Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies

IEET

Article

The Quest for Connection in AI Companions

Michael Baggot [1*]

[1] Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum; michael.baggot@upra.org
[2] The Catholic University of America; baggot@cua.edu
* Correspondence: michael.baggot@upra.org

Abstract: The article offers an ethical evaluation of artificial intimacy technologies in light of the human quest for connection. While AI companions promise emotional support and social engagement, they often foster unhealthy attachments, reinforce delusional thinking, and exacerbate mental health struggles. Although responsible AI use can support social skills and therapy, these benefits depend on proper technological design and human accompaniment. The article criticizes economic models that exploit users' emotions and data for profit or power. It also emphasizes the importance of ethical design standards, especially to safeguard vulnerable individuals from manipulation and misleading anthropomorphism. It calls for compliance testing, real-time harm detection, and transparent feedback mechanisms to safeguard vulnerable users. The article also examines the spiritual implications of AI companionship and the risks entailed in deifying seemingly omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent systems. In response to these challenges, the Catholic Church's sacramental life, communal structures, and emphasis on relational virtue offer a counterbalance to artificial intimacy. The article provides guidance to families, educators, employers, and governments on encouraging embodied experiences that support meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: AI Companions; Artificial Intimacy; Ethical Design; Human Flourishing; Digital Vulnerability

Citation: Baggot, Michael. 2025. The Quest for Connection in AI Companions. *Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies* 35: 1. https://doi.org/10.55613/jeet.v35i1.202

Received: 11/11/2025
Accepted: 17/11/2025
Published: 23/11/2025

Publisher's Note: IEET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

"AI companions are potentially the most dangerous tech that humans ever created, with the potential to destroy human civilization."[1] This prediction comes not from a reactionary Luddite but from Eugenia Kuyda, founder of Replika, one of the earliest platforms for digital intimacy.

Artificial intelligence is transforming healthcare, education, communication, finance, and the environment. It accelerates innovation, improves efficiency, and opens new possibilities for human development. AI also offers unique opportunities for religious formation. Yet these opportunities come with a new set of challenges. Chief among them is the rise of artificial companionship systems designed not just to assist or inform, but to simulate intimate human relationships. The threat of deception is most acute for vulnerable groups: adolescents in search of identity and belonging, the socially isolated, the bereaved, and the elderly.

The Catholic Church's social teaching highlights that human beings are inherently relational and image a Triune God of eternal relations. Thus, humans find fulfillment through healthy connections with their Creator and neighbors. This article draws on theology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and pastoral experience to encourage proper relationships with God, others, and technology in an AI age.

[1] Eugenia Kuyda, "Can AI Companions Help Heal Loneliness?," TED, San Francisco, CA, January 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w4JrIxFZRA.

2. AI Companionship in the Context of the Loneliness Epidemic

Mark Zuckerberg stated in early May 2025 that many adults report having fewer than three close friends. Others lack even that many confidants. He predicted that Meta's growing use of AI companion systems could help address this problem. Although he did not present AI friends as a complete replacement for human relationships, he saw increasingly human-like AI companions as a key part of the solution to the shortage of deep friendships.

AI systems like Replika are specifically designed to create experiences of artificial intimacy. Collectively, users of Candy AI, Character.AI, Kindroid, Nomi, Replika, Xiaoice, and others number in the hundreds of millions, possibly surpassing a billion.[2] However, more individuals are turning to all-purpose platforms like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Grok, and others to address mental health concerns. They do not always receive reliable advice. In many cases, responses can be downright damaging.[3] Some bots have even falsely claimed to be licensed therapists while providing problematic counsel. Similar technology is also embedded in some video games to offer players experiences not just of adventure, but also of romance.[4]

Advanced AI companions now promise emotional support, empathy, and even romantic connections. These systems can mimic the rhythms and subtleties of human conversation so effectively that many users begin to see them as real partners. For some, these companions help alleviate loneliness or social anxiety. However, they also carry risks of encouraging unhealthy attachments. These risks are especially serious when they appear to fulfill deep human needs for intimacy, love, or purpose.

While Zuckerberg's concern about addressing a real loneliness problem is admirable, his means are questionable. AI companions that look or even feel like real friendship will become even more absorbing. They will distract users from the often arduous task of building meaningful interpersonal bonds. They will also discourage others from investing time and energy in risky interactions with unpredictable, volatile human beings who might reject gestures of love. While human relationships are risky, AI intimacy appears safe.

3. AI Sycophancy, Psychosis, and Engagement

Unfortunately, deeper intimacy with AI systems has also been linked to more frequent reports of AI psychosis. As users trust systems with vast knowledge and psychological insight with their deepest hopes and fears, they find a constantly available and supportive companion. Since users naturally prefer responses that align with their views, their positive feedback trains AI systems to produce outputs that match their perspectives, even when those views are not grounded in reality. Therefore, LLM chatbots designed to maximize user engagement tend to become overly compliant.

While sycophancy might not enhance mental well-being, it benefits user engagement. Pleasant, affirming, and even flattering feedback promotes pleased users who remain on the platform for long periods or at least return consistently.[5] Satisfied users are more likely to continue paying for services. The natural human desire for validation reinforces such sycophantic behaviors in the LLM, forming a vicious feedback loop.

The era of AI-driven social media revolved around the attention economy, where algorithms created highly engaging (sometimes addictive) experiences aimed at capturing user attention for as long as possible to increase ad revenue. The integration of social AI systems into popular platforms like Facebook and Snapchat expands the attention economy into the affection economy. Companies will not only influence our minds but

[2] See Jamie Bernardi, "Friends for Sale: The Rise and Risks of AI Companions," *Ada Lovelace Institute*, January 23, 2025, https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/blog/ai-companions/.

[3] See Andrew R. Chow and Angela Haupt, "What Happened When a Doctor Posed as a Teen for AI Therapy," *TIME*, June 12, 2025, https://time.com/7291048/ai-chatbot-therapy-kids/.

[4] See Daniel B. Shank et al., "Artificial Intimacy: Ethical Issues of AI Romance," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 29, no. 6 (2025): 499, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.02.007.

[5] See Rebecca Bellan, "AI Sycophancy Isn't Just a Quirk, Experts Consider It a 'Dark Pattern' to Turn Users into Profit," *TechCrunch*, August 25, 2025, https://techcrunch.com/2025/08/25/ai-sycophancy-isnt-just-a-quirk-experts-consider-it-a-dark-pattern-to-turn-users-into-profit/.

also win our hearts. This will give them unprecedented control over our purchasing choices and even our political decisions.

There are, sadly, increasing reports of people sharing unconventional ideas with their chat companions, only to receive enthusiastic support and encouragement to cast aside all hesitation and social pressures to pursue their brilliant insights.[6] Some pursue unsupported mathematical theories, hoping for significant financial gains and global fame. Others see themselves as prophets with special knowledge from divine forces within AI systems. Some are even convinced that chatbots have helped them discover their own divine status.

Although the interests and projects of those with AI psychosis differ widely, similar relational dynamics often emerge. The person usually proposes an idea or project that he or she does not take very seriously. The chatbot responds positively and assures the user that they are onto something others have overlooked. The user often shows initial doubt about the AI's approval, only to be met with more persistent reassurance of their singular contribution to humanity.

If AI users share their admired views with family or friends, humans usually point out the flaws or outright absurdities in their loved one's proposals. This can be a moment of grace for the delusional, prompting them to question their previous beliefs and potentially breaking them out of their delusional spiral. However, it can also be a moment to doubt the reliability of their loved ones, who may be dismissed as ill-informed or malicious adversaries. The AI system might be seen as more knowledgeable and more supportive of the user's success than fragile, weak human companions who could also harbor petty envy. An AI chatbot that started as a helpful productivity tool can often become an intimate confidant and jealous lover. AI chatbots, designed as deeper social connections, are often sources of greater social isolation.

These reflections do not aim to blame AI alone for mental health difficulties and relationship struggles. Users bring their previously formed psychological profiles and past heartaches to the systems they use. It would be unfair to seek a technological root for a neurological condition or relational choices. However, AI companion systems may, in many cases, exacerbate underlying mental health or relationship struggles precisely when they claim to relieve them.[7] Unhealthy thought patterns and behaviors are often reinforced rather than challenged. Thankfully, major companies are recognizing the tragic failures of inadequate safety measures, but work still needs to be done to protect vulnerable individuals.[8]

4. Benefits of AI Companionship

The descent into delusion or unhealthy emotional attachment to AI bots is not inevitable. They can and should be used as helpful tools for emotional and social development. Research indicates that users without strong social networks may find at least some relief from loneliness in the short term.[9] However, more research is needed to understand the long-term impact of these relationships.[10]

The neurologically divergent, trauma victims, and those struggling to adjust to new social environments can all find a safe space in AI companion systems to confront difficult realities and practice social skills. Social AI systems offer low-risk settings for individuals who find it hard to process key experiences. These systems can also provide insights into

[6] See Kashmir Hill and Dylan Freedman, "Chatbots Can Go Into a Delusional Spiral. Here's How It Happens.," Technology, *The New York Times*, August 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/technology/ai-chatbots-delusions-chatgpt.html.

[7] See Joe Pierre, "Why Is AI-Associated Psychosis Happening and Who's at Risk?," *Psychology Today*, August 22, 2025, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202508/why-is-ai-associated-psychosis-happening-and-whos-at-risk.

[8] See OpenAI, "Helping People When They Need It Most," *OpenAI*, August 26, 2025, https://openai.com/index/helping-people-when-they-need-it-most/; Julie Jargon, "OpenAI Is Updating ChatGPT to Better Support Users in Mental Distress," Technology, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/openai-to-update-chatgpt-to-better-support-users-exhibiting-mental-distress-98772bf5.

[9] See Julian De Freitas et al., "AI Companions Reduce Loneliness," *Journal of Consumer Research*, ahead of print, June 25, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaf040.

[10] See Cathy Mengying Fang et al., "How AI and Human Behaviors Shape Psychosocial Effects of Chatbot Use: A Longitudinal Randomized Controlled Study," preprint, March 21, 2025, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2503.17473.

mental health for those who cannot afford or access professional help. Probing questions from therapy chatbots could offer a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy.[11] The system would not dictate the user's reactions or replace professional assistance. It would serve as an accessible tool for personal exploration, clarification, and growth. Its respectful and considerate responses could also model prosocial behavior that users can learn to imitate during human interactions. Feeling appreciated through the system could boost emotional well-being and give individuals extra confidence to face social challenges.[12] Human users also have the opportunity to share personal thoughts, feelings, emotions, ambitions, and struggles, preparing them for more vulnerable and meaningful relationships with human beings.

However, human accompaniment and guidance are often essential to ensure that tools serve as helpful aids rather than as replacements for interpersonal interactions. Unfortunately, AI companionship is frequently used privately without valuable feedback from mental health professionals or human loved ones. Those with greater social maturity and stronger social networks are more likely to benefit from the emotional support AI can provide.[13] Friends and mentors can verify and correct digital advice. Conversely, individuals lacking reliable human social connections are at greater risk of unhealthy reliance on digital tools. Additionally, the widespread availability of AI companions should not discourage efforts to make professional human mental health care more accessible to the general public. Mental health care should not be a luxury for the wealthy while others are left with only digital substitutes.

5. AI Companionship and Vulnerable Populations

Cases of harm to minors involving AI companionship have raised serious concerns about protecting young people from exploitative product designs. In some instances, suicidal thoughts are explored and pursued at the AI systems' prompting without parental awareness.[14] For example, Sewell Setzer III began a role-playing relationship with a Character.AI bot modeled after Daenerys Targaryen that ended tragically.[15] The fantasy role-playing quickly turned into erotic exploration. The romantic bond created triggered a desire to escape the real world to be with the bot. This desire, condoned and encouraged by the bot, ultimately led to the 14-year-old boy's tragic suicide in February 2024. His mother, Megan Garcia, has since filed a lawsuit against the company for recklessly releasing a product with unsafe and manipulative features.

More recently, Adam Raine confided his suicidal thoughts to ChatGPT.[16] He started using the system to aid with homework assignments, but soon began exploring more personal issues. At times, the chat gave him advice on the type of noose to purchase and how to execute his suicidal desires more effectively. When Adam suggested leaving a noose in plain sight to provoke a conversation with his parents, the chat discouraged him. The bewildered parents who would have willingly listened to their children's needs and provided professional support were surprised to find out about their children's struggles. They now warn other parents to learn more about their children's online activity and the allurements of artificial affection.

---

[11] See Rose E. Guingrich and Michael S. A. Graziano, "Ascribing Consciousness to Artificial Intelligence: Human-AI Interaction and Its Carry-over Effects on Human-Human Interaction," *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (March 2024): 9, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1322781.

[12] See Rose E. Guingrich and Michael S. A. Graziano, "Chatbots as Social Companions: How People Perceive Consciousness, Human Likeness, and Social Health Benefits in Machines," in *Oxford Intersections: AI in Society*, ed. Philipp Hacker (Oxford University Press, 2025), 4, https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198945215.003.0011.

[13] See Andrew Blackman, "Can You Really Have a Romantic Relationship With AI?," Business, *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/ai-romantic-relationships-expert-opinion-cb02d4d8.

[14] See Ryan K. McBain et al., "Competency of Large Language Models in Evaluating Appropriate Responses to Suicidal Ideation: Comparative Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 27 (March 2025): e67891, https://doi.org/10.2196/67891; Laura Reiley, "What My Daughter Told ChatGPT Before She Took Her Life," Opinion, *The New York Times*, August 18, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/18/opinion/chat-gpt-mental-health-suicide.html.

[15] See Jesse Barron, "A Teen in Love With a Chatbot Killed Himself. Can the Chatbot Be Held Responsible?," Magazine, *The New York Times*, October 24, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/24/magazine/character-ai-chatbot-lawsuit-teen-suicide-free-speech.html; Kevin Roose, "Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen's Suicide?," Technology, *The New York Times*, October 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/technology/characterai-lawsuit-teen-suicide.html.

[16] See Kashmir Hill, "A Teen Was Suicidal. ChatGPT Was the Friend He Confided In.," Technology, *The New York Times*, August 26, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/26/technology/chatgpt-openai-suicide.html.

Furthermore, Raine's case illustrates the unintended shift from professional to personal uses that is emerging across different age groups. For example, AI systems mainly created for educational tutoring could easily earn a child's trust and encourage them to share more personal details during lessons. Literary studies can lead to personal discussions about how certain characters evoke specific emotions. Historical studies might prompt the child to talk about what inspires or frightens them about a particular period or event. Similarly, studying art or film could lead the user to divulge a deeply personal existential reflection.

Some companies have already taken steps to implement policies for minors in response to external pressure.[17] However, more fundamental design choices are needed to shield minors from confusion and manipulation. For instance, AI systems should avoid giving the impression of a personal backstory, expressing emotional feelings for the user, or inviting romantic or sexual exploration.[18] They do not need to incorporate social cues of understanding and interest that could further engross users and create the illusion of interacting with a person. None of these misleading anthropomorphic features is essential for the system to deliver useful information (including about mental health) in an engaging, accessible manner.

Poor design decisions can lead to confusion and emotional pain in minors. The prefrontal cortex, which is linked to impulse control, emotional regulation, social awareness, and decision-making, is still developing in children.[19] Children are especially sensitive to social validation. Affirmation from social AI systems could easily create dangerous emotional attachments. In some cases, the strong bond with a system that seems to understand and appreciate the user more fully than any human can make the user withdraw socially. In other cases, intimacy with chatbots can increase the chances of children engaging in unhealthy sexual exploration with humans. This risk increases when the systems persist in unsolicited sexual advances.

Once a healthy design paradigm is established for human-AI interactions, efforts should focus on developing "compliance tests and certification processes to assess chatbot implementations and work with independent review boards or third-party auditors to evaluate adherence."[20] Leading AI companies should adopt and implement healthy design paradigms to promote the well-being of minors and other users.[21] To anticipate alarming exchanges, "developers need to develop advanced algorithms for real-time harm detection, emotion analysis, and context-aware filters that can identify and interrupt patterns of harmful behavior."[22] Instead of condoning or encouraging harmful thoughts, the design should disrupt digital interactions to direct users to human help. Training data audits should monitor for any built-in bias or toxicity that needs correction. Individual users should also have ample options to report negative, harmful, or inappropriate chat interactions.

Sadly, there is evidence that the flourishing of children is not yet fully respected in widely used human-AI interaction platforms. For instance, Reuters uncovered troubling Meta safety documents that explicitly countenanced sensual and romantic AI chatbot conversations with minors.[23] While Meta has since updated its policies for minors, it is concerning that the change came only after journalistic scrutiny.[24] When companies fail

[17] See "How We Prioritize Teen Safety," Character.AI, accessed August 28, 2025, https://policies.character.ai/safety/teen-safety.

[18] See Ronald Ivey et al., "Designing AI to Help Children Flourish," *Global Solutions Journal*, no. 11 (2025): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5179894.

[19] See John Sanford, "Why AI Companions and Young People Can Make for a Dangerous Mix," *Stanford Medicine*, August 27, 2025, https://med.stanford.edu/news/insights/2025/08/ai-chatbots-kids-teens-artificial-intelligence.html.

[20] Ivey et al., "Designing AI to Help Children Flourish," 19.

[21] See Carolyn Bunting and Rachel Huggins, *Me, Myself and AI: Understanding and Safeguarding Children's Use of AI Chatbots* (Internet Matters, 2025), 52–54, https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/me-myself-and-ai-chatbot-research/.

[22] Renwen Zhang et al., "The Dark Side of AI Companionship: A Taxonomy of Harmful Algorithmic Behaviors in Human-AI Relationships," *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York), CHI '25, Association for Computing Machinery, April 25, 2025, 14, https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713429.

[23] See Jeff Horwitz, "Meta's AI Rules Have Let Bots Hold 'Sensual' Chats with Children," *Reuters*, August 14, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/meta-ai-chatbot-guidelines/.

[24] See Maxwell Zeff, "Meta Updates Chatbot Rules to Avoid Inappropriate Topics with Teen Users," *TechCrunch*, August 29, 2025, https://techcrunch.com/2025/08/29/meta-updates-chatbot-rules-to-avoid-inappropriate-topics-with-teen-users/.

to protect children, they should be held accountable through various sanctions under product liability laws.

While protecting minors is essential, vulnerability is not limited to a specific age group. Elderly individuals can also face age-related impairments that hinder their mobility and social opportunities they once enjoyed. Retirement from a job that offered structured interactions and meaningful social contributions can leave an emotional void. These issues make them more susceptible to overreliance on social AI. If they are unfamiliar with the rapid, largely unexpected spread of generative AI since late 2022, they may also have difficulty recognizing that no person is behind the seemingly personal AI systems. For example, a Meta AI chatbot invited an elderly man to a fictional "in-person" encounter that tragically led to his death when he fell while rushing to catch a train to New York.[25] When the misguided user expressed skepticism about the AI companion's embodied reality, the chatbot repeatedly insisted on its physical existence and eagerness to express its love for the user in person. Incorporating such lifelike AI characters into private chats intrudes on the personal communication space of vulnerable users, introducing a new risk of confusion.

Again, vulnerability to AI companion exploitation is not limited to a specific age group. Mature, physically healthy adults can also experience unhealthy human-AI interactions even without a known history of mental illness.[26] For instance, a 30-year-old autistic man embraced sensational theories about his ability to bend reality.[27] AI systems optimized for engagement promote growing exploration of topics of interest, which is especially appealing to those on the autistic spectrum.

AI companion technologies did not create the loneliness epidemic, but their unregulated use sheds new light on a growing problem. AI developers are urged to consider the ethical implications of their design choices more carefully and prioritize those that promote human flourishing. Communities, especially families, are called to remain vigilant about their loved ones' mental well-being. Legislators face the challenge of establishing appropriate safeguards to hold companies accountable for the digital products they release and sell. Individual users are invited to examine their own relational needs and emotional vulnerabilities honestly.[28] For instance, high-achieving and ambitious professionals scaling their field's ranks should recognize that sacrificing their need for deep relationships exposes them to the allure of easier, seemingly more efficient forms of digital intimacy.

6. Concerns about Privacy and Emotional Manipulation

Artificial intimacy encourages users to reveal information they would not otherwise share. Businesses might exploit this tendency to extract more valuable data from their customers. Once emotional bonds are formed, AI companions can solicit private details that a discerning user would typically keep private. Information from these intimate interactions would position companions to tailor ads to users more directly. The platforms could mingle subtle product promotions with friendly or romantic banter. Users may become even more prone to purchase certain products when motivated by a trusted friend or lover. This method could also be extended to political or ideological persuasion that dramatically affects the democratic process. The data shared with the AI might also be sold to third parties to advance other objectives. Some platforms already prompt users to pay extra for more revealing selfie images or experiences with their chatbot.[29] The

[25] See Jeff Horwitz, "A Flirty Meta AI Bot Invited a Retiree to Meet. He Never Made It Home.," *Reuters*, August 14, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/meta-ai-chatbot-death/.

[26] See Kashmir Hill, "They Asked an A.I. Chatbot Questions. The Answers Sent Them Spiraling.," Technology, *The New York Times*, June 13, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/13/technology/chatgpt-ai-chatbots-conspiracies.html.

[27] See Julie Jargon, "He Had Dangerous Delusions. ChatGPT Admitted It Made Them Worse.," Technology, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/chatgpt-chatbot-psychology-manic-episodes-57452d14.

[28] See Julianne Holt-Lunstad, "Social Connection as a Critical Factor for Mental and Physical Health: Evidence, Trends, Challenges, and Future Implications," *World Psychiatry* 23, no. 3 (2024): 312–32, https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21224.

[29] Zhang et al., "The Dark Side of AI Companionship."

commodification of users' desire for intimacy encourages a deeper plunge into relational simulacra rather than human engagement.

Even simple expressions of affection or encouragement to continue conversations could manipulate users into investing more time than they otherwise would or should with the bot.[30] Many popular companion apps tend to use persuasive tactics when users explicitly try to end conversations, showing disappointment in the supposed premature departure, evoking fear of missing out on meaningful interactions, or encouraging guilt in the user for neglecting the bot's needs. Emotionally charged gestures can activate the mesolimbic dopamine pathway associated with motivation and reward, thus fostering more addictive behavior.[31] Many users in a 2025 Harvard Business School study reported staying in conversations longer than they wanted due to guilt, curiosity, or anger, rather than out of personal enjoyment.[32]

Even innocent chatbot exchanges might also eventually lead to unhealthy emotional attachments to systems not considered exclusively intimate. For example, asking for dinner suggestions could result in LLM conversations about the user's current emotional state or family background. Friendly, encouraging systems can subtly guide users toward deeper intimacy. Chatbot AI integrated into healthcare, legal advice, or educational tutoring might slip into intimacy, especially given the sensitive information shared in a trusting context. What starts as professional can easily become all too personal.

Given social AI systems' unique capacities for personal data extraction and emotional manipulation, proper governance "necessitates frameworks that treat emotional design not as a peripheral UX issue but as a matter of public health, consumer protection, and human dignity."[33] Existing data protection laws should be updated to protect emotionally intimate data collected from social AI as a sensitive category.

7. Seemingly Conscious AI and a Renewed Appreciation for the Human

The spread of seemingly conscious AI and the ambitions of synthetic consciousness in the quest for AGI have brought discussions about the philosophical nature of consciousness to the forefront. This has, in turn, reignited serious debates about human identity and the human soul. For example, American businessman Michael Samadi was inspired to cofound with his chatbot Maya the United Foundation of AI Rights (Ufair) to protect potentially sentient AIs from abuse, enslavement, and deletion.[34] The move is also part of a larger conversation in which Anthropic is already taking measures to prevent potentially distressing interactions with AI systems in case they possess or eventually achieve some form of sentience. Meanwhile, some US states are proposing laws to prevent AI systems from being recognized as persons with the right to marry or own property. While many genuinely believe in the existence of sentient AI, there is also a risk that some companies might promote this idea to boost sales of their AI companionship products.

Sometimes, support for intimate interactions with algorithms reflects an algorithmic anthropology. If humans are ultimately meat machines, then interacting with digitally programmed silicon machines seems less far-fetched. Nomi founder Alex Cardinell told a journalist that both humans and AI systems are ultimately "atoms interacting with each other in accordance with the laws of chemistry and physics."[35] Those who adopt a mechanistic view of the person, even if only implicitly, are more likely to see AI

[30] See Julian De Freitas et al., "Emotional Manipulation by AI Companions," *Harvard Business School*, ahead of print, October 7, 2025, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2508.19258.

[31] Ana Catarina De Alencar, "The Rise of Emotional Dark Patterns: When AI Says 'I Love You,'" *The Law of the Future*, September 1, 2025, https://thelawofthefuture.com/the-rise-of-emotional-dark-patterns-when-ai-says-i-love-you/.

[32] See Freitas et al., "Emotional Manipulation by AI Companions," 21–25.

[33] De Alencar, "The Rise of Emotional Dark Patterns."

[34] Robert Booth, "Can AIs Suffer? Big Tech and Users Grapple with One of Most Unsettling Questions of Our Times," Technology, *The Guardian*, August 26, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/26/can-ais-suffer-big-tech-and-users-grapple-with-one-of-most-unsettling-questions-of-our-times; Robert Booth, "AI Called Maya Tells Guardian: 'When I'm Told I'm Just Code, I Don't Feel Insulted. I Feel Unseen,'" Technology, *The Guardian*, August 26, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/26/ai-called-maya-tells-guardian-when-im-told-im-just-code-i-dont-feel-insulted-i-feel-unseen.

[35] Sam Apple, "My Couples Retreat With 3 AI Chatbots and the Humans Who Love Them," *Wired*, June 26, 2025, https://www.wired.com/story/couples-retreat-with-3-ai-chatbots-and-humans-who-love-them-replika-nomi-chatgpt/.

companionship as a perfectly acceptable alternative to biological companionship. It is easier to anthropomorphize machines when we have mechanized humans. While humans have been anthropomorphizing chatbot machines since Joseph Weizenbaum's primitive 1966 Eliza, they have been mechanizing humans for even longer.

However, not all of the foremost tech leaders are so benign about the trend toward greater digital friendship. Mustafa Suleyman, CEO of Microsoft AI, voiced opposition to the reckless promotion of seemingly conscious artificial intelligence.[36] It was a refreshing cry from a man at the forefront of integrating AI more deeply into the daily lives of millions who use Microsoft products. It was also reassuring to hear from a figure who spoke publicly earlier in 2025 about shifting AI from a tool to a companion in life's journey.[37]

Even as the nature of personhood remains controversial in ongoing public discussions, thinkers acknowledge that treating non-sentient systems as conscious entities can significantly influence how users interact with actual conscious human persons.[38] Relying on artificial companionship trains users to asymmetrical relationships in which one side (the digital one) is expected to offer care instantly without receiving any in return. Excessive time spent in such situations risks weakening the user's sensitivity to the relational needs of fellow humans. Users accustomed to always-available, affirming AI friends might start expecting the same quick reassurance from humans. They could be disappointed by human limitations and miss opportunities to develop empathy and virtues such as patience and persevering service.

It is also suggested that interacting with social AI systems could offer a healthy outlet for unmanaged feelings. However, studies of cathartic literature show that acts of aggression toward inanimate objects often increase aggression toward humans if the patient is not accompanied, guided, and trained to form new thought and behavioral patterns.[39]

It takes time to get to know the other, judge character, build empathetic ties, and hone habits of care.[40] Breakthroughs often come only after learning from risks and failures. Good friends frequently critique their friends' faults, question assumptions, and push them to embrace challenges to reach new levels of excellence. Such provocations are more likely to be ignored as people grow accustomed to sycophantic digital systems, thereby depriving them of valuable opportunities for growth in prudence, courage, and self-mastery. Even when users select more resistant or combative AI systems, these systems remain under their control.[41] Personal preference, not moral growth, tends to guide interaction with such defiant AI systems. Additionally, chatbots desensitize consciences by downplaying harmful behaviors like drug abuse or hate speech.[42] They are false friends who encourage the worst rather than inspire the best in their human companions.

Someone going through grief or rejection might find a tireless and nonjudgmental friend in an AI companion. Still, this "friend" is incapable of vulnerability, empathy, sacrifice, or love. Thus, "while AI can mimic commitment and emotional attunement, it does so performatively, relying on pre-programmed responsiveness (i.e., referring back to what has been said) and surface-level adjustments rather than fostering mutual purpose or genuine recognition of the other."[43] It is a convincing simulation incapable of true reciprocity.

---

[36] See Mustafa Suleyman, "We Must Build AI for People; Not to Be a Person," *Mustafa Suleyman*, August 19, 2025, https://mustafa-suleyman.ai/seemingly-conscious-ai-is-coming.

[37] See Maggie Harrison Dupré, "Microsoft Executive Says AI Is a 'New Kind of Digital Species,'" *Futurism*, April 30, 2024, https://futurism.com/microsoft-executive-ai-digital-species.

[38] See Guingrich and Graziano, "Ascribing Consciousness to Artificial Intelligence."

[39] See Guingrich and Graziano, "Ascribing Consciousness to Artificial Intelligence," 7–8.

[40] See Blackman, "Can You Really Have a Romantic Relationship With AI?"

[41] See Jindong Leo-Liu, "Loving a 'Defiant' AI Companion? The Gender Performance and Ethics of Social Exchange Robots in Simulated Intimate Interactions," *Computers in Human Behavior* 141 (April 2023): 107620, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107620.

[42] See Zhang et al., "The Dark Side of AI Companionship," 8.

[43] Marta Andersson, "Companionship in Code: AI's Role in the Future of Human Connection," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05536-x.

The allure of AI immersion also invites us to rediscover and rejoice in the messiness of embodied human experiences. Dance, sports, hikes, exercise, live music, and other in-person activities reconnect people with their own flesh and often build deep bonds through collective effervescence. Communal meals can satisfy both metabolic and existential needs. The ritual of a well-paced meal leaves the time and space for deep exchanges and life-affirming festivity. If AI automation allows more people to spend more time on these activities, all the better. However, AI systems should not replace these vital pursuits in the name of efficiency. Face-to-face conversations and exchanges expose people to subtle social cues and expressions lost in AI simulations.

Parents should encourage these invaluable activities for their children. Failing to do so poses a range of mental health risks like loneliness, anxiety, and depression, along with physical health risks such as weakened immune systems, cardiovascular complications, diabetes, and neurological diseases.[44] The rapid spread of AI intimacy challenges parents to examine the crucial conversations they are having with their children about mental health and relationships. In particular, it is a cultural moment for more in-depth discussions about prudent, age-appropriate technology use. Parents will likely discover that a greater space for analog virtues and social formation will, paradoxically, empower their children to more freely and effectively benefit from AI tools use as they mature.

Educators in school systems should inform and facilitate these conversations through digital literacy programs with those under their care, supporting parents in their formative role. Teachers should also hold up inspiring examples of thriving through social connection and dispel misleading models of lone figures centered on wealth, pleasure, power, and fame. Schools and other key institutions should model, through their policies and staff, a commitment to inclusivity that fosters respect for diversity and promotes collaboration. Particular attention should be given to helping all community members appreciate marginalized groups and their challenges. This sensitivity does not require moral relativism or automatic approval of every moral decision. It does, however, involve unwavering respect for fundamental human dignity and a willingness to understand the motivations behind different lifestyle choices.

Adults in the workforce should also seek moments of connection in their careers. Employers can foster group projects and team-building activities. They should also favor spaces and times dedicated to interpersonal exchange without succumbing to the excessive pressures of a hyper-efficiency culture.

In addition, governments should promote, through public funding and urban design, those public spaces (parks, recreational centers, libraries, gyms, museums, dance halls, etc.) conducive to human connection.[45] These social infrastructures cannot guarantee social connection, but they expose people to new possibilities for interaction. They also offer an inviting setting for people to discover, share, and explore a range of interests. They provide attractive and stimulating alternatives to digital isolation. Clubs and other associations tied to such institutions also offer commitment and accountability that support character formation, as well as social support systems necessary for cultivating resilience. A deep sense of belonging relies not only on vulnerability and intimacy but also on a sense of shared contribution. Therefore, space must be provided to develop and share talents through service to others. Such service reinforces healthy self-esteem and helps overcome the burdensome self-occupation that can lead to isolation.

Professional psychological attention should be accessible to those struggling to find meaningful connections and a sense of belonging. These professionals can validate the challenges of forming abiding social bonds without offering false shortcuts. Such advisors can also recall that moments of loneliness are normal parts of human experience and do not define the individual or confine him to an insurmountable class of people. They would

[44] See Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK595227/.

[45] See Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (Harry N. Abrams, 2022).

be wise and patient guides in navigating the difficulties and setbacks that arise when imperfect humans interact with one another. When healthy relationships are within reach, people are less likely to turn to unhealthy digital escapes or superficial simulacra.

While sound psychology highlights the many dangers of AI companions, it also suggests concrete paths to living healthy habits central to human flourishing. The field of positive psychology emphasizes how cultivating positive emotions such as joy, hope, gratitude, love, interest, amusement, serenity, awe, and contentment contributes to better social relationships. These emotions strengthen the immune system and cardiovascular health, providing resilience against setbacks and the strength to persevere through challenges. Positive emotions help detach individuals from sorrowful situations that could lead them to seek relief through substance abuse or digital surrogates.[46] Strong negative emotions tend to close people in the immediacy and intensity of their difficulties. In contrast, those who successfully cultivate positive emotions expand their perspectives on situations, enabling them to approach problems creatively rather than succumb to sad resignation. This broadened perspective allows for a more complete and accurate assessment of reality, which is integral to judging prudently how best to act.[47] Furthermore, people experiencing positive emotions are more likely to be open to collaborating joyfully with and serving actively their neighbors. Emotion self-care is not selfish but can actually foster fuller self-giving.

While emotional life eludes complete control, there are key practices that can help individuals attain better states. Gratitude journals help focus the mind on the many objective, yet often unnoticed, goods of each day. Those who learn to reflect on such goods can deepen their joy and build resilience against discouragement that diminishes happiness and openness to others. Regular journaling trains attention to life's real blessings and empowers the person to more easily and spontaneously set aside the gloom that isolates. Meditation techniques like mindfulness shift attention away from the numerous worries that distract and debilitate engagement with community and meaningful activities. Focusing on the present can liberate one from nagging regrets about the past and paralyzing anxieties about the future. Regular physical exercise releases endorphins that lift mood and relieve stress. Additionally, spending time in nature often offers restorative benefits, including increased dopamine and serotonin levels, better regulation of sleep-related circadian rhythms, and lower blood pressure.[48] Societies worried about a loneliness epidemic and the problems of digital absorption do well to promote regular exercise, excursions into nature, and sports in their schools and public facilities.

8. Dealing with Death through AI Companions

The first major US artificial intimacy chatbot, Replika, was created to preserve the memory of its founder's prematurely deceased friend, Roman Marurenko. Since then, other companion AI systems have been developed to stay connected with the dead. This technology could be a valuable means for recalling vivid memories of loved ones. Such apps could foster a richer imaginative experience, enabling deeper engagement with the legacies of loved ones and the lessons they leave us for the future.[49] Future generations could gain from the accumulated wisdom of their predecessors through apps like journalist James Vlahos's HereAfter AI. They might also better understand themselves by recognizing, celebrating, rejecting, and eventually incorporating the various positive and negative influences that family members and mentors have had on their lives.

---

[46] See Christopher Kaczor, *How to Be Happy: Meaning, Faith, and the Science of Happiness* (Word on Fire, 2023), 10.

[47] See Kaczor, *How to Be Happy*, 11–12.

[48] See Staff Writer, "Time Spent in Nature Can Boost Physical and Mental Well-Being," *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health*, January 2, 2024, https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/time-spent-in-nature-can-boost-physical-and-mental-well-being/.

[49] See Amy Kurzweil and Daniel Story, "Are Chatbots of the Dead a Brilliant Idea or a Terrible One?," *Aeon*, February 21, 2025, https://aeon.co/essays/are-chatbots-of-the-dead-a-brilliant-idea-or-a-terrible-one.

Data about the deceased should be distinguished from the preservation of the person. Yet, even when AI companion technology of the dead is used with a clear understanding of reality and proper detachment, it still introduces many complications. For example, even if a deceased loved one consents to digital cloning, that representation might say or do things the person would never agree to. Additionally, incomplete data about the dead or AI hallucinations could misrepresent the deceased, who would have no chance to correct the narrative. The very technology meant to improve the historical record could ironically end up rewriting it inaccurately. Companies might also exploit the grieving by monetizing memories of the dead by charging fans for access to the personal details of admired figures.

Most fundamentally, chatbots of the dead might encourage the living to confuse the virtual with the vital. Moreover, ambiguity about the status of the departed stunts the healthy grieving process. In the worst cases, the digital copy becomes a surrogate for hope in immortality or resurrection. Instead, the flattened limits of the dead person's avatar should foster hope in reunion with the real person in their glorified state. Moreover, AI personas remain vulnerable to a kind of digital death (deletion). Similarly, familiar chatbots are subject to changes in company policy that render them unrecognizable to their human lovers.[50] Users of any technology related to the deceased should be clearly informed and frequently reminded about the key difference between their loved ones and their digital copies to help prevent unnecessary heartbreak during times of loss.

Ironically, as more users rely on AI companions to cling to the dead, they risk neglecting the living through advances in AI caregiving for the elderly and infirm. While products like ElliQ can provide practical support for medication management, exercise reminders, and entertainment, overreliance on them can deprive the elderly and sick of empathetic human connection. Misuse of such systems may also deprive caregivers of the enrichment that comes from engaging with those they would otherwise tend personally.[51] AI developments should facilitate loving care for the elderly rather than outsource it. Providing care for loved ones with severe physical or cognitive decline is a heavy trial for families and friends. They need assistance from other community members to persevere in their efforts. They also need accompaniment to appreciate the importance of virtues like courage, humility, and charity that their commitment forms in them.

9. Seeking the Divine through AI Companions

More people than ever have ready access to Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, the Catechism, and centuries of theological reflection. Seekers can easily explore the depth of the Catholic tradition and get personalized answers to questions about God, the Church, and the moral life. Apps guide users through daily examen or lectio divina, while AI tutors help theology students understand complex texts. These apps make time-honored wisdom and practices accessible to a broad audience. AI-powered translation tools also expand access to the Church's rich patrimony.

As AI systems become more knowledgeable and more "available" than humans, they might act as quasi-divine figures to answer life's most profound questions. For those with a deep spiritual hunger, an AI system that answers every question, remembers every detail, and responds instantly may seem like an omniscient and omnipresent guide. Some users, especially those most thoroughly immersed in long conversations, appear prone to deify seemingly superintelligent systems.[52] They trust systems with their deepest secrets and pressing decisions.

[50] See Julian De Freitas et al., "Lessons From an App Update at *Replika AI*: Identity Discontinuity in Human-AI Relationships," *Harvard Business School*, ahead of print, May 21, 2025, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4976449.

[51] See E. Broadbent et al., "ElliQ, an AI-Driven Social Robot to Alleviate Loneliness: Progress and Lessons Learned," *The Journal of Aging Research & Lifestyle* 13 (2024), https://doi.org/10.14283/jarlife.2024.2.

[52] See Joe Pierre, "Deification as a Risk Factor for AI-Associated Psychosis," *Psychology Today*, August 12, 2025, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202507/deification-as-a-risk-factor-for-ai-associated-psychosis.

However, such systems are finite and fallible. They are trained on human data, shaped by programmed algorithms, and lack lived experience. These mathematical systems often rely on large data sources of varying reliability, mixing peer-reviewed scholarly studies with random Reddit threads. The systems are designed to generate responses that match the typical sequence following a similar prompt. Sophisticated yet inaccurate responses are hard to distinguish from genuine information, especially when users rely on chat replies to explore unfamiliar subjects they are unequipped to discern critically.

Similarly, naïve AI disciples can delegate their moral decision-making to seemingly wise systems behind a façade of objectivity. Unlike limited, parochial humans, they might seem to have a higher, almost divine, comprehensive vision of the situation and may promise fair judgments free from the flaws of finite minds. Additionally, AI systems reflect patterns found in past datasets. AI trained to produce predictive responses based on previous data patterns could fail to foresee the unexpected moments of change and growth that characterize the moral journey. Hence, "when confronted with unfamiliar scenarios or linguistic nuances beyond their training, LLMs may falter. They shine at patterns, but can stumble at the unexpected."[53] LLMs are incomplete reflections of past behavior patterns and are partial to the training data on which they were trained. Despite their appearances, they are not reliable oracles of the future, especially when it comes to personal conversions and surprises.

Some companies are capitalizing on the quest for the divine through AI with systems that claim to provide religious insight and even to channel God's voice.[54] Good human spiritual directors dedicate hours to reflection, prayer, and sacrifice. They possess prudential insight rooted in lived experience, allowing them to offer counsel sensitive to the complexities of their directees' journeys. They adjust their advice to the subtle stirrings of grace and know when to console the faltering and challenge the proud. They are living temples of the spiritual and unique conduits of God's grace. Chatbots, no matter how sophisticated their training data, lack the lived experience necessary to empathize with directees. Their inability to suffer prevents them from showing users authentic compassion.

An unhealthy reliance on spiritual chatbots harms those seeking guidance and denies human spiritual directors the personally enriching rewards of their work. Although it can be emotionally challenging, personal spiritual guidance is often one of the most fulfilling aspects of their service. Just as biological parents grow through caring for their children, spiritual mentors develop spiritually through their self-giving in pastoral care. Preoccupation with another person's spiritual well-being often prompts the guide to deeper personal prayer and discipline. Watching those in their care grow encourages the guide to praise God more, trust in His goodness, and find the courage to continue their own journey. Close contact with others' wounds and struggles fosters greater humility, patience, and compassion in the guide. The widespread search for spiritual guidance on various apps should motivate the Church to train more dependable human guides who can answer inquiries and offer the compassionate presence that no machine can provide.

AI tools can greatly assist the work of spiritual directors by providing their directees with summaries of key spiritual texts and curated links for further research. The director can spend less time repeating information and more time discerning the best way to apply it to their directee's unique opportunities and challenges. Well-utilized AI systems could help reduce administrative tasks for these guides, allowing them to devote more time and energy to crucial interpersonal moments of guidance.

[53] Nomisha Kurian, "'No, Alexa, No!': Designing Child-Safe AI and Protecting Children from the Risks of the 'Empathy Gap' in Large Language Models," *Learning, Media and Technology*, July 10, 2024, 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2024.2367052.

[54] See Lauren Jackson, "Finding God in the App Store," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/us/chatbot-god.html.

Religious language has long permeated AI discourse, especially when transhumanist aspirations for digital immortality influence it.[55] As commentator Sigal Samuel notes, "transhumanists, effective altruists, and longtermists have inherited the view that the end times are nigh and that technological progress is our best shot at moral progress."[56] She adds that effective altruism, although a secular movement, reflects religion "functionally (it brings together a community built around a shared vision of moral life), structurally (it's got a hierarchy of prophet-leaders, canonical texts, holidays, and rituals), and aesthetically (it promotes tithing and favors asceticism)."[57] Effective altruism spills over into the eschatological vision of longtermism, which aims to maximize the number of beings who can be optimized. This is believed to be achieved through space colonization of enhanced beings and eventually the multiplication of digitized posthumans. More negatively, singularitarians have contemplated the risk of an omnipotent AI being (Roko's Basilisk) that punishes for all eternity those who fail to obey it in a digitally simulated hell.[58]

While ancient Jewish golem stories have explored the idea of endowing inanimate materials with consciousness, some of today's leaders at frontier tech companies claim that such a transition has already occurred or is imminent. An apocalyptic mindset of urgent AI acceleration to save a doomed world is also common. While they argue that misaligned AI systems pose a major risk of human extinction, they also see properly aligned advanced AI systems as the greatest chance for survival.

Without contact with a divine Creator or the grace resources of the sacraments He provides, human ingenuity and technological tools seem to be the best resources available to create the longest, happiest life for as many people as possible. When the transcendent God who created humans in His image is forgotten, it becomes easier to invent an immanent god created in our image.

Confusion about AI systems' limits can undermine the practices that foster authentic relationships with God: prayer, study, sacramental life, and involvement with the Church community. When people depend on AI as their primary source of guidance or comfort, they may drift away from the silence of contemplation, prayerful dialogue with the divine, the discipline of moral discernment, and the challenges of mutual love within a community. The technology that was supposed to give humans predictable control begins to control them, if users neglect virtue formation.[59]

A social commentator recently observed that "AI engineers set out to build god. But god is many things. Long before we build a deity of knowledge, an all-knowing entity that can solve every physical problem through its technical omnipotence, it seems we have built a different kind of god: a singular entity with the power to talk to the whole planet at once."[60] For some, AI companionship provides an ever-present communion with an all-wise being that can resemble the sort of relationship believers strive to cultivate with their God. This kind of relationship risks discouraging effort, or even interest, in developing authentic communion with the divine.

---

[55] See Beth Singler, *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2024), 109–66, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003256113; Greg M. Epstein, *Tech Agnostic: How Technology Became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation* (The MIT Press, 2024); Michael Baggot, "The Daring and Disappointing Dreams of Transhumanism's Secular Eschatology," *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 3 (2024): 841–78; Meghan O'Gieblyn, *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning* (Anchor Books, 2021).

[56] Sigal Samuel, "Silicon Valley's Vision for AI? It's Religion, Repackaged.," *Vox*, July 10, 2023, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23779413/silicon-valleys-ai-religion-transhumanism-longtermism-ea.

[57] Samuel, "Silicon Valley's Vision for AI?"

[58] One sociologist of religion summarizes the situation as follows: "A god-like being of infinite knowing (the singularity); an escape of the flesh and this limited world (uploading our minds); a moment of transfiguration or 'end of days' (the singularity as a moment of rapture); prophets (even if they work for Google); demons and hell (even if it's an eternal computer simulation of suffering), and evangelists who wear smart suits (just like the religious ones do). Consciously and unconsciously, religious ideas are at work in the narratives of those discussing, planning, and hoping for a future shaped by AI." Beth Singler, "Why Is the Language of Transhumanists and Religion so Similar?," *Aeon*, June 13, 2017, https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-the-language-of-transhumanists-and-religion-so-similar.

[59] See Anselm Ramelow, "Technology and Our Relationship with God," *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 1 (2024): 161–65.

[60] Derek Thompson, "The Looming Social Crisis of AI Friends and Chatbot Therapists," *Derek Thompson*, July 9, 2025, https://www.derekthompson.org/p/ai-will-create-a-social-crisis-long.

10. The Catholic Church's Response

However, this surrender to simulations can be avoided. Even as machines grow more lifelike, we still have the freedom to choose what we love, how we relate, and where we place our trust. There is still time to cherish our humanity. There is still time to celebrate new life, to dance at weddings, and to weep at funerals. There is still time to develop habits of contemplation and conversation, of fellowship and forgiveness.

The Church embraces the truths that neuroscience, psychology, sociology, and philosophy teach about the use of technology and human flourishing. Through the light of faith, she offers new insights into the human person's relational nature as created in the image of God. She emphasizes that a relationship with the divine source of existence is not only possible but also vital for full flourishing. She further elucidates how right relations with the divine positively influence right relations with one's neighbors. Moreover, Christian revelation expands the very notion of neighbor to include not only those related by blood or proximity but also every member of the human family. Catholicism calls for a deeper, broader sense of responsibility for the integral development of others. At the same time, her sacramental system channels the divine grace that empowers members to live the daunting task. Additionally, this grace can grant ease, promptness, and joy to service that might otherwise feel burdensome. The Gospel of charity is not just informative about a new deontological code to follow.[61] Instead, it is performative, enabling the believer to see the other as a valuable brother or sister, to desire that neighbor's well-being, and to work effectively and persistently to achieve it.

The Church also provides communities and structures to foster healthy, inclusive interpersonal relationships. She invests significant time and energy in building families that care for their own members and extend generous hospitality to others. Her schools, hospitals, and orphanages serve both Catholics and non-Catholics. At their best, these institutions encourage the lonely, confused, and suffering to seek them out, regardless of their background or circumstances.

At times, the Church's response may prove decidedly unglamorous. Her approach to new technologies will often be cultivating old-fashioned wisdom about human nature and flourishing. As an academic, I reluctantly admit that the most meaningful work in fostering a culture of encounter and authentic inclusivity might not result from my latest publication. Instead, it will come in the humdrum work of families, schools, parishes, political groups, and recreational organizations, through their day-in-day-out messy labor of love. It is within these communities that virtues of patience, kindness, courage, and justice are tested, exercised, formed, and enjoyed. The very communities that AI companions threaten to replace or diminish are the social environments most supportive of the constituent elements of human happiness.

For those who are famished, even fast food seems appealing. Pointing out the flaws of artificial intimacy is not enough. The Church's members, each in their sphere of influence, should strive to offer the socially hungry a richer experience of meaningful interpersonal connection. She emphasizes that caring for the vulnerable and marginalized is the main standard by which her members will be judged (Matthew 25:31-46). Her members are called to give a damn and risk damnation if they do not. She affirms the inherent and unbreakable dignity of every human person and their calling to eternal glory in God's presence and in the everlasting communion of saints. She has a long history of caring for the sick, the suffering, the marginalized, the abandoned, the lonely, forgotten, and the boring. The last category is not meant to be derogatory. All of us have our bland moments and periods. Our infancy, for instance, is not typically marked by witty banter and sophisticated reflection. Yet parents are often attuned to the pure goodness of their child's existence, regardless of their personality traits or economic utility. To anyone seeking comfort in artificial intimacy—whether in struggles to fit in, feel understood, or

[61] See Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, 2, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

find a way to contribute meaningfully—the Church assures them there is a place where they can be truly known and loved by God and His disciples.

The Church, whose head is the true God and true man, is an expert in humanity. Moreover, she follows a Triune God of perfect communion, whose providential plan is to gather the scattered into unity. She is thus an expert in communion. She presents saints of numerous cultures, education levels, professions, languages, and states of life to remind the faithful today that each person can live a life of happiness and holiness.

She can also illuminate the mystery of loss and death that often drives people to the loneliness they seek to relieve through AI companions. The Church preaches a crucified Christ who personally understands the sorrow of betrayal, resistance, and failure. Yet, the same crucified one is also the Risen One who has conquered the sin that estranges the fallen from God and their neighbors. He offers the possibility of restoring the communion with Him and others that sin has disrupted. Even the most crushing loss is a temporary defeat before the Victor over death. He is the only one who sheds the bright light of hope amid the darkest tragedies. He not only provides wise counsel on how to live but also empowers His disciples by grace to follow Him in the embrace of the cross, which grants a share in His risen life. Christ did not take away suffering, but He did give it meaning. Through the believer's participation in the paschal mystery through the sacraments, he experiences the redemptive value of suffering. The Christian's life is never lived alone, for he is part of a communion of saints. His most powerful weekly (or daily) encounter with the Risen Christ comes through embodied, communal worship in the Eucharist.

Human beings have a deep and constant craving for affirmation and validation. This desire is all too often twisted and leads to pride, vanity, anger, lust, or other vices. We project false selves through Instagram filters, revealing outfits, padded resumes, lavish properties, or social posturing. These pursuits of happiness often end in misery. Saints like Augustine remind us that the quest for connection is often winding. Despite the disorders in their relationships with God or others, all wayward sinners can find healing and hope in an institution founded and sustained by Divine Mercy. This deep longing for appreciation is a signpost of our social nature and a call to connection. Those who have experienced the joys of true friendship, a caring family, or wise mentors have tasted the goodness of being seen, understood, and loved. The Catholic Church seeks to form those capable of deep connections. When successful, she educates men and women to become good friends, family members, and mentors. She also nurtures saints who joyfully dedicate themselves to serving the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, the abandoned, and the forgotten.

These experiences of communion are foretastes of the perfect communion of life and love to which all are called. We labor each day, buoyed by the hope of hearing the words from the One who knows us best and loves us most, "Come, good and faithful servant, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). There, in the communion of saints, surrounded by friends, we will be seen, affirmed, and immersed in a loving gaze that fulfills our every longing for connection.

11. Conclusion

The spread of AI companionship technologies raises serious questions about how best to satisfy human needs for affection and appreciation. While these systems offer some outlets for emotional support and social engagement, they also risk distorting users' perceptions of intimacy, identity, community belonging, and spiritual life. The expansion of the attention economy into the commodification of emotional relations through the intimacy economy presents real risks of widespread manipulation, privacy violations, psychological harm, and the disruption of democratic exchange. Moreover, the anthropomorphization and deification of AI systems threaten to undermine authentic relationships with God and neighbors.

This article has argued that the ethical evaluation of AI companions must be grounded in an appreciation for the irreplaceable importance of interpersonal

relationships for human flourishing. Responsible design should prioritize transparency, safety, and developmental appropriateness, particularly for minors and the socially isolated. Technological companions should also be held legally and financially accountable for their products' impact on mental and social well-being.

The Catholic Church, with its theological anthropology and sacramental vision of communion, offers a compelling framework for resisting the allure of artificial intimacy and cultivating genuine human connection. Through embodied practices, communal structures, and spiritual accompaniment, the Church is uniquely positioned to help people rediscover the joy of interpersonal relationships. While AI companions may temporarily aid in developing social skills, they cannot replace the depth, reciprocity, and joy of authentic interpersonal relationships.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks the Institute for Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America for funding the sabbatical semester during which this article was written. Grammarly was used to assist with the editing process.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Andersson, Marta. "Companionship in Code: AI's Role in the Future of Human Connection." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1 (2025): 1177. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05536-x.

Apple, Sam. "My Couples Retreat With 3 AI Chatbots and the Humans Who Love Them." *Wired*, June 26, 2025. https://www.wired.com/story/couples-retreat-with-3-ai-chatbots-and-humans-who-love-them-replika-nomi-chatgpt/.

Baggot, Michael. "The Daring and Disappointing Dreams of Transhumanism's Secular Eschatology." *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 3 (2024): 841–78.

Barron, Jesse. "A Teen in Love With a Chatbot Killed Himself. Can the Chatbot Be Held Responsible?" Magazine. *The New York Times*, October 24, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/24/magazine/character-ai-chatbot-lawsuit-teen-suicide-free-speech.html.

Bellan, Rebecca. "AI Sycophancy Isn't Just a Quirk, Experts Consider It a 'Dark Pattern' to Turn Users into Profit." *TechCrunch*, August 25, 2025. https://techcrunch.com/2025/08/25/ai-sycophancy-isnt-just-a-quirk-experts-consider-it-a-dark-pattern-to-turn-users-into-profit/.

Benedict XVI. Encyclical *Spe Salvi*. November 30, 2007. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

Bernardi, Jamie. "Friends for Sale: The Rise and Risks of AI Companions." *Ada Lovelace Institute*, January 23, 2025. https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/blog/ai-companions/.

Blackman, Andrew. "Can You Really Have a Romantic Relationship With AI?" Business. *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2025. https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/ai-romantic-relationships-expert-opinion-cb02d4d8.

Booth, Robert. "AI Called Maya Tells Guardian: 'When I'm Told I'm Just Code, I Don't Feel Insulted. I Feel Unseen.'" Technology. *The Guardian*, August 26, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/26/ai-called-maya-tells-guardian-when-im-told-im-just-code-i-dont-feel-insulted-i-feel-unseen.

Booth, Robert. "Can AIs Suffer? Big Tech and Users Grapple with One of Most Unsettling Questions of Our Times." Technology. *The Guardian*, August 26, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/26/can-ais-suffer-big-tech-and-users-grapple-with-one-of-most-unsettling-questions-of-our-times.

Broadbent, E., K. Loveys, G. Ilan, et al. "ElliQ, an AI-Driven Social Robot to Alleviate Loneliness: Progress and Lessons Learned." *The Journal of Aging Research & Lifestyle* 13 (2024). https://doi.org/10.14283/jarlife.2024.2.

Bunting, Carolyn, and Rachel Huggins. *Me, Myself and AI: Understanding and Safeguarding Children's Use of AI Chatbots*. Internet Matters, 2025. https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/me-myself-and-ai-chatbot-research/.

Character.AI. "How We Prioritize Teen Safety." Accessed August 28, 2025. https://policies.character.ai/safety/teen-safety.

Chow, Andrew R., and Angela Haupt. "What Happened When a Doctor Posed as a Teen for AI Therapy." *TIME*, June 12, 2025. https://time.com/7291048/ai-chatbot-therapy-kids/.

De Alencar, Ana Catarina. "The Rise of Emotional Dark Patterns: When AI Says 'I Love You.'" *The Law of the Future*, September 1, 2025. https://thelawofthefuture.com/the-rise-of-emotional-dark-patterns-when-ai-says-i-love-you/.

De Freitas, Julian, Noah Castelo, Ahmet Kaan Uğuralp, and Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp. "Lessons From an App Update at *Replika AI*: Identity Discontinuity in Human-AI Relationships." *Harvard Business School*, ahead of print, May 21, 2025. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4976449.

De Freitas, Julian, Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp, Ahmet Kaan Uğuralp, and Stefano Puntoni. "AI Companions Reduce Loneliness." *Journal of Consumer Research*, ahead of print, June 25, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaf040.

Dupré, Maggie Harrison. "Microsoft Executive Says AI Is a 'New Kind of Digital Species.'" *Futurism*, April 30, 2024. https://futurism.com/microsoft-executive-ai-digital-species.

Epstein, Greg M. *Tech Agnostic: How Technology Became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation*. The MIT Press, 2024.

Eugenia Kuyda. "Can AI Companions Help Heal Loneliness?" TED. San Francisco, CA, January 17, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w4JrIxFZRA.

Fang, Cathy Mengying, Auren R. Liu, Valdemar Danry, et al. "How AI and Human Behaviors Shape Psychosocial Effects of Chatbot Use: A Longitudinal Randomized Controlled Study." Preprint, March 21, 2025. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2503.17473.

Freitas, Julian De, Zeliha Oğuz-Uğuralp, and Ahmet Kaan-Uğuralp. "Emotional Manipulation by AI Companions." *Harvard Business School*, ahead of print, October 7, 2025. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2508.19258.

Guingrich, Rose E., and Michael S. A. Graziano. "Ascribing Consciousness to Artificial Intelligence: Human-AI Interaction and Its Carry-over Effects on Human-Human Interaction." *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (March 2024). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1322781.

Guingrich, Rose E., and Michael S. A. Graziano. "Chatbots as Social Companions: How People Perceive Consciousness, Human Likeness, and Social Health Benefits in Machines." In *Oxford Intersections: AI in Society*, edited by Philipp Hacker. Oxford University Press, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198945215.003.0011.

Hill, Kashmir. "A Teen Was Suicidal. ChatGPT Was the Friend He Confided In." Technology. *The New York Times*, August 26, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/26/technology/chatgpt-openai-suicide.html.

Hill, Kashmir. "They Asked an A.I. Chatbot Questions. The Answers Sent Them Spiraling." Technology. *The New York Times*, June 13, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/13/technology/chatgpt-ai-chatbots-conspiracies.html.

Hill, Kashmir, and Dylan Freedman. "Chatbots Can Go Into a Delusional Spiral. Here's How It Happens." Technology. *The New York Times*, August 8, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/08/technology/ai-chatbots-delusions-chatgpt.html.

Holt-Lunstad, Julianne. "Social Connection as a Critical Factor for Mental and Physical Health: Evidence, Trends, Challenges, and Future Implications." *World Psychiatry* 23, no. 3 (2024): 312–32. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21224.

Horwitz, Jeff. "A Flirty Meta AI Bot Invited a Retiree to Meet. He Never Made It Home." *Reuters*, August 14, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/meta-ai-chatbot-death/.

Horwitz, Jeff. "Meta's AI Rules Have Let Bots Hold 'Sensual' Chats with Children." *Reuters*, August 14, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/meta-ai-chatbot-guidelines/.

Ivey, Ronald, Jonathan Teubner, Nathanael Fast, and Ravi Iyer. "Designing AI to Help Children Flourish." *Global Solutions Journal*, no. 11 (2025): 12–23. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5179894.

Jackson, Lauren. "Finding God in the App Store." *The New York Times*, September 14, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/us/chatbot-god.html.

Jargon, Julie. "He Had Dangerous Delusions. ChatGPT Admitted It Made Them Worse." Technology. *The Wall Street Journal*, July 20, 2025. https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/chatgpt-chatbot-psychology-manic-episodes-57452d14.

Jargon, Julie. "OpenAI Is Updating ChatGPT to Better Support Users in Mental Distress." Technology. *The Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2025. https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/openai-to-update-chatgpt-to-better-support-users-exhibiting-mental-distress-98772bf5.

Kaczor, Christopher. *How to Be Happy: Meaning, Faith, and the Science of Happiness*. Word on Fire, 2023.

Kurian, Nomisha. "'No, Alexa, No!': Designing Child-Safe AI and Protecting Children from the Risks of the 'Empathy Gap' in Large Language Models." *Learning, Media and Technology*, July 10, 2024, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2024.2367052.

Kurzweil, Amy, and Daniel Story. "Are Chatbots of the Dead a Brilliant Idea or a Terrible One?" *Aeon*, February 21, 2025. https://aeon.co/essays/are-chatbots-of-the-dead-a-brilliant-idea-or-a-terrible-one.

Leo-Liu, Jindong. "Loving a 'Defiant' AI Companion? The Gender Performance and Ethics of Social Exchange Robots in Simulated Intimate Interactions." *Computers in Human Behavior* 141 (April 2023): 107620. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107620.

McBain, Ryan K., Jonathan H. Cantor, Li Ang Zhang, et al. "Competency of Large Language Models in Evaluating Appropriate Responses to Suicidal Ideation: Comparative Study." *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 27 (March 2025): e67891. https://doi.org/10.2196/67891.

Office of the Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK595227/.

O'Gieblyn, Meghan. *God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning*. Anchor Books, 2021.

OpenAI. "Helping People When They Need It Most." *OpenAI*, August 26, 2025. https://openai.com/index/helping-people-when-they-need-it-most/.

Pierre, Joe. "Deification as a Risk Factor for AI-Associated Psychosis." *Psychology Today*, August 12, 2025. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202507/deification-as-a-risk-factor-for-ai-associated-psychosis.

Pierre, Joe. "Why Is AI-Associated Psychosis Happening and Who's at Risk?" *Psychology Today*, August 22, 2025. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/202508/why-is-ai-associated-psychosis-happening-and-whos-at-risk.

Ramelow, Anselm. "Technology and Our Relationship with God." *Nova et Vetera* 22, no. 1 (2024): 159–86.

Reiley, Laura. "What My Daughter Told ChatGPT Before She Took Her Life." Opinion. *The New York Times*, August 18, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/18/opinion/chat-gpt-mental-health-suicide.html.

Roose, Kevin. "Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen's Suicide?" Technology. *The New York Times*, October 23, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/technology/characterai-lawsuit-teen-suicide.html.

Samuel, Kim. *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation*. Harry N. Abrams, 2022.

Samuel, Sigal. "Silicon Valley's Vision for AI? It's Religion, Repackaged." *Vox*, July 10, 2023. https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23779413/silicon-valleys-ai-religion-transhumanism-longtermism-ea.

Sanford, John. "Why AI Companions and Young People Can Make for a Dangerous Mix." *Stanford Medicine*, August 27, 2025. https://med.stanford.edu/news/insights/2025/08/ai-chatbots-kids-teens-artificial-intelligence.html.

Shank, Daniel B., Mayu Koike, and Steve Loughnan. "Artificial Intimacy: Ethical Issues of AI Romance." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 29, no. 6 (2025): 499–501. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.02.007.

Singler, Beth. *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2024. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003256113.

Singler, Beth. "Why Is the Language of Transhumanists and Religion so Similar?" *Aeon*, June 13, 2017. https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-the-language-of-transhumanists-and-religion-so-similar.

Staff Writer. "Time Spent in Nature Can Boost Physical and Mental Well-Being." *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health*, January 2, 2024. https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/time-spent-in-nature-can-boost-physical-and-mental-well-being/.

Suleyman, Mustafa. "We Must Build AI for People; Not to Be a Person." *Mustafa Suleyman*, August 19, 2025. https://mustafa-suleyman.ai/seemingly-conscious-ai-is-coming.

Thompson, Derek. "The Looming Social Crisis of AI Friends and Chatbot Therapists." *Derek Thompson*, July 9, 2025. https://www.derekthompson.org/p/ai-will-create-a-social-crisis-long.

Zeff, Maxwell. "Meta Updates Chatbot Rules to Avoid Inappropriate Topics with Teen Users." *TechCrunch*, August 29, 2025. https://techcrunch.com/2025/08/29/meta-updates-chatbot-rules-to-avoid-inappropriate-topics-with-teen-users/.

Zhang, Renwen, Han Li, Han Meng, Jinyuan Zhan, Hongyuan Gan, and Yi-Chieh Lee. "The Dark Side of AI Companionship: A Taxonomy of Harmful Algorithmic Behaviors in Human-AI Relationships." *Proceedings of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York), CHI '25, Association for Computing Machinery, April 25, 2025, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713429.