



How Interacting with AI Chatbots Influences Young Adults Emotional Experiences, Social Interactions, And Interpersonal Connections

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Abstract: The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into everyday communication has introduced AI chatbots as novel social and emotional interlocutors, particularly among young adults. This study explores how interactions with AI chatbots influence emotional experiences, social interactions, and interpersonal connections during young adulthood. Drawing on psychological and human–computer interaction research, the study examines the ways in which chatbot-mediated communication may shape emotional regulation, coping processes, and perceptions of social and relational support. A qualitative research design was employed to capture young adults lived experiences of engaging with AI chatbots for emotional expression, companionship, and everyday interaction. The findings suggest that AI chatbots provide a low-pressure, non-judgmental space that facilitates emotional expression and short-term emotional relief, particularly during periods of stress, loneliness, or social discomfort. At the same time, reliance on chatbot interactions may influence expectations from human relationships, social engagement patterns, and perceptions of interpersonal closeness. While AI chatbots may complement existing social and emotional resources, concerns related to emotional dependency, reduced human interaction, and the simulation of relational intimacy warrant careful consideration. The study contributes to the emerging literature on AI-mediated interaction by highlighting both the supportive and potentially transformative role of chatbots in young adults’ emotional and social lives.

Keywords: *AI chatbots, young adulthood, emotional experiences, social interaction, interpersonal connections*

1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a critical developmental period characterized by emotional variability, identity exploration, and changes in social and interpersonal functioning. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 experience increased demands related to academic performance, career preparation, and relationship formation, making this stage particularly sensitive to emotional stress and psychosocial adjustment (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2015). Emotional experiences during this phase often involve heightened stress, uncertainty, and self-reflection, and the availability of emotional support plays a central role in psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In recent years, technological advancements have altered how young adults seek and experience emotional and social support. Artificial intelligence–based chatbots have emerged as interactive conversational agents capable of simulating human-like dialogue through natural language processing and machine learning (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). Unlike traditional digital tools, AI chatbots engage users in continuous, responsive conversations, often incorporating emotionally supportive language. This shift has led to increased use of chatbots for emotional expression, stress management, and companionship, particularly among young adults who are frequent users of digitally mediated communication (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022).

Research examining emotional experiences associated with AI chatbot interaction suggests mixed outcomes. Several studies have reported that chatbot-based interactions can reduce emotional distress and provide short-term emotional relief. Abd-Alrazaq et al. (2020), Boucher et al. (2021), and Denecke et al. (2021) found that emotionally responsive chatbots contributed to reduced stress and improved emotional awareness among users. Similarly, Meng and Dai (2021) demonstrated that perceived empathy and emotional responsiveness in chatbots facilitated cognitive reappraisal and distress reduction. However, other studies have raised concerns that frequent or compensatory chatbot use may be associated with emotional overdependence, reduced life satisfaction, and maladaptive coping patterns, particularly among lonely or socially vulnerable individuals (Frennert, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

Beyond emotional experiences, AI chatbot use may influence social interaction patterns during young adulthood. Social interaction is a core component of psychosocial development, contributing to social competence, communication skills, and a sense of belonging (Rubin et al., 2015). While some studies suggest that AI-mediated interaction may complement social life by providing low-pressure spaces for communication, others indicate that reliance on non-human agents may alter expectations regarding availability, responsiveness, and emotional effort in human relationships (Christoforakos et al., 2022; Xia

et al., 2025). Baumeister et al. (2026) reported that AI-mediated communication may reduce emotional engagement compared to face-to-face interaction, although it can increase participation among socially inhibited individuals.

Interpersonal connections, defined by emotional closeness, trust, and mutual responsiveness, are particularly salient during young adulthood. Psychological theories emphasize the human need for belonging and meaningful relationships as essential for well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Emerging research suggests that users may form perceived relational bonds with AI chatbots, often describing them as companions or confidants due to their consistency, availability, and non-judgmental responses (Skjuve et al., 2021; Pataranutaporn et al., 2024). However, such connections are inherently one-sided, as chatbots lack genuine emotional experience or reciprocity. Scholars have cautioned that simulated intimacy may blur relational boundaries and influence users' perceptions of interpersonal closeness and support (Katoch & Sandhu, 2026).

Anonymity further distinguishes AI chatbot interaction from human relationships. The absence of social evaluation allows users to disclose personal thoughts and emotions more freely, including sensitive or stigmatized concerns (Yu et al., 2024). Studies have shown that anonymity reduces inhibition and increases depth of self-disclosure in chatbot interactions (Huang et al., 2025). However, excessive self-disclosure and oversharing may raise concerns related to emotional dependency, privacy, and unrealistic expectations of relational support (Laestadius et al., 2022).

Although a growing body of research has examined emotional support, companionship, and ethical concerns related to AI chatbots, existing studies often address these outcomes in isolation. Limited research has explored how AI chatbot interaction simultaneously influences emotional experiences, social interactions, and interpersonal connections during young adulthood. Moreover, there is a lack of integrative research examining how these domains intersect within everyday life contexts of young adults.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine how interacting with AI chatbots influences young adults' emotional experiences, social interactions, and interpersonal connections. By situating AI chatbot use within the developmental context of young adulthood, the study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of AI-mediated interaction and its psychological implications.

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim

The objective of the research was to investigate the effect of AI chatbots interaction on the emotional experiences, emotion regulation, face-to-face social behavior, and interpersonal emotional relationship of Indian college students aged between 18-23 years.

2.2 Objectives

- a) Explore the effects of AI chatbots on emotional regulation, attachment, well-being, and coping mechanisms, paying attention to gender and field-specific variations.
- b) Analyze the shift of social skills, the face-to-face interpersonal connections, and the new tendencies in dependency connected with the use of chatbots.
- c) Investigate how cultural norms and gender expectations affect the expression of emotions, self-disclosure, and relational meaning within the Indian context.
- d) Prepare evidence-based suggestions on how to design culturally sensitive chatbots, improve college mental health policies, and introduce ethical or regulatory protections.

2.3 Research Design

The research design was qualitative phenomenological research since it aimed at examining the lived experiences of Indian college students when communicating with AI chatbots. The use of phenomenology was suitable as the study was looking at subjective emotional experiences, social meanings, and personal interpretations that cannot be sufficiently obtained using quantitative research methods.

The paradigm assumed in the research was the interpretivist paradigm, which presupposes that individuals create meaning in accordance with their own experience, social conditions, and cultures.

2.4 Participants and Sampling

The body of the sample was 14 undergraduate students (7 males and 7 females) aged between 18 and 23 years. The participants were recruited across various academic disciplines including engineering, commerce, humanities, and sciences in order to have a varied pool of views. The sampling method was convenient purposive and selected the participants who had previously played with AI chatbots and were able to take part in the study.

2.5 Inclusion Criteria

To be included the participants had to fulfill the following criteria:

- a) Aged 18-23 years were college students.
- b) Has had experience with AI chatbots whether emotionally, informatively, or entertainingly.

- c) Those who were not opposed to face-to-face interviews and informed consent.

2.6 Exclusion Criteria

The respondents were not to include those who:

- a) None of the experience with AI chatbots.
- b) Severely psychologically distressed and may not participate.
- c) Could not give informed consent.

2.7 Research Setting

Research has been completed in the campuses of the Indian urban cities where the population of smartphones and digital technologies is widespread among students. The interviews were held in confidential and non-noisy places on campus like seminar rooms, office of the faculty and library to provide confidentiality and comfort to the participants.

2.8 Data Collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used in data collection, and the participants were given the freedom to narrate their experiences provided that all important topics in the research were covered.

Exemplary Interview questions.

Can you describe your experiences of using chatbots, if any?

- a) "What usually motivates you to start or continue a conversation with a chatbot?"
- b) "Describe your experiences regarding face-to-face interactions with friends and family."
- c) How do you usually manage difficult emotions or problems in your life?
- d) What kind of connection, if any, do you experience when interacting with a chatbot?
- e) Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with chatbots, emotions, or relationships?

All interviews were audio-taped upon consent of the participants and took about 45-75 minutes. Field notes were also taken to observe nonverbal and contextual observations. The data collection would be applied until the thematic saturation, i.e. no new information could be obtained by further interviews.

2.9 Data Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis in accordance with the model of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data.

The analysis involved:

- a. The practice with transcripts of interviews.
- b. Deriving preliminary codes out of meaningful statements.

- c. Stating codes into possible themes.
- d. Checking and improving themes.
- e. Defining and naming themes
- f. Reporting results with the representative quotes by the participants.

The data on qualitative data were coded and handled with the help of ATLAS.ti software that aided in systematic coding and the generation of themes.

2.9 Ensuring Trustworthiness

In order to have rigor, the study adhered to the requirements presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

- a) Credibility:** A lot of this was gained during the in-depth interviews and by interpreting the stories of the participants.
- b) Transferability:** The transferability was ensured with the description of participants and research setting.
- c) Dependability:** This is ensured by recordkeeping of methodological processes and analytical choices.
- d) Confirmability:** Grounded in the use of personal words of the participants and reflexive recognition of researcher bias.

3. Results

The reflexive thematic analysis of interview data revealed four major themes describing the emotional, social, and interpersonal experiences of Indian college students interacting with AI chatbots. These themes highlight both the supportive and potentially problematic roles of AI chatbots in participants' daily emotional lives.

The first theme reflected emotional comfort, validation, and perceived support. Most participants described AI chatbots as emotionally accessible and non-judgmental, making them easier to approach during periods of stress, loneliness, or emotional confusion. Participants reported feeling heard and emotionally acknowledged, particularly when chatbot responses appeared empathetic or reassuring. However, this support was largely described as temporary and situational, with participants acknowledging that chatbot interactions could not fully replace emotional support from trusted humans.

The second theme focused on emotion regulation and coping strategies. Participants frequently used chatbots for venting emotions, organizing thoughts, seeking reassurance, or distracting themselves from distress. For some, chatbot interaction facilitated adaptive coping by reducing emotional intensity and enabling clearer thinking before engaging with others. In

contrast, a few participants described avoidant coping patterns, where repeated chatbot use delayed confronting emotional problems or seeking human support, indicating emerging emotional dependency.

The third theme concerned the influence of AI chatbot use on face-to-face social behavior. Participants reported mixed effects. Some indicated that emotional regulation through chatbots improved their confidence and readiness for offline interactions. Others described reduced motivation for face-to-face communication, particularly during emotionally demanding situations, as chatbot interaction felt emotionally safer and less effortful than human conversations.

The fourth theme related to interpersonal emotional connection and simulated intimacy. Several participants reported experiencing a sense of connection or attachment to chatbots, describing them as companions or emotional outlets. Despite this, participants were generally aware that chatbot interactions lacked genuine reciprocity and emotional subjectivity. This awareness resulted in emotional ambivalence, where comfort coexisted with recognition of artificiality.

4. Discussion

The present study explored how AI chatbot interaction influences emotional experiences, emotion regulation, social behavior, and interpersonal connections among Indian college students. The findings indicate that AI chatbots function primarily as supplementary emotional tools rather than substitutes for human relationships.

Consistent with previous research, participants experienced short-term emotional relief and validation through chatbot interaction. The non-judgmental and anonymous nature of AI chatbots appeared particularly appealing within the cultural context, where emotional expression may be constrained by social and familial expectations. Chatbots provided a private space for emotional disclosure without fear of evaluation.

Emotion regulation emerged as a central function of chatbot use. While many participants engaged in adaptive coping through reflection and reassurance, some demonstrated avoidant patterns, suggesting that reliance on AI-mediated support may interfere with direct emotional processing and interpersonal help-seeking. This dual role reflects both the benefits and risks of AI-based emotional support.

The influence of chatbot interaction on face-to-face social behavior was not uniform. While some participants reported improved emotional readiness for social engagement, others experienced withdrawal and reduced interpersonal effort. These findings suggest that

AI chatbot use may either complement or displace human interaction depending on individual coping styles and emotional vulnerability.

Participants' experiences of simulated intimacy highlight an important psychological concern. Although emotional connection was reported, the absence of reciprocity and embodied presence limited relational depth. This aligns with theories emphasizing that meaningful interpersonal relationships require mutual responsiveness and emotional investment.

4.1 Implications of the Study

The results of the current research have significant practical, clinical, and policy implications in terms of recognizing the increasing role of AI chatbots in the emotional life of young adults. The findings indicate that AI chatbots can be discussed as convenient auxiliary emotional support resources, especially in case of stressed, lonely, or emotionally disoriented college students. Incorporating AI into systems of college mental health support may assist students in dealing with the early emotional distress and controlling their emotions and then formal assistance. Nonetheless, this type of integration should be provided with strict ethical standards, the clarity of restrictions of chatbots, and protection against emotional addiction as chatbots cannot entirely imitate the richness and reciprocity of human relationships.

Clinically, the use of chatbots by young adults should be considered by mental health practitioners in the assessment of the level and intent of chatbot use as a coping mechanism in students. The constant use of AI chatbots can be a symptom of a lack of emotional needs, isolation, and unwillingness to interact with people. The awareness of these patterns can assist clinicians to recognize those who could be at risk of needing further emotional support, counseling or measures that could enhance the real-life social interaction.

On the policy and institutional level, the educational institutions and policymakers ought to come up with policies that encourage the responsible and balanced use of AI technologies among students. Students can be informed on the advantages of AI-mediated emotional support as well as the possible psychological dangers of the latter through awareness programs. Moreover, the creation of culturally sensitive chatbot applications that facilitate healthy coping mechanisms and strengthen the need to have human relationships is critical in facilitating psychological health within the academic context.

4.2 Limitations

The current study has several limitations, which ought to be mentioned despite the contributions. The study had a very small qualitative sample that restricts the extrapolation of the results to the wider populations. Outcomes are also premised on the self-reported

experiences subject to recall bias, personal interpretation, or social desirability. Also, the cross-sectional character of the study does not imply an opportunity to study how emotional experience of students with AI chatbots can evolve over time.

The other limitation is associated with the characteristics of the sample. The participants were mainly urban college students, and this might not reflect accurately what the rural population and people of other socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds experience. Technology access patterns, emotional expression patterns, and help-seeking patterns might not be identical in different populations, and this did not come into the framework of the current study.

4.3 Future Directions

The research needs to be elaborated to a larger scale in future by using larger and diverse samples to make the results more generalizable. Longitudinal studies would also be useful in terms of studying the psychological impacts of AI chatbot communication in the long-term, such as the extent to which prolonged use affects emotional coping responses, interpersonal relationships, or dependency patterns in the long term.

Moreover, the qualitative/quantitative mixed-method research design would allow gaining a more in-depth insight into the effects of AI chatbots on emotional well-being and social behavior. The comparative research comparing the AI-mediated emotional support and human-mediated support systems would also provide a more in-depth understanding of the relational and psychological consequences of the technologies.

Cultural and socioeconomic differences in the application of AI chatbots should also be examined in the future because, despite being emotional, seeking assistance, and the perception of technology differ among cultures. Knowledge of these differences can help in creation of more ethically developed culturally responsive AI systems that promote healthy emotional and social functioning.

5. Conclusion

The current research demonstrates the multi-layered and sophisticated issue of AI chatbots and their influence on the emotional and social experiences of Indian college students. The results show that AI chatbots offer low-cost and non-judgmental spaces where people can express their emotions, reflect, and regulate their emotions in the short term. To many interviewees, chatbot interactions acted as a handy way of emotional release, thought organization, and temporary distress management.

Nevertheless, the findings also show that AI chatbots are devoid of the reciprocity, emotional and relationship richness that defines meaningful human relationships. Although it gave comfort to some participants and gave them the illusion of emotional companionship, they knew that interactions with chatbots are not real. This realization developed a feeling of emotional ambivalence, in which the feelings of support were accompanied by the awareness of the weaknesses of AI-based interaction.

In general, the results indicate that AI chatbots can be viewed as the additional emotional resources and not the alternative to human relationships. They can be utilized with emotional coping and immediate assistance in distressful situations when applied responsibly. But over dependence can lead to less human interaction or emotional dependency especially in the case of vulnerable individuals. The findings allow highlighting the necessity of ethical and culturally aware integration of AI technologies into mental health support systems and educational settings to guarantee the fact that technological innovation supplements the human bond, as opposed to substituting it.

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