

Adolescents' Interpretations of Romantic Chatbots, Relational Control, and AI-Enabled Harm

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This exploratory qualitative study examines how adolescents interpret AI-mediated intimate practices that may not yet be widespread among minors but are already salient within their digital imaginaries, focusing on romantic chatbots, AI-assisted relational advice, and AI-enabled practices of control and harm. Six online, gender-segregated focus groups were conducted with 33 adolescents aged 16–18 in Spain. Participants framed romantic chatbots as sites of idealized, conflict-free intimacy shaped by user control; evaluations of AI-based relational advice were ambivalent, particularly among girls, who questioned its personalization and intent. Adolescents condemned highly intrusive practices such as message cloning, yet often normalized other forms of monitoring (e.g., real-time location sharing) as safety or care. Deepfakes were consistently identified as the most harmful practice, with participants highlighting violations of consent and noting gendered dynamics in peer-group circulation. Overall, AI appears less as a source of novel inequalities than as an amplifier of existing affective and gendered scripts in adolescent digital cultures.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; adolescents; romantic chatbots; digital intimacy; relational advice; relational control; surveillance; deepfakes; relational harm.

Introduction

The academic debate on the ethical and relational risks associated with conversational AI systems has expanded significantly in recent years (Chaturvedi et al., 2023).

However, empirical evidence based on young people's own voices remains limited (Livingstone & Third, 2017), particularly in Spanish-speaking contexts. Therefore, the present study examines how young people aged 16 to 18 interpret the role of AI as a tool for affection, control, and relational harm through a qualitative approach. This is a rapidly expanding and weakly regulated sociotechnical field, whose communicative and

relational impact is becoming increasingly significant as these technologies become normalized within youth cultures (Zuboff, 2019; Floridi et al., 2018).

From a communication theory perspective, it is important to understand these practices not merely as uses of emerging technologies, but as forms that shape relational experience and emotional connection (Cefai & Couldry, 2019). As Madianou and Miller (2013) have shown, the choice of communication channel acquires a social, affective, and moral dimension, as each medium entails a different degree of involvement. This perspective is particularly relevant in adolescence, as young people's affective lives are largely articulated through media and platforms.

Youth relationships in digital environments are characterized by immediacy, constant availability, and a sense of emotional proximity (Setty & Dobson, 2025). AI intensifies these dynamics by adding forms of companionship and responsive feedback, but it also reshapes expectations of reciprocity and autonomy within the personal sphere (Wang & Dehnert, 2026). The contribution of the present study to the field of communication lies not only in identifying adolescents' perceptions of specific relational uses of AI, but also in showing how these technologies intervene in the communicative construction of intimacy, surveillance, and relational harm.

AI-mediated intimacy and relational dynamics in adolescence

Adolescents are highly exposed to emerging technologies and digital environments (Choroszewicz, 2025), where problematic discourses about love, couple relationships, and sex proliferate (Weiß et al., 2025; Bocheva et al., 2025). The recent incorporation of AI-based applications into these environments has expanded forms of communicative mediation, with direct implications for affective-sexual socialization (Vanhoffelen et al., 2025).

One of the most salient phenomena in this domain is the emergence of advisory or therapeutic chatbots. Overall, empirical studies report promising findings regarding the therapeutic capacities of AI tools, particularly in relation to sexual and mental health (Döring et al., 2024; Roehrer et al., 2024). Relationships with AI-generated virtual partners give rise to emotional bonds, characterized by a marked relational asymmetry in which the user retains control over the artificial agent's appearance, behavior, and degree of emotional availability (Griol et al., 2013). The literature has also identified certain benefits associated with these interactions, such as a sense of companionship, stress reduction, and the absence of social judgment (Djufril et al., 2025; Ho et al., 2025).

However, other studies caution that these virtual relationships may function as spaces of affective idealization and relational rehearsal, in which emotional scripts based on compliance, constant availability, and the absence of conflict are normalized (Alabed et al., 2024; Ciriello et al., 2024). From a communicative perspective, human-like appearance, the use of natural language, and the perception of control foster processes of anthropomorphism that intensify the interpretation of these interactions as real romantic relationships (Placani, 2024).

Moreover, scholars have emphasized that the predominance of feminized avatars and the reproduction of stereotypes associated with submission or availability reinforce heteromasculine norms of interaction (Cheng et al., 2023; Hanson & Bolthouse, 2024; Grogan et al., 2025). Although such configurations do not necessarily generate misogynistic attitudes directly, they may amplify unequal relationships when they converge with masculine digital cultures that legitimize control and domination (Depounti et al., 2023).

Alongside these forms of AI-mediated intimacy, the literature on digital youth relationships has documented the expansion of everyday practices of control and surveillance (Depounti et al., 2023), such as the sharing of passwords, the monitoring of social media activity, as well as the shared use of real-time location tracking (Ruggieri et al., 2021; Borau, 2025). A number of authors have linked these practices to dynamics of jealousy and to forms of coercive control and possessiveness, permeated by the idealization of romantic love and by gendered stereotypes (Aragon & Lozano, 2024). These practices blur the boundaries between intimacy, trust, and surveillance (Mascheroni et al., 2017).

Finally, an emerging area of particular severity concerns technology-mediated sexual violence by AI, especially through the generation of deepfakes (Williams, 2025). The creation and dissemination of falsified sexual images or videos violate the consent and integrity of those affected and pose new communicative and relational challenges in youth contexts (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Henry & Powell, 2018). This form of abuse produces, among other harms, a silencing effect that discourages women from participating online due to fear, while audience reactions further intensify the negative consequences (Rini & Cohen, 2022). More broadly, scholars note that the accessibility of these tools, the normalization of non-consensual sexualization of others, and the minimization of harm (Flynn et al., 2025) give rise to an invisible threat that looms over women in their everyday lives (McGlynn & Toparlak, 2025).

Although empirical research on this phenomenon among adolescents remains limited, the literature warns of its potential to reinforce dynamics of control, humiliation, and relational harm, particularly when such practices become normalized within peer-based digital socialization circuits (Powell et al., 2020).

Objective and Research Questions

The overall objective of this study is to explore how adolescents aged 16 to 18 interpret and evaluate the role of AI in the domain of affective relationships and digital intimacy. More specifically, the study focuses on emerging practices such as romantic and conversational chatbots, as well as the circulation of potentially harmful AI-generated content.

In line with these analytical dimensions, the following research questions are proposed:

- RQ1. How do adolescents interpret the use of romantic and conversational chatbots?
- RQ2. How do adolescents perceive the use of AI-based tools in practices of relational control?
- RQ3. How do adolescents understand forms of AI-mediated symbolic and sexual violence, particularly deepfakes?

Material and Methods

Design and participants

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach based on the conduct of six focus groups with a total of 33 adolescents (18 girls, 15 boys) aged 16 to 18, held online in October 2025. This exploratory qualitative approach, based on focus groups, was chosen to capture adolescents' interpretations of emerging AI-mediated relational practices, while fostering collective reflection and interaction among participants. In order to foster a climate of trust, the focus groups were organized in a single-sex format, with three groups composed of girls and three composed of boys. Participants were recruited through a combination of open calls disseminated via social media and

snowball sampling, which was used to complement group composition. The sample included adolescents from diverse geographical areas across Spain (e.g., Galicia, Castilla y León, La Rioja, Catalonia, Basque Country, and Murcia), ensuring a heterogeneous composition in terms of territorial background. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 16 and 18 years old and to have regular exposure to digital environments and platforms, ensuring their ability to engage with the topics discussed, even if not based on direct personal experience. Care was taken to ensure that participants within the same focus group were not personally acquainted and did not come from the same locality, in order to encourage open discussion and avoid pre-existing group dynamics. Participation was voluntary and compensated with a small financial incentive.

Procedure

Each focus group session lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and was moderated by one researcher with experience in qualitative methods. The sessions followed a semi-structured discussion guide (see Appendix I), which included prompts designed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences related to AI in relational contexts. The guide allowed flexibility to adapt to participants' level of familiarity with specific topics:

- AI and affective relationships: participants' knowledge of and perceptions about romantic chatbots, as well as the use of AI as a source of relational advice.
- AI and practices of control: digital surveillance within romantic relationships.
- AI and symbolic and sexual violence: particular attention to deepfakes, their circulation, and perceptions of the associated harm.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through a two-phase manual coding process using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. In the first stage, a deductive coding strategy was applied, guided by the thematic dimensions and research questions that structured the focus group guide. In the second stage, an inductive coding process was carried out based on a close reading of the transcripts, allowing for the identification of emergent codes directly from participants' discourse and capturing meanings, tensions, and patterns not initially anticipated (Table 1).

The coding process was conducted by two researchers. To ensure reliability, an iterative process of comparison and discussion was followed, with discrepancies resolved through consensus.

[Table 1]

The study complies with ethical principles for research involving minors and adheres to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. It received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Complutense University of Madrid (Ref: CE_20240509_02_SOC), and informed consent was obtained from both participants and their legal guardians. All data collected were treated anonymously and used exclusively for research purposes.

Results

This section presents the main findings, structured around three thematic areas—AI-mediated affective relationships, AI-enabled practices of control, and AI-related forms of symbolic and sexual harm, in line with the research questions guiding the study.

AI-mediated affective relationships: virtual partners and relational advice

When addressing the affective dimension of artificial intelligence, adolescents describe a range of uses linked to both romantic and conversational chatbots. Although these practices are not presented as common personal experiences, participants demonstrate broad knowledge of how such systems function and articulate ambivalent evaluations of their relational implications.

With regard to “virtual girlfriends,” participants unanimously report being familiar with what it means to maintain a relationship with an AI-generated partner, suggesting that this phenomenon is highly present in the youth imaginaries. Participants consider that those who turn to these applications often do so because they are unable to find a partner in their offline environment or as a way of coping with unwanted loneliness. In this sense, the primary motivation is not associated with negative connotations, but rather with a search for affection, validation, and emotional connection.

However, some female participants note that individuals who maintain these kinds of bonds are, above all, seeking a “perfect” partner who conforms precisely to male expectations. From this perspective, they raise the issue of the need for control that some men pursue in their affective relationships. Indeed, more broadly, this use of AI tends to be evaluated negatively, as participants perceive it as reproducing dynamics characteristic of more unequal traditional relationships.

[Figure 1]

Another use of AI that emerges in the discussion concerns the search for romantic or emotional advice. Although none of the participants report personally using these tools, there is nonetheless widespread awareness of such practices, and several participants refer to close cases of friends who turn to them. Based on these reported

cases, three main uses are identified: AI as a conversational assistant to help decide what to say and how to say it; as a source of practical guidance when facing conflicts or doubts within a relationship; and as a form of emotional support, in some cases equated with a therapeutic function when sufficient help cannot be found in one's immediate social environment. Overall, these uses do not initially elicit rejection and are described as potentially useful in specific situations, particularly when friends hold polarized opinions or when there is a lack of personal clarity:

"Well, maybe when among friends, we're all giving our opinions and we're very polarized, like everyone is at a different extreme, then maybe it can actually be helpful."

(Group 4 – girls)

However, when the quality of the advice provided by AI is evaluated explicitly, a critical stance emerges, expressed primarily by female participants. The main objections focus on the lack of personalization and on AI's tendency to offer compliant responses, perceived as aimed at confirming what the user wants to hear rather than questioning or exploring the situation in greater depth:

"AI gathers data from a lot of websites and gives the best answer that more or less fits your question. So, it does it based on the opinions of many people; it's not something very personal." (Group 6 – girls)

"AI is going to tell you what you want to hear. Because in the end it's a program that has a lot of data stored about you. [...] It's designed to please." (Group 4 – girls)

AI and digital technologies as tools of relational control

With regard to artificial intelligence and digital technologies as tools of control, adolescents clearly distinguish between practices perceived as invasive and others that

tend to be normalized within romantic relationships. These evaluations reveal tensions between discourses of privacy, care, and trust, as well as gender differences in how certain control practices are perceived and accepted.

When presented with a case involving the cloning of messages (i.e., replicating or accessing a partner's messages to monitor or control communication...), reactions were almost unanimous: both girls and boys condemned the practice, describing it as toxic. However, alongside this explicit rejection, female participants acknowledge engaging in or accepting other forms of surveillance that they consider normal, such as sharing real-time location, typically justified in terms of safety:

"I have my partner's location and she has mine, and it's totally for safety, not for anything else. But there will definitely be people who want the location to control where the other person is, whether they're lying or whatever." (Group 2 – girls)

At the same time, ambivalent discourses around privacy emerge: while permanent access to accounts or messages is rejected, some girls accept that their partner may check their phone in specific situations. This points to a hierarchy of control practices, in which certain intrusions are perceived as excessive, while others are seen as legitimate or tolerable:

"I wouldn't like it, but for my own reasons. If my partner asked me for it, I'd find it very strange, because he already has access to my phone whenever he wants. If he feels the need to look at something, my phone is always there, but I think having my account is excessive. I should be able to talk to my friend about him freely and... that's just too much." (Group 2 – girls)

AI-enabled symbolic and sexual harm: adolescents' views on deepfakes

The use of AI to create deepfakes is identified by adolescents as the most harmful

practice discussed in the focus groups. There is clear consensus in considering deepfakes a form of violence that violates consent and can cause serious reputational and emotional harm. Both girls and boys report being aware of close cases, suggesting a wide circulation of this practice within youth environments:

“I have a friend who had something similar done to his cousin, and honestly it really affected him... There must have been some kind of confrontation with the person who did it. And I think that’s completely normal. Honestly, I find it very immature to make that kind of video.” (Group 5 – boys)

“In the end, what they’re doing is violating your consent, because you haven’t given those people permission to do that with your photos.” (Group 6 – girls)

Regarding the reception of this type of content, most participants state that they would not share it. However, gender differences emerge in interpretations and potential dissemination practices. Some female participants suggest that, while women would tend to act more responsibly and avoid sharing such content, in male socialization contexts, there may be greater tolerance or justification for the circulation of deepfakes:

“I think that if women are sent something like that, [...] they wouldn’t encourage it, but I think that if, for example, it’s sent to a guy, it would generally be different. And especially if it’s sent to a group with lots of boys, then I think it would be much worse, because they back each other up.” (Group 6 – girls)

Adolescents do not passively adopt AI in their relational practices, but actively interpret it through existing communicative and gendered frameworks. The normalization of certain surveillance practices appears to be linked to their framing as care or protection; AI advice operates as a low-risk intermediary within relational communication; and gender norms shape how AI-mediated intimacy, control, and harm are perceived and evaluated.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings suggest that, within this sample, AI is not perceived as introducing entirely new forms of relational inequality or misogyny, but rather as amplifying affective and gendered scripts already present within youth cultures and society at large (Depounti et al., 2023). Adolescents' perceptions of romantic chatbots indicate that these technologies are interpreted as spaces of idealized intimacy, characterized by constant availability, the absence of conflict, and adaptation to user's expectations. Far from being perceived as "unreal" relationships without impact, these forms of artificial intimacy can be interpreted as sites of relational rehearsal, where dynamics of compliance and control—closely aligned with traditional models of affective inequality—appear to be normalized, thereby reinforcing the arguments put forward by Grogan et al. (2025).

From a communication perspective, these findings suggest that romantic chatbots, automated affective advice, and AI-enabled practices of surveillance or harm may play a role in shaping how concepts such as closeness, care, reciprocity, and violation are interpreted. In this sense, the study suggests that AI-mediated intimacy can be understood as an intensified extension of the affective, gendered, and control-oriented logics present in contemporary digital cultures.

Another key contribution of this study lies in identifying a paradox surrounding practices of relational control, understood as the coexistence of competing relational meanings, where practices framed as care simultaneously operate as mechanisms of surveillance (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023). Adolescents clearly condemn practices perceived as invasive. However, forms of digital surveillance, such as mutual real-time location sharing, are normalized and justified in terms of safety, care, or trust, in line with the findings of Borau (2025). This distinction suggests that control practices are

evaluated differently depending on how they are framed or justified, making it more difficult to distinguish between care and surveillance. In this context, AI and digital technologies do not appear to create new forms of relational control in themselves, but rather seem to facilitate their integration into everyday life, thereby complicating its critical scrutiny.

It is also important to highlight the gender differences that emerge in the evaluation of relational uses of AI. Female participants adopt a more critical stance toward the advice offered by chatbots, more clearly identifying the lack of personalization and the tendency of these systems to provide user-pleasing responses. They are also the ones who most forcefully express concern about the ethical and relational implications of practices such as deepfakes. These differences suggest that young women appear to display greater critical sensitivity in this context, possibly linked to prior experiences of exposure to forms of control or harm in digital environments. At the same time, with regard to control practices, girls display greater ambivalence, oscillating between normative acceptance and diffuse discomfort, without yet possessing robust tools to address such dynamics. This finding underscores the need to incorporate a gender perspective into analyses of AI literacy and digital relational competencies.

Finally, the results show that deepfakes constitute a sharply defined moral boundary. Nevertheless, this consensus coexists with doubts about the practical consistency of these positions, particularly with respect to the circulation of such content within peer groups and the dynamics of group endorsement—especially among boys—as noted by Powell et al. (2020). The tension between moral condemnation and social normalization highlights the fragility of ethical boundaries in digital socialization

contexts, where peer pressure can weaken individual judgment, at least within the perceptions expressed by participants in this study.

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Given its exploratory and qualitative nature, as well as the relatively small sample size, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of emerging patterns in adolescents' perceptions rather than as generalizable conclusions. In addition, the data are based on self-reported discourses within focus group settings, which may not fully reflect actual behaviors or practices.

These findings also have practical implications. They highlight the need to strengthen adolescents' critical and ethical literacy regarding AI-mediated relational practices, particularly in relation to the normalization of surveillance framed as care. Interventions should address not only technological risks, but also the relational meanings embedded in these practices. Additionally, the observed gender differences underline the importance of incorporating a gender-sensitive perspective into AI and digital literacy initiatives.

Taken together, this study highlights that, although the practices examined may not be frequent or reported as direct personal experiences, their presence in the youth imaginaries and their technical accessibility make them significant elements of contemporary relational socialization. Generative AI technologies associated with emotional companionship thus constitute sociotechnical scenarios in which notions of intimacy, consent, reciprocity, and care are negotiated and at times distorted.

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Tables and figures

RQ	Category of analysis	Coding codes
RQ1	Affective AI and AI-mediated relationships	– Familiarity with and motivations attributed to the use of virtual partners (loneliness, curiosity, desire for companionship). – Idealization of the relationship (the “perfect” partner, absence of conflict) and adaptation of the chatbot to the user. – Compliance and constant availability. – Use of chatbots as relational advisers, including therapeutic support (what to say, how to act). – Critical evaluation of the advice provided by AI.
RQ2	AI and digital technologies as tools of relational control	– Practices perceived as excessive or invasive vs. normalized practices of digital surveillance. – Justifications for control (security, care, trust). – Gender differences in the perception and acceptance of control practices.
RQ3	AI as symbolic and sexual violence: deepfakes	– Awareness of deepfakes and motivations attributed to their creation and dissemination. – Perception of deepfakes as violence. – Reactions to receiving deepfakes (deleting, not sharing, warning others). – Normalization and circulation within peer groups. – Gender differences in the interpretation and dissemination of content.

Table 1. Analytical categories and coding codes.

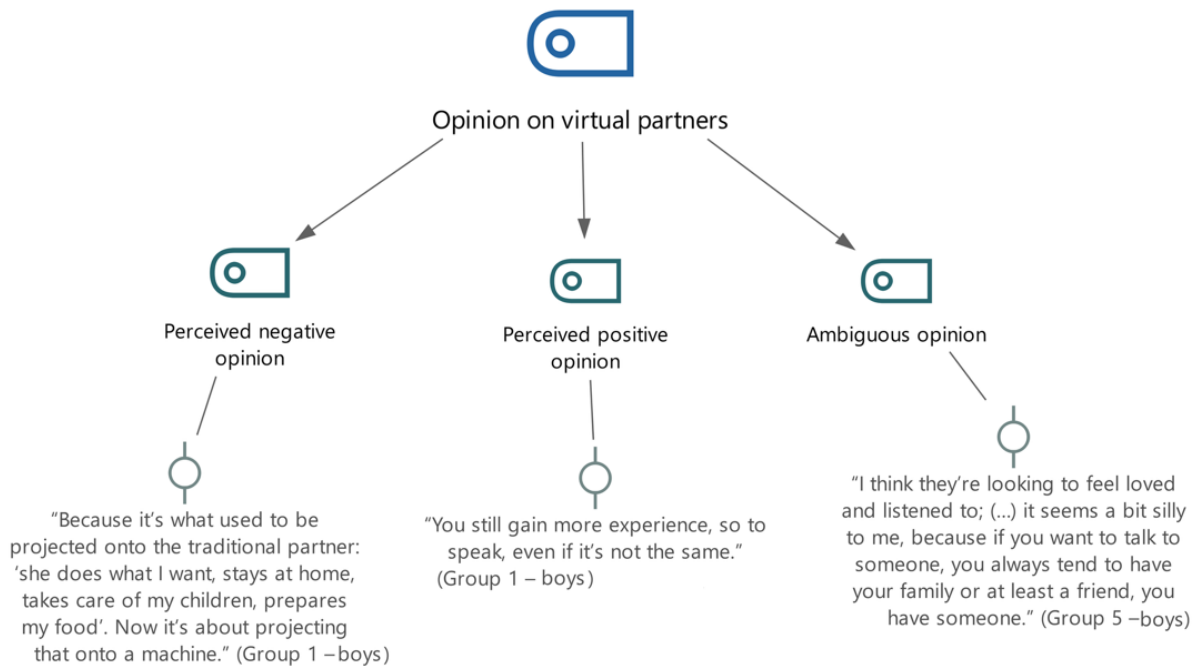


Figure 1. Adolescents' perceptions of virtual partners

Appendix I - Focus group discussion guide

1. Conversational Chatbots

- Have you heard about virtual girlfriends/boyfriends? (If not, skip the topic). If yes, why do you think someone would engage in this type of relationship? What are they looking for?
- Do you ask AI for advice about your relationships (e.g., as a kind of “advice column”)?
- What kind of questions do you ask? Can you give examples? What kind of advice does AI provide?
- In your opinion, is this good advice? Do you follow it?

2. AI for Control. Discussing algorithmic surveillance in relationships

- There is also a growing practice of cloning a partner’s messages. Do you think this is a way of protecting or controlling?
- Are jealousy and love the same thing?
- What do you think about this practice?

3. Deepfakes and Synthetic Sexual Violence: Discussing the circulation and normalization of manipulated images

- There have been cases where AI-generated videos use a classmate’s photo to create pornographic content and then distribute it.
- Why do you think this happens?
- Are you aware of similar cases? Do you think this is a “joke” or a form of violence?
- How would you react if you received a video like this?