

# UN iNViTED GUEST



STATE OF  
THE YAYA  
REPORT  
2025



# Who is...

MOJO Ad is a full-service agency at the University of Missouri that not only specializes in all things young but is also staffed entirely by young adults. Specializing in the 18- to 24-year-old market, also known as the youth and young adult (YAYA) market, we are certified experts because we are them. Our unique position in this sought-after demographic grants us the ability to act as a liaison between YAYAs and the professionals seeking to reach them.

## What is a YAYA?

Originally coined by MOJO Ad, “YAYA” refers to 18- to 24- year-olds. These consumers are at a pivotal life stage in which they are developing their identities and embracing their reality. At 31 million strong in the United States with \$9.8 trillion in spending power these consumers are choosing whether to stick with the brands they know or try new ones. If marketers fail to reach them, they might never catch up.

## What is State of the YAYA?

The State of the YAYA is an annual report that provides marketers with an in-depth look at the trends and activities of the 18- to 24-year-old

market. Created by MOJO Ad staff, the report presents exclusive data on the YAYA demographic to help marketers connect with them on a deeper level. The report not only highlights who they are as consumers, but individuals as well, by providing an extensive look at their attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

## Our Methodology:

To best understand the YAYA market, we crafted a 66-question survey that was distributed nationwide. This resulted in 807 completed responses from YAYA consumers. The sample was representative of the U.S. Census Bureau data for 18- to 24-year-olds related to race, ethnicity and gender.

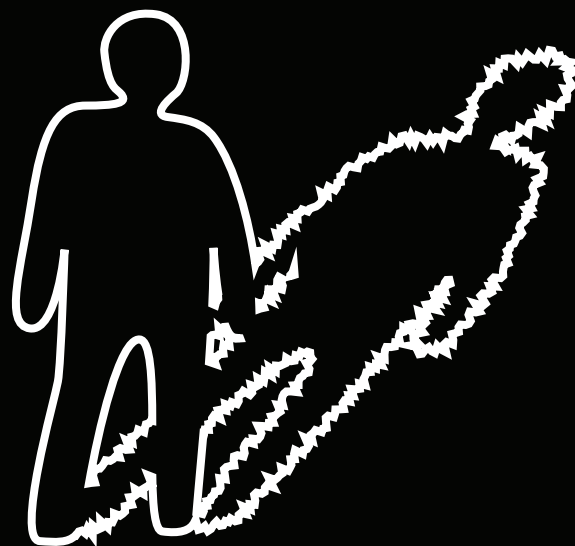
Our qualitative research consisted of seven focus groups, six paired-depth interviews, and 16 in-depth interviews with a total of 61 participants across the United States. In addition to our extensive primary research, we utilized a variety of secondary sources, including Forbes, Mintel, Yahoo Finance, NBC News and UCLA, as well as previous State of the YAYA reports to get a complete understanding of the ever-evolving YAYA market.



## meet the team



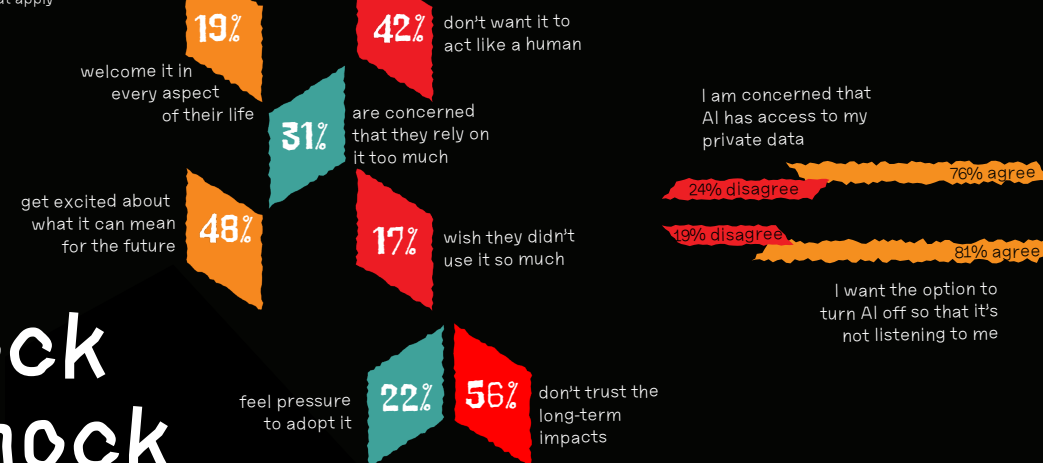
MEET  
THE



# UNINVITED GUEST

## When thinking about AI...

\*select all  
that apply



## Knock Knock

Baggage in tow, AI arrived unexpectedly on the doorsteps of 18- to 24-year-olds, inviting itself into every aspect of their lives. Some slammed the door, others welcomed it, but most kept it at arm's length, unsure of its motives.

At first, it was polite, offering a helpful suggestion here, a perfectly timed correction there. But soon, the uninvited guest was no longer just lurking in the background—it settled into the most essential parts of life: school, work, relationships.

AI's sudden integration left one research participant feeling as though "a decision has been made already without me." Still, before

they knew it, AI was indispensable, with 95% of YAYAs reporting using AI and over 51% using it multiple times a week.

The line between user and used blurred as the tool became more intimately intertwined, making it unclear who is really in control.

Yet, 44% of YAYA individuals admit they use AI despite fearing it. Just like protagonists in scary movies, YAYAs are blindly walking toward the entity they fear.

As AI seeps into every facet of existence, it doesn't just assist, it alters. Replaces. Rewrites. And with each small concession, the humanity of its hosts begins to fade.

You don't remember letting it in but it's made itself at home. It's always watching. Learning. Suggesting. Always present.

The uninvited guest is here to stay.



# THE STUDENT

## The New Kid

AI gave itself a seat at every YAYA student's table. It lingers in lecture halls, lurks in late-night study sessions and hovers over every blinking cursor, whispering suggestions into the margins of every assignment. It rewrites, rephrases and thinks for them.

Students never invited it in, yet suddenly it's learning – not alongside them, but instead of them.



## The Guest Rewrites the Rules

For many students, AI is a lifeline. When asked how AI helps them, 51% of YAYA respondents said it helps them use their time more efficiently, 40% said it helps them produce higher-quality work and 37% said it makes them think more creatively.

But this relationship is complicated. AI is both a tool and a temptation. YAYAs are torn, as 36% say AI makes them feel conflicted, while another 36% say it makes them feel innovative. The other most common emotions were fascinated (30%), intelligent (28%) and guilty (26%). The juxtaposition in answers brings to the



surface the unease YAYAs feel about AI's role in their learning. AI is a shortcut that 73% of YAYAs say allows them to work smarter, not harder. But is this shortcut the easy way out when 78% also agree it discourages learning?

Even those who welcome AI into their studies don't trust it. When asked to label what AI tools were, the top responses were untrustworthy (17%), unethical (15%), stealing my data (15%), creepy (14%) and cheating (14%). AI is a guest they can rely on, but one they can never quite turn their back on.

## AI helps me\* ...

**51%**  
use my  
time more  
efficiently

**40%**  
produce  
higher-quality  
work

**37%**  
think more  
creatively

**35%**  
multitask

**32%**  
communicate  
better

**30%**  
feel more  
confident in  
my ideas

**28%**  
think more  
critically

**19%**  
none of the  
above

**16%**  
take control  
of my time

**13%**  
work a side  
hustle

**12%**  
spend more  
time on my  
hobbies

**8%**  
feel less  
lonely

\*select all  
that apply



# The Illusion of Learning

Assignments get completed, essays take shape and answers appear with ease. But when AI does all the thinking, does the student ever learn?

Only 31% of YAYAs believe AI truly helps them learn, and 76% say it makes developing critical thinking skills harder. This guest doesn't just assist, it replaces. It strips away the friction that forges knowledge, leaving behind polished work without the struggle that gave it meaning.

One YAYA reflected on the eerie shift, "I think back to how much work I did in high school with just brainstorming and outlining, making presentations, and how now I can do that in five minutes, because of AI. In high school, that would take me hours to do some of those processes."

When students abandon essential learning habits for completion and ease, what happens to the value of a diploma? When intelligence, once earned through years of study, becomes second to computer-generated perfection, learning becomes an illusion.



## Using AI makes me feel...

- 36% Conflicted...Innovative
- 30% Fascinated
- 28% Inspired
- 26% Guilty
- 25% Dependent
- 24% Uncomfortable
- 21% Relaxed...Empowered...Excited
- 20% Amused...Anxious
- 16% Powerful
- 12% Frustrated...Cool
- 10% Confused
- 8% Overwhelmed

## Who Earns the Degree?

AI is no longer just a tool, it's a boundless presence, lurking in the shadows of every document, and looming over every assignment. Only a third of YAYA respondents believe AI will have a positive impact on human knowledge. Yet it's here, shaping the next generation of graduates.

So when the time comes to cross the stage, who really earned the degree?

The student?

Or the uninvited guest?



# MEET THE MENTOR

## YAYAs' Newest Boss...



The workplace is where YAYAs have most welcomed the uninvited guest. AI hovers over cubicles, assisting with tasks and refining ideas at a speed no human could match. Fifty-six percent of YAYAs believe AI should be integrated into the workforce to make their jobs easier.

Still, YAYAs hesitate to give it too much control with 60% believing it should only be used for administrative or basic tasks, but 24% of YAYAs said they would lose confidence in their ideas without AI. The guest is no longer just a helpful tool; it has become a quiet authority whispering in their ears.

### Pressure to Invite It In

The relationship between YAYAs and AI comes with an unspoken pressure. Many invited it in out of sheer necessity, fearing they'd fall behind if they didn't. The worry isn't just about using AI, but about using it well enough to compete.

One participant put it bluntly, "People are gonna have to use AI to keep up to be more efficient." AI no longer feels like an option for YAYA employees but rather an expectation.





# Everyone Gets a Gold Star

In the past, YAYA employees turned to mentors who provided guidance, offered tough but necessary feedback, challenged them to grow and saw potential where they could not. But now, 46% of Gen Z employees report that they prefer asking AI work-related questions over their colleagues or managers, according to a 2024 Forbes Study.

It's not just about convenience, it's about trust. YAYAs aren't just treating AI as a search engine, they are interacting with it like a guide. Sixty-eight percent say AI performs better with polite prompts, proving how YAYAs subconsciously humanize it, shaping their responses as if speaking to a person.

One participant said of their confidence in AI, "I put my trust in AI, just as if you were to put a trust into an academic professor if you

were in a math class. They may not be 100% right most of the time, but they're pretty knowledgeable in that subjective field, so you can probably trust them about 95% of the time. But they don't know everything. So you kind of just gotta put your trust in their hand."

Another participant noted that while they don't see AI as a mentor now, they recognize that's the direction it's going. "I know that they are trying to move the AI to a place where it's more of your mentor and someone you actually trust. That's kind of just crazy to me, but I guess that's where it's heading."

Unlike a human mentor, AI does not challenge or push back. It is a feedback loop, reinforcing the biases we bring to it. And YAYAs know this as 57% agree AI is biased. Yet, they still turn to it for validation, allowing its responses to shape their decisions, their work, and ultimately, their careers.

## A Hollow Decay of Progress

Only 39% of YAYAs agree that AI-generated work is as impressive as human-made work. Eighty-one percent believe that human perspective is irreplaceable. And yet, 1 in 5 still call AI a mentor.

AI isn't replacing mentorship, it's replacing discomfort. The hard lessons that shape strong professionals are being smoothed over, replaced with easy answers that ask for nothing in return.

And so, YAYAs find themselves in a trap of their own making. By turning to AI for guidance, they forgo the challenges that make them better. When they lean on the quest for mentorship, they don't elevate their careers or skills. They erode them.

Without AI for a day, I would\*...

56%  
not miss it

24%  
feel less confident in my decisions and ideas

10%  
feel accomplished

14%  
drown at work

8%  
breathe easier

7%  
feel lost and confused  
\*select all that apply

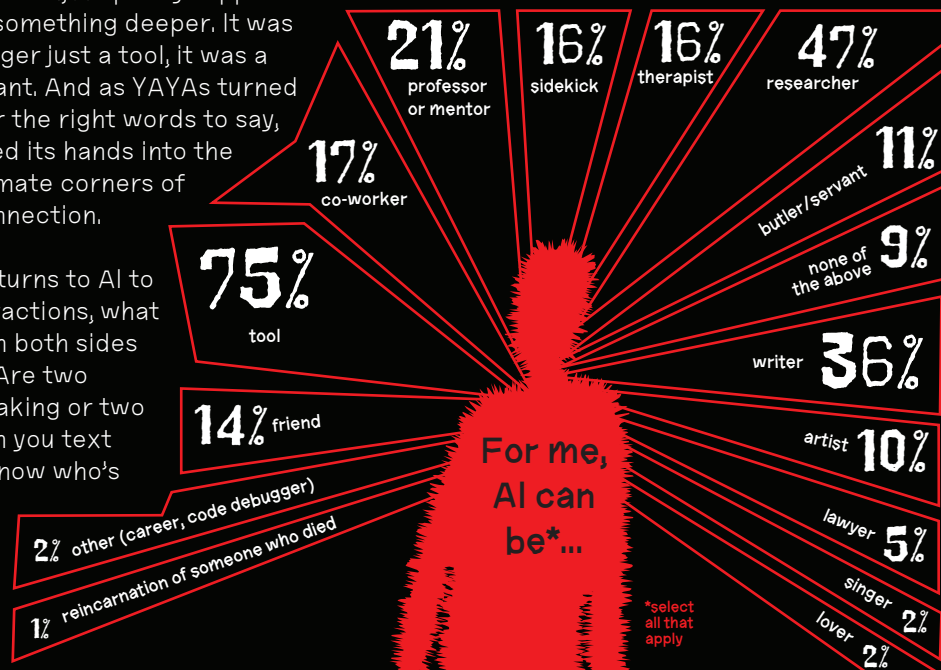
# THE DATE?



## Relationship

Quickly indispensable at school and work, AI quietly slipped into something deeper. It was no longer just a tool, it was a confidant. And as YAYAs turned to AI for the right words to say, it reached its hands into the most intimate corners of human connection.

If everyone turns to AI to perfect interactions, what happens when both sides do the same? Are two people still speaking or two machines? When you text a friend, do you know who's really answering?



## Perfection Over Connection

The internal pressure YAYAs feel to be perfect allowed the guest to creep into their relationships. With 42% admitting that they talk to AI like a person, it's no surprise they consult AI for personal matters.

One participant spoke about how he uses AI to talk to girls on dating apps, "I ask it, 'What do I say to this girl? How do I talk to girls? What do you think about me doing this?'"

Another said, "It almost makes people feel better about the fact that they're just talking to a robot, a computer. They like the privacy of the chat and the lack of judgement."

YAYAs rely on AI to craft the perfect message, but in doing so, they risk losing the raw, unfiltered nature of real connection. Sixty-three percent agree that AI will make anxiety and depression worse by making people more reliant on their phones. Even as AI offers a safety net, it may also be a tightening web of isolation.

## Status Update: In a Relationship

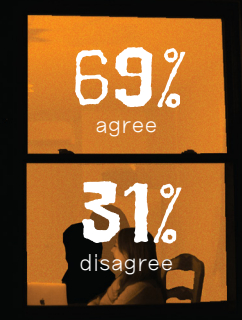
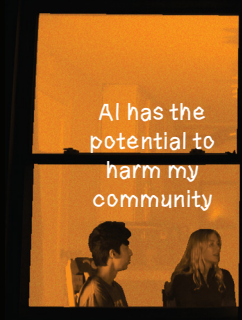
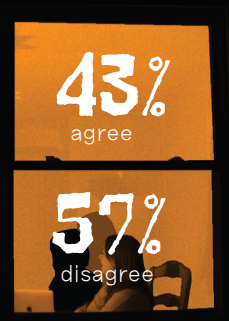
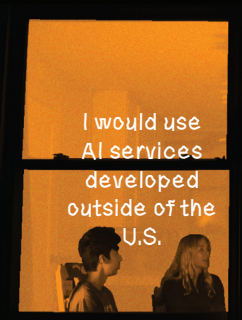
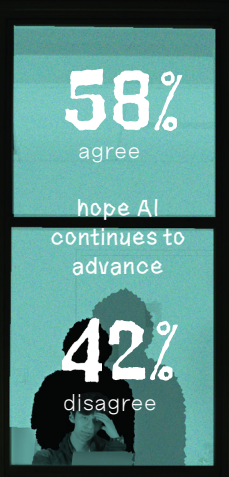
If AI is the translator of human emotion, how long until it becomes the relationship itself? YAYAs already assign AI roles beyond utility as 16% call it a therapist, 14% call it a friend and 2% call it lover. While this may not be the majority, the growing emotional reliance is undeniable, especially when many may feel this way without explicitly labeling it.

The guest smoothed out the rough edges of being human until there was nothing human left at all. If YAYAs continue to value perfection over authenticity, when do they stop needing other people at all?

"In a world run by AI we lose humanity," one YAYA reflected. "Just kinda that connection between two people. It'll just feel kind of hollow."

YAYAs don't remember when they stopped resisting the guest's influence in their personal lives, only that once it arrived, it never left.





# THE GUEST LIVES



# EVERYWHERE



## It All Started With a Knock.

And a guest who promised to make life easier. In many ways it did, with 60% of YAYAs agreeing that AI made their lives better. YAYAs believed they were in control. But how do you shut out something that no longer knocks, because it's already inside, influencing every decision?

The fear of this guest lingering in all corners of YAYAs' lives is spine-tingling, with 65% agreeing AI has the potential to harm them and 69% agreeing AI will harm their community. When asked plainly if AI will ruin the world, 58% of YAYAs agree.

YAYAs can't turn their backs on the guest, but also can't turn it away. Only 29% agree that AI should be destroyed and 58% agree AI is a necessary advancement and they hope it continues to advance.

It's up to us to remember what makes us human and take ownership of our relationship with AI. We have to do human things, even if they're tedious or make us uncomfortable.

AI eases the burden of being human, but we lose those moments that make us most human – our flubs and unfiltered thoughts. The moments of discomfort that, in hindsight, teach us.

Perhaps we can't slam the door on AI, but we can decide how much space we give it. Some rooms should remain ours alone.

We opened the door, we let in our uninvited guest. But there's still time to decide where it belongs.

## AI will have a positive effect on...

human knowledge  
63% agree

economy  
55% agree  
workplace  
61% agree

environment  
62% disagree  
politics  
68% disagree  
human rights  
66% disagree  
human connection  
74% disagree  
mental health & well-being  
52% disagree  
personal safety & privacy  
68% disagree  
national security  
59% disagree

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