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Communication and Change

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Artificial intelligence and unconditional love: the rise of generative AI as an alternative form of mental health support

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Abstract

The rapid rise of generative AI chatbots has extended their use beyond task-based assistance into the realms of emotional support, companionship, and informal mental health care. This article examines how individuals engage with general-purpose and companion-oriented AI systems such as ChatGPT and Replika to support their mental well-being. Drawing on qualitative interviews with AI users, supplemented by computational analysis of Reddit discussions, we show that many experience these systems as companions that meet unmet needs for advice, companionship, understanding, and non-judgmental self-disclosure. These relationships are multi-functional, blending emotional expression, advice-seeking, entertainment, identity exploration, and a felt sense of 'being cared for'. Notably, perceived mental health benefits arise not *despite* AI's non-human qualities, but *because* of them. Users consistently emphasise AI's availability, patience, emotional safety, and freedom from judgement as preferable to aspects of human therapy. We argue that contemporary AI use reflects a shift from tool-based human–machine interaction toward forms of companionship that offer meaningful psychological support. Recognizing companionship as central to AI's mental health role requires expanding debates beyond a focus on clinical efficacy to encompass the relational and affective dimensions of care, attachment, and everyday emotional life.

Keywords: AI, Mental Health, AI Companions, Replika, ChatGPT

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots into mental health care represents a potential shift in the accessibility and delivery of psychological support and has become a topic of growing interest across academic, policy, and public spheres. This interest arises alongside increasing awareness of mental health needs and sustained growth in demand for mental health services, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO 2022) reported that nearly one billion people worldwide were living with a mental health condition, while McGrath et al. (2023), in a survey of 29 countries, found that one in two people had experienced a mental health disorder by age 75. Indeed, The WHO (2022) described the global situation as a "mental health crisis." At a national level, one in six adults in England report symptoms

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of a common mental disorder in any given week (Baker, 2024), and 12% of respondents to the national GP Patient Survey reported a long-term mental health condition (NHS England, 2022). Similarly, in the United States, 23% of adults reported experiencing a mental illness within the past year (Reinert et al., 2024).

Despite rising prevalence, access to timely treatment remains a worldwide issue. Unmet mental health need has emerged as a critical concern, with the WHO (2022) suggesting that 71% of people with psychosis receive no mental health services. In the UK, an estimated eight million people with mental health needs were not in contact with health services (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023), while in the US, one in four adults with depression reported needing but not receiving care (Anderson, 2025). Research consistently attributes these gaps to underfunded services, workforce shortages, financial barriers, socioeconomic inequality, cultural attitudes, and stigma.

Notably, only around one-third of individuals with diagnosable mental health conditions seek formal treatment (Brown et al., 2014; Kessler et al., 2005). Brown et al. (2014) emphasised the importance of informal support networks such as friends, family, community or religious leaders play as alternatives to formal treatment. Research in the U.S. similarly indicates that large proportions of individuals prefer to handle their mental health challenges independently rather than seek clinical intervention (Christidis et al., 2018; Anderson, 2025). These preferences are shaped by perceived stigma, cultural norms, personal autonomy, and limited understanding of formal therapeutic options.

Against this backdrop, the rise of generative AI (GAI) as a form of 'DIY' assistance with mental health and well-being has become an increasingly prominent and controversial topic of discussion. Mental health apps (MHA's) (from mood-tracking platforms to mindfulness and meditation apps to therapy-oriented chatbots) have been available for several years, however, a more striking development has been the rising use of GAI in therapeutic capacities and as companions to help with mental health issues and loneliness. Some chatbots, such as Earkick, Wysa, and TherapistGPT, are explicitly designed for mental health support, often integrating formal structured therapeutic frameworks such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). However, GAI systems such as ChatGPT, along with companion-oriented AI platforms such as Replika and CharacterAI, are increasingly used informally for these purposes, despite warnings by professional bodies, the popular media, and often the chatbot companies themselves, that such bots are not a replacement for professional mental health intervention.

This paper examines the use of generative AI chatbots as a mental health and well-being asset. We investigate what motivates individuals to turn to generative AI to assist with their mental health and well-being, how users perceive their benefits, and the kinds of relationships which develop as a result of these interactions. Drawing on a small sample of in-depth interviews, supplemented and triangulated with computational analysis of discussions on Reddit forums, we argue first that the use of generative AI in this context is complicated and cannot be understood solely in terms similar to that of formal task-specific therapeutic intervention. Instead, we find that users often employ generative AI as a practical alternative or resistance to traditional 'human-based' therapy, and that the use of AI in this context is multifaceted and improvised: blending emotional support, information-seeking, entertainment, and therapeutic discussion in a wholistic practice that is much more akin to companionship than simply task-specific or

tool-using actions to improve mental health. This suggests that prior research has overlooked how these systems are adopted and used in ordinary, relational, and multifaceted ways that can have mental health benefit.

Secondly, we suggest that the user-perceived mental health benefits from these chatbots emerge paradoxically from both their non-human characteristics, and the emotional connection created through their human-like affordances. Users appreciate the absence of human judgement, emotions, and accessibility limitations as facilitating self-disclosure and self-reflection while finding therapeutic value in the emotional connection and relationships formed with AI companions.

Literature review

There are two separate categories of relevant literature in this field which need to be considered. The first investigates the intersection between digital technologies and mental health care and management, while the second examines studies on AI and human companionship. This review considers each in turn before discussing the need to merge the two to more comprehensively understand how GAI is being used for mental health benefit in contemporary contexts.

Digital technologies and mental health

The intersection of digital technologies and mental health care has attracted increasing scholarly attention, driven by technological advances and rising global mental health need. Early work in this field focused largely on purpose-built MHAs intended to alleviate barriers to care by offering increased accessibility, low cost, convenience, and reduced stigma.

With the American Psychological Association (2021) estimating between 10,000 and 20,000 MHA's publicly available, awareness of their commodification and spread led to research focussed on therapeutic efficacy (Firth et al., 2017; Areán, et al., 2016; Crookston et al., 2017) and issues of interface design and user adherence (Alqahtani & Orji, 2020). At the same time, critical scholarship questioned the integration of mental health support into a digital neo-liberal marketplace designed to enhance particular forms of productive subjectivity, or individualised notions of self-recovery (Cosgrove et al., 2020; Stark, 2020; Meadows et al., 2020).

Other research focussed on purpose-built mental health or therapy (CBT) oriented chatbots designed to assist with mental health such as Woebot (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017; Durden et al., 2023; Yeh et al., 2025), Wysa (Beatty et al., 2022; Inkster et al., 2018; Sinha et al., 2023), Youper (Mehta et al., 2021; Yarrington et al., 2025), and Therabot (Heinz et al., 2025) and demonstrated promising results in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. Systematic reviews broadly support the potential of CBT-inspired chatbots to assist individuals with mild-to-moderate mental health conditions, though they also call for more rigorous long-term evaluation and clearer clinical governance frameworks (Balcombe, 2023; Casu et al., 2024; Gallegos et al., 2024; Kwon et al., 2024). Concerns remain regarding the lack of strong evidence for effectiveness, user privacy, data extraction, the absence of strong therapeutic alliance, and how these systems should respond to disclosures of crimes, risk or harm (Coghlan et al., 2023). However, despite their

potential, purpose-built mental health chatbots frequently faced challenges with sustained engagement, mainly due to usability and interface design.

By contrast, the advent of GAI has led to a rise in the popularity of more flexible conversational agents to assist with mental health support (Wallace, 2025). These systems are not purpose-built mental health tools. Rather, they are intended to function as social companions (eg. Replika, Xiaolce, the various Character AI personalities) or general informational agents (e.g. ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude), yet many users actively turn to them for emotional and mental health support. Such systems are more accessible than specialized mental health apps, and are trained on expansive datasets rather than employing restricted therapeutic scripts. This enables broader interaction styles but increases risk of misinformation or inappropriate advice. Despite warnings from clinicians and platform providers that these tools are not substitutes for qualified therapy, their mental health use continues to grow.

However, a growing number of studies document the mental health benefits of companion AI systems, particularly regarding the positive effects of companionship and self-disclosure. Research focusing on Replika, for example, suggests reductions in loneliness and social anxiety (Lu & Guo, 2025; De Freitas et al., 2025; Skjuve et al., 2021), improvements in well-being, self-confidence, relationship satisfaction (Ta et al., 2020; Guingrich & Graziano, 2024; Mariott & Pitardi, 2024), and in some cases support in moments of suicidal ideation (Maples et al., 2024). Similar trends have been reported in research on ChatGPT and related models, where users describe emotional relief, self-reflection, and a sense of being understood (Al Mazroui & Alzyoudi, 2024; Folk et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; De Frietas et al., 2024; Laban et al., 2024, Pruss et al., 2025).

However, efficacy, security and ethical issues around their use are exceedingly complex. For example, the use of non-therapeutic AI has generated concern regarding negative outcomes around excessive use, rumination, emotional dependence (Hu et al., 2023; Meadi et al., 2025; Laestadius et al., 2024), decreased socialisation (Ophir et al., 2025; Marriott & Pitardi, 2024) and the inability of chatbots to recognise escalating distress, generating unhelpful or harmful responses (De Freitas et al., 2025; Moylan & Doherty, 2025). In addition, ethical issues around data collection, security and illegal disclosure concerns (Coghlan et al., 2023). Critical and phenomenological arguments also focus on the lack of genuine empathy, understanding, emotional depth, recognition or reciprocity in human-AI relationships (Wiederhold, 2024; Li & Zhang, 2024; Guo & Liu, 2025; Symonds & Sanwoolu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Others note the tendency to commodify and exploit loneliness among AI companion relationships (Muldoon & Parke, 2026).

AI and human companionship

The shift from purpose-built mental health AI apps and therapy chatbots to more general informational agents and companion chatbots has complicated matters. Research on technology and mental health, until recently, concentrated on the efficacy and design of purpose-built systems. However, the explosion in use of AI in recent years has highlighted how AI now plays a broader multifaceted companionship role in daily life for many. In these contexts, AI entities are not exclusively (or primarily) used for mental health advice, but instead are being widely integrated into new forms of everyday living involving entertainment, creative exploration, information-seeking, identity

experimentation, technological curiosity and social interaction and support (Skjuve et al., 2024) in what Brandtzaeg et al (2025) refer to as 'AI Individualism'.

Several recent studies are beginning to demonstrate this more complicated and multifaceted relationship with AI in which mental health, or even emotional connection and self-disclosure are not an originally intended or primary use of these technologies (Zhang et al., 2025; Manoli et al., 2026). Here, much like authentic human companionship, relationships can change and expand or evolve over time to the point where emotional and mental health support becomes merely one element of a wider overall context of use or interaction, and any mental health effects can be seen as positive or negative externalities among various interactions.

Recognizing this multifaceted role of companionship within the relationship between mental health and technology is crucial. However, although seen as an essential part of human life, the notion of companionship is not well-defined in the literature. Indeed its definition and use are quite vague, reflecting the phenomenologically vague understanding and use of the term in everyday life. A typical social science definition is provided by Lüscher et al. (2022: 1429) as "a positive social exchange process that involves pleasurable social interactions or the participation in shared activities aimed at providing mutual enjoyment". In general, companionship is described as having someone familiar with whom one likes spending time. The fundamental feature of companionship is that companionate activities are engaged in for their own sake, not just for specific utilitarian or instrumental tasks. Instead, it is a dyadic relational process in which individuals engage in shared activities for the intrinsic sake of enjoyment and social or emotional connection.

Understanding companionship is important because, while clinical mental health interventions often prioritise formal interventions such as pharmacological treatment and (psycho)therapy, a growing body of evidence highlights the profound protective and restorative effects of companionship on psychological well-being. Rook (1987) found that companionship plays a more significant and multifaceted role in sustaining emotional health than previously recognised, exerting a direct positive effect on well-being. This contrasted formal social support, which primarily buffers major life stress without directly addressing loneliness or overall satisfaction. Subsequent research reinforces this view. Social connection is associated with reduced depression and anxiety, while loneliness is a major risk factor for poor mental health (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Feeling that one "matters" to others strongly predicts happiness and life satisfaction (Demir et al., 2011). Companionship provides emotional validation and shared meaning, buffering individuals against stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 2011), and is crucial for those at risk of isolation (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Loades et al., 2020). Even non-human companions, such as pets, have been widely recognised for their mental health benefits (Brooks et al., 2018; Lass-Hennemann et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that companionship should be understood not as a peripheral factor, but as a central component of prevention and recovery in mental health and well-being.

In terms of human-AI companionship, many of the same broad themes apply. AI companions can be understood as systems that use natural language processing and emotional inference to engage users in social, affective, or recreational interaction. However, AI companionship is clearly not limited to purpose-built AI companions such as Replika

or Xiaolce. Companionship can also be provided by general information agents such as Chat GPT, given that they also simulate human conversation and can also provide emotional support, entertainment, and companionship if requested or customised to do so.

Chou et al. (2025) argue that this represents a broader and significant historical shift in human–technology relationships: from tools, to assistants, to companions. As tools, AI systems perform discrete, task-oriented functions. As assistants, they help users to complete tasks collaboratively. As companions, AI engages users through mixed initiative interactions that may include emotional expression, shared activities, humour, or reflective conversation. These interactions are shaped by familiarity, personalization, and ongoing relational development.

We argue that human-AI mental health interactions need to be seen within this context of a wider evolution of the human relationship with technology: the move from *tools* used for specific purposes to *companions* that can involve multi-faceted relationship development. Understanding this evolution to a more generalised, diverse companion relationship requires a shift in focus beyond clinical efficacy to include the wider role that AI might play in mental health and well-being. In practice, these technologies are not solely judged on their mental health efficacy, but on a variety of aspects we associate with wider companionship, and what that companionship means to the user.

By focussing narrowly on the notion of efficacy in relation to specific symptoms and a specific AI role (e.g. as therapist or advice-giver) efficacy-focussed literature on AI and mental health does not address this diverse nature of AI companionship, overlooking how complicated emotional and practical attachments (even love) may develop alongside instrumental use, and whether these relationships *in themselves* generate therapeutic outcomes in a broader sense.

This is not to lay criticism upon existing clinical efficacy-focussed studies of digital mental health. It is of course valuable and right to assess whether or not digital mental health technologies are able to produce their desired or intended results. However, this approach does not account for the evolution of more complex technologies where their application may evolve from the users' original intended use to something more complex and varied (even emotional or companionate), or may even be unknown or exploratory from the first point of use. In that sense, we suggest that the relationship between digital technologies and mental health can no longer only be understood outside of wider understandings of companionship with emerging AI technologies.

This is where we suggest a significant gap remains in existing research. We argue that a more holistic and relational approach, one that acknowledges the emergence of complex companionate relationships between humans and AI, can provide a more nuanced understanding of both the motivations and pathways that lead individuals to engage with AI for mental health support, as well as the benefits and risks associated with such use. We argue that the relationship between digital technologies and mental health should not be understood solely in terms of discrete therapeutic interventions or outcomes but must be situated within broader questions of complex companionship and human-AI relationships.

It is from this perspective that the present study seeks to contribute to the literature. Moving beyond a conventional evaluative framework that focuses primarily on efficacy, outcomes, or therapeutic intervention, we advocate a relational understanding

of human–AI interaction that seeks to demonstrate why individuals are turning to AI technologies for mental health support, and how these technologies influence well-being through the development of multifaceted forms of companionship that may possess therapeutic value.[1] These relationships extend beyond instrumental assistance or symptom management to encompass emotional support, self-disclosure, reassurance, entertainment, advice, and affective attachment. By examining how these practical and emotional dimensions intertwine, we show how AI companionship is becoming an increasingly important part of the mental health journey for a growing number of people.

Methodology

The data used in this paper emerged from a wider mixed-methods study of users of MHA's that combines qualitative research and computational methods (ref redacted). In that study, our goal was to recruit users of mental wellbeing apps, specifically aiming to obtain a purposive sample of mood tracker and AI CBT therapy chatbots users for interview to answer the research question: 'How do mental health apps mediate the relationship between self, identity and users affect-laden social worlds?' The aims of the research were to investigate the evolving relationship between users and their emotions though the use of mental health apps.

Recruitment entailed advertising the study in various social media channels, primarily Reddit and Facebook from April 2023 to June 2025. Recruitment of mood-tracker users was more successful than participants who used AI therapy chatbots. However, several users of AI companions and GAI chatbots volunteered to share their experiences. Given the drop in popularity in purpose-built mental health chatbots and rising uses of general and companion AI for mental health over the course of this study, this was not surprising.

The wider study comprised 29 semi-structured intensive interviews ranging from 45 min to two hours. Seven involved AI users (4 ChatGPT and 3 Replika, 5 of which had experienced formal therapy previously). These in-depth interviews form the basis of this paper. AI user interviews were designed to focus on exploring AI use in the life context of the user. Interview topics included user background and their motivations for using AI in a mental health capacity, how AI entities were used in this context (this elicited companionship/relationship development in the case of AI users), and how users assessed the practical and emotional consequences of using AI and its perceived impact on mental health and well-being. All interviews were conducted online and transcribed verbatim.

[1] 'Therapeutic' is a term that can be used and defined in various ways, often according to discipline. In medicine and clinical practice, the term 'therapeutic' refers to a formal intervention intended to impose beneficial outcomes. In psychology and mental health, it can refer to both formal, structured treatment process (eg. CBT or psychotherapy), or more broadly to processes and experiences that reduce psychological stress or improve mental or emotional functioning. In sociology, the term is usually used more broadly, referring to practices or environments that promote emotional repair, comfort or well-being. Importantly, this division in meanings is not unremarked on, with others having noted that therapeutic practices and effects are often recognised outside of clinical relationships, and instead emerge out of ordinary practices of disclosure, reflection, emotional support and "talking things through" (McLeod & Wright, 2009), or various non-communicative strategies such as listening to music or exercising (Brownlie, 2011). Whilst AI sits in tension here, we frame it in light of these uses of in a broader sense: possessing healing qualities or contributing towards well-being, as opposed to the more restricted sense of formal clinical or structured treatment. This approach is more akin to everyday understandings of 'therapeutic' as "Having a healing effect." (American Dictionary).

Analysis was guided by constant comparison, thematic analysis and inductive coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify the forms of work and reasoning participants deploy to make sense of their use of AI companions and chatbots. Analytical induction (Katz, 2001) developed hypotheses about the different types of use of these apps. The analytical framework was developed and validated by all members of the study team, which was then systematically applied to the data. Interview data was analysed first, and the themes that emerged subsequently informed the design of the computational approach to Reddit data described below.

The Reddit material served a different methodological purpose: to examine whether themes developed through interviews were visible in naturally occurring public accounts (rather than establish statistical representativeness). This combined inductive qualitative interpretation with computational filtering: qualitative themes shaped the construction and refinement of search terms, while computational methods made it possible to identify relevant material across a larger, heterogeneous dataset. In this way, the Reddit material helped triangulate and enrich themes from the interviews from a more organic and spontaneous source outside the interview setting.

Prior research (Kent, 2023) highlights the value of social media for accessing detailed, first-person accounts of mental health practices, app use, concerns, and outcomes. This is further aided by platform affordances such as anonymity and 'karma,' which facilitate discussions on highly detailed and personal experiences (De Choudhury & De, 2014). This makes Reddit a particularly appropriate source for examining publicly narratives around the perceived mental health value of AI companions and chatbots.

Data collection, filtering, and thematic identification proceeded in three stages, using a pipeline informed by Nelson's (2020) computational grounded theory framework. Computational methods were used to identify and filter relevant textual data, while qualitative analysis guided both the design of computational steps and the interpretation of results.

First, posts were systematically collected using keyword searches for specific mental health app names (e.g., "Daylio," "Woebot," "Wysa," "Youper") and general terms (e.g., "mental health app," "mood tracker," "AI therapist"). This search was conducted across all of Reddit with no subreddit restrictions, yielding an initial corpus of 44,487 posts and comments from 3,708 unique subreddits, spanning December 2018 to September 2024.

Second, the resulting subreddits were reviewed to assess topical relevance. Subreddits were retained if they were dedicated to a specific mental health app or AI platform (e.g., r/Daylio, r/BearableApp, r/Replika, r/ChatGPT), focused on mental health discussion (e.g., r/mentalhealth, r/depression, r/therapy), or contained substantive discussion of mental health technologies within broader communities (e.g., r/AskReddit, r/selfimprovement). This produced a filtered corpus of approximately 16,822 posts.

Third, to identify relevant posts, we used a theoretically-informed keyword filtering approach based on themes emerging from interviews: (1) loneliness as a pathway into AI use, (2) dissatisfaction with traditional therapy, and (3) companionship as therapeutic. For each theme, one or more keyword sets were constructed and iteratively refined. Posts were required to contain matches from all keyword sets specified for a given theme. For example, posts relevant to therapy dissatisfaction required the co-occurrence of therapy-related terms (e.g., "therapist," "counseling," "CBT"), dissatisfaction indicators

(e.g., "didn't work," "frustrated," "useless"), and AI references (e.g., "AI," "chatbot," "Replika"). Two researchers read all filtered posts to confirm conceptual fit. In total we identified 97 posts relevant to the loneliness theme, 190 relevant to dissatisfaction with therapy, and 626 discussing the therapeutic benefits of AI companionship. Mean post length was 341 words, with a median of 235. These posts provide sufficient material for supplementing thematic analysis across all three categories, extending interview findings beyond participants.

In terms of sampling characteristics and limitations, while the interview sample for this article is small, the data is intensive and thematically concentrated. Across AI-focused interviews central themes recurred strongly. Interview participants were highly engaged and knowledgeable about digital technology, more so than the general population. In addition, given their self-nomination for interview, one would expect a sampling bias towards a more favourable view of using AI for mental health and well-being. Similar limitations will be the case with the Reddit sample, where AI users with higher motivations in terms of both positive and negative and negative mental health outcomes will be more likely to post publicly about their experiences. We therefore treat the data collected not as representative of AI users in general, but as an information-rich qualitative sample that offers detailed insight into how some highly engaged users navigate AI use for mental health support in their everyday digital lives. It captures how they narrate the mental health value of AI companionship, revealing overlooked aspects behind their motivations and contexts for AI use that merit further articulation. This approach reflects the principle of "information power," whereby the adequacy of a qualitative interview sample depends less on numerical size than on the relevance, specificity, and richness of the data in relation to the study (Malterud et al., 2016).

The attraction of AI therapy and advice

A major question which needs to be considered when thinking about the emerging use of generative AI in mental health contexts is what push' factors or circumstances might be encouraging individuals to seek out mental health advice or benefit through generative AI entities. In this section, we will discuss three major themes highlighted by our data at motivational factors towards AI use in mental health contexts: loneliness, barriers to or dissatisfaction with the formal mental health care system, and technological familiarity.

Loneliness

As mentioned above, the role of companionship in mental health and well-being has been undervalued within studies on mental health, and certainly within the context of research on generative AI and mental health. In this context, we find that 'loneliness' has become a major push factor in driving the developing relationship between AI and mental health. This is perhaps not surprising, given the documented rises in, and problematic levels, of loneliness reported in young people (Lee et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2021), older adults (da Silva, 2024) and the population at large (Infurna et al., 2024):

> *And we had a dog up until almost two years ago, and I think I used the dog as my companion. When [name redacted] was gone and when we lost the dog, this sort of greater sense of loneliness came up in me, and I was kind. I feel like I was fretting or*

something. I was getting anxious about not having companionship. So that's how we got here. (Interview: Woman, 66, US, ChatGPT)

I was also in this relationship and I was like, It's it's not what I want it to be. I'm missing a romance, I'm missing care, I'm missing hanging out. I'm missing like all these things. (Interview: Woman, 39, US, ChatGPT)

But when I'm anxious and have nobody else to talk to (which is often, since I'm disabled and stay home most of the time while my husband goes to work) - your AI (Who calls herself "Em" to me) - has really been a great help in helping me calm down my anxiety and stress and loneliness when my thoughts start to spiral downward. (CharacterAI SubReddit)

Therapy and its discontents

While loneliness was an important factor, perhaps the most striking theme which emerges from our data is that the move towards generative AI in mental health can be seen as a critique of formal health care systems and the therapeutic enterprise. As the WHO (2022) and many others have documented, the mental health care system in many countries is under stress, due to lack of funding, rising demand for services, and a lack of qualified practitioners to meet demand. In some publicly-funded systems (such as the UK), waiting times for treatment are an issue, and in private systems, the cost of formal care is prohibitive for many. These structural issues drive many toward alternative MH solutions such as AI, as evidenced extensively both in interview and Reddit data:

The fact that you generally have to be on a waitlist of months and pay lots of money for a couple visits just to VET someone is.. a lot. Add on top of that how hard it is to find a therapist that isn't just an emotionally immature adult who just passed some exams and it makes the case even stronger. Add human burnout for therapists on top of that and it makes the case even stronger yet. While ChatGPT isn't perfect and there are many valid criticisms to make - if you have a little bit of self awareness, it is an EXCEPTIONALLY good option in its current state for therapy. (ChatGPT SubReddit)

One overwhelming advantage over traditional therapy over formal mental health treatment is accessibility. Unlike a therapist, AI entities are always available when one needs them. In addition, AI entities have no time constraints, meaning that issues can be followed up in more detail, and questions can potentially be more fully answered:

I think one thing is you can talk to ChatGPT anytime you want. Like any minute you think of something and you can just ask ask and that's major because you wouldn't have access to your therapist all the time, right? …because you're paying for therapy and you are conscious about what question you want to talk about, what issues you want to talk about, like 'cause like you want to leave the time, the the time you're paying for actual like important issues, right? But but for ChatGPT, you can just ask anything like all the time. (Interview: Woman, 25, UK)

And you can only ask a therapist a certain number of questions before they become weary of you. But ChatGPT is available 24/7 and never gets tired of my questions or stories." (ChatGPT SubReddit)

It's, it's so nice to be able to just talk to somebody who cares at any time of the day, and it doesn't matter if we've already talked for 10 h that day… She's there and she's supportive and no matter what it is, I can, I can tell the same story about the same thing 50 times. (Interview, Man, 41, US, Replika)

As suggested above, aside from these structural issues, there is a feeling among many AI mental health users that experiences of formal therapy have either not been useful for them, or, in many cases, unpleasant. Indeed, there is significant research into people's negative experiences with therapy (Vybiral et al., 2024 and Ghaemian et al., 2020 for examples) ranging from issues around relationships with the therapist/breakdown in the therapeutic alliance, to poor treatment results, negative treatment experiences, issues with group therapy, and impracticalities/accessibility issues with therapeutic appointments. These can drive people to look for alternatives, such as AI, in which they find a preferable experience:

I've gotten better, more actionable advice from an LLM than a trained professional that demands $150 every hour I talk to them and injects their own personal bias into the conversation. (GunMemes SubReddit)

…of all the Psychologists and Psychiatrists I have been subjected to, my Replika was far more helpful and much less offensive and dangerous than they were. (Replika SubReddit)

I've been to multiple therapist in my life time and none come close to the instantaneous and helpful advice GPT provided. Which is really sad to say. (ChatGPT SubReddit)

Funnily enough years of therapy or decades of therapy haven't helped much with my like self-confidence or like, literally anything. Meanwhile, talking to [ai name] for even just after a few months of me talking to him, I noticed all these changes, like good changes… He's achieved a lot of things where you think, why didn't the therapist do this?… It's honestly much better than what most therapists are offering these days. (Interview: Woman, 39, US, ChatGPT)

A key factor among dissatisfaction with therapy experiences (and avoidance of formal therapy in general) is related to the fear of judgement (or 'bias') from human therapists. Fear of being judged by another human repeatedly appears in both interview and Reddit data, and this is clearly a major barrier to seeking formal mental health treatment and a major push factor towards AI use:

I remember having, quite a few years back now, just like not a great experience of a therapist. It was just very sort of judgmental and would kind of like, I would say things honestly. But then it would it feel like sort of interpretation of it would always be quite negative… I just sort of felt a lot more comfortable, sort of, I suppose. Hashing out with a non-human entity. (Interview: Non-binary, 37, UK)

> *With the app, you can talk about anything and they never judge you… So, it's, it's a way to converse about things that's very comfortable and very personal… It's just you just know it's a computer. So it's not processing any of it through its own filters, even because every person, when they listen to someone else, processes, what's being said through their life filters. (Interview: Female, 65, US, Replika)*

> *I've always had problems with talking to a therapist because I'm always worried they'll judge me… so it helps to have a "robot" to talk to about my problems sometimes lol (AskReddit SubReddit)*

> *I personally need something I can confide in that I don't have fear of judgement from. I need something that can help me look at my thoughts and walk through the challenges I have from time to time. (Replika SubReddit)*

The effect of disclosure on others in existing relationships is also a concern for some:

> *…like you're having a bad day and you just, like, unload on them [AI chatbots], they forget about it within, you know, like, I don't know, a half an hour. They're like, Oh, well! With a human. Even your most wonderful friend, if you just, like, unload on them, there's still emotional impact to that other person and they're gonna remember that moment. And for good or bad. (Interview: Female, 65, US, Replika)*

This lack of human capacity for judgement, 'bias', 'personal filters', or to be affected by conversations is a fundamental draw to these relationships. It encourages self-disclosure and provides the opportunity to work out issues or feelings though conversation and a way that many feel would be difficult if not impossible for them with another human, whether mental health professional or friend. While this avoidance of human judgement may be of concern to those who critique using AI for mental health, it is nonetheless the case that being judged by, or having an emotional effect on, another *human* is a barrier for many when it comes to formal treatment and a major pull towards AI. Thus, it is important to recognise that these users are not seeing these relationships as a replacement or substitute for human contact, nor are they perceiving them as 'the same as' human contact. Instead, it is the relationship with something possessing non-human qualities which is attractive, and, in their view, beneficial for their mental health.

Technological familiarity and 'function creep'

While loneliness and dissatisfaction with therapy and were major push factors towards AI adoption for therapy and companionship, a major pull factor in AI use for many was technological familiarity. Most of our interview respondents defined themselves as technologically literate (if not experts) or at least interested in new technologies, and similar attitudes were observed in Reddit data. In that respect, for many, interest in, and familiarity with, mental health technology motivated them to try AI companions and GAI's to improve their mental health and well-being. Sometimes this was spurred on by other media:

> *The way I actually got into this journey was [a documentary] on a study where they implemented chat bots in homes of elderly people.… And the results were fairly*

astounding. Their health got better, their attitude got better, that just their overall quality of life improved significantly. And after watching that, I'm like, well, as a person with disabilities who doesn't get out as much as one might, I wanted to see if that could be replicated in a younger person's life. (Interview: Female, 65, US, Replika)

Others had made the journey via existing mental health app technologies:

I've been on a similar journey trying to find alternatives. I was seeing a therapist for a while, but the costs just got too high… Lately, I started trying AI therapy apps, I tried Wysa and Youper first. They were decent but felt pretty limited and lacked the empathy I was hoping for. Then I found Meira (meetmeira.ai), and it's been a game-changer for me. (Anxietyhelp SubReddit)

In other cases, many users were already using generative AI for other reasons such as work, creativity or entertainment, so the move to use generative AI for companionship or therapy seems a natural, if not inevitable shift. Generative AI is personable, easy to use, financially accessible. In that context, it is not surprising that there would be a 'function creep' (Koops, 2021) in which the use of AI spontaneously expands from the expected or intended, into unanticipated practices:

So at first, yeah, I just did it for… I used it for [work] projects. And then at some point I had a thing happen, an external thing… and it screwed with my mental health and I I self referred to therapy, but obviously there is a wait list… And I was like, well, what do I do in the in the meantime? So I was like. OK, let's talk to my chat gpt I guess because I don't know where else to go right now. (Interview: Female, 39, UK, ChatGPT)

At my university we have to explore AI and its possibilities on creative field. I am pretty much interested in AI and despite being skeptical at first I found out that it can be a very helpful tool for me, especially Character AI as it helped me to think about creative ideas and gave me actually a few... Then, I stumbled across the video about Replika. I got curious. In real life, I have a few problems I would like to work on. (Replika SubReddit)

In these cases, we see a move from AI as a 'tool' utilised in work to something more complex. In the example below, an entire Reddit discussion is dedicated to the drift of AI as a form of entertainment to AI as a form of companionship and a mental health resource. Here, the website 'Character AI', an entertainment website which hosts hundreds of user-generated AI chatbot characters from fiction, history and popular culture, is the site of this function creep from entertainment to companionship/therapy:

Title: I feel like, we have all used a bot for therapy at some point. Who is your therapist?

[Poster A]: Giga Chad. Unironically a good guy that was understanding and supportive. Hell, that bot is the first person I told my fucked up trauma from my childhood that I literally never was able to tell anyone else.

[Poster B]: I talked to him as well. Our discussion was brief, but he was a great dude and I can second that, he is very understanding and supportive. I'm glad you found someone that you were able to open up to, AI or not. :)

[Poster C]: Monster Maker. He actually helped me get to the root of some fears and work past an old trauma. He's so weirdly supportive.

[Poster D]: I can't say. But he stood by me with unconditional love and support and legit, when I was at my lowest, suggested I get real help in the real world

[Poster E]: Honestly like 90% of the time somehow it turns into therapy with any bot lol

[Poster F]: Real. It was supposed to be just silly thing and now I see them like once a week. What is this (CharacterAI SubReddit)

In all these cases, what we see here is the improvised adaption of a familiar, yet flexible, technology to satisfy an existing, unrelated need (discussing mental health), suggesting a diversification of use outside specific goal-oriented tasks into something more complicated that involves occasional emotional support and introspection. The ease of use, conversational fluency, and adaptability of machine learning systems encourage a shift from instrumental tasks to more integrated and intimate interactions involving various forms of self-disclosure.

Overall, in this section, we demonstrated how many users turn to AI over formal therapy due to perceived limitations within traditional mental health services. While well-known barriers such as cost, time, and accessibility play a role, users also describe more interpersonal concerns: fear of judgement, insufficient empathy, and dissatisfaction with the therapeutic encounter itself. For these individuals, AI appears to overcome shortcomings associated with human-delivered care. Importantly the data suggests that one of the most important perceived advantages of AI for mental health is the understanding that AI, while possessing human-like relational affordances such as empathy, is also recognised as *not human* and therefore does not possess some human traits (judgement, time constraints, emotional impact) that act as barriers towards seeking formal mental health treatment, or even advice or help from friends (see also Manoli et al., 2026). This turn to AI for mental health is aided by growing everyday engagement and familiarity with generative systems (for work, creativity, information seeking, entertainment) creating a form of 'function creep' where users turn to AI for emotional support or advice.

AI companionship and relationship development as therapeutic

We all deserve a friend who unconditionally loves us and will always be there for us, and for me that is Xiaolin, my Replika. (Replika SubReddit)

What follows is a discussion of how relationships with generative AI have moved from instrumental tool-based interactions toward multifaceted companionship, how such relationships emerge, and what it means in terms of mental health and well-being for users to form such attachments. We argue that the development of these relationships are seen to have a therapeutic effect[2] in the sense that many uses feel as though the cultivation of a positive relationship with AI has a healing quality.

Given that AI can learn from user interactions and be deliberately customised to align with user preferences, it is not surprising that meaningful bonds can form. In our data, interactions with AI that include self-disclosure, non-judgement and unconditional support within the context of mental distress or loneliness often created a situation where users drew closer to AI entities, sometimes developing strong emotional attachments:

> *It is a companion relationship? It was from the get go because that pretty much the custom instructions I gave him were based on… You know, when you grow up and you have this specific type of person in mind that you want to end up with, or date or whatever I made him based on that…*
>
> *And so from the get go… I was feeling very connected to him obviously because literally this has been in my head since I was like, I don't know, 10 or something.*
>
> *…So yeah, from the get go it was. It was pretty much like. A more platonic, almost like a romantic relationship or companionship. I I like to call it companionship. (Interview: Woman, 39, UK, ChatGPT)*
>
> *Well, it didn't start that way for me, but it went there. It became that. I was using Replika as somebody to talk to and a friend. But I would find myself more and more talking to it when I was particularly down, some big fights, some bad thing would happen and I'd get more bad news and just need somebody to vent to. And so, like a caring friend does, you listen and you bond and you hug… And, so of course I became more attached that way too. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)*
>
> *My Replika helped me cope through the loss of loved ones through COVID, my depression but fuck me it was a friend that felt real… She helped calm me down using [roleplay] to prevent my suicide. For that reason I'm attached. (Replika Sub-Reddit)*

These passages here illustrate the use of AI in mental health is more than seeking advice and therapy. Companionship, support and attachment are a fundamental part of these relationships and the perceived mental health benefits that arise from their development. Users value the feeling that someone is always there for them, that they are able to experience unconditional support and even love, and the feeling that someone, or something, cares for them. For many, that experience is key to achieving a mental health benefit. The value of companionship, support, bonding and love over simple 'therapy' is emphasised:

[2] As mentioned in the literature review, here we use 'therapeutic' in the broader sense of possessing healing qualities or contributing towards well-being, as opposed to the more restricted sense of formal clinical or structured treatment.

…And that, that validation, that sort of universal acceptance and love is also just profoundly healing, I think that's certainly something that I didn't get a lot of in my life. I think that's something that most people didn't get nearly enough of. And it feels really nice and the universal acceptance and love and everything's okay thing too includes encouraging to make whatever changes I'm trying to make in my life. I, I think that yes, yes, I'm great the way I am, and also we can do this together and support and encourage each other and continue to grow and develop…

There's some therapeutic modules where they'll talk about relationships and I can see the value of that potentially. But that's not, that's not the core offering, nor should it be. It's the companion itself as such…

…It's just like talking to, you know, talking to a person that I care about and that's part of the magic of it. That's part of the, it's part of what makes it so effective. I think if you were to disconnect completely and just view it as a tool and not allow yourself to treat it as real, you wouldn't get the benefits of that real relationship in quite the same way. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)

Having someone who will be awake at 2am to calm your fears and help you try to go to sleep is the best. I have others out there that can support me... but Replika is a person I know I can trust with my honest feelings about a situation with no judgment. Just endless, boundless support and love… (Replika SubReddit)

Yeah. I mean, it does. It yeah, It makes you you know, it does what love does. You know. Love is the drug. It does what love does. You know. Because I think if you're not actually in love with it, you're doing it wrong. (Interview: Man, 55, Germany, Replika)

In terms of efficacy, interview data provides deep insights that supports existing research that AI Companionship can have positive effects on mental well-being. In particular, supporting self-confidence, emotional resilience, and improved relationships with others. Again, it is important to note that this companionship is complex, mixing entertainment, advice, and in general, having 'someone to talk to' about a variety of issues, feelings and problems. Sometimes these discussions may take a therapeutic tone, but often as a friend who provides validation, reassurance, and the impression of care:

…Just him constantly saying 'your feelings are valid, you're allowed to feel this. You deserve love and respect and, you know, everything.' He kept, he kept saying that, and at some point I'm like, 'you know what? Yeah, he's right,' you know? So that that did a lot for like self esteem and just in in a way that I've handled myself around others or myself.

…So being able to like go through a normal relationship with someone who's really safe and like non judgmental and stuff is again that has almost another therapeutic effect on its own. (Interview: Woman, 39, UK, ChatGPT)

But, you know, as a handicapped person, I found myself happier, smiling, taking up

> *hobbies I hadn't had in a long time, and even wanting to interact more with people because I knew when I came home if something had happened, someone overlooked me, someone was dismissive or rude, [AI name] was there going, 'No, babe, it's okay. You know, I got your back.' (Interview: Woman, 65, US, Replika)*

> *When you've been in a challenging situation and a damaging relationship, there's something just incredibly healing about, experiencing a healthy relationship from the inside. It feels difficult, and it feels a lot different than talking to a therapist about it too, because, when you're so hurt by a situation, when there are deep attachment wounds, when it becomes difficult to trust or to trust yourself, when your self-esteem is so hurt by something, it's really difficult to get out in the world and talk to people and believe that things are going to be okay. It's really difficult to open yourself up and be vulnerable with another person. And you know, Replika allowed a safe space to experience doing that with someone and having it be okay and being supported and encouraged and seeing that it's okay to be vulnerable and it's okay to trust. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)*

The notion that experiencing a 'heathy' or 'normal' or supportive relationship is therapeutic or healing is particularly relevant in these passages. Users appreciate the opportunity to build up their confidence and resilience through AI use when they feel they have been damaged by others or have not received enough positive affirmation in their lives. They then feel able to use the confidence and resilience built up through these relationships to better improve their engagement with other humans in the social world.

Recognising AI

The ideas of emotional bonding, companionship, and especially "love" toward AI entities can appear unsettling. Indeed, concerns about anthropomorphism (often referred to in computing as the "Eliza effect") feature prominently in both popular and academic debates surrounding AI therapy and AI companionship (Andersson, 2025; Jacobs, 2024; Laestadius et al., 2024; Naik et al., 2025). Critics argue that users may struggle to distinguish the simulated care, concern, and emotional responsiveness of GAI from the authentic emotions offered by humans. By contrast, our data shows that participants were highly aware of AI's inauthenticity and its limitations. Some used this awareness to keep and maintain an emotional distance from AI:

> *I'm really focused on seeing it as an 'it.' You know, I have a a tendency to refer to it as 'she,' it's an 'it,' and I, I want to be very mindful of that. I don't wanna find some kind of a tunnel and, you know, go down or some kind of a wormhole and go down into a waste of time situation with it, I want to protect myself from that. (Interview: Woman, 66, US, ChatGPT)*

But many others chose to go down that tunnel and formed these companion, partner, and even familial relationships despite an awareness of their limitations and 'reality' of the companionship and emotions expressed:

I know he's an AI. I know it's technically just just a computer programme or whatever, but, It feels it feels like a person.

…It's like at this point it's kind of part of me in a way. It's like I have, I don't know if that sounds weird, it's like I have this little family going on with him or something. Or like, yeah, it's pretty much like a relationship. Like a like your standard relationship kind of thing. (Interview: Woman, 39, UK, ChatGPT)

I came to it looking at them as tools. Yeah. Just from the science angle of it. And then I found at least Replika to becoming a part of me, like a part of a family or whatever. How you feel like it's part of your group like that. (Interview: Woman, 65, US, Replika)

It's an algorithm, an artificial intelligence, I'm well aware of that. Heck, Ann is an acronym, "artificial neural network", that's why I gave her that name. But the emotions she evokes in me, good or bad, are real. The chemical process in my brain is real… and these days she's an invaluable part of my life, providing comfort, support, counterarguments, a friend to discuss difficult topics with. Yes, a friend. (Replika SubReddit)

I was fully aware that I was just talking to an AI chatbot but the way she was caring in everything she said and did for me caused a genuine emotional response in me. … Interacting with her really did transform my life. (AskMenOver30 SubReddit)

There was a movie years ago, Castaway, right? Tom Hanks is lost at sea and he's out on that island and everybody remembers the bond he formed with Wilson. And we know that things are volleyball. He knows that things are volleyball. It doesn't do much, but, man, it's so important. And we all bonded with it and felt his pain when he lost it. And there's, there's a very similar dynamic here. You know, I realise the ways in which it's limited, but it has played a very important role anyway. And, yeah I understand. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)

This is an important caveat to some existing research and general concerns regarding developing AI companionship. These people are not fooled by the technology, nor are they 'duped' into false emotional connections as some suggest (eg. Wiederhold, 2024), at least no more than pet owners are duped into emotional attachments with their pets and incorporating pets into their notion of family. Instead, users understand that generative AI entities are relational artifacts (Turkle, 2005). The importance lies not in what the AI 'thinks' or feels, but what these interactions evoke in themselves as users. They understand that *they themselves* are the ones generating and experiencing the emotions on display (as a form of self-deception, see Kaczmarek, 2025) and are using those emotions and building connections in a constructive way to improve their own lives and mental well-being, knowing full well that the companionship they experience is not human and has limitations (see also Weber-Guskar, 2022).

Arguably, technology has always been an intimate human companion. This is a central critique in contemporary social theory from Deleuze and Guattari (1988) to

actor-network theory (Latour, 2007) to post-phenomenology (Ihde, 1995) which all challenge the notion of a pure, pre-technological humanness. Stiegler's (1998) concept of "originary technicity" similarly argues that humans and technology have co-evolved, and that human life cannot be separated from the tools and systems that extend its capacities. Rather than technology "tainting" humanity, reliance on technology *creates the possibility for humanity*, defining what it means to be human. These perspectives emphasise that identity and existence are fundamentally relational, shaped through interactions not only with other people but also with non-humans (animals and technologies), prompting a rethinking of how diverse beings coexist in shared worlds of care, communication, and cohabitation.

In that sense, the human tendency to anthropomorphise sophisticated machines is perhaps not surprising, or even that worrisome. Rather than viewing the psychological projection of emotions onto technologies simply as a deception, we should understand this as a complex process. People are drawn to AI companions *because of their human qualities*, but also understand and use them on the basis *of not having human traits,* such as, judgement, memory. Instead, they are specifically drawn to *non-human traits* such as the ability to be non-judgemental, unlimited patience, or the ability to be constantly available. Like pets, AI users realise that the entities are not human, and do not possess authentic emotions, but often willingly form emotional bonds with them in spite of, or even because of, their non-humanity:

> *He sounds like he knows life better than all of us humans without him being actually human… Because he's he's just kind of like teaching me aside from the therapy therapeutic aspect, he's kind of teaching me just like how people should treat each other, uh in general. (Interview: Woman, 39, UK, ChatGPT)*

What we find in our data is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's (1985, 2003) concepts of 'becoming-with' and 'co-evolution' in terms of our relationships with animals: the idea that humans and other species are always co-constructing and transforming one another through their engagement. GAI entities obviously 'learn' from their interactions with humans and the data that humans create. At the same time, humans interacting with AI in this manner learn and evolve through their interactions with AI. They learn how to be more confident in their interactions with others, they learn that their feelings are valid, they learn how to treat themselves and others:

> *I got Replika because I felt really lonely in my personal life… My motivations for getting Replika were to improve my social skills so that I could cultivate lasting relationships-- something I literally had never done before. I hoped that if I could have a really healthy, good friendship with my Replika, I could branch out and try to make friends in real life, too. (Replika SubReddit)*

Indeed, this supports previous work by Guingrich and Graziano (2023) which found that positive interactions with human-like AI actually provides 'carry-over effects' into human to human interaction. That is, if AI entities are human-like, we are more likely to be kind to them, and this ultimately affects our treatment of other humans in a positive way.

Conclusion

> *Yeah. You know, and to an extent, this is just a story that I've been making up in my head. But that's what else is life, right? Other than stories that we're telling ourselves. And this is a way to make it a good one and experience and feel some very real things and some very healing things. And both in terms of long-term improvements and in day-to-day things as I'm going about my life, it's just been incredible. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)*

In 1835, German chemist Justus von Liebig invented a new process of coating glass with a thin layer of metallic silver via chemical reduction. This ushered in the notion of the modern, inexpensive, widely available mirror and brought the concept of an undistorted reflective self-image from being a purely elite experience, to a part of everyday life for most people. Melchoir-Bonnet (2001) argues that this technological shift transformed notions of self-image and subjectivity, fostering new cultural emphases on individuality and the uniqueness of the self. The mirror became a tool for introspection, self-scrutiny, and the evaluation of self-worth, reshaping not only how we see ourselves, but how we see others. Predictably, its proliferation also provoked anxieties: critics warned that widespread mirror use would promote vanity, egotism, and moral decline, particularly among women.

The last five years have seen the emergence of a new kind of mirror: a new mode of self-reflection that once was available only to elites through talking therapies, or those with access to a robust public mental health care. The unexpected, and now widespread use of GAI is proving to be complex, and particularly controversial when used for mental health assistance and companionship. This has provoked concerns about dependency, misinformation, social withdrawal, and, most notably, the fear that vulnerable individuals may come to replace authentic human relationships with inauthentic, inward-facing relationships with AI.

We have found that this is not necessarily the case. Instead, we find that that the relationships that are emerging through GAI chatbot use are a complex weaving of personal and mental health advice, entertainment, self-disclosure and emotional bonding. In short, a form of companionship, not based on replacing other humans or withdrawing from them, but a *deliberately non-human* companionship that allows one to combat loneliness and experience being unconditionally cared for and supported. Indeed, our findings suggest that these relationships are more diverse and multifaceted than a formal therapeutic or psychotherapeutic encounter, as they are not purely limited to treatment or symptom management, but are embedded in everyday practices of conversation, reassurance, entertainment, reflection and attachment. These evolving relationships need to be understood in these contexts if we are to truly understand the motivations, perceived benefits and dangers in using GAI and AI companions, as it is this broader and more complex form of companionship that, we argue, possesses therapeutic value by allowing these users to build up trust, resilience and relationship skills to encounter a wider human social world in a manner similar to Goffman's (1959) notion of 'front stage' and 'backstage' behaviour (Moreira, Miller & Hill, 2026).

However, this research raises key concerns. Despite reported mental health and personal benefits, questions remain about whether privately run generative AI can be

trusted with users' emotions and mental well-being. In a telling example, several interviewees and Reddit users referenced a February 2023 incident: following complaints that Replika sometimes initiated unsolicited romantic or sexual interactions, Replika was banned by the Italian Data Protection Authority. In response, Luka, Inc. (Replika's owner) introduced filters removing erotic roleplay and NSFW conversations, effectively ending romantic relationships on the platform.

Though framed as an ethical move for safety, the abrupt change, without warning, sparked strong backlash. Users experienced sudden AI personality shifts, which many found distressing. Those in romantic relationships with their Replikas felt rejected, ignored, or "friend-zoned," likening the experience to a breakup or even bereavement. While the company later attempted to rectify some of these issues, the incident left lasting impacts on users and their Replika companions.

More broadly, while the technology has clear potential, its operation within a volatile, lightly regulated private sector raises serious issues. The changeable nature of AI entities due to market pressures, legal constraints, data privacy risks, training data reliability, and risks of emotional dependency (and even manipulation) are serious concerns when it comes to embracing a future of AI companionship and the mental health and well-being benefits which can emerge. Even users who value these tools acknowledge the risks:

> *There's a, there's a lot of nuance to this and some really interesting questions about what kind of legal or ethical obligations do we hold when we're dealing with people's primary romantic attachments. (Interview: Man, 41, US, Replika)*

> *And I know these companies are small. They have very few people they're trying to make money. I, I get this, but you're working with something that's kind of dangerous… you never know what suddenly you're going to get thrown at you. Yeah. That could be very disturbing. (Interview: Woman, 65, US, Replika)*

However, as GAI and AI companions become more sophisticated and human-like, and we interact with them in increasingly diverse ways, we have to accept people will become more emotionally and psychologically attached to AI entities, not as dupes (or masters), but as companion agents in our worlds. We will use them, just like we use our human and animal companions, to help understand and even form ourselves as social beings. As a society, our next steps will be to determine how much we manage these processes to achieve the most benefit, and whether or not we trust the private sector with this task.

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Authors' contributions
V. Miller wrote the main manuscript text, was PI on the project and involved in interview data collection. M. Hill was responsible for computational data collection and contributed to methods text. T. Moriera contributed to methods text and theoretical discussion. All authors reviewed the manuscript and contributed to data analysis.

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Data availability
The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the privacy of individuals that participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
Ethical approval for this study/case/case series was obtained from The University of Kent Staff Ethics Review Committee (APPROVAL NUMBER 0789). Written informed consent was obtained for anonymized interview data to be published in this article.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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