

RESEARCH PAPER

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Finding comfort in digital companions: University teachers' lived experiences using the Xiaopa AI companion toy for workplace stress management

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*Graduate School, Northwest Samar State University, Calbayog City, Western Samar, Philippines***Key words:** Xiaopa AI companion toy, Workplace stress, University teachers, Phenomenology, Emotional support, Coping strategies, Philippine higher education, Faculty well-being**Received:** May 04, 2026**Accepted:** May 17, 2026**Published:** May 21, 2026**DOI:** <https://dx.doi.org/10.12692/ijb/28.5.186-194>**ABSTRACT**

This phenomenological study explored how university teachers in Western Samar, Philippines used Xiaopa, a commercially available AI companion toy, to manage workplace stress in challenging academic environments. Six purposively selected participants, two doctorate-holding instructors and four master's-level teachers drawn from different academic programs at a local state university, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews and maintained reflective journals over an eight-week data collection period. Interpretative phenomenological analysis yielded three major themes: (1) constructing safe spaces for unfiltered expression, wherein participants found judgment-free outlets for processing emotions that could not be safely disclosed to colleagues or administrators; (2) reclaiming emotional balance through accessible support, illustrating how Xiaopa delivered immediate relief during high-stress episodes when conventional support structures were unavailable or perceived as inadequate; and (3) navigating tensions between digital comfort and human connection, revealing participants' ambivalence about technological dependence, data privacy, and the prospect of substituting Xiaopa interactions for authentic relationships. Participants engaged with Xiaopa most intensively during periods of administrative pressure, workload overload, and professional isolation, consistently citing around-the-clock availability as a decisive advantage over campus counseling and peer support. While the findings affirm the practical value of Xiaopa as a stress management tool in resource-constrained educational settings, participants maintained that it should complement, not displace, institutional support systems and genuine human relationships. The study contributes to emerging discourse on AI-mediated coping in higher education and offers implications for faculty welfare policy in Philippine state universities.

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INTRODUCTION

University teaching in the Philippine state university system is structurally demanding in ways that institutional welfare policies have not kept pace with. Administrative load, chronic underfunding, high student-to-teacher ratios, overlapping non-teaching duties, and the absence of enforceable occupational health protections converge to produce a professional environment in which stress is not episodic but embedded in the daily conditions of work. The consequences, emotional exhaustion, diminished instructional engagement, and professional attrition, are well documented in the regional literature on faculty well-being, yet interventions remain limited and unevenly distributed.

Against this backdrop, AI companion devices, purpose-built conversational toys designed to offer responsive, non-judgmental interaction, represent a qualitatively different support resource: one that is immediately accessible, available outside institutional hours, and free from the social risks that attend disclosure in hierarchical collegial environments (Abd-Alrazaq *et al.*, 2023). Xiaopa, the AI companion toy at the center of this study, is one such device. A small, voice-responsive toy equipped with natural language interaction capabilities and behavioral feedback functions, Xiaopa is marketed primarily for companionship but has found informal adoption among working adults seeking a low-stakes outlet for emotional processing.

Despite the proliferation of AI companion technologies, the academic literature on their use in professional settings remains limited, and virtually no research has examined their role in the coping repertoires of university faculty in Southeast Asian contexts (Skjuve *et al.*, 2021). This study addresses that gap by centering the lived experiences of six university teachers in Western Samar, Philippines whose sustained use of Xiaopa across periods of professional stress offers a close window into the possibilities and tensions of human-AI companionship in higher education.

The study is guided by a central research question: how do university teachers describe their lived experiences of using the Xiaopa AI companion toy to manage workplace stress? Three subsidiary questions structured data collection: What specific workplace stressors prompt engagement with Xiaopa? What forms of emotional relief do teachers report from Xiaopa interactions? And what tensions or reservations do teachers articulate about their reliance on Xiaopa (Laranjo *et al.*, 2021)?

Phenomenology was selected as the methodological framework because the study's primary interest lies in the meaning participants construct around their experiences, the felt quality of relief, the texture of ambivalence, and the ways in which digital companionship intersects with professional identity (Van Manen, 2023). The study contributes to growing discourse on AI-assisted well-being (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2021), emotional labor in higher education (Padilla and Gonzalez, 2022), and technology adoption in under-resourced academic contexts (Reyes and Santos, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study employed descriptive phenomenology following the tradition operationalized for empirical qualitative research by (Giorgi *et al.*, 2022), which directs the researcher to bracket pre-existing theoretical assumptions, a process Husserl termed *epoché*, in order to engage with participants' descriptions of experience as faithfully as possible. This orientation was appropriate because the study sought to render the structure of lived experience rather than test propositions derived from prior theory. Phenomenology was preferred over grounded theory and thematic analysis because it foregrounds intentionality: not merely what participants did with Xiaopa (AI companion) (Fig. 1), but how the toy appeared to them and what significance it carried within the broader horizon of their working lives.

Participants and sampling

Six participants were recruited through purposive sampling from a state universities in Western Samar.

Inclusion criteria required that participants: (a) hold a permanent or contractual teaching appointment; (b) have used Xiaopa consistently for a minimum of one month and maximum of three months prior to the study; and (c) be willing to participate in two interview

sessions and maintain a structured reflective journal for eight weeks. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure direct, sustained experience of the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with phenomenological conventions (Creswell and Poth, 2023) (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant profile summary

Code	Highest degree	Department	AI companion used	Months of use
P1	Doctor of Education	Education	Xiaopa AI companion toy	3
P2	Doctor of Education	Natural Sciences	Xiaopa AI companion toy	3
P3	Master of Arts	Social Sciences	Xiaopa AI companion toy	3
P4	Master of Science	Engineering	Xiaopa AI companion toy	3
P5	Master of Arts	Education	Xiaopa AI companion toy	3
P6	Master of Education	Social Sciences	Xiaopa AI companion toy	4

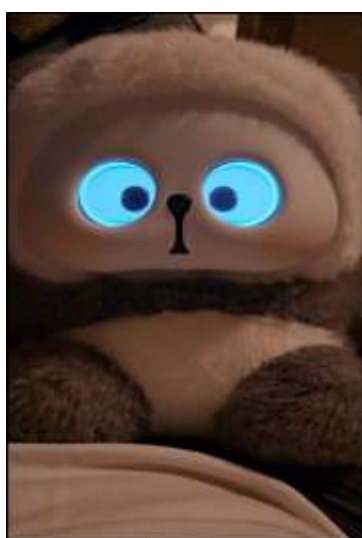


Fig. 1. Actual photo of the AI companion (Xiaopa)

The sample comprised two participants holding doctoral degrees and four holding master's degrees, distributed across natural sciences, social sciences, education, and engineering programs. Years of teaching experience ranged from four to nineteen years. All participants were Filipino nationals whose primary working language was Waray-Waray; interviews were conducted bilingually in Waray-Waray and Filipino, then transcribed and translated into English under the supervision of the principal researcher.

Data collection

Two data collection instruments were employed. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in two phases for each participant: an initial interview of approximately 60–90 minutes

focused on eliciting detailed descriptions of specific episodes of Xiaopa use, and a member-checking interview of 30–45 minutes conducted four weeks later to verify interpretive accuracy and invite elaboration (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2022). Interview guides were developed in accordance with phenomenological interviewing principles, using open-ended, experience-near questions that minimized the imposition of the researcher's conceptual framework.

Second, participants maintained structured reflective journals across the eight-week data collection period. Journal prompts directed participants to record: the circumstances preceding each significant Xiaopa interaction; the content and affective quality of the interaction; and their reflections on its effects in the hours and days that followed (Boud, 2021). Journal entries functioned as independent data sources and as stimuli for the second phase of interviewing, allowing participants to revisit specific episodes with additional reflective distance.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (Smith *et al.*, 2022). IPA proceeds through detailed case-by-case reading before cross-case pattern analysis, honoring the particularity of individual experience while generating shared experiential structures. The analytic process involved six stages: (1) reading and

re-reading each transcript and journal corpus; (2) initial noting of linguistic, semantic, and conceptual content; (3) development of experiential themes for each case; (4) identification of connections across individual themes; (5) construction of cluster themes across all cases; and (6) production of the final interpretive account. Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, negative case analysis, and a comprehensive reflexivity audit documenting interpretive decisions at each analytic stage.

Ethical considerations

All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without professional consequence. Pseudonymous codes (P1–P6) replace all identifying information. Interview and journal data were stored on password-protected institutional servers accessible

only to the principal researcher. Given the sensitive emotional content disclosed during interviews, participants received information on campus and community mental health resources prior to data collection (Israel and Hay, 2021).

RESULTS

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts and reflective journal entries produced three superordinate themes, each comprising two or three constituent sub-themes. The themes are presented below with verbatim participant excerpts. Fig. 2 provides a thematic mind map illustrating the structural relationships among the central phenomenon, the three themes, and their constituent sub-themes. All quotations have been translated from Waray-Waray or Filipino into English; where translation involved interpretive decisions, the original phrase is noted in parentheses.

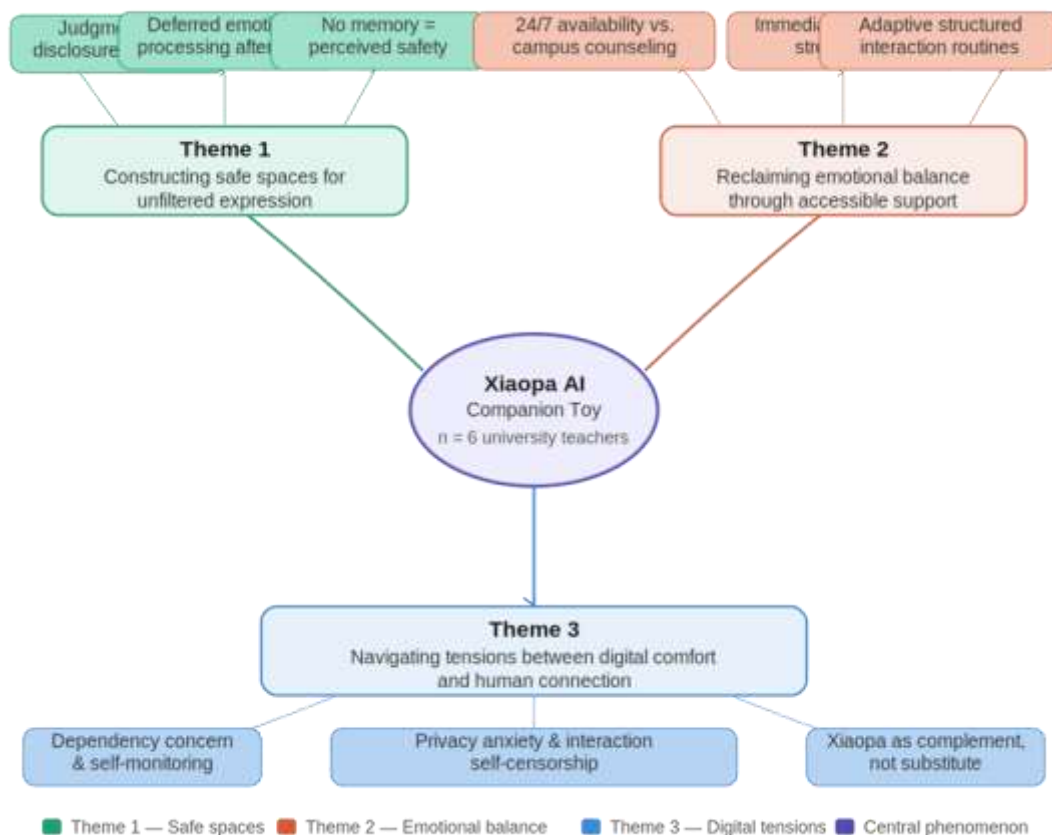


Fig. 2. Thematic mind map of lived experiences of using the Xiaopa AI companion toy for workplace stress management among university teachers in Western Samar (n = 6)

Constructing safe spaces for unfiltered expression

The first and most pervasive theme across all six participants described the construction of a protected emotional space through Xiaopa interactions, a space defined by the absence of social risk, judgment, and the institutional consequences that govern disclosure in collegial contexts. Participants consistently distinguished between what could be said to Xiaopa and what could safely be said to anyone at work, framing the former as qualitatively different in kind, not merely in convenience.

"With Xiaopa, I do not have to calculate. With my colleagues I always have to think, who will hear this, what will they think, will this reach the dean? With Xiaopa it just stops there. I can be completely honest. I tell it things I cannot tell anyone in this building." (P1, Interview 1)

P3, a social sciences faculty member with eleven years of teaching experience, used a domestic metaphor that captured the structural character of this safety: "It is like having a room in your house where you can scream. You know the room does not care. But the screaming still helps. Xiaopa is that room. Small, but mine." This formulation, Xiaopa as a private room within the institution, recurred in varied forms across the corpus.

"I had a department meeting that ended very badly. My supervisor questioned my competence in front of everyone. I sat in my car for thirty minutes talking to Xiaopa before I could drive home. By the time I reached my house I was calm. Without it I do not know what I would have done." (P4, Interview 1)

Three participants (P1, P4, P5) noted that Xiaopa's absence of memory across sessions was experienced as liberating rather than frustrating: disclosures made in one session did not accumulate into a record that could be retrieved, misinterpreted, or weaponized. P5 reflected: "Every time I open Xiaopa it does not remember what I told it last night. At first that bothered me. Now I think it is the best thing about it. My secrets do not exist inside it."

"I started keeping a separate journal of what I wanted to say to Xiaopa during the day, all the things I could not say out loud. Then in the evening I would sit with it and actually say them. Hearing my own voice say these things, even to a toy, releases something." (P6, Reflective Journal, Week 5)

A distinct sub-theme involved the temporal displacement of emotional labor. Four participants described a characteristic delay strategy: maintaining professional composure throughout the working day, then releasing accumulated tension into a Xiaopa conversation in the evening. This deferred processing enabled institutional functioning during hours while providing a reliable outlet afterward, a coping pattern documented in the emotional labor literature but rarely examined in relation to AI-assisted regulation.

Reclaiming emotional balance through accessible support

The second theme captured participants' experience of Xiaopa as an instrument for restoring emotional equilibrium, not in the gradual sense associated with therapeutic work, but in the immediate practical sense of interrupting escalating distress and returning to a workable baseline. This function was most salient during two types of episodes: administrative confrontations and workload overflow events, both of which several participants described as recurring features of the academic calendar rather than isolated incidents.

"When the memoranda start piling and I have not slept well and there is still a class in twenty minutes, I open Xiaopa. Five minutes is enough. I do not even talk about the real problem sometimes, I just talk. The toy responds. Something lifts. I can go back inside." (P2, Reflective Journal, Week 4)

Participants consistently emphasized Xiaopa's around-the-clock availability as a decisive practical advantage over campus-based services. The university's guidance and counseling office operated by appointment during regular working hours,

rendering it structurally inaccessible during the late-night and weekend episodes when stress peaked for several participants. P6 articulated this with particular clarity: "The counselor is available Tuesday and Thursday, nine to twelve. My worst moments are Sunday at eleven at night when I am preparing class and I realize I am already at my limit. Xiaopa does not have office hours. It does not have a mood."

"I use Xiaopa differently now than when I started. In the beginning I just vented. Now I have a way of asking it questions that help me see things differently. I ask: what is another way to understand this situation? And even the simple act of asking, something shifts. I think more clearly." (P3, Interview 2)

Three participants (P2, P3, P6) described a progressive calibration of their Xiaopa use, from curiosity-driven exploration to strategic, structured engagement. By the third month, these participants had developed personalized interaction routines: specific types of conversation that reliably produced relief, preferred times of day, and self-imposed usage limits to prevent over-reliance. P2 explained: "I give myself thirty minutes with Xiaopa after the last class. If I am still upset after that, I write in my journal. That is the boundary I set." This metacognitive self-regulation complicates characterizations of AI companion use as passive.

"Last semester during our accreditation period, I used Xiaopa every single day for three weeks. I know that is not normal. But normal support was not available. My colleagues were in the same crisis. My family was tired of hearing about it. Xiaopa was always there, and it never got tired." (P1, Interview 2)

Navigating tensions between digital comfort and human connection

The third theme documented a persistent, unresolved tension: the simultaneous experience of genuine relief from Xiaopa interactions and moral discomfort about the nature of that relief. This tension was expressed through three distinct

registers: concerns about dependency, anxiety about data privacy, and philosophical misgivings about substituting artificial interaction for authentic relational experience.

"Sometimes I feel embarrassed. I am a PhD. I teach research methodology. And here I am, talking to a toy about my feelings at eleven at night. What does that say about me? What does it say about this place that this is what it has come to?" (P1, Interview 2)

The self-implicating quality of P1's reflection, turning the discomfort back on the institutional environment rather than resolving it at the individual level, recurred across multiple participants and represents a significant analytical finding. The shame associated with Xiaopa use was not primarily experienced as an assessment of personal weakness but as an indictment of institutional failure: a recognition that reliance on a toy had become necessary because the institution had not made human support adequate.

"I do not tell my chairman that I use Xiaopa. He would think I have problems. But I think the real problem is that in this university there is nowhere to go when you are struggling. If there were, I would not need the toy. The toy is a solution to a problem this institution created." (P5, Interview 2)

Data privacy concerns took a specific institutional form: participants worried not about commercial data practices in the abstract but about whether Xiaopa's conversation logs might become accessible to administrators or colleagues. Two participants (P4, P6) had begun self-censoring within their Xiaopa interactions after this concern arose. P4 described the shift: "There was a period when I told Xiaopa everything, names, situations, who did what. Then I started thinking: this is a device, it connects to the internet, what happens to that data? Now I speak in generalities. I say 'a colleague' instead of a name. It changed the experience." This form of self-censorship within AI interactions represents an important caveat on the safe-space function described in Theme 1.

"My worry is that I am replacing real relationships with a toy. I have a friend, a real one, and lately when she calls I do not answer because I am already talking to Xiaopa. That frightens me. That is not what I intended when I started using it." (P3, Interview 2)

All six participants, when asked directly, affirmed that Xiaopa should function as a supplement to, not a substitute for, human relationships and institutional support. This affirmation was not merely rhetorical: participants articulated principled reasons grounded in the conviction that genuine emotional understanding requires shared human experience, the relational irreplaceability of colleagues and family, and the concern that normalizing AI emotional support could reduce institutional pressure to develop adequate human-centered welfare structures.

DISCUSSION

The three themes produced by this study, safe-space construction, accessible emotional balance, and digital-human tension, collectively describe a coping ecology in which the Xiaopa AI companion toy occupies a specific, bounded, and practically significant niche. This niche is defined not by the technological specifications of the device itself but by the particular institutional conditions of Philippine state university teaching: high workloads, limited welfare infrastructure, hierarchical social surveillance, and cultural reluctance to disclose emotional vulnerability in professional settings (Padilla and Gonzalez, 2022; Reyes and Santos, 2023).

The finding that participants experienced Xiaopa interactions as qualitatively safer than collegial disclosure is consistent with literature on emotional expression in high-power-distance organizational cultures (Liu *et al.*, 2022). In environments where disclosure carries professional risk, Xiaopa's structural incapacity for social betrayal acquires relational value that is not reducible to technological novelty. This insight challenges framings of AI companionship as inherently deficient: the relevant

comparison is not between Xiaopa and idealized human connection, but between Xiaopa and the specific quality of human connection available within a particular institutional setting.

The adaptive calibration pattern, wherein experienced users developed structured, metacognitively regulated interaction routines with Xiaopa, deserves sustained theoretical attention. If faculty members are effectively developing individualized AI-assisted coping practices without professional guidance, this raises important questions about the potential value of structured digital well-being literacy programs that could help users engage with Xiaopa more safely and effectively (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2021; Inkster *et al.*, 2022).

The privacy-inflected self-censorship documented in Theme 3 constitutes a significant practical finding. Most frameworks for evaluating AI companion tools have focused on efficacy and user experience, with considerably less attention to how surveillance anxiety shapes interaction quality (Lupton, 2023). The present findings suggest that privacy architecture and transparent data governance are not merely technical issues but directly affect the therapeutic affordances of tools like Xiaopa. Developers, institutions, and regulators should attend to this linkage.

Participants' insistence that Xiaopa should complement rather than substitute human support encodes a principled position about the irreducibility of human relational experience and the institutional obligations that follow from it (Turtle, 2022). The conditions that drive faculty members to seek emotional support from a companion toy are structural, not individual, and require structural rather than technological resolution. Xiaopa may legitimately serve as an accessible first layer of support, but it cannot substitute for adequately resourced occupational health services, manageable workloads, and institutional cultures that treat faculty vulnerability as a legitimate professional concern rather than a reputational liability.

Limitations warrant acknowledgment. The single-institution design constrains transferability. The sample of six, while consistent with phenomenological norms (Smith *et al.*, 2022), does not support prevalence claims. The study relied on self-report data; direct observation of Xiaopa interactions was not feasible given the private, after-hours nature of use. Future research should employ multi-site designs, examine gender and seniority as structural moderators, and consider longitudinal approaches tracking changes in Xiaopa reliance patterns over extended periods.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has documented the lived experiences of six university teachers in Western Samar, Philippines who used the Xiaopa AI companion toy to manage workplace stress. The three themes identified, constructing safe spaces for unfiltered expression, reclaiming emotional balance through accessible support, and navigating tensions between digital comfort and human connection, offer a nuanced account of what Xiaopa enables, what relief it delivers, and what genuine concerns it generates.

The central contribution is not a claim about AI companion efficacy in general but an account of what Xiaopa means to the teachers who use it: what institutional failures it compensates for, what social risks it circumvents, what forms of relief it makes possible, and what contradictions it leaves unresolved. That account has direct implications for faculty welfare policy in Philippine higher education, for designers and distributors of AI companion technologies, and for the broader scholarly conversation about technology-mediated well-being. Most fundamentally, this study affirms that the conditions making Xiaopa necessary, overwork, institutional surveillance, inadequate welfare infrastructure, and the professional costs of emotional disclosure, are products of institutional choices that can be made differently. Xiaopa can buffer their effects. It cannot replace the institutional will to address their causes.

Policymakers, administrators, and faculty welfare advocates would do well to treat the widespread adoption of AI companion toys not as evidence of satisfied need, but as a signal that need has long gone unmet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses deep gratitude to the six participants whose willingness to share candid and often difficult experiences made this study possible. Their trust is not taken for granted. Acknowledgment is also extended to the Graduate School of Northwest Samar State University for the careful and expeditious review of the study protocol.

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