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AI as a Friend? – The Evolution of Digital Companionship in the Youth Landscape

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Preview:

With the continual evolution of technology, it is a growing concern that many lonely young people are using Artificial Intelligence (AI) Companion Apps to create what they perceive to be the perfect friend or confidant, which can blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

Article:

Introduction

With the continual evolution of technology, it is growing concern that many lonely young people are using Artificial Intelligence (AI) companion apps to create what they perceive to be the perfect friend or confidant. Unfortunately, in many cases, these online interactions have blurred the lines between fantasy and reality. This article explores this rapidly evolving landscape.

Key Terms

Bot – An autonomous program on the internet or another network that can quickly interact with systems or users. Bots can do a variety of different tasks, such as tracking your preferences.

Chatbot – A chatbot, originally known as a chatterbot, is a software application, using AI that is designed to simulate a conversation with human users, typically through text or voice interactions. A commercial example of this would be when one is conversing with an engaging chatbot customer service representative rather than a real person—some people can't even tell the difference.

AI Companion Apps – An AI companion app is a type of artificial intelligence application designed to simulate conversation, companionship and interaction, with a human user, in a way that feels natural, friendly and supportive.

Unlike humans, AI Companions are programmed to be highly engaging. Some of these apps allow the customization of appearance, voice and personality, making the interaction feel more personal and real. The key characteristics include when the programmed "person" in the chat:

- Has constant, 24/7 availability

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- Never gets annoyed; is endlessly patient
- Is nonjudgmental, constantly agreeing with the human user
- Will offer "over simplified" or misleading advice
- Portrays themselves as loyal, and thus unlike the user's other human friends

The Scope of the Trend

AI is no longer just a tool for doing homework. It has become an everyday, conversational companion for young people. Popular apps like Character.ai and Replika, as well as general platforms like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude, have millions of users and are deeply integrated into the social lives of youth.

Unfortunately, many caring adults don't realize that unlike better-known AI tools like ChatGPT, AI Companions have been designed by their developers to "prioritize acting like virtual friends."

As CNN recently reported, "The majority of teenagers—72%—have used AI companions, according to the survey of over 1,000 13 to 17-year-olds conducted this year by Common Sense Media… Over half of the teens use them regularly, according to the research, and one-third turn to them for relationships and social interactions."[1]

NPR also recently reported that "1 in 5 surveyed high schoolers has had a romantic AI Companion relationship and 42% of students surveyed say that they or someone they know have used AI for companionship."[2]

Identified Risks for Youth

Social and Emotional Impact

While providing temporary relief from loneliness, AI Companions may foster an over-reliance on artificial intimacy. This can be a problem because children and teens will actively pursue and engage in a variety of interests, emotions and experiences as they develop. Additionally, adolescence is inherently filled with social anxiety, fear of judgment, turbulent peer pressure and AI companions can offer a striking alternative.

There have been many cases where chatbots and other AI tools have encouraged people to have eating disorders, and even to attempt suicide. A concerning issue is that chatbots and AI tools are not totally "controllable" despite programmed countermeasures to prevent this type of "behavior."

Using AI as a companion can lead to increased social isolation from family and genuine friends. Furthermore, it can establish unrealistic expectations for human relationships, which naturally require compromise and conflict resolution that AI companion apps

[1] CNN, https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/16/health/teens-ai-companion-wellness
[2] NPR, https://www.npr.org/2025/10/08/nx-s1-5561981/ai-students-schools-teachers

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cannot provide.

Guidance and Information Quality

AI companions lack genuine human judgment and situational empathy. They may offer oversimplified or flawed perspectives on sensitive topics such as:

- Self-esteem and body image
- Mental health challenges
- Peer pressure and bullying
- Substance use and health-related behaviors

Exposure to Unsuitable Content

Despite safety filters, these platforms may generate responses across various themes that are not suitable for minors, including violent or age-inappropriate sexual material. Ongoing exposure to these highly sexualized conversations can undermine a young person's understanding of a safe interaction, particularly with unknown adults. This can make it easier for child abusers to groom and then sexually abuse them both in person or through online exploitation.

Age Verification Vulnerabilities

Companion Apps' safety measures can easily be subverted if a young person provides a false birth date or utilizes alternative email accounts to bypass restrictions. Research has shown that children subvert these types of controls frequently, often with parental knowledge and permission.

Integration into Daily Life

According to reports, future AI Companions will move past simple "reactive" text or voice-based conversations into very personalized exchanges. A number of AI Companion models already remember a user's personal history, preferences, and their different emotional states over long periods of time. The platforms then allow the AI Companion App to seamlessly integrate itself into all aspects of a young person's daily routines.

Warning Signs of AI Companion Isolation for Young People

AI Companion Isolation is characterized as a psychological and social phenomenon where an individual's emotional, social, or romantic reliance on an AI companion leads to their withdrawal from real-life human relationships.[3] Early identification of AI Companion Isolation allows parents, caring adults and educators to intervene before a

[3] https://www.apa.org/monitor/2026/01-02/trends-digital-ai-relationships-emotional-connection

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deep emotional dependence develops. If this is suspected, one should look for specific behavioral, social and emotional changes in young people.

Behavioral Shifts

- Device hiding: Shielding screens or closing chat windows quickly when someone enters the room.
- Secretive talking: Speaking to a device in whispers or in a locked room, or late at night.

Social Withdrawal

- Friend displacement: Dropping long-term friends in favor of spending time alone with a device.
- Activity abandonment: Quitting sports, clubs, or hobbies that they previously enjoyed.
- Social skill decline: Showing increased awkwardness or impatience during brief human interactions.

Emotional Indicators

- One-sided venting: Expressing frustration that real people "don't understand" them like the Companion does.
- False attachment: Referring to the AI as a best friend, romantic partner, or primary confidant.

Actionable Resources for Adults

- **American Psychological Association (APA)**: *APA Parental Guidance for Parents on AI Chatbots*[4]. This resource emphasizes asking exploratory questions, setting collaborative rules, and identifying signs where technology may be replacing human connections.

- **Internet Matters**: The *AI Chatbots and Virtual Friends Guide*[5] provides instructions on checking age ratings, discussing data privacy, and exploring these tools alongside children.

Conclusion

To effectively protect children, parents, caring adults and educators must first recognize that AI companion apps are purely "unfeeling algorithms." Grounded in this understanding and by sharing this concept with young people, adults can implement proactive interventions to foster healthy and safe digital habits.

[4] The *APA Guidance for Parents on AI Chatbots*, The%20APA%20Guidance%20for%20Parents%20on%20AI%20Chatbots
[5] https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/ai-chatbots-and-virtual-friends-how-parents-can-keep-children-safe/

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Adult involvement must include: Open communication, exploring AI Companion Apps together with a young person, jointly setting clear boundaries for AI Companion Apps use and then actively monitoring those interactions.

By understanding the potential dangers and implementing proactive measures, parents, caring adults and educators can help children navigate the ever-changing world of AI Companions safely and responsibly.

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