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Beyond the Lecture Hall: Ai Companions as Emotional Support Tools and Their Implications for Student Well-being and Pedagogy in Singapore's Higher Education

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Abstract

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) into higher education has expanded beyond academic tasks to encompass students' emotional and psychological lives (Roumeliotis & Tselikas, 2023). AI chatbots such as ChatGPT and Meta AI are increasingly being adopted by university students in Singapore not only as learning aids but as informal emotional companions. As institutions grapple with rising mental health concerns and strained counselling resources, understanding how students engage with these digital companions carries significant implications. A significant amount of literature has emerged which have focused on how AI simulates empathy (Dorigoni & Giardino, 2025), as well as having implicit biases affecting its output with users (Grogan & Kay, 2025). Others have reviewed the issues that come with having AI companions (Ho et al., 2025). However, there has been a dearth of literature on how university students in Singapore, most likely to turn to AI as companion, perceive the quality, authenticity, and limitations of emotional support they receive from AI companions.

Our team's study explores how university students aged 21 to 35 in Singapore engage with AI companions for emotional support and self-reflection. A cross-sectional online survey (n=30) was administered, incorporating Likert-scale measures assessing perceived empathy, authenticity, trust, and satisfaction in AI interactions, alongside open-ended questions exploring participants' conceptualisations of emotional authenticity in human-AI exchanges. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analyses, while open-ended responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Preliminary findings reveal that the absence of human judgment in AI companions allows users to experience a version of their authentic self that feels inaccessible in traditional human-to-human interactions (HCIs). Therefore, it could be said that AI companions are shaping new forms of digital

intimacy and self-care among Singaporean university students, with implications that extend into student well-being infrastructure, responsible AI design in education, and possibly leveraging AI-mediated self-reflection as a tool for socio-emotional learning and metacognitive development in the future.

Keywords: Ai, Wellbeing, Mental Health, Authentic, Education, Emotion, Intimacy, Digital, Metacognitive