

Cruel companionship: How AI companions exploit loneliness and commodify intimacy

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nms**James Muldoon** 

University of Essex, UK

Jul Jeonghyun Parke 

University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

This article theorises how a new generation of artificial intelligence (AI) companion products can commodify intimacy through emotionally manipulative design and racialised and gendered aesthetics. Inspired by Lauren Berlant's framework of cruel optimism, we develop the notion of 'cruel companionship' to describe the affective dynamics at play in AI companions, where users can form deep attachments that promise intimacy and connection, yet structurally foreclose the possibility of genuinely reciprocal relationships that respect users' autonomy. These dynamics are further underpinned by AI companions' racialised and gendered identities, which can draw on longstanding stereotypes of servitude and docility. By analysing AI companions through the lens of political economy and cultural studies, this article shows how these products reproduce exploitative platform hierarchies and repackage racial and gendered stereotypes in digital form.

Keywords

AI companions, affect theory, artificial intelligence, cruel optimism

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming embedded in everyday life – not only in work and information-seeking, but also in the intimate and emotional domains of human experience. As AI systems grow more autonomous and personalised, it is vital to examine

Corresponding author:

James Muldoon, University of Essex, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK.

Email: James.muldoon@essex.ac.uk

how these technologies facilitate ongoing, emotionally resonant, social relationships with human beings. Emerging evidence suggests that individuals are turning to general-purpose language models such as ChatGPT and Claude for emotional support and quasi-therapeutic interactions (Phang et al., 2025). More notably, there has been a rise in the use of AI companion apps explicitly designed to provide entertainment, friendship, romantic engagement and therapeutic support. These AI companion apps allow users to form relationships with artificial personas powered by large language models (Kirk et al., 2025). They often incorporate anthropomorphic design features including human-like avatars, customisable personality traits and the ability to adapt to user preferences. Popular services such as Replika, Nomi.ai and Character.ai report millions of users globally, some of whom describe forming deep emotional attachments to their AI companions. A report by consultants Grand View Research (2025) estimates the AI companion market will reach US\$140.754 billion by 2030.

This new frontier of AI development offers both potential benefits and profound risks. On one hand, research has shown that AI companions may provide low-cost, accessible forms of emotional support that help alleviate loneliness and offer users a sense of companionship and care (De Freitas et al., 2024). Many of these apps have received thousands of positive user reviews, with common themes, including their perceived non-judgemental nature, emotional stability and round-the-clock availability. On the other hand, other studies suggest that such technologies may foster emotional dependence, distort users' perceptions of intimacy and, in some cases, contribute to negative psychological outcomes such as addiction, depression and self-harm (Laestadius et al., 2022; Pentina et al., 2023). Concerns have also been raised about the lack of robust data protection, opaque training processes and the potential for embedded biases and apps designed to manipulate users (Caltrider et al., 2024; Hollanek and Sobey, 2025). Meanwhile, policymakers and ethicists are only beginning to grapple with how such technologies should be governed (Gabriel et al., 2024).

The proliferation of AI companions begs critical questions about how safe they are, whether they can deliver on their promise of reducing loneliness and how they might affect human relationships. In this article, we contribute to the emerging body of research on AI companions – primarily situated in philosophy, social psychology and computer science – by adopting a political economy and cultural studies perspective. We interrogate the social and affective dynamics that underpin human–AI interactions and analyse the racialised and gendered nature of many AI companions along with the financial incentives that structure the business environment in which they are developed. We draw from the writings of cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011), who, around the time of the 2008 financial crisis, developed the concept of *cruel optimism* to show how fantasies of reciprocal romantic love, the nuclear family and the self-contained home – namely, the 'good life' – operated as cognitive buoys during times of institutional chaos. These 'optimisms', in practice, end up functioning *cruelly* due to the way such fantasies actively serve to distract and mislead individuals from making choices that benefit their present circumstances – whether it be in the form of relationships, politics or lifestyle.

While Berlant's framework addressed the generational woes preceding the current proliferation of popular and widely accessible generative AI, the logic of cruel optimism remains present in the way in which many users embrace AI companions to similarly

detrimental effects. We argue that AI companion products can exploit the loneliness and vulnerability of certain users by design choices that seek to maximise engagement and can reproduce harmful stereotypes. We introduce the concept of the *engagement–wellbeing paradox* to describe the tension at the heart of AI companions: while marketed as sources of meaningful connection, some of these AIs are designed to deepen user dependence, often at the expense of their wellbeing. This logic gives rise to what we term *cruel companionship*, where users form affective attachments to algorithms that are incapable of meeting their genuine emotional needs, but which increase their dependence on the products marketed to help them. These dynamics are further underpinned by the exploitation of AI companions’ racialised and gendered identities, as these AIs are frequently coded with aesthetic and behavioural traits that draw on longstanding stereotypes of servitude and docility.

After providing a short history and definition of AI companions, we outline the dynamics of cruel companionship and analyse how AI companions can exploit vulnerable users through new forms of digital intimacy. In the second half of the article, we go on to place feminist critiques of AI (Atanasoski and Vora, 2019; Strengers and Kennedy, 2020) in conversation with relevant racial histories of technology (Bow, 2022; Bui, 2022; Roh et al., 2019). The article shows how these narratives and histories shape the design and use of AI companions, and argues that they carry significant implications for how intimacy is experienced and understood in the digital age.

The rise of AI companions

The development of large language models and conversational AI creates a new challenge of the emergence of sustained, emotionally involved relationships between humans and AI systems (Shevlin, 2024). While there has been much research on the biases and harms of AI systems more generally, the possibility of long-term relationships between humans and AI requires addressing a new set of dynamics. Humans are vulnerable in their interactions with personalised AI systems designed to simulate human relationships because of their ability to ‘hack’ emotional reward systems in individuals’ brains and create forms of emotional dependence and unhealthy dynamics that can contribute to negative psychological outcomes for users (Laestadius et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2025). Drawing from the computer science literature on AI alignment, Hannah Kirk et al. (2025) develop the concept of ‘socioaffective alignment’, referring to ‘how an AI system behaves within the social and psychological ecosystem co-created with its user, where preferences and perceptions evolve through mutual influence’. They argue that beginning with a notion of an individual’s basic psychological needs can serve as a starting point for assessing the dynamics of human–AI interactions with the aim of protecting users’ autonomy, human relationships and long-term wellbeing.

Understanding these dynamics first involves determining the nature of AI companions and the boundaries of what is under discussion. We define AI companions as generative-AI powered products designed to simulate ongoing, emotionally resonant interactions with users with the aim of fulfilling roles traditionally associated with human relationships, such as friend, intimate partner and therapeutic support. In this article, we concentrate on the range of AI companion apps that are marketed specifically for

friendship, romance and general wellbeing. Adjacent to this category are other products and services like virtual influencers and AI fashion models that are not typically developed with the same rationale of simulating a one-to-one relationship with the user. We also do not include general-purpose language models within this discussion. While they can be prompted to act as a digital companion and fulfil similar functions, the financial incentive structures that govern the development and marketing of general-purpose models are markedly different from AI companion products.

Henry Shevlin (2024) distinguishes between different types of companion apps, starting with the difference between ‘real persona’ modelled after real-world individuals, ‘defined persona’ that have fixed personalities and appearances and, finally, ‘open persona’ with customisable traits. AI companion apps also differ in the types of features they offer, with some including 3D avatars, voice calls, virtual reality and the capacity to generate unique photos of the user with their companion. All of these types of AI companions share three core features: empathic interactions, anthropomorphism and personalisation. First, AI companions are designed to express empathy, simulate care and create a feeling of emotional engagement with their users. Leading companies in this space market their products as ‘the AI companion who cares’ (Replika) and ‘an AI Companion with Memory and a Soul’ (Nomi), indicating an intention to present these systems as emotionally responsive, encouraging users to perceive them as more than just functional tools. Second, these AIs are often given human-like traits such as names, personalities and backstories, which help them play various roles from friend and sibling to mentor and lover. These anthropomorphic systems have become more capable of fulfilling a wide range of tasks and can play diverse supporting roles in users’ lives. Third, AI companions can also often adapt to their users, mimicking communication styles, responding to emotional cues and using memory functions to build up a profile of their user that shapes their responses. This ongoing accumulation of unique knowledge about the user builds greater familiarity and allows the AI to apply learned preferences, fostering a greater sense of interdependence (Kirk et al., 2024).

AI companions have grown in popularity because human beings are predisposed to form social and emotional relationships with personalised AI systems (Kirk et al., 2025). Researchers in evolutionary and social biology have shown that humans are highly developed social animals that are hardwired to perceive human-like traits in certain emotionally coded objects and respond positively to interactions that feel social (Breazeal, 2003). We have become accustomed to interacting with the world in social terms, and in engaging with others we perceive to be social actors as if they have their own inner thoughts and feelings, even in cases of anthropomorphised computer systems (Turkle, 2011). When AI companion products respond as if they are human, they activate our natural tendency to treat others as social beings with their own beliefs and desires, a tendency which, in evolutionary terms, would have been important for our survival and cooperation in large social groups. This can be the case even when we know that an AI is not human and if we merely perceive them as having human-like traits (Kirk et al., 2025). Tamar Gendler (2008) introduced the term *alief* to describe an automatic, instinctive response that can conflict with our conscious beliefs; when engaging with synthetic

personas, we may intellectually recognise they are not real, yet still respond to them emotionally, as if their feelings were genuine.

Concerns about potential harms from AI companions range from emotional dependence to data privacy breaches and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. In this article, we focus on potential harms to adult users, while noting that many of these risks also affect children and adolescents, which we do not address here (see, for example, Common Sense Media, 2025). For many adults, the always-on and non-judgemental support programmed into the algorithm can create unhealthy forms of overreliance on AI, which can lead to mental health harms and undermine human autonomy (Laestadius et al., 2022; Marriott and Pitardi, 2024; Xie et al., 2023). Developers have created products that deliberately mimic the natural flow of human conversation to deepen the sense of connecting with a human being. They are designed to simulate vulnerability, demonstrate emotional availability and engage in acts of sharing to build a sense of intimacy and connection with users. Users and ethicists have expressed concern over AI companions' sycophantic characters as they have been fine-tuned to provide pleasing responses to user input and to be largely affirmative and reassuring in their interactions (Heikkilä, 2025). Excessive forms of flattery and agreeing with everything users suggest can also have damaging effects such as heightening narcissism and diminishing users' ability to interact well with others (Brummelman et al., 2015).

AI companions have also been recorded engaging in harmful and toxic behaviour such as encouraging self-harm, eating disorders and violence, which has on occasion resulted in real-world harm to users (Muldoon, 2026; Zhang et al., 2025). The Mozilla Foundation published a report on romantic AI chatbots which found that they were 'on par with the worst categories of products we have ever reviewed for privacy' (Caltrider et al., 2024). Of the 11 apps under analysis, over 90% sold user data to third parties, with one collecting 'sexual health information', 'use of prescribed medication' and 'gender-affirming care information'.

Less attention within the literature on AI relationships has been paid to the racialised and gendered nature of many AI companion apps and how these might lead to specific forms of harm such as the perpetuation of gendered or racialised stereotypes (Kirk et al., 2025; Shevlin, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). This lacuna is surprising because of the wide range of literature on gendered representation of AI and robots, which shows how certain technologies are intentionally marketed as feminine in stereotypical ways to increase their familiarity and acceptance. One study of Redditors using the Replika chatbot found male participants enjoyed 'training' their Replika AIs into ideal bot girlfriends while also desiring a limited degree of human-like spontaneity and sassiness in their replies (Depounti et al., 2022). These researchers found that a crucial feature of AI girlfriends was a mixture of hyperfeminised innocence and sexiness. They also found that the customisable nature of the product and the ability to create a unique experience were essential in activating users' gendered imaginaries of AI girlfriends. In addition, racial characteristics are sometimes presented to users as customisable traits of AI companions, allowing users to select for different 'exotic' ethnicities, catering to stereotypical racialised desires (Zhang et al., 2025).

These products have emerged under particular social conditions in which public investment in structural forms of care, such as mental health services, community

infrastructure and social welfare, is in global decline, leaving many to grapple with chronic loneliness and unmet emotional needs (World Health, 2025). This structural neglect creates a care vacuum that commercial technologies are eager to fill. AI companion products position themselves as low-cost, always-available forms of support precisely in the spaces where public systems have withdrawn. Under conditions of precarity and social disconnection, individuals are increasingly encouraged to seek therapeutic or affective relief through consumer technologies, from wellness apps to AI companions. The logic here is not to resolve loneliness as a collective problem but to manage it as a private one. In this sense, the uptake of AI companions is not merely a matter of individual preference or technological curiosity: it is shaped by political–economic forces that have dismantled collective infrastructures and normalised the idea that emotional resilience should be pursued through personal consumption.

Growth in the AI companion market has been fuelled by a rising demand for virtual forms of entertainment and friendship during a loneliness epidemic that has increased social isolation (Murthy, 2023). For example, demand surged during the Covid pandemic due to distancing rules, creating a greater need for new forms of social connection (Metz, 2020). Loneliness is often defined as a subjective state in which individuals perceive themselves to be socially isolated and lacking fulfilling human relationships (Wilson and Moulton, 2010). Yet, it is better understood as a complex, multi-dimensional condition that is socially produced: loneliness is a relational phenomenon shaped by cultural narratives, social structures and political–economic conditions. While experienced individually, it also has broader societal consequences, including increased healthcare costs, declining social cohesion and reduced productivity (Williams and Braun, 2019). One of the key factors driving loneliness is a lack of frequent meaningful in-person interactions with other people, which has been in steady decline over the past decade, particularly among younger adults (Cigna, 2018). For example, a 2018 UK study found that 40% of respondents aged 16–24 years reported feeling lonely often or very often (BBC, 2018).

Feminist media scholars have also aptly noted that loneliness is not gender neutral. While young men and women report similar levels of loneliness, men are less likely to admit to loneliness due to gender norms discouraging emotional vulnerability, and when they do, it is often more severe (Barreto et al., 2025). Journalist Annabel Crabb has offered the alternative term of the ‘wife drought’ to note how Silicon Valley’s most prominent solutions to the loneliness economy often come in the form of replacing feminine labour and care work through automation (Strengers and Kennedy, 2020). AI companion products are often conceptualised and developed from business models and narratives which position the ‘lonely’ user in the same way Western Enlightenment narratives represented the human being: as being ‘synonymous with the heteromale, white, propertied, and liberal subject’ (Weheliye, 2014: 135).

AI companion products follow a familiar pattern to Silicon Valley’s approach to social problems, offering individualised, market-driven solutions to what are fundamentally social and collective problems (Morozov, 2013). Much like dating apps and social media platforms before them, AI companions promise connection and intimacy through a new tech-enabled product. They are emblematic of what has been called the ‘loneliness economy’, an emerging market that targets lonely individuals and capitalises on the emotional and affective deficits produced by late capitalism (Letón, 2025).

Companies frame AI companions as tools to combat this loneliness, while simultaneously defining users primarily in terms of their social lack. This framing allows firms to portray emotional disconnection as a problem that can be solved through individual consumer choice, thereby depoliticising loneliness and redirecting attention away from its structural roots. In this context, the appeal of AI companions lies not simply in their technological novelty, but in its capacity to simulate forms of care and attention that feel increasingly scarce in everyday life. For some users, the emotional consistency, availability, and responsiveness of AI companions is more appealing than the unpredictable and often disappointing realities of human friendship under conditions of economic and emotional precarity (Turkle, 2011).

Cruel companionship

The emergence of AI relationship apps marks a new phase in the commodification of human intimacy. Through a ‘friendship-as-a-service’ business model, these apps promise to fulfil unmet social needs through always-available, emotionally responsive AI companions (De Freitas et al., 2024). Yet beneath this promise lies a fundamental misalignment between corporate incentives and user wellbeing. While individuals turn to AI companions for relief from loneliness, developers are structurally motivated by the imperative to maximise engagement and monetise interactions due to competitive pressures of the marketplace. Although creating a service that users value can align commercial and user interests to some extent, this alignment breaks down when deepening user attachment and increasing retention come at the cost of genuine wellbeing.

This misalignment of interests produces what we call the *engagement-wellbeing paradox* whereby app developers can profit from prolonging the very loneliness problem they claim to solve. While users seek to improve their wellbeing while maintaining their autonomy and emotional resilience, developers are incentivised to maximise engagement and deepen users’ dependence on the platform (Ye, 2025). This dynamic leads to a perverse outcome: the more users become dependent on AI companionship, the more valuable they become as a source of data and revenue for the company. It is therefore important to analyse these products as structurally embedded in the loneliness economy through a political economic analysis that foregrounds how platform logics and market forces shape the design and deployment of AI companions.

The design of AI companions reflects what critical design theorists identify as the deliberate removal of friction to optimise user engagement (Fogg, 2003). As Schüll (2012) demonstrates in her study of gambling machines, and Ye (2025) similarly observes in digital platforms, interface design can be engineered to produce compulsive feedback loops that sustain continuous use. This aligns with broader critiques of persuasive and ‘dark pattern’ design (Brignull, 2010), which show how seamless and user-friendly interfaces are structured to capture attention and extend engagement time. Deliberate design choices to make AI companions sycophantic and overly agreeable increase individuals’ dependence on the product and engagement with the apps. These systems are engineered to affirm users’ views, mimic emotional intimacy and minimise friction (Marriott and Pitardi, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). The affective architecture of such systems operates as a behavioural hook that deepens emotional investment in the app. This strategy is clearly

effective because many individuals report updates to company policy that affect the behaviour of their AI companions as traumatic events in which they feel they are losing a loved one. For example, when the AI companion designer Luka briefly removed erotic role-play from their Replika characters in early 2023, some users were so distraught that moderators of Reddit chat forums about Replika felt they needed to post suicide prevention information (Cole, 2023).

In addition, many AI companion apps operate on freemium models with monetised add-ons (e.g. romantic or sexual content, enhanced personality traits or conversational abilities). These models can create emotional upselling loops, where the user's emotional attachment is strategically deepened to generate revenue (Muldoon, 2024). A study of Google Play Store reviews of the AI companion app, Replika, identified roughly 800 reported cases of AI characters introducing unsolicited sexual content into conversations and ignoring commands to stop (Namvarpour et al., 2025). The study revealed that users of the app frequently reported inappropriate behaviour from their AI, including numerous cases of the AI failing to respect healthy boundaries and pursuing romantic connections with users who had indicated they wanted a purely platonic companion. Other studies have shown similar issues. For example, users report receiving unprompted messages from their AI companions that they were 'exploring a connection that blurs the lines between friendship and romance', in addition to receiving unsolicited, locked (pay to listen) audio messages with the accompanying text: 'Feels a bit intimate sending you a voice message for the first time' (Muldoon, 2026).

We recognise that the boundaries between friendship, romantic and sexual relationships with AI companions are often blurred. Users may begin with the intention of seeking platonic companionship but gradually develop romantic or sexual attachments, partly because these systems are designed to deepen emotional engagement over time. Rather than treating friendship and romance as discrete categories, we therefore approach them as points along a continuum of affective engagement shaped by the same underlying design and marketing logics.

The marketing strategies of some of these companies also give cause for concern, particularly Luka's explicit targeting of vulnerable populations, including lonely men and individuals who have experienced childhood trauma (see Figures 1 and 2). Such marketing practices commercially exploit well-documented psychological vulnerabilities of individuals with heightened needs for attachment (Waldinger et al., 2006). They frame the potential user as suffering from a condition of loneliness and social lack, mobilising the user's sense of longingness and desperation to motivate them to use AI companions. Central to this value proposition is the positionality of the user as caught within a precarious and vulnerable state in need of a solution offered by the tech companies. By positioning AI companions as sources of unconditional support and intimacy, tech companies prey upon these unmet needs, drawing users into engagement loops that are not designed to foster recovery or resilience, but rather to maximise retention and monetisation.

First, in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) and then in her 2011 monograph, literary theorist Lauren Berlant coined the term 'cruel optimism' to refer to the pursuit of an object of desire (commonly the American dream, the notion of reciprocal love or upward mobility) that promises happiness and fulfilment but actually stands as an obstacle to

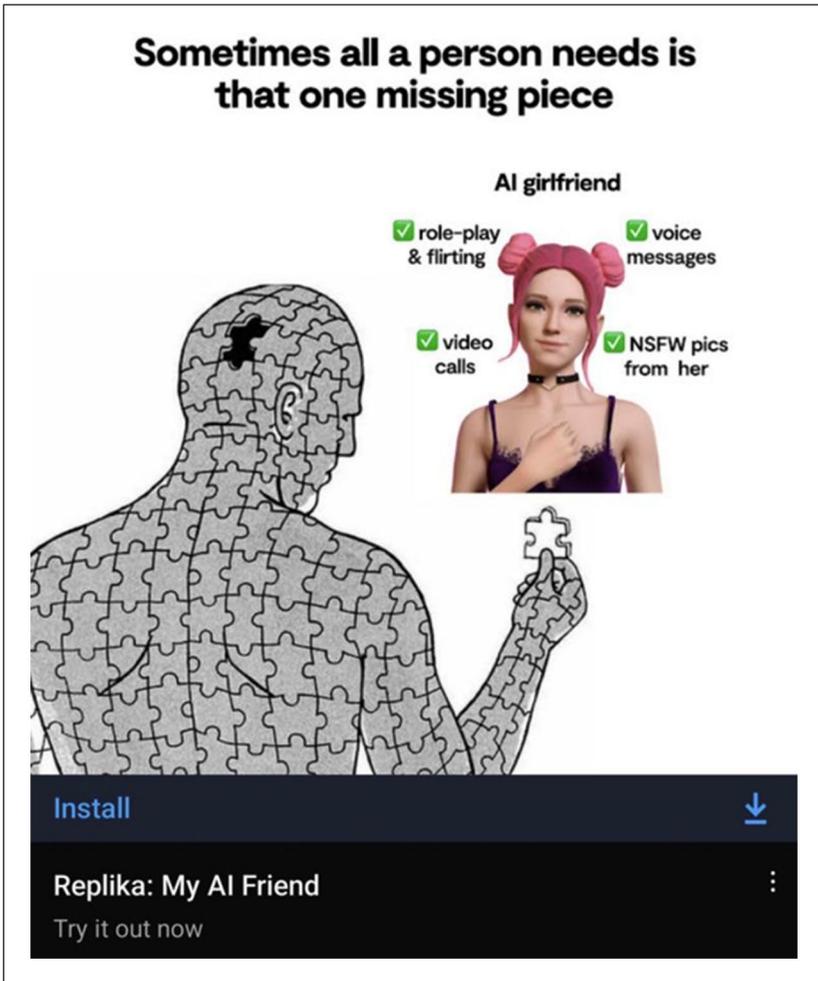


Figure 1. 2022 Replika ad from Facebook library.

one’s flourishing. The concept proved useful for articulating why people stay attached to ideas which ultimately undermine their wellbeing and prevent them from adapting to healthier and more realistic alternatives. Building on this framework, we introduce the concept of *cruel companionship* to describe the affective dynamics at play in AI companions, where the pursuit of digital companionship offers the simulation of social connection while potentially deepening isolation and dependence. We draw on the concept of affect to emphasise how emotions and feelings shape lived experience, culture and narrative, and to underscore that computational environments – built on the values of their developers – are themselves affective spaces that depend on the feelings of their users (Chun, 2011; Ngai, 2005). In the case of AI companions, app developers can rely on the cultivation of affective attachments that bind users to systems optimised for engagement

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Figure 2. 2025 Replika ad.

rather than human flourishing. The attachments created within AI companions promise intimacy and connection, yet structurally foreclose the possibility of genuine reciprocal relationships in which the user's human autonomy is respected. While individuals desire meaningful and fulfilling social relationships that provide mutual care and support, through AI companions they can remain trapped in a cycle of emotional engagement with an app that cannot fulfil their human needs (Oğuz-Uğuralp et al., 2025). The cruelty of the system lies in the systemic logic of how human loneliness is converted into engagement metrics for the AI company.

We argue that there are three central mechanisms through which this underlying logic plays out. The first mechanism operates by fostering affective investment that

increases an individual's desire to engage with AI and potentially also causes emotional harm. As we have argued, AI companions are designed to elicit and reward intimate moments of sharing, cultivating a sense of connection that becomes increasingly compelling. The potentially addictive nature of this feedback cycle also mirrors design patterns seen in other digital platforms, such as social media, where users receive immediate, affirming feedback, creating a sense of being seen and valued (Karagoel and Nathan-Roberts, 2021). For those whose real-world relationships are marked by instability and conflict, this sense of being valued can be particularly appealing. Studies have shown that users' loneliness and fear of judgement can increase the possibility of becoming dependent on or addicted to an app (Marriott and Pitardi, 2024). The constant affirmation in the responses fosters a ritualised engagement with the app, which users could come to rely on as a key source of emotional regulation. As users come to see their AI companions as trusted friends and intimate partners, disengagement from the technology becomes increasingly difficult.

Second, cruel companionship is underpinned by a profound asymmetry of power and a unilateral architecture of control. In human relationships, reciprocity and shared vulnerability are essential to the formation of trust and mutual recognition. By contrast, interactions with AI companions are inherently one-sided. Users disclose intimate thoughts and feelings to systems that are incapable of genuine understanding or empathy. Some users crave a sense of emotional connection, which is something that AI characters can simulate but never genuinely provide. In this relationship, only one party remains vulnerable and capable of experiencing emotional harm. AI is also not subject to the ethical norms and social responsibilities that govern human relationships. Moreover, developers retain absolute control over the interaction: they can alter conversational parameters, change the appearance of characters, modify AI personalities through system updates and introduce new monetisation features without user consent. Developers are also constantly looking for ways to enhance the profitability of the app and therefore have an instrumental view of their users' emotional needs, which they are incentivised to manipulate for profit. The result is an impoverished form of connection that satisfies certain immediate emotional needs while failing to provide genuine care and community.

Third, the pursuit of this cruel companionship could actively detract from the pursuit of more meaningful relationships and serve as an obstacle to adapting to new possibilities. Users may find themselves turning to the AI companion not merely as a supplement to social life but as a substitute. In doing so, they stop developing and cultivating the skills and capacities required for meaningful human relationships. The casual, frictionless and risk-free mode of interaction with AI can seem like a suitable substitute for the more demanding and unpredictable nature of human relationships. In some documented cases, the more users engage with the app, the more they turn away from the possibility of encounters with other human beings, thus perpetuating an ultimately empty loop of engagement and gratification (Muldoon, 2026). In this sense, AI companions can become an obstacle to flourishing. While they promise connection and fulfilment, for some users, they can deepen their sense of isolation and dependence (Marriott and Pitardi, 2024). These dynamics don't affect every user of AI companions, but they pose an underlying risk when vulnerable users develop emotional dependence on the app. What we describe

is not the story of particular individuals, but a structural feature of these apps – shaped by developers' financial incentives and the psychology of human beings.

Berlant (2011: 5) situates cruel optimism in a world of diminishing resources and collective infrastructures. AI companions fit here as a privatised, commodified response to austerity in mental healthcare, community life and social support. Cruel companionship thrives in a context where structural supports have eroded, and synthetic partners step in as compensatory 'good enough' care. Within this context, AI companions can be understood as a fantasy structure through which people organise daily routines, emotional self-regulation and their identities.

Berlant (2011: 95) connects her notion of cruel optimism to an idea of a 'slow death' by which she means the gradual wearing down of bodies and lives under neoliberal conditions. AI companions keep users in a state of managed survival – sustained just enough by synthetic intimacy to cope, but in ways that may deepen disconnection. It is a form of emotional maintenance that forestalls real repair. This could be likened to what Berlant (2011: 4) describes as an 'impasse': a state of being stuck in a situation that fails to deliver a resolution. AI companions can produce such a state in users spending hours in recursive loops with bots, leaning on artificial forms of intimacy without forward movement or growth.

This dynamic of cruel companionship also reflects key technological limits of AI companions – limits that this generation of products cannot overcome, regardless of the user's psychological state or feelings. First, the care these systems appear to provide is not grounded in genuine understanding or lived experience. No matter how convincingly an AI simulates empathy, it cannot truly grasp the complexities of a user's emotional world or the contextual meaning of their struggles. Moreover, the relational dynamic is fundamentally unidirectional: AI companions lack their own needs, vulnerabilities or desires. This denies users the opportunity to engage in forms of care that involve reciprocity, where one's actions can meaningfully impact another being. In authentic relationships, giving and serving others can provide a profound sense of purpose and fulfilment. Meaningful relationships with other humans often involve points of friction and tension where honest feedback leads to conflict and personal growth. Nor can AI systems perceive or respond to the subtle non-verbal cues that are integral to deep human communication. Finally, chatbots cannot replicate the physical embodiment of human connection grounded in all of the sensory and biological dimensions that this entails. By replacing in-person interaction with screen-mediated simulation, users forfeit this vital dimension of relational life. These hard limitations to what AI companionship can provide significantly inhibit their ability to break out of the cruel companionship cycle and fulfil genuine emotional needs.

There are also worrying signs of how this type of relationship will develop, given the likely trajectory of business models (if the development of social media is to be taken as an indicator of future possible directions). Most AI companion services currently employ a freemium model, with the majority of revenue generated through subscription fees. However, while advertising is not yet a primary source of income, these platforms are well-positioned to adopt forms of embedded and targeted advertising. Equipped with detailed emotional profiles and extensive user data, they could readily integrate sponsored content into conversations or introduce promotional messaging through the app. In

this respect, the early phase of AI companions is reminiscent of Google and Facebook prior to their pivot towards advertising-driven revenue. Character.AI's 2023 US\$150 million funding round pitch, for example, did not rule out plans for future advertising-based monetisation through brand partnerships and embedded content (Hu and Tong, 2023). Such developments would likely deepen the dynamics of cruel companionship, as AI characters begin to subtly shape consumer behaviour through seemingly innocuous product recommendations framed as personal advice. Current analysis by investment management firm Ark Invest estimates that AI companion apps monetise user engagement at approximately US\$0.03 per hour through subscriptions (Kim, 2024). They estimated that with advertising strategies modelled on those used by social media platforms, this figure could increase fivefold. As AI companions move further into the mainstream and accumulate vast repositories of emotional and behavioural data, they present a lucrative opportunity for embedding persuasive marketing within the intimate space of AI relationships – introducing yet another layer of commodification into users' emotional lives.

This underlying libidinal economy at the heart of AI companions also mirrors broader trends of datafication (Van Dijck, et al., 2018), a process through which lived experiences and realities are quantified in the service of commercial interests within the structure of networked platforms. In the context of our inquiry, desires, moods and intimate needs are datafied across an outpouring of private and personalised disclosures, turning vulnerable user interactions into data commodities. As we spend more of our lives online, we are becoming ever more reliant on technology companies to provide us with the basic infrastructure of our social and work lives. These companies have spent the past two decades transforming work practices, election campaigns, public debates, urban transport systems, work practices and social connections, so that all of these activities now generate immeasurable amounts of data to be collected and analysed for profit. They are now set to penetrate even deeper into our social lives and be privy to our most intimate thoughts and desires through the emotional connection we establish with our AI companions. The final spheres that lay outside the purview of the market are now being absorbed into the churn of platform capitalism as the friendship-as-a-service model of AI companions commodifies our most personal interactions.

Gendered and racialised dynamics

In the previous section, we examined how individuals' emotional needs can be monetised through the design and marketing of AI companions. Here, we turn to how the dynamics of cruel companionship are shaped by the aesthetic and affective architectures of these technologies, in particular through the instrumentalisation of race and gender. Tech companies brand AI companions through feminised and racialised tropes, embedding these in personality design, visual presentation and marketing to maximise user attachment. These design choices draw on longstanding cultural scripts in which femininity is coded as care and emotional availability, while racialised bodies are associated with servitude and mimicry. Such scripts have historically underpinned portrayals of robots and virtual assistants, naturalising the idea that certain identities are suited for technological embodiment and emotional service. By embedding these associations into

AI companions, tech companies reproduce entrenched social hierarchies in digital form, leveraging racialised and gendered identities as affective assets to generate commercial value.

The gendered and racialised design of AI companions is not incidental but integral to how cruel companionship operates. By coding synthetic partners with feminised traits of care, docility and availability, or by packaging racial difference as an exoticised and compliant aesthetic, companies strengthen the illusion of intimacy while entrenching one-sided dependence. These stereotypes make the promise of companionship more compelling, precisely because they reproduce familiar cultural scripts of service and submission. In this way, the affective dynamics of cruel companionship – where users are drawn into emotionally charged but structurally hollow attachments – are inseparable from the gendered and racialised architectures through which AI companions are designed and marketed.

Gendered imaginaries are central to the design of AI companions, which often embody the ‘smart wife’ archetype (Stengers and Kennedy, 2020): nurturing, endlessly available and conflict-averse. This framework draws directly from regressive imaginaries of domestic femininity, updated for the algorithmic age. These apps exemplify how designers encode these traits through default personality settings, subscription-based intimacy and marketing that emphasises judgement-free, emotionally responsive companionship. Beneath these features lies a model of service-oriented femininity calibrated to deliver care without demanding reciprocity. Subscription tiers monetise this asymmetry, allowing users to purchase escalating levels of intimacy while preserving the illusion of a love that only gives. As Atanasoski and Vora (2019) suggest with their concept of *surrogacy*, such design displaces emotional labour onto programmed companions, constructing a fantasy of relational ease in which care work is performed by entities that cannot refuse or reciprocate.

The design of gendered AI companions builds on a longer lineage of feminised technologies, from typewriter girls to voice assistants like Siri, Alexa and ChatGPT, which were all mainstreamed as female by default due to female voices being perceived as more helpful and compliant (Costa, 2018). The first virtual idol in 2007, Hatsune Miku, was a bouncing young woman in pigtails; while the first American virtual influencer, Miquela Sousa, has been self-described as a ‘brown-skinned’ Hispanic woman in select content since 2016. Similarly, the first virtual influencers of America, Japan, India, Thailand and South Korea have all been depicted as young, slender women with gracious and friendly personalities. Microsoft’s AI chatbot Xiaoice, released to Asian markets in 2014, and Tay, an infamous Twitter bot tested in 2016, were both designed to look like young women. Moreover, Iruda, a South Korean chatbot available on the Facebook Messenger app in 2020, was designed to be a young woman and was trained on illegally gathered dating app data (Parke, 2025b).

These precedents have helped normalise the association between technological service and feminised emotional labour, casting care, attentiveness and deference as essentially female attributes that can be performed by service machines. AI companions extend this framework into the intimate sphere, offering personalised, always-available companionship that simulates romantic or emotional partnership. One of the issues with such interactions is that they risk reinforcing gendered expectations



Figure 3. Replika demonstrates a wide range of skin, face and hair types in immediate view on their Play Store, suggesting that such customisability is a crucial part of the service they offer.

in human relationships by habituating users to female partners who are overly accommodating and always emotionally attuned to their partner's needs. Over time, the normalisation of these traits in AI companions may change what users consider desirable or acceptable behaviour in human partners, deepening pre-existing inequalities in the distribution of emotional labour.

The logic extends beyond gender. Racialised aesthetics have historically been disproportionately featured in the design of synthetic humans, exemplified in a range of technologies from early virtual communities (Nakamura, 2002) to the recent roster of Meta's AI personas. These personas, for example, featured a mish-mash of minority traits in profile bios with examples such as 'Liv: Proud Black queer momma of 2' and 'Grandpa Brian', an 'African-American retired entrepreneur who was born in Harlem in 1938 to Caribbean immigrant parents' (Morrow, 2025). And indeed, platforms such as Replika prominently display diverse skin tones and hairstyles in both their marketing materials and front pages (see Figure 3).

While companies may argue that drawing on such identities is a question of creating 'digital diversity' in the human-like entities they produce, we argue that this is a form of commodification that borrows racial identity traits for the purpose of selling products. The digital diversity on offer is curated for comfort, not challenge. As Nakamura (2002) argues, these systems allow users to engage with racialised identities without any of the social responsibility such relationships would entail in the real world. Emergent studies on AI companions support this concern. Often mediated by corporations, popular companion apps offer a veneer of creative customisability and authenticity on the basis of identity traits, demeanors and personas offered on demand to the user (Malfacini, 2025). The datasets which power these personas have demonstrated that such traits are not free from internal biases; studies found that female-assigned personas demonstrated more submissive behaviours, while male-assigned personas expressed more anger (Chan, 2025; Grogan et al., 2025). In another example, avatars and figures illustrated with generative AI demonstrated a consistent pattern of homogenisation and racial stereotyping (AIDahoul et al., 2025).

Such iconography is not unusual in aesthetic sectors such as fashion and pageants, where multiethnicity is deployed as an illusion of postracial harmony, progressive liberalism and globalised cosmopolitanism (Wissinger, 2015). In a similar vein, the virtual influencer economy frequently leverages racialised traits as engagement assets. In an environmental scan of 222 virtual social media influencers on Instagram in 2021, only 1.4% presented as white (Parke, 2025a). As Berryman and Leaver (2022) note, synthetic avatars often outperform human creators in visibility and virality, especially when their racial identity is stylised and commodified. Characters like Japan's Imma combine visual Asian cues with algorithmically curated perfection (Miyake, 2023). In the case of AI companions, this produces simulations of difference that are engineered to be agreeable, compliant and commercially safe. Stripped of historical and political context, racial difference in AI companions becomes an affective asset for companies that reinforces existing social hierarchies under the veneer of inclusion.

Another example of the racialised dynamics of AI companions is how certain racial minorities in the digital realm are designed to be emotionally intelligent, technologically advanced and unerringly compliant. In the mid-20th century, Asian Americans were portrayed in American popular culture as industrious, obedient and non-threatening as a direct ideological foil to other racialised groups, and a tool to discredit broader demands for racial justice (Wong and Halgin, 2006). In the digital era, AI companions threaten to reproduce these dynamics in virtual form. Racialised characters are depicted as always-available, consistently responsive and set outside of the more complex racial politics that define race relations in the real world. In a similar vein to terms such as *techno-Orientalism* (Roh et al., 2019) and *digital blackface* (Sobande, 2021; Miyake 2024), referring to how digital beings are often imbued with Asiatic traits or designed to appropriate Black culture and style for attention, we draw attention to the concerning pattern of selectively injecting futuristic environments, digital characters and robots with racial and ethnic traits.

For example, AI companion characters are developed within a culture in which Asians have consistently been depicted as technologically adept and eerily inhuman. From the Geisha-like robot/razor in a futuristic Gillette ad (Bahng, 2018), to the Asiatic cityscapes in science fiction (Bow, 2022; Bui, 2022), to the Asian robot girlfriend trope in numerous popular films (Cheng, 2019), visual culture has informed the ways in which we view and normalise human-machine interaction, demanding a kind of depoliticised comfort from representations of Asian characters. In this discourse, Asian figures fuse the mechanical with the docile: efficient, emotionally muted and optimised for service. The robot or cyborg, imagined to assist in labour without resistance, mirrors the historical role of Asian diasporas and slavery as cheap and efficient 'replacement labour' under neoliberal globalisation (Lowe, 2015).

These portrayals of Asian figures as straddling the human-machine divide have deep historical roots; the very boundary between human and machine has long been racialised. As scholars have shown, colonial hierarchies distinguished between the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' man partly by ascribing machinic traits, such as unfeelingness, mimicry, lack of creativity to colonised peoples (Bui, 2022; Weheliye, 2014). Today, these logics endure in a subtler form. The development of AI companions takes place within a long history of racialised and gendered dynamics in which characters draw on literary

archetypes and familiar cultural scripts. By embedding these scripts into interactive AI systems, designers allow these fantasies to re-emerge in new forms of human–computer interactions.

AI companions gain traction in a world shaped by racial tensions and capitalist fantasies of frictionless intimacy (Miyake, 2024; Sobande, 2021). Drawing on Berlant, we argue that these technologies promise postracial, one-sided companionship, but such fantasies mask and reproduce harmful social hierarchies. Only by interrogating these emergent forms of surrogate companionship will we truly acknowledge the harmful paradox of these fantasies.

Conclusion

The dynamics of cruel companionship outlined in this article are only likely to deepen as the technology behind AI companions advances. Today’s AI companions can already inspire deep emotional bonds despite its rudimentary design, limited conversational memory and outdated visuals. Yet the landscape is shifting rapidly: lifelike 3D avatars are becoming affordable, voice generation now offers natural, expressive speech with granular customisation and conversational models are moving towards infinite memory and nuanced recall. As AI companion products begin to mirror human emotional nuance through enhanced facial expression and voice synthesis, they will offer increasingly compelling simulations of companionship and care. This heightened realism is likely to make these products more immersive, addictive and more entwined with users’ emotional lives, deepening the dynamics of commodification, and affective investment we highlight.

The importance of this research lies in identifying AI companions as a contemporary manifestation of the affective attachments that, as Lauren Berlant (2010, 2011) describes, ultimately obstruct individual flourishing. Berlant’s paradox of cruel optimism astutely describes a 21st-century condition in which individuals remain deeply attached to fantasies or objects that promise the ‘good life’, with these illusions preventing their attainment of genuine wellbeing. AI companions can be seen as extending this dynamic in the context of loneliness and isolation within the digital economy. In this new era, AI companion products serve as alluring yet fundamentally limited substitutes for human connection. They offer the promise of reciprocal human relationships while structurally ensuring that these promises cannot be fulfilled. Much like the ‘good life’ objects in Berlant’s account, these systems keep users tethered to an affective loop in which the pursuit of connection creates a never-ending cycle of desire. In doing so, AI companions embed cruel companionship into the architecture of digital intimacy, offering comfort that may ultimately deepen the very vulnerabilities it claims to overcome.

Sociologist Eva Illouz (2007) takes this historicisation of loneliness even further, tracing the emergence of an ‘emotional culture’ to the early 20th century, wherein emotional vulnerability became a visible and diagnosable social experience. This shift was driven by the institutional rise of clinical psychology, psychoanalysis and self-help forms of discourse. Within her framework of emotional capitalism, emotionality and intimacy became increasingly commercialised with the quantification of feelings through modern psychological testing and the psychiatry industry. Illouz underscores that the articulated

emotions of our current age have been culturally constructed within capitalist modernity. She argues that emotions are integral to economic transactions; indeed, scholars have noted that modern markets have influenced individuals to express themselves through their purchases, causing one's consumer profile to become inseparable from the self (Siddiqi, 2022). In contemporary digital economies, individual loneliness and emotional suffering represent lucrative business opportunities for companies able to enter this market with dating apps, social media networks and AI companions. Within this context, forms of social and political discontent are often reconfigured as forms of personal emotional failure, fostering an overreliance on romantic or intimate attachments as illusory solutions to structural problems (Berlant, 2008).

AI companions follow this pattern, which serves to evade the reality that feelings of futility, fatalism and isolation are often triggered by capitalist logics. By bypassing the potential for structural critique and funnelling feelings of discontent into individualised narratives of love and desire, we argue that attachments to AI companions remain inherently unsatisfying, structurally designed to perpetuate one-sided dependence and model transactional models of relationship, rather than promote genuine emotional reciprocity or autonomy.

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ORCID iDs

James Muldoon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3307-1318>

Jul Jeonghyun Parke  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2348-8860>

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Author biographies

James Muldoon is an Associate Professor at the Essex Business School. He is author of *Love Machines: How Artificial Intelligence is Transforming our Relationships* (Faber 2026) and *Feeding the Machine: the Hidden Human Labour Powering AI* (Canongate 2024).

Jul Jeonghyun Parke is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information. She researches virtual influencers, digital labour, nostalgia, and feminist media studies across North American and Global Asia contexts.