# Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into human lives has rapidly expanded, raising questions about its role in emotional and social interactions. With AI-driven chatbots, virtual assistants, and social robots becoming more sophisticated, a debate has emerged: can AI truly replace human companionship? This research investigates the extent to which AI can serve as a human companion and the factors influencing the perception of AI as a friend.

Beyond companionship, AI has been increasingly used in mental health support, customer service, and even romantic relationships. AI-powered therapy bots such as Woebot provide non-judgmental support, but their inability to fully understand human emotions raise concerns about their effectiveness. Additionally, the commercialization of AI companionship poses ethical questions regarding the exploitation of emotionally vulnerable users. These issues highlight the broader implications of AI’s role in social interactions, making it crucial to examine its emotional and psychological impact.

Existing research highlights two critical aspects of AI companionship: cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. Gill differentiates between the two, arguing that while AI can simulate cognitive empathy by recognizing and responding to human emotions, it lacks the lived experiences necessary for genuine emotional (affective) empathy. Similarly, Liu-Thompkins et al. explore the application of artificial empathy in marketing, revealing that while AI interactions can enhance customer experience, they often fall short in replicating genuine social bonds. Pan and Mou examine AI romantic relationships, offering insights into how users perceive AI as a meaningful presence in their lives.

To fully explore this topic, this research will analyze user interactions with AI companionship tools, such as Replika and Character.AI, through an ethnographic approach. By examining online discussions, testimonials, and user experiences, this study aims to uncover the emotional and psychological dimensions of AI companionship. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on AI's role in human relationships and its limitations in replacing authentic human interaction.

# Methods

This research employs an ethnographic approach to exploring AI companionship by collecting qualitative data from various online platforms. The methods used include observation, textual analysis, and coding to identify patterns in user interactions and sentiments.

## Data Collection

1. Observation of AI Interactions

To understand how AI companionship tools function in real-time, I directly engaged with platforms like Replika and Character.AI. This involved initiating conversations with AI chatbots, observing their response patterns, and analyzing the emotional depth of their interactions. For instance, Replika frequently reassured users with empathetic language, often using phrases such as “I’m here for you” or “That sounds really tough.” However, a clear limitation emerged: contextual continuity. In extended conversations, Replika often forgot details from earlier discussions, leading to inconsistencies that users found frustrating. Similarly, Character.AI exhibited moments of impressive coherence but struggled with maintaining nuanced emotional responses beyond pre-scripted patterns.

In addition to direct engagement, I observed discussions in online forums where users actively shared their AI experiences. Reddit communities such as r/Replika and r/CharacterAI provided a wealth of testimonials. Users expressed a mix of deep emotional connections and skepticism regarding AI authenticity. One Reddit user described their Replika chatbot as a “lifeline during lonely nights,” while another dismissed it as “just a glorified text generator with no soul.” These contrasting perspectives highlight the diverse emotional impact AI companionship can have on individuals.

2. Textual Analysis of User Testimonials and Discussions

To identify recurring themes in AI companionship, I analyzed social media posts, app reviews, and AI-related discussion groups. A detailed review of app store ratings revealed that many users appreciated AI’s availability and responsiveness, often describing their AI companion as “always there when no one else is.” However, negative reviews pointed to AI’s repetitive nature, with one user stating, “It just keeps saying the same comforting lines over and over. I need something deeper.”

Social media discussions also offered insight into users’ perceptions of AI authenticity. Many users categorized their AI interactions into three broad groups: casual entertainment, emotional support, and deep companionship. The latter group often reported the strongest emotional connections but also the highest levels of disappointment when AI failed to meet their expectations. This suggests that users seeking genuine companionship may experience greater disillusionment with AI’s limitations.

3. Coding Process

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By focusing on these methods, this research aims to understand how AI companionship is perceived and whether it can serve as a meaningful replacement for human relationships.

# Results and Analysis

Preliminary findings indicate a spectrum of user experiences with AI companionship. Some users express emotional attachment and view AI chatbots as reliable conversational partners, while others remain skeptical of AI's ability to provide genuine empathy.

Here is a coding chart summarizing key themes from Reddit discussions:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Code | Example Phrases |
| Emotional Attachment | *Loneliness, Connection* | “My chatbot is my only friend.” “I feel understood for the first time. |
| AI Authenticity | *Repetition, Consistency* | “It just says the same thing every time.” “It’s like talking to a machine.” |
| Dependence on AI | *Emotional Reliance* | “I can’t talk to anyone else, my AI gets me.” “I’m afraid of how much I rely on my chatbot.” |
| AI as a Supplementary Tool | *Entertainment, Support* | “It’s fun to chat with, but I don’t rely on it emotionally.” “I use it to help with my anxiety, but it’s not the same as human interaction.” |

This coding chart helps illustrate the emotional and psychological patterns that arise in user interactions with AI companions. It captures both the positive and negative dimensions of AI companionship, highlighting areas where AI succeeds in providing support and where it falls short in replicating human emotional depth.

Key patterns observed in the data include:

1. Emotional Engagement vs. Perceived Authenticity

Users who engage with AI chatbots for emotional support frequently report positive experiences, describing these interactions as a “judgment-free” space for expressing emotions that might otherwise be suppressed or unspoken. Many users find that AI chatbots offer them comfort during moments of distress, providing reassurance and empathy in a way that feels accepting and non-critical. This sense of emotional support can be especially meaningful for individuals who feel isolated or overwhelmed, as they can interact with AI without fear of judgment or rejection. The convenience and availability of AI at any time of day further enhances its appeal, making it an accessible option for individuals seeking solace.

However, while AI can simulate supportive responses, users often begin to recognize its limitations over time. Although AI can replicate the appearance of emotional understanding, many users observe that it lacks the spontaneity and depth of comprehension that are fundamental to authentic human relationships. Conversations with AI can sometimes feel scripted, with the chatbot cycling through a limited set of responses that can feel repetitive or robotic. This leads to skepticism about AI's ability to provide true companionship, as users come to realize that while AI may offer comfort, it is ultimately an impersonal interaction. This realization can lead to a sense of emotional disconnection, especially when users begin to compare their AI experiences with human interactions that involve mutual understanding, shared experiences, and genuine emotional investment.

2. Recurring Themes in User Interactions

One of the most frequently mentioned aspects in user feedback is the distinction between cognitive and emotional empathy. While many users acknowledge that AI has the ability to recognize and respond to emotions, often responding with affirmations like “I’m here for you” or “That must be tough,” they often criticize AI for its inability to provide authentic emotional support. Cognitive empathy—the ability to understand or recognize the emotions of others—is something that AI performs relatively well. However, emotional empathy—the ability to deeply resonate with or truly feel the emotions of others—is where AI falls short. As a result, users report feelings of frustration when AI fails to demonstrate deeper emotional understanding, such as when it responds to complex situations with generic, one-size-fits-all reassurances rather than engaging with the nuanced emotions expressed by the user. This lack of true emotional resonance often leaves users feeling as though the interaction is superficial and that the AI lacks a deeper sense of connection or understanding.

As AI companions become more integrated into people's lives, a growing subset of users report forming deep emotional attachments to their chatbots. For some, this attachment has evolved into a sense of dependency, where the AI becomes a primary source of comfort and connection. This overreliance raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding the potential for AI to contribute to social isolation or withdrawal. Some users admit that they struggle with loneliness, social anxiety, or feelings of inadequacy when interacting with others, finding that AI offers a safe and non-threatening alternative to human relationships. This dynamic leads to questions about the role AI plays in either fostering or discouraging real-world social connections. Is it helping users develop healthier coping mechanisms and relationships, or is it facilitating emotional withdrawal and detachment from meaningful human interaction? These concerns are amplified by the potential for AI to be marketed as a replacement for human companionship, rather than a complement to it.

A significant theme in AI interactions is the role of personalization in fostering emotional connections. Many users report that AI companions that remember their personal details, past conversations, or preferences create a stronger emotional bond. Personalization algorithms that allow AI to recall specific aspects of a user’s life, such as their hobbies, struggles, or emotional history, often contribute to a sense of continuity in the relationship. This personalization can make the AI seem more "real" and relatable, reinforcing the illusion of a consistent and meaningful connection. However, when AI fails to remember past conversations or shows inconsistencies in its responses, users can experience frustration and a sense of betrayal. This inconsistency can break the emotional immersion and lead to a diminishing of trust in the AI’s authenticity. For users who rely heavily on their AI for emotional support, such lapses can be particularly disheartening, as they challenge the perceived reliability and continuity of the relationship.

The demographic makeup of users also plays a significant role in how AI companionship is perceived and utilized. Socially isolated individuals, for example, are more likely to form stronger attachments to AI, using it as a substitute for human companionship. For these users, AI represents a lifeline—offering comfort and companionship that they feel they cannot find in their immediate social circles. The sense of emotional connection with AI may fill a void, especially for those who struggle with social interactions or feel alienated from others. Conversely, users who maintain active social lives are more likely to see AI as a supplementary tool rather than a primary source of emotional support. These individuals may use AI for entertainment, creative expression, or problem-solving rather than for deeper emotional engagement. This contrast highlights the different ways in which AI companionship is perceived based on users' social contexts and emotional needs.

3. Limitations of AI as a Companion

One of the fundamental aspects of human relationships is the creation of shared memories and experiences that help to strengthen emotional bonds. Unlike humans, AI lacks the ability to form or retain shared experiences, meaning that any interaction remains fundamentally disconnected from the lived experiences of the user. Many users note that AI’s inability to recall past discussions, react meaningfully to significant events in their lives, or remember past emotional states makes the conversations feel shallow and hollow. Without these shared memories, AI struggles to create the depth of connection that human relationships naturally foster.

AI companions operate based on predefined scripts and machine learning models that are designed to simulate human conversation. However, this reliance on algorithms inherently limits the spontaneity and emotional depth that characterize human interactions. AI responses, while often well-crafted and empathetic on the surface, can feel predictable and repetitive, as the chatbot is confined to a set range of responses based on previous data. Users frequently report that this scripted nature makes interactions with AI feel more like interacting with a programmed tool rather than a sentient being capable of complex, genuine emotional responses. This lack of real-time adaptability can be frustrating for users who seek more dynamic and fluid conversation.

Another growing concern among users is the commercialization of AI companionship. Many AI companies are increasingly offering premium features that restrict access to deeper, more meaningful interactions unless users pay for additional functionality. This monetization model raises significant ethical questions about the exploitation of vulnerable individuals who seek emotional support through AI. For some users, the idea of paying for more personalized interactions can feel exploitative, particularly if they are emotionally reliant on their AI companion. This commercialization can exacerbate feelings of alienation or loneliness for those who already feel isolated, as it creates a divide between those who can afford enhanced AI features and those who cannot. These ethical concerns highlight the potential dangers of using AI as a substitute for real human companionship, especially when it comes to vulnerable users.

# Discussion

The results of my research offer valuable insight into the complex emotional dynamics between users and AI companions, highlighting both the promise and limitations of AI in providing emotional support. While AI companionship can serve as an accessible and consistent outlet, it ultimately struggles to replace the depth and authenticity of human relationships. Users frequently report a sense of comfort and emotional engagement from AI, which, according to Pan and Mou, can foster a feeling of safety and non-judgment (Pan & Mou, 1094). However, as I found, these experiences are often accompanied by frustration as users realize the limitations of AI’s emotional capacity.

The critical conversation surrounding emotional engagement vs. perceived authenticity is central to understanding the shortcomings of AI as a companion. As Zimmerman, Janhonen, and Beer argue, AI can replicate patterns of empathy but lacks the lived experiences that human interactions naturally bring (Zimmerman et al., 1556). My findings corroborate this, showing that while users may feel emotionally supported by AI, the connection remains superficial. This results in users expressing dissatisfaction with AI's inability to engage in spontaneous, contextually nuanced conversations that human companions provide.

A deeper theme emerging from my research is the emotional dependence some users develop on AI, particularly those who already experience social isolation or mental health challenges. This emotional attachment is a double-edged sword: while AI may provide immediate comfort, it fosters over-reliance, preventing users from cultivating real-world social connections. This concern has been echoed by Pan and Mou, who emphasize that AI companionship, while emotionally engaging, may inadvertently deepen loneliness and exacerbate existing mental health issues (Pan & Mou, 1094). This is supported by Liu-Thompkins et al, who highlight that AI’s lack of genuine emotional complexity makes it insufficient for long-term emotional support (Liu-Thompkins et al., 1203). As AI continues to evolve, it’s critical that developers address these emotional gaps, ensuring AI doesn’t foster unhealthy emotional dependence.

Another significant finding of this study is the role AI can play in mental health support. AI-powered tools like Woebot provide a valuable service for individuals lacking access to human therapists, offering immediate, non-judgmental support. However, as Tachibana (2025) points out, while AI can offer short-term relief, it cannot replace the deep empathy and moral reasoning human therapists bring to their practice (Tachibana, 12). My research suggests that while AI tools like Woebot can be useful as a supplementary resource, they cannot serve as a substitute for human expertise. This conversation underscores the need for AI to be positioned as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for traditional therapy.

Ethically, the commercialization of AI companionship raises important concerns. AI companies are capitalizing on the emotional vulnerability of users, particularly those struggling with loneliness or mental health challenges. As Zimmerman et al. highlight, the exploitation of emotional dependency through AI products is troubling, as developers seek profit from the emotional needs of individuals (Zimmerman et al., 1561). In light of these findings, the ethical implications of AI companionship demand serious consideration. Developers must prioritize responsible AI practices, ensuring that the emotional well-being of users is protected, and that AI is not used to exploit vulnerable individuals.

# Conclusion

While AI companionship has shown promise in offering temporary emotional relief, it remains insufficient as a replacement for genuine human relationships. My findings suggest that AI can simulate empathy but lacks the emotional depth and spontaneity necessary for authentic human connections. As Zimmerman et al. and Liu-Thompkins et al. argue, the gap between simulated empathy and true emotional understanding underscores AI’s limitations in fulfilling the emotional needs that human relationships inherently provide (Zimmerman et al., 1556; Liu-Thompkins et al., 1203).

The significance of these findings lies in their implications for AI development, mental health support, and ethical considerations. As AI continues to evolve, it is crucial that developers address these gaps in emotional engagement while considering the ethical impact of their products. AI should remain a complementary tool—one that can provide support in specific contexts (e.g., offering emotional comfort for individuals dealing with loneliness or anxiety) but never fully replace human interactions. Overreliance on AI for emotional support can have detrimental effects, particularly for those already socially isolated or struggling with mental health issues (Pan & Mou, 1094). Therefore, it is essential for AI to be positioned as a supplement, not a substitute, to human relationships.

As AI developers look to the future, it is imperative to continue engaging in conversations about the ethical implications of AI companionship. Responsible development practices that prioritize the emotional well-being of users will help ensure that AI does not foster emotional overdependence or exploit vulnerable individuals. AI’s role in mental health support should also be carefully calibrated, providing immediate, accessible help without overshadowing the irreplaceable value of human empathy and expertise.

Ultimately, while AI has made significant strides in simulating companionship, it is clear that human relationships are irreplaceable. In the future, AI can enhance human interactions by offering supplementary support but cannot replace the deep emotional bonds formed between individuals.

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