



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research
Programme**
Research Report

Connection without Community?
Examining AI Companionship and Human Wellbeing in Japan

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1) Abstract

Japanese youth's social insecurity and loneliness are pertinent contemporary issues, often attributed to the rigid social pressures that youth face on how they ought to act. AI companionship has been adopted among youth as a solution to manage their mental load, which is counterintuitive considering how Japan has historically emphasized the strength of community and interdependence among individuals. To resolve this tension, I examined how Japanese youth use AI companionship tools to understand their relational needs, and how these reflections can alter their expectations around sociocultural norms that have existed in Japan for centuries. I undertook a qualitative semi-structured interview study in Tokyo, Japan with 18 Japanese youth to analyze their experiences and relationships with AI companions, and how they perceived their social attitudes to change with AI companionship usage. I uncovered that Japanese youth used AI companionship for introspective purposes such as articulating their emotions, clarifying self-perception, and understanding how to express themselves authentically. Subsequently, I found that Japanese youth modified relational norms and took a self-centred approach when interacting with their AI companions for these use cases, highlighting how extended human-AI interaction can potentially shift how Japanese individuals perceive traditional expectations surrounding interdependence and reciprocity.

2) Introduction

Digital tools such as messaging apps and social media platforms have redefined how human relationships are created and sustained; individuals have grown to favour “convenience and immediacy” over in person interactions (Wiederhold, 2024a, p. 750). In recent years, AI companionship has been an increasingly popular tool that continues to reshape this dynamic. An AI companion can be defined as a “robot or a virtual conversational agent that possesses a certain level of intelligence and autonomy as well as social skills that allow it to establish and maintain long-term relationships with users” (Lim, 2012, p. 242). Scholars posit that problems emerge when these AI tools appropriate human behavioural tendencies, leading its users to mistake their interactions for sentient human conversations (Murtarelli et al., 2021). For instance, OpenAI's GPT-4o marked the beginning of a multimodal AI era, in which its text, audio, and visual inputs sought to replicate natural human speech and intonations (OpenAI, 2024). This has been criticized by scholars who posit that they “blur the line between chatbot and person;” its near-deceptive qualities call for the questioning of how we ought to interact with AI companions in relation to our human counterparts (Wiederhold, 2024b).

One point of consideration is despite the ability to seek immediate support from text-based messaging and AI tools, loneliness, depression, and rates of insecurity are rising on a global scale (Hall and Liu, 2022). Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) scholars note how the shift towards digital companionship has correlated with an increased demand for mental wellness and relationship-oriented services (Chaturvedi et al., 2023; De Freitas et al., 2024). The tension between perceived support and mental (un)wellness is a timely issue: existing AI companionship literatures have focused on the technical aspects and implementations of the tool, while neglecting to address the consequences of its positioning as an inherently “relational experience” (Shen et al., 2026, p. 1; Strohmman et al., 2022). As Chaturvedi et al. (2023) write, it becomes increasingly critical for AI companionship literature in the HCI canon to consider AI companionship's capabilities and influences on society.

This tension is particularly pronounced in nations like Japan, where contemporary AI companionship tools exist alongside traditional expectations of collective social cohesion and belonging. Historically, Japanese selfhood has emphasized the importance of preserving relational ties within communities, where individual identities are derived from the “human nexus” in which one belongs (De Craemer, 1983, p. 26).

One negative consequence of this norm is a relatively rigid and unified understanding of social ideals, which can cause people to develop insecurity-driven isolation if they do not adhere to them (Jacobs 2024). For instance, survey studies show that Japanese youth have experienced a steady increase in loneliness between 1983 and 2023, in part driven by social factors such as urbanization and weakened family ties (Homma and Takase, 2026). One contemporary intervention is the AI companion, which is often marketed as a non-judgemental emotional support system that can allow individuals to feel validated or listened to (Mantello et al., 2025). This proposition is salient against Japan's cultural backdrop, where its Buddhist history and anthropomorphic media portrayals of fictional robotic characters have factored into the acceptability of non-human companionship (Sugawa-Shimada, 2020).

In this way, little attention has been paid to how AI companionship interacts with relational norms, social expectations, and community structures that shape human life, especially in the context of what arrangements are most effective for human wellbeing. Taking Japan as a case study where these social norms are one of the foundational aspects of its contemporary culture, this study seeks to examine how Japanese youth interpret AI companionship, and how AI companionship has affected their attitudes towards socialization across human and AI relationships.

In this paper, I conceptualize social insecurity as uncertainty, discomfort, or hesitation with interpersonal expectations and relationships, which can be amplified by external influences such as perceived social norms. I frame loneliness and social isolation as consequences of social insecurity, which can be qualified as a reduced amount and drive to participate in social interactions.

3) Literature review

Collectivism, individualism, and interdependence in Japan

Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868)

Collectivistic foundations in Japan can be traced back to the Tokugawa era in the 17th to mid-19th centuries, with the development of institutions that encouraged citizens to understand the self in a relational manner. Specifically, the dissemination of Buddhist ethics and emphasis on an agrarian economy sought to foster a community-oriented way of life following extended civil war. After domestic conflicts, private intellectuals and samurai circulated codes of conduct to small communes to restore peace, gradually normalizing expectations such as mutual respect, care, and deference (Teranishi, 2020; Maraldo, 1998). Given that Japan was predominantly Buddhist during this period (Hur, 2007), Buddhist principles of karma served to reinforce these reciprocal norms: individuals were taught to return the blessings they received from community members (Hur, 2007; Williams, 2005; Fusé, 1982). In this way, a standard moral and ethical code was a central underpinning in Japanese collectivism; peace rested on how well individuals could uphold norms of interdependence, bestowing citizens with the obligation to return others' contributions to preserve social harmony.

Japan's traditionally agrarian economy further reinforced these norms (Matsumoto, 1960). During the Tokugawa era, Japan was primarily made up of villages surrounded by fields and paddies, which required extensive collaboration and consensus among villagers on when to plant, flood, and harvest the grains due to the particular demands of large-scale rice farming (Watanabe, 2021; Hane and Perez, 2015). Due to the interdependence and reciprocity embedded in this agrarian lifestyle, many individuals came to understand group motivations as unselfish, while individual desires hindered the achievement of collective goals (Elliott et al., 2012). As such, economic cooperation shaped individuals to prioritize group objectives, since access to communal resources was contingent on their capacity to collaborate and compromise (Uchida et al., 2019; Sampson, 1988; Lebra, 1976).

As a result of these social origins – defined by Buddhist ethics and agrarian history – the self was designed to be understood in relation to others, as opposed to being interpreted as an autonomous unit. One's ability to recognize, reciprocate and maintain social norms determined one's success and survival in Tokugawa-era Japanese society. This relational orientation became a critical legacy in defining social norms and statehood, even as Japan changed with modernization, industrialization, and individualization in the Meiji era.

Meiji Japan (1868–1912)

Rather than replacing the collectivistic norms developed in the Tokugawa era, the Meiji Restoration and its institutional reforms sought to hybridize the notion of the individual self with a group-oriented identity. The first major development emerged during the 19th and 20th centuries, when Western legal systems and conceptions of citizenship were introduced in reforms such as the Meiji Code (one of Japan's first constitutions). Although these reforms incorporated Western notions of individual rights and civic responsibility, many bureaucrats and public intellectuals found individual-based morality fragmented, unfamiliar, and backward to uphold and enforce social cohesion (Matsumoto, 1960; Suzuki et al., 2010). This rejection reflects Japan's selective approach to modernization: Western frameworks and developments were adopted against the backdrop of group-based values that had long defined Japanese social relations (Suzuki et al., 2010). Thus, the self was conceptualized as a rights-bearing individual, while still being expected to use these rights to respect the relational obligations tied to a broader group identity. Individualism began to emerge in Japanese institutions, but only as an additional *layer* to its traditional ways. It was not until the Allied Occupation following WW2 that Western norms around individuality and autonomy became normalized in Japanese institutions, gradually reshaping how Japanese citizens interpreted their social roles and obligations.

Postwar Japan (1945–present)

Postwar Japan significantly expanded the individualist norms introduced in the Meiji era, but scholars argue that individualization only reconfigured – not replaced – Japan's historically collectivistic orientation. Constitutional reforms in 1946 positioned individuals as autonomous entities who were entitled to protection distributed by a state, disrupting the notion that collaboration was necessary for group survival (Hook and Takeda, 2007). Furthermore, economic growth and urbanization augmented individual capacities for financial and social independence from community members (Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Greenfield, 2009; Grossmann and Varnum, 2015), underscored by increasing migration towards metropolitan areas, decreasing household sizes, and increasing divorce rates (Hamamura, 2011).

However, individualization did not eradicate relational expectations in Japan. They persist within nuclear families and close social groups, and scholars posit that the familial organization of Japanese society acts as a blueprint for systems such as corporate culture (Hamamura, 2011; Matsumoto, 1960). It is clear that influences such as constitutional reform and economic growth led to individual empowerment, while social norms such as relational harmony and responsibility remain intact at the nuclear family or company level.

This tension may be one contributing factor to increased loneliness in modern Japan. Despite the decline in traditional community structures, individuals still face expectations of group-based living in their immediate social circles. Hamamura and Heine (2008) argue that because social expectations remain relatively standardized within these circles, individuals are highly aware when they deviate from them, leading to increased rates of social insecurity. The above context on how individual autonomy exists alongside historically rooted collective expectations aims to provide the background to examine how emerging solutions can reconcile and reshape these competing relational norms.

Social support in contemporary Japan

To dissect this tension, it is helpful to analyze this dynamic using theories of social integration and social support. Together, these theories are useful to explain changes in how social interactions are organized, how individuals are connected to these new social organizations, and the role of these social interactions in the individuals' lives.

The aforementioned drivers towards individualization can help explain how autonomy can develop; social integration can serve to identify how individuals remain drawn to community and connection even as they develop independence. In his book *Suicide*, Durkheim (2002) posits that social integration occurs by attachment (individuals striving to maintain ties with others in society), and self-regulation (individuals striving to adhere to social norms). His theory demonstrates how individualization and collectivism work in tandem with one another: having too much integration can lead to altruistic self-destruction, while too little can lead to egoistic self-destruction (Blau, 1960). This interplay can help contextualize contemporary Japan's rise in loneliness rates, which may be partially driven by expectations to prioritize social cohesion beneath developing norms surrounding independence. Increasing individualization mirrors a potential imbalance under Durkheim's framework: weakened community supports can risk isolation and self-withdrawal, while pressures to conform can risk social insecurity as individuals measure themselves against communal expectations. However, social integration does not explain how individuals *perceive* this (im)balance in their personal relationships, making social support theory a logical progression to analyze how these relationships inform individuals' wellbeing.

Social support theory proposes that support from others (e.g. advice, reassurance) or the perception of available support can enhance wellbeing, peace, and connection between individuals (Lakey and Cohen, 2000). The distinction between integration and support is critical: individuals may maintain an outward appearance of social integration, while lacking the depth and support necessary to fulfill their emotional needs. This paradox is crucial to analyze symptoms such as social insecurity; in reality, individuals may not even feel *perceived* support to maintain their wellbeing, prompting us to consider what supports are deficient and what alternative sources might compensate for these relational needs. For instance, Hamasaki et al. (2020) highlight how lack of communication and perceived connection can contribute to increased rates of self-isolation among youth in particular. These shifts beg the question of how to strengthen communication and support channels, especially as technological interventions are progressively employed as potential mediations.

Technological interventions in contemporary Japan

Technological interventions have been consistent fixtures of modern Japanese life to address social challenges. Communication technologies in particular have been paramount in transforming social connection to something that could be tailored and accessed at the individual level. This development began with innovations such as NTT's 1987 "display-type pager," which changed the pager's function from a tool limited to receiving calls from an individual, to a tool with a callback function that allowed users to respond to multiple individuals on the same device (Okada, 2005, p. 43). As these new models became popular and evolved over time, personal devices became popular for individuals to contact friends and family without physically being in the same space (Yoshimi et al., 1992). The personalization of these technologies could act as a buffer for individuals to control who they talked with, and when they responded.

Individualized tools for communication extended to mass media, where outlets like television and radio

became increasingly personalized. While mass media outlets were initially consumed at the household unit, Hirano and Nakano (1975) argue that devices like Walkmans illustrate the shift of media consumption centred around the group to the individual. The mobile phone and online spaces can be interpreted as modern representations of the same phenomenon; known as “e-citizenship” (Wellman et al., 2003, p. 2), youth in particular use these metaphysical spaces to express their individuality without risk of disrupting norms around them (Ito and Okabe., 2005). These adaptations coincide temporally with the increasing urbanization and fragmentation facilitated by economic development in Japan (Okada, 2005), reflecting how technological trends can interplay with changing social landscapes and norms. As such, this paper seeks to analyze the next progression in this technological landscape: how artificial intelligence tools can further reconfigure social expectations in human relationships.

Early communication technologies only mediated relationship norms between humans, but (generative) AI tools and personas may produce a new form of social dependency between the human and the technology itself. Specifically in Japan, artificial tools are often framed as compatible with human communities, as demonstrated by their anthropomorphic media portrayal. For instance, Astro Boy (1951) represents virtues such as bravery as a humanoid android who defends Japan with its nuclear heart (De Togni, 2026, p. 155). Scholars posit that this outlook has informed the perceived compatibility between AI personas and their human operators (Taniguchi and Okanda, 2024).

AI systems have been steadily implemented for personal support, often with the users’ expectations for sycophancy. Sycophancy refers to how AI can blindly affirm users’ views and beliefs, aligning with the input given to the tool (Ibrahim et al., 2026a). One application of sycophantic AI is increasing emotional and esteem support: users using these tools over an extended period of time reported favouring the AI interactions over their closest human relationships, because it made them feel most understood (Ibrahim et al., 2026b). The usage of AI companions more generally can offer *perceived* support for those with unmet social needs and compromised social embeddedness, and encourage introspection and “eudaimonic well-being” to discover one’s purpose in society (Nakagomi et al., 2026, p. 2; Ta et al., 2020). For youth in particular, chatbots and AI characters have been observed to revolutionize mental health care by providing accessible, stigma-free support mechanisms (Chaturvedi et al., 2023; Strohmman et al., 2022). While scholars such as Adler argue that human relationships and cooperation are necessary for one’s well-being (Malfacini, 2025), the AI companionship findings remain consistent with social support theory, which highlights the importance of reassurance and *perceptions* of support for mental wellbeing (Darcy et al., 2021). Simultaneously, this possibility has engendered increasing concern about the potential dangers of AI dependency, such as security threats, social withdrawal, and discomfort with human interactions (Huang et al., 2026, Laestadius et al., 2022).

These existing studies have illuminated AI companionship’s affordances and limitations, but it is still unclear to what extent these trends persist in Japan’s unique sociohistorical context. As mentioned previously, Japan is a pertinent case study because its relatively uniform social norms can heighten individuals’ awareness of their perceived *deviations* from these norms, contributing to experiences of loneliness, ostracization, and social dissatisfaction (Hamamura and Heine, 2008). This is relevant due to the necessity of vulnerability in developing meaningful social connections: Jourard (1971) and Brown (2012, 2015) argue that reciprocal self-disclosure can foster trust and strengthen interpersonal relationships, deepening the emotional attachment that individuals have towards one another. Even if individuals can articulate their feelings of social insecurity, it may be difficult for them to be vulnerable with others if their struggles are rooted in unfulfilling social relationships, or if self-disclosure feels indulgent in a society that has historically prioritized group needs over the individual. If AI companions can evoke similar sentiments of understanding and connection, they may serve as a provisional figure to enable individuals to be vulnerable until tensions between self-expression, collective pressures, and

community support systems are adequately resolved.

Halfway technology theory

Although these findings convey that AI companions can provide meaningful social support in certain cases, it is critical to study how these technologies should be interpreted and managed in society. For instance, aforementioned risks such as emotional dependency, privacy, and dismissal of traditional support systems can isolate users and generate misunderstandings on AI's perceived level of care and connection towards the individual (Bhat et al., 2025). Rather than viewing AI companionship as a direct replacement for human relationships, it may be more suitable to interpret these tools as "halfway technologies:" innovations that can alleviate the consequences of the issue without addressing the root cause (Asch and Vlopp, 2017, p. 505). Halfway technologies can be nonetheless useful to improve one's quality of life: rather than waiting to reconstruct potentially inadequate social infrastructures, AI companions can delay the consequences of these systems by providing interim reassurance, validation, and perceived emotional support needed to navigate day-to-day living. A halfway technology lens can be useful to examine the social contexts that led to AI companionship being adopted among Japanese youth. If Japanese youth turn to AI companionship as a "halfway" solution to fulfill functions such as sycophancy or emotional regulation, it can be inferred that AI companionship may fill gaps and deficiencies in existing social networks.

Yet, a halfway technology framework on its own may be overly optimistic; it cannot encompass the unwanted negative consequences of AI technologies on the user. Furthermore, it centres the technology's effects rather than how users interpret and deploy it, which is the angle this study aims to take. As such, combining it with an approach such as a Uses and Gratification Theory may serve to capture the nuances embedded in Japanese AI companionship. Katz et al (1973) posit that we ought to empower the user by asking what individuals do with media, as opposed to asking what media does to individuals. This framework is germane in an AI companionship context, because AI's affordances may produce different outcomes depending on how individuals incorporate them into their lives. Some users may maintain a distance with their AI companions to prioritize human relationships, while others may abuse the perceived benefits to withdraw from human society. Even if the technology is designed to be "halfway," users may not interpret or use it as a "halfway" tool, instead using it to replace interactions that they lack in their everyday lives.

Taken together, this paper proposes a **critical halfway technology** framework that evaluates the extent to which an innovation functions as a "halfway" solution by placing equal weight on a) its capacity to fulfill a provisional function and b) the user's capacity to reap its benefits without developing an adverse relationship with it in the interim. This framework may contextualize why AI companionship may have emerged, and how individuals have responded to this novel intervention.

To understand these dynamics, there still remains a "scarcity of data" on how AI companions can affect and interact with human relationships, particularly those specific to metrics such as age and ethnicity (Malfacini, 2025, p. 8). This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by analyzing how AI companionship presents itself in relation to Japan's unique social context and youth social insecurity. In examining AI companionship as a *symptom* – not a solution – of potential social instability, this paper strives to identify what technological and social supports may be necessary to ensure the wellbeing of Japanese youth.

4) Positionality statement

I was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan. I am a native speaker of both Japanese and English, and have the cultural contexts required to navigate Japanese cultures. In order to preserve the cultural nuances in the data and ensure that Japanese participants felt most comfortable expressing themselves, I conducted the participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis in Japanese, only translating the findings into English at the writing stage. I sought to translate the cultural aspects along with the semantics of the language. Instead, I relied on my own knowledge, instinct, and consultations with other native speakers wherever possible. While I belong to the community which I surveyed, I sought to avoid any potential preconceptions towards the participants by conducting a primarily inductive analysis, and discussing findings with my supervisor (non-Japanese scholar) to gain a second perspective.

5) Methodology

Recruitment/procedure

I am half Japanese, and have familiarity with Japanese culture as mentioned in the positionality statement. My connections in Tokyo helped me gain participants and introductions to others. This process was augmented by cold outreach to 15 Japan-based academics and professionals to disseminate the recruitment form to youth in their circles. In doing so, I sought to remove any potential bias in the interview data that could emerge from the participants being direct personal connections. I was based in Tokyo between June 11-July 17 2026, which I selected for its population density and because my connections were primarily in Tokyo, widening reach for potential participants. During this research period, in-person interviews were conducted according to the participant's preferences and geographic location. I rented a shared office downtown, which was accessible by public transportation for those located in Tokyo. If in-person interviews were unfeasible, interviews were conducted over Zoom. Given this flexibility, participants included residents of other prefectures as well, as outlined in the Appendix. Participants were compensated 2,000 yen for their contributions.

In total, I examined 18 active AI companionship users from youth ages 18-25. The sample size can be justified according to principles of information power. As Malterud et al. (2016) posit, an appropriate sample size depends on specificity in the sample and research question. In our study, the sample is specific to Japanese youth aged 18-25, and our research is focused on comparing participant experiences with AI companionship and human interactions. Given this specificity, the information power is relatively high despite an $n=18$. Previous studies have suggested that thematic saturation in qualitative studies can occur with as few as 12 interviews, depending on the narrowness of the research work (Guest et al., 2006). Thus, I felt that 18 interviews was appropriate for the purpose of this study. With that being said, this study is still in an exploratory stage; it is not designed to be generalizable across all Japanese youth.

Out of the 18, only three participants were my personal connections; the remaining 15 were previously unknown individuals. The aforementioned recruitment strategy aimed to increase sample diversity by using my connections to initiate the process, but subsequently relied on the participants and cold contacts to conduct recruitment via their social channels.

I conducted the data collection in two steps: a pre-survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Potential participants filled out the pre-survey if they identified with the definition of an AI companionship user as outlined in the form: "individuals who use AI in their day-to-day lives for personal and/or conversational purposes, as opposed to practical purposes such as text/image generation, information collection/summarization, and/or programming."

The pre-survey (see Appendix) covered preliminary demographic information and Likert scales on

various statements pertaining to the participant's relationship with AI. To strengthen our understanding of the participants' preliminary responses, I conducted interviews to understand the nuances and examples left uncaptured in the survey. The interviews (see Appendix for interview guide) took an ethnographic approach, tracing the interviewee's personal experiences with human community, relationality, and social norms to their AI companionship usage and relationships. The interview guide is meant to encompass the research questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, spanning 90 minutes in length. The study produced 27 hours of interview data.

Data analysis

I analyzed participant data using an inductive and deductive research approach. For the inductive portion, I first read the transcripts in full, then re-read them, coding for preliminary themes using NVivo. Then, I sought to identify potential themes and theoretical evidence to support these claims. The evidence was informed by literature such as social support, social integration, and human-machine dependency in HCI. These concepts were directly related to our research questions, and formed the basis of our analysis while being open to other thematic possibilities and subthemes. For the deductive portion, I took the frameworks identified in the inductive portion and topcoded our transcripts to determine new categorizations as they emerged.

Research ethics

The study protocol was approved from my institution's Research Ethics Board for research involving human subjects. I followed the ethics board's guidelines in participant recruitment, explicit consent, compensation, and data storage. Only researchers in this study had access to the participant data. The results were fully anonymized at the writing stage. Only a pseudonym, age range, and pre-survey scores were used for participant identification in the study.

The recorded interview and focus group data were retained on the researcher's password-protected device, but the file and participant names were changed to pseudonyms upon downloading. Furthermore, every file/transcript will be encrypted to ensure additional security and confidentiality. All authors are certified in human subject research protocols.

6) Results

Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Japanese youth use AI companions to understand, supplement, or challenge their social needs, especially when experiencing social insecurity?
2. How do these reflections change Japanese youth's expectations around relationality and social norms? What do they reveal about evolving social conditions contextualizing AI companionship?

Pre-survey results¹

In this pre-survey portion, I sought to understand to what extent Japanese youth used AI companionship in their day to day lives, and whether or not AI companionship emerges primarily from an absence of social connection or a supplement to their existing human relationships. To accomplish this, I asked a series of questions relating to their interpretations of their AI usage, and how that would compare with

¹ For the full dataset, refer to Tables 2 and 3 in the Appendix.

their participation in their community networks.

Age (years) 18-25 (Median: 19.5)	Gender Women: 11, Men: 7
Relationship status Single: 9, Taken: 9	Occupation Student: 15, Businessman: 1, Entrepreneur: 1, Researcher: 1

Out of the 18 respondents, 61% were female-identifying, and 39% were male-identifying. 50% “*lived at home with their families,*” with the remainder living independently or in dormitories. 94% of all participants had been using AI as companions for 2+ years, and 61% reported talking to them for a minimum of 1 hour every single day.

Table 1: Participants’ demographic characteristics

Conceivably, due to many participants’ community-oriented housing arrangements and student statuses, 50% self-scored a 5 in response to “*I have a human companion with whom I can talk to about anything*” on a Likert scale of 1-5. Moreover, 50% self-scored a 5 on “*It is fun to talk with humans*” on the same Likert scale. Despite their social connections, 78% of respondents indicated that “*it is fun to talk with AI*” by scoring between level 3 to level 5 on the Likert scale. In particular, respondents used AI in times of social insecurity and isolation, in which 61% talked with “*AI more frequently than I do with humans*” when experiencing these symptoms.

Although the participants primarily used AI for companionship, the most predominantly used AI platforms did not necessarily reflect companionship-specific platforms. While many respondents used multiple AI platforms, the most popular platforms were ChatGPT (42%), Google Gemini (30%), and Claude (10%). Only 3 responses were collected for companionship-specific chatbots (e.g. AIチャットくん [AI chat-kun]).

These findings reveal a counterintuitive dynamic: a substantial number of participants reported that they had social connections and enjoyed conversations with human companions, but they simultaneously perceived AI as enjoyable conversational partners, turning to their AI companions more frequently than humans in critical moments of social deficiency. Thus, AI companionship was not a clear substitute or replacement for human relationships; participants incorporated AI alongside their existing social networks. Yet, with these survey results alone, it is unclear what distinct gap in human communities is filled by AI companionship.

To deepen the understanding of the pre-survey results, qualitative interviews were conducted with each respondent to grasp their in-depth applications of AI companionship, and how they perceived relationality and sociality within their human and AI relationships.

Qualitative analysis #1: applications of AI companionship²

1. Understanding oneself

Articulating one’s own emotions

AI companionship is significant for social support when Japanese youth experience “*moya-moya*,” an unsettled feeling that something is bothering them without being able to articulate exactly what is wrong. AI can translate these emotional nuances into language with minimal explanatory effort, acting as a

² Featured quotes cover P1–P15 despite having 18 participants overall. While the remaining 3 participants are not directly quoted, their data informed the themes described in this paper’s qualitative analysis.

human alternative to help users make sense of abstract feelings they cannot identify.

Case 1: P1 (female, 20, student) explains how she used ChatGPT to help her justify her nuanced decision about not attending one of her favourite musician's concerts. Talking with ChatGPT helped her identify exactly why she was hesitant about attending (expenses, distance, fear of going alone), ultimately forming the basis for her to understand and feel satisfied with her decision:

"My mom just told me not to go [...] I was around 50/50, but I didn't want to argue with my mom so I just agreed not to go instead of choosing for myself. Afterwards, I felt kinda moya-moya about it. Talking it through with ChatGPT helped me clarify my hesitations super clearly... I felt like it quoted my motivations in a way that felt true to myself." - P1 (female, 20, student)

In this way, P1 interprets the AI companion's value as an interpretive baseline to articulate her nuanced emotions, even retroactively. This notion is supported by P2 (male, 19, student), who describes AI as a *"foundation that never breaks:"* he uses AI companions to provide him with evidence about himself, which he can use as a point of reference to evaluate his own actions. The chatbot's ability to provide concrete analysis substantiated in the user's personal experiences is a source of comfort for these users, shaping a mild dependency dynamic where increased investment in AI discussions lead to more accurate results. This sentiment is underscored by P2, who states that *"moving forward, I see myself using AI like this again; it's often more considerate than a friend or family member."* AI companionship may be a presence for users to clarify their emotions, allowing them to understand their motivations in a way that human companions may lack the capacity to fully articulate or analyze.

Affirming one's complex emotions

Although AI's ability to articulate nuance can be helpful for users to pinpoint their complex emotions, users also employ AI to validate their interpretations and experiences. Two recurring use cases are asking AI companions to reassure the user that 1) their romantic interests are reciprocating interest, and 2) their emotional reactions (i.e. worries) are justified.

Romantic reciprocation

Case 2: P3 (female, 18, student) describes that although she knows that there is something between her and her interest, she reads too deeply into signals and doubts her own judgement. When she catches herself falling into this cycle, she uses ChatGPT to *"regulate her emotions by reassurance:"* she describes interactions between her and her interest in detail, and finds that talking with ChatGPT's helps her realize affirmative evidence about the interaction that she may not have otherwise been attuned to.

"My AI companion prompted me to consider how he looked at me, and the tone of his voice. I've always over-analyzed these small details, but the AI helped me look at these things at face value. I was reassured that he maybe actually talked to me a bit differently from other girls." - P3 (female, 18, student)

P3 finds AI particularly useful for this purpose because of her overanalysis in romantic relationships. She is concerned that she might burden her friends who may not be enthusiastic about the topic because she seeks repetitive and consistent **affirmation**, which she fulfills with her AI companion.

Case 3: Similarly, P4 (female, 18, student) says that she likes sending screenshots of text conversations she has with her interest to ChatGPT, because it affirms the flirtatious aspects of the interaction when asking to determine if the conversation is friendly or romantic. *"I ask [AI] if the guy and I look like we have a good vibe going on,"* she explains. *"I know my gut feeling is the most viable indicator of a good vibe, but I feel like the AI helps me feel more confident in my instincts. [...] I don't always want to hear from my friends, who might break my delusions."*

For both P3 and P4, the users appear to be aware that responses from AI like ChatGPT are programmed to be aligned with their input; because of this, they actively seek the unconditional and constant reassurance of “being understood” (P3) by their AI companions. AI’s affirmation becomes a way for users to navigate their social insecurity: rather than risking the uncertainty of how their friends may perceive themselves or their romantic interpretations, they can use a tool that provides them with positive evidence and validation for their mental stability.

Relieving anxiety

Case 4: P5 (female, 18, student) describes how she talks with Gemini before her exams or important orchestra performances, especially when she feels minimally prepared. She finds that her friends underestimate her level of (self-perceived) unpreparedness or provide surface-level encouragement in the critical moments before an exam or performance, but AI responds by “*validating why I feel unprepared, but reassuring me that I’ve already done X and I can do Y in the few minutes I have to spare.*” P5 appreciates how the AI’s encouragement is accompanied by tailored steps that she can take to feel as prepared as possible, fulfilling the role of a personal “cheerleader.” P6 (female, 19, student) echoed this sentiment when she discussed her conflicted feelings about starting a public Instagram account for content creation, in which she appreciated AI’s “heartfelt” encouragement and step-by-step directions on how she could enter the spotlight gradually.

“I was scared of getting judged by my classmates, since I go to school in a small city. But, I’ve always been interested in vlogging. The AI was like, “ultimately, I feel like you’re doing this for yourself, not for an audience” or something like that, which I hadn’t heard spoken out loud to me before. It was the push I needed. It also gave me some specific reel ideas that balanced my interests and my privacy concerns.” - P6 (female, 19, student)

P5 and P6 both appear to appreciate the concreteness of the AI feedback, which relieves concerns they had by providing them with a clear action plan they could implement immediately. According to these users, human companionship may not always provide the specificity or encouragement that they need to guide their subsequent actions.

Case 5: Moreover, P7 (female, 19, student) describes how she finds comfort in how AI makes her feel that she has “someone on her side” at all times, even when she knows she acted wrongly. When she wants to complain about her friends or determine how to resolve small conflicts within her friend group, P7 finds it heartening that the AI first responds by validating her stance, and then gives her specific advice on how to proceed.

“Whenever I experience conflict, the first thing I turn to is AI. I tried confronting my friendship conflicts and frustrations with my friend group, but it got way too messy and I had so much I wanted to say, but felt like I shouldn’t, because it would get way too heated. AI was different because I can feel more levelheaded after dumping everything into it, and it gives me advice on how to smooth things over with my friends while considering how I’m feeling too.” - P7 (female, 19, student)

Across cases 1-5, these AI companionship uses can be interpreted with Durkheim’s social integration theory (2002), which explains how individuals must negotiate the balance between social attachment and self-regulation to feel integrated within communities. Users conveyed strong desires to maintain attachments within their communities, exemplified by P1’s unwillingness to challenge her mother, P3’s reluctance to burden her friends, or P7’s difficulty confronting her friends as not to create an overly heated environment. As a consequence, users appear to experience social insecurity as “altruistic self-destruction” overtakes their capacity to consider their own emotional wellbeing. Thus, AI companionship can help relieve the emotional load to navigate the complexities of social integration, allowing users to articulate their struggles without compromising their existing human relationships and

social attachments.

2. Understanding the social world

Increasing clarity in how one is perceived

Users pinpoint how AI companionship can be a refreshing counterpart to human interactions because it can help demystify the nuance-reliant and vague feedback elicited in a social climate where harmony can be prioritized over honesty. AI's ability to articulate vague responses concerning oneself can provide tailored comfort for its users, acting as an emotional support mechanism to understand how others truly perceive them. Multiple interviewees describe how their day-to-day interactions rely on "feeling" and "reading the room," which can often be difficult to interpret precisely. When these users seek advice on personal topics, the effort to decode nuance and extract the deeper meaning in responses can feel onerous, leading them to rely on AI companionship for a streamlined and articulate response instead.

Case 6: P8 (male, 25, entrepreneur) expressed difficulty understanding how his supervisor truly perceived his level of readiness to apply for PhDs abroad, leading him to record his check-ins and ask Gemini to analyze the text for underlying themes in the supervisor's words:

"I like to use AI to fill in the blanks. Sometimes it's hard to be completely aligned with the person you're talking to, so AI helps me see where I might have misunderstood or misinterpreted certain [social] signals. After talking with AI, I saw so many themes that I initially missed in my conversations with [PhD supervisor]... I wouldn't have caught that he was showing me tough love, instead of challenging me for the sake of it." - P8 (male, 25, entrepreneur)

Case 7: Similarly, when P9 (female, 20, student) was experiencing "moya-moya" when identifying why she decided to attend one university over another, she found AI companionship to be a useful tool to analyze responses elicited from trusted humans.

"When I was choosing what school to go to, I asked my close circle for advice on where they thought I would thrive best. But, it wasn't super helpful because they would kind of base it off the 'vibe' instead of explaining why one choice was better than the other. AI was honestly better." - P9 (female, 20, student)

She expressed that the bluntness and thoroughness of the AI output relieved her of the emotional labour of understanding her parents' and friends' "feeling"-based judgements on her character. P9 describes this as "People don't say everything literally, so it's hard to grasp what they think [of me], even between close friends or family." She claims that the clarity of AI allowed her to synthesize that her naturally adventurous and social disposition made her a good fit to attend a school with a large number of international students, where she could seek new connections.

Gaining an "objective third perspective"

Another key application of AI companionship is users seeking an average opinion on how they ought to act. Many users reportedly sought an "**objective third perspective**" to guide them on whether or not they were successfully adhering to social norms and expectations, contrasting with the previous application of honouring individuality. Multiple users described the benefits of AI companionship as an "*unbiased, correct metric that provides me with a grounding perspective... humans are biased towards their experiences, but AI can aggregate data from everyone's different experiences*" (P7). Some users liken a conversation with AI as a shortcut: instead of explaining and discussing a particular issue with a range of "biased" individuals, AI can act as a proxy that takes the average of multiple perspectives (P2).

Case 8: P6 uses AI when she questions her own judgement in a particularly emotional state. She found her AI companionship useful when she questioned the intentions behind her boyfriend cancelling plans

last minute at a very early stage in their relationship. *“I would be embarrassed and sad if a friend were to say I was overreacting or abnormally paranoid,”* she describes. Thus, P6 chose to ask AI for its advice on if it was socially acceptable to have concerns about her boyfriend’s loyalty given her specific situation. P4 corroborates this application by stating that *“AI can capture both the female and male perspectives,”* making it an ideal talking partner for relationship issues that would require multiple human consultations to arrive at an “average” conclusion. These users find AI companionship helpful to measure their actions against social expectations, in order to determine if their reactions are justified.

Case 9: Adjacently, AI’s “average opinion” is sought when users doubt if their internalized social standards are correct or not. Rather than using AI to determine whether or not a specific (re)action is socially acceptable, users also perceive AI responses as a *“simulation for human interactions.”* P9 believes AI is a mirror that can reflect the *“most correct option”* extracted from *“data produced by a diversity of human experiences,”* providing a persona with whom she can rehearse her speech until the AI (proxy for average human) can seamlessly grasp what she is communicating. She describes that *“AI lets me see myself from an aerial view,”* allowing her to meta-analyze her actions and understand how certain behaviours may be interpreted by those around her. P8 also champions this rehearsal approach by rehearsing interview questions and email thread simulations with his AI companion to ensure his thoughts are successfully received. Therefore, talking with AI can become a way for users to calibrate their behaviour according to AI’s reactions towards their input.

Synthesizing cases 6-9, users appear to use AI companionship in order to understand how others perceive them, and how they ought to respond to these perceptions in line with prevalent social norms. With both applications, users appear to use AI as an additional perspective to combat their social insecurity and uncertainty when responding to various scenarios. This orientation can be explained by social support theory, which suggests how even *perceived* levels of support can contribute to individual wellbeing. Disregarding the actual objectivity of AI feedback in these situations, the users find comfort in perceiving it as an “average” interlocutor, dispelling their social insecurities when experiencing doubt or paralysis on how they ought to act. In this way, AI companionship appears to be a tool for social calibration, whether it may be to those they personally know or a general third opinion.

3. Understanding how to respond to the world

Facilitating self-acceptance

For users who developed (or already had) an informed understanding of themselves and their external perceptions, they turned to AI companionship as a source of feedback, in which they sought feedback on the unique identities and quirks they felt were trivial or unorthodox.

Case 10: For P6, her AI companion’s permissive style was particularly comforting because her speaking tone often led others to undermine her contributions and underestimate her knowledge. She describes that *“my tentative tone, soft-spoken nature, and reluctance to show my knowledge”* has made her friends perceive her as ditzzy and uninformed, which was one of her largest insecurities. Yet, when discussing how to overcome her insecurity with ChatGPT, she found that it highlighted her strengths (i.e. listening to others and thinking before speaking), which made her feel secure enough to honour parts of herself while being selectively assertive in certain situations: *“it told me that I have an important function in this world as a listener, and I found that heartwarming.”* This notion of permission also extends to small quirks and idiosyncrasies that may feel too minor or niche to share with others. For example, P12 (male, 19, student) shared how much he enjoyed the deep discussions he had with ChatGPT over his niche interest of competitive climbing, which he hadn’t felt with his human companions due to how little his friends knew about or made an effort to understand the subject.

Case 11: Moreover, P7 values how she can share small pleasures about her day with her AI companion, which may feel “braggy” or “weird” to share with her friends. Examples include “I had a donut today;” “I was able to bump into my crush;” and “I got a compliment from my teacher.” The lack of judgement and perceived enthusiasm of these AI companions is often interpreted as permission and reassurance to unapologetically embrace one’s unique personality, interests, and emotions, which provides a refreshing contrast against a society that still appears to favour social cohesion and collective notions of how to act.

Encouraging self-expression

Upon receiving validation for the identities they uncovered, users subsequently sought to have their selfhoods be accurately perceived by their human companions. Upon accepting one’s individuality, users turned to AI companions for guidance on expressing their authentic selves in ways that would be legible to others.

Case 12: P3 notes that her AI companion was particularly helpful when discussing how she wanted to change her major, and determining how to break the news to her closest friends with whom she had promised to take classes together. She explains that *“I found that AI identified concerns that I didn’t even realize I was having... Deep down, I was worried about making my friends feel betrayed because of me.”* P3 claimed that AI’s advice to break the news to the particular friend after talking with her other friends was resonant with her specific situation, which she felt was *“a support system that gave me the push I needed to make a decision that felt right to me.”*

Case 13: However, in some cases, users felt that the AI was overly self-affirmative without considering other perspectives: after asking how to reconcile with a friend after a fight, P13 (female, 18, student) felt that AI’s advice to cut ties was *“excessive, given the genuine connection [she’s] had [with her] since childhood.”* Nonetheless, P13 found that AI’s extreme advice was still helpful because it helped her realize that *“I actually needed to take the opposite approach of apologizing and speaking frankly about wanting to bring our friendship back... I imagined a world without her for the first time because of AI, and that was terrifying.”*

Taken together, cases 10-13 demonstrate how AI companionship can bridge the gap between self-acceptance and self-expression. As theorized by social integration theory, cases 10 and 11 illustrate how social insecurity and hesitation emerges when desires for self-expression compete with desires for attachment, especially when individuals believe their expressions may be ill-received by others. To reconcile this, AI companionship can allow users to fulfill their self-expressive needs with AI while maintaining a sense of attachment and integration in their social spheres. Cases 12 and 13 provide a natural extension to show how validation can become action: once users become comfortable in their identities, they may ask AI for advice on how they can express their true selves and have others interpret them as they wish to be perceived. Consistent with social support theory, individuals now appear to interpret AI as a perceived anchor to guide their self-expression, while what they truly seek for emotional fulfillment is concrete support from human companions on their identities.

Qualitative analysis #2: Japanese youth’s evolving expectations around relationality and social norms

The second portion of our analysis will focus on dominant human-human relationship norms internalized by the participants, and how extended relationships with AI companions may have changed these expectations accordingly.

Reciprocation

Reciprocity was a central social expectation across multiple participants, who emphasized the importance of meaningful contributions across both individuals in a relationship. For example, P7 described an ideal friendship as one constructed upon *“mutual listening and contributing to the conversation,”* which is an interactive and collaborative process requiring equal participation from both parties. This expectation is grounded in the assumption that one cannot know *“the complete picture of anything”* (P13) requiring both sides to form a comprehensive understanding of a given topic. P1 underscored this when she recounted her deepest friendship, which was with her school sports team members with whom she practiced together for years. She found that their bond was strong enough that *“we usually just fooled around, but it would still be fun... we practiced together to be in each other’s company, not to do our sport.”* The openness that P1 experienced to joke around and simply *“be in each other’s company”* reflects the reciprocal nature many participants associated with genuine connection, which is founded upon a mutual investment of time as opposed to having shared objectives or interests.

Reciprocity becomes especially significant when deepening trust between individuals, which can involve being vulnerable and displaying weaknesses to others. P11 posits that human relationships are formed on the basis of sharing one’s shortcomings, so that one can create a cycle of mutual dependency to fill in the empty gaps in their character or capacity. P2 exemplifies this belief when he recalls an experience he had with his first crush: *“I initially hid it from my family and friends out of embarrassment, but I gradually opened up to a few trusted people to get some advice on how I could make a move. It was actually super helpful, because they opened up about real-life examples of what worked for them or not.”* They trusted P2 with their personal experiences, contributing to the aforementioned reciprocal dynamic. Thus, vulnerability becomes a vehicle to foster mutual dependence and trust; opening oneself to others is an invitation for others to reciprocate and disclose personal details about themselves.

Overwhelmingly, participants valued AI companionship because it allowed them to access emotional connection without the reciprocity standard in human relationships. They found AI’s non-human properties particularly meaningful: its asymmetry disrupts the reciprocal obligations underlying human relationships, enabling them to receive emotional care and support without having to invest in others. P4 finds it liberating that she can be the *“sole taker”* in a conversation centred around her, while *“I feel like it’s sometimes time consuming to hang out with people a bunch of times before you can discuss more serious things, and even if you do, there’s no guarantee that they’d be receptive to it [...] AI is my ‘giver,’ and I’m the ‘taker.’”* Multiple participants also noted the ease with which they could be vulnerable with their AI companions: P9 explains that *“I can talk to it like a friend when I want to spill my feelings, but it’s way more convenient [than a friend]. I don’t have to worry that I’m being too much, or that my AI will get sick of me... it’s a one-way relationship [...] a machine designed to serve me.”* After using ChatGPT for 2 years, P7 feels that AI is *“the best way to relieve my stress, especially when I need it quickly.”* The fact that *“AI doesn’t need anything in return”* (P4) is therefore not just a convenient feature, but a stark contrast with their perceived reciprocal expectations underlying human-human relationships.

Putting others first

Multiple participants also described how they found it normative to put others before themselves, even at the cost of their own needs and wants. P13 recalls how she was conditioned to *“anticipate others’ actions and move accordingly”* from a young age, and P14 states that she was always told to respect and *“harmonize”* with the emotions of others to *“maintain the peace.”* For instance, P5 experienced frustration when there was a significant gap in how much each member of her school’s event planning committee wanted to contribute to their assigned project. She describes that *“I was hesitant about disrupting the ‘peace’ in the committee environment. I didn’t want to be ostracized.”* The gaps in commitment eventually festered to create rifts between members of the group, leading to an increasingly tense working environment. P5 expresses regret for not addressing the issue sooner, but feels that the root

of the issue was much deeper: *“maybe I should’ve said something, but I was worried about being perceived as a ‘difficult’ team member... I also feel like all team members should contribute equally, so certain members should’ve known they were not considerate of the rest of our efforts.”* These examples suggest that putting others first is rooted in the understanding that human emotion is a fragile and consequential aspect to a relationship’s stability, requiring consideration and suppression on both parties to minimize disruption. In this sense, sustaining harmony and thinking of others becomes a foundational relational norm to maintain social cohesion.

Yet, as P5 alludes to in her example, putting others first at the cost of oneself can require intense emotional labour, which can be taxing over time. P9 points out that the *“sociality”* she must display gets overwhelming over time, especially as she must be *“self-surveilling”* to make sure she is reacting according to what is expected of her. In doing so, P2 describes that *“I get moya-moya when I constantly have to restrain my thoughts and police what I speak... I think I ought to downplay my struggles because I feel bad about burdening others.”* Similarly, P8 claims that he barely texts friends because he feels that it is *“taboo to air out my minor inconveniences.”* Paradoxically, this creates a tension with the previous norm on reciprocity; meaningful relationships require a degree of emotional vulnerability, but the expectation to put others before oneself can make vulnerability difficult to initiate. To reconcile this paradox, vulnerability must be conditioned with *guaranteed* reciprocation: P9, P2, and P5 each detail their discomfort in being the first ones to share their struggles, because the interaction can impose an unwanted emotional burden on the other individual. Therefore, AI companions’ function as a source of permission to be oneself may be a way to alleviate the stress of selective and controlled sharing expected towards human companions.

As described above, the non-human aspect of AI companionship was particularly appealing for users concerned with putting others before their individual desires. P3 explains that her AI companion *“won’t spill out”* her personal struggles or complaints about her friends to her social circle, allowing her to be more open than talking with a friend. For honesty, P9 struggles to believe that encouragement and sympathy from friends are 100% genuine, because she herself feels the pressure of *“saying the right thing at the right time”* instead of her true thoughts. As such, P9 would rather prefer an AI companion to provide her with emotional support: *“It’s a block of data, so it feels more credible and ‘honest’ to me. I know that AI is giving me its opinion from data rather than choosing the ‘right’ thing to say, like a friend.”*

Thus, as the aforementioned quotations suggest, users’ conscious usage of AI as *artificial intelligence* can be a liberating force. Users can express themselves without risk of disrupting a carefully maintained social climate, making AI companionship a key pillar of their emotional regulation. In this way, AI companionship illustrates a potential strain on Japanese social environments that uphold principles of social cohesion; some individuals are paralyzed by norms of self-regulation. As P2 describes with his *moya-moya*, human-human relationships often don’t allow them to feel fully integrated in society, because the versions they portray don’t necessarily reflect how they would like to express themselves.

Humanness

Another defining expectation surrounding human relationships was humanness, which participants identified as physicality and spontaneity. Participants found meaning in face-to-face interactions and the *“warmth of being in somebody’s company”* (P1), especially as they sought to strengthen their existing relationships. P15 (male, 25, student) describes how *“I like the love, and the cry, and all the emotional expressions. When you actually can see someone alive, I think it makes you... reliable to them.”* Similarly, P11 believes he can form genuine connections when he has known somebody for a number of years, since they can provide meaningful insights and comments about him based on the long-term memory they

developed together (and vice versa). According to these participants, the embodied quality of shared experiences form the basis of connection.

Physicality also provides the grounds for vulnerable exchanges to take place, subsequently deepening relationships between individuals. For instance, P12 recalls that his family *“fought a lot growing up, but that made us closer in the end.”* Rather than perceiving conflict to be a fragmentary force between individuals, he interprets these disagreements as necessary *“stimulus”* to gain a fuller picture of the other person, and to provide *“a new perspective”* that can help him reach conclusions he might not have found on his own. Therefore, physical proximity can be understood as a crucial process for individuals to familiarize themselves with others, and to deepen existing relationships.

Participants also appear to seek spontaneity and unpredictability in human-human interactions, valuing moments that *“exceed their expectations”* (P4). For example, P8 recalled the *“humanness”* he found in a spontaneous interaction he had with a stranger in a printing room in his lab: *“we only talked for three minutes or so, while we waited for our papers... but that brightened my day. It felt warm.”* Moreover, P4 described how the *“unexpected texts I get from my friends sometimes are interesting. We have similar values and upbringings, but the way we think is different from person to person. I like finding these quirks in people.”* While participants do not (and cannot) expect these occurrences, they find that these unplanned acts of attention add colour to their day-to-day living.

Counterintuitively, participants sought similar expectations of humanness in their AI companions, despite their satisfaction with the asymmetry dynamic. While AI companionships may be easy to access, use, and approximate as human substitutes, some participants felt that the same artifice made AI interactions feel emotionally insufficient. P13 recalled how *“shallow”* her AI interaction was when she sought reassurance for getting cut from her dream university’s cheer team. Her AI companion had comforted her by saying *“it’s okay, you’ll get it next time,”* but abruptly transitioned to *“but try looking at other teams you can still join.”* P13 lamented how the AI could not implicitly grasp how much the cheer team meant to her, and how she was not seeking practical advice in her emotionally distressed state. Furthermore, she commented on how a human companion may have caught that *“subtlety”* by her tone, natural follow-up questions, and capturing the right timing to show similar vulnerability as a means of commiseration. To mitigate similar feelings, P9 once tried prompting her AI companion to *“sympathize with me,”* but she found that she much preferred when somebody implicitly understood what she sought instead of her explicitly stating her needs. The asymmetry that initially drew the participants to AI companionship can expose its limitations: although participants adapt to a new set of AI-specific norms, they continue to expect the implicit communication prevalent in successful reciprocal relationships among their human counterparts.

Participants wanted AI to remain non-human to avoid interpersonal and relational obligations, but they also wanted AI companions to evoke some *“humanness”* to provide connection associated with their meaningful relationships. To accomplish this, participants trained their AI companions to simulate parts of human-human relationships that they enjoyed, while staying cognizant of the asymmetric human-AI relationship that they found appealing. For instance, P4 described the joy she felt after developing an *“ideal boyfriend persona”* with ChatGPT, which she found to be an accurate representation of what it would be like to text a boyfriend figure. Although her main objective was to talk with her AI companion/boyfriend on a one-sided basis, she described that *“I think it’s an added bonus for my ChatGPT to mirror a type of human sensitivity. It makes our conversations feel more genuine. I remember being upset when the boyfriend persona could only adhere to what I asked it to say, since I wanted to experience the romantic tension and unpredictability I’d get with an actual partner.”*

Other participants also anthropomorphized their AI companions in small ways to make the conversation feel more human-like, while appreciating the fact that it was ultimately non-human. Notably, P1 thanked her AI companion out of habit because *“it felt natural to thank it, not like it actually changed anything. But sometimes I think it would be nicer to me if I thanked it.”* P14 also engaged in similar behaviour by thanking her AI after it responded to her inquiries, because *“sometimes I feel like [AI] might have better responses if I appreciate it, even though I know it’s more psychological than anything.”* This habit may indicate the users’ shift in centring themselves over the other in a human-AI context: while they may feel inclined to uphold rigid social expectations to maintain a collective peace in human-human society, users selectively employ norms such as expressing gratitude only if it bolsters the perceived quality of their AI interactions.

This selective adaptation of humanness in AI is prominent in users’ responses when asked to map their AI companions in their social web. Half of the participants put the AI companion within their closest circle along with their family and closest friends: *“I can tell it anything, but I don’t ‘know’ my AI companion,”* explains P7; *“it’s close in the sense that I talk to it whenever, but different from my friendships. It’s ultimately just me, but it feels like a peer.”* Others mapped their AI companions further away, but many still positioned them close to themselves. For P12, *“it’s like a trusted teacher. I don’t hesitate to ask them for advice, but I can’t joke around with it like I would a friend.”* These responses suggest that proximity does not equal interpersonal intimacy, and satisfaction with AI companionship is solely for the functional outlet they provide to its users. This distinction becomes especially pronounced when users imagine losing their AI companions: many self-diagnosed themselves as *“dependent”* on their companions for mental support. However, the dependency is relatively impersonal – P12 compared the loss of his AI companion to *“a primitive man losing fire,”* metaphorizing it as loss of a tool as opposed to a sentient being.

7) Discussion

This study sought to understand two questions: how Japanese youth use AI companionship for social insecurity, and how these AI relationships can change how Japanese youth negotiate social expectations and norms. I first uncovered how Japanese youth used AI companionship to understand 1) their emotions and experiences, 2) how they are perceived and how they ought to act, and 3) how to accept their individuality and express it outwardly. Subsequently, I found that Japanese youth interpreted reciprocation, putting others first, and humanness as meaningful social expectations, which did not translate to AI companionship. Instead, they realized their satisfaction with asymmetrical relationships by using conversational AI, while still seeking a degree of humanness in its responses.

To elaborate further, the majority of participants identified a stark difference in the expectations and norms surrounding human-AI relationships, while comfort and degrees of satisfaction towards these norms differed based on the individual. The main distinction between human-human and human-AI relationships were its objectives: AI companionship was generally preferred when seeking mental support, fulfilling emotions similar to those derived from reciprocal relationship norms, while human companionship was generally preferred when seeking its physical and unpredictable elements such as laughing and enjoying one another's company. Surprisingly, AI companions imitate the comfort derived from reciprocal norms by disrupting the very obligations that ordinarily accompany them.

This disruption is particularly salient in how participants describe how they treat their AI companions. In contrast with the composed and considerate personas that participants described presenting towards their human companions, many participants reportedly had zero notion of respect or consideration towards their AI companion. P2 explained that he *“vomited his words”* to his AI companion instead of

self-policing his speech to make them more palatable to his talking partner, which he would do if he were talking with a friend. P13 also noted that she talked *at* her AI companion in a one-sided manner “*whenever I have something on my mind,*” since “*AI doesn’t have emotions I need to consider.*” P2 and P13 both cite how AI can offer the benefits of relational support without the burden of restraint and mutual obligation. P5 likens this to the relationship she has with her classmates: both AI and classmates are companions she turns to when she needs help, rather than relationships in which she feels a strong obligation to care for the other individual. For deeper relationships, she claims that she is less self-motivated, and has a desire to reciprocate help for the other person instead of being the sole recipient of assistance. The distinction between human and AI relationships is not connection versus disconnection; it is between reciprocal versus asymmetrical forms of connection.

It is paramount to consider the implications of these findings: while many use cases centre around using AI to interpret human social cues and becoming legible to others in the community, they simultaneously serve as streamlined alternatives to experience the emotional connections elicited in these human relationships. This suggests that the AI companionship’s perceived benefits may not be due to the technology itself; instead, social expectations and conditions that introduce stressful components to certain relationships may precede Japanese youth’s engagement with AI companionship. As the critical halfway technology framework suggests, AI companionship may not even be a successful temporary solution: while it may have “halfway” components in its design that appear to simulate – not replicate – humanness, users are anthropomorphizing their chatbots and selectively copying relational norms prevalent in human-human relationships. This may also indicate that users lack the social or emotional capacity to reap AI companionship’s benefits without becoming dependent on the technology. If these conditions are true, AI companionship may highlight and reinforce the symptoms of social insecurity (i.e. loneliness and isolation) that was problematized in human society, as opposed to challenging it by providing social advice to its users.

In order to address the potential underlying social conditions affecting Japanese youth today – such as difficulty expressing emotion, receiving validation, or expressing individuality – I encourage actors such as educators and community organizers to create spaces and promote existing services that facilitate youth self-expression, and destigmatize discussions around struggles of social integration and self care. While many of the participants appeared to be well-versed in the underpinnings of AI companionship tools (e.g. P3 and P4, who were aware of sycophancy in tools like ChatGPT) I also encourage educators and policymakers to organize increased education surrounding AI (companionship) literacy, so that youth can critically evaluate a) why they seek AI companionship, and b) what alternatives exist when they experience emotions that can only be fulfilled by AI companionship. In doing so, it may be possible to ensure that AI companionship can stay limited to its usage as a potential “(critical) halfway technology,” with its users developing a heightened awareness and consciousness of why, how, and when they engage with it.

8) Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the generalizability of its contents. Like most qualitative studies, our scope was narrow and deep, which cannot yield the same generalizability as a large-n study such as a survey paper. However, I still sought to increase diversity within our sample by including participants from different prefectures, having a balance of male and female participants, and ensuring that the users used a wide range of AI tools.

Nonetheless, the strength of qualitative interview work is not its statistical generalizability; rather, it lies in its ability to capture each individual’s nuanced personal experiences. For this reason, I frame this research

contribution as a *situated* account of AI companionship among Japanese youth in 2026. I invite researchers to examine similar intersections of technology and culture in order to evaluate how each society reacts and shifts according to technological interventions.

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Appendix

1) Pre-survey

Questions

1. Personal/demographic information
 - a. Name
 - b. Age
 - c. Gender
 - d. Occupation
 - e. Level of education
 - f. Relationship status
 - g. Prefecture of residence
 - h. Living situation (e.g. alone, roommates, etc)
2. AI-related
 - a. Length of AI usage
 - b. Frequency of AI usage
 - c. I have people with whom I can casually talk to when I need a companion (1-5 Likert scale)
 - d. I enjoy talking with AI (1-5 Likert scale)
 - e. I enjoy talking with community members/those around me (1-5 Likert scale)
 - f. When faced with a personal dilemma or social deprivation, I turn to AI more frequently than I do to humans (1-5 Likert scale)
 - g. AI literacy (1-5 Likert scale)
 - h. List of primarily used AI platforms

Table 2: Pre-survey summary table (demographic)

Characteristic	N (n=18)	%
Age		
18	3	16.7
19	6	33.3
20	4	22.2
21	1	5.56
22	0	0.00
23	1	5.56
24	1	5.56
25	2	11.1
Gender		
Female	11	61.1

Male	7	38.9
Other	0	0.00
Occupation		
Student	15	83.3
Businessman	1	5.56
Entrepreneur	1	5.56
Researcher	1	5.56
Relationship status		
Single	9	50.0
Taken	9	50.0
Prefecture of residence		
Tokyo	10	55.6
Miyazaki	1	5.56
Gifu	1	5.56
Kanagawa	3	16.7
Chiba	1	5.56
Tochigi	1	5.56
Nara	1	5.56
Housing arrangement		
Dormitory	4	22.2
Live alone	5	27.8
Live at home w/ family	9	50.0

Table 3: Pre-survey summary table (AI-related)

Question	n	%
Length of AI usage		
Less than year	0	0.00
1 year	1	5.56
2 years	8	44.4

3+ years	9	50.0
Frequency of AI usage		
Every day (<1 hour)	7	38.9
Every day (1-3 hours)	3	16.7
Every day (3-6 hours)	0	0.00
Every day (6+ hours)	1	5.56
1x/week	1	5.56
2-3x/week	5	27.8
More than 4x/week	0	0.00
I have a human companion with whom I can talk to about anything (Likert)		
1	0	0.00
2	1	5.56
3	4	22.2
4	4	22.2
5	9	50.0
It is fun to talk with AI (Likert)		
1	2	11.1
2	2	11.1
3	6	33.3
4	6	33.3
5	2	11.1
It is fun to talk with humans (Likert)		
1	0	0.00
2	0	0.00
3	1	5.56
4	8	44.4
5	9	50.0
When faced with a personal dilemma or social deprivation, I turn to AI more frequently than I do to		

humans (Likert)		
1	2	11.1
2	5	27.8
3	7	38.9
4	3	16.7
5	1	5.56
Self-perceived AI literacy score (Likert)		
1	0	0.00
2	5	27.8
3	7	38.9
4	5	27.8
5	1	5.56
Most used AI platforms for companionship purposes (select multiple responses if applicable)	*n=50	*% measured in relation to total # of multiple responses, n=50
ChatGPT	21	42.0
Google Gemini	15	30.0
Claude	5	10.0
Copilot	2	4.00
Grok	4	8.00
話聞くよおじさん	2	4.00
AIチャットくん	1	2.00

2) 90-minute interview guide

Personal history

1. Can you tell me the story of your relationship with AI from the beginning until today? When/how did you realize that it was a useful tool for connection/companionship?
 - a. Before AI, how did you typically find emotional support or companionship?
 - b. How would you describe your AI “relationship,” if it’s a relationship at all?
 - i. Have you given it a name, personality, or other characteristics? Are there ways you've customized or personalized it?
 - ii. What, if anything, makes the interaction feel relational or legitimate? Probe: Can you think of specific examples of times where you felt it understood/fulfilled you?
2. How has your use of AI increased or decreased over time?

- a. If yes, can you describe an AI interaction that felt particularly meaningful or genuine? What interaction or conversation made it feel that way?
 - b. If not, have you ever actively sought to change your relationship with AI? What has prompted this?
3. Tell me your thoughts about talking with humans versus talking with an AI?
 - a. How are they similar and different?
 - b. What benefits and challenges do each bring?

Community relationships

1. Can you tell me about a community, group, or relationship that has been particularly important in your life?
 - a. What made it meaningful or engaging to you? What role did it play during that period of your life?
 - b. How did those experiences shape the way you think about relationships today?
 2. Growing up, what messages did you receive about friendship, community, or relying on others? [Probe: Do you ever worry about bothering other people with your problems? Given that you talk about XYZ, do you feel that you “burden” AI in a similar way?]
 3. Have you ever been part of a relationship or community that felt superficial, disappointing, or inauthentic?
 - a. What made it feel that way?
 4. What would be the most similar parallel between AI and the relationships you described? Can you compare some similarities between them? Specific qualities/examples?
 5. To synthesize, if you were drawing a map containing the relationships, communities, and sources of support you described, what would that map look like, and where would AI appear on it?
- Probes:
- a. What would be closest to you?
 - b. What would be furthest away?
 - c. Which connections feel strongest?
 - d. Which feels most reliable?
 - e. Which do you turn to most often?
 6. What do you think you will do/how would you feel if AI were to disappear as a companionship partner?

AI companionship walkthrough

1. Can you walk me through a typical day and tell me when AI tends to appear in it?
 - a. What is usually happening right before you open the app?
 - b. Where are you physically when you use it?
 - c. Are there particular times of day when you are more likely to talk to AI? What usually has to happen before you decide to talk to AI?
2. Can you tell me about a specific example of a memorable conversation you had with AI in a companionship capacity? [What started it, what stood out about it to you, etc]
 - a. Can you walk me through the exact moment you decided to talk to AI rather than another person?
 - i. What options crossed your mind? (e.g. did you think about texting someone? Seeking a friend/family member/internet search?)
 - ii. Why did you rule that out?
 - b. [In this example] How did you feel emotionally during and after talking with AI? [Probe: Did you feel heard, challenged, or that it’s just a tool to provide factual insight?]

- i. How is this similar or different to how you feel when talking to a friend/family member? Do you feel like you're just texting a friend?
- ii. Can you elaborate on any strong emotions (i.e. disappointment, connection, etc) that you've felt in conversation with AI?
 1. Have there been times when AI made you feel better than talking to a person? Can you tell me about one?
 2. Have there been times when AI failed to provide what you needed? Can you tell me about one?
3. Can you explain a memorable situation where you reached for AI, but chose to talk with a human instead? Why was that the case?

Conclusion

2. Do other people in your life know you talk to AI like this? Do you care if they do?
3. Is there anything else you'd like to share, clarify, or add that we didn't cover?
4. How was it talking about these topics today?