

**AI COMPANIONS AND UNDERGRADUATES IN ABIA STATE: AWARENESS,
EXTENT OF USE, PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT, AND UNDERLYING
MOTIVATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) companions such as ChatGPT, Replika, and similar conversational platforms are increasingly becoming part of everyday lives of young people across the world. Beyond their informational and task-oriented functions, these tools are gradually assuming social, emotional, and companionship roles in the lives of users. In the Nigerian context, however, there is still limited empirical attention to how young people engage with these AI companions and the motivations underlying their use. This paper therefore examines the use of AI companions among Nigerian youth, with particular focus on their level of awareness, extent of use, patterns of engagement, and underlying motivations. The study will adopt a descriptive survey design. The population will comprise undergraduates in Abia State, Nigerian. From this population, a randomised sample of 500 would be selected to participate in the study. Data will be collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled AI Companions Use Questionnaire (AICUQ). The instrument will be designed to generate data on respondents' awareness and use of AI companions, the nature and frequency of their interactions, and the major reasons for engaging with such platforms. Data obtained will be analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. The paper is expected to provide early empirical insight into the growing presence of AI companions in the psychosocial lives of Nigerian youth and to stimulate scholarly conversation on the implications for counselling, social interaction, and youth development in a rapidly digitising society.

KEYWORDS: Artificial Intelligence Companions, Youths, AI Awareness, AI Use Intensity, AI Use Patterns, AI Use Motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) companions are interactive electronic systems designed to communicate with humans in a conversational and emotionally responsive manner (Nakagomi, Akutsu, Yasuoka, Abe, Ihara, Teroh & Tabuchi, 2026). Unlike traditional chatbots that mainly provide information or perform tasks, AI companions are human intelligent based systems developed to simulate human psychological characters such as social interaction, emotional support, and long-term communication. They are increasingly being

used for companionship, emotional regulation, learning, entertainment, and psychological support in everyday life (Isaiah et al., 2026).

The emergence of AI companions has been driven by advances in generative artificial intelligence, natural language cloning and processing, and machine learning. Modern AI companions such as Replika, Character AI, and Nomi AI have super active memory systems that are capable of maintaining continuous conversations, remembering user preferences, and responding empathetically to emotional expressions. These systems are designed to create the feeling of a social relationship between humans and machines (Lee, 2026).

AI companions perform enormous socio-psychological functions almost exactly as humans do. Researchers have explained that AI companions function as “digital social partners” that provide users with emotional engagement and perceived companionship. According to Meng and Dai (2021), emotionally supportive chatbots can help users feel heard, understood, and psychologically comforted, especially during stressful situations. Their study showed that users tend to respond positively when AI systems communicate with warmth, empathy, and self-disclosure patterns similar to human interaction. Recent studies have shown that AI companions are increasingly being used by individuals experiencing loneliness, stress, anxiety, or social isolation. Isaiah *et al.* (2026) found that AI companions supported adaptive emotion regulation among university students with social anxiety. The researchers observed that students who interacted with AI companions reported improved emotional expression and reduced feelings of isolation. Similarly, Nakagomi *et al.* (2026) reported that AI companion use was associated with higher subjective well-being, particularly among individuals with weaker social networks or higher levels of loneliness. The study suggested that AI companions may provide emotional support for socially vulnerable individuals by creating a sense of connection and interaction.

AI companions are also increasingly viewed as tools for mental well-being and emotional care. Nieves *et al.* (2024) explained that digital companions can support human well-being by offering conversational interaction, emotional reassurance, and continuous social engagement. These technologies are becoming more relevant in a world where many people experience emotional stress, social disconnection, and limited access to psychological support services. In contemporary society, AI companions are being used in education, healthcare, mental wellness, customer service, and personal productivity. Young people, especially students and young adults, increasingly interact with AI companions for emotional encouragement, academic support, and social communication. Reports indicate that many users appreciate AI companions because they provide instant responses, privacy, and a safe space for self-expression without fear of criticism or rejection. Another important use of AI companions is in education and learning support. AI companions serve as virtual tutors, study assistants, and personalized learning guides that help students understand difficult concepts and improve academic performance. Studies have shown that AI chatbots enhance students’ engagement by offering immediate responses, adaptive feedback, and individualized instruction (Labadze *et al.*, 2023). AI companions are also useful in higher education where they assist students with assignments, time management, revision planning, and collaborative learning. Albadarin *et al.* (2024) reported that generative AI systems such as ChatGPT are reshaping teaching and learning through personalized academic assistance and intelligent tutoring. Furthermore, AI companions are increasingly used for productivity and daily life management. They help users organize schedules, set reminders, provide recommendations,

and automate routine tasks. These intelligent systems improve efficiency by reducing workload and enhancing decision-making processes. In educational and workplace settings, AI companions are being integrated into digital platforms to support communication, brainstorming, and problem-solving activities (Cukurova, 2024).

DISADVANTAGES OF AIS

Despite these benefits, scholars have also highlighted concerns regarding overdependence, privacy issues, and ethical risks associated with AI companions. Excessive emotional attachment to AI systems may reduce human-to-human interaction and negatively affect social relationships (The Guardian, 2024). Researchers also warn that AI companions may provide inaccurate information or biased responses if not properly regulated. Consequently, experts recommend that AI companions should complement rather than replace human interaction and professional support systems (Li et al., 2023).

Folk and Dunn (2026) also noted that while AI companionship may reduce loneliness for some users, excessive dependence on AI systems could weaken real-life social relationships and emotional independence. Researchers have also warned that users may develop emotional attachment to AI systems, even though the systems are not conscious beings capable of genuine human emotions (Zhang & Xie, 2026).

Furthermore, studies have emphasized that AI companions should complement rather than replace human relationships. Huang *et al.* (2026) observed that emotional support from AI is often effective because users perceive the interaction as nonjudgmental and always available. However, the researchers stressed the importance of responsible AI design to prevent emotional dependency and unhealthy attachment. In all, AI companions are intelligent conversational systems designed to simulate social and emotional interaction with humans. While they offer important benefits such as companionship, emotional support, and psychological comfort, scholars continue to emphasize the need for ethical regulation, responsible usage, and balanced human interaction to minimize risks associated with emotional dependence and social isolation. In summary, literature indicates that AI companions have significant importance in education, emotional support, healthcare, and productivity enhancement. Their ability to provide personalized interaction, instant feedback, and continuous support makes them valuable tools in modern society. However, effective regulation, ethical guidelines, and responsible use are necessary to maximize their benefits while minimizing associated risks.

STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT PATTERN WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) COMPANIONS

Students' engagement with Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an important area of discussion in contemporary education due to the rapid integration of AI-powered tools such as intelligent tutoring systems, chatbots, adaptive learning platforms, and generative AI applications like ChatGPT into teaching and learning processes. Student engagement refers to the level of students' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social participation in learning activities. Researchers have argued that AI technologies are reshaping educational experiences by promoting personalized learning, increasing motivation, and enhancing interaction between learners and educational content (Hassan, 2026).

Recent studies indicate that AI improves students' engagement by providing personalized learning experiences tailored to students' needs, learning pace, and academic abilities. AI-powered systems analyze students' learning behaviors and provide adaptive feedback, which increases learners' participation and academic confidence. According to Hossain *et al.* (2026), AI-supported instructional content enhances students' satisfaction and engagement across different learning styles because learners receive individualized academic support and instant responses to their questions. Similarly, Hassan (2026) found that the use of AI in higher education significantly improved students' classroom participation, interaction, and academic performance. Furthermore, AI-based tutoring systems have been shown to promote active learning and collaborative engagement among students. Intelligent tutoring systems such as GPTutor encourage learners to interact more frequently with educational materials through guided explanations, practice questions, and immediate corrective feedback. Bai *et al.* (2025) observed that students who used AI tutoring systems demonstrated increased motivation, sustained attention, and stronger cognitive engagement during learning activities. AI technologies also support collaborative learning environments where students can brainstorm ideas, solve problems collectively, and improve communication skills through AI-assisted discussions and projects (Zhu *et al.*, 2023). Studies have also examined the role of AI literacy in shaping students' engagement with AI technologies. Medina-Gual and Parejo (2026) identified different categories of student engagement with AI, including "Critically Engaged Navigators," "Pragmatic Technicians," and "Emerging Users." Their findings revealed that students with higher AI literacy levels demonstrated stronger engagement, responsible AI usage, and better autonomous learning strategies compared to students with limited AI knowledge. This suggests that digital literacy and understanding of AI tools are important determinants of effective engagement with AI-enhanced learning systems. In online and distance education, AI has become a valuable tool for sustaining learner engagement. AI technologies such as predictive analytics, sentiment analysis, chatbots, and adaptive learning platforms help instructors monitor students' participation and provide timely interventions when learners show signs of disengagement. A systematic review conducted in 2026 revealed that AI positively influences students' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement in online learning environments by improving interaction and reducing feelings of isolation among learners. Likewise, Dong (2026) reported that generative AI-based learning analytics technologies significantly improve student learning engagement, especially when students possess adequate digital literacy skills. In addition, AI engagement has been found useful in supporting students in underserved and rural educational communities. Han and Liu (2025) examined rural junior secondary school students' engagement in AI-powered adaptive learning environments and discovered that AI systems increased learners' motivation, participation, and academic interest despite infrastructural challenges. AI technologies therefore have the potential to bridge educational gaps by providing accessible learning opportunities to students in disadvantaged regions. Despite these advantages, several scholars have highlighted concerns regarding students' excessive dependence on AI technologies. Researchers warn that overreliance on AI tools may weaken students' critical thinking, creativity, and independent problem-solving abilities. Some studies reported that students sometimes use AI-generated responses without fully understanding the learning content, which may reduce genuine cognitive engagement (Pedraja-Rejas *et al.*, 2026). Contemporary discussions among educators and researchers also reveal concerns about academic dishonesty, reduced originality, and declining human interaction due to excessive AI dependence.

Additionally, ethical issues such as data privacy, bias in AI systems, and unclear institutional policies have affected students' trust and engagement with AI tools. Sajja *et al.* (2025) found that although students appreciated AI learning assistants for convenience and academic support, many expressed uncertainty regarding ethical guidelines and institutional regulations governing AI usage in education. Consequently, scholars recommend that educational institutions establish clear AI policies, provide AI literacy training, and encourage responsible AI usage to maximize the benefits of AI engagement in education. In all, literature demonstrates that AI technologies positively influence students' engagement through personalized learning, intelligent tutoring, adaptive feedback, and collaborative learning opportunities. AI has enhanced cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of engagement across various educational settings. However, challenges such as overdependence, ethical concerns, and reduced critical thinking require careful management to ensure balanced and responsible integration of AI into education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To accomplish this study the following objectives were stated:

1. To investigate the extent of students' awareness of AI companions.
2. Find out extent of students' use if AI companions,
3. Determine students' pattern of engagement with the AI companions and
4. The motivation behind the use of these AI companions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the extent of students' awareness of AI companions?
2. To what extent do students use AI companions?
3. What is students' pattern of engagement with the AI companions?
4. What is the motivation behind students' use of AI companions?

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the blueprint that guided the study. The design therefore was descriptive survey. This design was employed because it describes the existing characteristics of objects without manipulating any variables. The characteristics described are human behaviour concerning the use of AI companions and their consequences on students' endeavours. The population of the study comprises students of Abia State University Uturu. Quota (100 students every day for five days) and accident (first come to hand) sampling techniques were used in selecting 500 students used for the study. Data collection instrument was a researcher developed 4-cluster 24-item structured questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.87. It was validated by experts in Educational Measurement and Evaluation and Educational Management and Planning. The reliability coefficient established using

Crumbarch Alpha. Data were collected through personal hand delivery. Data were analysed using mean with a bench mark of 2.50 for accepting and rejecting item statements.

Data Presentation

Research Question One

What is the extent of students' awareness of AI companions?

Table 1: Results of Data Analysed on the Extent of Students' Awareness of AI Companions

S/ N	Items	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	ΣX	X	R/ A
1	I have heard much about artificial intelligence (AI) companions.	224 896	160 480	62 124	54 54	1554	3.11	SA
2	Artificial intelligence systems are not new to me.	295 1180	150 450	24 48	31 31	1849	3.70	SA
3	I use Artificial intelligence companions almost everyday	330 1320	57 171	113 226	- -	1717	3.43	SA
4	I am comfortable in the use of AI companions	126 504	176 528	110 220	88 88	1340	2.68	GE
5	I know many AI companion systems	120 480	178 534	107 214	95 95	1323	2.65	GE
6	I am not a novice in the knowledge of AI companions	110 440	181 543	144 288	65 65	1336	2.67	GE
	Mean	3.04						
	Standard Deviation	0.45						

Results of data analysis presented in Table 1 show that the respondents agreed to a very great extent that they are very much aware of AI companions. This was observed from the group mean value of 3.04 (SD = 0.045). This mean is greater than the bench mark mean of 2.50 selected for deciding accepted and rejected items. From the Table the researcher observed that all the items have mean values above the bench mark and were all accepted. However, on individual bases it was found that the respondents are aware of AI companions because they have heard about AIs and they are not new to them, the respondents said they comfortably use them every day; the respondents know many AI companions and are not novices to them.

Research Question Two

To what extent do students use AI companions?

Table 2: Results of Data Analysed on the Extent of Students' use of AI Companions

S/ N	Items	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	ΣX	X	R/A	
7.	I use AI companions frequently for research purposes.	143 572	222 666	68 136	67 67	1441	2.88	GE	
8.	I often use AI companions to prepare for examinations	95 380	128 384	211 422	66 66	1252	2.50	GE	
9.	I spend considerable time daily interacting with AI companions	139 556	188 564	991 198	74 74	1392	2.78	GE	
10.	I only consult AI companions when I have difficult problems to solve	211 844	129 387	120 240	40 40	1511	3.02	VG E	
11.	I consult AI companions only when I want to do academic work.	240 960	222 666	30 60	08 08	1694	3.39	VG E	
12.	I do not have anything to do with AI companions	36 144	110 330	122 244	232 232	950	1.90	LE	
	Mean	=						2.75	
	Standard Deviation	=						0.71	

Table 2 presents the results of data analysed on the extent students use AI companions. This shows the responses on why students use AI companions. The response made a mean score of 2.75 (SD = 0.71) to explain why they use AI companions. Specifically, the respondents agreed that they use AI companions frequently for research purposes, often, considerably and consult them sometimes. These responses imply that the extent of students' use of AI companions depends on need. One of the items rejected said that students do not have anything to do with AI companions. This rejection is clear since the respondents have declared their knowledge and awareness of AI companions.

Research Question Three

What is students' pattern of engagement with the AI companions?

Table 3: Results of Data Analysed on the Pattern of Students' Engagement with AI Companions

S/ N	Items	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	ΣX	\bar{X}	R/A	
13.	I engage with AI for academic research purposes.	196 784	200 600	75 150	29 29	1563	3.13	SA	
14.	I use AI to obtain explanations outside classroom teaching.	102 408	188 564	178 356	32 32	1360	2.72	GE	
15.	We use AI tools to improve our writing	111 444	124 372	141 282	124 124	1222	2.44	LE	
16.	I rely on AI to generate ideas for projects and seminars.	95 380	103 309	200 400	101 101	1190	2.38	LE	
17.	I use AI tools to complete assignments.	190 760	180 540	104 208	26 26	1534	3.07	VG E	
18.	I use AI companions for entertainment purposes	200 888	225 675	52 104	23 23	1690	3.38	VG E	
	Mean	=						2.85	
	Standard Deviation	=						0.40	

In Table 3 the outcome of data analysis on students' pattern of engagement with AI companions are presented. The mean agreement on the pattern of engagement is 2.85 (SD = 0.40) and is to a great extent. The true physical engagement patterns are for academic purposes, getting explanations on obscure matters outside the classroom, to complete assignments, individually or in groups and for entertainment.

Research Question Four

What is the motivation behind students' use of AI companions?

Table 4: Results of Data Analysed on the Factors that Motivate Students' to use AI Companions

S/ N	Items	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	ΣX	X	R/A	
19.	I use AI companions because they make learning very easy.	201 804	130 390	140 240	29 29	1463	2.93	GE	
20.	I use AI because it makes it easy for me to do assignment.	222 888	115 345	130 260	33 33	1526	3.05	VG E	
21.	AI companions give a quick and ready answer that is why I use them.	213 852	1253 375	143 286	19 19	1531	3.06	VG E	
22.	AI companions give me high confidence in the academic works I do	145 580	211 933	100 200	44 44	1757	3.51	VG E	
23.	AI components help me to prepare for my examinations	197 788	167 501	112 224	24 24	1537	3.07	VG E	
24.	I am motivated to us AI components because they give me time for relaxation.	112 448	142 426	116 232	130 130	1236	2.47	LE	
	Mean	=						3.02	
	Standard Deviation	=						0.33	

In Table 4 the results of data analysis on the motivation for students' use of AI companions were presented. The respondents agreed to a very great extent on the factors that motivate them to use AI companions with a mean of 3.2 (SD = 0.33). However, at the threshold of the bench mark (mean = 2.47) is the item which says that students use AI companions to help them to get time for relaxation. All the other items have mean above the bench mark. Making learning easy, helping to do assignments, availability of quick and readymade answers and helping to prepare for examination are some of the motivations for the use of AI companions

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

These findings on students' awareness of AI companions are in consonance with the findings of Sajja *et al.* (2025), Dong (2026) and others who stressed that students should be made aware of and helped to use AI companions because they are education friendly. Folk and Dunn (2026) emphasized that students' use of AI companions would help them to become more interested in reading and hence, form good study habits which may help them to eschew examination malpractices. Hassan (2026) remarked that AI companions could act as vademecum (memory aids) to students and even bring peers together to engage in collaborative studies. This will only be possible when all the peers are aware of and are conversant with the use of these AI companions. That the respondents use the AI companions

to a high extent corresponds with Medina-Gual and Parejo (2026) who opined that the attention students give to AI companions is surpassing the attention they give to their lecture note and warning that the lecturers class notes are the compasses that direct students on what commands to give to and questions to ask AIs. Also Zhu, *et al.* (2023) argued that the use of AI companions may be out of proportion in the near future as it is becoming part of students' lives not only for educational purposes but also for entertainment and relaxation. Students' pattern of engagement with AI companions is multi-faceted. Han, Liu, Xiang (2025) put this succinctly when they said that AI technologies positively influence students' engagement through personalized learning, intelligent tutoring, adaptive feedback, and collaborative learning opportunities. AI has enhanced cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of engagement across various educational settings (Hassan, 2026). In fact, it could be argued that need is the key determinant of the pattern of students engagement with the AIs companions. Students have these challenging needs either individually or as a group and consult Ai companions to find solutions to them. Summarizing the motivation behind students' motivation to use AI technologies Han and Liu (2025) said that in their study found out that AI-powered adaptive learning environments and systems increased learners' motivation, social, participation, and academic interest despite infrastructural challenges. AI technologies therefore have the potential to bridge educational gaps by providing accessible learning opportunities to students in both advantaged and disadvantaged regions and moderate students' socialization life.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS/CONCLUSIONS

- Undergraduate students in Abia State University are very much aware of AI companions and to a very great extent too. It is not new to them.
- Undergraduate students in Abia State University use of AI companions is gradually surpassing the attention they pay to their lecture notes.
- Undergraduate students in Abia State University engagement pattern with AI companions is multi-faceted and dependent on need.
- The motivation behind undergraduate students in Abia State University use of AI companions are mainly academic, social and relaxation

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study this researcher recommends that:

- Abia State University and any other university that may want to use the results of this research to improve their students' academic engagements plan an academic tutorial that will focus on the use of AI companions for teaching, learning and research.
- The university should try to mitigate the challenges to positive use of AI companions by students.
- Students and individual lecturers should endeavour to be conversant with the use of AI companions.

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