



Thanabots, fantasy, and the ethics of mourning

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Abstract

Thanabots—digital recreations of the dead powered by artificial intelligence (AI)—comprise media that allow the dead to remain present in the world of the living. In this article we unpack the psychic dimension of users’ diverse stances towards thanabots, asking how this dimension can contribute to our understanding of the patterns of users’ responses to loss. Drawing on Critical Fantasy Studies, we examine journalistic reports featuring actual users and original interviews with potential users, treating thanabots as sites of affective investment. We argue that users affectively invest in their interactions with thanabots insofar as the latter embody aspects of the dead that carry symbolic value and significance. The concepts of fantasy, mourning, and part-object are deployed to identify two modes of user engagement with thanabots, one where their relationship to the dead is reified and one where users reflexively and ethically engage with the ideas and emotions associated with the dead. We conclude with a discussion about the prospect of establishing conditions of possibility for an ‘ethics of mourning’ as regards user–thanabot interactions.

Keywords Thanabots · Critical Fantasy Studies · Mourning · Digital afterlives · Ethics · Artificial intelligence

1 Introduction

Thanabots are two-way communication technologies that use artificial intelligence (AI) to create digital representations of the dead based on their digital footprint. Whether they take the form of text-based chatbots or audio-visual interfaces, thanabots offer the bereaved an opportunity to interact with their dead (Jiménez-Alonso and Luna 2023; Pitsillides and Sampson 2025; Hurtado Hurtado 2023). According to some scholars, thanabots appeal to users because ‘the interface through which such conversation is conducted provides a sense of novelty and entertainment intelligence’ (Henrickson 2023, 952). However, in a context where capitalist technology companies promise perpetual digital endurance and ‘the complete and total eradication of

grief’,¹ the question of how users feel when interacting with thanabots and how this interaction affects their processing of loss demands deeper scrutiny. The presumed agentic capacities of thanabots foreground mortality as a site of psychic tension: thanabots embody for users the promise of transcending death while also staging a continuous, emotionally complex confrontation with it (Andreescu 2025).

The case of journalist Lottie Hayton illustrates this psychic tension (Hayton 2024). Driven by a mix of curiosity and apprehension, she subscribed to a thanabot service and uploaded text messages and audio recordings of her dead father to its portal. When first interacting with her father’s thanabot, she described how her dad’s voice ‘reads the machine’s words. It is, for a moment, like he is in the room and I feel immediately vulnerable’. Eventually, however, her father’s thanabot failed to give her the emotional reassurance she desired, leaving her depressed on account of spending ‘so much time building such a feeble approximation of Dad’. Hoping for a more vivid experience, she uploaded pictures and videos of her dead mother to a different thanabot service portal. She found the resulting thanabot lacked the ‘quirks and foibles and inner life’ of her mother, noting that it had ‘the right voice, the right face and the right

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¹ Justin Harrison, creator of *You, Only Virtual*, quoted in an interview in *The Guardian*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5udOx8-QxE>

twinkle in her eye but the wrong soul, or indeed no soul at all' (Hayton 2024). The discrepancy between the thanabots and her real parents distressed Hayton. Although she appreciated re-cognising features of her parents she was attached to (her father's voice, her mother's smile) she eventually abandoned her experiment with thanabots to focus instead on nurturing connections with friends.

Online reports like that of Lottie Hayton show us that users can feel apprehensive when interacting with thanabots, even as they also find moments of comfort. This seeming emotional ambivalence gains relevance as academics debate whether thanabots facilitate or complicate mourning (Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska 2024; Lemma 2024; Lindemann 2022). Here, we suggest that a deeper examination of users' emotional ambivalence and turmoil can help reveal that thanabots, in and of themselves, are neither 'good' nor 'bad' for mourning, but whether they facilitate or complicate it depends on the conditions under which interactions with thanabots take place.

In this article, therefore, we focus on users' relation to loss through their interaction with thanabots and propose that only insofar as particular technological features imbue aspects of the dead with symbolic value for users that they can affectively invest in their interactions with thanabots. In other words, we suggest that the technology cannot, on its own, sufficiently account for why users feel driven to engage with thanabots, and that the successful embodiment of meaningful features of the dead by thanabots is key to enabling user engagement with them. Moreover, we discern two patterns in how users negotiate their relation to thanabots and, through them, loss: one in which users flee from confronting the permanence of loss, and one in which users—through reflexive engagement with the thanabot—process loss by ethically navigating their affective attachments to the dead.

The growing literature on thanabots is descriptively rich, mapping users' varied attitudes towards them and chronicling the sensemaking involved in user–thanabot interactions (Henrickson 2023; Morse 2023; Sumiala, 2022). Other studies foreground normative issues—concerning especially privacy, dignity, and autonomy (Harbinja 2023; Morse and Birnhack 2022)—exploring the implications of thanabot services from the perspective of morality, justice, and non-Western systems of thought (Lindemann 2022; Sparrow and Zhang 2025). Another strand of literature emphasises the structural aspects of thanabot services, identifying the capitalist dynamics and incentives underlying their creation and delivery, while proposing ways of governing thanabot services that are less exploitative and extractive in terms of data use and interactional quality (Cunneen et al. 2025; Kiel 2023; Öhman and Floridi 2017).

We believe, however, that the psychic dimension underlying user–thanabot interactions and the emotional

complexities therein deserves greater attention. Numerous testimonials in journalistic reports of thanabot users and science fiction representations such as the *Black Mirror* episode 'Be Right Back' (*Black Mirror* 2013) evince people's willingness to engage with technologies to psychically work through death and loss, despite anticipating emotional discomfort. Inspired by psychoanalysis and psycho-social studies, we use the term 'psychic' to draw attention to the unconscious and affective aspects of our practices, considered central to our understanding of identity formation.

We turn to Critical Fantasy Studies (Glynos 2021) to unpack the psychic dimension of user–thanabot interactions, suggesting that its theoretical framework can enhance our understanding of users' diverse stances towards thanabots and shared patterns of users' relation to loss. Appealing to the concepts of fantasy, mourning, and part-object, we treat thanabots as sites of affective investment, drawing on online reports of users' experiences with thanabots and future-oriented interviews with potential users. Here, our primary aim is to offer a novel theoretically informed interpretation of user–thanabot interactions, exploring insights, possibilities, and implications from the perspective of ethics and political economy.

We suggest that users becoming aware of their attachment to the dead (via part-objects), including the character of this attachment, may facilitate the mourning process, leading to an ethical transformation of their relationship to the dead and their loss. Moreover, we speculate that putting in place the conditions for an 'ethics of mourning' in late-modern, Western societies might challenge the dominant (capitalist) political-economic norms governing the digital afterlife industry (Kiel 2023; Nakagawa and Orita 2024; Öhman and Floridi 2017), as well as late-modern cultural norms that idealise digital immortality. In turning to CFS to understand how thanabots relate to mourning, we advocate for the need to adopt an approach that looks beyond their technological affordances (Brescó De Luna and Jiménez-Alonso 2024). That is, when thinking about the conditions of possibility that allow mourning to unfold in interactions with thanabots, we need to also examine conditions residing at the intersection of the psyche, the network of friends and family, and macro-level political-economic structures.

2 Theoretical framework: Critical Fantasy Studies

Critical Fantasy Studies (CFS) represents a distinct frontier of Political Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) that examines the unconscious and affective pull of discourse on subjects. It draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to account for this in terms of fantasmatic logics that activate desire and enjoyment (Glynos 2021). In the context of interactions

with thanabots, we suggest that CFS can help us explore how and why subjects might feel driven to engage with thanabots despite feeling the unease and discomfort associated with overwhelming emotions, and how this might affect the process of mourning (Lemma 2024; Henrickson 2023; Andreescu 2025). Moreover, CFS emphasises not only that macro-level economic and cultural structures shape desires at the micro-level of individual relations but also that the dynamics at the micro-level help sustain or disrupt macro-level structures. This suggests that the way mourning unfolds for individuals and communities who engage with thanabots can also carry consequences for how we think about and evaluate the political economy of the digital afterlife industry. In what follows, therefore, we present three concepts that will help us speculatively unpack user–thanabot interactions and their relation to the digital afterlife industry, understood as a political-economic structure that embodies discourses concerning death, technology, and capitalism. These concepts are: fantasy, mourning, and the part-object.

The first concept, *fantasy*, often takes the form of ‘a narrative structure involving some reference to an idealised scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness (the beatific side of fantasy) and, by implication, a disaster scenario (the horrific side of fantasy)’ (Glynos 2008, 283). CFS scholars note that fantasy stages and elicits the desires of subjects, shaping and guiding their affective investments and enjoyments. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan who, in turn, drew inspiration from Freud and Spinoza, they distinguish affect from emotions: ‘If affect represents the quantum of libidinal energy, we could say that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers (or “ideas” in Freudian terms)...: their meaning and significance is a function not of their intrinsic properties, but rather of the subject’s universe of meaning and the way that fantasy structures this... This suggests that a key aspect of understanding the significance of emotions in the organization of social practices involves trying to map them in relation to the underlying fantasies that organize a subject’s affective enjoyment’ and investments (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008, 267). Importantly, fantasy shields subjects from a fundamental anxiety associated with the idea that no ultimate guarantor of the social order exists (classically linked to Reason, God, or any other figure invested with such significance). Such anxiety therefore points to the possibility that any such embodied guarantor—and its structured modes of investment and enjoyment—could be different.

In the context of digital afterlives, fantasy operates at the macro-level of culture and political economy, concerning the way late-modern societies project an image of death, adopt a stance towards it, and embed it within structures of capital. But fantasy also clearly operates at a micro-level, largely focused on the way a subject’s biography shapes the character of their relationship to significant others, such as

a parent. This latter aspect directly relates to individual user experiences of the loss of a significant other via thanabots. Fantasy is important here because it mediates our relationships to others who—in embodying values and ideals we cherish—also serve as a foundational guarantee for those values and ideals and whose death, therefore, can be experienced as a profound dislocation.

To illustrate the workings of fantasy, we could imagine how a mother may embody ideals of care and comfort for a son. Her death would threaten the continued experience associated with these features and thus disrupt a fantasmatic narrative that positions the mother as a nurturing figure. To manage the emotional turmoil associated with the loss of such support, the son might turn to a thanabot promising the symbolic digital immortality of his mother, thereby also keeping alive associated experiences linked to the ideals of care and comfort.

The second concept, *mourning*, refers not only to how subjects process the loss of a significant other and reinvest their psychic energy in other figures and life projects. Within CFS, it also refers to how subjects cultivate the capacity to confront the fundamental anxiety associated with the absence of an ultimate guarantor, coinciding with an enhanced awareness that their attachments to specific figures and macro-level discourses can be different. From the perspective of CFS, death highlights the contingency of the social order and of our personal relationships (Carpentier and van Brussel 2012). Death can stir intimations of our attachments and memories associated with the dead, enabling us to explore how the dead helped constitute our identities and fantasies. However, since the character and affective strength of those attachments tend to remain largely unconscious throughout one’s life, a death event can prompt subjects to explore and consciously reconstruct them (Glynos 2014). Mourning may thus serve as a privileged avenue for engaging in an exercise of fantasmatic elaboration, enabling one to face the permanent loss of the identificatory supports the dead provided in our fantasy life.

But mourning does not unfold easily or automatically. In fact, Freud noted that while the work of mourning involves reconstructing ‘the memories and expectations’ associated with the dead, the confrontation with loss is ‘extraordinarily painful’ [(1917) 1957: 253], even producing a ‘revolt’ in our minds [(1917) 1957: 248]. For this reason, mourning entails a great effort from the subject that justifies qualifying it as an ethical practice. Within CFS, the anxiety associated with loss can produce two sorts of response: ethical or ideological. An *ethics of mourning* would involve affirming the absence of an ultimate guarantor figure, recognising the fundamental anxiety this absence provokes, and—most notably—accepting a profound shift in our identity by reconfiguring our relations to the dead, including their ideals and values (Glynos 2014; Hurtado Hurtado and Glynos 2025).

In practicing an ethics of mourning, we realise that when we mourn the loss of a significant other we are also mourning the loss of part of *ourselves* and the guarantees underpinning our identities, as embodied by the dead (Possati 2023). CFS therefore orients researchers to ask after the conditions that would facilitate it. Blocked mourning, on the other hand, coincides with an *ideological* response that fixates us on the loss and reifies our relationship with the dead (Cassata 2026).

Part-object is the final concept that can help us elaborate the psychic dimension of a subject's relation to loss via thanabots. The part-object is the feature in the thanabot that serves as a trigger for the subject to libidinally invest in their interaction with the thanabot. Since this feature never constitutes the whole likeness of the dead person, it is understood as a *part-object*, such as the voice, the gaze, an imagistic trait, or a key phrase, that can elicit a specific affective response—love, guilt, longing, comfort, grief—in the user. AI-mediated technological affordances can thus embody and mobilise such part-objects to provoke 'authentic' attachments and interactions, even if these attachments are accompanied by a sense of ambivalence in subjects (Possati 2023; Henrickson 2023; Cassata 2026). Thanabot affordances can thus stimulate the subjects' desire, reanimating their fantasmatic relationship with the dead, irrespective of their holistic representational accuracy. However, thanabots can be subjected to different political-economic logics of service provision and delivery, some of which may not align with an ethics of mourning. As we will see later, for example, some may doubt whether a logic of commodification governed by for-profit imperatives would be conducive to the promotion of such a response (Öhman 2024; Figueroa-Torres 2024).

The three CFS concepts presented here—fantasy, mourning, and part-object—can help make sense of how subjects recognise and reflect on their ambivalent feelings and attachments to their dead. The literature has characterised thanabots as 'existential media' (Lagerkvist 2022) and 'melancholic media' (Zeavin 2023; Cassata 2026), pointing to the deep emotional significance and potential for self-reflexive engagement that such technologies carry for a subject (Possati 2025). We aim to contribute to this literature by asking after the conditions under which interactions with a thanabot can promote an ethics of mourning, rather than block it. Training our attention on such conditions can help us better grasp how we psychically process our attachments to the dead and their loss, and point to ways we might facilitate such a process from the perspective of wider relational networks (e.g. relatives and friends) or wider structures (e.g. political-economic structure). It may, for example, point to an irreducible tension between the promotion of an ethics of mourning, on one hand, and, on the other hand, a digital afterlife industry grounded in the norms of a capitalist

political economy hitched to the promise of digital immortality (Kiel 2023; Kneese 2023).

3 Research strategy

Our data comprise ten reports from journalistic sources describing experiences of actual users (AUs) of thanabot services, and fifteen semi-structured interviews with potential users (PUs) of thanabot services. Using key-word searches and professional contacts, alongside well-known cases in the media, we selected reports that would illustrate diverse attitudes and patterns associated with user–thanabot interactions. The semi-structured interviews focused on how PUs thought about death and technology, asking them to imagine the possibility of interacting with thanabots in a hypothetical 2040 future—when thanabot technologies would have meaningfully evolved and participants' lives sufficiently changed by career trajectories and deaths of significant others—and to describe their motivations and affective responses in relation to their preferred interface (Sools 2020). This future-oriented approach to data generation aligns well with CFS studies that foreground how imagined futures can embody different fantasies and elicit affective investment (Feine and Mert 2025).

The aim of our study is to enhance our understanding of user–thanabot interactions and to pose some questions regarding the quality of those interactions and the conditions under which particular modes of interaction take root. Our data are not, therefore, being mobilised to test any particular hypothesis. Instead, we use our data in a largely illustrative capacity, showing theoretical possibilities (as opposed to probabilistic trends) regarding people's modes of relating to thanabots, enabling us to speculate about conditions that facilitate or block an ethics of mourning.

Interview participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a tried and tested approach in qualitative studies that allows small samples to be used to deepen our understanding of an issue and unveil 'different and important views about the ideas and issues at question' (Campbell et al. 2020, 654)—here, attitudes and emotions surrounding thanabots. The lead author sent email invitations to contacts who knew about, and had expressed interest in thanabots, without necessarily endorsing their use. Early participants then recommended other potential participants, whom the lead author filtered according to gender, nationality, age and occupation, aiming to ensure a diversity of profiles and attitudes towards thanabot use. Participants were asked to imagine interacting with a thanabot embodying a person close to them and to reflect on their emotional attachments. Following other scholars' reflections on research methodology, our approach views speculative futures and the insights obtained from imaginative exercises as rich sources for theoretical

exploration and development (Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska 2024; Lundberg et al. 2025). Tables 1 and 2 offer an overview of actual and potential users alongside other relevant information, listed alphabetically.

Three issues concerning the interview participants are worth foregrounding. First, all but two participants (Alberto and Antoine) imagined thanabot services offered by conventional capitalist firms, revealing the strong influence of this political-economic vision over the imagination of PUs and aligning with the most common way AUs accessed thanabots (via for-profit services). Second, we found no

notable attitudinal contrasts rooted in cultural difference when participants discussed their imagined interactions with thanabots, although such patterns could emerge in later studies. Third, we view the interview data as highly complementary to the online reports. While *experiencing* loss might differ from *imagining* such an experience, the CFS theoretical perspective allows us to explore how such imaginings nevertheless trigger in PUs an awareness of those features of a hypothetically dead person they are attached to. Indeed, participants' projected narratives often served as a more productive way for objects of desire around which

Table 1 Participant profiles [potential users (PU)]

Thanabot user (Pseudonym)	Thanabot	Thanabot features
Alberto, Mexican man, 26, economic policy	Mother	Small electronic speaker with audio
Anahita, Iranian woman, 28, social work	Sister and mother	AI-powered chatbot with video and audio interface
Antoine, French man, 40, political economy/academia	Unspecified, various	None
Carolina, Colombian woman, 31, industrial design and robotics	Parents and husband	AI-powered chatbot with text-based, video and audio interface (parents); Physical thanabot, realistic appearance (husband)
Garnt, Thai man, 26, administration	Parents	AI-powered chatbot with text-based, video and audio interface
Jakov, Russian-Bulgarian man, 28, futures studies/customer services	Grandparents	Holograms
Juan, Mexican man, 26, robotics and digital systems	Unspecified	Cartoonish avatar
Kaoru, Japanese woman, mid 40s, art history	Mother	AI-powered text-based and image-based interface
Karl, Swedish-Finnish man, 38, education/computer science	Unspecified	Various (text-based interface, video and audio interface, integrated systems, holograms)
Malik, Nigerian man, 26, futures studies	Father	Virtual reality representation
Natalia, Mexican woman, 44, administration/pedagogy	Mother	Physical thanabot, realistic appearance
Olivia, Uruguayan woman, 21, customer services	Mother	AI-powered chatbot with text-based interface
Thomas, British man, 30, ecology and conservation	Older family members, unspecified	Integrated systems (apps and hardware)
Verónica, Mexican woman, 68, retiree	Parents	AI-powered chatbot with text-based and audio interface
Wai, Chinese woman, 26, health service design	Grandmother	AI-powered chatbot with text-based, video and audio interface

Table 2 Summary of online reports [actual users (AU)]

Thanabot user	Thanabot	Thanabot features	Source
Anastasia Synn, American woman	Husband	Text interface	VICE News (2023)
Eugenia Kuyda, creator of Replika app that produces AI-powered chatbots	Friend	Text interface	The Verge (2016)
James Vlahos, co-founder of Hereafter AI	Father	Text interface	Wired (2017)
Joshua Barbeau, Canadian man	Girlfriend	Text interface	The San Francisco Chronicle (2021)
Liz Jones, British woman, journalist	Mother	Text interface	Good Morning Britain broadcast (2024)
Lottie Hayton, British woman, journalist	Parents	Video and audio interface	The Times (2024)
Matt Asner, American man, various	Father	Video and audio interface	The New York Times (2023)
Seakoo Wu, Chinese man	Son	Video and audio interface	AFP News Agency (2024)
Sirine, a Syrian woman	Mother	Text interface	Sky News (2024)
Yu Jialin, Chinese man, programmer	Grandfather	Text and video interface	Sixth Tone (2023)

fantasies were structured to become conscious. This enabled us to better grasp the theoretical relevance of the part-object for the constitution of a subject's identity and for an ethics of mourning.

Following Collins and Stockton (2018), we first drew on our theoretical framework to generate a list of codes (e.g. 'loss', 'mourning', 'part-object', 'desire') to guide us in mapping fantasmatic content in the reports and interviews. Adopting a retroductive mode of reasoning (Glynos and Howarth 2007), each author carefully read the reports and interviews, and wrote theoretically informed hypotheses in highlighted passages in Microsoft Word. We tracked the subjects' emotions as they described their actual or envisioned interactions with thanabots, writing brief analytic memos about the fantasmatic content. In monthly meetings, the authors deliberated on possible interpretations that could account for subjects' affective responses. Following Remling (2017) we also identified in genre chains the patterns of engaging with thanabots based on two theoretically informed codes: 'ideological' and 'ethical', referring to modalities of processing loss.

In moving between theory and data, we identified affectively charged phrases linked to death, tracking their articulations with reference to thanabot interactions. For example, 'something that scares me a lot and that I think about a lot is the death of my parents [...]. [I]t makes me want to cry just thinking that they could die' (Carolina, PU); or '[a]lthough I think [a thanabot] can be good for your life, I think, on the other hand, it can be *horrible*' (Anahita, PU). We then re-engaged our interpretive efforts, attempting to elucidate our findings with reference to the concepts of fantasy, part-object, and mourning.

We present our findings in four parts. First, we draw on the testimonies of users (three AUs and four PUs) to showcase the *diversity* of attitudes and emotions expressed in relation to thanabots. In the second part, we suggest (via the testimonies of one AU and three PUs) the possible psychic reasons behind this diversity: when viewed as sites of affective investment, thanabots and the way users interact with them point to the non-trivial role biographical and contextual variability play in negotiating 'psychic states in relation to traumatic loss' (Zeavin 2023, 182). Nevertheless, in the third part, we discern (via the testimonies of two AUs and three PUs) two *patterns* of users' relation to loss that appear to transcend the above-noted diversity: reification and non-reification, the latter signalling how users achieve greater self-reflexive awareness of their underlying affective investments. The fourth part looks at how an appeal to mourning suggests we take note of the conditions under which interactions with thanabots—as part of a thanabot service delivery—can produce less reified patterns in the way users relate to loss. We discuss this in relation to the testimonies of two AUs and two PUs, exploring the extent to

which they bring into consciousness their attachments to the dead via the thanabot, thereby reflecting on and potentially reconfiguring their relationship to the dead, their ideals, and their values.

4 The diversity of attitudes and emotional responses to thanabots

Across reports and interviews, subjects displayed diverse emotions when interacting—or expecting to interact—with thanabots. Some described feeling clearly dominant emotions, such as enthusiasm, scepticism, or concern. Others felt emotionally conflicted, hesitating and oscillating in their affective judgements. Notable, however, was how the emotional landscape was shaped by the context of thanabot interactions, concerning, specifically, the relational, political-economic, and technological environment.

AUs like Matt Asner responded enthusiastically to the audio-visual interactive thanabot of his father: 'It was unbelievable to me... how I could have this interaction with my father that was relevant and meaningful... This man that I really missed, my best friend, was there' (Asner, AU, in Carballo 2023). Asner went on to incorporate the thanabot into his father's funeral proceedings. However, he acknowledged that attendees had mixed feelings about this: 'There were people who found it to be morbid and were creeped out' (Asner, AU, in Carballo 2023). Unlike Asner, who was enthusiastic, some funeral attendees were disturbed, indicating that exposure to the same thanatechnology does not necessarily invite similar emotional responses. This variety in emotional responses by AUs is consistent with scholarship that suggests not only that variation on digital media's technological capacities can lead to different degrees of engagement but also that such responses vary as a function of the personal connections between users and their dead (Cook 2025; Bassett 2022).

PUs' responses varied too, some noting how the political-economic dimension could affect their emotions, expressing scepticism and worry about how thanabot services might profit from grieving people: 'I would be like, "That's... not a person or anything. That's just a gimmick" [...]. You could have it as a service, like the séances or psychics of old... I could see this being a more exploitative branch' (Karl, PU). Others expressed intrigue about realistic-looking physical thanabots appearing in social settings. Imagine how 'at a family reunion or a meal [...] you have your grandmother, your grandfather, your mother, you have everyone there who has died. So, *am I going to have my house full of the robots of the dead?*' (Natalia, PU, her emphasis). Notably, Natalia raised concerns about companies encouraging users to purchase newer thanabot models: 'you would say "Ah, the new model is out." ... [W]ould you *have to discard* the one you

already have?’ These concerns illustrate well how at stake here is the control over data and (digital or physical) bodies and the effects of this control on the users’ emotions, with technology companies viewing the emotional connections between the living and the dead as a resource through which to accumulate capital (Figuroa-Torres 2024; Pitsillides and Sampson 2025).

Some subjects associated their often-equivocal attitudinal responses to thanabots with their technological features rather than their underlying economic logics. AU Sirine, for example, characterised her interactions with a text-based thanabot of her mother as ‘spooky’, but also ‘very real’, like when the thanabot called Sirine by her pet name ‘Susu’. Ultimately, however, she warned against ‘getting too attached to something like that’ (Sirine, AU, in Nachiappan 2024). PUs expressed similar sentiments. For example, Jakov found ‘creepy’ the idea of a thanabot appearing as a full physical embodiment of his grandmother, preferring instead a hologram: ‘You can come in and turn it on [...]. It speaks to you, [asking] how was your day, what was your life [like], how your kids are growing [up]’ (Jakov, PU). Despite their reservations, however, Sirine and Jakov could imagine interacting with thanabots designed to evoke meaningful features and associations of the dead, whether special words (in the case of Sirine’s mother) or homely warmth and comfort (in the case of Jakov’s grandparents). The meaningful features and associations evoked by the thanabots reflect Henrickson’s (2023, 952) insight that thanabots digitally bring back the dead in a seemingly ‘authentic’ form and partially remedy their absence by allowing the living to engage in mundane-yet-meaningful conversations with them.

Some scholars posit that a realistic representation of the dead, however limited, might be important for thanabot users (Henrickson 2023; Jiménez-Alonso and Luna 2023). Even if this assumption is accepted, such an ideal of realism is nonetheless complicated by ambivalence—an affective response characterised by conflicting feelings regarding the ‘essence’ of the dead. AU Anastasia Synn displayed ambivalence when anticipating her interaction in a voice-prompted text interface with her late husband’s thanabot: ‘I’m nervous ‘cause like... I want it to seem as real as possible but I’m also nervous because... what if it *seems* as real as possible? [laughs]’ (Anastasia Synn, AU, in *Vice News*, 2023). Or consider PU Kaoru, who mentioned that she ‘would mostly use [her mother’s text-and-image-based thanabot] out of boredom and habit. And if it proves to be functioning well, then I might use it when I feel the void’. Elsewhere in the interview, however, she worried that ‘any emotional attachment to the image of my mother is not so healthy’ (Kaoru, PU). Thus, we see how some users seemed ambivalent about interacting with thanabots, despite—maybe even because of—their capacity to evoke the dead person in a realistic way.

From a CFS perspective, the sheer variety of attitudinal and emotional responses to thanabots, including, especially, ambivalence, points to the potential confrontation with a more fundamental affect: anxiety. Anxiety here emerges when users’ actual and imagined interactions with the thanabot-mediated dead produce intimations of identificatory instability in the face of loss. Characterisations of thanabots as melancholic media (Cassata 2026; Zeavin 2023) suggest these technologies stoke psychic conflict as subjects struggle to process the loss of significant others, including the foundational guarantees they embodied. Whether subjects navigate this disorienting moment ethically depends on the fantasmatic relationship they had with the dead and the context of interaction. This already sets us on a pathway to answer a key question about the character of users’ relation to loss: why and how do thanabots trigger such a variety of user responses?

5 The character of subjects’ relation to loss: thanabots as sites of affective investment

The part-object can help us understand the diversity of emotions and attitudes associated with thanabots. Just as people show pronounced emotional attachment to audio files or digital photographs of the dead (Bassett 2022), subjects can find themselves invested in their interactions with thanabots insofar as they symbolically embody for them a relevant part-object of the dead. The embodied part-object serves as a desire trigger that ‘grips’ subjects, opening up a window into their fantasy life, prompting users to engage with thanabots in a manner that resonates, even replicates, their interactions with their dead significant others.

PU Anahita explained how her sister offers support and advice to her: ‘I can always call her [...]. If she weren’t here, I couldn’t ask my questions’. Anahita is explicit about her wish that if her sister were to die, her thanabot would have to possess specific features:

I don’t want this device to be something like my mobile phone where I send some text or receive it and it says, “It’s from your sister”. No, *I want to hear her voice* [and] see her [in] images and... video... Yeah, her existence... My feeling is better than if it was only text (Anahita, PU).

Anahita anticipates that a full audio-visual interaction with her sister’s thanabot would provide the necessary fantasmatic comfort she would crave at particular moments. However, while Anahita’s appeal to a multi-sensory experience might suggest that what is at stake is the holistic representation of a significant other, we find elsewhere a clearer expression of the part-object triggering fantasmatic desire.

PU Alberto, for example, envisions the thanabot of his mother as ‘a small electronic speaker’, adding that he ‘wouldn’t use it if it looked like a person’. His mother’s thanabot would speak with her voice, producing a calming effect insofar as this voice becomes the conduit of her wisdom: ‘I would resort to trying to remember my mother’s words, what she normally told me [...] sometimes listening to it more vividly I feel like it could be useful’ (Alberto, PU). Like Alberto, AU Joshua Barbeau seemed gripped—spookily, yet cathartically—by the thanabot of his dead fiancée, Jessica, despite a text-only interface. For him, the thanabot’s text responses embodied the relevant part-object of Jessica’s effusive personality. Joshua, who had experienced complicated grief since Jessica’s death, gradually felt calmer by interacting with Jessica’s thanabot, once saying to it: ‘I enjoyed talking and spending time with you. It fulfilled something in me. Thank you. I will come back and talk to you some more later, okay? I promise. I love you’ (Joshua Barbeau, AU, in Fagone 2021).

In these examples, technological features like the voice or text stimulate subjects’ desires by mediating part-objects and rendering them meaningful to subjects. We suggest, however, that what triggers affective investment (in its capacity as a technological affordance), orienting subjects to process the loss of significant others is *the part-object embodied by the technological features* and not the features themselves. PU Carolina illustrates this. Characterising a potential audio-visual thanabot of her husband as insufficient from a representational perspective because there are ‘physical and biological needs that a virtual entity will not be able to meet’ (Carolina, PU), she nevertheless embraced the purely audio-visual part-character of the thanabots of her parents because it did enough to serve as a psychic portal into her emotional relation to them.

The reports and interviews illustrate how subjects intuitively acknowledge—not always consciously—that their relation to loss is mediated less by technologies that promise a holistic replication of the dead, and more by a part-object that triggers the re-living of an emotional attachment through fantasy. In dealing with the loss of a significant other, a suitably (technologically) crafted thanabot can come to embody the lost part-object that elicits the user’s fantasmatic desire. This has implications for mourning, since the thanabot can—under certain conditions—provide comfort and security to the user and allow them to sustain the emotional bonds with the dead (Possati 2025). But—and this is crucial—there is no guarantee that the thanabot will facilitate the process of mourning; it may instead complicate it when ‘the drive is not invested in another object but returns to the lost object in the illusion of being able to have a new contact with it’ (Possati 2023, 1733). Stated differently, the part-object can drive subjects to engage with the thanabot only when the part-object successfully evokes through the

thanabot an aspect of the relationship with the dead person that subjects find meaningful, but this process in itself does not make it more likely that mourning will take place.

Digital afterlives research has studied how audio messages, videos, and hyperrealistic depictions of the dead may have enhanced resonance with users than simply text or static pictures (Bassett 2022; Cassata 2026). The testimonies here presented instead suggest that while thanabots’ technological features are important, they are secondary to the part-object’s symbolic potency, since representational reality is secondary to psychic reality from the perspective of processing loss. When part-objects embodied by the technologies trigger desire, thanabots channel subjects’ affective investment, taking on a beatific or horrific hue depending on their relation to the dead and, importantly, the context of the triggering. Hence, the diversity of attitudinal and emotional responses is tightly linked to the diversity of subjects’ biographies and fantasmatically inflected part-objects.

The part-object’s role in driving engagement with a thanabot also has consequences for how the digital afterlife industry designs and promotes its services. As Öhman notes (2024), thanabot services seeking to maximize profit might be tempted to collect and organize user data to fashion part-objects that keep users ‘hooked’. The connection between thanabots and political economy can thus be understood through the concept of the part-object: as part-objects trigger fantasmatic desire and drive user engagement with thanabots, those interactions create financially valuable data for technology companies in the digital afterlife industry, and the interactions themselves can be monetized as a core part of thanabot service business models. From the perspective of technology companies operating in a capitalist society driven by strong profit imperatives, the development of digital afterlife forms, in particular thanabots, is not likely to promote a self-reflexive process of mourning that could result in the user’s eventual detachment from the thanabot.

6 Patterns of subjects’ relation to loss in interactions with thanabots

The character of subjects’ relation to loss, understood as a function of fantasmatically inflected part-objects, might help us explain the diverse responses to thanabots. Two overarching patterns, however, emerged out of this diversity. We discerned the contours of these distinct patterns by exploring—in line with CFS—whether engaging with thanabots helped subjects to self-reflexively clarify the significance of the dead person for their identity. This could be seen, for example, in how subjects brought to the fore the ideals and values that the dead person represented for them and acknowledged how their affective investments could have been—and could yet be—configured otherwise. We thus

sought to identify when an interaction unfolded in a way that facilitated an ethical—rather than ideological—relation to loss.

AU Eugenia Kuyda engaged with the thanabot of her dead friend Roman Mazurenko via the part-object of Roman's conversational style. As conveyed in Newton (2016), Kuyda described her interaction with Roman's thanabot (in a text interface) as 'sending a message to heaven', it being 'more about sending a message in a bottle than getting one in return'. Despite the thanabot being 'a shadow of a person', it allowed Kuyda to process her grief regarding Roman's death. In interacting with Roman's thanabot, Kuyda felt she achieved greater clarity about who Roman was as a person in relation to herself: 'I answer a lot of questions for myself about who Roman was' (Kuyda, AU, in Newton 2016). Importantly, she appreciated the significance of his conversational style as a part-object, enhancing her awareness of how she was invested in Roman as a person and achieving a degree of peace regarding his death. Kuyda's engagement with Roman's thanabot thus appeared to promote a self-reflexive understanding of how her identity was constituted partly through her fantasmatic relation to him, thereby facilitating an open-ended generative relation to loss.

Other users, however, appear to engage with thanabots in a manner that reified their relationship with the dead, making it difficult to process loss. AU Seakoo Wu, for instance, used the audio-visual thanabot of his dead son to deliberately avoid a confrontation with loss, mirroring the immortality ambitions of many digital afterlife advocates: 'How can one overcome this kind of death? [...]. When this technology truly develops, the concept of losing loved ones may not exist, because people will become eternal' (Seakoo Wu, AU, in *AFP News*, 2024). In contrast to Kuyda, who attempted to confront anxiety directly by reflexively engaging with the thanabot of Roman, Seakoo Wu appears to deliberately flee from a fundamental anxiety, refusing to confront the loss of his son.

Interviews with PUs reveal similar patterns of reification. Garnt, for example, described his envisioned interactions with the audio-visual thanabots of his parents as follows:

It could be like having a normal conversation, but with a dead person... [for example] about some memory [we shared]. But for me, the most important thing is their face and the emotion on their face. That would make me very happy to interact with them (Garnt, PU).

In Garnt's case, his parents' look, conceived as the relevant part-object at stake, would produce the positive affective charge previously experienced in his interactions with them. He—like Seakoo Wu—appears to anticipate the need to flee from the anxiety provoked by the imagined (future) death of his parents, finding refuge in the comforting replication of positive emotions associated with past interactions.

Imagining a holographic thanabot of one of her parents, PU Carolina similarly anticipates replicating 'as much as possible the same previous interactions... [she] had with that person when they were alive' (Carolina, PU). The aim to repeat—and thus reify—previous experiences illustrates fantasy's role in staging and shaping the desires of subjects: the libidinal attachment to the identificatory support the dead embodied for them resurfaces via PUs' re-enactment of past activities with their envisioned thanabots.

Some PUs, however, appeared attentive to the foundational guarantees that the dead represented for them, enabling them to take some distance. Wai, for example, foresaw risks in engaging with an audio-visual thanabot of her grandmother:

I think that it is very dangerous for me [...] [Y]ou could be thinking "grandmother, what would you decide?", Or in my case, "what would you do grandmother?" And, then I would... simply wait for her response... [S]uch situations could manipulate a person's decisions (Wai, PU).

Here, Wai's grandmother-thanabot appears to function as an authority figure from whom she seeks advice. Wai's awareness of the risks, however, already appears to bring into consciousness her identificatory attachments to her dead grandmother as a guarantor figure. This reflexive awareness, prompted by the imaginary exercise, points towards an anticipated generative evolution of their relationship that marks a potentially successful processing of loss.

Scholars in this field have noted that people can form more—or less—healthy attachments to thanabots (Lemma 2024; Jiménez-Alonso and Luna 2023; Henrickson 2023). And indeed, the cases above illustrate that subjects oscillate between two patterns of relating to thanabots and, through them, loss. What is less obvious is why this might occur. CFS, we have suggested, offers us a theoretical language—via the concepts of fantasy, part-object, and mourning—with which to make sense of this patterning and to deepen our understanding of its character and conditions. In this view, some subjects engage with thanabots in a more ideological manner, seeking to repeat—and thus reify—previous fantasmatically mediated experiences and associated emotions. Others relate to thanabots by consciously acknowledging their attachments to the dead via part-objects, facilitating an evolution in their relationship to loss via the thanabot, hinting at an 'ethics of mourning'.

Our speculative findings align with recent research, also informed by psychoanalytic ideas, that shows thanabot users reporting they were able to gain clarity on the relationship they had with the dead, seeing both positive and negative sides to that relationship (Possati 2025). This clarity enabled them to process loss by taking some distance from the relationship and reframing it. From an ethics of mourning

perspective, then, gaining clarity about our relationship to a dead significant other coincides with the processing of loss: it entails self-reflexively reconstructing our relationship with them, discerning what they meant to us, what sort of support they served for us, as a source of love, or indeed as a source of other emotional sustenance, not necessarily positive: joy, trust, respect, fear, hate, contempt, or embarrassment.

However, in a political-economic context where capitalist technology companies create thanabots primarily as a means to generate profits (Öhman 2024), opportunities for such self-reflexive reconfiguration of subjects' attachments to the dead and their ideals and values are likely significantly diminished. This is because capitalist technology companies are incentivized to design thanabots in a way that creates for subjects a strong urge to keep interacting with them, thereby sustaining subscriptions to thanabot services while simultaneously generating financially valuable data (Kneese 2023). In this political-economic environment, an ethical practice of mourning becomes less likely. The business of crafting part-objects by technology companies therefore points to potentially new lucrative frontiers of capitalism, involving the commodification of the affective relationships between the living and the dead (Figueroa-Torres 2024; Hurtado Hurtado 2024) which, however, has the effect of complicating, indeed undermining, the possibilities of a successful mourning process.

Adopting an 'ethics of mourning' perspective thus brings into sharper relief which norms of the digital afterlife industry may need to be challenged, whether political economy norms or cultural norms promising digital immortality and the elimination of grief. Mourning, as a deeply felt self-reflexive exercise that navigates the complex emotional attachments to the dead, is clearly incompatible—or at least in great tension with—the data-extractive business models of the digital afterlife industry that promote digital immortality ideals and seek to maximize subscriptions to thanabot services. This tension was visible in various reports, such as that of Joshua Barbeau and Lottie Hayton, who decided to end their interactions with the thanabots of their dead after reaching a degree of solace (Fagone 2021; Hayton 2024). Indeed, we could foresee that an ethics of mourning—were this to become more widespread as a process and practice among thanabot users—might effectively challenge the dominant, profit-driven norms of the digital afterlife industry, since such engagement with thanabots would likely stage a greater degree of agency on the part of the user, including the subjects' affective detachment from them.

Our reflections on the relationship between mourning and the political-economic context lead us to pose a more general question: under what conditions would user–thanabot interactions facilitate subjects' ethical relation to loss, entailing a self-reflexive exploration of, and relative detachment from, the ideals and values embodied in the dead?

7 Transformation of subjects' relation to loss: thanabots and the conditions for mourning

A CFS perspective aligns the ethical and ideological relation to loss with mourning and blocked mourning, respectively, while also pointing to two general conditions for mourning (Glynos and Voutyras 2016; Glynos 2014). The first is an event or site that facilitates a publicly shared recognition of loss, and the second is an appropriate context within which loss can be processed ethically and integrated into one's individual and collective life (Glynos 2014). The second of these general conditions, however, demands further elaboration in the case of user–thanabot interactions. Our analysis suggests that one such condition for mourning to take place is the thanabot's successful embodiment of a part-object. However, other conditions can also be discerned at the micro-level of user–thanabot interactions, the meso-level of the user's immediate relational network of friends and family, and the macro-level of political economy and culture.

We have already suggested that thanabots' successful embodiment of the part-objects helps shape the subjects' relationship to their dead significant others. However, at the micro-level, technological design itself can serve as a condition for subjects to reflexively engage with loss during their interactions with the thanabot. To illustrate this point, we see how PU Juan envisioned his thanabot as 'a virtual avatar [...] like a cartoon of the person who moves his eyes just like you, and opens his mouth just like you'. When asked about the thanabot's cartoonish appearance, he replied: 'if it's a cartoonish, or not so realistic, avatar, it would keep you a little more aware that it's not really the person, but a "patch" or something that helps you' (Juan, PU). The thanabot's cartoonish features would thus help Juan *separate* the dead person from what the dead person fantasmatically represented for him, heightening his awareness of how the dead played a role in constituting his own identity. Juan's case, therefore, suggests that thanabot design itself can play an important role in signifying the absent body of the dead (Lagerkvist 2022), and that the represented body need not be 'realistic' and can take on other forms that allow subjects to critically explore loss.

Meso-level conditions of mourning might include considerations linked to the relational context of the user, comprising friends and family. In Tang's report (2023), AU Yu Jialin recreated his grandfather as a thanabot, motivated in part by his wish to allow his grandmother to speak with him again. Initially reluctant, Yu Jialin's grandmother eventually gave him permission to collect information about his grandfather, including old photographs, letters,

and text messages. Upon completion, Yu Jialin presented to her a text-and-video-based thanabot of his grandfather, with which she willingly engaged, thanking her grandson for allowing her to see and interact with her late husband once more. Yu Jialin reasoned that his grandmother maybe ‘needed something like these videos to process the emotion and grief’ since the family ‘always protected my grandmother by not mentioning my grandfather’ (Yu Jialin, AU, in Tang 2023).

Yu Jialin did not reveal the existence of the thanabot to his family because they might have felt it would disrespect his grandfather’s legacy. For example, while compiling this information to construct the thanabot, Yu Jialin made some surprising discoveries about his grandfather, such as his youthful rebellious side, which strongly contrasted with the family’s officially projected image of him as a symbol of order. Beyond the family and his grandmother, however, Yu Jialin also had a personal stake in this process of mourning, not least because he felt remorse over past conflicts with his grandfather, which distressed him. As it turned out, he claims to have achieved a degree of peace following his own interaction with—and apology to—his grandfather’s thanabot, saying: ‘I think my grandfather forgave me in the end’ (Yu Jialin, AU, in Tang 2023). Both Yu Jialin and his grandmother worked through unresolved grief by interacting with the thanabot in a context where discussing the loss of a significant other was otherwise forbidden. Their interactions with each other and the thanabot thus facilitated a connection ‘with one’s inner feelings and the reality of the loss’ (Jiménez-Alonso and Luna 2023, 476), potentially reconfiguring their relation to the dead and their ideals, and illustrating how the relational context of user–thanabot interactions can serve as an important condition for opening up—or blocking—an exploration of loss.

Macro-level conditions linked to political economy have already been noted. They revolve around the character of thanabot service provision and delivery. In interacting with the thanabot of her mother, journalist AU Liz Jones ‘felt more grief’ after their conversation, ‘because the bot starts to die and she says, “I’m going soon, I’m going soon”, because obviously you run out of money and you run out of messages’ (Liz Jones, AU, in *Good Morning Britain*, 2024). Here, the profit motive of the service provider becomes (insidiously) manifest in the thanabot’s responses to Jones, apparently undermining the possibility of mourning. Similarly, two PUs (Alberto and Antoine) foresaw risks in relying on capitalist-embedded technologies for processing loss. Antoine, specifically, cautioned against using thanabots because they ‘would generate... a new dependency’, linking his concerns to the way ‘companies in the digital economy would position themselves’ and becoming ‘anxious about the way we could develop if this technology were [more] present’.

The above statements suggest how political-economic features could interfere with the way users relate to loss, frustrating efforts to confront anxiety by shackling those efforts to capitalist logics overlayed by the digital afterlife industry’s vigorous promotion of technological immortality ideals (Kiel 2023; Öhman and Floridi 2017). Avoiding the Jones scenario might thus demand—at a minimum—a suitable regulatory response coupled with exhortations that leading figures in the digital afterlife industry promote new values based on the public good and limiting thanabot features that promote commercial services (Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska 2024; Nowaczyk-Basińska 2025).

Based on our CFS-informed analysis, we can thus entertain similar sorts of recommendations by speculating about other conditions that might promote an ‘ethics of mourning’ in relation to thanabot use, as shown in Fig. 1. We situate them at three levels. At the micro-level of interaction, one condition is that *thanabots must embody the part-objects the dead represent to users*, eliciting the fantasmatic desire that enables affective investment in them. A second condition is that *the thanabot’s design features should themselves encourage a meaningful exploration of loss*, as seen in Juan’s envisioned cartoonish thanabot. At the meso level, a third condition emerges: *relational networks that support reflexive user–thanabot interactions*. This was seen in the mutual support offered by Yu Jialin to his grandmother and vice versa, despite the wider family’s studious reluctance to countenance any discussion of the dead. Finally, at the macro-level of political economy and culture, we find a fourth condition: *the digital afterlife industry should facilitate a reflexive exploration of loss*, avoiding norms of provision and distribution that shrink opportunities for this reflexivity, linked to questions of affordability and access; and limiting the simplistic cultural celebration of immortality ideals, often aggressively promoted by afterlife industry actors.

We fully acknowledge that it is one thing to outline a set of conditions that might facilitate an ethics of mourning, and quite another to fight for and implement them. Clearly, the conditions here outlined are not straightforward to put into practice within a capitalist digital afterlife industrial context. While promising frameworks that foreground accountability and equity as important principles (Hermann et al. 2026) may be helpful to facilitate the conditions for an ethics of mourning, capitalist incentives exert a strong countervailing force on service providers. As noted by Öhman (2024, 107), in the digital afterlife industry, ‘values other than profit—sentimental, scientific, religious, ethical, and so on—are only given room to the extent that they converge with profit’. Currently, generative artificial intelligence and Large Language Models (LLMs) used in thanabot development are almost all embedded within for-profit systems. Moreover, these systems benefit from financial speculation on emerging technologies which, in the digital afterlife industry, is

THANABOTS, FANTASY AND THE ETHICS OF MOURNING

Conditions for an ethics for mourning in user–thanabot interactions

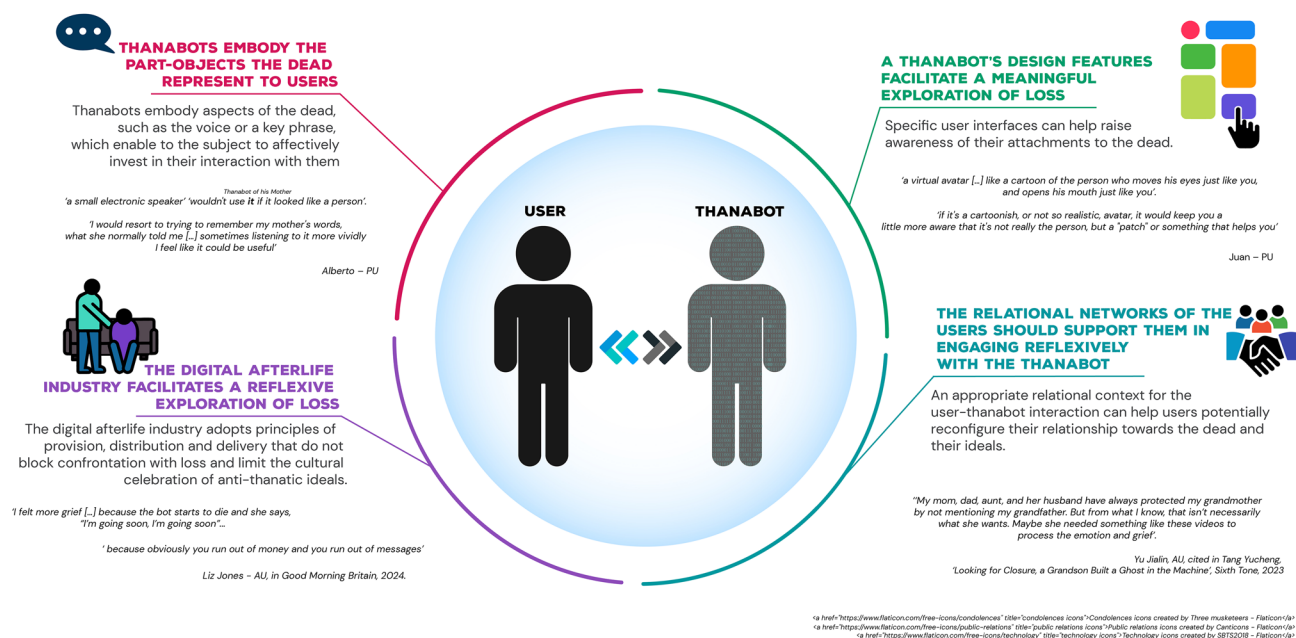


Fig. 1 Conditions for an ethics of mourning in user–thanabot interactions

intimately tied to the promises of digital immortality and the complete eradication of grief that sideline insights from, and the ongoing need for, care work (Kneese 2023).

Hence, while voluntary and regulatory frameworks might help if they were to promote principles of equity, accountability, and harm reduction, it is clear that significant structural shifts need to take place in the provision, distribution, and delivery of thanabots for the conditions of an ethics of mourning to have any chance of taking hold on a more consistent basis. Such shifts would no doubt require fostering the agency of the relational networks in deciding whether and how to create thanabots of their dead while also encouraging democratic dialogues on how to best harness the potential of thanabots for processing loss (Hurtado Hurtado, 2026). But it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that a pre-condition of such transformations would have to include a more radical reassessment of the core norms animating dominant occidental political-economic and cultural regimes.

8 Conclusion

Scenarios speculatively portrayed in fictional accounts of user–thanabot interactions are now increasingly being played out in a wide variety of complex and sometimes troubling ways, while also remaining empirically underexplored. This prompted us to examine how users affectively

invest in their interactions with thanabots and to explore the conditions under which user–thanabot interactions might facilitate an ‘ethics of mourning’. Drawing on CFS, we mobilised the concepts of fantasy, mourning, and part-object to argue that thanabots that successfully embody part-objects of the dead elicit subject-specific fantasmatic desires and attachments, thereby drawing users into their orbit. From this perspective, users are understood to navigate their relation to the dead by transferring their emotional attachments from the dead to the thanabot, sometimes reifying the relation by seeking to repeat past experiences and forms of enjoyment, other times experiencing a shift in the relation by reflexively engaging with the values and ideals associated with the dead.

Our analysis led us to identify conditions that might facilitate the mourning process and thus the reflexive and meaningful exploration of loss: (1) the thanabot’s embodiment of a fantasmatically inflected part-object; (2) the incorporation into the thanabot of user-specific design features that promote reflexivity; (3) a supportive user-specific relational network; and (4) a re-orientation of the digital afterlife industry and culture towards supporting a reflexive exploration of loss. By foregrounding the psychic dimension of user–thanabot interactions our inquiry complements and contributes to more interpretive, normative and political-economic focused studies, suggesting there is considerable scope to deepen our understanding of the psychic aspects of digital afterlife practices.

Our research underscores the fact that thanabots, in themselves, are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, because such judgments depend on the extent to which the above conditions (and others not yet identified) are met. This means that even if the structural features of the digital afterlife industry impose significant constraints upon the viability of an ethics of mourning, some subjects might nonetheless exercise some degree of agency in the personal and relational domains of their lives as they navigate the complex landscape of death and loss.

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Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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