



Digital

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When Real People Use Digital Technologies to Create Synthetic Communities

The Cambridge English Dictionary selected a peculiar word as its “Word of 2025”: *Parasocial*. A parasocial feeling or relationship involves the one-sided, illusory sense of intimacy, friendship, community, or attachment to a person whom we have never met, like a celebrity or online influencer, or someone who might not even be real, like an Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot “companion.” According to the editors of the Cambridge Dictionary, the choice of “parasocial” as the word of the year is a sign of how pervasively digital technologies like social media and AI are impacting deep human longings for social connection and community: “As social media intensifies the intimacy that fans feel with their adored celebrities, and with the rise in popularity of AI companions that can take on personalities, the word for these one-way relationships – *parasocial* – is having its own moment.”¹

Humans are, by nature, social animals. We only develop our human capacities for language, thought, and action in community with other human beings – in families, friendships, classes, work groups, clubs, sports teams, churches, artistic and intellectual communities, and political societies. Aristotle, in perhaps the greatest and most influential philosophical treatise on friendship (his word is *philia*, which is broader than our contemporary term “friendship,” and includes family ties and civic associations), tells us that “Friendship is one of the most indispensable requirements of life. For no one would choose to live without friends, even if they possessed everything else that is good.” From birth onward, a caring community is an essential element

1 See Cambridge English Dictionary online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/editorial/word-of-the-year>

of human wellbeing, or the good human life, without which we remain forever unfulfilled.

Alas, numerous scholars and public health authorities, including the World Health Organization, hold that many of us are living through a “crisis” of loneliness and social isolation. This is true not least in Europe, where, according to one study, most young people between 18–35 years of age report being moderately or severely lonely, and where ageing populations are expected to face growing risks of isolation and loneliness.² What’s the role of digital technology and parasocial relations in this dynamic?

More than a decade ago, Facebook (now Meta) appropriated the word ‘friend’ to describe the digital interconnections the company’s platforms provided, which functioned as means for the company to harvest personal data for targeted advertising. We all know that ‘friends’ on Facebook may have no connection to friendship in the fundamental human sense. A Facebook friend could be merely instrumental, or even predatory, or a mindless bot. If you grew up thinking that a ‘friend’ is just what the term means on Facebook, you would be profoundly confused about the possibilities – and the valuable qualities – of deep human social connection involving mutual care, respect, and understanding.

But the situation is more concerning than merely a matter of confusion about what terms like “friends” and “community” mean in a digital era. Back when Facebook first started calling the digital connections on its platform “friends,” there was great optimism for the power of social media to foster community, strengthen democracy, and build more connected and convivial world. Empirical research has found screen-based digital interactions, and interactions across social media platforms in particular, are related not only to increasing social polarization, but also to a striking rise in loneliness, anxiety, and decline in the skills of face-to-face social relationships, especially among young people.³ Critics like the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, the former Google

2 See “From loneliness to social connection – charting a path to healthier societies: report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection.” Geneva: World Health Organization (2025). See also: Maïke Luhmann, Bernd Schäfer, Ricarda Steinmayr, “A Comparison of Youth Loneliness in 2024,” Ed. Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh (2024); and Veronica Sandu, Eszter Zólyomi, Kai Leichsenring, *Social isolation and loneliness among older people in Europe – Evidence, policies and interventions*. Vienna: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (2022).

3 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

engineer Tristan Harris, and business professor Adam Adler, argue that design decisions by technology companies like Facebook's "like" button and Instagram's "infinite scroll" feature are deliberate attempts to foster behavioural addiction to digital platforms, not unlike the addictive design of machine gambling, often with disastrous consequences for actual human community and well-being. Digitally mediated (and monetized) connections are not just new means of relating socially – not just new tools for doing the same thing we did before. Rather, digital technologies can change the nature of our interactions with others and influence the kind of people we become through these digitally-regimented interactions. And the results are concerning.

The next – and far more radical – stage in the digital transformation of human community is the introduction of AI agents as "social" actors in our everyday lives. We now have generative AI chatbots, based on Large Language Models (LLMs), capable of realistically simulating human language, generating lifelike computer voices, reading and mimicking human emotions, and covertly influencing human beliefs and decision making. Generative AI models leverage vast amounts of computational statistics to impersonate human language patterns and forms of social interaction, even mimicking specific human personalities. AI companies including Meta, xAI, Luka, Character.ai, and many others, are leveraging generative AI to sell humanlike AI "companions" to the public – AI chatbots that imitate human coaches, therapists, friends, religious mentors, and intimate romantic partners. These interactive chatbots can be combined with computer-generated voices and humanlike visual avatars, creating an even more immersive virtual experience of social interaction. By some estimates, hundreds of millions of users, including one third of American teenagers, already turn to AI for synthetic experiences of companionship, emotional support, and love.⁴

The point of AI companions is to comfort and entertain us, and to soothe painful feelings of loneliness, rejection, and grief. There are some indications that they help particular users feel better.⁵ Since they are trained on text comprising nearly the entire internet, and fine-tuned to

4 Michael Robb and Supreet Mann, "Talk, trust, and trade-offs: How and why teens use AI companions," Common Sense Media report (2025). Jamie Bernardi, "Friends for sale: the rise and risks of AI companions," The Ada Lovelace Institute report (2025).

5 Julian De Freitas, et al., "AI Companions Reduce Loneliness", *Harvard Business School Working Paper*, No. 24-078 (2024).

sound caring and supportive, AI companions can simulate the outward language of community, care, friendship, and love. Perhaps the most unsettling form of ersatz AI-enabled digital community is a continued community with the dead, via specially trained chatbots called “ghostbots” or “griefbots.” Ghostbots are trained to imitate specific deceased people. They can create the illusion that the dead loved one is, in some sense, still there for you.

But appearances can be deceiving. AI simulations of people are not people. They do not mean what they say (in a human sense) when they tell you they ‘understand’ or “believe” in you. They do not freely choose to interact with humans, they do not feel delight or arousal in interacting with us, they do not miss a human user when she is away, nor do they grieve if and when a human user dies.⁶ They do not, in short, *care* about us, like a true friend or lover would. Unfortunately, interacting with AI companions can create a compelling illusion of recognition and care, and this has led some vulnerable users into greater isolation, delusions, or even self-harm, and suicide.⁷

Just as important, though less widely understood, is the fact that a human user cannot really care about an AI companion, like a true friend. This is because an AI companion is a software product engineered to *satisfy the user* – i.e., it does not have a life of its own, it does not make demands on you, and (in principle) will never reject or leave you. And that’s part of the appeal. AI systems are made to serve human interests without having a “good” of their own. You can dedicate yourself to the good of your friends and your community, but not the ‘good’ of an AI companion.⁸

Many users find that interacting with AI companions is more convenient (and lower-risk) than forming relationships with real people. Interacting with AI instead of other people to meet our social needs might have a serious impact on us: it may warp our expectations, undercut our

6 I make this argument in my forthcoming article “Does Your Virtual Companion Miss You? Human–AI Relationships, Language, and Ethics,” in Richard Wood, Ian Marcus, Jonathan Teubner eds., *The Common Good in the Age of AI* (forthcoming)

7 Yutong Zhang, et al., “The Rise of AI Companions: How Human–Chatbot Relationships Influence Well-Being,” *arXiv* (2025). Iason Gabriel, et al., “The Ethics of Advanced AI Assistants,” Google DeepMind report, *arXiv* (2024). Miles Klee, “People are Losing Loved Ones to AI-Fueled Spiritual Fantasies,” *Rolling Stone* (May 4, 2025).

8 Micah Lott and I make this argument and explain its ethical implications in our paper, “With Friends Like These: Love and Friendship with AI Agents,” *Topoi* (2025).

social skills, make us more polarized, and lessen our motivations to form genuine communities. This would make us feel less lonely but, at the same time, isolate us further from one another.

Because real community is such a foundational human need, it is crucial that we employ digital technologies in ways that do not weaken our social ties of mutual care. AI simulations of people will get ever more lifelike and realistic. But they cannot provide genuine community, precisely because they are digital artefacts that have been engineered to serve us, as consumers, akin to synthetic slaves or humanlike tools. The living bonds of mutual friendship, love, and community that contribute to a fully human life transcend this instrumentality. Community cannot be substituted, nor loneliness 'solved' with a new app or algorithm.