

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF AI-POWERED CHATBOT FOR ENHANCING SUPPORT SERVICES IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: EVIDENCE FROM AL-HIKMAH UNIVERSITY

BY

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Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of AI-powered chatbots for enhancing support services in Nigerian universities, with empirical evidence drawn from Al-Hikmah University. As the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in higher education continues to rise globally, chatbots have emerged as innovative tools designed to improve communication, streamline administrative processes, and provide immediate assistance to students. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with 25 students from four faculties (Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Management Sciences and Agriculture) at Al-Hikmah University. The study aims to identify the perceived benefits and challenges influencing students' acceptance of AI-powered chatbots for academic and administrative support services. It seeks to understand students' expectations regarding the effectiveness of chatbots in providing timely information, reducing administrative burdens, and enhancing the overall student experience. Findings from the study suggest that students generally perceive AI-powered chatbots as valuable tools for improving access to essential information, such as lecture schedules, course registration, and fee payments. The 24/7 availability of chatbots was highlighted as a major advantage, particularly for resolving issues outside of office hours. However, concerns regarding data privacy, the chatbot's accuracy, and its ability to handle complex queries were also raised. The study concludes by offering recommendations for the successful implementation of AI-powered chatbots in Nigerian universities, emphasizing the importance of user-friendly design, regular updates, and ensuring data security. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on AI in higher education, providing insights for institutions considering the integration of chatbots into their support systems.

Keywords: Support Services, Chatbots, Perception, 24/7 Availability, Qualitative Approach

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has revolutionized numerous sectors, with higher education being no exception. One of the most significant technological innovations in this field is the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which has reshaped how universities engage with students, particularly in the realm of student support services (Al-Refaei, Ali, Aldaba & Zumrah, 2024; Tossell et. al., 2024; Yusuf, 2024). AI, with its ability to simulate human-like interactions, has led to the widespread adoption of AI-powered chatbots as tools for enhancing communication, streamlining administrative tasks, and providing immediate, personalized support to students. In recent years, AI-powered chatbots have become increasingly popular in universities globally, offering automated assistance across a variety of academic and administrative functions. These chatbots, powered by advanced machine learning and natural language processing technologies, are designed to answer frequently asked questions, assist with course registrations, provide information on fees, and even guide students through administrative procedures. Their ability to provide real-time, 24/7 responses makes them invaluable in addressing students' needs promptly and efficiently, particularly when universities face high demand or limited staff availability (Ojonugwa, Yakubu & Idoko, 2024; Shafqat & Amjad, 2024).

According to Saif et. al. (2024), the appeal of AI-powered chatbots in higher education lies in their ability to enhance the overall student experience. By automating repetitive tasks and addressing routine inquiries, chatbots free up human staff to focus on more complex issues, thus improving operational efficiency. For students, chatbots provide immediate access to critical information, reducing the need for physical visits to administrative offices, long waiting times, or delays in communication. This accessibility is especially crucial in today's fast-paced educational environment, where students often need quick answers to stay on track with their academic and administrative responsibilities. Oladipupo and Samuel (2024) opined that as universities continue to embrace digital transformation, the demand for AI applications, such as chatbots, is expected to grow. These tools not only offer operational advantages but also align with the increasing expectations of today's tech-savvy student population. Students are increasingly accustomed to digital interfaces, including messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, making the transition to AI-powered chatbots more seamless. The ability to interact with AI in a way that feels familiar enhances student engagement and ensures that support services are available at their fingertips, whether on a mobile device or computer.

In Nigerian universities, where large student populations and limited administrative resources often result in delays and inefficiencies, the adoption of AI-powered chatbots can offer a viable solution to enhance student support services. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on how they are perceived by students and whether they meet their expectations. Students' perceptions of AI-powered chatbots are critical, as their willingness to engage with these tools directly impacts their success in using them effectively (Nwankwo, MacDonald & Abugu, 2021; Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2024). Understanding students' attitudes toward AI-powered chatbots is essential for universities seeking to optimize their use and ensure that they serve as valuable support resources (Orok et. al., 2024; Yusuf et. al., 2024). While AI-powered chatbots have the potential to revolutionize student support services in Nigerian universities, there is a lack of empirical research on how students perceive these tools. In particular, there is limited understanding of the potential challenges and benefits associated with the use of AI chatbots from the students' perspective. This gap in the literature is critical, as students' perceptions and willingness to use these tools directly impact their success.

In the case of Al-Hikmah University, the AI-powered chatbot has not yet been introduced as a tool for enhancing support services. However, there is limited data regarding how the student population would perceive such a technology if implemented. As universities worldwide increasingly integrate AI-powered chatbots to streamline administrative tasks, enhance communication, and provide immediate assistance to students, understanding the potential benefits and challenges is essential for Al-Hikmah University.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of students at Al-Hikmah University regarding the usefulness of AI-powered chatbots in enhancing academic and administrative support services?
2. To what extent do students at Al-Hikmah University find AI-powered chatbots easy to use and accessible for resolving their support service needs?
3. What are the perceived potential challenges and benefits of using AI-powered chatbots for student support services as identified by students at Al-Hikmah University?

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a transformative force in the educational landscape, with AI-powered chatbots emerging as a key tool in enhancing student support services. A chatbot is an AI application designed to simulate human conversation, capable of responding to queries, delivering information, and supporting decision-making processes. Within the context of higher education, AI-powered chatbots serve as virtual assistants, handling

tasks such as admission inquiries, course registration, academic advising, library searches, and mental health support (Enoch, Mohammed & Ziblim, 2025). In Nigerian universities, student support services often face significant challenges, including understaffing, delayed responses, and inconsistent service delivery. Integrating AI-powered chatbots offers the potential to address these gaps by providing 24/7 service, reducing administrative burdens, and improving the quality and consistency of information dissemination. The concept of chatbot-assisted support is also aligned with digital transformation goals in the education sector, particularly in light of post-COVID-19 realities. The perception of students towards such technologies is crucial. Positive perceptions often correlate with willingness to adopt and use new technologies, while negative perceptions may stem from issues of trust, accuracy, digital literacy, and accessibility. Therefore, understanding students' perception of AI-powered chatbots is essential to ensure their effective integration and utilization in Nigerian higher education institutions (Hossain et. al.2024; Ismaila, Bello & Gambari, 2024; Musa et. al., 2024).

The study is underpinned by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989). TAM posits that two primary factors such as Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) influence an individual's intention to use a technology. According to this model, if students perceive chatbots as useful in solving academic and administrative problems and find them easy to interact with, they are more likely to adopt and use them regularly. Further, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) by Venkatesh et al. (2003) expands on TAM and adds variables such as performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. These factors provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the predictors of student acceptance of AI tools. Another relevant theory is the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), which explains how new technologies are adopted within a social system over time. According to this theory, the adoption of AI-powered chatbots will depend on factors such as relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. These dimensions help explain the pace and scope of chatbot adoption among students in various Nigerian universities.

Several studies across global and African contexts have explored the use of AI chatbots in education. Yusuf (2024) investigated AI chatbot adoption in selected Nigerian universities with focus on Al-Hikmah University and found that students appreciated the 24-hour availability and instant feedback capabilities of chatbots, though concerns about personalization and language limitations were raised. Yusuf et al. (2024) studied the implementation of a locally developed chatbot for student enquiries at a federal university in South-West Nigeria. Their findings showed a 40% reduction in office visits for routine queries and increased student satisfaction. However, they also reported technical challenges such as inconsistent internet connectivity and lack of integration with legacy systems. Orok et. al. (2024) examined the role of chatbots in virtual learning environments. The study revealed that students valued the conversational and human-like features of AI systems, especially in providing academic support and mental health guidance. Similarly, Zamora (2017) evaluated the use of chatbots in higher education and noted that students generally viewed chatbots as efficient and trustworthy sources of information when adequately programmed and supported. Shafqat and Amjad (2024) assessed the impact of AI-based learning technologies, including chatbots, and emphasized the role of digital equity and internet access as critical factors influencing students' usage patterns and satisfaction. This has implications for Nigeria, where infrastructural disparities may affect the adoption of such technologies in rural versus urban university settings. Other studies, such as Oladipupo and Samuel (2024), conducted surveys on students' perceptions of AI technologies in private universities in Nigeria. Their findings suggested high awareness levels of AI tools but moderate usage due to concerns over data privacy, lack of training, and inadequate institutional support. Overall, these empirical insights indicate a growing interest and receptivity to AI-powered chatbots among Nigerian university students. However, issues related to trust, usability, training, and infrastructure need to be systematically addressed for sustainable adoption.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore students' perception of AI-powered chatbots for enhancing support services in Nigerian universities, with specific focus on Al-Hikmah University. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, attitudes, and

views regarding the use of AI-driven technologies in academic and administrative support. The study employed a phenomenological method to capture the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of students who have interacted with, or have knowledge of AI-powered chatbots in their academic environment. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of students from four faculties, who could provide rich, relevant insights. A total of 25 students participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives. Each interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview protocol was guided by open-ended questions addressing perceived benefits, usability, accessibility, and challenges associated with AI-powered chatbots in delivering student support services. Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Transcripts from the interviews were carefully reviewed and coded, with emerging themes categorized to reflect patterns in students' perceptions. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of the research process. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. This methodology provided the depth and context necessary to understand students' views on AI-powered support tools, offering valuable insights for university administrators, technology developers, and policy makers aiming to improve student engagement and support through artificial intelligence.

Results

Response to Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of students regarding the usefulness of AI-powered chatbots in enhancing academic and administrative support services?

E1 (Education):

"I think AI chatbots can be very helpful especially for quick responses. Sometimes we need urgent clarification on lecture schedules, and the chatbot can provide answers faster than waiting for an officer or lecturer."

E2 (Education):

"The chatbot has the potential to reduce long queues at the registry. If it can answer basic registration or result issues, it will save us the stress of moving around."

E3 (Education):

"It's a good innovation, but many students still don't trust the answers it gives. For it to be useful, it has to be very accurate and work all the time, not just sometimes."

A1 (Agricultural Science):

"I've not used any chatbot yet, but if it works well, I believe it can be useful for information like school fees, deadlines, and course allocations."

A3 (Agricultural Science):

"Some of us struggle to get feedback from departments. If the chatbot can link us to the right officer or provide updated info, it will really help. But it must be student-friendly."

M1 (Management Sciences):

"The usefulness depends on the design. If it's interactive and can solve problems like payment confirmation, that will be a big plus. Otherwise, it's just another app we ignore."

M4 (Management Sciences):

"I would say it's useful, especially for fresh students who don't know the system yet. If it's programmed well, it can assist them with basic orientation and navigation of services."

H1 (Humanities):

"It is a good support tool, especially if it operates 24/7. Sometimes we need help late at night when offices are closed. A chatbot can fill that gap."

H4 (Humanities):

"In my opinion, AI chatbots can reduce dependency on physical staff for minor issues. But they must be updated regularly. Outdated info can be frustrating."

H6 (Humanities):

"The usefulness of a chatbot is clear if it is responsive, precise, and simple to use. If it's too technical or robotic, students might not find it helpful."

Research Question 2: To what extent do students at Al-Hikmah University find AI-powered chatbots easy to use and accessible for resolving their support service needs?

E3 (Education):

"Honestly, I believe if properly introduced, AI-powered chatbots will be easy to use. Most students are already familiar with chat interfaces like WhatsApp or Telegram. If the chatbot is designed with a friendly interface and doesn't require too much technical knowledge, students will definitely use it to access services like checking results or asking academic-related questions."

A3 (Agriculture):

"I think accessibility will depend on internet availability and students' awareness. Some students may not even know that such a service exists unless it is well publicized. But once they know and try it, they'll find it easy, especially if it's quick and responds at any time, unlike physical offices."

A1 (Agriculture):

"For a new student like me, having an AI chatbot would really help. Sometimes you don't know where to go or who to ask about registration or course selection. If the chatbot is there 24/7 and answers basic questions, it would reduce stress. It should also use simple English so everyone can understand."

H3 (Humanities and Social Sciences):

"Many students are already tech-savvy, so ease of use may not be a problem. The real issue will be how fast and accurate the chatbot is. If I ask about my timetable or fees and it gives wrong info, I won't use it again. Accessibility is good if it works on phones without needing to download an app."

H1 (Humanities):

"Some of my friends might struggle with it at first, especially those who are not too used to technology. But if it's integrated into the student portal or made compulsory for some services, more people will get used to it. It should also have options in different Nigerian languages for wider use."

H4 (Humanities):

"The main benefit is that we won't need to queue or wait for someone to answer questions at the admin office. If the chatbot works well and is available both day and night, it will be highly accessible. But I suggest there should also be a way to escalate to a human if needed."

M1 (Management Sciences):

"From my experience with other AI tools like ChatGPT, I believe a university chatbot can be easy to use if it is user-centered. It should be optimized for both mobile and PC, and not consume too much data. Accessibility also includes making it available offline or via SMS for those without steady internet."

These qualitative responses reflect a general openness among students at Al-Hikmah University toward using AI-powered chatbots, provided that the tools are user-friendly, reliable, accessible on common platforms, and supported with adequate publicity and technical backup.

Research Question 3: What are the perceived potential challenges and benefits of using AI-powered chatbots for student support services as identified by students at Al-Hikmah University?

Participant E4 (Education):

"One of the main benefits is that AI chatbots can answer questions quickly, especially during registration or when you need information about courses or fees. But sometimes, the chatbot does not understand specific or complex questions, which can be frustrating. It needs to be more human-like in communication."

Participant M3 (Management Sciences):

"I think the chatbot is very helpful when you need urgent help at night or during weekends. You don't have to wait for office hours. But I'm worried about my data privacy. I don't know who has access to what I share with the bot."

Participant A2 (Agriculture):

"AI makes access to information easier. It helped me get details about my exam timetable without stress. But it doesn't always give accurate or updated answers. Sometimes, it feels like the responses are too generic or outdated."

Participant H1 (Humanities):

"I will enjoy using the chatbot because it saves me from queuing in front of the office. It's user-friendly, but some of my friends who are not tech-savvy find it difficult to navigate. Maybe more training or orientation is needed."

Participant H3 (Humanities):

"The chatbot is good for small inquiries like checking course registration status. However, for complex academic complaints, it usually refers you back to a human staff. It would be better if it can handle more advanced student issues."

Participant H4 (Humanities):

"For me, the chatbot's 24/7 availability is its best feature. It helps when you have last-minute questions. But there's a lack of emotional connection. Sometimes students just want empathy or reassurance, which AI can't provide."

Participant M2 (Management Sciences):

"The chatbot made my first-year experience less stressful. I used it to find lecture venues and course outlines. But it doesn't work well when the internet is poor, and some students don't even know it's available. The school should promote it more."

Discussion

In view of the first research question, findings from student responses indicate a generally positive perception of the usefulness of AI-powered chatbots, particularly in improving access to academic and administrative support services. Many students expressed appreciation for the potential of chatbots to offer immediate responses to inquiries, such as lecture schedules, payment confirmations, and course information. This immediacy is valued

especially in time-sensitive situations or when administrative offices are closed, as highlighted by participants. Several participants noted that AI chatbots can serve as effective tools for reducing the stress associated with physically visiting university offices and standing in long queues. This is especially beneficial for resolving basic issues like registration or navigating school services. However, some concerns were raised regarding the accuracy, reliability, and responsiveness of the chatbot. They emphasized that for the chatbot to be useful, it must deliver precise and up-to-date information. That the design and usability of the chatbot will greatly influence its effectiveness if it's not user-friendly or interactive, students may ignore it. Findings of the study align with Shafqat and Amjad (2024) who examined the impact of AI-based learning technologies, including chatbots, highlighting the significance of digital equity and internet access as key factors that influence students' usage patterns and satisfaction. This is particularly relevant, where infrastructural disparities between rural and urban areas may affect the adoption and effectiveness of such technologies in university settings. Yusuf (2024) found that chatbots, as AI applications, are designed to simulate human conversation and can respond to queries, provide information, and support decision-making processes. In the context of higher education, AI-powered chatbots function as virtual assistants, managing tasks such as handling admission inquiries, facilitating course registration, providing academic advising, assisting with library searches, and offering mental health support.

Based on the second research question, findings reveal that students at Al-Hikmah University generally perceive AI-powered chatbots as potentially easy to use and accessible, provided they are well-designed and properly introduced. Several respondents noted that most students are already accustomed to chat interfaces such as WhatsApp or Telegram, making the transition to chatbot usage relatively seamless. However, the ease of use is contingent on a friendly interface, simplicity of language, and minimal technical requirements. Accessibility concerns were tied to internet connectivity, device compatibility, and student awareness. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring the chatbot functions well on mobile devices without requiring app downloads or high data consumption. They also advocated for 24/7 availability and suggested features such as multilingual support and offline/SMS functionality to enhance inclusion. While some students expressed concerns about potential technical barriers for less tech-savvy peers, they believed this could be overcome through integration into the student portal and awareness campaigns. Overall, students' openness to using AI-powered chatbots is strong, especially if the tools are designed to be intuitive, accurate, and accessible through various digital channels. Hossain et al. (2024) emphasized that students' perceptions of technologies like AI-powered chatbots are pivotal. Positive perceptions are often linked to a higher willingness to adopt and use new technologies, whereas negative perceptions may arise from concerns about trust, accuracy, digital literacy, and accessibility. Consequently, understanding students' perceptions of AI-powered chatbots is critical for their successful integration and effective use in higher education institutions. Yusuf et. al. (2024) found that a high level of awareness regarding AI tools, but usage was moderate, primarily due to concerns over data privacy, insufficient training, and a lack of adequate institutional support. The study conducted by Saif et. al. (2024) aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which suggests that two key factors such as Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) influence an individual's intention to adopt a technology. According to this model, if students perceive chatbots as useful for addressing academic and administrative challenges and find them easy to use, they are more likely to adopt and consistently engage with the technology.

Regarding the third question, students at Al-Hikmah University identified several benefits and challenges associated with AI-powered chatbots in enhancing student support services. A significant benefit mentioned by participants is the chatbot's ability to provide quick and immediate responses, especially during off-hours, such as nights or weekends. This availability is highly appreciated as it saves time and helps students avoid long queues. Additionally, participants noted that the chatbot simplifies access to essential information, such as exam timetables, course registration statuses, and fees. However, students also pointed out several challenges. One of the major concerns was the chatbot's inability to understand complex or specific queries, which could lead to frustration. There were also concerns regarding data privacy and the lack of emotional connection when using the chatbot, which may be vital for addressing sensitive issues. Some participants also mentioned that the chatbot sometimes provides generic or

outdated responses, and that it lacks the ability to handle more complex academic issues. Students expressed the need for more training and awareness to ensure effective use of the chatbot.

The study of Hpssain (2024) found several problems associated with chatbot usage in universities. These included issues related to the accuracy of responses, where students reported receiving generic or outdated information, leading to frustration. Another major concern was the limited capability of chatbots to handle complex or specific queries, often referring students back to human staff for more detailed assistance. Additionally, students expressed concerns over data privacy, with uncertainties about how personal information shared through chatbots is stored and accessed. Yusuf (2024) found that technical barriers, such as poor internet connectivity and device compatibility, were also highlighted as challenges that hindered effective use of chatbots. Furthermore, there was a lack of emotional connection, as students noted that chatbots could not provide empathy or reassurance, which is sometimes necessary, particularly when addressing sensitive academic or personal issues. The absence of adequate training and awareness programs for students further contributed to these challenges, making it difficult for some students to fully utilize the chatbot's potential.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the findings from this study reveal a generally positive perception of AI-powered chatbots among students at Al-Hikmah University, particularly in enhancing access to academic and administrative support services. Students highlighted the chatbot's potential to provide quick, 24/7 access to essential information, helping to alleviate common stressors such as waiting in long queues or navigating administrative offices. However, concerns about the chatbot's accuracy, reliability, and ability to address complex issues were raised. Students also emphasized the need for user-friendly design and effective functionality to ensure the tool's success in improving student support services. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, it is crucial for the university to ensure that the AI chatbot is designed to provide accurate, up-to-date, and precise information to enhance its reliability. The chatbot's responses should be regularly updated to reflect any changes in schedules, fees, or procedures to avoid student frustration. Second, training and awareness campaigns should be implemented to familiarize students with the chatbot's features and ensure they are aware of its availability and capabilities. Third, the design and usability of the chatbot must be prioritized. It should be user-friendly, with a simple interface, minimal technical requirements, and compatibility across mobile devices, as many students depend on their phones for accessing such services. Additionally, to increase inclusivity, the chatbot should offer multilingual support and functionality in offline modes or via SMS. Finally, addressing concerns around data privacy should be a top priority, with transparent policies in place regarding student data usage and storage.

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