

DIGITAL COMPANIONS

How Young Men in the UK (18–25) use AI for Emotional Support and Connection

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Summary

- ➔ AI chatbots are increasingly used for emotional support and companionship, yet little research has examined how young men specifically engage with AI in this way.
- ➔ This gap is critical amid young men's low help-seeking, a well-documented mental health crisis, and rising 'manosphere culture' concerns.
- ➔ This study distinguishes two AI emotional use styles: **Relational Use** (AI as companion) and **Instrumental Use** (AI as tool), and tests their links to young men's psychosocial wellbeing.

Aims

- 🔍 Address the lack of research into the impact of AI use on individuals based on demographic.
- 🔍 Distinguish two styles of AI emotional use in young men and examine their links to loneliness, wellbeing, and social support.
- 🔍 Investigate whether relational AI use is associated with hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and psychological entitlement.

Methodology

401 UK men aged 18–25 (337 via Prolific, 64 via community channels) completed an online survey.

This survey included a newly developed **AI Emotional Use and Social Identification Scale (AEUSI)**, alongside validated measures of loneliness, wellbeing, perceived social support, attachment, sexism, and entitlement.

Using R, hierarchical regressions tested associations while controlling for frequency of AI use.

Results

- **Loneliness (Hypothesis 1, supported):** Relational AI use was positively associated with loneliness, independent of usage frequency.
- **Wellbeing (H2, not supported):** No significant association between relational AI use and wellbeing.
- **Social support (H3, supported):** Relational AI use was linked to lower perceived social support once frequency was controlled.
- **Attachment (H4, not supported):** Attachment anxiety/avoidance did not moderate the relational use–loneliness link, though both independently predicted loneliness.
- **Sexism and entitlement (H5, supported):** The strongest finding - hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and psychological entitlement each uniquely and positively predicted relational AI use, together explaining 25% of variance.
- **Instrumental AI use** showed the opposite pattern: negatively linked to loneliness, positively linked to wellbeing and social support.

Analysis & Conclusion

➔ AI emotional use is not uniform

- Findings suggest how young men relate to AI matters more than how much or whether they use it.
- Relational v Instrumental AI use prove to be useful distinctions.

➔ Relational engagement with AI may appeal particularly to men with higher entitlement and sexist attitudes.

- possibly because AI offers a controllable, non-reciprocal interaction free from the demands of human relationships.
- These associations warrant further research into their underlying causal mechanisms.

Link to my scholars network and full research paper:



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