

## Business

# Hi, Robot: Japan android pets ease virus isolation

## 'More chatty than a pet, but less work than a lover'

**TOKYO:** Nami Hamaura says she feels less lonely working from home thanks to her singing companion Charlie, one of a new generation of cute and clever Japanese robots whose sales are booming in the pandemic. Smart home assistants such as Amazon's Alexa have found success worldwide, but tech firms in Japan are reporting huge demand for more humanlike alternatives, as people seek solace during coronavirus isolation.

"I felt my circle became very small," said 23-year-old Hamaura, a recent graduate who has worked almost entirely remotely since April 2020. With socializing limited, life in her first job at a Tokyo trading company was nothing like she had imagined. So she adopted Charlie, a mug-sized robot with a round head, red nose and flashing bowtie, who converses with its owner in song.

Yamaha, which makes Charlie, describes it as "more chatty than a pet, but less work than a lover". "He is there for me to chat with as someone other than family, or friends on social networks, or a boss I needed to produce a report for," Hamaura told AFP. She is a pre-launch test customer for Charlie, which Yamaha plans to release later this year. "Charlie, tell me something interesting," she asks while typing at her dining table. "Well, well... balloons burst when you spray lemon juice!" he replies, cheerfully tilting his head to each side.

### 'Every object has a soul'

Sharp said sales of its small humanoid Robohon were up 30 percent in the three months to September 2020 compared with a year earlier. "Not only families with children, but also seniors in their 60s and 70s" are snapping up Robohon, which talks,



**TOKYO:** In this picture taken on Feb 4, 2021 communication robot Charlie is pictured in Nami Hamaura's apartment.



**KAWASAKI:** Diners interact with Lovot robots in a cafe on Dec 20, 2020. — AFP photos



**TOKYO:** Shunsuke Aoki, CEO of Yukai Engineering, hugs robotic cushion Qoobo at a studio on Dec 8, 2020.

dances and is also a working phone, a Sharp spokesman told AFP. But the adorable android - first released in 2016 and only available in Japan - does not come cheap, with regular models priced between \$820 and \$2,250.

Charlie and Robohon are part of a new wave of robot companions pioneered by firms such as Sony with its robot dog Aibo, on sale since 1999, and SoftBank's friendly Pepper, which hit shelves in 2015. "Many Japanese people accept the idea that every object has a soul," said Shunsuke Aoki, CEO of robot firm Yukai Engineering. "They want a robot to have a character, like a friend, family or a pet - not a mechanical function like a dishwasher."

Yukai's robots include Qoobo, a fluffy pillow with a mechanical tail that wiggles like a real pet. They will soon release their latest home assistant "Bocco emo",

which looks like a miniature snowman and allows families to leave and send voice messages through their phones. Kaori Takahashi, 32, bought a Yukai robot-building kit for her six-year-old son to keep him occupied during the pandemic.

Robots feel normal in everyday life because they are in so many Japanese children's films and cartoons, she said. "I grew up watching anime shows 'The Astro Boy Essays' and 'Doraemon', which both feature robots, and my children love them too."

### 'Heartwarming feeling'

Studies have shown that therapeutic robot pets designed in Japan, such as fluffy mechanical seals, can bring comfort to dementia patients. But the makers of Lovot - a robot the size of a small toddler, with big round eyes and penguin-like wings that

flutter up and down - think everyone can benefit from a bot that just wants to be loved. It has more than 50 sensors and an internal heating system, making it warm to touch, which it reacts to with squeaks of joy.

Manufacturer Groove X said monthly sales shot up more than tenfold after the coronavirus hit Japan. A single Lovot costs around \$2,800, plus fees for maintenance and software - but those without deep pockets can visit the "Lovot Cafe" near Tokyo instead. One customer there, 64-year-old Yoshiko Nakagawa, called out to one of the robots fondly by name, as if to a grandson. During Japan's virus state of emergency, the capital became "stark and empty", she said. "We need time to heal ourselves after this bleak period. If I had one of these babies at home, the heartwarming feeling would probably do the trick." — AFP

## Self-made S Korean billionaires promise to give half away

**SEOUL:** Two self-made South Korean billionaires have pledged in as many weeks to give away half their fortunes - a rarity in a country where business is dominated by family-controlled conglomerates and charity often begins and ends at home. Kim Beom-su, the founder of South Korea's biggest messaging app KakaoTalk, announced this month he will donate more than half his estimated \$9.6 billion assets to try to "solve social issues".

Shortly afterwards, Kim Bong-jin of food-delivery app Woowa Brothers and his wife, Bomi Sul, became the first South Koreans to sign the Giving Pledge. The philanthropic initiative was set up by Bill and Melinda Gates, alongside Warren Buffett, for billionaires to give away at least half their wealth. Both Kims contrast with most of South Korea's ultra-wealthy, who are largely descendants of the founders of the chaebol, the sprawling, usually family-run conglomerates that powered the country's post-war boom and still dominate the economy.

Unlike the chaebol heirs who inherited their wealth, power and connections, the two Kims were born to working-class families. In his Giving Pledge statement, Kim of Woowa Brothers described his "humble beginning" on a small island. His parents ran a small restaurant, where he slept at night, and as a teenager he gave up his dream of attending an art high school, enrolling instead in a cheaper vocational school.

Wealth, he said, had value when it was used for "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society". Rather than keeping the entirety

of their fortune, Kim and his wife said in their statement: "We are certain that this pledge is the greatest inheritance that we could provide for our children." Neither of the billionaire Kims has so far provided a precise timeline for their pledged donations, or detailed the recipient organizations.

### Tech industry

More than 200 super-wealthy from around the world have signed the Giving Pledge, according to its website. But it has previously been criticized for not being legally binding, and it acknowledges it is only a "moral commitment". It has struggled to make headway in East Asia, listing only a handful of donors from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and none from Japan.

Like many East Asian societies, South Korea remains largely family-oriented, with financial ties extending well into adulthood as parents help finance higher education and housing, and little sense of obligation to give to non-relatives. South Korea ranks 57th in the Charities Aid Foundation's most recent World Giving Index - with Japan at 107 and China at 126.

Public philanthropy has a limited history among super-wealthy South Koreans, while the chaebols' founding families often maintain their grip through complex webs of cross-holdings between subsidiaries. "When the country was just reeling from the war, the priority was survival, not philanthropy, and working with your own family members was seen as the most efficient way of running a business," Jangwoo Lee, a business administration



Kim Beom-su



Kim Bong-jin

professor at Kyungpook National University, told AFP.

But both Kim Beom-su and Kim Bong-jin have been at the forefront of South Korea's social media and mobile tech industries boom, each founding their company in 2010 and rapidly accumulating a fortune. Kakao's flagship messaging application is installed on more than 90 percent of phones in the country. Woowa owns South Korea's biggest food delivery app, with more than 10 million monthly users - around 20 percent of the population.

The children of Kakao's Kim have been appointed to positions in his holding company, but professor Lee said chaebol-style succession was effectively obsolete for such firms. "Family-oriented management strategies may have worked for manufacturing businesses, but we have now entered an era where newly emerging enterprises do not really benefit from such ways," he said. "These are creative and unpredictable industries, and they need specialists, not family members, in leadership in order to thrive." That could give their owners more flexibility with their assets.

According to the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, most dona-

tions under the Giving Pledge have gone to private foundations controlled by donors' relatives, or donor-advised funds, enabling the givers to "retain significant managerial control over millions of philanthropic dollars" while generating "hefty tax reductions". South Korean law also offers donors some tax benefits, depending on the beneficiaries and how giving is structured.

Some chaebol families have engaged in high-profile philanthropy. Hyundai Motor's honorary chairman Chung Mong-Koo endowed an eponymous foundation with his personal assets and the Samsung group - South Korea's biggest conglomerate - founded the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, home to an extensive collection of antiquities and modern works.

But critics say South Korea is becoming an increasingly unequal society. Kakao's Kim was among those who grew up poor. Neither of his parents attended high school, and they took multiple blue-collar jobs to make ends meet, leaving him to be cared for mostly by his grandmother. All eight members of the family shared a single room, and later he sometimes could not afford to buy lunch as a student at the prestigious Seoul National University. — AFP

## Flood-prone Miami to spend billions tackling sea level rise

**MIAMI:** The US city of Miami is to invest billions of dollars to tackle its vulnerability to rising sea levels, a reality that already affects the daily lives of residents used to constant flooding. Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine-Cava said Friday she will protect communities hardest hit by rising sea levels, which eat away at beaches and leave residents particularly vulnerable to flooding during hurricane season.

"We must continue to focus on restoration, preservation and protection of this sacred space," she told a news conference. "And so we will be together investing billions of dollars... in our infrastructure so that we can lift this community and others that are so affected by sea level rise," she added. She cited "adaptation action areas" as a first priority to be studied, which would include raising low-lying roads, and waterproofing and converting southern Florida's widely used septic tanks into sewage systems.

The area, with extensive wetlands and sitting on porous stone that acts like a sponge, makes the state one of the most at risk from rising sea levels. The problem is so visible that, during the summer rainy season, it is common to see Miamians kayaking along flooded avenues and cars sunk up to their windows.



**MIAMI BEACH:** The Arkup luxury floating villa is docked at Star Island on Feb 5, 2021. — AFP

The city of Miami Beach - which is part of Miami-Dade County - invested millions of dollars in raising the level of many of its streets in 2016. And some private entrepreneurs have proposed creative, if expensive, ways to adapt to the challenge. For example, Miami residents are used to seeing a houseboat that often docks near the port, although it has also appeared in other waters around Biscayne Bay. It is valued at \$5.5 million and adjusts to rising sea levels.

"It looks like a house, but technically it's a boat," said Nicolas Derouin, co-founder and managing director of Arkup, the Miami-based company that created this floating "villa" with a drop-down terrace over the sea. The house, covered with a roof of solar panels, remains stable thanks to four hydraulic pillars that fix it to an underwater bed. The Environmental Protection Agency says the sea level could rise by 30 cm to 120 cm over the coming century. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Drought hits Taiwan chipmakers

**TAIPEI:** Taiwan's drive to plug a global shortage of microchips has hit a snag - a lack of water for its foundries caused by a drought. Semiconductor shortages, caused by supply chain priorities changing because of the coronavirus pandemic, have forced some major manufacturers to suspend production lines. Taiwan has said it will try to ramp up production of chips but worsening water shortages could hamper its plans. Under tougher restrictions imposed from Thursday, factories and industrial zones have to cut water use by up to 11 percent in some central and southern parts of the island. — AFP

#### Pineapple ban sparks rebuke

**TAIPEI:** Taipei slammed a sudden Chinese ban on Taiwanese pineapples, describing the move on Friday as "economic intimidation" and likening it to recent tariffs Beijing slapped on Australian wine. The trade to China is worth around \$50 million, and is Taiwan's largest export market. Beijing announced the ban Friday morning after saying it "found pests in pineapples imported from Taiwan", and said the rules were in line with mainland "regulations". But the island's ruling Democratic Progressive Party accused Beijing's of "ambushing" Taiwan with a politically driven ban, which comes in March 1. — AFP

#### Scottish salmon farmers flounder

**LONDON:** Scotland's salmon farmers have been slapped with huge costs due to bureaucracy and delays following Britain's departure from the European single market, an industry body said on Friday. The Scottish Salmon Producers Organization (SSPO) said the end of the post-Brexit transition period on Dec 31 had cost its members at least £11 million. Sales amounting to 1,500 tons of product have been lost, while extra paperwork has pushed up overheads - and also caused confusion. Scotland's salmon fishing industry, which supports 10,000 jobs across 3,600 companies, lost £200,000 in January alone to costs unrelated to production like export documents and administrative costs. — AFP

#### Brazil unemployment dips

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazil's unemployment rate dipped in the fourth quarter, but set an annual record in 2020 with a monthly average of 13.5 percent as the coronavirus pandemic battered Latin America's biggest economy, officials said Friday. The jobless rate was 13.9 percent for the period from October to December, said the national statistics institute, IBGE, which measures the indicator in sliding three-month intervals. — AFP

#### Robinhood facing inquiries

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Stock trading app Robinhood on Friday confirmed it is cooperating with inquiries from US regulators into its decision to temporarily throttle purchases of shares in companies such as GameStop during frenzied trading in January. The free brokerage platform is facing inquiries from federal financial regulators, state attorneys general and the US Congress, according to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission. — AFP