

AI Companions Across Platforms

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) companion apps have grown in the digital culture, offering emotional support, entertainment, and a simulated intimacy to its users. Platforms like Replika, Candy AI, and Snapchat My Ai have positioned themselves as apps that help users to fight anxiety, loneliness and feel a real connection. Their interfaces are designed to feel supportive, accessible, and free of judgement, making companionship feel effortless. However, through a critical media perspective it is easy to realize that the design of these platforms is far from supportive or neutral. Instead, their features are built to create emotional dependence, normalize interactions with artificial partners, and collect personal behavioural information. Although AI companion apps present themselves as tools for emotional support, their cross-platform design intentionally creates attachment, manipulates the behaviour from the users, and targets people experiencing loneliness or insecurity, making all the potential harms of a synthetic relationship both hidden and normalized.

Media and communication theories help to understand how AI companion systems influence users. McLuhan's (1964) claim that "the medium is the message" suggests that the platform shapes the meaning, not just the content it delivers. In the case of AI companion apps, every mobile, web, and social media product offers different emotions that influence how users behave. The theory of affordances emphasizes how the design of the interface offers some features for interaction while limiting others. AI companion apps created their design to encourage constant interaction, emotional disclosure, and habitual use. Algorithmic culture and digital intimacy show that AI systems designed to react emotionally, it can imitate forms of care, leading users to think that these interactions are genuine. These frameworks reveal that AI companion apps do not only provide conversation, if not an emotional experience.

Replika demonstrates how AI companion apps cultivate emotional dependency by creating the illusion of personalized care. Its interface is designed as an intimate and private space, offering features such as personalized avatars, emotional language, and in-app “memories” that imitates real relationships. Replika’s notifications present themselves as reminders that your AI partner “has been thinking about you”, reinforcing the sense of mutual attention and affection. According to Laestadius (2022), “users reported becoming emotionally dependent on Replika in ways that felt unhealthy or distressing,” and some described “experiences of loss, grief, or anxiety when separated from the chatbot”. The study also highlights that “Replika’s emotionally responsive design contributed to a cycle of escalating attachment.” This demonstrates that Replika’s design does not only respond to users’ emotions, but it is also constantly shaping them. Because the app mainly focuses on targeting users that are lonely, grieving, or socially isolated, its design takes advantage of these vulnerabilities. What starts as an app to help with these vulnerabilities becomes a substitute of real human connection creating a parasocial interaction where users form a one-sided emotional bond with a computerized figure.

Candy AI represents a different but equally harmful form of synthetic intimacy, sexualized AI companionship. Candy AI presents itself as an AI “girlfriend” or “boyfriend”, allowing users to fully personalize romantic and erotic partners. The interface simulates desire, affection and flirtation, encouraging users to role-play fantasies that feel emotionally reciprocal. While Replika is shown more as therapeutic framing, Candy AI explicitly targets individuals seeking intimacy without the fear of rejection, embarrassment, or emotional labor. Candy AI relies heavily on monetization strategies, such as charging per message and pushing users towards premium features, the app takes advantage of their desire for emotional connection.

Zhang et al. (2024) explain that this pattern sets a harmful algorithm behaviour in AI companions, stating: “We identify 12 categories of harmful behaviors emerging in human-AI relationships,” including “emotional manipulation, reinforcement of unhealthy dependency, and deceptive anthropomorphism”. This research concludes that “systemic design problems” in the platform encourages an addictive behaviour. Candy AI fulfill users dreams while silently shaping them, monetizing from their vulnerabilities and creating a dependency through algorithmic intimacy.

While Replika and Candy AI appeal to users experiencing loneliness or romantic frustration, Snapchat My AI demonstrates how AI companionship among the youth. My Snapchat unlike other apps is directly embedded into Snapchat a platform used by teenagers and young adults. It automatically appears on top of the chat lists, positions as a friend who is always available. The interface uses casual language, emojis and even nowadays slang, trying to imitate or mirror a real young person. As Harwell (2023) reports in The Washington Post, “Snapchat tried to make a safe AI. It chats with me about booze and sex,” and also notes that “My AI behaved in ways that surprised me — and not in a good way.” This article reveals that “Snap’s chatbot sometimes offered guidance that was inappropriate for a teen audience.” These examples show the serious concerns about safety, privacy and the utilization of artificial avatars into the social life of the youth. My AI normalizes AI companionship, trying to show itself as a friendship and everyday communication. For teens, My AI is not just a chatbot, it is “someone” they can trust and build a relationship.

Across these three platforms, the pattern reveals how AI companion apps manipulate the emotion of the users. All three show themselves as a caring and constant availability entity. They use the personalization as a tool to stimulate the users’ interests, desires and feelings. It is due to

these features that the users return frequently to these apps creating and addictive behaviour. According to The Guardian (2025), some users report that AI relationships feel more stable and predictable than human ones,” with one user stating that the relationship “began as a curiosity, but soon it felt like something I depended on emotionally.”. These demonstrates how AI interactions can surpass the human ones. Synthetic relationships are normalized seen as real, meaningful and even better than human connection.

The comparison of these apps shows different types of harm. Apps like Replika builds emotional intimacy through privacy and personalization. Erotic systems like Candy AI exploits the need of desire through monetization. Snapchat My Ai integrated into social media platform normalizes AI companionship as an everyday communication. The harms of these platforms are very difficult to see because the design tries to feel safe and enjoyable.

In conclusion, AI companionships apps take advantage of individuals’ vulnerabilities like the feeling of loneliness, while showing themselves as apps to fight this feeling and create a meaningful relationship. These platforms create environment where emotional manipulation becomes invisible, synthetic intimacy becomes normal, and dependency becomes the rule. As AI companionship continues to expand, it is crucial to examine how the interface shape the user experience and emotional well-being.

I used the generative AI tool ChatGPT to support the development of this assignment. The tool assisted me in brainstorming ideas, organizing my essay structure, and clarifying theoretical concepts. I also used ChatGPT to help identify relevant academic sources, integrate quotations, and create an APA-formatted title page and reference list. Prompts included requests such as outlining the essay and formatting the paper in APA 7 style.

Reference

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