Cuddly, Not Creepy: Petmorphic AI Companions Deepen Emotional Connection and Enhance User Engagement

Mohammadhesam HAJIGHASEMI
ESSEC Business School
Amir Sepehri
ESSEC Business School
Christian Hildebrand
University of St. Gallen
Cait Lamberton
University of Pennsylvania, Wharton Business School

Cite as:
HAJIGHASEMI Mohammadhesam, Sepehri Amir, Hildebrand Christian, Lamberton Cait (2026), Cuddly, Not Creepy: Petmorphic AI Companions Deepen Emotional Connection and Enhance User Engagement. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (131926)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026

Cuddly, Not Creepy: Petmorphic AI Companions Deepen Emotional Connection and Enhance User Engagement

Abstract

For many people, having a pet is not always possible due to housing restrictions, financial constraints, or the continuous care pets require. However, today's "new friend"—Generative AI—offers an emerging avenue for emotional support, potentially recreating the comfort and companionship traditionally provided by pets. Growing research suggests that AI companions can substitute for human interaction in fostering emotional connection. We extend this literature by proposing petmorphism—the design of AI companions with pet-like features such as animal avatars, affectionate naming, and playful language—as a novel pathway to deepen emotional bonds. Across three preregistered experiments, including one real interaction study with a petmorphized chatbot, participants reported higher ratings, stronger emotional connection, and greater engagement with petmorphized chatbots. Emotional connection fully mediated these effects, which generalized to cat-like AI companions, especially among self-identified cat owners. Petmorphic design activates schemas of warmth, loyalty, and nonjudgmental affection, reducing resistance to AI companionship.

Track: Consumer Behaviour