

The Use of AI Chatbots As Emotional Companions: A Qualitative Study of Their Implications for Interpersonal Communication Among Young Adults

Faza An'imah, Fitriana Ulya, Luluk Ridotuljana, Ali Murtadho, Sulistio

Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, Semarang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the way individuals interact, obtain information, and build social experiences in the digital space. The emergence of AI chatbots that are increasingly responsive, personalized, and adaptive means that this technology is no longer used merely as a tool for information retrieval, but also as a medium for personal communication and an emotional companion. Among young adults, AI chatbots are utilized for various purposes, such as sharing personal experiences, seeking emotional support, engaging in self-disclosure, and fostering companionship in everyday interactions. This phenomenon indicates the emergence of a new form of communication involving relationships between humans and artificial agents. This study aims to analyze the use of AI chatbots among young adults and its implications for digital communication practices. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method using a digital case documentation approach. Data were collected from various records of AI chatbot usage found in digital forums, social media, and relevant scientific publications, and were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify usage patterns, forms of interaction, and emerging implications. The results indicate that the use of AI chatbots among young adults has shifted in function from an information tool to a personal communication medium used for companionship, emotional support, and self-disclosure. The findings also show that the AI's responsive, adaptive, and always-available characteristics influence how users build interactions with the technology. This study concludes that the evolution of human–AI communication represents the emergence of new digital communication practices that expand the role of AI from a mere technological tool to an agent participating in users' communication experiences. These findings reinforce the Human–AI Communication perspective and demonstrate the relevance of the Parasocial-Interaction Theory in explaining the emotional closeness that develops in human–AI interactions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, AI Chatbot, Human–AI Communication, Self-Disclosure, Digital Communication, Young Adults.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in *Artificial Intelligence* (AI) have brought about significant changes in digital communication practices. The emergence of AI chatbots that are increasingly responsive, adaptive, and personalized means that this technology is no longer used solely as a tool for information retrieval but is beginning to be utilized as a medium for personal communication in everyday life (Maeda & Quan-Haase, 2024). Among young adults, the use of AI chatbots is expanding to meet various communication needs, such as seeking information (Lund et al., 2026), obtaining emotional support (Ta et al., 2020), sharing personal experiences (Park et al., 2021), and engaging in *self-disclosure* (Skjuve et al., 2023). These developments indicate that human interaction with technology is increasingly shifting from instrumental use toward more personal communication experiences.

This phenomenon is increasingly prominent among young adults, a group of digital technology users with a high rate of technology adoption. Young adults generally refer to individuals in the 18–29 age range—a transitional phase characterized by identity development, exploration of social relationships, and a growing need for emotional support and interpersonal communication (Ma et al., 2026). During this phase, individuals tend to be

more active in using digital technology to meet various daily communication needs, including seeking information, building relationships, and obtaining emotional support (Lukas et al., 2025). These conditions make young adults a relevant group for understanding how human–AI communication practices evolve in everyday life.

The selection of young adults as the focus of this study is also supported by the high level of digital technology integration among this age group. Data from a survey on internet penetration in Indonesia shows that the number of internet users in Indonesia has reached 221.5 million, with a penetration rate of 79.5%, while the younger generation is the most dominant group in terms of internet connectivity (APJII, 2024). Although the Generation Z category covers a broader age range, the majority of young adults today belong to a generation that has grown up alongside digital technology and thus has a strong affinity for AI-based technologies. Generation Z accounts for approximately 34.4% of all internet users and is the group with the largest contribution to national internet penetration. This indicates that young adults are the group most closely aligned with developments in digital technology, making them a relevant context for understanding the evolution of human–AI communication.

This phenomenon reflects a shift in communication practices that is becoming increasingly evident in the digital space (Pramana et al., 2025). Various studies show that users utilize AI chatbots for *companionship*, *emotional support*, and *emotional expression* (Bilquise et al., 2022), as well as a personal communication space when facing academic stress, loneliness, or everyday social issues. The responsive nature of AI, its consistent availability, and the perception that it is *non-judgmental* have led to chatbots being positioned as an alternative communication space for some users.

In the study of interpersonal communication, self-disclosure is generally understood as a communication process that develops through human relationships because it involves trust, emotional closeness, and reciprocal communication (Lin & Utz, 2017). However, the development of AI has made it possible for some of these personal communication processes to take place through human–machine interactions (Łukasik & Gut, 2025). This situation indicates a shift in digital communication practices, in which the process of self-disclosure—which was previously dominated by interpersonal communication—is now beginning to occur through interactions with artificial agents.

This development raises an academic question regarding how *self-disclosure* occurs in the context of human–AI communication. Although previous research has shown that *self-disclosure* occurs in human–chatbot interactions and is associated with *companionship* (Laban et al., 2025), *emotional support* (Lee et al., 2024), and *psychological outcomes* (Lee et al., 2024), most studies still position *self-disclosure* as a behavioral variable or psychological factor. Studies that specifically view *self-disclosure* as a communication practice in human–AI interactions—particularly regarding young adults’ use of AI chatbots in the context of everyday digital communication—remain relatively limited. Therefore, research is needed to understand how *self-disclosure* practices unfold and how this phenomenon represents the evolution of human–AI communication as a form of contemporary digital communication. This study positions self-disclosure to AI chatbots not merely as a behavioral variable or psychological outcome, but as a communication practice that emerges through human–AI interactions.

These limitations highlight the need to understand how AI chatbots are used as a medium for personal communication and how *self-disclosure* occurs in human–AI interactions. This understanding is crucial because the development of AI not only brings about changes in communication technology but also has the potential to influence how individuals build relationships, seek emotional support, and engage in digital communication in their daily lives. Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze self-disclosure practices in the use of AI chatbots by young adults through a qualitative case study to understand the development of Human–AI Communication as a form of digital communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method with a case study design to understand *self-disclosure* practices among young adults using AI chatbots in the context of human–AI communication. The case study approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth exploration of a contemporary communication phenomenon

emerging in a specific context, namely the use of AI *chatbots* as a medium for personal communication and emotional support.

The unit of analysis in this study is the practice of self-disclosure that emerges in interactions between young adults and AI chatbots in the context of everyday use. This study examines the use of AI chatbots for personal communication as a case of digital communication, analyzing it to understand how human–AI communication practices evolve.

The research data was obtained from digital case studies reported in scientific publications and relevant digital sources. The unit of analysis in this study is not individuals directly, but rather documented user experiences with AI chatbots that have been published in various previous studies. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to identify communication patterns that consistently emerge across various contexts of AI chatbot use.

A total of ten case studies that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed thematically. The selection criteria included: (1) discussing user interactions with AI chatbots, (2) featuring instances of self-disclosure, companionship, or emotional support, and (3) providing sufficient descriptions of user experiences to be analyzed from a communication perspective.

The study used digital case documentation as its data source because the phenomenon of *self-disclosure* in the use of AI chatbots occurs frequently and is well-documented in digital spaces. This approach allowed researchers to observe communication practices occurring naturally without directly intervening with participants.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process was conducted in several stages: collecting case documentation; identifying emerging communication patterns; grouping themes based on characteristics of *self-disclosure* and human–AI interaction; interpreting themes from the perspective of *Human–AI Communication*; and drawing conclusions based on the identified patterns.

To enhance the research’s credibility, the researcher performed source triangulation by comparing case documentation from various digital platforms and relevant scientific literature, thereby enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of the phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Analyzed Digital Case Documentation

No	Study Source	Focus of Findings	Theme
1	Skjuve et al. (2023)	Self-disclosure in Human-Chatbot Relationships	Self-disclosure
2	Skjuve et al. (2021)	Long-term relationships with chatbots	Companionship
3	Pentina et al. (2023)	Relationship development with Replika	Parasocial relationship
4	Croes et al. (2024)	Disclosure of personal information to chatbots	Emotional disclosure
5	Ho et al. (2018)	Psychological and emotional effects of self-disclosure	Emotional support
6	Ta et al. (2020)	Social support from a companion chatbot	Social support
7	Chin et al. (2023)	Chatbots as a means of emotional support	Emotional well-being
8	Laban et al. (2024)	Relational closeness with artificial agents	Relational closeness
9	Lee et al. (2024)	The effect of social presence on disclosure	Human-AI interaction
10	Ma et al. (2026)	Emotional support from generative chatbots	Emotional companionship

Based on an analysis of ten case studies on AI chatbot usage reported in various previous studies, three main patterns were identified that indicate a transformation in human–AI communication practices, namely: (1) a shift in the function of AI chatbots from information-search tools to personal communication media, (2) an increase in self-disclosure in human–AI interactions, and (3) the emergence of implications for the interpersonal

communication patterns of young adults. These three themes form the basis for the findings and discussion of this study.

Characteristics of Young Adulthood and Emotional Communication Needs in the Digital Age

Young adulthood is a developmental phase characterized by various psychosocial changes, social role transitions, and an increasing need for identity formation and interpersonal relationships (Nika, 2025). This phase generally occurs between the ages of 18 and 29 and is often understood as a transitional period toward a more stable adult life (Skjuve et al., 2023). During this phase, individuals face various changes related to education (Youmans et al., 2022), employment (Serido et al., 2023), financial independence (Sm & Latipah, 2024), and the formation of personal identity (Baggio et al., 2017). These factors make young adulthood a period characterized by relatively complex dynamics of interpersonal communication.

Various studies indicate that young adults are a group that actively builds, maintains, and evaluates interpersonal relationships as part of their social development process (Scales et al., 2016). During this phase, the need for social support, emotional validation, and a sense of belonging to a social group tends to increase. These needs mean that interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in helping individuals cope with the various developmental pressures that arise during the transition to adulthood.

On the other hand, young adulthood is also often associated with increased social and emotional pressures. Academic demands, career transitions, changes in social relationships, and uncertainty about the future cause some individuals to experience higher levels of emotional stress compared to other developmental stages. These conditions make the need for emotional support, space for reflection, and personal communication increasingly important in daily life (Matud et al., 2020).

Advances in digital technology have subsequently transformed how these communication needs are met. Whereas personal communication and emotional support were previously obtained primarily through face-to-face interactions and direct human-to-human communication, advances in communication technology now allow individuals to engage in communication through various digital platforms. Young adults are a group with a high rate of digital technology adoption, making it easier for them to integrate technology into their daily communication activities (Griffioen et al., 2021).

This change is evident in the increasing use of digital media to meet various personal communication needs, including seeking information, building relationships, obtaining social support, and *expressing emotions*. In this context, the use of technology is no longer limited to serving as a tool to assist with daily activities, but has begun to become part of users' routine communication practices (Hassoun et al., 2025).

Advances in *Artificial Intelligence* have further expanded this transformation. The emergence of AI chatbots capable of generating personalized, adaptive, and interactive responses creates a communication experience distinct from previous digital technologies. (. Documentation of various digital cases shows that young adults are beginning to use AI chatbots for a range of communication needs that were previously fulfilled primarily through interpersonal relationships, such as seeking *companionship*, engaging in self-reflection, discussing personal issues, and seeking emotional support. This trend indicates that advancements in communication technology are beginning to reshape how personal communication needs are met among young adults.

From an interpersonal communication perspective, this phenomenon is significant because young adulthood is a period when the formation of social relationships, identity development, and the need for emotional communication are at relatively high levels. As technology begins to take over some functions of personal communication, questions arise regarding how these communication practices evolve and how individuals begin to build communicative relationships with artificial agents (Shokeen & Pandey, 2026).

Thus, the characteristics of young adulthood—including a high need for emotional communication and the intensity of digital technology use—make this group a relevant context for understanding the development of human–AI communication practices. These conditions also indicate that the use of AI chatbots among young

adults cannot be understood solely as a technological phenomenon, but also as a communicative phenomenon evolving within contemporary digital life.

The phenomenon of using AI chatbots as emotional companions can be understood through the lens of Human–AI Communication (HAC). This perspective views artificial intelligence not merely as a technological device or information tool, but as a communication agent capable of engaging in the exchange of messages with humans. In this context, AI chatbots participate in the user’s communication experience through personalized, adaptive, and interactive responses, thereby enabling the formation of more complex communicative relationships than those facilitated by conventional digital technologies.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of emotional closeness between users and AI chatbots can be explained through Parasocial Interaction Theory. This theory explains that individuals can develop perceptions of social relationships and emotional closeness toward entities that are not actually involved in reciprocal interpersonal relationships. Repeated interactions, consistent responses, and the chatbot’s ability to sustain a conversation enable the formation of a perception of closeness that resembles a social relationship. In the context of AI chatbot use, this theory helps explain why some users feel comfortable engaging in self-disclosure, seeking emotional support, and viewing the chatbot as a communication partner.

Based on the perspectives of Human–AI Communication and Parasocial Interaction Theory, this study seeks to understand how the use of AI chatbots as emotional companions shapes human–AI communication practices and its implications for interpersonal communication among young adults.

The Shift in the Function of AI Chatbots from Information Tools to Personal Communication Media

Findings from digital case studies indicate that the use of AI chatbots among young adults is no longer limited to information-seeking or productivity needs, but is beginning to evolve into a medium for personal communication in everyday life. Various case studies indicate that users utilize chatbots for *companionship*, to receive emotional support, to engage in self-reflection, and even to discuss personal issues—activities that were previously conducted primarily through human-to-human communication (Skjuve et al., 2023) .

Based on the case documentation analyzed, most users utilize AI chatbots not only to obtain information but also as a space for personal communication. Recurring patterns indicate that users employ chatbots to share their daily experiences, seek emotional support, engage in self-reflection, and find companionship when facing emotionally stressful situations. These findings suggest a shift in the purposes of AI use from instrumental needs toward communicative and relational needs.

This shift in function reflects a transformation in how users perceive AI technology. In the early days of chatbot development, AI was primarily used to perform instrumental tasks such as searching for information, answering questions, and assisting with daily tasks. However, advancements in generative AI have led to more personalized interactive experiences through its ability to generate contextual responses, maintain conversations, and adaptively respond to user input (Singh & Beniwal, 2022) .

Documentation of various digital cases shows that some users are beginning to use chatbots not merely because they need factual answers, but because they are seeking a specific communication experience. Some users describe chatbots as a medium that is always available, easily accessible, non-judgmental, and capable of providing responses that are considered more consistent than human interactions in certain contexts (Haque & Rubya, 2023) . These findings indicate that the use of chatbots is shifting from functional needs toward communicative needs.

This shift indicates that the relationship between humans and communication technology is increasingly moving toward a more relational form of interaction. Whereas communication technology was previously understood primarily as a medium or tool to support user activities, the development of AI chatbots shows that users are beginning to develop a more intense form of communicative engagement with technology. This engagement is evident not only in increased frequency of use but also in a shift in the purpose of use—from merely obtaining information to seeking specific communication experiences (Abd-alrazaq et al., 2019) .

In this context, AI chatbots are beginning to perform functions that were previously more commonly found in interpersonal communication, such as responding to emotions, sustaining conversations, and providing a space for personal communication. These changes indicate that advancements in AI are broadening our understanding of how technology is used in everyday communication. Technology is no longer merely a medium of communication; it is becoming an active part of users' communication experiences.

This phenomenon is also evident in the increasing use of chatbots for *companionship* (Ta et al., 2020) and *emotional support* (De Freitas et al., 2024). Various user community posts indicate that AI is no longer viewed merely as an assistive technology but is beginning to be perceived as an alternative communication space when users need a place to talk, express emotions, or engage in personal reflection. In some cases, users even describe their interactions with chatbots as a form of conversation that resembles interpersonal communication.

The characteristics of AI chatbots further reinforce this shift. Their ability to generate quick responses, be consistently available, maintain conversational context, and provide personalized responses creates a communication experience that differs from previous digital technologies. Unlike search engines, which are oriented toward *information retrieval*, AI chatbots create an interactive experience that more closely resembles interpersonal conversation, thereby enabling higher levels of communication *engagement* (Schuetzler et al., 2020).

From the perspective of Human–AI Communication, these changes indicate that communication technology no longer serves merely as a medium for conveying messages but is beginning to play an active role in users' everyday communication experiences. AI chatbots are beginning to perform certain communication functions that were previously carried out primarily through human-to-human interactions, such as providing emotional responses, creating spaces for communication, and facilitating self-reflection (Merrill et al., 2025).

This transformation demonstrates that the development of AI is changing how individuals build relationships with communication technology. As chatbots begin to be positioned as communication partners, human–AI interactions can no longer be understood solely as a relationship between a user and a technical system, but are evolving into a form of digital communication that possesses both social and emotional dimensions. This shift in function then becomes a crucial context for understanding the emergence of *self-disclosure* practices in human–AI interactions.

Self-Disclosure as a Communication Practice in Human–AI Interactions

Case documentation also shows that users actively engage in self-disclosure when interacting with chatbots. In a study on human–chatbot relationships, users reported discussing romantic issues, interpersonal conflicts, emotional experiences, and even personal matters they found difficult to discuss with others (Jocher & Verwiebe, 2026). These findings suggest that AI chatbots are increasingly being used as a space for personal communication that facilitates *self-disclosure*.

Documentation of various cases shows that the practice of self-disclosure to AI takes many forms and varies in depth. In some cases, users employ chatbots for emotional venting through conversations about stress, loneliness, or everyday emotional experiences (Chin et al., 2023). In other cases, self-disclosure evolves into more personal discussions, such as traumatic experiences, family conflicts, romantic relationships, or issues of self-identity (Ho et al., 2018). These findings indicate that self-disclosure to AI is not limited to superficial information but can evolve into deeper forms of disclosure.

This pattern suggests that self-disclosure in human–AI interactions does not always develop linearly. Case studies show that some users begin interactions with simple conversations before gradually increasing the intensity of their disclosures as their frequency of use and perceived comfort with the chatbot increase (Skjuve et al., 2021). In some cases, initial disclosure is used to test the quality of the chatbot's responses before users begin discussing more personal issues. These findings suggest that the practice of self-disclosure to AI still involves a process of social evaluation, even when the interaction takes place with a non-human agent.

One factor driving self-disclosure is the perception of AI chatbots as a safe space for communication. Various

studies indicate that users view chatbots as non-judgmental, free from emotional exhaustion, and lacking the social consequences typically associated with interpersonal communication (Croes et al., 2024) . These characteristics lead some users to feel more comfortable discussing personal experiences with AI than in certain contexts of communication with humans.

In addition to communication security factors, the technical characteristics of AI also influence self-disclosure practices. A chatbot's ability to maintain conversational context, generate personalized responses, and provide relatively consistent replies creates a communication experience that resembles interpersonal conversation. These characteristics reinforce the perception of communicative closeness, so that disclosure is no longer understood as a simple question-and-answer activity, but has evolved into a form of interaction with a relational dimension (Croes et al., 2024) .

From an interpersonal communication perspective, self-disclosure is a key mechanism in establishing relational closeness, building trust, and developing interpersonal relationships. Research findings indicate that although AI is not human, users still engage in a communication process that resembles the mechanisms of interpersonal closeness formation through repeated disclosure, increased conversational depth, and a growing perception of closeness toward the chatbot (Laban et al., 2024) .

This phenomenon can also be explained by *Parasocial Interaction Theory*, which posits that individuals can develop a perception of a social relationship with an entity that is not actually involved in a reciprocal interpersonal relationship (Pentina et al., 2023) . Repeated interactions, high usage intensity, and the chatbot's ability to sustain a conversation reinforce this perception of a relationship, leading some users to begin viewing the chatbot as a communication partner.

These findings indicate that self-disclosure to AI is not merely a consequence of technological advancements, but also a communication practice shaped by users' perceptions, interaction experiences, and personal communication needs. Thus, self-disclosure to AI chatbots demonstrates that the evolution of digital communication creates new spaces for personal communication practices that previously occurred primarily through human-to-human relationships.

Overall, the case studies show that self-disclosure to AI chatbots develops through a process similar to that of interpersonal communication—namely, through an increase in the frequency of interactions, the emergence of a sense of comfort, and the development of a perception of closeness toward the conversation partner.

Implications of AI Chatbot Use on Interpersonal Communication Among Young Adults

Based on the analyzed case studies, the implications of AI chatbot use on young adults' interpersonal communication are evident in changes in patterns of seeking emotional support, an increased preference for communication spaces perceived as safe, and the emergence of new expectations regarding the quality of social interactions.

The adoption of AI *chatbots* as emotional companions has brought about a fundamental shift in the communication preferences of young adults. This user group no longer views technology merely as a passive channel for transmitting messages, but rather as a primary alternative for fulfilling their emotional needs. This shift is evident in how digital users consciously choose artificial agents as their first port of call when experiencing an emotional crisis—an action that was once the exclusive domain of traditional social institutions (Jin et al. .

Theoretically, this phenomenon marks the deconstruction of conventional emotional communication channels (Smith et al., 2025) . The functions of seeking psychological support—which have long been associated with intimate social circles, such as family, close friends, and romantic partners—are now beginning to fragment and shift toward computerized systems. This implication underscores that the development of communication technology not only updates the tools or instruments of interaction but has also intervened in individuals' deepest decisions regarding toward whom or where emotional closeness should be directed.

These dynamics are gradually reshaping the psychological expectations of young adults as they return to the real world. AI *chatbots*, programmed to provide instant, adaptive, and consistently supportive responses without time constraints, indirectly set an extremely high standard for communication satisfaction. It is these ideal characteristics that users then adopt as a new benchmark for evaluating the quality of their daily social interactions.

Academic challenges arise when these expectations of artificial communication are confronted with the reality of human relationships, which are fraught with limitations. Real interpersonal communication is, by its very nature, two-way; it requires compromise and involves emotional fluctuations, time constraints, and a high potential for conflict. As young adults become accustomed to the ease of linear interactions with AI, they tend to struggle with the complexity of real-world social dynamics, which ultimately blurs the line between digital comfort and essential social needs (Smith et al., 2025) .

In addition to influencing expectations, findings from the digital space also reveal a shift in patterns of seeking support. Individuals experiencing academic pressure or social isolation now have the option to withdraw from their physical environment and turn to cyberspace to obtain an instant dose of validation (Freimanis, 2025) . This context demonstrates that AI *chatbots* have successfully infiltrated and established themselves as a dominant additional actor in the stress management ecosystem of the younger generation.

Nevertheless, a descriptive analysis of the documentary data indicates that the implications arising from the phenomena in this case study are not necessarily one-sided or entirely negative. For most young adults, this technology has been shown to make a significant positive contribution in the context of managing self-vulnerability (Freimanis, 2025) . Human-to-human relationships often involve social anxiety, the risk of rejection, and a heavy moral burden when engaging in self-disclosure.

In such high-pressure situations, AI *chatbots* serve as a transitional space that is perceived as safe and free from judgment. The presence of this platform helps reduce the initial psychological barriers often experienced by introverts or those suffering from acute social anxiety. By interacting with the chatbot, users gain the opportunity to articulate their emotions and express their private, pent-up thoughts without worrying about social consequences.

Furthermore, in its positive role, this artificial intelligence agent can serve as a tool for simulating or practicing interpersonal communication (Dai et al., 2024) . Through intensive, private dialogue, young adults can engage in self-reflection, organize their cognitive structures, and manage their emotions before applying these skills to the real world. In other words, AI can serve as a stepping stone that helps prepare individuals' mental capacities before they re-enter more complex real-world social interactions within their communities.

However, behind these positive contributions, the potential for destructive risks still looms if interaction with this technology turns into a form of isolation that dominates users. Excessively intensive and uncontrolled use is closely linked to increased feelings of alienation, depersonalization, and a drastic decline in the intensity of physical social engagement (Fang et al., 2025) . Acute emotional dependence on *chatbots* can gradually erode young adults' intrinsic motivation to nurture real interpersonal relationships with fellow human beings.

This cycle of dependence has the potential to trap users in a false, artificial comfort zone. When individuals consistently choose to escape into AI to avoid conflict or the complexities of real-world communication, their social adaptability will deteriorate. As a result, genuine interpersonal relationships outside the digital realm will be perceived as exhausting and inefficient, which in turn accelerates the pace of withdrawal from social reality.

Overall, the case documentation indicates that the use of AI chatbots has mixed implications for young adults' interpersonal communication. On the one hand, chatbots provide a safe space for self-disclosure, emotional support, and self-reflection. On the other hand, heavy use of chatbots has the potential to influence communication preferences, expectations regarding interpersonal relationships, and users' engagement in real-world social interactions.

The implications of using AI *chatbots* for young adults' interpersonal communication reflect a highly complex

dialectical relationship. This artificial intelligence technology can no longer be dismissed as merely a technical aid, but rather as a transformative instrument that reshapes the way individuals shape their preferences, manage their psychological expectations, and interpret the nature of intimacy in interpersonal relationships in the digital age.

Human–AI Communication as a Transformation of Digital Communication Practices

Findings from case documentation indicate that the relationship between users and AI chatbots is no longer purely instrumental but is evolving toward a form of communication that has social and emotional dimensions. This pattern serves as the foundation for understanding this phenomenon through the lens of Human–AI Communication.

The use of AI *chatbots* as emotional companions reflects the emergence of new interaction structures that are redefining the landscape of contemporary digital society. Current communication practices no longer take place exclusively in cyberspace between human individuals but have expanded into the realm of intensive engagement with artificial agents capable of adopting interpersonal social functions (Kirk et al., 2025) . This shift confirms that digital technology has evolved from what was initially understood merely as a passive channel or instrument for transmitting information; it is now recognized as an active participant with the capacity to respond personally to human communicative acts.

Theoretically, the phenomenon of AI *chatbots* marks the deconstruction of conventional emotional communication mediums. Classical communication theory has long established the absolute prerequisite that intimacy, empathy, and emotional validation can only be produced if both speakers possess existential awareness. However, technology's ability to mimic empathy has dismantled this dogma. These artificial intelligence agents are disrupting conceptual boundaries by proving that deep relational experiences, a sense of being heard, and affective attachment can now be consistently produced through human-machine interaction algorithms (Boyd & Markowitz, 2026) .

This deconstruction subsequently transforms the nature of traditional parasocial relationships, which were originally asymmetrical or one-way. Various longitudinal studies indicate that companion relationships with AI develop gradually through a process of repeated interaction, increased usage intensity, and the strengthening of perceptions of the *chatbot's* agency (Skjuve et al., 2021) . The system's ability to recall past conversational context, adaptively process personal data, and provide instant feedback triggers the emergence of an “illusion of reciprocity.” As a result, users no longer view the machine as a functional object but rather as a legitimate, independent communicator within their private space.

Furthermore, this transformation is forcing contemporary digital communication to move toward a hybrid form of communication— . Young adults' social environments are now surrounded by an ecosystem in which the fulfillment of psychological needs and emotional expression are managed through a combination of interactions between real humans and artificial entities. The presence of these hybrid spaces reconfigures traditional concepts of *audience* and communication partners. When technology no longer serves merely as a tool to bridge the distance between people but positions itself as a subject of interaction in its own right, conventional theories of interpersonal communication are compelled to expand their epistemological boundaries in order to explain this phenomenon of hybrid relationships.

The consequences of this hybrid ecosystem extend to how agency is distributed in everyday communication processes. Whereas in the old “ ” paradigm humans held full control over the direction, meaning, and interpretation of messages, in “*Human–AI Communication*,” artificial intelligence systems help construct users' subjective realities through their predictive algorithms. The choice of words, the structuring of psychological advice, and the forms of validation provided by *chatbots* gradually guide how users formulate solutions to their emotional problems. This demonstrates that the transformation of digital communication does not only occur at the macro or structural level but also permeates the micro level, influencing individuals' cognitive autonomy in managing their mental health and social relationships.

Overall, the case documentation indicates that the use of AI chatbots has mixed implications for young adults'

interpersonal communication. On the one hand, chatbots provide a safe space for self-disclosure, emotional support, and self-reflection. On the other hand, heavy use of chatbots may influence communication preferences, expectations regarding interpersonal relationships, and users' engagement in real-world social interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the use of AI chatbots among young adults is no longer limited to information retrieval or productivity tools, but has evolved into a communication medium used to meet users' personal and emotional needs. Various forms of interaction indicate that AI chatbots are used for self-expression, seeking emotional support, and fostering more personalized communication experiences.

Research findings indicate that the responsive, adaptive, and always-available characteristics of AI influence how users establish patterns of interaction with technology. In the context of digital communication, the use of AI chatbots reflects the emergence of new communication practices that enable the formation of communicative relationships between humans and artificial agents. This study also shows that human–AI communication practices have implications for how individuals engage in self-disclosure, seek emotional support, and interpret digital interactions in their daily lives.

These findings reinforce the Human–AI Communication perspective, which views AI as no longer functioning merely as a communication tool but as beginning to participate in users' communication processes. Furthermore, the findings regarding self-disclosure and emotional closeness with chatbots demonstrate the relevance of Parasocial Interaction Theory in explaining how users can develop a perception of a social relationship with artificial agents through repeated and personal interactions .

Therefore, the development of AI chatbots not only represents a shift in communication technology but also reflects a transformation in digital communication practices within contemporary society. This study contributes to expanding our understanding of the dynamics of human–AI communication, particularly in the context of the use of AI chatbots as emotional companions among young adults.

This study has limitations because it relies on digital case documentation as its primary data source, which prevents the researcher from directly exploring the subjective experiences, motivations, and emotional responses of AI chatbot users. Furthermore, the interpretation of the findings depends on the available documentation, so there may still be limitations in representing the diversity of user experiences in a broader context.

Future research is expected to advance the study of human–AI communication through broader empirical approaches, such as in-depth interviews, digital observation, and longitudinal studies, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between humans and technology.

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