

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

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Background

- **AI companionship** has been branded as a solution for mental un-wellness and loneliness (Chaturvedi et al. 2023).
- The consequences of AI companionship has neglected to address how it is an inherently “**relational experience**” (Strohmann et al., 2023).
- **Japanese social norms** have emphasized **reciprocity/harmony**, posing a tension with emerging attitudes towards individual autonomy (Hamamura 2011). Adequate social supports have not developed alongside changing social norms, contributing to increased social insecurity among Japanese youth (Homma & Takase, 2026).
- Taking Japanese youth as a case study, we examined the **under-explored area** of how AI companionship can counter social insecurity, and reshape relational norms and community structures that inform human life.

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?

Methodology

1. Recruitment:

- 18 active AI companionship users from youth ages 18-25
- Cold outreach + personal connections

2. Pre-survey:

- Preliminary demographic information
- Likert scales on statements pertaining to the participant’s relationship with AI

3. Semi-structured interviews:

- Interviews to understand the nuances and examples left uncaptured in the survey
- 90 minutes/interview, 27 hours in total
- Transcribed and coded thematically in NVivo

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

Table 1: Participants’ demographic characteristics

Results

RQ1: Applications of AI companionship

1. Understanding oneself

- **Articulating emotions:** translating unsettled feelings into logical motivations.
- **Affirming one’s experiences:** unconditional reassurance to validate user experiences/interpretations.



“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.” - P4 (female, 18, student)

2. Understanding the social world

- **Clarifying self-perception:** understanding how others truly perceive them.
- **Objective third perspective:** “average opinions” when users doubt if their internalized social standards are correct or not.



“Humans are biased towards their experiences, but AI can aggregate data from everyone’s different experiences.” - P7 (female, 19, student)

3. Navigating responses to the world

- **Self-acceptance:** accepting the the unique identities and quirks they felt were trivial/unorthodox.
- **Self-expression:** guidance on expressing their authentic selves in ways that would be legible to others.



“[AI companion] told me that I have an important function in this world as a listener, and I found that heartwarming.” - P6 (female, 19, student)

RQ2: Changing expectations around relationality

- **AI’s non-human properties were particularly meaningful:** its asymmetry disrupts the reciprocal obligations underlying human relationships, enabling them to receive emotional support without having to invest in others.
- Paradoxically, participants sought similar expectations of **humanness** in their AI companions due to its emotional insufficiencies, despite their satisfaction with the asymmetry dynamic. Participants trained their AI companions to simulate parts of human relationships that they enjoyed:

“I think it’s an added bonus for my ChatGPT to mirror a type of human sensitivity. 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 I’d get with an actual partner.” - P4 (female, 18, student)

Discussion

- AI companionship can alleviate the emotional labour of human relationships, creating a new norm of asymmetrical connection.
- Participants still sought “humanness,” underscoring how AI companionship is only complementary, not substitutive.
- Findings can be useful to designers, developers, policymakers, and community organizers to determine how best to facilitate connection and mental wellbeing in a digital age.

Acknowledgements & References

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Full paper:

