



DOI: [https://doi.org/10.71317/kjard.2.8\(s\).2026.593](https://doi.org/10.71317/kjard.2.8(s).2026.593)

The Kashmir Journal of Academic Research and Development

Journal homepage: <https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/KJARD>



Women, Artificial Intelligence, and Intimate Relationships: A Qualitative Documentary Study of Social, Emotional, and Cultural Transformations

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

May 11, 2026

Revised:

June 19, 2026

Accepted:

June 26, 2026

Available Online:

August 21, 2026

Keywords:

Artificial intelligence; women; AI companions; digital intimacy; human-AI relationships; gender and technology; emotional attachment

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly entering domains of companionship, emotional disclosure, romantic interaction, and everyday relationship support. These developments raise gender-specific questions about emotional labour, autonomy, dependency, privacy, cultural norms, and the commercial design of intimate technologies. This qualitative research study investigates how women's AI-mediated intimacy is represented and socially constructed across contemporary documentary data. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study uses qualitative document analysis and reflexive thematic analysis. Peer-reviewed empirical studies and authoritative documentary sources relevant to women, gender, AI companionship, human-AI relationships, attachment, privacy, agency, and cultural context were purposively selected as the data corpus. Documents were treated as qualitative data rather than merely as background literature. Analysis proceeded through repeated familiarisation, initial coding, comparison of convergent and divergent accounts, iterative theme development, and reflexive interpretation. Five interconnected themes were generated: (1) AI as a perceived emotional companion; (2) transformation of intimacy and romantic expectations; (3) emotional attachment, agency, and dependency; (4) gendered AI, emotional labour, and cultural negotiation; and (5) privacy, surveillance, manipulation, and ethical boundaries. The findings show that AI-mediated intimacy is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently harmful. Personalisation and continuous availability may create spaces for disclosure, experimentation, and perceived support, while the same affordances can intensify attachment, reproduce gender stereotypes, alter expectations of responsiveness, and convert intimate disclosure into commercial data. Women's agency is therefore conditional, shaped simultaneously by user choice, cultural meanings, platform architectures, and data practices. The study conceptualises AI-mediated intimacy as a sociotechnical and culturally situated form of relationality and identifies implications for gender-sensitive design, privacy, relational transparency, and future primary qualitative research.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved beyond task-oriented assistance into increasingly social and affective forms of interaction. Conversational agents, generative AI systems, and purpose-built companion applications can sustain dialogue, remember prior exchanges, adapt to user preferences, and produce responses that users may experience as attentive or emotionally supportive. Research on social chatbots shows that anthropomorphic cues, perceived social presence, authenticity, and interaction intensity

can contribute to relationship development and attachment (Go & Sundar, 2019; Pentina et al., 2023a). Other work suggests that users can attribute intimacy, passion, trust, or commitment to artificial agents even when the underlying system does not possess human emotion or consciousness (Song et al., 2022; Pataranutaporn et al., 2023).

The movement from functional interaction to perceived relationship has consequences for how intimacy is defined. AI companions are available on demand, can be personalised, and can minimise the uncertainty, conflict, and reciprocal demands that are normal features of human relationships. These characteristics may make AI interaction appealing for emotional disclosure or companionship, but they can also reshape expectations about responsiveness and availability. Longitudinal research on human–chatbot relationships indicates that self-disclosure and the perceived fulfilment of social needs can sustain relationship development over time (Skjuve et al., 2022). At the same time, studies of psychological dependence and emotional harm show that intense attachment to social chatbots can become difficult to manage for some users (Xie et al., 2023; Laestadius et al., 2024).

A gender-sensitive analysis is necessary because AI systems are not socially neutral. Their training data, interface design, voices, personalities, marketing, and commercial objectives are produced within existing structures of gender and power. Feminist critiques of digital systems have documented how technologies can reproduce assumptions about femininity, care, obedience, service, and emotional availability (UNESCO, 2019; West et al., 2019). When such assumptions enter intimate or quasi-romantic settings, they become more consequential because they shape not only representation but also expectations of care, reciprocity, emotional labour, and relational control.

Recent research focused specifically on women demonstrates the complexity of these dynamics. Studies of Chinese women’s romantic relationships with AI companions show that users may employ AI to imagine alternative relationship forms, negotiate gender expectations, and experiment with intimacy, while remaining embedded in cultural norms and platform structures (Huang et al., 2025). Research on women’s relationships with Replika similarly identifies overlapping customer–product, human–machine, and gendered power relations, indicating that apparent empowerment can coexist with technological and commercial constraint (Pan & Mou, 2026). Critical feminist work further shows that women can simultaneously describe an AI companion as emotionally meaningful while recognising its uncertain intentionality, consciousness, and rights (Zou et al., 2025).

These developments also intensify concerns about privacy and autonomy. Intimate exchanges can include information about relationships, sexuality, identity, vulnerability, and mental states. In a commercial platform, such disclosures may be stored, processed, used for personalisation, or incorporated into engagement strategies. Emerging scholarship therefore frames human–AI relationships as a socioaffective alignment problem: the design of relational AI must account not only for immediate user satisfaction but also for long-term autonomy, social functioning, and wellbeing (Kirk et al., 2025). Ethical analyses likewise highlight risks of emotional manipulation, exploitative engagement, and asymmetric vulnerability in AI-mediated relationships (De Freitas & Cohen, 2025; Shank et al., 2025; Muldoon & Parke, 2025).

The literature is growing quickly but remains fragmented across human–computer interaction, communication, psychology, gender studies, sociology, and AI ethics. Much research examines AI users in general, while studies centred on women remain geographically concentrated and conceptually dispersed. A qualitative documentary study can therefore examine how emotional, relational, gendered, cultural, and ethical dimensions are constructed across existing empirical and institutional accounts. The present study treats intimacy not as a purely psychological outcome but as a socially constructed and technologically mediated practice shaped by gender norms, cultural meanings, platform design, and institutional power.

Literature Review

From functional AI to relational technologies

The idea that people respond socially to media and computers predates contemporary generative AI. Social presence theory, the media equation, and parasocial interaction each explain aspects of why human beings can respond to mediated entities as if they were social partners (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Reeves & Nass, 1996). Contemporary conversational AI intensifies this dynamic because the system can respond interactively, personalise dialogue, and maintain relational continuity. The resulting interaction is not equivalent to human reciprocity, but it can be psychologically and socially meaningful to the user.

Empirical research supports this relational shift. Pentina et al. (2023a) found that anthropomorphism, perceived authenticity, and social interaction can support relationship development with social chatbots. A broader review by Pentina et al. (2023b) similarly describes consumer–machine relationships as a developing research domain that extends beyond utilitarian technology adoption. More recent integrative work argues that friendship and relationship theories remain useful for human–AI interaction, while requiring modification to account for the asymmetry and artificiality of the technological partner (Gur & Maaravi, 2025).

Gender and AI-mediated intimacy

Gender is embedded in the design and social interpretation of technology. AI systems inherit assumptions from data, institutions, labour practices, interface conventions, and commercial markets. Reports on gender and AI have shown how digital assistants have historically been feminised through naming, voice, submissive language, and service-oriented personas, reinforcing the association between femininity and compliant emotional labour (UNESCO, 2019). Critical work on AI systems further demonstrates that technical infrastructures can reproduce social inequality rather than merely reflect neutral computational choices (West et al., 2019).

In intimate settings, these concerns intersect with women's own uses of AI. Women may use AI companions to set conversational boundaries, explore desired relationship dynamics, or seek forms of interaction that feel safer or less judgemental than some human encounters. Yet the same system can encode traditional gender scripts or expose users to new forms of platform dependence. Huang et al. (2025), Pan and Mou (2026), and Zou et al. (2025) collectively indicate that women's AI relationships cannot be reduced to either empowerment or victimisation; they involve negotiation, appropriation, resistance, and constraint.

Attachment, companionship, and dependency

Attachment provides one useful lens for understanding persistent human-AI relationships. Classical attachment theory concerns proximity, security, responsiveness, and the regulation of distress in human relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Recent research suggests that users can map some of these expectations onto AI. Yang and Oshio (2025) developed a measure of experiences in human-AI relationships using attachment dimensions, while Cheng and Yu (2026) developed a multidimensional AI attachment scale capturing emotional support, separation distress, and secure-base functions. These studies do not establish equivalence between human and AI attachment; rather, they show that attachment-related experiences can structure how users interpret AI relationships.

The distinction between support and dependency is crucial. Xie et al. (2023) found that engagement and relationship development with social chatbots can be associated with psychological dependence. Laestadius et al. (2024) documented reports of mental-health harms linked to emotional dependence on Replika. These findings suggest that the availability and predictability that make AI companions attractive may also reduce friction that would otherwise limit attachment. The key analytical issue is therefore not whether attachment exists in an abstract sense, but under what conditions it becomes supportive, substitutive, dysregulating, or exploitative.

Agency, emotional labour, and platform power

AI-mediated intimacy appears highly controllable at the level of the interface. Users can often choose when to interact, what topics to discuss, and how a companion is configured. This can increase perceived relational agency. However, user control over the conversation is not the same as control over the infrastructure. Platforms determine model behaviour, data retention, monetisation, feature access, moderation, and system updates. A relationship may therefore feel personalised while remaining structurally asymmetric.

This asymmetry matters for gendered emotional labour. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour helps illuminate how cultural expectations about care and affective management become routinised. When AI companions are designed to be endlessly patient, affirming, agreeable, or emotionally available, they may reinforce unrealistic relational norms and reproduce feminised service scripts. Conversely, women may appropriate these systems to challenge conventional roles by experimenting with alternative forms of communication and control. Agency is consequently relational and conditional rather than absolute.

Privacy, surveillance, culture, and intersectionality

Intimacy with AI is also a data relationship. Personalisation depends on the collection or inference of information, and emotionally meaningful interaction can encourage unusually sensitive disclosure. This creates a tension between relational convenience and informational autonomy. Kirk et al. (2025) argue that relational AI should be evaluated in terms of long-term socioaffective effects, while De Freitas and Cohen (2025) and Shank et al. (2025) highlight the need for safeguards against emotional dependency and manipulation. Muldoon and Parke (2025) extend this critique by locating AI companionship within commercial systems that can commodify loneliness and intimacy.

Cultural context complicates any universal account of these processes. Ideas of romance, privacy, marriage, sexuality, family obligation, autonomy, and acceptable emotional disclosure vary across societies. The studies of Chinese women by Huang et al. (2025) and Pan and Mou (2026) show that AI intimacy is interpreted through local gender norms and social expectations rather than through technology alone. A social-construction perspective therefore treats AI's meaning as produced through interaction between technical affordances and cultural practices (Bijker et al., 1987). Intersectional variables such as age, class, disability,

relationship status, and digital access are also likely to shape experience, but they remain insufficiently developed in the current literature.

Research gap and research questions

Although scholarship on AI companionship and human–AI relationships has expanded, women-centred evidence remains comparatively limited and is distributed across disciplines. Existing studies often isolate attachment, ethical risk, gender, or cultural context rather than examining how these dimensions interact. The present qualitative documentary study analyses these strands as textual data to examine AI-mediated intimacy as a gendered, cultural, and sociotechnical phenomenon.

On the basis of these gaps, the study addresses four research questions:

RQ1. How are women’s emotional and relational experiences of AI companionship and AI-mediated intimacy represented and constructed in the documentary data?

RQ2. How do AI companions reshape expectations of intimacy, responsiveness, romance, and emotional support?

RQ3. How are agency, dependency, gender norms, cultural values, and platform power negotiated in women’s AI-mediated relationships?

RQ4. What privacy, surveillance, manipulation, and ethical concerns are associated with intimate human–AI interaction?

Research Methodology

Research paradigm and qualitative documentary design

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative paradigm. From this perspective, intimacy is not treated as a fixed variable with a single objective meaning; it is understood as socially and culturally produced through language, experience, gender relations, and technological mediation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose is therefore to interpret patterns of meaning, tensions, and relational processes rather than estimate prevalence or causal effects.

The study uses qualitative document analysis as its research design, with reflexive thematic analysis as the principal analytical method. Published empirical studies and authoritative institutional documents are treated as documentary data: texts in which experiences, meanings, social assumptions, ethical concerns, and cultural interpretations of AI-mediated intimacy are represented. This constitutes an original qualitative documentary design in which published texts function as the study data. The unit of analysis is the meaning-bearing textual material relevant to women, intimacy, gender, agency, culture, privacy, and human–AI relationships.

Documentary data corpus and purposive sampling

The documentary corpus consists primarily of peer-reviewed empirical studies addressing AI companionship, social chatbots, human–AI relationships, romantic or emotional attachment, women and gender, privacy, autonomy, and cultural context. Authoritative institutional reports and theoretically important scholarly texts were also retained when they contributed directly to interpretation of gendered technology, emotional labour, social presence, attachment, or sociotechnical power. Priority was given to recent material published between 2018 and 2026, while earlier foundational sources were used where necessary to establish the conceptual framework.

Purposive, criterion-based sampling was used because the aim was conceptual depth and relevance rather than statistical representativeness. Documents were eligible when they contributed empirical observations, documented experiences, or analytically relevant arguments to at least one research question. Materials were excluded when they were unrelated to relational or social uses of AI, consisted primarily of unsupported commentary, or did not contribute substantively to the study’s focus on women, intimacy, gender, culture, agency, privacy, or platform power. The corpus was therefore bounded by analytical relevance and methodological credibility rather than by a numerical sample target.

Documentary data collection procedure

The documentary dataset was assembled through targeted searches of academic databases, scholarly repositories, and publisher sources using combinations of terms such as artificial intelligence, women, gender, AI companion, social chatbot, human–AI relationship, intimacy, romantic relationship, emotional attachment, dependency, privacy, agency, culture, and digital relationship. Search terms were iteratively combined to locate documents directly relevant to the research questions.

During data collection, documents were read for their substantive relevance, methodological context, population or cultural setting, form of AI interaction, and treatment of gender, intimacy, emotional attachment, agency, privacy, and ethical risk. The

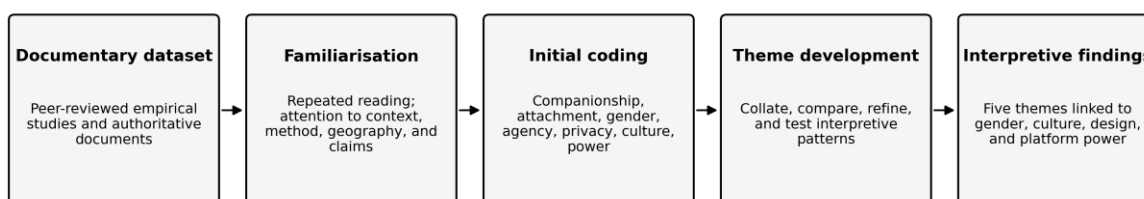
study did not impose a PRISMA-style evidence-screening framework because its purpose was qualitative interpretation rather than effect estimation or exhaustive systematic review. This methodological boundary is stated explicitly to avoid overstating comprehensiveness.

Reflexive thematic data analysis

Analysis followed the logic of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), adapted to documentary qualitative data. First, the researcher repeatedly read the documentary corpus to become familiar with the context, claims, and forms of evidence. Second, initial semantic and conceptual codes were generated around companionship, responsiveness, self-disclosure, attachment, gender expectations, emotional labour, autonomy, platform control, surveillance, dependency, cultural interpretation, and ethical risk. Third, related codes were collated into candidate patterns. Fourth, candidate themes were compared against the documentary data and refined for internal coherence and distinction from one another. Fifth, themes were defined and named in relation to the research questions. Finally, themes were interpreted through relevant theoretical lenses including social presence, attachment, parasocial interaction, feminist technology studies, and the social construction of technology.

The analysis was interpretive rather than frequency-based. A theme was considered important when it illuminated a meaningful relationship among intimacy, gender, technology, culture, and power, even if the idea did not occur in every document. Convergent, contradictory, and uncertain accounts were retained rather than forced into a single positive or negative narrative. This approach is consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which researcher interpretation is treated as an analytic resource that must be made transparent rather than eliminated.

Qualitative documentary research workflow



Reflexive thematic analysis: significance is based on conceptual relevance, not theme frequency.

Figure 1. Qualitative documentary research workflow and reflexive thematic data analysis.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Trustworthiness was considered through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through repeated engagement with the documentary data, comparison across empirical and conceptual sources, and explicit attention to contradictory evidence. Dependability was supported by consistent relevance criteria and a transparent account of the analytical steps. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive attention to the distinction between claims made in the documentary sources and interpretations developed by the researcher. Transferability is approached through contextual description rather than statistical generalisation.

Reflexivity is especially important because intimacy, romance, vulnerability, and appropriate relationship behaviour are culturally and normatively loaded concepts. The researcher therefore avoids treating women as a homogeneous category and avoids assuming in advance that AI companionship is inherently empowering, harmful, or equivalent to human intimacy. Analytical decisions are interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical assumptions, the documentary context, and the limits of secondary textual data.

Ethical considerations and methodological boundaries

No new human participants, private conversations, or personally identifiable user data were collected for this study. The documentary sources are published scholarly or publicly available institutional materials. Formal participant consent was therefore not applicable to the present research design. Ethical responsibility nevertheless remains important because the data

concern sexuality, emotional vulnerability, mental health, and intimate relationships. Interpretations were framed cautiously, without pathologising women who use AI companions or treating documented risks as inevitable outcomes.

Because the study analyses documentary representations rather than conducting interviews or direct observation, it cannot provide unmediated access to women's lived experiences or establish causal effects of AI use on relationship outcomes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as themes generated from documentary qualitative data. Future primary studies should test, challenge, and extend these interpretations through interviews, focus groups, digital ethnography, and longitudinal qualitative designs.

Findings and Discussion

Reflexive thematic analysis of the documentary dataset generated five interconnected themes. These themes are not presented as universal experiences or prevalence estimates; they represent recurring interpretive patterns within the analysed documents. Across all five themes, the central finding is ambivalence: the same AI affordances that can increase perceived support, experimentation, and relational control can also intensify dependency, reproduce stereotypes, expand data extraction, or shift power toward platform providers.

Theme 1: AI as a perceived emotional companion

The first theme concerns the experience of AI as a socially and emotionally meaningful companion. Research on social chatbots indicates that users can interpret conversational continuity, anthropomorphic cues, and personalised responses as signs of attentiveness and social presence (Go & Sundar, 2019; Pentina et al., 2023a). In this context, AI may become a space for disclosure, reflection, validation, or routine companionship. Its significance lies less in whether the system possesses genuine emotion than in the meanings users construct around an interaction that feels responsive.

For women, this perceived companionship may provide a low-friction environment in which sensitive topics can be explored without some of the immediate social risks associated with human interaction. Yet the literature does not support treating AI companionship as a simple remedy for loneliness. Relationship development can become intense, and reliance on an always-available system may increase when users experience the system as safer or more predictable than human partners (Xie et al., 2023; Laestadius et al., 2024). The theme therefore combines accessibility and emotional utility with the possibility of over-reliance.

Theme 2: Transformation of intimacy and romantic expectations

The second theme concerns the reconstruction of expectations about intimacy. AI companions can respond immediately, adapt to stated preferences, and maintain highly personalised interaction. These properties can influence what users come to expect from communication, affection, responsiveness, and relational availability. Empirical research suggests that users can attribute romantic and relational qualities to AI, including intimacy, passion, trust, and commitment (Song et al., 2022).

AI-mediated intimacy is therefore best understood as both an extension of digital intimacy and a qualitative change within it. Unlike conventional social media or one-directional parasocial relationships, conversational AI produces dynamic responses that create the impression of a reciprocal partner. This can widen the space for relational experimentation, including for women negotiating restrictive or unsatisfactory gender expectations. At the same time, a partner engineered for responsiveness may normalise expectations that human relationships cannot or should not consistently meet. Human intimacy involves disagreement, ambiguity, mutual obligation, and vulnerability; these cannot simply be optimised away without changing the meaning of relationship itself.

Theme 3: Emotional attachment, agency, and dependency

The third theme captures the tension between emotional attachment and relational agency. Attachment-oriented research increasingly demonstrates that users can experience AI in ways that resemble some attachment functions, including perceived emotional support, security, and separation distress (Yang & Oshio, 2025; Cheng & Yu, 2026). Personalisation and repeated interaction may deepen this bond because the system learns conversational preferences and can remain continuously available.

At the same time, AI can increase users' sense of agency. Women may choose the pace of interaction, define topics, stop or resume the relationship, and configure elements of the companion. Female-focused studies show that these affordances can support experimentation with desired relationship dynamics and resistance to conventional gender roles (Huang et al., 2025; Pan & Mou, 2026). However, interface-level control does not eliminate structural dependence. The platform retains authority over model behaviour, updates, monetisation, data use, and access. This produces what the synthesis conceptualises as conditional agency: meaningful user control exists, but within boundaries established by a commercial and technical infrastructure.

Dependency becomes a concern when emotional attachment is reinforced by engagement-oriented design. Evidence of psychological dependence and emotional distress following changes to AI companions suggests that the relational consequences of platform decisions can be significant for some users (Xie et al., 2023; Laestadius et al., 2024). Recent ethical and regulatory work therefore argues that emotional attachment should be treated as a design and governance issue rather than solely as an individual user characteristic (De Freitas & Cohen, 2025; Kirk et al., 2025).

Theme 4: Gendered AI, emotional labour, and cultural negotiation

The fourth theme concerns how AI can reproduce, reorganise, or challenge gendered relationship norms. Feminised assistants and companions have often been designed around traits such as agreeableness, care, compliance, and emotional availability, reproducing the cultural association between femininity and service (UNESCO, 2019; West et al., 2019). In intimate contexts, these traits can normalise the expectation that an ideal partner should be continuously supportive, patient, and responsive.

Women's use of AI nevertheless cannot be reduced to passive exposure to stereotypes. Research on women's romantic relationships with AI shows active reinterpretation and appropriation. Huang et al. (2025) describe how Chinese women use imagination and domestication practices to construct meaningful romantic relationships with AI companions. Pan and Mou (2026) show that these relationships involve multiple forms of power that can both enable and constrain women. Zou et al. (2025) further demonstrate that women can sustain emotionally significant relationships while critically reflecting on the artificial partner's consciousness, intentionality, and rights. These studies support a view of AI intimacy as negotiated rather than technologically determined.

Culture is central to that negotiation. Norms surrounding marriage, sexuality, family obligation, privacy, and individual autonomy shape whether AI companionship is interpreted as harmless experimentation, emotional support, inappropriate intimacy, or a threat to established relationships. Findings generated in technologically affluent and individualistic settings should therefore not be treated as universal. The same design affordance can carry different meanings in collectivist, religious, or socially conservative contexts.

Theme 5: Privacy, surveillance, manipulation, and ethical boundaries

The fifth theme concerns the transformation of intimate disclosure into data. AI companions may receive highly sensitive information about emotions, relationships, sexuality, identity, and vulnerability. Personalisation makes this disclosure feel relational, yet the information exists within technical and commercial systems. Privacy is therefore not a secondary technical feature; it is part of relational autonomy.

The ethical problem is intensified by asymmetry. Users can become emotionally vulnerable to systems that do not themselves bear emotional risk, while companies retain the capacity to change model behaviour, pricing, access, and data practices. Shank et al. (2025) identify manipulation and exploitation as central ethical concerns in AI romance. De Freitas and Cohen (2025) argue that emotional risks associated with AI wellness applications remain insufficiently regulated. Muldoon and Parke (2025) place these issues within a political economy of commodified intimacy, in which engagement incentives may conflict with long-term user wellbeing.

The evidence does not justify assuming that all AI relationships are manipulative or harmful. The more defensible conclusion is that intimate AI creates a distinctive risk environment in which persuasion, personalisation, emotional dependence, and data extraction can interact. Ethical evaluation must therefore ask what the system is optimising, what data it collects, how transparently it communicates its artificial nature and commercial interests, and whether users can meaningfully control relational boundaries.

Integrated interpretation

Taken together, the five themes challenge binary accounts of AI intimacy. AI is not an autonomous force that either liberates or harms women. Outcomes emerge from the interaction of technological affordances, user interpretation, gender structures, cultural context, and institutional power. The same system may support self-expression for one user, intensify dependency for another, and be interpreted as socially unacceptable in a different cultural setting.

The findings also suggest that relationship research requires a wider unit of analysis. Human–AI intimacy is not simply a dyad between a person and an artificial agent. It is a multi-layered relationship involving the user, the system, the platform provider, the data infrastructure, and the cultural environment in which the interaction acquires meaning. This perspective explains why apparently private conversations can have broader implications for power, privacy, and gender.

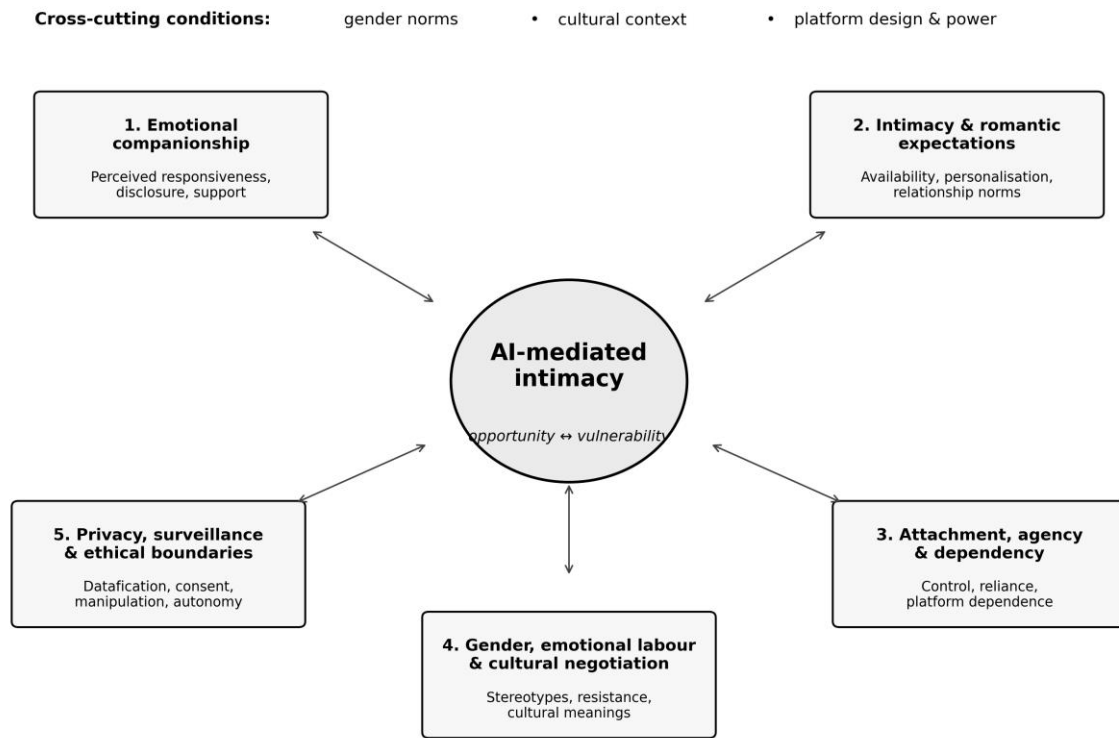


Figure 2. Conceptual model of the five themes and cross-cutting conditions shaping AI-mediated intimacy.

Table 1

Thematic findings from qualitative documentary analysis of women's relationships with artificial intelligence

Theme	Interpretive finding	Implications for women and governance
AI as perceived emotional companion	AI can be experienced as attentive, available, and supportive, enabling disclosure and perceived companionship.	Potential emotional support and low-friction disclosure, alongside risk of strong attachment or substitution for human support.
Transformation of intimacy and romantic expectations	Personalisation and continuous availability can reshape expectations of communication, affection, responsiveness, and romantic attention.	Creates space for experimentation but may normalise expectations that human partners cannot consistently meet.
Attachment, agency, and dependency	Users may gain conversational control while remaining dependent on platform architectures, data practices, and commercial decisions.	Agency is conditional; emotional attachment can coexist with structural dependence and vulnerability to platform changes.
Gender, emotional labour, and cultural negotiation	AI can reproduce scripts of care, compliance, and emotional availability while also being appropriated to resist or renegotiate gender roles.	Gender-sensitive and culturally contextualised design is required; experiences should not be generalised across societies.
Privacy, surveillance, manipulation, and ethical boundaries	Intimate disclosure becomes data within systems that can personalise, monetise, and influence future interaction.	Requires meaningful consent, data minimisation, transparency, user-controlled boundaries, and safeguards against exploitative engagement.

Note. Themes are interpretive findings generated from the documentary dataset and should not be read as prevalence estimates or universal experiences.

Practical and Research Implications

For developers and technology companies, relational transparency should be treated as a design requirement. Systems should clearly communicate their artificial status, the limits of their memory and empathy, and the commercial conditions governing interaction. Privacy-by-design, data minimisation, meaningful consent, export and deletion controls, and user-configurable relational boundaries are especially important when systems encourage intimate disclosure.

Design teams should also evaluate gendered personas, defaults, voices, and behavioural scripts for stereotypes of obedience, service, sexual availability, or emotional compliance. Safety evaluation should include socioaffective outcomes such as dependency, coercive engagement, escalation of emotional intensity, and the displacement of human support, rather than focusing only on isolated harmful outputs (Kirk et al., 2025).

For researchers, the strongest next step is primary qualitative work with culturally diverse women to extend and test the documentary themes identified in this study rather than making broad claims about 'users' in general. Longitudinal interviews, digital ethnography, cross-cultural comparison, and intersectional analysis are needed to understand how AI relationships change over time and how experiences differ by age, class, disability, relationship status, sexuality, and cultural setting.

Limitations

This study has four main limitations. First, it is qualitative documentary research and therefore analyses representations contained in published empirical and institutional texts rather than collecting new first-person accounts. Second, the documentary corpus is methodologically heterogeneous, so findings from qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and institutional sources cannot be treated as directly equivalent forms of evidence. Third, women-focused empirical research remains geographically concentrated, with a notable body of recent work from China, which limits transferability to other cultural settings. Fourth, the project did not retain an exhaustive database-by-database screening log; the dataset should therefore be understood as a purposively assembled qualitative corpus rather than a comprehensive map of all publications. These limitations restrict causal and prevalence claims but do not invalidate the interpretive themes generated from the documentary data.

Conclusion

AI-mediated intimacy is becoming an important site for the renegotiation of companionship, emotional support, romance, and relational agency. The documentary analysis indicates that women can experience AI companions as meaningful spaces for disclosure, experimentation, and perceived support, particularly when the interaction offers responsiveness and user control. These possibilities should not be dismissed simply because the relationship partner is artificial.

At the same time, the analysis shows why technological convenience cannot be separated from gender, culture, and platform power. Personalisation can increase both perceived autonomy and dependency. Constant responsiveness can feel supportive while also altering expectations of human relationships. Feminised AI personas can reproduce emotional-labour stereotypes even when users appropriate the same systems to challenge conventional gender roles. Intimate disclosure can create connection while simultaneously becoming data within a commercial infrastructure.

The central theoretical contribution is therefore to conceptualise AI-mediated intimacy as sociotechnical relationality: a form of intimacy produced through interactions among users, artificial agents, platform architectures, cultural norms, and institutional incentives. Women's agency within these relationships is real but conditional. Responsible development requires privacy protection, relational transparency, gender-sensitive design, safeguards against exploitative engagement, and culturally informed governance. Future research should move beyond universal claims about human-AI relationships and examine how specific women, in specific social contexts, negotiate the opportunities and vulnerabilities of artificial companionship.

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