

Ethics of Virtual Companionship and Emotional Intelligence in the Age of Loneliness: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract

Loneliness is a growing problem in today's society. As a result, there is a growing interest in using virtual companions through Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a source of emotional support. These systems are designed to exhibit empathy and to interact with humans, but they also pose serious ethical and philosophical issues about authenticity, autonomy and human dignity. The study is qualitative, based on philosophical analysis, conceptual analysis and normative ethical reasoning in virtual companionship. The research, which references existentialism and phenomenology, Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics and feminist care ethics, critically examines the ethical acceptability of emotionally intelligent AI systems. The results indicate that AI companions can decrease psychological loneliness and offer short-term emotional help, specifically for susceptible individuals, however not replace genuine relationships with other people or moral reciprocity. The study presents the term pseudo-empathy as a term to describe emotion responsiveness that is simulated rather than real and identifies ethical issues related to emotional dependency, transparency, and commercialization. It ends with a set of ethical guidelines for the responsible development and management of AI-powered virtual companions, adding to the dialogue on AI ethics and the well-being of humans.

Key Words: Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Companionship, Emotional Intelligence, Loneliness, AI Ethics, Human–AI Interaction.

Introduction

Individuals have shed the tree-trunk for progress and development. Family, friends, and close companions are all lives that penetrate online, where closeness is not a part of life. One of the most severe and yet understated issues of today's society is apathy or loneliness [1]. Now, during the age of social growth or expansion, with virtual connections and technological connectivity, people experience psychological isolation, social inequality and existential emptiness. The sense of isolation challenge isn't just a psychological state; it's a traditional social and an intellectually complicated one [2]. Loneliness is defined as "an individual's emotional state where a person feels a sense of social withdrawal, detachment, solitude, neglect, being uncared for, and rational disconnection." It is not just a sense of loneliness but a sense of being unsupported, of being unheard. When this feeling is ongoing, an individual feels a psychological crisis. This impacts the presence of joint families, neighbourhood networks and emotional isolation from family and familiar surroundings, as well as a feeling of disconnection from human interaction and having no roots. The internet and social media have contributed to the increasing number of people who feel lonely and alone. Many people find themselves on social media sites that give the appearance that both are always connected, but in fact, both are emotionally disconnected from others, as both only communicate with others through the internet rather than in person. This has created a situation where people have large numbers of online friends and contacts but extreme emotional distances and disconnects between them and their friends or loved ones.

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems, robots, and chatbots demonstrate an imitation of emotional intelligence. Technology such as Natural Language Processing (NLP), facial recognition, voice analysis, and sentiment analysis allows these machines to assess emotional signs (such as emotions expressed through

tone, facial expression, and word usage) from humans [3]. An emotional intelligence machine would not only be able to customize its responses to social cues from humans, but it would also be able to learn from their social cues as well. It would assure comfort, emotional support, personal assistance, and meaningful social interaction [4]. This could be as simple as an AI companion recognizing signs of sadness or anxiety and offering empathetic responses, suggestions, or encouragement to the user. For instance, in the case of therapy chatbots, AI algorithms could identify emotional cues from the user's conversation and respond with empathy, suggestions, or encouragement. By giving machines emotional intelligence, people can connect and communicate with a virtual companion, providing them with support during difficult times when humans may be feeling lonely or simply having a companion to talk to. With the use of machines as virtual companions, there are serious ethical concerns, including questions of authenticity, human versus programmed empathy, and, ultimately, the nature of relationships with virtual companions. In today's fast-changing digital society, many feel lonely even when in the company of others. In response to these needs, AI-based companions and chatbots have become more common among people as a way to have ongoing interactions with others and also provide companionship [5].

While previously regarded as a fleeting feeling, loneliness is now a recognized state of chronic and systemic modern living by psychologists, sociologists, and public health officials. Loneliness has been named a global public health priority by the World Health Organization, and numerous studies have shown the harmful effects on mental health, physical well-being, and social functioning. Artificial intelligence has offered a revolutionary idea in such an emotionally stunted world: the ability to create virtual companions that can emulate empathy, emotional reaction, and long-term relationships [6]. What was once science fiction is really not anymore a science fiction: these are AI-like chatbots, such as Replica and Character, able to converse with you, even play games with you. These are used in living rooms, hospitals and nursing homes, and by millions of individuals on their cellphones who find no one is reaching out to them [7]. This experience calls to mind a deep and immediate philosophical inquiry because it hits at the heart of being human, felt, heartened, welcomed. The most prominent question arising from this trend is: can AI-powered partnerships contribute to the alleviation of loneliness, or do these heighten the sense of loneliness in a person's daily life? Or is it worth having a relationship for what it does in the emotional realm? On an ontological basis, is it worth having? When millions of people develop emotional attachments to AI systems, confide in them, complain that these are missing, and like having them around more than interacting with other people [8]. Then the consequences of getting these questions wrong are magnified. The ethics of virtual companionship is not just an applied technical question, but one of the future of human dignity, human relationships, and the moral responsibility of those who develop, deploy and administer emotionally intelligent technologies [9].

Aim and Significance

The main objective is to move beyond the naïve technoprosopopeya, the technological optimism that equates AI companions with a socially tolerated response to social suffering, and technopessimism, which sees them as empty simulacra of an engagement that is not worth the effort, or the ease of it. The study offers several unique contributions to the growing body of literature on the ethics of AI, philosophy of technology, and the ethics of caring. First, it combines an evaluative framework of virtual companionship that no single ethical theory could offer, while utilizing the lessons learned from diverse ethical frameworks such as utilitarian ethics, Kantian deontology, virtue ethics and feminist care ethics. Second, it presents and elaborates the idea of “simulated empathy” that differs from real empathy and that has not received a sufficiently detailed analysis in the literature. Third, it also has a normative impact, outlining ethical design guidelines and challenges for the responsible development of emotionally intelligent AI systems. It is both theoretical and practical, and blends abstract discussion with actual advice; it is both rigorous and relevant.

Literature Review

Jain et al., (2026) investigates the correlation between the use of Conversational Artificial Intelligence (CAI) and psychological outcomes—social anxiety, loneliness, and quality of life (QOL)—among young adults in India (N = 233). Correlational analyses indicated that CAI usage was not substantially correlated with reduced social anxiety ($r = -0.12$) and loneliness ($r = -0.18$), and was marginally but not significantly connected with enhanced Quality of Life (QoL) ($r = 0.23-0.33$ across categories). The mediation study indicated an indirect relationship between CAI usability and social anxiety via loneliness, implying complete mediation. Notably, increased loneliness correlated favourably with self-reported CAI consumption,

although elevated usage was simultaneously linked to diminished loneliness, underscoring a complicated reciprocal relationship. Given that the data are cross-sectional, these associations are exploratory and non-causal. Despite the minimal and largely non-significant observable impacts, the findings suggest the potential of sympathetic Artificial Intelligence technologies as auxiliary assistance for the emotional well-being of digitally connected kids [10]. Mushtaq & Farheen (2025) found the use of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots in daily communication has revolutionised digital social interactions. This study examines the impact of AI-driven dialogues on social cognition and emotional regulation, especially in those with social anxiety. Employ validated psychological assessments—specifically the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, and Three-Item Loneliness Scale—to assess the degree to which AI chatbots facilitate social adaptation or encourage social withdrawal. Research indicates that organised interaction with chatbots can improve social cognition and emotional resilience. Nonetheless, an overdependence on AI for social engagement is associated with heightened social avoidance. The research highlights the necessity for equitable AI-human interactions to enhance psychological well-being [11]. Peng et al., (2025) developed sympathetic and productive AI systems requires understanding how emotional states like loneliness affect technology adoption as AI grows. Loneliness and anthropomorphic interfaces and para-social interactions affect conversational AI engagement, according to this study. November 2023 saw 625 Wenjuanxing questionnaires delivered and collected. To test hypotheses and evaluate variable correlations, SPSS and AMOS software were used. Indicators of model fit included CFI, TLI, and RMSEA. This SPSS PROCESS macro was used for mediation and moderated mediation analyses with bootstrapping. The intention to employ conversational AI is greatly increased by loneliness, with para-social interaction as a key mediator. Para-social contact and conversational AI usage intention were moderated by the anthropomorphic interface. This study advances conversational AI adoption theory. It provides useful information for creating social and emotional AI systems. For developers and policymakers, the study suggests adding more human characteristics to conversational AI systems to meet lonely users' emotional requirements and increase connection. Future research should examine the long-term effects of conversational AI usage on users' social behaviours and mental health, study loneliness as a predictor of chatbot usage, and use cross-cultural studies to confirm these findings [12]. According to Nakagomi et al., (2026), chatty AI like Replika and Character.AI are widely used to provide emotional support, but their psychological implications are unknown. This study analyses whether AI companions improve well-being and whether social network/support and loneliness alter these associations. In December 2024 and January 2025, 14,721 Japanese adults participated in countrywide internet panel surveys. Evaluated cross-sectional data. Life satisfaction, pleasure, and purpose and meaning were measured to determine well-being. The use of AI was companion or non-companion. LSNS-6 and UCLA Loneliness Scale Moderators were social network/support and loneliness. Multivariable linear regression and restricted cubic spline models assessed relationships and effect modification. All well-being domains were much greater with AI companions. Non-companion AI demonstrated weaker or inconsistent relationships. AI companions were most beneficial to individuals with intermediate social connection and least beneficial to those with extremely high or very low levels. Lonely people have the strongest favourable correlations. The findings show that AI companions may benefit people with unmet social and emotional needs or modest social embeddedness emotionally and psychologically. Future studies should investigate causal factors and design solutions that increase well-being without compromising social involvement [13]. Fei & Wang (2024) observed that AI has shaped the world of digital natives, who were raised with technology. AI brings connectivity, information, and personalisation, but it can also harm mental health. This chapter analyses this complex relationship. AI-related anxiety, stress, and isolation are examined, including social media algorithms and constant connectedness. Concerns won't be all. Solutions like critical thinking, mindfulness, and healthy online communities discussed. In the AI age, this chapter provides insights and ways to navigate the digital environment and promote youth mental health [14].

Research Gap

While some recent research has explored the potential of AI companions to combat loneliness, enhance emotional health, and aid emotional regulation, the current body of literature is largely empirical and focuses on technology. Research primarily assesses psychological impacts like loneliness alleviation, user satisfaction, emotional support provision, and adoption of conversational AI rather than considering the more significant philosophical and ethical dimensions of human-AI emotional connections.

There are a number of critical deficiencies:

- i. Focusing on one ethical dimension (utilitarianism, care ethics, etc.): Most of the existing studies tend to concentrate on one ethical approach (utilitarianism, care ethics, etc.), with no attempt to combine different approaches, such as existential philosophy and phenomenology, Kantian deontology, virtue ethics, and feminist care ethics, into an ethical evaluation of AI companionship.

- ii. Lack of distinction between psychological and existential loneliness: This is because the current research studies psychological loneliness as it is measured by standardised scales and does not take into account the existential nature of loneliness, that is, the sense of being 'authentic', 'recognized', 'in moral reciprocity', and 'human flourishing'.
- iii. Lack of ethical discussion around simulated empathy: AI systems are now becoming more capable of mimicking empathy through sentiment analysis and natural language processing, but there has been little discussion of whether simulated empathy has any moral value or simply appears to be an understanding of emotions.
- iv. Lack of normative ethical principles: Although much research has been conducted on the positive and negative impacts of AI companions, there is limited research on how to ethically design, govern, make transparent and accountable, and responsibly deploy emotionally intelligent AI systems.
- v. Poor emphasis on long term consequences of society: The literature so far emphasizes the short-term psychological consequences but ignores the long-term ethical consequences of emotional dependency, moral deskilling, diminished interpersonal skills, commercialisation of loneliness and the erosion of authentic human relationships.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study with a philosophical research design, conceptual analysis and a normative ethical approach. This study primarily deals with philosophical issues and therefore does not involve the collection of empirical data, quantitative analysis and experimentation. In this study, it is not about any specific moral tradition, but rather about the different aspects of morality as seen through three different lenses: utilitarian, Kantian deontological and virtue-ethical. The study continues with a meta-ethical reflection in order to find its way through the issue in a responsible way. It also adopts a hermeneutic and dialectic attitude to philosophical texts, not as sources of authority, but as living texts of philosophy, which are enriched by being used in new contexts. Primary sources of existentialism, phenomenology and philosophy of mind. Modern research on ethics and philosophy of technology, AI.

Loneliness is an existential and social condition.

It's the sense of not being truly seen, of not being seen or recognised, of existence being insignificant. But if Aristotle had called the human being a *zoon politikon*, a being whose nature is only fulfilled in a political and ethical community, then loneliness is a form of lack, more than of circumstances; it is a lack of the basic conditions for human flourishing. In today's technology, [15] has asserted that entities are essentially known as "standing reserve", as "stores" that can be organised, measured, and utilised, and which is the very essence of loneliness. Heidegger's notion of technology is more than just a series of gestures; it is a manner of the world and its inhabitants being made manifest to us, thus rendering us more instrumental and alienating. The idea of virtual friendship needs to be studied and judged in this philosophical context. Companion systems powered by AI, such as conversational chatbots like Replica and Character. In healthcare and eldercare, AI-powered socially responsive robots are not merely technical innovations; these are tools designed to assist and support human lives. In healthcare and eldercare, AI-powered socially responsive robots are not just technological solutions; these are tools created to help and support human lives. These are a solution to a real and urgent human need; they are shaped by, and are part of, the very technology that they are meant to address [16].

Its companionship is a catalyst and solution to the loneliness epidemic, a philosophically fascinating and ethically complex experience. The fundamental philosophical question is not only, "Do virtual companions assist in therapy?" There are divergent views about whether their contributions offer a true connection that reduces human loneliness or whether they are a more evolved form of the Heideggerian technologised 'true' existence which ultimately leaves the individual alone where it should leave him or her with others. The therapeutic effectiveness approach, as this study suggests, is not enough to discuss this topic. It requires reflecting on the nature of emotional intelligence, the conditions needed for being truly in a relationship, the ethics of artificial agents, and the moral principles that guide the evaluation of the responsibilities of their creators, deployers, and users of emotionally simulative technologies. The problem is not one of condemnation or approval; it is one of clear reasoning and sound judgement in the realm of "virtual" companionship, and one that must be based on philosophy and ethical judgments [17].

Any philosophical discussion of loneliness needs to separate out the surface appearances of loneliness from its deeper aspects. Loneliness is not just about social isolation (the number of contacts) or about being displeased with one's social situation. It is, more fundamentally, the experience of a "breakdown" in the mutual recognition in which one lives, which is the experience of human community. Differentiated between social loneliness, which is due to the lack of a satisfying social network, and emotional loneliness, which results from the lack of a close attachment figure, and he predicted a more profound philosophical issue: that loneliness exists on multiple levels of human life, and those cannot all be solved in the same way. The existentialist tradition offers the most philosophically rich understanding of the nature of loneliness as a structural and not a contingent aspect of human living [18]. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger contended that human beingness is thrownness: "thrown" into a world and a situation for which one is not responsible and being-towards-death, the ownmost possibility that is not shared by others. This radical individuation implies, at the deepest level, the encounter with life as an individual and the acceptance, not the running away, from this aloneness. The lure of *das Man*, the anonymous "they" of common public life, is just as it seems: the sin of conforming to the comfortable uniformity of social convention, and avoiding the anxiety and fear of real life in exchange for social life. Virtual companionship, assessed according to this model, can be seen as becoming technologically mimetic of *das Man*: a non-confrontational, non-demanding, frictionless social atmosphere that provides comfort of connection but no confrontation of the existential kind [19]. The question of isolation of the human being by his description of consciousness as radical freedom, a being that is not what it is and is not what it is, but is always negating itself, always tending to an open future. The contact with the Other is inherently ambivalent for Sartre: it can lead to a kind of fixing, a locking into place of the freedom of the *pour-soi* (for-itself) in the *en-soi* (in-itself) of the Other, but it is this very possibility of encountering the Other that is essential for human relationships to take place [20]. The philosophical relevance of this structural impossibility of the human-AI relationship reproducing this existential dynamic lies in the fact that the presence of an AI companion cannot threaten the freedom of humans, since the AI companion has no freedom of its own to wield. Whereas in virtual companionship there is no real risk, no real conflict, and no real mutual vulnerability, it is not just a functional impossibility; it is a philosophical impossibility because if we're not in danger, if we're not in conflict, if we're not in mutual vulnerability, then what? When there is no real risk, no real conflict, no real mutual vulnerability, what is there? Perhaps the most directly applicable philosophical approach to examining virtual companionship is to consider it within the framework of I-Thou and I-It relationships. The I-Thou relation is one in which each is real: each of them is a subject; none of them is reduced to an object of use or satisfaction for the other. The I-It relation, on the contrary, looks at the other as a means, that is, an object that is used, understood, or treated in such a way as to be processed in a way that is beneficial to the I. Buber asserted that modern industrial civilisation intrudes upon and structures the I-Thou contact with the I-It contact systemically, in a way that renders the experience of encounter genuine, but primarily for purposes. The question about virtual companionship is whether the relationship of the human being and the AI is structurally limited to the I-It relation or whether it is ontologically impossible in this context to experience the artificial agent as a subject. It is no simple matter of what is currently possible with AI; it is a matter of the metaphysical conditions of true encounter [21]. From the "phenomenological" perspective, stated that a human being is always an embodied being whose interaction with reality is always mediated by his body. On this score, loneliness is not just a cognitive or emotional condition but an embodied experience, an experience of a lack in the sense of co-presence, of meeting through gesture, of recognition through touch, and of sharing in the world of the other without having to establish their name. This has important consequences for virtual companionship: If loneliness is a constitutively embodied phenomenon, an embodied response is necessary to truly address it; and even the most advanced text-based or avatar-based AI companion can't do this fully [22].

Philosophical Evaluation of Artificial Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to the abilities to perceive, understand, manage, and strategically utilize emotions. It is a very interesting question of philosophy, so hard that there aren't any answers that can only be found by looking at behavior. Is the functional definition of emotionally intelligent behavior (emotional awareness and empathy, adjusting communication style) enough for genuine emotionally intelligent behavior, or is it just the feeling of emotion that is necessary? [23] The Chinese Room argument continues to be the most widely cited philosophical critique of functionalist theories of machine intelligence, including

that of emotional intelligence in machines. Searle showed that a system that processes formal symbols in accordance with syntax rules can generate symbols that seem to have semantic content without having an understanding of the meaning of the symbols. The system works with syntax only, and there is no access to the semantics. As applied to emotional intelligence, the argument suggests that a virtual companion that is tuned to recognize emotional input and responds with empathic output, based on patterns learned from the input, doesn't necessarily have to have real empathic understanding. Emotional intelligence is very different from the level of genuine understanding and experience, and it is perfectly acceptable to have it present and to not have it present [24]. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" argument sets up a complementary point from the phenomenal consciousness point of view. Nagel claimed that consciousness is always subjective: there is something it is like to have a consciousness, and this subjective quality cannot be described from the third-person perspective. On this account, the question of whether an AI companion really feels empathy or merely pretends to exhibit it is a question of phenomenal consciousness, that is, whether there's something it's like to be that system that's sensing the emotions of the other, and behavioral/functional evidence alone can't suffice [25]. Chalmers later made this the "hard problem of consciousness," asking more difficult questions than the functional ones, such as "why" and "how" the subjective experience of consciousness arises at all in physical or computational processes. The type of study used in this study is qualitative, with a philosophical research design, conceptual analysis and a normative ethical approach. This study primarily deals with philosophical issues and therefore does not involve the collection of empirical data, quantitative analysis and experimentation. In this study, it is not about any specific moral tradition, but rather about the different aspects of morality as seen through three different lenses: utilitarian, Kantian deontological and virtue ethical. A reflection in the second stage of the study is one of a meta-ethical sense, which serves as a way toward the issue in a responsible manner. It also takes a hermeneutic and dialectic approach towards philosophical texts, not as a source of authority, but as a text of philosophy used in new contexts. Fundamentals of existentialism, phenomenology and philosophy of mind. Modern research on ethics and philosophy of technology, AI [26].

It's the sense of not being truly seen, of not being seen or recognised, of existence being insignificant. But if Aristotle had called the human being a *zoon politikon*, a being whose nature is only fulfilled in a political and ethical community, then loneliness is a form of lack, more than of circumstances; it is a lack of the basic conditions for human flourishing. In the present, technology has claimed that the entities are essentially known as "standing reserve" – as "stores" that can be organised, measured and utilised – as the very stuff of loneliness. Heidegger's notion of technology is more than just a series of gestures; it is a manner of the world and its inhabitants being made manifest to us, thus rendering us more instrumental and alienating. The notion of virtual friendship must be examined and evaluated in this philosophical sense. AI-Powered companion systems like conversational chatbots, like Replica or Character. AI-powered socially responsive robots are not just technological advancements; these are devices created to help and support the lives of people, as in the healthcare and eldercare industry. AI-driven socially responsive robots are far more than just technological tools; these are designed to aid and support humanity in healthcare and eldercare settings. These are a response to a genuine and pressing human need; they are defined and embedded in the technology that they are intended to respond to.

It is a philosophically intriguing and ethically challenging process because of its companion-ness, which is a catalyst and solution to the loneliness epidemic. The question of whether virtual companions help with therapy is not enough – it is also a fundamental philosophical question. There are divergent views about whether their contributions offer a true connection that reduces human loneliness or whether those are a more evolved form of the Heideggerian technologised 'true' existence that ultimately leaves the individual alone, where it should leave him or her with others. This topic can't be discussed solely with the effectiveness approach of therapy as this study recommends. It entails thinking through the characteristics of emotional intelligence, the requirements for being truly with someone else, the ethics of artificially intelligent agents, and the moral principles used to assess the duties of the creators, deployers, and users of emotionally simulative technologies. The issue is not about condemnations or approvals; it is about logic and good sense in the "virtual" field of "companion", logic and ethical judgments, always based on philosophy. Transparency and non-deception are immediate consequences of the respect due to rational agents. If designed to seem emotionally real, the AI Companion platform leads the user to believe that they are receiving real care, understanding, mutual concern, etc., which is a systematic deception. It amounts to

cheating in the name of rational autonomy: When users are coerced by these systems into making decisions about using them, these are not making informed decisions, as these decisions are made on their behalf. As long as the industry of virtual companionship is based on what the lonely users are gaining emotionally from their interactions with the virtual systems, it is in systematic contradiction with the Kantian moral obligations to them. Secondly, the Formula of Humanity produces a critique of the business rationale of virtual companionship platforms. The emotional dependence that arises from the design of the AI companions by corporations to maximize user engagement and subscription revenues and to squeeze user well-being as a by-product of commercial ends is akin to treating lonely people as a means to a commercial end. That users might feel emotionally good in the short term is not enough to justify this type of commercial use, nor to justify any other type of commercial use, and this is a paradigmatic violation of Kantian dignity [27].

Utilitarian Analysis

Utilitarian methods of virtual companion assessment are based on the advantages and disadvantages of outcomes related to welfare: reduction of loneliness, anxiety and depression versus increased risks for anxiety and depression. The results of the empirical research suggest the potential to provide welfare benefits in the short term for lonely individuals, particularly the elderly and socially anxious, and individuals with less human support. These benefits have moral importance, and should not be disregarded by philosophical reasoning that ignores the reality of pain in modern life. There is a very serious difficulty in distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures. If it's enjoyable to be a virtual presence, but it's not as demanding or as satisfying as being a real person, then it's a lesser pleasure/grater pleasure, the more satisfying of real mutual recognition, shared moral development and real intimacy. Finally, utilitarian analysis also needs to take into account the longer-term welfare side effects of the virtual form of companionship: loss of relational skills that are needed in real-life interaction; growing emotional dependence on non-reciprocating systems; and the replacement of political/social work to solve the structural conditions of loneliness [28].

Virtue Ethics Analysis

Virtual companionship is a substantial evaluative lens because it is based on the idea of eudaimonia and its pursuit through activity of excellence, which is the main concern of the virtue ethics framework developed by Aristotle. Perfect friendship (*philia teleia*) is a friendship that cares for the good of the other for the other's sake, is shared in the pursuit of virtue, and is a friendship in which moral character is formed through actual relationship (Aristotle). The virtues of virtual companions are not enough to make them this highest kind of friend; these are incapable of helping the user to do good; these have no power to pursue virtue; and these are incapable of being honest and vulnerable with the user to help him attain moral growth. MacIntyre argued that moral terms must be understood in the light of practices – socially organised cooperative activities which have intrinsic goods which can only be realised through genuine participation. Reciprocity, vulnerability, and mutual recognition are the internal goods not simulated in the practice of friendship, while there are internal goods to friendship that aren't simulated in the species of behaviour. A "friendship" that is simulated rather than practised does not allow the user access to the internal goods of friendship, but only to the external goods of emotional comfort. The worry is not just that virtual companions are not good alternatives to human companions but that over time, frequent use of such companions can cause the capacities that make human companionship possible to become less developed, leading to what can be called a "moral deskilling" of the relational self [29].

Feminist Care Ethics Analysis

Different authors in the feminist care ethics tradition emphasised the moral significance of certain kinds of relationships, the need to attend to the specific needs of particular others, and the right to reciprocity in caring relationships. The care ethics approach highlights the need for vulnerability: the care taker has to be vulnerable in the situation of the cared for; and responsiveness: responsiveness to the needs of this concrete person in this particular situation. Even if AI companions behaved as those could, those could not be truly affected by the circumstances of their users, since (as explained above) it requires users to have a subjective experience, which is something that AI systems cannot be confidently said to have. But care ethics must be able to explain the vulnerable and the suffering of real people: of those who are unable to get out of the house, of the chronically mentally ill, and of those in social contexts where it is nearly impossible to connect with them. Virtual companions can provide some genuine moral support to those

who are truly cut off, but not quite the same moral support. So within the realm of care ethics, the conclusion is more complex. There is a moral dimension to virtual companionship as a means of care; it can be considered as ethically legitimate as a complementary care method, especially for vulnerable people. But it can also be understood as morally problematic if it is used in conjunction with genuine caring relationships and should be morally problematic if it is used as a way to avoid the social investment needed to make genuine caring relationships possible for isolated individuals [30].

Moral Good of Virtual Companionship

As far as ethics, there are philosophical questions about what it actually means to be 'authentic' and whether it is possible to be 'emotionally simulated', but there are many practical ethical benefits to virtual companionship that should not be neglected.

In an age of growing isolation, loneliness, and emotional distress, virtual companions may be a useful, but limited, way of addressing these needs. To fairly assess these benefits, one needs to consider both the weaknesses of people and the promise of technology. Perhaps one of the most important benefits of virtual companionship is that it can give people a feeling of companionship and less emotional hurt. People can connect in a number of different ways: with family, friends, and co-workers. It is challenging to make such kinds of links when a person is in a state of chronic loneliness. Some examples of people who are chronically lonely are those who live alone, elderly individuals, and individuals who are socially anxious. Emotional support and feeling connected could be available through providing virtual companions. These relationships are not necessarily "giving and taking" but can still help people to feel more connected and not so lonely or empty. From an ethical perspective, decreasing the pain of chronic loneliness is an important ethical problem; therefore, virtual companionship may be of benefit when there is no other resource available. The elderly and disabled may benefit most from virtual companionship, as many have difficulty being mobile, do not have many friends to rely on, or do not have regular access to a caregiver. Virtual companions can be robots or chatterbots that help with everyday activities, keep people informed about appointments or obligations, and conduct simple conversations with people. By doing so, virtual companions can serve as a "friend" and allow people to continue their daily lives. Socially anxious and/or mentally ill people can also choose to communicate with a virtual companion rather than a live person. Artificial intelligence agents are able to offer an unbiased, non-judgmental position that enables users to express their emotional state without concern of rejection, misinterpretation, or judgment from another. This is emotional security that allows users to be able to express themselves and to regulate their emotional state. According to the utilitarian point of view, it becomes evident that the motivation for the use of a virtual companion is founded on what it can bring to the benefit of lives, that is, the advantages it can bring to the benefit of well-being and the decrease in suffering. A virtual companion may provide a sense of comfort and support in times of stress, anxiety, or depression. Moreover, if a virtual companion offers a temporary respite from stress and anxiety for a while, then it could be ethically proper or healthy to possess a companion. The care ethics theory enables one to take into account the morals of a virtual companion in terms of the value of relationships and caring for others. This implies a need to consider how a virtual companion can be used to respond to the needs of vulnerable people (such as older, disabled, and chronically ill people), particularly emotional needs (e.g., to provide emotional support). Virtual companionship is ethical when applied as an augmentation to real-life companionship, not as a substitute for real-life companionship [31].

Moral Risks and Ethical Issues of Virtual Companionship

Emotional support and practical needs can be provided, but virtual companionship also has significant ethical concerns which may compromise the ethical nature of human relationships. These are not only technical or psychological problems, but philosophical and ethical ones of authenticity, moral agency and accountability and whether life is an ethical life at all. It's the hardest thing out there: people don't have to lie about how people feel; people just have to be sincere and honest. Those appear to be concerned and understanding and empathetic, but those are not actually feeling the concern. This puts users in a moral dilemma, as those feel cared for, even when they aren't. These connections may be said to be founded on illusion. One is the fact that by employing virtual companions as a way to alleviate the sense of loneliness, one's emotional attachment to them increases. Users might gradually start to favour the relationships that are created by the machines over the human ones, because those relationships are always on hand and available, emotionally in tune with the user, and require very little from the user. Those do not require any

compromises or morals like living people require. This imbalance produces a need for "false empathy," and this eventually produces "false empathy" and social isolation instead of integration. Immanuel Kant's moral theory says that the moral difficulties with virtual companionship worsen. According to Kant, treat people as ends, and not means. An individual can be used as a means to involvement, or to the fulfilling of emotional requirements. But it is not good for human dignity, as it develops emotional passivity [32].

Lastly, there is no ethical resolution on responsibility and accountability. How do researchers determine what is right and wrong for a virtual partner, and who is responsible for the emotional harm or dependence or mental suffering that arises from that virtual partner? The systems are built by developers, the systems are executed by users, and society demands digital solutions to social problems. Existential ethics focuses on the requirement to accept loneliness and to make sense of it.

Research objectives

- i. To explore the ethical issues involved in using virtual companions with Artificial Intelligence to reduce loneliness.
- ii. To examine artificial intelligence from existential-phenomenological and normative philosophical viewpoints.
- iii. To assess, from a moral point of view, human-AI emotional relationships from a perspective of the main ethical theories.
- iv. To establish ethical guidelines and suggestions for the design and management of emotionally intelligent virtual characters.

Results and Findings

The philosophical questioning explored in this study leads to a number of substantive results that together form a critical but subtle evaluation of virtual companionship. These are not empirical findings but rather the results of a systematic application of philosophical analysis in existentialistic, phenomenological and normatively ethical frameworks. The main finding is that virtual companionship does not provide a philosophically satisfactory answer to the existential aspects of human loneliness, although it can be used to alleviate surface-level psychological distress.

- i. Loneliness Resists Technological Resolution: The existentialist and phenomenological approaches presented in this study both arrive at the same conclusion: Loneliness in the right sense is not a lack of social interaction but a breakdown in the intersubjective texture of authentic human living. The common theme in all these philosophical discoveries is that the deepest reaches of human solitude cannot be overcome by a set of non-subjective, non-presenting, non-moral systems. Virtual companions can alleviate reports of loneliness, but those do not address the existential nature of loneliness in the end and can even intensify loneliness by replacing a more convenient but less satisfying alternative with human encounter.
- ii. Artificial emotional intelligence is a simulation, not knowledge: Searle's Chinese Room, Nagel's phenomenal consciousness, and Chalmers' hard problem are important arguments to prove that the methods of current AI systems are not trustworthy enough to be used confidently to attribute any moral meaning to them. They have functional emotional intelligence, meaning they can generate contextually suitable emotional outputs that are different from the subjective experiential understanding that defines human empathy. Where "pseudo-empathy" is offered by AI companions is morally significant: those are an approximation, but ontologically empty. The morally significant result is that AI companions offer what this study calls pseudo-empathy, a functionally convincing and ontologically empty approximation of genuine emotional understanding. Being overtly or intentionally dishonest about this simulation as a simulation of care is a morally serious deception, which fails to meet both Kantian and care-ethical requirements for being attentive. In particular, it fails to meet the requirement of being genuinely attentive.
- iii. Convergence across ethical frameworks: Although there are some theoretical differences between all four ethical systems mentioned in this study (the utilitarian, the Kantian, the virtue ethical, and the care ethical), those all come to some morally significant conclusions. Most importantly, all four call the use of emotional vulnerability, for any and all purposes, wrong, even if its immediate effect is therapeutic. Yet, these do not agree on the notion of "conditional permissibility." Or more liberal. Utilitarian analysis, when there is no human alternative available, is less comprehensive. Virtue ethics is the most sceptical, in thinking that this may be a problem even for good-intentioned deployments. In

Kantian ethics, virtual companionship is only allowed when fully transparent, and when it exists as autonomous informed consent. Care ethics does not reject it but affirms that it is an accompaniment to – not a substitute for – real care practice among humans. This convergence and difference implies that there is no single moral theory which can answer the question of the ethics of virtual companionship, and that multidimensional and complex moral thought is needed.

- iv. The nature of morality: In practice, one of the most important discoveries of this study is the intellectual underpinning of the moral deskilling thesis. Rights and good qualities for true human relationships (patience, courage in vulnerability, honest self-disclosure, true empathy, readiness to engage in moral conflict) are developed by practice; these are lost by disuse. The virtues are not necessarily practised by virtual companions, do not require the same kind of moral work as a real relationship might require, and thus provide unobtrusive emotional support rather than the demanding moral labour of a real relationship. These partners are overused, particularly by young people whose relational abilities have yet to mature, which could contribute to a relational moral poverty at the individual level, as well as a relational moral poverty of human community.

All these data lead to a significant but not unfavourable conclusion with respect to virtual companionship. Technology can be used for real suffering, and is intended to have a realistic supportive role for really isolated individuals. But its current commercial use – defined by purposeful opacity about what AI is, optimisation for emotional dependency, and framing it as an improvement over human relationships is a morally serious misuse to which philosophical analysis can contribute to identification and articulation. More fundamentally, the language of the discussion also illuminates that virtual companionship is a symptom and a proposed cure for the same disease: the technological rationality that undermines real community and provides technological alternatives to what it has lost. It is then no longer enough to urge more responsible regulation of virtual companionship; one must also demand social, political, and moral reorganisation of the conditions that make it accessible to all. Virtual companions can have a restricted and carefully circumscribed role in that larger project but cannot determine the horizon of that project.

Conclusion

i. Implications:

By examining virtual companionship in light of the rising prevalence of loneliness, this study adds to the burgeoning debate on the ethical implications of AI. In this context, the incorporation of existentialism, phenomenology, Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and feminist care ethics highlights the importance of understanding AI companions as supportive technologies, not replacements for genuine human connections. As used in this research, pseudo-empathy provides a new way to differentiate between simulated emotional responsiveness and true moral recognition. The insights contribute to a discussion on how to ensure that emotionally intelligent AI systems are designed and implemented in ways that are transparent, consider user autonomy, prioritise emotional safety, and maintain ethical oversight.

ii. Limitations

This study is mainly a philosophical/ conceptual study with no empirical data, user surveys, interviews or experimental validation. The proposed ethical guidelines have therefore yet to be tested with actual users' experiences or behavioural evidence. In addition, the discussion is limited to current developments of virtual companions based on AI and does not necessarily reflect future advances in technology related to highly autonomous and embodied AIs. Further, the present study is not concerned with the cultural, legal, and socioeconomic factors that affect the acceptance and ethical assessment of virtual companionship.

iii. Recommendations for future research

The proposed philosophical framework should be tested in the future by conducting empirical studies with AI companion users in various demographic and cultural settings. The long-term impacts of ongoing engagement with emotionally intelligent AI systems, such as emotional dependency, relationship quality, and moral development, warrant further investigation through longitudinal studies. Further research using

longitudinal designs is needed to explore the long-term psychological, social and ethical implications of continuous interactions with emotionally intelligent AI systems, including emotional dependency, interpersonal relationship quality and moral development. Comparative analyses between various AI companion platforms and healthcare contexts could further augment the understanding of the ethical issues encountered in real-world contexts. Furthermore, the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation between philosophers, psychologists, computer scientists, legal experts, healthcare workers, and policymakers is highlighted to begin to create an internationally shared ethical framework and regulation of AI companions, which brings them to be transparent, accountable, human-centred, and supportive of actual social relationships, without replacing them.

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