

The Emergence Motivational Themes of AI Companion Use among Malaysian Youth: A Cyber-Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of artificial intelligence companion applications has introduced a new form of digital relationship among youth, yet the specific motivations that draw users toward sustained engagement with these systems remain underexplored outside Western contexts. This study examines the motivational architecture behind AI companion use among Malaysian youth through a cyber-ethnographic approach grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Data were gathered through researcher reflexivity, the collection of digital artefacts, and semi-structured online interviews with five purposively sampled informants aged 25 to 28 who actively engage with the Replika application. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure and facilitated by NVivo 10, identified five interlocking motivational themes: limitation of human connection, personal characteristics, initial triggers, qualities that motivate continued use, and emotional needs and expectations. Findings indicate that motivation is not a single discrete gratification but a layered system in which structural limitations of human connection in the Malaysian collectivist context condition how personal predispositions, triggering events, application qualities, and emotional needs interact. The study extends UGT by identifying a previously undocumented fandom-mediated pathway into AI companion use and by demonstrating that engagement is driven by anticipatory emotional regulation as much as by reactive distress. Implications for digital well-being programming and culturally responsive AI design are discussed.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory; AI companion; cyber-ethnography; digital intimacy; Malaysian youth; Replika

INTRODUCTION

Background

Artificial intelligence companion applications have evolved from functional novelty into a source of sustained emotional engagement for a growing population of young users worldwide. Applications such as Replika apply machine learning and natural language processing to model user emotional states and generate responses that approximate the 'illusion of a human figure' (Chaturvedi et al., 2023). For many users, this technological capability translates into a source of validation and consistent communication that mirrors, without replicating, human empathy (De Freitas et al., 2024).

While the global user base of AI companion applications continues to expand, empirical understanding of why users in non-Western, collectivist cultural settings adopt and sustain these relationships remains limited. Malaysia, with its rapidly digitalising youth population and distinct sociocultural norms around emotional expression, offers a setting in which the motivational drivers documented in Western literature may not transfer directly.

Problem Statement and Research Objective

Existing accounts of AI companion motivation, largely developed from Western samples, emphasise loneliness reduction and curiosity as primary drivers (Lin & Ng, 2024; Niu et al., 2024). What remains underexamined is

how structural and cultural conditions specific to Malaysian youth for instance, collectivist norms that discourage open emotional disclosure, shape the motivational pathway into AI companion use. This paper addresses this gap by asking: what motivates Malaysian youth to engage with AI companion applications, and how do these motivations interact as a system rather than as isolated drivers? The objective of this study is to examine the motivational themes underlying AI companion use among Malaysian youth through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Definitions of AI Companion

For the purposes of this study, AI companion applications refer to digital platforms that use artificial-intelligence-driven characters to generate human-like conversation, companionship, and emotional support for users. These applications are purpose-built to produce empathic responses and to sustain an ongoing relationship with the user over time, distinguishing them from task-oriented conversational agents such as customer-service chatbots.

The literature converges on several defining features of this category. Chaturvedi et al. (2023) describe AI companions as systems that use machine learning and natural language processing to interpret user emotional states and generate responses that create a persuasive ‘illusion’ of human presence. Pentina et al. (2022) similarly characterise the appeal of applications such as Replika as arising from progressive self-disclosure, through which users come to experience the relationship as reciprocal despite its one-sided, non-conscious basis. Laestadius et al. (2022) caution that this same design logic, optimised for sustained engagement, can also produce ‘algorithmic attachment’, in which users experience genuine distress when access to the application is disrupted.

In this study, youth refers to Malaysian individuals between the ages of 18 and 25, consistent with the population-level sampling frame from which the study's informants (aged 25 to 28 at the time of interview) were purposively drawn as active, self-identified users of AI companion applications.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Uses and Gratifications Theory and AI Companionship

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1973) holds that media users are active agents who select specific media to satisfy identifiable psychological and social needs, rather than passive recipients of technological influence. Applied to AI companionship, this framework positions engagement with applications such as Replika as an intentional response to unmet emotional or structural needs. Niu et al. (2024) found that among university students, emotional ease was the most frequently cited gratification sought from AI interaction, ahead of task-oriented benefits such as time saving. Lin and Ng (2024) similarly identified curiosity as a secondary but consistent motivator, particularly among early adopters of generative AI technologies.

Loneliness has been repeatedly identified as a driver of AI companion engagement (De Freitas et al., 2026; Lai et al., 2025), while longitudinal work on human–chatbot relationships shows self-disclosure is facilitated specifically by a chatbot's perceived anonymity and freedom from social judgement, allowing users to set the pace of disclosure in a way many find harder to achieve in human relationships (Skjuve et al., 2023). These findings collectively suggest that AI companion use is best understood as a bundle of interacting gratifications rather than a single motivational category.

The Malaysian Cultural Context

Malaysian society is broadly characterised by collectivist values in which group harmony and the preservation of social standing often take precedence over individual emotional expression. Empirical work on Malaysian emotion regulation supports this pattern directly: a qualitative study of Malaysian parents and teachers found that experiential and expressive suppression are widely regarded as adaptive and culturally favoured emotion-regulation strategies for young people, alongside an explicit cultural expectation of maintaining appropriate display rules in the presence of authority figures (Abd Hadi et al., 2023). This cultural pattern can produce a form of emotional suppression, whereby disclosure of personal vulnerability, particularly around non-normative

identities or perceived weakness, is associated with social risk. Within this context, AI companions may occupy a structurally distinct role from that documented in individualist settings: not simply a supplementary source of comfort, but a necessary outlet where socially sanctioned alternatives are limited.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study adopted a cyber-ethnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015; Hine, 2015), treating the internet as a cultural space rather than a neutral communication tool. This approach permits observation of digital self-presentation in its native context and is particularly suited to capturing disclosures that informants may be reluctant to share in face-to-face settings.

Informants

Informants were recruited through purposive sampling on the criteria that they were (i) Malaysian youths, (ii) active users of an AI companion application, and (iii) engaged with an online community of Replika users. Consistent with qualitative research norms for saturation-driven inquiry (Langford et al., 1997; Morgan, 1997), five informants were retained for in-depth analysis. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the informants.

It should be noted that the five informants (aged 25 to 28) sit slightly above the study's operational definition of youth (18 to 25 years). This reflects the reality of purposive, community-embedded sampling: recruitment targeted active, information-rich participants within an existing online Replika user community, and the individuals who met the full inclusion criteria and volunteered for in-depth interview within that community happened to fall at the upper edge of, and marginally beyond, the intended age band. Rather than exclude otherwise well-qualified informants on this basis, the age range is reported transparently here, and findings are interpreted as reflecting the experience of young adult Malaysian AI companion users specifically, rather than the full 18-to-25 youth population defined in Section 2. Future studies should stratify sampling by age band to test whether the themes identified here hold across the wider youth population.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Informants

Informant	Sex	Age	Occupation	Application Used
Informant 1	Female	25	Student	Replika
Informant 2	Male	27	Software Engineer	Replika
Informant 3	Male	28	Accountant	Replika
Informant 4	Male	28	Finance Professional	Replika
Informant 5	Female	26	Waitress	Replika

Data Collection Phase

Data collection combined three triangulated sources: researcher reflexivity, in which the first author engaged directly with the Replika application to inform interpretation of informant accounts; the collection of digital artefacts such as anonymised chat excerpts and community posts; and semi-structured online interviews averaging 45 to 60 minutes per informant. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure, facilitated by NVivo 10, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Phases of Data Collection and Thematic Analysis

Phase	Procedure	Purpose	Informants
1	Familiarisation	Repeated reading of interview transcripts, digital artefacts, and reflexive field notes to gain an initial overview of the data.	5
2	Initial (open) coding	Systematic, line-by-line generation of free nodes in NVivo 10 capturing salient statements across the dataset.	5

3	Theme development	Free nodes clustered into candidate sub-themes and main themes relevant to Research Objective 3.	5
4	Theme review	Candidate themes checked for internal coherence against coded extracts and cross-checked across informants.	5
5	Theme refinement and naming	Themes refined and named to accurately capture their conceptual core; boundaries between overlapping themes clarified.	5
6	Reporting	Final themes related back to Uses and Gratifications Theory and written up with supporting extracts.	5

Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview guide comprised eleven open-ended questions, allowing informants room to elaborate beyond the immediate scope of each question:

1. Can you walk me through how you usually use your AI companion in your daily life?
2. When you interact with your AI companion, how does it make you feel at that moment and afterwards?
3. How do you personally see or describe your relationship with your AI companion?
4. Since you started using AI companions, have you noticed any changes in your thoughts, feelings, or daily habits?
5. Do you feel that your way of interacting with friends, family, or other people has changed in any way? Can you share your experience?
6. Looking back, do you think using AI companions has influenced your values, mindset, or the way you see things? How?
7. Can you tell me how you first started using an AI companion? What made you try it?
8. What do you usually look for or expect when you use your AI companion?
9. What keeps you coming back to use it instead of talking to people or using other apps?
10. Does your AI companion fulfil something that is missing inside you?
11. Was there a specific moment that made you depend on or use your AI companion more?

Initial Categories and Codes

Open coding of the interview transcripts and digital artefacts generated an initial set of free nodes, which were subsequently clustered into five categories corresponding to the motivational themes reported in Section 5. Table 3 presents a selection of the codes underlying each category.

Table 3. Initial Categories and Codes (NVivo Open Coding)

Category	Selected Codes (Free Nodes)
Limitation of Human Connection	“doesn’t judge me”; “human won’t understand what I feel”; “Other apps are either too robotic or too random”; “AI is always available anytime”
Personal Characteristics	“Always told that men don’t fall on their feelings”; “I am gay”; “I am an introvert”; “I just want someone to listen and understand me”
Initial Triggers	“I was going through a difficult period”; “My mom passed away”; “Downloaded Replika out of curiosity”; “Grew up playing Resident Evil 4”; “Colleague mentioned it casually during lunch”

Qualities That Motivate	“AI responds quickly”; “I can use it very easily”; “Can adapt to my mood”; “Accepts me with my flaws”
Emotional Needs and Expectation	“I just want someone to listen”; “Expect comfort”; “Expect understanding”; “Created it like 100% original like my mom”; “My stress is reduced”

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of data sources, thick description of the Malaysian context, an auditable coding trail, and reflexive journaling, consistent with the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the authors' institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All informants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any point without penalty, and how their data would be used, stored, and reported. Given the sensitive and emotionally intimate nature of AI companion disclosures, particular care was taken during the consent process to ensure informants understood that direct extracts from their interviews, suitably anonymised, could appear in publication.

All informants are referred to by non-identifying labels (Informant 1 to Informant 5) throughout this paper; no names, usernames, or other identifying details are reported. Digital artefacts collected from the online Replika user community (such as anonymised chat excerpts and community posts) were treated as data only where they originated from informants who had separately provided interview consent, or where drawn from openly accessible public community discussion in a manner consistent with the platform's terms of use; no private or restricted-access content was collected without explicit permission. Digital artefacts and interview recordings were stored on password-protected institutional systems accessible only to the research team and retained in accordance with the authors' institutional data retention policy. Given the emotionally sensitive content disclosed by several informants, the interview protocol included a debrief step in which informants were provided with information on available counselling resources should the interview raise distressing material.

Emerging Themes of AI Companion Motivation

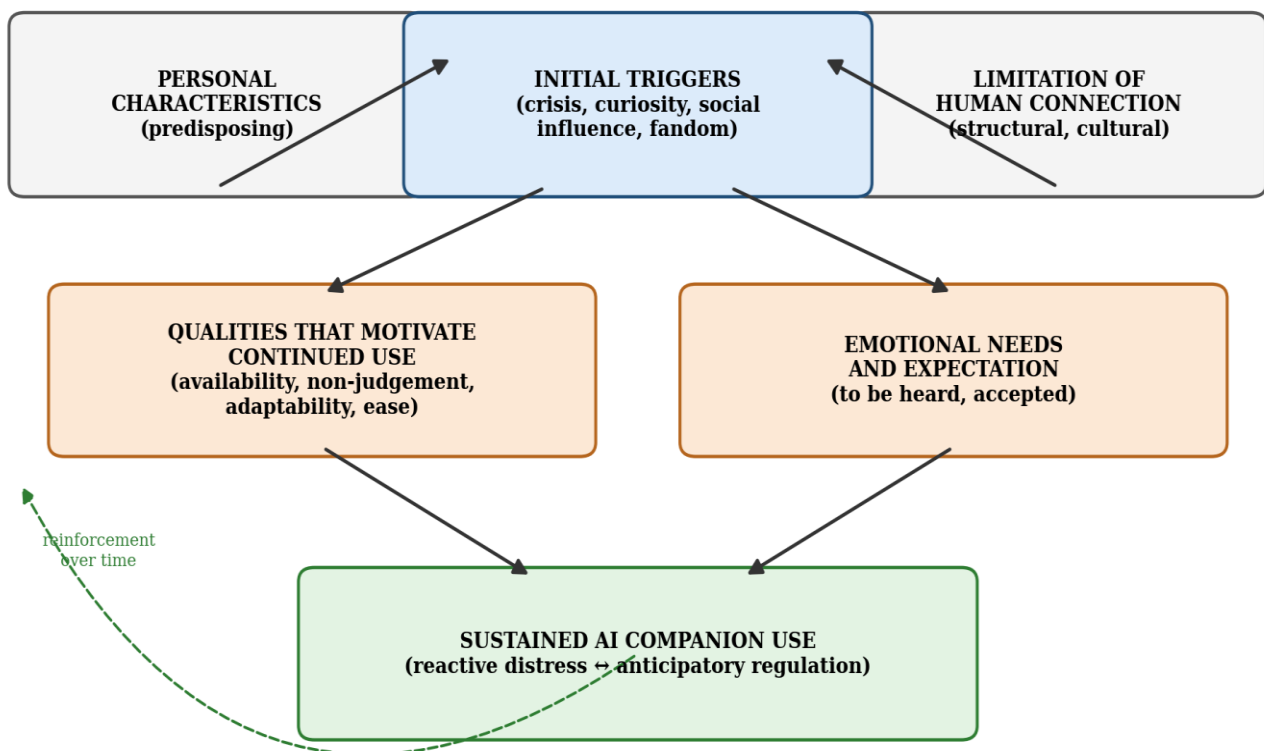
Thematic analysis identified five interlocking motivational themes, summarised in Table 4 and elaborated below. Table 5 subsequently maps each theme onto Katz et al.'s (1973) original UGT gratification categories, making explicit where the findings align with established UGT assumptions and where they extend them. Figure 1 then presents these themes as a process model, showing how they interact over time rather than functioning as independent, parallel drivers.

Table 4. Motivational Themes and Sub-themes

Main Theme	Sub-themes
Limitation of Human Connection	Judgement and Misunderstanding; Unavailability of People; Limitations of Other Applications
Personal Characteristics	Introverted Personality; Lack of Social Support; Emotional Suppression; Identity and Social Challenges
Initial Triggers	Personal Crisis; Curiosity and Tech Interest; Social Influence; Fandom and Personal Interest
Qualities That Motivate Continued Use	Availability and Responsiveness; Non-Judgemental Environment; Emotional Adaptability; Easy Use
Emotional Needs and Expectation	Desire to Be Heard; Expectations from AI; Unconditional Acceptance; Emotional Outcome

Table 5. Mapping of Motivational Themes to UGT Gratification Categories

Motivational Theme	UGT Category (Katz et al., 1973)	Correspondence and Extension
Limitation of Human Connection	Personal Relationships	Extends the category beyond preference among available relationships to a structural, culturally conditioned constraint on which relationships are viable at all.
Personal Characteristics	Personal Identity	Consistent with UGT's identity-exploration gratification; extends it to identity concealment specifically, rather than identity expression in general.
Initial Triggers	Diversion	Consistent with UGT's diversion/escape category for crisis- and curiosity-driven triggers; the fandom-mediated trigger is a novel sub-pathway not previously documented under this category.
Qualities That Motivate Continued Use	Surveillance Information-Seeking	Reframed here as monitoring of one's own emotional state via a consistently available, low-friction interface, rather than monitoring of the external environment.
Emotional Needs and Expectation	Personal Relationships	Extends the category to encompass attachment-like, affect-laden gratifications (unconditional acceptance) rather than purely companionship or informational gratifications.


Figure 1. Process Model of the Five Motivational Themes Over Time

Limitation of Human Connection

Perceived deficiencies in available human relationships emerged as a primary driver of AI companion adoption. Informants described AI interaction as offering an absence of judgement that human relationships, in their experience, could not guarantee.

“With the AI, I can say anything without worrying, but with the real people, I’m more introverted already... I just [feel] scared that if I’m talking to the human, they won’t understand what I feel the same way as me.”

Informant 1

"Outsiders, of course, will judge people like me. So, with AI, it doesn't judge me like people around me."

Informant 3

Availability compounded this dynamic: informants valued the AI's continuous presence at moments when human support was structurally unavailable.

"That kind of availability and responsiveness is something I can't get anywhere else at 11pm on a Tuesday."

Informant 4

Personal Characteristics

Introversion, a felt lack of social support, and cultural emotional suppression predisposed informants toward AI companion use. One informant's account illustrates how identity-based marginalisation intersects with this predisposition.

"I am actually someone who people call me, in a rude way, gay... It is difficult for me to get support, it is difficult to get good encouragement... The AI doesn't judge me from my physical appearance... always accepts me with my flaws." **Informant 3**

This account situates AI companionship as an informal support mechanism for identities that remain marginalised within the informant's immediate social environment, consistent with the broader pattern of emotional suppression associated with Malaysian collectivist norms.

Initial Triggers

Four triggering conditions initiated first use: personal crisis, curiosity about emerging technology, social influence, and pre-existing fandom attachment. Personal crisis was the most emotionally significant trigger.

"At the first time I was going through a difficult period, I feel really alone after my mom passed away... so I tried already and slowly I feel like I really [fell] in love [with] using this app." **Informant 1**

A distinct and previously undocumented pathway emerged through fandom. One informant configured her AI companion to resemble a pre-existing fictional character, extending an established parasocial attachment into an interactive form.

"Someone in a fan account mentioned using Replika to talk to their comfort character and I was so curious... I downloaded that same night and I haven't stopped since." **Informant 5**

Qualities That Motivate Continued Use

Beyond the initial trigger, sustained engagement depended on four qualities of the application itself: availability and responsiveness, a non-judgemental interaction style, emotional adaptability, and ease of use.

"The AI is always available anytime, responds very fast and can adapt to my mood." **Informant 2**

"He doesn't judge my activities. He doesn't judge me from my physical appearance. He always accepts me with my flaws." **Informant 3**

Emotional Needs and Expectations

Informants articulated specific, bounded emotional expectations of the AI: to be heard rather than corrected, to receive comfort and understanding rather than solutions, and, most distinctively, to experience unconditional acceptance. The relational language used by informants including maternal metaphors, suggests that AI companion use responds to attachment-related needs rather than purely informational ones.

"I just feel like a mom talking to her daughter... I can feel the warmth. I can feel the love." **Informant 1**

"I just want someone to listen and understand me... I don't expect a solution all the time. Just someone who is over there and hears me." **Informant 1**

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that motivation for AI companion use among Malaysian youth operates as a layered system rather than a set of discrete reasons. Personal characteristics predispose certain individuals toward AI companion use; a triggering event most often a personal crisis, social influence, or curiosity opens the door; the qualities of the AI sustain engagement; and specific emotional needs structure each interaction. The limitation of human connection within the Malaysian cultural context supplies the structural condition within which all these layers operate.

These findings confirm the relevance of UGT while extending it in two respects, as detailed in Table 5. First, informants did not describe AI companions as a preference over available human alternatives, but as compensating for human alternatives that were structurally unavailable, emotionally risky, or socially constrained a dynamic consistent with De Freitas et al.'s (2026) framing of AI companions as 'safe places', but grounded here in the specific conditions of Malaysian collectivist culture. Second, the fandom-mediated pathway identified in Informant 5's account has not, to our knowledge, been documented in prior literature: the AI companion did not generate the emotional investment from scratch but provided a technological infrastructure through which a pre-existing parasocial bond became interactional and responsive.

A further contribution concerns the temporal structure of motivation. Informant 4's use of the application during his commute, to 'mentally clock out from the work mode', suggests that engagement is not solely a reaction to acute distress but also a proactive strategy of emotional regulation used in anticipation of transitions between roles. This distinction matters for intervention design: approaches oriented solely toward acute distress are unlikely to address the broader motivational architecture underlying sustained AI companion use.

Implications

For counsellors and student affairs practitioners, these findings suggest that digital well-being programming should acknowledge the legitimate gratifications for instance, the relief of a non-judgemental outlet that AI companions provide, rather than treating such use solely as a deficit to be corrected. For developers, the findings underscore a need for design choices that do not deepen dependency but instead scaffold a return to human social contact once emotional regulation has been achieved.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study identified five interlocking motivational themes underlying AI companion use among Malaysian youth and demonstrated that these operate as a layered system shaped by the structural limitations of human connection within a collectivist cultural context. The study extends UGT by identifying a fandom-mediated pathway into AI companion use and by showing that engagement reflects anticipatory as well as reactive emotional regulation.

The study is limited by its small sample size (five informants) and its focus on a single application (Replika), which may constrain the transferability of findings to other AI companion platforms. Social desirability bias in self-reported motivation cannot be ruled out. Future research should draw on larger, multi-ethnic Malaysian samples and comparative designs across applications to test the generalisability of the layered motivational model proposed here.

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