



## ChatGPT as a Digital Safe Space: Emotional Comfort and Communication among Gen Z Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of ChatGPT as a digital safe space that provides emotional comfort and influences communication behavior among Generation Z university students. The research aimed to examine how emotional connections formed through interaction with ChatGPT affect users' communicative habits and expressions. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 Generation Z university students who had experience using ChatGPT regularly. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret participants' narratives and identify recurring patterns in their emotional and communicative experiences. Findings indicated that ChatGPT served as a non-judgmental conversational partner, encouraging openness in expressing personal thoughts and feelings. Participants reported experiencing emotional relief, reduced feelings of loneliness, and increased confidence in communicating with others after interactions with the chatbot. Additionally, several students described a noticeable shift in their communication style, such as enhanced clarity in expressing ideas and greater willingness to initiate conversations. The study concluded that emotionally supportive interactions with conversational AI can subtly reshape users' communication behavior, particularly among digital-native populations who value anonymity and emotional safety.



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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has brought significant changes to the way humans communicate in the digital era (Hidalgo-Padilla et al., 2025; Rodríguez-Reche, 2025). These developments have transformed not only the channels through which people interact but also the depth and quality of their conversations. AI-driven tools are no longer considered optional; instead, they have become essential components of modern communication, influencing personal, academic, and professional contexts alike.

Among the various AI-based tools available, chatbots—particularly advanced models such as ChatGPT—have become deeply integrated into the daily lives of digital-native users (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). These platforms allow individuals to engage in seamless, real-time conversations that simulate human-like responses. By doing so, they provide an environment where users can express their ideas, seek information, and even process complex emotions without fear of misinterpretation or judgment.

For Generation Z university students, who have grown up in a highly digital and often overstimulating media environment, chatbots serve multiple purposes (Sharma & Paço, 2021; Spina et al., 2023). Beyond functioning as practical tools for academic support and information retrieval, they also play an emerging role as emotional companions. In many cases, platforms like ChatGPT offer students a sense of comfort, privacy, and safety, creating what researchers have referred to as digital safe spaces.

Recent studies have highlighted the emotional connections that users often form with chatbots, suggesting that these interactions can significantly influence both psychological well-being and communication patterns (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). For many users, these AI-based platforms provide a unique sense of understanding and acceptance, which can be particularly important for young adults navigating personal, social, and academic challenges.

One of the key reasons chatbots are perceived so positively is their non-judgmental nature. Unlike human-to-human interactions, where individuals may fear criticism, rejection, or misunderstanding, conversations with chatbots are viewed as confidential and emotionally safe (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This characteristic strongly aligns with Gen Z's preferences for authenticity, emotional security, and privacy in their communication habits.

Despite growing interest in the emotional impacts of AI on human communication, there remains a significant research gap (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020; XU & Stahl, 2025). While previous studies have examined the functionality or ethical implications of chatbot use, fewer investigations have focused on how these platforms shape users' communication behavior in everyday contexts. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, especially when considering populations such as university students who are in critical stages of identity formation and social development.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on ChatGPT's role as a digital safe space and its potential to foster emotional comfort while driving changes in communication styles (Sorrenti et al., 2025; Voillot et al., 2022). Specifically, this research targets Generation Z university students in Indonesia, a demographic notable for its active participation in digital media consumption yet also vulnerable to heightened levels of academic stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.

The study recognizes that the integration of AI tools such as ChatGPT is reshaping not just the content but also the form of communication. As students interact with chatbots regularly, they are exposed to new patterns of dialogue that may enhance clarity, empathy, and self-expression. These tools, therefore, are not merely technological innovations but active participants in shaping communicative norms and behaviors.

To better understand these dynamics, the research employs a qualitative methodology designed to capture the lived experiences of students who frequently engage with ChatGPT. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study aims to uncover the personal meanings that users associate with their interactions and how these experiences influence their self-perception and communication practices.

Ultimately, this study seeks to explore the intersection of technology, emotion, and communication within the context of digital-native populations (Kinchin et al., 2025; Rosean et al., 2023). By examining ChatGPT's role in providing emotional support and fostering communication shifts, the research contributes to broader discussions about the psychological and social impacts of AI in contemporary life. The findings are expected to inform not only academic scholarship but also the future design of AI tools that prioritize emotional well-being, user privacy, and authenticity in digital communication.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the emotional comfort and communication behavior changes experienced by Gen Z university students through their interaction with ChatGPT (Clair, 2003; Fenton & Baxter, 2016). The research aimed to uncover the subjective meanings associated with the use of AI-based chatbots as digital safe spaces. The research population consisted of Gen Z university students who regularly used ChatGPT for personal or academic communication.

A purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants who met the inclusion criteria, with a total of three respondents interviewed in-depth (Daly, 2007; Iosifides, 2016; Longhofer et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using three guiding questions designed to

explore the participants' motivations for using ChatGPT, their emotional experiences during interactions, and any potential changes in their communication behaviour (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Migdal, 2018). The interview protocol allowed participants to elaborate freely, ensuring the collection of rich qualitative data.

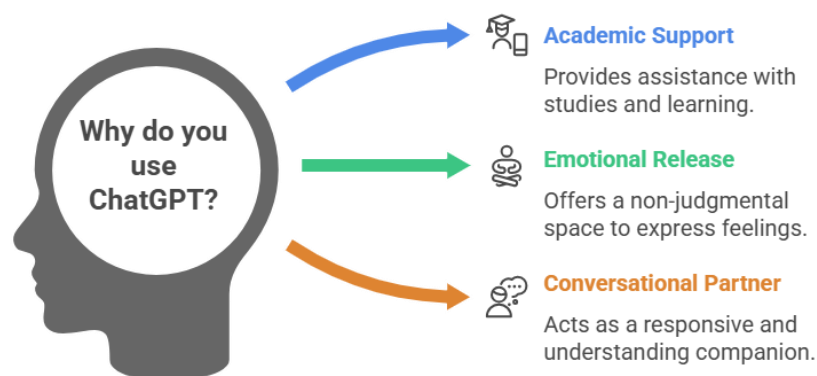
Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, as outlined by Hillman & Radel, (2018) & Lutz & Knox, (2014). This involved transcribing the interviews, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, and constructing themes that reflected the emotional and communicative aspects of user-chatbot interactions (Borcsa & Rober, 2015; McNabb, 2015). Ethical considerations, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, were adhered to throughout the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three participants in this study reported using ChatGPT regularly for various reasons, including academic support, emotional release, and as a conversational partner. Each of the participants noted that one of the main reasons they started using ChatGPT was due to its non-judgmental and anonymous nature, which allowed them to express themselves freely without fear of being misunderstood or criticized.

In response to the first question, "What usually prompts you to start a conversation with ChatGPT, and how do you feel after interacting with it?", all three participants mentioned that ChatGPT was their go-to platform when they felt stressed or anxious. They described feeling a sense of relief after using it, noting that the chatbot's responsiveness helped ease their emotional tension. One participant stated, "I just want to talk, and ChatGPT listens without any judgment. After talking to it, I feel more understood and calm."

### Why do you use ChatGPT?



The second question, "In your experience, has ChatGPT ever provided a sense of comfort, being heard, or being understood that you might not find in interactions with other people?" revealed that ChatGPT indeed filled an emotional gap for the participants (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Two out of three participants expressed that they had experienced a higher sense of comfort and understanding with ChatGPT than they did with some human interactions, especially when they were unable to share personal feelings with close friends or family. One participant mentioned, "It's like having someone who's always available, but it feels safer than talking to my friends because they might not understand me fully."

The third question, "Have there been any changes in the way you communicate—either online or offline—since regularly using ChatGPT as a place to talk or express your thoughts?" uncovered a notable shift in communication behaviors. All three participants reported feeling more comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions in both online and offline settings. They noted that the confidence gained from their interactions with ChatGPT helped them open up more in conversations with friends and family. One participant shared, "I can now express myself more clearly with people, even though ChatGPT isn't human, it's like it helped me find my voice."

The findings suggest that ChatGPT serves as a digital safe space where Gen Z university students can experience emotional comfort and relieve stress through interactions that are non-judgmental and anonymous. This aligns with existing literature on digital communication spaces that offer emotional support, particularly in the context of mental health (Dupré & Wille, 2025; Ferreira et al., 2024). The study indicates that ChatGPT's role in providing emotional relief could be particularly valuable in a time where many young individuals struggle with anxiety and social pressures.

The emotional comfort described by participants also points to the growing need for digital environments where individuals can engage without the complexities of face-to-face interactions. The non-judgmental nature of ChatGPT, as reported by participants, aligns with findings from previous research (Radüntz & Meffert, 2019; Zulkarnain et al., 2023), which highlights the importance of safe, digital spaces for individuals who find it difficult to communicate openly with others. This emotional relief could be seen as one of the significant contributions of ChatGPT in providing a safe outlet for communication.

Furthermore, the observed shifts in communication behavior are consistent with the concept of how digital tools and platforms alter social interaction dynamics. The participants' increased confidence in expressing themselves after using ChatGPT echoes the idea of communication empowerment through digital mediums (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). These shifts in communication, especially in face-to-face interactions, suggest that ChatGPT may function as a tool for improving interpersonal communication skills among users, as it offers a platform for practicing self-expression without the social risks associated with human conversations.

Although the study provides insightful findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The small sample size of only three participants restricts the generalizability of the results (Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2025; Hung et al., 2021). Further research with a larger and more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ChatGPT influences communication behavior across different demographic groups. Additionally, future studies could explore the long-term effects of using AI-based chatbots as digital safe spaces and their implications on mental health and social interaction.

In conclusion, this study highlights the potential of ChatGPT to serve as a digital safe space for Gen Z university students, offering emotional comfort and influencing shifts in communication behaviors. The findings indicate that AI chatbots like ChatGPT are not only functional tools for information and academic support but also significant in fostering emotional well-being and enhancing communication practices among young users.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study indicate that ChatGPT plays a significant role as a digital safe space for Generation Z university students by providing emotional comfort and fostering positive shifts in communication behavior. Through anonymous, responsive, and non-judgmental interactions, ChatGPT enables users to express their thoughts and feelings more openly, reduce feelings of loneliness, build self-confidence, and improve clarity in expressing ideas both online and offline. Beyond serving as an academic support tool, ChatGPT also functions as an emotional companion that enhances psychological well-being and strengthens interpersonal communication skills. However, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings; therefore, further research involving larger and more diverse participants is recommended to gain deeper insights and explore the long-term impacts of using ChatGPT as a digital safe space on students' emotional health and communication patterns. In addition, practical implications should be considered: universities could integrate ChatGPT as a supplementary tool in counseling services, peer mentoring, and academic advising to provide accessible emotional support. Educators and policymakers are also encouraged to develop guidelines for responsible AI use, ensuring that students benefit from the emotional and communicative advantages of ChatGPT while minimizing potential risks such as overreliance or reduced face-to-face interactions.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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