THOMAS MORE | UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES



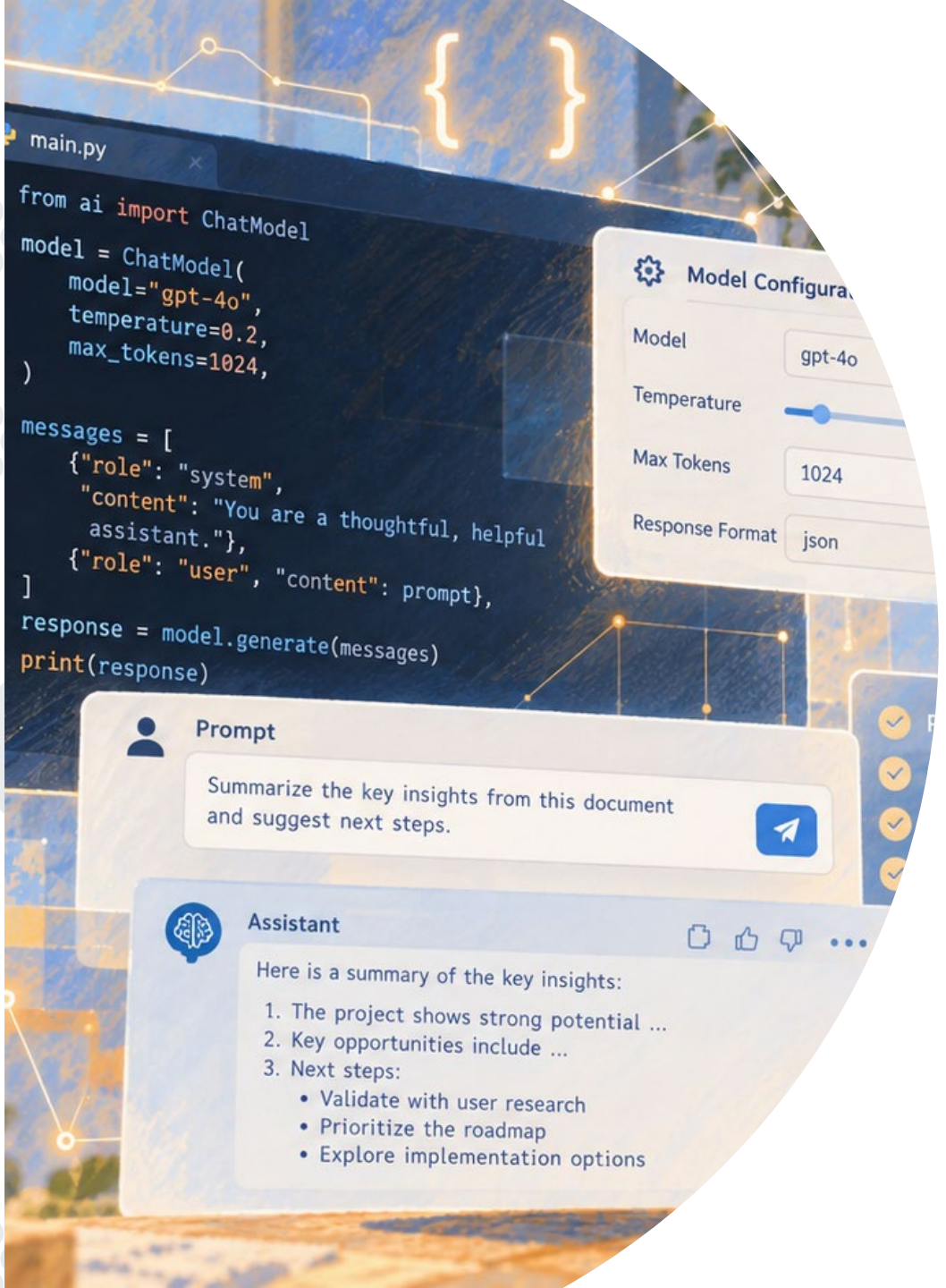
When chatbots become confidants

Exploring real-world use of AI chatbots for mental health support

Sylvie Bernaerts, PhD, Fien Buelens, Nele De Witte, Andreas Balaskas, Toon Colman & Tom Van Daele
ESRII 2026 – 11/10/2026

AI chatbots are part of daily life

- General-purpose AI chatbots are commonly used by millions of people
- Accumulating evidence indicates use for mental health support
- Little is known about real-world user behaviour
- Most research focuses on chatbot performance, rather than actual use



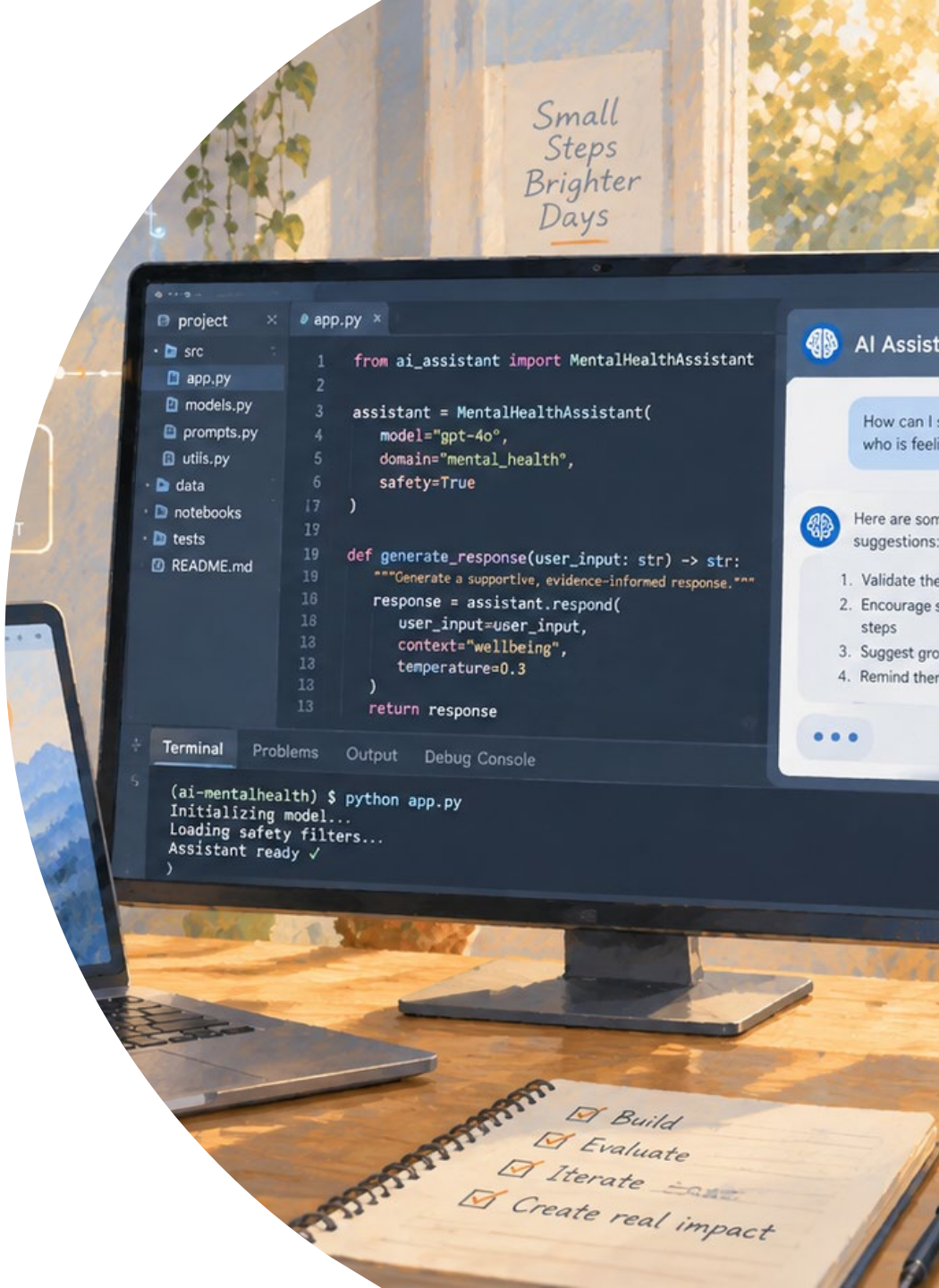
Bodner et al. (2026)

Research questions

- Who uses AI chatbots for mental health support?
- How are they used?
- Why are they used?
- Is digital working alliance related to engagement?

Study design

- Cross-sectional online survey
- Belgium, Oct ’25 – March ’26
- Two samples
    - 73 1st-year Applied Psychology students
    - 276 general public
- Measures
    - Usage characteristics
    - Topics discussed
    - Reasons for use
    - Helpfulness and negatieve experiences
    - Digital Working Alliance Inventory (D-WAI)



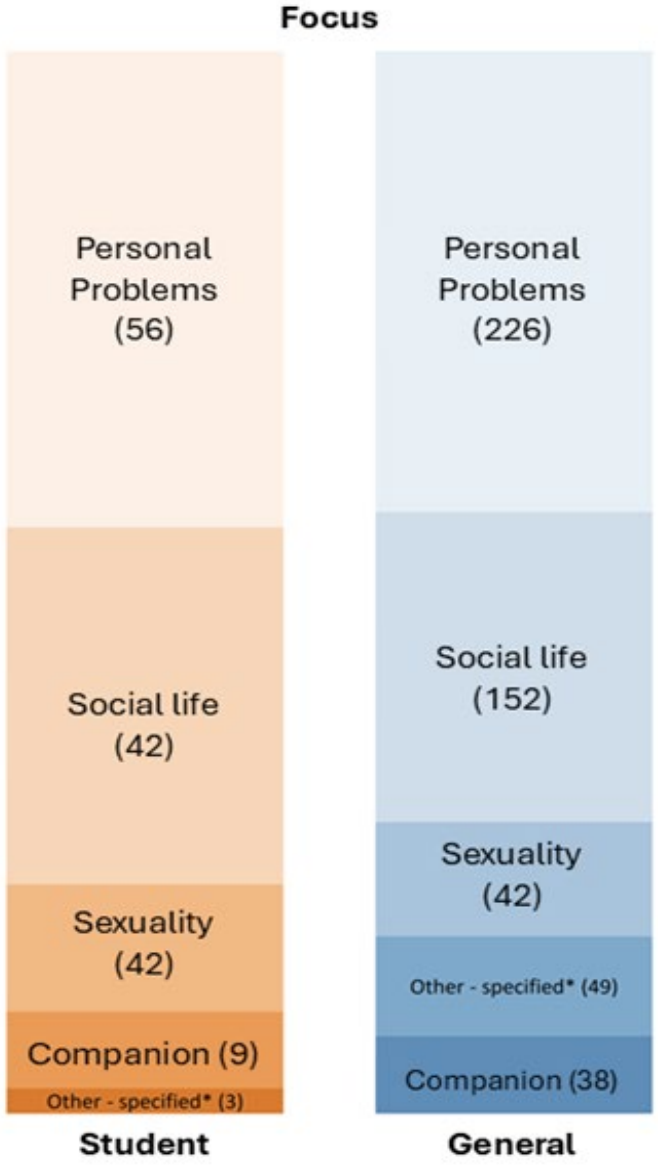
Results – Who uses AI chatbots?

- 40% of recruited students (73/181)
- Majority of users were women
    - Recruitment bias
- Prior experience with professional mental health care
- Most did not inform therapist
- ChatGPT is most common

→ **AI chatbots are often not replacing therapy, but supplementing existing support**



Results – How are AI chatbots used?

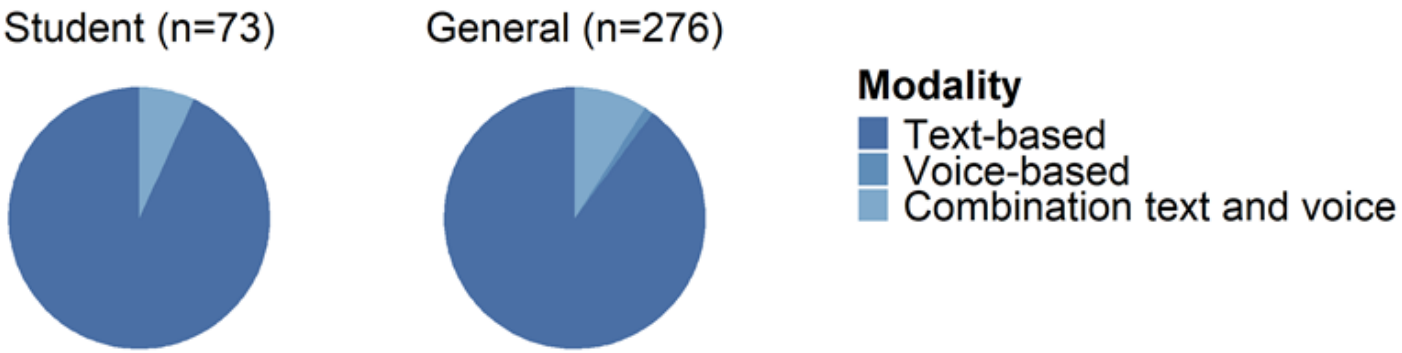


Primarily seeking emotional and social support rather than formal therapy

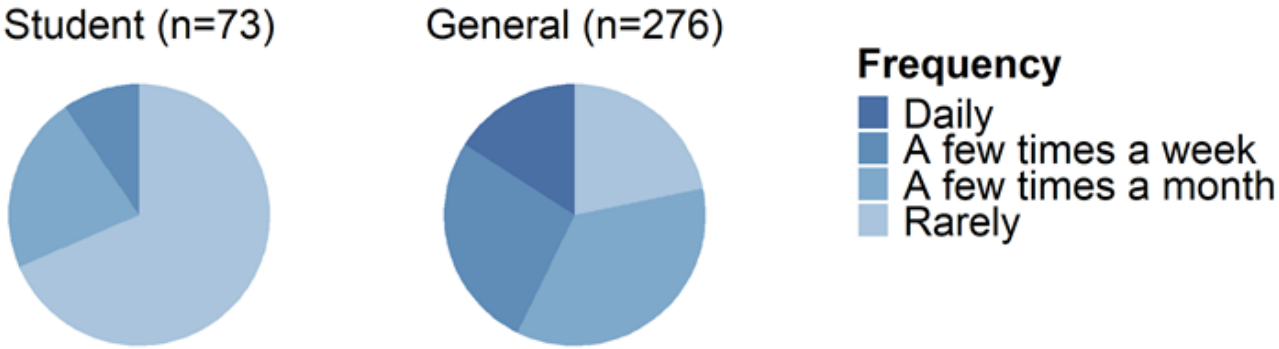
Main drivers seem to mirror known barriers to mental health care

Results – User experiences

Text- and voice-based use in student and general sample

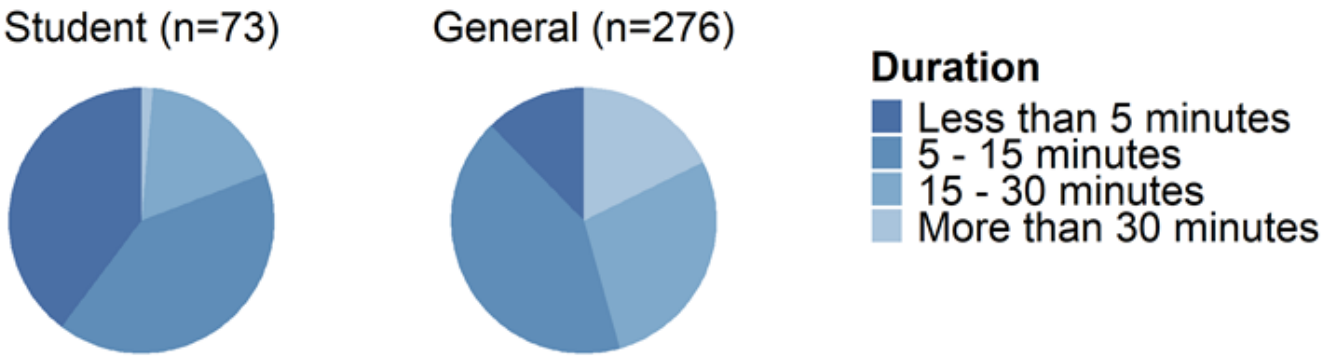


Frequency of chat conversations in student and general sample

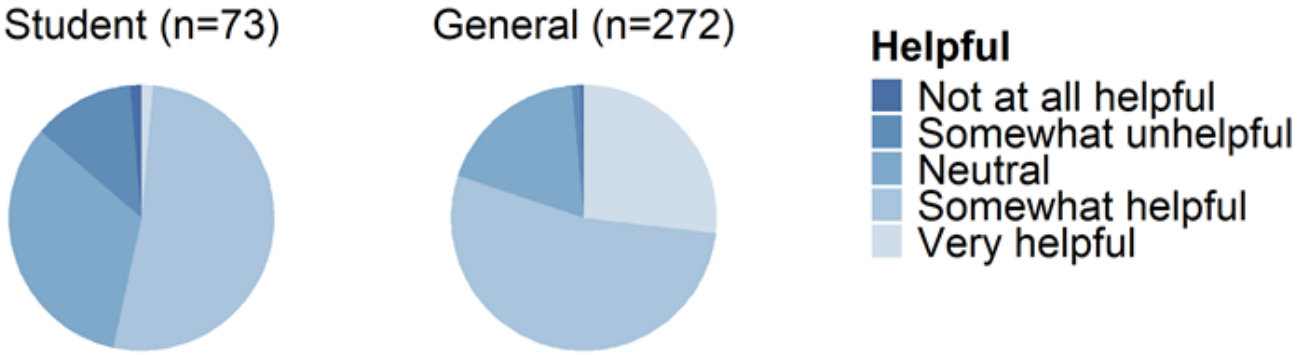


Results – User experiences

Duration of chat conversations in student and general sample



Experienced helpfulness in student and general sample



Results – Digital working alliance

Relationship between therapeutic alliance and engagement factors

Higher D-WAI scores are associated with more frequent chatbot use

- Student sample (also higher duration)
- General public

Association =/= causation



What does this mean?



Clinicians

Discuss AI chatbot use

Explore unmet needs



Developers

Implement safeguards

Improve referral mechanisms

Improve existing models for mental health use?
Or, create mental health AI chatbots?



Researchers

Study long-term effects

Assess clinical outcomes

Investigate therapeutic alliance further

Define mental health use

THOMAS MORE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES



General-purpose AI chatbots are used for emotional support.

Should we improve existing models, or create new ones focused on mental health use?

Sylvie.bernaerts@thomasmore.be

Psychology & technology

Centre of Expertise Care & Well-being



Exploring Real-World Use of AI Chatbots for Mental Health Support: Cross-Sectional Survey Study

Sylvie Bernaerts[1]; Fien Buelens[1]; Nele A J De Witte[1]; Andreas Balaskas[2]; Toon Colman[1]; Tom Van Daele[1,3]

References

Bodner R, Lim K, Siddals S, Goldberg S, Torous J. Barriers to understanding how many people use AI for mental health support: an estimate and narrative review. npj Digit Public Health. 2026;1(1):21. [doi: 10.1038/s44482-026-00025-7]