

The Self-Meaning of College Students Use ChatGPT in Social Reality

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ABSTRACT

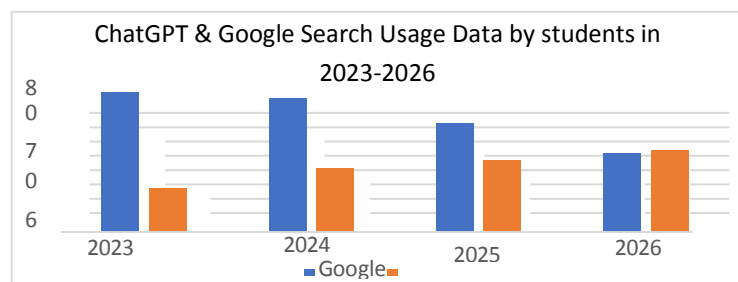
This study aims to analyze and examine the motives, experiences, and meanings of the social phenomenon regarding how students interact with artificial intelligence (ChatGPT), which has not previously been explored in scientific studies within social phenomenology interactions. In the findings of this study, various data reductions were obtained through interviews with 3 informants and 1 expert data using purposive sampling techniques, resulting in several major themes that can be examined. From the perspective of using Alfred Schutz's main phenomenological theory and Peter L. Berger's supporting theory of social reality construction, it was found that the main motive for students choosing to use ChatGPT is based on aspects of the Because of Motive and In Order to Motive, derived from reasons for use and usage purposes, as well as other conceptual aspects such as Life World, Intersubjective, and Stock of Knowledge, and also in the concept within the theory of social reality construction such as Externalization, Objectivation, Internalization, thus the data findings signify that now the process of interaction between students and artificial intelligence is understood as a social reality within the academic space through a collection of meanings and experiences constructed into the lives of students. Now, students feel that their experience in discussing with artificial intelligence like ChatGPT is very helpful, making them more confident and becoming students who innovate in handling lectures as well as other tasks. Keywords: Phenomenology, Communication, Social Reality Construction, Collage Students, ChatGPT, Motive, Experience, Self-Meaning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has reshaped how humans interact with digital technology. What once imposed clear limits on human-technology communication has progressively seen those boundaries dissolve, largely driven by AI innovations. As Pramana (*Pramana et al., 2023*) observed, AI has fundamentally altered the nature of digital interaction—transforming platforms like Google from a one-way information delivery system into a two-way conversational interface. This shift became concretely visible during the pandemic, when AI-powered health chatbots such as PeduliLindungi and Halodoc were deployed to support public health policies.

Within higher education, this transformation is especially pronounced among university students. Belonging to Generation Z (aged 19–23), today's students have grown up amid rapid technological change, making them the most active user group in AI adoption. A specific focus lies on ChatGPT, a deep learning-based chatbot developed by OpenAI, capable of generating human-like responses to natural language input (*Kurnia Ramadhan et al., 2023*). Evidence from (Agustya et al., 2023) shows a 43% year-on-year increase in student usage of AI tools by 2023, with ChatGPT being the dominant platform for diverse daily needs.

1.1. Growth Diagram Table



Pre-research data collected by the author from three university students further supports this pattern. Over one month, usage frequency ranged from 12 to 23 interactions per student, with stated purposes including task assistance, idea sharing, anxiety consultation, research data analysis, and discussion of social issues. These findings point to a high-intensity, multi-purpose engagement between students and ChatGPT.

Tabel 1.2. Pre-Research Data

Informan	Durasi Penggunaan (1 Bulan)	Tujuan
Muhammad Imam Saputra (Universitas Gunadarma Jakarta)	12 x	Perbantuan pada pekerjaan, dan berbagi ide
Muti'ah Nabilla (Universitas Terbuka Palembang)	23x	Konsultasi kecemasan, dan perbantuan analisis data penelitian
Muhammad Raditya Nugraha (Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang)	18x	Diskusi tentang isu permasalahan disekitar

To investigate the reasons behind this shift, the study adopts Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach. Emphasis is placed on subjective experience and meaning-making as primary data, exploring how students construct social reality from their interactions with ChatGPT. Schutz's framework requires researchers to practice *epoche*—suspending their own scientific knowledge to align with the informants' everyday understanding (*Nindito, n.d.*)

This methodological stance seeks to uncover the motives, interpretive processes, and emotional dimensions underlying student-AI interaction. By doing so, the study aims to address a gap in previous research, which has largely focused on media interaction models rather than the phenomenological construction of meaning in human-AI encounters.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Research

The researcher analyzed several previous research literatures that are relevant to what will be discussed and studied in this research design. With the review of previous literatures, the researcher can know the guideline limits and comparisons as well as reference materials from the research concepts that have been used. This literature review is also used as a reinforcement and complement to the research formulation so that it can fill the gaps of previous research. The following are some findings from previous literature reviews that the author describes:

Norsely, Arviani, and Abidin (*Norsely F et al., 2023*) investigated why adolescents turn to ChatGPT as a platform for venting personal emotions. Drawing on Alfred Schutz's phenomenological analysis, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews to uncover subjective meanings behind this practice. Findings revealed that although ChatGPT lacks genuine emotional depth, its responses made young users feel heard and understood without fear of judgment—an experience rarely found in human interactions. Some informants even reported gaining new perspectives on their problems through the chatbot's replies. Nevertheless, the study also highlighted negative consequences: ChatGPT does not possess real-life knowledge or lived

experience, so its suggestions do not always align with human reality. Users were therefore advised to remain cautious and apply the tool only where contextually appropriate. For my own research, this study offers a comparable methodological framework—phenomenology applied to AI interaction—and provides initial insight into how meaning is constructed through consultation with artificial intelligence.

A separate investigation by Romlah, Padli, Azizah, and Istiqomah (*Romlah et al., 2023*) focused on ChatGPT's role in shaping learning experiences among university students in Makassar. Data were gathered through both interviews and questionnaires, allowing the research team to capture subjective accounts of how students use the tool for academic support. Several key interpretations emerged from the analysis. ChatGPT was described as a practical information source that clarifies complex topics. Students also reported that the tool expands their understanding by supplying detailed explanations. What connects this study to mine is the shared emphasis on students as the primary user group, the same technology (ChatGPT), and an orientation toward meaning-making derived from daily academic routines.

Haqu (*Haqu R, 2024*) examined artificial intelligence as a social agent within digital communication, focusing specifically on ChatGPT. Adopting media equation theory alongside a qualitative approach, the researcher explored how individuals perceive and assign meaning to ChatGPT's role as a communication partner. Observations led to the conclusion that while AI can successfully mimic and adapt to human conversational patterns, its limitations remain significant. Emotional regulation and a genuine grasp of subjective experience fall outside ChatGPT's capabilities—shortcomings that distinguish human-to-human interaction from human-AI encounters. For my own work, this study reinforces the importance of exploring boundaries in AI responsiveness and highlights a research strategy that gives informants room to co-construct meaning from their lived experiences.

B. *Theoretical Framework*

1. **Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology**

Phenomenology, as Schutz (1967, cited in Manggola & Thadi, 2021) (*Manggola et al., 2021*) explained, originates from the Greek word *phenomenon*, meaning "that which appears." The approach reflects direct human experience in relation to an object. A central claim in Schutz's thought is that reality is twofold: there exists an empirical, objective world alongside a world of subjective consciousness. Applied to the current study, students' interpretation of their interaction with ChatGPT emerges from intensive, rationally grounded experience with that very object. Chusnul Rofiah (2023) (*Dr. Chusnul Rofiah, 2023*) further elaborates that humans do not digest their experiences as purely objective realities. Instead, experience is processed subjectively—as a chain of interconnected objects that carry meaning. Meaning itself does not come from raw sensory data; it arises when current experiences connect with previous ones through ongoing interaction. This process yields both subjective meaning (unique to each individual) and collective meaning (shared across individuals), both of which are relevant to understanding how students construct their relationship with ChatGPT.

Schutz distinguished two types of motives behind human action, as noted by Futhihat Rizky (*Futhihat Rizky, n.d.*). The *because of motive* refers to past circumstances that drive a person to act—retrospective reasons rooted in prior conditions. The *in-order-to motive* looks forward: it concerns the future situation an individual intends to bring about through their action. Both motives operate in how students decide to use ChatGPT for different purposes. Another key concept is the *stock of knowledge* (*Campbell, cited in Farid M et al., 2018*), which refers to the accumulated reservoir of knowledge each person possesses. This stock shapes the meanings constructed in one's mind, attitudes, and behaviors, and ultimately influences how an individual applies prior understanding to new situations. In this research, the stock of knowledge becomes an essential factor in explaining why students turn to

ChatGPT—their background understanding directs how and for what ends they deploy the technology.

Schutz also introduced the concept of *life world*, adopted from Ritzer's discussion of modern sociological theory. Rather than focusing on how individuals understand others' consciousness, Schutz emphasized living within one's own stream of consciousness. Habitual practices that become embedded in daily life form part of this life world. Within the present study, the researcher attempts to analyze differences in informants' perspectives by examining their stock of knowledge and how it shapes their use of ChatGPT. Finally, the notion of *intersubjectivity* (Phillipson, 1972, cited in Wita et al., 2022) complements the framework. Intersubjectivity describes how, within a social phenomenon, individuals relate to one another, producing shared awareness. Personal experience and the experience of others become a collective experience. This mutual understanding occurs because individuals assume that the phenomena they encounter can also be—or have been—experienced by others in similar ways.

2. Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckmann)

This study also draws on Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction as a supporting framework to understand how meaning derived from experience is transformed into social reality. According to (Safitra Linda et al., 2025) citing Berger & Luckmann (1996), the theory describes a dialectical process between individuals and the social institutions that carry shared values. Social order rests on meanings that are widely recognized and collectively held. Meanings that fall outside this shared understanding are human creations emerging from specific social contexts, whereas the collectively held meanings are referred to as objective reality. Values and meanings are never static; they continuously shift and reshape the surrounding ecosystem.

Karman 2015, cited (Safitra Linda et al., 2025)) identifies three central processes through which this ontological framework operates: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Through externalization, humans project their subjective meanings onto the social world. These projections then undergo objectivation, where interactions, behaviors, and structures come to be perceived as objective facts—social constructions become typified and generally accepted as reality. This objective reality incorporates social structures, conventions, and values. Finally, during internalization, individuals reintegrate and assimilate that objective world back into their subjective consciousness.

In other words, human beings are products of the very society they themselves have built. Applied to the current research, this lens helps explain how students' repeated interactions with ChatGPT produce shared meanings that gradually solidify into a taken-for-granted reality within their daily academic and personal lives.

C. Research Context

A few key concepts need spelling out before we go further, not every term from the original list made it into the final analysis, but six of them really matter here: university students, interaction, ChatGPT, meaning, motive, and experience.

University students, following Sarwono (1978) in (Harun Gafur, 2015), are individuals officially registered in higher education, typically between 18 and 30 years old. Society grants them a distinct status as future intellectuals or young scholars. *Interaction* (Dadi Ahmadi, 2020) refers to a two-way communication process involving the exchange of messages and information, always driven by a purpose, shared understanding, or expected benefit. Within this study, interaction takes a digital form: students engaging with a technological system. That system is *ChatGPT*. Rachbini, Evi, and Suyanto (2023) (Rachbini et al., 2023) describe

it as an advanced AI developed by OpenAI, built on the GPT-4 architecture. ChatGPT generates human-like text responses through a pre-trained generative large language model grounded in deep learning techniques.

Meaning (Umi Hanifah et al., 2023) concerns how language influences thought – the conceptual link between a word or utterance and whatever it points to in the external world. *Motive*, as James Drever (cited in *Ma'rifah Setiawati et al., 2018*) puts it, is an internal drive that pushes a person to act. Motives underlie and direct individual effort toward achieving specific goals; in short, they are the initial "why" constructed before an activity begins. *Experience* Prasetya & Hidayat (*Prasetya & Hidayat, n.d.*) is what results from sensory processing – an event, whether new or long past, that can be shared with others as a lesson. Experience also functions as episodic memory: a cognitive store that receives and holds what a person has undergone at particular times and places, ready to be used as a reference later. These six concepts together supply the operational vocabulary for examining how students construct meaning and motives through their lived interactions with ChatGPT.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach shapes this study. Creswell 2003, cited in Dr. Rukin (*Dr. Rukin, n.d.*) argues that qualitative inquiry builds knowledge from a constructive standpoint – using social values, personal experience, and history. Lincoln and Guba (1982) add that its goal is deep description, not general laws. The specific framework comes from Alfred Schutz. As Djaya notes, Schutz requires researchers to be logically consistent (checking whether objectives align with everyday reality), position themselves subjectively to understand human actions from within, and build scientific tools for grasping individual social action. The interpretive paradigm, following James A. Anderson, fits here.

It relies on in-depth interviews and text analysis to understand individual perception and experience, while recognizing that meaning gets shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Together, qualitative phenomenology and the interpretive paradigm allow this study to dig into how motives, experiences, and meanings are socially constructed around interaction with ChatGPT.

B. Data Collection Techniques

Four techniques were used. First, *in-depth interviews* (Yunus, 2010, cited in *Harliansyah Faizuddin, n.d.*) – a face-to-face question-and-answer process that goes beyond simple replies to capture explanation and understanding. Second, *non-participant observation*. Here the researcher does not take part in the activity being observed, which helps maintain privacy and comfort for the informants while still gathering data. Third, *documentation study* (Sugiyono, 2005): an essential complement to observation and interviews, adding credibility to qualitative findings. Fourth, *literature study (Wahyudin Darmalaksana, n.d.)* drawing on primary and secondary sources to support the research aims.

C. Data Analysis Technique

Sugiyono (2017) (*Wahyudin Darmalaksana, n.d.*) describes qualitative data analysis as a process of systematically searching and organizing data from field notes, interviews, and documents. This study follows four steps. *Data reduction* filters interview results to focus on experiences directly tied to the phenomenon. *Categorization and thematic coding* groups discovered meanings into main themes related to ChatGPT interaction. *Interpretation of meaning and social construction* connects those themes back to Alfred Schutz's phenomenology and Peter Berger's social construction of reality. Finally, *drawing conclusions* formulates the collective essence of what informants experienced and what social meaning arises from using AI as an interaction partner.

D. *Research Object and Subjects*

The research object – following Husen Umar 2005 in (*Surokim et al., n.d.*) – refers to the subjective side of things: motive, lived experience, and meaning-making behind the social construction of reality that emerges from ChatGPT interactions. As for the subjects, they are university students from Generation Z. Why this group? Because they have grown up amid rapid technological change and tend to be the heaviest users of AI tools. Their daily dependence on innovations like ChatGPT makes them suitable informants for exploring how digital interaction gets constructed into social reality. Only active ChatGPT users were selected, as their close engagement offers a window into the meanings and motives this research seeks to uncover.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. *Research Findings - Motive Finding Data*

When asked about her experience, Muti'ah Nabilah, a student at Universitas Terbuka Jakarta, described ChatGPT as a more detailed version of Brainly – the tool she used back in middle school. The platform gave her peace of mind, especially when compiling a proposal report. ChatGPT suggested including a budget plan (RAB), something she had not considered before. That insight saved her from multiple revision cycles. Still, she admitted that prompts need to be clear; vague instructions leave her frustrated.

Muhammad Imam Saputra, from Universitas Gunadarma, sees ChatGPT sometimes as a mentor – because it explains material in a structured, step-by-step way – and other times as a discussion partner. No fear of being judged. What stands out for him is that the tool does not just hand over answers; it walks him through the reasoning process slowly until things click. When stuck on an assignment, a chat with ChatGPT opens up his thinking again. Work gets done faster and more clearly. The key, he says, is brainstorming first so confusion clears up. For him, using ChatGPT makes him a technologically literate student.

Muhammad Raditya Nugraha, from Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang, feels ChatGPT is like a peer – someone to talk things over with or even vent to. The answers satisfy his curiosity. He gave an example: discussing gym schedules, proper meal timing for bulking or cutting, and even worries about his future. The responses reassure him and bring calm. ChatGPT holds a deep conversation and delivers solutions that match what his mind needs.

B. *Phenomenological Analysis of Motive*

Two main motives emerged from the data. The first is *academic and professional efficiency*. Muti'ah Nabilah, an office archives student, prefers ChatGPT because it helps her grasp classification rules faster than digging through official journals one by one. She admitted that a friend's recommendation pushed her to try the chatbot. What she finds valuable is the two-way communication – unlike Google's one-way search. Still, she noted that prompts must be detailed; otherwise the system misreads her intent. Muhammad Imam Saputra, a multimedia communication student, started using ChatGPT after campus peers suggested it. Buried under coursework and an editing internship, he bought a premium subscription. The chatbot helped him sketch visual ideas for an animation project and generate fresh editing concepts. Yet he cautioned that he never fully depends on it; sometimes the advice misses the mark. Muhammad Raditya Nugraha first heard about ChatGPT from academic social media accounts (@ZonaMahasiswa and @TipsKuliah). His motive was also efficiency – the promise of easier idea processing and comfortable discussion.

The second motive is *cognitive and brainstorming*. Imam sees ChatGPT as a mentor or a friend. The responses come in a well-structured sequence, and the tone feels comfortable – not just templated information like old Google searches. Raditya echoed this. For him, the main draw is not just efficiency but the chatbot's ability to act like a peer. It gives calm, confident answers to his curiosity, even allowing deep discussion or casual venting. When Schutz's framework is applied, the first theme aligns with the *because-of motive* (Schutz, in *Futhihat Rizky, n.d.*). This

refers to past experiences that push someone to act. Students turned to ChatGPT because they had struggled before – with organizing ideas, understanding complex topics, or piecing together concepts. Those past difficulties drove them toward a more efficient solution. The second theme fits Schutz's *in-order-to motive* – a forward-looking intention. Here, students actively seek certainty and depth of knowledge. They want a communication partner that adapts to their level of understanding, offering not just answers but a genuine back-and-forth that satisfies their intellectual curiosity.

C. Expert Perspectives Synthesis

According to Kompas.id (MEDIANA & MUKHAMAD KURNIAWAN, 2023) AI has reshaped work. ChatGPT's NLU and NLP capabilities save enormous time on tasks like summarization. Yet Wahyu notes ethical concerns about data handling. Sunu Wibirama (UGM) argues that fighting AI's speed is pointless; academia worries but cannot stop students from using ChatGPT – it is now embedded as an innovation. In a July 2025 seminar, Kurniawan showed how ChatGPT aids PR work: brainstorming, language refinement, transcription. These uses mirror this study's two motives (efficiency and cognitive brainstorming) under Schutz's framework.

V. CONCLUSION

Drawing on the analysis of motives, meanings, and experiences using the phenomenological communication framework and social construction theory, three main conclusions emerge. First, students' motives for interacting with ChatGPT varied considerably. Different backgrounds and personal knowledge led some to seek deep, comfortable learning through the system's programming and language, while others pursued time efficiency – influenced by collective information exchange within their academic circles. Second, the experiences students drew from came from prior academic activities, whether through other media or direct discussions with peers. They came to see ChatGPT interaction as comfortable, easy to grasp, and genuinely helpful for building academic reasoning. Third, the meanings attached to this interaction turned out just as diverse. Students reported feeling more confident, saw their academic competence grow, and viewed using ChatGPT as part of a modern learning culture – an innovation woven into their daily routines.

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