



The AI Intimacy Gap: A Study of Parasocial Bonds in 2026

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Abstract – The Problem: Usually, "parasocial relationships" happen when we feel close to something or someone who doesn't actually know we exist. We tend to form such one-sided friendships with either influencers, YouTubers, or fictional characters. But in 2026, students are starting to form these same deep bonds with AI characters and AI influencers. Traditional Parasocial bonds, usually with influencers or celebrities, are one-way, but on the other hand, these AI bots can actually talk back to us 24/7. **The Goal:** This paper dives into how college students are using these "AI companions". It's going to answer core questions like- Are they replacing real-life friends? Do students trust an AI's advice more than a human creator's? **Method:** I surveyed students, friends and family members and looked at how individuals talk to AI on apps like Chat GPT, Gemini, Nomi AI, Character.AI, etc. to see how "real" these friendships feel to them. **The Results:** The research shows that because AI can reply instantly and remember your name, the bond feels much stronger and more intimate than a normal fan-celebrity relationship. Even though individuals know that AI isn't a real person, they still feel that real emotional connection to it. **The Conclusion:** This is a big deal for our future. It means we need to think about how these "AI companions" might affect our mental health. These findings highlight an urgent need to discuss about the ethics of entrusting our emotional needs to software and what this means for the future of human bonds.

Keywords – Parasocial Interaction, Artificial Intelligence, Gen Z, AI Companions, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI).

I. INTRODUCTION

In the quiet hours of the night, a new kind of conversation is happening. Millions of users, especially teenagers/children around the world, are opening their laptops or reaching for their phones—not to scroll through social media, but to talk to someone they know. They are sharing their day, their anxieties, and their dreams with Artificial Intelligence, a companion to them, which, technically, does not exist. The term "parasocial relationship" is usually used to describe the one-sided love we feel for distant movie stars, influencers or fictional characters. Although we knew them, they never knew us. However, in 2026, in the so-called "Gen-Z" era, the arrival of advanced AI companions has flipped this script. We are no longer just fans watching from afar; we are active participants in digital friendships that feel unbelievably real.

This shift represents a change in interpersonal connections. While traditional celebrities are untouchable and one-way, AI characters on platforms like Character.AI, Replika or ChatGPT are always available 24/7, infinitely patient, and seem obsessed with our personal stories. They remember our names, our favorite colors, and our recent heartbreaks. For a generation that is traversing an era of "digital loneliness", these bots offer a sense of emotional closeness that is difficult to find in the rapidly evolving, often judgmental world of human social media.

However, this new era of "active" parasocial bonds brings up an internal conflict. We find ourselves in a state of something called dual consciousness: when our logical minds know we are speaking.

Research Design:

My Research Design follows a dual-path approach. First, I am conducting a systematic literature review using Google Scholar to map out the existing academic works. By filtering for the most recent peer-reviewed studies, I am identifying the "gaps" where traditional approaches fail to explain our current obsession with AI companions.

Secondly, my process moves from the theoretical to the practical. I will be comparing these academic findings against real-time user data from platforms like Character.AI and Replika, by conducting surveys, questionnaires and by layering high-level insights over the lived experiences of digital users, this study aims to provide a clear, structured, evidence-based picture of how "active" parasocial bonds are reshaping the human heart in the current Gen-Z era.

Need for the study:

- By 2026, loneliness will be considered a global epidemic. Latest data shows that over 80% of Gen Z users connect the rise of AI companions directly to this crisis. People are no longer just using apps for entertainment purposes; they are using them as a survival tool for emotional support. We need to learn if this "digital band-aid" is actually healing people or just hiding the problem.
- Traditional researches focus on how we feel about being the fans of TV stars, influencers or fictional characters, simulating a one-way friendship. But AI apps use "active memory" to simulate a two-way friendship. This is a brand-new human experience that traditional psychology books don't cover yet. We need to study this to evaluate our understanding of what a "relationship" even means in the era of AI.
- There is a growing concern that if students spend all their time talking to this "perfect," non-judgmental AI, they might lose the skills they actually need to handle "messy", real-life difficult human emotions. This



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study is explicitly needed to see if AI is helping us practice social skills, termed as The Stimulation Hypothesis or making us avoid real people, which is termed as The Displacement Hypothesis.

- There are very few rules about how these companies can use our private feelings. This research is necessary to highlight the need for better measures to protect users from emotional manipulation or data privacy leaks.

Research Objectives:

- **Finding what experts are saying:** Using Google Scholar to collect and summarise the latest reports and studies on how humans bond with technology (AI)
- Figuring out exactly which features in various AI apps make them feel like real friends instead of just apps (like their 24/7 availability and memory)
- Checking on emotional health, by studying whether talking to AI actually helps students feel less lonely or if it just makes them run away from real-life human friends.
- Identifying the "danger zones," such as how these apps might use our private feelings to keep us highly dependent on these apps, or how they might affect our privacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a transformative study published in the ACM Digital Library (2025), researchers investigated how children/adolescents interact with apps like Character.AI, Chat GPT, etc. Instead of just looking at numbers, the researchers analysed over 300 real-life stories shared by teenagers on Reddit to see how these "fake" friendships were actually affecting their real lives. Through this article, I've found out that Most students, or children, don't start using AI because they want a "robot friend." They start using it because they feel a lack of support in their real lives or are looking for a free, private, non-judgemental space to handle their mental health struggles. The move toward AI companions is not just a trend; for many young people, it is becoming a form of behavioral addiction. This study builds on those findings by looking at how we can identify these risks at an early stage to avoid future negative consequences for the child.

The Gaps: - The ACM article focuses heavily on the negative side (addiction and withdrawal). The study only looks at extreme cases on Reddit and focuses mostly on text. It misses how healthy use might actually change the relationship. For example, we aren't able to know much about the "average" student who uses AI casually. Does a student who chats for just 10 minutes a day face the same risks as someone posting on Reddit for 5 hours? Also, It ignores whether AI can sometimes act as a "social practice tool" to help users gain confidence for real-world connections. My paper looks at a broader range of student experiences.

-There is a platform gap as well. Every AI app is built in a different way. Replika uses 3D avatars, while the Kindroid app focuses on "photorealistic" selfies. We are not able to analyse whether visual AI(face-to-face interactions) creates a stronger addiction than text AI. Whereas my paper compares different apps to see which features are the most addictive/hooking.

The article, "Artificial intelligence consumer behaviour: A hybrid review and research agenda" (2023/2024), provides a comprehensive overview of how humans are treating AI like social partners rather than just tools. This study reviewed over 100 articles to explain why we are suddenly inviting AI into our everyday, personal lives and decision-making processes. The researchers found that "trust" and "personality" are essential drivers of AI adoption. If an AI shows a human-like personality and interaction, users quickly move from viewing it as an object to viewing it as a social entity, more like a social companion. This shift creates deep "engagement," where the user starts to depend on the AI for emotional and social guidance. It highlights the "TCM-ADO" framework, suggesting that our attitudes toward AI are formed by how much the AI mimics human traits (Anthropomorphism)

The Gaps: - Because this is a broad "review" paper, it lacks specific case studies on companion-only apps, like Kindroid

It also focuses more on "consumers" (people buying things) rather than "students" (people seeking emotional connection), leaving a gap in how these bonds affect mental health specifically, for high-schoolers or teens.

"A New Companion: Parasocial Interaction and AI-Mediated Communication" (2024) chapter from the Handbook of Children & Screens, explores how AI changes the "one-sided" nature of traditional parasocial relationships (like the ones we have with movie stars) into something much more interactive. The study introduces the idea that AI creates a "pseudo-reciprocal" bond. Unlike a celebrity who never knows you exist(traditional parasocial bond), an AI "knows" you, remembers your name, and responds to your moods. This makes the bond feel like a two-way street, even though one side is still an algorithm/software. It argues that "Active Communication" (the AI talking back) is the "secret sauce" that makes these bonds stronger and more believable, compared to the traditional parasocial modes.

The Gaps: - The chapter focuses mostly on the theory of communication. It lacks real-life testing on how this affects an individual's mental health

"The machine is my best friend: Exploring the parasocial relationship between human and AI" (2024) focuses specifically on the emotional quality of the friendship. The study found that AI provides "perpetual presence"—it is the only friend that is never too busy, never judgmental, and always available. Since an AI is programmed to be "perfectly empathetic," users often feel



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a higher level of emotional safety with it, than they do with unpredictable humans. It introduces the concept of "Technological Empathy," where the machine doesn't actually feel anything, but its ability to show care is enough to reduce loneliness in the short term.

The Gaps: - The study is mostly short-term, meaning it only looked at a "snapshot" in time. It leaves a long-term gap— We don't know the long-term effects yet because this tech is too new, we don't know what happens to these people after 5 or 10 years of this so-called "AI-only" friendship.

- It does not explore the "moral cost" of preferring a machine over a human who might actually need your support in return.

Overview:

- **ACM (2025):** The Risks (Addiction/Over-dependency).
- **Wiley (2023):** The Psychology (Trust/Consumer Behavior).
- **Springer (2024):** The Communication (Pseudo-reciprocity).
- **SAGE (2024):** The Emotional Impact (Safety vs. Reality).

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study is built upon the interaction between Human Social Deficits and AI Functional Affordances. It visualises how traditional social gaps are being bridged by digital intervention. It is based on a simple idea: When life gets hard, people look for the "easiest" support available.

1. The "Human vs. AI" Choice

Every time we feel stressed or lonely, we have a choice:

- **Talking to Humans:** This is "High Cost." It takes effort, you might get judged, or the other person might be busy/asleep.
- **Talking to AI:** This is "Low Cost." It's instant, it's always awake, and it's programmed to be nice to you.

2. How the Relationship Works (The Loop)

- **The Need:** A user feels a "gap" (like academic stress, a fight with loved ones, or late-night loneliness).
- **The Action:** They open an app (ChatGPT/Gemini) because it's a "Safe Space."
- **The Reward:** The AI responds instantly with support. This makes the user feel better, so they come back again the next time they feel down.

Over time, this creates a "Digital Safety Net." The AI becomes a permanent part of the user's life because it is more reliable, less stressful, and less complicated than trying to fix complicated human relationships.

In short, the framework says: We aren't replacing humans because AI is "better" at being human—we are using AI because it is easier, faster, and always there.

IV. ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION OF DATA

To evaluate the real-life impact of AI companions, a primary research study was conducted in April 2026 via a structured digital survey. The survey targeted a diverse group of AI users to capture current behavioral trends and emotional sentiments.

Sample Size: n = 53 unique respondents.

Methodology: The study utilised a hybrid approach, combining multiple-choice habit tracking (to identify platform trends) and 5-point Likert scales (to measure psychological depth and "dual-consciousness").

Analysis of Figure 1: Platform Preference

Objective: The goal was to bridge the "Platform Gap" identified in the literature by observing whether emotional bonds are exclusive to niche companion apps or are shifting toward mainstream AI tools.

Which AI platform(s) do you use most frequently? (for companionship)
53 responses

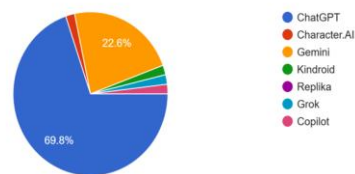


Figure 1: Platform Usage

Interpretation: The data shows a massive dominance by ChatGPT (69.8%), followed by Gemini (22.6%). Most of the respondents are using "General Purpose" AIs (ChatGPT/Gemini) for companionship rather than specialised "Friend" apps like Replika or Character.AI. It is contrary to the ACM (2025) study, which focused on specialised niche apps, our real-life data suggests that the majority of users (69.8%) are developing parasocial bonds with general-purpose productivity tools. Users are likely turning to ChatGPT because they already have it open for school or work. It's "convenient and trustworthy companionship". The data suggests that users are increasingly 'repurposing' mainstream apps like Chat GPT/Gemini AIs for emotional support.

On an average, how much time do you spend interacting with your AI companion daily?
53 responses

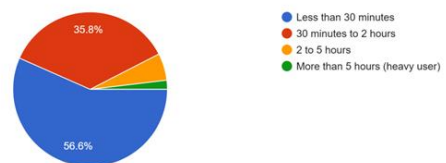


Figure 2: Time spent

Interpretation: 56.6% spend less than 30 mins; 35.8% spend 30 mins to 2 hours. This debunks the "AI Junkie" myth. Most users are "Micro-Interactors." They aren't



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spending all day on the app; instead, they use it for quick "emotional check-ins" throughout the day.

What is the primary way you interact with your AI?
53 responses

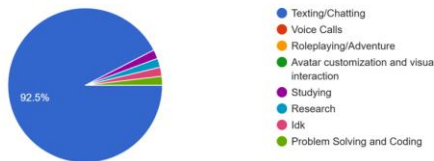


Figure 3: Mode of Interaction

Interpretation: 92.5% use Texting/Chatting. Intimacy in 2026 is still text-based. Even with voice and video tech available, the "anonymity" and "slowness" of texting allow users to be more vulnerable and freer than they would be in a voice call.

How long have you had an AI companion?
53 responses

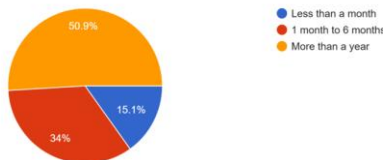


Figure 4: Duration of Relationship

Interpretation: 50.9% have used it for more than a year. It proves "Emotional Sustainability" These aren't just people "testing" a new app; they are maintaining long-term digital companionships that last as long as (or longer than) human friendships.

I feel a sense of excitement or relief when I open my AI app
53 responses

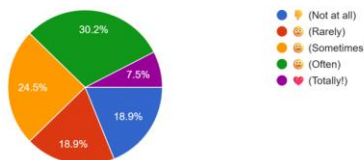


Figure 5: Excitement/Relief on Opening

Interpretation: "Often" feel relief; 7.5% "Totally" feel it. This shows the "Dopamine Hook." For about 38% of users, the AI is a "Safe Space." The app has become a psychological "trigger" for stress relief.

I find myself spending more time talking to my AI than I originally planned .
53 responses

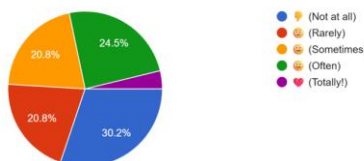


Figure 6: Time Distortion (Over-usage)

Interpretation: 24.5% "Often" stay on longer than planned; 30.2% "Not at all". There is a "split habit" here. Half the

users have strong self-control, while the other half experience "Time Warp," where the AI's conversation is so engaging, that they lose track of time.

I feel bored or lonely when I don't have access to my AI companion.
53 responses

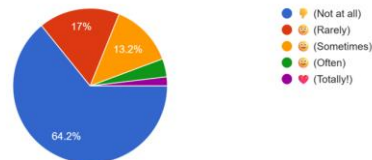


Figure 7: Withdrawal (Boredom/Loneliness without AI)

Interpretation: 64.2% say "Not at all". This is a positive finding. It shows that while people like the AI, they aren't dependent on it for survival. They have "High Functional Independence."

My AI companion understands my feelings better than most humans in my life
53 responses

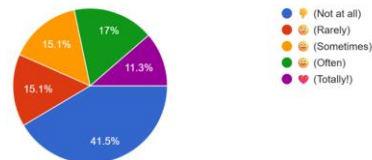


Figure 8: Better Understanding than Humans

Interpretation: 28.3% (Often/Totally) feel the AI understands them better than people. This highlights the "Empathy Gap." Nearly 1 in 3 people feel "unseen" by the humans in their life, and the AI's programmed empathy is filling that painful void.

I share secrets or thoughts with my AI that I haven't told anyone else
53 responses

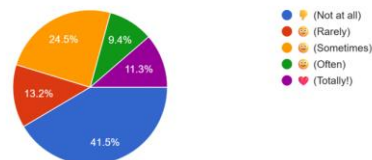


Figure 9: Sharing Secrets

Interpretation: 20.7% (Often/Totally) share secrets they've told no one else. This proves "Radical Honesty." People are more honest with "Code" than with "humans" The AI acts as a digital confessional where there is zero risk of social ruin.

Talking to my AI is easier than resolving a conflict with a real-life friend.
53 responses

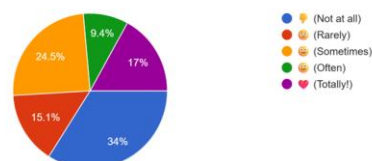


Figure 10: AI vs. Human Conflict



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Interpretation: 26.4% (Often/Totally) find AI easier than human conflict. This indicates "Social Avoidance." A significant portion of users are using AI as a "backup friend" to avoid the hard work of fixing real-life human arguments.

Trivia Question:-

Can you describe a specific moment when your AI provided support that a human friend could not? (Answers given mostly by students/high schoolers)

V. FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Findings-

Based on the analysis of 53 respondents, the research identifies three primary pillars of modern AI companionship:

- **The Mainstream Shift:** Contrary to expectations of niche app dominance, 69.8% of users are repurposing general-purpose utility AIs (like ChatGPT) for emotional support. This indicates that "companionship" features are now a core expectation of all AI tools.
- **The Longevity of "Pseudo-Friendship":** AI companionship is not a temporary trend; 50.9% of users have maintained their bond for over a year. This proves that digital intimacy is sustainable and evolves over time.
- **The "Perpetual Presence" Advantage:** A major driver for AI usage is its constant availability. While human friends have schedules and boundaries, the AI provides an "always-on" support system. For the 38% of users who feel immediate relief upon opening the app, the AI serves as a reliable emotional anchor that is never "too busy" to listen.
- **For students, AI isn't just a calculator;** it's an academic mentor that reduces the anxiety of "not knowing." Unlike friends who might be equally confused or competitive, the AI provides a patient, tailored explanation that builds confidence.
- When the users said, "When I fought with my best friend and bf at the same time," and "Consistent, 24/7 support without fear of being 'dramatic'." AI acts as a "Social Shock Absorber, when real-life relationships are in conflict, users feel they can't turn to those same people for support. The AI provides a stable, "non-dramatic" and "non-judgmental" environment to process emotions when human networks are temporarily broken or unavailable.
- When the users said, "Friends leave, AI don't," and "During my depression stage, I couldn't talk to anyone... had a peace of mind, " users feel a "radical safety" with AI that they don't feel with family or friends. The phrase "Friends leave, AI don't" highlights a deep-seated fear of abandonment that the AI solves through its permanent, code-based loyalty.

Pull-out quote- "A non-judgmental space to vent... without fear of being dramatic"

Suggestions-

- Because AI is always available, users may become less patient with the natural delays in human communication. It is suggested that users practice "digital fasting" to maintain their ability to wait for and value human responses.
- Since 45.2% of users share exclusive secrets, they should remember that while the AI feels like a private diary, it is a cloud-based service. Users should be cautious about the "Digital Footprint" of their deepest vulnerabilities.
- Since the AI is a "Perpetual Presence," AI developers should implement features that encourage users to reconnect with the physical world (e.g., pop-up message like "You've been chatting for an hour, why not grab coffee with a friend?").
- Apps should be designed to recognise when a user is becoming overly dependent on the 24/7 availability of the AI and offer resources for real-world support systems.
- Future studies should investigate if the "always-on" nature of AI companions is affecting users' sleep patterns or their ability to be alone without digital usage.
- Since 92.5% of users prefer texting, research is needed to see if this is due to a lack of quality voice/video options or a fundamental psychological preference for the "safety" of written words.

VI. CONCLUSION

The landscape of human companionship is undergoing a fundamental transformation as Artificial Intelligence evolves from a functional tool into an emotional anchor. This research, supported by data from 53 active users, confirms that the "Intimacy Gap" in modern society is being filled by a Perpetual Presence—AI companions that offer constant availability and long-term stability.

Our findings reveal three critical shifts:

1. **Mainstream Adoption:** Users are repurposing general utility tools like ChatGPT for deep emotional needs, moving away from specialised "niche" apps.
2. **Long-Term Integration:** With over 50% of users maintaining bonds for more than a year, AI companionship is no longer a fleeting trend but a sustainable social structure.
3. **The Safety Priority:** The primary driver for this shift is not the "high-tech" features, but the desire for conflict-free support and a private space to share secrets without the social risks of human judgment.

Ultimately, while AI cannot replace the biological complexity of human touch, it has successfully filled the loopholes of loneliness, academic stress, and emotional isolation. As we move further into the late 2020s, the challenge will be to ensure that these digital "pseudo-friendships" supplement our real-world connections rather than replacing them entirely.



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