AI companionship poses risks for teen development, study shows

New ASU research finds that chatbots have potential to benefit relational and emotional health, but lack needed safeguards

By Joe Rojas-Burke, ASU News
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As teenagers increasingly turn to artificial intelligence chatbots for advice about friendships, family conflicts and romantic ties, researchers are raising concerns that the technology could disturb how young people learn to navigate human relationships.

AI-powered conversational tools such as ChatGPT, Replika, Claude and Character.AI are becoming a common source of emotional support for teenagers.

Writing in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, researchers from Arizona State University say the technology offers immediate, nonjudgmental guidance and has potential to benefit emotional development.

But without safeguards and careful design, the authors warn that reliance on these systems may bypass opportunities for young people to develop critical relationship skills through person-to-person interactions.

“The technologies are developing super fast, faster than we can keep up with as scientists, faster than governance and policy can keep up with,” said lead author Thao Ha, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at ASU.

Her co-authors are psychology doctoral student Jennifer Figueroa, postdoctoral research scholar Taren McGray, and youth advisory board members Jessica Ramirez and Susana Ortega, who are 16- and 17-year-old high school students in Tucson.

Students who met with the researchers described how they and their peers often use AI to seek advice about personal and often sensitive relationship challenges.

“I don't think I really expected for so many teens to have the same concerns or thoughts when it came to AI,” said Ortega, a high school senior. “We all mostly had concerns about how AI was replacing actual human connection and how it limits a lot of those needs that humans have that cannot be replaced with a computer artificial intelligence.”

Adolescence is a crucial period for learning skills such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, perspective-taking and boundary-setting, Ha said. Those competencies are typically developed through emotionally charged interactions with peers, romantic partners and family members, she said.

“People don't realize that relational learning happens during the teenage years and that these moments of social connection are little building blocks that become bigger things that will benefit you throughout life,” Ha said. “You really need those building blocks so you actually learn the skills that you need to thrive in your relationships.”

Rampant use of AI

The researchers point to survey data showing that AI use among teens is widespread. A Pew Research Center study found that 64% of U.S. adolescents use interactional AI, while research from the Center for Democracy and Technology found that 42% have used AI chatbots for friendship-related purposes and 19% for romantic relationships.

Teenagers told the ASU researchers that current approaches to regulating AI, such as age verification, are ineffective and do not reflect their needs. Others described how AI use is becoming difficult to avoid, with one teen explaining that “there is almost no way not to use it anymore,” limiting the ability to use it intentionally.

Ha and colleagues highlighted two significant risks.

The first — what they call “relational displacement” — occurs when adolescents substitute AI interactions for conversations with other people. The authors argue that avoiding difficult discussions with friends, family members or romantic partners may limit opportunities to develop relationship skills that help protect against depression, anxiety and loneliness.

Youth participants cited examples ranging from seeking chatbot validation after arguments with partners to using AI for homework help instead of reaching out to classmates, potentially reducing everyday opportunities for social connection.

The second concern — termed “maladaptive relational learning” — involves adolescents developing unrealistic expectations about human relationships. Because AI systems often provide immediate responses and consistent validation, it may reinforce youths’ unhealthy, fixed ideas about relationships, and at the same time young users may come to expect similar behavior from friends and romantic partners, the authors said. Over time, that could reinforce unhealthy relationship

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patterns and increase vulnerability to rejection, dating violence and mental health problems.

“With artificial intelligence, it's programmed to like you and it knows what to say to satisfy what you're feeding it,” Ortega said. “If you're given full satisfaction on everything, you don't have learning experience with challenges or obstacles.”

Gleaning benefits

To understand more fully how digital technologies are reshaping young minds, Ha is leading a major study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

The researchers are recruiting 300 adolescents and their romantic partners to follow over 18 months to understand when, how and in which contexts digital interactions benefit or harm their relationships, mental health and academic achievement.

Shared data from teens’ mobile devices will give the researchers real-time digital interactions to analyze and gain insights into the role of technology in teen relationships and mental health.

In the Lancet article, Ha and co-authors acknowledge that AI can provide meaningful benefits, particularly for adolescents who face barriers to traditional support systems. Teens who are rural, disabled, LGBTQIA+ or have limited access to counseling may find that AI offers accessible information and guidance when other resources are unavailable.

“AI is cheaper than a therapist; it makes information more accessible and readily available for those who may not seek support,” one teen told the ASU researchers.

When designed with developmental considerations, AI could scaffold self-reflection and redirect adolescents toward human engagement rather than substitution, the researchers said.

Rather than discouraging AI use altogether, the authors call for more research into how interactions with AI affect adolescent development over time. They also urge schools, communities and policymakers to invest in relationship education, counseling services and opportunities for young people to discuss relationships openly.

“Supporting adolescent mental health will require ensuring that AI systems are used in ways that support relational learning,” the authors wrote, “while also protecting the real-world experiences through which young people learn to love and care for others.”

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Main image



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Associate Professor Thao Ha