede personal learning. Some participants urge teachers to guide students in integrating AI into their lessons, teach essential research skills to prevent plagiarism, and tailor lessons to meet the students' diverse needs while ensuring the accuracy of the information presented. Under this theme, three sub-themes emerged: Integration and Ethical guidance.

Theme 5: Integration
This theme illustrates that AI tools significantly improve learning by enhancing the quality of students' work and making education more efficient. Participants mentioned that AI can help correct mistakes and provide helpful guidance, which supports better learning. Combining AI with traditional methods encourages teamwork between humans and technology, allowing students to be more creative.
Table 5 represents subtheme Integration, which tells how AI integration has enhanced participants' learning by improving work quality, providing corrections, and offering helpful guidance.

Table 5. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students with AI Integration and Its Positive Impact on Learning*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with AI Integration and Its Positive Impact on Learning	Enhancing Learning Quality	AI helps improve students' work	Integration
	Increasing Efficiency	AI simplifies and enhances the learning process.	
	Encouraging Creativity	AI fosters innovation	

These statements from the participants illustrate the importance of blending traditional learning methods with AI to create a more meaningful educational experience that fosters knowledge sharing:

QuillBot is very useful because when you paraphrase, you can choose words that you can match together. It gives a lot of words. For one word, it shows additional synonyms (P1).

Now and then, I also go back to my traditional way of learning while also using AI. That is one way of making it meaningful because I also have something to share. AI has already given that to me, so I should also internalize it (P3).

Additionally, they acknowledge that AI can assist educators in designing engaging activities tailored to students' interests, thereby complementing individual efforts and enhancing creativity in the learning process. In line with this thought, Chan (2023) suggested that universities can support students and faculty by offering AI training, which prepares graduates to engage in AI development and tackle the ethical, societal, and economic challenges associated with its widespread use.

Theme 6: Ethical Guidance
This theme highlights the importance of teachers using AI responsibly and guiding students in its proper use. Participants advised teachers to avoid over-reliance on AI, ensuring it supports learning without hindering critical thinking or encouraging plagiarism. Teachers are encouraged to adapt lessons to meet students' needs, maintain the accuracy of information, and create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable learning from their mistakes. Table 6 shows the sixth subtheme, Ethical Guidance, which emphasizes the role of teachers in ensuring the responsible use of AI in education.

Table 6. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on the Importance of Ethical Guidance in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with AI Usage and Ethical Guidance in Education	Responsible AI Use	AI as a supportive tool without over-reliance	Ethical Guidance
	Prevention of Plagiarism	Prevent academic dishonesty	
	Ensuring Information Accuracy	Verifying AI-generated content to prevent misinformation.	

The statements from the participants emphasized the need for teachers to use AI responsibly, both in the classroom and in their studies:

We should also be keen because there is also information that is not true or real. So, as a teacher, the information you give your students should be something you have already checked. Students might question your credibility. If you tell them something and they see that your work is based on ChatGPT, they might think, "Oh, you just got that from ChatGPT." It is not about the final product but the process of how you came up with the information. If we only focus on the product, there might be no questions. But if it is clear that it came from AI, students might doubt your credibility as a teacher (P4).

So, I think it still falls under the teacher's role to implement that it's not just about copying and pasting. It's okay if you do that, but make sure you include a citation when you copy and paste. However, it's better if you get the gist of it and paraphrase it so that it's not completely copied and pasted (P7).

They urged educators to refrain from over-relying on AI tools, which can hinder their learning and creativity. This supports the conclusions of Birenbaum (2023), who said that students commonly use AI to collect and organize information for their academic tasks, such as research projects and essays; however, some expect AI to write the papers for them. In line with this, Wu (2023) noted that AI chatbots significantly influence students' learning outcomes, particularly in higher education, with shorter interactions leading to greater improvements. This effect may be attributed to the diminishing novelty benefits associated with extended use.

Emergent Theme 4: Efficiency
This theme reflects how participants have begun using AI tools in their education and work to save time and better manage their responsibilities. Many started using AI during their master's programs to assist with tasks such as translating lessons or completing assignments under tight deadlines. This theme includes two sub-themes: Personal engagement and Time management.

Theme 7: Personal Engagement
This theme shows that participants mainly started using AI when pursuing their master's degree. They turn to AI for help with tasks such as translating lessons and accomplishing schoolwork more easily. Before their postgraduate studies, they had limited access to AI, making using these tools hard. Table 7 presents the eighth subtheme, Personal Engagement, highlighting how participants began using AI primarily during their master's studies.

Table 7. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on Personal Engagement with AI in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with Personal Engagement in AI for Learning	Introduction to AI During Graduate Studies	Most students started using AI in their master's studies	Personal Engagement
	Limited AI Access Before Postgraduate Studies	Limited AI exposure	
	Growing Dependence on AI	Students use AI more as they progress	

All these statements from the participants illustrate the growing use of AI tools in education, highlighting how they assist with tasks like lesson translation and research:

I started using AI like last year in the middle of December. I struggled to translate everything, like my daily lessons in Filipino, because I was handling four grade levels. If I translate it on my own, it would take time, so I let AI help me (P2)

I first encountered AI or used AI in 2023. That was the very first time I used AI because some of my classmates introduced it to me when I enrolled here at the Foundation (P5).

Most participants recognize AI's benefits in their advanced studies, particularly after facing limited access and availability in the past. This trend reflects the increasing importance and accessibility of AI in educational settings. This is aligned with the notion of Mandal and Mete (2023), who argued that enhancing educational materials and including AI in curricula and teacher training programs are essential to promoting inclusive and comprehensive education, ultimately improving AI understanding for teachers and students.

Theme 8: Time Management
This theme talks about how AI tools assist participants in balancing work, studies, and personal life by saving time and reducing workload, especially during busy periods and tight deadlines. Table 8 presents the ninth subtheme, Time Management, which explores how AI tools help participants balance work, studies, and personal life.

Table 8. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on Time Management with AI in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with AI for Time Management in Education	Balancing Responsibilities	AI helps students manage their work.	Time Management
	Reducing Workload	AI simplifies tasks	
	Meeting Deadlines	AI an assistant	

Based on the testimonies above, the participants utilized AI tools to manage their responsibilities outside of work and school, leading to a more organized lifestyle:

Because AI makes our lives easier because we have lives outside of school and work, so, besides that, our time is more divided adequately between our work, our study, and our family, and our work will also be enhanced (P1).

I don't function if I am not under time pressure. If I work, that's when I am really close to the deadline, like tomorrow or next week. So, I work on it the day before, which really helps me because I don't usually do work in advance, especially since I'm very busy with work and studying. It really speeds things up (P7).

By simplifying their tasks, AI allows them to allocate time effectively among work, studies, and family, ultimately enhancing the quality of their output. This resonates with the conclusions of Rong et al. (2022), who suggested that integrating AI with human intelligence enhances students' psychological well-being by boosting their focus and creativity in learning environments. In line with this, Fitria (2021) stated that AI allows teachers to conserve their energy, enabling them to focus on other important tasks.

Emergent Theme 5: Confusion
This theme explores how participants have developed distinct preferences for various AI tools, influenced by their perceived effectiveness and limitations. Participants indicate that their choice of tools is shaped by how well these AI applications meet their specific needs, whether in research, writing, or task management. Under this, two themes also emerged: Preference and Tool constraints.

Theme 9: Preference
This theme illustrates the participants' diverse choices and inclinations toward different AI tools based on their specific needs and experiences. Participants expressed varying preferences, with some favoring AI tools over traditional search engines like Google, as they found the former more efficient and focused on providing relevant information. Table 9 presents the tenth subtheme, Preference, which explores participants' varying choices of AI tools based on their specific needs and experiences.

Table 9. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on Their Preferences for AI Tools in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with AI Tools Based on Their Preferences in Education	Diverse Tool	Preferences for AI tools	Preference
	Preferences Personalized Learning	Personalized AI Support	
	Student-Driven Choices	Preferences for AI tools	

These testimonies from the participants show that they have developed distinct preferences for different AI tools based on their experiences and specific needs:

That, too, because for me to fully understand, and if you solely depend on Google, there are a lot of things, a lot of information that can divert you, unlike AI, which is very specific (P4).

However, in terms of information gathering, my go-to is Liner. That is the only AI that I know. Sometimes, I use ChatGPT, especially for a faster pace of information because it lays everything out (P7).

Some participants find specific AI tools more practical for gathering information or completing tasks than traditional search engines like Google. They appreciate the specificity and clarity that some AI tools offer, which helps them navigate the overwhelming amount of online information. This is in line with the thoughts of Wollny et al. (2021), who highlighted the potential of chatbots as tools enabling students to learn at their own pace, and Labadze et al. (2023), who emphasized that AI-powered chatbots support students by assisting with homework, offering personalized learning experiences, and fostering skill development.

Theme 10: Tool Constraints
This theme addresses the challenges participants experience with AI tools. It highlights specific issues that participants encounter, such as the tendency of some AI platforms to provide repetitive or incorrect definitions, which can lead to confusion among similar terms. Table 10 presents the eleventh subtheme, Tool Constraints, highlighting participants' challenges with AI tools.

Table 10. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on the Challenges of AI Tools in Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with the Challenges of AI Tools in Education	Repetitive and Incorrect Definitions	AI tools give redundant definitions.	Tool Constraints
	Misunderstanding of Similar Terms	AI misinterprets similar terms.	

These statements highlight the participants' concerns about the reliability and effectiveness of specific digital tools:

I use Scribbr; I copy the link from Google Scholar and then paste it into Scribbr. But sometimes, they cannot cite the sources, so you need to search manually (P5).

The thing with ChatGPT is that it provides comprehensive responses. It seems just to consolidate all the data from the internet and then just give it to you, leaving it up to you to read through everything (P6)

For instance, participants noted that some tools frequently provide repetitive and overly vague responses and confusing definitions, while others fail to cite sources accurately, necessitating manual searches. This aligns with the findings of Darwin et al. (2023), who revealed that while students recognized their potential to enhance academic research, theory analysis, and experimental design, they also identified limitations such as issues with detailed understanding, repetitive content, and a lack of originality. Similarly, Mageira et al. (2022) conducted an experiment using AsasaraBot; their findings highlighted ongoing technical challenges, including difficulties in understanding natural language, creating seamless conversational flows, and training teachers and students to utilize the technology effectively.

Emergent Theme 6: Independence
This theme focuses on the need for participants to think for themselves when using AI tools. It stresses that while AI can help with tasks, participants should not completely rely on it. Participants believe it is important to check and understand the information provided by AI instead of just accepting it. This theme has two sub-themes: Reflection and Self-reliance.

Theme 11: Reflection
This theme focuses on the need for users to actively engage with AI tools rather than completely rely on them. It highlights the importance of critical thinking and personal initiative when using these technologies. Table 11 presents the twelfth subtheme, Reflection, which explores participants' experiences with AI tools.

Table 11. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on the Importance of Reflection in AI Use for Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with Reflection in AI Use for Education	Active Engagement	Students recognize the need to engage thoughtfully with AI	Reflection
	Critical Thinking	AI should support, not replace	
		Effective AI use requires active evaluation and interpretation.	
	Personal Initiative		

These testimonies from the participants emphasized the need for active engagement with AI tools. They stressed that users should not rely solely on AI but should review and understand the information it provides:

But again, you need to use your brain as a human. Yeah, you need to read it and polish it in your own way as an English teacher (P2).

if you do not like writing what you have asked ChatGPT you can always go back to it because it also saves the topic you have searched on its history. You can go through that, read, then internalize. I think that's pretty much what you can do so that you are not just completely relying on AI (P3).

I think we really need to step back because I've noticed that people are very reliant on it now. Because AI is really just artificial (P5).

They also advocate for using personal knowledge and experiences to grasp both content and structure, promoting a balanced approach between technology and critical thinking. This aligns with the observation of Picciano, as cited by Gocen and Aydemir (2020), who mentioned that people who can use AI will have an edge over those who cannot. In line with this thought, Ross (2023) highlighted that the emphasis should be on teaching learners the skills that AI does not possess. This corresponds to the findings of the study of Lee et al. (2021) who suggested that combining AI, ethics, and professional perspectives can effectively improve AI literacy in middle school students.

Theme 12: Self-reliance
This theme showed a clear understanding of how AI and human decision-making relate to each other. Participants recognized the benefits of using AI but also stressed the need to maintain their independence and improve their critical thinking skills. Table 12 represents the subtheme Self-Reliance, which highlights participants' experiences in balancing AI use with independent decision-making and developing critical thinking skills.

Table 12. *Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students on the Importance of Self-Reliance in AI Use for Education*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Themes
Graduate Students' Lived Experiences with Self-Reliance in AI Use for Education	Balancing AI and Independence	Students use AI as a tool while maintaining independence	Self-Reliance
		Students prioritize control over their learning	
	Personal Decision-Making	Responsible AI use refines analytical skills	
	Encouraging Analytical Skills		

These statements from the participants illustrate that achieving a balance between using AI as a tool and depending on their own abilities is essential:

For me, it should be 50/50. There is AI, and there are also humans who do their part. So it's not necessarily that AI has completely replaced teachers. We cannot avoid AI nowadays; it's already here, and we are using it. Therefore, we might as well just collaborate. It should be a win-win for both sides. It shouldn't just be that AI wins (P3).

It's best not to rely too much on AI because, again, it's just AI. It's something created by humans, and at the same time, you shouldn't just copy and paste from it (P6).

While they recognize the benefits that AI can offer in terms of efficiency and support, they stress the importance of maintaining personal responsibility, creativity, and critical thinking. This reflects the findings of Burkhard (2022) who noted that students have varied opinions about AI-powered writing tools. Some students use these tools without reflecting on their work, which can result in plagiarism, while others avoid them due to skepticism or a lack of effective learning strategies.

4.0 Conclusions

This study explored graduate students' perspectives on digital assistants in academic work, particularly their role in supporting learning and improving efficiency. Participants appreciated their usefulness in handling complex topics but emphasized the importance of responsible use to maintain originality and honesty. These findings echo previous studies highlighting AI-based learning tools' benefits and ethical challenges (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2022; Celik, 2023). While these tools helped verify information, their weaknesses, such as occasional inaccuracies, highlighted the need for independent thinking and careful evaluation (Awal & Asaduzzaman, 2024). This aligns with prior research indicating that AI tools, though valuable, require careful oversight to avoid over-reliance (Borbajo, Malbas, & Dacanay, 2023).

By examining how these technologies shaped academic habits, this research underscored the importance of a balanced approach that combined personal effort, creativity, and guidance from educators. As supported by Darwin et al. (2023), the ability to critically assess AI-generated content is essential for fostering higher-order thinking skills. These insights could help shape school policies, course design, and teacher training programs that encourage thoughtful and ethical use of digital tools while strengthening students' ability to think critically and uphold academic standards (Chan, 2023; Wu & Yu, 2023).

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9.0 References

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