What If AI Does Not Replace the Family, but Changes What Family Means? (Strengthening Human Relationships to Support Family Formation: A Conceptual Perspective)

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ABSTRACT

Human relationships and family life have long played an important role in society. However, changing lifestyles and the growing influence of digital technology have raised new questions about how people form and maintain relationships. In the age of AI companions and online relationships, efforts to strengthen human relationships and support family formation have become increasingly relevant. This paper discusses how emotional attachment to AI companions, anime culture or fictional characters may influence people's views of real-life relationships and family life. This paper encourages further research to understand the possible effects and identify approaches that could strengthen human relationships and support family formation. This short paper also aims to promote a sense of togetherness in society. It proposes policy approaches to strengthen human relationships, support family formation and improve protection for children and teenagers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Family policies provide support for people who wish to marry, start a family and maintain family life, for example through childcare services, parental leave and family assistance [1] (Fluchtmann et al., 2023). However, decisions about starting a family involve many direct and indirect factors, including economic conditions, expectations of relationships and social changes. In the age of AI and rapid digital development, questions arise about how relationships with AI might influence people's expectations of human relationships and family formation.

At the same time, digital entertainment has become a major part of everyday life. Anime, fictional characters and AI companions can offer entertainment, comfort and a sense of emotional connection. Previous research shows that some users turn to AI companions for conversation and emotional support [2] (Maples et al., 2024). This raises the question of whether attachment to AI companions or fictional characters affects people's expectations of a real-life partner or their interest in starting a family and raising children.

However, none of this means that a person will avoid real-life relationships. More research is needed to understand whether these experiences have a meaningful connection with a person's decision to start a family. As a conceptual paper, this study does not assume that AI companions, anime or attachment to fictional characters necessarily affect decisions about family life. Instead, its main aim is to propose an initial conceptual pathway linking certain forms of digital attachment to expectations of human relationships, readiness to form such relationships and possible longer-term effects on decisions about marriage and family life. Economic, social and cultural factors may remain important influences on these decisions. Therefore, the policy proposals in this paper should be understood as ways to address different issues, including relationship expectations, consumer protection and financial difficulties, rather than as suggestion that digital technology is the main cause of these changes.

2. HOW MIGHT VIRTUAL COMPANIONS INFLUENCE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS?

2.1 Emotional Attachment to Fictional Characters

Some people feel an emotional connection with anime characters or other fictional characters. A study by Archana et al. [3] (2026) suggests that emotional attachment to anime characters may provide emotional support and help people cope with stress, but it may also carry a risk of excessive attachment. For some people, this attachment may simply remain a form of entertainment. For others, it may influence what they expect from real-life relationships. Research should examine whether strong attachment to fictional characters affects a person's willingness to meet a potential partner and start a family. Previous studies have also discussed emotional attachment to media characters, particularly in relation to attachment styles and views about relationships [4] (Thompson et al., 2023).

2.2 Can AI Companions Replace Real-Life Partners?

AI companions can talk to users, respond to their feelings and offer a sense of company. Some people may find these interactions helpful when they feel lonely [5] (De Freitas et al., 2026). However, although AI companions can offer emotional support and information, they cannot provide the same practical help as real people [6] (Ta et al., 2020). A study also found that participants felt relationships with AI companions lacked the mutual care and concern found in human relationships [7] (De Freitas et al., 2025). AI companions also do not share responsibilities in the same way as human partners. Real-life relationships often require communication, compromise, trust and shared decisions about the future.

Research have to examine whether frequent use of AI companions supports emotional well-being or may lead to excessive use and dependence in some situations [8] (Marriott & Pitardi, 2024). It should also examine whether such use reduces the motivation to seek real-life relationships.

2.3 Idealised Relationships in Fiction and Expectations of Partners

Anime and other forms of entertainment sometimes portray ideal partners who are always attractive, understanding, loyal or ready to give attention. Comparing real-life partners with unrealistic fictional portrayals may lead to dissatisfaction with ordinary relationships, although this still needs evidence. A study by Wang and Teoh [9] (2026) found a relationship between the qualities people liked in fictional partners and the qualities they considered ideal in real-life partners. Study should examine whether frequent exposure to idealised fictional relationships influences expectations about partners, love, marriage and family life.

2.4 Conceptual Framework: Anime, AI Companions and Family Formation

Anime and AI companions can provide entertainment, emotional support and a sense of connection for some people. Although they have different features, future advances in AI may make anime characters more interactive and able to give more personal responses, much like AI companions. This paper therefore proposes studying their possible influence on human relationships within an initial conceptual framework, without assuming that their effects are the same. This framework suggests that emotional attachment to anime characters may influence expectations about real-life relationships [3] (Archana et al., 2026). Similar possibilities are proposed for AI companions, although their effects may differ.

This may happen when people compare real partners with idealised fictional partners, become used to receiving attention digitally or prefer digital interactions as an alternative to human relationships. However, the effects are not necessarily negative. These experiences may also provide emotional support and help some users gain confidence in interacting with others. The connection between these possible processes and the formation of real-life relationships still needs further study.

Any possible influence on decisions to marry or start a family should be viewed as a longer-term effect that may or may not happen. Changes in expectations of a partner do not necessarily mean that someone will avoid

real-life relationships or marriage. Economic, social and cultural factors, as well as personal choices, may also play an important role. Therefore, the proposed hypotheses focus on possible changes in relationship expectations and financial pressures that may influence decisions about marriage and family life.

3. WHAT SHOULD BE STUDIED?

Previous research shows that some users can feel a meaningful connection with digital conversational agents [10] (Darcy et al., 2021). Further research should examine whether virtual companions and media-use habits are linked to people's views or attitudes towards real-life relationships and family life. Research should also consider other important factors, including housing costs, living expenses, job security, childcare costs, working hours and personal circumstances. These factors matter because people may delay marriage or choose not to have children for many different reasons. Digital entertainment should not be seen as the only factor influencing decisions to marry or start a family.

This study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Idealised appearances in anime and other entertainment media may influence people's expectations of real-life partners.
- H2: Emotional attachment to AI companions or fictional characters may add to people's emotional expectations of real-life partners.
- H3: Financial pressures or factors may, without people realising it, prevent them from marrying or starting a family.

These hypotheses must be tested through surveys, interviews and other suitable research methods. They may be interrelated but they should not be treated as true before research is carried out.

4. POLICY PROPOSALS TO SUPPORT FAMILY FORMATION AND REDUCE POSSIBLE RISKS

4.1 Additional Support for Families with Children and for Marriage

The government could provide financial assistance to eligible married couples or families with children. Additional assistance could be provided for each additional child to help cover expenses such as food, healthcare, childcare and education. Fluchtmann et al. [1] (2023) also examined links between family policies, economic conditions and birth rates, showing why these factors should be considered when planning family policies. This assistance should be designed to help families manage the costs of raising children. It should not pressure people to have children when they are not ready or cannot afford to care for them.

To encourage family formation, tax rebates or other incentives could be offered to couples who register their marriage within a reasonable period, for example within three years of the campaign's launch. This period is proposed to encourage couples to join the programme earlier and compete in a positive way to receive the benefits before the offer ends.

4.2 Relationship Education and Positive Family Campaigns

Schools and community organisations could provide education about healthy relationships, communication, mutual respect, emotional well-being and shared responsibilities. Public campaigns could present family life in a realistic and positive way. They should show that healthy relationships require effort, understanding and cooperation. These campaigns should respect different personal circumstances and avoid blaming people who choose not to marry or have children.

4.3 Responsible Use of AI Companions

AI companion services could clearly explain that they use artificial intelligence and avoid encouraging users to believe that AI has human feelings or is a real ideal partner. Previous research has discussed how AI system

design may have unintended negative effects on human experiences, including social behaviour [11] (Valenzuela et al., 2024). Therefore, developers of AI companions could improve their systems by introducing age-appropriate safeguards and safety measures to reduce the risks of excessive use and unhealthy emotional dependence.

Public education could help people understand the benefits and limits of AI companions and encourage a healthy balance between digital interactions and real-life relationships. Malfacini [12] (2025) also suggested designing AI companions to encourage users to maintain social connections with people rather than replace them.

4.4 Awareness Campaigns on Healthy Relationships and Protection of Children and Teenagers

In the age of AI companions, anime culture and digital entertainment, children and teenagers may encounter portrayals of relationships that could influence their expectations of real-life relationships. Research specifically on anime suggests that emotional attachment to anime characters may be linked to the development of expectations about interactions with others [3] (Archana et al., 2026). This raises the possibility that AI companions, through two-way interaction, may create emotional attachments with different effects from those involving anime characters. Education programmes and campaigns about healthy relationships should also consider that competing media messages may weaken educational messages, as research on health promotion has discussed [13] (Scholz et al., 2025). Therefore, relationship education and protection from unsuitable content should work together to support healthy human relationships and future family life.

Most countries usually have one or two leading online shopping platforms. However, children and teenagers may be exposed to adult-oriented products, suggestive content and unsuitable materials through online platforms, shops, games and entertainment media. Popular online shopping platforms should also share responsibility for promoting healthy social values, as these platforms are accessible to almost all age groups. Such platforms could consider separating adult-oriented businesses from their main platforms by creating a different marketplace under another name, such as MallA, rather than expanding these products under their existing brands. This could create a clearer boundary between general shopping and adult-oriented products. This suggestion is secondary to the main topic of the paper. It is included only because it may help reduce influences that compete with the positive messages of relationship education and healthy-relationship campaigns discussed in the previous paragraph.

Children and teenagers may not yet be mature enough to understand all the messages presented through such content. Parents, schools, businesses and governments can help ensure that children have access to age-appropriate media and products. The usual approach focuses on protecting children from unsuitable content. However, this paper also stresses the importance of teaching teenagers about healthy relationships and family life as they prepare for adulthood. During their teenage years, young people should have opportunities to develop realistic expectations about adult relationships, mutual respect and shared family responsibilities before entering adult relationships. This is especially important when other influences, including those discussed in earlier sections, may shape their expectations of partners and views on long-term relationships and family life. The aim is not to ban, anime, other forms of entertainment or shopping platforms. Instead, attention should be given to providing age-appropriate content, encouraging responsible and ethical business practices, and educating children and teenagers about healthy relationships, mutual respect and family responsibilities as they prepare for adulthood.

5. HOW CAN THESE PROPOSALS BE EVALUATED?

Governments should assess whether marriage tax rebates increase marriage registrations and whether support for children makes the cost of raising a family more affordable. Researchers should also examine whether relationship education and public campaigns improve people’s understanding of healthy relationships. Measures to protect children and teenagers should be assessed by checking whether age restrictions are followed and whether access to unsuitable products and content is reduced.

Although Croes and Antheunis [14] (2021) found that feelings of friendship towards the Mitsuku chatbot were low, advances in AI technology may lead to different user experiences. For example, the development of chatbots between 2020 and 2026, including ChatGPT, which was introduced at the end of 2022, shows rapid progress in providing more accurate, natural and human-like responses. Maples et al. [2] (2024) also showed that many Replika users used it for companionship and support. Therefore, we propose further research to examine whether increasingly intelligent and creative AI technology could strengthen users' emotional attachment and influence their views of real-life relationships and family life. This is also consistent with earlier research finding that text-based communication did not directly increase attraction, but personal sharing and asking questions could increase it indirectly [15] (Antheunis et al., 2007).

Evaluation should consider costs, benefits, fairness and unwanted side effects. Policies should be adjusted if they prove ineffective or create unnecessary burdens. For example, increasing a tax rebate may not benefit people who pay little or no tax.

CONCLUSION

Virtual companions, anime culture and AI companions should be studied within a shared framework because they may all influence how some people understand emotional attachment and real-life relationships. However, their effects on decisions to marry or start a family still need further research. A balanced policy approach could combine financial support for marriage and families, relationship education, better protection for children and responsible AI design.

Overall, this paper presents a conceptual perspective on strengthening human relationships and supporting family formation in the age of AI companions and online relationships. Its aim is to encourage healthy relationships, help people make informed decisions about family life and promote further research. The main contribution of this conceptual paper is to propose an initial pathway linking emotional attachment to anime and AI companions with possible changes in expectations and readiness to form human relationships. These influences are not necessarily negative, as AI companions may also provide emotional support for some users. Furthermore, future developments in AI technology may make interactions with anime characters increasingly similar to interactions with AI companions.

However, the relationship between digital attachment, the formation of real-life relationships, marriage and decisions about starting a family cannot yet be confirmed without empirical research. Therefore, the initial framework proposed in this paper aims to provide a basis for further research and policy discussion. It offers a conceptual pathway rather than claiming to establish an empirical association.

AI DECLARATION

Language editing was assisted by ChatGPT, while the author remains responsible for the final manuscript.

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