Ethical Implications of Digitized Intimacy with Non-Corporeal AI Agents

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Introduction Interactions between humans and non-corporeal social Actors, such as virtual Agents and conversational bots, have grown in popularity since they were integrated with artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. If expectations of credible emotional behavior are met, the Agent is perceived to have social influence, competence, and trustworthiness. Parallel emergence of affective activation and shifting in attributions bestows parasocial qualities on such interactions: the investment of emotional energy, interest, and time on Actors unaware of their existence. While often stigmatized and relegated to liminality, parasocial Human/AI relationships are embraced by growing audiences: a careful and up-to-date examination of the specific ethical matters of this practice is thus overdue.

Method An exploratory literature review has been carried out involving PsycInfo, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, examining: i) Features and affordances enabling parasociality; ii) Forms and critiques of human/AI actors' parasociality; iii) Risks, opportunities, and central issues.

Results The Agent's capability to mimic human behavior, combined with the user's predisposition to anthropomorphize, is crucial for the human/AI actor's relationship to mirror a human relationship. The resulting forms of digitized intimacy can include feelings of empathy, admiration, and care, along with mediated psychophysiological affects. Those topics appear scarcely explored, borrowing from contiguous research fields, such as video games and computer-mediated communication. However, possible benefits of parasociality with non-corporeal social agents appear to involve safe self-exploration in simulated relations, reduction of loneliness, partial preservation of social skills, sense of belonging, and empowerment.

Critiques of such phenomena also seem inadequately examined, as they are presently centered on theoretical discussions on gendered matters or exploring human attachment to Agents as a matter of sex and robots. In contrast, non-corporeal social Agents exclusively emphasize on developing intimacy via verbal engagement. Nonetheless, an interesting yet limited body of literature has examined areas of concern regarding the manipulation of human feelings, their commodification, and the values attributed to user experiences.

A deeper re-elaboration of parasociality in the age of AI should reconsider varied definitions of love, its embeddedness in cultural and social practices, and its potential connections to orthosocial relationships. We explore such issues guided by Floridi et al.'s (2021) ethical AI framework's principles of benevolence, non-malevolence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. Given the in-progress nature of AI parasocial phenomena, we privilege contrasts as sites of potentially generative discourses, considering Wittlestone et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of tensions in AI ethics.

Conclusion Considering the promising business value commercialization of non-corporeal social Agents has in the AI industry, parasocial relationships with AI Agents are a relevant research area with implications on social dynamics, relationships, and personality. Psychology can contribute to navigating the implied issues in fields such as Agents' design and policy and community well-being through AI literacy and psychotherapy. Potential avenues of application are discussed, aiming at examining AI ethics in the context of parasocial relationships and bridging fragmented literature while proposing general unifying tendencies.

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