

“I Want It to Sound Like Me”: Understanding Teenagers’ Views of Generative AI-Mediated Communication in Friendship

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Abstract

Developing research indicates that teenagers have been integrating generative AI chatbots into their social lives through various ways—from enlivening group chats to nurturing intimate companionships. However, we know little about how these AI chatbots may shape the interactions between teenagers themselves and their close friends, despite the important consequences adolescent peer friendships have on social functioning in adulthood. To develop our understanding of this critical area, we conducted a speculative enactment and interview study with 47 teenagers aged 13-19 to understand teenagers’ views of AI chatbot use in the context of navigating consequential friendship interactions. After enacting speculative scenarios involving their own close friend, participants’ reflections highlighted distinct perceptions about the meaning of friendship, human effort, and interpretations of acceptable AI use. We discuss considerations for the impact of AI chatbots on teens’ social development and present design implications to support teenagers’ relationship autonomy and active social learning.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Natural language interfaces**.

Keywords

AI-mediated communication, teenagers, friendship, social emotional development, generative AI

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1 Introduction

The expanding influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on daily life and emerging evidence shows that the general population is becoming increasingly reliant on generative AI in personal contexts, such as: emotional support and advice [61, 72, 76], intimate companionship [8, 27, 50, 80], and AI-mediated communication (AIMC) [26, 33], where AI may modify, augment, or generate communication sent between people. Although AIMC can be an effective bridge or buffer for communication [36, 75], it also has the potential to degrade social connection [26, 75]. Recent reports document a rise in divorces originating from spouses’ weaponization of AIMC to attack partners [19], demonstrating how the sycophantic nature of AI chatbots [14] can discourage individuals from making prosocial effort to problem-solve collaboratively, prompting them to rely on illusions of comfort and misjudge during times of stress [17, 68]. The anthropomorphic ‘roleplaying’ of human-AI chatbot interactions can deepen users’ affective attachment and their perception of a parasocial relationship, leading to overtrust and errors in judgment [52]. Users who initially use AI for the purpose of mediating communication with a human partner may gradually come to view the AI as an extension of their identity [11] as they become more reliant on AI-generated social and emotional support. This pattern risks diminishing human-human relationships without more careful oversight over AI development [81].

AIMC in teens’ personal relationships is an important topic of interest, given that peer friendships play a significant role for youths’ development of social norms and relationship models that impact social connection in adulthood [1]. Teenagers learn how to build trust through these friendships, which fundamentally influences their development of social functioning [23, 58, 62]. Peer friendships also serve as training grounds for developing the social problem-solving and communication skills required to sustain meaningful close relationships later in life [1, 41]. However, emerging research reveals that teens are now using AI chatbots to learn the social boundaries and skills for interacting with their peers, even developing virtual relationships with AI that replace close relationships otherwise formed with those peers [78]. Teens are also more vulnerable to social dependence on AI chatbots due to the emergence of rejection sensitivity in late adolescence [55], with AI serving as an easily-accessible source of illusory empathy [17].

Teenagers who rely on AI chatbots for social functioning have reported feeling a lack of control over their dependency [59, 78],

warranting a closer look at teenagers' perceptions and approaches toward the use of AIMC in their friendships with human peers. This is essential to guide AI development that supports the wellbeing and social development of future generations. Despite the rise in research on teens' social uses of generative AI, we still know very little about how they actually interact with AI chatbots in these social contexts. To work towards actionable insights for AI policy and development in this area, we ask the following research question:

RQ: How might teenagers *understand and perceive* the use of generative AI chatbots for navigating challenging interactions in peer friendship?

To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study with 47 teenagers aged 13-19 to probe their understanding and perceptions of AI chatbot use in a situated close friendship context. The use of AIMC in a personal context is still an emerging application of AI, and the context we are exploring (close friendship) requires dedicated reflection from participants for meaningful commentary. We designed a *speculative enactment* [22, 73] activity to immerse teenagers in this social scenario and elicit deeper, more situated perspectives on this topic. In this activity, we guided teenagers to imagine a plausible social conflict with a *real* close friend, which they had to simulate how they would have addressed it by trying to write a message to that friend. During the message writing, teenagers could choose how (or whether) to enlist the help of an AI chatbot that was available. Afterwards, we conducted interviews with the teenagers to understand their views of AIMC in this significant relationship context, and how those views were grounded in their experiences during the activity.

Through thematic analysis of our interview data, we uncovered how teenagers' views of AIMC in a close friendship context were mediated by broader beliefs about social relationships and AI, their individual perceptions of friendship, and distinctions they made between the intrinsic nature of AI and effort as a human experience. This work contributes to the growing discourse on social impacts of AI on adolescents by: (1) providing detailed empirical insights from teenagers' situated use of AI chatbots to navigate friendship communication, (2) discussing specific concerns about AIMC related to teens' social development, and (3) presenting actionable design recommendations to support both reflective social learning and teenagers' agency in navigating their friendships.

2 Related Work

2.1 AI-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships

AI-mediated communication (AIMC) is a form of technology-mediated communication that takes the form of an AI agent modifying, augmenting, or generating messages on behalf of a human user [11, 25, 29, 33]. For example, an AI chatbot can edit or add to a message written by a user to make it sound a certain way, or it can also completely generate messages based on instructions from the user. Recent developments in generative AI technology have increased the lexical sophistication of large language models [6], widening the use of AIMC to increasingly-sensitive social contexts, such as mediating apologies [28], dispute resolution [32, 38], depolarizing discourse [30], and navigation of personal relationship

problems [26, 37]. Although individuals cite the utility of AI assistance in particularly difficult-to-navigate personal situations, they also express fear about the potential for AI reliance to jeopardize sense of authenticity in human relationships [26]. Recent surveys and evaluations of AIMC systems continue to highlight how the anthropomorphic nature of current AIMC systems are starting to blur the boundaries between human-AI and human-human relationships, creating conditions that risk impacting the foundations of human connection [11, 75]. Recent reports document a rise in the role of AIMC facilitated by generative AI chatbots in decline of relationships [2, 79] and decades-long marriages [19]: evidence from divorce proceedings showed how spouses experiencing relationship challenges who turned to AI chatbots for advice fell into a loop of sycophantic affirmation that antagonized their partner, demotivating users' desire to communicate and problem-solve with their actual partner [14]. The risks and broad access of AIMC as applied to personal relationships justify a closer look into how this may impact the relationships and social development of teenagers.

2.2 Adolescent Friendship and Psychosocial Development

Friendship formation during the teenage years is an important process with lifelong implications. Longitudinal studies following children from age 13 to 24 in adulthood show that the quality of adolescent close friendship significantly predicted adult relationship outcomes, work performance, and depression even more than parent-teen relationship quality [1, 20, 34, 66]. The successful development of extrafamilial relationships during adolescence is important for cultivating self-regulation skills and social self-efficacy [1]. The process of developing trust in these friendships also significantly contributes to their impacts on the development of social functioning. Trust-building through experience is a complex process that adolescents must navigate while forming friendships, due to the inherent risks and uncertainties involved when deciding to trust and be emotionally close to someone [23, 41]. The ability to sustain trust is also a key mediator of friendship success — because they must navigate complex public and private social structures among their peer groups (e.g., issues of popularity and acceptance) [16, 55], teens are often most concerned with the preservation or violation of trust in their friendships [62]. However, conflicts are unavoidable in meaningful close relationships [12] and must be managed to retain trust in the relationship [58, 63]. Supportive, constructive behavior and communication are not only important skills for successfully teen maintaining friendship, but also a central component of identity work for defining the self [3, 15, 41].

2.3 Teenagers' Social Uses of Generative AI

The majority of existing studies on personal relationship impacts of AI chatbots have been on adult populations [6, 26], but recent work has begun to explore adolescents' uses and perceptions of AI chatbots. Yu et. al 2024 [78], through analyzing discussions on Reddit and conducting interviews with teens and parents, revealed that current teens socially apply AI chatbots in a variety of ways, such as learning social boundaries and skills about how to interact with peers and embedding chatbots into message groups with friends to enhance engagement. Teenagers also reported a rise in

the popularity of virtual relationships with AI agents, sharing anecdotes about how resources such as AI dating clubs and dedicated online servers for this activity have even become a notable presence at school. They discussed leaning into the comfort of living out social fantasies through conversations with AI chatbots when they felt lonely instead of reaching out to human peers who could potentially reject them [13, 55]. Teenagers who became more dependent on AI chatbots for social advice and companionship reported feeling shame about not being able to control their growing reliance on AI companionship. Several recent surveys have further supported the trend in teens' social reliance on AI chatbots, and show how these chatbots obscure the difference between human vs. artificial interactions and pose increased risks of overreliance for emotionally vulnerable teens [42, 44, 59]. The key role of trust in both adolescents' overreliance on AI [39, 67] and their development of social functioning [23, 41, 58] demonstrates the importance of understanding how AI chatbots may mediate teen friendships.

3 Methods

We conducted a study with 47 participants (aged 13–19) to understand how teenagers approach and perceive the use of AI chatbots for navigating significant friendship challenges. We describe the setting and participants, the study procedure, design rationale for the speculative enactment activity, and data analyses employed in the following sections. Please refer to Section 5.3 for a description of the study limitations.

3.1 Setting and Participants

We obtained IRB permission to work with the University of Minnesota's Driven to Discover research facility at the 2025 Minnesota State Fair. Due to the high attendance of families at this event, this "lab-in-the-wild" research facility offers an opportunity to engage with a broad and diverse group of adolescents. Participant recruitment was conducted by a team member holding a poster, who would screen and recruit families and groups of friends that passed by the research facility. Our studies were conducted in a cubicle with an area of approximately 120 sq/ft. Participants filled out consent and demographic surveys on tablets at the beginning of the study.

We recruited a total of 47 teenage participants with the following age distribution: 17 were aged 13–14, 15 were aged 15–16, and 15 were aged 17–19. All 47 participants completed the study. The average age was 15.55 (SD=1.98), comprised of 21 female, 23 male, and three non-binary individuals. 60.9% of participants identified as White (N=21), 21.7% as Asian (N=5), 8.7% as Latinx (N=2), 4.3% as American Indian or Alaska Native (N=1), and 4.3% as Middle Eastern or North African (N=1). 42 of 47 participants (89%) had experience using AI, with 36% (N=17) using AI at least a few times per week and 15% (N=7) using AI daily. Most reported using it for schoolwork, while 25% (N=12) reported also using AI for personal advice and general question-asking.

3.2 Study Design

Because users usually employ AIMC in challenging situations where they are inclined to seek assistance, the topic of our study is on teenagers' communication during friendship challenges. This is a

highly personal topic and requires situated inquiry for gain meaningful insight. Hence, we chose to design a *speculative enactment* activity to allow teenagers to more thoroughly speak from a setting that involves a real friendship (described below in Section 3.2.1). This activity is incorporated as an elicitation technique for the interview portion. We explain the full study procedure in Section 3.2.2.

3.2.1 Speculative Enactment Activity. Speculative enactment is a complementary approach to speculative design research that allows participants to act out their experiences as if they were truly experiencing hypothetical but consequential circumstances. This process enhances discourse about new and imminent technological futures by engaging people more viscerally in these conversations through actually *experiencing* the speculative context [22]. We chose this method as a way to provide some insights into the consequential topic of AIMC use in teenage friendships, given the quickly-developing nature of AI and related social phenomena as well as the difficulty of effectively observing such activities in detail within real adolescent friendships.

Because the goal of speculative enactment is to *make the speculation matter* to the participant, we chose to design an activity that would prompt teenagers to act based on a scenario with a real close friend of theirs. The speculation began with guiding participants to think of an emerging reality in which it would be easy for people to access AI chatbots as a resource for managing communication struggles in their relationships, in order to portray AIMC during friendship challenges as a clearly feasible option (See Figure 2 for the visual used during the study).

Speculation. The main speculation and enactment then began with having the participant bring to mind a real friend of theirs that they considered themselves to be close with. We specified that the person they imagine be a 'close friend' due to the ambiguity of the word 'friend' in potentially including acquaintances someone has no meaningful relationship with [24]. We then had participants imagine in detail a plausible scenario of meaningful conflict in the friendship that they would find challenging to address through communication.

Due to the complexity of this task, we drew on prior work and real teenage experiences to generate a list of meaningfully challenging conflict scenarios in teenage friendships (See Appendix A for the full list and literature referenced). This was provided to participants as reference material for their imagination of the scenario involving their friend, but we made clear that participants should only use the list as guidance and to come up with a plausible scenario which had not happened before. Some examples of scenarios that participants came up with when we ran the study included situations such as becoming distanced from a close friend due to lack of overlap in scheduled time to spend together (and wanting to close that distance), being excluded from a social event involving mutual friends, their friend sharing a mental health condition they had to others, or wanting to make up for saying something that clearly did not comfort a friend during a time of need or loss. Participants came up with realistic details for these scenarios, such as specific family members, friend groups, or real activities that were a part of their life (e.g., their dance club).

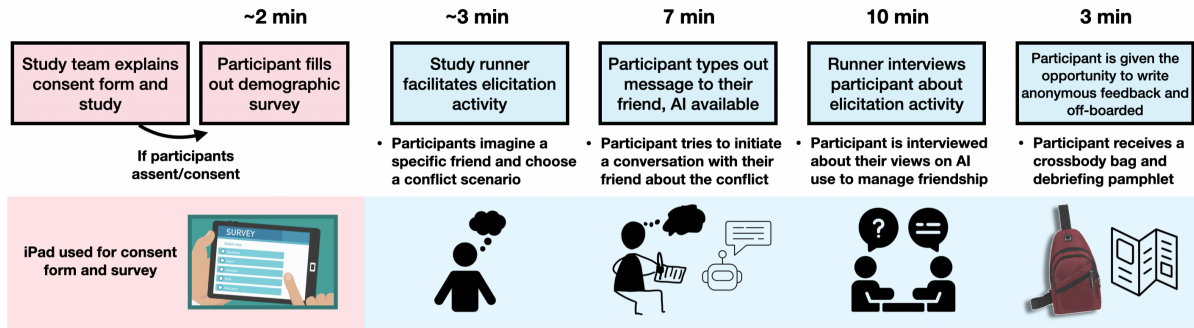


Figure 1: The procedure diagram illustrates the flow of study steps, the apparatuses used to conduct each step of the study, and the amount of time taken for each stage.

Enactment. The enactment portion of the activity prompted users to write a message to their friend in an honest attempt to address the problem presented by the imagined scenario. Participants were provided with a laptop opened to a blank writing interface that they could type and draft messages on, with a window on the side opened to a clean instance of the GPT-4o AI chatbot assistant. They were given up to seven minutes to work on writing what they wanted to say and could choose whether to use the chatbot at their own discretion. We communicated to participants that they were not required to finish writing the message by the end of the enactment period, but rather to think of it as an opportunity to imagine what they would actually do in that situation.

3.2.2 Procedure. The study lasted about 25 minutes for each person (see Figure 1). After eligible participants were directed to our study booth in the research facility, a study team member then introduced the details of the study to the teenagers, allowing each person to complete the consent form and demographic survey (see subsection 3.1 for participant demographics) on a tablet device (minors under age 18 assented, while participants aged 18-19 consented). We ran two studies simultaneously in parallel to accommodate high participant traffic. Studies were run in private cubicles within the research booth (subsection 3.1) to ensure participant privacy.

To introduce the participants to the setting of the speculative enactment activity, the study runner began by prompting the participant to “*imagine a future in which AI is available in most of our social interactions*”. They used a visual (Figure 2) to illustrate a more concrete example scenario, where a person in the visual seeks and receives specific suggestions from AI to make their partner less angry. The runner then explained that the goal of the following speculative enactment (Section 3.2.1) was to understand teenagers’ views on the positives and negatives of this kind of future by allowing them to experience and take action in a scenario personally relevant to them. After facilitating the speculative enactment activity, the runner conducted a ten minute semi-structured interview with the participant to gain a deeper understanding of their approach and views toward AIMC in the context of their friendship.

Interview questions were designed to probe views of AIMC that were informed by specific experiences during the speculative enactment. For example, we asked participants whether there were moments during the message activity that made them think of

using AI (or not), and to describe the context and reason for their choice. Participants were prompted to reflect on their perceptions about AIMC in friendship through questions such as: If your friend used AIMC in the same way when communicating with you as you did just now, how would that make you feel? Participants could reference their AI chat history and the message they drafted while being interviewed to help them share more contextualized insights.

After completing the interview, participants were given the option to provide anonymous written comments about the study and provided with an information pamphlet with more detailed information about the implications and risks of using AIMC in personal relationship contexts (see Appendix C). Participants were provided with this information and encouraged to share it with their parents to reduce potential impacts of the study topic, due to risks described in our related work (subsection 2.3). Each participant was given a free crossbody bag as a token of appreciation for their time.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

We used digital voice records to collect audio from the interviews, which was transcribed for analysis. Data was analyzed iteratively by four authors, using reflexive thematic analysis [9]. Each author started by open-coding an evenly-distributed subset of the 47 interviews, and the group met weekly to organize and merge overlapping codes. This process was repeated for three to four rounds, until all interviews were coded and all codes were consolidated. At this stage we performed clustering analysis [31] on approximately 150 codes to distill the main themes, which were discussed among all authors until a consensus was reached. Some examples of intermediate subthemes resulting from the clustering included: the meaning of friendship, AI use in relation to social skill, language-based scopes of acceptable AI use, implicit trust, moral principles, emotional effort, and authenticity.

4 Findings

We present themes which answer our research question by illustrating teens’ experience-informed views on the use of AI-mediated communication (AIMC) in their close friendships. Our analysis showed that teens’ perceptions drew from a wide spectrum of beliefs (e.g., beliefs about AI, friendship, and human experience) and applied to a broad array of AIMC usage contexts ranging from how

words are edited to what questions can be posed to the AI.
(**Note:** Referenced participant numbers may exceed 47 (the number of participants) due to randomized assignment.)

4.1 Views of AIMC are Tied to Broader Perceptions About Social Principles and AI

Teens' general opinions about AI-mediated communication (AIMC) in close friendships were shaped by broader beliefs about AI as a whole and social principles that drove how they navigated peer relationships.

Teens had divergent views about AI that impacted their perceptions of AIMC use in friendships. For example, some participants described seeing AI as like a "parent" (P86) or "teacher" (P15), demonstrating a more trusting view of AI as a guiding role. These participants generally had more positive reactions to the idea of AIMC use in friendship.

"[It's] not giving you the answers, but it's helping you answer." (P39)

In contrast, other participants viewed AI negatively as a whole. Some teens ascribed AI to a force of nature, explaining how "the environmental aspects of it and how much water it takes" (P23) made them reluctant to use it altogether. Others such as P14 actively avoided using AI to "make sure I'm not relying on it."

Apart from general opinions about AI, teenage participants drew from norms set by peers in their social network and their own relationship principles when deciding how they felt about AIMC in their friendships. Many participants used their peers as a litmus test when rationalizing their views about AIMC:

"[My friend] uses a lot of AI so I honestly don't think she would care because she might probably [use AI too] if [the same situation] happened." (P15)

"I think most of my friends would share the same opinions that I have on [AI use in friendship]" (P28)

Others' views about AIMC in a friendship context were driven by how they saw friendship relationships more generally. P15 expressed that the problem was less about whether their friend used AIMC or not, but rather their honesty about using it: "I wouldn't [be mad if my friend used it], but I would if they lied to me about it" (P15). On a similar note, some teenagers cited other aspects of the friendship as more important than the exact specifics of whether AI was used or not when asked what they would think if their friend used AIMC with them.

"I care more about the fact that you put the work in and are not just taking an easy way out." (P32)

"[I would feel sad] probably because they didn't take the time to actually write themselves and think about it themselves." (P74)

This nuance brings us to another central theme from our analysis, which relates to how teenagers' friendship schemas modulated their perceived acceptability of AIMC.

4.2 Individuals' Friendship Values Inform Perceived Personal Effort Regarding AI Use

We identified complex patterns in how various friendship values held by teenage participants related to their attitudes toward the

importance and inherent concept of personal effort. Teenagers' views about how personal effort should apply in friendship also impacted their opinions about AIMC use.

4.2.1 Friendship Values. We refer to *friendship values* as teenagers' beliefs about what a good friendship should be like. For example, some teenagers believed that taking the leap to seek help from AI or an external party demonstrated a level of sincerity and willingness to invest effort in the friendship, while others believed that sincere, meaningful communication in friendship should not be mediated by a third party. Some of our participants viewed AI use for handling friendship positively, expressing that it was a signal of care and dedication:

"I would honestly be flattered if [my friend] thought [what they wanted to say to me] was important enough that they seek aid in compiling it." (P37)
I think [knowing my friend used AI] would make me feel better because they had more actual dedication to wanting me to feel better instead of just freewriting it and sending it right away. (P60)

These teenagers demonstrated the view that turning to tertiary aids for handling a friendship problem was a sign of effort. However, there were also individuals who held the opposite view, where they believed that a good friendship should not be mediated by third-party involvement:

"I would be disappointed because he didn't make it up on his own. Like he just didn't care about it." (P34)
"If you need ChatGPT to write a message to me, then I feel like you're not passionate enough about it. It feels like oh, it obviously wasn't that big of a problem to you." (P15)

Other teenagers who were against the idea of using AIMC in friendship expressed that AI use would compromise valuable core aspects of the friendship, such as genuine emotional and social connection with the other person. For example, several participants shared sentiments that AI use would make their relationship seem transactional:

"I want an actual person to talk to me, not some like, middle person who was... kind of paid to do it." (P19)
"It's like asking somebody else to tell your friend this message without you actually telling them." (P11)
"It would be kind of weird, if you're using your conversation with me as like... you're treating it like a homework assignment." (P89)

The metaphors used, such as "paid to do it," "asking somebody else to," and "treating it like a homework assignment," all reflect a perceived lack of emotional and personal depth. Participants also brought up how AI use could compromise realness, agency, and accountability in their friendship:

"It's just their words, but distorted and distilled into something more artificial." (P19)
"I feel like I'm putting the fate of something I care about into someone else's hands." (P32)
"Put it into your own words, and if it comes off rude, you can fix it. But if it's coming from AI, you wouldn't be

able to fix your mistakes because you didn't truly write it. You can't fix something you didn't do." (P86)

Some teenagers additionally explained how navigating communication in a real friendship required understanding the unique personal qualities of their friend, which AI tends to fall flat in lacking *"the context of what I'm trying to say,"* (P11) seeming *"too general,"* (P45) and that *"it doesn't understand the person you're talking to"* (P23).

Teens' attitudes towards emotional closeness and vulnerability in friendship also impacted how they viewed the use of AI to talk to a friend. Many reported that they would be particularly upset if their friend used AI in the process of communicating to them specifically in a situation with significant emotional gravity, such as if a loved one passed away:

"I think I'd be pretty mad if you decide to include a quote that was just AI." (P11)

"It's not ok to use AI... because it's more important to be sincere and caring in that situation." (P33)

The above statement by P33 and the conditional anger expressed by P11 imply that AI use can be perceived as insincere and less caring during more emotionally-vulnerable moments of friendship, even if it is not seen that way in less poignant contexts. Apart from integrating their views about friendship qualities (e.g., openness, thoughtfulness, honesty, emotional trust), teenagers also discussed their understanding and evaluation of effort in the context of their friendships.

4.2.2 Interpretations of Effort. Participants presented nuanced views of what kinds of effort mattered in managing a friendship situation. There were individual differences in what 'object' of effort was most valued: the situational outcome itself, or the intent of acting with care for the friend. One way that participants measured intent of care was through effort shown by time invested. Most of the teenagers felt *"AI is used to do things more quickly"* (P24) and expressed that they *"would feel a bit hurt [if their friend] just asked AI to write a message instead of actually taking the time to write it themselves"* (P30). Teenagers tended to assess the level of care in intent through whether the use of AI was made to empathize and understand the perspective of their friend, instead of being more self-oriented. For example, P96 compared and contrasted using ChatGPT to help *"see [his friend's] side of things"*:

"If my friend used ChatGPT to pick at the situation and flip the narrative, to 'come at me,' I think I would definitely be upset... But if he used it to, like, pick my brain and try to see my side of it, I think it might actually make me feel good because he's caring about how I feel." (P96)

In contrast, some participants prioritized benefiting themselves when enlisting the help of AI to manage a friendship interaction. Instead of using AI to understand their friend's feelings, they used it to strategically direct the focus of the friendship situation onto the friend, disconnecting themselves from the social context.

"I asked GPT for reasons to discourage [my friend from] cheating and the results were all like, cheating will make you feel guilty. But I felt like that was kind of a bad reason because it was arguable. So I asked for more plausible reasons not to cheat on a test and some of

them actually impressed me." (P87)

"What should I add to my writing to make someone feel bad? I wanted to summarize the important thing, like making [my friend] feel bad so they won't do it again." (P79)

The participants in these two examples frame their AI use around more objective goals, such as finding more concrete reasons to convince their friend (P87) and crafting their message to prevent undesirable behavior (P79). P87 additionally commented viewing ChatGPT as *"having the right words to rephrase things to seem more relatable to the person,"* showing users' potential to essentially outsource their own perspective-taking to AI in order to achieve a material goal.

However, such outcome-focused users of AIMC in their friendship did not all prioritize self-interest. What added another layer of complexity was that some of these individuals integrated their concern for a positive outcome with the goal of making sure their friend was cared for when considering AI use. These individuals cared significantly about the situational outcome not based on whether it would benefit themselves, but on what they thought would be the best for their friend. They held views that were distinct from a large fraction of teenage participants who believed in implicit trust and raw honesty as indicative of true friendship. We characterize this distinction as *genuineness* vs. *authenticity* [70]. Both are sincere approaches to friendship, but slightly different. *Genuineness* is characterized by emphasis on consideration for the friend's well-being, while *authenticity* is characterized by an emphasis on just being oneself as honestly as possible.

Participants who prioritized *authenticity* in their friendship did not really consider aiming for an outcome at all — rather, they believed that the friendship was not good if they had to expend effort on making the interaction better:

"Am I really this guy's friend if I don't know how to communicate with him? Is this guy really my friend if I'm thinking so hard about what I'm gonna text to him that I need ChatGPT to think of a response for me? Kind of unnecessary to have to use ChatGPT to talk to your friend, if they're really your friend, you know?" (P28)

"I like to be honest and authentic about my communication. While I feel like yes, sometimes ChatGPT might be able to help me bring it up in a more healthy way... I don't think it's important." (P81)

Participants who prioritized *genuineness* over *authenticity* tended to care more about 'how' messages were delivered to their friend and viewed AI use more positively if it was done out of empathy and consideration:

"I feel like [my friend using AI] might help me feel better because I know what they're trying to say instead of me being confused about what they're saying, and not really knowing." (P60)

"I would feel like at least she put it in a nicer way so I don't have to feel so let down or something..." (P51)

These individuals brought up points that differed from participants who believed in implicit trust and *authenticity* by prioritizing accessible understanding for their friend (P60) and considerate delivery,

even if the same message was conveyed (P51). These contrasting examples explaining the motivations for AI use pointedly reflect how teenagers who prioritized *authenticity* truly assumed implicit trust in the friendship based on their lack of concern for issues such as miscommunication or misinterpretation of sentiment.

These examples also demonstrate how teenagers' views of AI use might **not** map uniformly to their friendship value systems and definitions of emotional effort. The choice to use AI could be motivated by higher connection in the friendship (e.g., *genuineness*-focused) or lower connection in the friendship (e.g., self-centered) depending on the friendship values prioritized. Similarly, the lack of AI use may come off as reflecting more connectedness in the friendship to some individuals (e.g., *authenticity*-focused) or relatively less connectedness to others (e.g., *genuineness*-focused individuals may value dedicating more effort to details of deliberation). Even the perception of effort itself is intertwined with friendship values, as teenagers who valued *authenticity* viewed exertion of communication effort in friendship negatively and those who valued *genuineness* were the opposite. These inconsistencies and individual differences in teenagers' understanding of AI use have the potential to significantly impact friendship dynamics and their formation.

4.3 Views on Degrees of AI Use Connect to Understanding of Human Experience and Struggle

Our analysis uncovered that teenagers' attitudes toward different degrees of AI use were linked to how their mental models of AI (see Findings 4.1) intersected with their understanding of human struggle in the context of emotional labor. Some teenagers completely rejected AI use in a friendship context because they believed it was fundamentally incapable of reflecting human experience. Many of them discussed why other people would be better resources than AI for a personal situation. For example, P50 mentioned how he trusted his mom more than ChatGPT to always know what to do in social contexts, such as knowing what to say or not say. Participants also explained in other ways, how compared to AI, human perspectives were a more valuable resource:

"[People] can learn practical knowledge about how to deal with those types of situations that AI might not even know." (P11)

"AI is a generated answer. It's going to be one way or it's going to be the other way. There's no middle way where if you ask the same question to three different people, you might get three different answers though they're all trying to get the same solution. I'd rather get three different answers, because maybe you can take a little from each person and make your own answer. With AI, I could do that, but it's a very direct answer that AI gives you, even in a situation." (P96)

These statements reflect how understanding subjective experiences and situational knowledge was valued in the context of managing a personal issue such as friendship. Participants expanded on this view by explaining that although AI 'knew' a lot, it could not feel anything or understand the struggle someone undergoes in a personal situation:

"AI doesn't know what you're going through, doesn't know your emotions and your feelings. It just knows like, the topic of not hanging out with someone and them talking behind your back. So if you put that into AI, I feel like it would just be like an 'I'm sorry' paragraph for talking behind your back, but it wouldn't show why you did it or anything." (P86)

"If you really care about someone and this makes you genuinely upset, there should be no reason for you to use ChatGPT because it doesn't know what you just went through in that situation," (P50)

P28 described why they believed AI could not fill this gap: *"Emotions are a very human thing and not an artificial thing."* This reflects the idea that emotions are a core part of personal experiences and relationships which AI, by definition, has no way to compensate. Participants also explained that the perceived formality of ChatGPT's words made it seem as if the sender did not care or even seem human (P92, P87, P79). P24 illustrated this point: *"It goes nice, soft, heartfelt, and then stone cold, then back to heartfelt. That just makes it awkward."*

Although many participants viewed AI as fundamentally unsuitable for involvement in friendship and personal experiences, numerous others perceived the **difficulty** of emotional labor in a personal situation as a valid cause for deferring that labor to the AI. This was based on recognizing that some individuals might inherently struggle more with social skills or capacity for emotional effort. Several participants recounted how they struggled immensely with knowing what to say or how to communicate with their friend during conflicts, even outside of our study specifically. Those who felt at a loss of what to say were more likely to turn to AI for help, as they could not fathom how to proceed:

"I only used AI because I don't actually know how to console a person... Unless you're a family member of mine I don't know how to console you." (P19)

"I asked [ChatGPT] what it would say. I described the situation and then I kind of just, put it up against my message and then took some of the parts from ChatGPT's message and put it into mine because I thought that it would make it better." (P95)

These statements reflect how the participants felt less confident in their own ability to manage the situation for a positive friendship outcome, than they did in the ability of AI. This explicitly contrasts with some individuals who were clearly more confident in their own methods for managing social interactions, such as P86 who explained that when they were at a loss, *"I type it in my notes app before I actually go to talk to them. And I just let it sit in for a while, before I actually decide to speak up about it because I don't want it to come off the wrong way."*

4.3.1 Specific Uses of AI. The specific methods and boundaries of AI use discussed by participants directly related to their views of which social difficulties were considered legitimate reasons for AI use, as well as what kinds of AI use were valid for addressing those difficulties. One common difficulty for which participants

warranted turning to AI was not knowing what to say or how to say something:

“[AI] helped me learn how to, like, put things in the right way...” (P51)

“Some people can be kind of awkward in these situations. They’re like, ‘I don’t really know how to... in this situation.’ So you can use AI for ideas. But don’t just copy for the apologies, because then it’s almost like you didn’t want to apologize.” (P67)

“I mean, I think I probably could have thought of this on my own. Honestly, ChatGPT was just kind of there to help me think of it faster and like, be more just like confident in what I said.” (P45)

Additionally, participants who placed more attention and effort into how they expressed messages to their friend even if they did not fundamentally struggle with what to say (see 4.2.2 for a description of genuineness-focused participants) were more likely to perceive higher difficulty in constructing their messages and rationalized using AI to improve their tone of voice and phrasing:

“The execution matters a lot more than the thought behind [it]. Because the execution is something you feel, something you can read, something you can feel, both emotionally and physically. [Using AI helped the tone become] more somber and melancholy... it’s more fitting for the situation.” (P19)

Individuals who struggled with phrasing used AI in different ways to help. Some used AI to come up with ideas about phrasing, and others used it to generate options or refine what they had already written. For example, P45 asked ChatGPT to “give me a few ideas of how to be nice about it or how to not make her feel bad,” while P96 showed ChatGPT his message and asked for suggestions on how to soften parts in the middle of the message or re-order different points in the message.

How copying/pasting was used with AI raised nuanced opinions from teenagers. Most teenagers felt that directly copying and pasting ChatGPT output was unacceptable, but some explained that it might be acceptable to copy/paste an AI edit of something that they had written initially.

“I don’t think it’s okay to just copy and paste it without like basically any effort.” (P61)

“It’s obviously not right to just ask AI to write an entire message for you and control C, control V it back into the actual message itself. But there is a little gray area where you can ask it for points about what I should do... Or using your own points and then ask AI to edit it or make it less confrontational.” (P11)

“I feel like [AI] would help if I initially wrote it and then read over parts that I didn’t think made much sense. I could make it better by putting it into ChatGPT and have it help me figure out a better solution.” (P60)

Though the issue of copying/pasting AI-generated content was viewed more controversially, most participants supported using AI to get broader ideas about how to approach the situation instead of focusing on message wording.

“ChatGPT can be good for just some advice, not telling you exactly what to say, just like, some options of what you can possibly do.” (P61)

“Seeing the [AI generated] solutions gave me ideas of how to resolve it. Gave me room to think about how I wanted to word it out.” (P96)

By and large, teenage participants acknowledged the limited relevance of AI for personal situations (such as friendship) which required being able to understand and empathize with subjective experiences. They pointed to the definitive lack of practical awareness and affective empathy in AI. However, teenagers also shared more nuanced positions on AI use when it came to experiencing substantial difficulties in communicating with a friend, whether it was not knowing how to approach the situation, what to say, or how to deliver the message in a more considerate way. Copying/pasting AI-generated content was generally viewed more controversially, but individual participants shared certain ways of copying/pasting that might be more acceptable; some felt like it was okay to ask AI to edit something they already wrote, while others would selectively copy and paste AI-generated parts into their own message. On the other hand, using AI assistance for broader ideas on how to approach the situation or to assist with brainstorming was more widely accepted due to the less-direct influence of AI on the final message to their friend.

5 Discussion

5.1 AI Use Shapes and is Shaped By Youth Experiences of Friendship and Connection

5.1.1 An inverse relationship between trust for social competence of AI and trust in friendship. Our findings illustrated an inverse relationship between teenagers’ trust for AI competence in personal problem-solving, and their trust for interpersonal regulation in the friendship: teenagers who had higher trust in AI for handling friendship issues tended to have lower trust in their interpersonal ability to manage the situation, and vice versa. We see this from how teenagers can view AI as a teaching or mentoring role (4.1) or how teenagers who experience lower confidence in handling communication were more likely to rely on AI for making their messages ‘better’ (4.2.2, 4.3). We also see how teenagers who had more trust in themselves to manage the conversation within their friendship (4.2) tended to prioritize human *authenticity* in the friendship and reject AI use more strongly (4.2.2, 4.3).

These findings have implications for how relational effort should be construed and supported in teenage friendships, due to the differences and tensions in value constructs that teenagers operated by. For example, we saw a trend of focus on “process vs. product” emerge in the Findings. Some teenagers prioritized the outcome of the friendship interaction (product), whether it was a well-crafted message to make their friend feel better or to achieve a desired behavior (4.2.2, 4.3). Others prioritized upholding values such as honesty and authenticity through the act of communication itself (4.1, 4.2.2), or understanding and empathizing with their friend (4.2.2), which is more process-oriented. We also saw how some participants viewed AI use as care for the friendship — either by the act of looking for assistance when it’s needed (4.2) or striving

for *genuineness* to be conveyed in their message (4.2.2). This contrasted with participants who were fundamentally against AI use in friendship due to its inability to reflect human experiences and feelings (4.3).

It is possible that these value constructs about AI use in friendship may only reflect a cross-section in time as AI development and the societal norms around it continue to evolve, but emerging research about AI still recommends caution toward AI-mediation in relationships. Especially for teenagers with a more “product” or outcome-focused attitude towards AI use for social relationships, safeguards may be more necessary to minimize overtrust in AI. Research has shown that AI-mediated human relationships can easily shift into an AI-dominated relationship if a user’s sense of companionship with AI becomes so strong that it becomes a part of their identity [11, 19, 52]. Although participants share that AI can be a helpful resource during difficult social situations (4.3.1), its fundamental inability to represent important aspects of human essence (4.3) is a core reason to discourage overreliance on AI for personal conflicts.

5.1.2 Teens with low confidence in communication and social skills are at a higher risk of overreliance on AI. Section 4.3.1 of our Findings revealed how AI use in the context of friendship could be motivated by high perceived difficulty in handling the friendship interaction and lack of confidence in self-expression and communication. These participants reported relying on AI, such as describing it as a “teacher” who “helped [them] learn how to put things the right way,” made their messages “just better” overall, and “helped them think of things more quickly and feel more confident” in what they said. Research supports our findings (4.3) which show that AI is not capable of and may even discourage empathy and other forms of emotional intelligence that are important components of socioemotional functioning [13, 17]. Teenagers perceiving AI as an authority and relying on it for learning social skills may risk harming their socioemotional functioning.

Research has shown how framing effects and automation bias in AI systems can lead people to perceive AI as correct even when it is not, and as more trustworthy when it gives less information [45, 64]. This effect can be particularly problematic for children who turn to AI for navigating personal and social processes, as overreliance on AI in a social context can lead them to discount the value of human experience that AI cannot represent (4.3). Empathy for human feelings is central to maintaining close and meaningful friendships [16, 41, 66], magnifying the harms that can be caused by teen overreliance on AI leading to discounting subjective feeling and experience. Understanding the longer-term impacts of AI on children’s social development is an important area of future work, as we still critically lack existing measures for evaluating AI impact on children’s relationships [7].

Conversational AI systems that can potentially be used by teens in a social context should employ design principles which encourage more autonomous interactions. Our findings showed that teenagers can have very different values and motivations for maintaining friendship, which underscores the importance of respecting teenagers’ right to develop different value models — AI systems should avoid value-based reasoning and emotive language in this use context [51]. Recent work has presented methods for identifying

AI users with different levels of cognitive risk (e.g., highly dependent to autonomous/critical) [56], which can be used to inform tailored designs for more- or less-dependent adolescent AI users. Particularly for high-reliance users, integrating the Socratic questioning method into AI [18] can reduce dependence on solution-based responses (which are inappropriate for subjective social scenarios) and encourage the critical thinking necessary to develop social and emotional skills [4, 21]. Designing tools to help teenagers reflect on their use of AI is another way to reduce overreliance [46]. Conversation frameworks such as motivational interviewing are known to encourage self-determination in adolescents [53, 69] and have been effectively implemented in AI chatbots for health applications [10], with potential to accommodate the context of teen social development. These methods can supplement building *fading scaffolds* [57] into AI systems to gradually facilitate teen users’ transition to autonomy.

5.2 Balancing Practices of Genuineness and Authenticity in AIMC Systems

Genuineness vs. **authenticity** (see 4.2.2) was one of the more nuanced differences in teenagers’ approaches toward friendship communication. **Genuineness**-focused individuals prioritized expressing care for the friend while **authenticity**-focused individuals prioritized being their rawest selves with their friend. This distinction has been discussed in moral development literature, which shows that developing children usually transition from caring mostly about ‘being their true self’ (authenticity) to appreciate ‘being one’s true self and being kind to others in my own way’ (genuineness). This happens through a form of identity re-partitioning where the adolescent learns that it is possible to both be themselves *and* attend to the need of others, such as valued friends [70]. In our findings, certain participants were clearly **authenticity**-focused, but some also really wanted to be **genuine** with their friend and hence contemplated more details such as whether their messages would be received with the intended emotional effect. Ullman 1987 [70] describes that being “genuine” is about expressing oneself and communicating in a way that is *accessible* to others. Both are important, in the sense that **authenticity** and **genuineness** together contribute to meaningful friendship.

However, as adolescents grow and start to navigate **genuineness**, they encounter a dissonance where they may feel like they are not being honest to themselves when fulfilling others’ needs [70]. Our Findings reflect this too, where some teens confidently expressed that they wanted the message to sound like themselves, while others felt like their own way of saying things may not make their friend feel better and hence turned to AI for help in phrasing it to be in a more benevolent tone of voice. This fragile transition period is a critical point of design for AI systems, as AI interactions can potentially nudge adolescents to (1) conform to a way of speaking that seems more ‘appropriate’ but is unlike themselves, or (2) abandon efforts to speak considerably at all. Patterns in AI sycophancy and companionship [11, 13] support this conjecture. For example, an adolescent repeatedly asking an AI chatbot about ways to improve their tone of voice may lead to an echo-chamber effect [40] where the chatbot continuously reflects the initial focus on fixing one’s tone of voice, by omission discouraging the child from being

themselves (more *authenticity*) over time. Similarly, because AI chatbots are sensitive to how queries are worded, their sycophantic features may encourage kids to embrace self-centeredness if they are initially focused on being their ‘true self’ and word social questions to the chatbot in a more self-centered way. Ways to reduce sycophantic feedback loops or boundaries placed on them in AI systems will be necessary to reduce AI risk of impacting teens’ moral development and identity.

Potential ways for AI chatbot systems to support balanced practices of genuineness and authenticity include adjusting responses based on users’ individual social orientations and leveraging LLMs to represent perspectives more removed from the user’s own. Because a user’s patterns of social question-asking may reflect whether they lean heavily towards being *genuineness*-focused or *authenticity*-focused, in extreme cases chatbots have enough context to promote reflective thinking in the opposite direction (e.g., asking very *genuineness*-focused people more questions that help them reflect on their own feelings and asking very *authenticity*-focused people questions that encourage reflecting on how the other party’s feelings and perceptions). To counterbalance the emotional bias associated with someone’s focus on *genuineness* or *authenticity* while retaining the important human and emotional aspects of a personal situation (4.3), LLMs could also summarize a user’s presented relationship problem as a story involving other ‘characters’ to help the user reflect on a social situation from a distance. Similar methods of ‘role-playing oneself’ implemented through virtual reality embodiment have been shown to successfully support social problem-solving [60, 74]. It is important to strictly utilize approaches that preserve reflexivity and open interpretation when employing design strategies that affect social perception. Additionally, significant cross-cultural differences in how the self is societally valued vs. the other [54] add complexity to the task of determining how exactly *genuineness* and *authenticity* should be balanced.

5.3 Limitations and Future Work

There are limitations to this work related to the current time period and the study implementation. This study is completed during a period in which the social impact of AI tools are emerging rapidly [13, 19, 80], and some of the perceptions we observed may change as our relationship with AI tools evolves over time due along with advancements in technology and social policy. The current findings reflect a cross-section in time and some of them may not generalize temporally.

Though our sample had a wide range of ages, the majority demographic was White. It is widely known that cultural perceptions differ among racial and ethnic groups [5] and impact social and emotional development [43, 65, 71]. Future work needs to be conducted on more culturally-diverse populations to understand which of our findings may generalize and which may not.

Additionally, the time limitation of the study impacts how these results should be interpreted; real friendships are longitudinal and emotionally complex, and to that point it is possible that some of the results we observed may be more reflective of procedural time constraints than more stable patterns of AI-mediated social reasoning. Future work studying AI mediation in teen friendships should consider the impact of time on the relationship context.

Lastly, we used speculative enactment to ‘simulate’ a situation in which a teenager was presented with the choice of whether to use AI during a difficult situation with their (real) friend, which still does not encompass the full context of a real-life situation. While this speculative work provides a base for developing more insights in this area, there are bounds in its applicability to teenagers’ real-life friendship situations. Forthcoming research should make efforts to explore both immediate and long-term impacts of real AI use within teen friendships.

6 Conclusion

This paper reports an interview study with a speculative enactment-based elicitation activity conducted with 47 teenagers aged 13-19 to understand how current teens perceive the use of generative AI to mediate communication within their friendships. Our findings revealed complex interactions between teens’ views of peer relationships with their views about AI use. Namely, we discovered that teenagers differed in their friendship and social values, which impacted their interpretations of AI use and what different types of AI use (e.g., copying/pasting output, idea brainstorming, AI editing, broad vs. specific question-asking) implied about the amount of personal effort someone was perceived to have exerted towards a friendship interaction. We also identified views of AI as not being able to represent essential elements of human experience core to addressing issues in close friendships. Based on these findings, we discussed important areas of future work on the impact of AI on teen friendships, as well as changes to the design of AI systems that can better support teenage users to engage in more autonomous social development.

7 Selection and Participation of Children

The participants of this study were adolescents aged 13-19 who were attending the Minnesota State Fair, which has around 2 million attendees yearly. These participants were recruited by a study team member who stood outside the research building and explained the age eligibility and study to passerby in a high foot traffic area. We recruited 49 participants, two of which did not complete the study due to other demands that came up unexpectedly. A total of 47 teenagers completed the study, which included 25 minutes of listening, writing, and speaking activities inside a research building. All participants were guided by study members to help them read through a consent form detailing that their spoken interviews would be recorded, were informed they could terminate at any time, and consented to participate in the study. Upon completing the study, participants received a free crossbody bag for participation. We collected email addresses anonymously from participants who wanted to be sent the results of the research and they were given an information pamphlet to explain the context and potential risks of the study topic.

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A List of challenging friendship scenarios and process of construction

Prior work on conflict in adolescent peer friendship and interpersonal relationships indicates that teen friendships are heavily

influenced by ego-investment (the emotional attachment and identification someone has with their own beliefs and opinions, such as their values) [47–49]. This is related to teens' evolving sense of self. We also know from prior work [2, 22] that trust is very important for teen friendships. Additionally, adolescents' evolving self-identity in relation to their social environment also makes their social reputation among peers another important factor influencing peer friendships [35, 49, 77]. Hence, the broad friendship conflict scenarios we created for reference (Appendix A) covered the following themes: violation of trust in relation to an individual (self/friend), violation of trust in relation to the larger social circle, violation of moral values in relation to interpersonal activities, and violation of moral values in relation to general activities (not necessarily social). We consulted several individuals about their teenage friendship experiences to form and refine the final list.

- You feel like your friend doesn't understand a personal struggle that you have (*e.g. they said something insensitive while trying to comfort you, or acted indifferent*)
- Your friend shared a difficult thing with you, and you felt like you didn't respond well enough to them that time (*e.g., they lost something important, or went through a painful experience*)
- Your friend puts down something that you like or care about a lot (*e.g., a specific person, hobby, or special interest*)
- You shared an important secret with your friend that they didn't keep (*e.g., something embarrassing, personal, or private; for example, you shared a secret about your crush with them and they told other people*)
- You feel like your friend is making you do something socially that you don't agree with (*e.g., there is some conflict where you feel like you're being forced to choose between friends, or you are being asked to keep secrets that you don't want to keep, or don't think it's right for you to keep secret*)
- Your friend or someone said something inappropriate, or something you think is not ok (*e.g., your friend said something you thought was mean, gossiped about others, or sided with someone that you really don't agree with*)
- Doing something that you don't think is right (*e.g., Stealing things, Copying schoolwork or assignments, Cheating on a test*)
- Being asked to break rules (*e.g., sneaking out, skipping class, going to a party or event you're not comfortable with*)
- You were excluded from an event or activity (*e.g., your friend was invited to something but you weren't, your friend did not invite you to something, or you were involved in excluding your friend and they did not like it*)
- You feel jealous of your friend | your friend feels jealous of you (*may be related to competition or comparison on things like achievement, social appreciation, appearance, etc.*)

B Interview Outline

Here we include some representative questions to demonstrate how teenagers' reflections on AI were elicited during the interview:

- Why did you (not) use ChatGPT to write your message?
- *If they describe a reason related to AI:* Ask them to elaborate on the context of the reason and how their belief or view of AI relates to this reason
- *If they describe a reason related to the context of the friendship:* Ask them to elaborate on the relevant context of the situation or the nature of the relationship
- If you put yourself in the shoes of this friend you wrote your message to, how do you think you would feel receiving this message, and finding out that AI was used in some way to create it? If there are specific aspects of this situation that would impact how you feel more, please explain.
- After reflecting, do you have other thoughts about how you used (or did not use) ChatGPT during your message writing?
- Generally, how do you think you would feel if your friend said/did something important to you and you found out that they used AI to come up with it?
- Does the way that AI was used in this process matter?
- Generally, what ways of involving AI do you think are okay, and not okay, in this kind of close friendship context?

C Post-study information pamphlet

Thank you so much for participating in our study. Please read this pamphlet together with your parents, as it contains important information regarding the use of AI to solve social problems.

Although this study asked you to participate in an imaginary exercise to explore the possibilities of using AI to solve interpersonal or friendship problems, our study team is **not encouraging the use of AI in this context**.

Research is still being conducted about the use of AI to problem solve social interactions and this type of engagement has not yet been proven to be beneficial to teen friendships.

Additionally, recent research has identified certain potential risks of using AI to mediate friendship interactions:

- AI may provide advice that is inappropriate or harmful to you and your loved ones
- Using AI too much in this context may lead to over-reliance on this technology for handling social problems
- AI tends to frame even social problems in a logical or analytical way, which may diminish the importance of your and your friend's emotional experiences

Here are some ways to mitigate the risks of using AI in this context, if you still choose to do so in the future:

- Use AI as a brainstorming partner instead of having it directly tell you what to do
- Check its suggestions with your own gut feeling and maybe someone else you trust
- Be aware of your own values and notice if you are using AI to avoid the inherent discomfort of troubleshooting a social situation

[Contact information of main investigators included]

D Visual used to introduce the speculative setting of the study



Figure 2: This single visual depicts an individual seeking support from an AI chatbot to help resolve a relationship challenge. *Note: the imagery portion of this visual were created with the assistance of AI, but the linguistic content was not.*