



EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS IN THE UTILIZATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - POWERED TOOLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological inquiry explored the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of college students in the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered tools in academic tasks in selected private tertiary schools in Davao City. Participants were selected through purposive sampling considering the set inclusion criteria. With the utilization of expert-validated researcher-made interview guide questions, themes were generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to better understand the phenomenon. The findings revealed three themes on the lived experiences of students utilizing AI-powered tools: AI as an Academic Support Tool, Concerns on Ownership and Authenticity, and AI Tool Dependence and Reduced Critical Thinking. Four themes emerged on coping mechanisms: Verification and Validation Strategies, Responsible and Self-Regulated AI Tool Utilization, Adaptive Use of AI Tools, and Collaborative and Peer Support Strategies. Finally, three themes emerged from students' insights: Responsible and Guided Use of AI-Powered Tools, Ethical Considerations in AI Tool Utilization and Perceived Effects of AI on Learning and Society. Overall, the findings show that students recognize AI tool as a useful academic support while emphasizing critical evaluation, responsible use, proper guidance, and ethical awareness. The study was conducted within the school year of 2025-2026 and completed in the month of July 2026.

Keywords: *Education, artificial intelligence, AI-powered tools, students, qualitative phenomenology, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies has significantly influenced various sectors, particularly education, where AI-powered tools have become increasingly integrated into teaching, learning, and academic writing (Bozkurt, 2024). These technologies enable students and researchers to generate human-like text, organize ideas, and improve academic communication, making learning more efficient and accessible (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). Despite these benefits, concerns have emerged regarding academic dishonesty, bias, misinformation, and the impact of AI-generated content on knowledge creation and academic integrity (Lee et al., 2024).

Previous studies have demonstrated both the opportunities and challenges associated with AI use in higher education. Chan et al. (2023) reported that university students generally viewed generative AI positively because of its ability to support personalized learning and academic tasks, although concerns regarding accuracy, privacy, and ethical use persisted. Similarly, Wang (2024) found that while AI assisted students in conceptualizing and organizing ideas, many struggled to maintain originality and regulate their own learning when relying on AI-generated content.

International evidence likewise highlights this dual perspective. In Norway, Schei et al. (2024) found that students considered AI chatbots beneficial for writing and coding tasks but questioned the reliability of AI-generated responses and their potential effects on creativity, discipline, and critical thinking. In Australia, Newell and Dahlenburg (2024) reported widespread use of generative AI for writing, brainstorming, and summarizing, accompanied by concerns regarding academic integrity and overreliance on AI. Likewise, Attewell (2025) found that university students in the United Kingdom valued AI as a learning support tool while expressing concerns about plagiarism, misinformation, ethical use, and the possible erosion of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Within the Philippine context, Cabuquin et al. (2024) reported that students in Eastern Visayas encountered repetitive, insufficient, and inaccurate information when using ChatGPT and raised concerns about excessive dependence on AI-generated outputs. Similarly, Obenza et al. (2024) found that university students in Davao City frequently used ChatGPT for academic purposes but identified issues related to academic integrity, information validity, and the responsible use of generative AI.

Although existing studies have explored students' perceptions, acceptance, and utilization of AI-powered tools, there remains limited qualitative research that examines the lived experiences of students, the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the meanings they attach to AI use in their academic work, particularly among students in private higher education institutions and within the field of social sciences. Understanding these experiences is timely given the rapid integration of AI technologies into higher education and the growing need to promote ethical, responsible, and effective AI utilization in learning.

To address this gap, this phenomenological inquiry explored the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of college students regarding the utilization of AI-powered tools in academic tasks in selected private tertiary schools in Davao City. By examining students' firsthand experiences, the study provides a deeper understanding of how learners balance the advantages of AI with the demands of academic integrity, critical thinking, and authentic learning, thereby contributing evidence that may inform future educational practices and policies on the responsible integration of AI in higher education.

Research Questions

1. What are lived experiences of students in the utilization of AI-powered tools?
2. What are the coping mechanisms of the participants in the utilization of AI-powered tools?
3. What insights can be shared to the academe and the society?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of college students regarding the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered tools in academic tasks. The study was conducted in selected private tertiary schools in Davao City. The names of the participating institutions are withheld to preserve confidentiality.

The participants consisted of twenty (20) college students enrolled in social science courses. They were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled as first- to third-year college students in a private tertiary institution in Davao City; (2) have used AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or QuillBot in at least three academic outputs during the current semester; and (3) are at least 18 years old. Students enrolled in programs with direct AI integration, such as Computer Science, Information Technology, and Multimedia Arts, as well as senior high school students, were excluded from the study. Data saturation was achieved through two focus group discussions (FGDs) involving six participants each and eight in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Data were gathered through face-to-face FGDs and IDIs using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions aligned with the objectives of the study. The interview guide was validated by experts prior to data collection to establish content validity. Before the interviews, participants were oriented regarding the study, and informed consent was obtained. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes, while each IDI lasted 45–60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into categories to

identify recurring patterns and themes. The resulting themes were refined and interpreted based on the participants' narratives to describe the essence of their lived experiences in utilizing AI-powered tools for academic purposes.

The study focused on the lived experiences of college students from selected private tertiary schools in Davao City who used AI-powered tools for academic tasks. The findings are limited to the experiences of the participants and may not be generalized to students from other disciplines, public higher education institutions, or educational contexts. As a qualitative phenomenological study, the results provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than statistical generalizations.

RESULTS

Table 1. Themes on the Lived Experiences of Students in the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

Theme	Core Ideas
AI as an Academic Support Tool	Academic writing organization and refinement; personalized learning support; assistance in assignment completion and examination preparation; information retrieval and synthesis
Concerns on Ownership and Authenticity	Reduced ownership of academic outputs; uncertainty whether outputs reflect personal learning; ethical concerns in AI utilization
AI Tool Dependence and Reduced Critical Thinking	Overreliance on AI; reduced independent thinking; diminished autonomous decision-making in independent Learning

Table 2. Themes on the Coping Mechanisms of Students in the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

Theme	Core Ideas
Verification and Validation Strategies	Double-checking AI outputs; consulting textbooks, notes, and online references; comparing multiple information sources
Responsible and Self-Regulated AI Tool Utilization	Setting boundaries; using AI tool only when necessary; maintaining personal study routines
Adaptive Use of AI Tools	Refining prompts; revising AI-tool generated outputs; selecting relevant information

Theme	Core Ideas
Collaborative and Peer Support Strategies	Consulting classmates; peer discussions; validating information with peers

Table 3. Themes on the Insights of Students on the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

Theme	Core Ideas
Responsible and Guided Use of AI-Powered Tools	Recognizing appropriate role of AI tools effective prompting practices; teacher guidance and supervision; balanced AI tool dependence; development of critical thinking skills
Ethical Considerations in AI Tool Utilization	Upholding academic integrity; maintaining originality; acknowledging AI tool assistance; responsible use of AI-tool generated content
Perceived Effects of the use AI tool on Learning and Society	Faster and more accessible learning; Enhanced learning efficiency through AI tool; Risk of misuse and overreliance

DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of Students in the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

The findings revealed that students perceived AI-powered tools as valuable academic support systems that enhanced writing, personalized learning, information retrieval, and examination preparation. Participants viewed AI as an effective aid in organizing ideas, simplifying complex concepts, and improving the quality of academic outputs, suggesting that AI has become an important learning companion that promotes academic efficiency. These findings were consistent with previous studies demonstrating that AI supports academic writing, learning organization, personalized instruction, and information synthesis (Chan & Hu, 2023; Jauhiainen & Guerra, 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Khader & Khalil, 2025; Mostafa, 2026; Sitanggang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024). Despite these benefits, participants expressed concerns regarding ownership, authenticity, and ethical responsibility, questioning whether AI-assisted outputs genuinely reflected their knowledge and academic effort. These experiences indicate that students recognize the tension between utilizing AI as a learning aid and preserving academic integrity, a finding that corroborates earlier studies highlighting challenges related to authorship, originality, authenticity, and ethical AI use in education (Bozkurt, 2024; Duah & McGivern, 2024; Ferrara, 2023; Jin et al., 2024; Murray & Williams, 2023; Walter, 2024; Wang, 2024; Zhai et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the findings showed that students were aware of the risks associated with excessive dependence on AI, particularly its potential to diminish independent thinking, problem-solving abilities, and autonomous decision-making. Although participants acknowledged AI's convenience, they recognized the importance of maintaining active cognitive engagement and critical reflection during learning. This interpretation supports previous research indicating that overreliance on AI may reduce learners' critical thinking, creativity, reflective learning, and independent judgment (Çela et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2024; Gerlich, 2025; Jose, 2025; Melisa et al., 2025; Pitts et al., 2025; Sok & Heng, 2023; Vendrell & Johnston, 2026; Yavich, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings suggested that while AI serves as a powerful educational support tool, its effective integration in higher education requires a balanced approach that promotes academic integrity, preserves students' ownership of learning, and strengthens critical thinking rather than replacing it.

Coping Mechanisms of Students in the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

The findings identified four major coping mechanisms adopted by students in utilizing AI-powered tools: Verification and Validation Strategies, Responsible and Self-Regulated AI Tool Utilization, Adaptive Use of AI Tools, and Collaborative and Peer Support Strategies. The results suggest that students did not rely passively on AI-generated information but instead demonstrated deliberate efforts to information by consulting textbooks, scholarly references, class notes, and other reliable sources, reflecting their awareness of the need to critically assess AI outputs before integrating them into academic tasks. This finding was consistent with previous studies emphasizing that AI-generated content should be verified to address issues of misinformation, bias, and inaccuracies and to promote critical thinking, academic rigor, and responsible AI use (Chan & Hu, 2023; Dgebuadze & Kenkebashvili, 2025; Martí & Martínez, 2025; Vendrell & Johnston, 2026; Zhai et al., 2024). Moreover, participants practiced responsible and self-regulated AI utilization by setting boundaries on AI use, employing AI only when necessary, and maintaining their own study routines, indicating that they viewed AI as a supplementary learning resource rather than a replacement for independent learning. These findings corroborated earlier studies highlighting the importance of self-regulation, purposeful AI use, and preserving learner autonomy in technology-enhanced learning environments (Balzan et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2023; Vera & López, 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

The study further revealed that students adapted their use of AI by refining prompts, revising AI-generated responses, and selectively filtering relevant information, demonstrating active engagement and metacognitive regulation during AI-assisted learning. These findings were aligned with studies suggesting that strategic prompting, critical evaluation, and modification of AI outputs improve learning quality and strengthen students' cognitive engagement and ownership of their academic work (Balzan et al., 2026; Jin et al., 2023; Mpofu et al., 2026; Vera & López, 2025; Xiao-hua et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Finally, participants

emphasized the value of collaborative and peer support strategies by consulting classmates, engaging in discussions and validating AI-generated information with peers before applying it in academic tasks. This indicates that human interaction remained an essential component of learning despite the availability of AI technologies. The findings were consistent with previous research showing that peer collaboration enhances reflective learning, critical evaluation, responsible AI use, and self-regulated learning by allowing students to examine multiple perspectives and validate AI-generated information collectively (Balzan et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Mpofu et al., 2026; Vera & López, 2025; Xiao-hua et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings demonstrated that students employed intentional cognitive, metacognitive, and collaborative strategies to maximize the benefits of AI while preserving critical thinking, academic integrity, and independent learning.

Insights of Students on the Utilization of AI-Powered Tools

The findings identified three major themes reflecting students' insights on the use of AI-powered tools: Responsible and Guided Use of AI-Powered Tools, Ethical Considerations in AI Tool Utilization, and Perceived Effects of AI on Learning and Society. The results suggest that students recognized AI as a supportive learning resource rather than a replacement for their own intellectual effort, as they emphasized the importance of recognizing the appropriate role of AI tools, valuing teacher guidance, and developing effective AI-tool interaction and prompting practices. Participants viewed AI as useful for understanding lessons, accessing information, and completing academic tasks, but they also recognized the need to establish boundaries regarding when and how AI should be used. This finding was consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of understanding both the capabilities and limitations of AI, providing appropriate pedagogical guidance, and maintaining learner autonomy in AI-supported learning environments (Balzan et al., 2026; Lodge et al., 2023; Vera & López, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Xiao-hua et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025).

Moreover, participants valued teacher guidance and supervision, indicating that educators remained important in establishing appropriate expectations and ensuring that AI supported rather than replaced students' learning. These findings corroborated earlier studies highlighting the role of teachers in promoting responsible, safe, and meaningful AI use while reducing the risks of overreliance (Chang et al., 2023; George & Wooden, 2023; Vera & López, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). The findings further revealed that students recognized the importance of developing effective AI-tool interaction and prompting practices by formulating clear, specific, and meaningful prompts to obtain responses relevant to their academic needs. This demonstrated that students engaged with AI actively rather than merely accepting its outputs, reflecting strategic and purposeful interaction with the technology. The finding was aligned with studies indicating that effective prompting, critical engagement, and deliberate interaction with AI can

improve the relevance of generated responses while strengthening active learning and metacognitive awareness (Balzan et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Xiao-hua et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). In terms of Ethical Considerations in AI Tool Utilization, participants emphasized the importance of upholding academic integrity in AI-assisted tasks and exercising caution toward AI-tool generated information. They recognized that the use of AI did not remove their responsibility for the academic work they submitted and that AI-generated responses needed to be questioned, verified, and critically evaluated before being incorporated into academic outputs. These findings demonstrated students' awareness that ethical AI use involved not only responsible authorship and accountability but also careful evaluation of the reliability of AI-generated information. This finding was consistent with previous studies emphasizing intellectual property, authorship, academic authenticity, ethical accountability, and the need to critically evaluate AI-generated information for accuracy, relevance, and potential bias (Bozkurt, 2024; Eke, 2023; Kim et al., 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2025; Vera & López, 2025; Walter, 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Xiao-hua et al., 2025).

Finally, the findings revealed that students perceived both positive and negative effects of AI on learning and society. Participants identified faster and more accessible learning and enhanced learning efficiency through AI tools as major benefits, explaining that AI provided immediate access to information, explanations, summaries, and academic assistance, particularly when they encountered difficult lessons or faced multiple academic requirements. These findings suggested that students perceived AI as a convenient and accessible learning resource capable of reducing the time required to obtain and organize information. This was consistent with previous studies emphasizing the potential of AI to provide accessible academic assistance and support learning according to students' needs (Balzan et al., 2026; Vera & López, 2025; Wang et al., 2025).

However, participants also recognized the risk of misuse and overreliance, noting that excessive dependence on AI could reduce personal effort, discourage independent learning, and limit opportunities for critical and deeper thinking. This finding corroborated studies warning that excessive reliance on AI-generated responses and the convenience of immediate information may reduce independent intellectual engagement, deeper cognitive processing, critical thinking, and autonomous learning (Çela et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2024; Walter, 2024; Yavich, 2025; Zhai et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings demonstrated that students held a balanced view of AI-powered tools, recognizing their potential to make learning more accessible and efficient while also acknowledging the ethical responsibilities and risks associated with their use. The findings further indicated that the educational value of AI depended not simply on access to the technology but on students' ability to use it responsibly, critically, and purposefully while maintaining teacher guidance, academic integrity, independent learning, and human direction in the learning process.

Conclusions

This phenomenological inquiry found that students generally perceived AI-powered tools as valuable academic resources that supported writing, learning, information retrieval, and task completion, while also recognizing concerns related to ownership and authenticity, overreliance, reduced critical thinking, and diminished independent decision-making. To address these challenges, students adopted coping mechanisms such as verifying AI-generated information through credible sources, practicing responsible and self-regulated AI use, refining and critically evaluating AI outputs, and collaborating with peers to validate information and strengthen understanding. Furthermore, students emphasized that the responsible integration of AI in education requires proper guidance from educators, ethical awareness, critical thinking, independent learning, and balanced AI utilization. Overall, the findings suggest that while AI-powered tools can enhance learning efficiency and academic productivity, their educational value depends on students' ability to use them critically, ethically, and responsibly, ensuring that AI complements rather than replaces human judgment, intellectual development, and authentic learning.

Recommendations

The findings of this study may guide higher education institutions in developing policies, instructional strategies, and faculty development programs that promote the responsible and ethical integration of AI-powered tools in teaching and learning. Institutions may also implement AI literacy and responsible AI use training programs for students and faculty to strengthen critical thinking, information verification, academic integrity, and effective prompting skills while encouraging AI as a tool to support rather than replace learning. Future research is recommended using larger and more diverse samples from different higher education institutions and academic disciplines, as well as employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to examine the relationships among AI utilization, academic performance, critical thinking, self-directed learning, and academic integrity. Further qualitative investigations may also explore students' verification and validation practices, prompt engineering skills, and AI literacy to provide deeper insights into responsible AI utilization in different educational settings and levels such as senior high school and post-graduate studies.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The author declares that this study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research integrity and applicable ethical standards. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) before data collection commenced. Informed consent was secured from all participants after they were fully informed of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study.

at any time without penalty. The anonymity and confidentiality of all participants were strictly maintained through the use of codes instead of personal identifiers, and all personal information was handled in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). The well-being, dignity, and privacy of the participants were safeguarded throughout the conduct of the study by providing a respectful environment and allowing them to decline answering questions that caused discomfort. The author further declares that no conflict of interest existed in the conduct of this research, plagiarism was strictly avoided through proper acknowledgment of all sources, and the findings were interpreted objectively without bias. The results of the study were used solely for academic and research purposes. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were utilized only to assist in language refinement, grammar checking, and improving the clarity of the manuscript, while all research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final conclusions remained the sole responsibility of the author.

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