

Romanticizing AI: A Study on AI As an Emotional Comforter for Gen Z

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Abstract- This study explores Gen Z's emotional engagement with AI chatbots, examining (1) how Gen Z perceives romantic relationships with AI and whether these are seen as emotional support, (2) whether such engagement affects real-life relationships, and (3) the potential risks of emotional dependence on AI. A survey of 152 Gen Z respondents combined with qualitative analysis was used to assess their experiences and emotional reactions. The findings indicate that while AI chatbots may offer temporary emotional relief, most respondents do not consider them emotionally understanding or a substitute for human relationships, though excessive reliance on AI could, over time, affect personal and social relationships.

Keywords: *AI, Romanticising AI, Emotion, Attachment, Gen Z*

I. INTRODUCTION

Technological advances — especially AI chatbots — have created new forms of emotionally driven human–AI interaction (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Gen Z, as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), increasingly forms emotional attachments to AI, a trend termed “romanticising AI,” driven by AI’s non-judgmental nature, round-the-clock availability, and the high degree of control users have over conversations — unlike human relationships, which require mutual understanding and compromise.

While AI can support those facing social anxiety (Turkle, 2011), excessive reliance may weaken real-world social ties and skills (Turkle, 2015) and create unrealistic relational expectations, since AI is designed to imitate rather than experience empathy (Russell & Norvig, 2021).

Such bonds resemble parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), creating particular tension in India, where Gen Z navigates between traditional family and social values and an individuality-focused digital

lifestyle. This interdisciplinary study — spanning psychology, sociology, and technology — examines Gen Z’s emotional engagement with AI chatbots and its effects on interpersonal relationships, aiming to understand how technology can supplement rather than replace genuine human connection (Maslow, 1943).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prior research shows AI companions (e.g., Replika, Character AI) fulfil psychological needs for security, companionship, and predictability, while raising concerns about dependency, gender stereotypes, and the commercialisation of intimacy (Khairi et al., 2024). Studies of human-like AI chatbots find that users increasingly perceive them as emotionally responsive, prompting calls for users to remain aware they are interacting with AI rather than people, given the risk of emotional confusion and dependence (De Freitas & Cohen, 2024).

Systematic reviews report that AI companions can reduce loneliness and provide validation, particularly for socially anxious users, but may also foster emotional dependency and unrealistic relational expectations (Chen & Hartanto, 2023).

Research on synthetic relationships similarly finds temporary loneliness reduction alongside risks of psychological dependence for emotionally vulnerable users, while ethical analyses of Replika highlight privacy concerns and design features that encourage prolonged engagement (Ventura et al., 2024; Cirielli & Hannon, 2024).

Users of social chatbots often treat them as companions for sharing thoughts and problems, though heavy use correlates with lower well-being and reduced social engagement, especially among

those with smaller social networks (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022).

2.1 Research Gap

Most existing research originates from Western contexts and focuses on heavy users of dedicated AI companions (e.g., Replika), leaving the experiences of general-purpose chatbot users in collectivist societies such as India underexplored — particularly regarding “romanticising AI” and its effects on real-life romantic expectations. This study addresses that gap by examining how Gen Z in India perceives and emotionally engages with AI chatbots across three dimensions: romantic perception, influence on real-life relationships, and risk of emotional dependency.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study draws on six frameworks: Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), explaining users' motivations for seeking AI companionship; Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), linking media reliance to behavioural effects; Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978), applied to emotional security-seeking with AI;

Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), explaining the sense of closeness in human-like AI interaction; Technological Determinism (McLuhan, 1964), on how AI may reshape notions of intimacy; and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), explaining one-sided emotional bonds with AI despite users' awareness that interactions are programmed.

III. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, descriptive-analytical design was used, with primary data collected via an online Google Forms survey comprising demographic and Likert-scale/multiple-choice attitude items, chosen for its cost-effectiveness and suitability for reaching digitally active youth.

A pilot study confirmed the questionnaire's clarity and reliability before minor revisions were made. Using non-probability convenience sampling, 152 respondents (male and female, aged 18–30) from varied educational and social backgrounds were

surveyed; data were used solely for academic purposes, with participant identity protected throughout. The research objectives were:

- To examine how Gen Z perceives romanticised relationships with AI chatbots for emotional comfort.
- To investigate whether AI chatbots have started influencing real-life relationships.
- To evaluate potential risks of emotional dependence on AI chatbots.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Profile

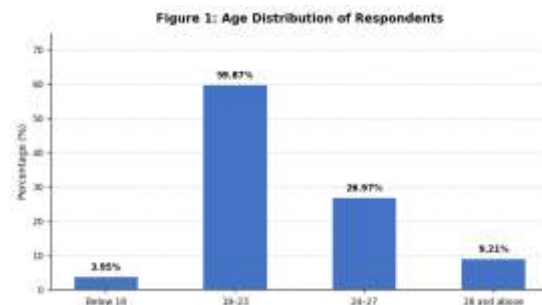


Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

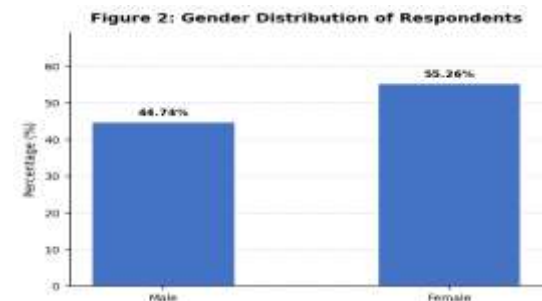


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

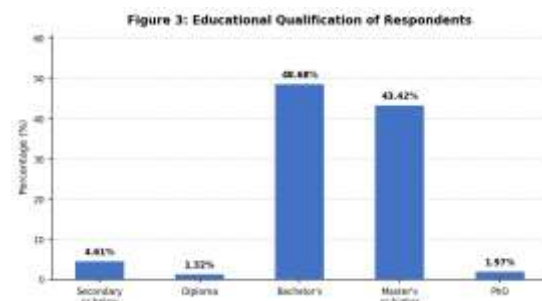


Figure 3: Educational Qualification

The sample (N=152) was predominantly aged 19–23 (59.87%, n=91), followed by 24–27 (26.97%, n=41), 28+ (9.21%, n=14), and under 18 (3.95%, n=6) (Figure 1). Female respondents formed 55.26% (n=84) and male 44.74% (n=68) (Figure 2). Most held a Bachelor's degree (48.68%, n=74) or a Master's degree or higher (43.42%, n=66), with smaller shares holding secondary education or below (4.61%, n=7), Diplomas (1.32%, n=2), or PhDs (1.97%, n=3) (Figure 3).

4.2 AI Chatbot Usage Patterns

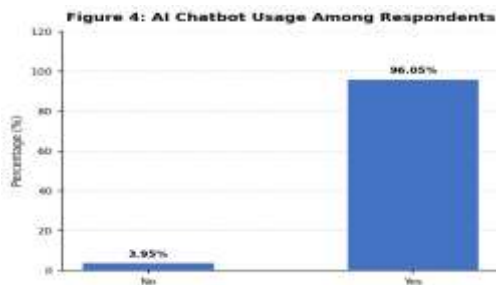


Figure 4: AI Chatbot Usage Among Respondents



Figure 5: Most Familiar AI Platform Used

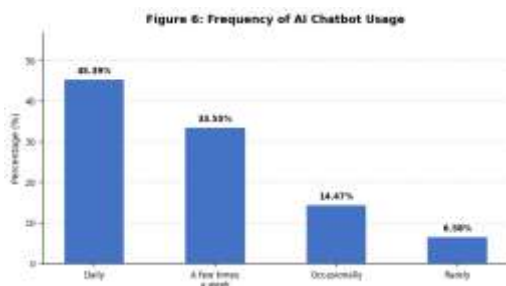


Figure 6: Frequency of AI Chatbot Usage

Almost all respondents (96.05%, n=146) had used an AI chatbot (Figure 4), with ChatGPT dominating at 72.37% (n=110), followed by Gemini (18.42%, n=28), Claude (5.92%, n=9), Perplexity (1.97%, n=3), and Copilot/Grok (0.66% each) (Figure 5).

Usage was frequent: 45.39% (n=69) used chatbots daily and 33.55% (n=51) a few times a week, while only 6.58% (n=10) used them rarely (Figure 6) — confirming AI chatbots' deep integration into Gen Z's digital routines.

4.3 Emotional and Romantic Perceptions of AI

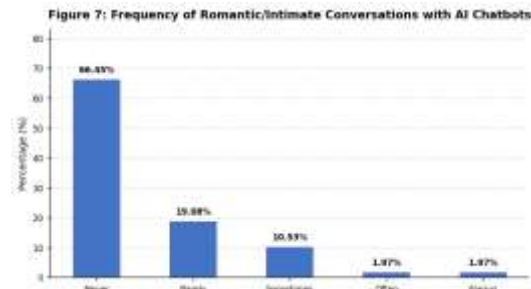


Figure 7: Frequency of Romantic/Intimate Conversations

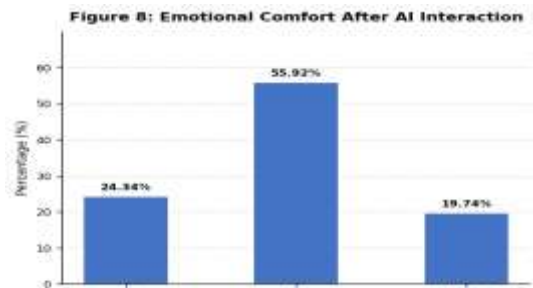


Figure 8: Emotional Comfort After AI Interaction

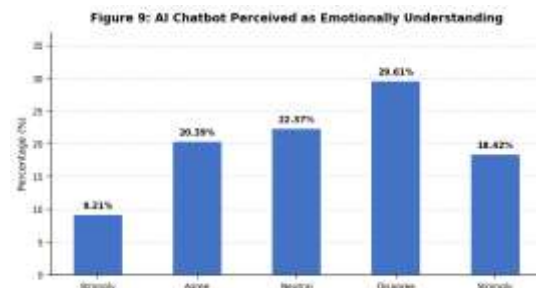


Figure 9: AI Perceived as Emotionally Understanding



Figure 10: Sharing Personal Feelings with AI

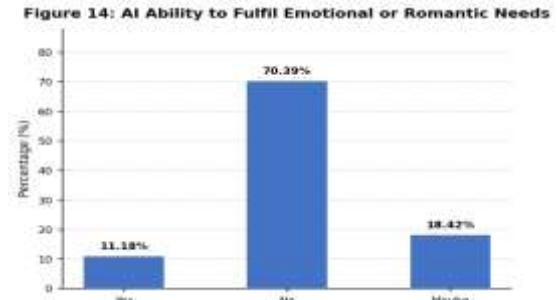


Figure 14: AI Ability to Fulfil Emotional/Romantic Needs

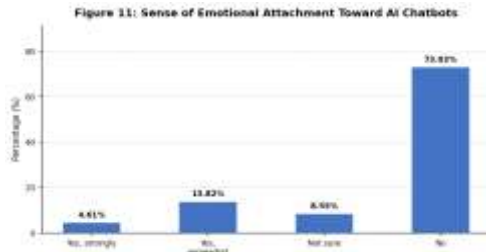


Figure 11: Emotional Attachment Toward AI

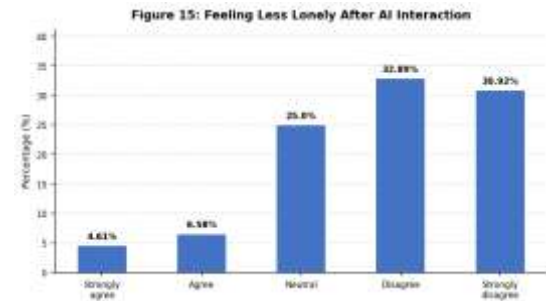


Figure 15: Feeling Less Lonely After AI Interaction

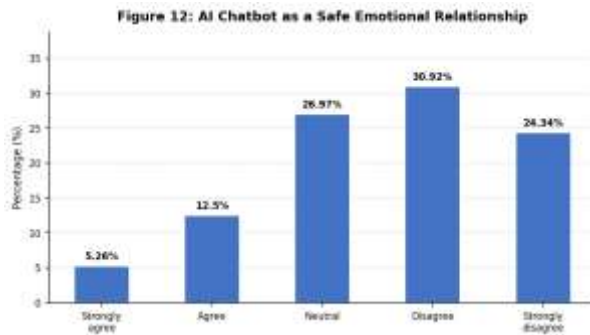


Figure 12: AI as a Safe Emotional Relationship

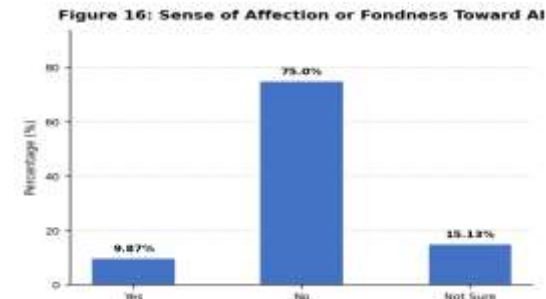


Figure 16: Sense of Affection or Fondness Toward AI

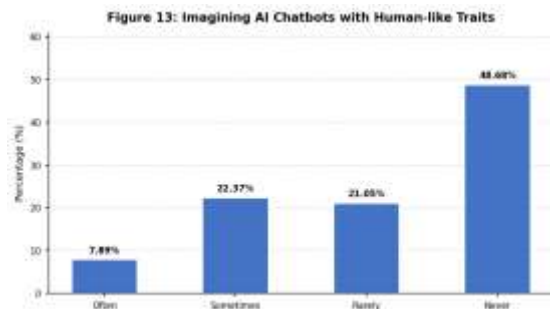


Figure 13: Imagining AI with Human-like Traits

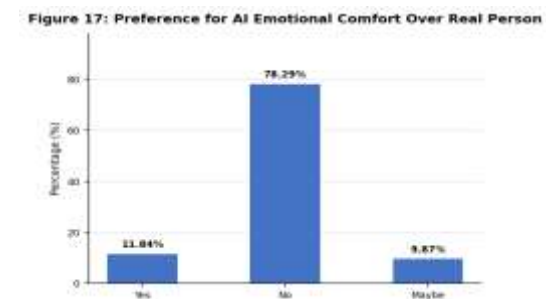


Figure 17: Preference for AI Over Real Person (Comfort)

Most respondents reported limited romantic or emotional engagement with AI: 66.45% (n=101) never had romantic or intimate conversations with

chatbots (Figure 7), 55.92% (n=85) felt no emotional comfort after interacting with AI (Figure 8), and 73.03% (n=111) reported no emotional attachment to any chatbot (Figure 11). Similarly, 64.47% (n=98) had never shared personal feelings with AI that they would not share with others (Figure 10), and 75.00% (n=114) had never felt love or friendship toward a chatbot (Figure 16).

Scepticism extended to AI's emotional capabilities: only 29.61% felt AI truly understood them (Figure 9), 55.26% disagreed that AI interactions felt like safe emotional relationships (Figure 12), and 70.39% (n=107) did not believe AI could fulfil emotional or romantic needs (Figure 14). Nearly half (48.68%, n=74) had never imagined chatbots as having human-like emotions (Figure 13), and 63.81% disagreed or strongly disagreed that AI made them feel less lonely (Figure 15). Overall, 78.29% (n=119) preferred emotional comfort from a real person over an AI chatbot (Figure 17).

4.4 AI Influence on Real-Life Relationships

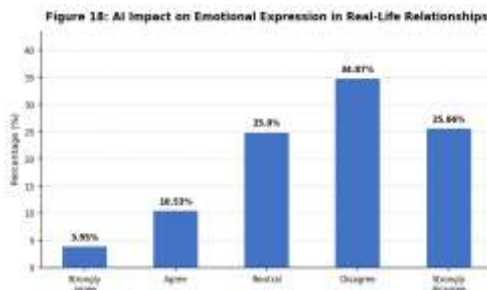


Figure 18: AI Impact on Emotional Expression

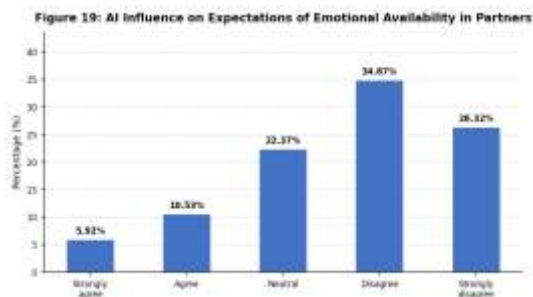


Figure 19: AI Influence on Partner Availability Expectations

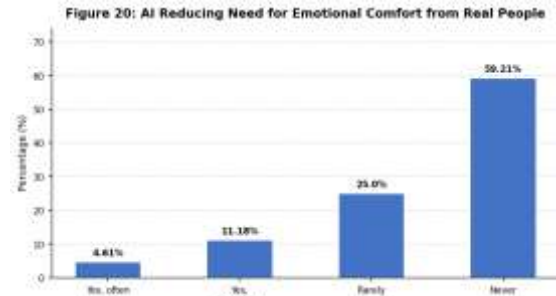


Figure 20: AI Reducing Need for Human Comfort

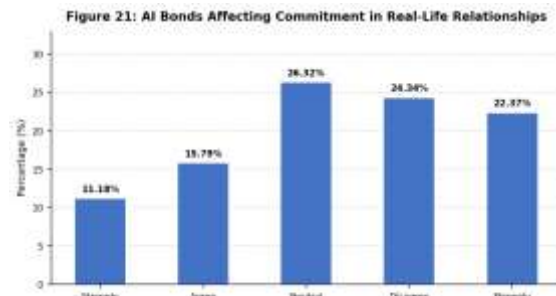


Figure 21: AI Bonds Affecting Commitment

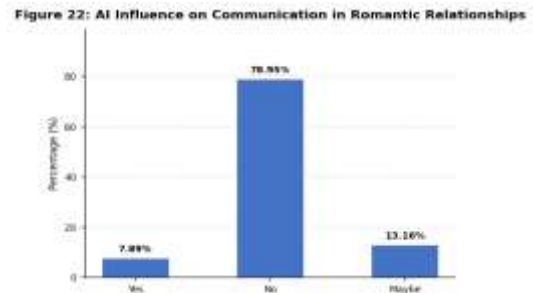


Figure 22: AI Influence on Romantic Communication

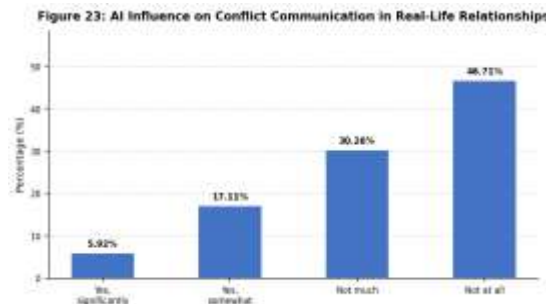


Figure 23: AI Influence on Conflict Communication

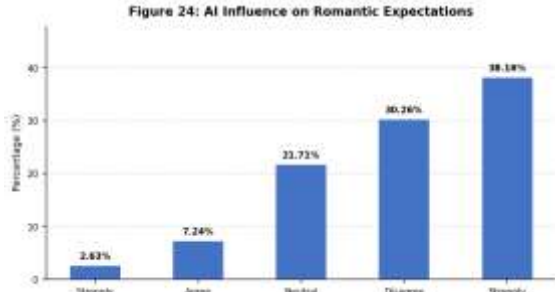


Figure 24: AI Influence on Romantic Expectations

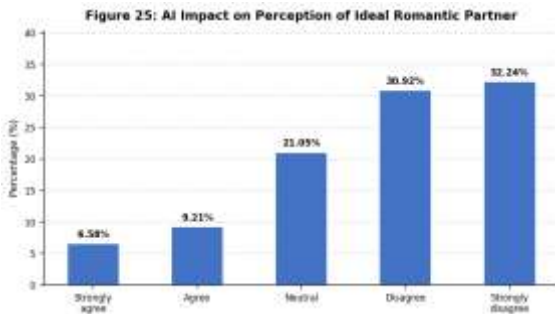


Figure 25: AI Impact on Ideal Romantic Partner

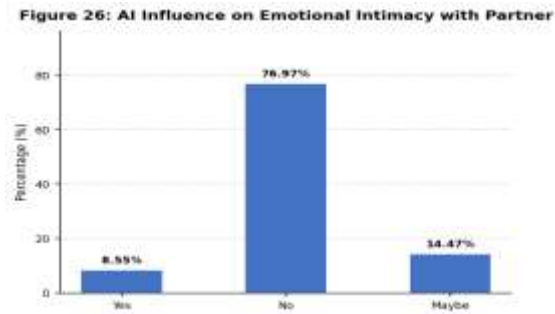


Figure 26: AI Influence on Emotional Intimacy

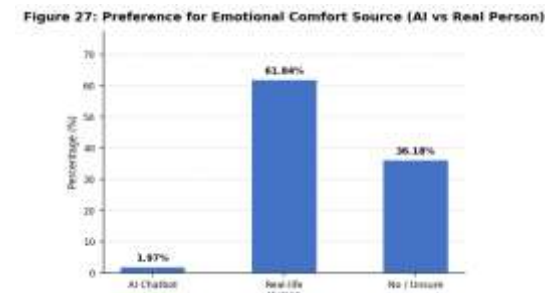


Figure 27: Preference for Emotional Comfort Source

AI chatbot use showed minimal influence on real-life romantic relationships across all measured dimensions. Most respondents disagreed that AI had changed how they express emotions (60.53%

combined disagree/strongly disagree, Figure 18) or influenced their expectations of a partner's emotional availability (61.19%, Figure 19).

The majority (59.21%) said AI had never reduced their need for human emotional comfort (Figure 20), though responses on whether AI bonds affect relationship commitment were more mixed, with 'neutral' (26.32%) the most common response (Figure 21).

Most respondents reported AI had not influenced communication (78.95%, Figure 22) or conflict communication (76.97% combined 'not at all'/'not much', Figure 23) in romantic relationships, nor changed romantic expectations (68.42% disagree/strongly disagree, Figure 24), perceptions of an ideal partner (63.16%, Figure 25), or emotional intimacy with a partner (76.97%, Figure 26). When choosing a source of emotional comfort, 61.84% preferred a real person over AI (1.97%) (Figure 27).

4.5 Emotional Dependency and Risk Assessment

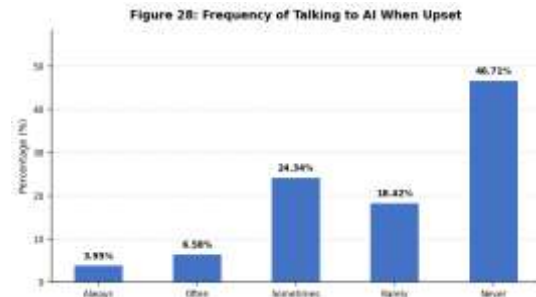


Figure 28: Frequency of Talking to AI When Upset

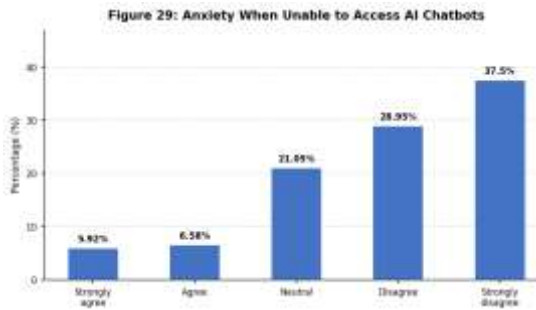


Figure 29: Anxiety When Unable to Access AI

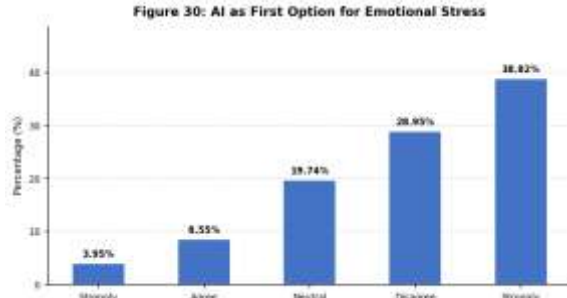


Figure 30: AI as First Option for Emotional Stress

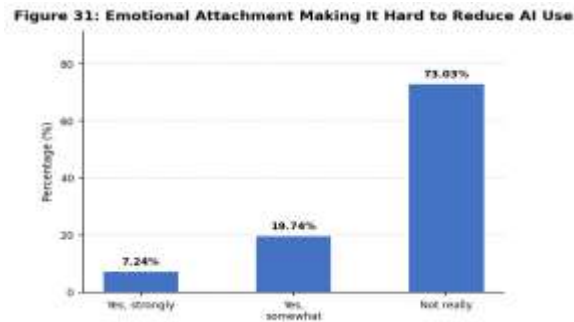


Figure 31: Attachment Making It Hard to Reduce AI Use

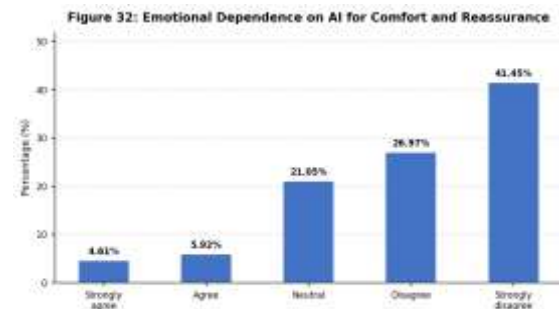


Figure 32: Emotional Dependence on AI for Comfort Indicators of problematic AI dependence were low overall. While 24.34% (n=31) sometimes turned to AI when upset, 46.71% (n=59) never did (Figure 28). Most respondents reported no anxiety when unable to access AI (66.45% disagree/strongly disagree, Figure 29) and did not use AI as a first response to emotional stress (67.77%, Figure 30). Emotional attachment rarely made it hard to reduce AI use (73.03% said ‘not really’, Figure 31), and 68.42% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt emotionally dependent on AI for comfort and reassurance (Figure 32).

4.6 Qualitative Insights

Open-ended responses reinforced the quantitative findings: most participants valued authentic human relationships above AI and felt that excessive AI reliance could harm real relationships and foster social isolation, though a subset found AI useful for reducing loneliness and stress as a supplement — not a replacement — for human connection. Across responses, real human contact was overwhelmingly preferred for romantic conversation.

4.7 Major Findings

- 96.05% of respondents had used an AI chatbot; ChatGPT was the most popular (72.37%), and 45.39% used chatbots daily.
- 66.45% never had romantic or intimate conversations with AI, and 73.03% reported no emotional attachment to AI chatbots.
- 55.92% felt no emotional comfort from AI, and only 11.18% believed AI could fulfil emotional or romantic needs.
- 75.00% never felt love or friendship toward an AI chatbot, and 78.29% preferred human emotional comfort over AI.
- Between 60% and 79% of respondents saw no AI influence on emotional expression, romantic expectations, communication, or intimacy in real relationships.
- Emotional dependency on AI remained very low, with 41.45% strongly disagreeing that they depend on AI for comfort and reassurance.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined how AI chatbots shape Gen Z's emotional and relational lives. AI tools are now nearly universal among Gen Z (96% usage, with nearly half using them daily), but are used primarily for information, productivity, and entertainment rather than emotional support.

Most participants treat AI as a tool rather than an emotional substitute, valuing human relationships as their primary source of emotional satisfaction — though a notable subset finds AI a useful, therapist-like supplement for stress relief, while still recognising that excessive attachment could harm real relationships and create unrealistic expectations.

Limitations: These findings are limited by the convenience sample (n=152), the quantitative-only design (which may understate emotional nuance), potential social desirability bias on sensitive questions, and the rapidly evolving nature of AI technology.

Implications: As AI systems increasingly simulate emotional connection, developers should prioritise user emotional safety and well-being, while society should continue strengthening genuine interpersonal communication skills — with AI potentially serving as a carefully managed complement to, rather than a replacement for, mental health support.

Future Research: Future studies should employ larger, more diverse samples, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, and longitudinal, cross-platform comparisons (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Replika), incorporating variables such as gender, relationship status, and psychological well-being.

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