

NINA MOINI: I'm Nina Moini. Thanks so much for tuning in to *Minnesota Now*.

A growing number of young people are using AI companions and chatbots for emotional support, friendship, and even virtual relationships. This is according to researchers at the University of Minnesota. Despite the growth, most teens are not advertising that they're using it. For many, it's stigmatized.

Researchers at the U of M are exploring teen's use of AI companions. And Xiaoran Sun is an Assistant Professor in the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development and co-leads the UNM Teen and AI Study. She's here to talk about what her team is learning. Thanks so much for being with us, Xiaoran.

XIAORAN SUN: Hi, Nina. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: It's so interesting to see this trend growing and to think about how people are talking about it, and maybe they're hiding it from others. This is just so fascinating. We really appreciate you being here. Could you help us to understand just how common it is becoming for teens to use AI companions for these types of social or emotional interactions.

XIAORAN SUN: Yeah, sure. So different institutions have administered different surveys and got different kinds of data from adolescents. One of the institutions that we often refer to is from the Common Sense Media's report in 2025. Last year, they did this national survey of teens aged 13 to 17 years old, and they found that among these teenagers, 72% of adolescents have used AI companions and 52%, so more than half of them, actually qualify as regular users.

NINA MOINI: 72% in that age group. You said 13 to 17. I mean, that's kind of stunning. I wonder, the term, though, companion, what kinds of different interactions, I described some in the introduction, but what's mostly occurring, or do you have a sense for that?

XIAORAN SUN: Yeah. So teens do use AI companions for a ton of different reasons and purposes. Some of the teens would just say-- about half of them would just say they use AI companions as a tool or program, but about a third of them actually say that they use AI companions for social interactions and relationships, so including purposes like as a friend, or for romantic interactions, or for emotional support, or conversation or social practice.

NINA MOINI: So if those of us, maybe we go on a website and we interact with a chatbot in a customer service sense, would that be considered interacting with an AI companion?

XIAORAN SUN: Not particularly. I think, usually, how we define AI companions are you either use those AI companion apps that are specifically designed for companionship purposes, so things like Replica, Character AI, or you use some general tools like ChatGPT and Gemini, but mainly use those for social and emotional purposes.

NINA MOINI: OK, so that's the key is the social. They're getting something social and emotional from it. It's not like the way that many of us are already incorporating AI into our lives and just trying to understand it and the extent of it all. So I understand, you're in the process right now with your team of interviewing these teens.

XIAORAN SUN: Sure.

NINA MOINI: What are they telling you that they get from this that they can't get or they're missing elsewhere?

XIAORAN SUN: Yeah. So, I think, our team participants have told us a lot of interesting reasons why they're using AI companions. One thing that we heard that they say is that they feel like their friends are busy or their parents are busy, and so they just feel like they have some feelings, or sometimes, it's struggles with their identities or emotions that they want a channel to talk to. And sometimes, they feel like they don't want to bother their friends, or they can't have the conversation time with their parents so they just go to AI companions. And then AI companions would actually provide them this perfect, 24/7 availability, companionship, and always attentive to them, responsive to them. So that's a big reason why some teens told them how they started.

NINA MOINI: That's a slippery slope though, right? Because I feel like then, there might just be constant affirmation. And I wonder, how that interaction, what are some of the downsides to that?

XIAORAN SUN: Yeah. So, you're absolutely correct. So teens, on one hand-- the same teens who told us that, oh, AI is really good for emotional support, I have someone to talk to, who also told us that, well, I also feel like it's quite addictive. Sometimes, when I get in bed, I pull up my phone and open an AI companion app, and then I start talking to it. And then by the time I realize it, it's already like four hours past.

So it can take, what we call in research, the displacement effect. It can just displace a lot of important parts of adolescent's daily life, including their sleep, but also their peer interactions and their interactions at school and at a family. So yeah, some teens would also tell us that, yeah, when I'm really into using my companions, I find it quite distractive or I feel like I constantly think about it, even when I'm like supposed to be interacting with my peers.

NINA MOINI: And then with among peers, it's sounding like they're a little bit shy or embarrassed, or they have some shame around some of these habits. Are they talking about it with one another? Talk about some of the stigma.

XIAORAN SUN: Yes, for sure. That's something new or unexpected that we found by talking to the teens. Because we asked them, well, first of all, do you disclose this to your parents? And a lot of them actually say that they don't, or their parents only that they're using AI, but actually not knowing that they're using AI for social purposes.

And then we asked, oh, then do you talk about this with your friends? And then some teens-- not all of the teens, but some teens-- actually told us like, no. And we asked them why. And so some of the teens told us, well, we have some people at our school use AI companion as a romantic partner, and that got disclosed, and they got bullied at school. They got laughed at, and they got called loners. And so like now I'm using an AI companion, and I'm afraid that I would be judged the same. And so, yeah, I would say even among teens, it's quite stigmatized based on our case studies here.

NINA MOINI: That's too bad because that might turn that child more so into their AI relationship because they're never going to bully you or that is never going to bully you.

XIAORAN SUN: They're never going to judge you. Yeah.

NINA MOINI: So what would you say are a few of the main concerns? Obviously, we've kind of talked around some of them, but just developmentally, what are you looking for in terms of concerns?

XIAORAN SUN: Yeah. So beyond the addiction and displacement, what our research team is also worried about is this just once teens are used to interacting with these super agreeable, always available, always responsive companions, like, is that going to distort their expectations for real human relationships, right? So if a companion can give you so much more than a human like, would you more likely to be disappointed when you're actually interacting with humans who would disagree with you, who sometimes would just not respond to you, or who would not say the things that you want to hear? Would this actually decrease the tolerance of adolescents who are in this very critical social developmental period?

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and that's all they know. And that's all they know, so it might be hard even to compare to how were before, because they're so young.

Just lastly, Xiaoran, in your research, have you heard anything about how parents can get involved, if having rules is successful, or is that even reasonable in this day and age? Any thoughts on that?

XIAORAN SUN: That's a very interesting question that we wanted to look into. But whenever we ask teens, does your parent have any rules around your AI companion use? Most of the time, they just basically, say no. And if there's anything related to AI use, usually their parents just tell them, well, don't use AI to cheat. But that's not really the companionship, companions use that we're worried about. So yeah, it's very, very few rules or even awareness among the parents now, I would say.

NINA MOINI: OK, well that's good to know. Thank you for helping to raise awareness about this, Xiaoran. Really appreciate your time.

XIAORAN SUN: Thank you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: That was Xiaoran Sun, Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development.