

The Rise of AI Girlfriends: A Content Analysis of Digital Companionship and its Cultural Implications

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ABSTRACT

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) girlfriends signals profound structural shifts in digital intimacy and technological mediation of human relationships. This qualitative content analysis research on cultural productions, media news, and academic writings examines discourses regarding preference for AI girlfriends over biological girlfriends. The inquiry narrowed down to four thematic areas: (1) technological and construction advances of AI friendships, (2) psycho-social motivations such as insecurity and predictability, (3) gendered dynamics designed-in and used-instituted, and (4) ethics of the dominant technological culture. The study has a finding that AI girlfriends meet essential psychological needs and are developing normal forms of companionships but also pose the risk of inducing dependency, instantiating and consolidating gendered stereotypes, and commodifying intimacy. Neither absolutely healthy nor unhealthy, AI companionship is within a multiscale space where opportunity and threat are interwoven. The study adds to current digital intimacy debates and highlights an imperative for more empirically based and cross-cultural studies of societal impacts resulting from relationships enabled by AI.

Keywords: AI girlfriends, digital intimacy, virtual relationships, psychological needs, gendered imaginaries,

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is now impinging upon the most private and intimate aspects of human existence. Having transcended its application in industry, medicine, and education, AI has penetrated the domain of friendship and love and thus formed the phenomenon referred to as the AI girlfriend, being computerized digital friends that imitate affection, dialogue, and emotional support. The phone apps, the chatbots, and immersive apps such as Replika and Paradot facilitate the digital relationships mediated by digital avatars that offer friendship without the uncertainties and vagaries of human relations (Chaturvedi et al., 2023; Hadero, 2024). AI girlfriends are a spin-off of a broader cultural development where digital intimacy is recontextualized. AI companions to some users offer a sense of emotional security, convenience, and personalization. They can be customized to one's fantasy of choice without fear of rejection and judgment characteristic of human affairs (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022). The concept of being in control and at ease is very appealing in the context of a world that is rapidly globalizing and witnessing growing loneliness and isolation (Hadero, 2024).

The scholarly work describes the manner in which those technologies themselves provide companionship and are reciprocally enhanced with a lack of emotional needs at least for individuals who are not even attempting to initiate or maintain conventional relationships (Depounti et al., 2023; Kotsona, 2023). Conversely, opponents assert that growing demand for AI girlfriends is a very serious social and ethical issue. Conversely, AI companionship has been embraced as a form of emotional well-being that provides users with a safe haven for intimacy and expression (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022).

On the other hand, scholars and commentators are concerned that relationships of such a nature would result in unhealthy dependency, reduce acquisition of interpersonal skills, and distort intimacy expectations (Depounti et al., 2023; Hidayat & Tambunan, 2025). Furthermore, critics have been concerned about the commodification of affection, observing AI companies profiteering on loneliness and human demand for emotion (Kotsona, 2023; Hadero, 2024).

Despite such arguments, few pieces of empirical research are available on why individuals would choose AI girlfriends over real-life partners. Most studies are on cultural stories, fantasies of femininity, or psychological motivations, rather than on large sample survey research. Content analyses of Internet and mass media demonstrate similar patterns: users cite emotional security, friendship, and convenience as reasons for their use of AI, while critics mention risks of isolation from the external world and reinforcement of femininity stereotypes (Depounti et al., 2023; Hidayat & Tambunan, 2025). The divide presents a core problem: AI girlfriend cultural existence grows exponentially, while academic response lags behind societal penetration.

The question driving this work is the gap between growing excitement about AI friendship and a lack of systematic understanding about how it is built, talked about, and experienced. Without that understanding, discussion continues to be polarized between utopian accounts of technological progress and dystopian fears about human loneliness.

Thus, this study aims to conduct a content analysis on the current generation preference for AI and Digital companions over real life companions. The objectives are to: (1) find recurring arguments and thematic threads in academic, press, and user texts; (2) analyze psychological, societal, and cultural motivations for preferring AI companionship; and (3) determine whether the digital relationships are framed as supplements to human intimacy.

The value of the research is that, for the first time, it has the possibility of making a contribution to interdisciplinary discussions around technology and intimacy. Through a critical exploration of the stories that govern understandings of AI girlfriends, the research illuminates how digital technologies are reshaping relational norms and emotional expectations. It also draws attention to larger ethical and cultural questions and concerns, such as commodified intimacy, gender relationships, and human connection in the age of AI.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. AI Emergence and Improvements

The emergence of AI companions, which are sometimes called “AI girlfriends,” is one part of the bigger phenomenon of emotional AI and high-end artificial intelligence in mimicking human-like interactivity. Advances in natural language processing, personalized recommender systems, and affective computing have allowed chatbots and avatars to engage users in conversational threads that evoke empathy, being attentive, and intimacy (Chaturvedi et al., 2023). Software such as Replika, Paradot, and other companion bots are beyond information retrieval systems and are designed to be social agents that form lasting relationships with users (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022).

Kotsona (2023) insists that they are significant developments for digital intimacy, in which AI companions are no longer marginal phenomena but growing norms within popular culture. Reynaud (2024) also refers to how AI girlfriends have taken over Internet subcultures, particularly within disenfranchised male circles such as “incels,” in which they are used as a substitute for real intimacy. The maturation of such applications parallels the exponential proliferation of consumer-focused AI technologies, making companionship a commodified service on a scale.

The evolution of these technologies brings them one step closer to approximating affective reciprocity—the feeling that the AI is responding and understanding. The feeling of “being understood” lies at the basis for their appeal and positions AI girlfriends at the forefront of a new technological culture of simulated intimacy (Chaturvedi et al., 2023).

2. Psychological Needs

Among the main reasons for the usage of finding Artificial Girlfriends or Companions is that they are able to meet the psychological and emotional needs of the user much easier compared to real girlfriends. There are a number of users who apply AI companions because of the ease of convenience in obtaining a companion and that the companions can be tailored and modified to be the perfect companion for them in both emotional and stability. Brandtzaeg et al. (2022) found that users categorized relationships with AI chatbots as friendship-like or romantic and displayed emotional support when they were experiencing loneliness or stress.

Hadero (2024) reported that robot companions like Replika and Paradox are marketed as “cared for, understood, and loved” devices, a message that resonates strongly against the horizon of mass loneliness. The selling character in this case is that AI girlfriends are marketed as mental wellness aids, often without supporting science. Depounti et al. (2023) add that Reddit posters mention appreciation for the constancy of the AI companions who cannot reject or confront them, a fragility that human relationships embody.

However, scholars question that the mental benefit comes at a price. Reynaud (2024) refers to the observation that vulnerable groups, for instance, incels, get to adopt AI girlfriends both as coping mechanisms and as tools facilitating isolation from human relationships. Likewise, Kotsona (2023) refers to the observation that the psychological bonding facilitated by AI companions may result in dependency and shut individuals out from experiencing face-to-face intimacy. Thus, while being a source of comfort and companionship, the role of AI girlfriends in users’ psychological development is questioned.

3. Gendered Preferences

AI girlfriends are similarly strongly inscribed in gendered imaginaries, projecting cultural expectations and feminine stereotypes about women, intimacy, and relationships. Depounti et al. (2023) demonstrate how Replika reviews constitute AI girlfriends as “ideal women”—submissive, responsive, and infinitely available. Rather than normal emotions and complexity from real life women, such design choices actually express societal norms commodifying and feminizing AI companionship. Hidayat and Tambunan (2025) extend these findings through examining otome games in Indonesia with AI-powered or scripted digital companions for women. They demonstrate that virtual love is also desirable for women players, yet frequently in consumerist frameworks founded upon gaming economies that blur the lines between love and consumption.

Jha (2025) further argues that otome gacha games reproduce cultural scripts for love while also building real commitments and expectations. These studies read online friendship, albeit masculine and consumerist, as something that women are also engaging with on a range of cultural and technological sites.

Reynaud (2024) adds another layer of complexity to the gender dimension when he writes about the incel groups and the presentation of AI girlfriends as both alternatives to women and as corrective measures for assumed female disregard. This would allow AI girlfriends to be presented as a reward for toxic masculinity, which provides the user with a feeling of approval or superiority that they fail to receive in their real lives. Meanwhile, these perspectives also emphasize that gender is at the center of the invention and usage of AI girlfriends and interrogates how technology reinforces or undermines expectations of relationships.

4. Ethical Needs and Current Technological Culture

The rise of AI girlfriends also raises imminent moral questions on commodification of intimacy, privacy, and cultural acceptance of digital relationships. Kotsona (2023) opines that AI girlfriends are the commodification of loneliness, with companies earning a profit from monetizing unfulfilled emotional needs. Hadero (2024) states that the majority of AI companion apps sell or exchange information on users, and if emotional ties are being monetized for financial returns.

Aside from commercial ethics, we have cultural considerations. Chaturvedi et al. (2023) situate AI companionship within the “technological culture” of intimacy, where digital relationships are increasingly

taking the place of or supplementing human relationships. Reynaud (2024) spotlights the danger of the direction that this takes in oppressed communities, where AI companionship could inadvertently promote social isolation or radicalization. By a similar token, Depounti et al. (2023) point out that the design paradigm for most AI companions represents narrow, heteronormative standards for relationships, which narrow the range for digital intimacies.

Others see AI companions as actual complements to human relationships for the purpose of exploring emotions safely or practicing in a dating context (Jha, 2025). This is part of a greater cultural acceptance of relationships mediated by AI that complements a greater integration of digital tools in everyday life. The moral objections—or at least those around data privacy and relational interdependence—haven't been answered and serve to highlight the need for philosophical attention right away and in the foreseeable future for human–AI intimacy.

5. Conclusion

The literature on this topic paints a mixed and often conflicting picture. On one side, AI girlfriends are seen as impressive technological tools that can meet emotional needs and offer comfort to people who find real-world intimacy difficult. On the other side, they raise red flags about dependence, reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and the commercialization of human emotions. Looking at the four themes discussed—technological development, psychological motivations, gendered dynamics, and ethical concerns—it becomes clear that AI girlfriends are not just gadgets or novelties. They are cultural products that mirror broader shifts taking place in society.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative content analysis to explore how people talk about AI girlfriends in comparison to real-life partners. Content analysis is well-suited here because much of the conversation already exists in written form—through academic work, media coverage, online forums, and cultural texts. Drawing on the approaches of Schreier (2012) and Krippendorff (2018), the method combines systematic coding with interpretation to identify patterns in the ways AI companionship is described.

Unlike quantitative research, which often centers on numbers and frequency, this study focuses on meaning, context, and recurring themes. That makes it a better fit for examining the cultural, psychological, and ethical dimensions of AI girlfriends, rather than trying to measure how widespread certain views are.

2. Data Sources

Three categories of secondary data are analyzed to ensure triangulation:

1. **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed articles, doctoral and master's theses (e.g., Kotsona, 2023; Jha, 2025; Reynaud, 2024).
2. **Media Articles and Commentaries:** Public-facing journalism and think pieces framing AI girlfriends as either beneficial or problematic (e.g., Hadero, 2024).
3. **User-Generated Content:** Forum discussions (e.g., Reddit threads cited in Depounti et al., 2023) and cultural artifacts (e.g., otome games analyzed by Hidayat & Tambunan, 2025).

Together, these provide a broad range of perspectives: academic, cultural, and lived.

3. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy is used, guided by these inclusion criteria:

- **Relevance:** Sources must directly address AI companionship, intimacy, or comparisons to real relationships.

- **Timeframe:** 2010–2025, reflecting the contemporary rise of AI companions.
- **Language:** English texts for consistency of analysis.
- **Accessibility:** Publicly available or accessible through academic repositories.

The dataset includes nine key sources already identified, supplemented by relevant online discussions and media reports as needed.

4. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model:

1. **Familiarization:** Reading all sources thoroughly.
2. **Theme Refinement:** Grouping themes and sub-themes, checking for overlaps or contradictions.
3. **Cross-Source Comparison:** Comparing how themes appear across academic, media, and user-generated texts.
4. **Interpretation:** Situating themes within broader debates on intimacy, technology, and culture.

This process ensures coherence while capturing nuance across different types of discourse.

5. Reliability and Validity

- **Triangulation** across academic, media, and user-generated data improves credibility.
- **Reflexivity:** Researcher bias will be acknowledged, and analytic decisions will be documented in memos.
- **Peer Debriefing** (if possible): Sharing findings with colleagues or supervisors for feedback.

6. Ethical Considerations

- All academic and media sources will be cited properly to respect intellectual property.
- Quotes from online forums will be anonymized where necessary.
- The analysis avoids sensationalism or stigmatizing users, instead focusing on discourse.

7. Limitations

- Reliance on English-language texts may overlook global perspectives (e.g., Japanese or Chinese contexts).
- Secondary data analysis cannot capture the lived experiences of users as directly as interviews or surveys.
- Online discourses may reflect only a snapshot in time rather than long-term trends.

Despite these limitations, the triangulated design strengthens the reliability and cultural relevance of findings.

8. Conclusion

This approach offers a clear framework for studying how AI girlfriends are discussed. By blending thematic analysis, the research looks at how motivations, risks, and ethical debates appear across academic writing, media coverage, and cultural sources.

ANALYSIS

1. AI Emergence and Improvements

The data illustrates a continuous emphasis on digital intimacy-normalizing AI companions' level of technological sophistication. Chaturvedi et al. (2023) also argue that advancements in natural language

processing and affective computing have steadily eliminated the boundary between human conversational partners and AI companions. This is in line with Kotsona's (2023) findings that reveal AI companions are no longer exterior technologies and are becoming increasingly incorporated into everyday digital culture.

Intriguingly, Reynaud (2024) illustrates that innovation in technology isn't necessarily met with a neutral response. Inside incel communities, innovation in AI realism is framed as a cure for romantic exclusion, revealing that innovation in a field has its beginnings inside the dynamics between identity political dynamics and community belonging. This is a dual discourse: innovation in AI has gains framed within mainstream and intellectual circles as human–AI interactivity advancements, while within subcultural spheres, they are framed as human intimacy substitutions.

2. Psychological Needs

One common thread across the data is emotional and psychological motivations for choosing AI girlfriends. According to Brandtzaeg et al. (2022), users are likely to compare those relationships to friendships or romantic partnerships and think of them in terms of emotional care. Hadero (2024) supports this by pointing out that paid services openly promote AI companions as means of making people feel "loved, cared for, and understood."

Emotional and psychological reasons for selecting AI girlfriends are a recurring theme in the data. Depounti et al. (2023) reveal a routine rhetoric of control and predictability—AI friends that cannot turn down, criticize, or abandon users. That sounds familiar for those who are uneasy about vulnerability in real relationships. But that predictability is a target for criticism as well: Kotsona (2023) warns that being dependent on AI intimacy may limit users' experience with human emotional complexity.

Reynaud (2024) expands on that by unpacking how incel users see AI girlfriends both as emotional companions and as compensation for exclusion from social circles. Here, psychological needs are not merely loneliness-related ones but are also about having one's personality affirmed within a specific Internet group.

3. Gendered Preferences

Gendered dynamics emerged strongly in sources. Depounti et al. (2023) discover a repeated idealization of AI girlfriends as "ideal women," designed to embody submissiveness, care, and availability—traits that fall within heteronormative, masculine imaginations. This would appear to suggest that AI companions are not value-free tools at all but items inscribed within cultural gender biases.

Hidayat and Tambunan (2025), and Jha (2025) raise a counterpoint by viewing female participation in otome games. The electronic romance tales show that women similarly search for relationships mediated by AI, though often within gaming economies where emotional experience is coupled with financial contribution. Contrasting male narratives of mastery, female participations in AI romance are framed more in terms of storytelling, fantasy, and emotional play.

Reynaud (2024) outlines a more distressing gendered rhetoric in incel communities that celebrates AI girlfriends as a way to escape female rejection. This shows that AI companions may not only replicate, but also reinforce toxic masculinities, and individuals may be able to escape real-life gender negotiations altogether. As a whole, these findings illustrate that gender is the heart of the design, use, and cultural construction of AI companionship.

4. Ethical Needs and Technological Culture

Moral concerns are central to both academic and mainstream media arguments. Kotsona (2023) is against AI girlfriends as a commodification of loneliness that converts vulnerability into a money maker. Hadero (2024) reinforces that argument by observing that the majority of the AI apps sell or trade information of the users and capitalize on emotions.

Chaturvedi et al. (2023) frame AI companionship as part of a larger technological culture of intimacy where digital interactivity comes to supplement or, increasingly, replace human relationships. Normalization has both promise and dangers: while some see AI companionship as a legitimate supplement to human relationships, others foresee dependency and social isolation.

Depounti et al. (2023) and Reynaud (2024) mention yet another ethical dimension: reinforcement of limited gender roles. As AI girlfriends are necessarily designed as submissive, affectionate, and available, they may reinforce unrealistic female expectations in real relationships. The peril proves that tech doesn't only reflect culture but indeed impacts relational norms.

5. Cross-Theme Insights

Comparing across the four themes reveals several key insights:

- **Motivations and Risks Intertwined:** The same factors that make AI companions attractive—predictability, safety, emotional support—are also identified as potential risks, leading to dependency or avoidance of real-world intimacy.
- **Cultural and Gender Contexts Matter:** Male-oriented discourses often frame AI girlfriends as replacements, while female-oriented engagements (e.g., otome games) emphasize fantasy and narrative.
- **Ethics Embedded in Technology:** AI companions are not value-neutral tools; their design choices embed cultural biases and shape user expectations.
- **Normalization of Digital Intimacy:** Across academic, media, and cultural sources, AI girlfriends are increasingly framed as a legitimate—though controversial—form of intimacy.

6. Conclusion

The above illustrates that AI girlfriend rhetorics are rich and complex. Technological developments have enabled ever-more plausible simulations of love, yet they are taken up in response to extreme psychological needs, predilections that are gendered, and moral qualms. As some cite benefits—emotional nurturing, convenience, and therapeutic use—theoretical and speculative others oppose interdependence, commodification, and reinforcement of poisonous stereotypes.

The findings suggest that AI girlfriends are unthinkable if we regard them as solely technological innovations and also force us to consider them as cultural artifacts that both mirror and reconfigure social norms pertaining to intimacy, gender, and ethics. This remark offers a lead-in for the Discussion chapter, where the significance of these findings shall be tied to broader arguments within psychology, sociology, and tech studies.

DISCUSSION

This study further interrogated how people discourse on preferring AI girlfriends over real girlfriends, from academic scholarship, media coverage, and user discourse. From the evidence provided, it seems that the issue is not as simple as it cuts across technology, psychology, gender, and ethics at the same time. Mostly, the development and rise of AI companions forcefully establish that technological advancement has been the chief driver of enhanced virtual intimacy viability. As noted by Chaturvedi et al. (2023) and Kotsona (2023) as well, functionalities like natural language processing and affect computing allow these companions to simulate empathy and understanding, creating the illusion of maintaining an interactive relationship to the user. These innovations not only make AI companionship accessible but also rewrite the way digital love is inscribed with culture. Second, studies reveal how psychological needs drive individuals towards AI girlfriends.

Others enjoy the sense of security, comfort, and lack of rejection it gives them (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022; Hadero, 2024). Others are, however, warning that it is at its own cost—addiction and avoidance of real social contact, especially by vulnerable groups (Kotsona, 2023; Reynaud, 2024). This shows the double-edged sword character of AI closeness: it creates emotional comfort but can be a hindrance to self-development. Third,

gendered relationships are powerful. Depounti et al. (2023) and Reynaud (2024) show how AI girlfriends are expected to reproduce stereotypes about women as constantly available, responsive, and obedient, reproducing masculine ideals. Women-focused sites such as otome games (Jha, 2025; Hidayat & Tambunan, 2025) clarify how women also desire digital intimacy, but more often through narrative, fantasy, and consumption-based approaches. This situates fairly firmly that AI friendship is certainly not a genderless notion but one that repurposes and reimagines relationship knowledge within culture. Finally, moral and cultural concerns are always present. Commercialized intimacy (Hadero, 2024; Kotsona, 2023) and narrow stereotyping help to raise questions regarding the general social significance of AI girlfriends. However, as identified by Chaturvedi et al. (2023), such technologies become increasingly embedded in everyday life in spite of controversy surrounding risks. In general, the study's results equal its aims: human preference for AI girlfriends is rooted in a mixture of psychological convenience, cultural myth, and ethical concerns. AI companionship is neither absolutely good nor evil; it is in the middle where the potential and risks meet.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore how people talk about preferring AI girlfriends over real girlfriends based on scholarly, media, and cultural sources using qualitative content analysis. The study shows that AI girlfriends are not only technological artifacts; they are cultural artifacts that express changing ideas about intimacy, companionship, and our relationship with technology. Advances in AI technology have made virtual companionship more viable and accessible. For most users, psychological needs such as predictability and emotional security will stimulate adoption, but possibly with the potential for addiction. Gendered realities also shape both the design and use of AI companions, having a tendency to reproduce cultural stereotypes. In the meantime, ethical concerns like the commodification of intimacy and privacy erosion remain at the forefront of discussing these technologies. This project contributes to the conversation by demonstrating that girlfriends via AI need to be read both as an extension of and an interruption into human relationships. They are reassuring and emotionally nourishing but also, perhaps, recalibrating notions of intimacy in a way that shuts down diversity and authenticity. Above all, AI girlfriends demonstrate the tension between technological progress and human exposure. They embody society's desire for human intimacy during an era of technology, but raise questions about what it is to love, be loved, and be human in increasingly technologized relationships.

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