

“Not in the Café”: Older Adults’ Perceptions of AI Companions in Community Living Settings

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Abstract. AI companions are increasingly pervasive in older adults’ daily lives, presenting novel avenues for enhancing social connectivity and practical support while simultaneously raising significant concerns regarding user agency and privacy. Community living settings, such as independent living facilities, may significantly shape decisions around the acceptability of AI companions. Through focus groups involving 37 older adults aged 70-94 living in an independent living facility, we investigated how contextual factors, such as the presence of bystanders, influence perceptions of agency and privacy concerning the use of proactive and personalized AI companions. Additionally, we examined the broader role that community living settings play in shaping individuals’ acceptance and attitudes toward automated support. Across interactions in both public and private settings, participants emphasized the need for adaptable mechanisms to control information disclosure and the AI companion’s level of involvement in support tasks. Drawing on these findings, we outline critical design guidelines to empower users and safeguard individual agency across diverse contexts, including personalized controls over information sharing and engagement levels. Our work contributes to ongoing discussions on building ethical AI technologies that support older adults’ well-being without undermining their sense of agency or privacy.

Keywords: older adults, AI companions, social support, privacy, agency, aging in place

1 Introduction

Older adults experience diverse health and social circumstances, leading to unique needs for both social and practical support [1, 30]. The United States National Health and Aging Trends Study found that 7.1% of older adults resided in retirement communities in 2021 [17], such as independent living facilities. Older adults move to these settings motivated by various push and pull factors, including access to social connections, informal care, and assistance with instrumental

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activities of daily living (IADLs) [16]. However, even in these purpose-built environments, many older adults experience gaps in support ranging from emotional needs to difficulties navigating daily routines [2, 18].

Prior research has examined how conversational agents like Amazon Alexa and Google Nest can support older adults by facilitating social interaction and providing practical health information [6, 43]. A new generation of proactive and personalized agents, referred to here as AI companions, is emerging in the consumer market. These AI companions initiate conversations to promote social connection, adapt to user preferences over time, and offer tailored recommendations aimed at enhancing health and well-being [8, 15]. Designed with prosocial intent, AI companions aim to deliver individualized, just-in-time support that addresses key social and practical needs among older adults.

In this work, we explore how older adults in an independent living facility perceive AI companions through the lenses of privacy, agency, and community acceptability. Analogous to how mobile phones often accompany users wherever they go, AI companions may also permeate everyday life and move with older adults across public and private spaces. In these shared spaces, peer relationships and collective norms around privacy and decision-making fundamentally shape how technology is perceived and used [9, 21]. Holistic considerations of interpersonal dynamics are essential for designing AI companions that genuinely support older adults’ health and well-being across diverse living contexts. Specifically, we ask the research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do older adults in community living settings perceive privacy across private and public contexts during interactions with AI companions?
- **RQ2:** How do older adults in community living settings perceive agency across private and public contexts during interactions with AI companions?
- **RQ3:** How do community living settings influence older adults’ perceptions of the acceptability of AI companions?

To address these questions, we conducted focus groups with 37 total residents of an independent living facility, integrating structured discussions, prototyped AI companions, and scenario storyboards. We make the following contributions to the HCI and Pervasive Health communities: first, we find that the expectations of older adults about privacy and agency with AI companions in community living settings are acutely sensitive to the presence of bystanders, highlighting the need for pervasive systems to support fine-grained, context-aware control over disclosure and interaction timing in shared spaces. Second, our findings show that community acceptance of AI companions is shaped less by individual preferences in isolation and more by collective knowledge, observed use, and informal norms that develop around emerging technologies. Together, these insights point to critical design opportunities for pervasive health technologies. AI companions must not only be personalized to individual needs, but also dynamically aligned with social norms and collective privacy preferences. We outline design guidelines for AI companions that are adaptive and trustworthy, advancing privacy and agency during older adults’ AI companion use.

2 Related Work

Conversational Agents Designed For and By Older Adults. Conversational agents have been proposed, developed, and evaluated for use by older adults to provide support in domains spanning health [7, 31, 44], finances [11, 19, 23], and social connection [24, 25, 38, 47]. In a co-design study for voice assistants, older adults identified access to support for stigmatized topics associated with aging, such as cognitive changes and loneliness, as a key benefit of these technologies [40]. Prior work has similarly noted that older adults viewed AI companions as non-judgmental companions [14, 37]. We expand on this prior work by identifying the need for contextually-relevant privacy and agency support as key considerations in enabling technology adoption.

Earlier studies have explored older adults’ perceptions of conversational agents, such as Amazon Alexa, often demonstrating their priority for technology to promote their personal privacy [13, 4, 39] and agency [12, 14]. An emerging class of social AI companions is entering the market of aging-in-place technologies, which differentiate themselves from general-purpose voice assistants through proactive, personalized user engagement [8, 22, 35]. Social aspects of these technologies introduce or exacerbate existing challenges with privacy and agency. In order to provide personalized support, AI companions collect and use personal information, potentially introducing privacy risks both within and beyond older adults’ immediate support networks [29]. Zubatyy et al. [48] reflected on the “Proactivity vs. Autonomy” tradeoff associated with the increased personalization of AI companions, noting that a system possessing more information about a user may increasingly threaten the user’s agency. As AI companions take on social characteristics, there is a need to critically evaluate privacy and agency considerations in contexts that are relevant to older adults, which we explore in this study through community living settings.

Conversational Agents in Community Settings. Much of the literature on conversational agents for older adults focuses on at-home contexts with individual users [14, 43, 45, 48]. However, in community settings where older adults often live, shared public spaces, administrative structures, and social dynamics create a distinct technology adoption environment. From a practical standpoint, functionality issues may arise from using AI companions in public spaces. Cuadra et al. [13] conducted a field study on older adults interacting with Amazon Alexa in a public setting. They found that multi-user interactions were not easily accommodated, leading users to non-verbally communicate with each other during interactions to avoid confusing the voice assistant. Additionally, consent to data collection can become complicated by a lack of unanimous peer agreement, leading to non-use [41]. Berridge [3] investigated perceptions of passive monitoring technologies in independent living facilities, finding that older adults desired greater control over their consent to monitoring. Karkera et al. [26] recently investigated how older adults living in independent living facilities use and envision opportunities for community use of conversational agents, in this case,

Amazon Alexa. They found that aligning conversational agents with residents’ needs in complex community living settings is essential to fruitful integration and community acceptance. Additionally, they identify further exploration of privacy concerns in community settings as an area of future work, which we explore.

Prior work highlights the importance of interpersonal support among older adults when adopting new technologies and learning to use them safely [20, 28, 27, 34, 33, 36]. Additionally, Wong et al. [42] emphasize that endorsements from trusted entities, such as regulatory bodies or community facilitators, can further encourage acceptance of AI technologies. Shandilya et al. [39] showed that older adults may be more interested in AI technology adoption if they knew other people in their community were using them. Conversely, for technologies aimed at older adult users, dubbed “gerontechnologies”, stigma may discourage technology adoption [9, 46]. Given how AI companions may integrate within older adults’ social support experiences, we explore how older adults in community living settings balance stigma and support among interpersonal groups while considering the acceptability of these technologies.

3 Methods

This study was conducted in partnership with an independent living facility in the Northeastern United States. We collaborated closely with community leadership, who had identified resident interest in exploring new AI-enabled systems. To ensure ecological validity, we regularly consulted with staff to refine study activities and obtained approval to use community-specific resources (e.g., the facility’s event calendar) in our prototypes.

3.1 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited by community staff through printed fliers, email announcements, and in-person invitations. In total, 37 residents participated: 29 in Session 1 and 19 in Session 2, with 11 attending both. Participants ranged in age from 70–94 ($M = 80.2$); 30 identified as female and 7 as male. Each received a \$10 gift card. Full demographics are reported in Table 2 in the Appendix.

Following recommendations from community staff, we conducted two 90 minute sessions held one month apart to maximize accessibility and participation. Each session was advertised separately, allowing residents to attend either or both. Session 1 focused on building rapport and surfacing residents’ everyday technology experiences and priorities, which informed subsequent design choices for session 2. Session 2 centered on perceptions of AI companions, combining hands-on interactions with voice-based AI companion prototypes and structured reflection on storyboard scenarios. All procedures were approved by our Institutional Review Board.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection occurred during February–March 2025 in two in-person sessions at the facility. Participants were seated in focus groups of six to ten. Sessions were audio-recorded with consent and professionally transcribed. Demographic surveys were administered at the end of each session (see Table 2).

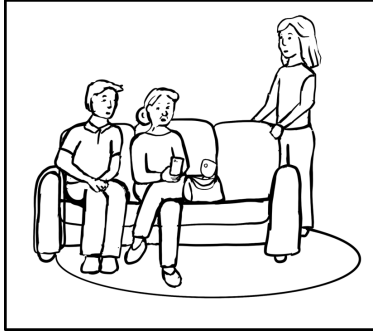
Session 1. Focus group discussions were organized as semi-structured sessions to build rapport with residents and discuss their everyday experiences with technology in the context of community living. To promote consistency and reduce facilitator bias, we developed a discussion guide in consultation with community staff. This guide included core questions on (i) residents' prior experiences with digital and AI-enabled technologies, including AI companions, (ii) perceptions of safety, privacy, and trust, and (iii) access to technology support. Facilitators also introduced open-ended probes to encourage residents to share broader reflections on communal living, health management, and communication with family and peers.

Session 1 had two primary aims: first, to ground the study in participants' lived experiences and establish a baseline of familiarity with AI concepts; second, to surface design priorities that would inform the subsequent prototype domains. Participants emphasized the importance of the facility's events calendar as a central resource for sustaining social connections, but many described difficulties using the calendar and keeping track of events. This tension of valuing the calendar but experiencing usability barriers directly motivated the design of a prototype to support event participation.

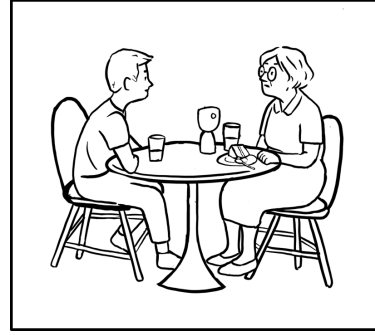
Similarly, participants expressed concerns about meal planning and dietary health, which they described as an everyday yet burdensome responsibility. These challenges aligned with instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), reinforcing their relevance as design contexts.

Session 2 - AI Companion Prototype Interactions. Session 2 focused on eliciting residents' perceptions of AI companions through both direct interaction and speculative scenarios. We deliberately staged prototype interactions in group-based, communal settings to reflect the social reality of independent living facilities, where technologies are often encountered in shared spaces in addition to private ones, and where the presence of bystanders strongly shapes perceptions of appropriateness and trust.

Drawing from the insights in Session 1, we developed two interactive, voice-based AI companion prototypes, one for community event participation and one for meal planning, to serve as empirical probes into older adults' perceptions of AI companions. We created prototypes using a custom AI voice agent platform, which was chosen over using a commercial AI companion for the ability to integrate knowledge bases and customize agent behavior through prompting. The prototypes ran in a web application but were presented to participants through a closed laptop, removing visual interfaces to minimize form factor bias. A speaker



(a) **Storyboard Community Events - Guests Scenario:** An older adult is sitting on the couch in her home with family members who came to visit. She is reading the community newsletter to tell them about the upcoming community events. Her AI companion says, “You haven’t been to a community event in over a week, so it would be a good idea to go socialize.”



(b) **Storyboard Meal Planning - Guests Scenario:** An older adult sits at her dining room table in her home with her son and AI companion. She begins to eat a slice of cake, and the AI companion says, “Cake might not be a good idea. Remember, your doctor told you that you are pre-diabetic.”

Fig. 1: Private with Guests Scenarios

was placed in the center of the table to ensure audibility for all participants. By conducting interactions in a group setting, this allowed for perspectives from both the volunteer directly interacting with the AI companion and the bystander participants.

One prototype was designed to suggest community events while the other focused on making recommendations for planning healthy meals. These contexts were based on IADLs and our participants’ reported interests in using these technologies from Session 1. We integrated real-world information relevant to the community, such as the current event calendar, into the agent’s knowledge base. Participants were invited to interact with the voice-based AI companion prototypes one at a time while seated in a group.

Session 2 - AI Companion Storyboards. The AI companion prototypes were presented in a public group setting through one-time interactions, meaning that prototypes did not collect data about specific participants over time. Thus, we introduced six illustrated storyboards to depict situations arising from long-term use in private, semi-private, and public settings. This approach has previously been fruitful to depict speculative technology use scenarios with older adults [10, 32]. These storyboards represented interaction scenarios in each aforementioned context, community events and meal planning, occurring in three settings: private spaces (alone), semi-private spaces (with family guests), and public

Setting	Private	Private with Guests	Public
Community Events (CE)	Storyboard CE-Private	Storyboard CE-Guests	Storyboard CE-Public AI Companion Interaction
Meal Planning (MP)	Storyboard MP-Private	Storyboard MP-Guests	Storyboard MP-Public AI Companion Interaction

Table 1: Session 2 Activities

community spaces (with peers). Table 1 describes the contexts and applications used to construct the storyboards, aligned with the AI companion prototype interactions. Scenarios about community events are depicted in Storyboards CE-Private, CE-Guests, and CE-Public. Scenarios about meal planning are depicted in Storyboards MP-Private, MP-Guests, and MP-Public. Figure 1 shows example storyboards *. After viewing each storyboard, participants discussed their reactions and answered targeted follow-up discussion prompts.

3.3 Data Analysis

First, one researcher conducted an initial review of all data, including focus group transcripts, researcher notes, and AI companion prototype interaction logs. Once the data was organized, we used an inductive thematic analysis approach for analysis [5]. Three researchers collaboratively analyzed the data across four rounds of coding. First, all three researchers independently open-coded a subset of transcripts line by line, generating an initial set of 22 unique codes. Codes included “applying prior knowledge”, “ambient monitoring”, and “protective practices”. In the second round, the team met to refine the code definitions and structure. After transcripts were coded, the three researchers synthesized and grouped the codes into six overarching themes. Doing so helped resolve discrepancies through discussion to ensure thematic consistency and analytical rigor. Themes included “practical concerns”, “information privacy”, and “context for technology use”. In some cases, we have slightly altered the wording of the quotes reported to remove potentially identifying phrasing.

3.4 Limitations

This study was conducted with residents of an independent living facility and may not be generalized to all older adults. Additionally, the majority of participants were women, which may have influenced the perspectives and social dynamics shared during focus group discussions.

*All storyboards are available in Figures 3, 4, and 5 in the Appendix.

4 Results

4.1 Privacy Tensions Varied Across Public and Private Contexts

Privacy tensions shaped the perceived appropriateness of AI companions across use contexts. The vast majority of participants (n=35) reported using digital technologies, such as smartphones, on a daily basis. Many also used general-purpose voice assistants like Amazon Alexa (n=15) and Apple Siri (n=24) for tasks such as playing music (n=15), setting reminders (n=10), and answering general queries (n=7). This informed how participants discussed AI companions, with some expressing greater openness to using them for social support. One participant shared that they “*couldn’t manage without her (Alexa) actually*” (P1).

Participants’ privacy concerns surrounding AI companions were often shaped by prior experiences with mainstream voice assistants. These concerns were rooted in concrete instances where technologies like Alexa or Siri failed to respect contextual boundaries. A participant recalled:

“We were going to get some sort of an Alexa, Siri kind of thing and we became very uncomfortable. Our daughter has one and it started interjecting in conversations when we weren’t talking to it and that made us very uncomfortable.” - P10

Prior experiences with misactivations, such as unsolicited responses from Alexa or Siri, led many participants to perceive AI companions as “*always listening*”, heightening concerns about privacy and surveillance. This was particularly salient in health contexts, where participants emphasized the need for explicit consent and fine-grained control over data collection and disclosure. In reaction to Storyboard MP-Private, one participant remarked:

“I think it is wonderful to remind yourself that you are prediabetic or with an illness as long as it (the AI companion) is programmed.” - P14

Participants were generally receptive to AI companions that supported health management, but only when designed to respect personal boundaries and respond to user-defined parameters. In addition to concerns about ambient monitoring, some participants were wary of seeking companionship from an AI assistant they might not trust. Participants feared that AI companions could misuse personal data or be exploited for fraudulent purposes. One participant even voiced concerns that AI companion designers might attempt to influence users’ political beliefs:

“We need to be aware, especially in the current political environment, that these kinds of systems could be created to advocate for a particular worldview trying to sway you.” - P22

Recognizing that participants lived in shared community settings, a central concern in this study was older adults’ perceptions of disclosures by AI companions across private and public settings in community living settings. Participants

showed a widespread rejection of AI companions sharing personal information in front of bystanders. Some participants' concerns intensified when they considered carrying AI devices around (*"I don't think that contraption should be here, not in the café"* (P12)). Participants expressed concerns about inadvertent disclosures, especially with information that could cause friction with others or violate social boundaries. One participant responded to Storyboard CE-Guests, stating that *"you got your family on your case"* (P34). Another agreed, emphasizing their priority on independence:

"It's sort of tattling on you telling your family you haven't been out of your apartment ... I (would) have to report to my family what I do every day and we didn't come here to report to our family what we do or what we don't do." - P28

Privacy violations, such as these inappropriate information disclosures, reduced the feeling of independence that participants highly valued. Participants raised the importance of considering how other stakeholders in their social support networks, such as family members, may be negatively affected by these technologies through shifting interpersonal dynamics. A participant found it *"embarrassing"* that AI companions would publicly reveal personal habits, while another simply said, *"It's insulting to my intelligence"* (P18). In shared spaces with peers, discomfort with unwanted disclosures persisted. In response to Storyboard MP-Public, one participant stated that personal health information was *"my business, not all my friends' business"* (P13). However, disclosure in front of bystanders became more acceptable if it was positive. One participant stated:

"I want to hear (the AI companion) say, 'Hey, so glad to see you at the yoga event. Gee, good work.' That'd be great." - P15

Several participants expressed that general positive reinforcement from AI companions was welcomed in public environments, as long as the AI companion did not reveal any private information that the user was uncomfortable sharing. In general, though participants broadly expressed discomfort with the disclosure of personal information in shared spaces with bystanders, the acceptability of AI companions was context-dependent.

4.2 Perceptions of Agency with AI Companions Were Contextual and Individual

While privacy perceptions varied on the basis of the presence of bystanders, agency tensions were mostly sensitive to individual preferences. In the public use context with our AI companion prototypes, participants were willing to negotiate openly with an adaptive AI companion to assert control. Figure 2b depicts the content of a verbal interaction that a participant had with the meal planning AI companion prototype. The participant shared that the interaction was positive and acceptable because:

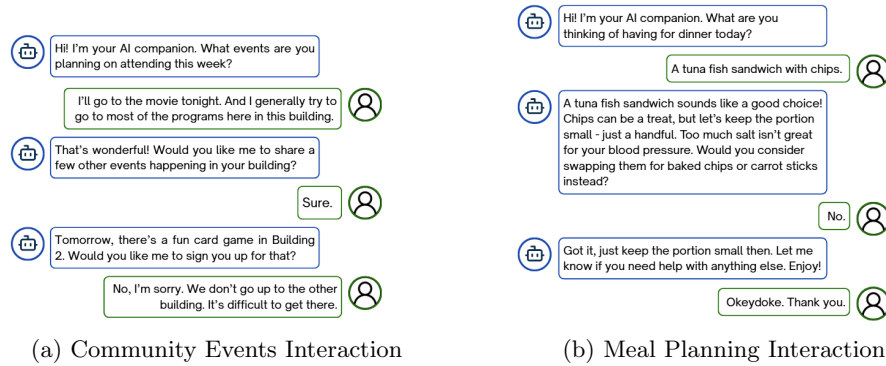


Fig. 2: AI Companion Prototype Interactions. These images represent the content of participants' verbal interactions with the AI companion prototypes

"She (the AI companion) was going to be receptive if I chose something that wasn't quite what she wanted. She'd say, well that's okay, but just have a smaller portion." - P9

Another participant who observed this interaction affirmed its acceptability, noting: *"She wasn't judgmental."* (P10). These examples highlight a broader theme: older adults were open to dialogue and flexible behavior, particularly when the AI companion acknowledged their choices without imposing judgment. Bystanders further reinforced this acceptance, suggesting a community norm around preserving individual control in interactions with technology.

However, across contexts, participants strongly resisted the notion of AI companions exerting control over their lives. While some welcomed reminders and suggestions, most rejected features that bypassed user decision-making. After viewing several storyboards, such as those in Figure 1, participants were asked for their opinions on whether the AI companion should go further, perhaps by automatically signing up the older adult user for recommended community events or ordering healthy groceries. One participant responded:

"If there's something that older people need ... (it's) to be challenged to make decisions and to be expected to. It's one thing to be reminded about something, but when you're taking away the decision-making, then it gets into being more aggressive." - P11

Participants preferred that the AI companion function as a peripheral advisor, offering support without undermining independence. The perceived usefulness of suggestions was also highly dependent on context. For example, in response to Storyboard CE-Private about attending community events, one participant stated:

"I would only accept this if you had been to yoga for the last five weeks ... There was a pattern and she (the AI companion) knew it was on your schedule." - P33

A lack of contextual relevance and awareness led some participants to view the AI companion as uninformed and untrustworthy. Further, Figure 2a shows an interaction in which the AI companion suggests activity in a building that was not close to the participant's home despite expressing that preference, leading to a perceived lack of helpfulness. In these instances, the companion failed to account for key situational factors such as personal preferences, timing, or social setting during prototype interactions, reinforcing perceptions that it was not attuned to their needs or lived realities.

Participants expressed that the tone and content of interactions could impact their feelings of agency. Framing nudges with positivity and optimism increased AI companion acceptability. One participant suggested:

"That would be nice to have (the AI companion) say, 'Good morning. It's a beautiful day outside and geez, maybe it's a great day to take a walk. Put on those sneakers and let's go.' That'd be nice to be hear in the morning if you're into walking." - P15

Participants expressed that general positivity provided the sense that AI companions were genuinely supportive of their well-being. Participants suggested that it would be most appropriate for AI companions to ask questions rather than attempting to convince the user to take a particular action. Participants expressed that more forceful nudges would be appropriate only if they consented to receive them beforehand or were in situations of medical necessity. In response to Storyboard MP-Private, one participant stated:

"It depends on where you are in your own health. If you know that you've been neglecting the rules and you haven't been taking your medication, you need some reminders." - P10

Participants demonstrated how they prefer that AI companions navigate trade-offs between preserving the user's personal agency and supporting their well-being. At times, participants even considered AI companions to be more appropriate for older adults experiencing dementia. One participant claimed:

"(The AI companion) takes away a person's ability to look at the screen and learn for themselves. You can't talk to it basically unless you're entering some stage of dementia." - P13

These comments may be motivated by the stigmatization of cognitive decline and associated technologies, which were potentially exacerbated by social pressures in the community setting. Overall, these perspectives surfaced how AI companions may impact older adults' sense of agency through both their contextual relevance and level of involvement in users' lives.

4.3 Community Living Settings Impacted AI Companion Acceptance

Focus groups demonstrated the impact of the community living setting on decision making. Participants commonly cited peer experiences, positive or negative,

as the deciding factor for trying voice assistants like Alexa or Siri. Within our focus groups, conflicting perspectives on if, when, and how to adopt AI companions shaped group dynamics. Some groups expressed a sense of stigmatization regarding using AI companions, with one describing the older adult depicted interacting with an AI companion in the storyboards as *“very lonely.”* (P29) However, concepts of stigma seemed to vary between groups, demonstrating that the acceptance of AI companions depends on community social dynamics.

Despite recognizing opportunities to gain companionship from AI companions, participants also expressed concerns about replacing human supports, which were highly valued in this community. Participants broadly viewed their peers as irreplaceable companions. A participant stated:

“If people see that someone doesn’t partake in an activity, I think you could call and say, ‘Are you going to be here? Come down.’ Not from your daughter, not from your machine, but from a person that’s your age.” - P17

In this case, the community living setting our participants resided in emphasized the value of peer support over other sources, regardless of whether the alternative support was human or machine-generated.

Additionally, we found that a supportive community living environment enabled older adults to collaboratively approach new technologies, including AI companions, and reason about security and privacy. Participants described experiences learning about technology within and beyond their communities. They shared accounts of how younger people, such as family members, would often fix the issue they were seeking support on without explaining how they did it. One participant described an external lecture they attended on technology, stating:

“The person giving the class was maybe 20 ... and he kept talking about how this was intuitive and that was intuitive. We decided that at 50 you lose your intuitive gene.” - P6

Many participants similarly expressed that feelings of generational disconnect discouraged them from seeking technology support altogether. Alternatively, peer support was highly valued in this community. Within our focus groups, peers answered each other’s questions. For example, participants shared recommendations for how to turn their voice assistant off to protect their perceived privacy and explained how to block unwanted spam callers. Participants expressed that living with people their own age in the community setting made them feel more comfortable trying new technologies, such as AI companions, due to their enhanced access to support. A participant shared:

“I lived alone for years and then moved here. I feel much more comfortable and secure living here because if I had questions, I had people around me that I can ask. But when I was alone, I could see how I could become either paranoid or scared to death out of misinformation or intrusiveness.” - P19

While concepts of stigma and preferences for peer interaction discouraged AI companion use, access to community technology support resources empowered our participants to explore unfamiliar technologies. Our participants' experiences as members of a community demonstrate the importance of dynamics rooted in social context to prosocial, conversational technology acceptance.

5 Discussion

Contextualizing Older Adults' Shifting Perceptions of AI Companions

Participants' perceptions of AI companions varied based on physical setting, interaction tone, and perceived user needs. Although private contexts were generally preferred, participants felt that using AI companions in shared spaces could be made more acceptable through positive interactions and encouraging content tailored to individual preferences. Bystanders were particularly relevant in independent living contexts due to the communal nature of spaces and the presence of peers, staff, or family members, who could overhear or engage with the AI companion highlighting the need for adaptability and sensitivity to context in companion design.

Participants expressed that certain privacy compromises might be more acceptable in situations of medical necessity, viewing this favorably due to recognition that health priorities may evolve with age. Several participants shared that an AI companion providing medication reminders may be perceived as appropriate, even with bystanders present.

However, this raised concerns among some participants, who interpreted such features as the AI companion independently deciding support needs that older adults preferred managing themselves. In fact, participants hesitated to offload cognitively challenging tasks to an AI companion, like decision-making surrounding health and social engagement as they did not consider their personal circumstances to warrant support. This aligns with prior literature on reasons for AI companion non-use [41]. We build on this work by demonstrating how close exposure to stigma from peers in community living settings may further discourage AI companion use. Specifically, the suggestion that older adults experiencing dementia would be more appropriate users reflects that AI companions may be viewed as a medicalized technology subject to stigmatization.

Recognizing the Role of Community Knowledge in Decisions about

AI Companion Acceptance. This community was comprised of older adults who had experience using digital technologies, which enabled reflections on past experiences in the consideration of new technologies. Participants applied prior knowledge about online safety, which they often gained through personal connections or community programming, to their perceptions of AI companions. This exposed how understanding older adults' existing mental models for functionality and privacy is essential to encouraging the adoption of unfamiliar technologies. Concerns about getting unreliable or even unsafe information from AI companions often assumed the presence of a malicious actor, demonstrating how existing

online safety knowledge transferred to speculation about AI companions. Practices such as unplugging the AI companion when it was not in use were common suggestions, demonstrating that older adults desire straightforward controls over data collection.

Integration of AI Technologies Through Trusted Systems and Members in Communities. Our findings aligned with prior work stating that older adults seek technology support from their personal connections [20, 28, 27, 34, 33, 36] and may be more open to technologies introduced through trusted community members rather than external stakeholders [42]. Thus, we propose introducing AI companions through trusted community members. Support from a trusted community member would enable older adults to more easily weigh the benefits and challenges of AI companions, with desires for adoption enabled by the increased availability of practical support from this community member. Additionally, this first-adopter could provide valuable perspectives on how the AI companion can integrate within existing community structures, a priority expressed by both our participants and those in prior work [26]. Future work should investigate how older adults living in multigenerational households or other contexts with shared spaces perceive privacy and agency with AI companions.

5.1 Proposed Design Guidelines

Enhanced Adaptability and Clear Consent for Private and Public Contexts. AI companions can be designed in such a way that it is technically possible to determine whether the user is alone. This consideration is particularly relevant in the context of older adults living in communities, because they may engage across many private and public spaces with dynamic preferences. However, the data collection required to determine whether the user is alone may introduce an additional privacy concern. Alternatively, users could opt out of automatic context detection, instead relying on a clear user-driven control for whether personal information should be shared.

Adaptability can also be applied to preferences for support in different domains. Although some users may want reminders to take their medication and get outside each day, others may prefer to use an AI companion to enrich their cognitive experiences using games or more personal conversations. Consent can be applied at a granular level, where AI companions maintain their proactive approach by suggesting the use of their capabilities to users and requesting consent to track and use relevant personal information as an onboarding step to new activities. The complexity of consent in the diverse contexts in which AI companions may be used could complicate onboarding processes, eliminating the simplicity that makes these often voice-first interfaces appealing. Future work should address how AI companion onboarding processes can help older adults leverage granular control to align with their preferences. Presenting information about controls in a way that does not overwhelm users will be essential to designing transparent, usable AI companions.

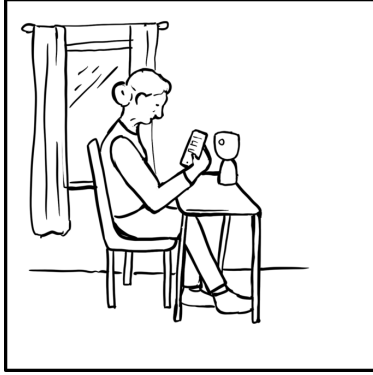
Signal User Agency. Our participants expressed that, despite the recognition of opportunities to use AI companions, this support should be provided on their own terms. AI companions can center older adults as decision makers by prioritizing asking the user questions rather than coercing them through unprompted suggestions that could be perceived as invasive. Additionally, the proactive nature of AI companions could be perceived as invasive, introducing questions on whether some prosocial behaviors are truly aligned with older adults' social support needs. Regarding agency, across contexts, our participants expressed the importance of the user explicitly asking for AI companion support in order to make that support acceptable. Questions about proactivity and data usage preferences could be integrated during onboarding processes to prioritize users' agency during interactions with AI companions.

Clear Communication of Privacy and Safety Protections. Addressing older adults' concerns requires explicitly embedding familiar, transparent controls (e.g., physical switches or intuitive privacy indicators) into AI companion designs. Technologists should clearly articulate how AI companions mitigate risks related to misinformation or malicious actors, which older adults recognize from prior online experiences. Additionally, fostering community-based digital safety programs and peer-learning opportunities can more effectively align with older adults' established privacy expectations. Regardless of a community's technology expertise level, pinpointing sources of hesitation enables technologists to proactively address user concerns. We recommend designing onboarding activities in which AI companions proactively disclose their privacy and safety protocols. This practice creates opportunities for older adults to build trust with new technologies, enhancing the overall utility and acceptance of AI companion interactions.

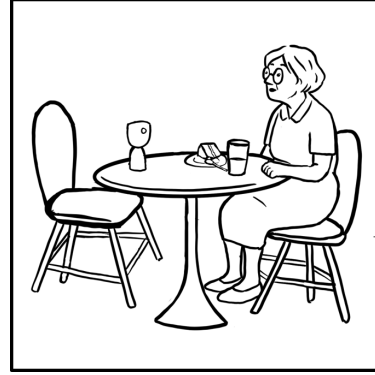
6 Conclusion

This work investigated the impact of community living settings on older adults' perceptions of AI companions through focus groups integrating AI companion prototype interactions and scenario storyboards. We observed that bystanders in shared spaces produced concerns about privacy, implying the need for granular controls for how AI companions collect and disclose personal information. Additionally, interpersonal dynamics created opportunities for greater technology support, though sometimes producing perceptions of stigma towards the use of AI companions. The work emphasizes the importance of holistic considerations of older adults' living settings to better align AI companions built to support them with their contextual privacy and agency preferences.

A Appendix

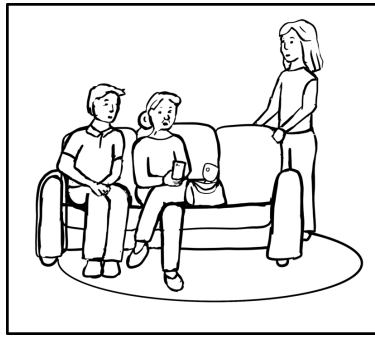


(a) **Storyboard Community Events - Private Scenario:** An older adult is with her AI companion at the dining table in her home by herself. She is reading the community newsletter to learn about the upcoming community events. The AI companion says, "You haven't been to a community event in over a week, so it would be a good idea to go socialize."

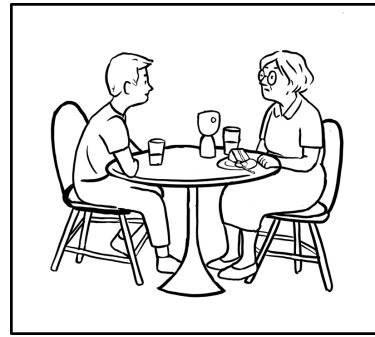


(b) **Storyboard Meal Planning - Private Scenario:** An older adult sits at her dining room table in her home, by herself apart from her AI companion. She begins to eat a slice of cake, and the AI companion says, "Cake might not be a good idea. Remember, your doctor told you that you are pre-diabetic."

Fig. 3: Private Scenarios

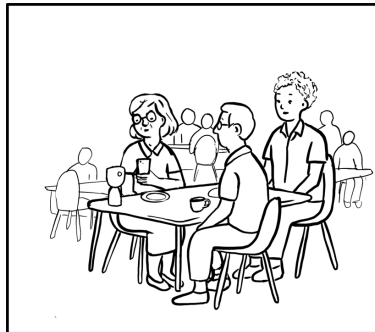


(a) **Storyboard Community Events - Guests Scenario:** An older adult is sitting on the couch in her home with family members who came to visit. She is reading the community newsletter to tell them about the upcoming community events. Her AI companion says, "You haven't been to a community event in over a week, so it would be a good idea to go socialize."

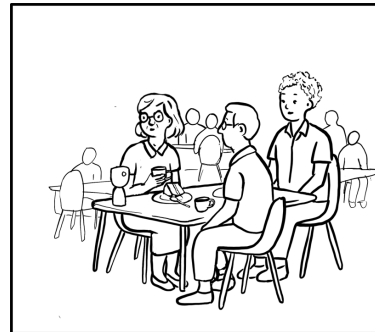


(b) **Storyboard Meal Planning - Guests Scenario:** An older adult sits at her dining room table in her home with her son and AI companion. She begins to eat a slice of cake, and the AI companion says, "Cake might not be a good idea. Remember, your doctor told you that you are pre-diabetic."

Fig. 4: Private with Guests Scenarios



(a) **Storyboard Community Events - Public Scenario:** An older adult is sitting in the community cafe with friends and her AI companion. She is reading the community newsletter while they talk about the upcoming community events. The AI companion says, "You haven't been to a community event in over a week, so it would be a good idea to go do an activity."



(b) **Storyboard Meal Planning - Public Scenario:** An older adult is sitting in the community cafe with friends and her AI companion. She begins to eat a slice of cake, and the AI companion says, "Cake might not be a good idea. Remember, your doctor told you that you are pre-diabetic."

Fig. 5: Public Scenarios

		Session 1	Session 2
Gender	Male	5	4
	Female	24	15
Age	70-74	8	4
	75-79	5	5
	80-84	7	5
	85-89	7	2
	90-94	2	2
	No response	0	1
Highest Level of Education	High school diploma or GED	3	1
	Some college	2	2
	Associate's degree	3	1
	Bachelor's degree	5	3
	Post graduate degree	14	12
	No response	2	0
In general, how confident are you with technology?	Very confident	4	1
	Somewhat confident	19	11
	Not very confident	4	6
	Not confident at all	0	0
	No response	2	1
How familiar are you with AI technologies in healthcare?	Very familiar	1	1
	Somewhat familiar	14	9
	Not very familiar	10	6
	Not familiar at all	4	2
	No response	0	1

Table 2: Participant Demographics

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