The Role of ChatGPT in Shaping Academic and Digital Communication Practices among University Students

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Abstract

Generative artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in students' academic work and digital communication, yet its functional role in everyday higher-education practices remains insufficiently understood in the Malaysian context. This exploratory qualitative study examines how Malaysian university students use ChatGPT for academic tasks and communication, and how such use may reshape their cognitive and communicative workflows. Five university students with prior experience using ChatGPT participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's approach. Three themes were organised from the available interview excerpts: academic scaffolding, AI-mediated communication support, and task-completion efficiency. Students described using ChatGPT to generate and organise ideas, simplify difficult material, refine grammar and sentence structure, draft formal messages, and obtain information rapidly. Interpretively, these practices suggest forms of cognitive offloading, syntactic scaffolding, and techno-pedagogical mediation, while also raising concerns about overreliance, verification, authorship, and the possible flattening of personal voice. The findings are discussed through contemporary technology-acceptance and Human-AI interaction perspectives and compared with Malaysian and international research on AI-assisted writing. The study proposes an actionable AI literacy framework centred on prompt literacy, output verification, source validation, authorship transparency, linguistic autonomy, and task-appropriate use. Given the small, network-recruited sample, the findings are exploratory rather than generalisable.

Keywords: *ChatGPT, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Communication, Human-AI Interaction, AI Literacy, Student Practices*

1.0 Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has transformed how university students search for information, develop ideas, write academic texts, and manage digital communication. Generative AI systems differ from earlier educational technologies because they can sustain natural-language dialogue, respond to iterative prompts, reformulate text, and generate context-sensitive outputs. ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, has become one of the most visible examples of this shift and is increasingly used for academic writing, explanation, summarisation, brainstorming, and communication support [1], [2].

Within higher education, the significance of ChatGPT extends beyond speed or automation. Students can interact with the system repeatedly, request alternative explanations, adjust tone, refine sentence structure, and use the generated response as a starting point for further work. This interactive quality positions generative AI not merely as an information channel but as a conversational and adaptive interface within students' learning processes. Recent technology-acceptance research similarly shows that perceived usefulness, facilitating conditions, system quality, and conversational quality shape students' willingness to adopt and continue using ChatGPT [11], [12].

ChatGPT is also increasingly embedded in communication-related practices. Students use it to draft formal emails, improve grammar, adjust tone, and enhance clarity when communicating with lecturers or peers. In multilingual and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) settings, these functions may operate as syntactic and linguistic scaffolding: the system helps users convert intended meanings into more conventionally structured academic or professional language. At the same time, AI mediation introduces

questions about communicative authenticity, authorship, confidence, and the extent to which students retain control over their own voice [5], [13].

The Malaysian context is particularly relevant because university students often operate across multilingual academic environments and may use English for formal academic writing and institutional communication. Emerging Malaysian studies indicate that students value ChatGPT for idea generation and writing support but also encounter difficulties involving inaccurate citations, revision of AI-generated responses, originality, and the expression of distinctive writing styles [14], [15]. These tensions suggest that functional use cannot be understood solely in terms of whether students use ChatGPT; attention is also needed on how the tool is integrated into cognitive and communicative workflows.

Accordingly, this study explores the functional role of ChatGPT among Malaysian university students, focusing on its use in academic and digital communication contexts. Rather than treating generative AI as a static technological resource, the study considers it as an interactive Human-AI system through which students negotiate ideas, language, task demands, and communication choices. The study asks: (1) How do university students functionally integrate ChatGPT into academic tasks? (2) How is ChatGPT used to mediate digital communication? and (3) What implications do these practices have for efficiency, critical engagement, and responsible AI use?

2.0 Literature Review and Conceptual Positioning

This section reviews the use of generative AI in higher education and repositions the study using contemporary technology-acceptance and Human-AI interaction perspectives. The revised conceptual positioning responds to the need to account for the interactive affordances of large language models rather than conceptualising ChatGPT only through conventional information-flow or organisational communication frameworks.

2.1 Generative AI in Higher Education

Artificial intelligence has become an important component of contemporary higher education, supporting teaching, learning, assessment, feedback, and communication. Generative AI extends these functions by allowing users to produce and revise text through conversational prompts. Kasneci et al. identify opportunities for personalised support, writing assistance, and idea development, while also emphasising risks related to misinformation, bias, overreliance, and assessment integrity [2]. UNESCO similarly stresses that generative AI should be integrated through human-centred governance, transparency, capacity building, and appropriate pedagogical oversight [7].

For students, this shift changes the nature of digital academic support. Instead of locating information and independently synthesising it from multiple sources, a user can ask an AI system to explain, condense, restructure, compare, or rewrite information. Such practices can reduce the effort required for routine stages of academic work, but they may also relocate cognitive effort from initial production to prompting, evaluation, verification, and revision. This redistribution is important for understanding both the usefulness and the educational risks of generative AI.

2.2 Technology Acceptance and Human-AI Interaction

Contemporary technology-acceptance research provides a more suitable basis for understanding why students integrate ChatGPT into everyday tasks. Strzelecki's extended UTAUT2 study shows that acceptance of ChatGPT in higher education is influenced by factors associated with expected performance, effort, social context, habit, and personal innovativeness [11]. Related work in Malaysia indicates that students' continued intention to use ChatGPT is associated with facilitating conditions, habit, system quality, information quality, service quality, and conversational quality [12]. These perspectives are relevant because the present study's participants repeatedly described convenience, rapid response, clarity, and ease of interaction as reasons for use.

A Human-AI interaction perspective further emphasises that users do not simply receive information from an AI system; they iteratively formulate prompts, interpret responses, judge relevance, and decide whether to accept, modify, or reject outputs. In academic work, this interaction can become a form of techno-pedagogical mediation in which the system supports the learner between intention and final

expression. The educational value of this mediation therefore depends on students' capacity to ask purposeful questions, detect weaknesses, verify claims, and retain responsibility for the final academic or communicative product.

2.3 ChatGPT in Academic Writing and Cognitive Workflows

Students commonly use ChatGPT for brainstorming, summarisation, explanation, drafting, language correction, and feedback [2], [3]. These uses can be interpreted as forms of cognitive offloading, where selected cognitive operations are delegated to an external system so that users can focus on other parts of the task. Cognitive offloading is not inherently negative; calculators, search engines, reference managers, and writing tools similarly redistribute effort. The central issue is whether offloading supports learning or substitutes for the reasoning that an academic task is intended to develop.

Recent ESL/EFL research illustrates this tension. Mahapatra found that ChatGPT-supported formative feedback can improve undergraduate ESL academic writing, particularly when students receive appropriate training [16]. Woo et al. found that EFL learners valued ChatGPT-supported writing but experienced substantial cognitive load during prompt engineering, indicating that effective AI use itself requires new skills [17]. Studies in Thailand and Vietnam similarly report that learners use ChatGPT for brainstorming, organising ideas, clarifying concepts, and editing drafts, while highlighting the need for curriculum design and teacher guidance [18].

2.4 ChatGPT in Digital Communication Practices

Beyond academic writing, generative AI can mediate interpersonal and institutional communication. Students may use ChatGPT to draft emails, adjust politeness, refine tone, and reduce uncertainty about grammar or phrasing. In this role, the system functions as a linguistic intermediary between communicative intention and the message ultimately sent. This may increase confidence for students who are uncertain about formal English conventions, but it can also create dependence on AI-mediated phrasing and reduce opportunities to develop independent communicative judgement.

The issue is especially salient in lecturer-student communication. A student who is hesitant about wording a request can use ChatGPT to produce a more formal message, potentially reducing anxiety and increasing willingness to communicate. However, the polished output may not fully represent the student's natural voice or contextual knowledge. AI-assisted communication therefore requires not only language accuracy but also pragmatic judgement: students must determine whether the tone, level of formality, factual content, and implied relationship are appropriate to the specific recipient and situation.

2.5 Academic Integrity, Verification and AI Literacy

Generative AI creates challenges for authorship transparency, plagiarism policies, assessment fairness, and source reliability [5], [8]. Unlike conventional search tools, a language model may produce fluent responses without providing reliable evidence for every claim. Students therefore require verification practices that distinguish linguistic fluency from factual accuracy. Responsible use includes checking claims against credible sources, confirming references, disclosing AI assistance where required, and ensuring that submitted work reflects the student's own intellectual contribution.

AI literacy should consequently extend beyond knowing how to operate a chatbot. It should include prompt literacy, output evaluation, source validation, bias awareness, privacy awareness, authorship and disclosure norms, and the ability to decide when AI use is pedagogically appropriate. This broader conception aligns with UNESCO's human-centred guidance and directly addresses the vulnerabilities identified in the present study: reliance on AI for language improvement, rapid information access, and task completion [7].

2.6 Research Gap

Although the literature on ChatGPT in higher education has expanded rapidly, much research focuses on adoption intentions, general attitudes, academic integrity, or measurable writing outcomes. Fewer qualitative studies examine how Malaysian students functionally incorporate ChatGPT across both

academic and communication tasks as part of their everyday workflow. Malaysian evidence has begun to document writing-related challenges and acceptance patterns [14], [15], but the interaction between academic scaffolding, communication mediation, and efficiency remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap through an exploratory qualitative examination of five experienced student users.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design to examine how university students use ChatGPT in academic and communication practices. The study is presented as exploratory because the small sample is intended to provide contextualised insight into lived experiences rather than statistical or population-level generalisation. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to describe how, when, and why they use ChatGPT while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues in greater depth.

3.1 Scope and Case Boundary

The case is bounded by the phenomenon of experienced ChatGPT use among university students studying at higher education institutions in Malaysia. Participants were required to have prior experience using ChatGPT for academic or communication-related activities. The unit of inquiry is therefore not a single university or faculty; it is the shared phenomenon of functional ChatGPT use within the Malaysian higher-education setting. This boundary should be interpreted cautiously because institutional contexts may differ across participants.

3.2 Participants and Recruitment

A total of five university students participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify students who had prior experience using ChatGPT for academic or communication purposes. Access was facilitated through the researcher's personal networks. This recruitment route enabled access to relevant participants but also introduces potential selection and social-desirability bias; participants known through personal networks may be more willing to report positive, acceptable, or researcher-aligned practices. The original manuscript did not record sufficient demographic and academic profile information to complete the reviewer-requested participant characterisation.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at a mutually agreed location and time. An interview guide containing open-ended questions focused on participants' experiences using ChatGPT, purposes of use, and its role in academic and communication practices. Follow-up questions were asked when clarification or elaboration was required.

Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of informant labels. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. Data were stored for academic research purposes.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke [4]. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, review and refinement of candidate themes, theme definition, and reporting. The analysis focused on recurring descriptions of academic assistance, communication support, and task-completion efficiency. In the revised manuscript, these descriptive categories are interpreted more explicitly in relation to cognitive offloading, syntactic scaffolding, communicative confidence, and Human-AI mediation.

3.5 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be recognised. First, the study involves only five participants, so the findings should be treated as exploratory and cannot represent Malaysian university students generally. Second, recruitment through personal networks may introduce selection bias and social-desirability effects. Third, the original dataset does not contain sufficiently documented demographic information to enable systematic comparison by discipline, study level, age, or institutional type. Fourth, the interview excerpts available in the original manuscript are brief; consequently, the revised interpretation cannot claim the level of thick description that would be possible with full transcript excerpts. Future studies should recruit a more diverse sample, document participant characteristics systematically, and retain longer contextual excerpts concerning prompting, output evaluation, and responses to inaccurate or fabricated AI content.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Analytic Transparency

Audio recording, field notes and a thematic analysis sequence are documented in the available source manuscript. However, there is no documentation establishing member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, a formal audit trail or systematic negative-case analysis. Such procedures are therefore not claimed. To support interpretive transparency, the present report ties each theme to identifiable participant extracts and distinguishes interview-based observations from literature-informed implications. These reporting decisions do not substitute for documented credibility, dependability or confirmability procedures.

3.7 Ethical Considerations and Data Management

Participants were informed of the study purpose and gave voluntary consent before interview participation. The source study reports anonymised informant identifiers, consent to audio recording and the use of field notes. The available research documentation does not establish whether institutional ethics approval or a formal exemption was obtained, whether separate permission to publish verbatim quotations was requested, or the arrangements for withdrawal, incentives, data access, retention and disposal. These details cannot be inferred retrospectively. The authors must verify and report the applicable institutional requirements and actual research procedures from contemporaneous records. This documentation gap is a limitation of the study.

3.8 Participant Profile and Inclusion Criteria

All five informants were university students with prior ChatGPT experience in academic or communication-related activities. The source does not substantiate a minimum use frequency, duration of experience, age, gender, programme, year of study, or university category. The recruitment criterion was therefore broad and the study is described as an exploratory account of a convenience-accessed purposive group rather than a representative sample. No saturation claim is made.

4.0 Findings

The six available excerpts were organised into three descriptive themes: academic scaffolding, AI-mediated communication support, and task-completion efficiency. The themes retain the substance of the original findings while the revised interpretation considers what the reported practices imply for students' cognitive and communicative workflows.

4.1 Academic Scaffolding: From Idea Generation to Syntactic Support

Participants described ChatGPT as a practical resource during the early and intermediate stages of academic work. Its functions included generating ideas, simplifying difficult topics, improving grammar, restructuring sentences, and organising assignment content. These uses indicate that students were not

relying on a single function; instead, they moved between conceptual support and language-level refinement depending on the task.

"Usually, I use ChatGPT when I want to generate ideas for assignments or when I do not fully understand certain topics in class. It helps me simplify information and makes it easier to start my writing." (Informant 2)

"I often use ChatGPT to improve my grammar and sentence structure, especially for academic writing. It helps me organise my ideas more clearly before submitting assignments." (Informant 5)

The first excerpt suggests that ChatGPT reduces the difficulty of task initiation by converting a broad or difficult topic into a more manageable starting point. This can be interpreted as cognitive offloading: part of the initial ideation and explanation process is transferred to the AI system. The benefit is reduced friction at the beginning of a task, but the educational value depends on whether the student subsequently evaluates, expands, and independently reconstructs the generated material.

The second excerpt points to syntactic scaffolding. Here, ChatGPT mediates between the student's intended meaning and the linguistic form required in academic writing. The participant appears to retain ownership of the underlying idea while using AI to improve organisation and expression. This distinction is important because AI-assisted language refinement can support students' confidence and accessibility, particularly in ESL contexts, while still requiring the learner to verify whether the revised wording accurately represents the intended argument.

4.2 AI-Mediated Communication and Communicative Confidence

Participants also used ChatGPT to support formal written communication, particularly when drafting emails or messages to lecturers and when participating in group discussions. The tool was valued for improving sentence structure, clarity, professionalism, and tone.

"I use ChatGPT when I need to write formal emails or messages because sometimes I do not know how to phrase my sentences properly." (Informant 1)

"ChatGPT helps me make my communication sound clearer and more professional, especially when communicating with lecturers or during group discussions." (Informant 4)

These excerpts concern more than grammar correction, although they do not directly establish changes in confidence. Informant 1 describes uncertainty about how to phrase a message, indicating that the challenge is partly pragmatic and interpersonal: the student must decide how to sound appropriate when addressing another person. ChatGPT becomes an AI-mediated rehearsal space in which wording can be tested before the message is sent. This could plausibly increase communicative confidence, a proposition that requires further empirical examination by lowering the perceived risk of using an inappropriate tone or unclear sentence.

At the same time, the mediation introduces a tension between confidence and authenticity. A polished AI-generated message may enable a student to participate more confidently, but it may also distance the final wording from the student's spontaneous voice. Responsible use therefore requires the student to remain the final communicative decision-maker, checking whether the generated tone is appropriate to the relationship, purpose, and institutional context.

4.3 Task-Completion Efficiency and the Redistribution of Cognitive Effort

A third theme concerned speed and convenience. Participants described ChatGPT as a time-saving resource when they were managing multiple assignments or needed quick access to explanations and summaries.

"Sometimes I use ChatGPT because it saves time, especially when I have many assignments to complete within a short period." (Informant 3)

"It is easier to get quick information from ChatGPT compared to searching through many websites." (Informant 1)

Efficiency appears to be a central driver of use, but the second excerpt also indicates a shift in information-seeking behaviour. Instead of searching across multiple sources, the student can obtain a synthesised response from one conversational interface. This reduces search effort but increases the importance of verification because the convenience of a single answer can obscure uncertainty, missing context, or unsupported claims.

As an interpretation informed by previous literature, this pattern raises the possibility of redistributing rather than eliminating cognitive work. Search and drafting effort may decrease, while responsible use requires greater attention to prompt formulation, source checking, comparison, and judgement. If students treat fluency as evidence of accuracy, efficiency may encourage surface-level learning. If they use the saved time to verify and refine the response, the same efficiency can support deeper engagement.

4.4 Boundaries of the Evidence and Contradictory Cases

The six available interview extracts all concern perceived benefits. None provides direct evidence of hallucinations, rejected AI responses, overdependence, integrity violations or diminished personal voice. These issues are therefore discussed as risks documented or theorised in prior scholarship, not as experiences established in this sample. The available excerpts do not establish whether the full interviews included dissenting accounts; this limits the scope of the analysis.

5.0 Discussion

The participants' accounts indicate reported ChatGPT use across three connected functions: academic scaffolding, communication mediation, and task-efficiency support. These functions should not be treated as isolated benefits. Together, they indicate that generative AI is becoming part of the workflow through which students initiate tasks, formulate language, manage uncertainty, and allocate cognitive effort.

5.1 Academic Scaffolding and Cognitive Offloading

The use of ChatGPT for idea generation, explanation, grammar, and organisation is consistent with international research on AI-assisted writing. Mahapatra found that ChatGPT can function as a formative feedback tool that improves aspects of ESL academic writing when students are appropriately trained [16]. Research with EFL learners in Thailand and Vietnam similarly shows frequent use for brainstorming, organising ideas, clarifying concepts, and editing drafts [18]. The present Malaysian findings align with this pattern, particularly in the way Informants 2 and 5 used the system to initiate writing and refine linguistic form.

However, the findings also suggest that cognitive offloading requires careful pedagogical interpretation. Delegating routine reformulation or brainstorming to an AI system may reduce unnecessary friction, but delegating the reasoning that an assignment is designed to assess could undermine learning. The educational question is therefore not whether offloading occurs, but which cognitive processes are being offloaded, why they are being offloaded, and what the student does after receiving the AI output.

5.2 Language Support in the Malaysian and ESL/EFL Context

Language improvement is a particularly important dimension of the findings. Malaysian students often operate in multilingual settings, and formal academic English may create additional cognitive and affective demands. Malaysian research has reported that students use ChatGPT to generate ideas, revise language, and support written communication, while also facing challenges involving inaccurate citations, revision difficulties, and loss of distinctive writing style [14], [15]. These concerns closely mirror the present finding that ChatGPT can improve clarity while potentially encouraging dependence on AI-mediated expression.

International ESL/EFL evidence provides a useful comparison. Mahapatra reports positive effects of ChatGPT-supported feedback on undergraduate ESL writing [16], while Woo et al. show that prompt engineering can itself create substantial cognitive load for EFL learners [17]. Studies across Thailand and Vietnam further show that learners value ChatGPT for idea generation and editing but still require instructional guidance [18]. Thus, the Malaysian participants' reliance on ChatGPT for grammar and sentence structure is not an isolated behaviour; it forms part of a broader pattern in which generative AI functions as a linguistic scaffold. The distinctive issue for institutions is how to convert that scaffold into learning rather than permanent dependency.

5.3 Communicative Confidence and AI Persona Mediation

The communication findings extend the discussion beyond academic writing. When students use ChatGPT to draft emails to lecturers, the system effectively mediates student-faculty interaction. Informant 1's uncertainty about phrasing indicates that AI support may reduce anxiety surrounding formal communication, while Informant 4's emphasis on professionalism suggests that students use the system to align messages with perceived institutional norms.

This mediation can be beneficial when it enables students to participate in communication they might otherwise avoid or delay. Nevertheless, communicative competence involves more than grammatical correctness. Students need to understand audience, purpose, power relations, politeness, context, and personal accountability. An AI-generated message can be linguistically polished yet pragmatically inappropriate. Therefore, AI-assisted communication should be taught as a process of drafting and judgement rather than automatic substitution of the student's voice.

5.4 Efficiency, Verification and Critical Engagement

The efficiency theme is consistent with technology-acceptance studies in which usefulness, system quality, and conversational quality contribute to ChatGPT adoption [11], [12]. Immediate responses are especially attractive when students face workload pressure. Yet the finding that ChatGPT is perceived as easier than searching multiple websites highlights a critical vulnerability: students may bypass the source-evaluation practices normally associated with academic research.

This is where efficiency and AI literacy intersect. Students should be trained to distinguish between low-risk tasks, such as brainstorming alternative headings, and high-stakes tasks, such as generating factual claims, references, interpretations of research evidence, or assessed arguments. The more consequential the output, the stronger the verification requirement should be. Efficiency should therefore be framed as time reallocation: time saved in drafting or searching should be reinvested in checking, comparing, and refining.

5.5 An Actionable AI Literacy Framework for Universities

Based on the specific vulnerabilities identified in the findings, institutional guidance should move beyond general statements such as "use AI responsibly." A practical AI literacy framework for university students should include six elements. First, prompt literacy: students should learn to formulate clear, bounded, and iterative prompts and recognise that prompt quality affects output quality. Second, output verification: factual claims, calculations, quotations, and references generated by AI should be checked against authoritative sources. Third, source validation: students should understand that ChatGPT is not a substitute for peer-reviewed literature, official documents, or primary evidence. Fourth, authorship transparency: students should follow institutional rules on acknowledgement or disclosure of AI assistance and remain responsible for the submitted work. Fifth, linguistic autonomy: language support should be used to develop the student's own capacity rather than replace it; students should compare revisions, understand why changes were made, and retain their intended meaning. Sixth, task-appropriate use: institutions should clarify which uses are acceptable for brainstorming, editing, translation, coding, assessment, and communication, with expectations adjusted to the learning outcomes of each task.

This proposed framework links reported practices to potential safeguards; its effectiveness was not tested in this study. Idea generation requires prompt literacy and authorship responsibility; grammar and sentence refinement require linguistic autonomy; rapid information access requires source validation and verification; formal email drafting requires communicative judgement and transparency where relevant. Connecting policy elements to actual student practices can make institutional guidance more usable than broad prohibitions or generic ethical statements.

5.6 From Student Practice to Institutional Design

The findings, read alongside previous research, suggest why institutional AI policy should be designed around observable student practices rather than around the technology in the abstract. The

available quotations did not describe a single, uniform form of "ChatGPT use." They moved between brainstorming, explanation, grammar correction, message drafting, and rapid information retrieval. Each practice carries a different level of academic risk and therefore requires a different form of guidance. Treating all AI use as equivalent can produce rules that are either too permissive for high-stakes tasks or unnecessarily restrictive for low-risk learning support.

A practice-based approach can connect permitted uses to learning outcomes. For example, brainstorming may be appropriate when the learning outcome concerns argument development, provided the student independently evaluates and develops the ideas. Language polishing may be appropriate when the learning outcome is disciplinary knowledge rather than unaided language production, but it may require tighter limits in a language-proficiency assessment. Similarly, AI-generated summaries may support orientation to a topic, but they should not replace engagement with assigned readings or primary evidence. This differentiation makes AI governance pedagogically meaningful rather than merely procedural.

The communication theme further suggests that universities should include AI-assisted interpersonal communication in digital literacy programmes. Students need guidance on checking whether an AI-generated email accurately represents their intention, uses an appropriate level of formality, protects confidential information, and avoids inventing facts or commitments. Such training would recognise that generative AI is increasingly involved not only in assessed academic writing but also in everyday institutional communication.

Finally, the exploratory nature of this study highlights a research agenda for future work. Subsequent studies should examine variation across disciplines, proficiency levels, public and private institutions, and undergraduate and postgraduate populations. Process-oriented methods, including screen recordings, prompt logs, stimulated-recall interviews, and comparison of pre- and post-AI drafts, would make it possible to observe how students actually negotiate prompts, reject outputs, verify claims, and revise language. These methods would provide the thick description that cannot be reconstructed from the brief excerpts available in the present source manuscript.

TABLE 1
Linking Observed Practices to AI Literacy Requirements

Observed Practice	Potential Benefit	Primary Vulnerability	Required AI Literacy Response
Idea generation	Reduces task-initiation difficulty	Overreliance on generated ideas	Prompt literacy; authorship responsibility
Grammar and sentence refinement	Improves clarity and linguistic confidence	Loss of personal voice; uncritical acceptance	Linguistic autonomy; revision awareness
Formal message drafting	Supports tone and professionalism	Pragmatic mismatch; authenticity concerns	Audience judgement; contextual review
Rapid information retrieval	Saves search time	Hallucination; weak source evaluation	Output verification; source validation
Task acceleration	Helps manage workload	Surface learning; cognitive substitution	Task-appropriate use; reflective checking

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study examined how five Malaysian university students functionally use ChatGPT in academic and digital communication practices. Three interconnected themes were identified: academic scaffolding, AI-mediated communication support, and task-completion efficiency. Participants used ChatGPT to initiate and organise academic work, simplify difficult material, improve grammar and sentence structure, draft formal messages, and obtain rapid explanations.

The accounts can be cautiously interpreted as forms of cognitive offloading, syntactic scaffolding, and techno-pedagogical mediation. ChatGPT may lower barriers to task initiation and formal communication, but the same convenience can increase dependence on AI-generated language and reduce source-searching or independent formulation if outputs are accepted uncritically. The central

implication is therefore not that ChatGPT is simply beneficial or harmful; its educational value depends on how students prompt, evaluate, verify, revise, and take responsibility for the final output.

The findings are exploratory and should not be generalised beyond the study context. The small sample, recruitment through personal networks, missing demographic detail in the source dataset, and brief interview excerpts limit the depth of comparison and thick description. These limitations should guide future work toward larger and more diverse qualitative samples, systematic participant profiling, and detailed examination of prompting and verification practices.

6.2 Recommendations

Universities should implement an explicit AI literacy framework that addresses prompt literacy, output verification, source validation, authorship transparency, linguistic autonomy, and task-appropriate use. Such guidance should include examples of acceptable and unacceptable AI use for different assessment types rather than relying only on general statements about responsible use.

Lecturers should incorporate verification exercises into teaching. Students can be required to compare AI-generated claims with peer-reviewed or official sources, identify unsupported information, explain revisions made to AI-generated text, and document how prompts were refined. These activities make critical evaluation visible and reduce the tendency to treat fluent output as automatically reliable.

For language and communication support, students should be encouraged to use ChatGPT as a scaffold rather than a replacement for personal expression. When using AI to revise emails or academic prose, students should review changes in tone, grammar, and meaning and decide which revisions are appropriate. This approach can convert AI-assisted editing into an opportunity for language learning and communicative judgement.

Institutional policies should also distinguish between low-risk and high-stakes uses. Brainstorming or language polishing may be permitted under defined conditions, while assessed reasoning, evidence generation, and source attribution may require stricter disclosure and verification. Policies should be reviewed periodically because generative AI capabilities and patterns of use are evolving rapidly.

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