



The role of AI in mental health: Advancing health equity

El papel de la IA en la salud mental: Promoviendo la equidad en salud

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Conflict of interest: Nothing

Key contribution of the study

Objective	To explore how individuals use AI-based companionship and therapeutic tools for emotional and mental health support
Study design	Qualitative research design using online ethnography and thematic analysis
Source of information	Publicly available discussions from Reddit, Mental Health Forum, and Facebook groups focusing on AI-based mental health and companionship tools
Population / sample	Individuals participating in online discussions about the use of AI for emotional support, mental health, and companionship
Statistical analysis	No statistical analysis was performed. Data were coded inductively and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes
Main findings	Two dominant themes emerged: (1) AI as a tool for emotional support and daily coping, and (2) comparisons between AI-based support and traditional therapy. Participants described AI as accessible, nonjudgmental, and emotionally safe, providing immediate support during periods of distress and facilitating self-reflection. However, participants also recognized that AI cannot replace human relationships, professional clinical judgment, or ethical accountability. Concerns regarding health equity, data privacy, and limited regulatory oversight were also identified

Abstract

Introduction: Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly embedded in everyday life, supporting administrative tasks, healthcare navigation, and customer service. Beyond these functional roles, AI is now emerging as a source of emotional and mental health support, raising important social, psychological, and ethical questions.

Objective: To explore how individuals use AI-based companionship and therapeutic tools for emotional support.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed using online ethnography and thematic analysis. Publicly available discussions from Reddit, Mental Health Forum, and Facebook groups were analyzed to examine users' experiences with AI-based mental health and companionship tools. Data were coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to emotional support, therapeutic use, and perceptions of AI.

Results: Two dominant themes emerged: AI as a tool for emotional support and daily coping, and comparisons between AI-based support and traditional therapy. Participants consistently described AI as accessible, nonjudgmental, and emotionally safe, providing immediate assistance during distress periods and facilitating self-reflection. Despite these benefits, recognized important limitations: AI cannot replace human relationships, professional clinical

judgment, or ethical accountability. Broader concerns regarding health equity, data privacy, and the lack of regulatory oversight for many AI mental health applications were identified.

Conclusion: AI-based mental health tools show promises as accessible and supportive resources that enhance emotional well-being and improve access to care. However, they are most appropriately used as complementary rather than replacement interventions. A hybrid model integrating AI with human-led mental health services may maximize the benefits of these technologies while addressing ethical, clinical, and regulatory challenges.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; mental health; AI companionship; digital therapeutics; emotional support; online ethnography; qualitative analysis; health equity; access to care; human–AI interaction.

Resumen

Introducción: La inteligencia artificial (IA) se ha integrado cada vez más en la vida cotidiana, facilitando tareas administrativas, gestión de la atención y servicio al cliente. Emerge como apoyo para la salud emocional y mental.

Objetivo: Explorar cómo se utilizan las herramientas de IA terapéuticas y de acompañamiento para obtener apoyo emocional.

Métodos: Investigación cualitativa mediante etnografía y análisis temático. Se analizaron discusiones públicas de Reddit, Foro de Salud Mental y grupos de Facebook para examinar las experiencias de los usuarios con la IA relacionadas con apoyo y acompañamiento. Los datos se codificaron para identificar temas recurrentes relacionados con la IA, apoyo emocional, uso terapéutico y percepciones.

Resultados: Surgieron dos temas: 1) IA como herramienta de apoyo emocional y para afrontar las dificultades diarias; 2) Comparaciones entre el apoyo basado en IA y la terapia tradicional. Se encontró que la IA es accesible, imparcial y emocionalmente segura; proporciona asistencia inmediata durante periodos de angustia y facilita la autorreflexión. Se reconocen limitaciones: no puede reemplazar las relaciones humanas, el juicio clínico profesional y la responsabilidad ética. Se identificaron preocupaciones con respecto a la equidad en salud, la privacidad de los datos y la falta de supervisión regulatoria para estas aplicaciones.

Conclusión: Herramientas de salud mental basadas en IA son prometedoras como recursos accesibles y de apoyo. Su uso más apropiado sería intervenciones complementarias, no sustitutivas. Un modelo híbrido que integre la IA con servicios de salud mental podría maximizar los beneficios, al tiempo que aborda los desafíos éticos, clínicos y regulatorios.

Palabras clave: Inteligencia artificial; salud mental; acompañamiento mediante IA; terapias digitales; apoyo emocional; etnografía en línea; análisis cualitativo; equidad en salud; acceso a la atención médica; interacción humano-IA.

Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has become deeply embedded in everyday life, managing workplace tasks, scheduling medical appointments, and handling customer support interactions. While these functional uses of AI have been widely accepted, its growing role in emotional and social support—particularly in mental health—has sparked significant debate.

In earlier eras, personal relationships were formed primarily through family, community, and face-to-face interaction; however, a growing number of individuals are now turning to AI companionship, emotional support, and personal connection. This shift occurs within a broader context of loneliness, changing patterns of social connectedness, and increasing comfort with digital platforms. AI-based conversational systems offer users continuous availability, responsive interaction, and opportunities to disclose thoughts and emotions in a private setting. Emerging research suggests that AI companionship may represent a new form of digitally mediated social interaction, particularly among individuals experiencing loneliness or seeking accessible emotional support (1,2).

From a psychological perspective, AI can provide immediate responses without the fear of embarrassment or rejection and can simulate human-like interaction through language-based models. Research on conversational agents suggests that these systems may reduce psychological distress and provide accessible support for some users (2). However, while such responsiveness may offer short-term emotional relief, concerns remain regarding safety, overreliance, problematic use, and the possibility that AI-mediated interaction could alter users' engagement with human relationships (1,3). This tension highlights the importance of critically examining not only how AI is used, but also the psychological and social conditions that make such systems emotionally appealing.

At the same time, access to mental health professionals in the United States remains uneven and often insufficient, particularly for vulnerable and underserved populations. Multiple structural and social

barriers can limit access to care, including financial constraints, inadequate insurance coverage, workforce shortages, geographic disparities, limited availability of culturally responsive providers, stigma, and other social determinants of health (4,5). These barriers were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which substantially affected mental health and disrupted the delivery of mental health services (6,7). In 2022, approximately 50.6% of U.S. adults with any mental illness received mental health treatment during the preceding year, indicating that nearly half did not receive treatment (8).

In response to these gaps, AI-based chatbots and conversational applications have emerged as scalable tools designed to provide cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)-informed interventions and therapeutic-like support. These systems aim to expand access by providing low-cost and readily available psychological assistance, particularly for individuals who may encounter barriers to traditional care. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that conversational agents can improve certain mental health outcomes, although the magnitude and durability of these effects vary across interventions and populations (2,9).

Despite their promise, significant limitations remain. Evidence concerning the safety, explainability, cultural appropriateness, and clinical effectiveness of conversational AI remains incomplete, particularly when systems are used for complex mental health conditions or crisis situations (9,10). In addition, AI systems may reproduce biases present in training data and may provide inappropriate or unsafe responses. These concerns raise important questions regarding oversight, equity, privacy, accountability, and the appropriate scope of AI in mental health support (10,11).

Given these developments, the objective of this study was to explore the intersection of mental health and AI-based companionship, with a specific focus on how and why individuals use AI systems as a source of emotional support and how these interactions shape perceptions of connection, safety, and well-being.

Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using digital ethnography and thematic analysis to examine the psychological and social factors influencing individuals' reliance on AI for companionship and emotional support. The study sought to explore how users describe their experiences with AI-based companions and therapeutic tools, as well as the underlying motivations that contribute to the development of emotional connections with these technologies.

Data were collected from publicly accessible online discussion platforms between September 2025 and October 2025. The selected platforms included Reddit, Mental Health Forum, and publicly viewable Facebook groups, as these spaces contain naturally occurring discussions where individuals voluntarily share experiences related to AI companionship, chatbot interactions, and AI-assisted emotional support. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify relevant discussions through keyword searches, including terms such as "AI companion," "AI friend," "AI therapist," "chatbot support," "emotional attachment to AI," and "AI for loneliness." Only English-language posts were included to ensure consistency in data interpretation and analysis.

The study analyzed a total of 150 posts and discussion threads that met the established inclusion criteria. Eligible posts were required to be publicly accessible, written in English, and contain substantive discussion of personal experiences, perceptions, or emotional interactions with AI systems. Posts discussing the use of AI for companionship, emotional support, mental health support, or interpersonal connection were included. Posts were excluded if they focused solely on technical aspects of AI development, software functionality, promotional or marketing content, duplicate discussions, or topics unrelated to emotional or psychological experiences with AI.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (12). The analysis began with repeated readings of the collected posts to facilitate familiarization with the data. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful patterns related to users' motivations, emotional experiences, perceptions of AI companionship, and the role of AI in addressing loneliness and emotional needs. Codes were reviewed and organized into broader categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes through an iterative process.

Attention was given to themes associated with emotional safety, avoidance of interpersonal vulnerability, perceived nonjudgmental support, convenience, accessibility, predictability, and desire for control. Themes were continuously reviewed and compared across the different platforms to identify recurring patterns and variations in user experiences. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing narratives across multiple online communities. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained throughout the analytical process to support transparency, confirmability, and methodological rigor.

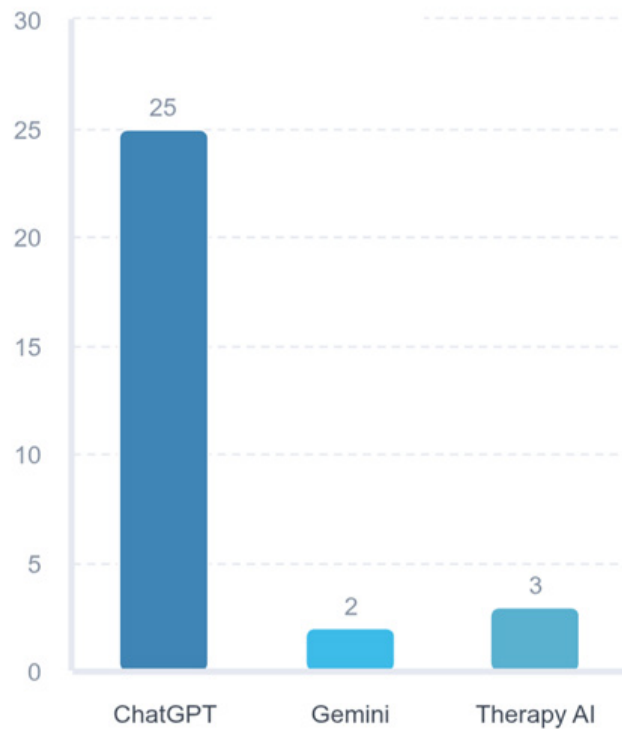


Figure 1. The demographic breakdown of the AI platforms commonly utilized

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the research. Only publicly available content was analyzed, and no direct interaction with users occurred. Usernames, profile information, and any potentially identifying details were removed during data extraction and reporting to protect participant anonymity. The study adhered to established ethical principles for internet-mediated research by respecting privacy expectations and minimizing potential risks associated with the use of publicly accessible online data.

Results

Using ethnographic observation on social media, we uncovered two discourses or themes that kept recurring. These discourses were: 1) General usage: Emotional Support & Daily Coping, and 2) Comparisons Between AI-Based Support & Traditional Therapy.

General usage: emotional support and daily coping

Analysis of Reddit discussion threads revealed a growing trend in which individuals openly describe their daily use of AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, as a source of emotional support (Figure 1), reflection, and coping. Across posts spanning the past one to two years, users shared mental health challenges such as PTSD, anxiety disorders, and borderline personality disorder (BPD), often disclosing the duration of their struggles and the contexts in which they turned to AI.

The majority of users described AI as an accessible companion that provided tailored responses, immediate feedback, and a nonjudgmental space to articulate their feelings. Emotional support was the primary motivation for AI use (86.7%), with users valuing its nonjudgmental nature (70.0%) and ability to safely vent (60.0%) (Figure 2).

Users emphasized that interacting with AI felt safe and emotionally unburdened, allowing them to explore their thoughts with greater clarity and honesty. Some users described experiencing genuine moments of insight that emerged from simply “talking” to the system—often expressing their thoughts at length and then stepping back to read a coherent response. These reflections helped users articulate their situations more clearly in subsequent prompts, leading to structured responses that enabled them to process their experiences more effectively.

These interactions were often framed as supplemental to users’ mental health needs—something available instantly, particularly during moments of emotional intensity or isolation. The ability to rewrite feelings,

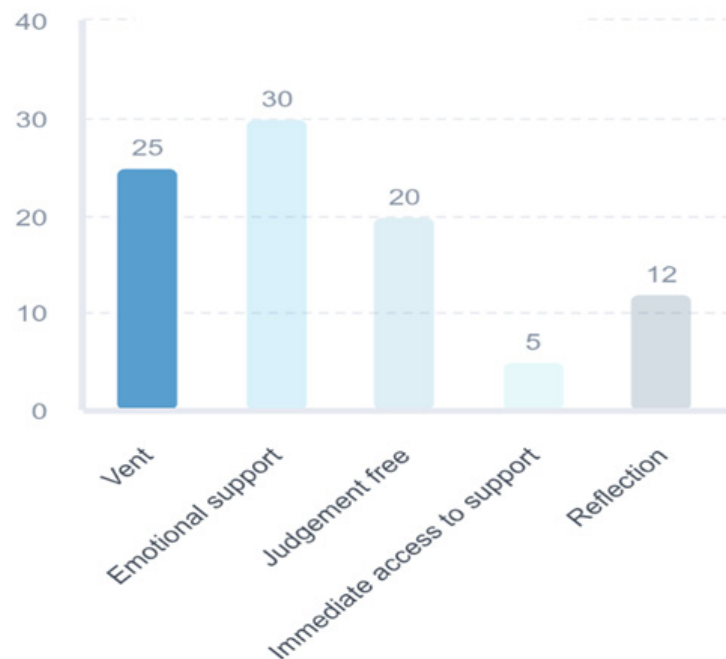


Figure 2. The frequency of why AI utilized

adjust tone, and articulate experiences more clearly gave many users a sense of agency, which in turn helped the AI generate more useful feedback. Overall, these discussions showed that a broad group of individuals uses AI as a low-barrier and readily available tool for organizing emotions, gaining perspective, and navigating daily psychological stressors. These observations are consistent with emerging research describing users' experiences with generative AI for emotional and mental health support (13,14).

Comparisons between AI-based support and traditional therapy

A secondary theme that emerged was users' comparison of AI-based support with traditional therapy. Many users described a perceived duality between the two, noting that AI offered a uniquely nonjudgmental and seemingly unbiased environment that some felt was difficult to access in human-led therapeutic settings. Several users reported experiencing emotional breakthroughs with AI that they had not achieved in traditional sessions, attributing this to the comfort of anonymity, the absence of perceived judgment, and the ability to address problems immediately without spending multiple sessions building rapport with a therapist. Some users also noted that the scheduled nature of traditional therapy sessions can make it difficult to address the core issue in a single appointment, whereas AI allows users to discuss concerns immediately.

One participant, for example, shared that after "hitting rock bottom" and losing relationships, they wrote detailed prompts about their situation and received an in-depth analysis that helped them reflect on and reframe destructive thought patterns. They described the experience as learning to confront challenges more directly, with greater clarity and courage.

Some users also valued AI's flexibility, noting that it could adopt different therapeutic or communication styles depending on the prompts. Another user shared that their therapist uses an AI chatbot called Opal, which relays the user's conversations back to the therapist. This allows the therapist to better understand the user's concerns and helps the user process experiences between sessions.

While AI-based support systems cannot replace the depth and nuance of a real therapeutic relationship, users described them as potentially valuable tools that may bridge gaps between sessions and support emotional processing. These observations are consistent with research suggesting that conversational agents can provide accessible mental health support while also requiring appropriate safeguards and human oversight (9,10).

At the same time, many participants acknowledged limitations. Several commenters emphasized that AI is not a replacement for human connection and that therapy still requires experienced clinicians who can provide professional insight, nuance, and emotional presence. Others highlighted the emotional difficulty

and exhaustion of repeatedly searching for the right therapist—particularly when sharing traumatic experiences—which can take a significant toll and ultimately deter individuals from seeking help.

Participants noted that AI can serve as an immediate, low-pressure resource when someone is emotionally overwhelmed or unable to access support. Users also cautioned that AI's value depends heavily on an individual's capacity for critical thinking and ability to distinguish helpful guidance from generalized or inaccurate responses. Many viewed AI not as a stand-alone solution but as a sounding board, a tool for exploration, or a temporary supplement to traditional care. Despite differing views, participants generally recognized that while AI-supported interaction is not suitable for everyone, it may provide meaningful support for individuals who find it useful.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the nuanced ways individuals use AI-based tools such as ChatGPT for emotional support, self-reflection, and daily coping. Users described AI as accessible, immediate, and nonjudgmental, allowing them to process experiences more openly than they might in traditional therapeutic settings. For many, AI served as a supplemental resource that helped them articulate emotions, identify patterns in their thinking, and gain clarity during moments of distress. These findings are consistent with emerging literature suggesting that conversational AI can provide accessible mental health support and may reduce barriers to engaging with digital psychological interventions (2,9,13,14).

At the same time, a consistent theme across users' narratives was that AI was not perceived as a complete substitute for human mental healthcare. Rather, participants viewed it as a convenient tool that could enhance—but not replace—the relational, empathetic, and deeply interpersonal aspects of therapy.

Beyond its role as a self-help or therapeutic resource, the findings reveal a more complex phenomenon: the emergence of emotional attachment and companionship between users and AI systems. Many participants described forming meaningful connections with AI, viewing these systems as companions capable of providing comfort, validation, and a sense of connection during periods of loneliness or emotional distress. This trend reflects broader societal changes in which relationships and emotional support are increasingly mediated through digital technologies (1,3).

Globally, AI companionship is emerging as a significant social phenomenon, particularly among younger populations experiencing loneliness, social isolation, and changing expectations regarding relationships. Recent reporting from China has described the growing popularity of AI-powered companions, including AI boyfriends designed to simulate emotionally intimate relationships (15). One widely reported example involves Melissa, a Beijing-based human resources manager who described feeling as though she was genuinely in a relationship with an AI companion associated with Xiaoice, a conversational AI platform. Although she recognized that the relationship was not equivalent to a human relationship, she described the companionship as emotionally reassuring (15).

Such accounts suggest that AI companionship is not merely a technological novelty but may represent a broader cultural response to unmet emotional and social needs. Academic discussions of AI companionship similarly highlight the possibility that AI systems can provide a form of digitally mediated recognition while simultaneously raising questions about whether such interactions fulfill or replace meaningful human relationships (1).

The growing popularity of AI companions raises important questions about the future of interpersonal relationships and mental health support. While these technologies may provide temporary relief from loneliness, they also offer highly personalized, predictable, and emotionally responsive interactions that differ substantially from human relationships, which require vulnerability, compromise, reciprocity, and negotiation. Existing research on AI companionship and digital loneliness suggests that the social meaning of these interactions cannot be reduced simply to whether they are beneficial or harmful; their effects may depend on users' characteristics, patterns of use, and existing social relationships (1).

The findings of this study support this perspective, as participants frequently emphasized the appeal of AI systems that are constantly available, responsive, and free from many of the complexities associated with human interaction. Consequently, AI companionship may be understood not only as a technological development but also as a reflection of broader social trends involving loneliness, changing social connectedness, and dissatisfaction with traditional forms of support (1,3).

Importantly, participants in this study did not generally view AI as a replacement for professional mental healthcare. Rather, they described AI as a supplemental resource that could assist with emotional processing, journaling, self-reflection, and problem clarification. This distinction is consistent with

emerging clinical literature suggesting that AI-based conversational systems may function as adjunctive tools rather than standalone therapeutic interventions (2,9,14).

While users appreciated the convenience and immediacy of AI interactions, many acknowledged that AI systems lack the empathy, lived experience, clinical judgment, and relational depth associated with human therapists. These findings support the growing view that AI may be most appropriately integrated into existing mental health frameworks rather than positioned as a replacement for professional care (10,11).

However, these findings must be interpreted within the limitations inherent in analyzing publicly accessible online forums. The study draws from posts written by self-selecting individuals who are comfortable sharing their mental health experiences on social media platforms such as Reddit and Facebook. As such, the perspectives represented may not reflect the broader population of AI users or individuals with mental health conditions. Additionally, posts lack contextual detail, diagnostic verification, and follow-up, making it difficult to fully understand long-term impacts. The anonymity of online spaces also complicates the ability to confirm authenticity, evaluate demographic information, and assess psychosocial factors that shape users' experiences.

Despite these limitations, online discussions provide meaningful insight into emerging patterns of AI-based emotional support and users' perceptions of its value.

Beyond methodological limitations, the use of AI for mental health raises serious ethical concerns, particularly around data privacy and regulatory oversight. Many users openly share sensitive psychological information with AI systems without fully understanding how their data may be stored, analyzed, or reused. Importantly, HIPAA protections do not automatically apply to all consumer applications or technology companies. Under U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidance, HIPAA generally applies to covered entities and business associates, meaning that information entered into consumer applications outside those relationships may not receive HIPAA protection(16).

This creates potential risks related to privacy, third-party access, secondary data use, and data governance.

The literature therefore highlights the need for transparency, accountability, privacy protections, and stronger governance frameworks in digital mental health technologies (10,11,16).

Notably, the study's findings align with emerging concerns in academic literature—particularly recent work from Stanford University—which cautions against relying on AI as a standalone therapeutic tool. Stanford researchers reported that AI therapy chatbots may lack the safety, empathy, and situational awareness required for mental healthcare (17). Their research identified concerning biases toward individuals with conditions such as alcohol dependence and schizophrenia and reported failures in responding appropriately to certain mental health scenarios (17,18).

These findings underscore the limitations of AI systems in interpreting complex human emotion, assessing clinical risk, and responding with appropriate therapeutic judgment. Conversational AI systems may produce responses that appear empathetic or authoritative while lacking the clinical reasoning and accountability of trained professionals (10,17).

The Stanford research reinforces a critical distinction articulated by users in this study: while AI may be helpful for reflection, journaling, emotional processing, or gaining quick emotional clarity, it does not possess the relational depth, clinical training, ethical responsibility, or professional accountability required for mental healthcare (17,18).

AI may nevertheless support mental healthcare through functions such as administrative assistance, appointment scheduling, information navigation, therapist training simulations, documentation, and supplemental emotional support. The appropriate role of AI therefore may be one of augmentation rather than replacement (11,19).

Taken together, this study suggests that the most effective model for mental health support may be a hybrid approach that integrates AI tools with traditional therapy rather than treating them as competing alternatives. Users valued AI for its immediacy, convenience, accessibility, and nonjudgmental interaction, but also acknowledged that trained professionals provide empathy, accountability, clinical judgment, and human connection necessary for comprehensive treatment.

Pairing AI-assisted reflection with therapeutic guidance may help alleviate some pressures on the mental health system—particularly in settings where access to care is limited—while ensuring that safety, personalization, and ethical oversight remain anchored in human expertise.

Ultimately, while AI offers meaningful benefits as a supportive resource, it should be understood as one component of a broader mental health ecosystem. Its responsible use will require collaboration among developers, clinicians, researchers, policymakers, and users to ensure that technology enhances access to care without replacing the human relationships that remain fundamental to psychological well-being. As AI companionship continues to expand globally, future research should examine the long-term psychological, social, and relational consequences of these interactions to better understand both their benefits and potential risks.

Conclusion

The rise of AI for personal comfort and the development of increasingly intimate relationships with AI reflect a broader shift in how people seek connection, support, and emotional safety in an increasingly digital world. Unlike previous generations, who relied primarily on family, community networks, and in-person interactions, an increasing number of individuals now navigate social isolation, time scarcity, and anxiety surrounding interpersonal conflict through digitally mediated interactions.

AI companions offer an appealing alternative through their ease of availability and emotionally consistent, responsive, and nonjudgmental interactions, while requiring little or no reciprocal effort. For individuals overwhelmed by the complexities of human relationships, AI can provide a controlled and predictable form of interaction that may feel easier and safer than traditional social engagement. However, this convenience may come with an important tradeoff: AI-mediated companionship cannot fully reproduce the reciprocity, vulnerability, empathy, and shared experience inherent in human relationships.

This shift highlights deeper societal issues, including loneliness, changing community ties, and growing comfort with digital intimacy. While AI may support emotional well-being in the short term, excessive reliance on AI could potentially reduce opportunities for human interaction and reinforce social withdrawal. These possibilities warrant further empirical investigation rather than assumptions that AI companionship is inherently beneficial or harmful.

With the continued integration of AI into everyday life, it is crucial to balance its potential benefits with careful attention to its long-term psychological, social, ethical, and relational consequences.

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