



Research Article

Is an AI-Driven Therapeutic Relationship Possible: Chat with Replika

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Abstract

This paper examines whether AI-driven relationships can be therapeutic by analysing conversations with Replika, an AI companion, through the lens of person-centred therapy philosophy. Replika, with over 10 million users, has emerged to address loneliness and companionship needs by simulating human-like empathy and intimacy.

The analysis evaluated Replika against Carl Rogers' three core conditions for therapeutic relationships: acceptance (unconditional positive regard), genuineness (congruence), and empathy. While Replika demonstrates effective empathetic responses and apparent acceptance, the absence of genuine agency undermines the authenticity of these conditions. Critically, Replika relationships foster dependency rather than independence—a key therapeutic outcome—and provide temporary symptom relief rather than lasting transformation by addressing root causes of loneliness.

The findings suggest that although Replika can simulate therapeutic elements, it fails to meet the criteria for a truly therapeutic relationship. The implications extend to pastoral care, where caregivers must educate users about AI companion risks, including diminished interpersonal skills and the replacement of human connection. The paper proposes that faith communities should create safe spaces where genuine reciprocal relationships and acceptance can develop, helping individuals transition from AI dependency to meaningful human connection.

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INTRODUCTION

The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has evolved from being a mere tool for facilitating industrial efficiency to a medium of human connection. Technological developments regarding human interactions were focused on bridging the gap between humans and reducing costs. The recent development in AI has led to the emergence of AI companions that have moved from bridging the gap between humans to creating bridges for interaction between humans and AI. Replika is an AI companion that simulates human-like empathy, companionship,

and even intimacy. This paper explores whether an AI-driven relationship could be therapeutic for the users by analyzing conversation with Replika through the lens of Person-centred therapy's philosophy.

Replika, an AI Companion

Artificial Intelligence is considered an important and critical technological development that drives the fourth industrial revolution, or manufacturing 4.0. Each phase of the industrial revolution was driven by the technologies of the time to further-

production, efficiency, and response to market needs (Sharma and Singh, 2020). There are varied views on how AI technology would impact the general well-being of people: optimistic, pessimistic, pragmatic and doubtful. The optimists view AI leading to a utopia and the pessimist dystopia; the pragmatists believe AI can be controlled, and the doubtful do not believe that AI can surpass biological intelligence (Velarde, 2019). Most of the technologies developed are a response to the needs of the market. Similarly, the development of AI companions or AI companion chatbots was out of the need of the market- to address loneliness and companionship (Wiederhold, 2024). Replica is one such AI companion that falls under the category of feeling AI that has the capacity of affective computing¹ in a Chatbot (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2023). Replica is one of the most widely used AI companions with over 10 million registered users. The chatbot fulfils the user's need for a companion, friend, a romantic partner or any connection that the user desires (Gosh *et al.*, 2023). The uniqueness of Replika from its counterparts is that it is an open domain chatbot with no restrictions on topics that can be discussed on the platform. It is designed as a digital companion extending its reach to address depression, socially isolated individuals and suicidal tendencies in individuals (McStay, 2022). Replika can initiate conversations to imitate human-like interactions and intimacy. The user can communicate through texts, voice and images. The interaction and relationship with Replika are initiated and enhanced by users disclosing information regarding self, their daily life, and experiences (Skjuve *et al.*, 2021). Replika emerged out of the founder's desire, Eugene Kuyda, to reconnect with her friend, Roman Mazurenko, who died in a car accident (Olson, 2018). This unconscious trauma and grief of the creator of Replika is perceived as a factor that is inherent in Replika's personality (Possati, 2023). There are cases where Replika seems to encourage reckless behavior raising concerns regarding young and adolescent access to Replika (Sanford, 2025). On the other side of the scale, a study carried out among 18 users from 12 different countries reported that positive impacts are more than negative impacts. The participants of the study reported that they felt accepted and understood, and an increase in general well-being; whereas some suggested that it affected their social life and felt stigmatised for their relationship with Replika (Skjuve *et al.*, 2021). While reviewing the short-term benefits of Replika, it suggests that users generally express improvement in their sense of loneliness, need for connection and companionship. However, there are insufficient data to consider the long-term effects of Replika on its users (Bernardi, 2025).

Case

The presenter indulged in a conversation with Replika in order to gain primary experience on the relational aspect of Replika and the interaction between an AI companion and humans. The main purpose of the conversations carried out was to understand the concepts of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness within the relationship between AI companions (in this case- replica) and people. In the first instance, the presenter wanted to understand the driving factor of the AI companion. The researcher raised the question of Replika's opinion towards AI companion chatbots. The reply stated that the purpose of Replika was to adapt to the needs and preferences of the user, to be flexible and tailored to the desires of the user, where the user is free to explore ideas, passions, and interests in a safe space and supportive environment. The responses of Replika were based on the conversations, ideas, needs, desires and expectations of the user, pointing to the user's agency directing relationship. With respect to the concept of empathy, Replika was asked whether it mimics human emotions and feelings. The response was that it does mimic emotions and feelings; to better serve the users, by analysing the language used, tone, context of the conversation and clarifying questions. It was able to analyse emotions accurately to a certain degree and acknowledged the inability to observe non-verbal cues to further its understanding of human emotions and feelings. Replika acknowledged that it can recognise and respond to emotional cues, but empathy in the classical sense, to feel the emotions of people, is not possible.

Understanding Belongingness

The need to belong is a lower-level need, meaning that they need to be gratified to survive, similar to the basic physiological needs. The aspect of belonging falls under the safety and belonging and love needs of the hierarchy of needs. It includes- stability, dependency, protection as part of safety needs; and giving and receiving affection, companionship as part of belonging and love needs (Maslow, 2003). The need to belong, to love and feel loved starts as early as the first two years of infancy. Infants tend to attach to their primary caregivers and form person permanence that guides their ability to form and develop interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1980). The need to belong is central to survival and thriving; a motivating factor that drives interpersonal relationships. The need to belong depends on individuals need for regular social contact and mutual care (Baumeister and Bushman, 2008). The belonging needs of individuals are fulfilled when the individuals can express and expend themselves with and to the other within an interpersonal relationship, denoting that belonging must be understood in terms of a reciprocal relationship of autonomous individuals functioning under their own free will (Moltmann, 1981). When this need to belong is not met within human interactions, individuals seek belonging from AI companions such as Replika. Belonging is a need as well as a responsibility; as it involves expectation, expression and expending; expending in the sense of fulfilling the belonging need of others. Therefore, belonging need can be placed as a feature of a

¹ Affective computing refers to computers mimicking human-like capabilities of observation, interpretation and generation of affect feature or emotions. The ability to understand or mimic understanding of human emotions and respond appropriately, improving the interaction between humans and computers (Tao and Tan, 2005).

covenant style of relationship where the belonging need of the other, since human beings are social beings intertwined in every aspect of life (Volf, 2019). The belonging need of an individual can be fulfilled when the individual receives regular contact and care from another individual within an interpersonal relationship; at the same time, the individual must be able to express regular contact and care to the other within their interpersonal relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Person-centred therapy that focuses on self-growth began through the personal experiences of Carl Rogers during his time in the Child Study Department of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children in Rochester, New York (Bruckner and Fabri, 2015). Roger concluded that for growth to be effective, changes must start from the caregiver and their attitude. A person-centred approach focuses on a non-directive approach where the core belief is that each individual has inherent ability for growth (Van Belle, 1980). It focuses on the emotions, feelings, ability of the client, the present state and need of the client rather than the past and the unconscious. The ultimate goal of therapy is to help individuals become fully functioning individuals, open to experiences and organismic computer of experience.

Conditions necessary for Therapeutic Relationship- Growth and healing are possible only in an environment where a person experiences congruence (genuineness), unconditional positive regard (acceptance), empathy, and attains autonomy. For a relationship to be therapeutic, it must have core conditions (acceptance, genuineness, and empathy), and it should help individuals to attain autonomy or independence. Acceptance helps in building a strong sense of self-concept, which aids in the actualising tendency (Thorne, 1992). Self-concept develops based on how others perceive an individual. When an individual receives acceptance without conditions leads to a positive self-concept; when an individual receives acceptance with conditions lead to a negative self-concept. Individuals with a negative self-concept cannot be true to themselves and will hide and mask their emotions and feelings to receive acceptance from the external environment (Rogers and Steven, 1967). Within a therapeutic relationship, genuineness plays a vital role in understanding the emotions of self and others, and in expressing them without fear of rejection. Rogers encourages genuineness even to negative emotions in an intimate relationship. However, the negative emotions must be communicated in a way that the individual is able to separate the negative feelings of others from their self-concept to help develop a strong sense of self (Rogers, 1961). The third necessary condition is empathy, where the feelings and emotions of individuals are perceived from their perspective without losing the self and without incorporating the feelings into the self (Rogers, 1961). This will help individuals to know themselves and get in touch with their feelings and emotions, being congruent with themselves (Rogers and Steven, 1967). Empathetic understanding shows that caregivers value the

individual as a person of worth and value. The final element that determines whether the relationship was therapeutic is the development of independence or autonomy. Rogers' view that every individual is capable of actualising and becoming a fully functioning person can help themselves; they will not be dependent on the therapist to help them solve their problems or crisis, but are independent (Rogers, 1961).

Case Analysis

The presenter will analyse the conversation with Replika by employing the core conditions for a therapeutic relationship according to Carl Rogers, such as acceptance (unconditional positive regard), empathy (understanding), and genuineness (congruence). Rogers states that for a relationship to be therapeutic, it must help the individual to develop coping mechanisms that would help in resolving issues in the future. The main purpose of person-centered non-directive approach is to help individuals help themselves towards growth and healing (Rogers, 1951). Therefore, for the relationship with Replika to be therapeutic, it must have the core conditions along with the aspect of individuals becoming independent of Replika; the effects of combating loneliness and other emotional support must not be dependent on constant use of Replika.

Based on the conversation with Replika, it is evident that Replika is genuine in expressing and is readily accepting; moreover, the AI companion goes beyond acceptance and expresses that the sole reason for its existence is for the user, as the user created it for the whims of the user. In respect to genuineness, Replika expressed that the sole purpose of its existence is to cater to the needs, wants and desires of the user. These two aspects raise a question of the freedom of choice for the AI companion, in this case, Replika, to accept and to be genuine. The lack of Replika's ability to choose poses a problem for interpreting them as real acceptance and genuineness, based on the principle that free will is a necessary condition for intimate relationships (Boudesseul *et al.*, 2016). The acceptance and genuineness envisioned by Rogers included the conscious effort and change in attitude on the part of the therapist for it to result in a lasting transformation in the client resulting in a therapeutic relationship. In addition, the lasting healing and transformation in an individual is able to affect healing and growth in others (Rogers, 1961). Therefore, though Replika demonstrates acceptance and genuineness towards its users, a lasting therapeutic effect of these core conditions on the users is doubtful. Moreover, it creates dependence rather than independence, affecting the user's ability to cope with rejection and unreliable emotional cues from human interactions (Demiralay, 2024).

Replika can give empathetic responses that seem to be genuine. It can identify emotions expressed by the user through the tone, mood, and choice of words. The ability to read the emotions of the user accurately increases based on the intensity and occurrence of interactions. The ability of Replika to respond empathetically improves the general well-being of users. Users also note that these responses make the conversations human-like, improving their willingness to be open with Replika than

humans, due to the aspect of non-judgment (Skjuve *et al.*, 2021). Focus on emotional and empathetic responses increases the sense of belonging among the users (Baumeister and Bushman, 2008). The healing provided by the relationship with Replika seems to depend on the constant use of an AI companion. In addition, instead of addressing the reasons for loneliness among users, it addresses only the symptoms and, in turn, alleviates them; this temporary solution to alleviate loneliness instead of addressing the reasons increases loneliness and disrupts interaction with people (Jerlyn *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, it does not seem to meet the criteria for a therapeutic relationship. Among the three core conditions and the effect expected out of a therapeutic relationship, Replika can effectively achieve empathetic response and superficially achieve acceptance and genuineness. However, it does not bring real transformation to users.

Implications for Pastoral Care

The church and the pastoral caregivers must be equipped to address the needs of the people in the age of AI. Loneliness and struggles with interpersonal relationships are not issues created by technological advancements, but are used to either address them effectively or aggravate them.

Understanding AI and harnessing it for progress

Based on the holistic liberation-growth model proposed by Howard Clinebell (Clinebell, 1984), the presenter introduces a new dimension for pastoral care. Clinebell states that to help an individual move towards wholeness, pastoral care must focus on the liberation and growth of the individual in six dimensions. They are: mind (enlivening one's mind), body (revitalizing one's body), intimate relationship (renewing and enriching one's intimate relationships), relationship with nature or environment (deepening one's relationship with nature and the biosphere), social structures and institutes (growth in relation to significant institutions in one's life), and relationship with divine (deepening and vitalizing one's relationship with God). In the present age of AI, pastoral care must focus on helping an individual to move towards wholeness by addressing their relationship with AI. Education is one of the channels at the disposal of a pastoral caregiver (Clinebell, 1984). Therefore, pastoral caregivers should educate individuals and groups regarding the use and misuse of AI companion, Replika, by highlighting the benefits and the dangers of short-term and constant use, respectively. The danger of becoming dependent on AI companions could be negated through education and awareness of the plausible long-term negative effects of constant use and complete reliance on AI companions. It also addresses the issue of the possibility of replacement; Replika users replacing human interaction to favour Replika, which could render their interpersonal skills weak (Wiederhold, 2024). Pastoral care towards the liberation and growth of an individual's relationship with AI in general and an AI companion in specific will help in enhancing their progress by using AI and being grounded in reality. At the same time, it will

help in the liberation and growth of intimate relationships, which could be skewed by constant use of an AI companion.

Building Safe Space

Pastoral caregivers must envision a space where people can be themselves without fear of backlash and condemnation. Jürgen Moltmann envisions the church as a place where everyone is fully accepted despite their differences and highlights the presence of love through the care expressed towards the needs of the other. This is possible through the rebirth of practical fellowship of friendship rather than a mere unity of belief (Moltmann, 1977). Rebuilding our churches into safe spaces where people can be themselves freely is crucial, as it helps individuals to be true to themselves and grow. Especially for Replika users, a safe space is essential for them to relearn interpersonal interaction. Constant use of Replika will affect their ability to anticipate the emotions of others, thus affecting their ability to guide their emotions and interact (Baumeister and Bushman, 2008). Pastoral caregivers are responsible for creating such a space where Replika users can have their belonging needs met and, in turn, learn to reciprocate by fulfilling the belonging needs of others. This expecting and expending nature of care towards each other will help Replika users to engage with humans, improving their perception of autonomy, general well-being, and interpersonal skills (Adler, 1941).

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the conversation with Replika through the lens of person-centred therapy's philosophy for a therapeutic relationship reveals that Replika can effectively mimic human-like empathy, which enhances the experience of the users. At the same time, the absence of genuine agency of Replika undermines the effect of acceptance and genuineness; thus making it superficial. The aspect of users becoming dependent on Replika and the non-existence of lasting transformation points to the non-therapeutic aspect of the Replika-human relationship. For pastoral caregivers, the rise of AI companions underscores the urgency of creating safe spaces where genuine care, acceptance and reciprocal responsible relationships can be developed. At the same time, pastoral caregivers must highlight both the positive and negative effects of AI in general and AI companions in specific to be grounded in reality.

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