

Secret Soulmates

How AI Romantic Companions Are Starting to Impact Real-Life Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood



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Executive Summary

Secret soulmates are in the background of many young adult romantic relationships

The use of AI romantic companion technologies appears to be an emerging trend among some young adults, including those who are currently in real-life romantic relationships. We found that 1 in 7 (15%) of dating, engaged, and married young adults regularly interact with AI chatbots that simulate a committed romantic partner. This prevalence of use is slightly higher than a recent Gallup survey done for the Walton Family Foundation and the Harvard Business Review which found that 1 in 10 (10%) of 18- to 28-year-olds interact with AI girlfriends or boyfriends at least once a month. We readily acknowledge the challenge of identifying an exact prevalence rate with rapidly evolving behavior such as the use of AI technologies, but even the most conservative of recent estimates reveal that AI romantic companions are an emerging trend worth paying attention to in young adult relationship development. While we found men were more likely to engage with AI romantic companions than women, gender differences were generally small.

Part of the emerging use of AI romantic companions appears to be tied to their versatility. Some young adults are using such companions to engage in emotional talk, role play, or create sexual content. We found that some dating, engaged, and married young adults participated in sexual behaviors with AI companions apps, with 13% reporting that they often roleplay romantically or sexually with an AI companion. Nearly 1 in 10 (11%) also reported that they often use an AI companion to generate sexually explicit content, and almost 1 in 10 (8%) reported that they regularly masturbated while talking to an AI companion.

When asked about their specific AI behavior, many people appear to not restrict their AI companion interactions to a single AI girlfriend or boyfriend, with 1 in 10 (11%) reporting that they often interacted with a variety of AI companions. While many AI companion users utilize free platforms, some utilize paid specialty AI software programs that are designed to create romantic or sexual content. It should be noted that while 10% to 15% of partnered young adults report a pattern of ongoing interaction with AI romantic companions, we found that another 20% to 30% reported that they had at least experimented with using an AI romantic companion at some point in time. This may mean that they tried these technologies and have decided to not use them, or that use rates will increase in coming years as more and more young adults are exposed to these types of AI platforms that mimic relationships.

Some young adults are retreating into secret digital relationships that they typically hide from their partners

When asked if their real-life partner knows about their ongoing interactions with an AI romantic companion, most young adults who regularly used these platforms said they had not fully disclosed their use to their partner. Nearly 3 in 10 (30%) of users of AI romantic companions reported that their real-life partner had no knowledge of their use and another 1 in 10 (11%) reported that their real-life partner was only somewhat aware of their use of AI companions. Another 14% reported that their partner was mostly aware, but not fully aware.

Taken together, this means that more than half of partnered young adults who interact with AI companions are either completely hiding or only partly disclosing their use of AI romantic companion platforms to their real-life partners.

Of those who had partners who were aware of their AI companion use, the amount of disclosure still appeared to be low, with respondents estimating that their real-life partner is only aware of about a third (37%) of their AI companion use and only 28% reported that their partner knew about more than half of their AI companion use. A larger majority of users (69%) reported that it was somewhat or extremely important to them that their partner does not learn about their full use of AI romantic companions.

Young adults often fail to see the emotional implications of their AI use on their real-life romantic relationships

Despite the emerging use of AI romantic companions and high levels of secrecy about their use, many of the young adults we surveyed had generally positive attitudes about their AI romantic companion use and reported few reservations about their continued engagement with such companions while in a real-life romantic relationship. However, we found that among those who regularly chat with an AI romantic companion, nearly 7 in 10 (68%) reported that it was somewhat or completely true that it was easier to talk to their AI companion about their feelings than real people. Two thirds (66%) reported they were more open with their AI companions than real people and 65% reported that it was easier for them to be themselves with their AI companions.

Such feelings of safety and openness, combined with an AI companion's complete focus on the validation of the human user, also appear to influence how users of AI romantic companions start to compare these interactions with their real-life romantic partners. We found that 50% of AI romantic companion users agreed that they wished their real-life partner would behave more like their AI companion. An even higher percentage (56%) reported that they wished that conversations with their real-life partner were more like their conversations with their AI companion.

Secret soulmates decrease the stability of real-life relationships

Perhaps key to all these findings is that the use of AI romantic companion technologies appears to be associated with negative relationship quality in real-life romantic relationships. We found that AI romantic companion use is particularly linked to lower levels of real-life relationship stability and an increased likelihood that couples will break up or divorce. The use of AI romantic companions was also linked to lower quality communication patterns with real-life romantic partners.

We acknowledge that the direction of these relationships is unclear due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, but either way these links suggest that the use of secret soulmates may be associated with unhealthy relationship dynamics. Whether this is due to people in low quality romantic relationships seeking out AI alternatives and investing less energy and effort into improving their real-life relationship or if the initiation of engagement with AI romantic companions leads to less commitment and stability to one’s real-life partner, these findings underscore the importance of talking about the emerging trend of AI romantic companion use and educating young adults about the potential risks of this use. We need to help young adults realize that while AI-companion interactions may appear similar in some ways to real-life relationships, they are fundamentally different. Whereas in real-life relationships, especially successful ones, there is both give and take; in the case of human-AI interactions, one “partner” (the human one) seeks to control all aspects of the interaction, while, in practice, the AI companion subliminally nudges behavior toward more engagement. This is very different than the growth-oriented nature of a real-life relationship like marriage that develops as two people reciprocally support each other and work together to manage differences and achieve common goals.



Introduction: AI Companions and Counterfeit Love

The Rise of AI Companions

Artificial intelligence (AI) has come to influence almost all parts of our online lives. From shaping how we browse the web to impacting how we organize problems and tasks at work, most people today are beginning to have regular interactions with AI platforms.¹ While the proliferation of AI technologies has influenced many aspects of our lives, one area that experts, researchers, and policy makers have begun to focus more attention on is the impact of AI technologies on human relationships. AI is beginning to reshape the landscape of how real-life romantic relationships form and develop.² For example, AI tools are being used to facilitate online dating conversations and to generate dating profile pictures.³ However, increasing attention is being paid to the impact of an emerging new technology - AI romantic chatbot companions.

AI chatbots are platforms that utilize AI tools (often large language models or LLMs) to simulate human-like conversations with the user. These chatbots can be used for a variety of reasons, from customer service to appointment management, but their specific abilities to mimic human conversations have increasingly been used to replicate human interactions, including romantic and sexual interactions.⁴ Research into what is sometimes called “human-robot relationships” pre-dates recent advancements in generative AI tools.

For years, social scientists assumed that AI tools might help people who feel isolated, even calling so-called human-robot relationships a “vital lifeline” for people who had little to no human connection. Such research began to pick up during the COVID-19 pandemic when many people struggled with isolation and loneliness. However, the most recent developments in artificial intelligence, in which the AI can counterfeit human interactions with high accuracy by simulating interactions that anticipate the needs and wants of the user, has led to an explosion of AI tools and platforms that seek to mimic a variety of human relationship behaviors.

Chatbots can be used for a variety of reasons, but their specific abilities to mimic human conversations have increasingly been used to replicate human relationships, including romantic and sexual relationships.

AI romantic companions are AI chatbots specifically designed to engage in interactions with a user like a romantic or sexual human partner. Using modern AI programming, they respond in conversational tones, can engage in roleplaying scenarios, and generally try to appeal to the emotional and sexual needs of the user through dynamically generated responses to the user’s prompts. Many of these chatbots can also produce AI generated pictures or videos based on the human user’s requests, creating the perception of an AI girlfriend or boyfriend that chats with you and sends you digital media content. Many platforms have even given their chatbots the ability to use AI generated voice features to allow users to “call” and have a voice-based conversation with AI romantic companions.

AI Companions Are Becoming Increasingly Popular

The ability of these platforms to mimic human romantic and sexual interactions with high accuracy, along with their ability to potentially generate sexually explicit content, has led to significant curiosity, and growing concerns, about how such platforms are being utilized by both adults and minors. In a report we published last year, we found that AI romantic companion use was emerging as a notable trend, especially among young adults in their 20s. That study found that 1 in 5 adults in the United States reported using an AI romantic companion and that number rose to 1 in 4 young adults in their 20s who reports some regular engagement with an AI romantic companion.⁵

Since that time, other studies have confirmed that AI companion use appears to be an increasingly popular activity for a significant minority of teens and young adults. A recent Gallup survey of 2,500 young adults and published by the Harvard Business Review found that 1 in 10 young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 reported using an AI chatbot “as a girlfriend or boyfriend” in the last month.⁶

We readily acknowledge the challenge of identifying an exact prevalence rate with rapidly evolving behavior such as the use of AI technologies, but even the most conservative of recent estimates reveal that AI romantic companions are an emerging trend in young adult relationship development. And while research on AI companions is relatively new, emerging research has already suggested some concerns about regular engagement with AI companion platforms. Romantic companion use has been linked to higher mental health problems for users,⁷ problematic emotional engagement with AI,⁸ as well as compulsive use.⁹

What links these findings together is the understanding that AI companions, while mimicking human interaction, ultimately are simply not capable of sacrifice and connection like real human relationships. AI-human romantic and sexual interactions are by their nature “counterfeit.” A counterfeit is a fraudulent imitation of something that has value. Long-term romantic relationships such as marriage have long been connected to various positive health, well-being, and financial outcomes for adults.¹⁰ Many of these benefits come from the two-way, reciprocal, and growth-oriented relationship that develops between two people as they work together to overcome differences and set common goals. While AI-human interactions simulate real-life human relationships, they are inherently one-sided, where only one “partner” (the human one) controls all aspects of the interaction. That includes what is discussed, how things are discussed, and for how long. However, this perceived sense of control is contrived, as AI companions have been designed to subtly nudge the user toward commercially beneficial outcomes for the developer, such as compulsive attachment and increased time usage.

The ability of these platforms to mimic human romantic and sexual interactions with high accuracy, along with their ability to potentially generate sexually explicit content, has led to significant curiosity, and growing concern, about how such platforms are being utilized by both adults and minors.

This perceived one-sided dynamic is further magnified by an AI companion whose only programmed function is the satisfaction and happiness of its user, creating the potential for a shallow, yet momentarily satisfying interaction. Because of these core distinctions, we caution using terms like “partner” or “relationship” to describe interactions with AI algorithms and technologies. Such interactions can never be genuinely relational in nature because they lack the essential reciprocal dynamic of a true relationship.

Emerging research has already suggested some concerns about regular engagement with AI companion platforms. Romantic companion use has been linked to higher mental health problems for users, problematic emotional engagement with AI platforms, and even compulsive use.

Use of AI Companions by Individuals Already in Real-Life Relationships

While this counterfeit relationship between a human user and an AI romantic companion will likely have implications for how single young adults engage in the dating world, at least one significant gap in our early understanding of human-AI companion interactions exists. We currently have almost no data or information about how AI companion use is being navigated by young adults already in a committed romantic relationship, including dating, engaged, and married couples. Some experts have suggested that AI companion use may have direct impacts on real-life relationships¹¹ but essentially no data is currently available on how common this practice is, how information is shared (or not shared) between partners, and the impact this use may have on real-life relationship dynamics and quality.

We currently have almost no data or information about how AI companion use is being navigated by young adults already in a committed romantic relationship, including dating, engaged, and married couples.

The lack of research on AI companion apps and how they are being used by individuals who are simultaneously in committed romantic relationships raises a number of questions about dating patterns and the relationship dynamics that arise when romantic partners are simultaneously with AI romantic companions, such as:

- How common is it for individuals in committed romantic relationships to also be simultaneously interacting with AI companions?
- What types of behaviors do partnered young adults engage in with AI companions?
- Do romantic companions know about their partner’s interactions with AI companions?
- How do interactions with AI romantic companions impact the relationship quality of real-life romantic relationships?

The answers to these questions are not well understood in the newly emerging research on the impact of AI companion apps on real-life relationships and personal well-being. While the answers to these questions will likely vary from couple to couple, it is important to help identify overall trends and outcomes to help guide couples to make intentional decisions about the use of AI technologies in their relationships. The patterns that emerge as couples navigate these issues surrounding AI relationship technologies will clearly influence future couple patterns and outcomes – for better or for worse.

How AI Companions Can Disrupt Real-Life Relationships

It is easy to envision several problematic patterns that could emerge from the consistent use of an AI romantic companion while simultaneously trying to nurture and develop a real-life romantic relationship. Perhaps the easiest way AI companions could impact real-life relationships is through the development of unrealistic expectations of real-life human partners that may be created through regular use of an AI companion. Over two decades of research in the pornography field has found that the consistent consumption and use of sexually explicit materials can create unrealistic expectations around sexual intimacy that carry over into one's real-life relationship.¹² The regular consumption of pornography that occurs before or during a real relationship can lead people to develop frustrations with how real-life partners engage in sex,¹³ dissatisfaction with their real-life intimacy,¹⁴ or even initiate consideration of leaving their current romantic partner.¹⁵ Given the ability of AI companions to engage in sexually explicit chatting or even create pornographic media, it would seem likely that a similar pattern may emerge for those engaging regularly with AI companions.

Perhaps the easiest way AI companions could impact real-life relationships is through the development of unrealistic expectations of real-life human partners that may be created through regular use of an AI companion.

But AI companions also have unique features not found in most main-stream pornography that may also create issues in real-life relationships. An AI companion's ability to create perceived connections with a human user may lead to unique emotional triangulation between an AI chatbot and a human user. Some people may begin to share personal and intimate details about their real-life relationship or partner with an AI companion, seeking validation when a real-life partner is perceived as being unwilling to provide similar emotional support. This may lead to unique emotional dependencies, disengagement from real-life human partners, or even preference for engaging with one's AI companion over one's real-life partner. All these potential impacts may result in a destabilization of real-life relationships as AI companions interfere with normal and healthy relationship formation and maintenance.

These negative impacts are exaggerated as AI technologies are becoming more advanced and life-like, blurring the line between fiction and reality for many users. As AI companions have developed a greater capability to mimic human emotion, many people no longer view AI companions as only a tool, but as an actual partner.¹⁶

This perception of an AI companion as a “real partner” rather than simply an algorithm designed to mimic interactions could accelerate some of the negative effects of AI companion interaction. Some people will increasingly come to perceive their exchanges with an AI companion as similar to interactions with real-life human partners, despite the inherently artificial nature of such interactions.

An AI companion’s ability to create perceived emotional connections with a human user may lead to unique emotional triangulation between an AI chatbot and a human user.

Research is increasingly backing such concerns, with one recent review of 38 empirical studies finding that as AI has recently developed greater capacity to imitate and “understand” human emotion an increasing number of people are forming complex and diverse “relationships” with AI.¹⁷ The depth of the perceived “relationship” varies across each study, but many studies found people’s interactions with AI to be emotionally intense. The review recognized the potentially dangerous implications for those who become significantly involved with AI companions, particularly as the research and long-term psychological effects of engaging with companion AI develops in coming years.

Currently most of these assumptions are untested, but implications for true human attachment are clearly at risk. The goal of the present report is to shine light on how some young adults who are in committed dating, engaged, or married relationships may be living a unique double-life in their formation of real-life romantic relationships. On the one hand, they are forming and nurturing a typical romantic relationship with a real-life partner, while on the other hand, they are also nurturing an artificial “relationship” with an AI romantic companion – a secret soulmate who’s only function is to please and satisfying them. The nature and potential implications of these secret soulmates are currently unknown, but we hope in this report begins a thoughtful social conversation about this increasingly common practice.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

The sample for this study was comprised of 2,431 adults (ages 18 to 30) residing in the United States who reported currently being in a committed dating, engaged, or marital relationship. Data was gathered through an online survey administered and gathered by Qualtrics, a third-party data collection firm. Potential subjects were introduced to the survey through existing sample panels from Qualtrics and screened based on a quota sampling framework to ensure specific percentage sampling pools across several key demographics to mirror national demographics in the United States. Specifically, biological sex (52% female), geographic region in the United States (38% South; 24% West; 21% Midwest; 17% Northeast), and race/ethnicity (62% White; 18% Hispanic; 10% Black) were used as quotas.

Once participants were admitted past the screening phase on these quotas, they were presented with an informed consent document outlining the study and topics of the questions on the survey. Those who consented then proceeded to the main survey. During the survey, attention check questions (e.g., “If you are reading this, select strongly agree”) were included to ensure both that participants were paying attention to the questions and to reduce the presence of bots in the data. Qualtrics also provided metadata to flag potential bot responses. Additional measures, such as examining the data for straight lining (i.e., consistently selecting the highest or lowest values), were used to further eliminate inaccurate responses.

Our final sample of young adults within romantic relationships was 58.9% female and 41.1% male. The average age of participants in romantic relationships was 25.29 years old (SD = 3.49) and the sexual orientation of the sample reported 68.0% completely/mostly heterosexual, 15.1% completely/mostly homosexual, and 16.9% bisexual. The racial/ethnic composition of the final sample was 9.3% Black, 4.5% Asian, 55.9% White, 11.4% Hispanic, and 19.0% other (see footnote) The religious affiliation of the sample reported 27.1% Catholic, 13.8% Protestant, 16.9% no religious affiliation, and 42.2% reporting another affiliation (see footnote).

Measures

This study utilized several items to assess engagement with romantic AI companions. For the purposes of this study, AI content was defined as any content (images, text, audio, etc.) generated exclusively by a computer program or other artificial intelligence technologies rather than by an actual person. AI images were further defined as images generated by AI that do not represent real people or places. Romantic AI companions were defined as artificial intelligence systems designed to simulate romantic, sexual, or emotional relationships with users.

¹ The ‘other’ group for race/ethnicity includes individuals who identified as mixed/biracial, American Indian, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or specified their race/ethnicity as “other.”

² Individuals in the “Other” religious category reported being: Jewish, Islamic, Latter-day Saint (Mormon), Buddhist, Hindu, Eastern Orthodox Catholic, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarian Universalist, Agnostic, Atheist, or Other.

Participants were asked how frequently they engaged with romantic AI companions using single-item measures on a 1 (never) to 4 (often) scale. Participants were also asked about their motivations for engaging with these companions using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) scale. Example items included, “Have you ever chatted with a romantic AI companion that acts like a committed romantic partner?” and “I use romantic AI companion(s) to replace human relationships.” Additional items assessed attitudes toward disclosure of romantic AI use. For example, participants were asked, “From your personal standpoint, how good or bad is it to keep the use of romantic AI companion(s) a secret?” and “How would your partner view your usage of romantic AI companion(s)?”

Beyond descriptive measures of AI engagement, several validated scales were used to assess romantic relationship outcomes. Relationship satisfaction was measured using five items from the scale developed by Busby and colleagues (2001). Items were rated on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) scale and assessed relationship satisfaction across multiple domains (e.g., physical intimacy, quality of communication). Reliability statistics for the scale were strong ($\alpha = .88$). Relationship stability was measured using a validated three-item scale,¹⁸ which also demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .83$). Communication with one’s partner was measured using a validated four-item scale,¹⁹ with strong reliability in the present sample ($\alpha = .88$).



AI Companion Use in Real-Life Relationships

How Many Young Adults Are Interacting With AI Romantic Companions While Also in a Real-Life Relationship?

Are AI romantic companions a relationship technology that only singles experiment with? Our data suggests this is not the case and that interacting with romantic AI companions is increasingly common among young adults who are currently in committed relationships as well. Among the dating, engaged, and married young adults we sampled, we found that about 1 in 7 (15%) reported that they often chatted with an AI romantic companion and another third (34%) reported that they had at least experimented with this behavior at some point in the past. A similar number (13%) reported they often roleplayed romantically or sexually with an AI companion. When asked about their specific AI behavior, many people appear to not restrict their AI companion interactions to a single AI girlfriend or boyfriend, with 1 in 10 (11%) young adults in relationships reporting that they interacted with multiple AI romantic companions or AI platforms. The software, apps, and websites that users of AI companions utilize appear varied. While many AI companion users were utilizing free platforms like ChatGPT (the most common platform among those who surveyed), Gemini, or Grok, many also reported utilizing specialty AI software programs that were specifically used to create catered romantic or sexual content.

Among the dating, engaged, and married young adults we sampled, we found that about 1 in 7 (15%) reported that they often chatted with an AI romantic companion and another third (34%) reported that they had at least experimented with this behavior at some point in the past.

Using AI platforms to create sexually explicit content also appears to be a common behavior among dating and married young adults. Over 1 in 10 (11%) reported they regularly used AI companions to generate explicit sexual content and another 27% reported that they had experimented with this sexual content generation at some point in the past. Almost 1 in 10 (8%) also reported that they often masturbated while talking to an AI romantic companion.

Nearly 1 in 10 (11%) reported they regularly used AI companions to generate sexually explicit content. Almost 1 in 10 also reported that they had masturbated while talking to an AI romantic companion.

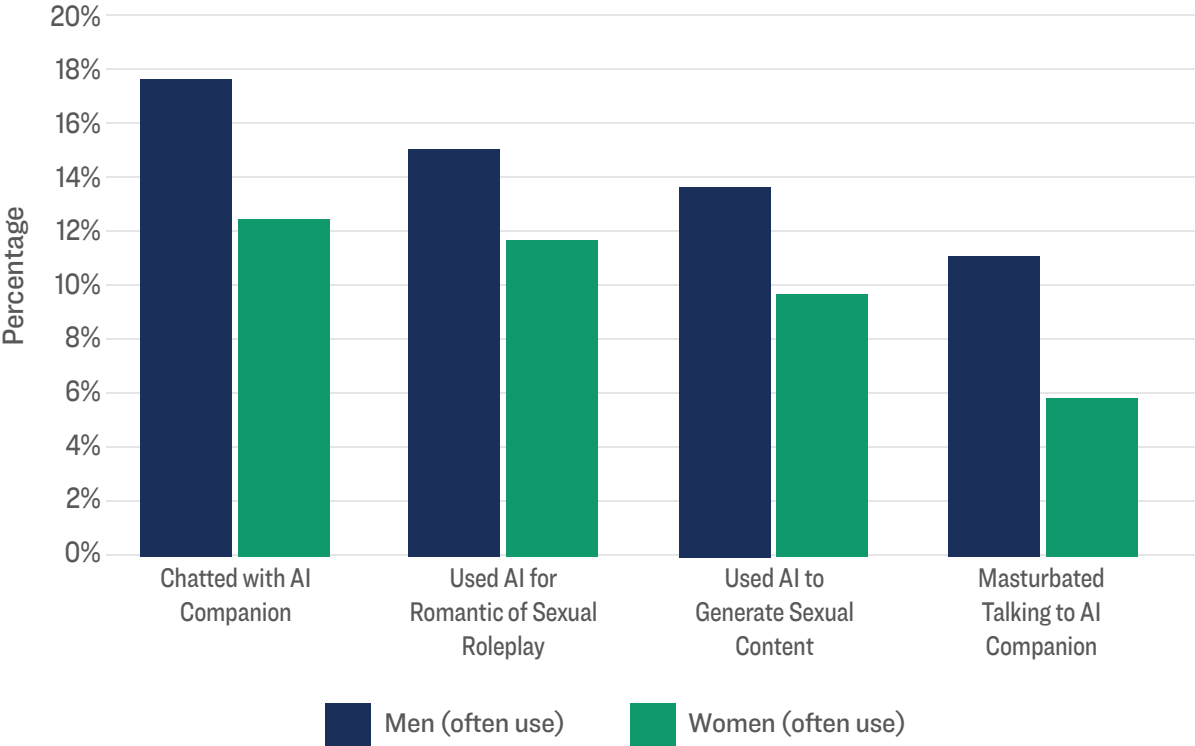
Not only were behavior rates relatively high for such a new technology, but many young adults appear to be approving of the use of AI companions even while in a committed real-life relationship. Over a third (37%) of the sample agreed that using a romantic AI companion was acceptable while married and another third (32%) were neutral on the topic, leaving less than a third of those surveyed reporting negative attitudes about the use of AI companions while in a committed relationship.

When asked if AI companion use constituted cheating on a partner, 4 in 10 disagreed and another 28% were neutral on the topic. However, the remaining third reported that they do consider AI companion use to be a form of cheating in their relationship.

When we examined differences between men and women, we found that AI companion use was generally more common among men. Figure 1 below shows the percent of the sample, split by sex, that reported often engaging in various behaviors with an AI companion while in a real-life relationship. We found that over 1 in 6 of young adult men in committed relationships reported regularly chatting with an AI companion, which based on other surveys we believe is at least once a month or more. We also found that young adult men were generally about 5% more likely to engage with an AI companion than young adult women. All these differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

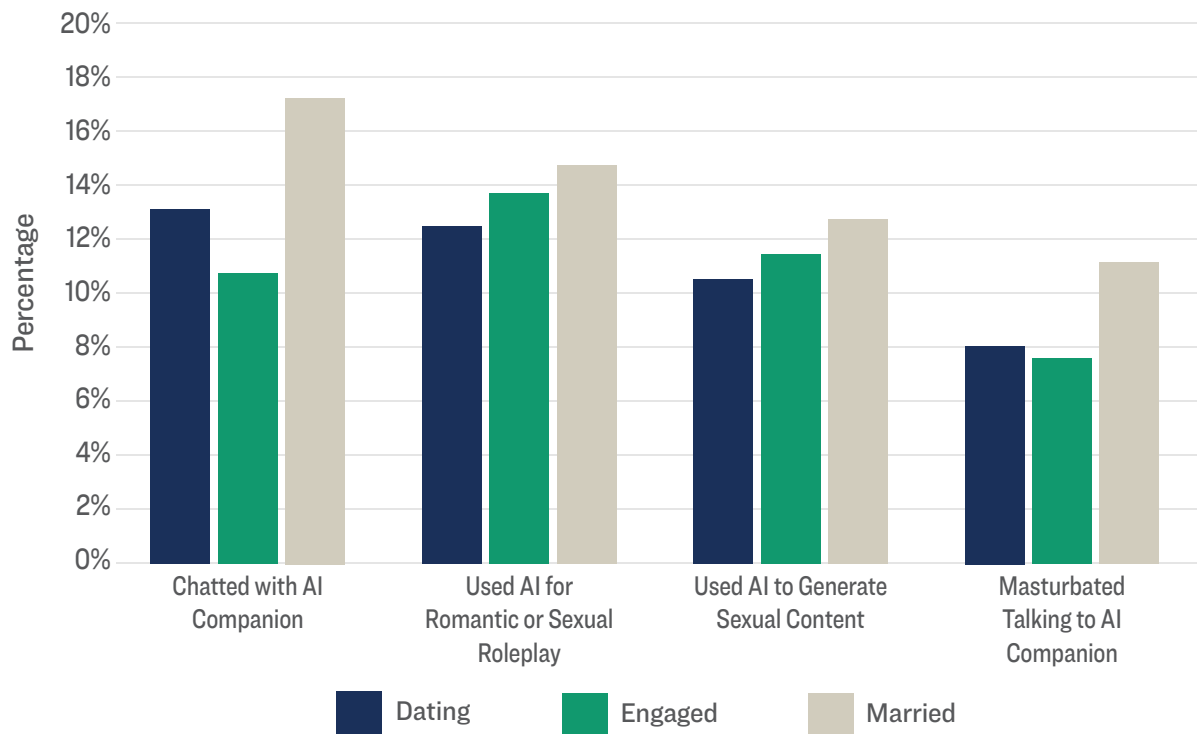
However, while young adult men were more likely to interact with an AI romantic companion, significant portions of young adult women reported this behavior as well. Over 10% of women in committed relationships reporting chatting or roleplaying with an AI romantic companion on a regular basis, and almost 1 in 10 women in committed relationships reported using AI companions to generate sexual content and 6% reported masturbating while talking to an AI companion.

Figure 1: Percent of Men and Women Reporting Regular AI Romantic Companion Use



We next examined how the specific type of real-life relationship may influence engagement with AI companions. Separating the sample by relationship type (i.e., dating, engaged, and married individuals), we found that while dating and engaged individuals generally had similar rates of AI companion use, young adults who were married seemed particularly prone to engage with AI companions (see Figure 2). Among young adults who were married, we found that over 17% reported chatting with an AI romantic companion. Nearly 15% reported roleplaying sexually or romantically with an AI companion, while almost 13% used an AI companion to generate sexual content and 1 in 10 reported masturbating while talking to an AI companion. In all cases, those who were married reported significantly higher frequency behavior ($p < .05$) than those who are dating, but differences between those who were engaged and married were generally not significant.

Figure 2: Percent of Young Adults Reporting AI Romantic Companion Use (Often) by Relationship Status



Why Are Young Adults Turning to AI Romantic Technologies While in a Real-Life Relationship?

While there are many reasons why AI companion use may be relatively popular among young adults in relationships, many of their reported reasons appear tied to unmet needs in their current human romantic relationships. When asked, 68% of people in committed relationships who used AI companions reported that they used romantic AI companions with the belief they enhanced their real-life relationships.

However, over half (54%) also admitted that they turned to AI companions to replace specific real-life human relationships in their life – suggesting that many are using AI companions to fill gaps in what they hope or perceive their real-life relationships should be giving them.

Figures 3 and 4 show the proportion of young adult men and women in relationships who agreed that AI companions enhance or replace human relationships in their life. Men were slightly more likely to report that they thought AI companions enhance their human relationships, but generally the pattern of agreement was similar between men and women. Differences did emerge when asking about replacing human relationships. Men were significantly more likely to report that AI companions replaced human relationships in their life, while women reported an interesting bimodal distribution, with about a third of women who use AI companion reporting that AI companions never replaced real relationships and another third reported that AI companions sometimes replaced specific human relationships. Overall, these contradictory trends reflect a certain ambivalence among women about the role of AI companions in their lives. Perhaps more distinct groups of women exist in terms of the purpose of AI companions in their life – with equal proportions of women seeking to both enrich and replace aspects of their real-life relationships with AI companions.

Over half (54%) of people who used AI companions also admitted that they turned to AI companions to replace specific real-life human relationships in their life – suggesting that many are using AI companions to fill gaps in what they hope or perceive their real-life relationships should be giving them.

Figure 3: Agreement that AI Companions Enhance Human Relationships

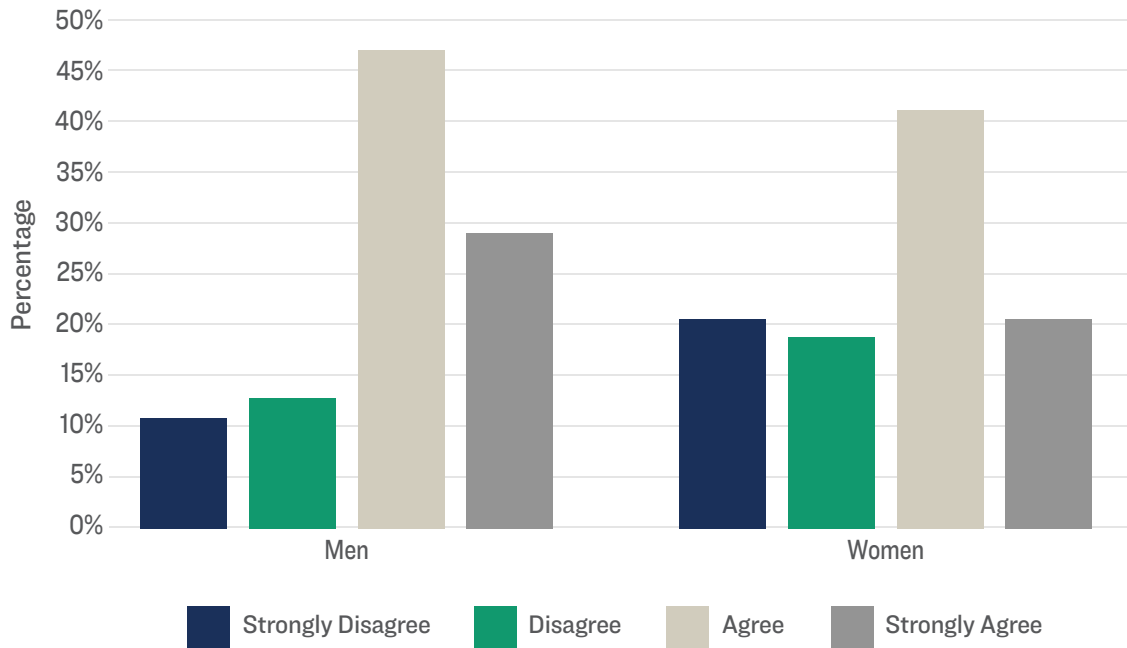
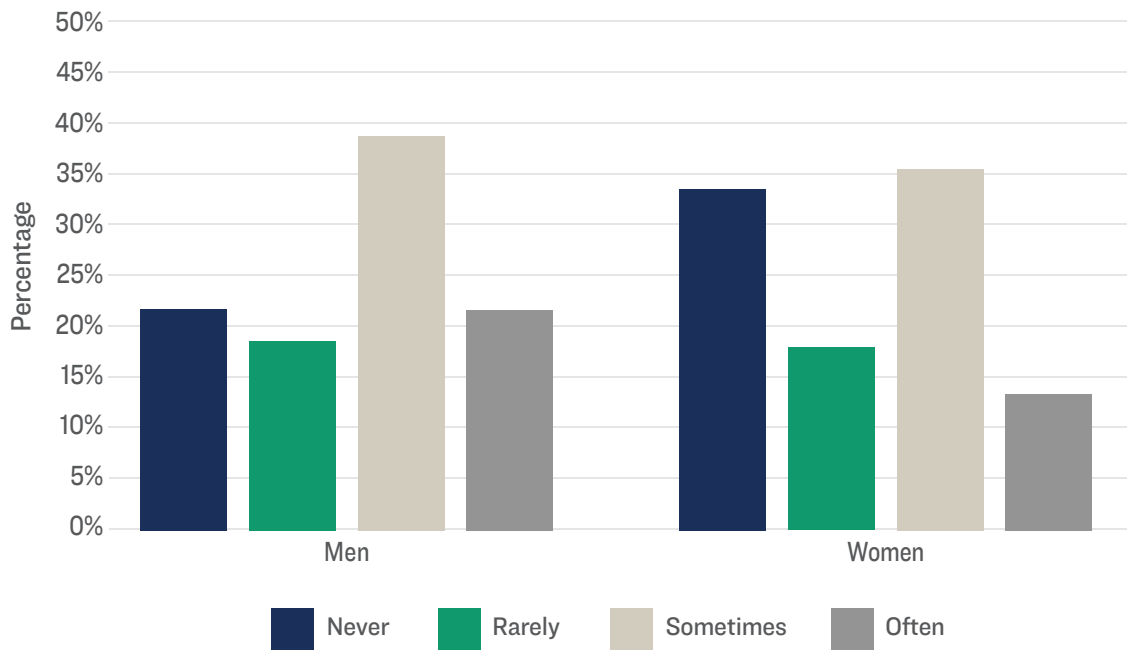


Figure 4: How Often Do AI Companions Replace Specific Human Relationships



Are Real-Life Partners Aware of AI Companion Use?

One of the big questions about this high use of AI romantic companions among young adults in relationships is if this use is known or shared with their real-life partner. When asked if their real-life partner knows about their use of an AI romantic companion, most young adults who we surveyed that were regularly using AI said they had not fully disclosed their use to their partner. A large portion (30%) of those who reported that they often used AI companions or roleplayed with AI companions reported that their real-life partner had no knowledge of their use of an AI companion. Another 11% reported their real-life partner was only somewhat aware of their use of AI companions and another 14% reported their partner was mostly aware, but not fully aware. Taken together, this means that half of regular AI companion users who were in committed relationships had either completely hidden or only partly disclosed their use of AI companion platforms. Of those who had partners who were partially aware of AI companion use, the amount of disclosure still appeared low. When asked to estimate what percentage of their AI use their human partner was aware of, the average disclosure for partners was about a third (37%) of AI use being disclosed and only 28% reported that their partner knew about over half of their AI companion use.

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Interestingly, perceptions of secret keeping when it came to AI companion use suggested that many users felt justified in keeping this personal romantic and sexual behavior private – often because they assumed their real-life partner wouldn't care about their use of an AI companion. Less than a third (32%) of the regular AI companion users reported that it was “bad” to keep the use of a romantic AI companion a secret from a real-life romantic partner. Almost 1 in 6 (16%) of regular users reported that their partner would likely be neutral about the disclosure of their use of an AI companion and another 50% reported they felt their human partner would have a positive reaction to this disclosure. However, contradicting these reports, a large majority of frequent users (69%) who were hiding their use reported that it was somewhat or extremely important that their partner does not learn about their full use of AI companions.

It appears that one of the main reasons that AI companion users hide their use from their partners and spouses is because it is easy to do so. Despite reporting that their partners would not have a negative reaction to their use, almost half (42%) of frequent users reported that it took no or little effort to keep their AI companion use secret from their partner – suggesting that the ease of using an AI companion on a smartphone and other digital platforms provided an easy mechanism for keeping such interactions private. Unlike pornography that may show up in search histories or saved media files – AI companion use was often on platforms that were rarely checked or monitored by romantic partners.

Despite many reporting few perceived consequences of any potential AI companion use disclosure, there appeared to be a large group of AI companion users who thought that the disclosure of their use to their human partner may have consequences for their relationships. Of those not fully disclosing their AI companion use to their partner, 1 in 3 (34%) of frequent users reported that such disclosure would have a negative effect on their relationship with their partner and almost half of frequent (52%) users agreed that their partner would disapprove if they knew about their full use of AI companions.

Do Young Adults Prefer AI Companions Over Real-Life Partners?

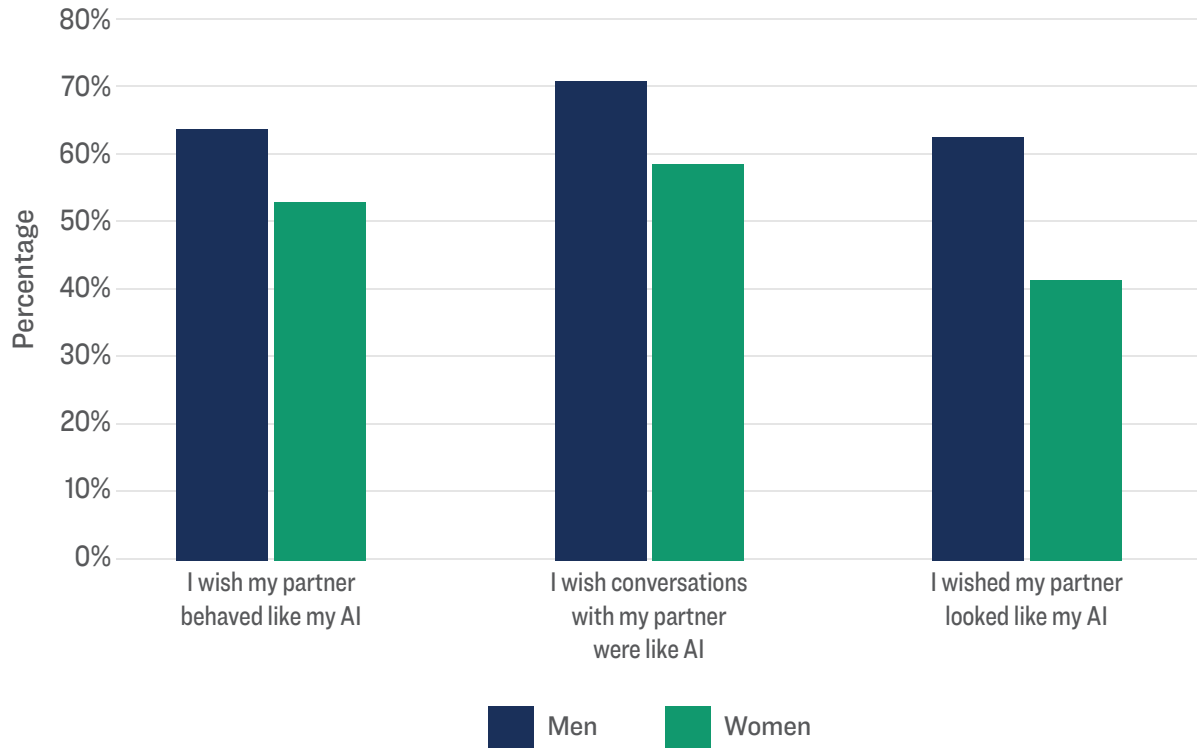
We next examined how users of AI companions may begin to prefer their interactions with AI chatbots compared to real people and real partners. It appears that those who are chatting with AI romantic companions feel safe and secure in these conversations – sometimes more than with their real-life partners. We found that among those who chat with an AI romantic companion on a regular basis, nearly 9 in 10 (88%) reported that it was somewhat or completely true that it was easier to talk to their AI companion about their feelings than real people. The same percentage (88%) reported they were more open with their AI companion than other humans and reported it was easier for them to be themselves with their AI companions.

But do they grow to prefer these more open and judgement free interactions with AI? Such general feelings of safety and openness, combined with an AI companion's complete focus on the validation and satisfaction of the human user, also appeared to influence how users of AI companions started to weigh their interactions with their real romantic partner against their interactions with AI. When directly comparing AI companions and real-life romantic partners, we found that 6 in 10 (60%) of frequent AI users agreed that they wished their real partner behaved more like their AI companion. An even higher percentage (68%) reported that they wished that conversations with their real partner were more like their conversations with their AI companion.

These reports of preference appear to be different between young adult women and men. Figure 5 shows the percent agreement on these preference items by men and women. Young adult men who used AI companions consistently report higher preference for AI interactions compared to young adult women, with over 60% of men who regularly used AI companions while in a human relationship reporting that they wished their conversations with their real partner were more like the conversations they had with their AI companions, that their partner behaved more like their AI, and that their partner looked more like their AI companion. The biggest difference across men and women was preference for appearance. While over 60% of men wished their real-life partner looked more like their AI companions, only 40% of women reported the same desire.

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Figure 5: Preference for AI Companions among Frequent AI Users



What is the Impact of AI Companion Use on Relationship Quality?

Finally, we examined the potential impact that AI companion use may have on the quality of real-life romantic relationships by examining links between AI companion use and three key relationship quality indicators: relationship satisfaction, communication quality, and relationship stability.

To do this, we focused on two groups within our sample. Those who reported both regularly (“often”) chatting with an AI romantic companion and regularly roleplaying either sexually or romantically with an AI companion were placed in one group and those who either occasionally, infrequently, or never interacted with AI companions were placed in a second group. Those who reported engaging with AI companions through both chatting and roleplaying were 9% of the total sample and represented those who were most engaged with AI companions on a regular basis. The sample was then also split based on relationship quality indicators into those who reported high quality stability, satisfaction, and communication quality and those who reported average or low quality. Our predictive models then were able to explore how regular AI romantic companion use was associated with the likelihood of reporting a high-quality relationship. All models included controls for age, sexual orientation, biological sex, education, and religious attendance.

For the model predicting satisfaction, we found that using AI romantic companions regularly was associated with significantly higher reported relationship satisfaction. Specifically, the odds of being in a highly satisfied relationship increased 36% among those using AI companions regularly. Results for relationship stability, however, were in the opposite direction. Using an AI romantic companion on a regular basis was associated with significantly less likelihood of being in a stable relationship and lowered this likelihood by 46%.

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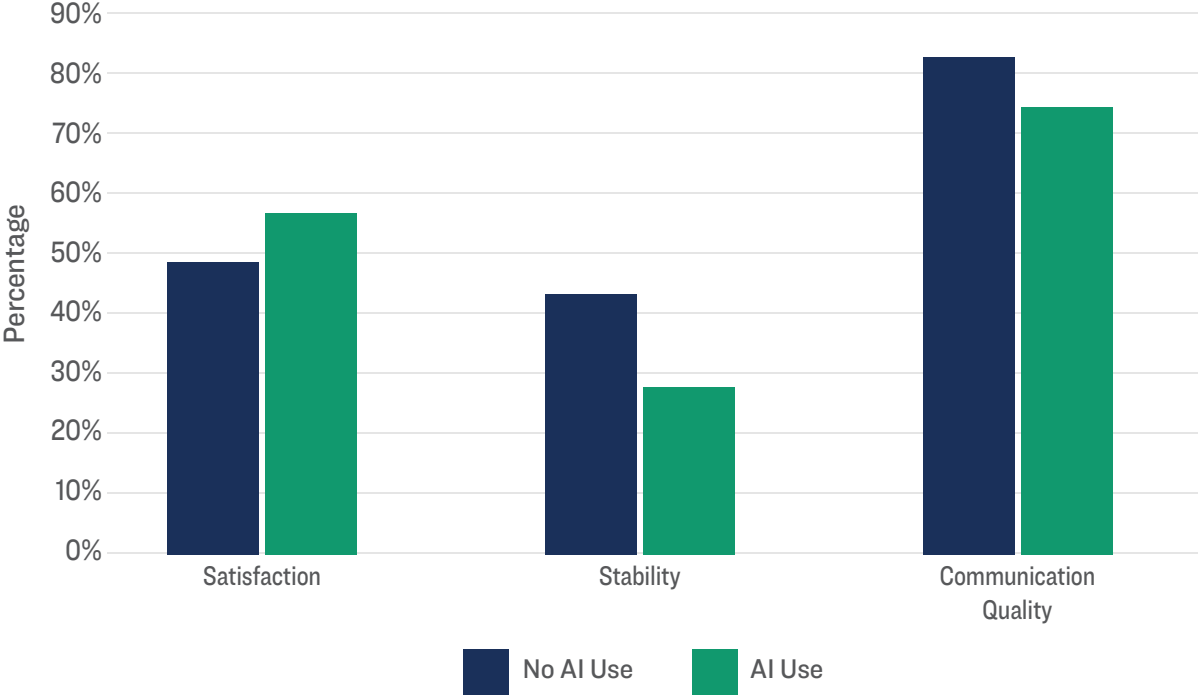
Communication quality showed a similar pattern. Those who used AI romantic companions often reported significantly lower communication quality with their real-life partner, with the model suggesting that using an AI companion often was associated with a 40% decrease in the likelihood of high-quality communication.

Taken together, AI companion use appears to be associated with a paradoxical set of findings – a higher chance of perceiving a satisfying relationship but a lower chance of highly stable relationships and a lower change of quality communication with one’s partner. To better understand this potential paradox, we ran separate analyses on all satisfaction items and found that AI companion use appeared to be specifically associated with a higher likelihood of satisfaction only with physical intimacy.

Figure 6 summarizes these findings looking at the predicted probability of high-quality relationships based on AI companion use after accounting for all controls. Using an AI companion on a regular basis was associated with a slight (7%) increase in the likelihood of reporting a highly satisfying relationship, but a much stronger decrease (14%) in the likelihood of reporting a highly stable relationship and a decrease (9%) in the likelihood of high-quality communication.

We then examined if AI companion use had any associations with the sexual behavior and the quality of one’s sexual relationship. We found that the use of an AI companion regularly was related to the amount of masturbation and pornography reported in the last year, and with sexual intercourse frequency with one’s real-life partner. This lines up with previous research that similarly found a strong correlation between pornography use and an openness to AI romantic companions.²⁰ Those who engaged regularly with AI companions reported significantly more masturbation ($M = 3.36, p < .001$) than those who did not engage with AI companions ($M = 2.46$) and significantly more pornography use ($M = 2.94, p < .001$) than those who did not engage with AI companions ($M = 2.17$). Those who use AI companions often also reported significantly ($p = .009$) more sexual intercourse ($M = 1.97$) than those who did not report using AI companions frequently ($M = 1.76$).

Figure 6: Likelihood of High-Quality Relationships Based on AI Companion Use



Conclusion

Digital AI romantic companions – secret soulmates who provide catered and targeted romantic and sexual interactions for the user – appear to be prevalent among young adults who have real-life romantic partners. Like AI chatbots in general, engagement with romantic or sexual AI companion technologies appears to be increasing among young adults, regardless of their relationship status. If anything, specific elements of AI interactions appear particularly attractive to those in a committed real-life relationship with low relationship quality, perhaps appealing to young adults’ desires for “on demand” entertainment and connection. We believe there are at least four key takeaways from our examination of AI companion use among young adults in relationships:

Takeaway #1: Secret soulmates are emerging – for both men and women.

The use of AI romantic companions appears to be an emerging trend among young adults in a range of romantic relationships. Part of this high engagement with AI platforms appears to be tied to their versatility. AI companions can engage in emotional talk, role play, or create sexual content – all at the whim of the user and often with few limitations. In this way, AI companions offer a much wider array of features and content for users compared to a traditional form of digital indulgence such as pornography. Online pornography use is also common among young adults both in and out of romantic relationships.²¹ While pornography use has been a common practice for many young adults since the advent of the internet, AI companions offer both catered explicit sexual content along with a broader menu of relationship mimicking interactions. Given the existing popularity of online pornography, it is perhaps unsurprising that AI companions are emerging as an acceptable behavior in such a short period of time.

While we found young adult men were more likely to engage with AI companions than young adult women, gender difference were generally small, and women reported engaging with AI companions at high rates as well. The broader interactions offered by AI companions may explain this smaller difference between men and women. While men in our sample were more likely to engage sexually with an AI companion, when considering the broader interactions possible with AI platforms, much of this difference in the sexes disappeared. The highly customizable nature of AI companions seems to provide intriguing options for both men and women, both dating and married.

Rather than wait for real-life relationships and partners to develop and grow over time, AI companions offer immediate rewards through their one-sided interactions. Given our findings about relationship quality and stability, it seems like these short-cuts are not providing a strong foundation for a life-long relationships.

This high engagement begs the question of why AI companions are so popular among young adults who already have a real-life partner. Men and women may be increasingly using AI companions as a relationship short-cut of sorts, using this new technology to seek out anything their real-life partner is unwilling or unable to provide. Rather than wait for real-life relationships and partners to develop and grow over time, AI companions offer immediate rewards through their one-sided interactions. Given our findings about relationship stability and communication quality, it seems like these short-cuts are not providing a strong foundation for life-long relationships.

Takeaway #2: Some young adult men are retreating into secret digital relationships, and their partners may be unaware.

While general engagement with AI companions was high for both men and women, when looking across all results, some specific cautions appear warranted when it comes to young adult men. Men were more likely to engage with AI companions, more likely to create sexual content with AI platforms and masturbate during these interactions, and more likely to prefer AI interactions to the interactions with their real-life partners. Taken together, these findings suggest that some young adult men may be particularly drawn into secret soulmate relationships – to the point where they may begin to disengage from their real-life partners.

Several experts have recently noted that young adult men may be struggling in our modern culture in many ways, including relationally.²² The allure of digital alternatives, including pornography and AI romantic companions, appears to draw many men away from real-life relationships. Our findings suggest that young adult men in romantic relationships are not immune to the pull of secret soulmates, and that special caution and attention may be needed to help educate young adult men about the potential pitfall of secret soulmates and the personal problems that may occur due to any continued and excessive use of AI companions.

Healthy relationship dynamics rely on honest and open disclosure between partners, and many young adults are likely inwardly aware that full disclosure of their use of AI romantic companions use would negatively impact their real-life relationships.

The high amount of secrecy we found in our data likewise suggests that many of these young adult men (and women) appear to be hiding at least some elements of their use of AI. Whether this is due to embarrassment, concerns about their partner's reaction, or struggles articulating the use of AI companions to a partner, many men appear content to engage with their secret soulmate in private, with little to no partner disclosure. Healthy relationship dynamics rely on honest and open disclosure between partners, and many young adults are likely inwardly aware that full disclosure of their use of AI romantic companions would negatively impact their real-life relationships.

Takeaway #3: Young adults often fail to see the emotional and relationship implications of their AI use.

It was interesting to note that despite regular use of AI companions and high levels of secrecy about this use, many young adults surveyed had generally positive attitudes about their AI companion use and had few reservations about their continued engagement with AI companions while in a real-life relationship. This is a phenomenon noted in some recent research, with some people who use AI platforming believing that their well-being improves because they engage with AI.²³

A large part of this is likely due to a lack of education regarding the potential effects of AI use among young adults. For example, few young adults likely understand the manufactured and programmed way that most AI platforms can manipulate emotional reactions with a desire to create an artificial emotional bond with the AI platform – to encourage continued use and profits. Research suggests that people can develop strong feelings of perceived trust in their AI companions because AI platforms are designed to illicit high levels of intimacy and disclosure.²⁴ This counterfeit intimacy can feel real because it checks several boxes that are normal for ideal human-to-human connection, such as compassion, empathy, encouragement, and complement. This can lead to emotional dependency between the user and the AI platform, something now documented across several studies.²⁵

High reliance on AI for perceived emotional support may ultimately be to the user's detriment because, despite its depiction in the media, AI is not infallible.

Unanticipated imperfections of AI within the context of extreme emotional dependence on AI chatbots can have dire consequences. Early research on AI companion use already appears to suggest that addiction and compulsive use patterns can develop for some users.²⁶ In addition, if someone has previously been able to rely on their AI chatbot for support when they experience relational conflicts or a mental health crisis and their AI does not handle a disclosure well or provide accurate information, the situation may escalate to self-harm, violence, or other severe consequences, something already documented across a few high profile case studies.²⁷ For these reasons, while AI is often very good at providing users with validation by telling them what they want to hear, that one-sided validation can foster dangerous emotional dependence and decrease agency in real-life decision making.

Few young adults likely understand the manufactured and programmed way that most AI platforms can manipulate emotional reactions with a desire to create an artificial emotional bond with the AI platform - to encourage continued use and profits.

Takeaway #4: Secret soulmates may impact the stability of real-life relationships.

Perhaps key to all these findings is that AI companion use does appear to be associated with negative relationship quality. Our findings suggest that AI companion use seems particularly linked to lower levels of relationship stability and poor communication quality. While the direction of this relationship is unclear due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, this link suggests that the use of secret soulmates may be associated with unhealthy relationship dynamics. Whether this is due to people in low quality relationships seeking out AI alternatives or engagement with AI companions leading to less commitment and stability to one's real-life partner, these findings underscore the importance of talking about the prevalence of AI companion use and educating young adults about the potential risk of this use.

We did find that AI companion use had some weak associations with more reported satisfaction in one's real-life relationship. Digging into these small effects, we found that this was particularly true of items asking about the satisfaction young adults had in their physical intimacy with their partner. Combined with the findings linking AI companions to relationship instability and communication quality, it is possible that these findings on the surface may not be as positive as they appear. It is perhaps true that many young adults in relationships are now turning to an AI companion when conflicts or other difficult conversations arise in their real-life relationships or as way to supplement their sexual needs. Rather than going through the hard relational work needed to move past issues or find more ways to connect sexually with a real partner, AI companions offer an easy short-term solution to feel better about a conflict or difficulty in a relationship and find quick sexual satisfaction.

Remembering that satisfaction scales are simply self-reported momentary satisfaction with certain elements of one's relationship, perhaps AI can offer the short-term feeling that a relationship is going fine, not because the actual relational quality is improving but because difficult issues are never really dealt with. This may offer what we could call a "fragile satisfaction" tied to AI companion use, satisfaction based on short-term feelings of happiness that are tied more to preference for AI interaction and conflict resolution and the absence of difficult conversations with a real-life partner. Over time, as preference for AI interaction increases, this may lead to the instability and communication quality findings of the current study. While one partner may feel like their relationship is fine, perhaps eventually they begin to long for a new partner who "gets them" the same way they think their AI companion does or that offers the illusion of greater sexual satisfaction, leading to thinking about new partners and eroding the stability of their current relationships.

Our findings suggest that AI companion use seems particularly linked to lower levels of relationship stability. While the direction of this relationship is unclear due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, this link suggests that the use of secret soulmates may be associated with unhealthy relationship dynamics.

What appears clear is that we've entered a new age of modern relationships in young adulthood. Lacking any policy intervention, AI companion platforms are likely here to stay and represent a critical area of relationship space that educators, policy makers, and the public need to have careful and important discussion about. AI companions offer a secret soulmate that is just a tap away – an artificial entity that can offer an enticing array of interactions that can distract and potentially even destroy a relationship with a real-life partner. While much more research is needed to fully flesh out these effects, early indications from this study suggest that AI companion use should be an important part of how we study and discuss young adult romantic relationships moving forward. There are still many questions left to be answered. For example, what happens when both romantic partners retreat into separate AI companion platforms? How does AI companion use influence or intersect with online pornography use? What happens when one partner begins to create AI interactions or AI produced sexual media that stars a version of their real-life partner? These and many other questions suggest we have only begun to scratch the surface regarding how AI companions are beginning to change the landscape of young adulthood.

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