

Chatbot creep: Generative AI in young adults' everyday information practices

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1. Introduction

It seems that generative AI chatbots have crept up on us, quickly and quietly integrating themselves into our everyday lives (Chatterji et al., 2025; Costa-Gomes et al., 2025). From the latest research we can extrapolate that young adults are leading the way in integrating AI chatbots into everyday life (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2025; Gallup, 2026). Little research however exists on young adults' everyday information practices involving AI chatbots. We lack a detailed understanding of how young adults conceptualize chatbots, the situations in which they use them and the decisions they make and strategies they employ when interacting with them.

This presentation reports findings from an MA thesis, an exploratory in-depth inquiry into how young adults integrate generative AI chatbots into their everyday lives. The notion of “chatbot creep” anchors the thesis — hence the title. While the word “creep” refers primarily to the almost imperceptible expansion of chatbots into the everyday lives of young adults, it also alludes to the uncanniness of a machine masquerading as a human.

Drawing on Savolainen's (2008) Everyday Information Practices (EIP) model complemented by Kaptelinin and Nardi's (2012) Mediated Action Perspective (MAP), the thesis uses reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to analyze ten semi-structured interviews conducted with 18- to 24-year-old university students in early 2026. While everyday information practices are habitual and largely invisible (Savolainen, 2008; Haider & Sundin, 2019), the interviews elicited rich accounts of concrete episodes and daily routines through which the participants reflected on their chatbot use (Bates, 2004; Flick, 2000).

The findings reveal an inherent tension in the conceptualization of chatbots: users understand chatbots as tools made of code but often speak of and engage with them as if they were actors made of flesh. The empirical data suggest that chatbots are reorganizing information source horizons and altering information pathways. This integration of chatbots into the participants' information environments is also reshaping everyday information practices, with chatbots functioning not only as information sources but also as resources in their daily lives.

Furthermore, chatbot use has become normalized: the participants no longer consider whether to use a chatbot but which chatbot to use, for what purpose and under what conditions. The thesis proposes a continuum of chatbot involvement in everyday information practices and suggests that the young adults in the study engage in an active negotiation of chatbot use, negotiating trade-offs between agency, efficiency and capability. The participants also perform a continuous balancing act, exploiting the enabling affordances of convenience, interaction and cognition while navigating deficits, frictions and broader constraints.

Taken together, the findings support the notion of “chatbot creep”: the gradual normalization of AI chatbots and their embedding into young adults' everyday information environments, where they quietly reorganize information source horizons, alter information pathways and reshape everyday information practices. The thesis suggests that generative AI does not simply represent a new information source but a transformation of how everyday information practices are enacted in increasingly AI-mediated environments.

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3. References

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