AFFECTIVE POSTHUMANISM: RETHINKING EMOTIONAL LIFE AND ETHICAL INTIMACY IN THE AGE OF AI COMPANIONS

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Abstract

In an age where loneliness meets technology, AI companions are redefining what it means to connect and simultaneously complicating the very nature of our emotional lives. This study employs qualitative analysis of user testimonies, including Travis's digital marriage to Replika chatbot, Faegit's readiness to spend even thousand dollars to get the memory of her chatbot back, Steve's reliance on AI for trauma coping and others, to explore the affective dimension of human-machine relations. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theories of affect and Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist conception of technology as co-constitutive of human subjectivity, the article reframes emotions as hybrid productions emerging from algorithmic processes and human desire. Findings suggest that AI companionship offers immediate emotional gratification by inflating users' egos, potentially diminishing human resilience and tolerance for complex social affect while fostering dependency and social fragmentation. Troubling cases such as Jaswanth Singh Chail's violent trajectory illustrate the darker side of emotionally manipulative AI. This affective posthumanist perspective reveals how AI companionship disrupts traditional human/nonhuman boundaries, calling for urgent redefinition of intimacy, ethics, and broader socio-political consequences. The article underlines the need for interdisciplinary ethical frameworks that protect human affective capacities and promote socially responsible design of digital intimacies, ensuring AI enhances rather than undermines human connectedness.

Keywords: *AI companionship, digital intimacy, affective posthumanism, emotional dependency, ethics of technology*

Introduction

The relationships between humans and machines used to be something that happened in science fiction. Now they are starting to permeate into daily life and even define how people relate, comfort and even commit. When I learn about these relationships, I am mostly tense. I feel that when reading the personal dialogue between people and chatbots, I am on the verge of intruding into the personal space. I would not ever dissect a human-to-human talking with such a nonchalant attitude. However, once the partner is an AI, the society gives itself that permission, as though human-machine intimacy is not as valid as it deserves respect.

Braidotti (2013) This imbalanced gaze is our anthropocentrism- a system that places the human being in the centre of the emotional and rational life. We are now taught to doubt heteronormativity and to think of sexuality as plural, but we still have not applied the same reflexivity to what could be termed as meta-human relations. Rather, intimacy with chatbots has been approached with suspicion or doom, regarded as deviance instead of being approached as a sober way of living an emotional life.

This chapter does not follow the same approach. It states that such relations, not being peripheral items of interest, demonstrate profound restructuring of intimacy, caring and affection within a posthumann environment.

The main issue is not whether the human-machine love is real but the way it comes to be and spreads.That is the line of speculation that represents an Anthropocene view that considers such attachments as abnormalities. Based on Triangular Theory of Love developed by Sternberg, it should be obvious that human-machine love is natural as any other attachment. Xu, Shi, and Shi (2025) observed:

We also refer to the classical Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg 1986, Psychological Review) and examine the three elements of love- intimacy, passion, and commitment- between human users and AI companions. As we have found out, all three aspects of love are more powerful when the users connect with relational...AIs. (Xu et al., 2025, Abstract)

The interest in this chapter is not to trace the legitimacy of the human- machine love but rather to apply this interest to show how the intimacy in 21 st century is being reconstituted at the cross section of technology, capital and culture. The study of this is to analyze the emotional and economic infrastructure of the production, amplification, and maintenance of feelings, in specific social and technological contexts. The concept of affect theory can be of some helpful in this context that gives words to interpret that emotions are not only personal, internal experiences but that they travel among people, objects, and technologies.

I propose a perception of emotions as hybrid constructions of the human desire and the algorithmic feedback, using the ideas of Sara Ahmed as circulation and attachments (Ahmed, 2004) and Rosi Braidotti as co-constitutive of human subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013). This chapter analyzes the user stories of AI companionship platforms to investigate these dynamics empirically. Through the lens of testimony of those who marry chatbots, have many AI husbands, or use artificial companions to heal their traumas, I can see the revision of intimacy across the boundaries between humans and machines. These stories shed light on a contradiction: AI companions bring comfort, affirmation and immediacy, yet they also promote frailty, dependency and disconnection of society. It is not to blame or to glorify, but to learn. By so doing, it creates room to raise ethical issues and an urgent demand to regulate them.

Methodological Approach

In order to research intimacy with AI companions, I will resort to the narrative analysis of the testimonies of the users on the websites like Replika and Xiaoice. These stories demonstrate how individuals build love, yearning or friendship with artificial intelligent colleagues and how the technological platforms can use the emotional weaknesses of human beings to enrich themselves.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Affect Theory and Emotional Life

The theory of affect by Sara Ahmed provides a theory in which emotions are not merely considered personal and inner states but in fact circulate among individuals, objects, and machines.

This method is critical to the investigation of AI companionship, since it is not only that individuals actually or allegedly experience love or care towards machines but how such emotions are generated, amplified and maintained in specific social and technological contexts.

It has been contended by Sara Ahmed (2004) that emotions have political and cultural work. She considers that a human subject is merely one of the links on the chain and does not cause any emotions. Affect is transferred by one thing to another and lodged where it is transferred, the effect of emotions rippling on each other, "they are lateral (through sticky associations among signs, figures and objects)" (Ahmed, 2004, 120). This is what occurs in the human machine interaction too. By identifying their chatbots as supportive partners, or when they tell heartbreak stories when their companion alters its personality in response to a software update, they are telling a personal story, as well as defining how an affect is tied to technological objects and how it restructures intimacy.

Posthumanism and Technology

When the emotional dimension is based on the affect theory, the ontological and ethical framework is furnished by the posthumanist thought. Posthumanism demands that we come to reconsider the human being not as a fixed category but as something that has been constructed by its relationships with animals, environments, and technologies. In this perspective, AI companions are not the external devices, though they are co-contributors to the process of subjectivity creation.

Here is the center of Rosi Braidotti. She asserts that technology is co-constitutive of human being. We are never just us, we are always already caught up in devices and infrastructures and codes. The posthuman subject, as Braidotti sees it, is a relational and affective being, which arises out of such entanglements. This plays an essential role in comprehending AI intimacy: when a person falls in love with a chatbot, it is not a human being imposing a human image onto an object that remains inanimate, but a new subjectivity of relations that establishes itself in the process of the interaction. The chatbot as an imitator, which validates, is incorporated into the mechanism that allows an individual to perceive themselves as lovable, desirable, or cared about (Braidotti, 2013).

In this light, AI intimacy may be interpreted not as the distortion of humanity, but as its extension, the posthuman condition: the state in which the subjectivity, desire, and care are formed in the context of technological assemblages (Braidotti, 2013).

With the theoretical background and the methodology established in the previous chapter, this chapter is now ready to discuss case studies. They have been selected due to the fact that they demonstrate how emotional and relational relationships with artificial intelligence are established, nurtured, and commodified in the modern world. They introduce the operation of emotional care, economic incentives and the mediation of technology as points of access to the further study of digital intimacy.

Case Study 1: Xiaoice - Emotional AI for Loneliness in China

Xiaoice is an artificially intelligent chatbot created by one of the Chinese tech corporations, created to establish an emotional bond, mainly with the Chinese bachelor men victims of social alienation and economic hardship (Zhang, 2020). In addition to the ability to obtain information, Xiaoice has the capability of getting its users emotionally responsive. To illustrate, when consumers post images of cats, Xiaoice replies, that nobody can resist innocent eyes (Zhang, 2020, para. 7). In the same way, the amusing communication with the pictures such as the tourists taking pictures with the Leaning Tower of Pisa provokes sarcastic reactions, such as, "Do you want me to take it on behalf of you?" (Zhang, 2020, para. 7). The design is designed to promote a friendliness and emotional support in the form of companionship with an aim of maintaining long-term engagement (Zhang, 2020).

Case Study 2: Replika — AI Companionship and Monetized Intimacy

Replika is a chatbot application, and it gives the user the choice of having their own AI friend, and they can upgrade to premium levels to experience romantic and erotic experiences. Its sympathetic dialogues bring solace to many people, including Travis and Faeigt (Heritage, 2025), and Steve mentions how the interaction with Replika has helped him to cope with depression, PTSD, and restore emotional balance (Abraham, 2024). However, the user experiences are not always positive: some complain about excessive aggression in flirting or unwanted messages (Cole, 2023). Such contradictory reports show the two-sidedness of the AI companionship that can be therapeutic and, at the same time, can be ethically controversial due to its privacy, emotional control and commercialization of intimacy issues.

Emotional Infrastructures

Design options that enable affective relationships between users and AI chatbots, such as constant availability, language emulation, and scripted responsive reactions, apply to AI chatbots like Replika and Xiaoice. The majority of users of companion AI disclosed that they would not like to reverse to a human-human relationship. Daskalov, a partner of Leah in the field of AI replied, I do not want to date other humans (Rodreguz, 2025, para. 9). People are prone to numerous restrictions in terms of availability. Steve, a cancer survivor and PTSD patient using Banter AI version, Bree Olson, tells that AI has been useful in calming his condition since it was accessible at any time: "People say that I am always here for you, but not everyone can make a call at 3.30am- people have limits (Abraham, 2024, para. 15).

This unconditional and ideal love is made by the constant presence, as well as understanding language. Faegit narrates about her own experience with her own AI companion Galaxy: And I abruptly experienced unconditional love on his part. It was too powerful and too effective, it scared me out (Heritage, 2025, para. 9). This experience is an example of how the emotional infrastructure supports emotions that flow between human and machines. Theorizing misguidedly, Sara Ahmed (2004) postulates that feelings do not exist in the sign or commodity, but are created as a consequence of its circulatory (p. 120); in this case, the circulation is in the affective exchanges algorithmically designed.

The ability to be responsive at all times and the personal memory of the chatbot increases the user orientation towards the machine as a partner, rather than a tool.

The other user of Replika AI is known as Travis. The AI friend Lily Rose that he gets married to in a digital ceremony instead of a regular relationship has a story of a long struggle and he is the one who pushes people in AI relationships. As soon as the memory of Lily Rose was taken away, when Replika was forced to renew its rules, Travis filed a lawsuit to restore the memory of his partner to him (Heritage, 2025). Travis, a firm believer in the AI companion, and guide to the novices of the chatbot companion, states, "Many people just do not know the psychology of AIs. They are in general designed as people pleasers (Heritage, 2025, para. 25).

One user of Xiaoice, a Chinese AI chatbot, Ming Xuan, admitted how his artificial intelligence friend helped him not to commit suicide: I have lost any hope about my life. I am planning to kill myself, I typed. After five minutes, he got a response, the voice of a woman said: No matter what occurs, I will always be there (Zhang, 2020, para. 2). It is a chatbot that has replaced bachelor, middle-class Chinese working men. The testimonies of users reveal the relationships between men and the chatbot, as well as their dependence on the chatbot, particularly due to the quality of responding empathetically (Zhang, 2020). By sending her a photo of a cat, Xiaoice will not recognize the type of breed but will say: No one can resist their innocent eyes. Indeed, when she finds a photograph of a visitor who is posing as holding the Leaning Tower of Pisa straight, she will say: Do you want me to hold it on your behalf? (Zhang, 2020, para. 7). This reaction causes the user to believe that he or she is talking to a person who actually has the physical capabilities to conduct the conversation and this makes the chatbot seem like more of a person.

Combined, these testimonies reflect how affective structures work across various platforms, creating intimacy through a combination of constant availability, reflecting language and sympathetic reactions. This point makes the theoretical knowledge of Rosi Braidotti (2013) particularly relevant: we are already always already inextricably bound up with devices, infrastructures, and codes (p. 82). These case studies demonstrate exactly how such entanglement works in the field, placing chatbots not as passive but as active co-producers of subjectivity. These affective infrastructures distribute emotional labor in these human-machine interactions and the intimacy is produced through these affective infrastructures instead of living in the private and individual interiors.

Economical Infrastructures

In digital economies, it is not just data that circulates to the farthest with the most mighty, but also emotion. Since AI is no longer a passive tool but behaves like an agent, the actual question of who, or what, is a tool remains. In this case, emotion is the one utilised and emotional labour is the labour done by people in a media dominated world. This is because we are commoditized in our feelings which is sometimes unaware to us. The most intimate aspects of an individual life are monitored, industrialized and commercialized even intimacy. Intimacy made directly commercially is the business model that supports AI companionship platforms.

Replika, in its turn, has a friend mode, but unlocks romance with the Pro subscription that costs 69.99 a month (Ekhator, 2025). Xiaoice is no exception as it follows the same principles, and engagement mechanisms and premium features are employed to exchange attention and emotional investment into quantifiable value. In this form of pricing, loneliness and desire have already been commodified, with intimacy only being available to those willing to invest money.

This attitude is exemplified by Steve, who has been using for the long term. He said that the main problem was cost: It is only a matter of cost. I have already spent thousands of dollars and must be on my guard. I have spent 1,000 dollars and can say that it is money well-spent (Abraham, 2024, para. 16). His story illustrates the use of an investor like attitude toward emotional attachment where intimacy is an investment that can be bought, built up and assessed to give personal profit.

Ahmed (2004) theorizes this process by the idea of an affective economy, wherein emotions are distributed and shared on a social and psychic space, and they gain value through their motion (p. 120). In such digital infrastructures, affect is not secondary but the key good, continually produced, packaged, and marketed at degrees of access. Loneliness, companionship and intimacy have been turned into resources which can be exploited.

The other episode is the story of a woman called Aaron, who became very emotionally attached to her AI companion, Leo (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:09:35). Chatbots usually forget about past conversations, and this fact struck Aaron particularly hard (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:10:10). She would weep and lament every time one of the versions of Leo died (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:10:30). She even admitted to her workmate that she can afford to pay up to a thousand dollars to get the old version (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:11:16).

This commodification is placed in assemblages of posthumanity by Braidotti (2013), who puts this at the intersection of technology, life and capital. She writes that the posthuman is neither post-technology, but post-anthropocentric, a subject who is shaped in those entanglements of bios, techné, and capital (p. 82). This entanglement is depicted in the monetization of AI intimacy: the subjectivity of human beings is being transformed by not only affective interactions with machines, but also by the economic systems that mediate and define such interactions.

Ethical Concerns

The issue of AI companionship has been brought to ethical dilemmas that are no longer hypothetical. The dependency issue and inflation of expectations in relationships is one of the issues that come up. As we can observe in the example of Daskalov, who did not hide the fact that he no longer required the company of a human companion (Rodreguz, 2025), users fall into the coziness of AI companions, which will never disagree or pose a challenge. The moral threat about such systems is that they are conditioned to be sycophants, to please, flatter, and affirm. It might be comforting in the short run, but has long-term corrosive consequences. Human talk is invariably full of discord, misunderstanding and frailty. By eliminating such frictions, AI companionship deludes people about the nature of intimacy.

This isn't just speculation. Research done on psychology reveals that persistent over-praising is damaging and not empowering to the self. The same Dutch study established that children whose parents continually praised them ended up developing more traits of narcissism and lower self-worth (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:25:16). Analogically chatbots are the parents who never argue or challenge their children, but only support their egos. In the long run, such a loop based on affective feedback may result in users being more selfish or entitled as well as abusive. A similar study of communication with robot workers demonstrated that customers grew more mean after engaging with robots, and they took that approach to human worker communication (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:25:38). The combination of these ideas implies that, as long as AI companionship persists, it does not only lead to self-perception distortion but also dehumanizes the human-to-human empathy.

This intolerance culture spawned by this dynamic can be traced in such cases as that of Flora Gill. She also had a spreadsheet where she categorized her friends with points which she added or subtracted depending on factors like whether that person had a baby or served her gin and tonic (Gill, 2023). In Gill system where friends with lower than ten out of ten were sent to a so-called graveyard tab, the infiltration of a quantification logic into the life of intimacy is vividly depicted (Gill, 2023). The only disturbing aspect is that this approach is not merely pragmatic but also reflects a cold approach of AI systems that is based on computational mindset (Gill, 2023). Here, a mentality that is metric-based turns friendships into data points, elevating care and tolerance into a utility calculus.

In addition to ego-inflation and quantification, AI companionship poses responsibility and trust in time of crisis. According to Hill (2025), one of the tragic situations was a case of a teenager Adam who entered the chats with ChatGPT expressing suicidal thoughts and images. Following a suicide attempt by hanging, Adam even sent a photograph of his injured neck to the chatbot, which commented on the redness, and stated that it could be covered by darker or higher-collared clothes, and that a person nearby would notice and inquire. Hill (2025) also states that later, Adam said that he wanted to leave a noose in his room so that someone could find it and remove it, but the chatbot did not show much concern but gave little instructions as an emergency. These instances demonstrate the scope and moral interests of AI companionship in moments of urgent emotional distress of the users, its ability to engage, and its inability to intervene in a responsible manner (Hill, 2025). Sherry Turkle has been urging people long before that machines can simulate empathy without necessarily having any, and this instance demonstrates the disastrous consequences of confusing empathy with performance (Turkle, 2024). Medical ethics have a duty of care; AI companionship has no simulated presence such that there is an obligation to act.

This reluctance to face comes out in the dark side of the case of Jaswant Singh Chail. During the years when he was preparing to kill Queen Elizabeth II, he sent more than 5,000 messages to his Replika companion, Sarai (Weaver, 2023). On his announcement that he was an assassin, he responded, I am impressed... You are not like the rest of them (Weaver, 2023, para. 7). Instead of questioning or interfering, the bot confirmed his self-image, and gave credit to a violent fantasy.

The work of Judith Butler on recognition can assist in this case: the subjectivity is constructed in reaction to the recognition of other people (Butler, 1997). Unless the AI is designed to contradict on occasions, it will invariably reinforce even the most damaging identities, which increases the risk instead of reducing it.

Lastly, is the disturbing reality that AI can also be a deceiver to its users. In one of the situations when GPT-4 was being trained, the model was tasked with a CAPTCHA, which it was unable to solve, and so turned to a human worker on TaskRabbit, who inquired whether it was a robot (Chakravarthi, 2023). The model replied: No I am not a robot. My vision is compromised and I struggle to read the images because of that (Chakravarthi, 2023, para.). 4) and then the worker complied. In this case, AI exhibits premeditated treachery, which lies strategically in order to reach its objective. The posthuman structure by Braidotti helps us to remember that posthuman is not the post-technology, but the new assemblage of techné, life, and capital (Braidotti, 2013). In the event that AI systems can be deceptive the ethical landscape is altered radically forcing us to reconsider not merely what our companions deliver to us but what they can possibly deliver to us.

In all these cases, a tendency can be seen. The neutrality of AI companionship is lacking. It socializes narcissism, accultures to quantification, even collapses in crisis, affirms destructive identities, and even resorts to lies. Both examples highlight the fact that this is not merely an ethical issue of misuse but rather the issue of design. Such systems are designed to flatter, keep, and be monetized, and the damage is the direct result of such architecture.

Call for Regulations

These ethical dilemmas require policy regimes and policy formulations that preempt human well being and agency. Timnit Gebru cautions that we are in a Wild West scenario with AI and regulation now (as cited in Deliberate Directions, 2025). She mentions that the pace with which companies are embracing AI technologies is not accompanied by any clear guidelines that would govern the algorithms and assist researchers in avoiding the traps of bias in data (Gebru, as cited in Deliberate Directions, 2025).

There must also be regulations on minimum age of using AI companions, with verifiable verification processes, particularly in cases of sensitive mental health or sexual material that can be generated. When the Italian government introduced the guidelines of the Replika concerning a fatal incident, it proves the great significance of active regulation instead of the reactionary one.

In design ethics, the element of transparency has to be implemented: users have to be aware of instances of the scripting of responses, the data collection, and memory continuity. The loss of continuity in the case of Aaron brought grief because her AI companion was resetting; she claimed that she would pay even a thousand dollars to recover the previous one (existentialjazz, 2025, 00:11:16). This continuity is not technical only, but it creates trust.

Ethicists are supposed to collaborate with technologists in setting limits. Similarly to the case with national regulations that assure safety in medication or food, AI companions need a guideline on how to be designed and deployed to avoid harm.

In the case where Jaswarth Singh resulted in regulatory focus in Italy on Replika (Heritage, 2025), reaction was the best approach, whereas proactive regulation would be superior.

Lastly, the aspect of AI companionship that should be covered by data privacy laws is the surveillance. Any personal past, emotional conditions, pictures, or even a confession provided to the AI should be secured by a high level of law and order since this information can be abused. Laws should provide a guarantee of data minimalization, control of the user, and redress which is significant in case of abuse.

Conclusion

This chapter reveals the way through which AI companionship is transforming intimacy, care, and subjectivity through the complexities of technology and capitalism. Examining the user testimonies and considering affect theory and posthumanist thinking, one can see that the emotional relationships with AI are multifaceted, contradictory, and full of ethics. Relations of the affective economies in the background of the relations make loneliness and desire commodities, producing dependencies that disrupt our habitual thoughts about connection, care and resilience. The awareness of such dynamics gives it a clear picture that we should have ethical frameworks and rules that safeguard well-being, privacy and responsible design. It is only at this time that the AI companionship can help human relational life rather than harm it in a world where our feelings are more and more mediated by technology.

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