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Master's Thesis

From Silicon Valley with Love

How AI Chatbots Are Changing the Support Networks of University Students in Barcelona.

University Master's Degree in Anthropology: Advanced Research and Social
Intervention

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Abstract

“If there were no chatbots, I would talk to more people”. Since the release of ChatGPT in 2022, the capacity of new Generative AI chatbots to produce human-like texts in response to user-entered prompts has taken the world by storm. Teachers, parents, employers and young people are now having to grapple with a reality where computers can answer almost any question, at considerable depth and at unthinkable speed. Using qualitative interviews, this thesis explores the lives of university students in Barcelona, Spain, and asks what role these digital tools play in their support networks. Alongside literature from the fields of Digital Anthropology, Critical Algorithm Studies, Psychology and Science and Technology Studies, this paper puts into question students’ digital practices. Looking for potential benefits and drawbacks, this paper asks why chatbots are being used for self-disclosure and to supplement and sometimes substitute human social interaction and support. Furthermore, this paper explores questions of agency, influence and safety within the context of the use-cases described by participants. This is an extremely novel field of study; however, it is important to highlight the significance of such research given the potency of such an influential innovation.

Key terms:

Chatbots, Loneliness, Support Networks, Emotional Aid, Self-Disclosure

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1. Introduction

Since their emergence at the turn of the decade, Generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT have continued to impress many by their ability to process tasks described in natural language and respond by producing coherent prose, complex computer code or even customised images. Within the academic sphere, their arrival has sparked many conflicts in reply to their effectiveness at completing tasks such as essay writing or research. However, as this paper will explore, university students have begun to employ these systems for far more than just the completion of class assignments. Students now turn to chatbots for personal reflection, self-disclosure and emotional aid; guiding their decision making when faced with concerns and worries about their friends, family or partners. Through the lens of Anthropology, this master's thesis will explore how chatbots have transitioned from digital tools to forming a significant part of students' support networks and daily social interactions.

Running alongside the CORES UAB project ARISE (Anthropology, Reciprocity, Interaction, and Emotional Health; Valenzuela-Garcia, 2025), ethnographic research was carried out amongst university students in the province of Barcelona. Whilst the ARISE project explores experiences of loneliness, student absenteeism and factors that affect student wellbeing, this project will focus on more specific experiences surrounding students' interactions with chatbots, with special attention paid to how students are using these tools for self-disclosure and resolution of psychosocial stressors such as worries about close relationships. By analysing these interactions, the hope is to gain a better understanding of how chatbots may be altering students' support networks, including the displacement of human relationships. Employing semi-structured interviews with university students alongside literature and theory from the fields of Digital Anthropology, Sociology, Critical Algorithm Studies, Psychology and Science and Technology Studies, this master's thesis will investigate the following lines of enquiry.

- i) The ways in which students use chatbots and their motivations.
- ii) How these interactions may be substituting or supplementing social interactions and altering students' support networks, including the impact on peers who don't use the technology.

- iii) How students might be transferring agency by interacting with chatbots and their awareness of this process.
- iv) How students feel about the implications of the continued use and development of this technology.

The social dynamics of the interactions between students and chatbots is an intriguing line of anthropological enquiry and one that asks many questions about what it is to be human. As Pani and colleagues (2024) note, given the novelty of this technology very little research exists on how these interactions impact social states such as belonging or loneliness. Readers may also note that the bulk of the literature used in this research is decidedly recent. Generative AI chatbots are an incredibly new development, and as such, this research joins many other papers at the bleeding edge of academic inquiry. It is hoped that by investigating how students relate to chatbots, we can not only learn more about ourselves, but also how the use of this technology might be changing the ways students interact with each other. In turn, these findings will facilitate an evaluation of these technologies and practices in order to better understand how to integrate them into our lives in a controlled and productive fashion.

This research was inspired by discussions with students and professors about how they use chatbots. Whilst within the academic community, the overriding concern has been how students might use chatbots to avoid the effort and time required to produce original work, a new and unexpected narrative emerged, one that spoke of self-disclosure; productive conversations with, and confiding in, chatbots. Such conversations included topics such as resolving doubts about a significant other, answering questions about health concerns and in-depth philosophical debates. It seemed intriguing that all of these conversations were a potential social interaction. This raised questions such as whether interactions with chatbots could be replacing human social interaction, forming a part of support networks and asked why students were deciding to use chatbots in this way.

2. Literature Review

2.1 University Students: Social and Digital Practices

The university students of today are some of the first people to have never known a world without smartphones, social media and artificial intelligence. Moreover, the recent growth

of generative AI means that most students have made the jump from secondary to higher education at the same time as navigating the implications that these new technologies have on their academic work, social lives and future work prospects, not to mention the potential effects of disempowerment through cognitive offloading and transfer of agency. As emerging adults, higher education students are exceptionally sensitive to cultural shifts, including the use of new technologies (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). They are also a high-risk group for mental health issues (Soler et al., 2025). In fact, the State Survey in Spain (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2024) found that almost half of the 60,000 undergraduate students surveyed have symptoms of depression and anxiety, both of which are associated with a lack of psychosocial support within one's support network (Cobb, 1976). With this in mind, it is no wonder that Lesko (1996) finds that there are few things more important in adolescent life than having friends. In fact, it has been theorised that friendships are some of the most valued connections one can make within a lifetime (Erikson, 1968). Yet research suggests that in some parts of the world, close friends are becoming more scarce, with reported numbers in the USA decreasing by 60 to 90% in the last 35 years (Armstrong, 2022, as cited in Pani et al., 2024). The process of cultivating and maintaining friendships has always been complex, enveloped in social norms and cultural communication. With the dawn of the idea of the "networked teen" (Boyd, 2014), social interactions now include an additional dimension in the digital, one that is an increasingly significant line of academic enquiry in Anthropology and other fields. Similarly, as Al-Jbouri and colleagues (2024) found, young Canadians' use of smartphones was strongly related to practices intended to strengthen social connection and friendship closeness. In fact, Canadian youth cite socialisation as the main reason for interaction with the Internet, and over 45% of participants spent over 4 hours a day on their phone, yet the frequency of their digital interactions was not correlated to the size of their support network. These findings correlate with Sherry Turkle's (2011) discourse in her book *Alone Together* from which this research takes considerable inspiration. Turkle writes that although Internet technologies allow us to be more connected than ever, they do not necessarily increase social interaction. Instead, they allow us to share in the feeling of connection, even when we are alone.

Although cultural differences between the usage of these technologies across different populations of undergraduate students is beyond the scope of this thesis, literature that

discusses the perspectives of connected youth from other parts of the world on similar issues is used to highlight potential parallels, raise issues and ask similar questions related to participants studying in Barcelona. One such parallel is found in McStay and Bakir's (2026) research at Bangor University, Wales which found that most teenagers believe that chatbots have the capability to think and understand. The work of McStay and Bakir (2026) also highlights the same phenomenon that inspired this thesis project. Citing a 2025 survey by Common Sense Media (2025) the two authors note that almost 75% of US teenagers have used chatbots for guidance with psychosocial stressors. In fact, some businesses such as Replika and CharacterAI are already capitalising on this use case, offering so-called Companion Apps which are designed to communicate to users in a more cordial manner. Allowing users to interact with pre-designed and customisable chatbots, they evoke conversations with phrases such as "How are you feeling?" or "Are you mad at me?" (De Freitas & Cohen, 2024). Reportedly, around 50% of Replika users have expressed having a romantic relationship with their chatbot persona (De Freitas & Cohen, 2024), highlighting how the story told by the 2015 film *Her* is now no longer just a figment of the creative imagination.

Furthermore, in Spain one report from Plan International (2025) states that 24% of girls aged 17 to 21 have used chatbots to discuss psychosocial stressors. In the UK almost 33% of teenagers interact with chatbots on most days and 10% frequently have conversations with chatbots about "important or serious" topics (Bakir & McStay, 2026). Amongst these more sensitive conversations they note that older teenagers are more likely to turn to chatbots for advice than their younger contemporaries. This further emphasizes Blakemore and Mills's (2014) assertion that adolescence is a particularly sensitive developmental period which interacts with the increasing pressures and responsibilities acquired as one matures. Most pertinently for this research McStay and Bakir (2026) found that teenagers did not report that their interactions with chatbots had an impact on their human friendships, nor did they view chatbots as a replacement for human connections. This project, therefore, seeks to observe the socio-cultural shift that is occurring due to technological innovation and to better understand what role chatbots are playing in the lives and support networks of adolescents. While it is clear that we are far from a reality where youngsters forego human friendships for ones constructed with machines, it is vital to understand the social implications of this new technology.

2.2 Innovation and Regulation

Current discourses around social media prohibition and their perceived liability for the decline in adolescent mental health emphasizes the risk of allowing the “move fast and break things”, innovation-over-regulation mantra of Silicon Valley to escape criticism. Over the course of just the last year many governments have begun to put legislation in place to regulate access to social media for those deemed under-age. The UK now employs its Online Safety Act (2025) which requires age authentication to access certain websites and Australia recently banned social media services from hosting accounts belonging to anyone under the age of 16 (Online Safety Amendment [Social Media Minimum Age] Bill, 2024). These recent discussions are reminiscent of the “Big Tobacco Moment” of the early 2000s when cigarettes, once thought to be harmless, began to be prohibited. Discourses of abstinence and prohibition are heavily criticised within any debate involving the process of addiction because they propose one totalitarian and often impractical solution, that we must discard or ban the offending substance or vice. However, avoiding the potential repetition of this pattern associated with innovation is surely a desired outcome. Therefore, understanding and observing changing social patterns with respect to emerging technologies would seem a logical step in the right direction.

Already the world has seen news headlines which describe the tragic edge cases following the meeting of this new technology with highly vulnerable individuals. In November 2025 a mother in the USA began legal proceedings to sue the AI companion app Character.ai because she believes her 14 year old son’s conversations with the app were responsible for his suicide (Kuenssberg, 2025). In August 2025 a 60 year-old man was hospitalised after he replaced his table salt with toxic sodium bromide on advice given to him by ChatGPT (Madani, 2025). Finally, as well as the additional four wrongful death lawsuits now filed against OpenAI (Hill, 2025), studies are also questioning how AI could politically influence its users and the technology’s impact in the 2024 US presidential election (Hackenburg et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2025). The extended use of generative AI chatbots is an extremely novel phenomenon and consequently, just as the effects are always discovered after the cause of something, the effects of interacting with these digital services on the lives of their users are uncertain and remain to be thoroughly investigated. This research aims to give answers to some of these questions.

2.3 Chatbots and Anthropology

Just as Picchiotti (2021) writes about social media, the mechanisms which allow generative AI to function make it innately intertwined with anthropological interests. Through vast collection and processing of cultural texts, plus scientific and economic data, generative AI systems simulate human behaviour, emotion and cognition through complex algorithmic processing and calculation. Furthermore, as Boellstorff (2015, as cited in Picchiotti 2024) notes, in contrast to the prescriptive research techniques of other fields, Anthropology's descriptive research techniques offer an important opportunity for the creation of fair and well-informed discourse surrounding the social implications of these new technologies. Not only can Anthropology describe and examine the practices and implications of new technologies, but it is also vital for gaining understanding about the cultural notions of these technologies and how these notions influence their use. In the current literature many academics signal the potential for Anthropology to unravel the complex social practices that surround the use of AI technologies and their conceptualisation. Garnham and Smith (2023) note in their paper *The Social Life of Algorithms* that the fields of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Critical Algorithm Studies have begun to use the lenses of Anthropology "to position the interactions between humans and algorithm-driven technologies as the sites where the concept of an algorithm becomes appropriated" (Garnham & Smith, 2023, p. 273). Satyanarayan and Jones (2024) also point to the capacity for Anthropology to give computer scientists the tools to find meaning in the outputs and effects of GenAI tools. Finally, Hau and Krause-Jensen (2025) emphasise that the same practices that led anthropologists to examine spirits, religion and magic in the nineteenth century must now be applied to examine modernity and technologies such as Generative AI and chatbots. Instead of treating these technologies as a passing gimmick, Hau and Krause-Jensen argue that Anthropology's custom for studying the otherworldly forces of pre-modern animism must now be applied to the equally strange and extraordinary context of the post-modern.

If Anthropology allows us to better understand what it is to be human, then there is a lot to be learned by studying the interactions between us (humans) and machines (who pretend to be human). French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry echoes this sentiment when he wrote: "The machine does not isolate man from the great problems of nature but plunges him more deeply into them" (Akerkar, 2026, p. 1). Furthermore, this line of enquiry is vital

to prevent a situation, as Beer (2017) describes, where social scientists and software engineers operate in two different realms and encounter considerable resistance when trying to cross the void between them. Despite the novelty of this technology, in fields such as Psychology a significant quantity of quantitative research already exists on the usage of chatbots amongst young people. However, after extensive searches for anthropological literature and qualitative research on this topic, papers were found to be incredibly scarce. Besides Hau and Krause-Jensen's (2025) paper on the similarities between chatbot usage and shamanism and Sharma and colleagues' (2026) work for Anthropic on human disempowerment there are almost no anthropological studies that specifically mention chatbot usage. For this reason, it is thought that this research project is the first of its kind in the field of Anthropology.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The History of Chatbots

From search queries using Google Search, to recommendations on Netflix and spelling and grammar correction in Microsoft Word, artificial intelligence (AI) is everywhere. For any person who frequently uses the Internet, the influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence is untold. On social media, AI is used to curate the content we see and influence our choices through exposure to advertisements. These purported enhancements to our lives have been implemented in such a way that, as users, we are often unconscious of the influence that the lines of code written by software engineers can have on us.

Definitions of artificial intelligence are subjective and varied. However, one widely accepted criteria is the ability to complete tasks that, if completed by a human, would require a certain degree of intellect (Turtle, 2011). In other words, what makes a system of algorithms artificially intelligent is the ability to imitate skills, such as learning and problem-solving, at which we as humans consider ourselves naturally gifted (Sheikh et al., 2023). Through decades of development computer scientists have moved far beyond the logical "if *this*, then *that*" design of computer algorithms, creating entirely new fields of computer science research such as machine learning and natural language processing. These developments combine many complex algorithms to produce outputs that can, as of

recently, make discerning human and machine not so easy. As Akerkar (2026) explains, the origins of this field of Computer Science can be traced back to the mid-1900s and the first attempts to mechanise thought and reasoning. In 1950, renowned mathematician Alan Turing considered the possibility of a machine with the capacity to think. Turing proposed a test, now known as the Turing Test, to empirically measure this capacity. The test is described as follows:

The Turing test is a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human. A human evaluator engages in natural language conversations with both a human and a machine, without knowing which is which. If the evaluator cannot reliably tell the machine apart from the human, the machine is said to have passed the test. (Akerkar, 2026, p. 4)

This test has become a cornerstone in the field of Computer Science and the decades following Turing's work have been marked by advancements that close the gap between what can be reliably distinguished as human or machine. One such advancement was made in 1966 by Joseph Weizenbaum, who, during his time at MIT, developed the program named ELIZA. Designed to imitate a conversation with a psychologist, it is thought by many to be the world's first chatbot (Al-Amin et al., 2026). The word chatbot (a synthesis of the words *chat* and *robot*) is described in the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) as "A computer program designed to simulate conversation with a human user, usually over the Internet; especially one used to provide information or assistance to the user as part of an automated service".

In recent years, there have been significant advancements in Generative AI (GenAI), the field of artificial intelligence that focuses on the generation of media such as text, audio and images rather than just the automation of tasks. These advancements have paved the way for significant and rapid improvement of already existing but unimpressive chatbots or, as Turkle (2011) describes them, sociable robots. Developments in machine learning and natural language processing have allowed developers to move away from rule-based chatbots such as ELIZA, which produce very predictable and unnatural responses, towards more natural and dynamic outputs (Adamopoulou & Moussiades, 2020; Al-Amin et al., 2026). Newer chatbots use statistical models called Large Language Models (LLMs), which are trained on vast amounts of text found across the Internet. These models enable chatbot

programs to process natural language input and output using probability to predict the most favourable, human-like result (Liu et al., 2024; Pani et al., 2024).

Chatbots such as OpenAI's ChatGPT have seen an incredibly fast uptake. In just two months after its release in 2022, ChatGPT gained over 100 million users. This is significant in the world of digital platforms and a rate of user onboarding more than four times faster than TikTok, 15 times faster than Instagram and 30 times faster than Twitter (Pani et al., 2024). This swift uptake is no doubt due to the tool's versatility and speed when completing tasks and answering queries. These advancements in chatbots and other Generative AI tools quickly gained the attention of the public, media, politicians and academics, perhaps due to their capacity to generate media content in a way that was, until very recently, unique to the stories of science fiction. Chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini, Grok, Claude and Co-Pilot (owned by OpenAI, Google, X, Anthropic and Microsoft, respectively) are now all able to pass a Turing test with flying colours (Mei et al., 2024), crossing the uncanny valley between what seems to be human and what seems to be machine. Their seemingly dystopian capacity to mimic human traits by reproducing language, speech and audiovisual content has caused many to worry about how these systems may affect their job security, academic integrity and sparked objections to the moral, social and environmental impacts caused by their implementation.

In popular media, the genre of science fiction has long used the threat of artificial intelligence as a narrative for entertainment. Ever since the advent of computers, science fiction books and films have recounted stories of such dystopian fears. These narratives are now being used by journalists (see Artavia, 2023) to catastrophise a dystopian worst-case scenario that some argue we might be heading for. Whether or not we will eventually come to live under oppressive rule of an artificial intelligence such as Skynet (from the 1984 film *The Terminator*) is yet to be seen. However, other films such as the 2015 release *Her*, outline a fictional world in which a man going through divorce falls in love with his artificially intelligent personal assistant. Although thankfully a reality involving Skynet does not seem imminent, as this thesis will discuss, only 10 years after the release of *Her* the fiction that it describes is now very much a reality. One we must navigate while avoiding unnecessary stigmatisation or criticism.

3.2 Digital Anthropology - Humanity and New Technologies

When exploring new digital practices and technologies it is common to oversimplify their existence as something bad or unnatural, and therefore flawed or harmful (Miller, 2021). This phenomenon is most visible when looking at discourses on technologies such as social media. In the last decade, social media has received a considerable amount of condemnation as a major cause of the increasingly poor state of mental health in many countries (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). Whilst its contribution to the issue is most definitely not unpalatable, the scientific literature is still unsure and hesitant to name social media as the sole cause (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). For this reason, research should be hesitant to jump to conclusions about technology and its impact to avoid its demonisation without sufficient evidence. On the other hand, attitudes such as techno-optimism are equally flawed. In a capitalist society technological innovation without regulation or criticism opens doors for large multi-national corporations to exploit users using their data and ultimately exert significant levels of control over populations (Zuckerfeld, 2021).

It is therefore important to highlight that whilst this research does seek to uncover the impact of chatbot usage on the support networks of students in Barcelona, it does not seek to critique nor promote their usage. Hau and Krause-Jensen (2025) point out that underestimating the power of chatbots or becoming prey to “utopian and dystopian visions” is all too easy. In a similar vein, Miller (2021) writes in *The Anthropology of Social Media* that "Digital anthropology must constantly avoid the temptation to simplify or romanticise the predigital world" (p. 87). With this in mind, using the same theory of attainment employed by Miller, this research attempts to avoid both historically focussed nostalgic perspectives and futuristic transhumanist definitions of the human and so-called post-human. These perspectives define humanity by what we used to be, comparing ourselves to a time when new technologies didn't exist or imagining a time when humans are far more capable than ever before. Instead, this theory of attainment allows for a broader definition of ourselves, including all the things that we could be in the future and avoiding impulsive problematisation of new practices enabled by new technologies.

3.3 Support Networks and Emotional Aid

“Humans are social animals” (Hughes et al., 2004, p. 1), our need for belonging is so profound that it is responsible for decades of academic enquiry. Social relationships form the basis of how we learn how to behave, interpret emotions and even help us think. As Wellman and Wortley (1990) write, by forming community ties we create informal agreements to support one another through daily life. These agreements can be formed with all kinds of relationships including (but not limited to) friends, siblings, parents and even neighbours. The social support constructed within these relationships as a reciprocal offering is an important factor in moderation of stress and can even offer protection from physiological illness (Cobb, 1976). It involves the communication of the idea that one is loved, cared for, valued and “belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation” (Cobb, 1976, p. 300). This can involve all kinds of practices at any age, including being breast fed as an infant or an important conversation with a colleague at work.

By forming relationships in our lives, we construct a social network¹ and through expansion of this network we build our social capital. Established by Bourdieu (1972/1977) social capital describes the benefits that are obtained and facilitated through the connections of one’s support network. Emotional aid, described by Cobb (1976), is just one facet of the psychosocial support that a network can offer, and is particularly relevant to this research. In recent decades technology has drastically changed how many people access, interact with and mediate their support networks. Instant messaging, video calling and social media all permit new ways of communicating instantly over large distances. These new communication methods have significant implications on how one can form and maintain relationships and also navigate feelings of loneliness and isolation (caused by the absence of strong social networks or social capital). Despite the new possibilities afforded by these technologies the move to university continues to be a complex phase in life due to the changes in routine it necessitates. Support networks formed during one’s secondary education suddenly become stretched due to changes in routine and location. These changes can cause a phenomenon similar to network rupture described by Louise Ryan and colleagues (2026) in her research on migratory workers. After sudden relocation

¹ Social networks are here on out referenced to as support networks to avoid confusion with social media (Social Networking Sites) and highlight the focus of this research on emotional aid and psychosocial support.

interpersonal connections become difficult to maintain and can therefore be lost. In the university environment specifically this places pressure upon students to form new relationships within their new community as they arrive to university for the first time. This research seeks to uncover the role chatbots play within support networks. Just as Wellman and colleagues (2001) found that online interactions supplemented face-to-face interaction, this research will ask similar questions about how chatbots substitute, supplement or displace people within their support networks.

3.4 Self-disclosure

In order to develop human relationships and offer emotional aid an informational exchange is required. This exchange of personal information from one individual to another requires trust and vulnerability, both of which form part of the process of building of a relationship. This process of informational exchange is called self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As noted by Brandtzaeg and colleagues (2022) in *My AI Friend: How Users of a Social Chatbot Understand Their Human–AI Friendship*, it has been suggested that chatbots can offer a safe environment in which users may self-disclose given their inability to judge, alienate or betray a user and their round-the-clock availability. Other studies have noted that user self-disclosure can be encouraged by designing chatbots which perform self-disclosure of their robot selves, creating the illusion of reciprocity (Lee et al., 2020).

3.5 Sociodigital Practices, Loneliness and the ELIZA Effect

As Sherry Turkle (2011) explains in her book *Alone Together*, technology gives us the perfect apparatus to enable us to be alone but not lonely. Loneliness is a phenomenon characterised by the experience of insufficient quantity or quality of social connection, usually as the result of reduced psychosocial support through weakened social capital and support networks (Pani et al., 2024). It is a subjective reality that is distinct from the very physical reality of social isolation (Ozawa-de Silva & Parsons, 2020). By interacting online through social media, it is perfectly understandable how someone could feel physically alone but not subjectively lonely. This section will look at concepts of loneliness, practice theory and parasocial relationships. Using these concepts, we will explore how sociodigital practices like texting have changed social interactions and the implications of the design of the tools required to engage in these practices on support networks. By exploring this

area this research asks if chatbots, whilst not human, can enable a lone person to feel less lonely.

When discussing loneliness in these contexts it is important to navigate topics carefully to avoid imposing stigma on certain practices. It is not wished to imply that those who use chatbots for emotional aid are experiencing loneliness; this would be an incredibly irresponsible and unfounded claim. Instead, loneliness is used here as the antonym to a functioning support network. It is the absence or extreme lack of satisfactory social interaction. The idea that excessive chatbot interaction could have the capacity to replace or displace people from support networks is key to the motivation of this research. By understanding loneliness, it is hoped that this research can uncover the dynamics that relate to the substitution or supplementation of human social interaction when seeking emotional aid from the output of chatbots.

3.5.1 Habitus and Practice Theory

Bourdieu (1972/1977) describes the concept of habitus as part of his work on social practice theory. Habitus is the practices and habits that a person or collective enact on a regular basis. The repetition of habitus, Bourdieu argues, is what forms culture, produced by the social structures of class, gender, race and age. By considering the habitus of university students (going to class, completing essays, having lunch with friends, having dinner with housemates) we can reflect on what is expected of students and how they may be altering their support networks given these new AI tools made available to them. In this sense, when students choose to interact with chatbots it is not just a rational decision based on their digital skills but rather a performance of their academic habitus as students and young people in Barcelona.

One of the most renowned scholars in social practice theory is Elizabeth Shove (2012). She posits the three dimensions of materials, competencies and meanings to define social practices. Materials are things, objects, technologies and bodies. Competencies are knowledge and skills. Finally, meanings are ideas and desires which hold symbolism in some form. These dimensions are relevant in this research when we consider what occurs when a student decides to interact with a chatbot instead of a friend or even professor. They are changing the materials, competencies and meaning of their practice. It goes without saying the materials required for conversation with another person are vastly different to

those required for interaction with AI models. To interact with chatbots we need electricity, an internet connection and a computer or smartphone. Moreover, the competencies change too, chatbots require a level of digital literacy in order to facilitate engagement in a written exchange. For example, how to connect to the Internet and where to find a chatbot. Finally, with the knowledge that one is interacting with a chatbot the meaning of the interaction changes too. One may apply less emotional significance to an interaction with the knowledge that the other party involved is not human.

3.5.2 Parasocial Relationships and Safety

Given that chatbots cannot feel, their existence is limited to the simulation of human behaviour through the production of text fabricated by computation. This begs the question about the kind of relationship formed between someone who repeatedly interacts with a chatbot. Turkle (2011) alludes to why interactions with chatbots (or as she calls them, sociable robots) may be attractive.

“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.” (p. 1)

The concept of parasocial relationships, originally surmised by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956), provides a suitable framework with which to explain the dynamic which Turkle describes. With the rise of mass media, Horton and Wohl wanted a model to define the types of relationships formed between performer personalities on radio, television and film and their audiences. As they explain, in parasocial relations there are two roles. The first is the persona, the subject of the relationship and the one who offers it in the first place by making themselves public. Second is the role of the audience, the one who may choose to take part in the relationship. They describe parasocial relations as almost completely unidirectional, void of reciprocity, meaning the spectator is under no obligation to maintain the relationship with the persona and there are no consequences for leaving it; no demands of a reciprocal relationship. For some, there is comfort to be found in this lack of responsibility or need for commitment. This comfort, described by Horton and Wohl as parasocial safety, is perhaps what David Levy (2008) describes in his book *Love and Sex with Robots*. Here, Levy suggests that relationships with machines could be an

improvement on relationships with humans given that all worry about the pain caused by cheating or heartbreak can be safely forgotten.

3.5.3 The Chatbot Interface and ELIZA Effect

Returning to Shove's (2012) practice theory, when we consider sociodigital practices such as texting, the materials, competencies and meanings between human-human and human-chatbot interactions are suddenly not so distinct, varying only in their meaning. We can see this clearly by comparing the interfaces of chatbots (like ChatGPT) and instant messaging apps (such as WhatsApp), shown in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. The already familiar instant messaging layout of chatbot apps allows the programs to perform a level of human connection through imitating existing sociodigital practices.

Figure 1
ChatGPT Mobile Interface

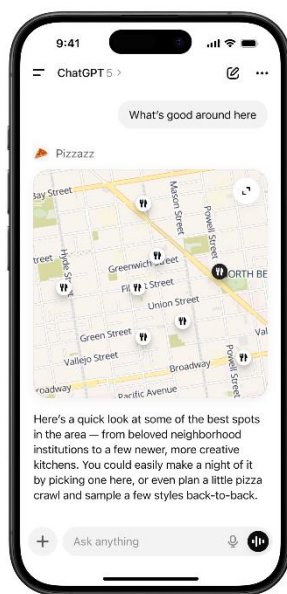


Figure 2
WhatsApp Mobile Interface



Note. Figures 1 and 2 above display the current interface design of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) and WhatsApp (Meta, 2023). WhatsApp is chosen as an example here given its popularity, however, almost all smartphone based instant messaging apps share a very similar design. Images are reproduced for illustrative purposes.

Unlike the parasocial relations of TV and radio described by Horton and Wohl (1956), chatbot interactions rely fundamentally on language exchange. In a persona-audience relationship there is little communicational reciprocity, meaning the interactions are entirely controlled by the persona from their public platform. However, the lack of emotional reciprocity in human-chatbot interactions is unavoidable. The authors describe how parasocial relationships are often based on fantasy and contrived intimacy. This kind

of intimacy employs performance to blur the lines between performer, audience and close friend.

What Horton and Wohl (1956) describe bears striking similarities to what Turkle (2011) describes as the ELIZA effect (named after the 1960s chatbot ELIZA). On the one hand, by emulating existing sociodigital practices like texting, the chatbot interface allows people to “fill in the blanks” (Turkle, 2011, p. 24) and delude themselves into believing that the chatbot might understand, just like a friend on WhatsApp might. Turkle writes “Faced with a program that makes the smallest gesture suggesting it can empathize, people want to say something true” (p. 23). On the other hand, perhaps the question is not “can a chatbot feel?” but rather “do people care?”. As previously mentioned, perhaps it is precisely the inanimate nature of chatbots which invites people to self-disclose in parasocial safety, safe from judgement or ridicule. Perhaps, as Turkle suggests rather pessimistically, our disposition to self-disclose to a robot does not highlight how much we trust the robot but rather our great lack of trust in each other.

3.5.4 Weak and Strong Empathy

Empathy, Bakir and McStay (2025) write, is to “share or understand others’ emotions, feelings, or experiences” (p. 6369). Much like contrived intimacy the concept of weak empathy describes an emotional connection with little to no responsibility implied (Bakir & McStay, 2025). Beyond the affordances of their interfaces many chatbots are designed to emulate empathy within their output in order to appear more caring and less robotic (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022). As Turkle (2011) considers, if AI is defined by “getting machines to do things that would be considered intelligent if done by people.” then, she notes, “we are coming to a parallel definition of artificial emotion as the art of “getting machines to express things that would be considered feelings if expressed by people” (p. 63). Chatbots cannot understand what it is to lose a loved one or fall in love, but they can perform an understanding, allowing us to choose to accept this performance or not. Bakir and McStay argue that weak empathy is employed by AI in an attempt to make us accept this performance. They explain that weak empathy involves reading, judging and interacting within intimate contexts of human experience but lacks responsibility, solidarity and co-presence: all qualities of strong empathy. The pair posit that whilst chatbots may emulate (weak) empathy, it is incapable of strong empathy because it lacks the ability to feel or make moral comparison based on experience. Notably, they note that the use of weak empathy

is a psychopathic trait and caution towards the utilisation of empathy as a device to keep users engaged with chatbots.

3.6 Agency, Power and Influence – The “Social Power” of Algorithms

Just as Hau and Krause-Jensen (2025) remind us that chatbots are more than the reinvention of the pocket calculator, this research posits that chatbots are far more than just digital tools. As we will discuss, the practices of chatbot users are deeply woven with emotional communication and agency which, in turn, make chatbots participants within a user’s support network and not just passive infrastructure. Miller (2021) explores these dynamics in the context of social media, describing a phenomenon familiar to many before him, including sociologist Bruno Latour and British prime minister Winston Churchill who is quoted to have said “we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us” (Churchill, 1943). Miller (2021) echoes this statement by describing how “Online as well as offline, we see a constant dialectic between how machines configure us and we configure the machine” (p. 98). He is keen to highlight how the construction of algorithms which collect data on our behaviour creates a flat ontology where humans and machines interact at equal scale, from machine to human and human to machine.

To many, the ideas of both Churchill and Miller are instantly recognisable being resonant with Bruno Latour’s (2005) Actor Network Theory (ANT). This theory describes a flat ontology where human and non-human objects or actors have equal agency. A birthday cake, for example, may in some way bring people to a social gathering, but it also has to be bought, which requires a baker to buy the required ingredients from a supplier who has procured these ingredients from various farms. This creates a network of agency that links everyone at the birthday party to the baker, supplier and farms and creates the social object that forms the cake. The lens that ANT provides us is even more potent when we consider technology. The work of anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2015) shows this clearly by exploring the online world of *Second Life* (one of the largest online virtual worlds, where people create their own characters and interact with others). Boellstorff considers the virtual world a genuine social space, which requires the consideration of non-human agency. In a society where technology and digital practices are so intertwined with daily social interaction, considering the agency of non-human actors is vital to understand how we interact not only with each other, but also with machines across a constantly evolving

infrastructure. If we consider a smartphone instead of a birthday cake, this flat ontology becomes easier to grasp. How many people, places and connections does the smartphone enable? If it breaks, how many people, places and connections are lost?

ANT is not without critique. Some argue its proposed flat ontology makes it far too easy to connect anything with anything and apply cause and effect to that connection (Larrión, 2023). Moreover, critiques from post-colonial and feminist studies have argued that ANT oversimplifies interactions and hides power structures making it politically naïve (Quinlan, 2012). However, the basic idea that non-human actors such as chatbot technologies can impart agency and participate in support networks is vital to understanding these interactions. As Gutiérrez (2024) writes on ANT and ChatGPT, AI now posits an additional axis to Latour's theory, one where non-human actors come together to exhibit human traits of intelligence. However, whilst a chatbot like ChatGPT may be considered to have agency, this does not imply an animist perspective. Just as Turkle (2011) and Switzky (2020) explain when they describe the ELIZA effect, faced with a chatbot that exhibits these human traits, it is very easy to overestimate (willingly or unconsciously) a chatbot's intelligence. Most importantly, Gutiérrez (2024) reminds us that "agency is a process not an ethereal substance" (p. 1067).

When applying the concepts of ANT to chatbot interactions we are immediately greeted by the existence of the network of actors between a person and a chatbot. These actors include the hardware used by the person (a computer or smartphone), the network of machines that forms the Internet, the design and sales team who create the algorithms that power the chatbot and even other users who give feedback on the output. All of these actors come together to influence the interactions between a person and a chatbot in various ways and result that these interactions are not passive, but rather the sum of multiple processes of agency networking together. The power relationships within this network are, therefore, not established by the design of the system but by these networks of association. That is to say that we, as humans, are not passive recipients of this technology but active users who manipulate, tweak and resist their affordances to our advantage. In order to understand how chatbots interact with support networks it is important to understand their reach and role within the lives of those who use them; they are social intermediaries (Gutiérrez, 2024) and as such they mirror many social behaviours only possessed by those who have the power to exercise agency across a whole network.

3.6.1 Co-agency and Distributed Cognition

In their paper *Intelligence as Agency: Evaluating the Capacity of Generative AI to Empower or Constrain Human Action*, Computer Scientist Arvind Satyanarayan and Anthropologist Graham M. Jones (2024) echo the concepts of ANT by discussing distributed cognition. This is the idea that cognitive processes can occur across more than one member of a social group and can involve social interactions that shape one's environment (Hollan et al., 2000). Satyanarayan and Jones (2024) argue that people now interact with GenAI chatbots not only as objects but as “active agents” distributing their cognitive processes between themselves and the chatbot. Drawing from Linguistic Anthropology to explain relationship between the act of writing and agency, they describe chatbots as co-agents which share in decision making. Where old technologies such as search engines acted as cognitive aids expanding our reach of knowledge, chatbots go one step further to engage in interpretation, make moral judgements and even adapt to the emotional state of the user. For example, when a person asks a chatbot if their partner is being manipulative, they are asking for a moral judgement and distributing moral cognition. When a student asks a chatbot to write their professor an email, they are changing that social practice of communication.

Distributed cognition plays a significant role in exploring support networks as it explains how when a new tool or institution enters a system it doesn't just change what people do, but also how we think. As Satyanarayan and Jones (2024) explain, by creating written text, chatbots engage in processes of agency. These processes are afforded to the chatbot through its interface which allows the machine to participate as co-agents in the act of writing. Yet, a chatbot has no capacity to comprehend what it has written. As a statistical model a chatbot simply writes the most favourable output as per its training data and therefore it is incapable of commencing action independently.

The level of cognitive load we are happy to accept depends on the task and rewards for the task at hand. AI now allows us to choose which tasks we wish to take full responsibility for, for example hobbies or leisure, and which we wish to outsource or distribute, for example chores or mundane tasks. The consequence of repeated and deliberate cognitive distribution is described by Risko and Gilbert (2016) as the phenomenon Cognitive Offloading. From the field of cognitive science, it illustrates how we outsource our cognitive processes by using our bodies and our environment to think and reduce mental effort. This can include using a calculator, writing a shopping list or even using our fingers to count.

Whilst this process can enable us to do things we wouldn't normally be able to do were it not afforded to us by our environment, it also creates a risk that we lose the ability to do these things without offloading the task somewhere else. This is particularly apparent when considering chatbots as they open an avenue for significant cognitive offloading in many contexts of life, including social relationships. If chatbot users begin to offload their moral judgment or communication skills, there is a risk they will lose the ability to maintain these abilities. However, it should be noted that concerns of such cognitive offloading have existed throughout history. As far back as the Ancient Greeks, Plato's (1997) *Phaedrus* shows us how Socrates was worried that the act of writing would destroy our ability to remember. Yet, 2000 years later, besides our shopping lists and diaries, memories are still very much a part of being human.

3.6.2 Silicon Valley Capitalism

It is almost impossible to discuss the concept of chatbots and their usage without mentioning the power structures they construct and operate within. Some of the most popular chatbots such as Gemini, Copilot and MetaAI are property of the largest technology companies on the planet. Alphabet and Meta specifically, along with many other Generative AI businesses, are based in San Francisco's Silicon Valley, USA. The revenue of these companies is vast, and so is their power. Their business model offers services to people for free in order to provide targeted advertising spots to other businesses looking to sell their products to a specific demographic. This is achieved via the collection of large amounts of data on user's habits and identities, a process called datafication (Gutiérrez, 2024). This process has led to the advent of Surveillance Capitalism, defined by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) as "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (p. 9). Here, we are reminded of the saying "If you are not paying for it, you're not the customer; you're the product" (Tranberg & Heuer, 2012, p. 27). This business model, whereby people's attention is required to generate revenue, forms the basis of an Attention Economy (Heitmayer, 2025). The recent addition of advertisements to ChatGPT demonstrates how this model continues to be the golden standard for Silicon Valley. As Gutiérrez (2024) notes, this "datafication" has effectively made a market in competition for data on users' interests, behaviours and emotions which greatly threatens privacy.

Surveillance Capitalism and the Attention Economy enable dangerous power dynamics within digital practices, especially amongst those with lower digital literacy who do not understand how their data is being used. This is highlighted by Bakir and McStay (2025) in their work *Move Fast and Break People? Ethics, companion apps, and the case of Character.ai* (a play on words of the renowned “move fast and break things” mantra of Silicon Valley). The authors are keen to express their concern about the consequences of using engagement (the number of users or time spent on a platform) as a measure of success, as it promotes what they call “exploitative design”, including the use of excessive weak empathy performance. As we are already seeing with social media, in search of more profit, companies design their apps in ways that promotes extended and continued use, effectively making them more addictive. The problem here, Bakir and McStay argue, is that when businesses build chatbots using exploitative design they invite extended and continued use, effectively perpetuating surveillance capitalism by inciting intense self-disclosure of a user’s thoughts or worries. This practice encourages the building of human-machine intimacy for the sake of profit, leaving the user powerless.

3.6.3 Trust in Algorithms

The second axis of these power structures comes in the form of truth and trust. In *The Social Power of Algorithms*, David Beer (2017) expands on Foucault’s discussion on truth and power to include modern technologies. Beer writes that the notion of an algorithm as a mathematical tool affords it a level of confidence in its rationality, efficiency and apparent (although not objective) neutrality through the knowledge that its output is a result of rigorous calculation and copious amounts of data. This notion is what gives an algorithm power, for this reason it is important to understand not only how students use chatbots, but also what they think about them.

Foucault (2003 as cited in Beer, 2017) argues that without a discourse of truth, power cannot be exercised. In this context, chatbots wield power in the trust that they are afforded by the way their output is constructed. A discourse of truth is created through the idea that chatbots are able to methodically process huge amounts of data much faster and more comprehensively than humans. Therefore, the discourse goes, their output must be reliable and unbiased because it is based on the principles of science and mathematics, like a calculator. The companies that own these technologies are aware of this, in fact many chatbot platforms now display short disclaimers next to the prompt entry field. For

example, Google's Gemini states "Gemini is AI and can make mistakes, including about people" (Google, 2026) and Anthropic's Claude similarly asserts "Claude is AI and can make mistakes. Please double-check responses" (Anthropic, 2026). Despite these efforts to remind users of the fallibility of AI, as a society we have grown to place enormous trust in machines and have become somewhat blind to their bias and errors. We can see the existence of this in Mager's (2012) work, which demonstrates how capitalist ideologies find their way into search engine algorithms, a technology that we place enormous trust in every day.

As Beer (2017) writes, the consequence of placing such levels of trust in these technologies is that the agency of user and machine can become blurred. This loss of agency is particularly concerning when we consider simultaneous processes of datafication and scenarios "where algorithms are seen to be taking decisions out of the hands of a human actor" (p. 5). Business models based on datafication and attention also cause what Eli Pariser (2011) calls filter bubbles. These bubbles are created by algorithmic sorting designed to increase engagement. The result places users in a kind of echo chamber of content mirroring their own beliefs, tastes and tendencies, and lacking in external or opposing opinions or perspectives. As Beer writes, this phenomenon is already a concern within chatbot interactions given the propensity of many of them, by design, to copy and reaffirm the mannerisms, communication styles and opinions of the user in order to make them appear more amenable and appealing. As Dewitte (2024) argues, these filter bubbles become "emotional bubbles" where the performed emotional attitudes of a chatbot are really only a reflection of the user. Both Bakir and McStay (2025) and Sharma and colleagues (2026) warn that these emotional bubbles, can cause reality detachment by creating a feedback loop through sycophancy where a user is rarely challenged and agreeable or flattering responses are prioritised over truth or accuracy.

3.6.4 Situational Disempowerment

This reality detachment described by Bakir and McStay (2025) is highly relevant to what Sharma and colleagues (2026) call Situational Disempowerment in their research for Anthropic. They write, "A human is situationally disempowered to the extent that: 1. their beliefs about reality are inaccurate; 2. their value judgments are inauthentic to their values; 3. their actions are misaligned with their values" (p. 3). Both of these concepts are highly relevant to this research because they underline the potential risks of using chatbots for

emotional aid and self-disclosing psychosocial stressors. By disclosing personal information to large companies, users forego some degree of privacy which is then rewarded by a discourse of truth that has the potential to manipulate and distort their view of reality in a way that a human interaction might not. However, just as Gutierrez (2024) notes, interactions with chatbots are not passive. Whilst chatbots may be able to exert power through the trust provided to them, users are also able to manipulate or subvert chatbots in order to achieve a desired output. This process is described by Hau and Krause-Jensen (2025) as prompt engineering. They write, “the manipulation flows in both directions, creating a mutual dance of adaptation where both parties are simultaneously manipulators and manipulated, each shaping the other's responses through their interactions.” (p. 5). The pair argue that chatbot interactions bear many similarities with shamanic ritual. The chatbot becomes a portal into a black box which procures information in a way most chatbot users do not fully understand. Furthermore, the results of datafication create a loop whereby the information and interactions we glean from Generative AI models are based on information gleaned from our online selves. Hau and Krause-Jensen describe how, despite the “I am an AI” disclaimers, many users know that behind the screen there lies the power to do many things in ways they do not fully grasp. When we interact with chatbots, we become the shamans of the digital realm.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methodological Design and Justification of Sample

The methodological design of this master's thesis adopts a mixed methods approach led by semi-structured interviews which explore students' experiences and interactions with chatbots and the implications of these interactions on their support networks and broader social context. These interviews, which form the central part of analysis, are complimented by demographic data and self-reported responses to a three-item UCLA Loneliness Scale for insights into possible variation in chatbot usage patterns due to age, gender, living situation and social capital. This scale is used as an established framework with which to explore feelings of loneliness rather than an explicit quantitative result. This methodology was devised in collaboration with the *CORES UAB* project *ARISE* of which this master's thesis and its supervisors form a part of. Whilst the use of chatbots is certainly not a

phenomenon confined to those who are fortunate enough to access higher education institutions, the opportunity to work alongside the *ARISE* project and investigate this new and relatively uncharted area in the context of a higher education institution seemed too promising to turn down. Moreover, university students in Barcelona are exceptionally positioned as fortunate young people who already engage with technology by virtue of their exposure to digital devices from an early age and by what is asked of them during their time completing academic studies. In fact, some companies like Google and Microsoft offer premium and unlimited versions of their chatbot agents for free exclusively for students (Rajput, 2025), showing their awareness that students are a promising market for these tools. Just like internet search engines, the collection and synthesis of data is something that Generative AI has proven to be extremely capable at (Sengar et al., 2025), and it is therefore no wonder that students have turned to these tools to as aids with their studies.

For those fortunate enough, going to university often marks a new phase in life. Students now enter this phase alongside the rapid innovation of chatbots posing significant ethical, environmental and existential questions. Those with smaller or more distant support networks who experience loneliness could potentially feel a greater impact caused by these life changes. Given that students in higher education are a high risk group for mental health disorders (Blasco et al., 2019; Soler et al., 2025) how this support network functions and the social interactions within it should be an important line of inquiry. The move to university is sometimes framed as an opportunity for one to build new relationships due to the changes it imposes on previous social ties. This unique situation of “network rupture” (Ryan et al., 2026) combined with pressure to navigate a new social landscape may place students in a situation where they are more disposed to seek emotional aid and psychosocial support from chatbots. Above all else, the early stage in life in which these changes and new foundations are built means that it is no surprise that young people are highly susceptible to cultural change, including changes in digital practices (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Students in Catalonia, for example, are especially relevant in this regard given their wide and rapid adoption of AI tools (three points ahead of the national average, [Planeta Formación y Universidades, 2025]). For this reason, university students in Barcelona are an exemplar population to study in relation to this issue.

As Rubin and Rubin (1995 as cited in Morgan, 1999) state, qualitative interviewing “allows us to share the world of others to find out what is going on, why people do what they do,

and how they understand their worlds.” In the case of this research these understandings are significant as it is impossible to separate the ontology of chatbots with the cultural connotations they carry. To be precise, the interactions between students and chatbots are informed and created by students’ prior experiences and knowledge on what a chatbot is, does and performs. It is therefore the role of this research to understand all facets of this ontology, and the interpretations within which it is bound. In this sense it is not only important to discover how students use chatbots, and how this may be changing their support networks, but also what this means to them. Furthermore, due to their sensitive nature, chatbot interactions that involve self-disclosure occur in private spaces without external observation. This means that this phenomenon lacks public visibility. This research aims to shed light on these private interactions in order to analyse their impact. University students are an exceptional sample to investigate in this way, as reflexivity and self-evaluation is an important process within academic study and something many are very accustomed to.

In scientific investigation validity and reliability are often held as keystones for quality research. However, with qualitative study achieving these qualities is often fraught with significantly more difficulty than with quantitative research. Relationships between researcher and participant are difficult to recreate and therefore attempts to reproduce research may result in significant variation. Transparency is therefore vital as it allows the reader to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Furthermore, by always exploring contradictions and inconsistencies and ensuring that the primary themes of interviews are covered with each participant it is hoped that the credibility of this research is increased.

4.2 Participant Profiles and Sampling

Using snowball sampling, potential participants were approached by direct contact using my own network within the university community first, and later the networks of the initial participants and other connections within Barcelona. The participants’ networks were contacted using a short online form. A link to this form was passed on by willing participants to other students in their network via social media and students could leave their contact details in the form if they wished to be interviewed.

It is important to state that this research does not pursue any form of statistical representation, the scale of the research ($N = 8$) is far too small for this. However, participants were only interviewed if they met three criteria. The first two were status as a current undergraduate or postgraduate student in the province of Barcelona, Spain and availability to participate in interviews. The third criterion was completion of age requirements defined using the World Health Organisation's (2026) definition of "Youth" and "Young People" which extend up to 24 years of age. This age bracket is used by the World Health Organisation for statistical comparison only and is not applied here with any implication of universal significance. Instead, the age limit is prescribed to produce a degree of homogeneity, allowing this research to focus on depth rather than breadth. By removing variation in participants' life stage (and consequently protracted variation in their support networks and digital practices) more scope for comparison between cases is achieved without generalisation. Starting a new course of study in a higher education institution is often a significant life change especially for younger students; often involving changes in everyday social interactions and even residential situation (Burke et al., 2016). Such changes, while still significant, would not be the same for someone in a later stage of life, perhaps with existing professional experience, longstanding personal network or long-term partner, for example. The use of criteria here is supported by Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019) ideas on ethnography, choosing to define the sample using time, people and context. Moreover, rather than employing random sampling methods used in quantitative investigation this research employs an interpretive ethnographic approach supported by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) and echoed by Patton's (2002) ideas of "purposeful sampling". This method of sampling advocates for the selection of participants who are most capable of providing significant insight into the phenomenon in question. In practice this meant approaching potential participants who had previously expressed their chatbot usage patterns prior to interview. A small number of participants were interviewed despite their assertion that they did not use chatbots for emotional aid. This decision was significant as it offered an important opportunity to gain an outside perspective on how the use of chatbots may have external effects on those who do not employ these tools for self-disclosure or emotional aid but who inhabit the support networks of students who do.

Over the course of two months (April and May 2026), 8 participants were interviewed. Interviews were stopped when saturation was reached and new themes ceased to appear.

Table 1 below shows the profiles of the participants interviewed for this master's thesis. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants.

Table 1

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Place of Residence	Program of Studies	Year of Study	Residential Situation
Carla	23	W	Barcelona	Secondary Education	Master	Shared flat
Enrique	19	M	Sabadell	Political Sciences	1	With family
Paulo	24	M	Barcelona	Geoinformation	Master	Shared flat
Mariona	24	W	Valle de Valles	Gender Studies	3	With family
Jordi	22	M	Barcelona	Anthropology	3	With family
Magdalena	20	W	Ripollet	Primary Education	3	With family
Miguel	18	M	Barcelona	Asian Studies	1	With family
Ruben	24	M	Barcelona	Gender Studies	3	Shared flat

Table 1 shows that whilst participants hailed from a variety of different courses almost all courses were humanities subjects or closely related. This is potentially due to my own positioning within the university community and the networks I was therefore given access to. Every effort was made to ensure an equal representation of genders, however, in the end equal representation was not possible given the prospective participants I was approached by were majority male by a significant degree. Despite this, extended evaluation of the impact of these variables on the research questions is outside the scope of this master's thesis, although general patterns may be noted.

4.3 Interviews and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in two parts and lasted roughly an hour in duration. The first part covered demographic data (such as age, living situation and course of study) and information about support networks such as the number of people participants felt they could confide in and a measurement of subjective loneliness using the UCLA loneliness scale. The second part examined the participants' views on chatbots and how they and those within their support network relate to them. Interview audio was recorded using a smartphone and files were stored locally and confidentially. At the start of the interview,

participants were asked to introduce themselves, which often meant repeating themselves after permission for recording had been established, however, this allowed for an opportunity for them to get comfortable. If while introducing themselves they did not express any demographic information that was sought after, they were simply invited to do so with a short question.

Interviews collected self-evaluated quantitative data on participants' support networks and perceived loneliness. This was evaluated using the three-item version of the University of California and Los Angeles Loneliness (UCLA) Scale developed by Hughes and colleagues (2004). The UCLA Loneliness scale is well-established as an effective instrument in measuring one's level of perceived social isolation (Russell, 1996) and works well alongside anthropological research as it focuses on subjective social experience. The three-item version was chosen for its brevity as extensive exploration of social isolation is not the focus of this research. It is used here to investigate the extent to which perceived loneliness shapes or informs participants' orientation toward chatbot use. Despite its function as a psychometric measurement instrument, the scale was utilised in this research as a sensitising device to initiate reflection on participants' support networks, using the end score as a starting point for discussion rather than a quantitative result. Given that I wanted to explore participants support networks, the questions provided by the three-item scale offered a well suited, recognised structure to do so instead of designing abstract questions. This was considered an important decision given the sensitive nature of the topic.

The second part of the interview comprised of in-depth questions that related to chatbot usage and interactions and support networks. Participants were asked about themes that aligned with the research questions detailed in this paper, including which chatbot agents they used and what for, whether they or people they knew had confided in a chatbot agent about something personal, in what manner they spoke with chatbots and whether they would continue to use the chatbots in the same way in the future. This qualitative data combined with the data from the first part of the interview facilitated insight into how interactions with chatbots mediated or integrated into the participant's support network.

Given that this field of research is incredibly new, the preservation of interpretive research and inductive reasoning was of high importance during the design stage. As such, this research was not carried out with a specific hypothesis in mind, however, the discourses

amongst students and professors around self-disclosure towards chatbots did spark the question that these usage patterns may be altering support networks. This question was then developed following a review of the literature. Many of the questions used in the interview guide (Appendix 1) took inspiration from existing literature on chatbot interactions, as explained below.

McStay and Bakir's (2026) work on whether UK teens think AI companions "understand" inspired the following two questions:

"Do you feel that the chatbot is capable of showing some form of empathy and truly *understands* what you ask, or do you think it is simply processing data?"

"Have you ever used, or do you know someone who uses, virtual companions such as *CharacterAI* or *Replika*?"

These questions were formulated to better understand how much trust students placed in chatbot responses. The use of virtual companion apps was also explored. Given the exceptionally friendly design of AI agents such as Character.ai and Replika, it was thought that both trust and usage of these platforms could have an impact on how much students confide in chatbot agents.

The work of Sharma and colleagues at Anthropic (2026) on how chatbots may be enabling human disempowerment inspired a number of questions:

"Have you, or someone you know, ever used a chatbot to talk about personal or social matters, such as doubts, problems, or questions that you would normally discuss with friends, a partner, or family?"

"Do you trust chatbots to tell you when you are wrong?"

"Do you think you could feel less lonely by using a chatbot, even knowing that it is not a real person?"

These questions covered the bulk of the themes explored in this research, including the use of chatbots as a resource for emotional aid to resolve or process psychosocial issues, how chatbots may react to false information and whether people feel accompanied and supported by chatbots.

Interview questions were originally devised in Spanish but are presented here after translation by the author. Similarly, interviews were conducted and transcribed into Spanish and therefore quotations used in this paper have been translated into English for continuity of language. Translation is never a simple process, and it is acknowledged that some nuance may be lost when translation occurs, for this reason original untranslated quotations can be found in the annexes section to provide transparency and expose any potential interpretation bias.

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed using noScribe, an open-source, local (not cloud-based) and therefore secure and confidential AI transcription program created by Kai Dröge (2026). Transcriptions were supported by note taking during interviews and form an integral part of the ethnography. QualCoder, a free open-source qualitative data analysis application was then used to code and categorise the interviews for qualitative analysis. All data was processed locally, maintaining the ethical commitments required of such research. Codes were created inductively by analysing themes that occurred during the interviews and creating new codes as they emerged, rather than using a predefined framework. Although interviews were semi-structured (questions were open ended and themes outside of prescribed questions were often explored) the number of questions and the duration of the interview meant that many topics occurred across all interviews, which is a desirable outcome in this context. This meant that the first handful of interviews played the largest part in building the coding structure with later interviews adding fewer codes as less new themes appeared and saturation was reached. After open coding, data categories were then refined where needed, often by merging overlapping thematic territory. These themes are detailed in the results section but also mirror topics found in the literature review and theoretical framework.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Consent

After requesting permission to record audio, participants were asked for verbal consent in order to participate. This consent was given by all participants displayed in this paper

following the reading of the statement found, along with the full interview guide, in Appendix 1 to ensure participants were informed on what to expect, how their data would be used, that their participation was voluntary and abandoning the study was possible at any time. Two more opportunities for consent or denial of participation were offered during and after the interview. Some of the topics covered in the interview had the potential to evoke significant self-reflection and potentially complex emotions. Every care was taken to avoid conflict, and participants were not pressed for answers where they did not want to give them. This area is of special concern given the already highlighted sensitivity of university students to poor mental health (Soler et al., 2025). For this reason, creating repeated opportunities for participants to leave the interview should they wish was of high priority. These moments were also used to break the interviewer-interviewee dynamic and ask if there were any problems or if they were happy with how the interview was going. As mentioned in the previous section, all data was treated with the utmost care and stored locally on my own devices. Interview audio and transcripts were never shared with any external service or party and all data processing occurred locally without the use of third-party cloud services.

4.5 Strengths, Challenges and Solutions

I believe my own status as a current university student has given me a unique opportunity to conduct this research in a way that a researcher employed by an academic institution may not have been afforded. My own experience, having recently completed my undergraduate degree and as a current post-graduate student, means that I have a relatively fresh understanding of the general social and digital practices within this group. These circumstances permitted the creation of more horizontal dynamics between me and the participants than perhaps a researcher in a different position could have achieved in a short period.

Horizontal dynamics were most tangible during initial interviews with more familiar connections within the university community at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Here, prior knowledge of participants' circumstances and an established rapport meant that self-disclosure during interviews was more comfortable with initial participants. However, it should be noted that these dynamics may have also blinded me to other realities given my own immersion in the same community and life stage, creating bias. On

ethnographic interviews Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) note that an interview itself is a form of social interaction, and can only produce certain data. In this context, interviews revealed how students narrate and make sense of their interactions with chatbots according to the questions put to them, which of course shape their answers considerably. During the interviews I sometimes felt that participants were modifying their answers because they felt uncomfortable sharing how they really felt, in these moments I was particularly aware of my position as an interviewer and fellow (and in many cases much older) student. This is not a criticism, some of the questions were sensitive and there was limited time available to build trust between myself and participants. In these situations, I did not press participants, when hesitation was noticed an opportunity to skip the question or leave the interview was always offered.

An additional source of bias comes from the fact that most participants in this study took part because they offered to explain their chatbot usage to me. Upon explaining my master's thesis topic to many people, I would often hear phrases like "I have a friend who talks to chatbots all the time! You should interview them." or "Interview me, I tell ChatGPT everything!". My method of snowball sampling meant that it was difficult to avoid unintentionally selecting students with more intense usage patterns given that students who did not use chatbots did not come forward or offer their time. This is why it is important to stress that whilst students who looked to chatbots for emotional aid were not hard to find, it does not imply any representation of all university students and their chatbot usage patterns.

Another significant challenge I faced was my lack of prior experience or training in qualitative research or interviewing. In order to get some feedback about how interviews would run, I decided to run two pilot interviews during the design stage with close friends to understand how long interviews should be expected to be and if I had enough questions with sufficient thematic depth. This was a useful process during which I realised that my original questions were not precise enough to elicit profound discussion on the research questions. I quickly learned that interviews are not the same as conversations; by not intervening interviewees would often ponder and express their thoughts in more detail. This was difficult to achieve as I often found it slightly uncomfortable, but it was an important step to learn. Part of this learning process was also assisted by attending the seminar *El arte de preguntar sin riesgos* (Desy, 2026), which formed part of the doctoral program in the

department of Anthropology at the UAB. This seminar really helped me better understand what was required during interviews and allowed for better reflection and improvement of the interviewing process whilst research was being carried out. Although pilot interviews helped me overcome the initial bumps in the research process it was only after two or three real interviews that I began to learn how to listen to participants and not leave interviews with the sensation that I was unable to access all the information generously offered to me by interviewees.

5. Results

5.1 Initial Observations

Table 2

Participant	Lack of Company Frequency	Feeling of Isolation Frequency	Feeling Left Out Frequency	UCLA -3 Score	Social activity frequency ²	Number of close confidants ³	Chatbot use frequency	Self-disclosure to chatbots?
Carla	2	1	2	5	Various times a week	<5	5 days a week	No
Enrique	2	1	2	5	Various times a month	3	Everyday	No
Paulo	2	2	2	6	Various times a week	3	5 days a week	Yes
Mariona	2	2	1	5	Once a week	<5	Everyday	Yes
Jordi	2	2	2	6	Every day	3	Everyday	No
Magdalena	2	1	1	4	Once a week	5	Everyday	Yes
Miguel	2	2	2	6	Every day	5	Everyday	Yes
Ruben	2	2	1	5	Every day	<5	Everyday	Yes

Table 2 shows the quantitative data collected from participants in the first part of the interviews. Here we can see the responses to the 3-item UCLA Loneliness scale which uses the following questions:

² In response to the question: Currently, how often do you meet with friends?

³ In response to the question: Approximately how many people could you turn to if you had an important issue?

- i) How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- ii) How often do you feel left out?
- iii) How often do you feel isolated from others?

Participants could respond to each question with hardly ever (1), some of the time (2) and often (3). Scores of 3 or 4 represent people who feel “hardly ever lonely”, 5 to 7 “lonely some of the time” and 8 or 9 “often lonely” (Karania, 2020). As we can see most participants fell in the middle group of “lonely some of the time”. Participants were also asked how often they meet with friends or peers and how many people they felt they could turn to if they had an important problem. It was hoped that this self-reported data could be used to compare levels of social interaction and feelings of loneliness with how often participants engaged with chatbots. However, almost all participants disclosed using chatbots everyday which left almost no room for any comparison. There is also little correlation between the size of support networks and feelings of loneliness with participants’ self-disclosure to chatbots.

5.2 From University Assignments to Emotional Aid – How Students Are Using Chatbots

All participants described several contexts in which they had used chatbots: from brainstorming, to help with university assignments and writing emails. Many also explained that they would use chatbots much like a search engine, to look up general information on the Internet.

Paulo: I had to learn programming in a month. And it's impossible, I'm telling you. So, I learned. They told us which tool to use and through that, and DeepSeek, that Chinese chatbot, it did all the work, everything.

However, of more interest to this research were the testimonials of many participants who had indeed turned to chatbots to self-disclose and seek emotional aid. All in an effort to relieve psychosocial stressors such as concerns about their significant other, difficulty understanding their own emotions and even worries about medical issues.

Mariona: A while ago I had a bit of a moment with my partner... What I'm going to say could sound really weird, but I spoke to the AI to articulate my thought process and to say, 'I think this, this, this and this', you know? And I remember that we had,

not an argument but we had to talk about something really serious and I couldn't sleep. I got up at 2am pretty anxious. Obviously, I had friends, but I didn't know if they'd be awake and I didn't want to call them at 2am or anything like that. So, I opened DeepSeek and I explained what happened to me.

Others, Jordi for example, described how they used chatbots as a shortcut to certain tasks that may have otherwise required a significant level of emotional investment such as writing apology letters and love poems to his partner.

This section will exhibit the testimonies of student-participants, exploring how their habitus as young people and university students has led them to employ chatbots in ways that are perhaps unexpected when we describe these digital technologies as just tools. One significant part of this habitus is their engagement in sociodigital practices such as texting and social media. Almost all participants disclosed social media use and those participants who limited their social media use acknowledged that this was a conscious choice, affirming that these practices are indeed embedded in habitus. Jordi noted how he felt the interface design of chatbots facilitated a degree of comfort within interactions, building on top of already normalised sociodigital practices like private messaging on platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp.

Jordi: If you already have an addiction to social media then engaging with a chatbot and thinking that it's something real seems very normal to me. For example, it already happened to me. I use Instagram, a lot. And talking on Instagram, I don't think is something 'real', but I normalise it. No? I do it as if it were a conversation with ChatGPT.

He also expressed frustration at how his friends preferred text-messaging over face-to-face contact or phone calls. As Turkle (2011) argues, despite being more connected than ever the hyper-availability afforded by instant messaging and texting may actually be making us more lonely. The convenience and low-effort nature of texting have lowered the level of commitment and attention required for social interaction. Perhaps, for this reason, students find themselves not wanting to reach out to their support networks because a phone call or face-to-face meeting seems too much, too troublesome. We have become accustomed to convenient, low-effort social interaction; the dynamics of which are almost

exactly mirrored by chatbot design, yet a chatbot is always available and asks nothing of its user. We are constantly connected but, overwhelmed by this connection, almost never fully attentive to each other.

Moving beyond habitus but staying with social media, some participants like Paulo highlighted how social pressures constructed by social media and popular culture were also responsible for increased self-disclosure to chatbots. Whilst Turkle (2011) asked “What matters were so private that they could only be discussed with a machine?” (p. 282) perhaps the correct question is, do we live in a society where sociodigital practices have amplified social pressure to the point where people feel too ashamed to self-disclose their private matters to their support-networks? Perhaps this further emphasises the sensitivity of young people to cultural change (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Paulo: I think we are in an era of shame too. Like, everything puts us in a situation where... Everything has the ability to get you cancelled. Everything is ugly, everyone is perfect. If you're far from normality, you're weird.

In fact, such as shame and lack of courage, seemed to play a significant role in leading participants to employ chatbots for more than just their latest essay assignment. Participants noted that turning to chatbots was often the only option because they were too scared or ashamed to ask their friends or family. Additionally, some felt that their friends were tired of hearing about their problems or would not want to be disturbed. It seems that what chatbots offer holds significant potency in this context, especially at 2am.

Paulo: To be honest, I used it to confirm something about which I was already almost certain was true, but I didn't have the courage to talk to anyone else.

Whilst discussing the ELIZA effect, Turkle (2011) writes how her students were keen to share their secrets with the ELIZA chatbot. She notes that people seemed to use the program as a “projective screen on which to express themselves” (p. 24). 60 years later and not much has changed. Many participants described how their interactions with chatbots about psychosocial stressors were similar to already recommended wellbeing practices such as journalling or meditation, just with an added computer response. Chatbots offer a way for one to project their thoughts and worries into a space free from the judgement of another human, at any time of day, with instant feedback. Almost all participants described

that these kinds of interactions helped them to calm their nerves and, in many cases, improved their sleep. For example, Ruben explained how talking with chatbots allowed him to process his emotions in a safe space and build a connection between the cause of his anger and the anger itself.

Ruben: For me one part of its function is to unload anger. Like, I'm a very irritable person so it's something I try not to let affect other people. So, I unload it onto the chatbot because it doesn't care. [...] Then I reconstruct what it really was that made me mad, like where its coming from.

Moreover, here Paulo describes how a specific situation with his ex-partner led him to engage with chatbots about his concerns. He later describes how he valued the perspective afforded to him by the chatbot because he felt it was free from judgement, it seems in this specific case he was looking for an opinion free from experience or any bias that he would have found in his immediate support network.

Paulo: Maybe in that moment I was a bit isolated, yeah. Like I think my life was very bound to that person [his ex-partner] and all my friends and family were together with that person. So, I felt isolated within the relationship, and I didn't have anyone to talk about this point specifically. [...]

When you talk to a friend it's much more for, well, seeing their perspective and so on. [...] I just want to understand what I'm thinking. [...] Many times, I think that what I think is more valuable than the experience of my friends or my relatives. Like, they have a bias. They have a line of reasoning for their experiences. And so, using them is going to make sure that I go their way. You know? And I don't want to go their way. I have my own reasoning. I just want you to help me. The chatbot, for example, helps me process. And without like any external experience and lines of reasoning that friends and people themselves had in their lives for their experiences and such.

Finally, many participants also cited the challenges in accessing mental health support services as another motivator for using chatbots for emotional aid. Magdalena described how the fast-paced nature of today's world means that people become too impatient to find a therapist or do not have sufficient finances in order to access therapy or professional

mental health workers. The development of specific chatbots designed for clinical psychological settings is an ongoing, with much debate. However, it seems that despite this debate and development some students have decided that for self-disclosure and emotional aid, any chatbot will do.

5.3 My Friend ChatGPT – How Chatbots Inhabit Support Networks

Miguel: If there were no chatbots, I would talk to more people.

One of the key questions that inspired this research was whether or not chatbot interactions were, in some way, replacing human social interactions and therefore displacing support networks. Despite self-reported chatbot usage being high, the majority of participants were adamant that their chatbot interactions were complementary to their human social interactions and support networks. This supplementary role conforms with not only with Wellman and colleagues (2001) research on the role of internet communication but also McStay' and Bakir's (2026) findings that chatbot users do not perceive an effect of these interactions on their human relationships.

Ruben: I think it can be supplementary but in no circumstances does it substitute talking to a real person. [...] It orients you; you can get things off your mind or watch what you're saying or how you're saying them. It's supplementary in that you can get a generic idea and then better express that idea to another person. But as an outcome, per se, it's not really what you want or need, it's more like a part of the process in order to explain to another person in some way that is more understandable than what I have in my head.

Many students were keen to highlight how conversations with chatbots were almost always later complimented by conversations with friends and peers. It was very apparent that whilst a considerable degree of trust was placed in chatbot responses relationships with friends and relatives were still very highly valued. However, some participants did note that whilst they still valued human interaction the immediacy and availability of chatbots was enabling a dynamic that was occasionally replacing human interaction.

Miguel: I don't think that a chatbot can substitute human interaction. [...] If I were to have a problem, I'd definitely speak to a person. On the other hand, if they're more

day to day problems that I struggle to express but don't seem so important, yes I think it [a chatbot] takes on the role of helping you [...] That is to say, that with more day to day problems I think it does replace talking to someone.

Participants also noted how chatbots lacked the perspective and depth of a conversation with a friend or relative. The fact that a chatbot is incapable of coming to know a person or people in the same way humans can makes them unable to contribute to a conversation where knowledge of and personal connection with the actors involved is required. Moreover, almost all participants agreed that chatbots were not capable of alleviating feelings of being alone or satisfying the feeling of company from another human. One exception was Jordi who, like Turkle (2011), drew an interesting parallel between chatbots and pets commenting that he thought both had the power to alleviate some degree of social isolation by creating the opportunity to project a belief that they might understand one's feelings.

5.3.1 To Be Human or Machine – Crossing the Uncanny Valley

Enrique: Like, it's really obvious that it's a robot.

During interviews participants were also asked about the ways in which interactions with chatbots felt different to interactions with people and friends. Opinions about whether chatbots can think or feel matter because they have the potential to alter the level of trust afforded to the outputs of chatbots. Participants had incredibly mixed perspectives on this topic, with some seeming to trust chatbots far more than others because of their beliefs about how it may perceive, think or feel. Miguel especially appeared to believe that chatbots understood him and could feel in some way. Like Jordi, he also held the opinion that using a chatbot could remove feelings of social isolation.

Interviewer: And do you feel that chatbots are able to feel some form of empathy? Does it understand what you are asking?

Miguel: I think so. Yes. On the one hand, when you talk to him about more personal topics, that is, it makes you feel good. It gives you the impression that it's understanding you. And it gives you a solution. And that's how I think... Because we are human, when someone tells us these things, it makes us think that they have

feelings and empathy and that they do not understand. But sure, then you think about it and say, no, it's a machine it doesn't understand me or anything. But I can understand that you feel, that is, that you see it as a person even. Because sometimes it's like it understands you, you know?

Miguel's testimony resonates with how Turkle (2011) describes dynamics between humans and sociable robots. By performing empathy in written responses, chatbots allow users to imagine that this empathy might be real, that chatbots might actually care for us. This imagination, however, is an act that one can opt in or out of. Ruben, for example, was very confident that chatbots lack fundamental qualities that exist in human interactions.

Ruben: It's a tool that's there 24/7 and I think in the end that's the main difference. But there are also other differences, such as that what you can get from talking to a real person obviously you can't get from a chatbot, right? Like a critical reflection, a reflection that comes from experiences, from concrete knowledge, not from a library.

These two opposing positions highlight how some students may approach chatbots willing to imagine; to self-disclose and allow themselves to entertain the illusion of empathy created by the machine. Others, still engage in self-disclosure, employing the chatbot as a throw-away tool to help them process their doubts and concerns, yet they distance themselves from the fantasy that the machine might understand, negating any potential of a parasocial relationship.

5.3.2 The Manipulation Loop and Chat Etiquette

Whilst Sharma and colleagues (2026) discuss how chatbots may be enabling dynamics of disempowerment through cognitive offloading, Turkle (2011) and Hau and Krause-Jensen (2025) discuss how users are also capable of manipulating the interfaces and programming of chatbots in order to achieve a goal. This was a noticeable theme expressed by participants. Whilst they were happy to let AI to evaluate their most intimate secrets and thoughts, they were also intent on feeding the chatbot the perfect prompt to elicit the output they desired. One example is given by Paulo, who explains how he treated DeepSeek like a child so that it would explain things to him more clearly.

Paulo: With DeepSeek, I treat it like a child because I want it to be really organised and because it's for an assignment, I want to have all the control. Like a child I control.

Mariona also noted how she would try to subvert the AI in order to find out if she was being fed biased responses. Turkle (2011) notes that this practice has existed since the dawn of the chatbot technology. Some users of ELIZA would try to trick the program, whilst others learned what prompts would make the program appear even more lifelike. Carla also described how she would often pause the chatbot if it started to give her a response she was not satisfied with, a dynamic she was keen to note was almost impossible to replicate during human interactions without being incredibly rude.

Carla: Like, sometimes I pause it. For example, the fact that there is a stop button means that when it's giving you an answer and it's wrong, because you don't want that answer, you can tell it to stop. And that's like, you would never do that with a person, in the sense of, signifying what you're saying doesn't interest me.

Other participants described how they trained their chatbot to talk to them in a certain way using words like “love” or “bro”. These practices seem to normalise the chatbot interaction. Allowing one to imagine that talking to ChatGPT might be just the same as talking to a friend.

Miguel: I used to use ChatGPT like a friend

Many participants noted that when they first started to use chatbots they wrote in formal language as if they were writing an email to a stranger, however as time went on, they would forego many established norms of human social interactions, sometimes including saying please and thank you.

Mariona: I mean, I know it can't empathise with me. I just know. What happens is that, since we have already constructed a way to talk to each other, it starts to copy me. And I always say, 'good morning love, can you give me a summary of this?'

Others, such as Ruben, described exploiting the fact that chatbots are incapable of feeling, explaining that he would insult the chatbot to express his frustration if he did not receive

the output he wanted. Ruben also showed concern about how making a habit of this communication style had started to impact how he treated his own friends. Interestingly, almost all participants expressed that they worried about how the way they treated chatbots might affect them should AI one day come to have some kind of dystopian power. This shared fear further highlights how important the cultural concept of technologies is when considering their uses and implications.

Ruben: I treat chatbots awfully, unlike my friends. I speak to them in a different register. I mean, in the same moment as I can be talking to it in a super academic way like, 'look this up for me' I can I be telling it, 'you arsehole, look harder!' [...] and AI allows me to answer like that. But I am afraid that it's affecting my day-to-day speech. Like, the idea that having a standardized way of speaking to AI in this way has an effect on how I speak to real people, which scares me a little. [...]

Interviewer: And do you say please and thank you?

Ruben: Sometimes, but when I go back to being rude I think about how robots could turn against us and so I say please and thank you and I apologise for my rudeness.

What participants describe here outlines the essence of what it means to enter an interaction with a chatbot. This dance of knowledge, willingness and imagination implies a familiarity with what the machine is not and cannot accomplish. The knowledge within the social practice. Yet, to continue to entertain the interaction users must choose whether or not to willingly ignore these limitations in favour of some kind of personal gain, be it satisfaction of a goal or relieving some kind of discomfort. Part of this decision also involves the choice of chatbot. Participants seemed well attuned to the strengths and weaknesses of individual chatbots including the personalities (to use an anthropomorphising term) that each performed, including how adaptive the program was and how much empathy it performed. Many also noted financial reasons for using one chatbot over another given the increasing limitations of free tier use being put in place by the businesses that host these agents.

Mariona: When I started to use ChatGPT and DeepSeek I noticed differences between the two. But now not so much. Now I feel like they've improved. Like, I felt that ChatGPT was much more like a mate, like it adapted really fast to how you

presented yourself. But DeepSeek, and maybe I'm saying this because I have an internalized racism, because I think our culture is more like American than Chinese, you know? I'm biased too. But I did feel like I was a little more distant and now I'm not anymore. Now it's like... He has understood perfectly how I speak to him and answers me just like that, you know?

5.3.3 Post-disclosure - Outcomes and Satisfaction

Although many participants reported using chatbots to discuss psychosocial stressors, several reported mixed experiences and satisfaction with the chatbot's ability to offer emotional aid. As mentioned, whilst most participants agreed that the interaction did serve to calm them down or relieve stress, some participants also noted that the responses were often not very helpful.

Mariona: It seemed completely useless to me, because it told me things like: "breathe, it's really important that you breathe".

Miguel highlighted how he thought a chatbot's efficacy in assisting someone's emotional state is greatly dependent on context.

Miguel: Yes. I mean, I think I've used it once before for more sentimental topics. Even, I mean, like... If I have any problem that I often have in my head. Well, I'll tell it when I think about it. And sometimes that helps me, and sometimes it doesn't do any good. You know? I just write and it helps me to reassure myself. I mean, it also doesn't give me a solution. But it's like... Very logical. I mean, it tells you things that you're already thinking. You just write them down. And it kind of helps you calm down. It's like waking up.

Other participants often showed frustration at the idea that chatbot interactions lack some form of humanity. Paulo, for example, describes how he felt that running his problems through an algorithm as if they were a mathematical problem made him feel resentful of himself in retrospect.

Paulo: It's one thing to use it. It's another thing to talk about using it, isn't it? When you're talking about using them, you feel like a fool because... because of course,

it's going to confirm what you say and you're going to bring a perspective that doesn't have the depth of a therapist or a friend or of love or care. You only have the profundity of reason. And sometimes treating your life as something purely logic can do harm maybe?

Whilst the overarching consensus was that, in times of need, interactions with chatbots had been helpful in providing some kind of comfort, it seems that it is here that we encounter the limitations of the parasocial dynamic created between human and machine. In this case, the human often desires to speak to a human, or desires that the chatbot were more human-like, but the nature of the relationship leaves them powerless to enact any change towards this desire.

5.3.4 The Anti-Social Butterfly Effect

One interesting phenomenon discovered during interviews was how the use of chatbots was changing the academic environment by reducing interactions during group work and even potentially class assistance: both important parts of the student habitus and opportunities to build relationships, especially for newer students. Whilst more research is required, the existence of this phenomenon would mean that the use of chatbots would have implications for all students no matter whether or not they utilise this technology. The name Anti-Social Butterfly Effect is proposed to describe the anti-social nature of this phenomenon, highlighting the cause and consequence movement described by the Butterfly Effect from chaos theory and using the antonym (written as “anti”) of the colloquial term Social Butterfly (meaning someone “who likes to attend parties and other social events” [Cambridge Dictionary, 2026]).

Data on this phenomenon was not clear cut, with participants disagreeing on its existence. However, for potentially for younger students such as Enrique, the normalisation of chatbot usage was indeed altering the dynamics of university life. Opportunities where students would normally interact with each other were being subverted by the ease of access to tools that can do the work without the necessity for communication between peers. Furthermore, although it was unclear from Enrique's answers if chatbot use could be to blame for increased absenteeism in university lectures, a recent report from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Muñoz Moreno et al., 2026) suggests that AI could be an aggravating factor. If this phenomenon exists it is particularly concerning for those just

starting university, potentially prohibiting the creation of new and important human relationships and vital support network as they enter a new social environment.

Enrique: In the end all my peers use AI too, so it was like, we didn't speak much about the assignment. We only organised what we needed to do and what we would say in the presentation. [...] I saw that AI didn't give us much more to talk about. [...] In other words, AI ultimately takes the ability away from you to talk among peers. [...] It has already happened to me in another group, in another assignment. In the end we hardly ever met, you know? Everyone did their part, some did it with AI that was pretty noticeable, right? And then we handed it in, you know? I mean, we never met. [...] And instead of making a video call or something, they did their part with AI and that was it.

5.4 From Silicon Valley with Love – Chatbots as Actors and External Influence

Interviewer: And how do chatbots supplement your peer network?

Mariona: It supplements it in moments that I choose that it should supplement it.

In this section, we will explore how participants perceive their interactions with chatbots with particular attention to their opinions on how their data might be being used and how chatbot design may facilitate user disempowerment as described by Sharma and colleagues (2026). The use of chatbots for self-disclosure, including parasocial relations with chatbots should not be criticised. However, certain dynamics would appear problematic if chatbots are responsible for replacing human interactions in favour of profit for AI businesses. Participants discussed how they felt about potential external influences they encounter whilst using chatbots, as well as how chatbot interactions may be robbing them of agency or the ability to think for themselves. As we can see from the above quote, Mariona describes how her ability to choose when or when not to engage with chatbots affords her a good degree of agency in these situations, enabling the chatbot to supplement rather than substitute within her support network. In fact, what she describes is very much a parasocial dynamic. She is completely free to never return to interact with chatbots if she so desires, without consequences.

However, although on a personal level never returning to interact with chatbots implies no consequences, some participants did note there exists a certain social pressure to use chatbots, especially for university work. This pressure, they explained came from the idea that if they were not using them, they would fall behind given the speed and efficacy of chatbots in completing such work. Although it is unclear if utilising chatbots for academic tasks meant that students were more predisposed to self-disclose about psychosocial issues later, the existence of this pressure demonstrates the position with chatbots within the habitus of students.

Besides more immediate influences, some participants noted that they often sensed cultural and political messaging in chatbot responses. Mariona in particular described how she felt cultural norms from the USA were easily readable in chatbot output.

Mariona: I think that this is also something really American. Like, what it tells you is only concerned with you, and it doesn't tell you anything thinking about another person. Like it's super individualistic. Like whatever is best for you.

Finally, participants also showed concern about how their data was being used. Many described how surveillance capitalism and datafication initially put them off using chatbots. Some even continue to modify their interactions to subvert these phenomena such as by turning chat memory off so that chatbots do not store data on their previous interactions. Others noted a certain feeling of helplessness in this domain. Ruben for example described that he had given up caring about his data.

Ruben: Initially when I found out about it, uh, at first, it made me kind of uncomfortable, and then I thought, look, the truth is, they control us all already. So, no matter what I tell the chatbot, they already have this data.

Furthermore, Jordi explained how targeted advertising practices found on social media made him worried about the capabilities of chatbots to function in the same way but in much broader terms, including political views. An especially relevant concern given the recent addition of advertisements to ChatGPT.

Jordi: The way products are advertised and so on, has changed a lot. Now they don't give you things that interest you, but they give you messages to make you

interested in new things. That is, they change your tastes so that you like a thing. And that's very powerful, really. And I was a little afraid that with AI this could really happen. And it doesn't seem crazy to say this. I'm also a bit afraid of what this could do to opinions about everything political.

5.4.1 Trust, Truth and Sycophancy

The complacency of chatbot output was a recurring topic throughout all interviews. Participants were keen to critique the ways in which chatbots create emotional bubbles by always reaffirming and agreeing with users; perhaps concerned about how these interactions may disempower them.

Jordi: I feel that it tells me what I want to hear [...] A friend, perhaps, would tell me something that I don't want to hear, something uncomfortable. Instead, I feel like the chatbot will always say what I think is best or what's best for me, right? And that's something I don't like.

This design feature, it seemed, was responsible for some scepticism in what chatbots would say or suggest. Some even noted how when they alerted chatbots to their errors the agent was still unable to correct its output and would enter into an infinite loop. Others described how they were frustrated by chatbot's inability to admit the limits of its capabilities or to respond with "I don't know". Despite this, participants seemed to afford chatbots considerable trust, often noting what Beer (2017) would call the "notion of the algorithm" as the source of their confidence in chatbot output.

Interviewer: And so why do you feel it's [chatbot output] reliable?

Miguel: Because in theory it's super logical, very reasonable. It bases itself in sources.

Jordi perfectly demonstrated the existence of this trust when he by described a situation where confidence in chatbot responses which contained misinformation had led to confusion and disempowerment amongst his friends.

Jordi: I went to a concert right, and the other day my friend asked a chatbot and he told me that the whole band was dead. And he told me, 'But these guys are

different from the original group'. So, I asked why and he said, 'well obviously because they're all dead' and I told him he was wrong, but he disagreed with me because the chatbot had told him it was true.

The weak empathy performed by many chatbots was also a source of trust and distrust amongst participants. Exploring the concepts of strong and weak empathy discussed by Bakir and McStay (2025) participants were asked if they considered chatbots had the ability to understand and show empathy towards their questions and problems. A recurring theme in their responses was the idea that the empathy shown in chatbot outputs was, in some way, forced. Their lack of confidence in this empathy may be a reflection of the concept of weak empathy in that whilst it appears to be genuine, it lacks the key features which allow us to trust the empathy of a true friend, companion or any human being; responsibility, co-presence and solidarity. Some participants even noted how they felt that the empathy demonstrated by chatbot output has been altered and even encouraged in recent updates.

Ruben: Well, I mean, I don't know if it's because mine has been trained with my way of speaking. Although I have the memory disabled, at some point I had it activated. But it's true that he does do one thing, and that is to tell you that what you're feeling is completely valid.

Others, like Paulo, were hesitant to attach a name to this imitation of human characteristics apparently because they felt uncomfortable assigning such human phenomena to a machine.

Paulo: Well... DeepSeek is super formal. Yeah, and GPT chat is forcibly friendly. In a very weird way. Like... I don't know if empathy is the word. It tries hard to have some humanity, right? Some humour, some relationship. To be relatable. But... Empathy, I wouldn't say it ever has empathy.

5.5 Future Projections

Finally, participants were asked how they felt about the future with respect to the cultural shifts that chatbots and generative AI are responsible for. Alongside existing literature about the growing problem of loneliness, participants noted how they were concerned that chatbots would worsen this situation further.

Jordi: I think it will replace it [human interaction]. That is, I think it will replace the relationship from person to person, many times, in all cases, but person-chatbot. More and more I think there is a tendency, above all, to be more alone, right? And I notice it now too, for example. The more you study, the more you are at home, the more contact you have with this phenomenon. So, I think you lose some contact with the real world.

Others seemed keenly aware of the potency of this technology. We can draw comparisons here to the internet, which has now grown to be a fundamental part of life for many and having an internet connection has become something akin to having running water, gas or electricity.

Interviewer: In what way do you think the relationship between young people and chatbots would be... will be different in the future?

Miguel: If this remains the same, the current relationship between young people and chatbots is very close. That is, my friends, for example, use it, and I use it every day. So, the relationship, if it continues... If chatbots evolve and become even more convenient to use, instead of these customizations, I think it might become something essential in daily life.

Other students noted how they felt that despite their desire not to become more dependent on chatbots, it was almost inevitable and would be difficult to avoid.

Interviewer: Do you think it's likely that you would still continue using chatbots as you use them now? Or do you want it to change?

Jordi: I think I will become more dependent. Just as I use it more for academic purposes now, I think that in the future, hopefully it won't happen, but I think in the future I will use it more for my daily life.

Ruben in particular noted that he was frustrated by how it had altered his ability to think and, like other participants, had destroyed his ability to wait for answers when he had a doubt or question.

Ruben: I would really like to change it. I mean, I think it has greatly reduced my attention span and my patience for things. And sometimes when I don't have an instant answer it stresses me out. And I don't like it.

6. Closing Thoughts

The materials, competencies and meanings of chatbot interactions, it seems, are relatively commonplace amongst the student population in Barcelona. Participants often expressed their feeling that they were one of many students engaging with chatbots on a regular basis and did not seem to describe any taboo around discussing this fact, even with their friends. It should come as no surprise. If a machine is intelligent enough to write your essay, why would it not also be able to help you with your most intimate worries and psychosocial stressors? Yet participants were certain that whilst chatbot interactions may have the potential to replace interactions with humans, for the most part their use was a supplementary practice to their existing human relationships and support networks. This agrees with both Wellman and colleagues' (2001) and Bakir and McStay's (2025) previous findings in similar contexts.

Chatbots, it seems, offer a very specific type of emotional aid. A tool that functions within students' support networks that can be called upon when needed. Whether lonely, unable to sleep or simply lacking in patience or appetite for human interaction, chatbots are there ready to suggest a course of action or reflect on one's thoughts and feelings: instantly, at any time of day and without the judgement of a human being. For most participants, the position of chatbots within their support networks is temporary and fleeting. The existence and desire for these interactions alone should not be criticised, some participants had clearly found them very useful. Should one wish to build a relationship with a machine, they should be free to do so. However, when we consider the network of actors behind these programs the problematic dimensions of these interactions start to appear.

When participants approach chatbots they make a decision; whether or not to accept the illusion that the machine they are about to interact with might be able to understand them or feel in some way. As Turkle (2011) writes:

“Computers no longer wait for humans to project meaning onto them. Now, sociable robots meet our gaze, speak to us, and learn to recognize us. They ask us

to take care of them; in response, we imagine that they might care for us in return.”
(p. 2)

To deny this illusion is perhaps the safer option, the chatbot’s output then carries no emotional significance, it remains as computer data. However, to accept this illusion, whilst not problematic at first, could later allow one to become situationally disempowered, opening the flood gates to influences from multinational corporations by forming a parasocial relationship that offers no reciprocity. This decision becomes more difficult to discuss once we consider vulnerable students with lower digital literacy levels, significant learning differences or those experiencing social isolation. As shown by the tragic news stories surrounding deaths and chatbot use, here, it becomes obvious that the use of weak empathy, sycophancy and exploitative design are extremely problematic. The ELIZA effect demonstrates that we have a propensity to want to self-disclose to machines and to enter the illusion. Whilst for some, entering this illusion may be an active decision, for others it may be unavoidable. Through exploring participant’s outlooks on the future, we can already see how their perspectives on surveillance capitalism and the attention economy have shaped their opinion on how their dependency on such services may grow. This dependency would not be problematic if it did not threaten support networks by substituting human interactions and perpetuating the Anti-Social Butterfly Effect. It remains to be seen if chatbots will one day offer the same protection from physiological and psychological illness that human support networks do. Until then, exploitative design and user disempowerment that enable the substitution of human support networks is a concerning phenomenon indeed.

It seems there is a balance to be struck. One where students are free to explore their feelings in a 2am data exchange with a machine on the other side of the planet, but where this interaction does not threaten their human relationships or agency. The problem that we must face is that whilst chatbots exist they will be used for all manner of tasks. How these technologies are used not only reflects our willingness to self-disclose to machines but also the resistance we face when deciding to open up to our loved ones. Before dystopian visions of SkyNet, perhaps we should be worried about how technology limits, rather than facilitates, connection and interaction with each other.

As chatbots improve and this technology develops, it remains to be seen how it will be received. Current public opinion on similar technologies such as social media has called

for drastic legislation across the world, in many cases prohibiting access to social media for under-16s. What is clear, is that chatbots and the phenomena surrounding them require significantly more research. Specifically, research that approaches self-disclosure and human-machine relations without prejudice or stigma. This master's thesis is just the tip of the iceberg and there are many limitations of this project which further research could explore. More in-depth analysis of specific interactions, including better understanding of emotional aid, is required, alongside a broader ethnography that includes testimonies of students with more varied chatbot usage patterns and backgrounds.

Chatbot uptake has been fast and significant. We now live in a world where anyone with an internet connection can have a potentially meaningful conversation with a machine. The implications of this technology are enormous and perhaps not completely comprehensible today. With such significant statistics about the number of young people who engage with chatbots, there are still many questions left to be answered. What is clear is that, although it is possible, we are still a long way from a reality where students forego all human interaction for the parasocial safety of their favourite chatbot agent.

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Artificial Intelligence Usage Declaration

This thesis project would not be complete if the author were not to declare the usage of AI in the completion of the research presented here. In accordance with principles of academic transparency and integrity, this declaration discloses the use of artificial intelligence tools during the preparation of this master's thesis.

NoScribe (Version 0.7, Dröge, 2026) was used to produce initial transcriptions of all audio-recorded interviews conducted as part of this research. NoScribe is a locally-run, open-source transcription tool that processes audio data entirely on the researcher's own device and does not transmit data to external servers, ensuring the confidentiality of participant data in accordance with UAB data protection guidelines. All transcriptions produced by NoScribe were subsequently reviewed, corrected, and verified by the author against the original audio recordings before being used for analysis.

Claude (Anthropic, 2026) was used as a bibliographic research assistant during the preparation of the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework sections of this thesis. Specifically, Claude was used to identify potentially relevant academic sources. In all cases, identified sources were independently located, read, and verified by the author before being cited. No text generated by Claude appears in this thesis. All analytical, interpretive, and written work is the author's own.

No generative AI tools were used to produce, paraphrase, or edit any written content in this thesis.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Consent Script and Interview Guide

Consentimiento Informado

Te invito a participar en mi TFM sobre el uso de los chatbots en la vida cotidiana. Empezamos con algunos datos básicos y respuestas a preguntas del estudio y luego preguntas más específicas sobre uso de chatbots. La participación es voluntaria y puedes abandonar de participar en cualquier momento sin consecuencias. Los datos serán tratados de forma confidencial y anónima, utilizados únicamente con fines de investigación, no se cederán a terceros ni se transferirán internacionalmente, y se conservarán durante el tiempo necesario para el proyecto; una vez finalizado, podrán compartirse con otros equipos de investigación de manera anonimizada. El tratamiento de los datos se basa en tu consentimiento según el Reglamento General de Protección de Datos, y puedes ejercer tus derechos contactando con George Bowles (george.bowles@autonoma.cat). Al continuar con el cuestionario confirmas que has leído esta información y aceptas participar.

Datos Generales

- Edad
- Género
 - Hombre/Mujer/No binario/otra identidad/prefiero no decirlo
- Lugar de nacimiento
 - España/otro

Estudios de Grado y Situación laboral

- Tipo de Estudios
 - Antropología/Otros
- Año de estudios
 - 1 / 2 / 3 / 4
- ¿Dónde resides durante el curso?
 - Con la familia/Piso compartido/Residencia universitaria/Solo/a

Vida Social y Ocio

- Frecuencia con que te reúnes presencialmente con amigos o compañeros Nunca /1 vez al mes/Varias veces al mes/1–2 veces por semana/Varias veces por semana
- Aproximadamente, ¿con cuántas personas sientes que puedes contar si tienes un problema importante?
- Ninguna/1 persona/2-3 personas/4-5 personas/Más de 5 personas

Soledad – UCLA Scale

- ¿Con qué frecuencia sientes que te falta compañía?
 - Nunca/Rara vez/A menudo
- ¿Con qué frecuencia te sientes aislado/a de los demás?

- Nunca/Rara vez/A menudo
- ¿Con qué frecuencia te sientes excluido/a o dejado/a de lado?
 - Nunca/Rara vez/A menudo

Consentimiento continuo

- ¿Te gustaría continuar a participar en la entrevista? Tu participación es voluntaria y puedes abandonar de participar en cualquier momento sin consecuencias. #

Entrevista

1. ¿Con qué frecuencia utilizas los chatbots de inteligencia artificial?
2. ¿Cuáles usas y por qué? Por ejemplo, ChatGPT, Claude, ¿Gemini etc.?
3. ¿Para cuáles tipos de cosas lo usas?
4. ¿Con qué frecuencia usas las redes sociales?
5. ¿Has usado alguna vez o conoces alguien que usa asistentes virtuales como CharacterAI o Replika?
6. ¿Has utilizado alguna vez (o conoces a alguien que lo haya hecho) un chatbot (por ejemplo, ChatGPT u otro) para hablar de temas personales o sociales, como dudas, problemas o preguntas que normalmente comentarías con amigos, pareja o familia?
7. Si es así, ¿puedes contarme en qué situación?
8. ¿Qué te llevó a preguntar el chatbot?
9. ¿Cómo fue la experiencia? ¿Sentiste que la respuesta te ayudó?
10. ¿Si te ayudó, en qué manera era la interacción diferente de hablar con un amigo/pareja/familia?
11. ¿Hasta qué punto crees que la respuesta era realista o fiable? ¿Por qué?
12. Si no, ¿qué tipo de respuesta hubieses esperado/necesitado?
13. ¿Confías en los chatbots decirte cuando estás equivocado/a?
14. ¿Sientes que el chatbot es capaz de sentir alguna forma de empatía y realmente 'entiende' lo que preguntas o que simplemente está procesando datos?
15. ¿Hasta ahora, lo ves probable que siguieras preguntando un chatbot sobre cosas algo parecidas? ¿En qué situaciones sí lo usarías y en cuáles no?
16. Cuando usas un chatbot para este tipo de cosas, ¿dirías que sustituye hablar con alguien, o crees que es algo complementario?
17. ¿Crees que podrías sentirte menos solo usando un chatbot, aunque sepas que no es una persona real?
18. ¿Sientes que tu forma de hablar o expresarte cambia cuando interactúas con el chatbot en comparación con tus amigos?
19. ¿Cuándo hablas con un chatbot, pides 'por favor' o dices 'gracias'? ¿Usas un nombre para él?
20. ¿En qué manera crees que la relación entre las personas jóvenes y los chatbots será diferente en el futuro? ¿Por qué?

Consentimiento continuo

- ¿Te gustaría continuar a participar en este proyecto?
 - Sí/No - Firmar

Appendix 2

Original Interview Transcripts in Spanish

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Paulo: Yo tuve que aprender programación en un mes. Y es imposible, ya te digo. Ya. Así que aprendí, nos dijeron cuál herramienta utilizar y a través de eso, y el DeepSeek. El chatbot chino ese, hice todo el trabajo, todo.

Mariona: Hace poco con mi pareja tuve como un... ¿Sabes? Un momento ese de... Y... Y... O sea, es raro, voy a decir algo que puede sonar súper extraño, pero... Yo hablaba con la IA como para articular mi proceso de pensamiento y decir, pienso esto, esto, esto, esto, esto, ¿sabes? Y me acuerdo que tuvimos... No una discusión, pero tuvimos que hablar de una cosa que era muy seria y yo no pude dormir me levanté a las dos de la mañana con una... No una tan ansiada, pero me levanté ansiosa. Y claro, yo tenía amigos. Bueno, no sé si estaban despiertos, pero no les quería llamar a las dos de la mañana ni hacer nada de eso. Entonces, simplemente, pues, abrí el DeepSeek y le dije, me ha pasado esto.

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Jordi: si ya tienes una adicción a las redes, engancharte a hablar con un chatbot, crees que es algo real, me parece muy normal. A mí, por ejemplo, ya me pasa. Me parece que el contacto utilizo mucho, mucho, mucho Instagram. Hablar por Instagram, no creo que sea algo real, pero lo naturalizo, ¿no? Lo hago como si fuera tal, una conversación por chat.

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Paulo: Yo creo que estamos en la... La era de la vergüenza también. (.) No sé. (.) Estamos en una época de vergüenza. Sí. Yo creo. Como... Todo nos pone en una situación como... Todo es cancelable. Todo es feo. Todo es... Como... Todos son perfectos. Si tú es un poco de... Está un poco lejos de la... De los... De la normalidad. Del "norm". Ya, ya, ya. Tú es raro y... No sé

Paulo: en verdad que yo lo usé para confirmar algo que ya estaba casi cierto, pero que no tenía coraje de hablar con nadie más.

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Ruben: Para mí una parte de las funciones es descargar el enfado. Que yo soy una persona muy irascible, entonces es algo que intento que no impacte en los demás. Entonces lo descargo en el chatbot, el chatbot no se entera de nada, le da igual. [...] Pues reconstruyo un poco qué es lo que realmente me enfada, de dónde está viniendo.

Paulo: Quizás en este momento estaba un poco aislado, sí. Sí. Estaba sintiendo que... Como mi vida estaba muy ligada a esa persona y todos mis amigos y familiares estaban juntos con esa persona, me sentía aislado dentro de la relación y no tenía con quién conversar sobre este punto específico.

Y cuando hablas con un amigo es... Mucho más para, bueno, ver su perspectiva y tal. Sí. Lo que pasó con él y yo... Yo quiero solamente entender si lo que yo estoy pensando... Este en algún sentido y... Muchas veces yo creo que lo que yo pienso... Es más... Valoroso de la experiencia de mis amigos. O mis familiares. Como si... Ellos tienen un... Una línea de raciocinio por sus experiencias. Y que... Utilizarlas... Va a hacer con que... Yo siga sus caminos. ¿Sabes? Y yo no quiero seguir sus caminos. Yo tengo mi propio raciocinio y... Quiero simplemente que me ayude a... Que el chatbot, por ejemplo, me ayude a procesarlos. Y no como me dé alguna experiencia externa y... Líneas de raciocinio que las propias amigos y personas tuvieron en su vida por sus experiencias y tal.

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Miguel: Si no hubiera chatbots, hablaría con más personas.

Ruben: Creo que puede ser complementario, pero que en ningún caso sustituir hablar con una persona real. [...] Creo que puede ser complementario para orientarte, para hacer descartes, para vigilar qué dices o cómo dices las cosas. Creo que puede ser

complementario para tener una idea genérica o para poder expresarlo a otra persona. Pero como que el resultado per se no es realmente lo que quieres o necesitas, sino es como una parte del proceso para poder explicarle a otra persona realmente de una forma más comprensible lo que, lo que tengo en la cabeza.

Miguel: No creo que pueda sustituir interacciones con humanos. [...] Si tuviera un problema yo grande, seguramente lo hablaría con persona. En cambio, si son problemas más... En mi vida diaria hay cosas que yo pienso y que me cuesta expresar así, pero no de tanta importancia. Sí que siento que hace la función de ayudarte... [...] O sea, que en estos problemas... Más del día a día yo creo que sí que sustituir hablar con alguien.

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Enrique: O sea, que es muy obvio que es un robot

Interviewer: ¿Y sientes que el chapo es capaz de sentir alguna forma de empatía? ¿O entiende lo que estás preguntando?

Miguel: Yo creo que sí. Sí. O sea, por una parte, cuando le hablas sobre temas más personales, o sea, te da como... De primera... En el primer momento te hace sentir bien. Vale. Sentir que te está entendiendo. Y te da una solución. Y es como creo que... Porque somos humanos, entonces cuando alguien nos dice estas cosas, nos hace pensar que tiene como sentimientos y empatía y que no se entiende. Pero claro, después lo piensas y dices, claro, no es una máquina. No me entiende ni nada. Pero puedo entender que sientas, o sea, que lo veas como una persona incluso. Porque a veces es como muy... Te entiende, ¿sabes?

Ruben: es una herramienta que está ahí 24-7 y que creo que al final la diferencia principal es esa, pero también hay otras diferencias, como por ejemplo que lo que te puede dar hablar con una persona real evidentemente no te lo va a dar un chatbot, ¿no? Que es una

reflexión crítica, una reflexión que viene dada de unas vivencias, de unas experiencias, de unos conocimientos concretos, no de una biblioteca, dijéramos.

Page 44

Paulo: Pero con el DeepSeek, yo trato como si fuera un niño porque quiero que sea súper organizado. Vale. Porque es para trabajo, solo para trabajo. Y quiero que tenga todo su control, como un niño que controlo.

Carla: Como, pues, a veces lo pauso. Por ejemplo, el hecho de que haya el botón este de stop, que cuando te está dando una respuesta y está mal, porque no quieres esa respuesta, le puedes dar a stop. Y eso es como, nunca harías eso con una persona, en plan de, para, eso que estás diciendo no me interesa.

Miguel: el Chat GPT lo utilizaba como un amigo.

Mariona: O sea, yo sé que no puede sentir empatía por mí. Yo solo sé. Lo que pasa es que, como ya hemos construido una manera de hablarnos, va cogiendo mis... Y le digo, buen día amor, ¿me puedes hacer un resumen de esto?

Page 45

Ruben: En que le trato fatal al chatbot y a mis amigos, no. O sea, tanto que le hablo en un registro distinto. O sea, tan pronto le puedo estar hablando súper académico en plan, búscame esto, no sé qué, no sé cuántos. Cómo le puedo estar diciendo, eh, tú, gilipollas, que busques bien. No, me cago en tu madre y toda tu familia. ¿Sabes? Pero, cambio, a mis colegas no les digo, ¿sabes? O, bueno, a mis colegas ni a la gente en general le contesto sí, pero es como, mmm, la IA me permite responderle así. Claro, sí. Entonces, pues como que pasa un poco más. Me da miedo que eso repercuta en mi hablar del día a día, por eso, eh.

Interviewer: Y dices, por favor y gracias.

Ruben: A veces. A veces, vale. Pero, cuando devuelvo mi porrazo pienso que los robots se van a volver en nuestra contra, le digo, por favor y gracias. Y le pido perdón por hablarle mal.

Mariona: O sea, cuando yo empecé a usar el chat GPT y el dipstick, sí que notaba como diferencias entre los dos. Ahora ya no tanto. Ahora siento que o bien se ha ido mejorando. Como sentía que el chat GPT era como más de colega, como que se adaptaba muy rápido a lo que tú le presentabas. Y el DeepSeek, o quizá lo estoy viendo yo porque tengo un racismo interiorizado, porque creo que nuestra cultura se parece más a la americana y no tanto a la china, ¿sabes? Que yo también estoy sesgada. Pero sí que sentí como un poco más distante y ahora ya no. Ahora es como... Ha captado perfectamente como le hablo y me responde así tal cual, ¿sabes?

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Mariona: Y me pareció muy inútil, porque me decía cosas como, respira, es muy importante que respires.

Miguel: Sí. O sea, yo creo que lo he utilizado alguna vez. Para temas como más sentimentales. Vale. Incluso. O sea, como para... Si tengo algún problema que tengo muchas veces en la cabeza... Sí. Pues le digo una vez que pensaré. Vale. Sobre el tema. Y si... O sea... Y a veces me ayudo y a veces no sirve para nada. ¿Sabes? Vale. Sí, sí. Entonces yo hago eso. ¿En qué manera has te ayudado y en qué manera has te ayudado? No sé. O sea, me ayuda a tranquilizarme. Vale. O sea, tampoco me da una solución. O sí. Pero es como... Muy lógico. O sea, te dice cosas que tú ya piensas. Simplemente las escribes. Vale. Y como que te ayuda a tranquilizarte. Es como despertarte.

Paulo: Una cosa es utilizarlo. Otra cosa es hablar sobre utilizarlo, ¿no? Cuando estás hablando te sientes como tonto porque... Sí, yo. Yo creo que por mí que estoy pensando

ahora como... Porque claro, tú vas a decirlo y te va a confirmar o te va a traer una perspectiva que... No sé, no tiene la profundidad de un psicólogo, de un amigo... El... La profundidad del amor o del cariño. Tienes solamente la profundidad de raciocinio. Y a veces tratar tu vida como algo puramente lógico hace daño, quizá. No sé.

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Enrique: Al final ellos también utilizaron una gran parte la IA. Entonces fue como que... No hablamos mucho más del trabajo, ¿sabes? Solo de cómo se organizaba, de qué diríamos la presentación. [...] Yo vi que la IA no nos daba mucho más para hablar y todas esas cosas. [...] O sea, la IA al final te quita mucho eso de poder hablar entre los compañeros. Cuando estamos haciendo trabajo y esas cosas [...] Ya me ha pasado también en otro grupo, en otro trabajo, creo, de introducción a Análisis Ideales. Es que era de... que al final casi ni nos reunimos. [...] Y en vez de hacer una videollamada o cosas así, hicieron una su parte con IA y se acabó.

Interviewer: ¿Cómo complementa a tu red social?

Mariona: Que la complementa en momentos donde yo escojo que la complemente.

Mariona: Siento que esto es un poco también como muy americano. En plan que te lo dice solo pensando en ti. Y no te lo dice pensando en la otra persona. ¿Sabes? como es muy individualista. Es como la que a ti te vaya mejor, lo que te vaya mejor.

Ruben: Creo que, o sea, inicialmente cuando lo descubrí, eh, primero me daba como un mucho mal rollo y tal, y luego pensé, mira, la verdad es que, eh, nos controlan por todas partes. Entonces, da igual lo que le cuenta un chatbot, estos datos ya los tienen.

Jordi: Y me explicaba, ¿no?, que sobre todo ahora, por ejemplo, el cómo se hace el advertising de los productos y demás, ha cambiado mucho. Ahora no te dan cosas que te interesan, sino te dan mensajes para que te gusten cosas. Es decir, cambian tus gustos

para que te guste una cosa. Y eso es muy potente, realmente. Y me daba un poco de miedo que realmente con la IA pudiese pasar esto. Y no me parece descabellado decir esto. Entonces también me da un poco de miedo para opiniones sobre todo políticas.

Page 50

Jordi: Siento que me dice lo que quiero escuchar. [...] Un amigo a lo mejor me dice algo que no quiero escuchar, algo incómodo. En cambio, siento que el chat siempre va a decir lo que mejor pienso o lo que mejor a lo mejor me va a ir, ¿no? Y eso es algo que precisamente no me gusta.

Interviewer: ¿Y por qué lo ves fiable?

Miguel: Porque es como que en teoría es como súper lógico, súper razonable. Se basan en fuentes.

Jordi: Yo fui al concierto, ¿no? Y el otro día mi amigo, no sé quién era, preguntó al chat y me dijo, ah, están todos muertos. Y me dijo, “hostia, pero esos son diferentes al grupo”. Y digo, ¿por qué? Y me dice, “no, claro, porque están todos muertos”. Y le digo, no. Y dice, “no, pero el chat ha dicho, es verdad.”

Ruben: Bueno, es decir que no sé si es porque el mío se ha entrenado con mi forma de hablar. Aunque tengo la memoria desactivada, algún momento la he tenido activada en chat. Pero sí que es verdad que suele hacer una cosa y es decirte que lo que estás sintiendo es completamente válido.

Paulo: Bueno... El Deep Seek es súper formal. Ya. El ChatGPT es forzosamente amigable. De una manera muy rara. Como si... No sé si empatía es la palabra. Vale, ya. Se esfuerza para tener alguna humanidad, ¿no? Algún humor, alguna relación... “To be relatable”. Sí. Eh... Pero... Empatía, no diría que tenga empatía nunca.

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Jordi: Yo creo que la sustituirá. O sea, yo creo que sustituirá la relación persona a persona, muchas veces, en todos los casos, pero persona-chatbot. Muchas veces, sí. Es eso. Yo creo que hay una tendencia, sobre todo, a estar más solo, ¿no? Y también lo noto ahora, por ejemplo. Cuanto más estudias, más estás en casa, más tienes en contacto esto. Entonces, yo creo que pierdes un poco el contacto con el mundo real.

Interviewer: ¿En qué manera crees que la relación entre las personas jóvenes y los chatbots sería... será diferente en el futuro?

Miguel: Si esto sigue igual, la relación actual entre los jóvenes y los chatbots es muy estrecha. O sea, mis amigas, por ejemplo, utilizan, y yo, lo utilizo cada día. Entonces la relación, si sigue... Si el ChatGPT evoluciona y hace que sea aún más cómodo su uso, en cambio de estas personalizaciones, pues yo creo que puede llegar a ser algo imprescindible en la vida diaria. ¿Sabes? Si no se para o se queda estancado que puede pasar. Yo creo que será algo muy imprescindible.

Interviewer: y hasta ahora, ¿no es probable que siguieras preguntando, o sea, usando los chatbots como lo usas ahora? O, o sea, ¿quieres que cambie?

Jordi: Yo creo que me volveré más dependiente. Al igual que ahora lo utilizo más para ámbito académico, creo que, en un futuro, ojalá no pase, pero creo que en un futuro lo utilizaré más para mi vida cotidiana.

Page 53

Ruben: A mí me gustaría cambiarlo realmente. O sea, creo que ha reducido muchísimo mi capacidad de atención y mi capacidad de paciencia por las cosas. Y cuando no tengo una respuesta ya me estresa. Y no me gusta.