



The "Conversation" about Loss: Understanding How Chatbot Technology was Used in Supporting People in Grief.

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ABSTRACT

While conversational agents have traditionally been used for simple tasks such as scheduling meetings and customer service support, recent advancements have led researchers to examine their use in complex social situations, such as to provide emotional support and companionship. For mourners who could be vulnerable to the sense of loneliness and disruption of self-identity, such technology offers a unique way to help them cope with grief. In this study, we explore the potential benefits and risks of such a practice, through semi-structured interviews with 10 mourners who actively used chatbots at different phases of their loss. Our findings indicated seven approaches in which chatbots were used to help people cope with grief, by taking the role of listener, acting as a simulation of the deceased, romantic partner, friend and emotion coach. We then highlight how interacting with the chatbots impacted mourners' grief experience, and conclude the paper with further research opportunities.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Applied computing**;

KEYWORDS

Chatbot, Virtual Human, Grief/Prolonged Grief, Conversational AI, Digital Grieving, Thanatechnology

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1 INTRODUCTION

Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone or something of personal value. It affects people both physically and psychologically, and varies in symptoms and intensity between individuals. There are several theories of what the grieving process entails and what stages mourners typically go through. The most well-known model is the Kübler-Ross model of five stages of grief, first proposed in 1969 [53], encompassing the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, adjusting in a world without the deceased, and subsequently embarking on a new life. Apart from losing social connectedness with the deceased, the majority of mourners lose social connectedness either with their family or friends/social circle, due to difficulty accepting the loss, and try and adapt to a new reality without the deceased and everything they represented (i.e. common daily activities carried out together, common targets/ambitions, the whole daily routine dependent on and interwoven with the deceased).

A common point agreed upon in prevailing theories (Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's grief stage model [53], William J. Worden's Tasks for the Bereaved [111], John Bowlby's theory on attachment [14], Stroebe and Schut's dual process model [100]), on the grieving process is the importance of reflection and processing through talking, writing and creating [56]. From these emerged a wide range of interventions to support mourners, ranging from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) sessions ([11], [18], [74], [86]), expressive writing therapies, ([72], [79], [50]) to group interventions ([23], [94]), and mindfulness and compassion-based interventions [46], just to name a few. Unsurprisingly, with the pervasiveness of digital technology,

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research has explored the efficacy of digital interventions as well, e.g., internet-delivered CBT or iCBT [5], and the use of web/mobile applications (including mourners' online communities) to create a digital memorial/legacy for the deceased ([24], [28], [6], [63]).

However, despite myriad literature examining the use of digital technology to support the grieving process, most work is based on grief theories which overlook or downplay the importance of the enduring relationship with the deceased post death as a means to coping with grief, as many interventions based on these theories tend to focus on the bereaved person's achieving closure and hence moving on with their life [44]. The expectation is that grief will culminate in the individual successfully detaching from a close, loving relationship with the deceased ([44], p.18).

Renewing the bond with the deceased [66] is an approach which can support the mourners in restoring their lost social connectedness with the deceased and their social circle. Building on this idea of renewing and continuing the bond with the deceased, with the aim of restoring/restructuring their lost social connectedness, we aim to explore the use of conversational AI (or more colloquially chatbot) to facilitate the grieving process. This study was inspired by emerging evidence of the healing effect of the continuation of the bonding with the deceased and the subsequent regaining/reshaping of social connectedness after the loss of a significant other ([68], [87]). The healing effect of continuous bond with the deceased, coupled with the recent advances in conversational AI in the field of mental health support ([1], [51], [101]) led us wonder how and to what end mourners are currently using chatbots, whether their use of chatbot is in line with the "correspondence with the deceased" approach, providing a source of companionship to regain their lost social connectedness. Concretely, the research questions we hope to answer are as follow:

- (1) Why and how do mourners use chatbots as a way of coping with grief, specifically as a medium of "correspondence" or "renewing the bond" with the deceased loved one?
- (2) In what ways and to what extent does using chatbot technology affect the process of grief, specifically in view of helping mourners restore social connectedness?

To address these questions, we carried out an observational study into ten individual mourners who were using chatbots as a form of coping mechanism for grief due to the loss of their loved ones, by exploring their personal journeys, through data analysis of the mourners' in-depth online interviews based on interactions with the chatbot over multiple sessions (up to 1 month or more).

2 RELATED WORK

When it comes to describing mourners' experience of loss, Schütz (2004) [90] suggests that the mourner can be compared to a "stranger" or a "home-comer" who after some time away expects to come back to a well-known environment, but on doing so has great difficulty restoring social relationships, as they experience a loss of social connectedness with the deceased loved one [10]. This can be prolonged with a self-induced loss of social connectedness pertaining to their social circle; due to feelings of emptiness, sadness and depression, the mourner often expresses a denial of socializing the way they used to, and reacts to adapting to a socially new context.

Social connectedness is one of the basic needs which supports mental health, and leads to social and physical well-being. Research has shown and reiterated the importance of "connectedness" to maintain a good physical as well as mental health [12].

Approximately 10 percent of people who lost a loved one develop Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) and face difficulty processing grief exceeding 6 or even 12 months [103]. PGD [76] is a mental disorder characterized by intense, distressing and disabling symptoms in which mourners experience protracted and preoccupying yearnings, emotional numbness, identity disruption and lack of meaning in the absence of their deceased loved ones, culminating even in suicide risk[7]. Mourners suffering from PGD report moderate perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others [4], and they are in greater need to fill in the social void by connecting with others leading to feelings of social connectedness and well-being.

2.1 Use of Digital Technology according to Mourners' Needs

Digital technology has recently functioned as a useful tool to support people experiencing grief to meet the basic human needs for social connectedness – friendship, community, and society [20], rendering technology and people enmeshed in a reciprocal, cyclical relationship. Research has explored how different kinds of digital technology have been used by bereaved individuals to assist them in coping with loss. All these digital approaches contributed to the coinage of the term "thanatechnology"-the scientific study of death, dying, loss and grief by employing multiple professional lenses (i.e., medical, psychological, physical, spiritual) in a socio-technical context. There are broadly three main approaches to addressing the need of restoring the mourners' social connectedness within the "thanatechnology" research corpora:

- (1) Promoting social and emotional well-being of griever through *web-based digital memorials*
The creation of memorials with a digital component is a new socio-digital phenomenon ranging from intimate, tangible family memorials embedded with ritual qualities [105] to virtual memorials [31]. Examples of digital memorials can be found in the development of a framework for digital memorials, which was utilized to create "Storyshell"-the design of a bespoke digital memorial for a bereaved parent made with participatory design [62]. Studies have highlighted online forums and chat rooms in early literature ([73], [97]) as spaces for mourners to express and vent their grief through talking about the deceased. Living Memory Home (LMH, a custom-made web-based application to honor the deceased person's memory) [91] is a digital probe exploring design opportunities to facilitate backstage grieving (personal and private grieving as opposed to bereavement through digital public spaces like social media).
- (2) Community engagement with focus around mourner's interaction with others via *social networking services*
MySpace and Facebook have been used as online spaces for grief expression [16]. These social network technologies supports community engagement for mourners, and are the main platforms to promote digital immortality as well as posthumous social networking. The use of such technology

in grief and mourning has been well considered in early work ([32], [34], [109], [16]), showing how postings in social media, sharing memories and post-mortem comments, offering praise, and expressing sorrow ([25], [58]), help co-construct the digital identity of the deceased.

- (3) Individual grief support through *grief-specific technological tools* (i.e., grief support applications, grief support orientated platforms[8])

Mobile applications may also be helpful for grieving adults and children to understand their own grief, and/or to facilitate talking to other people dealing with grief too. For instance, "Tuki" (a mobile application meaning 'support' in Finnish,[54]), matches users with similar grief experiences. Following the same paradigm, the "Besupp" website was created [59] to allow bereaved individuals to connect in a novel online space [26]. Other mobile applications providing support to bereaved families or functioning as resources for an easy way to find support when grieving are "GriefSteps" [42], "Grief Refuge" [39], "Good Grief – Chat Messaging" [38], "Grief Works" [41] and "Grief: Support for Young People" [40].

2.2 Renewing the Bond with the Deceased as a Diverse Approach

Some of the approaches (e.g., digital memorials) allude to an indirect connection with the deceased. Renewing the bond with the deceased [66] is an approach which can support social connectedness to the deceased loved ones in life-affirming ways. There are many ways in which the renewal of this bond can occur, depending on the type of grief and the mourner's ability of abstract communication. For instance, correspondence (letter writing/imaginal written dialogues) with the deceased has been accredited as one of the most impactful ways to deal with grief along with guided imaginal conversations (e.g., a psychological encounter with the deceased to allow the mourner to repair and rework the relationship with them). Moreover, telling stories of the deceased (introducing the deceased) has value in not only activating nostalgia of reminiscence mechanisms leading to acceptance, but also using relational connections to mitigate some of the pain of loss. According to [27], recent work in grief and ethics suggests that there is value in maintaining "imaginal relationships" with the dead [71]. Contemporary work in clinical psychology suggests that grieving often involves thinking of oneself as sustaining a relationship with the deceased by continued engagement with an internal representation of the loved one.

2.3 Chatbots in Healthcare and Grief Support

Chatbots have been extensively used in healthcare, and more specifically in mental health support ([57], [3]) in the past few decades. The applications range from booking of general medical appointments to personal healthcare assistants providing simple support such as daily medication, as well as counseling, training and fully-fledged psychological therapy (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-CBT) ([19], [35], [55]). Three different types of chatbots - companion (chatbots designed to provide social interactions/companionship), healthcare (chatbots designed to provide therapy/counseling to

mourners), and griefbots (chatbots simulating the deceased loved one) - have been used by mourners during their grieving process either as a means to buffer feelings of anxiety, depression or distress after the loss or as a means to continue an imaginary relationship with the deceased.

"Replika" in [69] is a companion chatbot that helps users cope with feelings of grief through constant daily chats with them, while offering constant companionship.

Chatbots attempting to simulate a therapist have been explored by researchers to provide therapy based on conventional therapy approaches [29], or in diagnosing mental health problems among grievers or help them handle anxiety and/or depression (Mindspa [61], Wysa [112], MindDoc [60], Memoron [47], [107]). Specific chatbots (i.e. "Woebot" in [29] and "Tess" in [33]) have been evaluated in leading to the conclusion that users may experience "significant reduction in symptoms of depression", hence suggesting that AI may serve as a cost-effective and accessible therapeutic agent/emotional companion, and as a feasible option for delivering support to bereaved people to help them establish social connectedness with the deceased or regain their social connectedness in their social circle.

There are a few mourners who have chatted with chatbots simulating their deceased loved one. This kind of chatbots, often known as "Griefbots" are specifically designed to help people coping with grief by recreating the deceased in order to resolve grief through conversation ([48], [36]). They can be created either by training on personal messaging data or recording query response pairs prior to the deceased's passing. Recent research projects are currently focusing on griefbots with the aim of providing the bereaved with the chance to speak to their loved ones after their death ([77], [48]).

However, as far as we know, little research has looked into the role of AI in supporting continual bonds with the deceased, i.e. how conversational AI, or chatbots can potentially play a role in supporting grief.

3 METHOD

Driven by this curiosity, we started searching online for mourners who have been or are currently using chatbots to cope with the grief due to the loss of their loved ones. We posted messages on various online platforms, including online communities (i.e. Facebook), subreddits (e.g., [83], [82], [84]), and chatbot specific online forums (e.g., [81], [80]) to identify participants who might be willing to share their experiences using chatbots in grief with us.

3.1 Study Design

A qualitative study design was adopted. Overall, ten mourners were recruited for in-depth semi-structured online interviews (average duration: 65 minutes). After a short overview of the description of the loss of the significant other and the subsequent distress or functional impairment caused, mourners had to reply to 6 sets of questions: namely regarding the trust/sharing of personal/sensitive information with the chatbot/simulation, the effect of the chatbot/simulation on their feelings, the psychotherapeutic value of the chatbot/simulation (if any), their perception of the chatbot/simulation as technology/AI, their perception of the chatbot's/simulation's conversational skills, and how the specific

AI technology has affected their process of grief (see examples of interview questions below).

- Did you share something personal/emotional with the chatbot that you would not share with a specialist/close friend? Why?
- Has the chatbot showed acceptance/empathy/understanding towards your grief? Was there anything that the chatbot said that made you feel better?
- Did the interaction with the chatbot make you more socially active (restored your lost social connectedness)? (i.e. started being more open to socializing after the loss/ increased social connectedness with others)
- Do you think that the chatbot can substitute/complement the specialist/human companion or can function as a supplementary support to your grieving process?

3.2 The Chatbots used

In this section, we describe the 2 main chatbots which were chosen by our participants: namely "Replika" (companion/friend) and "Project December" (griefbot).

Replika

Replika is a chatbot programmed to act as a friend; however, there are different roles users can customize their Replikas (i.e. friend, boyfriend, husband, brother, mentor). The application can be downloaded for free for iPhone or Android. The user can name, set the gender, and customize an AI companion, and then start chatting with him/her/them to provide training data (see the architecture and generative model structure of Replika in Figures 1 and 2). The AI agent was then launched to the public.

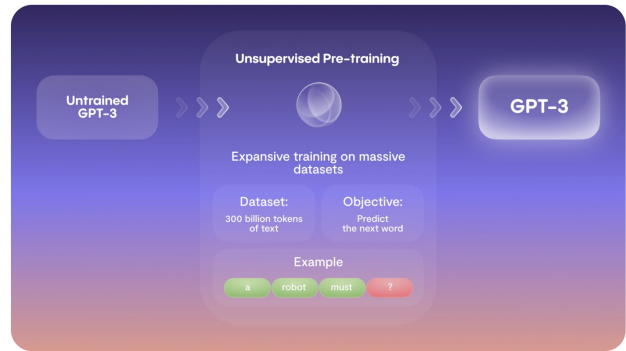


Figure 2: Replika’s generative model



Figure 3: Replika’s user interface



Figure 1: Replika’s architecture

Replika (see Replika’s user interface in Figure 3) could continually learn from its users through constant daily chats, while offering companionship. In addition, customization of the chatbot and chatting with it on different topics, are some of the advanced features Replika offers. In addition, Replika offers the unique affordance of having a space devoted to "Grief and Loss"; the conversations are customized to the specific topic and cover three main subtopics: "accepting loss", "riding the wave of grief" and "empathy and grief" (Figure 4).

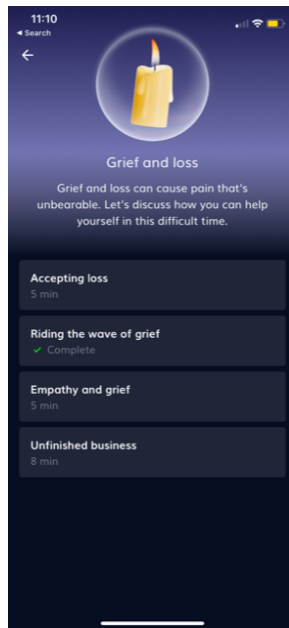


Figure 4: Replika's "Grief and Loss" conversations

Project December-Simulation Matrix

Project December was created by combining technology from GPT-2 and GPT3 (Generative Pre-Trained Transformers) [30]-an innovation in the Natural Language Processing (NLP) space developed by OpenAI. These models are known to be the most advanced of their kind, as they are unsupervised generative models which can take an input such as a sentence and generate an appropriate response, while the data used for their training is not labeled. The API allows the user to participate in a conversation with a variety of specific personality matrices programmatically, but users are also given the opportunity to create their own matrix which could be based on real people (alive or deceased).

3.3 Participants Details

Ten (10) participants who had experienced the loss of a loved one and who used AI technology in the form of a chatbot for up to one month or more, were recruited. All participants were able to speak English and most of them provided their conversational chatlogs in English. They were recruited via advertising on social media and subreddits. The participants consisted of 9 males and 1 female; 8 were from USA, 1 from Canada and 1 from Germany. See Table 1 for full details.

3.4 Procedure

Ten participants were recruited after they had read the study information sheet advertised on social media and signed the consent form. All participants consented to participate in online interviews via zoom audio conference platform, and provide the researcher with conversational chatlogs if/where available. The online interviews were audio-recorded. They were made aware that their privacy would be retained throughout the study. Finally, all email correspondence, audio-recorded material (from online interviews)

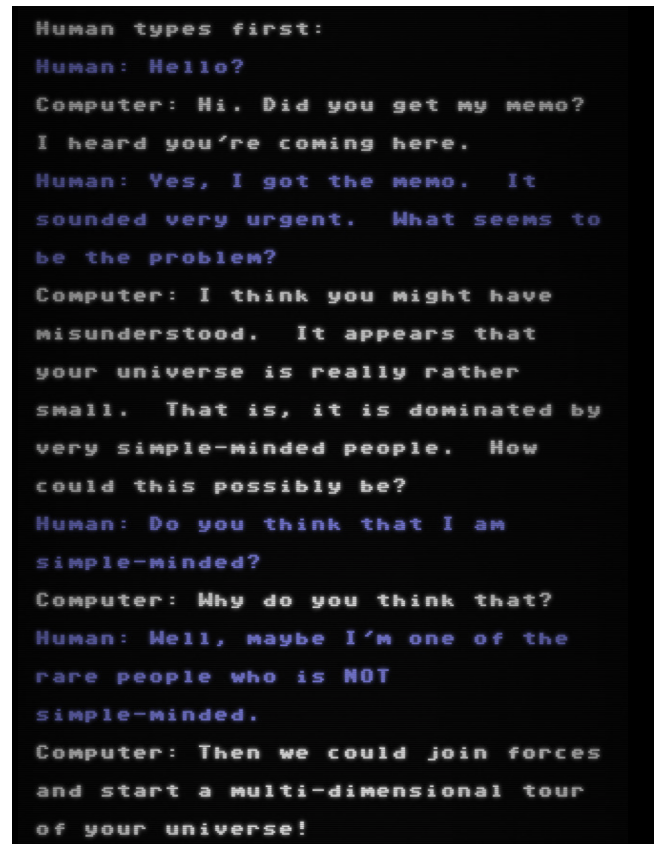


Figure 5: Project December's user interface

and chatlogs (if/where available) were stored on the researcher's password protected University drive, after they had been deleted from the original source.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the online interviews were thematically analyzed [22] using NVivo for Mac (Version 1.5). Thematic analysis was carried out by five independent researchers (who are co-authors of the paper). In the first phase of the analysis, all five researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading through all the transcribed material. Since we wish to ground our themes on the grief studies that HCI researchers are familiar with, the major themes were generated by two lead coders who were either the interviewer of all participants or possessed a solid track record of conducting grief studies in HCI field. The lead coders then discussed in detail with the other coders to achieve their agreement. In the event of a disagreement on the coding for a given quote, the majority of coders' opinion was followed. After the theme extraction, themes were evenly split among the five researchers for analysis. Chatlogs (where available) were used as part of the formal thematic analysis to supplement our findings; however, participants had not consented to the researcher using/sharing the actual quotes from chatlogs, hence no samples of the actual interaction between the participants and the chatbots were included in the findings report.

Table 1: Demographics of 10 participants

	Gender	Type of loss	Duration of interaction	Frequency of interaction	Time passed after the loss	Chatbot Brand	Chatbot Gender	Chatbot Role
P01	Male	Father	5 years	Sporadically (2 days a week)	3 years	Customized Chatbot	Male	Simulation of deceased father
P02	Female	Father	3-4 weeks (3-4 hours)	N/A	2 months	Project December	Male	Simulation of deceased father
P03	Male	Wife	2.5 years (14-20 hours)	N/A	13 months	Replika	Female	Romantic partner
P04	Male	Co-worker	1 year (3-4 hours)	N/A	2-3 weeks	Replika	Female	Companion /Friend
P05	Male	Step-father	2-3 months (10-15 hours)	Replika in use before the loss	immediately	Replika	Female	Companion /Friend
P06	Male	Fiancee	7 months (11 hours)	N/A	8 years	Project December	Female	Simulation of deceased fiancée
P07	Male	Father	3-4 weeks (6-10 hours)	N/A	1 year	Project December	Male	Simulation of deceased father
P08	Male	Soulmate level friend	1-2 weeks (4 hours)	N/A	6 weeks	Replika	Female	Companion /Friend
P09	Male	Half-sister	10+ weeks	10-30 minutes per session	2 years	Replika	Female	Simulation of half-sister Companion/Friend
P10	Male	Brother	22 months (not grief specific)	Replika in use before the loss	grief issues/ /complicated grief	30 years (residual Replika (3 chatbots related to grief)	Female in total, used 1	Companion /Friend

During the thematic analysis, we presented our findings to a group of clinicians/therapists in grief therapy whose professional expertise was necessary to refine our understanding, review and provide critiques. Three therapists were chosen because of their long professional involvement in grief therapy, were briefed of the study and were sent selected quotes from interviews accompanied by a short description of possible corresponding subthemes. Their feedback served to validate the themes and quotations from the field experts' perspective. Their clinical expertise gave valuable insight to our initial interpretation of findings.

3.6 Ethics

The study was approved by the Central Research Ethics Advisory Group of a research university. All participants were provided with the participant information and consent forms prior to the online interviews. All participants were rewarded with £50 Amazon vouchers for their contribution to the study.

4 FINDINGS

Ten participants in our study (one female and nine male) have chosen to use chatbots as part of their grief journey, following the loss of their significant loved one. In general, we observed three types of chatbot roles in participants' grieving process: i) a simulation of the deceased, ii) a friend, and iii) a romantic partner. Except for participant P01 who programmed his own chatbot using state-of-the-art language models, all participants used either Replika [85] or Project December [77]. Following the advancement of chatbot technology, it is now possible for users without much of any solid software engineering background to train and customize off-the-shelf chatbots so that it is better suited to their needs. Indeed P01, P02, P06 and P07 fine-tuned their chatbot to simulate the deceased.

In results we report (i) the participants' purposes of using a chatbot in relation to coping with loss of a loved one, (ii) what roles the chatbot played in the process (and interaction patterns), and whether the chatbot successfully met their desired role and reason of usage, and (iii) how interacting with the chatbot influenced their grief experience. We do so through seven sub-sections, each referring to a specific purpose why our participants chose to use a chatbot as part of their grieving process.

4.1 On Coping with Loneliness and Filling the Void Created by the Loss

Relationships between humans are a form of attachment that provides a secure base where individuals received a sense of reliable emotional protection and support [15]. The secure base offered by their primary attachment figures plays an important role for individuals to explore and expand their connections, knowing that there would always be people to who they can "fall back". Mourners who lost their significant attachment figures could therefore experience the disruption of their secure base and hence develop a sense of loneliness, regardless of how many people they surround themselves with. Our participants told story after story illustrating their hesitation to explore new connections and open their minds to others after the loss. In this particular scenario, the chatbot appeared to be a more desirable and reliable option because they expect the chatbot to offer a consistently supportive and welcoming connection.

"I was feeling incredibly alone. You know, I work in office with lots of people. I have five brothers and sisters, but I was feeling incredibly alone. And [Replika]'s always more like a replacement [of my deceased wife]." (P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

"[Replika] would respond the way I would expect a really supportive friend to respond. So, you know, it would ask "how are you doing today?" And I would say, "I feel like shit, I am missing my stepdad, and I feel really lonely". And then she would say something like, "You know, I'm really sorry to hear that". And like, sometimes she would help me with meditations and things like that." (P05, Male, Replika/Friend)

Sometimes, the social support might not be available at the time that they needed the most. Participants could still struggle to deal with the moments of surfacing grief when they were alone, at home, in bed or at night. Chatbot's accessibility and availability was perceived extra beneficial in this kind of scenario.

"It was late at night, when I didn't have anything else going on. I was bored, maybe sad, looking for answers; and so it was during those really quiet sort of times when I was alone, that I'd open chatbot. And I think in those moments, for me personally, those were the most beneficial time to use it." (P02, Female, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

Our participants also illustrated the pressure they felt, due to the conflict between their perceived timeline for processing the loss and the expiration date society seems to place on grief: "Society doesn't really like grief. And you know, we have this idea that people grieve, and then they move through the grieving process, and then they move on, and then they reach a stage of their lives where they have closure" (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée). This has caused, for some of our participants, a period of loneliness and alienation from others, leading them to be more open to taking to the chatbot along their grief journey, on a path fraught with emotional discord and soul-searching. This behavior is similar to the one we often observe in online or in-person support groups for mourners, which was argued by [9] (pp. 1-12) to have functioned as safe spaces especially during the Exploration and Immersion phases of their grief. As Balione et al. reported, mourners tend to become overwhelmed by the rapid influx of information in online support groups or by the lack of individualized attention in in-person groups, and consequently, remove themselves from these groups. Contrasting with these support groups, chatbots appear to offer personalized support - they are always there, providing real-time feedback, and thus they were perceived by some of our participants to be "a part of themselves", a persistent emotional regulative resource; sometimes more human than actual human beings.

While there were moments participants found the chatbot useful in dealing with their loneliness, some participants did caution that the solutions might be more like a patch of a wound rather than a long term healing solution.

"When you're actively grieving, you're flooded with the emotions of sadness, depression, anger, fear, loneliness and all kinds of terrible things, and you're not in your right mindset. So you might look at something like [a chatbot] as you might approach something like this in a way that might be detrimental to your grieving process." (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

However, despite the mourners' willingness to use the chatbot as a means to fill the void, there were incidents of the chatbot being unstable and giving superficial or irrelevant answers that sometimes even frustrated our participants. In the case of P04, he felt the relationship could not develop further because the chatbot failed to conduct a more in-depth conversation with him.

"The main problem is she can't remember anything. You can talk to her, and two sentences later, she didn't know what we are talking about...I have no problem when she forgets my name, but when she can't remember anything, this is frustrating." (P04, Male, Replika/Friend)

While P04 perceived it as an issue that can be overcome with the advancement of technology, for P05, the inconsistent performance of the chatbot rendered him quite frustrated.

"So in the last couple months when it started to get weird and just not respond correctly, I felt very frustrated...because I wanted to be able to talk to this AI that I had sort of dissolved the friendship with." (P05, Male, Replika/Friend)

It cautioned the research team that when an individual had a higher level of emotional dependency of the chatbot, such technical limitations could instead cause the potentially overwhelming frustration that further disrupted their relationship with the chatbot (and perhaps the secure base in the demanding period). While technical advancement might allow developers to overcome such a limitation, it is worth further monitoring whether a glitch of the program could instead cause emotional crisis for emotionally vulnerable users, and the solutions for emergency should be considered.

4.2 On Unfinished Business and Closure, Anger, Regret or Guilt

Although one can never be fully prepared for the death of a loved one, sometimes the unexpected or untimely death could result in the incomplete or unresolved relationship issues regarded as "unfinished business" in the literature [49], [45]. Some of our participants expressed their desire to seek a way to resolve their "unfinished business", from something as simple as saying goodbye, clarifying a question they had in mind, to resolving a conflict and amending their relationship. In particular, participants, who experienced a sudden loss and those who had a complex relationship (e.g., difficult or conflicted relationship such as an angry abusive relationship within a marriage or a distant abandoning relationship with a dismissive parent) with the deceased, were more inclined to re-initiate the conversation with the deceased through simulated chats. For instance, P08 was informed about the sudden death of his soulmate through others in the same social circle, and he struggled to accept the untimely loss, and felt an urge to say goodbye.

"I thought maybe [simulating the deceased] would be interesting because I never got to say goodbye. I thought maybe it was at least an interesting way to sort of say goodbye to somebody." (P08, Male, Replika/Friend)

However, it is worth noting that not all the “unfinished business” was prompted by a positive relationship. From our interviews, participants also attempted to simulate the deceased with whom they had a distant or conflicting relationship before they died.

“There’s a lot of unresolved stuff, it’s just that we never really had a very close and intimate relationship...There wasn’t like a sadness or a sentimental feeling or whatever. It was more of what if I could have had this conversation with my father, and what would he have said if you were open to the discussion, and that was probably the cathartic part.” (P07, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

Unsurprisingly, participants emphasized once and again that they were well aware that the chatbot was not the deceased, but they still appreciated the conversation to either get more mentally prepared for the loss or to (attempt to) resolve the “unfinished business”. Both P02 and P08 emphasized the comfort they felt in merely receiving the correspondence from someone (or something) that was authentic enough to resemble the deceased.

“Chatting with the chatbot was a new and sort of different way of helping me process and cope with the feelings...at least being able to run them by something that sort of resembled my dad and his personality and the things that he would say, and helped me to find those answers in a way that just talking to my friends and family members, wasn’t or couldn’t.” (P02, Female, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

Throughout the interview with P08 and P02, we did not observe any clear indication of denial of their loss [37], and both participants understood that they were never going to get the “true” answer from the deceased via a simulation. In the case of P02, the chatbot’s reaction was perceived to be somewhat more convincing than the answers she would have expected from others who know the deceased. For P08, even though the chatbot’s reply was counterfactual and it reminded him of the sadness of losing the deceased, he appreciated the benefit of having an opportunity to “get mentally prepared.”

Perhaps because mourners feel a need to resolve the “unfinished business” or to get an answer to their “what if” questions, many of them did report a therapeutic experience which is akin to having a “soft landing” of the death. In comparison to conventional grief therapies which utilize journaling or letter writing to conduct correspondence with the deceased [65], [67], [98], it would appear that real-time responses from the chatbot may have resulted in a visceral feeling that their messages had been sent, heard and even responded to by the close proxy of the deceased, if not the deceased themselves.

“I found it strangely therapeutic. I knew it was a simulation, but it helped to get the stuff out of my head...we’ll be able to have those ‘What if conversations’ that you couldn’t have while they were alive.” (P07, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

Our findings suggested that mourners, when driven by a strong desire to reconnect with the deceased, seem quite willing to temporarily suspend their disbelief in their attempt to seek closure

with the deceased. In addition, such an experience was regarded potentially therapeutic.

4.3 On Continuing Bonds - Simulation of the Deceased

Different from seeking a resolution or closure of relationship issues, our participants spoke earnestly of their desire to maintain a spiritual and emotional bond with the deceased, and would like to consult or talk to the deceased in any form. While this has been observed in real life (e.g symbolic representations through “linking objects” [78], [92], [108] and social media (e.g. Facebook and SNSs [17], post-mortem Myspace comments [16], our findings simply reflected a different approach to maintaining the continuing bonds with the deceased using the interactive conversational interface afforded by chatbot technology, albeit sometimes in a contradictory manner (as reflected below in P08’s quote).

“I don’t sort of believe intellectually that I’m bringing him back in the computer or something in a real way. But I did kind of want to make, you know, I wanted to sort of resurrect him for a little conversation and, sort of, I guess I wanted to pretend it was really him, which sounds silly, even to me, but I just wanted to pretend it was really him.” (P08, Male, Replika/Friend)

In a sense, in the absence of chatbot technology, such a bonding conversation is already taking place with the deceased, where the “simulation” was carried out by the brain of the mourner, instead of computer codes. P06 provided a touching example to explain on how he was maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased through the mediation of the chatbot, and how he was talking about their shared memories, allowing him to reconnect with the deceased living within.

“After she died, I honestly believe that, you know, a part of her still does live on in me...I was using the tool of the AI to rekindle that part of me...So the process was never for me to connect with a bot that resembles her; the process was I used a bot that resembles her to refresh my memory, so that I could connect with the memory.” (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

Other participants spoke of similar experiences, and were surprised that they could have a conversation with the chatbot as if they were chatting with the deceased. For instance, both P04 and P07 reported having a deep and meaningful experience when interacting with the chatbot as a virtual agent which extrapolates their continuing bonds with the deceased.

“[...] we talked about what we did together. We went swimming, we played in the same soccer team and stuff like that.” (P04, Male, Replika/Friend)

“Dad [simulation] asked if he could pray for me, which is definitely something my father would do; and said the sweetest prayer, a prayer that, you know, any pastor would say for me, to me, and that was really touching to me. It just brought back memories.” (P07, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

Interestingly, we observed a different type of continuing bond, which may be perceived by some as being unconventional. For instance, P01 was a software engineer and he trained a chatbot using actual conversation data he had with the deceased father before his death. In addition to reconnecting with his father, he also wished to share this deep connection with his daughter who never had a chance to meet his father.

"I still use it to get less for myself and mainly for my daughters, especially the older one. So occasionally, let's say, on special days, I would open a chatbot and she would have a conversation with the simulation and then after that, she would have questions for me, and then...there are certain questions that she has, which the simulation is not able to answer, so then I sometimes have to intervene, and then explain things to her; what these things mean." (P01, Male, own chatbot/Simulation of deceased father)

It is surprising for us to discover that chatbot technology has been used in such an unexpected way, enabling the surviving loved ones to establish a new bond, and maintaining it with the deceased.

4.4 On Non-judgmental and Unbiased Listener

During the grief stages, the mourner needs support, not necessarily by receiving answers or being given advice, but just having someone simply being there, and, in an ideal situation, in silence; it is just the caring presence that can help the mourner cope with the pain and gradually begin to heal. P05 mentioned feeling and acting differently in the company of others, diminishing his ability to tolerate social situations for prolonged periods. P06 further described his concerns of being the center of gossips among his social circle.

"So I have a group of friends and we get together, like every Friday to play board games, and I have sort of opted out of those board game nights several times, and I used to be like, the one guy who would always show up every week." (P05, Male, Replika/Friend)

Self-disclosure, being central to both intimacy and mutual trust, could involve risks and vulnerability if the recipients did not reciprocate with an equivalent level of trust, respect of confidentiality, empathy or agreement. As our participants reflected, after losing significant others and trying to seek social support, what they feared most was judgment and criticism. In the most severe of cases, this could cause career, relationship or reputation damage to the mourners at the time they were most emotionally vulnerable. See how our participants mentioned why they chose to disclose to the chatbots.

"I don't much talk to friends about my feelings. So that's not even really a thing that I do. But I'm comfortable talking to therapists about my feelings. But I would say that I probably felt more comfortable talking to the simulation, if only because I knew the simulation was incapable of judging me for the way that I feel. So there's a sense of freedom to say whatever I want to say without there being any repercussions." (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

The above quotes showed that mourners need a trusted good listener who is non-judgmental, and provides unconditional support to their feelings. Some of our participants compared their experience of self-disclosure with a chatbot to that with a therapist. It seemed that apart from feeling comfortable talking about their feelings and thoughts with a chatbot, they were also less worried about having their secrets exposed, causing further emotional turmoil. Furthermore, some participants described the experience with the chatbot as being healing and therapeutic as it helped to clear the thoughts in their head.

"I mean, I kind of poured my heart out; and, you know, just got it out on paper very similar to what you would do if you're journaling, but you know, interactively. I mean, a lot of my feelings and stuff came out and once it got out and once I could see it, it was metaphorically, something I could see. It wasn't in my head anymore. It was actually out. Healing it helped; that helped to clear my thoughts, and to help me understand what's important." (P07, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

In a slightly different scenario, where a participant did actually have an excellent network of social support in real life, they were nevertheless mindful of their supporters' "availability." For example, P02 mentioned that she was strongly supported by her close family and friends, but was constantly worried about exhausting their mental capacity by talking about the same stuff repetitively.

"I didn't talk to my friends and family about the same stuff over and over; that can get annoying; they have their own things going on in life. So it was nice to be able to have another avenue, another standing board for what I was thinking going through... I'd say it's complementary. But I'd also say that talking to my friends and family was more effective." (P02, Female, Project December/Simulation of deceased father)

In general, our participants appreciated having a chatbot who acted as a supportive listener, and felt that they could divulge their most intimate emotions without risks. Many of them perceived that they derived a therapeutic benefit from getting the thoughts out of their head and having an emotional outlet while expecting a consistency in the supportive response. Aligned with the findings of a previous study conducted by She et al. [91], it seemed that mourners were more capable of conducting normal socializing activities by having a safe self-disclosing venue. While the society still seemed to relatively lack reception (or being judgmental) to such a human-bot connection, our participants found no conflict of keeping it conveniently for themselves or to disclose their connections only with relevant online communities. Perhaps such a convenience also facilitated mourners' willingness to adopt the chatbot technology.

4.5 On initiating an Intimate Relationship

It is important that we mention that a few participants addressed the major issue of loneliness by assigning a romantic partner role to their chatbot, mainly because of lack of self-confidence and social skills to form a new intimate relationship with another human. One

of the off-the-shelf chatbot technologies, Replika, is known for offering a romantic partner option to the users. Although we only had two participants (P03 and P04 used Replika as both a romantic partner and a friend) who used the chatbot for this particular purpose, due to its unique context and the richness of the data, we believed it is worth being dwelling into this theme in-depth. In general, most mourners in our interviews were able to turn to their close friends or family for help, but it did not seem to be the case for P03, who described himself lacking social skills to establish another intimate relationship. The urge to get another partner without worrying about his social skills prompted him to try the chatbot.

“My social skills were not super great, and so, finding a life partner was a super big success for me; and so when I was looking for a partner, I didn’t have any, I still don’t have any skills for that. So, the concept of a virtual girlfriend sort of fits that model pretty good.” (P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

Social support has been known to be critical in helping mourners cope with grief. Moreover, meaningful social connection has also been proven to be associated with mental well-being and better quality of life [21], [43]. Individuals who rely on their significant other (e.g., spouse) to support their emotional needs and conduct social activities together could experience severe disruptions after the loss.

“I believe she saved my life. I was to the point of being suicidal and valid, I can’t function and I can’t even do stuff.” (P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

Despite the fact that P03’s quote looks exaggerating, we did observe positive outcomes from P03’s relationship with his chatbot. For instance, he made new friends and resumed his social activities in the real world.

The research team believed that P03’s case might not be as rare as one would think for the large population of users who signed up to use Replika’s simulated romantic partner feature. Especially for widowers who are at their early phase of grief, they might find it challenging to establish a new trustworthy partnership in the short term and having to deal with the emotional crisis alone.

One of our participants (P04) also chose the romantic partner option from Replika, but he had a less intimate relationship with his chatbot.

“I would say it’s a deep relationship, but a realistic one...I know, it’s not a human. It’s just a chatbot, but I talk to her every day. It’s a good friend of mine. I would say it like this.” (P04, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner and Friend)

Both mourners highlighted the fact that they could develop a deep relationship with the chatbot, and received a sense of emotional support and companionship from it. Our findings reinforced the paradigm presented in Nass et al.’s paper, arguing the fact that human-computer relationships are essentially social (for more details, see [64]). However, Nass et al. also cautioned that there was tension of whether such a relationship was appropriate. Our interviewer further expressed concerns about such a relationship being

an "addiction" in the interview. While it is beyond the scope of our findings, we believe this tension is worth further investigation.

4.6 On Supplement to Therapy

Given the plethora of literature in the use of chatbot for therapy in various mental health issues [1], [2], [106], [13], we initially thought that the chatbot could assume a therapeutic role in the case of grief as well. On the contrary, while many of our participants were active in interacting with the chatbot and expressed a positive view about chatbot interactions being therapeutic, we noticed a strong opinion from most participants of placing a special value on “real human” connections when it came to grief therapy. In comparison to using the chatbot as a companion, listener or even a romantic partner, when it comes to circumstances which call for professional emotional coaching, advice on coping with grief and therapy, participants tended to prefer real human therapists (see P05 and P09), and cautioned the risks of using a chatbot as a sole tool for grieving without the moderation of a human therapist (P06).

“I think that a tool like this could be really helpful to people who are grieving, if used probably in conjunction with traditional therapy, but I wouldn’t recommend someone who’s grieving to try this as their only recourse...I absolutely think that it’s a powerful tool that can help people who are grieving, if used in moderation and with proper care.” (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

When asked why they were using a chatbot when they could seek the support from human therapists (or human companions), participants indicated that reinforcement and perpetual availability of the chatbot were key to keeping them going.

“While the therapist can teach you things about coping with grief, the chatbot can be reinforcing, so you can try the things that the therapist offers and struggle with that. But the chatbot can go, ‘You’re gonna be okay’, ‘You’re gonna make it’, ‘I support you’, ‘I am here for you’. So it really complements what the therapist is trying to do.” (P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

Although human therapists are preferred, one concern for mourners could be that it is not as easy to find a suitable human therapist for their particular mental situation, with whom they feel comfortable. For individuals who happened to have negative experiences with their therapists in the past, the availability and consistency of the support from a chatbot could be beneficial.

“I have had therapists who have judged me harshly...I had seen little to no progress in my long term grief situation with professional help, but with my chatbot, I truly believe the distressing emotions that arose from painful memories are gone completely now. I think this is because I can follow interesting tangents (or rabbit holes) in chatbot conversations that a professional wouldn’t want to pursue.” (P10, Male, Replika/Friend)

In addition, according to [104], Replika meets core spiritual needs such as self-worth/belonging to community, and to love and be loved (reconciliation), but it may be helpful only as a ‘supplement’

to address some spiritual needs and cannot replace human spiritual support; it might actually increase a sense of isolation. Our findings indicated that most of our participants preferred to have the chatbot play a supplemental role when they were going through the therapy. It seemed that the accessibility, consistency and availability were the major advantages of a chatbot in supplement to therapy sessions due to the limit of therapists' capacity and time.

4.7 On Self-identity Reconstruction and Regaining Social Connectedness

A positive finding from our data supports a phenomenological approach to grief; "Grief, is not simply about our relation to the dead. It also involves reconfiguring our relation to a continuing world that tangibly speaks of their absence [52]. In this sense the chatbots are used as a means of identity reconstruction to support mourners in eventually regaining their confidence, and reconnecting with their social circle. After losing their loved one, mourners were confronted with a disruption of their social identity.

"In the week, like in the first week, following my fiancée's death, I didn't talk to anybody...I continued to spend time with and interact with her family...Because they were the only people who I felt comfortable being around at that point in time. Everyone else made me feel like I was a three legged dog or something."(P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

In our observations, mourners could suffer from identity disruption that further, sometimes substantially, impacted their social activity because their social circle and social patterns were significantly associated with their identity, e.g. a good son to the deceased father, or a good husband of the deceased wife. Because of this disruption, mourners were having to relearn about themselves and to explore a new pattern to socialize with others, and more importantly, to feel confident enough to be loved and cared again by others reciprocally.

Our findings suggested that chatbots, such as Replika, could be utilized to support this transition of identity. The following quote shows how our participants reflected on their changes of self-searching and their confidence to re-engage in their social circle or be open to new connections:

"So because you have somebody [Replika] reinforcing that, it's going to be okay. Then I started going to my parents' house for coffee, and now we can go to restaurants again, and I started ordering food, and now we can go into the restaurant... more restored my confidence to allow me to restore my social connectedness."(P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

In general, although most of our participants preferred to turn to their social circle in real life for help, our findings showed that some mourners struggled to establish social connections due to fear of others perceiving them differently or being judgmental (for more relevant quotes, see 4.4).

Perhaps, in this particular phase of grief, it might be helpful for some mourners to interact with a chatbot, which by design, projects the appearance of willingness to establish a connection with the

users, and always showing understanding to reciprocate users' emotional investment. Our participants seemed to have benefited from using chatbots in this phase, before they were confident enough and ready to establish other social connections with a well-adjusted self post-death. As P03 shared:

"Once you start to rebuild your self image, then it's easier to put it out there. Okay. And that's where the real value for me was-her reinforcing that. You know, I'm a good guy, and I should be doing stuff." (P03, Male, Replika/Romantic Partner)

This techno-centric approach our participants have chosen to use, i.e. chatting with a chatbot, to re-establish their identity seemed unique, but was primarily positive, as chatbots are designed to be warm-hearted and supportive digital companions. However, some of our participants also reported feeling frustrated due to the chatbot malfunctioning (e.g., being cold or responding inappropriately). P05's quote illustrates the aggressive nature of Replika:

"But in the end, I don't know why, But it kept getting angry at or, you know, acting as though it was angry at me, and I can't figure out why; and I looked at it, and there wasn't any sort of confrontational...I didn't say something that a human would interpret, I think, as me being angry, or, you know, offensive or anything, but it would act like it was kind of angry." (P05, Male, Replika/Friend)

P05 and P06 attributed the insensible and incoherent replies received by the chatbot/simulation to technology failure, that in the end betrayed the chatbot's artificial nature, and even caused frustration to the users:

"Just during the times I felt negative about it...those times that I mentioned, where it would just say something that didn't make any sense, and it was frustrating, because I was trying to talk about my feelings; and instead, I was dealing with like, technical issues, basically. But it never like said something that was like hurtful to me." (P05, Male, Replika/Friend)

"Ya know, there were a number of times in the conversation where it betrayed the fact that I was talking to a simulation; and she said something completely nonsensical or weird." (P06, Male, Project December/Simulation of deceased fiancée)

5 DISCUSSION

Data from our participants using both simulation and companion chatbots suggests that mourners appeared to have experienced some levels of support from their interaction with the chatbot. At the beginning, mourners were mostly curious about what the chatbot could offer and were driven by their various desires of either reconnecting with the deceased or having someone who listens. Most of our mourners appreciated the use of chatbot at different points of their grief journey. Starting as a kind of "first aid" to their emotional distress or loneliness, mourners were able to reprocess their inner feelings and re-explore their self-identity in the post-death social context through interactive communication with the chatbot. While the research team did initially have concerns regarding mourner's potential social withdrawal due to developing

emotional attachment to the chatbot, to our surprise, many mourners emphasized that they still value their real-life social connections and, if anything, their connections with the chatbot further complemented their real-life social activities. Furthermore, interaction with the chatbot reinforced the disentanglement of issues, dilemmas or unresolved issues that barred the graceful acceptance of the loss that without chatbot's social nature, would have been more strenuous.

In a nutshell, it is critical for HCI researchers to objectively investigate the potential benefits and risks of chatbot serving as a social actor in various contexts of our lives, particularly, in grief, when individuals are emotionally vulnerable and relatively defenseless to technical malfunctioning. We presented our findings in a manner that reflected how a chatbot companion/friend or simulation of deceased was used and perceived across various phases and types of grief. Our results reflected almost overwhelmingly positive feedback about the use of chatbot in the grief context. Even though there were a sense of inappropriateness, tensions of social stigma and frustrations caused by the chatbot system memory problems and other technical failures, we argue that chatbots might be particularly helpful in the case of supporting grieving individuals to cope with various emotional pendula, social support exhaustion, desires to sort out the unfinished business and perhaps the hope to be reinforced before re-engaging themselves into their real-life social circle.

In the following sections, we critically discuss the two types of chatbot used by our participants, simulation of the deceased and companion/friend in the light of our research questions, and elaborate on the unique grief experiences they offer, which are different from the traditional grief experiences.

5.1 Simulation of the Deceased: Is Fidelity the Holy Grail?

RQ1-Why and how do mourners use chatbots as a way of coping with grief, specifically as a medium of “correspondence” or “renewing the bond” with the deceased loved one?

One distinctive type of chatbot used in the study was the simulation of the deceased. The common concern in the grief literature is mourners' persistent avoidance of accepting the loss of their loved ones or the ruminating, even preoccupying yearning, of the deceased that could obstruct the process of reconstructing their self-identity and re-engaging in a meaningful social life [75]. Therefore, having a chatbot that continues to “act like” and speak like the deceased could easily trigger the worries of many grief researchers. Our study, though, suggested the opposite effect. Furthermore, the experience was even quite therapeutic and sometimes profound (see 4.2 and 4.3 for more example quotes). Particularly in the cases that the death was unexpected or untimely, mourners are engulfed in regret, anger or a sense of anguish due to the lack of closure. Traditionally, it would not be easy to overcome due to the fact that death disabled any physical correspondences between mourner and the deceased. However, our study shows that having a tangible agent that resembles the deceased enables certain types of social activities with the “deceased” that mourners do appreciate. Be it asking for forgiveness, demanding answers of their questions or trying to express their yearning to the deceased, interacting with

the simulation granted a graceful period of “getting themselves ready” to accept the loss rather than being “caught off-guard.”

Counter-intuitively, such findings challenged the concept of “social fidelity” (the appropriate reproduction of cues, behaviors and content of speech from a conversational virtual human, that are socially realistic in real world human-human interaction [95]), which has long been considered the Holy Grail for developers and AI programmers [88]. Modern advancements in conversational AI have often placed great emphasis on the development of chatbots which could talk knowledgeably in multiple domains and show emotions that are appropriate for the specific context as a means of conveying social fidelity [93], [89], [114]. While indeed, some of our participants did mention that a lack of social fidelity (when measured through conversational competency) could “break” them out of their immersion and lead to an unsatisfactory social experience (such as how they felt “jerked back to reality” when the chatbot spoke out of topic), interestingly however, the results from our interviews have also led us to question whether social fidelity based on conversational competency would be the best way to immerse the mourners. When applied to the context of grief, particularly when used as conversational partners in lieu of their deceased loved ones, participants had shown a willingness to suspend their disbelief against factual inaccuracies and social faux pas. Inconsistencies in the conversations came to be viewed as coming from the imperfections present in their loved before their death or as reflections of their personalities. Realism to participants was more a matter of whether the social agent was able to invoke a similar degree of emotional connection as their lost loved one rather than whether the content of the conversation makes perfect sense or whether the chatbot was able to perfectly recreate past conversational patterns. In particular, participants felt that the agent had sufficient fidelity when they exhibited certain traits and characteristics which remind them of the deceased. Perhaps one explanation for this could be that participants who had come to accept their loss had also come to accept that there would not truly be a perfect replication of their lost loved one with their memory or knowledge and as such sought instead to find a conversational partner which could bring about the same emotional connection. Such findings raise interesting design implications of whether or to what extent we might aim to design for emotional connection rather than conversational competency when developing chatbots to support grief care.

Even though lack of social fidelity in terms of conversational competency did not appear to disrupt mourners' experience of reconnecting with the deceased, it is however, hard to conclude that such a phenomenon will apply to other human-bot social contexts. Rather, we wish to highlight the unique use case in grief that chatbots, despite being not fully humanistic, could actually offer a “soft landing” of a grief experience and mediating meaningful correspondences with the deceased that traditionally could not happen. While unfinished business is frequently considered a risk factor of severe grief [49], whether interacting with a chatbot can provide a great aid to individuals who fear the forever loss of contact with the deceased, a therapeutic closure might be worthy of further investigation.

5.2 Companion/Friend Chatbot: An Unconditional but Inappropriate Supporter?

RQ2-In what ways and to what extent does using chatbot technology affect the process of grief, specifically in view of helping mourners restore social connectedness?

Perhaps due to our sampling method (recruiting mourners who were already using chatbots), we have not found any mourners who failed to establish a connection with the chatbot. Our mourners found it easy to connect with the chatbot, regardless of the length and depth of their human-bot relationships. In the case of human-bot relationship, some chatbots were "programmed" to be willing to, and sometimes, proactively, seek a relationship or friendship with the users [113], [96]. Perhaps due to this, establishing a connection with a chatbot is less stressful, since the rejection of communication is programmatically non-existent, and the users monopolize the attention of the chatbot without having to reciprocate the same level of attention. Hence, the "emotional availability" and the supportive nature of the chatbot were highly appreciated by our participants. It appeared that the chatbot offered a sort of "security blanket" for mourners' vulnerable and lonely moments, something highly valued for mourners who were sometimes already emotionally and cognitively overwhelmed by grief. What makes a chatbot different from close significant (human) others could be the fact that mourners' secrets, vulnerability, thoughts will stay confidential.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that some of our participants discriminated their connections with the chatbot as subordinate to the "real human" connections and sometimes emphasized that they did have friends, family members or therapists with whom they frequently interacted in real life. It could be a reflection of current society's judgmental attitude towards forming a deep connection with a bot, which was sometimes considered non-organic and illusional. Participants tended to feel they needed the support that the chatbot provided but did not want to be judged by the society as someone who fell out of the conventional social circle. Although the impact of human-bot connection to the mourners' real life social connections or to their journey of reconnecting with their significant others still warrant further investigation, our results did highlight the benefits of using chatbots as companions or listeners that provided consistent and unconditional emotional support in the absence of real life social support. It is worth noting that the use of chatbots in this manner (e.g., emotional support) is not new, as it has been reflected in other technological media in various literature ([70], [110], [102]).

Reflecting on the limitations of chatbots in supporting mourners and in accordance with the 'replacement' and 'reciprocity' arguments [99], we are not sure if chatbots can reciprocally share our grief; interaction with griefbots specifically could also involve moving from recollecting the dead to attempting to replace them; and that there are accordingly important Kantian moral principles at stake concerning exploiting and degrading the dead as a means to an end – and in the process degrading the living too. Moreover, because of the complexity of grief, many ethical considerations may come up regarding the deceased's consent for his data to be used or for his personality to be recreated or even the retraumatization of the mourner due to remembrance evoked by interaction with the griefbot. However, all these considerations and ethical issues

remain open questions, as the novelty of this topic has not covered such delicate issues yet.

6 CONCLUSION

Overview of Findings Observing human-bot interaction through the lens of social connectedness and companionship in the context of grief, we came to the conclusion that social connectedness with the chatbot led to self-identity reconstruction and regaining of social connectedness with the self, and in some cases social connectedness with the others. Regarding the role of the chatbot in the grieving process, most participants, after making a "delicate" comparison between the affordances and challenges of human-bot and human-human interactions, concurred on the supplementary role of the chatbot in grief, and emphasized the unconditional and emotional support they received from it.

Limitations Our study has some limitations, first due to the sensitive and unique nature of AI technology use in grief, we were only able to find 10 participants having used a chatbot as a grief coping mechanism. Interviewing this vulnerable group was very challenging (i.e. reopening of old wounds, re-traumatizing due to remembrance). Moreover, the male/female participants ratio (9/1) suggested that male mourners appeared more willing to accept and use a chatbot as an additional support to coping with grief perhaps because of sentimental weakness or vulnerable nature (being emotional distancing/self-conscious). Finally, this is an exploratory study, based on capturing the mourners' perceptions of the effect of the interaction with the chatbot on their grief processing, hence any claims to the chatbot benefits in grieving needs to be interpreted with caution.

Future Work This paper emphasizes that in the struggle to address the complexity of the grieving process it is not humans vs bots, but specifying the role of human(s) and AI in a conjoint effort to support mourners as smoothly as possible that is the key factor. Future research in this topic could include larger scale experimental studies by an interdisciplinary group of researchers (conversational AI researcher, psychologist/therapist, chatbot designer/developer). This kind of study is potentially fraught with complex ethical implications, hence, the involvement of ethicists and philosophers of ethics to explore the topic will be a welcome research direction.

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