Rethinking Productivity with GenAI: A Neurodivergent Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Recent advancements in generative AI (GenAI) leveraging large language models (LLMs) have led to scholarship on how they (e.g., ChatGPT) can help neurodivergent students create customized workarounds and refocus energy. In response to calls for countering ableist narratives of lessening burdens and challenging normative norms that favor neurotypical individuals in prior research, we use interviews (n = 19) to center neurodivergent higher-education students' accounts related to the use, motivation, and vision for LLM-based GenAI tools in academia. While students found the tools helpful, their experiences revealed challenges with integration into tried-and-tested workflows, limited AI literacy support, experimentation, and flattening personality. Drawing on crip time, we illustrate how GenAI tools can reinforce the normative value of productivity, shifting the burden of access-making onto students themselves. We propose three design values, flexibility, adaptability, and self-authenticity, to reimagine GenAI as a partner rather than a tool prioritizing speed and self-sufficiency.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in accessibility**; *Accessibility technologies.*

Keywords

Generative Artificial Intelligence, Accessibility, Neurodivergence, Disability Studies, Qualitative Research

ACM Reference Format:
Hira Jamshed, Mustafa Naseem †, Venkatesh Potluri, and Robin N. Brewer †. 2025. Rethinking Productivity with GenAI: A Neurodivergent Students' Perspective. In *The 27th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '25), October 26–29, 2025, Denver, CO, USA.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 16 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3663547.3746329

ASSETS '25, Denver, CO, USA

ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-0676-9/2025/10
https://doi.org/10.1145/3663547.3746329

1 Introduction

Recent advancements in generative AI (GenAI), especially those leveraging large language models (LLMs) and employing natural language processing (NLP) technologies, have rapidly gained popularity, leading to shocking news reports like "ChatGPT Passes Wharton School's MBA exam and US Medical Licensing Exam" [31, 64]. Students in higher education institutions are increasingly using them to do various academic tasks like summarizing, searching, and reviewing [58]. Scholars have also illustrated how LLM-based GenAI tools (e.g., ChatGPT [1] or Gemini [4]) can help students create customized workflows and refocus students' energy on more demanding tasks (e.g., generating ideas vs. correcting spelling errors) [85].

This potential is particularly significant for *neurodivergent* (ND) students, a term used to destigmatize atypical neurological structures [71]. The concept, which originated through self-advocacy, rejects the deficit-based language implied through standard medical labels for cognitive disabilities (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and focuses on understanding the variation in how nervous systems interact with the world instead [65]. At its core, the term represents the areas where skills and needs differ from neurotypical individuals (those not identifying as neurodivergent), such as executive functioning (e.g., working memory and skills related to planning), fluctuations in energy levels or the ability to process information (e.g., people with dyslexia often use assistive technology to write) [16]. Researchers argue that the tools can provide meaningful support to students in these areas [11, 17, 34, 74], especially considering the presence of ableist narratives, insufficient knowledge of the needs of neurodivergent populations, and the flawed practice of retroactive accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education institutions [16, 41, 70]. For example, Borsotti et al. [16] found that staff and teachers could not sufficiently address students' needs related to course components primarily because the staff and teachers lacked literacy on neurodiversity or cognitive accessibility. As a result, students employed multiple workarounds to complete their tasks, such as creating shared spaces for communicating hacks and workflow suggestions (e.g., substituting reading with alternative visual content like videos). However,

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more research is needed to capture such practices of *access knowing-making* [37] in the context of GenAI use and raise awareness about the needs of neurodivergent students.

Consequently, critical accessibility works note neuronormative expectations regarding efficiency, wherein students are rewarded for learning and working at a continuous, linear, and fast pace [54, 68, 77, 80]. To critique these neurotypical expectations, Alison Kafer [44], a disability studies scholar, conceptualized *crip time*. Crip time recognizes flexible pacing and nonlinearity as central to neurodiversity, acknowledging that neurodivergent individuals may engage with academic tasks in fluctuating ways depending on the energy, focus, and capacity available in the moment. Since then, researchers have advocated for institutions and technologies to embody these principles and proactively create inclusive environments [7, 10, 27, 60]. Relatedly, critical accessibility scholars, such as Spiel et al. [72], argue that much of the research centering on technology use by people with ADHD is mired in an ableist narrative of mitigating *burdens* and enforcing routines that disregard the fluctuations often experienced by neurodivergent individuals. The lack of accessible practices and awareness wrongly places the responsibility of creating accessible environments on neurodivergent individuals.

Encouraging the shift away from deficit-based lenses, researchers suggest investigating why technologies built for neurodivergent individuals fail and raising awareness regarding the strengths and intrinsic motivations of the different neurotypes [18, 22, 72]. They call for researchers to step back and study how neurodivergent populations already use and appropriate existing technologies. Therefore, joining accessibility researchers who are increasingly leveraging disability studies scholarship to critically and authentically engage with participants' lived realities [14, 40, 48, 73, 83], our study contributes to calls for working with neurodivergent individuals to understand and reflect on their experiences with (GenAI) technologies [16, 32, 72]. In doing so, we ask the following questions:

(1) What motivates students' use of GenAI tools for academic tasks?
(2) How do students use or refuse these tools? What are the challenges in adopting these tools?
(3) What role do ND students envision for GenAI tools in their academics?

Interviews with undergraduate and graduate neurodivergent students (n = 19) illustrate how they used GenAI tools to brainstorm, clarify concepts, or proofread writing in response to difficulties managing time, maintaining focus, and experiencing significant gaps in support. While these tools provided benefits, such as providing on-demand assistance, reserving capacities, and offering judgment-free spaces for conversations, participants also encountered challenges. They expressed concerns over disrupting established routines, spending time and energy experimenting with the tools amidst capacity constraints, limited guidance regarding tools, and the dimming of one's personality. This led participants to redefine or limit their use of GenAI tools. When asked to envision their future academic GenAI use (RQ3), participants highlighted the potential for these tools to support planning, organization, and prioritization of tasks to better manage deadlines and workloads.

Drawing on crip time to understand the tensions in our findings, our study contributes the following to the accessibility community:

- Empirical accounts of neurodivergent students' GenAI use, refusal, motivation, and future vision.
- Critical commentary on the neuronormative standards of productivity enforced through GenAI tools.
- Design recommendations and open questions for making accessible GenAI tools that reflect neurodivergent perspectives and crip time.

2 Related Work

We outline relevant areas of scholarship, beginning with how technology-based accessibility research has engaged with neurodivergent individuals and reflected on harmful practices. We then summarize research at the intersections of neurodiversity, GenAI, and higher education.

2.1 Accessibility Research with Neurodivergent Individuals

Neurodiversity is an understudied area in HCI and accessibility research [49, 69], with a recent increase in scholarship [32]. While there are no expansive reviews that summarize research concerning neurodiversity and technology, scholars frequently focus on the following conditions [49, 56, 57]:

- ADHD primarily points to patterns of inattention or hyperactivity. Research revolves around attention and concentration (e.g., adaptive learning environments that guide attention via a virtual agent on-screen), followed by detection, behavioral management, and general mental health [72, 74]. An important point to note is that the majority of research on ADHD is conducted on children and adolescents [22, 72, 74], leaving a gap in knowledge about the perceptions and challenges of a growing number of adults with ADHD.
- Dyslexia affects reading, presenting slow reading acquisition, inaccurate spelling, poor writing, or mixing up similar words. Research primarily revolves around textual preferences [62, 63], web accessibility [55], social media information access [79], and spelling and grammar checkers [35, 80].
- Autism Spectrum Disorder presents as difficulties in language development, communication, and atypical social functioning. Existing research uses technology to assist with skills like learning new concepts (e.g., mathematics or programming) or communicating in social settings [24, 42, 78].

Researchers note that technologies are not exclusive to a neurotype as characteristics can overlap (e.g., ASD often co-occurs with ADHD) [22]. Neurodivergence can also include chronical illness [51] or develop as part of injury (e.g., post-concussion syndrome) or trauma [16]. Considering such overlaps, we find it helpful to adopt the framework Mack et al. [51] created for chronic illness and accessibility to holistically center the experiences of those identifying as neurodivergent. Their framework serves as a helpful guide to (1) move beyond medical needs by centering access needs and individual expertise, (2) center day-to-day fluctuations in ability, and (3) consider social barriers with the reality of the impairments.

Additionally, HCI research tends to recognize cognitive disabilities as a category of identity instead of acknowledging how neurology shapes individual perceptions of the environment and the processing of external signals [72]. It talks about cognitive disabilities as a burden, a source of suffering, and something that needs to be 'fixed,' often focusing on bringing neurodivergent individuals on par with neurotypical individuals [15, 16, 22, 51, 82, 86]. Researchers advocating against such ableist and unhelpful narratives point out that, while the difficulties need support, the type of support must refrain from externally driven interventions and consider the strengths of each neurotype. For example, Motti et al. [57] note that those with ADHD tend to be more creative multi-taskers, people with ASD are more likely to have above-average attention to detail and strong visual-spatial skills, and individuals with dyslexia can be strong visual thinkers with the ability to develop a broad overview of significantly complex problems.

Interestingly, disability studies scholarship has been increasingly integrated into HCI and accessibility research, leading to a fundamental reframing of accessibility research from *fixing* impairments to prioritizing disabled agency and critical reflection on ableist norms [40, 49, 53, 72, 73, 83]. Accessibility researchers have also borrowed from critical disability studies to introduce multiple frameworks for understanding accessible technologies, such as *interdependence* that cautions against the focus of assistive technology on independence [13, 40] or *crip HCI* that positions disabled users as knowledge creators and co-designers instead of passive recipients of accessibility interventions [83]. Bennett et al. [14] extend these insights by introducing *crip technoscience* as a framework for AI technologies, highlighting how disabled people adapt and repurpose technology in unique ways that challenge dominant narratives. Similarly, Angelini et al. [10] explore the concept of *criptopias* to critique technoableism, arguing that technology research often assumes able-bodied norms as defaults, leading to accessibility solutions that reinforce existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Taking inspiration from such scholarly works, this research departs from the dominant ableist narrative in HCI research and views neurodiversity holistically. It seeks to understand the sociotechnical barriers that neurodivergent students face and capture students' experiences of using or refusing GenAI tools. In doing so, we call on crip time to challenge neuronormative expectations of productivity embedded in these tools and aim to inform designers how the tools can better support academic journeys of neurodivergent students.

2.2 Neurodiversity in Higher Education

Ableist narratives persist beyond research. Dolmage [25] argues that higher education perpetuates rewarding ability and perfection. For example, Ghosh et al. [30] note that Computer Science curriculum's largely align with neuronormative expectations despite many neurodiverse students as instructors fail to sufficiently address diverse learning styles. Similarly, academic success is often attributed to fluency in reading and writing, especially for students progressing toward research careers [41, 59]. Yet, institutions fail to accommodate for neurodivergent students' difficulties with reading large amounts of text, maintaining focus, or writing (e.g., recognizing misspellings) [57, 74, 80]. For example, Wang and Piper [80] found that academics tended to conflate writing quality and competency, often reacting with ableist microaggressions like "not putting in enough time and effort" (p. 15) when the student asked for writing help.

While universities offer accommodations for specific needs through dedicated offices, such bureaucratization produces disability as an individual problem and reinforces the stigma attached to disabilities [25, 54, 76]. Additionally, the availability of accommodations in higher education does not guarantee equal access [41, 70], shifting the burden on students to create access through ad-hoc solutions and alternative workflows. For example, Borsotti et al. [16] identified student-driven bottom-up micro-interventions, like volunteering as a "human book" on autism to raise awareness or creating an inclusive and remote workflow to do group work with neurotypical peers. This leads to a differential between the access that non/disabled students experience, poor academic performance, and academic burnout [47, 70, 74].

Researchers argue that we must understand students' invisible labor of access and support it through sociotechnical means, including tools, services, and organizational practices [80]. Consequently, researchers are increasingly documenting efforts to rethink and redesign equal access in the form of innovative frameworks, such as a curriculum that leverages Universal Design of Instruction (UDI) principles [30], or *Access Grafting* which merges "new branches of access knowing-making" into organizational practices by neurodivergent people and their allies [16]. Assistive technologies also target areas like building fluency in reading and writing, developing social skills, and enabling alternative modes of interacting with the web/texts (e.g., via voice) [85]. However, gaps in support from technology often lead to discriminatory material outcomes. For instance, reviewers and instructors penalized and assumed erroneous writing to be lazy/rushed [16, 80] or students experienced accessibility breakdowns during exams [16]. Such lack of support also indicates incomplete knowledge regarding neurodivergent needs, perpetuating social inequality. Students are then forced to devote more time, effort, and resources despite being just as competent as their neurotypical peers [48, 70, 80].

Our study adds to this literature by documenting neurodivergent students' perceptions, motivations, behaviors, and visions regarding LLM-based Gen-AI tools. By doing so, it informs the more extensive literature on how students navigate sociotechnical inaccessible organizational structures and how technologies can be improved to better support their invisible labor of access.

2.3 GenAI for Neurodivergent Students in Academia

Out of all GenAI technologies, large language models (LLMs) have received the most attention in academic contexts. Researchers report that they can help personalize reading and writing tasks (e.g., giving feedback on tone), support creative thinking, facilitate problem-solving, and provide support whenever and wherever needed [17, 32, 38, 56, 58]. Consequently, many accessibility-focused GenAI tools have been deployed and actively used by the community [32]. While this shows promise for on-demand support for accessibility needs, researchers also point out critical problems like hallucinations (e.g., generating incorrect citations), bias, disinformation, and inaccessibility [8, 12, 33, 34].

However, perspectives from student populations remain limited in research. For example, after examining 61 online neurodivergent communities on Reddit for daily use of GenAI tools, Carik et al. [23] noted the need to capture detailed narratives through interviews to better understand the nuances of education-related challenges and concerns. Glazko and Cha et al. [32] contributed an autoethnographic study on how GenAI tools empower *power users*. They reported that the tools provided agency and facilitated access needs during work, communication, and finding information. Notably, they highlight how neurodivergent users work within and push against the normative expectations embedded in AI systems, offering critical insight into the relational dynamics between users and tools over time. Relatedly, researchers note that the landscape for these tools is rapidly changing due to new versions [46] and the tools are increasingly gaining popularity amongst higher-ed students. As new versions of GenAI tools are released, universities also provide resources for practical uses (e.g., workshops on effective input prompts) [6].

Thus, this research contributes neurodivergent narratives regarding GenAI to this literature through multi-faceted interviews with university students. We situate their narratives in crip time to conceptualize moving beyond neuronormativity, critically understanding and informing the potential of GenAI in academic contexts.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participant Recruitment

We recruited 19 neurodivergent students (aged 18 years or older) from the University of Michigan in the United States . The interview protocol, recruitment materials, and consent form were approved by our institutional review board, and participants received a 30$ gift card for their participation. After approval, we distributed surveys through public study spaces, campus organizations, and departments. We asked individuals to complete a screener survey to help recruit a diverse sample, which collected information regarding their disability, field of study, level of study, familiarity with tools, and demographic information.

Adopting an expansive definition of neurodiversity [16] allowed us to include students with Autism, ADHD, OCD, Dysgraphia, Auditory Processing Disorder, and a combination of Autism/ADHD/OCD. Although many participants had formal diagnosis, we chose to trust their self-identification in recognition of the systemic gate-keeping and limitations of medical labels regarding invisible disabilities [14, 28, 40]. We note that our study does not aim to generalize across the wide range of neurotypes participants self-identified with. Instead, we center the situated, subjective accounts of participants in Sec 4 to highlight patterns and tensions in the motivations, use, refusal, and envisioning related to GenAI tools. The details for each participant's disability, field of study, education level, and tool usage are described in Table 1, wherein participant's most common use cases are listed in the order they were described. For example, P3 described using these tools mostly for brainstorming and summarizing, followed by explaining complex concepts and drafting emails. All participants were familiar with GenAI tools (with ChatGPT being the most popular (n = 19), followed by Gemini (n = 8) and Goblin Tools [21] (n = 2)) and categorized their frequency of use as constantly changing.

3.2 Interview Structure

We used a semi-structured approach to explore participants' lived experiences and GenAI use in-depth, while also being open to new insights that may emerge during the conversation. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio recorded, and lasted between 45-60 minutes. They were divided into three parts:

(1) **Context and motivation:** We first asked participants to describe their coursework, their disability, and any relational effects. We also asked about their academic environments (e.g., course designs) and motivation for using GenAI tools.
(2) **Reflection on GenAI use and challenges:** We then asked participants to elaborate on their use through recalling specific scenarios (e.g., a recent essay assignment) and reflect on any challenges faced during the process. We also asked about strategies they used to overcome any of the tools' challenges.
(3) **Envisioning the future of GenAI tools:** Finally, we asked participants how they expect to use GenAI tools for educational purposes in the future. We used a magic-wand type question [81] (i.e., "Imagine you had a magic wand and could create anything that would help you with your challenges related to your academic workload. What comes to mind?") to probe imaginations.

As suggested by prior studies [16, 50], we asked for optional access requests and followed best practices during the scheduling process. For example, we communicated the flow and core questions of the interview, informed them that they can take breaks anytime, and let them decide the modality of the interview.

3.3 Data Analysis

The research team used Zoom to auto-transcribe each interview, and the first author manually corrected the transcripts. After each interview, the first author wrote memos to capture key insights and takeaways. They then applied the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach to analyze the interview data [19, 20].

The first author began with reading a sample of five transcripts and conducting inductive, semantic-level open coding to note initial observations (e.g., 'personalized collaborator' or 'tried-and-tested routine'). Next, they organized the initial round of codes deductively based on the research questions (i.e., students' motivation, use, and envisioning of GenAI tools), as our interviews were explicitly structured around those questions (Sec 3.2). Within these categories, we used inductive coding to generate an initial set of themes that unified the codes based on central concepts (e.g., challenges related to 'experimentation,' 'routine,' and 'personality'). This hybrid structure reflects RTA [12], where research questions shape interpretation but do not rigidly define theme development. Co-authors contributed to this process through iterative critical dialogue after every stage: memoing, developing codes, and generating themes. We refer to Braun and Clarke's framing of dialogic, not consensus-based, collaboration in RTA to contextualize our approach, which

Table 1: Participant Details and Tool Usage

PID	Disability	Field of Study	Education Level	Common Use Case(s)
P0	OCD	Higher Ed	Graduate	Brainstorm
P1	Autism/ADHD, OCD	Health	Undergraduate	Grammatical support, information search (e.g., medical facts)
P2	Autism/ADHD	Health	Undergraduate	Information search
P3	Autism/ADHD	Health	Undergraduate	Brainstorm, summarize, explain concepts, draft emails
P4	Autism/ADHD	Information	Undergraduate	Coding assistance, prepare career-related materials (e.g., resume bullet points)
P5	ADHD	Information	Undergraduate	Debug, explain concepts
P6	ADHD, OCD	Social Work	Graduate	Brainstorm (e.g., relevant words/synonyms), grammatical support
P7	Autism/ADHD	Data Science	Undergraduate	Clarify assignment instructions, debug
P8	ADHD	Media	Undergraduate	Breakdown academic tasks (e.g., split assignment into multiple steps), simplify dense texts
P9	Autism/ADHD	Health	Undergraduate	Grammatical support, explain concepts
P10	Auditory Processing Disorder, Dysgraphia	Art	Undergraduate	Brainstorm, information search, grammatical support, breakdown academic tasks
P11	ADHD	Information	Undergraduate	Coding assistance, explain concepts
P12	Autism/ADHD	Science	Graduate	Coding assistance
P13	Autism/ADHD	Computer Science	Undergraduate	Brainstorm, explain concepts, information search, grammatical support, coding assistance
P14	ADHD	Computer Science	Undergraduate	Debug, assistance for math assignments (e.g., structured walkthrough showing approach)
P15	Autism	Engineering	Undergraduate	Debug, explain concepts
P16	ADHD	Science	Undergraduate	Simplify dense texts, grammatical support
P17	ADHD	Health	Graduate	Note-taking (e.g., for lectures and meetings), brainstorm, grammatical support, explain concepts
P18	ADHD	Engineering	Undergraduate	Coding assistance, summarize, test learning (e.g., create practice questions from class material)

supports deeper reflexive thinking while preserving the subjectivity and interpretive integrity of the first author's analytic process. After revisiting the themes of the coded data to evaluate whether they accurately reflected the dataset and participants' meanings, we developed a detailed definition of each theme to answer our RQs around students' motivation, use, challenges, and vision regarding GenAI tools. We share our final themes in table 2.

Additionally, since the interviews reflected technological advancements at the time of late 2024, suggestions now reflected in current tools were omitted at the time of writing. These suggestions are described in table 3, with references to developments in ChatGPT for context as it was the most common tool amongst participants. It should be noted that some of these features are only available to paid users, which emphasizes the need for generally accessible interfaces as a lot of students use free versions of the tools.

4 Findings

We present the qualitative data as a continuous narrative. We begin with participants' motivations highlighting their lived experiences with their disability and the environmental barriers shaping their engagement with the GenAI tools (RQ1). Next, we elaborate on the

Table 2: Overview of Main Themes

Theme	Description
Neurodivergence	Reflections about (1) ND traits and (2) effect of their ND identity on their academic work (4.1.1)
Academic structure	Descriptions of inaccessible academic structures (e.g., lack of accessible practices in classrooms) (4.1.1)
Efficiency	Participants save time, conserve energy, and streamline work using tools (4.1.2)
Busy Work	Participants use tools for tedious tasks (e.g., writing repetitive code) (4.1.2) and envision tools as a personal assistant for non-substantive work (e.g., creating checklists for assignments) (4.4)
Customized Guidance	Participants use tools for tailored support across academic tasks (e.g., overcome creative blocks, search relevant words, or proofread writing) (4.1.2)
Human-interaction	Participants compare tool interactions with human-based conversations (i.e., tools make participants feel less vulnerable and judged) (4.1.2).
Experimentation	Descriptions of the negative impacts of needing to invest time and effort for understanding how to use tools efficiently (4.2)
Routine	Lack of motivation to experiment with tools due to tried-and-tested, fixed routines (4.2)
AI Literacy	Participants' complaints regarding lack of access to possible use cases or useful strategies (4.2)
Personality	Participants' concerns about tools dimming one's personality when writing (4.2)
Constraint	Participants reason between different ethical (e.g., biases) and moral (e.g., quick-fixes, potential) rationales, showing a sense of limiting or justifying use (4.3)
Individual use-cases	Detailed descriptions about tools' usecases (4.1.2), including motivation (4.1) and challenges (4.2)
Vision	Participants' future vision for GenAI tools (4.4)

Table 3: Already-Implemented Suggestions for GenAI Tools

Feature	Description
Directly editable outputs	Participants wanted to edit code and text within the interface to avoid repetitive back-and-forth text-based communication, which was draining. This feature, while in early stages, has been available in ChatGPT since early 2025 [3].
Image-based inputs	Participants felt it was laborious to be restricted to a text-based input format, especially considering the frequently experienced tight timelines (Sec 4.1.1). They noted the utility of attaching images for explaining concepts or simplifying information (e.g., a paragraph from a textbook). ChatGPT allows PDFs and diagrams to be uploaded since early 2025 for such purposes [3].
Image-based outputs	Participants often preferred visual learning, explaining the utility of receiving explanations via diagrams/images (e.g., biological processes) to align better with their learning styles. While in early stages, ChatGPT provides the option to generate images for a given prompt since early 2025 [3].
Link to web search	Participants noted that using GenAI tools for quick searches minimizes distractions by eliminating the need to browse multiple articles (Sec 4.1.2. Although participants were aware of inaccuracies in outputs of GenAI tools, they desired seeing direct citations to web pages when searching for commonly known information (e.g., objective concepts or terms). ChatGPT included 'web search' as an option in late 2024 [3].
Personalized output style	Participants frequently expressed the desire to personalize output styles from these tools from the get-go. Interestingly, ChatGPT provides an option for 'custom instructions' to personalize output style and behavior since late 2023 [2]. However, participants were unaware of the option (in 'settings') as they amount of experimentation required left little bandwidth for deep exploration (as described in Sec 4.2). Additionally, OpenAI provided the option to build custom GPTs in mid 2024 to paid users, with free users being allowed to use already-built GPTs. [5]

challenges of adopting these tools for use cases illustrated in table 1 (RQ2). The tension between the motivations and challenges led students to redraw boundaries with the tools (e.g., redefining or limiting use). As revealed through the detailed descriptions, this process further elaborates on their use and refusal of GenAI tools

(RQ2). We conclude with participants' future visions for GenAI tools for their academic success (RQ3).

4.1 Motivation for Using GenAI Tools

Participants' narration of how their disabilities factor into their coursework revealed their motivations for using GenAI tools as supporting tools in academic contexts, helping them fulfill various requirements and deadlines.

4.1.1 Participants' Lived Experiences. All participants shared a variety of unique but interrelated neurodivergent experiences that made academic work stressful and a source of anxiety. For instance, P16 described needing extensions because of experiencing frequent distractions as part of their ADHD (e.g., news, events, or different deadlines), getting *"intimidated by big assignments like essays,"* and being *"too afraid to even work on it."* Similarly, P6 ascribed delayed submissions to the combination of ADHD and perfectionism, thinking, *"Oh my gosh! This will never be right and will never meet my expectations"* Meanwhile, P8, a film and media student, spoke of *"thinking in loops"* as part of their ADHD, which disrupted the linear writing flow required for production scripts,

> *"I'll think something, but then I have to address another part, and so then I'll go to that part, and then I think of other things, so I'm like, oh, I should go back to that part. And then I don't know how to return to where I started."*

P9 echoed this sentiment and shared that *"my ADHD brain thinks of too many thoughts too fast"* to fully capture those thoughts. The lived experiences of these participants highlight the nonlinearity and fluctuations central to neurodiverse identities.

More importantly, participants related their difficulties to the lack of understanding and support in their academic environment. For example, P5, a computer science undergraduate, requested a rubric explaining an assignment's expectations. The instructor denied the request, stating the rubric contained answers, and didn't convey expectations effectively. They expressed, *"It's very frustrating when I don't clearly understand what I'm working on... why does the rubric have all the answers?"* P17, a graduate student, left professional meetings with *"no notes because focusing on the conversation in real-time left little mental bandwidth for transcription."* Participants also noted that strategies from disability support offices, like Pomodoro timers, were often ineffective because they felt *"forced and hard to implement due to a lack of self-motivation"* (P6). They expressed a desire to find ways to improve their time management on their own but were unsure how to do so.

These personal narratives reveal a common thread of feeling overwhelmed, unfocused, and under-supported, highlighting gaps in the support they require to meet academic expectations.

4.1.2 GenAI as an Accessibility Aid. Echoing prior literature [23, 32], table 1 shows how participants wanted help with different academic areas (e.g., brainstorming, clarifying concepts, grammatical support, or debugging). For example, P3, a nursing student, described the tool as *"having another brain,"* which helped them brainstorm *"ideas in an hour or two as opposed to days"* for essay-based assignments that were not directly related to their major (e.g., in a history course). As such, participants pointed to several roles through which GenAI tools helped them save time and be productive. We categorize these roles as (1) an on-demand collaborator personalized to needs in the moment, (2) an information decomposer who breaks down information for easy digestion, (3) a coach without feelings or bias, and (4) someone who takes care of less meaningful tasks. We elaborate on these below:

Serving as a Personalized and On-Demand Collaborator. A central benefit noted by all participants was the highly personalized nature of AI-driven assistance. Specifically, they characterized GenAI as a flexible and on-demand collaborator that can adapt to varying academic needs. For instance, P10, who used the tools to build on their strength of visualizing stories with formalized outputs, found AI-based assistance to be instrumental in directing them to relevant resources for their project as they *"sometimes get caught in a knot."* They described the assistance as a *"collaboration where it's like you are talking to someone. I think it's definitely helpful to customize my strengths and writing ideas."* Similarly, P11 appreciated the affordance of approaching concepts in different ways, *"As a student with a learning disability, it takes a long time to learn complex concepts... AI allows me to ask nuanced questions, like if the incorrect answer would be correct if phrased differently... I don't have to sit the whole night continuously wondering what is exactly right."* P8, experiencing difficulty with time management, used the Quizlet GenAI tool to test their understanding through randomly generated practice questions from the class material, saying, *"it was like having another brain versus if I were to just studying by myself by sitting overnight without having anyone to help me... it would be overwhelming. I am already overwhelmed because of my ADHD."* Interestingly, P17 described using the AI tool as a quiet back-channel for catching up on crucial points in the classroom. They used the tool to accommodate for a *"tangential teaching style,"* explaining,

> *"I'm already distracted by things in my brain. The instructor is getting distracted with stuff in his brain. So, by the time he says something important, I'm just no longer there. I thought, 'Huh, I wonder if GPT can explain it?' I asked, 'Hey, can you explain these concepts like I'm 5.' It gave me a great explanation that helped me get enough gist and participate in class."*

P17 emphasized that the on-demand and flexible nature of AI's support helped them avoid needing *"to show the whole class that I zoned out or explain to the instructor that I have ADHD so that they can change their teaching style."* Overall, these quotes emphasize the benefit of immediate and personal support from GenAI tools.

Serving as an Information Decomposer. Participants emphasized that the GenAI tool's ability to break down content into digestible pieces aligned well with their learning preferences, filling gaps where traditional instruction fell short. For instance, P2 explained the significance of getting concise information for their learning purposes, *"having a processing disorder with information makes it difficult to sift through paragraphs about background and other irrelevant stuff that won't help me."* They mention how this helps them conserve energy because *"finding another source feels like too much work and I don't have the energy to search again."* Similarly, P16, who needed structure to maintain focus when absorbing large amounts of information, found it helpful to pose incremental questions and scaffold foundational biology concepts instead of asking repetitive questions in class, *"It's hard for me to articulate stuff in the class quickly, so I ask things from AI bit by bit. It's just how my brain works."* P3 frequently asked the tool, *"Can you explain this concept as if I were five or ten years old?"* so that the information is *"digestible enough for my brain."* They then *"ask it to add more detail until I understand what the heck it's saying."* P5 echoed these sentiments, reasoning the need to break information down, *"sometimes you are just stuck, you are spiraling, and you don't really know what to do."* This support filled the gaps in traditional pedagogy, giving participants an opportunity to learn at their own pace and style.

Serving as an Unbiased Coach. Echoing prior research that shows neurodivergent individuals' concern about negative judgment on repetitive queries [23, 32, 75], participants appreciated GenAI tools for providing a stress-free environment to do so. In terms of academic environments, they reflected how large classes, inaccessible office hours, or fear of peer/instructor-based judgment often left them without the timely and individual help they needed.

Specifically, while office hours were designed to increase access to students through dedicated help, crowded sessions and time constraints often led instructors and teaching assistants to offer only cursory help. For example, P7 recalled a lack of personal space and sensory overload from having "thousands upon thousands of students... it feels very inhuman and the teaching staff needs to get to other students," leaving their queries incomplete. In contrast, P7 appreciated the agency provided by the tool to ask "all my questions without annoying everybody or wasting anybody's time, learning what I needed and wanted to at the moment" and temporarily filling the accessibility gap in their environment.

Additionally, P17 described being worried about taking significant time during meetings due to their nonlinear thinking, *"it's really nice not to deal with the social pressures with ChatGPT. I don't have to think, 'I bet they wish I would stop talking now' because they have things they need to be doing."* Interestingly, P13 described feeling less guilty when asking the GenAI tool a question *"20 times"* because *"it doesn't really have feelings and doesn't expect me to know it already."* Likewise, P15, who is autistic and experiences judgment on their conversation style, shared feeling pressured to mask when the teaching staff *"wants to make small talk… or explain things in an unhelpful way."* They felt that GenAI simplifies interactions, *"I ask one thing, it gives me one thing."*

Overall, participants used GenAI tools to reduce social costs and avoid conforming to neurotypical standards (e.g., being fast, linear, or non-repetitive). Participants felt more comfortable communicating and acting on their needs with the tools, such as asking the same query from multiple angles (P16).

Serving as a Tedious-Task-Worker. Participants often used the tools to handle repetitive or non-essential tasks, saving energy for more meaningful work. P9, for example, used it to complete boring, auto-graded assignments like discussion posts, saying that they *"genuinely have much better uses of the time."* Participants routinely referred to such tasks as *"labor work"* (P2), like *"simple functions"* they had written *"100 times before"* (P14). P17, a graduate student with ADHD, reasoned that *"correcting formatting and typing all literature out is not beneficial to me as a researcher or learner."* They emphasized that *"things take me so long with ADHD that anywhere that I can save even 5 min, I feel I should take it."* Similarly, P13 ascribed lack of focus to their ADHD and used the tool to reduce fruitless Google searches. They described using the tool as a *"database that can compile multiple sources into one concise answer."* Other participants extended the definition of busy work to following academic social contexts, like emails. For example, P3 relied on AI to draft important emails when their *"social battery"* was low. P9, who was concerned about being interpreted correctly, echoed the sentiment, saying, *"It can be repetitive and boring and frustrating to speak corporate academic language."* They felt the tool helped them *"save significant mental energy and fuel for important tasks. I spend too long drafting and rearranging every word for the correct tone and length."* These experiences emphasize saving time and energy from outsourcing mundane tasks to GenAI tools, allowing students to more easily reserve their capacity for the tasks they most value. In this sense, the efficiency gained through AI wasn't just about convenience but a means to better navigate the constraints of academic life.

4.2 Challenges and Concerns in Adopting GenAI Tools

Participants viewed GenAI as a potential aid to their difficulties, particularly when traditional methods like time-blocking aids or office hours did not suffice. Participants mentioned using the GenAI tools to brainstorm, clarify concepts, proofread writing, and help with debugging. However, their detailed narrations also revealed several barriers and concerns that conflicted with their motivations for using the tools to gain energy and time (RQ2) and meet the expectations of their academic requirements. These challenges reflect the lack of diverse perspectives when creating and designing technologies [61] and reveal how neurodivergent students are often left with the misplaced responsibility of creating access through technologies [16, 72].

4.2.1 Change Tried-and-Tested Routines. Participants frequently described a tension between *"disrupting something that already works"* (P8) and integrating new strategies/tools, like GenAI, into their workflow. Participants, particularly those with anxiety, related their reluctance to their disability. P0, who has OCD, explained,

> *"I am less likely to experiment than some of my peers because I have a set way of doing things. Sometimes, when I experience new things, the change is hard, so I go back to what I know very well. That's just my brain's syncing process. If I'm in a situation where I have a very different assignment, I probably won't use ChatGPT until the second or third very different assignment."*

Similarly, P1 called themself a *"hesitant person"* because of *"having an anxiety disorder like OCD. I'm generally a scheduler. I stick to my routine."* Participants, like P7, felt afraid to change routines that took considerable effort to develop,

> *"I don't look into recommendations for people with ADHD because I've heard that many are time-wasting scams. I am already short on time. I've spent so much*

> *time putting systems in place to get stuff done that trying to add AI feels overwhelming."*

P15 compared themselves with *"people who use GenAI to help structure tasks, their workflow, or their daily agenda."* They expressed comfort in sticking to their *"analog system that works perfectly well… I don't want to seek out transferring that."* P3 echoed a similar preference of resisting experimentation with AI, *"GPT fills the niche of the support I need. I don't see the need to make it do more for me."* P2 shared *"keeping AI in my periphery"* as they *"don't like to change something that works even though AI might make life easier."*

These quotes illustrate the decision-making process of these students, indicating how adopting such tools is not straightforward. Instead, it required thorough consideration and intricate calculations as some neurodivergent conditions (e.g., ADHD or OCD) introduced additional difficulties when changing routines.

4.2.2 Lack of AI Literacy Support. Participants described understanding GenAI's capabilities as an integral factor in shaping their use cases of broadly ideating, organizing, and reviewing work. They showed interest in learning how to use these tools but, in response to the tension of changing well-crafted routines, felt that there was not an accessible way of understanding the various ways these tools could be integrated into their workflows. Therefore, many mentioned they only used *"bare bones"* (P10) functionality, unaware of advanced features such as personalizing conversation styles in ChatGPT. P4 shared,

> *"I don't have the time to explore features or ways. I would appreciate an easy way to figure out what it can be helpful for. Like, break use cases up into sections, like, what it's helpful for with academia, what it's helpful for with daily activities, with coding, and so forth."*

P7 was surprised when opening up ChatGPT's settings during the interview, saying, *"It's been very use-case-based for me. I didn't know that you could do that! Do they have a place where you input text on how you want it to personalize responses? That's so interesting!"* P17 related their use to that of a *"grandparent with a smartphone,"* where *"they could do the basic calls, but the rest of the features would be virtually inaccessible. That's how I feel. It can probably be more than I'm asking it to do, but I don't know what it could be."* In fact, echoing other participants' concerns, P9 expressed frustration with classroom bans given how useful these tools can be, saying, *"I find it frustrating how many classes have to put an explicit ban on its use. There needs to be better education on how it works... many people think it's kind of an all-knowing wizard and abuse it."*

Overall, limited AI literacy, whether due to a lack of accessible tutorials or classroom bans, restricted the depth and breadth of GenAI tool usage.

4.2.3 Experimentation is Draining. Most participants felt the trial-and-error nature of working with generative AI tools added to the burdens of navigating inaccessible academic environments. While many saw value in learning to work with AI tools, they shared that the demand conflicted with their available capacities. For example, P14 frustratedly chose to *"figure it out on my own"* rather than *"putting in so much extra effort"* for complex queries through GenAI tools, reflecting how *"it doesn't help that I already procrastinate so much or have issues managing my time."* Similarly, P8 shared that *"I don't know how to learn AI because it requires a lot of time and energy. Sometimes, I try to work with friends, but it is not enough."* P1, who previously mentioned needing to stick to routines as part of their OCD, mentioned the risk of going down *"rabbit holes in an ADHD sort of way… I get distracted and impulsive, like, I'll be reading but thinking about something else"* when experimenting with AI. Experimentation was impractical given their busy schedule, *"I am taking 18 credits… learning a whole new way of doing something I have already figured out doesn't make sense."* Similarly, P4 was open to learning but couldn't find time, *"I have just been trying to get things done… It gets overwhelming."*

Moreover, the tools' inaccuracies forced participants into cycles of revision and re-explaining their intent to the tool instead of streamlining their work. P10 abandoned an AI tool in Photoshop after poor interpretation of the request, saying, *"I don't have time for fixes."* P14 stopped using the tool in a math class to conserve capacity because *"it kept getting the problem wrong, even giving different answers every time... I realized it kept hallucinating something wrong."* Interestingly, P16, who builds on simple concepts to learn complex concepts through the tool, shared instances where their tool refused to agree to corrections, *"I tell it that it's not right, but it doesn't listen."* While these mishaps taught participants to be careful when using GenAI, using the tools required a degree of effort that the students didn't have the capacity for.

Some students pushed past initial challenges but reasoned that reaching a place of relative comfort took effort. P3 explained that they were initially *"really annoyed"* with the tool's inability to understand what they wanted. Motivated by getting on-demand guidance for their academic workload, they eventually learned *"after rephrasing a couple of times and it not understanding what I wanted or me not phrasing it correctly to get the response I wanted."* Similarly, P5 explained how they *"need to have a vision. If I'm using this, I must have at least half of it done. It tries a lot, and then it still fails a lot."*

However, these quotes illustrate that continuous tweaking creates barriers and frustrating experiences for neurodivergent students who face challenges managing workloads. While GenAI tools can be powerful, especially for accommodating inaccessible practices within higher education institutions, the requirement to experiment and the embedded risk of misleading outputs led participants to opt out or deterred them from fully utilizing the tools.

4.2.4 Lack of Personality. Another significant challenge for participants, especially those identifying as autistic or with language-processing disorders, was how the tools tended to produce *"dry"* (P2), *"stiff-sounding"* (P8), *"robotic"* (P0), or *"corporate"* (P9) language. While participants sought help for clarity or grammar, they valued the distinctive voice in their writing that AI-based suggestions frequently erased. For instance, P1 questioned whether *"everybody has to sound like they have a graduate degree"* to be respected, noting that personal quirks carry social meaning in specific contexts, *"I work mostly with women where I feel like it's normal to put exclamation marks after stuff, you know? I feel like that captures a degree of my excitement."* They worried that AI's tendency to standardize language would remove a layer of authenticity,

> *"I've heard oftentimes in English classes that what makes writing good is if it's just you who could have made*

that, especially in creative writing... I don't want it to take out my exclamation marks and make everything short. I want people to know it's me."

P10 echoed similar sentiments, frustrated with how *"you can get great stuff from this tool, but it can't mirror you."* P9 found the tool *"annoying"* because it made them *"sound like an alien,"* conflicting with the context-appropriate but human-friendly tone they wanted to adopt in everyday communication channels, like emails.

While some participants experimented, others stopped using the tool for writing-specific support. For example, when P3 asked their tool to sound more natural, it swung too far the other way, *"If I'm like 'make this less formal,' it spits out a version that's too casual. I can't find a happy medium... So I edit it and show it to my trusted friends."* Meanwhile, P0 avoided their tool altogether, explaining that it changed punctuation in undesired ways, *"I said, you know what? I like my own proofreading better."* P10 would *"modify the output to include my tone even in formal essays"*, reasoning that *"I don't even formally sound like that."* P6 explained, *"searching words and giving feedback is fine, but I wouldn't like GPT's output if I told it to write an entire paragraph."*

These quotes illustrate a critical tension between wanting to utilize GenAI tools for writing-related support and having their nuanced styles flattened. These concerns also relate to a broader concern regarding the tendency for (assistive) technologies to enforce normative ways to fit dominant worldviews [10, 32, 40].

4.3 Redrawing and Justifying Boundaries for GenAI Adoption

In response to the motivations and challenges, participants redefined use in unique ways. The decision-making process highlights how participants navigated GenAI use to minimize complexity when their fluctuating needs conflicted with the neurotypical expectations in academic structures and technologies (RQ2).

Some participants discovered ways to narrow GenAI use as a supportive writing assistant tailored to their neurodivergent needs rather than as a content generator that demands advanced prompting or risks bias. P8, for example, used to jot down ideas on paper maps but described difficulty getting distracted when fitting new strands of thoughts (ascribing nonlinear thinking to their ADHD) since it would require repeating the entire exercise. They mentioned how, with GenAI and considerable effort, they have modified the routine,

> *"I still make a map, but I don't have to keep track of the stack of sheets for anything I want to add. I input everything and wait until the entire story creation process is done. Then, I can see the whole picture through the AI's output versus going off on random strands of thought in the middle and getting overwhelmed. It helps save time from the hours spent thinking in circles."*

Similarly, P10 reflected on using the tool to build on their strength of visualizing stories with the much-needed organization of text that then helps them fill unintended gaps in the written version,

> *"I'll splatter to GPT about a story, but I have no idea how to organize that on paper. So, it shows me what's good in this story and what I'm missing. Like, hey, you missed out on your story's climax, or it's left open-ended. It makes it less overwhelming that way."*

Others, who were more conservative about GenAI use, reduced the tools to rare scenarios or preferred alternate ways. For example, P15 limited its use to *"synthesizing and clarifying objective material"* to avoid experimentation or having to research accuracy levels of models. Similarly, P14, disappointed with lack of personality, felt the tools were only useful in structured tasks, such as *"a rejection email,"* compared to *"creative assignments,"*, which require nuance and complex reasoning. Often facing time constraints, they shared that they have *"difficulty resisting when I am short on time."* but force themselves to reconsider, *"No, you're gonna fail your exam!"* P18, concerned about their learning quality, emphasized spending time to write the code first and then using the tool as an *"assistant"* that verifies their code and helps with debugging. P1, afraid of GenAI use in a sensitive context, like their nursing major, interestingly compared the benefit of GenAI tools to the strength of *"having a very one-track interest most of my life, which is characteristic of a lot of autistic people having a special interest or having a topic they're very dedicated to."* They elaborated how *"it's very motivating... it helps me do the readings because I know I must do this."*

However, these boundaries evolved consistently, leaving some confused and guilty when using GenAI to help with their academic workload or inaccessible environments. For instance, P13 felt that *"even though it makes it easier for my ADHD, I don't use it to summarize readings for me. It just feels like you're putting in less work."* They shared a similar sentiment when turning to AI for help clarifying concepts, sharing how *"it feels less like cheating when you ask a person, except it is technically the same thing if you use AI."* They explained justifying the use by comparing it with *"emailing our instructor about it, except it's way faster, and we'll be able to personalize it."* P1, also an editor of a disability-related anthology, discovered that their *"opinions are only somewhat founded"* after having to change negative perceptions of an AI-generated art piece. The author *"had a fine arts degree but had lost some mobility. So, it was actually a multimodal way of making art where AI was just a step."* P6, confused about effective use, reasoned, *"I don't really know how to use it in a way that would really help me,"* sharing that their thoughts may change if the tool can offer tailored guidance for their ADHD. Meanwhile, P7, a computer science student, described how they initially thought, *"I'll do it on my own even though it will take longer"* because they were *"really against using GPT at first."* They grew more accepting of GenAI after an internship experience where *"every single engineer had GenAI open."* Despite that, they shared,

> *"It feels like cheating to have such a helpful tool, even if I'm never letting it do my work because I know I will need it on an exam. It feels like an unfair advantage. If I'm in a course that hasn't explicitly mentioned it yet, it feels like I'm doing something wrong, even though I know I'm not."*

Generally, all participants illustrated a process of redrawing boundaries in GenAI's use by narrowing use to subjective contexts, balancing the tools' potential as accessibility aids with their sticky challenges (e.g., routine changes, experimentation, limited AI literacy support, and lack of personality). This emphasizes the lack of attention to and recognition of neurodivergent ways of working (e.g., nonlinearity and fluctuating capacities), adding to the inaccessibility of academic structures.

4.4 Envisioning GenAI Tools as Supporting Executive Function

The last part of the interview invited participants to imagine GenAI's role in creating an accessible academic environment (RQ3). The most popular vision included a dedicated assistant/coach capable of managing schedules, organizing tasks, and monitoring energy levels. These priorities are representative of the difficulties participants tied to their disabilities earlier (4.1.1) and the support gaps in academic environments due to an inherent bias towards neuronormative standards [7, 16, 60], often leading neurodivergent individuals to mask their differences [48, 72]. They imagined the tool pulling assignments from syllabi, assigning priorities, estimating task durations, and suggesting time blocks. P4, for example, emphasized, *"I have my academics figured out but I have difficulty with time due to my ADHD."* They wished the tool autonomously updates and prioritizes tasks to *"help with saving time and labor of writing each due date."* P15 entertained digitizing their analog workflow, where they *"write everything out for the week and cross tasks one by one,"* imagining that the tool says, *"Hey, you're gonna take 45 minutes to do this homework and it'll take you 1 hour to do X reading. Do the homework at one on Tuesday."* P17 wanted to translate the *"unorganized chaotic thoughts that my brain is spitting out"* into a to-do list. Mirroring a personal assistant, they wanted the tool to keep them focused by pointing out, *"Okay, you put these things down, but actually the class tomorrow matters most... and those deadlines, even though they don't feel as exciting as that idea you just had, those are the things that you have to do."* Meanwhile, P6 imagined receiving *"dynamic suggestions"* instead of being forced to do assignments within certain periods to maintain agency and self-motivation, suggesting notifications like, *"this is a great time to do this because your energy levels are at a peak."* Interestingly, P18 envisioned improvements to their workflow, *"It could see how I'm spending my time… how I might improve, not necessarily be more productive, but track what I'm doing, how I'm feeling, and what I do when I'm feeling certain things."*

Overall, participants envisioned the tools helping them manage time as they found it exhausting. They wanted GenAI tools to give them personal insights, understand the fluidity and nonlinearity central to neurodiverse experiences, work with them to improve their workflow, and help them allocate more brainpower to meaningful engagement with their work.

5 Discussion

Findings from RQ1 and RQ2 illustrated a critical tension: while participants appreciated the tools for helping with neurodiversity-related challenges (e.g., nonlinear thinking, decomposing overwhelming tasks, avoiding distractions) in their academic environments, they also felt discouraged because of the neurotypical pressures from adopting the tools (4.2). This led participants to justify, redefine, or limit their use of GenAI tools. However, when asked to envision the role of these tools in their future academics (RQ3), participants excitedly highlighted the potential for GenAI to support them in planning, organizing, and prioritizing academic tasks.

In what follows, we first use the critical lens of crip time [45] to pull apart the tensions in participants' narratives, identifying and criticizing the neuronormative standards of productivity that GenAI tools promote (5.1). Next, we argue for a shift away from these neuronormative standards of productivity. We describe flexibility, adaptability, and self-authenticity as three directions for designing GenAI tools that can capture neurodivergent ways of functioning, support participants' vision, and embody crip time (5.2).

5.1 Refusing Neuronormativity in AI-based Tools with Crip Time

Crip time recognizes that disabled people experience and navigate time differently due to bodily, cognitive, or systemic factors. In the context of neurodiversity, it disrupts the assumption that time is fixed, linear, and universally experienced. Instead, it emphasizes fluidity and honoring neurodiverse people's authentic selves. Specifically, Kafer [45] reasoned, *"... rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds"* (p. 27).

However, interviews (sec 4.1) revealed how the need to follow a neurotypical conception of productivity (i.e., doing more in less time) motivated participants to use GenAI. Consequently, participants constantly adjusted their neurodivergent ways of functioning. For example, throughout section 4, participants described using the tools to maintain a consistent focus when researching information, minimize nonlinear thinking, move to individualized support from staff-based support, or brainstorm faster. While participants shared how the tools helped fill accessibility gaps in their academic environment (e.g., having on-demand personalized assistance), they described doing more in less time as a primary motivation. Recall P17 in section 4.1.2, who reasoned feeling pressured to save even five minutes when explaining the significance of using these tools.

The focus on "productivity" and "efficiency" in higher education institutions is commonly criticized by researchers as characteristic of neuronormative expectations, wherein students' minds are valued based on socially constructed ideas of intelligence, excellence, and success, usually marked by quick, high-quality, consistent outputs [7, 25, 39, 48, 52, 60]. Interestingly, participants illustrated resisting neuronormative pressures to preserve their unique working and thinking styles in section 4.3. For example, P8 continued using hand-drawn maps from their analog brainstorming routine in combination with their GenAI tool. While the maps helped them preserve their traditional working style, using GenAI tools helped save time from simultaneously following multiple branches of the map due to their nonlinear thinking. However, they and other participants felt pressured and anxious about not having enough time to explore the tools' capabilities or efficiently adapt them to fit their tried-and-tested routines (4.2). The tension of limiting GenAI use to avoid additional complexity despite the tools' potential to support accessibility gaps illustrates an indirect push towards neuronormative interpretations of a successful and productive student. This push from GenAI tools prompts critical questions: *Are these tools supporting all ways of being or reinforcing conformation to dominant* *ideals of speed, efficiency, and output? What can GenAI be beyond productivity?*

We argue that GenAI tools in education that embody crip time would not push all students to follow neuronormative standards and prioritize productivity. Instead, they could support different ways of functioning by prioritizing the following values: *flexibility*, *adaptability*, and *self-authenticity*. These values are inspired by a synthesis of the lived experiences of participants (e.g., 4.2), their vision (4.4), and scholarship engaging with crip time [10, 43, 48]. For example, scholars have theorized that the strength of crip time lies in its emphasis on flexible timelines that capture the fluidity in neurodivergent functioning [7, 27, 60]. However, Kafer [45] cautions that flexible accommodations, such as providing extra time, can reinscribe productivity norms by promoting flexibility only as a means of accomplishing more rather than working differently. In response, we argue that flexibility can be adopted by GenAI technologies to facilitate users' own pace and style. Similarly, rather than expecting users to maintain a consistent focus, we argue that tools could adopt adaptability to support the dynamic realities of users [84]. Finally, since these tools are trained on normative language and professional standards [23], we argue that self-authenticity remains central to avoid flattening personal tone or requiring standard ways of prompting to be understood. We elaborate on our vision for how GenAI tools can operationalize flexibility, adaptability, and self-authenticity in the next section. It includes designing for nonlinear engagement, accommodating fluid capacities, and preserving individual tone and expression. However, it should be noted that this line of envisioning requires long-term research with neurodivergent students to better understand their lived experiences amidst the fast-changing pace of GenAI technologies.

5.2 Design Recommendations for *Accessible* GenAI Tools

We offer *adaptability*, *flexibility*, and *self-authenticity* as seeds for replacing the tools' current focus on maximizing neuronormative standards of productivity. Similar to how such ideas are operationalized in conjunction with scholars from disabilities studies in prior accessibility research [7, 10, 43, 49, 72, 83], the following directions reflect our imagining of how crip time can be embodied for designing LLM-based GenAI tools inclusive of neurodivergence.

5.2.1 Crip Access by Facilitating Flexibility. As participants shared, rigid timelines and the pressure to *keep up* often conflicted with their fluctuating energy, motivation, or cognitive states (4.2). Instead of functioning as a seamless ally, they felt that GenAI systems required infeasible amounts of time and energy, especially when students are juggling the multiple demands of higher education. Rather than focusing on productivity, GenAI tools can proactively encourage flexibility - not only in when and how users interact with them, but in how outputs are structured, revisited, and shaped over time. These sentiments emphasize crip time's recognition for accommodating fluctuating cognitive and energy levels as neurodivergent students' capacity is often not constant. It shifts the labor and responsibility from students to the tools and allows students to choose the pace and depth of learning, which is also a strength of GenAI tools recognized in prior literature [32, 58]. For example, flexible GenAI tools can have:

- **Context-specific tips:** suggest precise strategies (e.g., "Try specifying the reading level" or "Add bullet points for clarity") to help participants understand the tools' capabilities, reduce frustration, and avoid guesswork.
- **Pacing controls:** provide custom options for the output's speed (e.g., a slow mode generation or staggered suggestions) to help users engage at a rhythm that suits their capacity in the moment rather than overwhelm them with rapid outputs [23] (e.g., 'AI timeouts' [29]).
- **Community-based guided learning:** provide access to built-in communities of GenAI *power users* [32] to facilitate access to tried-and-tested GenAI-specific techniques that can help individuals develop AI literacy *with* like-minded communities. While companies have begun to provide guided learning platforms (e.g., OpenAI Academy [1], neurodivergent users frequently emphasize their capacity constraints for finding relevant resources. Designers can benefit from scholarship showing the power of communal understanding and knowledge-production to ensure proactive accessible tools [23, 26]

However, doing so brings forth critical open questions: How can interfaces minimize cognitive load with such personalized suggestions? How can the design evolve with the user's disability (e.g., [66, 84])?

5.2.2 Enable Adaptive Experiences. While GenAI tools are often imagined as productivity enhancers (on neuronormative standards), our participants envisioned a different future: one where the tools could adjust to their shifting needs, energy levels, and cognitive bandwidth (4.4). This vision reflects crip time's emphasis on nonlinearity and variability [7, 44, 67], where periods of high focus may alternate with fatigue and attention itself may shift unpredictably. To support these dynamic realities, we propose:

- **Integration with academic portals:** pull due dates, potential time conflicts, and major announcements to better help students with planning tasks. This is not just a preference for neurodivergent students but a way to reduce the *invisible labor* [16] they already perform in cripping academic structures to fit their needs.
- **Context-aware nudges:** suggest study windows based on the user's stated preferences and past patterns. For example, this can look like, "Here's a time window where you might feel fresh. Completing Course X's readings would be a good idea here!"
- **Lightweight self-check-ins:** include mood or focus check-ins via simple sliders, emoji-based inputs, or voice prompts. This avoids extensive setup while still giving the AI meaningful signals to adjust pacing, content type, or output volume. However, this invites scholarship from the fields of privacy and security for a critical analysis of privacy implications.
- **Mode switching for attention states:** include toggles between focused (minimalist) and exploratory (multi-threaded) modes, allowing users to decide how much input/output complexity they want at any moment.

[1] https://academy.openai.com

These adaptive mechanisms reduce the need for users to *bend* themselves to fit rigid tools. Instead, they encourage tools to respond to user capacities. However, doing so also raises critical questions: How should energy fluctuations be communicated and designed? What are the privacy implications of collecting detailed personal data? We note that our participants did not raise issues regarding privacy and surveillance without explicitly being asked during interviews. This absence may reflect the structure of our interviews, which focused students' *use* of and *vision* for GenAI tools in academic contexts, leaving limited time to probe for broader systemic concerns. Prior work in privacy and accessibility (e.g. [9]) highlights that personalization can lead to harms if systems are not designed transparently or with appropriate user control. We echo these calls and suggest that adaptive GenAI design can also design for explainability, informed consent practices, and settings that allow users to self-modulate disclosure.

5.2.3 Honor Authentic Selves. Many participants noted how GenAI tools, while helpful in addressing spelling, grammar, or structure, also risked the loss of personal quirks or style (4.2.4). This dilemma echoes findings in prior work where people with invisible disabilities want to be authentically represented, whether in writing [35] or virtual spaces [36]. Similar to opposing neurotypical conceptions of time, we could also resist pushing a uniform, streamlined "professional" voice by preserving the user's voice and ensuring that the system aligns with each individual's way of thinking and communicating. To preserve voice and support authenticity, we propose:

- **Tone and Style Customizations:** provide intuitive user flows to communicate tone and style preferences, letting users specify nuances (e.g., casual vs. formal) that match their intentions. While some GenAI tools provide users with these settings, participants were either unaware of the options or skeptical about them, which speaks to the experimental nature of these systems [23, 32].
- **Multimodal input:** expand input options to multiple forms such as visual diagrams, hand-drawn mind maps, voice notes, or incomplete fragments without requiring formal prompts or full sentences. While systems are advancing towards these forms, designers should note these preferences as proactive design considerations rather than reactive fixes.

These strategies help position GenAI not as a standardizing force but as a collaborator that listens and adapts to users' personal preferences (Sec 4.2.4). By "put(ting) control over when and how access needs are met squarely in the hands of the user [32]," these tools can affirm the legitimacy of non-standard expression, ensuring users are heard as themselves.

6 Limitations and Future Work

While the study provides perspective into the ways neurodivergent students used GenAI tools in their academics, it is limited in the diversity of perspectives that it represents. For example, the majority of students have ADHD and are undergraduate students attending *one* university. The limited number of graduate students also narrowed our focus on *how* students used the tool. Future work could more directly attend to how academic level mediates GenAI use, especially given the differing forms of autonomy, workload, and norms at various stages of higher education. The study also does not engage with intersecting identities, such as race. Additionally, participants who chose to take part in the study may already have a particular stance on GenAI tools, whether positive or negative. This could lead to an over-representation of those who actively use or critically engage with AI, while students who avoid such tools altogether might be underrepresented. Moreover, the study focused on semi-structured interviews, which enable in-depth exploration of a participant's specific moment but does not provide a continuity of responses to see how perspectives may change over time as technologies evolve. Similarly, the study did not observe participants' interactions with the technologies in real-time and relied on narrative accounts and perceptions of use. Observing how participants use the technologies may capture additional insights about the challenges they experience and how they address those challenges. Finally, as noted in Sec 5.2.2, future research should critically examine how neurodivergent users perceive the risks of data sharing when designing personalized support mechanisms like those described in Sec 4.4.

7 Conclusion

We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and graduate neurodivergent students to explore their motivation, use, refusal, and future vision for GenAI tools in higher education. While these tools provided benefits, such as providing on-demand assistance, reserving capacities, and offering judgment-free spaces for conversations, participants also encountered challenges. They expressed concerns over disrupting established routines, spending time and energy experimenting with the tools amidst capacity constraints, limited guidance about tools, and lack of personality. This led participants to redefine or limit their use of GenAI tools. When asked to envision the future role of these tools for their academics, participants highlighted GenAI's potential as a dedicated assistant/coach capable of managing schedules, organizing tasks, and monitoring energy levels. These priorities are representative of the support gaps in academic environments due to an inherent bias towards neuronormative standards. Drawing from Kafer's conceptualization of crip time [44], we highlight the ways in which current GenAI tools often fail to accommodate the fluidity and flexibility integral to neurodivergent ways of learning. In response, we argue for a shift in design values toward flexibility, adaptability, and self-authenticity to envision GenAI not as enhancing neuronormative standards of productivity, but as a dynamic partner attentive to user-defined rhythms and priorities. As GenAI tools continue to evolve, we call on researchers, designers, and educators to work alongside neurodivergent users in shaping these systems.

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