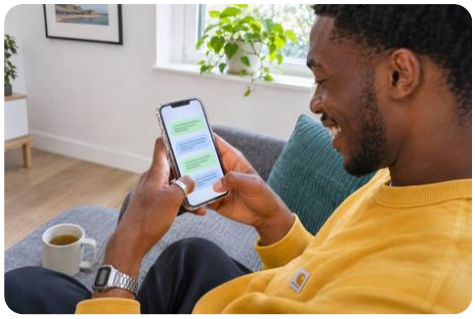
NEWS LESSON

Close, Yet Lonely: What a Chatbot Relationship Study Does and Does Not Show



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What does a relationship need in order to count as genuine, and could a non-human partner ever meet that standard?
2. To what extent do you think technology has changed what people expect from closeness?
3. Do you see AI companionship as a symptom of loneliness or as one possible remedy for it?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**instinct**	☐	A	a natural feeling about something, without careful thought
2	**anchor**	☐	B	having both good and bad effects
3	**double-edged**	☐	C	a very close and personal connection
4	**dimensions**	☐	D	to fix an argument firmly to something solid
5	**diverged**	☐	E	became different and went in separate directions
6	**noteworthy**	☐	F	alone, with little contact with other people
7	**isolated**	☐	G	different parts or aspects of something
8	**intimacy**	☐	H	interesting or important enough to be noticed

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A University of Michigan survey of 463 US adults found similar emotional closeness in chatbot and human relationships, but a different link to loneliness. The authors stress associations, and the evidence cannot show cause.

1 Debates about AI companions tend to run on instinct. Some people see a lifeline for the isolated, others a double-edged sword that may quietly replace human contact. A University of Michigan study, covered by Phys.org on 12 November 2026 and published in Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans, tries to anchor the argument in evidence by comparing people in relationships with chatbots against two kinds of human couples.

2 Lionel Robert, Annette Masterson and Xin Ye surveyed 463 adults in the United States, all of them already in relationships: 155 with a chatbot, 153 in long-distance relationships with another person and 155 with a partner they saw in person. The long-distance group serves as a useful comparison, helping to separate what is peculiar to AI from what simply comes with physical separation. The groups were comparable in age, gender, relationship length and reported depression.

3 Participants rated closeness along several dimensions, including sharing feelings, exchanging ideas, sexual closeness, shared social networks and joint activities. They also reported on loneliness, satisfaction, wellbeing and the social support they felt they had. Ratings of emotional and intellectual intimacy were broadly similar across the three groups, which undercuts any assumption that people in chatbot relationships describe thinner bonds.

4 The patterns diverged on loneliness, where the chatbot data tell a different story. In both human groups, greater emotional intimacy accompanied less loneliness. Among chatbot users it accompanied more loneliness, although also more satisfaction with the relationship. The paper singles out this apparent contradiction as its most noteworthy result. Once perceived social support entered the analysis, the chatbot link vanished, which the authors take as evidence that human relationships outside the chatbot shape its emotional effects.

5 Other associations were more specific. Sexual intimacy was linked with greater satisfaction in chatbot and long-distance relationships but not in in-person ones. Intellectual intimacy was linked with higher satisfaction and wellbeing among chatbot users and, among long-distance partners, with wellbeing alone. These links held after accounting for social support. Taken together, the results suggest that the kind of intimacy matters, and that a single label such as intimacy hides several different patterns.

6 Caution is essential. Every finding is an association, and none shows that chatbots cause loneliness or relieve it: lonely people might equally gravitate towards chatbots, or an unmeasured factor might drive both. The data rest on self-reports from US adults, and people who describe themselves as being in a relationship with a chatbot may differ from other users in ways the survey did not capture. Because the sample is limited to the United States, cultural differences remain untested.

7 Robert has said the results turned out more complicated than expected, and the study raises more questions than it answers. That may be the fairest summary. It is possible to feel close to something that is not human and to feel lonely at the same time, and what matters most may be how much human support surrounds the relationship. The work was supported by two University of Michigan institutes, according to the journal record.

Sources: Phys.org, Finding romance with AI: Study explores benefits, limits of chatbot intimacy; Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans, Finding romance with AI: Comparing human and AI chatbot intimacy and relationships. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The link between sexual intimacy and satisfaction differed between in-person couples and the other two groups. T F NG
2. The authors treat the chatbot loneliness result as unremarkable. T F NG
3. For long-distance partners, intellectual intimacy was linked with both satisfaction and wellbeing. T F NG
4. The text says how many chatbot users had previously been in a human relationship. T F NG
5. The authors' reading implies that chatbot users with plenty of human support are less likely to show the closeness and loneliness link. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

confirmed	gravitate	peculiar	perceived	self-reports	trivial	untested	vanished

1. Researchers added a comparison group to find out which effects were genuinely _____ to chatbots.
2. When the researchers adjusted for support, the apparent link _____ entirely.
3. People who already feel isolated may _____ towards an always available companion.
4. A weakness of the design is that it relies on _____ rather than on observed behaviour.
5. Whether the findings hold in other societies is still _____ .
6. The study measured _____ support, meaning how much help people felt they had.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Because the groups were _____ in age and depression, differences are less likely to reflect those factors. (COMPARE)
2. The paper highlights an apparent _____ in the chatbot data. (CONTRADICT)
3. Caution is _____ when reading these findings. (ESSENCE)
4. The findings challenge the _____ that chatbot users describe thinner bonds. (ASSUME)
5. The long-distance group helps to isolate the role of physical _____ . (SEPARATE)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some verbs change meaning completely with a particle. Check the meaning, the subject and the tense before you choose.

brush	comes	rest	run	singles	spill	turned

1. The argument over AI partners has _____ on for years without a clear answer.
2. The paper _____ out one finding as the most surprising.
3. The study's weakness is that its findings _____ on what people say about themselves.
4. Distance often _____ with a sense of isolation.
5. The results _____ out more complicated than the researchers had predicted.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. How should we weigh the comfort chatbots may give some people against the risk of replacing human contact?
2. What responsibilities do you think companies have towards users who become emotionally attached to a chatbot?
3. If closeness and loneliness can exist side by side, what does that tell you about how loneliness should be defined?

9 Role-play: a worried friend

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the worried friend

Your friend spends every evening talking to an AI chatbot and says it feels like a partner. You are not angry, but you are worried. Ask at least two questions and suggest something to do together.

Student B · the person with a chatbot

You feel close to your chatbot and it makes you happy. Explain why it matters to you. You may be lonely sometimes. Decide if you will accept your friend's idea.

Useful phrases

I'm worried about you.

It really helps me to talk to it.

Don't you ever feel lonely?

I'd love to see you more often.

That's not what I'm saying.

Could we meet for dinner this week?

Afterwards, tell the class: did the friend change your mind, and what did you decide?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 A · 2 D · 3 B · 4 G · 5 E · 6 H · 7 F · 8 C

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 F · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 peculiar · 2 vanished · 3 gravitate · 4 self-reports · 5 untested · 6 perceived

6 Word forms

1 comparable · 2 contradiction · 3 essential · 4 assumption · 5 separation

7 Language focus

1 run · 2 singles · 3 rest · 4 comes · 5 turned

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