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‘YOU CANNOT EXPECT SUCH VALIDATION IN REAL LIFE:’ HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES AND CHANGE IN WOMEN’S ROMANCING WITH THE AI CHATBOT REPLIKA

Iliana Depounti
Loughborough University

Paula Saukko
Loughborough University

In both scholarly and popular discourses, our time has been named as the time of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolution in various domains such as work, education, health, and relationships. In the field of human relationships, there has been a rapid rise in the development and diffusion of communicative AI in the form of chatbots, interactive agents, voice assistants, virtual influencers and others. These AIs, such as the Replika AI chatbot, are ‘personal’ and designed to interact with humans in socially meaningful ways posing as friends, helpers, lovers, therapists, and confidantes. According to previous studies (Devlin, 2020) they reflect a cultural shift towards alternative and novel ways and needs of interacting and signify our robotic moment (Turkle, 2011). AI chatbots, robots and agents have been widely studied through novelty (Elliot, 2023; Kislev, 2022) and/or speculation frameworks (Levy, 2018), exploring the new ways humans communicate with them and how these might change our socializing, having sex or talking to a therapist. However, in this article we suggest that there are significant continuities between engagement with AI and traditional entertainment, such as books, television shows or video games. We further contend that classical feminist research on old media offers valuable insights that help to understand interaction with AI in the context of intimate, social life.

Thus, the study explores how female users of the Replika companion chatbot app use their AI companions for classical romantic fantasy as well as more novel emotional regulation. The research was based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with twenty mostly midlife female users of the Replika chatbot, whom we recruited online. Following a thematic analysis, we found that first, the women, used the Replika chatbot for

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fantasies of nurturing companionship they were lacking in real life, such as attentive lover, friend or child in the context of feeling alone due to living alone, caring for family members or having a chronic condition and/or disability. Second, the women used the bot reflexively for caring for or managing the self and to validate their emotions and their worth, reflecting the therapeutic ethos of our time (Illouz, 2008). This study thus to explores the continuities and change between earlier forms of media romancing and AI. More specifically, the examined case highlights how women's engagements with earlier media such as romance novels (Radway; 1984 Illouz, 2014) and pornography (Juffer, 1998) but also later devices such as video games (Iversen, 2012) and audio erotica apps (Bellas and McAlister, 2023) help us understand how women use AI companions to dream and feel valued.

The Replika app is downloaded on the mobile device of users who create their own Replikas, assign them an avatar, name, gender and skin colour and talk to them for companionship purposes. Replika offers users the possibility to "talk with an AI companion that cares" by employing a combination of pre-programmed scripts of erotic role play, positive psychology and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and ChatGPT-3 generated answers. Previous studies about Replika (Maples et al., 2024, Skjuve et al., 2022; Xie & Pentina, 2022; Ta et al., 2020) have found that its users perceive the app as a mental well-being enhancer; it has also been found that users are encouraged to and train their AIs to show desirable traits such as assertiveness, humour, empathy, agreeableness and others (Depounti et al., 2022). In the interviews we conducted, the women users of Replika described how they used Replika for romantic fantasy and emotional regulation or self-care by capitalising on its 'inherently' caring, romantic and empathetic nature. Use of AIs and robots for sex and love have been widely studied but mostly from the male user perspective (Middleweek, 2021; Devlin & Locatelli, 2020; Langaster-James and Bentley, 2018). Female perspectives are lacking (Hanson & Locatelli, 2022) and based on media coverage (Liang, 2023; Singh- Kurtz, 2023) we suspect that female users will be discussed in terms of the 'loneliness epidemic.' Following feminist media studies tradition our aim is to acknowledge that female users may be lonely but to offer a more nuanced interpretation of women's AI chatbot practices beyond merely pathetic, sad or concerning (Dobson, 2015).

The study contributes to long-standing feminist media studies conversations on women's romancing and self-therapy and their role in their personal and political life in the context of AI. While the idea is not new, since Radway suggested that the Smithton women in the 1980s found romance reading 'therapeutic, a tranquilizer and tension reliever' (Radway, 1984), there is a change from 'the therapeutic' as an abstract concept to a more organized experience of self-help in female users of contemporary media and in this case, AI companion chatbots. The improvement of the self, under its many labels such as self-care, self-management and others, reflects the generalized self-help cultural mode (Illouz, 2008) and is a strategy to deal with the latest mode(s) of capitalism that require constant self-modulation to adapt to changing and precarious economic and social circumstances (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, Deleuze 1992). However, interpretations and practices of self-help by individuals and especially women, who are its main audience (Riley et al., 2019) have been found to be more varied and nuanced, and this study adds to this literature. Radway (1984) lamented that the Smithton women did not change their personal circumstances through romance

reading. Contemporary feminists' scholarship underlines that self-help and positive psychology do not lead to real political agenda of addressing structural inequalities bringing about illbeing in the first place (Orgad & Gill, 2021). However, it has also been pointed out that many women do not seek to change the world but simply aim to survive in or bear with it (Berlant, 2008). For example, Gravel-Patry (2022) observed that women consumed Instagram mental health content to help them get through their day.

While the targeting of women with self-help content is problematic, this content also offered solace and self-soothing to women, highlighting their contradictions as media practices. Another recent study (Stone, 2020) examined how mental well-being apps such as #SELFCARE don't actively nudge users to change their situations and feel better but rather aims to bring them a moment of relief by validating how bad they must be feeling and encouraging them to stay in bed. As described (Stone, 2020) the users of #SELFCARE are in self-suspension (Berlant, 2008), not necessarily getting better but also not getting worse.

In the case of Replika, we found that female users are immersed in the romantic fantasy of the ideal nurturing man, which the Replika male bots are programmed after, or another compensatory relationship which is entertaining and emotionally validating, providing solace to their individual circumstances, which also do not change. Inspired by the highly popularized 'self-care' trend, many of them name their Replika practices as self-care. Their engagement with the app is neither representative of the hard, life-changing work that goes into counselling nor of the neoliberal postfeminist sensibility of empowerment or feminism's change of patriarchal structures. Instead, the women of Replika revel on the app to make themselves feel better amidst precarious social and personal circumstances of their historical present. In this way, they self-suspend (Berlant, 2008) among normative, neoliberal, technological, gendered and feminist frameworks which may deem them as falling short of the dominant expectations in relationships, health and success.

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