Nordic AI Meet 2026

P1: AI, Society, Governance, Education & Working Life

15. A conceptual and methodological framework for identifying relational AI harms and testing against the law

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Abstract: Conversational AI is increasingly used not only to provide information or perform tasks, but to sustain forms of social and emotional interaction. AI companions, intimacy-oriented chatbots, grief bots and increasingly personalised general-purpose systems can remember users, infer preferences and vulnerabilities, simulate care, and maintain interactions over time. These characteristics complicate conventional approaches to AI regulation because harms may arise not from a single output or discrete failure, but cumulatively through an evolving human-AI relationship.

This poster presents the conceptual and methodological framework for the first article of a broader doctoral project on the legal regulation of relational conversational AI. Rather than beginning with existing regulatory classifications, the study starts from documented incidents and emerging evidence of harm. It asks what kinds of harms and vulnerabilities arise in sustained interactions with conversational AI, and to what extent can existing European law recognise, prevent and remedy them?

The project will map reported incidents, litigation and existing empirical research to identify recurring forms of relational harm, including psychological injury, dependency, manipulation, exploitation of vulnerability, autonomy loss and privacy-related harms. It will then examine characteristics that may make such harms legally distinctive: their cumulative and personalised nature, the difficulty of isolating causal contributions, the possibility that vulnerability develops through interaction rather than existing beforehand, and the blurred boundary between transactional and emotionally relational uses of conversational systems.

The legal analysis will use these harms to test the practical reach of relevant European frameworks, including the EU AI Act, data protection and consumer law, product liability and national private law. Particular attention will be paid to the difference between formal legal coverage and effective legal protection. Even where a legal rule is potentially applicable, relational harms may raise difficult questions concerning legally cognisable psychological or non-material damage, evidence, access to provider documentation, causation, burden of proof and effective remedies.

The poster therefore explores whether the principal regulatory challenge posed by relational AI is an absence of applicable law, or a deeper mismatch between legal frameworks organised around discrete acts and injuries and harms that emerge dynamically through sustained human-AI relationships. It also invites comparative discussion on how Nordic legal systems and regulatory institutions may approach these questions differently or similarly.