

Challenges and Coping Strategies of Graduate Students in Using AI-Assisted Tools for Academic Work

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Abstract: Graduate education increasingly incorporates artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools to aid academic tasks; however, their rising use also brings challenges concerning accuracy, critical thinking, and responsible application. This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the difficulties, coping mechanisms, and applications of AI-assisted tools among 13 graduate students chosen through purposive sampling. Data collection involved individual semi-structured online interviews, and thematic analysis was employed for data examination. The study identified several challenges, such as inaccurate or misleading information, excessive reliance on AI, diminished critical thinking, technical and connectivity problems, misinterpretation of prompts, biased or hallucinated outputs, and language and contextual constraints. To address these issues, participants verified AI-generated information with trustworthy sources, employed critical thinking, refined their prompts, adapted to technical challenges, continuously enhanced their AI-related skills, and viewed AI as a supportive tool rather than a substitute for their knowledge and effort. Participants frequently utilized AI for generating ideas and brainstorming, content creation and instructional support, research and information retrieval, assessment development, writing and language improvement, learning support, boosting productivity, and improving task efficiency. The findings indicate that AI-assisted tools can offer valuable support for graduate-level academic work when paired with thorough verification, critical evaluation, ethical awareness, and responsible human judgment. This research underscores the necessity of preserving originality, academic integrity, and independent thinking while using AI to augment rather than replace students' intellectual engagement and scholarly endeavors.

Keywords: AI-assisted tools, academic work, coping strategies, graduate students, artificial intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is shaking up education worldwide. With tools such as writing assistants and chatbots, academic tasks are becoming more efficient and accessible, offering personalized learning experiences that keep both students and educators more engaged and productive (Anghel et al., 2025; Garzón et al., 2025). AI's ability to adapt means that it can provide tailored instruction and real-time feedback, which is great for active learning and promoting inclusivity. This is especially helpful for students with disabilities, as AI-powered assistive technologies help create fairer learning environments (Hussein et al., 2025; Melo-López et al., 2025). However, while there are clear benefits, the increasing use of AI in education raises some concerns. There are concerns that relying too much on AI tools might reduce critical thinking skills and increase plagiarism risks. Moreover, ethical issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, and misinformation are ongoing challenges in the responsible integration of AI in academic settings (Chavez et al., 2024). To tackle these issues, educational institutions are developing policies, improving faculty training, and establishing ethical frameworks to ensure that AI innovation goes hand in hand with academic integrity and human oversight (H N et al., 2024; Sağın et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, an increasing number of students, especially those in higher education, are turning to AI-assisted tools. Universities are beginning to recognize both the potential and challenges of AI in education. However, the rules and guidelines for using AI in academic work are still a bit fuzzy or not fully developed, which makes it tricky to ensure that students produce original and high-quality work (Alejandro et al., 2024; Cacho, 2024). Graduate students, particularly those working on their master's and PhD degrees, often use AI tools for writing, research, and data organization. However, they face challenges such as checking the accuracy of AI-generated content and dealing with ethical issues surrounding responsible use (Benuyenah & Dewnarain, 2024). To tackle these challenges, students develop their own strategies; however, there is still much to learn about how they effectively balance the advantages of AI with the need to maintain academic integrity (Cacho, 2024; Liu, 2025).

The existing literature predominantly emphasizes AI acceptance and technology adoption models, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), focusing on theoretical and quantitative perspectives. However, there is a notable lack of attention to the actual lived experiences of graduate students actively utilizing AI-assisted tools in academic contexts. Specifically, there is a deficiency in qualitative research exploring the specific challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the real-world experiences of graduate students, providing deeper insights into the difficulties they face and the strategies they use to manage AI-assisted tools in their academic work, thereby contributing to a more contextualized understanding beyond adoption metrics.

Main Research Question

What challenges and coping strategies do graduate students experience when using AI-assisted tools for academic work?

Research Questions

1. What challenges do graduate students face when using AI-assisted tools
2. How do graduate students cope with these challenges?
3. How do graduate students use AI-assisted tools in their academic work

Review of Related Literature

Use of AI-Assisted Tools in Academic Work

The use of AI-assisted tools in academic work has become increasingly prevalent, with students employing technologies (Alnaimat et al., 2025; Doskaliuk et al., 2025). While AI can significantly aid academic productivity and streamline various research and writing tasks, such as chatbots and writing assistants for writing, editing, research, summarizing, and idea generation. These tools significantly contribute to improving productivity, efficiency, and accessibility of information in academic contexts. Research indicates that students perceive these AI applications as beneficial for enhancing academic performance by providing personalized learning experiences and facilitating more efficient workflows (Phua et al., 2025; Yerbabuena Torres et al., 2024). Graduate students, in particular, tend to utilize AI tools for complex academic tasks, including research synthesis and writing support, reflecting a deeper integration of AI in advanced scholarly work (Ali et al., 2024; Saúde et al., 2024). Despite these advantages, concerns about reliance on AI tools have emerged, primarily regarding their potential to undermine critical thinking and independent learning skills. The overuse of AI-generated content may impede the development of problem-solving abilities and ethical academic practices, necessitating pedagogical frameworks that foster critical, digital, and ethical literacy alongside AI usage (Phua et al., 2025; Saúde et al., 2024). Moreover, issues such as data security, privacy, algorithmic bias, and misinformation associated with AI outputs pose challenges that require careful consideration and responsible implementation by educators and institutions (Yerbabuena Torres et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2024). To mitigate these risks, the development of comprehensive ethical guidelines and human-

centered frameworks is advocated to balance AI's benefits with the preservation of academic integrity and autonomy (Le Dinh et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2024). AI-assisted tools hold substantial promise for enhancing academic productivity and access to knowledge, particularly for graduate-level tasks. However, their integration in academia must be accompanied by strategies that uphold critical thinking, ethical use, and vigilant oversight to ensure that AI augments rather than diminishes the learning process (Ali et al., 2024; Phua et al., 2025; Saúde et al., 2024; Yerbabuena Torres et al., 2024).

Challenges and Ethical Concerns in Using AI

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic work presents several challenges and ethical concerns that warrant careful attention. One major difficulty students face is the issue of inaccurate or misleading AI-generated content. Although AI tools are efficient, they can produce outputs that may lack accuracy or exhibit bias, necessitating critical verification and cautious use. This challenge is compounded by students' overdependence on AI, which can erode independent learning and critical thinking skills as learners may increasingly rely on AI-generated information without adequate scrutiny. Additionally, verifying sources and ensuring transparency about the origin of AI-assisted content pose significant difficulties, further complicating academic rigor and trustworthiness (Chavez et al., 2024; Ugwu et al., 2024). Ethical concerns are equally prominent, particularly regarding academic integrity. The potential for plagiarism increases when AI-generated text is used without proper attribution or rephrasing, raising questions about originality and authorship. There is ongoing debate about the acceptable boundaries for AI use in academic work, including whether AI should be credited as a contributor and how transparent users should be about AI assistance. Many educational institutions currently lack clear policies or guidelines on AI use, resulting in ambiguity and inconsistent enforcement of academic standards (Chavez et al., 2024; Miao et al., 2023; Ugwu et al., 2024). Moreover, concerns extend to the fairness of AI-assisted outputs, as algorithmic biases may affect peer review, publication decisions, and equitable academic assessment, amplifying systemic inequalities within academia (Alnaimat et al., 2025; Daskaliuk et al., 2025).

Additional ethical dilemmas arise in the journal publishing process, where AI tools are integrated for plagiarism detection and ethics checks. Although these tools enhance efficiency and consistency, they raise questions about accountability, transparency, and the risk of overreliance on automated judgments, which may lack nuanced understanding of scholarly content. Furthermore, the handling of sensitive data by AI systems necessitates stringent privacy and confidentiality safeguards to protect research participants and simultaneously introduces complex ethical challenges. These include risks to academic integrity through plagiarism and misattribution, difficulties verifying and evaluating AI-generated content, lack of institutional policies, and concerns over fairness and bias. Addressing these issues requires robust guidelines, ethical training for users, transparent disclosure of AI involvement, and human oversight to ensure responsible use. Such measures are essential to balance innovation with the preservation of integrity, fairness, and trust in academic work (Alnaimat et al., 2025; Chavez et al., 2024; Daskaliuk et al., 2025; Miao et al., 2023; Ugwu et al., 2024).

Coping Strategies and Responsible Use of AI

Coping strategies for managing AI-related challenges in academic work emphasize a balanced and responsible approach to AI use. Students commonly adopt practices such as cross-checking AI-generated information against reliable, authoritative sources to mitigate the risks of misinformation and errors. Rather than relying on AI tools as primary sources, learners are encouraged to use them as supportive aids that enhance productivity and understanding without replacing their own critical engagement and original thinking. Additionally, students often personalize and edit AI-generated content to reflect their voice and maintain authenticity, a practice aligned with preserving academic integrity (Haroud & Saqri, 2025; Kostas et al., 2025). Digital literacy plays a pivotal role in these coping mechanisms. Comprehensive AI literacy—encompassing critical discernment, ethical awareness, and cognitive independence—equips students to evaluate AI outputs thoughtfully and recognize potential

biases or inaccuracies. Educational programs aimed at enhancing media and information literacy specifically address these competencies, fostering students' ability to interact responsibly with AI tools (Ponce Rojo et al., 2025; Walter, 2024). Ethical guidelines established by institutions further support responsible AI use by clearly defining acceptable practices and emphasizing transparency and academic honesty. Such policies encourage students to acknowledge AI contributions appropriately and uphold fairness while addressing concerns about data privacy and algorithmic bias (Azman & Tümkaya, 2025; Qadhi et al., 2024).

Educators play a crucial role in promoting critical thinking skills alongside AI integration, guiding students to recognize AI's limitations and interpret outputs with a reflective and evaluative mindset. Pedagogical designs that integrate AI literacy with critical analysis exercises ensure that AI serves as a complement, rather than a substitute, for human intellect (Haroud & Saqri, 2025; Ponce Rojo et al., 2025). Moreover, responsible AI adoption involves stakeholder-centered approaches to AI education, which tailor learning experiences to diverse needs and emphasize ethics and social implications, thereby bridging gaps in access and competence (Domínguez Figaredo & Stoyanovich, 2023; Kostas et al., 2025). The responsible use of AI in academic contexts relies on students' active engagement with digital literacy, ethical conduct, and critical thinking, supported by clear institutional frameworks and educator guidance to maximize AI's educational benefits while safeguarding academic integrity and equity.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore and understand graduate students lived experiences of using AI-assisted tools for academic work. This approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives, challenges, and coping strategies in their natural academic contexts. The participants of the study consisted of thirteen (13) graduate students who were selected based on their direct experience in using AI-assisted tools. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the participants were knowledgeable and capable of providing meaningful insights relevant to the research topic. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide aligned with the study's research questions, allowing for flexibility for follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding. The interviews were conducted using online platforms. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained, and the participants were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, wherein the responses were systematically reviewed, coded, and organized into categories to identify emerging patterns and themes related to the challenges and coping strategies of graduate students. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study by ensuring anonymity, safeguarding participants' information, and using the data for academic purposes only.

FINDINGS

Table 1. Challenges in Using AI-Assisted Tools

Theme	Description
Inaccuracy and Misinformation	Participants reported that AI-assisted tools may generate incorrect, misleading, or outdated information, requiring careful verification prior to use.
Overdependence on AI	Many respondents expressed concern about the excessive reliance on AI, which may reduce independent thinking and make users less attentive to verifying information.
Decline in Critical Thinking Skills	The convenience of AI tools may lead users to rely on generated answers without deeper analysis, thereby affecting their problem-solving and critical thinking abilities.

Technical and Connectivity Issues	Slow internet connection, unstable access, and delayed responses are challenges that hinder the effective use of AI tools.
Misinterpretation and Irrelevant Responses	AI tools may misunderstand prompts or fail to capture context, especially for complex or unclear questions, resulting in inaccurate or irrelevant answers.
Bias and Hallucination in Outputs	Participants noted that AI could produce biased content or fabricated information (“hallucinations”), raising concerns about reliability and trustworthiness.
Language and Context Limitations	Difficulties arise when AI tools struggle with local languages (e.g., Filipino) or fail to fully understand nuanced, context-specific queries.

The findings in Table 1 reveal that graduate students encounter several challenges when using AI-assisted tools for academic work. A major concern is inaccuracy and misinformation, as AI tools may generate incorrect, misleading, or outdated information that requires careful verification by the user. This supports the findings of Ugwu et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of evaluating AI-generated information and addressing the ethical concerns associated with AI use in academic work. Participants also identified overdependence on AI and a possible decline in critical thinking, suggesting that excessive reliance on generated responses may reduce independent thinking and deeper analyses. Similarly, Haroud and Saqri (2025) emphasized that AI should support rather than replace students’ intellectual engagement and independent learning. Technical and connectivity issues are also identified as barriers to effective AI use. In addition, participants experienced misinterpretation of prompts, irrelevant responses, bias, and hallucinated information, which may affect the reliability and credibility of AI-generated content. These concerns are consistent with those of Garzón et al. (2025), who identified the limitations and challenges associated with the increasing integration of AI into education. Furthermore, language and contextual limitations were experienced when AI tools had difficulty interpreting local languages or context-specific queries. These findings emphasize the need for users to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs rather than automatically accepting them as accurate. As suggested by Walter (2024), AI literacy, prompt engineering, and critical thinking are important competencies for responsibly using AI in education. Overall, the findings indicate that although AI-assisted tools provide valuable academic support, graduate students must use them with verification, critical judgment and responsible human oversight.

Table 2 Coping Strategies in Using AI-Assisted Tools

Theme	Description
Verification and Validation of Information	Participants cope by reviewing, checking, and cross-validating AI-generated outputs with reliable sources to ensure their accuracy and credibility before use.
Application of Critical Thinking	Respondents emphasized using their own ideas first, analyzing and evaluating AI-generated content, and ensuring originality and a deeper understanding.
AI as a Support Tool	Participants used AI as a supplementary aid rather than a replacement for learning, ensuring that their own knowledge and efforts remained central.
Refinement of Prompts and Responses	Users can improve the quality of AI outputs by refining instructions, clarifying prompts, and carefully reviewing generated responses.

Patience and Adaptability to Technical Issues	Coping strategies included being patient with slow Internet or system delays, adjusting to limitations, and seeking better connectivity when necessary.
Continuous Learning and Skill Enhancement	Participants developed their competence by exploring AI features, practicing regularly, and learning how to use tools more effectively.
Resourcefulness and Strategy Adjustment	Users adapt to challenges by verifying information through other sources, seeking help when needed, and adjusting their strategies depending on the situation.

Table 2 presents the coping strategies employed by graduate students to address the challenges associated with the use of AI-assisted tools. The findings indicate that participants primarily rely on the verification and validation of information by reviewing and cross-checking AI-generated outputs with credible sources before using them in their academic work. This practice supports Ugwu et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of carefully evaluating AI-generated information to maintain accuracy and academic integrity. The application of critical thinking also emerged as an important coping strategy, as participants analyzed AI-generated responses, used their own ideas, and ensured the originality of their academic work. Participants further emphasized using AI as a support tool rather than a replacement for their own knowledge and effort. These findings are consistent with Haroud and Saqri (2025), who emphasized maintaining critical engagement and digital literacy when using generative AI in higher education. Another strategy involves the refinement of prompts and responses, wherein participants clarify their instructions and carefully review AI-generated outputs to obtain more relevant information. This supports Walter (2024), who highlighted the importance of AI literacy, prompt engineering, and critical thinking in effectively using AI in education. Participants also demonstrated patience and adaptability in dealing with technical difficulties, continuously developed their AI-related skills, and showed resourcefulness by consulting other reliable sources and adjusting their strategies when necessary. Overall, these coping strategies demonstrate that responsible AI use requires continuous learning, critical evaluation, information verification, and human judgment to ensure that AI supports rather than replaces meaningful academic engagement.

Table 3 Use of AI-Assisted Tools in Academic Work

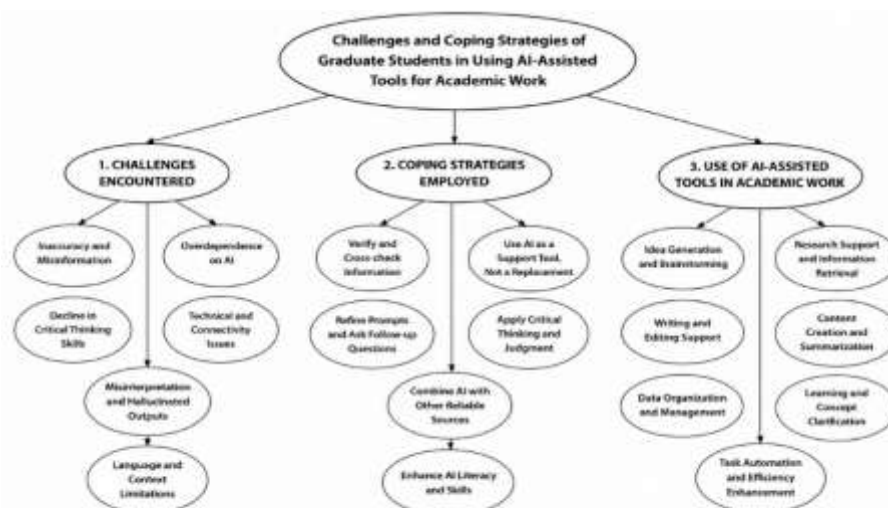
Theme	Description
Idea Generation and Brainstorming	Participants used AI tools to generate ideas, brainstorm topics, and develop concepts for academic tasks and activities.
Content Creation and Instructional Support	AI is utilized to create instructional materials, lesson planning, generate interactive content, and simplify complex topics for better student understanding.
Research and Information Retrieval	Respondents used AI to quickly search for information, gather additional knowledge, and obtain immediate answers to academic queries.
Assessment and Test Development	AI tools can be used to create test items, quizzes, and summative assessments, making evaluation processes more efficient.
Writing and Language Enhancement	Participants use AI to improve grammar, check errors, refine writing, and enhance the overall quality of academic outputs.
Learning Support and Academic Understanding	AI assists users in understanding lessons, answering practice questions, and improving their overall academic performance and efficiency.

Productivity and Task Efficiency Tools	AI applications (e.g., chatbots, Grammarly, Canva, and Tableau) are used to streamline tasks such as report writing, data analysis, design, and accessing templates for work-related needs.
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Table 3 presents the different ways in which graduate students use AI-assisted tools for academic work. The findings show that participants used AI for idea generation and brainstorming, content creation, instructional support, research and information retrieval, assessment development, writing and language improvement, learning support, and productivity improvement. These findings support Saúde et al. (2024), who emphasized the growing role of generative AI in supporting academic activities in higher education. Similarly, Yerbabuena Torres et al. (2024) highlighted the usefulness of AI tools in improving educational and learning processes. Garzón et al. (2025) identified benefits such as improved efficiency, accessibility, and learning support. Overall, the findings indicate that AI-assisted tools can help graduate students complete academic tasks more efficiently and improve their learning experiences when used appropriately and responsibly.

DISCUSSION

The content analysis shows that graduate students' experiences with AI-assisted tools in academic work can be understood through three major areas: challenges encountered, coping strategies, and the use of AI-assisted tools. The participants identified challenges such as inaccurate or misleading information, overdependence on AI, reduced critical thinking, technical and connectivity problems, misinterpretation of prompts, hallucinations, and limitations in understanding the language and context. These findings reflect concerns in the literature that AI-generated information may contain errors or biases and that excessive dependence on AI may affect independent learning and critical thinking (Chavez et al., 2024; Ugwu et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, graduate students demonstrated several strategies for the responsible use of AI. These include verifying and cross-checking AI-generated information, applying critical thinking, refining prompts, consulting other reliable sources, continuously improving their AI skills, and treating AI as a support tool rather than a replacement for their knowledge and efforts. These practices are consistent with Haroud and Saqri (2025), who emphasized the importance of maintaining critical engagement when using generative AI, and Walter (2024), who highlighted the importance of AI literacy, prompt engineering, and critical thinking in education. The findings further revealed that AI-assisted tools have been integrated into various academic activities by graduate students. Participants used AI for idea generation and brainstorming, instructional content creation, research and information retrieval, assessment development, writing and language improvement, learning support, and productivity-related tasks. These findings support previous studies indicating that AI can improve efficiency, provide learning support, and assist students with complex academic tasks (Ali et al., 2024; Phua et al., 2025; Saúde et al., 2024). Overall, the content analysis suggests that AI can provide meaningful academic support when graduate students combine its use with verification, critical thinking, ethical awareness, and responsible human judgment, rather than depending entirely on AI-generated outputs.



CONCLUSION

The study concludes that AI-assisted tools have become valuable resources in the academic work of graduate students, particularly for idea generation and brainstorming, content creation, research and information retrieval, assessment development, writing and language enhancement, learning support, and improving productivity and task efficiency. However, their use also presents several challenges, including inaccurate or misleading information, overdependence on AI, possible decline in critical thinking skills, technical and connectivity issues, misinterpretation of prompts, biased or hallucinated outputs, and limitations in understanding the language and context. Despite these challenges, graduate students demonstrated responsible coping strategies by verifying AI-generated information using reliable sources, applying critical thinking, refining prompts, continuously improving their AI-related skills, and treating AI as a support tool rather than a replacement for their own knowledge and academic effort. Overall, the findings suggest that AI-assisted tools can contribute positively to graduate students' academic work when used critically, ethically, and responsibly, with human judgment remaining central to the learning and research processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, graduate students are encouraged to use AI-assisted tools as supplementary resources rather than substitutes for independent thinking, academic judgment, and original work. They should consistently verify AI-generated information using credible academic sources, carefully evaluate outputs for inaccuracies, biases, and fabricated information, and develop effective prompting and AI-literacy skills. Graduate schools and higher education institutions are encouraged to provide clear guidelines on the acceptable and ethical use of AI in academic work, particularly regarding academic integrity, transparency, authorship, data privacy, and the appropriate disclosure of AI assistance. Faculty members may also integrate AI literacy, critical thinking, information verification, and responsible AI use into graduate-level instruction and research activities to help students maximize the benefits of these technologies while minimizing the potential risks. Institutions should provide training, seminars, and workshops on responsible and effective AI use. Finally, future researchers may conduct similar studies involving larger and more diverse groups of graduate students, compare experiences across academic disciplines or institutions, and investigate how AI-assisted tools influence critical thinking, research competence, academic integrity, and the overall quality of graduate-level academic work.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to 13 graduate students selected through purposive sampling. Since the study used interviews, the findings were based on participants' personal experiences and perceptions. The small number of participants may limit the application of the findings to other graduate students and institutions.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future researchers should conduct similar studies with more graduate students from different programs and institutions. They may also use quantitative or mixed-method approaches to further examine AI use, AI literacy, critical thinking, academic integrity, and academic performance. Future studies should explore how changes in AI technology affect students' academic practices.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained. The information collected was used only for academic purposes, and appropriate ethical principles were followed throughout this study.

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AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist with grammar checking, language refinement, and the improvement of the clarity and organization of the manuscript. No AI-assisted tools were used for the collection, analysis, interpretation, or integration of research findings. All findings and interpretations were based on the actual data gathered from the participants and analyzed by the researchers themselves. The author carefully reviewed and edited all AI-assisted content and took full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the published work.

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