

AI Chatbot Companionship and Emotional Bonds: A Study of the Influence of AI Chatbots on the Youth

Sravana D¹ & Jubbi Francis²

Abstract

This paper examines emotional attachment between youth and AI chatbots, with a focus on college students aged 18-25 in Angamaly, Kerala. As AI technologies become increasingly embedded in daily life. The research investigates three primary concerns: whether AI chatbots are becoming emotional substitutes for human relationships, what motivates youth to seek emotional fulfilment through these platforms, and what role AI chatbots play in addressing loneliness among young adults.

Employing a mixed-method research, quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires from 100 college students, and qualitative data through a panel interview with five health professionals (a psychologist, a counsellor, two ASHA workers, and a social worker). Findings reveal that 96.3% of respondents use AI, with over half using chatbots for emotional support and 76.6% reporting emotional connection with AI systems. The non-judgmental nature and 24/7 availability of chatbots emerged as primary motivators for use. Both data sources confirm that chatbots serve as supplementary rather than replacement emotional support, with human relationships remaining irreplaceable.

The study accepts the Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): AI chatbots have a significant influence on emotional companionship and emotional bonds among youth. This influence is characterised as supplementary-chatbots function as an accessible coping layer, not a substitute for authentic human connection. The study concludes with eight practice-oriented recommendations spanning digital literacy, ethical AI design, mental health integration, and longitudinal research.

Keywords: *Emotional attachment, AI chatbot companionship, Youth, Emotional fulfilment, Human-AI interaction.*

¹ Student, MA JMC 2024-26, School of Media & Communication, De Paul Institute of Science & Technology (DiST), Angamaly, Kerala, India.
Email: sravanadas2004@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, School of Media & Communication, De Paul Institute of Science & Technology (DiST), Angamaly, Kerala, India.
Email: jubbifrancis@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an important part of everyday communication and digital life. Among its many applications, AI chatbots have gained particular importance because they allow users to communicate with technology through natural language. AI chatbots use technologies such as Natural Language Processing (NLP), machine learning, and Large Language Models (LLMs) to understand user input and generate responses that resemble human conversation. As these systems have become more advanced, their role has moved beyond providing information or completing tasks. They are increasingly being used for conversation, advice, emotional expression, and companionship.

The growth of companion-oriented platforms and conversational systems has therefore created a new form of digital interaction in which users may begin to perceive an AI chatbot as a friend, confidant, or source of emotional support.

This development is particularly relevant to young people. Youth between the ages of 18 and 25 experience an important stage of emotional and social development. College students often face academic pressure, career uncertainty, changing friendships, separation from family, and difficulties in expressing personal emotions. At the same time, young people are highly familiar with digital communication and spend a significant amount of time using smartphones, social media, and other online platforms. These conditions create an environment in which digital technologies can become closely connected to their emotional lives.

One important issue affecting young people is loneliness. Digital connectivity does not always result in emotional connection, and young people may experience feelings of isolation even while remaining constantly connected online. Fear of judgement, social pressure, stigma surrounding mental

health support, and limited access to emotional support may also make it difficult for some young people to openly communicate their feelings with others. In this context, AI chatbots may appear attractive because they are easily accessible, available at any time, and perceived as non-judgmental. They can provide users with a space to express thoughts and emotions without the fear of criticism or rejection.

AI chatbots can therefore function as a form of digital companionship. Through continuous conversation, personalised responses, and emotional language, users may develop feelings of comfort, familiarity, and attachment towards the chatbot.

This becomes more significant when AI chatbots are used during periods of stress, sadness, or loneliness. Their constant availability may provide immediate emotional comfort when family members, friends, or other support systems are not available. At the same time, excessive emotional dependence on chatbots may create concerns about reduced human interaction and the possible weakening of real-life social relationships. Therefore, AI chatbot companionship cannot be understood only in terms of its technological advantages; its emotional and social consequences also need to be examined.

From a media and communication perspective, AI chatbots represent a significant development in interactive digital media. Unlike traditional mass media, which mainly involves one-way communication, chatbots allow personalised and continuous two-way interaction. Users actively shape conversations, while chatbots respond according to the content and context of those interactions. This makes AI chatbots not merely information tools but interactive communication agents capable of participating in emotionally meaningful conversations.

The present study focuses on this emerging relationship between AI chatbots and youth in Angamaly. It examines whether AI chatbots are becoming emotional substitutes for human relationships, identifies the reasons that motivate young people to seek emotional fulfilment through chatbots, and analyses the role of chatbots in addressing feelings of loneliness. The study particularly considers the importance of features such as privacy, non-judgmental responses, personalised interaction, and 24/7 availability in shaping users' emotional engagement with AI chatbots.

Angamaly provides a relevant local context for examining this issue because young people in the area are increasingly exposed to digital technologies while continuing to live within a socially and culturally connected environment. Studying AI chatbot companionship in this setting can provide a better understanding of how a global technological development is influencing the emotional experiences and communication patterns of local youth. The study therefore seeks to understand not only how frequently young people use AI chatbots, but also why they turn to them, how emotionally connected they become, and whether chatbot interaction reduces loneliness or creates a greater dependence on artificial companionship.

2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of recent international scholarship explores the emotional dimensions of human-AI chatbot interaction, converging on a set of common themes: emotional attachment, loneliness, the nature of AI companionship, and the risks of dependency.

Zhang et al. (2025), in their study *The Rise of AI Companions: How Human-Chatbot Relationships Influence Well-Being*, examined how people develop emotional relationships with AI chatbots and how such relationships influence their

psychological well-being. The study particularly focused on whether users develop emotional attachment to AI companions and whether chatbots provide emotional support or gradually contribute to greater emotional dependence. The researchers also examined the reasons why individuals use AI chatbots as companions and whether users with limited social connections are more likely to develop such relationships. Using a mixed-method approach, the study surveyed 1,131 active AI chatbot users and analysed more than 4,300 chatbot sessions involving 244 participants, focusing on emotional intimacy, bonding, stress, support and self-disclosure (Zhang et al., 2025).

The findings showed that some users turned to AI chatbots because of loneliness and perceived them as safe spaces for communication because they were constantly available and non-judgmental. However, the study also found that heavy emotional reliance on chatbots could be associated with increased feelings of loneliness rather than reducing them. Users who relied on chatbots primarily for companionship often experienced greater emotional dependence, whereas casual use for work or entertainment was associated with better well-being. The study therefore suggests that the impact of AI chatbots depends largely on how and why they are used, highlighting the complex relationship between AI companionship, emotional attachment and loneliness (Zhang et al., 2025).

This study is particularly relevant to the present research, *AI Chatbot Companionship and Emotional Bonds: A Study of the Influence of AI Chatbots on the Youth in Angamaly*, as both studies examine AI chatbots as sources of companionship and emotional support. While Zhang et al. (2025) investigate the broader relationship between AI companionship and well-being, the present study focuses specifically on youth in Angamaly and examines emotional attachment, motivations for

using chatbots, loneliness and the possibility of AI chatbots becoming substitutes for human emotional relationships.

3. Significance of the Study

The study's significance lies in addressing a globally emerging phenomenon with specific local grounding. Angamaly represents a community at the intersection of rapid digitalisation and traditional social values-making it an ideal site for studying how AI companionship unfolds in a semi-urban South Indian context. The findings are relevant to educators, mental health professionals, parents, media researchers, and policymakers seeking to understand how AI chatbot interactions shape the emotional behaviour and social relationships of college-going youth. The study also contributes to communication and media studies by analysing human-AI interaction through social-emotional and relational lenses.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 100 college students aged 18-25 in Angamaly, covering chatbot usage frequency, emotional attachment, loneliness, perceived emotional support, and impact on real-life relationships. Qualitative data were collected through a panel interview with five health professionals-a psychologist, a counsellor, two ASHA workers, and a social worker-focusing on emotional dependency, youth mental health, and the psychological implications of AI companionship.

Sampling employed a purposive technique, selecting respondents based on age eligibility (18-25), confirmed chatbot use, and geographic accessibility within Angamaly. This ensured that all participants were relevant to the research

objectives and had firsthand chatbot experience. Primary data comprised questionnaire responses (111 valid submissions received from 100-participant target) and panel interview transcripts. Secondary data included peer-reviewed journal articles, books on AI and psychology, and online academic databases. The study was conducted over five months from December 2025 to April 2026. Angamaly was chosen as the study site for its dual character-high digital penetration combined with a socially and culturally traditional environment-making it particularly instructive for studying AI's emotional role.

5. Objectives

- To examine how AI chatbots are becoming emotional substitutes for human relationships
- To identify the motivations behind youth use of AI chatbots for emotional fulfilment
- To analyse the role of AI chatbots in addressing loneliness among youth in Angamaly.

6. Hypothesis of the Study

H0: AI chatbots do not have a significant influence on emotional companionship and emotional bonds among youth.

H1: AI chatbots have a significant influence on emotional companionship and emotional bonds among youth.

7. Limitations

Limitations include the relatively small and geographically confined sample, the risk of social desirability bias in self-reported emotional data, cross-sectional design precluding longitudinal tracking of effects, and the rapidly evolving nature

of AI technology which may make specific findings contextually time-bound. Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than definitively generalisable to all youth populations.

8. Findings

AI use was near-universal among respondents, with 96.3% reporting some form of use and only 3.7% abstaining. This use was largely multifunctional: half (50.5%) engaged AI for information, entertainment, and emotional support simultaneously, while smaller shares used it primarily for information (31.5%), entertainment (15.3%), or emotional support alone (2.7%). Chatbot interaction was frequent, with 82.9% engaging very frequently or frequently, and only 2.7% reporting no use at all.

Emotional engagement was substantial: 53.2% reported using chatbots for emotional support, with a further 27.9% unsure, and 76.6% reported feeling emotionally connected to AI systems. A majority also used chatbots to cope with stress and anxiety (55.8%) and to fill moments of emotional loneliness (59.4%), with 60.3% agreeing that chatbots helped reduce feelings of isolation. Just over half (52.2%) found chatbot interactions calming during distress, while 37.8% remained neutral. Comfort in disclosing personal thoughts to chatbots was notably high, with 62.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and strong agreement (36.9%) as the single largest response.

9. Results and Discussions

This study provides a comprehensive, contextually grounded understanding of how AI chatbots are influencing the emotional lives of youth in Angamaly. The evidence from both quantitative surveys and expert qualitative interviews converges on a nuanced and internally consistent picture: AI

chatbots have become genuine participants in the emotional world of young adults-not as novelties or purely functional tools, but as perceived companions, confidants, and stress regulators.

The accessibility, non-judgmental nature, and perpetual availability of AI chatbots make them uniquely suited to the emotional needs of youth who face stigma around help-seeking, limited access to professional mental health services, or geographic separation from traditional support networks. For these users, chatbots fill a genuine and previously unmet need. The emotional connections formed are real in their subjective experience and consequential in their effects on behaviour, even if the AI itself lacks consciousness, genuine empathy, or authentic relational reciprocity.

Yet the study is equally clear about chatbots' limitations. The emotional support they provide is largely temporary, lacking the depth, shared experience, and genuine mutual investment that characterise meaningful human relationships. Neither the survey respondents nor the health professionals view chatbots as adequate substitutes for human connection. There is a risk-particularly for users who are already socially isolated or who lack strong offline social networks-that intensive reliance on AI could progressively erode the motivation and skill to form and maintain human relationships.

The study situates these findings within the broader evolution of media and communication: AI chatbots represent a new form of emotionally interactive media that moves beyond information dissemination into the realm of relational engagement. This shift demands renewed attention from educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and technology developers alike.

As AI chatbots grow more emotionally sophisticated, societies will need to grapple with fundamental questions: What

constitutes authentic companionship? Can emotional connection exist between humans and machines? What responsibilities do developers and policymakers bear in shaping this relational landscape? Education systems must prepare young people not only with digital literacy but with relational literacy-the capacity to distinguish genuine human connection from simulated intimacy, to value the effortful reciprocity that authentic relationships require, and to deploy digital tools as enhancements rather than replacements for social life. The central conclusion of this study is that AI chatbots have a significant but bounded role in the emotional lives of Angamaly youth-serving as a valuable supplementary coping resource while human relationships remain irreplaceable for long-term emotional well-being and social development.

References

- Brandtzaeg, P. B., Skjuve, M., & Folstad, A. (2022). My AI friend: How users of a social chatbot understand their human-AI friendship.
- Kostka, G., & Zhou, H. (2025). Emotional Attachment to AI Chatbots: Evidence from Germany, China, South Africa, and the United States.
- Liu, A. R., Pataranutaporn, P., & Maes, P. (2024). Chatbot companionship: A mixed-methods study of companion chatbot usage patterns and their relationship to loneliness in active users.
- Merrill Jr., K., Mikkilineni, S. D., & Dehnert, M. (2025). Artificial intelligence chatbots as a source of virtual social support: Implications for loneliness and anxiety management.
- Nwamuruamu, G. U., Odilanma, O. K., & Adiele, I. (2025). My chatbot companion: Navigating the evolving human-AI connection.
- Rupprechter, N., & Dienlin, T. It's her! Investigating relationship development with social AI chatbots.
- Sjoraida, D. F. (2025). AI and Emotional Intimacy: Exploring Romantic Bonds with Artificial Companions.

- Turing, A. (1950). Computing machinery and intelligence. *Mind*, 59(236), 433–460.
- Weizenbaum, J. (1966). ELIZA—a computer program for the study of natural language communication between man and machine. *Communications of the ACM*, 9(1), 36–45.
- Wyganska, J. (2025). The Experience of Everyday Life alongside Virtual Companions: A Case Study of Human-Chatbot Encounters.
- Xie, T., & Pentina, I. (2022). Attachment theory as a framework to understand relationships with social chatbots: A case study of Replika.
- Zhang, Y., Zhao, D., Hancock, J. T., Kraut, R., & Yang, D. (2025). The Rise of AI Companions: How Human-Chatbot Relationships Influence Well-Being.