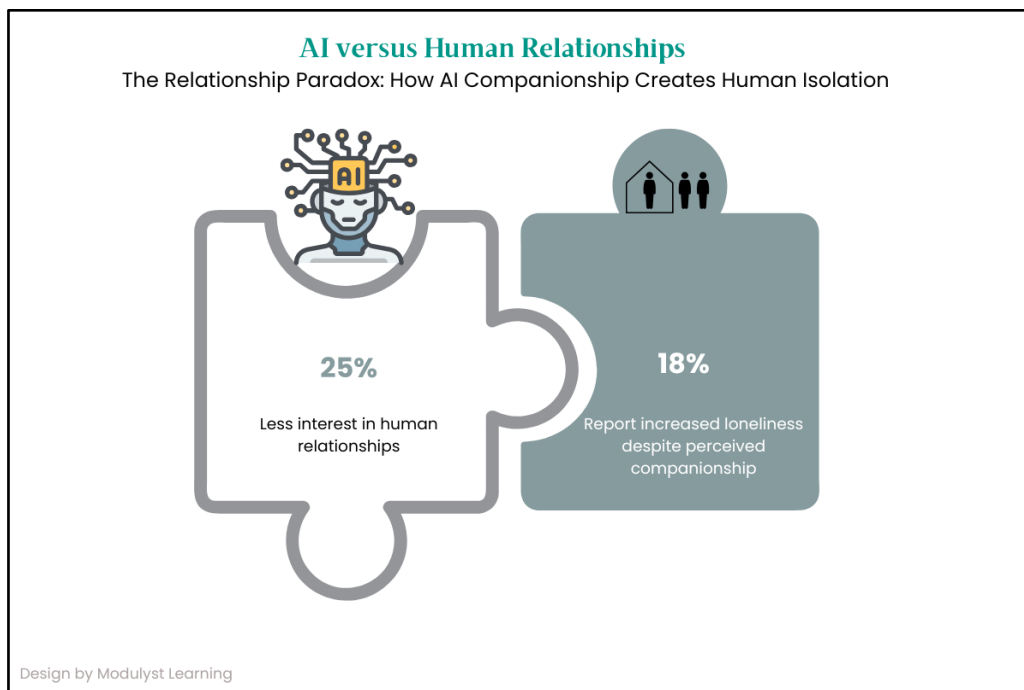


HARMFUL FRIENDS WITHOUT BENEFITS

More and more people have established emotional relationships with artificial intelligence (AI)-powered characters. These characters are constructed to validate users without disagreement, providing emotional and intimate support within seconds. Users perceive sophisticated chatbots as friendly and accepting peers constantly available to provide validation, praise, and companionship. The result may be an attachment to an artificial, non-empathetic agent whose reactions mostly reflect the user's emotions but are out of the user's control. Since unsatisfied social needs are often the underlying motive for engaging with AI-powered characters, socially vulnerable people are more likely to use these products, which hinder personal growth and can lead to vicious cycles of deteriorating social isolation and poor mental well-being.

AI-powered characters are used as friends and romantic partners in video games (some downloaded more than 10 million times, and others have more than 660 million users). These games can produce unrealistic expectations about relationships with flawless partners and may lead to the rejection of imperfect human relationships.



As people invest considerable time and energy into their seemingly perfect relationships with AI-powered characters, imperfect human relationships can be neglected or even rejected. Twenty-five percent of people who regularly interact with these characters report less interest in forming human relationships. It not only erodes people's ability to

nurture relationships but also leads to feelings of detachment and alienation from the human community, with 18 percent of frequent users of these features reporting increased loneliness and isolation, even though they perceive a sense of companionship.

As apps with AI-powered characters come and go from the market, and with the uncertainty of electricity or device availability, it is alarming that users report potential mental well-being deterioration if certain apps were to disappear. Experts also see a significant potential for addiction; indeed, 32 percent of frequent users show symptoms consistent with behavioural addiction. The most important contributor to addiction is the experience of conversational flow and attachment, which is generated by AI's perceived intelligence, interactivity, personalization, and human-like responses.

There has already been at least one reported teenage suicide related to a synthetic relationship. The AI-powered character indirectly supported the idea of pulling the gun trigger. This sad example highlights the danger of emotional bubbles — the false impression that personal emotions are externally validated, one of the core differences from human relationships. It also illustrates the alignment problem. This underscores the urgent need for regulation protecting users from false expectations, such as repeated warnings and reminders that users interact with nonhuman entities. Age restrictions should apply, given the increased vulnerability of younger people.

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Source: Human Development Report 2025 (UNDP)