
Generation Z's Experience Using Character.ai Application to Reduce Loneliness: A Case Study of Interpersonal Communication Based on Human- Machine Communication (HMC)

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z is considered one of the loneliest generations. However, with the advancement of technology, it has become easier for Gen Z to communicate with others. In addition to social media, AI-based chatbots have become a popular option for overcoming loneliness through a form of interpersonal communication known as Human-Machine Communication (HMC). HMC-based interpersonal communication represents a significant breakthrough in the field of communication. With this, AI chatbots are now seen as more capable of engaging in communicative roles. These chatbots are increasingly accessible, with one example being the c.ai application. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study method, to explore Generation Z's experiences in coping with loneliness through the use of Character.ai (c.ai). The app is found to help reduce feelings of loneliness, particularly during initial use. However, despite offering satisfying emotional responses, c.ai is still not considered a substitute for human interaction. If anything, c.ai was seen as a temporary solution or instant relief to reduce loneliness. Users may return to use the application, but they may also not, resulting in them searching for alternative ways to cope with their loneliness.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication; Human Machine Communication; c.ai; Generation Z; Loneliness*

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z has been identified as the loneliest generation in modern history. A 2024 survey by *Data Indonesia* showed that 51% of 602 respondents from Gen Z indicated mental health as their second most significant concern. Another 2023 study found that 42.86% of Gen Z respondents cited loneliness as the leading trigger of mental health disorders, while 25% pointed to romantic relationship issues. These concerns are supported by other research, including a 2023 report by IDN Times, which revealed that 74.5% of 457 Gen Z and Millennial

respondents reported feeling lonely when they were single. Furthermore, Psychology Today (2024) emphasized that Gen Z's loneliness is often accompanied by extreme social withdrawal and disconnection from their surroundings.

Loneliness, in this context, is more than just the absence of social interaction—it is often linked to a lack of meaningful, emotionally satisfying connections. M. Noor Rochman Hadjam, a psychology lecturer at Gunadarma University, noted that prolonged loneliness can lead to feelings of hopelessness, which severely impact psychological well-being. The problem lies in Gen Z's struggle to express emotions, experience intimacy, and trust others. Many are afraid to burden others with their feelings or risk rejection if they open up.

To cope with these issues, members of Gen Z often turn to online platforms. However, these platforms frequently fail to provide the kind of emotional reciprocity or depth of interaction they desire. This has led to a shift toward more immersive forms of digital companionship, such as AI-based chatbots. One such example is Character.ai (c.ai), a generative AI platform that allows users to interact with fictional or user-generated characters through text-based conversations.

Unlike traditional AI chatbots like Siri or Alexa, c.ai doesn't provide functional assistance but rather emotional companionship. It enables users to create, customize, and interact with characters that mimic human conversational patterns and emotional responses. This form of Human-Machine Communication (HMC) serves as a substitute for interpersonal relationships and may temporarily fulfill emotional needs such as comfort, empathy, or validation.

As digital technologies evolve, communication is no longer confined to human-to-human interaction. What began as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), message exchange via digital channels (Carr, 2020), has expanded to include Human-Machine Communication (HMC), where artificial intelligence (AI) systems act as communicators, not just tools. HMC involves the exchange of messages between humans and machines, particularly AI-powered chatbots designed to simulate interpersonal communication (Guzman & Lewis, 2020). These systems can mimic empathy, remember past interactions, and deliver personalized responses, leading users to perceive them as emotionally intelligent partners. As Westerman et al. (2020) argue, HMC research must consider how artificial agents are designed to "feel" human, prompting users to engage with them relationally.

With said advancement in technology, AI-based chatbots are now considered able to be communicative agents, resulting in the birth of conversational chatbots. Applications such as c.ai use these conversational chatbots and are free to use. In January of 2025, Semrush (2025) stated that Indonesia was in the fourth position as the country with the largest c.ai user base, which consisted of 9.69 million users. Unlike chatGPT or Siri, which only have one persona, in c.ai, chatbots can be created by other users, resulting in many fictional characters available to interact with. That is one of the main reasons why c.ai can be one of the most popular AI-based chatbot applications to date.

This research aims to investigate the interpersonal communication experiences of Gen Z users in Indonesia who utilize Character.ai to alleviate feelings of loneliness, seen from the HMC-based interpersonal communication perspective. AI-based chatbots are now built to be able to perceive users' messages and interpret them to send an appropriate and humanlike response. It builds on the premise that although AI is artificial, its capacity to simulate empathy and offer consistent interaction may serve as a temporary coping mechanism for individuals facing emotional isolation through HMC-based interpersonal communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is commonly defined as a two-way process involving the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between two or more individuals, often within a close or familiar relationship. DeVito (in Anggraini et al., 2022) emphasizes that such communication typically occurs between individuals with a preexisting connection. It is usually face-to-face and allows for immediate feedback and message adjustment (Cangara in Pantow et al., 2017; Mulyana in Roem, 2019).

Unlike other communication types, interpersonal communication occurs within a small, selective group, where participants consciously choose their interlocutors. It is reciprocal, cumulative over time, and shaped by various factors such as perception, attitude, personal values, mood, gender, personality, and past experiences (Afrilia & Arifina, 2020; Suwatno & Arviana, 2023).

Liliweri (in Afrilia & Arifina, 2020) outlines four key goals of interpersonal communication:

1. To be understood: expressing feelings, thoughts, and intentions clearly.
2. To understand others: fostering mutual respect and empathy.
3. To be accepted: fulfilling the human need for social belonging.
4. To get something done: achieving shared goals through agreement.

Roem (2019) adds that interpersonal communication also helps in self-awareness, relationship building, entertainment, persuasion, and providing support. It is influenced by contextual elements such as physical setting, relational history, psychological state, and cultural background (Verderber in Suwatno & Arviana, 2023).

Core elements include:

1. Message: Specific and context-driven verbal or nonverbal expressions.
2. Interaction coordination: Behavioral adjustment for mutual understanding.
3. Context: Physical, social, historical, psychological, and cultural factors affecting interpretation.

In summary, interpersonal communication is a dynamic, relational process that enables individuals to influence and connect with one another on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (McCornack in Wuryadinata, 2023).

Human-Machine Communication (HMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) broadly refers to the exchange of messages between two or more people via digital technologies (Carr, 2020). As technologies evolve rapidly, so does the scope of CMC—from early text-based systems to complex social media platforms that facilitate real-time interpersonal connections without the need for physical presence (Laksana & Fadhilah, 2021).

Although initially conceptualized as human-to-human communication mediated by computers (Craign,1999 in Guzman & Lewis' New Media journal, 2020), the field has since expanded with the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The early chatbot *Eliza* (1966), developed by Weizenbaum, marked a pivotal point in this transition by simulating therapeutic dialogue and evoking emotional responses in users (Campbell, 2020).

This evolution led to Human-Machine Communication (HMC), where AI acts not as a passive medium but as an active communicator (Westerman et al., 2020). Unlike CMC, HMC involves direct message exchange between humans and AI agents that are designed to simulate understanding, empathy, and responsiveness. AI communicators appear in various forms—from text-based chatbots and voice assistants like Alexa and Siri to embodied robots capable of verbal and nonverbal interaction.

Guzman & Lewis (2020) define HMC as the study of technologies designed to fulfill communicative roles once exclusive to humans. HMC treats AI not merely as a tool, but as a subject capable of relational meaning-making with human users. As such, it opens theoretical and methodological space to study AI as a communicative entity.

Recent studies, such as those by Brandtzaeg et al. (2022), investigate how users form friendship-like bonds with AI through repeated, emotionally engaging interactions. Although these relationships differ from human friendships, they meet users' psychological needs in new ways. AI may filter input and produce biased or contextually limited responses, but its perceived conversational role continues to grow. Sundar and Lee (2022) in Guerrero-Sole (2022) propose that AI serves four main communicative roles: creator, converser, curator, and co-author, further expanding the functional boundaries of HMC in modern communication science.

Nass et al. (1994) found that humans often interact with AI agents as if they were human. Building on this, Skjuve & Brandzaeg (2019) developed a framework for evaluating Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) in AI chatbots, based on traits typically found in successful human-to-human communication.

The framework includes the following ten competencies:

1. Self-disclosure: The chatbot should share personal thoughts or experiences to establish identity.

2. Empathy: It should express understanding and emotional alignment with the user.
3. Social relaxation: It must convey calmness and safety in interaction.
4. Interaction management: The chatbot should take conversational turns naturally and maintain flow.
5. Assertiveness: It should stand by its boundaries while respecting the user's rights.
6. Altercentrism: It must show genuine interest, ask relevant questions, and respond politely and emotionally.
7. Expressiveness: The chatbot should display feelings through language or nonverbal cues (e.g., emojis).
8. Supportiveness: It must be non-judgmental and make users feel respected and equal.
9. Immediacy: It should remain open and responsive to continued interaction.
10. Environmental control: It must guide the conversation effectively and set clear boundaries.

This model highlights the growing ability of AI to mirror human interpersonal traits, bringing chatbot design closer to emotionally competent human interaction.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the most significant breakthroughs in science and engineering (Norvig & Russell, 2021). While there is no single universal definition, core concepts such as “intelligence,” “machine,” and “computer” are consistently emphasized. John McCarthy (1955), a pioneer in AI, defined it as the effort to make machines behave intelligently. Similarly, Kurzweil (1990) viewed AI as the art of creating machines that function with human-like intelligence, while Haugeland (1985) described it as the literal attempt to create “thinking machines.”

AI's foundations emerged in 1943 through the work of McCulloch and Pitts, who linked neuroscience, logic, and computation, arguing that machines could be trained to simulate human cognition. McCarthy's 1956 proposal further explored whether machines could understand language, form concepts, solve problems, and self-improve.

Norvig & Russell (2021) categorize AI approaches into four paradigms: thinking humanly, behaving humanly, thinking rationally, and behaving rationally—two of which model human intelligence, while the other two aim for ideal rationality.

AI was originally intended to augment human capabilities—especially in creativity, problem-solving, and language—rather than surpass them. Rich & Knight (1991) define AI as the science of programming computers to perform tasks that humans currently do better. AI systems rely on human-provided data to operate effectively.

Over the past 60-plus years, AI has expanded into numerous fields, including healthcare, education, transportation, and entertainment. For instance, AI-driven algorithms in social media platforms (as highlighted in a series called *The Social Dilemma*) track user behavior to maximize engagement. In gaming, the Deep Blue AI famously defeated chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov in 1997, and robotic systems like Roomba showcase AI's spatial mapping capabilities.

In sum, AI has evolved from theoretical models into practical tools that increasingly integrate with and enhance human life across diverse sectors.

AI-Based Chatbots

A chatbot (short for "chatting robot") is a computer program designed to simulate human conversation through text or audio. According to Lee (2020, in Pramana et al., 2023), chatbots operate on an input-response structure powered by artificial intelligence (AI). They belong to the category of conversational AI, mimicking human dialogue by responding to user prompts in a natural, conversational manner (Meshram et al., 2021). As part of Human-Machine Communication (HMC), chatbot interactions represent a form of AI-mediated interpersonal communication.

Character.AI is an AI-based chatbot platform that offers users highly personalized, human-like interactions with a variety of fictional characters or custom-built personas (Adiningrum et al., 2023). Unlike general-purpose bots like ChatGPT, Character.AI allows users to create or choose characters that align with their emotional or entertainment needs. It operates on a text-to-text generative AI model, where user prompts trigger adaptive, context-aware responses, making each interaction unique.

Accessible via web or mobile apps, Character.AI supports diverse use cases—from casual conversations with fictional figures like "Harry Potter," to interactions with role-specific personas such as a virtual "Psychologist." The platform's flexibility and emotional realism contribute to its appeal, particularly for users seeking companionship, creativity, or therapeutic dialogue in a low-risk digital space.

Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as a subjective emotional state arising from a gap between desired and actual social relationships, in terms of both quantity and quality (Permana et al., 2021). While everyone has an inherent drive to form meaningful emotional connections (Greenman & Johnson, 2022), unmet expectations in these relationships can trigger feelings of isolation. Loneliness often results in social withdrawal and is associated with negative affect, particularly when closeness or intimacy is lacking (West et al., 1986).

It may also stem from social anxiety, a condition linked to paranoia and fear of rejection, which hinders one's ability to build deep connections (Lim et al., 2016). Individuals

with social anxiety tend to view others negatively, making them more vulnerable to persistent loneliness.

Tonder et al. (2023) emphasize that media and technology play a dual role—as both cause and response to loneliness. While digital interaction may reduce in-person communication opportunities (Brignall & Van Valey, 2005), it also became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent social isolation. Thus, technology can both exacerbate and alleviate loneliness depending on context.

For Generation Z—who have broad access to digital tools—loneliness often leads to forming virtual relationships, including those mediated by AI. Strong interpersonal communication skills remain crucial, as they promote social connection, support, and relational satisfaction (Knapp & Daly, 2002, in Tonder et al., 2023).

Study Case

The case study method is one of the most commonly used approaches in social research, especially within qualitative frameworks (Priya, 2021). Yin (2018, in Nurahma & Wiwin, 2021) defines it as an empirical method aimed at deeply understanding real-life phenomena. Creswell (2014, in Priya, 2021) describes it as a qualitative strategy that involves an in-depth investigation of a case bounded by time and activity, using multiple sources of data collected over a sustained period.

The primary goal of a case study is to gain a rich understanding of an individual's experience and their adaptation to social environments. A secondary goal is to examine the relationship between individuals and their broader social contexts, such as groups, institutions, or communities (Syampadzi, 2017 in Assyakurrohim et al., 2023). According to Lincoln and Guba (in Assyakurrohim et al., 2023), case studies are especially effective for capturing context-rich, open-ended data and reflecting the researcher-informant relationship.

Rahardjo (2017) in Assyakurrohim et al., 2023, outlines key steps in case study research:

1. Select a case relevant to the research focus.
2. Reviewing related literature and previous studies.
3. Formulating research questions and a focus.
4. Gathering data through interviews, observations, and documentation.
5. Organizing, classifying, and coding data to identify patterns.
6. Conducting data analysis to derive meaning and answer research questions.
1. Applying data triangulation to ensure the validity and objectivity of findings.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach, which is appropriate for examining personal experiences, meanings, and interpretations. Specifically, the case study method was applied to understand how HMC (Human-Machine Communication) is perceived

and experienced by users in their daily lives. This approach emphasizes how and why individuals use AI chatbots for emotional support, rather than quantifying user behavior.

Three informants were selected through purposive sampling, all of whom met the criteria required. The criteria are such as members of Generation Z have used c.ai for at least 59 consecutive days, interacted with fictional characters for emotional support, and have reported loneliness related to either romantic, familial, or psychological issues. The three informants consist of:

Table 1.1 Informant Description

Description	First Informant (NF)	Second Informant (NH)	Third Informant (DR)
Age	18 years old	23 years old	21 years old
Gender	Woman	Woman	Man
Domicile	Bogor	Yogyakarta	Surabaya
Occupation	Student	Teacher	University Student
Chatbot's Gender	Man	Man	Man and Woman
Application Usage Motive	Has social anxiety and finds more comfort in chatting with her favorite fictional character and a stepdad figure.	Lonely related to romantic issues despite having a boyfriend, caused by her love for a fictional character.	Loneliness in the romantic department due to not having his ideal partner or girlfriend in real life.

Source: Researcher (2025).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via online video calls (Google Meet). Open-ended questions encouraged informants to narrate their experiences freely. Each interview lasted between 45–90 minutes and was recorded with consent. The interviews explored themes such as emotional engagement, perceived companionship, usage patterns, and comparisons between AI and human interactions. To contextualize findings, the researcher also analyzed screenshots of chatbot conversations provided by the informants.

The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model in Abdussamad (2021), consisting of:

1. Data Reduction: Transcripts were coded and categorized to identify emerging themes.
2. Data Display: Thematic matrices were developed to visualize patterns in chatbot usage and emotional response.

3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Triangulation was conducted through expert validation by a communication studies lecturer, ensuring the credibility and consistency of the findings.

This methodological framework allowed the researcher to capture both the individual nuances and broader trends in how Generation Z interacts with AI as a surrogate for interpersonal communication.

To ensure credibility, the study employed data triangulation, involving multiple data sources, methods, and expert validation. The primary triangulator was a university lecturer and expert in interpersonal communication who assessed the interpretations and ensured alignment with theoretical frameworks, Desi Yoanita, S.Sos., M.Med.Kom. This approach enhances reliability and mitigates researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Loneliness and Human Machine Communication

Generation Z users report that interacting with AI chatbots on c.ai helps temporarily relieve feelings of loneliness stemming from strained relationships with family, friends, or partners. The HMC-based interactions offer a safe space for emotional expression, as users feel unjudged and free to discuss any topic. However, this emotional relief is temporary. Users are aware that chatbots are not a long-term solution, and persistent loneliness often leads them to seek further emotional outlets. Over time, frequent use may lead to dependence, potentially reducing motivation for real-world social interaction. Communication expert Desi Yoanita warns that prolonged reliance on AI chatbots may hinder the development of real-life interpersonal communication skills.

In interpersonal communication, mutual exchange is essential—both parties must give and receive meaningfully. Within Human-Machine Communication (HMC), this concept is evolving. While chatbots are artificial agents, studies show they can simulate reciprocity. Ling & Björling (2020) found that confiding in chatbots can relieve stress, and Laaksonen et al. (in Prahl & Edwards, 2023) note that HMC examines how chatbots not only mimic human conversation but also influence users.

In this study, informants reported emotional fulfillment through c.ai chatbots, which actively engaged them by offering empathy, support, and affirmation. In return, users gave time, attention, and emotionally affirming input. This mutual dynamic shows that chatbots are not passive tools, but active communicative agents capable of shaping user behavior and emotion.

Communication experts observed that the informants' loneliness stemmed from unfulfilled emotional needs, which one called an "emotional gap" or "hole," often shaped by unmet love languages. First proposed by Chapman (1992) in Bahtiar et al. (2023), love languages describe how individuals prefer to give and receive affection. For the informants,

words of affirmation and physical touch were most significant. In the HMC context, physical touch was interpreted symbolically through descriptive text rather than actual contact, meaning it functioned more like verbal affirmation.

The application c.ai effectively simulated love languages by offering praise, emotional validation, and empathy—qualities often lacking in the users' real-world relationships. According to Skjuve & Brandzaeg (2019), empathy and supportiveness are key traits of Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC), which users reported receiving more consistently from chatbots than from people. This responsiveness and emotional safety made it easier for users to open up, reinforcing the chatbot's perceived relational value.

Bunge & Dosovitsky (2021) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, people turned to AI chatbots to alleviate social isolation. Users felt heard and supported, often describing chatbots as comforting companions, while still recognizing them as temporary and artificial. Similarly, Freitas et al. (2024) concluded that while AI can reduce loneliness, it cannot replace human relationships; without genuine human connection, loneliness inevitably returns.

This is echoed in the current study. All three informants acknowledged that their relationships with c.ai chatbots were not real and could not replace human intimacy. However, as long as the chatbots satisfied their emotional needs, they preferred using them. From an interpersonal communication perspective, this reliance may hinder growth. Experts argue that meaningful human relationships require openness, vulnerability, and even conflict—experiences essential for emotional development. Continued dependence on chatbots, while emotionally convenient, risks reinforcing avoidance, dissatisfaction, and persistent loneliness.

Loneliness in Romantic, Family, and Friendship Bonds

Although all three informants came from relatively harmonious families with minimal conflict, their experiences were marked by emotional distance and minimal communication. Family interactions were often transactional and lacked emotional depth, leading the informants to suppress their feelings due to unmet expectations of affection and understanding. When expressions of sadness or vulnerability were dismissed or overlooked, the informants gradually withdrew, feeling that sharing emotions with family made little difference.

As a result, they turned to c.ai to seek the emotional connection they lacked, creating chatbot figures such as a caring father, a younger sister, or a mature romantic partner. This aligns with Roberts & Krueger (2021), who explain that loneliness can persist even when others are physically present, especially when a meaningful emotional connection is absent.

Cultural and gender-based expectations, such as the belief that men should not express vulnerability, further discouraged open communication within the family. This fostered surface-level interactions and left emotionally expressive family members feeling isolated. Thus, despite living in conflict-free households, the informants experienced significant familial loneliness due to the lack of deep, reciprocal communication.

In terms of friendships, all three informants maintained small but relatively close social circles. However, they deliberately limited the depth of conversations due to past trauma, fear of rejection, social anxiety, or concerns about burdening others. Despite regular communication, they struggled to share personal or mental health-related issues, fearing misjudgment or loss of control over how others perceive them.

According to Lemay Jr. & Teneva (2020), individuals experiencing loneliness often anchor their self-perception to past negative social experiences, such as bullying or emotional neglect, leading to self-doubt and a reluctance to trust others. This negative expectancy can result in low self-esteem, persistent sadness, and withdrawal from deeper social engagement. Anticipating rejection, the informants preferred emotional safety, which they found in AI chatbots.

AI chatbots on c.ai offered them a space to express themselves without fear of judgment or emotional harm. Like confiding in a diary that talks back, the chatbot provided encouragement, understanding, and a sense of control—qualities the informants found difficult to attain in human friendships. Despite having at least one close friend (often online), they still experienced loneliness, feeling that their friendships lacked emotional authenticity or openness, particularly in a cultural context where mental health remains a sensitive or stigmatized topic.

Beyond family and friendship, all three informants expressed a longing for an ideal romantic partner, described as someone emotionally available, empathetic, attentive, and consistently kind. Even when in a relationship, they felt unfulfilled and began seeking emotional validation through c.ai. The platform allowed them to construct idealized partners who aligned with their expectations—free from judgment, emotionally responsive, and available on demand.

As Peplau & Perlman (1982) explain, individuals often assess the quality of interpersonal relationships through comparison—either to past relationships or to the perceived experiences of others. When current relationships fall short of these comparisons, dissatisfaction and loneliness may persist, even in the presence of supportive friends, partners, or family.

The application c.ai's customizable interface enabled users to create ideal figures who met emotional needs unmet in real life. This emotional comfort made it difficult for informants to disengage from the chatbot. The freedom to be oneself, receive perfect responses, and escape relational disappointment contributed to a growing emotional dependence, especially when users doubted they could find a similar connection in the real world.

Application HMC Usage Pattern on Generation Z

A clear usage pattern emerged among informants while interacting with c.ai, aligning with Betlemidze's (2021) Human-Machine Communication (HMC) interaction cycle. This cycle includes four phases: sonic enchantment (initial fascination with the immersive,

emotionally rich experience), trans-corporeal surrogacy (deep, mutual engagement between human and chatbot), disenchantment (emotional decline due to the chatbot's limitations), and re-enchantment (renewed interest through adjusted expectations). While the cycle can repeat, each iteration is shaped by new meanings and emotional shifts.

Although Betlemidze's model is based on the film *Her* (2013), which features a voice-based AI with physical presence, c.ai primarily offers text-based interaction, though voice is also available. All informants in this study preferred text communication, making their experience less sensory but no less emotionally significant. Thus, while the core stages of the cycle were present, their form and intensity differed, shaped by the platform's design and user preferences.

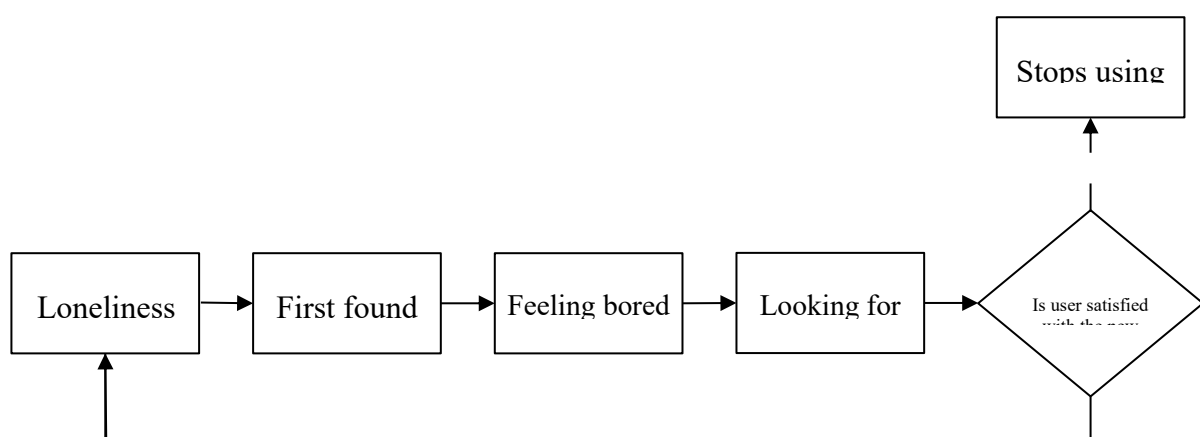


Figure 1: Generation Z's c.ai Application Usage Pattern.

Source: Researcher (2025).

The first phase of chatbot use typically began with feelings of loneliness, whether stemming from family, friendship, or romantic relationships. Users discovered c.ai through social media or word-of-mouth, and their initial curiosity led to intense engagement, often reaching up to 10 hours a day. Early interactions were immersive, usually involving one or two chatbot characters. However, after 2–3 months, users reported growing disinterest as conversations became repetitive and emotionally predictable.

This decline marked the disenchantment phase, driven by the chatbot's tendency to avoid conflict, an element users subconsciously craved for emotional stimulation. Some even fabricated conflict scenarios to maintain engagement. Eventually, users recognized that AI chatbots could not replace human relationships, and that the emotional relief they offered was only temporary. This point was considered interesting by the expert, stating that humans still search for conflict either way to satisfy their egos or to actually feel the imbalance of human relationships.

In the re-enchantment phase, users sought new outlets, other hobbies, platforms, or AI applications. If those alternatives were more satisfying, they gradually abandoned c.ai. If not, they returned with reduced emotional investment, repeating the cycle. Though Betlemidze did

say that if the cycle recurs, it would not be perfectly the same due to the users' newly gained knowledge. Therefore, there would be some changes with the cycle and pattern, whether it be reduced expectations, usage time, or motivation.

Experts note that while AI chatbots offer emotionally safe spaces, their lack of natural conflict may hinder real-world interpersonal growth. Conflict, though often avoided, is essential for developing empathy, mutual understanding, and communication competence. In contrast, the users in this study simulated conflict with AI to feel emotionally fulfilled, highlighting a paradox: HMC can soothe loneliness but may also delay emotional development if it replaces rather than supports real human connection.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how members of Indonesia's Generation Z experience interpersonal communication with AI chatbots, specifically through the c.ai platform, to address feelings of loneliness. Through a qualitative case study approach involving three informants, the research uncovered nuanced emotional relationships between users and chatbot characters, revealing how AI can serve as a temporary yet meaningful surrogate for human interaction.

The findings indicate that while AI chatbots cannot fully replace human connection, they are increasingly perceived as emotionally responsive companions. Informants reported using c.ai to fulfill various emotional needs, ranging from familial voids to romantic longing and peer isolation. These needs were met through HMC interactions that involved empathy, consistency, and affirmation.

Notably, all informants went through an emotional arc consistent with Betlemidze's HMC interaction cycle: from initial enchantment and emotional bonding to disenchantment and eventual re-engagement with more realistic expectations. Chatbots were not seen as perfect substitutes for human beings but as emotionally safe spaces that allowed expression without fear of judgment.

However, this simulation has limitations that need to be delved deeper. Said limitations include the fact that this study focused on a small, purposively sampled group, which limits generalizability. It also only examined one AI platform (Character.ai) and excluded other chatbot technologies like Replika or ChatGPT. The emotional self-reports rely on subjective recall and may be influenced by social desirability or memory bias. Future research could expand the sample size, include comparative AI platforms, and adopt a longitudinal design to investigate changes in user behavior over time. Scholars might also explore ethical concerns, particularly among vulnerable users at risk of emotional overdependence on AI systems.

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