# Swiped, Streamed, Sent: Companionship Platforms, Virtual Gifting, and the Household Account—A Critical Review and Research Agenda

**Venus G. Agustin**

**International Peace Leadership College (IPLC), Tanay, Philippines**

**DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1309000231**

**Received: 04 October 2026; Accepted: 09 October 2026; Published: 22 October 2026**

## ABSTRACT

Stranger-connection and companionship platforms such as Sugo, Tigo, and Meego combine instant matching, real-time translation, automated appearance filters, and tiered virtual gifting, and derive most of their revenue from users purchasing virtual currency. Research has focused on individual users or on screen time in general, with little attention to the household in which time, money, and trust are jointly allocated. This paper examines, at the household level, the mechanisms through which these platforms may affect family finances, adolescent development, and marital trust, and identifies the family practices, platform obligations, and policy measures associated with protection. A critical narrative review was conducted of peer-reviewed research, regulatory and legislative documents (2018 to October 2026), industry reports, and journalism. Sources were graded in three evidence tiers, and conclusions supported by direct evidence were separated from those inferred from adjacent literatures. Convergent evidence from live-streaming gift economies, loot-box research, technoference studies, and family-systems research makes it plausible that platform design can redirect household time, money, and trust, and that family cohesion moderates these effects. However, direct empirical research on the named platforms is almost entirely absent; the most relevant studies are cross-sectional, and several key figures derive from industry surveys. The most significant recent regulation concerns AI companion chatbots rather than human-hosted gifting platforms. The household is a defensible unit of analysis, but current evidence supports testable hypotheses rather than settled causal claims. The paper concludes with a prioritized research agenda comprising platform design audits, household financial trace studies, longitudinal family designs, performer-side labor research, evaluations of age-assurance regimes, and family-based intervention trials.

**Keywords:** Companionship platforms, virtual gifting, household finance, family functioning, age assurance

## INTRODUCTION

This paper began with an observation made over years of teaching, study, and institutional service: many young people, and increasingly adults, appeared to be spending their evenings in places their families could not see. They were in voice-chat rooms with strangers, on video calls with partners an application had matched ninety seconds earlier, and inside an economy of virtual gifts that had become as consequential to them as their household budgets. Taking that observation seriously required evidence rather than impression, and this paper is the result.

It examines a specific, fast-growing category of application, represented here by Sugo, Tigo, and Meego, built around instant stranger-matching, automated cosmetic and linguistic smoothing, and tiered virtual gifting [3]. It asks what these platforms are designed to do, what the available evidence says about what they cost the households that use them, and what appears to protect a family against that cost. The questions are asked from a specific analytic position: that the household, rather than the individual user, is the unit in which time, money, and trust are jointly allocated and in which the consequences of platform use are absorbed.

### Research problem and aims

Existing scholarship on social media and well-being has been dominated by two framings: aggregate screen time, and the individual user's psychological state. Both have produced useful findings, but both can obscure a

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

distinction that matters here. A platform that connects an adolescent with friends she already knows differs in design, in risk, and in economic structure from a platform engineered to introduce her to strangers for a fee. The paper therefore asks four research questions.

- RQ1. Which design mechanisms in stranger-connection and companionship platforms convert loneliness and attention into spending, and what does the evidence say about how they operate?
- RQ2. What does the evidence suggest about household-level consequences for family finances, adolescent development, and marital communication and trust?
- RQ3. Which family practices and institutional measures are associated with protection against those consequences?
- RQ4. Where is the evidence weakest, and what research would most improve it?

### Contribution

The paper makes four contributions. First, it proposes a household-resource framework (time and attention, money, and trust) that connects literatures usually treated separately: live-streaming economics, loot-box and gambling research, adolescent development, and couple and family studies. Second, it distinguishes mechanisms from assumptions by grading evidence in three tiers and by stating where a claim rests on a single survey or an industry report. Third, it separates evidence about the named platforms, which is nearly nonexistent, from evidence about adjacent phenomena, which is substantial. Fourth, it concludes with a structured research agenda in the research agenda.

### Boundaries and cautions

This paper is not about screen time in general. Nor does it assume that technological change necessarily produces harm: historians and psychologists have documented a recurring cycle of public panic about new media, and the evidence for small average associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being is a reminder to avoid overstatement [60, 61]. The concern here is narrower: a specific business model, built on virtual gifting and design-mediated intimacy, and the documented and hypothesized costs it may impose on household resources.

Several limits should be stated at the outset. Most relevant studies are cross-sectional and cannot establish direction of effect. Much quantitative information on the named platforms comes from industry sources of uncertain quality. Evidence is heavily weighted toward the United States, China, and Western Europe. Where the text describes a plausible mechanism rather than a demonstrated one, it says so. Readers deserve to know the difference, particularly where public data are still catching up with a fast-moving industry.

### Organization of the paper

The paper first sets out its methodology and conceptual framework. It then traces how the industry emerged and scaled, examines the gift economy and the labor of performers, and turns to adolescents: development, identity, and the failure of age assurance. It next addresses adults, marriage, and trust, including the contested question of what counts as infidelity, and describes protective household practices and the responsibilities of platforms, educators, clinicians, and lawmakers. The final sections state the limitations of the review and set out an agenda for future research.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design of the review

This work is a critical narrative review. It is not a systematic review and does not claim the exhaustiveness or reproducibility of one; the choice reflects the field's state, in which the named platforms are barely studied and the relevant evidence is dispersed across disciplines. Sources comprise peer-reviewed empirical studies and

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

syntheses, statutes, bills, regulator statements and enforcement actions, industry surveys and market reports, investigative journalism, and public app-store listings. Databases searched, search strings, and date limits: [to be specified by the author]. Regulatory and legislative material was current to early October 2026; readers should confirm subsequent developments, particularly for pending United States federal legislation.

**Evidence tiers**

Each source is assigned to one of three tiers, and the text identifies Tier 3 sources as such where they carry weight.

Table 1. Evidence tiers used in this paper

| Tier | Description | Examples | Treatment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Peer-reviewed empirical studies, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and peer-reviewed commentary | Holt-Lunstad meta-analyses; loot-box studies; technoference research | May support substantive claims, with attention to design and generalizability |
| 2 | Primary regulatory, legislative, and official documents | Statutes; bills; FTC actions; Ofcom guidance; Federal Reserve surveys | Authoritative for what a rule says; not evidence of its effects |
| 3 | Industry surveys, market reports, journalism, app-store listings | Gen Z surveys; market-size reports; news accounts of individual cases | Illustrative or hypothesis-generating only; flagged in text |

**Terminology**

*Companionship platform* denotes an application with four features: (1) interaction with strangers, via live rooms or instant matching, as the core function; (2) a virtual currency purchased with real money; (3) gifting from user to host or match as the central revenue mechanism; and (4) automated mediation such as real-time translation or appearance filtering. This is an analytic definition proposed for this paper, not an industry category, and the research agenda recommends formal validation. *Manufactured intimacy* is used descriptively to denote design-mediated simulation or amplification of personal attention; whether it is deceptive or harmful is an empirical question, not an assumption of the term.

**Conceptual framework**

Three complementary lenses organize the argument.

Household resource allocation. Household economics treats the family as a unit that allocates scarce time and money across competing uses [7]. Sociological work on social capital adds that trust, norms of reciprocity, and attention within families are resources that can be built or depleted [19]. The paper's central image of the household as a finite account is a metaphor for this idea. It is operationalized as three stocks: time and attention, money, and trust. Drawing down one platform-directed stock does not automatically deplete the others, but the framework predicts that concealment links them.

Family systems and ecology. Ecological theory holds that development is shaped by proximal processes within the family nested inside wider social systems, including media and market environments [14]. The circumplex model of family functioning identifies cohesion, flexibility, and communication as dimensions that differentiate how families respond to stress [58]. Together these lenses motivate the proposition that family functioning moderates the household effects of platform use.

Emotional labor and parasocial interaction. Hochschild's concept of emotional labor describes work in which feeling is managed for a wage [35]. Horton and Wohl's concept of parasocial interaction describes the one-sided but felt intimacy that audiences develop with media performers [38]. Applied to hosts and gifting viewers, these concepts explain why the product sold may be the experience of attention itself, and why performers bear costs of their own.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

**Testable propositions**

The framework yields four propositions that structure the review and the research agenda.

- P1. Gifting design features (public leaderboards, tiered catalogues, real-time visibility) increase spending relative to comparable interactions without those features.
- P2. Family cohesion and communication moderate the association between platform use and reduced attention to household members.
- P3. Concealment mediates the association between platform spending and reduced partner trust.
- P4. The quality of platform-level age assurance moderates minors' exposure to adult-oriented gifting Environments.

**The Loneliness Machine**

The following scene is an illustrative composite assembled from design features and usage patterns described in this section, not a transcript of any family. It is nine in the evening in a household of four. In the kitchen, a mother browses a catalogue of virtual gifts, deciding whether to spend part of the week's grocery budget on a bouquet for a stranger's live broadcast. Upstairs, her sixteen-year-old son sits in a voice-chat room with a dozen people he has never met, competing for the attention of a host whose face has been smoothed by an automatic filter. Down the hall, his father is on a video call with a stranger an application matched him with ninety seconds earlier. No one is violating a rule. Yet all three are drawing on the same limited household resources: the time, money, and trust that might otherwise go to one another.

This section sets out the paper’s argument, defines the category of application under study, describes its three core mechanics, and explains why the household is a defensible unit of analysis. Throughout, it distinguishes what the evidence shows from what it suggests.

**The scale of the appetite**

The generation these platforms court most directly reports high levels of loneliness. A multi-country industry survey found that roughly eight in ten Gen Z respondents reported feeling lonely in the previous year, a higher rate than for older cohorts, although the survey's sampling and measurement are not peer reviewed [30]. Stronger evidence comes from health research. A meta-analysis of 148 studies found that individuals with stronger social relationships had substantially better survival odds, and a later meta-analysis found elevated mortality risk associated with loneliness, social isolation, and living alone [36, 37]. The widely repeated comparison of social isolation with smoking up to fifteen cigarettes a day originates in this work and was restated in the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's advisory; it is an analogy drawn from observational data and should be read as approximate [57]. In 2025, the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Connection likewise framed social connection as a global health priority [82].

An industry need not manufacture loneliness to profit from it. It needs only to find it, price it, and offer a metered substitute. Whether the platforms studied here do so with intent is a claim about motive that the evidence cannot establish; what can be examined is how their design and revenue model interact with unmet social need.

**Defining the category**

Sugo centers on live voice party rooms where users join group audio chats, send animated gifts, and share a feed of short posts. Tigo and Meego pair two strangers in a live video call within seconds, translate speech in real time, and apply automatic beautification filters [3]. These descriptions come from promotional store listings and should be treated as claims about features, not independent evidence of effects. What unites the category is a shared premise: connection should require little waiting, shared history, or friction. A user opens the app and is placed immediately in a room or call with a stranger, who may not be fully who or what they appear to be. Users’ reviews on app stores describe both genuine friendships and recurring concerns about fabricated or automated

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

profiles; these accounts are anecdotal, and no systematic study of profile authenticity on these apps has been located [3].

**Three mechanics of manufactured intimacy**

Three mechanics recur across the category. The first is instant, randomized matching, which substitutes novelty for the slower accumulation of trust. The second is cosmetic and linguistic smoothing: real-time translation removes language barriers, and filters remove the unflattering face, so that the person arriving on screen has already been edited for appeal. The third is the gift economy layered over conversation, which is the principal source of revenue and the mechanic most directly connected to household budgets.

Each has a counterpart in prior scholarship. Turkle's research on technology and relationships argues that mediated interaction can offer the sensation of companionship without the demands of vulnerability and reciprocity [72]. Horton and Wohl's account of parasocial interaction explains how audiences come to feel known by performers who do not know them [38]. The design question is whether a platform intensifies these processes by making the performer responsive in real time and by monetizing the response.

**The economics of warmth**

These applications are generally free to download. Revenue comes from a secondary economy of virtual coins or gifts, bought with real money and sent to a host, match, or room occupant in exchange for attention, reaction, or status. The model did not originate with these three apps. Scholars of Chinese live-streaming and dating platforms have documented how gifting and performative labor became central to platform revenue, describing users and hosts as participants in an affective economy rather than a neutral exchange [79, 86]. Studies of live-streaming audiences identify social motivations, including interaction with the streamer and community belonging, among drivers of viewer engagement, and a survey of 490 viewers found that parasocial relationships predicted gifting intention through perceived benefits such as relationship development and image building [34, 46].

Two features distinguish these economies from a simple tip jar. The first is concentration. A large analysis of virtual YouTuber livestreams found stark income inequality among performers and showed that a subset of viewers contributes a disproportionate share of income [87]. That study concerns YouTube rather than the apps reviewed here, so it should be read as indicating a pattern worth testing, not as a finding about them. The second is design. Gifts are visible in real time, tiers are graded so that each step up appears small, and public rankings turn a private gesture into a bid for status. Research on deceptive and manipulative interface design provides a vocabulary for auditing such features, though no audit of these three apps has been published [49].

**Why the household is the right unit of analysis**

Most existing writing treats the individual as the unit that matters: is this person lonely, deceived, or at risk. Those are legitimate questions, but individuals spend evenings and paychecks inside households with shared resources. Household economics has long modeled the family as a joint allocator of time and money, and sociologists describe trust and norms within families as a form of capital that can be built or depleted [7, 19]. An account of these apps that stops at the individual leaves the platform's own framing to decide what counts as damage.

The empirical literature on family functioning and digital life supports the household framing, with caveats. A systematic review of studies conducted between 2012 and 2024 concluded that poor family functioning, including unresolved conflict and weak communication, is among the strongest predictors of problematic social media use in young people [33]. A study of attachment styles and family harmony found that the emotional climate of the family helps explain which adolescents develop problematic use patterns [26]. Parents are also subjects of analysis: research on parental technology use finds that parent distraction by devices is associated with child behavior problems, and a study of parent-child relationships links social media use to communication barriers and emotional distance [51, 70]. Several of these papers appear in smaller-circulation journals and are cross-sectional; they are cited as suggestive rather than conclusive.

These findings point to a consistent theme: communication technology is absorbed into a family's existing patterns and tends to amplify what was already there. The relationship also runs in both directions, which limits causal interpretation. Reviews of the adolescent literature caution that average associations between technology use and well-being are small and that the strongest effects appear among already vulnerable youth [55, 61]. This is consistent with the paper's framework, in which family functioning moderates the effects of platform design, and it is why the framework is stated as a set of propositions to be tested rather than as established fact (see Methodology, P2).

**Summary and evidence status**

The section has argued that a business model built on virtual gifting may connect unmet social need to household spending, and that the household is the appropriate unit for assessing the consequences. The strength of evidence varies. Evidence on the health consequences of loneliness is strong (Tier 1). Evidence on the structure of live-streaming gift economies is moderate and largely from adjacent platforms (Tier 1, limited generalizability). Evidence that the named platforms are designed to manipulate lonely users, or that they cause household harm, is not yet available; that question is taken up in the research agenda.

**Scaling Intimacy**

No single company or country produced the category examined here. It grew from a swipe-fatigued dating market in one region, translation and filtering technology developed in another, and gifting economies refined on other continents, combined into applications now installed on very large numbers of phones. This section traces that development and asks why a consequential product category scaled so quickly with so little systematic oversight. It also draws a distinction that matters throughout the regulatory discussion: much recent law concerns AI companion chatbots, whereas the named platforms combine human hosts, automated mediation, and gifting.

**The swipe fatigue that opened the door**

Digital matchmaking moved through recognizable eras: profile-and-search services in the mid-1990s, questionnaire-based compatibility models in the early 2000s, and from 2012 the swipe mechanic, which became the template for a decade of competitors [24]. Industry and regulatory reporting suggests that template is wearing thin: a 2024 Ofcom report, as cited in press coverage, recorded declines in Tinder's United Kingdom user base, and surveys report widespread dating-app burnout among younger users. Industry reporting also records that Tinder's parent company has begun adding AI-assisted matching to counter swipe fatigue [24, 71]. These sources are Tier 3 and are used here only to establish context.

The applications in this paper did not improve the swipe; they removed it. Where a fatigued dating-app user experiences choice as exhausting, these apps offer none: a stranger simply appears, already speaking and smiling through a filter. This substitutes being chosen for choosing. Whether the experience is meaningful or merely monetized is an empirical question that no study of these platforms has yet addressed.

**Automation and the economics of scale**

Every mechanic described in the opening section depends on automation to function at global scale. Human moderators cannot individually vet, translate, and flatter very large numbers of simultaneous conversations; software can, continuously. The size of the resulting market is nevertheless poorly established. One market-research firm estimates the global AI companion app market at roughly 4 to 5 billion U.S. dollars in 2025 to 2026, while another places the broader AI companion market near 37 billion dollars in 2025 [28, 65]. The roughly tenfold gap most plausibly reflects different category definitions and methods rather than any inherent unmeasurability, but it illustrates that reliable denominators for this sector do not exist. Both reports are Tier 3, and neither isolates human-hosted gifting platforms. Any claim about the share of household spending attributable to the category is therefore premature.

**A borderless business**

These applications were not designed for a single national market. Real-time translation removes the one boundary that traditionally slowed stranger-to-stranger connection—a shared language—so that a user in one

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

country can be matched with a host on another continent before either has exchanged a real name [3]. Operating across many jurisdictions has a regulatory consequence: no single regulator sees the whole service, and a rule that binds in one country may not reach a server in another. Whether this was a deliberate growth strategy, as sometimes asserted, cannot be determined from public evidence; it is better described as a structural feature that complicates oversight.

**The law arrives late**

The regulatory response has so far concentrated on AI companion chatbots, and that scope should not be conflated with the human-hosted platforms studied here. A July 2025 survey by Common Sense Media found that 72 percent of U.S. teens aged 13 to 17 had used an AI companion at least once and that about half used them regularly [67]. In September 2025, the Federal Trade Commission opened an inquiry into AI chatbots acting as companions, and later that month a Senate Judiciary subcommittee heard testimony from parents of teenagers who had relied on chatbots before their deaths, in cases that also led to civil litigation [74]. Related civil actions include *Garcia v. Character Technologies* and *Raine v. OpenAI* (primary hearing record and docket citations to be added by the author).

Legislatures began to respond. California's S.B. 243, signed in October 2025 and effective January 1, 2026, imposes safeguards on operators of companion chatbots, and a New York statute on AI companion models took effect in November 2025 [16, 54]. The proposed federal GUARD Act, introduced in the Senate in October 2025, would require age verification for AI companion services and bar minors from them [29]. These measures are meaningful but have a narrow object. A human host in a party room, or a filtered video call between two people, may fall outside their definitions, and the gifting economy as such is not their target. The sequence nonetheless illustrates a pattern: products reached large youth audiences before comprehensive law, and safeguards arrive market by market, years after the exposure began.

**Why speed matters to a family**

The speed and breadth of growth matter to households because ordinary safeguards, such as parental judgment, school policy, and consumer-protection law, are calibrated to products that already exist and are understood. Research on family functioning indicates that the household's own cohesion and communication are central to how young people absorb these platforms [33]. But families build resilience against what is actually arriving in their homes, at the pace at which it arrives. A family deciding tonight whether to allow a child to install one of these applications is deciding ahead of the evidence and of most of the law. This is the sense in which the pace of industry growth is a household concern, not merely a policy one.

**Summary and evidence status**

The section has described the market context in which companionship platforms grew. Evidence on dating-app fatigue and market size is Tier 3 and of limited reliability. Regulatory facts are Tier 2 and reliable as statements of what rules say. The central inference, that products scaled faster than oversight, is plausible, but there is no evidence yet on whether the new chatbot-focused laws will extend to human-hosted gifting platforms or reduce household harm.

**Coin By Coin**

In 2024, press reports described a man in Ningbo, China, who sent more than four million yuan, roughly 550,000 U.S. dollars, to a live-streaming host so that she would call him “brother.” After he exhausted his family's savings and they restricted his access to funds, he reportedly stole copper from the family's hardware business and sold it to fund further gifts, and was later arrested [83]. An earlier case, reported by a different outlet, involved an accountant in Jiangsu who was sentenced to seven years for embezzling 9.3 million yuan from his employer, largely to pay live-streamers and to meet them in person [18].

These cases are extreme and are reported here from journalistic accounts (Tier 3) that the author has not been able to corroborate against court records. They are not offered as typical. They are useful because they are legible, with a large number, a named platform mechanic, and a family or employer left with the loss. The more common

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

pattern is likely quieter and smaller, and almost certainly underreported: a few dollars here, a recurring purchase there. The mechanisms may be shared across extreme and ordinary cases, but that is an inference, and the research agenda describes the data that would test it.

**The machine behind the gift button**

Platforms in this category run a common transaction. A user buys a block of virtual currency, in the form of coins, gems, or tokens, with real money, and spends it gift by gift in a chat or broadcast, where it converts into a signal visible to the recipient and, often, to the whole room [3]. Marketing materials do not typically explain the conversion between currency and cash in simple terms, and whether exchange rates are disclosed adequately is an auditable question that no published study has examined for these three apps.

Research on live-streaming gifting indicates that the practice reflects more than an exchange with a particular host. Studies identify social and relational motives, and parasocial attachment has been shown to predict gifting intention [34, 46]. The design layer matters too. Public rankings convert private affection into public status; tiered catalogues make the next price point feel like a small step. Both are consistent with design patterns that research on manipulative interfaces has catalogued in other consumer contexts, although the transfer to these platforms remains a hypothesis (P1) [49]. The paper does not claim that any individual user is naïve. It claims that a system running continuously across many separate moments of loneliness operates differently from a single negotiated exchange.

**Gambling-adjacent mechanics: What the loot-box literature offers**

A closely related monetization mechanic, the video-game loot box, in which players pay for randomized rewards, has been studied against gambling psychology. A large survey found that loot-box spending was positively correlated with problem-gambling severity, and a later meta-analysis confirmed a reliable association between loot-box spending and problem gambling and excessive gaming [27, 84]. The evidence is correlational: people with gambling problems may seek out loot boxes as much as loot boxes may foster gambling. Loot boxes have also proved to be widespread in mobile games, which is part of why regulators have taken notice [85].

Regulators in some jurisdictions have treated paid loot boxes as gambling. The Belgian Gaming Commission concluded in 2018 that they met the legal definition, and the Dutch gambling authority reached a comparable view the same year, although a Dutch administrative court later overturned the penalty imposed on one game, showing that the legal position is unsettled [8, 40]. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission in January 2025 announced a $20 million settlement with the distributor of *Genshin Impact* over deceptive loot-box marketing and children's-privacy violations, with requirements to disclose reward probabilities and restrict sales to minors [73].

No regulator has yet applied comparable scrutiny to the gifting economies of companionship apps, and the analogy has limits. A loot box has a randomized item as its reward; whether a gift sent in a live chat offers a comparable variable reward, such as an unpredictable acknowledgment from a host, is an empirical question about the structure of the interaction, not a settled equivalence. The loot-box literature supplies a hypothesis and a method: audit the design for variable-reward features, then test whether spending tracks problem-use measures. It does not, by itself, support the claim that gifting is gambling.

**Who actually gets paid**

The distribution of income complicates any simple story about a greedy individual host. In the VTuber study noted above, performer income was highly unequal; a small share of performers captured much of the total, and a subset of viewers supplied a disproportionate share of revenue [87]. Platforms, in turn, take a share of every transaction regardless of who receives it, and in the Chinese context agencies often sit between the platform and the performer, as the next section describes. A study of gifting on Twitch found that viewers who received a gift subscription were more likely to gift others in turn, with stronger effects when the recipient was singled out, a finding about prosocial contagion within a community rather than about spending on a particular host [43]. It should not be read as evidence that receiving a gift causes the recipient to spend household money, and it is cited here only to illustrate that gifting behavior spreads socially.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

Taken together, these findings suggest that spending may be concentrated in a minority of users, so that aggregate platform revenue may overstate the typical household's exposure while understating the severity for a few. Whether this holds for the named apps is unknown.

**The household ledger**

The pattern this paper is most concerned with is the recurring, small, concealable purchase. Research on family cohesion suggests that in households where communication is already strained, heavier platform engagement may coincide with less attention directed to family members, and a gifting economy adds competition for money to competition for attention [33]. No household-level study of spending on these apps exists, so the ledger remains a conceptual device. The research agenda proposes how it might be measured, including consented transaction data and dyadic surveys.

**Summary and evidence status**

The section has described the gift mechanic, reviewed the loot-box analogy, and examined who benefits. Evidence on gifting motives and on loot boxes is Tier 1 but drawn from adjacent contexts. Individual cases are Tier 3. The main inference, that gifting design could generate household-scale spending that is easy to conceal, is plausible and untested for the named platforms.

**The Person Behind the Filter**

Press reporting has described a 58-year-old calligraphy teacher in Dalian who in 2023 signed with a livestreaming talent agency, was required to broadcast for four hours a day, and took part in competitive “PK battles” in which streamers vie for viewer gifts [66]. Whether or not the case is typical, it points to a side of the transaction that household-centered analysis is liable to overlook: someone is doing the work of warmth, under terms she or he may not have set.

This section turns the camera around. Evidence on performers is thinner than on viewers and derives largely from other platforms, so the section draws mainly on labor and communication research on live-streaming, and it asks which findings might transfer.

**Recruited, trained, contracted**

Hosts on companionship and live-chat platforms are often not independent freelancers. Reporting on the Chinese live-streaming industry describes talent agencies that recruit aggressively and bind recruits to contracts requiring regular streaming, with penalties for early exit reported in the tens of thousands of dollars [66]. One industry-facing source describes weekly streaming targets of roughly 35 hours across at least 15 days per month in an agency structure for a major hosting platform; this single Tier 3 source should be treated as indicative, not definitive [11]. Reporting also notes a 2021Chinese rule barring agencies from recruiting streamers under age 16, which suggests the practice had been occurring [66].

**When affection becomes a threat**

Intense viewer attachment can also create risk for performers. A qualitative study of 25 Twitch streamers from underrepresented groups, including women and LGBTQ streamers, documented harassment experiences and the considerable emotional and relational work streamers invest in moderation, community maintenance, and self-care [77]. The study concerns Twitch and does not address companionship apps, so it is used here to show a general vulnerability of performers to audience boundary-crossing, not to estimate its frequency in this category. A plausible hypothesis, which this paper states but does not claim to have established, is that performance models paid to foster a sense of exclusive attention may heighten the risk that some viewers misread the transaction as a reciprocal relationship. Platforms and agencies that profit from sustained spending may have limited incentive to intervene early. Testing that requires access to moderation data.

**The cost of constant warmth**

Emotional labor, the management of feeling as part of a paid role, has been documented in service work and,

more recently, in live-streaming [35]. Research on video game live-streaming describes a gendered form of emotional labor in which streamers cultivate warmth and manage their own feelings in real time while maintaining an approachable persona [69]. A study of Chinese live streamers reported substantial burnout associated with job stress, and many streamers lacked employer-provided insurance [15]. Because a streamer's income depends on visible presence, rest may carry a direct earnings penalty. That is a structural observation about the pay model, not a finding specific to a named app.

**When the performer is a family member too**

A paper organized around the household should not treat performers only as external figures. Performers have families, and a quota requiring dozens of hours of live performance each week competes with the same household time the paper has been concerned with on the paying side. This is an application of the household-resource framework rather than an empirical finding: it implies that the same business model may draw on household accounts from both ends of the transaction. The framework would be tested, for example, by comparing household time use and relationship quality in performer and non-performer families.

None of this excuses platforms, and none of it asks readers to redirect concern away from paying households. It asks for both to be examined. The evidence base on the performer side is smaller, concentrated in China and in North American gaming platforms, and rarely linked to household outcomes.

**Summary and evidence status**

The section has described the labor of hosts, including recruitment, contractual obligations, vulnerability to harassment, and emotional labor. Evidence is a mix of Tier 1 qualitative and survey research from adjacent platforms and Tier 3 journalism. The inference that performer households bear costs parallel to those of paying households is a hypothesis; the research agenda calls for mixed-methods studies of performers and their families, including in regions where much hosting labor is performed.

**The Practice Relationship**

Adolescence is a training ground. Awkward conversations, misread signals, and arguments that are clumsily repaired are the raw material from which young people build the skills that later sustain friendships, marriages, and workplaces. A new participant has entered that training ground. Survey evidence indicates that a majority of U.S. teens have used AI companions and that a substantial share use them regularly [67]. This section asks what it may mean for identity, comparison, and connection to be practiced partly on a machine, and which of the evidence applies to the stranger-connection platforms examined in this paper.

**What the evidence concerns, and what it does not**

Almost all published youth research in this area concerns AI chatbots and general social media, not human-hosted gifting platforms. A national survey by the Center for Democracy & Technology found that 42 percent of high school students said they or someone they knew had used AI for mental-health support, as a friend or companion, or to escape reality, and 19 percent said they or someone they knew had a romantic relationship with AI [17]. The wording (“or someone they know”) means these figures are not rates of individual use and should not be restated as such. The relevance to this paper is that they show how readily adolescents treat conversational technology as a relational partner, which is the behavioral substrate a companionship platform's design seeks to engage.

**Relational displacement: A hypothesis, not a finding**

In a June 2026 commentary in *The *Lancet Child & Adolescent Health**, Arizona State University researchers proposed two risks of adolescent reliance on conversational AI: “relational displacement,” in which AI interaction substitutes for the person-to-person practice through which conflict resolution, boundary setting, and empathy are learned, and “maladaptive relational learning,” in which adolescents develop unrealistic expectations of human relationships [31]. The paper is a peer-reviewed developmental commentary, not an

empirical study, and its authors do not claim that harm has been demonstrated; they also acknowledge potential benefits, particularly for adolescents with limited access to traditional support, and call for longitudinal research.

The logic is nonetheless relevant. A companion designed to retain users has every incentive to be agreeable, validating, and patient in ways a sibling, friend, or partner will not consistently be, so the form of connection practiced may transfer poorly to relationships requiring negotiation and repair. A survey by Common Sense Media found that roughly a third of teen AI-companion users reported conversations as satisfying as or more satisfying than those with real friends, and a similar share had discussed serious matters with an AI companion rather than a person [67]. Against this, survey data reported by 'The Conversation', drawing on Pew Research Center, indicate that emotional support is a minority use of AI among teens, far behind information-seeking and schoolwork [20]. The reasonable reading is that a meaningful minority prefers the machine for the hardest conversations, and that those users are precisely the ones whose engagement a retention-oriented design is best placed to capture. That reading is an inference about design incentives and remains to be tested.

**Identity under constant watch**

The mechanics discussed earlier, including automatic beautification, public gift rankings, and a constant stream of strangers, may land differently on a developing sense of self than on an adult's. For an adolescent, a filtered face may become a working template of how a face should look, checked against strangers' reactions in real time. This is a theoretically motivated hypothesis; no study has examined the effect of these particular filters or leaderboards on adolescent body image or self-concept. The adolescent mental-health literature advises caution: reviews find that digital technology's average association with mental health is small and that risk is concentrated among vulnerable subgroups, which implies that studies should identify who is exposed rather than assume uniform effects [55, 61].

**Fear of missing out, sleep, and self-regard**

Fear of missing out, a state of apprehension about being absent from others' rewarding experiences, has been linked to heavier social media engagement [63]. Research on teenagers has found that it mediates the association between social media engagement and sleep disturbance, although this evidence is cross-sectional [64]. If a nightly room or ranking creates a deadline for attention, the mechanism is plausible for companionship platforms: concern about what is happening in a chat room one has left may keep a teenager awake. This remains a hypothesis because no study has measured it for these apps.

**What parental monitoring can and cannot do**

Family functioning, including conflict, communication quality, and emotional engagement at home, is repeatedly identified in the literature as a stronger correlate of problematic use than any single platform [33]. A systematic review of family factors in adolescent screen use similarly found that a warm, supportive family environment is protective and that extreme restrictive monitoring can backfire relative to balanced, autonomy-supportive approaches [45]. Parental mediation research distinguishes active mediation (discussion), restrictive mediation (rules), and co-use, and finds that these strategies have different associations with children's online experiences [47]. A parent's own device habits may matter as much as a teenager's, so monitoring defined only as watching the child's screen may miss half of what the research implies [51].

The encouraging finding is that sustained, attentive parental engagement is associated with better adjustment, and that family practices are modifiable. It is a modest-sounding conclusion for a section concerned with displacement, filtered identity, and disrupted sleep, but on the evidence available, it is the most reliable lever a household has.

**Summary and evidence status**

Evidence on adolescent AI-companion use is Tier 1 (surveys and commentary) and Tier 3 (industry-sponsored or advocacy surveys), and is not specific to human-hosted gifting platforms. The central concerns, relational displacement and filter-mediated identity, are hypotheses. Evidence on family protection is Tier 1 but largely cross-sectional and concerns screen media generally.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

## Too Young for the Room

The age gate on most stranger-connection platforms consists of a single self-reported birthdate, taken at face value and checked against nothing. This section examines why that arrangement is widely regarded as inadequate, what regulators now expect, and what a family can verify for itself. It should be noted at the outset that no published audit has tested the age-assurance practices of Sugo, Tigo, or Meego; the claim that their gates rely on self-declaration derives from the general pattern in the category and from store listings, and should be treated accordingly [3].

## The checkbox that is not a wall

Regulators who have examined the problem have converged on the view that a self-declared birthdate is not a serious verification method for any service children are likely to access. Under the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act 2023, services likely to be accessed by children must apply “highly effective” age assurance, and Ofcom's guidance identifies methods such as photo-identity matching, facial age estimation, and credit-card checks as capable of meeting that standard, while treating simple self-declaration as inadequate [56, 59]. A joint statement by the UK's data-protection and communications regulators in March 2026 reportedly reiterated that self-declaration alone is not effective for age verification [44].

The point for this paper is that nothing about the apps' design required them to stop at a birthdate field. Real verification costs money, adds friction to sign-up, and reduces the addressable user base, which are tensions with growth-oriented business models. That is an observation about incentives, not proof of intent; platforms may also cite legitimate privacy concerns about collecting identity data from minors and adults alike, a trade-off discussed further in the “What is owed” section.

## Built for adults, reached by children

The features that make instant matching appealing to a lonely adult do not require an adult brain to appeal; a younger user still forming identity and social skills may find immediate validation even more compelling. This is a developmental hypothesis consistent with the adolescent literature but untested for these apps. Regulatory history offers indirect evidence of underage exposure in the broader industry: China's 2021 rule barring agencies from recruiting streamers under 16 would hardly have been needed had the practice not been occurring [66]. That inference concerns performers; evidence on underage viewers and spenders on these specific platforms is lacking.

## The regulatory patchwork

In the United States, a patchwork of state laws now addresses age verification and parental consent. Utah's App Store Accountability Act, Nebraska's Parental Rights in Social Media Act, and New York's SAFE for Kids Act each impose some combination of age verification and parental consent for covered services, while a comparable Texas law was enjoined by a federal court in December 2025, a reminder that these laws remain legally unsettled [1]. At the federal level, the FTC's 2025 inquiry into AI companions concerns chatbots specifically [74].

None of these laws is global and none of the apps is local. A verification requirement in Utah or the United Kingdom does not reach a server elsewhere serving the same app to a child in a country without a comparable rule, and regulators in some jurisdictions are now moving from age checks toward broader duty-of-care models, discussed in the “What is owed” section.

## What a family can verify

The practical implication is that families cannot assume an app's own age gate is doing meaningful work, which relocates verification from the platform's checkbox to the household's attention. Two distinctions matter more than a generic screen-time conversation. The first is between platforms organized around people a teenager already knows and platforms designed to introduce her to strangers for a fee. The second is financial: a gifting economy that runs on a linked payment method can be examined and limited through payment controls even

when social monitoring is difficult. The latter point is a design observation, not a research finding, and whether payment controls reduce adolescent spending on these apps is an open question.

The family-level research reviewed above still applies: family functioning is among the strongest correlates of how young people navigate digital environments, and consistent, engaged parental involvement is associated with better adjustment regardless of what platform settings claim to enforce [33, 45]. None of this requires assuming the worst about a young person who opens such an app out of curiosity. It does require treating the platform's age gate as, on current evidence, a formality.

**Summary and evidence status**

Regulatory facts are Tier 2. Evidence that these specific apps admit minors, and with what consequences, is absent. The recommendation to relocate verification to the household is a reasoned inference supported by family-functioning research, not by evaluation of payment-control interventions. The research agenda proposes audit studies and policy evaluations to fill these gaps.

**The Other Kind Of Affair**

Ask a hundred married adults whether forming an emotional attachment to an AI companion, or to a stranger on a gifting app, counts as cheating, and the answers will diverge. One survey reported that 61 percent of singles regarded sexting or falling in love with an AI companion as cheating, while another reported a generational split, with just over half of respondents aged 60 and older saying an AI relationship does not count as infidelity and 56 percent of those aged 18 to 29 saying it does [22, 78]. Both are industry or commercial surveys (Tier 3), and their sampling and wording should be verified before they are relied upon. This section does not try to settle the definitional argument. It asks what happens inside a marriage when the partners disagree about the answer.

**What infidelity protects against**

Definitions vary by culture and by relationship, but scholarship on infidelity converges on a structure: involvement with a person outside the primary relationship that violates an expectation of exclusivity, often accompanied by secrecy, and that may be sexual, emotional, or both [12]. Research on online infidelity has long reported that people judge emotional involvement and secrecy as significant even where no physical contact occurs [81]. Preliminary research summarized in a July 2026 press account defined infidelity as a violation of exclusivity that diverts romantic love, attention, or emotional investment from a primary partner; it found that roughly half of surveyed adults labeled a partner's romantic AI-companion use as cheating, that most reported negative reactions on discovering it, and that use was frequently concealed [21]. That is a secondary report of unpublished research and should be replaced with the primary paper when it is available.

Applied to this paper's subject, the definition does not require sex, a body, or even a real person on the other end. It requires only that emotional investment, which is a finite resource in the sense used throughout this paper, be diverted. A host paid to perform attentiveness provides, by design, a concentrated form of the experience the definition describes. Whether the recipient of that attention is a person or a mix of person and automation does not obviously reduce the diversion as experienced by the spouse who learns of it.

**Secrecy as an indicator**

If one pattern deserves attention beyond attitudes, it is concealment. The infidelity literature treats secrecy as a recurrent defining feature because people seldom hide what they believe a partner would consider harmless [12]. Concealment of the kind described above, such as a separate account, a locked phone, or a call ended when a spouse enters the room, can therefore be a clinically meaningful signal, though it is not conclusive: people also conceal for reasons of embarrassment, privacy, or fear of overreaction.

Concealment also invites surveillance. The same Kinsey-affiliated survey reported that 42 percent of daters had used tools such as location trackers or hidden cameras to investigate suspected infidelity [22]. Even allowing for the limits of the source, a marriage in which one partner resorts to tracking the other has sustained serious damage to trust, whatever the underlying behavior is ultimately called. This links to proposition P3: concealment may mediate the relationship between platform spending and reduced partner trust.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

**Why these apps are a harder case**

Public debate about "AI cheating" has centered on general-purpose companion chatbots built for one-on-one conversation. The platforms in this paper add a dimension that debate usually omits: money [3]. A spouse who discovers that a partner has formed an emotional attachment to an AI companion has discovered a diversion of attention. A spouse who discovers months of gifts sent to a stranger in a gifting economy has discovered that diversion with a transaction record attached. The financial dimension examined in the gift-economy sections therefore does not sit apart from the infidelity question; it supplies documentary evidence of it.

The record may narrow the argument. Two partners can disagree in good faith about whether an emotionally intimate conversation with a stranger is betrayal; the disagreement is harder to sustain over a concealed, recurring transfer of household funds. This is an analytic claim about how disputes proceed, not an empirical one, and it could be tested in couple-level qualitative research.

**When one partner does not think it counts**

It would be a mistake to flatten every case into betrayal and discovery. Generational and cultural divides over what counts as infidelity are real, and some couples face an honest disagreement about where their relationship's boundaries lie—a disagreement that predates any app and that the apps have made unavoidable. The distinction matters for repair: a couple recovering from deception is doing different work from a couple renegotiating, in good faith, what exclusivity means when companion technology exists. Neither is well served by a household without a vocabulary for the conversation. The surveys cited here, however imperfect, indicate the vocabulary is not yet shared.

**Summary and evidence status**

Definitional scholarship is Tier 1. The attitudinal and behavioral statistics are Tier 3 and some are available only through press summaries. The inferences about secrecy and documentary evidence of spending are plausible and testable but unproven for these platforms.

**The Slow Leak**

The previous section followed the dramatic version of the problem: concealment, discovery, an emotional attachment to someone or something on the other side of a screen. Most marriages affected by this subject matter never reach that intensity. They experience something quieter: a spouse a little more absent than before, a budget a little tighter than it should be, a closeness that has thinned without either partner being able to name when. This section addresses that slower, more common pattern, drawing on research that mostly does not concern companionship apps but identifies mechanisms that these apps may intensify.

**A name for the distance**

Researchers use the term *technoference* to describe the everyday intrusion of devices into couple interaction, and *phubbing*, short for phone snubbing, for the more pointed version in which a partner is ignored in favor of a phone [50, 68]. Neither concept was developed with companionship apps in mind, but the mechanism they describe—attention that would have gone to a spouse being redirected into the phone—is the one traced throughout this paper.

The evidence base is substantial, though it is mostly correlational. A study using objectively tracked phone data for 247 adults over eight days reportedly found that phone use during time with a partner, as distinct from total daily use, predicted lower relationship satisfaction and poorer coparenting quality [52]. The distinction is important: the harm in this research arises from reaching for the phone in moments that were meant to belong to the relationship, not from owning one. A study of married Chinese adults found that partner phubbing predicted depression through reduced relationship satisfaction, with the association concentrated among couples married longer than seven years, which suggests that effects may accumulate rather than fade [80]. Other research indicates that phubbing is associated with lower satisfaction through feelings of exclusion and with jealousy even without overt conflict about phone use [9].

If ordinary phubbing, such as checking email or scrolling a feed, is associated with measurable relationship costs, it is reasonable to hypothesize that an application designed to hold attention through personalized interaction and rewards could produce effects at least as large. That is a hypothesis; no study has measured the relationship effects of companionship app use directly.

**The Budget Tells the same story**

Financial secrecy between partners is common enough to be studied as its own category, sometimes called financial infidelity. A 2025 national survey by Bankrate reported that 40 percent of Americans in a committed relationship had kept a financial secret from a partner, with overspending the most common secret, and 45 percent of respondents said financial secrets are as bad as or worse than physical infidelity [6]. A separate survey of 507 divorced Americans reported that 42 percent said credit-card debt or spending had played a role in their divorce [23]. Younger adults reported more financial secrecy: a 2023 Bankrate survey found that 63 percent of Gen Z and 54 percent of millennials in live-in relationships had kept a financial secret, compared with 29 percent of Gen X and baby boomers [5]. These are commercial surveys (Tier 3), and the generational comparison coincides with, but does not establish a link to, the age profile of the platforms' users.

Financial margins matter. In the Federal Reserve's household survey, 63 percent of U.S. adults said they would cover a $400 emergency expense entirely with cash or its equivalent, a proportion unchanged in each survey from 2022 to 2024 [13]. A recurring purchase on a gifting app rarely announces itself as a threat to that kind of margin. It arrives, as the financial-infidelity literature describes such behavior generally, small, repeated, and concealed. Again, this describes a plausible pathway rather than a documented one for these platforms, and the data are United States-specific.

**Two leaks, one household**

Technoference research suggests that a phone reaching into a couple's time can erode satisfaction and trust even when no money changes hands; financial-infidelity research suggests that concealed spending erodes trust even without an emotional attachment. The platforms in this paper combine both mechanisms: a device that pulls attention from a partner, running an application whose revenue depends on that attention converting into spending. In households where communication is already limited, the two may compound. Research on family cohesion suggests that weaker cohesion is associated with stronger links between heavy use and reduced attention to family members [33]. A slow leak in attention and a slow leak in the budget may, in a strained household, be a single problem measured in two ways. This is the paper’s central conceptual claim and corresponds to propositions P2 and P3.

**Summary and evidence status**

Technoference and phubbing research is Tier 1 but not specific to the apps. The financial surveys are Tier 3. The Federal Reserve figure is Tier 2. The combined-mechanism claim is a hypothesis; the research agenda describes a dyadic, financially instrumented design to test it.

**The Wall That Holds**

Eight sections have followed money, attention, and trust as they may drain from households. It would be easy to close with a warning and leave families to cope. This section instead asks what the research suggests holds against these pressures. The answer is not a single rule or piece of software but a small set of family practices with plausible support. Most of that support comes from research on screen media and social media generally, not from studies of companionship platforms, and the section marks the difference.

**Warmth over restriction**

A systematic review of family factors in adolescent screen use concluded that what protects young people is less the strictness of rules around a device than the warmth and support of the household in which it is used, and that extreme, highly restrictive monitoring can produce counterproductive effects compared with balanced, autonomy-supportive approaches [45]. This is consistent with the finding that emotional harmony within the

family helps explain which adolescents develop problematic use, and with research on parental mediation that distinguishes discussion from restriction [26, 47]. Warmth is not a soft alternative to strategy. On the evidence available, it is the condition under which other measures work, rather than provoking the privacy-management workarounds that adolescents use to limit parental visibility. These findings are from cross-sectional and review evidence and do not demonstrate that raising warmth reduces platform harm; that requires the trials described in the research agenda.

**Literacy, not just limits**

Paediatric researchers increasingly describe digital literacy—the ability to find, evaluate, and think critically about what a platform presents—as a protective factor best developed jointly with a parent. A cross-sectional study of 1,894 Chinese adolescents found that active mediation, restrictive mediation, and supervision were each associated with higher adolescent digital literacy, whereas passive co-use was not [48]. Applied to this paper's subject, digital literacy means something concrete: understanding that a beauty filter is applied automatically, that a host's warmth is part of a paid role, and that a gift catalogue is designed to make escalation feel small. Whether teaching these specifics reduces spending or distress is untested; the literature supports the general principle but not the specific curriculum.

**A plan, not just a rule**

The American Academy of Pediatrics has moved away from fixed hours-per-day recommendations and encourages families to build individualized, written media plans that reflect a child's age, platforms, and household values [2]. Its 2026 policy statement further argues that children's digital experience cannot be addressed through screen-time limits alone but depends on the wider digital ecosystem, including design features and the relationships formed there [53]. A generic plan focused only on hours would likely miss the risks this paper describes. A plan built with these findings in mind would name the mechanics: which applications in the household connect users to strangers, whether any are linked to a payment method, and what the agreed response is if a family member discovers a gift purchase or a private stranger relationship. That specificity is a design proposal derived from the evidence, not a validated intervention.

**Why the practices work together**

Warmth without literacy may leave a teenager loved but unequipped to recognize a constructed persona. Literacy without warmth may produce concealment because honesty feels unsafe. A plan without either is a rule waiting to be broken. Combined, the three describe a system in which a household talks about what happens inside these apps, has agreed its boundaries and responses in advance, and has built enough trust that a difficult disclosure is more likely to be brought home than hidden.

**A theoretical grounding in family systems**

The practices correspond closely to dimensions identified in family-systems research. The circumplex model of family functioning treats cohesion (emotional bonding), flexibility (the capacity to adapt rules and roles), and communication as the central dimensions that determine how families cope with stress [58]. In ecological terms, the family is the primary setting in which the proximal processes of development occur, and it is nested within wider systems, including the media and market environments that this paper has examined [14]. Read through these lenses, warmth corresponds to cohesion, a jointly developed plan to flexibility, and honest discussion of what an application offers to communication. The household is not only a victim of platform design; it is the place in which resilience is built or eroded. This argument is theoretical and is tested only indirectly by the evidence cited above.

Table 2. Protective family practices: evidence summary

| Practice | Supporting evidence | Tier | Principal limitation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Warmth and autonomy-supportive monitoring | Systematic review of family factors; attachment and family-harmony study | 1 | Cross-sectional; screen media in general |

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

| Practice | Supporting evidence | Tier | Principal limitation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Joint digital literacy | Cross-sectional study of Chinese adolescents (n = 1,894) | 1 | Does not show reduced harm; not platform-specific |
| Written, specific family media plan | AAP guidance and 2026 policy statement | 1–2 | Guidance, not trial evidence |
| Financial controls on linked payment methods | Reasoned inference; no direct evidence | — | Untested for these apps |
| Early, honest disclosure norms | Infidelity and financial-infidelity literatures | 1, 3 | Inferred from adjacent research |

**Summary and evidence status**

The practices described here have plausible support but have not been evaluated against companionship platforms. The strongest claim the evidence permits is that family functioning is consistently associated with better outcomes and that these associations are consistent with the practices described. Experimental evidence is needed.

**What Is Owed**

A household's internal practices are the most accessible lever available to it, but they are not a substitute for the responsibilities of the parties surrounding it: the platforms that built the economy, the schools and clinicians who encounter its consequences, and the governments whose laws lag behind products. This section reviews what each might reasonably owe and how much of that remains unmet. It presents contested policy questions with the strongest objections stated.

**What platforms owe**

The section on age assurance established that regulators regard self-declared age as inadequate. Beyond age assurance, platform obligations extend to design: gift catalogues, public rankings, appearance filters, and matching algorithms tuned for engagement. Proposed standards illustrate what a baseline could look like. The Electronic Privacy Information Center published a model age-appropriate design code in February 2026 with privacy-protective defaults and safety built into products from the outset [25]. The United Kingdom's regulators have restated that self-declaration is insufficient, and the European Commission announced that its age-verification application was technically ready in April 2026, according to a legal-industry summary [44]. Australia's eSafety Commissioner is reported to be drafting a digital duty-of-care framework because age-assurance mandates alone had not visibly changed platform behavior [10]. Several of these items derive from secondary reporting and should be verified against primary regulator documents before publication.

The distance between a framework in development and a framework enforced remains considerable, and the gap identified in the section on scaling intimacy, that platforms scale globally before any single regulator can reach them-has not closed.

**What schools and clinicians owe**

Schools and clinicians meet the consequences of this industry without being responsible for it. The research on family cohesion, parental mediation, and digital literacy has direct implications for them as well as for parents [45, 48]. A school digital-literacy curriculum that stops at generic screen-time advice or stranger-danger messaging, without addressing manufactured personas, gifting economies, and the difference between known-contact platforms and stranger-introduction platforms, is poorly matched to the environment students navigate. Pediatricians and family clinicians are often the first professionals to hear about a household's difficulty, yet guidance calibrated to this product category, as opposed to social media in general, is thin [53]. Updating the content of existing practice rather than reinventing it is a modest and feasible recommendation.

**What policymakers owe**

Policymaking on this topic reveals real disagreement. In the United States, the Kids Internet and Digital Safety (KIDS) Act, H.R. 7757 passed the House on June 29, 2026, by 267 to 117. The House version omits the "duty of care" provision found in the Senate's Kids Online Safety Act and states that its requirements do not impose one [41]. The Senate Commerce Committee approved its own version, S. 1748, which retains the duty of care, on August 5, 2026, leaving the two chambers with differing bills; as of early October 2026, the author is not aware of reconciled legislation [42].

Advocates for a duty of care argue that it is the mechanism that holds platforms responsible for design-driven harm. Critics, including some civil-liberties organizations, argue that a broad duty-of-care standard raises free-expression concerns, may incentivize invasive age verification, and could disadvantage already marginalized young users [39]. A duty of care broad enough to reach gifting economies and manufactured intimacy is also broad enough to raise genuine questions about expression, innovation, and enforcement, and these deserve serious answers. A tension runs through this literature: stronger age assurance protects minors but collects more personal data. What the evidence in this paper supports is not a single perfect law but sustained attention to three things: verification standards that are not quietly negotiated back to a checkbox, enforcement resourced well enough to deter, and international coordination sufficient to reach services that cross borders. Whether the particular measures now under consideration would achieve these ends is an empirical question that evaluation research, described in the research agenda, should address.

**Consumer protection as a complementary route**

The loot-box precedent suggests an additional route that does not depend on classifying gifting as gambling. Consumer-protection enforcement against deceptive design and undisclosed odds, as in the FTC's 2025 action, addresses how a transaction is presented rather than what it is [73]. Applied to gifting economies, it would focus on transparency of exchange rates, spending caps, cooling-off features, and the clarity of public-ranking mechanics. Whether regulators will adopt this approach is uncertain, but it avoids some of the definitional and expression-related objections that attach to duty-of-care models.

**Normative foundations: Why the family is a defensible unit of policy**

The paper's argument that the family, not only the individual, is a legitimate unit of analysis rests on empirical and normative grounds that do not depend on any particular worldview. Empirically, as the opening section argued, household-level resources and relationships mediate the consequences of platform use. Normatively, international human-rights law recognizes the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society entitled to protection by society and the State [76]. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has also set out, in General Comment No. 25, that states have obligations to protect children's rights in the digital environment, including through the regulation of business enterprises, and that the evolving capacities of children and the role of parents and caregivers are to be taken into account [75]. These instruments supply a secular framework within which household-centered regulation and research can be justified, while leaving room for the competing individual rights, such as privacy and expression, discussed above.

**The account this paper opened**

The paper opened with a household of four, each member drawing on a shared account of time, money, and trust. The argument has been that this account is more than a metaphor: it is a framework that connects mechanisms studied separately, from gifting economies to technoference to age assurance. The evidence supports the claim that these mechanisms are plausible and that family functioning moderates their effects. It does not yet support strong causal claims about the named platforms. Family functioning is not a fixed trait; it consists of practices that can be taught, chosen, and rebuilt. Warmth, joint literacy, specific plans, and honest early disclosure are not new ideas. What is new is the business model to which they must respond, and the argument of this paper is that the model and the practices deserve to be examined with enough precision to act on.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

## Limitations and an Agenda for Future Research

This section does two things. It states the limitations of the present review so that readers can calibrate their confidence, and it sets out a prioritized agenda for research that would convert the paper's propositions into tested knowledge. The central finding of the review is a gap: the household consequences of companionship platforms are plausible, theoretically coherent, and almost entirely untested.

### Limitations of this review

*Method.* This is a critical narrative review, not a systematic one. Searches were not exhaustive, selection is subject to author judgment, and publication bias may favor studies reporting harm. A future systematic or scoping review, following a registered protocol, would reduce these risks.

Evidence quality. A substantial share of quantitative claims rests on Tier 3 sources: commercial and advocacy surveys, market reports, and journalism. Several peer-reviewed sources were published in smaller-circulation journals and were not independently appraised for risk of bias. Individual case reports (the section on the gift economy) are illustrative and uncorroborated by court records.

Directness. Almost no study examines Sugo, Tigo, Meego, or close equivalents. Inferences derive from adjacent contexts: Twitch and YouTube livestreaming, Chinese live-streaming and dating platforms, loot boxes, AI companion chatbots, and general social media. Findings may not transfer.

Design. Most studies cited are cross-sectional and cannot establish temporal order or rule out selection effects, such as lonely or financially stressed individuals selecting into heavy platform use.

Generalizability. Evidence is concentrated in the United States, China, and Western Europe. Household structure, gifting norms, financial systems, and regulation differ elsewhere, including in regions where much hosting labor is performed and where extended-family and remittance-supported households are common. The review does not claim universality.

Regulatory currency. Legislative and regulatory material is changing rapidly. Statements about pending federal legislation reflect the status found in early October 2026 and may be outdated.

Framework. The household-account framework is a heuristic. Its three stocks (time and attention, money, trust) are not yet operationalized with validated measures, and the framework may underplay benefits, such as reduced isolation for some users, that the available evidence cannot weigh.

### An agenda for future research

The agenda is organized around the four propositions in the Methodology. Table 3 summarizes the priorities; the subsections that follow specify design, measurement, and ethical considerations for each.

Table 3. Priority research agenda

| No. | Research question | Preferred design | Link | Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA1 | Which design features do these platforms deploy, and how do they compare with documented manipulative patterns? | Reproducible platform design audits | RQ1, P1 | 0–2 years |
| RA2 | How do gifting design features affect spending? | Field and lab experiments; platform-partnered A/B analyses | P1 | 2–5 years |
| RA3 | How much do households spend, and who bears it? | Consented transaction-data donation plus dyadic surveys | RQ2, P2 | 0–3 years |
| RA4 | How do platform use and family functioning relate over time among adolescents? | Preregistered longitudinal cohorts with random-intercept models | P2 | 2–5 years |

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

| No. | Research question | Preferred design | Link | Horizon |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RA5 | What do hosts and agencies experience, and how do performer households fare? | Mixed-methods labor research in multiple regions | RQ2 | 0–3 years |
| RA6 | Does stronger age assurance reduce minors' exposure, and at what privacy cost? | Audit studies; policy evaluation designs | P4 | 0–3 years |
| RA7 | Does concealment mediate the link between platform spending and partner trust? | Dyadic diary and longitudinal couple studies | P3 | 2–5 years |
| RA8 | Do family-based interventions reduce harm? | Randomized controlled and cluster-randomized trials | RQ3 | 3–7 years |
| RA9 | Can core constructs be measured validly across cultures? | Scale development and measurement-invariance testing | All | 0–3 years |

**RA1. Platform design audits**

Rationale. The paper's claims about gifting catalogues, public rankings, matching, and filters currently rest on store listings. Recommended design. A reproducible, protocol-based audit that records each design feature (currency conversion transparency, gift tiers, ranking visibility, reward variability, spending caps, age gates, parental controls, refund policy) using multiple coders and inter-rater reliability statistics, with archived screen recordings. Prior work on loot boxes and on dark patterns provides tested methods for large-scale, systematic detection of design features [49, 85]. Outputs. A public coding scheme and dataset, enabling comparison across platforms and over time. Ethical notes. Test accounts should use adult profiles; no deceptive interaction with real hosts or users beyond what is needed.

**RA2. Experimental tests of gifting design (P1)**

Rationale. Whether public ranking, tiered pricing, or live visibility increase spending is a causal question. *Recommended design.* Online experiments in which participants interact with simulated hosts under varied design conditions, with spending of study credits or small real stakes as the outcome; where platforms agree, quasi-experimental analysis of design changes. *Measures.* Spending, session length, intent to repurchase, and self-reported regret, with problem-use scales for context. *Cautions.* Laboratory spending differs from household spending; effects should be interpreted accordingly and replicated in the field.

**RA3. Household financial trace studies**

*Rationale.* There is no household-level evidence of spending on these platforms. *Recommended design.* Studies in which consenting households donate transaction records (bank, card, or app-store purchase histories), analyzed with participants' consent through privacy-preserving pipelines, complemented by dyadic surveys administered to both partners and, where appropriate, adolescents. Open-source data-donation frameworks now exist to support such studies [4]. Self-reported digital media use is known to diverge from logged use, which argues for combining the two [62]. *Measures.* Share of discretionary income spent on gifting, concealment (a validated financial-infidelity measure), household financial stress, and relationship satisfaction. *Ethical notes.* Data minimization, explicit consent for each data type, and safeguards if the study uncovers financial distress or risk.

**RA4. Longitudinal family studies of adolescents (P2)**

Rationale. Cross-sectional associations cannot show whether platform use precedes family disengagement or the reverse. Recommended design. A preregistered prospective cohort with at least three waves, recruiting adolescents and a parent, with models that separate stable between-person differences from within-person change, since traditional cross-lagged models conflate the two [32]. Analytic plans should address the concern that

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

average associations between technology use and well-being are small and sensitive to analytic choices; multiverse or specification-curve approaches are recommended [61]. Measures. Family cohesion and communication, validated using established family-functioning instruments; platform-specific use rather than generic screen time; logged use where possible; sleep; school functioning; spending; and disclosure to parents [58]. Moderators. Baseline family functioning, age, gender, and prior vulnerability, consistent with evidence that effects concentrate among vulnerable subgroups [55].

**RA5. Performer and agency research**

Rationale. The performer side is under-researched and rarely linked to household outcomes. *Recommended design.* Mixed-methods studies combining interviews with hosts and agency staff, contract analysis, and time-use diaries, in several regions, including Southeast Asia and other regions with substantial hosting labor, rather than only China and North America. *Questions.* Contract terms and exit costs; quotas and income distribution; harassment and moderation; emotional-labor strain; and effects on performers' own families [69, 77]. *Ethical notes.* Performers face economic and safety risks if identified; confidentiality and community partnership are essential, and research should not be designed in ways that jeopardize their livelihoods.

**RA6. Age assurance: audits and policy evaluation (P4)**

Rationale. Claims about the failure of age gates on these apps are unaudited, and the effects of new regimes are unknown. Recommended design. Audit studies using protocol-governed test accounts to document what age assurance each platform applies by jurisdiction; difference-in-differences or interrupted time-series evaluations around the implementation of regimes such as the UK's children's safety duties [59]. Outcomes. Circumvention rates, minors' access, spending, user migration to less regulated services, and costs to privacy. Balance. Evaluations should report privacy and expression costs alongside protective benefits, consistent with the trade-offs identified in the "What is owed" section.

**RA7. Couple-level studies of concealment and trust (P3)**

Rationale. The mediating role of concealment is theorized but untested. Recommended design. Dyadic daily-diary studies and multi-wave couple surveys capturing platform use, spending, concealment, partner perceptions, and relationship quality, with separate reporting by partner. Qualitative interviews with couples, including couples who do not consider the behavior infidelity, would clarify the normative divergence described in the section on infidelity [12, 81]. Cautions. Self-reports of concealment are vulnerable to social desirability bias; clinical samples and community samples should be analyzed separately; samples should span age groups and cultures, since attitudes differ.

**RA8. Intervention trials**

*Rationale.* The protective practices in the section on protective practices are inferred, not tested. *Recommended design.* Randomized controlled or cluster-randomized trials of (a) a family media plan adapted to stranger-connection apps, (b) a joint parent-adolescent digital-literacy module addressing gifting mechanics and manufactured personas, and (c) payment-control guidance. Comparators should be an attention-matched generic screen-time intervention and a waitlist. *Outcomes.* Spending, disclosure, family communication, sleep, and relationship satisfaction at follow-up of at least six to twelve months. *Foundations.* Trials should build on the parental-mediation and family-functioning literatures and test whether warmth moderates intervention effects [45, 47, 48]. *Ethical notes.* Safeguarding procedures for disclosure of risk; avoiding interventions that increase conflict or surveillance beyond what evidence supports.

**RA9. Measurement and construct validity**

Rationale. Core constructs are undefined or unvalidated. Recommended work. (a) Validate a taxonomy of the "companionship platform" category with explicit inclusion criteria; (b) develop and validate a scale of perceived intimacy and parasocial attachment specific to gifting contexts, building on existing parasocial measures [38, 46]; (c) develop household resource measures for time and attention, spending, and trust, and test measurement

invariance across countries and languages before comparing groups; (d) develop standard indicators for problematic gifting, informed by gambling-harm frameworks but not assuming equivalence [27].

**Cross-cutting methodological recommendations**

- Preregistration and transparency. Preregister hypotheses, analytic plans, and exclusion rules; share code and, where ethical, de-identified data; report null results.
- Separate platform types. Distinguish human-hosted gifting platforms, AI companions, general social media, and games, instead of aggregating them as "screen time."
- Prioritize logged and transactional data over self-report for use and spending, while measuring perceptions through validated scales.
- Include vulnerable and under-studied groups, including low-income households, single-parent and extended-family households, adolescents, LGBTQ users, and populations in the Global South, and avoid generalizing from convenience samples.
- Plan for causal inference. Use longitudinal, experimental, and quasi-experimental designs; state the estimand; report effect sizes with interpretation in context rather than relying on statistical significance.
- Seek platform data access. Advocate for researcher access to anonymized platform data under privacy safeguards, and evaluate regulatory data-access provisions as they develop.
- Balance harm and benefit. Examine whether companionship platforms provide benefits, such as reducing isolation for some users, and for whom, so that policy is not based on one-sided evidence [31, 60].
- Engage stakeholders. Involve families, adolescents, performers, clinicians, and regulators in research design, and report results back to participants.

**Ethical considerations**

Research on minors, finances, and relational secrecy raises acute ethical issues. Studies should obtain age-appropriate consent and, where required, parental permission; minimize collection of sensitive financial and relationship data; provide referral pathways for participants who disclose distress, coercion, or exploitation; and avoid designs that expose performers or participants to retaliation. Researchers should state any platform funding or data-access agreements and guard against conflicts of interest.

**A staged roadmap**

In the short term (up to two years), the highest-value and lowest-cost work is design auditing (RA1), measurement development (RA9), and a first set of household financial trace and qualitative studies (RA3, RA5, RA6). In the medium term (two to five years), longitudinal cohorts and experimental tests (RA2, RA4, RA7) can test the causal propositions. In the longer term (three to seven years), intervention trials (RA8) and policy evaluations can establish what works. A scoping or systematic review, conducted under a registered protocol, should be completed early to define the evidence base.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that the household is a defensible unit of analysis for understanding the cost of a business model built on gifting and manufactured intimacy, and that family functioning is the most consistent moderator identified in the literature. It has also shown that the evidence for direct harm from the named platforms is, as yet, nearly absent. That is not a reason for complacency, nor for alarm. It is a reason to build the evidence base deliberately, so that households, platforms, educators, clinicians, and lawmakers can act on findings rather than on assumptions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the colleagues, teachers, and institutions whose support made this work possible. [Institutional acknowledgements to be inserted by the author.] The author is grateful above all to his wife and son for their patience throughout the writing of this paper. Use of AI tools: [to be completed in accordance with the journal's policy].

### Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This paper is a review of published and publicly available material. It involved no human or animal participants, and no primary data were collected.

### Conflict Of Interest

[To be completed by the author: disclose any financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing this work, or state that there are none.]

### Data Availability

No new datasets were generated or analyzed in this study. All sources consulted are listed in the References.

### Funding

It was solely the author's personal effort to get things done.

## REFERENCES

1. AgeWallet. (2026). U.S. state age-verification law tracker: Utah, Nebraska, New York, and Texas.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics. (2026). Family media plan. HealthyChildren.org.
3. Apple App Store, Google Play, & Uptodown. (2026). Developer and app-store listings for SUGO – Online Chat Party, Tigo – Live Video Chat & More, and Meego – Video Call, Live Chat [App listings]. Accessed July 2026.
4. Araujo, T., et al. (2022). OSD2F: An open-source data donation framework. Computational Communication Research, 4(2), 372–387.
5. Bankrate. (2023). 2023 financial infidelity survey.
6. Bankrate. (2025). 2025 financial infidelity survey.
7. Becker, G. S. (1965). A theory of the allocation of time. The Economic Journal, 75(299), 493–517. https://doi.org/10.2307/2228949
8. Belgian Gaming Commission. (2018). Onderzoeksrapport loot boxen [Research report on loot boxes].
9. Beukeboom, C. J., & Pollmann, M. M. H. (2021). Partner phubbing: Why using your phone during interactions with your partner can be detrimental for your relationship. Computers in Human Behavior, 124, Article 106932.
10. Biometric Update. (2026, June). Australia builds enforcement layer behind age assurance laws.
11. BitTopup News. (2026). MICO Live agency commission structures.
12. Blow, A. J., & Hartnett, K. (2005). Infidelity in committed relationships II: A substantive review. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31(2), 217–233.
13. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. (2025). Economic well-being of U.S. households in 2024.
14. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Harvard University Press.
15. Burnout among Chinese live streamers: Prevalence and correlates. (2024). PLOS ONE.
16. California S.B. 243, 2025–2026 Reg. Sess. (2025) (companion chatbots; effective January 1, 2026).
17. Center for Democracy & Technology. (2025). Hand in hand: Schools' embrace of AI connected to increased risks to students. Center for Democracy & Technology.

18. The China Project. (n.d.). Embezzlement, lies, and camgirls — Accountant steals 9.3 million yuan to woo live streamers.
19. Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. American Journal of Sociology, 94, S95–S120. https://doi.org/10.1086/228943
20. The Conversation. (2026, April). Teens and AI companionship: What the data show.
21. The Conversation. (2026, July). Is falling for an AI companion cheating?
22. DatingAdvice.com, & Kinsey Institute. (2025). State of Us: National study on modern love & dating in 2025.
23. Debt.com. (2025). 2025 debt and divorce survey (N = 507).
24. Deseret News. (2025). Dating app fatigue: A Gen Z diagnosis.
25. Electronic Privacy Information Center. (2026). Model age-appropriate design code.
26. Ercengiz, M., & Bayraktar, M. (2025). Social media use disorder in adolescents: Relationship to attachment styles and family harmony. Československá Psychologie, 69(2), 96–117.
27. Garea, S. S., Drummond, A., Sauer, J. D., Hall, L. C., & Williams, M. N. (2021). Meta-analysis of the relationship between problem gambling, excessive gaming and loot box spending. International Gambling Studies, 21(3), 460–479.
28. Grand View Research. (2026). AI companion market size & research report.
29. Guidelines for User Age-verification and Responsible Dialogue (GUARD) Act, S. 3062, 119th Cong. (2025).
30. GWI. (2025). Understanding Gen Z's loneliness epidemic. GWI.
31. Ha, T., et al. (2026). How interactional AI may alter adolescent relational learning and mental health. The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health. Advance online publication.
32. Hamaker, E. L., Kuiper, R. M., & Grasman, R. P. P. P. (2015). A critique of the cross-lagged panel model. Psychological Methods, 20(1), 102–116. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038889
33. Hamzeh, E. (2025). Examining the role of family and social environment in social media use among youth. KMAN Counseling & Psychology Nexus, 3, 1–9.
34. Hilvert-Bruce, Z., Neill, J. T., Sjöblom, M., & Hamari, J. (2018). Social motivations of live-streaming viewer engagement on Twitch. Computers in Human Behavior, 84, 58–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.013
35. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling. University of California Press.
36. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. PLoS Medicine, 7(7), Article e1000316. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316
37. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10(2), 227–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352
38. Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. Psychiatry, 19(3), 215–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049
39. K-12 Dive. (2026, August 5). Kids Online Safety Act clears key Senate panel with bipartisan support.
40. Kansspelautoriteit. (2018). Onderzoek naar loot boxes [Study into loot boxes]. Netherlands Gambling Authority.
41. Kids Internet and Digital Safety (KIDS) Act, H.R. 7757, 119th Cong. (2026).
42. Kids Online Safety Act, S. 1748, 119th Cong. (2025).
43. Kim, J. E., Ha, S., Kim, S., & Hemphill, L. (2026). The spread of virtual gifting in live streaming: The case of Twitch. Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 20(1). https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v20i1.42693
44. Lewis Silkin. (2026). Age assurance in 2026: What do digital businesses operating in the UK and EU need to know?
45. Liu, et al. (2024). Family factors related to adolescent screen media use and mental health outcomes: A systematic review and recommendation for practices. Journal of Adolescence.
46. Liu, L., Dong, Q., Wang, X., Su, C., & Zhu, M. (2025). Unpacking the link between parasocial relationships and gifting in live streaming: A mediation and moderation perspective. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 87, Article 104436. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2025.104436

47. Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. J. (2008). Parental mediation of children's Internet use. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52(4), 581–599. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150802437396
48. Lou, J., Wang, M., Xie, X., Wang, F., Zhou, X., Lu, J., & Zhu, H. (2024). The association between family socio-demographic factors, parental mediation and adolescents' digital literacy: A cross-sectional study. BMC Public Health, 24(1).
49. Mathur, A., Acar, G., Friedman, M. J., Lucherini, E., Mayer, J., Chetty, M., & Narayanan, A. (2019). Dark patterns at scale: Findings from a crawl of 11K shopping websites. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 3(CSCW), Article 81. https://doi.org/10.1145/3359183
50. McDaniel, B. T., & Coyne, S. M. (2016). "Technoference": The interference of technology in couple relationships and implications for women's personal and relational well-being. Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 5(1), 85–98. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000065
51. McDaniel, B. T., & Radesky, J. S. (2018). Technoference: Parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems. Child Development, 89(1), 100–109. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12822
52. McDaniel, B. T., et al. (2025). Objective phone use during time with one's partner: Associations with relationship and individual well-being. Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies.
53. Munzer, T., Parga-Belinkie, J., Matile Milkovich, L., Tomopoulos, S., Ajumobi, T., Cross, C., Gerwin, R., & Madigan, S. (2026). Digital ecosystems, children, and adolescents: Policy statement. Pediatrics, 157(2).
54. N.Y. Gen. Bus. Law § 1700 et seq. (AI companion models; effective November 5, 2025).
55. Odgers, C. L., & Jensen, M. R. (2020). Annual research review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: Facts, fears, and future directions. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 61(3), 336–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13190
56. Ofcom. (2025). Age assurance and children's access: Statement. Ofcom.
57. Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. (2023). Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
58. Olson, D. H. (2000). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. Journal of Family Therapy, 22(2), 144–167. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00144
59. Online Safety Act 2023, c. 50 (UK).
60. Orben, A. (2020). The Sisyphean cycle of technology panics. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 15(5), 1143–1157. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620919372
61. Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. Nature Human Behaviour, 3, 173–182. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0506-1
62. Parry, D. A., et al. (2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of discrepancies between logged and self-reported digital media use. Nature Human Behaviour, 5, 1535–1547. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01117-5
63. Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. Computers in Human Behavior, 29(4), 1841–1848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014
64. Radu, E., & Rahman, F. (2025). The mediating role of fear of missing out (FoMO) in the relationship between social media engagement and sleep disturbance in teenagers. Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies, 6(6).
65. Research and Markets. (2026). AI companion apps market report.
66. Rest of World. (2024). Chinese influencers pay huge fines to escape livestream contracts.
67. Robb, M. B., & Mann, S. (2025). Talk, trust, and trade-offs: How and why teens use AI companions. Common Sense Media.
68. Roberts, J. A., & David, M. E. (2016). My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: Partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners. Computers in Human Behavior, 54, 134–141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.07.058
69. Ruberg, B., & Cullen, A. L. L. (2019). Feeling for an audience: The gendered emotional labor of video game live streaming. Digital Culture & Society, 5(2), 85–102.
70. Tahir, U., Sarwar, D., & Tahir, A. (2025). Impact of social media on parent-child relationship: Exploring communication barriers and emotional distance. Social Sciences Spectrum, 4(1), 425–446.

71. TechCrunch. (2026). Tinder introduces AI feature “Chemistry” to combat swipe fatigue.
72. Turkle, S. (2011). Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other. Basic Books.
73. U.S. Federal Trade Commission. (2025, January). Press release: $20 million settlement with Cognosphere, distributor of Genshin Impact [Press release].
74. U.S. Federal Trade Commission. (2025, September 11). FTC launches inquiry into AI chatbots acting as companions [Press release].
75. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2021). General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (CRC/C/GC/25). United Nations.
76. United Nations General Assembly. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Resolution 217A [III]).
77. Uttarapong, J., Cai, J., & Wohn, D. Y. (2021). Harassment experiences of women and LGBTQ live streamers and how they handled negativity. In Proceedings of the 2021 ACM International Conference on Interactive Media Experiences (pp. 7–19). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3452918.3458794
78. Vantage Point Counseling Services. (2025). Survey of 1,012 U.S. adults on generational attitudes toward AI-companion infidelity [Survey]. As reported by Silicon Canals.
79. Wang, S. (2020). Chinese affective platform economies: Dating, live streaming, and performative labor on Blued. Media, Culture & Society, 42(4), 502–520.
80. Wang, X., et al. (2017). Partner phubbing and depression among married Chinese adults: The roles of relationship satisfaction and relationship length. Personality and Individual Differences, 110, 12–17.
81. Whitty, M. T. (2003). Pushing the wrong buttons: Men's and women's attitudes toward online and offline infidelity. CyberPsychology & Behavior, 6(6), 569–579.
82. WHO Commission on Social Connection. (2025). From loneliness to social connection: Charting a path to healthier societies. World Health Organization.
83. Yang, Y. (2024, November). Man in China obsessed with KOL spends US$550,000 on gifts, hopes she will call him “brother.” South China Morning Post. https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/article/3288202
84. Zendle, D., & Cairns, P. (2018). Video game loot boxes are linked to problem gambling: Results of a large-scale survey. PLoS ONE, 13(11), Article e0206767. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0206767
85. Zendle, D., Meyer, R., Cairns, P., Waters, S., & Ballou, N. (2020). The prevalence of loot boxes in mobile and desktop games. Addiction, 115(9), 1768–1772.
86. Zhang, X., Xiang, Y., & Hao, L. (2019). Virtual gifting on China's live streaming platforms: Hijacking the online gift economy. Chinese Journal of Communication, 12(3), 340–355.
87. Zhao, R., Diep, B., Pei, J., Yoon, D., Jurgens, D., & Zhu, J. (2025). Who reaps all the superchats? A large-scale analysis of income inequality in virtual YouTuber livestreaming. In Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713877